

Back to basics: Questioning the process of design

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Back to Basics: Questioning the Process of Design

How many times have we heard designers and design theorists preface talks about their work or writings by defining what they mean by the word 'design'? This is not a criticism; it is an observation of the character of the discipline as complex, involved, multi-faceted and challenging. Its definitions are legion and in many ways elusive. Part of the reason lies in the nature of design practice. The processes employed are in a constant state of flux, responding to changing social, economic, technological and political directives. It is this constant flux that makes design so of the moment, and so open to constant reassessment. Design's ability to respond to, and even anticipate changes in these parameters are what keeps design so fascinating, and so pertinent to the human condition. In one way or another, the papers in this issue are all concerned with questioning the processes of design and proposing improvements in design methods.

Walker's paper contemplates the processes of practice based researchers engaged in research-through-design. He explores a 'critical design' approach of using conceptual products to reflect on the relationship of electronic consumer goods to 'environmental and social aspects of sustainability and to understandings of meaning'. Walker believes that without considering the notion of personal meaning in products, sustainable design will continue to lack potency. The use of conceptual objects in this way can, he argues, lead us to 'question our preconceptions about the nature and role of electronic goods, and bring about 'fundamental, systemic change'.

Schoormans et al propose a specific design method in the paper on packaging design. Simultaneously taking into consideration both concrete and abstract product attributes at the concept design stage of the process can result in more successful packaging that is more easily recognized and understood by the consumer. Through the use of perceptual mapping, the authors look at the extent to which existing type forms can be pushed before they start to lose their received meanings. An interdisciplinary approach to design is key, as the resulting method 'can be seen to bring together a number of "well established" market research techniques with design expertise'.

Ramduny-Ellis et al discuss the issue of physicality and the role of designers' involvement with 'materials as an intrinsic part of the design process'. The discussion in part arises from an appreciation of the increasingly pervasive role of digital technologies in design, and the potential distance such technologies can create between designers and the materiality of their work. The authors argue that designers should not forget the value of prototyping to obtain valuable design information, and document the trialling of a 'back to basics' design method using various sets of very simple materials. This is based on the insight that the constraints of limited material resources can actually act to force more creative approaches from designers. The results reaffirm 'the importance of producing low fidelity prototypes at an early stage in the design' and provide a convincing argument for retaining physical modelling as part of design education.

There is a comparison drawn between the methodologies of user-centred design and the gradual move to 'audience-centred' approaches in museology in Lake-Hammond and Waite's paper on exhibition design. 'Where once the curator was the sole keeper of expert knowledge, the contemporary exhibition process has become a collaborative effort involving curators, designers, educators, technicians and, increasingly, the audience themselves.' Their study of the design of a museum exploring the national identity of New Zealand highlights the key role played by exhibition design in enabling a higher level of audience engagement. This is no straightforward feat as, again, an interdisciplinary approach to communication design is required. As the authors state, exhibition design as a discipline encompasses graphic, industrial and architectural design, as well as interaction and organization design.

Finally, Mukhopadhyay and Srivastava's paper describes the importance of detailed observation in rapid ethnographic research methods to underpin the discipline of design ergonomics. Their paper relates a method of recording and analysing the activities of workers in different craft activities in India which can be carried out at low cost and without extensive training of researchers. As a result the paper proposes ways in which designers could proactively intervene in the design of tools, workstations and work processes, and in doing so significantly reduce the occurrence of work-related musculoskeletal disorders.

This issue concludes with a valuable book review by Collingham, which also explores themes of design process. *Design is the Problem: The Future of Design Must be Sustainable* (Shedroff, 2009), looks at 'how design methods can be utilized as a tool for addressing the global environmental and social issues that we currently face'. As is normal for *The Design Journal*, the contents cover design theory and praxis across a range of different disciplines, but this diversity masks an underlying unity in the aims of design. Taken together, the contents of this issue demonstrate the value of constantly questioning the processes we adopt, of continually searching for improved ways of thinking about, teaching and practising design. They remind us that as the world changes so must design if it is to remain an agent for improving the human condition. In the end, such questioning benefits us all.