



legacy of a sixties credo

if I were to design a program from scratch today, what would be its basis?

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**“It doesn’t matter
what’s behind us
or what’s ahead of us
but what’s inside us.”**

—Emerson paraphrase

hi! story

I have sometimes somewhat cynically referred to history as “hi! story.” Older histories, it seems, are constantly subject to revision. Some, like the erroneous coupling of the Basel School with the Bauhaus, are almost impossible to correct once they have been established. I think of the coupling of Al Queda and Iraq in a cartoon because they both have q’s in the name. It seems we’re enamored of and easily seduced by connections. Making connections, bridging gaps, is creative, revealing work. Discerning among these is another matter.

legacy of a sixties credo

The credo to which I refer in the title was drafted in 1966 and revised in 1968, to guide us in transforming an advertising design program at the Philadelphia College of Art into a graphic design program. Outsiders had referred to PCA as a rendering school of design. Rendering in this sense is to make something show-worthy, and in fact, projects need to be rendered in order to be presented to others. But used the way it was, it was a pejorative. It suggested the cart before the horse, that the emphasis on show pre-empted the rigor of process, that simulation and the decorative had an ascendancy over structure and depth, that persuasion came before information.

This was the situation in many American art schools, and of course, it was also the time when design programs existed primarily in art schools. The shift to dominance, at least in numbers, to academic university programs is an aspect of contextual change in design education since 1966 of which I’m well aware.

Credo is a loaded word.

I don’t mean dogma, I do mean belief.

I don’t mean doctrine, I do mean principles.

I don’t mean gospel, I do mean philosophy.

At one extreme I mean a word that sounds similar: cradle.

A cradle is a womb-like, nurturing surrounding for growth, as in “the cradle of civilization.”

At the other extreme I mean a manifesto which defines change. For example: Before we came, students at PCA had been instructed in letter forms by rendering a plethora (±30) of faces while they were projected for fixed amounts of time. Our revolutionary change

Note:
Items in red are projected except when in parentheses. These are spoken elaborations of the preceding opposites.

was to make letter design a truly perceptual drawing process, accounting for all aspects of form in an original design based on structural fundamentals that had general applicability in design. Intensive, generative experience with letters replaced rendering the surface beauty of letters. (But today you don't have to draw anything!?)

The credo was thus a set of guidelines, a statement of purpose. It had a base in my own experience in a studio school—the School of Design in Basel, augmented by my experience teaching at then Carnegie Institute of Technology. And it was formulated to morally confront society, in particular the world of visual communication.

legacy of a sixties credo

Legacy could mean an obsolete throwback or a vital on-going tradition, a groundwork of durable value. Since it could be either, it is honest to look at it from both sides.

legacy of a sixties credo

I wanted to know if what we set out as a purpose in the late 60's had relevance today and how today's situation challenges those earlier precepts. Or, to ask it another way, if I were to design a program from scratch today, what would be its basis.

Since the 60's we've experienced radical change:

- The vernacular revolution
- The computer revolution
- The sexual revolution and feminism
- Television ubiquity
- Alternative medicine
- New wave and all the small isms
- The information explosion and infotainment
- The internet and burgeoning subcultures
- Globalization and xenophobia
- Mixed media
- Project complexity
- Design of loose parts
- Postmodernism and deconstruction
- Commercial penetration into non-commercial content
- Speed of change
- Death of heroes

What I concluded was that programs in design today tend again to be rendering schools, finding the effects that entice the viewer without the thought and work of original design. "Now that form is easy . . ." was the way one design teacher prefaced her remarks.

Form is only easy, I find, if you abdicate your process to software, templates, or styles.

Returning to CMU in 2001 I had another look at educational purpose and wrote a set of discernment skills which I posited against the generally negative real world pressures we face—a kind of value system for education. They've been updated somewhat for this lecture.

Discernment skills are what I call basic skills: separating the valuable, relevant, fresh, true from the worthless, trivial, stale, false. **Any skill requires guidance and practice. It is not a matter of lip service or perfunctory action.**

I place them in five categories:

Veracity
Clarity
Vital Form
Self
Service

Each category consists of attitudinal and work skills that are foundational ones which transcend stylistic and technological shifts. I'm showing them in confrontation with common real world pressures.

Then I will compare these discernment skills with the way we stated similar concerns in our late 60's credo. You can judge if what I'm describing as a key skill set and the antecedent in the credo have validity for our current situation.

●
veracity:

For example, under veracity we see the real world pressure as deception. Opposing deception is illumination, a discernment skill.

illumination vs deception

Continuing now with aspects of veracity:

substance vs posturing
(expression vs dazzling effects)
allowing reflection vs evasive
speed

1966-68:

Recognition of situational exigencies today: thought and attitudes, issues, materials, functions, change. Study of historical forms in terms of their material-spiritual necessities (non-imitative). Relating to historical matter in an essential way, finding the common and universal threads. Developing a method of problem-solving independent of preconceived notions. Pro-

viding a sequence of problems, gauged in such a way that the knowledge gained in previous problems can be directly utilized.

● clarity:

semiotic precision vs mixed signals

Derrida:

Points out what he sees as a typical discrepancy between intention and form—yielding multiple readings; that, in fact, every viewer sees things differently. I don't see this as a permission to therefore design things with an intentional confusion of meanings, leaving the viewer to find a meaning—as compared to a process of discovering the meaning.

Derrida also warns of the exclusivity of overly bounded forms. The challenge for graphic communication is to create effectively bounded forms with qualities that transcend their immediate usage.

coherent simultaneity vs raging illiteracy

breathing room vs congestion (transparency vs murkiness)

1966-68:

Preparing a student to recognize and work within valid limitations; at the same time to see through arbitrary or purely conventional ones. Cultivation of the objectivisation of feeling: common perception, relevant gestalt, consensus gestalt.

● vital form:

generative process vs stealing (or appropriation)

invention vs stylistic overlay

craft authority vs craft dependence

Craft dependence occurs whenever formal decisions are yielded to software or templates. Craft authority derives from manual and perceptual studies which give the designer true control over image-making, regardless of the medium for transmission.

perceptual proof vs stylistic dependence

paradox vs banality

(poetry vs superfluity)
(positive-negative dynamic vs simplistic form)
abstraction vs literalism
(structural narrative integration vs narrative safety)

1966-68:

Knowledge-by-experience of the language of form, color, and relationships: a command of the generic design means which we define as: point, line and plane, module, proportion, sets, rhythm, scale and dimensionality, texture, color, series, direction, motion, confrontation, symbol, metaphor, thought processes, reproduction processes.

Avoidance of premature style, effects, mannerisms, prejudices, fads, clichés. Generative, non-eclectic formation of visual vocabulary.

Development of superior manual and technical skills as an integral part of the conceptual process. Organic growth of a result. Preservation of the reality of the material means. Development of a student's awareness and aesthetic sensitivity and appreciation.

● self:

connection to the inner self vs outer slickness
(passion & ecstasy vs cynicism & jadedness)
(overcoming resistance vs seeking ease)
(essentials are key vs wants dominate)
relatedness vs alienation
(wholeness vs fragmentation)
fairness toward others vs status seeking

1966-68:

Encouraging self-confrontation: developing an individual point of view and independent judgement. Tireless questioning, evaluating, revising, testing of alternatives.

Internalizing the design process through extensive experimentation that allows for failure (process above result).

Developing a capability in the student to isolate and define a problem for oneself and a personal commitment to and philosophy about one's problem-solving activity.

Providing an educational environment which will induce students to work on the highest possible level qualitatively and allow all to progress according to their own capacities.

● **service:**

accountability vs exploitation

**(user advocacy vs cavalier
superiority)**

long term benefit vs opportunism

ecology, resourcefulness vs excess

1966-68:

Cultivating discernment concerning moral-ethical implications of design (social responsibility).

Preparing a student to face creatively the technological and use shifts throughout a lifetime and conversely, to avoid indulgence of momentary and exploitative fads and fashions. Professional competence instead of professionalism.

● **Summary:**

1966-68

To provide a climate and a controlled series of experience possibilities which will prepare the student to deal intelligently, sensitively and inventively with the whole range of problems in visual communications through fidelity to intrinsic properties of forms and ideas and to self; to enable the student to interrelate with the serious worker in allied professions and the positive strivings of humans generally.

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A prime purpose of education in design is to cultivate the generative, creative spirit. The essential benefit to society is that it frees from the bonds of purely commercial interests, from the mass culture of the empty self, and from moribund tradition. The creative spirit both defines society and gives it direction. It neither condescends to insulting levels nor joins in empty hubris.

For the designer dedicated to the common good, the creative spirit yields results resting on qualities of accessibility in material and perception rather than

the superficial slickness of style.

The genius of creativity is to begin with a very limited, modest circumstance and finding in it an expression of surprising breadth and wider significance. Addressing the local and immediate in ways that are not prescriptive, dogmatic or formalistic places the onus for success on learning—learning of long-term value—and thus on the quality of the teaching.

Education must be seen as a real world in which deeply nurtured discipline and sense of self are cultivated, a place to build essential honesty, authenticity, and concern for the human condition, where the skills to develop communications appropriate to content are fostered. This nurturing requires time and reflection, accorded now to lesser and lesser degrees because of a nervous desire to match external “real world” demands.

In teaching the rhythmic interplay of experiences of the radically simple and the typically complex, both experiences must be kept vital and generative. While building blocks in design education might look outwardly similar, the learning processes and effective outcomes may be completely opposite depending on the quality of the teaching.

Form construction might be seen as a “technicality” but it is so only if it is sought as an end in itself rather than linked to meaning. Form-making is, finally, still the outcome and form quality is at issue. Distinctions have to be made between valid aspects of visual language universals and stylistic entropy ensuing from blind repetition of basics.

Kenneth Hiebert