



CITIZEN MAU

BRUCE MAU IS INCREDIBLY PASSIONATE ABOUT DESIGN, SO MUCH SO HE SEES IT EVERYWHERE, IN EVERYTHING. HIS DEEP THINKING ON THE SUBJECT, AND HIS MASSIVE CHANGE PROJECT, INSPIRED US TO INCLUDE HIM IN OUR ANNUAL LIST OF GLOBAL VISIONARIES (**PLANET^o 30**) EARLIER THIS YEAR. WE WANTED TO HEAR MORE, SO WE ASKED GEOFFREY COFFEY TO HAVE A CHAT.

INTERVIEW BY **GEOFFREY COFFEY** ILLUSTRATION BY **ALEXANDRA COMPAIN-TISSIER**

“DON’T BE COOL,” advises Bruce Mau. “Cool is conservative fear dressed in black. Free yourself from limits of this sort.”

Such iconoclasm may define the career of this 47-year-old Canadian uber-designer who earned a reputation as a smasher of genres by his junior year of high school, making a last-minute decision to leave the math-science stream and apply to art college. “Too late,” said the guidance counselor. “Watch me,” said Mau.

Today that ability to cross-pollinate has amassed him a portfolio that ranges from the signage for Frank Gehry’s shape-shifting Disney Hall in Los Angeles and Rem Koolhaas’s exquisite public library in Seattle to more complex projects like the program for the “Puenta de Vida” museum of biodiversity in Panama City and the design (again with Koolhaas) for “Tree City”, an urban national park on the perimeter of Toronto. His studio does work in a range of disciplines like book design, visual identity and branding, environmental graphics, programming and exhibitions, product development, and more, but Mau’s true forte lies in breaking apart those boxes to re-combine ideas in new and unusual ways. In 2003 he founded the Institute without Boundaries (IwB), a post-graduate interdisciplinary program with Toronto City College that sends 10 students into Mau’s studio for 12 months to research, design, and realize a public intellectual project. Their most recent and widely lauded effort, Massive Change, explores the future of global design (see massivechange.com). This coming year Bruce Mau Design will get bolder still, as they’ve been commissioned by the country of Guatemala to “refashion” the nation.

Your job title...perhaps “jumper of fences and crosser of fields”... (laughs) We’re struggling with that — how to define what we do. For a lot of people,

design is purely a formal, visual category. My approach is different, more of a comprehensive look at what is possible. **You’ve written that the “new designer” is, in the words of Bucky Fuller, “a synthesis of artist, inventor, mechanic, objective economist, and evolutionary strategist.” Wonderful coinage.** (laughs) Yeah, isn’t that great? **To that list, in your case, we might add “educator.”** Yes, the studio was designed around an early experience I had working with Zone Books. It blew my mind — I discovered fields and people that I had never even heard about. And I realized I wanted to make a studio like that — a fundamentally educational workplace. **You’re educating not only this new breed of designer, but also the wider public.** Yeah, the IwB is both challenging and public. That combination produces an entrepreneurial learner. When you have to do your work on stage, it focuses the mind, it makes you ambitious. **Let’s not forget Heisenberg: just by being observed, something has been changed.** Exactly. I’ve never thought about it that way. Absolutely our own experience, I mean that’s what happened to me.... And the first few years of the Institute have proven the model is effective. A dramatic chemical change takes place. **So tell us about Massive Change — it’s a traveling museum exhibit, a book, a Web site, a feature film, and more. The theme was inspired by a quotation from the historian Arnold Toynbee, perhaps you can recite it from memory by now?** Oh, for sure. “The twentieth century will be remembered by future generations not as an era of political conflict or technological invention, but as an age in which human society dared to think of the welfare of the whole human race as a practical objective.” **Practical objective...as opposed to “utopian ambition”...** Right. We were invited by Vancouver [Museum of Modern Art] to do an exhibition on design...very open as to what it could contain. Now



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something very irritating to me is the conflict between what I see and experience in the world — positive, optimistic, international, connected, global, all these interesting developments — and, on the contrary, a negative mood. People are convinced that we’re going to hell in a handcart, things are getting worse all over...which seems to run counter to the facts and to my own experience. It was worth investigating — are we really such gross failures? So we started looking, and we found the Toynbee quote, and this is exactly the pattern we’re seeing. If you take away all the differences in the design disciplines, and say “What are designers interested in?” They are interested in the welfare of the entire human race as a practical objective. This may not be conscious...they may not see how their one pixel fits in to the larger, beautiful image...but that is what we’re up to. **So you’re expanding our understanding of the word “designer.” It applies to scientists and academics and many others.** That’s right. And we discovered that a lot of these people didn’t see themselves as “designers” either — but they used the word “design,” as a verb, to describe what they do. **Designing chemical polymers or mass transit systems or whatever.** Right. When we talk about design, professionally, we talk about categories and boundaries: graphic design, industrial design, furniture design.... But colloquially, we’re broad and inclusive, we’re more intelligent about our use of the word. To design is to manipulate our environment according to our needs. And so we said, let’s look at that for the exhibition. We’re going to forget about the disciplines, and see design from the perspective of a citizen. Almost everywhere you go, you find yourself together with designed things — the city is produced by us, full of things produced by us, information produced by us — you realize that almost your entire experience is a designed one. Massive Change is not about the world of design; it’s about the design of the world. **It also pursues the question, “Now that we can do anything, what will we do?”** For us as designers, we had to understand the practical dimension to this. It’s not only optimistic, imaginative, and hopeful, but also practical and plausible. The world is now connected to the knowledge capacity. It’s no longer about a singular authorship, a singular aesthetic, a singular place, a singular designer...it’s about a collective, connected capacity to produce collaborative solutions. And that’s a whole new order of magnitude. **As a math student, did you feel a special affinity for the distributive property?** (laughs) I love the whole idea, that actually the field is charged. It’s not a linear thing any more. Suddenly you have a field charged with potential, and the solutions can come from anywhere. So what’s the most important attribute in this new landscape? Strategic optimism and applied imagination. But not blind optimism! We’ve been accused of being naïve...but we absolutely are not. We know there are problems and implications. New designs produce new problems. Many of the troubles we face today are because of design success, not design failure. Take the problem of the car...it’s not a problem because it failed! So we’re not naïve about that. **Then what is the current creative brief for the evolutionary strategy of mankind?** When Franklin, Crick, and Watson figured out the DNA structure as a system of information, they handed us “life” as a design problem. They handed us evolution...they gave us the responsibility for evolution. And you can say “I want no part of that”... (laughs) **As some do.** As many do. But let’s say you did a worldwide referendum to put the genie back in the bottle and say, “We won’t pursue genetics.” Even if you did that, you would still be designing evolution by choosing that accidental pathway. So you would have the responsibility anyway. There’s no getting away from it. Either go backwards and take responsibility for designing it backwards and for all the implications of that decision, like living with incurable genetic

diseases, for example...or you take the other path, which is to say, let’s develop this capacity with greater precision, we have these tools to produce change, now we move forward. **Some are afraid to tamper with Mother Nature.** I’m surprised by how many people have such a sentimental idea of nature. You know, they think that dogs are natural. (laughs) We discovered in our research that only one dog is natural: the wolf. Humans domesticated the wolf 10,000 years ago, and since then we’ve invented and designed every other breed for our own purposes. We need them nasty to protect our property, and we made them like that. We need them friendly to be cuddly, and we made them like that. **Good noses to hunt rabbits.** Yeah, we need them fast to get those rabbits, and we made them like that. They’re all us. Dogs are man’s best friend because we designed them. **Dangerously good logic.** No, the real danger is this idea of preserving nature, that you can somehow make a park, draw a line around that piece, and preserve it. This doesn’t work, because ecosystems don’t respect the boundaries of our political life.... And it functions as a license to do the worst thing everywhere else.... “We’ve saved a little piece, so now we can wreck the rest.” We propose to invert the diagram. Over the next 100 years, we want to grow the pieces that are parks of intelligent behavior until they dominate the landscape, they become the landscape and we’re left with parks of stupid behavior...we would have islands of stupidity in a sea of intelligence. At the moment, it’s the reverse. People still think of cities as objects...we propose that there is no boundary to the city. Everywhere is urban. Even “natural” environments need to be integrated and designed as part of an urban ecology. **Over the course of your career, the scope of your projects has expanded...as you put it, from the singular to the plural...more specifically, from designing Zone Books to designing the country of Guatemala. Does this expand the number of projects you’ll take on, or does it limit the possibilities to only those which are suitably massive?** We’re looking for the right situations and the right conditions. We’ll probably do fewer projects in the future, and on a bigger scale. We’re looking to limit the number and increase the scope. The ambition needs to be exciting. **What’s happening with Guatemala? I love the notion of designing a new vision for an entire country.** We have to be careful. People attribute to me a kind of megalomania that isn’t justified. It comes from the wrong place. People still see design as a singular practice...so when you talk about the design of a country, people think it sounds absurd. **They think dictator.** Exactly. And they would be right. **That’s the old model.** Yeah, the idea that you can somehow “get it right” and make a perfect place...that’s not what this is about. We were approached by the people in Guatemala, who asked, “Can you produce an image that will serve as a collective ambition, a powerful replacement for those three images which now dominate our society after 36 years of violence?” Those images today are bloodshed, poverty, and corruption. They want us to help express a new Guatemalan vision. **A new national identity?** A vision for a better future. And that, to me, is an exciting project. **How’s your Spanish?** Pretty non-existent. Our whole team, everybody we work with there, speaks English. Even the Mayan leaders, the union leaders. **Do you speak German, by any chance?** No, only English. A tragic limitation. **I just thought, for such a multidisciplinary guy, you might have a few other languages under your belt.** No, they just won’t stick with me. I’ve studied them for years, but the moment I turn away from the book, they evaporate. I’ve made peace with the fact that I’ll never speak another language. **Or perhaps you’ll design a new language that you’re able to learn.** That would be optimistic, imaginative, and hopeful, for sure, but likely not practical or plausible. ○

MEDIUM®

MINIMALIST LUX Design by Eric Meyer

The Minimalist LUX’s defining feature is the extreme simplification of form, relying solely on a mixture of fine material for its structure and shape. The refined upper is executed in a durable nylon base accented with supple leather detailing. Additional refined details including leather bound finishes have enhanced the LUX version.

Die stärkste Eigenschaft des Minimalist LUX ist die extreme Vereinfachung der Form und beruht auf einer Mischung von ausgesuchten Materialien für seine Struktur und Form. Das veredelte Obermaterial besteht aus einer beständigen Nylon-Basis. Eine besondere Note erhält dieses Modell durch Lederdetails. Raffinierte Details, z.B. aus Leder gearbeitete Abschlüsse, erhöhen den Stellenwert des LUX.

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