

Foreword: “A Shared Language”
By Shawn M. McKinney

(Excerpted from the book: *The Strategic Designer*, By David Holston, HOW Books, Cincinnati, OH, 2011.)

Several years ago, over dinner with a mentor, I brought up the perennially difficult question of explaining to someone what we designers do for a living. How does one possibly explain design to someone unfamiliar with the discipline, without getting bogged down in an exhaustive, self-referential exercise in futility?

He laughed and began moving his silverware around. He caused his knife to trade places with his fork, then after a moment's consideration returned them to their original positions. He slid his fork a half-inch to his left, then a few nudges north. He straightened his spoon to run exactly parallel to his knife and fork. He moved his water glass a bit to his left, to left-align it precisely with his knife. This, he suggested, is what we do.

In essence, as designers, this IS what we do. We move things about. We consider new combinations, new possibilities. We align one thing with another. We create physical (and psychological, and metaphorical) relationships. We consider size, weight, space, proportion, materiality and so forth. We utilize, knowingly or not, design author Robin Williams's catchy list of principles: Contrast, Repetition, Alignment, Proximity. We constantly add to the world's landfills while struggling to improve our visual environments. We do much, in fact, to order, organize, reinterpret, shape and communicate ideas, information and space.

Yet, we continue to struggle to communicate what exactly we do, and why it is of value and significance. In particular, we struggle to communicate the value of design to the business community. Our professional organization, the American Institute of Graphic Arts, has devoted many hours and resources over the past several years to address just this. Yet too often, designers perceive business as fundamentally foreign to our way of thinking, while business leaders are often reluctant to credit the role design plays in their own success. We can hardly fail to acknowledge each other's presence, yet we often find ourselves without a clue as to how to join forces, how to find common ground and share notes. Business we tend to think of as a left-brain activity, while certainly design belongs to the right. Yet, we need both sides, working together, to function effectively. Designers stand to benefit immensely from strengthening their business acumen, while business people only increase their chances of success by thinking more like designers.

How then, to bring both sides together, to build bridges, to encourage a mutually beneficial dialogue and collaboration? It just so happens we share a language. That language is “process,” as Dave Holston makes clear in the pages that follow. Both designers and business people have their own ways of doing things, particular processes for solving problems and achieving results. Yet, we share many principles in common.

In both the worlds of business and design, as in many other walks of life, repetition is a key element of success. What distinguishes the professional from the amateur, first and foremost, are degrees of skill, discipline, and experience that enable someone to repeat a process as a means of obtaining a desired result, again and again. In areas of practice such as business, medicine and food preparation, repetition and predictability are essential.

Creativity and experimentation are perhaps emphasized more strongly and more often in the field of design, yet here, too, on closer inspection, we see the importance of repetition and process. Here, too, we can see the essential role that process and repetition play in producing success.

How, then, does one move from amateur to professional status. One route is several years of intensive on-the-job-training, under the expert tutelage of seasoned veterans dealing with everyday challenges. Many design disciplines do not currently require profession certification, or even a college degree. A strong portfolio of work, solid references, and the ability to make a convincing presentation may still be enough to secure an entry-level position. Yet, such designers are often marked by a lack of critical perspective, an ignorance of design history and theory, a limited understanding of responsible practice.

Another path involves pursuing a formal design education. A key component sustaining the educational philosophy of the Savannah College of Art and Design, among the nation's largest such institutions, "process" is no ordinary design term. For example, as any graphic design professor at SCAD will verify, most projects in most courses require students to create and submit a process book, along with final work they submit for a project grade. A process book represents an organized journal or scrapbook that helps a student organize and articulate the journey that led him to solve a design problem or complete a design experiment.

SCAD students do not simply operate without restraint, or attempt to "reinvent the wheel" every time they sit down to a blank piece of paper or a glowing computer screen. Even ideation often takes place in a context of mutual observation, feedback, discipline, accountability and purpose. Students are asked not only to explain their ideas and solutions, but also, given specific guidelines and requirements, to document their process. While creativity is certainly emphasized, organization and focus are considered equally valuable. Every student is also required to complete a course in "The Business of Graphic Design," an integral part of the curriculum rapidly gaining favor in other institutions. As this book and current trends in global competitiveness should make clear, in the near future creativity alone will hardly guarantee success in a field as complex and essential as design.

Process is a concept — a way of doing design, a way of doing business — that neither professionals nor students can afford to ignore. Process is the language of business. Process is the language of design.

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