

THE VALUE OF DESIGN RESEARCH

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DESIGN CITIZENS: IS EDUCATION A CATALYST FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE?

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ABSTRACT

Design programs educate students not just in theoretical aspects of design but in its professional practice and ways to use the skills afforded by their professions to be more competitive, corporate, and exploitative. Many design programs are also centering curriculums on using design as means for systemic change through educating their students on ways to create practices that stem from the concept of being a good "design citizen" – that is, a designer who uses professional practice and the skills afforded by their professions to be inclusive, powerful and cooperative.

Using Design Activism as a central tenet makes pedagogical sense as it empowers, directs and engages students on a level well beyond themselves and their "connected" lives. It encompasses a wide range of real-life, business, social and environmental engaged actions. Additionally, it includes processes that innovate forms of creative practice, providing branding models by which designers might work, or challenge existing conventions of research, cultural views or public / private policy.

Through examining the systemic underpinnings of design activism and design education this paper asks can design truly educate students in ways to have a successful politicized practice that encompasses a wide range of real-life, business, social and environmental engaged actions? Is it hypocritical to pursue design activism in a capitalist society? Does design education create a fait accompli where "the means" creates an outcome that ultimately destroys "the ends"?

Keywords: Activism, Society, Engagement, Convergence, Education

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Design, both in education and practice, is a broad arena that encompasses a myriad of techniques, tools, philosophies, theories and craft. In part, design can be seen as an approach to solving problems and through that guise has several fundamental qualities – as a practice and as a mind-set – that make it effective in the face of complicated issues. Whether in plan, project, or working hypothesis, design is a significant factor in shaping human experience. (Buchanan, 1992, P.15).

It is often said that the purpose of design education is to "perpetuate and reshape society" (McMannon, 1997. P.6). We educate students, not just in theoretical aspects of design, but in ways to use the skills of their prospective professions to be more competitive, corporate, and, when necessary, even exploitative.

Of course, "The grammar of schooling" (Tyack & Tobin, 1994) is a product of history, not some primordial creation. It results from the efforts of groups that mobilize to win support for their definitions of problems and their proposed

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solutions (Noguera, 1983, p.86). In the case of design education, both problems and solutions stem from the pressures of how to most effectively train and prepare students to meet the professional expectations of the commercial marketplace. Especially as these expectations continue to be understood and implemented across a variety of procedural, conceptual and explorative design disciplines.

Design education has not traveled far from its beginnings. When considering design and its relationship to education, in 1929 the educational reformer John Dewey described design practices "as an employment of individuals that use integrative thinking instead of specialization," and as the "art of production" with integrated abilities and skills (Dewey, 1960, p.24). With a few tweaks, this definition is applicable to most if not all not all professionally-focused design programs, as "Integrative thinking" is replaced by "design thinking" and "production" with professional practice.

Design education often emphasizes processes by which specs can be met and goals and objectives achieved. Here, design intention and generalization is "transmuted" into intentioned and directed product. This process of particularizing and defining is an inherent part of the activity of designing (Walker, 2010, 817) but it also creates an educational dynamic where functionality and commercial results take precedence over expression and aesthetics. Contemporary design practice often defines itself as "designing as a creative, integrated and iterative process of *thinking-and-doing*." (Walker, 2010, 814) However, the challenge for design programs is how to initiate curriculum that fosters a more expansive notion of design thinking.

In his book *Pedagogy Of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, And Civic Courage*, Pablo Freire speaks of the desire to teach "authentic knowledge," where students are "engaged in continuous transformation through which they [the students] become authentic subjects of the construction and reconstruction of what is being taught"(Freire, 1998, p.33). At its core, that is what design education strives to do: to teach knowledge and methodologies that enable students to research, empathize and articulate messages that speak to an audience. To take what is learned, and transfer it beyond the "safe" confines of the classroom into the modern marketplace. To give students the tools that will prepare them for both the practical exploration of design and the complex problems of the future.

When considering the broad discussion of what constitutes a "professional practice" in design education, many questions arise: how much "professional practice" can truly be introduced in undergraduate education? Does pursuing a pedagogical philosophy of "professional practice" as opposed to creative artistic expressions set the foundations for student to be life-long learners? If students are trained in this manner, will they be able to extend their design practice to meet the complex problems of the future, be they commercial, social, or cultural, and provide the answer clients will expect?

If one uses the premise that all design is fundamental to all human activity and that the creative power behind design thinking is in recognizing that the impossible "may actually only be a limitation of imagination that can be overcome by better design thinking" (Wahl, & Baxter, 2008, p.76), then there should be several broadly accepted points of departure in pursuing design education.

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Many, if not all educators likely agree that finding ways to encourage students to be both integrators and facilitators in the collaborative process is essential in any design practice. Additionally, since “all design decisions are fundamentally worldview and value-system dependent” (Wahl, & Baxter, 2008, p.76), another point of agreement would be that finding ways to foster a transdisciplinary dialogue that continually asks students to question their “deeply held assumptions regarding culture, meaning and identity” (Bohm,1996) is of great importance. Perhaps, agreement among educators could also be found in the necessity of creating “thought-directed” projects that encourage alternative paths to problem solving and asks students to reflect on the necessity of developing a focused practice that adopts an empathetic approach to commerce, culture, need and actions.

Even while stressing and incorporating these fundamentals in one’s pedagogical approach, a criticism of design education is that espousing professional practice and preparedness programs often focuses too much on teaching technical and process skills. Conversely, that not enough time and effort are spent educating students on how to approach and handle the interlocking complexities of human and social behavior, technology and business. (Norman, 2010)

To answer this criticism, many design schools are working to develop programs that combine professional design practice with the concept of being a good “design citizen” (Heller & Vienne, 2003)—in other words, a designer who uses the skills afforded by the profession to have a politicized practice that is inclusive, powerful and cooperative. These programs create curricula that center on fostering the critical capacity, curiosity, and autonomy of the learner (Freire, 1998, p.33). It is believed that by placing emphasis on how research is an inherent act of designing, students will learn that their professional practice can and should have a direct impact on the complex political, ecological, economic, and social problems of the world in which they live.

Though contrary to appearances, design activism is not contradictory to design education and the market place. In reality, it one and the same thing as they use many of the same principles and approaches – though with different desired outcomes. However, with design educations’ emphasis on developing a politicized practice, is a situation being created that is, at its core, untenable? Can design truly teach students to have a successful politicized practice that encompasses a wide range of real-life, business, socially- and environmentally-engaged actions? Does design education create a *fait accompli*, wherein “the means” creates an outcome that ultimately destroys “the ends”?

DESIGN ACTIVISM AS EDUCATION

Using Design Activism as a central tenet for design education makes pedagogical sense, as it encompasses a wide range of real-life, business, socially- and environmentally-engaged actions, while empowering, directing and engaging students on a level well beyond themselves and their “connected” lives. It also gives students an opportunity to see the full power of design as a form of social production rather than as a series of individual acts of creativity. It presents a platform for students to understand the nature of the design activity and locate it within a historical context that relates it to contemporary economic and

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political forces (Howard, 1994). Additionally, using design activism as a mode of teaching creates spaces for students to innovate forms of creative practice by providing models through which designers might work, while challenging existing conventions of research, cultural views and public/private policy.

There are a number of themes regarding design and activism that have become ever more pluralistic as our "industrial economies and concurrent societies have metamorphosed into 'post-industrial', 'consumer' and 'knowledge' economies" (Tarrow, 2005). For the purposes of this conversation, I am drawn to Guy Julier's definition: Design activism is "work that functions both in a utilitarian and a politicizing sense" (Guy J. 2013, p.219). That Design Activism, is "a broad movement that partially overlaps with a range of practices, including social design, community design, participatory design, and critical design. As such, it ranges across all sectors of design and beyond to some practices in architecture, art, landscape architecture, and planning" (Guy J. 2013, p.226).

Julier's definition speaks to the systemic principle that all design asks, in one form or another: the question of "[in] what sort of society do we want to live?" In doing so, he acknowledges that not only is all design in some way political (Alastair, F-L, 2009. P.6), but designers are members of a "culture society" (Mcrobbie,1999). In his book *The Disruptive Aesthetics of Design Activism: Enacting Design between Art and Politics* Thomas Markussen underscores the focus of design activism by saying the pragmatic gesture of design and design activism goes beyond manifestos or declarations, that "the design act is not a boycott, strike, protest, demonstration, or some other political act, but lends its power of resistance from being precisely a *designerly* way of intervening into people's lives (Markussen, 2013, p.38). Through the auspices of design activism, designers can, and should, use design to play a central role in geopolitical, cultural, economic, and environmental debates both locally and abroad.

John Wood stresses the need for designers to engage in cross-disciplinary cooperation and a "professional discourse that acknowledges the complexity of wholeness." He argues that, while tackling individual design problems, "we simultaneously have to be aware of the kind of 'meta-design' these products effect in human culture" (Wood, 2005, p.1). Creating pedagogical frameworks centered around design activism exposes students to the deep complexity of social and organizational problems that they will face upon graduation. It also further educates students as to how design research and process is an indispensable element in considering and creating alternative paths to problem solving and taking the abstract ideas to practical solutions.

BRANDING, COMMERCIAL PRACTICE AND EDUCATION

Branding and marketing are often criticized for being the primary causes of overproduction and articulated as tools used to brainwash consumers. They are also accused of creating a culture of sociocultural needs based upon fulfillment through the consumption of new goods (Lehner, M. & Halliday, S. V 2014, p.16), and ostensibly creating a culture where people go "from consuming to live into living to consume" (Kilbourne, McDonagh, & Prothero, 1997, p.4). On the surface, it would seem that branding and marketing are diametrically opposed to the very concept of creating situations where positive change can take place, as

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they exists to create artificial want and spectacle among and for consumers and society at large.

Karl Marx's forecasts of fetishized commodities being divorced from their manufacture, and Guy Debord's thoughts on its effect on society where all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles have become realized in the contemporary marketplace. As a result, there is what Jan Jagodzinski calls "designer capitalism;" "an economic system based not so much on desire but the drive to satisfy ever more desire" (Jagodzinski, 2004, p.20). This shift has not only created an overproduction of goods, but a society where the "very function of design is to create a flâneur out of every potential consumer" (Debord, 1967).

There has always been a kind of co-dependence and interdependence between design and industry. With its emphasis on the capitalist cycle of production to consumption, designers are also often tasked with devising strategies to create experiences that engage enthusiasm and loyalty among consumers, thereby bolstering production and market performance for goods and services (Schmitt, 1999). However, using branding as an educational, and even critical tool in the classroom has many tangible and intangible benefits.

By tapping into students' existing exuberance for brand (evidenced through their virtuosity for displaying themselves and their personal and cultural ideologies via social networks), educators can help students to understand how production and consumption are mediated by the designer, and how they, in turn, shape (but not necessarily determine) the form, content and meaning of the "things" they produce. More importantly, through learning the branding design process, students learn how products and services are embedded with socialized meaning through which consumers identify and engage well beyond the use of the product itself. Students also learn ways to orient their design approach to reflect user experiences, emotions, attitudes and lifestyles, as opposed to their own personal assumptions. Essentially, they are learning ways to build brand equity and to take "the gray" out of the decision-making process, as well as the methodological exactitude they will need in their professional practice.

Educating students about brand practices creates situations where students can explore a progressively wider range of connections in everyday experience, which gives educators a platform to make the conceptual "object, or prototype, a tangible expression not just of functionality and aesthetics but also of strategic ideas that can inform and help steer systemic change" (Brown, 2009, p.7, 89). It is at this point where design functions as a form of social production, and design activism enters into design pedagogy.

BRAND AS ACTIVISM/ ACTIVISM AS BRAND

Today, the economy is driven as much by aesthetic as utilitarian considerations. Consumers wish to be entertained, enthralled and related to in personal ways that simultaneously stimulate their desire and their pocketbook. Through teaching branding processes alongside design activist agendas, students learn that the marketplace requires creative agents who are versed in both "flexible"

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(Jagodzinski, 2010, p.157) and “aesthetic” (Duncum, 2007, p. 291) capitalism, and can readily adapt to ever-changing situations and technologies. Through learning to see the connections and similarities between capitalism, production, branding and societal issues, students develop ways to understand that “design is not about prediction and control, but about appropriate participation, flexibility, and constant learning” (Wahl & Baxter, 2008, p.83). It also prepares them for the design problems of tomorrow.

When considering how brand and design activism function as a touchstone for design education, Richard Buchanan reminds us that there is an important visionary element to all facets of design that affects how we experience and shape our environment. That “designers deal with possible worlds and with opinions about what the parts and the whole of the human environment should be” (Buchanan, 1995, p.25). Design thinking, in this context, is “not thinking directed toward a technological “quick fix” in hardware, but toward new integrations of signs, things, actions, and environment that address the concrete needs and values of human beings in diverse circumstances” (Buchanan, 1992, p.21).

Most of the “real world” problems addressed and tackled by designers are what Horst Rittel, as summarized by Buchanan (1995), defines as *wicked problems*; that is a “class of social system problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing.” If geopolitical, cultural, economic, and environmental issues are “the most challenging wicked problem[s] of the current era” (Alastair, 2009, 142), then empowering and educating students to use their skills to foster and enable systemic change would seem essential – both from a moral and capitalist point of view.

Today’s “wicked problems” call for integrated and flexible design solutions that are appropriately adapted to the social complexity of their scale-linking context (Wahl & Baxter, 2008, p.75). They require the development and refinement of a critical design practice that utilizes design process and the ability to operate through a variety of inter- and trans-disciplinary systems. To prepare students to tackle the “wicked problems” of today requires curriculum that requires students to test the creative limits of design thinking by asking them to critically evaluate and creatively consider where and when they can functionally intervene in the development of new processes and artifacts, striking a balance between commercial enterprise and the political, social and ecological effects and uses of the things they create.

At its very core, critical design through activism and brand asks students to understand that creativity, in and of itself, is not enough, and to convince them of the need to evaluate their assumptions about the nature of their world and their design intentions. Considering wicked problems through the lens of design activism allows students to think of design as a form of social production, subject to same economic and ideological forces that shape other forms of human social activity (Howard, 1994). By evaluating branding, marketing and design activist practices, students are encouraged to understand the interplay and overlap between production and consumption and learn not only the complementary nature of these domains but that, when taken together, design emphasis can move from directed, linear processes aimed at specific audiences, to more fluid, mobile and cultural diverse audiences with differing expectations,

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needs and desires.

Asking students to use branding methods to create collectively-shared, emotional narratives, such as the public construction of “truth,” “beauty” and “utility,” for a purpose other than establishing and capturing market share creates a dynamic opportunity for change in a student’s personal disposition. It creates an educational space for what Alastair Fuad-Luke terms “transformational activism,” where, via their role as “change agents” and their attempts to influence and change the behavior of others, students may consequently undergo a personal, internal transformation themselves (Alastair, 2009, p.20). This suggests that, through the pursuit of design activism and branding as a politicized practice, students will not only strengthen their ability to handle complex design problems, but also empower them to responsibly consider their roles as mediators of production and consumption.

THE GRAMMAR OF DESIGN REFORM

The questions of what constitutes “the grammar of design education” and whether it is “hypocritical to pursue design activism in a capitalist society” are, of course, not new in design and design education. In the 1963 “First Things First Manifesto” (*The Guardian*, 1963), the authors made an “appeal to reject the high pitched scream of consumer selling” and the omnipotent lure of the advertising industry in favor of what was defined as “socially useful graphic design work.” These same concerns were again recognized and addressed by the authors of the “First Things First 2000” design manifesto with a slight redirection – that designers should pursue tasks that were, moreover, “worthy of [their] problem-solving skills,” such as “unprecedented environmental, social and cultural crises...a mindshift away from product marketing and toward the exploration and production of a new kind of meaning” (Émigré, 1999).

Considering this manifesto, Andrew Howard reflected that its logic “implies that social and cultural needs are constantly circumvented, if not distorted, by the power of an industry whose primary purpose is to create demand for consumption, regardless of usefulness” (Howard, 1994). Design and design education have always had parasitic relationship with their commercial host and, as such, have become understandably frustrated with the gulf between the need to drive commerce and the desire to have a politicized practice where one might create “meaningful” design – work that feeds a designer’s creativity and improves the cultural, environmental and societal conditions in which they live.

The modern marketplace requires a contemporary design education that not only transfers knowledge but also creates situations where students can attain a deeper knowledge in design process and in the manipulation of consumer emotions, attitudes, needs and devotion. However, it should also be possible for education to go beyond perpetuating the past to create new, sustainable cultures of design. To collectively—as educators, practitioners and students—learn how to use the skills and abilities afforded through design and make ideas and information accessible and memorable for outcomes beyond commerce.

Grace Lees-Maffei asks how truly “radical” or “activist” it is that “design activism is something performed by one (educated, socially-progressive, middle-class) group on behalf of a not her (less well-educated, lower-class)

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group?" (Lees-Maffei, 2012, p.91) With the re-discovery of design and its approach to problem-solving by U.S. media, business and universities through programs such as the D-School at Stanford University, D-Lab at MIT, Innovation and Design Thinking at the University of Cincinnati, the Design School at Carnegie Mellon, this question has ever more merit regarding professional practice, design education and its focus on students developing a politicized practice. If designer capitalism thrives only if creativity is used to consistently create the "new" for continuous consumption, then how can design activism be used to fight the very master it serves? Are design educators using design activism as platform to initiate design reform? Does the practice of design and its output suffer from, and speak to, the same challenge – a clever and deceptive guise of "pseudo-empowerment" where media, industry and culture are, at least subconsciously, accepted as real and true?

It is difficult, if not impossible to remove a designer—whether a novice or professional—from the world in which they live and work. They play a part both in commerce and in aiding human agency. Design education has always been future-directed, but it is not enough for students to be creative. Students also need to cultivate artistic and cultural responsibility and the means to critique how their work functions and effects society at large. If the design process is indeed about questioning our assumptions then what better way to teach such principles than through something that both feeds and challenges the wicked problems of today? Does design education create a *fait accompli* where "the means" creates an outcome that ultimately destroys "the ends"? Maybe...but that does not mean it is not worth the effort.

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