

DESIGN YOUR FUTURE

DESIGNERS

Their studios are often located in former shops, workshops or temporary factory spaces, and they work in teams with people either young or young-at-heart, on commissions from a diverse set of clients. In their breaks, they play table football, prepare a joint lunch for the team, take the time for a walk in the sun or to go and read on a park bench. They attach importance to their clothes, to sustainable goods, and to carefully furnished living and working spaces. They cultivate professional networks and private friendships, and spend their weekends at parties, in the mountains or in a fashionable metropolis. Whereas until only recently it was the norm to work into the early hours, the role models of today are those who stop work at 6 pm in order to meet friends at a vernissage, to ride their bike to yoga or Pilates class, to fetch the kids from their day-care centre, or to go to the movies. Their lifestyle and working style are both characterised by personal fulfilment and contentment; this is something I often observe in Switzerland in general, but especially often among designers, both men and women.

WORKING METHODS IN DESIGN

Is it the case that here designers are simply benefiting from the privileges available, or are they themselves making a contribution towards fulfilled living? What methods, actions and attitudes of design itself, as a discipline, might be of fundamental assistance to them in influencing their life plans?

Designers are curious and ask a lot of questions in order to grasp the point of depar-

ture for a job, and to be able to get a holistic understanding of a problem. What is decisive here is that they don't just think about things: they pursue their mental processes in the context of physical action. They try things out by putting themselves in a specific situation, they carry out test runs on themselves or their environment, and they build prototypes. The knowledge that they generate through asking specific questions and making specific tests is condensed into possible solutions, then elaborated and tested again. During their working process, designers are constantly compelled to take pragmatic decisions, and then start afresh from a new position and advance once more. They learn to move within the narrow confines of given specifications and to act and design within this framework. They have no difficulty in accepting a specific reality, and are able to work despite (or perhaps due to) being constricted by numerous stipulations. What's more, they have a good feeling for what is harmonious, and can both recognise it and create it themselves. A design process should not be visualised as something linear, but rather as something circular. Iterative working processes are not tiring for designers, but their customary path towards finding a better solution.

If designers apply these working methods to a life plan, it can mean that their ability to design within a narrow framework helps them, in the long term, to design their own activities at work or in their own design studio, in an enjoyable way. This also means that their work is in keeping with their own abilities and interests, and that they are able to link

their work with other, exciting areas of activity. Thanks to their innate curiosity, they can recognise opportunities that will take them further, and since they are not afraid of making decisions but are in fact accustomed to them, they will also take advantage of opportunities that present themselves. They will try out different things in life, and test out how things feel in new, different settings.


EFFECTS ON CAREER PLANNING



Besides these job-related issues, we can also observe general tendencies that influence designers in their professional development. The Happenstance Learning Theory, ^[15] for example, says that, besides other environmental influences, chance is the key determining factor in career advancement. Designers possess both curiosity and, often, an extensive network too, so they have a good chance of unexpectedly receiving interesting commissions or job offers. Their general approach to work has changed; for many, achieving self-realisation in the workplace and reconciling professional and private life are more important than the classical career path and the status that comes with climbing the ladder. ^[16] This tendency can also be observed among design graduates. Whereas, twenty years ago, they would have been happy to get a practical internship in a design office and would have been prepared to slog away at the job until late at night, today's

^[15] Andreas Hirschi, "Neuere Theorien der Laufbahnforschung und deren Implikationen für die Beratungspraxis," in *Zukunftsfeld Bildungs- und Berufsberatung II: Das Gemeinsame in der Differenz finden*,


eds. Marika Hammerer, Erika Kanelutti-Chilas and Ingeborg Melter (Bielefeld: Bertelsmann, 2013), 105–113.


^[16] Ibid.

young designers already have a clear idea of what their working day should be like, even before they've finished their studies. It's important to them to work with people they like, to be active in a field that they find meaningful, to work in a company whose values they share, and to spend their time in a place that they can organise themselves. Their career planning is not primarily driven by money, but focussed on their own contentment and sense of fulfilment. 

A survey carried out in 2017 by the Federal Office of Statistics shows that 94% of design graduates have a job one year after completing their studies, and are very happy with their workplace, their working conditions and their working environment (which got 4.9 out of a possible 5 points).  However, there is also a downside that stands in contrast to the observations sketched out in the opening paragraphs above (namely, the notion that the lifestyle and working methods of designers are characterised by a sense of personal fulfilment and contentment). The societal phenomenon of “burnout” has also become prevalent among them. Even design students complain of constant fatigue and feeling burned out. Depression, exhaustion and other mental illnesses are becoming markedly more widespread, not just in their working environment, but also during their training.  It would seem that designers—given the high demands that they must place on themselves—

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 I here refer to numerous conversations with students and to written responses given on the occasion of the lecture series “Methoden, Strategien und Wirkung des Designs” (ZHdK, February 2019–June 2019).

 Hanja Blendin, BFS Hochschulabsolventenbefragung 2016, Zurich University of the Arts, 16.

are also highly liable to succumb to the expectations of university and society, and there are regular cases of students who have difficulty handling the pressure of their degree course or their career as artists. ^{4/11/18} The fact that people working in the creative field have fluid boundaries between their professional and leisure activities, and that their job is also a way of life, means that they are in particular danger of having a burnout. I am of the opinion that designers should already be taught during their training how best to cope with the interweaving of their professional and private life, and how to strike a balance in order to remain healthy in the long run. There is as yet no such offering at the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK), but according to its teaching evaluation of 2018/19, its Department of Performing Arts and Film has recognised the need for it and aims to develop a comprehensive concept for providing such mentoring during a student's study programme, also with a view to their later career. They are aware that their current offerings in dance medicine and their psychological services will be insufficient in the medium term. ^{11/11/18}

INTUITION AND THE INNER VOICE

Innumerable self-help books on life and work deal with the problem of how to find a balance in our careers, and with our desire for a pana-

^{4/11/18} I here refer to conversations with staff at the Department of Design, Human Resources Management, and to the fact that an emergency regulation for mentally ill students has recently been established at the ZHdK at the repeated request of management and lecturers.

^{4/11/18} Wanja Kröger, Anne Gruber and Dossier Lehre, Unterrichts-evaluation 2018/19, Zurich University of the Arts, 6.
^{11/11/18} Ibid.

cea to make us happy—a panacea which, in a best-case scenario, can also help us to make the right decisions. In most cases, their recipes for a fulfilled life are based on a mixture of self-determination, self-realisation, the right diet and getting enough exercise.

Bill Burnett, Director of the Design Programme at Stanford, and Dave Evans, a lecturer in the same programme, are the joint authors of the bestseller *Designing Your Life*. ¶ For many years, they have been advising students and designers on their career and life planning by applying methods of design thinking. When they look back today, after many years of experience in teaching and counselling, and consider where their students and clients benefited most from their easy-to-apply tools and tips, the answer is surprising. Their prime recommendation for achieving a well-designed life is not to have a perfectly designed workspace or living space, but planning and pondering on one's actual life using methods from design thinking. Above all, they recommend developing in the “inner voice” that can be trained by engaging in “personal practices” such as writing a diary, conducting spiritual exercises, meditation, or physical training such as yoga or tai chi. ¶¶ They are convinced that people who rush from one activity to the next have no access to their inner desires. As a result, they recommend starting personal training straightaway. ¶¶

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¶ William Burnett and David J. Evans, *Designing Your Life: How to Build a Well-lived, Joyful Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016).

¶¶ “Perhaps the most important recommendation we can give you to sustain a well-designed life is to invest in and commit to some personal practices of the variety we described in chapter 9.” Burnett and Evans, *Designing Your Life*, 226.








There also seems to be a great need among ZHdK students to have a break now and then amidst their heavy curriculum, and to train themselves further in this area. This need can, for example, manifest in the choices they make from a transdisciplinary range of courses available to all ZHdK students in the fields of art, music, performing arts and communication. After the second most popular module (web design), the meditation seminar entitled “If not now, when?” has been students’ most popular choice by far, chosen out of a possible 40 modules.  “Learning mindfulness meditation to strengthen one’s artistic presence and to promote lateral thinking as a basis for artistic creativity”  seems to be a basic need among today’s students. It is clear that some students on the bachelor course in Design already have experience of meditation, judging from their answers to the question as to their biggest immersive experience. Over 15% of students mentioned their meditation experiences as an immersive experience (whether successful or not). 



FIG. 1
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 “In other words, don’t forget to listen to [...] your heart. Doing this requires that you educate and mature your access to and awareness of your emotional/intuitive/spiritual ways of knowing [...]. For centuries, the most commonly affirmed path to such maturity has been that of personal practices such as journaling, prayer or spiritual exercises, meditation, integrated physical practices like yoga or Tai Chi, and so on. [...] Rarely do people get access to their deepest wisdom by rushing around a few hours before a deadline and talking a lot or surfing the Web. It’s a slower, quieter thing.” Burnett and Evans, *Designing Your Life*, 168.


 Wanja Kröger and Dossier Lehre, Auswertung Wahlverhalten Z-Module Prio A im Frühlingsemester 2016, Zurich University of the Arts; Wanja Kröger and Dossier Lehre, Auswertung Wahlverhalten Z-Module Prio A im Frühlingsemester 2019, Zurich University of the Arts.

 “If not now, when?” Zurich University for the Arts, Vorlesungsverzeichnis, Autumn Semester 2019, accessed August 27, 2019, http://intern.zhdk.ch/?vorlesungsverzeichnis&semester_id=151059&search=Wann+wenn+nicht+jetzt&course_id=203686.

 I here refer to answers given by students at the lecture series “Methoden, Strategien und Wirkung des Designs” (Zurich University of the Arts, May 6, 2019) when asked about an immersive experience, either successful or unsuccessful.


Gaining access to one's own consciousness is not just helpful in decision-making processes, but also in regard to creative activity. Already at the time of the reform schools, yoga and meditation rituals were regularly being practised at Black Mountain College and at the Bauhaus. The painter and art pedagogue Johannes Itten, one of the most important figures in the early phase of the Bauhaus, utilised movement and breathing exercises at the beginning of his lessons.  Students had to “loosen up and relax” in order to “create direction and order from out of the flow.” 

ENVIRONMENT

Besides recommending strengthening our inner voice, it is worth taking a look at the environment and its influence on our creative drive and the sense of contentment bound up with this. William Morris, one of the co-founders of the Arts and Crafts Movement, believed that “Those who are to make beautiful things must live in a beautiful place,” and insisted “Have nothing in your houses which you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.” 

At the ZHdK, which is an arts university situated in a converted former yoghurt factory, the infrastructure is organised extremely functionally and optimally, just as when the building was a factory, though hardly anyone would call this place particularly beautiful. The teaching rooms are far from the light of day, the building has endless, long corridors, and the generally cold steel and concrete envi-



ronment continues to exude a factory-like atmosphere that stands in contradiction to the expectations that we have of our students. We want them to learn to think, to formulate their thoughts, to shape their ideas, to realise themselves creatively and to grow as individuals through what they experience. We do not want them to simply follow given processes so as to produce results as efficiently and cheaply as if working on a factory production line. The designer Stefan Sagmeister believes that beauty has become discredited and that functionalism is dictating form instead; and he has issued a crushing judgement on the architecture of the building itself: “When I was preparing an exhibition last year for the Museum of Design in Zurich, I lived for days at the Toni Areal. It’s terrible there! This mediocre Swiss trash-quality architecture! It’s got a bit of quality, it’s ‘corporate’ And it’s cold. More importantly: the architecture doesn’t work, and it’s been proven not to work. None of the balconies is used. Even though they were built under the guise of ‘functionalism’ This nonsense has to stop.” 

Marie Kondo, a Japanese woman who has achieved great popularity in designer circles, shares the belief of the 100-year-old Arts and Crafts Movement that our environment has a direct impact on our design and our sensibility. She believes that two thirds of the things we find in a household or at a workplace

 Stefan Sagmeister, “Funktionalismus im Design, dieser Blödsinn muss aufhören,” SRF Kulturplatz, May 15, 2019, accessed September 20, 2019, <http://www.srf.ch/kultur/kunst/funktionalismus-im-design-dieser-bloedsinn-muss-aufhoeren>.

could be disposed of, if we only kept what actually gave us pleasure. In order to assess whether this pleasure is indeed triggered by an object, the owner has to hold every object or piece of clothing and ask themselves whether it sparks joy or not. 🧹 This sounds radical, and it has provided second-hand shops with an unprecedented flood of goods. ☀️ However, it is a simple principle that I have found is actually one by which many designers live. They surround themselves with things and people that contribute to their joie de vivre, and they do things that make them feel content, without becoming a slave to senseless consumption. It matters to them what cup they use to drink their coffee (which doesn't mean that it has to be a designer cup!), and it matters to them how it tastes, what chair they sit on while they drink it, what newspaper they read while drinking it, who sits with them while they're drinking it, and how the atmosphere of the room feels. So there is some truth in the exaggerated description of designers as offered at the beginning of this essay. They truly do a lot to optimise their personal lifestyle so that it contributes to their feeling of well-being.

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LIFE AND CAREER PLANNING

One of the prime characteristics of designers is that they want to optimise things. Thus

🧹 Marie Kondo, *Magic Cleaning: Wie richtiges Aufräumen ihr Leben verändert* (Reinbek b. Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2013). This book has sold over seven million copies worldwide. In 2019, Netflix released the series *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo*, accessed August 27, 2019, <http://netflix.com/title/80209379>.



☀️ Lucie Machac, "Brockis werden von Entrümpelungswütigen überrannt," *Tages-Anzeiger*, February 12, 2019, accessed September 20, 2019,

<http://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/leben-auto/brockis-werden-von-entruempelungswuetigen-ueber-rannt/story/14004850>; "Öko-Trend als Problem: Secondhandläden platzen aus allen Nähten," *SRF Kultur*, Gesellschaft, Religion, abgerufen am May 25, 2019, accessed September 20, 2019, <http://www.srf.ch/kultur/gesellschaft-religion/oeko-trend-als-problem-secondhandlaeden-platzen-aus-allen-naehten>.


FIG.1 Students and lecturers of the BA Design during a joint meditation session on the ZHdK rooftop terrace, 2017 (Photo: Andrea Roca).





we may assume that they are also constantly adjusting their lives and their careers. However, the question then arises as to whether this planning is personally motivated, and whether or not we may assume that students are adequately prepared during their studies for what comes after they have graduated.

According to Bill Burnett and Dave Evans, more than two-thirds of all American university graduates work in a field that is not directly connected to their principal subject.  Among design graduates of the ZHdK, however, 76% of them afterwards find work that is directly linked to their main subject; this is undoubtedly thanks to the use of prototypical test scenarios and to their intensive contact with the professional field during their studies. They have a keen intuition for choosing their place of work, they are at least content with their working environment, their level of responsibility, their working conditions and the actual tasks on which they have to work. They are, however, less satisfied with the available opportunities for promotion and for further training, and are also less happy about their wages. 

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The student survey at the ZHdK  shows that design students are already intensively occupied in testing what career path might suit them even before they have finished their studies. A third of them do an internship in a design office, or spend a semester studying at a different university. More than half of


 "In fact [...] only 27 percent of college grads end up in a career related to their majors." Burnett and Evans, *Designing Your Life*, x.  Blendin, BFS Hochschulabsolventenbefragung 2016, 16.

 Department of Design, Departementsbericht Design 2018, Auswertung der Studierendenbefragung 2018, Zurich University of the Arts, 30.


them work parallel to their studies or finance their degree completely on their own. Many students—especially those who have already completed an apprenticeship—already take on design commissions in their early semesters, work freelance for agencies or in editorial offices, or set up their own companies that they run in between classes. In other words, besides the regular curriculum, students engage with “test settings” that are worthwhile in terms of their later career, but that are hardly ideal in terms of workload, because 43% of students regard working alongside their studies as a problem they have to live with.

The exaggerated picture offered at the outset of fulfilled designers in Switzerland who are able to optimise their private life and their work in every detail is one that we have to assess in the context of the high burnout rate among them. Nevertheless, one gets the impression that designers are particularly sensitive to societal phenomena (self-optimisation, work-life balance, decluttering à la Marie Kondo, meditating, etc.) and that the methods they employ also mean they are particularly able to put their ideas into practice.

Many graduates would like to receive more support at the start of their careers, and they believe that preparing for their professional lives could be better integrated into their actual study programme. They find it difficult to visualise the future, and the strategic design skills that they have acquired are probably insufficient for them to be able to “design” their own job and to get the best out of their given conditions. They describe a feeling of being lost after their studies and are un-

certain where to get proper advice on their career.  If we are to give greater weight to the topic of career advice as part of the curriculum in future, then we should not just maintain close links to the design profession. The curriculum itself should also address the topic of how to organise one's career in order for it to be a long-term source of pleasure. Design strategies ought to be communicated as a basis on which future scenarios may be conceived and visualised. Even in a crowded curriculum, space should be made for personal practices such as yoga, meditation, mindfulness training and the like, in order to counter the pressure placed on students by society and university, and in order to strengthen the gut instincts that help us to make the necessary decisions in our lives.

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 "Alumni attested that they had felt lost after graduation. As with other areas of support and guidance, the majority of students seemed to be uncertain about where to go to seek advice for their professional lives." EQ Arts, Quality Enhancement Review Report, Institutional Review & Design Programme Review, Zurich University of the Arts, 2018, 29–30.

ITERATIVE WORKING PROCESSES ARE NOT TIRING FOR DESIGNERS

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