

DAMN RIGHT DESIGN:  
A PROPOSAL OF A CREATIVE PLATFORM TO FACILITATE SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE  
GRAPHIC DESIGN

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES IN PARTIAL  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The term *social design* refers to design that aims at creating and promoting activities and products related to issues that are usually not addressed by the commercial industry. It has gained great interest in the recent years, mainly in the disciplines of urban and industrial design. The graphic design discipline in particular, has been involved in social movements and social advocacy such as labour and women's movements and political protests even before graphic design was considered a professional discipline (Cushing and Drescher, 2009). For instance, design thinking strategies have been well equipped for such tasks, but they have tended to take a commercial, business-like perspective used within corporations where there is no real engagement with the final users and their context. Hence, this thesis argues that the discipline of graphic design still lacks awareness of the significant role it plays in addressing social problems. In social (graphic) design projects, designers move away from the more conventional design practice that takes place within an advertising agency or design firm, to work together with different organizations to address diverse social issues by contributing with their skills – skills that are much more than make things “look nice”. I claim that designers haven't realized the importance of their visual skills to help in such causes. Through *Damn Right Design*, this thesis proposes a creative, graphic design focused platform that aims at helping graphic designers to understand how they can be of use in addressing projects for communities or social organizations. Its goal is also guiding designers to ponder over their attitudes, and how to implement design thinking tools in mindful ways.

## **Keywords**

Social graphic design, socially responsible graphic design, design for social impact, participatory design, design thinking, graphic design education.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgments .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	iv
Introduction .....	1
Stage one: From Social Design to Socially Responsible Design .....	3
Overview .....	3
Outline of social design .....	3
Socially responsible design .....	5
Case studies on socially responsible industrial design .....	7
Case studies on socially responsible graphic design .....	9
Summary .....	13
Stage two: Design Thinking Tools for Socially Responsible Graphic Design .....	14
Overview .....	14
Design thinking .....	14
Summary .....	16
Stage three: The making of <i>Damn Right Design</i> .....	16
Overview .....	16
Objectives .....	17
Target audience .....	18
<i>Damn Right Design</i> .....	18
Final designs .....	19
Summary .....	20
Conclusion and further directions .....	21
Bibliography .....	23
Appendix .....	26

## INTRODUCTION

Currently, the design-field is moving towards a collaborative, user-oriented, interdisciplinary practice (see Rock 2010; Thackara 2011) that aims at addressing concerns not usually addressed by the commercial industry. Many designers and theorists (e.g., Mau 2004, Heller and Vienne 2003, Berman 2008, Manzini 2015, Bush 2003, Armstrong and Stojmirovic 2011) have pointed out that there is an imperious need to shift the focus from market-driven concerns toward deeper and more relevant questions about design's impact on the world. In this sense, the field of *social design* has historically paid attention to the issue, mainly in the area of industrial design. The term *social design* can be traced back as far as the design discipline itself goes, as for example in Victor Papanek's book *Design For The Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change*, published in 1971. Practitioners of social design such as John Thackara (2011), stress the importance of the role and responsibility of designers in society, and argues that it is urgent that designers should be aware about the outcomes of design actions, and to take into consideration the cultural, social, and environmental context in which their practice takes place.

Other scholars have echoed these concerns, such as Matt Ratto (2008), who coined the term *critical making* to conceptualize a modality of object-making that focuses on the connections between the objects and the social sphere, emphasizing that there is a need in design practice to care for critical social matters. Pelle Ehn (2013) also argues that there is still a need for a long-term infrastructure in which social design projects could bring dialogues and relationships that go beyond the project itself. Armstrong et al. (2014) state that research on social design often results in short-term projects that aim to have ephemeral impact instead of longer-term project aiming to build knowledge. Grace Lees-Maffei (2011) points out the raising interest of designers to reflect on their role in society, by involving themselves in subjects such as community, politics and social issues (such as climate change, poverty, etc.).

*Design thinking* methodology has tried to respond to the needs of developing design solutions to non-commercial goals. Since the 1990s, the American design firm IDEO has popularized the term, defining it as a collection of methods for problem solving that encourages participation in the design process, using a human-centered empathic approach, and mainly oriented towards industrial design projects. While this methodology has become famous for its compassionate and

conscious nature, other scholars argue that, in practice, design thinking is too business-oriented consequently rendering their final outcome too superficial and inattentive to the final users and their context (e.g. Kimbell, 2011).

These past approaches to a design that moves from commercial interests suggest that graphic design can indeed help with enterprises guided by value-rationality rather than consumption; it could be an important tool for social action given the persuasive effects of visual communication. In fact, design projects where graphic designers actively collaborate with diverse community groups or organizations in order to provide effective visual communication solutions or messages have been an alternative for the conventional design practice within an advertising agency or design firm. As graphic designer Peter Claver Fine (2016) argues, there are

“Integrated projects that find graphic designers working directly with communities and social groups on systemic problems to provide concrete and lasting solutions as well as the design process and tools to sustain them.”(p.85)

In spite the fact that, as Claver Fine (2016) points out, graphic design has been involved in non-commercial projects, there is a gap in the literature as there has been no systematic approach on how graphic design can be involved in such projects. Thus, this thesis aims at responding to this limitation on graphic design and to contribute to design thinking's toolbox. First, I will provide with a literature review of the definitions and origins of social design, a study of the term itself, its definitions and problems. I will argue that the term *social design* is too broad and can lead to confusion, and I propose using instead the term *socially responsible design* as a more explanatory term for this field. Then, I will describe case studies in the areas of socially responsible industrial design and socially responsible graphic design. Second, I will analyze how design thinking methods could go beyond their commercial focus and can in fact be used in a mindful way towards graphic design projects that address social causes. Finally, I will propose the design of the platform *Damn Right Design* (DRD) that can be used as reference for a more reflexive way of understanding and applying graphic design in non-commercial social-needs oriented projects.

By proposing this DRD platform, I hope that we can go beyond short-term and narrow-sighted results that Ehn (2013) and Armstrong et al. (2014), for example, indicated. Therefore, this thesis fills that gap by proposing DRD as a platform that generates dialogues and provokes discussions among designers by considering the capital role of the actors implicated in the graphic design outcomes, and reflection on the power and impact that graphic design can have in non-commercial, community oriented projects. DRD objective is to foster reflexivity within designers about the larger picture in which their practice takes place, its impact in their societal context, as well as the potential meanings and uses of graphic design communication – meanings that go beyond aesthetics and selling-pitches. It also aims at showing designers the potential that graphic design has for working in projects with social organizations or communities, where visual communications tools can help enabling effective communication channels and making messages more visible when dealing with social issues.

## **STAGE ONE: FROM SOCIAL DESIGN TO SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE DESIGN**

### **Overview**

In this first stage I will review some of the existing literature on social design, which will provide the background for *Damn Right Design*. I argue that there is a terminological misunderstanding because *social design* is too diffuse of a term. Thus, I propose to use the term *socially responsible design* instead, as in my opinion it is more suitable for encapsulating the meaning and aims of social design. From that point on, I will switch terms and refer to social design as socially responsible design. Lastly, I will review what has been done in the areas of socially responsible industrial design and socially responsible graphic design – antecedents to what I define as socially responsible design.

### **Outline of social design**

The history of social design can go back as far as William Morris and the Arts & Crafts movement around 1880s, a movement that questioned the relationship of art and industry and the interaction between design and society. In 1964, graphic designers, photographers and students questioned the priorities in the use and applications of their talents as visual communicators in the publication *The First Things First Manifesto*. Later, in 1971, Victor Papanek contested the commercial aspect of design and called for design activism and socially responsible design in his book *Design For*

*The Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change*. With the same spirit than these first critiques, design historians Victor Margolin and Sylvia Margolin (2002) state that since the Industrial Revolution, design has been envisioned and produced with market-driven purposes, and that one of the main reasons why social design practice does not count with more support is because there is not enough research and facts evidencing how much designers and design contribute to human well-being. Therefore, it is necessary to propose a social model of design practice along with a research agenda that contributes to such ends - an agenda that addresses issues such as the role of the designer in a collaborative process of social intervention and reflects on the agency of designers for the greater good.

The existing literature about social design is predominantly in the area of industrial design. Considering the above claims by Morris, Papanek and Margolin and Margolin, in which a shift in design priorities is proposed towards human well-being, it is no surprise that social design is directly linked to industrial design, as it is easier to see the connection between designed, tangible objects, and humans. The connection between visual, graphic design, and humans seems to be harder to notice, but it is, nonetheless, equally important, and some graphic designers have also been involved in these issues. Graphic designer Milton Glaser (2005) for example, vouches for a design practice that cares about the world and takes into consideration the effects of graphic design in society, and graphic designer Christopher Simmons (2011) argues that designers have the ability to deal with larger problems such as “equality, water, education, community, peace, justice and hope” (p.3) by using their visual communication skills to raise awareness on those subjects. Hence designer’s work can “be and do good” (ibid.), as designers are indeed well equipped for working in collaborative and challenging contexts (see Thackara 2011; Ratto 2011) besides working for brands and the industry in general.

*Social design* has been an approach to design practice that has considered these critiques, but there is not a monolithic definition of what social design is, or its goals. Ezio Manzini (2015) defines it as “a design activity that deals with problems that are not dealt with by the market or by the state, and in which the people involved do not normally have a voice” (p.65). In a similar fashion, Noah Scalin and Michelle Taute (2012) offer a definition for “socially conscious design” as a compromise to make mindful choices, and being conscious of the impact of those design



decisions have on people and the planet. The Social Design Program at the Maryland Institute College of Art, defines its goal as “explor[ing] the designer’s role and responsibility in society, challeng[ing] conventional ways of thinking, facilitat[ing] new institutional collaborations, utiliz[ing] design and the design process to bring about social change, and striv[ing] to create contexts in which ideas can be sustained” (Overview 2016). Combining these tenets of social design, Thomas Markussen (2013) describes “design activism” as “representing design’s central role in (1) promoting social change, (2) raising awareness about values and beliefs (e.g., in relation to climate change, sustainability, etc.), or (3) questioning the constraints that mass production and consumerism place on people’s everyday life.” In conclusion, a social design project would consist of designers collaborating with local community groups, non-profit organizations or community members, to address problems and build collective communications solutions. This is what makes social design different from design driven by the market, corporate branding or advertising campaigns. Social design aims to provide design solutions by developing collaborative relationships with all the actors involved in the design process.

As there are many definitions and approaches to social design, it is difficult to pinpoint what it entails as a concept, and what are its specific areas of application. Thus, next I propose that a more useful term would be that of *socially responsible design*.

### **Socially responsible design**

Sociologist Max Weber (1947) points out that a social action is social “insofar as its subjective meaning takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course” (p.88). According to this definition, any kind of design is social because it is inherently social: design is in fact aimed at people’s actions; it does not take place in a void. Therefore, the term *social design* seems to be redundant, too broad, and confusing. I would then like to propose that *socially responsible design* is a more accurate definition for this area of practice, as it focuses on the potential influence, implications and social responsibilities of designers. Considering that these responsibilities are less evident in graphic design and visual communication, and as a graphic designer myself, I believe that this approach to design is critical, as it implies that the role of the designer should be re-evaluated. This posture also invites those of us engaged in this practice to get into discussions about the deep impact of the design discipline in the world (Kimbell, 2011) –

an impact that goes well beyond commercial impact or a superficial aesthetic sensitivity. Within this framework, and agreeing with *The First Things First Manifesto* (1964), I do not believe that graphic design should deny its persuasive nature related to the commercial aspect, but I do believe that designers should, and in fact have, the ability to go further. First, by reflecting and understanding the potential of its persuasive tools; second, by analyzing how that potential could be used to address the needs of organization guided by a different rationality beyond that aimed at consumption. This means to change our mindset when working with community organizations or non-for profits, for example. As Katherine McCoy argues (1993), designers shouldn't and can't be passive in these matters. On the contrary, we should acknowledge the power of our skills, and encourage participation among social actors from the outset, in order to create design pieces that address their needs. In this sense, graphic designers should not be isolated from the social fabric in which its practice takes place. This would make graphic design more socially responsible as it would help in understanding visual communication as an exchange between the myriad of actors that are implicated in the design process, rather than as something static, fixed, and one-dimensional, which relies on a sort of solipsistic understanding of the designer as such (see Bush, 2003). This change toward concrete socially responsible graphic design, I claim, first and foremost is a mindset, a way of being towards design.

Next I will survey eighteen case studies such as applied projects, books, toolkits, websites, hubs, labs and social organizations that focus mainly on this idea of socially responsible design, or design applied to products/systems with a human-centered approach that has a clear focus on responding to social needs/problems (versus focusing on the commercial aspect of design). Because socially responsible design has been applied mostly in the areas of industrial design, I consider that case studies on the area are also of relevance. Then I analyze case studies specifically on the area of graphic design, which is the main focus area of this thesis. These reviews will not only provide a better understanding of the field but also aid to move further with the development of *Damn Right Design* platform. For organizational purposes, they are broken down into two main categories: socially responsible industrial design (seven examples) and socially responsible graphic design (eleven examples). To clearly understand what a socially responsible design project could entail, each category starts with an applied project within their main area.

## **Case studies on socially responsible industrial design**

### **Applied Projects**

Safe Agua (image 1) was a project developed in 2009 in the framework of a collaborative project between Designmatters, a collaborative hub within the educational department of California's Art Center College of Design and Latin American NGO Un Techo para mi País. This project addressed the challenges of Chile's poorest families living in slum developments of gaining access to safe water. This project developed by proposing an on-site, immersive, collaborative design research that lasted two weeks. The designers then proposed low-cost prototypes and systems that would help to solve specific water needs that they were able to identify in their field research. Some solutions were for example, the provision of water containers that were easy to heat on a stove so families could shower, low-cost foot pumps and ergonomic faucets. A booklet that contains all the details of the project can be downloaded from their website (Safe Agua, 2009). This example of an applied socially responsible industrial design project helps to understand how design can address a systemic, community problem and how designers were able to provide mindful solutions by immersing in the context of the situation.

### **Toolkits**

*The Design Revolution Toolkit* (image 2) was produced in 2009 by a non-profit organization called Project H Design. The booklet is available for free download online (Design Revolution The Toolkit, 2009) and it aims at providing with tactics to design "for change instead of consumption" (p.1) by way of giving advice for different design situations. The *Ideo Toolkit* (2009) is a book that also provides with different methodologies for applying human-centered design, in a how-to, step-by-step format (image 3). They also count with a website that supplies definitions, methods and work-plans. They divide their design methods into three big categories: Inspiration, Ideation and Implementation. Both toolkits are relevant as background to this project because they shed light on a possible design application approach, as well as a reference for design thinking tools.

### **Labs and Hubs**

In 2007, The Social Innovation Lab for Kent, in the United Kingdom, proposed its own methodology called *SILK*, which covered three main areas within the *design for social innovation* field: Strategy and Policy, Service Re-design, and Creating Sustainable Communities. They

introduced an idea for breaking down the projects into: Initiate, Create, Test and Define. In addition, they put together a collection of methodologies in their *SILK Method (card) Deck* (image 4), which can be used in projects by designers, researchers, and community experts. From 2009 to 2013, The Helsinki Design Lab (image 5) provided information, analysis and government oriented guidance on what they called “strategic design” - a design method that takes into account all the aspects of the design problem in order to provide better solutions for it. Even if they didn't not use the term social design they gave important consideration to communities, sustainability and design thinking: “re-examining, re-thinking, and redesigning the systems we've inherited from the past” (About HDL, 2009).

In a similar fashion, The Impact Design Hub (image 6) emerged in 2010 as an online platform that defines itself as “The online resource for people committed to designing a better world” (Impact Design Hub, n.d). Also, the website *Development Impact and You* (2014) (image 7), presents tools for the development of ideas that support social innovation, and a blog with related articles, references and case studies. They offer a free downloadable version of their printed toolkit as well. These online platforms/hubs are of particular importance to this project as they provide with useful information such as interviews, blog posts, news, job boards as well as diverse design thinking tools. Also, their platform can be used to gain insight into the building of a socially responsible graphic design online platform. Lastly, their integrative and open take on design aligns very closely to the one aimed at in this project.

## **Books**

Anne van der Zwaag 2014 book *Looks Good Feels Good Is Good - How social design Changes Our World*, intends to be an introduction into social design, where it is described as a practice that address “projects or products that are principally concerned with or for society” (p.13). It aims at inspiring and encouraging readers to take action. It is divided into five chapters that aim to broaden the boundaries of design applications in areas that the author identifies as “internationally urgent, relate to society, (...) and offer opportunities for an interdisciplinary approach” (p.17): Energy, Water, Waste, Food and Well-Being. Each chapter counts with a brief description of the theme, interviews, and varied case studies that goes from global scale projects to grassroots organizations. This book is of importance to this project as the author points out that

it is key for social design projects to be multidisciplinary and to present sustainable design solutions. Van der Zwaag also raises questions about the attitudes of designers towards social issues and what can they bring to the table. The book's main value to this project is the shared idea of seeing socially responsible design as a mindset rather than a discipline.

In the book *Design for Social Innovation in Canada*, Lorenzo Imbesi (2016) analyzes what is the role of the design discipline and the designer as a social agent for social innovation in Canada by collecting case studies and considering their methodologies as well their design process and final outcomes. Both books are valuable sources of information for this project as they both give understanding of case studies and present them in a well-planned, designed format.

All the cases above share similarities and core concepts such as: Design within communities, sustainability, multidisciplinary, open resources and design thinking tools. They all yield valuable information to this project insofar that, even if their main focus is on industrial design, they propose a comprehensive, human-centered approach that takes into consideration the social context of the design product/system, and they highlight the importance of designers' awareness and commitment with social issues that surrounds them.

## **Case studies on socially responsible graphic design**

### **Applied projects**

We Mean Business (2015) (image 8) was an advocacy, visual campaign done by New York's studio WeShouldDoItAll in collaboration with AIGA/NY and 3x3 studio. This campaign aimed to "enhance small businesses' awareness of current changes in the neighbourhood in face of rezoning measures and rapidly changing demographics; fast-track access to existing business development services offered by local non-profits, and eventually empower owners to unite as a merchant alliance" (We Mean Business Campaign, 2015). After conducting an immersive on-site research, designers proposed the launching of a visual campaign that aimed to provide awareness, access, and give voice to the community. This project is a good example of how graphic design can engage with and within communities and, in this case, foster collaboration for positive neighborhood change. By providing the community with diverse graphic design pieces (logo, posters, flyers, website and workshops) that truly resonated with their needs and their

context, We mean Business succeeded in engaging with their audience, to the point that members of the community volunteered to be “the faces” of the campaign.

## **Books**

In the book *Do Good Design*, David Berman (2009) delves deep into design’s role in environmental, economic and social problems of the modern world, and he calls deceptive advertisings “weapons of mass deception” (p.4). Berman then urges designers to take responsibility, mainly by proposing sustainable design approaches. He also introduces a “do good pledge” divided into categories:

“Immediacy: The time to commit is now

Ethics: ‘I will be true to my profession’

Principles: ‘I will be true to myself’

Effort: ‘I will spend at least 10 percent of my professional time helping repair the world”

(p.146).

Aligned with Berman’s idea, *The Design Activist’s Handbook* (2012) presents itself as a handbook for how to make a difference with Design, and how designers can address social issues. It analyzes the term socially conscious design, defining it as a commitment to make conscious choices in the whole design process. The books also provide the reader with a set of design thinking tools, resources and interviews that can help to understand and/or pursue a socially conscious design career. In addition, in *Design for Social Change*, Andrew Shea (2012) also proposes diverse courses of action to tackle down socially engaged projects with a graphic design focus, arguing that by carrying them out, a designer can achieve a better, more socially involved outcome. The author focus on ten main steps which are:

1. Immerse yourself
2. Build trust
3. Promise only what you can deliver
4. Prioritize process
5. Confront controversy
6. Identify the community’s strengths
7. Utilize local resources
8. Design with the community’s voice

9. Give communities ownership
10. Sustained Engagement

All three books supply the reader with diverse design thinking tools, advice, and room for self-awareness, which are of relevance to this project as they could be used as starting points in the development of practical tools for addressing mindful and proactive attitudes within the graphic design practice.

*The interventionists* (2004) is a collection of different projects for social advocacy in the form of a handbook. The collection of works is organized by the artist's modus operandi: mobile projects, action on public places, fashion or political impact and pedagogy and theory. With this book the authors do not aim to indoctrinate but to propose useful tools to create new social actions and to generate further discussions on the issue. With a similar approach, *Truth is concrete* (2014) is a handbook of strategies for politically involved art projects along with a website that serves as a repository. The book outlines diverse projects by artists from all over the world that engage with social activism, and addresses issues such as the intersections of art and activism, and if art can be used as a tool to create conditions for social change. For the purpose of this project, the most valuable asset from these books is the idea of bringing together artists from across the world to problematize on social matters in a participatory fashion, and then to put into graphic expressions.

### **Hubs and websites**

From a digital perspective, diverse organizations provide with the useful idea of a digital sharing hub with a graphic design focus and thus serving as models for the development of *Damn Right Design*. One is *Design Ignites Change* (2010) (image 9), an American organization that promotes and supports projects that aim to improve the lives of individuals and communities through Design. They count with several programs: awards, scholarships, workshops, sponsorships and mentoring. This case is a great example of how graphic design can be used as a medium to address social needs, not only by supporting projects of that nature, but also by giving the opportunity to people who may be interested in using their abilities to join in. Similar to *Design Ignites Change*, *Aiga's Design for Good* (2011) (image 10) is a platform by The American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA), that promotes the application of design thinking for social needs, by

supporting and connecting designers with online sources, networking tools, promotions and events. Similarly, *Making the City* (2015) (image 11) is how New York's chapter of the AIGA advocates for Design within the city's civic and cultural life. With both long and short-term participatory projects, *Making the City* engages designers in shaping their city through public exhibitions, designer-led community charrettes, creative placemaking projects, and public programs. *Making the City* particularly relates to the development of this project as it serves as reference for a meeting point where designers can come together, it offer open spaces to share and get involved in projects for their community.

### **Social organizations**

Adbusters is a Canadian non-profit organization of artists, activists, educators and entrepreneurs. Since 1989 they have been publishing an independent print magazine that aims to promote anti-consumerist, anti-capitalist behaviour. They define themselves as "the unwavering voice of dissent in a media landscape plagued by corporate interests" (Support Adbusters, n.d). In 2011, they initiated a protest movement called Occupy Wall Street, (image 12) against corruption and social and economic inequality. They made an open call to design posters with a dissent approach and submit them to their website. The posters were available for download (Adbusters: Occupy Wallstreet, 2011) and Adbusters urged people to go to the streets and tape them up everywhere. Aligned with the notions discussed in *The First Things First Manifesto* (1964) (image 13), Occupy Design London (2012) (image 14) is a movement that argues that Design and designers can play a major role in society, and thus they can and must act politically. Hence, they urge designers to stop contributing to the consumerism culture and to take an active part of discussions and actions on the world's challenges and crises. Some of their projects involve poster production (image 15) and free distribution, workshops and talks. "We cannot not change the world. Occupy Design! Designers for Occupy!" (Occupy Design UK, n.d). They also have a website that collects the posters from the Occupy Movement. Both Adbusters and Occupy Design London are interesting examples on how an organization engages with social issues and uses graphic design as a medium to support their activism through various formats (print, web, social actions) and also to raise discussions about the relation between design and social issues.



## Summary

After analyzing the origins and definitions of *social design* I have come to the conclusion that the term itself is problematic, and that is why I would rather call it *socially responsible design*. As seen in the literature above, it can be concluded that socially responsible design entails 1) an attitude towards design such as being mindful of design's impact and power in addressing social causes, and 2) a way of practicing, such as following certain steps or using toolkits from design thinking that would help get a better understanding of the social context in which the socially responsible design project is taking place. While not all the cases seen above share the same term to define their field of practice (design revolution, design for social innovation, impact design, design activism, design for social change, etc.), it is evident that much has already been done and discussed around the notions of socially responsible design, both for industrial and graphic design. But there is still a need for a platform that provides graphic designers and graphic design enthusiasts down-to-earth, hands-on material to get into an introspective journey in order to become more aware and mindful of the graphic design discipline and its impact in society when working with not for profit organizations.

The above reviews have provided me with key concepts and principles that should be considered while designing *Damn Right Design* creative platform, such as: the idea of activating / embracing public participation, social advocacy, designers' awareness and engagement with their social context, and sustainability. Instead of trying to "fix" the world, we can start by trying to "fix" our own discipline. We have to understand we are not really in power to "fix" anything, but we have to acknowledge our ability to enable, activate or catalyze spaces/moments of encounter among social actors that try to improve our communities. Graphic designers can provide a wide array of useful skills to help in this regard, because visual communication is fundamental for the success of any strategy aiming at the social good; but we have to actually realize that, and own up to our potential. By articulating this theoretical framework along with the following design thinking methodology, this thesis seek to create design elements that would aim to provide educational and practical tools to reflect on the social responsibilities of graphic design and how to apply socially responsible graphic design. Also, the design of a sharing digital website/platform that could serve both as a repository of the aforementioned tools and a virtual space of dialogue where graphic designers and design enthusiasts can intermix their views and ideas.

## **STAGE TWO: DESIGN THINKING FOR SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE GRAPHIC DESIGN**

### **Overview**

This section explains what is in the toolbox of this thesis project, which identifies design thinking methods for the understanding and applying socially responsible graphic design. Here I argue that design thinking methods can move away from their business-like ends and be used when applying socially responsible graphic design. By examining the role of the graphic designer in a society along with the notions of participatory design, open design, and graphic design responsibilities, I propose a shift in the role of the graphic designer from a distant problem-solver to an engaged articulator of the needs of the participants involved in community or social goals, by using design thinking tools.

### **Design thinking**

Design thinking is a methodology that focuses on a human-centered, empathic and integrative approach to problem solving. Its most prominent characteristics are the combination of analytical and creative thinking techniques, its collaborative nature, the importance given to the design process, and iterative prototyping (Curedale, 2013). Early discussions on design thinking date to 1987 in Peter Rowe's publication of a book with the same title (Kimbell, 2011). The term nonetheless started gaining a significant momentum around and outside the Design discipline thanks to *IDEO* company, an American design and consulting firm that has been involved with socially responsible industrial design projects, and his CEO Tim Brown, and Roger Martin from the *Rotman School of Management* in Toronto. Both of them have been important actors in promoting design thinking tools with a corporative/business profile. However, Lucy Kimbell (2011) says that those views on design thinking are too vague and constraining because: a) they don't really propose an in-depth research on the final users and their environment, b) puts the designer as the main agent in the final product, and c) the final product ends up being too shallow and superficial. She moves away from the corporate business model to what she calls "Design-as-practice" and "Designs-in-practice" (p.134). These concepts acknowledge the work of the professional practice of Design and the importance of the people that are implicated in the design process (employees, end users, organizations, customers, etc.), while also highlight the "incomplete nature of the process and outcomes of designing" (p.135).

These ideas are of critical importance to understand the role of design and designers in society, and to analyze the meaning of socially responsible graphic design; they situate the designer in a dialogic, collaborative exchange with other key players in the design process, opposed to the idea of the designer as the unique/main voice (Bush, 2003). These concepts add on to the notions of *participatory design*, which is based on a cooperative model of designing which requires the participation of the user to be completed (Armstrong, 2011), and to *open design*, which proposes a change of paradigm in the design industry and within the design culture toward a collaborative experience in order to overcome the control that's being imposed by the industry (Thackara, 2011). Marleen Stikker (2011) evaluates the agenda of open design and argues that more than a mere design trend, open design is a form disruption within industrial and political movements that control and privatize knowledge. It is about understanding what designers are doing when they make things, but it is also about the democratization of knowledge. In this context, Armstrong and Stojmirovic (2011) present and study the concepts of community, engagement and modularity in the context of participatory design projects, along its possibilities and implications, which allows them to address topics such as the design process, citizenship and engagement, authorship, and user participation.

Furthermore, Ratto and Boler (2014) suggest an understanding and reflection of the relationship between the maker and the things produced, and how these elements work together. This methodology, which they named *critical making*, could provide a look on graphic design not only as final product(s) or as an apparatus of the consumer culture, but also as a discipline capable of:

- a) Self-reflecting, in the sense of grasping the significations of what it produces and its relations to the viewer and the environment that surrounds it, and
- b) Understanding its production not as a static piece, but as a virtual space of dialogue, which will be completed, repurposed or even rejected by its readers. Additionally, Ratto and Boler explore the emergent communities of DIY (do-it-yourself) critical makers, people who are actively participate in their communities by means of making, repurposing and exchanging resources to shape, change, challenge or reconstruct their identities and their environments.

## Summary

Design thinking is an interesting methodology to be used in socially responsible graphic design projects because it provides with a great amount of tools that facilitate the design process with creative thinking techniques and its collaborative nature gives designers social context, which helps them to be aware of the impact of their products. Agreeing with Kimbell views', if design thinking moves away from its business oriented approach (which puts the designer as the main voice in a design product, and where no real engagement takes place between designers and all the agents involved in the design process), graphic designers can really benefit from using design thinking to get to understand their practice as something dialogic and dynamic.

*Damn Right Design* is a combination of all the concepts analyzed above. I believe that by introducing a model of hands-on learning while designing (critical making + participatory design), embracing the idea of openness (open design) and activating spaces of dialogue, *Damn Right Design* could offer a more open relation among graphic designers and those implicated in its products, and provide room for reflections on the role and responsibility of graphic designers within society.

## STAGE THREE: THE MAKING OF *DAMN RIGHT DESIGN*

### Overview

After conducting literature review and analysis of case studies in Stage One, and identifying possible design thinking tools in Stage Two, it was very important for the development of *Damn Right Design* to get a hands-on experience on a socially responsible graphic design project. This instance would provide me with insights about the practices and processes that take place in a project of this nature, as well as the dynamics of collaboration between the diverse actors of the design process. *Damn Right Design* is informed by the course *Impact! Design for Social Change* offered at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. This course consists on an immersive, hands-on, community visual communication project. I took this course in July 2016, and it was an experience of extreme relevance for this thesis and for the creation of *Damn Right Design*; it shed light on what elements graphic designers could use and benefit from to better understand our own practice in function to our audience. It also illuminated how to make mindful choices and how to get to know the people we are designing for and with. Agreeing with Lucy Kimbell (2011) and

Anne Bush (2003), I came to realize that, for a successful socially responsible graphic design project, there needs to be a shift in the role of the graphic designer, from a distant problem-solver to an committed articulator, and that there are design thinking tools such as participatory design, open design, critical making, that embrace this idea of co-creation, by situating the designer in a collaborative interchange with the public of the design process.

*Damn Right Design* then arises as my response to the critiques on graphic design and graphic designers' lack of self-awareness and their removed, problem-solver approach, and the need of a repository of design thinking tools for socially responsible graphic design projects. It is a call for changing the univocal, perfunctory, navel-gazing notion of graphic design, and to help in establishing graphic design's utility for organizations oriented toward different goals than profit. It proposes a creative platform to facilitate socially responsible graphic design, by encouraging graphic designers, graphic design students, and enthusiasts, to be daring to do the (damn) "right thing" in their creative work with socially oriented organizations. *Damn Right Design* consists on a creative, graphic-design focused platform that aims to educate, promote and facilitate mindful attitudes within the graphic design practice.

### **Objectives**

Considering this thesis' analysis on the critiques towards graphic design as a discipline that carries the blame of being superficial and soulless, and the belief that, in order to overcome those critiques, a change has to come from within by changing our mindsets, the objectives of *Damn Right Design* are:

- Provide spaces of reflection and provoke discussions on the meaning of socially responsible graphic design: understanding the power of visual skills to aid in projects of social nature (i.e. a project that helps to better communicate a problem within a particular community, as opposed to a project within a design firm to create a logo).
- Promote and facilitate the use of design thinking tools that activate and catalyze engagement of designers within the social context of their design project
- Propose a shift on the role of the graphic designer from problem solver to an activator of conditions for social exchange and interactions.

- Inquire into the potentials of graphic design as a tool for dialogue and as a voice for social needs that are currently not addressed by the market or the state.
- Bring to discussion the role of graphic designers in society.

### **Target audience**

As per the objectives described above, *Damn Right Design* seeks to raise awareness within the graphic design community; hence, the main target audience of this project are graphic designers and graphic design students. Because it also proposes a decentralization of the role of designers and embraces the idea of an open, participatory design process where visual communication is seen as a dynamic exchange, a secondary target audience is graphic design enthusiasts, and, for the engage-workshops component, also the actors of the communities in which the design projects take place.

### **Damn Right Design**

This creative platform consists of diverse components that aim to respond to this project's objectives. It is divided into four main categories:

#### 1. Educate

What is socially responsible graphic design, what is the role and importance of graphic design in a community project that addresses social issues?

#### 2. Activate

Design thinking tools that provide designers with human-centered and empathic approaches for their designs in a project that address social issues.

#### 3. Engage

Activities that promote open spaces for dialogue on socially responsible graphic design, how graphic design can be of use in communities, how can communities embrace some graphic design tools for their own social actions, etc.

#### 4. Share

Spaces of sharing knowledge, resources, material and promotion.

## Final designs

After analyzing the objectives and reviewing the categories in which the *Damn Right Design* platform is divided, I propose the design of products of varied mediums and formats: prompt cards, booklet, design workshops, social media campaign, website, cellphone application and launching campaign.

1. Prompt cards (image 16) designed to help start a conversation about the meanings, responsibilities and roles that graphic design and designers play in our society. The questions are divided in four categories (career, reflection and self-discovery, ethics, action and participation), each of them with a representative icon. Some cards cover more than one category at the time. There also blank cards to create own questions, and cards with ideas to pair up with the questions in the prompt cards. These cards can be used by interdisciplinary teams within a company, graphic designers, graphic design students, graphic design enthusiasts and they will be available for free download online. The player(s) simply start by choosing five cards from each category, read the prompt question(s), and reflect on possible answers. Additionally, they can find possible answers in the Ideas cards to pair up. They can write down and reflect on the answers as a group or individually.

2. Booklet / Toolkit (image 17) manual for applying socially responsible graphic design, which will also be available for free download online. This booklet aims to provide ideas, insights, resources and spaces of self-discovery, while working on socially responsible graphic design projects. The booklet has an introduction to *Damn Right Design*, and then counts with main points to consider and design thinking tools for each design stage: Plan, Execute, Implement and Iterate. It also provides with resources and blank spaces for the user to take notes and add comments. The collection of design thinking tools is from the literature review of the toolkits, books and hubs. The intention of the booklet is to help designers, design students or design enthusiasts to activate their ideas into actions of some sort. Maybe it's not a huge, well-known project, maybe it is not even about a project for others, but a project for their own self-discovery as what socially responsible graphic design means to them. The booklet emphasizes that the important thing is to start somewhere, and it is an invitation to "get active, embrace and reconcile with your (socially responsible) graphic designer self".

3. Design activities & workshops. These design activities seek to bring together interactions between the graphic design practice and non-designers, community members in which a design project can take place, as to provide them understanding of the fundamental qualities and uses that graphic design can provide as a tool for their social actions. The outline of these activities will also be available online for download.

4. Social media campaign is proposed to create a digital space of sharing. This allows *Damn Right Design* users to interact by sharing their related pictures/posts/tweets.

5. Website (image 18) as a container for *Damn Right Design* creative platform and its components. The website serves as a creative and sharing hub that provides with all the design items mentioned above available for download, additional resources and the possibility of sharing information in a blog section.

6. Similar to the website, the design of a cellphone application (image 19) is proposed to serve as a container for the creative platform and its components, making emphasis on to-go, easy-access tools to activating social design projects from a graphic design perspective.

7. Launching campaign with promotional and instructional pieces such as an explanatory video, posters, postcards, pins (image 20).

Finally, to be consistent with the ideas analyzed in this paper on the notions of Open Design, mindfulness and decentralization of the designer, typeface choices were made from open sources, using solely Google fonts. Regarding print material, because all the design materials will be available for free download/print at home, the formats for each were decided considering the printing facilities that can be found at any house (printer for letter size format maximum). Also, all the items were designed using just one ink to be more eco-friendly.

## **Summary**

I expect this project would help to shed some light into the meaning of what are the attitudes of graphic designers towards a non-commercial, socially engaged project, and on the role of



designers in helping social organizations/communities. I also hope that this project goes beyond being an ephemeral project and that actually helps to build knowledge in the area of socially responsible graphic design. More than being final products or formulas, *Damn Right Design* components are proposed as open starting points into inquiring the potentials of graphic design as a tool in such social causes. Even if it could be argued that tools like this one will leave graphic designers job-less, on the contrary, I hope projects like these could enrich the practice from within, in terms of both practice and education.

## **CONCLUSION AND FURTHER DIRECTIONS**

Graphic design has had a long-standing relation with different social goals. I argue that there is room in social design to bring onto the table discussions on the awareness of graphic designers of their cultural and societal context. I believe that for the social graphic design to establish itself as a relevant discipline, and for having a human-focused approach, it is key to address questions of its own nature first. What is social graphic design? seem to be the first question to appear when trying to explain the field. But in the development of this project, I realized that the question that needs to be raised first is: what are the attitudes of designers when facing a visual communication project? and also, are designers aware of their own abilities and skills? and how valuable could those skills be for a non-commercial, socially engaged project?

Additionally, after analyzing the term *social design*, I believe that it can lead to confusion, as it is just too broad. By calling it social (graphic) design we are not saying much, because all design is inherently social, namely, oriented toward others' conducts. Hence, I claim that *socially responsible graphic design* is a more accurate term for this area of practice, as the area of focus should be on the responsibilities and impact of the graphic design practice within society, through its collaboration with organizations whose objective is not necessarily profit. Thus, I strongly believe that the discipline benefits by implementing projects like *Damn Right Design*, in which graphic designers have the opportunity to reflect on their role. This project doesn't aim to measure or judge how "social" are you as a designer, or to teach technical/aesthetic aspects on how to design, but to generate a space of dialogue and self-discovery in order to promote a change of mindset, to encourage designers to engage with their communities, and offer the useful skills they possess. This goes beyond being commercial-oriented and shallow.

I was able to identify a design solution of a creative platform that contemplates the provision of (free download) educating, activating, and sharing tools on the subject. This design solution, *Damn Right Design*, addresses both aspects of socially responsible graphic design: the attitudes towards design by providing self-reflecting tools and activities, and how to practice it by giving directions on how to use design thinking tools in a mindful way. I believe *Damn Right Design* strength resides in the fact that it provides questions or open-ended statements and interactive activities instead of fixed answers (or do's and don'ts). Also, opposite to the majority of case studies reviewed, *Damn Right Design* doesn't pose graphic designers as the problem-solvers that will come and save the day with a sort of exogenous, unengaged participation, but as active members of a community that have knowledge and technical skills that could help raise awareness on social issues deemed important by community organizations.

How well this platform would actually perform in terms of user attraction, engagement, and interaction are questions that remain open, as the project is still at a beginning stage.

Although this project addresses questions such as what are the social implications of graphic design, attitudes, responsibilities and impact in society, further endeavours will entail inquiring about the possibilities of graphic design as the converging point in projects that entail bringing the community closer, or projects that bring to the attention certain aspects of a community that needs to be addressed, changed, or even praised.

It would also be interesting to expand each category of action within this platform by adding different design materials/activities. This could be implemented also with an open, collective approach, where users of the platform would suggest to aggregate specific content or materials. Once people eventually join in the creative platform, and bring in their own ideas and discussions, it would be interesting to propose the creation of real meeting-points within diverse geographical points, where people interested in bringing about social change in their community can gather and use the tools provided in *Damn Right Design* creative platform as starting points for their projects.

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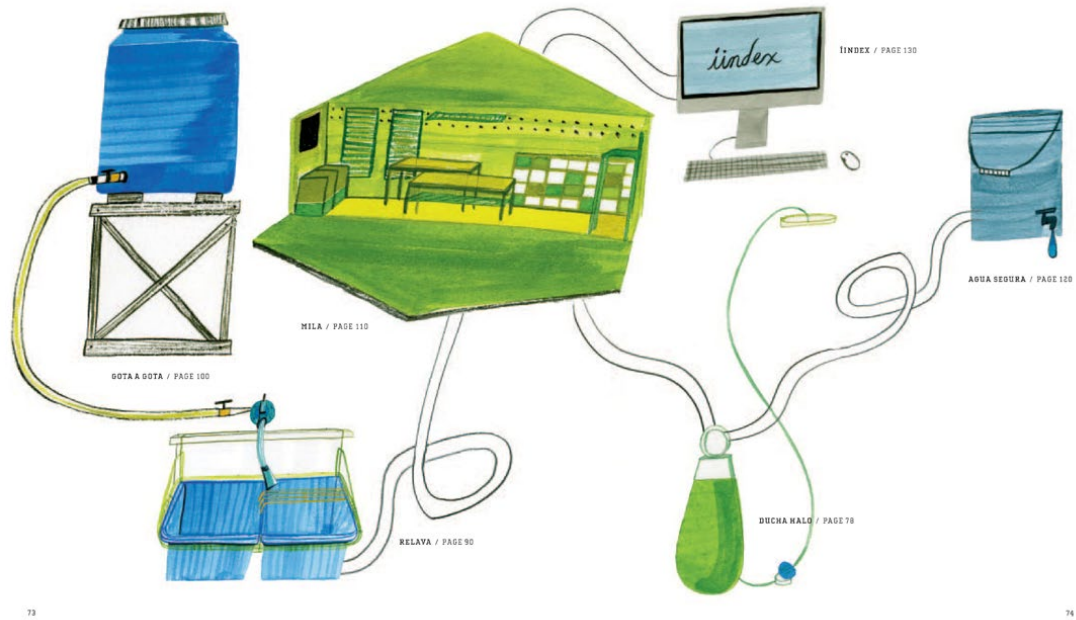
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## APPENDIX

Image 1



Safe Agua project

Image 2



The Design Revolution Toolkit

Image 3



**HOW MIGHT YOU...**

**...MODIFY THE WAY YOU WORK?**

**...EDUCATE OTHERS?**

**...DEVELOP NETWORKS?**

**...IDENTIFY FUNDING STREAMS?**

**...MODIFY YOUR STRUCTURE?**

---

*IDEO Toolkit*

Image 4



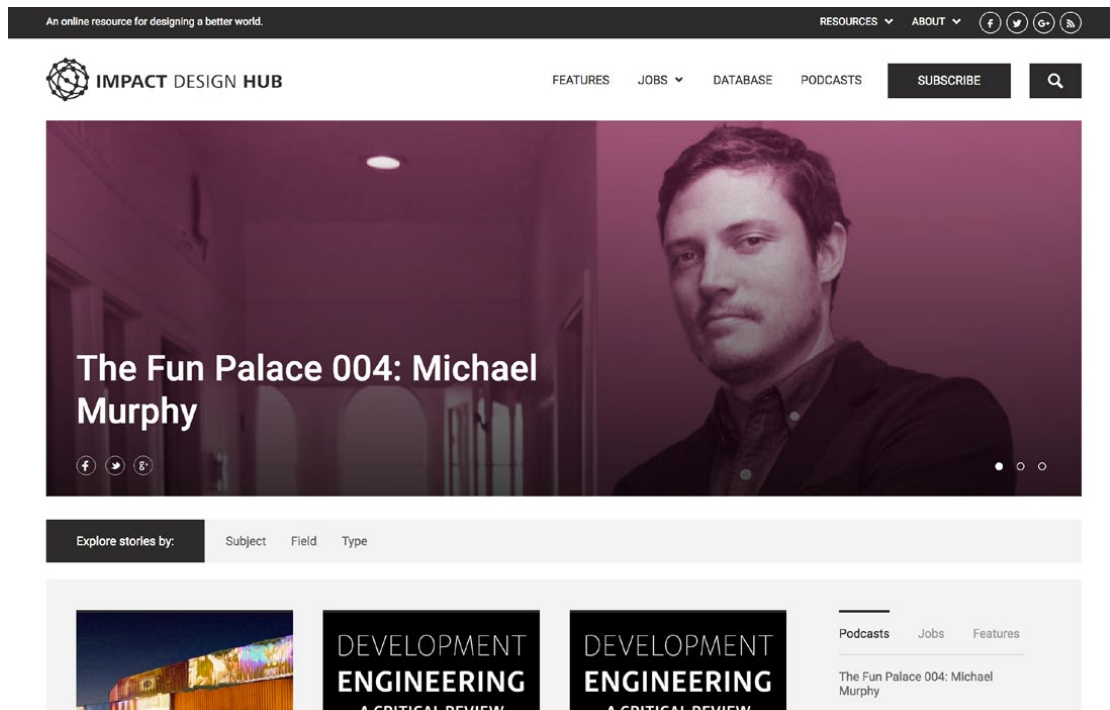
*SILK Method Card Deck*

Image 5



The Helsinki Design Lab

Image 6



Impact Design Hub



Image 7

EN - SUBSCRIBE Tw Fb G+

**DIY** Development Impact & You

PRactical TOOLS TO TRIGGER & SUPPORT SOCIAL INNOVATION

TOOLS | BLOG | ABOUT | BACKGROUND | DIY LEARN

**FIND YOUR TOOL**

The DIY Toolkit has been especially designed for development practitioners to invent, adopt or adapt ideas that can deliver better results.

FIND OUT MORE

Four small colored squares (red, white, white, white) at the bottom.

Development Impact & You

Image 8

A collection of posters for the 'We Mean Business' campaign. The top row features five portraits of diverse individuals with their names and short quotes. The bottom row features four posters with the following text:

- WE MEAN BUSINESS EAST NEW YORK UNITE TO STAY**
- WE LIVE HERE. WE WORK HERE. WE ARE HERE.**

Other posters include a checklist: 'Grow your biz', 'Learn to promote your biz', 'Know how to recruit here in ENY', 'Understand renters/owners rights', and 'Know the changing zoning rules'. Each poster includes the 'WE MEAN BUSINESS' logo and the 'ENY' logo.

We Mean Business campaign

Image 9

**DESIGN IGNITES CHANGE**

**Creativity holds enormous power to spark positive social change.**  
Through a range of initiatives, we support creative professionals and college students, who want to use their abilities to improve the lives of individuals and communities.

Founded by worldstudio social initiatives

**SYLVIA HARRIS  
CITIZEN  
DESIGN AWARD**

Awarding a design project that enhances public life.

Explore our original website, an archive of our activities from 2009–2016: we have provided over \$135,000 in social design awards; created mentoring programs and workshops; offered visibility for over 650 project case studies from 74 schools; provided non-profit status to organizations through our

[ARCHIVE SITE 2009–2016](#)  
[SUMMARY PDF](#)  
[CONTACT](#)

Design Ignites Change

Image 10

**AIGA** the professional association for design

[BELONG](#) [PROGRAMS](#) [DESIGN](#) [RESOURCES](#) [EVENTS](#) [ABOUT](#)

## Design for Good

*Filed Under: Tools and Resources, social issues, pro bono*

**AIGA design for good.**

**Design for Good is a movement to ignite, accelerate, and amplify design-driven social change.**  
As of 2016, AIGA reinstates its commitment to public good, social impact, and civic engagement by

### Design for Good resources

**JOIN NOW!**

**Follow @AIGAdesign on Twitter**

eldarbek89gcha (Vanessa Butler) RT @AIGAdesign: Best Time to Get Work Done? Here's #AIGAdesign Presenting Sponsor @CreativeGroup's infographic <http://t.co/CxGyDPRZ> <http://t.co/CxGyDPRZ> <http://t.co/CxGyDPRZ> 2 days ago

### Case Study: The Donkey Sanctuary Identity System

**From the Blogs**

City of art: Nathalie Du Pasquier's comprehensive solo show in Vienna  
Posted by July 15, 2016 From Wallpaper\* News Feed

**From the archives**

AIGA Design for Good

Image 11

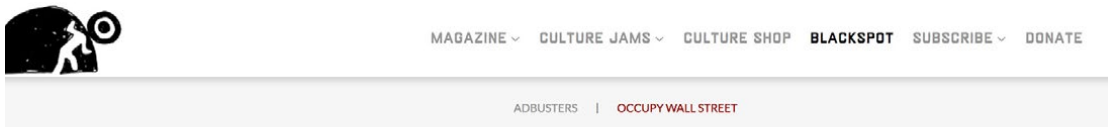


Current Initiatives



AIGA NY Making The City

Image 12



**The joyous freedom of possibility.**

Adbuster's Occupy Wallstreet website

Image 13

**first  
things  
first**

**A manifesto**

We, the undersigned, are graphic designers, photographers and students who have been brought up in a world in which the techniques and apparatus of advertising have persistently been presented to us as the most lucrative, effective and desirable means of using our talents. We have been bombarded with publications devoted to this belief, applauding the work of those who have flogged their skill and imagination to sell such things as:

cat food, stomach powders, detergent, hair restorer, striped toothpaste, aftershave lotion, before-shave lotion, slimming diets, fattening diets, deodorants, fizzy water, cigarettes, roll-ons, pull-ons and slip-ons.

By far the greatest time and effort of those working in the advertising industry are wasted on these trivial purposes, which contribute little or nothing to our national prosperity.

In common with an increasing number of the general public, we have reached a saturation point at which the high pitched scream of consumer selling is no more than sheer noise. We think that there are other things more worth using our skill and experience on. There are signs for streets and buildings, books and periodicals, catalogues, instructional manuals, industrial photography, educational aids, films, television features, scientific and industrial publications and all the other media through which we promote our trade, our education, our culture and our greater awareness of the world.

We do not advocate the abolition of high pressure consumer advertising: this is not feasible. Nor do we want to take any of the fun out of life. But we are proposing a reversal of priorities in favour of the more useful and more lasting forms of communication. We hope that our society will tire of gimmick merchants, status salesmen and hidden persuaders, and that the prior call on our skills will be for worthwhile purposes. With this in mind, we propose to share our experience and opinions, and to make them available to colleagues, students and others who may be interested.

Edward Wright  
Geoffrey White  
William Slack  
Caroline Rawlence  
Ian McLaren  
Sam Lambert  
Ivor Kamlish  
Gerald Jones  
Bernard Highton  
Brian Grimby  
John Garner  
Ken Garland  
Anthony Froshaug  
Robin Fler  
Germano Facetti  
Ivan Dodd  
Harriet Crowder  
Anthony Clift  
Gerry Cinamon  
Robert Chapman  
Ray Carpenter  
Ken Briggs

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First Things First Manifesto

Image 14

expects parameter 1 to be array, object given in /home/occupydesign/occupydesign.org.uk/wp-content/plugins/bbpress/includes/core/template-functions.p

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Image 15



Occupy Design London poster production

Image 16



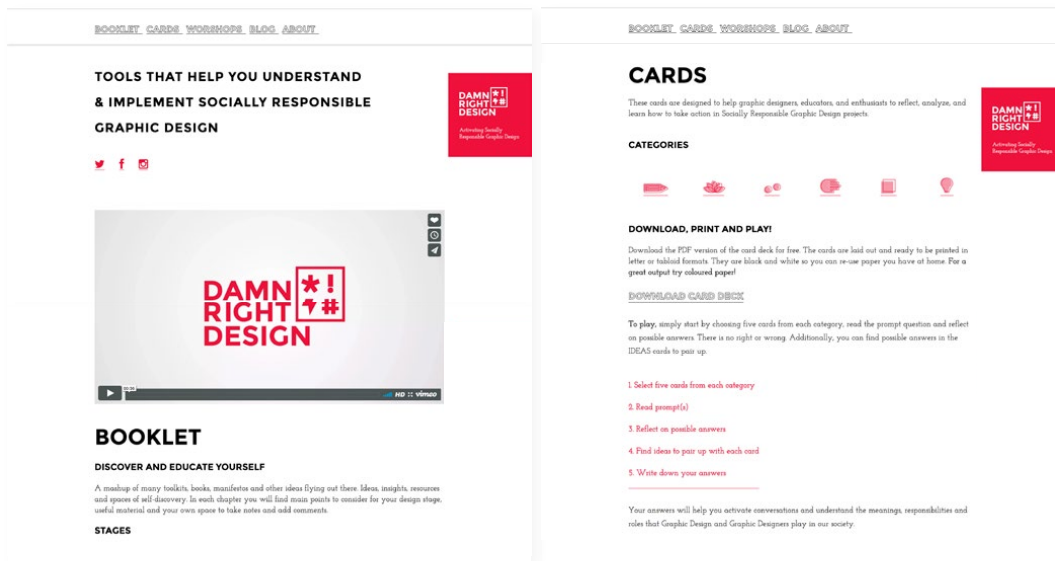
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Image 17



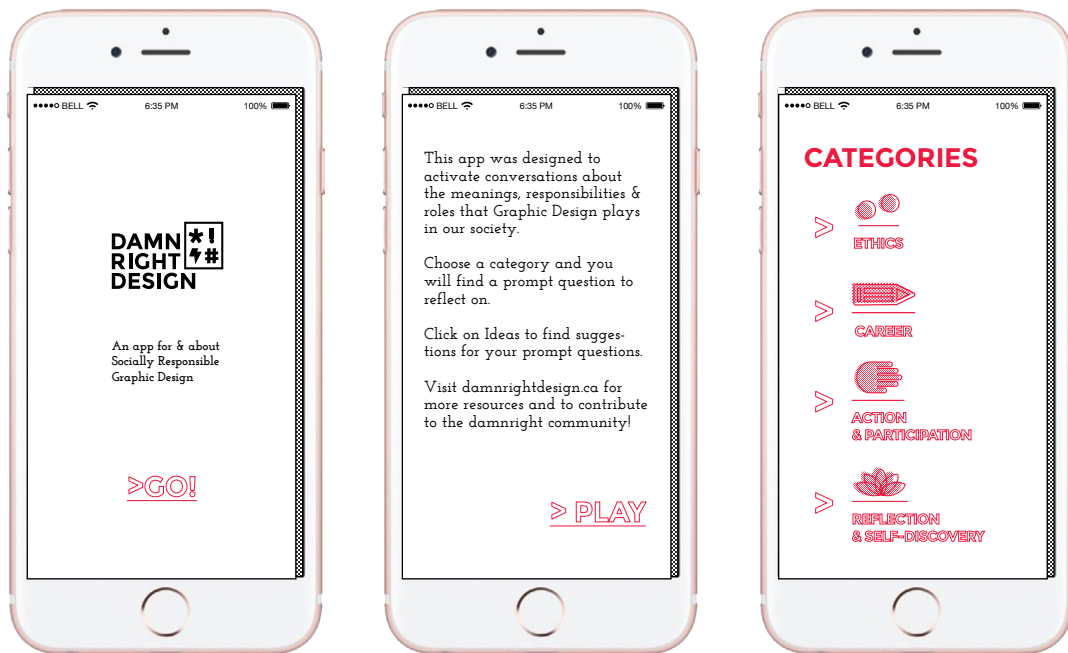
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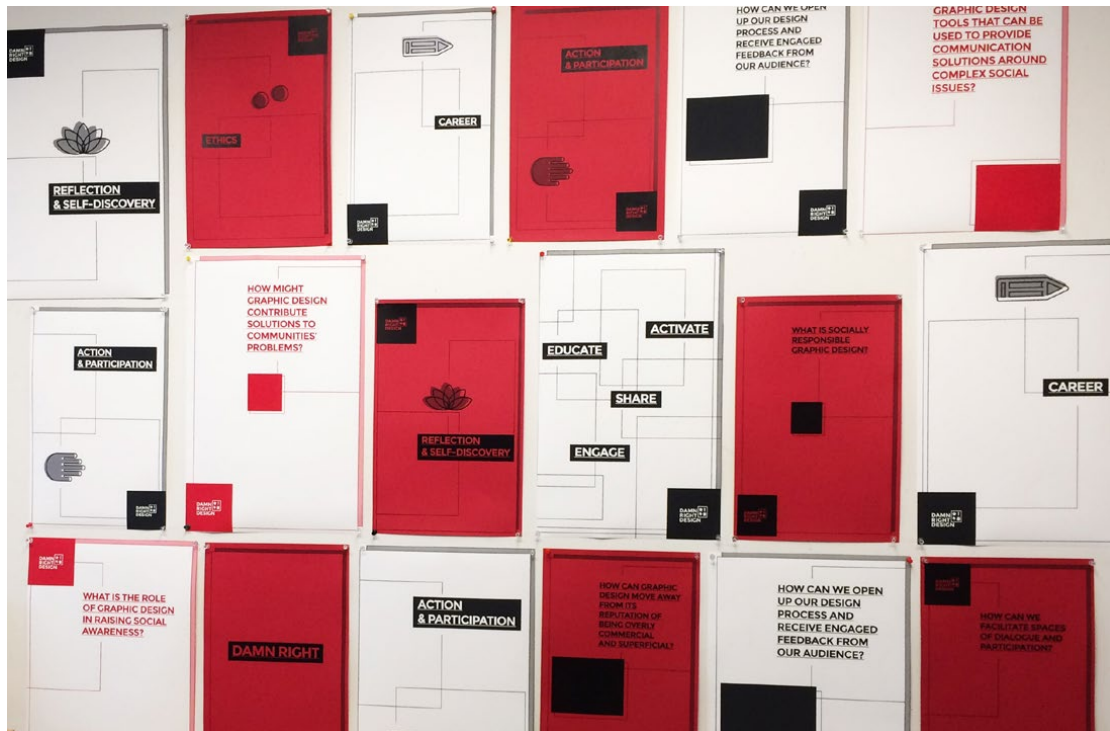
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Image 19



Damn Right Design phone application

Image 20



Damn Right Design launching campaign posters