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## The Future of Design

SoFA Design Institute's recent symposium raised important questions regarding the future of design.



By JUSTIN UMALI | Dec 3, 2018

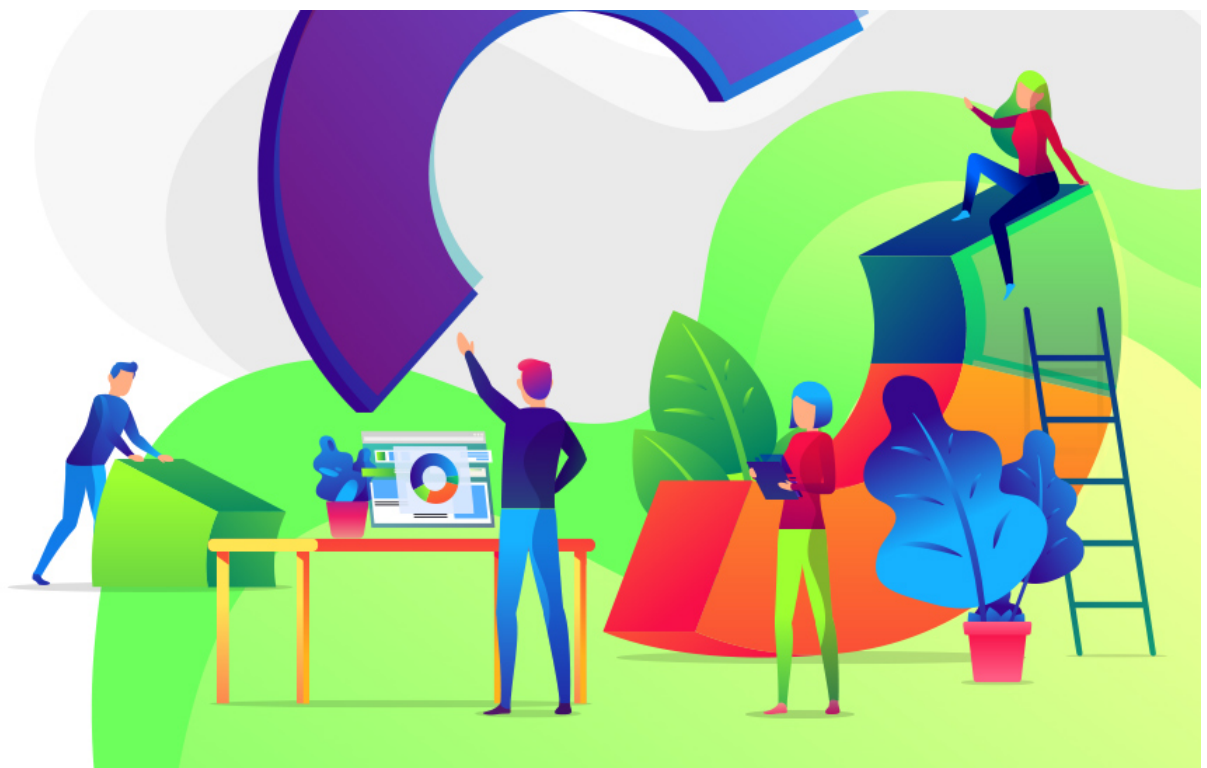


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on stories, and designing something is about telling stories and what they mean.” **Tobias Guggenheimer** is a tall man with gray hair and an easy demeanor. Though he’s Dean of the SoFA Design Institute, he doesn’t remind you of that terror professor or of a strict disciplinarian. He’s laid-back, friendly, yet still passionate as ever when it comes to design.

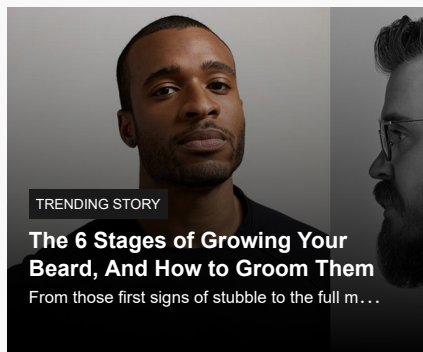
Design, as Tobi described it, goes beyond simply creating a plan or making something look nice. Design takes bits and pieces from everything like experience and culture, and good design becomes an outward expression of the culture and the history behind the work while contributing to that same space. Design seeks to solve the challenges put forward by society.

“You’re not just telling your own story,” he says. “In design, you’re telling other people’s stories, the story of your client, of your society, several different stories that you’re weaving together in a way that creates a narrative.”

Recently, the **SoFA Design Institute**, in collaboration with the **Goethe Institute**, held a symposium titled **Futures Now: Imagining Alternative Human Environments**. Industry leaders and other personalities like futurists and philosophers were invited to discuss evolved spaces and more generally, the future of design. It was held at the Mind Museum; fitting, as speculating the future was a game for the mind.

A diverse group of speakers discussed multiple topics. It’s not hard to understand why Tobi would cast such a wide net: Design, much more “designing for the future,” is as broad a topic as “music” and demands a broad collection of people to discuss it. How do you design for a future that’s uncertain; or rather, should you even try?

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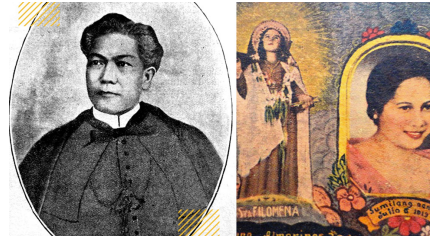


There is a term known as the designer’s dilemma: Should you invest in innovating for the future when clients wish to solve current problems? How does a designer thread the line between innovation and invention? It’s a hard question to unpack, but the key seems to be in understanding our current situation so that we can adapt from it. Learning about the future by looking at the present.

The thing about understanding the present, though, is that it’s intricately linked with the past. It’s like one long story, beginning somewhere and will end at some other place; reading the latest sentence wouldn’t make sense unless you go back a few paragraphs for context. It’s hard to solve the traffic situation in Manila if you don’t understand what caused it in the first place, and it’s hard to come up with solutions that would be acceptable to everybody if we don’t understand the context behind the problems.

And that rings true across all fields of design, from architecture to industrial design and interior design. Buildings are constructed with a focus on considerations other than aesthetic. Spaces are built with visitor experiences, health and safety in mind. Factors such as space, economics, culture, and even labor, now also take greater precedence when

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We're not discounting aesthetics. Aesthetic is the outward expression of culture, and the way something looks presents a message. It can take on the shape of a church floor plan looking like a cross, or the walls of Urdaneta Village representing a division between classes. It is the brutalist edifice complex of Marcos-era architecture, the glass dome of the German Reichstag building, and the classicist Greco-Roman designs of Capitol Hill.

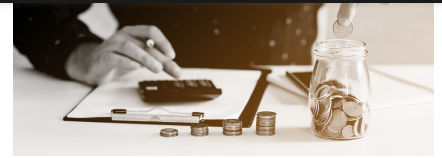
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All of these designs serve to convey meaning upon those who view it; a sense of power, or an embodiment of a concept. It shapes the world of the people who live with them, and that, in turn, lives on to the coming generations.

Designing for the future becomes less about vague speculation or borderline science fiction, and more about the art of telling stories about society. How to weave a narrative that's relevant and will remain relevant for years to come.

The Filipino designer is posed the ultimate question: How do you tell the story of the Philippines in your work? In a country faced with the specter of post-colonial neo-liberalism, where ancestral land is taken and converted to condominiums, American art deco buildings and old Spanish *casas* are left to rot under the sun, and anything before Miguel Lopez de Legaspi is reduced to nothing more than "bamboo architecture," what kind of story defines the Filipino? What design will solve the problems of our country, our identity?

There are no easy answers to tough questions, but that wasn't really the point of the symposium. There really isn't one correct answer. It's hard to talk in terms of absolutes when there is nothing concrete to talk about. The best that we can really do is to prepare ourselves for what may come and to adapt to changes in the world. Not all designs have to



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Design is a story, and the only way to really find out what happens next is to read on.  
“There are 100 million Filipinos,” Tobi said. “And there are 100 million stories to tell.”

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Ultimately, it is the things that we make that live on. People die, actions change the world, but the objects they leave behind are the ones that speak of the world they inhabited and define the world to come. The challenge for Filipinos, designers or otherwise, is to make something that lives on. Something that survives our generation and transforms the next. The future is uncertain, but what is certain is that somebody will live them out, based on what we decide today.

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