

Share to Survive

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Abstract:

Where competition is fierce and occurring on a global level, the designer must be armed with all the tools necessary to survive, this includes up to date information, skills and resources. Schon recommends collaboration between researchers and practitioners to publish their experiences and findings on design projects (Schon, 1988). Unless practitioners share information and build up on a resource of knowledge they will leave themselves open to further fragmentation of their profession. They will dissipate into a meaningless superficial body of designers that are not taken seriously. This paper discusses why professional interior designers are reluctant to share information and enter design discourse.

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Growing up in a household with five siblings necessitated the sharing of play toys, baths, bedrooms and clothing. As I grew older sharing extended to friendships, make-up and clothing. At university, friends shared houses, food, money, drawing equipment, exchanged ideas, and sometimes boyfriends. As we moved through our education programs we became more competitive, encouraged by our tutors to achieve higher grades, and relying on high marks to apply for much needed financial scholarships. The camaraderie however, still existed, with students willing to openly discuss and critique one another's work sharing information gained through various stages of the project.

On entering the work force however, the notion of sharing disappeared, we were encouraged to be competitive, keeping information within the 'firm', never discussing our work projects with friends employed by competitive design practices. Sometimes this lack of sharing extended to our work colleagues. Loyalties would switch to each new design firm you worked for, bringing with you the knowledge and experience gained from the previous company, so inadvertently, the information did travel, yet it was never openly recognized or published to be made available to a wider professional design community, let alone the client.

A change in career from practice to education high-lighted a lack of design research material. Students directed to examine design projects from a critical stand point found limited reference material. Information available was found predominantly in superficial design journals or outdated publications that dealt with the elementary factors of planning and the aesthetics of interior environments or alternatively from the view of the architect, which seldom considers a conscious expansion of human experience in space and time. The delivery on design information therefore rests primarily with the tutor, some of whom, but not all have practice experience. Although conceptual design approaches need not necessarily be informed by the pragmatics of practice, an understanding of the way space is occupied, and its physical and emotional effects require an experienced practiced perspective.

Students graduating from interior design/architecture programs are our future, and given the competitive market place they move into and the expectations of them to be immediately proactive within the design practice also requires them to come armed with knowledge and skills in order to survive their initial years of professional life. When part of this knowledge is withheld by the very institution that demands an understanding of the profession of interior design/architecture - that being practice, the expectations become unrealistic. This lack of design research does not only restrict design education but also hampers the progress of the profession of interior design.

Interior Design firms do not publish information and knowledge gained on design projects as they see this as risking their competitive edge. Yet within a transient market and more alliances between design practices occurring when competing on large projects the question needs to be asked why? Designers moving between one design practice to another, and freelance design consultants employed for their specific skills on various stages of a design project take with them the knowledge of how that practice does business and experience gained during their employment. Therefore the knowledge, information and experience gained is inadvertently translated to competitive design practices, so where does the threat lie? It cannot be assumed that the staff who are transient are not privy to the business of that practice nor can it be assumed that staff who change jobs after two or three years have not had

exposure to the firms methods of competing for new projects, or gained an understanding of their culture, their approach to design and therefore their perceived competitive edge.

At the QUT conference Inside/Out held , keynote speaker and director of one of Australia's leading design practices was asked why his practice chose not to publish design research undertaken by their office on various design projects, his reply was that they would risk losing their competitive edge. If it can be assumed that transient staff do relay information and are not bound by some act of secrecy or disclosure, preventing them from sharing knowledge and experience gained at that office, then how is this competitive edge protected?

Australian design practices look to form strategic alliances when competing for large national or international design projects. There are three drivers behind the development of strategic alliances " 1. Globalisation. Companies need to operate in all markets, but they do not necessarily have the expertise or local knowledge themselves. 2. Technology is blurring the boundaries between industries. For example, a car company gets into the banking industry. Banks get into telecommunications. Telcos get into media. 3. Business is now too competitive to tolerate mediocrity anywhere. Harbison argues that companies used to believe that they could present a portfolio of capabilities. If they were best in the field with their core capability, it did not matter if they were half-way down the field with another capability. Alliances are a means of building strengths in areas of weakness. The argument runs that companies may end up as loose agglomerations or networks of smaller firms or individuals bound to each other by corporate culture and communications." (Uren 1999 p46)

Those firms choosing not to enter such alliances need to look at other ways to increase their competitive edge. Those firms who do choose to enter alliances also need to continually keep abreast of changes occurring within their areas of specialties and should these alliances only be temporary then how do they protect their competitive edge, as the next time they compete for a design project the competitor may well be the same firm they chose to align themselves with on the previous project.

"Design without a research underpinning makes no sense. Even fashion purports to understand something about consumer values and motivations, albeit as it tries to shape consumer tastes and values. Because design, unlike art, is intended to be used - lived and worked in - it must strive to do more than engage the user's mind, or bring pleasure. It must facilitate and make easier those activities that occur within it." (Becker, 1999 pp60-62)

Other professions look to support and inform their professional body. Case studies in medicine are continually written and published to guide the practicing medical doctor in their analysis of new, uncommon and existing diseases. The skill, experience and creative ability of the way information is interpreted defines and distinguishes the successful practitioner from their competitor. Similarly the designer interprets, disseminates and applies information to eventuate in a design solution, her approach thereby distinguishing her from another designer. If a design practice perceives their competitive edge as their ability to undergo theoretical research in order to inform complex design problems and to solve these from a creative perspective together with the skills to successfully document, administer and control design projects from conception to completion, developing a strong professional relationship with their client. Then this practice will further benefit from the sharing of information and experienced knowledge gained on each new design project by other practicing professionals, and the profession as a whole will gain from that resource.

In the journal 'Nurse Education Today:1999' Lyons explores the role of the midwife. He states "to continually develop as a discipline, a profession needs to generate a knowledge base that can evolve from education and practice". He suggests that midwifery reflective practitioners have the potential to develop clinical expertise directed towards achieving desirable, safe and effective practice. For example; To become skilled helpers students need to develop reflective skills and valid midwifery knowledge grounded in their personal experiences and practice. Midwife educators and practitioners can assist students and enhance their learning by expanding the scope of practice, encouraging self-assessment and the development of reflective and professional skills. Lyons paper explores journal writing as a learning strategy for the development of reflective skills within midwifery and explores its value for midwifery education. It also examines, through the use of critical social theory and adult learning principles, how midwives can assist and thus enhance students learning through the development of professional and reflective skills for midwifery"

Case studies written on aspects of design practice would be beneficial to educators and the profession in defining what not to do. Some possibilities are described below:

Brief: The process of obtaining the initial client brief, a description of how/why the brief evolved and/or changed throughout the project, and how these changes affected the design intent, budgets and time frames for completion.

Team: The process of establishing a team, outlining the roles and responsibilities of each team member (names need not be included), their areas of expertise and years of experience. A description of which stage in the project the team worked best, to its maximum capacity and at which stage of the project the team worked at its weakest capacity and why.

Design: What key issues in the client brief motivated the design team, how did they address the client's concerns, desires and needs within the design. What areas did they consider within their initial designs and which areas did they choose to ignore. What motivating factor drove the design. What level of research was undertaken at the commencement of the design project and throughout the design development stage. What was the final outcome, and its effects on the client - both physical and emotional, and did this improve the profitability of the company.

Time: How effectively did the design team meet their time deadlines, at which stage of the project were the design team under the greatest pressure to meet deadlines. If deadlines were not met, what were the reasons.

Client: A study of the client/designer relationship and how it evolved throughout the project. At which stages in the project were the client/designer relationship at their strongest and at which stages were they weakest - and a reflection of why this may have occurred. How often were meetings held with the client, and did they equate with the progression of the project.

Budget: Did the project complete on time and within budget, if not, what caused the extra costs, whether through time delays, brief additions, lack of information, etc. Where did the major costs occur on the design project, and how do these equate with designer fees.

Consultants: What other consultants were employed at the commencement and retained for the duration of the project, what were their areas of expertise and the period they served on the project.

POE (Post Occupancy Evaluation): Following the completion of the project, a study based on the client's perception of the success of the project, the design's effect on business practice and productivity.

“Case studies however, only identify elements of a total system, while design is fundamentally a synthetic activity, seeking to balance competing interests in which tradeoffs among different elements and subsystems is the rule. Becker suggests that post-occupancy evaluations (POE) on user satisfaction with a design element (kitchen counters or living room lighting, for instance) is mostly about what to avoid doing, not about ideas and inspiration. It is often fairly mechanical in nature, focusing on design elements rather than the overall pattern of design, or, how the elements relate to each other in dynamic ways. It fails to tell a story that gives the designer insight into how a total system works. Yet design as a creative process is fundamentally rooted in understanding just such dynamic relations. In the context of understanding organizations this approach to design research has been described as the study of organizational ecology.” (Becker 1999p60) Case studies do however fulfill a role for the client, using collected data and the expertise of the clients, interior designers can quantify and measure the differences made in the clients’ productivity based on the newly designed work environment. The statistics then need to be analyzed from the client’s perspective - not the design perspective (Farrow, 1993)

Companies such as DEGW currently study organizational ecology for large corporations. These studies include; Time Utilization Studies (TUS) and Work Place Performance Studies (WPS) where employee’s are ‘tracked’ over a period of two weeks to determine where they spend most of their time, and how they spend their time. This information can be very useful to design practices prior to commencing a design project, as it will inform them of systems to employ such as hotelling or hot desking for a given client. (workplaceforum.co.uk)

To achieve the aim of increasing the publication of case studies and the sharing of knowledge and information, university academics could assist the practicing profession by pairing with willing interior design firms to write up case studies and design research. Their role would be as co-ordinators, or as consultants, documenting design research prior to design commencing.

Case studies would require establishing guidelines for collecting information, reviewing the development of the project at various stages throughout the project, meeting with the design team and the client at intermittent stages, and compiling information at the end of the project into a written report. The case study could prove to be beneficial to both the client, the designer and design profession.

Whilst employed with a London based design practice we were invited by the largest retailing group in Britain at that time to design six prototype stores for a completely new image for one of their male retailing chains. A retail merchandise display system was designed and prototyped at an existing retail outlet. Over a period of six weeks, customer’s and staff were surveyed as to the success of the system, whether merchandise was within reaching distance, well stocked, sizing was easily identifiable and the range of merchandise clearly visible. Staff were surveyed on whether the system was flexible, easily altered, were the components easily stored, and were there too many components. The system was fine-tuned at the end of the prototype stage and then went into production. The exercise saved the client time and money, and also provided us, the designers with a better understanding of the market, in addition it provided us with information we could draw on for future retail projects. Naturally, the results were never published!

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“The bedrock of any research or scholarly activity is the commitment to treating one’s work, whatever form it may take, as structured learning that gains value only as part of a public dialogue with knowledgeable contemporaries and colleagues. The motivating concept is that the work be available, so that it can be debated and subjected to the pressures and force of ideas that it will either withstand or not. It is in contributing to that crucible of ideas that design research springs to life. Ultimately it can help shape our understanding of why the built environment is the way it is and how it might contribute to making our planet a better place to be” (Becker 1999p62)

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Nancy Spanbroek is a Lecturer for the Department of Interior Design, Curtin University, WA. Since her commencement in 1992, Nancy has been instrumental in the teaching and development of existing and new programs within the current Bachelor of Interior Design, 4 year degree program.

Nancy has 10 years professional experience in London and Melbourne. She was an Associate Director of Geyer Design (Melbourne), and Senior Designer for David Davies Associates (London), both award winning Interior Design practices. Nancy participated in the marketing and management of the firms. She lead teams of designers and technical staff in her areas of specialty which included retail and large scale corporate office design, and has had her design work published in design journals both nationally and internationally.

Her publications include:

- **Document**, published by School of ACP 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998 *Semester Intro + Program Review*
- **Diaglogue** Design Institute of Australia (DIA) , WA Chapter
- *Personal profile 1996*
- **Herdsa Conference**, 1996, Paper presentation, published in refereed conference proceedings ‘Facing Global Change: Strengthening Lifelong Education in Interior Design’

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