World swept by change

I see a *world* swept by *change*. A *world* we inhabit together in which the rules have *changed*. A *world* where our very conceptions of the possible have *changed*.

And the changes of the past century have been profound. Over the course of the 20th century, the telegraph, telephone, photography, films, publishing, and broadcasting have changed how ideas move quickly around the world. The phenomenon of globalization – with the rapid movement of information, trade, people and ideas – is here to stay.

Over the past century, the world's gross domestic product – the goods and services we produce – has increased 5-fold, but trade across national borders has increased 14 times. Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan attributes the surge in international trade to technological innovation and the substitution of ideas and creativity for material bulk and brute human effort.

The growing interest in creativity is a response to the relentless pace of change in the Information Age. Educators and economists alike are asking how can we best educate and train a skilled and adaptable workforce for the future.

But creativity and innovation cannot be divorced from preserving and understanding the cultural legacies that nourish and sustain innovation. An over-abundance of information moving at lightening speed is not knowledge and will not yield wisdom without judgment and reflection. Constant innovation can sever our connections with the past and lead us to neglect our sources of collective memory, values, and identity.

So, the technological achievements of the old century and the rising tide of globalization are not without serious flaws. We could do without the atomic bomb and the threat of nuclear war. We could do without pollution and overcrowding. We could do without fear and hatred engendered when civilizations clash. We could do without the loss of cultures and the loss of innocent lives. There are some changes that are not welcome.

No one, it seems to me, could have imagined the sight of the twin towers of the World Trade Center collapsing upon themselves, evaporating from the top down, vanishing in a cascade of smoke and debris and hidden humanity. As we all reflect on the tragedy of September 11 and we hear calls for tightened American Security and a war on terrorism it is obvious that none of us has any good answers to that most compelling question: "Why?" What is the cause of this evil?

We must seek answers at the deepest level – in the worldview of "the other" where lies a sense of grave injustice and suffering and an endless cycle of despair, hopelessness, retribution and anguish. We must look as well to the way people reacted to this impossible change. How disaster brought forth from the friends and families, from New York City, from the U.S. and the world, a renewed sense of our common obligation to one another, to the community, to this world.

The designer's role

What is our obligation as members of the design profession? How do we respond to this fundamental change? To respond effectively, we must first examine our craft and determine our value to the world at large.

Many outsiders do not readily appreciate the value of the design. But, we, as trained professionals, know the value of design, it is a bridge between dream and reality, chaos and order, and – in an artistic sense – between the mundane and the sublime. Design – good design – is a powerful tool in helping to achieve economic, social, educational and environmental goals. It is also an essential element in bringing technology to the marketplace, providing a sustainable environment, developing critical thinking and viable solutions and, perhaps most importantly, in breaking down the physical and psychological barriers to full participation in society. Still, "the world" could care less about design. It is easily ignored in the chaos.

"The world's" blase attitude towards design bothers many in our profession, prompting some to lament, "How can we increase awareness about design in the world?" But, given the dramatic changes in the world and the rules by which it operates, perhaps this is no longer an appropriate or responsible question. Rather than, "How can we increase awareness about design in the world?" -- shouldn't we be pondering -- "How can we increase our awareness about the world?"

"How can we increase our awareness about the world?" What does this mean? After all, designers are worldly people. We can clearly see all the spaces, pages, frames, sites and places, even causes in need of design. But is this how we should be looking? The world may see itself differently, less as a place and more as people in the flow of life. Every thing is related to everything else What makes the spaces and places important to the world is how they serve life . . . or impede it.

The greatest skill designers can bring to the community, and society as a whole, is the power to help life flow. Whether its an ad page or an airport, design works when it resonates with the instincts and intuitions in life in motion—in the body, in the heart, and in the mind.

In the words of British design educator Nigel Cross, we designers possess a gift, "the designerly way of thinking." This "designerly way of thinking" can also be termed "interdisciplinary thinking," and is what allows us to envision ideas from different perspectives while drawing inspiration from multiple disciplines. Because of it, we see the multi-faceted nature inherent in any problem. We borrow from history, philosophy, science, art, technology, and sociology in arriving at solutions.

We apply our "designerly way of thinking" in tangible or intangible environments. We use it daily as practitioners of a single design discipline, or in collaborative efforts that bring design professionals of different specializations together with experts in other fields, all working in concert towards a unified vision that changes and improves our environment.

Our "designerly way of thinking" comes so naturally to us that often we tend to take it for granted, forgetting how easily our clients may miss its subtlety. However, we must understand that we possess a unique skill-set, vital to today's world. The inter-relationships we identify can work in concert to shape an inclusive vision to change and improve our environment—in its physical, social, and virtual forms. Our abilities to

appreciate the multi-faceted nature of problems, borrow from varied disciplines in creatively solving the problems, collaborate, and reach a mutual understanding will become essential to all aspects of our collective lives whether social, political, or economic —and at all levels of community—civic, national and global.

Interdisciplinary skills and design are also desperately needed to shape our collective environment and the civic realm —both physical and virtual. This is an exciting arena for designers, for there are new venues emerging in private, public, and non-profit sectors that will give citizens the means to express their needs and to solve their communal problems. This is where we often encounter our clients, if not with their business hats on, then in their roles as volunteers, civic leaders, and appointed officials.

An email received from the Vera List Center for Art and Politics at NYU entitled, "Looking forward, New York 2050" illustrates how interdisciplinary thinking can shape the future.

"Suddenly and tragically, the conversation about the future of New York has started pervading media and private discussions. Each day, newspapers bring voices and opinions from all kinds of people (architects, developers, historians, real estate business owners, writers) about what to do with what is left after the destruction of the WTC in Lower Manhattan.
>   *We start with reference to September 11th and the plans and ideas proposed for rebuilding. But short-term needs are not enough, and the criteria for sound decisions or even the terms of the debate need to be rooted in a broader framework.*
>   *The issues and choices related to architecture, social policy, economics, arts and culture, must be framed in the larger context of space. The future of Lower Manhattan must be related to all five boroughs of New York City. A discussion about the future of New York is not only a domestic issue, nor simply a metropolitan one, but rather one that involves New York's interdependency with the rest of the world."*

Under this altered paradigm of interdependent thinking, businesses and governments will need to begin to address problems and communities using the "designer's way" to cope with the ever-changing demands of people... understanding their needs from a variety of cultural perspectives, appreciating the role that history has played in shaping the actions of individuals and the group, and responding to the stresses and opportunities of the current age while forecasting those coming in the next five, ten, twenty years and beyond.

Specialization is the hallmark of separation; it is the pieces of the elephant. And since none of us can be skilled in all fields, seeing problems whole and tackling them in whole ways require communication and partnership. Working in community to help mend its disparate parts, we integrate all the parts that make design work-- for the flow of life.
In the places where we and our neighbors make our homes, life does not flow when housing is alienating, when there is no place for public life, when the only art or graphics in neighborhoods is graffiti or official signs prohibiting this, prohibiting that. Places and spaces harbor clues to what's wrong in community-- the monotony of 'safe' suburbs, the despair of old neighborhoods, the wall between them.

"Our society will never be great until our cities are great, in the next 40 years, we must rebuild the entire USA. There is the decay of the centers and the despoiling of the suburbs. There is not enough

housing for our people or transportation for our traffic. Open land is vanishing and old landmarks are violated. A few years ago we were concerned about the ugly American. Today, we must act to prevent an ugly America." …Lyndon B Johnson

Through interdisciplinary work with other fields, we aim to demonstrate how rich our communities can be when design is part of our common cultural dialogue. That is very different from a product delivered by designers to a client.

This will not be an easy task, because as all designers know, interdisciplinary collaboration is harder than working alone. It takes more time, it may cost more money, and the designer may have to give up star billing. But interdisciplinary collaboration is the heart of a true design process. It helps us understand the ever-changing needs and demands of people and community from the variety of cultural and historical perspectives that are the norm in our pluralistic society.

The power of design is extended ten-fold when it springs from collaboration, involvement, teamwork, and community. Sometimes the partners are obvious, and sometimes it's up to us to figure out who we are designing for and should therefore be designing with-- and we must look also to see what professions besides design are needed on the project-- to bring other viewpoints, wider input into the process.

We are talking now about major change. We are moving beyond the tribe. Historically, people have tended to communicate among themselves. We focus through a single lens on the preoccupations of our special discipline, and not about design as a fundamental way of thinking and working collaboratively.

National leadership is critical to the emerging practice of building community by designing with interdisciplinary partnerships. There are pockets of people doing this across the nation. We need to learn more about the successes. How did they achieve them? Who needs help, what kind, and how can the national interdisciplinary community contribute? How do we institute community design as a national standard of civic responsibility?

Beyond serving the corporate sector, many of our clients may already be active as "citizen/designers" by taking on other roles in their communities. Developing an appreciation for the notion that design is a creative, collaborative activity and a civic responsibility should begin in grade school. This idea of "citizen/designer" is not so far-fetched. As Charles and Ray Eames pointed out in the Bicentennial exhibition, "The World of Franklin & Jefferson," many or our early political heroes were designers not only figuratively, but also literally, with diverse skills and backgrounds.

For instance, Paul Revere, trained as an engraver & silversmith, produced the first issue of Continental paper money, designed the new State seal of Massachusetts, and helped to tip popular support towards revolution by producing anti-Red Coat propaganda engravings.

Tom Paine, who wrote Common Sense, the text that forced public opinion in favor of independence, was trained as an inventor, that day's equivalent of a product designer.

Benjamin Franklin, publisher of his own newspaper the Pennsylvania Grazette, created political cartoons such as the famous "Join or Die."

Most significant was Thomas Jefferson: although trained as a farmer, he is better known as one of the most precocious intellects and talents this country has ever produced. In addition

to designing buildings at Monticello and the University of Virginia, he was an "architect" of the Declaration of Independence and the Louisiana Purchase. Jefferson even joined Franklin and Samuel Adams on the committee that developed an important logotype: the Seal of the United States.

That these brilliant patriots their interdisciplinary skills to shape a new government is hardly surprising considering that the education of their day emphasized a balance of knowledge and skills placing the arts on a level with science. It is ironic that today the balance has been lost, with the arts —and in turn design- under attack on so many fonts.

The de-evolution of design

To continue to effect this bit of magic in a fast-changing world, we may need to come to grips with two things. The first is what I call de-evolution of design -- so-called high design. I see a lot of it and I've done it, and sometimes it is most appropriate. But it also seems to me that what makes design 'right' for this needy world is changing -- opening up, moving away from long-held theories of high design and over-reliance on formal theory.

So if the world doesn't appreciate high design, it may be because in a time of great social need, design divorced from community is irrelevant and dismissed as elitist. Why? Because the rapid changes of technology and an unprecedented mix of cultures are pulling the rug of place, of familiarity and common history out from under America. Consequently, there is a great need to feel welcome in this volatile world. People very much need design that helps them touch base with something real, to know:

that there is community; and

that they are a part of it.

So now, if we are to build design through community and vice versa, what is community? It comes in many forms that can be physical, social or virtual, but above all community is the opposite of separation. Community is the interaction of people in and with a place--a neighborhood, a town-- or it is the interaction of people bonded by common interests, a common religion or ethnic identity. And the new kid on the block, virtual community in cyberspace can have local or global implications, fostering communication between people of similar interest and motivations who work together where ever they are in community and between communities.

There is a crying need for design that resonates with commonalities of humaneness, that bridges gaps between disparate people and helps us deal with modern life-- that is the design of the future. Community begins with a bow toward social equity. As William Mitchell writes of cyberspace:

"Surely, the most fundamental challenge in building the biosphere will be to deploy access according to principles of social equity — not in ways that heighten the privilege of the haves and further marginalize the have-nots. For designers and planners, the task of the 21st century will be to build the bitsphere — a worldwide, electronically mediated environment in which networks are everywhere"

The egalitarian impulse of the bitsphere can teach us a great deal about the living, breathing sphere of family, neighborhood, world.

Conclusion

In closing, I challenge all of you to become architects of change. You begin by bringing an understanding of the changes going on in the world, and a sensitivity to the many cultural values and traditions that give value to the human condition. Your next step is through your individual action at the community level, where the true architects of change reside. We are all Thomas Jeffersons, capable of being citizen-designers, shaping our new destiny, rising

from the ashes to bring change. Begin in the home, move to the street, reach out to the neighborhood, restore the community, re-imagine the world.

Where the twin towers once stood, they have shone two beams of light up into the night sky as a potent symbol. Jefferson once wrote that "Light and liberty go together," and that the most effectual means of preventing the perversion of power into tyranny are "to illuminate. . . the minds of the people at large." The architecture of change depends upon an enlightened design community.