‘DESIGN MEANS DIFFERENT THINGS TO DIFFERENT PEOPLE’

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces completed PhD research investigating the question ‘What is design?’ (Micklethwaite, 2002) ‘Design’ is an ubiquitous yet ambiguous term. The origins of the study introduced here are located in the observation that ‘design means different things to different people’.

The study empirically investigates how ‘design’ is understood by a theoretical sample of 31 interview informants, drawn from five design stakeholder groups: Business; Designers; Education; Promotion; Users. A total of 41 interrelating conceptions of design are identified, the examination of which illuminates the richness of the term ‘design’ as it is understood within the interview data.

The generated map of meanings of ‘design’ enables each of us to consider ‘design’ with more objectivity, and less implicit subjectivity, than might otherwise be the case. Some ways in which the current study may be developed are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

ORIGINS OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

This paper introduces completed PhD research investigating the question ‘What is design?’ The selection of this ambitious question for investigation is probably linked to the author’s non-designer status. In approaching design as a field of research and study, the most interesting issue for the researcher was the apparent contentiousness of the term ‘design’ itself. ‘Design’ struck this researcher as being an ubiquitous yet ambiguous term.

DESIGN AS A CULTURAL PHENOMENON

The consideration and study of design has moved towards the approach taken by cultural studies (Whiteley, 1995), to include a consideration of ‘the entire range of a society’s arts, beliefs, institutions and communicative practices’ (Grossberg, Nelson & Treichler 1992:4), as they relate to design. Design has come to be seen to embody, or at

least directly relate to, the values of its wider milieu, rather than simply those of its isolated originators: the designers (Whiteley, 1993). Design is in this way 'value laden' (Dormer 1990:11), and even 'values made visible' (Cooper & Press, 1995).

THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF DESIGN

A wider engagement with design issues may also be noted, expressed as a 'democratization' of design. [1] Responsibility for design issues is now seen to be shared among a wider community of participating design stakeholders (CPSR, no date; Dumas, 1996; Scrivener, Ball & Woodcock, 2000). Acceptance of the view that design is an influence permeating throughout society, embodied in the statement that design is 'values made visible', entails that all members of a society should be considered as design stakeholders. One outcome of a newly inclusive mode of design engagement is the emergence of an inclusive design discourse, indicative of widening design engagement and participation (Liddament, 1996; Buchanan, Doordan & Margolin, 1998). [2] In a memorable quote: 'Design is too important to be left to designers alone.' (Dumas 1996:13)

THE COMMUNITY OF DESIGN STAKEHOLDERS

The research introduced in this paper addresses the democratization of the discourse, rather than the practice, of design. It focuses on the multiple perspectives and perceptions which emerge around design as it is thought about and discussed. (Margolin and Buchanan, 1995) As a methodological consequence, all voices from within the design stakeholder community are included.

NAVIGATING THE AMBIGUITY OF 'DESIGN'

It has been observed that '[t]he word design means many things to many people.' (Morrison & Twyford 1994:18). Design, moreover, means *different* things to *different* people. [3]

An inclusive design discourse has emerged, comprising multiple perspectives on design itself. A call has been made for the integration of these competing perspectives, not through the development of a single unified view, but through a process of *navigation*:

> 'The challenge that faces us today is not to search again for a universal language that will unite all stakeholders but instead to consider how we might navigate among the different ways of reflecting on design so that we can bring them into relation with each other as we seek […] "systemic integration."'
> Buchanan, Doordan & Margolin (1998:1)

This exercise in navigation is seen as crucial at a point at which 'both the discipline of design and its concomitant discourse are still in their early stages of development'

[1] Julier (2000:35) writes of 'a partial 'democratization'' of the *practice* of design, resulting from the greater access to the tools of design allowed by new technologies (particularly Desk Top Publishing). This idea of wider design engagement is applied here to all aspects of design and its discourse.

[2] The 'design discourse' is defined as comprising the totality of ways in which design is thought about and verbally discussed by design stakeholders. (Krippendorff, 1994)

[3] This observation, or one similar to it, was made in the closing plenary session of the Design Cultures (EAD III) Conference held at Sheffield Hallam University, UK, 1999.

(Buchanan, Doordan & Margolin 1998:1). [4] The present study was conceived in response to this call.

THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The study may be conceived as a social and cultural, as well as empirical, study of design. It investigates understandings of design manifest in a specific national context, the UK, in which the contemporary profile of design is considerable.

The repositioning of the UK Design Council initiated in 1994 is discussed by Woodham (1999). The implementation of the 'new' Design Council's redefined role is ongoing (Summers, 2000). The reconsideration of the economic and political attitude to design, inherent in this new agenda for the Design Council, has, moreover, explicitly informed the stated economic policy of the last two UK Labour Governments. An emphasis on design is a key component in the current economic policy in the UK. Political emphasis on design as a source of economic competitive advantage and regeneration incorporates an inclusive promotion of design to all sectors of the economy (e.g., Design Council, 1998; DCMS, 1998, 2001).

A continuing explosion in design related mass-media entertainment and discussion, in both television and print media, suggests a heightened engagement with design at a mass-cultural level in the UK (Rich, 1999). In particular, coinciding with the shift in the economic and political attitude to design in the UK, is a trend beginning in the mid-1990s for television programmes seeking to make design a topic accessible to a mass audience (Lloyd, 2000 (a) (b)).

The continuing influence of these parallel developments, both originating in the mid-1990s, signifies a democratization of design in the UK on cultural, economic and political levels. This is the contemporary UK context for the study of design investigated here. The current prominence of design in the UK suggests that an investigation of conceptions of design is of significant contemporary interest and relevance.

METHOD

> 'Probably the most practical way of understanding what design means is to acknowledge what people know it to be, including the context in which the word is used.'
> Morrison & Twyford (1994:1)

31 INTERVIEWS, FIVE STAKEHOLDER GROUPS

The study empirically investigates how design is understood by a non-random purposive sample of 31 interviewees (informants), drawn from five design stakeholder groups: Business; Designers; Education; Promotion; Users (Figure 1). [5]

[4] This is the researcher's reading of Buchanan, Doordan & Margolin's (1998) justification here. They refer the reader to Buchanan's notion of "systemic integration", in Buchanan (1998).
[5] The five stakeholder groups used were derived from those cited in other sources investigating the community of design stakeholders. A *matrix* sampling technique was used to identify individual informants within these groups (Reed, Procter & Murray, 1996).

Group I	'Business'	(i) Manufacturers and managers with responsibility for design in a non-design business, who are not themselves active as designers, and (ii) Retailers.	5 informants
Group II	'Designer'	Professional design practitioners, across different working environments and specialisms. Includes in-house and staff designers employed by an organization, those employed by design consultancies and agencies, and independent freelance designers.	10 informants
Group III	'Education'	Those involved full-time in design education at Further and Higher Educational levels.	6 informants
Group IV	'Promotion'	Those who support, represent and promote design in various ways. Includes (i) governmental and affiliate agencies with a responsibility for design promotion, (ii) professional design bodies, (iii) design media.	7 informants
Group V	'User'	Those with no professional involvement in design. Defined by non-eligibility for any of the other defined design stakeholder groups.	3 informants

Figure 1 The informant sample

This range of informants represents an attempt to include all voices from within the design stakeholder community.

In the 31 non-directive interviews, interviewees were encouraged to discuss design in whatever ways it has meaning to them. No pre-determined schedule of questions was used by the researcher. (see Robson 2002:282)

41 MEANINGS OF DESIGN

An analysis of the qualitative interview data was conducted in the form of a 'template analysis' (King, 1998) of textual interview transcripts imported into the QSR NUD*IST (v.4) computer qualitative data analysis package. This analysis constituted an open coding of the data (Miles & Huberman 1994:58). The 'template' generated constitutes an holistic map of the data organized by informants' thematic discussion of design. A total of 41 interrelating conceptions of design were identified.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS [6]

In the data template, 41 separate headings, each representing a separate 'meaning of design', are identified, structured in a hierarchy of four levels. The template is comprised of four 'families' of meanings of design, each representing a generic mode of discussing design. Design is discussed:

(1) in relation to a designed object;
(2) as an activity;
(3) in relation to the designer;
(4) as relating to a specific context.

These four families of meanings of design are of differing size and complexity, containing data codes of varying number and richness. Each family of codes is examined briefly in this section.

[6] The presentation of findings included here is necessarily brief in relation to the large volume of exclusively qualitative interview data collected and analyzed. A fuller analysis, with extensive informant quotes and author's commentary, is included in the source PhD thesis (Micklethwaite, 2002).

(1) DESIGN AND THE OBJECT

The first family of codes representing differentiated meanings of design in the interview data is presented below. [7]

(1) Design as of an object
(1 1) Function and aesthetics
(1 2) Design and meaning
(1 3) Design value

The informant perspective contained in this family of codes is summarized below:

Design relates to a designed 'object'. Discussion of an object's design focuses on (i) function and aesthetics, and (ii) design semantics. In addition, a designed artefact has a 'design value', based on provision of benefit.

This summary combines four individual code summaries:

(1) Design as of an object
Design is considered at a basic level as relating to a designed 'object' (the thing that is designed), though that object need not have physical form. Design is seen in various senses as an aspect of this 'object'.

(1 1) Function and aesthetics
Functionality and aesthetics are seen as essentially related, but clearly distinct aspects of a design. Different design approaches may emphasize either one over, or at the expense of, the other.

(1 2) Design and meaning
A designed object communicates social meaning through its symbolic value. This meaning derives from the designer and the consumer.

(1 3) Design value
Designed artefacts have a non-monetary 'design value', based on perceived benefit. This design value does not necessarily coincide with monetary value or financial expense.

(2) DESIGN AS AN ACTIVITY

The second, much larger family of codes is presented below. [8]

(2) Design as an activity *
(2 1) Design as a single discipline *
(2 1 1) Design domains
(2 1 2) Design generalism
(2 2) Design as a commercial activity
(2 2 1) Designer accountability
(2 2 1 1) Accountability to the client
(2 2 1 2) Designing for the consumer

[7] Code numbering follows the 'legal' system.
[8] Code headings indicated by '*' only organize the template structure. These 'empty' codes do not contain interview discussion, and so do not contribute code summaries below.

(2 2 1 3) Communicating to others
(2 2 2) Design as a competitive strategy
(2 2 3) Designing for profit
(2 3) Design as a creative activity *
(2 3 1) Creativity and design process
(2 3 2) Designing and making
(2 3 3) Originality of design outcome
(2 4) Design as a manageable process
(2 4 1) Codifying design
(2 4 2) Design and the organization

The informant perspective contained in this family of codes is summarized below:

Design is an activity. This activity is complex, comprising various domains. Design is overtly commercial, which has significant implications for the designer. Design is also an essentially creative activity, but the management of this creativity is potentially problematic.

This summary combines all the individual code summaries given below:

(2 1 1) Design domains

Design is a complex discipline with distinct domains. A general distinction is made between (i) design allied to art, and (ii) design allied to technology and engineering. Conflicting understandings of the nature and practice of design are evident on the two opposing sides of this divide. Erosion of barriers between design domains introduces the possibility of design generalism.

(2 1 2) Design generalism

To what extent do domain-specific skills and knowledge prevent an individual designer from practicing across design disciplines? In general, the true generalism of equal professional capability across design disciplines, is thought beyond the individual designer. A generalist design service is provided through designer collaboration, and the combination of design specialisms.

(2 2) Design as a commercial activity

Design is a commercial activity. This commerciality is seen as problematic, however, particularly in relation to creativity and preservation of non-commercial design ideals.

(2 2 1) Designer accountability

Who is the designer designing for? The designer might design for him/herself, or for others. Accountability to others (for example, the client) is a commercial necessity for the designer, but is often unwelcome.

(2 2 1 1) The designer & the client

A designer is accountable to the client 'sponsor' of design. This relationship has clear negative aspects for the designer. Designers respond in various ways, from resigned acceptance to rejection.

(2 2 1 2) The designer & the consumer

The designer is designing ultimately for the consumer. The designer must therefore assess, interpret and satisfy consumer needs. This is problematic where designer and consumer preference differ, in which case the designer may seek to influence consumer perspective.

(2 2 1 3) Communicating to others

Design is a *discursive* activity. The designer has to be able to communicate to others about his/her design. This can be problematic for designers who are not verbally-oriented. Use of a 'language of design' merely excludes the non-designer.

(2 2 2) Design as a competitive strategy

Design is a strategic resource, delivering commercial competitiveness beyond simple leadership on price. An overall design orientation includes both the way a company functions, and how it presents itself to the consumer through branding.

(2 2 3) Designing for profit

Design must make money. This can lead to an unashamedly commercial design agenda. Profitability and design value can be in competition, unless consumers are willing to pay a premium price.

(2 3 1) Creativity and design process

Designing is a creative activity. Creativity is primarily evident in the thoughtfulness of conceptual design, rather than in the process and performance of developmental design. Creativity can be carried through from design education into design practice.

(2 3 2) Designing and making

The role of making in designing is explored in terms of the relation between design and craft processes. Craft production, with its emphasis on technique, is distinguished from designing for manufacture. A similar preoccupation with technique is also apparent in use of the computer as a design tool.

(2 3 3) Originality of design outcome

Originality is a goal of the designer, and derives from a creative design process.

(2 4) Design as a manageable process

Design is a business process to be managed like any other.

(2 4 1) Codifying design

The idea of having a code or formula for designing offers the prospect of efficient management of the design process, but denies its essential creativity.

(2 4 2) Design and the organization

Effective in-house design depends on an appropriate organizational structure and working culture.

(3) DESIGN AND THE DESIGNER

The third family of codes is presented below.

(3)	Design and the designer *
(3 1)	Design as a vocation
(3 2)	Designer motivation
(3 3)	Development of the designer
(3 4)	Design as a group activity
(3 5)	Design as a profession
(3 5 1)	Professional ownership of designing
(3 5 2)	Consumer involvement in design
(3 5 3)	Designer responsibility
(3 6)	Stereotypes of the designer

The informant perspective contained in this family of codes is summarized below:

Design is done by a designer. A designer's relationship with designing relates to ideas of vocation, motivation and personal development. Design is successful as a group activity. Design as a profession relates to issues of ownership of designing, the role of the consumer, and designer responsibility. Stereotypes of the designer exist.

This summary combines all the individual code summaries given below:

(3 1) Design as a vocation

Designers see design as their vocation.

(3 2) Designer motivation

Designers' motivation focuses on the *what* the designer is designing for. Altruism is a dominant motivation, underlying which is a pursuit of personal fulfillment.

(3 3) Development of the designer

A skills-based design capability is distinct from an innate aptitude for designing. Development as a designer comes from experiential learning, and is linked to the personal development of the individual.

(3 4) Design as a group activity

Design is better done by a team than by an individual designer working alone. Design is a co-operative, multi-disciplinary activity.

(3 5) Design as a profession

Design is not fully recognized as a profession in its own right.

(3 5 1) Professional ownership of designing

Professional designers do not have a monopoly on designing. Professional design standards are likely to exceed those of non-designers. The professional design community has a strong sense of an ownership of designing.

(3 5 2) Consumer involvement in design

Product customization allows limited design choices. The consumer is involved more through consultation with the designer.

(3 5 3) Designer responsibility

A designer has a responsibility for his/her design.

(3 6) Stereotypes of the designer

Designers are unhappy at the stereotype that exists of their profession, but are implicated in perpetuating that stereotype.

(4) DESIGN AS OF A SPECIFIC CONTEXT

The fourth family of codes is presented below.

(4)	Design as of a specific context *
(4 1)	Design as currently fashionable *
(4 1 1)	Politicization of design
(4 1 2)	The ‘designer’ label
(4 1 3)	Design awareness
(4 1 4)	Multiple meanings of ‘design’
(4 2)	Design as culturally linked
(4 2 1)	Design and cultural change
(4 2 2)	Evaluation of design

The informant perspective contained in this family of codes is summarized below:

Design relates to its context. Interest in design is currently high in the UK, politically and culturally. Yet awareness does not guarantee understanding of design. ‘Design’ is an ambiguous term. Design reflects its context, but can also change it. What is considered ‘good’ design is also linked to context.

This summary combines all the individual code summaries given below:

(4 1 1) Politicization of design

Recent political interest in design is welcomed, but viewed with some scepticism.

(4 1 2) The ‘designer’ label

‘Design’ has become synonymous with ‘style’ and fashionable consumption. This devalues design.

(4 1 3) Design awareness

General interest in design is currently high. Design awareness, fuelled by design-oriented television programmes, does not guarantee design understanding. Current interest in design may not last.

(4 1 4) Multiple meanings of ‘design’

‘Design’ is an ambiguous term, due to a wide and indiscriminate use. Yet attempting to define ‘design’ is inappropriate.

(4 2) Design as culturally linked

Design reflects its social, historical and regional context. This occurs through cultural influences on the designer.

(4 2 1) Design and cultural change

The designer can use design to influence society, for good and bad.

(4 2 2) Evaluation of design

There are functional and aesthetic grounds for evaluating design. Functionally-good design can be stated objectively, but what is aesthetically-good design is open to interpretation. Any consensus in the subjective evaluation of design can never be absolute. Another framework for evaluating design is ‘effectiveness’, measured against stated objectives.

EXAMPLE FINDINGS: (4 1 4) MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF ‘DESIGN’

INTRODUCTION

A summary for the code ‘(4 1 4) Multiple meanings of ‘design’’ has already been given above:

‘Design’ is an ambiguous term, due to a wide and indiscriminate use. Yet attempting to define ‘design’ is inappropriate.

A presentation of the data collected at this code is given here, in the form of informant quotes and an accompanying author’s commentary. [9] Informants are identified according to their membership of the stakeholder groups given in Figure 1. This code has been selected for presentation in full due to its relevance to the focus of the current study: design meaning different things to different people. This data, presented under the

[9] The author is currently preparing a report covering *all* listed data codes in this way.

headings ‘Ambiguity’ and ‘Definition’, constitutes informants’ discussion of that very issue.

AMBIGUITY

> “people have this, they use this word ‘design’, and it means so many different things to so many people”
> (Designer-Agency 12)

All language is to some degree ambiguous:

> “essentially what you’re talking about is language meaning different things to different people.”
> (Education-Higher 01)

Nevertheless, ambiguity around ‘design’ is particularly problematic.

> “I think the trouble with the word 'design' is that it’s been overused and under-understood, misunderstood”
> (Education-Higher 08)

But hasn’t ‘design’ become more democratic in its usage?

> “I don’t think it has become democratic in its usage, actually. I think people are imprisoned by its usage, because they no longer understand what ‘design’ or ‘designer’ means.”
> (Education-Higher 01)

‘Design’ has become “almost invisible as a term” (Education-Higher 01).

“Overuse” of ‘design’ is also seen as “abuse”:

> “I think that you’ll always have a language being abused. Anyone who gets upset about it is not doing themselves any good, because you’ll never stop it.”
> (Education-Higher 01)

Widespread and indiscriminate use of ‘design’ and ‘designer’ is “kind of irritating” (Education-Higher 01), but what can be done?

Designers might actually exploit this situation to their advantage:

> “they’re quite happy to have the flexibility of: ‘Well, whatever it means is, that’s what I want it to mean at a particular point in time’”
> (Promotion-Design 27)

DEFINITION

What to do when ‘design’ has become “invisible” (Education-Higher 01), “clichéd” (Education-Further 02), and “bastardized” (Promotion-Design 27)? Well, it could be abandoned.

> "maybe it's jargon and language that's part of the problem, using that word 'design' is maybe not the right word"
> (Designer-Agency 12)

Substitution of 'the right word' promises removal of the present ambiguity around 'design'.

In response to the question "Do you think, perhaps, we need a new word for a designer?", another answer is:

> "I suppose one would argue immediately: 'Yes', but I think on reflection I would probably tend to say 'No'. I think what we actually need to do is to protect the term, gain a respect for the terminology and the word itself, so that people don't actually abuse it - or when it is abused, people understand that that's not what design is about."
> (Promotion-Design 27)

'Design' should be protected. So should we try to define 'design'?

> "it might be actually too rigid. It might be too clear cut, and if something's very clear cut it can be very dangerous. […] You have to allow some interpretation"
> (Education-Higher 01)

Some degree of ambiguity is an important aspect of 'design'. Definition would eradicate this.

> "I think it's very useful, to TRY and define it. I don't know if it's - I don't know how achievable that is. Part of me is not even sure if I would want somebody to define it."
> (Designer-Agency 05)

> "everybody uses 'design' in the way that applies to themselves. […] But it's not very useful having arguments about exactly what it applies to."
> (Promotion-General 29)

One interviewee uses a pragmatic 'definition' of design, but this is loose enough to adapt to the specific needs and requirements of each client.

> "maybe my definition wouldn't fit so neatly with what other people might do, but I keep returning to it, and it still works for me with the job that I'm doing."
> (Promotion-General 28)

COMMENT

The data presentation just given indicates the format of the full analysis in the source thesis. More particularly, the informant quotes given above clearly show that the topic of this study is relevant to these individuals as design stakeholders.

CONCLUSIONS

MAPPING MEANINGS OF 'DESIGN'

It was observed above that design means different things to different people. The generated map of meanings of 'design' summarized here demonstrates the richness of the term just within the present sample of interview data.

The findings of the present study are of relevance not just to compilers of dictionaries, however. A call was given above

> 'to consider how we might navigate among the different ways of reflecting on design so that we can bring them into relation with each other as we seek […] "systemic integration."'
> Buchanan, Doordan & Margolin (1998:1)

The empirically-grounded mapping of the many meanings of 'design' introduced here contributes to this project of "systemic integration", by revealing the precisely *how* design means different things to different people within the present sample of interview data. While it may be acknowledged as uncontroversial claim, the assertion that design means different things to different people is rarely addressed within the framework of a rigorous research process.

The utility of the exercise, and the findings it has generated, lies in the widened perspective it gives on what 'design' is understood to be across the community of design stakeholders. Consideration of the data template provides us with an opportunity to re-examine our own personal subjective perspective on 'design', and how this personal perspective relates to the many other perspectives of other design stakeholders. An exercise such as the one introduced here can enable all of us who are engaged with design to consider that term with greater objectivity and less implicit subjectivity.

WIDER APPLICABILITY OF THE FINDINGS

Generalizing from the findings of small-scale studies to those likely to be obtained from much larger populations is always problematic. Purposive sampling can not guarantee wider representativeness. The findings presented here should therefore be considered as constituting a record of how design was conceptualized by a selected sample of design stakeholders, within a particular context.

The findings introduced here are not, therefore, exhaustive in accounting for all contemporary meanings of 'design'. These findings do, however, represent a useful contribution to contemporary debate about how we use the word 'design'.

EXTENDING THE SCOPE OF THE CURRENT STUDY

Additional design stakeholders may be included in the study. This may add to the richness and coverage of the template of conceptions of design generated in this study, by introducing the perspectives of any neglected groups. The sampling strategy employed in informant selection here was unavoidably selective. A larger and more inclusive informant sample would generate a data template with greater coverage of perspective across the community of design stakeholders.

EXTENDING THE DEPTH OF THE CURRENT STUDY

Particular groups of design stakeholders may be investigated in more detail. This would give a richer picture of, for example, consumer understandings of 'design' than is provided here. The selectivity of the dimensional sampling strategy employed in informant selection here inevitably necessitated a compromise between the breadth and the depth of the coverage of the community of design stakeholders. Any particular interest in the perspectives of specific stakeholder groups could therefore lead to use of a more narrowly-focused informant sample.

REPRISING THE CURRENT STUDY

The value of 'cumulative' research lies in escaping '[t]he tendency for qualitative researchers to limit themselves to 'one-off' studies, which are "conceived and executed in magnificent isolation" (Murphy et al, 1998:192). A future reprise of the current empirical study would allow an assessment to be made of changes in the currency and use of the term 'design' over time. This would be especially valuable considering the contention that 'design' is a term with lively currency open to constant innovation in its usage.

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