

## M Stands for Mobilize: An Interview with John Bielenberg

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**D**esign organizations and schools all over the world are increasingly pondering the proverbial question: Do designers have the ability to change the world? In the face of the current worldwide economic crisis, it may be hard to be optimistic. Yet given the right engine for change, the answer, according to Project M's John Bielenberg, is a resounding YES—however, he would argue, it can only be done one community at a time. Through his intensive summer program, Bielenberg's students use design, writing, photography and other strategic skills to address global issues at the local level. From the rural American South to urban Iceland, Project M applies design thinking to help provide safe drinking water (Buy a Meter, in Hale County, Alabama) or turn abandoned lots into parks (This Is Not Grass, in East Baltimore, Maryland). Recently, Bielenberg went to Reykjavík as the nation's economy collapsed and led an M Blitz workshop, in which creative collaborators have just 48 hours to make a positive impact. As the recession continues here at home, we spoke to Bielenberg about his experience in Iceland and what Project M will do next to save the world.

**Heller: For several years now you've been running Project M, an intensive learning experience—a global classroom, so to speak—with the objective to “change the world.” What was the impetus for the program, and what does the M stand for?**

**Bielenberg:** I was totally and completely inspired by Samuel Mockbee, founder of the Auburn Rural Studio for architecture in Hale County, Alabama. So, M stands for Mockbee, Maine (where I live), messages, mentoring, mavericks—not McCain—and more meanings to come.

**Heller: You've held Project M programs in the rural South, in urban East Baltimore and in the rainforest of Costa Rica, and you developed the Mbulance to help victims of Katrina. Recently, you were in Reykjavík. Why Reykjavík? Iceland is not known as a third world country...**

**Bielenberg:** I was asked to run a Project M Design Activism class at the Iceland Academy of the Arts, which happened to coincide with their recent economic and political meltdown. It was a perfect opportunity to use design as a response to their crisis, even though the country is fairly affluent. While I was there, the government was forced to resign by crowds of Icelanders banging on pots and pans in front of the Parliament building. It was too loud for them to carry on business! They told me that nobody had protested in Iceland for 40 years.

**Heller: The Icelanders were melting. You say that “ability equals responsibility.” Does that mean everyone on your M team is responsible for a small piece of the earth?**

**Bielenberg:** [Laughs] I just think we all should just care about something deeply and use our skills as designers to do something about it. Maybe it’s the earth, maybe not.

**Heller: Let’s talk about the Reykjavik project. What were the results of it and did it make the proverbial change?**

**Bielenberg:** The Iceland group was engaged in something I call an M Blitz. It’s a 48-hour project using design for the greater good. In this case, design was used to respond publicly to their current crisis. Several of the seven Blitz projects were covered in the Icelandic national news. They were all documented in 48-second YouTube videos.

**Heller: What is the profile of your participants?**

**Bielenberg:** There were about 40 young students from the architecture, graphic and product design programs. Most were Icelandic, but not all.

**Heller: I presume anyone involved is serious about social issues. But how much are they willing to sacrifice to go the distance?**

**Bielenberg:** I was overwhelmed by their energy, passion and courage... and secretly afraid that they might get injured or arrested. A couple of the projects were potentially dangerous and, while I wouldn’t encourage risking life and limb, they kicked ass.

**Heller: You have a motto that can easily be taken as a superficial saying: “Learn how to think wrong.” What does that mean? Is wrong the new right?**

**Bielenberg:** Thinking wrong is really about challenging our conventions, processes and orthodoxies, especially during the idea-generation phase of design. I believe that the process of thinking wrong is an antidote to how our brains create synaptic connections, or heuristic biases, to efficiently function in the world and produce predictable, but expected results. It’s about generating a huge number of possibilities, before selecting or executing, and is based on the assumption that creativity, invention and innovation are good things. At Project M we use a variety of exercises to short circuit our biases and connect things that wouldn’t normally be connected. It doesn’t mean that the final project looks or feels “wrong.”

**Heller: What have you and your participants accomplished that is quantifiably life altering?**

**Bielenberg:** I think of Project M as an incubator, or boot camp, for designers that share a common belief in the power of design to shape the future in a positive way. The true impact of Project M can only be measured when you evaluate the arc of the careers of the people who have participated. The actual projects we produce together are useful—I hope—byproducts of our brief experience together. However, I do think some of them have been successful, like connecting a hundred families to fresh water in Hale County, Alabama.

**Heller: How do you keep Project M afloat?**

**Bielenberg:** Good question! At this point it's completely self-funded. The participants share the cost of running the program, and all the advisors donate their time. There's no profit built into the model—just ask my wife, Dee. The good part of this is that we are completely free of external forces or agendas, like we might not be with corporate funding. This model might need to change at some point as Project M expands to meet increasing demand.

**Heller: Do you foresee the economic slowdown as impacting the work of Project M?**

**Bielenberg:** So far it's had a positive effect. Because of factors like financial collapse, global climate change and decreasing supply of fossil fuels, we are all a bit anxious and young people are increasingly interested in doing work that matters. I also think that the job market is so tight that they are looking for alternative creative outlets. I haven't seen this level of engagement since the 1960s! Also, there is no shortage of projects that we might care about addressing.

**Heller: What do you envision as the future for Project M?**

**Bielenberg:** As I mentioned before, there's a lot of interest and momentum in Project M and using design for the greater good. I'd like to offer more people more ways to participate. Although I'm not the type to have a business plan, I do have some expansion ideas. In addition to my traditional four-week Project M program in Alabama in June, I'm expanding to offer a two-week program in Maine in March. We're also establishing permanent design studios called Project M Labs in several locations. The first, built by the 2008 M Team, is in Greensboro, Alabama, and I am in conversations to open similar ones in Belfast, Maine, Baltimore, Maryland, and Reykjavík, Iceland. These studios will be staffed by young designers and work on ongoing projects, as well as help facilitate other groups coming through to have the M experience.

We're also launching the M Blitz movement, and I'm working on an M Blitz guidebook right now. The last thing I'd like to do is bring together M Expedition teams to travel to places and do projects. I've been talking to a group from the Dakota Sioux reservation in South Dakota about doing something there. I imagine this as a more functional version of Team Zissou, from the movie *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*.

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**About the Author.** Steven Heller, co-chair of the Designer as Author MFA and co-founder of the MFA in Design Criticism at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine*