

Perspective

Aesthetic Minefield

Redesigning a design magazine presents a whole slew of unique challenges.

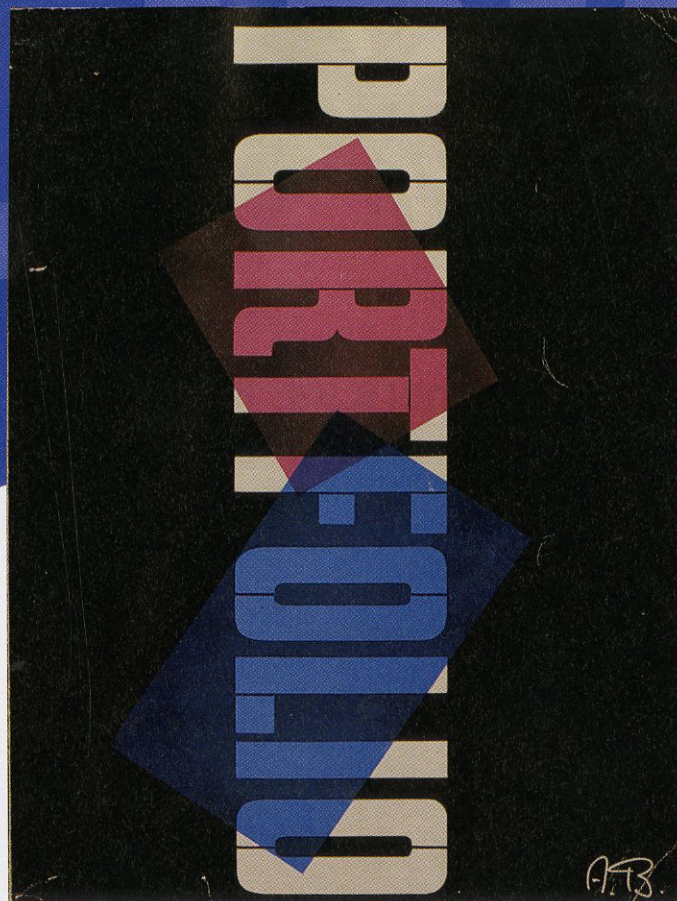
Redesigning a design magazine is not for the fainthearted or hamfisted. If the finished product isn't visually outstanding, the publication won't establish its own credibility. Moreover, a design magazine must always keep pace with—or predict—fashion. At the very least it should inspire readers, which involves touching on the zeitgeist. In the past three years *Communication Arts*, *How, I.D.*, *Print*, and *Step* have all stepped up to the challenge, commissioning makeovers aimed at redefining their identities while reflecting the times.

The most beautiful example of the genre ever was *Portfolio*, which published only three issues, from 1949 to 1951. Alexey Brodovitch's elegant editorial spreads flowed cinematically from one "scene" to the next, but this would have been impossible if the editors had not rejected advertising. Without ads *Portfolio* raised its coverage of the Eameses, Saul Steinberg, E. McKnight Kauffer, Paul Rand, gigantic advertising sculpture, cattle brands, 3-D graphics, and hobo markings to a cultural plane above traditional trade magazines. Brodovitch's design didn't clash with content, the main bugaboo plaguing publications that showcase the designs of others. Unfortunately no design periodical today is well funded enough to forgo advertising—and even for *Portfolio* it was suicidal. So a graphic designer's first challenge here is to integrate or isolate editorial content and advertisements while retain-

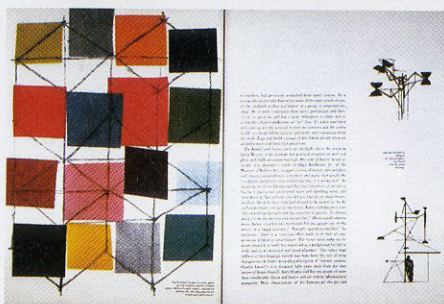
ing design integrity.

Periodic redesigns are routine since a design magazine that adheres to a rigid format (or even the same logo) for too long is like an aging pop star who sings his greatest hits ad nauseam. It may be crowd-pleasing in Branson, Missouri, but sophisticated audiences are less likely to tolerate nostalgia. Design publications can't be preserved in amber, even if it's the color of the moment.

In the late 1990s *Step by Step*, a how-to graphic-arts magazine out of Peoria, Illinois, experienced a steady decline in readers owing to its obsolete content and mundane design. In 2002 it made an ambitious change by deemphasizing "how," and focusing on "what" and "why." But reinvigorating its stagnant format could not cure all its ills. A novel look had to be both glue and gloss for its fresh direction, signaled by a new title, *Step (Inside Design)*.



By Steven Heller



The magazine banked on designer Robert Valentine's redesign—a genetic splicing of *Martha Stewart Living* and *Wallpaper*—to create buzz and allure. The format uses white space liberally. Instead of an excessive number of reproductions on each spread, as is common in design magazines, fewer items are shown in larger scale. The type is uniform, but the composition mixes minimal settings and highly controlled clutter. For example, pieces of tightly led body text are intermittently blown up to shout out key sentences and even entire paragraphs at strategic points throughout an article. When it first appeared this device was jarring and fussy, but now it's seen as endemic to the magazine's graphic identity.

Step took a page out of the *Communication Arts (CA)* stylebook. For the better part of its 46-year run this showcase for mainstream practice has maintained a dignified format that frames professional design and illustration. Simple headlines sat atop pristine pages of tidily composed classical-looking body text. There was no cinematic pacing. Restraint reigned; balance was achieved by not overplaying any single component. Reproductions ostensibly drove the magazine's look, and this straightforward format kept the variety of disparate examples from clashing with one

another. In fact, the entire editorial well looked as clean as a J. Crew catalog. For *CA*'s anniversary issue last March, continued on page 76

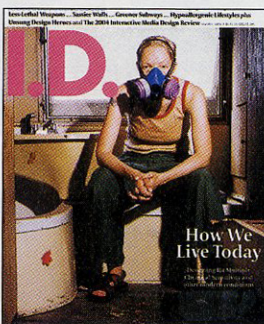
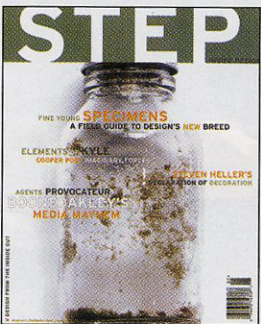
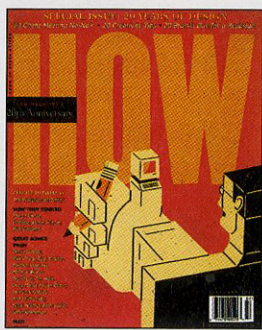
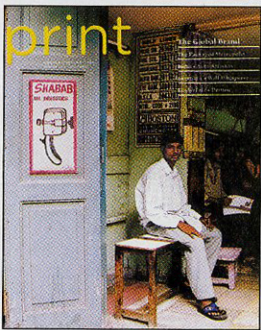
Alexey Brodovitch's *Portfolio* magazine published only three issues in its brief lifespan (1949–51). Left, a spread on type; right, an article on cattle brands. Top, the first cover; center, two spreads on Charles Eames.



Top, courtesy Steven Heller

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In the past three years, these leading design magazines have been redesigned: (clockwise from top left) *Print*, Abbott Miller of Pentagram; *How*, D. J. Stout of Pentagram; *I.D.*, Nico Schweizer; and *Step*, Robert Valentine.

editor and art director Patrick Coyne revised the format by introducing new typeface families and subtle layout tweaks but retained the clean, gallery-like purist aura.

If *CA* is a gallery, then Cincinnati-based *How* is like a gym with banks of flat-screen TVs all set to different channels. For low- and mid-level designers, its editorial focus has been to provide practical advice and showcase designers' work and work spaces, as well as report on how their creative and business plans function. It covers design craft rather than culture. Instead of deconstructing theories, *How* dissects design like a side of beef, revealing how it works in dense information-packed diagrams.

To mark its 20th anniversary, *How* launched a new format created by Pentagram partner D. J. Stout, former art director of the innovative *Texas Monthly*. The design for the special issue did not try to hide clutter under the rug of clean typography but left a lot of stuff in the center of the room. "*How* prides itself on not being overly designy," says Stout. The new design is aimed "at their niche audience" and includes graphic doodads sandwiched between stiff paper promos and loose blow-in cards. The visual language was built on various tricks of contemporary digital trade—outlines, in-

"The biggest challenge," says Abbott Miller on revamping a design magazine, "is creating a frame that maintains its separateness from the design being showcased."

lines, lines connecting type to images, lines connecting colored boxes and blurbs, as well as bold lines, crayon lines, time lines, and a surfeit of cover lines. Stout admits that he would have preferred more "eye candy-like elements," but the editors refused to veer too far from the original formula. His plan was to make the *How* logo—which had been tucked into the left-hand corner (à la *Life* magazine)—into the entire cover, with the letter O as a frame for art. "The editors thought it was too artsy," he says. Instead an excessively large Gothic *HOW* takes up half of the cover; the other half is packed with headlines and an illustration, which contributes to its mail-order catalog look.

I.D.'s recent redesign is more a cross between a consumer and a "design" look. About 12 years ago Bruce Mau redesigned the magazine in a minimalist manner, providing uniformity and eliminating distracting conceits. But the format was deemed so ascetic that subsequent designers injected typographic variety to spice it up. After a while this improvisational approach diluted the original concept. The current makeover, by design director Nico Schweizer, was developed as much to signal the vision of the publication's editor in chief, Julie Lasky, as to create a more flexible frame in which to present a menu of interdisciplinary themes and objects. "I used the motto 'Design is most successful when it's not seen,'" Schweizer says. "It was never my intent to set off graphic fireworks or illustrate stories too much. I tried to design for an audience that I assume to be smart and already interested in the subject matter, so I don't feel the necessity to impress and package." Nonetheless the fundamental problem is not the quality of the design's typography or layout but the lack of a signature graphic identity. With the exception of the demonstrative *I.D.* logo (retained from Mau), the interior layouts would work nicely in any well-designed magazine.

Creating an identity was also the goal of *Print* magazine's recent redesign. Founded in 1940, the publication has undergone more makeovers than Michael Jackson. In the 1960s continued on page 78

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All these designers would be lying if they claimed not to be influenced by their colleagues' scrutiny.

Herbert Bayer standardized the typography with Helvetica, which signaled the magazine's brief Modernist period. Yet for most of *Print*'s run, its coverage has been comprehensive, showcasing illustration and cartoons, vernacular and alternative design, cultural manifestations and social activism—all of which might appear in the same issue along with features on mainstream advertising and corporate identity. Designing for this range of content was not easy; it required a format that avoided chaos while reveling in variety. Over the years *Print* has not always had exemplary formats, but this new iteration—designed by Pentagram partner Abbott Miller, known for the stylish arts and culture magazine *Twice*—tries to reconcile standardization and eclecticism in one format. “In many ways the biggest challenge is creating a framework that maintains its separateness from the design being showcased,” he explains. “I wanted a format where, once you gained familiarity with the language of the design, you could easily distinguish the frame from the picture. I was not after neutrality in the frame but consistency of expression.”

All these designers would be lying if they claimed not to be influenced by their colleagues' scrutiny. “I have an awareness of the audience, and it probably resulted in an aura of sobriety or restraint,” Miller concedes. “But ultimately there's not enough of a baseline of what the design community wants to make me beholden to a particular look.” Still, with the specter of keen oversight, any flaw—no matter how minute—will doubtless be critiqued. *Portfolio* is revered in magazine circles, but during its extremely short run it was oblivious to the realities of demographics, advertising, and focus groups. Contemporary design magazines must balance all this and somehow be in the groove, be ahead of the curve, and be models of impeccable taste. It can be a thankless job. Then again, if designers can't look to design magazines for perfection, where else can they look?

Steven Heller is a contributing editor at *I.D.* and *Print* magazines, and is the author of *Design Literacy (Continued): Understanding Graphic Design*.