Education, Design and Practice – Understanding skills in a Complex World

• Paper / Proposal Title:
Beyond Discipline: Design Practice and Design Education in the 21st Century

• Author(s) Name:
Lara Furniss

• University or Company Affiliation:
Birmingham City University, United Kingdom

• Abstract (300 words):
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.

This paper outlines the findings of a PhD research project exploring this disconnection, and although situated within the UK the findings have international relevance. An initial scoping exercise draws on interviews with leading commentators from the UK design sector, examining the evolution of design practice over the last ten years, and possible future directions for undergraduate education. Findings highlight that UK policy for creative education has placed undergraduate design courses in potential crisis, the current university system is outdated, and that it is now necessary to re-define the skills and processes that 21st Century designers need.
The main body of the research is situated within five internationally renowned creative studios who defy classification. The studios include: Ron Arad Associates; Heatherwick Studio; Jason Bruges Studio; Punchdrunk; Assemble (recent Turner Prize winners). In-depth ethnographic studies cross-analyse the creative processes of these studios and their views on education. Findings identify key components of each studio’s process, core skills and capabilities required by studio members, and innovative organisational structures and use of studio space, while also exploring studio members' past educational experiences, present involvement within education and reflections on future implications for pedagogy.

This paper argues that this growing disconnection between practice and education calls for existing pedagogic models to be challenged, proposes alternative approaches, and highlights the need for policymakers, practitioners and educators to work together to best prepare young designers to meet the challenges of the 21st Century.

KEYWORDS: design practice; design pedagogy; design policy; design disciplines

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Lara Furniss has 20 years professional experience working internationally across many art and design disciplines, a degree in Three Dimensional Design from Manchester Metropolitan University, and a Master of Fine Arts from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is a Senior Lecturer (Design for Performance) and doctorial researcher within the School of Visual Communication at Birmingham City University, and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Lara has worked across scenography, exhibitions, events, interiors and installation, for a wide range of design studios, include Imagination, Event Communications and DEGW Architects. Clients include The Imperial War Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, Ericsson, BBC, Ten Chimneys Foundation and the New York City Players. This extensive cross-disciplinary professional practice directly informs Lara’s teaching, with a primary interest in developing new pedagogic approaches to non-discipline specific problem solving.

Lara’s research interests have emerged directly from her professional practice and academic experience within Higher Education. Her PhD study explores evolving design practice and design education in the 21st Century. The study examines the processes of internationally renowned UK design studios and the implications for design pedagogy. Studios taking part include Ron Arad Associates, Heatherwick Studio, Punchdrunk, Jason Bruges Studio and Assemble.