

Michael Bierut is a funny guy

 By [Herman Manson](#)

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The opening speaker at the 2010 Design Indaba Conference, the famous graphic designer Michael Bierut, gave a humorous presentation filled with some valuable lessons for graphic designers. The conference opened this morning, Wednesday, 24 February 2010. [[view twitterfall](#)]



Bierut is a partner in design agency Pentagram. The Design Indaba website mentions he was born in Cleveland, Ohio, but somehow fails to mention that this is also the home town of Drew Carey! Go Cleveland! He (Bierut, not Carey) is also co-founder of the omni-present Design Observer.

The project he very nearly blew

Bierut presented on the project he, in his words, very nearly blew. The Robin Hood Foundation is a fundraiser financing The Library Project, which redesigns libraries in the NY public school system with the help of well-known architects, designers and artists. Bierut serves as the co-coordinating graphic designer on the project.

Going in he made a couple of critical mistakes. For starters he thought he understood the assignment. He also overestimated the need for overall control. He mistook creating a brand for creating an experience. He overestimated the need for uniformity and finally he didn't recognise how complex his audience really was.

It didn't fly

From the outset he viewed the project as a branding exercise. He figured kids were bored with libraries, and he came up with several new identities and logos. He proposed dropping the word Library as the descriptive name and instead calling it OWL or even RED. It didn't fly.

Of course, these kids didn't think libraries were boring - they had hardly had any experience or engagement with libraries in the past.

So Bierut created a logo around LIBRARY - a library with something extra, and worked with the assigned architects on the empty spaces between the roof and the shelves. These became galleries filled with huge pictures of the kids, their poetry and questions. In the end this is what made a difference to the look and feel of each library - it now belonged to the community and reflected their diversity.

Changed the space

Bierut says it changed the space not only for kids and teachers but also for librarians who found renewed joy in their work.

Sixty libraries later, the project has been a huge success, making a real difference to the people making use of these spaces.

Bierut offered some valuable lessons graphic designers would do well to take home with them:

1. Don't be so damned clever
2. You get power by giving it away (the value of collaboration)
3. The real opportunity may not be part of the original scope of your work
4. Consistency does not = sameness
5. Your audience is more wonderful than you think.

To view images of the libraries, go to www.pentagram.com/en/new/2009/03/murals-for-the-library-initiat.php

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Herman Manson is a freelance business journalist and media commentator who helped Bizcommunity.com cover Design Indaba 2010. He blogs at <http://www.marklives.com> and his writing has appeared in newspapers and magazines locally and abroad in titles as diverse as *AdVantage*, *Business 2.0*, the *Mail & Guardian*, *Men's Health*, *Computer World* and *African Communications*. He co-founded *Brand* magazine. Follow him on Twitter at @marklives.

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