

IRIDESCENT

FACING THE FUTURE: POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH IN COMMUNICATION DESIGN

Repositioning the graphic designer as researcher

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Abstract

In academic terms, the discipline of graphic design is relatively young. Consequently the position of the discipline within academic territory, and the role of the designer, continue to be debated. In part, these debates have been a product of attempts to define and defend the discipline's borders from within, in order to establish a sense of the role of graphic design and the graphic designer as commensurate with other disciplines both within and beyond art and design. In recent years graphic designers have variously been defined as 'authors', 'producers' and 'readers', yet none of these definitions seem to have provided any kind of productive or lasting impact within the academy. This paper suggests that rather than continue to seek territorial definitions and positions from within, it could be more productive to look beyond the confines of the discipline. Gaining a broader, interdisciplinary perspective on, and understanding of, qualitative research methods from other disciplines may enable the graphic designer to more fully position his or her practice within the wider academy. Such a perspective could help facilitate the repositioning and redefinition of the graphic designer as 'researcher'—a move that would be productive in relation to the future development of postgraduate research within the discipline.

Key Words: *graphic design, interdisciplinary, research*

Introduction

The first known use of the term graphic design was recorded in 1922 (Livingston & Livingston 1992: 59) and the notion of graphic design as a profession was not fully established until the middle of the twentieth century (Hollis 1994: 8). In the United Kingdom graphic design degree courses were first offered in Polytechnics from the mid 1960s, with validation by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). In academic terms, therefore, graphic design does not have the established credentials or research territory of many other subjects. Indeed, for many graphic designers, there is a perceived separation between theory and practice. Design writer and critic Rick Poynor (2003: 10) suggests that graphic design has 'long had an aversion to theory', whilst Ellen Lupton (2009: 6) has stated that whilst 'theory is all about the question 'why'? The process of becoming a designer is focused largely on 'how'.' For educator/designers Ian Noble & Russell Bestley (2001: 14), this aversion to, or lack of, theoretical engagement is 'symptomatic of the immaturity of the developing discipline'. However, debates within academia about the nature of the discipline, and in particular the nature of research within the discipline, continue to unfold—particularly those relating to research involving design practice. Though this may also be true of other design disciplines, this paper focuses solely on graphic design.

Since the early 1990s, the role of the graphic designer has been described in ways that attempt to challenge the notion that it is 'merely' a service-led profession. Perhaps the most well known of these is the phrase 'designer as author', which came to prominence in the mid to late 1990s. Often attributed to Michael Rock in 1996, but previously coined by Rick Poynor (1991), the definition was not without its problems, and in 1998 Ellen Lupton (2011) sought to replace the notion of the 'author' with that of the 'producer'. This was followed by Gerard Mermoz (Mau & Mermoz 2004) who replaced the term 'author'

with 'reader'. The three definitions clearly relate to each other, drawing on ideas of meaning in relation to both production and communication, and striving to position the role of the designer as engaging in practice in ways that are more complex and productive than perhaps previously interpreted. However, to date, the phrase 'designer as author' has more often than not been misinterpreted and the ideas of 'producer' and 'reader' have had little impact within education or industry. Meanwhile, graphic design programmes within higher education continue to increase in numbers and expand their intake throughout the world. Graduates seeking to further develop their fledgling portfolios in order to gain an edge in a very competitive employment market increasingly undertake a Masters programme (Shaughnessy 2009: 102), but there remains little sense of an established postgraduate progression to PhD. Yet, contemporary graphic design has recently been described as becoming 'a knowledge-intensive multi-disciplinary discipline' and designers acknowledged to have a range of skills that would underpin the practice of research well (van der Velden 2011: 16). Perhaps it is not only the definition of the role of the graphic designer that is important, but also an understanding of the possibilities and potential of research and the PhD that needs addressing. In adopting van der Velden's (2011) view of graphic design, whilst drawing on elements from the three previous definitions, this paper proposes that a more productive notion could be that of 'graphic designer as researcher'. This is a definition, and paper, that purposefully looks beyond the territory of art and design to enable the reframing of graphic design research and practice within the wider academy.

The initial sections of the paper seek to contextualise this new proposal by revisiting and evaluating the three earlier definitions of 'author', 'producer' and 'reader' in detail. The potential of designers to act as researchers is then discussed in relation to the design process, and how this might be underpinned and strengthened by looking beyond the confines of one's own discipline in relation to the traditions of qualitative research in the wider academy. The fruits of such an approach are then evidenced through a brief discussion of the author's doctoral research that was developed using interdisciplinary strategies drawn from graphic design and cultural geography. The paper concludes by suggesting that the potential inherent in the role of graphic designer as researcher offers a bright future for both postgraduate graphic design education and the industry.

The designer as author

The term 'designer as author' gained popularity during the late 1990s, but it was the article by Rick Poyner (1991) in the UK magazine *Blueprint* that sowed the initial seeds for a debate about the role of the graphic designer that has, according to its main proponents, more often than not been misinterpreted. Poyner's (1991) article focused on graphic designers such as Neville Brody and Jonathan Barnbrook who were using technology to the full and generating layered and complex typographic compositions that positioned the designer as 'annotating a client's message' (Lupton 2011: 59). A graphic designer's role will always carry with it the notion of subjectivity, as it is an interpretive one. However, there is a sense here that this 'annotation' was taking that further; that the designers involved were far more proactively engaging with the message in a way that was as overtly on their terms as much as those of their clients. During the same period, some graphic designers, particularly those at Cranbrook Academy of Art in the United States, began to engage with post-structuralist theoretical writing, using many of the ideas relating to the instability of meaning and language within their visual work (see Lupton & Miller 1996). This two-pronged assault on the traditions of typography, driven by technology and linguistic theory, was derided by many graphic designers and writers at the time (see Heller 1994, Kinross 1997, Rand 1997), which served to fan the flames of debate further as it played out within the pages of magazines such as *Emigre* and *Eye*. As the founding editor of *Eye*, Poyner asked designer/writer Michael Rock to pen a follow up piece to his 1991 article. First published in 1996 in *Eye*, and in many anthologies since, it was Rock's (2002) *Designer as Author* that really cemented the phrase within the wider graphic design vocabulary.

The use of the word 'author' resonated with many graphic designers who felt that their role was perceived as a subservient one, inferior to that of artists. Rock (2005: np) suggests that 'designers aspire to be authors because we are insecure about our work', and that this insecurity is spawned because many designers feel they have a marginal role in the communication process and are simply 'called in at the end of the process to make things look good' (Lupton 2011: 59). The term began to be used in relation to 'new aspirations for the practice of graphic design', suggesting a more powerful, less passive pro-activity in relation to the creation of graphic design work (Lupton 2003: 23). The article and its notions of authorship were misinterpreted by many as a call to develop self-generated, self-expressive work (see Lupton & Miller 1996, Rock 2005). This type of authorship could be said to hinge on 'a nostalgic ideal of

the writer or artist as a singular point of origin', (Lupton 2011: 13), one that has long since been revealed by Barthes (1977) as subservient to the reader. However, its ramifications still reverberate today with British writer and designer Adrian Shaughnessy (discussing graphic design education) suggesting that 'the pedagogical pendulum has swung too far towards high-minded notions of personal expression and the designer-as-author' (2009: 101).

In reality, Rock did not intend to become, as Lupton (2011: 59) describes him, an 'unwilling poster child for a designer as author epidemic'. Rather, he had intended to cast doubt on the need to develop content as the only way to contend with our anxieties about the perceived position of the graphic designer, encouraging designers instead to focus on visual techniques that construct meaning above and beyond that of the text or message. The essay was actually 'an attempt to recuperate the act of design itself as essentially linguistic—a vibrant, evocative language' (Rock 2011: 15), a call to see value in the designer's manipulation of content as much as its origination and as Bruinsma (1999) has noted 'style is content too'. It is partly this aspect of Rock's idea of authorship, this engagement with form, that lead to Ellen Lupton's attempt to redefine the role of the graphic designer.

The designer as producer

Given the spread and longevity of the notion of 'designer as author' within the discipline, it is clear that Rock's essay resonated with many who wished to redefine their practice. However, the word 'author' remained problematic, as did the misinterpretation. In 1998 Ellen Lupton attempted to rectify this with her essay *The Designer as Producer* (2011). By using the word 'producer', Lupton shifts the meaning of the definition, and associations to the word 'author', in a variety of ways. Authorship has 'more solitary and cerebral connotations' (Blauvelt & Lupton 2011: 9) and the position of the author has not only been challenged by Barthes (1977) in relation to the construction of meaning, but also by the artistic avant-garde movements of the early 1900s who critiqued the romantic ideals of art and the idea of 'unique forms' being generated from 'the depths of the interior self' (Lupton 2011: 13). In contrast, production grounds the role in the material world, encompassing 'direct modes of action ... in order to realise creative projects' (Blauvelt & Lupton 2011: 9).

Lupton draws on Walter Benjamin's 1934 essay *The Author as Producer*, in which he claimed that new forms of communication such as cinema and radio were blurring the boundaries between the author and the reader, and that the author should question, and ultimately control, the material form of the work. During the past twenty years of graphic design, a similar situation has been evident. The advent of the Apple Mac in the 1990s offered designers an opportunity to engage in production where previously it had been the specialist area of trained composers and paste up artists; digital printing has made small scale publishing a feasible undertaking; and, sites like Tumblr or WordPress offer designers an opportunity to publish their work at no cost at all. The 'network of creative and economic collaborators' that Lupton (2003: 24) proposed is thriving—opportunities for self publishing in the form of providers like of blurb.com and The Newspaper Club continue to grow, small publisher fairs are held regularly worldwide and many design groups produce either occasional or regular publications alongside their client based work (see for example Wire design's *Crossfields* publications or Fuel whose publishing activity has evolved into a separate part of their business). Many graphic designers now also produce products as part of their repertoire, for example, Experimental Jetset's range of T-shirts and Graphic Thought Facility's *MeBox* storage system. The 'proletarianisation' of design as Lupton puts it, (2003: 25) has produced an entrepreneurial culture that shows little sign of abating (see Heller 2011).

The idea of the 'producer' also links to Rock's original ideas about using the visual, material language of graphic design as a form of content. However, it goes further, actively privileging 'things over ideas, making over imagining, practice over theory' (Lupton 2011: 13). There is perhaps a danger here that the pendulum could swing too far, and the notion could be interpreted in such a way that separates any kind of idea or theory from practice. Defining things in terms of such binary oppositions of theory or practice, style or content, form or function, seems commonplace within the discipline, yet not particularly productive. Moving beyond such simplistic dualisms and arguments in graphic design is something that designer/educator Gerard Mermoz (2004) was attempting with his definition of the 'designer as reader'.

The designer as reader

Mermoz first attempted to engage graphic designers in a more critical reflection of their practice during the same period that Rock and Lupton's definitions were developed. His articles *On Typographic*

Reference: Part 1 (1995) and *Deconstruction and the Typography of Books* (1998) were critical of the 'retinal' state of graphic design and looked to move debates in graphic design beyond 'surface pattern and complacent self-expression' (Mermoz 1998: 41). At this stage, Mermoz's focus was on typography, and he first raised his idea of 'designer as reader' in conversation with graphic designer Bruce Mau, seeing it as a potential way of framing graphic design practice that goes beyond that which is purely 'retinal' and works 'at the level of the text' in such a way that both form and content are used productively (Mau & Mermoz 2004: 33). The use of the term 'reader' references Barthes' (1990: 4) notion of the 'writerly' text, the goal of which is to position 'the reader no longer as a consumer but as a producer of the text'.

Mermoz developed this idea further through the project *City of Signs*, which 'set out to redefine graphic design as research, and the graphic designer as reader' (2004: 37). Based in Istanbul, the project was a collaboration between Istanbul Bilgi University and London College of Communication. Participants spent ten days in Istanbul 'observing, discussing, recording and documenting' their impressions. They sought areas outside of tourist guides that aligned to their own research interests, developed during the months previous to the residency, and used the material they gathered to 'articulate' their own 'readings' of the city (Mermoz 2004: 37). The results of the project were shown at an exhibition where viewers were invited 'to engage with the rhetoric' of the 'propositions', which were deliberately created in such a way as to avoid making definitive statements or enabling the drawing of a 'readymade conclusion'. These 'open' works required the viewer to 'extrapolate' their own conclusions (Mermoz 2006: 85).

The reversal of the roles of 'reader' and 'author' clearly repositions both graphic designer and the audience in a way that aligns with Barthes' (1977, 1990) thinking and addresses some of Lupton's issues with the original term. Although if one subscribes to the notion of research as offering 'new knowledge' then can the production of work without a 'conclusion' be considered research as such? Perhaps if the effects of this way of working were analysed further in relation to the audience and their understandings, some new insight might be gained, but it seems they were not. Therefore, this seems to be a definition of research that most academics would contest, regardless of discipline. However, this paper contends that graphic design does have the potential to contribute to academic research, and to this end suggests that by looking beyond art and design, graphic designers could develop a greater awareness and understanding of traditional qualitative research methods, enabling them to reframe and rethink their practice in a way that could redefine the graphic designer as 'researcher'¹.

Repositioning the designer as researcher: looking beyond the discipline

In *Graphic design: A user's manual*, (Shaughnessy 2009) the alphabetically ordered series of short texts moves from 'Rejection' to 'Sacking clients', with no mention of research, and historically there has been little integration between academic research and commercial graphic design, with the professional community often holding a negative view of 'academics' (Yee 2007: 2). A commonly held perception of research within graphic design is that it is purely 'information gathering', something that is undertaken at the beginning of a brief (Yee 2007: 3).

However, undergraduate students do regularly engage in qualitative research methods that go beyond simple information gathering—for example, they explore areas on foot, they take photographs and they keep research diaries. All strategies that essentially draw on ethnographic research methods. They then use their 'design process' to analyse, synthesise and evaluate their findings in order to progress their work, and these three iterative stages of a designer's process 'can also be applied to the research process' (Yee 2007: 5). Yet the majority of them do not have the language to articulate 'ethnography' as their methodology, nor do they have any real understanding of the traditions of qualitative research or research design. There is rarely any grounding in, or introduction to, any of the potential philosophical and methodological approaches of qualitative research. For doctoral students in many other disciplines, such introductions are covered at undergraduate level; within graphic design, this is rarely the case. There also

¹ Research, particularly that which engages a form of design practice, is an issue that is regularly discussed and debated within design focused higher education programmes, conferences and online forums/lists. Therefore, the notion of 'research' used within the context of this paper needs to be clarified. This paper does not equate practice to research, rather it sees the idea of the graphic designer as researcher as producing practice-led research, that is '[R]esearch in which the professional and/or creative practices of art, design or architecture play an instrumental part in an inquiry' (Rust, Mottram & Till 2007: 11). See Scrivener 2000 for an account of the use of reflection in practice-led doctoral research).

seems to be little preparation for progression from MA to PhD within graphic design. Perhaps this is unsurprising, as often students now use Masters programmes to prepare them more fully for the commercial world of work (Shaughnessy 2009: 102). Yet, if we wish the research territory in the field to deepen and expand, this lack of understanding or introduction to traditional research methods will continue to leave students ill-prepared for doctoral study.

Daniel van der Velden suggests that many of the conditions that could underpin the idea of 'graphic designer as researcher' are already in place;

Writing, agency, authorship, mobility, post-studio field work, new collaborations, strategic and theoretical activities all are transforming design into a knowledge-intensive multi-disciplinary discipline' (van der Velden 2011: 16).

The previous definitions of 'author', 'producer' and 'reader' have clearly all played their part in contributing to the development of this scenario, however, in order to fully develop the potential of 'graphic designer as researcher', this paper proposes that we need to look beyond the confines of art and design and engage in interdisciplinary work. Taking this different perspective offers both a fuller understanding of the traditions and methodologies of qualitative research that are more established in areas such as the social sciences but also a greater understanding of how many of the methods employed within the design process can be reframed as research methods. In relation to work of an interdisciplinary nature, Emma Cocker (2008) suggests that:

Being in a different place serves to distance the familiar and the known, such that a fresh and perhaps more critical vantage point may be developed through this geographically displaced perspective.

Such a position can help identify and articulate what graphic designers are not, but also what we are, or could be—in this case, 'graphic designer as researcher'.

It would seem that graphic design is well placed to undertake such interdisciplinary work, and as James Goggin (2011: 55) has stated, graphic design is a 'distinctly in-between discipline' which enables the infiltration and use of 'the systems of other disciplines when desired and where relevant'. This type of pluralist, 'boundary-less' approach is often said to be characteristic of an art and design research methodology (Gray & Malins: 2004²: 72–4) and can be described as that of the bricoleur (Denzin & Lincoln 2005: 4). However, this is not to suggest that it is simply a case of haphazardly 'throwing together' a set of methods, rather it is that a set of interlinked and related methods are drawn together to form a set which is developmental and coherent (Gray & Malins 2004: 72–74), so an understanding of the methods used is key. So how could such an approach work in practice? The following section discusses the author's doctoral research project that utilised this type of interdisciplinary approach.

Graphic designer as researcher: An example

Stemming from a belief that the practice of print based graphic design could offer a great deal to cultural geographic practices and theories relating to the understanding and representation of place, this practice-led doctoral research sought to develop a 'geo/graphic' design process that is interdisciplinary in nature (for more detail see Barnes 2012 and Barnes 2013). Undertaken primarily in the London borough of Hackney, the research draws on both ethnographic and design-led methods with which to understand and represent place. These included, amongst others, visual ethnography (Pink 2007), walking as a research method (Pink, Hubbard, O'Neill & Radley 2010); cultural probes (Gaver, Dunne & Pacenti 1999); auto-photography (Johnsen, May & Cloke 2008); and, participatory action research (Pedgley & Wormauld 2007). The ethnographic methods generated a range of textual and visual content about Hackney that enabled the development of a series of graphic design test projects that each centred on a particular aspect of place. The design test projects were adopted as a form of 'educative enquiry', which has similarities to participatory action research (Pedgley & Wormauld 2007: 79). In design research of this type, the designer acts as both observer and participant within the practice (Glanville 1999: 89) employing 'systematic self reflection' (Kemmis & McTaggart 2005: 563). The framing of graphic design practice as an

² This text has received criticism in some quarters (see Love 2006). However, the text usefully discusses how reflection can drive the process of practice-led research.

integral part of these methods enabled reflection on its ability to contribute to the process and results of the research.

Engaging with texts from the social sciences that focus on qualitative methods, such as ethnography, enabled a fuller understanding of issues including subjectivity, rhetoric, content analysis and the construction of ethnographic narratives. So, whilst the initial intent was for the research to reveal the potential that the graphic design process might offer cultural geographers, it soon became apparent that the reverse was also true. Having such an understanding enables a clearer positioning of many methods used within graphic design practice within this wider academic territory. However, it also enables one to bring a design specific, *subjective* approach to these methods, as the intent of such interdisciplinary work is not for the graphic designer to become an ethnographer, for example, but rather for the designer to be able to frame, and further develop, their practice within this new understanding, benefiting from the dialectical nature of this type of 'methodological synthesis' (Kincheloe 2001: 685). In order to illustrate this, the paper focuses on one test project, and in particular the process of prototyping as a form of analysis through graphic design practice.

The small, experimental book³ *Stuff* (fig. 1) was inspired by answers to the question 'What makes your house a home?' that was included within cultural probe packs. Many of the answers to the question listed items that related to memories and to the process of one's life unfolding over time. As Blunt & Dowling (2006: 114) have stated, many people's homes are 'sites of memory, filled with objects to remind them of family and events'. Things like photographs, travel souvenirs and childhood toys become autobiographical objects and form a spatial representation of identity—an autotopography, a 'physical map of memory, history and belief' (Gonzalez 1995: 133–4). Integral to who we are is a sense of our past and such possessions act as mnemonic devices that can reconstruct the past within the present (Gonzalez 1995: 136). Each item has a very particular, and more importantly, personal code of signification—a tatty childhood suitcase redolent with memories and remembered images for its owner, is another person's rubbish.



Fig. 1: *Stuff* is traditionally bound and covered with buckram cloth. 140 x 180mm

The book contains four different texts; an academic essay written about 'stuff'; a participant's life story written in relation to their 'stuff habit'; segments of conversation between researcher and participants about their 'stuff'; and, a range of memories and photographs of particular items referred to in participants' probe pack answers. The graphic and typographic interventions within the pages and format engage with

³ The term 'experimental book' is drawn from the idea of a 'livre d'avant garde', which challenges the conventions of the book in order to challenge both art and life (Amar, 2011: 2).

ideas of the processual, open-ended nature of place, montage writing, temporality, multi-sensoriality, and interactivity in such a way as to offer the reader a three-dimensional space that demands physical engagement with a multi-linear narrative. Here the knowledge and understanding drawn from cultural geography and ethnography is utilised *subjectively*, and brought to life through the communicative potential of graphic design and typography.

The design of *Stuff* was an integral part of the research process and it was not executed solely for the sake of visual representation. A geographer's central aim is not just to represent place, but to explore, understand, and make sense of the ongoing complex and relational production of place. The geo/graphic design process is therefore holistic, synthesising both form and content in order to facilitate both representation and understanding. It is this focus on understanding that elevates the practice of the graphic designer to that of graphic designer as researcher. Prototyping played a key role in developing this understanding, and this phase of the design process reveals comparisons with the use of walking as a research method. Walking is said to create 'embodied ways of knowing' (Pink et al 2010) and slows one down, effectively forcing the researcher 'to perceive actively, to make connections, to articulate thoughts and feelings which would otherwise remain at a pre-reflective or practical level of consciousness' (Tilley 2004: 223-4). Prototyping works in a similar way, the process of making slows one down and creates a physical form that enables a point of reflection and analysis within the design process. For example, various design interventions were developed during the prototyping phase. These enable the reader to get a greater understanding of; the private space of the home (fig. 2); how academic theories relating to collecting and personal possessions are practiced within everyday life (fig 3); how memories are often triggered by tangible artifacts (fig 4); how smell and touch can play a part in the recollection of places (figs. 5 & 6) and how these memories and meanings are more often than not hidden from view for anyone other than the owner (fig 7). They also all engage the reader with the form and materials of the book, encouraging them to touch, to explore and to interact, as they could in a real home.



Fig. 2: On 'entering' the book, a reader encounters end pages made of brightly patterned wallpaper. Contrasting with the front cover, they emphasise the move from the external public face of the 'street', to the internal personal space of the 'hallway'.

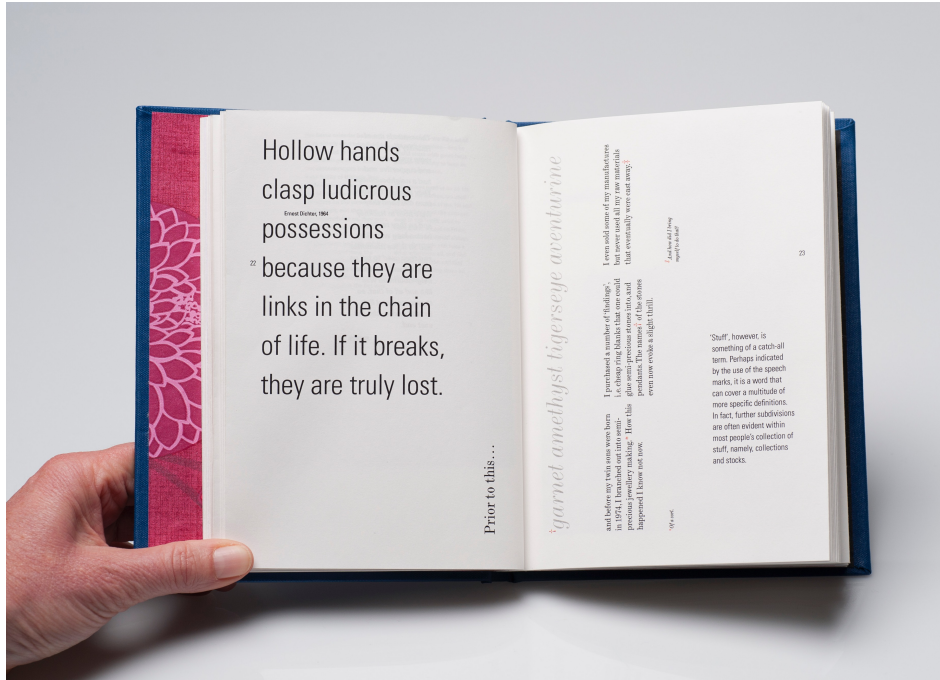


Fig. 3: Throughout the book the participant's life story is type set at a 90° angle. Readers must turn the book 90° to read this text. This physical act suggests readers literally move away from the other text, re-orienting themselves through this new information—perhaps like turning a map round so it is pointing in the same way one is going.



Fig. 4: Bound within *Stuff* are items that function as another page of the book, and create separate places of exploration, discovery and imagination. Envelopes containing used stamps, cigarette cards, letters, old photographs and slides—purchased from second hand shops in Hackney—are included, allowing the reader to draw out the contents. This physical engagement triggers a reader's memories of their own childhood hobbies, family holidays, or the experience of looking through drawers and cupboards in family homes that contain such collections. The book becomes interactive and, with the readers at the heart of the process, enables them to bring thoughts of their own to the experience that reinforce the possibility that each reading of the book will become an individual journey.



Figs. 5 & 6: Glassine paper interleaves some of the pages that contain images, and perfumed drawer liners create other pages. The use of these materials draws the reader's imagination to sites and objects they may have experienced previously: homes of older relatives or old family photographs in a traditional album collected through generations. This prompts the reader to frame their own understandings and memories of such items within the context and content of the book.



Fig. 7: The texts that explain the particular significance of many of the items contained within the book are hidden within the French folds, behind the image they refer to. This intervention engages with the fact that one's precious possessions are often meaningless to others. By positioning the captions in this way, the reader sees an old chair at first, with no sense of why it is meaningful, and what significant memories might be associated with it. By going beyond the face value of the image, by literally looking behind the surface of the page and discovering the captions, the chair becomes a gateway to memories of moving to, and falling in love with, a new city.

However, this interaction with the material form of the work is not only productive for the reader, it effectively re-sites the researcher in place—in this case Hackney and the participant's homes—and offers a further opportunity to reflect on one's experience. The geo/graphic design process in a sense, therefore, functions as an analytical tool for exploring the making of place through the making of the work. This can also be seen as a similar process to writing, which has been described as a deepening of 'analytical endeavour' (Coffey & Atkinson 1996: 109) and as a 'method of inquiry' rather than just a 'mode of telling' (Richardson 2000: 923).

Writing is also a way of 'knowing'—a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable (Richardson 2000: 923).

The practice of design has been likened to writing (Burdick 1995: np, Bruinsma 2001: 1) and if one were to substitute the word 'writing' with the word 'design' in Laurel Richardson's quote, the statement would not only make sense, but would sum up well the approach of this type of practice-led research.

This analysis enables the test projects to reveal theories about particular aspects of place and therefore work developed through this interdisciplinary approach could be defined as 'research through design' (Frayling 1993) or as Sevaldson (2010) suggests, 'research by design'. In this type of work, the designer as researcher takes on both the role of author and producer, yet this is not the kind of authorship or production that is driven by personal style or neglects theory. Here the authorial role is driven by the broader aims and articulation of the research itself, and the production is an analytical process within that research. Such an approach enables graphic designers to contribute beyond their discipline and it repositions the practice of graphic design to 'an instrument for the production and communication of knowledge' (Mermoz 2006: 77). This is not to suggest that graphic designers strive to become social scientists for example, but that by engaging with other disciplines and research traditions they may discover parallels with, and particularities within, their own practice. Finding such parallels should not be seen as in some way diminishing what is, or could be, particular about graphic design, rather it should be

seen as confirmation that the process can be rigorous and uses the type of methods which are commonly used in research (see McNiff & Whitehead 2006: 8).

Conclusion

Repositioning the 'graphic designer as researcher' builds on, and draws together, aspects of the previous definitions of 'author', 'producer' and 'reader'. Given its multi-faceted, integrative nature, the practice of graphic design would seem well placed to undertake a greater role in relation to research both within and beyond art and design. This bodes well for the future of postgraduate research within the discipline, though there is some work to do in enabling undergraduate graphic designers to recognize and articulate their research methods, and in developing further scaffolding between Masters programmes and doctoral research in relation to a greater understanding of research design and research methods. Perhaps there is also a need to develop aspirations in relation to this progression, not only in terms of thinking about doctoral research in relation to an academic career, but also in relation to the positive impact it could have within an industry that often holds a negative view of 'academics' (Yee 2007: 2).

In *Graphic design: A user's manual*, in the section 'Knowledge', Shaughnessy (2009: 172–3) asserts that graphic designers need a wide understanding of the world in order to engage fully with the diversity of projects they are likely to work on. He suggests that to accumulate it...

we need to speak to people from other disciplines; we need to watch and study; and once we've done all these things we need to keep doing them.

This would suggest that, again because of its integrative nature, graphic designer practitioners need interdisciplinary understandings. Don Norman (2011: np) has recently suggested that all designers these days are likely to work in multidisciplinary teams and Friedman (2000: 10–11) has suggested that the very nature of design places it at the intersection of six very large fields; natural sciences, humanities and liberal arts, social and behavioural sciences, human professions and services, creative and applied arts, and technology and engineering. Therefore, having an understanding of methods and approaches from outside of the discipline can only help in this instance, and being able to understand another's position and articulate one's own will surely lead to more productive collaboration. Repositioning the 'graphic designer as researcher' will facilitate the development of critically aware, articulate practitioners whose contextual understanding and reasoning can stand up to the clients' questioning and who, by inextricably linking theory with practice, can make work that not only looks good, but also answers the client's brief.

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