The Usual Suspects
(Creative Review. April 2000)

Regular contributors to a small number of influential websites may be forming a new media design elite.
Liz Faber reports

In the old days of design - and not too long ago - individuals carved a name for themselves: Rand, Brody, Carson. The books they published served as personal manifestos and their reputations as gurus grew strong. But this is changing. In the world of new media design, the group is the dominant force. Individuals can put their work on the web, but it is by linking with other like-minded souls that reputations are being created. It is through collaboration that the new leaders are emerging. An internet design community is rising to the surface amid the dotcom frenzy. Like any other web community, its participants are global, the community is self-generated and members are forming friendships and exchanging ideas. Though many publish their own experimental websites and CDRoms, the community is anchored by a handful of website and CD-Rom showcases. In many ways these showcases serve as digital art galleries, explains Matt Owens of Volumeone (Creative Review, Jan 2000): "The web community has provided an outlet that has never existed before and gives us an intimate level of communication that traditional organisations can't." Among the more established CD-Roms and sites are Hotwired's RGB Gallery www.hotwired.com/rgb, Born magazine www.bornmag.com, the Creative Review CD-Rom (of course); the Gas Book series (Creative Review, March 1999), more recently Josh Ulm's Codex CD-Roms www.codexseries.com/ and the Fabrica websites www.fabrica.it. Two of the most prolific and successful design "galleries" are www.theremediproject.com and www.shift.jp.org. Shift is a Japanese e-zine published by Taketo Oguchi to which designers from around the world submit work and written contributions. Online since November 1996, it carries website reviews and profiles of designers as well as links to related sites. It is enormously popular. Each month a different design company contributes an interactive cover and the archive of these forms an intriguing collection of web art.

The list of contributors will give you a pretty good idea of who is part of this community. Shift also publishes the Gas Book series of CD-Roms, another community focal point. The Remedi Project is a loose coalition of around a dozen designers. The name reflects its founding principle - REdesigning the MEdium through DIscovery - explains its creator Josh Ulm. The site was "created in the belief that by suspending judgement about the web, and by abandoning our preconceptions about how to use it to communicate, we may find a better way to express our discordant voices," says Ulm. These two organisations in particular seem to be the gathering points for the discordant voices.

Now after five years, what started as an ad hoc gathering of the like-minded has gelled into something more solid. And the same names crop up time and again. One such familiar name is designer Daniel Jenett, who says: "It is always the same people that submit their pieces to some events. I like showing off my talent in free projects and I'm also proud to influence design development as it happens online." It is perhaps significant that contributors to The Remedi Project all met in San Francisco this Christmas. This gathering cemented friendships and served to consolidate a community. "There was a lot of talk about how the community evolved. Was it nepotism?" says Tom Hobbs. "The reality is it never happened like that; it evolved. We don't really understand how it happened." Annette Loudon, another of the project's founding members, was also at the party: "It reminded me of what I love about the whole web design thing," she says. "Excellent people flew in from all over the place, busy locals came out of their hidey holes, many people met face to face for the first time. It was a truly warm, fuzzy experience." Publishing work on sites such as The Remedi Project and Shift gives the designers an opportunity to set an agenda for their work, a digital design manifesto for the world to see and, as a result, the work on these sites is influencing the direction that web design is taking. The unusual thing about this is that the strength of influence lies in the group rather than with the individual. Though, for instance, Neville Brody's Fuse project has explored the potential of driving design innovation through collaboration, the gurus of graphic design have, up until now, earned their reputations by and large through the pursuit of an individualistic vision. However, producing work for the web is essentially a collaborative experience.

That said, with the group works serving as a platform, recognition for the individuals is also gaining momentum. The group projects and the works they publish themselves bring them to a wider audience. This encourages clients to start to be bold about the work they commission. Inevitably, commercial success is a measure of influence. Daljit Singh of Digit, a regular contributor to Gas Book and Shift, says: "Our own projects have provided us with fantastic opportunities both in terms of new clients and their perception of what is possible. These types of projects act like Trojan Horses: they allow us to deliver concepts and demonstrate our ability without having to communicate for a particular brand or service." Tomato Interactive's Tom Roope has strived throughout his career to maintain a balance between his personal and client work and has regularly published his own works and participated in community projects. He says: "Tomato Interactive is not set up to make people feel safe in terms of our infrastructure. Clients come to us because they want to differentiate themselves." He feels that many companies developing an e-commerce strategy tend to adopt a bargainbasement attitude, wanting something cheap, cheerful and unimaginative. It's hard for creativity not to be compromised by commercial interests. "I find the D&AD judging very depressing whereas the works created for Shift are exciting," says Roope.

At the end of the day it's difficult for most new media design companies to really express themselves in their client work, in an environment where commerce and technology still prevail over creativity. At the start of the new media revolution, many young designers were part of the culture of the cool art collective. But very quickly the landscape of the new media design community changed. Large agencies jumped on the new media bandwagon, and the funky design consortiums were swallowed up to become agency dotcoms: there are very few small web companies left. To fathom this new medium it is essential for its leading designers to share ideas. For now, like any social community, it is driven by friendship. Daniel Jenett comments: "I know many of the web design folk through their work. I have had the chance to meet some and visit them during my travels. Just last week I met Matt Owens for the first time; right away we had a mutual understanding because we have been around for an eternal time, at least four or five years." Cynics might suggest that these individuals are nothing more than a self-congratulatory global design clique. Only time will tell whether this mutual exchange of ideas will last, or whether rivalry between participants will emerge. Four or five years, in the real world, is no eternity.