How do you capture the present state of design in one single chart, with only 50 names? You don’t. But, inspired by the effort of those 50, we gave it a shot in Fast Company’s 2011 design issue.

In Fast Company’s 2011 design issue, we focused on American design: What it means, where it stands, and where it’s going. And so naturally, we thought it necessary to create a list of the country’s most influential designers. We could have left it as a list, and that would be fine. It would have enraged a few people, enlightened a few more, and that’s it. But instead, we wanted to gave readers a bit more insight into what “design” actually means today. Say it with me now: Infographics, to the rescue!
Here is what Co.Design, working with the talented Kristian Dimatteo, came up with. On the horizontal axis, you see the discipline, which is arranged from the virtual (websites and information) to the physical (cars and even spaceships). But the axis is also meant to give a rough approximation of the scope of each profession. A building, for example, may require a cast of dozens of designers and thousands of workers to create. Graphic designers, on the other hand, almost always work in teams that are no bigger than a couple people. Buildings usually exist as one-off objects. But a car, on the other hand, will be produced for many years before its redesigned—thus creating an economic impact that spans the globe for decades.

The vertical axis is meant to show that some designers who are “thinkers,” insofar as they wield influence through writing and leadership. Others, however, are “makers,” who aren’t particularly known for being outspoken, but whose work exerts outsized sway over their discipline.

I want to explain a bit more about the chart, but before I do, here are the mini bios we came up with, explaining who each person is:

1. **Stephen Alesch and Robin Standefer**, the duo behind Roman & Williams, did the interior of New York’s Ace Hotel and set the standard for the worldwide haute-lodge trend. 3. **Paola Antonelli**, MoMA’s design curator, is a quirky tastemaker and articulate advocate. 4. **Chris Bangle**’s controversial flared designs made BMW a sales monster. 5. **Fabien Baron**, designer of Madonna’s book Sex, later defined fashion at Harper’s Bazaar, Interview, and Calvin Klein. 6. **Jake Barton**, founder of Local Projects, designs interactive websites and environments, most notably for the 9/11 memorial and museum. 7. **Yves Behar**’s designs—from the Peel Universal Remote to Jawbone’s Bluetooth headset—are a mainstay of Silicon Valley startups. 8. **Kathleen Brandenburg**, head of the firm IA Collaborative, is a guru of user-focused design. 9. **David Butler** made design part of Coke’s modern DNA. 10. **James Corner** helped create New York’s High Line, the most acclaimed public park in recent memory. 11. **Teddy Cruz** uses U.S.–Mexican border towns as new models for urban development. 12. **Scott Dadich**, Wired’s former creative director, now oversees Condé Nast’s iPad and digital editions. 13. **Nicholas Felton**’s witty “Annual Reports” plotted his life in infographics; Facebook noticed (and hired) him. 14. **Ben Fry** cocreated Processing, the programming language behind today’s best data-visualization projects. 15. **Jeanne Gang**’s Aqua skyscraper, in Chicago, is the world’s tallest designed by a woman. 16. **Frank Gehry**’s guggenheim Bilbao museum changed architectural norms and led to new software for designing hypercomplex structures. 17. **Michael Graves** has revamped everything from teapots for Target to products for the dis-abled. 18. **Tinker Hatfield**’s iconic shoe designs helped turn Nike into a footwear powerhouse. 19./20. Jonathan Hoefler and **Tobias Frere-Jones**’s typefaces—for everyone from the New York Jets to The New York Times—pervade our culture. 21. **Steven Holl**’s standout recent work includes a horizontal skyscraper in China. 22. **Jonathan Ive**’s designs set Apple along a path to iDomination. 23. **Marc Jacobs**’s massive sales have not diminished his insider cool. 24. **Natalie Jeremijenko** explores the limits of technology with art projects including robot dogs that report on environmental conditions. 25. **David Kelley** is a founder of Ideo and Stanford’s d.school; he’s also a father of design thinking. 26./27. **Duane King** and **Ian Coyle** create websites that
stretch the medium’s possibilities. 28. Ji Lee, Facebook’s creative director, commands more eyeballs than any designer alive. 29. Phillip Lim has been the most aggressive empire builder of his generation, and his clothes are both elegant and affordable. 30. John Maeda, a path-breaking designer and programmer, is president of RISD. 31. Michael Maltzan’s small projects—houses and community centers—have earned him big-time museum commissions. 32. J Mays, Ford’s chief designer, created the 1994 New Beetle, the Ford GT, and the Land Rover LR3/Discovery. 33. Bill Moggridge designed the first laptop computer and now heads the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum. 34. Mauro Porcini used design to reinvent 3M’s innovation process. 35. Aza Raskin left Mozilla to found the startup Massive Health, which aims to fix America’s health-care mess with smart, simple user interfaces. 36. Carlo Ratti runs MIT’s SeNSeable City Lab, which has created a hybrid electric bike wheel and heads-up driving displays. 37. Michael Rock’s firm 2x4 brings a cool sensibility to its work for Prada, Malin+goetz, and Nike. 38. Eric Rodenbeck founded Stamen, a data-visualization firm that mapped American military deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan for CNN. 39. Joe Rospars, creative director at Blue State Digital, helped propel Barack Obama into office in 2008. 40. Burt Rutan’s x Prize–winning SpaceShipOne launched space tourism. 41. Stefan Sagmeister, infamous for cutting letters into his skin, has become a creativity guru. 42. Lisa Strausfeld created novel interfaces for the $100 XO laptop and the Litl Webbook. 43. Ed Tufte, a godfather of information design, literally wrote the discipline’s bibles. 44. Michael Van Valkenburgh’s green spaces include Brooklyn Bridge Park and, soon, one for St. Louis’s gateway Arch. 45. Khoi Vinh oversaw many of nytimes.com’s best interactive experiments. 46. Alexander Wang turned sweatshirts and lounge pants into high fashion. 47. Kelly Wearstler’s provocative, 1970s-inspired interiors defined a trend toward wacky chic. 48. Scott Wilson’s iPod Nano wristband raised nearly $1 million from Kickstarter and pushed countless designers toward entrepreneurship. 49. Robert Wong, head of Google Creative Lab, markets everything from Chrome to Google Docs. 50. Fred Woodward, design director at GQ, is the most influential magazine designer of the past 25 years.

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Obviously, the infographic we created is, at best, imprecise. And a few people, beating their chests quite self-importantly, have called this chart a “fucking waste of effort.” Pardon their French.

But it has its virtues, and I’m ready to defend it. In creating the horizontal spectrum, we wanted to indicate the fact that many of today’s design disciplines bleed into one another. Thus, you often find website designers being drafted into duty as information designers or graphic designers. So where each designer is placed is meant as a rough indicator of what genres they find themselves frequently dipping their toes into.
About the vertical axis, we don't meant to indicate that certain people along the mid-line are "average" thinkers or makers. Rather, they are people such as John Maeda who have created some astonishing work, but through teaching, books, or leadership, have exerted all the more influence. Contrast that with someone like David Butler, at Coke. Butler's position precludes much hands-on work. But he leads a global team of designers, so his influence is felt in the decisions he makes every day. Likewise, there are brilliant designers such as Phillip Lim who don't ever say much about their work, but whose work is watched and dissected all the same.

Now, this chart appears in full in the current issue of Fast Company. It also appears here, in an interactive version. But I wanted to post it on Co.Design as well because I want to be open to your responses. I expect many of them to be unkind. But I hope that many others will be constructive. The Co.Design 50 was a first approximation at a recurring, annual effort. You can help make it better.

I also wanted to post it here because the print version constricted the space we had for explaining each and every choice. Rest assured, thought and debate went into the placement of every name. In the comments, I'm hoping to address every detail that you all want more information on. Why, for instance, are some people not on here, while others are? Is it really fair to put Nicholas Felton on a chart that includes a well-established giant such as David Kelley? And why is Michael Graves listed under product design rather than architecture? Fire away. I'll try my best to answer each question.

If you made it this far, thank you! And thanks for reading Co.Design.
umm...i know she's a she and all, but Paula Scher is one of the most influential designers of all times.

Joe Rospers or Joe Rospars?

This list was never going to satisfy everyone. Everyone has a different perspective on what they believe is influential.

About the claim of sexism, I believe in school the numbers are about even but in practice that isn't so. Women fall off the radar for a variety of reasons such as having children. Also some practices are more female heavy than others.

Kathryn Gustafson would have been a good addition - she did just pull in the Cooper Hewitt

Just read your replies to other posts about sexism. I would like to see the stats backing up your statements that design is a male-dominated field, even on the same level as engineering. That is just ridiculous. When was the last time you visited a design school? Honestly, your statement is based on what? People need to not dismiss the underlying sexism that exists in design.

Granted, I don't have hard data. But combined, our staff has spent about 50 years covering design. The mix of sexes might look different IN SCHOOL, but I challenge you to argue that it's anything resembling 50/50 at the creative-director level and above at Americas top design firms.

Sexism? Hardly. Who are your picks for most influential? And why are they better than the people here?

Another design blog reveals its sexism.

Great comment by Mjankus "A rare post for which the comments will actually add to the value of the piece. Congratulations".I agree! Gutsy info graphic Cliff. Good on you for sticking your neck out with such a stimulating article.
FROM THE EDITOR

Thanks for stopping by Fast Company’s Co.Design. Here, we try to bridge the fuzzy border between design and business. We started this site with a few simple premises in mind. First, design is a window onto the world at large, and the culture we live in. When a designer sets down to make something new, she can’t help but have some idea about how some object could be so much better than ever before...read more »