Chicago Design Archive: A Short History

Left: 1942 advertisement, designer Man Ray
Right: 1956, designer Bruce Beck

Jack Weiss

The Chicago Design Archive (CDA) was created in 2003 as a way to document and promote Chicago's important design history. Only a few Chicago designers are aware of the early history of the CDA that began with the Society of Typographic Arts (STA) in 1981. That year STA sponsored a symposium at the Art Institute of Chicago titled: "Images and Realities: Discovering the History of Graphic Design in Chicago." The purpose of the meeting was to create a model that other cities could use in discovering their design histories. One outcome of the symposium was the development of the Design Archives at the University of Illinois, Chicago (UIC) Special Collections.

In 1989 the STA changed its name to American Center for Design (ACD) and expanded to a national focus. By 1990 an alternative "new" STA had formed and continued to pursue goals that remained focused on Chicago. In October 2000, STA hosted "Chicago by Design," a symposium at Columbia College. This project was an attempt to create a comprehensive one-hundred-year history of graphic design and related printing arts in

Chicago and to produce a variety of outcomes that would include exhibitions, oral histories, a web site (or linked sites), and a book. The STA would be celebrating its seventy-fifth anniversary in 2002 and it was hoped that several goals from the "Chicago by Design" symposium would be realized for that event.

Meanwhile, ACD's board of directors voted to fold the organization in April 2002, citing "declining membership, conference attendance, and sponsorship revenues." The offices closed in May 2002. ACD president Chris Conley said there was no plan for their archives. The day they vacated, members of the "new" STA drove to the alley behind the ACD offices and "dumpster dove" to save thousands of STA/ACD archive materials. In July, Conley donated twelve boxes of books, catalogues, 35mm slides, promotional materials, and other valuable documents to the STA. This was all summarized in an eight-page inventory. Those materials became a valuable asset for the CDA.

In October 2002, the newly re-formed STA celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary, hosting three exhibitions at Columbia College Chicago, UIC, and Scott Foresman. The exhibition at Columbia College featured nearly all

the slides recovered in May plus others from collections at UIC, Northwestern University, and the Chicago History Museum. More than one hundred people attended the events and over $5,000 was raised, some of which was eventually used to digitize the entire collection of slides.

In 2003 Ron Kovach, Wayne Stuetzer, and Jack Weiss discussed preserving the *STA75* slide collection on a CD. Kovach proposed something better – an interactive website showcasing work that was collected for *STA75* – over eight hundred works by Chicago designers. That concept became the Chicago Design Archive. Kovach designed and managed the website and Weiss chaired an advisory board that included Kovach and Stuetzer. During that summer, slides from the *STA75* exhibition were sorted and catalogued. In September all were sent out for digitizing. On December 12, STA hosted a holiday party at the Chicago Architecture Foundation's CitySpace Gallery and the CDA was launched.

From its inception, the CDA was designed as a fully searchable database so that users could search by date, designer, design office, client, project type, or subject. The first content spreadsheet contained the

1985 recruitment brochure, designer Gene Rosner

documentation for the first 815 images. In 2003 Stuetzer designed a series of email teasers that went out to the STA membership, inviting them to submit their work. In October 2004 he outlined a plan to the STA that would replace the *ACD 100* – which had become a national design competition – and return to a Chicago-based competition. He demonstrated how both the CDA website and an annual *Archive* competition could enhance STA growth. Work selected each year for the *Archive* show would be added to the CDA collection. In 2004 CDA published its first call to submit award-winning work.

Archive 05, named for its first year, was launched. It was the first truly Chicago-focused design competition in nearly twenty years, chaired by Cheri McIntyre (formerly Gearhart) and Stuetzer, and celebrated at the Hot House in downtown Chicago. Annual juried work now became part of the CDA collection. Jurors were Alessandro Franchini, design director, Crate & Barrel; John Rieben, formerly with Unimark; and Anne Telford, editor, *Communication Arts*. Andy Rogers created the Archive brand and was creative director for all competition marketing materials for many years.
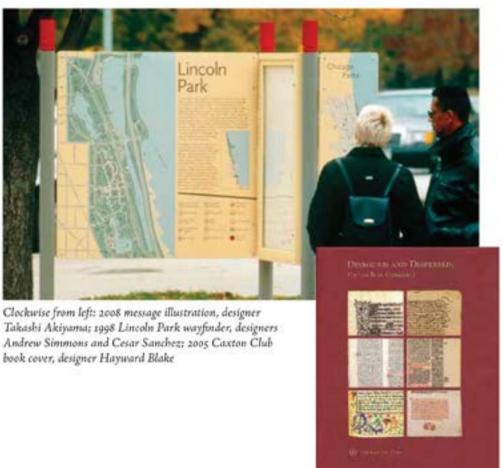
A book by then Yale student Sharon Oiga, was among the ninety-three works selected for *Archive 05*. The CDA collection now exceeded one thousand images and its website was logging more than one hundred hits per day.

Archive 07 contained the largest number of juried works to date. A logo by Joseph Essex for the University of Chicago was one of 123 chosen. The year 2007 marked the first time posters by STA Student Scholarship winners were added. The tradition continued for eight years until the STA discontinued the program. In an effort to add whole collections of historically significant design work, CDA began to include new material from other sources. Nineteen posters from the South Shore Line series were added with permission by the authors of *Moonlight in Duneland*.

Patrick Coyne, editor, *Communication Arts* magazine, which got its start in Chicago, gave CDA permission to post copies of every feature article highlighting the work of Chicago designers. Thirty-two were added in 2008 along with articles and papers from other sources and ten videos featuring Chicago designers.

One hundred and thirty-one works by Chicago designers were added to the CDA with *Archive 08, 09*, and *10*. Eighty-three works

Clockwise from left: 2008 message illustration, designer
Takashi Akiyama; 1998 Lincoln Park wayfinder, designers
Andrew Simmons and Cesar Sanchez; 2005 Caxton Club
book cover, designer Hayward Blake

were accepted for *Archive 11*. We continued to add more material to the "Resources" section including three films given to us from the Chicago Film Archive that featured the work of Mort Goldsholl, Frank McMahon, and Rhodes Patterson.

Differences arose between STA and CDA in April 2012. STA leadership wanted more ownership of the *Archive* competition by adding the STA name, calling it *STA Archive Competition*. The CDA board argued that the STA brand was on every *Archive* competition document and in the footer of every CDA website page. The CDA had sought, from the start, to embrace the work of all Chicago designers – regardless of organizational membership – and rejected the STA's request.

In May 2012 the Chicago Design Museum opened in a pop-up space on Chicago's west side. CDA held an exhibition of work by the 27 Chicago Designers from its collection for that event. Erin Borreson produced a short film honoring the 27 that has since become part of the CDA collection.

Archive 13 included eighty-one works by Chicago designers and a branding project by Firebelly Design for Divvy. It was one of forty-nine pieces accepted for *Archive 14*.

In a new initiative to include other design exhibitions in the CDA, the *Starts/Speculations* exhibition at the Chicago Design Museum was added to the Collections page.

Another conflict arose between STA and CDA in August 2014 when the STA attempted to gain control over its "independent-minded" Archive Committee by proposing another rebranding – STA Archive Committee – placing a majority of STA board members on the committee. The CDA rejected the proposal. In 2015 CDA settled on its current brand, designed by Weiss and referencing the square format of Joseph Essex's STA brand, and the red color from its header type on the website.

As disagreements between STA and CDA were building, *Archive 15* became the last *Archive* competition to be sponsored by STA. Sixty-eight pieces were added to the CDA collection. Seventeen North Shore Line posters were added in 2015, complementing those from the South Shore Line that were added in 2007.

During a warm August 2015 meeting in Essex's back yard, STA, citing "branding issues," stated that they would no longer support the CDA, and requested that the two organizations separate. In October 2015,

seeking to secure and preserve its unique place in documenting Chicago's design history and legally protect its holdings, CDA incorporated as a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization, giving it the new advantage of seeking grants. After months of negotiation, a separation agreement between STA and CDA was signed on December 31, 2015. Advancing from "committee" to "corporation" brought a new dedication to organization and structure.

In April 2016, past STA president McIntyre joined the CDA board, bringing technical and management skills. An advisory board was formed, composed of graphic design leaders and a curatorial board with professional curator/archivists. In 2017 the advisory board was expanded to include professionals in the fields of product and experiential design.

Without contributions from the annual *Archive* competitions that had added over 750 examples of Chicago work to our collection, we focused on new sources for Chicago-based design work – other Chicago design exhibitions. Rick Valicenti's 2014 *ChgoDsgn* was the first, followed by the *Unfolded* exhibition from the Chicago Design Museum, and *Typeforce 1*. In addition, the 27 *Chicago Designers* exhibition included printed works, videos, a

Left: 2005 annual report, designer Jill Misawa
Right: 2023 Outside with Pride, designer
Brian Rau

catalogue, and a book – 27 *Chicago Designers: When Art Became Design* by Joseph Essex, the CDA's first publishing effort. In 2016 alone over 560 examples of work had been added to the CDA collections.

In 2017 the CDA website was enhanced with user- and device-friendly features through a $15,000 gift-in-kind from Mathematic Arts. New, searchable features such as designer biographies and project descriptions were added. Forty-one examples from the *Typeforce 2* exhibition were added to the CDA. Images from the 2008 *Chicago International Poster Biennial*, held in Millenium Park, appeared in the CDA as did posters from the later 2010 *Chicago International Poster Biennial*.

As the year progressed a new opportunity emerged. Kovach urged the board to consider adding product design. That field, like graphic design, has played an equal role in Chicago's rich design history. The board decided to add product design and experiential design – which already had an informal presence – to the CDA's collections. Later in 2017 CDA Press published a second book: *STA: 90-Years*, initiated by Stuetzer, edited by Stuetzer, Guy Villa, and Oiga, and designed by Villa and Oiga. As 2017 ended, it was noted that "over

2,100 examples of work and 750 designers and their clients can be found." Oiga at UIC and Lauren Meranda at Northeastern Illinois University joined the CDA board, adding academic leadership.

In recent years, as online submissions, additional work juried by the board, and new material for the Resources section have continued to flow into the CDA, efforts to develop compatible events and programs have made the public more aware of its mission. In 2019 CDA presented *Chicago Design Milestones*, a massive video creation for *150 Media Stream*.

In 2022 CDA presented a second large-scale video program, *Chicago Design Through the Decades*, for *Art on the Mart*. The two programs gathered a total of ten awards. And in August 2024, in celebration of its twentieth anniversary, *20 Years of the Chicago Design Archive*, a curated collection of Archive work, opened at the Design Museum of Chicago.

Cheri McIntyre took over as president of CDA early in 2024 and Weiss became director emeritus. Lara Allison, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and Grace Spee, UIC, added further academic depth to the board. Educational assets and curricula were added to CDA's substantial resource collection.

Today, over four thousand works by 1,223 Chicago experiential, graphic, and product designers at 484 firms can be seen on the CDA website. Analyzing the website performance January through July 2024, users from seventy-nine countries clicked on the site over six thousand times. Top searches continue to be for Container Corporation of America and Unimark International.

As the CDA moves into its twenty-first year, a new chapter is being written in Chicago's design history. It continues to gain the respect of Chicago "brick and mortar" collections, as it generously shares "the best of Chicago design" in a uniquely digital format.
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Editorial notes: This essay is based on a revised and updated version of a booklet published for CDA in 2018. Ron Kovach, a co-founder of the CDA, died on December 13th, 2024.