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DESIGN BY NARRATIVE

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There is no design in silence. All designers, like all designed objects, “tell stories,” sometimes deliberately, many other times without much degree of consciousness.

Design is permeated with narratives because it is constituted within a field of discourses: formal, psychological, ideological, theoretical.

As full time professors and researchers at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Xochimilco (UAM-X), within the Division of Design, we are directly concerned with design education at the professional level. Our students are young men and women 18 to 22 years old.

The fact that designers are reluctant to use written and oral expression, and are devoted to develop and express themselves merely through visual languages, often means that theory is a realm in the hands of intellectuals, as well known perhaps for their obscure and inaccessible discourse as their design.

If we depart from the concept that every design is defined by -- and gives definition to -- social narratives that influence the behaviour associated with design spaces or objects, then as professors of the introductory course on Design we think that teaching how to make a better use of verbal expressions is a must.

Traditionally, and as defined in the curriculum, “Introduction” is focused mainly on the visual languages. It imposes and is concerned with a heavy load on skills such as drawing, modelling, etc., where “theory” plays a weak role and is based on an obsolete bibliography. Research on specific subjects or themes is only done as part of what will come in the next courses: design by simulation.

We think that the Design Studio already criticized for being vertical, authoritarian, and based on the experience of teachers, rather than the experiences of students, must be challenged by new forms of teaching. By making the mandatory course on “Theory” a workshop on narrative, we have found that we can make a profound pedagogical difference.

Yet to speak of narrative strategies in design pushes one immediately into difficulty. Our design culture is dominated by two different views, “non-rhetorical” design (claiming that a brick is just a brick, a vase is just a vase, that stone, steel and board can not or should not “speak”) and an intention to “add meaning” to design through the telling of fables, leaving small space to suggest another position. There is a difference, between a definition based on “design as narrative” and the idea of “narrative design.” The latter approach is exemplified in the following attempt of a definition made by

architects¹: *“Many architects have something to say, a story to tell. There are a variety of means architects employ in expressing their own, or their client values, thoughts, wishes, beliefs, and desires. They often communicate a unifying theme elaborated throughout the “plot”. Some of the storytellers of our discipline choose to relate the entire story in a single design, while others “write” continuing sagas in which each building is a sequel to the last. Others, whether consciously or not, allude to earlier work by masters or to vital vernacular traditions. The architect’s tale can be as captivating and powerful as the writer’s. The best narratives give building added meaning and encourage people to become involved with and to cherish works of architecture”.*

The apparent opposed positions of a “non-rhetorical” design and a “story-telling” design converge in their belief that rhetorical meaning does not reside in design objects, other than in the most general sense, as expressions of classical or vernacular ideals, or as a “zeitgeist” expression. Basically story here is an addition to the “mute” and empty vessel of design, like a coda, or footnote, that we put at the end as interpretation or explanation. We believe that in order to educate the future designer and prepare her or him to confront any design problem, they need to conceive their design departing from a story, or interacting with one, rather than ending with one.

So, rather than conceiving a narrative design arising from an addition of a singular story-line, it would be critically more constructive to choose from the plurality of narratives ready in their imagination.

At our institution we teach within a “modular system” divided in quarters of 11 weeks; we avoid courses based on ‘lectures,’ and work by choosing ‘real problems,’ what we call “objects of transformation.” Our most often-used theme is that of ‘the public garden,’ and the sub-environmental design apparatuses for each space: furniture, media devices, appliances, infrastructure, etc. as our students will later choose different study options: graphic, industrial, urban and architectural design.

We try to challenge the so-called linear structures of both narrative and temporality, related issues that inevitably arise as arguments that are supposed to keep narrative wholly distinct from design. There is a tendency to conceive of narrative in terms of what was assumed to be the conventions operating in 19th century realist fiction. With the development of technology, we ask students to use all the newly accessible possibilities through the computer software. Also, recent literary theory has shown that the conventions of realism operate in much more complex and indeterminate ways than previously thought. Beginnings do not constitute definitive origins, development is never seamlessly continuous (as transitions are inevitably disjunctive) and endings do not provide definitive closure².

To help students to put themselves in the position of authors of a scenario (or “mise en scene,”) and to define and understand the series of tensions between narrative thought and formal thought, we ask them to include the following elements:

¹ OZ, (1988) Journal of the Collage of Architecture and Design at Kansas State University, issue dedicated to “Narrative Architecture”

² Rakatansky, Mark “Spacial Narratives” The Harvard Architecture Review 8, Rizzoli, 1992

- 1) Setting: To define the situation or problem and its temporality: any event has a past, a present and implication for the future. By analyzing the context it is possible to recognize those “others” as forces prevailing or influencing our design. We have to interact with them, to understand them, and to challenge them in order to overcome expectations, pressures, rules, and constraints.
- 2) Actors: Define the f(actors) that have an important or meaningful role performing in the situation.
- 3) Dramatic conflict: those actions taken not only for practical facts but also as symbols, or interpretations. The use of metaphor becomes necessary or useful here. What are the challenges, opportunities, dangers, and possibilities that we want to confront or evade with our design?
- 4) Possible resolutions: We end the narrative in ways that satisfy and convince the reader or listener. The resolution is how we resolve and overcome obstacles, restrictions and rules.
- 5) Uncertainties: As facts have a broad array of explanations, design has many potential interpretations. We can try them out as desired scenarios created by the student, where diversity and plurality are embedded in (the realm of) a creative narrative imagination.

We see the following advantages to this approach:

- a) It increases the capability of students, and their teachers, to reveal not only the unconscious or hidden visions of the world, but our own assumptions about causes and effects.
- b) Values become more evident; our cultural baggage is the source of our imagination, as well as prejudices, personalities and creativity.
- c) Narrative stimulates the mind to make clear our thoughts. It encourages the complexity and subtlety of our ideas, as well as unexpected solutions, innovation, and surprising possibilities.
- d) We write with the belief that we know what we want, but as it is difficult to express ourselves, we struggle to find the right words, exposing our vacuums, our doubts, and the murky areas of our selves. Intuition becomes a tool to understand what is apparently is incomprehensible, and in the process we become empowered, developing our potentials.
- e) The effort to base and explain our design through narratives also helps the audience to understand us better.

Students in México tend to be very reluctant to oral participation. They have scarce practice in writing and reading. Nevertheless, behind their silence hides a very insightful sensibility (subjective, as of, relating to, or emanating from their emotions, prejudices, etc, *subjective views*. Referring not to the person with the subjective views but to the

nature of those views) In a first stage, they tend to respond with conventional stereotypes (in speech, writing and design). The students find in this a way to resolve their 'struggle' between two contradictory realities: their inability to narrate in a structured manner, and their inability to *not* articulate verbally their experiences or ideas. When they visualize the relationship between a story and a design, as experiencing a new or unexpected freedom, the results are sometimes outstanding. We will present as an illustration of all this, some examples of stories, along with their visual development as design projects. For students taking the first steps of their professional career, the possibility of getting out of themselves – through narratives that become drawings, models, animations or simple images -- becomes an effective way to discover themselves and their imaginative potential.