

# The citizen designer

---

By Fernando Rodríguez Álvarez

In the dark days that live Mexico, emerges a discussion about how designers get involved with social conflicts.



In appearance you should not doubt the commitment of the designers—or other creative professionals— about to the multiple conflicts plaguing society, to provide solutions as experts or to participate as citizens, from its scope or within their means.

In addition to common design problems and communication, today designers also face violence, forced disappearance of persons, mistreatment of migrants or the economic crisis; global warming, human trafficking or fracking; information theft, control social networks or slave labor, among others. No matter if you live or work in a small town or a big city.

The arguments in favor of get engaged with a close community —vulnerable or at risk— seem a matter of personal belief or political or a few activists involved, but not a design theme. Often it starts with a complaint, a protest, an unpunished crime or claim an injustice that ends in a popular movement and that sometimes leads to awareness and participation, but disorganized and spontaneous.

The arguments against not only question the participation in protest marches—causing traffic jams— or effectiveness of picket lines to monopolies television and media companies—nobody sees or hears—, but the annoying explicit affiliation of some designers, artists, writers, photographers and filmmakers; or the preparation of posters, messages and advertising for any reason, at the slightest provocation, by design students.

Some designers are challenged to support causes for your personal brilliance or not to recognize the ineffectiveness of posters exhibition in some obscure university gallery or the illustrated messages in social networks — very controlled—, which do not benefit those involved in a conflict or the victims of a crime.

However, artists from all fields -and writers of all genres- have a long tradition of collaboration with popular movements and social justice in Mexico. Similarly, designers have actively participated in the recent past.<sup>1</sup>

### **A neutral design?**

There is no question, however, that participation of designers in political, electoral and social campaigns - sponsoring government agencies, political parties, religious groups or independent agencies- because it is paid that require the review papers and expert action on media, messages or products of various kinds and trying to persuade about a candidate, a party, public health campaign, a memorial or to relieve the victims of a disaster. There is then a double speech.

That apparent neutrality that is required to design and designers on policy issues -and all professions in general- challenges the social role that involves any project, whether in the production of messages, objects, spaces, services, strategies, events or support the protests of various social groups. Every design has an address, a target audience, a reader, a user, a hearing, a consumer, customer, community, some citizens. No matter if produced one piece, of limited manufacturing or by a massive product system.

The social design is not just a theoretical statement -with roots in the works of Viktor Papanek, Nigel Whiteley, Ernst Friedrich Schumacher and Victor Margolin, among other authors-;<sup>2</sup> it is a vigorous movement which also manifest and collective action, promotes the participation of designers in organized groups for or against various social issues and cultural

and political causes.<sup>3</sup>

## Citizenship of Design

At present design specializations are many that go beyond traditional categories. Not only graphics, industrial, textiles, information designers and architects — or as Nigel Whiteley says: “formalized designers, theorists, politicized, consumerism, technology, recovered”<sup>4</sup> — but today designers-authors, designers- producers, designers-activists, designers-entrepreneurs, designers-curators, designers-integral, designers-artists, designers-partners are formed.<sup>5</sup> Their theoretical and methodological approaches ranging from “socially responsible” design, sustainable, eco-design, “user-centered”, universal, “slow design”, and so on, to the design for luxury, extravagance or profit. Practically there is a type of designer for each product listed in The Locarno Classification.<sup>6</sup>

Missing in this typology are citizens-designers: those who are engaged in a process attentive to the social context in which they live; interested in the impact of its products on the environment and material culture; determined to expand the fundamental rights of its members, for the common good and honesty.<sup>7</sup>

Increasingly, associations and schools of designers who are in favor of an ethical commitment in dealing with colleagues and clients, as well citizens, public; but there are very few groups that are directly involved to promote public policies that not only benefit the guild but advocate for the respect of citizens or organized collective action for the common good.<sup>8</sup>

Design is not just a matter of form, as medicine is not just a health issue, nor art a matter of expression or the law a mere matter of justice, in the abstract.<sup>9</sup> True, the design will not save the world, and neither will the medicine, law, engineering, art or administration. Who can do it are the citizens, whether they are doctors, lawyers, engineers, artists, managers or designers.<sup>10</sup>

In Mexico, today all have an acquaintance, friend, relative, student, who has been the victim of a crime, of violence or forced disappearance. As professionals we must act as we do: as specialists and citizens.

Published on 28/10/2015

---

1. Documented in books, like: Aquino, Arnulfo and Jorge Perezvega (2004), *Images and symbols 68/ Photography and graphics of the student movement*, UNAM, Mexico; Vilchis Esquivel, Luz del Carmen, (2010), *History of graphic design in Mexico (1910-2010)*, Conaculta/INBA, Mexico; Troconi, Giovanni (2010), *Graphic design in Mexico. 100 years, 1900-2000*, Arts of Mexico, Mexico; Aquino, Arnulfo (2011), *Epic images in contemporary Mexico*, Conaculta/INBA/Cenidiap, México; and Aquino, Arnulfo (2012), *Images of rebellion and resistance: Oaxaca 2006*, Conaculta/INBA/Cenidiap, Mexico; among others.

2. Papanek, Viktor (1983), *Design for Human Scale*, Van Nostrand Reinhold, Nueva York; Whiteley, Nigel (2006), *Design for society*, Reaktion Books, Londres; Schumacher, E.F. (1978), *Small is beautiful: Economics as if people mattered*, Blume, Barcelona; y Margolin, Victor (2002), *The policies of the artificial*, Designio, Mexico. You may also revised texts Frascara, Jorge (2000), *Graphic design for people*, Infinito, Buenos Aires; Ledesma, María (2003), *Graphic Design, a public voice*, Argonauta, Buenos Aires; Tapia Alejandro (2004), *Graphic design in social space*, Designio/Encuadre, Mexico.
3. López-Lago Ortiz, Samuel (2014), [50 años del manifiesto First Things First](#), FOROALFA.
4. Whiteley, Nigel (2008), [El diseñador valorizado](#) (*The Valorised Designer*), Mexicanos Diseñando (blog).
5. McCarthy, Steven (2013), *The Designer as...: Author, Producer, Activist, Entrepreneur, Curator, and Collaborator: New Models for Communicating*, Bis Publishers, Amsterdam.
6. [Locarno Classification](#) (1968), is an international classification used for the purposes of registration of industrial designs and is part of WIPO (International Organization of intellectual property).
7. De la Cuadra Revoco, Gonzalo (2014), [Trabajando para el bien común](#), FOROALFA.
8. For example: Colegio de Diseñadores Industriales y Gráficos de México, AC, Codigram, [Código de ética](#); American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA), [Ethics and Social Responsibility](#).
9. Owen, Charles (2007) [Design Thinking: Notes on its Nature and Use](#). Design Research Quarterly, (Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 16-27).
10. Heller, Steven and Veronique Vienne (2003), *Citizen Designer. Perspectives on Design Responsibility*, Allworth Press, New York.

**FOROALFA**

ISSN 1851-5606

<https://foroalfa.org/en/articles/the-citizen-designer>

