

Chapter 1 / p.17-27

Attributes needed by the modern designer '*Graphic design is for self-centred obsessives*' A discussion of the main creative, philosophical and practical attributes required by the contemporary graphic designer.

How to be a graphic designer, without losing your soul

Quoted by Virginia Postrel in *The Substance of Style* (New York: Harper Collins), 2003.

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Among the myriad definitions of graphic design, one of the most illuminating is by the American designer and writer Jessica Helfand. According to Helfand, graphic design is a 'visual language uniting harmony and balance, colour and light, scale and tension, form and content. But it is also an idiomatic language, a language of cues and puns and symbols and allusions, of cultural references and perceptual inferences that challenge both the intellect and the eye.'¹

I like Helfand's definition. Her first sentence is a conventional summary of graphic design; few would argue with it. But her second sentence throws a punch: it alludes to design's expressive power and higher intent. Even as a recalcitrant teenager I sensed graphic design's emotive potency. I didn't even know there was such a thing as graphic design, but I lovingly copied lettering from album covers, magazines, cereal boxes and comic books. I didn't copy other elements; only the lettering. I liked the way that particular letterforms gave words added meaning. I noticed that the same words in a different typeface were not necessarily as beguiling. Copying letterforms is a common enough occupation among bored teenagers – it seems to have a calming effect on turbulent hormones: it was used memorably as a trope for disaffected youth by Geoff McFetridge in his title sequence for Sofia Coppola's film *The Virgin Suicides*.

As with many designers, album covers provided me with a link between an embryonic visual awareness and the discovery of graphic design.² I was mesmerized by the imagery I found on record sleeves, and before long I started noticing the design credits on album covers. This led to the realization that there was something called graphic design (I'm not sure I'd have got it from any other source) – and it seemed like a pretty cool occupation. Today, graphic design is far less mysterious. You can study it at school, and any kid with a computer discovers fonts, layout and image manipulation at about the same time as they learn to stop using a diaper.

The number of contemporary graphic designers who cite album covers as providing the impetus to take up graphic design is legion: the California-based designer and musician Tom Recchion is typical. In a recent article he wrote: 'King Crimson's first cover astonished me and forced me to buy it as an expensive import without hearing a note'. ('The Inner Sleeve', *The Wire* 248, October 2004). It confirms album cover design as an enduring and substantial factor in design, and yet music graphics have not been treated by educators and the design establishment, with the same respect or degree of seriousness normally reserved for other forms of design.

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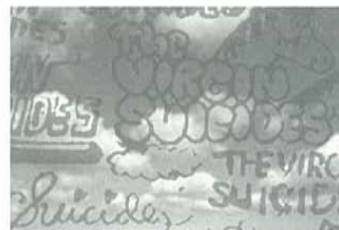
Cultural Awareness

The second part of Helfand's definition provides the key to producing meaningful and expressive graphic design: 'cues and puns and symbols and allusions, of cultural references and perceptual inferences' are the elements that give work authority and resonance. And if you want to introduce these elements into your work, it means taking an interest in everything that goes on around you, and having curiosity about areas other than graphic design: politics, entertainment, business, technology, art, ten-pin bowling and mud wrestling.

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This cultural awareness (you can call it research, if you like, but it's really something larger) ranks higher than technical ability and academic qualifications in the designer's portfolio of attributes. When the British writer Iain Sinclair was asked if he did research for his books, he replied that his whole life was research. I can't think of a better adage for the modern graphic designer. Without constantly scanning, scrutinizing and absorbing what goes on around you, you cannot become a successful designer. This was brought home to me a few years ago at a design seminar in Hong Kong that I took part in. After presentations by a number of British designers, there was a lively Q&A session. Someone in the audience asked me if I'd like to work for clients in Hong Kong. I said yes – mainly out of politeness, but also because I thought it was the answer the audience expected to hear. Then I thought about it: I was kidding myself. I've only been in Hong Kong for twenty-four hours, I don't speak the language, my knowledge of the place's history and customs is slight, to say the least, and yet here I am presuming to think that I can create meaningful design. But, most chastening of all was the realization that I'd spent the previous hour demonstrating to the audience how my company's design work was stuffed with subtle cultural allusions – things that you had to be culturally savvy to spot. How could I achieve the same in Hong Kong without study, research and knowledge of the culture?

Cultural awareness is vital for the modern designer and most designers are culturally aware people. It's why designers are often witty with a sophisticated sense of humour (we shouldn't be surprised at this: designers are observers, and the best humour comes from microscopic observation). Take Peter Saville's CD cover design for the band Gay Dad. Saville is not generally thought of as a graphic humorist, but his clever appropriation of the silhouette of the 'little green man' from the walk sign, for the cover of a CD by a louche rock band, is unexpected and amusing. Everyone knows this symbol. In fact, it's so familiar we barely notice it. Yet it takes a graphic designer's sly wit to extract it from the mundane environment and place it in this unlikely setting. Witty, you might say.



Courtesy of Geoff McFetridge

Frames from the title sequence of *The Virgin Suicides* by Geoff McFetridge

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The designer Lorraine Wild describes the benefits of understanding the 'larger context' in which her work is situated: 'I used to do more research and now I'm more intuitive. I've gotten better at understanding the materials that I'm given to work with by writers, editors, curators, artists and architects, etc. I have always been conscientious about knowing the material, but now I've accumulated a library in my head which helps me read the larger context that surrounds the subject I'm about to work with ...' Lorraine Wild, 'Reputations', *Eye* 36, Summer 2000.

I once read that safe-crackers rub the tips of their fingers with sandpaper to increase tactile sensitivity. It makes their fingertips ultra-sensitive and enables them to feel the nuances of the lock's gear mechanism, as they rotate the dial in search of the magic combination that will open the safe. It's the same with graphic design: the more sensitive you become to the world around you the better you will function. This means studying design in all its contemporary manifestations, as well as design history and the visual arts in general. But it also means studying the world beyond graphic design. Designers sometimes imagine that the world revolves around graphic design, and when you are working fourteen-hour days it's hard to remember that it doesn't. But the best designers have a healthy interest in life beyond their subject; design may be their main concern, and it may provide them with a consuming and stimulating career, but it doesn't eclipse other interests.³

I know what you're thinking: you're thinking, Okay, but how does this help me become a better designer and get my work accepted? Here's how: the single most important thing you can do when discussing a job with a new or potential client is to demonstrate understanding, openness and receptivity. The designer who shows only signs of self-absorption and narrowness of focus isn't going to inspire his or her client. It might seem obvious, but it's surprising how many designers use meetings with clients to talk about themselves and their work. These are often the same designers who complain that their work is frequently rejected or that they are never allowed to 'do what they want to do'. Hardly surprising. They are guilty of the worst crime a graphic designer can commit: they are revealing themselves to be self-centred and to have a narrow outlook. For the ambitious designer, this is fatal.

If you can demonstrate some knowledge about the client's field of activity, if you can talk about the project at hand and if you can listen instead of prattling on about yourself, you will be astonished at how receptive your new client will be to you and your ideas. It's a rich paradox, but the less you make a client/designer relationship about yourself, the more it will tip in your favour. Try it, it works.

Of course, it isn't always enough to rely on knowledge. You need to back it up with specific research. I once turned up at a meeting with an art gallery who were looking for a new design company. Arrogantly, I didn't do any research. I relied on a shaky notion of who I thought my potential client was. In fact, I'd got them mixed up with another gallery. When my mistake was exposed I got a frosty response and, needless to say, I didn't get the gig.

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Communication

As well as possessing cultural awareness and being aware of the world beyond graphic design, the modern designer needs to be a skilled communicator. This is not the same as being able to make eloquent speeches at design conferences. Rather, it is about possessing the ability to talk about your work, especially with clients and non-designers, in a coherent, convincing and objective way, without resorting to the language and idioms that you'd use with other designers. And since communication is a two-way street, it is also about listening.

Graphic design is a non-verbal medium.

Graphic design is expected to communicate without the benefit of written or spoken commentaries describing the designer's intentions: you can't stand beside your poster in the street drawing attention to your subtle use of Akzidenz and pointing out its mute evocation of Modernist rationality and truthfulness, can you? Yet designers need words: and they rarely need them as much as when they are presenting new work. As Norman Potter notes in his seminal text *What is a Designer*: 'This aspect of design work is frequently underestimated: an ability to use words clearly, pointedly, and persuasively is at all times relevant to design work.'⁴

Persuading clients that your ideas are right and that their money is being spent wisely, requires huge amounts of carefully formulated argument. Presenting work to new clients, and to those clients who are not design literate, is among the most difficult tasks facing the designer. And surprisingly, considering its importance, designers are often not very good at talking about their own work. In a later chapter I'll discuss the finer points of making a good presentation (there's an art to it: think of it as the graphic designer's equivalent of the Japanese tea ceremony), but for now, I'll confine myself to making the point that knowing how to talk about your work is fundamental to becoming a successful designer.

To help designers develop verbal skills, I sometimes ask them to describe what they've done *before* they show me what they've done. I ask them to describe their work to such a degree of accuracy that it isn't necessary to actually see the work to know what they've done. It's a good exercise and worth trying out with your own work. At Intro, this ability to 'tell but not show' came in useful when I was told that an important new client had arrived in the building unexpectedly. 'I was just passing ...' he said, 'thought I'd drop in to see how you were getting on.' My diary said that he wasn't due to visit us for another three days. And besides, our presentation wasn't ready – it wasn't even started. But he was one of these impatient clients who imagine that once they've briefed a designer, the designer does nothing else other than work on their project. I had a dilemma: should I tell him to go away, or talk to him about our ideas without showing him anything?

Norman Potter,
What is a Designer
(London: Hyphen
Press), 2002.

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What is a Designer,
Norman Potter,
cover design by
Françoise Berserik

Courtesy of Hyphen Press

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Courtesy of Intro

Malcolm McLaren,
The Largest Movie House in Paris,
by Mat Cook at Intro

I spoke to Mat Cook, the Intro designer working on the project. Mat looked at me calmly and said he could deal with it. We sat down with our client, and I watched, dry-mouthed, as Mat (an inspirational art director) described his intentions. He had an elaborate and ambitious plan to photograph an old-fashioned radiator in the middle of a block of ice; the heater was to be switched on and glowing at the heart of the frozen block. Mat described the image, slowly and methodically conjuring up a mental picture of the finished image, its setting and its likely effect on its intended audience. He did this with such vividness and confidence that our client approved the idea on the spot – without seeing anything. I don't recommend this as a universal strategy; it is usually better to have smart visual representations of your ideas, but it's a good demonstration of the merits of being able to talk effectively about your work.

The way designers present ideas is as important as the ideas themselves. When a good idea is rejected, it is often the presentation of that idea that is being rejected, not the idea itself. The dominance of the computer has meant that hand-made layouts, and what were once called 'roughs' or 'visuals', are now largely redundant. We have lost the opportunity to 'sketch' ideas roughly;⁵ where once clients would have been content with mocked-up approximations of the finished design, they now expect and demand to see the finished thing. Digital technology makes this possible, and life is made easier for the graphic designer. But not every idea can be executed in this way, and one of the consequences of this is that we find ourselves presenting only those ideas that we can comfortably mock-up using our scanner and Photoshop. In other words, we avoid ideas that can't be easily executed by digital means: designers must not let technological capabilities define their thinking.

- 5 I have a long-standing music industry client (Daniel Miller of Mute Records), who invariably prefers 'roughs' to the finished jobs. It's the same with music: he usually prefers the demo to the finished track.

Yet if we want to present complex ideas like radiators in blocks of ice, it is often not sufficiently convincing to attempt to replicate the idea using sub-standard images cobbled together in Photoshop. Our attempts will not convince. If we can do away with the need to do inaccurate visuals by using language to describe our ideas, we can often save ourselves a great deal of heartbreak. Of course there is a danger that our client will get the wrong idea, so our language must be precise.

Spoken communication therefore is a vital component of the modern designer's kitbag. But there is a communication skill even more important than being able to talk convincingly about your work: listening. I'm talking about the acknowledgement that communication is a two-way street, and that your client has a point of view that you need to listen to carefully for clues and unspoken messages. If you could climb inside your client's head, you'd be astonished by what you'd find. You'd find someone fretting about spending money on something that he or she can't see or touch. Imagine going into a chic store and agreeing to buy a sofa that you aren't allowed to look at. You wouldn't do it. But that, roughly speaking, is what clients are asked to do when they buy design – especially from a new and untried

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graphic designer. They don't really know what they are buying until it is delivered. It makes hiring a designer difficult and leads to more unhappiness and failed jobs than any other factor. But by listening intently, you can often identify the factors that concern clients the most.

What we are really talking about is listening to the client's point of view. This is the first rule of communication for the graphic designer. Now, I know what you're thinking. Earlier I argued in favour of the designer developing and maintaining a personal voice. Well, I'm certainly not abandoning that view. But, if you want your opinions as a designer to be taken seriously, you have to allow your client to have an opinion too. In other words, there has to be a balance of interests. And that balance of interests usually has to be achieved through negotiation. It won't happen naturally. I recently saw an example of this inability to negotiate a balance between client and designer on a television programme that followed an interior designer as she tried to design an apartment for a client. The client was arrogant and indecisive, the interior designer hesitant and easily bullied. Their professional relationship jumped the rails almost immediately. The interior designer's response to her client's unreasonable and fluctuating demands was to offer to 'keep showing you stuff until you are happy'. Big mistake.

So what should she have done? She should have listened to the brief and then responded with her ideas. If, at this stage, her client had remained indecisive and interfering, she had a choice – dump the client or insist on drawing up a new brief. She did neither, instead she offered to do 'whatever' her client wanted, and as a result an ugly and protracted meltdown ensued. The client ended up driving the project despite saying repeatedly that he didn't know anything about design, and the designer became angry and defeatist. Yet I blame the designer: she began correctly by allowing her client to have a point of view, but she forgot to have one herself – perhaps she never had one in the first place? All great work comes about when viewpoints are balanced: in other words, when both client and designer feel that they are being listened to. Achieve this – find the point of balance in a relationship – and you'll get results.

The designer Rudy VanderLans identifies another frequent problem in designer/client relationships. 'You have to listen very carefully to what the client wants', notes VanderLans, 'and be careful not to approach the project with a preconceived idea of what it should look like. In my own experience, too often I approached a design job wanting to use a certain font or a particular typographic mannerism, simply because it's what I felt comfortable with at the time. But that wasn't always what the client wanted'.

This is a hot potato for the ambitious, independent-minded designer. Good designers have plenty of ideas and they're itching to use them. But it's a mistake, as VanderLans points out, to foist them on clients. It usually ends in tears – an unhappy client and a dissatisfied designer. Another frequent cause of breakdowns between client and designer is closely related to this problem: designers often make the mistake of saying to their clients: 'I've done it like this *because I like it*'. It is an understandable viewpoint; designers can't help putting their personal tastes and sensibilities into their work.

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There's a great piece of archive film from the 1960s, in which a fierce-looking professor of music commands his viewers – in heavily European-accented English – to listen to the music of the Pink Floyd. The band plays one of their meandering psychedelic album tracks, and then joins the professor for an uncomfortable discussion. The professor, barely able to contain his epicurean disgust, asks them why their music has to be so loud. Bass-player Roger Waters good-naturedly replies: 'Because we like it' – and promptly loses the argument.

Designers use fonts, colours, layouts and imagery because they like them: it would be an odd designer who used design elements that he or she *didn't* like. Even when designers are being totally subservient to the brief, they still use styles and modes of expression that they personally like. It follows, therefore, that there is nothing wrong with doing things because you 'like' them. But there is something wrong with telling clients that this is what you've done; in fact, it's the worst thing you can say to a client. You might get away with it if you are a star designer, or if you have a cheerful trusting rapport with your client. But if you are establishing a new working relationship you have to be able to articulate a genuine rationale for your work.⁶

I say genuine, because we're not talking about perfecting some sleazy 'customer relations' technique here. We are actually talking about confronting a familiar problem in design: we are talking about the frequent occurrence of designers making clients feel (rightly or wrongly) that designers are pleasing themselves at their client's expense. It's well known in advertising, for example, that winning industry-awards is sometimes the primary concern of an agency's creative staff, and because of this, clients often accuse agencies of ignoring their needs in favour of creating work that appeals to the judges who sit on awards panels, usually fellow practitioners. The new managing director of a giant global brand recently caused a furore amongst UK advertising agencies when his comments about his company's advertising were reported in the British advertising journal *Campaign*: 'I don't like any of the ads ...' he said, 'they are focused on awards, not on selling more product to more people at higher prices.'

I'm aware that it is hard for designers to be detached and objective when talking about their work. Designers often 'feel things' at a sub-verbal level, and are loath, or unable, to provide explanations for creative actions. Some well-known designers, capable of the most elegant and articulate work, are not much good at talking about what they do or explaining why they do it. But if you can learn to talk about your work – especially if you are not a paradigm-shifting design genius – and if you can find patterns of words that communicate meaning and value to clients, you will reap the benefits. And the easiest way to do this is to remove the personal from the equation. Do this and you'll find clients keener to accept your ideas and take your guidance: in other words, less you means more you.

I've talked a great deal about clients in this chapter: it's hard to avoid them. They share the terrain with us, so it's hardly surprising that they turn up everywhere. Self-initiated projects aside, no matter where you are in the graphic design landscape, you always have clients. If you work in a corporation you might report to a non-designer; if you work in a design studio you may report to a creative director or a senior designer, but they are all *clients* and how you treat them determines how they treat your work. For the ambitious designer, how to communicate with clients is the passport to good work, and it's worth becoming good at it.

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Nor are clients the only people you have to communicate effectively with. You need to know how to talk to other designers. If you have designers as partners in a small business, or if you employ designers, then you have to be able to communicate with them in such a way that they don't feel cowed, threatened or discouraged by your views. You have to be able to talk to suppliers and collaborators. You will have to talk to IT people, bank managers, tax officials and window cleaners.

How we do this depends on our personalities and our circumstances. In a profile of Canadian designer Bruce Mau and his studio, his communications skills were praised by Cathy Jonasson, Bruce Mau Design's vice-president and managing director. 'Bruce is demanding, but he's not prescriptive', she says. Jonasson left a prestigious curatorial position at the Art Gallery of Ontario – and took a twenty per cent pay cut – to work for Mau's office. 'Mau is very good at looking at someone's work and finding the best in it. People leave him feeling good about their work and knowing what they have to do to make their work even better. He constantly emphasizes what you might call the "Mau method": Ask the right questions, understand the problem, and explore lots of possible solutions'.⁷

Scott Kirsner.
'Bruce Mau',
Fast Company 39
⁷ (October 2000).

Integrity

Integrity in design is a bit like obesity in ballet dancers – you don't often see it. This is not because designers lack honesty and decency; quite the opposite. Rather it is because preserving integrity in the remorseless climate of modern business is difficult. For designers, integrity often becomes a bargaining chip. We give it away in return for a job that comes with a lot of cash, or we hang onto it and do the work we want to do for little or no money. It is tough to retain integrity and make a living. But it's not impossible.

There are laws to prevent fraudulent practices. Specific offences such as copyright theft and malpractice in the workplace are punishable. Yet in the way that we conduct ourselves as designers, we are as free as the marketplace allows us to be. However, as a general rule, the designer who behaves morally will do better than the one who doesn't – if only because design is a social activity, with social consequences. Over the years, many professional design associations have attempted to draw up ethical codes. There is much to be said for these attempts to establish rules and guidelines for the proper conduct of designers. Unfortunately they tend to be undermined by shifts in public and business morality, or overtaken by rapid technological change.

In the 1971 edition of her book, *The Professional Practice of Design*, the British writer Dorothy Goslett wrote about the professional codes of conduct advocated by SIAD (the Society of Industrial Artists and Designers, now called the Chartered Society of Designers). She noted the following instruction: 'Now there is another Clause, Number 8, in the Code of Professional Conduct of the SIAD which may also have to be invoked during your first meeting with a possible client. This Clause reads: "A member (of the SIAD) shall not knowingly accept any professional assignment on which another designer has been or is working except with the agreement of the other designer or until he is satisfied that the former appointment has been properly terminated"'.⁸

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This prohibition is charming and old-fashioned, and it is clearly untenable in the modern marketplace, where competition is valued above everything else. But is it so outmoded? I was talking to a designer friend recently and I mentioned that I'd heard that a large upmarket retailer in central London – a world-famous name – was looking for new designers to work on various projects. My friend said that he couldn't approach this client, because a designer friend of his already worked regularly for this retailer. I was struck by my friend's old-fashioned loyalty. This is what I mean when I talk about integrity: a personal philosophy which is not abandoned at the first sign of trouble.

Integrity, at its most earthbound, might be as simple as a love of design expressed in such a way that clients can see that, for you, design is something more than professional expediency. Alternatively, it might take a more practical form; it might be a refusal to take part in 'free pitches'. Free – or unpaid – pitching, is a hotly debated issue in contemporary design. Very few jobs of any size are assigned without a competitive pitch, and frequently these pitches are unpaid. As we've already noted, you are free to say no to these; many designers do. But in the post-Enron era of transparency in financial reporting, and new tendering rules in Europe, nearly all public bodies (and many firms) are obliged to offer contracts up to open tender to avoid accusations of corruption and mismanagement.

Our policy at Intro was to participate in unpaid pitches if they opened doors that would otherwise remain closed to us. Because we weren't a conventional design group, we were often added to a pitch list as a wild card entry, so that the client could demonstrate that they had asked a variety of studios to compete. We used these opportunities to good advantage, often winning jobs by doing our homework as thoroughly as the others but also by bringing a freshness to what was new territory for us, and thereby exposing the formulaic nature of our more sector-experienced competitors. But, before agreeing to free pitch, we always asked for a pitch fee (sometimes, to our surprise, we got one; sometimes we didn't). We insisted on knowing who we were pitching against and we made a friendly protest (through gritted teeth) about the inadvisability of pitches being the best way to commission design.

Whenever designers gather to discuss their profession, the subject of free pitching arises; various professional bodies around the world have tried to formulate a correct response to the invitation by clients to free pitch, but without much success. It is now so prevalent, that it is almost impossible to avoid taking part in it if you want to win bigger and more remunerative work. Yet the only way to do genuinely good work is for designer and client to form a partnership and explore all angles together in a mutually trusting and open way. This is not possible in a competitive pitch. No matter how good the brief, the designer is not addressing the client's requirements: he or she is merely taking part in a beauty parade. Regardless, clients derive a substantial benefit from being given – at no cost – a range of responses to their brief. This helps them to make and justify their final choice (they have something to evaluate it against), and in the case of unscrupulous clients (of which there are fewer than designers imagine) it affords them an opportunity to steal ideas. In other words, clients are receiving a quantifiable benefit that they do not pay for. Nor is it made any more excusable by designers' willingness to take part in unpaid pitches.

There is not much chance of pitching becoming any less common; in fact the opposite is happening, with even small projects being offered up for pitch. And laudable as it is to avoid corruption, designers who are expected to produce creative work without payment seem unduly penalized by this new drive for fiscal transparency. But by saying no to free pitching, studios and individuals are taking a principled stance – they might also be missing out on opportunities, but the respect they get from taking such a stance outweighs the occasional loss of business.

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If we believe in nothing, then our clients will have no reason to believe in us. If we demonstrate the morals of the marketplace then we will be treated like a commodity – and our services bought off at bargain basement prices. And here's an odd thing: in a world with no principles, people often respect those who have some.

Nor is it just in our work that we need to display integrity. We must have integrity in the way we deal with other designers, with suppliers (printers, programmers, technicians), and with people we meet in professional life. We must have integrity in the way we handle the creative work of other designers and creative people such as photographers and illustrators. Many of us will have been cavalier at some point in our working lives with typefaces, photographs or graphics software – but this is theft as surely as if we'd gone into someone's house and taken their possessions. We have to show integrity to the three 'audiences' for which design is most usually done: our clients, our intended audience and ourselves. Designers will differ on the order of importance in which they place this trinity: in my view, the demands and responsibilities of all three have to be equally balanced.

For Neville Brody, personal integrity in design is what differentiates the 'good from the bad'. And he's right. By standing up for yourself, by having beliefs (creative and ethical beliefs), and perhaps most importantly of all, by questioning what you are asked to do as a designer, you can acquire self-respect, which is the first step on the path to earning the respect of clients and other designers. You might also get the sack, but that's integrity for you – there's a price to be paid for it.⁹ Just remember, it's always less than the price of your self-respect. I might even say, the price of your soul.

I promised you practical advice and up until now we've dealt only with rather lofty, abstract notions. In subsequent chapters we'll tackle more mundane matters. Yet without the attributes of cultural awareness, communication skills and professional and personal integrity, you are not going to grow as a designer. You will notice, thus far, I haven't mentioned the word 'talent'. You need talent to be a graphic designer, but talent in graphic design comes in myriad forms. There is no yardstick: no foolproof way of measuring it and it's one of the great joys of the craft of graphic design that it accommodates so many sorts of 'talent'. You don't have to be able to draw to be a great typographer, for example. Design is a very generous and accommodating matrix of opportunities, and yes, you will need talent to be a successful graphic designer, but a little talent can be made to go a long way if it is supported by the attributes listed above. Some designers are born with cultural awareness, communication skills and personal integrity, while others have to work to acquire them: this takes time and there are disappointments and setbacks along the way.

⁹ Peter Saville told the *Times* of London (15 September, 2004): 'The trouble with graphic design today is: when can you believe it? It's not the message of the designer anymore. Every applied artist ends up selling his or her soul at some point. I haven't done it and look at me. People call me one of the most famous designers in the world and I haven't got any money.'



AS Tell me about your design education. NB I did a foundation course at Hornsey Art School which had been a militant hotbed of rebellion in the 1960s, but Margaret Thatcher closed it down when she became prime minister. She demolished mass social action and sold everything off to the highest bidder. After this, I went to the London College of Printing because it had a reputation for being strict and traditional. I wanted to learn my trade. I really believe in the apprenticeship idea.

In interviews you have said that you were accused of 'not being commercial'. How did the LCP equip you for working life? The only advice they gave me was to wear a tie to interviews. I left and went into four years of real poverty. People urged me to get a job in advertising – but I stuck to what I believed in. And if you believe in something you must do the same. Not getting a job doesn't mean that you are no good. Things will come round.

What inspired you to set up on your own and pursue your own ideas? When I started out I had a feeling that I could change things. There was a sense of revolution. People like Nick Logan (founder of *The Face*), and even people like Richard Branson, had this feeling that change was possible. Punk was a big liberator. Then along came Thatcher and Reagan and they said risk is dangerous. They sanitized society. They introduced genericism – standardized lifestyles. Their answer to anyone was if you feel depressed – go buy something. Today there is no equivalence to punk. It felt like anything was possible.

What's the difference between today's designers and your generation – the designers who came out of punk and post-punk? Young designers say they want their work to be seen. That's their message, that's their reason for doing something – to gain recognition. It wasn't mine, I had ideas that got picked up. I didn't start out to be famous, I started out with some ideas and a philosophy. Today, design has become about celebrity for celebrity's sake. But being a famous designer doesn't make you rich. You get fired by clients. And you sometimes have to fire clients.

What is your advice to a designer setting out in business today? If you have integrity, you say no to things. You must say no to things that are morally wrong. I wouldn't work for a tobacco company, for example. But I also believe in trying to work closely with clients. Microsoft dominates ninety per cent of the computer market – but by working for them, I'm saying the war is over. I want to try and get them to humanize their process. I've told them that they have to be a bottom-up – not a top-down company. So many big brands are now outdated. Digital distribution is changing everything; there is a new hunger – a post-branding generation that I have a great optimism about.

A final word? The main thing is to have personal integrity. It's what differentiates the good from the bad. Oh, and traditional graphic design ruined my eyesight.