

Alternative Models for Research and Writing in Design Studies

Design Studies Forum Special Session, College Art Association annual conference, Atlanta, Georgia
Thursday, February 17, 2005, 5:30-7:00 PM

Cabinet, Convention Level, Atlanta Marriott Marquis

Session chair:

Michael Golec, College of Design, Iowa State University

Speakers:

Carolyn Thomas de la Peña, University of California, Davis

Body Meets Technology: What the Design of Everyday Objects has to Teach

Everyday objects are often all that remain of the complex relationships between bodies and technologies during a given era. As a result, the design and user-interface of commercially successful technological objects can reveal much about the complex motivations individuals have for engaging with particular technologies over others at a given time. My paper reflects on my work with two types of everyday objects produced and consumed in the United States : weight machines from the early twentieth century and saccharin containers from the 1950s. I will use these objects to make four points: 1) producers of mass-market technological products frequently place their products in a historical continuum, thereby combining antiquated symbols with products explicitly designed to be “modern,” 2) objects created to mediate the technological with the physical often create a particular context through their the design in which consumers can re-frame a common technological experience as natural, 3) the act of engaging with technological objects can allow users to enact physically a narrative of “natural technologies,” and 4) commercially successful everyday technological products reveal that Americans are not the celebrators of technological progress frequently touted by historians, but rather hesitant technological adopters who seek to reconcile technological progress with the natural world.

Liz C. Throop, Ernest G. Welch School of Art and Design, Georgia State University

“Field Research in Graphic Design: Imperfect and Necessary”

Demographic information, focus group results, and audience interviews play a key part in the development of graphic design projects. Yet the majority of this research is proprietary and not published. This poses problems for design scholarship, because academic researchers cannot ascertain the intent or the audience for many works of design.

Critics can instead employ semiotic, linguistic, or literary readings to describe what a work of design communicates to them personally, and how it goes about doing so. Such writing can be very valuable, especially if the critic is empathetic and familiar with many cultural milieus.

In addition to their own impressions, those who write about design may draw on published research in areas such as mass communication, education, marketing, and sociology. For instance, there is an abundance of articles regarding the optimal length of a line of type in a textbook, depending on a student’s age and reading level. This information is based on field tests, and may be important to design research, yet it falls short of accounting for how an illustration on a page might figure into a student’s grasp of a given text.

At some point, design writers must compare their own appreciation for the complexities and nuances of visual communication with the perceptions of intended audiences.

Designer-driven field research can be time-consuming and expensive. It often identifies the quantifiable and objective, in a realm that values the sublime and the novel. Market research data, for example, is known for eliciting formulaic, rather than truly imaginative, responses. Design researchers must develop ways not only to gather hard information, but ways to use it for creative stimulus rather than for dry prescription. Research in fields from industrial design, to cultural anthropology, to psychology, may provide useful models.

Design writing can be more than “design appreciation” for existing artifacts. We can closely observe how works of graphic design communicate to different people, and this can give us new insights on which to ground theory.

Researchers must be able to measure their own perceptions against those of the diverse publics that graphic design influences. The time is right for field research into design.

Alison Matthews David, Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton

“Fashioning Diversity: New Directions in the Study of Dress and Design”

Dress and Fashion History have traditionally been concerned with studying the making, construction and materials of historical dress and accessories. In more recent years, studies of fashion have also attempted to wrestle with its consumption, representation and global dissemination. With the appearance in the last decade of dedicated academic journals such as Berg Press’ Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture and an increasing number of books on the topic of fashion published by serious academic presses such as MIT, Yale and UC Press, the study of fashion is continuing to gain legitimacy in the scholarly world. While I feel that object-based and material culture approaches have a great deal to offer the researcher and writer of design history, how might these be integrated more productively into larger theoretical debates taking place within the humanities? How can studying clothing give us new perspectives on embodiment and experience unavailable through other forms of cultural and material production?

What might fields and approaches such as oral history, cultural geography, disability studies, gay and lesbian studies and postcolonial theory have to contribute to the study of dress and design?

Coming from the perspective of a UK-based scholar, this talk will debate the past and future directions of this growing field in an international context. It focuses on two case studies. The first examines the theme and reception of the V & A’s Black British Style exhibition in the fall of 2004. According to the V & A ‘This exhibition is the first of its kind in the UK ’ and uses music, photography and film to supplement the narrative of the dress objects displayed. The second case study discusses how two scholars have used oral history to research areas of dress culture that are not easily accessible through traditional fashion history, namely gay and lesbian history and dress for the disabled.

Michael Schmidt, University of Memphis

“Graphic Design: Distributed to the Max?”

Graphic Design’s boundaries have grown increasingly hard to delineate ever since the Macintosh replaced the drawing board. The World Wide Web, interactive media applications and digital video further dispersed the activities of graphic designers, transforming a largely print-based congregation into a diaspora of new media converts. No longer moored to the centuries-old trade of printing, the communications principles, visual-cognitive theories, and rhetorical methodologies of graphic design drifted to new ports, establishing new destinations for thousands of students and seasoned practitioners alike.

Today, Graphic Design is, arguably, entering a second diaspora—this time not one of migration to new media, but migration of media expertise gained in the last exodus to the “applied research” of surprisingly diverse collaborative initiatives. This recent design emigration is exemplified by the Center for Multimedia Arts (CMA) in the FedEx Institute of Technology at The University of Memphis. The CMA is directed by two graphic design professors who collaborate with faculty, staff, and community members from disciplines as varied as computer science, applied linguistics, mechanical engineering, ethnography, educational psychology, and information technology—to name a few. The Center’s mission—to improve communication, enhance comprehension, and enrich human experiences through collaboration and new media—has generated a wide array of applied research opportunities, contributing to—as well as complicating—the redefinition of graphic design scholarship and practice for our present stage.

The Center’s experiences will be used to first characterize this second diaspora and subsequently to question the potential solvency of any project to define graphic design or its research models in the midst of such change: change that may supplant diaspora with the outright dissolution of the field.

Key experiences to be discussed include the Center’s development of media solutions for the National Civil Rights Museum, creation of a Native American artifacts database for archeologists, construction of interactive narratives to communicate the tragedies and deaths in a Memphis community exposed to toxins from a local Army defense depot, and management of a project and design of a product to communicate the complexities of medical alternatives for parents facing tough choices for their children at St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital.

Original call for participation:

“Alternative Models for Research and Writing in Design Studies”

Design Studies Forum Special Session, CAA Annual Conference, Atlanta, Feb. 16-19, 2005.

Session chair: Michael Golec, College of Design, Iowa State University

Deadline for receipt of abstracts: June 30, 2004

Broadly speaking, the humanities model of research and writing in design studies defines design as a human activity that is best understood within a social-historical context. New theories of communication following the advent of cybernetics and the development of new technologies have contested the validity of such a model. It can be argued that in its focus on design as a human activity, the humanities model misses how humans submit to, adapt to, and resist design. An alternative to the humanities model of research and writing in design studies has yet to be defined. At the very least, the still nascent field of design studies should acknowledge that designed artifacts and systems contribute to the ongoing conditions of complexity that have made up our experience of the world. Alternative models for research and writing will help design studies emerge from a starting position and move forward into high gear. Design Studies Forum invites abstracts for its 1 1/2 hour Special Session in Atlanta that address the possibility for alternative models of research and writing in design studies. Issues that prospective participants may wish to address include: The value that design studies takes from historically embedded objects and systems. The role of diachronic methods that examine aspects of design that are constitutive of their past (as well as their potential future) versus synchronic methods that focus on the context of design. The relevance of research areas that are on the periphery of design studies-neurophysiology and cognitive processing to name two- to the material aesthetic processes integral to design and its public reception. Case studies that focus on design applications, like the development of multimedia databases, the design and dissemination of electronic documents, or the contribution of design to information-networks and their accessibility. Submit c.v. and abstract of 400 words or less by June 30, 2004 to: Michael Golec Asst. Professor of Art and Design History, Iowa State University Department of Art and Design Department of Architecture, 389 College of Design, Ames, IA 50011, T: 515 294 3796, F: 515 294 2725, E: mjg402@iastate.edu