

Wake Up! Massimo Vignelli helped us see our world in new ways

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As 2014 ended, the New York Times devoted an entire page to remembering Massimo Vignelli, the designer who was born in 1931 and died in May. You may not know his name, but you've seen his work a million times in countless forms.

In a dozen photos and a brief profile of Vignelli, The Times explains how this one Italian-American immigrant and his wife Lella shaped contemporary America, calling Massimo "a modern-design missionary. His signature simplicity cut away the clutter found in much commercial design."

That's why the release of [*Design is One: Lella & Massimo Vignelli*](#) by documentary filmmakers Kathy Brew and Roberto Guerra is such an eye-opening experience. Close your eyes for a moment and envision the "look" of American Airlines, Ford, IBM, Xerox, Gillette, JCPenney, Bloomingdales and Saks.

Chances are your mind's eye holds snapshots of Vignelli logos, products, signs, shopping bags and more. You've already got image after image of the Vignellis' work stored away; seeing this film will unlock new insights into how those images connect.

Why are we reviewing this documentary in ReadTheSpirit—an online magazine widely read by people who care about spirituality and cultural diversity? Because this film is a terrific discussion-starter for small groups. You'll find a host of associations with themes of faith and the goal of building healthy, diverse communities. In the film, the Vignellis say that their proudest accomplishment is the design of [St. Peter's](#)



[Church in New York City](#), where they both planned to be interred and, of course, Massimo arrived in 2014.

As we tour this church in the film, Massimo points to the St. Peter's [columbarium](#) and says, "That's our permanent residence. It makes me so happy to know that we will be here forever." If you discuss this film with friends, you'll have an evening of spirited conversation on the St. Peter's sequence, alone.

And, as the filmmakers show us in the course of the documentary, the Vignellis were interfaith pioneers, also designing a number of gorgeous pieces for Jewish families, especially focusing on silver candleholders in various forms.

Stepping back from the specifically religious content of the film, the Vignellis spare modernist approach to design had the overall mission of encouraging healthy communities by bringing greater clarity to the treasures that can unite us as a body of diverse people. One of Massimo Vignelli's most enduring projects was a redesign of the "look" of our National Parks.

Even [the National Parks Conservation Association](#) says that the graphical "look" of National Parks publications and maps was "an idiosyncratic hodgepodge" before Vignelli arrived in 1977 with the goal of popping Americans' eyes open to the wonders awaiting us in our parks. Because of federal-government bureaucracy before that time, National Parks publications were printed in black and white in a crazy quilt of designs. Vignelli (with support from National Parks publications chief Vincent Gleason) designed maps and brochures and paperback books that featured gorgeous color photographs, simplified maps and a standardized design that welcomed visitors to any of the hundreds of nationally administered parks.

In the film, we hear Lella and Massimo repeatedly explain that their lives were dedicated to helping millions of Americans understand our country in clear and inviting ways. From home furnishings to subway maps, from chairs to books, from jewelry to magazines, from watches to calendars—this couple's hands made our world more hospitable. As they accomplished their goal through a remarkably long career, they made America a more welcoming place for the growing diversity of our people.

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