Good vs. Great Design

by CAMERON MOLL

THE CREATIVE PAUSE

The Bossini Aquavolo shower head. Its looks may inspire you as much as its falling water.

There's something about showering that tends to spawn new ideas which may not occur otherwise. And the frequency with which this occurs seems to suggest that perhaps the occurrence isn't merely happenstance, but instead a decent model for what has been called "creative pause"—the shift from being fully engaged in a creative activity to being passively engaged, or the shift to being disengaged altogether.

Edward de Bono, who may have first coined the phrase, describes creative pause as a deliberate, self-imposed pause to consider alternative solutions to a problem—even when things are going perfectly fine—for "some of the best results come when people stop to think about things that no one else has stopped to think about."[1] He suggests these pauses can be as short as 30 seconds.

In his paper for International Journal of Psychoanalysis, Professor Lajos Székely describes creative pause as follows: "The 'creative pause' is defined as the time interval which begins when the thinker interrupts conscious preoccupation with an unsolved problem, and ends when the solution to the problem unexpectedly appears in consciousness."[2]

These two descriptions of creative pause suggest that deliberate interruptions, whether short or an unknown period of time, may be helpful to problem-solving. Aside from the obvious that showering is a pause to another activity, following are some additional observations about why showering often yields unexpected ideas

and creative thinking, and why it may be an ideal model for creative pause in general.

There's little opportunity for distraction. The confinement produced by the physical environment of a shower results in isolation from work materials, digital devices, and social interaction.

Minimal mental engagement is required for the the task at hand. The monotony and nearly subconscious nature of scrubbing, rinsing, and washing frees the mind to focus on things other than the physical activity of showering. You become preoccupied with entertaining yourself mentally.

Showering creates a "white noise" effect. Water that is sprayed from a nozzle and falls to the ground may result in a white noise-like environment.

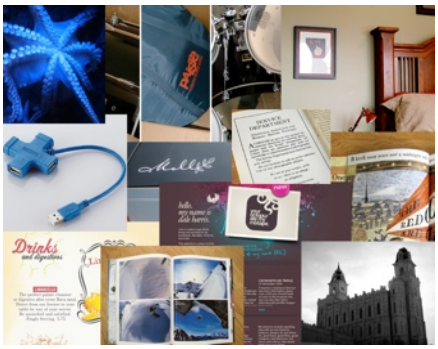
A change of scenery sets the stage for the unexpected. Merely changing your view and perception of things sometimes results in new thinking. With showering, the change is the location, temperature, attire (or lack thereof), and the addition of water.

Of course, few of us enjoy the convenience, time, or even desire to hop in the shower any time we're struggling with a challenging problem or want to think about the problem differently. But these observations suggest a model for other activities that may yield similar results if similar criteria are at play: 1) distractions are minimized, including noise; 2) the body is engaged in a monotonous, mundane, or repetitive activity, freeing the mind to think about other things; 3) the environment is changed. What kinds of activities do these criteria spring to mind?

INFLUENCE IS BORROWED, INSPIRATION IS EARNED

A reader once emailed me to ask, "Where do you look for inspiration when designing new sites? I am looking to redesign a personal site and I keep getting stuck. Mental block and the like." (Sound familiar?)

My reply was also a question: "Are you referring to 'inspiration' or 'influence'?" I went on to describe that I interpret *influence* as being something readily available in design annuals, on award websites, and the like. Influence is immediate and free for the taking. Because of this, its utility is often short-lived. At times it may even serve as little more than a platform for duplication.



Some of the sources of my inspiration.

Inspiration, on the other hand, is an on-going journey in which one continually seeks to heighten his or her awareness of design in its many shapes and forms. It is an understanding of the interplay between design and the cultural, social, and economic facets of society. Inspiration is not always immediate, and it has to be earned. Its utility is nurtured and harvested over time—months, even years—through personal experiences. Often it is the catalyst of true creativity.

In *The Elements of Typographic Style,* Robert Bringhurst writes, "Instinct … is largely memory in disguise. It works quite well when it is trained, and poorly otherwise." I translate 'instinct' as being that moment when you sit down, you have an epiphany, and memory kicks in. Your months and years of harvesting inspiration immediately feed you with ideas in the very moment they are needed. You already prepared for that moment many times over.

VISUAL HIERARCHY IS THE ART OF MANAGING, NOT ELIMINATING

Among the many definitions you've likely encountered for the following design principle, I offer one more: Visual hierarchy is the emphasis and classification of elements according to a) relative importance within the composition as a whole and b) parent, child, and sibling relationships. Luke Wroblewski offers a similar definition: "A balanced hierarchy provides not only a clear path for recognizing and understanding information, it also helps unify the disparate elements within a page

A view of the cockpit inside the Airbus A380, currently the largest passenger airliner in the world.

layout into a cohesive whole."[3]

It is difficult to talk about hierarchy exclusively without mentioning other design principles—proportion, proximity, position, alignment, contrast, relativity, dominance, and color, all of which can play a role in classifying elements and

emphasizing those elements that need emphasis. But the one thing I've learned over the years about visual hierarchy is this: *Great hierarchy isn't always achieved by eliminating complexity, but by managing it.*

Imagine the pilot's cockpit in the Airbus A380 aircraft, currently the largest passenger airliner in the world with a wingspan nearly as wide as a football field. To you and me, the interface is probably terribly complex. However, the principles mentioned in the previous paragraph all play a role in organizing the instruments precisely how they need to be for the user, in this case a trained pilot.

Unfortunately, in my experience working with many other experienced and novice designers, it has become clear that visual hierarchy is one of the most ignored and underutilized principles of design. We would do well as design craftsmen to thoroughly study and apply the principle of visual hierarchy.

THE CAPACITY WITHIN US

Around 1796, Ludwig van Beethoven began suffering from a loss of hearing. By 1814, one of the greatest composers of the 19th century—and perhaps of all time—-was completely deaf.

Imagine yourself in his position: You're quickly gaining fame as a virtuoso pianist and an accomplished composer. But in public conversations, you, whose hearing is critical to your craft, can hardly hear what the person next to you is saying. It was this very social paradox that led Beethoven to withdraw from society towards the end of the 18th century.

At the recommendation of friends and medical practitioners, Beethoven retreated to rural Heiligenstadt, Austria, where distance from city life (and noise) was believed to a means of remedying his loss of hearing. It didn't work. In fact, isolation might have only increased despair about his condition and about life in general. He contemplated suicide in earnest, but fortunately for all of us, he eventually rejected the notion.

It was during his stay in Heiligenstadt that Beethoven composed, in my opinion, one of the greatest "works" of his career. It came in the form of a letter written to his brothers Carl and Johann, and has since become known as the Heiligenstadt Testament.[4] Penned in 1802, about halfway through his life at age 31, the letter was found in his room after his death in 1827.

Among other things, his letter addresses reasoning for withdrawing from society, as painfully evidenced by these examples:

> *"[W]hat a humiliation for me when someone standing next to me heard a flute in the distance and I heard nothing… Such incidents drove me almost to despair; a little more of that and I would have ended me life—it was only my art that held me back."*

During his deaf years, it's believed that Beethoven had a metal rod mounted to the soundboard on his piano. He would then bite down on this rod to increase his perception of sounds coming from the piano.

And then Beethoven writes the following, which unequivocally manifests a yearning to produce all that he had the capacity—not just capability—to produce, in whatever amount of time his life would lend, and irrespective of his deficiencies; a yearning I think we all have the capacity to achieve:

> *"Ah, it seemed to me impossible to leave the world until I had brought forth all that I felt was within me. So I endured this wretched existence—truly wretched for so susceptible a body, which can be thrown by a sudden change from the best condition to the very worst…. Perhaps I shall get better, perhaps not; I am ready."*

And strive Beethoven did. Two of his greatest works, Symphony No. 5 (1808) and Symphony No. 9 (1824), were composed in the years following Heiligenstadt, even as he was nearing complete deafness. Which leaves one asking just one question: What do I have yet to bring and have the capacity of bringing forth before leaving this world?

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[1] *Serious Creativity: Using the Power of Lateral Thinking to Create New Ideas,* Edward De Bono, Harper Business Press.

[2] "The Creative Pause", Lajos Székely, International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 1967.

[3] "Visible Narratives: Understanding Visual Organization," Luke Wroblewski, http://www.lukew.com/resources/articles/visible_narratives.html

[4] The full text of the testament in German and English can be found here: http://w3.rz-berlin.mpg.de/cmp/beethoven_heiligenstadt.html

Excerpts from *How Designers Think*

BRYAN LAWSON, AUTHOR

THERE ARE NO OPTIMAL DESIGN SOLUTIONS

"Design almost invariably involves compromise…. Rarely can the designer simply optimise one requirement without suffering losses elsewhere…. There are no established methods for deciding just how good or bad solutions are, and still the best test of most design is to wait and see how well it works in practice. Design solutions can never be perfect and are often more easily criticised than created, and designers must accept that they will almost invariably appear wrong in some ways to some people."

DESIGN SOLUTIONS ARE A CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

"Once an idea has been formed and a design completed the world has in some way changed. Each design, whether built or made, or even if just left on the drawing-board, represents progress in some way…. Thus the completion of a design solution does not just serve the client, but enables the designer to develop his or her own ideas in a public and examinable way."

THE PROCESS INVOLVES FINDING AS WELL AS SOLVING PROBLEMS

"It is clear from our analysis of the nature of design problems that the designer must inevitably expend considerable energy in identifying the problems. It is central to modern thinking about design that problems and solutions are seen as emerging together, rather than one following logically upon the other…. [B]oth problem and solution become clearer as the process goes on."

DESIGN IS A PRESCRIPTIVE ACTIVITY

"[D]esign is essentially prescriptive whereas science is predominantly descriptive. Designers do not aim to deal with questions of what is, how and why, but, rather, with what might be, could be and should be. While scientists may help us to understand the present and predict the future, designers may be seen to prescribe and to create the future, and thus their process deserves not just ethical but also moral scrutiny."

DESIGNERS WORK IN THE CONTEXT OF A NEED FOR ACTION

"Unlike the artist, the designer is not free to concentrate exclusively on those issues which seem most interesting. Clearly one of the central skills in design is the ability rapidly to become fascinated by problems previously unheard of…. Not only must designers face up to all the problems which emerge they must also do so in a limited time. Design is often a matter of compromise decisions made on the basis of inadequate information…. Designers, unlike scientists, do not seem to have the right to be wrong. While we accept that a disproved theory may have helped science to advance, we rarely acknowledge the similar contribution made by mistaken designs."

About the Presenter

Cameron Moll is the founder of Authentic Jobs, a targeted job board for web and creative professionals. He's the co-author of the best-selling *CSS Mastery* and author of *Mobile Web Design,* a self-published title. Cameron's work or advice has been featured by *HOW, Communication Arts, PRINT,* Forrester Research, National Public Radio (NPR), and many others. One of his letterpress type posters, the most recent of which can be seen at ColosseoType.com, was the recipient of the HOW 2008 In-House Design Award.

Cameron resides in Sarasota, Florida, with his wife Suzanne and four sons. His life online can be found at these locations:

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