

MAPPING DESIGN STUDENTS' AESTHETIC AND VISUAL PREFERENCE

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ABSTRACT

The overall purpose of our research is to investigate young designers design processes and methods on a global scale, by conducting a series of workshops at selected design universities in among others Taiwan, China, Brazil, South Africa, India and Russia. The focus of the research project is to compare and map cultural differences, similarities and preferences in young designers design approach in order to understand how globalization and localization influence design. It is also the purpose to investigate how different teaching methods influence the way the young designers understand the practice and conceptions of design.

In March 2015 we conducted our first workshop at the Shih Chien University in Taipei, Taiwan (2015). The workshop focused on the “wunderkammer” as a work method and as an analytical perspective. Museal as well as personal collections deal with objects as parts of wholes and of principles of collecting (Pomian 1990; Raahauge 1997 & 2001; Stjernfelt 1993), one of them being the Wunderkammer (Williams and Tsien 2013)), these perspectives have been at the core of our workshop, as a didactical method and as a way to combine diverse aesthetic, empirical and intuitive dimensions (Hansen 2014). The students were asked to create a “wunderkammer” of personal collected images and things from their local environment and culture .

The focus of the workshops is collecting and organizing objects from the students visual explorations within the following topics: body, home, urban space, identity, and cultural codes. The workshops are documented, analysed and compared in order to get a better understanding of how, and if, different universities' learning methods and cultural backgrounds influence the students' design approaches, practices and conceptions. In this way we hope to broaden the importance of design and to gain knowledge and understanding of how design is conceived, practiced and taught, furthermore we hope to pave the way for discussions and exchange on these topics and perspectives between design students and designers cross boundaries.

The purpose of the mapping is to compile comparable data and propagate best practices from selected design universities in order to both maintain and strengthen local differences in design practices and perceptions but also to cross borders and find methods for collaborations within design praxis and research.

In the paper we will unfold the project and discuss how it might be discussed in the framework of design education.

Keywords: Design concepts, design practices, design educations, globalisation, localisation, Wunderkammer

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with design students' aesthetic and visual preferences. It is about the design concept and the way students work with design. As part of the project *Mapping Design Students' Aesthetic and Visual Preferences*, we have conducted a pilot project, and the paper builds on the findings from this exploration. We plan to conduct other workshops in order to be able to map these topics globally – or at least we work with the concept of mapping while working, since a map covering these floating topics would be impossible to make. This project is a work in progress, thus we will not present elaborated interpretations or rich conclusions. This is a presentation of hypotheses, tentative methods and lay-outs of our project.

The initial idea for investigating young designers design processes and methods on a global scale is based on our experience as tutors and teachers of design students, and our hypothesis is that design students on a global scale diverge in their concept of design and also in their design praxis in ways that might be systematised and discussed. This multitude of definitions of the design concept is elaborated through various articles in a recent volume of the design journal *Artifact*, *The Design Concept* [1]. Furthermore, we assume that divergence is connected to the diversity of design disciplines that the students come from; the various disciplines refer to specific areas of design in specific empirical settings in the surrounding environment, and furthermore, they refer to specific historical developments inside the design discipline.

At the same time, the students' methods for collecting data for their design projects seem to become more and more identical, more often than not using the Internet as their primary source when researching for visual inspiration and reference material. This development might promote a shared understanding of aesthetics and perceptions of how design should be articulated. We have noticed a recurrent structure in the way the students use the Internet at the local institution where we work: Even though the visual material they collect is sourced from different digital platforms, e.g. Google, Pinterest, Instagram, and even though the stream of images seem endless, our design students end up sourcing the same kind of visual material. This might be influenced by a certain shared understanding of aesthetics and visual preferences within the walls of our own academy, but from visits to other design universities we found the design students there having similar visual material in their sketchbooks.

On this background, the overall purpose of our research project is to investigate young design students' design processes and methods on a global scale, by conducting a series of workshops at selected design universities in among others Taiwan, China, Brazil, South Africa, India and Russia. We intend to compare and map differences, similarities and preferences in young designers design approach in order to understand how globalization and localization influence design. It is also the purpose to investigate how different teaching methods influence the way the young designers understand the practice and conceptions of design. The workshops will be documented, analysed and compared in order to get a better understanding of how, and if, different universities' learning methods and societal backgrounds influence the design approaches, practices and conceptions of the design students.

In 2015 we conducted a pilot workshop for 26 students from Industrial Design, Communication Design, Fashion Design and Architecture at Shih Chien University in Taipei, Taiwan. We had asked the staff of Shih Chien University to select a variety of interested students from different disciplines, and we therefore had a variety of students from architecture, industrial design, visual communication and fashion design, but also from very different levels; from 1st year BA students to 5th year graduate students. Upon arrival we looked at this combination of students as an asset, and combined them in groups of 4, mixing students from different disciplines and levels, which looking back worked really well since e.g. more experienced students helped 1st year students. Also the workshop were limited to 4 nights after studies between 6 and 9 pm, which was certainly not what we had asked for, but by the end worked out really well, especially because the different disciplines were combined in a balanced way. Concerning the level of students, few freshmen stood out, because their overview of their work method and conceptual stand point was not elaborated. This was interesting, because it showed the impact of education, and how short a time it takes, before the students are enrolled in a certain praxis and concept of design as well as visual aesthetics. In our next workshop we will also have to go with the possibilities offered to us by the institution. This we see as an advantage, since the comparative exploration of the project is not based on positivistic, objective, or quantitatively anchored material, rather it is a hermeneutical project that focuses on the similarities and differences through interpretation of not only the students, but also of the framework offered to them and to us by the different institutions.

In Taipei, the focus of the workshops was to collect and organize objects within the themes of *body*, *home*, *urban space*, *identity*, and *cultural codes*.

2 METHOD: WUNDERKAMMER AS A PRINCIPLE

In preparing the didactical frame for the workshop, we wanted to create a space in which we on limited time could meet the students, observe and discuss their work. We needed a frame that could not only be repeated in order to compare the results from each of our planned workshops, but also ensure a framework that could support the overall purpose to let the design students' aesthetical and visual preferences become manifest, and more specifically to create a space in which to observe each student's (artistic) considerations and decisions while working. Furthermore, it was important to achieve not only an oral dialogue, but also to enable us to observe the students nonverbal dialogue when arranging and rearranging the visual materials/objects that we wanted the students to bring [7]. With this in mind, the workshop focused on the Wunderkammer as a work method and as an analytical perspective. Museal as well as personal collections deal with objects as parts of wholes and of principles of collecting, as the museum theorist Krzysztof Pomian argues [2], an argument that is further elaborated in Stjernfelts article on museums and collections [3], and in Raahauges article on collections [4] in the anthology *Samling og Samlere* [5] one of them being the Wunderkammer, a principle of collecting for private, royal museums, described by among others Tod and Tsien [6], these perspectives have been at the core of our workshop, as a didactical method and as a way to combine diverse design approaches. The students were asked to create a Wunderkammer using the objects and images they had been asked to collect.

The basic analytical method of the workshop was that of sorting objects and pictures according to the principle chosen by the student. We had defined a square on the floor for each student, and inside the borders of this square, the students were to collect and exhibit their personal *Wunderkammer* according to a relevant topic that they pointed out themselves; this might be a colour, a shape, notions of the city, a specific object in the local area etc. The only restriction was, that it should relate to one or more of the themes mentioned above.

2.1 The workshop

The students were divided into interdisciplinary groups of four, each group containing one student from each of the disciplines represented, fashion, industrial design, visual communication and architecture. The students worked individually with their own square, but they were asked to discuss with each other inside the group, finding out if their square was able to state its own topic clearly, and if it communicated relevant contexts of their topic, perspectivizing both their design approach and the relevance of their topic by way of specific objects and connections between objects.

With each new day a new way of working with the square was added, going through objects trouvés, objects créés, 2D illustrations and 3D folding, and the interplay of adding and removing objects from the square. Each day we also added new perspectives on the assignment by way of small lectures and discussions with the students, and also by way of individual tutorials. The headings of each day of the workshop were as follows: 1st day: *Act and collect*, 2nd day: *analyse, select, expand or exclude*, 3rd day: *Prepare presentation*, 4th day: *Present and reflect*. We will expand on the workshops below:

2.1.1 Act and collect I

Within the themes stated above, namely *body, home, urban space, identity and cultural codes*, the students were asked to prepare their own visual material by collecting photos and other images, objects, "odds and ends" and short videos if necessary. As mentioned, they were not allowed to use the Internet, in stead they were asked to explore and create their own material from their local surroundings and environments – photos, drawings, smaller objects and things that they found in their local street life and places like the home, markets and other places in the city. The research material should address the following questions or other similar questions that the student considered relevant: How are people dressed? How do they live? How are shops and streets organized? What is normal and what is special? How do you spot the extraordinary, and how do you recognize the ordinary?

The students were also asked to think about their definition of the concept of design: what does it mean to you? How would you define it? How is it connected to your discipline (fashion, industrial design, architecture and visual communication)? How is it connected to other contexts such as the market, the history, the society, or the materiality of the world surrounding you? – and thus, the material you have collected?

The students documented their visual process and reflections in logbooks, which in combination with the visual documentation of the workshop constitutes an important part of our empirical material.

2.1.2 During the workshop

As mentioned above, before the arrival of the students we had prepared 60x60 cm frames on the floor in groups of four, since we wanted the students to discuss their independent work in interdisciplinary teams. When the students arrived, each of them got a logbook in which to document their work day by day through images, drawings, and writing (in English).

2.1.3 Day 1: Act and collect II

We introduced to the workshop; after that the students made a presentation of their findings. During this part of the workshop we introduced the students to different Western European principles and methods of organizing museum collections and to the idea of the *Wunderkammer* as a framework of organizing and composing their material. During the first session we also opened up for a discussion of how to work with and conceptualise design.

2.1.4 Day 2: Analyse, select, expand or exclude

The collected material was discussed with the students through individual tutorials and also through a discussion in groups of four among the students. After that, the material was rearranged, and items were discarded if they seemed not to fit the theme. Furthermore, we asked the students to participate in paper folding that might add something to their collection in the squares by way of 3D material and also some material that was created by the students, not just found or photographed. Additionally, the students were asked to scout for odds and ends, images, and things, to conduct interviews and to be open for other findings during the week of the workshop. This had the purpose of strengthening their collection of material and also of adding more objects and ideas along the way. By way of this on going collection of material, the intention was furthermore to ask the students to prepare for a final presentation of their collection. Furthermore, the students were asked to remove one object from their collection, in order to find out if it would alter the principle of the collection and the relation between the remaining objects – thus questioning the visual design exploration and the design concept of the student [7].

2.1.5 Day 3: Wrap up and prepare for presentation

The students were asked to select a format for the final presentation, 2D, 3D, video, animation, installation or whatever visual presentations they found appropriate. They had to present it within (or as a video or animation of) the square they had got as their physical frame and they also had to make a two-minute oral presentation of the content of the square and the idea behind it. They were encouraged to think about this introduction as a presentation of an exhibition, possibly framed as a *Wunderkammer* of objects, pictures and videos within a particular frame defining the principle, created by their work with collecting, mapping, analysing, and selecting their findings. Furthermore, we discussed the general themes and concepts, and also we discussed the most significant principles in the students' work. We mapped concrete themes emphasized by the students, but especially we searched for concepts of an analytical nature, be they social, cultural, design-oriented, material, spatial, or historical.

2.1.6 Day 4: Presentation and reflection

The students were asked to present their square in public, hereby also reflecting on their method and their design idea and possibly their design statement. As mentioned, the idea was for them to make a presentation about their process and their project and also about the square and its objects, and the principle the square was related to. Furthermore, they were asked to point to the possible new perspectives that their work might point at. When leaving the university, we took the students' logbooks with us, in order to analyse them and thereby reflect on the workshop. This reflection also took place during the workshop: during the week, we continuously discussed the interconnections of the concept of design and the visual and aesthetical preferences as seen from the students' point of view, and we included their work, their findings, and their ideas about the world surrounding them in this first analytical phase of the pilot project.

The period of the workshop was limited to four days. Furthermore, the workshop was only possible to conduct at night time, for two and a half hours every evening, therefore, the students had to work after their ordinary day of studies in order to follow the workshop. Another disadvantage was the language barrier. Some of the students spoke English fluently, while others did not understand all of the discussions. These obstacles were of course challenging for the workshop, but having said this, it was impressive to see, how the eagerness of the students made them work enthusiastically with their assignment despite these obstacles.

3 REFLEXION

Having conducted but one workshop our first analysis of and reflexions upon the visual material obtained are mainly concerned around whether the frame of the workshop serves as an appropriate method for exploring the students' design approach and process. Even though the Western idea of the Wunderkammer was unfamiliar to the students from Taiwan, they quickly grasped the purpose and worked seriously within this framework, arranging and rearranging their visual material and objects within their square. The distance produced by the Wunderkammer as an unknown principle of collecting might even have been an advantage, since it made the students focus on their work, instead of trying to interpret a well-known tradition. At the same time, the proximity produced by working with the familiar concept of collecting had the advantage of offering the students a well known framework for their work. This oscillation between unknown and familiar principles is one that we wish to unfold in our coming workshops (these two principles are also discussed in 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6). The students emphasized that they appreciated the discussions with their fellow students across disciplines, a work set up they had never tried before; additionally the students got inspired to test new directions, than what had been first on their minds by way of the discussions with each other as well as through tutorials and discussions in plenum. They appreciated the criteria of not using the Internet thus being forced to rediscover their local environment, also, they expressed curiosity towards contextualizing their findings to e.g. historical traditions, cultural ideas and societal matters. Considering that it was not a well known method for the students, they were fast at understanding the idea of the workshop, selecting and photographing relevant motives and collecting related objects. On this empirical and methodological level, it is possible to gain knowledge for our mapping. On a deeper analytical, critical reflexive level, we hesitate to proceed before having access to comparative material. In fact, both empirically and analytically it might be difficult to discuss the students' interpretations of topics of "design" and "visual preferences" before having conducted comparative fieldwork through other workshops. For now, we rely only on the students' own statements, their logbooks and our visual material in this interpretation in progress.

Having gone through the logbooks it is obvious to us that these students seemed to be unfamiliar with documenting their design process. While the students' work within the Wunderkammer frame visually progressed, they seemed reluctant concerning how to use the logbooks as a tool for documentation, in order to maintain what they had done and their thoughts and associations when doing it. It is therefore difficult to base an accurate analysis of each students' day to day progression since the logbooks show gaps and jumps between the students' visual Wunderkammer work and the visual material they present in the books. It is for example, difficult to follow their final decisions in selecting the direction towards their first design proposals, and even though this may be the result of the limited time, many of the students' sketches towards the design proposals have only vague connections to their discoveries and concepts from their Wunderkammer. While this gives us lesser material to analyse, it also gives us an important piece of information about the didactical framework of the students: they are simply not used to work consciously with documenting their process. So for our next workshop we might address the theme of "process" as well as "concept" and "preference". These themes mirror discussions inside the design discipline as to how to conceive of the design concept. These meta discussions and their relation to how designers conceptualize their discipline and their practices are the focus of [1].

4 DISCUSSION

As mentioned, this is still a work in progress, and we will not be able to take it much further, before we have collected a set of comparative material from our next workshop. Meanwhile we intend to present our findings for students from our own institution in order to get further material for our analysis, but also in order to create bridges between design students from disparate environments.

In the workshop to come at our own institution, and also in the future workshops abroad, we will develop the theme mentioned above, namely the method of using Wunderkammer and collection as a framework (see 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6). Furthermore, we will involve the students in the discussion of the design concept touched upon in 1. Additionally, we will unfold the theme of aesthetic preferences further through this workshop, also touching upon new perspectives through literature on this theme. In our future workshops we will try to visit both universities in the countries mentioned in the abstract and universities in Europe in order to be able to compare not only the overall themes, but also the more mundane question of language: is it problematic to conduct workshops in countries where English is not spoken fluently? This theme also touches upon the interpretation of imagery and practice: how far can we go with our interpretations of imagery that is for everybody to experience, when language is not understood on equal terms (being a disadvantage) and when language is not standing in the way (being a possible advantage)? Apart from the fact that we have to stress the importance of the students' daily documentation in the logbooks even more than we did in Taipei, the daily work with the Wunderkammer as a visual and verbal dialogue between objects, visual material, students and us, still seems to be a liable method in order to explore the students' aesthetic and visual preferences. When analysing the visual documentation of the workshop and the content of the logbooks it has become obvious to us, that the next step in our work will be to establish a principle for our comparison. Thus, when we have conducted our next workshop, we intend to lay out a set of comparative principles that will enable us to compare our analyses now and in the future.

As for the tentative hypothesis we started out with, it seems rather difficult to discuss and conclude with only this pilot project at hand. That is, the broad initial hypothesis has been confirmed: design students do tend to have diverse concepts and practices concerning design, and they do tend to use the Internet in similar ways in order to search for visual material. The students were not allowed to bring images from the Internet to the workshops, but in their log books and presentations, the imagery of the Taipei students could also have been used by students from our institution. On the other hand, this is a difficult argument to bring up, since the material is very limited, which makes it difficult to judge. We will explore this and unfold other comparative perspectives after our next workshops.

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