

DISCURSIVE DESIGN BASICS: MODE AND AUDIENCE

BRUCE M. THARP
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO
BTHARP@UIC.EDU

STEPHANIE M. THARP
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO
SNMUNSON@UIC.EDU

ABSTRACT

Presented within are four categories of product/industrial design practice, one of which, Discursive Design, is problematized regarding basic operational mode and audience. Two dimensions will be offered that provide fundamental structure for future theorization. Having emerged over the last two decades, increasingly critical practice is being developed within design's art-based, exhibitivistic model, and also within the field of design research. Here the dimension of Terminal/Instrumental is posited as an operational modality, while the audience along this dimension is posited in terms of Internal/External participation.

INTRODUCTION

In an attempt to help make sense of the expansion and maturation of industrial/product design research and practice, especially in the 21st Century, a basic framework is offered—a four-field approach to broadly categorizing design practice (commercial-, responsible-, experimental-, and discursive-design) previously articulated by the authors. In addition, two dimensions thereof are posited to aid in understanding discursive design, which is the least familiar of these four fields. Sharing much in common with notions of critical design, here discursive design is presented as an overarching rubric that encompasses critical design and more appropriately accounts for the varied forms of current and emerging “critical” practice. The binary dimensions (Terminal/Instrumental and Internal/External) while basic, help provide a theoretical foundation for future articulation of existing practice, as well as a fundamental vocabulary for practitioners to better understand what may be possible as they venture into this newfound design territory.

FOUR FIELDS

The first of the four fields is **commercial design**, representing what is the most common understanding of industrial/product design practice. This not only represents the overwhelming majority of current professional activity, but also acknowledges its historical roots. This is design work oriented toward, and driven by, the market. Success is largely defined in economic terms: profitability or sufficient return on investment. The primary intent of the designer is to create useful, useable, and desirable products capable of generating adequate financial return.

Responsible design encompasses what is largely understood as socially responsible design, driven by a more humanitarian notion of service. Here the designer works to provide a useful, useable, and desirable product to those who are largely ignored by the market. Issues such as compassion, altruism, morality, and philanthropy surround the work, be it for users in developing or developed countries. While responsible design can and often does have a relation to the market—being offered for sale to individuals or institutions—its primary intent is not a maximization of profit, but instead to serve the underserved.

Experimental design represents a fairly narrow swath within the broad field of design, and its primary intention is exploration, experimentation, and discovery. Experimental design is defined perhaps more by its process than its outcome. In its purest form it is not driven by an overly specific end-goal of application, but instead is motivated by inquiry—investigating the design implications of, for example: a scientific innovation, a manufacturing technique, a material, a concept, or an aesthetic issue. Just as with responsible design, a marketable object may eventually result from an experimental project, especially after specific refinements and deliberate commercialization efforts. However, the primary intent of experimental design is to explore possibilities with less regard for serving the market.

Discursive design refers to the creation of utilitarian objects/services/interactions whose primary purpose is to communicate ideas—artifacts embedded with

discourse. These are tools for thinking; they raise awareness and perhaps understanding of substantive and often debatable issues of psychological, sociological, and ideological consequence. Discursive design is the type of work that is generally less visible in the marketplace (though it can certainly exist there), but rather is most often seen in exhibition, print, film, and in the research process. Importantly however, these are understood as design—objects of utility, yet ones designed to carry ideas. They function (or could function) in the everyday world offering utility, but their discursive voice is what is most important and ultimately their reason for being.

It is important to note that work in one of the four domains does not entirely exclude other intentions or effects—a designer may predominantly wish to make a commercially successful product, but may also wish to do so with a more experimental design, for example. While multiple motivations and results (hybrids) are almost always present, the scheme extends from the idea that one is likely dominant—this often becomes evident as the designer makes decisions among competing issues. For example, the designer might choose a component material that is very reliable but prosaic, over one that is novel and exciting, but is ultimately less dependable. Both would offer a particular design advantage, but one is chosen/rejected.

It should be understood that precise categorization within the framework is not of ultimate concern. Instead its primary aim is a helpful starting point for design planning, which helps keep the designer on course amid the vagaries of the design process. The framework also provides a basic vocabulary that can aid professionals and the public in understanding and discussing design.

DISCURSIVE DESIGN

The discussion of the four-field approach helps to contextualize the focus of this paper—discursive design and the fundamental categories of operational mode and audience. While present to some degree (however small) throughout most of the history of industrial/product design, critical practice has gained purchase in the 21st Century, and the notion of critical design has become a rallying point and a loose, organizing rubric. The establishment of the term “critical architecture” began taking root in the late 1970s, but is largely attributed to Michael Hays’ 1984 article, “Critical Architecture: Between culture and form.” Following suit, critical design has been greatly promulgated by the work of Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, and that of their Design Interactions program students at the Royal College of Art. The most widely referenced notions of critical design have proliferated through Hertzian Tales (Dunne, 1999) and Design Noir (Dunne and Raby, 2001), yet their initial definition has increasingly become distorted. Originally, critical design described specifically electronic objects and also ones that could not exist in the marketplace. Further, Dunne and Raby associate criticality with the Frankfurt School theorists

and critical theory’s goals of enlightenment and emancipation, which is a high (and elitist) bar that is seemingly lost upon so many other’s work that is being called “critical design.”

The field of discursive design shares the same sense that the product-form can be primarily a vehicle for the expression of substantive ideas, with active discourse, discussion, and social debate usually as desirable outcomes. Discursive design is intended as an umbrella category that includes critical design (be it around the Dunne and Raby’s initial conception of non-commercial electronica) or instantiations that engage other forms of speculation, research, or commerce.

TERMINAL AND INSTRUMENTAL

Most typically discursive design is understood as a specific breed of objects that a designer plans and instantiates in some physical or digital form. These are then publicly released in hopes of adding to the discourse of a topic, while perhaps engendering reflection and transforming thought and action in the world. In this sense, once the designer completes and distributes the object, their job is basically finished; the hope of reflection and transformation is fundamentally beyond their control (i.e. “message in a bottle”). This is what is referred to as a *terminal* form of discursive design; the object is the terminus of the designer’s direct effort and control. Certainly the designer may subsequently alter the design or its context of user/viewer engagement in order to better affect communication of their message, however these are still efforts aimed at refining the object’s terminality.

An example is Julia Lohmann’s 2004 cow-benches, which are a “bovine memento mori” that raise concern of human utilization of animals as raw material. She makes her statement through her full-sized cow-shaped benches upholstered with a single cowhide, adding to the discourse surrounding “animal rights.” While receiving a great deal of press and inclusion in museum collections like the MoMA, most often however, such discursive projects speak to a much smaller audience through, for example, gallery exhibitions, student exhibitions, design publications, design blogs, designers’ websites, or small commercial niches. Because the objects are most often speculative and not intended to physically enter into mass consumers’ utilitarian lives, an art-based model of engagement is dominant.

Around the turn of the 21st Century a newer mode of discursive design emerged wherein the discursive object comprises a commercial research methodology. Discursive designing is included within a larger project—the discursive object is a means to some other end. This *instrumental* form of discursive design behaves similarly to myriad research tools that engage potential users and hopefully produce insight into their hopes, dreams, values, concerns, behaviours, etc. For example, the method of “collaging” has been a common design researcher tool over at least the last two decades. Here a

research subject is asked to create a collage of images (and words), whether of their own making or clipped from magazines or other curated lists. The scope can be general, such as, “What are your worries about the future?” to more specific questions, such as “What’s it like driving your car?” Here the research value is not the object itself—the collage—but instead the subsequent conversation that it engenders. The collage becomes a “discussion tool” in the sense that it opens up a dialogue between designer/researcher and stakeholders. Through the use of imagery and some text, users enter into a less-familiar expressive process—they often communicate differently, more broadly and more introspectively than perhaps when taking a survey or asked to articulate a verbal response to a question.

Instrumental discursive design involves the creation of discursive objects that operate much in the same way as these collages, though they normally are not created by, or co-created with, the user. Instrumental discursive designs are the outcome of the researcher’s efforts to design objects that elicit responses; users are invited to speak broadly, to reflect on the objects’ possible meanings. The discursive designer/researcher is looking to communicate ideas through their objects that are provocative on psychological-, sociological-, and ideological-levels. The goal is a substantive, values-based exchange. The instrumental discursive object is used differently than a typical prototype; they are more of a probe used to evoke user responses that may be difficult to assess otherwise. They may be presented as a prototype, but intentionally provocative. Ambiguity is also often intentionally leveraged with these discursive instruments. As Gaver et. al. discuss, ambiguity allows designers to “suggest issues and perspectives for consideration without imposing solutions... to raise topics or ask questions while renouncing the possibility of dictating [users’] answers.”

It is important to note that Terminal and Instrumental represent two ends of a continuum, rather than neat and distinct classifications. While much work is presently done at both ends, designers wishing to make an impact with their Terminal work should consider ways to engender a dialogical relationship with the audience. Rather than the message in the bottle, how can the designer keep the exchange going? How can they design for a more engaged discourse? A growing possibility for such interaction may be use of the Internet and forums or feedback devices on sites such as YouTube. And designers/researchers creating discursive objects that normally remain inside research projects can search for subsequent uses. Rather than being ignored or discarded after achieving their primary function of advancing a project, what other useful lives might these prototypes have?

INTERNAL AUDIENCE

There are varying degrees of engagement between user/viewer and the idea(s) embedded in the discursive

designer’s object. At the most basic level the designer disseminates her product/ideas that then become a part of a general notion of discourse around a certain topic. However, these become effective, valuable discursive objects when their message actually gets contemplated and is understood by others. Going further, the ideas may become internalized and reflected upon, after which they may cause a change in thinking. Ultimately these new perspectives may result in changes in behaviour and action, changing the world even in the smallest ways at the level of one individual, but also perhaps with collectives and with ripple effects even influencing societal structures.

Fundamentally discursive design can communicate to any group; the targeted audience, however, usually depends on a number of factors determined by the designer. The reflective designer, based upon their chosen message, may already know who the best audience is, or they may need to define and research how and with whom to communicate. Then, they plan the encounter with the audience, which of course may or may not go as intended. As ideas spread, the designer loses control, which can be both powerful and limiting. For many, the broader reach of the message, the better. In some instances a limited audience may be desirable, and if so, the designer may consider particular ways to limit others’ engagements with the objects, as well as how the objects communicate the ideas. But it should be clear that designers have both intended audiences and actual audiences, no different than product/ industrial design in general.

Two major audience categories have emerged over the decades through design’s discursive practice and are posited as Internal and External. As aforementioned, architecture has had a strong impact within this mode of ideas-based designing. If its history begins, as often cited, with Italian Radical Design of the 1960s, critical practice was largely focused inwardly. Critical architecture was employed to criticize architecture, and as such, this design practice operated similarly to the text-based field of architectural criticism. It can be considered a hybrid form of architecture and criticism. This development is not surprising given their long histories, and that practicing architects often engage in the production of theory and write critically about the discipline in the same professional publications as critics. This Internal focus/audience is a somewhat broad category and usually includes, for example, the political, technical, and professional systems that support the production of architecture. Today an internal focus still predominates the field of critical architecture.

Memphis may be the first significant product-design-related movement towards discursive design. Furniture was the medium used to challenge the cold rationality of a prevailing modernist aesthetic, along with the status quo of manufacturers, media, curators, and critics—those that play a role in the construction and dissemination of designs and design ideas.

INTERNAL		EXTERNAL	
INTERNAL	Object is terminus of design activity. Audience is design & related disciplines. Example: <i>A product designed for an exhibition that criticizes "green-washing" of products by marketers and complicit designers.</i>	EXTERNAL	Object is terminus of design activity. Audience is those outside of design. Example: <i>A product designed for an exhibition that questions societal norms of beauty and the objectification of women.</i>
	Object is a part of other design activity. Audience is design & related disciplines. Example: <i>A provocative prototype to help elicit values of a design team regarding the meaning & importance of sustainability for upcoming project.</i>		Object is a part of other design activity. Audience is those outside of design. Example: <i>A provocative prototype used to elicit women's values regarding body image for the initial research phase of client project to design exercise equipment.</i>
INSTRUMENTAL		INSTRUMENTAL	

Memphis, was an “anti-“ movement, reactive much in the same way that critical architecture today still has its back to, and faces “projectively” (Somol and Whiting 2002) away from modernism. While Memphis claimed concern for, and significance within, broader culture, the first-order focus of their work was the design profession itself. Affecting culture was a second-order consequence of their internal focus.

Today, while internally-focused discursive design indeed produces objects of discourse, it (like Memphis) aims for hearty self-reflection and changes within the discipline. To this end, while discourse has been defined here as the exchange of ideas that are of psychological, sociological, and ideological import, the Internal focus largely deals with the ideology of design, which in turn ultimately affects the individual and the social. But the first-order emphasis is upon design ideology.

EXTERNAL AUDIENCE

While self-reflection and -criticism are important components of healthy, mature disciplines, they of course ultimately strive for impact beyond their own walls. With a concern for how design practice can extend its influence deeper and differently into the social, the novel opportunity for discursive design lies with an External audience as a first-order emphasis. This is the most common understanding of discursive designing—communicating substantive ideas of some topical complexity that are relevant to other individuals and collectives. The goal here is not to use design to communicate and criticize design itself, although that may occur. The intention is to use design, the products of design and the strengths that such stuff affords, to communicate in a different and hopefully effective manner; design provides a more intellectual service.

The discussion so far of Internal/External has been geared toward Terminal forms of discursive design: the object is released into the public sphere. When the discursive object is nested within a larger design/research project, this is an Instrumental mode—a research methodology. Therefore Internal and External foci for Instrumental projects have different audiences than for Terminal ones. In the case of a discursive object employed as a research tool (like the collage

analogy), an Internal audience would involve the stakeholders themselves. Just as with Terminal+Internal projects, the message of the audience is aimed within, and geared toward those that are involved on the production side of the project. For example, a discursive object is used to help elicit reaction from other designers, engineers, marketers, executives, etc.; the Instrumental+Internal object is not meant to be viewed or consumed by the public or the user group. On the other hand, Instrumental+External objects are meant to elicit response from users. Specific members of the target audience are brought into the research process, and exposed to the discursive objects in hopes of gaining insight from their response. The insight is used to design something else, be it commercial, responsible, experimental, or even another discursive product. Yet, as aforementioned, the Instrumental+External object is not a prototype but somehow ancillary or peripheral in the sense of a genotype (Dunne 1999).

Researchers, design researchers, and corporate and independent practitioners all currently use discursive design to their own ends. From the most basic perspective, the notion of Terminal and Instrumental operational modes, as well as the respective Internal and External audiences both help to express the breadth of the value that discursive design can offer to individuals, the profession, and society. This structure is intended to help undergird further theorization that this burgeoning discipline needs to help legitimize and popularize itself within the broader community of academic and professional practice.

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