

Can design change the world?

By **Manav Tanneeru**, CNN

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Author: Design is "a way of looking at the world with an eye toward changing it"
- Technology is helping create a class of "citizen designers," he says
- Design holds the potential to address global issues, he says

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(CNN) -- The title of Warren Berger's recently published book -- "Glimmer: How Design Can Transform Your Life and Maybe Even the World" -- is ambitious.

The typical understanding of what "design" means to many of us is the way something looks or feels: the look of an iPod or a movie poster, furniture or everyday appliances, for example. But, what if it was, as Berger says, "a way of looking at the world with an eye toward changing it?"

"The premise of this book is that design is applicable to just about any challenge," Berger writes. "And its principles are accessible to anyone."

New and improved technology -- which is also cheaper -- and increased connectivity are creating a class of "citizen designers," who are looking to find solutions to old problems, Berger says.

"The democratization of design that began a quarter century ago with the introduction of Apple's Macintosh computer has moved to a whole new level in the era of interactive, social network media," he writes.

CNN recently spoke to [Berger](#) about design, technology and Bruce Mau, a designer he collaborated with to write the book.

Below are excerpts from the interview. They have been edited for length and clarity.

CNN: How can design change the world?

Berger: When people talk about design changing the world, it tends to sound a little grand and ridiculous, because they think of design as, in one fell swoop, changing the world and solving our problems. What design actually can do, it can solve problems on a case-by-case basis around the world. As it does that, it changes the world, because it changes the reality for people wherever the situation is happening.

If design can change water delivery in a certain part of the world, then it changes that part of the world for those people. That's the way design changes the world.

CNN: When we speak of design, we usually think of the look of a book jacket or a Web site, or we think of architecture. What do you think of when someone says design?

Berger: It's a word that has about a million different definitions. What I use in my book -- the working model in my head -- is that I think of it as creative problem solving. Basically, design tries to take on a challenge or a need and figure out how to solve it.

It usually does so through creative processes that involve really studying people to figure out what's lacking in their lives, what's needed and going through a lot of brainstorming to come up with lots of ideas. And then going through a process of prototyping or testing those ideas out to see if they actually work. That's kind of my model of design, and it doesn't apply to every kind of design.

There's an artistic kind of design that's really a bit more different, that's more self-expression. But when you talk the kind of design I'm talking about in the book, it's more just any of creative problem-solving.

CNN: With that definition, does the problem solving necessarily have to come from what we conceive of as professional designers, or can it be just anybody?

Berger: When you enlarge the definition of design, it's no longer limited to professional designers. In fact, designers now who are taking on big problems are doing so -- if you look at the big design firms like Smart Design or Bruce Mau Design -- what they are doing is a very multidisciplinary approach to solving problems. They're using designers, they're using engineers -- a lot of the time, it's a very multifaceted problem, and you need a lot of different people in creating the solution. That's one of the big trends in design now.

Everybody's a designer now, in a way. People now have more opportunities to design on their own than they ever did before. They have more tools to do it. They have a little more understanding how to creatively solve problems and express themselves than they did ever before. There's a bit of a democratization of design going on now.

CNN: Those tools you just spoke about, is it simply computer hardware and software?

Berger: It's information that's the big change. If people are creatively trying to solve problems or take on challenges, the most important thing they need is information. And what's happened in the information age and in the age of social networking is just an explosion of information. You can get the information you need so much easier now than before, and for a designer, this is incredibly important. You can find out what's been done already; you can find out what has been tried; you can get some technical information you might need.

Before, that might have been a pretty heavy research undertaking. You might have to go out and spend a lot of hours tracking down the answers to that question. Now, you can probably do it in a matter of minutes.

Another big thing is that people can collaborate more. It's now easier because of social networking. It's easier to find other people to help you solve a problem. A lot of times, a problem can't be solved by one person. It involves teamwork; it involves people working together. Now, through social networking, you can find other people who are also trying to solve the same problem that you're trying to solve.

CNN: Information is just about everywhere, it seems. How does data visualization fit into the premise of your book?

Berger: Making things clear to people is such an important part of design. And data visualization is really an important part of that, as is any kind of visual design. Really, I think what design is trying to do is to show you something so that you understand it. If it's trying to educate you on a problem, it needs to show you the problem in a way that is compelling and that makes it very clear to you.

CNN: The striking thing about data visualization is that it seems, almost, a new way of looking at the world around us.

Berger: It's all about making sense of what would ordinarily be overwhelming to us. There's so much going on around us. There's so much information that you need to have certain things arranged and highlighted so that you know what to focus on.

The people who study this, who study visualization and the way the mind absorbs information, what they say is that the brain is always looking to figure out what's important, what should I be focusing on. And it sometimes has trouble. Your eye kind of goes all over the place, and it doesn't know where to look or where to stop and focus.

What designers do is that they try to get you to focus where you're supposed to focus. Now, of course, they could also do that in a bad way.

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Telling people is one thing, but we absorb information visually much differently than we absorb words that are spoken to us or words that we read. The power of the visual is much stronger.

If you can show people a problem, it's much more compelling than just telling them about a problem. I don't know why that is, but it's true.

CNN: Why this book, and why Bruce Mau?

Berger: It just felt to me that something big was going on in design, and a lot of people were not aware of it. That design is now being seen by Bruce and a lot of other people as this phenomenon that can help us to solve some of the problems around us. It's a way of thinking and a way of approaching problems. It's an attitude as well as a methodology, where you go through certain steps.

This is a way of thinking and a process that we could apply to all kinds of problems that we don't think of as having anything to do with design: social problems, life problems. The premise behind the book was to capture this new way of thinking of design as something much, much more than style and aesthetics.

CNN: It's more utilitarian than aesthetics.

Berger: Again, there are both kinds of design. I'm not denying one or the other. All I'm saying is that people are usually thinking of the other kind and they don't think of the problem solving kind as much. So, I wanted to highlight the problem-solving kind and also to show that there's a new movement going on, a new way of thinking about "we can use design in all kinds of ways that we might not have thought of."

The reason for Bruce is that he's been out front on this. He was one of the people to really articulate this idea three or four years ago when he launched his show "Massive Change."

In that exhibit, he was basically saying design is not about aesthetics; it's not about beauty. It's about problem solving. And we have a lot of problems in the world, and the way we're going to deal with those problems is by designing solutions. In the show, he was showing examples of how people were trying to use design to solve and take on different issues around the world. He was showing you how design can be applied to

these big, complex problems around the world having to do with education, transportation and all those sorts of things.

CNN: Why is he considered divisive by some people?

Berger: He's divisive because this idea that design is a big world-changing tool is a divisive idea. It's divisive within the design community because I think people are afraid that it's overstating the power of design. And everyone has their own definition of design, and some people -- if they are graphic designers, design is just graphic design -- and they want to preserve that identity.

There's concern that he's saying that design can save the world or change the world, and that makes people uncomfortable when you say that. That's a phrase that is divisive. It immediately gets associated with hype. It gets associated with being a Pollyanna and that the solutions are so easy. Everything is going to get better overnight, or if only we create prettier pictures of things, it'll solve all our problems. It conjures up all sorts of things.


CNN: Simply, even if you display all the crime statistics of a city on a map, it's not going to solve the problem of crime.

Berger: It's like anything else. We're not going to deal with the problems of the world in these grand, sweeping ways that solve things in one shot. Everything is about little steps. When you talk about design changing the world, you're talking about whether it can be used to take on individual problems on a localized basis, on a case-by-case situation. And maybe eventually, you get to something larger.

But, it's not going to have any great sweeping solutions to hunger overnight. I think that's the danger when, sometimes, when people talk about design changing the world. It gets people's back up because it sounds like these great, grand pronouncements are being made, and there's nothing to back them up.

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