Design School: Undisciplined and Irresponsible

Craig Bremner
Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, Australia
cbremner@csu.edu.au

Paul A. Rodgers
Northumbria University, Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK
paul.rogers@northumbria.ac.uk

Abstract
Since the inception of the Bauhaus, two major contemporary socio-cultural and technological transformations have forced schools of design to revise their curriculum. First, if we follow contemporary literature on what is called postmodernism, then the turn to the discourse of disciplinary autonomy and inter-disciplinarity can be associated with the student uprising of 1968; and the second transformation can be associated with the emergence of consumer culture and information and communication technologies. The socio-cultural transformation then had three consequences for the teaching of design. First, instead of the Bauhaus emphasis on ‘design’, ‘design studies’ sought the realisation of its potential in establishing a dialogue with methods and theories developed in scientific realms. Second, whereas a major objective of the Bauhaus was to replace the traditional notion of ‘creativity’ with that of ‘invention’, the latter’s scope was framed either by typological and morphological research, or (and this is the third consequence) by the emergence of neo-avant-gardism supported by the rising inter-disciplinary research, and a positive attitude toward technology formulated by revisionist readings of the Modern design movement. The other contemporary development that has transformed the state of design education is the introduction of digital technologies in the 1990s, not only in the area of design, but also in the traditional ways of manufacture, representation, promotion, selling and consumption. And if we accept the argument that digitalisation has negated the Humanist discourse on design theory and practice, then it is necessary to investigate the ways that digitally reproduced serial variability breaks away from the traditionally conceived rapport between designing, making, and representation. In this paper we examine how this amalgam of vectors is crafting the education of design, and we speculate on the challenge to the future by the practice of design derived from globalised information flows and the spectacle of image making.

Key words: Interdisciplinarity; Digitisation; Policy

Introduction
Any advance in design education should have a direct impact on the conditions of the world we live in. However, there are sets of conditions that are impacting on design education in ways that the history of the discipline has not traced, and as such need to be explored. And there are a mix of factors shaping the design school—internal, external and contextual—that together are making a significant impression of the education of the designer. The major external factors are two socio-cultural trends; the blurring of discipline boundaries, and ‘making’ consumed by digital reproducitivity. This second factor is essentially external to the discipline because the digitalisation of design did not arise from the internal factors of the traditional design school—design studio/history/theory, techniques of making, and techniques of representation. And while these two trends are shaping education in general, it is also important to consider the impact of the corporate concept of organization, now ubiquitous in the tertiary sector, which locates programs in faculties based on criterion that more often than not have little to do with the pedagogical systems in use since the inauguration of the Bauhaus. We also propose that the internal factors are subject to constant change (both in content and learning outcomes) due to three other related contextual factors—the educational policies of governments, the aims and expectations of the profession, and the organisational strategies by which universities allocate resources.
Since the inception of the Bauhaus, these contemporary socio-cultural and technological transformations have forced schools of design to revise their curriculum. If we follow the contemporary literature on what is called postmodernism, the first is the turn from the discourse of disciplinary autonomy to interdisciplinarity that can be associated with the student uprising of 1968; and the second is the emergence of consumer culture and information and communication technologies. These developments have had three consequences for the teaching of art and design (De Duve, 1994). First, instead of the Bauhaus emphasis on ‘design’, there was a shift to gain academic legitimacy by establishing a dialogue with history and theory developed in firstly scientific and then philosophical realms. Second, whereas a major objective of the Bauhaus was to replace the traditional notion of ‘creativity’ with that of ‘invention’, the latter’s scope was framed either by typological and morphological research typical of design science activity. And the third consequence was the emergence of neo-avant-gardism supported by the push toward interdisciplinarity, and a positive attitude toward technology as formulated by Reyner Banham’s (1960) revisionist reading of the Modern movement. So the shift from disciplinary autonomy to interdisciplinarity, which is now seen as normal and even desirable, has in fact cultivated a very different landscape for the design school.

The other contemporary development that has transformed the state of design education is the introduction of digital techniques in the 1990s, not only in the area of design, but also in the traditional ways of creating, representing, making, promoting and selling. If we accept the argument that digitalisation has debunked the Humanist discourse on design theory and practice, then it is necessary to examine and investigate the ways that digitally reproduced serial variability breaks away from the traditionally conceived rapport between design, manufacture, and representation. By the humanist discourse we mean the discourse relating theories of talent to theories of making, which the digital has transformed into imitative reproductivity—more later.

We are interested in how the dialogic of internal, external, and contextual factors have influenced and transformed the design school, and what design education might have to do to deal with these often-contradictory vectors. And in particular in the present situation when design’s recognition and relevance are the products of disseminations through globalised flows of information and the spectacle of image making.

One of the main objectives of this paper is to demonstrate the extent to which transformations taking place in the mix of these factors influence the pedagogical orientation permeating design education. For example, while it has been almost a normative practice for schools of design to appoint positions of directorship from either academia or the profession, more often than not this decision is shaped by issues associated with governance and bureaucracy, which together are now also shaping the profession of design. So we argue that the direction of design education is now more a result of structural forces than forceful personalities or strategies. And while structural forces push the design school into the required corporate shape, the blurring of disciplinarity is dissolving its pedagogical platform.

Contextual Factors
With regard to what we call the contextual factors—the educational policies of governments; the aims and expectations of the profession; and the organisational strategies by which universities allocate resources—these simply need noting, mostly because they cannot be resolved and are beyond the scope of this paper. However, governments and administrations are actively reshaping what we perceive of the thing called the university. And what was always a trickle of complaint about the domestication of the modern university (post 1968), has become a flood of books, reports, opinions and editorials, public admonishments, proposals and counterproposals, new methodologies (including the new deal for free online courses), and the establishment of several free but illegal universities (e.g. The Free University of Liverpool, and Copenhagen Free University), all questioning the future project of the university. The student uprisings of 1968 alerted administrations to the enormous power that political independence had always invested in the idea of the university, which when flexed demonstrated it could destabilize an increasingly
At the same time the design profession appears to be flattered by a feint glow from the growing recognition of design, but while staring in the face of increasingly severe global limits the relevance of what it does is plummeting. This paradox is reflected in increasing pressure by the professional for work-ready graduates, readily supported by universities who are required by governments to promote the employability of their graduates, almost guaranteeing that the important question about how design actually operates in the world will be avoided. In addition, the allocation of resources to schools is based on ‘incentives’ established by governments that reward this paradox.

Design and the Digital
With the introduction of digital technologies in the 1990s, not only in the area of design, but also in the traditional ways of manufacture and representation, digitisation has consigned the tradition of idea or concept driving design into a loop of imitative reproductivity. And this is an important development that follows the split between idea and manufacture that precipitated development of a language (commonly known as design) to communicate the making and the meaning of virtually everything in our lives.

And if we accept the argument that digitisation has negated the Humanist discourse on design theory and practice (the discourse relating theories of truth and authenticity to theories of making), then it is necessary to investigate the ways that digitally reproduced serial variability breaks away from the traditionally conceived rapport between designing, making, and representation. The Bauhaus codified a process where idea drove the development of the object-type whose imitation was to be serially reproduced and distributed to secure the condition of a better world. In this system representation was simply a medium to describe idea to manufacture. Somehow this system didn’t seem to notice that the machine had already transformed the idea into an imitation of itself—first an imitation in the shape of machine then an idea in the shape of other ideas (a serially reproduced imitation).

In the condition we call ‘alter-modern’ in the next section, it has become apparent that the relationship between production and the project of design has been changed again by digital technology. Whereas for most of the twentieth century none of us were involved in the production of anything, it was nothing to imagine consuming everything. Now, courtesy of the digital, we are all involved in the project of producing nothing, but that ‘nothing’ is consuming every imagining. Instead of projecting ‘what-might-become’, the digital is producing the design of an ‘other’ world where the project is to archive ‘what-was’. And it is taking more and more of our time to produce and consume this project. Imitation is the means of contributing to, and taking guidance from, this project forming a reassuringly derivative loop. The derivative is also one of the dominant products of global capital and it functions as a financial medium of insurance against change, which is a dangerous development for the project of design which is predicated on change.

Having split idea from manufacture the digital has turned the imagination of change into an image. And our imaginings are now torrents of images of the here-and-now, locking both ideas and images in the permanent present of the everyday. Change has now become a virtual world full of floating images with no there, and the abundance of images in the digital flows that might refer to the possible future scenarios of our imaginings are now the floating images of no-place that is everywhere (Bauman, 2003).

The digital technologies that facilitate the networks that facilitate participatory culture that, in turn, facilitate the abundance of digital flows call into question the historic relationship between
production and consumption. While we were once consumers at the end of the great chains of production it appears to be generally accepted that the new digital flows have licensed us all to be producers as well (as predicted by Alvin Toffler). This has signified a change of purpose for the design school from instructing production to observing users. It appears the design school has exchanged an uncomfortable compact with capital for a new covenant with flows loosely called experiences and, as a result, the discipline of design is now blurred at the edges.

Design and its Discipline
The following discussion is based on some already published material (Rodgers & Bremner, 2011), and is reprised here because it is a comprehensive theory on the blurring of disciplinarity, and we would argue that this is the major complication for the design school.

A recent spate of books (Smith & Dean, 2009; Elkins, 2009; Buckley & Conomos, 2009; Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Madoff, 2009); and two recent conferences concerning art education Transpedagogy: Contemporary Art and the Vehicles of Education, MoMA, New York, in 2009; and Deschooling Society, Hayward Gallery, London, in 2010, highlight, as the writers and speakers remind us, that art education is undergoing another periodic revision. Similarly, the recent conference on the PhD, Doctoral Education in Design Conference: Practice Knowledge Vision, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, 22-25 May, 2011, could be seen to be an indicator of cyclical concerns in design education. Especially since the first Doctoral Education in Design Conference, Ohio, 8-11 October, 1998, was soon followed by Foundations for the Future: Doctoral Education in Design, La Clusaz, France, 8-12 July, 2000, and then the 3rd Doctoral Education in Design Conference, Tsukuba International Congress Center, Tsukuba, Japan. 14–17 October 2003. That nearly a decade passed from the last of these conferences provides evidence that discussions around the artist, the designer, and the academy regularly address one crisis or another in the educational turn.

While perhaps we shouldn’t draw comfort from the knowledge that education revolves around a cycle of crises, the recent conferences and publications are a response to growing concerns about art and design education. A rationale for these concerns is best captured by Nicholas Bourriaud (2009) in his thesis for the Altermodern exhibition at Tate Modern in 2009 which states “The times seem propitious for the recomposition of a modernity in the present, reconfigured according to the specific context within which we live – crucially in the age of globalisation – understood in its economic, political and cultural aspects: an altermodernity.”

If the purpose of all dimensions of design education is to make us better designers, and generally better informed about the possibilities and limitations of the subject that is design, so this too must be the primary function of practice. Moreover, if what we call design is now best described as a soluble instrument in the altermodern project, it is easy to see why we might be concerned about design education in this contaminated territory.

Furthermore, if we accept that design education is framed by its three basic components of design studio/history/theory; techniques of making; and techniques of representation; then they all began to blur their disciplinary characteristics some time ago. And the idea of design without discipline has, from the Bauhaus, been presumed to be impossible. However, we can trace the dissolving disciplines in an essay from 1994, “When Form Has Become Attitude—And Beyond” (resulting from another conference on the crisis in art education), in which Thierry de Duve described the shift from the Academic to the Modern to the Post-modern model of art education (and because his Modern model was developed at the time of the Bauhaus we take his critique to be equally applicable to design). And to this framework another temporal dimension can be added—the Alter-modern model. The Alter-modern model coincides with a condition brought about by the dissolve of disciplinarity into a blurred state we have called Alterplinarity in an earlier paper (an alternative disciplinarity) (Rodgers & Bremner, 2011). Both the model and the condition are caused by globalisation and the proliferation of the digital resulting in connections that are no longer “amid”, cannot be measured “across”, nor encompass a “whole” system, which has generated an “other” dimension (Bourriaud, 2009), an “alternative disciplinarity”—an “alterplinarity”.
Disciplining Design

The function and character of disciplinarity is highly relevant in design education, and many authors have investigated a variety of disciplinary perspectives across a wide range of design activities including; interaction design (Blevis & Stolterman, 2008); architectural design (Rendell, 2004); engineering design (Tomiyama et al., 2007); plus (Dykes et al., 2009) developed a new disciplinary framework for emerging forms of design practice. One aim of this new disciplinary framework was to better facilitate the location and delineation of activities and outputs within emerging types of design practice, research, and education.

However, when looking at the claim by design to be an innately collaborative activity Hal Foster expresses doubt, “Collaboration here, then, is a given, and this relationship might not always be welcome by others. Have we reached a point where interdisciplinarity is designed in, as it were, as a value in its own right?” And Foster inserts a footnote to his question; “As even a great proponent of this mode, the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, has commented, ‘Collaboration is the answer, but what is the question?’” (Foster, 2011). Even when we know the questions the desire to broaden the scope and scale of design thought and action into every permutation of progress (and its opposite), using its many disciplinary guises as its visa, design appears to be seeking collaboration over content.
What is overlooked in this fragmenting evolution is that disciplinarity and its many variations is all about the individual observer. Historically, the practitioner was initiated into the discipline and only with mastery could collaborate with other disciplines, but that collaboration was not aimed at practicing a new discipline; it was aimed at strengthening the foundation of the discipline. The project of interdisciplinarity meant the individual learnt more about their discipline by observation. So we should consider further structural alterations in looking at what has happened to the integrity of the disciplines. The first of these is that the critique of interdisciplinarity and its other fragmentary forms is impossible to conduct from a disciplinary perspective. This is because whatever doubts we might have about what has become of the discipline of design we have to be aware of the fact that disciplines are designed to perpetuate and domesticate doubt as healthy scepticism (Brown, 2009), producing a sense of belonging and submission to a set of regularised practices (Chandler, 2009), where expertise is internally unstable (Post, 2009). What that means is that from inside design we should be aware that we have to employ discrete tactics to first see and then analyse its blurring disciplinarity.

Stanley Fish (1989) argued that “…being interdisciplinary is so very hard to do…” on the basis that despite having an historical core that cannot be ignored, disciplines are not natural, and their identity is conferred by relation to other disciplines making it impossible for an authentic critique. However, twenty years later in the ongoing debate around the disciplines W.J.T. Mitchell (2009) responded claiming interdisciplinarity “…is in fact all too easy…”, and he based his negation on a taxonomy of three different kinds of interdisciplinarity - “…top-down (conceptually synthesised), bottom-up (socially motivated), and undisciplinarity (anarchist) or what he calls lateral interdisciplinarity…”.

The first looks to frame an overarching system in which all disciplines relate, the second responds to emergencies and upheavals in disciplines, and the last is a rupture in the continuity of the regularising practices of disciplines (the disciplines disciplining the disciplines, or self-discipline). Wherever we might position ourselves in Mitchell’s interdisciplinary taxonomies, we argue that the blurred disciplines cannot exist with the disciplines, so when design finds itself without discipline (un-disciplined) we need to find what exists.

The historic frame of entering a creative field meant that you were initiated into its mysteries, which you had to practice repeatedly leading to mastery. When collaborating with another discipline or disciplines the practitioner is contaminated by this contact (a culturally enriching necessity—Appiah, 2006) and learns to translate ideas leading to a healthy skepticism, or doubt, about disciplinarity. In the other setting of transdisciplinarity, where disciplines are no longer primary, the initiation gives way to intuition, guessing your way into the conversation, where the resulting derivation from the other disciplines is the insurance against changes to the disciplinary platforms. When disciplines break free of self-disciplining constraints, as in the case of alterplinarity the overwhelming derivation brought about by the ubiquity of the digital is transfigured. The guesswork required for transdisciplinary collaboration is replaced by ignorance—the state of not-knowing from which learning takes place. And not-knowing is important because the core framework can only be assembled as a temporary platform for each projection and should never become a platform that we say we know and can omit because it is known.

The safety or insurance produced by derivation as the current cornerstone of design action (a state that has allowed the word design to be attached to everything on the planet), has to be seen to be un-natural and instead of continuing to render imitations, misrepresentation becomes the means to assemble the design school in the alterplinary condition. This means that the disciplinary borders of design (the discipline of the disciplines) have become very porous so the ‘idea’ of design has almost eroded. And in that state, the educational project may well be the medium of manifestation for the ignorant designer attempting to apply design without discipline in the altermodern circumstance.

What we have attempted to illustrate here is the disciplinary dissolve of design and the relational response of the disciplines. Given that the global problems of the 21st century are increasingly complex and interdependent, and they are not isolated to particular sectors or disciplines it is
possible that the design school might need to be “undisciplined” in its nature (Mitchell’s lateral interdisciplinarity). Moreover, there might even be a need for the graduate to be “irresponsible” because we need more playful and habitable worlds that the old forms of production are ill equipped to produce (Marshall & Bleecker, 2010).

Conclusions: The Discourse of Alterplinarity
The idea of an alternative disciplinarity, an alterplinarity, is a proposal; where the creative practitioner is viewed as a prototype of a contemporary traveller whose passage through signs and formats refers to a contemporary experience of mobility, travel and transpassing; where the aim is on materialising trajectories rather than destinations; and where the form of the work expresses a course, a wandering, rather than a fixed space-time (Rodgers & Bremner, 2011). And this idea is based on Nicholas Bourriaud’s (2009) notion of the “Altermodern”. The fragmentation of distinct disciplines, including those located in traditional art and design contexts, has shifted design practice from being ‘discipline-based’ to ‘issue- or project-based’ (Heppell, 2006). This shift has emphasised and perhaps encouraged positively irresponsible practitioners, who purposely blur distinctions and borrow and utilise methods from many different fields. Therefore, it is logical to propose that the design school has to shift from being ‘discipline-based’ to ‘issue- or project-based’, and undisciplined and unknowing graduates will be best placed to make connections that generate new methods, and to identify ‘other’ dimensions of creative research, practice and thought that is needed for the contemporary complex and interdependent issues we now face.

We are advocating that there is a responsibility on designers to be “irresponsible” in their work. Brewer (2010) goes even further in his criticism of existing forms of knowledge production and claims that contemporary “specialized forms of knowledge have become debased instruments of social control and discipline.” Moving towards “undisciplined” practice and states of “unknowing” in an age of alterplinarity therefore requires an epistemological shift. However, this will in turn offer us new ways of fixing the problems the old disciplinary and extra-disciplinary practices created in the first place.

So the amalgam of vectors that since the Bauhaus have forced schools of design to revise their curriculum—postmodernism; the ‘design studies’ turn to appropriated theories; ‘creativity’ superseded by ‘invention’; the positivist attitude toward technology that laid the groundwork for digital reproductivity; and the pursuit of inter-disciplinarity challenge the future of the design school and the practice of design derived from globalised information flows and the spectacle of image making.

References


