Successful Design Briefs are not all Black and White

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Abstract

The task of a designer is to project the future into the present by articulating a possible outcome to an existing condition. This paper will examine the outcomes of these projections, through a comparative analysis of a controlled group of design students designing products and spaces for birthing units. Linked to a larger interdisciplinary study on the impact of birthing unit design on communication between birthing mothers, staff and family/support members, this research provided an opportunity to explore practice-led research together with case studies and literature reviews of current conditions.

With the educational design directive to explore conceptual ideas, the first of two groups of students were presented with a standard written brief for the redesign of birthing units. They were asked to focus on either: a product, space, or combination of product and spatial design to address the needs of a birthing unit. A second group were given the same problem but were also provided with detailed video ethnographic information to supplement the written brief. The aim of this paper is to critically reflect upon the differences in the outcomes of a traditional form of design brief with that of the brief using video ethnography. By examination of all the factors affecting the complex context of birthing units, and the mode of communication of a project brief, this paper will present its findings that will facilitate future design briefs for birthing units to lead to more appropriate outcomes. In doing so the issue of whether or not a black and white text document is sufficient for improving the design of birthing units.

KEYWORDS: Design briefs, video ethnography, birthing units.

Introduction

Design is about the future. It addresses the needs brought to the attention of the designer through a design brief that identifies the potential for change. These requests come to the designer from a number of sources, and the degree of detail varies according to the type of project, discipline, relationship of the designer to the client, or other contextual factors. However, all design briefs are about requesting the need to change the present conditions in order to achieve a desired future outcome, or multiple outcomes. The professional designer takes the importance of the briefing document extremely seriously, not only in a legal and financial manner, but also in a view of clearly identifying the key elements of the project through an analysis of the design condition—sometimes called the design problem. If the brief does not elucidate the problem clearly, then there is scope for the designer to further explore the conditions of the design brief. Quite simply put, designers are change agents, as they project the future into the present by articulating a possible outcome to an existing condition described in a brief.

Change agency is a process that is not solely the domain of design. Many members in society are change agents and perform the task of amending the conditions of a situation by taking action to bring about the desired outcome, with some actions being conscious and others intuitive or reactionary. However, it is the conscious decisions that this paper deals with in terms of the design process. To decide to take a course of action an understanding of the consequences is required, and, although design deals with creating the future, it is based on the past. Understanding past conditions provides the designer with a solid base to make informed decisions. Yet saying this does not mean that a textbook of facts will give a designer a better understanding of the conditions requiring change.

Perkins builds on the work of Strike and Posner when he discusses pedagogical approaches to the constructivist learner as being instructed to confront complex situations that inherently are inconsistent with their existing naïve model. This intervention leads to them construct better models or consider alternative models. (Perkins, 1991) The practice of design sees designers constantly construct new realities, as "...contemporary designers on the margins, but it is this location on the fringe that forms the centre of their design ethos" (Verghese, 2010).

This paper will unpack the method of providing the description of the project – known as the design brief – that will provide the most effective results. Through a comparative analysis, this research presented explored the difference in the final designed outcome from a controlled group that were provided with just a text document, to one in which detailed video ethnographic information was provided to supplement the written brief.

In order provide a clear boundary for the research, the framework in which the brief was provided was aligned to the design of birthing units. It is within this relationship of design and process of birth, that a larger interdisciplinary study on the impact of birthing unit design on communication between birthing mothers, staff and family/support members is been undertaken. It is clear from the current research by Professor Maralyn Foureur et.al.¹., that the current approach to birthing units are not effective in reducing the stress levels experienced by the birthing mother. The analysis of various birth units is the scope of that particular research study involving the disciplines of midwifery and design through a process of video ethnography. (Davis, et al, 2010). The research that follows examines an aspect of this larger project, by questioning the actual delivery of the information provided to the designer in attempt to see if there is any correlation to creative output. This can only be seen as a catalyst for further research in the relationship of design to birthing units. This additional research can be extended beyond

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¹ 1. Two funded research projects; Developing Cutting Edge Birth Unit Design: A Feasibility Study and Theorising the relationship between birth unit design and the communication patterns of labouring women and their maternity care providers with researchers; Prof Maralyn J Foureur, Prof Caroline Homer, Dr Jennifer H Fenwick, A/Prof Deborah L Davis, Dr Roslyn Sorensen, A/Prof Ian F Forbes, Prof Iedema Rick, George Verghese and Berto Pandolfo.

the framework of birthing units design towards providing a basis for effectively improving the design outcomes through improved briefing processes.

The Design Process

Throughout the history of design there have been many attempts to propose design methods that would result in more effective outcomes. These attempts have all contributed to the richness of diversity of design. Methodologies from different disciplines have been translated across practice boundaries and informed the decision-making of designers. The research project that has initiated the exploration examined in this paper is highly interdisciplinary. The interaction of designers with mid-wives may not seem like a natural fit but in many ways the professions share similarities. Both are concerned with the human being and their wellbeing, and both go through the process of analysis and synthesis. This is achieved by observation, and development of a clear knowledge base that is then followed by an action to achieve the results needed. These actions are then recorded for future scenarios. No doubt there are differences between professions but affecting the right conditions for the human being is central to both.

In terms of design processes, some disciplines deal with exclusive site-specific conditions, but the discipline of industrial design has to achieve a balance of art and industry. Art in a sense that it addresses our wants and desires, but is composed so as to be comfortable to look at and use. Industry as it has to be manufactured and not crafted for the sole use of one person. As a profession, industrial design is responsible for the development of new products and services of many kinds. A relatively new field, it emerged out of the industrial revolution and the advent of mass production during the middle of the 20th century. For the successful development of new products and services, designers follow a process that although not linear, does suggest key points or markers as a means to articulate the various phases required.

Broadly speaking the design process involves the process of inductive and deductive reasoning that begins with observation and analysis. Ideation follows this initial phase that leads towards the communication of the outcome. This process includes many feedback processes in which the designer constantly goes back to look at missing information and analysis later in the project to refine the initial ideas. Design is an iterative process that is constantly moving between the many simultaneous demands on any project. It is the reading of the brief and the impact that parts of it would have with the designer that creates the direction that they would lead the project. Using various techniques of reasoning, and research methodology, the designer drills deeper into the problem presented by the brief.

The students that were involved in this research were following a methodology best described by Hasso Plattner (Stanford 2010), from the Institute for Design in which he describes the five key steps as being: empathise, define, ideate, prototype, and test. The first stage of empathy establishes the connection that the designer has with the behaviour and context of the user. It allows for a clear understanding of the experiences of the user by immersing themselves in the problem. The next stage of definition is more than just restating the information gathered in the previous stage. It is at this point that observations gained are then synthesized and framed into a point of view that guides the designer. The ideation stage is most synonymous with design as this is where the exploration of ideas are formed from the definition and viewpoint of the designer. The prototype stage begins to focus the ideas into tangible form that are later tested in the final stage. (Stanford, 2011) For the purposes of this research, only the first four stages of this process were investigated.

Design is both an outcome and a process. The education of a designer requires establishing the need for clarity in the design process so as not to promote bias and uninformed outcomes. The defining of a process is necessary because ideas do not emerge fully formed out of minds of designers (Brown 2008). A central focus for designers during the design process is 'the user'. Identifying and meeting the needs of the user is never straight forward, consumers have complex, multiple needs, which they are not always able to articulate (Wasson 2000). It is the definition of the problem in relationship to the user that is the central question of this research.

The Design Brief

Details of a design project that include information about 'the user' are most commonly defined using a design brief. A design brief is a document that sets out the objectives for the design activity so that all respondents to the brief are absolutely clear of the design activities intent. The respondents, or stake holders, bring to the brief different perspectives and expectations and it is one major role of the brief to bring balance and clarity to these diverse interests (Worthington 2001). The design brief much like the design process is not definitive or restrictive, it should be considered a live document open to review and modification. Often the challenge in settling on a brief is that the client thinks a designer requires extremely detailed information, designers on the other hand prefer for a design brief to be as brief as possible, a 'one or two page' document that is less restrictive, some designers prefer to be brought in on a project even before the brief has been created.(Dorst 2009)

Design briefs, regardless of the scope, are usually in a particular format. This format of a design brief is dominated by text documents that are sometimes supported by diagrams and 2-

dimensional images or photos. The method of using text allows for precise details of the brief to be clearly articulated and uniformly comprehended by all stakeholders. As a document that often provides the legal and financial directives for the profession in terms of informing the contractual process, this method of delivering a brief quite often has a business-like sense of clarity. Any discrepancies can be addressed and the universal nature of a written document enables a design brief to reach across cultures by being able to be translated into different languages. The research undertaken was not necessarily about the quantity of text provided for the brief, but rather on the type of information provided. It can also be argued that words can take on a variety of meanings and present less than a clear view. This can benefit the designer as it may present the designer with a sufficiently vague description allowing them the freedom to proceed more as they interpret the brief (Dorst 2009).

In their work on visualizing research, Gray and Malins discuss techniques for the use of video as a form of documentation. They describe the raw state of the research topic that is captured by video that does not unconsciously filter out our perceptional biases and presents the material in a straight unedited manner. (Gray and Malins, 2004) The contrast of a standard brief with an enhanced brief using video is the core pedagogical research question raised with this paper.

The Project

The aim of the research was to examine whether or not the final results of the design of products and spaces for birthing units would be different depending on the method of being briefed. The provocation was that not all briefs are black and white, and this does only refer to the relationship of the text document, but that it also indicates that there is always ambiguity within a brief. The former gave rise to the core aspect of an educational brief for industrial design students used in this test case. This was to understand the impact that images, or lack of images, at the briefing stage of a project have on the outcomes of a design project.

The project was conducted with fourth-year undergraduate students from the industrial design program at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). A total of 26 students participated; the number of males (20 or 77%) was considerably higher than the number of females (6 or 23%). The project was to be conducted over a seven week period, from April 11, 2011 to June 6, 2011. The students were divided into two equal groups, group A and group B, of 13 students each, and both groups were informed of the briefing session, date, location and time. Group A and group B would be briefed on the same day only several hours apart. On week one of the project, students were briefed to the particulars of the project and each student was given an identical copy of the project brief. The project brief was a two page text document that detailed the task

they were required to complete, the learning objectives, the assessment criteria, the submission requirements and a weekly schedule.

A room that could be closed and not visible from the outside was selected as the venue for the project briefing. It was important to avoid the possibility for students from the one group to accidently see the other groups' presentation.

Group A was presented the project with the aid of a project brief, a digital presentation that was made up of 14 slides, 9 of which included pictorial images relating to the subject matter. Group A was also presented with a 10 minute colour video. The video showed birthing units in action with pregnant women, their partners and support people as well as nurses and midwives. The video was explicit and a variety of different birthing couples and birthing environments were shown.

Group B was presented the project with the aid of the identical project brief and a digital presentation that was however, void of any pictorial images. This digital presentation was smaller than the one used for group A and consisted of 11 slides.

Following each presentation both groups were allowed 10 minutes to ask questions to clarify any unclear aspects of the project. Because of the video and the three extra slides in the digital presentation, the group A presentation lasted longer (35 minutes) than the presentation for group B (28 minutes). All 26 students were noted as being present at the project briefing.

Following the project briefing, subsequent interactions with students in the development of the project were identical for both groups, to ensure this, both groups met each week at the same time in the same room and engaged with the same staff members. A site visit was conducted in week 2 to visit a birthing unit at a hospital in Sydney, both groups were required to attend. The structure of the project required that students present their research findings in week 3 of the project followed by the final presentation of their work in week 7.

Following the conclusion of the student project in week 7 the two academic staff coordinating the project carried out the assessment of the students work. The assessment was carried out in two sessions, the first session required each staff member to assess the work individually and then together to bench mark. The following criteria was used to asses each students' presentation;

1. Sensitivity and diversity shown in research.

- 2. Ability to be creative in distilling design brief into original concepts.
- 4. Range and depth of considerations in addressing final design.
- 5. Clarity and effectiveness of communication.

Each criteria was allocated equal assessment weighting. Results for the student work have been collated in table 1 below;

| Group A | Students 13 | Highest 93 | Lowest 48 | Mean 70.8 | Median 69 | Range 45 |
|---------|----------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|
| Group B | Students | Highest | Lowest | Mean | Median | Range |
| | 13 | 87 | 41 | 58.6 | 66 | 46 |

Table 1 - Student Results

Conclusion

In the analysis of student marks for the project all results show Group A has having achieved higher grades. However, it is not the grades that are the key finding here but that the elevated results were attained through a greater level of achievement of learning objectives as outlined by the brief. The ability to be creative in distilling design brief into original concepts; and, the range and depth of considerations in addressing final design, were the two criteria that are linked to the research question raised in this paper.

At the conclusion of the project students were asked to anonymously respond to the following question; Did the way you were briefed for the Birthing Unit project influence the research you conducted for this project? Responses from two students are collated below.

Student A - Yes most definitely the briefing influenced the research conducted and the initial direction taken. The briefing showed us what priority the "client" places on certain elements of the project, what their influences are, and often what direction they think they want to head in. In this instance I presume you are referring to the use of the video in the briefing? So more specifically it gave us a graphic insight into the act of giving birth which stayed with us throughout our design process. Obviously each person has their own way of interpreting the

information they received based on their backgrounds (cultural, economic, social, etc), and will design accordingly.

Student B - I feel the way we were briefed influenced the type of birthing units we researched, as I personally tried to follow what was demonstrated in the video at the beginning of the project. However, when we visited RNS, perceptions changed slightly, as the project became a little more clinically based, though the roots of the natural birthing unit brief and video remained dominant throughout the project.

Student A identifies the fact that the video made an impression on them that remained for the duration of the design process. Keeping the user central and ever present during the design process facilitates in the mind of the designer, a constant reference to the end user, maximizing the potential for useful and appropriate solutions to be developed. Student B was initially influenced by the video and then further refined their understanding of the task following the site visit, suggesting that the video enabled a deeper more informative experience to be gained from the site visit.

Further studies would determine if there is a correlation between how designers are briefed for the design of birthing unit design and the diversity of the final outcome. However, it can be clearly confirmed that those that succeed in this project were those that attained more understanding of the users' true needs by empathetically coming to terms with the experiences of the user at childbirth. Knowledge of core pieces of information, and code requirements, and the needs of the hospital are all very important. These are often the elements of a design brief that would also suggest further enhancement though observation and case studies. Sadly, these are not always undertaken as standard approaches prevail and, at the time of great joy through the moment of childbirth, the opportunity to fully understand the needs of the user is lost. This paper suggests that a different form of brief would result in a greater level of empathy and understanding to be able to create better products and spaces for childbirth.

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Crafting the future

The theme of the conference is designer's practice knowledge. How can the specific knowledge of designers be brought forward, articulated, made visible and be understood and used in contexts like innovation, business development and social change?

Invitation text

Design is a central field for practice and research in visioning and crafting the future - and facilitating changes that could lead to a better future. Business has realized this to a great extent but also many public organizations have discovered the value of design for developing and communicating services. With the changing role of design, the boundaries of design as well as its practice has changed. When packaged in a process format and language to appeal to managers and large organizations, the core of what designers do is at risk of getting blurred. Designing is about crafting, making, visualizing, and imagining the future, regardless of whether we are involved with products, services, fashion, interactions, or other areas of practice. Have these core activities changed?

We invite design researchers and practitioners to celebrate the 10th conference of the European Academy of Design with contributions to our conversation on the role of design and designers in crafting our futures. We invite empirical studies that return to the roots of design practice, and theoretical frameworks that help us better explore and understand the role of our practice in business and society.

The University of Gothenburg

The Faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts at the University of Gothenburg is the home of a wide range of disciplines, which makes it unique in all the Nordic countries. The venue of the conference is the Faculty's School of Design and Crafts (HDK), which was founded already in 1848, and is still housed in the same characteristic building. Located right in the center of the city, history and future go hand in hand in this building that hosts

both research and education in design. The research of HDK combines the will to experiment with practical design methods, always with an awareness of the important role that design plays in society. The Business & Design Lab (BDL) is a cross-disciplinary research center within the university that is a formal cooperation between The Faculty of Fine, Applied and Creative Arts and the Faculty of Business, Economics and Law. BDL plays a central role in organizing the EAD conference.

The Röhsska Museum

The Röhsska Museum is the only museum in Sweden specializing in design, fashion and the applied arts. Since it opened about one century ago the museum has enjoyed a fruitful collaboration with the School of Design and Crafts at the University of Gothenburg. The permanent exhibitions of the museum ranges from East-Asian antiques to modern and contemporary design.

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9. Design and Craft (Crafting the Education of Design)

Bronwen Gray, Alan Young

Communication design and community: pedagogy and empowerment

Noemi Sadowska, Dominic Laffy

Crafting innovation education through design in a business school

Burcak Altav

Design Education with Empathy: 'The Grandparent Experience'

Craig Bremner, Paul A. Rodgers

Design School: Undisciplined and Irresponsible

Hernández, Gabriel; Evans, Martyn; Cruickshank, Leon Design thinking features in design education.

Spyros Bofylatos, Thomas Spyrou, Jenny S. Darzentas, John

Designing for Sustainability: A Generic Framework

Mike Woods

Do good designers make good teachers of design?

Louise Valentine

Looking Up, Down, Across and Back: development of a design management tool for craft practitioners and a discussion of its implications for future craft education

Noemi Sadowska, Rebecca Taylor

Reflections on crafting the education of design in non-native environments

Two Wrouw

REFRAMING STRUCTURES, Framing Architectural Construction in Artistic Design Education

Ian Grout

Resilience in a Convivial Society Some Possible Innovations, Activities and Opportunities for Design

Christopher Kueh, Stuart Medley, Alun Price

Service Design 101: The joy and challenge of introducing service design into an undergraduate design curriculum

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Stretching Boundaries To Design $\With': A User-Oriented$ and Interdisciplinary Student Collaboration

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Through thingness: a world perceived and presented by "materially attuned" practitioners

Maral Babapour, Ulrike Rahe

Visualizing the design process - an educational approach for the synthesis of design diaries

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ABOUT PROGRAM REGISTER ROHSSKA WORKSHOPS ACADEMIC PAPERS

POSTER SESSIONS KEYNOTE SPEAKERS CONTACT

- Full academic papers
- Schedule of paper presentations
- List of participants

Note: The catalog has ISBN nr 978-91-979541-5-0 and refers to the full length academic papers online.

Tracks

The organizing committee of the 10th European Academy of Design Conference - Crafting the Future - is pleased to present the following tracks:

- 1. Designing Future Mobility
- 2. Design Development of Future Homes for Future Cities
- 3. Design and Innovation
- 4. MAKING TOGETHER Open, Connected, Collaborative
- 5. The craft of design in design of service
- 6. Fashion Design for Sustainability
- 7. Design history as a tool for better design
- 8. Power to the People: Practices of Empowerment through Craft
- 9. Design & Craft (Crafting the Education of Design)
- 10. Open Track

Paper Presentations

There will be 7 parallel sessions with paper presentations. All authors will have 30 minutes to present. 15-20 minutes for presentation and 10-15 minutes for discussion. Which means 3 papers per session.

We ask you to read the papers of the 2 other authors that will present in the same session as you to make the discussions more interesting. We will publish the academic papers online on April 1, so that all delegates can read and reflect and comment on each other's papers.

When it is time for your presentation; please be on time! All 3 authors that are presenting must prepare the PowerPoint presentation 20 minutes before the beginning of the session! This is to avoid time slippage during presentations so that delegates can move between tracks and sessions.

Please bring your PowerPoint presentation on a USB stick. All rooms are equipped with Mac mini. Make sure your file is compatible with our equipment.

(Some tracks have other arrangements and will contact you with additional information.)

Review process

Papers of 10th European Academy of Design Conference - Crafting the Future have undergone a double blind review.

The review was made by the Convenors of the tracks and readers they had asked to help, 2 independent persons reviewed each paper. The reviewers did not know the author's identity, as any identifying information was stripped from the paper before review. The acceptance rate was 60 %. A Majority of the papers were accepted with revisions.

Subject: RE: 21. Successful Design Briefs are not all Black and White - accepted with revisions

From: Peter Jones <peter.jones@plymouth.ac.uk>

Date: Sun, 25 Nov 2012 23:39:35 +1100

To: Berto Pandolfo <Berto.Pandolfo@uts.edu.au>

CC: "mina.dennert@hdk.gu.se" <mina.dennert@hdk.gu.se>, "Strickfaden, Megan" <Megan.Strickfaden@ualberta.ca>

Hi Berto

Please find revisons requested outlined below.

This is an interesting example that pulls together relevant literature and makes a cogent case for their premise.

The essay raises interesting questions about the design briefing and the design process not only within a commercial but also in a teaching and learning context, consequently the essay relates to the track effectively and is an interesting case study with good potential.

However, the majority if not all of the reference is Design related.

The introduction of some pedagogic reference/ theory would make the paper
more rounded, discursive and relate more effectively to the educational nature of the track.

Depending on the Pedagogic areas selected (eg stimulating, motivating and engaging a student cohort), this
may also be of future relevance to the development of this project.

Regards Peter

From: Peter Jones

Sent: 22 November 2012 14:09
To: Berto.Pandolfo@uts.edu.au
Cc: mina.dennert@hdk.gu.se

Subject: 21. Successful Design Briefs are not all Black and White - accepted with revisions

Dear Berto

We are pleased to inform you that your paper Successful Design Briefs are not all Black and White has been accepted with revision to the 10th European Academy of Design Conference - Crafting the Future.

This means that you need to make changes to your paper before January 15, 2013, and send them to peter.jones@plymouth.ac.uk

I am still awaiting the revisions from the reviewing panel. They should be with you by Monday next week.

Kind regards

/The 10th European Academy of Design Conference committee