On design 'problematization': Theorising differences in designed outcomes

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This paper offers a speculative account of the way in which architectural design problems are 'solved', and of the significant ways in which such problems are constructed by the designers themselves. Deliberately retaining pro tem *the traditional 'problem–solution' language frame, the paper questions this viewpoint by positing a distinction between two categories of problem: the 'problem as given' and the 'problem as design goal'. While the first represents a conventional understanding of the problem presented for solution, the paper speculates that this is* not *the problem that the designer seeks to solve. A second category is therefore introduced to delineate* the *problem that is actually solved. This problem, termed the 'problem as design goal', is created by the imposition on to the 'problem as given' of a range of designer preferences, expectations and prejudices which not only define the 'actual' problem but, at the same time, establish the means and requirements for its acceptable solution. Such 'problematization', different for each designer and for each project, is posited as being central to architectural design, informing and constraining both the design activity and the final outcome in ways that are not determined by the brief itself.*
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Whhile the general contentions offered below might well be widened to encompass a vast range of designed objects, this paper takes as its vehicle design in architecture. Imagine an architectural design competition. Without the need to examine any of the submissions received two simple and non-contentious assertions might be advanced. First, it might confidently be predicted that no two entries will be the same, i.e. that each individual scheme will be different from all the others submitted. Second, and with similar confidence, it might be averred that, irrespective of the individual differences between entries, at a fundamental level all the design proposals will share a number of similarities. Putting aside the likelihood that the submissions will be amenable to categorisation and subdivision according to specific

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'family resemblances' (i.e. that, despite their individual differences, schemes will inevitably exhibit, and thus allow grouping according to, shared characteristics, be they formal, stylistic or strategic) this second assertion is usually intended to draw attention to, and thus to stress the significance of, a different and more fundamental aspect of sameness, namely the fact that all the competition entrants are *working from the same brief*. On the basis of this, the differences identified in the first assertion are then most usually attributed to differences in the range and level of the skills, experience, professional competence, and imagination that the designer (or design team) can bring to bear on this common brief in preparing the design proposal.

Neither of these assertions, nor their respective 'explanations', is surprising. Indeed, they might be expected to be commonplaces for the design literate, who would have encountered them, albeit in a slightly different language, in respect of many, if not all, of their experiences with design and designing, be they in the 'real' world of the professional designer or in the parallel academic world of the design educator. A particularly revealing example, almost inescapably couched in the 'problem/problem-solving' language frame that has been near ubiquitous in the design literature since the 1960s, emerges from the author's extensive experiences teaching in architectural design studios. Over a wide period of time, at different universities, and at a variety of different year levels, it has not been unusual to have heard colleagues assert, on pinning up the design submissions of a particular class for critique and/or assessment, that 'here are fifty different solutions to the same problem'. This assumption — elsewhere dubbed the 'same problem characterisation' (Harfield, 2002) — I do not subscribe to. While I am happy to accept the 'same brief' scenario as our starting point, I do *not* believe that students working on studio projects, nor different architects working on the same design competition, are engaged in solving the same design problem. Consequently, neither do I accept that the differences in the resulting solutions can simply be attributed to the differences in the skills, talent, professional competence, and so on, that the designers involved bring to bear on their analyses of the initial brief and thus on the development of 'their' solutions to this singular problem. For me there are *not* 'fifty solutions to the same problem' but, in important respects, 'fifty different solutions to *fifty different problems*'.

Before embarking on an explanation of the above contention, though, it is as well to point out at the outset that, while I entertain serious reservations as to the use value of couching design tasks and activities in problem/problem-solving terms at all I have retained the extant language frame within the current paper precisely in order to demonstrate how radically the conventional designation 'problem' must be augmented and recontextualized if it is to even partially identify 'that which we intend to solve and how we go about solving it'.