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Design for non-designers

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Design for Non-Designers

As someone with a keen interest in amateur design and its relationship to professional design, I was highly interested in a strong theme running through most of the papers in this issue. As part of my own research, I have conducted interviews with people involved in Do-It-Yourself activity, and with people using systems designed to aid them in experiencing the design process. It has been evident through some of the sentiments expressed that views and terms which professional designers take as read without the need for any kind of further exploration hold completely different meanings to people who have not been trained as designers. The notion of design and its perception by 'non-designers' is a fascinating one, as I'm sure many professional designers can testify in trying to explain to people from other walks of life exactly what it is that designers do.

Continuing our series of invited pieces to celebrate our twentieth year, Catherine McDermott opens this issue with a reflection on the emergence and growth of curating contemporary design as a discipline in its own right and in particular, as an area of academic study, in which she has played a key role. She notes that over the last 20 years, changes in the meanings, perception and consumption of 'design' per se are reflected in changing curatorial practice as curators strive to ensure that the currency and value of design are represented accurately to people outside of its normal sphere of practice.

Two of the papers in this issue concern the seemingly straightforward act of sketching – something most designers take for granted. The first of these, by James Self, compares the reasoning processes of design and non-design students in reaching solutions when faced with ill-defined or 'wicked' problems. It is accepted that the ability to externally represent a problem in the form of sketches enables the problem to be analysed more deeply and for the proposed solutions to be assessed more accurately. Self goes further, suggesting that it is this sketching ability that furnishes design students with the opportunity to employ appropriate reasoning methods in solving wicked problems. Even though the design students observed had very limited experience in the application of design skills in a professional context, they proved significantly more likely to engage in the process of reasoning between problem definition and potential solutions than students that had no sketching ability. Non-design students spent significantly more time refining the definition of the problem and seemingly resisted proposing solutions. As Self notes, this understanding of the role of sketching could prove of great benefit to other, non-design, disciplines that also face the challenges of resolving wicked problems.

The second paper, by Nicole Lotz and Helen Sharp, considers the use of sketching as an ideation process for interaction designer students in two very different cultural contexts. Previous studies have identified different types of sketches based on their principal application: the thinking sketch, the talking sketch, the prescriptive or communication sketch and the storing sketch. It is also noted that sketching as a practice is employed differently in different design domains. Within the domain of interaction design, sketching has been found to support more discussion than other types of prototypes, but this research looks at how

the use of sketch ideation varies in different countries. The study compared two cohorts of students undertaking the same module, one in the Open University in the UK and one in Batho University in Botswana. The results highlight a number of similarities and variations in the use of sketching between the two, informing the adoption of different approaches to interaction design in industry and education, and highlighting the influence on ideation of 'an important but complex relationship' between culture, cognitive style and design settings.

While the first two papers address using design and ideation processes to solve problems, the third assesses another process aimed at helping non-designers solve problems, in this instance in a data-driven company. Tomasz Miaskiewicz and Caryndon Luxmoore's case study reports on a project to develop detailed personas representing particular groups of people in order to help a company better understand their clientele. It is not the first time that qualitative and quantitative data have been combined to develop such personas, but the usual methods use qualitative data to develop outline personas, which are then enhanced through the addition of quantitative data to improve reliability and accuracy. In contrast, the authors' study used quantitative data to segment people into groups through the use of cluster analysis, and then used the segments as a basis for personas, which could be 'fleshed out' through the application of qualitative research data. The authors found that – within this case study – the resulting personas had an increased level of credibility that led to their ready adoption by the corporation concerned. It also resulted in an increased focus on user needs when making design decisions.

Another relatively recent phenomenon in design with great relevance for non-designers is the emergence of the 'Fab Lab' or 'makerspace'. In 'Making "Making" Critical', Cindy Kohtala examines the 'Fabrication Laboratory' – a space where users (designers or non-designers) can access digital design and manufacturing technologies to create products as an alternative to the passive consumption of mass-produced goods – and critiques the ways in which the users of such spaces consider the issues of sustainability. The environmental and social benefits of direct digital manufacturing are held to be a key part of the appeal for the users of Fab Labs, and these concerns have also been at the heart of a number of academic debates about the potential future impacts of free access to these technologies. This paper is focused on the role of Fab Labs in effecting citizen activism and socio-technical change, or as Kohtala names it, 'critical making'. The relationships between the users of Fab Labs and their social worlds, their favoured concepts and the meaning they attach to objects were mapped in diagrams and written into narrative summaries to try and understand a key issue: why do people become engaged in making. As Kohtala states, 'For actors in Fab Labs, making is more than just a hobby. It is part of a new industrial revolution ...' and as she notes, Fab Labs are spaces where new, open models of design, innovation and education are explored.

The subject of the final paper, Makoto Saito, has no formal training as an artist or a designer, yet nevertheless has become a prominent figure in the world of Japanese art and design. The author, Hung Ky Nguyen, conducts a visual analysis of two well-known controversial posters by Saito, depicting human bones

painted in International Klein Blue floating on a white background. In doing so, he notes that the imagery is inextricably tied into and yet working against particular cultural notions of religion and death, and so in many respects the visual analysis is forced to move beyond the straightforward semiotic interpretations so often employed. A fine example of the multiplicity of meanings that can be embodied in designed pieces with which to draw this issue to a close.