Original research article

DES IGN ING

Designing
2026, Vol. 0(0) 1–13

DOI: 10.1177/30497671261435974
journals.sagepub.com/home/des
Sage

Establishing the design management consultant as an innovation intermediary: Michael Farr (Design Integration) as an early outlier in networked organization

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Abstract

This paper investigates the emergence of design management as a professional practice through historical analysis of Michael Farr (Design Integration), founded in 1961 as Europe's first independent design management consultancy. Drawing on materials from the V&A Archive of Art & Design, supported by secondary sources, it examines how MFDI occupied a jurisdictional gap between design practice and business management in post-war Britain. Using Abbott's theory of professional jurisdiction, the study shows how Farr sought to define and legitimise this new professional role. A key influence was Bruce Archer and the emerging Design Methods movement, whose systematic approaches shaped MFDI's organizational model and operational philosophy. Archer's frameworks guided the coordination of remote freelance designers and the structuring of design processes. By analysing these early experiments, the paper sheds light on the challenges of professionalising design management, establishing legitimacy, and coordinating knowledge-intensive work – issues that still resonate in contemporary design practice and consultancy.

Keywords

management, design method(s), design history, case study, professionalization

Introduction

The history of design management is commonly told through a leadership-centred narrative, shaped by the histories a few prominent organizations and key figures. This is illustrated by individuals such as Peter Behrens at AEG (Borja De Mozota, 2003), Frank Pick at London Transport (Barman, 1979), Harley Earl at General Motors (Clarke, 1999), and Eliot Noyes at IBM (Harwood, 2011), as well as organizational exemplars such as Philips (Heskett, 1989) and Olivetti (Kicherer, 1990). These canonical accounts emphasise the integration of design into organizational strategy, framing design management as a coordinated function (Best, 2015; Bruce and Bessant, 2002; Cooper et al., 2011).

What this historiography marginalises are alternative organizational forms – most notably independent design management consultancies that sought to establish the practice as a distinct professional service outside corporate hierarchies. This corporate-centred narrative naturalises design management as an internal function and leaves independent consultancy models analytically underdeveloped. The result is a partial historical account in which early professionalisation is read primarily through processes of corporate integration, rather than through the more tentative and contested efforts to articulate design management as an independent consultancy service.

This paper examines the work of Michael Farr and his consultancy Michael Farr (Design Integration) Ltd (MFDI) to illuminate how design management emerged as a recognised professional practice in 1960s Britain. It considers why Farr's attempts to establish design management as an independent practice ultimately stumbled over the longer term. As one of the first systematic attempts at independent design management, MFDI offers a lens on practice that sits between established design and business management frameworks. Farr is widely credited as a key progenitor of the concept of design management, writing extensively on the subject and publishing *Design Management*, the first textbook on the subject in 1966. Despite recognition of his influence (Best, 2015; Cooper et al., 2011; Cooper and Press, 1995; Murphy and Evans, 2016), scholars have devoted little sustained attention to his ideas and virtually

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none to his independent practice. This research addresses the gap by focussing on Farr's consultancy, MFDI, and his collaboration with Design Methods innovator Bruce Archer, showing how the contemporaneous Design Methods movement shaped the conceptualisation and professionalisation of design management practice.

This study draws primarily on archival sources from the V&A Archive of Art & Design, triangulating these with contemporaneous secondary sources, and further supplements the analysis with accounts from those who worked with MFDI. It traces how Farr initiated a professional practice coordinating design processes across specialisms while attempting to remain commercially viable. The paper explores how Farr conceptualised design management between 1959 and 1961, establishing what is regarded as the first independent design management consultancy in Europe.

This analysis addresses three key questions: How did early design management practitioners seek to establish professional legitimacy in a contested jurisdictional space? What organizational innovations did they develop to coordinate distributed design networks? And why did independent design management consultancies struggle to remain viable beyond the 1970s? Examining these questions through the MFDI case draws attention to three interconnected dimensions – professional jurisdiction, the coordination of distributed design networks, and the ambiguity of value in knowledge-intensive services – which collectively frame the analysis that follows.

By revisiting MFDI's practices through the lens of professional jurisdiction, this paper recovers an overlooked episode in British design history. It addresses fundamental challenges in design management practice: how distributed design networks are coordinated, how professional authority is negotiated across disciplinary boundaries, and why independent design consultancies struggled to establish commercial viability. Examining how Farr and Archer addressed these issues in the 1960s provides historically grounded insights into how the role of design management was later understood and negotiated.

Theoretical framing

The emergence of design management can be understood through Andrew Abbott's (1988) theory of professional jurisdiction, which examines how professions establish, maintain, and contest claims over particular domains of expertise. Abbott argues that professions engage in boundary work to define territories and defend them from adjacent fields. In the context of 1960s Britain, design management emerged at the intersection of these domains, creating a jurisdictional gap where new expertise became necessary to mediate between existing professional communities.

The research draws on the corporate archive of Michael Farr (Design Integration) Ltd, housed in the V&A Archive of Art and Design. Comprising approximately 200 items – including notes, publicity material, patents, project briefs, reports and photographs – the collection offers a partial but valuable record of the firm's activities. Donated by Farr in 1989, the archive must be understood as a constructed source, shaped by the intentions and selectivity of its donor. As with many corporate or personal archives, it reflects a curated image, raising methodological concerns about omission and representation. To mitigate these limitations, the study also consulted secondary sources beyond the archive, cross-referencing contemporaneous publications such as design journals and annuals, as well as drawing on interview material from designers who worked with MFDI. The archive provides rich evidence of how MFDI was conceptualized, structured, and marketed, but more limited insight into enacted coordination practices. Project documentation emphasizes organizational arrangements over day-to-day mediation between designers and clients. This gap reflects a broader challenge in studying coordination work: phone calls, negotiations, and advisory conversations leave fewer documentary traces than contracts or diagrams. This analysis therefore focuses on how design management was conceived and institutionalized as a professional practice, while acknowledging that questions about the specific effectiveness of coordination activities remain partially unanswered.

Abbott's work illuminates how early design management figures like Michael Farr sought to establish professional authority over the coordination and strategic direction of design processes, negotiating boundaries with both creative design practice and general business administration. His framework explains why establishing design management as a distinct profession proved so difficult. Jurisdictional claims must be socially recognized and institutionally supported to become stable – yet early design management consultancies lacked the professional infrastructure to secure such recognition. Abbott's lens reveals these challenges as structural features of professional emergence, not individual failures.

The rise of design management also reflects transformations in professional services, characterized by what Mats Alvesson (2004) describes as the expansion of knowledge work; that is, activities that involve the creation, manipulation and application of symbolic knowledge rather than physical production. Design management exemplifies what Alvesson (2004, p. 21) terms the 'expert services' offered by Professional Service Firms (PSF) – professional activities claiming specialized expertise to solve complex problems. This perspective clarifies a central tension running through the MFDI archive: Farr's struggle to make his work visible and valuable. Unlike physical production, coordinating design processes left no tangible artefact, forcing Farr to continuously justify his consultancy through reports, presentations, and methodological frameworks.

This perspective helps explain why design management emerged when it did: the increasing complexity of post-war consumer markets, technological innovation and corporate communications created demand for specialized knowledge about how to coordinate and optimize design processes. However, as Alvesson notes, knowledge work is inherently ambiguous – its value is difficult to demonstrate, making it vulnerable to client scepticism and professional competition. The archival evidence shows this ambiguity playing out in Farr's client relationships.

The organizational model pioneered by consultancies like MFDI can be understood through Walter Powell's (1990) analysis of network organizations, which are hybrid forms that combine elements of markets and hierarchies to coordinate complex, knowledge-intensive activities. Powell argues that network forms suit contexts requiring rapid adaptation, specialized expertise and collaborative innovation; characteristics that describe the 1960s design services sector. Powell's analysis illuminates why MFDI took the particular organizational form it did, operating through flexible networks of specialists.

Scholarship on innovation systems provides another means for understanding design management's emergence. Jeremy Howells (2006: 720) conceptualizes 'innovation intermediaries' as agents that facilitate knowledge transfer and collaboration between different professional communities, helping to bridge cognitive and cultural gaps that impede innovation. Design management consultants can be understood as a type of innovation intermediary, specializing in translating between the creative logics of design practice and the commercial imperatives of business management. Howells' concept illuminates Farr's distinctive role: not designing products himself, but orchestrating collaboration between those who did design and those who commissioned it.

Drawing these theoretical perspectives together, this analysis employs three interconnected dimensions: Professional Legitimacy – how design management sought to establish itself as a distinct professional domain; Network Coordination – how early consultancies organized distributed professional networks; and Value Creation and Capture – how they attempted to demonstrate and sustain their value proposition. These dimensions provide the framework for examining design management's historical emergence while connecting this analysis to contemporary debates about professional practice and organizational innovation. Together, these frameworks make visible structural patterns in Farr's practice that the archival materials document, but do not themselves explain.

Post-war design culture and jurisdictional opportunities

Michael Bryant Farr's path into design management exemplifies the fluid professional boundaries that characterized post-war British design culture. Born in 1924, Farr graduated from Cambridge University in 1949 with a degree in English Literature, having studied under literary critic F. R. Leavis. His transition from literary criticism to design journalism and later to design management consultancy, illustrates what Abbott (1988) describes as the permeable boundaries of emerging professional fields before disciplinary territories are rigidly defined.

Farr's lack of formal design training made him a relative outsider to the design profession, but this marginality later proved advantageous for developing a jurisdictional claim that transcended traditional design practice. His collaboration with Nikolaus Pevsner on what would become *Design in British Industry: A Mid-Century Survey* (Farr, 1955), provided professional credibility while establishing his expertise in analysing design as a business activity rather than an artistic one.[1]

Farr's (1955: xxxvi) early writing tended towards a moralising tone, typical of the era, setting out the need to 'fight against the shoddy design of goods' considered 'thoughtless', 'insensitive', 'dishonest', 'vulgar' or 'boastful'. Here he aligned himself with a trope of British reformist design, the social idealism that demonized so-called 'bad' design and valorised 'good'.[2]

In 1950s, Britain designers were seen as needing to serve social needs in an era of post-war reconstruction. In the US, by contrast, Farr (1955: 151) described how 'personal responsibility for a design standard tended to be obscured by the need for making money'.[3] Though Hayward (1998) argues that the axiom of good design was about an elitist form of good taste designed to influence mass culture preferences, many British designers of the post-war era *were* intrinsically motivated by social purpose, believing it to be part of their professional responsibility (Armstrong, 2015).[4] In Farr's case, he aligned himself to a human-centred form of industrial design as opposed to the more commercial impetus of advertising, with his later interest in ergonomics reinforcing the notion that he was actively interested in, and motivated by human wellbeing.

After finishing work on *Design in British Industry*, Farr took the role of News Editor at *The Architect's Journal*, which led to the post of Editor at the Council of Industrial Design's (CoID) magazine, *Design*. Farr remained Editor for 7 years. When he left the role in 1959 he remained with the CoID for a further 2 years, acting as Chief Information Officer. During this phase he became General Secretary at the Design and Industries Association, serving from 1962 to 1966 (Farr, 1991).

Farr's editorial roles at *The Architect's Journal* and *Design* provided insight into the challenges facing British industry's engagement with design. Recognizing that existing professional expertise was inadequate to address emerging problems, he identified a jurisdictional gap in industrial management's understanding of design's potential contribution to economic progress. This gap existed because traditional design practice focused on creative problem-solving within defined briefs, while business management lacked the specialized knowledge to effectively coordinate design processes.

The increasing complexity of post-war corporate communications, product development, and branding created demand for 'knowledge workers' (Alvesson, 2004: 8) who could bridge these professional domains. Farr's reflection that he had struggled in formulating the philosophy he later called design management (Farr, 1991) reveals the conceptual work required to establish new professional territories. This involved not merely identifying unmet needs but articulating a coherent professional identity that could legitimate claims to specialized expertise.

Farr was not alone in his attempts to establish design management within the British industrial context. By the

mid-60s *Design* began to cover the subject more frequently. In January 1965 they reported on the establishment of the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) Presidential Awards for Design Management.[5] These awards celebrated 'long pioneering' work by Heal's (furniture) and London Transport; while Conran & Co (furniture), W. & A. Gilbey (wine and spirits), Hille (furniture) and Jaeger (fashion) were awarded for 'current achievement' (Blake, 1965). The list of awardees shows recognition went to consumer-facing organizations and brands, not individual design managers or consultancies. In this sense Farr's company was antithetical to trends of the era, with design management typically understood as an in-house provision rather than a consultant operation that could be bolted-on.

Design magazine's early coverage aligned with the awards initiative of the RSA, with three articles profiling awardees. Dennis Cheetham (1965) interviewed managing directors from the contemporary award-winners, while Corin Hughes-Stanton (1965a, 1965b) profiled London Transport and Heal's design management policies. These articles appearing May–July were followed in August by Farr (1965b) feature from his forthcoming book, 'Design management: Why is it needed now?'. Across these issues *Design* began establishing a recognized community of practice around this new profession.

Developments at *ID* magazine in the US followed a similar path, initially focused on product planning, before turning to design management between 1967 and 1971 (Cooper et al., 2011). In the UK the early enthusiasm for design management within *Design* was short-lived, and by the 1970s the magazine emphasized broader applications of design. Although the Design Management Institute was founded in 1975, disciplinary discourse remained stagnant (Cooper et al., 2011), until Peter Gorb's (1986) *The Business of Design Management* and the 1989 launch of the *Design Management Journal*.

Establishing an Independent design Management Consultancy

Farr had begun developing his consultancy model several years before design management discourse gained momentum. His path to this innovation was shaped by a decade of immersion in British design culture. During his early career as a writer and journalist, Farr developed a comprehensive understanding of British design, building relationships with influential practitioners and policymakers.[6] These experiences positioned him advantageously for what would follow.

Farr (1991: para. 5) later reflected on Design magazine's role in enabling his venture:

> It is necessary to stress what *Design* magazine meant to me because it was there that I conceived the idea that not all was going to go well with design in industry unless there was a greater understanding on the part of management of what designers could do. Although the term was not used in those days, I was struggling to formulate the philosophy which I later called design management, and how it should be practised.

Explaining how he had come to work in the field, he (Farr, 1991: para. 6) explained:

> I had a rather peculiar upbringing in the design business. I am not a designer as most people in the business are, but I had been closely concerned with it and had also been a journalist. I had been able to look, partly from the outside, at what the problems were likely to be in industry. In writing up stories I had talked to many manufacturers and designers about the difficulties they faced. I am not talking about just one type of design but a broad area – all types of product design and some light engineering goods, graphics of all kinds, and interior design. I wanted to make some contribution to all of these. One designer could not possibly be knowledgeable in all of them, but a design management consultant could have a working knowledge with the main problems which beset this big variety of industries.

The second phase of Farr's career began in 1959, formalising the principles of MFDI. Though he had identified the need for practitioners who could bridge the gap between design and management, he needed to formalize principles and assess whether the practice could be viable.

The new independent design management consultant would operate as a conduit between design practitioners and industry leaders, coordinating operations from the vantage point of an external agent. As Farr (1965b: 38) later defined it, the function of design management would be in 'defining a design problem, finding the most suitable designer, and making it possible for him to solve it on time and within budget'. He framed this as a consciously managed exercise which applied to all design disciplines and all aspects of designers' work. Though modestly defined, in practice MFDI's model of design management covered a wide range of functions, taking in design strategy (defining vision and goals), the administrative management of design (people and project delivery) as well as operational dimensions that enabled designers to focus on creative tasks.

Between 1959 and 1961 Farr planned his consultancy, launching MFDI in November 1961. Historical records from the V&A (Farr, 1956–86) provide valuable insights into the concerns and working methods Farr adopted during the establishment of this groundbreaking design management consultancy. These records from the final months of 1961 reflect his apprehension about the dramatic career change he was about to undertake. Leaving the Design Council was risky, especially with four children to support.

As he developed the model for his new practice Farr sought advice from industrial design luminaries, recording suggestions on loose note sheets (Farr, 1961). His confidants included Misha Black, partner in the industry leading consultancy Design Research Unit; Gordon Russell, furniture designer and director of the Design Council; Willy de Majo, Director of W. M. de Majo Associates and F. H. K. Henrion, Director of Henrion Design Associates. Russell advised on finance, while others offered operational guidance on the service's value. Henrion mentioned a German designers' society,

'Novum'; Black suggested that 'coordination may be worth more than the design fees'. In highlighting the inestimable value to the client of design coordination services, Black reinforced the opportunity that Farr sought to address.

At this time design in Britain was transforming from a cottage industry into a recognized contributor to industrial growth. Farr was not the only one attempting to capitalize on opportunities to bridge between design and business, with other, more commercially ambitious figures also recognising the potential. Whereas Farr positioned design management as a satellite service, James Pilditch and Wally Olins integrated management into their own firms, using design not just as a service but as a strategic business advantage to shape corporate identity and drive market growth. Pilditch founded Allied International Designers in 1959 and became the first Briton to float a design business on the stock exchange. Olins, meanwhile, joined forces with Michael Wolff in 1965, forming the influential branding agency Wolff Olins – prior to this Wolff had worked for MFDI through his previous company Main Wolff.[7]

Conceptualising a design Management Practice

Archival documents held at the V&A show the most forceful influence on Farr's thinking came from his close associate Bruce Archer. Born in 1922, Archer had trained as a mechanical engineer at what is now City University, London. He set up an engineering consultancy in 1953 and was teaching evening classes at the Central School, going full-time by 1957 (Boyd-Davis and Gristwood, 2016). Where Archer and Farr met is unclear, but Archer (1954) contributed articles to *Design* during Farr's tenure as Editor, with his ideas about rational design methods making an impression on Farr. Designer Ken Garland (cited in Twemlow, 2013: 77) explains:

Farr's own inclinations were towards human-factors design – and he was most comfortable working with writers like Christopher Jones, Brian Shackel, and Bruce Archer, who held similar views.

While others had influenced his thinking from afar, Archer became an employee of Farr's company, operating as design co-ordinator on projects including a house style for Brook Green Laundry.[8] His input into the ideology and principles of the firm is significant given he was a key figure in the modernisation and development of design methods in Britain. As a progenitor of the Design Methods movement, he championed a dogmatic systems approach to design and its management.[9] His text, *Systematic methods for designers*, was influential, being reissued as an offprint, due to unprecedented interest (Council of Industrial Design, 1965: 73).[10]

Archer's technocratic mind-set profoundly influenced the business, as indicated by Farr's personal notes from the period. One example from a meeting between the pair on 30 October 1961 indicates that Archer helped Farr to work up the fundamental idea and operational structure of his business (Farr, 1961). Labelled 'Meeting with Bruce Archer, Monday 30/10/61', the front of the sheet is dominated by a sketch of a network diagram with a central hub and spokes leading to connected modules (Figure 1). It is notable that throughout

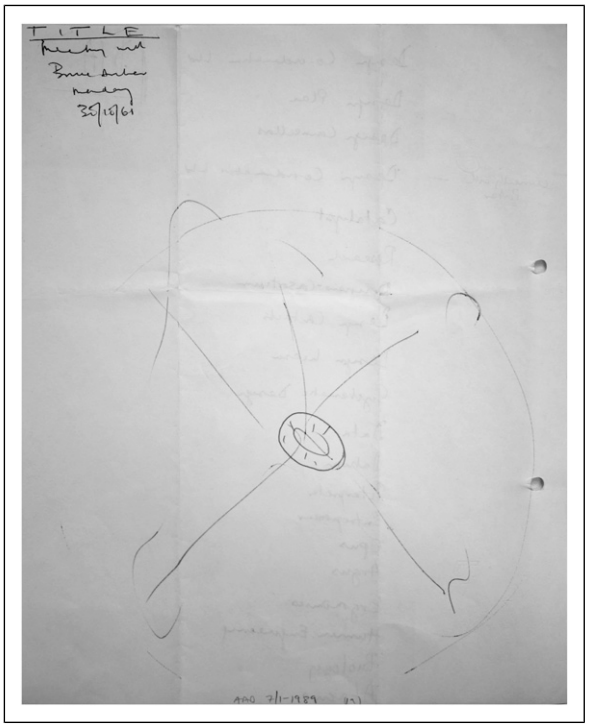

Figure 1. Sketched network diagram. From Michael Farr meeting notes with Bruce Archer, 1965. Item held by the V&A Archive of Art and Design, Michael Farr Archive, AAD/1989/7/1. Estate of Michael Farr; courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

their careers Archer and Farr consistently used complex diagrammatic models in their publications and journalism. Though rough by comparison, it hints at the emergent nature of their proposition at this stage. This emergent model of distributed collaboration anticipates the informally networked forms that Powell (1990) later theorises, even if they appeared here in improvised and fragile early form.

The reverse of the sheet lists company names, suggesting that Archer worked directly with Farr to scope options. Their suggestions reveal the ideological emphases they toyed with. From notions of organizational planning ('Design Co-ordination Ltd', 'Design Plan') and systematic rigour ('Systematic Design'), to ideas about social networks ('Design Contacts', 'Designers Consortium', 'Human Engineering') and the link between design and business ('Design Liaison'). These names indicate both their intent and the limits of their thinking. Later entries resemble keywords rather than viable names. One playful example, 'argus', from Greek mythology – a watchman with a hundred eyes – hints ominously at designers' prospects under their command.

A subsequent sheet shows refined proposals including 'Design Counsellors' and 'Design Network' alongside the chosen name, Michael Farr (Design Integration) Ltd. Farr's choice to prioritize his own name is striking, but ultimately understandable given his profile, as consultancies very often named themselves after the established designers who led them.[11] While setting 'Design Integration' in brackets framed it as an adjunct (Figure 2), the inclusion of 'integration' implied a range of possibilities: a cohesive service with streamlined administration; the

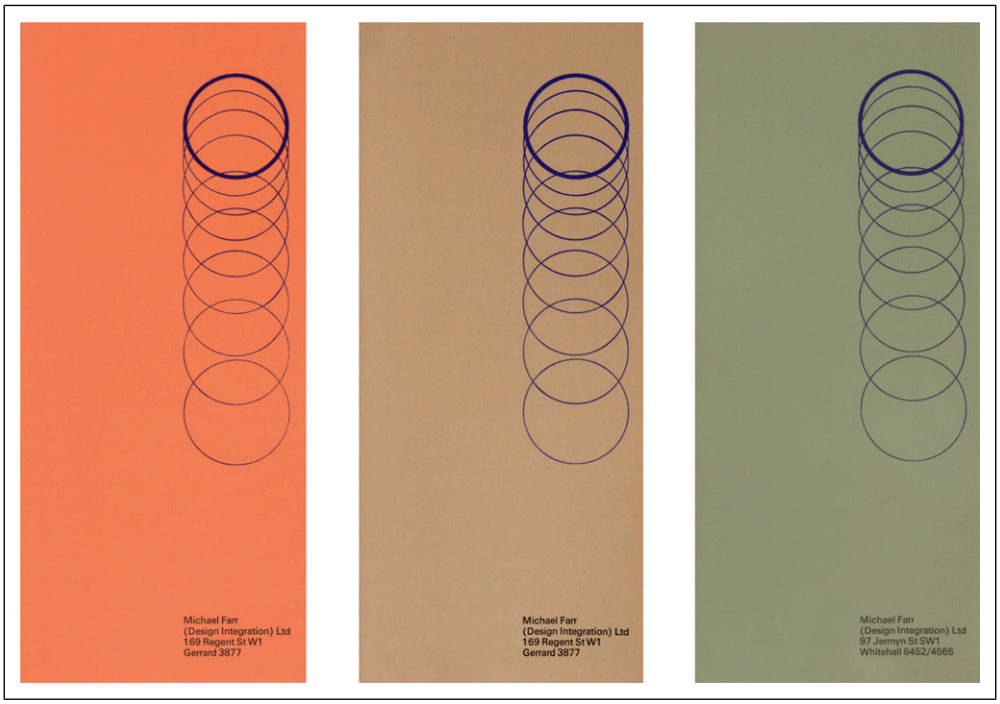

Figure 2. Marketing pamphlets promoting the services of Michael Farr (Design Integration), 1961. Designed by Ken Garland & Associates. Image courtesy of the Estate of Michael Farr.

promise of consistent 'house style' outputs; integration with client operations; or coordination across multiple design specialisms.

A final note underscores Archer's influence: 'Bruce Archer in association with Michael Farr (Design Integration) Ltd' Farr may have been testing the name in a hypothetical press release, but this is further evidence that Archer's ideas directly influenced his business plan. If his level of influence remained in doubt, a note labelled 'IMAGE Basic premise worked out by BA' lists facets and ideas for the firm, not all intelligible (Farr, 1991: n.pag). In this list, he notes his intent to be an 'all co-ordinating' force at the 'centre of a communications network', a 'seller of services, not of things' and a 'counsellor' aiming to 'govern all I surround myself with'. Given the rapidly increasing importance of television within advertising and design during the period, Farr's analogy that he would seek to offer the 'Versatility of [a] TV producer' is pertinent as a representation of technological trends of the era.

Farr and Archer's initial planning meetings occurred in 1961 while Archer was a visiting lecturer at Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm (1960–1961), among the most important post-war design schools (Jacob, 1988; Spitz, 2002).[12] Archer was invited by Tomás Maldonado to lecture and act as mediator between the school's two rival factions: mathematicians and scientists/designers.[13] Ulm's raison d'être was a scientific and objective approach to design, characterized by design historian Jonathan Woodham (1997: 180) as:

> ...a move away from intuition to method, from component to system, from product to process, and from the individual to an interdisciplinary design team as an appropriate means of solving problems.

Archer's visiting lectureship at Ulm (1960–1961) provided international legitimacy for MFDI's systematic approaches. The Ulm philosophy aligned with Archer's interests, and he and his colleagues mutually influenced each other. Among the luminaries to have graced Ulm it would be possible to conclude that Archer's short tenure had limited significance, but communication scholar and former student Klaus Krippendorff (2008: 62) cites Archer as 'the most influential product design teacher for me', recalling how he 'brought a design method to the department; was intensely involved with his students and open to explore alternative approaches'.[14] According to Krippendorff, Archer and Horst Rittel had 'worked well together and later became major pillars of the Design Methods movement' (2008: 64).

Archer's involvement with Farr at this formative moment was mutually beneficial, not a one-way influence. Farr benefitted from Archer's interest in operational research and scientific management, while Archer's association with MFDI enabled him to 'engage deeply with the commercial world' (Boyd Davis and Gristwood, 2016: 2). In his 1968 doctoral thesis, Archer credits Farr with providing 'many opportunities to put his theories to the test within the framework of Michael Farr design management organization' (Archer, 1968).

Marketing a design Management Consultancy

As design management was a new concept, Farr considered how to position the company to attract clients and achieve profitability. On one sheet, Farr (1961) lists selling points deemed pivotal for attracting clients:

Announcement aimed at clients

One bill for everything

Know all in design world – multiple personality

Evaluation – pre brief – co-ordinate – see it thro

Communicator – network controller – conductor

International – pan European

Ex COID – DESIGN during its formative years

author of standard work

COID as the authority today – Head of Inf DW

MF is now AVAILABLE!

as entrepreneur

Marketing – research briefing – designing new products to meet human needs – no gimmick styling for fashion

Low overheads and comprehensive service

Save clients' money by planning and expert placing

Business-like designing – to time

Field covered

In this positioning Farr highlighted his expertise and the merits of his business offer to clients, claiming jurisdiction across a range of specialisms and suggesting he has the 'field covered' and 'knows all' in the business. This highlighted his advantage over consultancies lacking a management focus. This episode illustrates how the ambiguity of knowledge-intensive work materialised in practice (Alvesson, 2004), requiring continual justification of co-ordination as a billable service.

Farr (1966: 38) later argued that 'good designers' should not manage their own projects, even when capable of doing so. He claimed that given designers' training and experience lay in design, this is how they should be best engaged and fulfilled. This contrasted with British consultancies where creative practitioners assumed leadership roles, managing staff while overseeing production and design. This was the case for Henrion, Schleger and De Majo's companies, as well as Design Research Unit, the company of Misha Black and Milner Gray; with the design personalities at the heads of the firms transitioning from craftsmen to leadership figures.

Farr considered registering as a sole trader or limited company, ultimately choosing the latter. Archer (cited in Farr, 1961) advised that setting up alone offered more freedom, warning that forming with designers would be a 'glorified agency – an exchange and mart'. Together they worked through the logistics of how to enlist designers to projects, with Archer advising: 'Just tell des[igner] "I like your work – and I think I can sell it" – but make no agreement to do so – hold out hope of putting designer on a retainer later'. This implies designers were not contracted, but might later gain permanent agreements. Farr (1961) notes later in his papers that 'Designers will tend to come after me if the business goes well. And I'm still free to call on the best men for the job'.

Their networked arrangement was one of MFDI's most unorthodox features. The model centred on dynamic, project-specific organization rather than a fixed workforce. This resembles modern creative industries' 'project-based organization', where freelance talent is pooled per project (DeFillippi, 2015).

Rather than hosting designers in their office they took the unusual step of managing designers working remotely. Farr justified this to keep overheads low, maintaining a small coordinating London office for fast communication and minimal costs. Working separately would require strict communication protocols, with Farr (1961) noting that:

> All des[igners] working for MF to supply MF with carbon [copy] of everything written or ordered on behalf of the job. Or, all orders thro' MF office & all correspondence.
>
> Phone calls by des[igners] on job to be logged by him in handy note block & pencil supplied by MF. Each page serial numbered. Each sheet to be large size pre-paid postcard addressed to MF.

The idea that calls between designers and clients would be logged on postcards and delivered through the post was a form of micro-management, but Farr was concerned about retaining command over what he saw as the free-spirited creatives under his watch – he believed that designers were concerned primarily with the artistic standard of their work, with little concern for business issues (Farr, 1955). These administrative protocols similarly reflect attempts to stabilise and make visible forms of coordinating labour that are otherwise difficult to evidence or measure.

Operating a design Management Practice

MFDI's client base reflected their vision for design management as a cross-sector professional service. The consultancy served organizations including Dancer & Hearn (furniture), Brook Green (launderers), International Computers & Tabulators (data processing equipment), Crookes Laboratories (pharmaceuticals), V. & E. Friedland (chimes and doorbells) and B. Lilly & Sons (builders' hardware). The ultimate goal of their work was typically focused on coordination of one kind or another. Whether it be supporting the development of a coherent corporate image or overseeing the design of a coordinated range of products – often the two factors playing out in tandem.

Concentrating on the strategic management of design, they recruited and briefed creatives, controlled budgets and schedules, and ensured effective deployment of design talent in service of the hiring organization. They appear to have been relatively unconcerned with the art direction or micro-management of creative work, driven instead by how design strategically integrated with the business policies and economic ambitions of their clients. They also sought to influence organizational structures, advocating for systems that would embed design more systematically within client

operations. The case of Crookes Laboratories illustrates both the scope and limitations of this approach.

Farr's plan to tightly control the relationship between designers and his clients proved difficult to realise, with some designers having only limited interaction with him and his colleagues at MFDI. Within the archival records at the V&A, John McConnell has been credited as a key figure for his graphic design work on the house style for Crookes Laboratories (Farr, 1965a). Farr's (1966a) book shows that McConnell was hired at the same time as Roger Brockbank, another freelance designer specialising in product and pack design. Together they had been contracted by the client to work on package and label designs.

Although (personal communication, September 28, 2017) recalls his close collaboration with Crookes' Publicity Manager, John Meyer, he has no recollection of working with MFDI or Farr. This is notable given that archival records credit MFDI with managing his work, suggesting that the consultancy's coordination role remained largely invisible to some of the designers it engaged. While this was not necessarily universal – photographs (Farr, 1966a) indicate occasions on which designers and design management consultants met to approve proposals prior to client presentations – it is significant that MFDI did not register with McConnell's as a meaningful presence in the relationship between designer and client.

A Crookes organizational diagram from 1966 (Figure 3) illustrates MFDI's proposed role within the firm. They position themselves as a centralized management service at the heart of the company, reporting to the managing director as an intermediate step between director and middle management. The diagram shows that design talent was managed by the administrative team on the client side, so MFDI had only tenuous links to implementing designers in this case. This indicates they had limited contact with McConnell and Brockbank, challenging assumptions about what design managers ought to provide in terms of creative oversight. This corroborates McConnell's account that the internal publicity manager at Crookes had been the regular contact point for him and that MFDI were peripheral to his experience of working for the company. Furthermore, (personal communication, September 28, 2017) suggests that his work for Crookes had most likely come through the Design Council's recommendation service. This suggests Farr had relied upon his previous employers at the Design Council for such recruitment needs.

In MFDI's project report for Crookes they suggested updates to clarify and restate what they could actually provide and to help streamline how their clients could access these services. This responded to client restructuring and ongoing concerns about the limited impact of their work. They sought to clarify what they were accountable for, claiming 'MF(DI)'s role should again be clearly defined and publicly promulgated' (Farr, 1966b: 5). They emphasized that they should remain directly answerable to the managing director, who would decide how their services were used. They recommend a work ticketing system which would, 'enable any department to initiate design work in a consistent and methodical way' (Farr, 1966b: 6). Central to the report was better control of design work within Crookes, embedding MFDI's services and directing demand productively.

The diagram highlights that flexibility and adaptive development are needed to respond to unpredictable

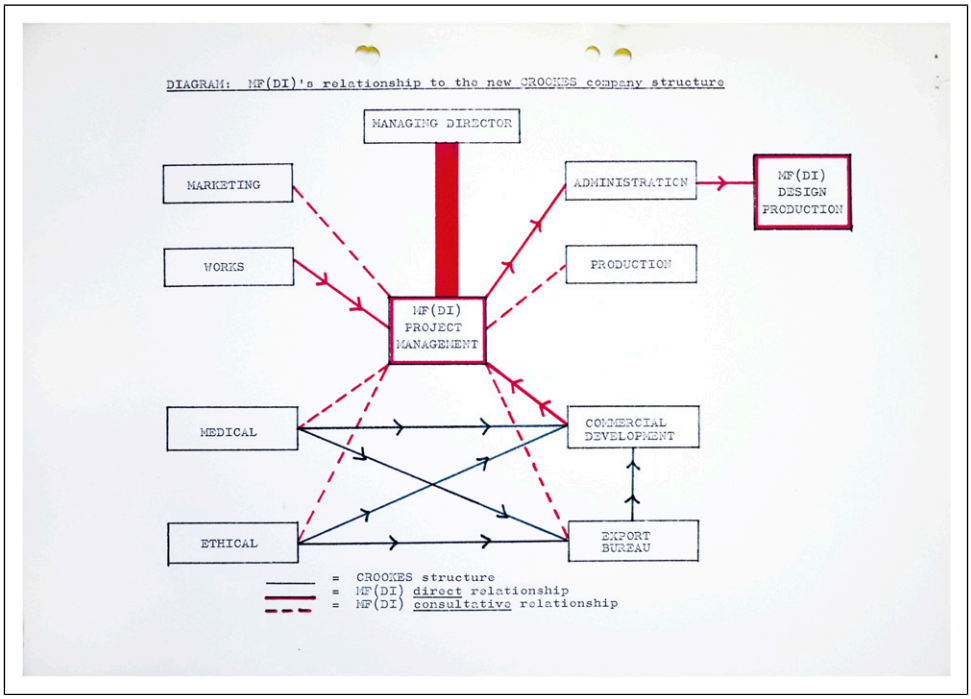

Figure 3. 'Diagram: MF(DI)'s relationship to the new CROOKES company structure', from *Report No 11*, Michael Farr business correspondence with The Crookes Laboratories (1 of 10 pages), 13 June 1966. Item held by the V&A Archive of Art and Design, Michael Farr Archive, AAD/1989/7/67–82. Estate of Michael Farr; courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

situations. This flexibility contrasts with the precise, technocratic diagrams typically favoured by Farr and Archer, who attempted to lock down inflexible models. Archer's (1965) design process codification produced a cumbersome 229-step, 14-page arrow diagram. Farr's codification of design management (Figure 4) was less complex, but similarly prescriptive, creating a universal model unlikely to be replicable in other contexts.

MFDI worked with emerging designers, aiming to introduce young creative talent into industry. They employed developing practitioners who went on to shape the development of corporate design. Key figures included Bill Moggridge (later Ideo), Michael Wolff (later Wolff Olins), Crosby/Fletcher/Forbes (later Pentagram), Dick Negus (Negus and Sharland), John McConnell (later Pentagram) and Ken Garland, known for his First Things First Manifesto.

In his book, Farr (1966: 78) weighed the pros and cons of employing independent young designers:

> The prevalence of small design practices makes life both better and more difficult for the design manager. Among the advantages he will see that the designer, once he has found the right man, is an expert in his particular field, otherwise he would not have survived as freelance. The design manager will be able to command the designer's personal attention throughout the project, and not have to deal with second and third string assistants. He will find that the designer's overheads are lower than those carried by larger practices, and hence his fees more modest. Among the disadvantages he may encounter are (oddly annoying this) the difficulty of getting a message through to the designer if he is away from his office; delays because the designer is unwilling to delegate; and a noticeable lack of interest in the routine of paperwork that is to some degree, always required during any design assignment.

He downplays designers' administrative abilities, reinforcing the need for dedicated design managers. In *Design Management* (1996) he gave short shrift to the contractual side of commissioning designers, deferring to Dorothy Goslett's (1961) *Professional Practice for Designers*. This may be explained by the fact that MFDI's designers were contracted by the client rather than MFDI, a system which ultimately enabled clients and designers to bypass MFDI.

Aside from the challenge of managing creatives, Farr needed to appoint design management staff to support day-to-day operations. His staffing strategy reflects challenges facing emerging professions in developing appropriate human resources. As Farr (1991) later reflected, 'you couldn't get a design manager off the shelf. In those days there was no training such as you now find in business and design schools; it was not possible 25 years ago to second or even poach from somewhere else'. This situation necessitated training project managers from adjacent disciplinary fields.

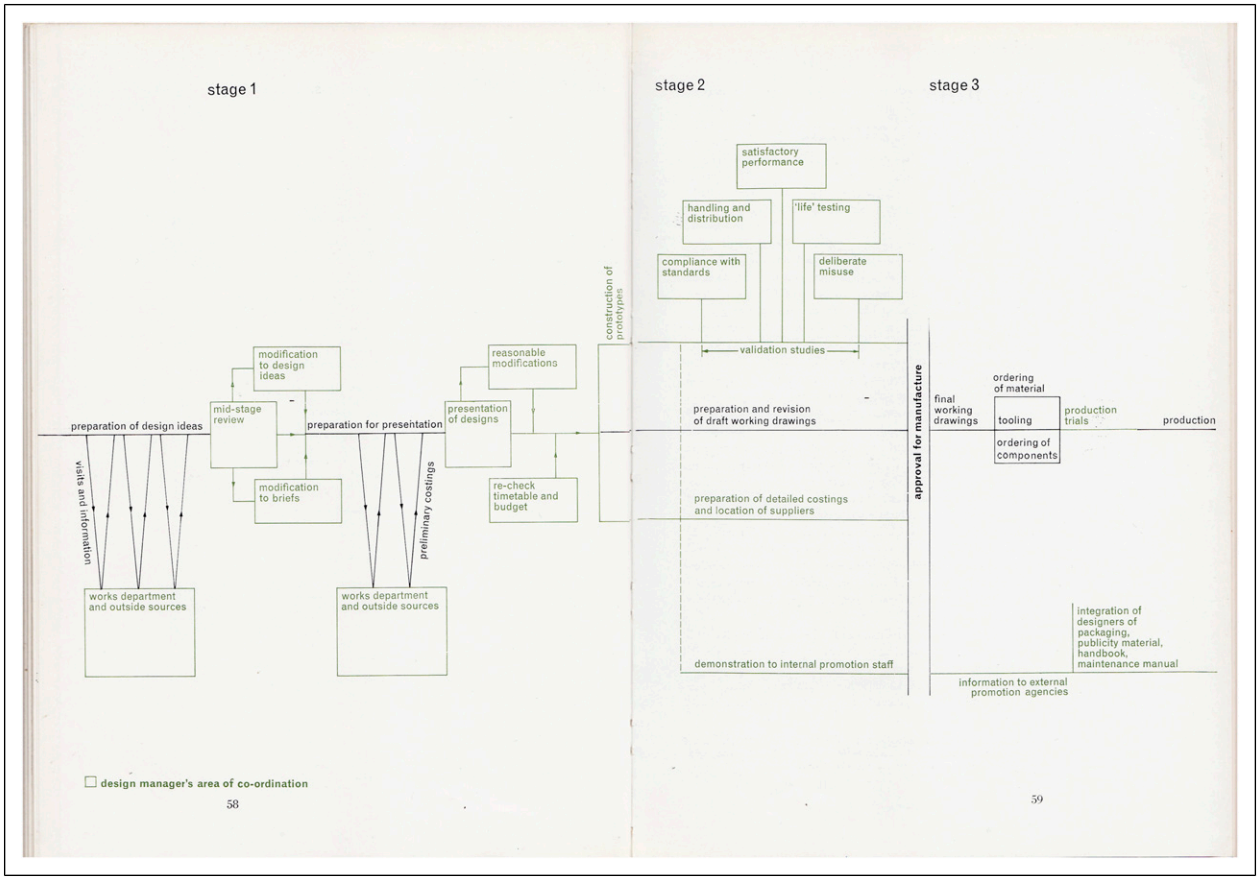

Figure 4. Two-page excerpt of 'Planning a Design Programme' diagram, from *Design Management* by Michael Farr, 1966a, pp. 58–59. Image courtesy of the Estate of Michael Farr.

Figure 5. Photograph of design briefing meeting for a record player project, with Michael Farr facing the camera to centre. Excerpt from *Design Management* by Michael Farr, 1966a, p. 156. Image courtesy of the Estate of Michael Farr.

Project managers included David Wainwright (Oxford, Journalism) and Donald Pattenden (Cambridge, Mechanical Sciences). Other staff included research assistant Caroline Pearce-Higgins (King's College) and assistant project manager Anthony Taylor (LSE). Archer appeared as 'Design Co-ordinator' in early materials (Farr, 1961) and remained on the staff list (Farr, 1956–1986) without a specific role. Albert Everett Jones, was a director and chairman of Everetts Advertising and Mass Observation.[15] Other surviving records indicate further staff, including former Notley Advertising account executive Michael Milliken (Oxford) and interior ship designer John West (Durham) as senior project manager (Farr, 1956–1986).

The credentials of the staff team (Figure 5) – including Oxbridge and Russell Group graduates – suggests a strategy of importing professional competence rather than design-specific knowledge. This reflects Evetts' (2006: 139) concept of 'organizational professionalism', developing professional practices within commercial contexts rather than via traditional education or institutions. Project managers developed hybrid expertise, combining design knowledge with business management, creating a new professional practice via on-the-job learning.

The inclusion of racing driver and broadcaster Stirling Moss as 'Special Projects Advisor' and later director shows an attempt to leverage celebrity and cross-industry connections. This reflects the importance of social networks in establishing professional credibility, particularly for emerging practices that lack established institutional support.

MFDI operated from 1961 to 1974 and moved premises regularly, operating from six locations, expanding and contracting in response to fluctuating demand. While they completed many commissions in their first decade, by the end of the 1960s Farr began to diversify his interests, directing Organized Office Designs Ltd and Farr Ergonomics Ltd from the same premises. Collectively these firms were responsible for over a hundred design projects completed in Britain and Europe (Farr, 1991).

As demand declined, Farr moved operations from central London to Hampstead and later Birmingham. During this period, he published *Control Systems for Industrial Design* (Farr, 1973), building on the earlier success of *Design Management* (Farr, 1966a). In 1976 he moved to Hong Kong and became head of the Swire School of Design, a post held for 11 years, up to his retirement when he returned to England.

Conclusion

The case of MFDI illuminates both possibilities and vulnerabilities in establishing new professional practices in knowledge-intensive service sectors such as design management. This analysis has shown how Farr's vision emerged from a jurisdictional gap in post-war Britain, where established professions proved inadequate for coordinating increasingly complex corporate design processes. His attempt to institutionalize design management as an independent professional domain reveals the precariousness of jurisdictional claims in contested fields of practice.

Farr's background as a design journalist, far from a disadvantage, proved strategically useful in enabling him to cross professional boundaries. Yet MFDI's lean, network-oriented model – while anticipating contemporary organizational forms – faced enduring challenges of value capture and coherence. These dynamics reaffirm the instability of emerging professional jurisdictions, underscoring the kinds of contested boundary work that Abbott (1988) identifies as characteristic of new or weakly institutionalized expert domains. MFDI's operational difficulties also illuminate the fragility of early network-based organizational forms, echoing the challenges identified in analyses of hybrid or intermediary structures (Howells, 2006; Powell, 1990). Despite conceptual sophistication, MFDI struggled with what Alvesson (2004) calls the ambiguity of knowledge work: clients and designers could bypass the consultancy's coordination role, undermining its claim to indispensability.

The interplay between Farr and Archer illustrates how theoretical development and practical experimentation advanced together. What is striking in this case is how design management practice evolved in tandem with the

development of the Design Methods movement, with the MFDI operation serving as a testing ground for Archer's ideas. This case shows that addressing jurisdictional gaps through conceptual innovation alone proves insufficient, as enduring practices require institutional arrangements supporting both expertise and commercial viability.

Farr's challenges resonate with later efforts to systematize and commodify design expertise, most notably the rise of 'design thinking' in the 2000s and 2010s. Like Farr's attempts to codify design management, design thinking proposed that design's contribution to innovation could be captured in reproducible methodologies – workshops, toolkits, and staged processes accessible to non-designers (Brown, 2008, 2009). Both initiatives involved jurisdictional boundary-crossing: Farr, trained in literature, claimed authority to coordinate design processes; design thinking advocates asserted that managers could perform design by following codified methods. In both cases, optimism about formalizing design's value ran up against practical limits. Farr's prescriptive methods anticipated questions that would later be directed at design thinking (Kimbell, 2011; Loewe, 2019) about whether tacit knowledge can be fully codified.

What distinguishes these moments is less the nature of the challenge than the institutional responses. While Farr's independent consultancy model proved commercially unsustainable, design thinking's normalization occurred alongside the absorption of design capabilities into established organizational forms – design strategy roles, in-house innovation teams, and management consultancy practices. The challenge of establishing design management as an independent service that MFDI faced in the 1960s has persisted in the field's subsequent development. The recent rise of design ops roles and the absorption of design strategy into management consultancies like McKinsey and IDEO represents the institutional integration MFDI lacked. What failed as an independent professional service has succeeded as an internal corporate function or as one capability within broader consulting offerings.

The case offers historically grounded insights into the three analytical concerns outlined at the outset: how legitimacy was pursued, how coordination was enacted in practice, and why value proved difficult to stabilise. Understanding this trajectory enriches design methods history by situating design management within wider processes of professionalization. Farr's pioneering work laid important conceptual foundations, but the experience of MFDI demonstrates a critical institutional failure: that sustainable professionalization requires organizational forms capable of demonstrating value and securing market legitimacy in dynamic conditions. The structural tension between internal expertise, external legitimacy and organizational sustainability is the defining legacy of this early attempt to formalize the field.

Authors' note

The author used Claude Sonnet 4.5 to refine phrasing. All content was subsequently reviewed, edited, and verified by the author, who takes full responsibility for the final version.

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Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Farr's book *Design in British Industry* was a revised edition of Pevsner's 1937 tome, *An Inquiry into Industrial Art in England*.
2. For more on the issues presented by Britain's 'good design' discourse, see: Hayward (1998) and Twemlow (2013).
3. Farr claimed that there was no direct correlation between a raising of design standards and increased sales, contrary to what a number of American consultants had earlier claimed (Farr, 1955: 151).
4. This is not to suggest that their idealism was without complication or paradox (see: Armstrong, 2015).
5. The awards scheme was launched in June 1964, with awards bestowed in November of the same year.
6. Twemlow (2013: 162) notes that during the International Design Conference at Aspen in 1955, Farr had led 'A discussion and demonstration of international kites' alongside Charles Eames.
7. While Wally Olins has received considerable attention from scholars (Balmer, 2014; Olins, 2001), the significance of Pilditch, has, like Farr, been under explored.
8. The concept of 'house style' (later called corporate identity) would be a central tent of the new business offering, with MFDI promising to coordinate their clients' design and marketing collateral.
9. It is notable that John Chris Jones, another central figure in the Design Methods movement, was also close with Farr, serving as a reviewer on the manuscript for his book (Farr, 1966a).
10. It would go on to be translated into several other languages (Boyd Davis and Gristwood, 2016).
11. Other instances of established designers operating consultancies under their own name include Hans Schleger & Associates, Henrion Design Associates and W. M. de Majo Associates. Partnerships became more prevalent with design practitioners of the following generation, but surnames continued to predominate, with Banks & Miles, Crosby/Fletcher/Forbes, Main Wolff and Negus & Sharland.
12. Archer taught at Ulm for one academic year, thus it is likely that his planning meetings with Farr took place shortly after his appointment would have ended in the summer of 1961.
13. According to Boyd-Davis and Gristwood (2016), Archer inclined to the mathematicians camp.
14. Key staff at HfG Ulm included: Otl Aicher (founder, German), Max Bill (Director, Swiss), Tomas Maldonado (Rector/Prorector, Argentine), Horst Rittel (Professor of Design Methodology, German), and Gui Bonsiepe (student and lecturer, German).

15. The link to the advertising profession is notable here, with strong parallels evident between Everett Jones's role for MFDI and the advertising entrepreneur Marcus Brumwell's supportive role as a director at Design Research Unit. Like Everett, Brumwell was also a director of Mass Observation.

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