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A New Summit in Education

How Michael and Katherine McCoy
 developed a peak experience for learning.

by Beverly Russell

Ever since they arrived at Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1971 to co-chair the department of design, Michael and Katherine McCoy have initiated radical new thoughts about design education. At Cranbrook, where they headed design for 23 years, the McCoy's were famous for mixing up students with different backgrounds, putting "woodchucks" (or handcraft-oriented people) alongside high-tech designers. Continuing in the Cranbrook tradition, whose founders believed in the integration of art, architecture and nature, the McCoy's influenced a whole generation of educators and students with their insistence on cross disciplinary learning, derived from their own interests in two-dimensional visual communications design (Katherine holds the Gold Medal award from AIGA, the highest honor in the graphic design field) and three-dimensional design of furniture, interiors and products (Michael is the creator of numerous best-selling commercial products).

Their team-teaching techniques are legendary. They speak together creating seamless sentences with each contributing a phrase here and a phrase there to make the overall point they are emphasizing. It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that the McCoy's influence at Cranbrook was as important as their predecessor's, Charles Eames, who founded the department in 1939, with a course "for all branches of work." Their teaching and their work for national and international clients through their own firm, McCoy & McCoy, and Fahnstrom/McCoy (a partnership between Dale Fahnstrom and Michael McCoy) extended the finest traditions of design at the academy.

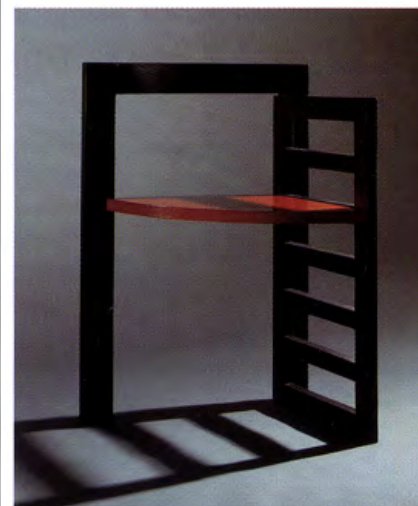
After leaving Cranbrook in 1995, the McCoy's were visiting professors for two years at the Royal College of Art in London. But since 1997, they have established a teaching routine that embraces an enviable commute between their rustic Rocky Mountain lodge in Buena Vista, CO, and an elegant loft in Chicago, IL. From August to December, they teach a semester as senior lecturers at the Illinois Institute of Technology's Institute of Design in Chicago, where graduate students in Human Centered Design study for their Master's and Doctorate degrees. From January to July they are based in Colorado, where they direct their unique High Ground studio conferences, which are refresher courses for active professionals in search of advancing their careers, enhancing their leadership skills and expanding their vision about the future of design.

Cover and
 portrait photography
 by Bill Tucker

Not surprisingly, High Ground, with its scenic ambiance of snowcapped mountains offering peaks of inspiration and stimulation, is establishing a new benchmark in design education. As of now, the McCoy's offer two courses, a three-day cross disciplinary event in nearby Breckenridge, open to 120 participants, called "Designing the Brand Experience," and a nine-day product workshop for 16 people at the High Ground Center, adjacent to the McCoy's residence, called "Designing the Product Experience." Both are organized in collaboration with the Industrial Design Society of America (IDSA).

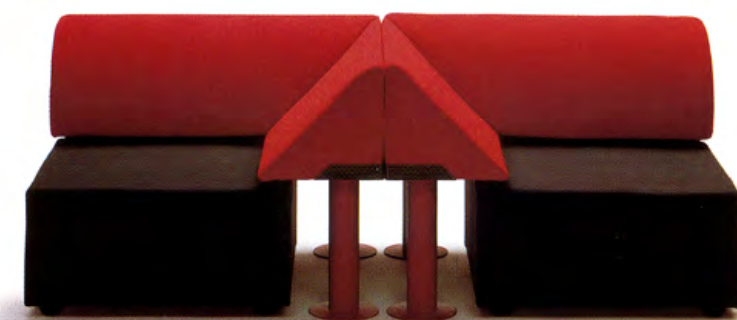
The High Ground program speaks to the new need for life-long learning; a testimony

The Bulldog chair for Knoll was designed in 1989 by Michael McCoy with Dale Fahnstrom and David VandenBranden, Fahnstrom/McCoy and is still one of the company's biggest sellers.

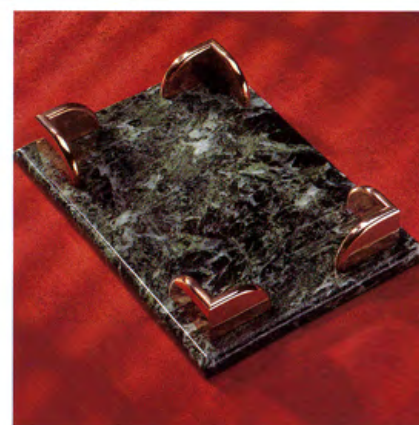


The Door chair designed in 1981 by Michael McCoy folds up flat.

Quadrio seating by Michael McCoy, designed in 1987 for Artifort, can be neatly reconfigured from sofa to two individual seats.

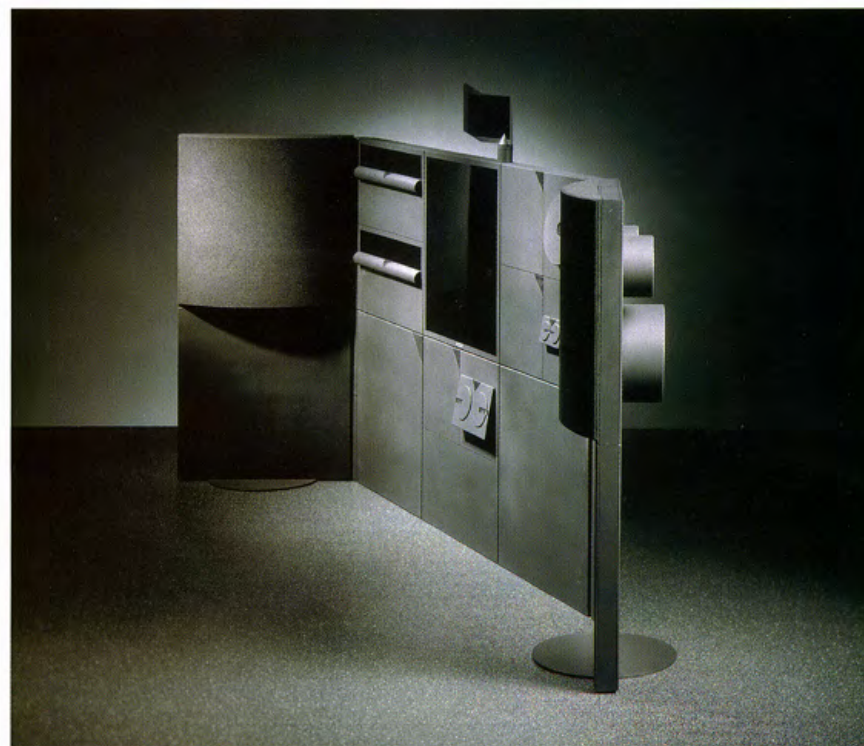


Deskcape desk accessories for Steelcase Details, were designed in 1989 by Michael McCoy with Dale Fahnstrom and David VandenBranden, Fahnstrom/McCoy





The Creel Morrel offices in Austin, TX, designed by Michael and Katherine McCoy in 1987, used colors and symbols to resonate with the client's design business.



This home entertainment system was designed in 1987 for Phillips by Michael McCoy with Dale Fahnstrom and David VandenBranden, Fahnstrom/McCoy.

to its relevance can be gathered by the fact that Sony sent its entire U.S. design team of 20 people to the three-day event this past June. The highest caliber of experts are retained as "studio masters" to coach the participants at High Ground conferences—all are noted for their breakthrough design and influential theories. Past faculty include Bill Moggridge, co-founder of IDEO; John Cain, vice president of E-Lab, Chicago; Chris Conley, president of Design Research, Chicago; Bill Hill, president of MetaDesign, San Francisco; Terry Swack, vice president of experience design for Razorfish; and Tucker Viemeister, executive vice president of research and development at Razorfish.

While the emphasis of these High Ground programs appears to be on product design (programs will be specifically geared to the interiors community in the



In 1995, Katherine McCoy designed this new Cranbrook entrance sign. Photography by Balthazar Korab



The Chicago Bears headquarters' signage was designed by Katherine McCoy in 1999.

not-too-distant future), given the inter-disciplinary nature of many design firms today, the information disseminated is obviously useful to *any* designer—whether an interior designer, graphic designer, Web designer, product designer or interactive designer—who might be working on anything from a restaurant to a virtual movie environment.

The heart of the curriculum philosophy is focused on user experience. It is no longer sufficient to "brand" a product, whether an interior environment or piece of furniture, with a brand logo and leave it at that. With a sophisticated generation of customers and complex cross-media product mixes, conventional branding is totally inef-

fective. To be successful, the brand must connect with the customers' values and lifestyles. It must generate a narrative consistent with their tastes and inclinations. The product must fit into their unique world in order for them to remain brand loyal and repeat buyers.

Such a unique branding experience can be seen today, for example, in the hugely successful Starbucks coffee shop enterprise, a total brand experience from the interiors of the retail coffee bars to the music played to the graphic design of everything right down to the shopping bags and the drinking straws. The Starbucks' brand fits a particular type of upscale, arts-oriented, visually-educated person who relates to the experience of being involved as a Starbucks' consumer.

At High Ground conferences, which are described as high-energy immersion



The McCoy Colorado home and studio in Buena Vista is an ongoing project since 1981. An adjacent conference center is where the High Ground conferences are held. Photography by Michael McCoy

courses, participants are initiated into the strategies for creating powerful brand character that ensures satisfying experiences resonating with the users' values.

"Today's designer needs to be able to understand and develop experiences," Katherine McCoy asserts. "The studio object, or the object of desire, is the traditional way to teach design. It is based on creating a portfolio of work at school and then assuming this portfolio is going to get you the job, and then take you through your career. Many young professionals may question, 'Why go to graduate school if you are not going to create precious objects?' What's relatively new is the need for designers to understand how objects can interface with experience, and how all interaction can converge."

"All design involves the need to go beyond sight and hearing," explains Michael McCoy. "We need to involve the contemplative senses, contact the haptic sense, the tactile sense to get down to the essence of informed design."

A key element in the High Ground process is to create four- to five-person groups which are asked to act out an experience with the goal of creating an entirely new system. They may first decide what kind of an object fits into the system, and then go through the blow-by-blow process of using it. They must begin by imagining some moment in someone's life, get dressed for the day, and then develop the system. This may involve changes in clothing or painting or some other artistic effort in order to validate the experience.

After acting out a scenario, they speak about the experience and process the infor-

In the McCoy's' Chicago loft a rail over the windows displays their collection of Native American ceramic art.



mation. By the end of the immersion process, they are expected to bring the system to reality. The speed of the High Ground process is in stark contrast to the traditional graduate school learning environment, where reading, philosophy, language and art and design issues are discussed in a reflective ambiance.

"We set an increased pace, because everything that a designer does these days is always required tomorrow, and software enables this fast delivery system to actually happen," adds Katherine.

Participants at High Ground conferences find that the burst of creativity experience can exceed that of the rest of the year in the work environment. It offers a conceptual

The High Ground seminar center was added to the McCoy home and studio complex in 1998. Designed to stimulate and motivate seminar participants, the center's peaked roof echoes the surrounding Rocky Mountain snow-capped peaks.



The interior of the High Ground seminar center is spacious enough to accommodate up to 16 seminar participants.





In the McCoy's Chicago loft meticulous millwork was designed and installed for books.



Double level living space separates dining and sitting areas.