Your Design Here

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
Designers no longer have a monopoly on design. The tools are cheaper, more powerful, and easy to find.
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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 himself, 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 specify 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.