

RSA Design & Society. *What should we be teaching professional designers today?* Transcript of a debate held on Tuesday 21 September 2010 at the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce, 8 John Adam Street, London WC2. *As innovation and participation have swept design up in their diffuse and inter-disciplinary embrace, the crafts and tools that traditionally constituted design have become less distinct – what are they now?* With speakers Roberto Verganti, Ellie Runcie and Sam Hecht, chaired by Emily Campbell for an invited audience of 70 designers, critics and tutors.

Introduction and speakers

Emily Campbell, Director of Design at the RSA, explained that its long title – the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce – betrays an ancient relationship with design. In the 18th & 19th centuries subscriptions from RSA Fellows were redistributed in the form of ‘premiums’ for inventions and ideas of all kinds – from the extendable chimney-brush to threshing machines and devices for escaping fires and avoiding drowning. The Society was very instrumental in setting up the Great Exhibition of 1851, an unprecedented spectacle of invention and design.

In the last century the RSA was principally known in design for conferring the honour of Royal Designer for Industry upon the country’s highest achieving professionals, and for the National Student Design Awards. Since their birth as an industrial bursaries scheme in the 1920s, these awards closely mirrored the evolution of professional design. They embodied the early classifications of commercial design in single-discipline craftsmanship and design for industry: fashions and decorative tableware, textiles, typography, furniture then later mobile communications and ceramic futures and, in recent years, a much bigger world of opportunity in the design of intangible systems and services.

Design used to be manifest in objects and environments and done by designers. Now design has moved into more diffuse forms of service innovation and socially-inclusive professional practice. Status has been won for design – never before have civil servants, for example, taken such an interest in what designers bring to the table of public service thinking – but in this expansion of application and meaning, the crafts and tools that traditionally constituted design have become less distinct.

While status has been won for design in this expansion of application and meaning, the crafts and tools that traditionally constituted design have become less distinct — Emily Campbell

Campbell reminded the audience that RSA student design awards had mirrored this evolution, adding: “As student design briefs classified under fashion & textiles, ceramics or industrial design gradually gave way to the public challenges of ageing, disability and mental health, prisons, public security and behaviour change, these crafts and tools also became less visible in the hundreds of entries to the RSA student awards”.

She said that on the occasion of the RSA’s annual briefing to design tutors from the 75-odd universities that regularly participate in the scheme, the RSA Design team thought it worth asking of a public audience the question “What should we be teaching professional designers?” She mentioned that a couple of months ago there was a lively education debate at the RSA entitled “What should everyone know?”, and that this debate could be construed as pursuing the question “What should designers know?”

Three speakers were invited to give a formal presentation in response to this question.

Discussion

This commentary summarises the Q&A immediately following the presentations, and the continuation of the discussion among tutors later in the day.

Understanding how things work

Sam Hecht was asked if he could point to anything in his education that nurtured him as a 'radical' or 'visionary' designer. Hecht's reply included the reflection that unless you have the grounding, it is very hard to be radical. You have to understand how things work in order to comment on them critically.

A tutor later complained, in response to a question about what this 'grounding' consisted of, that it was becoming more and more difficult to get students to make a physical model or prototype, with diminishing workshop facilities and studio space and dwindling teams of technicians.

Another said that his university had transformed the first of a three-year degree course into a foundation programme, to compensate for students' lack of core skills upon arrival from school, and the dwindling of the foundation course system. One tutor said how frequently he was surprised to discover that third year students don't know where the workshops are. The dwindling of foundation courses was felt to be disastrous by one tutor who pointed out that many students' difficulties are compounded by poor literacy skills and part-time jobs that leave them little time to get into the workshop.

Companies like IDEO have successfully transmitted the message to business that design is not art, but process; apparently controllable, which businesspeople like — Roberto Verganti

There was some discussion of what it means to 'understand how things work', and an acknowledgement that function is not simple, but intertwined with use. Verganti said that if you start to understand systems of making and systems of use, you can start to make the world a better place, thinking about the impact of a product on the environment, on criminal behaviour, and so on.

Another tutor expressed the caution "the user-centred stuff will not necessarily take place in the workshop", and it was felt by many that 'how things work' extends to how things are used, and therefore naturally to user-centred design. From this point of view Sam Hecht's idea of going out with the man on the street rather than staying the studio was felt to be a good one.

Presentations

Roberto Verganti is Professor of Innovation Management at the Politecnico di Milano, where he teaches both in the school of business and the school of design, and at Copenhagen Business School. He has been a visiting professor at Harvard Business School and is on the board of the European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management. Verganti is the author of *Design-Driven Innovation: Changing the Rules of Competition by Radically Innovating what Things Mean*, published last year by Harvard Business Press and widely hailed as provocative and iconoclastic.

Roberto Verganti said that he would consider the question of what designers should know from the perspective of business people; that is, the more visionary business people rather than 'lay' business people. When he started to teach design ten years ago, designers struggling to demonstrate the importance of design at business conferences were fighting to be listened to. He declared "that fight has now been won. Now, few companies *don't* use designers".

This owes less to academics than to companies like IDEO who have successfully transmitted the message to business that design is not art, but a process. They've helped to make the practice of design more visible and therefore apparently more controllable, which businesspeople like a lot.

To fill the gap between design and business, design schools are teaching a bit of business to design students. They focus on ethnographic enquiry methods, brainstorming, business models, strategy, and so on; and try to connect design more directly to competitive advantage and profit so that it's more 'palatable' to business. This is broadly what Verganti himself does at the design school in Milan – bringing designers closer to the world and language of management.

The 'process' approach to innovation promoted by IDEO has two imperatives. Firstly, that to do design and innovation you should start from the user. Secondly, that if you want to innovate you need a quantity of ideas. This approach has been so credible to managers that now business people regularly talk about design and even read books on design from business publishers. The trouble here is that if every company reads the same books, uses the same design process and the same designers (which also often happens) they will all do the same thing.

Fortunately, some companies do things differently. Artemide, a company that makes lighting, with a very strong reputation in design, recently produced a lamp that doesn't illuminate, but produces an ambient effect that makes you feel better. An MIT professor asked Artemide about the market analysis that led to this innovation. In the world of user centred innovation, it came as a shock to this professor that there was no market analysis. Neither does Nintendo use customer focus groups – they get feedback from developers in their industry. We need these different paths to innovation.

This is a golden age for design, in which every business person can understand it: it isn't a mysterious art. But as we follow the user-focused process that aims above all to produce lots of ideas, the world of design is becoming less innovative than the companies we are talking to. Designers are saying the same thing they were saying 15 years ago. We are teaching designers the language of business and they have lost the language of design.

Incremental change

Ellie Runcie was asked if she had any anxiety that designers would 'blow' the opportunities now presented in service design and innovation. Her answer identified designers' ability to deal confidently with multiple stakeholders as satisfying a need that was not going to go away. She also commented that students need to learn by doing and get as much exposure to working with extended teams of stakeholders. Design awards like those presented by the RSA and Audi Design Foundation, have a valuable role in providing this experience.

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A member of the audience asked what combination of user-centred incremental change and radical design is right. Roberto Verganti reframed this question as about whether we should teach both things to both sets of people. "Maybe you have two different schools" he said. "The only thing I am afraid of is when the discussion becomes monotone. Most of the radical changes happen in schools before they happen in society, it's important that we keep heterogeneity". The case for plurality was echoed by tutors.

Ettore Sottsass was the leader of a circle of architects who brought Post-Modern products into production, known as the Memphis Group. He proposed that people buy bookshelves not to store books, but to form an emotional connection to furniture. It was radical and visionary at the time. But if you go to a design fair in Milan now 80% of what you see is still influenced by this movement. We have lost visionaries like Sottsass. After 20 years their work becomes mainstream. The vision has not been replaced because designers have concentrated on understanding business. The better designers understand business the less innovation you get from them. You do not get radical design from brainstorming, but that has lodged in the mind of business people and designers as an imperative stage of the design process.

As a society we need radicals whose output is not an idea but a vision. Radicals work in circles: alone, they get lost, but if there are a few of you, you are not so easily dismissed as crazy. Radicals know that you don't need divergence and an abundance of ideas, you just need one. It's not about the quality of the ideas but the robustness of your vision.

Meanwhile we are telling people in design school to be culturally neutral in the face of business. But there are also radical businesses who can't consider you a designer unless your ambition is to change society. There are big challenges in closing the gap between mass and elite education. Most of the companies in Italy that want to be radical never hire designers; they hire architects instead because architects have never taken a course in marketing.

Rather than bringing designers closer to business, bring business people closer to the radical and visionary possibilities of design. Protect designers from being exposed to the business stuff: sometimes it is best not to know.

Ellie Runcie is National Programme Director of the Design Council's three Support Programmes: Public Services by Design; Designing Demand; and Innovate for Universities. She leads a national team to deliver these programmes with partners in the private and public sector. Public Services by Design is a new programme developed by the Design Council to inspire and enable public service transformation through design thinking and techniques in a series of pilot projects. Runcie was asked to answer the question "What do designers need to know?" from a public policy perspective.

Ellie Runcie opened her presentation by highlighting that the fundamental purpose of the Public Services by Design project is to enable public service managers and teams to transform the services they deliver through design. As a result the programme is both building innovation capacity and culture in public and opening up the market for designers in projects commissioned as a result.

It has never been more important for public service teams to think differently, which is where design comes in. It's a brilliant opportunity for designers right now. We don't have much time. How will we make the transition? — Ellie Runcie

The programme is delivered through the Design Council's network of 50 design mentors. These mentors are appointed nationally to work with private and public sector organisations that know they need to change and know design potentially has a role, but don't know how to manage it to enable change or transformation.

Nurturing the radical

There was some discussion of Verganti's call for an education climate that nurtures the radical. One member of the audience called his argument 'a bourgeois account of aesthetic design' arising from a purely business lens, and advocated diversity. From a practical point of view, some tutors felt that it was hard to teach students to be radical in little, prescribed blocks and modules. Others spoke in defense of the studio culture traditional in design – a social and pedagogical environment that encourages students to question things and break the mould – while admitting that studio time and space was becoming more and more of a premium in universities.

Teaching professional designers

A tutor identified the lack of radicals as owing to a system that just teaches people to have jobs. He cited a colleague who bemoaned "the mediocrity of competence", and claimed to have done a Masters degree himself in order to make himself "even less employable". Another tutor felt, conversely, that it was imperative to marry up graduates with companies looking to make things.

Emily Campbell cited the example of Deborah Szebeko, who while training as a graphic designer volunteered for Great Ormond Street Hospital, in a project management capacity not obviously related to her training as a designer. Finding ways to make herself indispensable in this environment of healthcare service delivery led her to establish a service design agency – Thinkpublic – which sustained in great measure by projects in healthcare. The example shows how the relationship between a design training and industry is not as obvious as it once was.

Runcie described the difficulties presented to public sector organisations as a result of the pressures on public funding. She explained that this had already had a considerable impact on the organisations involved in the programme. Acute fiscal constraints combined with increasing demand for public services mean that the urgent pressure is to do more with less. It has never been more important for public service teams to think differently, which is where design comes in: "It's a brilliant opportunity for designers right now. We don't have much time. How do we make the transition?"

The Design Council's programme (covering areas such as adult social care, young people at risk, obesity, young offenders and new businesses incorporation) help organisations look at their problems and challenges in new ways and identify how design can help tackle them. There is a real opportunity for public service agencies to harness the expertise and creativity within service teams, especially ideas from the frontline of delivery.

However, when significant funding cuts are approaching and people's jobs are at risk, they might well ask why design matters.

One of the Public Services by Design projects has been working with the London Borough of Lewisham to address the needs of homeless people in the borough. Lewisham signed up for the programme to help them understand how a design approach could improve the experiences of people using emergency housing services and direct people not entitled to emergency housing support to the appropriate team or agency more quickly.

A 'diagonal slice' of the organization, from senior executives to frontline staff, contributed new ideas for how to reduce the number of people requiring emergency housing service, and new ways to make the process of support more efficient, effective and targeted. Unlike the private sector, the challenge for public services is to try and reduce volume and 'repeat business'.

The project team agreed that their imperative was to know their users: who uses the services and how do they feel about them? Who is genuinely in need? What wider situations are people dealing with that resulted in them becoming homeless? Staff from the Housing Options team say this 'upfront' questioning immediately helped them understand the value of looking at a problem through a designer's eyes: it showed them that they had to start asking service users how the service could be improved.

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— *Ellie Runcie*

They set about their own ethnographic research, observing people in the reception/waiting area of the Housing Options Centre and asking them how they felt about the service. They captured these conversations on video with the help of a service design agency they had commissioned. Lewisham staff recorded the experience, or 'customer journey', as it is known in service design, of more than twenty people using the Housing Options Centre, and edited the footage into an 'insights' film. It was anticipated that this film would be more effective than a written report in communicating what was and was not working to everyone involved in the service.

Education and employment

The discussion of the relationship between education and employment continued. In spite of Verganti's confident assertion that businesses are looking for radicals, not business-savvy designers with marketing skills, there was some skepticism that 'radicals' will get jobs.

Verganti described a kind of closed circuit created by the business of design education combined with an oversupply of designers. "You spend five years studying in Milan and then - no job. So you convince your parents to let you do a Masters in design. Then you might even move on to a PhD. It's a huge self-perpetuating business, a bit like psychoanalysis. My friends who are designers - 50% of their salary comes from teaching people design".

At one point Emily Campbell asked the tutors if, given the plurality of pressures on them, they felt they were still producing designers. The answers showed how diffuse design has become as a discipline to be taught and how confusing the media and popular image of design is to young designers. One tutor expressed the preeminent need to open students' minds, to give them a wider view of what's going on, to encourage them to pick up as much as they can by simply seeing more. Another pointed out that designers are popularly perceived as living their lives in quite an exotic way. Design is sold around celebrity, but it needs to be projected as about excellence, about teamwork for the greater good. "We need to ask 'Have you got those special skills - are you one of ones that can make a difference?'"

Emily Campbell concluded the discussion by asking tutors what issues they would like to see debated at next year's seminar. "The big issue is what students are coming in with" was the most direct reply. That is, the preparation of students for design in secondary school. Another tutor speculated that the lack of a critical attitude to the brief and society in general might owe to deficiencies in the secondary system.

In an ideas-generation session led by their Design Associate, Lewisham staff used the problems identified in the film to come up with 100 ideas for improving their centre. The 'quick win' ideas that could be prototyped quickly included:

- *Right first time*: Ensuring staff know what questions to ask and what information to give during a customer's first interaction with the service
- *What next doc?* Information design prototypes to help housing advisors explain what happens after their first interview
- *Fact sheets*: A series of fact sheets about the details of the housing options service for use by staff and customers
- *Storyboards*: Illustrated scenarios and story boards in the reception area showing customers what to expect while they wait to see an advisor.

Low-cost prototypes of these ideas are being tried out in the Housing Options Centre.

Runcie made the point that public service design is particularly complex because you need to involve a whole range of stakeholders, from service users to managers and executives. She outlined the cost of one agency participating as £28k, plus design agency fees of £7k. Because their savings are projected at £368k per annum, the Social Return on Investment is 10:1 - a massive potential efficiency by improved design. Runcie summarised the most important tasks for design as:

- Finding ways to communicate people's needs, which are usually abstract concepts
- Working visually and tangibly so that stakeholders are all looking at the same thing - words are not enough
- Prototyping early and often to manage risk - £100 spent on a failed trial is £100,000 saved later on
- Working inclusively and collaboratively

Emily Campbell pointed out the contrast between Verganti's advocacy for the single-vision radical, and Runcie's conviction of the power of a 100 small ideas. She questioned whether the same designers are capable of big singular ideas *and* incremental change, and whether we should be educating both together. She added that in recent years the Student Design Awards had yielded many moderately competent exercises in user research but relatively few outstanding design ideas.

Sam Hecht is co-founder with Kim Colin of the design studio Industrial Facility. Industrial Facility's declared belief is in design as a progressive means of simplifying how we live. Their rigorous path of investigation and analysis has been well documented and has won them over 40 international awards, and a place in the permanent collections of the MoMA, New York; the Pompidou Centre in Paris; The State Museum of Applied Arts, Munich; the Museum Fur Kunsthandwerk, Frankfurt; and the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

Sam formed Platform 12 in Design Products with Durrell Bishop and André Klausner at the Royal College of Art, and taught from 2007 to 2010; while he and Kim Colin lecture and conduct workshops at schools all over the world. Hecht was asked as a Royal Designer for Industry and design professor what we need to be passing on to the next generation.

Sam Hecht opened his talk by revealing that he had recently resigned from teaching at the Royal College of Art, and that he would, in his presentations, try to explain the directions that he had propagated. He reflected that the value of design education has become unclear.

Hecht said that most of the students designed with the media in mind, and with exhibiting at the annual Milan Furniture Fair as the rite of passage into the media-design world. He pointed out that the kind of work displayed and discussed at Milan constitutes about 1.6% of what we use and consume on a daily basis. If young designers aspire to the Milan model, their contribution to society can therefore only ever hope to be marginal – to answer a tiny portion of human need. Since their education sets them on this Milan-media path, design education needs an upgrade.

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Once, design led science and business; now it seems to be leading the media (if it's really leading anything). We've forgotten that everything is a product and every product is part of a system; a system of making and a system of use. Young designers are not being given the opportunity to understand that system.

Hecht said that when he taught at the Royal College of Art, he and his fellow tutors always introduced the year with artists rather than designers, because they had a better grip on the way the world ticks. Richard Wentworth, for example, who decided to take students on a walking tour of Colindale – a place on the London Underground system between urban and suburban zones. The walks, known as 'Walking with Richard,' were about helping students understand the world around them and why things exist: why, for example, bricks are the size they are. Martin Creed is another example of an artist who knows that everything is a product and has reasons for being the way it is.

It's a pity, Hecht said, that it's been left to artists to maintain this territory. Many young designers have lost that ability to understand – or perhaps are not taught – why things are the way they are. In a way it's a loss of language. Hecht showed a photograph of MA students in one of his courses taking apart a radio, and pointed out that the students had never taken a product apart before. It's necessary to be a specialist as well as a generalist in design. In order to be a specialist, this ability to dismantle and analyse the parts of something is crucial.

Many young designers have lost the ability to understand – or perhaps are not taught – why things are the way they are; but this ability to dismantle and analyse the parts of something is crucial — Sam Hecht

Once they know the parts, designers can create something out of what's there. As a task for his students, Hecht asked them to 'make a product by producing a set of instructions.' Hecht described how one student put together instructions on how to blow a really loud whistle using your fingers, and with the instructions, Hecht was himself able to do it for the first time in his life. He showed some of the other results of Platform 12 including a folding 3-point plug and a bike that folds into the diameter of its wheel. The designer was only able to design and

produce a folding 3-point plug because he understood the system of plugs as a whole.

Design education is a flourishing business and Britain is a popular place to study design. 87% of the people Hecht has taught come from foreign lands and 57% of these had a poor command of English. It's difficult to talk about complex issues of design at MA level in this environment. The more media, the more business, the more foreign students will want to come here. Designers in the 1950s contributed to society. In the 1980s, they contributed to business. In 2010 they contribute to media. A lot of design is consumed as images rather than as a physicality.

We should look at the example of how architects have done a fantastic job in reoccupying the sector of urban planning which they once lost to planners and other professionals: even architecture students who know they will probably never design a building can still contribute to this big and important area of work. Designers should reoccupy how the real world ticks; understand it and comment on it. They need to understand how products are made, consumed and fit into contemporary life.

RSA

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