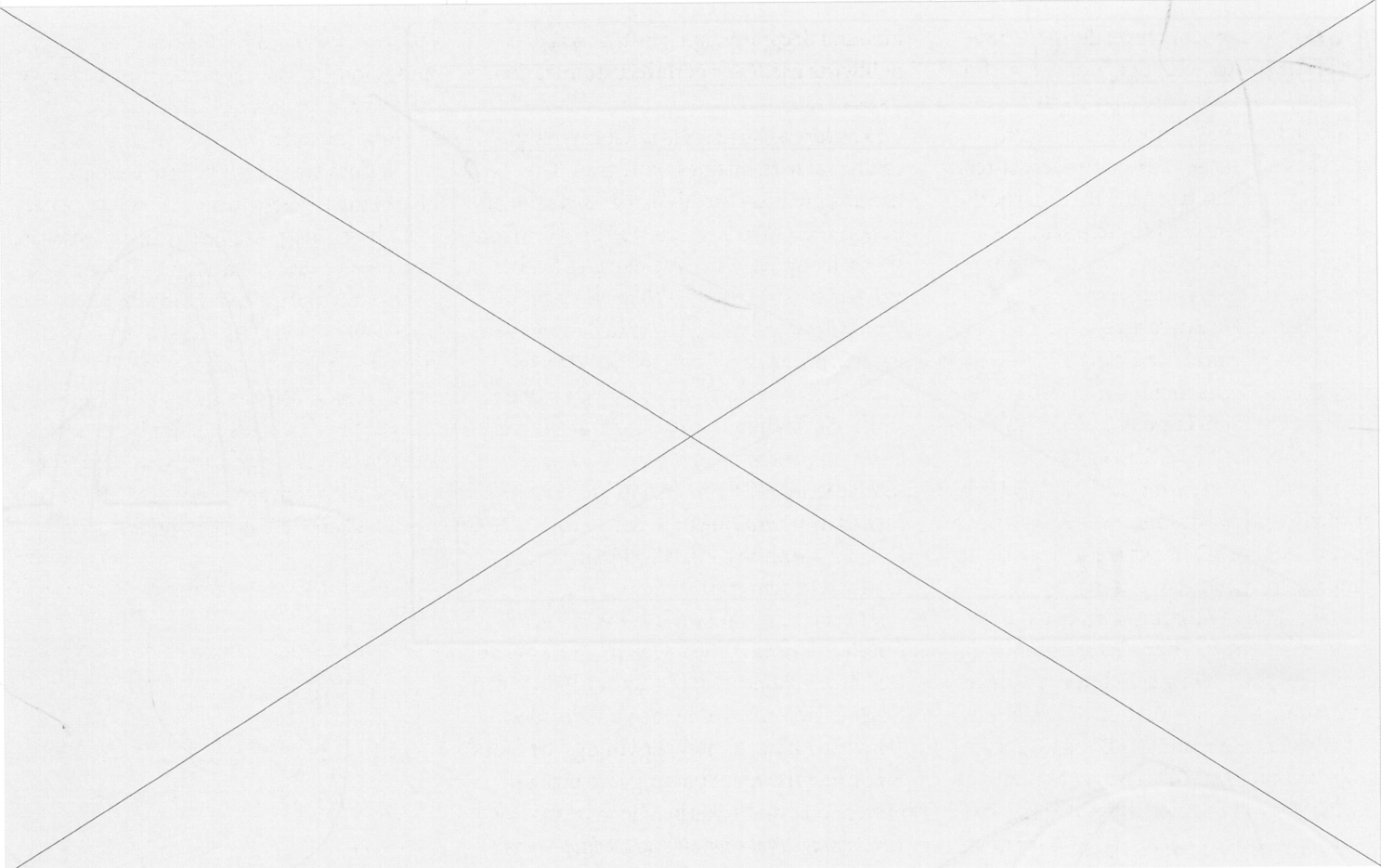


# Your Design Here

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*Are amateurs taking over?  
Don't panic—DIY design culture might  
just have something to teach us.*

By Virginia Postrel



**In the beginning**, circa 1968, there was *The Whole Earth Catalog*, the catalyst and model for the do-it-yourself movement. Subtitled “Access to Tools,” it told readers where to find the information, equipment, and supplies to do their own thing—from brewing beer to illuminating books.

*The Whole Earth Catalog* was the bible for everyone frustrated with industrialized mass production, from back-to-nature hippies to engineers with garage workshops. It was a best-seller that enacted what it preached: Enthusiasts produced the book with minimal design experience and an IBM Selectric Composer (leased for \$150 a month, plus \$30 to buy each font) for DIY typesetting. Wrote founder Stewart Brand,

“We can sit down with the layout people and editors and fit copy precisely to the page, with all the options of last-minute corrections.” Amazing.

To designers, DIY has two distinct meanings, and *The Whole Earth Catalog* embodied them both. DIY can be a style, with a deliberately unpolished look and feel, including such marks of amateurism as handwritten letters, inelegant spacing, and slightly crooked type. DIY style recalls John Ruskin’s Victorian-era nostalgia for the imperfections of Gothic handcraft; it’s a rebellion against machined perfection. DIY’s imprecision also declares—often disingenuously—that no professionals were involved. As long as DIY looks crude, whether by accident or design, professionals have nothing to fear.

But, of course, DIY has a second meaning, the one foretold by Brand’s exuberant embrace of typesetting tools. Designers no

longer have a monopoly on design. These days the tools are cheaper, more powerful, and easy to find online. They're also more likely to have skill embedded in them, whether that means the embroidery stitches programmed into a sewing machine or the standard layouts of a blog template. As a result, DIY work doesn't have to look crude, and it can take on just about any style. "If Dave Eggers decides to design his own magazine, that doesn't mean it looks a particular way. It means he's decided to become a producer," says Ellen Lupton, a *PRINT* contributor and editor of *D.I.Y.: Design It Yourself*, a handbook written and designed by her students and professors at the Maryland Institute College of Art, where she heads the graphic design M.F.A. program.

Today's DIY ethic emphasizes customization over craft. The point is not to perfect an underlying skill but to produce something that's yours alone. The impulse for what art theorist Ellen Dissanayake calls "making special"—behavior that is "sensorily and emotionally gratifying and more than strictly necessary"—is far more universal than the talent or patience to create polished work. Hence the stylistic paradox of today's do-it-yourself: homemade products that strive to look store-bought, made possible by tools that let amateurs recombine predesigned modules to produce professional, or semi-professional, results. "With the help of TypePad, even the severely HTML-impaired, specifically me, can build a website, and this kludge is my own artful creation," announces *National Journal* columnist Jonathan Rauch on his personal homepage. DIY tools range from CSS software templates to the special papers, letter

kits, and decorative stickers that scrapbook hobbyists use. They permit customization, Build-a-Bear style.

Developing such tools is itself a design challenge with business potential. The handbag makers Freddy & Ma let customers design their own bags online, choosing from six basic bag styles, several types of leather and hardware, and more than 200 textile options, including prints created for the line by nine professional designers. "We want you to experience the design process; the thrill of designing something beautiful, the anxiety in your stomach as you wait to receive it, and the joy of seeing your ideas turned into a unique product," write founders Anthony and Amy Pigliacampo at [freddyandma.com](http://freddyandma.com).

DIY tools tap a powerful source: the unfulfilled desires in each person's head. When Neil Gershenfeld of MIT Media Lab's Center for Bits and Atoms offered a course called "How To Make (Almost) Anything," he found that students weren't taking it to pick up professional skills. Rather, he writes in *Fab: The Coming Revolution on Your Desktop—From Personal Computers to Personal Fabrication*, "They were motivated by the desire to make things they'd always wanted, but that didn't exist," such as an alarm clock you have to wrestle to turn off. Computer-driven tools like laser cutters and 3-D scanners let these barely trained experimenters turn their desires into physical realities without giving up industrial precision. Graphic design tools do the same for creating statements and communities.

With enough experience and enjoyment, playing with design tools can turn amateurs into professionals. In Lupton's day, students came to art school knowing nothing about design. "We were going to be artists," she recalls. "We had studied drawing and painting in high school, and we were the art kids." The design program had to sell itself. By contrast, today's students "come to art school knowing what design is, knowing that they want to do it, knowing much of

the software, often having designed many things independently. Generationally, it's so different. They come to school attracted to design already."

Nor does every designer go to school. Like many writers, I have my own website, including a blog, and I frequently hear from readers who love the design and want to use the template. There is no template; I hired a pro to overhaul the site originally created by a DIY-talented friend. But my site's designer, Adrian Quan, is himself self-taught. An English major in college, he learned web design over years of fooling around with computer tools, learning from video and online tutorials, books, and

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conferences, and analyzing the best of the design he saw around him. “If a piece of design—web page, brochure, magazine, whatever—looks, works, and feels good and right, the question of who made it and how much experience they have becomes almost irrelevant,” he says. After seven years of self-employment, he has just been hired as a web designer at a Fortune 500 company.

Stories like this upset some designers, who equate specialized formal training with professional status. Periodically, calls arise for licensing or certification to keep out uncredentialed competition. How, if not through professional standards, can ignorant clients be sure of getting “good design”? To a professional writer, of course, these restrictionist dreams sound bizarre. After all, the First Amendment promises that anyone can express him- or herself in writing, yet writers don’t live in fear that people are issuing unlicensed prose. Everyone (at least in theory) learns to read and write in school, which is to the benefit of daily communication, and not the detriment of professional writers. Neither

my self-image nor my professional standing is threatened if you write a letter or a memo or a poem celebrating someone’s birthday, or, for that matter, publish an article or create a blog. Literacy doesn’t quench the demand for skillful writing—it enhances it.

Much of the professional knowledge gained through apprenticeship, whether as a writer working with editors or a design student or young designer working with master designers, comes from having an experienced pro suggest alternatives that achieve the same goals more gracefully. We learn by seeing how and why the “after” is noticeably better than the “before.” The changes may be subtle, but their effect is palpable. The

ability to make those subtle improvements at every stage of a project is what distinguishes a seasoned professional—however trained or compensated—from an amateur or a rookie. To fear that shoddy DIY work will replace good professional design is to suggest that the two are indistinguishable to the untrained eye. But the whole idea of good design, or good writing, is that the untrained audience will, in fact, respond to some work better than others. In a competitive marketplace, clients value that edge.

And, as every writer knows, real expertise is sadly elusive. Writers, like designers, may have to worry about how to get paid now that traditional business models are threatened by online publishing. But neither writers nor designers need fear that the world will stop needing our skills. Within limits, you can teach a computer program to check spelling or spec type. But conceptualization and structure involve hard-to-articulate tacit knowledge, the sort of expertise that comes with experience. Talent, practice, and apprenticeship make a tremendous difference when it comes to solving the hard problems of any profession.

Despite hippie dreams of self-sufficiency, we aren’t about to give up the advantages of specialization: “gains from trade,” in economics jargon. Responding to a DIY debate published on the AIGA’s online design journal, *Voice*, the designer and artist Raymond Prucher made a vital point: “A DIY-er might take 10 hours to do what we accomplish in a 5-minute thumbnail.”

Specialization is efficient. In fact, it's even efficient to let others do things you might do as well as they can, if you can do something else even better. "Why Michael Jordan doesn't mow his own lawn" is one way to express this idea, which economists call "comparative advantage."

Our economy is, if anything, more specialized than ever. Specialists not only make my clothes and fix my car, both classic do-it-yourself jobs, but wax my eyebrows and paint my fingernails, too. Americans spend nearly half their food budgets on meals away from home, up from just over a quarter in the early 1970s. Those meals at home include salad from a bag and rotisserie chicken cooked in the supermarket—templates for making dinner. Cake mixes were once a convenient substitute for baking from scratch; now they're the hands-on alternative to bakery products.

Little of today's DIY design is a substitute for the real challenges of professional practice. It's either routine or purely personal—the equivalent of home-style cooking, not a four-star restaurant meal. We wouldn't eat better, or appreciate fine cuisine more, if only certified chefs could buy fresh ingredients or use pots and pans. Access to typefaces doesn't define good graphic design any more than access to a word processor and a dictionary guarantees good writing. *The more amateurs do things themselves, the more they develop a refined taste for good professional work—whether in the kitchen or at the design station. P*