The Future of Design: An Academic Perspective for the School of Design

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Introduction
This paper looks to the future and to its implications for design as a discipline as well as a transdiscipline. ‘Transdiscipline’ is used in this sense as a term that recognises the interconnectedness and complexity of the world and the associated need to address this by looking beyond disciplines through the development of a new overarching discourse as well as within and across disciplines using existing discourses. The paper provides a basis for exploring within the context of current and anticipated external and internal constraints what this envisioned picture of the future is likely to mean for the School of Design here at QUT and for academic leadership within and through the School. As noted by Matathia & Salzman (1998), ‘Marshall McLuhan’s repeated urging to ‘know the present’ is even more pertinent today, for the present is the watchtower from which we view the future’ (p.13) and from which we make decisions that will have implications for us in the future.

Speculations about the future
My understanding of what the future might be like comes from a range of sources including scholarly writing, popular literature and the arts (including science fiction), as well as from my own intuition and imaginings.

Approaching the new millennium there were a myriad of books forecasting what it would be like post 2,000. One was Matathia & Salzman’s book Next: Trends for the Future. Another of specific relevance for designers was Bill Mitchell’s City of Bits. More recent books I have read that provide some preview of the future include among others: The Next Fifty Years: Science in the First Half of the Twenty-First Century edited by John Brockman (a science perspective), Richard Florida’s The Rise of the Creative Class (an economist’s perspective), from education there is Barnett’s journal article ‘Learning for an unknown future’ and two books by the philosopher Elizabeth Grosz Architecture from the Outside and The Nick of Time.

So, what do these say about the future? In general, they say that the future will be characterised by a new kind of change and uncertainty.

The next fifty years is “...a place where empiricism and epistemology collide and everything becomes different-and where we begin to rethink our own natures and what kind of world we live in” (Brockman, 2003, p, xiii).

In The Rise of the Creative Class Richard Florida asks: “Who would experience the greater change” – a person from 1900 dropped into the 1950s or someone from the 1950s dropped into the present day (p. 1). Given the huge technological changes occurring between 1900 and the 1950s surely it must be the person from 1900? On the contrary, Florida argues it would be the second time traveller who would be more disoriented and who would experience “…the deeper, more pervasive transformation. It is the second who has been thrust into a time when lifestyles and worldviews are most assuredly changing – a time when the old order has broken down, when flux
and uncertainty themselves seem to be part of the everyday norm” (Florida, 2003, p. 4).

So what does this mean for Design?

**Design and the future**

A credible response to this question comes from Florida’s understanding of the force behind this shift. The driving force he asserts is the rise of human creativity – the ability to create and keep creating meaningful new forms; a situation where “...technological and economic creativity are nurtured by and interact with artistic and cultural creativity” (p. 5). In all, “the deep and enduring changes of our age are not technological but social and cultural” (Florida, p. 17). According to Florida (2003), if you are an engineer, architect or designer, or you use creativity as a key factor in your work you are a member of the core creative class and as a member will “…continue to shape deep and profound shifts in the ways we work, in our values and desires, and in the very fabric of our everyday lives” (p. xv).

In the School of Design we have a cluster of disciplines that have as their focus the design of built or natural environments or of objects within these environments; these disciplines “...are responsible for designing..., environments in which the majority of Australians live, study, work, recreate, and play” (Dave, 2004, p. 87) and that are also responsible for designing objects people use in their everyday life, study, work, recreation and play. In addition to social and cultural significance, these design disciplines make a significant impact economically. Dave (2004) cites 2001 DEST figures that show that in 1999-2000, the building and construction industry contributed about $70 billion or 11.3 percent to gross domestic product (GDP) (p. 87). On this basis Dave (2004) argues that one may expect huge support for and acknowledgement of the design disciplines by the Commonwealth, professions, academics, and the community (p. 88). However, as we know this is not the case. One of the most compelling reasons for this anomaly appears to be the design disciplines’ resistance to being classified as a science or to belonging to the humanities. Despite attempts to do so the disciplines do not sit comfortably in either.

One only has to peruse the latest RQF (Research Quality Framework) document to appreciate what I am saying. The RQF is beginning to and will have a major impact on universities and of the value attributed to specific disciplines. With respect to possible metrics for impact, the Allen Consulting Group has differentiated between only two broad discipline groups: the physical and biological sciences; and the social sciences and humanities (Table 1, RQF Issues Paper, 2005, p. 21). This omission of design as a category presents a major challenge to our credibility, our survival and to our ability to make a profound difference in an increasingly complex and uncertain world. Unlike the two discipline categories represented in the RQF, design is concerned with imagined scenarios; with how things can be as opposed to how things are. Fundamentally, design is a creative process; it is experimental and speculative and, as such, defies attempts to be defined and measured in traditional scientific ways.

It may seem at this stage that I am laying all the blame for this attitude towards design disciplines on those outside the design disciplines. On the contrary, I actually lay most of the blame at the feet of designers themselves, in particular design academics who unlike their practitioner colleagues are, in some respects, more able to move beyond the all-consuming economic imperative that drives design practice or that seeks a utopia, that as Grosz (2001) describes it, “seeks to build, perform, or enact ideals or ideal solutions to contemporary or future problems” (p. 148). While Grosz (2001) focuses on architecture her thoughts could just as well be broadened to
incorporate the design disciplines generally. In this respect, she might argue that the goal of design is not solutions to political and social problems of the present but rather that “the radical role of the [designer] is best developed in design exploration and invention, in the recognition of the ongoing need for exploration and invention, in recognition of the roles of [design] and knowledge as experimental practices” (p. 148).

Rather than produce answers or solutions, the design disciplines should pose questions, questions which “...never yield the solutions they seek but which lead to the production of ever more inventive questions” (p. 148). While Florida sees the form of the object or environment as the outcome of a creative process, Grosz asks us to consider design and its outcome (form and experience) as elements of an ongoing process of experimentation involving user as well as designer. This demands a fundamental ontological shift for design educators and researchers from what are still essentially reductionist positions; positions which are at odds with design as a creative process and which only produce confusion in those viewing the disciplines from the outside.

**Implications for leadership in and of the School of Design**

The previous discussion has focussed on an increasingly unknowable and uncertain future as the main external force in reconsidering the role of design in society. I will now focus very tentatively on the implications of this for leadership in and of the School of Design preferring to regard this as a basis for provoking further discussion and debate. From my position at the moment there seems to be an urgent need:

1. To establish a shared articulated focus for design that goes beyond as well as embraces each of the design disciplines. The shared focus will provide the basis for exploring the potential of the School to provide learning environments that equip graduates for the future as described previously and that encourages truly innovative and speculative research exploiting the qualities of design as a site as well as a medium for research.

   This is our most fundamental challenge – why, because what we have to realise is that apart from each discipline having its own discourse, we do not speak the discourse, the discourse speaks us (Foucault paraphrased in Matheson & Matheson, 2000, p. 2). The discourse of a discipline represents a way of thinking about the world “...that is so deeply embedded in practice that we are unconscious of [its] existence and yet [it] forms our internalized expectations, values and behaviour” (Matheson & Matheson, 2000, p. 2). Even though interior design is a design discipline, architecture a design discipline and so on, each has its distinctive and differing understanding of the world including understanding of the nature of design. Within the imminent introduction of collaborative studios and Faculty wide units, the need to understand the distinctive cultural nature of disciplines is paramount.

2. To (dare I say) consider the disciplines from beyond existing professional parameters and constraints. To lead rather than just react; to push the boundaries beyond those drawn by the respective professions; to differentiate between design as a discipline and design as a profession. To not be afraid to operate at the edge; it is only at the edge that potentialities become more prominent.

3. To invite and explore new associations with other disciplines and to exploit the potential of design and designing (substantive and procedural) for other disciplines (and of the other disciplines for design). A case in point is the potential that design as a creative process may have for decision-making in disciplines dealing with
uncertainty and ill-definition, that is, other disciplines in our Faculty and many outside including Business, for example.

(4) To regard practice as a site for research and practice-led research as a credible form of research. Associated with this is the need to articulate and demonstrate the impact of design research; to describe it in the language of the RQF but to use standards internal to the disciplines; standards by which ‘they’ “…measure, acknowledge, and reward advances in knowledge, innovation, scholarship,…” as well as recognise “…ways in which ideas are valued and passed on from one generation [of designers] to another” (Dave, 2004, p. 91).

(5) To know who we are and what we do; to take every opportunity to market and promote design in, through and across our design disciplines.

And most importantly...

(6) To regard the School (and Faculty) as a creative community. As Florida reminds us: “Creativity comes from people. And while people can be hired and fired, their creative capacity cannot be bought or sold, or turned on or off at will...Creativity must be motivated and nurtured in a multitude of ways, by employers, by people themselves and by the communities where they locate” (Florida, 2003, p. 5).

In conclusion, this paper has purposefully not mentioned the Faculty vision, the University's blueprint or KPIs. Why – because these alone should not be the things that initiate our action – our action should be premised by issues more profound and enduring. In the words of Grosz (2001), concrete as blueprints and plans may be in conception, “they always prove to be indeterminable in their application. An adequate acknowledgment of the vicissitudes of controlling the future would ensure that we abandon the fantasy of controlling the future while not abdicating the responsibility of preparing for a better future than the present” (p. 149).

References/Bibliography


