



AMONG BRUCE MAU'S many standout projects is *Massive Change*, an exhibition commissioned by the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2004 (it later traveled to Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art) that explored how social, economic, environmental, and political problems could be solved by design. The back cover of the accompanying book put it best: "Massive Change is not about the world of design; it's about the design of the world." So when the idea guru arrives for this interview at his new Toronto studio as a comparatively svelte version of his formerly portly self, the discussion naturally turns to his own massive change. If his lunch is any indication, Mau now eats a lot of sashimi.

It is only recently that the people conceiving and creating brand identities have become brands themselves. And Mau, who was born outside the blustery northern Ontario mining town of Sudbury, may be one of the most well-known, most multi-disciplined designers working today. Collaborating with such starchitects as Frank Gehry and Rem Koolhaas certainly helps. Prior to that, he did stints at gold-standard design studio Pentagram and at *I.D.* magazine, where he served as creative director in the early '90s.

When Mau wrote *An Incomplete Manifesto for Growth* in 1998, he articulated a series of 43 ideas that encouraged a break from traditional ways of thinking. Note No. 14: "Don't be cool. Cool is conservative fear dressed in black." Or No. 6: "Capture accidents. The wrong answer is the right answer in search of a different question." In *Glimmer: How Design Can Transform Your Life, and Maybe Even the World* (Penguin) Warren Berger, the author, is shown to be a fan of No. 15: "Ask stupid questions." It's an insightful read in the school of Gladwell where, according to the cover, Mau's "ideas and wisdom" play a supporting role.

Mau, who turned 50 in October, is now based out of Chicago, a city where he believes "design and the idea that you can actually transform the world is part of the general culture—not just the design culture."

There are the clients that Mau will name: Arizona State University, Coca-Cola, MTV, the Meadowlands Stadium, and Dairy Management Inc. Certainly these are a potpourri of powerful brands. Then there are the confidential clients; it seems that these are the ones in which design becomes not so much a tangible product but a tool to rethink business strategy. After all, Mau is nothing if not a preacher of design being a fungible commodity. And sometimes, maybe even a fun one, too.

YOU LOOK NOTICEABLY SLIMMER. WHAT'S UP WITH THAT? Last year was probably the worst year of my life. I came to Toronto to meet with my partner, Miles Nadal. When he walked into the room, he was two-thirds [his size]. He explained that he had a real experience and that I was on

the same train as him and that his biggest risk doing business with [me] is that I would drop dead. So he said, "I'm going to send you to the doctor I found who's going to help you rethink how you live, because you have an incredible capacity to change the world. You have to apply that to yourself." I was totally knocked out. A week later, I went down to see Dr. Laura De Luca in Palm Beach.

AND WHAT DID SHE TELL YOU? She said, "You have to get in there and figure out why you are doing these things and where are they coming from." And I said, "Look, I know the science of why I'm gaining weight. It's not that I don't have the knowledge." I needed to think about it as a design problem.

THEY SAY THAT CHANGE ONLY HAPPENS WHEN YOU'RE READY. There are certain people who are very resistant to change. I'm not in that category. I have a very elastic intelligence. I think about things in a diverse way.

TELL ME WHY YOU DO WHAT YOU DO. That's a great question, and a tough one. I guess I see opportunity. When I look at situations, I see possibilities, and I think, Why aren't we doing that in a smarter way? For me, the outcome has been very organic. I started in quite a modest way as a communication designer, and over the years our clients and partners and collaborators pushed me into things I didn't know how to do. At this point in history, what we can do is off the charts. It's why purple is my favorite color, because for most of history, it was exclusively for royalty. We don't realize our possibilities, the tools that we have that we take for granted.

SO DO YOU THINK EVERYONE SHOULD ENGAGE THESE POSSIBILITIES OR ONLY PEOPLE WHO HAVE A GOOD GRASP OF THEM? I think that people do have a responsibility to

engage. And I think that responsibility escalates with your capacity and your awareness. If you have awareness and capacity, it becomes criminally negligent not to. It's one thing if you're not exposed and you have no concept of what's going on. You have a kind of criminal defense which is that [you] don't know.

IF EVERYONE CAN BE A DESIGNER, WHAT MAKES A GOOD DESIGNER?

The capacity to make smart things sexy. One of the things we realized in the course of *Massive Change* is that just having smart things isn't enough. Or just knowing what to do isn't enough. I knew what to do; I was still gaining weight. You have to make a new destination more exciting than the old one, not less exciting. And I think a lot of the environmental movement, for instance, was built around the words *no* and *don't*. We had the knowledge 40 years ago of the challenges we face, but we've made almost no progress. The reason is the image we presented of the solution was worse than what we had. People, naturally, don't want to do that. They want to go to something better. So a good designer is someone who can say, "We're going to take you to a better place, and it's going to be more exciting, cooler, more compelling, more visually beautiful." We have to compete with beauty. We have to make beauty work for the smart things, so the smart things are more compelling than the stupid things.

IN GLIMMER, WARREN BERGER ENCOURAGES BUSINESS PEOPLE TO THINK LIKE DESIGNERS. MUST DESIGNERS THINK LIKE BUSINESS PEOPLE?

Well, I think all design has an economy to it. I think what you're really trying to do is use less energy, use less material, have more fun. So more beauty, less material—that's a design problem that's shared with business. In that sense, all design is good business. For me, I always think about designing the budget. It's an economic design from the very beginning.

DO YOU THINK BIG COMPANIES ARE ACKNOWLEDGING THAT CHANGE IS NECESSARY?

I know that there are people who are simply rapacious—greedy, stupid, just the worst possible characters—they're part of the spectrum. But almost every businessperson I've ever met doesn't wake up in the morning and say, "You know what? My idea is to do things worse. I'm going to be a real pig and see how that goes."

HOW MUCH TIME IS SPENT DESIGNING MATERIAL THINGS VERSUS THINKING ABOUT IDEA DESIGN?

Ha! I don't have an immediate sense of an answer to that, partly because from the very beginning, I saw it as both ways. It was really conceived as enterprise design, product design, experience design—what's the interface for content?—with an outcome of a new possibility in the population. So a lot of work is now in the systems place. But for me, it still gets actualized in the object. When you see a book that has the right kind of cultural resonance, that's where it lives.

WHAT WERE YOU LIKE AS A KID? I was sort of odd and super nerdy, as you can imagine. I wear it as a badge. I grew up on a farm, so I didn't have the people around me who did what I ultimately wanted to do. My family didn't really have books, which was odd—I grew up without books and then have spent my life making books. I can show you a photograph of me as a kid in Markstay, outside of Sudbury, at the arena. You can't pick me out of that crowd of buddies and say, "That guy is going to be a designer and



PREVIOUS SPREAD, MAIN PICTURE: poster by bruce mau design. ABOVE RIGHT: "the image gallery" from *massive change*. LEFT: "wealth economy" from *massive change*. photographed by robert harshman



start a business." But I gradually began to see this outside world, and I came along at a point where our society was betting on everyone.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT? Moving to the United States, you realize they have a very different idea, which is: Let's make it competitive. If you win, you win big. [In Canada] it's very much a social concept—we don't realize how radical it is.

YOU HAVE YET TO UPDATE INCOMPLETE MANIFESTO. DO YOU STILL CONSIDER IT INCOMPLETE?

I have actually added to it but not published anything. I am thinking about it more. It wasn't like I just cooked it up and said, "This is what we should do." It was really writing down the way we work. So there were certain techniques I saw as part of a creative life. And I was like, How do we live together and produce creative things together?

HAVE YOU BEEN ABLE TO DESIGN YOUR OWN HAPPINESS?

I don't think you can get to happy. I think you can experience it in the process. We use happiness as a kind of real-time experience, not a destination. When I talk about designing the world, [people] think, What a megalomaniac; he just wants to control the world. It's actually quite the opposite in saying that we have a responsibility to collectively do something positive. If you think about a lot of the challenges we have right now, they are the problems of success, not failure. Climate change is not happening because we failed. Unfortunately, it's happening because we succeeded. In many ways, the success in our design has produced the crisis that we now face.

SHOULD WE EXPECT A BRUCE MAU SELF-HELP BOOK ANY TIME SOON? Ha! That sounds inevitable, actually.