

Opening up new contexts will be crucial in design

Reflections on Design education on the Arena Design Fair
Interview, June 2009, Poznan, Poland

What do you need to have to become a designer? Is it about talent?

I like to oppose the idea that you need to have some inborn gift to make a chance of becoming a designer. To me it seems that as children we all have been designing our world. We made this effort to experiment and understand in order to relate to that world around us. Extending this idea you need to have curiosity, an open mind and the ability to play, to test things out, to be ready for the unexpected like a child.

Is there a universal designer training model?

If you generalize the observation one could say that all training in design is based on case studies, on trial and error, on imitating daily life practice in studio. That might be true, but for the sake of gradual education and didactics, curricula are built up differently. All staff one day has to ask themselves the question: 'Where to start?' and 'How to simplify or essentialize the daily commissions to a educative assignment?' And the answer to that dilemma includes the approach to the profession of the particular institute. One will be technical, another functional, artistic or social.

The next question that pops up is how do you expect the student to learn? Is it by thinking or acting, by reflecting or by doing. In his theory on learning David Kolb notices two interesting things about these options. First, everyone has one of the four styles as a preference in learning. Second, the subsequence of the four forms an optimal process. Action generates an experience that can be reflected upon and essentialized to an insight before it can be applied in a new experimental action. When theory is key, action is regarded as application. When reflection is focus, action is seen as study material. By choosing a crucial point schools place themselves in that particular part of the design process. No wonder art school students find their jobs in small-scale assignments where active experiment still can function or in the laboratory of bigger design offices where active creativity is needed in the orientation phase of the process. On the other side of the spectrum students from a technical school based on theory will find their way in large-scale projects that are executed as variations on building systems that proved themselves already or in the calculating phases of a project.

So, after this reflection I'd rather answer no, there is no universal designer training model and sure, it's good to differentiate. Presumably the question how to position the different options in a general model could be guided by the two parameters of professional approach and educational style.

Where to look for models for design or in search of first-class education.

There is no 'best' education; there are just different options. I am talking here about the strategic level of the profession. True, when you consider the tactic or operational level you might point out a rate in quality, but on the so-called highest level, there are just different approaches. And as long as the chosen perspectives are relevant they are equally needed.

A young technician or a born artist?

Interesting question because it assumes that artist city is inborn, like a given talent while technique is to be learned and sparks of from playing. Next the opposition of both assumes that a choice should be made e.g. 'who is in charge?'. When the artist is in the leading role the technician will be stuck in the task of engineering the impossible dreams of the artist. When the technician starts the design process, nothing but styling will be left for the artist. The question is how to avoid this chess-game on hierarchy?

Beyond the level of expertise based on skills, we should think of a strategical level where different interests are partaking in a creative process of developing policy. These interests are partially political but at least do all have their own perspective, their own way of looking at the case. These approaches can be economical, social or cultural but also technical or even artistic. The key point on the cooperation on the strategic level is to accept the different stands not as opposed expertises but as mutually enriching perspectives. In search for the top one might ask: who is best educated to fulfill the pivotal function on this strategic level, I think it will depend on the ability to quickly accept, question, understand and incorporate any upcoming new context, interest or approach. Training in this creative awareness is what we try to offer in our master studies in design at the MAHKU. And I am sure that this ability of opening up new contexts will be crucial for all levels of design; even operationally speaking contexts are becoming flexible and in the execution phase one has to be focused but open and aware as well.

Designers ready, steady, go! What's next for industrial design graduates?

What you can do as a graduate lies between the borders of what

you are educated for. A technician will find its place in the technical zone of the profession. But within that zone there are many options again. And it is here that the personal touch counts. From time to time one of the zones is shifting. During the implementation of computer aided design the technical functions had to adapt most. When asking about the topical shifts you can think of the creative challenges that the financial crisis is putting forward. No longer there is appetite for conceptual statement design. New creativity needs to be constituted in the direction of integrated down to earth scenarios.

The situation for designers is different in Poland than in your country. What to do when design is not yet accepted by the industry?

Everywhere designers meet another challenge. In Holland design is so hot that any manufacturer thinks styling and branding will do miracles to their product. In reality the best days of this strategy have already passed. Now for Poland it is important to engage in industry in a way significant towards their circumstances. The urge to become a member of the world of famous brands may be tempting but false. When we look at the specific qualities of the Polish situation you find a good production well balanced in price and quality. Ikea is making good use of that capacity in Poland, yet this can turn out to become over-exploited. Instead it would be wise to take the opportunity and focus on custom-made products. A manufacturer of hotel furniture I met did good business in Western Europe because of the good affordable quality and the willingness to adapt the product to the needs of the architect. Operating like this you will not be famous for a characteristic collection of singular products but be well known on a tactical scale for your perfect cooperation. Designers then will have the function to help industry in setting up the facilities and root-products for this tailor made industry. And most probably that strategy is exactly what we need in a period where the superficiality of speculation has lead us in crisis. Bottom-up production, small-scale perfection in cooperation with the client could possibly be a way out. Poland has a couple of faculties to do so when designers are able to show the way.