RE- EDUCATING DESIGNERS, RE- DIRECTING DESIGN, DESIGN FUTURES.

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Abstract

The global impact of ever-increasing mass consumerism set against the reality of finite resources, posits design with the responsibility as well as the ability to influence consumerism at every level, however to do this demands changing the way designers think, which in turn means re-educating, re-directing design and moving to Design Futures.

The following quote is taken from a 2010 briefing paper by Professor Tony Fry:

“Rather than looking at design education from the perspective of the design industry, or towards it, the Design Futures frame of reference is wider. It looks at it refracted through university education in general, beyond the industry and out into the future. This point of view does not ignore practicalities but rejects the notion that design education is purely vocational and pragmatic. Rather it asserts that first and foremost it has to be an education. Design Futures is firmly committed to the creation of educated designers. What this means is an education whereby the designer understands the world in which they are going to practice – socially, culturally, economically, politically, environmentally. It is predicated on the assumption that they have to know what they are doing, why and with what consequence. More than this, designers have to understand what design is and does in a wider worldly sense, have a basic understanding of its history beyond the narrow characterisations delivered by design history. Above all, graduate designers must realise design’s implication in forming futures, and their own responsibility in this context.

Students still have to acquire a wide range of technical skills BUT they have to know how to direct them and to what ends. Every educated designer needs to be equipped with a strategic sensibility, so they can steer their career path in ethically and economically viable directions. For this to be possible students need to be adequately educated so that their economic and employment opportunities will expand not contract! A design education has to be understood as expanding horizons and qualifying young people for more than just a conventional design job.”

The paper will discuss the process of developing an existing 3 Year Bachelor of Design degree based upon the service industry model of the past into a new 4 Year Bachelor of Design degree with embedded honours and the underlying Design Futures philosophy as the foundation of this new degree.

Keywords: Design Paradigm, Design Futures, Service Provider, Consumerism

INTRODUCTION

In 1991 when the Queensland College of Art (QCA) located in Brisbane became part of Griffith University, a Bachelor of Fine Arts incorporating design was introduced. Subsequently a design department was formed and a Bachelor of Design Studies developed to offer dedicated studies in design, whereby the degree has been delivering essentially the same content.
In 2003 the design program was renamed the Bachelor of Design comprising of three majors: Visual Communication Design, Interior Design and Product Design. The degree’s teaching and learning strategies reflected a need to address the traditional requirements and demands of national and international design industries. The Queensland College of Art effectively addressed the unique requirements of the design industry across a range of parameters and as a result is recognised, for producing some of the highest level design graduates in Australia today; across all three design majors.

However, during this period it was becoming clear that design was growing as a field of significant impact and influence in the development of consumerism. Fry (1999) describes how unsustainability is mostly enacted as unconsciously living the error of striving to regain, or retain, ‘the quality of life of a standard of living’ that has been taken to be a right, all with no regard for the consequences. Here we are shown design as a positive force improving the quality of life on the one hand, but equally a negative force in that it takes little or no responsibility beyond the thing that has been created. “Design is recognised as having a potentially negative effect on our environment through waste of our finite resources, increasing pollution and contributing to climate change. Design has been deeply involved in the development of the consumer-driven throw-away culture that has contributed to high resource use since the advent of Industrial Design in the 1940’s. Increasingly design is also being seen as part of the solution to addressing the negative impacts of consumerism.

The existing model for design education is rapidly becoming redundant; in the short term it is still able to provide students with a reasonably good foundation for the very basic design service industry needs that still exist for the time being. In the long term however, the present model will not only be out of date, but effectively out of step with the needs and demands of a world facing climate change, finite natural resources and ever increasing population. Within this context it also clear that Art Theory and History which worked well under the Art and Design model in the past, is now not able to provide the new design program with the advanced level of Design Theory and History necessary to equip these path-finding design students.

Design teaching staff at the QCA recognised that the future teaching of design and the future work or outcomes of designers are a necessary part of the solution to consumerism’s environmental impact. We believe a change in attitudes, practices and consciousness can only be achieved by changing the way in which design is taught and learnt, moving from a service industry to that of path-finding. The design faculty at QCA decided that we needed a new design paradigm; to re-educate designers, re-direct design to consider the future for design through the philosophy of Design Futures.

**Design Futures Philosophy**

I only provide a snapshot or pocket introduction here to the Design Futures philosophy emerges from the work of Professor Tony Fry and represents a foundation for the new design education paradigm to be introduced by the Design Department of the Queensland College of Art. Design Futures recognises that in the coming decade a new breed of designer has to emerge, one who functions as a design pathfinder who is far better equipped and educated to respond to the future challenges as well as deal with the nature of our contemporary world.

The Queensland College of Art Design new design’s education paradigm is one of the most advanced nationally and internationally. Based upon the recognition that the world in which we live is now facing huge challenges that demand a radical shift in the way designers think and design. This design paradigm is about educating designers to function and flourish in both the present and future economic and environmental circumstances. Whilst it embraces sustainable design practices, this design paradigm also goes well beyond token gestures towards sustainability and political ‘green’ rhetoric. Fry believes that the design futures philosophy allows all students to understand the importance and nature of unsustainability; rather than placing the focus on that of sustainability, which tries to maintain the status quo.
The concept of *futuring* is now introduced as a design practice. All design students learn to understand, how to analyse problems and how to design solutions in the existing and emergent reality.

The underlying intent of the new program is to be proactive, preparing emerging designers for the uncertainty and opportunities that lay ahead. All designers regardless of discipline have to be able to think critically as well as creatively, to understand the world in which they will practice and to possess the necessary skill base to practice professionally and effectively. This new design education paradigm, underpinned by design futures philosophy, has been created to stimulate young designers and provide them with the capability to become ‘pathfinders’, to seize control of their own design future.

Fry (2011) continually shows us how un-sustainability is an intrinsic characteristic of the anthropocentric nature of human beings. The traditional design education perspective is the somewhat typical but limited view of looking at the needs and demands of industry, which in turn focuses on the needs of the consumer generating an anthropocentric view. The Design Futures positioning has a much wider frame of reference that looks towards industry and beyond to understand the possibilities of many variations of the future. Design Futures is a new and necessary design perspective whereby our centre of vision or viewpoint is now that of the planet which sustains us.

Design Futures makes no claims to have all the answers, but it does provide a point of entry for the new paradigm in ontological design education – one that changes the design agenda, the expectations and capabilities of designers.

In this paper I present the designer as a service provider to industry. I also present a case for the new design paradigm based upon the Design Futures philosophy. Finally I present how this new design paradigm will be delivered in such a way that old knowledge will be reconfigured and the agency of design expanded to move design from service to path-finding.

**A CRITIQUE OF DESIGNER AS SERVICE PROVIDER**

The act of designing provides a service to others: the designer responds to a request or written brief determined by others to solve a perceived problem, or more accurately to re-solve it. The designer is a tool for others to use.

In her paper “Design and Business Performance” Jeanne M. Liedtka (2006) discusses how design can be used as a political tool. Liedtka tenders examples from a recent program in Britain called “Design Against Crime” which called for design research aimed at crime prevention and discusses how the program created a reduction in crime in British companies.

Two ideas are interesting to note here, design as a *political tool* and the notion of *design research* as a tool for crime prevention. However, the nature and parameters of that design research have already been determined by others (*which could be seen as the traditional process for the designer as service provider*). The research is not research at all; it is compromised by others perception of what the problem is and at best the research is experiments or trialling around predetermined theme of solutions to limit crime, rather than eradicate it. Richard Buchanan (1995) provides the following example of a typical client brief, a problem is presented and a set of issues considered for resolving that problem. In situations where the brief specifies in great detail the particular features of the product to be designed, it often does so because the owner, corporate executive, or manager has attempted to perform the critical task of transforming problems and issues into a working hypothesis about the particular features of the product to be designed.

Liedtka (2004) also sees design as fundamental to integrating market research, marketing strategy, branding, engineering, new product development, production planning, distribution, and corporate communication policies. Here we can now see the potential for design to be a melting pot of sorts; to bring all these roles into a unified outcome. Roger Martin (2005) in his
paper “Embedding Design” tries to point out that to get the full benefits of design, firms must embed design into – not append it onto – their business. Design remains for the most part a creative appendix or add-on whilst the commercial role of the designer as the creative service provider dominates. The designer is compliant and willing to continue this role by providing the creative appendix or add-on, yet to alter this to ‘embedded’ the role of the designer has to also change.

In tracing the origins of Industrial Design Miekle (1979) discusses how the quality of the product or its mechanics improved over time. This is seen in terms of guaranteed reliability, where consumer demand moved from needs to the desire (artificial need) for individuality and products that express consumer lifestyles or aspirations to particular lifestyles: in other words the very foundation of early branding. Once identified, manufacturers and retailers began to try and determine exactly what the consumer wanted, something marketing continues to strive for, with questionable success, leading to the introduction of the ‘stylist’ to monitor trends and then develop products that maximise consumer demand (Meikle, Jeffrey 1979).

The references above are typical of past and current justifications for the increased influence and responsibility of design and designers within the service industry. There is a great deal of evidence, since the advent of Industrial Design, to show that whilst the designer is a futurist thinker, thinking is both limited to and manipulated by stylists on a number of levels to meet the political and commercial needs of those manipulating consumer desires in ways that maximise production. All that has been described so far has been built on a design education model that sees the designer as the commercial artist. The designer of today is not the commercial artist from yesterday and the designer of tomorrow needs to be completely different again. However the existing design model is not capable of preparing the designer of tomorrow, it requires a new design paradigm. Tony Fry (1994) often refers to designers being educated in error and in his publication Remakings points out that design is not just a matter of reforming education, that includes and addresses an agenda of industrial re-creation, but is also one requiring a more fundamental deconstruction and rebuilding of education on a different foundation.

CASE FOR A NEW DESIGN EDUCATION PARADIGM (Re-Direction)

A new design education paradigm is not simply a case of reworking the content of design education to better address the challenges that face us now and in the future. The new paradigm needs to re-direct design thinking to allow designers to fully understand the implications of what they design. What they design impacts upon others as well as creating designs beyond the original concept. Fry (1994) has identified this by asking “how do we stop educational institutions inducting students into de-structuring knowing” (Page 26). Fry (1999) points out that “technology arrives by design, is applied by design and, in its form and use, technology itself designs”. This then is how design impacts beyond the actual function of the designed thing, the other systems it spawns, the negative and positive impact it exerts in and on our culture and our environment. Fry goes on to point out that it is now becoming clearer that design also acts to reshape its maker and user as much as, and perhaps more than, that which it is presented in making.

For the designer to manage or take control of design continuing to design, s/he needs to be able to forecast possibilities, possible outcomes, foresight if you like and Fry (1999) adopts Aristotle’s term Prronesis, to represent Aristotle’s notion of practical philosophy, wherein action, theory and practice function together with foresight.

Action and practice fit the existing model of design education where creative thinking is pivotal and central to idea generation, however the concept of idea suggests a random or ‘lucky’ approach to the thought process. Practicing designers know this is an inaccurate public perception and much has been written to demonstrate this seemingly random concept of idea generation is actually not the case. However this incorrect perception does highlight an error within the existing design education model, in that when generating ideas the designer uses the act of drawing to give those thoughts form in the way the philosopher will write down
thoughts in much the same way as I do here. In the traditional art-based model for the design education, drawing is taught as a skill in terms of observation and likeness it is not taught or for that matter thought of, by those outside of (art) or design as anything more than a creative visualising skill. Heidegger (1968) talks about ideas as the demonstration of preliminary thoughts, but how do designers generate those ideas or thoughts? Drawing as a mode of visual research provides the designer with a deeper understanding of the object being drawn. To draw the same object from a range of distances and perspectives adds to a greater or deeper understanding of that being observed or in the process of conceiving and developing a design. At the same time this transfer of thought into a visual representation also raises other questions or new thoughts. The very act of drawing creates a thought-provoking visual analysis; it is a face-to-face meeting, yet designers do more than simply perceive it, they formulate ideas, make connections where none existed before, they create possibilities to be explored, to be questioned or to be further thought about.

According to Heidegger (1968) a thinker, thinks about what is, in what respect it is and in what way it is, he is asking what is it that calls for thinking? As the designer draws s/he does this to understand the problem, as well as the function, workings and structure of an object, so the action of drawing generates ideas or things that call for thinking, which in turn allow for the potential for thorough experimentation and design research.

At first sight the existing education design model may appear to be a well developed, well proven and practical in approach, but in reality this learning process now impacts negatively upon the students’ ability to apply basic skills to projects and/or assignments. The design students of today are effectively denied the opportunity to fully develop their design thinking and problem solving thought processes, in terms of variable applications, experimentation or design research.

In the original art school model for design the traditional methodology of learning was not a problem as the demands on designers were for aesthetic creative outcomes and more solutions-based in terms of producing 2D and 3D things. In the twenty-first century is more complex as there is a need to define the real problem before the problem solving even begins. Designers today and tomorrow have to understand, or at least have an appreciation of, a range of differing and often unrelated areas to design education.

NATURE OF A NEW DESIGN EDUCATION PARADIGM (Re-Education, Design Futures)

We are a finite species on a finite planet unable or unwilling to see ourselves (as opposed to nature), as the original architects of the challenges we face. Fry (1999) acknowledges our ignorance threatens us in highlighting that there is a great deal of difference between being interpellated by the anthropocentric drive and confronting it in such a way as to live, by decision and by design. We try to dominate our environment but we are not really in control, because we cannot accept the notion that the problems we face stem from our anthropocentric drive. The world we have created and those processes of creation within this finite planet only serve to accelerate its destruction by humans. In ignorance as designers we have created a de-futuring world within our world, we now have to be re-educated to recognise the human species as a threat to planetary health; designers have to become agents of positive change.

Fundamental to designers becoming agents of positive change is the recognition that all design practices have been unwitting accomplices in the negation of viable futures, but equally, if there are to be solutions they can only be by design. Design is centrally located in ‘the dialectic of sustainment’ – which is to say it rides the dividing line between creation and destruction – the created always arrives at the price of what is destroyed. Grasping this fact means understanding design as a field of materialised ethical decision (Fry, 2010).
Design Futures is the basis for educating educated designers to fully understand the world within a social, cultural, economic, political and environmental context. Such a new design education paradigm produces designers who see themselves as the future of design; fully understanding the impact and consequences of their creations from this point on. Designers taking responsibility for the implications of their creating such futures and in the process becoming agents of positive change that begins to alter the nature of consumerism as we presently understand it.

HOW THE NEW DESIGN EDUCATION PARADIGM IS TO BE DELIVERED

With the nature and contexts of design practice changing and sub-disciplines of design continually developing; the traditional design education model centring upon the aesthetic and creative outcomes which were based on the transfer of the art history model of liberal studies, has now become redundant.

Ontological Education can be referred to as “disclosing the essential in all things” and “brings back knowledge from its dispersal. The existing focus for design education is that of bringing ‘things’ into existence. We need to understand what ‘things’ do, by their very existence. We need to understand the impact ‘things’ make and the systems they go on to create directly or indirectly, to understand how design goes on designing beyond its original outcome. The meaning of ‘things’ here is extremely broad, and not just reducible to material objects. It includes ideas, institutions, products, organisations, images and so on. Writ large, ontological education is about understanding ‘why’ rather than just ‘how’. Comprehending what things do means an exploration of complexity across disciplines, time and impacts.

Complexity is the key to Design Futures. By understanding that ‘the complex’ is always more complex than the idea of complexity itself students learn to confront and deal with complexity.

The volume of design theory and history in terms of content required within a 21st Century design course is in excess of what art theory and history provides or is able to provide. The history of design is continually written from the perspective of the creation of things as contributing to the development of culture, yet it has totally ignored the destruction that is equally created by the making of each thing. As we create so we actively destroy our future, in other words we are de-futuring. De-futuring rewrites design history as we understand it and has to be a critical part of any design curriculum says Fry. Fry (1999) explains how de-futuring invites a reading of history in a new way, one that comprehends the de-futured. Design is operating in an ever-changing world and will continue to do so in the future. In turn design practice is also transforming at a rapid rate, with design and new design education paradigms needing to be understood phenomenologically.

Delivery of this new design education paradigm requires the ability for design thinking beyond that of creative thinking. Creative thinking in design is simply a creative process for radical idea generation within a predetermined theme. We continue to confuse creative thinking with design thinking and in doing so limit potential of the design process. Brigette Borja De Mozota (2003) in her description of design as a Creative Process outlines six creative phases; Investigation, Research, Exploration, Development, Realisation and Evaluation, and claims that these creative phases are constant no matter what the design discipline or the design project. However she identifies the design process as having a unique character, in that the final goal of every phase is to create a visual output. What she describes is the typical University/Art College creative thought process that is potentially scientific, is rarely thorough, and is trivialised or limited by an outdated or inadequate design education model.

Liedtka (2004) tell us that the scientific method, with its emphasis on cycles of hypothesis-generating and testing and the acquisition of new information to continually open up new possibilities, remains central to design thinking. She also points out that design is most successful when it creates a virtual world, a ‘learning laboratory’, where experiments can be conducted risk-free and where investments in early choices can be minimised. Coughlan &
Prokopoff (2005) explain how effective design (whether incremental or radical) begins with a clear understanding of the problem to be solved. Specifically, designers use observational research methodologies to reveal latent needs that can form the basis of change initiatives.

The above are all based upon the principle of designer as service provider, where the typical design process has a sound foundation but is misdirected by others, and has been since Industrial Design first came into existence. The current design education model continues with this misdirection, this business as usual approach, and therein lies the rub; the designer has to move from the role of service provider (reactive to the needs and demands of others) to the role of pathfinder or leader (proactive in determining what those needs and demands should be). To make this move possible, requires not only a new design education paradigm, but that paradigm needs to address the Design History & Theory curriculum content as well as being familiar with design futures literature, debates and teaching practice. The design education paradigm needs a developed understanding of design futures theory and practice as it articulates with other historical and theoretical design knowledge. It requires a situated understanding of the nature of design discourse as well as the current transformations of practice across the design disciplines (including relations to contemporary debates in other areas of theory and practice). Possibly, most importantly the design education paradigm requires an understanding of contemporary design challenges – environmental, socio-cultural and economic – as they impact upon design education as well as a sound understanding of cognate areas to design (including art history). This change requires the continual development of academic staff teaching and research performance, in addition the attraction of new staff of the highest calibre in terms of theoretical and practical capability. Those who are capable of unlearning much of the traditional design knowledge that has been learnt in the past.

Jones (1991) talks about the need to unlearn and that unlearning is the essence of designing. For any new design education paradigm to be successful there is a clear need to educate designers for the future in the first instance, but there is also a need to ensure they can gain employment in the present and in turn begin the re-education of others. The new paradigm reconfigures old knowledge; in doing so it will begin to drive new careers that expand the overall agency of design.

RECONFIGURING OLD KNOWLEDGE, EXPANDING THE AGENCY OF DESIGN

The preliminary new design degree pedagogy developed at QCA reconfigures old knowledge to ensure students have an informed and reflective capacity; as well as a strategic sensibility to function in the present and work successfully into the future. It takes into account both the horizontal teaching and learning of the design student as well as the vertical progressive teaching and learning structure.

The underlying structure of the preliminary new degree begins with a foundation year, unlike the original art school foundation model for art and design which provided a taste of art and/or design pathways. The foundation year is designed to ensure that all students have a good working knowledge of the basic design skills necessary to function in all or any of the design majors. This has two distinct advantages; firstly, the students are able to communicate with each other on a practical design discipline level through common manual skills and technology and secondly, students are now able to respect other design disciplines and collaborate more effectively at a basic level as they progress through the program.

Reconfiguring old knowledge

Within the pedagogy there are five main teaching and learning elements and within these much of the existing or old knowledge has to be reconfigured within the context of Design Futures re-education and re-direction. A number of new courses have also been written and introduced to begin to complete the lack of knowledge that exists within the more traditional pedagogy. Studio Foundation courses provide each design student with manual, technology
and preliminary intellectual or thinking skills. Theory and History courses provide intellectual development through progressive release of design futures theory and an historical understanding of the world, the past role of design and its implication within that history. This structure provides a challenge to students to expand their thinking and for the QCA to develop a design research culture. Studio Majors are discipline specific and introduce the necessary teaching and learning for the student to eventually practice and operate as professionals within their chosen design industry. In addition, students are also able to begin to challenge negative or out-dated thinking that exists within the same design discipline. Here they begin to apply theory and utilise their broader understanding of the history of design. Research Projects are the basis and opportunity for significant collaboration in joint projects that apply design futures philosophy as well as demonstrate different outcomes that re-direct the possibility of negative outcomes that would only serve to continue the nature of de-futuring. Electives make up the final element and allow students to self direct their learning towards their own specific interest within their chosen design discipline, or their future field of specialised practice within that discipline area.

The new design qualifications will thus have added value of a design futures capability for all students with some going on to specialise in the emergent area of Design Futures.

**Expanding the agency of Design**

This expands the whole agency of design, with student outcomes based on having an informed reflective capacity, a strategic sensibility and an ambition toward being leaders in the field. Students acquire a high level of design literacy: anthropologically, economically, phenomenologically, technically and culturally and learn design’s positioning in relation to the arts and sciences. They will gain a better understanding of design, its fluid and historical relation to visual arts and technology as well as an understanding of the historical formation of the design discourse, beyond the canon of design history. This will provide students with an ability to grasp the need for design leadership and strategic design thinking, and to critically engage design as image, object and textually presented. Finally students will acquire a developed understanding of re-directive practice and ontological design, with the ability to write clearly and critically about design issues and to have the rhetorical skills to exposit design knowledge and argument orally.

**Driving new careers**

In the long term, as students move into the workforce, this new knowledge about design will begin to have an impact on employers and industry, driving forward the creation of new careers in response and in relation to the level of influence. In the short term, the pedagogical program structure also allows for three career pathways for the student to follow beyond their chosen design discipline, to deliver three types of graduate profiles. The first career profile takes the best performing students of the highest calibre who are given the opportunity to be selected as Design strategists; graduates able to generate ideas at the highest level, define and solve complex problems, and who can be truly innovative. The second career profile is that of Proto-design leaders; graduates who aspire to being team leaders and design managers. The third career profile remains that of service provider designers; but with advanced skills and critical creative abilities. In each and every case graduates will have well developed and significant design futures theory and practice capability for their and our design future.

**CONCLUSION**

Whilst many universities around the world have or are now integrating sustainability into design programs and curriculums, in the majority of cases sustainability is dealt with at a relatively basic level and on the basis of the designer as a service provider. The level of input or influence thus provided will still be directly related to cultural and legal obligations within any particular country. These in turn will be directly tied to minimal short term expenditure and a short term attitude to economics in terms of profit and loss. This does not seriously
address the problem, but rather perpetuates the view and role of the designer as a service provider, an add-on as opposed to being embedded within an organisation or business enterprise, influencing every aspect.

In contrast, QCA is one of a small number of Universities around the world that is preparing and is prepared to deal with the role of design in the future head-on. What is proposed here and to be introduced in 2012 is only a beginning, it will require improvement and development, however design can provide a future but only if it shifts from its present subservient role within the commercial environment.
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