Before joining Adobe in 2000, I spent several years at a large web agency. I loved what software tools could enable, but I often loathed the way they worked. Just to get a 20-layer PSD file into Flash, for example, I had to perform 168 individual steps (I know – I counted. I’m odd like that). Multiply such inefficiency across millions of designers and you’re looking at a colossal waste of human potential.

I came to Adobe with hopes of making things better. In my time here I’ve met countless talented people who pour their passion into improving tools for creative folk. Despite our best efforts, however, progress can be slow. With so many customers having such deep and diverse needs, there’s no way to address everyone adequately. Today, millions of Photoshop users send their ideas to one small and generally overwhelmed group of people for consideration. If that group can make a change, then that’s fantastic, but generally the team has to say, “Great idea, but maybe next year – or the year after that…”

I reached a conclusion: we have to get Adobe out of the way of its tools and its customers. We can’t let the Photoshop team be a bottleneck that (unwillingly) impedes progress. That means we have to democratise how applications are built and by whom. Let’s measure the development team in the thousands, not in the dozens. Instead of relying on just the comparatively small crew at Adobe, let’s tap into the ‘Photoshop Nation’. And, rather than delivering improvements only every 18 to 24 months, let’s allow everyone to deliver them continuously, on the fly and on demand.

That’s all great… but how can we do it? The Photoshop team is revamping the app’s core architecture, effectively breaking it into a million pieces that can be combined much more freely than is achievable today. The resulting flexibility will make it possible to extend Photoshop and tune it for your specific needs.

Adobe Configurator – the free interface-building tool that’s downloadable from Adobe Labs – marks progress in this direction. By leveraging Photoshop CS4’s new Flash panel extensibility, Configurator enables anyone to create panels (palettes) through simply dragging and dropping. You can now start tailoring the Photoshop interface to your workflow. Got some favourite tools and commands? Pull them together into a panel for quick access.

Configurator isn’t just about adding to the already busy Photoshop interface – perhaps even more importantly, it’s about subtracting from it. By bringing forward the pieces you use, you can make it possible to hide the rest. Photoshop should be everything you need, nothing you don’t. Coupled with menu customisability and workspaces, Configurator panels enable a greatly streamlined UI.

And so, I think, Configurator is about smashing old authority. It’s about giving power to the people. Anarchy in the S(an) J(osé)? Don’t worry: we’re not going to start sticking safety pins through a plaid PS toolbar, nor is customisability a licence to forget consistency. But by opening some new doors, Adobe and its customers can work together to remix and reinvent the world of design tools. Configurator is just the first step.