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ATTENTION TO DYNAMIC CHANGE & INTERCONNECTEDNESS



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Thomas OCKERSE

# LEARN FROM THE CORE DESIGN FROM THE CORE

## ABSTRACT

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*The current objective, object-oriented approach to design is questioned along with design education viewed as a job-oriented endeavor. Instead relational knowledge and experience in a holistic sense, both tacit and explicit, are valued along with an appreciation of the unique character of the student. A new paradigm for design education is proposed that embraces collaboration and focuses on integration of study, experience and reflection that translates beyond design into an intelligent life.*



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EDUCATOR AND ACTIVIST, Parker Palmer claims:

*We are being called upon into a more paradoxical wholeness of knowing by many voices. There is a new community of scholars in a variety of fields now who understand that genuine knowing comes out of a healthy dance between the objective and the subjective, between the analytic and the integrative, between the experimental and what I would call the receptive.<sup>1</sup>*

In the same book, co-author Arthur Zajonc adds:

*The curricula offered by our institutions of higher education have largely neglected this central, if profoundly difficult task of learning to love, which is also the task of learning to live in true peace and harmony with others and with nature.*

These statements reflect the paradigm shift from the mechanistic Cartesian worldview (the world as a collection of objects) to a holistic, ecological view of reality as a shift in consciousness from objects to relationships. In this new perception of reality the properties of parts are not intrinsic properties, but can only be understood as merely a pattern in an inseparable, integrative and dynamic web of relationships. Realizing this shift is central to all our perceptions, and therefore to our future of design as a field of practice, and most significantly, central to design education.

For education, this means nothing less than a call for total transformation: to establish an emancipating environment that facilitates a process that awakens the capacities of the whole person for all participants in that community: students, faculty and staff. As Wendell Berry declared in 1987:

*The thing being made in a university is humanity ... (as) responsible heirs and members of human culture.*<sup>2</sup>

This transformation requires attention to what the Dalai Lama calls “the secular ethics of the heart”. . . the stuff most educators tend to dismiss as being outside the territory of the course subject, while faculty declare that this is “not our business.”

Education and design are now at this very threshold of change. They thrive on their interdependence, just as they have throughout their evolutions. I envision the respective fields to change significantly in the future—as they must if either is worth its salt regarding its contributions to the world and humanity’s stewardship to its planet called home.

In 2003 the ICOGRADA education team was asked to respond to the question: What can education offer that will truly sustain students in life? As an invited contributor my response was, in a nutshell: students need a process that helps them cultivate their intelligence to become truly integrated individuals capable of dealing with life as a whole — as human beings foremost — and only then as designers. I view this nurturing of intelligence as the central task for educators, their primary purpose. That we happen to do this via design is useful, but secondary. For education this is at the heart of the word sustainability. For what ultimately sustains us only comes from our inner capacities that arise from the core or our heart of being—not from some external source or authority.

Contemporary western education, with its tradition so firmly established since Aristotle, is a system based on comparison and competition. Its main interest is to multiply knowledge and facts and to develop intellectual skills and clever minds. That system perpetuates materialism and fragmentation as the way to view the world, which only proliferates the current state of our world. Clearly then, that system has missed the point because it has not helped bring about the understanding of the total process of consciousness.

*Caught up in explanations education fails to nurture intelligence. Intelligence reflects an understanding of the total being, the total process of human existence.*<sup>3</sup>

And only when the mind and heart are integrated in action does intelligence have a chance to enter into life.

In a recent interview with Hugh Dubberly (a former student of mine in the late '70s) by Melcher Media,<sup>4</sup> Hugh makes the observation that design practice is stuck, trapped in the past, unable to move forward, unclear on what forward might mean, lacking the mechanisms to build and share knowledge, and lacking even a model of design knowledge. He illustrates this with two speakers who spoke at a 1985 conference, Nicholas NegroponTE (architect and technologist at MIT) and Milton Glaser (graphic designer from New York), and again twenty years later at a similar conference (AIGA). In this second meeting Dubberly notices how much had changed in NegroponTE's professional life, while little had changed in Glaser's, even though both have lived in the same relational context of vast changes in computer technology and the Internet.

Interestingly enough, some of that is expressed in the field itself by the apparent "democratizing" of the practice and the proliferation of "expertise" under new labels (albeit reminiscent of the emperor's new clothes), such as: Information Architecture, Experience Design, Interface Design, Interaction Design, Interactive Design, Universal Design, Service Design, Ethnographic Design, Human-centered Design, User-centered Design; along with new jargon such as persona, stakeholders, usability, scenario, human factors, heuristic evaluation, design thinking, action-centric design, etc. In my opinion, none of these change what it means to design from its core perspective of meaning (as "right action" to network relational order for the purposes served), but appear on the surface as different, supporting separation. Again, the names and jargon set up illusory identities that merely perpetuate the objective worldview, but veils the essence of meaning.

Increasingly it appears that design cannot remain as limited, specialized knowledge and skills, but reflects more a process of a gathered, collective effort of expertise—or more precisely, intelligence. Interestingly enough, technology has facilitated this kind of "democratizing" of design, with more and more people participating from different fields that were either needed or

found their way in by coincidence. (By “democratizing,” I do not mean to give equal license to the non-skilled to perform specialized skills identified with experts, for example, in visual form giving, aesthetics, visual problem solving.) I mean to reflect collaboration and integration of the variety of input needed for a particular situation (expert or not). We know this is already happening. Those more prepared in intellectually-centered academia have contributed their knowledge from fields like cognitive science, computer science, engineering, biology, cultural anthropology, behavioral psychology, linguistics, philosophy, marketing—you name it. While “theory” (i.e., the abstraction of ideas relative to causal and contextual phenomena) remains relatively undeveloped in the design field (i.e., in comparison to other fields, especially the sciences), the practitioners in other disciplines have helped articulate the theoretical perspectives, in their own terms, for the field of design, thus stimulating and expanding our design awareness for relational factors.

Of course, this has created some confusion as the identity of design is diffused. For example, because of today’s technological emphasis, the relational phenomenon often directly reflects the design of electronic devices as a distinctive endeavor labeled as Experience Design and Interaction Design. However, “experience” and “interaction” are fundamental issues to all design products that serve human needs—from tickets to books, doorknobs, cell phones, buildings like museums, urban spaces, as well as social and informational forms of networking. In that same sense we cannot limit the term Interface Design to computing screens since all design products, from posters to phones to museums, serve as the means or “interface” to address some need or function. We are a species that not only relies too much on the need to label everything in order to “know it,” but then also rely too much on the “collapsed meaning” of such labels as the gospel truth of its nature. (By “collapsed meaning,” visualize a concept map with the word in the center and many other words around it—the collapse of the “many” into one, gives meaning to that center. But remove the surrounding relational elements the meaning is open to conjecture, i.e., we “think we know the idea.”) Labels have practical functions, of course, but meaning, as we learn sooner or later, is forever dynamic (not fixed or frozen) and merely a construction of thought that operates in an unlimited



space of dynamic relationships (therefore, at best, rendering the “object” temporarily as such)!

Furthermore, we cannot view the relational aspects involved merely in their simplistic format of object to client or user. For example, traditionally design has existed mostly in the overlap of business and art. Today we see an expanding relational view of interconnectivity with other fields: computer science, engineering, technology and the physical sciences (light, computing), cultural anthropology, behavioral psychology, ecology and other natural sciences, social sciences and politics, critical theory, philosophy and ethics, and we could even add metaphysics, or whatever relational value a field can possibly bring to help designers understand how to better address human needs, interests and values.

Design viewed from this multi-relational perspective becomes an opportunity to consider many related interests and skills for participation as collaborators! Consequently we can expect that more and more people can participate in this activity, contribute to the field, and also enable designers to make some of its tacit aspects become more understood from an explicit perspective. This collaboration provides a very powerful way of looking at our design future. Of course, the reciprocal also happens with other fields of expertise contributing to design. For example, in more recent times computer programmers have embraced Christopher Alexander’s architectural theories on “Pattern Language”<sup>5</sup> as a way to help them understand computer science.

However, this phenomenon also tends to bring about anxiety. Practicing designers get anxious when technology options seem to threaten their known ways of practice, and the younger generation appears to pass them by with knowledge and skills with which the older generation can’t keep up. In education, students tend to focus on their immediate future and readiness to be employed, not with what they might be doing in a changing world some ten to fifteen years later. Educators with anxieties about the rapidly evolving technologies effecting how information exchange can function tend to focus on training and facts, thus losing sight of their essential responsibility to help draw out the student’s intelligence, to nurture their capacities and to provide enduring knowledge and meaning.

The anxieties mostly reflect our own personal insecurities with change, our inability to let go of our projection of expectations,

our sense of inadequacy when others (especially academics) can spout the jargon more prolifically than those who use few words but create, and our continual focus on the appearance of material things rather than the invisible underlying principles. Teachers need to embrace these developments as an integral part of the ongoing process of human transformation. (As a designer and as an educator, I have delved into studies of semiotics and systems science to help me understand how to use the visual language of form beyond aesthetic values, and how to define the patterning of parts within the whole when giving visual form to information.)

This broader and deeper understanding of design reflects the relational aspects we come to see. When the mind is “on” the notion of complexity, it gets entangled, bound up and overwhelmed. When the mind is “in” complexity we can “know” and trust it, work through it, yet without being able to articulate it in words. Simplicity and complexity are not polar opposites, they are relations based on our perspective. Such awareness stimulates the vision to collaborate, to de-centralize knowledge and skills and to work in terms of a more integrative paradigm that speaks from the core of our intelligence and humanity. In turn designers strengthen the value of design and its significance to go well beyond the perception of design as surface treatment. This new paradigm embraces “life experience” as master teacher in living the life of knowledge in a world of constant and dynamic change.

Experience is significant. Not only does it help us correlate what we have “studied,” but it actively and immediately synthesizes and mediates our perceptions of and engagement with the external world with that deep sense of internal knowing from which ethics, truth and wisdom arise. Once we recognize, understand and appreciate this relational complexity and address the need for interactivity, those who prefer to operate closer to the center as a “designer” should also understand where to position themselves in relation to the other fields of expertise. In other words, the way we make use of this knowledge from within provides the key to its real value in what is expressed as design action and thinking.

While the “pouring in” of knowledge (the western Aristotelian approach) remains prevalent to education in general, art and design schools take exception to that by offering students a learning process mostly gained from direct experiences in their creative dialogues with what they make. This sensory-mindful engagement stimulates

sensitivity and insight, and truly draws out from within. An internal-external dialogue brings explicit and tacit awareness into a meaningful relationship. In this process of experience we integrate our total ontological nature with feeling, thinking and action: to navigate consciously and even unconsciously our immediate sense of relationship to the external along with our deepest and most profound sense of awareness and knowing (Plato’s “integrative” approach that draws out from within).

In my opinion we must learn to not preoccupy ourselves with the mind “on” objects (i.e., projecting, labeling, categorizing), but allow the mind to be open and “in” the objects to experience and “in” the actions of engagement. I call this the “contemplative practice of design.” Doing so allows the tacit (which the rational mind cannot easily explain) to have a chance to emerge and become meaningful. When we come to nurturing creativity, academics and study alone stifle it! Experience plays a major role in this perspective since creativity can only come from the unknown, never from the known. Similarly Tim Brown, CEO of IDEO, recently said

| *design is always a mix of disaster and opportunity*<sup>6</sup>

meaning that we work within the context of the system as we know it, while at the same time must keep an open mind and question it.

So “doing” and “being” are the two sides of the same coin. But, how often do we really ask ourselves what it means to simply “BE”? For example, the term “Human-centered Design,” one of today’s buzzwords, I like because it reflects a noble and justified principle that integrates the epistemology with ontology. But, do we really know what it means to be “human”? Of course, our whole human nature is an extremely complex system that remains largely still a mystery in spite of what science claims.

We each know our self and the universe around us through the perspective of our self. Each of us is the center of knowing, the knower. Knowledge results from a movement of consciousness going outward and inward, although this mostly reflects external relationships with objects and ideas of other people as an objectifying process. In this process we pay less attention to our inner nature, not observing what actually goes on within ourselves as a mediator and processor of consciousness. We particularly miss the tacit and immeasurable in our nature.

There is something more than our direct attention—we might call this phenomenon a peripheral view that can apply to all that triggers our consciousness in the process of awareness when we pay attention. This is why designers need to pay attention to the multiplicity of “centers” as parts seen in relation. When we become aware of these relational connections patterns emerge that reflect meaning from one depth to another. When we change one part we affect all relationships—exemplified by the butterfly effect Buddhist philosophy uses and the new science.

Now that we have traveled briefly in the larger picture of our nature of being, how does this reflect the nature of design? The task of being conscious of the many in this holistic relational web challenges us, although actually it’s so very simple: pay attention. Attention stimulates peripheral awareness as well as specifics. By default this reflects the nature of multi-centeredness; not limiting our perspectives to the specifics in isolation (as labels!). This shows the need to be open to perceive the dynamics of relational patterns active in an open network of relationships; such awareness enables us to allow our interest to perceive the relational contexts, while it simultaneously forces us to keep an open-mind and act responsibly toward the whole of attributing factors to help bring about meaning.

I strongly advocate theory, or “study” in the arts, but work hard to balance this with the process of creative production/action or “making.” However, a third component equally essential (but least attended to) is reflective practice. Reflection offers the assimilation and right appreciation of what the other two offer. Depth of meaning can only occur when these three dimensions of learning overlap. They remain unique methods, but cannot be used alone. To bring about their synthesis requires balance in their use. We tend to emphasize the left-brain activity, which promotes living with our minds “on” objects and projecting what we would like something to be. In that limited use of mainly the left-brain we limit awareness and the true capacity to unfold, discover and see anew. I call for more attention to seek a right balance between “study,” “experience” and “reflection” (primarily a right brain function) as a way to understand more fully the dynamic systems of underlying principles at work, especially for design practice. Again, this integrated perspective is at the heart of contemplative design.

The exploration of the nature of the explicit and the tacit always plays an important role in the creative efforts to which design holds the keys. Without it the results would never reach new heights. As William Butler Yeats said,

| *Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire!*

Furthermore, as education is merely one experience for that, the full responsibility for personal development and how to apply what was learned, rest ultimately on the capacities and choices of the individual—as part of one’s internal development of consciousness.

Having lived through an evolving process as educator, theorist and practitioner of design, I now feel an urgency to emphasize the balance of the aspects of study, making and reflection, and the need to provide an educational environment that considers the student first. Educators must not impose on students a projected program requirement of knowledge and skills but provide a flexible program that nurtures ethics, enduring values and develops integrative skills and perspectives, while addressing the individual’s interest with empathy and attention. In other words, an education that seeks to help draw out from within the inner capacities of the individual is the focus.

At the core of this reality is what we call “life” as the dynamic force of nature expressed from within and throughout our nature of being. We must understand this underlying holistic principle as the core of integrative being, thought and action, similarly design, in education and practice, especially with our increased reliance on digital media and in a world charged by the dynamics of change that affect the personal and social environments for human interaction needs integration. Designers with visual art expertise, as they try to frantically keep up with this dynamic evolution and intellectualizing mode, should not lose sight of their particular expertise as visual form givers and their cognitive approach to design.

Most importantly, all must attend and nurture their interests and inner faculties and work where they feel inspired. They should not feel obliged to develop expertise they don’t have or want; leave that to those with whom they collaborate. Only when the mind and attention are “in” the process as the experience, the contemplative approach, can designers (as collaborators) have the potential to become real instruments of value for creative insight

to define emerging patterns of relationships for which design serves its purpose. This human experience involves attention and heart—because only when we attend with heart are we able to open ourselves up to the web of relationships active in this process of engagement and cope with the very notion of complexity. We could say that this awareness reflects having a peripheral view, not just in the quality of perception, but in the principle it holds: to accept and not dismiss that which appears to be marginalized or even invisible; considering these aspects as in union with the center of focus.

In becoming tuned into the holistic nature of the human experience, we find ourselves becoming truly informed to help others. As Parker Palmer said in *The Courage to Teach*:

*Many programs are trying to effect educational reform from the outside in, but the greatest immediate power we have is reform from the inside out. Ultimately, human wholeness does not come from changes in our institutions, it comes from the reformation of our hearts.<sup>7</sup>*

From this process “sustainability” (another buzzword) takes on quite a different perspective, not just for environmental matters, but reflective of individuals. We need to nurture who we are, not what others think we should be.

For that matter I have worked toward a practice of design in depth, breadth and multi-centered awareness, which I have come to identify as “designing from the core”—the core reflecting one’s inner nature. From that core, design is merely a process that expresses itself in many ways for making and forming, for opening and understanding, for interpreting and expressing, and for the relational weaving of experiences, interests, needs and actions.

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