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INNOVATIVE DESIGN FOR THE

“Public Experience”



Analog Living in a Digital World

USING TECHNOLOGY EFFECTIVELY & APPROPRIATELY

The time has come for us to question our dependence on technology and its ability to counter our apathy. Admit it... you secretly love technology; yet simultaneously loathe it. We all enjoy having our cell phones available to call whoever we want whenever we want, but we hate that whoever wants to call *us* whenever *they* want is also possible. We can find an abundance of information online, but must sort out the intelligent information from the unintelligible in the world's largest and most unruly library. We enjoy being in environments where technology aids us in digesting information or provides some sort of entertainment, but are also somewhat overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of technological marvels that replace our personal experiences. It is a world of contradictions, where we all have a social responsibility to advance our society, but a personal necessity to maintain simplicity. Technology is not catering to our needs; it is forcing us to adapt for unrewarding reasons.

Technology is a tool...literally. Humans developed tools to aid in performing tasks. We began to combine those tools to create machines to entertain and inform – a light bulb, motor and celluloid film are all separate tools. The combination of those elements to create something greater than the sum of their parts (in this case a movie projection) is actually defined as an “interactive”. The translation of film to today's environments is a flat screen display or other digital projection. Whether they are in an environment to entertain, inform, or both is unique to each space, but

ultimately they should perform at least one of those tasks. Creating ambience with these displays (digital wallpaper) is certainly a valid contribution to entertainment, but at a certain point it is excessive, or worse – ignored.

In the retail environment, people have become so accustomed to the bombardment of branding messages that they now tune out subtleties that are the essence of a well thought marketing campaign.

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Looping TV ads and logos are the car alarms of our time – they flash about, largely disregarded by the passing consumer. In a corporate environment, companies attempt to prove their value with technological demonstrations that complicate the inherent simplicity of their product. In exhibits, curators attempt to convey information through computers and other digital interactives, when a simple book could be much more appropriate and (say it with me) interactive.

Technology itself is an interactive, and our relationship with technology is an entirely different interactive. The more synergistic humans are with technology, the greater its effect. Yet, at some point there is a self-imposed barricade between humans and technology. Case in point: at a baseball game in San Francisco, where the stadium was recently made home to wireless internet connections, the Giants mascot Lew Seal guided the crowd in singing the seventh inning stretch favorite “Take Me Out to the Ballgame.” Instead of the customary audience participation, Lew Seal was booed by 41,000 fans for using a “revolutionary” speech replication software application to sing the song. The technology was rejected because the anticipated traditional experience was deemed more personal and relevant.

We have learned that technology has its place. Technological interactives and displays can summon a wealth of information in a relatively small space or create an atmosphere conducive to learning, shopping, or entertaining. Yet, these marvels should ultimately be juxtaposed against more natural elements, richer in texture, detail, and of course content. We demand clarity and simplicity, but crave opportunities to examine, discover, choose, and absorb. Too many environments these days are void of substance because designers confuse simplicity with austerity.

Our attention spans are shortening because of media today. The typical response from the design industry is to create experiences that require an even narrower personal focus, thereby establishing the basis for the next trend. In this paradox, designers are incrementally diminishing public perception to a point where we cannot even appreciate the designs they have created. Designers have a responsibility to create healthy environments where people can ideally learn and be entertained simultaneously, or shop without the brainwashing.

We must realize that developing good content is the key to a successful environment, be it store, exhibit, or other public experience space. Don't sacrifice a well thought out environment for the sake of large screen displays and other technological marvels. Technology isn't a panacea for making an experience engaging or informative. Put some thought into your message and communicate it clearly with the right tools.

Analyzing the human experience is key in deciding how technology is assimilated into our lives and our environments. As purveyors of those experiences, we should be doing everything we can to understand public need and then integrate technology appropriately. I constantly hear the sounds of ringing cell phones, but many are changing their ringtones. Yes, some are opting for the theme song from the Sopranos or the latest hit from Britney. Yet a growing group is choosing the antiquated ring of a 1950's rotary dial phone. Are these people playing an ironic joke on the luddites that refuse to cave to digital living? Or is this the signal of a revolution – an assemblage that quietly makes their statement on technology through their mobile ringtones? I would like to think it's the latter.

Dual Office creates simple and elegant solutions for exhibitions, retail and restaurant environments, and other public experience projects. We fill the niche between graphic design and architecture, where information and branding combine with the built environment.