



DESIGN CAN SAVE THE WORLD

Yves Béhar has Convinced Us

As a child, Yves Béhar dreamed of becoming a writer. Inspired by the battle scenes covering the Turkish carpets in his parents' home and the French bestseller *Papillon* he devoured in his youth, Béhar's wild imagination took on a life of its own. He concocted crazy stories that detailed his own "escapes" from prison and imagined the lives of the survivors of the 1972 Andes plane crash that took place when Béhar was just five.

These stories of survival and risk had a level of adventure that was in stark contrast to Béhar's childhood in Switzerland. His dual cultural upbringing by his Turkish father and German mother infused him, on the one hand, with the Swiss need for consistency, a strong work ethic, and attention to detail, and on the other hand, the poetry, warmth, and storytelling culture of Turkey.

Just by looking at the designs that Béhar and his team create at his San Francisco design firm, fuseproject, you can see imagination and Turko-German synergy at work. The Mission One motorcycle aims to visualize what it means to "ride the wind," while the Vue watch Béhar created for Issey Miyake is a whimsical piece that only allows the user to see the current hour, as the last hour (and the next) fade in and out of view. Just as the motorcycle is a metaphor for ultimate liberty, the watch is a statement on the meaning of time and the dislocation of past and future.

The world is a better place because Béhar renounced a decision to take the safe path, preferring the one that catapulted him around the world. If he hadn't taken the leap of faith to pursue design and ended up at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, what is known to the world as the \$100 laptop might not exist today. The

(cont. on p. 52)

Page 48: Cool meets eco-fuel in a new generation of bikes. The Mission One motorcycle boasts a lightweight aluminum structure covered by honeycombed-detailed angular skins. A battery pack (no gas-tank, no tail pipe) integrates all mechanical elements. End product? Sharp lines, highly detailed surfaces and high performance transportation.

- 1 Yves Béhar
- 2 In Amplify, fuseproject's fourth collaboration Swarovski debuting at Salone del Mobile, they explored maximum effect with minimum materials and energy. Taking a single crystal, one low energy LED light, plus a faceted paper shade designed in six different shapes, each was carefully crafted to maximize refractions on the inner surfaces. The results were multiple, beautiful reflections and rainbow color bursts, wherein each chandelier becomes its own large glowing crystal.
- 3 In today's world, information is power. But for a majority of the people on our planet, gaining access to information remains difficult, especially in the developing world. The nonprofit One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) conceived of a low-cost laptop to lower the barriers that impede access to education, giving birth to the \$100 dollar laptop. Design followed swiftly in a drop proof, splash proof, and dust proof computer the size of a textbook and lighter than a lunchbox. The body is made of injection-molded plastic and is built with a minimum of toxic materials. Cheap and oh-so-cool.
- 4 Béhar created PUMA's new shoebox, which is scheduled to roll out in 2011, to reduce the company's carbon footprint while sustaining their visual branding. The end result was not a shoebox per se, but rather a shoebag that is made of heat-stitched recyclable polyester, uses 65 percent less cardboard than the standard shoe box, has no laminated printing, no tissue paper, takes up less space, weighs less for shipping, and replaces the plastic retail bag. Clearly, the "clever little" epithet that Behar uses to describe the product is fitting.
- 5 PUMA's new shoebox
- 6 Swarovski LED light packaging
- 7 The XO laptop



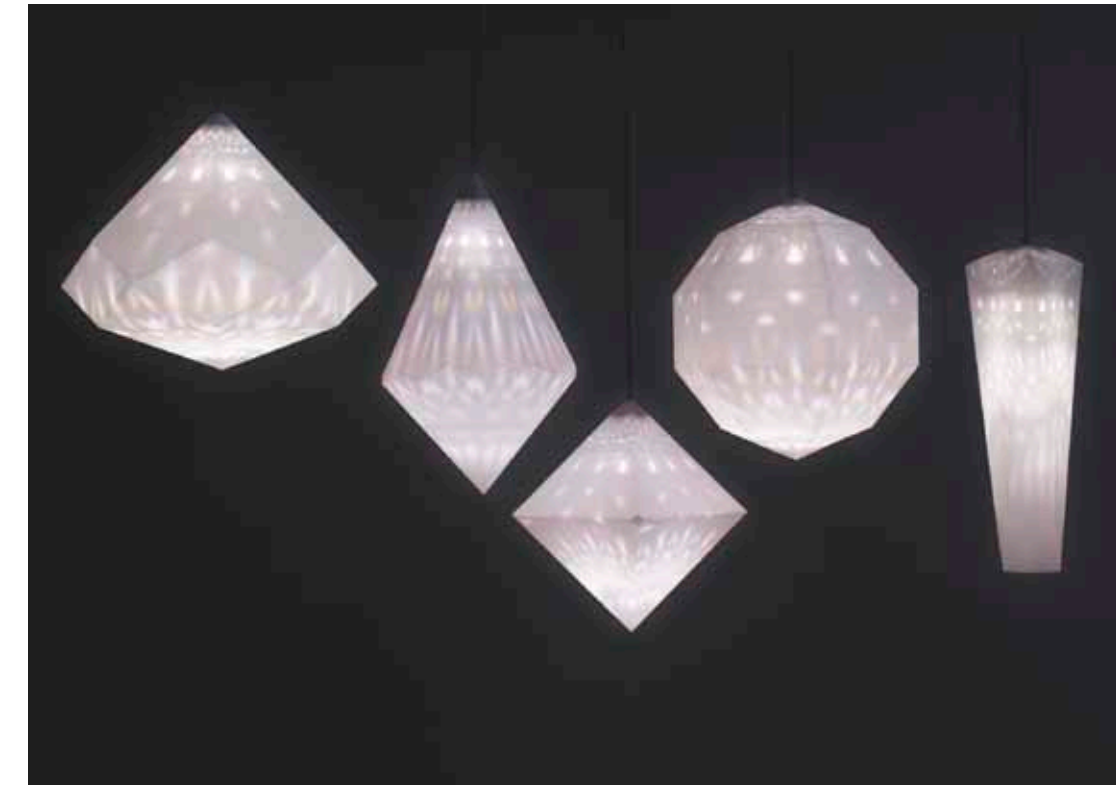
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idea was the brainchild of MIT Professor Nicholas Negroponte, who, after traveling to a Cambodian village in 2002 and watching children play with laptops, thought: “What potential would be unleashed if every child in the world had access to a computer?” This thought led to the One Laptop per Child initiative and the creation of the XO laptop, designed by Béhar. Many critics said that not only was a \$100 laptop an impossible dream, but also questioned the priority of computers when many children didn’t have food or clean water. Design Continuum, the firm initially brought on to create the laptop, hit a wall. Then, in 2005, fuseproject came in and labored for two years to create what is today considered a resounding success. More than one million laptops have been distributed to children around the world, and a new, all-plastic tablet screen design, which is semi-flexible and extremely durable, is expected to be released this year. This third generation model transforms from horizontal book mode to portrait mode, and includes the added element of multi-touch so that multiple children can use the same laptop at once.

Uruguay may have earned the prize for the most comprehensive rollout of the One Laptop per Child initiative in the world. The country’s Plan Ceibal is an education reform initiative with the goal of providing one computer for every student and teacher. Now that this goal has been accomplished at the primary school level, high schools are next in line to receive the computers. Uruguay’s example proves that a low-cost, high-quality laptop for every child is indeed possible.

Béhar believes that for technology to take hold in society, children need to lead the way. “Adults have a hard time adapting to anything new,” said Béhar in a recent phone conversation with *The Global Journal*. “The reason why we are able to get kids a laptop that goes beyond the conventions of the technology products we use today is because kids have an unadulterated, open mind. Technology has taught adults all these bad habits and complicated ways. When you can remove the layers of complexity and can bring in elements of customization and uniqueness that allow kids to take part in its creation, kids become the greatest adopters of new ideas.”

His most recent effort at fusing education and design is evident in See Better to Learn Better, a free eyeglasses program conceived in partnership with the Mexican government. The goal of this program is to give away 300,000 glasses every year, ensuring that the 11 percent of kids in Mexico who can’t learn because they can’t see, and who are stigmatized because they wear glasses, are given a real chance at education. The frames of the glasses are made from an almost unbreakable plastic and the two-part design of the frames allows kids to choose their favorite colors and shapes.

“It really changes their world when children see you created something specifically for them and you thought about how it will fit into their lives functionally, emotionally, and aesthetically,” Béhar said. “Good design treats people well from an ergonomics standpoint, a usage standpoint, an environmental standpoint, and a health standpoint.”

One of Béhar’s greatest gifts is his ability to marry the world of luxury and privilege with that of low-cost design. He has traveled to countries with a culture of hand-me-downs and no technology community to speak of in order to prove that high value can be delivered at any cost. While he has partnered with companies like high-end Bluetooth creator Aliph to create the best-selling Jawbone headset, and the venerable hippy-crunchy footwear company Birkenstock, it is his collaborations like those with Negroponte and the Mexican government that have proven Béhar’s mantra: design should be both sustainable and attainable.

How does Béhar implement his high-value design at low cost to communities? He starts by gathering the fuseproject team together for a giant ideas session. Everybody from the interns to the designers, with their diverse backgrounds and experiences, gather around a table and brainstorm. They are not there so much to think about the execution, but rather about the content: “What is the vision? How is this truly going to be game changing—from the business plan all the way through the graphics and design?” This is what Béhar calls “360 design,” where every element is taken into consideration, from the materials to the packaging to the out-of-box experience, a through-line all the way to the branding and naming of the product in question.

“We like to carry something through from beginning to end,” he explains. “We spend a lot of time at manufacturing sites and looking at small details because, at the end of the day, every single element of detail will be part of the user’s experience.”

Béhar doesn’t believe in three-month or six-month projects. Instead, fuseproject partners with clients for the long-term in what they call “design ventures,” where they become part of their client’s team and share in everything from the idea generation to the eventual profits.

But what Béhar is most proud of is how his designs inspire others to rethink the way they give aid, provide health services, and create value. The Mexican government’s See Better to Learn Better initiative came about as a result of the success of One Laptop per Child. One of Béhar’s more recent projects, the New York City condom campaign, for which he created a condom and dispenser, is making a similarly radical difference, increasing the number of condoms the city distributes to 39 million, up from 9 million.

“We have proven design creates tremendous value for for-profit companies and now we are also demonstrating that high design creates similar value for non-profits,” he said. “My core belief is that in order to convince a company or organization to go through the massive changes in infrastructure, manufacturing, and logistics to get to a sustainable way of living, you have to bring them solutions that are both game-changing and world-changing.”

When PUMA, for example, changed its shoebox, it took more than just delivering a sleek design. Béhar had to prove that he could marry good design with a sustainable box that uses far less materials and consumes less energy. Béhar did similar work in his fourth partnership to date with Swarovski. With the goal of merging sustainability with attainability, Béhar and Swarovski created Amplify, a large-scale lighting sculpture that debuted at Salone del Mobile in Milan this year. Amplify is sustainable because of its reduced energy draw; it is attainable because of its simple construction and accessible light source. Unlike most traditional chandeliers using numerous lights and crystals, Amplify uses one crystal, one low-energy LED light, and one faceted paper shade to create rainbow reflections. Designed in six different shapes, each chandelier becomes its own pulsing, glowing crystal.

Béhar is currently extending the scope of his work to include the world of motor vehicles. Unveiled at TED 2009, the Mission One is an all-electric motorcycle with an aluminum structure, highly detailed surfaces, and an ultra-fast ride. With a top speed of 150 miles per hour and an estimated range of 150 miles, the Mission One leaves gasoline bikes in the dust while outperforming any other electric motorcycle on the market. “This project was a dream come true: a statement about how design can make performance and sustainability come together without compromise,” said Béhar.

Right now, Béhar is hard at work on curating an exhibit at San Francisco’s Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, entitled TechnoCRAFT, which will run from July 10 through October 3, 2010 and will examine how the worlds of consumers and designers are merging.

With all of these projects, one thing is clear: from Béhar’s perspective it’s not just that the world of design is changing, but that the very role of the designer is also transforming dramatically from being the creator of a product to being the creator of a bold new vision of the world.

Béhar is on the cutting edge of this transformation. He knows how to create stories just like he did when he was a boy crawling around on his parents’ Turkish carpets. Only now his storytelling funnels into designs that tell us something about the world we live in today: “For me the story arc of our world is really about how we can create new bridges between the notion that design is about beauty and the notion that design should change the world.”

Béhar’s next stop involves rethinking the car industry. In February he showed a “hackable” car created for the developing world at the Greener Gadgets conference in New York. The car is completely customizable and can be powered and configured in multiple ways. The idea, he said at the conference, is to make low-end products desirable to high-end consumers instead of the other way around.

In his keynote, Behar pointed out the problem with green design: it is often “unsexy.” For Behar, design devoid of

aesthetics is useless. His personal motto: “It’s not beautiful if it’s not ethical; and if it’s not beautiful it probably shouldn’t exist.”

His new solar-powered, “hackable” car sure is sexy. It has an electric base, a flexible design for multiple uses, and interchangeable parts such as a symmetrical back and front. Although it has a standard frame as its base, it’s completely customizable for the user—it can be modified into a car, pickup truck, ambulance, van, or taxi. It has electrically-driven wheels that can be used on dirt roads and in areas without power (since it accepts power from various sources, including batteries, a charger, a small internal combustion engine, a hybrid system, or solar panels.) It’s James Bond meets Mad Max, function redefining form, the future prophesied—VCs take note!

Béhar feels prescient that like the XO laptop, his electronic vehicle will hit the world market and have consumers in the developed world lusting after it. Selling to consumers across the first world/third world divide is how designers are going to remain cutting edge.

“It’s rare that we get to a place where an industry is behind what people want,” Béhar explained. “But in this case the car industry is far behind what consumers desire.”

With his mantra—design brings stories to life—Béhar is taking design out of its glass box, shedding its image of exclusivity, and helping it better everyone’s lives. While changing the world may seem like a tough job, Béhar says he wouldn’t take on the massive challenges of these projects unless there was an element of fun. “They’re all tremendously fun and tremendously hard to do. If it wasn’t fun to create solutions that we know people would universally enjoy, we wouldn’t do it.”

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