

# How to design a library that makes kids want to read

Michael Bierut at TEDNYC

link: [www.ted.com/talks/michael\\_bierut\\_how\\_to\\_design\\_a\\_library\\_that\\_makes\\_kids\\_want\\_to\\_read](http://www.ted.com/talks/michael_bierut_how_to_design_a_library_that_makes_kids_want_to_read)  
download video: [https://download.ted.com/talks/MichaelBierut\\_2017S-480p-en.mp4](https://download.ted.com/talks/MichaelBierut_2017S-480p-en.mp4)  
download audio: [https://download.ted.com/talks/MichaelBierut\\_2017S.mp3](https://download.ted.com/talks/MichaelBierut_2017S.mp3)

So there's this thing called the law of unintended consequences. I thought it was just like a saying, but it actually exists, I guess. There's, like, academic papers about it. And I'm a designer. I don't like unintended consequences. People hire me because they have consequences that they really intend, and what they intend is for me to help them achieve those consequences. So I live in fear of unintended consequences. And so this is a story about consequences intended and unintended.

I got called by an organization called Robin Hood to do a favor for them. Robin Hood is based in New York, a wonderful philanthropic organization that does what it says in the name. They take from rich people, give it to poor people. In this case, what they wanted to benefit was the New York City school system, a huge enterprise that educates more than a million students at a time, and in buildings that are like this one, old buildings, big buildings, drafty buildings, sometimes buildings that are in disrepair, certainly buildings that could use a renovation. Robin Hood had this ambition to improve these buildings in some way, but what they realized was to fix the buildings would be too expensive and impractical. So instead they tried to figure out what one room they could go into in each of these buildings, in as many buildings that they could, and fix that one room so that they could improve the lives of the children inside as they were studying. And what they came up with was the school library, and they came up with this idea called the Library Initiative. All the students have to pass through the library. That's where the books are. That's where the heart and soul of the school is. So let's fix these libraries.

So they did this wonderful thing where they brought in first 10, then 20, then more architects, each one of whom was assigned a library to rethink what a library was. They trained special librarians. So they started this mighty enterprise to reform public schools by improving these libraries. Then they called me up and they said, "Could you make a little contribution?" I said, "Sure, what do you want me to do?" And they said, "Well, we want you to be the graphic designer in charge of the whole thing." And so I thought, I know what that means. That means I get to design a logo. I know how to design that. I design logos. That's what people come to me for. So OK, let's design a logo for this thing. Easy to do, actually, compared with architecture and being a librarian. Just do a logo, make a contribution, and then you're out, and you feel really good about yourself. And I'm a great guy and I like to feel good about myself when I do these favors.

So I thought, let's overdeliver. I'm going to give you three logos, all based on this one idea. So you have three options, pick any of the three. They're all great, I said. So the basic idea was these would be new school libraries for New York schools, and so the idea is that it's a new thing, a new idea that needs a new name. What I wanted to do was dispel the idea that these were musty old libraries, the kind of places that everyone is bored with, you know, not your grandparents' library. Don't

worry about that at all. This is going to this new, exciting thing, not a boring library.

So option number one: so instead of thinking of it as a library, think of it as a place where it is like: do talk, do make loud noises. Right? So no shushing, it's like a shush-free zone. We're going to call it the Reading Room.

That was option number one. OK, option number two. Option number two was, wait for it, OWL. I'll meet you at OWL. I'm getting my book from the OWL. Meet you after school down at OWL. I like that, right? Now, what does OWL stand for? Well, it could be One World Library, or it could be Open. Wonder. Learn. Or it could be -- and I figure librarians could figure out other things it could be because they know about words. So other things, right? And then look at this. It's like the eye of the owl. This is irresistible in my opinion.

But there's even another idea. Option number three. Option number three was based actually on language. It's the idea that "read" is the past tense of "read," and they're both spelled the same way. So why don't we call this place The Red Zone? I'll meet you at the Red Zone. Are you Red? Get Red. I'm well Red.

(Laughter)

I really loved this idea, and I somehow was not focused on the idea that librarians as a class are sort of interested in spelling and I don't know.

(Laughter)

But sometimes cleverness is more important than spelling, and I thought this would be one of those instances. So usually when I make these presentations I say there's just one question and the question should be, "How can I thank you, Mike?" But in this case, the question was more like, "Um, are you kidding?" Because, they said, the premise of all this work was that kids were bored with old libraries, musty old libraries. They were tired of them. And instead, they said, these kids have never really seen a library. The school libraries in these schools are really so dilapidated, if they're there at all, that they haven't bored anyone. They haven't even been there to bore anyone at all. So the idea was, just forget about giving it a new name. Just call it, one last try, a library. Right? OK. So I thought, OK, give it a little oomph? Exclamation point? Then -- this is because I'm clever -- move that into the "i," make it red, and there you have it, the Library Initiative. So I thought, mission accomplished, there's your logo. So what's interesting about this logo, an unintended consequence, was that it turned out that they didn't really even need my design because you could type it any font, you could write it by hand, and when they started sending emails around, they just would use Shift and I, they'd get their own logo just right out of the thing. And I thought, well, that's fine. Feel free to use that logo. And then I embarked on the real rollout of this thing -- working with every one of the architects to put this logo on the front door of their own library. Right?

So here's the big rollout. Basically I'd work with different architects. First Robin Hood was my client. Now these architects were my client. I'd say, "Here's your logo. Put it on the door." "Here's your logo. Put it on both doors." "Here's your logo. Put it off to the side." "Here's your logo repeated all over to the top." So everything was going swimmingly. I just was saying, "Here's your logo. Here's your logo."

Then I got a call from one of the architects, a guy named Richard Lewis, and he says, "I've got a problem. You're the graphics guy. Can you solve it?" And I said, OK, sure." And he said, "The problem is that there's a space between the shelf and the ceiling." So that sounds like an architectural issue to me, not a graphic design issue, so I'm, "Go on." And Richard says, "Well, the top shelf has to be low enough for the kid to reach it, but I'm in a big old building, and the ceilings are really high, so actually I've got all this space up there and I need something like a mural." And I'm like, "Whoa, you know, I'm a logo designer. I'm not Diego Rivera or something. I'm not a muralist." And so he said, "But can't you think of anything?" So I said, "OK, what if we just took pictures of the kids in the school and just put them around the top of the thing, and maybe that could work." And my wife is a photographer, and I said, "Dorothy, there's no budget, can you come to this school in east New York, take these pictures?" And she did, and if you go in Richard's library, which is one of the first that opened, it has this glorious frieze of, like, the heroes of the school, oversized, looking down into the little dollhouse of the real library, right? And the kids were great, hand-selected by the principals and the librarian. It just kind of created this heroic atmosphere in this library, this very dignified setting below and the joy of the children above.

So naturally all the other librarians in the other schools see this and they said, well, we want murals too. And I'm like, OK. So then I think, well, it can't be the same mural every time, so Dorothy did another one, and then she did another one, but then we needed more help, so I called an illustrator I knew named Lynn Pauley, and Lynn did these beautiful paintings of the kids. Then I called a guy named Charles Wilkin at a place called Automatic Design. He did these amazing collages. We had Rafael Esquer do these great silhouettes. He would work with the kids, asking for words, and then based on those prompts, come up with this little, delirious kind of constellation of silhouettes of things that are in books. Peter Arkle interviewed the kids and had them talk about their favorite books and he put their testimony as a frieze up there. Stefan Sagmeister worked with Yuko Shimizu and they did this amazing manga-style statement, "Everyone who is honest is interesting," that goes all the way around. Christoph Niemann, brilliant illustrator, did a whole series of things where he embedded books into the faces and characters and images and places that you find in the books. And then even Maira Kalman did this amazing cryptic installation of objects and words that kind of go all around and will fascinate students for as long as it's up there.

So this was really satisfying, and basically my role here was reading a series of dimensions to these artists, and I would say, "Three feet by 15 feet, whatever you want. Let me know if you have any problem with that." And they would go and install these. It just was the greatest thing.

But the greatest thing, actually, was -- Every once in a while, I'd get, like, an invitation in the mail made of construction paper, and it would say, "You are invited to the opening of our new library." So you'd go to the library, say, you'd go to PS10, and you'd go inside. There'd be balloons, there'd be a student ambassador, there'd be speeches that were read, poetry that was written specifically for the opening, dignitaries would present people with certificates, and the whole thing was just a delirious, fun party. So I loved going to these things. I would stand there dressed like this, obviously not belonging, and someone would say, "What are you doing here, mister?" And I'd say, "Well, I'm part of the team that designed this place." And they'd said, "You do these shelves?" And I said, "No." "You took the pictures up above." "No." "Well, what did you do?" "You know when you came in? The sign over the door?" "The sign that says library?"

(Laughter)

"Yeah, I did that!" And then they'd sort of go, "OK. Nice work if you can get it." So it was so satisfying going to these little openings despite the fact that I was kind of largely ignored or humiliated, but it was actually fun going to the openings, so I decided that I wanted to get the people in my office who had worked on these projects, get the illustrators and photographers, and I said, why don't we rent a van and drive around the five boroughs of New York and see how many we could hit at one time. And eventually there were going to be 60 of these libraries, so we probably got to see maybe half a dozen in one long day. And the best thing of all was meeting these librarians who kind of were running these, took possession of these places like their private stage upon which they were invited to mesmerize their students and bring the books to life, and it was just this really exciting experience for all of us to actually see these things in action. So we spent a long day doing this and we were in the very last library. It was still winter, because it got dark early, and the librarian says, "I'm about to close down. So really nice having you here. Hey, wait a second, do you want to see how I turn off the lights?" I'm like, "OK." And she said, "I have this special way that I do it." And then she showed me. What she did was she turned out every light one by one by one by one, and the last light she left on was the light that illuminated the kids' faces, and she said, "That's the last light I turn off every night, because I like to remind myself why I come to work."

So when I started this whole thing, remember, it was just about designing that logo and being clever, come up with a new name? The unintended consequence here, which I would like to take credit for and like to think I can think through the experience to that extent, but I can't. I was just focused on a foot ahead of me, as far as I could reach with my own hands. Instead, way off in the distance was a librarian who was going to find the chain of consequences that we had set in motion, a source of inspiration so that she in this case could do her work really well. 40,000 kids a year are affected by these libraries. They've been happening for more than 10 years now, so those librarians have kind of turned on a generation of children to books and so it's been a thrill to find out that sometimes unintended consequences are the best consequences.

Thank you very much.

*TED Talks recordings are owned by TED. Audio and video files, transcripts and/or information about a speaker, are licensed via Creative Commons license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International), which means that certain TED Content may be used for personal and/or educational purposes as long as the license terms and TED Talks Usage Policy are followed.*