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No More Utopias:

Modeling Incremental Change in Design Practice and Pedagogy

I. Design seminars and symposia attempting to address the world's manifold problems are suddenly commonplace. Although it is becoming clear that the UN Millennium Development goals are unattained and currently unachievable for some parts of the world, especially Africa, these same goals loom large on the agendas of the ERA, ICOGRADA, ICSID, the AIGA, the Aspen Summit, and other design conferences in the industrialized west. The message being sent is that utopia is a matter of designing it and, where there's a collective design initiative, and sufficient corporate sponsorship, anything is possible. Unfortunately, when it comes to design symposia, at the end of the week some few hundreds of attendees hop on a series of jumbo jets and return to their straight jobs, helping Fortune 1000 corporations discover new ways to extort profit from the world's misFortune 2,000,000,000. And in the process we pass this rubric on to our design students: business as usual, so long as you attend the occasional guilt-assuaging conference, never stopping to think how you might better have spent $1000.

Figure 1. ERA 05 World Design Conference

Figure 2. ICOGRADA Design Week, Seattle

AspenDesignSummit

Never before have one year's events so demanded a call for action on a global scale, and never before has the Aspen Design Summit been more ready for the challenge.

In June 2006, design-minded leaders from around the world will gather in Aspen, Colorado to make positive, measurable impacts on the social and cultural concerns of today.

The Aspen Design Summit, a partnership of IDCA and AIGA, is a multi-disciplinary retreat where design thinking and the design process will be used to craft solutions and commit participants to actions that improve the quality of life worldwide. At the Summit, design will be presented as a tool to inform and inspire innovative leadership across society.

Aspen Design Summit presentations and workshops will engage decision makers from around the world in dialogues and activities. Design will be used as a catalyst for innovation, and positive change. While the Aspen Design Summit will reach capacity at 340 participants, the impact will be felt around the globe.

In 1951, Chicago industrialist Walter Paepcke brought together 250 designers, artists, engineers, business and industry leaders for the first International Design Conference at Aspen (IDCA). For more than fifty years IDCA has positioned design as a tool to inform and inspire innovative leadership across society. Now, IDCA and AIGA are partners focused on shaping the Aspen Design Summit into an event that will be as groundbreaking for design in the 21st century as the Aspen Design Conference was in the 20th century.

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Figure 3. Aspen Design Summit, Colorado

Figure 4. Design Indaba, South Africa

In response to the sudden urge to right the world's wrongs through design what I'll call the 'consensus solution approach' has arisen. Bruce Mau's Institute Without Boundaries (http://www.institutewithoutboundaries.com) is one of the organizations driving this model. Bruce Mau Design has ostensibly attempted to develop an analysis of the future of global design called *Massive Change*. This initiative has resulted in a traveling exhibition, a book, a radio program, a website, an Umbra product line, and about fifteen students with participation certificates. As an experiment in design education, it has been widely praised.

By 2030, we will need to build 96,000 homes a day to give people shelter.

Be part of the world house project

Figure 5. IWB World House Project

One of the hallmarks of the IwB project, the thing that makes it similar to the aforementioned design symposia, is its insistence on consensus as process. The Institute without Boundaries combines the collective resources of Bruce Mau Design and the George Brown Toronto City College. In other words, it is an educational undertaking. As such it admits a select number of students each year for a major project. The current endeavor, called the World House Project, hopes to create "…a sustaining, universal and healthy human dwelling."

IwB team in the studio

NEXT

Figure 6. The IWB iterative process

While *Massive Change* is a much longer-term undertaking than a symposium, and under most circumstances pictures of rosy young professionals focusing on solving the world's most tenacious problems would bring joy to my heart, in this case I fear education is being co-opted as a warm and fuzzy image in a rather opportunistic spectacle. For starters, neither *Massive Change* nor the current crop of design-by-consensus-conferences begin to take responsibility for world change on a global scale, a thing much more difficult to achieve than model or describe. Other than absorbing a participant's money, time, and ideas, neither the schools nor the symposia address the matter of taking responsibility on a personal level, either. Attending an international design conference, or spending a few weeks in close proximity to other sympathetically inclined individuals in a prepackaged milieu, makes for a grand vacation. One meets interesting people, sees new sights, spends money, has good feelings, and does a lot of talking over beer. These are all necessary human pastimes, easily and perhaps best pursued in one's own neighborhood on any given Thursday after work. Trouble is, in the context of a world-changing paradigm, they fail to accomplish much other than proposals. And this is what *Massive Change* has become, a proposal writ large.

It is important to exemplify models of social change to one's students as many educators do, but one ought to be careful just whose methods one espouses. *Massive Change*, for instance, has been embarked on the creation of media spectacle for over three years. Although it data dives as part of its praxis, its application of data is far from comprehensive. Light on text, heavy on images, relying ponderously on interviews for its substantive copy, the *Massive Change* book is more "designerish" than scientific and de-contextualizes compilations of data in a sweeping manner. Rather than objectifying the problems confronting us in a truly sober manner, *Massive Change* re-presents information like so much ad copy: breezy, rhetorical, and entertaining. As an exercise in advertising, *Massive Change* is an unqualified success. Creators of their own exhibit, the *Massive Change* participants are delimiting the terms of their own argument, but as an instance of iterative so-called "design science" *Massive Change* leaves a lot to be desired.

Of course, there are other examples of attempting to improve the world by understanding it through observation. In fact, this could be a casual description of the scientific method so much design research depends upon. Play, for example, is an excellent metaphor in which to frame human solutions to human problems. In the 60's R. Buckminster Fuller focused on training a generation of prognosticators through his World Game initiative, and IwB refers to Fuller repeatedly, from the second page of its website onward.

"The best way to predict the future
is to design it."

Buckminster Fuller

NEXT

Figure 7. Bucky Fuller on the IWB website

The Buckminster Fuller Institute (http://www.bfi.org/) is currently developing a pre-emptive design project through the United Nations. Entitled Design Science Lab, it is a summer institute held annually at the UN International School in New York. Dedicated to the "…anticipatory application of the principles of science to the creative design of solutions to the problems of society," Design Science Lab accepts people of all ages to participate. Each summer, for one week, participants converge on New York. For $1000, which seems to be the magic number with these symposia, they are provided a bed in a Columbia University dorm, daily breakfast and lunch, and exposure to a selection of experts who set them on the road of a search for the Holy Grail of the Millennium Development Goals.

The Design Science Lab, although of a lower profile than *Massive Change*, relies heavily upon its famous pedigree. While proposing down-to-earth solutions for common problems like water filtration, land redistribution, and food storage, it still functions as a top-down, UN-driven, western-imposed solution to the world's persistent problems. As a model of design education it does not move much beyond Fuller's approach to applying research to an iterative design process.

Figure 8. Design Science Lab at the U.N.

A final example of Utopian design thinking, set in concrete these past thirty years, is Paolo Soleri's *Arcosanti* project (http://www.arcosanti.org). Constructed in the Arizona desert near Prescott, built largely with private funds and volunteer labor, *Arcosanti* is an experiment in collective frugality. Developed using Soleri's notions of the interpenetration of architecture and ecology, Arcosanti has been designed to reflect Soleri's theories of how to live within the limits of nature's carrying capacity. By focusing on health, environment, and personal interaction, *Arcosanti* is an instance of how a village-size vision can evolve over time to assume city-size proportions. Unlike the preceding projects, Arcosanti is a reified instance of planning, a desert community working to realize the future in survival today. It is similar to IwB and DSL in its confidence in a technological future, however, as it works to develop energy self-sufficiency based upon a combination of solar and hydrogen power.

Figure 9. Arcosanti

II. I am proposing that there *is* another model of design education that might be considered. In this model, students are encouraged to take control of their world on a personal basis, rather than performing to the jig of our collective fantasies about a future design techno-utopia. Students need to be empowered to act personally to affect small improvements in their world. Rather than talking about massive anything, which always sounds sexy but is akin to some of the mass methods that have gotten us into our current mess, we should be helping students discover ways to effect incremental change, as nature does.

I am referring to a variety of approaches, all small, related, and in the civil sector. I have been criticized for these suggestions. The most damning observation is that the cross-disciplinary efforts of undertakings like *Massive Change* and design symposia equivalents are better able to see a larger picture, one that needs to be openly discussed. While I agree that humans need to take cross-disciplinary approaches to expanding our vision, I am categorically opposed to initiatives that emphasize a dependence upon expert short-term involvement while promoting high-profile, hypertrophied technological solutions, as *Massive Change* does.

When I speak of effective initiatives I am thinking about small local applications of design know-how. One project that comes to mind is Design for Development's (http://www.designfordevelopment.org) Malawi Taxi initiative. No stranger to South Africa, Canadian Niki Dun implemented a project as a real-life applied design initiative to aid Africans in deep rural areas.
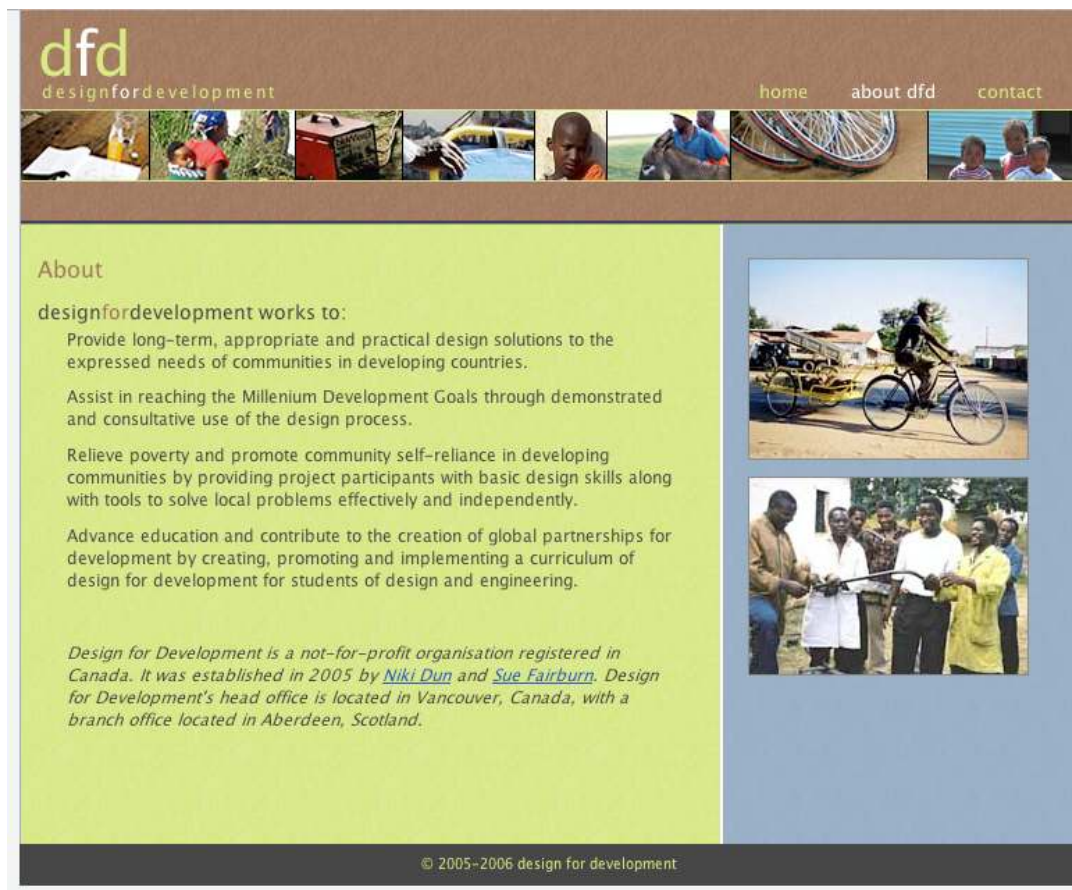

Figure 10. Design for Development

Ironically, this undertaking, conceived by an individual and realized through persistence, is one of the stories featured on the *Massive Change* website. As a tale of sheer gustiness it is a good example of small-as-beautiful. Unfortunately, it also falls into the "expert" category when co-opted by Mau and Co., even though the project originated as a student thesis.

Another instance of what I call "small kindnesses" would be architect Wes Janz' *onesmallproject* (http://www.onesmallproject.com). Currently existing as a website with a book in the planning stages, *onesmallproject* acts as an anthology and clearing house of small and individualized efforts to observe and assist humankind. Here everything from slums in Istanbul to abandoned housing in Flint, Michigan is subject to consideration.

Figure 10. onesmallproject

Of similar quality is the work of Architecture for Humanity (http://www.architectureforhumanity.org). Starting as a small non-profit in 1999, AfH expanded exponentially in the aftermath of the destructive storms of 2005. Originally, AfH sponsored online competitions for things like rural health clinics and soccer pitches. One such initiative, the *Siyathemba* project, has been taking place near here in Somkhele, KwaZulu Natal. While disaster drew attention to AfH's ability to respond rapidly in remote areas of the world I am happy to report that notoriety (they are recipients of an INDEX award and a TED prize) has not changed the organization, which is still overseen by its founding directors, Cameron Sinclair and Kate Stohr.

Architecture for Humanity

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Siyathemba

WINNER 2005 INDEX: AWARD

Siyathemba has been selected as one of five recipients to win a 2005 INDEX: Design for Life Award

Interested in supporting this project?
Make a donation.
Network for Good
OR
PayPal DONATE

(Be sure to mark "Siyathemba" as the designation.)

Siyathemba

Project Overview:
Description
Project Partners
Sponsors

Community Workshops:
June 2005

Design Competition:
Competition Overview
Competition Criteria
Site Information
Competition Jury

Launched in 2004, the "Siyathemba" competition challenged the world's designers to create the "perfect pitch," for the youth of Somkhele, South Africa, who are three times more likely to become HIV positive than youth in other parts of the world. (Siyathemba means "we hope" in IsiZulu.) In addition to serving as a gathering place for youth between the ages of 9-14, the facilty will double as a health outreach center. The pitch will also be home to the area's first girls' football league.

On World Aids Day, (December 1, 2004), the jury, which included, **Paola Antonelli**, curator of the Design Department at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, award-winning designer **Yves Behar** and *Survivor: Africa* winner and former pro-footballer **Ethan Zohn**, selected nine finalists and sixteen honorable mentions. Finalists included established architects as well as young emerging designers from across the globe. Austria, Chile, England, France, Ireland, Japan, Mexico, Peru, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States were all represented.

The finalists' schemes were displayed in schools and health centers throughout the area. Somkhele community members, including students, youth football players, nurses and teachers, then selected the scheme by Mr. Swee Hong Ng as the winning design. (The team of David Mathias and Tim Denis of Basildon, England placed second and the Swiss based team of Guy Lafranchi and Dietmar Panzenbock placed third.)

Figure 11. Architecture for Humanity's *"Siyathemba"* Project

Another success story is the Philadelphia design studio named Design for Social Impact (http://www.dfsi.org). In the North American environment, which is often saturated with do-good initiatives, DFSI stands out by virtue of its longevity. Founded by Ennis Carter in 1996, DFSI has survived for over a decade by delivering design to non-profits at below market cost. That they have accomplished this without sacrificing quality or filing for bankruptcy while growing to support a dozen employees is testament to the viability of the concept. And they have recently launched an online newsletter entitled *Griot*, describing their success in greater detail.

Figure 12. Design for Social Impact

As a final example of design altruism I'd like to speak about my personal experience operating Designers Without Borders (http://www.designerswithoutborders.org) in Uganda. Growing out of a Fulbright grant in 2000, DWB was first proposed as a student learning initiative. Design in Uganda is not as highly developed as it is in South Africa, and it seemed to my wife and I, that almost any assistance would be better than none.
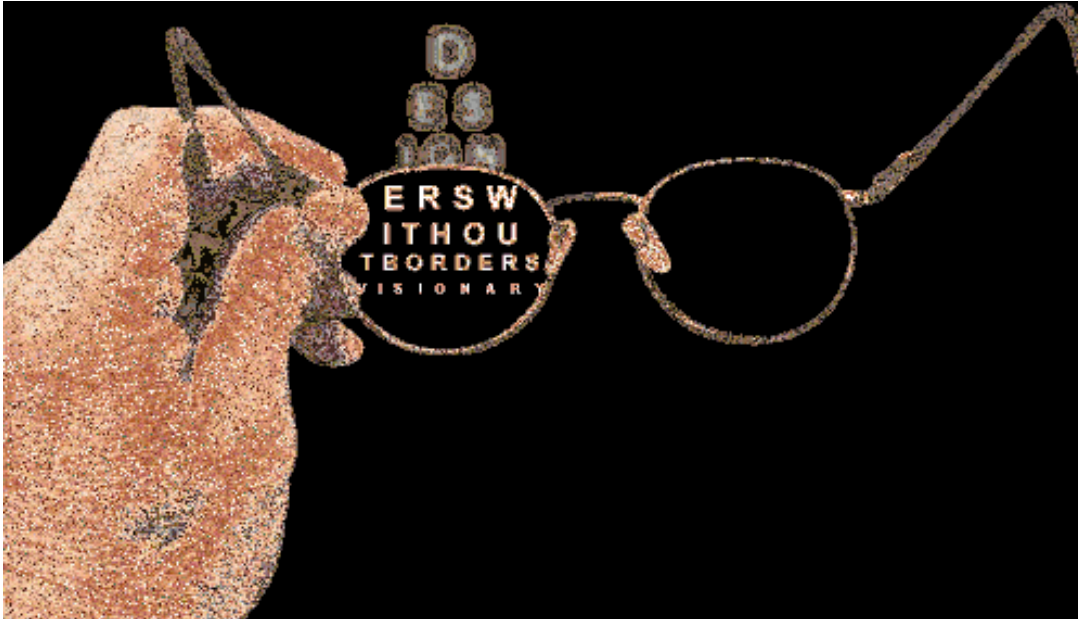

Figure 13. Designers Without Borders

From a lectureship at Makerere University in Kampala, we expanded to work with select secondary and vocational schools, as well as needy non-profit organizations. The premise was simple: if institutions could afford a basic commitment, say, a secure dry room for a computer, the cost of domain registry, or a small retainer toward the production costs of a brochure or website, we would provide training, design know how and, as money allowed, technology. We are back in Kampala, as a base of operations, expanding our Ugandan efforts with a new slate of partners. And as an adjunct to these efforts, we've piloted an online community entitled The Design-Altruism-Project (http://design-altruism-project.org) in an effort to expand discussion relating to alternative methods of design practice.
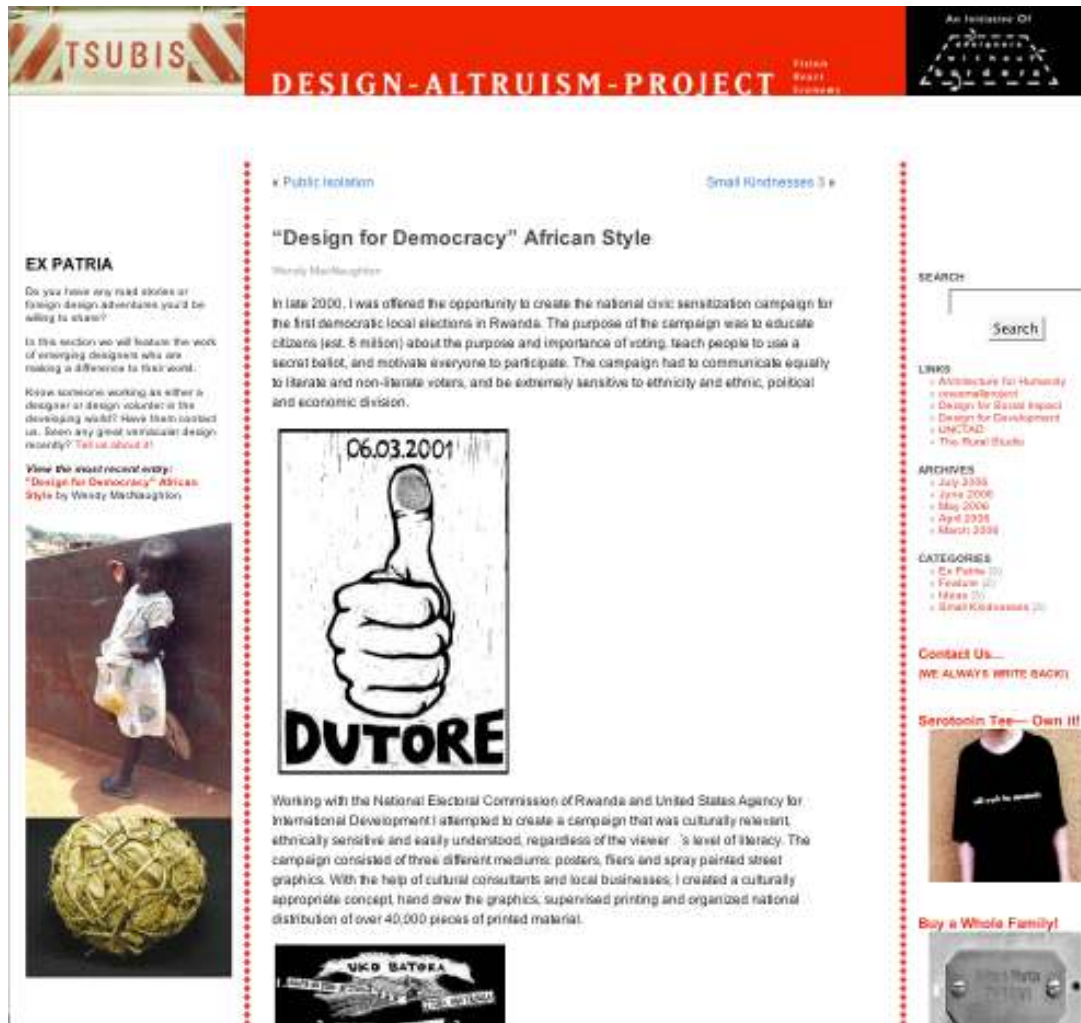
Figure 14. Design Altruism Project

Most of these projects are human-size in scale and prefer to think in localized terms, a thing Buckminster Fuller criticized. While village-size thinking appears less thorough than grand global schemes, it retains its idealism while being infinitely more realistic about outcomes. And since much of the world is unable to think in terms of Western ideals of techno-utopianism, it is good to work at village scale.

What these five projects hold in common is that they are small and fleet-footed. Each in its own way is able to respond to demands for change while remaining idealistic, unconventional, and practical. Each is dedicated to change, in the best sense of that word, and all remain open to suggestion and interrelation amid both online and in-person communities.

These organizations are distinct from large, centrally conceived projects like *Massive Change* or Design Science Lab, and, far from reinventing the wheel a hundred times over, actually benefit from the flexibility their size and structure permit. While no one organization can hope to take on all of the problems facing humanity, and the UN is testament to this, in our era of instant remote communication it is possible to be small, farsighted, and moderately effective at the same time.

III. I believe that socially- or altruistically-focused design practice holds great hope for the future, especially when applied to an educational setting. Any number of examples of using applied problems as classroom situations can be cited, as I'm sure most of you could attest. The Rural Studio (http://www.ruralstudio.com) at Auburn University in Alabama was founded by Dennis Ruth and Samuel Mockbee.

Since 1993 it has applied a design/build iterative process to dozens of projects for rural Alabamans. Typically, architecture students design for low budget builds by scrounging recyclable materials, here used tires encased in a concrete foundation, or car windscreens converted to skylights, making unique design statements that could not be afforded under other circumstances. Working both for and with unlikely clients, these Auburn University architecture students have constructed a series of lovely small postmodern additions to the small community architecture oeuvre. As an instance of bottom-up design education, a better example would be hard to cite. For his part in this undertaking Mockbee received a MacArthur Fellowship in 2000. Unfortunately, he died the next year, but the work he set in motion lives on.

Figure 15. The Rural Studio, Auburn University

An instance of applied work as a for-credit studio occurs at Western Michigan University. After two years of design studios third year students must enroll in the Design Center for two semesters. Here, in a built-in internship, they perform under the supervision of a faculty member developing solutions for campus and community clients on a regular basis.

Figure 16. Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo

In 2001 the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California launched its DesignMatters (http://www.artcenter.edu/accd/international/int_initiatives.jsp) program. Although it suffers a bit of what I'll call the Massive Change Syndrome in its breathless enthusiasm for "the public's increasing awareness of the power of design" Art Center is the first school to be designated a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) by the United Nations Department of Public Information.
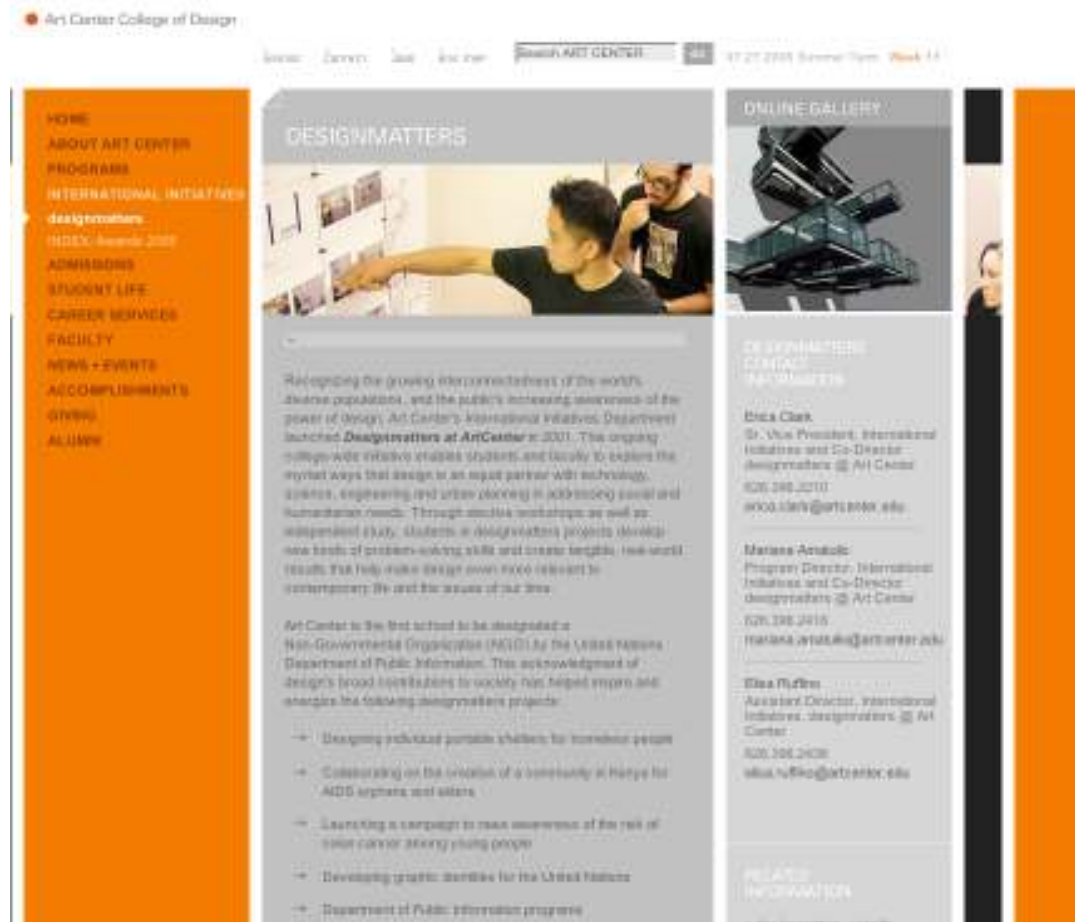

Figure 17. Art Center College, Pasadena

A final example comes to us from government. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's National Center for Environmental Research sponsors an annual student design contest entitled P3: People, Prosperity and the Planet (http://es.epa.gov/ncer/p3/). Devoted to sustainable solutions to persistent problems, P3 draws realistic proposals from college teams from around the U.S. and abroad. While appealing to engineering students, P3 has also fielded submissions in graphic design, medicine, computer science, and architecture. As a model of student involvement in life-size problem solving, it is an excellent example of a tax-driven initiative.

Figure 18. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency P³ Program

To my knowledge, few, if any, educational institutions practice design altruism in theory. These examples of pro bono design in practice and competition are as close as our system comes to making a social commitment in its curricula. At Central Michigan University we offer a course in Contemporary Design Issues, that includes units on community and social design, and there are doubtless numerous other examples one might find. But as an approach to design theory, concepts of design altruism are still in their infancy.

IV.   We have inherited a world out of balance in its human systems. Under capitalism we have been satisfied to accept enormous discrepancies in quality of life for the sake of the right to acquire wealth and status. The social problems that have ensued have been destructive and, in many instances, very tenacious. The consolidation of wealth, often based upon expropriation and environmental degradation, has been tolerated far too long. Re-striking a balance won't be easy. The assumption that those who have acquired great wealth, and I'm speaking here about individuals as well as multinational corporations, that these entities will return a due portion to the commonweal has been our operant assumption for too long.

In the meantime, while we have been assuming the world's problems will work themselves out, we ought better to be modeling a new paradigm for our students, one based upon a responsible model of social commitment grounded in individual action. With such a model it's just possible we could begin to affect change through design. Rather than depending upon the tax write-offs and occasional generosity of computer moguls and pop stars to solve our social problems, we each need to be assuming personal responsibility for the state of the world. This extends beyond the way we live, well into whether or not we participate in the economic status quo or collaborate in what has been called the "solidarity economy." Given the power of human imagination, it's conceivable we could outline a better world for our children's children than anything we've heretofore known.

Downgrading the perennial utopian ideal from a global megaplex to a common everyday outhouse may seem to fly in the face of human aspiration, but I have another image. It looks like William Blake on the beach, seeing the world in each tiny grain of sand. In this scenario Utopia exists not as the best of all possible worlds, but as a microcosm, an individual outcome of the communally applied intelligence of every human being on earth.

The future is not a time or a place, it's an abstract concept. It does not come into being through wishing, or even through anticipation, other than as the wish fulfillment of this very moment. If we accept the fact that the only possible way to plan for the future is to address the shortcomings of the immediate present, socially, environmentally, economically, and educationally, then our direction becomes clear. We can begin to design in earnest, in a way that's not fanciful, but comprehensively just. And we can get there individually, acting collectively, working for the greater good of all. It's really not too much to ask.