Bringing a Design to the Table

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vernacular
n.**1** the language or dialect spoken by the ordinary people of a country or region.
>*informal* the specialized terminology of a group or activity.
2 vernacular architecture.
adj. **1** spoken as or using one's mother tongue rather than a second language.
2 (of architecture) concerned with domestic and functional rather than public
buildings. (Concise Oxford English Dictionary) (graphic thing)

This writing reflects upon an artist and designer's shared experience of
making a film about a design and planning team's collaborative process.
The film, entitled '(Re)searching a Welsh Design Vernacular' documents a
meeting that took place on Friday 3rd October 2008 at Grwp Gwalia, a
social housing organisation based in Swansea, Wales. The film was
exhibited as part of 'Reflecting Wales: an architectural exhibition of
innovative, speculative and built work in Wales' at the Senedd in October
2008.

Artist and designer collaborations are notoriously awkward. The
stereotypically left-brain, right-brain encounter can lead to creative
synergy and the emergence of new meanings, or painful antagonism. The
architect Charles Jencks observes how we are living in a time when
'Architects become sculptors, engineers become designers, artists turn into
architects, and all these job descriptions become fuzzy'. (Jencks, in
Balmond, 2002, p5) The artist and the designer that co-authored this
article took part in a research project at Goldsmiths, University of London
(2007) that explored the synergies that occur between designers and
other professionals working together in a 'fuzzy' interdisciplinary context.
The project determined that the 'creative abrasion' that exists within a
design team is an inherent part of the team's collaborative experience and
creative output.

The purpose for making this film was to explore the experience of
interdisciplinary collaboration, focusing on the use of dialogue within a
group. This is the 'spoken design' that only exists as a whole when brought
to the table before it becomes realised as a physical object. In the book
'The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding' by

Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, which explores the nature of communication between animals, it states that

'We work out our lives in a mutual linguistic coupling, not because language permits us to reveal ourselves but because we are constituted in language in a continuous becoming that we bring forth with others.' (Maturana and Varela, 1987)

The film offers the viewer a glimpse of the forming-process of a design vernacular as it becomes established within a design team. The video camera was positioned at one end of a conference table to capture a fixed shot for the entirety of the meeting, thus, inviting the viewer to sit in on the discussion. As the meeting progresses, key words and sentences that are used by the participants are highlighted in yellow text on the screen. On film, the sentences sit across the centre of the table. In Christopher Alexander's book 'The Timeless Way of Building' he proposes the notion of creating a 'common language' from the 'separate languages of building tasks' to evolve a more joined-up way of envisioning scalable design projects (Alexander, 1979). These sentences provide a short hand narrative for the meeting but also represent the interweaving of a common language.

There are fourteen different professionals in the meeting who represent a team of people working together on the planning and design of a nursing home. The meeting follows a tight agenda that is led by a chairperson. It is the early stages of the design's development and there are a plethora of subjects being communicated and ticked off as the conversation unfolds. During the meeting, the colleagues individually exchange information, listening patiently to each other. Some participants take a more proactive role in facilitating this exchange, which allows for flexibility and adaptability within the conversations. The balance between coherency and discord that is achieved through their communication skills allow the group to become united, by being together and seeing together the design is allowed to unfold.

When adhering to a controlled agenda, individual summaries are acted out in a reductive space and this can become a problem. In order to stick to the itinerary, there are moments when the flow becomes too constrained and inputs and important messages are deemed ill timed or misplaced. A professional prickliness creeps in to the discursive space. Members of the team display an impatience or an over zealousness to get on with the job and complain that the uncreative agenda has designed out possibilities. The design philosopher and historian Professor Clive Dilnot notes how

'Design is a process of negotiating incommensurability, literally so in the sense of establishing dialogue with those involved in the situation, and configuratively so in the sense that what, in the end, design creates is a configuration in which incommensurables are reconciled not passively or definitively but as a proposition (*this* resolution, in *this* way, responding to *these* circumstances).' (Dilnot, 2005, p31)

The 'negotiation of incommensurables', which are aspects of the design that are measurable by different standards, is worked-through in the planning and design meeting. Architectural, technological, social and environmental details are discussed. Different professionals are accountable for different parts of the process but everybody is present in this relaying of information about telecommunications, traffic management, sedum roofing, timber frames and so on. This is a process of give and take that goes on until the project's completion.

The experience of working as an artist and designer collaboration and the reflections drawn from making the film indicate that in order for a collaborative project to be successful the group members need to contribute a willingness to understand the different parts of the process. An awkward tension can build up within the group's dynamics when trying to achieve a shared understanding that can open up a space where creativity can emerge and override the constraints of an agenda.

Bibliography
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