

What **Steve Jobs** Can Still Teach Us

The Best **American-Made** Gizmos, Gadgets, and Gear

REBOOT FRENZY:

Starbucks, Walmart, MTV, Polaroid-and J. Lo!







EARLY LAST NOVEMBER, SCOTT WILSON WAS FEELING

a little gloomy. The partnership in a startup he had worked on relentlessly for a year had fallen apart, leaving him with little but regret over the time he had spent away from his family and his Chicago design studio, Minimal.

But this is the United States, a country famous for second acts. So after a few days of moping, Wilson, a serial entrepreneur with a corporate stint as global creative director of Nike's watch division, jumped back in. He had a new idea—and a novel plan for funding it.

Wilson's brainchild was an innovative watch that grafted the body of an iPod Nano onto an aluminum case, turning the little touch screen into a cool, wrist-circling gadget that could wake you up in the morning, play your music, and even, with the help of a Nike+ chip mounted on the side, track your daily run.

The challenge, of course, was how the designer—who normally makes his living providing creative services to clients such as Steelcase, Google, Dell, and Microsoft's Xbox—could raise the money to bring the concept to market. Potential partners had balked at his design, saying it would be too expensive to produce.

That's when Wilson turned to Kickstarter, the webbased funding platform for independent creative projects. He posted his idea on November 16. Within a week, he had raised \$400,000 from 5,000 backers. Within a month, 13,500 people from 50 countries had ponied up nearly \$1 million. In total, he sold 21,120 units on Kickstarter and roughly 20,000 more through his own site, lunatik.com.

Then Apple took notice and called Wilson to urge him to sell his wares in its stores. This brings us to the particularly delicious part of the story: When Apple offered its customary profit split, Wilson pointed to a Kickstarter survey indicating that 76% of his buyers had purchased a Nano because of the wristband. In other words, his accessory was spurring Apple sales. "That let me negotiate more favorable terms," Wilson says. And now, Apple is selling twice as many watchbands as it had forecast.

This is a brand-new kind of American dream, one that mixes design, technology, and fresh business models. That Apple has ridden a design-infused wave to extraordinary heights is widely acknowledged, inspiring corporate leaders everywhere to reevaluate the potential of design. But Apple is only one edge in a powerful new entrepreneurial ecosystem, one that stretches across companies of all sizes and throughout all industries. America's greatest business success of the late 20th century was Silicon Valley entrepreneurship, which spawned so many companies and spurred





so much job and wealth creation; American design is the echo of that phenomenon, with the potential to be yet another distinctive and valuable American asset.

Design, on these shores, was not always perceived this way. Within the halls of power at big American companies, it has often been an afterthought. The reigning aesthetes of the global community, meanwhile, have generally dismissed American design as subpar. (Insert your favorite Hummer/megaplex/strip mall/McMansion reference here—or just visit an average American furniture showroom and consider the dispiriting array of bloated pleather sofas.) Yet now American design is at a defining moment. The disdain that European designers may have had for their U.S. cousins suddenly has a touch of jealousy: The Americans are getting better, their products have international reach, and, worst of all, they're making money. Less focused on creating stylish one-offs and more on the needs of real consumers, American design is having global impact in everything from fashion to human/machine interfaces, system design to artisanal craftsmanship, health-care devices to, yes, that miniature watch/alarm clock/pedometer/music player on your wrist.

As virtual products and services become increasingly important in the world economy, American designers lead the way. The marriage of technology and design has become a driver of America's success. Ease of use, a design concept, is at the core of Apple, Google, and Face-

DESIGN CAN BE A CRITICAL COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE— IF AMERICAN BUSINESS SEIZES THIS MOMENT.

book. Designers played a founding role at many of the most innovative web-based companies, including Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, and Tumblr. The business model that Wilson tapped into via Kickstarter has allowed for a bottom-up revolution in the marketplace, empowering a wide swath of creatives.

This is all critically important, and worth studying, because in the global marketplace, finding an edge is becoming harder. "We will not be able to

THIRTY COMPANIES THAT GET IT

A SAMPLING OF DESIGN STRONGHOLDS IN CORPORATE AMERICA



remain relevant by competing on such factors as labor or raw materials," says Northwestern University's Andrew Razeghi. As Fahrenheit 212's Mark Payne notes, in a world where all products start to look alike, design's role and importance expands. "Design is differentiation made visible, visceral, and experiential," he says. "Creativity and innovation are emerging as disciplines because we have no other choice." Design, in other words, can be a critical, and uniquely American, competitive advantage—if the nation seizes this moment.

ONE FRIDAY NIGHT last spring, I was sprawled on the sofa watching ABC's news magazine, 20/20, when a segment on American fashion designer Michael Kors rolled onto the screen. Kors is one of the country's top-grossing designers, with revenue soaring above

\$1 billion in 2010. It's unlikely that he'll ever garner an Alexander McQueen—style homage at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, but his spare, wearable aesthetic has earned him a passionate fan base that ranges from skinny petites to plus-size fashionistas. The 20/20 piece noted that Kors had been obsessed with fashion from the age of 5, when he took one look at his mother's dress for her second wedding and told her to lose the bows.

Wedding wear, it turns out, is useful for helping to distinguish American design from its global peers. Think back to Princess Diana's bow-riddled, Laura Ashley-on-steroids confection of a bridal gown. Or the Philip Treacy toilet-seat hat that Princess Beatrice wore to the Windsors' recent shindig. These cream puffs are perfectly appropriate for the British. Compare them to the sleek, bow-free Narciso Rodriguez sheath Carolyn Bessette wore to her wedding to John F. Kennedy Jr., America's version of royalty. Or Chelsea Clinton's elegant Vera Wang creation. The differences are clear.

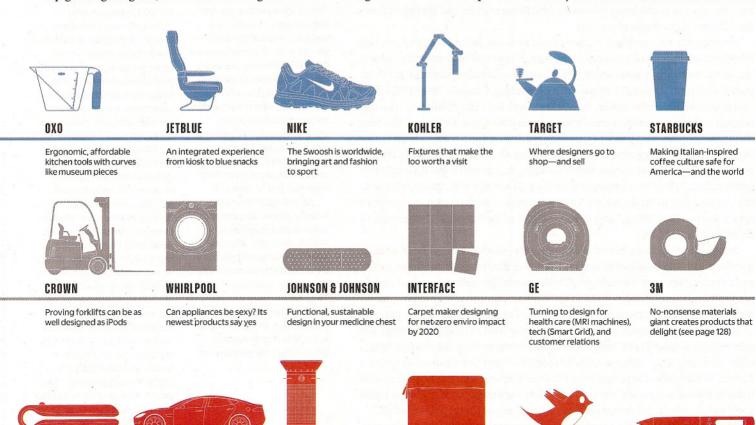
It can be perilous to generalize about a national design aesthetic. Is the quintessential Italian wedding dress necessarily sexy (think Donatella Versace or Dolce and Gabbana)? Do all Japanese brides dress in Issey Miyake's origami pleats, all French in the rococo style of Christian Lacroix? Of course not. And in the United States, where so many designers are émigrés, generalizations become tougher still. "It is a bit of a pointless task to try and tease out some Americanness in a

TWITTER

Its easy-to-use interface

regime topplers

works for corporations and



INCASE

The most stylish maker of

Apple accessories

LIVESCRIBE

Smartpen system captures

in a magic notebook

writing, listening, and images

FITBIT

Making health-data

monitoring easy,

fun-and cool

TESLA

lusting after

Sleek electric sports

cars that you can feel good

FUEGO

The outdoor-grill company

is burning up sales at Target



field where designers are migratory, ideas travel fast, and methods of production are global," contends Ideo's Tim Brown, a transplanted Brit who now calls Palo Alto home.

Still, America is different. The U.S. design community has a distinctive mind-set and perspective. Its design is pragmatic, with an emphasis on marketplace appeal; streamlined, in a way that focuses on ease of use; and democratic, which fuels the integration of new ideas, new processes, and new business models.

Breakthrough innovation has long been America's economic trump card. And if you study American history, you see that when innovation has been married to good design, it has yielded unprecedented economic growth. From the design of Levi's to the creation of the Coke bottle, the Model T to the Brownie camera, Frank Lloyd Wright's prairie houses to Air Jordans and iPads, Americans tend to deliver great designs in innovative ways that elevate products beyond being simply beautiful artifacts.

Hardworking design is part of an American heritage, points out Davin Stowell at SmartDesign, a firm famous for its user-friendly tools for Oxo. Early settlers and pioneers needed good ax handles and efficient scythes to tame the vast expanse of land, long-barrel rifles for the country's big game, and Conestoga wagons to carry their possessions across hostile countryside. Small wonder, then, that 235 years later, the country is still better known for John Deere tractors and 3M Post-it Notes than elegant china or precious chairs.

America has also excelled at process and systems design: There's Frederick Winslow Taylor's scientific management, Isaac Singer and his partner's epiphany that women would buy more sewing machines on an installment plan, Coca-Cola's franchise system, and eBay's reinvention of retailing. Consider Disney World. Of course there's Cinderella's castle and Mickey's ears, but there's also masterful line management and a comprehensive transportation system. Or Starbucks's faux Italian coffeehouse, with free Wi-Fi, customized drinks, and a rewards program for frequent abusers. Or Amazon's one-click ordering. Or FedEx's speedy delivery and online tracking. All have comprehensive designs that go well beyond a single tangible product. "These are complex interactions of products with spaces, with identity and enabling technologies, with a huge emphasis on making that experience easy to use and compelling," says Clive Roux, CEO of the Industrial Designers Society of America, or IDSA.

American design does have its downsides. Its practitioners can be impatient, unsubtle, and so committed to market share that they lose sight of the attractive and intuitive. Northwestern University's Walter Herbst posits that American designers have a bad case of shpilkes-Yiddish for "nervous energy," or "ants in your pants." It's hard to imagine Americans taking 40 years to design the Porsche 911, methodically refining it again and again. It's equally hard to imagine the exquisite minimalism of Japan's Muji design movement emerging from the raucous energy of the 50 states. "America is the world's laboratory," says Genesis partner Graham Button. "We're brilliant at prototyping, but there is always the rush to get to market to make money, leaving the market to complete the design process. Market forces don't design well: Stupid things get bolted on; important things get shaved off."

The very American focus on return on investment is a challenge to designers, who are repeatedly pressed to tease out how much of a product's or service's revenue can be attributed to design. Go to any conference where design managers gather, and a session on the value of design is sure to be on the agenda, along with the plaintive question: How do we get a seat at the table in the C-suite?

THROUGH DESIGN FOR AMERICA, COLLEGE STUDENTS APPLY THEIR SKILLS TO REAL-WORLD **PROBLEMS**

"It was all about the squishy bell peppers," laughs Tara Jasinski, a recent Cornell University grad who now works in Princeton, New Jersey, as an interior designer at architecture firm HDR. She's recalling the inspiration for the Design for America project she worked on this past spring at her alma mater. "That was all you could get. The grocery stores with good fresh food were just too far away."

So Jasinski, along with Ada Ng. Mariel Strauch, and other students led by Alix Berger, set out to design a solution that would get more fresh food to students and the Ithaca community as a whole. They followed a process established by Design for America. a grassroots initiative started in 2009 at Northwestern University, that encourages

problem-solving design students to apply their skills to real-world issues. As Ng and Strauch explain, the DFA approach is to define, discover, reframe, ideate, prototype, and implement. Ng calls this kind of problem solving—as opposed to drawing, or envisioning beautiful interior spaces or products—the essential wonder of design: "to have an idea and make it happen."

DFA's can-do approach is catching on. Seven more universities plan to launch their own DFA studios this fall. The Cornell branch will try to make the most of a new farmers' market that will be open each Thursday at the university's Ho Plaza, courtesy of the group Cornell to Farm. Strauch thinks the DFA crew she will lead with Ng can help get that fresh food into students' mouths. "Maybe we can work with vendors to package the vegetables in boxes with labels like 'stirfry,' with recipes inside," she says, "We'd give demos at the farmers' market, let them see that this tastes good—and that it doesn't take much work." After all, says Strauch, "I want people to be able to use what we design." -RICK TETZELI





But America's openness to anyone with a big idea makes the place a magnet for the world's talentdesigners such as Apple's Jonathan Ive (British), graphic-design guru Stefan Sagmeister (Austrian), industrial designer Yves Béhar (Swiss), product designer Dror Benshetrit (Israeli), and MoMA curator Paola Antonelli (Italian) among them. America's design strength-just like its strength in other fields, from Hollywood to Silicon Valley-is richer and more. powerful because it's continually replenished by new ideas from distant shores.

As a result, even the best global corporations now have something to learn from American design. University of Toronto Rotman School of Management dean Roger Martin currently serves on Toyota CEO Akio Toyoda's quality panel, which gives him a frontrow seat on the differences between cultures. In Japan, he says, engineers will listen to the user only to the extent that the user "behaves" and doesn't act dumb. Toyota's "engineers think that users are operating the Lexus GPS incompetently, so they are reluctant to fix the usability problem," he says. That attitude would never fly with the design team at Intuit.

FOR ALL OF APPLE'S SUCCESS, the value and power of design remains misunderstood in many parts of corporate America. David Butler, vice president of global design at Coca-Cola, has managed to get traction within the organization only because he's scrubbed his vocabulary of the word design, talking instead about how his team can "make stuff better."

In the U.S., there is no official support for design, no high-priority government programs or national design initiative. Bill Moggridge, head of the Cooper-Hewitt, the country's national design museum, is trying to remedy that-he's British, fittingly enoughbut he faces considerable obstacles (see page 94). There is an alphabet soup of individual design organizations in America (IDSA for industrial designers, AIGA for graphics folks, DMI for design managers,

WILL THE EXAMPLE **OF APPLE HAVE A** LASTING IMPACT ON AMERICA'S OFTEN SKEPTICAL BUSINESS LEADERS?

AMERICAN DESIGN ISN'T PERFECT. SOME OF THE COUNTRY'S MOST CLASSIC DESIGNS SHARE A SENSIBILITY WITH ITS MOST GRIEVOUS OFFENSES.



Levi's rugged jeans are still a staple—which is no excuse for parents buying denim-printed diapers.



The Hoberman Sphere wows you instantly, while the world-famous Slinky rarely works as advertised.



The Eames Lounge Chair and the Barcalounger are icons of comfort: one immortal, one hideous.



The Seattle Public Library: hyperfunctional logic, Seattle's Experience Music Project: barely functional expressiveness.



The Dodge Challenger is a throwback design done right; the Chrysler PT Cruiser is a parody.



Herman Miller's proto cubicles fomented creativityand then a sea of cubicles fomented white-collar malaise.







Burt Rutan developed SpaceShipOne for a few million dollars; the multibillion-dollar Bell-Boeing V-22 Osprey exemplifies military bloat.



Even Scrabble geniuses can't unscramble the letters in today's CAPTCHAS.

Carbon fiber is key to both the Flex-Foot Cheetah, a prosthetic that allows paraplegics to run, and the absurd Oakley C Six sunglasses, which cost \$1,500.

The Gem paper clip was a miracle of industrial efficiency. Microsoft's Clippy made every day less efficient for Windows users.













The iPad begat Flipboard's genius interface . . . and the flipdown desk chest.

Nike's Air Max 90 made high tech fashionable. Skechers Shape-Ups use "high tech" to tout a weight-loss fantasy.

The computer mouse made office work intuitive: endless office work made us fat, which led

to the dreaded treadmill desk.

The IBM Selectric hid high tech in a sleek case; the modern printer cartridge hides high user costs.



For drapey, iconic comfort, there's the DVF wrap dress; for drapey, iconic disaster, you can't touch this pair of MC Hammer pants.



The Golden Gate Bridge will stand forever. Its neighbor, the Bay Bridge, collapsed.



Harley-Davidson's 1957 Sportster influenced every Chopper after it; its Buell line was an evemelting sideshow.





The iPod's gestural genius made music libraries easy; Segway's gestural genius made easy commutes embarrassing.



Leatherman put all your tools in one neat package; the Rambo knife couldn't keep its few pieces intact.



The bendable drinking straw once represented plastic-age ingenuity; now it enables the bottomless Big Gulp.



NASA's old logo summoned astral ambitions: its new "meatball" logo summons tangled bureaucracy.



Not since Warhol has anyone walked the high-low line with the grace and god-awfulness of Gaga.



and many more). Each strives to make the case for design, but they do so in their own silos. The result is weakened influence.

Around the globe, however, countries are investing in design and integrating it into their business climate. The Chinese have expanded their base of design schools from 20 to 1,000 over the past decade; it now has more than 1 million students in the system. South Korea is similarly motivated, and Singapore is placing big national bets on design.

The U.K.'s Design Council promises to "place design at the heart of growth and renewal in Britain" and has launched the Design for Growth Fund. In Spain, the DDI, the state agency for the development of design and innovation, promotes the role the former can play in boosting competitiveness. In the Netherlands, Premsela, jointly funded by the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science and the City of Amsterdam, works to support and advise people in the design industry. Some nations even partner with one another: In April 2010, the India Design Council joined with the Japan Industrial Design Promotion Organization to develop related skills in both countries.

In typical American fashion, the antidote to a vacuum of governmental support has been the recent creation of an unofficial, bottom-up, democratic ecosystem. Scott Wilson tapped into that ecosystem via Kickstarter, and there are many other strains-from crafts seller Etsy to social productdevelopment company Quirky to fast-expanding online design communities such as Behance, Dribbble, Ffffound, Forrst, Sypply, and others. These sites give designers venues to share and vet their creations, to reach out to prospective employers, and to launch businesses without suffering through the complexity and obstacles of traditional capital raising or infrastructure building. A burgeoning national student organization called Design for

THE CHINESE HAVE EXPANDED **IEIR BASE OF** DESIGN SCHOOLS FROM 20 TO 1,000



VENTURE CAPITALISTS ARE READY TO CHURN **OUT DESIGN** STARTUPS.

If Silicon Valley is like a sprawling mafia family in khakis, then designers are like the half-Irish foot soldiersnever quite accepted, no matter how invaluable. Even though designers have defined countless Valley companies from Apple to Twitter, the archetype of success is Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg on a coding bender. As designer and entrepreneur

Enrique Allen puts it: "Designers don't control the narrative. We're always just asked to put lipstick on a pig."

Allen aims to fix that with the Designer Fund, born of the 500 Startups seed fund. which invests in nascent business ideas. But unlike 500 Startups, the Designer Fund is a not-for-profit: Rather than invest, it focuses on matchmaking. Allen vets fund applicants, then introduces those selected to a network of mentors and angels, such as John Zeratsky, a former YouTube designer, and Ben Blumenfeld, design lead at Facebook. Mentors then help guide designers toward setting up their businesses.

The fund was inspired by Allen's own frustrations as a designer for startups that Facebook and Venrock had invested in. For dozens of them. he tried to impart lessons in design thinking, from deep field research to building prototypes. It seldom took hold. Then it hit him—during a meditation session—that for

designers to get their due, they'd have to head their own companies.

"It's really a cultural paradigm," says Allen. "Investors saw big hits like Google and Facebook created by engineers and wanted more just like them. Engineers are great at scratching their own itches and building what they think is cool. But if you're trying to create a breakthrough, you need a broader vision."

The Designer Fund has already spawned two startups: CulturekitchenSF.com connects immigrants with foodies looking to learn home-cooking secrets, and the platform Storytree.me allows families to archive and share life stories. Explains Allen: "In order for designers to prove that their methods lead to innovation, the businesses we start have to have meaningful impact on people's lives. We have to create more than Apple accessories." -CLIFF KUANG



America, started at Northwestern by Yuri Malina, Mert Iseri, Hannah Chung, and Liz Gerber, is bringing design-process thinking to students at nine universities across the country, who typically might imagine that design encompasses furniture, fashion, and little more (see page 82). There's even interest in Silicon Valley, where venture capitalists have created a not-for-profit called the Designer Fund (see page 86) to train and capitalize designers.

Will all that unofficial activity keep America's design momentum alive? Will the example of Appleand the ingenuity of designers like Wilson-have a lasting impact on America's often skeptical business leaders? Apple has thrived because of its relentless focus on ease of use, its appealing user interfaces, and its ability to tie all its products together in a seamless system. But such discipline is easier to read about than to implement, and executives looking to design for a quick fix-or a way out of the nation's current economic doldrums-will be disappointed. Design's strategic value is not just in improving product offerings but in rethinking the entire way businesses operate.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for American design is that design itself is a concept both murky and diffuse, two adjectives that don't coexist easily with American enthusiasm and impatience. It encompasses a range of specialties, from information architecture to experience design. It is also broad-minded and broad-based-spanning art, fashion, architecture, and graphics. It requires a certain fluidity and tolerance for change that can be hard to manage, especially in a corporate context. For maximum effectiveness, it needs to be part of a bigger system. Even then, it's maddeningly hard to measure.

But if design really is such a fluid, elusive, and undefinable brew, that makes it just right for the United States. After a stodgy, if powerful, era defined by the ascendancy of the Fortune 500, American business was revitalized by the energy and openness of Silicon Valley. Today's American design is characterized by all the good qualities of that resurgence. This is why so many of the world's most talented-and innovative-designers tend to gravitate to the U.S.: It is the place where they can ply their trade in all its many variations. And that is cause for celebration, a ray of light in today's troubled economy. @

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OTHER CULTURES HAVE MOCKED AMERICAN DESIGN, BUT THEY'RE NOT INNOCENT.

The world laughs at American design? Well, "ha" back at 'em. Designers often see chairs as a signature avenue for expression. which make these seats the perfect global stereotypes. Take a guess which culture made what. Hints abound and answers are below. -C.K.



The island still can't forget its heady days of empire and plunder.

2. The Netherlands

In high-concept bizarro-land, there's almost a fetish for all things "natural."

3. France

Designs are often so conceptual that they're unrecognizable. Ce n'est pas une chair.

4. Germany

A love of rationality and right angles never dies, even at comfort's expense.

5. Italy

Silvio Berlusconi's country has, shall we say, some issues with objectifying females.

ITALY: D (NEMO CHAIR, BY FABIO NOVEMBRE) CERMANY: B (LANDEN PUBLIC SEATING, BY KONSTANTIN GRCIC) FRANCE: E (WW STOOL, BY PHILIPPE STARCK) THE NETHERLANDS: ▲ (TREE-TRUNK BENCH, BY JURGEN BEY) ENCLAND: C (SOFT HERCULES, BY FAT)

