



## Katherine McCoy on Design Education

Katherine McCoy is a professor of communications design at the Institute of Design at Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT). For twenty-three years she was cochair (with husband and industrial designer Michael McCoy) of the graduate design department of Cranbrook Academy of Art, where she administered an influential program that challenged the presumptions of modernist design. She consults in graphic design and design marketing for international corporate and cultural clients that have included the International Design Center Nagoya, Tobu Department Store, Philips Electronics, Unisys, the Detroit Institute of Arts, and Cranbrook Educational Community. Her work in design criticism has included coproducing the television documentary "Future Wave: Japan Design," and co-authoring and designing the book *Cranbrook Design: The New Discourse*, published by Rizzoli International.

### **How has your professional life changed since leaving Cranbrook?**

The twenty-three years at Cranbrook had made it so thoroughly familiar that I was very ready for change. And I do enjoy change. Perhaps that was one of the main reasons for leaving. Although the Cranbrook structure of autonomous departments allows great flexibility, we had pretty nearly explored the possibilities of change for us within that setting. I miss the collegiality of many of the Cranbrook faculty and staff, but as magical as the Cranbrook architectural setting is, I do not miss the place. Probably the fact that I grew up five minutes from Cranbrook is pertinent. Our final departure from Cranbrook was on Independence Day in my fiftieth year.

### **How does the IIT experience differ?**

At IIT's Institute of Design I have the benefit of so many resources from my colleagues in communications design and the rest of the faculty. The program is a mixed soup of influences, theories, and methods, combining design with cultural anthropology, sociology, computer science, and strategic planning in an approach we call human-centered design. I am always discovering great articles and handouts used by my fellow faculty for their IIT classes, a virtual banquet of ideas to feast on. In our end-of-semester faculty wrap-ups, each of us summarizes courses taught and shares class materials. We all agree we would like to take each other's courses if we could only find the time. And I am thoroughly enjoying the shift to an urban university, the city of Chicago, and a different set of theoretical design concerns.

### **How has your teaching changed?**

For the more structured communications theory courses at IIT, I have put together a

body of lectures, slides, handouts, and projects that formalize a lot of the studio experimentation we were doing at Cranbrook. In addition to each fall's teaching at IIT, my husband and partner Mike and I are embarking on High Ground, a seminar center based at our Colorado studio. During the seven months each year that we spend in Colorado, we plan to offer several workshops annually in graphic design and industrial design for professional designers who might not have the opportunity to pursue graduate school yet are interested in adding to their design resources. We envision workshops lasting ten days, with one or two guest faculty joining us for short intense projects with small groups of design participants. Our studio seems to be a natural gathering point; last July, twelve designers, architects, and design critics joined us in Colorado for three days of nonstop discussions on each person's view of the emerging issues facing design. We taped these, and an edited version will be published as an issue of the *Journal of the American Center for Design*. In the coming months I will be putting together our HighGroundDesign Web site that will draw on my interests in editing/writing, design, and teaching.

**How do you feel about theory-based design education now? If you had to do Cranbrook all over again, would you change anything?**

That could be as presumptuous as changing the course of the Mississippi. I probably couldn't have, even if I had tried. My role was to attract and choose the right students, to set the stage with some guiding structure and lots of resources, to insist on integrity and rigor, and then to stand back out of the stampede! Actually, IIT's program is even more theoretical than Cranbrook's, like jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. Because of IIT's emphasis on understanding our users and audiences, the theories we were investigating at Cranbrook are very applicable—literary criticism, semiotics, and poststructuralism explore how audiences construct meaning out of messages and the process of interpretation. So I have included a lot of these in the courses on communications theories I have been teaching. I am very excited about these courses and have been looking more deeply into rhetoric and narrative as well. It is so important for designers to have these resources to structure their design processes, both as synthetic methods and tools to explain the successful dynamics in design work we intuitively know is strong. They also help us communicate our design concepts to clients.

**Cranbrook was a hothouse for a great many ideas, especially midway through your own tenure, with the introduction of "theory" and the adoption of ideas from French linguistic theory. Do you feel that this was an important evolutionary step in the practice of design that made a formative impact on current practice? Or was it a flash in the pan?**

French literary theory (also referred to as poststructuralism, deconstruction, and criticism) is an important resource for communications designers, as are many other theories including semiotics (which preceded it), which design schools are just beginning to utilize to structure the communications design process. Graphic design is still a young discipline and has had very little theory until recently. The Big Idea approach of the New York School of the sixties is about all that we had, and that stressed personal intuition and cleverness rather than a codified method. But that raises a curious point. I have to say, current work in the magazines and most competitions do not hold my attention these

days. Instead, I find I am looking at the best of advertising design from the past forty years more and more, especially as examples of these language theories I have been teaching. Although Doyle Dane Bernbach's VW ads were conceived intuitively—I am guessing their creative department had little knowledge of semiotics, poststructuralism, or rhetoric—these ads are eloquent demonstrations of communication theories. Or rather, I should say that these theories explain what is so successful about that classic work.

**Cranbrook was an open situation, now you are teaching in a more conventional—I suspect syllabus-driven—program. Is there an advantage to the way you are teaching now as opposed to the less proscribed hothouse method of your past?**

I am a terrible pluralist, unable to choose between opposites. I want to do it all, have my cake and eat it, too. I refuse to see that design (or life) must be all this way or all that way. (Why do so many in design feel that to validate their vision, they must discredit all others?) It is a broad discipline with many varieties of practice; shouldn't it also have a vigorous breadth of theories and methods, philosophies, practice, and personalities? I find IIT's more academic environment of courses and classes a stimulating complement to the unstructured studios at Cranbrook (although IIT's courses have only skeletal outlines and rely on the special vision of each faculty member to supply the content, allowing a lot of opportunity for exploration). But as different as the two schools are, I think of them as connected on a continuum. At Cranbrook, we inserted theory into studio experimentation. At IIT, projects are referred to as demos, opportunities to demonstrate the application of the academic courses' theories and methods. Aren't these two sides of a coin? A mature discipline has a range of approaches and specializations; it is appropriate that there should be a range of design schools so that students can carefully choose the design education most suited to their own interests, abilities, and goals.

**How do you see design education changing?**

We will see the duration of a design education extended, with perhaps five years the norm expected for informed practice, especially true in light of the wide range of theory and skills required in interactive digital media, a far more conceptually and technically complex field than traditional print graphic design. Graduate study has become a widely accepted route to career progress, and I would not be surprised to see undergraduate pre-design liberal arts and sciences programs develop for students planning on graduate study at the outset of college. IIT's Institute of Design recently established the country's first Ph.D. program, and we look forward to other schools joining in the codification of a body of design knowledge—then graphic design will finally become a true profession.

**I perceive a kind of retrenchment. Veteran designers are fine-tuning their skills and craft. The era of busting boundaries is over. The so-called new wave is much more codified. Are your students more or less apt to lock into the fashions and trends that marked the past decade?**

Right now graphic design is in a tremendously fertile and exciting period, nothing less than a revolution brought about by new technologies. But this is not the graphic design we see in most of the magazines and competitions. The motion, sound, and interactivity of multimedia open up vast new challenges for designers. Those veteran designers that lament the plateauing of design must have their eyes closed! IIT is very involved in

interaction design and the theoretical underpinnings necessary to make meaningful and useful experiences for our audiences in virtual information/communication spaces. Interactivity in design is waiting for a grammar to be written in the way film was seventy years ago when Sergei Eisenstein wrote the book on film theory. This involves a wide range of exploration, from information systems to expressive electronic environments. I find the ideas of interactivity very useful for generating more compelling conventional print design—after all, the typical newsmagazine is fairly nonlinear and interactive, and these ideas have a lot more room for exploration. I am also very interested in the continuities between electronic and print media. Many communications programs use several media, and each medium offers unique opportunities to translate different aspects of a message.

**How do the experiments that took place at Cranbrook influence this?**

Many of the past experiments at Cranbrook are finding a natural extension into the realm of electronic space, and the current work in Cranbrook studios is energetically exploring forms for these new media.

**What do you see as your new role as teacher and mentor?**

My current enthusiasms come under the heading of audience-oriented design. These include rhetoric and narrative as means for delivering rich and compelling messages. Storytelling is especially important in connecting threads in virtual message spaces. I am fascinated by the interaction between information and persuasion, and the role each plays in delivering resonant communications. I am anxious to explore eccentric design languages tailored appropriately for subcultures and specific interpretive communities, drawing on IIT research methods from cultural anthropology. I am continuing to formulate project assignments as laboratory experiments in which to explore current issues. A gratifying thing about IIT students is that they tend to follow directions. Those ornery Cranbrook students hardly ever would follow a project brief! Because the Cranbrook digressions often brought terrific results, I rarely tried to reign them in. But now it is a pleasure to choose an area of investigation for a class and have the students pursue it rigorously.

**Would you, looking back, describe the best and worst achievements of your time as an educator?**

An educator's measure of success must ultimately be her graduates. I find enormous gratification in my students' career progress and achievements. But maybe that is too much like parents living through their children? So, to round out things, it is important to also engage in some writing and lecturing and, of course, designing.