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CHANGING THE WAY DESIGNERS THINK!

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ABSTRACT:

In the face of the global impact of continuing mass consumerism contrasted with finite resources, there is a need to change how we consume; why we consume; what we consume and where it comes from. It is my premise that designers are potentially well placed to influence consumerism at every level, however this can only be achieved by *changing the way designers think*.

1. DESIGN THINKING

My own experience is based on the one hand, working with architects and design engineers, whilst on the other hand practicing across the disciplines of Interior, Product and Visual Communication Design. Design is a term widely used to describe something which has been planned for a particular use and has some inherent aesthetic value. Design suggests a thought process has taken place to address a problem or provide a creative solution. This is reflected within education where learning strategies such as creative thinking are developed to influence and assist this thought process. Is creative thinking therefore the starting point for a designer? Does the term *creative* suggest a different approach to the thought process for the designer when in design mode, is creative thinking enough? Do we also need to change the way in which designers think about themselves and their roles as service provider to industry, should designers be directing industry as opposed to responding to current industry needs?

Should we accept the premise that design thinking is predominantly influenced in the first instance by the existing education system at any point in time and that this approach to thinking is in turn influenced by the design industry; which in turn is influenced by the demands/requirements of any given client? If we do then, in going full circle this learning process tends to suggest that as a designer learns how to practice in any particular discipline, so their thought process is also predominantly influenced by the demands of their particular industry.

In one sense there are no surprises within that statement, however if we analyse this much more closely, could it be viewed as a somewhat incestuous relationship? Where not unlike a spiral in reverse, the designer's thought process instead of expanding to incorporate as many *what if* or *may be* as possible, actually becomes more and more limited, continually reducing the designer's ability to think beyond an extremely narrow perspective. At which point it is no longer thinking, but rather decision making. If taken to its ultimate conclusion does this suggest any existing potential for a truly productive, proactive and creative design thought process eventually collapses in upon itself always producing or running the risk of producing a flawed outcome?

(Heidegger, Martin 1954) states that in order to be capable of thinking we need to learn it first.

Are we presently learning a negative thought process or just viewing this as a negative process? Can the same process in fact collapse towards a final solution in a positive way as the thought process deals with an ultimate range of options and progressively reduces the number of feasible possibilities towards the most effective or best suited outcome?

Designers may believe they influence the outcome of a design to varying degrees as the thought process moves towards a final

outcome, yet any design is heavily influenced by the client and their perceived need(s). In Australia we have begun to see how this has now impacted upon design or more specifically architecture.

Construction companies appointed by the client (*who is influenced by consumer demand in one way or another*) in turn appoint the architect to design the building as directed by the client's specifications and the construction company's budget. Here the designer (*or architect*) has limited influence beyond a number of predetermined commercial criteria already decided by the client and the builder.

If however, we now reverse this role model and place the designer (*or architect*) not just in the driving seat, but also them to determine where we need to go in the first place and how to get there, then I believe this scenario does have the potential to influence the consumer's needs in terms of demand, the very nature of those needs, the way in which the need is actually addressed in terms of the final outcome in response to a real need as opposed to the perceived need and the way in which it is eventually produced, how it is accessed and eventually disposed of or recycled by the consumer.

The word *consumer or consumerism* tends to suggest that something disappears once it has been consumed however there is always waste in one form or another, be it waste generated from or by a structure or a product that creates waste during its operation or a product (and/or packaging) at the end of its lifecycle.

(Fry, Tony 2009) states that consumption is an economic rather than a material condition – so much of what is made still exists after its use or aesthetic value is exhausted.

(Press & Cooper, 2003) believe consumer culture is a design experience that links production with consumption, professional designer with creative consumer. Designers as the *cultural intermediaries*, play a vital role in helping people find meaning, identity and sense in a highly confusing world. – *Professor Tony Fry suggests that they equally do the reverse!*

2. THREE DIMENSIONAL BRANDING

Using my experience as a practising designer it is my premise that whilst there are numerous design decisions made during the thought process of a designer when designing, in reality I believe there are actually a limited number of what I have termed *critical* design decisions that actually influence directly upon the consumer's decision to eventually consume. The function of a designed outcome is important in the sense that it addresses a real or perceived need; however I believe that the critical decisions are not so much about function but rather three dimensional forms. I am not referring here simply to individual aesthetics such as the beauty of line, form, shape and texture as important as they are to design. Rather the gestalt, the totality of all those individual design elements working together to present an outcome that looks appropriate in every sense of the word for its need from the viewpoint of the consumer. I have begun to interpret this as a more developed form of three-dimensional branding in terms of form (*and function to some degree*) that provides deeper meaning to the consumer as opposed to identity or product brand recognition provided by basic identity graphics application or two-dimensional branding.

There are now two issues here (i) what decisions does the designer actually have the power to make for thinking as a service provider when the key decisions are often made by the client; (ii) the whole issue of 'meaning' is problematic as is crudely shown by product semantics – how does the consumer interpret three dimensional visual form and can meaning ever be posited in some thing/text as it is a hermeneutic construct? Is this the domain of designer's unthinking?

(Olins, Wally 2008) poses the following question with regards to the delivery of branding in the 21st Century and asks "*With all the interest, how can it be that only a very few people can even say what a brand really is, let alone know how to create one, introduce one, manage it and sustain it.*?"

From a marketing viewpoint it would be argued that the product is designed as the brand and that brands are created, developed and built by marketing with the aid of *designed* advertising. This tends to be a misconception as marketing and advertising actually build awareness about a brand or create an illusion around a brand. Is it not the case that the three-dimensional visual expression of the product as a brand of any real *personal* value, meaning or perceived quality to the consumer will have its foundations within design, the management of the design thought process and thus the designer?

(Baudrillard, Jean 1968) notion of The System of Objects points out that 'personalisation', far from being a mere advertising ploy, is actually a basic ideological concept of a society which personalises objects and beliefs solely in order to integrate persons more effectively.

(De Mozota, 2003) sees design as integral to integrating market research, marketing strategy, branding, engineering, new product development, production planning, distribution, and corporate communication policies and suggests we are moving from the notion of measurable quality to the notion of perceived quality and that it is designers who contribute to creating perceived quality. (De Mozota, 2003)

(Klein, Naomi 1999) describes branding as a balloon economy, inflating with astonishing rapidity, but is full of hot air - *however I believe her comments really reflect marketing and advertising rather than branding itself.*

3. DESIGN 'THOUGHT' MANAGEMENT

The key issue of design management is framed by whom or what is directing design and where the designer is placed in this play of forces as a compliant or resistant subject. It is also necessary to understand exactly what it is that needs to be managed in the first place and why (*or what are the implications of that level of management*), thus exactly what we mean by design management and/or the management of the design thought process. Designers already manage or try to control or influence each and every process from design conception through development onto manufacture or production with varying degrees of success. The thought process of designing covers a multitude of decisions from engineering through to decoration. Design management requires analysis as a discourse

created to over-determine design process – which itself is a functionalism that negated designers thinking and is part of their induction into practice.

(Norman, Donald 2004) highlights cognitive and emotional consumer reactions to product as three levels visceral design, behavioural design and reflective design that can be mapped to product characteristics

Using a preliminary analysis model I have begun to identify what I term *critical* design decision points or milestones during the design thought process in terms of aesthetics, shape, form, materials and textures (*visceral design*) and so on which impact a design in relation to its perceived consumer/end user as well as its effectiveness, reliability and appropriateness (*behavioural design*). *Reflective design* in one sense being the self-image the consumer sees reflected back by the designed outcome and translates into this into meaning.

The preliminary analysis model will allow for extension or expansion of additional critical decision points that should question the very nature of a proposed design solution and/or the perceived need, as well as the nature of materials to be used, its lifespan and the very way in which it is to be conceived, the visceral, behavioural and reflective design elements. This could be seen as a much more in-depth approach to the management of what should be the *total* design thought process. Does this very notion of decision beg interrogation here – currently most designers work in a context of the already decided, the functional and the trivial: they have little sense of what defines or what needs to be decided and the ethical consequences of what they design as it goes on designing. The fact the design is never finished is refused by the very notion of the 'product.'

Professor Rachel Cooper in the forward to *Vision and Values in Design Management* states that Design Management is a discipline in continual motion, changing, responding and adapting to the ever-increasing dynamics of social and business transformation (Hands, David 2009).

Should we describe popular interpretations of design management as a discipline or is it simply a mere extension of contemporary managerial-ism and therefore just one more problem and hindrance in the existing design thought process? The generally accepted design approach is to solve a problem and/or address a perceived need and in one sense if we look at this as design management then we are simply introducing another set of problems or additional perceived needs into the mix, a few more design variables if you like. The problem therefore does not necessarily increase in size as such or become more difficult, it is simply a different set of variables and something every designer deals with each time they embark upon a new project.

(Fry, Tony 2009) in his recent book *Design Futuring* has identified design as one of the key movers of change and argues for this to happen, the very foundation of design and designing has to be transformed in terms of how designers think about design and designing.

To précis the above; the foundation of design or the design thought process is not just about the final outcome, it should firstly identify the real problem or outcome to be addressed beyond need and/or desire, only then should it begin to consider possible production, assembly or fabrication options and this should be against the backdrop the optimum design solution rather than available or commercially preferred operations. It should consider the needs of the end user in terms of psychology and semiotics by making the design accessible, useable, intuitive, it can consider the aesthetics and visual appeal to the end user in terms of branding through a much deeper emotional connection and address their perceived lifestyle choices which can then be further emphasised through advertising and marketing, making the potential consumer much more aware of the design, its impact upon the environment or lack of and where it fits into our overall lifestyles.

All the questions within the design thought process and more can be managed strategically by the designer for better or worse to achieve

a desired outcome of minimal environmental cost versus maximum value and perceived added value or meaning to the consumer. This all suggests that the designer already has the potential power to influence or redirect this process if he or she so desires. To change the way in which we conceive, construct, manufacture and produce, the materials and resources we use, our purchasing habits and consumer decisions. But to achieve this outcome we first need to begin to redirect the design profession and the way each designer thinks by re-educating designers at every level. Can it be argued that designers are currently inducted into a practice that circumscribes to possibility of thought? Does this mean that design practice needs to be redirected and to achieve this, designers have to learn how to think and not just react.

4. RE-EDUCATING, REDIRECTION?

By re-directing the practice of design in the future, is it possible for the outcome to actually re-direct the consumer and thereby demand for this new product, which in turn actually re-directs the manufacturer in terms of materials and production processes as optimum strategic environmental functions for the benefit of all?

(Fry, Tony 2009) in framing design as a re-directive practice states that to do this there is a need to take design beyond that of a disciplinary model. He also goes on to say that design and architecture are regarded as disciplinary domains constituted from a number of sub-disciplines that exist within a rationalist model of divisions of knowledge and skills. He suggests that disciplinary thinking by its very nature is exclusory, limiting the designers' ability to comprehend and engage the relational complexity of unsustainability and the creation of sustainment.

His solution is not to dispense with disciplines, but redirect how the disciplines communicate and interact with one another to become meta-disciplined, to redesign design. Humans are designed as well as the designers; it is not just the matter of the human experience, but the nature of human being.

(Buchanan, Richard 1995) states there is no area of contemporary life where design -the plan, project, or working hypothesis which constitutes the "intention" in intentional operations -is not a significant factor in shaping human experience.

Richard Buchanan goes to say that designers may not be able to prove that something is or *must be*, but they nevertheless reason that it *may be* and this style of thinking is critical to the creative process.

In terms of re-shaping the nature of the human being and human experience we first need to rethink the creative or design thought process, to re-shape the design education learning process and experience. If this *learning how to think* process is introduced into first year core subjects across all disciplines of design how then does this impact upon first year students ability to challenge their own virginal levels of creativity and originality, to reason the *what if* or *may be* style of thinking with as few constraints as possible? The existing library or volume of design solutions is becoming ever greater as each year passes, thus so does the challenge for students to still be creative and original within their own right. Is it important to provide time for the foundation of the creative thinking process to develop or to begin the *learning how to think* process as early as possible? Should carefully crafted first year design projects be introduced to develop the learning of how to think almost by stealth, to help students to develop the maturity of mind to effectively deal with their own needs and begin to break down their pre-conceived notions and begin to look beyond themselves?

(Heidegger, Martin 1954) What is Called Thinking discusses the idea of the last man and describes this human being not as the last person on the planet before the extinction of humankind, but rather drawing attention to the individuals no longer being able to look beyond themselves. Suggesting this is a crossroads where we need to consider a change of direction a change of attitude, or as Heidegger puts it "to rise above himself for once up to the level of his task and undertake that task in a way that is essentially right"

From a design education perspective this means providing students with material that allows them to learn how to think in a critical manner. Design students are presently concerned with the outcome and fail to understand or confront how imagination has been colonised.

The obstacles to changing the way designers think within typical existing education models may well be those design lecturers and

tutors themselves who have already become ingrained through their own earlier education and creative thought training process and years of professional practice using what they perceive as tried and tested traditional methods. The attitude "*but it's always been done that way*" that design has so often fought against could now come back to bite, highlighting how design lecturers, tutors and even the practitioner presently focus on industry led short term problems associated with change, instead of the potential for appropriate long term outcomes.

Are we therefore teaching a flawed practice and if so can solutions be arrived at until design and designing are redesigned?

The fact is that designers often see themselves as the instigators of change, but what change and once we understand the nature of change, how do designers embrace it. In one sense it could be argued that nothing has really changed in terms of how a designer should practice, yet in another sense everything has changed in how they should see themselves and how they learn to think. Is it the case that all we are doing is simply extending the design process as far as we can in both directions instead of just part way? Or should designers consider all the implications, the full cycle, as well as the options for decisions and eventual actions; should design thinking model itself on nature.

The *critical* design decision analysis model could be developed as a basis to begin to alter the design methodology & thought process used by designers, either changing the options and therefore the decisions or adding in other variables towards an outcome, even addressing unknown needs in the future and in this way *changing the way designers think!*

Design Thinking

3D Branding

Design Management

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