

The power of design

 By [Mike Freedman](#)

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The hero's journey is a story celebrated in art and life. "The Lion King" opens with a happy young cub. Then thrust out into the wilderness, tough lessons are learnt. In the third act, re-entry to the magic kingdom, the most extreme test, awaits.

Now consider the career of Steve Jobs. One of the great garagistas, his early and quite clunky personal computers heralded an age of digital deities. Then, losing his war against the carbonated drink CEO he had appointed, Jobs' wilderness was animation. Called back to the magic kingdom, at a time of dire trouble, he needed to fight his greatest battle - against the rampant Microsoft.

I want to put a ding in the Universe. - Steve Jobs

The value of Apple surged past Microsoft some time back, and a few weeks before Jobs announced his resignation as CEO, Apple became (albeit briefly) the most valuable company on the New York Stock Exchange.

Is it the beginning of a new world order where what's in your head is worth more than what's in the ground? Can oil and gas, the lifeblood of our world today, be less valuable than premium-priced consumer electronics - essentially a middle-class luxury?

In the late 1990s, Apple was on its last legs - *Wired* magazine called it "beleaguered" - now it is awash in cash, new launches have waiting lines around the world and Steve Jobs Apple-fests have been greeted with the reverence until recently only matched by Warren Buffet (who now has been a little slow in answering why ratings agency Moody's, which his company controls, was generous in its assessments of other companies in the Berkshire Hathaway stable).

Going back to basics, Buffet has been good at making money, while Jobs is good at making stuff. But stuff with a difference - embedded in every product that bears the Apple trademark is the power of design.

Everything is design

Take a drive - your car is a collaboration of design, from the body-shape to the dials. The road has been designed, as have the signs, the strip of green or concrete at the centre and the houses on the periphery. Look around your home - from toothpaste tubes to flat-screen TVs, everything is designed. Graphic designers, industrial designers, landscape designers and architects define us.

Design is more than visual expression. Braille is designed for the blind to read; music is composed by a designer of

sounds. Coaches design training programmes, leaders design strategies, entrepreneurs design new ways to create value.

A good business plan has the same elegance as a MacBook; a winning brand contains complexity within a user interface as seductively simple as an iPhone; Ecomagination, the fastest growing unit of GE, is designed with the same regard to the social zeitgeist and technology as the iPad; while beyond its minimalistic interface, iPod and iTunes are designed to change the way music is distributed.

The genius of Jobs is his intuitive grasp of three design principles that shape our times:

- Less is more seductive
- Marry art and science
- "Real artists ship"

Less is more seductive

The second coming of Jobs was accompanied by an unheralded Brit, Jonathan Ive, who became SVP of industrial design. Their first joint-venture was making that lump of grey on your desk attractive. The iMac, launched in 1998, came in transparent plastics, sporting a range of boiled sweet colours. It defined the Apple psychographic - spreadsheet-men live the monochromatic Microsoft life; imagineers explore the enticing realm of Apple.

Further collaborations created the iPod, iPhone and iPad, paying homage to German designer Dieter Rams, who developed technology minimalism with Braun. Rams wrote the [10 principles of good design](#), among which are "Good design is innovative", "Good design makes a product useful" and "Good design is as little as possible".

Marry art and science

"The Macintosh turned out so well because the people working on it were musicians, artists, poets and historians who also happened to be excellent computer scientists." - Steve Jobs

Apple creates lightweight, jewel-like objects of desire, with crystal-clear screens and instant touch-sensitive response that do their jobs superbly well. You feel the love and passion, the obsessive eye for detail that will reject 1000 reasonable ways to open the lid of a MacBook for the one that feels just right.

TS Eliot wrote about the dissociation of sensibility in poetry that happened after the time of the Metaphysical poets, who could devour and fuse any kind of experience. As in poetry, so in life - art and science have for 300 years trod different paths, with mutual suspicion. As we became more specialised, so the paths diverged further.

And then, in the second half of the 20th century, creative artists from Andy Warhol to Pink Floyd explored new technologically enabled frontiers. While they approached the new fusion from a means of expression, Jobs and Ive sought fusion in function.

While others sliced and diced hardware and software, the Apple vision was and is holistic. The company creates seamless works of modern technology and art.

"Real artists ship"

So many of us have the unrealised dreams, the potential game-changers that never seem to go beyond private doodles and the pub. Many of us have been in wonderful and frustrating strategy sessions where we reinvent the organisation, only to see the new Jerusalem fade in the face of a thousand cuts.

While the biggest tech companies repeatedly stumble, Apple gets things done - on time, in budget and mostly working like a dream. Organisational design at its best balances the dreamer with time and motion man, the blank sheet with the

stopwatch. A study some years back on how top analysts rated companies (beyond the figures) revealed they gave most weight to the ratio and speed of ideas to market. It's why Wall Street buys into the Apple story. This is where imagination comes to life.

The Apple venture into retail displays the same obsessional perfectionism. My wife was in one of the Cape Town stores in the midst of a nerve-wracking store-check that included measuring the precise distance of products from the edge of the shelves. The total Apple experience is designed to standards that are remorselessly kept.

Jobs has been called obsessed, a raging perfectionist and nearly impossible to work for - yet he put together a team that in the last decade has transformed the music and smartphone industries and now, with the iPad, transforms the personal computer. Perhaps, though, his ultimate innovation is to show a stumbling capitalist world how corporations can be reinvented through the power of design.

"Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything - all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure - these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart." - Steve Jobs, 2005

ABOUT MIKE FREEDMAN

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