Desperately seeking common ground: the emergence of design management in Greece

A. Yagou University of Thessaly & AKTO Art & Design, Greece
V. Tsironi AKTO Art & Design, Greece

Abstract

“Common ground,” defined as the “ability to communicate across fields,” provides the background for this paper. Communicating across fields is very significant in the design domain in general and particularly in design management, as both areas are highly interdisciplinary. The paper traces the “common ground” theme in the contemporary practice of design and design management in the Greek context. The state of Greek design is briefly presented and then the issue of design management is discussed through a number of interviews with related professionals. The cultivation of a common ground, by all parties involved, appears to be a crucial factor in the establishment and development of design management in the country. Further research is suggested in specific sectors of the local industry.
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Introduction
The theme for this conference is “common ground” and it provides the key concept for this paper. Herbert Simon (1996: 137) describes common ground as the “ability to communicate across fields.” This ability is very significant in the design domain, which is interdisciplinary par excellence (Scrivener et.al., 2000). Furthermore, this ability is particularly important in design management, a sub-discipline resulting from the interaction between design and management, two “cultures” with different interests and values. This paper will explore the “common ground” theme in relation to design management in a specific local context, that of Greece.

More specifically, the paper will present recent research on the development of design management in Greece. The main objectives of the research consist in tracing the past of design management in the country, identifying its current problems, and suggesting directions for its future development. As the field of design history and theory is practically virgin in Greece, it was decided that the research would have to take two forms.

Firstly, the research consisted of a bibliographic survey on the state of Greek design in general and of Greek product design in particular. A concise presentation of this bibliographic survey provides the necessary background. Despite the significant dearth of sources on the state of design in Greece, this brief historical account gives a basic view of this domain and indicates some of its shortcomings.

Secondly, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with a number of individuals who have been active in the last two decades in Greece, in the fields of design, design education, design management, and administration. The interviews focus on the state of design management in Greece and they have been used to explore the “common ground” issue in relation to the design sector in Greece.

The state of the design domain in Greece
It is generally acknowledged that in Greece the design domain in general is in a state of chronic underdevelopment, and produces very poor results compared to most European countries (Tzirtzilakis, 1989) (Vokotopoulos et.al., 1992; Adamou, 2001). This might be generally attributed to the orientation of the Greek economy to non-productive sectors, and to the direct or indirect dependency of the local economy from foreign capital (Mouzelis, 1978; Tsoukalas, 1992).

Pre-war developments of the design sector were limited in scope and the production of Greek firms was mainly based on copying foreign designs, in order to suppress cost. To give a characteristic example, copying or adapting foreign designs constituted standard practice in the furniture sector in the mid-war period, when a certain blooming of industry and design was taking place (Parmenidis and Roupa, 2002: 61, 99-100). After the war, there was a brief rise of design-related activities in the late fifties and early sixties, thanks to a group of art theorists, architects, businessmen, and other professionals. In 1962 they established the Centre and the Society of Industrial Morphology, aiming at creating the foundations for local design development, but this initiative was short-lived (Tzirtzilakis, 1989: 115).

State support has been non-existent until the late seventies. Then, design-related activities in Greece were relatively developed and reached a peak during the late eighties and the early nineties, thanks to the activities of the Hellenic Product Design Centre, which was founded in 1979 and operated
under the auspices of the Hellenic Organization of Small and Medium-Sized Industries (EOMMEX). However, funding was discontinued and the Hellenic Product Design Centre was shut down in 1993 (Vokotopoulos et al., 1992: 21-22) (Private communication with C. Karabelas and G. Adamopoulos of EOMMEX). Generally, the competitiveness of many Greek products is based on low prices rather than quality (Vokotopoulos et al., 1992: 9). A clear indication of the present shortcomings of the local design scene compared to other European countries is provided by the limited or non-existent representation of Greece in the activities of the European Community Design Prize (ECDP), which was launched in 1988 as a joint initiative between the design promotion organizations of the Member States and the Commission of the European Communities (Thackara, 1997).

One of the main reasons that hinder the development of product design activities in Greece is the fact that there are no Industrial Design Departments in Greek Universities. Design is taught as an elective course in some engineering or architectural departments, or in occasional seminars by various private or public institutions. Autonomous product design departments belong to private design colleges, which, however, do not have higher education status, according to the Greek law (Vokotopoulos et al., 1992: 23-24). The inadequacy of formal design education in Greece is responsible to a great extent for the fragmentation of design activities and discourse in the country. Design activities are primarily carried out by architects, engineers of various specializations, or designers educated in private institutions or abroad (Karabelas, 1993). A survey of contemporary design in Greece reveals that most of it never reaches mass production but remains at prototype level or is produced as one-off (Karabelas, 1993). The public awareness of design is very limited and design is practically equated with styling (Yagou, 2001: 134; Vokotopoulos et al., 1992: 9).

However, there are positive signs of change. There are some indications that the related professional and academic communities are gradually becoming more mature and, therefore, more interested in the combination of design with management, which appears to be a challenging direction for the near future. In March 2002, the founding meeting of the Hellenic Design Society took place in Athens. The Society aims to promote design activities in this country and revitalize the design discourse. A number of design competitions recently organized by private and public bodies will also perhaps support this aim. Finally, new design-related departments have been established in private and public institutions.

**Attitudes of Greek firms towards design and design management**

The “common ground” theme appears to be a crucial one in the formation of the design management domain in general: “Design management was created because in practice it was discovered that there is a large communication gap between managers and designers. It’s as if we’re talking about two different tribes speaking a different language and having different cultures. They don’t understand each other. And they can’t communicate with each other. The need to unite gave birth to an intermediate common aim, somebody who doesn’t have to be industrial designer or manager to deal with design, in order to be able to understand and translate, to speak both languages, to know both cultures and understand the demands of one side so that he/she can express them to the other side and vice versa” (Interview with economist/administrator) (Tsironi, 2002: 76). How does this apply to the Greek reality? Following the presentation of the state of design in Greece in the previous subchapter, we will now use the material of the interviews in order to focus on specific issues of design management, and relate these to the general structural and organizational problems of the Greek design domain.

The practice of design management in the Greek business context becomes complicated by the way firms are structured and managed. The size of Greek firms is a key factor in the way such firms tend to organise and develop themselves. “The problem with Greek firms is that, because they don’t
have the range and, respectively, the production runs of foreign firms, they try to reduce the size of the company or to keep it as small as possible, with the minimum number of employees. [...] Greek firms are essentially family-based (Interview with designer A) (Tsironi, 2002: 82). Duties are not distributed, but usually gathered under the authority of a single member of the family, who acts as the “boss” and has practically full responsibility for running the company. “Generally, in the Greek firm, one has to deal with the boss. [...] In a sense, firms are structured like this, the starting point is the family, so there is basically one person who has all the responsibility and makes all the decisions” (Interview with designer A) (Tsironi, 2002: 80-81). This means further that this person generally undertakes a variety of roles, usually including both roles of designer and manager. “[It is] one-man show. He is the businessman, the manager, the designer” (Interview with designer/educator) (Tsironi, 2002: 69). “In the Greek company, it is the general director who, in a sense, does everything” (Interview with designer A) (Tsironi, 2002: 80). In this case, the dialogue between design and management, which has been mentioned as forming the foundation of design management, doesn’t really exist. Both activities are essentially carried out by the same person.

This situation is exacerbated by the fact that firms are generally ignorant about design. “At this moment, Greek firms don’t know about design” (Interview with design theorist/educator) (Tsironi, 2002: 95). Even when they do know about it, it doesn’t attract much attention and it is not considered as an activity which might be relegated to specialists. As a result, it is dealt with in an informal way. Design is performed either by the businessman/director himself, or is even left to technical staff. “First of all, we have to perform this leap, to decide that it is not the businessman who does the design, or it is not the chief technician who does the design” (Interview with architect/designer/educator) (Tsironi, 2002: 101). The need for design expertise is not recognised. “They think they don’t need it. They act intuitively” (Interview with design theorist/educator) (Tsironi, 2002: 97). Similarly, other disciplines closely related to design, such as ergonomics, are not considered as demanding a specialist treatment. “Ergonomics? No, they think they can do it themselves” (Interview with design theorist/educator) (Tsironi, 2002: 98). This casual attitude towards design implies that professional design input is not valued in Greece and is in low demand. “I do not have the experience of a firm in Greece that deals with industrial designers. [...] From what I know, the situation is not so good. [...] I hear about things happening here and there, but in the end very few things are happening” (Interview with design theorist/educator) (Tsironi, 2002: 97). Even when design expertise is sought after, this often happens in a non-systematic, ad hoc basis. “Here in Greece, there are few companies who employ designers. Some employ them occasionally, some perhaps not at all. They might simply be getting a few ideas [from them] from time to time” (Interview with design theorist/educator) (Tsironi, 2002: 87-88).

The product development process is quite informal and unstructured, if it exists at all. New products often result from copying foreign products which have been successful. “Market research exists, to a certain extent, primarily through trade fairs, in which [Greek businesspeople] participate and which they visit. There is, to a small extent, production; they are informed about it to some point. What definitely doesn’t exist is new product development. Very few people know about this. What happens primarily, or at least what has been happening so far, is small modifications in existing products. There is no substantial new product development from scratch” (Interview with designer A) (Tsironi, 2002: 81). The complexity and cost of new product development appears daunting for Greek firms, and is therefore avoided. “There is a tendency [in Greek firms] to start new product development and in the course of the project they realise that there are many difficulties in applying all these innovations that exist in a new product. So there are many cases when several firms suspend the product development process” (Interview with designer A) (Tsironi, 2002: 83).

Given the doubt “whether [Greek firms] have realised the value of design itself” (Interview with architect/designer/educator) (Tsironi, 2002: 101), it is probably wildly optimistic to consider the
role of design management in their activities. “How can design management exist, when design itself doesn’t have a secure place in the Greek company?” (Interview with designer/educator) (Tsironi, 2002: 69) “There is hardly a need for design. […] Companies are still on a medieval level of thinking about what a product is, […] a thing, not even an object, “a thing which I sell” ” (Interview with designer B) (Tsironi, 2002: 119). “In Greece, we designers are forced to act as design managers. Because nobody knows the meaning of the term and nobody thinks that it is necessary” (Interview with designer B) (Tsironi, 2002: 115). The general impression is that design management is practically non-existent, despite its great potential for small and medium sized industries. “I have the feeling that in Greece nobody has a clue about design management. […] They have not understood what a powerful weapon design management could be in Greece” (Interview with economist/administrator) (Tsironi, 2002: 76-77). More specifically, discussing the furniture sector, it is stated: “Design management […] I haven’t seen it” (Interview with designer/educator) (Tsironi, 2002: 69). In more general terms, it is claimed that “[…] management in general is something new for Greece, not to mention design management” (Interview with designer A) (Tsironi, 2002: 82). There seems to be an issue of maturity, which Greek companies fail to reach. Their activities remain on an elementary level, where design management is probably a luxury they can’t afford. “The companies which collaborate with the Design Management Institute have reached a high degree of maturity. [In Greece], we’re talking about companies who need much more basic things, to be able to take advantage of more basic things. So perhaps design management has a very low priority” (Interview with design theorist/educator) (Tsironi, 2002: 98). This of course becomes in turn a major drawback to any further development.

Focus on the issue of design teams: members and problems

We will now focus on some remarks on design group work and on the interaction between various specialists involved in the design and design management process. We will comment on some of the views expressed by the people interviewed, which are related to the attribution of roles in design management and to issues of communication.

First of all we observe that there seems to be no consensus regarding the question of “who does what”. This lack of “common ground” might be attributed to the background of the interviewees, in other words, each one of them seems to assign a more important role in the design team to people of one’s own specialisation: “The third level of design management is the project itself. The first and most important thing for a design project to start is the existence of the so-called design brief. What is the design brief? It is design before design. The design brief is not the job of the designer. It is the job of anyone but the designer” (Interview with economist/administrator) (Tsironi, 2002: 74). “An economist? I’m afraid he won’t understand things very well” (Interview with architect/designer/educator) (Tsironi, 2002: 103). “It is difficult […] for somebody who is an economist or of a different specialization, to suddenly become the head of the [design] team” (Interview with designer/educator) (Tsironi, 2002: 66).

The variety of opinions extends to educational issues, specifically regarding the area of education in which design management belongs. It is acknowledged that “designers should know the business side of design” (Interview with design theorist/educator) (Tsironi, 2002: 86). Also, the view is expressed that design management courses “would be attended by management and administration students, […] also by specialists from this area, i.e. production managers, engineers, administration people, as well as designers” (Interview with design theorist/educator) (Tsironi, 2002: 86). However, the relevance of design management to studies of economics is questioned, and the view is expressed that design management belongs “[…] definitely in a technical faculty. It’s not a financial matter. Economists can’t do it” (Interview with architect/designer/educator) (Tsironi, 2002: 102). Given the interdisciplinary character of knowledge in general and of design management in particular, the attempt to label and classify design management in this way is rather
worrying. Furthermore, it is believed that a design manager “is very important [...] especially as a 
good assistant of the design department. Not as the person who will take the final decisions. If this 
kind of cooperation exists, I consider it very important. Otherwise, it shouldn’t exist at all”
(Interview with designer/educator) (Tsironi, 2002: 66). We sense here the conception of the lone, 
creative designer/hero, who faces the reactions of “the others”. This might be an indication that the 
concept of the design team itself is not assimilated by Greek designers. This conjecture should be 
more explored, but it is underpinned by the fact that Greek designers generally have very limited 
interaction with team work in industry, as already mentioned in the survey of local design.

Where opinions do not differ is the realisation that there are no design management specialists to be 
found in Greece. “I follow the people who write about design management abroad, I have never 
seen any Greek name. This is a very new area of management and a Greek person who goes abroad 
will not choose to deal with it, he/she will choose Finance or Marketing. They are established, 
design management is very new” (Interview with design theorist/educator) (Tsironi, 2002: 93). This 
of course obstructs any potential developments in the field, even in the case of firms with a positive 
stance towards design. “Perhaps the firms wanted to employ a design manager and could not find 
one. I can’t rule this out” (Interview with designer/educator) (Tsironi, 2002: 70). Which is in turn 
emphasised by a sharp but possibly true realisation: “We say that there are no Greek design 
mangers. But are there many Greek designers who could be serious and adequate enough in order 
to realise a project from A to Z with all its demands? My feeling is that there aren’t” 
(economist/administrator) (Tsironi, 2002: 77).

Conclusions and implications
Our research findings have provided an introduction to the current state of the Greek design domain 
in general, and of design management in particular. The combination of the bibliographic search 
with the interviews point to a wide range of issues, which directly affect the state of design 
management in Greece. Innovations are usually “imported,” often with significant time-lag, and 
most companies do not recognize the need of adding value to products through local design input. 
On the executive level, the need to commission and manage design is inadequately understood and 
leads to confusion of professional roles. On the level of public administration, support for any 
initiatives related to the management of design is lacking. Also, the academic environment is not 
sufficiently developed to encompass design management. These shortcomings in turn affect the 
quality of professional design available today in the country, as designers are forced to operate in an 
underdeveloped and adverse context, which offers them limited opportunities.

In more general terms, [in Greece] “it is very clear that one has borrowed a design ideology 
primarily produced abroad, in other words forms that are beautiful, forms that one can see their 
evolution, can understand the rules to design and transform them, and here one doesn’t have the 
technostructure. The structure of tools, of people, of knowledge, etc.” (Interview with 
architect/designer/educator) (Tsironi, 2002: 107) This quote expresses the fact that an 
aesthetic/formal ideology has been borrowed, adapted, and used, whereas the 
technical/professional/managerial ideology remains in an embryonic state. What could be done to 
face this situation? During the recent founding meeting of the Hellenic Design Society in Athens, 
the designer and educator G. Haidopoulos made a sharp and substantial remark: “The post-war 
history of design in Greece has been fragmented and heroic. It is no longer possible to have a heroic 
attitude against design in this country.” In other words, it is absolutely vital to develop a coherent 
and systematic approach against design, with the contribution of all related parties. This is 
supported by the fact that Greek companies are nowadays forced to operate in a pan-European and 
often global context, which presents unforeseen problems and demands new and highly creative 
solutions.
A minimum of consensus, as well as a high level of communication between all interested parties, is an absolute prerequisite for further development, given the fragmentation of design-related activities in Greece. The “common ground” of each other’s language should be discovered and cultivated, if anything significant is to be achieved in the near future. Further research is necessary on the subject, especially in the form of extensive, sector-specific case studies. Such studies would identify and demonstrate the range and variety of problems faced by certain sectors, as far as the interaction between design and management is concerned.
References


