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**BY BILL GLAUBER**

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# A designer's vision shatters a stigma

BY PAUL VAN SLAMBROUCK  
CORRESPONDENT

SAN FRANCISCO

Yves Béhar can see the swells of change from some distance. As an avid surfer, he's learned the skill of spotting a good "set" and anticipating the lift and thrust that will carry him forward.

That ability to see what's coming may be part of what has made the Swiss-born Mr. Béhar one of the elite industrial designers in the world. He's successful, in demand, and seemingly always on the cusp of what is new.

"He has no signature," says Joseph Rosa, the newly appointed director of the University of Michigan Museum of Art in Ann Arbor. That's high praise from Mr. Rosa, who says a designer's "signature," or an element that brands a design, is often a sign of someone starting to flatten out creatively and reread old ideas.

No one would accuse Béhar of that.

In the last couple of months, schoolchildren from poor families in Mexico have begun to see clearly thanks to Béhar-designed eyeglasses that are being given away free of charge.

By the end of the year, the new program, called See Better to Learn Better (*Ver Bien para Aprender Mejor*) aims to distribute 300,000 pairs of glasses to schoolchildren between 6 and 18 years of age – and then 300,000 each year thereafter. The effort is a partnership between Béhar's Fuseproject, the Mexican government, and Augen Optics.

Béhar says the program is in the middle of a test distribution, and that he could already see that one of the primary goals was being accomplished: to eliminate the stigma of wearing glasses. "The kids were excited and showing off" their new glasses, he says.

Don't be surprised if the eyeglasses, which carry several design innovations, cause ripples in the larger commercial eyewear market. That's the way Béhar's projects often work. For instance, his partnership with the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) program, which has distributed nearly 1.5 million computers to schoolchildren around the world, is credited by some with spurring the low-cost netbook computer market.

"What I'm always trying to demonstrate is that you can get high-quality design at a low price point when a low

## LOW-COST BUT STILL 'COOL,' GLASSES FROM YVES BÉHAR HELP MEXICAN SCHOOLCHILDREN TO FOCUS.

price is just one of the criteria you are using in creating the design," says Béhar.

Nicholas Negroponte, a founder of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab and creator of the One Laptop program, recalls how Béhar came into the laptop program when the original design team had hit a wall in 2005. They couldn't get it beyond the prototype stage and Béhar was able to punch through the design barrier and give the project new life.

"The best decision we ever made," says Mr. Negroponte of bringing in Béhar. "He was able to really listen and always come up with a solution or ask a better question."

Béhar's solution for the eyeglass program was an almost modular design where the frames of the glasses, which are plastic and almost unbreakable, are made in two pieces – upper and lower – allowing for a cheaper fusion of the lenses to the frames. As a result, the lenses can be replaced at lower cost as prescriptions change.

The "cool" factor is critical, says Béhar. In Mexico, low-income children in need of eyeglasses often don't get them partly because of cost, and partly because the low-end products look, well, not cool.

The *Ver Bien para Aprender Mejor* glasses come in five frame styles, three sizes, and seven colors. The mix-and-match design, as well as the low cost of incorporating the lenses, has lowered the manufacturing cost to about \$10 per pair, according to Béhar. Half of that cost is being borne by the Mexican government, and the other half by the nonprofit set up for the program.

According to Fuseproject, a half-million children enter Mexican schools each year in need of eyeglasses. The program will use local optometrists, or visiting ones in villages without one, to come to the

schools and provide exams and prescriptions. Within a couple of weeks of the exam, says Fuseproject, the finished glasses will be delivered to the schools and distributed.

Béhar's greatest innovation may be his success in pushing state-of-the-art design into noncommercial spaces, at costs that enable poor Mexican children to have catchy eyeglasses, just as poor children in Uruguay, Rwanda, and Haiti have their own uniquely designed OLPC laptops.

That ability to take high design to lower economic strata is built on the foundation of Béhar's commercial successes.

you can have a huge benefit for the world," he says.

Low energy use, along with a growing number of other green criteria are changing what designers think about, says Béhar. In part, he says, designers serve the function of acting as a sort of social radar for industry, being sensitive to user preferences and emerging social values. He pinpoints the car industry in particular as an industry where "people's expectations are way



PHOTOS COURTESY OF FUSEPROJECT

**Students wear frames** from See Better to Learn Better, a project that aims to deliver 300,000 pairs of eyeglasses to Mexican schools. The glasses can be inexpensively customized.



His projects include the Jawbone cell-phone headset for Aliph, the "Clever Little Bag" green-packaging system for Puma shoes, and the delicate Leaf Lamp design for furniture maker Herman Miller. Last year Fuseproject won seven International Design Awards.

Béhar says projects done with a high degree of social consciousness, such as the laptops and eyeglasses, have been "the biggest reward in my life." Still, he says his experience is that designing in both realms – social enterprise and strictly commercial – feed into each other. "If you think of using very low energy in a laptop,

beyond what is being provided." That may be just one example of the rather extraordinary period of history we are all living through, according to Béhar, when what people want is changing remarkably fast, and designers and industry are struggling to keep up.

"We are in a rare moment when there is a whole set of new criteria in people's lives that have entered the equation, and industry has the opportunity to rethink how it does things," says Béhar. "Now you know why it's impossible to get up in the morning and not be absolutely fired up about the possibilities." ■