

Chapter 15



HEROIC DESIGN



What's the Trend?

Design takes a leading role in the introduction of new products, ideas, and inspiration to change the world in nuanced, audacious, irreverent, and sometimes unexpectedly heroic ways.

The largest oceanic cleanup effort in history is starting in 2016—thanks to a crazy idea from a 21-year-old Dutch entrepreneur named Boyan Slat. In three short years since founding, Slat's ambitious project, The Ocean Cleanup, has gone from a lofty concept of floating barriers designed to use the ocean's current to capture plastic waste (instead of the current standard of using boats and nets), to near reality.

At the Seoul Digital Forum, Asia's largest technology conference, Slat announced that the first array of floating barriers will be deployed in 2016 off the coast of Tsushima, an island between Japan and South Korea, to become the longest floating structure in world history.

The project is world changing, blatantly optimistic, and a perfect sign of the new role that design has taken in our culture as the solution to our biggest problems. Design was once considered just a step along the path to launching a project or effort. Designers were creative professionals

who needed to be properly managed and art directed to achieve useful results.

Today, design is seen differently.

Thanks to the success of design-centric companies like Apple and Ikea, design has long been seen as the road to building a competitive advantage. The difference today is that this focus on design is continuing to evolve beyond offering a corporate differentiator. When I first wrote about this evolution back in 2014, I found countless examples where design itself was becoming world changing. In the two years since, this idea of *Heroic Design* has dramatically expanded.

In 2016, we will see more efforts like The Ocean Cleanup, where design is fundamentally driving a shift that changes how we deal with some of the biggest problems in the world. Even when it comes to problems on a smaller, local scale, design can be the ultimate weapon to convince governments, bureaucracies, industries, and conservative thinkers of the feasibility of new ideas.

As social media brings more attention to the needy and challenges become more public, global designers will continue to apply new thinking to develop solutions. As this happens, design will continue to take a leading role in the introduction of new products, ideas, and campaigns to impact the world.

Design Everywhere

In 2014 when Norway's Norges Bank held a design competition for the country's future currency, the results of the search attracted worldwide attention. When the final designs by graphic design studio The Metric System and Norwegian architecture and design firm Snøhetta Design were awarded (for the front and back, respectively), most of the coverage predicted the final combined design will be the world's best-looking currency when it launches in 2017.

From inspiring more beautiful currency to seeking "innovative technology-enabled design solutions for the aging population" (TechSage Design Competition), there are now hundreds of design competitions for all types of categories. As more design competitions seek new solutions

and outside thinking, design itself gains prestige and becomes more valued in the world of business.

Brands like Johnson & Johnson, 3M, and Pepsi all now have chief design officers overseeing the role of design in their day-to-day efforts. Philips, PepsiCo, and Hyundai have all added chief design officers as appointments to their boards.

In higher education, institutes like Stanford's d.school, University of Virginia's Darden School, and the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management all have programs designed to teach students how to answer any type of challenge with design thinking, and how to collaborate effectively with other disciplines to add design process and methodology to the way they currently approach and solve problems.

Leading consulting and technology brands like Wipro, Google, Adobe, Accenture, and others have each been making major acquisitions of design firms for the past several years to inject more design thinking into their everyday services.

From education to design competitions, the role that design is taking as a discipline that offers a new way to imagine solutions to any type of problem is transformative. Increasingly, this is making design one of the most important capabilities of any effort in order to truly create impact or develop solutions that really work—even if they may not be technically possible, yet.

Imagined Futures

Public transportation is one of the biggest changes facing almost any city, and Austin, Texas, is one of the fastest growing cities in the United States. To reimagine a potential solution for their home city, a team of designers at interactive agency Frog Design created a solution based on high-wire, hanging gondola system. In addition to dreaming up the inventive solution, they created and designed a complete system, down to a full regional map and smart card. The project was introduced to local government officials and presented at urban planning and design events around the world.

Another design firm, Teague, created a new model for the “airline of the future,” which it presented to executives in the airline industry at several events in 2015. The new design featured unique ideas such as doing away with cabin baggage (all luggage, apart from personal items, would be checked with RFID tags), offering certain seats up for corporate promotion (so the middle seat could be discounted/subsidized by a sponsor) and letting passengers easily swap seats or even resell them through a central marketplace if they have a change in travel plans. The vision is enough to actually offer hope that the airline experience of the future could one day offer pleasure instead of angst.

Yet together, these design-driven imagined futures do more than create dissatisfaction with what is available today. They also inspire entire industries to think bigger and consider different alternatives for the future, which is a heroic effect in itself.

Why It Matters

While the importance of design in business has certainly grown over the past several years, what makes design heroic are the myriad examples of how new solutions to the world’s biggest problems are being imagined through great design. What we once might have described as a superficial outer layer aimed to make something look better goes much deeper today. Design is the solution itself, as well as the way we perceive it.

As a result, *Heroic Design* will continue to drive more organizations to instill design-centric thinking at the foundation of their business—and designers as well as design-minded engineers, scientists, and researchers will be the ones that bring this new vision into reality.

Who Should Use This Trend?

Governments, nonprofits, and organizations focused on bringing new, innovative products or services to market will all be affected by this trend. The idea of design thinking is one of the most impactful elements of this trend, which any company focused on differentiating and creating impact will be able to use.

How To Use This Trend

- ✓ **Adopt a design-focused mindset** - In IDEO leader Tim Brown's book *Change By Design*, he advocates taking a moment each day to deeply observe the ordinary. It is a simple suggestion, but one that illustrates the potential power of design thinking. The more you can encourage yourself and your organization to use this sort of thinking to spot the every day opportunities or inefficiencies in how you do business, the more you can encourage innovation from within.
- ✓ **Add design to your big ideas** - When Frog Design approached the impossible challenge of rethinking public transportation, they designed a solution on paper with illustrations. If you already have a big idea in your organization, but you struggle to convey it to others, design may offer the ultimate solution to help you take that idea from something that a small, core group of people are excited about to something that could actually have an impact on the world because others are able to understand it and share it.