

The page features abstract geometric line art in red and gold. In the top left, a red line forms a jagged, mountain-like shape. In the top right, a gold line forms a similar jagged shape. On the left side, a red line forms a complex, multi-pointed shape. On the right side, a gold line forms a jagged shape. In the bottom left, a red line forms a jagged shape. In the bottom right, a red line forms a jagged shape. The text is centered between these shapes.

Innovation in Service to Others

JOHN ZIMMER '06

BY SANDI MULCONRY



John Zimmer '06, cofounder and president of Lyft, has a vision for the future that draws from the past: reducing the number of cars on the road so that cities can once again be places that invite human interaction. He views cities as the ultimate hospitality experience. "If we design cities so that they're for people, not cars—if we design them to elevate people's quality of life and

create greater equality—that is the best service, the best form of hospitality we could provide.”

Now in its second decade, Lyft had its genesis in Zimmer’s senior year when he took the Green Cities course in Cornell’s School of City and Regional Planning. Learning that cities’ impending population growth would soon overwhelm their infrastructures, he looked at automobiles and saw “transportation hotels”—ones with “high costs and horrible occupancy.” Taking note of the vast amounts of space devoted to parking, he began to think about how communities could reclaim that territory to turn it into parks and common spaces “where culture could thrive.” A design class taught by Stephani Robson, a senior lecturer in properties development and management in what is now the Nolan Hotel School, got him thinking further about the power of design.



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–John Zimmer ‘06

After graduation, Zimmer worked briefly for Lehman Brothers. Then, with Logan Green, he cofounded Zimride, a ride-sharing service for companies and universities, which they sold to Enterprise Holdings in 2013. In 2012, Zimmer and Green cofounded Lyft, the first company to establish peer-to-peer, on-demand ride-sharing.

“Everything we do flows from a commitment to service, community, and treating people right,” Zimmer said. “Cornell was influential in showing me the importance of those values in life and in business.”

A Business Defined by Innovation

The key to delivering on his vision, Zimmer said, is a transportation network that allows people to shop all their ground transportation needs from Lyft’s one platform, saving time, money, and the environment. Among other sustainability moves, Lyft has a carbon-offset program to make rides on its platform carbon-neutral and has committed to 100-percent electric vehicles on its platform by 2030.

“Over the next three to five years,” Zimmer said, “we will create an experience that extends from rideshare to include bikes, scooters, walking, car rentals, personal vehicle services, and finally autonomous vehicles. Today you see us as a rideshare company. Soon you will see us as a transportation network—the one stop for your transportation needs.”

Lyft owns most of the major bike-share programs in North America. A recent addition to that network is Lyft’s own electrified bike, built for safety and endurance with onboard sensors and retroreflective paint, a smooth and adaptive motor, and a battery that goes 60 miles on a single charge. Named one of Time magazine’s “Best Inventions of 2021,” the bike was beta-tested in the San Francisco Bay Area and introduced in Chicago in December 2021 and in New York City in May 2022. It is next slated to roll out in Washington, D.C.

A passenger gets a Lyft in San Francisco.

In Las Vegas, Lyft has offered autonomous rides with Motional, a pioneer in driverless technology, since 2018. Motional's all-electric, autonomous Ioniq 5, designed for fully driverless ride-hail operation, joined Lyft's network there in August. The two companies plan to launch a fully driverless service in Las Vegas in 2023 and then scale to multiple cities. Lyft autonomous rides are also available in Austin, Texas, and Miami. Although Zimmer expects to see significant growth in the technology within the next few years, he concedes, "We've been wrong in predicting the exact timeline for autonomous vehicles. But we see gains every year."

Numerous other innovations are in the offing. In its continuing quest to create a safer platform, Zimmer said, Lyft is using data analytics to build a navigation product that optimizes for safety. And he points to improvements in revenue management and marketplace management made possible by machine learning that “will allow us to provide the right mode of transportation at the right price at the right time on the right street corner.” The pandemic and its resulting “whiplash of market swings” in supply and demand accelerated these innovations, he said. “We provide tens of millions of rides every month, so incremental gains pay off massively. They have tens of millions of dollars of repercussion that we can then take to the bottom line or reinvest in our riders, our drivers, or the business.”

Among other enhancements spurred by the pandemic, Zimmer cites driver improvements such as giving top drivers priority during less busy times. Lyft’s healthcare product, Concierge, which allows healthcare partners to order rides for patients, expanded in scope to include Lyft Assisted “for riders who want a little extra help getting from their door to their destination.” B2B delivery also moved forward. “Our platform is quite good for helping businesses deliver multiple packages to nearby locations,” he said, “so that’s something we’re scaling now, too.”

That spirit of innovation extends to Lyft’s workplace culture, particularly in diversity, equity, and inclusion, where “we’ve had employee resource groups since the early days and track our progress closely,” he said. What Zimmer has found most innovative is “having a culture where people can speak their minds. We don’t surround ourselves with ‘yes people’; we surround ourselves with people who tell us when we’re wrong, and we make a point of valuing that. It’s shocking how honestly rare that is.”

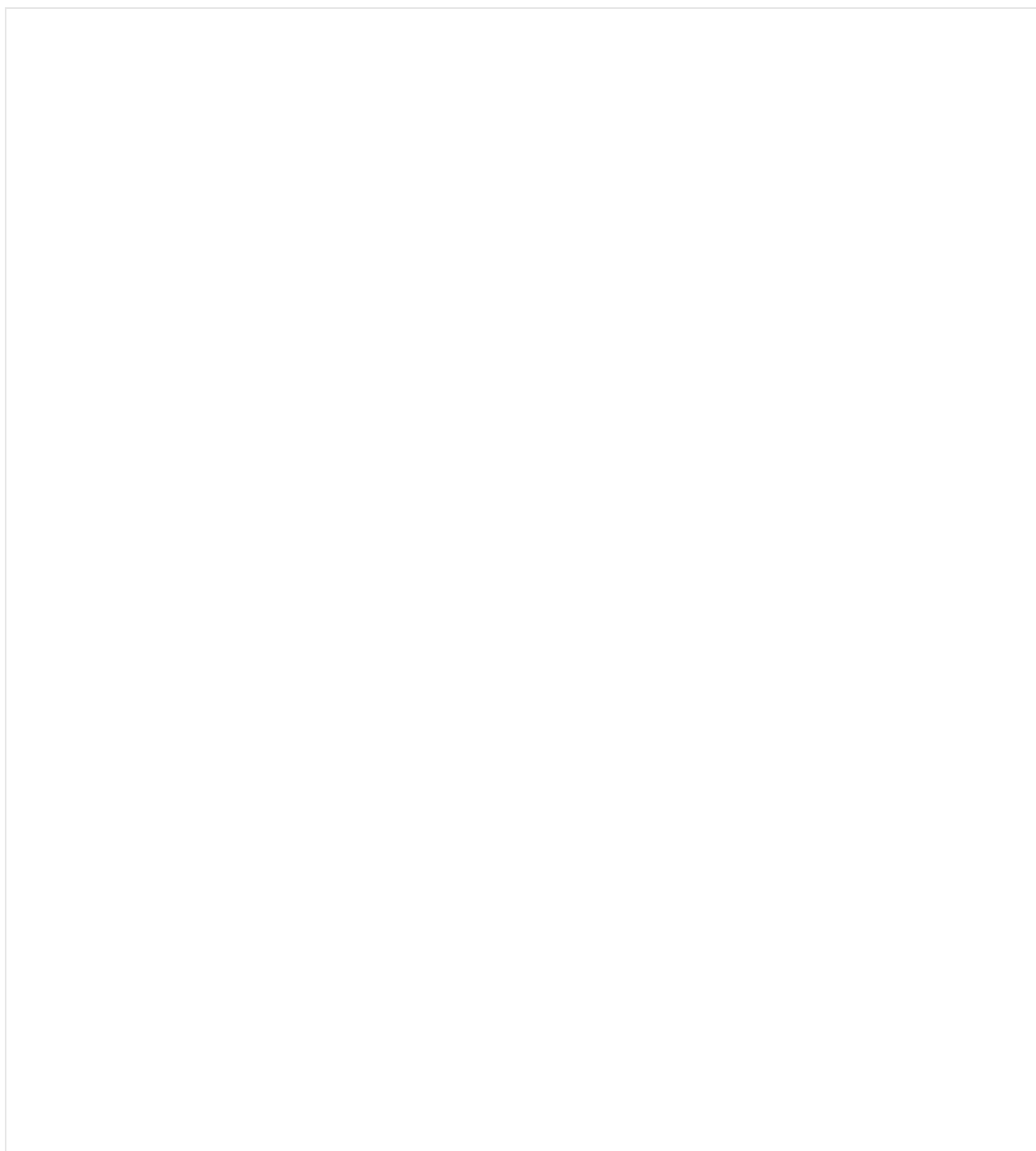
A Continuing Influence

Zimmer's efforts have won plaudits from both the Nolan Hotel School and the business community. He received the 2017 Cornell Hospitality Innovator Award, presented by the Pillsbury Institute for Hospitality Entrepreneurship. In 2015 and 2017, he was named to Fortune magazine's 40 Under 40 list of the most influential young people in business; in 2014, he was named to *Forbes* magazine's 30 Under 30 list of brightest stars in technology and *Inc.* magazine's 35 Under 35 list of coolest entrepreneurs.

The Nolan Hotel School, he said, showed him the difference between innovation in service to others and innovation for innovation's sake. "The rooting in service I received is something I think about all the time. It has become part of who I am."

He believes the school's greatest legacy is its "Life is service" ethos—an ethos needed to meet today's environmental, economic, and social challenges. "Sparking that service mentality in future generations will be incredibly beneficial for the world," he said.

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