Designing Schools of Design: The Agency of Research-led Design to Inform Curricula and Shape the Academic Culture within a Design School.

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Abstract

Rapid growth in design schools and their, often historic, dependence on part-time professional designers for faculty have tended toward cultivating administrations structured to cope with the present rather than to envisage and innovate for the future. The leadership in such schools is, often, consumed by fire fighting and crisis management, on the one hand, or quality assurance and policy compliance on the other, leaving less and less time for meaningfully defining and implementing a schools' academic mission and intellectual, social and cultural contribution. It was within this landscape that we began to question whether design—as a propositional, inquisitive practice—could be deployed to inform the way design schools are envisioned and led?

The practice of design being put forward here is one that incorporates a procedure for disclosing the problematic in its complexity in order to deal with the technological, cultural and political issues particular to a specific situation. If we are to be true to this contemporary proposition that designing can operate as a meta-process, uniquely able to engage various disciplinary, managerial and economic structures in complex, changing systems, then it is obvious that many design schools could and should be in this sense 'intelligently designed'.

Keywords

Design Education, Design Research, Visualizations

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This paper will discuss a particular approach to the academic development of a design school. The basic proposition here is whether design schools are on the whole well designed entities. This was the question the authors asked when faced with the challenge of further developing an established and well-known design school in the USA.

The 'designing' we speak of does not simply refer to the concrete design statement of a signature admissions building or an acclaimed student catalog, rather we are questioning, on an immaterial level, whether the educational culture can be designed. The practice of design being put forward is one that incorporates a procedure for disclosing the complexity in the problematic in order to deal with the technological, cultural and political issues particular to a situation. If we are to be true to this contemporary proposition, that designing can operate as a meta-process, and is uniquely able to engage various disciplinary, managerial and economic structures in complex, changing systems, then it is obvious that many design schools could and should be in this sense 'intelligently designed'. In shifting our perception of design to a future-oriented practice, it seems vital that design education exemplify the agency of the activity of designing.

When we framed this issue, questions that arose were: Is this design school exemplified by being a high quality and intelligently designed system and artifact? Are the designing processes and methods that we engender in our graduates used in the operation of this design school? Is the school easily navigated and does it clearly and substantively embody and communicate the values and aspirations that underpin the ethos of the school? Is continued change and modification a normative dimension of this designed system? Does it encourage faculty and students to be entrepreneurial and to routinely feel that their ideas and initiatives are valued – can they 'see' themselves in it? Is all this the product of strong ongoing research that is able to both legitimize and make explicit why we are doing what it is we are doing? Is there a coherence and logic to the academic structure? Are there ways of continually encouraging the constituents to locate and imagine its' future and their/our future as part of it? Are the service structures deployed clearly supporting the core business of the academy – i.e. education? And so on.

In pondering these questions the answers were at best mixed. It was clear that we were not overtly using the skills, understanding and methods of designing - precisely the domain of the expertise of the faculty - to re-imagine and reinvent the school. Had we really stepped outside of the inherited

structures and processes of the generic educational institution and thought as designers about alternatives? Why wouldn't we use scenario-based and user-centered research tools to better understand ourselves and our mission for instance?

Getting closer still is there something in the design studio practice that so many of us have expertise in that can be used to design our own design academy? Why not establish a practice-based research studio to do what good designers do – propose innovative means and devices to disclose and reframe the most pertinent questions that need to be asked and then prototype, test, implement, adapt and reframe again. The ends that these means are intended to pursue is the establishment of a designerly culture at the heart of the design academy.

This allowed us to conceive of the various deans and offices arranged according to a design process. Rather than bureaucratic governance and reporting structure alone defining the work of the school, the activities and functions are proposed along a project continuum of conception, development and implementation. What we want to design is not just a new reporting structure but also and most importantly a system, a community, a culture, and a means to disseminate and archive the collected wisdom and understanding that will enable the school's continued re-imagining and re-making of itself. Every design project, after all, ideally starts with thinking of the situation anew and then the adoption of processes that give the greatest opportunity for innovative propositions and optimal solutions to come effectively into being.

Creativity and innovation, imagination and speculation are the talk of the business world. Certain influential management thinkers are seeing possible clues in the design studio process for how businesses and managers need to operate in the new global economic landscape. Increasing numbers of faculty in the traditional academic disciplines and certain universities as a whole are seriously assessing design as a possible learning framework for students to better develop understandings of actual peoples, their issues and situations. Design in these instances is understood as offering a potential means to bring learning and knowing into a worldly engagement toward positive change.

So which ever way we looked at it, it seemed a folly not to be turning the design studio procedural wisdom toward the prototyping of the design academy itself. This seems almost too obvious of a proposal but one that we at least do not know too many precedents for. The first move was to re-conceive the rather static and bureaucratically bound academic office of the school to operate in part as a design studio. Then it was important to make explicit that this office was be to part of an academic service system in the fullest sense of this term and not an office defined in legislative and

compliance terms alone. The brief is an academic, structural, curricula and cultural reinvigoration of the school through building on the many strengths and achievements that had brought it to this point. The clients are the design students and faculty, the university and the design community.

The criteria for the success will be the effectiveness of this approach to enact a well designed design school that is able to introduce designerly ways of doing and understanding into its' operational fabric. It should be stressed that we are designing a system that won't be operating according to a design process at all times – it still needs to perform to certain educational institutional norms and requirements; however, just as design methods can enable the operations of a hospital to be rethought and reconfigured while it continues to perform to a medical logic so too can it be for a design school.

Intentions and Criteria

More specifically what is being pursued through this process is a set of ambitions and the realization of latent potentials.

- The values and contribution the school intends to be known for will be explicitly embedded and enacted in the school's programs and operation. Faculty should be able to enact and contest these values and students should be able to understand and challenge them through action and interrogation.

- The school is better able to 'know itself', to grow in an organized and adaptive fashion and be positioned to respond to changing ecological, economic, social and institutional dynamics and imperatives.

- The school should explicitly be led by academic goals and ambitions and imagined as the collective product of its faculty. Students should at all times be able to understand this, participate in this designing of the school and challenge meaningfully and substantively the assumptions, biases and relevance of this project.

- The ongoing contribution to the development of the design academy and profession will be an explicit dimension of the work of the school. This contribution will extend to engaging with the local community and the school will use its' locale as an exemplar situation for developing both individual and collective wisdom about the substantive issues of the day.

- The school will have the confidence and the intellectual resources required to make a substantive, qualitative and rigorous contribution to the universities educational goals.

- To establish a creative tension in the structure of the school such that the intellectual and practical issues that we intend to further pursue – sustainability, globalization, urbanity, entrepreneurship, social engagement, ideas of the new, and representation and identity – are

given equal structural significance and prominence as the pragmatic administrative functions required to deliver programs.

- The school is knowable from the outside: that it is reasonably legible and coherent and is interactive and able to be transformed through the interactions and engagements that the school community initiates and experiences.

The challenges and risks in undertaking significant school-wide change lie not only in ideation but more particularly in the development and implementation stages. As most designers are aware, it is in the adoption and execution stages that intelligent designs can run aground. A supporting critical culture and a shared sensitivity to the context and motivations for change are essential if significant change is to 'take hold' in an established institution.

Ways and Means

To this end an extended discursive phase is crucial to ascertain where consensus can be reached regarding the imperatives for change. In this instance, an open-ended semi-structured series of discussions based on provocations and questions were used to challenge and critique accepted wisdoms and assumed values. A key method for this process continues to be a steady stream of visualizations both responding to and agitating the discussions. This has proven to be an effective means to have the school wide dialogues, happening in multiple forums, maintain a momentum toward actual change. The visualizations also allow for the characteristics of the process itself to be continually articulated, reassessed and communicated. We have organized the representation of the process around three frameworks: lenses, ideas and strategies.

Visualizations allow for capturing and articulating complex non-linear and interconnected processes and propositions to be held in singular forms – something verbal and written language struggles to achieve as Frascara (164:2001) points out. "The structure of verbal language, however, offers a limited capacity to convey information. It promotes linear thinking and sequentiality, and is very poor for the presentations of hierarchies, inclusions, simultaneity, distinctions of levels, multiplicity of kinds and complexity of connections."[1]

We designed a series of diagrammatic representations to articulate the change process to the school community. They are both demonstrations of our use of visualizations and articulate the multifaceted nature of the change process itself.

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[1] Frascara, Jorge, *Diagramming as a way of thinking ecologically*, Visible Language, Journal for typographic research, **pgs 160 – 175**, v35.2, Winter 2001, MIT Press.

Mapping investigations (lenses)

Decisions are made (biases disclosed) regarding how the situation, the issues, the problematic and the context will be framed by the process. This makes it possible to set up a process that is neither overly predetermined nor directionless and without commitment or sense of destination - no matter how provisional. The analytical and research based responses to questions posed in the 'lens mode' establish a position that can then be responded to in a speculative and iterative manner. Each proposition made reshapes the 'field' and prefigures the next move that is now sensitive to a set of possibilities that could not be anticipated at the outset.

Mapping speculation (ideas)

The analytical process employed to know the field, the context and the ecology of agents that act on the school, if too rigorously adhered to in all dimensions of the process, will leave innovations and propositions of significant potential unlikely to surface. The ideation process therefore preferences discursive, iterative and speculative practices and required the establishment of 'safe space' for these proposals to be developed. This space is both a metaphoric and physical space - an academic development design studio has been established that is intended to encourage faculty to workshop ideas, with a range of expertise made available to assist them, and prototype and implement them.

Mapping transformations (strategies)

Various strategies continue to be deployed to critique and test ideas that emerge through the process. The 'strategies mode' is based on the studio critique model familiar to design and art studio courses and is used in the academic development studio to open the process, the assumptions, biases and ambitions up to the scrutiny of the school. Invited and 'walk-in' critiques, workshops, presentations, and scenario planning sessions will be used to keep the process both transparent and collaborative. Regular decisive critiques and workshops give authority to the next move in a direction framed, but not precisely predicted, in the 'lens' and 'ideas' modes of the project.

Mapping integration (designing)

The challenging aspect of adopting a process that attempts to integrate design studio based analytical, speculative and educational approaches for academic development is how to meaningfully integrate and effectively integrate them into the existing fabric of a university. The pressure of time, the usual shortage of human resource and the need to attend to issues of program, culture, structure and operation simultaneously is a potential major stress on an institution. The only point in undertaking such a project then is to open up possibilities that would otherwise remain out of reach through a conventional committee-based academic development procedure. The multi-dimensional and integrated approach should produce both the content of the changed institution and, importantly, the
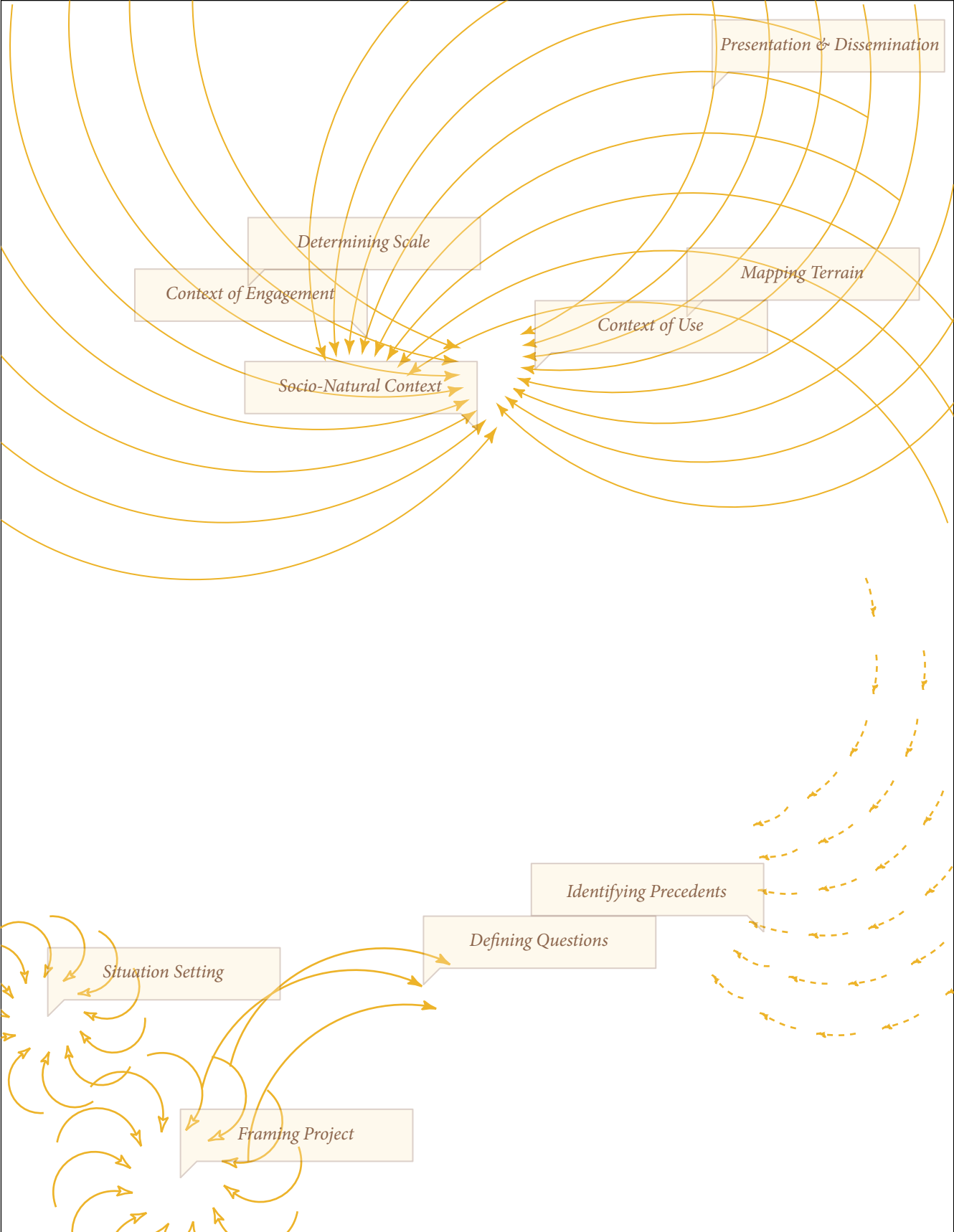
culture and methodology to move the institution beyond its' rather typical coping mode toward a sustainable model of progressive academic and professional development.

What happens now?

This paper has been written at a mid-point in the change process discussed. The discursive and consensus building phase is well advanced and the school is moving into a more focused stage of proposals and prototyping. The design-based project method adopted has proven thus far able to provide the flexibility, responsiveness and decisiveness needed to render an otherwise daunting complex of issues and threats such that they can be substantively acted upon.

An overlapping sequence of collaborative design teams (with varying types of core and consultative memberships) has been put together to take this work to at this decisive stage. These teams will define the network of intra and inter-school and university academic relationships; design the facilitation of an appropriate academic culture; and develop the new curriculum and programs, with supporting pedagogic methods, that will move the school toward possibilities and potentials made realizable through redefining the future nature, culture and character of the school.

Mapping Investigations

Presentation & Dissemination

Determining Scale

Context of Engagement

Mapping Terrain

Context of Use

Socio-Natural Context

Identifying Precedents

Defining Questions

Situation Setting

Framing Project

Mapping Speculation