



the tao of mau

BRUCE MAU AND THE FUTURE OF DESIGN

When we think of design, many envision a predictable mix of interiors, graphics and fashion. Yet, today, traditional disciplines of design have become increasingly abstract. According to design visionary, Bruce Mau, design is simply “the human capacity to plan and produce desired outcomes.” In that light, design is all around us. Unfortunately, often “it only becomes visible when it fails.” So, with much around us failing, from ecology to economics, it’s no surprise that the design community has expanded to include social activists, environmentalists, and business entrepreneurs... all linked by a dogged belief that everything is ripe for reinvention.

in his new book, *Glimmer: How Design can transform your life, your business and maybe even the world*, journalist Warren Berger examines this changing face of design and reveals how thinking like a designer can help resolve our greatest challenges. Much of his thesis was based on the works of Canadian Bruce Mau and his *Incomplete Manifesto for Growth*. So we decided to go right to the source of Berger's inspiration. COLLECTIONS' Jeremy Finkelstein sat down with Mr. Mau for a candid conversation on the future of design, the follies of the education system and our desperate need to think about 'forever.'

COLLECTIONS: When did you first realize that design was less about form and function and more about ideology?

bruce mau: Well, it's certainly about ideas. From the very beginning, I was just as interested in what we could do as what it would look like. To ask the question in any situation, "What's the best thing we can do?" and not "What form will it take?" was, for me, clear from the very beginning. Now, I still think the visual is a critical dimension, because the way we will be successful in the world, whether trying to solve climate change or trying to be successful at business, is to design things to be attractive for our customers.

C: You mention climate change. Do you believe that design principles can be applied to our most challenging issues or even change the world?

bm: If you imagine the world you live in, it's a designed world. Almost your entire experience is within a designed envelope. Think about the number of times you can close your eyes and open them in a place where you only see natural things. It's almost zero. And often when you do see natural things, it's been designed for you to see it that way. I think that we're waking up to the fact that we are actually designing the world. On a Toronto scale, one of the most important and challenging design problems is to design regionally. But look at a project like the Green Belt; that's designing at the regional scale. It says that we need to think about this region long-term, maintain the resources that we're going to need, and design a solution.

Globally, it's expected that we will go from roughly six billion people at the beginning of the century to roughly nine billion by mid-century. Imagine three billion people coming onto the planet and what the future holds for them if we fail to think this way.

C: It sounds daunting, yet you retain your optimism and enthusiasm for these challenges. Why is that?

bm: It's because I think a small problem is a small opportunity. A big problem is a huge opportunity. The problems that we face today

provide magnificent opportunities for design. A design problem is something that's not working. Well, we've got some pretty major things that are not working. That means that the design opportunities and the wealth that can be created in the course of solving them are absolutely staggering. It could not be a more exciting time.

One of the things that I think we should be clear about, however, is that almost all of the problems we have are problems of success. They are not problems of failure. We have challenges because we succeeded in designing solutions to problems we had. For example, we have doubled the life expectancy over the last century. We are closing in on seven billion people because we have designed solutions to disease, because we've designed ways for people to share knowledge. We've been so successful in applied design that we've created a whole new order of challenges and problems. Think about the car. Climate change and the car are intimately connected. We're confronting climate change because the automobile as a design product was radically successful. Of course, it was successful in addressing a problem that didn't include pollution. We have this idea in our culture of having things off-book... what accountants call externalities. Well, in the world there is no externality. Everything gets counted, so one of the things that we're working on is to develop methodologies of holistic thinking that take the complexity of design to a higher level, and look at those externalities, or outputs, as inputs for something else.

C: Collaborating with George Brown College, you developed the Institute without Boundaries (IwB) to pass on this philosophy to a new generation of students. Where did traditional education fail and how does the IwB differ?

bm: A traditional model operates on the basis that "I am the teacher and I have the knowledge and you are the student and you have none. And I am going to give you my knowledge in pieces over the course of our year together." That's still the way a lot of teachers are operating, even at the university level. And what is clear to me, is that some of the stuff the students have is actually better than what the teacher has. So you have a new higher order of work to be done, which is helping to navigate and negotiate this new access to knowledge. It's a different kind of discussion that puts the learning in real time with knowledge development. That's what we did with the IwB. The concept was to develop an entrepreneurial educational model where we use purpose – like a real challenge in the world – to radically accelerate learning. If I'm just broadcasting to you and you have no idea why I'm talking about certain things, the retention level, the reason, the engagement is missing. The moment that you have a purpose, you have a super-compelling accelerator attached to your learning because you become an entrepreneur.



Left: The 'Wealth And Politics' exhibit and the main entrance to the Massive Change Project.

C: How have the students responded to the methodology?

bm: I think I can safely describe it as life changing. It was for me. The Massive Change project changed the direction of our work.

C: Massive Change was a design project that you developed in collaboration with students from IwB?

bm: Absolutely. We developed this concept of purpose driven, experience based education, and the first project that we used as the prototype was Massive Change. We started with the question 'What is the future of design?', and we spent about twenty person years of research trying to figure it out.

I basically said to them, I don't know the answer. We are going to do this together. There was a time during the process when I came into the studio and my senior people took me aside and said, "Bruce, you've got to tell these people what to do because they're angry. They hate this." And I had to sit down with the people at the IwB, and say "I don't know the answer. We are lost in the woods together."

C: How has it influenced your work?

bm: When you go through that experience, you learn the content of the experience, but more importantly, you learn the experience of the content. You learn that you can actually be lost in the woods and get out. Almost all schools are allergic to that idea. They can tell you what you're going to experience six months from now, but we know from research that 50 per cent of the stuff learned in a technical degree is outdated by the time they graduate, so learning that content is not relevant. Learning to learn is relevant. We need to learn how to be lost in the woods.

C: Has your *Manifesto for Growth* evolved over the years, and do you still use its guiding principles in your work at Bruce Mau Design?

bm: Yes, we do. Actually, when Massive Change opened in Toronto, the Star sent a reporter to see if we were living up to it. I was worried because we don't consciously monitor that, but I was pleasantly surprised by the fact that in some ways it's kind of at the core of what we do. Basically what I tried to do with the Manifesto was to write down the patterns that I saw in our unique creative

methods. The Manifesto was done in the lightest possible spirit, but it has an incredible rhythm and frequency.

C: Journalist Warren Berger recently published the book *Glimmer*, illustrating how design can impact our lives, and he builds most of it around your vision. How did you become involved in that project?

bm: He called me and said, "I see what you're doing, and I'd like to write a book on this kind of thinking because you're one of the leaders in this revolution."

C: Berger breaks down design principles from your manifesto, compartmentalizing them into categories: Universal, Business, Social and Personal. Are certain design principles more applicable to one part of life than another?

bm: I think that some things can operate on all different scales while others find the most resonance on specific scales, but my own approach is that the design methodology that we've developed can operate across scales.

C: At January's International Design Show, you'll be giving a lecture titled *A World without Oil*. In your vision, how does this world differ from today's?

bm: The fundamental difference is that it has the potential of 'forever' built into it. Our current model is a short-term model. We can do what we're doing only if we don't share it with anyone, and if we don't do it for very long. If we weren't successful over the last 200 years and we were just a billion people living an average life span of thirty years, we could behave like frat boys. However, since we're seven billion, we have to radically reinvent how we live together, and that means incorporating the notion of forever.

We did this huge project with Coca-Cola, shifting their organization to a sustainable environment. Coke is a good example because they're a global system. There is no place that isn't Coca-Cola territory. We presented the work at a business conference and a kid comes up and says, "Why don't you just stop making Coke? Wouldn't that be the most sustainable thing to do?" And I said, "I don't want a world without Coca-Cola. That's not my idea of success." I love having a coke. I just want to do it in a way that doesn't steal from my children. I want them to have a coke, too. I want them to have a coke, knowing that they can do it in perpetuity. That's the new world.

C: If you had one word of advice for the next generation of designers in our audience, what would it be?

bm: Forever. The big idea is get to forever. Get to the ways of doing things that you love. It's not about sacrificing. It's about success. Get to the way of doing things that you love in a way that you can do them in perpetuity.

Right: Coca-Cola's Live Positively icon.

