Contextual Issues of Design
Educating The New Designer

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Abstract

Issues of design and design education need to be discussed from within the fluid atmosphere of design relative to the people involved in those activities. Although this dialog can be approached in many fashions, most seem inappropriate at this moment. This paper attempts to establish the discourse regarding the direction of design education not with the myopia of a manifesto, nor with simple stark contrast of good and bad, but with context. This paper's intent is to contextualize the issues and needs of the future.

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Introduction

There are some fundamental conflicts with a sole author writing about discourse, and particularly this author's main contention regarding people and context, yet it is my hope to inspire, provoke, jumpstart a dialog on the direction of design.

A dialog on the direction of design can be approached in many fashions; "my way or no way" approach of the manifesto, or the "good-design, bad-design, you decide", approach of polarization. One could start the dialog with the "steeped in the rich history" approach of this is how we do it, it has always worked before. But they all seem inappropriate at this moment. This paper attempts to establish a discourse regarding the direction of design education not with myopia of the manifesto, nor with simple stark contrast of good and bad, but with context. This paper's intent is to contextualize the issues and embrace the needs of the future

Context: Network of People

It is my contention that the issues of design and the future need for well educated designers be discussed in context. That context is a network of people relative to a landscape of accessibility. Issues of design and design education should be discussed from within the fluid atmosphere of design relative to the people involved in those activities. Innovative discourse may emerge only from the assembly of a dynamic group confronting a design problem. It is my belief that problems of design can range from the instilling of desirable aesthetic attributes to an object, to the creating of action inducing events.

It may appear to be an over simplification or a statement of the obvious to say it requires setting up diverse experiences in an educational setting with diverse people. It is the core faculty within a program of Industrial Design that should be diversified. This diversified faculty should be established with the common goal of shaping a new designer.

We need to accept that today's new designer faces such issues as product systems development, product interface, product surface/integration, as well as an increasing move towards the design of the experience. Subsequently we must work toward a simple change, that of diversification of industrial design faculty.

Context: An Economy of Access

Symptomatic of our rapidly changing culture there are times when it is difficult to hold some individuals' attention. As world markets react to of cultural change moving faster and faster, our lives have begun to follow the two second rule of video editing,

where every two to three seconds there is a need to shift vantage points to hold people's attention.

> Our young people are far more comfortable conducting business and engaging in social activity in the world of electronic commerce and cyberspace, and they adapt easily to the many simulated worlds that make up the cultural economy. Theirs is a world that is more theatrical than ideological and oriented more to a play ethos than to a work ethos. For them, access already is a way of life, and while property is important, being connected is even more important (Rifken, 12).

Placing the issues of design education in the context of this arena is like building a house on shifting sands. Building the framework for meaningful discussion about design requires the assembly of the right people, to create an environment of point and counterpoints. If assembled from all like-minded individuals there can be no dialogue. I am not advocating the complete disassembling of our design foundation, but the development of a constructive environment that may require the revision of that foundation. We need to look at the history of design education. In 1947 Moholy-Nagy wrote:

> Industrial design is a new profession. So far it has been more of an adventure than an exact knowledge concerning the demands of industrial production, its technology, sales and distribution techniques. If the profession should be stabilized, there is a need to analyze its requirements. In the past, the successful industrial designers of this country have come from stage design, painting and architecture---people with imagination and fantasy within the realm of the new aesthetics based upon mass production and potentials not hampered by tradition of the handicrafts (Moholy-Nagy, 33).

We are a young profession, though no longer a new one. The profession of Industrial Design is strong and more sure-footed than ever. Our value is recognized more than ever before. We should not take words like "stabilize" to mean fixed in place or having deep roots, because we must remain nimble and flexible. We must remain willing to respond to economic and cultural changes. Moholy-Nagy also recognized the influence of the economy on the direction of design.

> Economic considerations deeply influence and direct design. For example, design in this country is basically different from that of Europe. A country like the U.S., rich in resources, raw materials and human ingenuity can afford to be wasteful. Thus the economy in the United States has incorporated into its structure of frequent changes of models and a quick turnover, by declaring old models obsolete long before their technical usefulness has ceased. In contrast to this, the European design, based upon an old civilization and now specifically upon an export economy, tries to produce long-lasting goods and to conserve raw materials. In other words the European export economy requires that consumers wishes, to pay less and to buy less frequently, be taken into consideration because the money paid out for the imports represents a loss in the importing country's economy (Moholy-Nagy, 33).

Economic influence, although its landscape and appearance look different, is still fundamental and will be even more so as we look into the future. In the mid-60's, The

International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID) held a series of seminars on the Education of Industrial Designers. One of the working hypotheses formulated was:

> Industrial design is concerned primarily with the relation of products and systems to those who use them, plus it required an attitude to education which differs from that traditionally accepted as proper for the education of engineers and other related professions (ICSID, 5).

This for the most part still holds true today and echoes Maholy-Nagy's fundamental belief regarding the role of design as the unity of the arts with life. Today, a revised statement might read that: *The new designer is concerned primarily with the relation of products, systems, and experiences, relative to people*.

Examining the Structure

We need to examine the faculty within a program and begin to use and engage the faculty of the University in new and dynamic ways. We need to establish collaborative courses from mixed disciplines, breaking down typical departmental walls. These relationships are harder to maintain than to establish. Yet, regardless of the difficulty of university culture, collaborative teaching models are an important resource to utilize in the education of the new designer. We need to examine our educator and practitioner relationship, moving beyond the co-op model of training workers with skills, to one of lifetime learning and the advancement of the role of designer in the changing economy. Stating the obvious once again, it all comes down to the people. It will be from within the networking of multidisciplinary groups that we should educate the new designer.

> The goal would be to develop pioneering innovations on the basis of the dynamic net working of science, design, technology, business, and politics, innovations that reflect in and exemplary fashion on ecological, social, and economic problems. The development of discerning product-process systems would be conceivable here, for example.

> Only multidisciplinary groups will be able to handle complex tasks such as these, groups set up or changed specifically to tackle a particular task. The claim to flexibly bring together know-how in different fields presumes the existence of the right institutional structure. These must enable the expert composition of the individual project groups, and the totality of participants in future training to be defined and altered in line with each particular task (Meurer, 29).

As with most human endeavors the pervasive elements are the people. The people you surround yourself with will set the stage for any development. It is the people who outline the form, and the shape of the discussion. As we look closer, honing in on the issue of design, examining the content, that makes up the dialog, it reveals people, the experience of our senses, and the interactions of those people. If the meaningful issue is in the content and the context is people relative to the human experience, then design must be examined as a living organism. As it grows and changes, as it evolves, it may be easier to say what it is not. The issues of design are not analogous to the framework of a building with many floors, corridors, doors and windows. Design is much more organic. It is like a meander of water following and finding its own direction. It's much more like a branch structure system, which grows and sprouts.

We need to assemble people from varied backgrounds to educate the new designer. These new designers are filling crucial positions in dynamic groups. Similar to these groups, we need to assemble in our industrial design departments' people with backgrounds as diverse as interface design, anthropology, biomechanics, and product design. Forming our young designer from within this context is like the combination of andouille and shrimp. The textures compete, yet in gumbo have a marrying of flavors. The economic model of the world in which we work as designers continues to evolve.

This is a world in which

> We are making a long-term shift from industrial production to cultural production. More and more cutting-edge commerce in the future will involve the marketing of a vast array of cultural experiences rather than of just traditional industrial-based goods and services (Rifken, 7).

We must remain alert to the evolving economic landscape, for it is from within this environment that we work.

Conclusion

Most educators and practitioners know that our crystal ball is foggy. We all must accept the fact that we can not see very far into the future. With the rapid pace of growth and innovation, envisioning three to five years forward must be designed with great flexibility and the ability to adapt quickly. We need to train our new designers for careers which span 40 years or more, embracing the fact that those careers change over time as our economic principles continue to mature and develop. Our new designers must be equipped with the tools to adjust and change, as the future becomes the present. This is a dynamic life in motion; this is life happening and unfolding before our eyes.

As educators of the new designer we must be engaged in developing consummate leaders, learners and researchers. They must be willing to engage many problems and to be equipped to know how to set out solving those problems. The new designer must appreciate change and growth, and have an intuitive understanding that life is not stagnant. That a fixed model of design development is all but impossible, in the dynamic world in which we try to bring order. This new designer will expect a lifetime of learning. Being lifetime learners with appropriate models in place, the new designers should help fuel and diversify the educational environment.

Learning and designing involves more than accessing the right information at the right time. It is about interaction and interdependence of people in real time and in the real world. It is from within this context that we educate our new designer, building strong interpersonal skills as well as visual communication skills. Achieving this goal will require strong diverse groups working with a common goal to form The New Designer. This need not be a new institution or even exist apart from our current

educational structure. Diversification of faculty taking place within the individual program, and the networking of new educational relationships within the university will create a dynamic environment needed to shape The New Designer.

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