The Consumer Design Agenda?

Tim Moscovitch

Abstract:
Design education in the UK is still closely associated with the philosophy and principles of Fine Art and many UK Universities place a great emphasis upon the value and strategies employed by the Fine Art community. Many other Departments of Design maintain either an Arts and Crafts or Bauhaus tradition of Design. A small number of institutions focus upon the relationship between Design and Business with a concerted effort to instil a greater awareness and understanding of the importance of Design in a business context.

All of these approaches are valuable in their own right and clearly celebrate the rich diversity and opportunities available for Design graduates within the creative industries. The range of models have one common denominator; they provide an education for Designers to generate products which people use. Yet how does the Designer know what the consumer/user wants? How does he capture the most appropriate requirements to inform his Design development? How does he know that what he provides is acceptable, or better still exceeds the customers expectations? For too long now the Designer, regardless of discipline, has used his own individual personal judgement in determining what the consumer/user should have, predominantly satisfying his own creative predilections and leaving the success of his Design largely to speculation.

The paper will discuss the developments in user-centred Design in business and academia and the implications that this has upon the Designer being equipped to capture more accurate information about the consumer/users aspirations and values. The implications of which will undoubtedly be a new Consumer Design Agenda for the next generation of Designers.

The Consumer Design Agenda?

The tradition of associating Art with Design is firmly embedded within the UK Higher Education system and it is clear that this philosophy is one that the Art and Design community have reached a common consensus upon as indicated in the QAA Art & Design subject benchmarking document. However are there other additional and beneficial strategies which could be adopted as alternative or replacement options? The intention of this paper is to draw attention to a new proposed area of focus within Design Education namely the consumer design agenda.

The methods used in Art & Design Higher Education follow the well trodden path of late 19th century Arts and Crafts traditions enhanced with early 20th century Bauhaus principles. The effect has been to establish a template used in post 6th form foundation colleges based upon the acquisition of drawing skills; two and three dimensional basic design understanding and a grounding in the History of Art and Design. A small 'taster' element of investigating different process areas is usually, also included. Many of the foundation courses are staffed by Fine Art academics who usually stimulate great interest, passion and understanding of the Arts generally and fine artists specifically.

The other route after School is through specialist National Diploma courses where in addition to a shortened version of the general foundation in Art & Design as described above, students quickly get into the role of designing in specific disciplines i.e. Textiles or Graphic Design. The focus in both of these routes is towards the acquisition and understanding of practical visual skills and also critically the ability, authority and responsibility to be innovative and original. Understandably because Art & Design is a practice based discipline, it needs a lot of physical time and practice to be equipped professionally and this feature continues to be emphasised on undergraduate degree programmes. However, I would argue that during the last 100 years from 1903 to 2003 that whilst this process as described has grown in stature and become more sophisticated, particularly with the advent of computing, the issue of what the output is for and for who it is intended has remained unchanged.

During this same period of time the changes in our world have been quite profound with the developments in technology, communications, lifestyle, employment and social behaviour. The world has rapidly become very accessible for a huge range of opportunities. Our shopping habits have changed from a weekly local corner shop mentality where the supply of products are relatively close to the shopper to now where the onus is on the shopper to use their own transport and travel to an out-of-town complex or shopping mall where everything is in one location. In addition, shopping via the internet or simply by phone is an easy 'in your own house' option. The competition in the retail industry to increase profitability and secure larger sectors of their markets and also building upon their well known brand names to get into new product areas and markets has grown at a remarkable rate.

Significantly the nature, importance and power of the consumer has changed beyond all recognition during this same period. The initial passive respondent has been transformed into the pro-active participant realising his/her power in the customer/retailer cycle. Customised, bespoke products are now becoming more increasingly available; instant availability is now the norm as is quality and after-care service is now an automatic necessity.

Market research and marketing during this 100 year cycle has grown from very modest beginnings to a multi-billion pound industry; determining the success or failure of companies. The methods used have become more sophisticated especially with the aid of technology. However, the focus still rests upon the past and the present:

Traditional market research:

• **is excellent at capturing negative customer information – what is wrong with products**
• **but fails to capture the positive information required to delight customers**
• **maintains the barriers between marketing, development and the customer**
• **is very reliable but not always very useful**
• **can only capture what customers think now**
• **and customers are not very good at predicting what they will want in the future.   (1)**

Recent developments during the last decade have indicated the necessity for concentrating in the product development process upon the user and what has emerged is the basis for a new design strategy addressing what has been termed as user-centred design or human-centred design or empathic design. The need for such a process has been driven by an acknowledgement from a number of Design Consultancies and research organisations to adopt a human centred approach to the crucial requirements capture of new product development and only then to develop design solutions. The strategy is totally different to the designer centred approach were the designer is the major stakeholder with responsibility and authority for design solutions which he/she perceives that the user/consumer wants which ultimately rests far too heavily upon speculation.

> **'Good design is not simply about aesthetics or making a product easier to use. It's a central part of the business process, adding value to products and services and creative new markets' (2)**

The UK has an enviable reputation for its high quality Design Education system and many of its graduates find employment in what the Governments terms the Creative Industries which generates revenue approaching £60 billion per annum contributing over 4% to the GDP and employs around 1.5 million people. However, a significant proportion of the business associated with the Creative Industries is for companies and organisations outside of the UK. Ironically UK industry still has difficulty understanding and making use of design, despite what Mr Blair the Prime Minister says.

One of the UK's most well known Design entrepreneurs is Terence Conran who has said that

> **'Many products which achieve 98% (common sense i.e. form following function) are demonstrably good; but those with the extra 2% have a magic ingredient which places them in another category altogether. That 2% makes the difference between something which is perfectly acceptable and something which is so special that everyone wants to posses it'. (3)**

The so called 'magic ingredient' is the area where in the UK Design Education system it rests upon the natural differences of innovation between one designer and another. In my view, whilst still maintaining an ethos of innovation and creativity, UK Design Education has a great opportunity to look at new ways of addressing this 'magic ingredient' and thus hopefully reducing the speculation.

It is probably because of this hit and miss approach from the design community that many UK companies find difficulty in investing in design because they see the opportunity/risk analysis being far too heavily weighted towards too many risks.

The main thrust of this paper is to draw attention to one specific area where the risk associated with speculation can hopefully be reduced, namely user or human centred design. Interestingly Kenneth Grange of Pentagram made the perceptive comment that

> **'Three parties make up the success of a new product: the designer, the maker and the user. If you focus primarily upon the needs of the consumer, then the maker will also be well served and the product could then be able to sell easily. The designer stands more of a representative of the user than the maker'. (4)**

The last critical sentence is the one which I believe could be developed considerably further as a key feature of Design Education.

> **'It's easy to say, harder to put into practice. But the best way to make sure customers buy your products and services is to give them exactly what they want. Companies need to take a step back from their offering and try to put themselves in the shoes of their customers. Observing people carefully and analysing how they live their everyday lives needs to be central to the design process**. **(4)**

The British Government has made considerable mileage out of the buoyant Creative Industries of the UK. However, a large proportion of this wealth is generated from international business in advertising, design consultancies, architecture and fashion or associated with the entertainment industries of music, film and television. **(5)**

The success of the Creative Industries is heavily reliant upon a highly talented, continuous flow of graduates emerging from the UK Design Education system which is internationally acknowledged as one of the best and most comprehensive in the world.

Each year in the UK the number of first year students on design courses increases significantly and during the last five years numbers have grown by 25% and currently there are approximately 23,000. **(6)**

Students traditionally apply from two routes either directly from 6th form at a school or college or from a post 6th form Foundation course in Art & Design at normally their own local college. A considerable proportion of their tutors usually come from a Fine Art background and this can have a crucial impact upon their strategies and approach to Art & Design.

When students are engaged in their Degree programme they are subject to a highly rigorous system of quality assurance which is scrutinised intermittently by the UK Government Quality Assurance Agency. The focus is normally upon six areas consisting of: Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation; Teaching, Learning and Assessment; Student Progression and Achievement; Student Support & Guidance, Learning Resources and Quality Management & Enhancement.

In addition, the Higher Education Funding Council expects each subject area to establish its own agreed benchmarking criteria. All academics are also expected to carry out research within their normal duties in order to enhance their teaching and professional development and satisfy the UK Government Research Council.

The UK Art and Design subject benchmarking has been coordinated by CHEAD; the Council for Higher Education in Art and Design. A fundamental principle of this criteria is an acknowledgement and indeed, celebration of the diversity of the different approaches that are available in the UK system.

The underlying approach to this strategy is one of rigour, comprehensiveness, transparency and diversity. Yet, ironically the UK Design Council has repositioned itself quite dramatically since its transposition in 1995 to consider design and innovation in its broadest sense.

> **'Businesses today face an increasingly stark choice. They can turn out products and services aiming simply to be the cheapest – and leave themselves vulnerable to being beaten on price. Or they can inspire genuine loyalty from customers by giving them products, services and a whole experience, answering needs that not even the customers knew existed'. (7)**

Whilst acknowledging the achievements of the Creative Industries, albeit more successfully outside of the UK than within. The use of design with UK industry generally is still alarmingly low; at 49% **(8)** and many employers have a reluctance to take on designers because of cost and inadequate business knowledge and awareness.

The connection is still to be established by the UK Government between its strategies for improving the University HE system; specifically Design Education and its strategies for improving the UK economy as demonstrated by numerous Government documents on Innovation and Competition which have directly influenced the repositioning of the Design Council.

The predominant concern at present within Design Education in the UK is to equip graduates with cultural and aesthetic skills which can then be used as creative tools for their preoccupation with the 'tangible' physical object (form, line, structure, etc) as the means of providing the 'correct' solution. This approach I would suggest is far too speculative and driven by the demands of an Art and Designer centred approach where self-expression and personal satisfaction is the main justification of the process.

Two Universities in North America; Carnegie-Mellon in Pittsburgh and the University of Alberta in Canada have recently dismantled their undergraduate Design programmes and re-assembled them with a different focus based upon the philosophy of a user-centred design approach rather than designer-centred.

At Alberta a series of new Batchelor of Design programmes have emerged integrating modules of anthropology, sociology and psychology in order to reach a better understanding of people and of the users of design, in addition

to the traditional components of Design Education. At Carnegie Mellon their Industrial Design programme places a high value on the quality of human interaction and modules are delivered in; how people work; how people work with things; human factors; human experience in design and an introduction to psychology. The predominant feature of the course is how designers can understand the diverse qualities and needs of human beings.

User-centred, human-centred or empathic design strategies all have one feature in common which is that the central focus of NPD is based upon 'The ability to learn from – and with – individuals for whom we will design…'

Although my own Design Department has placed a strong emphasis upon an understanding of business and management and the needs of the consumer, it has relied heavily upon traditional cultural and market research methods.

Cultural capture requirements have included forecasting; trends; lifestyle scenarios and concept/moodboards. Market research has incorporated customer profiling; socio-economic data; segmentation and disposable income analysis.

However, we are concerned at Huddersfield that many of these tools are still too generic and speculative and provide a mechanism for still maintaining the traditional Designer-centred approach. We are anxious to develop more realistic human centred strategies for NPD in our Design Education curricula.

Anita Roddick formerly of the Body Shop has said that market research is like looking in your rear view mirror
"It tells me where I've been but not where I'm going." (9)

One of the leading consultancies in user or human centred research is Sonicrim **(10)** which identifies clear distinctions in the consumer, customer user equation.
> **"In todays product era we reduce people to the various roles they play in the design process. We see and think of them as "consumers" when they shop, as "customers" when they buy and "users" when they interact with objects. Rarely do we integrate these roles to come to see people in a holistic way."**

Liz Sanders the President of Sonicrim has identified six aspects of understanding peoples experience (past, current and potential)

Listening to what people say and making inferences about what they think
Watching what people do
Observing what people use
Uncovering what people know
Reaching towards an understanding of what people feel
Sharing in what people dream and imagine **(10)**

At Cranfield University there are two customer focused design research projects; CUPID (Customer Understanding Processes in Design) and HiCS (Highly customerised solutions) sponsored by Nissan, the automotive manufacturer both of which focus upon empathic design strategies.

A prime feature of both of these projects is an acknowledgement that people may not be aware of all of their needs; they may be unwilling to talk about their requirement; have difficulty in articulating their desires and cannot identify what will surprise them in the future.

The empathic design approach undertaken at Cranfield adopts an approach which promotes understanding customers rather than listening to them. Multi-disciplinary teams to research users bringing customers into the

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design process, creative interactions between designers and users a fundamental aim to identify latent, hidden and unvoiced needs; observational, naturalistic and qualitative research.

A number of different design organisations have pioneered work in user/human centred design and probably one of the best examples is IDEO a major design consultancy founded by Bill Moggridge, originally in the UK but now with its headquarters in the USA. The company has many major blue chip clients; it has been in business for over 20 years and currently has a £45 million turnover.

Bill Moggridge in a recent interview with the Design Council **(11)** explained that many companies say they meet their customers needs, but many fail and the major reason is that it is easier to develop products and services for ourselves rather than for other people. In other words designer-centred products rather than user/human centred products.

IDEO's success has been based upon developing a range of techniques and processes for learning about customers which fall into four categories:

Learn – to help businesses learn more about their customers

Watch – to observe people in action in order to assist the design process

Ask – involving customer participation in the design process

Build – assembling prototype products or services and test these, directly with customers

The range of services that IDEO offer include human factors and ergonomics including user-observation and profiling, behavioural archeology, video and photographic ethnography, task analysis, perceptual mapping, scenario building, and experience prototyping. The process is clearly centred upon human beings/users and based upon observation and user-centred involvement.

The UK Government has made a significant commitment during the last 8 years to improving the countries economy by promoting innovation in all aspects of business. Numerous Government publications have communicated these policies and in addition the Design Council has been radically transformed into an organisation which promotes and supports innovation, profitability and competitiveness within industry.

In paralell to this the Government have developed very rigorous processes and systems within its Higher Educational framework through the Quality Assurance Agency and the HEFCE Research Council.

In academia in the community of Art & Design practitioners it is the Fine Artists who have a more well developed notion of their roles and responsibilities and the research which underpins their practice. In Design it is still struggling to find a language and content which truly represents the needs of the Design Industries and which does not just duplicate some of the Fine Art traditions of history and theory. Why is this the case? Is it out of choice? Or is it because Design still struggles to find its centre of gravity with industry?

In the UK despite the success of the Creative Industries, we are long overdue a radical overhaul of our Design Education system in order to reflect more accurately the demands of the consumer and the market-place. Whilst not underestimating the importance and value of Art we still have a long way to go before we properly address the Design issue of the consumer and user which ultimately means a new consumer design agenda.

> **'Human-Centred Design Research gets you closer than you ever thought possible – to your end-users as humans first – then as consumers' 12**

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Biographical :

Professor Tim Moscovitch BA (Hons), MDes RCA, C.TextATI, MSD-C, FRSA is Professor of Design and Head of the Department of Design at the University of Huddersfield UK. Professional experience includes appointments as: Dean of the School of Design Technology, University of Huddersfield, Professor of Textile Design, University of Huddersfield; Quality Assurance Agency Subject Specialist Reviewer; Undergraduate and PhD Examiner at various Universities in the UK; BTEC moderator for Design courses; Design Advisor for BTEC; Design Advisor for the Yorkshire Arts Association; Design & Marketing Director for Moygashel Plc Joint partner in private practice; Moscovitch Design Consultants. Principal areas of research interest are: Design awareness in British industry; Innovation strategy; Management and marketing in Design courses; exploitation of technology by Designers; 3D function and 2D decoration interface.