

Propelling Design Inquiry into Areas of Ambiguity

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Abstract

Examining the implications of a radical redefinition of the relationship between the senses and intelligence for practice based research inquiry and research through design, this paper is based on a central premise that fundamentally redefines the epistemology, pedagogy and the function of design and has far reaching consequences for our understanding of language, intelligence, meaning, the senses and subjectivity. This pragmatic and holistic approach to consciousness is used here as a tool to examine and re-conceptualize the purpose, methodology and evaluation of research. Considering the problems created by the deep-seated and enduring legacy of rationalist principles, the alternative it proposes is that rather than recognize the intelligence of perception we should be seeing that perception is intelligence. Investigating the implications of this new approach for concepts such as decision making, objectivity and the presumed end point of research, it argues that shifting any inquiry away from the unequivocal towards the ambiguous is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of this paradigm and it is not just another way of saying that anything goes, but rather that work must be judged against different criteria. Truth is contingent, beliefs change, there is nothing is set in stone. And it is this flexibility that gives us such a great opportunity.

Set within landscape architecture, it has implications for other architecture, art and design disciplines, philosophy, aesthetics and education more generally.

Keywords: *philosophy, perception, research methodology, pragmatism, ambiguity, landscape architecture*

Introduction

Research in design, as it is in any subject, is ‘a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared’ (HEFCE, 2011). This simple definition makes you wonder why it is apparently so difficult to undertake, why design research remains ‘highly contested’, (Swaffield & Deming, 2011:43) weighed down with ‘confusion and controversy’ (Cross, 2007:126), still fraught with the misunderstandings and misconceptions (Durling, 2002) identified a decade ago when it was a relatively young, emergent discipline. Arguing for a fundamental shift in the way we think about how we perceive to deal head on with the ‘one big mistake’ Ryle 1949 (reprinted 1990):17) derides as ‘The absurdity of the Official Doctrine’, this paper traces the contentious nature of design research directly back to the dichotomy between body and mind to which Ryle refers. Proposing that research in design shouldn’t really be any different from research in any other discipline, does not suggest that design research is just another form of “problem solving’ or ‘information processing” (Cross, 2007:127). It does tell us however, that groundbreaking research in or through design is absolutely achievable, and that this can be critical, rigorous and ‘brilliant in idiosyncratic freewheeling ways’ (Rorty, 1999:178). The point is that research in design doesn’t necessarily have to be scientific and neither does it need to be based on rationalist views about the nature of intelligence, emotions, facts and values.

The paper is based on a central premise that fundamentally redefines the epistemology, pedagogy and the function of design and has far reaching consequences for our understanding of language, intelligence, meaning, the senses and subjectivity. As a pragmatic and holistic approach to consciousness this provides a tool to examine and re-conceptualise the purpose, methodology and evaluation of research. Set within landscape architecture, it also has implications for other architecture, art and design disciplines, philosophy, aesthetics and education more generally.

Philosophical underpinning

From a pragmatic perspective, designing is an iterative complex process, involving research, testing, redefining, refocusing and expressing ideas in a particular medium. It is the synthesis and analysis of a plethora of information to make propositions for the future. To do it well takes aesthetic skill, artistic sensibility, expertise and judgement, as well as technological know-how. Currently, the predicament design research finds itself in, is that no matter how scientific or phenomenological the process is, some part of it is thought to involve a deeply mysterious and unique act that, separate from intelligence, lies beyond investigation, entangled in

creativity, the mind's eye and the subconscious, engaging with universal truths and essences, archetypes and visual modes of thinking. Although it might make design seem special and alluring, this introduces a fundamental weakness, a conceptual void at the heart of the process that compromises research inquiry as much as it does design pedagogy. The problems stem from theories of perception. The Greeks got it wrong, Descartes was largely responsible for maintaining the perceptual myth and we are still suffering the consequences.

Intensely nuanced and variable, the general picture we have of the perceptual process depends on a sensory mode of thinking that somehow intervenes on our behalf to organise various inputs in order to serve intelligence – ‘a disastrous idea that has haunted Western philosophy since the seventeenth century (Putnam, 1999:43). Despite all the post-modern rhetoric, concepts such as visual thinking, intuition, language, emotions, artistic sensibility and design expertise remain imbued with the fundamental Cartesian distinction between mind and body, between facts and values, real truth and mere opinions, the consequence of a damaging metaphysical duality that has slipped under the intellectual radar, disguised in visual and perceptual theories.

Underpinning the distinction made between different conceptual frameworks such as science and art, this oddly enduring duality leaves us with a narrowly defined view of intelligence and rationality, the belief that language is linear and logical and that emotions and intuitions are subjective, irrational and inexplicable. Belief in a sensory interface that is supposedly making decisions on our behalf, means that whether research is undertaken from an empirical or transcendental perspective, or indeed anywhere between the two, it cannot escape a clutch of metaphysical concepts based on objective, universal truth or subjective, hidden essences, either position being nothing more than a camouflage for all sorts of agendas that are poorly articulated and open to abuse, essentially opinion masquerading as self-evidence. So prevalent are these rationalist beliefs, they are often taken to be common sense. It is also why some would plead that the process of designing is a special case, because it supposedly straddles these two conceptual realms.

This is a profoundly unequal dichotomy, with science as the epitome of truth and knowledge and art considered a bit fluffy, subjective, a matter of taste not fact. It leaves us with a number of fairly predictable scenarios translating on the one hand, into efforts to identify primeval, subconscious yearnings and recognitions, the invisible, or what lies beneath the surface, on the other, calls for research to be neutral, simple, clean and objective, with replicable analyses based on hard facts and incontrovertible truth. Caught on the horns of this dichotomy, an awful lot of time is spent

developing increasingly complex and elaborate strategies to build bridges or gateways between what are characterized as the emotional, intuitive aspects of design and the logical side, which deals with practicalities and language. Similarly, trying to understand the creative possibilities of a 'confusion of thought and perception' (Davey, 1999:8) working out how we can synthesize thinking in images with thinking in words, as well as how we might teach such a skill has become a preoccupation. Trying to patch up the division between the senses and intelligence, either by stressing the close proximity of the two or even arguing to reverse the usual rationalist bias, researchers are forever looking for new ways to freshen up old propositions, for example focusing on the aesthetic nature of scientific thought or language and the consensual, rational basis of poetic discourse. In contrast, speculation about *what* is actually perceived is negligible, despite as Ingold (2000) observes, this almost certainly being a far more significant question to ask.

Notwithstanding the substantial and impressive body of research dealing with an array of historical, contextual and technological issues, as esoteric, practical, obscure or technical as you like, the picture remains pretty much the same. At the critical point, when it tries to address the designing part of design, significant chunks of the process go missing; they slip away into an arcane, sensory netherworld. The spatial, conceptual and visual skills needed to generate form, to express ideas through materiality, the nuts and bolts of understanding why things look the way they do given the time, place and context, are hardly ever addressed.

The extraordinary success of the scientific paradigm has led to us being practically transfixed by the idea that research has to adopt a scientific methodology, maintaining at all times a neutral objectivity, even though time and again it has been shown that the design process does not sit easily within it (see Broadbent, 1988 (first published in 1975):321), neither incidentally do many other disciplines, including paradoxically, the sciences. Over the years, warning bells have been sounded about the validity of the rationalist doctrine. Railing against the empiricist proclivity at the turn of the 20th century, James (1981 (first published in 1907):20) said that the devotion to science was so overwhelming, it was to all intents and purposes, a religion, 'Our children, one might say, are almost born scientific', he despaired. The 'cult of the fact' Hudson (Hudson, 1976 first published 1972) criticizes remains almost impassible and we are still 'dazzled', Midgley (2001:59) says, by science. Support for this dissenting view, particularly from within the scientific community itself has made a bit of a dent in science's otherwise copper-bottomed reputation and design research is not alone in emerging from decades of analytical, logical inductive reasoning, number crunching, longitudinal studies and so-called objective analysis. But although in principle, many agree with Cross

(2007:126) that it is 'no longer necessary to turn design into an imitation of science; neither do we have to treat design as a mysterious, ineffable art', and despite a slow migration away from the explicitly scientific systems of inquiry such as those espoused by McHarg, led by amongst others, the existential 'happenings' organized on the beaches of California by Halprin in California (see Walker & Simo, 1994) phenomenological explorations of topophilia by Yi fu Tuan (1974) and concepts of placelessness of Edward Relph, (1976), the promise of certainty and truth offered by hard scientific methodology, is difficult to resist. A concern that clearly resonated with the 46th World Council of the International Federation of Landscape Architects, Rio de Janeiro in 2009 and at the General Assembly of European Federation for Landscape Architecture, Brussels in 2009 is the growing number of university departments requiring a scientific PhD as a prerequisite for teachers of design. Both meetings voted unanimously to urge funding bodies, universities, ministries of education and professional organisations to address the decline in knowledge and expertise this is causing as a matter of urgency, on the basis that it is damagingly prescriptive and will do enormous harm to the future development of the discipline.

More insidious however, is the fact that even when a scientific methodology is not explicitly adopted, the underlying rationalist principals are just too sticky to shake off, evident for example in the belief that we are "getting closer to the way things really are' or 'more fully grasping the essence of...' or 'finding out how it really should be done" Kuhn, quoted by Rorty (1999:187). They underlie attempts to find descriptions of the world as it really is, are clearly exposed in the notion that it is possible to gather practical, utilitarian hard facts, remote from the 'muddy, painful and perplexed' world of personal experience' James, (1981 (first published in 1907):23) and the idea that these facts can be separated from values, or that values can be added on after the facts have been established. Lurking in the background is a residual, deep-seated dependence on universal conceptions that are beyond all doubt, impermeable and implacable. The divided consciousness remains absolutely fundamental.

The pragmatic alternative

The alternative is to avoid altogether the 'obsolete and clumsy tools' that distinguish 'between absolutism and relativism, between rationality and irrationality, and between morality and expediency' (Rorty, 1989:44). By adopting an interpretative view of perception, the whole metaphysical edifice built on the flawed conception of a sensory mode of thinking comes tumbling down. Rather than argue we should recognize the intelligence of perception, we should be recognizing that perception *is* intelligence. Unlocking a major part of the debate, it disengages aesthetics, the visual,

creativity and many aspects of consciousness from primitive bodily ways of knowing, disentangles it from psychology and using a fresh common sense approach, brings materiality back into the picture.

Embracing ambiguity

Not only does this give us a means of dealing with spatial, visual information that is artistically and conceptually rigorous, we can also reject the idea of universal, inviolable truth without necessarily being sucked into the argument that the only alternative is to believe everything is relative and dependent on a point of view. But moving the purpose and methodology of design inquiry into such potentially ambiguous areas requires taking on board what may seem at first to be a number of contradictory propositions. For example, apart from recognizing the slippery nature of language and the interpretative nature of facts, we have to accept the rationality of emotions. Pragmatism focuses unequivocally on knowledge within a particular medium rather than any notion of innate, generic skill, suggesting that all perceptions, observations and analyses (even the most scientifically based) are ambiguous, flexible and open to interpretation.

Changing the epistemological basis of design, the bottom line is that we have no choice but to engage with ideas at every stage of the process. Understanding that even the most intimate, seemingly mystical elements of design are based on knowledge and knowledge alone prepares the ground for a fresh artistic and conceptual approach to design, establishing it as a holistic, critical endeavour. From this perspective, it makes any and every part of the design process accessible to investigation, it is also clear that the limits of our inquiries are governed only by our knowledge and experience. Responsibility for understanding what sense we make of the world is handed back to us. The driest, most reductive statistical equation or number crunching analysis is as full of presumptions and preconceptions as any ephemeral, instinctive response. Look at the debates relating to climate change and it's easy to see how open to interpretation the facts can be, let alone finding any consensus as to what is an actual fact and what isn't.

Evaluation

We should recognize that what is considered to be clear and rigorous research is absolutely contingent upon the knowledge, values and opinions of those who judge it. This explains why Swaffield and Deming (2011) find that what is valued in research is shaped by academic location, the educational background of academics and the particular approach of editors and reviewers. Those undertaking research effectively enter a lion's den, work can easily end up in the hands of someone with a

conflicting agenda, an entirely different view of the world. So, as supervisors, reviewers and editors, our role is to be informed and make judgments from a position of knowledge and experience, aware of our prejudices, preconceptions and desires. The hard part is to recognise what these are and then to have the courage to put them to one side if necessary. This is being properly objective – not trying to gauge how closely the work measures up to our own ideas, but being open and pragmatic enough to appreciate what might be an entirely different way of understanding things, aware that there is no single model for good work in any academic discipline and that we can even be, Rorty (1999:181) suggests, more relaxed about whether we have a rigorous research methodology or whether their work produces knowledge rather than mere opinion

Precisely what excites or appeals to us will depend on our inclination and temperament. James (1907) distinguishes between those who are tough minded from those who are tender minded, whereas Rorty (1999:127) suggests a more apt divide is between ‘those busy conforming to well-understood criteria for making contributions to knowledge from people trying to expand their own moral imaginations’. And this is precisely the point. Rather than staying within the safety of fixed disciplinary parameters, in order to overcome a long period of technological stagnation, we need to be more aggressively expansive, appropriating and operating confidently, making connections between disciplines, linking theory and practice, ideas and form, evaluating the ethical, aesthetic, ecological and artistic value of the physical and imagined environments with the explicit purpose of investigating how this knowledge can be used directly to inform design.

Design unlimited

The reason the complexities and richness of landscape architecture might appear difficult to capture, in the end, comes down to our own conceptions and ideas. If we really want to fully articulate the way we experience the world, there can be no room for the dry bureaucratic talk that squeezes the life out of any debate about place and space. We need a better set of descriptions. It is not as though we are stuck for ideas. There is a wealth of literature and research, evidence scientific, academic and anecdotal, imaginative narratives to inspire and show us things we hadn't noticed in the world. The real skill of a designer is in using the information to capture these narratives and/or create new ones through good investigative digging and then explicate the work in such a way that it fires the imagination. Obviously, it is not just about language and language alone. The narratives, the words, must be made real, supported by a demonstration of their spatial implications. When dealing with the

transformation of a place it is not only the understanding of new ideas that enables us to adjust to new circumstances and possibilities but the convincing and appropriate evidence of their expression in physical form. If we steer clear of the safe options we can begin to fill the conceptual void by talking seriously about ideas and their function in quality design.

Conclusion

Ditching the metaphysical baggage that weighs down most current theories of perception, enables us to demystify the art of design, teach the generation of form, connect spatial strategies to real places and develop ways of working that not only encourage but also demand the expression of ideas, the ideas that are fundamental to the design process. Changing the focus in the way we think of landscape from technology towards ideas, seeing the landscape as both a cultural *and* natural resource and a physical *and* abstract entity, having economic *and* social value, looking at the experience people have of their physical environment as well as making the vital connections between governance, culture, health and economics – these steps go some of the way to providing a viable new platform from which to deal holistically with the rural and the urban, wilderness and man-made, the most treasured and memorable and as well as the unloved and degraded. Setting a new agenda for research to bring fresh insights that will shape the future of our environment.

There is inevitably a degree of anxiety when old certainties are challenged and the interpretative, transient nature of everything we believe to be true finally dawns on us. Shifting any inquiry away from the unequivocal towards the ambiguous is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of this paradigm and it is not just another way of saying that anything goes, but rather that work must be judged against different criteria. Truth is contingent, beliefs change, there is nothing is set in stone. And it is this flexibility that gives us such a great opportunity. If we have the confidence to move away from the central hard core of scientific assumption and methodology, there is a real chance to develop new approaches, make connections across and between disciplines, erase rigidly drawn boundaries delineating and distinguishing practice from theory. The old Cartesian duality is a house of cards.... time to blow it down.

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