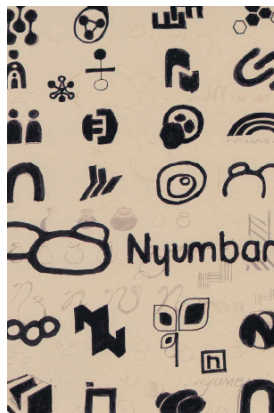
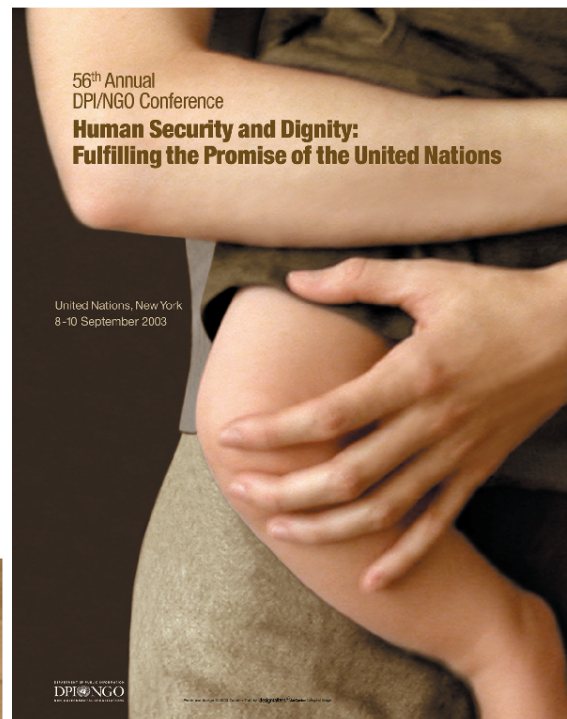


DESIGN AS A PLATFORM FOR DIPLOMACY: DESIGNMATTERS @ ART CENTER COLLEGE OF DESIGN

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INTRODUCTION/SUMMARY

Throughout the international design community today, there is a growing consensus that designers have a key role to play in embracing a social agenda for engagement, action, and intervention in response to many of the global issues confronting humanity. These issues—over one billion people living on less than one dollar a day, urban grid-lock, depleting natural resources, disease and security threats, and looming environmental calamities, to name just a few—urgently demand fresh approaches, and especially the involvement of the creative community.

Since its inception in 1930, Art Center College of Design has developed creative leaders who shape the form and function of our culture. Widely regarded as one of the premier schools of art and design in the world, the institution is a laboratory for innovation and a center of international dialogue in design, with a long tradition of real-world relevance in the practice and work of its faculty, students, and alumni. Now celebrating its 75th anniversary and a record of seminal achievements, Art Center remains on the cutting edge of design education and professional leadership.

With each passing decade, the College has also become a vital advocate for design's expanded range of responsibilities in a society of increasing interconnectedness and complexity. In the past few years in particular, this advocacy has directly affected the College's educational strategies, imbuing them with a greatly broadened world view. This paper presents a highly innovative and effective example of one of these strategies: **designmatters @ Art Center**, a College-wide initiative exploring the social and humanitarian applications of design in conjunction with non-profit and social service agencies and responsible business practices. The initiative itself also provides a compelling "case study" for the involvement of an entire institution—and not only one department or area—in a unified approach to methods of linking real-world issues with academic practices. Through **designmatters**, Art Center also seeks to expand upon the definition of inclusive design to encompass a wide variety of design-based approaches to the challenges of our time.

OPENING NEW DOORS TO ACTION

"This is about conviction, commitment, and contribution. It is about the individual designer having access to a wide range of options and boldly stepping out to make a difference."—Richard Koshalek, President, Art Center College of Design

Launched in 2001 by Art Center's International Initiatives department—charged with positioning the school in the midst of international dialogue about design's role in the larger world—**designmatters @ Art Center** offers a unique model of institutional engagement and an innovative framework for transdisciplinary research, advocacy and action. Building on the core concept that design is a basic instrument for improving the quality of human life in every realm, **designmatters** enhances educational opportunities within and between each of the disciplines taught at Art Center, by facilitating programming that involves all constituents of the College's community: students, faculty, staff, trustees and alumni. The initiative was conceived to function within an inclusive structure headed by a task force of individuals from every sector of the College. This core group, convened by International Initiatives on a regular basis, propelled the program forward during its initial phases, working closely with the College's educational leadership to integrate projects and shared methodologies as a horizontal thread within the overall curriculum. Thanks to its inclusive composition, the task force proved instrumental in generating a broad forum for discussion about socially responsible design within Art Center and bringing new expertise in many fields into the College as part of this discussion. Equally important, because of the real-world, tangible results generated by every **designmatters** project to date, the initiative has reached far

beyond the College as well, contributing immensely to the distinctive visibility that the program enjoys today. Now that the initiative is well-established, task force members have taken a more secondary role, and act on a consultative basis on specific projects that call for their particular expertise.

Since its inception, **designmatters** has endorsed and carried out a varied portfolio of projects—both on a local and international level. This portfolio comprises trans-disciplinary studios, course assignments, workshops, forums, and internships. All projects are screened by the initiative's Co-Directors and subsequently evaluated and selected in an inclusive process with department chairs and faculty, using rigorous criteria that measure a number of factors: educational enrichment, real-world relevance and application, and finally, potential to exemplify best design practices. Over the past year, the scope of **designmatters** has been further defined in order to make it especially relevant to the educational institution that gave it rise. Specifically, **designmatters** projects are focussing on four “mega-topics” as they relate to design:

- environmental aspects of sustainable development;
- universal education and visual literacy;
- reduction of violence (including violence against women);
- medicine and healthcare.

It is anticipated that by investing in a sustained effort of design research and practice in these four areas of inquiry, **designmatters** will contribute to bringing further awareness about the contributions that design can exert in these fields. Indeed, as the examples below illustrate, many projects undertaken thus far have exerted a profound impact on the local, national and international partnering agencies involved. Equally important from the perspective of the College's mission, **designmatters** has deeply affected the many students who have participated, broadening their appreciation of the roles they can play as designers in many arenas of knowledge, and helping to make them citizens empowered to catalyze solutions to global issues.

SPHERES OF INFLUENCE: SELECT PROJECTS

“Designers help wield power to change, modify, eliminate, or evolve totally new patterns.”—Victor Papanek, Design for the Real World, 1972

INTERNATIONAL ACTIVISM AS AN NGO

As the first design school to be designated a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) by the United Nations, Art Center has been in a unique position since 2002 to advocate for design's ability to effect positive change and solutions to global challenges. The trans-boundary nature and depth of its mandate made the UN a natural choice for **designmatters** to engage with as part of an outreach strategy furthering the international scope and humanitarian relevance of issues of interest to the Art Center community. This outreach has proved especially effective at a crucial juncture in the United Nation's history, at a time when the UN is validating the importance of multi-constituency partnerships with civil society and the private sector in addressing complex issues that no single government or sector can successfully resolve.



“Un-bathroom,” William Hsu : portable toilet for emergency relief situations.



Prototype shelter designed as part of a studio addressing homelessness.



Brody Larson's graphic identity design for the 2004 DPI/ NGO Conference at the United Nations.

Through **designmatters**, in the past two years Art Center has swiftly developed ongoing partnerships with numerous United Nations agencies, including the Department of Public Information (DPI), the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Regional Office of the World Health Organization, and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). This strategic alliance between the College and the UN demonstrates the profound contribution to international policy that can be made by the creative community and design in particular. By channeling the unique expertise of the College and leveraging individual contributions into a larger institutional one, this partnership has been especially potent in distinguishing Art Center's socially relevant agenda.

Two recent examples of collaborations with the United Nations merit special discussion in these respects. In 2003 and 2004, Art Center was invited to conceive and help implement the graphic identity for the Department of Public Information's annual NGO Conference at UN headquarters in New York. The '03 conference theme of "Human Security and Dignity: Fulfilling the Promise of the United Nations" was boldly translated into images designed by an advanced graphic design student and utilized in all conference program materials, banners, and posters. In 2004, the Conference theme, "Millennium Development Goals: Civil Society Takes Action," became the thesis topic for another senior student and the resulting images were similarly employed. In both cases, moreover, these projects were developed in the context of transdisciplinary studios that exposed many students and faculty to the complex mandate at hand. This work was further enhanced by yet another project at Art Center: the development, by Graduate Media Design students, of the first interactive website ever produced in the 50-plus-year history of the UN DPI/NGO Conference. Ultimately, all of these visual solutions reached a highly diverse audience representing NGOs in several hundred countries worldwide, and permitted thousands of people to follow the Conference proceedings and lend their voices to the debate.

Another series of collaborative projects with the UN demonstrates, perhaps even more powerfully, how design can affect the evolution of policy-making in critical areas of societal well-being. Since 2002, Art Center has been commissioned by several UN agencies to produce a number of Public Service Announcements (PSAs) for worldwide distribution. These spots highlight globally significant issues, including gender equality and prevention of violence against women (for UNIFEM), health (for PAHO), and the importance of achieving the Millennium Development Goals to improve health, environmental, and economic conditions around the world by 2015 (for the UN Millennium Campaign).

PRODUCT DESIGN IN THE SERVICE OF CONFLICT MEDIATION

In early 2004, **designmatters** spearheaded a project in the Los Angeles region in collaboration with two community partners: the Western Justice Center Foundation, a conflict mediation agency, and Pacific Oaks College, a prominent teacher training and early child development institution. The focus of the project was to explore the essential role that design can play when toys and games become tools for promoting peaceful conflict resolution among children. Students in Product Design worked closely with experts in child psychology and conflict resolution



Ron Tapia's What If? animated PSA, in support of the UN Millennium Development Goals.



Ron Tapia's print campaign, "What If?," for the UN Millennium Development Goals Campaign.



"Yo-yo Puzzle," Eunhye Kange: part of the "Toys as Tools for Peaceful Conflict Resolution" collaboration.

to produce prototypes of toys and interactive games whose primary objective is not only to entertain, but also to teach, comfort, and help children with cope conflict situations. As with all **designmatters** projects, this provided a key opportunity for Art Center students to understand and engage with the needs of end-users—in this case, a particularly vulnerable and significant population.

INCLUSIVE DRIVING ENVIRONMENTS

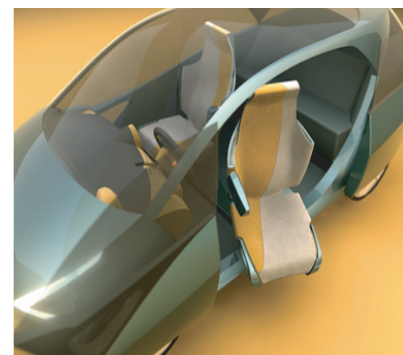
Over the course of an entire academic term in 2004, **designmatters** facilitated seminal research for a corporate-sponsored project at the College made possible by Johnson Controls, one of the world's leading companies in automotive interior design. In this major transdisciplinary studio, teams of students and faculty in Transportation Design, Product Design, Graphic Design, Environmental Design, Film, and Advertising were asked to conceive inclusive driving environments for the future, with a particular emphasis on innovative interfaces between drivers whose mobility is compromised due to age or disability, and personal road vehicles. The studio's work was immeasurably enhanced by the invited presence of experts in gerontology, emergent technologies, architecture, and disability issues; in addition, disabled users themselves provided invaluable first-hand perspectives. Five highly diverse schemes for automotive interiors were enthusiastically received by Johnson Controls, as ideas that can be universally embraced by the automotive industry.

CONCLUSION: DESIGN IN THE SERVICE OF SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

“Design...is one of the practical disciplines of responsible action for bringing the high values of a country or a culture into concrete reality.”—Richard Buchanan, Design Issues, 2001

Design education in the larger service of society is not a new concept. Awareness of its importance, however, is steadily increasing in the public realm, in business and industry, and—most encouragingly—among designers themselves. There is also ample and growing evidence that creative communities, which value design-related problem-solving approaches, foster productive societies in many respects. By placing design students in collaborative projects with partners of complementary expertise—often non design-based—**designmatters @ Art Center** illustrates these principles; in addition, it supports the notion advocated by contemporary sociologists such as Ronald S. Burt, that, creativity is an important “import-export game,” rather than a quasi-mystical heroic act or genetic gift.

Taking these tenets as its foundation, the **designmatters @ Art Center** initiative has, in a very short time, made remarkable progress in bringing a venerable educational institution and its constituencies into a new mode of engagement with the larger world. The initiative provides a new, inclusive platform for discussion and action throughout the College that allows everyone to participate in key contemporary issues. In the next few years, the curriculum in every Art Center department will offer at least one **designmatters**-related course each term—courses that like all the initiative's projects to date, yield tangible real-world results.



Students work in teams to create an automobile interior specifically designed for persons with disabilities.



Animated paper models were cut by hand and arranged in an animated film loop for the 2003 UN DPI/ NGO Conference.



Environmental design student at work on a transitional shelter unit for the homeless population.

In further support of this institutional stance, the International Initiatives department at Art Center has recently issued a position paper, entitled Terms of Engagement, that reframes the role of design education and its shared responsibility in society. The following statements are excerpted from this document:

Education is the basis of good design: not only the skills to execute the work at hand, but the knowledge necessary to explore and understand this work in relation to larger issues, and to comprehend how one's own creative contributions can affect these issues.

New solutions to design challenges reveal themselves in abundance to the creative individual who is deeply engaged in the larger world.

Great design reflects total commitment to one's work, and—in the fullest sense—empathy for those for whom the design is intended.

Art Center College of Design believes that a school of design today must bring the most relevant and diverse opportunities for worldly engagement to its faculty, students, and staff, and believes that these opportunities only enhance training in all design disciplines.

Going the distance is a mark of the engaged designer: understanding all aspects of the problem, exploring all possible solutions, expressing these solutions as clearly and persuasively as possible.

Expectations of design and the creative individual on a par with other kinds of powerful innovators will—as is appropriate—only continue to increase, and new generations of faculty and students must be prepared for this.

More design, in a world inundated with images and things, is better only if it is more informed and relevant to the issues that truly matter.

Engagement with significant issues need not impair aesthetic considerations; on the contrary, the finished results should set new parameters of beauty.

Now and in the future, the well-being of society – and perhaps even our civilization - depend on the creative designer's ability to engage with contemporary challenges of interest to him/her, and incorporate them into his/her professional life.

To designers of the 21st century, the terms of engagement, while complex, are also clearly evident and can be used to motivate others to become equally involved with the larger world.

In short, by implementing strategic initiatives and collaborations that advocate the importance of design and design education in highly diverse contexts and locales, **designmatters @ Art Center** works to foster more responsive and responsible generations of design leaders. Ultimately their contributions will help produce a new “diplomacy of the creative community” that transcends culture and politics alike, and that lends new meaning to design itself.

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