Interview with Katherine McCoy

Katherine McCoy is co-chairperson of the Department of Design at Cranbrook Academy of Art and partner of McCoy & McCoy Associates. Her design practice emphasizes interior design, graphic design, and marketing for cultural, educational and corporate clients. She writes frequently on design criticism and history, and has co-produced a television documentary on Japanese design. She is a fellow and past president of the Industrial Designers Society of America, and past vice president of the American Institute of Graphic Arts. She recently completed the design of Cranbrook Design: The New Discourse, a book published by Rizzoli International.

What role do designers play in the development of today's great and successful products?

Designers make their biggest contribution when they are brought in at the beginning of the product development process, ideally before a particular product is focused on as part of the strategic planning of the company's product line concept and marketing concept.

One of the most brilliant product designs might be the SONY Walkman where designers innovated or visualized an entirely new product type. There was no existing market data to suggest that such a product would be successful or that there was an existing market for it. The designers connected the entire range of their design skills to conceive this new product concept based on their understanding of people's lifestyles, values, activities, and the popular culture. The designers recognized the potential for a new way of listening to music based on recreational and fitness activities and the contemporary need for acoustical privacy. The Walkman, a tape recorder that did not record but only played back, became a brilliant solution to many existing needs that nobody had before identified.

Rather than just introduce yet another product version to compete in an already existing market, companies can go much further by creating new product types, even creating new lifestyle activities. Designers are consumers themselves and participants in the everyday culture. They integrate that knowledge with their professional design, business, marketing, and technical expertise.

Let me ask you to expand on that a bit more, because I think anybody on the product development team might say, "We live within the culture. Why can't we make the same contribution as the designer?" What makes the designer so special?

Designers combine skills of analysis and structured conceptualization with intuition and the ability to visualize abstractions. This unique blend results in a special kind of innovation.

What other roles do you feel designers are playing?

One of the designer's traditional roles is to be the user's advocate. This requires an expertise in the field of ergonomics, not just physical ergonomics, but psychological and perceptual ergonomics as well. Making products "user friendly" makes them approachable, comprehensible, and satisfying to operate, and promotes a sense of competency in the user, which enhances the product and increased sales. A comprehensible product will also be more likely to be operated correctly and safely. There is also a psychological dimension and a cultural dimension of ergonomics. Designers imbued in products communicate values that resonate with the user's personal and social value systems, so that products fit into consumer life patterns more appropriately. Interpreting culture is very important. Designers are trained in the history of our culture, in the history of science, literature, and art. Designers are also the advocates for the environment. The life cycle of a product is the equation between its resource consumption and its life expectancy, its disposability, and recycle-ability. The designer is able to find new connections to reduce the environmental impact of products, creating a better product and a bottom line, as well. Environmental responsibility is good business. Smart products require the designer to be an interpreter of psychological ergonomics. Products are becoming highly complex in their operation and many of their services are dematerializing to become information. Industrial designers need to understand visual communication principals to help their users navigate the conceptual interface of a product display and its use sequences.

Do you feel that designers' roles are changing?

The designer is becoming a key player in corporate strategy and the product development process. Business is altering the traditional linear product development process where designers were only brought in late in the process. A more holistic strategic process utilizes interdisciplinary teams that work concurrently and more fluidly. The technical expertise of the designer, the form-giving expertise of the designer, and the marketing expertise of the designer are major aspects of design.

The designer is also a cultural interpreter, skilled in bringing personal values, societal values, environmen-

tal values, and cultural values to the product process. The world looks to the United States for the incredible richness of our popular culture. If designers bring their almost anthropological understanding of poplar culture to the process, the product that they make will have much more resonance in the marketplace.

Katherine, what primary skills do you think designers need to be able to create these "resonate" products?

A perpetual curiosity, an alertness, a participation in the culture, an attitude of continual learning and self-education. The designer is the interpreter of many disparate facts and conditions needed to bring a product concept together. The formalized skills that the designer must have include continually updated knowledge of technological processes— from industrial technology and fabrication to complex computer concepts, the mature ability to bring form to concept, basic engineering, business theory, and marketing skills and strategies. The ideal designer might have both an MBA and a masters in anthropology, as well as excellent conventional design training. Designers need to be extremely well-educated people, both formally and informally, with thorough liberal arts and sciences education. At the same time designers must be comfortable in the business community.

Are these skills being taught today?

No one program embodies the ideal industrial design training, although there are some that do very well. It is wiser for an aspiring industrial designer to have four years of undergraduate university education in which they would have a thorough liberal arts and sciences training along with business, marketing, introductory engineering, and introductory art history, design history, and problem solving methodologies. Following that would be an extended professional masters design program of at least three years. Undergraduate art schools have very limited academics and business courses.

What about practitioners who are out of school— how can they acquire some of these skills?

A number of designers have completed MBA programs, allowing them more mobility and comfort within the business community. Education is a self-initiated life-long process. Every designer should be constantly reading a wide range of cultural materials, not just professional information. I'd like to see lots of designers get anthropology degrees. Anthropology has everything to tell us about our role in society. When anthropologists 2,000 years from now dig up our trash dumps, they will be "reading" a wealth of implications about our culture from the products that we have designed. Designers make

culture. We should know more about culture.

From your perspective, as your graduates assume their roles as the designers and interpreters of culture, are they responding to society's changing view of the quality of life? And, if so, how is it effecting their work with smarter products and environmental issues?

Industrial designers need to read philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and environmental writing. Everything applies; the challenge is to bend the ideas of many disciplines to our particular media and situations. A designer is a generalist who can draw from a universe of sources and focus it. The nature of design is the focusing of diversity to the problem of the moment, to extrapolate what is appropriate and bring it to closure. Designers contribute an interdisciplinary tolerance of a wide range of culture—the engineering culture, the marketing culture, the bottom line culture, the culture of the philosopher, the art historian, and the anthropologist. Designers must be incredibly flexible, speaking many different languages.

Every time you said "industrial designer" I have had this feeling that you're really saying "designer" in a much broader sense. Do you feel that the design professions are blending?

There will always be certain types of designers who are very focused, and many will stay in conventional areas of design. The field of industrial design is changing because the technology, the economy, and the culture are changing, and the environmental situation is critical. If a large part of the technology is information and communication, more and more product services are dematerialized into information rather than concrete physical functions. The term industrial designer relates to hard physical forms. The mechanical aspects of products seem to be decreasing to the size of a silicon chip. Since it was coined in the 1920s, the term "industrial" designer has always been somewhat misleading, but it is increasingly inappropriate. "Industrial design" is an anachronistic term in a post-industrial era.

Maybe we ought to change our name to post-industrial designers?

The terms "post-modern" or "post-industrial" relinquishes the obligation to actually define and comprehend our present condition. We are only defining ourselves as not what we were before.

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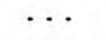313.642.9570
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product will also be more likely to be operated correctly and safely.
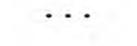
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