

What inspires designers? Preferences on inspirational approaches during idea generation



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Searching for inspirational stimuli is an essential step in the initial stages of the design process. However, there is a lack of information on what designers search for during such a phase. There is no distinction between what student and professional designers use as inspirational sources or idea generation methods. We present the results of a questionnaire involving 103 student and 52 professional designers on their reported preferences for inspirational approaches. Students and, to some extent, professional designers seem to give an exaggerated importance to a restricted number of approaches, when they could take advantage of a wide range of available resources. Further results have uncovered possible research directions for the exploration of alternative stimuli for inspiration during ideation phases.

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Designers, as human beings in general, are widely influenced by what surrounds them in their daily lives. This influence can occur in a systematic way, when designers actively search for inspiration, or even unconsciously or by chance (Goldschmidt & Sever, 2010; Herring, Chang, Krantzler, & Bailey, 2009). Inspiration has been defined as ‘the process of being mentally stimulated to do or feel something, especially to do something creative’ (Hornby, 2000). In design, inspiration as a process could entail both more active (deliberately searching for particular information, via the internet or books, for instance) as well as more passive (randomly encountering relevant information) procedures. Whilst engaging in information search, there is a general agreement that sources can arise from a number of different places. For instance, inspiration may be elicited by design examples of products or buildings, art pieces, pictures, written documents, but also from diverse forms of life from nature or other phenomena. Design researchers have defined inspiration in design as a process that can integrate the use of any entity in any form that elicits the formation of creative solutions for existing problems (e.g., Eckert, Stacey, & Clarkson, 2000). However, the overwhelming amount of possible stimuli a designer can search for and use adds

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to the complexity in understanding how inspiration influences the outcome of a solution. Presently, and as far as we can ascertain, there is no comprehensive overview of the types of inspirational stimuli designers reportedly use or prefer. Knowing more about the inspirational sources designers apply in their work is an essential step towards investigating the influence of inspiration during idea generation. Moreover, understanding the different approaches of student and professional designers on this matter can potentially help to support them in a more efficient search, retrieval and usage of available inspirational sources.

Research has shown that exposing people to examples can have a dual effect on design performance (Cai, Do, & Zimring, 2010). Such an effect can be both positive – where inspirational sources can stretch the solution space and the potential pool of creative solutions (e.g., Goldschmidt & Sever, 2010) and negative – by limiting ideas to replicating parts of existing examples (e.g., Jansson & Smith, 1991; Purcell & Gero, 1996).

Despite these conflicting perspectives on the influence of external stimuli during design idea generation, important questions are still unanswered. For instance, how far do designers value inspirational sources? What kinds of inspirational sources do designers search for during idea generation? What might be the differences between student and professional designers on their preferences for stimuli, as well as most used idea generation methods?

The aim of this paper is to answer these questions. This is expected to provide the basis for starting an investigation into how designers can be better supported during the front-end of product/service design and development – where ideation is likely to greatly influence design outcomes. Gaining insights into designers' current inspirational strategies could help establish future research directions on how designers select and transform available stimuli to produce new solutions. Therefore, learning about what types of stimuli designers search for during the initial phases of the design process would, ultimately, be a step towards finding out about the potential usefulness of particular types of inspirational sources. However, as the retrieval and usage of external stimuli is likely to be an integral element of different idea generation methods, this study also looks into some of these approaches. Consequently, the expectations underlying this study were as follows:

- We expected that both student and professional designers valued inspiration very highly (Eckert & Stacey, 2000). Although some studies have previously focussed on the topic of inspirational sources, they have provided only anecdotal evidence of their importance for designers. Additionally, from our experience in teaching design students and working with design

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