

Anarchism & Design

American anarchism isn't about bombs and leather jackets. If you're an independent designer, you might be an anarchist.

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The idea of pairing anarchism and design work seems – on its face – to be a ridiculous marriage. After all, design is about creating things from scratch, and anarchism is about burning everything down, right?

Well, no. Anarchism – particularly the American flavor of it – is woefully simplified and misunderstood by people on both the left and the right of the political spectrum. The truth is that most of the furniture designers and graphic designers I've worked with in my career possess strong anarchistic tendencies. They just don't know what to call their urges and beliefs.

I've been an aesthetic anarchist for more than 25 years, after first encountering the concept in graduate school (thanks Noam Chomsky), then observing one of my cousins, Jessamyn West, an anarchist librarian. There's a chance you might be one, too. And while I'm certain that you probably should be working on something far more pressing and billable for work at McCorp, reading this short article isn't going to hurt anything....

The Briefest Description Ever of American Anarchism

America's individualist anarchism is not about the violent overthrow of the government and its institutions. Period. Full stop. Instead, it is a tendency to eschew the enormous organizations – churches, states and corporations – that we have created during the last 250 years.

Why do this? While working with others is generally a good thing, there is some threshold upon which an organization becomes so large that it is capable of inhumane behavior – war, slavery, environmental destruction, mass extinctions or even just failing to treat its employees and contractors fairly. These are things that individuals are (mostly) incapable of accomplishing.

Anarchists like myself avoid working with these massive and dehumanizing institutions. I don't want to burn them down, but I also don't want to prop them up by shopping in their stores, praying in their cathedrals or voting in their elections.

That doesn't mean I'm opposed to making money, that I'm an atheist or that I'm uninvolved in my community. I just decline to work, pray and serve others via these institutions. Working with them gives them power, while working with the family architectural firm a few blocks away helps your neighbors in every way imaginable.

What in the heck does this worldview have to do with design? For me, quite a lot.

Design for the Long Haul

You might think me cynical, but I contend that most manufacturers design and build their products with a fairly short-term view. The products are intended to have a lifespan of hours, weeks, months or years at best. I've spent my career in the business of books, tools and furniture, and I have watched their lifespans shrink dramatically. Books are bound so their pages fall out after two readings. Electric motor manufacturers use fewer copper windings. The triggers and switches of drills and routers are barely sealed against dust. Bearings are replaced with inexpensive bushings. Furniture makers use dowels or flimsy metal fasteners that fail in years instead of decades (or centuries). The finishes are irreparable. And their raw materials fall apart when exposed to even a little moisture. I could fill this page with a list of the sins I've seen.

As a designer of books, tools and furniture, I have zero desire to make things that are intended from the get-go to fall apart.

I started my career inside big corporations, and I tried to make quality things. I mostly failed. Most corporations are consumed with cutting costs, keeping the quality just good enough to compete and – most of all – making a certain profit every financial quarter. Convincing a corporation to take a 10- or 20-year view of a product and its profit is a fool's game.

I concluded that the only way to design and build things that last was to leave corporate America, start my own company (which eventually became three businesses) and run things like an aesthetic anarchist might. It's not the path to make a lot of money. (Tip: If you want to make money, go to work in the business of managing other people's money.) But it is one possible way to both design good things and continue to eat.

Here's how a snapshot of how an anarchist design/build firm works.

Turn Your Back on Big

During Thanksgiving a few years ago, one of my in-laws commented: "Wouldn't it be exciting if some day your books and furniture were sold on Amazon?"

I took a deep swig of the box wine in front of me and said: "The day we start selling on Amazon is the day we start going out of business."

When you work with big corporations, especially as a small independent company, the rules are rigged. Big companies always win; small fish always lose. The only way to compete is to sidestep the scuffle. The companies I strive to work for are family-run businesses where the owner and I are on a first-name basis.

If I ever have a problem, I know who to call. And so do they.

Likewise, my suppliers are small independent operators like me. When I need to subcontract design work, I hire individuals – usually underemployed stay-at-home moms and dads. We bank at the smallest bank in town. Our accountant is a fellow woodworker with his own practice. Our lumber comes mostly from family-run mills. I know the names of my machinist's sons. Even my woodworking glue is made by a friend who mixes up the goo in his workshop's bathroom.

It's more work to find these people. Their work might be more expensive. But on the plus side I've never had a supplier or a subcontractor throw a monkey wrench into my business. That's because we all need each other and we all know each other. It's personal.

The Radical Stuff

All that above is just good business sense when it comes to running an independent operation. But it is also a foundation that allows me to be both radical and creative.

Here is the radical stuff: When you design and make things that last, they don't need to be replaced. That disrupts the overheated consumerism of our late capitalistic society. When the chairs that a customer has to replace every five years suddenly last 200 years, IKEA is not happy. But your customers will be thrilled.

When you are free from a corporate structure, you are free to choose better materials and insist on better workmanship. That's satisfying as a designer.

When you work with small suppliers and retailers only, everyone can make more money. Example: My first book was published (by the corporation for whom I worked at the time) in 2007. The retail price was \$34.95. The wholesale price was \$17. Amazon sold it for \$18 and change.

What happens when you take Amazon and other discounters out of the equation? Easy. You get to set the price instead of Amazon. So the publisher makes \$17 and the retailer makes \$17. This is enough money for the publisher to continue to make good books and for the retailer to continue to stock it and sell it.

The immediate criticism of this model is that no one will be able to buy your product if it's not on Amazon. That's crap. If you make good things and can tell the world about them (thanks, internet!), people will find you in time. You just have to be happy with fewer sales, a slow growth curve and (eventually) higher profit margins.

Like I said, this isn't about amassing wealth. It's about finding a way to do good work and to make customers happy because they own a book (or chair or hammer) that will last them the rest of their lives. The side benefit to this approach is there are fewer crappy books, chairs and hammers in the landfill.

This business model also nudges you into other radical territory.

If you want to survive as a tiny business that has a slow growth curve, I think you should eschew all debt. This keeps the banks out of your business. And it prevents you from having to meet a monthly sales goal to pay the interest on a loan. To some of you this might seem ridiculous. How will you buy the equipment necessary to launch your business?

You don't. Start your business with crappy equipment that you can scrounge. Subcontract what you can't do and take a lower profit as a result. Save your money to someday buy better equipment.

It's a tedious way to build a business. But if you can operate without debt, it's almost impossible to be put out of business. If you don't have a loan (or rent) on your facility, and you don't have a loan to cover operating costs, then you just have to find a way to keep the lights on and pay your suppliers.

Zero Employment; Complete Creativity

I know I'm making this sound like a paradise. If you haven't shut your laptop yet, let me suggest one more step you can take as an independent designer: Don't hire any employees.

I make enough money to have several employees, but I don't. Once you start hiring people, you have to give up some of your creative work in order to manage people. You have to build an institution with rules. And if you do a really excellent job, you'll grow to be quite big and become a corporation that's big enough to really muck with people's lives.

You'll become the thing – a big corporation – that you ran away from in the first place.

Avoiding employees ensures your business will stay stunted and small. But it also ensures that you will always be on the front lines, designing and making things. As you grow, you can subcontract out all the stuff you dislike (accounting, shipping, package design, whatever) and stay focused on what you like to do – and what you do best.

I won't lie to you, it's a difficult path to walk, especially at first. But despite the fact that corporations continue to consolidate their power and grow, there are still lots of oddball individuals out there who want what you want – to do good work and avoid the bullcrap. You will find one another.

Some Other Truths

It's almost impossible to avoid big corporations, big governments and churches. I haven't found anyone locally who can build me a car or a computer from scratch. Sometimes I have to hold my nose and click the "Buy" button at Amazon. But like I said before, anarchism is a tendency – not a set of philosophical beliefs with rules and a clubhouse (the Anarchist's Club is a funny idea, however).

If there are enough of us who decline at nearly every turn to play ball with big companies, churches and governments, the world will change. At the least, there will be other anarchists out there with whom you can do business. At most, the world might start preferring "craft cheese" over Kraft cheese in a big way.

But not too big.

Want to Read More on Anarchism?

- The book "Native American Anarchism" is a solid introduction to the many flavors of anarchism in North America.
- Read about the father of American anarchism, Josiah Warren, his innovative "time store" and his book, "Equitable Commerce."
- For the spiritual foundations of American anarchism, read about Anne Hutchinson and her clashes with Puritanism.
- I've written two books that weave anarchist ideas into my furniture making: "The Anarchist's Tool Chest" and "The Anarchist's Design Book."

Bio

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