

Strategic Design: Success In The Balance

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Whereas, words do not simply, or passively, express meaning; but, proactively frame and shape our understanding; and,

Whereas, our industry (and this publication) is transitioning from the traditional construct of entertainment, to the far more inclusive, current and future reality of experience;

Therefore, be it hereby resolved, the word “Designer” shall be replaced by “Strategic Designer,” whenever possible and appropriate.

The Backstory: Having evolved into the experience business from the commercial placemaking realm of the late, and very great, urban developer Jim Rouse, I was not properly imbued with the Hollywood doctrine and parlance of “suits” and “creatives.” Jim Rouse was known for wearing wild, colorful plaid sports jackets. Never in ten years did I see Jim wear a suit; nor sport red tennis shoes and body jewelry. In retrospect, I now see his apparel as the outward manifestation of his inner integration.

Jim Rouse was both a creative and a suit, both bold and colorful, yet within the confines of the business world. By education Jim was a lawyer, by business he was, at first, a mortgage banker, and later, a developer. Yet, by function Jim was, in essence, a Strategic Designer. He intuitively understood the intrinsic yin yang balance between the art and analysis of successful business. This lawyer, banker, and developer loved nothing more than to sit, side-by-side, with planners & architects, and leasing agents & financial analysts, contemporaneously designing the physical consumer experience along with the economic business experience, resulting in a Strategic Design that met people’s yearnings – be they guests or investors.

In the historic, Hollywood world of entertainment job descriptions, such integration on an individual scale is rare. After all, the stereotypes are clear:

A Creative – is a talented, if passionate, person who provides great value to the creation of entertainment; though, who, because their unit of measure is the idea, may be paid less than they are really worth (unless, of course, the creative is actually an animator).

A Suit – is an educated, if matter of fact, person who provides great value to the delivery of entertainment; though, who, because their unit of measure is money, may be paid more than they are really worth (unless, of course, the suit is actually an operator).

What if we did not divide the vital human resource assets of this industry into such simplistic categories? What if we did not systematically attribute cartoon-like right brain / left brain caricatures, which impose a type of intellectual prejudice that simultaneously demeans and excuses the one type for not having the attributes of the other? What if we educated, reinforced and rewarded a new, more whole, class of contributor called a Strategic Designer?

A Strategic Designer would be a person who artfully balances creative and analytical thinking, assesses the challenges and the opportunities, and then tangibly defines, in behavioral, financial, and physical terms what is to be achieved.

Strategic Designer is the job description that defines the genius of not only Jim Rouse, but of Walt Disney, who took the reverse course from Jim, from animator to Florida real estate mogul, yet both achieved the same level of integration, the same symbiosis of personality. Both gentlemen were pioneers who led us to where we have been for some time. Are these not the traits of people who our culture values most?

The seemingly boundless frontier of the “experience economy,” is far more challenging, as it has far fewer rules. We are enriching the real world with new models of heightened experiences. So, as the known comfort of the themepark-centric entertainment industry fades, so should the stereotypes of talent dissolve. Now, perhaps more than ever, we need not Suits and Creatives – but Strategic Designers to invent the future, to define successful new paradigms of experience, which augment the emotional richness of our world.

Now, perhaps more than ever, we need to wear plaid.