

Letter To A Young Designer

This Letter addresses you for it is your duty to create beauty.



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My dear friend

You must be in the habit of receiving advice and gratuitous suggestions and you may dismiss this letter as one more in such a series. You may also look at it as a gift from a teacher who has seen the world and has found beauty, no matter how concrete or abstract, as a value worth pursuing for all times in the past and all times to come. This letter addresses you for it is your duty to create beauty.

You may have chosen this profession out of your belief in yourself about a talent that you have. A talent that could be making a beautiful drawing or painting a lovely picture, it could be your skill with the camera or your facility with words, it could even be bringing things together and creating a working model that solves existing or new and hitherto unimagined problems. Your talent may be one among these or it may well be your capacity to think new thoughts, feel new feelings. Your unique capability might be to give them a body that takes the form of a solution when it is specific or a theory when it is general. Regardless of your talent, you must consider yourself blessed as you are among the very few who can do this. You may even consider yourself twice blessed as you have an ability to give birth to originality, a capacity that otherwise only mothers have when they create new human beings.

Your teachers and textbooks may have said that your concern is form and function, and that one evokes the other. They may have waxed eloquent on the fact that design is situated at the intersection of art, science and technology and you have to decide the proportion in which you would let them manifest in your work. They may even have reduced design to anthropometrics and ergonomics and made you realize that understanding the nuances of consumer psychology is critical to survive in this field. They may have given the discipline of design such a vast definition that it begins to situate itself in a problem-solution framework and you as designer becomes a problem solver. While all of it may be important, I would urge you not to forget that you have set out on the journey to becoming a designer and not a manager.

It is true that making people see is one of the primary responsibilities of a designer however; it is upon you to decide what would you make them see. Before you make others see, you have to learn to see yourself. While the object you create may have a visible presence, the relationships it has with its own idea and with its surroundings are invisible. You will have to see everything in a relationship to everything else. You as a designer must find ways to make visible those invisible relationships and that will be the challenge, my friend, you will have to take on. You will have to cultivate within yourself a sort of visual intelligence that sees beyond the material world and discern networks of ideas that underlie any object, unravel complex symbols through your creation that populate and give meaning to human society and elucidate interrelated subsystems that function with their own and independent logic. Your vision should so acquire the capability to penetrate human fears, needs, purposes, motivations and aspirations and project their essence on to creation of yours.

It is obvious that you would work with space as the raw material however, what is not so obvious is that there are at least three types of spaces: physical, mental and social. Each has its own peculiarity and therefore the power to exert upon the human mind. You are likely to look at space as geometric, empty and innocent that is waiting to be given shape or filled with objects and ideas. You will be wrong if you think so. You must consider mental and social spaces too as the material to work with. As you produce one of these spaces, you will automatically produce the other two as they represent the contemporary economic and social order. Through them, you can make your creation richer with ideas and an instrument to mirror if not drive social change. No matter what you create, will be a product of a psycho-social context and if you remain alive to them, your design would acquire a dense appeal which will make it relevant to a wider audience and a longer period. To be a designer worth your salt, you must learn to attain unity of all the three spaces in your designs.

As a designer, you have to decide not only the final form of your creation but also the method by which you will arrive at it. Such a responsibility is without a parallel as in most professions at least one of them is given. You are to frame the context against the backdrop of which your creation would find meaning. You must remember that the process and the product, both reside in the same system and you as the designer of both are its integral part. It is your responsibility to see that design does not get lost in between production and consumption and remain limited to the 'final finish'. You have the option of considering the system that produces the object as dynamically unfolding or you may give it a conceptually elegant form and address it part by part. No matter which process you follow, your action will be an aesthetic intervention.

To return to where we began, beauty as your prime concern, you must understand it is not the final finish alone. It encompasses ideas that easily transcend the elementary and subjective understanding of aesthetic forms. It includes conditions of beauty as proportion, clarity and integrity given by Thomas Aquinas at the same time, it contains all the four moments of an aesthetic judgment given by Immanuel Kant. It includes the element of purpose and utility and at the same time, it includes exemplary characteristics that exist for themselves without any purpose. It does not fail to emphasize, in a typical Hegelian manner, content as the source of freedom and richness of spirit nor does it take away the fact that you the artist and the artwork give birth to each other. As art is applied to become a design, you must apply yourself to become a designer. It may not be easy as it would require you to see with new eyes every time you set your eyes upon something. However, my friend, it is not to the dull that the responsibility of recreating this world is given. You are the flag bearer of humanity in whom it sees its most diverse and creative potential.

Yours truly

A teacher

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