

An Incomplete Manifesto for Growth (and design) Bruce Mau

Written in 1998, the Incomplete Manifesto is an articulation of statements that exemplify Bruce Mau's beliefs, motivations and strategies. It also articulates how the BMD studio works.

1. Allow events to change you. You have to be willing to grow. Growth is different from something that happens to you. You produce it. You live it. The prerequisites for growth: the openness to experience events and the willingness to be changed by them.
2. Forget about good. Good is a known quantity. Good is what we all agree on. Growth is not necessarily good. Growth is an exploration of unlit recesses that may or may not yield to our research. As long as you stick to good you'll never have real growth.
3. Process is more important than outcome. When the outcome drives the process we will only ever go to where we've already been. If process drives outcome we may not know where we're going, but we will know we want to be there.
4. Love your experiments (as you would an ugly child). Joy is the engine of growth. Exploit the liberty in casting your work as beautiful experiments, iterations, attempts, trials, and errors. Take the long view and allow yourself the fun of failure every day.
5. Go deep. The deeper you go the more likely you will discover something of value.
6. Capture accidents. The wrong answer is the right answer in search of a different question. Collect wrong answers as part of the process. Ask different questions.
7. Study. A studio is a place of study. Use the necessity of production as an excuse to study. Everyone will benefit.
8. Drift. Allow yourself to wander aimlessly. Explore adjacencies. Lack judgment. Postpone criticism.
9. Begin anywhere. John Cage tells us that not knowing where to begin is a common form of paralysis. His advice: begin anywhere.
10. Everyone is a leader. Growth happens. Whenever it does, allow it to emerge. Learn to follow when it makes sense. Let anyone lead.
11. Harvest ideas. Edit applications. Ideas need a dynamic, fluid, generous environment to sustain life. Applications, on the other hand, benefit from critical rigor. Produce a high ratio of ideas to applications.
12. Keep moving. The market and its operations have a tendency to reinforce success. Resist it. Allow failure and migration to be part of your practice.
13. Slow down. Desynchronize from standard time frames and surprising opportunities may present themselves.
14. Don't be cool. Cool is conservative fear dressed in black. Free yourself from limits of this sort.
15. Ask stupid questions. Growth is fueled by desire and innocence. Assess the answer, not the question. Imagine learning throughout your life at the rate of an infant.

16. Collaborate. The space between people working together is filled with conflict, friction, strife, exhilaration, delight, and vast creative potential.
17. —————. Intentionally left blank. Allow space for the ideas you haven't had yet, and for the ideas of others.
18. Stay up late. Strange things happen when you've gone too far, been up too long, worked too hard, and you're separated from the rest of the world.
19. Work the metaphor. Every object has the capacity to stand for something other than what is apparent. Work on what it stands for.
20. Be careful to take risks. Time is genetic. Today is the child of yesterday and the parent of tomorrow. The work you produce today will create your future.
21. Repeat yourself. If you like it, do it again. If you don't like it, do it again.
22. Make your own tools. Hybridize your tools in order to build unique things. Even simple tools that are your own can yield entirely new avenues of exploration. Remember, tools amplify our capacities, so even a small tool can make a big difference.
23. Stand on someone's shoulders. You can travel farther carried on the accomplishments of those who came before you. And the view is so much better.
24. Avoid software. The problem with software is that everyone has it.
25. Don't clean your desk. You might find something in the morning that you can't see tonight.
26. Don't enter awards competitions. Just don't. It's not good for you.
27. Read only left-hand pages. Marshall McLuhan did this. By decreasing the amount of information, we leave room for what he called our "noodle."
28. Make new words. Expand the lexicon. The new conditions demand a new way of thinking. The thinking demands new forms of expression. The expression generates new conditions.
29. Think with your mind. Forget technology. Creativity is not device-dependent.
30. Organization = Liberty. Real innovation in design, or any other field, happens in context. That context is usually some form of cooperatively managed enterprise. Frank Gehry, for instance, is only able to realize Bilbao because his studio can deliver it on budget. The myth of a split between "creatives" and "suits" is what Leonard Cohen calls a 'charming artifact of the past.'
31. Don't borrow money. Once again, Frank Gehry's advice. By maintaining financial control, we maintain creative control. It's not exactly rocket science, but it's surprising how hard it is to maintain this discipline, and how many have failed.
32. Listen carefully. Every collaborator who enters our orbit brings with him or her a world more strange and complex than any we could ever hope to imagine. By listening to the details and the subtlety of their needs, desires, or ambitions, we fold their world onto our own. Neither party will ever be the same.
33. Take field trips. The bandwidth of the world is greater than that of your TV set, or the Internet, or even a totally immersive, interactive, dynamically rendered, object-oriented, real-time, computer graphic-simulated environment.
34. Make mistakes faster. This isn't my idea — I borrowed it. I think it belongs to Andy Grove.

35. Imitate. Don't be shy about it. Try to get as close as you can. You'll never get all the way, and the separation might be truly remarkable. We have only to look to Richard Hamilton and his version of Marcel Duchamp's large glass to see how rich, discredited, and underused imitation is as a technique.

36. Scat. When you forget the words, do what Ella did: make up something else ... but not words.

37. Break it, stretch it, bend it, crush it, crack it, fold it.

38. Explore the other edge. Great liberty exists when we avoid trying to run with the technological pack. We can't find the leading edge because it's trampled underfoot. Try using old-tech equipment made obsolete by an economic cycle but still rich with potential.

39. Coffee breaks, cab rides, green rooms. Real growth often happens outside of where we intend it to, in the interstitial spaces — what Dr. Seuss calls "the waiting place." Hans Ulrich Obrist once organized a science and art conference with all of the infrastructure of a conference — the parties, chats, lunches, airport arrivals — but with no actual conference. Apparently it was hugely successful and spawned many ongoing collaborations.

40. Avoid fields. Jump fences. Disciplinary boundaries and regulatory regimes are attempts to control the wilding of creative life. They are often understandable efforts to order what are manifold, complex, evolutionary processes. Our job is to jump the fences and cross the fields.

41. Laugh. People visiting the studio often comment on how much we laugh. Since I've become aware of this, I use it as a barometer of how comfortably we are expressing ourselves.

42. Remember. Growth is only possible as a product of history. Without memory, innovation is merely novelty. History gives growth a direction. But a memory is never perfect. Every memory is a degraded or composite image of a previous moment or event. That's what makes us aware of its quality as a past and not a present. It means that every memory is new, a partial construct different from its source, and, as such, a potential for growth itself.

43. Power to the people. Play can only happen when people feel they have control over their lives. We can't be free agents if we're not free.

Bruce Mau Design Philosophy: (How he runs the office practice)

1. It takes two (or three or four). Collaboration is our wellspring - both within the studio and without. We enter into projects looking for the work that lies between our clients' ventures and our studio practice, finding that area where we can make the greatest contribution. This inevitably results in our opening up a terrain we can't enter into alone, and the absolute necessity for collaborative efforts.

2. We see projects, not accounts. This follows from the first point and explains why many of our clients have been with us for a decade or more. Zone, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Getty Center, Gehry Partners, all have stayed with us because our methods respect the integrity of their projects. Our clients come to us with ambitions that we can build on. They are ongoing projects that are never "closed".

3. We see readers, not viewers. We privilege the receivers of our work as readers - as people who are intelligent and appreciative of subtlety. Doing so expands the possibilities for more sophisticated levels of communication - for active involvement rather than passive reception - which in the end gives our work greater resonance and a more lasting effect.

4. The root of studio. We look at the studio as a place of study in service to its projects. Admittedly, this is partly selfish, a product of the desire for continual growth and a constitutional aversion to complacency. Our projects, and the intensive research we favour, provoke us to learn about the world, and we are enriched and changed by that level of engagement. But this rigorous process has also proven to be the

way to produce the best people with the highest capacity for tackling the most difficult projects. It is a process that produces work that cannot be arrived at by other means.

5. Re-Iteration moves design upstream. Solving a design problem is not a linear practice; it's an iterative one. Rather than focusing at the outset on producing that "perfect" thing, our method is loose and consequently very productive. All of the "what" questions are asked through a process that sketches out possibilities to their logical conclusions. We visualize a range of ideas to the point that we can say to our clients, "this is actually what you are asking us to do." This affords our clients the ability to see business decisions and their attendant implications early in the process - before design of the end product even begins.

6. Upstream the water's deeper. Rather than flowing down river, we prefer to labour against the current, to resist the simple solution, because that's where we find the real opportunity within a project. It's also where our contributions will have the greatest resonance.

7. We love things. And we love making them. We aspire to a level of quality you could call perfection, but it is more multifarious than that word implies; it comes out of a real love for the tactile object, for things that are beautiful, clever, unexpected. One of the ways this is manifest in the studio is that we make production part of the process - our creative input does not cease until the receiver sets their eyes or hands upon it.

8. The studio is not a tree. The studio's trajectory could best be described as rolling. Our capacity is constantly evolving in response to projects undertaken and as a defense against unhappiness. Our collective desire is to maintain a long life of real contribution - something we cannot maintain through repetitive practices. We want to grow in terms of what we are capable of, and technology has complied by advancing to the point that such an ambition is attainable.

9. We're claustrophobic. Not unrelated to the statement above, but with an addendum. Actually, it is the crux of the practice: we don't like boundaries. What drives client/studio collaboration is that we say, forget about what is usually done in this situation, let's look at what makes the most sense, what is the most exciting, what produces the best results, what is the most beautiful. If we feel we are contributing something of value, our ambition has no boundaries.

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