

STEVEN SKOVHOLT

Stanford design alumnus



STEVEN SKOV HOLT, who earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in design at Stanford University in 1992, was a visionary – it literally said so on his business card!

A native of rural Connecticut, Holt began his studies at Boston Architectural College and then transferred to Brown University where he completed a bachelor's degree in cognitive science. An early interest in design and the built environment eventually led Holt to graduate education at Stanford, but it was losing kidney function and going on a dialysis machine at age 19 that gave Holt the powers of determination and empathy that he would draw on over his life.

After college in 1982, well before his formal education in product design, “Holt answered an ad for a low-level job at Manhattan-based ID Magazine, the bible of industrial design. Within a year, the intense Holt was editor of the magazine that spotted and helped shape trends...” This experience would lead Holt to a stellar career of designing, writing, publishing, curating and educating, all while struggling with his health. He died of complications of kidney failure in 2015.

Casual athletic shoes – “sneakers” – fascinated Holt. His MFA thesis project “was about deconstructing the sneaker, literally blowing up the shoe into its constituent parts.” This “blowing up” approach served Holt creatively and conceptually as he developed an intellectual interest in “post-market product alteration,”

https://alumni.stanford.edu/get/page/magazine/article/?article_id=34006

<https://professor-stevenskovholt.com/2014/06/13/the-professor-finds-a-pair>

a term he used to describe how people customize products – cars, tools, clothing, appliances – to make them better, or at least make them different.

Holt even considered pursuing the topic through a research degree. “The Professor [Holt’s self-referential name used on his blog] had discussions in 1991 and 1992 with several professors at Stanford University, including Jim Adams, Bill Moggridge and David Kelley, about staying on for a Ph.D if he could find a way to do his doctoral thesis in PMPA (Post-Market Product Alteration) studies; it was determined to be too interdisciplinary of an idea to find a sponsoring department on campus.”

Holt’s absorption with post-market product alteration, an aspect of “post-credible culture” – his preferred term for post-Modernism – culminated in the co-curation of the exhibition Manuf@ctured: The Conspicuous Transformation of Everyday Objects for the Museum of Contemporary Craft in 2008. The notion of alteration extended to none other than his wife and exhibit co-curator Mara Holt Skov, as they each took the other’s last name as their legal middle names, an example of Holt’s relentless and unorthodox life-long creative project. That “holt” and “skov” mean forest in both late middle English and Danish respectively was not lost on the couple as a form of word play related to growth and nature.

Steven Skov Holt’s resume reads like an all-star roster of design firms and A-list experiences. He became Visionary and Vice President of Creative Culture at frog, Hartmutt Esslinger’s storied Silicon Valley design firm. Holt had stints at Tucker Viemeister’s Smart Design, and at Zebra Design. He co-curated the sneakers show Design Afoot with Aaron Betsky for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in the year 2000. In the same year, Holt curated the product design category of Design Culture Now: National

Design Triennial at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum. Holt co-founded the product design program at the Parsons School of Design in New York. In 1994 he began his long affiliation with the California College of the Arts, where Holt became the Distinguished Professor of Industrial Design and dove deeply into design education related to sports, sustainability and technology. In 2003, the Industrial Design Society of America awarded Holt the Career Award in Education. In 2005, he and his wife Skov co-curated the exhibit and published the book *Blobjects & Beyond: The New Fluidity in Design* for the San José Museum of Art.

What was Stanford’s role in Holt’s success? Perhaps it was a mix of the campus environment, resources and facilities, combined with stimulating faculty and creative classmates.

But Holt also experienced self-doubt, caused in part by being troubled with his brother’s military service in the 1992 Gulf War in Iraq:

“To counter his what-the-hell-am-I-doing-here-at-Stanford feelings, The Professor left the Design Loft – the studio shared by the grad students who were undertaking their thesis projects – and turned to drawing and painting; he practically became a resident at the school’s printmaking studio. He painted on copies of the *Stanford Daily* newspaper; all taken from the same date, and all with the same boldfaced headline “US DECLARES WAR.” The Professor – essentially unschooled as a painter – began to render camouflage, map imagery, targets and explosion-like patterns atop first page after first page of the paper. The Professor also learned to do monotype prints, and once he had the press technique dialed in, he experimented using photocopied images from newspapers, spray paint, tempera, acrylic paint, and dry pastels in various combinations.”

<https://professor-stevenskovholt.com/2014/11/13/the-professor-speaketh-the-international-design-conference-in-aspen>

<https://professor-stevenskovholt.com/2014/10/31/the-professor-opines-on-when-design-matters>

Mara Holt Skov
conversation with
author. 2018

Holt's widow recalls his "tricky time" at Stanford due to not feeling accepted by the engineering side of Stanford's Joint Program in Design. Mechanical Engineering professor Jim Adams was a supporter and friend, however, who went to Skov and Holt's wedding. On the Art side, Holt was not a fan of Matt Kahn's teaching; Kahn was critical of Holt because he did not produce "beautiful things."

The quote about the anti-war posters emphatically shows the influence on Holt of being in a fine art environment, which appears to have welcomed Holt's personal explorations, his creativity, his social activism and his intellectual curiosity – elements that served him well over his career and life.