

HearSay: 10 Conversations on Design

A Design Education Conference, November 7–9, 2003, The University of the Arts

Social Action: *What is the designer's responsibility to his/her community? How are communities defined and how can designers better connect them?*

The r-word has been a hot topic for years. From Garland's "First Things First" manifesto (1964) to Papanek's "Design for the Real World" (1971) to this year's design conference agendas there has been no shortage of hype on how important it is for design to be responsible.

Are a designer's responsibilities any different from those of the normal citizen? In most situations probably not, but designers do have at least two unique roles. First, they specify materials for manufacture that have a significant and often harmful effect on the environment; second, they coordinate the production and proliferation of images, which in turn influence the attitudes and behaviors of the public at large. The individual who wishes to work within a framework of social responsibility may be stymied by the very nature of the profession as it now functions. Though designers may be empowered by clients to make aesthetic decisions, the client generally determines the purpose and scope of a project and hence its societal impact.

Compounding this, the professionalization of their practice (through exclusive conferences, publications and awards ceremonies) creates an impenetrable barrier between designers and those outside its stylish borders. Educators are left to work within an art school paradigm of aesthetics, form and style, where the extreme emphasis on technical training further disables them from addressing larger cultural issues. Their students, upon graduation, are judged on the look of their portfolio and their facility with digital production tools.

Gestures such as printing on recycled paper and recognition of small-time do-gooders are so widespread that larger issues of sustainability and radical cutback of production are often lost in the celebration. Barring a major societal revision of the capitalist model, it is left to the individual designer to struggle with the complexities of his/her responsibility.