Design Freedom and the Sea of Sameness

Originally written for Shillington Post 07—The International Issue, Shillington London teacher Hilary Archer discusses how designers can fight against Instagram trend-chasing in their work.

In today’s design landscape new technology is bringing freedom to designers and unrestrained access to global design.

> *However, this flexibility is proving to be a double-edged sword that is also provoking the homogenisation of design.*

With so much incredible tech available to help us overcome physical distance, negate time differences, and promote a new kind of “face-to-face” contact, we find ourselves in a world where connecting digitally is as seamless as ever.

Tech solutions help us to connect, share files and organise so seamlessly, the boundaries surrounding the traditional working model have been almost entirely rewritten.

“Technology gives freedom back to designers, the opportunity to take back control. Whether agency, in-house or freelance there is the technology to allow designers to choose how, when and where they want to work. Breaking the shackles of the 9-5” — Nick Smith, Full-time Teacher, Manchester

Cloud based software and file storage like Dropbox, project management tools such as Basecamp and Trello, web and video conferencing options like Skype and Fuze, alongside email alternatives like Slack are amongst the many solutions changing the game for designers today. They have made it possible to schedule, produce, send and present work from the comfort of your flat, a cafe, a co-working space or even poolside on your Balinese holiday. It would seem the flexible, boundary free, work-life balance dreams of Millienials have been realised.

And social media? The ultimate gap-closer. Apps like Instagram and Twitter allow for jobs to be posted and won within the touch of a few buttons. Designers can easily now connect directly with studios and brands anywhere in the world. They can show off their work and network their way to their next brief through the comforting glow of their iPhone screens.

> *What does this mean for designers? The world is literally your oyster. Design is global.*

Branding for a Dutch fashion start up can be created in London, the lookbooks printed in Germany, UI built in Canada

and coded in India. There are no boundaries to work and therefore no boundaries to creativity and collaboration.

From my perspective as an expat freelance designer and Shillington teacher in London it means that the possibilities are endless. We can analyse case studies from a fresh studio making waves on the continent. Or we can share and champion work from a campus in another hemisphere. Students are no longer confined to understanding design and loving our industry within a one city bubble—but on a global scale.

I personally see this making bigger waves then we can imagine. Good design is no longer confined to what once was 'design hotbeds' of big cities. It is now accessible from the furthest corners of the smallest countries and most importantly, globally understood. This is even changing the way consumers purchase—we no longer respond to or accept bad design.

However, like all things seemingly too good to be true, I believe it to be a double edged sword.

I believe the same unrestrained access to global design that is providing such vast opportunities is also leading to the homogenisation of design. There is no longer a richness and diversity to the design landscape. Local trends have become global trends and there is no longer a connection to a specific people, place or culture. The lines that once defined a 'Tokyo style' or a 'Dutch style' are becoming increasingly blurred. It is now even more important to look to graphic design history to understand how certain styles or approaches developed. A design student in New York and one in Sydney can both easily see and be inspired by a studio's work from the opposite side of the world, and therefore answer a brief in the same way. Following #graphicdesign on Instagram now leads to millions of results from every corner of the world—but it's slowly becoming a scroll through a sea of sameness.

This homogenisation however, should inspire us to rebel.

> *Being aware of these trends can help designers move in a different direction and try new things. Awareness of trends can help us to respond to a brief in the most appropriate way—step in line, or swerve.*

"To stand out from homogenised design, we as designers need to adapt our skills utilising new tech methods available to us. Graphic design is no longer one career path. You have to be open to trying and learning new things to be inventive" – Amy Prus, Full-Time Teacher, London

Tech, as always, should be a tool, not a crutch. While it is our responsibility as designers to stay relevant and bring something to the table that technology cannot replace; it is also within our reach to let tech expand and enrich our networking, designing and sharing capabilities. Creativity is flexible, limitless and unconstrained; creativity is global.

Article and words by Shillington London teacher Hilary Archer.

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https://www.shillingtoneducation.com/blog/design-freedom-sea-sameness/