

Design Quest / Design Consciousness: real-time enquiry

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Abstract:

This paper aims to unfold the theory and practice of design consciousness, as both an individual 'state' and by group process. The description of DesignQuest is the development of a facilitation method whereby groups of designers can come together to refresh their perspectives on design and deepen their creative consciousness. The DesignQuest process has been continuously developed over a seven year period – firstly by the Design Transformation Group (DTG), and latterly by the nowherefoundation.

Fundamentally, this paper aims to illuminate the ways in which principles of contemporary management practice (namely LGI's and Open Space Technology) and esoteric and ancient wisdom practices (vision quest, medicine walks, wisdom councils), can be conflated with more recognisable practices of design education and practice (workshops, storytelling, brainstorming) in order to 'hold' open, rich and creatively responsible arenas for designerly self-actualisation.

Introduction to DesignQuest

DesignQuest (DQ) is both a process and event platform where participants contribute to develop the way they think, learn and create. This process facilitates a stimulating atmosphere which is flexible, inspiring and intense. The play of emotions within each immersed participant, and the wider DQ community is essential in promoting creative engagement that is faster, deeper, and richer.

Emotionally, mentally and physically challenging, DesignQuest and other radical processes are not for everybody. DQ is not about nudging forward our present understanding. DQ is about discontinuous creative leaps into the unknown and unknowing. This requires curious, self-aware and passionate individuals who can engage with, and contribute openly toward an enriched and vital group alchemy.

The essential aim is to promote the coming together of design practitioners so as to stimulate whole person engagement, through critical dialogue and vibrant playfulness. This paper aims to share the value and understanding behind the emotional 'rollercoaster' that the DesignQuest process offers, and crucially, the insights into creative consciousness that have resulted from it.

The major DesignQuests (as opposed to bespoke educational or professional workshops) were the following:

DesignQuest – ‘Closing the Gap Between Subject and Object’. 1996, 20-27 July. Held at Ravensbourne College, England.

DQ2 – ‘Changing Energy into Form’. 1998, 13 – 17 Sept. Held at Goldenhill Fort, Isle-of-Wight, England.

DQ:Magic. 2001, 31 March – 4 April. Held at Ascog, Isle-of-Bute, Scotland.

A Quest for Design Consciousness

Design is becoming increasingly technical, in both educational and professional life. That is to say it is developing into an increasingly ‘instrumental’ discipline – where more and more the outputs of design are detached from the outcomes of design. The world requires designers who not only have a conscience, but who are consciously creative and committed to engaging their consciousness with their chosen task.

Creative consciousness encompasses the ‘here-ness’, ‘close-ness’ and ‘now-ness’ of both the act of designing and it’s outcomes. The DesignQuest facilitation method has come about in order to unfold, enquire into and deepen the reflective and embodied practice of ‘being’, ‘becoming’, and contributing through design.

Designers are in a paradoxical position. Design is the conduit by which Capital finds form in the marketplace, therefore creating difference and novelty for the lowest investment against the greatest return. Design is also the arbiter of material values, and the curator of the physical environment to all human communication and creativity.

Design is thereby positioned at a certain nexus or fork, depending on your perspective, at which the forces of commerce and community, capital and conscience are in tension. It is the faculty of consciousness that enables design to acknowledge such interplay. By occupying this nexus, this place of arbitration and synthesis between form and function, harm and pleasure, design may stand fully in it’s magic.

An interesting etymological aside arises when the design nexus is inspected more closely. The Latin for a junction where three ways meet is trivium. Perhaps the site for the consideration of *trivia*, and all that is the opposite of the generic. Perhaps it is through dwelling in such places that designers might come to unfold the spiritual aspect of otherwise trivial detail? What is certain is that by dwelling at the meeting point of *‘Self-Others-Things’* for long enough, we begin to embody the extended interrelationship between *designer*, *designed*, and *deployer* of meaningful material. Indeed, by consciously surfacing and then interiorising your own, developing reasons for being a designer, you move closer to becoming your output and influence – taking real-time responsibility for the work you, and subsequent others, engage in.

DQ Group Process

Open-Space Technology is a facilitation technique that enables the dialogical space of a group. OST is most effective when a dynamic and diverse group of people are compelled to address complex issues. It establishes a set of basic tenets which puts the responsibility for learning and creating onto the individual, and while unremarkable as statements, they are extremely empowering by having had them aired.

Alongside all this freedom and responsibility, and just as important, is the process by which the wider DesignQuest group or community is convened every morning and evening. This allows everybody to catch a glimpse of what else has been going on during the last twelve hours, and enables the sessions and events timetabled for the next

twelve to be briefly introduced. These 'meetings' also allow the facilitators to intervene very lightly at the group level – perhaps by opening their own fears and hopes up – or offering the floor to the participants so as to share their personal experiences to date.

The DQ version of 'Open Space' is somewhat different to that described by management 'gurus'. The influences for its customisation and development come from two main sources : firstly because the participants are professional 'creatives', and secondly because the usual Open Space duration is between two and a half to four days – DQ is a minimum of five and a half. This extended event time allows for deeper 'brewing' and 'stewing' of all the various stages in the creative process, especially those of saturation and incubation or gestation.

Communities of Practice are fast becoming the accepted template for individuals to form cultural and dialogical spaces that foster creative thinking and innovation. In a recent article by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, seven principles for the cultivation of CoP's were established.

- 1/ Design for evolution
- 2/ Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives
- 3/ Invite different levels of participation
- 4/ Develop both public and private community spaces
- 5/ Focus on Value
- 6/ Combine familiarity and excitement
- 7/ Create a rhythm for the community

These points for cultivating communities of practice are couched in the language of inclusive management, of enabling and empowering those who may have some distance to cover before embracing the space that invites creative dialogue and an open-ness toward tension, cathexis and consciousness. It is helpful here to address the above points as comparative touchstone by which to describe further the nature of DTG events.

1/ The DQ process is perpetually evolving as it accommodates participants who have greater experience of previous Quests and/or other co-creative projects. The facilitators are changing too, both in wisdom, experience, and in person, adding more varied insight to the guidance of events. We are finding ways of bringing communities 'to the boil' deeper and quicker, and the participants themselves seem more able to cope.

2/ A characteristic of the community profile at any DQ is that there are participants present who not designers. Indeed, between ten and twenty five percent of the community will be artists, journalists, scientists, witches, film-makers or others who can both play the role of the Joker or Other – as well as participate equally in the creative play and experimentation of the event.

3/ The Open Space process specific to DesignQuest, and the critical mass of participants (at least eighteen) allows individuals to choose when and where to engage. They are all responsible for their learning and contribution, therefore looking after yourself and participating only when appropriate is of the utmost importance. When you do participate, you participate fully – you are here and now.

4/ DQ events are largely private spaces so that the participants can do the things that they need to do without fear of critical judgement or disturbing societal 'norms'. To get outside your own comfort zone you may have to do things that are somewhat unusual (eg: tying balloons to your hair or painting your face and dancing round a tree (see fig. 1)). It is for this reason that DQs usually take place in a remote location. However, at certain points in every DQ parts of the group will expose themselves to the local village – testing out how far away from everyday reality they have come – and also to test their own resolve at being creative catalysts in the future. Previously, such instances could be described as 'chaotic marching bands looking for chocolate', or a 'kid's bicycle ride' (see fig.2).



fig.1 'tree-ring', DQ:Magic, 2001



fig.2 'kid's cycle tour', DQ:Magic, 2001

A further extension of the public and private space principle is that each DQ aims to present its findings to the public via publication, whilst the spirit of the development of process is regularly transferred to the educational realm through student workshops.

5/ To 'focus on value' if your organisation is not-profit making (and non-product making) requires an ownership and relationship with value that is often overlooked. Value here is to be found 'between', in relationship rather than in exchange. Participants as catalysts seek to share what they know and stimulate or challenge others to uncover further value in themselves and through what they offer.

6/ A DQ combines familiarity and excitement through the central challenge of designing out of context. This is a familiarity-strangeness polarity. It is designing without designing. Objects may be produced, manifestos scrawled on walls, yet the *raison d'être* for this activity is consciously apprehended as being non-normative. 'What do you need to do, or design, when only you asks the question, and nobody is waiting for your offering?'

7/ Creating a rhythm for the community is the hardest job of the facilitator. Both in situ, during the events proper, and during the long stretches between Quests, being aware of the rhythm of change and what it is ready for is a subtle task. Like an unstructured educational program, the teacher is no longer a 'giver' of knowledge, merely a 'guide'. Yet the guide here is dealing with up to fifty adults, cooped up in a distant fortress, climbing the walls. Whilst in peacetime there may be over a hundred who have some affiliation. The trick outside of the event seems to do as little as possible. The trick inside the event is much the same. Very tricky to leave well alone when it looks like so much fun.

‘Self’ – the creative consciousness of the individual organism.

The ‘organism’ we speak of here may be an individual designer (as is the case of DQ participants), but it can also be the organisational organism that is composed of many individuals and is yet an individual amongst other brands and organisations. All such organisms, human or otherwise, have a sense of self or identity. It is the centre from which value and meaning are created.

There seem to be three concrete qualities of conscious experience:

Presence, or *now-ness*

Perspectivalness, or *here-ness*

Transparency, or *closeness*

Presence, the irreducible moment of being now, refers to the temporality of consciousness – the *now-ness* of subjective experience. If focussed upon, this ‘experiential presence’ reveals to us our method of engagement with the world; this *is* reflective practice.

Perspectivalness is the spatial nature of consciousness, or what it is like to be me. I am the experiencer of my thoughts and feelings, a vantage point nobody else can directly share. Consciousness is somehow centred in me.

The last quality refers to the fact that subjective experience is of course natural to all of us. I am a sensing, animate person. It is this intimacy with the lived experience which makes consciousness so infinitely close to us (as we are the experience itself), and yet so distant when it comes to observing the the experiencing ‘I’ at work. Subjective experience is in essence transparent, as we have been conditioned to look through it rather than at it.

What is important from this three-fold of consciousness is that by acknowledging their existence in the design of co-creative or collaborative space we can begin to approach an unfolding of our creative or design consciousness. Through a process of engaging with the dimensions, practices and knowledge attached to these three qualities, participants of DesignQuests step into a dialogue with the three aspects of design consciousness; Self-Others-Things. This is as it were, an active meditation, whereby the designerly consciousness can only be apprehended through the stillness achieved whilst designing. This unfolding must be authentic to the context of it’s emergence.

Certain exercises help catapult participants into the initial enquiry into individual creative consciousness, these include medicine walks or vision quests. Both are derived from Native American Earth Wisdom, though they doubtless have precedents in other pre- or non-christian cultures. Medicine walks typically take 4-12 hours and are conducted holding a question and in silence. Vision Quests take a minimum of 24 hours and involve retreating into a secluded part of the natural environment so as to come into contact with the self and perhaps gain insight into creative purpose (see Linn for further information).

‘Others’ - The Creative Cult of Community

New Design in a recent article profiling the group described the activities and participants a ‘Design cult’. However the reflexive and reflective participants of DesignQuest and members of the DTG are already aware of the double or shadow that creative dialogue stimulates. If the product changes then the people change. It is better that you enter into a transformational space with the understanding that by changing the material you will change the mind, and vice versa. DesignQuests are therefore as much ‘cult’ as they are ‘community’.

In Rushkoff’s book on cults and pyramidial marketing he lays out a twenty stage journey that initiates travel as they attempt to reach the zenith of their chosen sect. From ‘The Goal’, through ‘Sacred Doctrine’ and ‘Extraordinary Measures’, all the way to experiencing ‘The Cult Leader as Perfection’ ... the DesignQuest

experience is the antithesis of the cult whilst asking more of you and being a more radical, although less alienating journey. The DTG is the cult of 'no-cult'.

"If you don't waste yourself on the emptiness of commodities you are obviously queer and must by definition be breaking some law. True pleasure in this society is more dangerous than bank robbery." (Bey, 1994: 23)

DQ participants often find themselves wishing for the comfort of the group once they return – they have changed much in relation to their everyday environment, their friends and colleagues, their lovers and family. Indeed, this may be the hardest part of the experience: once you have learnt that which you were ready to learn, once you have changed to the degree that you were already open to, you must find your voice once more in the place that has not changed.

To meet someone who has recently participated in a DQ, therefore, may seem like they have been 'outside' of conventional reality and may say or do things that break convention or even the law.

'Things' - Creative Output

The concepts presented aim to confront the issues impacting on the future of design. The emphasis is clearly NOT on designing end products, but on scenarios, concepts, ideas and visions that go beyond the established design activities undertaken in industry and vocational art and design education, constantly making and unmaking material culture in iterative reflective cycles.

The DTG propose the idea of producing design models that reject the aesthetic prototypes currently produced by product designers in industry and academia, instead suggesting that by producing 'genotypes', designers would be in a position to produce models that transcend their material and structural reality and function critically. With the emphasis being firmly placed on the models content or 'genes' rather than its appearance.

The results of this explorative process aims to act as a catalyst, enriching and extending design discourse, and in time practice. The objects, images and ideas presented fall into a number of different categories, constructed, shaped and invented using a variety of media and tools. They are the result of a creative fusion by juxtaposition, by accident and by intent.

The DTG suggest that the designer can no longer understand or predict singular futures, instead offering strategic collisions between imaginative intervention and political reality. The proposals ask questions rather than answering them, exploring design through conceptual models of education and intervention rather than traditional routes of design realisation, operating as an evolving 'genotype', critique, or material thesis of critical design. Producing physical manifestos that embrace the following:

Sleeping Policeman / Cathexic objects and interfaces / Technological talismans / Urban Myth catalysers / Possessed Products / Mythical Souvenirs / Taxidermy technology / De-Instruction manuals / Designer Rituals / Placebo Products / etc

The two objects pictured below illustrate the type of 'consciousness-raising' designs that are typical of DesignQuest exploration. Figure 3, the 'roving-dictaphone' is a sketch model of a voice-recording device that aims to facilitate listening as well as talking. It physically orients itself to the loudest source of audio input, thereby demonstrating to all those persons around it the audio-intentional landscape. If nobody is listening and everybody is talking the dictaphone will not know where to turn and begin to spasm in a schizophrenic fit of directionlessness.

The image of the constellation of stars that transforms into a radio (Figure 4) is an illustration of theory developed during DQ2. It is part of the theoretical 'product' and aims to enhance the process of designing products that in turn catalyse creativity in users. The consciousness of objects is here described in the terms of an extended catalytic relationship that is part of the systemic consciousness of the user or deployer.



fig.3 'roving dictaphone', DQ1, 1996

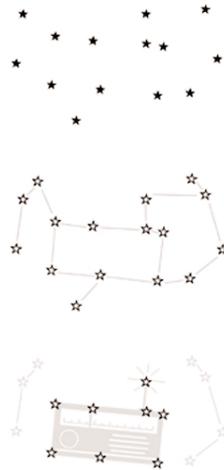


fig.4 'auto-catalytic web', DQ2, 1998

Other forms of output or interventions are hugely varied – typical rationale being 'whatever needed to happen'. These outputs cannot be contained or categorised, but might be characterised by the following: situational museums, physical installations, sound sculptures, audio pieces, body painting, ESP experiments, short films, debates and formal presentations, graffiti, breakdance workshops, object-dating services, long walks, group meditations, jumping up and down, etc.

The participants of DQ aim to create artefacts as fictional conclusions to the design narrative, entering the realm of mass consumption through publication and exhibition rather than prototyping and mass-production. Having no other object in mind than eating away at the immediate regulated boundaries of normative design, and turning these boundaries into the condition of the next, overdue critical, aesthetic and cultural development of designing multiple and mindful futures.

Authorial Reflections

'I feel myself that the writer's role, his authority and licence to act, have changed radically... He offers the reader the contents of his own head, he offers a set of options and imaginative alternatives. His role is that of a scientist, whether on safari or in his laboratory, faced with a completely unknown terrain or subject. All he can do is to devise various hypotheses and test them against the facts.'

Ballard, J.G., *Crash*, Noonday Press, 1996 p.9

As in Ballard's writer, the designer can no longer understand or predict the future, instead offering a strategic meeting of internal imagination and turbulent, plural reality. Engaging with DQ process, participatory experience asks questions rather than answering them, exploring design and emotion through conceptual models and experiential prototypes, rather than traditional routes of design realisation.

The DesignQuest process encourages the emergence of designerly models of being and becoming that reject the 'cool' aesthetic embodied by designers in industry and academia. The applicability of 'Quest' principles across

private and public sector domains suggest that by sculpting group process that promotes integrity and intensity, designers are in a position to produce artefacts that transcend their material and functional reality, critically engaging with the shadow-self of design.

When the product changes, the system is effected. When the system is changing and the product is renewed, the designer is also undergoing change. All consciousnesses are interconnected in their transformation. Change is the only constant.

Curiosity may arise regarding the fates of those transformed by a DesignQuest experience – do they succeed and prosper? The answer lies in the quotation attributed to Lao Tse:

Before enlightenment, chop wood and carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood and carry water

Conclusion

The real-time enquiry of DesignQuest participants into design or creative consciousness is an unavoidable by-product of taking responsibility for your own learning and creative contribution in a co-creative and collaborative environment. Significantly, the extended duration of the DQ event-space further stimulates self-reflexion and the identification of the features or characteristics of your interior, your co-creative and your communicative aspects of designerly consciousness. These textures or features may be similar to other peoples – they may well be very different, what is important is that the journey you are on as professional creatives is examined. Personal examination or action research of your creative dialogue with the objects and Others of the design-system is most useful when outside your comfort zone, when change is both allowed and supported.

Future Developments

DTG will continue to operate as a not-for-profit organisation, aiming to be of service to conscious designers as long as it is useful. Current work in progress is the publication resulting from DQ:Magic.

Accompanying this paper, the authors are holding an experiential and highly-charged workshop simply entitled 'DesignQuest workshop'.

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