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Published version

OAK, Arlene (2009). What Can Talk Tell Us About Design? Considering Practice Through Symbolic Interactionism and Conversation Analysis. In: Undisciplined! Design Research Society Conference 2008, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK, 16-19 July 2008.

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What Can Talk Tell Us About Design?
Considering Practice Through Symbolic Interactionism and Conversation Analysis

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Abstract:

How can scholars conduct rigorous research into the social activities that help constitute design practice? This paper considers this question through exploring how the interactive aspects of design may be fruitfully examined from the perspective of social psychology, especially through the approaches and methods of Symbolic Interactionism (SI) and Conversation Analysis (CA). The social activities of design refer to those situations wherein design is conducted in relation to face-to-face talk, or conversation. Since many aspects of design involve discussion, this paper argues that an SI-informed CA can offer an effective approach that may help us to better understand how communication and negotiation are central aspects of design. The author first outlines why social psychology is a significant perspective from which to study design through associating this perspective with the work of previous design researchers (Rittel, Schön). This is followed by an exploration of SI's concern with the relationship between social structure and personal agency. Through considering design-based talk through an SI- focused lens, we can see how participants in design negotiate both personal creativity and externally-imposed constraints. The concepts of creativity and constraint are discussed in more detail through analyses of excerpts of conversations from two design-education critiques. These analyses demonstrate how CA's methods can help scholars delineate the micro processes that link design practice to both personal opinion and wider social conditions. In summary, social psychology, SI, and CA are presented as distinctive, rigorous, and inter-related approaches that can help scholars of design practice to better understand the precise manner in which design is enacted through contexts of social interaction.

Keywords:

Conversation Analysis; Design Practice; Interaction; Social Psychology; Symbolic Interactionism.

A presentation was made at the conference following acceptance of the abstract, but a paper was not submitted for publication.

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Dr. Arlene Oak teaches in material culture studies and conducts research into the relationship between design and language. She is an Assistant Professor of Material Culture at the University of Alberta in the Department of Human Ecology. Arlene's background includes the studio practice of design (furniture

and product design) and research in design history (MA (RCA)) and the social psychology of design practice (PhD). Recently Arlene participated in the Design Thinking Research Symposia 7 (DTRS7) in which she focused on the importance of conversation in the practice of architecture.