

# Design as a Tool for Leadership and Social Change

Design and understanding of the design process can make people better leaders. That is a belief held by Sheila Danko, the J. Thomas Clark Professor of Entrepreneurship and Personal Enterprise in the Department of Design and Environmental Analysis. "Good design, like good leadership, is transformative. Both empower people to reach their own potential and improve the world around them," she says.

BY CAROLE STONE

Formally trained in architecture and industrial and graphic design, Danko embraces a broad view of design in daily life and encourages her students to do the same. Not merely a product, a noun, or object, design is also a process, a verb, a tool for communicating vision and for engaging people in the process of change, she says. Similar to the way in which a work of art or a piece of music communicates the intentions of its author and envelops the individual in a new view of reality, the designed world around us—from monuments and medical facilities to subway maps and strategic plans—reflects the intentions and values of the people who created it and shapes our world view.

In her research, Danko seeks to uncover the ideas embedded in designs, especially as they relate to social or interpersonal issues. "Design is unique in the arts because it is inherently proactive, synonymous with creative problem-solving, and can directly impact the health and well-being of society," she states. "This is my work—to move people beyond the notion of design as material artifact toward the concept of design as a tool for leadership and social change."

Danko's methodology is a hybrid one, blending the objective perspective of case-study method with the subjective, personal insights of narrative method, or storytelling. This approach enables her to examine design as part of an interrelated system of products, people, and processes revealing the intangible qualities of design, the values behind design decisions, and the nuances of the design process—with its inevitable conflicts, controversies, trade-offs, and reworkings.

"Stories are a powerful method for making sense of the world and understanding our role in it," she says. "We have embraced the scientific method to such a degree that we have forgotten other ways of knowing and learning. Narrative method provides evidence of how people derive meaning from design. It complements the scientific method with its power to illustrate, to

inform, and ultimately, to invite personal reflection."

In 1999 Danko began work on a collective research project for which she was a principal investigator, a project to identify and document personal stories of the life-changing impact of interior design in the workplace. "Strategic Stories: Shaping Interior Design for the 21st Century," was sponsored by FIDER, the Foundation for Interior Design Education and Research. Danko's collaborators, who did similar field work and analysis, studied the impact of design in a variety of organizations, including Boston Financial, DreamWorks Animation Studio, DuPont Antron, Sprint, and the Environmental Protection Agency.

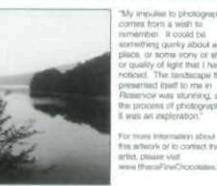
After conducting lengthy, tape-recorded interviews, Danko returned to Ithaca where her audiotapes were transcribed, verbatim. Then, the analysis began. The team identified major issues and recurring themes, which became the focus of the story writing. An established six-part framework was used for reconstructing the data into several interrelated stories.

"The goal of storytelling is to synthesize complex issues, ambiguous situations, and opposing forces in a contextually relevant way," Danko explains. "What is unique about our work is that all the stories are true stories about real people and real situations, not hypothetical composites or fictional scenarios." The stories highlight strategic applications of design, illustrating how decisions are made in the context of human tensions and emotion. While the stories often focus on a single voice, the data collection always includes multiple voices to enhance validity. Many points of view are essential to understand design in its social context, she says.

In 2000 Danko published "Beneath the Surface: A Story of Leadership, Recruitment, and the Hidden Dimensions of Strategic Workplace Design," in the *Journal of Interior Design*. The story describes a human-resources recruit who interviewed for a job at Boston Financial. The newly designed work space—its interior design, arrangement of individual offices and shared spaces, and choice of furnishings—had an important influence on the recruit's decision to accept a job offer. During her tour and subsequent interviews this woman discovered that the physical environ-



Everett Ruess (Age 19, Illinois, 1917)  
"This is the picture of the spirit of music. She is standing on the water with her fingers behind her. Above you can see the moon, her shadow, stars, a water and a lighthouse. Below is the water a bar and the shining path for the soul is taking to the unknown. This and others is a language that you may not understand. Another showed her the way for people in this world." (See [www.finechocolate.com](http://www.finechocolate.com) for more on our art.)

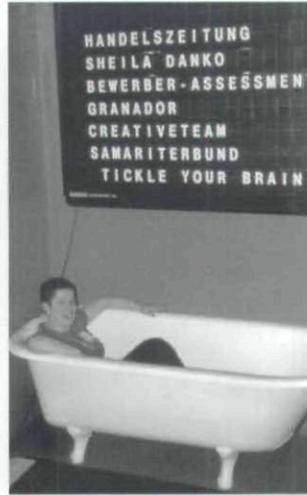
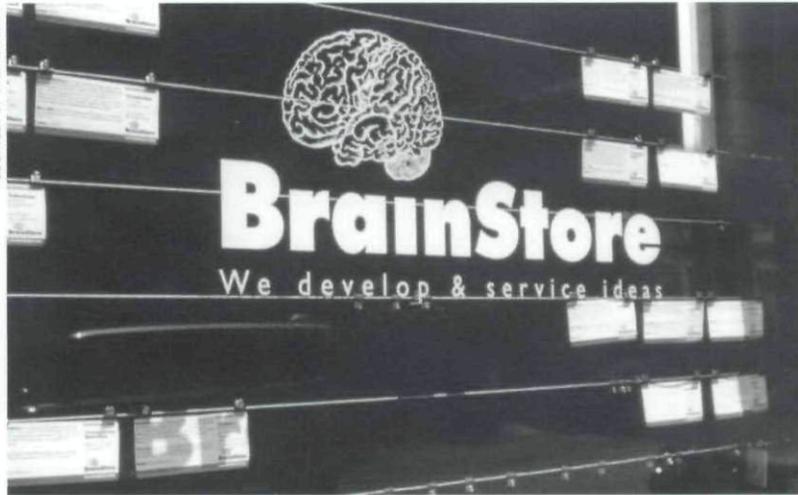


Debra Hatch, Ithaca, NY  
Recession: 1980. (Caption above photo: 7 x 11")  
ITHACA FINE CHOCOLATE

ITHACA FINE CHOCOLATE

Reproductions of art by adults and children from around the world can be found in Ithaca Fine Chocolate's "Art Bars."





BrainStore, an idea factory in Switzerland, uses its office design to shock people out of their complacency.

ment held clues about the people and the corporate culture, Danko explains. "Because the chief administrative officer and the director of organizational development viewed design as a strategic tool to communicate their values and social mission, they were able to articulate some very important things about the corporate culture, which convinced this young woman that she might like to work there," she says.

Danko's work challenges people by asking them about the kind of human beings they want to be. "Values consciousness is a critical part of education," she says. "Leadership development begins with an awareness of self and progresses to an understanding of self in relation to the world. I want my students to lead with their values."

Another strategic story from the Boston Financial project—entitled "The Gift of Purpose" (see page 5)—illustrates how managers can manifest values and communicate vision through the choices they make relative to the workplace. This and the other strategic stories lend insight into the ways in which leaders can use design to advance their organizations.

"A leader is someone who redesigns the world, who re-creates products and processes that fulfill a range of needs. Leaders need to understand how design can help them achieve their goals," Danko says.

She assigns "The Gift of Purpose" as required reading for students in her leadership skills mini-course, *Design: A Vital Part of the Leadership Equation*, which she teaches each year at Cornell's Johnson Graduate School of Management. Danko tells her students, "I want you to learn a new tool for your leadership repertoire—design and the thought processes of designing. It is a tangible means of putting your vision into practice in an organization and in the world."

Her use of stories in the classroom and in the Boston Financial study informed several subsequent case studies that were sponsored by the Robert and Edna Shelley Gates Fund for Leadership through Design. The stories embedded in the office design of Discovery Channel's Latin America Division reveal how conflict between the corporate culture and the existing societal culture of Miami-area employees could be meaningfully resolved, highlighting the

need for leaders to use design in culturally sensitive ways. Another case study, with BrainStore, Ltd, is about a Swiss idea factory whose stories of creative process illustrate how their workplace was designed intentionally to shock, challenge, and communicate their philosophy of creative problem-solving. Clients entering BrainStore are greeted not only by shocking-pink walls, but bathtubs, train-station signboards, and an industrial aesthetic reminiscent of a factory.

Danko's newest project explores how socially responsible entrepreneurs use design—product design, marketing design, and workplace design—to strategically communicate their vision, values, and social mission. The study, "Values-Led Entrepreneurship by Design: Strategic Stories of Growing a Socially Responsible Business," is sponsored by the J. Thomas Clark Professorship.

Ithaca Fine Chocolate's "Art Bar," the first case in this new project, is a good example of design supporting social mission. The core values of this new venture are strategically designed into every aspect of the company—from the fair-trade, organic chocolate suppliers and environmentally friendly packaging design, to a marketing design strategy that supports artists and art education via free art reproductions inside each candy bar. Emerging stories document the nature of the design decisions as they relate to the unique economic and social pressures of running a business with a social conscience. The stories also portray the ways in which the business impacts the lives of individuals, revealing new opportunities for leading social change by design.

Danko is currently investigating several other cases of values-led entrepreneurship—Girls Explore, Ltd., a company designed to provide role models to young girls through a collection of dolls modeled after women explorers and heroines; Share Our Strength, an organization designed to tap into both individual and corporate strength to raise money to end hunger; and the International Children's Art Foundation, designed to support world peace through art that promotes cross-cultural understanding. These stories of design leadership are still unfolding.

Preliminary findings from the cross-case comparisons reveal that those leaders who embrace a

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and came to visit in surprising numbers just to see it, and where it was hung. It seemed no one was making fun of her wall anymore.

Karen had changed offices several times due to the phasing of the renovations for the new space. Each time she moved everything would come down and then everything would go back up. The cynical comments subsided and were gradually replaced with genuine interest. "All of these visual cues, all of these symbols in my office are reminders that there's a whole business that has to be successful in order for the investment management part of the business to be successful, and that we can't ever take that underlying part for granted." She looked at me. "That's really been the message."

"But what really surprised me happened after we moved into the new space," Karen began. "After we moved we weren't supposed to put up any pictures ourselves. We were supposed to wait for the maintenance team to come around and put them up. So for a while the portraits were in piles against this wall. People kept stopping by and asking 'When are the faces going up? We miss the faces.' That was the first clue. As per our instructions, I put a number on the wall and a corresponding number on every photo indicating where each should go. One day, I left to go out of town on a business trip and when I came back, all the photos had all been put up exactly where they were supposed to be. I was delighted. But then the maintenance staff came back later and said 'It's up the way you want, but we really think they would look better if we hung them up this way,' and then they proceeded to describe a different arrangement of the faces on the wall."

"The building maintenance?" I asked surprised. "Yes, the maintenance workers," she said. "So I told them, reorganize it the way you want. And that's the way they are up on the wall now. 'The building maintenance people feel like they have a real sense of ownership of this wall,'" she said with pride. It seems there had gotten to be a whole lot more ownership of Karen's office symbols than she originally intended.

Shortly after the company moved into the new space, Karen related one of the most moving testimonials to the power of her symbols and their impact on the heart of the organization. "One of our biggest business units was holding an investor conference, so we decided to host a fancy reception downstairs on the thirteenth floor. This was really the first time we invited a big group of inves-

tors to our new space since the move-in. We organized the staff to give tours through the new space and to talk about what it meant to us and about who we were as a company. Now, not everyone in the firm was involved in this reception, only that particular business group. In fact, I was sitting here in my office working when I realized, after the first few guided visits, that I was on the tour. My office, it was on the tour."

Karen sat back and reflected for a moment.

"It's been a really interesting lesson for me to watch the evolution of people's reactions and their levels of ownership." Karen was clearly an insightful woman, but even she still seemed in awe of the power of the faces on the wall. "Honestly, when I first brought them in and put them on the wall, they were symbols for me. I knew this new position was going to push me a little bit out of balance, a little bit off center of where I needed to be every day in my own thinking, in my own priorities. So the faces, the tea service, the books, the hands, the tag line—they were really visual cues for me, to remember the real purpose behind my work and to balance that purpose against what it takes to be successful in the larger investment management business." Karen concluded by saying "What I learned is that from my being steadfast in having these cues around—the whole combination of them—people have, over time, really internalized some of the message and made it their own. They've made it part of the company's story, the company's purpose, and are proud to tell it."

A sense of purpose isn't something we typically expect the physical environment to help us achieve in our professional lives. In fact, we seem to expect very little from our physical work environments, dismissing any truly high expectations of the role they might play in our growth as individuals. Instead, we settle for environments that support our work rather than nourish our souls. We create environments that exert only the most benign influence on our activities rather than motivate us to greatness. We construct environments that facilitate process but neglect to build a foundation of shared values. Perhaps we have been expecting too little. Perhaps within a few heartfelt symbols lies the power to breathe renewed meaning into the environments that we inhabit and into the lives of those who have temporarily lost their sense of purpose.

whole-systems view of designing—one that goes well beyond the design of the product to a view of design as tool for aligning vision and values throughout the organization—are the leaders who gain a competitive advantage.

When Danko looks at the faces of students in her undergraduate course *Making a Difference by Design*, she imagines that more of them will become business leaders than will become designers. "I am not interested in turning students into designers but in teaching students how knowledge of design can help them be better doctors, lawyers, and business executives," she says.

Danko is a witness to the power of stories to communicate issues of design and leadership in daily life. "I have seen stories touch deeply rooted passion within individuals, helping them grasp a deeper sense of their own leadership ability and the role of design in supporting them," she says. She is working on a book, *Leadership by Design: Strategic Stories of Design that Makes a Difference*, which she hopes will reposition design as a strategic tool in the minds of chief executive officers and other key decision makers.

"When there is strong leadership—honest, true, values-led leadership—then society improves," Danko explains. "Design can help people become better leaders, both in the sense of leading others and in the sense of leading their own lives. It helps people feel more in line with their values. It helps them move the world in directions they would like to see. By engaging the transformative powers of good design, people can begin to heal the planet and, in so doing, experience a sense of purpose and meaning in life. They will feel more whole, more connected, and live healthier lives."

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