

"Design Studies in the Academy: Designing Our Future" Design Forum Special Session

Chair: Rosanne Gibel, Art Institute of Ft. Lauderdale

In the call for papers for this panel, participants were asked to describe their vision for how (and where) design studies programs should "fit" within traditional institutional structures and hierarchies, and/or what steps they taken at their institutions to reconfigure or realign relationships between departments and between designers, design historians, artists, art historians, and other faculty members whose work falls within the purview of "design studies." Short statements were requested, with the desire to initiate a dialog about the evolving state of design education.

The statements accepted reflect interdisciplinary practice, history, theory, criticism and the studio. The call did not define the term "Design Studies." It was left to the participants to do this themselves. The variety of statements submitted reflects both common concerns and diversity of opinion not only among the panelists selected, but in their institutions as well. It is clear that the "fit" is changing and that it is a negotiating process inside the department as well as outside.

Miodrag Mitrasinovic , University of Texas at Austin

I would like to point to a clear difference that has to be mapped out between DESIGN as an object of study, a discipline, a meta-disciplinary idea, or a subject matter of an interdisciplinary framework. What all the existing academic disciplines that share DESIGN as an object of study (graphic design, industrial design, architecture, etc.) have in common is not a definition of design, but a unique mode of reasoning, a unique process of synthesizing different forms of knowledge, and a mode of "acting in the world." That is also the reason for a wide academic interest in design that argues for the centrality of design to contemporary life. Design conceived as such, should become the subject matter of Design Studies, which should be developed by cognitively integrating various disciplines involved by homogenizing and systematically integrating the theories, methodologies, and standards of research that have become successful paradigms in those disciplines. Such homogenization can itself give rise to organizational forms whose cognitive and institutional structures could adequately respond to the new circumstances.

The Design Program at the University of Texas at Austin, is an interdisciplinary design program situated within the College of Fine Arts. Rather than amassing the disciplines, theories, methodologies and techniques, we have attempted to bring the expertise of scholars from different design backgrounds to bear on issues related to common projects and research agendas: graphic designers, architects, e-designers, industrial designers, critics and scholars as well as practitioners. All teaching is project-based, and within our studio environment projects are not medium-specific because we neither formulate a specific mode of practice nor we insist on a discipline-bound definition of outcome. Instead, we insist on interdisciplinary, theoretical and methodological foundations of the process of designing. We currently offer BFA in Design and MFA in Design. We plan to develop our program further through a Portfolio Plan that would give graduate students a

possibility of combining design courses with other areas of study university-wide, and a possibility of acquiring a custom-designed degree in Design. Informally, and unofficially, our program collaborates with faculty and students from various academic disciplines. Ideally, however, I see our program grow into an institutionally independent Design Studies program based in interdisciplinary homogenization among the academic disciplines already involved, moreover including but not being limited to engineering, rhetoric, anthropology, sociology, psychology, behavioral studies, and studies of material culture.

Rafael A. Fajardo , University of Denver

CONCRETE

³...how to position design studies within current institutional structures and cultures...²

What we did. . . introduced the notion of design studies as relevant to area studies, specifically to border studies and Latin American studies.

How we did this. . . first: I befriended an art-historian who became my collaborator (this was not done "strategically", rather it evolved organically, rhizomically.) I taught him as much about design as I could (he was interested, I was lucky. He in turn taught me much about writing).

second: we adopted a design studies point of view. This was facilitated for my collaborator, the art-historian, by the writings of Clifford Geertz, and of several other cultural anthropologists who have written on material culture, and who have made material culture their object of inquiry.

third: it was proposed that employing the lens of material culture studies (and design as a manifestation of- and manipulator of culture(s)) could provide novel insights to the study of the borderlands. This proposal was accepted by a research institution that then employed that lens for the purposes of seeking (and acquiring) Ford Foundation money for pilot research. (A report is currently being compiled for the Ford Foundation with outcomes of these pilot projects.)

Challenges: Efforts were met with apathy and antipathy by senior studio art faculty who formed review committees. Efforts were met with great sympathy by anthropologists, historians, and other colleagues who were part of the initiative.

How would (or will) I continue to proselytize? I believe that to understand culture, I should study design, and that to understand design, I should study culture. This intellectual framing of a professional practice has found resonance with academics and intellectuals who study culture(s) in all its manifestations. Critical Praxis becomes a partner with Critical Inquiry.

Cymbre Quincy Raub, North Carolina State University

During the 2001-2002 academic year, I devoted the better part of my research time to developing the only non-studio based degree program for the College of Design at North Carolina State University. This degree program, titled *Design Studies*, was prompted by two major factors:

1. The need to accommodate, at the state's largest public university, students interested in the history and theory of design rather than a studio based curriculum. For students majoring in *Design Studies*, the program provides a strong undergraduate degree for pursuing graduate work in art history, the history of architecture, art criticism, museum studies and related programs in design history, theory and criticism. The program also provides an excellent undergraduate education for those who wish to gain a traditional liberal arts degree before pursuing a professional graduate degree in any of the disciplines offered by the College of Design.

2. The professional programs at the College of Design offer only the required minimum of history and theory courses for each discipline. The College, the faculty, and the students desire more theory courses, but these are difficult to fit into the curricula demanded by accreditation boards and the general education requirements of the University. *Design Studies* provides history and theory courses that meet the needs of the College of Design programs, while providing general education courses geared to the University's student body.

Collateral advantages of the program include providing humanities courses to the entire university community, and perhaps more importantly, the opportunity for College of Design faculty to offer courses that reflect their interests. Additionally, participation in *Design Studies* will increase interdisciplinary relationships and projects among the faculty of the college. The effect of cross-disciplinary faculty participation will raise the level of theoretical discourse in the college.

While *Design Studies* requires students to gain a knowledge of the history of the fine arts, it is not intended to mimic nor replace an undergraduate degree in art history; the focus of the program is on design disciplines, specifically architecture, industrial design, graphic design, and landscape design. That is, the program focuses on those arts which clearly have a foot in both the fine arts and in the practical arts.

Robin Landa, Kean University

To best prepare students for the challenge of designing in the twenty-first century, we must teach our students to be designers who are critical thinkers and creative designers. In order to do this, students must have a strong liberal arts foundation as well as a strong design major. A design program that includes the liberal arts and teaches design theory, design history and criticism, art history, design skills, design practice, and actively fosters design sensibilities (philosophy, scope, creative visual problem-solving, imagination in practice) is ideal. The program consists of three parts:

- 1) Technical/skills training: critical in the short-run for young designers – least appropriate for higher education;

- 2) Creative visual problem solving: most important in the long run – a foundation best learned in a higher education setting. Fine arts courses are great here, however, design problem-solving should be emphasized;
- 3) General studies: least directly related to vocational requirement, however, gives content and depth to creative expression.

One generally finds this type of program in a Liberal Arts College or university. Like aspiring writers, aspiring designers need to be solid critical thinkers who also are capable of creative thinking and have mastery over an art form, over form and content.

A design program's courses in art and design history, criticism and theory *must* be supported by a strong foundation in liberal arts courses, including: several courses in philosophy, theater, film history, music theory and history, psychology, social psychology, anthropology, communications theory, creative writing, and literature courses.

Most design educators are in unfortunate and unique positions in liberal arts colleges; their mission is rarely understood by both their colleagues in fine art and art history, and by administrators (Deans, Provosts, Presidents). Some colleagues in fine arts and art history view design as a lesser partner in the visual arts, tainted by commerce. Administrators may view a design program as an expensive program to operate and/or be completely ignorant of the design discipline, thinking of us as artisans or on a par with graphic technology (printers). Also, other colleagues in the academic community have their own department's welfare at stake when establishing general studies curricula. All of this is at the expense of design programs and majors.

"Design Studies in the Academy: Designing Our Future

Remarks by Victor Margolin
Design Forum, CAA, February 20, 2003

The term "Design Studies" is now used frequently within the Academy. It brings with it a particular excitement because it calls for a deeper understanding of design than we have had until now, although it still lacks specificity and carries with it diverse meanings.

Adopted more than 20 years ago as the title of an academic journal sponsored by the Design Research Society, "design studies" denoted a rigorous investigation of processes and practices from engineering design, architecture, and the design of products. In 1995, Richard Buchanan and I used the term in the title of a book of conference papers, *Discovering Design: Explorations in Design Studies* and more recently I incorporated it in a book of my essays, *Politics of the Artificial: Essays on Design and Design Studies*.

When I first began to refer to "design studies" in my own writing, I departed from the meaning that the Design Research Society gave it and focused on it as the marker of a cultural domain beyond the processes and techniques of practice. I delineated four topics of study: design practice, design products, design discourse, and metadiscourse, which is

a reflexive investigation of design studies itself. I further elaborated these topics in a hypothetical proposal for a new doctoral program, which was subsequently published in Steven Heller's anthology, *The Education of a Designer*.

For some years I was calling for the need to bring the different sub-fields of design research together and this opportunity arose first through my involvement with the Design plus Research conference at the Politecnico di Milano in 2000, and then the Design Research Society's "Common Ground" conference, held at Brunel University last September. Both events included sessions on a range of topics including product development, design history, design management, and ecology. While most of the exchanges and connections at both conferences occurred informally, they established the format for an interdisciplinary meeting, which will continue on a regular basis at future DRS conferences, which will be held every two years. These conferences will not preclude the many specialized meetings that are taking place with increasing frequency but they will insure that within the design research community there will be at least one event on a regular basis that is dedicated to bringing together researchers with many different interests.

In anticipation of those conferences, I broadened my definition of design studies to include the multitude of different subfields that constitute the total community of design researchers. I have long argued, for example, that design history should be brought into relation with other modes of studying design in the belief that it would both modify the way that other types of research were conducted and would in turn be modified by them.

Where does that leave us in terms of incorporating "design studies" into the American academy? Given the difficult financial times that most universities find themselves in, the likelihood of establishing new design studies programs from scratch is low. It is therefore more probable that design studies rubric will find its way into the Academy through design departments or design programs that are expanding to include courses in design history, theory, and criticism as well as new models of design practice.

Miodrag Mitrasinovic makes the distinction between design as an object of study, a discipline, meta-disciplinary idea, or the subject matter of an interdisciplinary framework. What unites diverse practices of design is what he calls "a unique mode of reasoning." He speaks of designers as "synthesizing different forms of knowledge." At the University of Texas, Austin, the Art Department has taken the bold step of establishing an interdisciplinary BFA and MFA in Design that prepares students to work in a range of situations. Teaching is project-based and the project itself determines the kinds of knowledge that will be brought to bear on its realization.

We might consider this approach to be a "project-driven model" of design studies in which the body of knowledge grouped under the design studies rubric would be defined by its applicability to projects. This model might also be called an "action model" and design studies in relation to it would be knowledge for action. The model of design studies that Robin Landa proposes to develop critical thinking in design students also strikes me as a variant of the "project-driven model," as its aim is to improve the quality of projects by sharpening the critical awareness of designers.

Rafael Fajardo at the University of Denver envisions design studies related to border studies and Latin American studies. We might call this a "culture-driven model" in which the study of design or designed objects contributes to the understanding of something beyond design, in this case the borderlands. Such an approach, at least as it was presented

in the brief description I read, considers design knowledge as a contributor to the production of a greater knowledge about culture rather than to the production of designs.

The model of design studies, presented by Combre Quincy Raub of North Carolina State University constitutes "the only non-studio based degree program for the College of Design." I would call this a "discourse-driven model" whose aim is the mastery of design discourse, whether history, theory, or criticism.

What then are the fundamental differences between these three models and how do these contribute to the forms design studies might take in the Academy? First, the "project-driven model" is inseparable from a design program, as it is totally dependent on projects for its justification. It is that contributes to the definition of projects and to their successful execution. "Project-driven knowledge" is instrumental knowledge and in this model design studies itself is instrumentalized as a component of design action.

In the "culture-driven model" design studies constitutes a body of knowledge that can lead to greater understanding; in the case of Rafael Fajardo's program, an understanding of border culture. To understand culture is to develop a greater appreciation of its nuances as part of becoming a more conscious human being.

"Discourse-driven design studies focuses less on the act of designing as the object of study and more on the discourse about design; texts on history, theory, criticism, and practice. The mastery of design discourse is its own reward and leads to a broad understanding of design, though not necessarily to an understanding of how to design. Discourse-driven design studies comes into play in the work of museum curators, design managers, design retailers, and journalists. Unlike "culture-driven" studies where knowledge of design contributes to a greater knowledge of some larger cultural phenomenon, "discourse-driven studies lead to an increased understanding design itself through a greater knowledge of its discourse.

We need to recognize that design studies does not conform to a single model but rather can take multiple forms, depending on the purposes it is intended to serve. Therefore the wider community of design researchers is likely to remain heterogeneous, without a shared purpose other than a common interest in the subject of design. But given design's contingency as a subject that is constantly being created anew, it refuses to make itself available for conventional taxonomic classification. Rather it embraces a dynamic pool of purposes and desires. Thus, I believe design studies is likely to be different in each institution where it is established. Its identity will depend on the uses that an institution envisions for it and its realization in a given institution will depend as well on the skills and talents of those brought in to the institution as design studies scholars.