

Performing Design

Serious but not Literal Design!

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Document Version

Final published version

Publication date:

2003

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Citation for published version (APA):

Mouritsen, J., & Kreiner, K. (2003). *Performing Design: Serious but not Literal Design!* Institut for Organisation og Arbejdssociologi. Handelshøjskolen i København. Working Paper / Institut for Organisation og Arbejdssociologi (IOA). Copenhagen Business School No. 2003.28

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Download date: 14. Apr. 2024



Working Paper

No. 2003.28

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**Performing Design:
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Performing Design: Serious but not Literal Design!

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The concept of »design« harbours a promise of a specific *effect* that is produced by intention. But to design is a *task verb* – not an *achievement verb* (Ryle 1949/1990). We cannot assume that the intended effect will prevail merely because the object is designed with such an effect in mind. After all, designs are created at a long distance (in terms of both space and time) from where the effects manifest themselves. Performing (good) design means exploring the space between the designed objects and imagined effects. Supplementary things and actors that enter into relationships with the designed object develop the fate of the design, and together they produce its performance.

Consider the following illustration. At the Copenhagen Business School, like at most other universities around the world, students studying, rather than students eating, occupy the canteens. The space was carefully designed to facilitate eating, but it did not prevent interaction for other purposes. Students their group work, and such groups prevail in the canteens by exercising their first-comer advantage. The design of the building was premised on the fragile assumption that the typical user would be a hungry individual, and it turned out that the user was an assignment-oriented group of students.

In the future, the publicly accessible canteens at CBS could mobilize quite different networks of actors and artefacts. A general public in search for warmth and shelter may possibly drive out students seeking facilities for doing their assignments, just as they drove out the hungry students and staff on earlier occasions.

It is typical that designs fail to produce the designed effects because some design premises were misconstrued (Petroski 1994). Yet, most theories about design fail to confront this dilemma. For example, Jay Galbraith, in his seminal book *Organizational Design*, was looking for the stable – or essential – design elements, which in combination could constrain people –

particularly in the area of organisations – into effective action. The proclaimed effects were used as justification for the prescription of a particular configuration, and these effects could be deduced and reliably be predicted from the design itself. In this way, design was made to be a remote manoeuvre producing a reliable image of the future – as if the future of designed objects could be decided upon and chosen *by the designer*. But the designed objects will likely be modified *in ongoing use*.

For designers of buildings, organizations and technologies, the design is an outcome. However, it is a dead outcome, until others start treating the designed object as ‘input’. Somebody else than the designer must always bring it to life again by using it, appropriating it, adding to it or leaving things out, and inventing solutions to problems that the original designer never contemplated. The dilemma of design is that it is condemned to form dead things without a rationale, until it is enacted in practice and thereby given a context-specific rationale. *Without* the active participation of users and other actors, designs are unable to move the world. *With* the active participation of users and others, the designs are likely to have effects, but unlikely to have (only) the effects originally designed. Designing things seems in this sense to be a paradoxical and impossible task – which of course it is not! Thus, we need to understand how design may be rescued as a concept and a metier.

Ignorance and Innocence in Design Work

Design would lose its meaning, were we to give up the designed effects as reference point.

Architects cannot but design canteens - with all the particular meanings such a label implies. Yet, important effects are not designable. They emerge as tentative and temporally bounded effects as users enact their (constructed) worlds and mobilize the designed objects to their own projects. The position of the designer seems rather untenable – as design seems necessarily to harbour both a promise and a lie about its fate and rationale.

We suggest that the relationship between designer and user (as mediated by the designed object) is parallel to the relationship between scientists and politicians (as mediated by advice).

Opportunistically, politicians appropriate and translate the advice they receive to serve their needs and interests, just like the users appropriate and translate the CBS canteens. March (1980/1999) advocates for innocent scientific advisors, as we will advocate for innocent designers of objects and organisations. “Ignorance is not knowing the way life is; innocence is not attending to the way life is”, writes March (*ibid.*, 358). Designers may well know about the likely “misuse” of their artefact

without necessarily attending to it. Designers will be more trustworthy and helpful if they leave use-decisions to the users, i.e. as if they are *unambitious* about controlling the life of the users. The designed object will in multiple ways constrain and bias the users anyway, but its effects may be much more significant if the constraining aspect is implicit while the explicit aspects are of a more inspirational character. Canteen designs that not only allow consumption, but which also create the hunger - for food, knowledge and social interaction - will be tolerated for its inherent constraints more easily than canteens that constrain without inspiration. In a sense, when designs are evaluated as successful it is often because the drift away from the promised effects, which then is turned into a virtue.

The management of CBS points to the lively student environment in the canteens as an attractive feature of the building – so much so that this is being made part of the design premises for a new building under design. The misappropriation of the design (the lie) is made the very virtue of the design (the inspiration for alternative use, and for designers of subsequent projects). It is not hard to imagine that the evaluation might have focused on the lie-aspect – with dramatic consequences for the outcome of the evaluation.

Design *could* in many ways be a political game – a struggle between architects, who might be tempted to decide for the users how they should live their lives and use the buildings, and users, who insist that their needs and interests are sensitive to time and context. Experience shows that in such games, designers lose to users. Effective design rests on the ability of designers to avoid making it a political issue – by showing no ambition to control uses. Innocence will produce designed artefacts that facilitate rather than constrain users. Such artefacts may, in the hands of imaginative users, produce happy effects which were not designed, but which are nonetheless ascribed to the original design. Thus we sense the paradox of intent behind the design: The more designers aspire to control the use of their designs, the less likely they are to do. Innocence may simply be a better strategy towards successful design.

A design as a boundary object

The fate of designed canteens is not only determined in the immediate use of the physical space. Designs act as input in many different contexts and in many different shapes. In an immediate sense, they are boundary objects that connect between ‘thought worlds.’ Carlile (2002) teaches us that design has to undergo ‘redesign’ through alignment with other spheres of interest. As aesthetics

and pieces of art, the design helps the designer earn a reputation in the community of designers. Design spaces form central ingredients in the corporate communication and identity of organizations. Among firemen, it constitutes an evacuation space and a “war zone”. Among contractors, they represent challenges of implementation, and often symbolize the ignorance of designers. In its intended effects, designs need to be flexible to allow itself to be circulated across these many spheres of interest. They all affect the process of design at the drawing table. They are formed through processes where fragile potentialities are aired and proposed, and where gradually the design is fabricated and made a proposition. However, even at this point in time, the design is not stable because it continues to be circulated into new networks and is associated with new sets of actors all of which may raise their voices and challenge the design. People may resist the layout of the house, materials may resist the complexities of the proposed aesthetic qualities of the house, and the purposes of the house may change in the course of its fabrication. It may be a completely ‘different’ house and the design may produce new question and new resistance. Such questions and resistance can also be found in the execution of changes in organisational structures and incentive systems.

The use of canteens at the CBS is a reflection of the not only eating and socializing patterns, but also of the pedagogical policy of the school. In spite the many lecturing halls, the policy calls for active involvement of the students in the learning process. The result is teaching organized in small study groups, not lecturing. The results can be seen, not only in the empty lecturing halls, but also in the crowded canteens. But large-scale lecturing is cheaper than small-scale teaching, and the flow of students in the canteen is partly determined by the annual decisions of study council on the pedagogical forms to be used in upcoming semester, which again partly is a result of the financial appropriation released this year. The use of the building – its performativity – is suddenly conditioned in the fights over the annual budget!

Therefore, design is not the end; it is not even the beginning of the end; but it may be the end of the beginning (to paraphrase Churchill). To understand design as a beginning rather than as an end directs attention to the problematising aspects of design. It allows ‘designers’ to appreciate that they are starting a process rather than stopping one. The design is ultimately *an invitation* to others to participate rather than an exclusion. Good design is probably a gentle gesture, even if it appears to be cast in concrete and authoritative language.

Designs taken seriously, not literally

The design communicates a promise of designed effects that cannot be taken too literally because designs, intentions and objects are necessarily entangled with other designs, intentions and objects. We may imagine that the design was innocently done, and therefore its communicated meaning could not be immediately translated into prescripts and canons.

Imagine that the CBS management decided that canteens are made for eating, and that restrictions were introduced to prevent students from appropriating the space for doing group assignments. The intended function of the designed space could be insisted on, but would the students then meet in another building, and would the canteens end up empty all the time? Giving more authority to the label “canteen” than to the practices of users would take the original intentions and imaginations literally – but it would not make much sense.

The sense to be made of this experience is that labels try to partition the social interaction in a university according to ‘analytically correct’ but performatively irrelevant principles. Apparently, students eat while they study, and they study while experimenting with identities in social interaction. Canteens are scenes for all of this at the same time, and (except the constraining label if taken literally) in the CBS case probably a well-designed scene.

Design decisions are necessary – and are necessarily made at long distance from the use of the designed objects. They should not be made light-heartedly just because we know from experience that time and use will contradict many of the premises on which the decisions were made. The success comes not from being correct in one’s imaginations, but from being useful in the multitude of networks to which the designed object is linked. Since these networks are varied and not rationalized across each other, the design will come to mean and be useful in multiple ways. The insistence on defining the actual meaning of the design (likely in terms of the original imagination of the client or the designer) is not uncommon. But designs will, when taken literally, never be understood for the things implied by the design – by not being attended to, but also not ignored. Labels and designs may be richly interpreted, even if taken literally they operate on a restricted code.

Conclusions

We have reflected on the apparent paradox of design. Design means effectuating designed effects, but all experience indicates that effects are not controlled by design intentions. Effects are not uni-dimensional, because designed artefacts are repeatedly circulated in multiple networks that appropriate them in radically different inscriptions and for local and context-specific use. Design would be impossible if taken too literally. The restricted code of rational design should be interpreted with imagination for all the implied meanings and uses that the designed artefact might accommodate – not a symbol of failed design, but a symbol of the efficiency of the designed object.

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