

Profiling the Designer: How are the Design Professions Perceived?

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This paper describes research conducted in Australia and Korea. Mainly, it draws upon the first large-scale investigation into the design professions. This investigation was conducted in three stages, involving an occupational prestige survey, a series of focus groups, leading to an extensive questionnaire survey that was distributed throughout Australia. Three groups completed the questionnaire: designers who were members of the Design Institute of Australia, design educators in universities and colleges, and members of the public. In total, 1600 people participated in the research. While the research was conducted in one country, Australia, it is unlikely that the results cannot be generalised to other similar cultures. A feature of research within this paradigm is the high level of Western intercultural agreement. The paper addresses three distinct strands from the research.

First, it examines the perceived levels of social standing of five design professions (graphic designer, interior designer, fashion designer, industrial designer, furniture designer). This includes their perceived levels of education and income, usefulness as professions, and levels of responsibility. In this, comparisons are made with results from Korea.

Secondly, it addresses individual questions pertaining to the characteristics of design and the designer as perceived by the public, design educators and designers. These include questions pertaining to:

- The Nature-Nurture Controversy: Are Designers Naturally Creative or is it a Learnt Skill?
- Are Tertiary Qualifications needed to be a Designer?
- Is Design an Occupation for the Very Intelligent?
- The Art-Design Controversy: Are Art and Design Two Distinct Occupations? Are Art and Design Synonymous?
- What do Designers do?

Finally, based on the above a psychological profile is constructed of the design professions as perceived by the public (and it should be borne in mind that the 'public' consists of all those outside design, including industry, government and funding bodies). Within this psychological profile, design and designers are regarded as constructs – or categories – within the minds of others. Such constructs compete for meaning with other similar constructs, and in the case of designers they compete with the proximate constructs that people have for artist and architect.

The profile that emerges positions designer as an impoverished cognitive category between the well-structured and coherent categories of artist and architect. There is little public understanding of what designers do, and what exists is superficial. Furthermore, designers are not all equal. To the public, fashion design, graphic design and interior design at least exist as constructs; in other words, the public have some idea of these professions. Industrial design, however, does not exist as a design construct: it is completely lacking in categorical identity. Furniture design does exist as a construct, but not necessarily as a design construct. Rather, it exists as a 'woodworker-joinery' construct, with furniture designers as skilled workers. In terms of professional standing, design emerges as an occupation rather than a profession – unlike Korea, where design has a higher standing.

A number of implications are drawn from the above for the profiling and positioning of the designer.

HOW ARE DESIGNERS PERCEIVED?

Introduction

This paper draws upon the results of two large-scale investigations into the public's perceptions of the design professions. The first was a comparative study involving matched samples of Australians and South Koreans. Carried out within the framework of *occupational prestige assessment* (e.g. Daniel, 1983), it sought to position the design professions in terms of social standing relative to a range of other professions and occupations. It also provided a comparison of how designers perceived themselves against how the public perceived them (Chung and Whitfield, 1999; Whitfield and Smith, 2003). The second was the most extensive field survey so far undertaken into the design professions. Conducted in three stages, it involved an occupational prestige survey, a series of focus groups, followed by a questionnaire survey that was distributed throughout Australia. Three groups completed the questionnaire: designers who were members of the Design Institute of Australia, design educators in universities and colleges, and members of the public. In total, 1600 people participated in the research (Whitfield and Smith, 2004).

This paper addresses three questions from the research. The first is the question of perceived social and occupational standing. In other words, to what extent are designers perceived as a profession as distinct from an occupation? The design groups examined were graphic designer, interior designer, fashion designer, industrial designer, and furniture designer. The second question pertains to the public's understanding of the design fields. In other words, what do designers do and to what extent are they understood relative to other professions and occupations? The third question was not so

much a question as a putting together of the above into a profile of what designers are in the minds of non-designers, namely, the public. The importance of this latter question should not be under-estimated. It should be recognised that the term 'public' is much maligned and misunderstood. The public are not people who might be picked up in a straw poll: the public constitutes those who commission designs in both industry and government, those who formulate policies that have design ramifications, and those who 'consume' designs across the entire spectrum of the manufacturing and service industries. This is a not insignificant group: they represent the very life-blood of the entire design industry. Their perceptions are important.

The Occupational Standing of Designers

The picture that emerges of designers is that, unlike architects and lawyers, they are not perceived as a profession; rather, they occupy an intermediate level of occupational standing approximating, though slightly lower than, that of nurse and police officer. Effectively, they are a higher-level occupation, as distinct from a profession. Their perceived level of social standing is intermediate, as is their perceived level of education and income: their perceived level of usefulness and responsibility is low. At the higher end of occupational standing (within this intermediate level) comes fashion designer, and at the lowest level comes furniture designer, which is seen as on a par with mechanic. It may be disturbing to furniture designers to realise that their perceived level of education is lower than that of mechanics. It may also be disturbing to all of the design groups to find that their perceived level of usefulness is lower than that of mechanics.

Interestingly, designers fare better in South Korea than in Australia, though this is marginal. The higher standing of designers may reflect their status as a Western import. The Koreans also run counter to what is a universal feature of occupational prestige assessment, namely, that members of an occupational group enhance the standing of their own occupation (e.g. Gerstl and Cohen, 1964). Surprisingly, Korean designers and non-designers positioned 'designers' the same on the various scales used. In contrast, the

Australian sample performed to expectations. That is, the designers rated the various design occupations at a higher level than did the public. Inevitably, this can lead to occupational self-delusion. After all, if members of an occupational group, such as designers, share an enhanced view of their own standing, and others do not share this view, then they will feel undervalued. This is an inter-occupational phenomenon, and by no means unique to designers.

Based on the two studies drawn on here, it would be a misnomer to refer to the various design groups as professions. In the public mind, they are distinctly occupations. They are seen to do a job that has marginal utility and one that requires only an intermediate level of education. The implications of this will be discussed later.

Understanding the designer

From both the focus groups and the questionnaire survey that was distributed throughout Australia, a fairly clear picture emerges. First, the public have little idea of what designers do. Of a wide range of occupations/professions listed in the research, those pertaining to design came low in public understanding, with industrial design at the very bottom. Most public participants in the study considered that they themselves did not own anything designed by an industrial designer! Their perception of industrial designer – when they had any notion at all – was of someone who designed cranes, bridges, and even factories. Their perception of interior designer predictably was confused with interior decorator, and furniture designer was equated with woodworker, a craftsperson. The two most coherent groups to the public were graphic designer and fashion designer. While their perception of graphic designer as, effectively, an applied artist in the domain of print-based media would perhaps not appeal to some graphic designers; nonetheless, they grasped certain essentials of the work. However, by far the most coherent of the design groups was fashion designer. Significantly, most of the Korean and Australian public could name no member of any of the design groups, with the exception of fashion designers. While the latter may seem a rather trivial achievement, it

does indicate a level of 'engagement' that is completely absent for the other design groups.

A feature of the research was the public's almost complete absence of a conceptual model of industrial design. As an occupational category, industrial design simply does not exist in the public mind. The position of furniture design is perhaps even more desperate. As an occupational category, it does exist in the public mind, but, as indicated above, not necessarily as a design category. Rather, it appears to exist as a woodworker-joinery category.

Profiling the designer

Having established the low level of public understanding of what the various design groups do, the question arises of what do the public actually consider designing to be – assuming that they have some concept of this. It emerges that the public do have a conceptual model of designing. It may be limited and somewhat impoverished, but it does exist. The public regard designers essentially as applied artists. They consider designers to be a sub-class of artists, who apply their 'talent' to everyday objects (as distinct from applying it to art objects). Designers and artists are born with this talent, which they then nurture through experience and education. While artists produce art, designers produce 'style'. To the public, designers are 'stylists'. This is not a derogatory term to the public: it is actually admired. However, and perhaps to the consternation of the designer, it lacks the *gravitas* of art. This is hardly surprising. Art is a recognised and respected 'commodity'. It is part of the educational curriculum of children in all western countries, all western cities have – or aspire to have – art galleries for the deification of art (civic pride), and major artists are accorded a standing on a par with heroic figures in science, philosophy, and even political life. Designers do not have this. In comparison with artists, designers are concerned with the *mundane*. This may be offensive to designers; however, in designating design as concerned with the *mundane*, it acknowledges the absence of one crucial ingredient that art is seen to possess, namely, the *spiritual* or the *transcendental*. Since the European Renaissance, art progressively has been accorded a

transcendental status that lifts it from the mundane to the sublime.

Orchestrating this has been a vast literature of analysis and deification. Art has become quasi-religious. Design lacks this. The very utilitarian subject matter of design disallows it from an acquaintance with the sublime. After all, how can a vacuum cleaner, an interior, a visual identity or a chair be sublime? They are practical.

To the public, design is not an intellectual or scholarly pursuit, just as art is not – despite the protestations of designers and artists. Nor is design perceived as a business pursuit – despite the protestation of designers. The Australian public acknowledge design as contributing to the economy, but not necessarily in the manifestation of new products – rather in the styling of them. Design is a stylistic add-on, though one that is valued. This ‘skin deep’ association of the function of design positions it in a hinterland removed from the domains of ‘product innovation’ and ‘identity management’. Engineers develop products, architects design buildings (including interiors), and ‘IT’ developments come from ‘IT’ specialists. As to ‘identity management’, it is meaningless – unless it refers to ‘brands’. Brands have entered the public consciousness, though they are largely associated with clothing and footwear. Brands, as manifest in cars and consumer products, are not necessarily brands to the public: they are ‘makes’. Brands are associated with apparel: they are a manifestation of fashion, that most salient of the design areas to the public. That is why fashion brands are extending their ranges into non-clothing items such as sunglasses, cosmetics, and even paint. It is an extension of the *mundane*, though a profitable one.

So what of the socially beneficial aspects of design – the pursuits of sustainability, environmental sensitivity, design for the elderly, etc? These are not perceived as the pursuits of designers who, after all, are essentially stylists. Similarly, they are not perceived as the pursuits of artists who, after all, are concerned with more spiritual goals. Designers are typecast in the mould of artists, with their mission being to *style* products.

Implications for designers

To the authors it is important to understand how others perceive you, as distinct from how you would like to be perceived. The former is a necessary step to achieving the latter, as all service and manufacturing providers to the public will testify. This distinction is crucial to all providers, from family planning to selling beer. It can be encapsulated in the simple saying: 'ignore your clients at your peril'. Moreover, the public are the clients of the design groups in their various professional manifestations. Design has been amiss in not focusing more acutely upon the public. In this, it reveals an 'artistic' shortcoming; that is, it tends to see itself as dealing with more 'transcendental' and 'intellectual' pursuits. It aspires to an identity that is widely divergent from how it is seen. This is not proposing a slavish conformity to how it is seen. It is suggesting that if the perceptions are so divergent, then this should be acknowledged and a strategy put in place to adjust this perceptual divergence. To the authors' knowledge, this has not taken place. It may even be argued that the 'truth will out in the end'. In other words, the public will eventually realise the 'true' remit of design. Unfortunately, this presupposes that the public are wrong. To reiterate what was said at the beginning of this paper, the public constitute the very agencies that sponsor and consume design. Whether the public are right or wrong is irrelevant. The public are the judges, just as they are for the take-up of any service or the purchase of any product.

In recognising this divergence of perceived identities, the role of the professional – or occupational – design bodies inevitably comes into question. A defining characteristic of professions is that they are overseen by professional bodies that govern entry into the profession (usually, by prescribed education), set standards of practice, and have the power of excommunication. They are the guardians of professional standards. They also have the implicit responsibility of maintaining the well-being of the profession in the public eye. Such bodies will go to considerable lengths to protect the public standing of their 'brand'. Design appears to have shied away from this, perhaps because of the lowly academic qualifications of most designers; perhaps because of the absence of a research culture that actually

affords higher qualifications; perhaps because of in-fighting amongst the various design groups. Design is certainly not unified. It consists of groups that are widely different in their occupational pursuits. They are even perceived as such by the public. Furthermore, such differences are reinforced by the existence of 'group' occupational bodies, though their existence is unlikely to have any impact upon public perceptions, given that the public will be largely oblivious to them – and membership is unlikely to afford any special privileges.

At this juncture, the position of architects is relevant. As the only perceived professional 'design' group, architects have embarked upon a process of professionalisation that differentiates them from the other design groups. Moreover, this has been highly successful. The emergence of architecture as a profession places the design groups in the invidious position of being caught between the professional standing of the architectural profession and the standing of that distinctly non-professional group, artists. Almost by virtue of their anti-professionalisation, and their pursuit of the transcendental, artists achieve a standing that is publicly acknowledged. Designers exist in the grey area in-between. They are neither a profession nor transcendental.

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