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design

Designing for Inclusion

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Presented at

Together We Can Conference

hosted by

North Eastern Health Board
in association with the SHSSB and the Voluntary Sector
November 2003

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Successful design cannot be left to designers alone

In Australia I discovered a “people” centred design approach. The most interesting experience was in connection with the Museum of Victoria. I was part of a design team comprising seven educational officers and parents, teachers, business investors, seven psychiatrists.

Melbourne is very diverse- made up of Greek, Asian, Aborigine, Anglican, Afro-Caribbean communities- all of whom communicate differently. We had to create a design that would suit all.

This was 1986 and my first experience of Designing for Inclusion. I learned that “Inclusion” meant accommodating differences.

I asked my mentor at that time what makes a good designer- he told me to ask lots of questions, and be aware of differences so that when I am asked to design a bed I will not assume everyone sleeps on a mattress with four legs under it.

The Australian experience set standards for me in terms of inclusion up to a point. However as good as the experience was it missed including people with disabilities.

In 2001, I was commissioned by the OPW to research and design a touring exhibition on Design For All. The exhibition was in its execution to demonstrate the principles of Universal Design. The project was a turning point for us as a design office and for me personally as a member of the professional design community.

I realised that successful design cannot be left to designers alone. Design cannot successfully operate in isolation from the planning and management processes and cannot assume generalities about end users.

I also realised that we operate in compartmentalised structures. There is genuinely little dialogue between agencies that effect design and worse still there is a closed shop arrogance amongst many of these agencies.

Because of this I have found myself challenging my own colleagues in the Institute of Designers in Ireland, querying a lot of the decisions that are traditionally accepted as being “good enough” and asking “Can we do better?”

I think all of this contributes to why I am here now.

What is Good Design?

Everything is designed: cities, clothes, CD covers, systems, circulation routes, reporting mechanisms for communication etc. Objects, artefacts, systems and services – how these systems and services are consumed and used are natural outcomes and goals of the design process.

Not everyone requires specialist design or specialist products but everyone requires “good design”. Not everything designed is good Design.

Good design, defined in its widest sense as the process by which all artificially manufactured artefacts are conceived and brought into being – can be a means to improve the quality of life.

It is also a service of communication based upon creativity, innovation and competence.

Sometimes design seen as an opponent of consumerism but most often as a protagonist for it.

30 years ago Victor Papanek proposed a new design agenda focusing on social needs rather than market related criteria.

The reality is that the emphasis has remained on market –driven design.

Multinational companies dominate the high street.

Stereotypes of age, gender and social class are becoming increasingly blurred. Socio-economic changes have altered the fabrics of society and lifestyle of citizens.

We are all effected by these changes.

We all have the choice to use the impetus of a change as a means of educating and facilitating inclusion and integration. Or we can exploit these changes solely for commercial benefit.

In 2002, Victor Margolin Professor of Art and Design History, a prolific writer on Design for Sustainability and the future of design practises, has re-proposed Papanek's work and puts forward the argument that design for the market and design for social responsibility are in fact complementary.

his is currently being taken up by the various international design councils for further discussion.

I am not aware if it is being discussed amongst planners, policy makers or marketeers.

Yet it is the decisions made by the policy makers, the developers, and manufacturers at the earliest stages of a process that have the greatest impact on the success of design.

The Terms

There are many terms used in association with Design-
Design For All is defined as the work on the space around which the product, building, the communication and the services are created in order to offer the same opportunities to everyone always keeping in mind people are different. It aims to improve the quality of life of all citizens and recognises the necessity that each individual can develop in the best possible conditions.

Barrier Free Design means that all people regardless of age, gender, colour or disability, have a right to environments that are accessible, usable, safe and non-polluting.

Barriers are attitudinal as much as physical- they include pity, ignorance and more insulting the silent suggestion that “after all you’re not worth it.”

Universal Design is the design of products and environments to be usable by all people to the greatest extent possible without the need for adaptation or specialised design.

The intent of the universal design concept is to simplify life for everyone by making products, communications and the built environment more usable by more people at little or no extra cost. The universal design concept targets all people of all ages, sizes and abilities.

Designing For Inclusion is in part based on the social model of disability- it demands a redesign of the landscape.

This requires us to take the place of others, to embody sensitivity to all needs- safety, kindness, enjoyment, and pleasure. We all benefit from this approach.

Central to all the terms is the demand for a coherent collaborative, multidisciplinary planning process from the initial long term planning through to actual solutions.

What Designers Do

Many designers in the course of their work regularly face multidisciplinary settings. They often have to extract and illustrate key issues from a myriad of agendas. They sketch and explore possible solutions and facilitate communication between all stakeholders. These abilities have dramatic potential for enhancing the quality and inclusiveness of the initial decision making process, the planning and allocation of resources.

This requires involvement at the early research and development stage – asking questions like “what should be done and for whom”.

As an example from my own experience

Scroope Design was very fortunate to have won a commission from a semi-state body to create a blueprint for a development in Dublin. This was the first time that we as a design office had an active role in the policy and planning stage.

Immediately we were able to collaborate with the client on articulating the perceptions, expectations needs of all people who would work in, manage, operate, visit and use the facility.

The exercise involved many one to one research meetings with people of different responsibilities, different views, expectations, needs and I should add so there is no doubt- disabilities.

The final blue print for the development was determined more by how this facility will serve a wide community in the near and long term future rather than by financial, programming or market issues.

Although this cost money- an expenditure that is independent of the traditional costs associated with a development. But it did not add to the overall financial expenditure on the project. I know that work will in fact save the client money.

Designing for Inclusion lies in searching out the deep origins of existing and potential problems in order to make new ways for improved solutions – solutions guided by ethical values as much as by economic efficiencies.

To do this we must all be ready to question, to be curious, to be versatile, and have a readiness to learn.

There are processes and agencies available to assist us to be inclusive through understanding issues particularly in relation to disabilities.

Health and Social Welfare- defines the medical model of disability and assists with disability benefits.

The European Social Inclusion Programme requires us to comply with the social model of disability

The Building Regulations – while statutory these regulations can be seen as weak because they request “reasonable” provision of accommodation for disabled people. However the term “reasonable” is not clearly defined. The legal requirements also identify a minimum standard.

Publications are available such as:

“Buildings for Everyone” by the NRB revised by the NDA

“Building Sight” by the Royal National Institute for the Blind

“Ask Me” - Guidelines for Effective Consultation with People
by the NDA

Universal Design

The Barcelona Declaration 1995- the City and the Disabled

The European Institute for Design and Disability offers a resource for information and promotes Design for Inclusion.

The Institute for Design and Disability hold seminars and provide training.

The RIAI provide continuing professional development courses.

All the design schools include modules that focus on Designing for Inclusion.

While all of this information and references are available lets not forget one to one dialogue with people so that when we are involved in creating processes, objects or environments we will also know something about the way the rest of us are likely to use these things.

So that when the low platform bus is operated the driver does pull up to the curb and not one foot away from it or when an area is designed for maximum ease of access that the house manager does not put potted plants around the circulation routes.

And also that we do not make so many assumptions about people

Since the 1960's, we have a lot of this information available to us. We all agree and aspire to inclusiveness in design. So why are we here discussing it as if for the first time 40 years later? What is going wrong?

In reality we have budgets and programmes predetermined without considering that the process requires collaboration directly with users.

We do not have an accepted structure for continuing analysis and assessment throughout the design process. Yet we know how costly it is after the fact.

We do not have an inclusive system for evaluating design solutions. Award winners in the design field represent role models used by students and professionals. Awards are mostly given for material innovation and form. This in itself deprives the public from critically reviewing new designs and it perpetuates the closed-shop system.

We have constant arguments on costs.

In 1997 the cost of low floor buses in Britain was 25% greater than the traditional design.

In 2000 the difference was less than 5% and by 2003 less than 2%.

Public procurement procedures look for the lowest price on all aspects of developments- from professional fees to implementation costs to operational costs.

What is the way forward?

We will only be able to ensure fulfilment of our aspirations if we are prepared to say goodbye to some customary positions.

Knowledge can only be transmitted in its full complexity and design can only be given a social dimension not only if we demand “round table” culture but also work in a more integrated manner.

Solutions to inclusivity can only be found on an interdisciplinary basis.

In order for “Designing For Inclusion” to move from an aspiration to a valued reality we must move from words like “should” to “will”- that we **will** recognise the contribution design values make to the planning and management.

We all have to shift our ways of thinking.

In terms of policymaking more questions need to be asked and answered such as “what research will be carried out on the people who will be effected by the policy decisions”? The planning team, the operational managers, the designers, builders, implementation team, end users are all effected by policies.

How will data be collected – who is advising the policy process?

Is the advisory board reflective of Inclusion or Exclusion?

Will the policy actively include or exclude deaf, illiterate, blind people.

When determining capital investment – will the consultation process be allowed for? Will communication channels be in place to enable active and effective collaboration with the wide community aged, youth, disabled? Will implementation be to a high standard of design or meet the minimum regulation requirements? Will the individual needs of who will actually be using/consuming the design clearly understood and how long will the solution be effective?

What will determine the extent of a service – money, need, trend?

Will the terms of reference for making decisions clearly identified and available to all concerned?

Will a process be established for continuing assessment as a policy is being implemented?

Will this process be flexible enough to enable modifications if inequalities or exclusions come to light? How sustainable is the policy?

When engaging the design team will the criteria for selection require a design solution or will it require evidence of ability to reach a solution through a process of inclusion- evidence of awareness, analysis, of responsibility and creativity.

Both strategic and operational solutions to challenges require personalities with social responsibility, who are in a position to make decisions after weighing up the emotional and rational elements that are involved.

Whatever decisions are made they must not eliminate or ignore any persons rights, needs or opportunities.

We are not all policy makers, designer or commissioners of design but we all have a significant influence on the design process. As I suggested earlier we all have the choice to educate and create new manners in how we live or we can continue to facilitate the market based design agenda.

We all contribute to the Design process by what we buy, every time we select one brand over another, where we go to purchase goods, what we admire as good design or reject as bad design.

I suggest that if you like something – you say why.

If you don't like something say why also.

If we look more to the art of living than to consumerism we will think more inclusively.

We can ask questions such as- will this work for me at the age of 70 or when I have the baby in the buggy or does this work for my grandmother? Should I expect it to?

Consumer magazines that review products welcome views.

We don't have to be professionally qualified to have a view about design that includes.

Design for Inclusion ensures a better environment – it invites us all to participate. It is all about good design.

Good design enables. Bad design disables.