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GOOD IS SOCIALLY BENEFICIAL

PRODUCTS FOR A NEW AGE

by
**Ken
Shulman**

It may not be entirely fair to call industrial design a slacker at social responsibility. But it's certainly true that the discipline has struggled to figure out how to do good while still doing well. Architecture has had an easier time with green design, stroking its social conscience with solar panels and geothermal pumps while stoking the bottom line with lucrative commissions. And whether funded by governments, NGOs, or private donors, the world's poorest communities still need hospitals and bridges and homes. It's harder to make the same case for iPods. It's not that industrial designers haven't wanted to take a break from building a better MP3 player, but until recently neither they nor their employers could see how they might save the world without going broke.

"Altruism is a good reason to do something once, but not to repeat it," says Timothy Presterio, founder of Design that Matters, a nonprofit social-enterprise design company based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The organization teams student volunteers, professional consultants, and aid agencies to tackle some of the world's thorniest design

After years of lagging behind architecture, industrial design begins tackling some of the world's most vexing problems.

and distribution problems. The company's current collaborations include a low-cost, low-energy microfilm projector to promote literacy in West Africa and an intuitive intravenous-drip flow controller to allow nonmedical personnel to assist ailing family members. "There's a reason design isn't beating a path to the doors of nonprofits and aid agencies," Presterio says. "They don't tend to have a lot of money."

Of late, there has been a modest stirring in the field. Design students at top schools clamor to work on projects in which they can express creativity and concern. A few seasoned design firms contribute their employees' inactive but billable "white time" toward the greater global good. Consultancies now partner with NGOs and aid agencies to redraft their field-service and delivery strategies. Even major foundations have been swept up in the flurry, sponsoring workshops and research that explore the role design can play in fighting poverty, disease, and social injustice.

"There's a real hunger to work on these projects," says Sami Nerenberg, a 2007 Rhode Island School of Design industrial-design graduate who now teaches the Design for Social Entrepreneurship studio at her alma mater. Her students designed, among other projects, a backpack to be manufactured by the homeless, and reorganized volunteer services at a local inner-city school. "Two years ago I was part of a minority at RISD interested in these issues. Today students are looking at our economy, looking at where consumerism has led us. They want to shift away from producing excess and do something that makes them feel useful."

DESIGN FOR SOCIAL IMPACT: HOW-TO GUIDE

by IDEO

Produced with a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, IDEO's toolkit provides lofty inspiration and brass-tacks guidelines for firms eager to partner with aid agencies and other nonprofits. "We focused on IDEO as market leaders, as a company that does things differently than most," the Rockefeller Foundation's Maria Blair says. The illustrations below are from the "Educate Others" chapter of IDEO's *Design for Social Impact: How-to Guide*.

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

- Provide value.
- Be focused.
- Set up for success.

MODES OF ENGAGEMENT

- Modify the way you work.
- Educate others.
- Develop networks.
- Identify funding streams.
- Modify your structure.

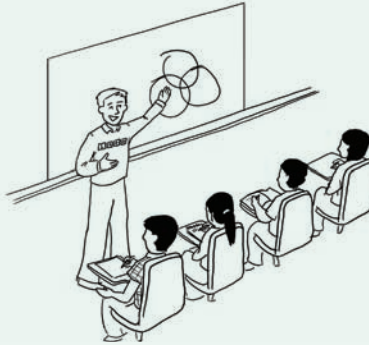


Organizing the homeless in Providence or teaching adults to read in Timbuktu may seem like unlikely roles for a trade long associated with releasing products into oversaturated markets. But the early innovators of socially responsible design believe they can make a vital contribution. "In development work, you tend to get jaded, which limits your thinking," says Graham Macmillan, senior director at VisionSpring. The New York-based NGO partnered with IDEO to produce and design affordable eyeglasses for children and some adults in India. The project was sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation. "And business consultants tend to focus on generating the greatest possible returns, which doesn't work very well

IDEO's toolkit provides lofty inspiration and brass-tacks guidelines for firms eager to partner with aid agencies and other nonprofits.

D.SCHOOL .IN/.ZA

Support or build the capacity of a design program in Africa and India by developing curriculum or providing professors.



EMPATHY FIELD TRIPS

Executives or other interested parties pay to participate in cultural observations to gain firsthand experience in the developing world.



DESIGN CERTIFICATION

Train and designate individuals to be official "social-impact designers." Certified designers can be hired by participating companies.



INTERN HOSTING

Host fellows or interns from emerging countries and markets, and train them in your design process.



PUBLISHING

Publish books, articles, blogs, and other tools on design for social impact. Publications help novices re-create the design process independently.



PROCESS WORKSHOP

Spread the word: conduct a two-hour to one-day session teaching the process of design for social impact at conferences, NGOs, and think tanks.



for clients at the bottom of the economic pyramid. Design is about the ultimate solution, about elegance. Designers tend to have more open minds and can approach a challenge without being exclusively driven by profit.”

Foundations active in social-sector research have also begun to tap the latent energy and know-how of the industry. “Design thinking can offer a series of new approaches and solutions for social issues,” says Maria Blair, associate vice president and managing director at the Rockefeller Foundation. The group has funded several socially responsible design initiatives, including a workbook produced by IDEO that provides a framework for design firms entering the social sphere. “Working in the social sector is often about complex systems that need to change, about aligning multiple stakeholders with multiple interests,” Blair says. “Design is an empathic, user-centered discipline. It has enormous potential in the social arena.”

As development actors usher design into the race, the profession still faces several entry hurdles. One is distribution. “Our first eighteen products went nowhere,” Presterio says. Design that Matters was born in 2001 as a student-led seminar at MIT, and its most recent project is an incubator that aims to save some of the four million babies who die each year shortly after birth. The device is heated by a pair of automobile headlights. “I didn’t understand that the distribution channel was our real client. Keeping babies warm isn’t rocket science. But you can’t just make some gadget, drop it out of the back of a helicopter and say good luck. The true design work is in understanding the system in which the incubator will be produced, distributed, maintained, and used.”

The second and even greater challenge facing design is how to pair with nonprofit agencies. “It’s the aid piece of the equation that’s the problem,” says Tim Brown, CEO and president of IDEO, recalling an epiphany he had after a 2007 meeting at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, in Seattle, about smallholder farmers. “The end users have traditionally been given things. After the meeting, it occurred to me that there might be a way of getting more leverage out of the design pro-

cess if you could hand over the net and not just the fish. Initial development efforts can still be funded by grants and staffed pro bono. But somehow we need to generate an engagement that builds the economy and sustains wealth.”

The Seattle meeting—and subsequent Gates Foundation grant—led IDEO to create a human-centered design kit to help aid agencies fathom the needs of the communities they are trying to serve. With the kit, agencies learn to understand production and consumption systems, not just how to deliver aid or objects. “We want to treat smallholder farmers as customers, not as objects of charity,” says Al Doerksen, CEO of International Development Enterprises, an agency that field-tested the IDEO kit with smallholder farmers in Ethiopia, Zambia, Vietnam, and Cambodia. “But in order to do so, the goods and services you produce have to make sense in their paradigm. You need to be extremely creative to sell stuff to poor people, to make things you can afford to produce and they can afford to buy with extremely meager resources.”

There is a critical mass of aid and development professionals convinced that design can help further their mission and, ultimately, help those living on the margins of society. But the profession also stands to benefit from its new direction. “We ask human-resource managers to send us their best and brightest for a week,” Presterio says. “People who are burnt out on snack crackers and golf bags. We send them to India or Bangladesh or Nepal, and they come back saying it was the greatest experience they ever had. It’s the design alternative to white-water rafting.”

Brown is convinced that focusing on world problems will generate not only happier designers but more innovative ones. “To be honest, design has just as much to gain from this as it has to contribute,” he observes. “There are clever people in these environments, and the lack of resources often leads them to original and ingenious solutions. For us, not working in these environments means running the risk of not being in the places where the most interesting design work is being done.”



Above: A Human-Centered Design Toolkit tailored for NGOs and social enterprises working in the developing world is available free of charge at ideo.com.

Left: The IDEO team took prototypes of tools to create vibrant conversations. Here, a farmer illustrates his sources of income and expenditures.