

# Design Education: The New Deal

Christian Guellerin

Director – L’Ecole de design Nantes Atlantique

[c.guellerin@lecolededesign.com](mailto:c.guellerin@lecolededesign.com)

President – Cumulus Association

<http://www.cumulusassociation.org>

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Design Schools are experiencing and will continue to experience huge upheavals. They are benefiting from real opportunities in development proportionate to the large cultural and socio-economic stakes the world is faced with today. They take a predominant place in the Higher Education field. Engineering Schools headed the field during the jubilant industrialization. Business Schools fell in behind them when the economy switched over from a production to a market economy. Design Schools, aware of the social responsibilities of designers as well as their economic responsibilities are becoming the key actors in Higher Education capable of uniting “science and conscience”, “social and economic”, “use, expectations and needs” with the aim to plan for tomorrow, a more sensible future than the present.

Design and designers have essentially the responsibility to change the world around them. At a time when the planet is threatened, when science has limitations, when the economic world is upside down, designers could have an immense responsibility. Design Schools should take their responsibility and train designers to become aware of these stakes.

## **1.1 Two pillars in a shattered context: globalized world and faltering capitalism**

The world has become “global,” enhanced means of communication and transportation have made it accessible to all as a whole, in its “global” dimension. A language – a type of English-based gibberish, a pidgin – has made it intelligible. If this trend paves the way to more freedom, then we should see it as fruitful. If this trend helps people reach a better understanding of the Others, accept their differences and learn from their culture, then we should rejoice over it.

Economically speaking, in Western countries globalization marked the end of the industrial era that began in the mid-nineteenth century. Means of production are now being redistributed according to new patterns. Today workforce-based industries are being relocated in China and in India; tomorrow they may even start settling in lower-production-cost countries offering better profit margins. Benefits and profit margins are capitalism’s

mainspring. The ongoing worldwide wealth redistribution is bound to happen / unavoidable. Entire sectors of the traditional industry are currently collapsing in Western countries. GM and Ford, worldwide symbols of the jubilant industrialization and Welfare society are undergoing great upheavals.

The well-known “assembly line” that engineers have strived to “rationalize” over time may soon reach the end of the line. “Total quality” policies have only sped up their decline process. These policies contributed to the advent of cost management, to gradually making it impossible to veer – however slightly – from the process agreed upon, to annihilating all creative potential and ultimately to place the industry in the hands of low-cost labor developing countries. For 150 years the sole concern of the most industrialized countries has been to keep becoming better and better at what they already knew how to do. But in a globalized world where competition fails to be ruled by fair practices, there is no point in improving one’s know-how *ad nauseam*. There is no reason why the Chinese shouldn’t do as good as we do with lesser means.

Some countries – such as the United Kingdom – anticipated the late-century industrial chaos by turning their back on their factories to favor the tertiary and financial sectors. Finance-based logics according to which money only serves financial interests without any wealth-sharing, has led the world to a terribly harmful crisis whose yet unknown aftermaths will probably be disastrous. The pound – a deeply ingrained symbol of the City – is now walking on shaky ground.

We are now coming to the bitter awareness that capitalism, this great wealth-generating economic system is, in fact and by essence totally devoid of ethical values. Because States failed to keep a strong hold on it and in the name of a liberalism too often mistaken for liberty, capitalism has solely enabled a bunch of happy few to get richer, leaving a vast majority of consumers out in the cold, frowning in frustration at not being invited to join the bountiful feast.

Capitalism must be rethought anew. State governments must reclaim their role in taming it and share the generated wealth so as to gradually fill in the gap between nations based on different societal models. Economies must strive in the service of Humankind and cease to promote the sole financial interests.

## **1.2 Two economic opportunities to seize: green economy and social networks**

Our planet is in jeopardy. Therefore we must lay new foundations for new production and consumption patterns to spread out. But will Humankind and science manage to do so? Looks doubtful... Never has the world population been so concerned with climate change and environmental hazards, yet never have marketers sold as many four-wheel-drive cars to meet consumer needs. Faced with such a paradox we must admit that ethical values and virtuousness definitely do not belong to the marketing jargon.

Though by essence capitalism is far from being ethical though we must not buy into ethical marketing, we must nonetheless endeavor to make green economy into a major tool to shape the new industrial and commercial patterns to come. If it proves hard to believe in the moral nature of human beings in the face of environmental issues, to compensate for non-existing ethics, taking an environment-friendly stance could be extremely

beneficial to economies all over the world. The re-industrialization of the world will not happen without our coming to awareness of the benefits inherent in green economy in the name of ethics, of course, but first and foremost in the name of interest.

Green economy is a tremendous source of profit and thereby it could heal the planet.

Besides – as freedom-threatening as it may seem in the long run – a newly emerged sociological trend is gradually shaking our way of perceiving vital space and dotting it with new meaning. Becoming part of a network is a means to tighten and create bonds at a time when globalization jeopardizes close relationships with our neighbors. On the economical level, networks lie at the core of a new approach to marketing in which the market and related needs would no longer be needs *per se* but would be willingly generated, conceived and shaped just like industrial products. Then the market would not be taken into consideration after production but generated prior to production. This kind of marketing stemming from a technical and scientific approach to information could be totally overlooked by market-engrossed marketers. However the reflection upon social networks – how they are conceived and used – will never be disregarded by designers, always on the look-out for new trends.

### **1.3 Design, a strategic discipline in tune with the major socio-economical issues**

So what role should design take on? Should we expect engineers to launch and drive the new industrial revolution Western countries have long been hoping for. Should we expect marketers to re-invent markets? Nothing is less certain because, to them, market trends mirror consumer needs. They take an overwhelming importance, thus totally putting the creative process aside.

Design and designers might take on a strategic position within companies bound to develop and grow bigger. To cope with the oncoming industrial turmoil to come many of those companies are going to have to adjust, evolve and veer towards new working methods. With globalization the era of total quality has been supplanted by creative and innovation-oriented approaches to industrial production: The era of total quality has come to an end, overthrown by creation and innovation-oriented approaches concerned with socio-economic issues. Now one cannot keep “improving and further what one already knows how to do” but rather “do something new by generating unknown matter from already known matter so as to create new, sustainable and large-scale situations.” This is how we should rethink the industrial paradigms in which Western economies now faced with globalization are rooted. However, should the automobile industry ask what they can do with their expertise for products other than cars, it would then be urgent to call on to designers.

The know-how of the car industry is focused primarily on engine technology explosion, the organization of the assembly line and particularly powerful distribution networks: “What can be done with this if it is not to make automobiles?”

This is the only question that the leaders of General Motors and Renault, to whom we are going to lend billions of dollars or Euros, should ask themselves.

Designers are the innovation-oriented craftsmen whose duty it is to rethink the future of companies and the

capitalism of tomorrow.

Apple\*'s tremendous success lies in its making creative skills a long-term and recurrent asset for the company, in its ability to become one of the leading online-music sellers at a time when engineers mistake it for a mere computer manufacturer.

Industrial societies are going to have to come out of the industrial branches in which they have been locked up for so long, and learn to do something else. This revolution is not to be triggered by engineers nor marketers, this revolution belongs to designers. The only companies that will live on are those that will prove able to switch from a working method and a profession to another, thus ceaselessly creating their own history. Acting as true pivotal stones designers will lie at the core of these efforts to keep mutating, to keep changing profession on a continuing basis by following a management-based organization and building new methods to take new strategic stances so as to generate and handle the much-needed change.

Design is by essence a human-centered discipline aiming to make tomorrow better. Conceiving products, packaging, creating the lay-out of spaces, displaying images are meaningless unless – like all creative initiatives – are centered upon Mankind and usage and one strives to infuse visions of tomorrow with images of progress.

Designers are the mainstays and initiators of eco-conception-related issues within companies. They must make sure to convince their co-workers within companies that eco-conception is a vital process. Because as soon as eco-conception initiatives will take on an economic dimension, green economy will automatically start soaring and become a prevalent concern for companies willing to keep up to date. Designers are the key figures of a new type of marketing applied to sustainable and ethical eco-design that will help meeting consumer needs and improving usage.

## **1.4 Tremendous evolution of training courses in design: work-based education brought to the fore**

Here is a question education institutions should definitely strive to answer: how can we make sure graduates who gained technical training in design schools manage to become “managers” and/or “strategists” fit for all the challenges modern societies and companies are faced with on a daily basis?

Here is a question that should be addressed to institutions teaching design: how can we make sure that designers attending a technical training at design schools become “managers” and/or “strategists” with an educational background that meets the requirements of a company and equips them with sufficient skills to take up the challenges the firm is faced with?

Should designers lag behind as mere technicians in the creative field and keep letting engineers and marketing specialists overtake them and fill the positions of strategic innovation departments or product development managers? Or don't they nowadays have the opportunity to fulfill executive management duties commensurate with their skills, their talent, their culture and peculiar vision of tomorrow's world: a user-centered world where humankind lies at the heart of all economically oriented reflection.

The training mission assigned to design schools has greatly evolved. They no longer aim at educating merely creative technicians but at training professionals in the creative field. Much is at stake here and the answer proposed by schools has an important impact on the future of the profession, of companies, of the economy and even on our society's future – since it is the designer's vocation to find answers for it.

Design schools have always strived to train creative professionals acknowledged for their abilities to invent new shapes, new products, to find new solutions with regards to processes, materials and/or services. Good designers are, above all, recognized as such for their ability to create.

This is what other people – society in general or professionals such as engineers, marketing specialists, managing directors etc. – expect them to do: to come up with ideas no one had ever thought of...

This image of the designer – a creative, slightly deviant professional entrusted with the mission to shake up business executives and society as a whole – has been conveyed by all designers and all schools. Indeed, this “expected deviance” is claimed by creative professionals as part of their know-how, as a certain trademark.

Schools and design students quite easily agree that the revelation of creative skills could have a praiseworthy and gratifying impact... However, in doing so, they fail to take into account many aspects that now hinder and delay the acknowledgement of their work within companies and lessen their chances to climb the hierarchical ladder..

Today design schools propose curriculums that have evolved a lot:

- Design schools have realized that students in design must be introduced to the industrial and economic fields during their training courses. They no longer solely focus upon talent, technique and know-how but now evaluate the social and economical relevance of student projects and the students' ability to enter the job market.
- More and more emphasis is put on management skills required for teamwork and the ability to work as part of a team. This type of skills had been overlooked too long by design schools where the sole individual talent was taken into account. Because of this, instead of being shared and showcased ideas and newly created items have been kept like a buried treasure. When dealing with creations aimed at improving the world we should make sure the largest possible amount of people can actually take advantage of it.
- Communication has now become an essential criterion in evaluating the relevance of students' output. As obvious as it may seem, this proposal has never been taken seriously, as though creation was sufficient unto itself.
- Design schools have opened up to other disciplines so that the work of their students can be evaluated by a many-sided audience. Methods inherited from the Applied Arts tradition, based on a one-sided relationship between omniscient Masters and supposedly unenlightened apprentices entailed an in-breeding process that has long prevented the discipline from gaining recognition and ground. Today schools endeavor to create diverse, mixed juries that bring together decision-makers, scientists and experts with all kinds of backgrounds.

Education in design schools has greatly evolved. It now increasingly encompasses the different elements I have just mentioned. In most institutions studies are increasingly opening up to the job market; multi-disciplinary teaching teams have been created and teamwork has been encouraged. Design institutions now set up links with business and engineering schools. Students learn to work with others. Companies are involved in many projects, students carry out internships and some schools now require students to put their knowledge into practice during a long-term internship so as to promote professional relations between schools and companies. A designer's degree no longer simply validates the technical know-how or mere skills but also the ability to find a suitable work position and to engage into a fulfilling career. Talent revelation and creativity are no longer a goal but a means, a *sine qua non*, a prerequisite to success.

But a lot remains yet to be done. To make design into a management discipline, we must transform the designer into a manager, a project manager, someone able to lead, to communicate, to impress. The mere ability to create is no longer sufficient. If designers keep claiming their difference and creative marginality, they run the risk of being reduced to this single feature and are likely to become suspicious for people who could possibly entrust them with other responsibilities. They must get out of their offices and share their ideas. One of the major challenges for design institutions to take up will be to provide students in design with enough management knowledge and self-assurance to aim for management-oriented once their talent is acknowledged within companies after they make use of their technical skills for a few years. In-house designers at age 25, what positions will they take up at age 35 or 45?

Thanks to their transversal culture, designers now qualify for team leader positions within companies in the creative fields. Why should the positions of product development managers in innovating firms only be covered by business school graduates? Why should only engineers be hired as research and development managers? Besides, in order to transform design into a strategic discipline – which it is by essence – designers must stop refraining themselves from reaching top executive positions.

The strength of engineering schools lies in that engineers have never excluded the possibility of becoming top executives. Why, then, should designers not strive for the same? All the more as they are dealing on a daily basis with crucial issues centered on humankind, usage and progress. All of those necessarily require skills to become a “manager” whose profitability will reach far beyond the mere financial sphere, an “ecological executive”, so to speak.

## **1.5 The need to adapt curriculums to a shifting context**

All higher education institutions are soon going to have to cope with major development-related issues, namely:

- 1) Strengthening the winning triumvirate “research – education – business” shaping their curriculums. If obviously most schools now favor work-based curriculums, there is still a lot to be done to organize research and knowledge production activities in coherence with social and economic. “Research in design” raises many interrogations thus giving researchers much food for thought. But it often amounts

to conducting research about what “research in design” could be. Of course, such a *mise en abyme* is far from being efficient or serious. Nonetheless institutions must imperatively voice their opinions about this issue so as to improve the quality of their outputs. Along the same line the bond between education institutions and their industrial partners should be redefined and clarified: schools can no longer stand to be substituted for agencies. “Incubation centers” – where new projects will be hatched – must be implemented. Moreover, like engineering schools, design schools must evolve into “innovation centers.”

- Giving a true international dimension to curriculums. The signing of the Bologna Treaty which lays the foundation of a worldwide organization of higher education curriculums around Bachelor’s, Master’s and PhD’s will probably result in students pursuing their Bachelor’s in their native country and their Master’s Degree abroad. Master’s Degrees in design are but a budding initiative for now. Only the most competitive Master’s Degrees – complying with the winning triumvirate “research–education–business” will attract foreign students.

As schools gradually begin to organize their training courses around “socio-economical themes,” cross-disciplining and versatile skills will undoubtedly be brought to the fore. The former segmentation framing design education according to traditional categories such as product design, interior architecture, graphic design, and multimedia is going to be shattered to pieces, giving way to a more global-scoped practice of design. Moreover this new segmentation will also tighten the bond between engineering schools and business schools through jointly run curriculums. Because design is a technical activity fundamentally grounded in graphic representation and handcraft no other training course will be in a position to claim to be able to train operational designers in a few weeks time. Merging design education with other training courses could result in depreciating the very job-title “designer” because this label would be used to refer to activities other than design. A true designer is a professional who masters specific skills and a very unique technical know-how.

Education institutions are also going to implement exemplary sustainable development policies. The recent signing of the Cumulus Kyoto Declaration by all Cumulus Network member schools shows how committed institutions and designers are. Schools must strive to grow into some kinds of idea labs where projects would be conducted with a view to setting up a conception-based marketing to be implemented prior to any market creation.

To finish with I would say that there are two ways to consider globalization and the emergence of newly industrialized countries. The first point of view equates challenging and questioning our whole economic system; it has resulted in a bottomless economic crisis. The second one opens up doors to new gigantic markets. Today all designers must busy themselves with adapting products to the Chinese, Indian, Brazilian markets... This opportunity will probably trigger new reflections about identity issues and how to make a difference. In this overwhelming global market where cultural standardization based on a shared bastardized lingua franca looms on the horizon, the identity of creation takes on a revolutionary depth. Economically and socially speaking designers must strive to make sense out of differences, because differences are what makes Humankind so

complete and plentiful.

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### Christian GUELLERIN



Directeur Général  
**L'École de design Nantes Atlantique**  
Tél : (33) 02 51 13 50 70  
[c.quellerin@lecolededesign.com](mailto:c.quellerin@lecolededesign.com)  
<http://www.lecolededesign.com>  
<http://christianquellerin.lecolededesign.com>



President  
**Cumulus Association**  
<http://www.cumulusassociation.org>