



INNOVATION

Design

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# It's Yves Béhar's WORLD. We Just Live (Better) in It.

THE MAN BEHIND THE JAMBOX, THE UP BAND, AND, SOON, THE OUYA (SAY IT "OOH YAH!") GAMING CONSOLE IS CHANGING THE BUSINESS OF PRODUCT DESIGN. GUESS WHO'S IN THE CATBIRD SEAT?



Yves Béhar at the Fuseproject office with prototypes of his Ouya controller.

**F**USEPROJECT FOUNDER YVES BÉHAR STRIDES across the empty white box of his design firm's new offices in Potrero Hill, the orange soles of his Undeclared sneakers echoing off polished concrete floors. In a few weeks, this unadorned reception area

will be a public art gallery. Beyond the gallery's white door, 58 Fuseproject team members—digital and industrial designers, user experience developers, branding and marketing specialists—will move into the open space that Béhar calls a “creative pit,” which surrounds a pyramid-like, two-story-tall tower of bleachers. Devoid of cubicles, it's a noisy, buzzing hive of activity, though less close-quartered than Fuseproject's old, sketch-littered offices in SoMa. (“We have desks now!” exclaims a public relations manager; each station is surrounded by a throng of caged-back Herman Miller Sayl chairs, which the firm designed in 2010.)

Béhar is dressed casually in a black sweater, chest hair peeking from the V-neck, and dark cuffed jeans—a decidedly sexier spin on Steve Jobs's black-turtleneck-and-dad-jeans uniform. He runs a hand through his trademark tousled curls and pushes up his sleeves. His left wrist is circled by a mint green Jawbone Up Band, a fitness-tracking device designed by his firm in 2011 that records his sleep cycles, walking distance, calories burned, and food intake. The band, he says, broke him of the “delusion” that his 45-minute gym routine was sufficient. Now he keeps tabs on his physical exertion even as he chases his kids through the park or treks up Mississippi Street for lunch. On his right wrist is a tangle of colorful braided bracelets with a small silver totem dangling from one, a memento of his annual surf pilgrimage to Indonesia. He taught himself to surf six years ago, at the age of 39. “Sometimes you can find peace of mind by transferring yourself to different situations. They're just reminders to stay...calm,” he says. Neither wrist ever goes bare: On one, a gadget that pushes him toward constant activity and dialed-in consciousness; on the other, a mental escape, a reminder of open seas and off-the-grid beaches.

This seemingly contradictory approach parallels Béhar's business strategy: one part tethered to the realities of the marketplace, the other bent on scrapping convention entirely. Turns out, it's a lucrative way to operate, and an even better way to solidify one's status as a visionary. And no one embodies the inwardly type A, outwardly Zen archetype better than Béhar, who, after 20 years in the design business, has vaulted to the very top of the international must-hire list. He recently added PayPal, SodaStream, and the German skincare giant Nivea to his client roster, all the while projecting his patented West-Coast-by-way-of-Switzerland chill vibe. “He

seems like the most laid-back California guy there is: He has a house near the beach, he goes to Burning Man, he skateboards with his kids, he surfs,” says freelance journalist Adam Fisher, a friend for over a decade (“since Yves was pre-famous,” he notes drolly). “But underneath, he's a perfectionist, a workaholic, and a real aesthete.”

Since founding Fuseproject in 1999, Béhar has subscribed to a philosophy that he calls holistic design. Whether engineering a more touch-sensitive vibrator, as the company did for Jimmyjane, or creating a pair of kids' eyeglasses for the nonprofit program See Better to Learn Better, Fuseproject takes a whole-body approach, tackling everything from the product name and logo to micro-details like the voice you hear when you call customer support. “It's in the touch, the name, the ergonomic function, the digital engagement,” says Béhar. “What you stand for as a brand has to ripple through every single thing that you do.”

That means considering the customer an integral part of the story. When starting out at firms Frog and Lunar Design in the mid-'90s, Béhar remembers, “you could build an entire brand around some jingle or 30-second ad.” Now, the entire design process has become a two-step with an increasingly engaged—and, not unimportant, blogging and tweeting—consumer. The buyer is attuned to design like never before. One glitch—and one scathing blog post—is enough to sink a startup. “You can't make anything crappy today and think it's going to be successful,” Béhar says. “Crappy's out.”

Although designers were once viewed as dispensable window dressers, today they're emerging as essential power players in a company's success, the people most responsible for pulling all the elements of a product launch together. Designers are founders or cofounders of some of the Bay Area's most successful startups, includ-

ing YouTube, Pinterest, and Airbnb. Last year, Béhar became the creative founder of Ouya, an Android-operated open-source gaming console that will allow any user to create a video game. In July, the product raised the most money in a single day in Kickstarter's history (nearly \$2.6 million) and went on to amass nearly \$8.6 million from more than 63,000 backers in just 30 days. “The era of the designer as a signature man is over,” says Béhar.

Not surprisingly, he looks for a similarly transformative ethos when selecting commissions. Though Fuseproject's clients have paid Béhar and company to create everything from Jambox speakers to cargo bikes, Béhar says that he is drawn mainly to jobs that challenge him to “make a contrarian idea successful.” Dismissing, for example, “the notion that sustainability is expensive or ugly,” his firm designed Puma's Clever Little Bag, a lightweight, recyclable pouch that uses 65 percent less cardboard than a standard shoe box. With equal contempt for “the notion that technology has to be difficult and humorless and uninspiring,” the firm came up with the neon-accented XO Laptop, a \$200 computer made specifically for kids. Béhar's next, still-under-wraps, project broaches the emerging field of in-home sensors.

Of course, it may be easier to get people to buy into your iconoclastic approach when you have a knack for waxing philosophic about sustainability and civic duty; a beautiful, well-connected partner (art adviser Sabrina Buell, daughter of developer Mark Buell); and a vague resemblance to Michelangelo's *David*. (On the flight home from a trip to Costa Rica recently, the flight attendant mistook Béhar for an X Games surfer half his age.) “Anyone who meets Yves will tell you he's very charismatic, fun to be around,” says Fisher. “I think that's one of the secrets to his success.” For

the record, Béhar scoffs at what he calls celebrity-directed design. “Relative to the world of true celebrity, designers are still very, very undercover,” he says. “It's not some signature designer or face that makes the whole thing work.” His own success, rather, lies in what happens in Fuseproject's creative pit.

**AT THE OFFICE**, the process starts with a brainstorm among a crew of industrial, graphic, and digital designers. Private offices are nonexistent at the new headquarters. Instead, there are some 30 workstations where groups can congregate and disperse quickly. (“We don't spend time in meeting rooms,” Béhar says dismissively.) The team works to hit upon a single, compelling idea, then builds the “brand ecosystem” around it. With the Ouya gaming console, for example, it all started with the name. “I was really excited about the notion of this open universe of games, so I started with the letters *O* and *U*,” says Béhar. “Then I wanted a sort of release sound—you know, like when something fun happens and you go, ‘Ooooo-yeeeeeaaahh!’” Amid cheers and fist pumping, Ouya was born.

Then the pencils come out. At Fuseproject, a single project generates thousands of sketches. Béhar himself can produce hundreds of thumbnail drawings in a day. It's an impulse embedded in adolescence: At the age of 19, rather than attending university like his friends, the Swiss-born Béhar enrolled in a drawing school in the town of Lausanne where teenage dropouts and retirees sat side by side shading landscapes. (The experience eventually led him to study at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena.) He still trumpets the sketch as the most effective form of communication. “I'm always telling my team, ‘If you never draw a bad idea, it will remain in your head. The best way to purge it is to draw it.’”

The prototyping phase comes next.

FROM THE OFFICE OF YVES BÉHAR



**SAYL CHAIR**, 2010  
CLIENT: **Herman Miller**  
CHALLENGE: **To craft a high-design office chair for half the price of the iconic Air chair.**



**UP BAND**, 2011  
CLIENT: **Jawbone**  
CHALLENGE: **To create a fitness- and sleep-tracking band cool (and comfortable) enough to be worn 24-7.**



**OUYA**, 2013  
CLIENT: **Ouya**  
CHALLENGE: **To engineer an Android-powered, open-source gaming console for under \$100.**



**VER BIEN GLASSES**, 2010  
CLIENT: **Augen Optics**  
CHALLENGE: **To make customizable, indestructible eyeglasses for low-income schoolchildren in Mexico.**

In creating the Herman Miller Sayl chair, the Fuseproject team produced 70 models in the span of eight months, “each uglier than the last.” Another of Béhar's tenets: “There's virtue in failing quickly.” It's a major reason that he prefers San Francisco to other design capitals. “In New York, it takes six months to schedule a meeting,” he says. “In San Francisco, we meet and two weeks later we work.”

Béhar is notoriously hands-on, preferring to work closely with CEOs to cut through the bureaucratic web. Ouya founder Julie Uhrman first approached Fuseproject with an underdeveloped, underfunded startup idea. After three meetings, she was surprised to learn that she would be working with Béhar directly. “For Yves, there's no beginning of the day or end of the day. It doesn't matter when the money comes in,” she says. (Fuseproject has partnered with promising startups at a reduced rate in exchange for equity.) “He throws himself into every project as though it's his own.”

At Fuseproject, Béhar is known as a demanding presence. The long hours and open work space foster a certain in-the-trenches spirit. And with the unusual design of the new office space, Béhar hopes to further stoke the community. “I'm interested in architecture that creates a moment,” he says. “Somebody's telling you something; somebody made something special for you.” The stop-you-in-your-tracks moment here is found at the top of the staggered bleachers. Soon, visitors will reportedly be able to pop their head out a skylight hatch for views of China Basin.

It's the thrill of the challenge, of pulling off something inherently risky, that drives Béhar—in his office renovation, in his business decisions, and on the beach, waiting out the next wave. “I like to put myself in places in which I need to focus, be in sync, and constantly get better,” he says, adding with a smirk: “Or else.”

LIFE IN 2023

10 LOCAL INNOVATORS SPECULATE ABOUT WHAT WILL COME TO PASS—AND CEASE TO EXIST—WITHIN THE NEXT 10 YEARS.



Chris Anderson

FOUNDER OF DIY DRONES, CEO OF 3D ROBOTICS, FORMER EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF WIRED

**HOME, ROBOT!**  
“Robots have been taking over human jobs for years—I'm sure that when elevator doors first closed without a human operator, people found it odd, but now we don't even notice. The same thing will happen soon with driverless cars. As for when robots will be truly intelligent? We don't even know what human intelligence is. Google does many things better than we do—finding patterns, making connections—and a desktop calculator can do math better than you or I, but is that really intelligence?”



BÉHAR PROJECTS: COURTESY OF FUSEPROJECT; CLOCK: COURTESY OF UC BERKELEY

INNOVATION ALMANAC

GADGETS, INVENTIONS, AND INSPIRATIONS THAT WILL CHANGE THE WAY YOU LIVE—OR AT LEAST BLOW YOUR MIND.

1 Bacteria Mapper

A science project that may one day provide some of the most important medical breakthroughs of our time begins in your nose. And your mouth. And your other, less visible orifices. Simply by **sending samples of your bodily fluids and exudates** to the crowdfunding **uBiome project** (ubiome.com), you can assist researchers who are mapping the trillions of microbes, called the microbiome, that live in the human body and affect everything from gut disorders to behavior. In return, you'll get a catalog of your own biome—and the satisfaction of knowing that your saliva (and so on) may someday help prevent or cure a disease. **JEREMY DORN**