

## **Abstracts for “Collaboration in Design”**

Design Forum special session

CAA 2004 annual conference, Seattle, Washington, 12:30-2:00 PM, Saturday, February 21, 2004

*Session chair:* Ann Schoenfeld

Susan Bowman, Rowan University

### **“Towards a Collaborative Authorship”**

Though there are the rare occurrences of leaderless collaborations, such as the conductor-less Orpheus Orchestra, groups need guidance to achieve results. The interest of this investigation is to articulate the role of a leader in the creative process and specifically within the design process with the goal of achieving a collaborative authorship.

Bringing together diverse individuals requires experimentation in problem solving that can only be achieved by “un”-learning time tested methods and beliefs of authorship where individual vision is the over-riding model that guides design practices. Traditional (Western) leadership is deeply individualistic resulting in a practice of dominance and subordination. Individuals are enlisted to work and improve on a project in compliance with a singular vision. Authorship and traditional leadership claim their strength through the selection of a few, limiting voice and power. In our present environment the ability to depart from this norm is required if we are to negotiate the radical changes produced by technology, mass media and rapidly shifting markets. Economic expansion and social change require cultural re-interpretation.

New approaches to leading become evident when leadership is defined as the interconnectedness of parts, inclusive of individual voices. With the recognition of the need for inclusion comes the opportunity to create a collective rather than individual voice. And by embracing human-centric concerns collaboration becomes systemic, not hierarchical. Developing leadership practices that are inclusive, fluid, and poly-vocal, gives expression to the roots of difference. The challenge is then how the diverse interests of those working together become a unified message or image.

Collaborative authorship creates vision by creating a forum for self-reflection in the light of plurality and connectedness to others. Leaders, who are skilled in negotiation, team building and the ability to recognize and reconcile difference can create a position of strength from plurality, overcoming the negative connotations of “designing by committee.” Similarly, the old adage of “too many cooks spoil the broth” is rendered senseless, for the designer’s domain is like that of a kitchen in which all contribute to the success of the menu, rather than merely one dish.

Barbara Dass, University of Ulster

### **“Ecocrisis and Material Culture: Locating Consequential Collaboration”**

The ecocrisis that faces humanity is believed to be essentially a crisis of fairness; issues of equality and ecology need to be considered as intricate parts of the same problem. For the global consuming elite the synthesis of ecocrisis and equality is symbolised in new emerging objects of desire, ‘sustainable consumables and services’. These objects have been conceived within a framework of natural equity where previous habitual inequities in the acquisition and exploitation of natural resources threaten the continuance of consuming lifestyles. The status and desirability of the ‘sustainable consumable’ created by marketing strategies and legitimised by global narratives of ecocrisis persuades consumers that science and technology are conquering problems of equality and ecology. For the hopeful in the surviving masses the synthesis of ecology and equality is manifest in ‘catching up development’ where equality is promised as an accessible process of levelling upwards. The environmental problems inherent in sustaining ever-expanding patterns of economic growth are not addressed. Market-driven developers have constructed a myth of global proportions of sustainable consumer-led development. For the hopeless in the surviving masses the synthesis of ecology and equality simply means daily living in an environment as ravaged, depleted and toxic as the meaning of equality. Such communities are almost beyond the allure of a market-driven material culture; one could argue that they have become the objects of material culture embodied in a form of provocative visual narratives of suffering. No longer able to hide the grotesque disparity in living conditions market-driven developers juxtapose scenarios of suffering with remedial treatments to create the illusion of movement towards greater equity. Material culture, the objects that we possess and desire reflect ideologies, social values and policies. Consideration of the objects that pervade the environments of the citizens of this world give insight into the diversity and toxicity of meanings ascribed to equality. The design professions are largely held responsible not only for generating these objects but also evoking new desires for objects not yet visible. The boundaries of engagement with issues of ecocrisis are still firmly set within the privileged

north. Habitual isolationism in modernizing states keeps returning attention to immediate rather than distant needs. Generating collaborations that are consequential to the emergence of new paradigms of design practice must be located in the 'distant' and 'unvoiced' majority world.

Paul Platosh, Pacific Northwest College of Art

**“Collaboration and Experience-based Design”**

Collaboration is the cornerstone of experience-based design. The core concept is that all experiences are important and we can learn from them, whether they are the traditional experiences--purchasing groceries at a market--or online, etc. In fact, we understand ourselves and our culture, through aggregated patterns of experiences. Designers must understand what makes a good experience and then to translate these principles without technology dictating the final form. The first question is, “Should I make this?” rather than, “What should it look like?”

Thus, the need to focus on human-centered experience is crucial at the curricular level. When design students learn to collaborate they consider their predispositions and biases in light of those of their peers. Often this results in moments of tension and conflict and through these Hegelian struggles of point and counterpoint, thesis and antithesis, meaningful and lasting design solutions arise. Indeed, as students surrender tightly held judgments and opinions and weigh them equally against (and with) those of their peers, they realize that the joy of design practice is not the final product, but rather it is the process itself. Through the participation of a diverse group, a realistic solution emerges, based on social need. Design solutions become lasting, more fluid, even transcendent. The design process that demands deeper, experiential participation from its group members becomes successful in the range of experiences it focuses towards a solution.

By its very definition, design collaboration somewhat diminishes the full expression of the individual. Yet when the practice of collaboration is undertaken by each participant in a reflexive and self-aware way through careful study of negotiation strategy and design theory, each participant remains committed to the process and true to his own beliefs about the work at hand. Students can defend these beliefs because it is only through this struggle that the synthesis of ideas takes place.

As students mature, they realize that collaboration is not only at the heart of experience-based design, it is at the heart of all design practice in general. No design solution is ever implemented, no matter how small, without the input of clients, engineers (or production people), and designers. This collaboration also includes marketing and distribution.

Collaboration is not a new idea, but one whose promise in education is only now rising to the surface as design programs shift their ideology to experience-based design.

Harry St.Ours, Montgomery College

**“Mosaics, Minarets and Multimedia Design: Reflections on American-style Design Education in the Middle East”**

In those Middle Eastern countries where prosperity and commitment to higher education have allowed the development of the most up-to-date communications infrastructures, essential lines of colloquy are being established as universities collaborate with Western educators in the field of design education. National and cultural boundaries are melting in the face of increasingly inexpensive technology, broader bandwidth and a desire for world-class educational opportunities, especially in societies of the region too often thought of in the West as Third World and politically repressive. Students at the new co-ed American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, where I was recently professor and chairman of the Design Department, hail mostly from progressive families of the Middle East: sons and daughters and nieces and nephews of the rulers and leading citizens of the U.A.E., Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Lebanon, Jordan and more.

After several years of advanced design and liberal arts study, as well as a constant and lively exchange of ideas, students with majors in the Design Department of the A.U.S. will internship at and later work for (or run) companies like Al Jazeera, Middle East Broadcasting, CNN Mid-East, Abu Dhabi Television and Saatchi & Saatchi Mid-East. Graduates will become their generation's leaders in fine and applied art, publication and Web design, film and video production, broadcast news, photojournalism, public relations and mass communications, and will help mold their cultures using the skills of visual persuasion taught to them in the American style. As long as our motives and methods are worthy who among tomorrow's promise in the Middle East but these designers are more important for our attention?

Design students in the Middle East are voracious for the best the West has to offer, yet misunderstandings between our cultures seem to increase as students struggle to reconcile their reverence for and revulsion of images in Western media. The daunting task

of design educators in the Middle East is to ensure that students comprehend the political power of visual communication and are given the insight to use these skills in progressive and ethical ways.

Reasoned discourse and practical application are the ingredients that lead to success and result in a celebration of some amazing design synergy, by providing rigorous design foundation studies to open the eyes, critical thinking in a liberal arts venue to open the mind and respect for cultural diversity in an open dialog to open the heart.

Michael Schmidt, The University of Memphis

“Collaboration or Collusion? Coordination or Control?”

Graphic Design is rife with contradictions. This should come as no surprise in a world comprised of paradoxical ideologies and political cross-purposes. Collaboration between designer and client, for instance, can achieve both coordination (of goals, messages, workers and managers) and control (of markets, assets, property, and brand equity). Coordination and control are not paradoxical: Examined within the context of global branding efforts, however, they illuminate the startling contradiction between human rights and property rights, forming what may well be the defining dialectic of the early twenty-first century and the process known generally as globalization.

The corporate graphic designer, in the most complimentary description of her collaborative role, develops systematic approaches to handling communications, media, and messages, so the coordinated efforts and goals of corporate clients, their investors, and other interested constituents, may be enacted. Nowhere is this particular design expertise more visibly evident than in brand creation and brand promulgation. The brand, while certainly key to coordination, is increasingly enhancing transnational corporate control over natural resources, factories, farms, workers’ rights, capital assets, intellectual property, and even access to nations, regions, and markets that have explicitly tried to reject this encroachment of foreign capital and extraction. This control enables corporations to chase profits around the globe, resulting in low wages and unsustainable economies of debt that dispossess millions of safe living and working environments, food, medicine, and clothing.

Designers can collaborate, and enable others to do so, because they understand the power of coordination and systematic thinking. But have designers—whether educators, students, or mainstream practitioners—thought critically enough and long enough about the systematic control wielded by transnational corporations and their brands?

Serious questions need to be asked about our roles as designers within this mix, because the growing backlash against “logos” isn’t simply about the grumbling of an overly-brand saturated society; the issue evokes very real, and highly legitimate, complaints regarding an interwoven set of problems, from living wages to national sovereignty.

The present credence awarded proponents of brand experience design and localization obscures the issues I’ve described, supplanting a common understanding of globalization’s deleterious effects with mere images of diversity. While designers are addressing these problems in proactive ways, and using a variety of means, corporate brand designers, and those who educate corporate brand designers, espouse a false philosophy of diversity anathema to actual solutions required.

### **Collaboration in Design Studies**

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Emphasizing a need to find common ground in a world of differing cultural and social values and resources, members of the International Council of Graphic Design Association drafted a comprehensive Design Education manifesto in 2000 in Seoul, Korea (See Design Issues, Spring 2002). The authors noted that design education programs “should foster strategies and methods for communication and collaboration” through facilitating a self-reflective attitude and ability. When the authors said that “Eastern values foreground community and social obligation in contrast to a Western concern with individuality and freedom,” they highlighted the need for developing flexible thinking. Their important observations and mandate seem prescient in a post 9/11 world where cultural value systems have been radically called into question. This panel addresses the need for collaboration in design studies: the necessity of collaborative projects, collaboration as an indispensable component of critical thinking, and the implications of collaborative thinking for changing social and political environments. Papers examine resulting benefits for design when collaboration produces active exchange of diversity and difference, when it generates new perspectives, insights, and debate. The panel considers collaboration as the process of negotiating different aesthetic languages, positions, and opinions as well as fostering holistic human-centered attitudes toward design.

#### *Session chair:*

Ann Schoenfeld, Pratt Institute

#### *Speakers:*

“Towards a Collaborative Authorship” Susan Bowman, Rowan University

“Ecocrisis and Material Culture: Locating Consequential Collaboration” Barbara Dass, University of Ulster

“Collaboration and Experience-based Design” Paul Platosh, Pacific Northwest College of Art

“Mosaics, Minarets and Multimedia Design: Reflections on American-style Design Education in the Middle East” Harry St.Ours, Montgomery College

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