



THE END OF THE GLUE-POT ERA

Steven Heller on how technology has remade graphic design. Plus: Sagmeister, Helfand, Blechman, and four more on why their work has (and hasn't) changed.

WHEN GRAPHIC DESIGN was not brain surgery, it was much easier to practice. The new graphic design—or, shall we say, cross-platform, multidisciplinary design—is more neurologically complex than at any other time in history. Arguably, it is more like actual brain surgery now (minus the life-and-death consequences), with a network every bit as complicated as your brain's synapses. Today's graphic design is not your mother's graphic design—unless your mother is a twentysomething. It is no longer possible to launch a career with a ruler, an X-acto blade, and a glue pot on your kitchen table. I'd bet that if El Lissitzky, Piet Zwart, or even Paul Rand (who owned a computer) returned from Valhalla to resume their practices, they wouldn't recognize the field.

The obvious engine for these changes is digital tools and what they have wrought. Only Gutenberg's invention of the printing press is comparable. Digital technologies have made it possible to increase the scope of design practice a hundredfold. Design is now deeply integrated into our daily lives, and engineering has made visionary concepts from decades past more feasible. Massimo Vignelli recently told me that his flawed yet revolutionary 1972 New York City subway map was “created in B.C. (before computer) for the A.C. (after computer) era.” The map was relaunched this fall by the city's Metropolitan Transportation Authority as an online interactive diagram, with all the bugs worked out—nearly 40 years after its introduction.

The capacity to make design move in multiple dimensions is no longer a novelty; it's a necessity. That's because

technology has forced graphic design to be time-and-space-based. Understanding the storytelling arc is essential to making analog and digital design alike. Knowing how to move the viewer's overtaxed eye from point A to B to Z is a skill that was once relatively minor. Increased data flow has turned narration into the primary function of design. Graphic designers have always thought about their audience, but now “user experience” is their mantra.

New technologies have also altered how designers do business, often turning them from service providers into entrepreneurs. Since there are so many variations in this flux, I asked some veteran graphic designers—those who have lived in both the B.C. and A.C. worlds—to reflect on how the last decade has altered their practices and, sometimes, their lives.

(continued on page 38)

(continued from page 36)

**Jessica Helfand,
Winterhouse, New Haven,
Connecticut**

“I tend to notice the changes in the profession less in terms of my own work and more in terms of the shifts in my students’. There was a time in the early 1990s when the then-new media skewed not only the perspectives of young designers but the economic environment within which they flourished. (As new opportunities proliferated, so, too, did the fat wallets that supported them.) Budgets ballooned, and so did egos—and none of it made for work that was that transformative or memorable or great. Leaner times make for better designers, more meaningful work, and greater challenges.”

**Cheryl Towler Weese,
Studio Blue, Chicago**

“One shift I’ve noticed is that in many projects, we’ve moved from creating narrative to developing an informational toolbox or dashboard. Working in interactive media has given us greater control over how information is organized—formerly, a role that fell within a writer or editor’s purview. I think the development of new media has shaken up roles and allowed cross-fertilization. Clients are also recognizing the value of social entrepreneurship and the role that strategy and change management can play in the front end of design.”

**Nicholas Blechman,
The New York Times Book
Review, New York City**

“The profession has shifted in subtle ways, mostly in how designers promote themselves and interact with each other. Bulky black portfolios have been replaced with slick iPads, and postcard promos with PDF attachments. I no

longer keep artists’ handouts on file but instead bookmark illustrator sites in Safari. I spend more time art directing through email than on the phone.”

**Jonathan Hoefler,
Hoefler Frere-Jones,
New York City**

“Both the practice of typeface design and the obligations of the designers have become considerably more complex in the past few decades. Twenty years ago, digital type was in its infancy and type design was a charming cottage industry. Independent designers, often working in isolation, could invent ideas for typefaces, produce them on the desktop, and supply them to nearby art directors. Today, the burdens of the entire world weigh down on the profession. Both our clients and their readers are distributed throughout the world, making the linguistic demands placed upon a typeface ever greater; and the requirement that typefaces function on a diverse and explosively growing number of platforms makes them evermore complicated to engineer and manufacture. A profession of

one-man bands has developed into an industry of organized specialists, not unlike the way the profession evolved between the era of independent typefounder Claude Garamond, and the advent of the Mergenthaler Linotype Company. But that evolution took 350 years, and what we’ve experienced has taken scarcely two decades.”

**Gael Towey, Martha Stewart
Omnimedia, New York City**

“In November 2010, we introduced our first iPad issue of *Martha Stewart Living*, called ‘Boundless Beauty.’ It wasn’t available in print, and it contained all-new stories. This was our beta test for creating simultaneous digital versions of our regular monthly issues, which we launched the following January for *Martha Stewart Living* and *Everyday Food*. For ‘Boundless Beauty,’ we took advantage of the new functionality available with the iPad with videos, slide shows, scrolls, panoramas, and animations. We created stories that would showcase these new functionalities (e.g., a peony story where you can glide your finger across a panorama of Martha’s garden).

Being able to show before-and-after, step-by-step slide shows makes it even easier to entice readers and teach them. All of this does require new training and mostly a curiosity and willingness to solve problems differently.”

**Ken Carbone,
Carbone Smolan Agency,
New York City**

“Twenty or thirty years ago, graphic design was the domain of a select group of highly trained practitioners in disciplines ranging from corporate identity and editorial design to packaging and environmental graphics. They were based in design hubs such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco and select cities abroad. All was good.

The advent of the computer ushered in the Great Design Democracy, and the ranks of graphic designers exploded. Now, great designers can be found in every 300-square-foot office around the globe, offering an expanded range of digital and interactive design services requiring new tools and new thinking. The barriers of entry to the profession no longer exist. Design is now a commodity business forcing ‘seasoned’ design firms to quickly adapt to the heightened competition. Clients benefit from this and have more choice. Having a ‘contemporary’ suite of design services keeps you in the game. However, the key to winning has not changed. Fresh talent, great design, solid client service, and the color red still breed success.”

**Stefan Sagmeister,
Sagmeister Inc.,
New York City**

“The still image will continue to lose in importance, and everything that can be animated will be animated—not always to the advantage of the quality of the project.” ■

