

A Beginner's Mind

PROCEEDINGS

**21st National Conference
on the Beginning Design Student**

Stephen Temple, editor

**Conference held at the
College of Architecture
The University of Texas at San Antonio
24-26 February 2005**

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Situating Beginnings
Questioning Representation
Alternative Educations
Abstractions and Conceptions
Developing Beginnings
Pedagogical Constructions
Primary Contexts
Informing Beginnings
Educational Pedagogies
Analog / Digital Beginnings
Curriculum and Continuity
Interdisciplinary Curricula
Beginnings
Design / Build
Cultural Pluralities
Contentions
Revisions
Projections

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Sex, Stereotypes and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*: Media and The Identity Quandaries of the Beginning Design Student

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Based on my experience interviewing prospective design students, it is safe to say that most are recruited today not by universities but by the media. The plethora of design shows such as *Trading Spaces*, *While You Were Out*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and *Divine Design*, (to mention only a few) in addition to America's present preoccupation with transformation and "re-do" has inspired many high school students to consider design as a career. In addition, media characterizations of designers, such as the interior designer Grace in the sitcom *Will and Grace*, George Costanza's impersonation of an architect to impress women in TV's *Seinfeld*, and Michele Pfeiffer's architect/mother role in the movie *One Fine Day* often give these students their first expectations about their future professions. Since most high schools have no consistent design or architectural curriculums and dependence on the media is pervasive as a prime source of cultural information in the United States, chances remain strong that entering design students will continue to be inspired by these sources.

Therefore, a major challenge to the design educator is dealing with the disconnect between what beginning design students believe their education will be about based on these portrayals, and the reality of our various curriculums in interior, industrial, and architectural design. In most cases, the strategy of many educators has been to ask the student to simply discard these inspirations as superficial. A student who expresses an interest in "decorating," for example, soon finds out the ramifications of uttering this word. Stereotypes and departmental identities (i.e. the academic distinctions and hierarchies between fields such as interior design and architecture) may further exacerbate the student's conflict between his/her preconceived perceptions and the realities of academia.

The first part of this paper asks--can the spark of interest inspired by the media, particularly T.V., be used to motivate and engage beginning students in the processes of design and their education? Should design educators ask students to discard their preconceived notions about design they gain from these programs? Should and could design education use the media as an educational tool particularly for the beginning designer?

To consider the answers to these questions this author was forced to do the unthinkable: watch all the current T.V. shows that focus on design. I found that on a given day one could view over 10-15 programs about design that broadcast practically hourly, day and night. The gamut includes programs such as: *While You were Out*, *Trading Spaces*, *Trading Spaces Family*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Design on a Dime*, *Design Remix*, *Decorating Cents*, *Design Challenge*, *Clean Sweep*, *Design to Sell*, *Curb Appeal*, *House Hunters*, *Painted House* and *Surprise Design* to mention just a few. A recent addition to the line up, which may be of particular note to design educators, is *Designer Finals* in which a soon-to-be-graduate of a design program is called upon to re-do a specific space and is then graded on their results.

The general format of these programs is fairly similar. An existing condition is presented that is undesirable: a space too small, too cluttered, and too un-aesthetically pleasing. A team of designers, which may include trained design professionals, the owners, their neighbors (who have "traded spaces" with them), contractors, carpenters and a variety of tradespeople, then work together to transform the space. The team almost always has time and budget constraints and is often forced to recycle materials, use found objects and/or shop carefully. The denouement of

each episode is when the team reaches some kind of conclusion to the project and the owner and/or unknowing surprise view the transformation. For the most part the owners of the spaces are emotionally moved by the result. A wide variety of screaming, crying, and “shock and awe” are usually demonstrated. The programs, however, leave the viewer fully understanding that design is transformative and can improve peoples’ lives if not only to just make them happy.

While at first these programs were limited to specialty cable channels about design like Home and Garden TV, other more general channels like The Learning Channel, the Discovery Channel and Bravo soon came on board. Recently this programming has expanded to prime time national networks with ABC’s *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. The design problems have expanded in scope as well, from one-room projects to whole communities with the debut of The Learning Channel’s new program *Town Haul*.

The preponderance of this kind of programming points to the rising public interest in design. Therefore, the chance that our incoming students have regularly viewed or at least seen one of these programs is high. As a professor in interior design, I find it common for entering or potential students to tell me which one of these is their favorite show.

But what exactly makes these programs so appealing? And more, what are our future students identifying with in them that inspire them to want to become designers?

Educational theorists Kristin Congdon, Marilyn Stewart and John Howell White state in their article *Mapping Identity for Curriculum Work*: “Our individual identities are constructed through our interaction within overlapping and intersecting communities to which we belong.”¹ Religious, gender, geographic, family, age, economic, political, recreational, aesthetic, racial/ethnic, occupational are identified by them as the categories of these communities. Although many or all of these kinds of identifications could be represented in the media design shows, the most prominent has to be occupational. These various design shows motivate our students to identify occupationally with design. Since this identifier is chosen rather than inherent (such as race and gender) it can be assumed that the viewer/student must be seeing positive benefits from this choice of identification. Something in these programs motivates our students to want to make design part of their identity.

I want to speculate here as to what they are responding. First and foremost the design programs clearly promote the idea that design is transformative, helpful, and life enhancing. While some programs focus merely on aesthetics (*Trading Spaces*, *Painted House*), others focus on improved function (*Clean Sweep*, *Queer Eye*). It is also evident that there is a trend to foreground design’s social responsibility. In ABC’s new – *Extreme Makeover Home Edition*, an abjectly poor extended family living in a dilapidated house in southern Los Angeles was chosen to have their home made over. A crew of designers and crafts persons analyzed (quite melodramatically) their existing conditions and decided to pull the house down and rebuild two houses so that the son of the family (a rising basketball star, now a paraplegic due to in a drive-by shooting, who was planning to be married) could have his own place. Although the inherent racism and elitism of having a team of educated white people “saving” a poor struggling African-American family was a bit too heavy handed, the theme of design as a tool to do things for people less fortunate was clearly highlighted. Regardless of the T.V. dramatics overlaid on this scenario, this trend has to be viewed as positive. Any student wishing to make an impact on the world and to create positive change would respond to this portrayal. As educators we can build on that desire.

Second, the design shows seem to highlight diversity. The image they present is that design is for everybody, and every kind of person can do design: men, women, gays, straights, people of various ethnicities, older people, younger people. What’s more stereotypes of these groups seem to be purposely challenged. Model-like girls are carpenters; jock-like men are identified as decorators. Girls with power tools frequently can be found instructing seemingly mechanically challenged males. In one episode I watched the male carpenter make a big deal about asking the woman designer/seamstress to teach him how to sew. “Its something I’ve

always wanted to do," he stated and later beamed with self-accomplishment when he was able to sew a window covering. The historical association of architecture with men and decorating with women is disrupted here.

Andrew J. Mahoney, in his study of gifted learners has identified that in order to work to their potential the gifted student must experience "affiliation" and "affinity," i.e. they need to know that someone understands their uniqueness and to relate to others like them. These criteria could be applied to any student. Because of the plethora of kinds of people who are portrayed as talented and successful in these design shows, almost any student, from any background can find affiliation and affinity. Students who may not have considered design in the past, based on their preconceived notions of what it was and who could be involved, may now understand that it is a possible career for them as well. This potentially could bring more diverse students into our classrooms with greater probability that they will challenge boundaries and stereotypes.

Third, and maybe most importantly from the student perspective, is that this media portrays design as contemporary and hip. Whereas the idea of becoming a lawyer (an perhaps even an architect) may conjure the image of wearing button-down shirts and bow ties and entering the rigidity of a corporate structure, becoming a designer here is presented as not requiring a transition to a conservative mode. While there is a level of professionalism portrayed, the people involved in design activities on these programs look like our students and act like our students. The men are shabby chic, dressed in jeans and tee shirts. The women sport current clothes styles and hair. They have personas more like rock musicians and athletes. They are hip and "super cool." By doing design they have stardom and success, fan clubs, and commercial endorsements. Take Ty Pennington, the star of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* for example. Ty, is described on his web site as a "Jack of all Trades and Master of None, a "home design guru," "off the wall" and "hunk-of-a carpenter", who "sings and plays the guitar in his spare time, still enjoys his boyhood passions of surfing, skateboarding and playing soccer." The message is clear here-- no lifestyle adjustment is necessary to enter this real-world scenario. In addition to being the author of *Ty's Tips*, a successful how-to book, Pennington has just signed an exclusive multi-year agreement to partner with Sears in a broad range of activities, including product design and development, merchandising and advertising, and is their ambassador for the Sears *American Dream Campaign*. The message is clear--yes, design can bring success and financial security. In these days of *American Idol* and other Cinderella stories these portrayals can't help but be appealing to our potential students. The end result for us is that more are applying to our programs than ever before.

And so if this is what gets them to want to be designers, what may we as educators expect as a result of it? First, we should get students who believe in design. As the sheer number of design shows tell us, design is being perceived as interesting, evocative, challenging, exciting and transformative. Because of T.V. design media, students come to our programs because they think that design is exciting and will allow them to make an imprint of their own individuality on the world. It seems that enthusiasm and belief in design is something that we as educators can never get enough of in our students.

Second, more practically, it seems like educators could expect that student inspired by the design shows should respond well to the educational format of the charette. Since the design shows all consistently use a format of a compressed time frame (which is enhanced by the media itself), the idea of completing a challenging project that requires all of your attention over a short duration of time should not seem overwhelming, but rather be appealing to these students. It at least suggests that the charette could an especially appropriate educational strategy for today's beginner designer.

Third, use of materials and construction methods are highlighted in the T.V. programs, often by an instructional moment, in which a cast member takes time to show the audience how they are building something or using a specific technique. A variety of materials are introduced,

considered and explained. Students who watch these programs should then have better understanding of the possibilities of materials and construction. It may indicate to educators, that more experiential projects in real spaces would be more appropriate for inspiring today's design students and that they would particularly be interested in building real things in real time with real materials.

Fourth, these media presentations should inspire a willingness to do team work and push disciplinary boundaries. An almost consistent practice of every T.V. design program is putting a variety people, including the clients, together in groups to work on the project. Carpenters, plumbers, designers, architects, and owners all work together to create the design solution. Each brings a different expertise and experience to the job ranging from degrees in interior, graphic, industrial, and architectural design; semiotics, scenography, fine arts and film as well as job experiences in construction, the movie industry, education, and theatre. Design is portrayed as a multi-disciplinary event that allows an individual to share his particular talent and learn new ones. This may indicate to educators that using a more interdisciplinary educational approach and pushing our students to explore disciplines outside our own may be a good strategy for teaching today's design students.

Fifth, the T.V. programs emphasize that design is a process and demonstrate its various steps, from site analysis, to programming, ideation, schematic, revision, and construction. In each episode a team creates a plan of attack and organizes the conditions necessary to reach a desired end. Students watching these programs should gain a sense that design is about not just the end product.

Finally, the media presentations of design perhaps overemphasize, but emphasize nonetheless, a human and emotional connection to design. It seems that having students that want to respond to human needs and have it inspire feeling can only stimulate their involvement in the design process and their education.

Of course the media presentations of design are not without their shortcomings. The compression of time required for a T.V. time slot cannot indicate what the full effort of the project must be. Nor does it reflect the daily reality of design in which it may take months or years rather than two days to complete a project. In doing so the T.V. programs tend to support the need for instant gratification that is generally characteristic of current students. This deserves a caveat. Along with this, the programs do not stress skills development or the fact the people participating actually went to school and/or had to practice for a while to be able to do what they do.² At the same time that they inspire students by their characterization of designers as cool and hip, they also tend to emphasize the idea of being a "design star" which may cause the need for some attitude adjustment in a typical academic studio scenario. Knowing that these shows may breed these kinds of attitudes, however, is helpful for us to understand and remedy potential student problems.

And so I believe this research has provided useful insight not only as to how design is being portrayed in the media, but also as to what our students will bring to the classroom from that experience and how we might use it to our advantage. However, by far the most useful thing I discovered through this exploration was a clearer understanding of my own ideas about design and design education.

Although I have been fascinated by this phenomenon of design on the media for a long while I had never actually watched any of the T.V. programs until I started this project. When my paper was accepted for this conference my first thought was "Damn, now I'm going to have to watch these stupid programs." I did start watching them, therefore, under extreme duress and with great skepticism. Something in my training and experience made me feel like I was lowering myself by doing this. I even made excuses to my husband when he came in while I was watching these programs and asserted, "I'm not watching this. I'm doing research!"

Then slowly I watched myself get sucked in. I began having my favorite programs and characters. I started cheering like a sports fan for the team to get the project done on time, and yelled at the T.V. concerning my perception that mistakes were being made. And yes, once or twice, a tear came to my eye at the unveiling of the end product. This of course, I am ashamed to admit here. And I would guess that what causes my shame is the same thing that makes us reluctant to admit these venues have any value to us as design educators. This realization poses my second question: is design education embedded so strongly with its own stereotypes and preconceived ideas that make it overly resistant to outside portrayals and outside influences?

Since the majority of my research has concentrated over the years on deconstructing stereotypes about design I was aghast at realizing my own rigidity in this project. For years I have been interrogating the perception that interior design is inferior to architecture by posing theoretical deconstructions. I realized though this project, however, that perhaps television was doing more for interior design than I was with my esoteric ramblings. Architecture, interior design, industrial design, art and decorating are not differentiated in these programs. The designers are from diverse backgrounds but they work together in the way that founding fathers of the Bauhaus dreamed of. The design shows have made design the interdisciplinary effort that my theories have long proposed but not been able to actualize.

However, our students who have watched and perhaps been inspired by these shows, then come to us and are divided by interdisciplinary boundaries of academia and the profession. They must realize very quickly (do we teach them this?) that each has a separate identity, a stereotype, a place in a hierarchy, and more often compete than work together. It seems that although, as this analysis clearly points out, design is a transformative process, design education is itself resistant to transformation. We teach our students that we must interrogate the status quo consistently to be a good designer, but yet we as educators seem to be reluctant to apply that method to ourselves.

For the most part, we continue to teach as we were taught, to transmit the values taught to us, to use the same resources and methods we are comfortable with. As my reluctance to do my own research demonstrated to me, we do so because other options sometimes seem to risk upsetting something that is seemingly very important to our self-identity, self-worth, legitimacy and "superiority". In this case, although T.V. is one of the most dominant forms of information distribution in our time, we may not consider a viable educational tool because it does not seem serious enough or worry that its use may somehow threaten our profession's credibility. But do we miss an opportunity in this?

As educators I'm sure we have all used the method of asking beginning designers to turn their model upside down so that they can see their work in a new way with new potentials. Isn't time we took the chance and turned the model upside down for education? If T.V. has something to offer shouldn't we take it? Or any of the other new venues out there? (Internet, X-box, movies, theater) --just to see what the potential could be for us, for our students, and for design education in this new millennium. By doing so it seems we have only to gain the potential of better understanding of the needs and hopes of our students as well as the needs and hopes of contemporary society for design.

Notes

1Kristen G. Congdon, Marilyn Stewart, and John Howell White, "Mapping Identity for Curriculum Work,"

Contemporary Issues in Art Education, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall) p. 109-117)

2Although cast members education is not mentioned specifically in the programs, their websites overview their education and experience.