

THE VALUE OF DESIGN RESEARCH

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APRIL 22-24 2015

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THE VALUE OF DESIGN AND DESIGN RESEARCH IN CULTURAL BRANDS MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The research considers a museums case study and suggests areas for improvement in the way design is managed in the context of cultural brands. Furthermore, it places design research and knowledge in the realm of cultural organisations and justifies its role in carrying out stronger projects, and achieving brand consistency and, ultimately, success.

More specifically, the study involves interviews with senior managers, senior curators, designers/design managers, project managers, the director of marketing, and a researcher at a large UK-based museums group (comprising ten galleries, museums, archives and archaeological sites).

It concludes that in the cultural industries there are two general concepts of design:

a) Design is the planning and coordination of various aspects of the project that lead to a particular focus, and therefore better branded exhibitions, and other cultural products.

b) Design contributes to the development of an identity and shared vision among the stakeholders of an organisation or project.

Finally, the author makes some practical suggestions from a design research and management point of view. For example: Design knowledge and research should transcend the boundaries of marketers and designers, which are the two professional specialisations most familiar with them. Project managers and curators also make decisions and impact design and brand quality because they first envision the exhibition (think visually), set up the "exhibition problem", specify the design brief, collaborate with designers and manage design knowledge in the context of creative projects.

Generally, the paper introduces principles that enhance understanding of the impact of design in conjunction with branding.

Keywords: Design, management, cultural brands.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses design and design knowledge in the cultural industries, with a focus on museums, and their products and brands. In the context of the museum, a cultural product refers to an exhibition, multimedia production, digital archive, learning programme, community engagement activity, event, book series, or any other output produced by the organisation. A museum brand can be either the exhibition or the museum itself. Most often, several brands will co-exist simultaneously, depending on the brand architecture or on the shape of the hierarchy the museum wishes to establish (Pitsaki, 2008:112). Moving from top to bottom in a brand hierarchy, we find the corporate brand (the museum), the product brand (the exhibition), and the artist or exhibit brand (e.g. a specific painting or work relevant enough to constitute a focus of the museum's marketing communications). This paper focuses specifically on

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two different levels in which brands operate: the corporate and the product level.

Furthermore, in the context of the present research, and through a museum case study, the paper presents a review of the use of design and identifies core areas for improvement.

The case study was conducted to achieve the following objectives:

- To understand how project managers, curators, and marketing experts think about design, incorporate it in their work, and approach its management.
- To suggest ways to improve design management, develop innovative exhibitions, and in general, create more successful cultural products/projects and brands, by giving non-designers access to design knowledge and research.

Finally, the paper introduces several principles that work to enhance understanding of the impact of design and design research. This set of principles -- here dubbed the 'Cultural Product Design Framework' -- is essentially a design-thinking and creative management tool for maximising all of the benefits that design can bring to cultural organisations.

2 METHODOLOGY

In their previous research, the author established the bases for the development of the Cultural Product Design Framework, by conducting a literature review of design theory, design management, cultural marketing and management, and developing unique parallels and concepts that applied to each of these fields. A series of logical considerations and observations were then established in order to describe the ways in which cultural organisations can benefit by using design knowledge and design thinking. These included: a) Since design is the central process of the development of any product, cultural product development (i.e., that of exhibitions, multimedia productions, digital archives, book series and others) could also be described from the perspective of the discipline of design; b) If cultural products are seen as 'experiences', then the incorporation of design knowledge such 'experience design' could be used to decisively yield or improve them. When we buy a book, we buy moments of reading, and when we visit an exhibition we seek out an experience; essentially, intangible, perceived benefits. In this case, what exactly do we mean by 'experience' and 'service design'? 'The design of services or experiences involves the design of both tangible and intangible aspects; design creates scenarios and acts as a 'platform' upon which services will be delivered or experiences will be deliberated through the use of material structures' (Pitsaki, 2010a: 15). In any museum, the creation of objects and environments can be seen as a mere means for an acquired cultural experience.

The theoretical and conceptual aspects of the Cultural Product Design Framework have been previously tested in the publishing industry; the museum case study described in the present paper constitutes yet a further area of its application.

2.1 DESCRIPTION OF THE MUSEUM CASE STUDY

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Over the course of the past academic year, the author conducted an analysis of the current standing of the Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums (TWAM). TWAM is a major regional museum and archives site in North-East England, and is funded jointly by the five local authorities in Tyne and Wear, Newcastle University, and the UK Department of Culture Media and Sports. TWAM oversees ten museums, galleries, and archaeological sites, as well as their associated collections and joint archives. The sites altogether receive 1.5 million visitors per year.

The study involved personal interviews with two senior managers/curators, a project manager and curator, a designer, a project manager, the director of marketing, and a PhD candidate who had been conducting research at the organisation for two years. Participants were asked to discuss their background and experience, how they interpreted the concept of 'design', and explain how it could add value to what they do. With respect to management specifically, they were asked to describe the way design was managed in specific cases; to evaluate what went well and which areas needed improvement in these specific instances; to suggest improvements within the context of the specific projects; and to comment on the role that branding played in the process of cultural product development.

The interviews were semi-structured and incorporated the conclusions yielded by previous research, as well as select elements of the Cultural Product Design Framework. Specifically, the indicative structure of the interviews included questions such as:

- What does design mean to you?
- How does design affect your current job?
- What are some specific examples of projects and the management of design and design knowledge therein?
- How does design and design knowledge impact curators' work?
- What problems have you noticed in the way design is managed and impacts the projects you've worked on?
- What management improvements would you suggest?
- How is design linked to strategic aspects of your institution? (e.g. the brand concept and missions)
- How central is the value of design to the brand at both the project and corporate level?
- How can design serve or affect the brands you are involved with?

Later, participants were given a list of ideas and concepts linked to the Cultural Product Design Framework and asked to comment on them. This part of the interview was conducted as a brainstorming session, recorded with a digital pen that allows the interviewer to add sonic elements to notes.

Finally, participants were asked to provide any kind of related data, such as cultural reports and bibliographies, as well as confidential documents like project management plans, project audits, meeting minutes, or vision statements.

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The data collected during the interviews was then analysed and contrasted with previous findings. The insights and points of view shared by TWAM employees ultimately led to conclusions about the way design is understood, managed, and evaluated by professionals in the museum service industry. Conclusions also involved design knowledge used by non-designers explicitly or implicitly and design knowledge that they need to develop as part of their work.

3 THE CASE STUDY FINDINGS

Below are recorded some of the thoughts of the participants interviewed:

MANAGER A. Background in history, archives and museums studies. Current post: Principal learning and community officer for the ten venues overseen by TWAM. She said that: 'Our office's role is to co-design the museums' offers with communities. Therefore, user-centred methods that are regularly applied in design and design research could help us to know what local communities need. Design and design research methods can lead to mind-maps, team activities, and very creative ways of first capturing the 'the need', and later the value, that a particular project generated. Further application of design-thinking in what we do would allow museums to be more reflective about their practices and their methods for engaging audiences. Museum visitors expect to acquire knowledge and have enjoyable experiences. Design could make these experiences more inspirational for people. A heavier focus on design would mean a greater focus on experiences that are developed more holistically'.

MANAGER B & SENIOR CURATOR. Background in marine sciences and geology exhibitions curatorship. Current post: Museum director and creative vision leader. She noted: 'We recently went through a complete renovation of the museum, for which we outsourced the design services to London-based agencies. There are projects that we can only carry out working with internal designers, because that allows for better planning of the work and more effective exchange of ideas. However, internal designers can easily get used to a venue, whilst in many cases, it's preferable to bring in a new, fresh approach. I believe that designers play an important role in the curatorial process, because they actually execute the ideas we want to get across, and they help us develop the narratives we hope to tell through the exhibited collections. I like getting designers involved from the initial concept stage. Since they are professionals with expertise in new technologies and ideas, it wouldn't do to simply tell them "I want this or that". Instead, there should be an "I want – somehow – to achieve this" approach. Designers can explore a question and tell us what we might do differently. Innovation can happen "when the sky is the limit" and designers can help in that by suggesting innovative ways to access objects. Every organisation has certain pre-set principles, but instead of telling every story an object could possibly have, we should try to tell the story that matches our particular organisational principles (i.e. the principles of the corporate brand). Museums should help people to understand their place in the world, and design is integral to how they access and experience the museum's cultural offerings. Design also serves as a bridge between what the curator intends to share and how people experience it, or engage in a dialogue with it. This has become very obvious in interaction design. In answer to the question "are curators designers?" I would say that most curators don't think they are actually designing, but most of them are doing so without even realising it. They meet the designers half-way in what is to be created, although design is integral to their concept. Design can be the product (how the exhibition feels and looks),

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the concept (a theoretical idea) and the action (the actual activity of what is going to be developed, what we are going to do in a specific context or exhibition)'.
(Note: The original text contains a stray 't' at the end of this paragraph.)

SENIOR CURATOR B. Background in history, museums studies and contemporary collections curator. Current post: curator and project manager. She noted that 'Design means many different things to me: 2D graphics, 3D displays and products, branding and logos, the specific atmosphere you create in a determined space, and the entire experience of the exhibition altogether, the meaning of what is displayed, the messages that the visitors perceive and what they generally derive, the quality of information and how accessible it is, the notion of breaking cultural barriers. Design is absolutely crucial to our work as curators; if it goes wrong, all our efforts could be wasted or completely compromised. Meetings with designers should take place in order to achieve good understanding. We need to engage with them closely, and ideally, they should grasp very quickly what we are trying to achieve and what our main idea is'.

DESIGNER/DESIGN MANAGER. Background in graphic design. Current post: general exhibition, design management and display design for all TWAM venues. He said: 'Freedom in what we do is something that I always look for; Freedom is translated into the responsibility that we have for each project. In terms of design management, it is important to be given enough notice, know all the budget constraints, work on a technically precise brief and against realistic expectations contrasted with our workload and time availability. Management needs to be consistent across the various projects that we work on simultaneously. Consistency also has to do with the budgets allocated to different projects; in these times of austerity and diminishing returns, low budgets can have a significant impact on the quality and scope of the design, often forcing the Designers to be ever more creative following the age-old axiom 'doing more with less'. Finally, when the museum has to work with external agencies, a strong tie with internal design teams is always beneficial'.

PROJECT MANAGER. Background in world culture and art. Current post: museum project manager who assists in exhibitions, community engagement initiatives, and learning programmes. She said: 'In the context of the specific exhibition, design underpins the entire process at all levels of the project. It is a kind of framework that helps to define the theme and various aspects of what we want to achieve. It also has to do with practical issues, like bringing in the designers and giving them a brief about how the exhibition should look. In our most recent project, designers came in towards the end of the process, mainly due to budget limitations. Design encapsulates the creativity that should be brought into the process early. Design makes things relevant, appealing, and fresh to the audience. It suggests something unique and brings about a context that encourages people to get involved. Visitors expect to get inspired and become enthusiastic about their experience. In that sense, design should challenge, respond to, and surprise visitors, suggesting a meaningful journey and making them want to be part of it'.

DIRECTOR OF MARKETING. Background in media studies and communications journalism. Currently serves marketing and communications manager for the ten venues overseen by TWAM. She manages communications in all print and digital and spaces. She also oversees public relations and branding. She said that 'design is about yielding aesthetically pleasing, easily accessible, and useful outputs for the audience. Design reflects the values of the brand and essentially

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materialises them for specifically targeted groups. It also helps to make the offer interesting, by encouraging people to be part of the brand, lending consistency, enhancing brand recognition, and allowing people to develop positive associations with it. As an example of how this affects my work, take the recent capital development and renovation undergone by one of our museums. Initially we built our design approach by contacting marketing research firms in order to define who the target audience was and consult on the image we should reflect. The design services were outsourced and that brought about creativity and many ideas about the visitors' experience. However, because projects develop very quickly, it would have been easier had our external designers been closer to the site and employed as part of the team. I would like to see design better integrated in our project planning; it would be good to have more in-house designers with broader design management experience (we currently have only one, and three graphic designers)'.

RESEARCHER. Background in cultural geography and cultural heritage management. Currently a PhD researcher of organizational understandings of community engagement. She spend a year in TWAM, researching public engagement and community participation. She said: 'It seems to me that often when people in museums say 'design', they are mostly referring to the design team. But more generally, design for me means taking something from the collaborative, brainstorming stages to the end result. In that sense, people involved in the project often talk about design but not necessarily with the designers, as they most often come in at the final stages of the project – this is what I observed. Usually, [within an exhibition process] there needs to be a mid-stage visualisation of the ideas because this is when we realise many things. Design is integral to how we tell stories and how we interpret things, and it becomes even more relevant when we use technology because it enables people to more directly interact with exhibits or archives. Design is connected to the museum's essential role in the sense that it engenders a dialogue about identity, and allows people to reflect on and feel proud of an effective exhibition. Design shapes the exhibition by playing a role in people's emotions and empathetic faculties. In terms of how things happen in museums, at times it seems that collaboration with designers is not always very smooth, either when taking place in-house or brought in externally [because they are so often brought in at the end of the process]'.

The interviews cited above capture the main ideas derived from the conclusions drawn from the research overall. This connection is often explicit and easy for the reader to perceive. In other cases it was necessary to read between the lines of the interviewees' testimonies. In addition, the research assumes management and design research perspectives and was conducted to answer two main questions: how museum management impacts the role of design, and how design and design knowledge are managed in the context of specific projects.

Finally, for the sake of clarity, conclusions focused exclusively on exhibition-related projects and corporate brands levels. Still, these findings apply just as well to other museum products (such as educational programming or events) and to cultural organisations in general.

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4 CONCLUSIONS

In answer to the question, 'What does design mean to you?', professionals agreed that there are fundamentally three general notions of design and its interpretation.

1. *Design is the process of putting ideas into practice and giving concrete physical form to curators' concepts and exploration of stories, history, information, etc.*

Furthermore, design refers to the process, the product that it generates, as well as all that it evokes in its wake. Design is commonly seen as the creative touch that improves aesthetic quality and makes things more attractive.

2. *There is the notion that design is the way things look; in other words, the physical and visually-perceived output of the abovementioned collaborative process. Within the scope of this notion, interviewees agreed that design a) makes the museum's products and projects more attractive and likable to the public; b) adds an aura of professionalism and innovation to the institution; c) engages people and enhances their experience in the space of the museum.*

Additionally¹, and from a very different perspective, design is sometimes seen by museum professionals as something non-physical; as a framework for clarity and purpose during the project. In that sense, a 'well-designed exhibition' is one in which complex factors were considered thoroughly and were brought together coherently around a specific focus.

3. *Design is the planning and coordination of various aspects of the project that lead to better targeted exhibitions, programmes, and other cultural products. In that sense, design adds focus and contributes to the development of a better offer and identity or shared vision among the stakeholders of the museum and the contributors to the project (brand identity management). Design fosters the creation of holistically developed cultural products. From this point of view, design can also be a driver for strategic innovation.*

DESIGN AS PROJECT FOCUS. Design in the context of an exhibition or other cultural product refers to the way main elements such as the artefacts and the artists' intentions are put in place to meet specific targets, such as the nature of engagement sought from the audience. In this sense, design may be understood as a series of planned actions and project components that will underpin and tie together the entire process of developing an exhibition. In other words, it serves

¹ A fundamental difference between the three notions of design emerges when we look at the individuals actually performing the design in each case. In the first, design is carried out by the designers in conjunction with curators; in the second, the designers are given exclusive responsibility; and in the third, it is a non-designer who has the overall responsibility of the project (e.g. the project manager).

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as the focus around which action is taken in order to achieve certain aims. For example, if the main purpose of an exhibition is educational, then the exhibits, the information given about them, the target audiences selected, and the messages communicated to them via marketing initiatives and promotions, will all be focused on achieving and emphasising this educational aim. On the contrary, if the main purpose of the exhibition is simply a great experience and the visitors' enjoyable interaction with the museum or with their families, the very same exhibit discussed in the previous example would be made available and presented to people in a very different way (e.g. through games that don't necessarily involve learning).

DESIGN AS BRAND COORDINATION FACTOR. Design incorporates diverse disciplines and their respective outputs (e.g. interiors, displays, information, service, and experience design) and aligns them with the goals of the exhibition. Design integrates the work of historians, writers, curators, managers, and the entire project team. Design is the culmination of the work and the physical manifestation of this collaboration. In addition, it protects the brand by insuring parity in the way interdisciplinary² perspectives connect to the brand at the exhibition and museum level. 'Branding' here can refer to a series of principles and values that the museum has established, and which underpins the institution's offer (exhibitions, programmes, or events). Corporate values trickle down onto any project, and design acts as the glue that binds all the elements that yield a certain desired identity for the project (e.g. the identity of an educational programme, as per the abovementioned example).

This research was conducted to determine whether the importance of design was demonstrable in the cultural industries. In conclusion, it was found that:

4. *Design is not always managed in a way that reflects its strategic importance and capacity to enhance potential. A better model for design management is needed in order to bring about an industry-wide reassessment of the way design is seen and used. Design is an indispensable part of what any cultural organisation does and stands for.*

At this point an interesting observation could be made. Although professionals admit the importance of design and design knowledge as an added value to their work, the way design is managed in practice demonstrates just the opposite. For example, in certain circumstances, budgets for design services are rather low; generally speaking, if an organisation doesn't spend money on a specific service, it indicates a lack of appreciation of it. In addition, designers are sometimes kept at bay during the concept development stages, and are brought into the project too late to effectively manifest the curators' ideas. In this case, we may assume that curators have the necessary skills to introduce the idea in depth, and in a way so that it will be easily and accurately grasped by designers. From a project management and design management efficiency perspective, it is relevant to better understand the impact of curators' design-thinking skills and design knowledge on overall product quality. From the early stages of an exhibition, curators' visualisations become a tool for thought and therefore

² 'Cultural Product Design is always seen as an interdisciplinary process, carried out by different professionals, depending on the demands of the project and the structure of the organisation' (Pitsaki, 2007:439)

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shape the final outcome. If designers are not active in these early stages, then curators alone must have the visual, technical, technological, and materials knowledge that will allow them to arrive at the best possible definition of the concept. In addition, they should speak the designers' language and understand their work to such an extent so as to ensure proper communications and appropriate specifications for their ideas later on in the project. This will also allow the designers to manifest the central notion in a short amount of time, without the need for a deeper understanding of the project and its origins. Therefore, this research leads to suggest that:

5. *Design knowledge could, and should, transcend the boundaries of the design disciplines, because it affects how the project managers and curators first envision the exhibition (think visually), set up the 'exhibition problem', give the brief to designers, collaborate with them, and manage design budgets and resources.*

The interviews showed that project managers and curators think they would benefit from some technical design knowledge. What they do does fall under the scope of design, and significantly shapes designers' work, for they generate the concepts that will ultimately be represented physically. Finally, another dimension of the project wherein design is shaped by non-designers is in the decisions made by senior managers and museum executives. Curators and designers often work on concepts and ideas that will later be shared with senior managers and possibly altered. Managers would also benefit from specific design knowledge which would facilitate sound decisions about the overall project and, ultimately, the product and organisational brand, as every project is a manifestation of the corporate brand.

Acknowledgements: *I would like to thank all Tyne & Wear Archives and Museums professionals who have very generously contributed their time and experiences to this research. I am deeply grateful to them for the open and honest way that they responded to all of the questions, and for engaging with the Cultural Product Design Framework.*

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