THE PRACTICE AND THE COMMUNITY:
A PROPOSITION FOR THE POSSIBLE CONTRIBUTION
OF COMMUNICATION DESIGN TO PUBLIC SPACE

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Title

The practice and the community: a proposition for the possible contribution of Communication Design to public space

Questions

How might a communication designer act with an awareness of, and a responsibility for, their own agency within society?

How might a communication designer develop a socially connected practice?

What changes; to designer, client, producer, user and community, and their roles within the design process might arise from this socially connected practice?

Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgment has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the exegesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and, any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

Name:

Student Number:

Signed:

Dated:
INTRODUCTION
This research project explores the designer within the community. The research is focused particularly on a consideration of designer agency; the power of design, the designed and the designer to have effect upon the communities they inhabit. Initiated through a consideration of the issues that arise from the production of designed communication artefacts within public space. This research questions who makes this work, why they make it, what effect the work has and what responsibilities come with the design and production of this work. The research aims to develop a communication design practice that enriches and supports the communities it is developed within and for.

Through their work, designers articulate the places that they inhabit; they give material form to ideas and culture. They have the potential to act as a conduit for the expression of the communities that they are part of. This research project examines communication work that exists within public space; the shared space which we inhabit as members of a community.

The term public space is used within this research to describe the physical or non-physical space all members of the public have access to. Due to this shared access public space is a space that, as active members of the community, we move through and interact with. It is common space, if we chose not to use it, we chose to deny ourselves one of the key benefits of living within a community. Public space belongs to everyone, but no one person has control, it is there for us all. Every action we take within this space has the potential to effect everyone else who uses the same space. Thus there is a responsibility involved in the use and the changing of public space. This is quite different to a private space that is entered into with the understanding that one is accepting the control of that space by a third party.

Whereas fine artists are generally cognisant of their role and responsibility when working within public space, communication designers and the commercial activities which might be described as the communication design industries are not always aware of this role and responsibility. It is as a communication designer that I am interested in looking at public space and that I wish to investigate and critique the role of communication design within this space.

Through the research and the individual projects that make up the research I have attempted to understand the dialogic of this public space, and investigate the potential for a communication design practice which operates as an ethical and authentic participant in this public space. In using the term ethical, I refer to an authentic, engaged, critically aware and questioning practice. A practice which acknowledges and accepts the power that design is entrusted with; to articulate communal narratives and construct contemporary mythologies. As designers, we can participate in the story-telling of our culture, yet we often deny the importance of this role, treat it trivially, and disrespect the agency used to make our living and express our creativity.

Within this research I refer to “community” and “communities”; in using these terms I am indicating the social space formed within and from the design practice, I also refer to the sections of society within which the work is completed. A community might be gathered around a boardroom table; it might be a nebulous conglomeration around an idea or political stance; it might be a professional community or it might be the ping pong game at the church hall. Critically, within the context of this research, community is defined by the intention of the design action. The community, in this sense, is defined through the focus of the designer.

Communication Design has traditionally used the method of defining a target audience to ensure that the design work takes into consideration the needs and ambitions of the group it is going to effect. Within this research I have used the term community rather than target audience to describe this group.
I would rather talk about facilitating communities than meeting target audiences needs. The distinction may seem subtle but I believe it to be fundamental. This research describes a design practice whereby a community is joined, or entered into, by the designer. The community is in some way facilitated through the practice of the designer. It may even be possible for a new community to be created during the process of design or through the action of the designed artefact or system.

The research, and this accompanying exegetical document, suggests a theoretically based practice; a praxis for the contemporary communication designer. The research work is two-fold. Firstly there is a focus on the instrumentalist properties of the projects and the work produced; how the work facilitates community and how well it achieves this. Secondly there is the reflection upon this work as design research and the methodology behind the development of the work; how does the work become research, and how might this research be communicated and fed back into both my own continuing research projects, as well as into contemporary communication design dialogue and debate in general.

Looking back

The following statements come from my initial application for research candidature;

  My proposal is to encourage those who control and disseminate these (public space) media to take some responsibility for their output.

  What non-commercial alternatives could evolve within the existing market-driven communication systems?

  Neal Haslem, Research progress presentation, May 2004

Looking back on these words it is clear that the core themes are still present in this research, however, they have been approached from a different direction. Today my research is focused on the designers’ role within the communities they inhabit. It is about the agency of the designer within the community. Rather than asking, as I did at the start of my research, how design in public space might be forced to change or be altered by utilising new forms, I am instead asking how we, as designers, can visualise our role differently and in so doing subtly shift the focus of our practice towards our role in the communities we engage in and affect through our work.

I propose that as the profession of communication design matures and becomes situated more clearly, one’s individual role as designer becomes focused on the community of intent, that is, the part of the community within which we work and effect change. My thinking has come to this point through reflecting upon the projects completed during this research.

Within this writing I revisit projects completed during this research project, reflect upon them, frame them through the questions arising here, and subsequently use them to frame the propositions that I am making. There have been numerous projects completed during this research project. Some I will reflect upon in detail, others I will briefly touch-on to illustrate a particular idea or turning point in the research. The individual projects are not discussed chronologically but rather as they fit within the research’s discussion and argument. Often individual projects tend to inform and reveal their learnings after some time has passed. Thus earlier projects can inform and influence those completed two or three iterations later.
The projects and the themes accompanying them have become the chapters of this submission. They communicate points of departure, the places where I have come from, the reasons I had for going where I did, the ideas that came along the way and the learning which has taken place. They synthesise the material generated during the research into a conclusion and a series of possibilities for research. The projects, and the discussion of those projects, reveal the developments in my own practice, both during the course of completing the individual projects and over the period of writing and compilation.

The core proposition

The fundamental proposition I will put forward that has both defined and been defined by this research, is as stated in the introduction, that of creating a model for a socially connected practice of Communication Design. This model includes the designer, the client, the constituency of effect, and the intentional field. It is about the holistic impact, both materially, culturally and spiritually, of the practice of design and the systems and artefacts which it produces.

Design can act as a practice that contributes to the community within which it is enacted. That it can contribute economically is well established. That it continues to develop and refine its ability to contribute aesthetically to our society and the made environment, providing products of beauty and meditation, is undeniable. In addition to these important contributions I wish to posit a model of a communication design practice that contributes to the self-expression of individuals and collectives within the community within which it is practiced. A model through which the practice of design provides a space for individual and collective voices to be heard and allows the “consumers” presence and agency to be recognised, empowered and articulated through the form and system of the design. A design practice that contributes to democratic principles within society and acts to enable an articulation of the community.

This research is not particularly interested in increasing the efficacy with which design engages, effects and convinces the consumers of communication design work. Rather, it is concerned with the effect of the work, the impact of the work, and the possibility that the work might actually contribute to the society within which it is practiced.

This proposal constitutes a re-alignment of the aims of the practice of design. A re-alignment of what it means to “be a designer”. A lot of the methods and techniques which come together to help define this re-alignment of the practice are already in use here and there brought about through the practice of designers themselves. This research hopes to go some way to collating these disparate tactics as a new definition of the practice of design.

Methodology – a study of community design and a study of design research

Pursuing the concerns, questions and propositions of the research is one aim. Developing the knowledge to do this and forming a sound and appropriate design research methodology is another. The development and refinement of this design research methodology forms a large part of the work in this research and is one of the major areas of learning accomplished during this project.
Whilst I remain unsure whether this research project reveals any new knowledge (and it is not required to do so under the current Higher Research Degree rules), it does lay the groundwork for further practice-led design research. This research has allowed me to trial ideas, gain experience in appropriate design research methods and develop a methodology to allow the discussion and dissemination of that work. It assesses the current state of my area of focus within the discipline, surveys my own and others’ current practice and allows me to be in a position to propose fruitful areas of investigation into the territory which has been defined.

Both design research and how to research design are critical issues at this point in time for design knowledge. This project uses the emergent practice-led-research methodology, a hotly debated model under the current climate of positivist data, results and action. Many researchers, particularly in the field of design, are opting for a practice-led-research method in an attempt to negotiate a research method which has the potential to lead to insights into design practice in a way that is not reductive and simplistic. It seems possible that practice-led research is a way to research into design that values the methodology of design itself and takes full advantage of design knowing and the way that design knowledge is different from, for example, scientific knowledge.

The discussion of practice-led design research methodology has become a large part of this research project, and the concerns of the current debate are articulated through the work of the research. This process works surprisingly efficiently. It allows two “ways in” to the project, each individual project informs both the questions and propositions of the research, while at the same time throwing light upon the research methodology. It is as much about the ways to acquire knowledge and the epistemology of design knowledge as it is about the knowledge itself.

Through journals, conversations, blog entries and through the practice of design education the concerns of the research are reflected on, refined and progressed. Through project work and the act of making and designing, knowledge is revealed and understandings gained. This research has been part-time over three years, allowing time for the meanings and understandings, questions and discoveries to be revealed from within and through the practice of design itself and providing opportunity for the repeated reflection which brings to consciousness the knowings of design practice.

The individual projects have been completed from within different scenarios and utilising different methods. Some have taken place within the institution of the academy itself, as collaborative work with fellow students and designers. Some have arisen from commercial commissions to produce defined design outcomes. Some have been formalized “design/research exercises”, while others have come about spontaneously and were only later seen to have direct bearing on the research.

This research is not tested. The results of the individual projects, the artefacts themselves and the effects of those artefacts on designer, client and audience are not analysed in either a traditional qualitative or quantitative manner. The completed projects do however provide pathways to reveal designerly knowledge. The work is discussed in multiple arenas of discourse: within online forums, during teaching practice, face-to-face with peers, presented at international research conferences, and with active design clients. Journals were kept and documentation made. The work was critically analysed with design peers and supervisors from within the university. In this way, and through the authenticity of the motivation behind the research, rigour was maintained and the design knowledge gained was rigorously questioned and tempered for its accuracy and applicability to a lived design practice. This
is not theoretical knowledge. If anything it is closer to an empirical knowledge based on the experience of practice. I hope to present a rich and valuable design research project which will add to a growing epistemology of communication design practice. What this research lacks in quantification it gains in the depth with which it can connect with the ontological nature of a design praxis. It is not set within a positivist framework. If it were then I would argue that the ideas and the projects would be reduced to mere collections of data.

This research uses aspects of theoretical knowledge to provide a shared language for discourse with others. Current critical and theoretical writing also acts as a checking device on the propositions being made. A harmony and a shared understanding is sought with the work of other like-minded design theorists and practitioners. Where the results of the study disagree or move away from accepted knowledge of design, questions are asked as to why, and the proposition is further refined and tested.

It is not imagined that this is applicable to every situation. It will not be acceptable to all designers. It could even be described as antithetical to many models for practice and business. It is not the aim of this research to provide a new way for all designers. I am not on a neo-modernist crusade, declaring some sort of universal solution. It will become clear that underlying this study is a highly personal desire to define a design practice which aligns to core beliefs and ambitions for what it means to “practice design” in the community. Although I was not consciously aware of it when I started, I have found myself using the research to re-orient, define and create my own professionally and personally sustainable practice.
PROJECTS OVERVIEW
Projects Overview

This chapter provides a brief overview of each project completed during this research. Later chapters analyse these projects. Refer to this chapter when reading the project analysis in other chapters. It provides written and photographic context to each of the individual research projects that make up this research.
Manifesto
May 2004

As part of the core unit “Research Methods” I wrote a manifesto and designed a form for it to take. I composed the text of the manifesto as a series of dot points. When I presented this manifesto to the Research Methods group the response was that it was “contradictory”. I believe now that these points were necessarily contradictory. The Manifesto states:

what if design could...
- reveal meaning in data
- reveal knowledge in information
- reveal connections and complexities

maybe we should try to...
- reflect complex ideas and ideals
- create avenues for creativity
- translate ideas and concepts
- create communication and discussion

is there a need to...
- simplify and elucidate
- create connections
- allow multiple visions

could we...
- protect languages of meaning
- encourage a democracy of forms
- explore new forms
- create forms which discuss ideas

I used the form of a virtual public space to display the manifesto. This allowed me to see the work as it might appear in public space alongside existing marketing material.

It was the “reflect complex ideas and ideals” and the “simplify and elucidate” which appeared to contradict one another. I had recently read a copy of Edward de Bono’s “I am right you are wrong”. In it he discusses his concept of “the stratal”. A stratal is “four or five statements about a subject, it does not have to add up to a conclusion, it is not a definition, it is not comprehensive, it may contain contradictory statements”. de Bono (1991)

De Bono posits that stratals allow us to move forward in ways that the traditional rhetorical paradigm of right/wrong, either/or does not allow. Perhaps I was making a stratal not a manifesto. It did, however, allow me to begin this research, and the ideas contained within the text are still relevant to my research. If one isolates the verbs from the text it reveals a common thread and the focus of my research becomes manifest: reveal, reflect, create, translate, simplify, elucidate, allow, protect, encourage, explore. They are terms of openness, transparency, democracy, social justice and empowerment. They point towards a practice which touches lightly and carefully, much as one might if mindful of the effect of interventions into a delicately balanced system or fragile ecology.
Dear John Screensaver
August 2004

The Dear John Screensaver was part of a group project; “Dear John”, aimed at activating young people to enrol and vote in the 2004 Federal election. Each designer involved in the project added a component which contributed to the objectives of the Dear John Project, and at the same time developed the concerns of their individual research.

Josie Ryan designed some downloadable “dingbats”; a cast of characters from the 2004 election, featuring “Johnny the Rat”. I took these caricatures of John Howard as rat and created an animated screensaver. The rat ran back and forth while comments appeared below him in speech bubbles. Users who downloaded the screensaver could email in a comment, which would subsequently appear on every activated version of the screensaver, as well as their own screen. It was a chat room of sorts, though asynchronous, and focused not on people talking to one another but on individuals venting their spleen on Johnny the Rat.

In designing the Dear John Screensaver I created a prescriptive opportunity to throw a text-based rotten egg or sit back and observe what else was being thrown. I created a space where one didn’t exist before, in the form of a screen-based interactive animation.
Dear John T-shirt
August 2004

This was a very small project, though an interesting and revealing one. I designed a political T-shirt that made no statement at all. The white or black T-shirts had a clear plastic pocket affixed to the front. Users could slip whatever they wanted into this pocket. The person who bought it at the fund-raising party asked me what he should say on it. I had just given him his picture on a polaroid. The point of this idea, however, was that people could put whatever they wanted to into the T-shirt pocket. They could follow my own example from the website and put in a rude message for John Howard, or take an infinity of other options. It put the onus on the user to make the statement that they wanted to make. Most people at the fund-raiser went for the more recognisable political statement T-shirts, where they could buy a finished statement and put it on like a wearable bumper sticker. Conversely the plastic pocket T-shirt was open and inclusive, non-prescriptive and subtle in its action.
Stairwell Series
December 2004

Keith Deverell and I went to the Straight Out of Brisbane conference in late 2004. We created a series of posters which embodied our response to Brisbane. We encouraged and facilitated direct response back into the work. We hoped people would view the work and respond, to continue the discussion we had started. We created a graphic space within which a community might articulate itself, a space which the individual viewers might choose to engage with and use a means of articulating aspects of their own response. We aimed to provide a starting point for a conversation.
Lost and Found
March 2005

The Lost and Found project was completed with artists Neil Thomas and Katy Bowman at the City Gallery of the Melbourne Town Hall. It was also part of the L’Oreal Melbourne Fashion Festival. The two artists came together to form “The Museum of Modern Oddities”. They used story-telling to weave modern mythologies around the banal objects of modern life. Their stories were very loosely based on a common reality. Audiences were drawn in to their narrative before realising that the narratives were imaginary.

I designed the programme, a series of cards, which bound together became the catalogue, the invitation and a take home memento. We photographed some faux fashion shots and juxtaposed them with black and white pictures from the Town Hall archives. Each card held a short text, which itemised and described a “lost” or “found” item. This text was particular for each card. Some texts had obvious connection to their images, some didn’t. The cards were numbered non-sequentially. These devices suggested the cards were part of a greater body of information, something that had a greater strategy and system. They were not.
Tramjatra (book launch)  
September 2005

Tramjatra is part of the overarching project tramtactic. I have worked with artist Mick Douglas on aspects of this project since 2001. I designed a book which documented the Tramjatra project and looked forward to other iterations. We launched the book in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) in October 2005. This project is a cultural exchange between Kolkata and Melbourne, using trams and tramways as a vehicle it brings communities together and investigates issues of transport and culture. The design of this book, and particularly its launch in Kolkata, led me to question my role in the design process. It pointed toward one of the main findings of this research: the model of a communication design practice in which the designer takes an active and connected role in the “intentional field” of the design.
ClauScen Street Party
February 2006

This project may not have been a project at all. It happened on the absolute periphery of this research. Yet upon reflection it provided critical experiences and understandings and informed central issues in the research.

I was instrumental in organising a street party where I lived in North Fitzroy, Melbourne. I designed and produced some signage, an invitation, and a printed request to remove your car so the party could proceed. I also designed and produced two games for the party, a target game drawn onto the middle of the road, and a coconut shy using recycled tin cans. The signage and notices I designed were not the interesting part of this project. They seemed out of context within the DIY aesthetic of the party.

The games, however, were interesting and proved highly influential in the understandings of this research. My presence was comparatively light as a designer. I researched which games might be appropriate and prepared enough game equipment so that the activity could take place. In spraying an old can with yellow paint and filling a tea-towel up with beans a game was produced, an activity was made, and an excuse was provided for social expression and connection.

This light intervention into public space facilitated the re-affirming of community ties and communication. It was just prescriptive enough to provide a framework around which a community of activity could take place, yet it was quickly taken up and reconfigured to become owned by the community of users.
Fashion City
February 2006

Fashion City was a group project, part of the 2006 Melbourne L’Oreal Fashion Festival. We defined the city of Melbourne as Fashion and invited participants to send in their own interpretations of what the Fashion of Melbourne was. I was instrumental in defining the form of the screen-based component of this project as well as the physical banners used for display.

We produced a system which allowed images to be thematically tagged and uploaded. The programatic system concatenated layers of the input and produced a continually updating, infinitely variable, stream of vision. This stream of vision was projected on Federation Square’s Atrium public screen. The system mixed the database of images together, taking it beyond both the designers’ and the participants’ control.
As part of a group of 7 postgraduate design students I spent a long weekend on a design retreat at a property near Bonnie Doon in rural Victoria. The group spent the weekend together in a small cabin with no telephone or internet connection. The first day we responded to the question “What is design?”. The second day we responded to the question “What is design research?”. Responses were designed and made manifest in the surrounding environment using materials found within that environment.
W-11
December 2006

This project was another part of Mick Douglas’ tram tactic project. Douglas invited a team of bus decorators from Karachi, Pakistan to travel to Melbourne and decorate one of the City Circle trams as part of the 2006 Commonwealth Games cultural project. In decorating that tram they created a bridge between two worlds. To travel on the W-11 tram was to travel in a different place. The tram is a focus for a world of social interaction, conversation and community.

For this W-11 project I designed a number of communication design artefacts, part of which was a series of twenty W-11 cards or tickets. Every passenger who boards the tram receives a ticket, with that ticket they gain admittance to an extended cross-cultural conversation. The cards are collectible, reconfigurable and beautiful (this, thanks to the exquisite and exuberant decoration provided by Iqbal and his team).
**Research Cards**  
**October 2005**

Prior to my research presentation in October 2005, I made a set of cards as an aid to analyse my research to that point. I found that through designing and using the cards – through externalising the projects and refining the process of the projects into simplified icons, I was able to articulate the scope and the focus of my research as a whole.

I presented the Research cards at the Graduate Research Conference using them as a device and mnemonic to discuss and dissect the projects, artefacts and abstract elements which form my research.
COMMUNITY
This research focuses on public space and the designed material which exists within that space. Within this area the research concentrates on communication design. This itself is a broad terrain with numerous forms and systems. The concern of this research is the effect this designed material has upon the people inhabiting this public space. This is research into not only the form of communication design artefacts and systems, but also the facilitation and articulation of communities within public space through the practice of communication design.

A basic premise of the research is that communication design work and the material outcomes of that work has a powerful effect within public space and upon the inhabitants of that space. It is clear that the vast majority of this designed material is either not mindful of this effect, or does not act to mediate its effect or make its effect a beneficial one but, conversely, acts rather brutally, mining public space for private gain. Further it is taken as a basic tenet of this research project that communication design in public space which helps facilitate and articulate the communities inhabiting that space is beneficial to those communities.

This chapter examines community and communication design within the frame of this research, and, through analysing completed projects, reveals the knowledge gained and demonstrates the application and development of that knowledge through further practice-based iterations.

Public Space is defined within the research as the physical or virtual space all members of the community have access to. As active members of the community we have no choice but to move through and interact with this space. To chose not to would be to deny ourselves the benefits of the community. The use of this space necessitates a susceptibility to the influence and action of the material within the space. Both the material and the people within public space affect us. This research concentrates on the portion of that material which falls within the domain of communication design: What responsibilities come with the production of material which inhabits public space? and What material might a communication designer produce which facilitates and articulates the communities within public space?

The terms artefact and system are used to describe the manifestations of communication design practice. An artefact might be a poster, a brochure, a website or signage. A system might be a suite of artefacts designed to act toward an overall strategy.

Firstly I discuss how and why “community” came to be a focus of the research and define the use of the term “community”. Secondly I examine the interaction between “community” and the communication design material within public space: What is the language being used? Where is the authority? Who is talking to who? Lastly I discuss, with reference to particular research projects, the practice of public space communication design, the knowledge gained during this research and the applications of that knowledge.

… as the complexity of life in late-industrial global culture increases, we are called upon to better understand the context in which we exist, and to better know where, how and when to intervene in that context with design endeavour… Douglas (2004, p1)
Why community?

The initial focus of this research was to produce non-marketing communication design material for public space, through an examination of current practice. The following sentence is from my submission for my first review of candidature:

Investigating new zones for non-commercial communication design within the public domain.

It was seen that other designers’ previous work, aimed at the non-commercial benefit of public space, had been unable to compete with the proliferation of marketing material. Perhaps there were other forms and/or “zones” which this material could take and thus become more effective.

The impetus at this early stage of the research was a belief that public communication design material did not have to be marketing-based. It could, alternatively, provide relief from the advertising material that fills public space and act with the interests of its viewers at its core, rather than the interests of the authors.

Later, it was realised through practice that the important focus of the research was not the design artefacts, systems or forms themselves, but the community within which that material is produced, and the community within which the designer practices. It is the community which inhabits the public space. It is the community which is impacted upon by the communication design within public space. Rather than look to new forms or zones through which communication design might occupy public space, it was seen that what was critical to maintain was a mindfulness towards the community within which design was practiced.

Thus community came to be placed at the centre of the research and with that the ability of a designer to facilitate and articulate community. The artefacts and systems are still important but the key issue was no longer focused on finding a new form or zone in which to produce design work, it was on working within the community and providing designed materials which allowed those communities to have expression.

Review of existing work

This research commenced through an examination of the designed material which inhabits public space. This focus was aimed at exploring techniques through which designed material and the practice of designing itself might impact positively rather than negatively on the community within which that design is practiced.

I reviewed other designers work which had been developed for public space and had clear aims to benefit the community within which it was placed. This was done to gain an understanding of what had already been tried. At this stage of the research I aimed to develop material (and specifically the form of that material) which was innovatory within public space and provided greater benefit than the work that had already been done.

The majority of designed artefacts and systems in public space are advertising. They are designed to provoke the people that inhabit that space to react, to buy, to acknowledge, to register, to meditate upon. Other forms are information-based and advise when to do and when not to do. They warn and chastise, direct and shepherd us away from danger or anarchy.
At the time when this research was commenced the Australian government had begun its anti-terrorist initiatives. This included public space campaigns featuring billboards with free-call numbers for reporting suspicious activities. This material, although commonplace today, was provocative and alarming at the time. It revealed Australia as a place to be suspicious and fearful of the other. Although not marketing as such, this example still uses the same language.

Most of the material I surveyed which was designed to benefit the community appeared to operate similarly to advertising or information design. The message was different but the form (and the language of communication) was similar. I started to think that the language of the work, the dialectic form of the design, was an important issue. How might designers work in a different way within public space, to support and encourage rather than to cajole and berate, to make space for other voices rather than use the authoritative “visual loud-hailer” form available through billboard and poster.

During this early stage I imagined the possibility of creating a visual space within the public space which allowed some relief from the constant media barrage, billboards which had nothing on them, or images of nature, or writing and “happy snaps” from the local shoe factory workers. What would I be trying to say with this work? Why was it appropriate to develop this dialogue in public space?

Public space is our shared space, it is the space we all have to inhabit in some way. It is also a space we cannot control. We are forced to engage with public space as it is. I felt that this space was a critical space and was a space where the responsibilities of the designer were critical.

The work of design in public space was the work of design which affected everyone, whether they wanted to be affected or not, whether they chose to be involved or not. The critical importance of this space for the health of our communities made obvious the need for public space design to address its responsibilities.

Projects

As interventions my first projects were low-impact and tentative. The projects were often ideas rather than actions, they were exploratory, tentative investigations, experimenting on the fringe of public space.

One of these early minor projects was not an actual intervention at all. It occurred virtually, through photo-composition. As I explained briefly in the projects overview during the early part of our research we were encouraged to complete a manifesto. Initially I was reluctant as I felt that manifesto’s were antithetical to my practice. They were by nature polemic, they were provocative and spoke from a position of knowing better. I was far more interested in allowing for a multiplicity of voices. However, I did complete the task, with the thought that because it was difficult it was probably worth doing. Here is that text:
what if design could...
- reveal meaning in data
- reveal knowledge in information
- reveal connections and complexities

maybe we should try to...
- reflect complex ideas and ideals
- create avenues for creativity
- translate ideas and concepts
- create communication and discussion

is there a need to...
- simplify and elucidate
- create connections
- allow multiple visions

could we...
- protect languages of meaning
- encourage a democracy of forms
- explore new forms
- create forms which discuss ideas

It was pointed out to me that my manifesto might have a few problems. Firstly, it was internally contradictory because I asked for design to both simplify and reveal complexity. Secondly, there was nothing particularly polemical about it. “What if” is hardly “We, the undersigned believe...”. In retrospect I find it satisfying that it has both those flaws. It seems to create the right type of manifesto for this research.

I took the manifesto text, went out at night, and photographed a series of “medialites”, the illuminated advertising signs at tram and bus stops. The photographs were clearly evocative of an empty, sleeping community. They had the melancholy of a pedestrian crossing sounding off in the middle of the night: bip bip bip bip bip. I photo-composited out the existing adverts and replaced them with my manifesto. I put myself into the community. I experienced the result of that extension, that self-expression, virtually and quietly. Looking at the resulting video, it became obvious that it was not necessary to go and physically enact this project. In putting my manifesto into that (virtual) public space, I had replaced the single-sided conversation of the marketing material, with my own single-sided statement. The fact that the text might be contradictory was the most interesting and promising thing about it. There was no longer any need to go down that path of high profile public interventions. The medialite medium itself prescribed a language of authority, undermining my aim for a supportive, facilitative language in public space.

Consequently I realised I needed to situate public space within this research a little differently, as public space created by the community, rather than merely inhabited by that community, and as space which affects the community while the community affects it. There’s no doubt that visual artefacts in public space affect the community, but does the community have the chance to have affect upon the visual artefacts in that space?

Community is formed through communication. We, as visual communicators, previously called ourselves graphic designers: we are now trying on the title “communication designer”.

COMMUNITY
What is community (for this research)?

Diethelm (2006, p1) talks of the “intentional field” in the design process;

Designing defined as a telic, conditioned and situated social process in an intentional field... Designing cognized as a four-phase, goal-oriented, valuing process in intentional space: Attending to..., Intending toward..., Forming out of..., Meaning in experience. The widened semantic of meaning; The field metaphor strategy for representing designing as contextually conditioned and situated.

What Diethelm attempts to communicate is a redefinition of the focus of design. It is a loose definition but it resonates with the concerns and the findings of this research. Within his model the context of the design practice is dominant. It is not a problem/solution model but rather the shifting goals are defined by the context and they are “moved towards”; we have intention in the process and we “intend toward” – quite different from “What's the problem? Let’s fix it!”

Diethelm's model supports multiple agenda, agencies and motivations. It places the experience of the design process for all parties involved as an important part of that process. It is a holistic view of design practice and necessitates the design process situating itself firmly within the “intentional field” rather than outside looking in.

Reading Diethelm’s paper helped me to understand that the community within which design was produced and enacted was a part of this “intentional field”; that the community in focus is defined by this intentional field. The act of designing itself, the initiation of the design process, creates the intentional field. This in turn defines the community of intent. The community is defined by the focus of the work. It is the people involved in the design process: the designer, the client, the production people as well as the people who will use or view or engage with the designed work.

In this way each of the sub-projects within this research has had a different community. Those communities have been defined by the focus of the design project, the intentional field. With some of the projects that make up this research, and to varying degrees, communities are created through the design process. Dear John screensaver is an example of this. Alternatively, communities are formed and focused through the work, as in the Clauscen Street Party project.

A social and political rhetoric

When we design, when we create an artefact, we articulate a politic and a culture. The designer's work forms a rhetoric or narration which describes a particular world-view. This communication is over and above the superficial message. All work, in this way, communicates multiple meanings beyond a pragmatic intention. Countless cultural critics, beginning in earnest with Judith Williamson and her critical writings on the texts of advertising (cite), have discussed the codified messages sent through society via the proliferation of advertising material.

It follows that if we design from outside a community, and insert work back into that community, we impose an external and disconnected world-view into that community. Simultaneously, since the community we are affecting is not our own, we disconnect ourselves from the governing motivation of having a vested interest in the longevity and health of that community.

Design work in public space has effect. This project attempts to be mindful of that effect
and seeks to produce work which can act in the interests of the community. At its core this project is about facilitating the articulation of the individual through communication design, and through the individual, the community.

**Designs on the community**

A common discourse within communication design is the efficacy of communication strategies. How do we as designers optimise our impact upon the action of the community? This research takes a different viewpoint. It is concerned not with us having more effect, or creating greater penetration of the market, but instead with what that effect is. How do the communication strategies operate within the community and how are they able to facilitate the articulation of that community?

A useful example is Bill Gaver’s work with “cultural probes”. His work was ground-breaking in its use of playful material items to communicate with a target community. His team used the probes to open up a conversation with that community of intent.

> we suggested the approach was valuable in inspiring design ideas for technologies that could enrich people’s lives in new and pleasurable ways. Gaver (2004, p1)

However, his novel research method received strong exposure and was taken up as an analytical tool aimed at achieving a verifiable collection of data about the community (“under examination” as opposed to “in conversation”). His paper rejects this “scientific” use of the “cultural probes”, saying that the method was never intended to produce such analytical results and that the attempt to “rationalize the probes” is missing the point.

> The Probes .... produce a dialectic between the volunteers and ourselves: On the one hand, the returns are inescapably the products of people different from us, constantly confronting us with other physical, conceptual, and emotional realities. On the other hand, the returns are layered with influence, ambiguity and indirection, demanding that we see the volunteers through ourselves to make any sense. This tension creates exactly the situation we believe is valuable for design, providing new perspectives that can constrain and open design ideas, while explicitly maintaining room for our own interests, understandings, and preferences. Gaver (2004, p6)

I would go further than Gaver’s criticism and say that the use of the “probes” to create analytical data is fraught with danger, being essentially an aggressive act. It allows the designer to treat the community as an object under the gaze of scientific research, then to take away raw data and use it to act on the community from the position of knowing. It reverses the intention of Gaver, changing the role of designer from having a conversation with the community of intent to that of analysing generated responses. As Gaver puts it:

- Analyses are often used as mediating representations for raw data: they blunt the contact that designers can have with users through Probe returns.

- Seeking for justifiable accounts of Probe returns constrains the imaginative engagement and story-telling which can be most useful for design. Gaver (2004, p7)

With this research I have endeavoured, like Gaver, to work “with” and “in” the communities of intent rather than “on” or “at” them. During the research I have come to understand that it is this way of designing which is core to the proposition rather than a particular form or media.
Designs with the community

The Dear John screensaver project created a space which a community could coalesce around. Dear John was a group project with design colleagues produced before the 2004 federal election. Together we applied various strategies, in line with our own personal research agendas, to help activate the youth vote for this critical election.

I used Josie Ryan’s political dingbats to design an environment within which one could have one’s say to a representation of Australia’s political leader, John Howard, as an animated rat. It gave people, in a small way, a voice. They could articulate their concerns. I hoped it would have the effect of slightly mitigating the sense of stunted free speech which was prevalent at the time. The screensaver was a successful download but not many people took up the opportunity of adding their own voice to the mix.

The Dear John screensaver project was an exciting breakthrough in this research. I realised that while I had been writing about and discussing community facilitation, I had also been making it. The screensaver created a form which was possible to be used by a community, for a community. It was a designed artefact aimed at facilitating community. As the comments were updated they appeared on each and every copy of the screensaver in different homes and offices simultaneously. It was a chat room but it was a screensaver. It was prescriptive in it’s design, and was criticised as such, but it would have been quite possible for someone to have weighed in on the side of the rat had they wanted to.

The fact that most people who downloaded the screensaver did not send in comments was interesting. It led me to think about open, participative systems. It seems that the less prescriptive a system is, the less fixed the rhetoric of an artefact is, the less people will choose to be actively involved. Returning to the efficacy point above, this work is not aimed at influencing and affecting the greatest number of people for the greatest amount of time. It is an open opt-in scenario, and it is not laid out clearly for all to see.

This nature of non-narrative, non-prescriptive systems was made clear through a later project. Fashion City was completed as a group project, part of the 2006 Melbourne L’Oreal Fashion Festival. I was instrumental in defining the form of the digital component of this project as well as the physical banners used for display. We produced a system which allowed images to be thematically tagged (“new”, “pink”, “grand”, “shiny”, etc) and uploaded. The programmatic system concatenated layers of the input and produced continually updating, infinitely variable, streams of vision. Keith Deverell was responsible for the beautiful coding that went into making this happen. For me, seeing this system take off for the first time was sublime. It mixed and mashed the database of images, influences and subtleties together, taking it beyond the designers control, taking it beyond anyone’s control. It reflected back our combined intentions and focuses and yet produced the new.

Fashion City, however, forced me to reflect on the fact that one cannot assume an audience will participate in a project because it is an interesting project. The public are not looking for an opportunity to participate in an oblique strategy which re-interprets the city as fashion. They are not going to flock to participate. As a designer one might put in strategies to coerce them or alternatively accept that whatever does happen, happens. I enjoyed the fact that Fashion City was low-key. I enjoyed the liaison with people at Federation Square, the contradiction between their interpretation of Fashion and Design and the work we actually produced. It was incredibly liberating and enjoyable to not be the autocratic designer, to release authorship and be able to participate oneself.
The Fashion City project taught me about working collaboratively and gave me the delightful feeling of creating something together with others that is slightly out of control, that takes ones work and re-presents it back, changed, surprising, interesting and generative.

Fashion City re-iterated the point made by the Dear John Screensaver, that a non-prescriptive, non-narrative project will have difficulty attracting a captive audience. The above examples were projects where I, the designer, created (or collaborated to create) a system for a target audience. The outcomes existed in public space but attempted to allow communities some level of self-articulation and expression through their form. After several iterations of this sort of project I thought about my role as a designer. Where did I sit, what was I trying to achieve, and where did I fit in the audience? Fashion City was my first project where I became part of the audience. The system took my work and re-fashioned it, represented it back to me. As a result I enjoyed it immensely. It was, but was not, my work anymore. My work had been altered by the activity of the designed artefact itself. This seemed a promising development.

The community and the designer - the meaning of practice

In late 2001 I began working as designer on the project “Tramjatra”, under the umbrella project of “tramtactic”. This was my first contact with Mick Douglas, the artist behind this project. Mick has since become an important collaborator in my design practice, as well as a good friend. He has been working on the tramtactic projects for over 10 years. The Tramjatra project was a cultural exchange between Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) and Melbourne, based around the two cities’ connection through tramways.

Douglas’ tramtactic project has continued in tandem with this research. It has provided me with the opportunity to complete some core projects for the research and examine and develop the research issues and questions. The tramtactic project is about community. It is about creating networks through the vehicle of the tram and tramways, and about cross-cultural networks of imagination and communication. For the last six years it has frequently been my role to give visual form to these networks. The tramtactic project has introduced me to new ways of thinking about design and design research. The project continues with the launch of the Tramjatra book, the shared lung project, the W-11 project and the design of the Tramjatra and W-11 websites.

The tramtactic projects and the artefacts and systems that I have designed for them have been critical in allowing me to pursue the concerns of this research project. They have allowed me to ask, and forced me to answer, What is community? What is engagement? and how might one facilitate community as a designer?

An example of this direct influence on my research, was the experience of travelling to India, to both launch the Tramjatra book and participate in the “shared lung” project. The Tramjatra book is a collection of essays, writing and imagery documenting the Tramjatra project, giving it a contemporary presence and a movement into the future. The book was launched in Kolkata in October 2005.

There was a moment on one of the trams in Kolkata, clanking along the uneven tracks, hot, sweaty, and not really knowing where I was going or what I was even doing there, when it occurred to me that this was what my research was about. Later I described myself in an email as an “embedded” designer - like a journalist sent to the front and getting dirty with the troops. In hindsight I realised it was not so much embedded as involved, being there, on
the ground, being accountable, and having to explain to the tram conductor, without benefit even of a shared language, what that Tramjatra book was about and why I had designed it in the way that I had.

I was shocked landing in India. My immediate reaction was that the Tramjatra book design was antithetical to Kolkata. The design was cool and based on a grid system of knowing and order, whereas this city and culture seemed to teeter on the verge of anarchy. Later, after seeing the book in action and using it myself on the tramways, I realised that the design did make sense. Seeing the book, not in a bookshop or a design annual, but being chucked around a tram as a talking point and a means to engage and start a conversation – a conversation about contradiction and East-West politics.

The book started working as a design. The artefact came alive. I realised that, although we had made good design decisions (for example the size of the book; it fitted into your hand, you could still hold onto the book and, simultaneously, a swaying, jolting tram), the material design was not the most important thing. The artefact was and at the same time was not, important. What was most important was what the artefact facilitated. This seems obvious now, but it was only being on the tram, suddenly seeing the book “in action”, or at the launch at the Calcutta Club, seeing Mick use the book as a catalyst for discussion, seeing the Bengali literary community, and the CTC (Calcutta Tram Company) community, and the Kolkata political community all using the book as a catalyst for opening up discussion and debate and communication. All of it together, making community. This, it became clear to me, was what my design work, and the work of this research project, was about.

… is not the work of the designer, at its best, nearer to the impulse that motivates the gift giver who gives out of love than to the huckster who provides the market with another “substitute” object? and is this not because objects work not only possessively, for the individual subject who owns them, but also dialogically, that is, between subjects, working at once to aid subjects materially in how they live but working also as a means of establishing concrete relations with the other? Dilnot (1993, p55)
What is our role as designers? What do we do when we design?

Design seems to be a rather difficult thing to analyse. As this research progressed, it has become apparent that designers are not always aware of what they do. This has been revealed largely through reflection on my own practice and through conversation and regular presentations with peers, colleagues and students. Designers often use flow charts and diagrams to describe their design process to others. They atomise the process into logical steps. These methods of description and analysis often tend to obfuscate the reality rather than reveal it. They appear to be provided to re-assure the design administrator, or the commissioning agent.

In this chapter I will use three projects; Lost and Found, Clauscen Street Party and W-11, to discuss the role of the designer. This research has not revealed a definitive truth about the designer’s role but it has revealed what is perhaps a more useful and sustainable model, for describing that role.

The designer can be seen as an agent in the process and effect of design. Designers act to create change. Predominantly they are initially activated by a third party, the client. Designers have historically seen their role as that of mastering the material and using that mastery to produce the required communicative items. If we step back from this reductive view we see that, with a mastery of material production, designers acquire an extended agency in the community. We also see that with this extended agency comes responsibility and an activation of ones social contract.

This shift in perspective activates the role of the designer in two ways: firstly, it makes our role political because we are forced to take responsibility for the results of our labours; secondly, it puts us, as designers, into the process, necessitating an engagement within the “intentional field”.

Design responsibility

Clearly, as soon as a notion of what it is to be a designer is sought to be transformed into an ethical agency, the pre-existing identity of what it is to be a designer, becomes an object of self-contestation for the designing identity.

This contestation is fundamental. It is not about being hip or cool; nor is it about being seen as creative or being a problem solver. It is not about the objects and images associated with one’s name nor about having articles written about oneself in glossy magazines. Rather it is about something profoundly unfashionable. It is about being serious.

To become an ethical designer means to become accountable to Being by what one brings into being. And such accountability brings the very essence of an identity based on ‘creativity’ into question. In fact it inverts the designer’s relations to creation. Fry (2006)

We are responsible for our actions. As designers we have an extended agency. The very act of merely transposing ideas into print gives those ideas greater power to influence and create change. Through adept design we can manipulate text and image to generate the appearance of truth. Fry’s statement above argues for the recognition of the accountability of the designer. It also suggests that ethical design practice comes with an engagement in the process of Being. This promises not only an ethical practice, but a connected and holistic
design practice, situated in context and giving voice to the community it is part of. In this way his statement is not only a call to realise the full extent of what ethical design might mean, it also indicates a way in which design might become a more meaningful and relevant profession within the community.

Designers have a history of keeping apart from the issues tied up in their work. It is a strategy which belittles what we do. We become the applicators of surface treatment to finished narratives. It defines our work as a mediocre task, more suitable to machine algorithm. To take back ownership of design practice, to make it a sustainable professional occupation, we must accept the responsibility that goes with it. We must become involved holistically with the work that we do.

We need to be active in the work we do, to be part of that work, willing to accept the fact that we have done it, and willing to take responsibility for our part in it. There will be mistakes and compromises. That is human and is part of living within a community. It is the stance of denying responsibility, pretending not to be part of what we do, that is problematic. This creates the tension between our desire to have material effect upon the world, and the desire to disregard the effect of that material on others or to be responsible for those effects.

**Lost and Found project**

As described in the Project Overview, the Lost and Found project took place in the public gallery of the Melbourne Town Hall. The City Gallery is aimed towards the community of Melbourne. It attempts to provide an exhibition programme that has something to offer to anyone who wanders in off the street.

The City Gallery commissioned artists Neil Thomas and Katy Bowman to create an exhibition for this gallery. Their work together, as “the Museum of Modern Oddities”, involves the weaving of fact and fiction around mnemonic material objects already infused with a nostalgic and communicative impact through their connection to history and culture.

I was commissioned by the artists to design the programme for the exhibition and was involved in conversations with the artists while they planned the exhibition. In this way the programme became a part of that exhibition. I became attuned to the artists discourse, taking part in the conversations from which the work of the show was generated. It was an holistic role for me as designer, and as such, uncomfortable at times. I was involved in the decision making process and saw the machinations of the artists as they discussed what should and shouldn’t be included in the work.

In the past my practice had more frequently been the traditional graphic design practice: take the commission, wait for the material to come in and complete the job. With the Lost and Found project I was involved in the creation of that material. I could not say to the client “come back to me when the copy is finalised”. The job forced me to take a greater role than that. In so doing it started to bring me to an understanding of my agency as a designer. I was there to be part of the discussion and to articulate that discussion into a communication design form.

We shot a “faux” fashion shoot and combined it with images from the Melbourne Town Hall picture archive. The artists composed texts around, between and beside those images. The images were placed onto a series of cards, loosely held together in a deck or collection. The
texts were not explanatory. They had the form of captions or explanatory texts, but they were disconnected. They contained apocryphal stories and references to things which didn’t exist. This disjunction belied the authority of their form and in so doing (it was hoped), transferred that questioning across to other public narratives.

It was a political exhibition. The programme was a political act, albeit a gentle one. Nevertheless the work was an attempt to undermine public assumptions of authority and cause people to question their dependency on public powers to create meaning and value. The whole project belied the credibility and power of print to inform and elucidate us. The cards were non-information, non-informative. They were imaginary mnemonics, designed to trigger memories and connections without needing to have an established provenance. The cards relied on a collective memory to create meaning and emotional engagement.

The materiality of “the Museum of Modern Oddities” shows is crucial. Some items are available to be felt and passed from hand to hand, some of the more ubiquitous items are placed behind glass to reverse their common-ness. My direct experience of the artists work developed my thinking about the power and play of narrative and the way that this play can bring pleasure and enjoyment to people, and how the power of connection can be summoned up around an artefact.

A further aspect of this project was the inclusion of an audience response card. This card could be filled in with either a “lost” or a “found” item. It was interesting discussing this with Neil Thomas. He mentioned that he had already tried this sort of thing and that people tend to write in whatever they are encouraged to write. He was quite cynical about it as a technique for drawing people in and engaging them. He felt that it was not that interesting because one was coaxing the reaction that one required out of the audience. We did however go ahead and make the interactive cards, and they were filled in, some with some quite poignant messages and statements. This feedback mechanism and invitation to participate held some of the same aspects as the Stairwell Series project. In comparison, however, Lost and Found was a controlled situation. The cards were generally filled in on location at the gallery, and the response mechanism was far more prescriptive, asking for certain types of comment: a name, a date, etc. Was this an effective method to facilitate community engagement?

I was personally part of this project until the launch, when the artists took it away with their performance. Some days later I went back into the gallery to document the work and had a conversation with one of the viewers/participants. She said that she had the programme as separate cards up on her wall and her mother did too. She said she liked the card with the man who had his foot in the gutter. Her mother had a different favourite. I was pleased to hear that this project was being reconfigured by the public, that the work had the capacity to be colonised by the viewer, that it was flexible enough to create multiple stories (like the artists work). The graphic voice was no longer an authority, it was more like a voice in a conversation, putting forward possibilities and ideas. Others were using the cards, attaching onto those ideas and making them their own. I was excited by the fact that the programme had been dismantled. Parts had been rejected, parts accepted and it had been reconfigured visually to take a place in someone’s home. The mnemonic device of the card thus became attuned to the individual collector.

There is also an element of gameplay built into the programme through the use of the card form. It allows a shuffling and a random access, and a tarot-like laying out and revealing of the cards. These interactions create connections between card user and fellow user.

Although the work of Lost and Found was political, it was reconfigurable by the audience. It existed within the “intentional field” as an impetus. It was not fixed or finished, it was only a
starting point. As such, through both its form and the process of its design, it reflected the
politic of the artists and the exhibition. It involved me, the designer, in the project completely,
from my conversations with the artists through to my discussion and involvement with the
recipients of the work. I was forced to take responsibility for that work. I didn’t write the text
but I was involved in those discussions. I was part of that process. I couldn’t just walk away.

**Designer and process; Clauscen Street Party**

Above I discuss how the Lost and Found project allowed me to become part of the complete
design process. Another project that illuminated this aspect of my research was the Clauscen
Street Party. I didn’t intend this project to become part of this research. I didn’t even know it
was a project. However it happened and the knowledge gained through it is too important
not to discuss here.

I became involved in my local community’s street party. The party had no particular reason to
happen. Some residents remembered having a street party years ago, and a new family had
moved in across the street. I attended a meeting and took on the role of games organiser. I
also made a series of signs and an invitation for the party. The signs and the invitations were
not particularly interesting and seemed rigid and out of context on a sunny afternoon with
kids, beers and water bombs. The games, however, did work, and made a few suggestions
to me.

They were very simple and inexpensive games. I spent time considering which games could
work and making the equipment needed. I bought chunky chalk for the target game and
made ”kid-friendly” throwing bags for both the target and the coconut shy. The cans were
discarded tin cans which I collected and painted different colours.

The street party required a lot of organisation including permits to close the street, liability
insurance and the delegation of jobs. On the day however it was a pretty relaxed affair, with
a low sun in the afternoon and people sitting around talking, eating and drinking. The games
proved remarkably effective, especially with the children. An additional feature quickly became
quite obvious: the cans were very noisy, so much so that you could hardly hear the mayor’s
speech for the sound of them crashing in the background.

This event and my part in it made clear to me how minor one’s intervention as a designer can
be and yet have a strong effect. It demonstrated how such a ”light” system – coloured cans
and throwing bags – can prove remarkably effective. People will make it their own, take it up,
reconfigure it and discover hidden elements which the designer did not know were there.
The designed system provides a focus point around which an expression of community can
coalesce and be articulated. It is through being part of the public space that this is made
possible. It is in the engagement with the ”intentional field” that the designing process
becomes a process of community facilitation.

It was through my engagement with Clauscen Street Party that these aspects of design started
to reveal themselves in this research. A reading which has proved useful since that time is
Anne-Marie Willis’ paper on Ontological Designing:

*Ontological designing, then, is (i) a hermeneutics of design concerned with the nature
and of the agency of design, which understands design as a subject-decentred practice,
acknowledging that things as well as people design, and following on from this, (ii) an
argument for particular ways of going about design activity, especially in the contemporary
context of ecological unsustainability. This leads to a further implication: the theory of
ontological designing carries with it a politics. Willis (2006)*
Willis reveals, through her paper, a different approach to design than that commonly used in the communication design discipline. She puts forward the idea of the designed artefact itself having agency, and, consequently, the inherently political nature of the activity through which this artefact is created.

**Design agency**

While the agency of the designer is manifold, the designed artefact or system itself has agency of its own which, in its turn, affects both the audience and the designer. A focus on the material item itself disregards agency, instead focusing on aesthetics and/or functionality. These are important aspects of the process of design but I would argue that to privilege them above all else is to miss out on the importance of design, and to regard design as simply an instrumentalist activity. It is patently more than that. Most importantly, perhaps, this view allows designers, and the practice of design, to imagine that their work is disconnected from the responsibilities of practice.

To the degree that a meta-narrative of spirituality is articulated as a discourse on human purpose, it can enable technologists and designers to make decisions about what research directions to pursue and what to design... the more a designer or an engineer can conceive of a user as a person of depth and worth, the more likely he or she is to design a valuable product. Design, understood in a deeper sense, is a service. It generates the products that we require to live our lives. Margolin (2002, p119)

**W-11 project**

W-11 is the most recent project described in this submission. It is another project under the tramtatic banner of artist Mick Douglas. He invited a group of bus decorators from Pakistan to Melbourne to decorate a tram on the City Circle route for the 2006 Commonwealth Games. The City Circle route circumnavigates the CBD and provides a free transport and a sightseeing ride, mostly to tourists, but also to locals in the evenings.

The bus decorators, Iqbal and his co-workers, were used to decorating the private buses which run on the W-11 public transport line through the city of Karachi. They use reflective vinyl which they hand cut and layer together with beaten sheet stainless steel to form a dense, incredibly decorative surface. This along with flashing LED lights and pulsing bangra music allows the Karachi buses to compete with one another for customers.

The bus decorators covered a Melbourne tram, inside and out, with a similar visual overload of pattern and colour. This tram ran the City Circle route during the commonwealth games in early 2006 and more recently over the summer of 2006/2007.

I created communication design artefacts to go with the event. A programme and timetable, a series of “tickets” and a website, where the public could comment on the event. For my research the most important part of this work was the tickets which created an excuse for interaction between the “tram conductors” and the travellers. They allowed travellers to take home a piece of the decoration. They were collectable and thus reconfigurable.

The programme I designed also had interesting aspects. The layout itself was an exercise in East meets West, the visual splendour of the outside contrasting with the gridded timetable inside. During the extremely tight production schedule I received a call from the printer. The work was
over-saturated, there was too much colour for a four colour press to handle. This seemed like the poetically inevitable hiccup for a project working within this context and content.

For me as practitioner/researcher, this particular communication design artefact came into its own when it was re-purposed, during the dancing, to beat against the tram with the bangra rhythm or as a fan to cool a humid summer night.

The W-11 cards found inspiration in Roberto D’Andrea, a collaborator with Mick Douglas on the tramtactic projects, and an ex-tram conductor. He used tickets when we travelled on the trams in Kolkata to create and connect with his audience and to engage people in conversation. The collectability of tickets and their multiplicity creates an extended communication and allows a lightness of contact and engagement. The device provides for an "opt-in/opt-out" engagement and consequently sits lightly in interpersonal space.

The cards are a non-prescriptive system on a boundary between gift exchange and communication. The only "call to action" they contain is the URL for the W-11 website. There are a series of twenty different cards. One side has a framed section of the tram decoration – peacocks, paisley-esque curlicues, the cockatoo of love. The other has a poetic line in Urdu script.

The cards provide opportunities for connection, play, reflection and conversation. They are prompts or sometime catalysts around which the conversation that is the space of the tram can take place. They are graphic placeholders or placemakers which aim to provide, through gift exchange and gesture, a connectivity between the travellers, possibly enabling community to coalesce.

The application of the research

The three projects detailed in this chapter have helped to clarify a range of issues in this research. They indicate the value of designing from within the context of a project and its intentional field and they indicate the agency with which the communication designer is endowed, and the responsibilities of exercising that agency. They also have started to outline the model for a communication design practice that is situated in the community within which it practices. The understanding gained from the Lost and Found and Clauscen Street Party projects fed into the W-11 project. They suggested the project materials be approached with a light touch, rather than a heavy handed prescription of outcomes and response. They suggested the design of communication design artefacts that facilitated and encouraged the building of community through their physical form and the rhetoric contained within them. Other devices and techniques used on individual projects throughout this research were applied in the W-11 project, these included the feedback mechanism of the website/blog, the cards, as items of collection and connection, the openness of the communication rhetoric and the gameplay and reconfigurability allowed for in the artefacts. All these components were used to facilitate and communicate a project that allowed for much needed cultural communication and social connection in the post-September 2001 era of growing fear and distrust in the other.
FEAR AND KNOWLEDGE
Knowledge is the antidote to fear said Ralph Waldo Emerson. This chapter examines his frequently used maxim in relation to the practice of communication design, and to a particular communication design project. Using his statement as a starting point I ask the question, ‘What is it designers fear?’ and further to this, ‘In finding an antidote to fear, what may designers lose?’ I make the proposition that, for some design projects, in certain design situations, we might be better served if we turn Emerson’s original statement around to become Fear is the antidote to knowledge.

I propose that when designing from a position of secure knowing, one is in danger of obviating the opportunity to learn. If we know what we know, and we know that we know, we are encouraged to act only on the basis of that knowledge. Our secure knowledge defines a pathway for action; it sets up our expectations as designers and allows us to control the responses to the work. In the security of that knowledge we no longer need to question our assumptions. We can proceed into the future guilelessly, guiltlessly and confidently. Conversely, if we are to actually find new knowledge, knowledge we don’t already know, we may need to allow ourselves to remain a little fearful and to proceed with a degree of unknowing.

This chapter discusses the case study of a disastrous project in order to lead the analysis of the above proposition. This particular project was a disaster in terms of fulfilling the designers’ intentions. It led from disaster to disorder and thence to discourse. It was through discourse that disorder and disaster came to be revealed as creative forces, forces capable of producing new knowledge and revealing new lines of inquiry.

Knowledge and fear

It is implicit within Emerson’s statement that fear itself is a negative, that it is better to be without fear, that we all desire the removal of fear. The technique for that removal, an antidote in this case, is knowledge. We are assured that through the gaining of knowledge we can remove fear. Antidotes generally remove poison, thus fear is cast in the role of a poison, reducing our capacity to have agency in the world and manifest our will. Knowledge is providing an antidote to that fear, removing it from our bodies and minds and freeing us to take action.

Designing also produces some new knowing on the part of a designer; there is a moment in the process where something is new to the designer – a new insight, an understanding of how to achieve a desired end, a satisfying arrangement of elements. If remembered or recorded, this moment of knowing starts on the path to becoming collective knowledge. Downton (2003, p.95)

Where does the knowledge come from to which Emerson refers? It is not clear from his statement. Knowledge might come from a number of different avenues: from an established canon, from personal experience in our practice or in our lives, from a mentor or a colleague.

Where does fear come from? We are born with fear. When we are children we often fear the dark, we want the light on, the light allows us to look around our bedroom and be reassured that there is nothing lurking in the corner. The light dispels those shadowy uncertainties and brings clarity and certainty to the situation. The fear is forgotten and we feel safe – safe; comfortable, without danger or risk. It feels good to remove this fear. It allows us to relax and to sleep.
However, it is clear that fear is not always a bad thing. It is a fundamental emotion and acts as a governor, protecting us from being too foolhardy, impulsive or overconfident. Fear of the consequences mediates the actions we take. We become aware of the conditions around us and mindful of “what might happen if”. Fear of social consequences often leads us to think of the other and of the events that might unfold if we were to take action without forethought.

Fear can be dispelled through knowledge, there is no doubt about that. Fear of the other dissipates when we gain knowledge of that other and come to understand that the other is not so very “other”. Fear of falling can be removed by the demonstration of the strength of the support that has been put in place. Fear of rejection can be removed by communication. We can come to understand the motivations that cause particular events to unfold rather than allow our imaginations (combined with precarious self-confidence) to run away with us and create paranoid fantasies of oppression and lack of equity.

I propose, however, that sometimes, by welcoming a certain lack of knowledge, and allowing a level of uncertainty, we might allow for the unexpected to happen. We might allow room for the unknown within a project to take place, or we might allow a project to “run away with us” a little and, in so doing, perhaps learn more than if we were to close all avenues off. It is a consequence of allowing this “unknowing” and “uncertainty” to remain part of a project that a certain level of fear is also present. As Rosenberg (2006) states in a recent paper, it is part and parcel with the nature of design practice that it embraces a difficult relationship with the known:

*Creative practice moves from what is known into what isn’t known; not-yet-known or not-knowable. If academia is to accommodate practice it must accept the uncertain and the unknowable in practice – the non-epistemological dimension of practice. It needs to engage with the movement that is necessary in order to bring into being.*

**Design and fear**

As designers we fear failure. It seems self-explanatory that if a project has not achieved the objective for which it was brought into being, then the project has failed and consequently we have failed as designers. To overcome this fear of failure we attempt to design our projects to reduce the chances of failure and increase the likelihood of a successful result.

It is, of course, not possible to remove all risk of failure. However, it is as we become more and more systematized in our design practice and put in place risk management systems that we can start to reduce the chance of failure to such a degree that it is negligible.

In doing this is it possible that we, as designers, lose the readiness to accept the unexpected in practice? I argue, using the Stairwell Series project, that by removing our fear through the antidote of known knowledge we might be taking away the opportunity for a project to generate the new and reveal the unknown. So it is put, rather glibly in the introduction to this chapter, that we might turn Emerson’s original statement around and say that fear is the antidote to knowledge.
Stairwell Series – the project

This chapter and the propositions put forward in it are inspired by a project named Stairwell Series. I completed this project with a colleague from my postgraduate design research group, Keith Deverell.

The project was produced while attending a conference in Brisbane, a city neither of us knew very well. Both Keith Deverell and I were acting as design researchers; our aim was to experiment and discover. We were both using a practice-led-research methodology.

Research methodology

To undertake to search, and search again, prompts us to challenge our assumptions with a commitment to intensify and better employ the assets at our disposal. The values, interests and effects that unfold through this process are many. Douglas (2004, p1)

Practice-led-research uses the application of practice itself as a research method. It applies the thinking as doing and doing as thinking nature of design to externalise and make material the knowledge which, as designers, we don’t necessarily know that we have. The design work becomes a means of thinking out loud. The work is, in time, critically reflected upon and analysed by both the practitioner/author and the members of the community of practice. The work is later reiterated, re-articulated and re-understood through the further materialising of artefact.

The artefact or system that is produced is an articulation of knowledge, it is the product of the method (the making, the thinking as doing and the doing as thinking) which designers use to articulate and externalise. The work is the bridge between subjectivity and objectivity, the self and the other. The practice involves process, the process is the work and the work allows a designerly research to take place - during the working. It is necessarily pre-literate - it unbinds us from language and allows our designerly sensibilities to open up and do the work that they do best. We can then go back to the work with the benefit of the device of language and reflect upon what we have just done/learnt/articulated.

Project description

We went to Brisbane to be on a discussion panel. The conference organizers indicated that they needed an exhibition for the stairwell. We realised that here was an opportunity for us to put into concrete form some ideas we had been discussing in relation to our research. We created a series of graphic provocations which embodied our shared view of this city we were both strangers to.

The project started with walking and talking and the taking of digital photographs. De Certeau (1984, p.100) talks of walking itself as a compositional act:

There is a rhetoric of walking. The art of ‘turning’ phrases finds an equivalent in an art of composing a path. Like ordinary language, this art implies and combines styles and uses

Before we knew we were going to make anything suitable for the stairwell space, we started taking photos and discussing them. We had recently purchased new digital cameras. We discussed the amazing ability of these cheap compact cameras to capture images in very low levels of light.
At one point we found our path along the river unexpectedly blocked as a new development claimed the waterfront, requiring us to retreat and go around this newly privatised and privileged space.

We came upon a strip of property development offices that promoted their developments with scale models, complete with citizens leaning on balconies and wandering through plazas. These models became real when captured by our cameras.

Scale was removed. The modelled building design was made material simply through processing in the CCD's of our cameras. The blur produced by the low light acted to enhance the reality of the image. Before our eyes the miniature plastic people took on their own stories, became real, had histories and desires. There were more people in the photos we took of the models than in the real streets around us.

Seeing the city through the eye of the camera led us to an abandoned building project, full of signs of activity and the will to create and enact change but devoid of the people it purported to serve.

These photos were an aesthetic response to the activity of walking and looking. The images were produced from the mix of conversation, half formed intent, and the stimulus of being in new surroundings. Our active looking fed off the digital reproduction of that looking, and produced further iterations.

Later that night the photos were reviewed and sorted. We discussed the themes that were revealed and in what form they might be reproduced to start a “conversation” with our audience. We decided on a series of seven A0 black and white laser outputs. These posters had selections of the photographed images, cropped and adjusted, along with clear areas and graphic prompts to encourage viewers to take part in the conversation and add comments.

We encouraged direct response back into the work, adding clear space and providing pencils for viewers to add to the work. We hoped people would view the work and respond, continue the discussion we had started. We created a graphic space within which a community (of conference goers, mostly Brisbane based) might articulate itself, whether it be to that particular space and time, the conference, who they were, the place, or a response to our own response.

Fears

I had fears. I feared that I wasn’t understanding the city correctly. What right had I to start the commentary, and did I know what I was talking about? I didn’t know our audience. How would they read the work? I didn’t really know what we were trying to do. I didn’t know what sort of response we might get – we might get none at all.

We were not in control of the situation. As designers, we had handed over authorial control by inviting others to participate in the making of the work. I had never done this before. We hoped the project would be a success, but the environment (the stairwell, the conference club, the city of Brisbane) was unknown to us. We did not have the knowledge to control or predict it. It was one of the first times I had collaborated so completely on a project with another designer. There were a lot of new aspects to this work. I felt fearful, but being in a different town, with different people, at a conference, gave me the ability to live with the fear of failure and the risk of design disaster.
Project intentions

The stairwell series project, unbeknownst to us at the time, was caught in the nexus of current debate on what constitutes design knowledge and how it might be valued academically. Rosenberg (2006, p2) informs this debate in his recent analysis of the pressure for design research to conform to an existing academic model:

_The heart of the Western Knowledge Project is research. The purpose of research is to study the world (the Other), adequate the Other so that it may be understandable/assayable in the court of the Same... and evolve theory through which one gains knowledge and control over the Other. Literally, put the Other in his, her or its place._

Rosenberg criticizes the “Western Knowledge Project” for co-opting research into the task of gaining knowledge for the control of the Other. There is no doubt that in designing the stairwell series we had designerly intention. We captured our response to the city through photography and the posters were the articulation of that response. The formal element of encouraging audience participation was an untried device we felt might illuminate aspects of our research. We hoped that people would read the posters’ themes and respond in kind, continuing the discussion we had started, adding their own points.

It was only in retrospect, upon viewing the response we received, that it became clear to me how strong my designer's intention had been; that I had attempted to prescribe the response; that I had very clear ideas of what I wished to receive back from the audience.

We invited people to view what we had to say and participate in that discussion. We acted as though we were chairing a meeting, or making a documentary: could we get someone to say something interesting about a subject that we find interesting?; could we convince people to enter into the discursive space we have produced and perform for us?

Asking for performance was not our conscious intention. It is only upon reflection that it became obvious how integral it was to the designerly intention. We wanted people to play our game, to respond to our rhetoric, to find our view interesting, perhaps even to learn from the work.

Our rhetoric was one of ‘add your voice to ours’. It appeared to be open, but in reality it was closed. We had already set the tone for the responses. We required people to surrender their own volition and tick our boxes. We would then, as designers, feel exonerated, feel that we had taught people to open their eyes, look at the world around them, and question their assumptions. We were not generous, we were not with our audience, we spoke down to them with our graphic rhetoric.

The posters had narrative. They used graphic rhetoric to convey that narrative. The visual language of Communication Designers generally aims to speak with the rhetoric of knowing. It is this convincing rhetoric of knowing which acts to give a designed communication strength and clarity. The visual narrative appears clear and speaks with authority:

_‘Be quiet,’ says the TV anchorman or the political representative, ‘These are the facts. Here are the data, the circumstances, etc. Therefore you must...’ Narrated reality constantly tells us what must be believed and what must be done. What can you oppose to the facts? You can only give in, and obey what they ‘signify’. Like an oracle, like the oracle of Delphi._

De Certeau (1984, p186)
That this authoritative narrative is a fiction, an argument through montage, is obvious upon analysis, but easily forgotten. It is in reflecting on this project that I started to understand that this designerly rhetoric of knowing can often serve to disallow both connection with audience and with the complexity of the world, both areas which Keith and I were actually attempting to engage.

Response to the project

When we saw the work after it had been added to, it was a shock. I was appalled. Our audience had not played our little game. They had scrawled tags, drawn doodles, written smutty comments, and most annoying to me of all, drawn back in some of the parts of the photos which we had removed.

The audience to our work had “jammed” it; they had rejected our invitation for some self-satisfied pontification about urban renewal and had instead made the work their own. They owned it now, or at least the ownership had become truly shared. They intervened on our neat ideology and co-opted it. Their response was rude and raw, ugly and trashed, vain and provocative, a strong expression of individual egos fully a match for our own egotistical promptings. We had produced an attempt at control, because by inviting participation we had asked people to come under our control. They had rebelled against this attempted control and made their own statements.

It is often the effect of participatory systems that they invite only a certain type of participation. The authors and producers of the work require a certain response. In creating the work, an imagined audience/participant is present in discussion and is required to produce the required response on request. As designers we are pulling the strings, the audience is dancing. This is a closed system. The designers know the response they require, all they wish to do is to receive it. It is not about the audience, it is about us, the authors of the work, and the producers of the communication. It is a single ticket ballot designed to give us a renewed mandate to create and express.

Project as disaster

This project was a disaster in terms of our designerly intentions It did not work. We did not get the response that we were looking for. We failed to achieve the conversation we wanted to facilitate. We were insulted and the work was misconstrued and co-opted. It was a design disaster.

This “disaster”, however, led me to reflect on what had happened. Initially I was shocked and then embarrassed because we had failed, we had been misunderstood and jeered at. Months later it started to reveal itself to me through discourse with my peers, through un-packing of the process and results. In this period the value of the project as practice-led-research started to become apparent and make itself heard.
These aspects of the project and the learning it yielded were not explicit when we put the posters on the wall. We truly felt we were experimenting with communication design work which invited and encouraged the articulation of the community within which it existed. We thought that we were providing an opportunity for people to speak and be heard. The reaction I had when I saw what had been added into our conversation was one of shock, embarrassment and the feeling of being misunderstood and of having failed. It was this reaction that revealed to me the underlying aspects of what we had been trying to achieve.

We were "jammed". Our audience did not react as we asked, deliver what we requested and toe the line. It was, however, to the benefit of our research that our project was a disaster. Once our audience intervened on our neatly designed system the conversation truly started. It was the audience who recognised that we had put forward a facade of consultation and conversation. We had attempted to dispense our ideology through image, while pretending not to.

As a design researcher, this project has been immensely valuable. It has proved a crucial element in my research. It has given me insight that might not have come otherwise. De Certeau (1984, p xii) posits the meaning of cultural production not being in the object itself but in the use of that object by its audience:

The presence and circulation of a representation... tells us nothing about what it is for its users. We must first analyse its manipulation by users who are not its makers. Only then can we gauge the difference or similarity between the production of the image and the secondary production hidden in the process of its utilisation.

 Insights

I have discussed two things in this chapter. First, the knowledge which this project produced, and secondly the reasons the project produced that knowledge.

This project allowed insights into the process of designing for an audience. It brought into question the underlying rhetoric and power-play which is embodied in all designed work. It brought the question of audience, and the rights of that audience into prominence. The project did not provide answers to these questions, rather it made it obvious that these were important considerations to remain mindful of when considering design. As such, it provided an excellent early research tool and led onto further fruitful research.

The reason this project was a valuable research project and a knowledge producing process, was that it was not controlled. We attempted control, but we were on uncertain ground, unknowing of our audience and uncertain of the techniques we used. This uncertainty led to much fear, but due to the lack of time, and the exuberant nature of a conference, we did not remove the fear by proceeding along safer, more well-known routes. The fear and the uncertainty freed the project and allowed it to teach us something. The fear and uncertainty, and the disaster of the project, allowed it to be highly generative as a design research project.

To revisit the initial quote and provocation, it is only because we, as designers, did not have the knowledge to control the outcome, did not know enough to banish our fear of failure, did not know enough to gather the responses we thought we wanted, that the project worked as well as it did. It was through allowing ourselves to go into the unknown, to work without being in total control, that the project functioned fully as a research project, creating new learning and knowledge. It revealed unexpected and unknown prejudices.
on our part. It revealed the dangers of thinking that you know what you are doing while actually doing something else. It revealed the insult of appearing to ask for participation but actually asking for mute agreement. It demonstrated the responsibility of the designer to truly respect the agency of their audience, and not speak for them, or use them. It revealed that design is about the people within which the design process takes place. It revealed that design is about the community within which the design takes effect. It revealed that design is not about the exercising of the designers ego, it is about a conversation. It revealed that the idea of a universal solution or that design is about solutions at all might be outdated and autocratic. It reveals that to design is to be situated in the difficult zone of contradiction, uncertainty and the unknown, and actively remain there.

In design research we may fear disaster. I would argue that it is sometimes in disaster, as it was with this project, that design research starts to be fruitful and to lead to new knowledge, knowledge that we don’t already know.
CONCLUSION
& bibliography
Communication design as a new discipline

Graphic design has changed. The revolution in design caused firstly by the computer and secondly the internet in the early 90s, challenged graphic design and in so doing forced it to review what it actually was and what its value was. In doing so graphic design matured as a practice. No longer is graphic design about how to produce visual material for mechanical reproduction. It has become concerned with the whys and wherefores of the impulse to produce such material and the strategic application of such material to achieve desired ends. It is about strategy, responsibility, and context, and it has started to take itself seriously.

It needed a name change. As a practice it certainly wasn’t limited to designing the “graphic” anymore. This remains a foundation and focus of the discipline but the practice has broadened in many ways, not the least of which is the inclusion of the new media.

Communication design (the new graphic design) has become non-media specific. It is concerned with strategy and tactics, working in culture, being context specific and visually sensitive. It facilitates the materialising of expression and communication. It creates change through effecting changes in the material world. It is the articulation and manifestation of intention. It involves developing a conversation between client and designer and taking that conversation out into the community. It is often a process of education for all parties involved in its process.

There is a danger in this redefinition of practice that communication design can become so broad a discipline, so unfocused and generalist that it becomes about everything in general and nothing in particular. To attempt to define it as a practice a little more narrowly:

- it is predominantly client led, or at least has an socially connected intentional field which drives it;
- it is not generally a “crafting” activity, but is a more materially disconnected “designing” activity;
- it is about communication, it has communication objectives which can be more or less fixed or prescriptive;
- it requires a knowledge and ability to source application technologies and/or media;
- it requires the ability to research to acquire the above-mentioned knowledge, which changes continuously;
- it does not necessarily produce physical artefacts as end outcomes;
- it requires finely developed visual literacy and visualising abilities;
- it requires highly developed typographic sensitivities, the ability to make the materialised word and language as strong and as communicative as they can be;
- it is not generally about self-expression except to achieve a communicative strategy;
- its primary role is the process of mediating the conjunction and communication between the natural and artificial worlds;
- it is a process to create flow and articulation between involved parties in an intentional field, i.e. an event, a book, an exhibit, an idea, a desired change;
- it is a process intended to increase levels of meaning and connection;
- it requires a mindfulness of one’s impact and agency as a designer;
- it is the design of communication.
In an attempt to provide a clear justification for current design pedagogy, many Australian universities are undergoing a transition towards privileging a user-centred design practice. Target audience research and demographic profiling are becoming embedded within the design curriculum at an undergraduate level. This change is largely driven by the increasing need for designers to appear more accountable and better able to demonstrate quantifiable evidence for the efficacy of their design outcomes.

User-centred design aims to create a design practice released from the subjectivity of both the designers’ wants and clients’ perceived needs. Rather it aims through the use of both qualitative and quantitative research, to bring about design outcomes that are objectively effective in achieving the desired impact within the targeted community. This is not immoral. It is, however, amoral. Individual projects may have an agenda of contributing to community, but the methodology remains a behaviourist and reductionist model for “getting the target community to do what we want it to do”. This mode of practice is not politically aligned; left, right, progressive and dictatorial agencies all utilise this model of “acting upon”.

The research presented here attempts to define an alternative option to user-centred design as the predominant model for developing a contemporary communication design practice. As graphic designers we traditionally isolated ourselves from the community within which we practiced. Through this isolation we have strived to develop a rarified environment of “good design” within which we might incubate better and better design – more refined, more innovative, more effective.

I would argue that in isolating ourselves from the community within which we practice, we, as communication designers, act to cut ourselves off from our context, relevancy and responsibility as producers of material culture. In so doing we prevent our communication design work from having its full relevancy or respect within the community as well as within other design disciplines.

It is only through an authentic connection with context that communication design will mature as a practice. Our most important work as communication designers is to act as a conduit through which the community within which we practice is articulated and reflected in the material world. Our job, as designers, is not to express ourselves. Our self-expression is, of course, inextricably wound up in process, in the experience of that process and in the outcome itself; however, the work is not about us.

Towards an alternative definition for a communication design practice

I have completed a series of projects that both investigate and reveal the questions of this research. As well as refining the research questions these projects illuminate the concerns and values which are the meta-narrative of the inquiry. Although I am nearing the end of this particular research, the exploration and learning have only just begun. The research has provided a foundation for further inquiry. It has started to give me the language and knowledge, the familiarity with the terrain, and the pathways so that I may start to work in this critical area of design understanding and development.

This research is concerned with bringing design back into its community. Its underlying aims are to increase the relevancy and appropriateness of design within communities. It proposes a design practice which engages with the people that the act of designing involves: the community of design, the audience, the users, the producers, the managers, the public...
space and impact of that practice on that place and space. This research wishes to promote a mindfulness of our impact, as designers, on the world around us, maintaining a sympathy with context, situating our practice in the space of intention and remaining there, accepting accountability for our agency, and the effect of our work, in the community.

Due to this connection with community, this proposed design practice necessitates some degree of compromise. It describes design as a conversation. This design conversation includes inefficiency, consensus and the messy, multi-orientated, pluralistic, super-complex process that takes place during the work of design.

The research aims towards a sustainable design practice, not limited to an ecological or economical sustainability, but an holistic view of sustainability. Diethelm (2006, p1) uses the term “attending to...” to describe the space of focus of the design activity. This project looks at that space and proposes a design practice which is holistically connected to the task at hand.

Design has effect. It is powerful. At this moment there are far more studies and energy focused on making design “more effective”. Could this be the legitimisation of a profession with a low self-opinion? I propose re-modeling the designer's role so that it is actually connected to the community that “hosts” it.

The results of this research (the projects and the reflection upon those projects) indicate that a possible future for communication design practice is as a practice situated within the community, rather than as an external force brought to bear upon the community to effect change.

A practice situated outside its community will act by following a universal set of rules and apply to whichever situation it is in. This model of practice denies an accountability with the work produced because as an outsider the designer has no natural vested interest in the effect of the work produced. This disconnected practice also encourages the framing of the designer as an omniscient agent who “knows better” regardless of the particularities of the community within which they have effect. In saying this I am not advocating dispensing with the skill and professionalism of the designer or undermining the value of this skill and professionalism. Designers are incredibly important in facilitating the articulation of community within public space. I am positing, however, that to work in isolation from the community disallows the connection of designer to community and creates a tension between the desire of the designer and the needs of the community.

I propose that through being situated in community a designer’s practice will become accountable and authentic both of which are necessary preconditions for an ethical practice. I would maintain that to continue an ethical practice without a connection to the community of effect is inauthentic and unsustainable.

Conversely, being situated in community allows a practice to have complex connections and references within that community. It creates support and continuity, knowledge and opportunity for reflection. This model of a communication design practice actively fosters the attributes which communication design has lost touch with in an industrialised age.

This research has developed and changed my personal design practice. It has altered the way I approach design work, and the projects that I am involved with. I now approach work in a different way. It is a subtle shift, but the emphasis has moved from creating a solution to a problem or need that a client outlines to one of becoming engaged with the client’s discourse and, through conversation, connecting to the “intentional field”. It requires a personal connection and thus an accountability of action. It is perhaps more difficult and less streamlined or time-efficient but it has the potential to lead to a more fulfilling and sustainable practice.
The projects I am involved with are evolving from the more traditional design briefs which require the application of a design aesthetic to a printed or electronic communication, to the development of a practice where it is more common that a brief involves me holistically with a project's intentions and development. In this developing practice a design project becomes a process of the development of a conversation through which design knowledge becomes attuned and focused, ultimately to be manifest in artefact or system. The material outcome is a product of the conversation. It represents a stage in an unfinished dialogue rather than a final outcome. It externalises and materialises the design conversation and thus allows the conversation to develop further. This model of practice requires a greater engagement with each individual project and disallows the application of a set of predefined rules. This makes it a less time-efficient process but ultimately, I would argue, a more sustainable and professionally and personally satisfying practice.

For me this research has greatly expanded my network of like-minded designers and community of practice groups, allowing me to both articulate and refine the learnings of the research. The findings and propositions of this research have allowed me to engage internationally as an active design research community member. This has led to the development of my practice as design educator and has expanded and developed the dialogue I maintain through that work. I now find myself in a position to propose and trial alternative pedagogies and engage with contemporaries from the forefront of communication design discourse and research.

The research has led to the development of a range of techniques and models for practice that have the potential to help communication design facilitate and articulate community. I have given form to this range of techniques and models in a series of cards. The cards, as artefact, embody the learnings of this research. They externalise and compartmentalise the design process and focus. They have multiple interpretations and allow for reconfiguration by the user. They contain and allow access to design knowledge but they are not a fixed set of rules. They are not didactic methodologies; instead they create “taking-off points” for designers to re-consider the design dialogues within which they find themselves.
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