

QUARTERLY OF THE INDUSTRIAL DESIGNERS SOCIETY OF AMERICA **WINTER 2016**

# INNOVATION



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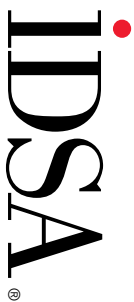


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Creativity in Crisis. See page 32.



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The quarterly publication of the Industrial Designers Society of America (IDSA), INNOVATION provides in-depth coverage of design issues and long-term trends while communicating the value of design to business and society at large.





# STORYTELLING IS MORE THAN ART

**R**eluctant acceptance. That's how it starts. A well-meaning individual does not initially want to go on the journey but is convinced either by other well-meaning individuals or, if the story is really tense, by not-so-well-meaning individuals. And so it begins. Next comes the meeting of the guru. Or is it the mentor? No matter, this adviser demonstrates the individual's potential and gives the hero some advice and also usually some kind of tool. Think of Yoda and the lightsaber, or is it Obi-Wan and the Force?

No matter, it's not that important to be precise, but rather to focus on getting the broad strokes in place and the rest will come. Now we start to climb. Usually a trek through something challenging, a forest, a virtual landscape or a mental barrier, enduring anywhere from a little to a lot of exertion with obstacles that are spaced out or condensed—that's the variable storytellers use to keep things interesting and unique. Still, like form follows function, the principles always apply and can be recognized if you look hard enough.

When Prasad Boradkar, IDSA, thought of this theme for an issue of INNOVATION, I was super excited. This tool of storytelling has been making itself known in the design world in recent years in many different and spectacular ways. Also, the changes that abound in the design world point to the stories to come. There are many: autonomous cars, virtual reality tools, design firms being acquired right and left in dramatic fashion by larger entities seeking the power of design thinking. Yes, many stories coming indeed. Now, where were we? Ah, yes...

A trek through adversity. Any kind. In Hollywood the big challenge is in coming up with new and unfamiliar landscapes because the same stories have been told so many times. Murder mystery, yes! But how about a murder mystery on a space ship headed to Mars? Then there it is—the achievement. Some kind of achievement our protagonist has accomplished—what they set out to do. Cause for celebration, right? Not so fast. Next comes the fall. Oh, it's always there—some kind of disaster, a recognition of facts that were hidden or unknown and then revealed, changing the landscape in a spectacular way.

Let's hope the story of design in this new century sees only a minor fall, or, better yet, that it takes a really long time for us to get there. That's the variable, right? I'm pulling for midcentury just like in the last one when midcentury design was recognized for its prowess and power, for its game-changing impact and its keen understanding of human need. Then came the '70s and '80s—the fall.

Here's the thing about the fall. It teaches. The hero learns and becomes aware. The second journey begins in earnest. The next rise is an informed one, depending on how much the storyteller wants to let the audience in on the ending. Sometimes the ending comes as a surprise; sometimes it makes perfect sense. Always in a good story it is very satisfying. That's why they call it the "elixir." Well, I guess to be precise that's what Joseph Campbell called it. Joseph John Campbell, that is, born March 26, 1904. He was an American mythologist, writer and lecturer, best known for his work in outlining the narrative I am writing about, what he called the "Hero's Journey," what arguably every Hollywood movie uses as a narrative for storytelling. George Lucas was the first Hollywood filmmaker to credit Campbell's influence, following the release of the first *Star Wars* film in 1977, whose story was shaped, in part, by ideas described in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and other works of Campbell's.

So it turns out that storytelling, even great storytelling, is not an art, but rather a tool that can be used and understood and varied and applied. And a tool that generates a consistency in its application. Many people are surprised to hear this, thinking that every good story is original. For design, I think it's an exceptional realization because stories are sticky. People remember what you did, how that product or service played out—as the great poet Maya Angelou said, people remember how you made them feel. Stories do that, and designers need to tell more stories, especially in the moment we find ourselves in, in this moment of great change. Who knows what might happen, what's the elixir to come in the decades ahead? I, for one, am pretty positive that this story ends well.

—Mark Dzierski, FIDSA, INNOVATION Executive Editor  
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**By Prasad Boradkar, IDSA and Lee Gutkind**

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**Prasad Boradkar**, industrial design professor at Arizona State University (ASU), is currently serving as design lead on a project at Google ATAP in Mountain View, CA. He is the author of *Designing Things: A Critical Introduction to the Culture of Objects* and is working on a book on Indian design. ■ **Lee Gutkind**, recognized by *Vanity Fair* as “the Godfather behind creative nonfiction,” is the author or editor of more than 30 books and founder and editor of *Creative Nonfiction*. He is a distinguished writer-in-residence in the Consortium for Science, Policy & Outcomes at ASU and a professor in the School for the Future of Innovation in Society.

# DESIGNING NARRATIVE | NARRATING DESIGN

**T**here’s a design to every story and a story in every design. True storytellers must think design—and designers must think story. This was our motivation when we began soliciting ideas and selecting stories for this special issue of INNOVATION. It may seem like writing and designing are two totally different professions. And in many ways that might be true, especially when you consider the end result: words for people to read or products for consumers to use. But we are also on the same page, especially in the beginning. Writers and designers are both motivated, inspired and defined by story. Without an overall story—what we call a narrative structure or arc—we may not connect with and serve our audience, whether they be readers or consumers.

We shape our world through stories. Interestingly, we also shape our world by design. The stories we tell and the things we design fashion our world, and these stories and things in turn fashion us, making us who we are. We know there’s a living visible structure to design. It’s all in what we see, feel and sense in the spaces we occupy and in most things we need and use—products like furniture, cooking utensils, athletic equipment, medical devices, etc. And the creation of these items and ideas begins and ends with story—precipitated by an obvious need or a problem perceived. The story is the primary motivating event that leads to design and innovation.

There’s also a structure to true storytelling, what is referred to as creative nonfiction—a design not only in the way it is crafted but also in the way it is created, the process from start to finish. And yet, designers rarely work with experienced storytellers. Although storytellers may from time to time write about design and designers, they most often report on rather than participate in the process. We believe that designers and storytellers can learn from one another and significantly enhance their writing and design work as a team.

The processes of designing and writing are remarkably similar. In some ways, writers are sculptors—or designers. Writers gather material in various ways and put all of the relevant stuff together before beginning the slow and challenging process of giving it a form—a shape—cutting, pasting, adding and taking away. Designers similarly generate a large number of ideas, and then a process of evaluation starts so that the most promising solutions can be selected for further development. This is often done by comparing new designs (often in the form of drawings and models) against a set of such criteria as beauty, functionality, usability, sustainability and so on.

## **Storytelling in Design**

In the past decade, designers have been exhibiting a growing interest in the power of storytelling. Human-centered design builds its methodology and goals on the conviction that design should emerge from people’s real needs; new products and services need to address the human condition rather than productize a technology or merely fill a market gap. New design solutions must have a meaningful impact on the daily lives of ordinary people. And in order to be able





Illustration by Minhua Zhu

to create new designs for products that can enrich people's lives, designers engage in ethnographic research to understand the habits, rituals, likes, dislikes, motivations—the culture—of individuals and social groups.

Stories are fundamental to human culture. We, as people, have been telling stories, listening to them, writing them down and passing them on to future generations for as long as we have been alive as a species, a community, a society and a culture. Therefore, stories can not only be highly effective in helping us understand people's cultural needs to generate designs but also in explaining how new designs can become a part of culture.

It is by paying close attention to and analyzing narratives of people's daily routines that designers can truly understand what people's needs are and how might they best be addressed by design. Therefore, in the design process, it is imperative that stories of people's lives be recorded and products be designed around them.

However, our goal with this issue of INNOVATION is not to explain how designers can or should use storytelling during the various stages of the design process; instead, our intent is to bring to you, the reader, a few stories of design written as creative nonfiction.

### The Design of Stories

Just as storytelling can play a critical role in design, a design exists in stories as well. There's a definite structure to true storytelling/creative nonfiction, which can best be described as *true stories well told*. Writers have to think about the shape and structure of the piece they are writing. They have to think about the way architects might look at a bridge or industrial designers might look at a product. The architect might see all the ways in which pedestrians might stroll across the bridge or lean on the balustrade; the industrial designer will see how a consumer might pick up a device and fiddle with the controls. But these designers also see the blueprints of the structure—how it all comes together, phase by phase and piece by piece. So too with writers. There's a structure to creative nonfiction—a shape. The shape will usually help define the story and at the same time pinpoint the words to be edited and sharpened and those to be eliminated.

The words "creative" and "nonfiction" describe the form. "Creative" refers to the use of literary craft, the techniques fiction writers, playwrights and documentary film-

makers employ to present nonfiction—factually accurate prose about real people and events—in a compelling, vivid, dramatic manner. The goal is to make nonfiction stories read like fiction so that readers are as enthralled by fact as they are by fantasy.

For this issue, we asked our contributors to present their stories as creative nonfiction. The idea of a story is critical to creative nonfiction, and, therefore, each essay, you will see, has been told in the form of a story. The authors do not present mere information; they tell stories. And one of the most effective techniques by which to tell stories through writing is to create scenes. A scene is a vivid, detailed description of an event that captures the attention of the reader. The scene is one of the primary building blocks of creative nonfiction. Often, the scene is followed by information that is critical for readers to know so that the story can move along.

The chart demonstrates the structure of a creative nonfiction essay organized into scenes, information and scenes embedded with information. The goal for creative nonfiction is to have as many scenes and scenes embedded with information as possible.

As you will discover, the authors in this issue of INNOVATION are storytellers, and we hope you find as much delight in reading their stories as we have. Joel Kashuba starts us off with a story of growing up as a



designer/researcher in a large corporation trying to figure out what is important, relevant and meaningful to consumers. In doing so, he also offers us insights into how to pull off a research project on a shoestring budget. Isabela Sa's story of letting users really guide design helps us realize how to be humble and enable our audience to become designers themselves. In the third essay, Caroline Tiger, A/IDSA, discusses, as we do in this introduction, the similarities between writing and design through her experience in teaching a course on object stories. Suzanne Gibbs Howard discusses her successes and struggles in bringing about unexpected change by design. By unexpected change she means not only extending the impact of design beyond the expected scale but also enabling others to gain creative confidence. By drawing inspiration from nature in the design of an orphanage in Haiti, architect Tom Knittel

walks us through his process of being creative under conditions of extreme crisis. Lauren Harms, in her essay about the design of book covers, examines how the rules of accuracy that apply to nonfiction writers extend to the design of the cover. Whether a novel or nonfiction, a cover design must accurately represent the story through type, image and layout. Shea Tillman, IDSA, guides us through the work of designer John Stram, L/IDSA, whose humility and matter-of-fact approach to design as solving problems led to some remarkable designs for companies like IBM. And finally, we get to hear about a budding industrial designer by the name of Steven Umbach, IDSA, who in his dogged pursuit of landing an internship during the summer of 1978 runs into some luminaries we know very well today.

This is creative nonfiction written about design by designers. ■





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