ATTITUDES TO CLIENTS OR CLIENTS WITH ATTITUDE?

Biography:

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'Start thinking about your marketing activities as a laser beam. Make a list of who you want your clients to be. That's right. Take names'. (Thompson, R. 2005) This comment by Ron Thompson, Chair and National Director, Society for Philanthropy in the Communication Arts, speaks of an increasing understanding of the relationship between visual artist and audiences, and a reframing of this relationship. Thompson, acting as commentator on an online forum within the fuel4arts.com website, highlighted the necessity of promotion and marketing in the arts. Historically there has been a view among some schools of artists that art is above commerce, and whilst currently there is an increasing recognition of art as one of the creative industries, there is less of a focus on the service industry component of this.

Design has also had to deal with the dichotomy of being at once a creative discipline and a servant of clients. The client provides work, but also often produces restrictions on a designer's activities; this can lead to a love/hate relationship between designer and client. Creative freedom is seen by most designers as an imperative, it conforms to Maslow's 'self actualisation' level of the hierarchy of needs (acel-team.com 2000), clients sometimes impinge upon this freedom and impose design ideas of their own or demand changes in the designers proposals. As students in design school we were taught to 'do what the client wants, but also to provide the designer's version'. It was implied that the client's version was probably not as good as that produced by the designer, and that clients had to be educated to understand good design.

The position of the artist (here taken to refer mainly to visual arts) or designer as creative producer can be seen in terms of a 'wicked' problem:

> As described in the first published report of Rittel's idea, wicked problems are a class of social system problems which are ill-formulated, where the information is confusing, where there are many clients and decision makers with conflicting values, and where the ramifications in the whole system are thoroughly confusing.
> Buchanan 1992 p. 15

Buchanan points to the indeterminate nature of design, he highlights the fact that, apart from the most basic design problem, there is no easily defined determined path to follow. This makes it difficult for a designer both to articulate and to justify their solutions, creating the

conditions for a miss match between designers and clients expectations. This can also be seen to apply to other creative output.

A survey of users of design services (Soutar, Sears & Price 1995) provides some evidence that this dissonance may be a significant factor in the relationship between designer and client. The researchers concluded that client satisfaction with design services was far from universal: 'if negative experiences reduce the likelihood of diffusion, designers need to understand why 14 percent of the sample was disenchanted with their design experiences'. (Soutar Seares & Price 1995 p. 16)

Very little has been written about this relationship in the design area, but there has been some research on architects and their relationships with clients. Architects are also a class of designer, and the profession places a high value on design. Cuff writes that 'In the negotiations between architects and their clients, as in any negotiation, an underlying consideration is control over knowledge and information' (Cuff 1992 p.38). Cuff, in her investigation into architectural practices, found that architects use a mystification of the architectural process when dealing with clients 'architects employ mysterious justifications like the art defense and scientific justifications like the analogous structural defense as means to withhold information from clients' (ibid). They rely on the client's lack of confidence in these areas to lead the client in the direction they wish to go. Designers interviewed in this project also valued the status of expert in their negotiations with clients. One of the effects of the advent of computer based design technologies may be that this status is challenged. Design activities, such as typesetting, coordinating colour schemes, and page layout, now appear more transparent than they did before the advent of computer design programs.

For the designer, creative freedom can be the most important factor in a job, however for a client, coming in on budget and market effectiveness are more likely to be valued. Salaman mentions sources of intrinsic satisfaction for architects, in a survey of 51 practitioners 63.46% mentioned creativity of work and the opportunity to use design skills as an important source of satisfaction. This factor's importance can be gauged by the gap between it and the next most popular response, which was variety of work, with 19.23%. In response to questions aimed at discovering restricting factors in their professional practice, regulatory considerations and interference from clients rated equally at 23.8% (Salaman 1974 p. 67)

Architects surveyed mentioned interference by clients as a restriction to their work:
> One architect was quite blunt about his problems. He said: "There's only one thing wrong with this work—clients".… Although not all architects personally experienced difficulties with clients, most architects apparently regard such frustrations as one of the major drawbacks of the profession. In a survey of British architects Abrams found that 91 per cent of the sample thought that the general level of design in this country was bad or indifferent, and two-thirds blamed the client for this.
> Salaman 1974 p. 72

The underlying causes for this tension between designer/architect and client would appear to include a struggle for authority in the design based disciplines. It is possible that the values held by the designer about what is 'good design' are not easily conveyed to the client, this

can lead to a lack of sense of authority. The designer becomes frustrated that the client does not share the values he holds, that the client doesn't understand good design. 'It also reflects architects' vestigial attachment to historical views of the nature of architecture: the architect as an artist hampered and harried by his patron'. (ibid)

Cuff suggests that 'a view of practice as a series of dialectical dualities is an apt model' (cuff 1992 p. 11). Dualities recognized by Cuff in the practice of architecture can also be discerned in the design industry. They include the dissonance between the notion of a designer as an autonomous artist, and the reality that the practice frequently requires the input of a team of people. The typical model for design education has been one where a student works on his or her own projects and in some environments, jealously guard their ideas, encouraging the notion of designer as an autonomous creator. A second dialectic involves the notion of design against business or art versus management. 'It's in the architectural office. While practitioners recognize the inescapable links between the two, it is by no means a happy marriage'. (ibid)

Further dualities inherent in the architectural profession, which also relate to the design industry, include comparisons between educational settings and office practice; these are the primary social settings for architects and designers. These are the places where their professional ideologies are developed. 'The umbrella under which all these dilemmas collect is a broader contrast between beliefs and practice, or ideology and action. That discrepancy, which every architectural student confronts in her or his first job, persists within the culture of practice'. (Cuff 1992 p. 11)

Donald Schön describes the suspension of disbelief needed to become a good student of design:

> …the design student knows she needs to look for something but does not know what that something is.… It has to be a kind of contract between the two. The teacher must be open to challenge and must be able to defend his position. The student, in turn, must be willing to suspend his disbelief, to give the teacher's suggestion a chance—to try the suggestion out. The student must be willing to trust that the faculty member has a programmatic intention which will be preempted or ruined by his requiring full justification and explanation before anything is done.... A good student is capable of the willing suspension of disbelief.
> Schön 1986 pp. 83-94

This situation would appear to explain a great deal about the relationship between designer and client, it is extremely unlikely that a client, whose intentions in dealing with a designer are business oriented, will be as willing to 'suspend disbelief'. Dana Cuff also discusses the sense of mystery that architects sometimes generate in dealing with clients, part of the mystery pertains to what she calls the 'art defense', in which architects assume an artist's role as a means to retain autonomy and escape judgment: 'In the role of the artist, the architect has a right to deal in mystery, in subjective truth. He has the artist's right to complete autonomy, to change his mind at whim, to be free of anyone's judgment but his own inner lights' (Cuff 1992 p. 37). The NextD organization calls this the 'magic wand' approach to designing (NextD 2004)

These relationships on their own are sufficiently difficult, but become potentially even more complex when dealing with committees of clients and/or teams of designers. Cuff mentions some of the problems: 'Their clients were even more startling; often they were committees, actively involved in the design enterprise and apparently in charge of it. When the architects and clients got together, it was hard to follow the thread of their conversation; they left meetings with no more decisions made than at the outset.' (Cuff 1992 p. 4).

It is worth considering the trajectory of this way of working, perhaps design needs to be aware of the potential hazards of not communicating effectively and articulating clearly, just what it is that it does. Possibly because of an emphasis on design in the education system above such topics as management, negotiation and other soft skills of communication, the design professional is forced to carry on business in a common sense manner, without a clear understanding of either their own discipline or their clients' needs.

> The architect finds it difficult to explain how to persuade a client, recognize an acceptable compromise, work within the budget—these are things you "just do…. Mysteriously based knowledge and the profession's control of its own evaluation help establish the exclusive exclusionary nature of the profession and the primacy of the autonomous architect. But perhaps architecture has carried this project too far.
> Cuff 1992 p. 5

The theme of educating the client is one that emerges frequently in interviews with designers, this is not to imply that the designer always attempts to convince a client of a series of facts or myths that may only be a product of the designers ideological make up. In many cases this process is a way of convincing the client that the designer has valuable insights that will achieve the client's objectives in an efficient and economical manner. As an interviewed designer puts it: 'This is how you cook a frog, you put them in cold water and turn up the heat, you don't throw them straight into the hot water because they will jump straight out again' (Designer 1). This was said in the context of how a designer should approach the education of a client, it implies that designers will not necessarily get a client to adopt their approach if they provide them with a finished product that conforms to the designers taste and style. It is also important that the client is ready for the designer's solution. 'it is the same with people… you've got to warm them up' (op. Cit.). The designer sees that the client needs to be warmed to his ideas. Designers frequently see the education of the client as an important part of their work.

> Its an interactive thing the clients hopefully learn from the exercise as they go through developing products they learn from the expertise they bring in from designers and other people and hopefully all the other experts learn as they go along too because you always discover new things on any job and the environment changes too
> (Designer 2 1997)

Many designers have been content to present a finished design solution and to persuade the client of its efficacy. Design education has in the past emphasised project presentation and the traditional studio model of design education relies on criticism sessions, where students

have to present and sell their ideas. 'The jury system nevertheless survives because it achieves results that would be otherwise impossible to obtain: it simulates to some extent the reality of making presentations in practice' (Anthony, 1991 p. 29)

In traditional design education as discussed by Anthony (1991) and others such as Swann (2000) the presentation stage is an important part of the design process, this is the stage where a weak solution can be made to seem credible by a skilled presenter. This is important when so much of a design solution can be intangible to a non-designer, relying very much on the tacit knowledge shared by the design community. This disparity of knowledge sometimes requires a leap of faith on behalf of the client; 'as far as clients go it's that blend of being able to achieve what they think they want and being able to stretch that into something they didn't imagine and then them having the trust to actually go with it' (Designer 1 1997). This may be a case of the designer needing to lead a client to an understanding of a complex solution. Two recent surveys carried out by the International Confederation of Graphic Design Organizations (ICOGRADA) provide information that might help this case. ICOGRADA 's surveys suggest that what differentiates the work of an untrained person producing design and a professional designer is the degree of conceptual sophistication. 69% of designers responding to an on-line survey believed that that was the most significant factor chosen in favour of; degree of technical skill (15%) and degree of aesthetic nuance (19%). (ICOGRADA 2005) Coupled with this a survey asking 'do graphic designers have enough authority to influence their clients when it comes to stereotypes'? had responses of 27% Yes, 57% Sometimes and 19% No. (ibid) These responses taken together make it clear that presentation by designers is a complex issue not simply a case of persuading the client of the benefits of a particular solution.

The relationship between client and designer usually comes down to finances. Ultimately the designer relies on the client to make money, this is a clearly defined power relationship and perhaps the designer's use of the mysteries and special nature of the design process are a way of balancing this relationship.

In the context of the development of a design culture in Western Australia there has been a changing relationship between designers and clients, in the 1980s, when design became established as a specialist area outside the advertising agencies and printing firms, neither party fully understood the needs of the other. Pioneers of the design consultancy industry had to work at developing these relationships with clients through a shared experience of working through design projects. 'As far as demands of the clients go I think that has had a huge effect on what we have done. We were few in numbers and with very little historic background, virtually none, certainly with no perception in our minds of clients as to what this thing was about. Everything was an uphill struggle in terms of them understanding what they might need it for.'(Designer 4 1997)

A workshop held with two groups of students at a UK design school in 2000 demonstrated that the students involved, mostly first and second year graphic design students, have formed strong opinions on clients and where they might fit in the world of design. Some key phrases used by the students included: 'Pounds with legs' and 'The client is always right even if their ideas are crap'. Of the 30 plus comments collected only 3 could be said to be positive. It is

clear from this workshop that there are entrenched negative attitudes towards clients, even among undergraduate students whose experience of professional design activity is limited. The smaller group of professionally active postgraduate students also expressed significantly more negative attitudes than positives.

So what does this mean for educators?   We can speculate on a number of propositions, but it is clear that the relationship between creative producers and their clients is one that requires careful consideration. Perhaps we could extend our consideration of sociological factors in art and design education, to better reflect the relationships that develop between producer and client. Whatever we choose to do it is important that we take every opportunity that we can to learn about the behavioural factors that relate tour client relationships.

In design, the NextDesign Leadership Institute (nextD.org) has proposed several approaches to the problem starting with the design team itself. These and other ways at looking at human interaction could, and perhaps should, be a part of all creative education.

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