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FUTURE

(why the cynics are wrong)

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with response by **Ghazaleh Etezal**

IMAGINING THE FUTURE

(why the cynics are wrong)

Let me begin with an admission. I am a designer, which means I cannot afford the luxury of cynicism. Designers are called upon to come up with solutions to problems of every imaginable description, from designing a machine to provide kidney dialysis at home to creating an interface for complex critical systems like air-traffic control. No matter what the specific nature of a project — whether it's a park or a product, a book or a business — optimism is always central to my work. It's as important to what I do as research tools, computer systems, or a sense of colour.

Three years ago, the Vancouver Art Gallery invited me to produce a major exhibition on the future of design. They had no fixed ideas as to what that might mean, except for the scale; they wanted something that would mark a significant commitment by their museum to the design field.

My first impulse was to say no. To discover what is happening in design around the world and to explore its potential across all the disciplines seemed too daunting. Besides, I was happily working on a full slate of projects that were already very demanding and personally rewarding.

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But something was irritating me. There was something floating around in our culture that I found deeply troubling. It got under my skin until it became an itch I had to scratch. There seemed to be a growing split between reality and mood, a conflict between what is actually happening in the world — what we are capable of, what we are committed to, what we are achieving — and our perception of how we're doing. The prevailing mood feels dark, negative, harrowingly pessimistic, and tending to the cynical. Bizarrely, this kind of negativity has become the vogue even in creative fields, which are traditionally committed to vision, beauty, and pleasure, to notions of utopia — to possibility, in other words. This is especially true in design. How, I wondered, had the virus of pessimism crept into the one area of art that is charged with looking forward?

Let me begin with my admission that I am a student and cannot afford the luxury of conspicuous consumption let alone the burden of cynicism. Having only been a freshman at Ontario College of Art and Design two and a half years ago, I must also admit that my optimistic visions for society did not trigger through my visual experience at the impressive Massive Change exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario. I dedicate my optimism to a personal experience and involvement within an empowering, active, inspiring, educated, dedicated, responsible and highly optimistic atmosphere, which I believe is the only way individuals can become less cynical in life. The power of change is found through involvement and action.

The spark went off in a first year Graphic Communication class taught by the most thought-provoking and informative professor of my life: Keith Rushton. He freaked us out with his class lectures. He frightened us from the world. He told us things we didn't know and never imagined to be told in an art and design university. He told us the truth. He made my eyes bulge out. He made my mind expand and he influenced my thinking and view on society. I began to see a new light.

In my sophomore year I luckily fell in Rushton's Think Tank class which is a mandatory course at OCAD for sophomore students. Teachers have the freedom to direct the course any way they wish as long as it makes you "think" differently. Rushton sparked it off for me. He is my catalyst and my initiator to pursue the mentality of design for a real cause.

I got a hold of all his recommended books and have stayed in contact to this day. Suddenly all the other classes became interlinked and Graphic Design History especially blew me away. I became more intelligent, more aware and more interested in reading to gain knowledge in every field. Information became fascination for me and furthering my intellect and education grew as the root for my

First and foremost, design is committed to a better, smarter future. It's the art form pragmatically focused on finding solutions for how we live in the world. But it seems we have mistakenly conflated the word "critical" with the word "negative" and embraced a cynical perspective. Art speaks mostly in dystopian terms, while business is charged with envisioning our future. Today the talent to make beautiful paintings is a bus pass to the suburbs of art discourse; cranky architects scowl from magazine covers and moan, absurdly, about their powerlessness. Gloom and doom are everywhere.

These days, to express optimism in educated company suggests that you are either wilfully ignorant of the facts or simply a fool. To be serious, to be critical, to have a voice, we have to be cynical. To strive for something — something better — is a Pollyanna project for the naive.

In stark contrast to this prevailing wind of negativity, the experience of the team that worked with me on Massive Change (as the Vancouver project came to be called) was quite the opposite. In the face of global challenges — and there are many of unprecedented seriousness, from the aids disaster in Africa to the environmental impact of our growing population — we nevertheless witnessed action coming to bear on almost every significant problem. We saw new possibilities in collaboration and connectedness, which, along with the Internet, would allow designers around the world to draw on knowledge and expertise that had never before been accessible.

My experience with this project has been delightful, with one startling exception: I discovered how controversial optimism can be.

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passion. I understood the power of thinking and choosing and their critical importance within the creative field of design.

Towards the end of my sophomore year I began searching for a summer job to replace the daunting, repetitive and aggravating retail sales position, which I would have been ashamed to have as my summer job for a consecutive third year. I told myself I had to do something with all this knowledge and not allow it to drift away. A teacher assistant gave me the website link to TakingITGlobal(dot)org knowing the mentality I had with design. I spent that entire night browsing. I created an account and began to explore. Days followed with reading profiles of inspiring young activists that were members on the site. I felt so little. I felt so inferior comparing myself to young people my age in dozens of countries involved in social campaigns and organizations. Young social activists as well as motivated positive individuals use the site

as a way to connect with one another and also use it as a resource for making change and getting involved in local and global communities. I felt like I was falling behind and I had to get involved... somehow!

TakingITGlobal miraculously happened to be in downtown of my home Toronto Canada. They just also happened to be needy of a designer. I got an interview and will never forget the first day that I entered that vibrant office. I fell in love instantly. Executive director Jennifer Corriero was the most down to earth, heart warming and inspiring person I had come to contact with in my entire life.

My first piece was something I did without knowing or caring if I was getting paid. I just wanted to do it because my heart told me to I didn't care about what

Despite our collective despondency, we live in a time when more people are richer, healthier, better educated, more literate, and more productive. We live longer, travel more, and enjoy greater access to knowledge and freedom than at any other time in human history. Worldwide, we now number more than six billion people — partly because we are able, with varying degrees of success, to sustain that number. We have beaten back the Malthusians. And there are other victories worth noting:

WE HAVE BEATEN BACK

HUNGER

Through ongoing innovations in agriculture and the development of crops that produce a higher yield — India has become a net exporter of rice, for instance — we are feeding more people. Not the whole world, it must be said, but we have come a long way. According to a 2004 report from the United Nations, more than thirty countries reduced the number of hungry people by at least 25 percent during the 1990s.

One way to measure global progress is through the United Nations Human Development Index. The hdi measures a basket of factors including life expectancy, school enrolment, adult literacy, and gross domestic product per capita. Taken together, these offer a useful portrait of the development of a society and its ability to meet the needs of its citizens.

Looking at human development around the world since 1975, it is striking to see that with few exceptions the trends are all positive. Not only do the United States, Canada, and other Western nations show steady improvement, but more recently countries like India, China, and Brazil are moving in the same direction. With the glaring exception of Africa, we are moving to a more developed world. Of the thirtytwo countries still classified as low development, with an hdi of less than 0.5, thirty are in Africa. But public awareness of Africa's situation is at least on an upward swing, a dramatic change in its long and tortured history with the West.

anyone else thought. It was a 40 page report of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) from young activists—who were members of the website as well—along with images from dozens of different countries around the planet. I worked with the organization's MDG advisor Franziska Seel—who was a tremendous inspiration and wonderful client—through email contact in Germany. I had never put together an editorial piece in the past to that degree. It was numerous hours and weeks of work and I was doing it while I was finishing the school year. I ended up tagging along with Seel for a trip to the United Nations in New York City for the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD-14). I stayed with a friend of a friend (Frederick Bernas) whom I had met on the TIG website. He was attending the conference as well as the United Kingdom youth delegate. I continued to work on the magazine while I was in New York. I met amazing youth from all around the world who attend conferences regularly as delegates and youth repre-

They amazed me. I was fascinated by how dedicated, intelligent, inspiring and motivated these young people were!

Another way to consider progress is to look at our commitment to reach certain objectives. At the Millennium Summit in September 2000, 189 countries adopted a global to-do list. The eight goals are to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and the empowerment of women; reduce child mortality by two-thirds; improve maternal health; combat hiv/aids, malaria, and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and cultivate a global partnership for development.

sentatives of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). They amazed me. I was fascinated by how dedicated, intelligent, inspiring and motivated these young people were! What I found amazing was how interested they were in who I was and what I did. I was not a social activist but I was still valued...as a designer and a young person involved in the same conference as them. They looked over my shoulders to see what I was working on and they were fascinated by it. I wanted to help all of them with their organizations. I believed in what they did because they believed in what they did. They came from all around the world with one vision, one cause and one goal: to help humanity work towards sustainable development. There was nothing but positive energy and optimism blowing in my direction.

The fact that we have come together to articulate these goals, and committed ourselves to meeting them, gives a sense of the true nature of our human project.

Are we on target to get through the list by the deadline of 2015? No. Are some places getting worse, not better? Certainly, but very few. Are some developed countries negligent in meeting their obligations? Yes. But are we making progress? Absolutely. We may be behind schedule but we are mostly moving forward. For instance, based on current trends, child mortality rates will be 15 percent lower in 2015 than they were in 1990. If the trend continues, we won't meet the Millennium goal until 2045. Thirty years late — but still a staggering human accomplishment, made possible by collective global collaboration.

Another way of measuring progress is to look at not only what we have defeated but what we have embraced. We have embraced wealth in all of its dimensions. In fact, one accomplishment of Massive Change was to reconfigure notions of wealth to include freedom, education, literacy, mobility, human rights, health, sanitation, communication, collaboration, science, technology, knowledge, and now, increasingly, sustainability.

To a large degree, the greatest challenge we face as a global culture — sustainability — is a consequence of our great success. We are six billion people today, not because we have failed in designing solutions to the problems we have faced, but because we have overcome many of the worst problems afflicting people around the world.

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Upon the completion of that report I was immediately hired by TakingITGlobal and taken on aboard as a paid intern for the summer. I was thrown into various projects and worked with many coordinators. The positive energy was ongoing as I began working in their office in the heart of downtown Toronto, which was actually a five minute walk to my college. TakingITGlobal became my second home and in spirit my extended family.

The next project was working with Francis Cardinal on Language as Violence; Violence as Language —a youth media workshop series for youth in targeted areas in Toronto to use digital photography as a means for expressing causes of violence in their communities. I designed the posters and postcards

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and joined him on the third workshop at each of the four locations. That was one of the most enjoyable experiences I had ever been offered to lead. I gave basic training on using Photoshop and demonstrated the basic technical skills they needed to adjust the photographs that they had taken. I realized that I really want to share my skills and knowledge and advise young people. It is something I believe to be important for me to do in order to give back to youth in society.

Then came along the XVI International AIDS Conference and TakingITGlobal was the hub of the material produced for the Youth Programme. There were staff specifically hired to work for the AIDS Conference through TakingITGlobal and the advocacy group including media and communications, HIV/AIDS and pre-conference coordinators.

WE HAVE BEATEN BACK

DISEASE

I don't want to sound overly optimistic here. AIDS continues to ravage Africa, and until we find ways to deal with that tragedy, a deep shadow will haunt our future. However, there is a genuine commitment to finding a cure for big killers like malaria and dysentery. In the past, a disease like SARS in China, Hong Kong, and Toronto would have wiped out tens or even hundreds of thousands of people. It didn't. Because we collaborated globally to fight SARS, we lost only hundreds.

WE HAVE BEATEN BACK CHILD MORTALITY

Since the sixties, we have halved the rates of child mortality for most of the developing world, including China, India, and Brazil, and at the same time we have increased global life expectancy by seventeen years. The average number of children per woman in most of the developing world has gone from more than five to fewer than four, while child mortality in some countries has gone from between 10 and 40 percent of the population under five to less than 10 percent. According to Gapminder.org, "Today most countries in Asia, Latin America, and the Arab world have small families and infant mortality is low. We now have a completely different world!"

Related to this shift is the changing role of women. In a conversation I had with E.O. Wilson, the author of *The Future of Life*, he said, "If you want to do something for the environment, educate and liberate women," because "when women are educated and liberated, the birth rate declines." The statistics suggest that this is exactly what is happening.

The tech staff worked on the youth website of the conference and I worked on all the printed material for the advocacy campaign. This project turned out to be the highlight of my accomplishments to date.

In the course of our work on Massive Change, we met an extraordinary man named Stewart Brand. An innovator and entrepreneur, he was the founder of the Whole Earth Catalog, a countercultural landmark in the late sixties and early seventies. He led a campaign to convince nasa to make a photograph of the Earth from space, an image that has become a defining icon of our age.

Brand is also a founder of The Long Now Foundation, an effort to expand our cultural time horizon from the next fiscal quarter to the long term. He believes that when people think things are bad and getting worse, they do the usual things people do to protect themselves: They circle their wagons, hunker down, and close the border. They move to gated communities in their cities and in their hearts. They take what they can get while they can still get it.

However, if they come to understand that things are improving — that we are working together to make things better — they will invest in their communities and their businesses, in their children and their family, in their culture and education. They will do so because once they discover that things are actually getting better, enlightened self-interest will make them want to be part of the improvement.

I think we have been missing something quite important in assessing where we really stand, and this gap limits our forward momentum. We have been missing it because the old politics of Left versus Right are no longer relevant or

Through emails and conference calls to New York, I collaborated with the advocacy team of the YouthForce from partner organizations and used the messages derived from their research tasks and brought them forth to visual format. They need to print postcards, stickers, t-shirts and I was also asked by the Local Host to use the same theme to create eight by seven feet panels that were going at the trade show open to the public at the convention centre in the Youth Pavilion. The most fascinating part was the impact. The most touching part was the response. The most amazing part was feeling my heart move because of the positive feedback I got for giving a voice

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to young people around the world. The most unbelievable part was that I had done it and I did it being a designer in the social activist environment. That is where I found my home. The work was caught on by MuchMusic—Canada's national

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helpful. A more collaborative approach is emerging. Rather than seeing things in terms of Left or Right, this approach seeks indicators of social and economic progress along a continuum running from retrograde to advanced.

music channel—as a producer found my name and contacted me for a piece he was doing for World AIDS Day. I was asked about my experience and how I was involved to affect social change through design and passion for my cause. I was a feature story on the 30 minute documentary that was aired on television on December 1st 2006.

To grasp the approach, think of an image whose pixels have been distributed to a million citizens worldwide. It is an image of collaboration, shared problem-solving, accessibility, and collective enterprise. It is a complex and beautiful image, perhaps the most beautiful image of all time. In contrast, our understanding of the world is driven by a media culture obsessed with violence and conflict. The tenor is one of negativity and crisis, which translates into pessimism and cynicism, and from there to apathy and paralysis. This negative world view can erode human agency — and without that, we're basically sunk.

As a global culture we are beginning to outgrow polarized and binary divisions but we still confuse the media with reality. If we were to publish a newspaper called Reality, it

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would be a mile thick. The first quarter-inch would arrive on your doorstep, scare the hell out of you, push the worst of human possibility into your world, make you want to lock your doors, inhibit your impulse toward community, and drive you to xenophobia, resentful and fearful of all the violent others determined to ruin your life. The rest of the mile of newspaper — the reality of our world, the part that never gets published — would be Massive Change, the story of how millions of people from every part of the world are working together to confront the dilemmas we face as a global society.

The media is our siren and our lullaby. In a neverending cycle, it shakes us up, alerts us to danger, then puts us back to sleep, reassured that someone else is taking care

TakingITGlobal changed my life and it did that because I allowed it. I chose to be part of them because I felt the need and was inspired by optimism and passion that was brought forth through being involved.

Young people every day are changing lives, educating others and being leaders in their communities all over the world. There are countless activism success stories and you will only see them if you decide to step into the optimistic community and open the door to a brighter vision.

Taking Information Technology Global is the first thing society is doing right massively for the planet since the post-industrial age. The first step towards massive change is through the spread of global activism and once you catch the spark it will spread like an epidemic

as it is spreading right now in every country in the world. People think the same, they have the same values and they want the same future in every part of the world. People are more educated, faster, healthier, versatile and creative right now in this very moment. We are in a very special time in history.

...Massive Change, the story of how millions of people from every part of the world are working together to confront the dilemmas we face as a global society.

WE HAVE BEATEN BACK

DEATH

Not literally, of course. I am not that optimistic! But for most of recorded history, life expectancy hovered around thirty years. Many died in infancy. If we survived, we married young, and died young. Even by the end of the nineteenth century, life expectancy was just over thirty-two years. Today, average life expectancy world-wide is now sixty-five years.

Massive change is a matter of spark.

But what we need to be reminded of is our own potential. We have the power to make change on a global scale, to solve the problems we are facing today. We have the means to make the things we love more intelligent and more delightful. We have the imagination and the ability to invent new ways of sustainable living in advanced, courageous, and open societies.

All we need is the optimism to realize it.

Your spark, my spark,
our spark,
all in one page.
We will spark together
to make change,
faster than
we have made
in any other age.