

# Design approaches in the contemporary scene: Structural essay on the relations between theory and practice

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## Abstract

This study presents a structural essay that aims to bring forward the relationship between society and Design by exploring the relations between theory and practice, and how they respond differently to social changes. Such development stems from the understanding of the Design profession as the result of three major historical processes: industrialization, modern urbanization, and globalization, considering the challenges that arise from them. Based on theoretical reference, a framework of analysis is proposed, which considers the multiple views upon the Design activity. A classification for the so-called Design approaches was built in three categories – habilitations, emphases, and transversal content – aiming to comprehend the possible relations among them. Both the structural essay and the proposed characterization intent to open space for the discussion about the different visions upon the area of Design and how they conjugate theory and practice with the constant social change that impacts the exercise and thinking about the profession.

**Keywords:** design theory, contemporary scenario, theory and practice, design approaches.

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## Introduction

Design has existed for as long as human beings exist. According to Cardoso (2008) and Thackara (2005), even before Design's formal existence as a profession, humankind have always performed the activities of designing functions, transforming and creating the artificial. However, the construction of a formal field as a profession and field of knowledge was first observed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was guided by processes of industrialization, urbanization, and globalization that operated around the world in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Cardoso, 2008). Therefore, Design constitutes a relatively young field. Internal processes that guide theoretical discussions and practice are thus essential for this field's consolidation (Bonsiepe, 2011).

Throughout the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>, society went through great changes concerning both quality and speed. While assisting in the construction of this society (Thackara, 2005), Design also seeks to constitute itself as field of knowledge and, in this dynamic scenario, challenges and distinct approaches of Design emerge, strongly guided by the triad theory, education, and practice.

For all this, this study intends to propose an analysis of these relations, raising the discussion about how new denominations for the exercise of Design appear and how they contribute for this field's establishment process before other fields of knowledge.

## Development

### Design today

When describing the space in which Design is currently situated, De Moraes (2010) highlights the issue of complexity as a strong paradigm. Whereas in the 21<sup>st</sup> century there was a dynamic scenario, we can observe, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a static scenario where one can identify processes that molded the construction of Design as a discipline and as professional activity.

*The methodology for developing products in most Design courses, and later practised also during the professional path, brings in its essence references of the static scenario present in the modern model, where usually the elements were easily decodable for not being hybrid and almost always had predictable contents for not yet having gone through a mix of information strongly present in the globalization process (De Moraes, 2010, p. 17, our translation).*

The dynamism above-mentioned reflects in the social sphere. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman characterizes the static scenario described by De Moraes as "first modernity", in opposition to what he describes nowadays as "liquid modernity". Bauman (2009) points that the liquid-ity indicates "a society where the conditions under which its members act move in a shorter time than necessary for

the consolidation of ways of acting in habits and routines" (Bauman, 2009, p. 7, our translation). Both the relations between individuals and the social structures show themselves as "fluid", that is, they do not keep their form for long. The key words that stand out are "unpredictability", "speed", and "uncertainty", used by the sociologist in the characterization of the current scene.

With the diverse characteristics of this complex scenario, we highlight what Bauman (1999) nominates as "the end of geography": the physical barriers are eliminated through Information Technology, which makes communication instantaneous. Castells (2003) also portrayed this phenomenon, in his text *The Rise of the Network Society*. The development of a technology that connects all sides of the world molds society to the Internet's image: infinite points of the globe connected in a network. Transformations are then observed in the functioning of the economy, with changes in the ways of development to an informational formatting; and in the functioning of society, with the global *versus* local dichotomy guiding the relations among people. In this scene, new polarizations between higher and lower classes also arise, as well as sustainability challenges caused by an economy based on consumption, which again affects citizens' lifestyle and interpersonal relations (Castells, 2003; Bauman, 2009).

It is based on these events that the designer's acting field is constructed in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, thus justifiably characterized as complex. "All these aspects will demand a new ability from designers that goes beyond the projectual aspect; a permanent capacity of updating themselves and managing complexity" (De Moraes, 2010, p. 11, our translation). Instead of being questioned for solutions, designers are increasingly being required to create strategies for the formulation of solutions and one can observe strong divergences in relation to Design's foundations, its contents and its teaching (Bonsiepe, 2011).

Considering the close relation between Design and society, we verify how the fast transformation factors, characteristic of the modern liquidity pointed by Bauman, have a significant influence on the field, both internally and externally. Designers then see themselves faced with a new range of challenges but also of possibilities for their performance.

### Theory, practice and education

It is pertinent to consider that "every practice carries an indispensable theoretical moment; practice is not done without basing itself in a more or less substantive theory" (Hocker, 2011, p. 190, our translation). In the Design field, the dichotomy is clearly noticed: theory *versus* practice. Gui Bonsiepe stresses an imbalance of this equation when pointing "little familiarity with practice" (Bonsiepe, 2011, p. 190), factor credited to the tradition of teaching guided towards the formation of skills.

*The beginning of Design learning in Brazil certainly occurred as in any another practical activity, that is, by means of training processes, observation and participation in concrete tasks, as it was in the times of manufactures and arts and crafts workshops guided by a master, attended by officers and apprentices. Thus it was in the beginnings of Bauhaus, divided in ateliers commanded*

*by masters and artists of reputation, and thus it still continues to occur in the continued and informal learning in industries, offices and other places where designers develop their professional activities (Couto, 2008, p. 19, our translation).*

Bonsiepe (2011) considers the pre-eminence of practice over theory justifiable, since "to design means to intervene in reality, thus a practical activity". In a dynamic and uncertain context such as the one described by Bauman and De Moraes, one understands the market will demand consecutive adjustments in accented speeds from the practice of Design. Couto (2008) considers these issues when describing the construction of the minimum Design *curricula*, developed in the end of the 1970s and made official in the beginning of the 1980s. This period is marked by the consolidation of new fields of knowledge that are added to the teaching of Design, as well as market requirements for specialization that originate, for example, Hypermedia Design (Couto, 2008). Therefore, one considers the relation of the practice of Design guided by society's quick changes in relation to its theoretical constitution.

*Considering that the reality of its demands change constantly, in contrast to the discrete jumps that characterize curricular transformations, how can we structuralize a minimum curriculum or another instrument that allows flexibility for future changes?*

*Minimum curricula connect disciplines, that is, consolidated fields of knowledge, which in turn are unfolded into disciplines at the structuring of the full curricula. Thus, one discipline is divided into isolated disciplines, creating an artificial compartmentation of knowledge and this fact has serious consequences in the education of a student who can hardly synthesize these knowledges in one organic whole.*

*The practice of dismembering disciplines into other isolated disciplines is antagonistic and directly contrary to the interdisciplinarity of Design (Couto, 2008, p. 27, our translation).*

The problematization of the issue "theory *versus* practice" can be seen here from two different views: first, the difference in the pace of development for theory and practice and second, the compartmentation of the academic structure and the disciplines to supply the teaching demand. About the first, we can refer to Bonsiepe (2011) as for how important it is to insist in developing a more expressive theoretical body, which the author names "projectual speech".

*Theory can be characterized as a domain of the distinctions that contribute to improve the understanding; in other words, a domain in which we problematize practice. Going from the differentiation between operational knowledge and critical knowledge, we can formulate the following interpretation: projectual practice as operational knowledge acts in the domain of production and social communication. The theory of Design as critical knowledge acts in the domain of social speech and, consequently, in politics, in which we discuss the type of society we want to live in (Bonsiepe, 2011, p. 184, our translation).*

On the other hand, the focus on the issue of fragmenting education in disciplines that function separately conflicts with the complex scenario marked by networks, then postulated by Castells (2003). One notices an increasing demand for “interdisciplinarity” for the solution of contemporary problems which “have been part of the speech of those who, to some extent, understand this field as suitable for working with other fields of knowledge” (Couto, 1999, p. 2, our translation). However, these proposals are rarely consolidated in the university environment (Couto, 1999).

Margolin (2002) indicates that the conventional divisions in the scope of practice are already falling on their own when designers come across problems that are beyond their comprehension or that they cannot solve alone. Such problems are directly related to these new challenges that are constituted in the complex scenario of today’s world and that go beyond the solid modern scene in which Design practice was developed (De Moraes, 2010).

*We could regard this as a crisis but can also consider it as a healthy opportunity to look beyond the existing boundaries of the distinct professional practices. Despite a past history of separating these practices, there is an emerging interest among some design educators in generating new academic programs that cut across departments of engineering, industrial design, and marketing, for example, or in setting up other projects where students from different departments such as architecture and design can work together (Margolin, 2002, p. 46).*

It is in face of these new realities that the appearance of new ways of thinking which consider looking at the practice of Design contemplating aspects of complexity and integration with multiple fields of knowledge can be verified. We highlight the expansion of a theoretical body dedicated to observing and understanding Design (Cardoso, 2008), as well as the incorporation of visuality to discourse, becoming a constituent resource of projectual theory (Bonsiepe, 2011). New terminologies then appear such as Design Thinking, proposed by authors like Brown (2009), Martin (2009) and Thomas Lockwood (2010); *Metaprojeto*, proposed by De Moraes (2010); Design Management and Strategic Design, contemplated in texts of Mozota (2010); The Social Design as points Margolin (2002); Design for Sustainability of Manzini and Vezzoli (2011); among many other names who seek to approach contemporary aspects in regards to the practice of design.

### Design approaches: an essay

*By principle: theory and practice are not antitheses. We could argue with an old idealistic thinker called Plato who said, “If I have the option between two things, I do as children do, I grasp both”. It is worth saying theory and practice together (Bloch in Bonsiepe, 2012, p. 13, our translation).*

Bonsiepe (2012), while discussing Design in current context argues that, in face of the complexity the global human society has reached, disciplines such as Design are necessary. They can contribute to guide, delimitate the fields of performance and contribute to a rational exercise of the profession. The author stresses that Design has been

going through a process of positioning and reorientation, “especially in colleges, one can observe initiatives aimed at defining and situating Design in the education and society scenarios” (Bonsiepe, 2012, p. 193, our translation), understanding Design as a socially relevant guiding discipline.

Considering the inflationary use of the term “design”, Bonsiepe (2012) defends the necessity of clarifying some important concepts, including the definition of Design’s relation with art and, above all, the discussion about the profession’s theoretical deficiency, which expresses itself in the fatal non-theorization of the economic, social and political context (Bonsiepe, 2012, p. 193).

In regards to concepts, the author defines Design as a “wild card” term of our days, used in the most diverse situations, with a range of meanings that, apparently, can be extended limitlessly. Curiously, this also applies, at least in part, to the context of professional assignment (Schneider, 2010, p. 195).

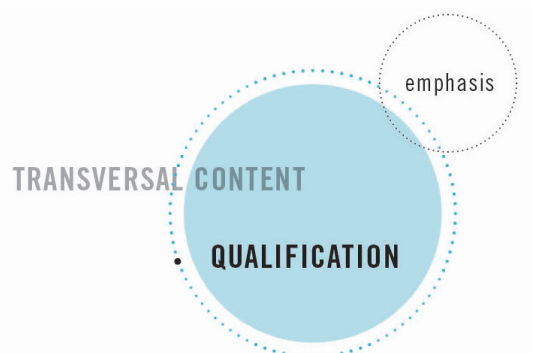
*[...] Design’s application scope is constantly expanding. If Design existed before only for concrete object forms, today it applies to computer programs, processes, ways of organization and services, people’s or companies’ forms of presentation (corporate design) (Schneider, 2010, p. 196-197, our translation).*

However, from these concepts defined by Bonsiepe (2012), this study elaborates a structural essay with the first intention of explaining the relations among Design concepts herein defined as approaches. It is pertinent to highlight that such structuring does not have the pretension to deplete the approaches and their relations. On the contrary, having in mind the fluidity of the present days, one understands the essay makes a cut of the multiplicity of approaches and their relations.

### Approaches: divisions and definitions

In an attempt to support the understanding of Design’s multiple approaches, its relations and, mainly, the “fluidity” of their appearance and adaptation, three divisions have been elaborated in this study (Figure 1), being:

- (i) Qualification.
- (ii) Emphasis.
- (iii) Transversal content.



**Figure 1.** Qualifications, emphases and transversal contents.  
Source: Elaborated by the authors, based on carried through research.

Qualifications are defined here as the body of macro approaches adopted by today's Design colleges, typical of the fragmentation of education. As an example, we four of the most common approaches offered by the Design courses: Graphic, Product, Environments and Fashion.

Bonsiepe (2012) defines three of the four Qualifications, being:

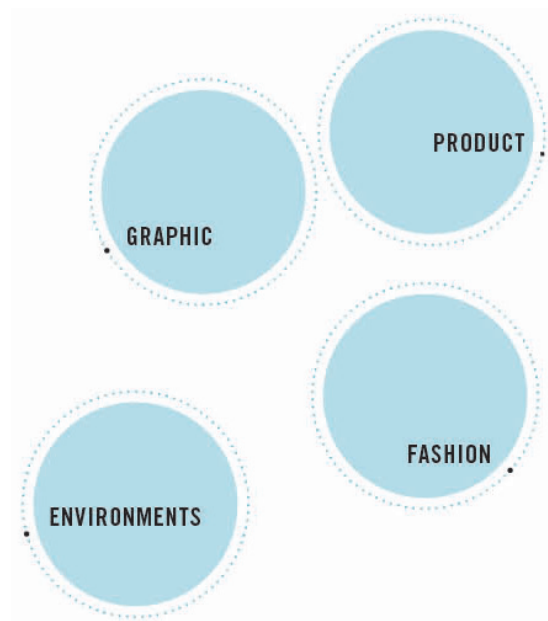
[...] *Graphic Design: Graphic Design traditionally comprises project and execution of bi-dimensional graphic surfaces (poster, book, advertisement, etc.).*

[...] *Product Design: Industrial Design, also known as product design, is a company's complex, hierarchically structuralized process, starting from a plan, moving on to the project, reaching the phase where they are ready to be produced in series. It not only encloses the beautiful world of consumption goods, but also medical technique instruments, as well as deadly weapons (rifles, tanks of war, missiles, etc.).*

[...] *Interior Design (environments): The concept assigns the configuration of internal spaces through the German concept of architecture of interiors (Bonsiepe, 2012, p. 203-204, our translation).*

Gomes Filho (2006, p. 21) defines Fashion Design as the conception of represented products, in general, pieces, trims, accessories and clothes (conventional or special), keeping the interfaces with Graphic Design and, especially, with Product Design, in regards to accessories in general.

Emphases are defined as disciplines that expand and update Qualifications (Figure 2). They are themes that flow around the qualifications in order to improve them or make them specific, in addition to assisting them regarding the market's requirements for specialization (Couto,

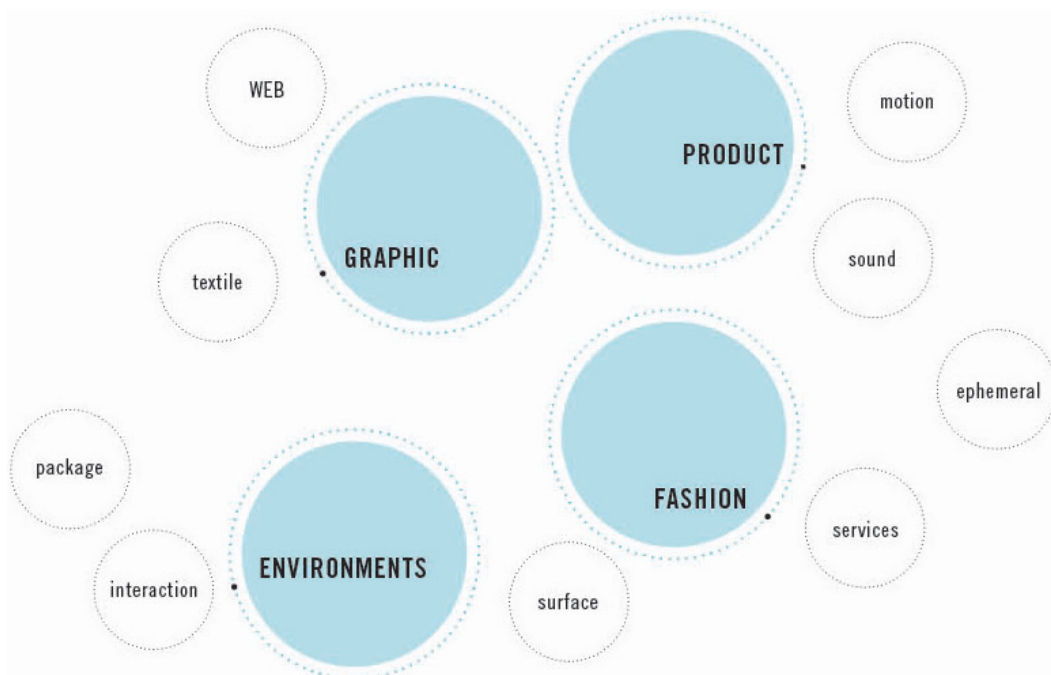


**Figure 2.** Qualifications.

Source: Elaborated by the authors, based on carried through research.

2008). They also help in the balance of the differences between the quick change in society and the theoretical constitution of Design. One understands that such Emphases are directly connected to the object of the Design project.

Transversal Contents are themes that cross through Qualifications and Emphases having contemporaneity as reference (Figure 3). When proposing a point of view on Design as process, Lockwood cites transversal aspects of Design considered by Buchanan:



**Figure 3.** Qualifications and emphases.

Source: Elaborated by the authors, based on carried through research.





**Figure 4.** Qualifications, emphases and transversal contents.  
Source: Elaborated by the authors, based on carried through research.

1. *Communication – the creation of signs and symbols to be used in mass communications.*
2. *Construction – the creation of objects via traditional industrial design.*
3. *Interaction – the actions and behaviors of people, as affected by design.*
4. *Organization – design considerations in the context of organizations, environments, systems, and cultures (Buchanan, 1995 in Lockwood, 2010 p. 82).*

The observation indicates that Buchanan's analysis helps one think Design from a depth optics that operates in contexts:

*But the fourth order is the sweet spot – the point at which the organization can involve design more integrative and holistic, building design methods into some of the internal systems and processes, and moving design towards a core competency (Lockwood, 2010, p. 82).*

From this proposal, Transversal Contents can be observed as assisting Design in the understanding and in practice amid the aspects of complexity. They are constituted by an analytical look over the practice of Design as a "philosophical study of the Design method" (Love, 2000, p. 293, our translation). The proposal of this category glimpses at the contribution of different fields of knowledge that integrate themselves to Design in order to prepare it to operate and to theorize in face of social needs, observing Design more strongly from the process scope (why and how) than from the result bias (what) (Figure 4).

With a range of meanings that can apparently be extended in limitless ways, some colloquial Emphases are also created, much more for fad than for their projectual and theoretical coherence with Design. Examples such as flower design; eyebrow design; hair design, amongst others (Figure 5).

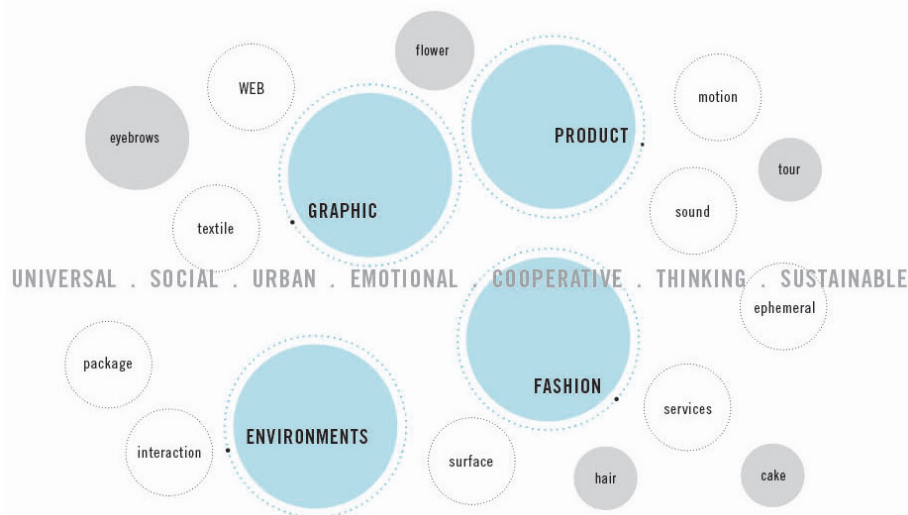
## Final considerations

In his preface to De Moraes' *Metaprojeto* book, Celaschi claims "[...] Design is, at the same time, a verb and a noun. The verb is the process and the noun is the result" (Celaschi, 2010, p. 15, our translation). The understanding of this dual quality is one of the main factors that guide this essay. Whereas Qualifications and Emphases address Design, in a more objective way, as a result (Graphic, Textile, Packing, etc.), Transversal Contents address process issues, by opening space for the analysis of method and of how the projectual area can integrate with other forms of knowledge, in addition to wider social matters.

The distinction between Qualifications and Emphases emerged from the propositions made by Couto (2008), regarding the academic rigidity and from its dialogue with the speed of the market and the society. While Qualifications consider a scope that is wider and guided by an education tradition that needs long processes for adjustment, Emphasis is a "product" of specific market demands. Although both categories deal with Design's "noun" aspect, the Emphases are more accurate and can be guided by the combination of expertise in different Qualifications. Packing Design can be mentioned as an example that observes structural issues, more strongly considered in product Design, as well as communicational issues, typical of Graphic Design.

As previously mentioned, this essay does not intend to deplete the subject, much less generate a rigid structure to be used as a base for the categorization of Design areas. It proposes a thinking model that stimulates the reflection on the various names Design acquires when in contact with the dynamic and fluid scenario of our days.

Observing the Design field, strongly guided by practice, it is possible to understand that certain contemporary approaches and proposals are seen by various designers with suspicion, as for example when new terms such as



**Figure 5.** Qualifications, emphases, transversal contents and others.  
Source: Elaborated by the authors, based on carried through research.

“Design Thinking” or “Universal Design” are proposed. However, beyond an entirely negative criticism, it is interesting to observe such approaches as subjects that promote discussion and reflection regarding Design and its role in society. Different from the fields of Qualifications and Emphases, these subjects do not need to be seen as an object of projectual processes, but rather in the increasing contributions for the discourse field envisioned by Bonsiepe (2011).

Considering also the existence of terms that cause great commotion among designers, like “Hair Design” or “Eyebrow Design”, observed in Figure 5 around the Emphases, it is interesting to think of why such denominations exist. We understand the foreign aspect of the word “design” in Brazil and the creation of a perception that is, at times, different from what the profession really means, on the part of the general public. One can go beyond Flaviano Celaschi’s thought (Celaschi *in* De Moraes, 2010, p. 15) for a situation in which the word “design” is also an adjective. These terms, most frequently of popular motivation, noticeably intent to add a certain quality by adding the word “design” in contexts that do not describe the act of projecting or the result of a project. It is plausible to think that such characteristics attributed by an audience that is lay to the word “design”, comes from social and cultural processes that permeated the construction of the profession and its dialogue with other fields of knowledge, mainly in Brazil (Couto, 2008; Niemeyer, 1998).

Therefore, it is by considering the existence of such anomalies that we can understand the relations of Design with culture, in order to locate the field in the desired way. The road to this goes through the construction of a concise speech that can base and justify the relevance of Design practice, to other fields of knowledge and to society in general. In the way we have already trodden for the construction of what Bonsiepe (2011) calls projectual speech, it is relevant to consider Design theory and practice and how they influence in its approaches and, consequently, in the proposed denominations, always in dialogue with society.

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