

NORDES 2021

# REVEALING WORDS FOR A DESIGN DEBATE: A DESIGN LEXICON CASE

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## ABSTRACT

In Autumn 2020, the Belgian association Wallonie Design dedicated to promoting design published a call tender to define and illustrate more than 100 words used in design practice. This Lexicon aims to complete an existing set of internal mediation tools, developed by the association to better explain the potential and benefits of design to different stakeholders and to promote design by and for other professions. Inter'Act research lab of University of Liege specialized in design and architectural research conducted this two-months project called "the Walloon Design Lexicon". It was developed through a collaborative writing process, a call for illustrative examples and two workshops. Through these participatory activities, the scale gap between words and practice revealed other intern and inter-professional communicational scale issues. The debate on the words generated a precious knowledge on design practice and designers in a macro (design industry) and global scale (economy of innovation).

## INTRODUCTION

Communicating design process and its creative nature is already an historically well-known issue (Cross, 1982). But considering the shifting nature of design, from objects to services (Findeli & Bousbaci, 2005) and even towards policy design (Bason, 2016), as well as the increasing interdisciplinarity and participatory approaches (Luck, 2018), communicating about design implies more than ever communicating towards an incredible diversity of stakeholders, thus calling for a real shared language.

The project presented here is an exploratory analysis of the results obtained during the "Walloon Design Lexicon" project. The Lexicon issued from this project is a context-based solution essentially trying to tackle design communication issues. It attempts to build bridges between different communities, publics and networks, but also through various scales of design, from product to policy.

Through this paper, we will focus on one particular workshop conducted in November 2020 with the local design community of the Walloon region in Belgium. The participants were invited to react to a selection of words and modify the suggested definitions, to better reflect their vision, practice, methods and tools.

The discussion generated during the process turned out to be an incredible generator of paradoxes, controversies and insights on design and designers' visions of their profession and relations to others. The results show different matters of scale when it comes to issues a) between designers; b) between designers and other professions; c) between design and the global context.

These issues and scales unfold at the intersection of two worlds, the one of language and the one of actions.

After introducing the related literature and existing tools, we present the project context and its methodology as well as the knowledge produced through this project.

## DESIGN, COMMUNICATION & LANGUAGE: SIMILAR BUT DIFFERENT SUPPORTS

The need to define and describe design is not new. Design communication is tackled by several authors for different issues. Among other works, we highlight communication within design teams (Eckert et al., 2000); communication with users and clients (Norouzi et al., 2014); explaining design (Cross, 1982; 2011; Zinna, 2020), and writing about and for design (Lees-Maffei, 2013). All these dimensions have a common point: the language. “For a collaborative future making, sharing a common ground is necessary” and the way toward such common ground is notably through language, and therefore words (Hillgren et al., 2020), among other media for communication.

Increasing adoption of design for innovation, transformation, problem-solving and transfer of best-practices generates the need to better understand its added value, methods, and tools. Often, it is not designers themselves who undertake such popularization initiatives to promote design, which makes this mission of demystification even harder.

On the one hand, considering for instance the divide between design and design thinking (DT), the latter became an autonomous entity when facing other fields and thus had to develop several descriptive and explicative tools, such as manuals, guidelines, frameworks and books. An important body of work (tools and methods used in DT) can thus be found (e.g., IDEO Toolkits; UK Design Council Toolkits; Curedale, 2012; Martin & Hannington, 2013). Although aiming for some “pedagogy” when communicating about design, its process, tools, and benefits, DT tools do not meet the communication gap between stakeholders.

On the other hand, the heterogeneous and plural growing practices in design force the design community (both in research and practice) to clarify its intentions too, notably through the use of its own vocabulary. In that regard, we can highlight several publications, starting with the work conducted in 2008 by the Board of International Research in Design, with the “Design Dictionary: Perspectives on Design Terminology”. More recently, in 2020, the Collaborative Future-Making Research platform (Malmo University) also published a Glossary to create some common ground between platform researchers (Hillgren et al., 2020).

The “Design Futures Lexicon” recently published by Fuel4Futures research program particularly focuses on design education: “located in design and primarily for design” (Morrison et al., 2020). It offers a set of toolkits to build a bottom-up shared vocabulary with and for the local design community of Oslo School of Architecture and Design. Finally, we would like to mention the upcoming book of S. Vial, the “[Vocabulaire du design](#)” for the French community, who deals with the evolving anglicisms besides the heterogeneity of such a design lexicon.

Worth to mention, there are differences between these existing works and the Lexicon presented here. Among them, we underline: 1) the contextual use of some words in Wallonia; 2) the list of words that is separated not through the lens of methods and tools, but rather through the lens of actions and deliverables; 3) the end-users of the Lexicon are here primarily design mediators, who are not themselves designers and 4) the Lexicon will complete a set of tools used in action when promoting design to companies, as a support to innovate through their projects and development strategies. For these reasons and others, undertaking a proper design lexicon project was considered a legitimate request, in complementarity to the references listed above.

## THE COMPLEX MISSION OF PROMOTING DESIGN

Wallonie Design (WD) is an independent organization who aims to promote design practices and methods as to increase sustainable and economic development of the Walloon Region and its companies. WD assists designers and companies at different levels, undertakes projects and collaborations with public local and European institutions, and improves accessibility to design.

In French and international contexts, we can compare it to the UK Design Council, Montreal City’ Design Office, Danish Design Center or French Agency for promotion of Industrial Creation. The punchline of the Wallonie Design (below: WD) summarizes well its mission: “The hyphen between designers and companies”. Thus, the WD team needs to master the culture and language of diverse professions, cultures, innovation strategies, public and private institutions services, in order to support design practice in the broader area of the labour market.

The team members (12) have backgrounds in management (4); project managers with art, design and architecture (4); human and social sciences (2) and communication (2). Even if they are acculturated to design culture and hold unique expertise on it, they are not themselves designers, as they openly mention. The increasing heterogeneous and complex practices in

design, going through important transformational dynamics, do not help the team overcome the gap they encounter in that regard on an everyday basis.

The team members therefore constantly need to question their understanding of design, designers, their tools and methods to act as mediators and better explain the added value, potentials and benefits that design might bring to the local ecosystem.

The request expressed by WD is i) to define 120 words separated into two categories – actions (50) and deliverables (70), and organised in seven design phases (see examples in Table 1 below); ii) to illustrate 70 deliverables with local design examples; iii) to undertake a participatory method (e.g. workshops) through the entire process.

Design Phases	Actions	Deliverables
Explore opportunities	UX	Ethnographic reporting
Shape the concept	2D visuals	Journey mapping
Study the feasibility	Benchmarking	Proof of Concept
Challenge the prototype	Useflows	Prototypes
Technical conception	3D Modelling	Technical plans
Prepare the project launch	Visual identity	User manual
Give Meaning	Co-design	Design specifications

Table 1: Examples of words extracted from the call tender (translated from FR to EN)

We would like to highlight here two observations, as to better understand the nature and construction process of the list of words itself. First, about the confidentiality of the word list itself: as part of the mediation tool, the selected words are part of the services offered by WD to its members. We have thus no possibility to openly share it.

Second, about the methodology through which the list was constituted: the list is based partly on other tools developed by WD, called IRL-D and DISC. The IRL-D (for “Design” version) is an interpretation and adaptation of the Innovation Readiness Level (IRL), itself based and inspired by [The Technology Readiness Level \(TRL\)](#) developed by NASA in 1974. This latter allows evaluating the maturity and state of a technological project. The [“Design Innovation Support & Collaboration” tool \(DISC\)](#) aims to explain and expose how design can contribute and improve project development through different phases. On basis of these

two existing tools, WD worked with an external design agency showing service, social & public design practice to define and complement the list of words. Additional words were thus deliberately chosen for their link with user/experience-based design fields, rarely practiced in Wallonia, as a way to orientate the local community knowledge not only towards techno-centric understanding of design, but also towards global design practice transformations. In that regard, the lead designer told us that the list is thus the result of an intern collaborative approach, but not per se a participatory one including the local professional community. Also, they added some concepts that they invented to show the creative relation that designers have with language.

As eventually submitted to us, the list of words uses actions and deliverables as main categories, which reveals the very pragmatic nature of the whole approach. These existing tools complemented with the Lexicon are mainly for people who need to convince others about integrating design in their companies, why they should do it and how much they should pay for it. In the list we can thus identify words designating design outcomes, supports, methods, tools, competencies, techniques proper to the field, but also words from broader professional fields (e.g. consulting, benchmark, prospective, coordination and planification). Design as such is understood and exposed here in a complex, intertwined matter.

The Lexicon project is therefore related to a larger ecology of tools that WD uses to promote design in the local context. Such a global toolkit aims to improve communication and operate in a very pragmatic and intimate scale of understanding, language and speaking. The toolkit operates as “mediating object” as understood by Freach (n.d.) and Dalsgaard (2017). It helps WD workers explain and build design knowledge with stakeholders, according to their problematics.

This filiation between technology, innovation, and design (already imbued in the IRL-D and DISC tools) to promote design for local companies and industries undoubtedly shapes the list of words, its goals and impacts, despite the attempt to include words from social-oriented design fields. The majority of words is indeed rather associated with industrial design, and bears technological resonance.

This toolkit supports and sustains frameworks or helps evaluate projects of different scales through design. The Lexicon, as its latest addition, is thus not a solitary object. It is connected at an intimate scale to design in its essence, but linked more broadly to a global network of tools provided to other professionals who try to grab what design is about.

## PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The mission was structured in three main phases, as illustrated in Figure 1. The first collaborative writing process was conducted between two researchers (architect and designer) to define and describe 48 commonly used or controversy words of the list, based on grey and scientific literature. As our main analysis is based on the data collected through the first Workshop (W#1) conducted with professional designers, we will develop only the parameters of the latter, as the data produced there was the most relevant, rich and meaningful one, regarding both the definitions' iterations and this conference thematic.

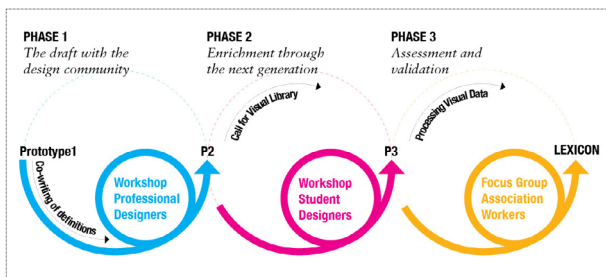


Figure 1: The project methodology to build the lexicon

This first two-hours online workshop was conducted on November 6th with 21 participants: 14 compensated professional designers recruited by WD; four commissioner team members; three public mediators who support technological innovation. First, seven groups of three participants were accompanied by an animator in a visual collaboration tool, presenting the selected definitions and a framework to modify them. We tested the structure, the meaning, the recognition of six selected words in each group.

This activity was followed with a second one, more open and half-controlled, as to explore the form, the use, the expectations and needs expressed in regard of the Lexicon, through a brainstorming and user journey tool (see Figure 2). This time four groups were constituted. Before, between and after both activities a general discussion was animated with all participants. At the end, we launched an online questionnaire to find illustrations for the words. Participant designers selected “actions” and “deliverables” that they would accept to illustrate through their design production. At the end of the project, 289 visual documents (.jpeg and multiple pages .PDF) were processed, archived, named as “action” or “deliverable”, as suggested by the designers.

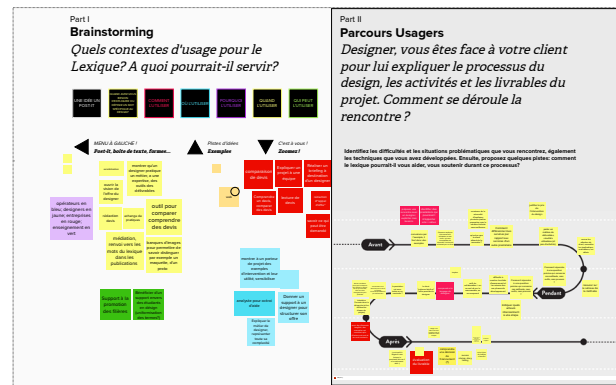


Figure 2: A screenshot from Workshop #1's second part (in FR)

## RAW DATA & ANALYSIS

The data generated in the lexicon project turned out to be a fertile field to reveal insights on design and designers' visions of their discipline. We based our analysis on 1) video and sound recordings of the workshop session; 2) screenshots; 3) notes taken during the entire project process. We focus on 1) the content of general discussions before and after group exercises; 2) the discussion and reactions during activities in smaller groups; 3) the modifications done by participants; 4) discussions' content during the meetings with the commissioner.

## RESULTS

What do “words” tell us about design? Considering the exploratory nature of this work, we highlight both singular and common manifestations of paradoxes, astonishments, controversies, reflections and interrogations that reveal enlightening insights on design and designers' practices.

We observed that the concerns lie in different pragmatic and philosophical dimensions, but they all revolve around three scales: 1) What happens inside the design practice itself, what happens in between designers and between design fields (product, graphic, interior, etc.); 2) What happens between designers and directly connected professional bodies such as mediators or technological innovation agents; 3) What happens between design fields and the global economy, such as industry or innovation.

We will give an example of each scale, but also add other insights that were identified. As we are in an exploratory stage of the data analysis, we can also expect more heterogeneous results connected or not to those scales.

## DEFINITIONS SEEN AS AN ENEMY OF FREEDOM

On the one hand, there is a need to name and describe things. On the other hand, describing designers' activities through language and words disturbed many participants. In regard of design practice itself, and as a whole, the lexicon has been first seen as a liberticide act against designers' freedom when establishing their relations with their clients. This was felt both by the dominant category of designers (product designers) and other, more isolated representants of design (graphic and service). They all pushed for more undefined, vague and general description without too much precision. A constructive way to resolve this issue was found by not "defining" but by "describing" the "actions" and "deliverables". The aim thus became to not describe the outcome, but rather describe what it is for, the objective or the benefit of it, i.e. not focusing on meanings but added-values. In the long run, the designer or WD employee indeed needs to explain what design brings, why paying for specific deliverables or activities.

The gap between graphic and product design became more tangible when looking at the words themselves. For example, some designers used "mock-up" and "prototype" interchangeably, while others never used some of the words and refused to be strongly associated to them. Trying to find some "universal" definition for those words was also perceived as a liberticide act, this time against the specifics of each sub-field.

Eventually, instead of finding systematic consensus or some collective understanding for each word, we observed that the debate rather allowed and contributed to community building as secondary outcome, as it is often the case in such participatory activities. The workshop thus rather contributed to ease and decrease the scale-gap still existing in between design sub-fields.

## THE END-USER DILEMMA: THE (IM)POSSIBLE SATISFACTION OF MULTIPLES USERS

The lexicon is first intended for the use of WD team members when approaching companies and other stakeholders who wish to include design and designers into their strategy. This crucial, concrete need implies to define the actions undertaken by designers and the nature of their productions in a pragmatic way. Yet, to be considered true and faithful to design practice, the lexicon should also be recognized and supported by the practitioners. It should reflect and remain connected to the design community, while serving the culture and language of other professional communities. Both approaches are essential for the success of the tool, and yet somehow conflicting.

As previously stated, designers felt danger for their freedom if their actions and deliverables were too

precisely defined. However, defining words in a very broad and conceptual manner is of no help to mediators. It risks to turn the lexicon into some purposeless list of words and make it useless. In the workshop, we thus observed a lack of methodology or a missing step, as to first increase designers' empathy towards people who need to communicate *for* design. We attempted to solve this issue by creating layers of definition: a first short general sentence explains the aim of each action or deliverable; it is followed by a more consistent and practical explanation on broader applications. We added when needed a third layer of text to inform about the controversies and different uses of some vocabulary. This second scale illustrates the challenges, through the words, of connecting sub-fields of design to other communities, directly linked to their practice.

## DESIGN THROUGH ACTIONS AND DELIVERABLES

The list constituted by WD is separated into actions and deliverables and includes design outcomes, supports, methods, tools, competencies, techniques proper to the field, but also words from management, prospective studies, ethnography, innovation culture, so on. This tentative to explain design through words classified into these two categories can wrongly echo to another existing controversy debate: design versus design thinking. In the lexicon case, the design is not separated solely into methods and tools. It is understood and reflected about in a more complex way. The objective is clearly to promote design and designers WITH their approaches, competencies, and ways of doing and WITHOUT disconnecting them from other professional actions such as management. This approach articulates design in dialogue with global context and workflows.

The debate revealed that participants still hold a strong attachment to a very personal way of practising, the need to remain flexible and to adapt according to the client, to change and adapt tools and methods, to invent their own words... During the workshop, designers explained that any explicitation step is done during meetings, phone calls, project presentations. In short, it is entirely based on the designer's communicational and relational competencies and thus not require any additional Lexicon. According to one designer, the duty of each designer is indeed to make its supports understandable and intelligible; as such, "the designer did his/her job wrong" if the client needs an additional lexicon. Identified as it is, it sounds like the classical design practice: according to this viewpoint, without a designer, clients and external stakeholders quickly reach their limits when comparing quotations, prices, deliverables or when trying to make sense of design as a whole. This can be seen as an idealist and controlling conception of the collaborative workflow of design, as it dispossesses other professionals to build an

empowering, balanced and rich dialogue with designers. The debate revealed another tension. For some designers, design is presented as a very complex process, but in their practice, it is much simpler and mainly based on human relations.

## DISCUSSION

We observed how words became the field for design debate. Naming and defining actions and deliverables undertaken by designers triggered reflections about multiple scales of connection, to their own practice, to other designers, other professions and the general world view of design. Words, the design vocabulary, are also designers' tools, and are considered their properties. The use, the meaning and the content they attribute to them are very personal. This singularity even reflects the plurality and richness of the practice, but doesn't overshadow the need for understanding and communication with the rest of the community.

Our exploratory observations reveal how personal scale of practice and conceptualizing one's design profession becomes an urgent, even though challenging task. The three scales of design communication (between designers, designer's verbal relationship with their client and other professionals, and communicating design without designers in a more global context) reveal also the dynamic dimensions of design vocabulary. The words' choices are context- and person-based, and even invented. Even though a lexicon itself might not address such intertwined communication and vision issues, it will directly feed some common ground of shared concepts, avoiding some misunderstandings about sometimes complex concepts, and thus hopefully avoid the potential erosion of professional relationships.

Beyond its content, the lexicon, as a concept, generated valuable debate on design communication and improved awareness on different stakeholders' communication needs. Thereby it shifted from a design outcome to a design debate tool, prone to explore these communicational issues. In that sense, we argue that further research is needed in this field through pragmatic tools such as lexicons but also through participative activities, as to explore other ways of addressing these communicational issues and as to improve empathy between different professional communities, but also design relations to different scales of ecology.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the participants who joined us at the workshops and Wallonie Design.

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