

**The professionals : contrasting professionalism within art,  
design and architecture practice and education**

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## **The Professionals:**

### **Contrasting Professionalism within Art, Design and Architecture Practice and Education**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper identifies key issues surrounding the notion of a profession and its significance to art, design and architecture education. It explores similarities and differences towards an understanding of professional development by evaluating professional practice within each discipline compared to its associated educational curricula.

In the context of art and design education and career aspirations should a distinction be drawn between professions and avocations? Universities are committed to intellectual models of positivism as a potential benchmark for professional status – suggesting that application of a field of knowledge and mastery of techniques of production or procedure constitute ‘professionalism’. In light of such a prevailing positivist paradigm, the apparent lack of a uniform approach in creative professional practice and education may appear as an anomaly.

Professional development within art and design education addresses many practical and procedural issues involved in working as a practitioner. However, they are often modified

by trial and error of individual practice and not necessarily monitored by an authorised institution. Compared to the standardised and institutional rigors of, for example, architecture or medicine, a hierarchy from architecture, through design, down to art may be interpreted as a structure of 'major' to 'minor' professions.

Should art and design education re-assess its claims towards professionalism or are there sufficient uniformity's within art, design and architecture practice to underpin a institutionalised and standardised model for professional practitioners? The paper presents a supportive argument for the justification and preservation of professional status within art, design and architecture practice – but not without confronting difficult questions.

Keywords: Art Education, Design Education, Architecture Education, Professionalism, Professional Practice

### **Contrasting Professionalism**

The issue of professionalism is pertinent – it is, perhaps, impossible to conceive of a modern nation without relying upon the characteristics of professional behaviour as indispensable to society as we know it, and want it to be. Indeed, our developing technological world can only maintain its fundamental character by enlarging the scope of what we consider to be professional behaviour. In this context we understand the

professional as someone who applies their knowledge to their vocation with rigour and probity, usually within a professionally oriented community.

Professional experience for architects is seen as integral to their education, and subject to the RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) and ARB (Architects Registration Board) code of professional conduct. Part of the problem with the issue of professionalisation of 'art' and 'design' revolves around the fluid, elastic or even vague definition of those terms (Micklethwaite, 2000). The practices of art or design are intimately bound yet emerge in the form of infinite different activities, materials and voices from traditional crafts to the latest digital technologies. Perhaps the difference between art and design is one of scale and reception between traditional craft output to larger industrial production. Anthony Smith in *What are the Arts for?* Suggests 'the meaning of a work is variable depending upon the circumstances in which it is received – rather than those in which it is made' (Smith 1991). The whole burden of what constitutes as art or design practice has shifted to the stage at which art or design is made public, therefore it is the reception of practice and its corresponding outcome which brings the work of art or design into existence. Guy Julier stated the word 'design' is '*intimately bound up in an historical process of the professionalisation of its practice*' (Julier, 2001).

However, the notion of professionalism for the artist or designer should not to be overlooked. A 1999 survey found that for artists, professional growth is expressed in terms of recognition, appreciation, acceptance, fee levels, audiences, commissioners and buyers. Support for professional development through advice and networking opportunities are considered preferable to arts hand-outs. Although funding remains significant to artists and designers, so is the need for professional recognition in the context of sustainable careers. (Editorial, AN Magazine Oct.1999)

The recent consultation document from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) *Culture and Creativity: the next ten years*, outlines proposals affecting individual arts practitioners, arts educators, and the arts in business. It demonstrates support in the value and process of creativity as opposed to just championing specific forms of cultural production, proposing a development of excellence amongst practitioners in conjunction with widening access to the arts. It also recommends the establishment of 'specialist arts colleges' to teach performing, visual and media arts. This green paper also proposes 'selling' the arts as a career by partnering schools with 'professional practitioners' and cultural institutions. For artists, and particularly graduates, there are recommendations to facilitate venture capital for start-up businesses, and to initiate procedures to make funds more 'artist friendly'. Every English local authority must produce a cultural strategy by the end of 2002 to significantly influence employment opportunities for professional artists and designer makers (Silver, 2000). Though this paper proposes radical changes to facilitate the integration of designer or artist into society it fails to address what constitutes as professional competence. In light of the potential money available one might begin to ask if this is a glaring omission?

In this context how can art or design professionals police themselves effectively? In the case of architecture, both RIBA and ARB ensure high standards of professional conduct and performance from all their members, to protect both the public and the status of the profession itself.

Another tension in the debate surrounding the professionalisation of art and design can be found in the differing attitudes between artists and designers and the bodies charged with promoting their respective industries. There is a long history of bodies taking this role at various levels, but it is the lack of coherence which causes the problem. The government department of DCMS currently holds the remit to promote art and design and constantly monitors the benefits of creative industries (however they may be

measured) to demonstrate their efficacy. The Arts Council and Design Council regularly issue research findings on the value of art and design to the UK economy. Interestingly, the Design Council reports asked the companies being surveyed to decide what constituted 'design'. Figures such as 'one million people are employed in the design sector' and '3 percent of all business turnover is spent on design', may sound impressive, but as Mike Exon in a *Design Week* analysis stated '*There are a number of reports around about the value of the [design] sector, it is just that 'the sector' is never the same thing*' (Exon, 2001).

So if the understanding of the professional artist and designer is so important to our economy and society, how do we begin to measure their professional abilities and conduct in comparison to the principles of practice outlined by RIBA or ARB? We would argue that professional development and success are best sustainable through the ability of intellectual enquiry and an appetite for knowledge in the context of practice. Surely the professional competence of an artist or designer should incorporate dealing with 'intellectual property' and critical self-reflection. Artists and designers work with ideas, and the history of ideas and practice within a fine art/design context is dense and complex, yet fundamental. In the current paradigm of what constitutes as professionalism (in art and design practice and education) there is little acknowledgement or an unwillingness to measure how a sense of thinking or the value of thought is of professional value.

On this note we would like to explore a broad historical underpinning of what constitutes 'professional' makeup. The professional is a claim to uniqueness as much as a preoccupation with a specialised skill premised upon an underlying theory. The prototypes of professional expertise are the learned professions such as medicine and law, followed by the 'weaker-minor' definitions of engineering, architecture and business (Wilber-Moore, 1970). Nathan Glazer refers to the difference of these professions as

'major' and 'near major', while 'minor' occupations include social work, education and divinity! Glazer argues that the minor professions are hopelessly non-rigorous and swayed too easily by economic or political forces. He proposes that major professions are disciplined by an unambiguous end and operate in a stable institutionalised context. Fundamental to this institutional context is the systematic application of 'fundamental knowledge', of which scientific knowledge is the prototype. In contrast the minor professions have ambiguous ends and suffer from unstable institutional contexts of practice and therefore are unable to ensure continuity and institutional standardisation (Glazer, 1974)

Donald Schön proclaims the systematic knowledge base of a profession is thought to have four essential properties: Specialised, Institutionalised, Scientific, and Standardised (Schon, 1991). Equally, Wilbert-Moore states that in professional occupations there are sufficient uniformity's in problems and in the devices for solving them to qualify the solvers as professionals ... thus professionals apply general principles or standardised knowledge to concrete problems. These general principles are seen to occupy the highest level of professional knowledge, whereas concrete problem solving is seen as the lowest level, which reflects the paradigm of a positivist epistemology (Wilber-Moore, 1970:58). In the evolution of every profession the researcher-theoretician takes on the role of scientific investigation and theory systemisation. Thus a division of labour evolves with hierarchical distinctions between a professions knowledge base and its practice.

On this basis one would expect that the Regional Arts Board or the Arts Council of England (ACE) or the Design Council to be driven by an 'expertise of professional knowledge' rather than by 'administrators' with an empathy towards art and design.

Taking the rigour of this model one step further, Edgar Schein proposed that disciplined theory should come first in all professional education, followed by technical skills in application, as the student cannot learn the skills without first having the applicable

knowledge. Schein even stated *“there is something disturbing about calling skills knowledge”* (Schein, 1973). Therefore in the context of the arts practitioner, skills, despite their qualities, are seen as ambiguous and a secondary kind of knowledge, which ultimately undermines the concept of the professional artist or designer.

To further an awareness of professional competence a host of different bodies and institutions ranging from the Arts Council, Design Council, Chartered Society of Designers, Fine Art Society, and Royal Society of Artists (RSA) to the self-proclaimed European Council of Artists offer varying degrees of advice on professional best practice. Despite the sound advice and clear guidelines given on the interface between the artist/designer and external agencies, the relationship between the depth of knowledge of a practice and its effective management is rarely discussed. The benefits of this mean we avoid too prescriptive and didactic accounts on the constitution of professional knowledge in activities that thrive on plurality and diversity within an open-ended understanding of institutionalisation. By comparison, the statutory validation procedures of architecture practice and education, which are overseen by both ARB and RIBA appear unambiguous yet clearly institutionalised.

If we ignore the importance of nurturing intellectual enquiry in art and design education by over emphasising professional development, we narrowly define the professional artist or designer as one who endeavours to earn a living from their practice. Equally, if the politics of professional presentation over substance presides are we not in danger of producing good administrators and managers by over emphasising what constitutes media success within the art and design world? This will weaken (in our opinion) the unique relationship between education and the development of non-profitable artwork/design-work driven by a sense of critical enquiry. As we have seen in other professions (for example medicine) the fact that someone earns a living from their practice does not guarantee professional standards.



This is where the tension lies: despite the drive of numerous bodies to systematise and normalise art and design in order to develop its own professional culture, art and design practitioners and educators often actively resist such attempts to be 'pigeonholed'. Art and design practice are consciously diverse activities, which constantly attract debate as to the nature of their discipline and the role of the artist/designer. As the DCMS and creative industries continue to push the role of the artist or designer towards working as 'cultural intermediaries and taste-creators', the notion of a 'professional' might be seen as bureaucratic, limiting, and the antipathy of creativity. As Julier notes, despite successive government attempts to make art and design education more in line with the needs of industry, its hugely different enrolment, teaching and assessment practices compared to other academic disciplines '*conspire to produce a working practice which assumes the status of a lifestyle*' (Julier, 2001:36)

So the professional artist or designer may be counted upon to do their job but not necessarily to define their job. Does being an artist or designer mean that we are now confronted with an unprecedented requirement for being adaptable in the context of new professional demands? If we apply these concerns to education; art and design lecturers are frequently embroiled in conflicts of values, target setting and the demands of increased efficiency in the context of contracting budgets, stretched resources and rising student numbers. The problem being we become unable to rectify a displacement between nurturing 'professional knowledge' and the new increasing demands of what constitutes 'professional education'.

Taking these dilemmas into account are we not bound to an epistemology of practice which leaves us at a loss to explain, or even describe the competencies to which we are now giving overriding importance, namely being professional. The potential danger of ambiguity and plurality of professionalism within art and design education is that we may become estranged from developing interesting work, live with managing crises, and

ultimately settle for maintaining bureaucratic accountability rather than extending a critical reflection upon our respected disciplines.

The publication *Out of the Bubble* by Art Data addresses the role and purpose of professional and critical practices in art, and states that although claimed to be integrated into art and design curricula, professional practice is in fact often overlooked within many courses. Art Data claims that courses incorporating work experience will automatically produce students that achieve more in the world of art and design.

A destinations and reflections survey of 2000 graduates of fourteen art and design institutions showed students undertaking professional development experience are significantly more likely to be working as an art or design practitioner and are less likely to be unemployed (Art Data, 2001). This might indicate that those who, early in their career, develop a professional practice framework are better equipped to deal with the real art and design world after graduation. A comparative template for art and design work experience could be the RIBA exam in Professional Practice and Management part 3. This acts as the culmination of an architect's seven years of education and training and marks the starting point of full professional status with its associated commitments to the code of Professional Conduct and maintaining and developing professional knowledge and skills. Students must also have taken a minimum of 24 months recorded professional experience that conforms to the RIBA's Professional Experience Regulations.

## **Conclusions**

It remains to be seen if the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) current attempts to put a series of 'benchmarking' systems in place across all educational disciplines succeeds in practice when it comes to art and design. There may appear to be conformity of course content of a broad nature at national and even international levels, yet this is at odds

with a higher education system which finds institutions desperately differentiating themselves in an attempt to compete for students. Despite the large number of art and design courses - even those having identical names - the specialisation of course content and the predilections of staff teaching the courses means no two will be the same.

What remains distinctive is the lack of equity between the various levels of professionalism of architecture, design and art. While the architect has a Professional Code of Conduct (established by an act of Parliament 1997) monitored by statutory bodies (RIBA and ARB), the artist or designer, though seen as significant to both the economy and promoting culture at large, has no overseeing statutory body. Consequently, the makeup of professional status for the artist or designer is driven by a variety of institutions and agencies with little or no correspondence and operating at differing levels.

The question which arises is should the facilitating relationship between government and art and design practice and education be managed and consolidated by a statutory body, which is able to bridge the QAA benchmarking and Arts Council/Design Council infrastructures? If so, such a statutory body would need to reassure the designer or artist that a protected professional title could be maintained and monitored without restricting the diverse and subjective character of art and design knowledge and application. Despite the rise in recent years of design and fine art PhD's, which on the whole remain within the paradigm of a positivist epistemology, there remains a clear lack of cohesion on the definition of professional 'designer' or 'artist' and yet the notion of a professional practitioner has been given kudos and significance by recent government initiatives.

If the professional is a qualified specialist, which is based upon rigour and the systematic application of an underlying theory, it remains to be seen to what extent the DCMS and its corresponding agencies are prepared to offer long-term support to 'non-profitable'

research and development within art and design practices. Or whether the mania for media presence and public outcome continues to permeate the character of professional expertise at the expense of a nurturing an interesting and diverse culture.

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