

# a commitment

## TO DESIGN'S FUTURE

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by **Nathan Shedroff**

This past week, I've felt like a time warp has engulfed the graphic design profession and sent it looping back to the 1990s. In the early '90s, graphic designers eschewed digital tools (Oh the humanity! What about typography?! Accurate color?! Won't somebody please think of the letterpress?!) and media as unholy incarnations of design. It set AIGA back years, if not decades, while print designers bemoaned new directions for their own skills and experience.

*Many graphic designers had to be dragged kicking and screaming toward the rapidly and obviously evolving present that, yes, saw opportunities for everyone to be a “designer” (often with disastrous results—remember all those PageMaker-generated, use-every-typeface-available brochures?) but also saw the design profession widen in a wonderful way, bringing in fresh people, ideas, techniques and design opportunities.*

It happened again in the late '90s, with the rise of interaction design and new media (web, mobile, etc.) that offered even more opportunities for designers to apply their skills, stretch their boundaries and work on increasingly complex and interesting applications. More kicking. More screaming. More moaning. And, it set AIGA back almost another decade.

Instead of AIGA also being the professional organization of interaction design and design in interactive media, that role is now filled by IxDA. Anyone that has eyes open to opportunities for professionals and graduates in design knows that there is a nearly unlimited demand for interaction design (and related) jobs and something close to a glut of graphic designers available and looking for work—especially those who avoid digital media. The

### About the Author:

Nathan Shedroff is the chair of the ground-breaking MBA in Design Strategy at California College of the Arts (CCA) in San Francisco, CA. This program prepares the next-generation of innovation leaders for a world that is profitable, sustainable, ethical, and truly meaningful. The program unites the perspectives of systems thinking, design and integrative thinking, sustainability, and generative leadership into a holistic strategic framework. Students learn to create innovative products, services, and policy, as well as new business models.

He is a pioneer in Experience Design, Interaction Design and Information Design, speaks and teaches internationally, and is a serial entrepreneur. His many books include: Experience Design 1.1, Making Meaning, Design is the Problem, Design Strategy in Action, and the upcoming Make It So.

He holds an MBA in Sustainable Management from Presidio Graduate School and a BS in Industrial Design from Art Center College of Design. He worked with Richard Saul Wurman at TheUnderstandingBusiness and, later, cofounded vivid studios, a decade-old pioneering company in interactive media and one of the first Web services firms on the planet.

vivid's hallmark was helping to establish and validate the field of information architecture, by training an entire generation of designers in the newly emerging Web industry. Nathan is on the board of directors for Teague and the AIGA.

If you listen to the majority of AIGA members, they appreciate the past and, at times, they like to learn from and celebrate it, but what they want is information on how to be successful and relevant in their work today. They're also much less interested in the work of design heroes, today's or yesterday's, for better or worse, and want to envision how they can thrive in a very different market than this profession's past. Today, there are an astonishing number of places to see great work and many more competitions to enter. However, there are still very few places to learn professional tools for advancing our skills as designers who create not only beauty but also value in the areas of sustainability, social justice, business and more.

AIGA was there first, of course, with the Advance for Design, which turned into the AIGA Experience Design group. But this initiative slowly died as those members who wanted to move forward toward new directions lost patience with the endless discussions about what it meant for current competitions, conferences, sponsorship from paper companies and the rest of AIGA's print design roots. The same could be said for the AIGA Center for Brand Experience, an initiative that was on the forefront but was superseded (and is now mostly owned) by the Design Management Institute (and, good for them).

In 2003, Terry Irwin programmed AIGA's annual conference around the theme “The Power of Design.” It was discounted by many of the old guard for being too “down” and devoid of people showing “cool” work. Despite the fact that few people like to sit through presentations where designers show their work while describing how great it is to be them, this has been the mainstay of design conferences. The sessions that make change, in our profession and ourselves, are sometimes not recognized until years later. This was confirmed last year in Phoenix at “Pivot,” eight years after “The Power of Design” conference in Vancouver.

Every theme that Terry foresaw was described again, but this time there was interest and even appreciation and little, if any, blowback. OK, there was some moaning about not seeing enough “work,” meaning “pretty design.” Today, however, everyone is able to see that kind of portfolio work online and in real time. With access to this work 24/7, what we want to hear about from designers on stage is their process and approach. We don't want them to merely show examples of their work.

AIGA missed the boat to lead the digital, experience and brand bandwagons, not because it didn't see the potential but because it was mired in endless hand-wringing by those members who felt the most threatened by the new opportunities and interests.

What's sad about this is that the old guard of AIGA has had a very limited definition of design. They use the term as if they own the whole thing—“we're the design organization”—but they only mean graphic design. Design is much bigger than just graphic design. There are information designers, industrial designers, interaction designers, environmental designers, brand designers, and, further afield, fashion designers, interior designers, architects, etc.—all vying for the customer experience. By making our perspective small, we've made our influence small and ceded influence over the customer experience to others—mostly, to marketing(which has its own huge issues holding it back from creating better products and services). Yet, the companies we view with the highest regard (well, OK, the ones everyone else views as design leaders)—Apple, Nike, Starbucks, Target, Virgin, Herman Miller, FedEx, Whirlpool, Steelcase, Coca-Cola, Roche, Interface, LVMH, Decathlon, P&G (Oh, God, not P&G!)—view design holistically and make fewer distinctions between different traditional aspects of design.

This isn't, of course, to say that graphic design fundamentals are no longer important. Quite the contrary: They're more important than ever, and there's a wider audience, market and need for designers of all ilk to understand typography, color, layout, iconography, cartography and information design along with interaction design, design research, business and sustainability.

But, continuing to define design as only graphic design or, worse, only “cool,” beautiful graphic design—mostly in print, but sometimes on screen—is serving no one but those whose careers it commemorates. It doesn't serve the future: the many, many designers who work every day without recognition by competitions or conferences.

*Aren't designers (of all sorts) more than just style and surface? Are we not doing something of more value than styling (as important as that is, of course)? Why can't this organization be about substance in addition to style—and why would that be a threat? Why can't it celebrate design in all its forms, and not only the traditional, print-based projects?*

That is what AIGA's membership is asking for, in fact, and not to respond to them would be to put a slow bullet in the head of an organization that could be more like the venerable UK Design Council and less like a club of amazing but insular experts who wax nostalgic for a world already changed and rapidly transforming away from history.

I left AIGA 10 years ago because it was moving too slowly and couldn't commit to the design interests I saw as leading the future of the industry. I'm back today because now it is making that commitment, and I'm excited to be part of that change.