

conversation {1/2}

It seems that the design industry is filled with various ongoing conversations. These can be amongst designers or between designers, clients, manufacturers, retailers etc. Recently the dialogue between designers and consumers appears to have become a key factor in the design process. {February 2012}

The diverse range of knowledge and skills that are utilised in the design field mean that there are various discussions that take place. In 2009, *Icon Magazine* identified the importance of these conversations and 'set-up' a series of interdisciplinary discussions between leading practitioners. In June 2009 they gathered designer Tom Dixon, architect David Adjaye and fashion designer Paul Smith. The diverse experience and expertise that these individuals brought to the table meant that the discussion seemed slightly random. The magazine provided a list of the topics:

- *'London vs Tokyo*
- *high heels on the number 52 bus*
- *super contemporary at the design museum*
- *flame-shooting rabbit incinerators*
- *crumbing infrastructure*
- *how Tony Blair tricked creatives*
- *the benefits of the collapse of the west'*¹

Attempting to document the interdisciplinary discussion of thoughts, opinions and ideas, to give an insight to others of how design conversations might work seems to be an ambitious task. Topics discussed might seem irrelevant because of their arbitrary nature but Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis suggest that this type of discussion is invaluable material when it takes place between client and designer:

*'Interdisciplinary approaches also thrive in the interface of disciplinary and lay understandings. They are needed for the practical application of disciplined understandings to the actually existing world. They are the raw material of dialogue between designers and their clients.'*²

Below, architecture and design writer, Philippe d'Anjou suggests three different models for the client and designer relationship to exist:

*'1. Paternalistic model: the designer is in charge of most decisions. 2. Autonomy model: the client is in charge of most decisions. 3. Cooperation model: the client and the designer engage in authentic conversation.'*³

The role of a designer also requires an understanding of the needs of a consumer. This can only happen if there is some type of dialogue between consumer and designer that is used to shape the design process. When consumers are consulted on aspects of a design it is often referred to as 'participatory design' and 'user-centred design'.

*'These turn the designer into conversationalist, facilitator, mentor and pedagogue – in this way destabilizing a legacy of self understanding in the designer who had formerly presented himself/herself as a technocrat or aesthete. Certainly, expertise and aesthetic commitment remain, but the centre of gravity has shifted in an ideal design relationship with users.'*⁴

However, industry analyst, Brian Solis, questions the authenticity of the conversation between designer and consumer when the development of social media means that customers are becoming indefinable, sophisticated and empowered:

*'the dynamics that govern the relationship between brands and customers is evolving. But even in this era of engagement and 'two-way' conversations, the reality is that the relationship businesses hope to have with customers through these new devices, applications, or networks and their true state are not one in the same. In fact, it is woefully one-sided, and usually not to the advantage of customers, which for all intents and purposes still affects businesses.'*⁵

It seems that although designers have gone from monologue to dialogue with consumers, there is still an ideal middle ground yet to be found. The 'Vote' option on online designer furniture retailer made.com appears to give consumers the upper hand:

*'You choose what makes it into our collection. Vote for your favourites and the most popular will be made available to order.'*⁶

When consumers are usually involved in the design process it is through focus groups that discuss prototypes, ideas and features of a design or customising an existing design by making limited modifications. Made.com is different because the dialogue with consumers affects the supply and demand cycle. This is a significant input before the product has reached the home because consumers are given the authority to choose what gets manufactured. At the other end of the scale is technology giant, Apple, where there is a complete shut down of conversation between consumer and designer.

*'The idea of understanding a consumer's needs before they actually needed what Apple was making has remained a hallmark of the company throughout its history. The idea of empathizing with a consumer before a market was even developed set Apple on the path of perpetually looking forward to find how people would behave.'*⁷

Apple has repeatedly claimed that they do not use focus groups or feedback from consumers to create or change their designs. The use of powerful advertising and branding means that they offer consumers a piece of design that previously never felt necessary but is made to be essential to daily life. There is no doubt that this methodology works for the company, however, surely the lack of conversation, limits the discussion of opinion, questions and disagreements? Charlotte West highlights this lack of critical conversation within the design industry:

*'The closest the mainstream press gets to design writing is the shopping pages of the Sunday supplements. And design magazines are often satisfied with merely reporting the doings of designers, as opposed to engaging with their work critically.'*⁸

During the past five years, education institutions across the globe have attempted to address this issue by setting up design criticism courses, for example, in 2008, the School of Visual Arts in New York set up Design Criticism MFA and London College of Communication [LCC] set up MA Design Writing Criticism. It is perhaps too early to see the usefulness or effect that courses like these will have on the design industry, especially as it seems that designers themselves are already aware of the importance of creating conversation around their practice. Increasingly, statements like the one below are what designers present on the 'Home' or 'About' pages of their websites.

'We believe design...
...Solves problems
...Is a dialogue and conversation
...Expands boundaries
...Gives form and function to
...Creates an emotional connection'⁹

And in 2008, *Icon Magazine's* 'What's with the Manifesto Mania' article pointed out:

*'All the exhibitors in the main exhibition at this year's Venice biennale were asked to provide manifestos. Now this month, the Serpentine Gallery is holding a 'manifesto marathon' - two days of back-to-back bugle calls... It seems that we are hungry for statements, positions, discourse, anything that suggests that there's conviction behind what we're doing... It compels people to lay out and justify their beliefs.'*¹⁰

The need for justification seems to have given rise to conversation for the sake of conversation. An increasing amount of statements, exchanges and updates that appear online have given rise to unconsidered thoughts being publicised in an open platform. *Limited Language* authors, Colin Davies and Monika Parrinder suggest what this 'feedback culture' can do if used effectively:

*'Just as walking down the street is as much about the mutterings and the conversation that you hear as it is about what you see, we use this feedback culture to construct our critique.'*¹¹

It seems that for useful conversation in the design industry to thrive in the future, content that is generated from feedback culture would somehow need to be edited to ensure that it is of good quality and so that it can inform considered critical design.

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1. **Icon Magazine: 'Conversation' Issue 76, October 2009 p.156**
 2. **Cope, B. and Kalantzis, M. *The Design Journal: 'Design' in Principle and Practice: A Reconsideration of the Terms of Design Engagement'* Volume 14, Issue 1, March 2011 p.54**
 3. **d'Anjou P. *The Design Journal: 'The Ethics of Authenticity in the Client-Designer Relationship'* Volume 14, Issue 1, March 2011 p.34-38**
 4. **Cope, B. and Kalantzis, M. *The Design Journal: 'Design' in Principle and Practice: A Reconsideration of the Terms of Design Engagement'* Volume 14, Issue 1, March 2011 p.52**
 5. **Brian Solis 'Why User Experience Is Critical To Customer Relationships' [2012] <http://www.fastcompany.com/1815756/the-importance-of-ux-in-customer-engagement> [Accessed: 22nd February 2012]**
 6. **Made 'Vote' [2012] www.made.com/vote [Accessed: 22nd February 2012]**
 7. **Cliff Kuang 'The 6 Pillars Of Steve Jobs's Design Philosophy' [2011] <http://www.fastcodesign.com/1665375/the-6-pillars-of-steve-jobs-design-philosophy> [Accessed: 22nd February 2012]**
 8. **West C., *Icon Magazine: 'Design Critic'* February 2008 p.43**
 9. **Little and Company 'About' [2012] <http://www.littleco.com/About> [Accessed: 22nd February 2012]**
 10. **McGuirk J., *Icon Magazine: 'What's with the Manifesto Mania'* Issue 65, November 2008 p.39**
 11. **Davies C. & Parrinder M., *Limited Language* [Berlin, Birkhauser 2010] p.8**