



When I knew that I was coming here this morning, I took down Volume III of my 12-volume Oxford English Dictionary to look up the definition of design. This great work was published in 1897. That is, before anyone ever heard of the Bauhaus, or Paul Rand or Leo Lionni or Moholy-Nagy, or the great design masters who had formed Pushpin Studios. The dictionary carried many definitions of the word design, with citations going back to the early 16th century.

As a noun, the sixth definition defined design as "A preliminary sketch for a picture or other work of art; the plan for a building or any part of it, or the outline of a piece of decorative work, after which the actual structure or texture is to be completed; a delineation, pattern." The eighth definition was: "the art of picturesque delineation and construction; original work in graphic or plastic art..."

As a verb, it came closer to what we now think of as design: "to form or fashion a work of art." But it was the first definition of the word as a noun that caught my attention:

"A plan or scheme conceived in the mind and intended for subsequent execution; the preliminary conception of an idea that is to be carried into effect by action; a project." This had a subhead, labeled "b", that said: "A scheme formed to the detriment of another; a plan or purpose of attack *upon* or *on*."

That definition came closer to the world that we now share. The fanatics who came out of a clear blue morning on September 11th had a design. That is, a plan to be carried into effect by action. They had made a plan whose purpose was an attack upon or on the towers of the World Trade Center, the city and country in which they stood, and the human beings who worked in them. The design that took shape in Hamburg, or Egypt, or the rocky wastes of Afghanistan succeeded beyond even their twisted visions.

All of us remember where we were when the attack took place. I was four blocks away, saw the explosion when the second plane smashed into the South Tower, was across the street from the site when that tower cracked, bent forward, righted itself, and came down with the sound of an avalanche. My wife was there too – she's a reporter for Japanese magazines – and we were separated in that 25-story-high cloud that millions have now seen on television.

The cloud erupted like some malignant *djinn* – and was so opaque that it looked like a solid. When it engulfed us – I had been hurled into the lobby of a building at 20 Vesey Street, my wife thrown towards Broadway by a cop – when it engulfed us, we lost the horizon. There was no line on the earth to remind us of where we stood, to provide a simple human sense of being anchored. I was in the company of firemen and cops, the door locked behind us, with no means of escape. If the North Tower came down – many of us thought – it would pulverize this puny building and all of us who thought we'd found refuge. Someone found an axe and smashed the doors and sent us out to the street.

The entire world was now white. St. Paul's graveyard. All of Vesey St. City Hall Park. City Hall. J&R Music. Pace. The cloud had covered everything with the pulverized remains of concrete, steel, glass, desks, computers, filing cabinets and human beings. I searched desperately for my wife, walking on the slippery talcum-like powder that covered Broadway. I saw no panic. Not even tears. But the image I remember most clearly of that morning was of more than a hundred women's shoes, kicked off in flight.

I found my wife, who was trying to find me, and then professionalism took over, and I used my own tools to write about what I'd seen. As in all my written work, I sub-consciously used principles I'd acquired in art school, at the School of Visual Arts, at Pratt Institute, or had absorbed from a lifetime of looking at art and listening to music and reading the works of great writers. But I had no time to think my way through stages of composition. The event itself provided the design, gave me my beginning, middle and end. And although the second airplane told us that this was terrorism, we could only imagine the design that existed in the minds of those men who had executed with such sickening success.

In the days and nights and then weeks that followed, all of us tried to adjust to what had happened. We live below Canal Street in New York, which is to say, within the Frozen Zone. We lived each day with the odor of the fires that were still burning seven weeks later. We lived in a time when we had to show passports to policemen in our own country. We were not victims. We were certainly not heroes – that much abused word. We were witnesses.

And as an old New Yorker, many things moved through me in those weeks. I never liked the World Trade Center as architecture, that is to say, as design. I knew the area too well, and hated what had been done to it. When I was a boy, my mother would take me and my younger brother across the great bridge from Brooklyn to explore downtown: the City Hall, and the Customs House, and the building on Broadway and Chambers Street where an Irishman named AT Stewart built the first New York department store in the 1840s. Later, I would go with my father to Radio Row on Cortlandt Street, where tubes for radios were sold from bins parked before buildings that dated to the 1840s. As a young newspaperman, I worked two blocks south of the WTC at the New York Post, and had coffee in the cold mornings in the stalls of the old Washington market. Coffee served by Syrians who read newspapers in Arabic.

That whole world was swept away by the WTC, and used for the landfill that would later become Battery Park City, our Alphaville. And the towers began their climb into the sky, destroying the accidental beauty of the skyline – what Truman Capote once called “a diamond iceberg” -- tilting the mass of downtown to the Hudson side of Manhattan. This too was about design. In 1962, the first non-stop jet passenger service to Europe had begun. The era of the ocean liners came to a shocking end. And the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey walked away from its primary responsibility – assuring the viability and health of the port – and decided to go into the real estate business. They conceived the World Trade Center, and a mixture of ego and salesmanship made them drive the architect – Minoru Yamasaki – to design towers that were taller than the Empire State Building. The clients had established their basic design principle: mine is bigger than yours. A principle as absurd in design as it is in life.

For decades, the WTC was a commercial failure. But people got used to it. So did I. Tourists climbed to its upper stories to view the vast city. Me, I preferred Cass Gilbert's masterpiece, the Woolworth Building, with all its visual delights, but went to the WTC to buy books at Borders or shoes at Florsheim or to enter the glorious downtown bazaar of Century 21. I had no desire to work in those towers, because in my Brooklyn childhood I had often heard another design principle: Never live higher than a fireman's ladder.

For all of that, the assault on the towers filled me, as it did many millions of others, with a sense of outrage. This wasn't architecture criticism. It was murder driven by the warped

mystifications of religious zealotry. Like millions of others, I went through the emotions of rage and awe and knew that whoever was behind this assault on human beings needed to be given a good beating. In the weeks that followed, I saw too how design – on a folk level and a professional level – could be used to express a wide variety of complex emotions. Milton Glaser did his brilliant variation on his own I Love New York design, adding a stain to the edge of the heart, and adding the words “More than Ever.” It ran on the front page of the Daily News and ended up taped to the windows of hundreds of store windows. The censored version – without the tempering stain -- appeared on about a million t-shirts.

In addition there were the spontaneous creations of altars and signs and slogans. At firehouses and police stations. In such public plazas as Union Square. The flag was in many of them, but not all. Children brought their innocent eyes to the events, showing the buildings, showing the airplanes, showing stick figures whose mouths were open in a scream as powerful as any painting by Munch. Walls, subway stations, lampposts were turned into a collage of the missing. Have you seen this woman? Or this man? All of them showing people who were smiling, photos taken at weddings or parties. Their faces transformed some of us from the furies of anger and vengeance to the acceptance of permanent sorrow.

And when it was over, when the fires were finally quenched and the air cleansed by winter winds off the harbor, when the National Guard was gone from the streets of our city, when the armed forces were in Afghanistan to batter the Taliban and hunt for the Al Qaeda, when rain and weather began to tatter the posters of the missing; we began to talk about what had happened to us and whether from this horror something of value had emerged.

I think something has. I don't mean a revived patriotism or the consolations of religion, both of which are certainly honorable. And I don't mean fear. I'd like to call it a healthy fatalism. We've been reminded in the most horrific way of what we already knew but seldom acknowledged: that any day could be the last day of our lives.

And that in turn reminded me of the message conveyed long ago in a wonderful play by William Saroyan: “In the time of your life, live.”

I read that to mean that we can't simply exist. We must live. We must affirm as often as possible that our time as human beings is limited, that each of us is living the only life we will ever have, and we must use that time to the fullest. That is, we shouldn't postpone until some distant date the things that we most want to do or see. If we long to walk in the piazzas of Florence, to stand in the same streets once trod by Leonardo and Donatello and Michelangelo, Alberti and Brunelleschi, then time must be carved out of a busy schedule to make that journey. If we ache to see the murals of Palenque, we must go now. Soon. If we've always planned to read all of Dickens, or to finish Proust, or to plunge into the works of Jane Austen, we shouldn't wait. If we've longed to take a year off to paint, or to write poetry, or simply to read, then it's time to start planning, that is, to make a design for life. We now know that there might be no leisurely future.

We can also examine what we do with our talents, whether we're artists or writers, architects or musicians. Those talents are a kind of privilege, refined and developed through hard work. We can vow that we will not use those talents to add to the lousiness of the world. We can vow that nothing that comes from our hands will debase us personally, or debase the world in which we live, that we will never give in to the prevailing cynicism. I believe that good design is a moral act. Slovenly, careless or cynical work harms other human beings.

Sometimes directly: the slovenly construction of a bridge or a flawed product or an ad that is a lie can actually kill people. But it's more than that: great art, whether created for the self or – as was done for centuries in mediaeval and Renaissance Europe – for a client – makes us more human. It allows us to connect across cultures and across centuries with those who came before us, and we should now be trying to connect to those who have not yet been born. A society's basic values are always expressed through art. Art makes those values visible.

On a simple human level, we must live as if there will be no endless expanse of time. That we could die with hot coffee on the desk and a cheese danish in a cellophane wrapper. In the spirit of healthy fatalism, that means that what matters most is not how, or when, we die, but how we live.

That, in turn, means that nothing human should be left unsaid. We must tell those we love that we love them, that we cherish them, that they have made our lives more human. This need not become an empty ritual. But if we've learned anything at all from September 11, it should be that we honor the dead by loving the living. If we've had old friends that have been lost through stupidity or carelessness or the pressures of work and career, we must track them down and meet them for lunch and start filling in the blanks. If there are old teachers who helped change our lives we must send them notes of gratitude, letting them know that when we were among the unruly young, they showed us the way to the future. If we have children, we must help them through the difficult project of becoming adults, and -- without sermonizing -- explain the snares and traps of the world, and the endless human capacity for folly. If we have grandchildren, we must sit them on our knees and whisper to them about the Count of Monte Cristo.

In the time of your life, live, says Saroyan. Now, as Milton Glaser said, more than ever. Thank you.