

Massimo Vignelli on Rational Design

Massimo Vignelli studied architecture in Milan. He came to the United States in 1957 on a fellowship from Twome Silver Smiths in Massachusetts and the Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology. In 1960, with Lella Vignelli, he established the Vignelli Office of Design and Architecture in Milan. In 1965, he became cofounder and design director of Unimark International Corporation, and in 1971, he and Lella Vignelli opened Vignelli Associates in New York. His work includes corporate identity programs, architectural graphics, and exhibition, interior, and product design.

You began your career in Italy as an architect, yet your work today covers every aspect of design.

It goes back to my growing up in Milan where the saying was “One should be able to design anything from a spoon to a city,” a statement attributed to the architect Adolf Loos. Indeed, it’s not what we design but how we design that’s important. I started in architecture because it was the basic training that was available at the time, but over the course of time, I switched to graphics, furniture, objects, glass, and other materials, and that became an attitude, a way of life.

So, you are not comfortable with specialization.

The versatility of our work is great because of the cross-pollination of one thing to another. I happen, as you can imagine, not to like specialization because it brings entropy; you keep doing one thing over and over because you have to do it and not because you are motivated. We specialize in graphic design and packaging, we specialize in product design, we specialize in interior design, we specialize in fashion design, and we do them with joy and flair and seriousness.

Are there situations where you do a number of different design projects for one specific client?

Yes, that’s usually the case. A prospective client may come in because he thinks he needs a logo, but maybe a logo isn’t the right thing for him. Once we talk about his needs and problems, we probably will end up doing a corporate identity program, then packaging or maybe his offices or a product itself. By the time he goes away, it’s a miracle if he hasn’t bought one of our suits.

Do you have specialists in all areas of design within Vignelli Associates?

We have specialists in all areas of design; however, about 60 percent of our work is in graphic design. Because of this, we do have specialists come in on some projects that are

more complex, for instance, corporate identity programs and other projects that require advanced technology. Sometimes we have computer specialists come in to help us.

How do you get started with a new or prospective client? With so many different components, how do you get to the heart of the problem?

We know in advance as much about the client and his company as possible. We call in our associates to listen and talk about possible directions at the outset—discuss the nature of the problems. Usually by the time he leaves, we know the direction we will take. This is why we don't do a lot of research; nobody knows better the nature of the problem than the owner or president of the company. We don't like to work with managers because they have to interpret what we do and our ideas to their boss and very often they pass along the wrong information. When we work directly with the boss, we are able to suggest alternatives, a different approach, on-the-spot problem solving. Another person could not begin to second-guess what someone else would like.

Your motto at Vignelli Associates, then, must be "We start at the top."

Yes. If you want to stay at the top, start at the top. This is our suggestion to young people starting out in design—only work with people who are going to make final decisions. This is the only way. It's also important to go after the top jobs, not mediocre jobs.

Do you mean in terms of the kind of jobs or the kind of clients?

The kind of clients. It's very important to get the good clients and establish a good working relationship and put quality first. It is much better to do a good job than to do a job that pays a lot of money. If you can combine these two things, it's ideal. You should never work for money because if you work for money, that's not the stuff that makes good design. You should work to make great designs for whatever problems might come along—demonstrate a commitment to quality.

We say that design is a profession to solve problems; however, you would need to say there's not such a thing as solving a problem in absolute terms. It's always an interpretation of a problem; therefore, it shows right away there's no reality in this business—it's only the interpretation of reality that's real.

Over the years you have carried the torch of what Richard Saul Wurman has dubbed "information architecture." What is the difference between this and other forms of graphic design?

There are two kinds of graphic designers: One is rooted in history and semiotics and problem solving. The other is more rooted in the liberal arts—painting, figurative arts, advertising, trends, and fashion. These are really two different avenues. The first kind is more interested in looking to the nature of the problem and organizing information. That's our kind of graphic design. To me, graphic design is the organization of information. The other kind is interested in the look and wants to change things all the time. It wants to be up-to-date, beautiful, trendy. David Carson is a perfect example of the other kind. I have tremendous respect for guys like Carson. I don't think he's a graphic designer, but he's an articulator, he's clever, and he's a terrific self-promoter. His work is fascinating. There are really two channels, completely different from each other: one side is the structured side, the other is the emotional side.

Are you saying that your side, problem solving and organization of information, is the better avenue to take?

I think there's a place for both, and they could benefit from some integration. Because of my background in architecture, my work is rooted in structure: structure of information, structure in design, structure in language; in one way you could say we are structuralists. I don't have a problem with fashion or trends, but we would never follow a trend; it would be in conflict with what we do. We are interested in designing things that will last because we feel we have a responsibility, which is something often overlooked—this notion of responsibility. As designers, we have two kinds of responsibility, one to our clients and the other to society.

We have a responsibility to our client not to design something that will become obsolete quickly; his investment should be justified; he should have something that will last. If a designer feels the responsibility to give the client something that's up-to-the-moment, then when that's obsolete, the client will get something else. This goes back to the notion of obsolescence, fashion, and trends. From my point of view, all are equally detestable.

We have a responsibility to society to look for meaning in design, structure, and information, in such a way that will last a long time, not be something you have to throw away. For example, look at the Heller designs; they have been around for thirty years. And we are producing objects and furniture that were designed many years ago.

There used to be a time when people had to design things to last a long time. It wasn't a natural kind of commitment, however. Of course there were fashions and fabulous art deco and trendy stuff. Probably the best period of trendiness in this century was the art deco period, and maybe art nouveau, especially in the United States where it was the best.

You consider yourself a modernist. What is the most important tenet of the modern movement?

One of the greatest things about the modern movement was the sense of responsibility. It was the modern movement that created people like Charles Eames, and many, many others; not me, but many others. What we have in the last fifty years is an incredible collection of junk. Maybe you have some major personalities like Michael Graves. He has a very different style, but I like him. This doesn't mean that I agree with what he does all the time, but I do respect him. There are many contemporaries of his whom I do not respect, or contemporaries of mine, especially in the graphic design field. However, this is why I say it's important to clarify fields by saying there are two avenues, not just one.

Does this mean that it's alright by you that there's room in graphic design for the other kind?

I think it's perfectly alright. There is a need for that too. What you hope is that one side takes care of the sublime and the other side takes care of the ridiculous.

I see a tremendous amount of what I perceive as trash coming out as graphic design all over the world, particularly from England and the United States. I think it's perfectly alright to experiment with this kind of thing as a fine artist, but it's not perfectly alright at all if you are a graphic designer. If you perceive graphic design as the organization of information, all this kind of computer layering, these trends, are not enriching

design one bit. It's just a way of making the form bigger, which has nothing to do with quality. It's totally irrelevant. I see irrelevance in other aspects of design, like in revivalism; all are desperate forms of intelligence for the unintelligent, if I can put it that way. They are lifesavers for the desperate. As you know, graphic design has been sinking like the *Titanic*.

Do you think this "sinking of graphic design" will continue, or is it just another trend?

Like in every profession, again, quantity versus quality. If you have few doctors, you are bound to have a lot of good doctors. If you have a lot of doctors, there are going to be a few good doctors and a lot of mediocre doctors. This is true in every profession. One has to go through phases of development; one is the ability to recognize trash. When you can recognize trash, then you can control trash. Otherwise you just live with trash, right?

Or it becomes kitsch.

Yes, or it becomes classic; that's even worse. Speaking of kitsch, there are so many chefs today. There used to be few chefs, and now look at how many there are. They go through incredible preparations, and they all have one direct thing in common—kitsch! There's so much kitsch in food preparation. It's unbelievable.

Not only in how it looks but in how it tastes, like nouvelle cuisine. Strawberries look pretty on fish, but the taste is rather strange.

Exactly. It's the exact same thing that you see in graphic design. Nouvelle cuisine is ultimate kitsch. It has no special tradition; it changes the value from taste to visual; it becomes only a visual thing. Cooking never had serious visual connotations, at least in our culture. Of course in the Japanese culture, food has always been very visual, and you get very little too. And the Chinese make everything look like something else.

There are more people graduating from design school now than ever before. Isn't it the responsibility of educators to teach design as organization of information?

If one can make this distinction very clear [structural design/emotional design] and give the proper education on both sides to the new generation coming along, then it will be up to the individual to choose one or the other. It's like architects and engineers. Architects always hated engineers, and engineers always hated architects. But you need both. In graphic design it's the same thing. On one side you have structural designers involved in structural information, and on the other side there is more involvement in the appearance of things. Maybe this is alright because you get something from it, and maybe that something has nothing to do with legibility, but it sets a mood, like in music. So I cannot anymore be ferociously against this side because there is indeed room for it too. Of course, I do resent that because of the lack of structure, we have more people falling in love with the other side. And because of the lack of training on the structural side, we have more people going to the other side. This is not the fault of the students but the fault of schools. You cannot have better design unless you have better schools. It's as simple as that.

In the last twenty years, we have seen teachers more interested in teaching an attitude of "why not?" and "what if?" That is the postmodern mentality. It is what's emerging from people who were rejected by the mainstream of thinking because they

were incapable, and eventually there were so many, they became a culture. They are the generation of the why-nots who have a “let’s-try, who-cares” attitude as opposed to those who have social responsibility and involvement, a commitment to making a better world. It’s not up to graphic designers to change the world, but everything visual and everything that surrounds us can be better design if you don’t offer the alternative of bad design.

How do you feel about new technology?

It’s fantastic. It’s never been as great as it is today; it’s fabulous. Can you imagine being without it?

No, I can’t. However, so many seasoned designers complain that it’s just a tool, blah, blah, blah. Do you believe that out of it there will come a new discipline?

Never in the history of typography, for example, could a designer control as much as he can control today. We can do so many good things that we couldn’t do before. We can also do bad things we never did before. But all the sloppiness of the past is gone. You can create beautiful things—even sizes of type that didn’t exist in the past. Technology gives us the opportunity to do better what we do. It gives us the control between the tool and the mind.

Out of the industrial revolution came the Bauhaus. Do you think there is going to be a kind of Bauhaus emerging from computer technology?

Yes, definitely. The basic meaning of the Bauhaus was to provide quality in mass production whether it was printing, molding, casting, whatever. The same thing will happen here. Already the new tool is providing so much trash that I think there will be a demand for people who can organize a way of thinking so that the quality will come back.

People like Massimo?

Oh, I’m on my way out, but by someone who is on the way in. One has to be young enough to do these things. You need to be at a time in your life when you are at your full capacity.