

By Eric Ransdell



Designing for the digital age
Clement Mok creates a wired identity for companies

What is the “space” in cyberspace? In many ways, it is the media equivalent of a black hole, where time, distance and some would argue, identity all collapse. Unlike the traditional conveyors of mass media— paper, film, television and radio— cyberspace has no form and few conventions. In fact, it is a place where old ideas of media converge into thousands of new hybrids that combine computing, broadcasting, print, audio, graphics and animation. For business, it is a forbidding new frontier: a digital universe of complexity and chaos, where a sense of order can only be achieved by design. “The role of the designer,” explains Clement Mok, the 38-year old founder of Studio Archetype, a San Francisco firm of identity and information architects, “has always been that of a facilitator who ties the ephemeral with the pragmatic world.”

As the pace of technological change accelerates with the World Wide Web expands, that role is increasingly becoming one of tying the digital world to its analog equivalent. Which is where Mok comes in. For nearly a decade, he has led one of the country’s most technologically adept design firms. In the early days, his studio’s work was done almost exclusively for high-tech companies that wanted to communicate their abstract ideas through the use of packaging and identity design. Much of his studio’s output is still in traditional media formats, but with computers and the Web moving high-tech into the mainstream, Mok now uses his design sense to help analog companies such as QVC, Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment and American Express make the difficult transition to the digital age. His studio which is expected to generate \$7 million in revenues this year, takes a holistic

approach that encompasses everything from executing corporate identity strategies to designing Web sites for businesses.

Merger.

Mok’s philosophy is summed up by the title of his new book, *Designing Businesses*, in which he expands upon his idea that the computing medium is bringing about a world where commerce, technology and design are all merging into one symbiotic whole. In Mok’s view, design is not the packaging or graphics that are tacked on once the product is finished but an integral part of a corporation’s overall strategy. “The level of complexity (that) digital media has added to the way a company can articulate its vision,” writes Mok, “makes clarity of vision more relevant than ever.” To that end, the designer works closely with companies to help them articulate not only what it is they sell or the services they provide, but also their goals, values and guiding principles. “Out of those,” adds Mok, “the identity is formed.”

Building.

But technology must be used to help construct that identity. “To us,” says Studio Archetype’s Amanda North, “it’s like putting together a house.” That helps explain why Mok and his colleagues refer to themselves as identity and information architects. In the digital realm, information is interactive. Its presentation, structure and underlying technology affect users and, in turn, reflect upon a corporation’s identity. Thus design — from graphics to the computer code that generates an E-mail form — must seamlessly work together to shape a

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user's experience of the information. And in today's world of contracting attention spans, that experience — to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan — also is the message. Or, from Mok's perspective, "It's designing more for the experience than the souvenir."

This is something Mok learned during his tenure at Apple Computer, where he was part of the original Macintosh team and later, a director of creative services before going solo in 1987. It was at Apple, he recalls, that he came "to realize how much the enabling piece of technology is a voice to be reckoned with in differentiating the identity of a company." It was also at Apple that Mok developed his core competencies as a manager in a changing corporate environment and as a student of the high-tech industry.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Sherry Turkle has said in her latest book, *Life on the Screen*, that in the age of the Internet, identity is becoming decentered and multiple. In that regard, Mok is a truce product of his era. Aside from his work at Studio Archetype, he is also the founder of NetObjects, a company that makes authoring tools for the Web, and CMCD, a publisher of photographic-image resources. Mok's workweek is divided between his minimalist offices in San Francisco and his software company in Silicon Valley. His home, conversely, is an old Victorian filled with globes, maps and other eclectic artifacts but, interestingly, no computers. "While everyone is trying to integrate across all of these thing," Mok notes, "I'm making very distinct choices that these are very different worlds."

History.

It is this idea of having one foot in the digital world and another in the analog that separates Mok and his design firm from any of their contemporaries. In a period that is largely seen as ahistorical, Mok finds inspiration in the past, particularly in the work of Charles and Ray Eames, whose Eames Chair, a simple yet elegant construction of molded plywood, remains a classic of midcentury design. Throughout their career which included everything from designing stretchers in World War II to staging the first multimedia exhibitions in the 1960s, the Eameses stressed process, the idea that people were integral to design, and a willingness to use new technologies.

Mok believes if the Eames were alive today, they would embrace the Web. And so, by using them as the archetype for his own firm, he provides not only a continuum to the history of American design, but perhaps, a preview of its future.