Legitimating design: a sociology of knowledge account of the field

Lucila Carvalho and *Andy Dong,* Design Lab, Faculty of Architecture, Design and Planning, Wilkinson Building (G04), University of Sydney, 148 City Road, Sydney NSW 2006, Australia
Karl Maton, Department of Sociology & Social Policy, Faculty of Arts, University of Sydney, Sydney NSW 2006, Australia

This paper presents a sociology of knowledge approach to describe disciplines in the field of design. We show how the approach casts the nature of knowledge in design disciplines as based upon socially agreed criteria for what constitutes the realization of legitimate knowledge. Interviews with designers and analyses of professional and pedagogic discourse about design are used to illustrate how the approach reveals the differences in what kind of design knowledge is valued, cultivated, and emphasised within a discipline. By placing a sociological lens on knowledge in design, we aim to suggest a language by which what counts as design knowledge can be explicitly expressed. A common, shared language to describe the differences opens a mechanism to discuss what can count as knowledge, rather than to retreat into corners and only agree to disagree that there are different knowledges in design.

Keywords: design knowledge, design theory, epistemology, interdisciplinarity, sociology of design

> An engineer's training is classical; it is a training in control. An architect's training is primarily romantic, a training in aesthetic conscience. … They see conflict between the two modes and control by their own mode as essential. (Happold, 1986, p. 136)

This quote is representative of one of a number of tensions within the field of design concerning differences in the interpretation of design activities and the knowledge required to undertake them. Such tensions express disagreements existent within the field about what knowledge one needs to design and what is the 'right' kind of knowledge. Debates over what counts as knowledge (e.g. empirical evidence, first-person accounts) and what displays of knowledge distinguishes disciplines are not new among academics and practitioners. However, they have become of growing concern in a contemporary climate that encourages inter- or even post-disciplinarity. Competing claims to knowledge touch upon all aspects of the professional practice of a discipline, shaping who is viewed as having insight, who is entitled

Corresponding author:
Lucila Carvalho
lude2071@mail.usyd.edu.au

www.elsevier.com/locate/destud
0142-694X $ - see front matter *Design Studies* **30** (2009) 483–502
doi:10.1016/j.destud.2008.11.005

to participate in the profession, whose voice is more legitimate, and so on. Calls for collaboration both within and between disciplines require knowledge of the knowledge and practices that are being brought together, or such calls will remain more rhetoric than reality.

This kind of debate is no stranger to the field of design. When design researchers and design professionals describe their processes, they tacitly assume that the readers (observers) already know (or agree with them) what constitutes a legitimate display of design knowledge. That is, the designers are performing what is essentially describable as designing. The competing claims to what counts as design knowledge is further complicated by incorporating the 'totality of disciplines, phenomena, knowledge, analytical instruments and philosophies that the design of useful objects must take into account' (Vitta, 1989, p. 31). In fact the 'culture of design' was said to encompass the 'culture of the object' itself. The struggles to agree upon what counts as design knowledge and its cultural identity can therefore be perceived as affecting and being affected by a complex system involving economy, production, social significance, consumption, use of objects, and so on. The broadness of what may be incorporated into the interpretation of design activities is overwhelming and its complexity may even prevent the realization of the discussion of what is considered legitimate design knowledge.

The many ways of describing design, which in turn need to make the assumption that what counts as a legitimate display of design knowledge has been 'agreed upon', has been partially rationalised by Dorst (Dorst and Dijkhuis, 1995; Dorst, 2008a, 2008b). Dorst cast the debate as a dialectic between Simon's rational problem-solving paradigm (Simon, 1995, 1996) and Schön's reflective practice approach (Schön, 1983). Whilst acknowledging the complexity of design, Simon writes, 'Design is inherently computational – a matter of computing the implications of initial assumptions and combinations about them.' (Simon, 1995, p. 247) Conversely, Schön embraces the inherent complexity of design and regards purely rational approaches with their reductionist tendencies and emphasis on quantitative data as unable to cope with the realities of design in practice. The 'reflective practitioner' must apply knowledge and experience to each unique circumstance.

At this point, we could rehearse all of the debates surrounding the description of design, and categorise the debates along dialectics including art vs. science, qualitative vs. quantitative, and rational vs. reflective. There is not one single description of design that could be agreed upon by practitioners and academics in the field since the design disciplines are continuously evolving and expanding into new dimensions, in both their practices and understandings (Buchanan, 2001). Individual designers are both artists and scientists, applying qualitative methods even during rational problem solving. The challenge in reaching an integrative discussion *about the field of design* is that designers