Design education began in the studios of Europe during the Renaissance, masters used apprentices to help complete the work at hand. During the nineteenth century, this was formalized further with the foundation of academies where the training could take place. Foremost among these was the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, established by Louis XIV. The Beaux-Arts approach was largely one of letting students "do their own thing." In the studio, teaching them to use the tools of the trade, but providing very little instruction in theory. Despite its shortcomings, Beaux-Arts is the dominant style of art and design education even today.

There is a better way, however. It derives directly from the Bauhaus, a school founded in 1919 by Walter Gropius. The Bauhaus is renowned for its unique emphasis on unity, its unity in theory. Despite fundamental differences within the faculty, Gropius was somehow able to unite his instructors in a commitment to this unity. No institution before or since has had equal impact on the course of design history.

- Before following the influence of the Bauhaus across the Atlantic, a degeneration is in order. The impact of the Bauhaus makes far more sense when considered in relation to a map of design types.

- Every product has performance and appearance. Performance, what a product does, is described by its name: toaster, newspaper, airplane, etc. The goal of performance design is to produce the most efficient and economical product possible. Appearance is the composite of messages deliberately added to products to control the viewer's responses. Pure appearance products include jewelry, monuments, neckties, and artworks.

- Clearly, a continuum exists between pure performance and pure appearance. Numerical values can be assigned to positions on this continuum, and the result is what I have christened the XAP scale. XAP 0 (rounded cap means x) is XAP 0.

- At XAP 1, there is a 1:1 identity between the product and the use for which it is intended. Products are pure mechanisms, like paper clips, handtaps, jackscrews, and perhaps jet fighters. At XAP 5 are products which are half performance and half appearance: the Cherry Impala, with its grille, opera windows, and wood-grain wall panels. Most big-selling commercial products are XAP 5. Luxury products are positioned at XAP 25; fine furniture, stereo hi-fi, armchair, mark coats, Rolls Royces. A Rolls costs $65,000 and is 25 times as much car as you need to get around. At XAP 25 one finds King Tut's burial artifacts, Versailles, and some shiek's solid-gold, tiger-upholstered, bulletproof limousine.

- Now, if we construct a chart with the XAP scale as its vertical axis and time as the horizontal one (placing old at the left, new in the center, and now at the right) we have the map of design types.
Clustering around XAP 1, we have five classes of design: humanist, minimalist, ergonomist, methodologist, and basist. Humanist design, with its strong do-good attitude, tries to help the lame, aged, sick, and poor; it pays the minimum attention to the objects it designs. Mechanist and ergonomist designs produce the unsung machine: weapons, canoes, commercial cookware. Basist design is a hybrid of mechanist, methodologist and purist designs: it emphasizes honest usefulness in the product, but strives for a simple, clean, "for the ages" appearance.

At XAP 2, we have commercial design. It actually covers much of the center of the chart, since it often mimics periods earlier or later than the present; commercial culture often imitates earlier styles; commercial automobiles once used fins to evoke the spirit of the future. But commercial design is firmly rooted in now: it is planned to sell big. It appears to the masses because it is expensive-looking on the outside and cheap on the inside. Purist design looks to tomorrow, expecting it will be much like today, only more so: it lacks the conviction of ultimate solutions which purists and expressionists have.

Towards the top end of the XAP scale, we find elitist, purist, and expressionist design. They share a lack of interest in the mundane function of an object. But whereas elitist design is living in the past, seeking to emulate the true and beautiful of all previous time, purism and expressionism seek to look toward, isolate perfection, and standardize the present. Purism streamlines high order and simplicity while using fine materials and craftsmanship; expressionism is highly individualized; the result is of some artist's gut feelings. Most Bauhaus instructors could be labeled either purists or expressionists. Among the purists were Albers, Bayer, and Mies; among the expressionists were Klee, Feininger, and Kandinsky.

So the Bauhaus, with its commitment to theory and its composition of purists and expressionists, clearly seized the high ground on the map of design types. By the late 1930's, the Bauhaus was beginning to be known in this country. But it took the extraordinary genius of Walter Paepcke to see how the situation could be harnessed to benefit commercial enterprises. He looked first at the image of Container Corporation, and set about systematically using Bauhaus and company's advertising. The effect was new, intellectual, and high-brow. (Bayer, Matter, Chassander, and Kepes were among the artists Paepcke tapped prior to 1940.)

Instructively, Paepcke went for the finest form of corporate identity: the "identity program," which occurs only when the man in charge of a company takes a personal interest and "pulls" the program through, turning it over to competent directors who are charged to find the best talent they can lay their hands on, and otherwise are given very little instruction other than to do the best they can and "not screw up." A second kind of corporate identity program, which might be called a "control program," occurs when an outside designer is brought in to design a new logo, select a typeface, and create a corporate design manual so big you shouldn’t drop it on your foot. Whereas a man like Paepcke pulls the design program through his company, this second type of design program must be pushed through by a few designers at the bottom of the corporate hill. Frequently, they feel as if they are trying to hold up that hill. (A third type of corporate identity is that of the individual-format company, like Procter & Gamble, which basically wishes to recede and allows its individual brand names to capture the attention of the marketplace.)

There have been and continue to be only a few quality-type corporate identity programs. Herman Miller, CBS, Bang & Olufsen, IBM, and Olivetti come to mind in addition to Container. The risk in the quality program is: what I call the war fish syndrome. Because so much high-powered design talent is put to work, and that talent abates repeating anything done before, the pressure for new ideas becomes intense, resulting in more and more daring solutions to design problems. When you open the latest piece of corporate communication, the shock is akin to being hit in the face with a wet fish. The results always win awards in design competitions, but frequently they are prime examples of noncommunication.

By 1937, Container’s own identity program was working so well that Paepcke was ready to start sharing Bauhaus ideas with others; he was a prime mover in the importation of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy to start the New Bauhaus. By 1939, when it became the School of Design, he had become practically its sole sponsor.

Paepcke is also the forward link to a later chapter in Chicago design history. For he was responsible for the presence in Chicago at one time or another of Ralph Eckerstrom (hired to be Container’s director of design at Herbert Bayer’s retirement in 1956), Massimo Vignelli (who did design work for Container in addition to his work as a teacher at the Institute of Design), and me. Paepcke went along with the recommendation of the commercial designers of Chicago to install me at ID in 1955. The result, in 1954, was Unimark.

When I was asked to come to the Institute of Design, I was executive designer with Raymond Loewy in New York, as well as vice-president of the Industrial Design Society of America. In the minds of students and faculty at the ID, I represented commercial design; the truth was that I had grown tired of Madison Avenue and most of what it represented. I was eager to get into the real world, where Keesey and Moholy had, and Mies now, held court in Crown Hall, the iron Parthenon of the south side.

What I found at the ID was a schism. Here was Mies, following a wholly purist approach, demanding that things be done his way or no way. He was absolutely uncompromising, which may well have been both the source of his greatness and the reason history may not deal favorably with a great deal of his work.

Then there was Moholy with his experiments, doing one, leaving that lead to four more, which in turn led to 16 experiments. I found it a daddling approach, where nothing was ever finished.

So here I was, the commercial designer, embossed with the king of purism in the hotbed of experimentalism. What do I do? I felt I had little choice but to see if I could have my own kind of school, a basic design school. We would go back and design very simple, straightforward, elegant things, and forget about experimentalism and purism. That was what we did. Gropius had a profound understanding of this problem. He wrote a letter to the AIA journal, talking about Frank Lloyd Wright, which clearly elucidates the problem of influence on students when a school devotes itself to the promulgating of a movement.

"Last year I visited Frank Lloyd Wright’s school in Taliesin which his widow can’t carry on after his death. I saw the work of several scores of students turning out without exception designs in the vocabulary of their great master. No independent approach could be found. This experience assured me again that such a method of education cannot be called creative, for it invites imitation and results in training assistants, not independent artists in their own right.

"When I started the Bauhaus as its responsible Director, I had come to the conclusion that an encompassing, subjective approach must block the innate budding expression of differently-talented students, as the teacher—even with the best intentions—impedes the results of his own thought and work on him. I have convinced myself that a good teacher must abstain from handing out his personal vocabulary to his student, but can exert himself only via dupes; that he should encourage the growth of independence in the student.

"Accordingly, handcraft in the workshops was right from the start, not an end in itself, but laboratory experiment preparatory to industrial production. If the initial products of the Bauhaus looked like individual craft products, this was a necessary detour for the groping student whom we avoided to prod with a foregone conclusion.

"We salvaged the best of experimental education and added to it a carefully constructed program of information-based design that produced noncommercial products that worked. It was a different school with different people and different goals in a different time. Our aim was to produce designers who had the will, the ability, and the ethical base to change American production for the better.

"I was somewhat concerned that this might be a middle-of-the-road position which would fail because it did not have the clarity of a polar position, such as purism or experimentalism. In fact, however, it succeeded: many of the students are doing important work all over the world."
I remained at the IIT through 1969. when a reorganization made it clear that the IIT's then administration was unenthusiastic to giving full support to the rapidly growing institute of design. But meanwhile, in 1964, I had joined with Eike Batista, Vignelli, and others in the founding of Unimark. A large part of what Unimark did was to automate design and market it to major American—
and international—industry. It was also proud of the commercial application of bastard design we were able to do, design which used minimum materials designed for highest performance, while maintaining excellent appearance. Neither the purist-expressionist design of Container's heyday nor the automated production of Unimark seemed particularly appropriate today. Graphic design that leans heavily on Helvetica laid out using grids is old hat. My hunch is that we are entering a new era of mechanized design (without the excitement over high-tech furniture); my hope is that it will be honest, carefully thought-out design, not simply a new commercial wrapping on the same old back approaches. Which leads us inevitably back to our starting point: design education. Today's designer is in an untenable position. However talented and well-trained, the designer's effectiveness is blocked by a visually illiterate public. An unprepared public that has been programmed to demand bad design and bad art presents overwhelming opposition. Today's designer can take only one of two positions: to design for a small, knowledgeable elite, or to compromise with mass demand. The solution to the enormous problem of visual illiteracy lies in the introduction of visual language into the educational system. A more visually sensitive public would demand better design, which would lead to a better environment. What's more, the failure to see accurately, in a structured way, results in an inability to separate the real from the symbolic world. For a century now, the public has grown further from reality as media communications, education, entertainment, and symbolic products have disconnected us. Only well-structured visual education can keep people in touch with reality. Design itself must move from practice to profession. A practice is the direct application of some sort of accumulated knowledge. If people break legs, then someone will try to fix them. Some people will develop skill at fixing broken legs and begin to tell each other how to do it, gradually distilling and passing along the most effective techniques. From this informal teaching of such practices, an educational program will be organized to teach practitioners. To structure that program requires analysis of a practice in order to develop the curriculum—what must be taught first, and how much of each subject. Once education gets organized, the educators begin to realize that pieces of the necessary knowledge are missing, which inevitably leads to research to fill the gaps. Once the research gets organized, the flow—practice-to-education-to-theory—reverses itself and becomes theory-to-education-to-practice. This reversal of flow is evidence that a practice has become a profession. Under this definition, design is still a practice, not a profession. So far design has gone from practice to education and stalled; it has not progressed to theory. There is no body of knowledge, no organized research, no downward flow of information from research to education to practice. The seed of the concept began at the Bauhaus in the experimental work of Gripsius and Moecky. Though there is great power in that seed of an idea, it has so far failed to take root and flourish in the schools of the world. It's up to us to become the gardeners.
Unimark International: Design Team
by Ralph Eckerstrom

Unimark was founded in 1965. The first name of the company was Eckerstrom, Bayer, Vignelli, Klein, and Foggelman. That was a Wednesday; on Thursday, it became Eckerstrom, Bayer, Vignelli, Klein, Foggelman, and Nooda. Then, after we had a meeting with Sub Moldafsky, it became Eckerstrom, Bayer, Vignelli, Klein, Foggelman, and Nooda. Obviously, that was not a very promising name, and if we were a problem solvers, that was not to start with our own company's name. Then Jim Foggelman came up with the name “Unimarketing.” With that name, we sounded a lot like the Kmart of design; fortunately it lasted for only a week. Part of the reason the government person responsible for name registration couldn’t believe a design firm would be called that... thank God for him.

Even if we didn’t have a name, we did have a concept. We felt that the profession needed a team style of organization, operating in many parts of the world and in many different areas of design. Included were graphic design, packaging, product design, and interiors. We also started out with the idea of being a team without a boss—all for one and one for all. We invested our money accordingly; at the beginning everyone put in the same amount. Part of the reason for this type of organization was due to Vignelli who has always had leftist inclinations.

Unimark’s work was influential, as a McDonald’s executive pointed out with his half-humorous suggestion that we had an institution akin to their Hamburger University. “Your hottest selling item is the grid. The graphic grid is as important to us as the French fries.” Then he added, “Look, Ralph; you’re really pushing the boat out, in terms of the financial value to Unimark. Your company’s use of Helvetica is comparable to our Big Mac.” Franchises these elements. Unfortunately, we did not follow his advice. We were not justifiable people. However, I believe we were shown in expressing our ideas and helping our clients, which is, after all, the basis for our kind of business. Even if we didn’t franchise our grids or gain a monopoly on Helvetica, the influence of our way of approaching design problems spread far and wide. Both our people and the work they did came to be the standard for comparison in many areas of design.