

the future of creativity

Learn how to survive in the new creative economy by facing these three key factors that will shape the future design professional.

Words / Art Neil & Jen Baker Brown



When standing at the cliff's edge above a slot canyon, the best course of action is to not look down before willingly stepping off. A short 150 feet to the canyon floor, the only way out of this predicament is down. We are in the vast high desert outside Moab, UT. Four months into what quickly became more than six months on the road, this unplanned excursion was born out of one of those daring "If not now, then when?" conversations.

To answer your inevitable question: No, we are not independently wealthy, nor the heirs of oil tycoons, and we are definitely not YouTube stars. But we have found ourselves—for the past several years—operating within a rapidly changing labor market as creative professionals with constantly evolving careers. Our work has become increasingly location-agnostic, our presence required only in meetings via phone or Skype. It was within this context that our ever-nagging

inner nomads took over and we embarked to discover as much of the USA as we could in six months, in our meticulously packed sedan.

This was not a trip of pure adventure or self-actualization, but an expedition to discover the future of the creative industry and the future of work. We sought to define the opportunities rising on the horizon and move beyond those that are setting. Interviews, meetings, debates and lots of coffee led to a developing thesis for the future. Since the onset of the third millennium, we have all sensed and felt shifting tides within the creative economy—the storms, the lulls and the prevailing winds. Turbulent economic deviations in 2008 and onward left many of us shaken and perhaps slightly scarred. But these fluctuations sent many not crawling back to corporate America, but to build something new in entrepreneurial America.

We packed up our car and set out to meet with individuals and organizations across an array of industries who are playing a significant role in the revitalization of America's urban centers—some small, some large, all of great importance. These are creative thinkers, catalysts of change who have established clothing brands, arts and culture programs, design shops, furniture companies and socially minded businesses. They are creating jobs and revitalizing cities like Providence, RI, Kansas City, KS, East Palo Alto, CA, Cleveland and Atlanta.

The creative industry at large is playing such a significant role in societal development that UNESCO's Creative Economy Report from 2013 lauded the global creative economy as "not only one of the most rapidly growing sectors of the world economy, but also a highly transformative one in terms of income generation, job creation and export earnings." UNESCO argues that creativity and culture are so interconnected with the development of new ideas and products that the fiscal and nonfiscal benefits are "recognized as instrumental to human development."

► EMBRACE THE DISRUPTION

Today, the way we work, and ultimately how we live, has been wholly upended. It's not hard to see why researchers like Steven Tepper and Elizabeth Lingo

refer to artists and creatives as agile "catalysts of change and innovation" that are adept at navigating diverse domains. Those of us who operate within the creative industries are historically familiar with non-traditional work scenarios: freelance, contract with a retainer, full-time freelance, part time, project-based, and a host of other situations. Recent economic downturns may have caused interim pain, but they ultimately forced our change agents and prophet-artists to envision a new future. With the rapid increase of independent contractors and on-demand labor, online talent platforms and the automation of skilled jobs, we are disrupting the creative industries from the inside out. It is not only the tech elite of San Francisco, Austin, New York, and other cities that are creating change; as members of the creative economy we are fundamentally altering the course of work and life.

Which brings us back to our accidental slot canyon rappelling adventure in Moab. All the docile photography tours were booked the weekend we arrived. Naively we assumed the available "beginners canyoneering tour" would involve a mere stroll through the canyon floor, perhaps a small stream crossing, and most importantly the chance to capture epic photos of the Mars-like landscapes. All but the last of our assumptions were significantly underestimated. Once we discovered the only way off this cliff to the floor of the canyon was to dangle from a thread, we embraced the challenge and yes, the photos of the vistas were epic.

Change and the challenges it brings are inevitable. We can embrace the beauty in disruption and its innovative opportunity, or get left behind. A recent study by the Oxford Martin School estimates that nearly half of U.S. jobs will be automated within two decades. Online platforms Persado, Percolate, Canva and Visage have accelerated the democratization of the production of creative assets. Individuals with limited skills can now more easily execute, manage, distribute, design and create an infinite variety of deliverables through the power of their web browser. It is reminiscent of Mac and Adobe revolutionizing the entire design industry, across all disciplines. While many workers will lose their jobs to automation, it is incorrect to assume or believe that automation

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reduces the number of available jobs. The inverse is true. As more and more tasks become automated, it actually increases total job opportunity and naturally the individual capacity of a worker. This newly realized job opportunity will however demand new skills, and the slow transition over time will prove exceptionally challenging for many.

► REDEFINE VALUE

Winding our way down the majority of the California coast—relishing each and every curve of Highway 1—we leisurely meandered to Los Angeles where we met Petruta Vrontikis, creative director and professor at Art Center College of Design. Over the last two years, she has been diligently researching an emergent trend and group she calls the New Creative Nomad. Her thesis is focused on this group of neonomadic individuals, their work and life, and the opportunities that emanate from them.

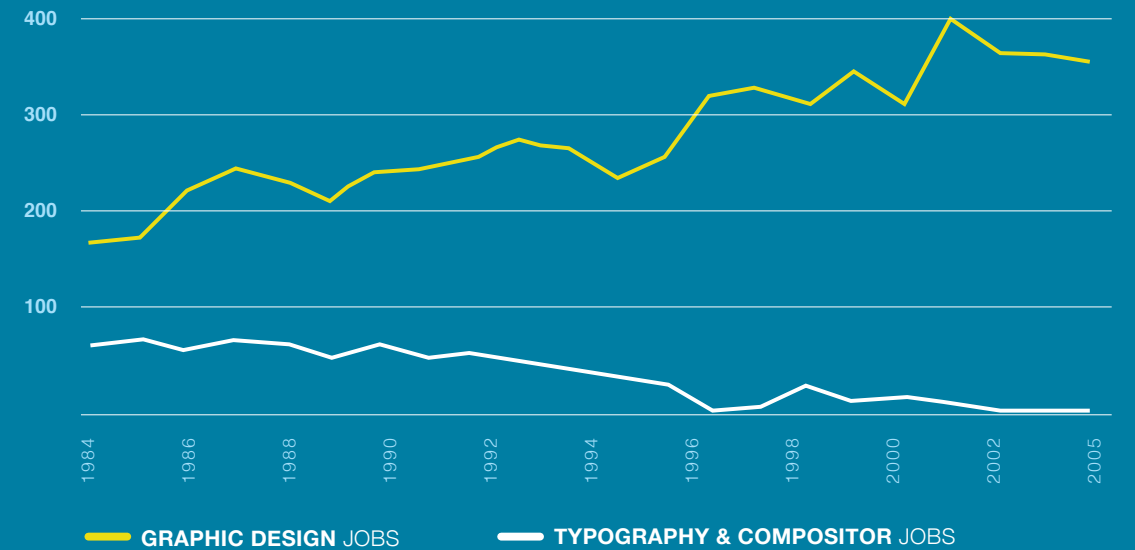
Petruta Vrontikis proposes that “Millennials are returning to our previous nomadic ways, meaning

individuals move based on environmental changes and shifts. It involves agile ways of thinking about place and space. This lifestyle questions ideas of home, identity, family and nation.” She believes these individuals develop an unconscious competence that will be an asset in the on-demand economy. “These are resilient qualities that young people are cultivating in a landscape with very few borders or boundaries.”

The unconscious competencies developing within this neonomadic Millennial paint an accurate image of the complex, shifting value system of the creative economy. Imagine a world where the value of creativity is tied to the outcomes its ideas generate, rather than the cost to produce the assets to support its ideas. This future state will require significant remodeling and permutations in the typical creative skills, requiring the creator to carry greater responsibility and accountability. This future creative must redefine their understanding of value and value creation.

In the middle of Salt Lake City, a unique startup academic endeavor—the Multi-disciplinary Design,

TYPOGRAPHERS VS DESIGNERS 1984 – 2002



Source: James Bessen, US Census

College of Architecture + Planning—has been established at the University of Utah. Students in this program are being groomed to become multi-disciplinary product designers, design researchers, product development experts, directors, practitioners, visionaries and leaders. Ultimately, students are learning to value the outcomes their solutions generate, rather than an ephemeral artifact they have crafted over many likely sleepless nights. This is a clear indication of the future creative mindset and a new perception of value. Keith Diaz Moore, Dean of the College of Architecture + Planning says “I would argue at the root of this program is its constant attention toward the impact design can, should, and needs to have in addressing the challenges of this century. It does so in a way that confronts prevailing assumptions about design, and embraces the challenge of preparing the creative mind for the future.”

Challenging to understand and even more complicated to define, the proper perspective on value creation is a critical function for survival in this new

economy. As creatives, we are taught early on that our value is tied directly to our craft and the time to execute our skill. This is a rudimentary equation at best and supports a system designed to center on the subjectivity of aesthetic. Is our lust for aesthetic merit (and its accolades) the very means to our devaluation?

Imagine a future state where thoughtful, considered, empathetic, human-centered design is ubiquitous in our world—a world wholly saturated in “good design.” It is a world where “good design” is fully democratic, instantly available to anyone with the privilege of owning a handheld device subsidized by a mobile phone retailer. In this hypothetical (soon to be reality) modern world, the emotional debate of aesthetic subjectivity will be silenced.

Value creation is inextricably woven together with the achievement of specific outcomes—economic,

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social, environmental, etc. Value is realized (or captured) by those responsible for delivering such outcomes. As creatives are able to shift their singular perspective that the artifact created by commission holds the exclusive value to a more enlightened view oriented toward outcomes, an entirely new world unfolds. The opportunity at hand is to foster exponential value through strategic partnership, ownership and shared risk in order to participate in the shared outcomes—the ultimate reward of a job well done.

► **ACCEPT GREATER RESPONSIBILITY**
Thriving in this new economy requires more than an

agile mindset and broadened outlook on value creation. Beneath the surface of these two prerequisites lies the depth of the iceberg—acceptance of greater responsibility. The impact a healthy creative economy has on society cannot be flippantly dismissed. Art, media, design and its milieu of siblings have great impact on our worldview and on economic growth. From expanding our collective empathy and understanding for others to providing a platform that speaks to the full breadth of our senses, the participants in the creative economy nurture a diverse culture that drives innovation.

Jumping into this new reality puts one at greater risk, but with the hope of greater outcomes. Not every creative professional is an entrepreneur, yet the role of the creative professional is evolving dramatically. As technical skills are becoming more and more automated there is an ever-increasing need for creatives to step into decision-making roles that also bear greater accountability; to use their soft skills of empathy, agility, prognostication and aesthetic prowess to forward innovation. The more the creative thinker is involved in the process of innovation and responsible for its consequences, the richer our world.

Walking along the canyon floor that day in Moab, we could not help but marvel at the landscape. The delicate stone arches and towering cliffs etched by erosion; water and wind slowly carving a beautiful work of art. What used to be sea is now desert, and yet delicate plants give root in this arid environment despite all odds. Had we focused on our current situation in that moment at the cliff's edge and given in to fear of the unknown, we would have missed the breathtaking view one can only experience dangling high above the canyon floor. The view of prevailing reality is narrow; it gives way to misconception, a desire to hold on to the past, and a desperate search for security in the present. Look beyond the horizon—opportunities in the future of work and life are boundless. **HOW**

Neil and Jen Baker Brown are design futurists, navigating the adventure that is life for the last 12 years in marriage and partnership across a variety of entrepreneurial endeavors and experiments. They have collaborated with others on projects ranging from an arts and event space in Manhattan, to a grassroots film festival; they have taught leadership development in Vietnam, coached young entrepreneurs, and built an agency to partner with early stage companies. You can consistently find them on the road and online. www.bakerbrownco.com @ [bakerbrownco](https://twitter.com/bakerbrownco)

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