



## Design Ignites Change

*Design as Social Educator*

We drove through the gritty streets of downtown Los Angeles in search of a billboard designed by Miguel, a shy Mexican teenager who spoke little English. He had recently come to the U.S. illegally in the trunk of a car.

Miguel was a member of Heart of Los Angeles Youth, an after-school program for at-risk high school students. Those of us in the car with Miguel recently completed a project that was created and lead by community artist and educator Janeil Engelstad. Visualizing Violence paired inner-city high school students with graphic designers in Los Angeles to create billboards around the theme of gun violence.

We made a sharp turn and there was Miguel's billboard, posted high above an auto parts store. We all hopped out, elated to see how great it looked. For a long time, Miguel stared silently at the billboard, it was the first time he had seen the small painting he did weeks ago enlarged to 40 times its original size. The central image was a small boy playing with a toy gun, to the left of him was the image of a young man dressed for work, to the right a gang member brandishing a gun. "What will your little cowboy be when he grows up?" asked the billboard.

As tears welled in his eyes, Miguel broke his silence and said, "I feel like we Latinos are always the ones blamed for gun violence, people say we don't care." He went on to say that he was proud to take a stand and communicate his concern around the issue so publicly. We could tell by his comments that creating this billboard had a profound effect on him, that the act of developing a powerful message for his community encapsulated the promise of America.

Simple as it may seem, this billboard exercise not only exposes students to a potential career in design, but demonstrates to

them the power of design to impact social change. As designer Victor Papanek said in *Design for the Real World*, "Design can and must become a way in which young people can participate in changing society." By instilling these ideals in the next generation of creative talent, we will help them to carry these ideals into their professionals lives.

The challenge facing the design community in particular is how to expand what we do to have a greater impact in the area of social change. The traditional approach to social responsibility, in graphic design at least, has revolved around two things: the materials we choose, i.e., specifying recycled paper, and the clients we choose, i.e., working with a nonprofit or messaging a corporation's socially responsible agenda.

We, designers, have the ability to contribute so much more. As the definition of designer expands we should add social entrepreneur to the list. Those designers in the forefront are using their design-thinking skills to develop and execute their own solutions to social problems—pushing the boundaries of what design

can do. By taking the lead in implementing our own projects, we can and should set precedents and create sustainable markets for socially responsible design.

John Bielenberg, a Belfast, Maine, and San Francisco-based graphic designer, used his entrepreneurial spirit to start Project M in 2003. This program for young people was inspired by the work of Samuel Mockbee and Rural Studio.

The Rural Studio brings architecture students to Hale County, Alabama, where they design, fund and build extraordinarily innovative housing and community projects for one of the most underserved areas of the U.S. During the hot and dusty summer of 2007, Bielenberg and a group of eight intrepid college students headed south to the head-



Billboard from Visualizing Violence by Miguel, age 19, in collaboration with mentor Janeil Engelstad.

## design issues

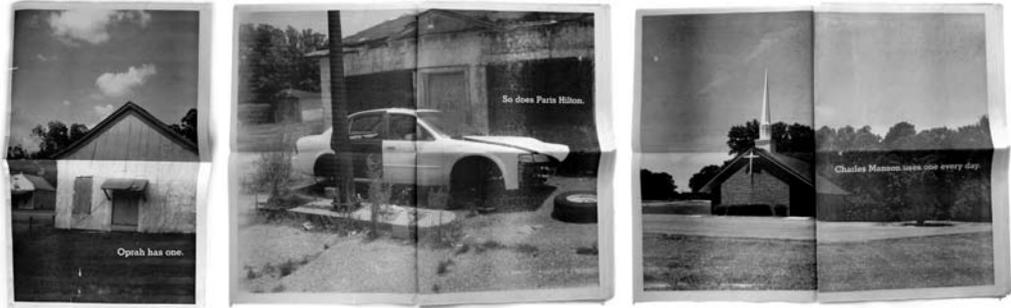
quarters of Rural Studio for a month, to see how graphic design could improve the lives of Hale County residents.

“When we start a project, I act as catalyst; it is the students who take the lead to determine which issue we’ll tackle,” says Bielenberg. His goal is to take the students out of their comfort zone and to teach them to “Think Wrong”—the Project M motto.

In Hale County, one out of every four homes doesn’t have access to clean drinking water. The problem can be easily solved with the installation of a \$425 water meter, but the challenge residents face is that so many have severely limited incomes.

With the problem so clearly defined, the Project M team decided to mount an awareness and fundraising campaign to provide the community with as many water meters as they could. The main messaging piece was a provocative 24-page newspaper with a cover line that read “Oprah has one,” a reference to the fact that the talk show maven most certainly has a water meter. The students also silk-screened T-shirts with a bold number 425 on the front, which they sold for a staggering \$425 each—the cost of a single water meter. The project delivered 120 water meters to residents in the community. “Thinking Wrong” did something very right.

The constraints of a professional designer’s job do not usually allow for exploration in the area of social change. The academic world is an incubator of innovation; major breakthroughs in math and science happen at the graduate level. In 2004, Mark Zuckerberg founded Facebook with a band of fellow students while at Harvard; he was twenty at the time.



Project M newspaper brochure, part of a fundraising campaign to provide underserved residents in Hale County, Alabama, with clean drinking water.

In an effort to tap some of this youthful energy, AIGA, a professional association for design, in collaboration with INDEX, an organization in Copenhagen dedicated to promoting how design can improve quality of life, launched Designing Water’s Future. “This international competition among college and university students brings design-thinking to bear on the global water crisis. We wanted to encourage students to develop solutions that have an impact and influence on behavior, raising awareness around issues of fresh water,” says Ric Grefé, executive director of AIGA.

Participation in the program exceeded the organizers’ expectation, with 225 students from 27 countries submitting projects that ranged from an innovative filtering system that can be dropped from an airplane into contaminated flood waters, to an awareness campaign targeting lawn-owning Los Angeles residents. Seven of the projects with the widest potential impact were then selected as the finalists. (The winning project will receive the \$10,000 challenge prize to implement its solution.)

The organizers plan to work closely with the winning students to help them realize their projects by 2011. “So often, the final execution of a project is a hurdle that a designer has a hard time overcoming,” says Grefé. By helping the students develop a business plan and introducing them to venture capitalists, the organizers will also be giving them a set of valuable entrepreneurial skills that will help to broaden the definition of design at the professional level.

Another example of the intersection of design and social thinking in education is Design Ignites Change. Conceived and developed by my own New York-based graphic design and marketing firm Worldstudio, in partnership with Adobe Youth Voices, Design Ignites Change challenges college and university students to develop socially-minded projects that benefit their local communities. “We believe that creativity has enormous power for positive social change,” says Worldstudio partner Andréa Pellegrino. “We created this initiative to highlight and bring to fruition some of the amazing projects that we saw being conceived in schools around the country.” A goal of the program is to find corporate and foundation support for the best projects, so they don’t just live in the pages of a student’s portfolio. The



A public awareness campaign, targeting lawn-owning Los Angeles residents, by CalArts, one of the winning schools in the AIGA’s Designing Water’s Future competition. Logo design by Manuel Garcia and Michelle Park, billboard design by Maece Seirafi-Najar.

Web site ([www.designigniteschange.org](http://www.designigniteschange.org)) showcases the work of the students.

In response to Design Ignites Change, the Academy of Art University in San Francisco created a classroom initiative for MFA students called Sustaining San Francisco. Graphic design, photography, industrial and fashion design students are developing solutions to sustainability issues that pertain



Logo for Design Ignites Change mentoring initiative Create! Don't Hate. Design by Worldstudio.

to the local community. At the end of the spring 2009 semester, the work was featured in a public exhibition, with the goal of executing a number of the more successful concepts. "An initiative like this demonstrates

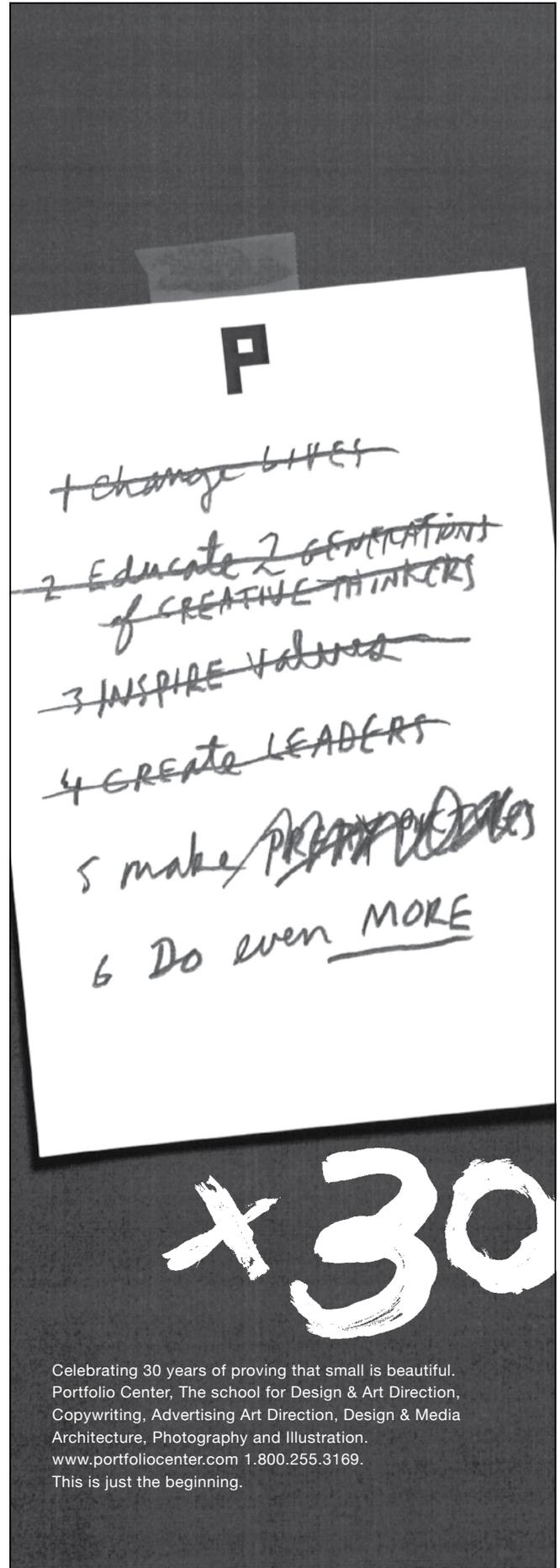
to the general public how creativity and design-thinking can be applied to a particular issue," says Pellegrino.

A major component of Design Ignites Change is a mentoring program for underserved high school students. The professional community is encouraged to participate through a six-week, self-guided mentoring program called Create! Don't Hate., where teams design powerful billboards that deal with issues of tolerance. The goal is to mount as many billboards as possible around the country. Peter Roman, a designer at the Cincinnati office of international branding firm Landor, says, "We have long wanted to set up a mentoring program here in the studio, but had no idea of where to begin. Create! Don't Hate. provides us with everything we need. It makes the process really manageable and fun for our office to execute." He goes on to say, "It is particularly exciting for us to be a part of a larger program that has some visibility."

### Design as social revolution

In the academic world, the freedom exists to explore how design can impact social change. How do we create space for designers to do this type of work at the professional level where concern about the bottom line is often the driving force. All too often the professional design community generates a flurry of activity around social issues in the form of a manifesto, a symposium or conference without much follow-through. The road is paved with good intentions, but in comparison to all of the discussion, there rarely seem to be enough tangible results.

In 1964, a group of designers drafted *First Things First*, a manifesto that railed against the system, encouraging the design community to use their creative abilities for more worthy causes than the selling of "dog biscuits." In 2000 the manifesto was revised and updated, with a list of design



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## What's Next?

So, what can you do right now? While so many of the world's problems are large, it's best to start small. Launching your own project is somewhat like launching a business. You may not have to go as far as drafting a business plan, but here are some brief things to consider moving forward.

### Find your passion

This is the single driving force behind positive social change. Any action you take should have the potential to give you great personal reward.

### Start local

You don't have to solve world hunger, or global warming. Small acts inspire big ideas; it's the proverbial flapping of the butterfly's wings. How can you make the lives of people in your neighborhood better?

### Go beyond the obvious

Incorporate new skills and modes of thinking into your process. Not only will it make for a better end product, but it will educate and engage you along the way. Another reward for thinking outside the box is the new knowledge that you gain.

### Find partners, build a coalition

Don't try and do it alone. Social change is often best achieved through community effort. By dividing the workload, the project can be implemented much easier with limited time and resources. Contributing something small to a larger initiative is better than being overwhelmed, and failing, by trying to do it alone.

### Be realistic

Think about what you can do with the resources that you have available, including the time you are willing to spend and any project costs. How will you cover those costs? Try not to think of this as just your way to "give back," but build compensation into your plan—a way to at least cover some of your time. It may not be much, but it starts you thinking in a more sustainable way.

### Raise some cash

One crucial element missing from the abilities of many creative professionals is the skill of securing funding for projects that are not client-based. In order to expand skills beyond assigned tasks and become more entrepreneurial, we need to secure funding for self-generated projects. Think about ways to fund a project through foundation grants, a client relationship or corporate sponsorship.

### Execute

This is what designers do best. Organize and execute your project just as you would for a client.

### Measure success

Did it work? Any tangible information you can gather on the success of your endeavor will help you demonstrate the power of design to impact social change.

### Spread the word

To educate the public and business community, we need to broadcast the results of our efforts. Promoting an innovative social project you have executed to your clients and the press just might create a new market for your capabilities.

## design issues



Founding Partners:



Project logos for Design Ignites Change. Design by Worldstudio.

luminaries signing on to much fanfare but little visible effect beyond accolades in design publications.

*First Things First* has now faded once again into the history books, and the Designers Accord has taken its place. The Accord is a global coalition of designers, educators, researchers, engineers and corporate leaders, working together to create positive environmental and social impact. By signing on to the Accord, you pledge to follow a set of guidelines to promote the best practices around the issue of sustainability. All are invited to sign on and so far over 150,000 have.

Jen van der Meer, one of the founders of the Accord, says, "We don't want the Accord to be something people just talk about. It is a movement, a voluntary community where designers share experiences, learn and grow." The decentralized and self-organized effort happens through an online platform and town-hall-style meetings across the U.S., where designers come together around the issue. The organization also plans to develop a component for the educational community.

One hopes that this is not just another passing fad to make designers feel as though they are contributing to a greater cause, without actually having to do anything. As one prominent San Francisco designer informally put it, "What concerns me is that there is no accountability, it's just fluff," so he questions its validity.

Creating an organization that anyone can easily participate in is a noble idea, but getting those participants to act on the promise and demonstrate change is the challenge. Currently, it's fashionable for corporations to jump on the "green" bandwagon, often in name only. To be taken seriously, the design community can't go for a temporary ride, since this is a critical issue to which we can make a positive contribution. If the Accord can expand its efforts and demonstrate that real activity is taking place, then it will have succeeded. Will the Designers Accord be yet another well-meaning but ineffective movement in design history? It's too early to tell, but right now it is a timely idea with a lot of support.

Often what holds a designer back is the prevailing attitude that executing social work only falls under the category of



The Design Ignites Change Web site ([www.designigniteschange.org](http://www.designigniteschange.org)) features design-related social change projects from schools around the country. Design by Worldstudio and Citizen Scholar.

pro bono. “Giving back” is an altruistic idea, but with limited time and resources it’s often not realistic. This attitude has to change in order to create a sustainable model that not only promotes this type of work, but also encourages it in the marketplace. As creative professionals, we should be compensated for the time and effort that we put into solving not only our client’s projects but, whenever possible, even for the projects we may create ourselves around social issues.

So, how do we integrate this type of work into our daily activities, with the eventual goal of being compensated for it, even modestly? By creating and executing our own projects around the issues we care most about, we will do a number of things:

- Allow ourselves the freedom to use design thinking in new and innovative ways without the constraints of a client—just the constraints of the problem at hand.
- Build case studies for new modes of design thinking that demonstrate the power of design to impact change.
- Create a sustainable market for ourselves to perpetuate this work.

The world we live in is shaped by design at every level. The work we do as graphic designers can sell, persuade, educate and inspire. As designers, we are trained to address projects and problems in creative and innovative ways. We get excited about pushing the envelope for our clients. If we can unleash this creativity and innovation on pressing social problems, the possibilities for positive social change are endless—and couldn’t be more timely. **CA**

*Editor’s note: Now is the ideal time to be thinking about how you can ignite change. —DK Holland*

Notes:

1. Papanek, Victor, *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* Second Edition, 1984, Academy Chicago Publishers.



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