

**BROUGHT  
TO YOU  
BY THE  
LETTER**

**Part sweat lodge,  
part think tank,  
John Bielenberg's  
Project M teaches  
passionate young  
designers why  
it's their job to  
change the world.**

BY ALISSA WALKER

ILLUSTRATION BY  
KATHERINE STREETER

Project M

2003



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- 1 In 2001, John Bielenberg chose this 100-year-old farmhouse in Belfast, ME, as the Project M headquarters.
- 2 Project M is a casual program, as evidenced by this brainstorming session next to the barn. Left to right: Nic Taylor, Dan Covert, Bonnie Berry, Satoru Nihei, Jimm Lasser, Christian Helms and Rachel Cellinese.
- 3 The 2003 project resulted in a book introducing the "think wrong" concept. It was selected for the AIGA's 50 Books/50 Covers exhibit.

# project m

is tucked into a quiet town on

**the rocky coast of Maine. Every summer, M attracts a trickle of fresh-faced designers. People with names like Sagmeister appear in the woods to work with M. M takes on international clients. At a national design conference, M is featured on a panel. M is promoted in schools. M produces two books. In job interviews, alumni mention they're part of M and receive knowing nods. But what is M? In 2003, John Bielenberg lured Project M's first class to Maine without telling them much more than this. So that's the perfect place to begin.**

## mystery

"Project M is similar to the Middle Ages' apprenticeship, where a child gets sent off to live with someone like DaVinci," says Bryce Howitson (M'04).

Andre Andreev (M'04) says it's like riding a roller-coaster in the dark without a seat belt. "You don't know what to expect or on what turn you might fly off."

Not even M advisors, like Volume/SF principal Eric Heiman, know all the details: "I knew there was going to be a select group of students and other visiting advisors like Art Chantry and Mark Fox, but everything else was a mystery until I got to Maine."

## maine

In 2001, Bielenberg moved his family from San Francisco to a 100-year-old farmhouse in the tiny town of Belfast, ME. "Belfast seemed to have a lot of what we needed," Bielenberg says. "Natural beauty, liberal attitudes, interesting people and relatively low cost of living." Here, where the continental U.S. breaks into

a jagged beard of evergreen islands scattered along Penobscot Bay, he established the Bielenberg Institute at the Edge of the Earth, a home for Project M.

If an internship prepares graduating designers for their profession, Project M prepares fledgling creatives for the possibilities beyond their profession. The M officially stands for three things: Maine, messages and Mockbee, as in Samuel Mockbee, an Alabama architecture professor who found a way to make pretty structures stand for something more meaningful. Bielenberg brings a handful of the brightest young creatives to Maine and challenges them to make messages that promote social change.

Although he still commutes to San Francisco to work at his partnership, C2, Bielenberg uses his East Coast "utopia" as a quiet place to contemplate bigger issues. He holds M here for the same reason: to reset the students' brains. "It really shows how important it is to shift your comfort zone to really get to a creative solution," says Jimm Lasser (M'03). "We were tossed together in a farmhouse in dirt Maine. That forced us to reach further."

Kodiak Starr (M'05) grew up in Maine and was surprised to return there. "It's pretty ironic: I moved from Maine to New York City to learn about the design world and somehow ended up in the last place I thought I would be," he says. "Some of my best ideas have come about while sitting on a pier at 12 a.m. with a bunch of rough Mainers, drinking a beer. This is a very important part of Project M. It's not a luxury design camp. It's about coming to a place that's very different from what you're used to."

## month

Project M runs from late-May through June each year. There's no schedule, no curriculum, no deadlines. Even the itinerary is improvised. The 2004 class divided their time between working in Maine and trekking through a rainforest preserve in Costa Rica. The 2005 class headed to Boston, New Hampshire and San Francisco. Although designed for recent college graduates, Bielenberg will also admit worthy seniors; the class sizes have ranged from seven to two.

"It's not so structured that you're following a predetermined path," says Christian Helms, who was part of the inaugural, and most experimental, class. "That sort of openness nurtures boundless possibility and a sort of unbridled creativity that doesn't often occur in the classroom."

Many factors shape the program each year: the participants, the causes, the advisors, the weather, your own attitude, notes Starr, who was one of only two students in 2005 (Bielenberg selected them specifically as the most engaged and passionate applicants).

"John has this infectious nature but he doesn't interfere," says Nic Taylor (M'03). He does, however, provide them with two very crucial sources of inspiration: a model and a method.

## model

In Hale County, AL, in the early '90s, about one-third of the residents lived below the poverty level, and even

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2004

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more lived in sub-standard housing. It was here where Samuel “Sambo” Mockbee first brought his architecture students in 1993. He challenged them to design affordable homes and buildings that answered the needs of the locals with unique, modern structures. In the Rural Studio, as it was later named, students live alongside their clients, attending school-board meetings, securing project funding, holding barbecues, hanging drywall, “sharing the sweat.”

In 2000, Mockbee was awarded a MacArthur Foundation grant, widely known as the “genius” grant. That same year, Bielenberg saw Mockbee speak at California College of the Arts. “As I listened to his presentation about the architecture program he created in Alabama, I distinctly remember thinking, ‘Why isn’t there something like this for graphic design?’” Bielenberg says. He began planning his move to Maine to answer that call.

“Sambo believed that the real impact of his program would be felt when the students went off and carried the Rural Studio’s ideals into their own work,” Bielenberg says. “I am sincerely in awe of what they’ve been able to accomplish and can only hope to have a fraction of that effect.”

## method

But before Bielenberg could apply Mockbee’s ideas to the design world, he needed to lay the foundation for his project. Stefan Sagmeister introduced him to a concept that would transform his approach to solving

design problems and become the philosophical cornerstone of Project M. Human behavior requires that our brains follow very specific thought patterns. We learn the actions necessary to complete a certain task, and we repeat those actions to accomplish that task again and again. This is called heuristic bias. In the creative process, however, heuristic bias doesn’t work. It’s only by abandoning these habitual processes that we can find unexpected solutions.

“I had been exploring this idea of ‘thinking wrong’ about solving problems for awhile, and Stefan thought that I’d be interested in reading a book called ‘Thinking Course’ by Edward DeBono,” Bielenberg says. Bielenberg felt so strongly about this contrarian way of thinking that it became part of the “contract” that Project M students must sign.

## messages

Unbeknownst to Bielenberg, he was cultivating roots for Project M a decade before he brought the program to life. In 1991, when he was creative director of Bielenberg Design in San Francisco, Bielenberg founded Virtual Telemetrix, a faux company. Over nine years, he and a team of Bay Area designers generated collateral satirizing corporate communications. In 2000, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art purchased six projects for its permanent collection, effectively “acquiring” Virtual Telemetrix. The show’s opening parodied the most common party of the dot-com explosion: an initial public offering.

- 1 In 2004, Project M participants got to know their cause first-hand. Here they take a rainforest trek up to a research station on a volcano.
- 2 Dan Janzen founded the conservation area in Costa Rica that was the focus of Project M in 2004.
- 3 Back in Maine, the M participants designed and assembled the book soliciting donations for the Costa Rica rainforest-preservation program.
- 4 Early page layouts for the 2004 book about the Guanacaste Conservation Area in Costa Rica.

2005



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- 1 Kodiak Starr and Lucia Dinh were the only two participants selected for Project M in 2005.
- 2 Starr and Dinh used a potato print to create the logo for the Women's Trust of Pokuase Village.
- 3 The 2005 national AIGA conference in Boston was just one of the stops for the Project M Expedition Lab. Starr and Dinh used the ambulance to convey the "critical" need for mentoring within the design community.
- 4 These are just a few of the women in Ghana who have received funds to start new businesses from the Women's Trust.

Bielenberg used the Virtual Telemetrix project to make a statement about design's overblown importance in shaping visual culture. That idea also supports Project M: Students tackle real projects with real impact. The end product of each M session must be a piece of communication that informs the public about a cause assigned to the students. The possibilities for the solution itself are left wide open.

"If you go into a project and you know what the outcome of a certain process is, then most likely the final product is going to be very standard," Starr says. "Sure, it may be beautiful and very detailed, but it probably will just blend in to the million other nicely designed pieces."

The 2003 and 2004 classes each produced books. The 2003 book, which introduced the "think wrong" concept, was selected for AIGA's 50 Books/50 Covers exhibit. The class of 2004 created a book to solicit donations for a Costa Rica rainforest-preservation program. The 2005 class was handed three causes: an AIGA mentoring guide, the Women's Trust and the Family Life Center. Each message—the end result—is still a work-in-progress.

### mentoring

While serving on AIGA's national board from 2002 to 2005, Bielenberg was charged with creating a mentoring guide for designers. "After struggling with deciding how to approach this topic for a couple years, I thought that the young designers at Project M would

be perfect collaborators," he says. "Who better to define mentoring than those starting their careers?" The task was handed to the 2005 class, who named it Project Mentor.

"After three weeks of talking about mentoring and whether a guide would really help, we decided to buy an ambulance," Starr says. "We transformed the ambulance into the Project M Expedition Lab." An ambulance would convey how critical mentoring is to designers. Plus, as Starr's father pointed out to them, they could get a used one really cheap.

Starr and Lucia Dinh got permission to bring the converted ambulance inside the Hynes Convention Center during AIGA's biennial conference in Boston in September 2005, where M was featured on a panel. "From there, I'll be driving the ambulance around to different design events and studios, collecting dialogues and documenting successful mentoring programs," Starr says. The material will be compiled on a website and will be used to create a book and a DVD about the importance of mentoring for the design profession.

### microlending

In Wilmot Flat, NH, a few hours' drive from Belfast, ME, a woman named Dana Dakin is slowly transforming a village in Africa. In 2003, Dakin sold her car and traveled to the Pokuase Village, Ghana, to establish the Women's Trust, a microlending program that provides local women with loans as small as \$20—enough to

bring a Ghanaian family out of poverty. The 2005 M students traveled to Wilmot Flat to meet with Dakin and the Women's Trust director. "We just sat at the kitchen table and went over the whole program from the beginning to the future for two days," Starr says. "We slept in their guest rooms, cooked dinner together."

The M students were awed by the power of Dakin's commitment. "Not only did the small amounts of money make a big impact financially, the program also gave the women a voice to be heard and dignity to hold their heads up high," Dinh says.

Dinh and Starr created an identity system for the Women's Trust and are working on fund-raising materials. This year, Bielenberg plans to take M to Ghana to continue the project.

## miracles

Jim McNulty, a 2005 M adviser and printer's rep for Blanchette Press in Vancouver, British Columbia, frequently collaborates with Bielenberg. After introducing them to the Family Life Center, a residential-treatment program for teens with severe behavioral trauma, McNulty traveled with Dinh, Starr and Bielenberg to the Sebastopol, CA, organization. They were allowed inside the "circle," a group-therapy session, and McNulty remembers the conversation growing tense when a few teens started graphically describing their childhood.

"John and the M students got a full-frontal experience of what the Family Life Center program was all about," McNulty recalls. "Every hair on their heads was straight up, their eyes wide and their hearts connected. This is an M moment that will forever inform them as designers and people as to the true opportunity that they have been given to help express meaning in their work." For Dinh and Starr, this was the moment that turned design on its ear. "I realized that corporations don't need help," Dinh says. "These people need help."

McNulty notes that the most difficult part now is to translate that emotion into the appropriate message to solicit funds for the center, recently hit with budget cuts. "The M challenge for them is to use their personal connection to the situation in order to make a truly creative statement that will help others get a full sense of that organization," he says. McNulty will work as a liaison between the Family Life Center and the 2005 M class to achieve that goal.

## mission

This is the secret of M: starting small. M focuses on finding a tiny, righteous piece of the world that needs a voice and giving it the proper bullhorn. The power of microlending. Two kids and an ambulance. One man and farmhouse.

"John reinforced by example an idea I already held firmly—that one person can do anything if they want it enough and work hard to make it happen," says M'03 alum Helms. "Building on that, he showed us that employing other passionate and talented people can make things happen bigger, better and more quickly."

As they drift away from the Belfast harbor each summer, the M alumni realize the potential of their blossoming careers. "I think that sooner or later, anyone who views design as more than a day job will have to grapple with the catalytic power of their communication and how they will choose to use it," says M'04 participant Howitson.

Before their M experience, many had struggled to see the relevance of design. With their roles as designers redefined, they vow to similarly elevate the profession. "Project M is designed to hit these young people before they become disillusioned," Bielenberg says, "and inspire them with the idea that design has the potential to have a meaningful and positive effect on the world."

Giving them free license to use the most important M-word of all: Maybe. **HOW**

*Alissa Walker writes for and about designers. She lives in Hollywood, CA. [alissamarie@mac.com](mailto:alissamarie@mac.com)*

**JOHN BIELENBERG** BELFAST, ME [www.bielenberg.com](http://www.bielenberg.com)

# mind-bending

**John Bielenberg requires all students of Project M to sign a contract guaranteeing they'll "think wrong" in order to design right. Here he offers a crash course in taking your mind off-course.**

**1** **Avoid business as usual. Business as usual means doing what everyone else does. Which means that, most likely, no one will notice you enough to care about who you are, what you do or why you matter. If the goal is to get people to hear, understand, act and participate, the fact that they don't care poses a serious obstacle.**

**2** **Disrupt the status quo. Status quo is the commonly accepted way of doing business. The accepted way of doing business, while tried and true, can also be defined as old and tired and not conducive to new (and possibly more effective) ways of doing business. The tried and true might turn out to be the right solution in the end, but you won't know without first thinking wrong.**

**3** **Think outside the boundaries of heuristic bias. Heuristic biases are learned, predefined modes of thought that are necessary for human beings to perform their everyday functions. But operating solely within the bounds of heuristic biases when conducting business hinders creativity, inhibits breakthrough ideas and cripples problem-solving skills.**

**4** **Look for unexpected answers, as opposed to merely satisfactory ones. When solving problems, it's best to begin by generating as many ideas as possible rather than working toward one preconceived solution. Trying to arrive at the "correct" solution precludes infinite superior possibilities.**

**5** **Apply radically different perceptions, concepts and entry points to problems. Breakthrough thinking requires multiple ways of looking at ourselves, our objectives, our audiences and our messages. By using all ways of seeing our challenge (from a macro view, a micro view and every other view in between), we're more likely to discover significantly higher-impact ways of doing things.**

**6** **Have the courage to try what hasn't been tried before. If something hasn't been done before, it's not because it was a bad idea. It's usually because it hasn't been conceived of yet or has been dismissed because it was deemed unusual, high-risk, politically incorrect, disruptive or just plain wacky. You'll need courage to follow through with an untested, great idea.**

**7** **Embrace ideas that might at first seem stupid. A stupid idea often leads to a perfect idea, one that never could have been conceived without first contemplating the stupid idea. Judgment of what's stupid and what's uncommon must be suspended until a truly powerful idea can be generated.**