

In 2007, AIGA Minnesota celebrates its 30th anniversary. In honor of this milestone, Issues will feature the individuals who have been instrumental in making AIGA Minnesota what it is today.

Tim Larsen Leads the Way to AIGA

Larsen was the first chairman of what is now AIGA Minnesota

By Cheryl B. Stone and Kolean Pitner

When Tim Larsen arrived in the Twin Cities in 1971 after graduating from the design department at Moorhead State University, he felt a little lonely.

“When I came to the Twin Cities, it was lonely being a graphic designer,” Larsen said. “Design was not accepted by corporations and businesses, and so few clients understood the value of design. We always had to explain what graphic design was and why it was an important strategic tool for businesses.”

In those early days of graphic design in Minnesota, most businesses were familiar only with commercial artists, who were called “wrists” because of their drawing ability, or advertising designers. Few people knew what a graphic designer was.

Larsen’s first job in the Twin Cities was at a firm called Design Center. He then joined the Ariss + Eaton Design Office, and in 1975 he founded Larsen Design out of his apartment in Bloomington. Larsen’s first client was Honeywell, for which he designed an annual report concept.

Larsen and design colleagues Peter Seitz, Dale Johnston, Eric Madsen, Bob Fleming, Jim Johnson, Patrick Redmond, and Kevin Kuester eventually sought each other out for moral and professional support. They met informally from time to time during the early 1970s at the Walker Art Center conference room “to shoot the breeze.” Eventually they became known as “the seminar group.” It wasn’t until these designers experienced a big disappointment that they decided to launch a formal design organization.

Disappointment Serves as Catalyst for New Design Organization

In 1976, the state of Minnesota decided to create a new license plate. Tim thought the state should hire a professional designer to design the plate. He and Kevin Kuester went to a Minnesota state legislative committee to voice their opinion. The only other public commentary on the topic was from a member of the Minnesota License Plate Collectors Club. His comments seemed to be taken more seriously by the committee because he was a member of an organization. In the end, the license plate committee chose the most neutral image for the new license plate, completely disregarding the input from the professional graphic designers.

Afterward, Tim asked how many members the Minnesota License Plate Collectors Club had. The answer: five. That’s when he realized that if graphic designers were to have any

impact in the public arena, they would need to be part of a professional organization. Although the license plate design issue was a disappointment for local graphic designers, it turned out to be the catalyst for the formation of Minnesota's first design organization.

MGDA Formed in 1977 with Tim Larsen as First Chairman

The first meeting to launch the Minnesota Graphic Designers Association (MGDA) was held in Dale Johnston's office in 1977. Tim Larsen served as both the first chairman and secretary. These early meetings of MGDA were filled with discussions about the importance of strength through fellowship. Members agreed that forming a professional organization and forging a strong bond between graphic designers for the greater good of the design community was more important than competing against each other.

At that time, the graphic designers' main competitors were advertising agencies and art studios. The group that founded MGDA was intent on "raising the bar" for quality design and educating the public and the business community about what graphic design was and why it was important. To help the public understand the value of design, Larsen and MGDA began exhibiting design shows at shopping centers like Southdale and Ridgedale.

According to its founders, the early MGDA was so egalitarian that its meetings became bogged down in endless discussions and organizational minutia. Members began to drop out, and only a few "true believers" slogged through the tedious bureaucratic and legal details that are a necessary part of starting a non-profit professional organization.

But thanks to Larsen's tireless leadership, skillful diplomacy, and sheer hard work, MGDA soon gained solid footing as a professional organization. He then passed the torch to Jim Johnson, Walker Art Center design director, who became the organization's second chairman. Johnson, in turn, was followed by Peter Seitz of InterDesign.

In 1980, Larsen was elected MGDA president and assumed this important leadership position for the second time. He was instrumental in establishing an MGDA board of directors, sponsoring design shows, and launching the MGDA Design Conference at Lutsen. The conference, which was modeled on the Aspen Design Conference, eventually became what is today's Design Camp.

MGDA Becomes AIGA Chapter in 1987 and Serves as Model for AIGA National Chapters

The keynote speaker at the Lutsen design conference in 1980 was Bob Vogel, president of Chicago's professional graphic design organization, the Society of Typographic Artists (STA). At the conference, Larsen and Vogel discussed merging MGDA and STA into a regional design organization.

"When the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) in New York caught wind of our plans to merge, it subsequently announced that it was planning to establish AIGA chapters throughout the country," Larsen said. "For this reason, we believe that MGDA was a catalyst for the development of AIGA chapters."

MGDA became an AIGA chapter in 1987. All of AIGA's national chapters were eventually modeled on the MGDA prototype. In fact, current AIGA President Ric Grefe says he considers AIGA Minnesota to be a bellweather of leadership integrity within the AIGA organization.

Certainly AIGA Minnesota has had a significant impact on the graphic design community in Minnesota during the past 30 years. "Now graphic design has exploded," Larsen observes. "Corporations think it's vital, and the whole World Wide Web revolves around it. We've taken giant steps forward, and AIGA Minnesota has been part of that." ■

Cheryl B. Stone is a member of the AIGA Minnesota Board of Directors and director of communications for the organization. She is also vice president of public relations for U.S. Bank's asset-management subsidiary, FAF Advisors, Inc. Kolean Pitner teaches History of Graphic Design at the College of Visual Arts. She is currently working on a book about the pioneers of Minnesota graphic design.

SUMMARY BOX:

What's New: AIGA Minnesota is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year.

The Background: When Tim Larsen became the first chairman of what is now AIGA Minnesota in 1997, few people understood what graphic design was or what its value was for business.

The Bottom Line: AIGA Minnesota has played a significant role in helping businesses and the public understand the meaning and value of graphic design during the past 30 years.