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SPECIAL ISSUE:
MODELS OF MENTAL HEALTH AND HUMAN RIGHTS
IN CELEBRATION OF THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE UNITED NATIONS DECLARATION OF
HUMAN RIGHTS FOR ALL

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“Images for human rights: student voices”. A model design education and public outreach project

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Since its inception in 2001, Designmatters, the social impact initiative at Art Center College of Design, in Pasadena, California, has developed a unique framework of curricular research methodologies and a value system for “best practices” in design education engaged in the critical issues of our time. This article features a recent exhibition project led by the Illustration Department at the college: “*Human Rights: Students Voices*,” which premiered at UNESCO during the 61st annual DPI/NGO Conference in September 2008, and provides insight into the salient traits of the project as an innovative and replicable approach to visual advocacy of human rights.

Keywords: design education; illustration; human rights; cross-pollination of expertise; social engagement; visual advocacy

Introduction

How do young artists and designers address human rights? How does the next generation of visual thinkers engage in a dialogue about freedom, human dignity and access to education? What are the lessons learned from a design education and public outreach effort aimed at this urgently timely theme? These and other questions were explored in a poster exhibition entitled *Human Rights: Student Voices*, organized by Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, through its social impact initiative Designmatters¹ to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The exhibition premiered at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) headquarters in Paris from 3–5 September 2008, during the 61st annual United Nations Department of Public Information Non-Governmental Organization conference *Reaffirming Human Rights For All: the Universal Declaration at 60*,² and was subsequently on view in December 2008 at the Pasadena Central Library, California, in conjunction with a citywide celebration of International Human Rights Day.³

Research methodology and project development

Leading up to the exhibition, a multidisciplinary group of students participated in a 14-week class led by Martha Rich and Esther Pearl Watson, faculty from Art

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Center's Illustration Department during the 2008 summer academic term. The class – working individually and in teams – was challenged to interpret and represent the Universal Declaration of Human Rights through visual images and text, while keeping in mind internationalism and accessibility in their messaging.

The starting point for the research approach was coming to terms with the tremendous complexity of the human rights issue. Jacques Lange, one of the senior advisors of the project and the Past President of the International Council of Graphic Design Associations (ICOGRADA), eloquently guided the students in key critiques by emphasizing this point:

Human rights is a very complex issue and it needs to be considered with an objective yet sensitive understanding of unique social, political and economic differences and sensitivities to vernacular constructs in different parts of the world. It is not a topic that operates on a clear black/white and right/wrong scorecard because the world does not operate in that manner, which makes it difficult to judge according to a singular/universal standard without entering the dangerous domains of becoming patronizing, paternalistic or imperialistic.⁴

Initial class assignments given by Rich and Watson required that the students connect at an individual level with the Universal Declaration Document. As much as possible, they were required to draw from personal experience or first-hand stories in order to keep their artwork honest. For example, one female student in the group, Ani Gevorgian, relied on her memories of witnessing situations of gender inequality while she was growing up in the Middle East. She used those experiences as inspiration for her poster illustrating Article 1 of the Declaration.⁵ Her final image, entitled *Equality is Freedom* (Figure 1) is a representation of a dove in free flight. The illustration evolved from an original photograph composed by Gevorgian of two hands in profile – male and female – coming together.

Students were also encouraged to explore the Declaration articles and their implications in depth, and were given the opportunity to choose freely which articles to illustrate for their project. The objective was for them to relate to the issues stated in the articles in a powerful way that could trigger inspiration for their artwork. Students experimented with different media and materials to prototype concepts, and were pressed throughout the evolution of the course to keep refining concepts in a constant process of self-critique that accounted for questions such as: Who is affected by this human right violation? Is this human rights violation still happening? Where does it happen? Why is it happening? What is being done to remedy the situation? What more can be done? How does this affect you?

International guest faculty experts contributed useful information and resources throughout key review junctures of the course. These experts included Dr Alison Dundes Renteln, Professor of Political Science and Anthropology at the University of Southern California Department of Political Science; Gala Narezo, an Art Center photography alumna based in New York who also served as Designmatters liaison to the planning committee organizing the DPI/NGO conference, as well as Lange, who participated from his native South Africa through a virtual portal made available by the social design site Design 21, a partner in the project.⁶

By the end of the course, a curatorial panel under the direction of Art Center's Illustration Chairman Ann Field led a rigorous review of approximately 80 poster concepts, selecting the final 25 images for inclusion in the exhibition.⁷ The criteria for the ultimate selection took into account considerations such as accessibility and clarity of the concept, level of social engagement and empathy, poignancy in



Figure 1. *Equality is Freedom* by Ani Gevorgian. Article 1, Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

communicating the given article of the Declaration, as well as sensitivity in conveying the issue to an international and diverse audience. The posters of two students, *I wish* by Christopher Kosek (Figure 2) and *Tools of Torture* by Cindy Chen (Figure 3) are cases in point. Together, these posters aim to inspire a vibrant dialogue on the universal theme of human rights through visual messaging that at times confronts the issues head-on. In this sense, Kosek's approach to his poster was exemplary, he was determined to show the voice of a child pleading for access to school. He went about inviting a 6-year-old to write the words, "I wish I could go to school" on a chalkboard which he subsequently photographed for his poster concept. To illustrate Article 5, "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment", Chen chose to depict familiar objects that can be encountered in a toolbox, such as drills and hammers, which he discovered can serve a much more frightening purpose in torture practices.

A case study for social engagement in art and design curricula

The research methodologies and development of the exhibition *Human Rights: Student Voices* are typical of all Designmatters projects at Art Center, and point to

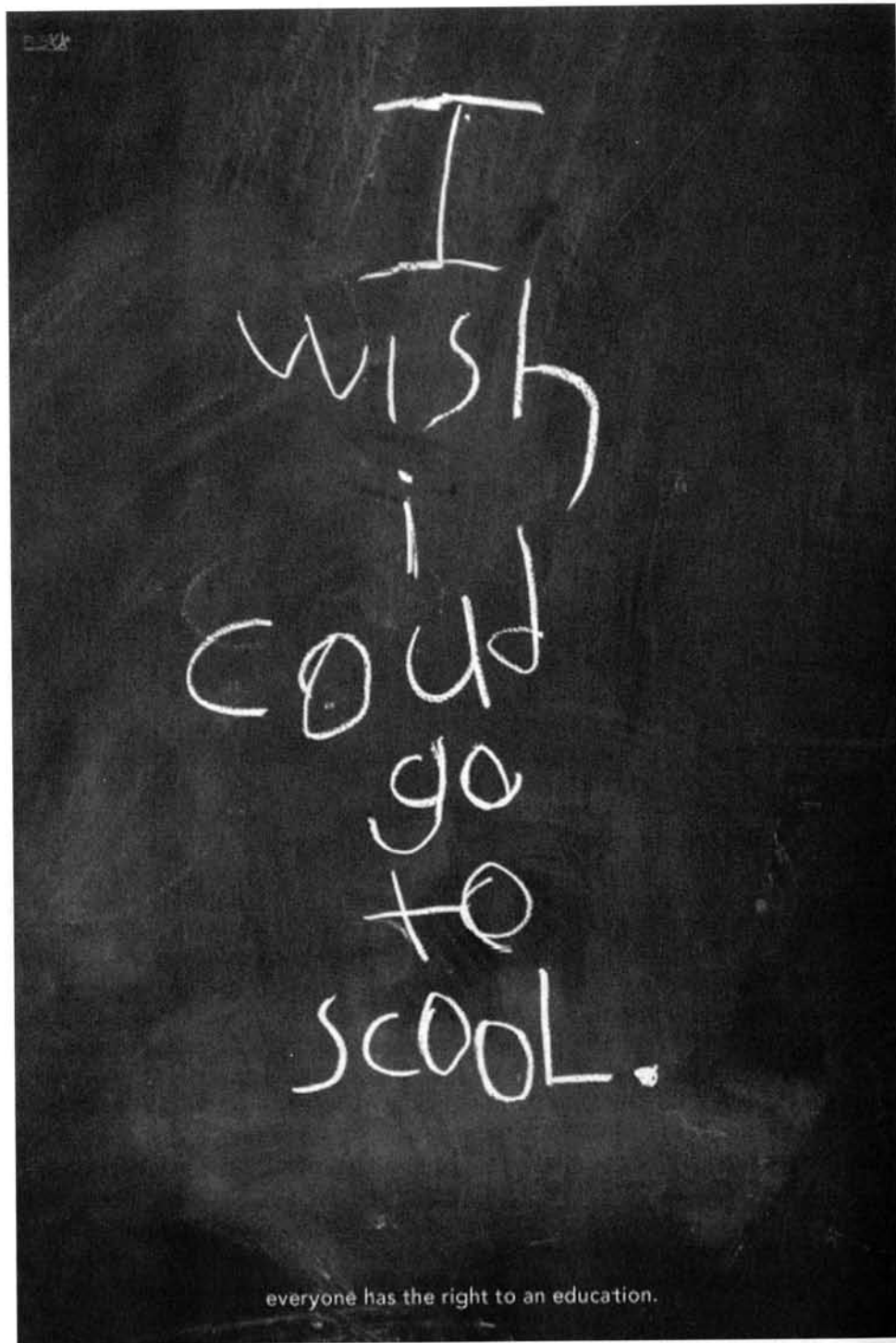


Figure 2. *I Wish* by Christopher Kosek. Article 26, Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

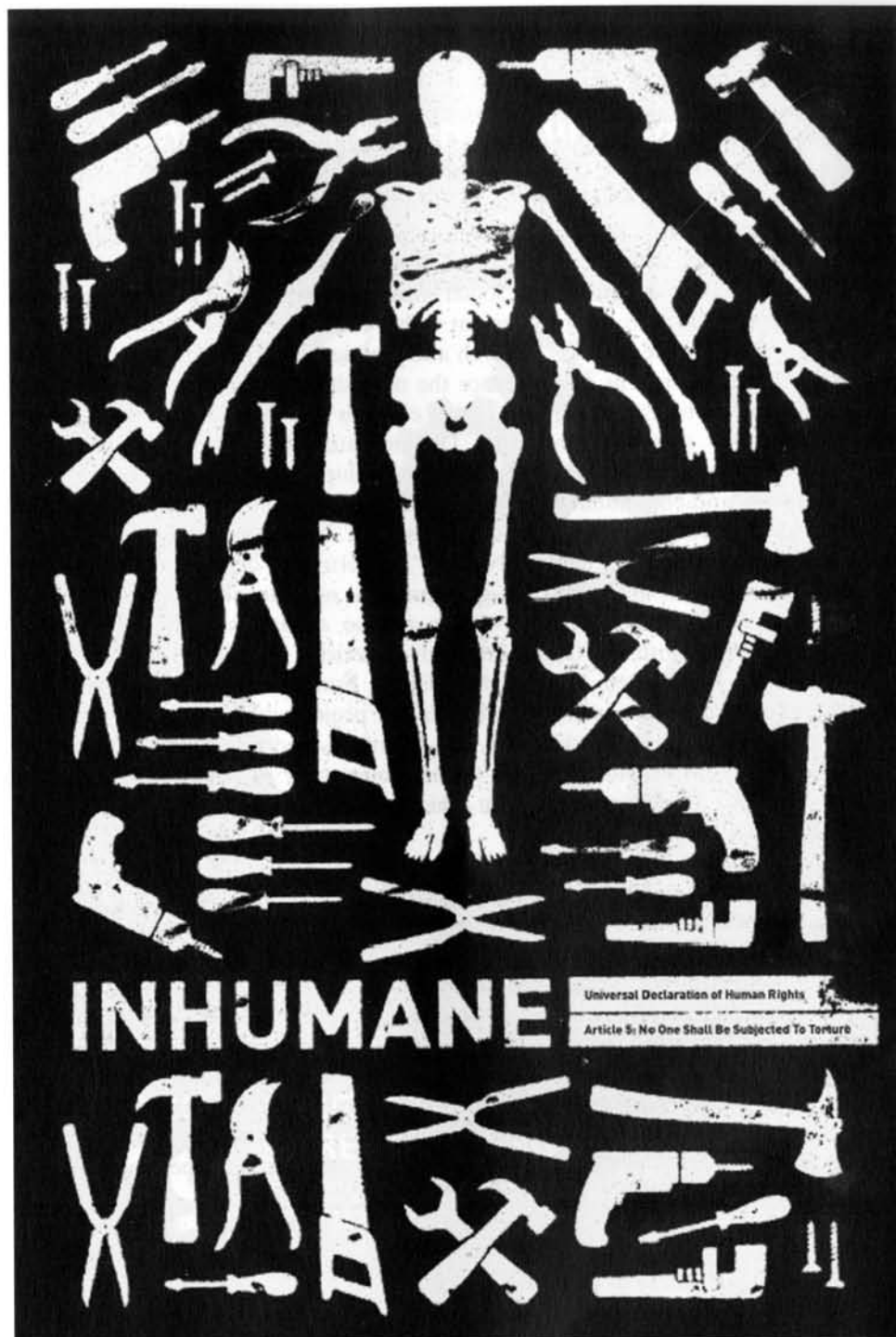


Figure 3. *Tools of Torture* by Cindy Chen. Article 5, Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

the compelling blueprint for a unified approach to linking real-world issues with academic practices of the program.⁸

Since the founding of Designmatters in 2001, the mission has been to enrich the Art Center curricula in all departments by providing opportunities for students and faculty to delve into contemporary issues and generate tangible outcomes that can make a difference in society. The initiative has generated a considerable portfolio of work, including public service announcements, branding identity systems, documentary films, product prototypes and mobility concepts. This varied portfolio reflects four broad thematic areas of inquiry: public policy, global healthcare, sustainable human development and social entrepreneurship. The initiative is viewed as a flagship effort in a growing movement within the professional design community and design schools alike, to align research and practice with the exploration of social and humanitarian concerns and embrace the necessity to produce “a new breed of designer” exposed to a meaningful range of cultures and experiences.⁹

The strategic alliances forged by Designmatters are especially significant, especially if one considers the concept of partnership as “a means to create space for individuals and communities of peoples to seek different types of leadership... which include new ways to express progressive values in addressing societal changes.”¹⁰ In 2003, the United Nations Department of Public Information designated Art Center an NGO (non-governmental organization) in recognition of Designmatters’ service to society.¹¹ Other unique affiliations now include civil organization status with the Organization of American States, and another NGO designation by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).¹² In addition, Designmatters’ consulting role in collaborative projects with the Pan American Health Organization, the World Bank, the American Red Cross, and UNESCO – among others – has provided the Art Center community of students, faculty, and alumni access to a prominent stage in which to offer original solutions to many critical issues of our time.

Through the development of creative leaders at the cutting-edge of design innovation and influence, Art Center has played a central role in shaping the form and function of our culture for the past 80 years. Renowned business innovator Peter Drucker’s definition of knowledge as “information that changes something or somebody – either by becoming grounds for action, or by making an individual or an institution capable of different and more effective action”¹³ offers insight into the paradigm shift that the Designmatters initiative has generated at the college. This advocacy-and-partnership-driven program has enabled the “DNA” of the entire institution to evolve with a new emphasis on imbuing the educational experience with critical content and a sense of contemporary relevance and commitment. Indeed, “research transformed by action” could be considered as the motto guiding all Designmatters projects.

Creative cross-pollination of expertise

A cross-pollination of expertise and knowledge transfer among seemingly unlikely partners occurs in the initiative’s “transdisciplinary” collaborations such as the Human Rights Project described here. This interchange constitutes one of the model’s salient traits, and one that is often noted in international conferences and seminars.¹⁴ The resulting far-reaching dialogue promoted by Designmatters is largely

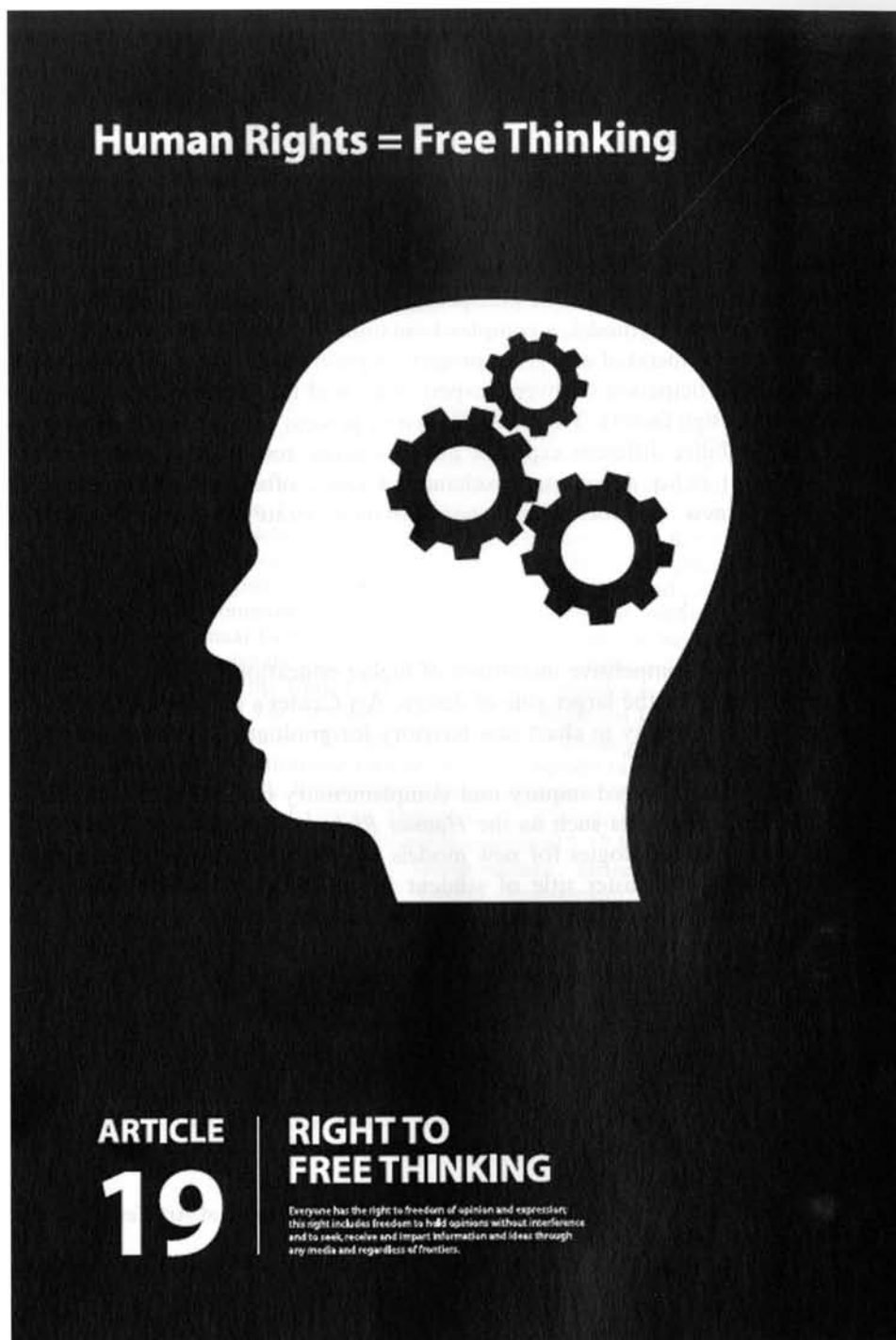


Figure 4. *Human Rights=Free Thinking* by Benny Chu. Articles 18 and 19, Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

driven by the wide range of experts routinely embedded in the courses as part of the projects – including gerontologists, policy analysts, social scientists, international development field officers, among others. The participation of experts from these different fields of knowledge within the learning environment of the studio fosters a process of applied research that is fundamental to the design outcomes of the projects and encourages students and faculty to abandon their comfort zone in the studio in order to experience the challenges and rewards inherent to real-world constraints. This transformative design process takes forceful discipline and a rigorous work ethic. Equally important, it requires heightened motivation – a component generally accepted as indispensable to creative production.¹⁵

In the Designmatters model, a complex humanitarian brief is not the only factor that drives the outcome(s) of any given project; as previously noted, vital inspiration stems from the participation of diverse experts who lead the initial research phase of each class with design faculty. This research-driven process enables all participants to leverage and mobilize different expertise and resources, resulting in joint problem-solving and a far richer debate and exchange of ideas, often beyond the realm of design. Thus the new “comfort zone” expands to incorporate this expanded range of inquiry.

Leading by design

As an international competitive institution of higher education for the 21st century, and as an advocate for the larger role of design, Art Center’s mandate is inexorably linked to the responsibility to chart new territory for graduates to be design leaders and to “lead by design”.¹⁶

The platform of engaged inquiry and complementary collaboration offered by Designmatters and projects such as the *Human Rights: Students Voices* exhibition present research methodologies for new models of cultural diplomacy and art and design education. The poster title of student Benny Chu’s *Human Rights=Free Thinking* (Figure 4), is perhaps symbolic of the profound impact the heightened awareness that this upcoming generation of artists, cultural leaders and designers can have in bridging societal differences and advocating for a more humane future for all.

Declaration of interest: The author reports no conflicts of interest. The author alone is responsible for the content and writing of the paper.

Notes

1. For a current portfolio of projects and overview of Designmatters at Art Center College of Design, see: <http://www.artcenter.edu/designmatters>
2. For more information on the proceedings of the 61st Annual DPI/NGO Conference, see: <http://www.un.org/dpi/ngosection/conference/home.shtml>
3. The France Los Angeles Exchange Foundation (FLAX), a Los Angeles-based cultural organization dedicated to fostering a better understanding of France through public art events that promote cross-cultural learning, made possible the generous sponsorship for the exhibition and an accompanying set of postcards with the 25 posters that were exhibited in each of the venues.
4. Jacques Lange, in correspondence with author and faculty design team, 22 June 2008. In addition to being past President of ICONOGRADA (2007–2009 term), Mr Lange’s

- career has included consultancies to the Nelson Mandela Foundation, the Centre of Human Rights, the Centre for the Study of AIDS (the latter two are both based at the University of Pretoria, South Africa), as well as the United Nations Development Programme.
5. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 1: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood".
 6. Design 21 is the international social design network endorsed by UNESCO, <http://www.design21sdn.com>
 7. The full portfolio of images in the exhibition can be viewed at http://www.accd-dm.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=124&Itemid=152
 8. In a feature article about the program in Design 21, Designmatters is referred to as "one of those rare, wonderful moments in education that asks students to close their books and open up to experience". For the full article, see Sarah Lidgus, "Real World Education," Design 21, <http://www.design21sdn.com/feature/839> (28 September 2007)
 9. See Cynthia E. Smith, "World Design to End Poverty", *Design for the Other 90%* (New York: exhibition catalogue Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Editions Assouline, 2007), p.12. Smith places Designmatters as one of the lead programs in the context of the "emerging arena" of socially responsible design initiatives.
 10. Simon Zadek from The Institute of Social and Ethical Accountability, cited in Henri Bartoli and Jane Nelson, *Building Partnerships, Cooperation Between the United Nations System and the Private Sector* (New York, United Nations Publications, 2002), p. 40.
 11. Since 2003, Designmatters is responsible every year for key and contributions to the visual identity and communication platforms (websites; print collateral and PSAs) of the DPI/NGO annual Conference held at UN Headquarters in New York.
 12. Art Center's designation with the Organization of American States dates from 2006; the NGO status with the United Nations Population Fund was granted in May 2007.
 13. Peter F. Drucker, *The New Realities* (London: Mandarin Press, 1990), p. 242.
 14. See Mariana Amatullo, "Design Education as a Change Agent", Allemandi Conference Press (<http://www.allemandi.com/cp/ctc/book.php?id=1&p=1>), June 2008; Mariana Amatullo and Mark Breitenberg, "Designmatters at Art Center College of Design: Design Advocacy and Global Engagement", *Cumulus Journal: Ethics 2006 Cumulus Nantes Conference, Design, Ethics and Humanism* (15-17 June):16-20; Mariana Amatullo, Erica Clark and Ann Field, "Designmatters: Shared Perspectives for Inclusive Communication Strategies and Global Engagement", Workshop Abstract and Proceedings, Royal College of Art, Helen Hamlyn Center, Include 2007, April 2007.
 15. For a comprehensive summary of current research and theory on the sources of innovation and creativity, see Karlyn Adams, "The Sources of Innovation and Creativity," a paper commissioned by the National Center on Education and the Economy for the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, September 2005, p. 4.
 16. The term "leadership by design" is one often used by Richard N. Swett, one of the few ambassador-architects in United States history. For his comprehensive account of architecture's broad contributions to society, see *Leadership by Design: Creating an Architecture of Trust* (Atlanta: Greenway Communications, 2005).