

## EMBODYING A REGENERATIVE REALITY

**Brian DOUGAN**

Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, USA

### **ABSTRACT**

Rose Slivka tells us in her essay, *The Persistent Object*, that the craftsman is a man of eminence, making objects to emanate power and magic (from its original Saxon form *kraft*, meaning power and strength) and invested all tools of utility with this presence. All objects were symbols of power no less than utility.

As an act of making, craft embodies a regenerative reality. Craft *was* more than it *is*, an integral ingredient of the human condition. It carries a reminder of being human. The act of making, of interacting with tools and materials is what it feels like to be human. Anything less is merely an illusion or a cerebral misunderstanding. The physical engagement in a creative process is a human phenomenon and by virtue of our relation to this biosphere we all deserve the privilege of being included in the event. Craft is fundamentally encoded in our DNA. If the gene for active creativity has somehow been repressed or misplaced, these words are a reminder that acknowledging the fact will more than likely suspend any atrophy.

The craftsman knows how to access, invest and reveal the power mentioned by Rose Slivka, but in the context of today amongst the congestion of excess, variety, and the perpetual discount, the crafted artifact is rarely sought nor its power recognized. While this is certainly a lot of conjecture, at the same time it is at the root of my relations with innumerable young college students all over the world studying architecture.

*Keywords: craft, design studio, pedagogy*

### 1 OVERTURE

I enjoy the good fortune of being a Foundations design studio professor pleased to be responsible for introducing the activity of design to inexperienced and misconstrued collegiate freshman aspiring to be designers. I am grateful too that I am given liberty to conduct my studios in my own pedagogical fashion. Such an academic freedom is evidence of the understanding that curricular content can maintain consistency while its delivery enjoys a rich diversity. DESIGN is big and we are obliged to remember that there are many ways of conducting a successful design studio. Every semester students arrive at the university carrying all kinds of strange preconceptions concerning their newly declared course of study. As of recently, the countless messages in my inbox concerning software and operating system requirements punctuate this misunderstanding.

### 2 A FUNDAMENTAL LESSON

The pervasive misconstructions every semester quite naturally set the stage for a valuable lesson. Design is persistently threatened by preconceptions or in other words, ideas are often mistaken for designs. In reality there is a keen distinction between the

recognition of an idea and a design. Most of the time, the idea or preconception is savoured by the young aspirant designer because it arrives as a brilliant epiphany and is completely painless in its presentation. We are obligated to confront this misunderstanding because even the industry celebrities contribute to its fabrication. The contemporary French Designer Philippe Starck explaining how he designed one of his most commercially successful chairs, the Dr Glob says, "I designed it on a flight to Tokyo between sitting down and fastening my seat belt. He continues by saying, fortunately I have a faithful tribe who help me in spite of everything, and transform my ideas into reality." [1] I would say that Philippe's use of the word design is lost in translation. Design or in other words that transformative activity performed by Starck's faithful includes not only specifying the path to production, but also refinement of the idea as an acknowledgement of opportunities. The design process requires so much time and energy that a normal eighteen-year-old college student usually has not the disposition nor patience necessary to endure the venture. A preconception, regardless how extraordinary it may seem is delivered complete and ready to eat - no baking necessary. What the naïve designer does not yet know is that the point is - to bake, which includes adding the yeast and the raisins, whirling the spatula and all the other construction tools used to provide nourishment. The activity dictates design. Design is best understood as a verb expressing action making the stasis of a preconceived conclusion or even a divine intervention the first obstacle an undeveloped designer must overcome.

### 3 THE STUDIO

This paper is an expression of the communication between teacher and students in a design studio environment with an emphasis on craft. There are innumerable questions one could ask about a design studio, but the one I think is most important is how. How does one teach a design student how to design? It is obviously inappropriate to impose upon the students a particular way of designing as if it were a recipe or scientific formula. We adopt a particular task in the studio for specific reasons and we attack the task with more specific reasons. The agenda is clearly articulated so the messy activity of design is not any messier than it has to be. Design studios under my jurisdiction always focus on the same concerns. For the sake of efficiency, clarity and communication I wrap the agenda into a tripartite package of criteria, which I believe encompass a healthy dose of design concerns. The first is rather generic in its necessity and the other two carry a personal partiality that brings me the joy I find necessary to sustain my professorial engagement from semester to semester.

- 1. The studio is obliged to rely on hierarchy, which is mostly concerned with communication and order. It expands to include articulation, clarity, legibility, relationships, and meaning.*
- 2. I also depend on what I refer to as density to help understand the quantifiable relationship between an idea and its context. Density is integrally related to the use of time and process and helps with our pushing the envelope by discouraging premature conclusions and striving for variation, development, and quantity in relation to space or content in relation to container.*
- 3. The third criteria is labeled craft and is mostly concerned with the simple relation between idea, material, and tool. This concern comes with an agenda that both includes and relies on making. The physical activity of interacting with tools and materials in regard to ideas tends to set the stage for what type projects comprise my studio.*

Rose Slivka tells us in her essay, *The Persistent Object* that the Craftsman is a man of eminence, making objects to emanate power and magic and invested all tools of utility with this presence [2]. I will use this opportunity to articulate how *craft*, proves itself beneficial to the architectural design studios I conduct. In the essay *Poetry of the Physical*, Paul J. Smith explains how an exhibit of the same name was curated to illustrate the skill, imagination, and vitality characteristic of contemporary craft [3]. He is implying that those are three important criteria for defining contemporary craft. While I do not share his exact use of vocabulary, Smith's repertoire of criteria coincides nicely with the agenda of my design studio and I will use them to clarify my instruction.

I do not advocate *skill* because it is often confused with talent and used as an excuse by students who think they were overlooked when it was transferred into their personal DNA. I do refer to *skill* as a product of experience because in an educational context it is important to understand that there are no short cuts to earning *skill*. The only way to acquire such a quality is through focused and intentional experience. It is not a God given faculty and the occasional happy accident also is not an indication of *skill*. Craft is often defined as a disciplined manipulation of materials [4] with the emphasis of course on discipline. The development of such a work ethic is a persistent reminder that design occupies time rather than simply recognizing an attractive idea. An experience with craft is like a love affair that transpires over time. When love penetrates our existence, craft is its natural reflection. The craftsman not only loves her work, but she loves the material she uses, the tools that intervene between her and the material, she loves herself, and most of all she loves the necessary time she spends with herself to do the work. The Jamaican recording artist Taurus Riley reminds us on a popular 2007 release that - love is what dreams are made of [5]. The craftsman is a lover extraordinaire.

The rubric of *imagination* is another avenue I try to avoid because it too is often misinterpreted to be a random musing in pursuit of an idea as if it was a reliable conduit for the reception of ideas. In the design studio ideas tend to be way over celebrated. *Imagination* is not the mysterious receipt or plagiarization of an idea. *Imagination* is more about discovery. It is the discovery of an unknown and the process of design is the perfect vehicle for revealing this invisible dimension. Design is an iterative process. It occurs when something is transformed into something else. The element of change is how we remember that design is most valuable as a verb. Every subsequent iteration is different from its predecessor. Each transformation sheds a light on the unknown and with enough time the evolution will present what was originally unimaginable or as we have seen, what is sometimes referred to as *imagination*.

I particularly appreciate Mr. Smith's reference made to *vitality*. We are all aware that designers must bring a sincere passion to the activity of design. An attempt to design without it is futile. Design requires access to some kind of latent energy that propels an engagement in the process. When we recognize design as process with an emphasis on the time required to satisfy it and we learn that preconceptions, epiphanies, and premature conclusions are only distractions to the process then we realize that design is not necessarily an efficient enterprise. It is often exhausting in its energy consumption to the extent that it usually appears to be a wasteful use of time. The tenacity of enduring the journey through a process is often frustrating and can cause discomfort to an inexperienced designer. Once we are aware of the endurance necessary to navigate the reality of a design process we can see there is a need to be *-comfortable being uncomfortable*. Some of us know that the anxiety that comes with the frustration and discomfort of a long-distance design process is the fuel we use to propel the process to

fruition. There is not really a way to avoid the discomfort, so we might as well turn it inside out and embrace it. Discovering the unknown or discrediting the preconceived idea requires the process to take us places we have never before visited because it is in the new places that we will discover what was previously unknown and the unknown is what we are looking for. The new places appear dangerous because they are unfamiliar. The danger makes us uncomfortable but we persist because we know that this is the risk we have been told that designers must take. A courageous persistence in time will prevail and the temporal endurance will compound. What once appeared to be a wasteful use of energy will eventually be understood as a refined vitality. The designer is able to endure the discomfort because as was mentioned earlier, the designer is in love with the activity. That has nothing to do with the designer having masochistic tendencies or some strange affinity for discomfort. It means that a love of making is a necessary posture for a designer and love itself is understood as a synonym for craft. The love or craft invested results in the same quality we recognize when we are struck with the desire to want a craft object to be part of our lives. It is the same quality we sense in a medieval village or cathedral having been built in an age of spiritual devotion by craftspeople investing their lives for the love of the divine.

*The love of making, the joie de faire (like joie de vivre) is important, even urgent. It indicates that there is something to be said about the sheer enjoyment of making something exist that did not exist before, of using one's own agency, dexterity, feelings, and judgment to mold, form, touch, hold, and craft physical materials apart from anticipating the fact of its eventual beauty, uniqueness or usefulness [6].*

Craft and as I am suggesting also design satisfies a human need to exercise our capacity to express that which we do. Human beings are makers. Making is what it feels like to be human.

## 5 SOCIETY

Most university students, even the digitally enthusiastic spectrum aspiring to be designers are products of a society that has become disconnected from the fundamental workings of life. Contemporary conveniences have intervened in our lives to such an extent that most of us no longer concern ourselves with the mechanics of our home, automobile, computer or anything else we own. Our lives are compromised by the opacity of consumable commodities serving us with the convenience of not requiring our time and understanding. The pervasive fast food ideology has consumed the globe - use it, discard it ... get a new one.

*In response to our contemporary displacement, the relationship between craft process and product is likely to be, if not quite transparent, then at least relatively accessible to most of us. There is pleasure from wearing or using something whose creation we can both admire and understand. There is an appeal to both our physical and our intellectual approval. In a world where we have unfortunately lost touch with the business of making things, the craft object restores us the connection between making and using [7].*

This idea of transparency and accessibility is of course especially poignant for designers and design education. It is an absolute necessity for the designer/inventor to be informed, to work with a thorough understanding that denies the opacity of superficially clad products mysteriously residing in our lives. Transparency is didactic. It denies

mystery and reveals the nature of things. Design is neither mysterious nor magical. Design is explicit and communicative. It is understood and expressed in the design process as craft. Crafting ones way through a design process promises a transparent agreement between idea, development, materials, and tools. In an essay entitled *The Pleasure and Meaning of Making*, Ellen Dissanayake constructs a strong defense for craft in our contemporary lives.

*One can defend the ordinary workmanlike, even repetitive, actions of scraping, sanding, weaving, stitching, knitting, hatching and polishing that are traditionally part of craftwork or careful making. This is a kind of engagement with the real world that many artists, in their concern with "ideas" and "concepts" have often forfeited. Let us not forget that nature itself is cyclical, or repetitive, and human work in the world, concerned with the daily round and the cycles of the seasons, has a rhythm and recurrence that for millennia have given satisfaction to many [8].*

Maybe we did a lot more making once upon a time, but we are still makers and will undoubtedly continue to be so until our fingers atrophy and are no longer able or willing to negotiate tools. Making is our nature. It is what distinguishes us from the other life forms on our blue planet. This activity of making has little to do with utility or survival, monetary value, or art. It is more a matter of how appropriate it feels to engage the repetitive cycle, how alive one feels when engaged in the act. Making is a selfish endeavor. It feels good when the movement of the body transcends intellectual supervision. The cycles of the every day deserve our attention more today than they ever have before because our recent alienation has resulted in a crisis about who we are. Half joking, I would like to see the university provide physical education credit for students attending design studio because the activity of design is a physical workout. Like the lesson about preconceptions mentioned earlier, students carry a penchant for an intellectual approach to design that entails much more cerebral activity than physical activity. If the design agenda includes craft, the physical cannot be avoided.

The physicality of careful work comes with an undeniable pleasure and there is a reciprocity that accompanies the pleasure. The pleasure is perpetual. The engagement in the physical activity creates joy and the joy sustains the engagement, which perpetually sustains the joy. I understand this joyful engagement with craft as a specifically human investment of time and energy. The investment becomes tangible and appreciable because we work with material. The material holds the joy that results from the engagement. Joy therefore becomes an integral part of the material object. The material is the vessel that contains the joy and is celebrated as *quality*. Those of us who are not makers think that such transference of energy from maker to artifact is either fictitious or magic. The fictitious accusation is true at the same time ironic because fiction is itself essentially a fabrication and requires the same kind of productive attention a craftsman would give any work. The magical explanation is expected as it comes from the uninformed and inexperienced position of the typical non-maker residing in our contemporary society. This quality of tangible joy contradicts the quantifiable laws of physics, so when it cannot be attributed to a procedural formula of direct reason, it is either mistaken for witchcraft or even worse it remains unrecognized or simply ignored.

The pleasure I find as a teacher lies at the root of this reciprocal perpetuity. The task of leading a complex journey of process in the design studio is always a challenge and requires a resolute trust from the students to endure the many obstacles encountered along the way. The responsibility of introducing creative possibilities is a slippery path

because the map of the journey is radically incomplete and written in so many different languages that it is often indecipherable. The transference of energy in the design studio is similar to that of the craftsman even though the quality we strive for in the studio is less objective than any particular craft product. The studio could probably operate without an emphasis on product, but that is an other story. Quality in the studio has more to do with the relation between the professor and the student than with the maker and her work. The professor's investment is in the student and visa versa. The teacher invests the student with responsibility, as would the craftsman invest joy. The teacher surrenders his responsibility to the student. In the design studio, responsibility means to assume control of a process, to engage an activity of making with the confidence, vitality, and courage to make the creativity real. Like the engaged craftsman, the successful transfer of responsibility in the studio is reciprocal because the satisfaction of giving away responsibility to the student is the same joy the professor has about being responsible. Sharing responsibility in the design studio is very much like investing joy in a carefully made craft object and education enjoys the same reciprocity except that instead of the product being the artifact, it is the student.

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Brian DOUGAN  
Texas A&M University  
College of Architecture  
College Station, Texas  
77845  
bdougan@tamu.edu  
979.845.0129