

THE PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATIVE DESIGN PROCESS AS A MODEL FOR THE TEACHING OF VISUAL DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

Professional practice in art making has for sometime presented as a model for curriculum design in Art Education. This paper links the professional collaborative design process of artist/designers, architect and interior designer who merge their professional skills to create a unified look or collaborative aesthetic. The model presented has applications in Visual Design Courses.

The design process is illuminated through an indepth study of a collaborative design project supported by an Australia Council grant for 'Art in Public Places' for the Newcastle Workers Club. The design process model of this project will be presented to illustrate the power of the collaborative process, the professional development of the individual artists and the strength of the collaborative aesthetic.

The paper draws attention to the professional characteristics of the collaborative process which sees the artists involved in:-

1 The collaborative aesthetic: The practice of merging individual artists aesthetics and concepts and a sharing of technical and artistic skills towards the creation of an original 'look' which sees the emergence of new symbols, images, colours and forms.

2 Team Production Skills: The practice of collaboration in production.

Parallels are drawn between this model and the collaborative design engagements of three groups of second year Art Education students. Each group was presented with the same design brief (based around A Wearable Design Module from the NSW Content Endorsed Visual Design Course) and followed the professional collaborative model described above.

The process and product of these collaborative design works and their evaluation are presented via the documentation of the presentation stage of the design process. The paper explores how, for each group, the shared learning in the creation of a new aesthetic was different, shedding light on the nature of the collaborative design process. The outcomes achieved and the processes explored by each group offer ideas for curriculum innovation and directions for aesthetic development when teachers embark on group design projects.

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INTRODUCTION

Professional practice in art making has for sometime been presented as a model for curriculum design in Art Education. (Greer, 1984; Dobbs, 1989) Visual Design in the Visual Arts Curriculum has assumed a new position in response to the changing technological, industrial and social emphasis afforded visual design in recent years. This new position follows recommendations made by the Australian Institute of Art Education stating in its National Policy (1986) recommending:

'The broadening of visual arts study to include design arts (environmental, graphic and product).. an understanding of visual arts in various social contexts.'

(Boughton, 1989)

This has been subsequently followed by the introduction of a Content Endorsed Years 11-12, Visual Design Course (1993) and the mandatory one third design component of the Visual Arts Syllabus (1994) produced by the Board of Studies, New South Wales, Australia. This will require greater emphasis on visual design in curriculum planning by art educators. Consideration will focus on skills acquisition in design within in a creative arts environment and provide opportunities for students to pursue their talents in design fields. A new examination of teaching strategies will subsequently be required as teachers are directed to consider visual design practice in a variety of settings across the community.

Collaboration is the term applied to creative partnerships and its traditions can be found in art history. Contemporary art practice is seeing a renewal of attention to this way of working. Artistic practice crosses many forms of representation and scale and often involves the combining of technical skills from other fields of knowledge.

'Artists are teaming up in growing numbers.'

(Zorpette, 1994)

The most well known recent collaborations in Australia were born from the

initiatives of The Australia Council and their policy for Art in Public Places (1990). The Art in Public Places Program was developed to encourage the employment of visual artists/craftspeople as members of collaborative design teams or to produce artworks which were integral to the building site. It was developed in response to a growing consciousness of the need to build more satisfactory urban spaces which sensitively respond to the needs, history and culture of the people who use them.

'Artists are resourceful, creative thinkers and planners who can add another dimension of thought and vision to a design team.'
(Visual Art/Craft Board, 1990)

Professional practice in design often sees artists engaged in collaborations with other professionals from the arts or other industries such as the building industry (King, 1992). There exist a number of examples and models of the design process (Stansmore and Stevenson, 1991) but little knowledge on the collaborative process operating within the design model or of how this process operates between designers or in educational contexts. How do design decisions get made . Who makes them within a team and why? How important is it to develop a community of inquiry (Hagaman, 1991) to foster the collaborative ideals and unity of thought within a design team.

It was the need to harness the strengths of professional artistic collaborations as a teaching strategy for visual design that prompted this research. The researcher was aware that artist have individual creative strengths, that they possess already established individual styles and

processes for creating. That these processes are identified in their images, symbols and media skills. The researcher was also aware of the powerful achievements possible through professional collaborations. Focus was then to be given to the collaborative dynamic operating in design teams and to determine whether similar principles operate in other design teams in educational settings.

SUBJECTS

In 1991 The Newcastle Workers Club successfully applied for an Art in Public Places Grant from the Visual Arts/Craft Board, Australia Council. This grant would support three artists to prototype stage for commissioned works for the new Newcastle Workers Club. Artist Birgitte Hansen, John Cliff and Kathryn Grushka would form part of the collaborative team with architect, Don Granatelli and architect/ interior designer, Janet Marsden and the collaboration to prototype stage and presentation constitutes case study one.

Case study two was of the Second Year Bachelor of Education, Art students at The University of Newcastle involved in a five week collaborative design project. The project involved the study of three design teams; two of five

team members and one of four. Each group was presented with the same design brief based on a Wearable Design Module from the Board of Studies Content Endorsed Visual Design Course. The students worked to prototype presentation stage of the design brief.

METHODS

The case study of the collaborative process for the artworks at The Newcastle Workers Club drew on a range of data sources. Initially as a participant observer the researcher was able to record from personal experiences and observations of the operational dynamics of the collaborators. The researcher as a member of the collaborative design team/artist was involved in all levels of consultation and deliberation. She was present at all negotiations between the Club Board (client), the architect and interior designer. To this is added her role as minutes secretary. She was the official documentor for all the collaborating meetings and took responsibility for the formal report writing. In this capacity the researcher was able to access all minutes and reports written on the project. These reports includes reflections of all participants, the architect, the interior designer, the client and the other members of the design team. Additional data was collected from the photographic documentation of the design works in progress and at final prototype stage and presentation.

The emergent design model from this case study was correlated with the design process the students in case study two were to experience. (Stansmore and Stevenson). This was done to validate the correlation findings between the operational collaborative design dynamics of both case studies.

Case study two data was collected and triangulated between the design teams and within the design teams. The data was collected in the form of a small questionnaire by each student on their feelings about the collaborative process. They were required to identify their role, their workload, their perceptions of the decision making process and other aspects of the operational dynamics. A series of slides were taken at the presentation stage to be used as a record of concept development and evidence of process and product. A final series of focus group interviews were made to informally record the reflections and ideas of the students on the collaborative design process they had recently experienced. The questions centred around the following prompt questions. What do you think

collaborations are and how do they work? What about style within the collaborative process? Who does what in a collaboration? Does skill and expertise have anything to do with collaborative partnerships? The data was transcribed and entered into the computer program Q.S.R. NUD.IST 3.0 (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching and Theorising) to assist in the qualitative analysis of the data. The text was collated, indexed and compared to establish conclusions about the working relationships between team members and across design teams.

RESULTS : CASE STUDY ONE

ART/DESIGN WORKS FOR THE NEWCASTLE WORKERS CLUB AND THE COLLABORATIVE DYNAMIC OF THE DESIGN TEAM

Description of the project objectives and art/design works

The initial aim of the artworks was to evoke the rebuilding of Newcastle after the 1989 earthquake. This theme underlined the basic concept of the building. The triangular motif reminiscent of the industrial aesthetic of triangulated steel framing seen so often in the industrial buildings of Newcastle were incorporated into the building aesthetic.

The artists interpreted the theme and worked with the industrial aesthetic of the triangulated structural steel frames. The triangle is present in all the artworks. They further enriched their designs by using motifs with rich visual symbols and images taken directly from the Newcastle environment. The themes chosen aimed to capture 'The Spirit of Newcastle' and are directly linked to the function and atmosphere of the interior spaces.

The artists picked up the theme and ran with it, developing a large centrepiece called 'The Beacon' for the foyer wall facing the main stair designed and managed by Kathryn Grushka a fibre artists. The work is symbolic of both the building of Newcastle, with its industry, mining and electricity references and adoption of the triangle in its structure. The lashed canvas is reminiscent of the trade union banners, this link is also part of the Club's story.

The pot series 'Valley Frieze Pots' designed and managed by John Cliff a ceramic artist is also thematically derivative of Newcastle with its motifs representative of the Lake, the Beaches, the Vineyards, Mining, Power Generation and Industry.

The works for the rooms around the foyer are more specifically aimed at the themes for those spaces. The Bistro painting 'Teaching Newcastle How to Swim' takes on the animated atmosphere at the Newcastle Baths. It enriches through the affinity of Novocastrians with this icon of Newcastle. The bar ceramic tile mural has a theme of local sport, in particular, horse racing, bowls and billiards. It draws strongly on the character of Newcastle and the Club and offers a lively reflection of the historical/ cultural past of Newcastle. Both these projects were managed by Birgitte Hansen a painter, mural artist.

The Collaborative Process

The collaborative process of designing public artworks for the Newcastle

Workers Club operated on two levels. The artists collaborating with the industry and the Board of the Newcastle Workers Club and the artists collaborating with one another on the site specific artworks.

The collaboration with industry in the design and research phase established the professional working relationship required at the production and installation stages. The artists negotiated directly with the architect, Don Granatelli and the Interior Designer, Janet Marsden in the initial round of briefings. It was here that the design objectives were clarified and the artists were able to establish a working knowledge of the new building. This also proved to be the most difficult stage of collaborations. After the research phase and the development of an initial design statement the artists worked more closely with the interior designer who kept them informed of the developments and changes to the building. The artists were given six possible sites for artworks and subsequently designed six prototype designs for presentation. Four were

carried through to fabrication and installation. This process is illustrated in Appendix 1 : Art in Public Places. Artworks At the Newcastle Workers' Club, the Collaborative Process.

The second level of collaboration was simultaneously in progress, that was the collaboration between the artists. This collaboration took a clear developmental form that traced the emergence of the design. Firstly the artists worked together researching and developing a conceptual base. Artists met regularly at their studios to discuss working drawings and to make decisions on symbols, images, techniques and colours. All aesthetic decisions of importance evolved through this process. The process of collaborating on concepts was based around discussion of working drawings submitted by all the team and it continued until the form of the site specific works became evident. At this point an artist emerged as the specific project manager. The emergence of the designer/ manager seemed to be strongly linked to the technical and artistic expertise required by the design brief for the specific sites.

This is illustrated in the model of the collaborative process based on the development of the artwork 'The Beacon' Appendix II: 'The Beacon', Newcastle Workers_ Club. The procedures for collaboration on the concept development and prototype formation involved the artists working in combinations of collaborations. These included :

- * Artists collaborating with the interior designer.
- * The reworking of concepts and images by the artists together through discussion.
- * Consultation between the artists.
- * Artists creating working drawings and models independently and together.
- * Artists presenting to the interior designer, re-working of ideas. Discussion and modification.

The resulting artworks showed a merging of the artists strong individual

aesthetics. This process was a challenging one for all the artists. Compromises on style and images was difficult, but they agreed that a new aesthetic was evident to varying degrees in all the works.

The merging and sharing of technical and aesthetic knowledge in the production of the prototype stage and the full commissioned stage was a unique aspect of this collaboration. To achieve this new aesthetic the artists married their techniques and worked outside their own disciplines. Gitte worked as a ceramic painter. Kathryn worked as a mural artist. John a construction worker and painter as well as all artists taking on many management and organisational/ liaison roles. The collaboration gave the artists the opportunity to work on a very large scale and to be involved in the long term design process and fabrication stages.

COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE DESIGN MODELS OPERATING IN THE CASE STUDIES

The research required a common comparative position for both case studies. This validation was established across the operating design process models. The emerging design process from the first case study (see appendix III) was compared with the educational design model presented by Stansmore and Stevenson. The comparison found that both models were essentially the same but unique in identifying terminology. This was to be expected as the Stansmore and Stevenson model drew heavily on the design process operating within the professional design industry.

Students in case study two were subsequently introduced to the above model as the appropriate design model to follow. Students engaged in an investigation of the clothing design industry. They researched the concepts, issues, symbols and communication conventions relevant to the

specifications of the design brief. Students were encouraged to develop innovative designs which harnessed their collaborative strengths. Students were involved in the experimentation and exploration of a variety of dying techniques and a range of print technologies. Students were to combine their conceptual skills to design symbols that communicated current social contextual meaning extending their own understandings of design conventions and an awareness o