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by Ruth Hagopian

C.H.E.N. D.E.S.I.G.N. A.S.S.O.C.I.A.T.E.S

When designer Joshua Chen met chef William Werner, they sensed an instant rapport. Werner wanted to start a high-end patisserie using local sourcing, high-quality ingredients and exciting new flavor combinations. He interviewed several designers and recognized Chen as someone equally passionate about his craft. “I had all this branding imagery, photos of my work, ideas I thought would be helpful and some of the designers didn’t even want to look at them,” Werner said. “But Josh just pored over it.” In the process of working together, what began as a traditional designer/client relationship has now evolved into an exciting new business venture that gives Chen the opportunity to shape and communicate ideas on a foundational level while developing products with mystique, emotion and, even, brand love.

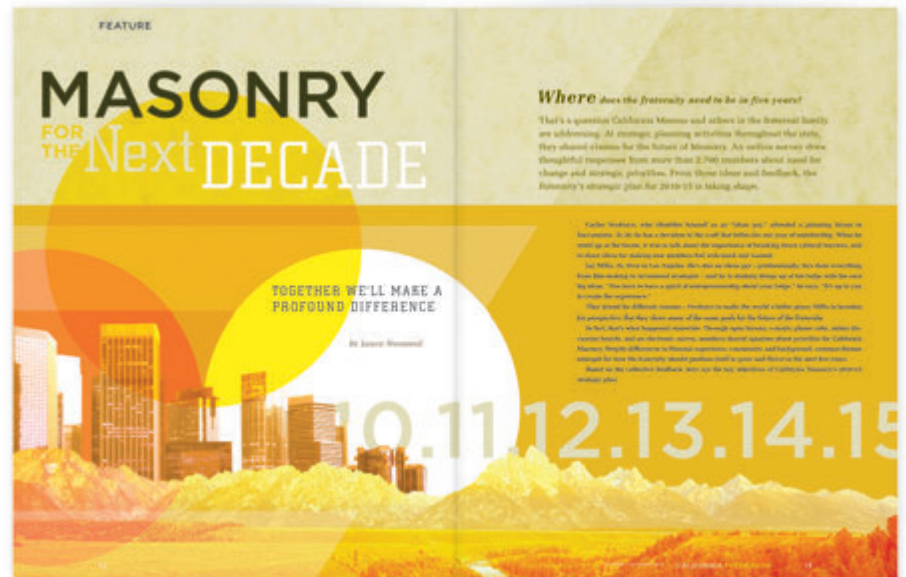
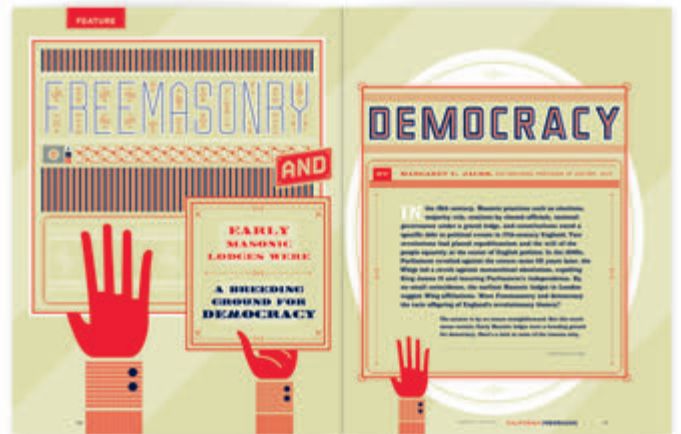
Chen Design Associates is located on a quiet side street in the heart of San Francisco’s Financial District. Flanked by the rare bench and tree, the formal architecture of the 105-year-old building complements the casual, industrious vibe of CDA up on the fifth floor. The large, sky-lit studio is bright and open, while Chen’s office is more like an elegant man-cave with a balcony and table tops casually spread with his books and ephemera. During his 21 years in business, Chen, 45, and CDA have survived both the dot-com and real estate recessions, and now a staff of ten cultivates work with diverse clients and products. “You hear that, in order to survive, you have to specialize,” said Max Spector, art director and design director. “But it seems like what’s worked for us is the opposite. We want to expand what we offer, not specialize.”

CDA’s clients include Chronicle Books, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The North Face, Stanford University, Masons of California, the University of California, Berkeley and People’s Harvest, to name a few. Its creative approach blends intuition with analysis of what a design solution says, how it speaks to the end user and what it communicates to the audience. “We really value the intuitive part, the uniqueness, the unexpected,” Spector said. “Ultimately some of that has got to be there if your design solution is going to make the audience pause and take notice.” As an art director, he has no interest in CDA’s creatives fostering an identifiable look in their designs. “We work against it when we recognize traits or stylistic leanings. As Stefan Sagmeister says, ‘Style equals fart.’ I interpret that to mean there’s no good reason to actively cultivate your own style. We want to have more tools in our arsenal.” Before CDA developed the look for Werner’s brand, Tell Tale Preserve Company, it began with its identity. Why is the logo a strawberry, held by a caliper with a tiny rolling pin attached to it? “I think it just invites people to ask those questions,” Chen said. “Maybe it’s a twist, maybe it’s a new way of presenting this food or maybe it’s a juxtaposition of the modern versus the old and how those two things work together.”

CDA developed Tell Tale’s entire brand from logo and stationery to packaging and the look of the retail store, but when the investor financing fell through, the patisserie already had a sizable following established. A new company, Outfit Generic, was formed and Chen became chief design officer, one of the company’s five partners. The idea was to come up with a name that would be intriguing, but also wouldn’t limit creativity.

Joshua C. Chen is creative director on all projects; both he and design director Max Spector wrote the captions, unless otherwise noted.

Right: “Over two years ago, the **Masons of California** decided it was time to redesign its member publication, the *California Freemason*. We found Josh and his team to be the best fit for what we were looking for,” said Angel Alvarez-Mapp, creative services manager, Masons of California. “A 162-year-old organization can’t just go completely wild and crazy. CDA has a strong eye for typography; they are great illustrators as well, taking really abstract topics and somehow bringing them to life without being trite or expected. You look at it and go, ‘damn, that makes a lot of sense.’ The February/March 2012 issue about Freemasonry and its effect on democracy is a perfect example of this.” Laurie Carrigan/Max Spector, art directors; Laurie Carrigan/Joshua C. Chen/Jordan Cullen/Debbie Ladas/Wes Mitchell/Max Spector, designers; Joshua C. Chen, creative director; Margaret Hartwell, senior brand strategist; Jordan Cullen/Debbie Ladas/Wes Mitchell/Max Spector, illustrators; Angel Alvarez-Mapp, Freemasons of California, client.



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“Curiosity is a lost art,” Chen said. “We’re bombarded every-day with all these messages telling us to do this, think that, buy this or act this way. Building intrigue is much more interesting and more layered. There’s depth and a continuation of the story. That doesn’t happen if it’s just one-dimensional.” Outfit Generic recently opened its new patisserie, Craftsman and Wolves, in the Valencia corridor of San Francisco’s Mission District.

Diversity is key to Josh Chen’s history. By the time he was ten years old, he had already lived on three continents. His father’s missionary work relocated the family from Taiwan, where Chen was born, to Singapore, Paris, Brussels, Springfield, Missouri, and back to Taiwan before they finally settled in California. Chen remembered Springfield as a difficult transition. “I was probably the only Chinese kid in grammar school and I had a really hard time,” he said. “They assumed, of course, that I was fresh off the boat from China, but I was like, ‘No. I came from Europe. I speak French and Flemish.’”

The richness of his European education in culture and art had a profound effect on him. Every Wednesday afternoon, Chen’s elementary school in Rhode-Saint-Genèse, just south of Brussels, would visit a museum. He loved to draw throughout his childhood, especially cars, houses and, specifically, tour buses. “I think that thread wove through the story of my life, wanting those connections, wanting people to understand, wanting to cross the cultural and social borders we put up between each other.”

With its diverse ethnic population and small size, Albany, California, proved to be a comfortable permanent home for Chen and his family during his junior and high school years. San Francisco is just 30 minutes across the bay and he attended San Francisco State University studying broadcast communications. Though he really enjoyed the behind-the-scenes role of a producer, he had no idea about how to use his degree. Fortunately, a publication design class gave him new direction. His instructor’s wife hired him at \$5 an hour to work in her home-based graphic design business. Being a learn-in-the-trenches kind of guy, he found Betsy Brill was a helpful mentor who taught him the fundamentals of the industry. “I learned about being resourceful, how to manage my time and about being flexible and in the moment,” he said. Brill decided to focus on writing and her clients were soon handed off to Chen,



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who juggled freelance work with a few years spent in the marketing communications department at Bechtel Corporation.

His client list grew with Apple, Adobe, nonprofits and local arts organizations, such as the San Francisco Symphony. Chen’s family had grown, as well. He married Pamela, whom he’d met in college and had two children, Rachel and Ethan. By 1999, he started entering his work in competitions and one of the first pieces that gave his company visibility was a promotional piece called *Methodology*. This hand-assembled calendar was a play on the unfounded Y2K fear of a technological crisis occurring at the start of the new millennium. Chen’s calendar offered an alternative of twelve elements; each month a different example showing what makes good design timeless, regardless of technology. “*Methodology* gave the design firm credibility and, while it was fun for the studio, it was also promoted in numerous design books and became a great tool to prequalify a client.”

That success sparked an interest in producing more design products that would put their energies toward a greater cause. “At some point during the dot-com era, everyone had a big ego, unlimited amounts of money to spend and promotional pieces from paper companies were equally lavish,” Chen said. “To what end, what purpose?” conversations kept reoccurring within the CDA team. “In 2001, post 9/11, there was a lot of talk about Good vs. Evil and Us vs. Them. We went to war and made rash decisions about who the enemy was.” Chen and Dr. David Krieger, founder of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, co-authored *Peace: 100 Ideas*, CDA’s next full-color illustrated book. The 100 ideas suggest simple, but contemplative acts of peace, for example: Erase a border in your mind. “We were hoping to start the conversation, ‘What do we really mean by peace?’” He opened the book at random and laughed. It read: *Let someone else go first*. “I have trouble with

This page: Chen Design Associates: (back row, left to right) Debbie Ladas, Jordan Cullen, Jeff Plank, Laurie Carrigan, Wes Mitchell, Morgan Marcani; (front row, left to right) Joshua C. Chen, Jon Campbell, Max Spector, Margaret Pott Hartwell.

Right: “**The wedding of Tala and Thomas** at the Palace of Fine Arts was unique, to say the least. The 350-guest event was on scale with the most elaborate and complex corporate events. We approached it like any other branding and identity project: first establishing the overall look and feel, developing our visual toolbox, then designing a range of letterpress invitations and keepsakes, as well as silkscreened gift bags. The seating charts were done on vintage blackboards. The wedding couple was amazing to work with, completely relaxed and enthusiastic at every meeting.” Max notes, “The only frustration (with the project) was in my (many) failed attempts to wrangle an invitation to the wedding.” Joshua C. Chen/Max Spector, art directors; Joshua Chen/Debbie Ladas/Max Spector, designers; Nancy Hopkins, calligraphy; Tala Banatao/Thomas Grownney/Alison Hotchkiss, Alison Events, clients.



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this one when I'm driving," he said. *Peace: 100 Ideas* found distribution, was sold at the Museum of Modern Art, Urban Outfitters and entered in several design competitions.

CDA's numerous awards for design and packaging include American Packaging Design, *Communication Arts*, *Graphis* and *Print* design annuals, AIGA, the Type Directors Club and the Addy Awards. As much as publications hold an important place in its body of work, most of its designs are rooted in branding. *Archetypes in Branding: A Toolkit for Creatives and Strategists* is a resource for designers and their clients co-authored by Chen and Margaret Pott Hartwell, brand strategy director for CDA. The toolkit is a deck of cards that features 60 illustrated archetypes with detailed information to help better understand a brand's customer base. The cards have many uses, including brainstorming, ideas for mood board imagery explorations and developing the look and feel of brand vocabulary.

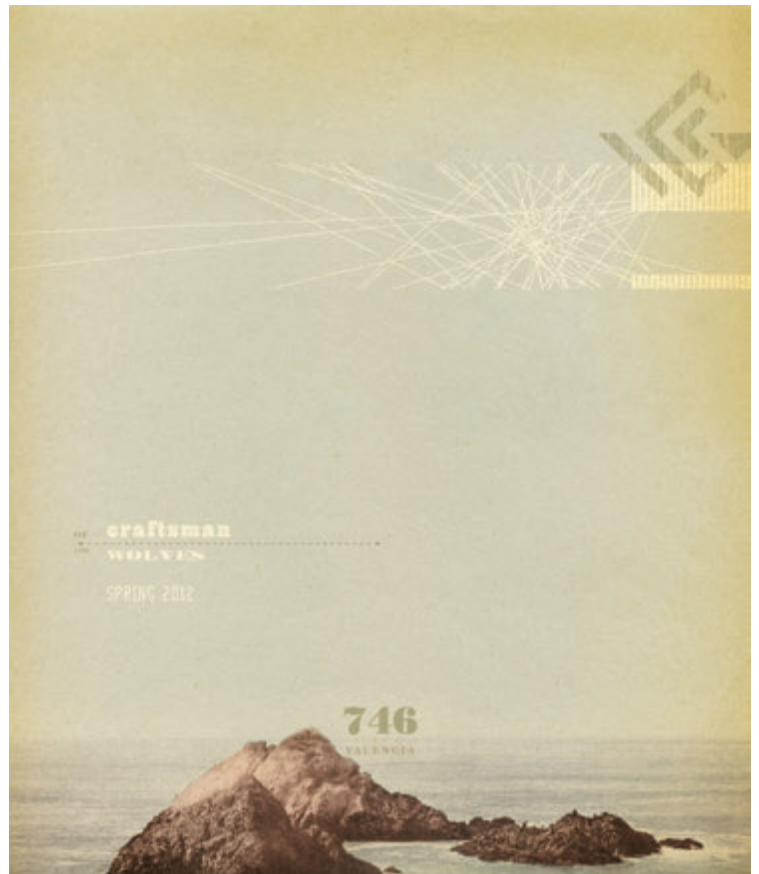
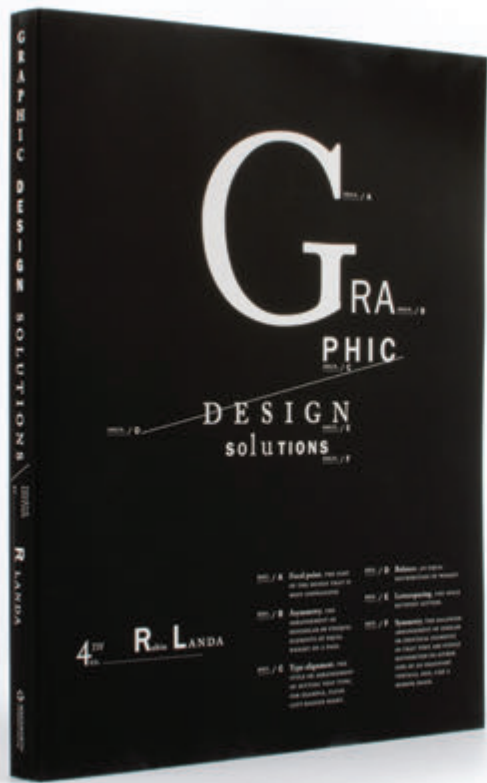
"Archetypes are part of the collective unconscious," Chen said. "Understanding what roles the brand plays, whether it's a storyteller brand, an idealist brand or a heroic brand is another way to create content for people to wrap their hearts and brains around." *Archetypes in Branding*, to be published by HOW Books in September 2012, helps define a brand's deeper level of needs and motivations. Spector led the creative team on this

This page: "The **Do-It-Yourself Holiday Message Kit** is inspired by traditional Advent calendars, where you open one 'window' a day, and the old-school *Concentration* TV game show where you try and solve a rebus puzzle. We came up with five themes that people could choose between—from the more standard 'happy holidays' to the quirky 'television, beer & general laziness' to customize their own holiday message. Or, anyone adventurous could mix and match all five themes to create a message that makes absolutely no sense. Hard to believe, but Max says this was even more fun to write than it was to design." Joshua C. Chen, art director; Max Spector, writer/designer; Chen Design Associates/Full Circle Press/PaperSpecs, clients.

Right: "**Graphic Design Solutions** by Robin Landa is one of the most comprehensive textbooks on graphic design and advertising available today. For the fourth edition, both the author and publisher wanted the design of the book to exude the best practices of design. The stark black-and-white cover is a living example of the material covered within, commanding attention and inviting students to study and dissect. We're currently working on the fifth edition." Max Spector, art director; Jure Gavran/Max Spector, designers; Cengage Learning, publisher.

"Brand launch imagery for **Craftsman and Wolves**. Breaking from the traditional, predictable and somewhat tired press release procedure so often found in the restaurant and hospitality industry, we unveiled Chef William Werner's comeback patisserie concept by delivering an anonymous, personalized bamboo flash drive filled with select brand artifacts and food imagery to the media two weeks before these posters started popping up around town. As the evocative, fanciful story-laden name alludes, the brand and the culinary creations are both built around the evocative and the unexpected. The launch strategy was as much a social media experiment as a desire to foster curiosity and discovery." Joshua C. Chen, art director; Joshua C. Chen/Max Spector, designers; William Werner, Outfit Generic, client.







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project and said, “A strategic approach that targets an archetype is going to be massively more successful. It means more audience base, more sales and more brand loyalty.”

Chen sees a dual future for CDA. One part is continuing with products like *Archetypes* and *Fingerprint No. 2*, the follow-up to the successful first book on graphic design that uses handmade elements. He’s also excited about the work with diverse clients, whether they’re startups or established corporations that need brand refreshes or product lines that might have a positive impact on the world. “We just want to work with good people and push the envelope in the best way to help take them to the next level.” **CA**



Left: “**Kettle Whistle** is a reinvention of the traditional afternoon tea, removing the stuffiness and reclaiming it for everyone. Riding on the heels of Tell Tale Preserve Company’s success and following, we collaborated with Chef William Werner to develop the brand name, media invitations and a single-page website that provide the right touch of elegance and exclusivity for this series of limited-engagement pop-up tea events.” Joshua C. Chen, art director; Joshua C. Chen/Wes Mitchell, designers; Justin Lewis/Aubrie Pick, photographers; Lawrence Lai, Naivetea/William Werner, Outfit Generic, clients.



“It started with a short e-mail and grew into a collaborative adventure. In May of 2010, executive pastry chef William Werner came to CDA with a new high-end pastry shop, **Tell Tale Preserve Company**. Each piece of design was conceived to match the quality of the pastries and confections. Along with identity and packaging, there were unique design opportunities such as the monthly CSA-style Society bag, Japanese furoshiki Valentine’s Day gift and an extended pop-up ‘Trunk Show’—the chalk art for this was completed over winter break, with CCA student Caitlin Ng and Josh’s kids helping out to get it done. Many pastries were consumed.” Joshua C. Chen, art director; Joshua C. Chen/Debbie Ladas/Max Spector, designers/illustration; William Werner, Tell Tale Preserve Company, client.

This page: “A San Francisco first, **Soma Grand luxury condos** featured boutique hotel-style services to pamper its residents. Josh remembers getting the job for Soma Grand as one of the shortest interviews and client thumbs-up ever in studio history: ‘I basically had less than fifteen minutes to pitch our work to CEOs of three companies and their respective teams; on the walk back to the studio I got a call that we got the job.’ The showcase piece of our Soma Grand integrated branding work was an oversized brochure folio incorporating bold sweeping photography with fine details, ample white space and matte silver printing on clear overlays.” Laurie Carrigan, art director; Carol Miller, writer; Max Spector, designer; AGI Capital/Joie de Vivre Hospitality/Pacific Marketing Associates/TMG Partners, clients.



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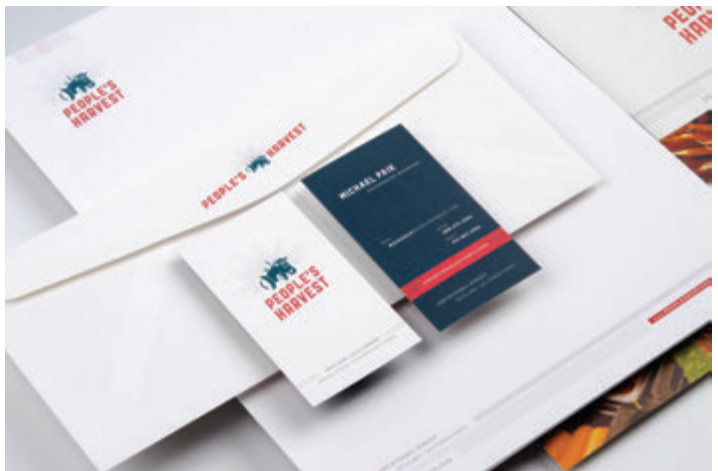
This page: **"The International Design Awards** recognize, celebrate and promote legendary design visionaries and uncover emerging talent. This was one of those 'all-hands-on-deck' projects. Once the overall design direction was set, every designer in the studio was assigned a section of the 100-plus page awards book and given a set of visual elements to work with." Joshua C. Chen/Max Spector, art directors; Glenda Alvarado/Kathrin Blatter/Laurie Carrigan/Joshua C. Chen/Shadi Kashefi/Max Spector/Will Yang, designers; International Design Awards, client.



"We were recently hired by Buckelew Programs to develop branding, collateral and a website for **People's Harvest**, a new fresh-cut food processing center located in the North Bay. People's Harvest creates jobs for people who have experienced barriers to employment and helps bridge the gap between small family farms and local schools, hospitals and other institutions looking to buy fresh-cut produce. The win-win scenario for everyone involved is what we got really excited about." Joshua C. Chen/Max Spector, art directors; Laurie Carrigan/Wes Mitchell/Priscilla Peña, designers; Neha Gupta, Belly Fire Branding/Michael Paik, Buckelew Programs/Steve Ramsland, Buckelew Programs, clients.



Right: "A project born out of the brand workshops that we run with new clients, **Archetypes in Branding** helps creatives and strategists bridge the gaps of understanding between themselves and their audiences. The toolkit centers around a deck of 60 cards, each representing aspects of the shared human experience. The deck is augmented with over 120 pages of descriptions, instructions, examples and case studies. The toolkit will be available from HOW Books in Fall 2012." Max Spector, art director/lead designer; Joshua C. Chen/Jordan Cullen/Liscelyn Grifal/Stephen Jones/Debbie Ladas/Morgan Marcani/Wes Mitchell/Sarah Rouse-Higgins/Wei Sun, designers; Joshua C. Chen/Margaret Pott Hartwell, creative directors/writers; Jordan Cullen/Liscelyn Grifal/Jure Gavran/Stephen Jones/Debbie Ladas/Morgan Marcani/Max Spector, illustrators; HOW Books, publisher.



"In the eight-plus years of working with **Stanford Lively Arts**, we revitalized a stodgy brand, helping reposition it as the innovative curator and originator of world-class arts programming that it truly is." Joshua C. Chen, art director; Joshua C. Chen/Shadi Kashefi, designers; Max Spector, lead designer; Kathleen Nicely, Stanford Lively Arts/Shayne Olson, Stanford Lively Arts, clients.



