

# Blue Collar Design Theory: Promoting Community Health Through a Partnership Between an Art School and Academic Health Centre



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Bernard J Canniffe, Graphic Design Co-Chair at The Maryland Institute College of Art, has had work featured in the Graphis design annual and HOW magazine. Three of his posters were included - This is for Real: War and the Contemporary Audience exhibition at Stony Brook University. He has made presentations on his "Blue Collar Design Theory" at Willem de Kooning Academie in Rotterdam, Lees McRae College in North Carolina, and at the P&D Design Conference in Brazil. He has made presentations on the role of the graphic designer as a social responder at medical, design and academic conferences. Professor Canniffe is a regular presenter at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School for Public Health.

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Four years ago, the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) began a partnership with the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (JHSPH) to develop creative public health information. Members of the JHSPH faculty and staff were concerned that their research was not being conveyed to the population that could benefit from it – the very people that lived in the JHSPH's backyard. It was determined, at this initial meeting, that the graphic design department would have the appropriate resources to be able to translate these messages, and Bernard J Canniffe, department Co-Chair was asked to act as its coordinator.

The partnership is creating a new model of service learning with enormous potential for design/health partnerships across the country. MICA students have an opportunity to understand the power and limits of graphic design, and have to learn to communicate not only to members of an at-risk urban community but to doctors and researchers. In this partnership the students transform scientific messages into culturally appropriate materials for the local community to apply to their own lives.

The initial challenge was to develop and promote a new course that would appeal to the MICA graphic design student body. The course, titled MICA/JHSPH Design Coalition, was offered, for the first time, in the fall 2002 semester. The course strengths would be that students could actually get their projects published. This course would provide real-world experience with real clients, real projects and a tangible outcome.

**Keywords:** *graphic design, cultural, community, health, partnership, urban*

## 1 Introduction

East Baltimore is poverty-stricken, predominantly African American, urban neighbourhood that begins a few miles from the MICA campus and surrounds the JHSPH campus. The vast majority of MICA students have never experienced conditions like those existing in this community. The neighbourhood has one of the highest infant mortality rates in the U.S. and disproportionately high syphilis and heroin indices. East Baltimore is second in the nation as the most violent place to live, has a plethora of single parent homes, and a high rate of unemployment – the average income is less than \$11,000 per year. Less than half the children in East Baltimore graduate from high school and one quarter of the East Baltimore households fall below the federal poverty level reflecting that one in three children in the community live in poverty. In addition, the lead poisoning statistics in Baltimore City (much of which is concentrated in East Baltimore) have been consistently high for generations. The citizens of East Baltimore are prone to hypertension, obesity, and diabetes. Because the challenges of daily life within East Baltimore are so intense, people have difficulty prioritising long-term health issues<sup>1</sup>.

This statistical information determined that to best communicate with this hard-to-reach community, messages must be delivered in a clear manner decipherable by those with an average reading level of below the sixth grade.

Graphic Design education has always been fraught with pedagogical dilemmas. These problems are, in part, due to the divide between student desires and instructors' educational experience through project delivery. Students seek a realistic and professional educational experience, which are not only important to their education, but also necessary for acquiring the appropriate skill sets to enter the competitive work place. Graphic Design instructors are faced with the complicated task of giving students both technical and theoretical skills in a discipline that needs to be segmented and structured. The introduction of the computer into Graphic Design has further complicated this educational structure as it has added another layer of instruction onto the demands of both student and instructor. The result has trial and error in the delivery of tried and tested 'artificial' projects with unrestricted parameters and unlimited time constraints. If instructors attempt to implement real-world projects they struggle with first finding an appropriate client and project, second a workable budget, and third a willing client committed to enriching the educational experience of the students. The result has been the implementation of various identity design projects because they fit neatly into the above concerns yet the professional benefits for students are weak at best because they don't get experience in client management, access to a community and multiple delivery vehicles.

It is hoped that this paper will illustrate how professional practice can be sustainable within the framework of education, and give educators an appropriate model to be implemented at their academic institutions. This paper will also address a new area of design education that partners with other academic institutions and community organizations.

## 2 Course History and Course Outline

The MICA/JHSPH Design Coalition is offered as an elective course where enrolment is open to the entire student population. The graphic design department anticipated that this approach would allow students to self-select the course, reflecting their level of motivation in being involved and committed to the social aspect of the MICA/JHSPH course description. It was hoped that students in other majors would also enrol in the course because of the uncertainty that graphic design would always be the appropriate delivery vehicle when trying to assess the needs of the client and the community. Students from other majors might also bring other methods of problem solving to the class and provide the course alternative project solutions. The hope was to always have a diverse student population and a socially responsible partnership between the three communities involved in the projects, viz: JHSPH, MICA and East Baltimore. The initial student enrolment was different from what was expected. The course attracted students heavily from graphic design (ten students) and only one student (illustration) from another major. However, in subsequent semesters the student population has become more diverse which is consistent with the original course intent. This semester, an undergraduate student from Johns Hopkins University, majoring in social work, enrolled, and many graduate graphic design students have also retaken the course. One graduate graphic design student devoted her thesis to a specific community-based research project partnering with JHSPH and the East Baltimore community. A key asset of this course was the impact it made on students who could potentially get their work published. In fact students expressed the primary reason for taking the course was to engage with the client and interact with the community. Of course they still want to get their design solution accepted by both parties, but this is a secondary consideration.

On the first day of class, as students are introduced to the course, they are instructed on how to define design solutions in a realistic and effective way. Students are asked to see the JHSPH research teams as the client and the East Baltimore community as the target audience. The students must value building a crucial connection between the target audience and the project results, allowing community members to share in the programs success, in order to inspire an actual change of behaviour, leading to an improvement in their quality of life. Despite diverse academic backgrounds, the students are encouraged to draw from their knowledge of the graphic design vocabulary and understanding of the industry-process and the complications involved in working with actual clients and target audiences.

Later that day, students meet with the JHSPH research teams who present their research projects and discuss their goals for disseminating results. After the JHSPH teams present, MICA students initially went on a driving tour of the East Baltimore community. Although this mode of transportation proved convenient, students were given an insulated and therefore diluted experience of what life in East Baltimore is like. For this reason, later courses adopted a walking tour of the community instead. These walking tours are lead by East Baltimore community leaders who are familiar with the community and its members. The walking tour strategy proved mutually beneficial, as the community awareness of the MICA/JHSPH partnership increased and the students now demonstrate a tangible understanding of community life in East Baltimore.

For the second class, students are asked to research background information regarding the JHSPH presentations and the target audience. The students then present their findings to the individual JHSPH research teams (on the fourth class) to ensure that the students' understanding of the nature of the project was in line with JHSPH goals. The students do not show creative strategies at this stage. This approach has proved beneficial to both JHSPH researchers and MICA students, and an effective example of how this student/client presentation works can be seen from one of the initial research projects for the DASH diet study that will be discussed later in this paper.

The JHSPH team had researched dietary control of hypertension and named it "Dietary Approach to Stop Hypertension—DASH Diet." Students addressed the potential confusion that could result from using the term "DASH" as the Baltimore Transit Authority was about to launch an advertising campaign and livery signage for the Downtown Area Shuttle (DASH). The students and the research team decided that the diet's name should be changed to avoid any confusion. The JHSPH teams also advised focusing on looking for general solutions rather than concerning themselves with every area of the research projects.

As a result of this second meeting, the instructor and the students devised a three-part strategy:

- 1 Concentrate on making the complicated research results easy to understand
- 2 Increase the self-esteem of the community
- 3 Promote positive aspects of the JHSPH

Within these strategies, it was recognized that the community should be involved at each stage of the process. Furthermore, the project should utilize the already existing community organizations as "community gateways" (discussed below) for testing possible design solutions and for disseminating information.

Throughout the 16-week semester, JHSPH researchers periodically presented to the class with the goal of further clarifying the research results, increasing sensitivity to the community, and responding to specific research-related questions. Specific presentations from JHSPH include: how to target the message to the appropriate reading level, effective use of language and cultural illustrations to an African American community, and the social-economic realities of the target community. The MICA course instructor provided guidance about design strategies, and how to target a design message to a specific audience. Impromptu community meetings were held in East Baltimore, and the JHSPH research teams coordinated planned focus groups.

### 3 Community Gateways and Social Design

Early on, the JHSPH research teams explained that the East Baltimore community had built up resentment and hostility toward the Johns Hopkins community. Recognizing that bridges must be built to connect the parties, or messages from the partnership would fall on deaf ears, a strategy to reach the East Baltimore community was developed. This became an essential focus of the partnership and was spearheaded by MICA in order to minimize the resistance. This additional goal was essential in implementing the primary goal of gaining acceptance of the health message within East Baltimore.

Community Gateways are defined as entities that have already earned the respect and trust of the community. MICA, with the assistance of JHSPH personnel, would build upon and strengthen these

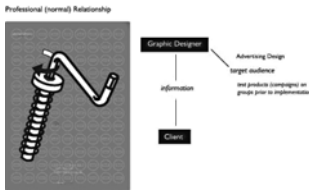


Figure 1: Graphic Designer/Client Relationship

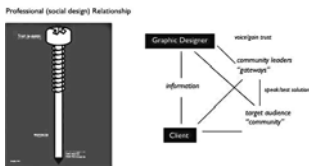


Figure 2: Graphic (Social) Designer/Client Relationship

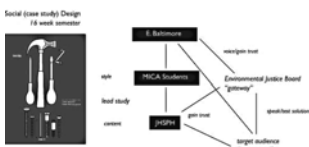


Figure 3: MICA/JHSPH Course Relationship

relationships. The Gateways would be engaged in focus groups and meetings to test potential design solutions and served as a resource to students seeking information about the community.

It was realized that a new strategy to graphic design education was needed for this course to allow students to both navigate and understand the complex relationships between community gateways and client. The normal paradigm of graphic design/client relationship (as shown in Fig. 1) did not apply to this course.

We can see the industrial relationship between the graphic designer and client in Figure 1. Information flows from one group to another through a series of meetings and presentations where mutual needs are met and the project is implemented. The graphic designer responds to the clients needs and establishes the appropriate visual language and delivery vehicle. This framework has become the accepted model of graphic design education where the instructor acts as client and student as designer. In some graphic design companies, and in most advertising agencies, project strategies are tested, prior to implementation, on a specific audience. It is important to note that even when the project is tested on this group, information still primarily flows between client and designer.

This figure shows how the graphic designer relates within the framework of social design. In this situation the graphic designer is able to respond to the needs of both client and community, and becomes a social responder by placing themselves between both communities. The dynamics of the matrix become far more complicated where information not only passes from client to graphic designer, but also from graphic designer to community leader (who acts as the gateway to the community), and community leader to client. The graphic designer has to acquire similar skill sets as a social worker as well as act as a mediator and designer.

This final figure shows how the MICA graphic design student is placed in the middle of the client and community. It can be seen that the framework is quite complex where information passes between the three major constituents. Students acquire important communication and problem-solving skills when they interact with these groups. These skills are essential in the development of the students' educational experience and industrial practice.

The relationship between graphic design and social responsibility is not new. This was addressed in the "First Things First" manifesto, written by Ken Garland in London in 1964, where 22 visual communicators signed the call for their skills to be put to worthwhile use. The manifesto was rewritten in 1999 and launched in *Adbusters* as well as in *Émigré* and the *AIGA* journal in North America, *Eye* and *Blueprint* in the United Kingdom. Afterwards, there was a slew of unprecedented letters either attacking or supporting the manifesto without little substantive views on how this could be applied to either industrial or educational practice.

The world-renowned graphic designer, Tibor Kalman, added to the role of the graphic designer as a social responder when he was interviewed in the *Advertising Institute of America (AIA)* journal about social responsibility. Mr. Kalman explained his feelings on how advertising makes companies and products look stylish without addressing their core values. He wanted to focus on the fact that graphic designers should use their skills to change the organization's infrastructures as well as making them look good. But again his remarks did little to encourage the student population on how they should develop the necessary skill sets in order to apply them in both their education and industrial careers.

It is clear that there is a desire and need for designers to become involved in social responsive work and the MICA/JHSPH Coalition course addresses both the social and pragmatic areas of design education. Students are instructed on how to use their skills to better society and to learn how to deal with both clients and community in a constructive and creative way.

The author has written and published his *Blue Collar Design Theory* that supports the role of the graphic designer becoming a social engager. This theory goes further than the *First Things First* manifesto's obvious pitfalls because it focuses on the positive aspects of design as it formulates a language, and approach, to be used as a template by designers, educators and students<sup>2</sup>.

## 4 Case Studies

Below are two case studies highlighted to define the MICA/JHSPH Design Coalition experience.

### **During the first course, the students focused on two projects:**

- 1 Dietary Approach to Stop Hypertension–DASH Diet Study
- 2 African American Male Hypertension Study

The partnership selected the Middle East Community Organization (MECO) as the primary Gateway for the DASH Diet Study, and The Men’s Center for the primary Gateway for the African American Male Hypertension study. JHSPH researchers met with community leaders, prior to the class’s first meeting with the community organizations, to ensure acceptance of the program and a smooth transition between the JHSPH research teams and the MICA class.

### **African American Male Hypertension**

As an established organization whose mission was to foster healthy relationships and lifestyles for males in the East Baltimore community, The Men’s Center proved to be an effective Gateway for the hypertension project because some of their members participated in the ongoing African American Male Hypertension Study conducted by JHSPH. MICA had direct access to both the intended target audience and to actual participants in the study.

Thirty African American males, who were involved with the study at some point, served as part of the focus group. They were initially asked a series of questions relating to dealing with hypertension. Priority was given to developing strategies that were perceived to be important in dealing with hypertension. This information became the basis for the students’ creative design strategies.

### **The results of the Focus Group Questionnaire given at The Men’s Center during the fall of 2002 are highlighted below. The men listed their concerns as follows:**

- 1 Many of the men were also dealing with drug addiction
- 2 All were dealing with acute hypertension
- 3 All expressed difficulty in remembering when to take their medication
- 4 All perceived the importance of informing other men about getting their blood pressure checked
- 5 Many felt that taking part in the hypertension study was important
- 6 All expressed an apparent and deep-rooted mistrust of Johns Hopkins University
- 7 Prior to study, the focus group participants all believed in many of the preventative hypertension myths (see below)

### **There were several prevalent myths about the treatment of hypertension reported by the respondents:**

- 1 Drinking vinegar would prevent hypertension
- 2 Drinking water would prevent hypertension
- 3 Headaches were the only sign of hypertension
- 4 Taking both blood pressure medication and illegal drugs would cause harm

The Men’s Center staff also shared information about existing services they offered and what their perceived role in the community was. Mr. Leon Purnell, Executive Director, led this meeting and used the Center’s existing marketing materials as the basis of his presentation. Through this process, it also became apparent that The Men’s Center organization could benefit from a professional identity. A recognizable identity would communicate The Men’s Center’s role within the community and strengthen the relationship between MICA, JHSPH, and the community.

The Men’s Center also provided a weekly food bank where fresh produce was freely distributed to the community. The food bank then provided another obvious gateway for the DASH diet study.

Six students presented identity solutions to both the Center staff and to a focus group at the Center. The final selection was a monogram consisting of an M and C based on African symbols, which are also used in The Men's Center's "Rites of Passage" program. The new identity was applied to letterheads, business cards, and envelopes and to all future health campaigns.

#### The Men's Center identity would:

- 1 Prove that JHSPH was committed to helping the community by financing the printing of the identity system
- 2 Financing the Men's Center identity system would also begin to dispel negative views about JHSPH because they invest in the community
- 3 Promote hypertension messages through this new identity would link The Men's Center to JHSPH's health message
- 4 The health messages would be accepted by the community
- 5 The Men's Center, in effect, would act as a brand ambassador for health message and JHSPH

#### Hypertension Campaigns

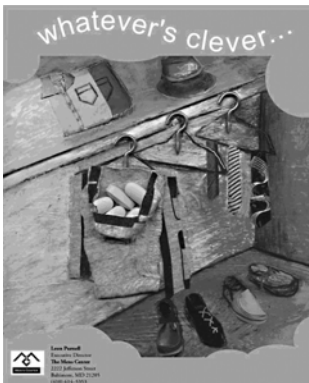
Several weeks later the JHSPH and focus group members met at The Men's Center to select the final hypertension prevention campaigns.

#### Two campaigns were selected:

##### Campaign One

The first campaign was a series of colour illustrated posters and T-Shirts with the heading "Whatever's..." The illustrations showed humorous depictions of medication placement that would enable people to remember to take their medication. The illustrative style was light, colourful, and not confrontational or condescending. The containers were placed inside shoes, jacket hoods and on toothbrushes. This strategy was adopted, in part, based on the focus group's response regarding forgetting to take medication. The "Whatever's..." heading suggested to do whatever was needed to remember to take your medication and to create a light-hearted approach to encourage participation by all family members to unite the community in a common goal.

Here we see an example of one poster that was part of a series. You can see the effective use of The Men's Center identity.



##### Campaign Two

The second campaign selected was a series of photographic posters containing people in the community who were dealing with hypertension. The posters focused on different people/situations in various stages of the condition. The purpose was to show identifiable individuals within the community. In effect, The Men's Center was trusted and therefore Johns Hopkins could be trusted.

The new professional identity of The Men's Center was applied to both campaigns to direct the community to seek hypertension information from a trusted member of the community.

##### DASH Diet

A different strategy from that of The Men's Center was employed at the MECO focus group. Participants were first asked to read information explaining the DASH diet. The information, edited by JHSPH researchers, contained a brief explanation of the diet's goals and a series of menus that could be adopted. The reading session lasted for thirty minutes after which, a series of conversation topics were explored. JHSPH researchers made sure that community participants attended the focus group meeting who knew about hypertension through their own experience or the experiences of a family member or friend. The JHSPH researchers did not attend the actual focus group meeting so that an unrestrained and candid discussion could take place between MICA students and East Baltimore

community. The group's ages were between 35 and 70 years and were split evenly between male and female. Specific questions addressed the name of the diet, the experience of following the regime, and the importance of dealing with hypertension in relation to other problems that they faced.

**The MECO focus group results revealed that participants:**

- 1 Did not identify with DASH name because the name was too obscure
- 2 Found the use of name 'diet' to be too confrontational and negative
- 3 Found information difficult to understand and therefore apply to their own lives
- 4 Found that suggested meals were expensive
- 5 Found that many of the meals were difficult to purchase and prepare
- 6 Considered that suggested menus were not culturally appropriate for the African American diet
- 7 Resisted changing their current meal plans
- 8 Did not like the food groups offered in the supplementary material
- 9 Distrusted Johns Hopkins

## 5 Creative Process

The students determined that they needed to change the name of the diet and produce a new image to make the diet more appealing to the target audience. Supported by both student research and the focus group information, the name was changed, and various typographic treatments and colours were applied. These images were tested in both the JHSPH team and the community focus group. To encourage community ownership and ideals of partnership, the community was asked to take an active role in the selection of the identity.

The students presented the following names as alternatives to the DASH diet:

- 1 NO-HYPE
- 2 FRESH GROOVE
- 3 NUMBERS
- 4 ALIVE

### Results

The focus group felt that "No-Hype," although alluding to "no hypertension," was both negative and confusing. Drug dealers and addicts in East Baltimore referred to hypodermic needles using the term "hype." The community rejected the Numbers and Alive solutions because they did not clearly identify the desired outcomes of the diet. Both groups (JHSPH and community groups) overwhelmingly selected "Fresh Groove" as the most effective name. "Fresh Groove" reflected the fresh nature of the food groups, and groove reflected the importance of following the daily/weekly schedule. Groove was a familiar term to the community, conveying fun, music, and dance.

### Campaigns

The last stage in the development of "Fresh Groove" was the production of an awareness campaign for the name and the food groups. Several students went on the diet for two weeks to better understand the experience. These students exclusively purchased food from stores in the East Baltimore community, and either walked or used public transportation from East Baltimore on their shopping trips, to gain an understanding of the dieter's experience. These students found it difficult to obtain fresh food in the East Baltimore community and also found that following the daily intake allowances resulted in hunger between meals. The students were concerned that certain members of the target audience who might be engaged in physical labour would need larger portions. Students were also concerned that if adding extra portions would affect the health of the community. JHSPH researchers instructed students that eating extra portions would not cause any harm to the community. They also instructed students that the primary message of the campaigns should be to eat healthily.

## Results

Six students presented at MECO to both JHSPH researchers and to the focus group. Both groups were asked to select the most effective strategy for implementation.

The selected campaign was a series of coloured numbers, placed within circular fields, with Fresh Groove applied on promotional posters, T-Shirts and advertisements that would be available for distribution throughout the community. The numbers were colour coded to represent specific food groups, and the numbers reflected the recommended daily servings. The circular fields and numbers were as follows:

8	Brown	=	Grains
5	Green	=	Vegetables
5	Orange	=	Fruits
2	Red	=	Protein
2	White	=	Dairy

The series of posters contained one or all of the numbers with a brief explanation of the food group, the serving amount, and the importance of healthy eating to prevent hypertension. An African American cookbook was produced which contained recipes using the foods promoted by the diet. The cookbook listed the locations within East Baltimore where the community could purchase reasonably priced food that complied with the diet and readers were directed to the food bank at The Men's Center.

## 5 Outcomes and Challenges

The development of the MICA/JHSPH Design Coalition course and partnership with JHSPH and East Baltimore community has created educational and social benefits. MICA has developed strong links with both JHSPH and the East Baltimore community. More importantly, the East Baltimore community has now increased their exposure to the significant research carried out at the JHSPH that will positively impact their lives. This partnership has also helped to dispel the many negative myths associated with the institution. The JHSPH faculty and staff have provided services and assistance that have proved crucial to the course development. They have also helped to create Community Gateways and provide future research projects.

In March 2003 The Men's Center identity and both hypertension campaigns have been implemented. Time will tell whether the campaigns will prove sustainable and actually help residents of East Baltimore by a change in behaviours. It is intended that both MICA and JHSPH researchers will evaluate these projects to measure their effectiveness at a later date.

The Fresh Groove campaign has been withheld until funding can be obtained for mass production. After the first year of the program we identified several areas for improvement. The JHSPH groups did not budget for print costs, an oversight problematic to both students and the community as a whole. The students felt disillusioned because they believed that one of the reasons for taking the course was the possibility of getting work printed. Also by not printing the campaign JHSPH inadvertently alienated the community that participated in the development process who never saw the results of their efforts. This added to the discord between Johns Hopkins and the East Baltimore community. This experience taught us to either budget for print production in the initial grant proposal or ensure that the necessary funds are available prior to engaging the partnership in subsequent efforts.

Since the development of this new partnership, the Maryland Institute College of Art's graphic design program has been inundated with requests from the East Baltimore community to produce graphic design projects. The MICA/JHSPH Design Coalition has produced design solutions for Type Two Diabetes, Child Injuries Through Gun Violence, Infant Lead Poisoning, Kidney Donation and a Mobile Safety Center (CareS), research projects that have all been implemented. MICA has recently developed an eighteen month course tentatively titled "Urban Studio" which is due to begin in the Spring 2005 semester. This institutionalised course will establish partners with other academic



institutions, (the Baltimore Contemporary Museum, Baltimore City Planning Department, and many other private companies) who will provide both financial and professional support to allow for larger community concerns, such as refurbishing buildings and providing employment opportunities.

It was initially thought that students would learn more about the relationship between graphic designer and client, and understand the dynamics of the community. In fact students have expressed that they find out more about themselves from the community and client. Students have taken the course two and three times with some students deciding to seek employment with design companies who have a similar client base or work as graphic designers in publication departments of the health field. Many graphic design companies have contacted the MICA graphic design department expressing the reason they employed students was, in part, because of the work they had produced in the MICA/JHSPH Design Coalition course.

There continues to be a commitment to strengthen the partnership between MICA, JHSPH, and the East Baltimore community and to see this partnership as a positive model embraced by other academic institutions to improve community well being.

## Additional Resources

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Bourriaud, Nicolas/Pinto, Roberto. (2003) *Lucy Orta.* Phaidon Press, Inc. ISBN: 0714843008

## Notes

- 1 <http://www.jhsph.edu/CHN/Resources/riskfactors.html>  
<http://www.jhsph.edu/adolescenthealth/Research/Sexual%20and%20Reproductive%20Health/Pilot%20HIV%20Risk>  
<http://www.jhsph.edu/CHN/Research/childobesity.html>  
<http://www.jhsph.edu/adolescenthealth/Research/Sexual%20and%20Reproductive%20Health/Pilot%20HIV%20Risk>

## 2 Blue Collar Design Theory

**blue**<sup>1</sup> (bloo) a. **1.** of the colour between green and violet in the spectrum, coloured like the clear sky or deep sea. ~ **collar worker**, manual or industrial (opp. to office) worker.

The understanding of Graphic Design has always been relegated to the sidelines of the applied arts community. There are a plethora of general interest magazines that showcase architecture, the decorative arts, product and fashion design with little, if any, mention of the role of the graphic designers who help mould and respond to the world around them. This is, in part, due to the graphic designers' self-absorbed approach to their chosen discipline, clients and the general public.

The role of the graphic designer is that of a social responder and we must begin to effectively communicate this to both the design community and the world.

The Blue Collar Theory will help eliminate myths, dispel fears and educate all to a new language and approach for everyone to rejoice in and understand. The Blue Collar Theory places graphic design at the front of the design dialogue.

Blue Collar explores the relationship between the client and designer, explains projects that exemplify this new approach, and more importantly focuses on role of the graphic designer in society.

Blue Collar is the language of the machine shed, the skilled labourer, the printer, the farmer, the factory floor and it is liberty.