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The Design Revolution. Which side are you on?

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BY CHERYL HELLER

In his remarkable book, *A World Lit Only by Fire*, William Manchester describes the dark ages¹ as a time when for centuries, nothing changed. There were no books to read, no new ideas to discuss, no inventions to adopt or reject. Communities did not extend beyond small villages, and during what were frequent wars and skirmishes, if soldiers were carried along in battle to foreign towns, they often couldn't find their way home since it had not occurred to anyone to draw a map. Because villages didn't have names, it was tough to distinguish one's hometown from others as "the one with the stream and the big tree next to it". Nor could a person reference his village chief, because people didn't have names either, and modes of dress weren't a distinguishing feature since nobody wore clothes.

Since then, to understate wildly, the world has witnessed much change and many revolutions – in power, ideologies, knowledge, art, spirituality, equality, fashion and mores. Some have been violent (Russian and French), some violently intellectual (Renaissance), some non-violent (The Czech Velvet Revolution), some world changing on every level (Industrial), and at least one revolution was fun – for those of us who fought in it (the sexual revolution).

Even without the benefit of historic perspective, it's not difficult to identify the revolutions we are currently experiencing, such as the green revolution, social networks revolution, globalization revolution, and so forth.

According to Dr. Paul Polak, we are also witnessing the inception of a design revolution. In fact, you are cordially invited to join it. I met Paul Polak about three years ago, at the first AIGA Aspen Design Summit (thank you, Dee Dunn). Paul is the founder of IDE International, an organization that has

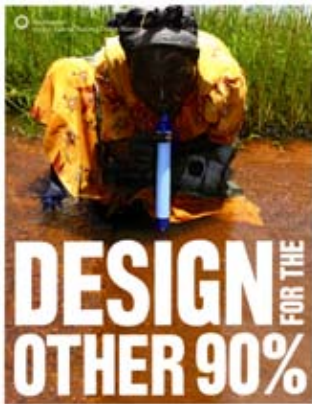
brought tens of thousands of small farmers around the world permanently out of poverty. While not one of the main presenters at the Summit, Paul had been having quiet but passionate conversations with people throughout the three days we were there. As the minutes wound down on the last plenary session, I passed him a note (yes, just like in grade school) telling him that a few of us wanted to join forces with him in his work. At the time, none of us (designers Ann Willoughby, Michael Cronan and Karin Hibma, and former curator of the Cooper Hewitt, Barbara Bloemink) had any idea about exactly what that meant. For me, it wasn't what he's trying to do that is so unique, because a lot of people are working to end poverty, and humans have always been my least favorite species anyway. There is something about the essential practicality and common sense with which Paul presents his case that makes it easy to see how it's possible to help him make it work. And there are clear parallels between his process and design.

Paul believes that the only difference between poor people and the rest of us is that poor people don't have money. His view is that by treating them – in this case, the 85 million small acre farmers who live on \$1.00 a day – as customers (like we treat our clients), by listening to them, understanding their needs and the context in which they operate, designing tools that will help them increase production at prices that are affordable to them (based on their incomes, not ours), and creating markets through which they can sell their crops. For your information, Paul has just written a book, *Out of Poverty*, which I highly recommend.

Many things have happened in the few years since I met Paul. IDE is now on very solid ground, and has attracted supporters like the Gates Foundation.

I have fully committed my time and energy to sustainability and using communications to move clients toward it, we have together worked on organizing the Solo Exhibit at the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum, called “Design for the Other 90%”, and now, Paul, at 73ish, has decided to move on to his next big adventure - which is fomenting a revolution in design.

Paul’s Design Revolution is called D-Rev: Design for the other 90%. (The name for the exhibit came from Paul.) It is a revolution intended to focus the understanding, talent and innovation of the best designers in the world on the vast majority of people who need it most. In the interest of full disclosure, I have joined D-Rev as Chief Creative Officer.



One of the products of our work together was the Solo Show in the garden at the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum last summer. No amount of reading or researching products prepared me for the impact of walking into a perfectly manicured city garden to see a typical small vegetable garden, home and tools of impoverished farmers. It was as if artifacts from a more primitive time had landed in perfect formation in the Upper East Side of Manhattan. But the design concepts included showed the way to the future, not the past. Above, the cover of the catalog from the exhibit at the Cooper Hewitt. The woman shown on the catalog cover above is using a Life Straw, intended to make potentially unsafe water potable.

What follows is the mission for D-Rev, some of which is in place already, as a continuation of Paul’s work, while much of it still needs to be developed.

D-Rev: Design for the other 90%.

Our mission is to create a design revolution by enlisting the best designers in the world to develop products and ideas that will benefit the 90% of the people on earth who are poor, in order to help them earn their way out of poverty.

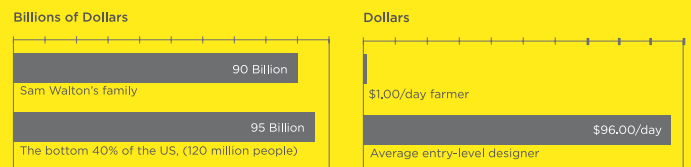
We do this in three ways:

Inspiring We inspire the world to see poor people as customers and entrepreneurs, designers to find more meaning in their lives by helping others, educational institutions to broaden their approach to design precepts, corporations to act on the enormous potential for growth in developing markets, and the media to help the world recognize and appreciate the designers who work to benefit others and the companies with the foresight to lead the way.

Educating We teach the principles of our proven program at the best schools in the world, through courses such as “The Ruthless Pursuit of Affordability”, to ensure that the tools designed will work in the markets and for the people they were intended to serve. We teach people everywhere the principles and benefits of designing for the other 90% through on-line and print-based educational materials. We teach poor farmers how new tools work, and how to use them to earn their way out of poverty. We give corporate partners access to our 27 years experience in creating successful, sustainable markets by helping impoverished people join the middle class.

Connecting We connect designers to their new customers in the field, we connect designers to each other through classes and an online platform, we connect good ideas to funding, in the form of grants and market knowledge, we connect corporations and manufacturers to opportunities to participate in new markets.

Paul has never been accused of lacking ambition or energy. Who could argue with this? It’s not necessary to go to Nepal to recognize the inequity. Walmart founder Sam Walton’s family has a net worth of about \$90 billion. “By contrast, the combined wealth of the bottom 40% of the United States (in 2005) – some 120 million people – was estimated to be about \$95 billion”²



And who would not want to take part in it? Designers are people who care deeply about these issues, and want passionately to help. But right now, as Paul says, 90% of the designers in the world design products for the 10% of the people who have a lot of money. Of course, from a purely business standpoint, this makes perfect sense, and one could argue that it would be foolish, based on accepted economic precepts, to do anything else. We're practicing what we've been taught about how to identify a market that will be receptive to our products or services, and then sell to it. Or vice versa.

In *Supercapitalism*, Robert Reich writes about the global forces that are putting increasingly intense competitive pressures on businesses, and driving down the margins they can make on what they sell. He says, "Starting in the 1970s and accelerating over subsequent decades, countless new technologies replaced previously stable production systems with multiple sellers that could turn on a dime. The result was much the same as with global supply chains: Old stable oligopolies were undermined and competition for consumers intensified. By the first decade of the new century...the average American company was losing more than half its customers every four years, which meant it had to be continuously seeking new ones while doing everything possible to hold on to those who remained."³

It's a slippery slope. For anyone who may not have noticed, almost everything about running a profitable business is harder than it used to be. Design firms not only represent a part of this dynamic, they service the other companies that suffer from it. There are more designers competing for the same work than there have ever been, and it has changed the nature of the work that gets done.

A core premise of the Design Revolution is that the other 90% of the world represents a potentially dynamic and exciting market – more interesting and inspiring in many ways than the one we know so well. For one thing, it's a whole new ball

game – an opportunity to create new products, services, and communications, to learn new things and stretch our skills rather than repeating them. More than anything else, it's an opportunity to make a difference at a scale that is next to impossible in our own crowded, jaded world of over-met rather than under-met needs.

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Product design is clearly undergoing a revolution fueled by the need for a sustainable society, as is architecture, city planning, publishing, software, social networks, energy, finance, food and education, just to name a few. (Look at Architecture for Humanity, Arup's plans for the world's first sustainable city in Dongtan, China, FaceBook, wikipedia and the Slow Food movement if you don't believe me.) But whereas we have seen a lot of activity in some graphic design practices around lowering their eco footprint and using renewable and recycled materials, the fact of the matter is that most graphic designers are affluent people who only know how to make stuff for other affluent people and organizations in the developed world. The progress so far in becoming more green may be incremental, but it is hardly revolutionary.

There is an elephant in the graphic design studio, and it is this: The kind of design that is going to eliminate the inequalities in the world is not graphic design as we know it. It is reasonably safe to say that it will be a very long time before developing

economies will be viable markets for annual reports, catalogs, fancy packages, e-commerce sites, or any of the other things traditionally provided to clients in our culture.

Like societies in the dark ages, people struggling with poverty have more basic needs than good typography. Like societies in the dark ages, people struggling with poverty have more basic needs than good typography. They need the essential things that sustain life and learning, and in order to be relevant to them, we need to think the way they do. Graphic designers will have to design new ways of thinking, and different things to design, in order to join the revolution.

Of course I oversimplify to make my point. There are designers – Milton Glaser comes first to mind – who have been using their talents to campaign for human rights and peace for many years, and there are countless others who work diligently for causes they believe in. But they are the exceptions.

In *First Things First 2000*, a design manifesto, a group of graphic designers argued against the trend for designers to “apply their skill and imagination to sell dog biscuits, designer coffee, diamonds, detergents, hair gel, cigarettes, credit cards, sneakers, butt toners, light beer and heavy-duty recreational vehicles,” out of fear that it has become “the way the world perceives graphic design”.

By now we’ve all had the opportunity to flip off a Hummer owner or two. But the changes we need to make, and the shifts that need to occur, go much deeper than the manifesto would imply. *First things First* is to me an admission of the fact that the majority of designers have become the tools of corporations, and that graphic design has lost its own voice, and its power to change thinking rather than just sell things.

Solving problems vs creating.

Robert Fritz, in his book, *Creating*, advises that we need to make a distinction between creating and problem solving. He says that when we are problem

solving, we are taking action to make things go away. When we create, we take action to cause something to come into being – our creation. “We have been taught that life moves from something to something else. We have been taught to think of ourselves as rearrangers, reactors: as merely outcomes of our DNA code, unconscious drives, conditioning, astrology, numerology, environment, or culture. Yet, if that is the case, where does music come from?⁴ It comes from people who do not need a pre-defined problem to solve; from people who are not preoccupied with repeatedly solving the same predictable western business and marketing challenges for the rest of their lives. It comes from people who are willing to reinvent themselves, and refocus on the basic, essential and imperative elements of a sustainable, equitable life on earth, and who are ready to join the revolution.

Go Betty

As always, nature has brilliant things to teach us about the rewards of valuing what is essential, and about the real potential of using design to sustain and improve life. Betty, a New Caledonian crow, participated in a videotaped experiment with another crow, Abel, a real bully. “For the experiment, Betty and Abel had to choose between a straight piece of wire or a hooked wire to snag the handle of a little bucket containing a piece of meat at the bottom of a tube. Both Betty and Abel quickly determined that the hooked wire was the best tool for the job – kid stuff, actually for crows. But during the experiment, Abel, being bigger and dominant, stole Betty’s hook. Without hesitation, Betty picked up the remaining straight wire with her beak, wedged the tip in a crack on the laboratory table, and bent it to form a hook exactly like the one Abel had appropriated. Betty then proceeded to use her hook to snag the bucket in the tube and retrieve the meat.”⁵ At their best, designers are like Betty – applying needed innovation it in just the right amount to what’s really important.

Joining the revolution

A revolution implies – and needs – something to revolt against. In the case of graphic design,

there are two. One is against the inequalities and injustices in the world, and the other is a revolt against the unimportance of most of the problems graphic designers spend their lives solving. Many of us have spent countless hours sitting in corporate board rooms, and know the dangerous effects on organizations of what we used to call “breathing their own exhaust” – convincing themselves that it’s both good and important to sell more Coke, introduce another model cell phone or dig

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another oil well. As Hunter S. Thompson said, “not much truth gets told between 9 and 5”. As a community, graphic design is not immune from this phenomenon. We have helped each other maintain the mental model that it’s good to keep making the things we are paid so highly to make.

Paul Polak truly believes that design can end poverty – indeed, that poverty is itself a function of bad design. That is likely to be one of the most revolutionary ideas, and one of the most inspiring challenges we will ever hear. So let’s take a page out of Betty’s book, apply our minds to what is truly essential, and join in. We stand to benefit from the most satisfying reward there is – the knowledge that our time, and our talent, have been applied to something that really matters.

Cheryl Heller, the founder of Heller Communication Design in New York City, is a writer, brand strategist and designer. Her company uses the creative process to help clients embed sustainability into their brand strategies and communications. She serves on the board of directors of Pop!Tech, and the Cloud Institute for Sustainability Education, and is the Chief Creative Officer of D-Rev.

1. *In European historiography, the term Dark Age(s) refers to the Early Middle Ages, the period encompassing (roughly) 476 to 1000 AD.*
2. *Supercapitalism, by Robert Reich, page 113*
3. *Supercapitalism, by Robert Reich, page 65*
4. *Robert Fritz, Creating, page 16*
5. *Tim Friend, Animal Talk, Breaking the Codes of Animal Language, page 37*