

# ChildArt



**LEARNING FROM DESIGN!**



# LOOK AROUND YOU. DESIGN IS EVERYWHERE!



by Kathy Bonte

Look around you. Everything you see, from the shiny toy on the store shelf to the colorful pillowcase on your bed or the very shirt on your back has been "designed" by someone. From a lively placemat pattern to the placement of a purse zipper – every detail is there for a reason. A professional designer carefully considers each of these decisions.

How does this creative process come to life? How does a toy designer, interior designer, textile designer or fashion designer come up with the designs that make it into our stores, our homes, and our lives? How can we, as aspiring designers, learn how to apply similar principles that professionals use to come up with our own creative and unique items to use, wear, and play?

Let us begin with the design of toys and playthings. In the [DezignKidz Summer Program](#), in Silicon Valley, California, "wannabe" designers in the Toy Design class often face a creative challenge. We first begin with a sketch; young designers come up with an idea and then

build a toy that is both sturdy and playful. They clearly define the problem set by deciding on who their audience or their customer will be. Are we designing for a chubby toddler whose fine motor skills are still developing? He/she will need a safe toy with no sharp edges or small pieces that could come loose. Now consider designing a toy for a ten-year-old – this may be more of a challenge.

Think about what the toy will do or what will the 10-year-old do with it? Is it a furry soft toy for cuddling at night or a vehicle with wheels that can move and transport small objects across the room? Can it change its shape or turn into a variety of things – like a set of blocks? How might the toy bend, fold, open, close, or take positions in different ways? Does it make a sound? What colors will you use? Most kids are attracted to bright colors. However, if the toy is a small-scale replica of a real life item (for example, a police car) – realistic colors may be better choices than bright neon shades.

After young designers generate many ideas and sketches, they select a final design. The next challenge is to build a model of the design without the assistance of a team of carpenters, metal smiths and model makers. Creative use of materials that are available and the clever repurposing (re-using stuff that you find) of found objects now comes into play. A slice of a Styrofoam pool noodle around a wooden spool becomes a car tire. A sliver of brightly colored duct tape becomes a racing stripe, and a painted wooden clothespin becomes a driver.

A similar creative process happens in the Interior Design summer program. Budding interior designers start with a mood board – a collection of images, paint chips, and swatches that help them solidify their vision for their room. For example, do they want to create an environment that is peaceful, with soft neutrals and cool colors, or stimulating to the senses, with bold patterns and contrasting hues? Perhaps they are trying to conjure up the feeling of the ocean or they

are inspired by the delicious colors of a candy store. Based on their initial vision, students then design a collection of appealing objects for their space that also serves important purposes as determined by them (based on what they know about the person who will be part of the user experience). A pillow may have a secret pocket for a hiding a book or diary or a hanging organizer may have just the right-sized compartments for a favorite collection.

Although we avoid teaching DIY (Do It Yourself) electrical wiring, students also explore the fundamental principles of lighting. Using a simple battery-powered LED as a base, students can create a decorative lighting element for their rooms. By changing the material that covers the bare bulb, students learn through doing to create different moods and effects. Cutouts in the material create interesting shadows on walls and ceilings, and the choice of color can create an eerie effect or a flattering glow.

The students in our Fashion Dezin program have perhaps the most personal connection to their finished projects, as they are creating something that they intend to wear. The design framework is that it must look good, flatter their individual body type AND reflect their personal style. Naturally, it must also fit properly, be comfortable to wear and not fall apart at an inopportune time. To achieve this, the aspiring designer must first look inward. If they are sporty and casual, a dress covered



in frills and lace may make them feel awkward. If they are quiet and low-key, a bright red jumpsuit may draw more attention than their comfort zone can handle.

Young designers are encouraged to look outward for inspiration – by flipping through magazines, studying the work of famous designers or just walking outside to take inspiration from nature. Once their initial vision becomes clear, a senior teacher and the counselors help them define the steps to turn it from a sketch to finished garment. Sometimes there are detours on the road from the sketch to the final project. One middle school boy designed an ambitious pair of pants with 22 different pockets, each one dedicated to a specific item he liked to carry with him. After two failed attempts at making his first cargo pocket, he eventually got the hang of it but soon decided that two large pockets were more than enough! Lesson learned: while it is important to see your vision through, sometimes you need to make adjustments.

The fledgling fashion designers at DezinKidz not only have themselves as clients; sometimes they get to design for a celebrity or a character in a favorite book or film. DK Challenges are a unique and beloved part of the program in which the students work in teams to design a “look” for a specific person or event. Perhaps they will design a touring outfit for Taylor Swift, a wardrobe for a tropical vacation, or, in the case of a recent challenge, a costume for a character in The



Hunger Games. For the Hunger Games Challenge, students first had to decide on a specific character and consider both the personality of the character as well as the mood and the setting in which the outfit would be worn. The groups worked together to brainstorm, sketch, and come up with a final design which they then created in miniature scale using scraps of fabric and other materials on hand.

Chances are only a handful of the students who come through our program will become professional fashion designers, toy designers or interior designers. While they learn many useful practical skills – how to sew a straight seam, how to hammer a nail, how to make a floor plan – the real lesson they take with them is how to take their ideas from concept to completion. It is a lesson they can apply wherever their futures takes them – whether they are building a skyscraper, a new iPhone app, or a lesson plan to inspire future generations of innovators. ■

Kathy Bonte is a designer and educator with over 30 years design experience across a variety of media—from print, web and film to more recent forays into fashion accessories and home decor. In 2009, with her partner Durga Kalavagunta, she co-founded DezinKidz, a Silicon Valley organization dedicated to providing creative enrichment programs to elementary and middle school-aged children.

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