

# Missing a Type of Design: a review of Make It New: The History of Silicon Valley Design by Barry M. Katz

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## BOOK REVIEW

# Missing a Type of Design: a review of *Make It New: The History of Silicon Valley Design* by Barry M. Katz

Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2015, 280pp.,  
32 colour illustrations.,  
Hardback, ISBN 9780262029636. \$29.95 / £22.95.  
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**Steven McCarthy**



*Make It New: The History of Silicon Valley Design* by Barry Katz is seemingly written by two people – one, an erudite scholar who has thoroughly researched the topic, and two, a lively insider with riveting stories to tell about his friends and colleagues. Katz succeeds with these two voices because they hold each other in balance. The book's rich array of facts, dates, names and places is delivered in an academically conversational tone

that effectively describes and analyses design's role in California's Silicon Valley over 60 years.

The basic structure of the book is a chronology arranged into six chapters. The chapters' various themes – historical context, research and development, 'sea change', design genealogy, education and the future – enable Katz to slide back and jump forward with ease. From the foundations of William Hewlett and David Packard's eponymously named corporation, to the influential research at Xerox PARC, to legendary Steve Jobs and Jonathan Ive at Apple, to global design company IDEO, to Facebook and Google today, the book tells of design's evolutionary and revolutionary impact on technology, commerce and culture.

Interconnectedness, ideology, collaboration and competition emerge as driving forces among the area's in-house corporate industrial design departments, independent design think tanks, and product design and engineering consultancies. Design education programs at Stanford University, San José State University and the California College of Art provided Silicon Valley with a trained workforce and gave professional designers adjunct teaching opportunities. The history of the latter school, while fascinating in its own right as told by one of its faculty, was not convincingly linked to 'Silicon Valley design'.

Katz acknowledges in passing that women designers were rarities in the engineering and technology dominated Silicon Valley of the 1950s, '60s and '70s. When the domain of design expanded in the 1980s and beyond to include considerations of user-centeredness, gaming, anthropology, interface and education, women like Susan Kare (Apple, Next) and Brenda Laurel (Atari Labs, Interval Research Corporation) began to achieve equal footing. The relative success of women in Silicon Valley since then – 'the Valley of the dudes' (Schumpeter, 2015) – shows that it is still a slippery slope.

Missing from Katz' history is the inclusion of Sara Little Turnbull, a dynamo who ran the Process of Change: Laboratory for Innovation and Design at Stanford's Graduate School of Business from 1988 to 2006. With a previous record of blue-chip corporate consulting – General Mills, 3M, Motorola, Corning Glass and NASA, among others – Little's world travels and teeming materials lab served as a campus resource for more than just business and engineering students. Her interest in 'applied cultural anthropology' (McFadden, 2015) emphasized humanistic design when much of Silicon Valley put the widget first.

Katz admits that his history ('*the history ...*' declares itself as monolithic) focuses on the design of Silicon Valley's main products, primarily electronic hardware and software, and therefore doesn't address architecture, fashion, graphics, furniture or other less regionally situated design forms. Nor can the book include every person, company or design, as shown above with Sara Little Turnbull. This is a reasonable parameter, with one exception: digital typography.

Stanford computer science professor Donald Knuth's pioneering work on TEX and Metafont, and the designs of his computer science colleague and typographer Charles Bigelow, are seminal to digital typography and an essential part of design in Silicon Valley. Bigelow's Lucida typeface addressed screen resolution and bit-map printing challenges in the early 1980s, paving the way for the desk-top publishing revolution.

Bigelow's former grad student Carol Twombly, Richard Slimbach and Sumner Stone, all Adobe type designers, are additional relevant names worthy of noting. All contributed to visual and textual communications, enabled by Postscript software and embedded in programs like InDesign, Illustrator and Photoshop, that emanated from Silicon Valley to the world.

Across the Bay in Berkeley, Zuzana Licko of Emigre (a digital foundry and experimental magazine) used an Apple Macintosh to create bitmapped and vector-based type designs that became the vocabulary of graphic design's avant garde from the mid-1980s through the 1990s. These digital typographers' combined innovations certainly involved Silicon Valley technology and commerce, and addressed the cultural side of design through message, style, expression and meaning. Indeed, it can be said with some certainty that Katz' book – typeset in Futura and open source Gentium – could not exist without their breakthroughs in digital legibility and readability.

Another topic for expansion is the role of visual art in design education, as Katz assigns a somewhat marginal role to the Art Department in Stanford's joint graduate program. Besides Professor Matt Kahn, whose experiences were in interiors, jewellery design and highly-stylized fine art painting, two other former art-design faculty deserve mention. Jan Molenkamp, who taught there in the 1970s, and Greg Lynch, throughout the '80s and early '90s, were more classically defined graphic designers. Students in the joint design program, artists and engineers alike, benefitted from their knowledge and creativity. Molenkamp taught typography to 'a youthful David Kelley' (House and Price, 2009) current Stanford professor, cofounder of the celebrated d.school and of the design company IDEO. Lynch maintained a consulting practice with many high tech clients.

Speaking of graphically-oriented design, this review will also address the physical and visual nature of *Make It New: The History of Silicon Valley Design*. The book is unexpectedly heavy for its size, even for a hardbound book. This is due to coated paper being used, which makes the coloured pictures print well, but the heightened reflectivity and black text on bright white stock tend to fatigue the reader.

Three graphic devices would improve the book as a user-oriented interface: a timeline (ideal for chronologies), a map (to show the places ranging over Bay Area geography) and, for the 52 pages

of endnotes, the use of marginalia, so the reader does not have to keep flipping back and forth. No graphic designer is credited with the book's design.

A minor error occurs on page 79, when Katz refers to the Apple Macintosh's 'keyboard graphics executed in a slanted Garamond typeface ...' – Garamond (a serif typeface derived from Claude Garamond's 16<sup>th</sup> century design) was Apple's corporate logotype and advertising face; the Mac keyboard featured Adrian Frutiger's 1957 sans serif typeface Univers oblique ('italic'). Omitting the influence of digital typography might be interpreted as an intellectual choice; calling Univers 'Garamond' is a typographic kick in the shin!

Additionally, it is surprising, knowing the rigour of MIT Press' editorial process, that the book contains a number of typos: 'adademy', 'Stuttgart', 'Pprofessor', 'ihe', missing and extra parentheses, and several inverted quotation marks and apostrophes. I do not blame Katz – it is the responsibility of the MIT Press to exercise quality control.

These are irritants, and largely superficial criticisms. Katz has written a fine book. To return to the book's content, *Make It New: The History of Silicon Valley Design* is a page-turner. I read it in three days. The stories cascade, splash, pool and reflect. Katz writes with style and is not above the occasional self-deprecating jab. His insider position (faculty member at California College of Art, consulting professor at Stanford University, and IDEO Fellow) gives the topic more depth and insight than a typical scholarly work would allow.

The end of the last chapter concludes with how some Silicon Valley designers are taking a 'social turn' – seeking to solve the world's wicked problems through design for social justice, sustainability, health care, poverty and education. Consideration of humanity, ethics and morality now appear to compete with the Valley's quest for technical supremacy, handsome profits, exponential growth and unrestrained ego.

To reference one of the book's central success stories, perhaps a solution is at hand. Apple's current '\$203 billion in cash reserves' (Meyer, 2015) – a value largely created by design – can be redirected to fund some of these altruistic initiatives. To provide context, this figure is about three times the reserves of the US federal government. What does this mean – does Apple over-charge for its products? Under-pay its employees, including out-sourced labour in other countries? Not return value to its shareholders? If ethical and moral concerns are now part of Silicon Valley's design culture, these are legitimate questions.

Lastly, *Make It New: The History of Silicon Valley Design* should be titled *A History ...* as different points of view acknowledge the relative importance of the myriad stories that comprise Silicon Valley lore. Foreword writer John Maeda describes Katz's 'wide-eyed excitement', an infectious quality that propels the story-telling while

also revealing the author's point of view as being largely complimentary and only slightly critical.

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## Biography

*Steven McCarthy* (MFA Design, Stanford University) is a professor of graphic design at the University of Minnesota. His long-standing interest in design authorship – as curator, scholar and practitioner – has led to lectures, exhibits, publications and grant-funded research in over a dozen countries. In 2013, McCarthy authored the book *The Designer As ... Author, Producer, Activist, Entrepreneur, Curator and Collaborator: New Models for Communicating* (BIS Publishers, Amsterdam).