

● Art Center: Incubating the Future of Design

Corporate Sponsors and Art Center College of Design

by Dan Wickemeyer

Someone asked me recently to define Art Center College of Design in a few words. One word came to mind immediately: it's an incubator. Since 1930 it's been a place to grow ideas from concept to execution.

I teach a 14-week multidisciplinary design studio class at Art Center. Since 1996 it's been a privilege for me to bridge the efforts of some of the most talented design students in the world with some of our most forward-thinking companies: Nokia, Northrop Grumman, Honda R&D, Johnson Controls, Ford Motor Company, Reebok, Nike, BMW, JPL, Philips Design, Intel, Hewlett-Packard, Samsung Wireless, Singapore Air, Volvo, Universal Studios, Sammy Entertainment, Herman Miller, Boeing, Old Navy and The Gap are just a few of the corporations who have sponsored educational projects at Art Center.

Our students are enrolled in ten Bachelor of Science degree majors: Advertising, Film, Fine Art, Graphic Design and Packaging Design, Illustration, Industrial Design (transportation, product, environmental) and Photography. Training here isn't just academic. It's an immersion in the real-world design process: demanding, collaborative, and fast. They're pushed to break new ground, to think like professionals and to challenge themselves and each other. Art Center has always worked with one foot in the corporate world, and these projects are treated like any professional endeavor. The products the students create will be used in the real world, so this isn't an ivory tower exercise. They're accountable to the sponsors and they rise to the occasion at every step from the first concept sketch to the final presentation.

The sponsors get the advantage of fresh thinking and cultivating new talent. These young designers bring new eyes and tastes to the task, so the results are often something no one has thought of before. It's been great watching ideas from my students help these leading companies stay sharp and competitive and create products that the public will love. Some examples include:

Johnson Controls, Inc., asked Art Center students to envision the car interior of the future fifteen years hence. The objective was to define the new "footprint" for car interiors by intentionally disrupting the traditional organization of elements. By using new technologies that put the control and command systems in new places in the car.

Nokia asked my students to rethink everything about cellular entertainment: Students were asked to respond to cultures and patterns of use of mobile communication and entertainment, acknowledging the social implications; and in turn create new cultures, objects, content, event whatever is appropriate.



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CORPORATE DESIGN EDUCATION



Honda America



Eupa, Tsann Kuen Group



Sammy Studios, Inc.

Boeing/Teague challenged environmental, product and transportation students to use design of interior and exterior environments to improve comfort for airline travel passengers from curbside to the cabin

Hewlett-Packard asked Art Center product design and packaging students to imagine designs for new technology that expands the boundaries of how and where we can print in the years to come. Students were to consider style, aesthetics and functionality for printers of the future.

Idealab! Asked students in Product Design to stretch themselves by finding the ideal application for an entry-level robot for today and tomorrow's consumer. Each student is to develop skills in client relations, drawing, conceptualization, communication and presentation capabilities.

Samsung Wireless sought design ideas for new business and products that address digital convergence to enrich our lives by 2008. Film, product design, graphic design, environmental design and user interface designers all participated.

Those are just a few of the clients and challenges we address. Others include Old Navy, Audi of America, Herman Miller, BMW and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory.

The designer teams that particulate are interdisciplinary, just as they would be in real corporate settings. The

Nokia project is a good example: Nokia asked us to look at the next generation of connected entertainment. We pulled together teams from user interface design, environmental design, graphic design, product designs, transportation design, and advertising. We also engaged participants from Caltech's humanities and social sciences department to complete the picture in the areas of anthropology, economics and psychology, and tackle some really big questions: what are the social implications of connected entertainment? How does a user interact with the surrounding environment while playing? Can you exploit the urban environment to improve play, interface, performance, and experience? Will a "throw test" be more suitable than a drop-test? How immersed in the game do you become? Can you control your level of immersion depending on your surroundings?

The process culminates in "Super Thursday," when students present their finished projects to the sponsors. Frequently these presentations are attended by upper management, who get a chance to see not only how well their investment has been used, but review some of the top talent that is now trained to join their teams. Art Center graduates are now leaders at prestigious companies around the world, and it's a point of great pride to us that their careers began here. ■

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