To Design or Not to Design:
A Conversation with Allan Chochinov

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Allan Chochinov—editor-in-chief of Core77 and teacher of industrial and product design at Pratt and in the School of Visual Arts' MFA Designer as Author program—has become a leading advocate against wasteful design. He puts his teaching where his mouth is by requiring students to answer "why" at nearly every stage of the design process and by urging them to avoid indulging in the typical trappings of consumer culture. Always armed with fresh insights, Chochinov keeps me on my toes in our ongoing discussions about ethics and efficacy. Here is an example of one such conversation, in which we talk about how to teach students to *not* design unless there is a need, as well as debate the concept of obsolescence as a tool for stimulating the economy.

Heller: You teach industrial design and are the editor-in-chief of a website that chronicles the field. But you have a unique worldview of I.D.—kind of "Enough is enough, already." You've questioned why designers should actually make more stuff. Well, why shouldn't they?

Chochinov: Well, it's not that they shouldn't make more stuff, exactly—we will obviously need all kinds of stuff in our world. It's just that the "making of stuff" as the initial mandate of the designer needs to be challenged. Say I'm a product designer in the classic sense (and yes, there are others). I get up in the morning, I go to my design studio, and the frame within which I work—indeed my entire *raison d'etre*—is: "I'm going to make a piece of stuff. In fact, I'm going to do such a good job designing this piece of stuff that my client is going to make lots and lots of these. And if they do a good job, too, they're going to sell thousands or hundreds of thousands of them.—millions even. So that's my role. And I will do it well."

I think this is preposterous and dangerous. And I know that a designer's professed responsibility is to "solve problems," but given market pressures, those solutions invariably involve manufacturing a ton of artifacts, which are quickly thrown away, of course. The mandates of design are seldom questioned in design schools, sadly. Product designers learn how to design products—lots of them.

Heller: Arguably, industrial designers must learn how to design products or they don't learn. Do you think they should learn how to *not* design products? Or should they be like the Shakers, each having to learn how to make a fundamentally essential, simple product—or have a quota of some sort—and then die off because they don't procreate? While I agree that too much stuff is available, isn't that what stimulates our economy? Wasn't forced obsolescence developed to keep the economy—and our way of life—moving?

Chochinov: There are several questions in there, Steve—the last one with great relevance to our current financial climate. Let's start with the first, though: There is an age-old debate between training students and educating them. This is true for many disciplines, and is perhaps reaching a crisis point with product, or industrial, design. I used to have a perennial argument with a fellow faculty member that took the form of: "These students won't be able to design anything if you don't teach them how" versus "These students will only be designing dumb stuff if you don't ask them why." One of the ways that new programs have navigated the issue of the expanding skill set (and purview) of design practice is to pick a sub-specialty and focus on it—be it design thinking, experiences and interactions, form-giving, etc. Another is to try and do it all—model building, materials and processes, abstract three-dimensional investigation, color, drawing, professional practice, thesis—and in that case the conventional approach seems to be skills first, thinking second. I actually don't agree with this order, but I see the irresistible logic in it.

To your second question, I absolutely think that students (and indeed, professionals) should learn how not to design products. But I don't argue this in a reactionary or antagonistic way. While many artifacts are necessary and desirable, they need to be appreciated in their larger context; they are usually part of a greater whole. Many products are props in an experience; others are necessary tools to accomplish work or tasks; still, others are totems or beloved objects. Some are just plain beautiful, or coveted, or disposable. In almost all of these roles, however, a product has just that—a role. And these days, with a greater appreciation of the consequences of mass production, the labor implications, the fuel, energy and pollution in transporting goods back and forth around the globe, we need to be sure that when we tool up to manufacture something that we're not doing so blindly, that we have thought about the role of that artifact and have considered whether that role can be fulfilled in a more sustainable, local, respectful and humane way.

That's where the discipline of service design comes in. Service design looks at a situation, a context—OK, a problem—and looks at modifying behavior, redistributing assets, goods, activities, talent, and seeks to improve the situation or contribute something new into the world. If "products" are needed, no problem; we'll make products. But it shouldn't necessarily be the first step.

Heller: Service design makes sense. Products are designed—indeed, invented—to serve a need. But need is not an end in itself—you didn't really address the last part of the question. In the 1920s and '30s sustainability might not have been a buzz issue or trend, so "new" was the consumer mantra—at least as advocated through advertising, which as we all know is more about image than reality. But what do you think about forced obsolescence? Should designers be directed to make "new" and "newer"—2.0, 5.0 or 25.5 versions of things that they know will be obsolete in a year or two?

Chochinov: I think "new" is still the consumer mantra—perhaps more so now than ever. And with the current financial situation, we are tempted to reduce everything we do here on Earth to the necessary creation and consumption of goods and services; that this will be our only way out: "Go shopping." No doubt designers are complicit in this feeding of ever more novel stuff to buy, but surely there are other ways to create value in our world.

A nice example is matching the elderly and the young, popularized by Ezio Manzini's *Sustainable Everyday Project*: Sick kids need childcare; the elderly need company, activity and energy. Why not create neighborhood-based childcare facilities where the elderly provide the staffing? Or surrogate grandparenting for older kids. That's veering back to service design, of course, but these models can be transposed to product design with little difficulty. Indeed, going forward I don't think we can engage in product design with any integrity if we don't take into consideration the larger contexts in which that product exists, and to push toward more holistic systems. Why own a car when you can be a member of a car-sharing group? Well, many people love owning a car, so it's up to designers to create an artifact, system, experienceand service—let's say Zipcar— that is so well-thought through, so economical and ecologically responsible, and so desirable—for all those quintessentially design-y reasons—that people are persuaded to join. That's an example of your 2.0 version that makes sense for the design community, and for business in general.

Alex Steffen, in an essay a couple years ago entitled "Strategic Consumption: How to Change the World with What You Buy," argues that "you cannot buy a better future, at least not the sort of bright green future we talk about here at Worldchanging. That sort of future—a sustainable one, a future that itself has a future—is not available for purchase: It doesn't yet exist. You can't find it on shelves, and you can't even order it up custom, no matter how much money you're willing to spend." He offers a five-point strategy in the second half of the article, but it's a good recipe for the other half of the consumer equation: the designers.

Heller: Designers become designers because they need to make things. That said, industrial designers dating back to their ascendancy during the 1930s were in large part attempting to do some fundamental good for society. Do you believe that romantic idea gave rise to *l'objet pour l'objet* in the postwar age? And if so, do you think that designers can really be convinced it is in their best interest to do as you have suggested—create more holistic systems that save rather than waste? I'm reminded of the Mad Max movies and how the survivors of whatever terrible calamity there was that caused Armageddon were forced to retool existing machinery because they had no choice. Should designers today be made to practice in a sustainable manner because they have no choice?

Chochinov: Right, like the preserved '50s cars in Cuba. I think you'll find designers in two camps these days: those for whom it's still business as usual, and those who believe that we are already past the crisis point. Well, maybe there are a few groups in between, but one hopes that there is a desire across the board to create value in ways that doesn't create more problems than they solve. I've written before that John Thackara, a design force for good, argues that he's never met a designer who, at base, didn't want to "make things better," so for him the good intentions are in the recipe, in the DNA.

I don't know that the "attempt to do some fundamental good for society" in the 1930s was the over-riding motivation; indeed, you talked about planned obsolescence and the rise of advertising in an earlier question. I tend to be cynical about these things, and there's no doubt that the promise of less drudgery in the home and more efficiencies on the roads and in the factories were powerful promises to anyone who could afford to avail themselves

of what industrial mass production had to offer. But they were also moving the merch. New, more streamlined, more futuristic iterations of products became a meme as well as a way of life, and the rest, as they say, is history. Now we're in an even more sophisticated era (see Debbie Millman's recent critique of Lucas Conley's *Obsessive Branding Disorder* on Design Observer), where brands, tribes and buzz marketing are the engines of the movement of goods and services. Masters of this discipline know full well that what really matters is designed experiences and can use that knowledge to manipulate us even more effectively. Well, that's the cynical argument, anyway. Debbie tries to balance the story out in her article.

You ask if designers today should be made to practice in a sustainable manner because they have no choice. Well, I'm on the board of the Designers Accord, a coalition of designers, educators, businesspeople and others working together to create change—to create positive environmental and social impact through sustainable design practice. Designers "adopt" the accord, pledging to talk to clients about sustainable options, to educate their staffs about sustainable practice, to do an audit, to share best practices with other designers on a community website. The Accord doesn't seek to bully designers and design firms; it seeks to catalyze innovation throughout the creative community by collectively building our intelligence around sustainability. I think it's a sensible approach.

Heller: I don't mean to say that designers are "perfect soldiers," mindlessly moving in mindless lockstep, making things regardless of consequence. But I am curious about how students embrace this field and what their prerogatives are at this point in environmental and economic history. You teach at Pratt (graduate industrial design) and SVA (graduate communications design): how have students changed perspective? In general, what are the key motivations and what is your goal as a teacher?

Chochinov: Their motivations are unclear, actually. Several years ago, the assistant chair in the department at Pratt mentioned to me that during the entrance interviews, "Not one of the students wanted anything other than to become an 'industrial designer'…to learn how to design stuff." None of them mentioned design research or ethnography. None mentioned design thinking or strategy or sustainability, discursive design or any other myriad sub-fields of the discipline. They all wanted, literally, to make products. And keep in mind that these are grown-ups: graduate students who had had some life experience.

Now, these students can't be blamed for not knowing all the amazing places they could find for themselves in the world of product design because they didn't know those places existed. So part of the responsibility of design education is to show students that the world of design enterprise is a broad and thriving place. For me, this is an incredibly important part of the discourse, helped by bringing in lots of guests who practice tangentially to the field, and providing demonstrable evidence that there are ways to solve problems, put wonderful things into the world and celebrate life that go way beyond constructing a pretty coffee maker.

Steve, can you sharpen up what you mean by prerogatives here? I'm fascinated by that word. What, as the co-chair of the Designer as Author Program at SVA, do you feel are the rights of the students in your program?

Heller: Students have the right to choose to be "citizen designers." I believe my students should not be herded into a pen where all they do is follow the golden rule, but I believe I—we—have an obligation to teach them to design in a responsible manner for a realistic goal. I also believe that they must be taught to convince others of the rightness of what they are doing. Of course, this is a double-edged sword, so to speak: They can be too convincing and, like Bernie Madoff, be total scoundrels. How do we keep designers from pulling the wool over the client's and the public's eyes? I believe we must be diligent about our critiques and what we accept or not. Too often students are allowed to get away with things that would not be accepted by professionals, under the guise of allowing them to grow. Have you been affected by that conundrum?

Chochinov: This is something I talk a lot about in class, actually—the notion of what is "playing fair" and how these students have been manipulated and bullied by all the forces active in contemporary culture, and how they are now learning the skills to fight back, and how they can be used for good rather than evil. I don't want to make too big a deal about this, but the art of design is very often the art of persuasion—whether it happens through a product or an ad campaign or a poster or a piece of interactive media. So preparing the practitioners of that art comes with an added responsibility—on top of the "training" and "educating" I alluded to before.

But when you offer that "too often students are allowed to get away with things that would not be accepted by professionals under the guise of allowing them to grow," I'd like to propose a caution: Professionals are some of the worst offenders, of course, and preparing students for "professional practice" may be preparing them for the compromises, complicity and propagation of the same unsustainable values and outputs that we now understand to be the dark side of design, advertising, marketing and mass production. I think school is exactly the place where they should be getting away with an unbelievable amount—particularly grad school. (I recently got a compliment from a student who commented that my ground rule for the class was to "go big or go home." I kinda liked that.) And so often I think that the rituals of professional practice should take a backseat. But then I realize that those rituals can be discussed, dissected and challenged as class discussion topics, and I get to have it both ways: the students have a grounding in reality, but hopefully the confidence and the nerve to challenge that reality.

Heller: You are right that "professional" is not always synonymous with all things good and pure. But, tell me, do you teach industrial design students how to just say no? It seems to me that too many designers, when faced with the choice of making something that is not necessary, in fact, make it anyway to satisfy the client. The word no is not always negative; it can be very positive. Would you agree?

Chochinov: I would, and you've teed things up quite nicely for me! A few years back, it was the end of the semester and I was having a bit of a bull session with the students, critiquing the course and talking about how the semester went. One of the students piped up and asked, "Allan, you seem to have such a conflicted relationship with this profession. You're so torn up about mass production and solid waste, but you love design so much and are so passionate about its potential. Doesn't it just kill you to come here every week and teach industrial design? I mean, why do you come here to do this?"

I looked the student straight in the eyes and said, "I come here to stop you."

I think that has always been the subtext of my pedagogy, but I don't exercise it with malice or resentment. I'm critical of design, designers and design practice—both in my teaching and in my editorial roles at Core77—but I'm also the biggest cheerleader for the power of design. I see unlimited potential for the discipline at a time when the world desperately needs creative thinkers, problem solvers and brave visionaries. I am also cognizant of the vast damage we can do as our design decisions are multiplied out across the globe. I don't see those two postures as mutually exclusive. Indeed, I see them as a requirement—both in practice *and* in school.

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 Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press). He is co-author of *New Vintage Type* (Thames & Hudson), *Becoming a Digital Designer* (John Wiley & Co.) and *Teaching Motion Design* (Allworth Press). His book *Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State* (Phaidon Press) will be published this spring.