

# CONNECTION

THE JOURNAL OF THE NEW ENGLAND BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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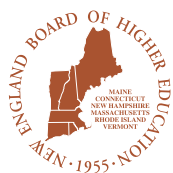
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## EDITOR'S MEMO

### Artists Only?

The city of Providence may have moved rivers, jailed mayors and inspired a hit TV show in the past couple of decades, but to me, it remains first and foremost the seat of the art school that produced Martin Mull and the Talking Heads.

So it was a bit jarring to arrive at the Rhode Island School of Design/Bryant University-sponsored "Success by Design" conference this past May just in time to hear Peter Dixon of Lippincott Mercer telling 450 young designers and other professionals how his firm would help McDonald's "create zones in the dining room" as part of a design strategy to entice young adults and "captive mothers." A self-described pioneer in corporate branding, Lippincott Mercer will also help McDonald's redesign its drive-through lanes to "double the throughput" and "speed up the transaction." But, Dixon assured the audience, "we're not going to cookie-cutter this idea."

For a moment, one might imagine it was David Byrne himself explaining how McD's would redesign its restaurants with "colors that say 'food.'" And that might've been Martin Mull deadpanning Dixon's typology of the new luxury: *translucency* in, *solidity* out; *natural* in, *traditional* out... all "great news for designers." Or explaining how Apple Computer retail stores are now infused with the faint smell of apples.

Back in reality, PUMA product design expert Gavin Ivester followed Dixon with a series of PowerPointed tips for becoming a "design-led" company. Ivester explained how the cat suit PUMA made for Serena Williams combined quality (freedom of movement) with style ("she felt like a rock star"). He nearly let slip that a product's intrinsic value is of no value at all really. The important thing is branding—and the associations that design instills in the consumer.

Turns out RISD is about both the Talking Heads *and* branding Puma. And in some ways, all New England is banking on the notion that what David Byrne does and what Peter Dixon does are two sides of the same coin, or at least the same side of two brains.

The idea is that New England's rich base of arts education programs, museums, symphonies and dance troupes enrich the region's quality of life and generate significant economic activity in terms of employment, construction, ticket sales and so on. But beyond that, they serve as midwives to the burgeoning "creative economy"—that collection of right-brained, moneymaking endeavors, from architecture to sportswear design, that promises relatively little pollution and few working blisters and cannot yet be off-shored to India or China.

Indeed, it's this creative *super*-supersector's breadth as well as its verve that make its promise so appealing to musty New England. As grand old brick school buildings are converted to elderly housing to suit the region's declining demography, grand old manufacturing facilities are converted into art galleries and design studios to suit its blossoming creative economy. Moribund cities spring to life.

This creative new world is not without challenges, however. New England's nonprofit arts endowments, museums and local theater companies are engaged in a constant battle for resources. And with each big corporate merger, a real or potential patron of the arts is gone from the landscape. Moreover, the creative economy offers most of the inequities its predecessor did. It was hard to find a black face in the Providence audience, let alone the Boston Symphony. For the most part, well-educated white and Asian women are shaping a new web-based graphic design industry, while under-educated Latinos sweep museum floors. And the usual patterns of income and educational attainment will conspire to keep it that way.

Moreover, school districts, rich and poor alike, marginalize art education as they become more and more obsessed with standardized math and language tests. And they're egged on by college admissions officers who, despite rhetoric about creative thinking, subtract arts grades when computing applicants' grade point averages—arts courses are not worthy.

The danger is that while New England celebrates the promise of the creative economy, it will lose its capacity to prepare the future workers needed to sustain it, and citizen-consumers able to navigate it. Heading off that prospect will require all the creativity the region can muster.

*John O. Harney is executive editor of CONNECTION.*