



Trying to Make the World a Better Place

**A conversation between
Brendan McGetrick & Sebastián Ocampo**

A dialogue about design education and social impact, through the prism of the Global Grad Show in Dubai. This discussion centers on design's evolution, new academic approaches, and students' social innovation projects identifying local opportunities and needs that are often overlooked by the market.

Brendan McGetrick is the director of the annual Global Grad Show. Sebastián Ocampo is the chair of CENTRO's Industrial Design department.

S.O. Brendan, considering your extensive professional development and your background in journalism, how did you end up in the design world?

B.M. I'm a curator and writer from the US, although I am based in London. I worked as a journalist for several years and then, through a very indirect path, became a kind of person in the design world. Originally, I was hired by Rem Koolhaas, the architect, to work with his team on a special issue of *Wired* magazine; then he hired me permanently as his personal editor and we published the book *Content*. I worked in his office for four years researching, publishing projects and developing exhibitions. Afterwards, I moved to China and col-

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laborated with architects and artists who worked in design or art. I collaborated with people like Ma Yansong and with Ai Weiwei in several projects; we made a book and a big exhibition at the Gwangju Design Biennale in Korea. The latter was the first project that I ever curated and it was called *Unnamed Design*. In that show we tried to expand the conception of design, so that it could go beyond the standard disciplines of architecture, furniture, fashion, etc. in order to include things which are much wider, like an honest assessment about the role design plays in the world and its negative impacts in terms of manufacturing weapons or developing mechanisms for people to control other people, whether politically or economically. Basically that project introduced me to curating and it became the foundation of what I try to do with my work in design, which is really to try to expand the definition and the conversation regarding design, so that people can see that it is relevant for everybody, that it includes contributions from as many places as possible, and that it doesn't depend solely on high technology or wealth.

Is this what you try to do with the *Global Grad Show*? Can you tell us more about it?

Yes, basically, *Global Grad Show* is an extension of that effort. Four years ago, some members of our Dubai group, who were at that time only planning to create something called *Dubai Design Week*, approached me and said: "We are going to launch the Design Week. Can you think of an original initiative that we may be able to include?" And I kind of thought of Dubai at the time—and still now—even if it is not really considered a design capital. Nevertheless, it is a place which is investing in education and in innovation and it is, without a doubt, one of the locations in the world where people get together and meet one another; it is a meeting place, especially for that part of the

world: the Middle East, South Asia, North Africa. Therefore, I thought that it would be really interesting if we used Dubai's great strengths, like the fact that it is a so-called hub in a meeting place, and we made a design exhibition that was really focused on the next generation of design. For me, this was always representative of design schools, so the idea was just to see if we could create a selection of what are the most interesting, ambitious and intelligent grad group projects from design schools and art schools and technology schools all over the world and put them all together in a single space. This is what we've done now for four editions. It started in a very small scale, with just ten very well-known schools like the MIT, the RCA, ECAL, and the National University of Singapore. We had a very positive response from the visitors, but the main negative response was that it was not really global enough, and that it was kind of the usual participants in terms of big established schools that already get a lot of attention, have a lot of money, and don't need a global platform as much as other schools in other countries.

What are the criteria you use in the selecting process of *Global Grad Show*?

What I try to do as a curator is to just open up design so that its value becomes clear. I think if you limit it to what most people think of as design—i.e. as expensive fashion, furniture, and so forth—it feels like it is not that relevant for a lot of people. In my opinion, really good design is just about problem-solving and trying to make the world better. And of course that is relevant for everybody. Now, the main criteria involve the question: Have you genuinely designed something new? And, if it were to go forward, would it make a positive impact? Does it actually address a need that hasn't been addressed in a new way? I think the main reason why I choose things on that basis is that it means that you don't need to have something that is super beautiful or an expensive prototype. It is innovating in its purest sense.

Regarding diversity, you mentioned that there were only ten schools in the first edition. How has this changed in more recent editions?

The main effort we made from the first year going into the second was to really expand the number of participating schools and programs, as well as the kinds of problems and issues that were being represented in the show. That's how we first got involved with CENTRO and many other schools. Since then, we have expanded so

Design is about problem solving and trying to make the world better

that we can really create a platform where young designers from all over the world can come together on an even playing field, get attention, and meet each other. In 2017 we had 93 schools from 42 or 43 countries; in 2018 we had 100 schools from 45 countries. However, the much more interesting thing that we figured out for the 2017 edition was that, although the schools were from 45 countries, the students came from 62 different countries and a lot of them were originally from places that don't really have design schools. For example, Palestine—which isn't even recognized as a country by some people—or Ethiopia, as well as other countries where basically the young talents, the students, have to go abroad and study in places like the RCA or RISD.

It is very significant that they get attention and that it's clear that design is something which is being pursued by people everywhere, but not necessarily with the same opportunities and infrastructure. What was exciting about the 2018 edition was that we had 160 projects from designers that came from 62 different countries. So almost every other project was from a student by a different country, which I think is really exciting.

For all of us at CENTRO, being selected by the *Global Grad Show* came like a recognition of the way in which we were practicing design. We have a final one-year project, which not all universities have, and we discovered that many of our students were working on social innovation or social responsibility oriented themes. This relates to the way you select projects that must have the objective of making the world a better place. Considering this, do you find that schools are promoting such a new way of practicing design that goes in this direction in a deliberate institutional way or is this just a cluster of isolated cases of students that get involved in socially responsible activities individually?

I think some schools do; obviously, CENTRO does. There are definitely schools that see social innovation design for social good as being part of their mission. What has really struck me while developing *Global Grad Show* is that actually a lot of the students themselves simply see design that way. What is beautiful about student design is that, because it's not responding to a client's demand or to the pressures of the marketplace, it's really coming from a place of emotion and hope. When we talk about *Global Grad Show*, sometimes the press will say things like: "These are student projects, which means they are not professional and they are not to be taken as seriously as

things which are being sold.” I always reply that is total nonsense because the reality is that projects that are coming out of design schools are very often addressing needs and identifying problems that the marketplace simply has no attention for, and, in a way, doesn’t care about. This, however, doesn’t make them any less urgent or any less important. I think it’s a really important balance because if you allow the market to make all the decisions about what design or technology should be, you’d just end up getting many versions of the same things that have already been proven to work. So, when I organize *Global Grad Show* as a curator, the main criteria that I use to choose a project is that it needs to feel new. This relates to the way I conceive of the nature of the student experience, of being a young person, which involves being immersed in design as a way to make the world better and intervene in it many times in a small yet meaningful way. That really is the answer to why design schools are so valuable. Regardless of whether or not they have design for social good built into their curriculum, I think it happens anyway because of the nature of the student experience, and due to the fact that schools in general encourage you to think about experiences outside of your own experience, to explore them and to try to understand in a really high level of detail what it is like to be handicapped, or blind, or a child in a hospital. I remember that CENTRO project from the first year that you guys participated, and I think the designer’s name was Miguel...

Design offers you the opportunity to deeply consider what it is like to be somebody else

Yes. It was called *Superheroes...*

And the project involved adding IV poles so that it would be like a little imaginary friend for a child in a hospital. I’ll never forget it because for me that was the essence of what was beautiful about *Global Grad Show* and about design in general: that it wasn’t expensive or complicated but it was very, very smart in terms of identifying an experience and then really trying to address it. I think that’s what great design does, and what’s great about schools is that they explore a much wider range of experience. In my case, simply by making *Global Grad Show*, my understanding of the human experience has been expanded so much because every year there are new projects about new issues that I just hadn’t considered and which are outside the scope of my life. I think that a lot of times design offers you the opportunity to deeply consider what it is like to be somebody else, to realize how badly designed the world is for so many people, and how unfair or difficult it is—unnecessarily—just because the people who made decisions only had themselves in mind.

Do you think that fifteen years ago you could have organized a *Global Grad Show* related to social innovation? What do you think has changed? Have the schools changed or are millennials just different? In other words, how do you rationalize this new way of approaching design?

Design is being pursued by people everywhere, but not necessarily with the same opportunities and infrastructure

I wouldn't imply that I know the answer to that question. On the one hand, young people are more optimistic and have a greater commitment to the future. I think that they feel that the problems that the world and they are facing simply will not be solved by older generations. There are a lot of reasons for that. One of them is that the market economy doesn't care about the social good. Of course, there are moments when it makes financial or economic sense to care about the social good; but at the end there are many examples of ways in which you can be celebrated and rewarded as a business person while committing incredible crimes against the social good. My feeling is that young people—particularly millennials—have grown up in an environment where money seems to be the ultimate value that dictates what matters. I think they recognize that as a dead end. They are witnessing their elders deal with very urgent problems and failing. If you look at the way things like climate change are going, the way governments are approaching migration, the way they are handling the relationships between themselves, it basically just feels absolutely out of control, irresponsible and immature. I think that young people are recognizing that and trying to respond within the powers that they have. Therefore, sometimes the best you can do is trying to design a small intervention that would make, for instance, migrants experience better or trying to figure out what would happen if the world's population of bees goes extinct or the sea levels rise a meter. It is already significant to try to figure out a way to communicate and contribute significantly to the lives of people who are going to be affected by such events, even though the problems are so large that there's not much you can do individually—and there's certainly not much you can do as a young person. Now, I do think that the schools recognize the value of that more than ever before, and I don't intend this to seem as if this is coming entirely from young people.

It seems that from the moment that you engage or that you develop a social innovation project it is taken for granted that it is good. Nonetheless, sometimes I see that there are no instruments to measure the impact or the outcome. Considering this, which would you say are the main difficulties and next steps for measuring the impact of these projects?

Yeah, this is really important. In terms of *Global Grad Show*, this is why it exists; I'm very skeptical of projects that are created in American or European schools and are then dumped into India or some African country. These projects are mostly for making the schools and the designers themselves feel good and that is why we try as much as possible to provide local solutions to local problems. Local solutions are based on a much more intimate understanding of what is going on and what is the real need or problem. There are so many examples of corporate social responsibility projects that are trying to help, for example, a remote medical clinic in Africa by introducing their technology and their goods and, after a big press release, the technology turns out to be inappropriate to the needs and resources of the place. That does more harm than good because the problems remain the same. I remember this article about how a med-tech company had given a centrifuge to a clinic in Africa to help them test for malaria and HIV but there wasn't steady electricity there and no one knew how to repair it if it broke down. A year after the delivery somebody went to check it out and it was being used to hold the door open. That's an extreme case of something that happens a lot, so we all need to look closely on our motivations and why we are doing things.

Compassion and the desire to help is part of the human experience

Why do you think human beings want to do things for others?

Well, because it's undeniable that there are situations where outside thinking can help, and I certainly believe that compassion and the desire to help is part of the human experience. I would say that another real problem of our present day context is that we live in a highly competitive environment that assumes that everybody is a self-interested person who is trying to maximize their own benefit and using every relationship that they have for their own ends. I don't believe that. I don't think that is human nature. I do think that people, when they have the possibility, do want to help each other and they want to apply their skills or resources to try to make a positive intervention. The only problem is, though, that there are sexier problems than others and people a lot of times are drawn to issues

that seem really cool and interesting to solve but that they don't really understand that well or frankly they'd be a lot better served by trying to solve a problem that is much closer to their home. It might be less interesting to them but is just as urgent and they can understand it a lot better.

This is very interesting. One of the necessary ingredients from the point of view of design perspective is to be very local and having the community actively participate. After the last earthquake that struck Mexico City in 2017, there was this brilliant guy who developed a system where—with the help of a lot of volunteers—you could verify information and make sure that you knew exactly where help was needed. This avoided misinformation and the waste of time and resources. When they tried to use the platform again for a flooding situation in another area and with the imposition of technology, it didn't work. Nobody used it. It didn't have the real participation of people in terms of building the project. What do you think regarding the use of technology and communal participation? What should we do as schools about it?

Things get
accomplished
by humans

I think it is especially dangerous in this kind of digital age to get this feeling that you can solve big problems only by having an app or with a very clever system that is based on digital technology. The reality is that nothing has changed that much, it's always basically people; it's always a human endeavor, things get accomplished by humans. I remember I read an article about Obama's presidential campaign in 2012 describing how he had this completely amazing system for identifying voters and relationships; it was all digital and about understanding to an extremely high level of detail who were potential voters, and how you could reach them. So, if you read this you could say: "Yeah, this is amazing; this is really impressive, and it is the future of democracy". However, when you get to the very end and ask his campaign manager, "What do you use all this technology for?," he would probably answer: "Usually we just use it so that when all the volunteers go out and knock on people's doors they know exactly where to go." What this means is that all that technology was just to support the work that everybody had been doing anyway, which is to physically go and talk to somebody.

Exactly...

Ultimately, it's about going and speaking to somebody and having a face-to-face interaction. And I think that it is absolutely true that students, especially these days, need to understand that the physical and the personal are like this. The digital is a kind of simulation of reality but it's not reality. In a way it is a very flattened version of reality. Therefore, any kind of solution that involves real people has to have real people as its foundation, and you have to understand that only real people can make it happen. That means you need to understand what they are actually doing already, what they want to do, what they believe in, and not impose something external to it.

Do you find similarities between the projects and the type of problems they want to resolve? Is it more common to find solutions for rural areas than it is for an urban setting?

No. I think it's reflective of whatever the specific country's issues are. Clearly a country like China has a lot of urban problems and a lot of rural problems. So, you'll see projects which are about the pollution and the difficulty of living in huge cities in China; but then you also see projects which are about kids in villages that basically can't get wheelchairs or basic medical equipment if they're handicapped or sick. Therefore, I don't think it is necessarily an urban versus a rural thing. I think it's much more reflective of what the conditions or main needs are, and what kinds of existing resources and traditions a country has, so that you are not doing something that is entirely new and foreign or weird.

Designers often don't consider the whole system and questions about the different aspects that a project must have and the different groups of people and stakeholders that should be part of it. Don't you think that there is still some inadequate behavior from designers or from the way in which we are teaching design that disables an understanding of some key issues like the relations you must establish with the local government or who the stakeholders regarding the project that you are developing should be?

A fully rounded education would force you to spend time on different areas, all the things that are part of the ecosystem that any projects enters into.

Yes, absolutely and that's not a problem limited to design or design schools. I think the lack of systemic thinking is one of the defining issues of our time. The thing that is a little frustrating about design is that designers and design schools go on and on about multidisciplinary, when the reality is that if you're really serious about it then you've got to talk to people in the government and people who have absolutely no connection to design but who will have a really drastic effect on whether or not any idea can actually work. I think that a fully rounded education would force you to spend time on different areas, to know about manufacture, finance, medical care, non-profits, all the things that are part of the ecosystem that any projects enters into. There's a professor and writer at Oxford, Theodore Zeldin, who has this idea of a generalist education that would give you over a year of experiences related to many fields. All these things that are the fundamental pillars of our society and our professional and personal worlds; you would have a basic immersion in them, so that you could understand what are their different perspectives and priorities. I totally agree with that. I am a well-educated person, but the amounts of things which define my life now that I had absolutely no training for in my education are totally amazing. I would hope that in the future that could be addressed. Especially because at least one part of a young designer's education—or any young person's education—should actually involve a deep immersion in as many different kinds of aspects of society as possible. ■

