

# Scaling Down: Why Designers Need to Reverse Their Thinking

**Abstract** The growth model of the 20th century required that designers and companies achieve economies of scale. Scaling up involved abstraction to make large-scale production possible for the global industrial economy. In the 21st century, social challenges are increasingly disrupting world markets. This changes the focus of the design process. Designers once needed to learn just a little about large groups of people to serve mass markets. Today, they must learn a great deal about relatively small numbers of people. They must shift from concentrating on what makes groups of people similar to what makes them different. This article explores the process of “scaling down” by describing key principles. It examines these principles at work in three case studies from The Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design to develop a lighting system for inner-city housing estates, a planning tool to create better workplaces, and a suicide-prevention strategy for a public health black spot.

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## A Close Shave

Today, I wet shaved with a mass-market shaver and shaving foam from the same manufacturer. Despite the unique contours and characteristics of my sixty-year-old face, I had exactly the same experience as billions of other men of different ages all over the planet perched in front of their shaving mirrors. I purchased my shaving kit relatively cheaply in London, but I could just as easily have acquired the same equipment in a hundred other cities (or airports) around the world for roughly the same price. The manufacturer backs up the shaver's brand identity using copious amounts of above- and below-the-line marketing – from sports sponsorship and blockbuster ads to distinctive packaging – *making it instantly recognizable* across different regions, languages, and cultures.

My shaver's optimum performance is the result of extensive research and development. Designers honed its style, materials, and blade configuration into a product with global appeal. They abstracted the act of shaving into a single product form and then wrapped a compelling brand image around it. Globalization, mass marketing, and mass distribution enhance this ability designers have to 'scale up' an abstracted solution so that it serves billions of consumers. I am hooked on it with the loyalty born of laziness and a fear of switching to an inferior product.

So what does my inexpensive little mass-market shaver tell me? That abstraction and scaling up – two significant contributions that designers have made to business practice in the last 70 years – have been central to its success. Designers learn to create designs that appeal to the lowest common denominator. A multitude of consumer products – cars, corporate logos, retail store fit outs, global office spaces – have undergone abstraction and scaling up. How has this come about?

## A (Very) Short History of Scaling Up

Some design historians point to the work of pioneering AEG design leader Peter Behrens right before WWI as the moment when scaling up became an industry practice. AEG was the first industrial giant of the modern age – the Sony or IBM of its day. Behrens created a simple, abstract, utilitarian style for its factories, products, and publicity. His ingenuity forged the world's first modern corporate identity.<sup>1</sup>

Behrens was ahead of his time. After World War II, scaling up shifted into high gear as the US financed Europe's reconstruction from a position of industrial strength. By the 1950s, designers had begun to enjoy a position of strength themselves. As visual arts critic Peter Dormer wrote in *Design Since 1945*, "At every turn in the history of the post-war world of technology and manufacturing, the designer finds he or she has a niche."<sup>2</sup> Designing contributed significantly to the profits and power of leading American mass producers. European companies such as Olivetti, Braun, and Philips followed suit.

In the 1960s, influential New York consultants like Raymond Lowey and Henry Dreyfuss created design templates for industry that most would come to emulate. Dreyfuss's *The Measure of Man*<sup>3</sup> was a virtual handbook for scaling up that included human factor data and three basic universal body types. *The Measure of Man* reduced the messy, diverse experiences of real people to a set of proportional measurements that would fit the "Average Joe."

By the time Austrian design educator Victor Papanek sat down at the end of the 1960s to write *Design for the Real World*, a stinging rebuke to the design profession in America, the industrial world had scaled up dramatically. He famously prefaced his masterwork:

"There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a very few of them.... Never before in human history have grown men sat down and

1 Wally Olins, *Corporate Identity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 48–49.

2 Peter Dormer, *Design Since 1945* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993).

3 Henry Dreyfuss, *The Measure of Man: Human Factors in Design* (New York: The Whitney Library of Design, 1960).

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