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Design as Contemplative Practice

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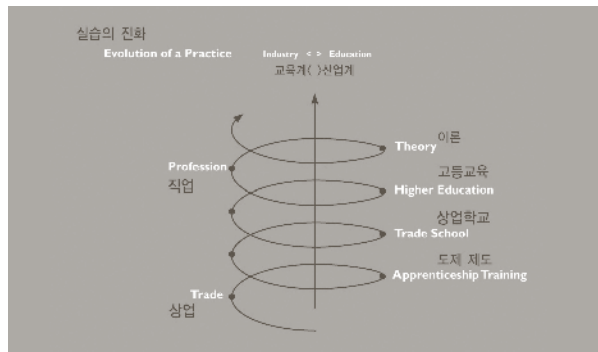


To help the speakers present their viewpoints and experiences regarding the SADI conference the following questions were posed:

- How has industry influenced the way you model your teaching/programs and how could design education influence industry?
- In considering the current situation of the industry and its influence on design education, what efforts do you make to ensure that students are prepared for the future profession; what changes do you foresee in that preparation?

Many years ago Jay Doblin, one of our insightful design educators from the Institute of Design in Chicago, already answered these questions quite eloquently. Importantly he pointed out the reciprocal relation of design practice or industry and education. Their evolution forms a spiraling dialogue between the two, between practice and theory, reflecting their mutual needs and interests. Each challenges the other as perception and awareness expand and methods respond to increased knowledge. This also raises expectation for quality, and our capacities to choose more discriminately and mindfully from the field of possibilities. Skills evolve from vocational needs that train for specificity toward professional levels that require accountability. In this education serves a process that draws out our intelligence. Theory evolves ways to deal with aspects of generalizations, abstractions, and vision. This inspires the practice, which influences theory, etc. etc. etc.

As I look back over the past 40 years to ask “*have design education and the industry changed?*” my immediate response is “*no, not significantly.*” Slicker, maybe, but not better. Though it can be said that designers have become more skilled as technicians, more facile in their methods, more confident of fitting the mold of expectation — this is mostly due to changing technology, not a change in the individual. Design unfortunately, as I see it, remains on the whole, surface treatment; or at best some egocentric endeavor. The last questions, about preparing students for the future, resonate more with the rest of my talk



The last questions, “*what efforts do you make to ensure that students are prepared for the future profession and what changes do you foresee in that preparation?*” gets more at the heart of the rest of this talk.

In the year 2000, ICOGRADA, led by our colleague Professor Ahn Sang Soo, held its international design congress in Seoul. For its theme “**Harmony**” — or Oullim in Korean language, the keynote speaker, Dr. Kim Young-Oak ended his talk with these four sentences: *There is no such a thing as a “designer.” Whatever or whoever designs, gets designed in turn simultaneously. The ultimate value of the designer must be found in “not designing.” Design should not be understood as “making,” but “making appear.”*

I love the paradoxes by these statements for they reflect a philosophical attitude toward design and design pedagogy that resonates with me. As paradoxes, of course, they may sound like gibberish at first, but if we **contemplate** them further they ring with truth.

“There is no such thing as a designer” seems to render all of us designers here today as pointless. That reaction is natural because we are part of today’s culture, which tends to measure the value of human existence by what we “do” rather than what we really “are.” We live in a world absorbed by quantitative values, a human culture that tends to emphasize our self-serving tendencies, that encourages us to compete, to stand out, to dominate. For design, and its commercial bent in industry, this means to glorify technical skills, cleverness, and window dressing.

The second sentence, *“Whatever or whoever designs, gets designed in turn simultaneously.”* is equally provoking, but underscores the fact that what the designer becomes is the result of a process.

The third sentence, *“The ultimate value of the designer must be found in ‘not designing.’”* challenges us to question **what we are taught and for what purpose.**

Dr Kim’s last statement, *“Design should not be understood as ‘making,’ but ‘making appear’”* is most mysterious suggesting the notion that the designer is nothing more than an instrument in the process of design, as design passes through that person.

These notes are essential to consider as we ponder the preparation of students for the future profession. Unfortunately we do little to bring such issues to our deliberations of pedagogy and what is at the heart of our practice. Instead our practice of design continues to perpetuate the past: **to satisfy surface of things as its primary objective.** This shallowness largely reflects the state of our world that continues, perhaps prizes more than ever, the competitive, rationalistic, dominating and self-serving values so clearly evident in our process of globalization and global market. Worse, this conviction starts education off on the wrong track making change in that respect most difficult. Change starts at the cradle, not at some higher level. So what then can we do?

We start, if you will, wherever we are, and wherever we CAN make a difference. Moreover, in spite of the criticism just provided, we ARE gaining a deeper sense of awareness of ourselves and of our relationship to the bigger picture of life. Fritjof Capra describes this as a growing global shift from a self-serving paradigm toward an **integrative** paradigm that will deeply affect and change our thinking and valuing. We see evidence of this already in ecological philosophy, in the growing number of grass root not-for-profit organizations and in our increasing appreciation of cultural differences as instrumental in the richness of life. Still, we are only beginning to understand how to address ideas of sustainability, but we are progressing nonetheless!

Rohit Mehta, an activist from India in its struggle for freedom, politician and philosopher, wrote this: *But what is a virtue except right relationship between the Whole and the Part? In other words, harmony between the Whole and the Part is true virtue, . . . Be it remembered, however, that the whole is NOT the sum of its parts. The putting together of parts does not create a psychological, a living whole, although it may create a mechanical whole. The Whole has to be perceived first before the Parts can be brought together in a harmonious pattern. The process cannot be reversed. Without perceiving the Whole the problem of relationship cannot be effectively tackled.*

These are essential ideas to inhabit, and live by. They reflect in the words of Dr. Kim Young-Oak, and I do my best to bring these ideas into my design practice and into my teaching. They hold what is of importance to us, first as members of humanity and a necessary worldview, and then as designers and creative contributors to our communal existence. When Capra describes the paradigm shift from the self-assertive to the integrative he truly reflects the critical issue: a **conscious shift from parts to wholes.** In fact, quantum physics already showed us dramatically that there are actually no parts at all in our universe, and that what we call parts are merely patterns in an inseparable web of relationships. This requires, as Capra calls it, a kind of figure-ground shift called contextual thinking that reflects that universal principle in nature of cause-and-effect. As the American Indian Chief Seattle said over a hundred years ago: *whatever we do to the web of life we do unto ourselves.* Contextual thinking — or mindfulness — does not mean to merely develop a “human-centered” awareness but a worldview based on the unity of all life, which is spirituality in its true sense.

Instead of the tendency for design and design education to perpetuate the limited superficial approach to produce objects I call for both to embrace this paradigm shift, a shift that moves us from the quantitative to the qualitative, from the reductive to the holistic. For education this means a pedagogical shift from a technical, skill-oriented, analytical approach toward a holistic-contemplative approach.

The contemplative approach is necessarily reflective, characterized by deep careful awareness, and is contextually mindful, meaning to be thoughtful and sensitive to integrate the networks of form, relationship and energy. I know from experience that only from that approach a design ideal is possible, design that offers humanity an experience that draws out the within, an experience that deepens and enlightens. In other words, an experience that draws out the poetry of life that we are so intimately part of and that is so crucial to the human spirit. Only from such experiences is it possible to find our selves moved toward a place of more inspired understanding.

Therefore, as with poetry and art, what our material requires from those who participate is a thoughtful and contemplative engagement with what is presented. This often means to exact from the reader/viewer/participant a

willingness to take time and to pay attention — not only to interact and interpret momentarily, but also to return to it and consider it further.

Good design requires sensitivity toward all aspects of human interaction with objects and information. Just as a single part has no meaning in isolation, a single means has limited capacity to invigorate human intelligence.

Design aids our movements, our actions and interactions with things. For me design is a potential bridge to the soul, with the capacity to energize or quiet, speed up or slow down our movements and actions — and yet to bring all of these qualities together in some uninterrupted rhythmic harmony, like a flowing stream. In this all the individual parts, visible but perhaps unnoticed, brought into relation by careful design, operate to help serve their cooperative essence. Good design helps establish that sense of wholeness in which all the parts can dance with the human spirit.

If done with proper care and attention, good design becomes an instrument for awakening our awareness that stimulates our minds, broadens our perceptions and draws out our intelligence. Its very means can bring into question our habitual human tendencies — such as our quickness to judge, the guarding of viewpoint, attachment to convenience, habit and convention. It can challenge us to keep an open mind and not limit perception. Just as we know that difference helps to broaden vision, and contrast serves to enrich perception, design can serve to stimulate our minds and broaden awareness. Design at its best enables us to open our senses so we can tune into the invisible and find ourselves moved toward a place of more inspired understanding.

To help designers arrive at this design ideal that mediates an experience that draws out, deepens and enlightens the human spirit, the process of designing requires nothing less than a contemplative practice.

In October 2003, Japan hosted an ICOGRADA Congress with the theme focused on “Quality.” The word “sustainability” was one of the buzzword for the conference and provided the impetus for my question posed for the session on education: What can education offer that will truly sustain students in life? Here is how I responded.

In a nutshell students need a process that helps them cultivate their intelligence so as to become truly integrated individuals capable of dealing with life as a whole — as human beings foremost, and only then as designers. I view this nurturing of intelligence as the central task for educators, their primary purpose. That we happen to do this via design is useful, but secondary. For education this is at the heart of the word sustainability. What ultimately sustains us only comes from our inner capacities, our heart and center of being — not from some external source or authority.

Contemporary Western education, with its tradition so firmly established since Aristotle, is a system based on comparison and competition. Its main interest is to multiply knowledge and facts and to develop intellectual skills and clever minds. That system perpetuates materialism and fragmentation as the way to view the world, which only proliferates the current state of our world. Clearly then, that system has missed the point because it has not helped bring about the understanding of the total process of consciousness. Caught up in explanations education fails to nurture intelligence.

Intelligence reflects an understanding of one’s whole being, which means also the total process of human existence. When the mind and heart are integrated in action does intelligence have a chance to enter into life.

In its root meaning the word “education” means “to draw out”. Contrary to Aristotle, who considered the individual born “empty” into which knowledge must be “poured”, Plato understood education as a process that “draws out” what is already within. Plato’s perspective reflects a sense of wholeness, wherein the function of education helps to unfold one’s intelligence as the capacity to perceive the essential. Principle educators — Pestalozzi, Froebel and Montessori — like Plato, perceived the student from that holistic perspective. They realized that intelligence can only unfold from one’s conscious integration with nature’s laws, within and without, relative to experiencing our world.

In the interest to develop our cleverness and competition we ignore our capacity to pay attention with “cognitive control” or the ability to act or think in accord with intention. Attention, or contemplative practice, is the gateway to consciousness. Attention nurtures our capacity for insight. Science has long rejected introspection when it studied consciousness, but is finally beginning to acknowledge that cognitive control and attention are essential to understanding. (See especially the research done at the Mind and Life Institute, mindandlife.org)

While design education has increased its need to address the intellectual body of design knowledge, and how design relates critically to social, ecological, and political issues, we fail to address individual responsibility and accountability. We glorify specialists, stylists, and intellectuals, but they only deal with the part, not with the whole. This admiration perpetuates imitation, which breeds conformity, power, and dogma, which kills creativity.

Design education also fails because we continue to emphasize technique and information. To merely train or inform means to teach efficiency and conformity, but such proficiency can never lead to wholeness. Moreover, as the teacher and philosopher J. Krishnamurti has once said, to cultivate these aspects without understanding life can never bring creative understanding. Understanding life means to know your SELF (that dictum of the Greek Oracle of

Delphi). To be is to be in relationship, and to “know your SELF” means to understand your relationships by being aware of your thoughts and feelings.

Behavioral science and psychology confirm that who we are filters our perceptions, colors our understanding, and creates our projections. Knowing your SELF means to see that filter, to become aware of projections and to try and heighten your understanding of the world and your relationship in it. Without this self-knowledge we can only perpetuate the past and limit ourselves from seeing anything new.

To make sure, I am not speaking of self-indulgence or selfishness. Self-discovery is much more than merely having a perception of self because understanding ourselves means also to understand our neighbors, our society, our world. We are that world, and the world begins with each of us. If our view of life is materialistic we will follow the selfish ideal of material happiness. If we believe ourselves as essentially spiritual beings then we are likely to live altruistically for the purpose to promote peace.

Today’s science, as opposed to Aristotle’s, (e.g. David Bohm’s views on perception) confirms our need to understand wholeness. That understanding requires inquiry, the means to help draw out and unfold what David Bohm called the implicate order as a new approach to reality. Without inquiry we remain in the status quo and creativity is impossible — thus making inquiry essential to education.

The key to cognitive control and understanding is to pay attention. When you pay attention there is awareness. With awareness you begin to see things in relation. From seeing things in relation meaning becomes apparent. From that, design study and practice have the potential to become acts of substance.

Substance becomes possible only with skillful action that does not perpetuate the limited, egocentric interest. From observation, sensitivity and mindful action you cannot help but see things in relation integrated within a larger whole. This idea of substance is true for design, and equally true for education. When there is understanding there is intelligence as the source for ethical living.



It is challenging to address this internalizing process in the short time we have, and more via visual projects. But, for an audience who prefers to see things I decided to try and exemplify this contemplative practice. I used a course called Concrete Books. **The course is about inseeing the book and experiments with that object.** The pedagogical goals are to experience inquiry via hand, mind and heart; to relax conditioned response; to incite (or stimulate) insight; and to open up awareness to the world lived in. By the way, this was designed for three huge screens, with modeling and

making represented on the left screen, the processing of ideas and feelings on the right screen, and the product in the center. (media show starts here)

As an educator I hope my students gain skills in awareness and a deeper sense of intelligence. I hope they increasingly become fully present in their work, unimpeded by their conditioning from their past or a projected future. I hope they can see design as an option for contemplative practice.

The left and right images on the screens reflect a graduate thesis by Gunta Kaza. Some of her work was sprinkled throughout the previous show. But it was the “dishcloth” that became the impulse for her discovery, insights and thesis. Hardly graphic design, one might say, but she writes: *“What this work has told me is that I have a need, a necessity and passion for being involved in the fringes, the margins, the unseen, rather than the mainstream. What has been revealed in the process is a submission, a giving in to listen to what is unspoken, to be alert to finding humor and interest in the most mundane, and to not be afraid of what I do not yet understand. The cloth informed me that, if I am the weft then what surrounds me is the warp I must pay attention to. My curiosity and lingering in the place of rupture, the rips and tears in the dishcloths has been a cathartic experience. They reveal a tension between the weft and the warp gone awry. They create fringe in the body of the cloth, margins in our mainstream culture. This is what motivates and drives my work.”*

The following quote from J. Krishnamurti, who greatly stimulated my pedagogical insights, sums up well this educational principle: When the heart enters into the mind the mind has quite a different quality; it is really, then, limitless, not only in its capacity to think, to act efficiently, but also in its sense of living in a vast space where you are part of everything.

For a more practical example of this framework for the contemplative practice here is a recent project I directed.

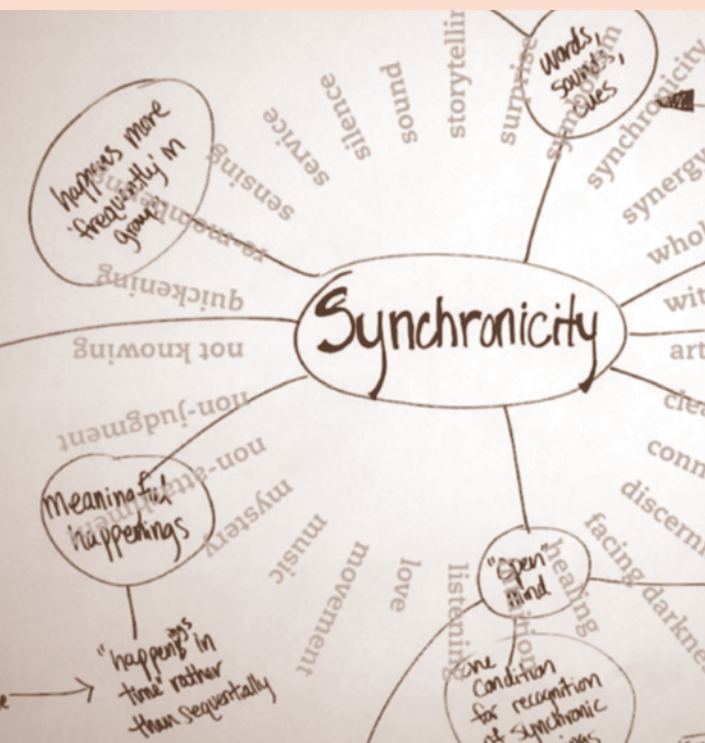
This project responded to the question *“How do we come together in order to touch, or be touched by, the intelligence we need?”*— a

question vital to the efforts of a Fetzer Institute sponsored group called The Collective Wisdom Initiative (TCWI). While I listened to the client’s description of this project I began to envision a dynamic or moving map in which the viewer would not only find the information gathered, but engage with the map as an object to actually experience in parallax to that information/subject of the field of collective wisdom. With a team of graduate students from our program we set out to create such a map as an interactive CD and website using the insights, images, stories, and core principles presented in the Centered on the Edge document.



The protein quality of consciousness made it necessary to think of a new way to look at interfaces of experience. Most interfaces are didactic and linear in their design and function because their goal is to disseminate information to the user in a convenient manner. This practical approach is quite suitable for many types of content, but when content is of a social or experiential nature this type of methodology does not work.

We considered the perceptual engagement with words and images as a “poetic” partnership, a gentle co-motion in time and space to stimulate a deep sense of consciousness — of imagination, broadened perspective, and heightened meaning. Poetics stimulates vitality through the power of grace. Grace invites a suspension of the ego, permitting receptivity and inspiration (= being in spirit). From that unfolds the energy of an emerging state of awareness, of intelligence, and the feeling of abundance.



The design is a non-hierarchical, non-linear structure — of center-points in which each point (or “cell”) is an organized principle that acts as both microcosm and macrocosm. This holistic conception applies to the entire design interface language from its largest structure to the smallest component. Interaction is with objects in constant flux. Links are programmed to randomize the parts along with a few controls so the user, like a strange attractor in chaos theory, becomes a precipitator of response, unexpected combinations and formation. That dynamism empowers the participant with possibilities and co-creation. In paying attention there is the possibility of surprise, which stimulates spontaneity and play. Every experience is therefore new, enabling fresh insights. The key is to participate with a contemplative attitude, leaving out expectations, and letting happen whatever happens.

This map is complete in its current state, and yet still in process since we envisioned the possibility to offer an ever broader and deeper delving into this web of consciousness. But the true depth of what the map has to offer, even at this relative incomplete stage, lies in the experience itself, of being in the moment as active participant and co-creator — and not in the world of expectation and passive consumption. We think of this digital project as a navigational art form that awakens a particular quality of perception, as if in conversation with the field. Like surfing, one rides the wave of moving particles that open and shift in space. Or, like viewing an impressionist painting, one encounters fractured phenomena up close, and then, as one backs out, the whole is revealed. So here it is, and for when you have a chance to enter it yourself the rules are simple: Play. Stay open. Believe in possibility.

To end this talk I leave your eyes to rest once again on the words by Dr Kim Young-Oak.

There is no such a thing as a “designer.”

Whatever or whoever designs, gets designed in turn simultaneously.

The ultimate value of the designer must be found in “not designing.”

Design should not be understood as “making,” but “making appear.”

To read these after what I presented in word and image I hope you can arrive at a better understanding of what he was saying, and that the words now resonate with significance.

DESIGN BEHAVIORS