

From Tailors to Gardeners: Shifting Roles for the Design Professionals

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Abstract — Over the last decades of the 20th century and the first years of the current one there has been a paradigm shift that has affected the way designers work and the projects they are required to tackle. This change has been emphasized with the adoption of digital media and the ubiquity of telecommunication portable devices. After the mechanical era, where different sub-areas of design have been consolidated, we have entered a period where designers seem to be less working as “tailors” and often working as “gardeners”: preparing the soil, planting seeds, watering them and pruning out some of the branches.

Index Terms — design, paradigm shift, biology age, liquid modernity.

0. PROLOGUE

This paper addresses different aspects of the Design profession in our current society. First, the acknowledgment of a paradigmatic change in the means of production, development and consumption of Design projects product of the advent of digital technologies. Second, it analyses the change in the nature of Design projects. And finally, it explains the parallel developments that could be established between the Open Source movement and Design.

In the conclusions, this paper explains why the proposed analogy introduced here – where designers are moving from working like tailors to act as gardeners – is meaningful in the actual context of action.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the English language, the word “tailor” is both a noun and a verb. Considered as a noun, a tailor is a dressmaker, a garment-maker. Understanding the word as a verb, to tailor is to adapt, modify, to shape or to reshape. Considering this meaning, understanding Design also as a verb, the proposed analogy is meaningful: we could say that designers work like tailors. Instead of making clothes, they give shape to the world around us.

Tailoring is an old profession that can be traced back at least a few centuries¹. Tailors work under a particular model: clients come to the shop; a tailor shows him or her different fabrics, takes body measures and makes a fitted cloth. The Oxford Dictionary of English (Third Edition) says “to fit individual customers” or “to meet individual requirements”. Once a particular work is finished, the process is finished. There is no further need of intervention neither by the tailor nor by the commissioner.

Gardeners have a different approach to their practice. Gardening is a process of creating an artificial reality in consonance with Nature. Understanding the art of cultivating, gardeners do not act by request or against the nature of any given soil and plants. They make them play the part at which they play its best. In this interaction, gardeners propose things and then Nature takes control. The gardener can adjust this dynamic system by watering, fertilizing or pruning. This process has more similarities with the activity of a Designer, particularly in an inter-networked, fluid and constantly changing society. Tim Brown [2] explains

the old assembly-line metaphors of the Industrial Revolution won't help us design the future. Our world is complex. Like a garden. We must tend it, cultivate it, steward it, and encourage it to meet our needs instead of always trying to be in control of it. Our solutions must accommodate the competing needs of humans and the rest of nature. Successful design, like successful gardening, is never finished and is constantly changing.

Understanding that Brown's ideas are presented in a broader context, this is the tension that this paper addresses. How are Design projects started and who is in control? Are designers acting like tailors or they have moved to a new scenario where they are behaving as gardeners?

II. ON THE VERGE OF A PARADIGMATIC CHANGE

Living in the early decades of the 21st Century, we are in a “hyper-connected, data-driven, global economy” [9]. All our relationships with means of production and distribution have changed and are in a constant movement. We are even re-examining our loyalty to traditional currency and perhaps moving also this into the digital realm, for example using Bitcoin as a global and decentralized currency.

1 The Oxford Dictionary of English (Third Edition) says that the verb dates from the mid 17th century.

Design has moved away from producing artifacts. Gui Bonsiepe [1] describes, “the interface *is not an object* but a space where the articulation between the human body, the tool and the object of the action happen” (p.17). This concept validates the action of graphic and industrial designers as “interface designers”. But the nature of the interface is rapidly changing in the context of the digital world.

Like Verplank [15] explains, over the years computers have been understood in three different paradigms:

- The computer as a person, which lead to the world of Artificial Intelligence;
- The computer as a tool, which was related to the desktop metaphor and the GUI;
- The computer as media, related to tactile and gesture controlled interfaces.

Even not knowing if there will be a fourth (and then fifth, and so forth) paradigmatic change in the future of computer technologies and our comprehension of their usage, we can perceive a certain leaning.

Understanding ubiquitous, mobile and high performance computers as media devices, designers are no longer only developing tools to achieve certain pre-defined goals. They are providing, proposing, and sometimes developing open environments that are immediately re-appropriated and re-contextualized by the consumers. The control is not so much on the hands of the designer but at the other end.

As Hugh Dubberly [8] have clearly stated,

Changes in the media designers use (the internet and related services) have altered what designers make and how their work is distributed and consumed. New media are changing significantly the way designers think about practice. New types of jobs have emerged. For many of us, both what we design and how we design are substantially different than they were a generation ago. (p.1)

The north-American design educator Meredith Davis [7] explains this need of transferring the control from designers to participants. Citing Gerhard Fischer (2002), she writes “as the influence of technology expands, control moves from the designer to the people for whom we design”. And then, quoting Liz Sanders (2006), she also explains “the designers need to think less about *consumers* and *users*, and more about *participants* and *co-creators*; about designing *with* people rather than *for* them” (p. 2). That is probably why Donald Norman [11] is calling for

a change in Design education, because

in today's world of ubiquitous sensors, controllers, motors, and displays, where the emphasis is on interaction, experience, and service, where designers work on organizational structure and services as much as on physical products, we need a new breed of designers.

There is a perceivable paradigmatic change.

Like it is always the case, changes are not affecting 100% of the community at once. Not on the design side, nor on the side of the consumers of design artifacts. Nevertheless, it is interesting to understand that there is a trend gaining momentum and this will eventually lead to the majority of the design community working under a different scenario.

As it happened to tailors: today there are a reduced number of artisans practicing their craft in the same way as their predecessors a century ago. They are a minority and they are working for an elite group that can afford to have a custom suit.

III. THE NATURE OF DESIGN PROJECTS

Change in the Design field is increasingly rapid. It has moved from a consolidation as a discipline with practices, discourses, and outcomes to a more fluid state where some Design methods are applicable to a large number of situations, from business to relationships between citizens and their states. Norman [11] explains

in the early days of industrial design, the work was primarily focused upon physical products. Today, however, designers work on organizational structure and social problems, on interaction, service, and experience design. Many problems involve complex social and political issues.

North-American educator Richard Buchanan [3] defines four orders of design: visualization, products, systems, and services.

Buchanan's "four orders of Design" have a correspondence with "Graphic Design", "Industrial Design", "Service Design" and "Culture Design". But there is an inherent question that remains the same: why do we design? Is Design a service as a response to requests from third parties or can Design be understood in a different manner? No simple answers to this question could be comprehensive; there are as many possibilities as designers exist. Paraphrasing Forrest Gump – the main character in the blockbuster Hollywood's movie by the same title – "designer

is as designer does”.

Nevertheless, there is a group that is interesting to analyze. They are a group of self-motivated professionals and entrepreneurs that have a *design discourse*, use *design methods* and produce design outcomes. Therefore, they are *designers*. But they do it without an external party (client) initiating a Design intervention.

There is nothing new to this way of working. But probably the idea of the designer *only* responding to external requests has been ruled Design over the last fifty years. And as such, this concept has also permeated the design education area.

Nowadays, technology gives more equal opportunities for people in different locations to reach markets not available in former times. People living in the “global village”, understanding its topological and not topographical nature, have extended their capability to reach clients from all around the World. As this relationship between commissioner and designer has changed, designers themselves are initiating and pitching to “audiences” much more than waiting for client requests.

Over the last decades, education institutions have educated plentiful people in Design. If we think only in terms of client-initiated projects, there would be too many new designers. These graduates establish using their *designerly ways of working* (paraphrasing Nigel Cross’ book “Designerly Ways of Knowing” [6]). Not having enough requests from the outside world and with the tools-of-the-trade at hand, they are self-initiating their own projects. Once Design schools have prepared the soil and planted the Design seed, people will flourish and Design will find its way. With or without an external request from a client.

This group of designers acts like gardeners: planting their flowers in the global economy, watering the soil and letting Nature (or the market) to do its work. They are not providing one solution to a particular client but proposing solutions to an open world.

Our industrial society has made us believe that Design is a service. As such, designers work assisting any industry to reach their goals in a better way. If we consider this as a fact, it is an important part of the design process to understand the client (industry) and the market (target audience) in order to provide a successful “design solution”. But we must recognize that designers working as service providers are not always the case.

As society moves beyond the industrial era, the means of mass production of goods and

services are detached from the location of consumption. The place where Design happens is also disconnected from the location where the design is used. Therefore, the idea of designers working from external requests and understanding the users and their context of action is at the stake.

Often the designer does not specifically know how their designs will be used, who will be using them and in which context. The global market for exchange of digital assets is enormous. One of these “digital shopping mall of creative practices”, Envato², has sellers that have already reached more than \$ 1,000,000 in sales [14].

This situation is not completely new for other creative disciplines, similar to design. Stock Photographers, Illustrators and Typographers have been creating assets without knowing final usages for many years. But this is something new for design professionals, used to work by request, as the old tailors did.

IV. PERSPECTIVES IN OPEN SOURCE DESIGN

Not so long ago, the software industry went through a revolution. From a period where buyers could not see the source code of the software industry moved into a time where important software (e.g. the Linux operating system, the Apache web server, the MySQL database engine, etc.) are developed by a volunteer community of coders and released under an Open Source license. Users have the freedom of running programs as they wish, the freedom of modifying the program to suit particular needs, the freedom to redistribute copies and the freedom to distribute modified versions of the program [13]. The Internet – and particularly the World Wide Web – would probably not exist in the way we know it without this distinct way of developing and releasing software.

Ideas originated from this realm have already permeated many other areas of our culture. This situation, which had an early impact for visual communication designers, is now also impacting product designers as 3D printers are getting cheaper and available to the masses. This may produce a similar revolution to that which desktop publishing (DTP) produced in the realm of Graphic Design with the release of the Laser printer. The *open source hardware* movement is as

2 Envato is an Australian-base company providing an “ecosystem of sites that help people to be creative”. They provide several digital marketplaces where people can buy images, templates, project files and creative assets, from photographs to WordPress templates to digital audio files.

well gaining momentum. There is already an important group of people designing and releasing 3D objects as ready-to-print digital files [4], not knowing specifically who the user is, what the needs are or the context of usage.

This change is also impacting architecture design, an area of design that we could consider difficult to understand without specific requirements. There are designers developing *open source architecture* [12] in a similar manner that Open Source software is developed.

A pertinent question, not having an external commissioner or a particular request, would then be why do designers design? As Gui Bonsiepe explains, talking in the first person, “I am not pessimistic, otherwise I could not be a project-maker. The digital realm encourages me, the opening of communication and participation spaces through the Net. And the designer being responsible for the introduction of technology and the process of making it easy-to-use in people’s daily life” [5]. Designers have the tendency to believe that their intervention will make a better world. Therefore, Design is always a future-oriented (trans-)discipline, constantly looking through the windshield (and only occasionally through the rear mirror). Designers may work for fame and fortune but this is not always the primary motivation.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

A tailor produces one unique solution that will fit only a particular client’s program of needs (the brief) under a considered set of circumstances (the context). He or she replies using all the tools of his trade and his experience on a one-to-one basis. A tailor is a *gun-for-hire*, waiting for a commissioner before acting upon the world. There is not a suit produced unless there is a customer’s request. Even more: a suit tailored for a particular customer is not suitable for another one. There is a need for a strong intervention of the tailor who will re-adapt this particular piece to a complete new program of needs (the customer’s body measures). In this analogy the possibility of solutions for many does not exist. This was the reality of the garment industry and also the reality of the Design industry. This reality is changing.

Designers are no longer solely developing closed products but open experiences that will be completed or appropriated by a myriad of agents. The designer no longer has the control of either these experiences or a simple way of understanding when, where and how these experiences occur. The methods applied for the creation of design artifacts have entered a new phase where the analogies with the idea of gardening make sense. In a garden, there is an

interaction of elements proposed by the gardener. Each garden style has particular rules, what can go and what does not belong. But the gardener is interacting with the complexity of Nature, which will raise its voice and sometimes fight back.

We do not know how our society will change in the coming years and what new contexts of action will arise for Design professionals. It is still uncertain where are we going to end working under this new paradigm. But one thing can be said: the nature of our discipline is facing new challenges.

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