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Fast Forward: Project H

Emily Pilloton and her spirited band of colleagues are creating a new model for 21st-century design activism.

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She uses the terms *rant*, *manifesto*, and *call to arms* both interchangeably and unironically. Most recently Emily Pilloton has been applying them to her book, *Design Revolution: 100 Products That Empower People*, released this month by Metropolis Books. A collection of 115 design projects for social good, it is the 27-year-old product designer's Whole Earth Catalog, the place where her crankiness about the design world's failings meets her remarkable ability to stand up and take action. Because when she isn't writing manifestos, she's running Project H Design, an ambitious volunteer design firm that spearheads humanitarian projects. The organization is only 20 months old and already has more than 300 active members in nine chapters around the world—and, more important, 22 projects either completed or well under way.

When considering Project H's brief existence and \$46,000 annual budget, and Pilloton's relative inexperience, one question comes to mind: How on earth did she do it? The answer has a lot to do with her age. Not just because she's young and energetic (though that's also true) but because she and her Project H colleagues—most in their twenties—have a decidedly fresh attitude toward ownership, collaboration, technology, and design as a social mission.

Their stories are remarkably similar. Many got into design to do good in the world—then ran up against the demoralizing realities of the profession. Pilloton grew up in Marin County, California, a crafter and self-proclaimed math nerd who spent Saturdays drawing floor plans of her bedroom with her dad. She got a bachelor's in architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, and a master's in product design at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where her thesis critiqued the failure of the sustainable-design movement to incorporate humanitarian issues.

But carrying that philosophy into the work world proved challenging. The Human Nest, a chair she designed for her thesis out of recycled materials, ended up in a high-end showroom retailing for \$1,800. Holding down jobs at traditional architecture and furniture firms only confirmed that she didn't want to bring more needless stuff into the world. By age 24, she found herself ordering dressing-room doorknobs for the Gap. That's when she decided she couldn't take it anymore. First she became managing editor of the green-design blog *Inhabitat*, where she had already been a contributor, frequently criticizing the profession. Then she realized that she couldn't just complain; she had to help fix what was wrong. She started Project H with a strong mission statement—based on her "rants" on *Inhabitat* about what was wrong with the design world—but not much of a business plan. "I wanted it to have impact, big impact," she says, "but I didn't anticipate that the growth would happen so quickly."

To herald the arrival of Project H, Pilloton posted a call to arms on the design Web site *Core77* when she wrote, "We need to challenge the design world to take the 'product' out of product design for a second and deliver results and impact rather than form and function." The anger behind her message struck a chord with readers like Dan Grossman, a 25-year-old housewares designer who now coheads the New York City chapter of Project H. When asked about the secret to Project H's rapid success, he says, "The secret is that there were a million people who felt like me. It's almost like, 'How was this puzzle piece missing for so long?'"

Grossman had tried to get involved with other humanitarian-design projects, but he was frustrated by the lack of opportunities for entry-level involvement—not to mention the egos, inner turmoil, and ulterior motives that were usually part of the gig. "Humanitarian design is a fad now. Firms are almost doing it just for the cred," he says. "When I read Emily's manifesto, it seemed so pure and untouched. I thought, 'There's no ego here.'"

Kim Karlsrud, cohead of Project H's Los Angeles chapter, was also eager to volunteer but frustrated by the typical experience. "We would volunteer for these wonderful organizations. All of the sudden you're cleaning out a closet or making sandwiches," the 24-year-old product designer says. "We're not afraid to volunteer our time, but we want to do something that has meaning and utilizes our skills."

Pilloton gets about 50 e-mails a day from fans who want to help. It didn't take long for her to realize that the organization would need to be self-forming and self-directed. "By the twenty-fifth e-mail from San Francisco, I was like, 'Let's just put them all in a room together,'" she says. The formula was repeated in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Austin, Seattle, London, Johannesburg, and Mexico City. The chapters are expected to develop their own projects, which makes for an organization that's flat and lean—a model of modern efficiency.

"It's a risky thing to have a totally bottom-up approach, because there's not a lot of quality control or curating," says Danny Phillips, a 24-year-old environmental designer who jointly runs the L.A. chapter with Karlsrud. "Emily goes way out on a limb. It's a relationship of trust where she says, 'I set up the armature and the mission statement, and you can interpret that as you want.'"

Her willingness to share authority is Pilloton's most striking trait as a leader. Designers, after all, are taught to act as singular geniuses. But she's far too practical for that. "It would be unreasonable for me to pretend like I know what's going on in Harlem," she

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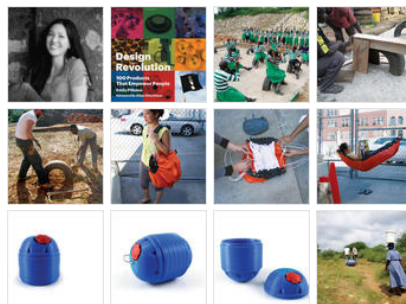
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HIPPO ROLLER

In collaboration with Engineers Without Borders San Francisco, Project H redesigned a device that brings potable water to the drought-stricken world. Courtesy Project H Design



says from her northern California headquarters. "It shouldn't be about me. It should be about the chapter engaging with the community." Pilloton and the chapter heads all say that she doesn't give them much beyond the legitimacy of the name, a small annual budget, and unwavering moral support. But those are powerful tools. "To have that name on my business card is priceless," Grossman says. "If I call an investor or a nonprofit and say, 'I'm part of Project H Design, here's our Web site, here's what we've done,' I have a feeling you're going to call me back."

For any of this to work, the chapter heads have to be ambitious, motivated, and bursting with ideas. They work at least three to ten hours a week on Project H, often much more. But Pilloton is also adamant about providing entry points for members who have less time to give.

"If we want to be successful, we have to rely on volunteers," she says, "so as part of every single project we have to think: How can we streamline the workforce so that every level of volunteer is both contributing something and getting something back?"

That kind of incremental thinking is another major ingredient in the Project H secret sauce. The average project costs \$1,000—and not all are newly invented objects. Having nearly two dozen completed projects has meant, in part, redefining success to include modest moves like improving on existing designs. Somehow, Pilloton manages to make this sound as exciting as being the lead designer on the latest Apple gadget: "How do you take the power of something that's clearly awesome and make it much more efficient as a business model and production cycle?" She's referring to the Hippo Roller, a device for transporting water in the developing world. It's been a proven success in South Africa for 15 years, but at \$100 each, it was way too expensive for what's essentially a plastic barrel. Project H reengineered the barrels as two-piece capsules that could be nested and stacked, making them far cheaper to ship.

The chapters are now beginning to swap projects so they can build more efficiently on their past successes. Their method of working, in which the clients are intimately involved in the development of designs, already creates effective feedback loops. Now, with another round of hands and minds involved, the projects will become even stronger. Take the Learning Landscape, a piece of playground equipment made from tires that teaches math concepts. Pilloton led several volunteers on the research and construction schemes. Grossman and Heleen de Goey, a Dutch design student, built the installation in Uganda. Pilloton and her partner, Matthew Miller, an architect who is also the project manager of Project H, have installed four in North Carolina and one in the Dominican Republic.

With strategic collaborations like this, Project H's reach can continue to expand without the organization's becoming bloated. Pilloton wants to stay small. The system works in part because it's volunteer run. Right now she is unpaid and supports herself through freelance work. She and Miller recently moved out of an apartment in San Francisco and into their Airstream trailer in order to keep their over-head low. A design firm (cofounded by John Bielenberg) lets them park in front of its office; thus, Project H headquarters is a paved yard in Half Moon Bay. The trailer will double as an exhibition space in early 2010, when Pilloton and Miller take Design Revolution on the road to 23 schools across the country. They will exhibit objects from the book, give lectures, and hold workshops for professors to help them meet the growing demand for classes on humanitarian design.

Of course, running a 21st-century start-up, Pilloton and her cohorts have another not-so-secret weapon: the Internet and its related technologies. As a blogger for Inhabitat, Pilloton built an audience and interviewed scads of designers; her mailing list is a force to be reckoned with. So is the Project H Web site, where a PayPal account brings in the majority of the group's funding. Average donation size: \$53. The ease of technology has empowered followers to get involved at whatever level they can; no contribution is too small to matter.

Similarly, Pilloton attributes some of her generation's outspokenness to growing up with pagers, cell phones, and e-mail—"feeling like you have a voice and the channels to publicize that voice," she says. Most recently, she has been honing hers through the microblogging site Twitter. She finds it a helpful exercise to distill her message into 140-character bites. "That's the one thing that I've learned from the Web," she says. "How to tell compelling stories simply but still retain a kind of humanity." In other words, the manifestos will continue to flow.