



FLUX: Design Education in a Changing World

DEFSA International Design Education Conference 2007

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Towards a new Master's Degree in Graphic Design for the Durban University of Technology.

Abstract

Title: Towards a new Master's Degree in Graphic Design for the Durban University of Technology.

This presentation will report on progress made in the development of a new Master's degree structure in Graphic Design at the Durban University of Technology.

In 2006, the Faculty of Arts at the DUT was tasked with the development of a new Master's degree in Design, intended to replace the current separate Departmental MTech offerings. The new degree was therefore to be structured to accommodate the four Design disciplines in the Faculty of Arts: Fashion and Textiles, Graphic, Interior and Jewellery. Subsequent restructuring of the Faculty, now known as the Faculty of Arts and Design, has resulted in this plan falling away. However, in this process, the Department of Graphic design began discussions on the purpose and nature of higher qualifications within the discipline, and how these might affect the structure and course offerings within the department. In particular the department is examining the possible effects of developing sub-disciplinary streams within the department.

The presentation will detail decisions taken about the philosophy, structure, and content of the proposed programme, and invite comment and discussion of them. At the moment it is anticipated that the degree will combine common theoretical and methodological components with a sub-discipline-specific dissertation and/or applied research project.

We are particularly interested in issues of sustainability and development and social responsibility in design, and how this can be integrated into the degree structure. Other theoretical elements particularly under consideration for integration into the programme are: issues of; indigenous knowledge; the position of Visual Communication Design and its sub-disciplines in the globalised and post-colonial world; and in South Africa; along with current contemporary critical issues of culture, communication, representation, and so on.

The planning is at an early stage, but it is anticipated that by the date of the conference, it will have reached an advanced point.

Key Words: *Master's degree, Graphic Design, development, sustainability*

Towards a new Master's Degree in Graphic Design for the Durban University of Technology.

Introduction

This paper reports on recent developments in the Master's degree structure in the Department of Graphic Design at the Durban University of Technology (DUT). It describes the history of this qualification in recent years and discusses proposals for the future philosophy, structure, and content of the proposed programme. In particular, it discusses the inclusion in the proposed programme of issues of sustainability and social responsibility in Graphic Design. It also discusses practical issues raised by these proposals, such those of staffing and marketing the new course.

The paper makes reference particularly to the critical assessment of design by the Australian writer Tony Fry, and the assessment produced by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) of the sustainability or otherwise of current world resource consumption, and the relationship between this consumption and Graphic Design. Examples of recent work at the department are then briefly described, to show how such work can develop into the sort of design projects envisaged by the revision of the Master's degree.

Original plans for this revision were for a multi-disciplinary Master's Degree in Design, as opposed to Graphic design, but this plan has fallen away due to Faculty re-structuring. The wide range of Graphic Design focused specialisations intended for the new Master's programme still involves considerable cross-disciplinary work and planning. Indeed, in larger institutions, our proposed specialised areas often form whole departments of their own. The prospectus for the London College of Communication (LCC), for example, describes film, video, photography, animation and interactive media courses in both the School of Media and the School of Graphic Design, which also includes courses or pathways in typography, illustration, printmaking, design for advertising, and information design (London College of Communication, 2006, various pages).

Part 1: The Master's Degree in Graphic Design (MTech) at the DUT: History, Motivation and Perceptions

Technikon Natal and ML Sultan Technikon, the predecessor institutions of the DUT, first introduced the MTech degree in Graphic design as a replacement for the old Master's Diploma in Technology in 2000. To date, only three Master's degrees in Graphic Design have been awarded by the department, all to lecturing staff. A fourth lecturing colleague is currently engaged in her Master's. In contrast, the BTech degree, introduced at the same time, has proved far more popular than the old Higher Diploma that it replaced, and now averages about thirty students per year.

At the moment, the DUT requirement of a Master's degree as a minimum qualification for permanent employment must be the main motivation for further Master's registrations. Indeed, my colleague Rick Andrew has expressed the opinion, quite reasonably, that academia is the most likely source of potential Master's students (Andrew, 2007: 2).

If this opinion is valid, neither our Master's course nor the qualification in general has a viable future. The number of new lecturers coming into the system is very small, and once the current staff have these qualifications, new registrations will be few and far between. A qualification offering which only attracts students on an occasional basis will not survive long in the current minimalist dispensation, where whole departments can be merged for being too small, let alone mere courses.

Why do we wish to continue with the Master's, then?

Firstly, there is the issue of international practice. Master's degrees in Graphic Design and related fields are offered at many tertiary institutions overseas. For the UK alone, the British Council/Education UK website lists 80 courses from 40 institutions just under Graphic Design postgraduate courses, excluding related fields such as illustration, animation or typography (http://www.educationuk.org/pls/hot_bc/bc_search_result.page_pls_use_results_col). As part of

upgrading the DUT to be internationally competitive in this field, it therefore seems imperative that we should also offer the qualification.

Secondly, awareness has been growing that there is increasingly a need to conduct in-depth research into solutions to design briefs, and that the more complex the design problem, the more able a researcher the designer needs to be. Audiences in South Africa are highly varied in terms of languages spoken and understood, cultural beliefs and practices, levels of education and modes of thought, religious beliefs, and so on. Communication with or between them cannot therefore be assumed to function as it might in a supposedly more homogenous European or North American society. Santos, however, in his descriptions of mostly cultural stumbling blocks to communication between “Anglo” and Hispanic populations in the Southwestern USA, makes it clear that such ideas of homogeneity are illusory in today’s world (Santos, 2003: 55-62). This awareness in turn is leading to the understanding that learning about research in a Design context such as the department is a good way to familiarise oneself with these methodologies and processes.

Thirdly, the DUT management has put great emphasis in recent years on improving academic standards within the lecturing staff, as already mentioned. As part of the conversion of the institution into a university it has been made clear that all permanent lecturing staff must be qualified as university lecturers and function as in university departments, conducting research and publishing as well as teaching. This pressure has impelled us into confronting the issue of what constitutes research in our disciplines, as well as into getting to grips with it. University departments, after all, are supposed to develop their disciplines by research, not just qualify themselves to teach them.

Additional factors have come into play, which may also change the perception of the degree as being only relevant to academics. Awareness of and interest in the qualification has been growing among students, partly because of the increasing popularity of such qualifications overseas, although this has yet to translate into registrations. (An ulterior factor promoting these developments is of course the advantage of a B degree or, for preference, a Master’s, when trying to emigrate to places like Australia, where it seems that a mere diploma carries no weight at all). Also, the DUT has at last agreed on functional procedures for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Confirmative Status (CS), which we believe will make it easier to promote the qualification to working designers.

It is also intended that the development of this Degree will take place in the context of an international research programme partnership between the University of Northumbria at Newcastle, UK, and Makerere University, Uganda, and ourselves. This England-Africa Project has grown out of previous research projects such as the Siyazama Project, and the associated NRF niche area of Appropriate Design Education for Sustainable Development (Design, Health and Community) as well as out of contacts with these institutions in that context. We hope to make use of their expertise and experience in the development of the degree. Maintenance and expansion of international links is one of the underlying aims of the project, and it is hoped that international staff and student exchanges will be a feature of the degree programme once established.

Proposed Revision of the MTech (GD):

The revision of the MTech degree in our department takes place as part of a process of overall course development, in which the BTech will become the main exit point from the system. The emphasis in the system then will be that the National Diploma concentrates on vocational skills, the BTech on conceptualisation and professional abilities, and the MTech on research. Our intention is that positioning the BTech as the exit level will raise the bar as far as students’ academic careers are concerned; we hope more will then look beyond the BTech to the Master’s level. The proposal on which this paper is based has been developed primarily from a combination of our own experience and comparison with similar courses, and as such is still in a preliminary stage.

Recent BTech numbers have made it necessary to divide the class according to specialisation, with one group concentrating on typographic and print design, another on illustration, and the third on design for multimedia and movement, i.e. web design and animation. These groups reflect student interests, and match international practice quite well.

It is our intention to offer similar specialisations in the MTech degree, and to provide a more formal structure to the course. In the past, it has been a research-project qualification, with only individual

tutorial contact with supervisors on offer as departmental input, as some PhD programmes operate. The onus of discovering research methodology, reference material, and initial writing skills has thus been left substantially to the student, and only when there has been something for the supervisor to comment on could he/she really come into play.

In contrast, comparisons with Master's courses in Graphic Design at British institutions like the London College of Communication (LCC), the University of Northumberland at Newcastle (UNN), Middlesex University (MU), or the University of Western England (UWE) at Bristol all show a substantial taught component, combined with a self-motivated research project. (London College of Communication, 2004: 25-45; Middlesex University, 1999: 18-31; University of Northumbria at Newcastle, 2007; and University of Western England, 2007). In all of these institutions, Master's degrees in design are more established than at the DUT. In the past, we have tended to assume that a course had to be run either as coursework or as project, with nothing in between, but these courses operate as part coursework and part project. The courses at Middlesex and Newcastle are framed as broad design programmes, whereas the other two are quite specialised within the discipline of Graphic design, but all allow for a range of sub-specialisations within this structure. Although our department is much smaller than any of these, this model of operation therefore seems appropriate. Our course must also cover a wide range, owing to the rarity of specialised courses in Durban at this level.

There is always a difficult balance to be found between following an international model on the one hand, and meeting the needs of South Africa on the other. The former has been developed without any consideration or knowledge of the latter, but serves as a standard against which we can match ourselves, while at the same ensuring relevant content within this structure.

The MTech degree may be taken either as 100% dissertation, or as 50/50 mini-dissertation and project. The proposed revision of the MTech is offered over a minimum of one year fulltime (two years part-time), including a much fuller programme, with a number of taught modules. These consist of:

1. Research Methodology and Proposal-writing;

- Introduction to research methodologies
- Problem formulation, data collection, compilation and analysis
- Quantitative and qualitative methods
- Self-motivated Research
- Formulation and delimitation of a project proposal
- Advanced Report and Essay Writing

2. Design as Visual Communication;

- Functions of Visual Communication
- Methods of analysis: semiotics and communication theory
- Contemporary Graphic Design Issues
- Analysis and Criticism of Texts
- Integration of Graphic Design History and Practice
- Contemporary Critical Discourses: Semiotics, etc
- Graphic Design in Contemporary South Africa

3. Visual Design in Context;

- The Audience and culture: design as social production
- Ecology, environmental sustainability
- Social responsibility & sustainability
- Cultural sustainability
- Individual and Cultural identity

In this module, students are required to consider these aspects of sustainability, and the interrelationships between them, and to comment in more detail on those, which appear most relevant to the project. The module may be integrated into a student's Master's degree project in two ways: 1) The student may reflect critically on the effects of an otherwise standard graphic design project. 2) He/she may take as the research topic an application of graphic design to an issue related to sustainability, and/or social responsibility, as a result of such reflection. This module is discussed at greater length in Part 2.

4. Visual Design as Specialisation: Electives ;

Students will be required to complete combined theoretical/practical modules in their specialised areas, as preparation for their major projects. The following specialist areas are available as focuses for study:

Typographic/Print Design,
Illustration,
Moving Image Design,
Interactive Design (Multi-media), and
Photography.

The purpose of these electives is the establishment of a clear basis for the major project and dissertation. They may take the form of research work such as case studies, may include applied project work, etc depending on the individual project as it is being developed.

These specialist areas must be considered in combination with consideration of the main communication function of the project: Information, Promotion, or Entertainment. The student will thus need to relate their project to discussions of communication theory such as in, for example, Barnard (2005:24-28, 85); and as such this part of the module follows on from Module 2.

5. Major Project and/or Dissertation:

This section of the course integrates all previous sections and modules, and leads either to a written or an applied solution to the self-defined design problem set out in the proposal. It should demonstrate in its conceptualisation, definition, research, documentation, methodology, analysis, reflection, and production an advanced ability and understanding of contemporary visual communication design. The topic should be situated socially, culturally, ecologically and personally in the dissertation, which should also support and be supported by the applied work if this option is chosen.

Entrance to the Master's:

There are a number of possible routes leading to the Master's qualification.

- 1) The 'normal' route is: National Diploma → BTech → MTech.
- 2) Alternatively, a student could complete the National Diploma, then work for at least five years, and following a successful RPL process, join the MTech course. The RPL process as currently envisaged will require a student to present a portfolio along with a critical and reflective report on his/her career so far, and if necessary, complete bridging modules in specialist areas or research methodology. We hope in this way to encourage mature designers whose careers have prevented them from doing the BTech to consider the MTech as a realistic option.
- 3) Would-be applicants from other disciplines have the option of applying for Confirmative Status, which again may require the presentation of a portfolio and/or bridging modules.

Staffing implications:

This proposed structure is far more formal than has been the case for Master's students to date, and assumes that there may be enough students to form a class group, or at least to follow a course more or less simultaneously. If this is the case, the staff required will be considerable. In the short to medium term, because some of our current staff themselves will be studying, extra staff will be needed as replacements. If total numbers of Master's students justify it, extra staffing will be necessary in addition to this. It would also be necessary to provide specialist lecturers for electives, although we hope that there may be some overlap in these roles. Specialist input is likely to be in the form of short workshops with external consultants, partly because our lecturers themselves will be students, and also because we have so far been unable to find specialists in these areas who have Master's degrees, who thus cannot be employed permanently as lecturers.

Marketing the course

Staffing implications make it vital for the course that we have an idea in advance of student numbers. In order to do this, we intend to advertise the course in the third term, with an early closing date, and emphasising the RPL route for entry, the range of time and specialisation options, and the current DUT policy of waiving tuition fees for higher qualifications. By the time this paper is delivered, it should be possible to report back on the success or otherwise of this approach.

Part 2: Social Responsibility and Sustainability

The relationship between Graphic Design and Sustainability

In many ways, the proposed structure and curriculum of the MTech must be comparable to Master's degree courses in Graphic design elsewhere. The main element that we hope to give a novel emphasis to is that of the Context of Design. This module will require the student to examine the consequences or effects of Graphic Design in general, of the specialist area, and of the project in particular. It will also require reflection on the consequences of these for the intended audience and the society in which it exists, for the local environment and resources, and for the designer.

The motivation for the introduction of this module is primarily a belief that graphic designers have the potential to contribute to solving or ameliorating some of the issues that affect South African society, and that they can thus contribute to the development of the nation. This is in contrast, and in addition, to graphic design's major function in recent decades, which has been to promote consumption and corporate profitability. In South Africa this function was presented as both normal and neutral, but in fact, it carries an ideological position, as the American designer and commentator Katherine McCoy has made clear:

"A dangerous assumption is that corporate work of innocuous content is devoid of political bias. The vast majority of student projects deal with corporate needs, placing a heavy priority on the corporate economic sector of our society. Commerce is where we are investing time, budgets, skills and creativity. This is a decisive vote for economics over other potential concerns, including social, educational, cultural, spiritual and political needs. This is a political statement in itself, both in education and practice." (1994:111)

In the same article, McCoy describes as "an act of self-censorship", the role of "the rationally objective professional (and) neutral transmitter of the client's messages" who was the ideal designer at the beginning of her career in the 1960s (1994:106). This view of the relationship between designer and client is still popular.

Unfortunately, this leaves Graphic Design in an ethically difficult position. As the Australian design theorist Tony Fry has commented: "...design is once more positioned as a handmaiden of uncritical instrumentalism (design for). The adoption of this service relation ...strands design in a condition of dependence upon the ethics of that which it serves. Design leadership cannot occur without a rupture from this sensibility of subordination". Fry, 2005(1): 1) Fry and McCoy's criticisms have been expressed within the discourse of design, but their views of its role are reflected by data from the environmental end of the spectrum.

Designers who wish to contribute substantially to anything other than the promotion of consumption and waste clearly need to find another mode of working. The ideas of designing for development or society, doing pro bono work or public service announcements, etc, are not new. However, the idea of criticising their own position in the structure of their industry, and situating such a criticism in the context of an explicit and negotiated concept of development, may be contentious for designers.

Fry makes the point that the widely accepted model of "development" is one which postulates "that 'underdeveloped countries' imitate the industrialisation of 'developed nations', but in an accelerated form" (2005(1): 1). This process has led, however, not to an overall improvement in people's lives, but to "Intervention in 'undeveloped' nations (which) did not lead necessarily to a general condition of development, but to the formation of new elites, social and economic divisions and inequalities...the construction of dependence...and uneven development...effectively installing enduring structural inequalities" (2005(1):4)). Fry clearly establishes the connection between consumption and globalised capital, and points out the inherent instability and unsustainability of this mode of relations. Fry's comments will find echoes in many South African minds, particularly those who had hoped for greater social equality and ecological sensitivity in post-Apartheid society, but instead experience a society in which the sole measure of progress, or success, seems to be consumption.

While the commonly accepted notion of development would include some idea of improving people's lives, the questions Fry raises include: whose lives, and at what cost?

Typically, the term sustainability refers to the potential of an activity or way of life to continue indefinitely without exhausting available resources. It is thus understood most often to refer to a

relationship between economics and the environment: whether the activity can remain profitable indefinitely, or whether the activity can continue without exhausting or damaging the planet, or at least the local eco-system. The Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future*, defined a sustainable version of development as "...those paths of social economic and political progress that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (World Commission on the Environment, 1987, quoted in Fry, 2005(2):1)), but Fry highlights the "anthropocentric bias" of this definition in ignoring the "interconnected interdependency of all biological life"(2005(2):1), as well as the report's ignoring of present inequalities in people's lives. He thus rightly requires a more holistic understanding of what development must include.

The Environmental Picture

The Worldwide Fund for Wildlife's "Living Planet Report " (2006) describes the sustainability of current resource use and its effects on the global ecosystem. It presents evidence that the consumerist lifestyle and mindset, which Graphic Design has promoted, is no longer sustainable. It uses an index of the "Ecological Footprint" of humanity, which "measures humanity's demand on the biosphere in terms of the area of biologically productive land and sea required to provide the resources we use and to absorb our waste... The footprint of a country includes all the cropland, grazing land, forest and fishing grounds required to produce the food, fibre, and timber it consumes, to absorb the wastes emitted in generating the energy it uses, and to provide space for its infrastructure"(WWF, 2006: 16). (This is distinct from the more familiar carbon footprint, which is a measure of our effect on Global Warming).

According to their figures, consumption of resources exceeded the planet's capacity to regenerate in the mid-1980s. That "overshoot" has continued to grow to about 25% by 2003 (the most recent year for which figures were available)(2006:4). In other words, we are now draining the planet's stored resources faster than they can be replaced.

The report further describes the individual "ecological footprint" as a total measure of resources required by our lifestyles. This measure is expressed in Global hectares (Gha), of which 1.8 is the break point for sustainability. The world average was about 2.2. South Africa's footprint was 2.4 Gha per person, already in excess of the sustainable level, despite our comparatively undeveloped state. That of the USA, meanwhile, the report gives as 9.6, meaning that the it is consuming about five times what is sustainable. (2006:16). The report does not predict the limits of this behaviour, but it does sound serious warnings about the likely consequences.

Clearly, humanity's environmental impact on the planet is the most fundamental aspect of sustainability, but issues of social/cultural/political sustainability must also be considered. Can a culture, society or political system sustain a lifestyle or activity indefinitely without damage, or can it adapt to necessary changes? These questions may apply to the environmentally sustainable "solutions" as much as to the problems.

Designing for Sustainability in Durban

South African society has undergone enormous stresses for many years, from colonial wars to apartheid and all its works, to more recent stresses of globalisation, pandemic disease, urbanisation, industrialisation, lack of education, extremely rapid changes in class formation, and so on. The result of these processes is a society with extremes of wealth, education, social/cultural alienation, crime, and other highly stressful conditions. Whether or not South African society is socio-culturally sustainable in the long term because of these forces, projects that improve or lessen any of these stresses will be beneficial, and no more than our responsibility to society. The importance of these issues have led some of us to believe that sustainability, in its social/cultural/political aspect as well as its environmental aspect, is as significant a long term concern for Graphic Design, or Visual Communication, as any other.

In this context, the range of potential developmental design projects in South Africa is clearly vast. A number of recent research projects from BTech and other levels have demonstrated some aspects of how students might approach such questions. These projects do not include the range of reflection on sustainability that we propose for the new MTech, as that has not so far been a requirement. They do still show pointers to the range of ways in which students and designers could contribute to a sustainable form of graphic design, or graphic design for sustainable ends, in the sense of making the society as a whole sustainable.

For example, one threat to South African social sustainability is certainly the AIDS pandemic. Recent figures give a possible infection rate of 18.8% for the population in general (UNICEF, 2005:3), and 75-80% amongst new registrations at Edward VIII Hospital in Durban (Hartzell, 2006). Either of these figures would demonstrate the clear threat to South African society posed by HIV/AIDS. HIV/AIDS as a whole may be too big an issue for an individual to change, but there are many small aspects of the overall crisis to which they may contribute.

Our pathfinder in the area of design for social responsibility, or social sustainability, was of course the Siyazama Project, led by Dr Kate Wells, with rural Zulu beadworkers, which has been documented elsewhere (see Wells, Sienaert & Conolly, 2004; or Carey, 2006). More recently, Samantha Robertson worked with traditional healers to develop appropriate visual education materials on AIDS transmission modes for them and their clients, in collaboration with the PEPFAR project at the Edward VIII Hospital in Durban. The logic was that some 80% of the population prefer to consult a traditional healer, and that therefore the healers were the most influential body in the health field. (Robertson, 2006; also Carey, 2006)

Current projects look at further aspects: the number of orphans in the country has been given as in the region of 2.5 million, of whom 1.2 million have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS (UNICEF, 2007:4). Many people would like to help these children in some capacity, but don't know what steps to take. One of our students, Jean Shange, is therefore designing a "Guide Book" to orphanages and related services in the Durban area. If produced, this guide will help volunteers to contribute, by providing a variety of information about what is needed and how volunteers may participate.

Further examples include students researching high school learners' attitudes to AIDS information and how it can be made more effective, and on the cultural side, researching local musicians with the aim of promoting local music against the international flood.

In these projects, each student's concern with some aspect of South African society or culture is explicit. Some do engage in the kind of analysis of the potential effects of their project that we envisage for the Master's, but this has not been a requirement at that level. Similarly, we cannot require that all students engage in such projects, but our intention is that in future all Master's projects, including those which have a "normal" commercial focus, will be required to assess their project in terms of its effect on society, particularly if it can be put into effect. Thus the student will be asked to examine their project in terms of its economic, financial, environmental, social, and cultural sustainability.

The range of topics that students have chosen for themselves in recent and current research projects such as these has encouraged us to promote this direction explicitly in the department. Because of their individual nature, short time-frame, and lack of appropriate support and contacts, our students' BTech projects have functioned at a very small scale. It is also problematic that because of these factors, the projects cannot normally be fully developed and put into practice. We hope that the larger scale of Master's projects will enable us to do this.

Conclusion

This paper has described the background to the revision of the Master's Degree in Graphic Design at the Durban University of Technology, and the proposed programme. It has discussed the structure of the proposed course, and attempted to situate this in comparison with selected Master's courses in the UK. In particular, it has sought to examine the part that the concepts of social responsibility and sustainability can play in this course, and what areas of research may be required of students. The paper makes reference to the work of writers like Tony Fry, amongst others, who has identified and challenged the subservient ethical position of Graphic Design; and of organisations like the World Wide Fund for Nature, whose "Living Planet Report" clearly identifies the dreadful risks inherent in our current lifestyles and aspirations. Finally, the paper has given relevant examples of the type of research that has been undertaken at the department of Graphic design at the DUT, and attempted to show how this kind of work can form a springboard for the intentions of the Master's.

In this context our aim as a department is to promote an awareness of the sustainability or otherwise of Graphic Design in general and a given project in particular; and an attitude that takes responsibility for the consequences of the design work done, in the broadest feasible manner, concentrating on society and the environment. The ethics of design have been an issue for design educators for a

number of years, but this has mostly referred to legal or moral issues within the industry – intellectual property, offensiveness or exploitation, and so on. Our new Master's proposal extends this to a broad awareness of the full context of Graphic Design, and aims to produce graduates who are capable of using design to help build a sustainable, independent, yet internationally connected, economy and culture for South Africa.

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Born 1955, Wraysbury, England. Educated in Toronto, Canada, and Dublin, Ireland.

1977: BA Hons Fine Art (Sculpture), Bath Academy of Art, UK

1980: Postgraduate Certificate in Printmaking, Brighton Polytechnic, UK.

1998: Higher National Diploma (Graphic Design), Technikon Natal, SA.

2004: Mtech degree (Graphic Design), cum Laude, Durban Institute of Technology, SA.

Worked in graphic design, printing and documentary films before joining Technikon Natal in 1990. Lectured in printmaking, illustration, and computers before focussing on history of Graphic Design and supervising Btech and Mtech students. Currently also revising the Mtech course.

**Towards a new Master's
Degree in Graphic Design
for the Durban University
of Technology.**

Piers Carey

Motivation for the MTech

- International Practice
- Need for Research and Development in the Field
- Internal Development of the Department
- Improving Staff Qualifications

Proposed Structure of the MTech degree

- 1) Taught Modules:
 - 1a) Research Methodologies and Proposal-Writing;
 - 1b) Design as Visual Communication;
 - 1c) Visual Design in Context
- 2) Combined Research/Applied Study in Sub-Discipline;
- 3) Major Project and/or Dissertation

Organisation and Numbers

- As the course will be offered both full- and part-time, and as students will probably need to arrange their studies in a variety of ways, the modular course structure will allow for students at various points in the course simultaneously.
- With current staff loads, it will be difficult to accommodate more than about 5 students per year. Our aim is a range of 7–10 per year.

Sub-disciplines within the BTech (Graphic Design) degree

- Design for Print/Typography;
- Design for the Web
- Design for Moving Media: Animation/Video
- Design for Narrative: Illustration

BTech Focus areas

- Form: in what technical specialisation will the work be done. Essentially the same as the 'sub-disciplines' above.
- Function: what function or combination of functions is the work attempting to fulfill, e.g persuasion, entertainment, education, information, promotion, etc.
- Context: what type of client and audience the project will be for, and in what socio/cultural context it will operate.

Implicit Ideology

- “A dangerous assumption is that corporate work of innocuous content is devoid of political bias. The vast majority of student projects deal with corporate needs, placing a heavy priority on the corporate economic sector of our society. Commerce is where we are investing time, budgets, skills and creativity. This is a decisive vote for economics over other potential concerns, including social, educational, cultural, spiritual and political needs. This is a political statement in itself, both in education and practice.” (McCoy,1994:111)

“Development”

- The widely accepted model of “development” is one which postulates “that ‘underdeveloped countries’ imitate the industrialisation of ‘developed nations’, but in an accelerated form” (Fry, 2005(1): 1). This process has led, however, not to an overall improvement in people’s lives, but to “...intervention in ‘undeveloped’ nations (which) did not lead necessarily to a general condition of development, but to the formation of new elites, social and economic divisions and inequalities...the construction of dependence...and uneven development...effectively installing enduring structural inequalities” (2005(1):4)).

Sustainability

- The term sustainability refers to the potential of an activity or way of life to continue indefinitely without exhausting available resources. It is thus understood most often to refer to a relationship between economics and the environment: whether the activity can remain profitable indefinitely, or whether the activity can continue without exhausting or damaging the planet, or at least the local eco-system.

“The Living Planet”

- The Worldwide Fund for Wildlife’s “Living Planet Report “ (2006) the individual “ecological footprint” as a total measure of resources required by our lifestyles. This measure is expressed in Global hectares (Gha), of which 1.8 is the break point for sustainability. The world average was about 2.2. South Africa’s footprint was 2.4 Gha per person, already in excess of the sustainable level, despite our comparatively undeveloped state. That of the USA, meanwhile, the report gives as 9.6, meaning that the it is consuming about five times what is sustainable. (2006:16).

What should Graphic Design be for?

- In these circumstances, how acceptable is it that the main purpose of most graphic design work is to encourage consumption regardless of effect, and that it will end up, as Rowan Gatfield (2005) has described it, merely as “colourful garbage”? How long can it continue?

Design: leader or subordinate?

- “...design is once more positioned as a handmaiden of uncritical instrumentalism (design for). The adoption of this service relation ...strands design in a condition of dependence upon the ethics of that which it serves. Design leadership cannot occur without a rupture from this sensibility of subordination”.
(Fry, 2005:1)

Recent Projects

- The Graphic Design Department at the DUT has in recent years hosted a number of projects which have attempted to apply design skills to social, rather than commercial, briefs; whose underlying purpose has been to strengthen and sustain South African society and the environment. Students are required to identify, research and formulate these briefs themselves.

- Following the example of the Siyazama Project, led by Dr Kate Wells, and originally in the context of the department's NRF niche area, "Design Education for Sustainable Development (Design, Health and Community)", a number of these have been related to various aspects of the AIDS pandemic, but others have focused on street children, the homeless, hospice care, cerebral palsy, and similar issues.

Design in Context

- These projects have been the model for the “Design in Context” module envisaged for the new MTech programme.
- The module will be used firstly as a means of analysing and criticising any graphic design project, and may further be integrated into a student’s course as the basis for a socially-oriented project.

Future MTech Projects

- We anticipate needing a further two years to develop and organise the course, and in the meantime will continue to work simultaneously with Master's students and to refine our preparations in light of their experiences.
- The proposal is that in future all Master's students within the Department of Graphic Design will be required to assess their projects in terms of their potential effect on both society and the environment, and in terms of their economic, financial, environmental, social, and cultural sustainability.

The Long-term Aim

- The aim of this conception of the MTech course is to produce more thoughtful and analytical designers, who are well-informed about the probable social and environmental consequences of their decisions, and who in the long term will prove capable of tackling the challenges that may face South Africa in the future.

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