Quality and qualities of design studies, design research and design

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Editorial

Quality and qualities of design studies, design research and design

The beginning of 2023 is a good time to review the past year and reflect on how the Journal is developing in the expanding field of design research. The journal publishes studies on the design process across a wide variety of disciplines using all kinds of research methods and I continue to be amazed by the sheer diversity of subjects and approaches of papers that are submitted and accepted. In courses that I teach I often refer students and researchers to the now very accessible body of work that constitutes *Design Studies* as the place to go to understand the activity and processes of designing, but *Design Studies* is much more than this. Interdisciplinarity has become a popular word for universities and funding bodies, and *Design Studies* demonstrates how this type of thinking can work successfully.

What characterises papers in the journal is a rigour of inquiry, a thoughtfulness of approach, a careful weighing of evidence, and a sensitivity to theoretical issues arising from design practices. Most papers are empirically based, but not all. I am sometimes puzzled by what researchers say about the journal (often without realising that I am the Editor-in-Chief). It is 'too scientific', or 'doesn't publish practice-based work', is 'too theoretical', or even 'biased' against certain forms of research. None of these things are true, as a look through recent volumes will establish, though it is true that the journal caters to different communities of researchers, who don't necessarily understand one another, and demands a high level of quality. *Design Studies* is, to some degree, what I think of as a 'pre-scientific' journal, testing ideas and perspectives about designing but not necessarily in the replicable mould of more scientifically oriented journals — a practice that is increasingly under question (2020). As Editor-in-Chief, I find this emergent aspect of *Design Studies* papers fascinating and very much support papers with an analysis or approach that can open the door to new research questions and identify useful work still to be done. This is a key strength of the journal, in my view, and what I think engages readers.

The field of design research is now mature. Strong sub-disciplines, often supported by good journals such as *CoDesign*, *She Ji*, *Design Science*, *The International Journal of Design*, and *Design Issues* are now evident. We are past the stage of claiming that design research is a new field, still finding its feet. We should also be past overly simplistic classifications of design research that are often passed on without much critical thought. The rigour of inquiry and the relevance of the research questions prosecuted are what matters, in my view, not whether a particular piece of research belongs to a certain tradition. Questions of design practice and its relationship to design research continue to crop up from time to time, but these questions are increasingly irrelevant. Practices that can be constituted or understood as designing are what drive the central core of the journal and research is surely a practice of design in whatever form it takes, a point that has been argued by Farrell

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and Hooker (2013). This is what I mean about the journal being in some ways 'pre-scientific'; *Design Studies'* papers help to bring to our attention the many configurations and environments where designing is practiced, along with an evaluation or analysis of that practice. A good example of this is the special issue on Design Anthropology [1] that we published last year, Edited by Rachel Charlotte Smith (2022). The issue brought new voices and perspectives into view, and new ways of presenting research; a valuable contribution and expansion of the field. This current volume, exploring new technologies for prototyping (Kang et al., 2023), critical analysis of sustainable design practices (Cooper, 2023), and collaborative creativity (Paay et al., 2023) also illustrates the diversity of practices that take place under the rubric of designing, and the different methods that can be used to explore them.

A further sign of maturity in a field is the capability to discuss and critique the methods, theories, and concepts developed by that field. Last year we introduced a new submission format for the journal to do just that. Research Notes, edited by Phil Cash, Laura Hay, and Jaap Daalhuizen (Cash et al., 2022), look at quality-related issues in design research. Research Notes published form part of an ongoing collection [2]. Some of the issues I have touched on above relate to this, but more focussed contributions are welcome at any time.

The years of the Covid-19 pandemic saw submissions to the journal increase significantly, almost doubling from 350 in 2018 to over 600 in 2020. Last year saw 568 papers submitted with 31 papers published. Though not all papers submitted in a particular year are published in that year, this represents a notional publication success rate of 5%. In practice many papers submitted do not meet the basic quality thresholds for the journal or are clearly out of scope (Lloyd, 2019). Of those 568 papers, less than half were considered for peer-review, and even less sent for full peer-review. This means that the success rate for papers that are in scope and meet quality thresholds is likely to be more in the region of 20%.

Being published in the journal depends, of course, on a successful outcome to the peer-review process and we are lucky to have developed, over the years, an outstanding community of reviewers to call on for insightful commentary about papers assigned to them. Most reviewers have themselves published in *Design Studies*, so bring with them a useful understanding of the journal aims, values, and standards. In the past few years I have noticed reviewers becoming more critical, which I take as a sign of a mature subject area, but also raises the threshold for acceptance. Authors, once published, often write to me with thanks for a review process that can significantly develop and sharpen papers. We depend on reviewing to maintain the highest levels of quality for the journal and in the following pages we acknowledge the reviewers that have generously contributed their time to *Design Studies* over the past year. One putative measure of this quality is our journal impact factor, which increased to 3.85 last year, the highest it has ever been.

To celebrate the highest quality papers published in the journal we have an annual best paper award, determined jointly by the editors of the journal and the Design Research Society. Slightly belatedly I would like to congratulate Xiao Ge, Larry Leifer, and Linlin Shui, from Stanford University, for their paper *Situated emotion and its constructive role in collaborative design: A mixed-method study of experienced designers* (2021), which was awarded best paper for 2021. The paper uses technological and more traditional methods to explore the role of 'situated emotion' in designing, showing how emotional engagement during a design process, measured by vocal pitch, results in the change and adjustment of design frames, characterised by the emergence of new words and phrases not previously spoken. The scope and focus of the paper, developing the emerging

subject area of affective science, was praised by the panel of editors.

Sadly, 2022 saw the passing of two major figures in the development of the Design Methods movement and the Design Research Society. John Chris Jones and Christopher Alexander produced a huge volume of work throughout their lives which continues to provoke debate and inspire practitioners and researchers far beyond the disciplines of design (John Chris Jones) and architecture/ planning (Christopher Alexander). John Chris Jones published articles, discussion pieces, and reviews from the very first issue of *Design Studies* leading from (and repudiating) his foundational early work on design methods (see, for example, Jones, 1979; Jones, 1980; Jones, 1983). Christopher Alexander, though never published in *Design Studies*, was a founder member of the US Design Methods Group which, in association with the Design Research Society, produced a forerunner journal to *Design Studies*: The DMG:DRS Journal. As with John Chris Jones, Christopher Alexander was also dismayed at overly rational interpretations of his early work, and for similar reasons. Both were trying to find a way for designing to balance new technical and complex realities against the human impulse for beauty, participation, and creativity; design that gives 'quality' to life. In a 1971 interview reported in Lopez (1973) Alexander said of his work:

"My situation in 1958 was very simple. I wanted to be able to create beautiful buildings. I didn't know how, and nothing I was learning at school was helping me. Yet at the same time, I had a very clear sense of the difference; I knew what beautiful buildings were and as far as I was concerned, not only was I incapable of making them, but so were most of the architects now practicing … *Notes on the Synthesis of Form* was for me, merely a way of getting a beauty, a way of getting at the foundations of a well-made beautiful thing. And the so called 'method' of that book was,

in the same way, simply a process which seemed to me to go to the heart of what had to be going on in a beautiful building." (p.15)

John Chris Jones was well-known for using chance to reveal unexpected insights, connections, and patterns in the later work he did, for example in reviewing books for *Design Studies* (1980). I use his 'method' to connect three of his publications across the decades: *A method of systematic design* (1962), *Design methods: Seeds of human futures* (1981), and *The internet and everyone* (2000). Using random numbers, page 60 was determined for each publication:

"Many factors affecting design interact with one another to make up a complicated situation which can be appreciated by experience. The systematic approach is to use charts, to ensure that all possible interactions are discovered, and diagrams, to make clear the pattern of relationships." (1962, p.60)

"I remember a priest explaining the zig-zag arch to me: "Evil is like a rhinoceros. It always charges in straight lines. We break the line of the bridge so that evil cannot cross, but falls over the edge to drown in the deep water in the middle."" (1981, p.60, quoting Laurens van der Post)

"when ellipsis makes books, tom does words, i do pictures: that is how i like to characterize the process. The only interesting point about this is that i am able to 'get away with' such an attitude (professional illiteracy), that i do not =have= to read any of the texts, and yet still ellipsis produces good books which have some sense of integrity editorially and pictorially" (2000, p.60)

I cannot do justice to the rich and variegated body of work that each left, save to say that they have, through their prescience and will, shaped the way we think about designing and the purpose

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of design. On a personal note, I was honoured that John Chris Jones accepted my invitation to present an overview of his work at the 50th Anniversary DRS conference held in Brighton, UK in 2016 (Lloyd, 2017). The DRS conference series was something that he helped to start in 1962 by being part of the organisation for the now famous *Conference on Design Methods*, a conference where Christopher Alexander also presented a paper (Alexander, 1962). John Chris Jones was lucid, modest, playful and insightful, as many others came to know him [3]. His Welsh voice and writing [4] will be much missed.

Finally, I would like to thank my fellow Editors for all their work in the past year. Ann Heylighen, Dirk Snelders, Robin Adams, Andy Dong, Fernando Secomandi, and Nigel Cross have provided outstanding support and advice in handling submissions and working through the many issues that naturally arise over the course of a year. I look forward to a productive 2023 for the journal. We have several special issues and collaborations in the pipeline and continue to forge closer connections with the Design Research Society to further advance the field of design research.

Notes

[1] The Design Anthropology Special Issue, published as an article collection can be found at the following link: https://www-sciencedirect-com.tudelft.idm.oclc.org/journal/design-studies/special-issue/10K7JX45KSR

[2] The ongoing Research Notes article collection can be found at the following link: https://www-sciencedirect-com.tudelft.idm.oclc.org/journal/design-studies/special-issue/10KRVXLSCTR

[3] A full obituary for John Chris Jones was written by Nigel Cross for the Design Research Society, accessible at the following link: https://www.designresearchsociety.org/articles/remembering-john-christopher-jones

[4] From 2001 to 2022 John Chris Jones kept a digital diary, along with other writing, accessible at the following link: http://www.publicwriting.net.

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