Samsung, Growing Innovation

Design Education at Samsung

by Dan Wickemeyer

In an effort to more effectively leverage it's design talent, Samsung and Art Center College of Design established an in-house design academy for product design, transportation, multimedia, and interdisciplinary design. Dan Wickemeyer describes the program as "a globe-trotting design workshop, with internships and mentor workshops built around a hands-on curriculum, all created to illuminate the intersections among culture, design, and business strategy."

"Across the globe, people are hungry for the same thing-freedom," says Samsung Chairman Kun Hee Lee. "Freedom from limitations of time and space. Freedom to access information and entertainment, or to communicate, anytime and anywhere, using products that are simple to handle, accessible, and innovative. This is true 'Digital Freedom,' and it should be available to everyone, regardless of age, culture, or geography. This is what Samsung understands and believes, truly, in our "heart.'"

As part of it's effort to support this mission, Samsung and Art Center established the Innovative Design Laboratory (IDS), an in-house design academy for product design, transportation, multimedia, and interdisciplinary design.

When I became Chair of Samsung's IDS program in 1998 our mandate was to take experienced designers from Samsung's various groups and improve their thinking skills and talents. The need was urgent to give Samsung a coherent global design look across a range of products, and secure a real identity for the brand. Good design would begin at the heart, so to speak, in the new ideas and experiences of the participants, and become integral to how Samsung's products and processes worked.

Samsung was looking for a leader who could help improve Samsung designers' creativity and global awareness, I had previous experience as a design consultant in Japan with Yamaha, Mitsubishi and Honda, so when Samsung was recruiting for a new leader, it came naturally to me to meet with the delegation from Korea at Art Center College of Design, and to develop a new design curriculum for twenty seven of Samsung's top design employees. Actually, this might have been Samsung's second choice—Chairman Lee offered to buy Art Center wholly. He settled for making a very generous donation and making use of our talents to build a unique educational program for Samsung's employees complete with international instructors from around the globe.

To introduce myself to the company I was flown to Seoul and visited a variety of Samsung sites: divisions for electronics, aerospace, heavy equipment industries, and semiconductors, as well as Samsung's Advanced Institute of Technology, its factories, and all its design centers. I also visited many historical sites in order to give me an introduction to Korean philosophies and its design heritage. Along the way I read Chairman Lee's book, Samsung's New Management: Change Begins with Me, and admired his goals for the company: he aimed to make Samsung's products more "human-centered" and achieve better quality, by making Samsung's designers more creative and more aware of international issues. It was exciting. I had a blank canvas from which to work and the support of the company's biggest design champion.

Both Chairman Lee's vision and the cultural climate of Korea made it clear to me that a conventional undergraduate design program would never do the job. Centuries of education by rote learning and memorization had tied the hands of Korean designers that was thoroughly Confucian—hierarchical, formal, and strict—but which worked against the creative freedom Samsung needed to compete effectively in the marketplace. To get Samsung to learn, my first task was to help them "unlearn"—to think outside the boundaries and let their creative imaginations loose. It was more than an educational process. I joined Korean culture, immersing myself in Korean ways, to share my own experience and help them grow.

The Course

The course builds upon the students' disciplinary training by teaching them about the activities comprising the product development process, including research, product planning, customer needs analysis, concept development and testing, financial analysis of production, design for manufacturing, intellectual property, and project management. The curriculum requires reading assignments, lectures, hands-on exercises, class discussion, case studies, and guest speakers, but the key learning vehicle is the team projects in which cross-functional groups of four to six students collaborate to develop new products. Each project begins with a design brief in the form of a market opportunity identified by the class. The teams are each given per diem to cover out-of-pocket expenses; they then go on to explore the market, benchmark competitive products, develop concepts, create working models, select one concept to pursue in detail, build a prototype, test the product with customers, and evaluate the product's business potential. Completed products are shown in professional-quality multimedia presentations before a cross-disciplinary panel of experts at the end of each fourteen week term.

The Global Design Workshops

The Samsung Global Workshops became the school-in-practice for Samsung's designers. The Chairman wanted to make Samsung a world leading corporation so we needed their designers to know the world itself. The workshops conducted three times a year, took 27 designers and four professors to New York, Los Angeles, Washington D.C. Mexico City, Paris, Florence, Berlin, Delhi, Agra, Jaipur, Beijing, Xian, Kyoto, and Tokyo, as well as sites in Korea. It was a comprehensive tour of the history of inspiring, effective design on the ground in a variety of cultures, focusing on great architecture, design, and art. Lectures were held on the sidewalks, in restaurants, in the museums and hotel rooms, discussing cultural diversity, great people, great ideas, inventions, intellectual properties, modern thinking, the Bauhaus, the design spirit, design and nature and much more. Repeatedly I was asked to define 'good design' and my answers were always the same: Forget about 'good.' Good was known and familiar. I wanted them to find their own new definitions about what was good, not to follow anyone else's definition. The process was what mattered, not the precedent, not the outcome. If we built a better process, the outcome would take care of itself.

The eminent designer Massimo Vignelli believed that "teaching the essential principles of design in an academic setting is almost impossible," he says. "You have to live and breathe it, not reduce it to abstractions and rules." Good design is inherently organic and alive. Design from rote learning and rigidity results in dead ideas and unsuccessful results. Inspired by such designers as Vignelli and George Nelson, I wrote a short list of flexible operating principles for Samsung. My goals were:

- Give the designers an education of historical, cultural quality in design, creative thinking and problem solving.
- Foster a climate of investigation and intellectual rigor in which visual creation can flourish.
- Improve the designers' cultural and international awareness, with an emphasis on social responsibility.
- Improve the designers' communication skills to help them articulate their ideas through visualization and verbalization.
- Send our graduates into the world with the ability to make a positive difference in the future direction of design.

After finishing the IDS program, some of the top designers are selected to travel abroad to spend an additional four months as an intern within a design consultancy or educational facility. Art Center, Rhode Island School of Design, Parsons, IDEO, Designworks BMW and Design Continuum have all eagerly accepted IDS designers. The staff and principals of these firms are their mentors.

Success Update 2003:

As a gauge for determining innovation amoung the worlds leading corporations, Every year the Industrial Design Excellence Awards (IDEA) are given by the Industrial Designers Society of America and sponsored by BusinessWeek. This year the 2003 IDEA contest demonstrated that Samsung's design competence continues to grow, Samsung won five honors and is now second only to Apple Computer Inc. in total awards for the past five years. A total of 17 awards since 1998 has made Samsung a global power in product design. ■

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