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Teaching Design by Confronting Homelessness

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The increasingly complex and technological world is fast becoming distant for vulnerable populations such as the aged, the homeless and the infirm. What is our role as designers in this increased complexity? How can we understand or empathise with people in difficult situations, or design with socially responsible solutions in mind?

For design to be relevant, or to try to improve the quality of life for the majority, designers need to grasp how product or spatial designs affect the human user in intimate and social sense, and this within real projects situated phenomenologically within the context of lived experience.

In this paper I explore what happened when I and my colleagues used a phenomenological approach to explore design problems with students, with a project dedicated to the subject of the homeless.

Understanding the underlying values that guide design decision-making means uncovering how and what intentions are instilled as part of student learning early in the design process. Seeking to understand the experience of users in their lived context is a way for students to

understand both the role of design and of the designer in society. For design to really affect the social fabric of society, students need to grasp the underlying philosophical values that shape design decision-making, and how design intentions are political, personal and social as much as aesthetic or form-driven.¹

Asking these larger questions is not useful if students cannot see how they are framed within current issues of contemporary society. Asking questions of a social, political or economic nature requires thinking about the larger world theoretically, and then making sense of issues uncovered through the design process via a more intimate exploration of problems in a local context. A phenomenological approach to design problem-solving is a means to collapse ideas about theory and practice together, where the vehicle of expression becomes the design project.

The Context of the Homeless Shelter Project

I will tell the story of a design project for the homeless. I speak from a personal perspective and present the studio design experiences of both teachers and students within a baccalaureate interior design program at the University of Montreal in Montreal, Canada. I taught the first year, second semester design studio with two colleagues and we were responsible for 45 students with design activities spanning 4 months during the winter semester. In preparing for this semester, my colleagues and I were frustrated by the previous year's students' responses to design problems as more aesthetic than human. In essence, we were questioning what we ourselves were teaching. We felt we needed to shift our teaching approach to instill more social awareness in our students, while still integrating aesthetic intent, physical constraint and other design concerns into the design problems we would set.

We revamped all three studio projects, introducing the Homeless Shelter project followed by a larger residential design problem for different family units within a working-class neighbourhood. Homelessness was chosen in part because it was currently in the news, and we felt this was a perfect opportunity to bring social issues to the students' awareness through their studio design learning experiences. Our goals for this project included:

- Getting underneath issues of aesthetic beauty in design;
- Instilling a sense of purpose to design and into student thinking;
- Developing both cognitive and affective aspects of student awareness;
- Appealing to students' own experiences of space, place and human social needs and how they might integrate their own understanding of a design problem through experiences;
- Creating a place of conversation and questioning within the studio milieu;

- Using both the design process and actual lived experience as the catalyst for design interventions.

One aspect in particular had disturbed us: students' lack of empathy for the people for whom they were designing. Empathy for users is a driver of socially responsible design thinking, and if instilled in the early learning stages of student experience, can provide a richer understanding of design's potential and of a different way to create and define design interventions.

The Concealed Complexity of Interior Design

The current emphasis on aesthetic form in design studio production often negates the social contexts of life, and relegates the more subjective complexities of human life to the background. Design schools tend to emphasise product production and spatial aesthetics, with priority given to form. Human and larger philosophical questions about knowledge and problem-solving are not as often considered. This emphasis on the aesthetic is simultaneously coupled with a tendency to design for the 'mainstream', ignoring the needs and desires of vulnerable populations such as the aged, children and those outside a relatively narrowly defined physical 'average' or norm. And yet it can be argued that design should be aimed at the full economic range and lifespan and of all people from birth to old age.²

Other questions were brought to the project, such as: How do we experience interior space as we live our daily lives and what does it mean to live well?

Design is generally considered to encompass both the aesthetic and the functional: we need certain spaces to perform certain tasks, and designers can solve living problems for specific functions or purposes in an aesthetically pleasing way that enhances the quality of life.³ But what about people who just need to survive? What about design that hinders your ability to move if you have arthritis or are disabled? In the early learning stages of design these social and affective aspects of design are, at worst, neglected, and at best, considered in terms of immediate physical parameters.

Good design requires self-reflection on the part of the designer, and the capacity to understand users' needs in an intimate way. Underlying questions that could be asked concern why spaces and products are designed in a certain way, such as:

- What are affective human experiences in the world that contribute to the betterment of human life?
- How does the increasingly technological and material world that we live in enhance or hinder that quality of life?
- How can we understand and create better ways of living if we do not understand the underlying values that shape who we are and what we do?

This latter question implies a recognition that the underlying values that govern how we work and play are in part grounded in the physical designs of the spaces that we create.

In considering the underlying values shaping space, young designers need to ask questions about what it means to improve mankind's situation in the world. In terms of considering human needs philosophically, Ludwig Wittgenstein understood this integral aspect of the betterment of life through self-reflection. Richard Shusterman, in *Practicing Philosophy : Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life*, suggests that fundamental to all philosophical thought is Wittgenstein's idea that "What help is it... to solve philosophical problems, if (one) cannot settle the chief, most important thing" – how to live a good and happy life?..."⁴ In considering Wittgenstein's idea about a philosophically pragmatic life, I suggest that designers have a role to play in helping people to live better lives through appropriate and socially responsible design, as well as through solving problems in and through design interventions.

Situated Theory for Design Education

In 1993, C. Thomas Mitchell suggested that:

...The industrial age has been giving away to a post-industrial era. This transition has profound consequences, throwing into question most traditional notions of what design is and what designers do. New technological developments, for example, make it possible for design to become much more responsive to the cultural, social and personal needs of design users than had been the case in the industrial era. The distinguishing characteristics of the emerging postindustrial tasks are that designing is more focused on the dynamic processes of user experience than on physical form.⁵

Now almost 15 years later, we see this shift in our lives daily, and yet design education has been slow to respond. I would suggest that as designing becomes even more focussed on dynamic processes of user experience, the social, cultural and personal factors within design processes become even more important for young designers to experience. The approach advocated is phenomenological one, where the designer becomes an interactive agent with the user in the lived situations that they find themselves. For students, this implies exploring theories of design within real-world problems situated in everyday life.

Students can examine theory while exploring design problems. If we consider the design process as problem-based learning, then this also implies engagement, lived experiences and what John Dewey calls a 'process of finding out'. Maggi Saven-Baden discusses problem-based learning as a fundamental component

of Dewey's idea about learning "...not as something reliable and changeless but as something that is an activity, a process of finding out."⁶ And this process of finding out includes questioning in the theoretical sense, and doing so exploring lived experiences in practice.

Carlos Alberto Torres suggests this means combining theory and practice, and that critical education is a means to build theory and practice in education, what Paolo Friere calls "...the political importance of teaching and learning as a human adventure." Torres quotes Friere:

Teaching and learning are therefore moments of a greater process that is knowing, which implies recognising. The educatee recognises himself by knowing objects, discovering that he is capable of knowing, witnessing the immersion of meanings, and by doing so becomes a critical signifier...⁷

Students need to ask difficult questions and to step out of their comfortable skin, and this requires experiencing problems as they are lived. Learning to question the relevance of design becomes as important as learning about human experience and, in a circular fashion, how this experience could be situated within relevant design processes and outcomes, including aesthetic form and context, needs to be considered. Within the academic setting, this means that a philosophical stance in interior design must be engaged, one that draws attention to how theory is embedded in practice, and dialectically, how practice might be also considered in theory.

Design Studio Teaching Rethought

In this setting, a phenomenological approach means thinking about design experiences as experiences grounded in the doing, while considering these very assumptions that come to the fore. This means creating learning experiences where students live and learn problem solving from both a pragmatic and a critically post-modern perspective. As mentioned earlier, traditionally, design projects in first year are grounded in issues of space as physical entity alone. Engagement with the homeless as the subject triggers the social necessity of design as a practice broader than considerations of aesthetic form; it can create a broader critical social understanding of design, as well as the integration of the user-designer perspective as a fundamental component of design interventions, situating design problem solving more directly within the realm of human experience.

A related issue often neglected in design studio teaching is the student and teacher stance, and yet we spend much of our time as teachers and students having conversations about design, challenging ideas about design, and we do so

with social, political and professional stances. These imply underlying value assumptions that are not always explicit, and yet affect how meanings are constructed in the design studio. Teacher-to-student conversations, and student-to-student conversations are major components in the construction of knowledge-making in the studio, as a means of making meaning. Projects examining social human issues necessitate conversation and human understanding of a more personal and intimate nature, and conversations help mediate these types of issues.

How can teachers make the design real for students, in a way that empowers them to be productive and engaged interior design professionals? Some teachers might engage students by linking theoretical constructs with the life-world, and some will not. I believe that students need both the theoretical and practical aspects of the design process to be made explicit, and need to be nurtured into the understanding of design processes. In other words, how can we as teachers engage students in the practice of interior design and use this to nurture more fundamental questions that must be asked?

Here I suggest that there is more potential for understanding the dynamic processes of interior design when practice is embedded in knowledge-making from the dynamic processes found in everyday life. Collins & Selina suggest that Heidegger made explicit the role of practical life as fundamental to theory and engagement in philosophical thought:

If the ordinary practical world is there, always, it comes first. It has to be there for someone before they can launch into abstract calculations, theorising about Transcendental Egos...Husserl, having noticed it, kept putting it back into brackets. But Heidegger set off on a meaningful new path – towards being as it was encountered and made meaningful, in PRACTICAL EVERYDAY LIFE.⁸

This suggests two issues for interior design teaching. First, how theory is incorporated into the design studio is almost as important as what processes are taught. Second, what theory and knowledge of interior design is and how this is situated within the larger design epistemological framework becomes important to consider. In defining theory creation as meaning making, Heidegger situates this thinking in the events of everyday life.

Telling the Story of the Homeless Shelter Project

I return now to the story of the studio project, where I was teaching first year interior design in a baccalaureate program at the University of Montreal with two colleagues. We had been reflecting on our activities in the design studio since the previous year, in preparation for the upcoming studio with 45 students beginning in

a blustery January winter in Montreal, Canada. I wrote about my thoughts at the time, and our general frustrations teaching in first year. Students were coming into the program with preconceived notions about designing in general and interior design in particular. We were trying to break them out of thinking solely about the aesthetic concept, which was their tendency at this point in their learning, as they had just completed one semester of more abstract approaches to design thinking, based in large part on traditional design foundations.

I recorded my thoughts at the time in the form of reflective memorandums, notes to myself written as we were going through the studio preparation and experience. The following memo explains what happened:

... We started both years with an "ice-breaker" project, a quick design problem that allows the students to jump right into design process and having to create an interior space for a specific problem. Last year the students did a design for people living in an appliance – a great way to break conventional thinking about where people could occupy space. Our second project was about living in St. Henri, a depressed, working class neighbourhood with pride in its roots, interesting architecture, an historic texture very specific to its own area, and a microcosm of urban fabric in Montreal with social problems. Within that context last year, the students designed two interiors based on a relatively vague client description and the division of a three storey space for two families. The reality of the neighbourhood, however, is really one of two or three families often living in a two storey home. The social issues of poverty and high unemployment that are characteristic of the area were in the end conditions far from the minds of many students, most of whom come from a homogenous (French Canadian) upper income background.

Despite our efforts to encourage the students to explore the neighbourhood, research the needs of the residents and try to integrate the social fabric within the design problem, the students remained somewhat aloof. The clients became people outside of the urban context that we had been trying to place them into, and many of the projects became well-designed spaces but unrealistic to the urban reality of the situated project. We realised that the ice-breaker, although fun and creative in breaking down conceptions of space, failed to prepare students for a socially considered design experience, perhaps due to its lack of linking the human context in terms of the social meaning of the human in that space. The human was dealt with spatially, but not socially.

So when my colleagues and I were asked to teach the course again, we saw an opportunity to revamp it and fine tune the projects to situate a more specific series of projects to bring the social consciousness to the students in a tangible way. I suggested grounding the ice-breaker activity in a more pragmatically situated project, while still changing the scale and encouraging the students to step of their reality, one of our goals from the outset. And yet we also wanted philosophical thinking to occur, both on the level of interior space, as we had last year (although this was essentially aesthetic theorising), but also on the social and phenomenological level. This year we decided to do an ice-breaker that situated the student immediately into a different social context.

The ice-breaker project we created was for the students to design a solution for the homeless in Montreal. This was timely as while the project was ongoing, there were news reports of the plight of the homeless and of a group whose makeshift boxes were being removed from under the bridges near one of Montreal highways. We felt that this would be a great design creativity process project, because it would force students to grasp a design thinking totally out of their “known” context.

.....

But what was different was the nature of the PERSON that the project was for, as well as HOW the students were to go about understanding their ‘client/user’. A homeless person was not someone that these students knew. As part of the problem, we encouraged them to “get to know” them, not an easy thing for middle and upper middle class students. We encouraged them to “live the life”, even if it meant being outside for 15 minutes in the cold and rain without protection, or going to see where they live and what they do....in other words, to develop empathy for their “client”.

Some students delved right into it, others pointedly said that they could not, still others decided that they would “do what was best for the homeless” without getting to know who they really were. Still others tried to “figure them out”, realising that maybe “providing a solution” was not what they wanted. Many students were surprised to find out that the news reports said that many of the displaced homeless actually did not want to leave – that that they were “happy” with their lot in life and felt a sense of control over their lives- that going to a shelter would indebt them and force them to become beholden to someone else, which they did want to do. Some students went onto the street to find out, and really tried to empathise with the homeless and their situation. One student actually set up a tarp and slept under the walking bridge to the University playing the role of the homeless person.

We watched him from the studio window and were amazed to see (observe) what he himself recounted to us later on – that not one person went to see what he was doing there. He actually got pneumonia, but understood very personally what this lifestyle actually was. Although we told him that he didn't have to go this far, I also realised how seriously some of the students were getting into the project, really trying to empathise with the plight of the homeless in Montreal. The resultant designs were varied in scope and approach, thoughtful and creative. We felt very gratified as teachers that this project helped the students to not only think spatially but also think humanly about the spaces of the human living situation. (Written April, 2002).

Discussion

The subject of the homeless compelled students to step out of their comfort zone, to engage problems of humanity in a personal way. Furthermore, students were compelled to discuss these uncomfortable issues within the design studio, the teachers helping them to work through their ideas as guides and as colleagues engaged in both theoretical discussion and pragmatic design problem solving. The students had to grapple with layers of complexity of shelter, place, space, and of users with real, human problems. Questions were situated within the context of lived experience, requiring design responses that were meaningful for people with complex ideas about shelter and home; at the same time, design responses had to be accountable to both aesthetic and form considerations.

The project provided the opportunity for students to learn about what it means to be homeless, what it means to think about solving human problems, and what it means to design for different types of lived situations. They changed their views about design in that project, and understood how social issues and empathy for the user are essential.

They came to understand and have empathy for users not in their own reality. Political, social and personal issues came to bear, and students produced a variety of solutions dependant on their subjective and objective views of the problem.

Conclusion

To be critical is to question the everyday reasons why we do what we do – in my case, practice, teach and research about issues in design and interior design. This is a critical and three-dimensional endeavour, that requires process-oriented thinking. *Design is about problem-solving: solving problems for the intimate human use and human interactions that is everyday life, captured inside spaces that we live in but understand little and question even less.*

In asking students to understand the plight of the homeless, we were also asking students to 'live the experience' of being

homeless. In essence, we were reflecting on the need to learn how to question design, by stepping into the shoes of the people for whom we were asking the students to design for. By situating the problem in social aspects of the human life-world, students used their lived experience to help them to theorise what it meant to be homeless, and what it meant to design for the homeless. Using a phenomenological approach allowed students to examine issues unfamiliar to them, and also allowed for a safe place in the design studio, where questions could be asked using the iterative process of design.

Design is as much about human experience as it is about dynamic relationships of humankind with others and with the world around them. Contextualising design problems within the questions of living a better life creates meaning and relevance in the choices that we make later on in our professional careers. In essence, we should and must use design for the betterment of human life – and help students to understand this imperative, so that they mature into designers capable of facing world problems with rigour and understanding. One way of doing this is by considering the issue, and the lived experience, of homelessness.

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