The Importance of Responsive Design in Times of Crisis

In the span of a year, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically altered our way of life. Reshaping our public spaces and daily routines, as well as the ways we communicate and connect with others, the crisis has also demonstrated design's unique ability, as an industry, practice and product, to adapt and respond even in the most trying of times.

The World Design Organization (WDO)® has watched with great pride as designers around the world, both within our community and outside of it, have stepped up to offer their skills and resources to develop impactful solutions. There have been a multitude of design innovations aimed at lessening the spread of COVID-19, easing the social and economic burden and safeguarding public health and safety. From tangible product innovations like Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), pop-up isolation units, ventilators and hands-free door openers to harnessing communication design to encourage behavioural changes.

In the early months of 2020, a variety of online fundraisers, events, hackathons and panels were hosted. The depth of dedication is apparent within the content of these two journal volumes that span five continents with its submissions. From hospitals, to home offices, PPE to big data, remote design education to designing against loneliness, design has the capacity and thoughtfulness to affect every facet of our day-to-day routine.

WDO also sought to rally designers against the virus and partnered with IBM Design and Design for America (DFA) to launch the COVID-19 Design Challenge. Over a period of three weeks, this design sprint brought together over 225 industrial, graphic and UX designers and design educators from 33 countries to collaborate virtually and address some of the most urgent and important challenges of the pandemic in its early days.

This initiative produced a total of 30 open source solutions focused on the themes of awareness and communications, essential workers, vulnerable communities, remote learning and healthy habits. Some of these projects included at-home learning platforms, integrated COVID-19 navigation apps, safe behaviour education campaigns and communications support platforms for frontline workers. The entire list of proposed solutions can be viewed and leveraged by different communities at covid19designchallenge.org.

Collectively, all of the innovations established during this time will go on to act as a powerful reminder of design's agility and inventiveness in times of crisis. Design has been a key player in helping to break the spread of misinformation, and to keep those on the frontlines, and at home, empowered and protected. While much of 2020 has indeed been turbulent and heart-breaking for many, design has endeavoured to bring us and keep us together.

As we look towards recovery, we must make space for design thinking to act alongside cultural and political institutions to redesign public life and infrastructure. Together, we can continue to use design as a tool to support one another and rebuild some of what we have lost.

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