HISTORY IN THE STUDIO: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FOR A MULTIDISCIPLINARY MASTER IN DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

The studio holds a major position in design teaching. Various types and forms of studios have existed to support different teaching and learning needs and strategies. This paper refers to the role of the studio in a new, multidisciplinary Master in Design offered by a private art and design institution in Greece. Issues and challenges presented by this new course are discussed, and adopted responses are described. The paper focuses on the use of studio space in practical projects related to the history of design and technology. These projects are employed as a means to question conventional methods of history teaching and to explore relevant educational analogies, such as the "surface versus deep" and "cathedral versus bazaar" approaches.

Keywords: design studio, multidisciplinarity, history, technology, learning

1   INTRODUCTION: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN CONTEXT

This paper focuses on certain aspects of a new Master in Design, which is offered to qualified graduates by AKTO art and design, a private college in Athens, Greece. This course, which is validated by Middlesex University (London, U.K.), has been under development during the academic year 2002-2003 and has been offered for the first time during 2003-2004. This postgraduate course attracts candidates from various disciplines, including but not limited to interior design, product/industrial design, graphic design, illustration, photography, fashion, fine art, comics, animation, as well as engineering. The new course's structure and content relies heavily on a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspective. Multidisciplinarity has been defined as concerning the study of a research topic not in just one discipline but in several at the same time. Interdisciplinarity has been defined as concerning the transfer of methods from one discipline to another. [1] In the course, the multidisciplinary perspective is supported by the variable intake of students from a wide range of design-related disciplines. The interdisciplinary perspective is supported by the establishment of several group projects and by the collaboration between students both for the purposes of these projects as well as in other joint activities in the studio. It becomes obvious from this description of the course's fundamental perspectives, that the studio is viewed as a key resource for everybody involved. Developing an innovative studio culture is considered to be crucial for the success of the course.

At this point, it has to be stressed that this Master in Design is one of only a handful of postgraduate design programmes available in the country. Therefore, the programme operates within an educational context which is very underdeveloped. This results in

limited opportunities for collaboration between teachers, in a lack of a critical mass of experience and disciplinary knowledge, and certainly in an almost complete absence of research in design education. In fact, personal experience indicates that design teaching in various public and private institutions in Greece still relies heavily on a so-called "surface" approach, as opposed to a "deep" approach. A surface approach is characterised by a student trying to remember and recall what they have been taught. On the other hand, a deep approach is characterised by the student's attempt to make sense of the subject. Students taking this approach try to relate concepts and use evidence and rationality to make personally meaningful judgements about their understanding of the subject. Knowledge and understanding gained in this way is often longer lasting. [2]

The course under discussion constitutes of several modules, one of which is "Technology in Design". The main aim of this module is to give designers a deeper awareness of the importance of technology in design and extend their ability to experiment and explore technology in relation to their area of interest. More specific objectives include the enhancement of critical thinking in technology and technology potential in design, as well as the development by the students of the ability to explore and experiment with technological issues related to their area of interest. [3] In this context, I was asked to provide part of the module's content, with a focus on history of technology.

2   TESTING NEW APPROACHES

My participation in this module gave me the opportunity to reflect on the role of history, and more specifically of the history of technology, within a postgraduate design course. Generally speaking, history in Greece is very much considered as a "taught" subject, which is delivered in the form of lectures and then assessed through a written test. There are various preconceptions about history as a very "serious" and often boring subject, which are not irrelevant to the formalism of the Greek educational system in general. [4] I was confronted with the challenge to deliver history of technology issues to postgraduate design students in a way that would be engaging and would make the subject-matter relevant to their individual projects and research questions. The approach I opted for was to attempt to challenge their preconceptions by dealing with history in two ways, both theoretically and practically. First, there was a rather conventional stream of lectures on the history of technology, with an emphasis on design examples.

Then, students were asked to form small groups and produce their own responses to a given text. Each group had to read and present different chapters of Adrian Forty's book *Objects of Desire*. [5] This book, a classic read in design history, is divided in chapters which are structured along major themes, such as "Design and mechanisation", "The home", "Hygiene and cleanliness", etc. Having read their assigned chapter, each group would have to present to the class their own interpretation of the chapter. The presentation should not be a written text or a slide presentation of the chapter's summary, but it had to involve making in a more direct fashion. A poster, a three-dimensional construction of any kind, a video, or a happening were acceptable modes of presentation. This was a novel approach for the student group in question and initially caused puzzled reactions and many questions. However, students soon realized that this project was offering them ample field for experimentation. Furthermore, the required responses to the brief would involve a great deal of making, which was very desirable by them as their backgrounds favored practical work.

One of the groups worked on the chapter "Electricity - The fuel of the future". They chose to set up a short stage presentation in the college's theatre. On stage, they directed a domestic scene of the past, set in a plain 19th century interior. A young lady/actress was sitting by the light of a candle, playing the violin. At the same time, there was a video projection on the background of the stage. The projection was based on contemporary images from urban spaces, with emphasis on sources of electric light, such as street lights, neon signs, etc. This interpretation of the text was an eloquent juxtaposition of the old and new technologies and design solutions.

Another group was working on the chapter "The first industrial designers". They came up with a row of columns, constructed from plexiglass, on which they had stuck images and text related to this chapter. Although their idea could have been further developed, they managed to identify and critically discuss properties of different modes of production. They particularly emphasized the issue of repetitive, mass production, and the restrictions posed by the usage of certain materials.

A third group, which had been assigned the chapter entitled "The home", created an interactive installation in the studio space. Their idea was based on using the student lockers, which they considered as personal space within the public space of the studio. First, they had asked all their classmates to bring photos of their rooms at home. They stuck these pictures randomly on the lockers, one on each locker. Then, they asked students and teachers to identify, by judging from the picture, the owner of each room, and place the picture on the corresponding locker. Their idea was to relate personal space at home with personal space in the studio, as well as to test the preconceptions we have about other people's personalities.

A fourth group dealt with the chapter "Labour-saving in the home" which examines the role of home appliances. The members of the group (all female) came up dressed as housewives in action and presented an installation where they showed together the past and present of cleaning and washing equipment. They juxtaposed traditional and modern objects used by housewives and discussed the influence of technological changes in domestic labour.

Other groups also presented creative and unconventional work. Generally, the project proved a great and in fact unexpected success in terms of student engagement. It started as a reading exercise which then evolved into a practical one, involving inventing and making tangible things. Although designers in general are notorious for their unwillingness to read and write, this combination of working modes has proven to be very engaging. A former application of a similar project idea in a different educational context (undergraduate architectural school) has been reported in another occasion. [6] I believe that the project has been successful in both cases and shows great potential for further application and development.

3   THE EVOLVING STUDIO

The case-study described made use of practical, group-work in a studio space for the purposes of a history-centered course. Although the aspirations and results of the project were rather modest, it is possible to use it as a starting point in order to formulate some more general thoughts about the role of the studio in design teaching. Traditionally, the

studio has been the established learning environment in architecture and design, with a central role as the place of experimentation, information exchange and socialization. In recent years, new communication technologies and remote interaction have increasingly questioned the old studio culture, which is often outdated and does not satisfy the demands of current practice. In the last decade we have witnessed several innovative experiments in education involving the use of computers and networking infrastructure for collaborative design projects. Nevertheless, the importance of physical presence and participation remains. [7] Without underestimating the potential of information technology, the studio as physical space still has a lot to offer to design educational praxis. In a sense, following some successes and some extremes of computer-based learning, it is perhaps time to re-assess the studio as a place of face to face interaction and experimentation. In the case-study described here, we have treated the studio as a workspace and exhibition space, which enables students to negotiate meanings through practical design projects.

I endorse the view that our responsibility as tutors is to engender understanding rather than knowledge, and encourage intellectual engagement and articulation. [8] If this is nowadays considered to be important in undergraduate education, it is all the more important in postgraduate education. However, as mentioned already, in my country's educational system there is a longstanding bias in favour of "surface" rather than "deep" approaches, especially in theoretical subjects such as history. But the shortcomings of a "surface" historical approach in relation to architecture and design have certainly been identified in the past. [9] The view has been expressed that the familiar design history survey created as support course in a studio-based curriculum is not adequate for a mutually rewarding conversation between professional training and traditional university cultures. History in design courses must be reconceptualized in order to address interdisciplinary audiences. [10] In this vein, my perspective in devising this project was focused in encouraging students to realize personal discoveries, rather than assimilate ready-made teaching material. History has been treated as a reflective process involving reading and making, rather than as absorbing a predefined, fixed reality.

In new, emerging forms of studio culture, the role of the teacher is also in a state of redefinition. The metaphor of the party host might be useful in this respect. On the basis of the party host metaphor, the teacher may be conceived as a person facilitating the interactions between students and their own educational development. [12] This is relevant to the "bazaar" versus "cathedral" argument. The so-called "bazaar" model of development makes use of a variety of differing agendas and approaches, leading to a coherent and stable system through an evolutionary process. The "bazaar" model emphasizes the importance of participants/students who are treated as co-developers, as opposed to the hierarchic "cathedral" model. Thus, the student continuously re-designs his/her own understanding within distributed, interactive networks. [13] In such an educational environment, the importance of group work and peer learning is crucial, although this issue is often a cause of confusion for students. They often misunderstand the teachers' urge towards peer learning as unwillingness by the teachers to teach. This is particularly true in the Greek context, where "cathedral"-type teaching is still very much the norm.

The matrix presented by Davies is particularly useful in outlining students' conceptions of learning design. [14] This matrix of descriptors represents a developmental model

and has been generated from a perspective of learning along two axes. The vertical axis reflects a developing conception of and approaches to learning and the horizontal axis reflects a developing conception of the subject. Through this matrix, the author distinguishes twelve different categories of such conceptions. We realize that the two extremes of the matrix correspond to the "cathedral versus bazaar" divide, with several intermediate categories. On the basis of the Davies matrix, the "cathedral" approach corresponds to the following conception of learning: "The outcome is entirely skills focused and is intended to provide the "right" answer. The student relies heavily on the teacher for advice in the belief that the teacher knows the 'right' answer". The "bazaar" side of the matrix, on the other hand, may be described as follows: "Learning is seen as self-discovery. Being a designer is seen as being a change-agent in society. There will be a strong focus on self-expression, reflection and integration of design principles, abilities and social values. The student will be an autonomous learner." The approach presented in this paper expresses the "bazaar" mentality and encourages autonomous learning and reflection.

4   CONCLUDING REMARKS

We do not of course claim to having re-invented the wheel and our aims have been modest in this project. The postgraduate programme within which this exercise was realized has just been established. The project was implemented with the very first intake of students, a rather variable group. Further implementations of the basic project idea will hopefully lead to more complex and sophisticated outcomes. There are certainly many things to practise and work out. Design education, especially on a postgraduate level, is in fact just emerging in our country. This leaves a lot to be expected. As educators in the design domain we are in our first steps and we have to rely heavily on foreign models. However, our specific context demands original directions. This continually drives new experiments and, hopefully, creative and educationally relevant solutions.

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