Part II

What is a Designer?

“To find fault is easy; to do better may be difficult.”

PLUTARCH
Chapter 3

The Nature of Designers

“Every human being is a designer.... Many also earn their living by design- in every field that warrants pause and careful consideration between the conceiving of an action, a fashioning of the means to carry it out, and an estimation of its effects.”

NORMAN POTTER

From, “What is a Designer: Education and Practice”

DEFINING INDUSTRIAL DESIGN

I had a hunch the word “designer” was not going to be easy to define. Just as with the term “success,” my preconceived notions of what a designer is, and what a designer is not, had to be readjusted. In my experience, it has been difficult to explain what I do for a living. To most people, the term “industrial designer” simply invites a natural response such as,

“Oh, so you design industries…or drill presses?”

“Well, not really. An industrial designer designs things like cars and consumer products and furniture.”

“You design cars?”
“No, I design baby strollers, bottle caps and flower boxes.”

“That’s interesting. I have to go. Will you please excuse me?”

There are many definitions of the word “designer.” Some are all encompassing and some are much more specific. Some people are of the opinion that “everyone is a designer” and that every human being that ever lived was a designer. Okay, I’ll buy that. I just want to know how to be a successful one, and I don’t have a lot of time. My thesis is due next week. The Industrial Designers Society of America’s definition of industrial design is accurate as it relates to my thesis, and is printed below in its entirety.

Industrial design is the professional service of creating and developing concepts and specifications that optimize the function, value and appearance of products and systems for the mutual benefit of both user and manufacturer. Industrial designers develop these concepts and specifications through collection, analysis and synthesis of data guided by the special requirements of the client or manufacturer. They are trained to prepare clear and concise recommendations through drawings, models and verbal descriptions. Industrial design services are often provided within the context of cooperative working relationships with other members of a development group. Typical groups include management, marketing, engineering and manufacturing specialists. The industrial designer expresses concepts that embody all relevant design criteria determined by the group.

The industrial designer’s unique contribution places emphasis on those aspects of the product or system that relate most directly to human characteristics, needs and interests. This contribution requires specialized understanding of visual, tactile, safety and convenience criteria, with concern for the user. Education and experience in anticipating psychological, physiological and sociological factors that
influence and are perceived by the user are essential industrial design resources.

**Industrial designers also maintain a practical concern for technical processes and requirements for manufacture; marketing opportunities and economic constraints; and distribution sales and servicing processes.** They work to ensure that design recommendations use materials and technology effectively, and comply with all legal and regulatory requirements.

In addition to supplying concepts for products and systems, industrial designers are often retained for consultation on a variety of problems that have to do with a client's image. Such assignments include product and organization identity systems, development of communication systems, interior space planning and exhibit design, advertising devices and packaging and other related services. Their expertise is sought in a wide variety of administrative arenas to assist in developing industrial standards, regulatory guidelines and quality control procedures to improve manufacturing operations and products.

Industrial designers, as professionals, are guided by their awareness of obligations to fulfill contractual responsibilities to clients, to protect the public safety and well-being, to respect the environment and to observe ethical business practice.

© 2002 Industrial Designers Society of America

---

**WHAT HAS CHANGED IN THE LAST THIRTY YEARS?**

RitaSue Siegel, Founder and President of RitaSue Siegel Resources, was Director of Placement at Pratt Institute when she completed her master’s thesis in Industrial Design in 1968. Her thesis included sending out surveys to 400 industrial designers who graduated from Pratt between 1950 and 1960. Her thirteen-page questionnaire was “an attempt to define the broad scale and function of [the industrial design] profession.” In her questionnaire, she explains, “I am interested in your feelings about the role of your
profession in our economic society as well as learning about factors that influenced your career choice and the attainment of your professional goals.” Her thesis has been a benchmark for my research. I asked her what had changed in the field in the past thirty years. “Everything and nothing,” she said.

Certainly, earnings have increased since that time. The US Department of Labor reports that in 1965 the average starting salary for college graduates was $6,611. Today, a designer with one to two years of experience makes $36,500. In addition, the number of designers has increased considerably, with 50,000 employed today as compared to only 10,000 in 1965. The United States Department of Labor’s website is a good source for information about the field, listing statistics such as employment numbers, job outlook and earnings.

Perhaps the most significant change is a greater respect for industrial designers by other design professions. Ms. Siegel’s survey revealed that one of the most important reasons for designers’ dissatisfaction in their jobs were “struggles competing with engineers for stature.” Ms. Siegel noted that at that time, architects and engineers were better known and more respected than industrial designers were. Today however, industrial designers are revered for their creative abilities and insight on human aspects of design, and are on equal footing with their counterparts. She noted that BusinessWeek magazine frequently stresses the importance of design in today’s products- something that was rarely mentioned thirty years ago.
The US department of Labor had this to say concerning the outlook for industrial design through the year 2010:

“Increased demand for industrial designers will stem from the continued emphasis on product quality and safety; the demand for new products that are easy and comfortable to use; the development of high-technology products in medicine, transportation, and other fields; and growing global competition among businesses.”

We have come a long way in the last few decades, proving our worth in today’s society. We need no longer hang our heads in shame and can walk proudly to our work cubicles without hearing the snickers of co-workers. Best of all, the term “industrial design” is practically a household name. However, with stature comes responsibility. Norman Potter notes:

“…a designer works through and for other people, and is concerned primarily with their problems rather than his own. In this respect, he can be regarded as rather like a doctor, with a responsibility for accurate diagnosis (problem analysis) and relevant prescription (design recommendations).”

In this quote, Mr. Potter brings up an important and intriguing challenge of being a designer: To analyze problems and make recommendations on how to solve them. This requires two types of thinking on the part of the designer. Analyzing problems, (or realizing problems exist in the first place) requires critical, or negative thinking. Making recommendations requires positive thinking. The following chapter explores the impact that these conflicting energies have on how we view the world, and how we make an impact through our work.
Chapter 4

Inside the Mind of the Designer

“Gee, there’s something wrong with just about everything, isn’t there Dad?”

BEAVER CLEAVER

“Just about, Beav.”

WARD CLEAVER

OUR CRITICAL INSTINCT

In order to be a successful designer, one must have talent. This is good news. I have a talent for finding something wrong with everything. Little things can be such an annoyance to me. Doors that swing in the wrong direction, light switches placed exactly where they shouldn’t be, and a slew of other things I notice on a daily basis. I wonder if everyone notices these things, or if I am just hypersensitive and crotchety.

When I moved into my apartment, I noticed my bathroom sink was draining slowly. This did not surprise me since there wasn’t a strainer in the drain opening. Upon fishing with a coat hanger in the pipes under the floor, I pulled out eight toothpaste caps, one by one. I wondered how many previous tenants with toothpaste dribbling down their chins, watched as their caps disappeared down the drain, and never bothered to put a strainer over the hole so it would not happen again? (Answer: Conceivably, just one.)
I have many more stories like this, and I am sure you have stories of your own where a simple solution to a problem is readily available, yet no one does anything to solve it. Like me, you probably see “opportunities for improvement” in more places than you care to. The difference between designers and cranky, old farts who’s life’s ambition is to complain about everything, is that designers are compelled to search for a solution and have confidence in their abilities to find one. **This is the challenge of the designer: to turn critical, negative thinking into positive, “anything is possible” thinking, which is essential to finding a solution and implementing it successfully.**

Switching from negative to positive thinking may be essential for being a good designer—even a great designer. After all, we get brownie points for finding fault with competitor’s products when attempting to take away their market share, and then derive a better solution for our own company’s product. But this talent can also make for a miserable designer if it is left to run wild and takes over other areas of one’s life. It is therefore important for a designer to be aware of the tendency to be critical, and to know how to regulate it and use it appropriately.

We all strive to be happy. Some say this is our purpose in life, and in order to be happy we must appreciate what we have instead of continually striving for something we don’t have. Finding fault with everything (or everyone) around us seems to be in direct opposition to obtaining what we really want in life: Happiness. **Raymond Loewy,** the highly respected and successful designer, is credited with saying, “Never leave well enough alone.” I think a prudent addendum to that might be, “…unless you’re referring to your spouse.” Knowing
when and under what circumstances to apply Loewy’s adage is of utmost importance when one is tempted to pick on people instead of things.

**CAN WE EVER BE SATISFIED?**

Many successful design firms pride themselves on the work they do for their clients. I read excerpts of a television program about Ziba Design, a firm that won an unprecedented number of awards for product designs in one year. The show’s host, Hattie Bryant, interviewed Ziba founder Sohrab Vossoughi and asked how they achieved this great feat:

"Design is a continuum. It never ends; once you do something, you know it can be done better. We are never satisfied with what we design. If we ever become satisfied in what we do then that’s the end of us.”

The comments from those designers are indeed inspiring, but it sounds like an obsession to me—never to be satisfied with what you have done. Bruce Hannah shared his philosophy he had when he started his career. It is refreshingly simple—I can see it printed on the back of a shampoo bottle:

“Sell a chair to Knoll. Then retire.”

Still, I am inclined to add one more step:

“Repeat, as necessary.”
I asked a number of designers if they are ever completely satisfied with their work.

Henry Yoo, Adjunct Assistant Professor at Pratt, and Principal of Hyrez Studio and The Yooniverse, sees a more comprehensive view of design in the world, saying:

“I find that most man-made things are usually boring, limiting, lifeless and eventually outdated. Even the most famous and respected works of scientists, inventors and “designers” are at some point outdone, overturned, or even disproved.”

He explained that in order to understand and appreciate any man-made object, you must first supply a man-made framework: How much did it cost and how much time was given to a solution? Then he asks, somewhat rhetorically:

“Why can’t we be more direct and honest when looking at the efforts by man? So much of the short-lived paraphernalia produced by mankind which end up in the landfills...had been praised as great products mere months before, whereas the amazing rules of the universe which govern the galaxies and the stars, the ever-occurring laws of nature, the sources and wonders of life of the humans, animals, plants, and the marvels of the micro-organic world are deemed as being of natural (accidental) existences.”

I was in way over my head. I had already thought about the “short-lived products that end up in a landfill” part on my own; that was easy. However, the part about the “ever-occurring laws of nature” was something I had not considered. I suspected he really didn’t know the answer and was just trying to avoid my question. But he continued:
“Even the best of the efforts…is eventually outdated and outdone…. Man-made efforts are bound by the limitations of mankind being ruled by the powers of the universe. [Design] is satisfying because the reason I am able to move around and think is because the world is working and things are going the way they should be going. The important thing is to recognize that none of it has anything to do with the “object” you end up with. It was actually determined to be dissatisfactory, and at the same time, because you were able to move and make effort, it is satisfactory.”

I almost dismissed what he was saying as being “too far out there.” I had been taking a much more practical approach, trying to narrow things down and stay focused. However, I could not dismiss his comments or pretend I did not hear them. They were almost incomprehensible at first, but once I understood them I experienced a paradigm shift—a new way of seeing design related to the world I had not previously considered.

THE STUDENT’S PERSPECTIVE

I was interested in seeing if there was a difference in attitude between students and design professionals in the way they approach their work. A student is in school to learn, which is not to imply that professionals do not learn from their experiences. It is just that a screw-up means someone is going to pay for it, and not, “Oh, I learned so much through this process by doing it wrong. Let’s do business again sometime.” Students are given an opportunity to push the limits, having the luxury of being in a protective environment. Knowing there is no real punishment for trying something that may fail opens up many more possibilities in the creative process.
I spoke with Alina Preciado, an industrial design student who has always impressed me with her attitude about design, learning, and life in general. Nothing seems to stop her from trying something new. It seems as though she has no fear of failure. I asked her if she is ever disappointed in the outcome of her efforts. She said,

“Every project I’ve done, the more I look at it I can think of ways to criticize it. But once I make something I generally feel pretty good. I think if you keep going with anything it just gets better so I don’t look at anything as being final. And maybe that’s why I’m not disappointed, because this is endless.”

She then told me about Joseph Maruska, a painter and friend of hers who was asked if he ever becomes upset when he sells a painting. To put your heart and soul into something only to give it away must be difficult. He responded, “No, not at all. I don’t let myself become attached to something I’ve created. I could burn it right now and it would not bother me. I underestimate myself if I could not destroy it because that stops me from making something greater. My abilities are stunted if I think this is the greatest thing I will ever make.”

This sounded like the same thing Ziba Design, Henry and Alina were saying. Each of these people is dealing with the same reality and the same laws of nature that dictate to us that nothing man-made is ever perfect, yet they all see it in a profoundly positive way. There was no negativity in it at all.
Creativity and the Design Process

“This creative man, who in his own selfish affairs is a coward to the backbone, will fight for an idea like a hero.”

BERNARD SHAW

THE COURAGE TO BE CREATIVE

Carl Rogers once said, “The very essence of the creative is its novelty, and hence we have no standard by which to judge it.” If something is truly new and not just a revision of something already in existence, it stands to reason that others will be unable to relate to it. It is impossible to hear a sound, look at a picture, or process words, without relating it to something you have heard, seen or thought before. For example, when we hear a song for the first time, we immediately say to ourselves, “This sounds like…” We never say simply, “This sounds,” and leave it at that.

Truly innovative people are continually at odds with those ideas and conventions that surround them. It takes a strong, convicted personality to remain in this state of tension for any period of time. If this tension is to be relieved, one of two things usually happens: Either the norm acknowledges and assimilates the new idea, or the innovative thinker ceases to believe in himself and falls
back in line with the norm. There is after all, a basic human need to be understood by our fellow human beings (as well as a fear of being seen as a lunatic amongst our peers). This does not mean to suggest there has never been an artist who remained in tension with the norm for his entire life, only to be embraced posthumously.

Many forward thinking designers who lack confidence fall back in line if they do not receive immediate acceptance of their ideas. This is often seen among design students who seek constant approval from their professors. However, if the idea is accepted by the masses, the norm advances (relative term) and the tension disappears. The forward thinking designer then dares to step out from the norm again. Those who have been successful in the past, gain more confidence to continue. In this way, **success breeds more success**. There is nothing like “riding the wave” of success. However, the term “true innovation” to some might be deemed “superficial hype” to others. Regardless, I believe this “lead and eventually follow” phenomenon ultimately enables us to expand our collective knowledge of the universe, allows us to grow, and is one reason we are driven to create. In his book entitled, “Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention,” Mihaly Csikskentmihalyi defines creativity:
“Creativity is any act, idea or product that changes an existing domain, or that transforms an existing domain into a new one. And the definition of a creative person is: someone whose thoughts or actions change a domain, or establish a new domain. It is important to remember…that a domain cannot be changed without the…consent of a field responsible for it.”

I notice that I often lose the desire to be creative (but never to create). It is a problem child for me—very temperamental. When I push it too hard, it won’t budge. I leave it alone and it beckons me. Save it for later and I can’t remember where I put it. It is tempting to put it on a leash, but it can’t be harnessed. Sometimes I would rather be a bricklayer instead of a designer. Building something is creating and it gives a sense of accomplishment, but the word “creating” and the word “creativity” are miles apart. We are talking about coming up with earth shattering ideas; going where no designer has gone before. **The stuff people are remembered for long after they are gone.**

**HUMOR AND CREATIVITY**

There are many books on creativity. I have tried to read some of them but have not been successful. I wonder how someone can take such a rewarding and enjoyable aspect of being human and make it into something so scientific and boring. In Edward De Bono’s book “Serious Creativity,” he talks about brain patterns and lateral thinking and makes a comparison to humor. (Thank God it was in the first twenty pages) He states that humor follows the same brain patterns as creative, lateral thinking. Exercising these parts of the brain helps to think more creatively. **Now that’s my kind of exercise.**
CREATIVITY AND THE REAL WORLD

There is no denying that designers enjoy being creative—thinking of new ideas and presenting them to management or to a client. In RitaSue Siegel’s thesis, respondents listed “creative problem solving” as being one of the most enjoyable aspects of their job. Nevertheless, it can be difficult getting our ideas accepted, especially if they are truly “new.” I am reminded of the scene in the movie “A Few Good Men,” where Jack Nicholson’s character becomes enraged on the witness stand and finally lashes out, “You want the truth? You can’t handle the truth!” The world can only handle so much “new” at one time. They ask for it, but what is truly “new” is often too much for people to accept. Eventually, what is new becomes familiar and is then easier to adopt.

RitaSue Siegel told me about the designers of the Ford Taurus who came up with the repeated ellipse design on the dashboard. Knowing they would face management opposition, they showed their concepts repeatedly, slowly breaking them in over time. Eventually, their ideas became familiar enough to be accepted. This is a good example of a paradox of design: Being asked to come up with something “new” by someone who requires that it be familiar (not new) in order to accept it.

I was interested in knowing how designers deal with their creativity in the working world. I asked designers if they have an innate desire to create. One responded enthusiastically, “Yes, and I also have an appreciation for what other people create.” Another said, “I receive great satisfaction out of two things coming together and creating something better. I feel a sense of control over the world and myself. I want to answer the question, "Why?"
I asked one designer if there were periods when he loses the desire:

“My goals as a designer have been very consistent. If I am going through a period in which the professional work is less interesting, I increase the creativity outside of the office. I am now working very seriously on two projects unrelated to the office. I have also intermittently maintained a hand in sculpting, which is yet another love of mine.”

Could it be that when we do not feel particularly creative, it is a sign that we are not very interested in what we are doing? There are times though, when we are truly engrossed in our work and creativity still “creates” more problems for us.

“In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.”

ALBERT EINSTEIN

THE DESIGN PROCESS

“Do you REALLY enjoy the process?” The question was posed to me by Lucia De Respinis who reviewed my thesis proposal—which was in essence, four pages of my complaining about how unsatisfied I was in the design profession. I was almost offended that she would ask me such a thing. “Do I enjoy the process? Of course, I enjoy the process! Every agonizing, exasperating and frustrating minute of it. I love the process!” I was not being completely honest with myself. Her question has haunted me for a year now, and I am still not sure of the answer. There are times when the process is anything but enjoyable. When I put tremendous pressure on myself to come up with that “perfect” answer, to put that “WOW” in the idea. When I feel like the
most uncreative person who ever thought had any talent. When everyone around me is coming up with all this fantastic stuff (while smiling, no less) and my ideas seem stupid.

Yet, there are other times when it is quite rewarding. It is important to note that we often fail to appreciate anything that comes easily to us. “It’s hard to play the guitar. That’s why it’s gratifying,” says Allan Chochinov, Adjunct Assistant Professor at Pratt. It is human nature to value what we must work at to attain. Some good ideas come to us effortlessly; some don’t. Great ideas hardly ever do. It is inevitable that at some point in a project or career, we encounter a problem where an effective solution is not apparent. Most design projects take me through this dark period when the gun is to my head and time is slipping away. Sometimes you work through it and you come up with a successful solution. When that happens, design is like a drug. It keeps you coming back for more of that euphoric feeling.

**THE PROCESS: STEP BY STEP**

To find an answer to Ms. De Respinis’ probing question, I chose a project I had recently completed and listed all the phases of the design process. I then rated my levels of enjoyment, frustration, and difficulty on a scale from 1 to 10 for each of the phases. I chose a project recently completed from a color class. We were asked to select a master’s painting and do a color histogram. We then analyzed the colors in the painting and suggested a soft-goods product that might incorporate those colors. Next, design the product and apply colors in appropriate combinations and proportions to reflect the overall feeling of the painting.
The beginning of the process was very enjoyable. Searching for paintings that appealed to me was easy and moderately enjoyable. (Difficulty and frustration rated a mere 1, enjoyment rated a 4) I chose a Picasso entitled, “Large Still Life with Pedestal Table.” (One thing to note: we were simply told to pick a painting we liked and to do a color analysis of it. We were not told what we were supposed to do with this information.) The next phase was to decide what product could be made using these colors. This part of the process was only slightly more difficult than the last phase (2), but the enjoyment was increased (7) as I started putting my problem solving skills to work. This painting said “beach bag” to me almost immediately. The next phase was to design the bag, leaving color application until later. The levels of difficulty, frustration and enjoyment did not change from the previous phase. I enjoyed the sketching, model making, and idea generating that was involved.

Then it was time to look for materials to make the bag. Difficulty went up (to a 4), and so did my frustration (3) as I went from fabric store to fabric store, looking for the right materials that would evoke the same spirit as the painting. Exact color matches were essential to the success of this project. Enjoyment went down slightly (5). This phase of the process was the turning point for me. I became increasingly frustrated as I looked for materials that did not seem to exist. I didn’t think it was going to take this long or be this difficult. The excitement of going into Manhattan’s fabric district turned into a nightmare of sorts. Difficulty and frustration skyrocketed (8 and 10), while enjoyment plummeted (1). But this downward spiral had a long way to go before it hit bottom.
At the same time I looked for materials to make the bag, I was still designing the bag—trying to come up with just the right way to apply the colors, assuming I could ever find them. I tried different shapes and styles and tried using piping, pockets and flaps, while at the same time attempting to utilize a whole slew of newly acquired color terms too numerous to mention in this sentence.

Things only got worse when I tried my hand at sewing. At first, I thought sewing would be fun, but after a few hours at the sewing machine I realized I needed to find another way to put this stupid bag together. At this point, frustration and difficulty (both 10) were far ahead of enjoyment (-1).

**Then something happened** I could not explain. Just sixteen hours before the project was due, I found all the materials I needed at a local fabric store, and came up with what I considered to be a good solution for applying the colors appropriately. Frustration dropped significantly (4) at the same time my enjoyment increased slightly (2). Now all I have to do is stay up all night making it. Difficulty (9). I finished the bag 15 minutes before class, and knew I had solved the problem. It didn’t matter if no one else liked it. What mattered was that I liked it. Could I have done better? Sure. I see things that are wrong with it, but when I consider what I went through to get it done to my satisfaction, I am not about to complain (aloud).
How did I feel when it was over? “What difficulty? What frustration? I don’t remember any of that. Enjoyment? I would give it a resounding 9.5. When can we do this again?”

Of course, my long winded explanation is nothing new to any designer, scientist, philosopher or any other creative person who has made an effort to go beyond what they think is possible. There is a part of the process that we all go through that really sucks. Do we enjoy that part? Hardly. How do we get through the rough spots? How do we find ways to smooth them out? Are those dark periods what drive us to a new level of thinking where we begin to see things in a different light? If this were the case, why would we want to change anything about the process? In his “Incomplete Manifesto for Growth,” Bruce Mau urges us to welcome this stage of the process:

“Stay up late. Strange things happen when you’ve gone too far, been up too long, worked too hard, and you’re separated from the rest of the world.”

I asked a number of designers if they enjoyed the process, and if there were any stages of the process that were difficult and frustrating. Responses varied from designer to designer. One young designer, Peter Valois of Touch Design Studios, noted:

 “[The process] is extremely difficult. If the process is easy, you are probably making easy choices that are not always the right choices. The process as a whole is great fun. There is no particular part of the process that I dislike, but there are always very frustrating (but very necessary) times when you run into walls. But the thrill of finding a way around them always outweighs the frustration.”
I asked Mario Turchi of Ion Design LLC what he finds difficult about the process. The hardest part of designing he says, “is knowing what IT should be.” He then explained his way of getting around the problem: he looks at what has been done before, and takes note of what he likes and what he dislikes. He then forms an opinion that builds on itself. His response gave me the impression that the process was not very frustrating for him. Perhaps this was because he knew exactly what part of the process was difficult for him, and found ways to get through it. Alina shed more light on the subject:

“I believe that you come to a point when you can control the whole process in a much more efficient way because you get to know yourself. Because you know that you struggle in this area, you know the way your mind gets through an entire process.”

The process may never be easy, but it can be more enjoyable if one has an awareness of past struggles, and is prepared for what lies ahead. Having faith in your abilities to pull through anticipated difficult periods not only makes the process more enjoyable but leads to a higher degree of problem solving.

And finally, a quote from author Edward M. Hallowell M.D.,

“If you think of a moment of frustration as a signal to try a different approach, rather than as a reason to quit, then you might...come back with...a willingness to try again, this time in a different way. We have a choice, always a choice, as to how to deal with a problem.”
Designers face a multitude of frustrations on a daily basis, as does anyone who is alive and gainfully employed. We are not the only professionals who feel unappreciated at times. I was interested in knowing how other designers get past the frustrations of the working environment and find meaning and fulfillment in their work. Ms. Siegel’s 1968 survey was of particular interest to me, as it exposed the frustrations of designers when the profession was relatively unknown. As I suspected, some designers were fulfilled, while others were not entirely happy in their positions. The following statement was from a design consultant:

“Ambition is limited because consultancy designers are always playing with the money of others (usually large sums). He creates, but doesn’t own. Therefore, he cannot totally control what is created. Secondly, he is in a mass-market field and is subject to mass tastes, which are usually dated. The result is always a compromise.”

Another designer noted, “Frustrations dull ambitions, while still paying well,” while another claimed, “Low esteem in which the designer is held by the business community has made my expectation of personal success depend less on the quality of my
professional work, than on my salesmanship.” Other designers were much more positive. Designers working for research and development companies in particular felt that their ambitions were extended. Said one designer, “I discovered that everyone was approximately as ignorant as I was and therefore all sorts of opportunities opened up.”

Ms. Siegel’s survey uncovered reasons for designers’ satisfaction levels in the field, including: recognition from employer, good salary, freedom to make decisions, and feeling appreciated and respected. Reasons for being unsatisfied included: competing with engineers for stature, politics, little praise, no client contact, and frustrations in convincing the client of their worth. The most satisfying job duties were seeing ideas become reality, solving problems, and creative aspects. The least satisfying duties were administrative chores, long boring departmental meetings, arguing with engineers, and compromising good design due to the client. One respondent (a design professor) wrote, “Teaching dullards, oafs, spoiled brats and know-it-alls.”

I found it interesting that frustration has long been a part of the designer’s profession. I asked designers to talk about their own frustrations to see if anything had changed in the last thirty years. Their stories echoed those of past designers:

“When the client’s definition of design is the same as mine, it is immensely satisfying...to work with them. When I find that the client’s definition...is entirely different from mine, oftentimes I do not even make it known that our definitions differ, as it is nearly impossible to come to an agreement in such situations, and it will only make things worse thereafter if surfaced. I guess I am working mostly for money in such cases...”
“...having to deal with sales people. When people don’t look at things objectively. Not being respected for all of your skills. The preconceived idea of what a designer is in some people’s minds.”

“Power politics within firms detracts from the work. There are many other things, but design is the reason why I put up with these things.”

“The management of projects and production. I feel this takes up ninety percent of my time, and my creativity suffers as a result.”

No one mentioned the occasional frustration of failing to see products come to fruition, so I asked specifically about this issue.

“I am less frustrated now than earlier in my career. I can still feel good about solving the problem. You have to get your own satisfaction.”

“Even if an idea is not implemented, there are always ideas that live on and can be applied to future projects.”

“I have been successful at completing most projects...This is in part due to tenacity, part to luck, and part to reading the client and the situation in order to insure a successful project. There is another characteristic, which is helpful. I quickly forget about the past and move on to the next opportunity.”

One designer I spoke with experienced a great deal of frustration with his boss, so he used that as incentive to start his own company. He was then able to take control of another problem—when production does not do the product justice, or when the client skimps on manufacturing aspects. To counteract this, he handles everything from concept to engineering details to production follow-through. This gives him more control over the success of his ideas. He can also offer more services to the customer.
I recently started working for a design firm as an intern. It is the first design position I have held since quitting my job two years ago to pursue my master's degree. By the end of my first day on the job, I was reminded of how specialized the working environment is. When you work in an office (this one, at least) you use only a few of the skills you learned in school. You might become an expert at one or two things at your job, but at the expense of other abilities that are quickly forgotten. My experience of going from school to work, then back to school, and now preparing to go back to work full-time, has made me realize the enormous differences between the academic world and the working world. Student internships and co-op programs can help ease the transition from school to work, and provide valuable experience, but frustration and disappointment may occur when a recent graduate begins a career as a designer. In his book, “What is a Designer: Education and Practice,” Norman Potter states:

“Design students are faced with change from designing something that looks good and works, to designing something that makes money and is manufacturable. Disappointment can be the result unless the person is able to adjust his altruistic attitudes. Those whose strength is too rooted in these attitudes can be severely disappointed and frustrated with the working environment and his career.”

One of the interesting aspects of returning to school is that although my classmates have less experience than I do, they have much more confidence. I am envious when I
see those with little or no experience having such a positive outlook, which is essential for success. However, I prefer to think that I have a more realistic attitude (albeit slightly negative) that only experience can offer. I picked up the latest ID magazine to find an article entitled, “Making the Grade,” by Jenny Wohlfarth. She asked seven high-profile industrial design professionals to share their opinions of modern design education. As were most of those interviewed, Brian Matt was critical of schools today:

“Our students from ID programs are being cranked out by the thousands, and they aren’t prepared to operate successfully within the framework of a contemporary business environment. Current curriculums cloud their vision with artsy idealism that’s only useful in limited industries and offshoot disciplines.”

I interviewed a recent graduate who echoed his sentiments:

“[The classroom] is a sheltered environment where you become convinced that the world of design is all about crazy ideas and the quest for the new and unique, and that this is what you do in your fancy design job when you graduate. 99% of design is centered around the tastes of middle America. [Design school] teaches you to design for Moss, not Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart is the real world.”

In her survey, Ms. Siegel asked designers if their definition of industrial design had changed since they left school. The following responses were telling:

“My definition [of industrial design] hasn’t changed, but making it work is more difficult than I first imagined.”
“Yes, I still feel that it’s [industrial design] designing things to be mass produced at a profit, but I no longer believe that they have to be good design as I once did. Junk sells very well.”

Ms. Siegel asked designers what influenced them the most when they were students. One respondent said his design “idol” was “an unknown designer who lectured to our Pratt class on the actual hard knocks of professional life.” A recent graduate told me:

“[Design school] prepared me to be a designer, but did not prepare me for a design career. I learned little to nothing about how to be a freelancer, an entrepreneur, planning a career path—none of the practical stuff. I think an organized, informative class that teaches specific business practices for designers would be a great idea.”

Since there are so many facets to being a designer and so few semesters in graduate school, it is nearly impossible to become proficient in all the necessary skills. Many students will excel in one skill—and spend their careers avoiding the others. Many graduates may be disappointed when they find a job, and realize it may be years before they see the fruits of their labor. What then, should recent graduates expect when starting their career? What dues must be paid before making an impact in the field and on the lives of others? The following sections provide some valuable insights from professional designers who have found their own paths to success and fulfillment—in spite of the adversities they have faced.