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Shashi Caan is an internationally recognised and acclaimed multidisciplinary designer, educator, and author dedicated to advancing human betterment through design. With over 25 years of experience, her work highlights design's transformative power to elevate life quality. She is the Founder and leader of SC COLLECTIVE, an innovative structured design firm, and the Founder and President of Globally We Design (GloWD), an independent design futures think-tank. Through her ReDesignEd Educators Forum, she facilitated the Universal Design Education Charter (2018) and The Johannesburg Declaration (2019). Previously, she served as Associate Partner and Design Director at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) in New York and as Chair of Interior Design at Parsons, The New School for Design.

In volunteer service to the design profession, Shashi serves as an Executive Committee member and Chief Executive Officer on the Board of the International Federation of Interior

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Her past volunteer leadership includes numerous board and executive roles, including with the United Nations Association (UNA).

RECLAIMING THE DESIGNER: FROM BASICS TO FUTURES

Shashi Caan

Abstract

As digital tools proliferate and design becomes increasingly democratised, the discipline faces an existential challenge: the erosion of expertise in favour of curatorial aesthetics. This paper argues that true design mastery demands a return to foundational principles of light, colour, and form, while purposefully integrating emerging technologies. Tracing the historical trajectory of design from craft to a rigorous discipline, it examines the Bauhaus legacy and its enduring impact on contemporary practice.

Today's digital shift risks reducing designers to curators rather than creators, necessitating a reframing of pedagogy and professional practice. The paper critiques the limitations of traditional Design Thinking and advocates for an evolved framework, one that moves away from the 'T-model' of specialisation to a 'Tree model' that strengthens shared foundational knowledge. It asserts that designers must reclaim their creative agency, distinguishing themselves from curators by shaping rather than merely organising visual and spatial experiences.

With current technological capabilities, if designers cannot only maintain but deepen their analog and sensory knowledge for meaningful integration with digital tools, design has the potential to be redefined at a transformative scale. Perhaps paralleling the paradigm-shifting impact of the Bauhaus. However, this evolution must remain human-driven, ensuring that technology serves as to

aid and increase human creativity, intentionality, and judgment rather than to replace. This synergy between human ingenuity and digital potential safeguards design's relevance and power in shaping a meaningful future.

Keywords: *Digital tools, Design, Bauhaus, technology, Tree-model, sensory knowledge*

Why Rethink Design?

In an era of rapid advancements in AI, digital technologies, and the global democratisation of design, the seductive ease of digital tools and the illusion of 'good taste' have led many to mistake curatorial skills for true design expertise. This shift toward curation over creation threatens to diminish the depth and intentionality required for meaningful design.

True design expertise demands disciplined education, intentional creativity, and a profound understanding of foundational design elements such as light, colour, and form. These essentials form the bedrock of the visual design language, supporting principles like scale, proportion, balance, and harmony. Together, they cultivate the ability to create visual poetry that transcends tools and surface stylisation.

Yet, as a visual language, this foundational knowledge has always been challenging to impart. The shift to digital design tools demands a renewed focus on purposefully adapting and integrating these principles into pedagogy, then to practice. This ensures that their relevance and depth are preserved, keeping design practices grounded in its core while embracing the possibilities of new technologies.

The Evolution of Design

The history of design traces its evolution from craftmaking to the recognised discipline it is today. Design, as a purposeful process, harmonises functionality, creativity, and aesthetics to support and enhance healthy living. It bridges form and purpose, transforming abstract ideas into tangible solutions that meet human needs and aspirations. By blending the rigour of science with the interpretive skill of art, design enriches human experience and fosters progress across all facets of life.

Grounded in artistic expression and skilled craftsmanship, early design was defined by the creative use of materials and artisans' interpretations to produce functional outcomes. Over time, it evolved beyond an artful craft into a rigorous discipline, serving as both a method for addressing practical needs and a medium for expressing reimagined, creative and aesthetic values.

The Bauhaus philosophy, developed between 1919 and 1933, marked a pivotal moment in this evolution. Pioneered by visionaries such as Walter Gropius, Josef Albers, Johannes Itten, László Moholy-Nagy, and Mies van der Rohe, the Bauhaus redefined design as a unified, principled discipline. At the short-lived but influential Bauhaus school, these leaders introduced a transformative approach that continues to shape modern design. Their work laid the foundation for Modernism, establishing principles and aesthetics that set enduring standards for contemporary practice.

The Bauhaus philosophy unified art, craft, and technology to serve functional, aesthetic, and societal purposes, emphasising experimentation and iterative processes for innovation. Walter Gropius merged art and technology with a focus on architecture and industrial design, Josef Albers explored materiality and the optical

interplay of forms, Johannes Itten introduced spiritual and intuitive dimensions through foundational training in form, colour, and materials, and László Moholy-Nagy expanded Bauhaus principles into new media like photography, film, and graphic design.

Mies van der Rohe, the final Bauhaus director, extended its legacy through his minimalist architectural philosophy and renowned dictum, Less is More. This approach emphasised simplicity, functionality, and elegance, becoming a core element of Modernist design DNA. Its influence profoundly shaped global design practices and remains relevant today.

While the Bauhaus vision continues to guide contemporary design, its ethos must now be reframed and reshaped to address the challenges and opportunities of this new era, where digital abstraction and rapid technological advancements redefine the designer's role.

Design's Modern Challenges

At this pivotal juncture of global change, the legacy of the Bauhaus serves as a reminder of design's transformative power. Born in response to the upheaval of Industrialisation, the Bauhaus elevated craftmaking into design, preserving its tactile qualities while introducing principles for affordable, high-quality production. This redefinition established design as an industrial necessity.

Today, as design enters the digital realm with newfound capabilities and increasing abstraction, it faces a critical challenge: balancing technological innovation with the tangible outcomes that are integral to the design process. This balance is essential to forge a meaningful partnership between human creativity and machine

intelligence, reshaping design expertise through fresh approaches to both thinking and making.

To navigate these changes, designers need a new ideology - one that envisions the full spectrum of creative possibilities while integrating technology imaginatively and responsibly. Such an ideology must ensure that technology remains a tool for purposeful, human-centred futures in both digital and physical realms. Grounding these futures in tangible, sensory-rich experiences, particularly through 3D design outcomes, is vital.

The global democratisation of knowledge and tools has given rise to unprecedented accessibility, empowering amateurs to engage in design with ease. While this democratisation has its merits, it also underscores the need for deeper intellectual and creative discernment in the use of such tools. Designers, as experts, must lead this digital transformation with intention, leveraging their expertise to navigate its far-reaching consequences while maintaining the depth and rigour that define the discipline.

Rethinking Design Thinking

Design is undergoing a profound transformation, propelled by advancements in artificial intelligence and machine learning. Traditional tools, once extensions of hand-eye coordination, have evolved into collaborative partners, offering capabilities like pattern recognition, rapid prototyping, and optimisation. This shift compels designers to blend human intuition and compassion with AI's precision and efficiency, expanding creative possibilities and redefining the design process.

Rooted in mid-20th-century ideas from pioneers like John E. Arnold (Creative Engineering, 1959), L. Bruce Archer, and Herbert Simon

(The Sciences of the Artificial, 1969), Design Thinking has long emphasised systematic, interdisciplinary approaches to complex challenges. Popularised by IDEO and Stanford's d.school, it revolutionised industries with its empathetic, team-driven, and iterative problem-solving methods.

However, in today's digital age, Design Thinking must evolve further. Integrating AI's analytical and generative strengths with human observational rigour, it must balance digital precision with multisensory discernment. This adaptation enables designers to harness the power of emerging tools while maintaining the unique human capacity for judgment and creativity.

As digital tools democratise design, blurring the boundaries between professionals and amateurs, designers must redefine their value. Mastery of foundational principles, contextual understanding, and purposeful creativity is now more critical than ever. Developing new visual and sensory literacies will distinguish professionals, enabling them to use digital tools as intelligent extensions of their imagination and creativity rather than substitutes for human judgment.

Beyond technical innovation, designers face global imperatives such as sustainability, inclusivity, and cultural sensitivity. They must honour local traditions while meeting global standards of functionality and accessibility. Achieving this balance demands robust education, expanded global awareness, and the ability to navigate conflicting demands, ensuring design remains authentic and universally relevant.

To remain vital, designers must transcend past philosophies and embrace evolving ideologies that prioritise intentionality,

innovation, and societal impact. By guiding technology responsibly, they can preserve humanity and the planet while shaping a rapidly changing world.

Back to Design Basics

As design transitions into an era of intelligent, machine-aided systems, the need to return to its fundamentals - light, colour, and form – is critical. These universal principles form the foundation of all visual and sensory literacy, sharpening observation, enhancing composition, and fostering intentionality in the creative process.

Mastery of these core elements is vital to carry their analog wisdom into the digital realm, enabling their purposeful application with new tools. This renewed focus equips designers to integrate emerging technologies, such as AI and generative systems, as extensions of their creativity rather than substitutes for human judgment. By grounding design in foundational knowledge, technology becomes an enhancer of the uniquely human aspects of the creative process, rather than overshadowing them.

Moreover, this mastery distinguishes the designer, who actively creates and shapes solutions, from the curator, whose role centres on organising and presenting pre-existing works. It also dispels the misconception that 'good taste' alone equates to good design, reinforcing that true design expertise is rooted in intentionality, critical thinking, and a command of these foundational elements.

By rooting design in its essential language, technology becomes a powerful amplifier of human creativity, underscoring the designer's role as an innovator capable of crafting meaningful, sensory-rich experiences that bridge both physical and digital realms.

From T to Tree

Today's leading design innovators demonstrate the transformative potential of creativity to address global challenges. From systems thinking to speculative futures, their work reveals how design can shape behaviours, environments, and societal values. Yet, their contributions often expose a critical gap in design education: the need to strengthen foundational visual literacy rooted in light, colour, and form.

To address this, the traditional T-model of early specialisation and deep expertise could evolve into a Tree model, offering a more holistic framework. This approach envisions a robust root system of shared foundational knowledge that supports a branching canopy of diverse specialisations. The Tree model allows designers to grow organically, informed by life practice and advancing technologies, while maintaining a strong connection to universal design principles.

This model emphasises a deeply interconnected foundation for all entrants to the design profession, fostering individual expertise within a comprehensive understanding of design's potential. Anchored in critical visual, sensory, and foundational principles, it calls for design education to begin with a substantial, mandatory core curriculum before progressing to professional specialisation. This approach ensures that all designers share a common literacy across disciplines, enabling them to innovate with depth, intention, and versatility.

By reimagining the educational framework in this way, the Tree model preserves the rigour and depth of design expertise while allowing space for personal and technological evolution. It ensures that designers remain creators, equipped to shape the future with

skill and intentionality, rather than curators simply organising the work of others.

Creators Over Curators

Designers are agents of change, uniquely equipped to transcend the role of curator and actively shape the future through imagination, responsible creativity, and intentionality. Reclaiming this leadership demands more than good taste or technical proficiency; it requires mastery of the art and craft of design, exploration of emerging tools, and purposeful collaboration across disciplines.

True designers are creators, transforming abstract ideas into imaginative, meaningful, responsible and sustainable futures. This expertise sets them apart from curators, whose role is to organise and present pre-existing works. By grounding design in foundational knowledge and purpose, designers amplify human creativity through technology, using it as a tool to enhance judgment and depth, not replace them.

Through their craft, designers have the power to shape futures that deeply resonate with human values and purposefully advance society. This unique capacity ensures their relevance and influence in an evolving world, reaffirming their role as creators of meaningful and lasting change.