

Locating design phenomena: a methodological excursion

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An analysis is presented of a design meeting in which users and other stakeholders enter the design dialogue as 'others' who are talked about and spoken for in absentia, with particular attention paid to the circumstances in which these others are invoked. This lays an empirical foundation from which to premise a methodological discussion about researchers' practices of identifying design phenomena to analyse. In many analytical treatments, the circumstances in and through which phenomena (e.g. designers' actions) emerge tend to be stripped from those phenomena when they are treated as objects of analytical interest. This hides the actual work that designers are doing, work that is only recoverable through consideration of the circumstances in which design moves are made in interaction. Such analytic practices can be prone to generate an alien or ironic understanding of designers' work. This does not condemn such analytic approaches, but the point remains that there is much of importance that 'falls through the cracks' in such analytical treatments, particularly since a pivotal objective of many forms of design research is to account for design activity.

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When researchers seek to study design activity, they are faced with a large number of choices. The study of design has been identified as nothing less than the 'science of man' (Simon, 1981), design has been described as a characteristic that separates humankind from the animal kingdom (Cross, 1999), and many well-known definitions of design (Friedman, 2003 employs several in his abstract) have been formulated so broadly as to subsume activities as diverse as tying one's shoelaces and mastering a foreign language under their auspices. Thus, choosing *what* to study, and what to focus one's study on, at least with respect to these definitions, are not straightforward issues. It would thus appear that the methodological options open to design research are remarkably divergent, and the history of design research testifies to such a methodological diversity (Roth, 1999).

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Obviously, this historical situation has not deterred design researchers from finding things to study and choosing ways to study them, nor has it arrested



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the progress of the field. But undoubtedly, there is value in scrutinising not only the claims made from empirical work, but also the methodological choices made in advancing such claims. Thus, this paper addresses a methodological trouble encountered in researchers' practices of locating and analysing design phenomena. I will demonstrate this difficulty through an analysis of designers' talk, focusing on an instance in which other stakeholders (e.g. users, installers, customers) enter designers' dialogue.

1 Studies of design interactions

Since the seminal work of [Bucciarelli \(1988, 1994\)](#), there has been increasing acknowledgement that design is a social process. Related studies documenting in detail the real world work conducted within design and technology organisations have built on and elaborated aspects of design's social practice; a cursory survey of such work would include practices such as designers' varied, coordinated and 'political' uses of prototypes and representations ([Henderson, 1999](#)), the social organisation of large-scale design work ([Sharrock and Button, 1997](#); [Button and Sharrock, 1998](#)), the importance of shared knowledge as part and parcel of designing ([Eckert and Stacey, 2000](#); [Lloyd, 2000](#)), the largely contingent, ad hoc nature of productive workplace interactions ([Backhouse and Drew, 1992](#)), and various rhetorical strategies (e.g. appeals to 'standard practice' or personal experience) employed by designers ([Brereton et al., 1996](#); [Lloyd and Busby, 2001](#)). Of course, the phenomena subsumed under the 'social' rubric tend to subtly shift from author to author and study to study, and amongst these there is no consensus as to the extent to which issues once considered largely or exclusively technical (e.g. design requirements, knowledge of the engineering sciences) should be respecified as social. Perhaps it is in light of this situation that demonstrations of what 'design as a social process' might actually entail in detail still appear to be needed. The analysis that follows stands in this particular tradition of documenting the social nature of design practice, focusing on an instance where other stakeholders (e.g. customers, installers) are invoked in a design dialogue.

Previous studies that have documented how users enter design conversations reveal a variety of practical purposes to which such talk is put. [Sharrock and Anderson \(1994\)](#) catalogue the patterning of users' appearances in designers' talk. Drawing on Alfred Schutz's observations of the ubiquity of typification as a sense-making device (see e.g. [Schutz, 1953](#)), they describe the ways in which designers stereotype different kinds of users in the course of accomplishing their work. In their study of a photocopier design team, 'users' of photocopiers enter designers' talk in a myriad of ways; for instance, as particular social types with particular concerns (bosses or repairpersons), as mis-users (e.g. placing coffee cups that leave sticky rings on copiers), or as individuals with technologically limited, but task-focused interests in copiers as objects of use. Sharrock and Anderson also identify that at other times, designers' talk about users became a discursive means of legitimation—what

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