Are We Doing Good?

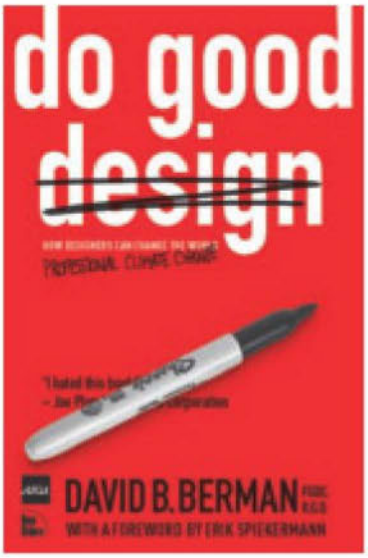
BY SUE GOULD

Do Good Design: How Designers Can Change the World
By David Berman
Berkeley: Peachpit Press, 2009

Canadian designer David Berman's book calls us all to account. He reminds us of issues that are hard to confront and that most of us don't want to think about when we're trying to decide on the right font that will give the right feeling to the next shopping center logo.

In Do Good Design, Berman surveys the sordid and unscrupulous objectives that design (especially graphic design for advertising) is often used to promote, and implores designers to stop allowing themselves to be the tools of uncaring and unethical corporate clients.

His selected visual examples are brilliant, many are funny, and they go way beyond the usual indictments of sexism to address the selling of cigarettes, beer, wine, clothes (a killer example: a pedophilic Japanese food package), and the ubiquitous recognition of the Coca- Cola logo everywhere in the world.



I do wish these examples were better reproduced. Perhaps intentionally, the book almost looks like it was issued during Samizdat (the underground distribution of anti-government books under the worst years of Soviet repression), with crude black and white photo reproductions and pseudo-scribbled marginal comments such as, over a picture of the Dalai Lama, "gonna keep this in the Chinese edition?" *Mad Magazine*-style.

Berman indicts us for supporting a corrupt system in which multinational giants replace indigenous diets with unhealthy, cheap, and inferior products and sell sex, violence, and overconsumption as a lifestyle around the world. And while he addresses primarily graphic designers, we who work on three-dimensional expressions of these values share the responsibility.

Berman exhorts us that we are more powerful than we know, and so is the imagery we create. "The same design that fuels mass overconsumption also holds the power to repair the world," he reminds us. His examples are Shepard Fairey's wildly successful and infamous Obama poster and Robert L. Peters' formula: "Design creates culture. Culture shapes values. Values determine the future. Design is therefore responsible for the world our children will live in."

It is only in the past decade that a general understanding has emerged that continual expansion and growth is not sustainable on the planet—in fact, in humans we call it cancer.

The real question is why we as a society are not content with "enough"—and why enough has to be continually expanded.

A recent study reported that the most content people in the world are the Danes. They have one of the world's highest standards of living, as well as one of the world's highest levels of taxation. When I lived there many years ago, the highest pleasure was contentment. They don't feel they have to conquer the world (they did that already), just enjoy it.

Berman also indicts visual lies: Photoshopped impossibilities (such as the physically impossible image of a Ralph Lauren model that made it onto a late-night television monologue recently), which convey impossible goals to young girls.

He also challenges us to respond to clients' requests for work that doesn't conform to our principles, by suggesting more ethical workarounds (examples of these would make another wonderful book), and he warns: "Ultimately you'll have the clients (or boss) you deserve."

Of course we are not the only culprits and only a part of the problem. The book ends with a slightly naïve call to pledge not to work on such degenerate projects that corrupt children and stimulate desires for more, more, more.

One cannot but agree with him, but it's not as easy as signing a pledge, is it?

Is it better to do the work, and use the profits to support those like The Nature Conservancy or UNICEF, or Doctors without Borders, or the many others who are working all over the world to counter the degradation we have already wrought?

Erik Spiekermann addresses this conflict in his foreword, asking how we make these choices of what to work on: "Is designing for a public transit system good but airport signage is bad because only rich people can afford to fly?" and he asks, "What is our responsibility?" His words could not be more prescient: "As we take in the big picture of what this book is about, let's begin by looking at our immediate reality. Charity begins at home."

I would ask, what are we all individually doing to create an example of a caring and healthy world? Do we weigh the environmental impact of our projects? Could we charge the client less for greener projects and more for those with a heavy carbon footprint? Do we support our staffs' efforts at recycling? The possibilities are as endless as we want them to be. X

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