

## Create Change.

This is the third in a series of essays reflecting upon pressing national issues that impact the future of Art Center and the educational experience of our students.

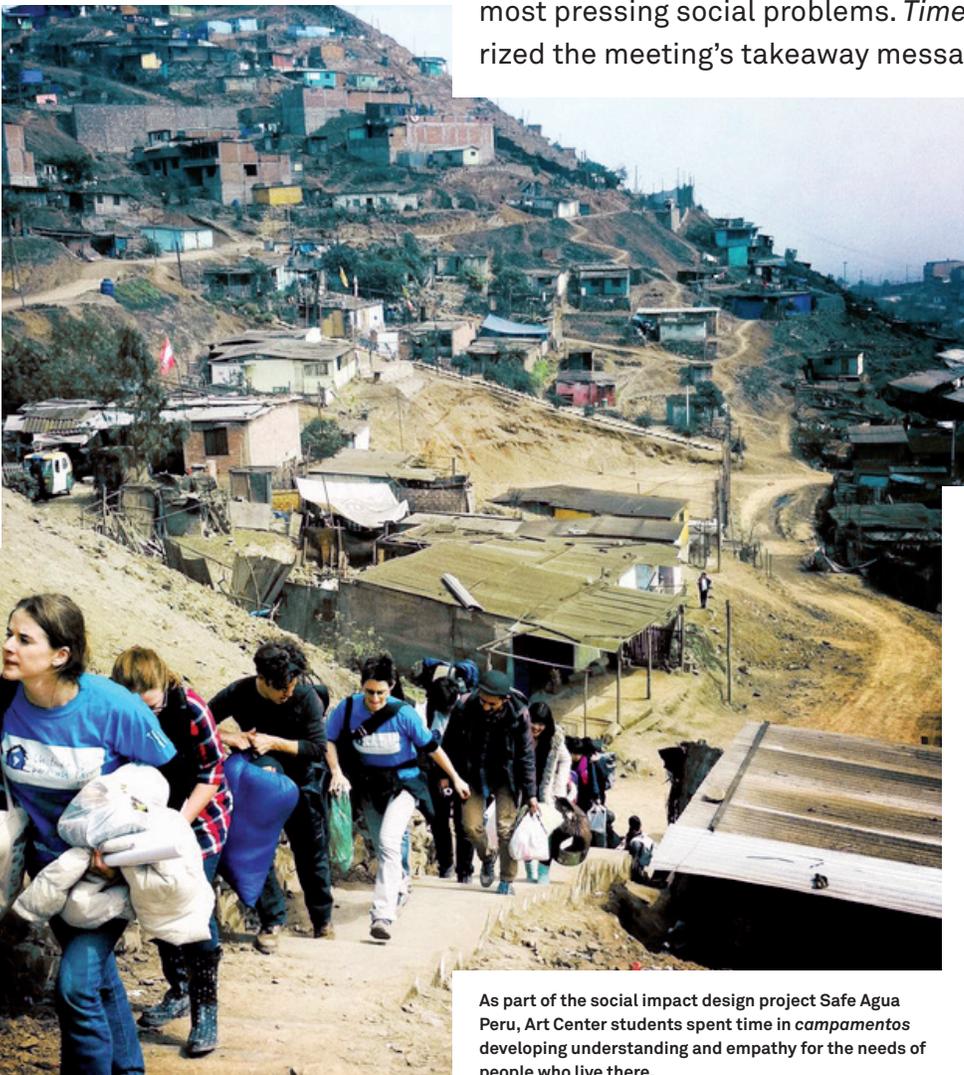
# Teaching Art, Design and Values for Social Impact

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“Designing for Impact,” the theme of the Clinton Global Initiative 2012 Annual Meeting, was a noteworthy acknowledgment of the growing influence of design thinking on efforts to address many of the world’s most pressing social problems. *Time* magazine’s Bryan Walsh summarized the meeting’s takeaway message this way:

Global problems—in health, in the economy, in the environment—begin and end with design. An intelligently designed system can make success inevitable, and a poorly designed one can make it impossible. Too often we react to global threats after the fact, our responses hamstrung by under-performing and outmoded systems. If we’re going to fix the world—and it takes only a cursory glance at the headlines to reveal that it needs fixing—we need to start with design.<sup>1</sup>

As president of one of the world’s preeminent design and art colleges, I am especially gratified to see discourse among our philanthropic and business leaders turning to what we at Art Center have understood for a long time: that the framework and process for understanding and solving problems through design have powerful implications for areas not traditionally associated with design; that the same skills that bring us improved computer interfaces and more ergonomic work environments can be applied with equal force to reducing unemployment, improving public health, eradicating poverty and more. It is this understanding of design’s potential to improve lives that led Art Center in 2001 to launch Designmatters, the College’s innovative social impact initiative focused on tackling issues relating to sustainable development, global healthcare, public policy and social entrepreneurship. In 2003, in recognition of Designmatters’ service to society, Art Center became the first (and



As part of the social impact design project Safe Agua Peru, Art Center students spent time in *campamentos* developing understanding and empathy for the needs of people who live there.

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Designmatters participants co-created innovative design solutions to overcome water poverty and provide safe water access for families.



ABOVE: Outcomes of the project include the Balde a Balde portable faucet, which delivers running water from any bucket, maximizing cleanliness while optimizing water use.

LEFT: Another design concept, GiraDora, a foot-powered washing and drying device that makes it easier, faster and safer to wash clothes.



remains the only) art and design school granted Nongovernmental Organization (NGO) status by the United Nations.

One need look no further than Art Center's classrooms and gallery of student work for vivid examples of the power of design to effect positive change. From a campaign educating at-risk youth about the dangers and long-term impact of gun violence to new sustainable transportation vehicles, our school is an incubator of creativity and big ideas that improve people's lives. At our best, we do much more than teach students how to solve a single problem for a single group of people; we offer a training ground for the future social entrepreneurs who know how to "design—in advance—solutions that can scale up to the national, regional and even global level."<sup>2</sup>

### Improving the Human Condition

Consider the award-winning Safe Agua Chile and Safe Agua Peru projects conducted through Designmatters. These projects, launched in partnership with the Latin American NGO, Un Techo para mi País, provided an educational platform from which Art Center students were able to co-innovate design solutions to overcome water poverty and provide safe water access for families living in *campamentos* (slum developments) on the outskirts of Santiago, Chile, and Lima, Peru.

Outcomes included a device for providing hot showers to people with no running water and inconsistent electricity; a human-powered clothes washer and spin dryer that increases efficiency, allows multitasking and reduces injuries from the repetitive motions of scrubbing laundry and hauling heavy loads; and a portable faucet that provides running water from any

container to maximize cleanliness while optimizing water use that Rubbermaid is now helping to bring to market.

The Safe Agua projects have received international recognition including, most recently, grants from the National Collegiate Inventors and Innovators Alliance. Un Techo is currently working with government and corporate partners to scale and distribute these solutions.

Such social impact projects represent a growing trend among Art Center students and graduates. In my essay "Creativity and Prosperity in the New Economy," I laid out some of the characteristics of an Art Center education that make possible extraordinary outcomes such as those of Safe Agua. These include providing opportunities for project-based, collaborative and transdisciplinary learning; engaging design in direct conversation with other fields, such as engineering, science and public policy; and emphasizing tangible, real-world solutions. Such characteristics, however, provide only half the picture of an Art Center education. I believe that Art Center graduates are uniquely prepared to be social entrepreneurs not only because of the practical, grounded education we provide them, but also, as importantly, because of the values we try to instill in them.

These values—including environmental responsibility, social justice, self-advocacy and community service—are woven into the fabric of an Art Center education. Our College seeks to provide every student from his or her first day on campus with as many opportunities as possible for understanding and engaging in work that can improve the human condition. Every act of design, of course, carries this potential. Every designed experience—from car to computer to

coffee cup—allows for the possibility of convenience, pleasure, comfort and beauty. Applying the values that distinguish an Art Center education elevates design to an undeniably greater purpose: creating greater opportunity and equality for our world's citizens.

### Community Engagement and Sustainability

How do the best designers create solutions that are both impactful and lasting? The most successful outcomes are usually attained by conducting research and conceptual development directly with the people in the communities one wishes to serve.

Design thinking incorporates constituent or consumer insights in depth and rapid prototyping, all aimed at getting beyond the assumptions that block effective solutions. Design thinking—inherently optimistic, constructive, and experiential—addresses the needs of the people who will consume a product or service and the infrastructure that enables it.<sup>3</sup>

Or, as Tim Brown, chief executive officer of IDEO, stated during the plenary session of the 2012 Clinton Global Initiative, one of the core principles of design "is to dive right in and start doing stuff."

One of the first things all good designers do...is just go out...and really spend time in the field and understand all the constraints... because [the solution] has to be sustainable in the market you're developing it for. That's as true if you're designing a new washing machine for North America as a new water pump for farmers in Rwanda.<sup>4</sup>

In the case of the Safe Agua projects, students spent time with the families in the *campamentos*, developing understanding



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of and empathy for their needs. They observed the kinds of often-overlooked details of daily living that can be easily deemed irrelevant or insignificant by the end user, but oftentimes are the key pieces of information that can spark a great idea for a design solution. For instance, it might not have been possible to acknowledge the relevance of a communal laundry facility without first understanding the large role laundry plays in day-to-day *campamento* life. Similarly, designing a shower solution may not have seemed like a priority until the designers witnessed firsthand the importance of preserving personal dignity in the face of extreme poverty.

Building on the successes of projects such as these, we are now adapting our social impact design model for wider implementation throughout the College. Art Center’s new Field track in Media Design Practices, an MFA jointly conceived with Designmatters, centers on communication and its relationship to design, technology, social justice and civic life. And considering social impact from the point of view of the visual artist has prompted us to develop an Artmatters concentration, a course of study that will recognize the role of activist art that confronts a range of social, environmental and political issues.

### Social Impact and Business Profitability

In my last essay I made the case that Art Center graduates enter the work world uniquely prepared to be creators of economic value. For this reason, it should not be surprising that many of our alumni have created businesses or occupy prominent positions within profitable global companies. It is important to point out, however, that business profitability and social

impact are far from mutually exclusive. More and more they are viewed as linked, with each serving as a valid means of augmenting the other.

Arguing for a paradigm for poverty alleviation that recognizes the poor in developing countries not as victims, but as “resilient and creative entrepreneurs and value-conscious consumers,” the late C.K. Prahalad wrote,

What is needed is a better approach to help the poor, an approach that involves partnering with them to innovate and achieve sustainable win-win scenarios where the poor are actively engaged and, at the same time, the companies providing products and services to them are profitable. This collaboration between the poor, civil society organizations, governments, and large firms can create the largest and fastest growing markets in the world.<sup>5</sup>

As corporations take on such challenges as building infrastructure, increasing access to health care, eradicating hunger and preserving the environment, they create the very markets they wish to serve. I believe that the combination of skills and values we teach at Art Center prepares our graduates to be accelerators of this “virtuous circle” of social impact and private sector success.

### Influencing Change from All Quarters

Among the many wonderful moments I have had at Art Center, few have been more gratifying than hearing from students who have had their eyes opened for the first time to the potential for creative practices to effect social change. Many have expressed to me that their experience working on social impact projects amounted to one of the most important aspects of their education. By enriching students’ education with

opportunities to make an impact, we prepare them to work in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. I take great pride in knowing that our graduates are armed with the skills and values to make as big a difference as they choose in the lives of their fellow human beings. Some will work for nonprofit or governmental organizations; many more will go into business. I believe all our alumni will, at some point in their careers, have the opportunity to apply their Art Center education to improve lives, and most will feel compelled to do so.

Maria Moon received her MFA in Media Design in 2008. Now a senior user experience designer for Samsung Design America who maintains close ties to Art Center’s Designmatters program, she recently stated, “Once you understand that you can make a difference through your work, the challenge to have a positive impact in the world is too strong to ignore.” ●

1 Bryan Walsh, “CGI: Designing—and Powering—a Better World,” *Time*, September 24, 2012.

2 *Ibid.*

3 “Design Thinking for Social Innovation,” by Tim Brown and Jocelyn Wyatt, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, [www.ssiireview.org/articles/entry/design\\_thinking\\_for\\_social\\_innovation/](http://www.ssiireview.org/articles/entry/design_thinking_for_social_innovation/)

4 To hear Tim Brown’s complete remarks during the opening plenary session of the 2012 Clinton Global Initiative annual meeting, go to [www.clintonglobalinitiative.org/ourmeetings/2012/webcast/archives/player.asp?id=4](http://www.clintonglobalinitiative.org/ourmeetings/2012/webcast/archives/player.asp?id=4)

5 C.K. Prahalad, *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid*, (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education, Inc., 2005) 3–4.