

A Personal History of AURAS Design

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IT'S HARD TO SEPARATE the story of AURAS from my own history. I have always wanted to be a graphic designer. I remember drawing Chevrolet chevrons in kindergarten. Throughout my school years, if there was any assignment that could be augmented with drawings or comic strips, that's what I'd do.

In high school, I took print shop instead of calculus—a move that landed me a session with the principal, who wanted to know why I was hanging with the trade-school kids instead of the ivy-league-bound SAT stars. But print shop proved to be very useful. I learned about prepress and typesetting (which in those days actually involved putting metal type into a chase) and began to produce design projects.

I have always tried to make AURAS a place where I would want to work and to be the kind of generous creative director who would teach and inspire rather than micromanage. I learned a lot from the bosses and workplaces of my early experiences in the field.

MY FIRST “REAL” JOB, working at a print shop called Colortone Press,

began with a humbling event. The owner, Al Hackle, was too cheap to have reset entire lines of type for the old mechanicals he wanted updated. Instead, he would have a hot-type vendor set small numbers and codes to be mortised into the old paste-ups—a tedious and exacting job that was really too meticulous for my nascent paste-up skills. Nevertheless, I knew the basics, and with great bravado, fed the type through the sheet waxer, only to realize I'd run it upside down. A goof, sure, but I knew a little solvent would take the wax right off. However, I'd only encountered phototype sheets, not hot-type copy made by inking the hot metal typeset lines on a proof press. The solvent dissolved the wax and also, to my horror, smeared the type beyond use. The production manager, an easy-going guy named Bill Meadows, gave me a huge amount of static—wondering who was going to pay to have it all reset—until he produced another proof sheet from the typesetter. Of course, little did I know that they sent multiple sets of copy for just such occurrences. I learned a valuable lesson—never claim to know how to do something when you just *think* you know how to do it.

Al Hackle loved printing and encouraged me to go through the plant and learn all I could. From camera room to stripping, platemaking to press, folding to binding, each part of producing a printed product had its own set of tools, skills and language. Most designers didn't have a clue how their creations were printed, but it became clear to me that if you didn't understand the total process, you weren't as

likely to get a good final piece.

Printers preferred to let designers believe they knew how to paste up their own boards. After receiving the mechanicals (original art shot for the negatives that would become part of the print process) from the designer, a printer would often completely redo them before shooting the film but let the designer take credit for making beautiful paste-ups. Just like high school print shop, the world of design and printing was a class-stratified system where design people and production people did their jobs and hardly interacted. When they did, the pecking order was clear: the designers were clients (thus always right) and the printers were vendors.

After Colortone, I spent most of my college years working at the American Chemical Society in its in-house design and production department. Working freelance (but nearly full-time) at ACS was a great way to learn the ins and outs of producing magazines. At the time—in the late 1970s—ACS produced five titles. I worked on them all—sometimes just creating charts and graphs, but sometimes getting to design.

One of the best perks about working at ACS was being allowed to work on other freelance jobs during off hours and get feedback from the other designers.

The department was run by Leroy Corcoran. He taught me a lot about managing a studio. He gave people opportunities to grow and accepted mistakes as part of the job, not failures of character. He fostered a sense of camaraderie among his employees and was always willing to pitch in when things needed to get done. To me, working at ACS was an extension of

my college education. I was going to American University and majoring in communications and design, but often it seemed I learned a lot more outside the classroom.

To this day, I appreciate the way Leroy managed his department. He protected his people from the politics and hassles in the rest of the organization, and he stood up for them when they faced unreasonable demands from other departments. He had designers work directly with the “clients” in other departments, allowing them to take ownership of their work, build relationships, and improve communication skills.

All these experiences informed my sense of what a design studio should be. I thought that, when the time came, I could have a place where creative people enjoyed coming to work and were challenged by dealing directly with clients.

MY FIRST PAYING MAGAZINE

CLIENT was the result of an exasperated designer who wanted to get rid of a client—a novice publisher who bristled at paying the outrageous sum of *six dollars a page* for layout and design. The designer, Judy Mays, had hired me to help paste up technical books and figured that, as a newly minted designer still in college, I would be happy with whatever work I could get. That is how I started working for Hershel Shanks and his Biblical Archaeology Society.

In the beginning, I may have been only a few steps ahead of Hershel's knowledge about magazine design, but they were crucial steps. When I proved that an 8½ x 11 magazine with a color picture on the cover could

be printed for the same price as his current 7x10 book, he allowed me to do my first redesign. Ultimately, his little project grew to four magazines, and BAS remains a client after 40 years. Every business needs a pivotal client, and Hershel was mine. He could be abrupt and stubborn, with a ready-fire-aim problem-solving technique (once he decreed that letters were never ever supposed to “touch” in headlines). But he has always been loyal and supportive of me and my studio. Our relationship ultimately went far beyond the usual business relationship.

In the early days, Hershel was constantly looking for better deals in producing his magazine, and changed printers and typesetters with upsetting frequency. However, after a small typesetting firm—one that didn’t waste money on things like backup punch tapes—produced an entire issue’s worth of typesetting that slowly began to fade a day after it was delivered, he finally agreed to deal with a more reputable typesetting firm. BAS used Harwood Type for four years, and I spent many hours at Harwood’s watching Harry Woodell and Tom Nevins set type on their Quaddex system. Along the way, I learned a lot about typesetting.

This all started while I was still in college, and I found ways of using my emerging design skills on campus. The biggest challenge I undertook was becoming yearbook editor. It wasn’t hard to become editor; it was a position with no other takers. While it was a ridiculous amount of work to add to my schedule, it was a chance to create a book! As both editor and designer, I had my first opportunity to hold

creative control over both the look and content of a big printed piece. It is an addicting experience, and it confirmed something that I have always believed: design serves content, and the perfect solution to any design problem is, at core, finding a better way of telling a story or explaining an idea.

I graduated from AU in 1978 and kept freelancing at ACS. After a while, the “non-ACS” work was getting to be too much of an imposition on the generosity of Leroy, who only very gently complained. I knew I had to start my own studio and stop using ACS as a crutch. In 1981 I started AURAS Design in a corner of my apartment. The name comes from Latin and, loosely translated, means “you are gold,” but it also kind of sounds like my initials, and at the time it was trendy to have obscure single-word studio names. AURAS seemed a perfect choice.

As most who have worked out of their home might agree, after a while it feels like you’ll go insane if you do it one day longer. I’d find excuses to head to ACS to visit with the crew there, or walk around the nearby National Zoo. One thing I realized—you never want to make your home a place you dread. I needed to find a real office space. Eventually, one of my new clients, a PR firm called Sobus & Lane, invited me to share space and be its in-house design partner. They seemed like smart people, so I agreed. We found space on Cathedral Avenue in an apartment building that backed up to the zoo. In the summer, when the wind blew just so, you knew you were near the animals.

After we—AURAS (just me) and four of them—moved into a two-bedroom

apartment, things started to get weird. To my admittedly naive sense of business conduct, they all seemed a little too friendly, but as it turned out, it was much weirder—they were all deep into EST. Erhard Seminar Training might be lost to time today, but back then it had gained a following. It was sort of a cross between Scientology and Mary Kay Cosmetics.

They seemed certain that by using their EST training, they would become a highly successful firm. In reality, all they did was annoy and alienate their clients, and after a few months I had the apartment on Cathedral Avenue to myself. By the end of 1981 EST was history, too.

Over the next few years, I had a variety of officemates; the best was Lauren Wadsworth, a new age-y masseuse who set up her practice in the other bedroom “office.” One of the side benefits of the arrangement was getting a weekly massage.

My first attempt at hiring an employee was a disaster—a woman who, as it turned out, had not been honest about her portfolio or her skill set. My first “real” employee, Mariann Seriff, proved to me that it was indeed possible to find a good designer who knew how to design. Soon we added a few new clients and a few more designers; business was starting to take off.

ONE DAY I RECEIVED A NOTICE from the D.C. government that my business was going to be audited. I was completely unprepared for the event and had made a major mistake: I hadn’t realized that a design firm had to charge sales tax on its work. The auditor presented an initial estimate

that I owed the District of Columbia over \$40,000 in back sales tax. I had to show that my clients were exempt because they were either non-profits or not based in D.C.

The biggest help fixing the situation came from a modern dancer I had met while photographing a group called the Dance Exchange. Helen Rea wasn’t just a dancer. She was in training to practice The Alexander Technique—and was also a bookkeeper. She helped me plow through my records and ultimately we proved that all but \$6,000 was tax-exempt. The District sent a confirmation of our very detailed report and indicated a bill would follow. In fact, no bill came, and I never heard from them again.

We decided to incorporate AURAS Design, and start our books fresh, paying proper attention to tax billing. I had found a friend and partner in Helen, and became one of her “guinea pig” clients in her Alexander training. After a few sessions, she helped relieve a back problem that I had endured for years. Soon we grew into a real couple, then a married couple and her contributions to making AURAS successful throughout the years are beyond measure.

I ALWAYS FELT THAT AURAS SHOULD be a place where the resources were used for creative purposes. We are probably the only design studio in the country that ever created and produced a modern dance concert. I was very involved in the modern dance community and had created promotional materials and shot stills for many dance companies. When I decided to produce a concert, I had lots of chits to call in. The



The author in 1988—already going gray.

concert was a series of dance parodies and tongue-in-cheek performance art. It was a great opportunity to use our design skills creating short videos as well as the promotion and branding for a show. “See This Concert and Keep the Flashlight FREE” featured many well-known local dancers and was performed at The Dance Place, so it was no wonder it sold out and even got pretty decent reviews. *The Washington Post* said it was an event “that should be held every year.”

THE FIRST MACINTOSH was introduced in 1984 and brought the world MacWrite and MacPaint. The Mac was a fun toy, but hardly a serious design tool. That changed in 1987, when Apple introduced the Mac II and—more important—the Laserwriter. The Laserwriter drew text using Postscript page-description language and was capable of producing type that rivaled the quality of typesetting machines—although most typesetters didn’t want to believe

it. Unlike every system that preceded it, Postscript type was based on vectors, not bitmaps, so it could be any size—from a small footnote to a huge headline—and still be razor sharp, or at least as sharp as its 300 dpi resolution would allow.

Mariann was positive that AURAS was way behind the curve adopting computers. So on the day before Christmas in 1987, I ordered our first Mac II and a ridiculously expensive Ikegami monitor—4,000 bucks and it mostly sucked. (I regretted not spending *six grand* on a Sony Trinitron for years afterward). But I was so sure the Mac II wouldn’t be a useful tool that I didn’t even bother buying a printer. The day after Christmas, I came to the studio to find a stack of boxes.

I had absolutely no experience setting up or using computers of any sort, so I was astounded that after attaching all the plugs and cables and turning the thing on, I heard the now-familiar chime.

Our “powerful” computer ran a copy of Aldus PageMaker 1.2 and FreeHand 1.0, and the Mac came with fonts that would print on a Laserwriter. It only took an hour or so using PageMaker for my experiences at Colortone Press and Harwood Type to tell me this wasn’t just a design tool, it was a production tool—and one that would change everything about the way we worked. Learning to use the Mac was a challenge, but our initial idea of using it experimentally didn’t last long.

I ordered a printer almost immediately, and, to my delight, it arrived the very next day—another new experience that was going to become a part of our everyday lives.

We produced our first live job on the computer two weeks after we got the equipment. True, it was a small brochure, and a few years later, when we looked at the file to revise it, we found it was made pretty badly, but WYSIWYG (“What You See Is What You Get”) worked—it looked and printed just fine. I sent a comp of the design to the client, who promptly called me to complain that the copy wasn’t finished yet, and I shouldn’t have sent it to the typesetter. She needed some extra reassurance that what I had sent over was, in fact, a mere comp. That was a pretty convincing conversation about the potential of using the Mac.

Of course, Mariann was totally wrong about one thing: it didn’t take long for us to realize that almost no other design firm had Macs, or knew their potential. That gave AURAS an advantage that we leveraged for many years.

AURAS HAD GROWN TO FOUR PEOPLE by the late 1980s, and we knew that the time had come to find real office space instead of squatting in a residential apartment building.

By then I was living in the Adams Morgan section of Washington, D.C., and I noticed a house for sale on Kalorama Road that I knew was zoned commercial—although it was offered as a residence.

Helen and I, carrying our new baby, Rebecca (we got married somewhere in there), wandered over for a look. The row house was a badly neglected property that had seen years of transient renters, and the current group had carved out four apartments in the small building, including the unfinished basement. The house, built

in 1902, still had original gas fixtures that were installed along with electric wiring, because back then a lot of people thought that electricity might be just a passing fad. The rear of the building sagged by almost a foot, giving the floor a slant that a ball would roll down. While the structure was once a nice example of middle-class housing, with 10-foot ceilings, plaster-and-lath walls, tiled entryways and mahogany trim, it had become a sad mess.

Walking away, I said, “This place is perfect,” and, simultaneously, Helen said, “This place is a disaster.” In reality it was neither; it was a shell waiting for renovation at a price that was affordable and in a great location. I’d always wanted a townhouse studio that felt as comfortable as being at home. It was also a block away from where we lived. Nice commute.

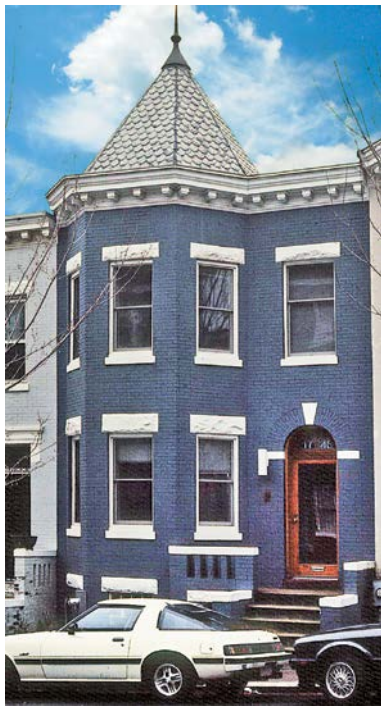
Even with the cost of renovating, the monthly payment was only about \$850—\$300 less than the Cathedral Avenue space. It always seemed to me that money spent on rent was a lost asset that owning a building could remedy. And while we didn’t need the huge 2,100 square feet of space yet, we could rent out the basement and grow into the building over time.

We hired a small firm to do the renovation, and, as layers of poor amateur additions were stripped away, it became apparent that the job was going to be a lot bigger than it looked. The building sagged because it was supported in the basement by two ancient railroad ties perched on brick tiers. As the ties had slowly disintegrated, the entire structure had sagged with them. The solution was to raise the entire house on jacks, replace the old wooden ties with steel, and

straighten every floor joist with a new cement base.

We restored pocket doors and a fireplace mantle, and saved the floors, but ultimately, everything else in the small building was replaced. The original front door was recreated at a woodworking shop just up the street. New HVAC, plumbing and wiring were added. Drywall replaced the rotting plaster and lath. New appliances, tile and fixtures were put in the bathrooms. We added a skylight in the stairwell and replaced all the windows. In the back, we planned a large sliding glass door set among

1746 Kalorama Road. The townhouse was the studio for AURAS from 1988 to 1998. That is my little white Mazda RX7 parked out front.



windows that spanned the entire rear wall leading to a deck.

The day the sliding door was being installed, the job foreman met me as I arrived at the building, blocking the entrance and asking: “Would you like the good news or the bad news?” That’s always a troubling way to start a conversation. I chose the former, the answer to which was, “Well, no one was hurt.” And the bad news? While they were adjusting the sliding doors, the entire rear wall—from the basement to the eaves—had collapsed in a cloud of dust.

For AURAS, it was actually a good thing, because the construction firm had to rebrick the entire back of the building at its own expense. Unfortunately for them, the job—one of their first—was also their last. It was only the integrity of the foreman, who came to do the punch list even though the company had gone kaput, that got the job finished.

WE MOVED INTO THE OFFICE at 1746 Kalorama Road in June 1988. During the past year we had used our computer more and more for production, but large projects were still difficult because of the lack of style sheets that could “tag” word-processing files with information that changed their font, size and leading. That changed with the release of PageMaker 2.1, installed shortly before our move. At this point we had about a dozen clients, mostly associations, and their big projects revolved around annual meetings. One client in particular, the National Association of Social Workers, had us produce a huge catalog of courses for its meeting, a project that had cost nearly \$14,000 in

typesetting fees the previous year.

Now, we had them tag their text and send us the entire file, instead of sending it to our typesetter. We prototyped a page, set up style sheets to match the tag names, and hit <command-D> to place the text onto the first blank page. And...nothing happened. But it was a large file, more than 120 pages of print-out. We went to lunch, and I came back early to check on the machine. To my utter amazement, there on the screen was the entire document, typeset perfectly, laid out into 80 pages. It only took a single keystroke to create a document that had previously involved 30 hours of paste-up and a huge typesetting fee.

If I wasn’t already convinced that the computer was the way of the future, I was now. We used a service bureau to output perfectly laid-out pages; our total cost was \$640. We billed NASW 15% less than the previous year, which made them pretty happy. Our total fee was enough to buy a second Mac system and put a down payment on our own imagesetter.

The next year we were told that NASW had been offered the same job for half our rate. Soon it was impossible to charge for typesetting, and most of the type shops in the area disappeared.

In 1990, we bought our first imagesetter, freeing us from sending files out to a service bureau. In the following decade, we bought two more generations of imagesetters. But nothing matches the thrill of your first. It took the technician an hour to build the printer stand and 15 minutes to set it up on our network. We produced our first page of real repro a half-hour later.

Printing high-rez pages on photo

paper replaced paste-up, but print shops still had to shoot halftones and strip in color separations. Our imagesetter could run film as well, and soon we were producing CMYK negatives. Unfortunately, the film would mis-align as it was exposed, causing such poor registration that we’d print each page’s set of negs twice and take the best four pieces of film out of eight—but it worked. The process was so new that the imagesetter’s rep came to see us do it, because he was certain it was impossible to make 133-line separations on our machine. Difficult, yes, but not impossible.

In 1990, we had our turn designing and producing the Art Directors Club of Metropolitan Washington’s magazine, *Full Bleed*. We decided, as a challenge, to produce an entire issue digitally. It was an alphabetical primer, each page produced by a different designer. Considering the state of the art, it’s a miracle it was produced at all; today it looks primitive. But it proved to the design community that change had already arrived.

Convincing our magazine clients to switch to the Mac also took some persuasion. Our approach was to guarantee that if they weren’t satisfied with the quality of the product, we would pay the typesetter the difference between our rates and theirs, usually double our fee. Not one magazine looked back after





The second floor of Kalorama in the early '90s. We may all have gotten workstations, but they're perched on our original art tables.

their first digitally produced issue. By the mid-1990s, we had moved entirely to digital production, and everyone had a workstation.

That also meant keeping up with new ways of marketing. In the mid-nineties we produced our own digital portfolio that we created as a multimedia presentation and installed on a 3½ inch disk and distributed as an insert in the magazine of the Society of National Association Publications and at The Folio:Show.

I have no idea how many people actually played the disk, but the mere act of creating it caused a lot of buzz.

Eventually, nine people occupied the Kalorama studio, filling all three floors. The senior designer

was—and still is—Sharri Wolfgang. She joined AURAS in 1987 after working at American Chemical Society for seven years. Sharri and I knew each other from high school. I had tried to get her to join the studio for a few years, but she wasn't quite ready to jump from the security of a big association to a

small design firm until I had a few more steady clients.

Sharri has always tackled tough jobs. Although brought kicking and screaming into the computer age, she has mastered every new version of every new program we have ever used. As we expanded, we needed more people who knew how to design on computers, which were fast becoming the dominant tool in the burgeoning desktop publishing revolution.

Because Sharri is so great, I had no problem leaving her in charge while I spent an entire summer away at the beach with my family—Helen, Rebecca, 8, and Steven, 5—something I'd always wanted to do. It was three hours from home, but I was still going to be involved. With a laptop, a modem and a printer, I thought I could work from the beach and communicate with people over dial-up modems using a program called Timbuktu.

It sort of worked. I could receive and edit files, and I could text-message people at work and even send files to the work printers. We racked up \$2,200 in long-distance charges. You pay for being an early adopter.

That summer we hired a new production person. David Fox interviewed with me but then started work after I left. He didn't see me the whole summer. But he has been at AURAS ever since, ultimately becoming a senior designer.

IT CONSTANTLY AMAZED ME how people who claimed to be experts using a Mac had only mediocre skills, the result of being mostly self-taught. One of our designers managed to avoid using the photo-cropping tool for a year because she didn't know what it was for. It became clear to me that we needed to train people how to use their computers and software better. I'd been teaching publication design at American University and knew I had a knack for it.

Our first AURAS training session was held in 1993 at the Four Seasons in Georgetown. It was a two-day affair introducing designers and publishers to digital design and production. We gave live demonstrations and a notebook with informative booklets, programs and fonts that we had developed at AURAS. We still see those fonts pop up online every so often. The sessions went well, but the best attendee comment was that “it was the best food I'd ever had at a training session.”

Because of my connection with the Art Directors Club and American University, I was asked to substitute for a speaker at a Folio:Show conference in 1992. That began a relationship with the show that lasted for 15 years (under three different owners, no less). At that time the Folio:Show,

held every fall in New York, was the largest publishing conference in the country, and so popular that they added smaller annual shows in Los Angeles, D.C. and Chicago, and a second Spring show in New York.

When I spoke in D.C., the conference director approached me and said my ideas made so much sense that Folio: ought to employ me to do its show marketing. Over the next seven years, AURAS produced Folio: materials as well as new branding and marketing programs for four other conferences, and I spoke at its conferences for eight years after that.

Having always loved AV technology, I was one of the first speakers to abandon using slide decks in favor of a projector and a computer. In the early Oughts, renting a video projector was ridiculously expensive, so I bought one of my own. Although it was “portable” in the sense that it *could* be carried, it was as big as a suitcase. And if the connections worked, it enabled real-time demonstrations using desktop publishing programs—an amazing feat in those days.

Speaking at Folio: shows was a tremendous promotion of the studio. In the emerging digital environment, having both a technical and creative handle on game-changing ways of production attracted a lot of attention.

BY THE END OF THE DECADE, our Kalorama townhouse was getting cramped. We started looking for space in Silver Spring, both because it was near my current home, and—having grown up in Silver Spring and watched its decline during the 1980s—I wanted to do something to help revive the downtown. Plus,



the real estate prices were a bargain compared to Northwest D.C.

One of the most interesting buildings in Silver Spring happened to be for sale. It was built as a Masonic Temple in 1927. The building underwent a cheap renovation in the early 1980s, and now the windows were boarded and the paint was peeling. At 12,000 square feet, it was much larger than we needed. But despite the roof leaks and dead pigeon in the top floor space, it just took one look at the views through the wrap-around windows to convince me we should be in this space.

After I called the listing agent to express interest, I immediately received three phone calls from different county and state agencies, all offering to help make the deal work. Montgomery County was anxious to get something going in downtown Silver Spring and wanted to help.

Even though a real estate agent warned it would be a tough sell at our asking price, we sold the Kalorama townhouse to the first people who looked at it, furniture and all. What sold the place to them was the modern renovation, proving that smart design has a strong return on investment. Because of the quick sale, we had to move out before our new space was finished.

In February 1998, we left our studio of nine years and rented temporary space next door to the Masonic Hall. One thing that had delayed the build-out was our discovery that, hidden by the poor 1980s renovation, the original Greek Revival details of the third-floor ceremonial hall were still intact.

Our initial plan, working with architects Howard Goldstein and Jill



The AURAS building in 2020. Originally built as a Masonic Hall, our 1998 renovation restored much of the third floor ceremonial hall details.

Shick, had been a hip loft with exposed pipes and HVAC ducts, but now we decided to restore the third floor to an approximation of its initial design, with modern updates. Our builders hired a specialty firm—one that regularly worked on the U.S. Capitol—to restore the egg-and-dart molding, rosettes and the Masonic symbol itself, a three-foot plaster relief in the center of the ceiling.

We moved into 8435 Georgia Avenue, rechristened The AURAS Building, in July 1998. It was the first new building project in downtown Silver Spring in seven years. At the ribbon-cutting ceremony, attended by county and state movers-and-shakers, I said that I hoped one day soon our little building would be the least interesting thing on the intersection. That has largely become true, and I couldn't be happier.

Soon after we moved in, the Silver Spring Regional Center—the county agency tasked with reviving the downtown—brought Discovery Channel's President and CEO over to see our new space. We don't really

know if it made a difference, but a week later Discovery announced it would build a new headquarters right across the street from us.

From our perch at one end of the downtown business district, we've watched a remarkable renaissance occur in an inner-suburb town center that had almost become a giant indoor mall.

We had restored the building but originally built out only the third floor for our space. Proving the old axiom that real estate is “location, location, location,” Montgomery County leased the first two floors for the Silver Spring Regional Center and Urban District, which became another AURAS client.

OUR ROUTINE WAS to have a production meeting in our conference room every Tuesday morning, going over project schedules and reviewing work. That is where we were on September 11, 2001, when we heard

about the terrorist attacks. Like millions of others, we spent the rest of the morning huddled together watching the tragedy unfold. We didn't know what was going to happen next, but with all of the speculation on the news and the uncertainty, we were honestly glad to be away from the center of the city.

The early 2000s were halcyon years for AURAS. We had a brand-new studio, we were producing 17 magazines, outputting film for most of them. One of our big upgrades when we moved to Silver Spring was installing a state-of-the-art imagesetter with in-line film processing. The data went in one end and finished cut plates of perfectly registered film came out the other end. At twenty bucks a sheet, it was like printing money.

When we built out the other floors for the Regional Center, we reserved part of the second floor to build a large meeting space that we could also use as a photo studio. The 1000 square foot space could seat 50 for a presentation, 25 for a conference, or be set up with a large cyclorama for a photoshoot. Over the next decade or so we used the space for all of those things. But for the first year we rented the space out to the American Film Institute's Washington office while their beautifully-restored theater and new offices were being finished a block away.

MAYBE IT WAS BECAUSE we were doing so well that we became a little too complacent. When the Internet became a place where clients could put content, we missed the rich opportunities of being a pioneer in the emerging field of web design. Of course we eventually developed the

skills to build web sites and produce media content for our clients, but the phenomenal advantage that early adopters caught by focusing on the web, echoing our own good fortune a decade earlier with personal computers, was a golden opportunity we should have exploited.

In our defense, no one knew in 2000 the far-reaching consequences that ever-expanding bandwidth would have on the graphic design business and the general cultural landscape. But one thing was clear—designing solely for print was going to be less profitable.

Another major revolution occurred at the same time. Print shops, which had been creating printing plates using negative film, discovered a new technology that would eliminate nearly all their time-consuming, labor-intensive prepress operations. Adobe's Portable Document Format (PDF), introduced in 1998, was intended to create files that would retain original formatting of documents so they could be read on a computer by anyone using its free reader software. But another use for the format was to encapsulate all the prepress information that had formerly been sent to imagesetters producing negative film for stripping. Data from PDF files could be directly scanned onto plates, eliminating film entirely.

Of course, most designers had no clue how to properly format their documents to trap ink correctly, or how to use spot colors or overprint, or how to correct color images. But we did. We'd done it for years.

In 2002 we produced 12,000 sheets of film, but in 2003 only 1,600. Printers—a notoriously conservative bunch—had adopted a PDF workflow



Since 1998, our current space has been an entire open floor surrounded by windows on all four sides. This is our staff in 2009.

amazingly quickly, and our days of “printing money” were over.

The first big project that we sent to the printer entirely as a digital file was a commemorative magazine for the American Chemical Society. The printer was in Florida, and we used our ISDN connection to send the 200-meg file to them in four hours. Two days later, a proof was delivered to us via FedEx. Even when we had provided negatives, it would still take a local printer four days to make proofs. These had come in a day. And they looked fabulous. It was pretty clear what the future of printing was going to be like. The critical issue from now on was how well your source file was made, because the printer wouldn't be responsible for printing mistakes caused by badly constructed files.

WE BOUGHT OUR FIRST SERIOUS transparency scanner in 1995, but it only scanned 35mm transparencies; the rest we sent to a service bureau with a big Scitex scanner. But in 1999 we bought a new, much more expensive scanner from a company called FlexTight. It could scan transparencies up to 8 x 10 at resolutions of 4000 ppi, more than enough for any image we encountered.

More critical, the quality rivaled what we were getting from our outside vendor. AURAS became capable of producing every part of a print product at high quality completely in-house.

It was such a great scanner, we paid it off in six months and ultimately bought another. But scanning transparencies was soon ending, too, as serious digital cameras began replacing film. By the mid-2000s we began seeing more and more digital files and had far fewer transparencies to scan.

EVERY BUSINESS HAS ITS UPS AND DOWNS, but AURAS had always done better year by year. In 2006, we were 25 years old, and felt pretty impervious to the economy. Revenue sources came and went. We had made money outputting film and scanning transparencies, but we anticipated when technologies changed, and were still producing magazines, marketing materials and identity programs, and began working on our most ambitious project ever—producing our own magazine, which launched in 2007. I always have loved working for clients, but I had always hoped to become my own client and create original material about what I loved—the art and

business of magazine design, and this was my attempt to take everything I had learned about our work and put it together into a fun and valuable publication that other designers would enjoy.

So it came as a complete shock that when the economy tanked in late 2007, it took many of our clients with it. By 2009, we were producing half the magazines we had in 2005. For the first time in our history, I reluctantly let people go.

So maybe 2007 was a bad time to introduce *FPO—For Publications Only*. It was an extension of the newsletters we had been producing since 2004 and



The author at his usual post in 2011, hand on trackball, at his typically messy desk.



Over the years, AURAS has produced a variety of creative promotions and products: an actual modern dance concert; a funky rubber stamp set designed by Marty Ittner; and note cards that celebrate the seasons designed by Sharrl Wolfgang. But our most ambitious project has been FPO Magazine. We poured everything we knew and loved about publication design into its seven issues.



studio that has produced both its own Modern Dance Concert and a Hardcover Cookbook.

Delicious by Design began as a way to celebrate our 30th anniversary in 2011 with a brochure that combined two of my great loves—design and cooking. Over the years I had developed a few recipes that I had given to friends who enjoyed a particular meal, so I thought that a dozen or so along with some studio history would make a nice small piece.

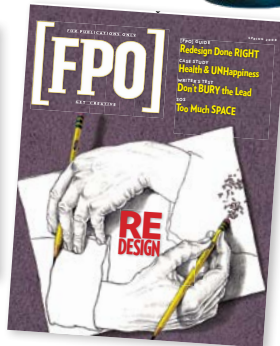
However, when I jotted down the fiftieth recipe I began to realize that maybe there was more of a cookbook here than I realized. That is when we decided to design and produce a full-fledged hardcover book.

The recipes were the easy part. Testing them and refining the language of the instructions was much harder. My sister Lynn—an adventurous cook in her own right—helped work through each recipe, checking the amounts and altering the instructions to be more explicit. My next-door neighbor Jo Bishoff helped edit the book. Perhaps most critical was engaging my friend Renee Comet, a well-known food photographer and her friend stylist Lisa Cherkasky to shoot the images for the book. That's

when the anniversary promotion became a real cookbook.

AURAS has designed more than 50 books of all types, but this was the first one that we wrote, designed and printed. It was an ambitious project—no, a ridiculously difficult project—that felt all the more satisfying when it was completed. The book features

The AURAS 2011 30th anniversary party was also the release party for, *Delicious by Design*. The SWAG included a copy of the book, a tote and a bottle of AURAS Spice Mix, one of the recipes in the book.



the design and production seminars we had been teaching for nearly as long. Magazine design, editing and production was something we knew a lot about, and we knew a lot of people who could use a magazine about it.

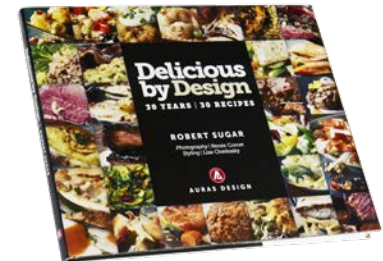
The business plan was pretty realistic; we needed at least 2,500 subscriptions to start, and we figured that it should be a breeze to find them. Since *Print* had 30,000 subscribers and *HOW* had 24,000, we should be able to get five percent of them interested in another magazine. That was the theory, anyway.

To be generous, let's call FPO a cult favorite. Readers liked the magazine and got a lot from it, but as the recession deepened, we ran out of money to promote the magazine, and our hoped-for sources

of subscriptions—universities, associations and publishers—suddenly didn't have money for subscriptions.

We had been hoping the magazine would get some Internet viral boost to help it grow, but that wasn't happening. And boy, the *schadenfreude* that comes with producing a magazine in your own field is kind of awesome. Everyone thinks they know more than you do, and no one is slow to point out your mistakes. We produced seven issues over two years and we were proud of all of them. A lot of the content is still worth reading.

WE PRODUCED A LOT OF PROMOTIONS over the years, including a bottle of wine, a rubber stamp set, a boxed set of notecards, but we are probably the only design



30 entree recipes and 20 sides, all of them originals that I have prepared for many years, all of them lavishly photographed and presented.

To celebrate the occasion of the launch of *Delicious by Design* and the studio's anniversary, we held a big party in our studio and served food from the book. Over 180 people came, enjoyed the food and left with a book. We printed 2500 copies of the book and have sold or given away all but a few dozen copies. Still it *was* a little ranking to see copies posted so quickly on the book's Amazon page put up there by people who had obviously attended the event—and offering premium copies signed by the author.

THE LAST DECADE has been a challenge for design studios—especially ones like AURAS that specialize in print projects. Luckily, a bright spot for a firm that loves to design magazines has been finding a business niche that still values print publications. For AURAS that has been the Electric Cooperatives around the country. To paraphrase the Genie in *Aladdin*, they have bi-i-i-g circulations—and teeny tiny budgets. But that plays to our strengths of producing simply elegant and efficient publications with strong style guides that can help less-experienced designers produce great-looking publications by training them to avoid the excesses of unbridled variation.

Plus, co-op magazines all share similar editorial ideas, so we have been able to share our knowledge of content generation among the 14 magazines we have redesigned for co-ops from Alabama to South Carolina.

THINGS COME FULL-CIRCLE, and a major project was compiling a deluxe two-volume boxed edition of forty of *Biblical Archeology Review's* most important stories to celebrate BAR's 40th anniversary. We have produced issues of BAR since 1978, and we started making digital pages in 1991. Finding original art for issues before 1990 was impossible, but scanning the art from original issues and using already-transcribed text allowed us to recreate the original stories, with even better color and art than originally printed.

Stories from the mid-nineties onward could be opened in QuarkXPress and converted to InDesign and the images could be re-corrected and improved. The maps, charts, graphs and schematic art were redrawn with new callouts. All forty stories were redesigned to a new template for the book but incorporated as much of the original layouts as possible. The end result seemed a little like the George Lucas Special Editions of the *Star Wars* trilogy—produced with the technology (and, let's face it, the experience) we wished we had thirty years ago.

THE COMMODIFICATION OF SKILLS and technology that began with desktop publishing has changed design studios forever. Fees for print design and production have plummeted over the last decade as ad sales have dried up and on-line solutions have proliferated. It seemed like digital magazines were going to be a thing, but that faded into irrelevance almost as soon as it was hyped as the next great thing.

Studios who profited from huge web design fees in the previous

decade (much as AURAS did in the '90s with typesetting) soon found that creating web sites became as easy and competitive as desktop publishing had become two decades previously. Getting by on technical proficiency alone is not profitable.

WHERE ARE WE NOW that we are nearing our 40th year? The magazine business has been in turmoil for a decade, faced with new delivery methods, new technologies and huge competition from media platforms that were not even imagined four decades ago.

But the most interesting aspect of design has always been finding solutions for telling complicated stories in ways that intrigue and delight. Whether it's re-making print publications for an iPad or developing Web sites that deliver a graphic experience that can rival print design (but with the added capability of motion, sound and interactivity)—someone *still* has to design these things, so why not do it by telling the best story that you can?.

As the years have gone by, we've become more interested in advancing the editorial message no matter what the ultimate platform, and often the best solution is a combination of print, web and social media. We have adapted by learning new skills and finding new markets. It's still fun to come to work every day, and I think the feeling is shared by current employees Sharri Wolfgang (33 years), David Fox (23 years) and Andrew Chapman (10 years), who have come to appreciate the AURAS way of working. Past long-term employees like Melissa Schmidt (11 years), Jason Clarke (9



The author in 2020. Still enjoying the ride.

years), Mark Colliton (8 years) and Ted Bonar (8 years) helped make the studio successful and, more important, a place to enjoy work with a minimum of drama. People like working at AURAS. I am proud of that.

Both the design of the space and the culture of the business have always been important to me. Most people are lucky to be able to create a workplace that represents their ideal environment; I have been fortunate to have created *two* spaces.

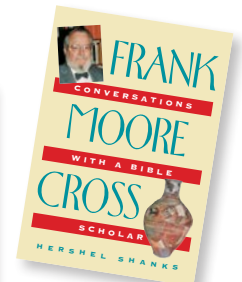
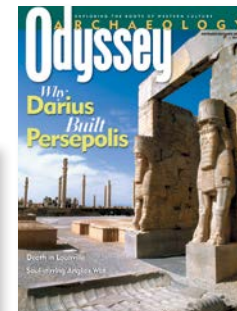
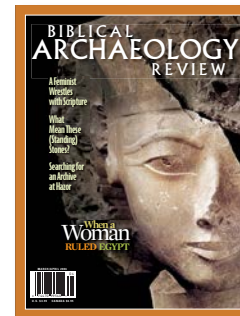
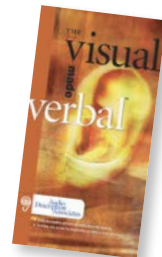
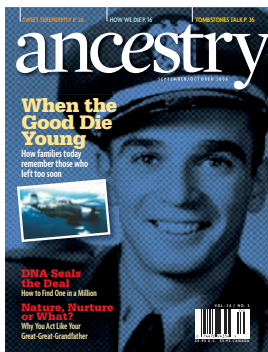
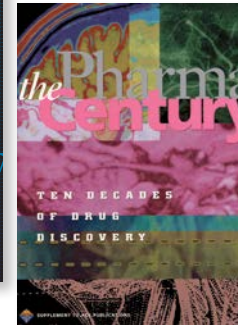
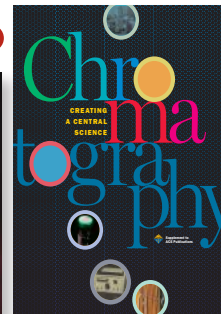
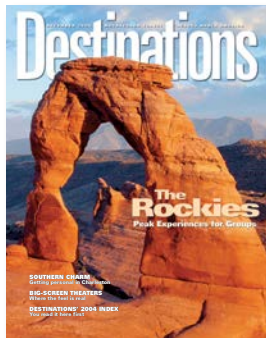
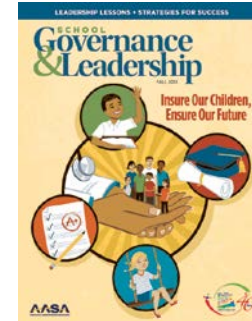
I have always loved the moment when a newly printed piece has been delivered. Seeing your work finally produced is always exciting. For me, it's not just visual, but tactile and even sensual. I confess to still burying my nose in a brand new publication to get a whiff of the inks and varnishes and smells of the pressroom I remember so well from my earliest experiences at Colortone. Somehow, sniffing a monitor or digital tablet just isn't the same.

ROBERT SUGAR
ROBSUGAR@AURAS.COM

40 Years / 40 Clients

AURAS has had more than 160 clients over four decades. These are some of our more interesting design work.

1. Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts
2. American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators
3. American Association of School Administrators
4. American Bus Association
5. American Chemical Society
6. American Pharmaceutical Association
7. Ancestry.com
8. Audio Description Associates
9. Axent Realty
10. Biblical Archaeology Society



10

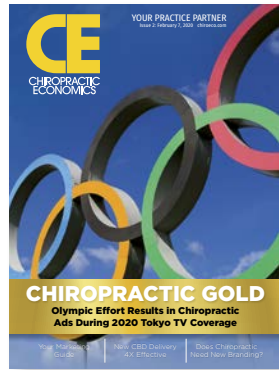


Biblical Archaeology Review





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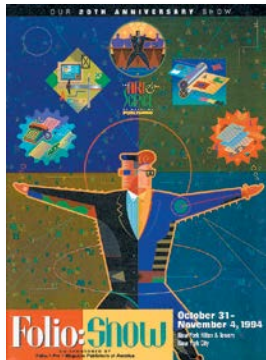
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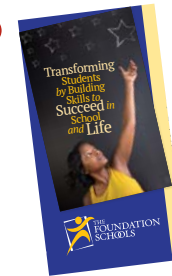
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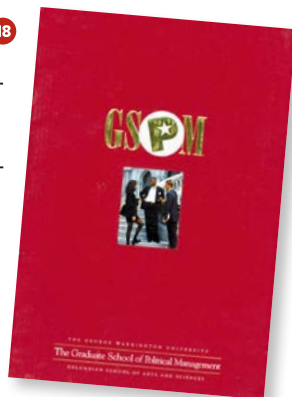
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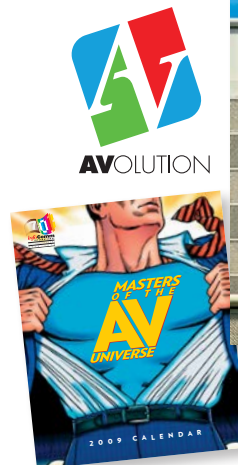
11. Boy Scouts of America
12. Chiropractic Economics
13. Clear Connection
14. Congressional Quarterly
15. Cowles Business Media
16. Electric Cooperatives of South Carolina
17. Foundation School
18. George Washington University
19. Higher Education Innovation Group
20. InfoComm



18

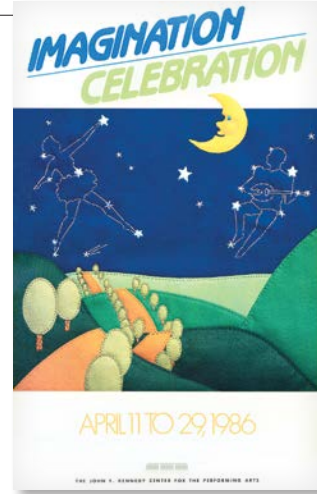
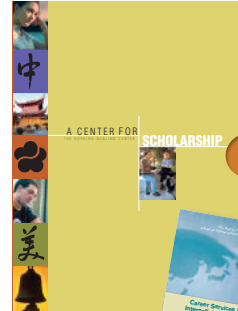
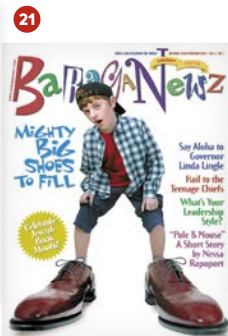


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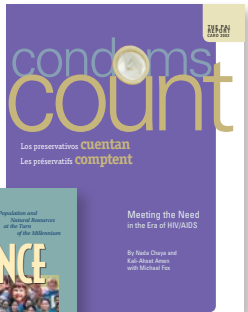
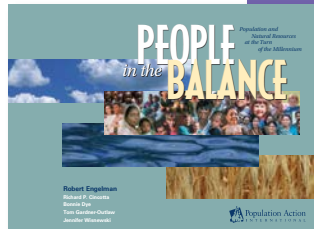
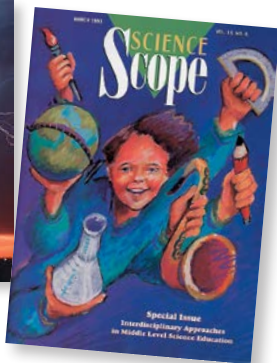
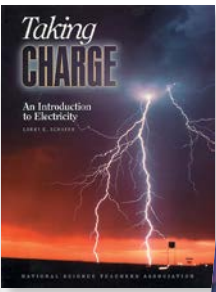


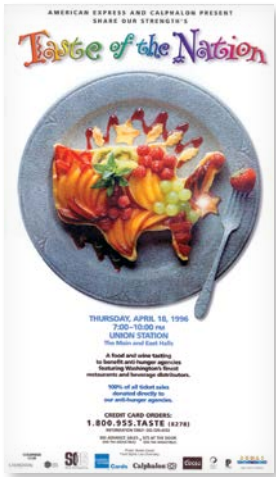
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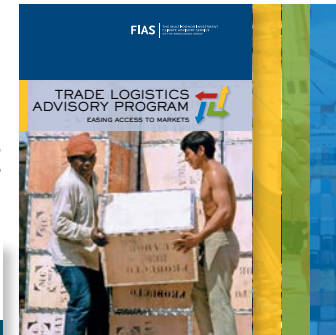
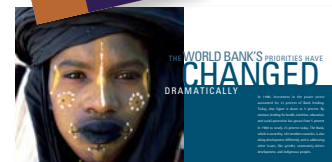
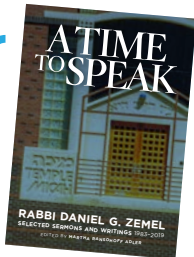
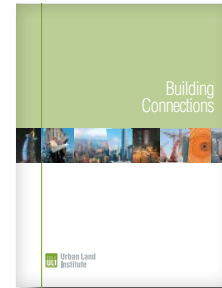
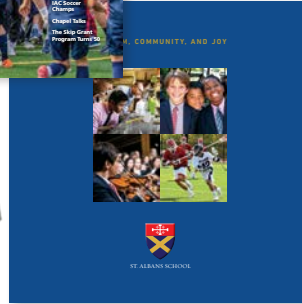


21. Jewish Educational Ventures
22. Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies
23. Kennedy Center
24. Kentucky Association of Electric Cooperatives
25. Montgomery County Government
26. National Asphalt Pavement Association
27. National Public Radio
28. National Science Teachers Association
29. Organization for the Promotion and Advancement of Small Telecommunications Companies
30. Population Action International





STRIVE
A CAMPAIGN FOR ST. ALBANS



- 31. Share Our Strength
- 32. St. Albans School
- 33. Telecommunications Industry of America
- 34. Temple Micha
- 35. The Rosen Group
- 36. University of Maryland
- 37. Urban Land Institute
- 38. Washington DC Dance Coalition
- 39. Women in Cybersecurity
- 40. World Bank

