



Stanford eCorner

Opportunity in the Failure of Design

William McDonough, *William McDonough + Partners*

October 15, 2008

Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/2073/Opportunity-in-the-Failure-of-Design>

Any kind of government regulation on the enterprise is a signal of design failure - but also an opportunity to improve upon and grow a more efficient business archetype. McDonough + Partners founder William McDonough points out that any business model that has roused government intervention - for pollution, carcinogens, etc. - presents an opportunity for better design and a more well-rounded approach to entrepreneurship.



Transcript

This distinction between the guardian and commerce was first articulated from my readings by Jane Jacobs, the urban theorist, who pointed out that the guardian and commerce have fundamentally different characteristics. The guardian is the State, it is very slow, it is very serious, it is looking after the public wheel. And it reserves the right to kill and things like that, and reserves the right to regulate. The commerce on the other hand is very quick, it's very efficient, it's highly effective, and it is fundamentally honest because you can't do business with somebody very long if you're not honest. She points out that if you get the two mixed up, the guardian and commerce, you get what she calls monstrous hybrids. For example, the mafia would be a monstrous hybrid. It does business but it reserves the right to kill. That's the problem. So let's keep these two things separate. What we realized is that the guardian's job is to make sure that the public is being protected or the public is being benefited by commerce.

And in that sense, a regulation is a signal of design failure. From a design perspective, a regulation is a signal of design failure because it's the state saying, we have to step in because you're releasing cadmium or cobalt in your production or whatever it is they're regulating and saying, we're going to have to regulate you because you're not behaving right because your design is wrong. So it's an opportunity for design. This is what I think is really important to understand. A regulation is a signal of design opportunity as much as it is a signal of failure. So this idea of taking opportunities and starting to design with them means we need a new framework for that design, a new kind of consciousness.