Changing the change

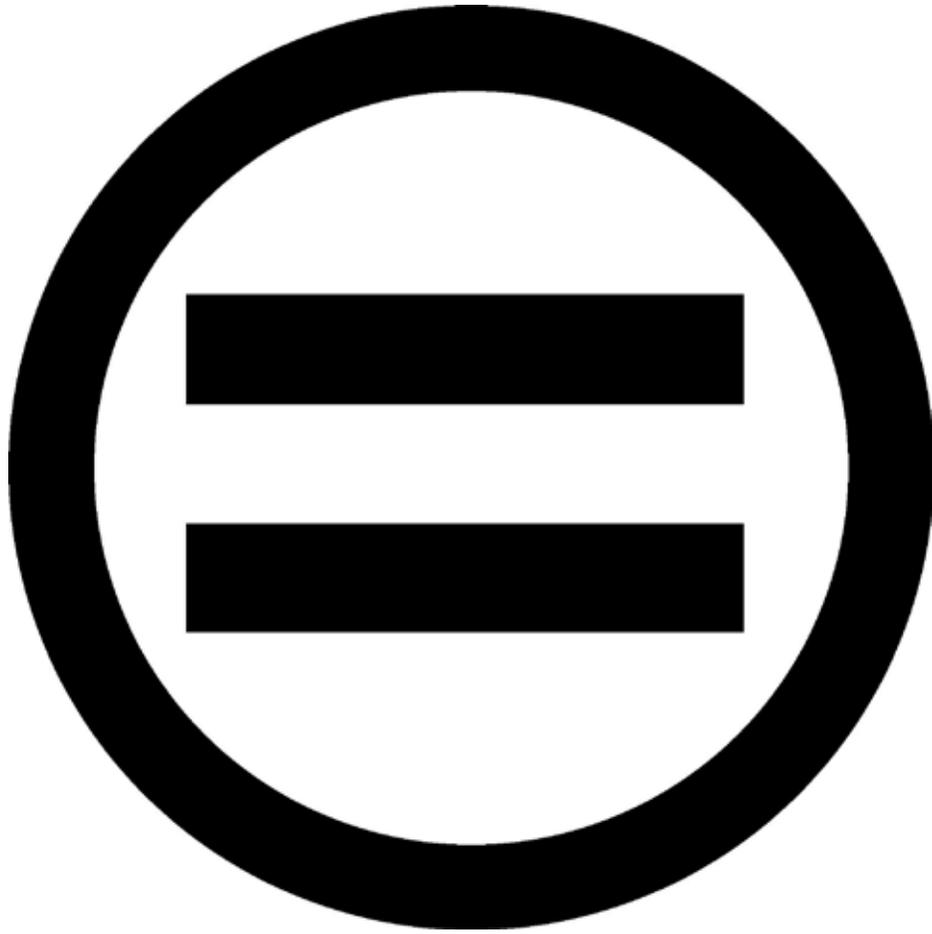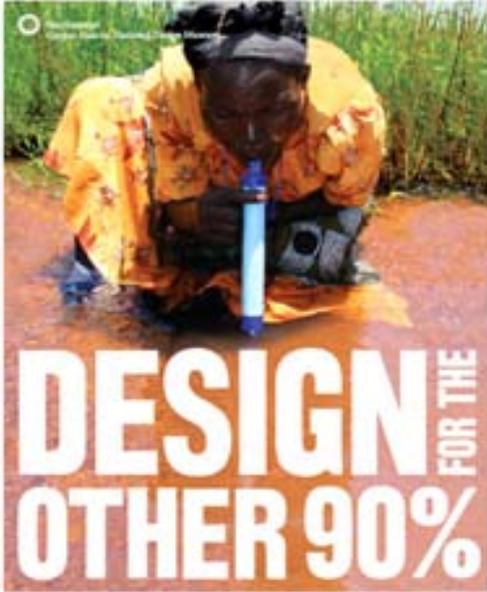**DESIGN** VISIONS PROPOSALS AND TOOLS

What if the World Were A More Equitable Place?
[Would Any of Us (Designers) Be Necessary?]

David Stairs

I'm trying to envision a world where technology is not merely ubiquitous, but affordable.

Why Design Won't Save the World

Design for the Other 90%, catalog cover. Photograph by Vestergaard Frandsen; design by Tsang Seymour Design.

The well-documented efforts of other professions to assist impoverished nations is already a part of the legend and legacy of global altruism, but designers often seem woefully behind the times. After ten months in Africa, I recently visited the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum to see *Design for the Other 90%*. Here, I thought, was an exhibition I could enthusiastically embrace. Unfortunately, I soon learned the culture shock I experience every time I return to America was in no way diminished by an exhibition supposedly sympathetic to the plight of billions of the world's poorest people.

DESIGN**OBSERVER**

Writings on Design and Culture

Design for the Other 90% reviewed on *Design Observer*[1]

I'm told that such a place exists, that designers are applying their abilities to make it real, but I'm still skeptical.

1. Stairs, David. 2007. Why Design Won't save thew World. Design Observer. http://www.designobserver.com/archives/027474. html (posted August 20th, 2007)

I'm searching for a world where access to communication is not based upon social caste.

No More Utopias:
Modelling Incremental Change in Design Practice and Pedagogy

David Stairs
Founder, Designers Without Borders
Coordinator, Graphic Design, Central Michigan University
109 W. Locust St.
Mt. Pleasant, MI 48858
USA
989-774-3064 phone
989-774-2278 fax
stair1dc@cmich.edu

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, 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 3,000,000,000. 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.

No More Utopias 2006[2]

Where healthful futures for all the world's people are not based upon massive changes, but personal, incremental, community-oriented steps.

2. Stairs, David. 2006. No More Utopias. Paper presented at the biannual meeting of the Design Education Forum South Africa (DEFSA), September 21-22, 2006, in Port Elizabeth, South Africa.
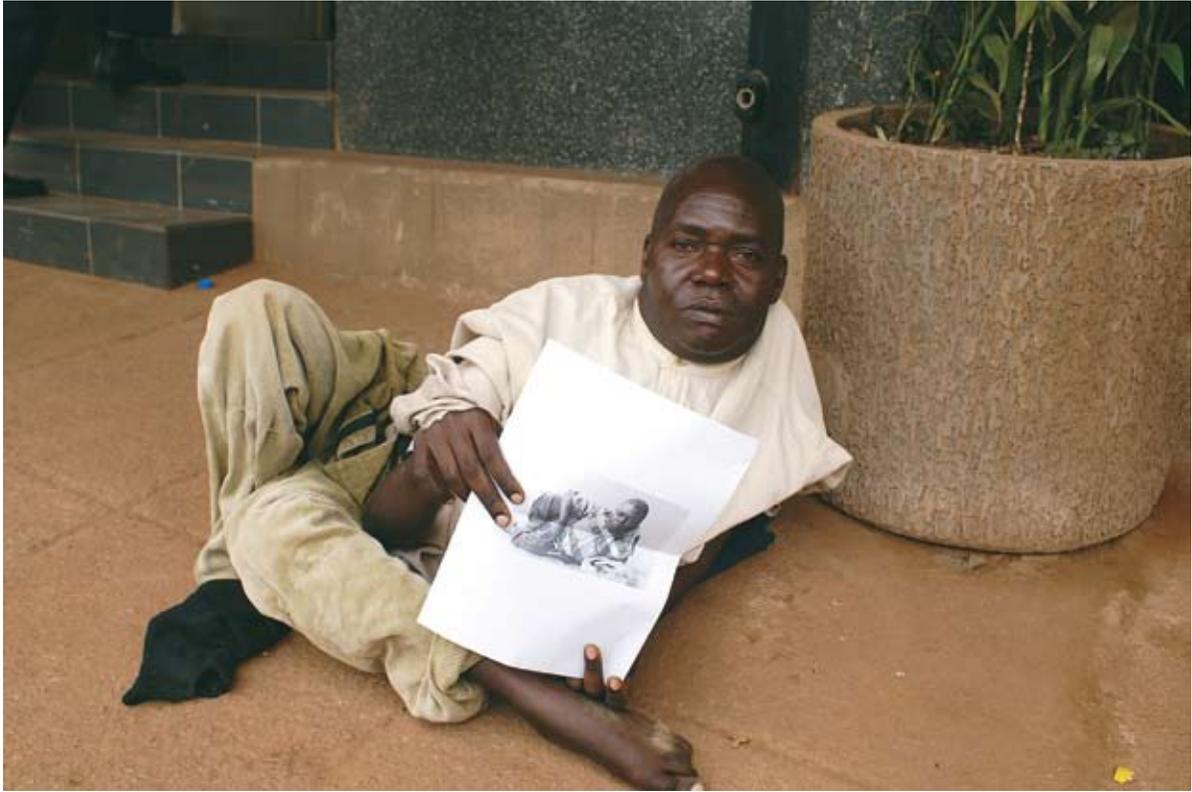
Rudyub begging outside Aristok Bookstore, Kampala   2006

A world where opportunity is so abundant that I am made professionally redundant, but the vision does not arise.

Index awards website (www.indexaward.dk)

In lieu of this imaginary place, I must be temporarily satisfied with ad hoc efforts to deliver opportunity to those less fortunate, less affluent, less connected.
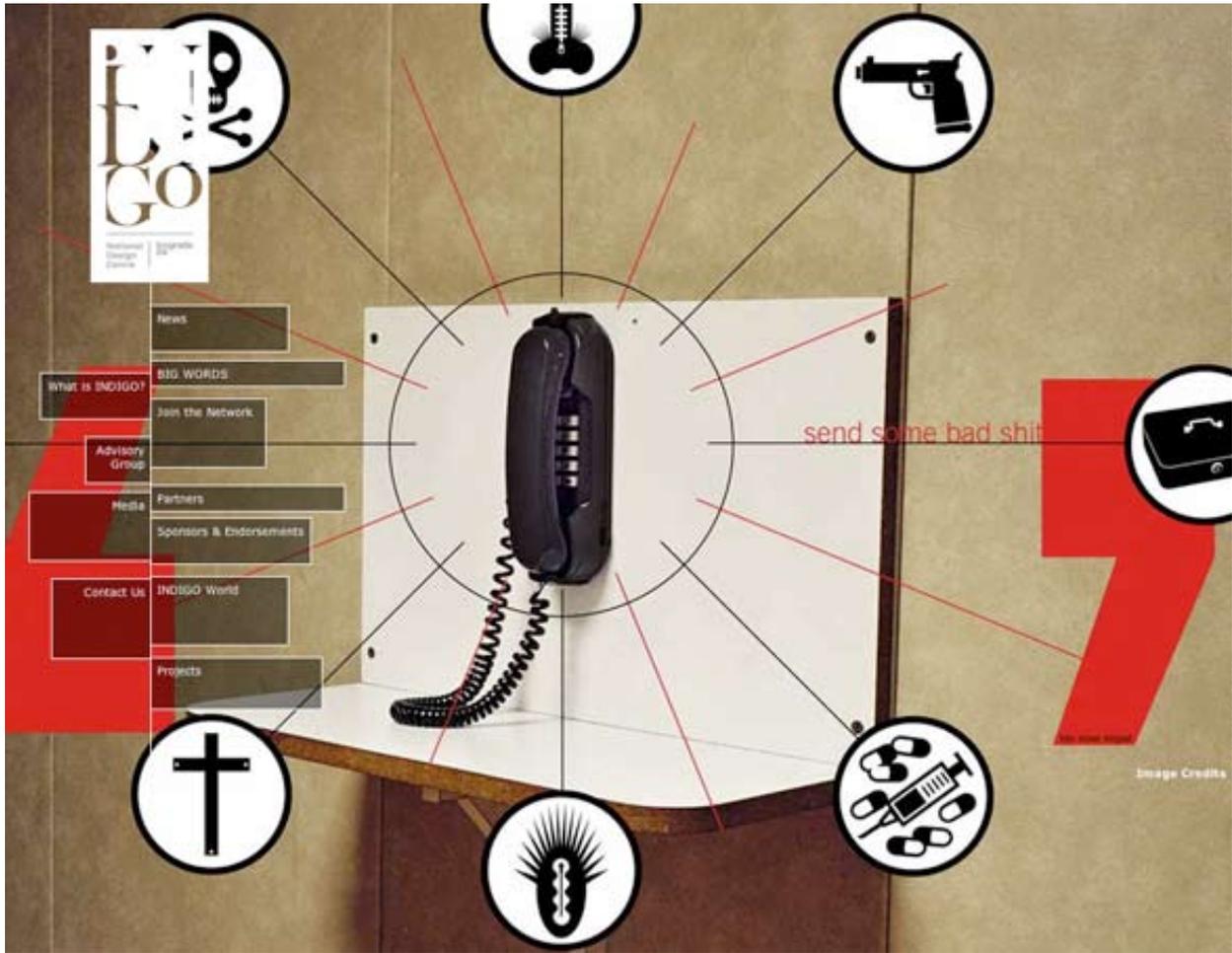
Indigo website (www.indigodesignnetwork.org)

I must suffer the efforts of some to co-opt the world's have-nots into globalized visual networks.

Architecture for Humanity website (www.architectureforhumanity.org)

Or accept the implication that disaster relief is the best way to help.

Designers Without Borders volunteer Fred Quillin with *Foundation for Development of Needy Community* students, Mbale, Uganda

I'm not trying to re-envision the world in the image and likeness of my culture. Far from it! What I'm interested in seeing is what others do with the same set of tools that is available to me. How will they communicate? Interrelate? Anticipate? Will they lose themselves, their unique culture, or will they en-hance it? Haven't others been doing just that (enhancing culture) throughout centuries of technological exchange? Isn't that what moves us all along, exchanging methods, sharing ideas?

S3 students (15 years) at St. M. Kalemba's Senior Secondary School, Nazigo

What I'm proposing is what I've been doing these last eight years: Projecting design education and socially just practice into other cultures. Not unsuspecting victims of conquering colonial invaders, but willing partners interested in exchange, expansion, and access.

Makerere University design student David Ssengendo (2004), now working at NUSAF (Northern Uganda Socail Action Fund) as an Information Education and Communication Assistant.

Education is the master metaphor of human evolution. Through it we create continuity by bridging the past to the future. Design education is my avenue of aesthetic, social, and economic interaction. I am not interested in intellectual privilege, or in the success of a given profession, but in the efficacy of design as an instrument of social change.
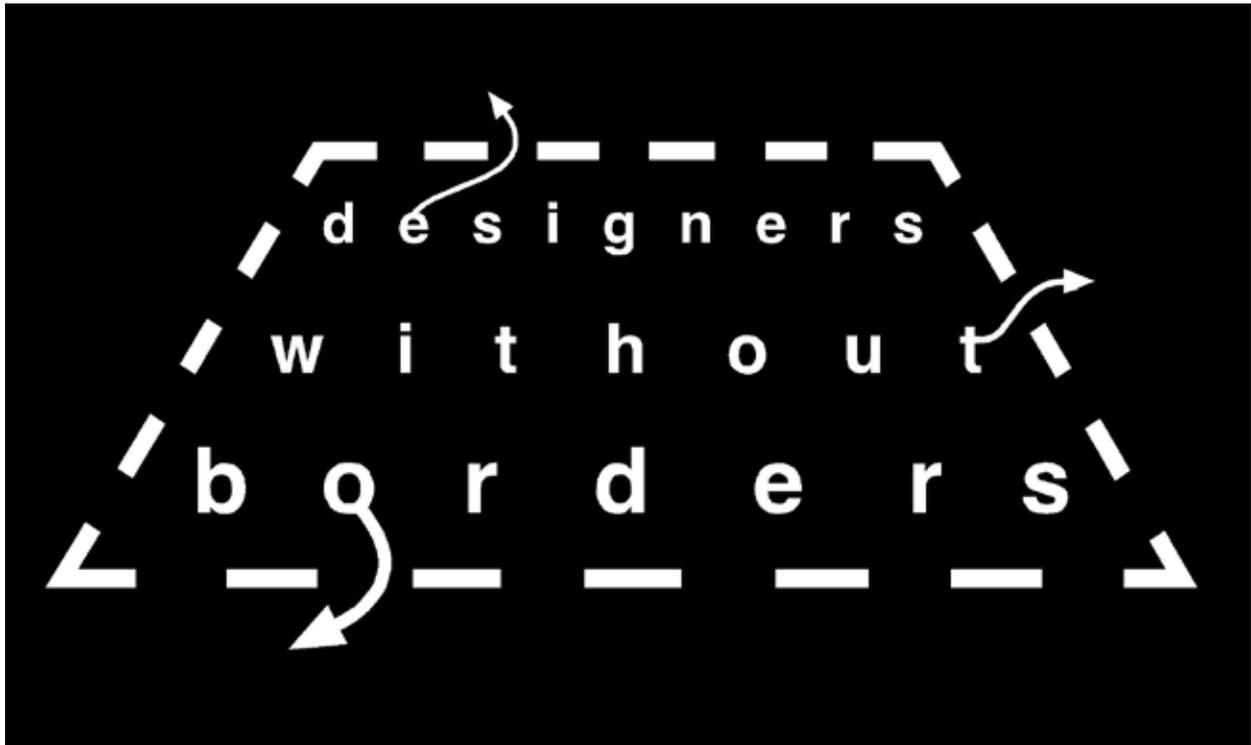
Designers Without Borders[3] (http://www.designerswithoutborders.org) is the vehicle, the vision, the means of focusing legal, financial, and technical resources on the goal of social change. It is both aegis and umbrella, providing organization and context for the purpose of development through design.

3. Founded in 2001 during a Fulbright research/lectureship to Uganda
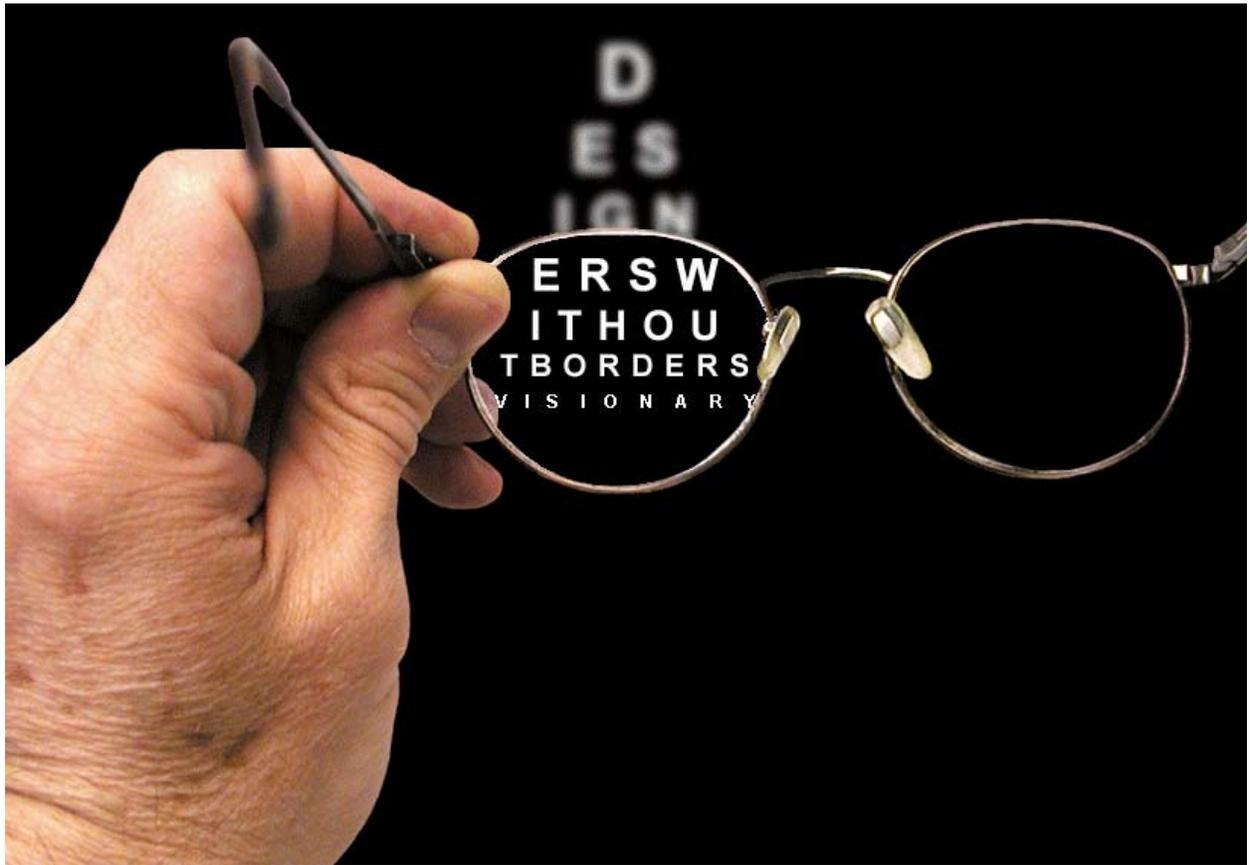
When we speak about economic development through "globalization" I see only the manifest effects: marginalization. Instead of economic globalization I have begun to strongly believe in localization, a much better metaphor.

Participants in the first DWB Online Mentorship Program 2007 (Julian Kiganda, project director)

By marshaling available resources in an effort to assist those less well off, we focus not on the world's difficulties, as the conventional media does, but on its possibilities.

2008
Online Mentoring Certificate

designers
without
borders

Yoweri Kaguta Museveni

Certificate for the DWB 2008 Online Mentorship Program
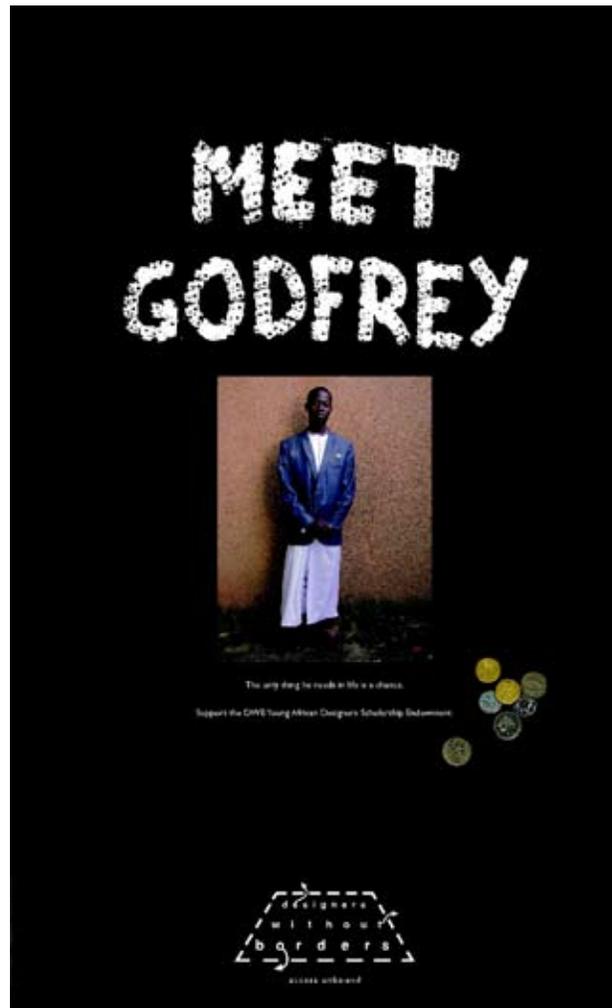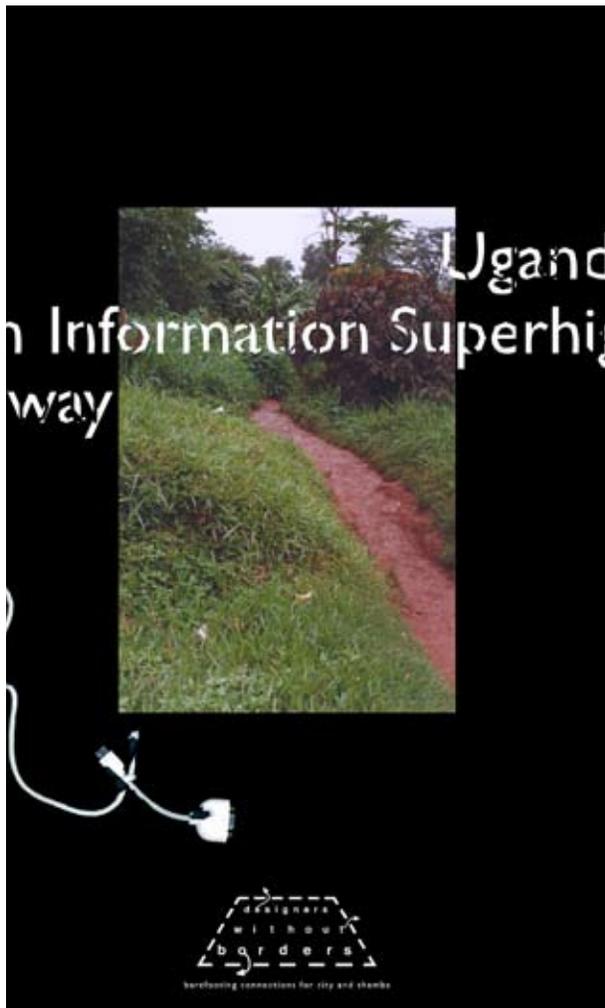
DWB Sappi Fine Papers' *Ideas That Matter* grant winner (Sydnee MacKay and David Stairs 2003)

Through DWB my colleagues and I have devised curricula and delivered design resources to over 500 students of Makerere and Kyambogo Universities, Mwereerwe and St. Kalemba's Secondary Schools, the Foundation for Development of Needy Communities, the National Committee of Women Living with AIDS, and FHope, to name a few institutions, all located in Uganda.

NACWOLA

National Community of Women
Living with HIV/AIDS in Uganda.

How to become a member?

Beneficiary membership is for women living with HIV/AIDS in Uganda. The fee is 2,000/= annually.

Subscriber membership is for individuals, institutions and organizations who are interested in the objectives and activities of NACWOLA. 25,000/= annually for individuals and 50,000/= annually for institutions and organizations.

Honorary membership is acquired after an individual, institution or organization has shown support and commitment to the aspirations of NACWOLA.

Where is NACWOLA located?

The 23 branches of NACWOLA are located in Arua and Adjumani in West Nile, Lira in the North and Soroti and Kumi in the North East. Hoima has a NACWOLA branch in North Western Uganda and Mbarara and Kasese in the West. In the East there are Mbale, Pallisa, Bugiri and Tororo branches and in the South Rukungiri. Central Eastern BJJK region covers Bugiri, Jinja, Iganga and Kamuli. Mukono District has branches in Njeri and Nagalama, and Mpigi District in Entebbe and Luwero.

The Kampala sub-branches are located in Kanwokya, Bwol., Rubaga, Nsambya, Namirembe and Mulago with the headquarters listed in Makindye.

NACWOLA
P.O. BOX 4485 Kampala, Uganda
Tel: 256-41-269694
Fax: 256-41-269694
e-mail: nacwola@infocom.co.ug
located in Makindye along the Lukuli-Kanganda Road.

revised 2003
concept: Designers Without Borders

"We should be bold
and speak out.
on issues that affect us!"

NACWOLA brochure (Sydnee MacKay 2002)

I will be the first to admit that this is only a beginning. After all, as an individual I see only part of the larger picture. But this is how I have chosen to assist those less fortunate than me to seek broader acceptance and locate access to opportunity. As a result I have been called "idealistic," "noble," and "unpragmatic."

The Margaret Trowell School of Industrial and Fine Arts

History

MTSIFA website (David Stairs 2002)

Collectively we see further and better than individually. I am happy to report that I am only part of a larger movement. *Designers Without Borders* is just one of many such initiatives being undertaken by designers worldwide today.

Uganda National Arts and Crafts Association brochure (David Stairs 2001)

Home

Arcadia Valleys Fountain of Hope (FHOPE) is a Ugandan Community-Based Organization dedicated to helping underprivileged youth. The idea behind FHOPE first took shape in 1994, when Mr. James Lutwama began assisting orphans. FHOPEs strategic vision is to ensure that vulnerable children who see no hope for the future can attain education and other vocational skills in order to enjoy a meaningful life in the future.

Fhope website (José Rivas 2006)

FDNC logo (David Stairs 2006)

Siyathemba poster in collaboration with Architecture for Humanity (Marlena Bucek 2005)

Henry Kakinda moving oxygen cylinders by bikeload 2001

Africa is key. The birthplace of humanity is today the world's most disadvantaged continent. How this came to be is less important than what we must do to reverse things. We need to find ways to enable Africans to compete on their own terms and from a position of strength.

"Eames" chairs at roadside furniture sales yard, Kampala, Uganda

Design has a place in Africa's recovery. And Africans, natural designers in their indigenous approaches, have a place in the world of design. Not as markets for Asia and the West, or as suppliers of commodities or tribal crafts, but as creators with living design solutions to longstanding everyday problems. Design is transformative. Design and education combined have the potential to be revolutionary.
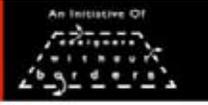
DESIGN-ALTRUISM-PROJECT
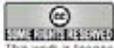
Blowing Competitions Up, and Other Acts of Good Citizenship

April 23rd, 2008

David Stairs

Ball State Visual Communications student Kat Townsend documenting a hand-painted sign on a condemned house in Flint, Michigan. Photo by Laura Huffman.

Winning and losing: the dichotomy is endemic to the American way of life. From Vegas to *American Idol*, from athletic wagers to *Dancing With the Stars*, we take our entertainment with a grain of confrontation. In fact, in a society that qualifies most forms of advancement in terms of competitiveness, it would be unnatural to think of removing all competition from education. But,

SEARCH

[Search]

LINKS
> Architecture for Humanity
> Barefoot College
> Citizen Scholar
> Design for Development
> Design for Social Impact
> onesmallproject
> The Rural Studio
> UNCTAD

The *Design-Altruism-Project*[4] (http://design-altruism-project.org) is the nexus, the community, the online resource where we test the resilience of a new memeplexe.

4. Founded online in 2006

Altruism as Design Methodology
David Stairs

Design must disengage itself from consumer culture ... and participate in projects for the welfare of humankind both inside and outside the market economy.
Victor Margolin
The Politics of the Artificial [1]

Suppose that the altruists also have a tendency to cooperate with one another in a way that ultimately benefits each altruist at the expense of non-altruists. Cliques and communes may require personal sacrifice, but if they are bonded by possession of one inherited trait, the trait can evolve as the groups triumph over otherwise comparable units of non-cooperating groups.
E. O. Wilson
Sociobiology [2]

The Argument

Over the last decade, there has been a tentative loosening of the stranglehold corporate models exert upon the design profession. In successive waves, designers and design theorists have embraced social and environmental causes with the growing awareness of slightly guilty affluent urbanites hoping to participate in a counter-cultural revolution.

For design writers, perhaps no better barometer of this growing awareness exists than Victor Margolin's *The Politics of the Artificial*. Published by the University of Chicago in 2002, Professor Margolin's book is a compilation of journal essays that appeared in print in the nineties. Addressing everything from design education to eco-feminism and sustainability, Margolin's book is a "what's what" of evolving design mores at the century's end. But politically correct appearances can be deceiving. While Margolin laments the way the "rhetoric of idealism is at odds with the reality of daily practice," and admits "The world's design needs are evident, but the plan for reinventing the design profession is not," [3] he stops short of providing a full-bodied prescription for the needed paradigm shift.

I'd like to suggest that, contrary to Margolin's cautious optimism, the design profession is being reinvented even as you read this, and in ways so antithetical to conventional design practice as to signal a sea of change in the way design is practiced. I propose to frame this change in terms of one of humanity's oldest collective instincts: mutual support, or altruism.

1   Victor Margolin, *The Politics of the Artificial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 99.
2   E. O. Wilson, *Sociobiology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 54.
3   Victor Margolin, *The Politics of the Artificial*, 102.

3

Altruism as Design Methodology 2005[5]

A Meme for Altruism

David Stairs

Sociobiology in the 70s wrestled manfully with the challenge of the genetic basis of human behavior. Robert Trivers[1], following W.D. Hamilton's theory of kin selection[2], asked whether reciprocal altruism might not be selected for. In otherwords, scientists were wondering whether there could be a gene for altruism.

In the mid 70s, in his now iconic book *The Selfish Gene*,[3] Richard Dawkins went a step further. He proposed that there might be a unit of culture that was a cultural replicator in the way genes are biological ones. Dawkins called his unit of cultural measurement a *meme*, from the rootword "mimetic," and described a meme as "a unit of information residing in a brain." This is a fairly broad definition, one that would apply equally well to ideas, stories, behaviors, styles, greetings, beliefs, arguments, even that tune you just can't get out of your head, anything so long as it is replicable.

The efforts by Dawkins, Trivers, Hamilton and other careful observers of nature and culture to define a non-genetic unit of transmitted information that is "faithful, fecund, and longlived" has not gone unnoticed. In her 1998 book *The Meme Machine*[4] Susan Blackmore suggests the possibility of there being a meme for altruism. Blackmore argues convincingly for a "memetic theory of altruism"— that when people are generous, whether selflessly or otherwise, they seem more attractive, become popular and, in so doing, spread altruism memes.

What, exactly does this mean? Scientists have speculated about the genetic basis of altruism since Robert Trivers, Bill Hamilton and Richard Dawkins in the 1960s and '70s.[6,7,8] The latter's proposal of a "cultural unit equivalent to the gene" makes a great deal of sense when one tries to connect altruism and design. Does the meme for altruism extend to the practice of design and, if so, can it serve as the basis of change for our profession? Can "reciprocal altruism" result in a new model of design practice? Can design for the betterment of society evolve into the predominant paradigm for design professionals?

6. Trivers, Robert. 1971 . The evolution of reciprocal altruism. *The Quarterly Review of Biology*;
7. Hamilton, W.D. 1964 . The genetical evolution of social behavior. *Journal of Theoretical Biology*;
8. Dawkins, Richard. 1976. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: London.

Some people take this very seriously.
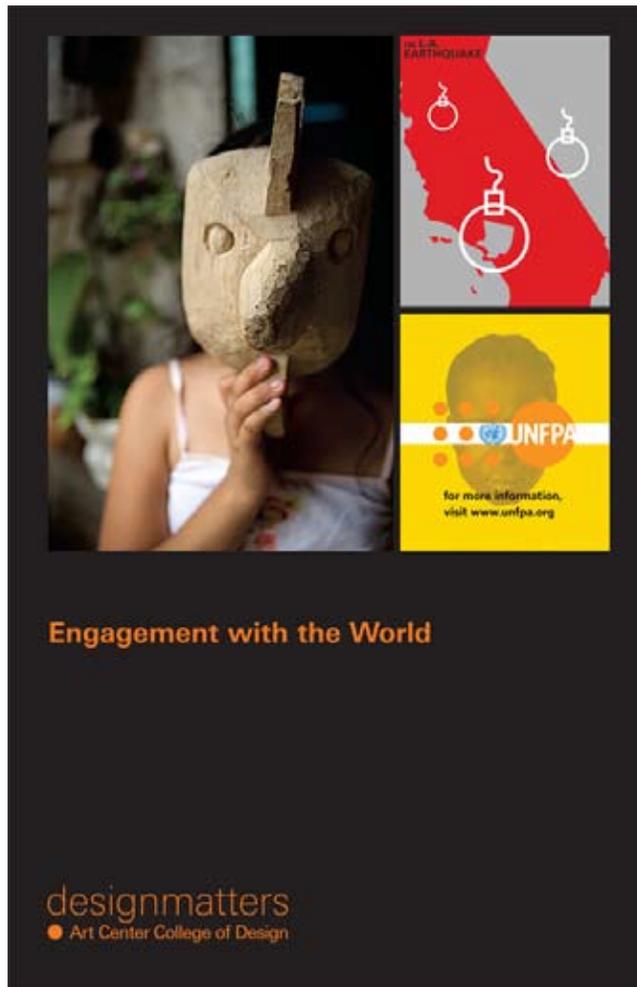
designmatters program at Art Center

In some places, the meme is already actively applied to education.

Agenda for a 21st Century India Report

Arvind Lodaya

Editor's note: In 1958, after several months' research, the Eames' published their famous India Report for Jawaharlal Nehru, a project that led directly to the development of the NID. Today, the need for good ideas is not less than it was fifty years ago, but perhaps good ideas these days ought to come in smaller, more sustainable, and universally applicable packages. DS

Student work by

Narayan Gopalan: "viral publicity campaign for kabir" - kabir was a 15th century saint-poet-mystic-subversive whose songs are sung all over the subcontinent even today, with no written record whatsoever.

In some minds, however, it is more a matter for a complete reconsideration of the profession.

OKUWANGAAL-A

Design Ugandan Style

David Stairs

Okuwangaala (forthcoming from MIT Press) is the book, the document, the investigation of how another culture applies design thinking in its own inimitable manner, not as an import, but naturally, unselfconsciously, as an element of human evolution.

Okuwangaala: The Persistent Vitality of the Vernacular
David Stairs

"In highly industrialized societies, design appears to have replaced nature as the dominant presence in human experience. The nature we do experience is often engineered and manipulated at an astonishing level of subtlety to serve human purposes."

V. Margolin / R. Buchanan,
from the introduction to *Discovering Design* [1]

"In other societies, however, especially nonindustrial ones, there is often no clear distinction between professional and amateur design abilities—the role of the professional designer may not exist. In craft-based societies, for example, craftspeople make objects that are not only highly practical but also very beautiful."

Nigel Cross, "Discovering Design Ability,"
from *Discovering Design* [2]

1   R. Buchanan and V. Margolin, eds., *Discovering Design* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), xii.
2   Ibid., 112.
3   Paul Shepard, *Nature and Madness* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1982), 42.

"He [the villager] came to live more and more with his own fabrications as the environment. Being of his own making, the things around him were indistinct from himself, and he was less differentiated than he wanted to be."

Paul Shepard, *Nature and Madness* [3]

Man with a cellphone

Prologue
The tropics, crucible of bloodborne diseases, is an endless complementary cycle of deluge and desiccation. The cumulative corrosive effects of humidity, dust, and fatalism prove a nemesis to most technology, especially high-tech. Yet the young man in the next room is very excited. He has just discovered some shareware on the Internet that permits him to send a brief text message from his workstation to a remote cellphone. "Big deal," I can almost hear you say. And under any other circumstances, your indifference would be justified. But this event is happening in a society that has overleapt two-and-a-half centuries of smokestack industrialism to find itself teetering on the brink of the IT Era. Welcome to the manifold ironies of life in modern sub-Saharan Africa.

Okuwangaala: The Persistent Vitality of the Vernacular 2002 [9]

Signage Systems

In Graphicswallah, his enlightening book about the graphic art and artists of India, Keith Lovegrove discusses the variable nature of graphical public service signage on the subcontinent. About traffic signage he writes: "In India, however, the 'No Horn' sign is the best example of ignored information graphics. Even the 'No Spitting or Urinating' sign commands more respect." [14]

[14.] Lovegrove, Keith, Graphicswallah: Graphics in India, New York: HarperCollins, 2003, p. 61.

Uganda is similarly fraught with informational irregularities. Both countries are former Commonwealth nations and have inherited the British left-handed road system. And population density, although lower in Uganda, can cause crushing gridlock in Kampala where there are only six major intersections with active traffic lights. Adding to the deplorable conditions of many paved roads, due to heavy rains and little money for maintenance, are forests of signs on every corner. "How do people navigate these roads?" is the first question every Western driver invariably asks upon arriving in Uganda. As in India, road signs are often ignored, sometimes at one's peril. Red octagonal stop signs, so familiar at home, are few and far between here, and where they exist they are largely ignored. The local equivalent I found were colonial-era, one of the only yield signs I saw in all Uganda.

How do pre-industrial societies survive in the Information Age? Is it possible to jump-start economic development without suffering the same problems industrialized nations have encountered? What are the unique cultural products of vernacular design? What part does it play in balance of trade?

One Axle or Two?
An ICSID Interdesign in South Africa

David Stairs

I was back in Africa for the first time since 2002, and for the first time ever in South Africa. The occasion was the 2005 Interdesign for Sustainable Rural Transportation, sponsored by the South African Design Institute, an arm of the South African Bureau of Standards (SABS), a parastatal corporation. It was the second effort in six years for the South Africans, who participated in a multinational Interdesign devoted to water in 1999.

The Interdesign program first got underway in 1971. Since that watershed year, ICSID (International Council of Societies of Industrial Design) has endorsed thirty-seven Interdesigns on subjects ranging from the production of bread (Minsk '71) to unemployment (Northern Ireland '76), and from product design for the handi-capped (Maastricht '82) to transportation for the future (Bergslagen '94). Because Interdesigns have occurred primarily in Europe, with a handful scattered across other continents (Asia: 2, S. America: 5, Africa: 1), this was a good opportunity to observe the concept's effectiveness in the developing world.

Actually, I was beginning to wonder whether I'd ever make it to South Africa. There was a time when I swore I didn't want to see Africa's premier economy and most highly industrialized state. Things have changed, but the scars from a long civil conflict are still evident. South Africa's forty-four million people, lopsidedly divided between a minority of whites, Indians, and mixed-race people, and the large majority of blacks (seventy-five percent), has a two-tier economy. As in other parts of Africa, there is the formal sector, the one that registers on government economic records, and then there is the informal one that drives government tax collectors crazy wondering how to tap into it. In South Africa, the distinction is especially pronounced.

Take the highways, for example. South Africa has a primary road system that is the envy of the continent. High-speed and well-maintained, it connects major urban areas and sustains a form of early-morning, rush-hour gridlock that could only be described as quasi-American. Then there also are unusual diversions such as *The Lost City*, Africa's first and most famous theme park, and a boom-ing mall-development culture that seems strangely out of place on a continent specializing in open-air bazaars. On the other hand, the men and boys approaching BMWs at busy intersections with every-thing from oranges to rolls of plastic garbage bags were not Bowery

One Axle or Two? 2006[10]

Varieties of concrete planters

commodities are a growing presence on Kampala roadsides as construction of middleclass houses continues to boom. One simply cannot argue with a material that neither weakens nor rots under the effects of torrential tropical rains.

Structures both plain and fancy are built under the same rubric, which will always conform to the prevailing fashions of local construction. Some airy-looking structures would seem to hardly require tons of reinforced concrete, while other bunker-like buildings appear almost too heavy to stand despite any number of poles. Appearances to the contrary, I must admit to having watched many buildings as they slowly cured and eventually emerged from their forest of poles to be inhabited. I can safely report I have also never been in a Ugandan building during an earthquake. Knock wood.

Concrete Molder

Indigenous design wisdom points the way toward possible solutions.

Terra cotta "pasi" or charcoal iron by John Kitutu, Bunangaka, Uganda

Personal case (wire, recycled crown caps)

"Lugubire" or million miler sandals (leather, cloth ribbon, rubber strap, recycled tires)

Reverse-engineered popcorn makers

Akatebe, or basket stool (bent rattan and poles)
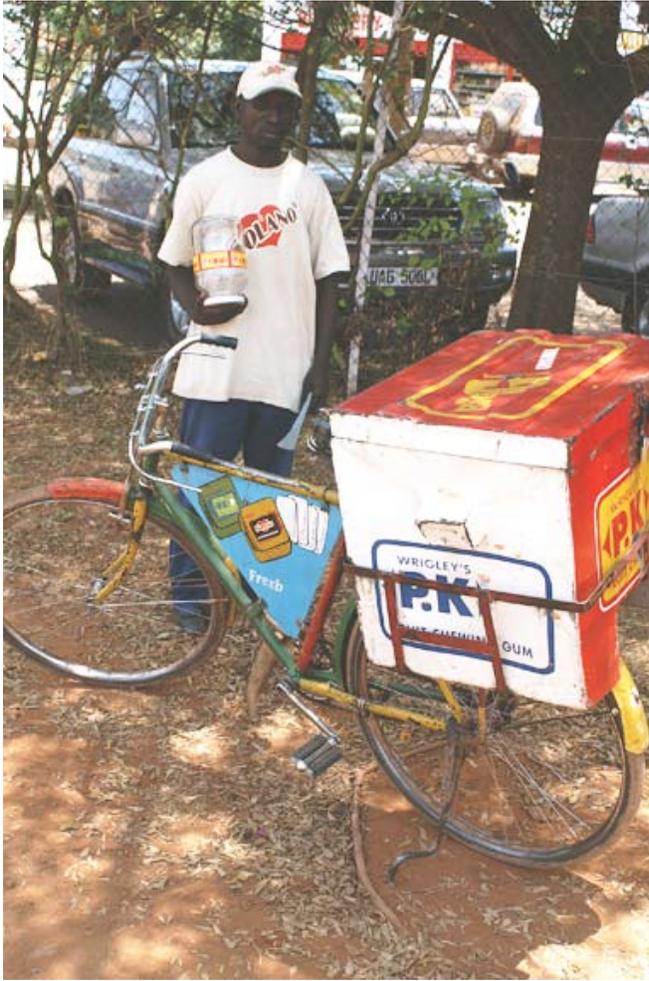
Hand made sign at Bujagali Falls near Jinja

"Wembley" or bananaleaf soccer ball

Metal "Keesu," or footlockers (sheet metal, spray paint stencils)

Kerosene lantern (recycled tin, glass, wire)

Wrigley's "Gum Bike"

Mr. Williams' Study Collection

David Stairs

It's not easy governing a modern African state. Long association with Europe and America has given most African nations a distinct trade disadvantage. Primarily colonized as sources of raw materials, African territories have dutifully provided commodities to the West for 150 years at steadily decreasing prices. The second purpose for African colonies was to provide guaranteed markets for the colonizers. With manufactured imports the order of the day for most colonies, there was no need to develop an industrial base. When leaders of newly independent African states realized the need for industry, modernization was often pursued in a centrally controlled manner with the resultant waste and inefficiency of mass manufacturing bureaucracies. Later, when industrialization was a requirement of World Bank fiscal adjustment plans, African nations were again at a distinct disadvantage, attempting to compete in markets that were bound to be tilted against them.

Viv Williams is not your typical Oxford-trained economist. Upon graduation in 1960, and after a brief stint at the Design Center in London, Williams launched a 40-year career as a development consultant in Africa. First in Zambia, and later in Ethiopia and Uganda Williams balanced a personal blend of pragmatism and idealism as he attempted to earn a living helping the beneficiaries of the sub-Saharan independence period get on their feet and practice self-development. It hasn't always been smooth sailing.

Viv Williams at "The New Africa House," Kampala

A proposal for Uganda's first industrial design craft study collection

Enlightened assistance acts as reinforcement for these efforts.
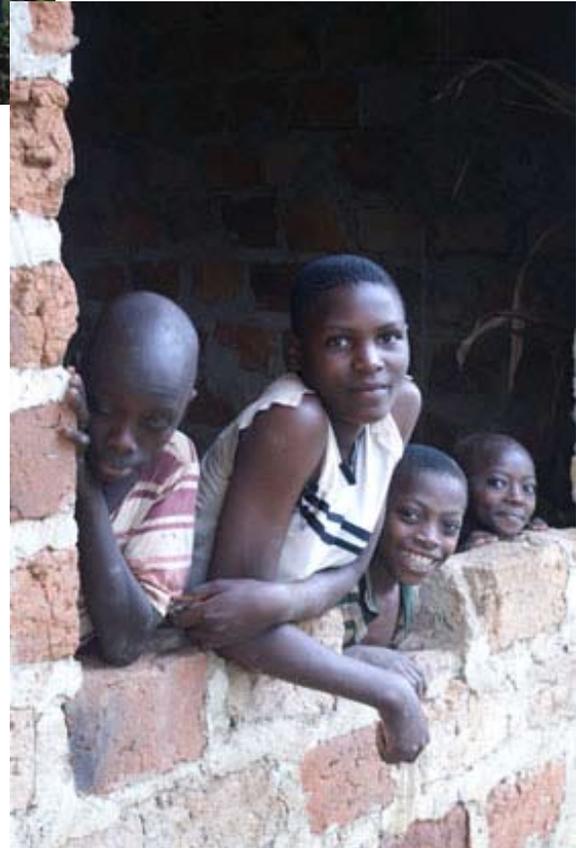
Fhope campus, near Bombo, Uganda 2006
(www.fhope.org)

If we are to truly be agents of change, we must not be afraid to be confrontational. Some will choose to do this through conventional channels, working to encourage change of the corporate culture, applying old ideas to new problems. Others will be more radical. Either way works. As my countryman Malcolm X once put it, we must proceed "By any means necessary." We must make the choices that will sustain our momentum, encourage universal participation, and respect traditional wisdom.

Workstation donation
Foundation for Development of Needy Communities
Mbale, Uganda 2007
(www.fdncuganda.org)

The ultimate goal is exposure, inclusion, access, the smelly human closeness that occurs when people are mutually excited about a shared idea. This can be accomplished through a variety of means; education must play a role. In many places universal secondary education does not exist. To the extent that design can help to improve this situation, it should be employed. Technology transfer is part of the burden, and generally mutually advantageous. We cannot be afraid to take the risk of giving away what we have or know.

Nagenda International Academy of Art & Design
Entebbe, Uganda 2007
(www.nagenda.org)

When these things are accomplished the world *will be* a more equitable place. In this way we *will* make the world *more* sound, *more* whole, *more* just, *more* livable for our children. When the world is a more equitable place, our role as designers might not be as necessary any more. By making ourselves hyper-pertinent now we may succeed in diminishing our roles later. But this is OK because when all men and women are rightfully seen as designers, as is naturally the case, then and only then will we have succeeded.

Photograph by Frank Barratt/Getty Images

To paraphrase John and Yoko: "Change happens, if you want it."

Your generosity makes it possible for
us to continue our valuable work.

Webale enyo! (Thanks!)

Let's not just want change, let's actively work to bring it about. Webale enyo. Thank you for listening.