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Research Proposal: The Feasibility of Design Ethics

Project Proposal

In the modern atmosphere of Western capitalism, most designers are accustomed to working for paying clients who require first-world solutions to first-world problems. This includes creating corporate logos and identities, making graphical user interfaces for retail sites, and even engineering intuitive office spaces and buildings for large corporations. Outside the frame of first-world design, however, exists a network of “responsible” or “ethical” design solutions aimed at sustainability and humanitarianism. The juxtaposition of these two sides of design brings forth the important question of ethics. Do designers have an obligation to apply their skills to solving the environmental, humanitarian, economic, and educational issues that persist throughout the globe? Or is the status quo of commercial focus acceptable? The majority of literature in this field that I have reviewed points towards the former.

One factor that hasn’t been considered by this body of literature, however, is the economic requirements and viability of these types of design solutions. Implementing responsible design tactics such as sustainability is more expensive than the current design practices we see most, and solutions of humanitarian nature boast much less economic return than their corporate-fueled counterparts. These factors, and the fact that they present an extant gap in current research of design ethics, bring to light my research question: is an industry-wide

transition to responsible design professionally and economically feasible for the design community?

This research question is important for several reasons. First, design in every form, from industrial to graphic, is a powerful practice with potential to create major shifts in ways of thinking and acting. Authors in the field such as David Berman, Steven Heller, and Tony Fry agree that designers hold the power to change the world, and have already done so. As will be revealed in the literature review that follows this section, graphic designers, product designers, and architects have all helped fuel the mass-consumption mentality of our modern society, a mentality that has an array of consequences for both society and the environment. Fry goes as far as claiming that designers are now playing the role of God: “Design, as an anthro-directive, profoundly secular, and omnipotent practice, has displaced the ‘invisible hand of God’” (3). Product designers have the ability to optimize aid systems for victims in developing nations, and print designers can spread important social justice and environmental messages through graphic communications. As you will find in the literature review section of this proposal, designers hold a great amount of power, and ethical design solutions can have significant impact in making the world a better place. This power ought to come with a great deal of responsibility, a fact that many designers have likely failed to consider.

Second, this research question is important because answering it will fill the extant gap that is present in the design ethics literature field. As mentioned previously, the literature regarding design ethics lacks discussion of the economic viability of ethical design solutions. I plan on examining a variety of writing that reveals the material and production costs of various ethically conscious solutions across graphic design, product design, and architecture in order to compile a review of this economic viability. With research regarding the economic feasibility of

individual projects, I will be able to analyze whether or not a total transition to ethical design, which the authors in my literature review propose, is viable from a business standpoint. My end goal is to answer the question: could the design community sustain itself professionally and economically, given modern business attitudes, if it were to transition exclusively to ethical design?

The research I propose is of great interest to me and is essential to understanding how my field of design can change the world for the better, and how it can do so feasibly and within economic reason. With ethical and responsible design, designers have the power to shift ways of thinking and acting on a global scale, and may be morally obligated to do so. However, it is equally important to consider how designers can do this and remain professionally supported in the business community.

Literature Review

Responsibility in the world of design has become a hot topic amongst professionals and writers in the field. Recently, writers such as Steven Heller, David Berman, and Tony Fry have written literature that has brought this discussion into the mainstream. These works have spurred the beginning of a movement to include ethics discussion in both design education curriculums and professional settings. In addition, modern web magazines such as *Fast Company* have increased their coverage of product, print, and architecture design solutions aimed at sustainability and humanitarianism. Consensus is building that the design community has the power to change the world and thus has the responsibility to implement ethical design. In his book *Citizen Designer: Perspectives on Design Responsibility*, Heller and his co-editor Véronique Vienne claim, “a designer must be professionally, culturally, and socially responsible for the impact his or her design has on the citizenry” (x).

The Status Quo

Stewart Ewen observes that, “the pivotal position of design within contemporary culture traces back to the turn of this century, and its growth in importance is inextricably linked to the rise of industrial mass production” (192). Here, we see an immediate tie between design and the corporate world. Catherine McCoy, along with many other professionals, notes that in the status quo, designers make an outstanding majority of their work to be used in corporate, profit-oriented manners. In her essay titled “Good Citizen”, McCoy claims that too often designers get caught up in “serving the client’s definition of function – generally profits – over other concerns, including safety, the environment, and social/cultural/political impacts” (5). My research reveals a trend towards criticism of this corporate mindset found within the design community. McCoy believes that the content of a design solution must be considered over the quality of that solution: “the most rarefied design solution can never surpass the quality of its content” (6). The majority of my research agrees with McCoy when she advocates for more value-oriented design, claiming that, “designers must break out of the obedient, neutral, servant-to-industry mentality” (5).

According to many authors and professionals, this “servant-to-industry mentality” means that the design community is fueling the culture of unsustainable consumption. David Berman acknowledges this in his book *Do Good Design* when he states, “The largest threat to humanity just may be the consumption of more than necessary. We are caught up in an unsustainable frenzy, spurred by rapid advances in the sophistication, psychology, speed, and reach of visual lies...” (2). By “visual lies,” Berman means the modern branding and advertising model, in which designers use their skills to persuade consumers to buy products and services. Berman elaborates on his argument by stating that the creativity of designers “fuels the most efficient (and most destructive) tools of deception in human history” (2). We can see that many

professionals agree that design has transcended into unethical realms by focusing on profits and other corporate motives over values such as sustainability and responsibility.

The Power of Design

Many people, some designers themselves, may doubt the true impact of design, however my research disagrees. In “Beyond Pro Bono: Graphic Design’s Social Work”, Anne Bush states, “design has an important social role... design practices should be anchored in the very reality of its social consequences.” Berman attests to the power of designers, claiming, “the same design that fuels mass overconsumption also holds the power to repair the world” (2). Later, the author states, “designers can use their professional power, persuasive skills, and wisdom to help distribute ideas that the world really needs: health information, conflict resolution, tolerance... human rights” (Berman 39). This power is granted to the design world because, according to Steven Fry, “Design... shapes the form, operation, appearance, and perceptions of the material world we occupy” (3). If the design community can shape these forms, functions, operations, and appearances around sustainability, humanitarianism, and social justice, the global psyche will transition towards those values. Fry argues that design has the power to “bring into being” a future of sustainability and social justice (2). Here, we can see how design has the potential to truly change the world for the better.

Graphic Design

Graphic design is currently one of the fastest growing professional fields. The graphic designer is tasked with translating a message from a client to an audience. To this point, Heller and Vienne claim, “the graphic designer is as responsible as the marketing and publicity departments for the propagation of a message” (xi). In the modern atmosphere of advertising and consumerism, messages that could be positive and forward thinking are often compromised by

corporate values. This leads to a variety of criticisms of graphic design, many of which are revealed by my research.

One major ethical criticism of graphic design is that the profession and its products fall far short of sustainability. In *Towards a More Sustainable Graphic Design Philosophy*, Lisa Graham observes, “Graphic design, as a discipline, is far behind other disciplines in establishing sustainability guidelines, standards, benchmarks, and certification systems” (169). In most cases, absurd amounts of non-renewable resources such as paper and ink are used in graphic design projects. To add to this, the majority of graphic design work is destined for landfills. Graham points this out when she claims, “Practitioners have long acknowledged that the majority of what they produce is ephemera – printed matter largely intended to be discarded after use” (170). These factors make the vast majority of graphic design work very harmful to the environment, a fact that is despised by the principles of Berman, Heller, and Fry.

The other major criticism of graphic design I found in my research is that it directly aids the manipulative advertising industry. As seen previously, authors tend to agree that overconsumption is our greatest threat. Berman links this to advertising, claiming,

The most powerful weapon we’ve invented to convince new markets to consume more stuff is brand advertising... Professional communicators are the people who proudly think up clever visual persuasion intended to trigger deep emotional needs to increase consumption (25-26).

In a recent Sentinel article, Ann King provides insight into designer Lauren Penny’s advertising firm, We Are Good. King states, “[Penny] believes that instead of using the tools at their disposal to simply generate more cash for multi-million pound companies, advertisers have the power to do some good.” King reports, “We Are Good only works with what it defines as

'ethical clients' such as those which offer high quality, wellcrafted [sic] products and services including charities, or businesses which operate in the fair trade, environmentally friendly or organic markets." We Are Good is example of ethical practice within the graphic design and advertising profession, and is a model of the kind of process authors like Berman, Heller, and Fry wish to see.

Architecture

The world of architecture is plagued with zealous over-consumption. Most major accolades are annually awarded to those architects who design the newest, shiniest, tallest buildings. Most of these buildings fall short of being responsibly designed, and use unsustainable amounts of resources and energy. Tony Fry explains this when he states, "Architects... have deep attachments... [that] are indivisible from the nature of architectural education and architectural journalism, with its focus on heroic architects and iconic buildings" (139).

In a *Fast Company* online article, Kelsey Campbell-Dollaghan reports about the architecture firm TIYN Tegenstue and the European Award for Architecture, which the firm won in 2012. TIYN is on a unique mission to spread inexpensive, sustainable, locally sourced architecture designs throughout the developing world. The article reports, "[TYIN]'s ingeniously thrifty, locally constructed projects in the developing world often cost less than \$10,000 to build--a drop in the bucket in an architecture world often mired in excess" (Campbell-Dollaghan). Campbell-Dollaghan quotes Christian Narkiewicz-Laine, director of the European Award for Architecture, "Architecture should be a vehicle for social change, social improvement, and real cultural development, and not an end result of [the] over-commercialization, over-consumption, and self aggrandizement which is so overwhelmingly apparent in our contemporary world."

TIYN is a shining example of the former, and is another model of Berman, Heller, and Fry's principles.

Product Design

Product design is perhaps the least responsible of all the design fields in terms of fueling over-consumption and environmental degradation. Product designers create the things that society feels it must have more and more of, and that eventually find their way to landfills to decompose over hundreds or thousands of years. Examples of responsible product design are apparent, however. In its annual "Most Innovative Company's" feature, *Fast Company* overviews such examples. In 2007, *Fast Company* celebrated Steelcase, a company dedicated to cradle-to-cradle product design principles (designs that can be broken down at the end of their use to make new products). The magazine reports that in addition to crafting 100% recyclable office furniture that is free of PVC, CFC's and other harmful chemical compounds, the company released "online diagnostic tool...to help companies assess their products' environmental footprint" (Fishman). The article quotes Allan Smith, Steelcase's chief of environmental strategy, when he states, "Product development teams can then use the analysis as a benchmark for, say, eliminating all carcinogens" (Fishman).

Another example of responsible product design is Greg McEvelly's "Glider". *Fast Company* reports that the product is a sleeping unit – a hammock and tarp – designed to elevate flood refugees off the wet ground and keep them dry in refugees camps, while simultaneously collecting rainwater in one-liter bottles for hydration (Rhodes). This is a prime example of designing to solve third world issues; as Margaret Rhodes reports, McEvelly set out designing with a, "commitment to counter the onslaught of vector-borne diseases, such as malaria and dengue fever, through product design. If people in disaster relief camps had a simple form of

alternative bedding, he ventured, then disease-bearing arthropods wouldn't pose a threat." The author states, "At first glance, it's a piece of camping gear or an easy bit of shade for the beach or tailgating. In practice, it's a model for uncomplicated products that have the potential to protect people's health in times of disaster" (Rhodes). Here, we see how McEvilly's design is a model for the kind of responsible design Berman, Heller, and Fry argue for.

The theme McEvilly follows in his product can be seen in other designs. *Fast Company's* Jordan Kushins provides an overview of Eliodomestico, a solar water distiller designed by Gabriele Diamanti. The distiller was designed with habitants of water-scarce areas who rely on filtration of tainted water, and won a Core77 Design Award for Social Impact (Kushins). Another *Fast Company* article details GiraDora, a foot-powered washing machine designed to lessen the burden of washing clothes in rural, underdeveloped areas (Campbell-Dollaghan "Washing Machine"). Kelsey Campbell-Dollaghan reports that this design solution allows rural habitants to spend less energy on mundane tasks like cleaning clothes ("Washing Machine"). This allows them to focus on other economic ventures, likening their chances of rising out of poverty.

These are just a few of the many examples of ethical product design. These kinds of solutions serve as models of the kind of forward-thinking design discussed by Berman, Heller, and Fry. Authors agree that sustainability and social-conscience ought to be central components of the product design process. This can be achieved through using recycled materials, creating recyclable products, and designing to help people overcome challenges and disasters across the globe.

It is evident that the field of literature surrounding ethical and responsible design is expansive. Writing covers a range of topics, from theory behind responsible design, to the

necessity of responsible design, to methods of responsible design. By examining this literature field, one finds that the majority of authors wish to see a greater moral standard within design. These authors advocate for increased sustainability, social responsibility, and practicality in design solutions. Furthermore, they argue that design both fuels and has the power to stop the overconsumption that threatens the environment and the human race.

Methods and Methodologies

In my research thus far, I have identified an extant gap that I wish to explore in my eventual thesis. This gap is the lack of consideration of the role of economics in responsible and ethical design. My research reveals that the design community is being urged, both internally and externally, to implement responsible design solutions on a wide-scale. What hasn't been considered, however, is if this action-plan is feasible for the design community to commit itself to. In *Do Good Design*, Berman makes no mention of the monetary challenges behind any of the responsible design solution he discusses. In *Citizen Designer*, Heller and Vienne don't include one essay that mentions the economic factors behind the authors' missions of sustainability and ethical design. This extant gap leaves an important question unanswered: will the profession of design be able to sustain itself and continue to find work opportunities if all members of the design community insisted on implementing only responsible design solutions? In order to fill the extant gap and answer this question, I must fulfill a variety of objectives: first, explain why responsible design is necessary; second, examine the economic factors of responsible design; and third, review the business-sensibility of wide scale responsible design.

My first objective is to examine and explain why social, humanitarian, and environmental responsibility ought to be considered a necessity in every design project. This objective requires a review and synthesis of existing literature in the design field. This exploration will be based

upon the literature review included in this proposal. I plan on analyzing a collection of sources expanded upon the set found in my current literature review. These sources will come from across the spectrum of literature within the design field. I will use print sources from renowned authors in the field the likes of David Berman, Steven Heller, and Tony Fry. These names are synonymous with the responsible design movement. Berman's *Do Good Design*, Heller's *Citizen Designer*, and Fry's *Design Futuring* have so far created a good foundation of research. Berman's text is dedicated to analyzing the reality and implications of all corners of the advertising design world, as well as why it exists. In his text, Heller, along with co-editor Veronique Vienne, compiles a multitude of essays and interviews on a variety of design ethics topics. *Design Futuring* aims to reveal "what design needs to bring into being to transcend the unsustainable, sustain all that needs to be sustained, and make viable futures possible" (Fry 20). These books will give me a starting point for what kind of design ethics are already expected in the status quo and what kind are being advocated for currently.

Furthermore, I plan on incorporating articles from the web source Fast Company, which will help me examine current trends of responsible design in real-world, modern design solutions. This source will provide me with reports on a great number of graphic, architecture, and product designs that reach beyond the standard corporate model. These articles contain information regarding concepts, processes, and real-world results of design solutions. It is important to analyze how much good a design solution bestows upon the world; how many lives or resources did a product save? This information is real-world insight regarding responsible design and can help reveal the tangible impact of ethical design solutions.

My second objective is to determine the economic feasibility of responsible/ethical design solutions. I aim to investigate general and specific economic setbacks that may be faced

by design teams in graphic, product, and architectural projects. This investigation will require a great amount of attention and detail. I will need to look at examples of past, present, and proposed projects throughout the design community alongside their budget and effectiveness. In order to assess the economic viability of each example, specific numbers regarding cost of materials, labor, and other resources involved in the process of a design solution must be examined and compared against those of traditional design solutions. It will be important for me to consider the details of project costs, most importantly the cost of various eco-friendly materials used. This examination will provide insight into the economic feasibility of responsible design solutions. Articles from *Fast Company's* online magazines will be useful in this investigation. These publications often review responsible design solutions across the design disciplines. These reviews often contain the valuable information I mentioned above: details regarding costs throughout the process of a design solution.

Furthermore, I will need to look at potential and existing methods of responsible design in order to gain an understanding of the process and its costs. So far *Design is the Problem: The Future of Design Must be Sustainable* by Nathan Shedroff is proving to be a useful source in this venture. Shedroff dedicates much of his writing to discussing and explaining sustainable methods in industrial and product design. In order to gain a better personal understanding of responsible design methods, however, I plan on utilizing a research methodology described by Carole Gray and Julian Malins as practice-based research. These authors recommend, "making art/design/creative work through specific project frameworks or as a body of work exploring the research question" (Gray and Malins 30). Through this methodology, I plan on carrying out my own ethical design project in order to create a study of ethical design methods. This will have

several benefits: in *Visualizing Research: A Guide to the Research Process in Art and Design*, Gray and Malins claim,

Practice-based research is uniquely placed to respond to these criticisms, through asking questions of ourselves about the place and value of Art and Design in society and encouraging an intellectual social dialogue; through clear and critical thinking and expression; through the articulation of a paradigm, in order to make ‘new culture’ and gain the understanding and support of society for this (24).

Through this practice-based design, I will attempt to carry out a design project that focuses on sustainability throughout the entire process. I plan on researching just how much more difficult and tedious a fully green design solution is to complete than a traditional solution. I will attempt to use only sustainable materials and processes to complete this project, including recycled paper, soy or vegetable inks, and energy-efficient digital printers, among others. This practice-based research will give me greater insight regarding responsible, specifically sustainable, design practices. This is beneficial to my research because it gives me primary research to base my thesis and arguments on.

In order to complete this practice-based research, it may be necessary for me to review instructions and examples. For this, I plan on acquiring two books: *Green Graphic Design* by Brian Dougherty and *SustainAble* by Aaris Sherin. Communication Arts asserts, “Brian Dougherty’s *Green Graphic Design* and Aaris Sherin’s *SustainAble* field guide are complete with resources and examples that show theory meeting practice in projects specific to graphic design.” These sources may help me discover methods of sustainable design that I can utilize in my project.

Third Objective

My third objective will be to assess whether or not the design community could sustain itself within the professional world if it were to redirect towards responsible design. My research thus far has revealed that the majority of design work being done today is for corporate use. As such, corporate values such as cutting costs and boosting profits are the main focus of design. As noted previously, a move towards responsible design solutions will mean increased costs for projects across the board. Eco-friendly materials such as recycled paper and plastics, soy and vegetable inks, and sustainably sourced building supplies such as bamboo cost more than their traditional counterparts. Furthermore, a move toward ethical design practices would require a shift away from the manipulative and extravagant advertising techniques seen throughout today's media. My objective here is to assess whether or not the corporate world that employs the vast majority of designers and firms today would be willing to shell out the extra funds if designers and firms began demanding that all projects be eco-friendly and socially responsible. I will be able to answer this question through several methods.

First, the methodology of a cost-benefit analysis is necessary. Applying this methodology will help me contextualize hard data and gain a grasp of the pros and cons of responsible design solutions. I plan on examining a wide variety of examples of responsible and ethical design practice through this cost-benefit lens. A cost-benefit analysis requires compiling data regarding the overall cost of an end product and analyzing that data against the product's benefit or contribution to the world. Employing this methodology will require great attention to detail and an understanding of economic principles. Due to these factors, I hope to connect with a Fort Lewis College faculty member in economics to help mentor me through this process. Guidance from this mentor will ensure that my cost-benefit analysis is accurate, accountable, and credible. Once complete, a cost-benefit analysis of a multitude of responsible design solutions will give

me a greater understanding of the economic feasibility of an industry transition towards responsible design.

Second, I plan on gaining an understanding of the likelihood of the current business model accepting a transition of responsible design by conducting discussions and interviews with a range of professionals in the field. I must create a robust questionnaire to give out to established professionals in the design community. The questions in this survey will focus on the participants' opinions regarding the feasibility of responsible design solutions. I will ultimately ask whether or not they believe it would be a business-smart decision to transition the design community exclusively towards non-corporate, responsible design, and why. I am looking for opinions and statements from established professionals in the field because that is the demographic that most fully understands the business and economic side of the design community. Fortunately, it will not be difficult for me to build a network of participants for this survey. Because I plan on mentoring under Paul Booth, the director of Fort Lewis College's Graphic Design program, I ought to have convenient access to this type of network.

Conclusion

My preliminary research reveals much about the status quo of design and what ethical roles designers ought to play. The majority of this research agrees with David Berman when he states, "Designers have an essential social responsibility because design is at the core of the world's largest challenges... and solutions... Designers have enormous power to influence how we engage our world, and how we envision our future" (1). So, design has tremendous power. My preliminary literature review reveals, however, that this power is often misguided by the corporate mentality surrounding design projects. My research has answered many questions thus far, such as what responsibilities ought to be expected of the design community and why the

status quo falls short of meeting these. This research has also revealed unanswered questions regarding design ethics. Perhaps the most pressing of these questions is whether or not the design community could truly sustain itself economically if it attempted an industry-wide transition to responsible, ethical design choices. This is the question I wish to answer in my research project, and I hope to develop a deep understanding of both the question and its answer.

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