Designing the Future

Inspired by
the Academic Plan,
the proposed Center for
Design Innovation applies
interdisciplinary collaboration
to the task of preparing
tomorrow's designers

By Patrick Farrell

Design was once regarded as mere decoration, if regarded at all. It was style tacked onto substance: chrome bumpers and tailfins dressing up a '50s Caddy. Today, a fundamental shift in the focus of design is under way. Experts recognize it as integral to function, with an expectation of style, elegance, and fit that touches not just tangible, diverse products, but also services, living environments, and even life experiences. Design encompasses everything from high fashion, disposable furniture, and telephones to vacation cruises, web sites, and theme parks. "As designers, our masters used to be the manufacturers," says College of Visual and Performing Arts (VPA) professor William Padgett, chair of the Department of Visual Communication. "Now, we answer to the end-users and their needs."

Gianfranco Zaccai '70, founder and CEO of Boston-based Design Continuum—one of the world's leading design firms—says people in other fields are beginning to see design as an interdisciplinary process necessary for success. "It's a way of approaching problems and understanding human desires and aspirations," says Zaccai, a VPA industrial design graduate. "Design is a valuable asset that can be leveraged in other fields. Over the past 10 years, we and a number of other companies have been involved in what is called 'design research and strategy'—an interdisciplinary function that looks qualitatively at related societal, economic, and technological issues. We use this approach to reconcile needs that people have a difficult time articulating."

Zaccai notes that this interdisciplinary approach extends beyond the traditional design disciplines to such work as creating corporate strategy and government policy. "Although not recognized as such, these disciplines really are about design," he says. He believes that exposing other disciplines to the processes of design often creates a fertile common ground where people with different backgrounds find solutions using a variety of means. This has also created a growing demand for people who not only pull form and function together in imaginative ways to meet end-users' needs, but who can also collaborate with those in disciplines traditionally outside the design realm. As School of Information Studies professor Abby Goodrum points out, one of design's most critical challenges today is learning how to design products, services, experiences, and even information spaces (such as web pages) so they can evolve, adapt, and maintain themselves over time. "This is where the need for interdisciplinary design teams becomes most apparent," she says.

This interdisciplinary emphasis is the driving force behind the University's Collaborative Design SPIRE, an initiative of the Academic Plan. The plan calls for the University to build on its strengths, and Syracuse has long enjoyed a reputation for design excellence across a range of disciplines. Indeed, few academic institutions anywhere rival SU's track records in such design fields as architecture, engineering and computer science, industrial design, information science, interior design, and visual communication—all prominent in the world of modern design. It only made sense, then, to find a way to bring these programs together. "Syracuse is not a series of design disciplines within an educational environment focused exclusively on technology or design," Zaccai says. "The fact that SU has a diverse mixture of outstanding schools, such as Maxwell and Newhouse, makes for a really rich environment. You won't find that richness in an institution that's too narrowly focused or doesn't have the strengths in the design disciplines. I think Syracuse is one of the few universities in the United States that fits this bill."

Designing a Center for Collaboration

To capitalize on these assets, the Collaborative Design SPIRE Committee, consisting of faculty members from the Uni-

Illustration by Linda Bleck

versity's design-related disciplines, has been meeting to define an ideal environment for design on campus—a place that facilitates and fosters interdisciplinary collaboration among a number of the University's schools and colleges. Discussion so far tends to favor the creation of a new center dedicated to the practice of interdisciplinary design.

As part of their research in developing a conceptual framework for this proposed Center for Design Innovation, committee members visited some of the world's most well-known and respected design centers and interviewed their directors—including Zaccai and his staff at Design Continuum. "After studying the interviews, the committee agreed that a design curriculum for the future should include collaborative work practices," says committee member Barry Davidson, a professor in the L.C. Smith College of Engineering and Computer Science. Davidson sees the center as a vehicle to provide a rich educational experience that can be tailored for a variety of applications.

In the past decade, Zaccai says, design theory has been integrated into the curricula of business schools and engineering programs, while designers have been adapting techniques from the fields of anthropology, behavioral psychology, cognitive science, market research, and engineering—though often this adaptation takes place in mutual isolation. "These things have been happening on two sides of a fence," he says. "The notion of the center—at least that's my vision and my hope for it—is that it helps break down these fences."

While it's clear that solutions to design problems will depend increasingly on interdisciplinary collaboration, questions remain as to the best way to teach this approach. Should the center be organized around a curriculum of classes in interdisciplinary design, or should it be a place where students, working with faculty, learn by solving real-world design problems? "These questions have been a source of a good deal of discussion," says VPA industrial design professor Donald Carr, a committee member. "I believe the center first needs to be established as an active place where interdisciplinary design hap-

pens. Once that's done, the educational component will follow. Our first task should be identifying compelling problems and finding the right people to explore them."

Committee members also identified forces they believe will influence the future role of the designer, as well as changes in design practices that will affect teaching it. With current trends focusing on end-users' needs, the designer's role has become one of eliciting design requirements from consumers and creating tools that enable consumers to design products and services for themselves. "Designers need to be T-shaped people," Padgett explains, borrowing a term coined by Tim Brown of California-based IDEO, one of the industry leaders interviewed by committee members. "A designer is a person who is deep in his or her discipline, but also has the breadth of understanding to conform—attaching to and detaching from different groups."

A Plan Emerges

As the committee continues its work, a blueprint of the proposed center is emerging. The center will be an actual workplace, providing environments—physical and virtual—that support research and design innovation as part of the curriculum. It will need to be flexible enough in its operation to accommodate a range of activities that includes informal engagements as well as traditional structured events. And, of course, the center will promote interdisciplinary interaction while maintaining a unique, autonomous identity independent of any particular school or department.

As a strong supporter of the center, Zaccai hopes to see Syracuse become one of the preeminent schools of interdisciplinary design in the world—a place where talented people from diverse backgrounds will work together to push the boundaries of creative discovery and human-centric solutions. "The program will take on a life of its own," he says, "and create a sort of shared-space curriculum that is very different from what may be currently available anywhere."