Making a Living as a Designer

By Sebastián Vivarelli

Why designers'compensation continues to be so low? A question that still calling for an answer.

The article *La traición del diseñador gráfico* deals with a recurring issue among colleagues, both in the graphic and digital fields. At the core of this issue are the phrases: "Our profession is not well paid," or "A designer does not earn as he/she should." Design has been developing for years, enjoys social recognition, and has college graduates. However, the economic reality of the profession has changed little or nothing at all. While it is not easy to single out a reason (like any other complex phenomenon, it is defined by a set of causes) some ideas can be discussed.

Using pirated software

It is striking that many comments on the article blame piracy (free and widespread access to software and fonts) for the proliferation of low-skilled professionals. What would determine that only those who can purchase original products can practice this profession? That only people with a comfortable economic position can practice (at least in most of Latin America)? Would this guarantee an increase in professional quality? Not necessarily. Many students with limited financial resources (a usual situation at public universities) would not even take some of the courses if they had to pay for the fonts or original software. Moreover, college students are encouraged to develop (above all) a project thinking that goes beyond resources or software. In fact, in courses like Typograhpy, Morphology, or Design; the students experiment with various materials - pencil, paper, wood, inks, pens. Computers are only the final stage of the process, where a professional finish is achieved. Emphasizing software proficiency only overemphasizes the technical profile of the professional, which in turn generates automated operators who follow orders rather than designers who think and make project decisions.

The boom of design careers

In the nineties, Argentina saw a boom of the prestige of design careers (Graphic, Industrial, Textile, Multimedia, etc.), which led to an increase in the number of students and, consequently, graduates. Existing historic public universities were gradually followed by private ones. The current market cannot absorb the number of existing professionals, and this imbalance leads to service buying companies to favor financial savings over professional quality. This means hiring designers with a profile known as *junior*, who are trained by more

experienced specialists on a daily basis. The designer then adds teaching to his/her daily tasks, all for the same price. Another consequence of this reality is the job openings where the requested profile is that of a "gifted technician", capable of operating multiple software applications, managing projects, and with thorough experience. Preferably, he/she should not exceed 30 years of age. On the one hand, the problem is that the compensation offered never matches the required skills and qualifications. On the other, experience only comes with years in the business.

Design as a matter of opinion

Who has not experienced this? Any professional or client that interacts with the designer has an opinion on design, proposes adjustments, and even offers his/her own alternative solutions. While, to a certain extent, this is necessary for projects to reach their final version based on interaction (*feedback*) with others, the way in which suggestions are offered is often striking. Very frequently, they are expressed in the imperative, almost with a derogatory attitude, which shows how little respect there is for the profession and how little consideration is given to specialized knowledge. It is hard to imagine a similar situation occurring with a patient refuting his/her surgeon, or a client doing the same with his/her lawyer. It may be the aesthetic aspect of the profession (wrongfully called "cosmetic") which turns it into a matter of opinion. Our profession is deceptively accessible and appealing to the suggestions and tastes of anyone. It seem impossible for people to refrain from commenting on colors, typography and images. Looking deep into the phrase "Nobody dies of design," installed in society for a long time now, may help us at this point.

Here and Now

Reality shows at least two sides. On the one hand, an improvement in the visual quality of newspapers, magazines, television broadcasts, packaging, websites, etc. is noticeable. In many cases, this is a result of the work of university graduates. Contemporary society has noticed the existence of the designer (and even understands its contributions), who was once considered a social *rara avis*. However, there is a persistent feeling among colleagues, especially when they compare to other professionals, for which a specific cause is yet to be found: it is difficult to earn a living as a designer.

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