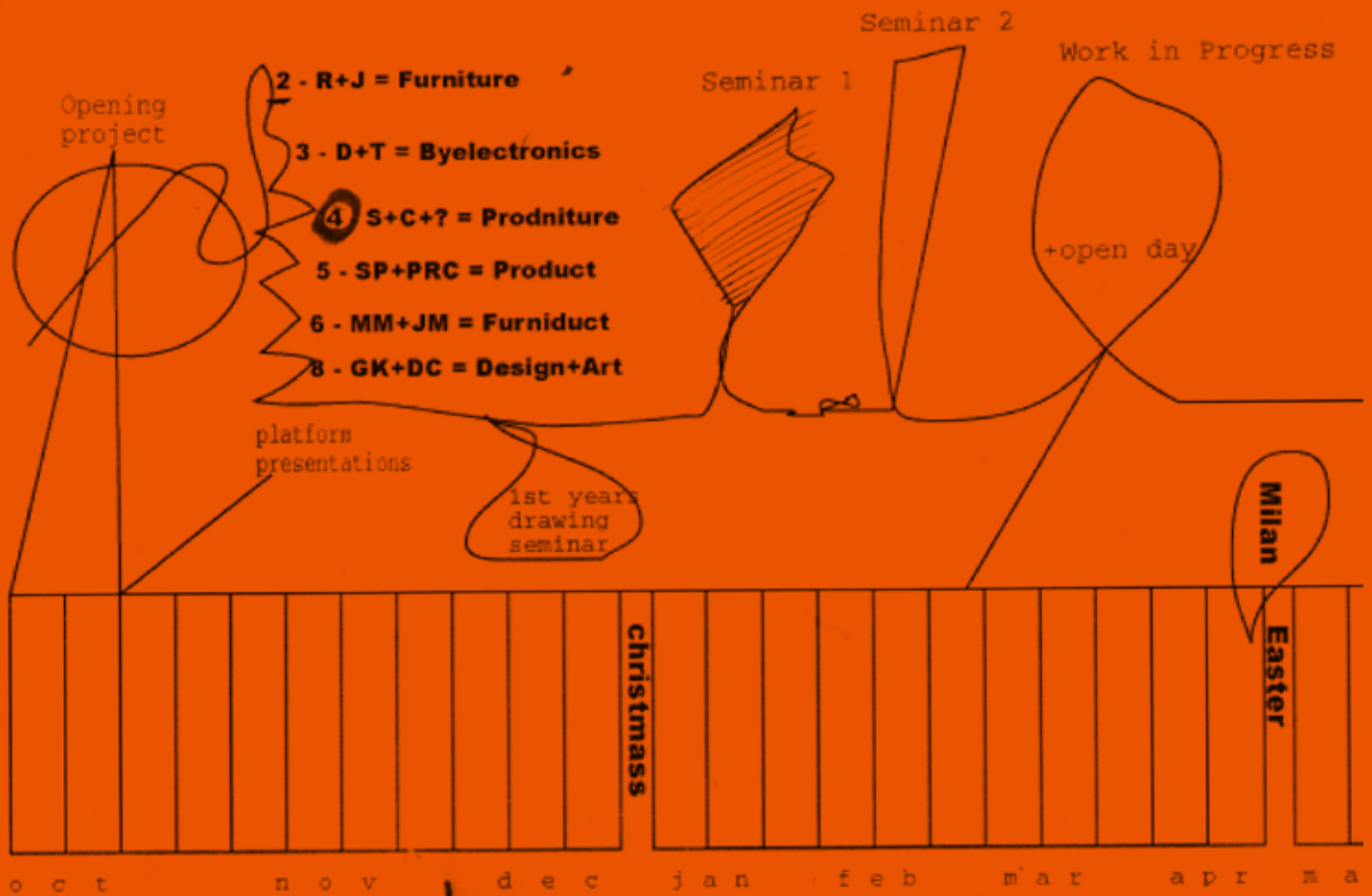


Beyond Discipline

Design Practice and Design Education
in the 21st Century



Lara Furniss

September 2015

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Foreword

Change is nothing new in the design sector. Indeed it is an inevitable and frequently positive experience for all involved in the industry, especially when anticipated accurately and addressed with appropriate strategies and smart adaptation. Doing what they do, designers are particularly well-attuned to change and to the creative and flexible responses that this requires. This adaptive resilience is fortunate as the UK design industry has witnessed progressive, sometimes dramatic, cycles of transformation throughout its history.

The past three decades have been particularly turbulent. The late '80s saw a significant upsurge of interest in the quality and international impact of UK design. However, in the early '90s, optimistic expansion turned quickly to shake-out and re-structuring as economic downturn gripped the UK economy. A return to economic health in the later '90s - allied with both rapid diffusion of new technologies and the UK's 'cool' factor - triggered further expansion in designer numbers and in studio start-ups. With strong demand, growth continued until the turn of the century when commoditisation and super-competition once more spawned retrenchment, consolidation and re-positioning. In the most recent period, renewed focus on the strategic role of the designer and the contribution of design to successful innovation has again stimulated expansion. However this good news has been confined largely to specific sub-sectors (and to particular regions) in the UK.

So, we see a landscape re-shaped perpetually by challenging economic, market, technological and supply factors, and a sector that has required fleet and often thoroughgoing adaptation. As torrents of change have coursed through design, these have been plotted and evaluated by agencies such as the Design Council and Nesta - both passionate advocates for the sector - that have recommended policy responses configured to support and promote a vital (and overwhelmingly successful) UK industry. So too, we have seen coordinated and intelligent responses in (parts of) Higher Education as smarter institutions have re-calibrated and re-tooled to equip next generation designers with the technical, business and adaptive skills that evolving markets will demand.

But what of the current and future situation: are we confronting a further wave of dramatic change? What challenges and opportunities will the coming decades hold? What factors and trajectories will shape design futures? What responses and strategies - from government, educators and industry - are required to maintain and build-upon the UK's success? It is these crucial questions that are posed in 'Beyond Discipline'. Taking the views of twelve global thought-leaders in the field as a knowledge platform, this report presents a candid image of the current state of the design sector, and the trends in thinking, practice and behaviour that characterise both established and emerging designers. The report engages too with training policy and practise, asking a further and centrally important question: 'is contemporary UK design and creativity education really fit for purpose in a rapidly and radically re-figuring landscape?'

The report may make uncomfortable reading for some, especially those in the policy and education sectors. However, it is timely and entirely well-intentioned. It reflects the strongly-held views of some of the UK's most widely respected and well-positioned commentators, each of whom is both passionate about the future of design in the UK, and committed to seeing the sector flourish whatever the early decades of the 21st Century may hold. The ride may not be an easy one - and recognition of shortcomings and challenges is rarely less than painful. However, a frank appraisal and acknowledgement of current realities constitutes a crucial first step in securing the sustained success of a vital and world-leading UK design industry.

Professor Simon Bolton
Dr Lawrence Green
Co-Directors, Strategic Creativity Research Lab
September 2015

strategic creativity
research lab

Executive Summary

Compared with ten years ago, the practice of design in the UK is unrecognisable. Changes result from role re-definition, process re-invention, and ongoing evolution.

- **Designers are questioning their purpose and re-defining their roles for the 21st Century.** They are becoming engaged increasingly with social, environmental and political agendas, and are recognising that they can apply innovative processes and transferable design skills across a spectrum of settings.
- **The design process has been re-invented.** There has been a dramatic rise in collaborative activity as designers prepare to meet challenges of the coming decades. Design studios are operating more fluidly across traditional and emerging disciplines. Agility and iteration are now emphasised as key elements in the design process.
- **The design sector continues to evolve rapidly.** There has been a steep increase in the number of smaller design studios. Larger, more established studios have found ways to move forward by splitting into segments. There has been a steady and strong growth in the number of freelancers.

Change is being driven by external and environmental factors, and by the choices that designers make.

- **External drivers are directly affecting change in practice.** Digital technology has permitted designers to work and learn in new ways. Economic pressures have seen larger studios either close or strengthen, and smaller studios develop broader offers. Industry is re-shaping the landscape through heavy in-house recruitment.
- **Change is coming from inside the sector too.** New attitudes and a universalistic outlook are enabling fluid, trans-disciplinary designers to look at design practice holistically. There has been a return to making and a resurgence in craft. Pioneering 20th Century practitioners have inspired change, with Ron Arad cited as a leading influence.

Whilst change has positive implications, there are negatives too.

- **There is significant positive propulsion in the design sector.** Many designers profess an optimistic outlook, and this is evident in their work. There has been a positive change in external perceptions of design, with designers being afforded greater credit. Designers now understand how their skills can be transferred to non-creative environments, and are pro-actively instigating change.
- **Negatives are still holding the sector back.** Many UK manufacturing firms fail to acknowledge or exploit UK design talent, and design has been devalued by commoditization, over-supply and lack of confidence.

Action needs to be taken to better define and represent design in order for Government to value it.

- **Government is choosing to ignore the importance of design.** Government de-investment in teaching arts subjects has negatively affected creative education across the board. The STEAM

agenda has been rejected, and the new Design & Technology and Art & Design courses are not valued as core subjects.

- **The design sector is fractured with no clear representation.** The industry cannot agree on a definition of design, and the sector is moving faster than any existing classification system. There is no single, powerful representative body that can speak to Government and stand up for the industry.

The current undergraduate design education system is in crisis: it is time for a new approach.

- **Policy for creative education has placed undergraduate design courses in potential crisis.** There is a critical lack of emphasis on creative subjects in primary and secondary education. Foundation courses are being cut, and the introduction of fees has negatively re-shaped the recruitment landscape. Universities are now financial institutions, students are consumers, and intake policy privileges quantity over quality in the pursuit of income targets.
- **The current university system is not working.** It is outdated, it does not reflect contemporary and evolving design practice, and it struggles to prepare or deliver the creative talent that Industry needs.
- **It is necessary to re-define the skills and processes that 21st Century designers need, and then look to alternative educational models.** Industry needs creative workers that can collaborate, communicate and integrate activities and projects. Education should be less about discipline-specific practical skills, and more about thinking and process: alternative initiatives and approaches should be pursued (and some excellent models are in place).

This report makes three key recommendations:

1. Design must be nurtured

Industry should: come together to re-consider and re-define the concept of 'design'. It should also demand strong representation from one main body that will instill pride and create a unified and compelling voice.

2. Design must be taught well

Education should: examine current practice and alternative educational models to better understand the processes and skills that young designers will require if they are to meet the challenges of coming decades.

3. Design must be valued

Government should: support and give credit to creative education across all levels, encourage continued growth, and value the potential of a vital and ever-evolving sector.

Advisory Team

Dr Lawrence Green
Gareth Williams
Lynda Relph-Knight
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Lara Furniss

Lara has 20 years professional experience working across many art and design disciplines, a degree in Interior Design from Manchester Metropolitan University, and a Master of Fine Arts from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is a lecturer (Design for Theatre, Performance and Events) and researcher within the School of Visual Communication at Birmingham City University.



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Interviewees

The roles of the following interviewees are correct from the time of each interview.

Ron Arad (RA) – Ron Arad Associates; Former Head of Design Products at the Royal College of Art

Zeev Aram (ZA) – Founder of Aram Store and The Aram Gallery

Haidee Bell (HB) – Head of Design Challenges at the Design Council

Helen Charman (HC) – Director of Learning and Research at Design Museum, London

Daniel Charny (DC) – Co Founder and Director of Fixperts; Professor of Design at Kingston University; Co Founder of From Now On

Nick Couch (NC) – Founder of Deskcamping; Business Director for Design at Mother, London

Deborah Dawton (DD) – Chief Executive at Design Business Association

Thomas Heatherwick (TH) – Heatherwick Studio

Nat Hunter (NH) – Co-Director of Design at Royal Society for the encouragement of the Arts (RSA); Founding Director of Airside

Tim Lindsay (TL) – Chief Executive Officer at D&AD

Lynda Relph-Knight (LRK) – Independent design writer and consultant; Former Editor of Design Week for more than 20 years

Gareth Williams (GW) – Design Curator, Lecturer and Author of '21 Twenty One – 21 Designers for Twenty-first Century Britain'

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Are we moving beyond discipline?

*What are the implications
for education?*

Introduction

In the centuries prior to industrialisation, polymaths and master craftspeople had created ‘total works of art’. However, the first 100 years of the Industrial Revolution saw the emergence then cementation of the separation and hierarchisation of arts and design disciplines at the level of both practice and education. This shift – one designed to meet the needs of rapid industrial development and mass consumption – continued throughout the 20th Century. The Foundation course, introduced in the mid-20th Century and inspired by the Bauhaus model, represented an attempt to return to earlier modes and permitted art and design students to cross fluidly between disciplines, immersing them in an open culture of technical development and creativity. In the move to undergraduate education, however, students were again required to identify one clear pathway. Whilst a handful of designers reacted against this constraint in the 20th Century, the majority regarded a disciplinary label as a necessity for success.

Since 2000, design practice in the UK has changed dramatically. Boundaries between design disciplines have dissolved, and many contemporary design studios now defy classification. These studios are reconfiguring the design landscape, yet a uni-disciplinary structure still dominates undergraduate education. This is creating a disconnection between practice and education, and posing critical questions for the current design education system. Perhaps surprisingly, few studies to date have explored this problem.

Drawing on interviews with 12 leading commentators from the UK design sector, this report examines the evolution of design practice over the last ten years. Key issues addressed include: changes and trajectories in the field of design; drivers for change and their positive and negative implications; barriers to necessary development and progress; and, future directions for undergraduate education. Are we moving beyond discipline? Are we moving beyond design? And what are the implications for education?

The design world has been completely revolutionised NH

Social agendas are driving the new contemporary studios DC

There is a mobility of discipline, transferal of skills, transferal of process DC

We live in a much more collaborative age TL

Key shifts in design practice over the last ten years

Findings from the interviews indicate that the practice of design in the UK is now unrecognisable compared with ten years ago. Three key shifts identified are role re-definition, process re-invention and continued evolution.

The role of the designer

The first shift is how design practitioners perceive themselves. Designers are questioning their purpose and re-defining their role for the 21st Century.

The designer as socio-political activist

Designers are becoming increasingly engaged with social, environmental and political agendas. Some see themselves as social scientists, anthropologists, or community activists. Studios like Participle and Engine Service Design follow a social agenda and focus on service design. Dunne and Raby use design as a means to speculate about the future. Industrial designer Freddie Yauner has established MSShift (shift.ms), a platform for young people with Multiple Sclerosis. There has been a reactionary move from corporate to anti-corporate and profit is no longer the main driver, as celebrated by the D&AD 'Beyond Profit' White Pencil award.

The designer as innovator

Designers are realising they can apply their innovative process and transferable skills to almost anything. Airside led the way at the turn of the Millennium, by crossing nearly every media, including digital, animation, illustration and branding, and now studios like Government Digital Service for GOV.UK are crossing copywriting, design and programming. El Ultimo Grito are beyond discipline, crossing art, interior, furniture, product and social services, while others, like Roland Lamb, are inventor-entrepreneurs, focusing on designing, producing and promoting one innovative product. Visionary designers like Martino Gamper are now curating, while others like Heatherwick Studio are taking a more active role as agents for change, collaborating with clients and co-creating briefs.

A developing process

The second shift is that design processes have been re-invented.

The age of collaboration

Design by its nature is participatory and collaborative, but this has evolved to the extent that there is now mass collaboration. Through the formation of collectives and the process of collaboration designers are now working together and supporting each other in many different ways, dependent on each other and also on those outside the design sector. Collectives are enabling designers to share space, facilities and ideas, keeping individual autonomy while sitting under one banner.

Beyond discipline

Many design studios are operating more fluidly across disciplines. Crossing disciplines has always occurred to some extent, but now it appears to be a necessity. Projects are increasingly issues-led rather than solutions-led and designers need to be more fluid in order to respond. For example, design collective Assemble explore public realm projects including pop-up theatres, adventure playgrounds and community workshops, but have also been nominated for the 2015 Turner Prize. They are the first design studio to be nominated for this prestigious art award (Dezeen 2015).

New methods and methodologies

Emphasis is now placed on agility and iteration as key methods in the design process. Design used to be about designing a product and then walking away. Now designers need to be more flexible and are reflecting this through fluid, emergent processes where solutions continually evolve. Designers are looking at issues, whether local or global, and then using design thinking to come up with alternative solutions. Sometimes these issues appear to be outside the normal realm of 'design' and do not have a traditional design output. Designers are taking on the role of stewardship, as identified by the Helsinki Design Lab (2013), facilitating processes by being in the middle rather than working in a top down or bottom up way. This suits design, helping with communication by bringing ideas down or bringing ideas up. Designers are also proactively self-generating work that is more self-reflective, celebrating their individual creativity.

The evolving sector

The third shift is that the design sector continues to evolve rapidly.

As professional practice has evolved, so has the size and shape of the studio. There has been a dramatic rise in the number of smaller design studios: they do not require major overheads and are more flexible and able to expand and contract as projects come and go. Larger studios have also found ways to evolve by splitting into segments with different offers for each. For example, Barber Osgerby have three separate studios under one umbrella: Barber and Osgerby, Map Projects and Universal Design Studio, offering product design, product strategy and architecture and interiors respectively. Alongside these evolving studios we have also seen the rise of the freelancer with a 40% increase in numbers from 2005 – 2009 (Design Council 2010).

These findings illuminate the key shifts that have taken place in UK design practice over the last ten years. They confirm that the sector is now unrecognizable as a result of role re-definition, process re-invention, and ongoing evolution.

*The notion of disciplines themselves
is unravelling HC*

*To be a designer in the 21st Century
you have to be really agile and really
iterative and you have to keep
changing yourself NH*

*Technology has just blown things apart
GW*

*We all want things faster. So designers
have to think faster LRK*

*You have to be serious about overseas if
you want to be a contender – you've got
to be global LRK*

*Big industry is investing very heavily
in the recruitment of designers and
building in-house capacity DD*

Having universal eyes TH

*Now, more and more,
there are designers who are acting
independently, autonomously,
inspired or led by Ron Arad GW*

Key drivers for change

Interviewees suggested that change is being driven by external and environmental factors, and by the choices that designers make.

External drivers

Key external drivers directly affecting change in design practice are digital technology, economics and industry.

Digital Technology

Digital technology as a way of designing and communicating has been the biggest driver. It is an enabler, allowing designers to work and learn in new ways, to be more self-networked, self-governed and less reliant on businesses. It has also created a more global world, with global connectivity. Designers now see themselves in a much broader context, with more awareness of overseas competitors and markets.

Economics

Economic pressures over the last ten years have affected the entire sector. Following the recession some larger, more established studios closed whilst others survived and became stronger. Many studios reduced their size, whilst offering a broader service. A Nesta report from 2008 highlighted that 'the recent economic slowdown is making generalism fashionable again, with many design consultancies attempting to enter their competitors' niche markets' (Miles, Green 2008). Hiring of full-time designers slowed dramatically after 2008, triggering the rise in freelancers.

Industry

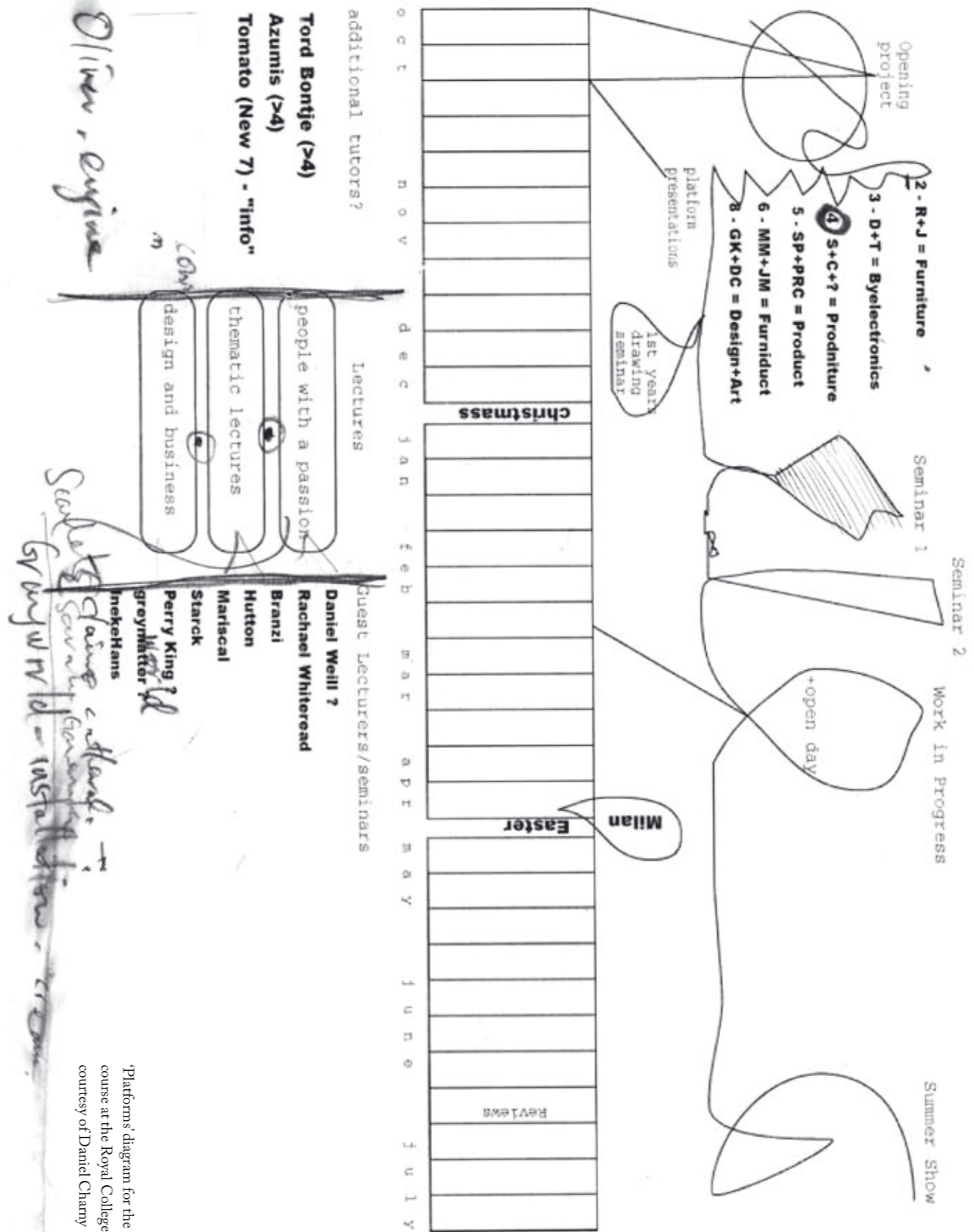
Industry is having a major impact on the design sector, recruiting heavily to build in-house teams at a larger scale than ever before. There is a belief that businesses are starting to understand the benefits – beyond superficial styling – that design can bring to how they think and organise themselves. The design sector's ability to move and change at a fast rate is attractive to industries that struggle to do so but see it as a necessity. There has been a rise in independent entrepreneurial 'challenger brands', and exporting has also risen steeply with successful markets building in other countries, particularly luxury goods exported to the Far East.

Internal drivers

It is not only external drivers affecting change, but also internal drivers associated with the mindset and orientation of designers and the choices that they are making.

A universal way of seeing

New attitudes and a universal outlook are key drivers. Fluid, cross-disciplinary designers tend not to see barriers, or themselves divided into segments, and look at design holistically. With no prior training available for many new emerging disciplines, designers have no preconceptions of what they should or should not do, liberating them from previous disciplinary constraints. This enables them to develop a very different mindset with respect to what a designer could be.



Platforms diagram for the Design Products course at the Royal College of Art, 1998, courtesy of Daniel Charny

A return to making

There has been a reaction against computers, with designers realising the value of 'holding', 'feeling' and haptics as a 'fundamental need'. For many years the making process lost importance due to the rise in technology. But now that importance has returned, as making allows designers to better connect and enable the process of iteration. In contrast, the ubiquity of technology has encouraged a resurgence in craft through Internet and Google sites like Instructables.

Design influence

Key 20th Century practitioners have inspired change, and Ron Arad is cited as a leading influence for 3D designers, through both his practice and teaching. As a practitioner Arad never thought he had to declare loyalty to any of the 'clubs', well captured in the 2009 exhibition No Discipline at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. He took design from a reactive to a proactive self-motivated process, creating self-generated work. In 1998 Arad, along with Daniel Charny, led the change in design education by creating the Design Products course at the Royal College of Art, declaring that 'defining courses by sectors was no longer relevant'. 'Platforms' were headed by different artists and designers and were not sector-specific, but focused on process, combining theory and practice (see Figure 1 opposite).

These findings highlight key drivers for change and demonstrate their breadth and complexity. They highlight external factors imposed on designers, and reflect the internal choices that designers are making.

Social design and social entrepreneurship is people reclaiming design and applying it to making the world better NH

Creative business is about being inquisitive and curious and open to new things and new ways of doing things NC

Positive and Negative implications of change

Findings from the interviews indicate that whilst change has positive implications that are moving the design sector forward, there are negatives too that hamper positive development.

Positive implications

Many positive shifts are moving the design sector forwards.

Optimistic outlook

Many designers now have an optimistic outlook to their work. By questioning their role and purpose in the 21st Century, and reacting against the previously dominated motivations of planned obsolescence and consumption, designers are addressing key social issues, seeing themselves as 'humanitarian catalysts for change'.

Changes in external perceptions

There has also been a positive change in external perceptions of design. It is not only businesses that are starting to understand the benefits that design can bring. Designers are being given more credit as cultural diplomats, with events like the 2012 London Olympics, that raise public awareness. Designers are also becoming better at recognizing how their skills can transfer into non-creative environments. Moving into the social and political sphere has meant that designers are now starting to influence policy: indeed, Policy Lab was launched to explore how design processes can aid policy development and assist better design of public services (GOV.UK 2014).

Entrepreneurialism

The rise of entrepreneurial activity is creating many positive strands with designers pro-actively instigating change. 'Deskcamping' is a direct response to the ever-expanding freelance community, and invites established studios to rent an empty desk to a freelancer. Not only does this address the negative impact of the recession on studio culture, by filling empty desks, it also encourages 'water cooler moments' where designers and freelancers (usually from a different discipline) start to explore how they might collaborate.

The rise of non-designers

Non-designers are also making an impact. The Design Council's Knee High Design Challenges are targeted at increasing the health and wellbeing of children under five. Usually the Design Council only awards briefs to the design sector. But for Knee High it has opened up the process beyond the sector and many of the chosen solutions are from non-designers, for example mums struggling to solve challenges at home. The solutions are being realised with the support of an experienced design team using design processes, but this shows that great social innovation can come from a more fluid, non-conformist way of thinking and working.

Negative implications

Yet for many of the interviewees there is a disconnect, with negatives holding the sector back.

Lack of support from the manufacturing industry

The UK manufacturing industry is not supporting UK design talent. For many years The Aram Gallery hosted a design graduate show and invited industry to attend at no cost. The aim was to bring the two worlds together to realise good design. Many industry members attended, but not one commission was ever made despite many of the designs being picked up later by international manufacturers. When manufacturing does happen, there is also a concern that it is too commercial, with priority placed on fast generation and turn around rather than on quality and long-term value.

Devaluing of design

Design is being devalued. It is now so quick to generate and so fast-changing that it is 'almost like fast food'. Sites like 'It's Nice That', whilst great visual resources, reinforce this issue by being more about the surface of design rather than actually about what underpins it and a way of thinking. Due to speed and a perceived need for change, design in some sectors has such a short life span that even the work itself is losing value. Design is also being devalued by the fact that there are too many designers and not enough jobs. Over-supply and less value afforded to certain design sectors is clearly evident in stagnant charge-out rates, and there is a lack of value attached to experience.

These findings suggest that there is a disconnect within the design sector. They demonstrate that while there are many positive factors moving the design sector forwards, there are also negatives that hamper desirable progress.

*I am deeply concerned about the future
of the profession LRK*

*We export our design talent abroad...
and then we import their design from
manufacturers abroad to back here.*

*Now if this is not absurd I don't know
what is ZA*

*How many more toothbrushes
do we need? HC*

The government doesn't know what design is and design doesn't know what design is GW

Michael Gove's de-investment in teaching arts subjects is an absolute travesty TL

Building for progressive change: tensions and blockages

Interviewees identified two key tensions that are hampering necessary transformation and progress in design: first, Government's lack of understanding of the importance of design; second, factors within the design community and sector itself.

Government

The first tension is Government.

A fundamental lack of understanding of the value of design

Up until the change of Government in the May 2015 elections, Government has chosen to ignore the value of design, despite the best efforts of organisations like the Cultural Learning Alliance, campaigns like Include Design and numerous reports ranging from The Cox Review of Creativity in Business (HM Treasury n.d.), to the All-Party Parliamentary Design and Innovation Group's Restarting Britain: Design Education and Growth (APDIG 2011). Key commentators in the sector pose the question, 'why is Government behaving in a way that could potentially destroy the industry when design is worth 3.5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the creative industries in the UK are bigger than the financial services?'

The new National Curriculum

Michael Gove's de-investment in teaching arts subjects has negatively affected creative education across the board, but at the epicentre is secondary education. According to Sir Christopher Frayling, speaking on Andrew Marr's Start the Week (2012), Lord Browne admitted that the creative subjects were 'accidentally' left out of the five pillars of Michael Gove's eBACC. But then why were the Arts not included in the rebranded STEM? Despite the STEAM agenda advocating the inclusion of the Arts in the STEM subjects, new Secretary of State for Education Nicky Morgan has not taken this up (Cultural Learning Alliance 2014). The new Design & Technology and Art & Design curricula were rolled out in September 2014, but are not included in the core subjects. This risks a tailing off for both student numbers and funding for creative subjects within schools. They will be seen as inferior fringe subjects that will not count on school league tables. Having the term 'design' in both also creates confusion. Nesta are continuing to push this issue with their recent plan for how Government can support the growth of the creative workforce, stating that Government should 'end the bias against multi-disciplinary education – supporting the combined take-up of arts and science subjects' (Nesta 2015).

Beyond 'design'?

Characteristics of the design sector itself create a second tension. In a fractured sector with no clear representation, are we moving beyond 'design'?

Lack of collective identity

A first issue is representation. There are up to 20 different organisations that speak for the design industry, from different viewpoints, but not one main body. Some of these organisations had strength in the past, but have become less relevant to practicing designers in recent years. Architecture has RIBA, film has BAFTA, but who represents design? Without it, who will set the agendas, lead the

debates, speak to Government and stand up for an industry that appears to be in increasing need of protection?

Defining Design

The design industry cannot agree on a definition of design. One reason that other creative industries are easier to represent is because they are easier to define. In 2013 the APDIG organised 'Defining Design: The Debate' (APDIG 2013). The debate proposed that design is 'misunderstood and undervalued by government, underused by business and misrepresented in the media'. The aim was to 'better articulate the nature and role of design, in order that it might be more easily classified, measured, evidenced and eventually supported with sensible policy'. Many leading design actors and organisations took part, but the group could not agree on a definition.

Terminology

Another issue is terminology. The design sector is moving faster than any existing classification systems. Separate standard classification systems for industry and education are full of inconsistencies in discipline definitions and groupings. Also, terms like cross-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary, multi-disciplinary, or trans-disciplinary are perceived to be unhelpful. Emerging designers do not see separation and boundaries, and therefore have no need for this terminology. One issue may be the word 'design' itself. Some designers simply call themselves designers rather than denoting a discipline, while others now describe themselves as artists, refusing even to be interviewed in a design context. Nesta has chosen not to use the word design, replacing it with terms like 'innovation'. Does the word 'design' help or hinder what designers do? Is it fundamentally misunderstood? Are we moving beyond design?

These findings illuminate serious concerns for the future growth and development of the design industry. This report argues that action needs to be taken to better define design in order for Government to value it, and in turn, protect and strengthen creative education.

*Who is leading the conversation about design in the UK at the moment?
Who is setting an agenda? NC*

Design is good at problem solving but it is absolutely hopeless at the problem of defining what it is GW

I think the more we talk about crossing boundaries the more you reinforce the boundaries. I don't see the boundaries and I think there's no room for debate. I think it should stop here RA

To distill the value of design education down to one thing, it would be that for young people, through design education, they can change the world for other people in the broader sense HC

Why are we cutting foundation courses? LRK

A degree has no value if you have to pay for it LRK

MAAs are going to die out unless something happens DD

Last year they had no UK students so they negotiated a bursary for one UK student LRK

Instead of closing one hospital, close 20 design colleges ZA

Implications for undergraduate design education in the UK

After examining key shifts in the field of design over the last ten years, and addressing the emerging landscape and related issues, interviewees were asked what they perceive to be the implications for undergraduate education, and what the future direction of travel should be. In summarizing the data from the interviews, the overwhelming response was that the current undergraduate design education system is in crisis. But what form should it take, what are the options, and how can the situation be turned around?

The negative impact of policy

Negative impacts of policy on creative education have moved undergraduate design education towards crisis.

BAs are in crisis

BAs are in crisis partly as a result of a critical lack of emphasis on creative subjects in primary and secondary education, and the closure of Foundation courses. Without exposure to creative subjects at an earlier stage, how will young people know that they want to be a designer? Yet with MAs also under threat as a result of falling numbers, the emphasis is now on BAs. The introduction of fees has negatively re-shaped the recruitment landscape. Many young people are now questioning whether they should enrol on these courses and this is impacting negatively on student diversity. Universities are now financial institutions and students see themselves as clients: this negatively shifts the dynamic of the learning environment. Teaching is frequently compromised as staff are under great pressure as a result of much increased bureaucratic responsibility, and growing fixation with research league tables.

Shifts in student intake policy

Universities now prioritise quantity over quality at intake in pursuit of income targets. This has led to a rise of weaker students, both national and international. International students have played an essential role in the development of the UK design industry for many years, as three of the interviewees in this report powerfully demonstrate. What has changed is that previously they were recruited on the basis of talent. Now the priority is money, with many courses operating with 80% international students. Another issue with quantity is that thousands of students are graduating from arts universities each year, but the traditional design jobs are no longer to be found in the UK.

The current university system

The current university design education system appears to be flawed and there are questions regarding the extent to which it delivers appropriate preparation.

Is a university degree the answer?

Interviewees posed the question, 'why do a university degree if a strong portfolio and life experience are what industry regards as key ingredients in securing a job, rather than qualifications?' Institutions by their nature are slow moving machines that restrict those inside them. Are academic institutions, with their inability to adapt quickly, requirement for academic rigour, and box ticking processes, the ideal environment for creative people?

Is the current system out of date?

This is an even more urgent question when there appears to be a disconnect between design practice and education. The current system does not reflect contemporary practice and is outdated. Industry claims that UK institutions are not producing the creative talent that is required, and is taking the situation into its own hands. It is recruiting from abroad and creating independent schools.

The Livingston School Hammersmith, a free school using games-based education, is being established by games designer Ian Livingston. Reacting against the current emphasis within schools on testing and conformity, he aims to focus on diversity and the trial and error nature of designing (Lee 2014). The London School of Architecture (LSA n.d.) is an independent postgraduate institution that works in collaboration with 40 architecture studios. With the aim of making education more relevant and cost effective, students divide time between studies and paid placements in practice, using a 'cost-neutral' financial model that balances tuition fees with salary. Whilst these are not undergraduate examples, it is perhaps just a matter of time before industry starts to consider a take-over and re-design of degree level design education.

What are the processes and skills needed for the 21st Century?

We must re-define the core processes and skills required for designers in the 21st Century.

Does the existing emphasis on specialisation remain relevant?

There is a clear perception in certain areas of the industry that if you want to be successful you need to clearly communicate a single specialism at which you excel. However, a strong case exists that education should reflect practice and 21st Century design appears to need people that can collaborate and integrate activities and opportunities. If there are skills relevant to all disciplines, and commonalities in process between them, why keep them divided when few sector-specific jobs remain?

How do you teach an ever-evolving practice?

How can universities stay current and teach an ever-evolving practice? Is it possible to replicate industry conditions in academia? How can academic staff keep their finger on the pulse of practice and better understand the changing role of the designer? These questions were posed and many solutions offered during interviews. As well as stressing the importance of fundamental skills such as drawing, making and knowing the past, other suggestions were made with respect to process, skills and use of space. Suggestions included making education less about discipline-specific practical skills and more about process and thinking, with briefs that are issues-based rather than discipline-focused. Some interviewees argued that students should be forced to collaborate with other disciplines, taught the importance of transferable skills, and encouraged to go deep, to re-analyse, synthesise and iterate. Finally, it was perceived that making should be brought back into all areas of design, with all disciplines brought together into one space.

What are the alternatives?

The interviewees highlighted existing academic institutions and alternative educational models that are currently pioneering new processes and ways of working, across Europe and within the UK, but these are in the minority.

I don't think university is the future for design LRK

A BA doesn't get you into a job DD

Teaching is still very out of date, 50 years out of date NH

The industry cannot wait for education to catch up DD

What you're training them for today is not what they're going to need tomorrow DD

In Europe, the key institutions cited were Aalto University, Design Academy Eindhoven and Polytechnic University of Milan. In the UK, the Royal College of Art was highlighted as leading the way with progressive MAs, and courses at Kingston, Goldsmiths and Central Saint Martins were cited for pioneering new ways of teaching BAs. Despite being sector-specific, these BA courses were said to be encouraging students to think about the world around them in a much broader, holistic way.

The interviewees also highlighted initiatives that are pioneering alternative educational models. These initiatives are emerging in response to evolution in the sector, and to all the perceived restrictions placed on traditional design education. Examples include:

Fixperts is an informal education platform that is split into three layers – schools, universities and professional practice (the latter led by volunteers). It focuses on design process in a social benefit setting rather than an educational programme. It removes the boundaries of discipline, shifting education from being sector-based to process-based, and helps designers realise how they can connect to the world (Fixperts n.d.).

Makerversity is a collective work environment for the ‘maker movement’. It is committed to providing alternative and free routes to hands-on learning. This is achieved through work placements, events and the Makerversity D.I.Y education programme. The curriculum focuses on hands-on making and professional members of Makerversity contribute to the faculty and donate their time (Makerversity n.d.).

The views of interviewees suggest strongly that – as a result of trajectories in Government policy – the current undergraduate design education system is simply not working. Many possible solutions are advanced, but even more questions are raised. There is clear scope for the exploration of alternative approaches, models and content in education. Re-definition of design processes and re-identification of design skills is necessary to ensure that young designers are equipped for practice in the early part of the 21st Century.

*The biggest problem is
‘what do we teach’? RA*

*Start by imagining there is no
education system existing and there’s a
world that’s full of kerbs, pavements,
posters etc. How do you train people to
think about that world? TH*

*If we were to study like we buy music
that would be very interesting DC*

Design is this inherently positive, outward-looking, progressive, optimistic way of thinking. To problem solve and to improve the world GW

If you're not aware of what's happening out there, you can't develop people for that environment DD

Design thinking is such an important tool for 21st Century life. We need design thinkers in Non-Governmental Organisations, in Conflict Resolution and in Healthcare HC

Design is a natural resource and you have to nurture it, teach it well, develop it, and give it facility, credit and air to breathe ZA

Conclusion and Recommendations

What does the future hold for design?

This report has shown that evolution in design practice in the UK over the last ten years has been dramatic and overwhelmingly positive. Yet we also see that design is at a pivotal crossroads, and without immediate action from Government, the education community and industry itself, we may see the collapse of not only a key creative sector, but in turn, innovation and creative thinking across many areas.

In order to secure the health of future design practice this report makes three key recommendations:

1. Design must be nurtured

Industry should: come together to consider and re-define the concept of 'design' (because if it cannot be defined it will not be valued). The design industry should also demand strong representation from one main body that will instill pride and create a unified and compelling voice.

2. Design must be taught well

Education should: examine current practice and alternative educational models to better understand the processes and skills that young designers will require if they are to meet the challenges of coming decades.

3. Design must be valued

Government should: support and give credit to creative education across all levels, encourage continued growth, and value the potential of a vital and ever-evolving sector.

This report has raised many issues for research. There is a necessity for in-depth analysis of developing process in practice to allow for better dialogue and transfer of knowledge between industry and education. Further evidence is also required with respect to the wider potential for (and implications of) design in both creative and non-creative environments. Armed with such evidence, we can widen our understanding of the potential of design and work towards optimal training, and optimal returns on investments in design inputs for the public, private and third sectors.

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Cover image: 'Platforms' diagram for the Design Products course
at the Royal College of Art, 1998, courtesy of Daniel Charny

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