

# Scaffolds for Experiencing in the New Design Space

Elizabeth B.-N. Sanders  
SonicRim

*The real act of discovery consists not in finding new lands but in seeing with new eyes.* Marcel Proust

## Looking with New Eyes

There is a *new land* in design called “experience design”.

*Experience design is the way in which meaning is communicated in the network society, where no point of contact has a simple beginning and end, and all points of contact must have meaning embedded within them...*

*The tools of the experience designer lie in software, hardware, and the “wetware” of the human mind. The experience designer must combine the rigors of engineering with the inspiration of high art. He or she must become adept at the traditional skills of design, and engage in dialogue with the virtuosos in the world of social science, economics, architecture, theatre and the narrative arts. ([www.advance.aiga.org](http://www.advance.aiga.org))*

But there is a problem with this concept of experience design. You can't design experience. Experiencing is in people.

Similarly, you can design information, but you can't design meanings. Information design can facilitate the act of meaning-making. It can speed up the rate of information processing and help ensure that communication takes place. But you can't design meaning. Meanings are in people (Berlo, D., 1960).

You can design experiential offers such as interfaces, environments and scenarios, but you can't design experiences (see also Thackara, J., 2000). It is the people who experience (the interface, environment or scenario, for example) who should be considered the “virtuosos” of the experiential domain. Because when you involve people, ordinary people, in the design development process, you begin to see the new land with *new eyes*, i.e., with the benefit of their eyes. When you look with new eyes, you can begin to see scaffolds for experiencing in the new design space.

## Evolution of the New Design Space

Design, particularly communication design, has undergone vast change in the past 30 years.

In the **Graphic Design** phase, experts trained in graphic design worked with visual images in print to communicate to people known as the “audience”. The methods and tools of the graphic designer focused on style and visual aesthetic embodiment.

**Information Design** was born out of the need to simplify the flood of information threatening to drown us. The primary goal of information design was to make content clear and usable to the “end-user” while serving the needs of the “client”. In the Information Design phase, interdisciplinary teams of experts worked with both images and words in order to communicate more effectively in print. The prior focus on style enlarged to include a concern with usability. Many universities changed from Departments of Graphic Design to Visual Communication Departments in this time period.

	Graphic Design	Information Design/ Visual Communication	Digital Folk Art	The New Design Space
Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>images</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>images</li> <li>words</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>images</li> <li>words</li> <li>with digital tools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>images</li> <li>words</li> <li>sound</li> <li>smell</li> <li>space &amp; time</li> </ul>
Who Designs?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>expert graphic designers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>expert teams               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- designers</li> <li>- writers</li> <li>- strategists</li> <li>- etc.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ordinary people with digital tools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ordinary people <i>with</i> experts</li> </ul>
For Whom?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the ‘audience’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the ‘end user’</li> <li>the ‘client’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>me</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>us</li> </ul>
Criteria for Success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>style</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>style</li> <li>usability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>self-expression</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>expressing</li> <li>experiencing</li> <li>meaning-making</li> </ul>

The introduction of the Apple Macintosh in 1984 marked the beginning of the end of the need for design expertise in communications. At least that is how many people see it. With the desktop publishing tools that emerged soon after the introduction of the Mac, ordinary people could express themselves directly because they no longer had to learn difficult graphic conceptualization and production skills.

In the **Digital Folk Art** phase, ordinary people (i.e., not experts in visual communication or information design) began using the new digital tools to express themselves and to communicate. The

introduction and use of electronic clip art contributed to the “folk art” feel of their expressions. Ordinary people were able to communicate in ways that weren’t possible in the past. This is most readily seen today on the Internet, where self-expression has taken precedence over both style and usability in communications (e.g., personal home pages).

A **New Design Space** is emerging. It is the culmination of all the phases preceding it. The new space is a CoDesign Space where interdisciplinary experts in design and research will work together with ordinary people. They will use the new digital tools to create and communicate with images, words, sound, smell, and space and time. Their creations will transcend the delivery media. Collectively they will generate many new ways of expressing, experiencing and meaning-making.

What will be the role of designers in the new design space? They will learn how to access and to understand the dreams of ordinary people in order to create scaffolds that help people realize their dreams. Designers will transform from being designers of “stuff” (e.g., products, communication pieces, etc.) to being the builders of scaffolds for experiencing.

### **Scaffolds for Experiencing**

Traditional scaffolds are “temporary or moveable platforms for workers to stand or sit on when working at a height above the floor or ground” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 1999). They are temporary structures for building enormous new things, but also for protecting the surrounding area from the new construction. Scaffolds provide support for the workers and their tools and materials. We can think of workbenches and toolboxes as being in the same general category as scaffolds.

Scaffolds for experiencing can be seen as temporary and moveable, as well. It is not yet clear what materials will be used in their construction, but it is likely that the materials will be indigenous. The appearance of scaffolds will not be driven by aesthetic concerns as they are likely to be built, at least initially, by the bricoleur, a person who accomplishes what needs to be accomplished with the resources at hand. Bricolage is the practice of transforming “found” materials by incorporating them into a new work (Levi-Strauss, C., 1966).

## **Preliminary Principles for Building Scaffolds**

### **People are creative.**

People are naturally creative. As designers of scaffolds, we need to give them participatory tools to promote generativity in their thinking (Sanders, E., 2000). Participatory toolkits contain a finite number of components that can be combined and recombined in an infinite variety of meaningful ways. Creativity comes in a variety of forms: physical, narrative, temporal, etc. We will need to build many different types of toolkits.

### **People will fill in.**

People will fill in what is unseen and they will fill in what is unsaid based on their own experience and imagination (McCloud, S., 1994). As scaffold designers, we need to utilize the unseen spaces between events. Say only enough to spark the imagination. Encourage “inbetweening” by minimizing the information content. Explore what is the optimal minimization of information.

### **People project their needs.**

People will project their own needs onto ambiguous stimuli because they are driven to make meaning (Bruner, J., 1990). As designers of scaffolds, we need to explore and acknowledge the consequences of ambiguity in order to learn about the boundaries of projective thinking and dreaming. Use ambiguous visual stimuli to make the tacit explicit. Use ambiguous verbal stimuli to start the conversation.

### **Respect.**

Collective generativity is beginning to replace individual creativity (Sanders, E., 2000). The use of generative tools for codesigning requires a new mindset on the part of all the people involved. Experts in design and research must respect the ideas and contributions of ordinary people, and vice versa.

## **Sources of Inspiration**

Where can we look for inspiration on scaffolds for experiencing? There are lessons to be learned from the use of physical scaffolds in the construction and/or rehabilitation of buildings. We are collecting images and stories of traditional scaffolds now, looking for clues to apply to scaffolds for experiencing.

Entertainment-oriented fields also offer some ideas. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1994) describes the power of inbetweening. Animators also clearly understand this principle as applied to their work. Will Wright, the creator of *The Sims* (a PC game which recently won a gold award in Interactive Media Design

Review 2000 sponsored by The International Design Magazine) cites *Understanding Comics* as a source of inspiration. Theatre is another source of practical ideas for scaffolding. The setting of the stage and its props are often very good examples of optimal minimization of information.

Small children will be an invaluable source of inspiration because they can see scaffolds for experiencing wherever they play.

I want to thank Jeff Borisch and Bryan Goodpaster at SonicRim for engaging in divergent discussions pointing the direction for the content expressed in this paper.

## References and Related Readings

- Barlow, J. P. (1994) "The Economy of Ideas." *Wired*, March, 85.
- Berlo, D. (1960) *Process of Communication: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York.
- Brand, S. (1999) *The Clock of the Long Now*. Basic Books, New York.
- Bruner, J. (1990) *Acts of Meaning*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Joy, B. (2000) "Design for the Digital Revolution." *Fortune*, March 6.
- Kelly, K. (1998) *New Rules for the New Economy*. Viking, New York.
- Levine, R., Locke, C., Searls, D. and Weinberger, D. (2000) *The Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business as Usual*. Perseus Books, Cambridge, MA.
- Levi-Strauss, C. (1966) *The Savage Mind*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- McCloud, S. (1994) *Understanding Comics*. Kitchen Sink Press, New York.
- Pine, B. J. and Gilmore, J. H. (1999) *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage*. Harvard Business School Press, Boston.
- Sanders, E. B.-N. (1992) "Converging Perspectives: Product Development Research for the 1990s." *Design Management Journal*, Fall 1992.
- Sanders, E. B.-N. (2000) "Generative Tools for CoDesigning" in *Collaborative Design*, Scrivener, Ball and Woodcock (Eds.) Springer-Verlag, London.
- Schlossberg, E. (1998) *Interactive Excellence: Defining and Developing New Standards for the Twenty-first Century*. The Ballantine Publishing Group, New York.
- Thackara, J. (2000) "Articles of Association Between Design, Technology and The People Formerly Known As Users." *Doors of Perception*, April 2000. [www.doorsofperception.com](http://www.doorsofperception.com)
- Venturi, R., Brown, D. and Izenour, S. (1977) *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. The MIT Press, London.