



Mirko Ilić

Designer and illustrator



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Mirko Ilić arrived in New York in 1986 and has been something of a force of nature ever since. He was the first designer I ever knew who “fired” a client. In addition to being an illustrator, Ilić, a native of Bosnia, has been art director of *Time*’s international edition and *The New York Times* Op-Ed page. He now runs a multifaceted design office, Mirko Ilić Corp., and believes that doing pro bono work is not optional. Ilić has seen how designers make a difference to people, organizations, and institutions by providing clear and informative communications. He is always ready, willing, and able to give everything, from advice to design concepts. I caught up with him to discuss what it means for a designer to do pro bono work and what is expected by the organizations he helps.

[What motivates you to do so much pro bono work?](#)

I was born in what was then Yugoslavia, a Communist country at the time. The nation went through bloody civil wars based on religious and ethnic intolerance. I tried to help stop the bloodshed. And that was not just because this was occurring in the region where I grew up. Regardless of where bad things are happening, how can somebody—an artist—who is supposed to be sensitive, tolerant, and compassionate do work exclusively for money and glory? [What determines to what or whom you will devote your time?](#) Sometimes I do things on my own, or with some of my friends, like Daniel Young, when we self-finance projects for different causes. We then offer our final product to organizations. Otherwise, they usually come to me after seeing my work for someone else, recognizing the possibility of advancing their causes using my work. I very rarely refuse to help. A lot of the assistance goes beyond graphic design to things like finding a cheap printer. I also get involved in getting different people together for projects, giving advice and strategies, and even suggesting ways to get funding.



A splashy design may get into design annuals but would waste an organization’s money. —Mirko Ilić

[What do you expect in return from the “client”?](#) Respect for my work and my time. [I’ve found that organizations getting something for nothing are not always willing to give the designer total freedom. Is this true for you?](#)

If they come to me to ask me for my design or to create something, obviously it’s because they couldn’t do it on their own. And because of that, I don’t think they were supposed to be involved in the details of the design. Meanwhile, as a designer, I also need to know what my obligations are toward these kinds of projects. In order to design for an organization like the Auschwitz Jewish Center, the designer needs to resist the tendency for self-indulgence and think about the cause. A splashy and fancy design may get one’s work into design annuals but would waste a lot of the organization’s money. That is not a place for the designer to

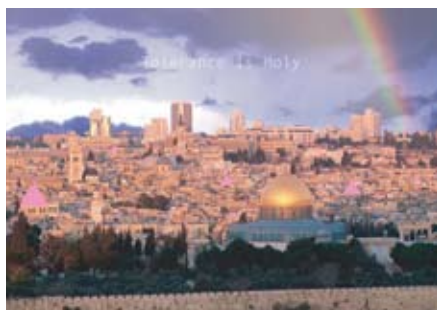
STEVEN HELLER

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MIRKO ILIĆ

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TOP TO BOTTOM: Identity for the Auschwitz Jewish Center, aerial voting campaign in Florida, and the "Tolerance Is Holy" poster supporting gay rights in Jerusalem.

show off or self-promote. Also, it would be counterproductive—would one want a design for an entity like the Auschwitz Jewish Center to be fancy and splashy?

[Give me an example of another project where you took this approach.](#)

Prior to the presidential election in 2004, I visited South Beach, Florida, and saw airplanes flying over beaches with party announcements or birthday messages trailing behind them in the sky. When the election approached, remembering what happened in Florida in the previous election, I felt it was critical to get people to vote, and I wanted to do something about it. The airplane came to mind. I assumed it was not that expensive if people could use it to announce birthdays. I found the company who does the announce-

ments for a relatively cheap hourly rate. I wanted to do a slogan/signage campaign that did not preach one particular side or another but a neutral one to ask people to get out and vote. I came up with "FIX THE MISTAKE!—VOTE!" In that kind of situation, it's not a question of using a trendy typeface or where to sign one's name but a question of getting the message through. I asked for financial support from Daniel Young, Louise Fili, and Stefan Sagmeister. With their help, we managed to have the airplane fly from the tip of Florida to Fort Lauderdale and back, from dawn to dusk, for ten days.

[You've done a lot of work for the Auschwitz Jewish Center. Do you believe your efforts have produced results?](#)

In the process of working for them, I did all their logos and redid their identity. I believe that my effort produced results, because at each stage they came back to me for more work. The work goes beyond design: For the organization's Raphael Lemkin Center—Lemkin was the first to coin the term "genocide"—I helped to get people from the governments of ex-Yugoslavian countries to participate in seminars teaching government officials to recognize the first signs of genocide in order to prevent it in the future.

[How would you define the most successful of your projects?](#) I worked on a logo design, this time with Milton Glaser, for the Sajmište memorial center in Serbia. This was an effort to reclaim the grounds of a German concentration camp where between 60,000 and 65,000 people were slaughtered. Currently, one part of this area is a discotheque, and boxing matches and weddings are also held there; people are living in another part. I asked Milton Glaser to help with the logo and brought with me the renowned architect and interior designer Adam Tihany, who also volunteered his services to create the memorial center. I tried to involve as many famous people as possible in order to give the project some serious weight. Furthermore, organizing a roundtable with the likes of architects Daniel Libeskind and Adam Tihany raised awareness and brought media coverage to the effort. Local activist Veran Matic, CEO of the B92 television station, created a two-part

documentary, which aired on B92 in Serbia and beyond. I hope all that started the process of reclaiming the grounds and building the memorial in the future. For the public, the only visible work from my end is the logo. But if they build the memorial, I would consider it most successful.

[Tell me about the "Tolerance Is Holy" project. Like some other images, you did this on your own and then found someone to adopt it.](#)

I did the "Tolerance Is Holy" poster with Daniel Young. What triggered us was an AP photo of religious leaders in Jerusalem gathering together in one place for the first time in order to condemn an international gay conference. After years of bloodshed and slaughter in the region, nothing could get them together, but stopping gays did it. Danny decided we needed to do a poster. I came up with the slogan "Tolerance Is Holy." We bought a photo from one of the major stock houses, an image of Jerusalem with a rainbow. Interestingly, in their contract one of the clauses was not to use their stock photo for any controversial issues, including homosexuality. We signed it, figuring that if they ever went after us it would be a huge embarrassment to them. We printed 2,000 posters and sent them to various organizations and institutions. The following year, the gay community officially adopted our slogan for the Jerusalem gay pride parade.

[I was quite touched by your Darfur poster, which equates the situation with the Nazi Holocaust. Did you receive any flak for this?](#)

Thinking about Darfur, the image of the famous poster of a child asking his father, "Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War?" came to my mind. [The poster, created in 1915 by U.K. designer Savile Lumley, shows a well-dressed father staring pensively into the distance.] I was partly asking myself what I would do if my child asked me what I did about this enormous suffering and slaughtering of the people of Darfur. Daniel Young came up with the idea to use "DAR-FUR" as an acronym to list the names of Nazi concentration camps. I developed the design; we distributed the poster to many organizations and even paid for it to be posted around New York City. 📍