

The Potential of Creative Investigation
How a data guided design process can help profile the profession
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THE POTENTIAL OF CREATIVE INVESTIGATION

In this presentation I will address the theme of the 2011 IIDA congress and start from 'design at the edges'; both the trouble it causes and opportunities it creates to the profession of Interior Design. This will show us that with an orientation on the process, the research qualities of a designer can play a remarkable contribution to many domains. The strategies to deliver knowledge are still to mature, but current experiments on creative investigation show interesting results.

To start with the challenge for Interior Design, the domain is pretty clear, it concerns the indoor space but the discipline has blurred. Many professionals with other origin make designs for interiors successfully. It urges the profession to think about its identity. Recently the International Federation of Interior Architects/Designers (IFI) launched the Interior Design Declaration. It states the value, relevance, responsibility, culture, business, and knowledge to conclude with the identity as: 'Interior designers and interior architects determine the relationship of people to spaces based on psychological and physical parameters to improve the quality of life'. This identity is neither a restriction nor set border but marks two pivotal points: humanity and space. In the declaration the common core values are stated, leaving space for enriching differences, opening up to challenging tendencies and accepting convincing exceptions. That is a remarkable asset. It guides towards a self-confidence that enables interior designers to approach the edges and design in related domains. The orientation on the relationship of people and space can be beneficial to many projects.

The shift from domain orientation to profession orientation includes emphasis on the assets the Interior designer can bring to the process.

The whole idea has an important premise in the postmodern context where no longer the expert's result is focus, but the investigative process is continuous. As such, research is integrated in design where anticipation, differentiation and participation are key words. Anticipation regards the particular context and engages in the unique circumstances at hand. Differentiation embraces manifold options to derive at a temporary optimum while developing. Participation includes the collaboration with stakeholders, manufacturers and users in a dance of roles.

To get a better grip on how designers cope with the postmodern setting I studied examples and tried to distillate significant methods.

First of all, these examples did not seem to start from the idea to solve a problem. Rather than discovering the conditions the investigation chooses a new perspective and challenges the stuck concept. A re-interpretation of the subject reveals hidden aspects and opportunities, especially when you include all phenomena in this chosen perspective. For the Dutch exhibition of the 2010 Biennial in Venice Ronald Rietveld made a ceiling with models from vacant buildings in the Netherlands. The collection

creates a world; it identifies, and signifies all empty buildings without exclusion. The windmill suddenly gets another connotation. It doesn't appear as a monument waiting for preservation but is one of the vacant buildings waiting for an alternative use. Visually these two steps of choosing a perspective and making a collection can be very convincing. Many artworks use this strategy, also in graphic design we are acquainted with works that simply collect data from a novel perspective. Although these inventories seem quiet straight, there is often a clever arrangement that gives significance to the image. When Rem Koolhaas designed a flag for the European Union he did not invent a new symbol but started from the existing flags. The matter however is, how to arrange this collection of national colours? The idea to make a barcode out of it makes a wink to the commercial basis for the Union.

Data often are reshaped or edited before an arrangement becomes significant. For spatial designers it is interesting to arrange data in space. In doing so the data make new connections to the territory. The Dutch designers 'van Bergen Kopla' projected the organisation of a supermarket to the landscape thus creating a drive-through Park Super Market.

Sometimes a multiple set of data needs to be connected to create a convincing image. Jeroen Hoogstraten took hexagonal sections of pavement from villages in a polder and replaced them at the dike on the original height above sea level. This stairway on the riverside of the dike gets flooded occasionally and indicates what villages would have drowned without the protection of the dike. This simple rearrangement of facts and physics creates a powerful image in which tacit knowledge becomes explicit.

This mode of working facilitates two important relations, one to temporality and another to participation. Hella Jongerius shows in many of her designs how the historical catalogue of a company can be basis for a new design. A collection of earlier decoration serves the rearrangements she designs. Abundance of random data is no problem as the prescription for design is set. In many interactive designs we find a programme open to process data input. In the same way the designer can create a framework to enable stakeholders to participate. The memorial bridge for the 'Elfstedentocht' skating race on natural ice is an example out of many. The submitted portraits of the skaters were printed on tiles and assessed on brightness to determine the place in a preset composition of skaters. The procedure enables limitless growth and consists of a network on Internet showing all kind of extra information. The design functions as databank.

In a small-scale urban project I tested the method of data guided design with the help of students from the Utrecht School of the Arts. Data were gathered from a variety of perspectives. Most successful was the survey where students asked inhabitants to pick from a book of samples the colour that represented their village best. The overview already indicates dominating pastel colours. Splitting up the data according to gender and age reveals that all dark and gloomy shades come from male over 50 years of age. Editing the pallet to a painting makes the picture convincing. Together with other inventories the crucial advice to the municipality was to upgrade the bottleneck alleys with the help of participating design.

The method of creative investigation is still under construction but already shows how it serves well in application to other domains. It acknowledges the identity of the

interior design profession; it merges research and design and thus stimulates postmodern assets like anticipation, differentiation and participation.

Finally the data guided process shows the ability to make tacit knowledge visible, which is crucial to cooperate in topical teamwork.

As the Interiors Declaration suggests it is our responsibility to position ourselves in the public realm. However, to interact with a respected input, the potential knowledge needs to become more explicit. The creative investigation has the ability to provide a contribution in the process of embodying human potential in space.