Bespoke Futures:  
Media Design & the Vision Deficit

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Where is the discipline heading and in what contexts will graphic designers be working?

Question is in the future tense, and that’s entirely appropriate, because my answer is about the future.
MUTANTS IN THE ROSE BOWL

A few terms back, one of my grad students showed me sketches for a film project he’d done about the future:

Radiation from nuclear fallout has mutated most of surviving humans, and those few who have proven immune have fortified the Rose Bowl's walls and made the interior... completely self-sustainable.

I wondered why this kind of post-apocalyptic landscape is now the default when we ask creative people to speculate about the future. I started to think about ways in which we could change this.
Flim Design Project

My film idea is a post-apocalyptic future set in southern California. Radiation from the nuclear fallout has mutated most of the surviving humans, and those few who have proven immune to the radiation have made the remains of the former Rose Bowl their home. To protect themselves from the violent and mindless ex-humans, they have fortified the Rose Bowl's walls and made the interior a completely self-sustainable abode.
As we hurtle into the 21st century, we suffer from a vision deficit. One reason we have so little faith in the future is that the shape of things to come has never been so inadequately imagined. My students see utopia as relentlessly personal, while for them, the apocalypse is one of the few shared universals. In other words, while they can posit a future for themselves as individuals (and even as a member of a family) they have little in the way of positive imagination for the realm of the social, much less the political. This explains why a movie like *Children of Men* resonates for them, but they can’t imagine a film in which a better future is portrayed as eloquently.

Knock modernism, if you choose, but at least the art, design, and architecture generated in that heady period put forth a panoply of futures seductive enough to inspire others to bring them into being.
From the Radiant Cities of ‘20s architecture
to the design Esperanto of Helvetica in the 50s,
from the space races of the ‘60s
through the postmodern technofabulism of goggles’n’gloves VR in the ‘80s.
and Flash-y exuberance of the dot.com ‘90s, the 20th century offered a surplus of futurities, those qualities we associate in or with the future itself.
In the 21st century, though, it’s not that we’re not thinking about the future, just that the future we’re thinking about is relentlessly grim. And if designers, who are trained to visualize, aren’t being trained to visualize a future they actually want to live in, why not?
Part of the answer to this is the transformation of design education. One hundred years ago, if you were at the Royal College of Art in London, the ultimate point of the curriculum was to produce designers who could better the commerce of the British Empire. There were similar academies all across Europe, established to promote German, Italian, Danish, and other national industries. This model has hardly disappeared, as you can see from even the most casual reading of mission statements for recently founded educational initiatives like Designium in Finland, LSCA in Singapore, and the School of Creative Media at the City University of Hong Kong.

Designium, the New Centre of Innovation in Design, a collaboration between the University of Art and Design Helsinki, the University of Lapland, Helsinki University of Technology (HUT), and the Helsinki School of Economics (HSE), whose mission statement is explicitly nationalistic: The mission of Designium is to promote the development of national design policy and the internationalization of Finnish design. The aim is to develop design into a major competitive factor for Finnish industry. The vision statement for Lasalle-SIA contains the following: In enabling Art, Design and Performance through education, research, publication, performance and exhibition of the highest quality from Foundation to PhD operating nationally and internationally as a University of the Arts whilst contributing to the Cultural Wealth of Singapore as the leading regional provider of Creativity.

http://www.lasallesia.edu.sg/secondary.html. As befits Hong Kongs
over the past two decades, you could trace the development of other national
design economies by the make-up of the international student body, Japanese
in the 1980s, Korean in the 1990s, the growing influx of Indians and Chinese
now. On the one hand, this is not surprising. As capitalism itself globalized,
why should design and the education of designers not follow suit?
But this mission of producing talent for the Unilevers, Sonys, Chrysler-Benzes, and Royal Dutch Shells of the world is hard to get one's heart around. Call it transnational corporate design education, or transnatcorp des-edu, as I do. Of course designers will work for these multi-nationals but what replaces that sense that one's creative practice feeds more than the client's bottom line, that one’s work contributes to a greater, communal goal?
mutants in the rose bowl
a vision deficit
transnatcorp des-edu®

the future as a client
bespoke futures
strategically hopeful
In a global economy, when the nationalist impulse is either outmoded or suspect, I propose a new mode of design education, one that can in fact be carried over into designers’ professionals practices. Why not posit the future itself as one of the designer’s chief clients? More than that, why not pick a better future as that client?

In other words, think of the future as either a pro bono client or a partner in an entrepreneurial enterprise. Both of these strategies take payment, much less profit, off the table at least for the time being. Taking the future as a client also gives the designer a certain space to breathe. Individual clients don’t have the right to all of the designer’s time and creativity, clients can be cranky, they can be wrong, they can be complete pains-in the ass. The future, unknowable and always in the process of formation, can be just as cantankerous, and even worse, than any other client.

All well and good you might say, but how can we adopt the future as a client, what methods are available to us? One that I have been exploring is scenario planning, or, as I’ll explain later, the development of bespoke futures. Over the last quarter century, far-sighted multi-nationals have institutionalized scenario planning to ponder upcoming conditions and their effects on long-term profit and loss. Some of the better known successes of the scenario planning process were Royal Dutch Shell’s ability to plan successfully for expansions and contractions of global oil demands after the price shocks of the 1970s, the ways that scenario planning by the South African government under apartheid
Society, Technology, Economics, Politics, and the Environment. The identified scenario drivers are then allayed in a spectrum (along one axis), a matrix (with two axes, four 2-D spaces), or a volume (with three axes and eight 3-D spaces).
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**bespoke futures**
strategically hopeful

I’m interested in taking this corporate scenario planning and perverting its methodologies, audiences, and outcomes, creating what I call bespoke future, Referencing clothing that is custom made.
the term “bespoke” comes to us from the 17th Century, when tailors held their own stocks of cloth. A customer would come in and choose the fabric for his suit, and then the tailor would then mark off the requisite length of material, referring to it as having “been spoken for.”

Yves Klein, Leap int the Void (1960)

**here’s a white board exercise**

These bespoke futures go beyond profit and loss statements, to create an opportunity space for the imagination, enabling individuals and independent groups to create visions of the future that inspire them. The point is to move from P&L to V&F -- profit and loss to vision and futurity -- from ROI to ROV -- the Return on Investment to a Return on Vision.
So, how are we to craft these custom made futures? I follow a Situationist strategy and *detourn* Peter Schwartz’s influential and popular book on the process, *The Art of the Long View*, which distills the scenario and strategy work that his consultancy, the Global Business Network (or GBN), has been involved with for decades.

1. Stay focused
   stay visionary

2. Keep It Simple
   keep it complex

3. Keep It Interactive
   design it interactive

4. Plan to Plan and Allow Enough Time
   plan for serendipity and allow enough space

5. Don’t Settle for a Simple High, Medium, and Low Plots
   aim high

6. Avoid Probabilities or “Most Likely” Plots
   [Key advice: “Don’t fixate on just one scenario that you want to achieve.”]
   Fixate on just one scenario that you want to achieve.

7. Avoid Drafting Too Many Scenarios
6. Avoid Probabilities or “Most Likely” Plots
[Key advice: “Don’t fixate on just one scenario that you want to achieve.”]
fixate on just one scenario that you want to achieve

7. Avoid Drafting Too Many Scenarios
draft enough scenarios to kill all but the best

8. Invent Catchy Names for the Scenarios
invent catchy visuals for the scenarios

9. Make the Decision Makers Own the Scenarios
own your own scenarios

10. Budget Sufficient Resources for Communicating the Scenarios
generate sufficient fervor to communicate the scenarios

Micro-Meta Histories
My first instruction to the students is that I want no images of burning oil fields. One student, from Tanzania, who now works in Dubai, of course, started with:
no oil fields on fire!

an oil field on fire. He said he had to, just to get it out of his system. He then moved on to rocks that served as memory storage units
an oil field on fire. He said he had to, just to get it out of his system. He then moved on to rocks that served as memory storage units
Stones used for memory
They hold archives of history
planets that are as routers on a truly intergalactic network
and an infinite alphabet, created in the hopes of allowing everyone to more fully communicate with each other. That was a future that he, as an ethnic Indian, who had grown up in East Africa, and whose family had converted to Islam less than one hundred years ago, really wanted to see.
we have to become strategically hopeful

william mcdonough

I want to close with a quote from William McDonough: "We realize that as a culture, we as a species, have become strategically tragic—that these tragedies are of our own making—and that if we really intended to destroy the world we couldn't be doing much better. And, so, if design is the first signal of human intention, then the question becomes: what is our intention as a species? What are we expecting of the world? and what do we want to do, to create the things that we would like to expect. And that means we have to become strategically hopeful."