Design & Development

Seminar Proceedings

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**Introduction**

The following papers are a record of the presentations and discussions from the seminar and consist of the following:

**An edited transcript** made from the recordings of the proceedings giving a record of the discussions held during the seminar.

**A contribution from each participant.** These vary from being reports of work ongoing to longer, more formal papers. At the seminar each person was invited to give a presentation of his or her interests and work. Some participants also contributed a more extensive written piece.

**Finally an endnote** records activities of TCG since the meeting and its plans for the future.

The seminar was specifically convened to discuss design and development. Both design and development are huge words capable of holding many meanings so it is important to define our area of interest.

**Design** covers all aspects of the subject; currently industrial, product and textile designers are represented in the group. The process of design is considered by the participants to be more important than the artefact produced.

**Development** is taken to mean that process of individual, community or national development that leads to greater prosperity and economic well being, particularly in low-income economies.

The focus of the group’s interest lies in those places of the South where the world imbalance of resources is most marked, that is Africa, parts of Latin America and parts of South Asia – although it is acknowledged that some of the issues might well apply in the developing economies of other regions.

The importance of design as an essential ingredient in the production of all goods and products, management systems and services is acknowledged and endorsed in industrialised, capitalist economies. As part of the development process, however, its role has not been articulated or theorised by either the design (including design education) world or the development world. It is that lack that TCG wants to address.

We hope you find this collection of writing interesting and stimulating and would welcome comment and feedback. (See P 89 for editorial team contact details).

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Does design have a contribution to make?
(N B: Transcript of presentation)

Introduction
In preparing this presentation I have felt the need to be able to explain the word design in this context. So, in addressing the three questions, I want to emphasise that I see design as much more to do with process rather than with product.

There are one or two things that have led me to feel that there is a perception in development situations that it does. Students come to the UK, from less industrialised countries and go back with degrees, master’s degrees and research degrees. We make very little attempt to modify what we teach them to fit to their own needs and situations but still they come.

There is also a perception that products are an important part of development in any context; in any part of the world, in any type of economy. Human kind is a tool making, tool using species and products are a result of that.

Design contributes to manufacture, to employment of those people that make and use products and so on. Products contribute, we believe, to the quality of life, and to cultural identity. The semantics of products help us understand them and understand what they are for and tell us something about ourselves.

I would like to make some general points about why it seems reasonable to assume that design does have a contribution to make.

The contribution of design
These are characteristics of design which, if you move away from the wholly object-centred side of it, more to the way that design is conducted, and in particular the way education works, at its best, are pertinent to this question. Fundamentally design is people-centred and is a significant factor in giving added value to products and systems. It has aspirations for how things can be better, how things can be developmental. Design is altruistic in the sense that those who are engaged in it are not necessarily concerned for their immediate personal gratification and benefit. It is concerned with ethical questions; it is multidisciplinary; involves team working;
and it uses common language. It is a remarkably jargon-free area of operation - perhaps because it has to interface with so many other disciplines. It should be and I believe it is consultative and evaluative. So we try to find out what users need, what these needs are and we test our hypotheses, our design proposals or systems proposals against those needs, in the field. It is intuitive, progressive, developmental and evolutionary in that it moves in organic and people-centred ways. It is very much in the public domain and publicly accountable. This is important - that almost every single output of the design process is tested in a very realistic way; it is very conscious of and often celebrates cultural and historic precedent. It needs to understand the ways in which those things that a society values from its past relate to the present and the future; and in that sense it respects indigenous cultural factors and at the same time is very open to questions or new product types. It has a very definite inventive and creative role as well as using and developing transferable skills.

There are, however, some problematic aspects of the discipline - at least from where I stand. Our educational system is predominantly practice-based and much of the learning is empirical. On the one hand it is under-theorised - very little research or theory underpinning most of the teaching. It is, in the North at least, overly dependent on, and driven by commerce and especially multi-national, global organisations. So the global product is one of the things that industrial designers have contributed to. And there is the preoccupation with the star designer and the cult product, that large numbers aspire to owning. The educational system is increasingly bureaucratised and I do wonder whether we are moving away from a model that we can honestly suggest as the basis for use elsewhere. Performance indicators (for education) are very much rooted in the perceived current context (eg employability) and there is very little scope for saying that the future may not be like this. How would you recognise future values, and how would you square up to the business of selling lifestyle, which is often unattainable even here, let alone elsewhere.

In discussing the role of design education in a non-Northern/Western context, there are some serious questions about the beneficiaries of that education. Is it the community, local or national, that benefits; or is it the individual, who might well see education as a means of becoming more mobile, moving away from his or her roots and contributing to another culture or economy?
**Examples of good practice**

Good practice begs the question how good is defined and measured. To be able to do this it is necessary to refer to the original aims and objectives of each example. One of the problems that besets design is that project aims and objectives are very seldom well researched or expressed. And if they have been, it is often the case that not enough is known about them and it is difficult to find good information. In the absence of a body of information, informed consensus is often a reliable indicator. I do believe that informed opinion holds the work of two particular organisations that engage in design within a development context, as effective and exemplary. Those two organisations, Motivation and ITDG, stand for me as examples of possible good practice.

**The potential contribution of design**

The potential, high-level, long-term contribution of design, I believe, is concerned with the processes of design, rather than with the intrinsic qualities of the objects it produces. Design is problem based and research based; it is concerned with improvement, it is generic rather than particular. Designers and design educators learn to identify issues and problems and to develop project briefs - and briefs are an important starting point. Design typically involves all who have an interest in the outcome and team working is an important ingredient in design. Design contributes to the whole life of a product; to all of the interests of all of the users and there is a concern for the viability and sustainability of the local community, whatever the definition of local. At its best design defines its community, economy and culture and works within it. At the same time there is an awareness of the larger context. Again, at its best, there is a concern for local need, direction and control whether it is within a company, the market or a community. Design involves being flexible and working in a diversity of scales.

Finally, it does seem that design skills are under-represented in development situations, and yet there is a consistency of approach between design and some of the development texts, particularly the work of Robert Chambers (Chambers 1993) where he proposes strategies for the ‘last to be first’ and for acting locally rather than acting distantly. There seems to be great potential in a convergence of the two disciplines.

**Reference**