



Tom Kelley:

Okay, this next presentation, the last one before the break, is one of the short stories and it's from Marcia Lausen, creative director for design consultants Studio/lab in Chicago, as well as director of the School of Design at the University of Illinois. In design circles and in the world at large, Marcia's probably best known for her work on the Design for Democracy movement and the book with that name, which she'll be talking about today. Edward Tufte, a well-known information design god, called Marcia's book "a notable and noble achievement, applying the craft of graphic design in the service of the public interest." For all of us in the design community who are a little chagrined by that pesky butterfly ballot incident eight years ago, Marcia's working hard to restore our karmic balance, so please welcome Marcia Lausen.

[Applause]

Marcia Lausen:

Hi everyone, this is Design for Democracy, the seven-minute version, so I'm afraid I have a script.

On November 7, 2000, a confusing ballot in Palm Beach County, Florida, became the focus of national media attention, providing an unprecedented opportunity for our profession to step forward and demonstrate how to use design to make choices clear. For the past eight years, working on behalf of AIGA,

Design for Democracy, a team of design professionals, educators and students have investigated and advocated for the transformative effects that good design might bring to the U.S. election experience. Our work is extended far beyond ballot design; we have learned a great deal about the production of elections in the United States and we have established design principles, tools and programs that seek to improve the voting experience for all involved. Building from research conducted in 2001 on behalf of AIGA by the experience-modeling group of Sapient, collaborative work began between the design programs at the University of Illinois at Chicago and our local election officials. In this initial work we identified opportunities and we developed and tested prototypes for improved information and instruction in the polling place environment, for poll worker training and support, for administrative processes and form systems -- we found very quickly that the behind the scenes of elections were as confusing if not more so than the ballots -- and for voting equipment and supplies. Always in our work seeking universal design solutions in consideration of persons with disabilities. We additionally worked to develop an identity program and to establish a comprehensive set of graphic standards that could be made available to designers and election officials nationwide.

Our efforts were supported in funding and in pro-bono contributions by a number of organizations including the Sappi Ideas That Matter program, The National Endowment for the Arts, and the U.S. Election Assistance Commission. Our accomplishments have been reported and celebrated in national and international press coverage, as well as in business and design publications. And we gain visibility through exhibition and presentation at museums, educational institutions, gatherings of government officials and design events here and abroad.

In the fall of 2000, the Design for Democracy map of influence looked something like this, with ongoing efforts involving top-down advocacy from AIGA's national office and with the beginnings in Chicago of a grassroots effort in election design reform, which have grown out of the events in Florida. That grassroots part began when, on behalf of AIGA Chicago, I volunteered to redesign Chicago's own infamous butterfly ballot. While I do not regret that moment of enthusiastic volunteerism, I did not realize what I'd gotten myself into. At that time, those working in elections were essentially unaware of the design professions; for example, many of the government officials that we met through our work seemed to confuse the word "design" with the word "decoration." It was not uncommon in my early days of speaking to our intended audience to be asked, when I explained that I was working in election design, if I were going to put flowers on the ballots. Ballot design, if it could be called that, happened where election officials, lawyers and printers came together in a chaotic rush to get it done on time. Most of the mistakes, which might cause confusion, are made from good intentions by election officials who are under severe pressures and who are simply not designers. Much of this has not changed; however, now, eight years later I am happy to report that many election professionals are all well aware of the work of Design for Democracy. Since 2000, yes --

[Applause]

-- since 2000, we have extended our initial work in punch-card ballot design to include optical-scan voting technologies, as well as interaction design models for touch-screen voting and we have developed resources, tools and programs that enable the production of elections nationwide to be more accurate, more efficient and to make information more assessable. We can now say that there are states coast to coast, not everyone, but coast to coast, working to improve their ballots and communication materials based on our work. And that we have a full set of tools joining the existing AIGA Get Out the Vote program that are available to designers, election officials and interested citizens.

One such tool is a book co-published in 2007 by AIGA and the University of Chicago Press -- I'm told prominently displayed in the Gain bookstore. This book is an advocacy tool for the profession and it is a how-to book for the collaborations between designers and election officials. AIGA has sent copies of this book to all members of Congress, to each Secretary of State and to each State Election Director. A tremendous body of work has also been produced through a partnership between AIGA and the U.S. Election Assistance Commission. Last summer the EAC accepted AIGA Design for Democracy's research and best-practice recommendations for ballot and polling-place information design. And in January, detailed guidelines and editable samples were sent to 6,000 election officials across the country. These samples and guidelines are available, but not so easy to find on the EAC website; they are also available and much more accessible on our own website, on the AIGA site. Through the ongoing efforts of AIGA Design for Democracy, our Managing Director, Jessica Friedman Hewitt, U.S. election officials and their administrative staffs are being encouraged to consult with design professionals and to consider hiring an AIGA fellow in their state.

The Design for Democracy fellow program is an emerging form of advocacy based on a successful placement of a full-time designer in the Secretary of State's office in Oregon. We are seeking to use Oregon as model to develop dedicated design positions at the state level. As I look back over the past eight years, on the eve of this much-anticipated election, I'm

reminded that there are some very rewarding, sometimes surprisingly glamorous moments, like our exhibitions in Lucerne and Paris and Copenhagen. There are also quite a few points of pain and frustration, like the time we discovered that lowercase letters were illegal in the state of Illinois and that we would have to change the law to incorporate our design recommendation.

[Audience laughter]

These images were collected in Chicago, where we are proud to see our work in action and we have also discovered a need for improved adhesives.

[Audience laughter]

There also seems to be need to instruct poll workers to place polling place signs on doorways that can actually be entered.

[Audience laughter]

I conclude with a few remarks from John Lindback, the Director of Elections in the state of Oregon. I need to get my slide up here. The Director of Elections of the State of Oregon and President of the National Association of State Election Directors, who has served as a critical bridge between our design efforts and the world of election administration. Elections in our country are very complex and because of our democratic structure they are controlled at the local level. Each state, county and even municipality has unique issues and constraints and many election officials, because they live in a world of following rules, have a general attitude of pointing out what can't be done instead of thinking about what's possible. While we have accomplished a great deal, this work is far from finished.

Thank you.

[Applause]

Tom Kelley:

So, Design for Democracy, it's kind of a movement, you know, and from my experience, in most movements there are resisters, there are detractors, there are devil's advocates trying to defend the status quo, mainly. Do you have that experience and anything you can tell us about the hurdles along the way?

Marcia Lausen:

Oh, I could do a whole conference on the detractors and difficulties discovered, but I think the main thing is that we have attempted to introduce our profession to one that didn't know about us and so it's a little bit like traveling to another planet, I think, you know, having to come to terms with that. There were -- I quit the project more times than I can count, once over the color red, once over, you know, some form of typography that was very offensive to me, but -- we learn to think very differently than I do in my work at Studio/lab, for example. We learn to describe great accomplishment as significant improvement, so.

Tom Kelley:

There you go. And so, you know, looking at your bio you, like Laura Granka who came before you, you split your time between academia and the commercial world. Can you tell us how that works out for you and, you know, what you'd recommend about that and where it makes you crazy?

Marcia Lausen:

Well, it makes me crazy every single day and I wouldn't change it for the world. I -- becoming engaged in the academic world on the level that I have has really changed the way I am as a designer, it has changed my practice, we are very selective and I don't mean that we can just choose the clients we want but we're very selective about the projects that we engage with. I think we've become what I would term a critical practice, where we're constantly thinking about new ways to work and wanting to be a firm that's engaging in emerging forms of design practice; this comes from my thinking and writing about design education. And the balance is very funny because at, part of the year, at the University there's this time of year where we have to do our faculty activity report, which is where we're supposed to be famous and everybody needs to know who we are and we need to have big important clients, and then there's the time of year where we have to fill out the non-university activities -- no, what's it called -- Report of Non-University Activities, where everything we do seems to be in conflict with the university. So, you learn after, you know, this is my 13th year in academia, you learn to put it together and not be disturbed by the fact that you're supposed to be one day something quite different than a teacher and on other days very much so.

Tom Kelley:

And do a lot of your students end up working for you at the firm?

Marcia Lausen:

I wouldn't say a lot because we're kind of small, but there definitely are employees of Studio/lab who are former students, yes.

Tom Kelley:

This was our secret weapon --

Marcia Lausen:

Yeah.

Tom Kelley:

You know, when I joined I was related to the founder of my firm, but every professional that joined before me had been his student at some time or another and that was considered cheating within the rules. I think it might have been outside the rules at Stanford but we still got away with it.

Marcia Lausen:

One thing that's interesting is if they're, the person in our firm is not formerly a student, they generally have an academic spouse. I mean we have a group of people that are engaged in the two worlds, for sure.

Tom Kelley:

So, you describe this in the run-up to -- the Design for Democracy in the run-up to the big 2008 election and so, two questions about that. One is, are you like, done, are you washing your hands of this? And two is, to the extent that you are not done or that others need to pick up that baton and run with it, did you learn things in the run-up to the current election that we could use in 2012, for example?

Marcia Lausen:

I think we have just arrived at the point where these tools are readily available and when I first started speaking to election officials they seemed to want to do what we were suggesting but didn't know how. Now we've gotten to the point where we can help them. But this is just beginning now in 2008, we will see very little impact of this. You saw the list of states there, and generally that's a county in those states, not the whole state, so I hope to see more. I think we've learned things about what is an initiative of Design for Democracy that could be captured for future initiatives that might fall under this umbrella, things like tax reform and Medicare, Medicaid and emergency and evacuation design is something we have going a little bit, so there is a lot learned there. And I will always be proud of the work and happy to talk about the work but for me the book was the way of getting it out of me and into the world so I am quite happy to arrive eight years later at a moment where I can say, "Buy the book, please."

Tom Kelley:

Yes, buy the book. Is there any, do you think there's an opportunity here to have like, you know, secondary and tertiary effects in the sense of empowering others to care in this work. So, for example, just to name randomly a presidential candidate, there's a website called MyBarackObama.com, right, in which if I wanted to, you know, create a fundraiser for that particular candidate, it, you know, it's the -- my whole kit. It sends out the e-vites, it, you know, sets up the way for people to do financial transactions without involving me, it, you know, allows it to go viral. Is there an equivalent in this Design for Democracy, because the work is not done, right? Is there an equivalent in this or could there be?

Marcia Lausen:

There most definitely is and any designer who can pair themselves with an election official or any election official that can seek out a designer can take this work much farther, we've solved a lot of the big problems but there are many, many more. And what we just hope is that those teams would build from this work so that together we're creating a larger system.

Tom Kelley:

And then my last question, looking, you know, from outside AIGA, you know, the Design for Democracy program, which you've obviously been shepherding, but is, you know, is an AIGA movement of sorts, you know, a sponsor and, you know, a coordinator of it, is this, you think, is this setting a precedent, do you think this is likely to spawn other such initiatives or movements or things like that 'cause this one seems to be the first of its kind?

Marcia Lausen:

Yeah, I think it's the most fully formed that we have an example of but I do think there are already other programs going on now, The Aspen Design Challenge, for example, the water

challenge is going on now, and that's engaging. I think we've learned that it can be useful and mutually beneficial to engage educational institutions in this work and so that's an example of another initiative that's happening through AIGA.

Tom Kelley:

Great, thank you very much.

Marcia Lausen:

Thank you.

[Applause]