

not
white

diversity in beginning design education



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Hampton University Department of Architecture

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Studying Difference: A University General Education Course on Diversity and Design

The notion of difference and ‘the other’ is essential to the contemporary study and practice of design. ‘The other’ extends us beyond ourselves into that which we do not know. It is a person-based idea of change. Attempting to understand ‘the other’ (including ‘the other’ within ourselves) is an inherent part of being human—and it is one of our primary asymptotic activities. This drive to know ‘the other’—to see or understand our differences is a subject in many disciplines, particularly in philosophy and psychology. Heidegger proposed that the very idea of communication itself—the exchange of words and signs—presupposes a desire to hear or understand ‘the other’, and that this notion is a fundamental aspect of Being. The encyclopedist Denis Diderot, in his “Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See” introduced us to the idea of ‘the other’ by taking us on an unusual journey of the visual from the rare perspective of the tactile. The psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan introduced the idea of ‘the other’ through his mirror-stage; he argued that the basic structure and nature of difference emerges in that moment when we recognize and identify with our reflection in a mirror for the first time.

Certainly, in our contemporary media, there are many examples of the desire to seek difference and to know ‘the other’—it is one of the basic themes of many books, films, and television series—*Star Trek*, *CatDog*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Edward Scissorhands*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *Elephant Man*, *Tootsie*, *Twin Falls – Idaho*, *Babette’s Feast*, *West Side Story*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*—the list goes on and on.

Despite its popularity in mainstream media, taking on the tasks of seeking difference and knowing ‘the other’ typically is not part of coursework in design education. Most instructors agree that to produce relevant design work, particularly as we move into a more globalized environment, students should have knowledge and understanding about cultures and populations other than our own.

This paper will address the topic of difference in design education and in general university level courses. Specifically, it will examine a course entitled ‘Design and Diversity) that has been offered as a general education course to the students at the University at Buffalo – State University of New York for the past two years. The course focuses on the changing nature of society and examines various types of diversity and their attendant design issues. Specifically, the course concentrates on the ways in which our physical and media environments affect various and, in turn, the ways these populations have affected our visuals, products, and environments. It introduces students to eight areas of cultural difference: race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, physical ability/disability, mental ability/disability, and religious sectarianism. Writings, films, products, graphics, electronic media, buildings and environments that address the issue of difference are examined.

Considering difference can move students (and faculty) out of typical processes in which they often focus on consequences that fit into their own agendas, and into thinking about other outcomes. Part of a critical design education is the examination of the possible consequences of design agendas and the conditions they foster: how do they impact the ‘other’ and who is included in our definition of ‘the other’? This paper suggests that studying difference fosters design solutions that recognize the ‘other’. As Paul Ricoeur states in “Oneself as Another,” “...If we can imagine the wide array of possible values, we can uncover an equally wide array of possible [design solutions] that might manifest and support other ways of thinking and being.”

abstract
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“What sets worlds in motion is the interplay of differences, their attractions and repulsions; life is plurality, death is uniformity.” -Octavio Paz

A few weeks ago, I was in a student lounge at the University at Buffalo and noticed a group of undergrads doubled up with laughter over a television program. They were watching a Seinfeld rerun. Upon closer inspection, I was able to identify it as an episode in which Jerry, George et al visit a young fan who has a medical condition that confines him to a plastic bubble. This boy has an attitude. He is mean, ornery, and verbally abusive to his parents. George ends up in a fight with him over a game of Trivial Pursuit. Afterwards, one of the students lamented, “I wish there was something still on as good as Seinfeld—there’s nothing like that out there anymore.” “What made it so damn funny?” one of the women asked.

The ensuing conversation was fascinating. Essentially the students concluded that Seinfeld made them laugh because it really was ‘about nothing’, a refreshing approach in this age of agenda-laden media. In addition, Seinfeld relentlessly pushed buttons beyond the socially acceptable. “Take the Bubble Boy,” one student remarked, “We’re supposed to treat someone like that with kid gloves; we’re supposed to be nice to people in bubbles and they’re supposed to be nice, too—maybe even grateful for any human interaction they can get. But this guy was a jerk, and George, jerk that he is, wasn’t going to put up with it, bubble or not.” Then the students proceeded with a litany of examples to make their point—the time that George pretended to have a disability to get a private bathroom at work; that an acquaintance lied about having cancer so that Jerry would be nice to him; that Kramer accidentally became a poster boy for the “Able Mentally Challenged Adults” organization; that Jerry stole a marble rye from an elderly woman; and so on. “The writers took the ‘suppose tos’ away,” remarked another student, “and that took away the distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’—whoever that might be.”

Then, almost on cue, the subject quickly moved to each of the students talking about what it would be like to know what their pets are thinking. Once again, as each person impersonated their own version of this, the group was hysterical with laughter.

Overhearing these conversations reinforced the notion that we are intensely interested in those who are different from us, perhaps even to the point that we desire to engage in the asymptotic activity of getting closer or more familiar. The notion of difference and ‘the other’ is essential to the contemporary study and practice of design. ‘The other’ extends us beyond ourselves into that which we do not know. It is a person-based idea of change. Attempting to understand ‘the other’ (including ‘the other’ within ourselves) is an inherent part of being human—and it is one of our primary asymptotic activities. This drive to know ‘the other’—to see or understand our differences is a subject in many disciplines, particularly in philosophy and psychology.

Heidegger proposed that the very idea of communication itself—the exchange of words and signs—presupposes a desire to hear or understand the Other, and that this notion is a fundamental aspect of being human.¹

The encyclopedist Denis Diderot, in his “Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See” introduces us to the idea of ‘the other’ by taking us on an unusual journey of the visual from the rare perspective of the tactile. Sight, Diderot’s blind man concludes, “is a kind of touch which extends to distant objects and is not applied to our face. Touch gives...an idea only of relief. Therefore, a mirror is an instrument that represents us in relief at a distance from ourselves, when properly placed with regard to [ourselves].” Within this relief environment, the blind man experiences sight (the unknown ‘other’) as a kind of figure/ground relationship; it is bound in the notion of difference—if the points of a figure are the same height or texture as the ground, they are lost and the figure disappears. This way of presenting ‘the other’ is a set of comparisons and/or metaphors that attempts to move both parties (the blind man and the sighted man) beyond themselves into a new space of greater understanding.²

The psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan introduced the idea of ‘the other’ through his mirror-stage; he argued that the basic nature of difference emerges in that moment when we recognize our reflection in a mirror for the first time. We recognize ourselves outside our bodies, outside and other to ourselves, the same as others, and yet other to others as well as to ourselves. This experience typically occurs between the ages of 6 and 18 months, a period of time in which the child is coming to grips with an array of motor skills that are as of yet uncoordinated and a source for some trepidation. As a sign of the overcoming of the fragmented body and the promise of a unified body yet to be realized, therefore, the experience of the ‘other’ in the mirror is attended by an anticipation of unity.³

Certainly, in our contemporary media, there are many examples of the desire to seek difference and to know ‘the other’—it is one of the basic themes of many books, films, and television series—*Star Trek, Being John Malkovich, CatDog, Beauty and the Beast, Edward Scissorhands, Silence of the Lambs, Elephant Man, Tootsie, Twin Falls – Idaho, Babette’s Feast, West Side Story, To Kill a Mockingbird*—the list goes on and on.

Despite its popularity in mainstream media, taking on the tasks of seeking difference and knowing ‘the other’ typically is not part of coursework in design education. Most instructors agree that to produce relevant design work, particularly as we move into a more globalized environment, students should have knowledge and understanding about cultures and populations other than our own.

I am fortunate to work in a university that clearly recognizes the need for education in diversity. As such, it requires that students take a course in pluralism as part of its general education curriculum. The University at Buffalo adopts the claim of Carol Geary Schneider, President of the Association of American College and Universities: “Diversity requirements signal the academy’s conviction that citizens now need to acquire significant knowledge both of cultures other than their own and of disparate cultures’ struggles for recognition and equity, in order to be adequately prepared for the world around them.”⁴

A course entitled “Diversity and Design” offered by the Department of Architecture is one of these general education courses, and has been available for the past two years. Over 200 students from a wide variety of majors—the bulk are from art, psych./soc., management, computing, engineering, theatre, modern languages, architecture and planning take the course. This course addresses what I think is one of the most important aspects of both design and general education; namely the consideration of difference and ‘the other’ as essential to anyone involved in the making of our worlds. (In this case, ‘design’ is used in the most general of terms—anyone who generates something that affects our environment and/or ways of being is thought of as a designer. Biologists, writers, psychologists, politicians, and others are then included in the mix.)

The course focuses on the changing nature of society and examines various types of diversity and their attendant design issues. Specifically, the course concentrates on the ways in which our physical and media environments affect various and, in turn, the ways these populations have affected our visuals, products, and environments. It introduces students to eight areas of cultural difference: race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, physical ability/disability, mental ability/disability, and religious sectarianism. Writings, films, products, graphics, electronic media, buildings and environments that address the issue of difference are examined.

The Diversity and Design course has several objectives:

- to raise awareness of the impact of design decisions on diverse populations
- to raise awareness of the specific desires and needs of various populations
- to build a vocabulary that demonstrates an understanding of diversity in relation to various design methods
- to critically examine the operations and processes of current design education and practice
- to analyze specific aspects of physical and visual environments keeping in mind the needs of diverse groups
- to develop design processes and proposals for inclusive physical and visual environments

The course has several activities and assignments that help students to extend their understanding of the relationship between design and diversity. For example:

Students analyze consumer media in relation to specific diversity issues and present position papers revealing their findings.

Students compare two products: one that is designed for a continually broadening population and one that is designed for a rigid niche of the population. They team up with someone younger than six or older than seventy in the evaluation process.

Students review the entries in an architecture competition from the point of view of an underrepresented group. They act as jurors.

They go to an ethnic restaurant and order something they’ve never had. Subsequently, they write a restaurant review in which they focus on ethnic and gendered space.

And, finally, in an effort to become arbiters of change, they design a book page that gives instructions on how to how a specific design discipline can affect a specific diversity group OR how a specific diversity group can affect a specific design discipline.

Students who are or were in the course and other individuals from various underrepresented groups have taken part in the design and refinement of the course. They’ve addressed questions that they thought were relevant to the meaningfulness of the course such as:

- Are there things that you are prevented from doing because of social or material constraints in your environment?
- What changes might be made to your environment and the products in them that would improve your life?
- What are your prejudices?
- What changes has technology had on your life?
- How do you think others see you? What do you want them to know and/or understand about you?

The following are excerpts from their feedback:

A student who is a devout Muslim:

I think that others see me as a terrorist because of the way we are portrayed in the media. That is so far away from the way that I am.

I think that designers should look at the ways that Islam blends into the environment and adapts to any setting. It allows us to practice anywhere without causing major disruptions to others.

Two young children, a three year old and a seven-year-old girl:

Kids don’t need much room. Houses should be smaller and things should be shorter so that we can reach them.

Several women students:

We should read everything bell hooks has ever written and then we should go to the east side of Buffalo and look around.

A thirty-eight year old male who uses a wheelchair:

It’s not the environment per se that I have a problem with; it’s the fact that the laws that make public places accessible to me are not enforced. If they were, I would be just fine. But when the delivery truck is on the access ramp at Burger King, I cannot get lunch. When sidewalks aren’t shoveled, I have to go into the street to get to the subway station so that I can get home from work. I think

as a class we should all go from here to the grocery store and note the obstructions.

A fifty-five year old Native American man:

Many of us live feeling that our way of life has been stolen—even our spirituality is being stolen. These thefts are violations of Native sovereignty - the inherent right of indigenous nations to govern themselves, and keep the lands, cultures, and economies that belong to them. There is much to learn from cultures of different Native American nations. But there is a difference between learning *about* a tradition, and stealing the tradition.

An eighty-eight year old man in good health:

You could ask your students to redesign pill bottles. I'm surprised companies haven't been sued for this already.

Actually, they should look at the overmedication of seniors in this country. It's a huge problem and it's going to get worse.

What should you know about being my age? That you worry about smelling bad—if you can't smell like you used to, how would you know? That I can't do what I used to and I wish I could. Sometimes that's hard to take.

CONCLUSION

Each person involved in the design of the course, in his or her own way, critiqued conditions and made suggestions for change that suggested certain possibilities for the course and for design in general. These desired conditions might be considered as extensions of ourselves. As designers, considering these extensions often moves us out of our typical processes in which we focus on the consequences that fit into our agenda. They might assist us in thinking about other outcomes that might emerge—some of which might have significant impact.

One of the dangers of a course like this is the possibility that the persons responsible might assume the role of expert or authority figure. It is essential to work within a kind of questioning and moving framework so that those with peripheral points of view, those on the margins, and those with contradictory viewpoints can participate in the discussion and practice of design. These voices are a necessary part of the process and play a major part in its critical practice. Certainly, as critical makers of the built environment, we need to examine the possible consequences of our design agendas and the conditions they foster—how do they impact the 'other' and who is included in our definition of 'the other'? Although we might not always consider it, our actions as socially conscious designers pose many questions and offer many possibilities. Already they challenge our conventional concepts of space and open choices for some that change choices for others. They confront current notions of 'citizen' and 'community' by setting up situations in which more diverse populations can participate in decision-making processes. They recondition 'criticism' by influencing questions about how institutional values are questioned or maintained. They ask what is found and what is lost, who wins and who loses as modes increase, and open inquiry into notions about habits and changes in our senses, perceptions, and states of being. Most importantly, examining the consequences of design provokes questions about how to teach and learn in ever-changing multi-conditions—conditions that ultimately move toward a utopia of conditions of diversity in design. Hopefully, this general education course has started that process, and will help us to open ourselves to the possibilities suggested in the following adapted statement by Paul Ricoeur in his text *Oneself as Another*: "...there are other kinds of [architecture], other ways of being or looking like [architecture], other ways in which the physical world could shape our minds, our bodies, and our spirits. Other sets of values would produce 'other' [architectures] that recognize the 'other', even the 'other' that is ourself."⁵ If we imagine the wide array of possible values, we can uncover an equally wide array of possible design approaches and solutions that might manifest and support other ways of thinking and being.

NOTES

¹ Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 17-22.

² Denis Diderot, "Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See," (1749), *Diderot's Early Philosophical Works*, trans. Margaret Jourdain (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1916), 72.

³ Jean La Marche, "Self and Surface: The Mirror of Architecture," *The Person-Environment Theory Series*, (Berkeley, CA: Center for Environmental Design Research, University of California, 1993) 4.

⁴ Carol Geary Schneider, <http://www.diversityweb.org/Digest/W01/civic.html>

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).