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Working Paper
Design Practice as a Strategic Tool

Summary

The role of design is changing – and it is changing fast. The designer as a “lone ranger” is no longer the only way of practicing (Heskett, 2004). In reality, many designers function in multidisciplinary teams, tackling increasingly complex projects. Also, designers do not just fix problems - they generate new opportunities and need to master unframed problem solving (NextD, 2004). Strangely, with a few exceptions, design communities have been blind to this development. This demands a new focus on the processes and methods of designers.

The research project holds that there is a tacit knowledge in leading contemporary design consultancies about design methods and design processes. If designers understand the processes by which they operate and become conscious of their own methodologies, a. the creative efficiency and quality and the likelihood of a successful practice can be markedly increased and b. the role of the designer will be empowered as a professional whose knowledge is applicable to a broader range of fields.

The intent of this Industrial Ph.D. research project is to uncover how leading, contemporary design agencies and consultancies work, to unravel the design processes and methods. What is it that they do – and why does it work? Which parts of their processes and methods are conscious and which parts are unconscious? And, importantly, do they in fact do what they say they do?

The **objectives** are threefold: 1. To raise awareness of how design methods and processes have radically changed within the last years. 2. To support e-Types, the collaborating design consultancy, in surfacing and sharing their unconscious knowledge and know-how and thus move the design process from a hidden, magical process to a visual, transparent and shared process. 3. To develop new strategic methods and tools for optimizing the design process in teams and organizations.

We believe the results will be of major importance, not only to e-Types, but to design research, design education, the design profession – and to many companies in need of producing new strategic design solutions, to keep up with and to create new markets.

The **theoretical foundation** is cross-paradigmatic, approaching the research questions from several perspectives. Studies include publications on Design Theory and Practice particularly design process and methodology, Organizational Theory, Creativity Theory and Complexity Theory. To mention a couple of important influences, my interest has been caught by Professor Mihaly Chikszentmihalyi, who describes creativity as *contextual* and as a process, which requires the ability to contain *complexity and ambiguity* (Chikszentmihalyi, 1996) and is enhanced by involving several *different personalities and competencies* (Darsø 2001, Leonard & Swap 1999).

Research Methods

11.2003-06.2004. The **first phase** of the research project consists of an explorative analysis with an extensive data production at e-Types, the hosting design consultancy. Simultaneously, studies of literature are in progress. The objective is to gain an insight into a new area of research and to develop new research questions and focuses.

07.2004-02.2005. The **second phase** is to visit other leading contemporary design consultancies and institutions in Europe and the US. Through observations and interviews the intent is to map general traits and differences in the methods and processes – and to determine whether the consultancies actually do what they say they do. Visits will take part in the summer and early fall of 2004. The result will provide an overview of design methods and processes – and overall directions or “schools” will be identified.

03.2005-08.2005. **Third phase:** The findings will be made available to the consultancies and institutions participating in the project and will feedback into the work practice at e-Types. Ideas and suggestions for new methods and processes will arise through an action research process, possibly “future workshops”. On this basis, experiments will be instigated in the winter of 2005. The aim is to carry out the experiments in real-life projects at e-Types and possibly at other design consultancies and institutions as well.

09.2005-02.2006. **Fourth phase:** Evaluation will precede a fine-tuning of the new strategic methods and tools.

03.2006-09.2006. The elaboration of a research report will take place in the spring-fall 2006 followed by a publication in winter 2007.

Phase 1

The formal start of the project was November 2003 and phase 1 is still in progress. Through individual and focus group interviews, observations and the analysis of documents, insights have been gained into existing design processes and methods at e-Types, the types of projects, the composition of the work force (the actors), and the workflow.

Simultaneously, studies of literature are in progress. Design practice in relation to business is a field still in its infancy and descriptions of the methods and processes of designers and design consultancies are limited - which supports the relevance of this project! There is a huge number of publications focusing on products - but the process has so far caught less attention, particularly as an object of research. According to Professor John Heskett *"Design practice is not well-served. Quite a few books can be described as design hagiology, essential uncritical forms of promotion for designers and design groups [...]"* (Heskett, 2002).

There are, however, a couple of exceptions, for instance the book "Life Style" by Bruce Mau Design, (Mau, 2000) and "The Art of Innovation - Lessons in Creativity from IDEO, America's leading design Firm" by Tom Kelley (Kelley, 2001). Both attempt to document the creative process and studio practice by the authoring design firms, the first in the form of a *"vast array of critical statements and project descriptions"* (Mau, 2000), the latter describing IDEO's principles and ideas for how to organize the work processes.

Other sources of information are articles and websites by the design consultancies themselves, design organizations and institutions. Design consultancies generally include descriptions of their design philosophy and approach, case stories and examples of their work. Some draw images of their design process and partly describe their methods and tools. At this point it is difficult to say, what is promotion material, what they think they do - and what are the actual processes and methods. Visits to the consultancies at a later stage of the project will help clarify this. The consultancies included in the analysis at this point are: Bruce Mau Design, Dublin, Frank O. Gehry, IDEO, Meta Design, Play, Pentagram, Saffron, Smart Design NYC, St. Lukes, Tomato, Wally Olins, and Wolff Olins.

Findings

The data production at e-Types and the published material by the design consultancies themselves, reveal both general traits and differences in design practice. The in-congruencies have helped encircle three new focuses of particular interest to disclosing contemporary design processes and methods:

1. Multidisciplinary approach, 2. Prototyping and 3. Relations to clients

The chosen design consultancies have different main focuses within the areas of design: branding, strategy, graphics, products, buildings and culture. They do however share common traits: they are leading, successful businesses, they are independent consultancies working internationally, they all have creative process as one of their core competencies and to use John Heskett's definition, they not only add value (by modifying products and systems in existing markets) they create value (by opening new markets and thus giving people what they never knew they wanted) (Heskett 2004).

1. Multidisciplinary approach. e-Types is a strategic brand and design consultancy with a workforce of 15 people divided between brand strategist, graphic designers, art directors, researchers and administration. At the start of this research project, e-Types documented the design process as consisting of six phases: 1. Expectations. 2. Explore. 3. Extract. 4. Express. 5. Elaborate. 6. Evaluate. Individual and focus group interviews revealed that more often than not, the strategist would be working on their parts of the process (1, 2, 3 and 6) and the designers and art directors on theirs (4 & 5). The fact, that the process was split in two halves was seen as a problem by both the strategists and the designers. They found that the most successful projects were characterized by close integration of competencies, for instance in joint brainstorming, and generally wished to be more involved in the work process of the other part.

The tendency towards separated work processes at e-Types differ from descriptions by other leading design consultancies, which all claim to use multidisciplinary team approaches to enable new, creative solutions. This is in line with much innovation research, showing that teams consisting of different personalities and competencies have a greater likelihood of a creative break-through than more homogeneous teams (Belbin, Leonard & Swap, Darsø). Also, design problems are becoming increasingly complex, which demands the participation and collaboration of many competencies and skills (Heskett 2004, NextD 2004). The design consultancies do, however, generally not describe how the multidisciplinary teams work, or how the interaction of different professions and skills take place during the entire design process. According to NextD, this is *"one of the least studied and understood complexities of the design business [...]"* (NextD 2004). Who is involved when? How is work carried out and handed over in a multi-skill approach? Do the team members work together at all times or is there a need to alternate between multi-disciplinary teamwork and work alone or with "your own kind"?

2. Prototyping. There is a long tradition for prototyping, simulation and model making in design practice. In an interview for the Spanish magazine El Croquis in the Fall 2003, Frank Gehry describes how model making enables him to have a dialogue with himself, with his employees and with the client. Other examples are IDEO, which has made an art form of "fast and dirty" prototyping and Smart Design in NYC, where prototyping is key to the joint development process. According to Michael Schrage, a research associate at MIT Media Lab, contrary to the popular assumption that innovative teams generate innovative prototypes, in fact innovative prototypes generates innovative teams in the sense that *"the value of prototypes resides less in the models themselves than in the interactions - the conversations, arguments, consultations, collaborations - they invite"* (Schrage 2000).

At e-Types, however, there is a tendency for the design work to stay in the computer at certain stages of the design process and is sometimes conceived as "hidden", particularly to the strategists. This does not mean that prototyping is not a tool at e-Types, it is. Prototypes are tools for rich dialogue to the designers. Important questions to clarify in relation to design process and methods are whether the prototyping has to be transparent to all actors in a design consultancy or if it might be an advantage to "protect" the design from interference in certain phases of the design process? Who in a design consultancy makes the prototypes and how are they made available to discussion and dialogue, both internally in relation to teamwork and externally in relation to clients?

3. Relations to clients. Business is the arena in which design practice (Heskett 2004) and all design consultancies have relationships with clients. Different consultancies, however, appear to have different ways of handling the relationship during a design process. St. Lukes in London describe how the client is invited to participate in the creative process: *"We see no reason to hide what's going on from clients, and your creativity and knowledge is at the nest of the process"*. At Frank O. Gehry's studio the client is invited to follow the process at a series of presentations, from the first "Shrek" models to the final presentation models. By doing this, the architect ensures that the client gets an understanding of the choices made in the process and does not get overwhelmed or reject the project at the final presentation. The client, however, is not involved in the creative process. At e-Types, the client is involved in the strategic phases, but rarely when design sets in. The strategists are interested in finding new ways of involving the client, whereas the designers prefer to work on their own when designing. As stated by one of the designers: *"We have got the expertise. If we involve the client, it becomes state of the art and not cutting edge. We want to give them the "Full Monty" at the final presentation"*.

There seems to be major differences in the approaches to working with and communicating with clients. On one hand is what we could call the "client-involved design", inviting the client to participate in the creative process. On the other hand is the "designer as the expert", tailoring what the client needs. This raises new questions. How do different fields of design interact with clients during the design process? How do different consultancies work with clients? And importantly, what are the benefits of a high client-involvement versus a low client-involvement?

Perspectives

Looking at the findings, there seems to be both general trends as well as different approaches in different design consultancies. If the trend in design practice moves in the direction of, among other things, multidisciplinary teamwork, prototyping as a vehicle for dialogue and a high client-involvement, e-Types appears in some aspects to be at the other end of the spectrum. But they are highly successful. This raises new questions and makes the answers less obvious. For instance, are we certain that multi-disciplinary teamwork is always the best mode of operation – or does the designer as the lone ranger have his place in a contemporary design consultancy too?

Next step is to further investigate the approaches to multidisciplinary approach, prototyping and relations with the client. Process diaries at e-Types and close observations during design process will provide a clear picture of the methods applied at different phases of the design process and will help clarify if the experiences of the design process, as it has been related through interviews is what really takes place. In the late summer/early fall, a study trip to leading contemporary design consultancies and institutions in Europe and the US will take place. Closely observing design consultancies at work will provide an insight into the skills and competencies in contemporary design practice as well as supply a snapshot of the changes taking place in design practice today, as pointed out by John Heskett (Heskett 2004).

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