

PAULA SCHER
PRO BONO HALL OF FAME, DESIGN



Paula Scher, iconic graphic designer, professor, lecturer and author, has been inducted into the Pro Bono Hall of Fame for her contributions in the field of design. Paula is one of the world's top 10 designers, and provides at least 25% of her work each year pro bono. Taproot founder, Aaron Hurst, recently contacted Paula to discuss how she uses pro bono as her lab and how her pro bono projects impact her commercial work.

When you first started your career, you did a lot of work with civic organizations. What inspired you to do that?

I didn't purposefully think about working for "civic organizations." Some of it was very selfish. I started out in the music industry, and I was a salaried employee. But I wanted to do terrific work that I was proud of. So I'd volunteer for things, projects that didn't have high visibility or weren't for famous recording artists, because I could do better work for them.

Then you continued that strategy when you transitioned into the design field?

I translated it to design organizations. I built some of my design reputation by doing pro bono pieces for graphic organizations, whether it was the AIGA, or the Art Directors Club. Then later, I began doing it with not-for-profits, when they couldn't afford something. It was something I cared about, and it was something that afforded me an opportunity to do good design.

How has your pro bono work impacted your commercial work?

I look at work in totality: some work pays the bills, some work is important to us as a society, and some work builds reputation. What's the best is when it does all three, which sometimes it does.

Do you have an example?

I donated a complete sign system for the NYC Parks Department. It was probably the biggest donation I've ever made. Then, because of that relationship, after Hurricane Sandy, they hired me to do a paid project designing signage for all the beaches.

The two things went together really well. If I hadn't done that massive donation, we wouldn't have developed a relationship and they might not have thought of me to do the paid work. So the pro bono and commercial work actually fed each other. I created two very visible pieces of work, one donated, and the other an assignment.

Fifty years from now, which works do you expect to outlive you and be a part of our society?

Probably the Boston album cover. More people know the Boston cover than almost anything I've done. I think it's hilarious. That thing was designed in 1976, you know, so... almost 40 years ago.

To invent something, or to do something that feels creative, or where you really push what's possible, you have to be a little bit ignorant. You have to kind of not know what you're doing, because if you know what you're doing, you're gonna do what you've already done or what somebody else has done before. Or what's expected of you. And that's never really very interesting.

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Which work do you see the most frequently?

Right now the thing I see the most is my damn Citibank logo, 'cause it's on every bike in New York.

If you had your choice, which work would you want to outlive you?

That's a funny question to answer. You have no control over that. Part of my reason for doing so much environmental work is that I like the fact that it has theoretically a longer lifespan, though I would argue that sometimes that's not true, people rip signs down all the time.

There are pieces of work that continue, and that become part of the vernacular, and I think my work for The Public Theater best fits that category. I don't know which individual piece will live on, but I suspect that as a form of identity design, it'll probably have some historic longevity.

Where do you look for inspiration when you're doing work?

Walking around the streets, going to a movie, going to a museum, looking at a magazine, browsing around online. Anywhere. Anytime. It's completely random. There's no design to it. If you live, you see stuff. I mean for me, walking around New York City is always continually inspiring, it's always changing. You're always bombarded by media.

How do you invent something new?

To invent something, or to do something that feels creative, or where you really push what's possible, you have to be a little bit ignorant. You have to kind of not know what you're doing, because if you know what you're doing, you're gonna do what you've already done or what somebody else has done before. Or what's expected of you. And that's never really very interesting, but it's the sort of formula for success that everybody feels comfortable with.

How do you break past that?

To invent something new, you have to be ok with not knowing what you are doing. That makes people feel vulnerable; it's taking a total risk. The only way I've found that people will take that risk with me, is if they're not paying for it. So, I use pro bono as my lab.

Lots of designers don't have a place like that to experiment.

Well, pro bono was always my lab. There were projects where you have the opportunity to figure out what something can be without somebody else's opinion. You know, it has a parameter, but you get to be the most focused, and that makes design more akin to fine art, to a degree, because there is a parameter, but there isn't necessarily a collaborator.

How do you want to influence the next generation of designers?

I am trying really hard not to. I think they just hate you for it, to be honest. Every generation has to find its own voice. I can teach them what I know, but they're in a different generation. If I can instill anything into them, I would want them to be optimistic about everything they do, and think that everything is potentially terrific.

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