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Death of the designer

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Abstract

This paper describes a paradigm for critical observation (or watching skills) in design and technology. This kind of study benefits from an understanding of linguistic theories and interpretation of text – beyond structuralism and semiotics – that moves towards a consideration of the ‘other’ or ‘difference’ in textual analysis. It is this that is explored as a paradigm for developing critical thinking about buildings and the spaces between them in design and technology.

‘The reader or critic shifts from the role of consumer to that of producer ... The work cannot be sprung shut, rendered determinate, by an appeal to the author, for the ‘death of the author’ is a slogan that modern criticism is now confidently able to proclaim.’

(Eagleton: 138)

Augé’s concept of supermodernity (Augé, 1995), exposes the effect of information overload on our perceptions of space. ‘Solitary contractuality’ confines the user to what the designer wants them to do in a particular space – the designer is at the flight deck controlling uniform connections in a ‘non-place’. Moving away from solitary contractuality into socially organic observation of the built environment is the main theme of this paper – observing how users are productive making place.

Keywords

architecture, semiotics, design vocabulary, space, narrative

Identifying new spatial zones/thinking big

The task specifications that characterise the breadth of study for design and technology at secondary level, include product analysis – usually the study of hand-held, small-scale objects that are taken out of use for classroom analysis. Placing objects in unfamiliar surroundings can indeed focus lateral thinking into imaging alternative functions of existing products, a key purpose of this type of task.



Figure 1.

A product analysis of the fish slice may direct semantic analysis to the operational aspects of the object – its ‘blade’, handle, weight, material, ‘look’ – to generate ideas for new scraping products (Figure 1). But what if a new kind of scraper wasn’t the best solution? How do we enable students to think bigger?

‘Of course, much of the time, designers are simply employing a well understood design vocabulary for the solution of conventional problems. They are, we might say, merely working within the parameters of an accepted paradigm. But design tends also to be thought of as a quintessentially creative activity; and it is at this point that we want to consider how language-games we play qua design, can as it were, acquire the kind of ‘new joint’ making it possible to grasp a new vision, cast old problems in a new light, glimpse new solutions, or even see new problems.’

(Liddament: 11)

The 1990 National Curriculum for design and technology included the study of large-scale environments – ‘Environments: surroundings made, or developed by people.’ (Dept of Education *et al*, A3)

If this area of study was still identified in the national curriculum, I suspect that product analysis activities would focus on the style, look, structure or intended purpose of made environments. As such, the operational function of the building would be uppermost in developing a critical analysis of the large-scale object – what makes a kitchen a kitchen and a shop, a shop – as opposed to what relationships the user actually constructs with their built environment. The purpose of this paper is not to argue for the inclusion of the built environment into

the national curriculum, but to present the uniqueness of large-scale products in developing critical analysis or reading skills necessary for creative design.

Krippendorff suggests that user identities are embedded in the products they surround themselves with:

‘Users [then] are in a part-whole (metonymic) relationship with the complex of objects surrounding them. (This relationship contrasts sharply with the means-end relationship of operational use.)’

(Margolin *et al*, 170)



Figure 2.

A metonymic relationship suggests one in which the original or intended purpose of an object is substituted by that constructed by the user. The original meaning becomes distorted through user appropriation and new relationships become integrated into the home environment through constant use and change. (The bicycle becomes a coat peg for a day in a study that was previously a bedroom for a year, Fig. 2.) Recognising, or being able to see or read the ordinary or everyday things that people do with space, offers opportunities for students in design and technology to grapple with complex relationships that are seemingly absent in a more clinical examination of hand-held products on the classroom table.

Product analysis, seen as a ‘closed’ activity, can be one in which the student’s task is to decipher the meaning of the artefact from analysis of its construction, intended purpose, fitness for use etc. Julier describes such a ‘grammar-based approach’ to design whereby semantic values are categorised in the design of new products; relationships between colour and emotion or types of behaviour and culture are key in determining a framework designing ‘resonances’ into products. (Julier: 94/95) Applied to architecture, one might read buildings as physical or strategic creations with specific materials, scale and structures – a product designed and, more importantly, unused. This kind of analysis focuses on a view of the designer (or architect) as central in determining interpretations of the product.

The built environment may appear to be that single voice, authoritarian in determining how the space is used. A structuralist reading of architecture would

uphold the authority of architects and planners in defining how buildings are used. Julier describes how the ‘Leeds look’ in the 1980s was a centrally planned initiative, designed by the city authorities to brand Leeds through exterior-defined style statements.

‘A series of prominent buildings were established exhibiting the same external usage of red brick, York stone for lintels, sills and other such details, slate roof, and Tuscan towers, pitch-roofs and window openings.’

(Julier: 119)

Restyling or papering over the cracks, reflects a concern with image and mono-functionality in design. Alternative ways of exploring the city that moves away from external, visual consumption (shopping mall syndrome) are not new. Jonathan Raban (*Soft City*, 1974) interprets London through the diversity and multiplicity of human experiences, placing, planning and rationality in negative opposition to the mysterious actions of people and their private benchmarks. Jane Jacobs attacked sterile planning grids that characterised city developments in the 1960s.

‘Cities are an immense laboratory of trial and error, failure and success, in city building and city design. This is the laboratory in which city planning should have been learning and forming and testing its theories. Instead, the practitioners and teachers of this discipline (if such it can be called), have ignored the study of success and failure in real life, have been incurious about the reasons for unexpected success, and are guided instead by the principles derived from the behaviour and appearance of towns, suburbs, tuberculosis sanatoria, fairs, and imaginary dream cities – from anything but cities themselves.’

(Jacobs: 16) [my underlining]

Design and language

‘There is no such thing as the ‘first’ literary work: all literature is ‘intertextual’. A specific piece of writing thus has no clearly defined boundaries: it spills over constantly into the works clustered around it, generating a hundred different perspectives which dwindle to vanishing point. The work cannot be sprung shut, rendered determinate by an appeal to the author, for the ‘death of the author’ is a slogan that modern criticism is now confidently able to proclaim ... It is language which speaks in literature, in all its swarming ‘polysemic’ plurality, not the author himself. If there is any place where this seething multiplicity of the text is momentarily focused, it is not the author but the reader.’

(Eagleton: 138)

In making an analogy between text-reader and building-user relationships, it could be argued that value and meaning in the built environment is about what people do with design rather than an explanation or critique of the building itself. Just as language is constantly evolving and changing through use, so the multiplicity of human activity that feeds the built environment provides a vocabulary for designing. Working out how to read this is the learned bit.

This is not to say that a building is a text, but that a post-structuralist relationship between reader and text is useful in furthering our understanding of user-building relationships. The analogy allows us to focus on the *productive* nature of design that, like language, is fuelled by what the reader/user brings to/does to a text or product.

‘Thinking of a description as a word-picture of the facts has something misleading about it: one tends to think only of such pictures as hang on our walls: which seem simply to portray how a thing looks, what it is like. (These pictures are as it were idle.)’
(Wittgenstein: 99)

Instead, design, like language, is never finished – hung up on the wall. Design icons or literary classics may mark the way; but it is through the relationship with the user or reader that products have meaning and value. Wittgenstein’s concept of ‘language games’ – underlying dynamic concepts that in their familiar relatedness to what is signified, challenge the notion of fixed principles – offer a structure for constructing meaning through identifying similar or familiar relations determined by the world in which we live: ‘What we count as real is bound up in the alterable structures of signification we live within.’ (Eagleton: 136)

In directing analysis-based activities towards reading difference or ‘unintended’ narratives in the surrounding environment, readers are offered *extra-significant* texts for interpreting human activity in the large-scale fabric of everyday life. The task of the teacher is to find such narratives.

A design vocabulary

Developing a vocabulary for creative design is about identifying how others contribute to the continuous reinvention of the product – this moves us away from studying designer/architect/planner intentions or a semantic analysis of specific features – to an emphasis on the user as signifier.

Marc Augé suggests that non-places (supermarkets, airports, cash points, bypasses) contract people to use them in defined ways. Information uniformly tells us what to do and what to expect, informing our solitary transit through these non-places at the expense of the

socially organic place. Watching people as a design and technology activity is learned for a purpose – to synthesise how people make place. (This differs from activities of the flaneur, where people watching is an end in itself or the tourist taking snapshots of what they expect to see.) In defining a framework for analysing socially organic place in the classroom, it is useful to start by thinking about ‘genres’ rather than specific buildings or areas – for example, temporal place and exposed place.

Temporal place

‘The quality of the place should only suggest the amount of time to be spent there, not the type of activity that should be indulged in. Each space is devoid of programmatic control. Function is only expressed through the control of time within each place ... a place occupied for five minutes becomes a five-minute space. There is therefore a three-week space or indeed three years, or a space forever.’

(Will Alsop, ‘Architecture and Time’,
www.alsoparchitects.com/practice)

Temporal place focuses on space defined by time spent there – giving students opportunities to look for relationships between environments and people activity. What activity characterises a one-hour space? Jane Jacobs described the social importance of the sidewalk in American cities; the place located by children for playing after school.

‘They need an unspecialised outdoor home base from which to play, to hang around in, and to help form their notions of the world.’

(Jacobs: 91)

In vibrant, lively city sidewalks, she argues, children learn social responsibilities from adult incidental intervention – adults who supervise in the course of carrying out other pursuits. From observing related environments for after-school play – for an hour during late afternoon – one can make a case for wider pavements. (Shopping malls and parks separate these activities and consequently become dead areas at night.) Jacobs highlights the importance of ‘unspecialised’ space, time spent there is what defines the place – not lots of purpose-built play equipment.

The skateboarders occupying the steps between St Paul’s Cathedral and the banks of the Thames, provide another example of temporal place. The smoothness of the empty pool surfaces that produced skateboarding space in Los Angeles in the 1960s/70s is evident in the steps by St Paul’s that is popular with skateboarders in London today. On one Friday in February, however, this place was again temporarily occupied and reinvented by others – a stream of

people crossing the newly opened Millennium Bridge. The space was transformed by people flow for a day (Figure 3).



Figure 3.

On the other side of the river, the Turbine Hall entrance to Tate Modern is characterised by a wide, smooth and shiny slope with steps going up one side and floor to ceiling windows of the bookshop on the other. Looking up, one can see people flowing around the upper floors. As such, the hall suggests a place for stopping for a few minutes. On observing this space for 15 minutes, one can watch people sitting/lounging on the steps and picnicking, children doing 'skids' or rolling small objects down the slope, and those queuing for tickets winding up the slope. Interestingly, not one sign tells people what to do in this space – the hall simply suggests 'stop for a bit'. 'The living environment can persist only through change and adaptation.' (Habraken: 6)

Exposed place

'Placing found objects in new contexts encourages us to make connections we would not normally make ... Such potentiality opposes the autocratic architect's pompous regimes of mono-functionality and also rejects the banality of highly flexible multi-purpose spaces designed for anything (but nothing) to happen in.'

(Hill: 245)

By juxtaposing objects in new environments, we can often see things from different aspects/angles – thus exposing the place. On an uphill side street to the Acropolis in Athens, a hand-painted 'this way' on a piece of scrap wood indicates the direction to this world heritage site. Its backdrop is indeed the towering Acropolis and the juxtaposition of such a famous-imagined site with the rather scruffy sign, makes one rethink such status. The sign is intended to point the tourist towards a refreshment stall.

The patchwork of bomb-damaged roofs in Dubrovnik could prove the point that restoration is 'freezing a collage of intervention' (Habraken: 6). In a bid to reclaim tourist numbers of pre-war years, the city's roofs have been restored with lookalike tiles. (The hidden interiors of many buildings remain damaged.) One roof intervenes in this process; a rooftop garden takes on the bomb damage and uses it to reinvent the top part of the building (Figure 4).



Figure 4.

Back to London, artist Richard Wentworth likens repairs to a fence on the Caledonian Road to a plaster on a wound – more comforting than the gaping hole (Barley, 2000). Furthermore, in front of a concrete block in Deptford, South East London, a flat owner reinvents dustbins to grow a garden (Figure 5).



Figure 5.

Developing design literacy in schools, demands a framework – one that is beyond the scope of this paper. The structure below, however, does highlight key areas that were used to develop a project with undergraduate students at Goldsmiths College. The focus of the project was to develop students' critical thinking skills through observation of large-scale environments. The project lasted for four days and students presented their work through a web site (Figure 8). They had a number of set tasks where students had to:

- produce a framework for developing design vocabulary
- identify genres of place e.g. temporal place e.g. exposed place
- produce intertextual images – showing 'borrowed bits' from other narratives/stories
- identify 'family relations' – what are the borrowed bits from other stories?



Figure 6: Container art Studios, London.

Students find out how people use place 'wrongly' or differently from the intended use.



Figure 7: Paris skaters.

Contextualise/focus – towards design opportunities
 E.g. *Deptford Under the Microscope*
A2 – A Traffic Free Zone



Figure 8: Verbalise connections.
 'New joint'/design idea

Conclusion

The development of a design vocabulary, through analysis of user-building relationships, offers design and technology in schools a framework for critical analysis of the made world – one that is largely stymied by the current emphasis on small, hand-held products. Picking apart complex, embedded relationships that users have with environments, exposes how people do things 'wrong' – thus producing design over and over again. It is this that energises the process.

'Functionalism supposes that only the quantifiable is real. It disregards non-productive, 'irrational' actions and focuses only on actions deemed to be 'useful'.'

(Hill: 142)

The curriculum for design and technology in schools would need a new paradigm – one that considers:

- conceptual outcomes
- oral assessment – verbalisation of ideas
- users as makers of change
- emphasis on design as unfinished business
- critical thinking skills
- qualities of empathising, imagining and modelling rather than specifying types of task (e.g. product analysis).

'A number of prominent architects appear to seek for verbally formulated core concepts of a metaphoric rather than definitional character, around which to focus the work of themselves and their teams. Verbalisation, in other words may play a role in visual design quite different from that of rational analysis.'

(Tomes *et al*: 129)

Designed objects are interpreted and used in a multiplicity of ways. Architecture offers analysis of

such creativity large scale – by observing what people do to make place. Designing without this is unsustainable.

'The rebirth of Liverpool failed over decades of rebuilding and top-down initiatives because nobody thought to reform its politics. Cities can be rescued only by the virility of their communities and chosen leaders.'

(Simon Jenkins, The Times, Nov 17th 2000)

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