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collaborative experimental design

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Reflecting on *Fashion City*: learning from collaborative experimental design

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Introduction

Learning through designing is a common pedagogical model in design education. Many design institutions utilise studio-based teaching with design tools and methods facilitating students' learning in a discovery-led way. This paper builds on the above model by examining the learning and discovery that took place that arose from a collaborative student design project named *Fashion City*. In contrast with most other learning models in undergraduate studio-based teaching, this project did not have a prescribed learning objective. Rather, it took an experimental approach to learn and discover from propositions, interventions, friction and failures. Instead of having a set objective, *Fashion City* evolved as a response to context, generated through the interactions and actions of a group of designers who all had developed research agendas. In this way *Fashion City* simply took a position of 'seeing what might happen' when a group of graduate students collaboratively designed a project within a particular context. The design or learning objectives were

deliberately left undefined at the outset to allow the students to focus on how to build a project collaboratively. The aims of *Fashion City* were fuzzy; they arose during the collaborative process and developed in a haphazard way. This could be perceived as a weakness, as certain aspects of the project 'failed' to achieve aims that one might normally perceive to be the key indicators of 'success'. However, this paper proposes that this indeterminacy was one of the key strengths of the project when viewed from the perspective of an exercise in design research and education. In other words, this paper does not set out to critique whether or not *Fashion City* successfully met its implicit objectives; rather, it evaluates its outcome as a vehicle for learning and generation of design knowledge.

Fashion City set out to explore the parameters of the city of Melbourne and its public, within the context of the Melbourne Fashion Festival. The project members were all graduate communication design research students as well as practicing designers and were interested in exploring this context with a collaborative model of designing. This collaborative model was ideal to examine how it facilitates and provokes an experimental approach of risk-taking and stepping into the unknown. The authors of this paper, themselves both members of the *Fashion City* team, have undertaken critical reflection on the outcome and process of the *Fashion City* project. This reflection has allowed themes such as public engagement, design authorship and a re-prioritising of the value of objects to emerge. The clarification of these themes has allowed the authors to view the project as a 'gift' – a rich source of knowledge and learning for design practice. Viewed in this way, *Fashion City* demonstrates the value of graduate education for commercially practicing designers, in generating design knowledge, investigating theory and evolving new models for practice.

Project description

Fashion City was a collaborative project undertaken by seven postgraduate design researchers at RMIT University, all of who were also active communication design practitioners. Each of these designers was also undertaking a PhD or Masters in practice-led research, and this project took place amongst this unique community of practice. It was an interactive multi-media event that coincided with the 2006 L'Oreal Melbourne Fashion Festival (26th February to 4th March 2006).

Fashion City set out to explore how people might create their own relationships between themselves and the city, to discover and construct familiar and unfamiliar experiences. To link in with the Melbourne Fashion Festival, the project used a metaphor of fabric, sewing, weaving and stitching to thread together the disparate experiences of the city as one traverses through it. The project took as its foundation the stance that the 'city of Melbourne is fashion', and that this 'fashion of Melbourne' is revealed and defined by the city's inhabitants. The street became the 'catwalk'. Rather than the usual passive viewing of models clad in fashionable garments, the project was interested in examining the notion that people can take a more active role and define, through a process of framing and curation what they choose to define as 'fashion' – whether they be garments, attitude, atmosphere, history, colour. In this way the project aimed to redefine and to some degree 'democratise' fashion.

40 These motivations translated into a series of provocations and interventions aimed to encourage the wider participants of the project (i.e. the inhabitants of the city of Melbourne)

to express their views and give their own interpretation of the city as fashion. The website (www.fashion-city.org now available at www.fashion-city.decomm.net) was designed to engage people in the project and collect and incorporate submissions. Maps were designed to provide starting points and 'ways in' to the project. They aimed to prompt a visual 'conversation', amongst the project instigators, the wider participants and the city itself. The maps contained guided walks, but were not provided as a 'how to' guide to walking and exploring the city. Instead, they aimed to be the start of a conversation to be continued by others – to trigger exploration, curiosity and discovery, in all the projects participants. The guided walks contained maps and reflective thoughts that were personal, random or themed. Irrespective of whether the participants chose to go on a guided walk or explored the city in their own independent ways, Fashion City invited them to take photos and upload them to the *Fashion City* visual stream. Participants chose from a list of email addresses to 'tag' their submitted image thematically. These submissions were incorporated to create the *Fashion City* visual stream.

The images collated and 'tagged' from various walks were shown as a visual stream of curated but randomly 'shuffled' sequences and juxtapositions on the atrium screen at Federation Square, the main public gathering place and arts hub of Melbourne. Initially, the team of designers seeded the visual stream with their own images collected from their own walks. It was intended that these first round of images would quickly be overwhelmed by the publicly submitted images. This system was designed to generate a complex, multi-authored outcome beyond the control of any one person. A whole formed from many disparate parts. The visual stream never repeated itself, it was always shifting and recombining, yet its core structure was defined and curated by the project instigators. It was a framework for re-presenting the submitted material and, as such, a lens to see the city of Melbourne as *Fashion City*. This visual stream created a multi-authored reading of the city by the participants of the project. It became a multi-layered view of the city that revealed the fabrics and unseen patterns below the familiar streetscape. It allowed the participants of the project to create together a new definition for the city of Melbourne as fashion.

An experiment challenging design-authorship

Fashion City aimed to challenge the traditional notion of graphic design by creating a multi-vocal communication outcome. Generally clients' messages are dominant and communicated in a monologue to a target audience. The designer's role in this context is perceived as service-provider in clarifying and conveying a client's message. Given the absence of a client, the *Fashion City* project might be framed as an exploration of design-authorship. Established paradigms of design-authorship revolve around the idea of designers creating and controlling the designed outcome, effectively creating their own monologue. McCarthy (2006) lists various definitions of design-authorship in the special edition of *visual:design:scholarship* devoted to that theme. The list contains common and familiar references to self-initiated projects, collaborative projects, integrated writing and designing and developing entrepreneurial ventures. He also adds his own interpretation of 'curating' as form of *meta* design-authorship. Using McCarthy's definitions, the *Fashion City* project might appear to fit neatly as an example of design-authorship.

41 However, *Fashion City* extended the boundaries of these design-authorship models in its attempt to enable the public to become co-authors of the project. Rather than the

project being a vehicle for designers to explore how to create or curate the content of the designed outcome, the project centred on various strategies to enable the public to become the project participants and therefore the co-authors.

Irrespective of the images submitted, they were all incorporated into the *Fashion City* database where they were incorporated into the visual stream. The cumulative and collaborative effect produced a visual stream of disparate images, juxtaposed together in a three-layered framework. The visual stream became a representation of the various interpretations, responses, opinions and commentary of Melbourne as a city of fashion.

Fashion City was a project that potentially had no ending. In contrast with commercial design jobs that have specific outcomes and definite deadlines, the project had the potential to evolve with time through people's participation and inhabitation. There were no set criteria for the look of the outcome – it was dynamically determined by the submitted contents of the database.

The lack of client agenda or constraints allowed the project to pursue idealistic tendencies. Without the usual limitations, the team were free to push the concept of 'democratising fashion', imagining and expecting an enthusiastic public to be involved. This freedom that enabled the designers to do what they wanted to do could be critiqued as self-indulgent. Rock (2002) is critical of how the design-authorship discourse can imply a championing of the designer as a central character. He prompts designers to critically consider 'not *who* made it, but rather *what* it [design] does and *how* it does it' (p.244). An important aspect of *Fashion City* was that every aspect of it assumed and required multiple creators; it was fundamentally a multi-authored project. Implicit in the preparation of the work was its inhabitation by participants outside the initial group of designers. To begin evaluating how successful our intentions were and critiquing the project to understand 'what it did' and learn from this process, we listened to the feedback from the public and critically reflected on the outcomes of the project.

Critique leading to several learnings from the project

After the project was launched, the project team received critical comments from friends who found the 'event' confusing. Their feedback revealed that it was too much effort for them to walk the streets, take photos and upload it onto the website – 'so why bother?' Possibly owing to this the project failed to generate a strong level of participation from the people of the city of Melbourne. Despite the efforts of placing maps in strategic areas around the city, sending press releases to various broadcast media outlets and staging a 'launch party', very few people (outside a committed circle) took part, reflecting the earlier critique. This criticism highlighted our focus on the potential *outcome* and what that could be, rather than a focus on ensuring the *process* of participation in the event was fun and engaging for the public. In retrospect this reveals the significant difference between *expecting* or *demanding* public participation and *enabling* public participation through design. The request for participation placed upon the public came with embedded rules for *how* they could participate. At the time the team felt that they had designed *Fashion City* in such a way as to encourage participation and add a new vehicle of expression for those who chose to take it. In hindsight, the consideration for public participation was limited to efficiency and ease of use via the maps and website rather than extending that consideration to *why* the people would want to take part. This assumption and the over-generalisation were fuelled by the projects idealistic desires. The team believed that the

end outcome would be enticing for the public because the team thought it was an oblique and interesting commentary on Melbourne and fashion. The project was, if perceived in this way, a self-indulgent, incomprehensible and impenetrable 'gift' given to the citizens of Melbourne, who in turn silently gave it back. The public voted loudly through their silence that they would not play in the space gifted to them.

To a trained and practicing designer, this realisation was a hard blow to take. Our usual professionalism for creating work centres on prioritising engagement with the audience, and the fact that the project had not achieved this could be seen as a 'failure'. However, *Fashion City* was an experiment, a project that experimented with new concepts for what a design activity might be. The project was very much at the periphery of mainstream design outcomes, making it somewhat difficult for an uninvolved uninitiated passer-by to access. *Fashion City* had, at its core, the intention to be populated by the public; it was a 'gift' to the city of Melbourne. That this 'gift' was not a popular one might not be the indictment it first seems.

Thread One: Collaborative Design

In an attempt to illuminate the lessons learnt, we have highlighted three threads for discussion that build upon the designer-authorship discourse. Firstly, one thread builds on Moline's paper (2006), *Authorship, Entrepreneurialism and Experimental design*, featured in the special edition of *visual:design:scholarship*. In this, Moline points to the polarised discourse between the two terms of designer-as-author and designer-as-service-provider and puts forward the idea of a third term called 'experimental design'. Experimental design is described as models for the creation of work that can critique design itself – thereby contributing to the discourse of communication design. Moline uses *Re-magazine* as an example of experimental design, which sets out to 'test and critique the condition and conventions of magazine design and demonstrate the enabling limits of graphic design practice' (p.9).

Using Moline's 'experimental design' as a frame for critique, *Fashion City* can be viewed as a project that explored designing as a collaborative practice. Even though many of the project members were familiar with collaborating with other people, this project enabled us to foster open-ended discussions and the giving and receiving of critique to generate propositions. The project idea itself was weaved from the input from the collaborators over three months. All the designers involved contributed, and yet none were in control. As such, the project was led by multiple authors who each had nascent ideas and concepts that they wanted to explore through this project. This created productive friction and a surrendering to unforeseen possibilities that forced us to create something that was out of each other's control. This release of authorial control is, however, a highly confronting risk to the designer. The rewards for this risk are in its potential to stimulate the experimentation and innovation that a safer, more predictable process would not. *Fashion City* took one's design work and re-presented it back, changed, altered, skewed. This process was generative and surprising yet unpredictable and challenging. It was an enjoyable experience of learning how to be comfortable with uncertainty – how the work wasn't anyone's in particular and celebrating this state of uncertainty. Without this collaborative element, the project's end outcome would have been drastically different. In this respect the project was definitely 'more than the sum of its parts'. Initially the project

imagined there would be participation by and collaboration with many of the inhabitants of the city of Melbourne. Although this did not eventuate, the effect of the collaborative process with the initial team was still strong.

Surrendering to the 'unknown' goes against the grain of the training received as communication designers. The traditional perception of design is a controlling activity where the designer takes control of the manifestation of the clients' needs. In a collaborative project this individual control is removed. This removal puts at risk the individual designer's 'resolved solution', instead injecting different and often contradictory tendencies into the process. Thus individual designers are required, through the collaborative process, to lose control and become somewhat disconnected from their envisaged solutions. It was in resisting the urge to take control and ensure a fixed final form that the team learnt to embrace unpredictability and happenstance. Through collaboration, the collaborators learnt how to be open to each other's input, critique and individual processes. As Paul Carter writes in *Material Thinking* '[c]ollaboration is always, first of all, an act of dismemberment' (2004, p.9). This 'dismemberment' can be interpreted as a way of removing oneself from comfort zones and severing presumptions. This removal has the capacity to insert significant potential for innovation, discovery and knowledge creation as one surrenders to an open-ended generative process.

Thread Two: The de-prioritising of object (non-object design)

The experimental design approach offered us an opportunity to examine the role of objects in design, the second thread of discussion. This approach forced us to re-examine the common perception of the object taking the central role of the design process, and that the designers' quest is to create that final form. Instead we attempted to create what Sanders (2002) might describe as a 'scaffold'; a system, itself composed of objects, which exists to support and facilitate the input and experience created by people. The metaphor proposed by Sanders echoes Bourriaud's (2002) definition of 'relational aesthetics'. Bourriaud describes how the role of an artwork, born from a social process, simultaneously performs a role in generating relationships between people. This alternative framework for design highlights the possibilities of a design process based on collective generation through interaction amongst various stakeholders. Various people can become co-authors and co-creators of communication activities within the design process, in contrast with a perception of design as an activity belonging only to designers.

There is an inherent tendency to prioritise the designing and production of the final object, and for this to be promoted as the central activity of a communication designer. This is evident throughout the majority of design discourse and promoted through the large body of lavish, colourful and beautifully crafted literature and design books. As a designed object themselves, these books celebrate a design practice which prioritises visual explorations and aesthetic refinement. This focus on the object provides ease and clarity in communicating the practice of communication design to those outside the discipline.

Vitta (1989) highlights the illusion where designers' central role is shared with the object. He warns how 'the same threat of disillusion and of rapid consumption hangs over him [designer] as well' (p.35). *Fashion City* attempted to de-centralise both the designer and the designed object, and to explore what can be learnt from this. As discussed in the

of designers from the ability to have authorial control over the project. This moderated the tendency to prioritise the object, and instead, encouraged experimentation with creating frameworks (or scaffolds) for participatory authorship. The focus on stakeholder participation created a design activity that is facilitative and conducive. It attempted to avoid being prescriptive and reductive. The *Fashion City* project designed an engine; literally by designing the 'parts' that worked together in a planned way, and figuratively by creating a vehicle which could allow the participants to explore the theme of fashion and Melbourne. *Fashion City* attempted to create an avenue for expression and social connection that had not existed previously.

Fashion City enabled us to explore questions about the 'object' – our possessiveness of it, its centrality to our practice and whether the 'object' could be never-ending and un-fixed. Facilitated by the digital web environment, the output and materiality of *Fashion City* can continue to evolve. The framework created by *Fashion City* was more akin to a conversation. It was not 'finished' and it never could be. Thereby we still share the responsibility of it with the public as well as the excitement of what it could become. It is a space designed to be populated. It is a system in flux, its form generated from the presence of all the people who chose to participate.

Thread Three: Designer agency leading to public agency

The intention of enabling participatory authorship and our reflection on the conversational nature of this project begins to open up a model for exploring another role for designers that is not contained within the polemical discourse on design-authorship. The last thread discusses a 'fourth term' that adds to those Moline has already put forward. According to Moline, the design authorship polemic argues that designer either has agency through complete 'control' and autonomy via self-initiated experimental designed projects, or they have a limited agency in serving the needs and production requirements of the client. In contrast, this project sought an active inclusion and authorship of content by the public. It looked at ways of designing frameworks or 'scaffolds' for people to participate.

The word audience can have an implied role of the 'receiver' or 'spectator', rather than an active participant in creation of content. Inclusion of audiences in creating the content is little discussed amongst the various perspectives on design-authorship (Lupton & Miller, 1999; Poynor, 2003; Rock, 2002). As already identified, this project was not as successful in engaging public participation, irrespective of how genuine our intentions were. However, the reflection and critique has led to fruitful questions on the role of the designer and what kind of practice a collaborative approach can create.

Critical reflection enabled the realisation that a designer's agency could be to *enable* the agency of the public, thereby establishing a partnership between designers and the public in a process of communication. The designer's agency and public's agency are not mutually exclusive; rather *Fashion City* has, upon reflection, proposed an approach to design that recognises the input, participation and ownership by both as valued stakeholders. It is a model advocated and promoted by Sanders (2002), from whom we borrowed her term of 'designing scaffolds' as a way to view and critique our project. Sanders' metaphorical positioning of design as a 'scaffold' suggests that designers can create and use tools that expand the language and methods of design for people to become co-authors and co-creators of communication activities. The team of *Fashion City* designers did attempt to

create tools, methods and languages, which invited the public to become co-authors of the project. The partnership model between designers and public through the process of designing 'scaffolds' for communication is an antithesis to designing a monologue of communicating clients' messages to target audiences. The proposition of a partnership model can enable the designer and the public to explore and create together what this world could be. We propose that such model that might be termed, to borrow from Bourriaud, 'relational design'. This could become the 'fourth term' that builds upon the existing polemic of designer-as-author discourse.

Conclusion

Fashion City was conducted more than a year ago – in that length of time the authors of this paper as design research-practitioners, have also changed, developed and have had the time to sit with the project and reflect upon it. This process of reflection gives the ability to reveal knowledge buried within and developed out of the project that was not clear before. Even though we reflected and critiqued the project through collaboration and discussion, the reflection that was undertaken during the project was not as deep or as critical as the reflection that has prompted the writing of this paper. The learnings that have emerged later were implicit during the project, and only revealed themselves fully later through reflection and critical analysis. The co-authoring of this paper has, in itself, been made possible through the learnings gained during and upon reflection of *Fashion City*.

To summarise, *Fashion City* has enabled various learnings through critical reflection of its processes and outcomes. Firstly, the collaborative design process enabled the team of designers to embrace an open-ended generative process. Through this model of designing, we experienced the release of 'individual' control over the outcome and were rewarded with the chance to explore the range of potentials generated from the group. Secondly, the team was able to explore questions about 'object', the designer's natural possessiveness of it and its centrality to our practice. This questioning realigned the focus upon designing a participatory activity that was facilitative and conductive. Lastly, we explored an alternative model for a design process and outcome; a 'scaffold' which enables the public to participate as co-authors and co-creators of communication activities. From this a new term, 'relational design', is proposed to add to the discourse of designer-authorship, which describes how both the designer's and the public's agency could be fostered within a design project.

This paper itself has been co-authored – this process has been an intense form of learning and discovery. Co-authoring the paper builds upon the collaborative model established and practiced through *Fashion City*. As with *Fashion City*, similar frictions and generative discussions, challenges and the unavoidable negotiation of alternative perspectives, has been critical in navigating the outcome of the paper. This has been another significant discovery and learning where the authors have each had to adopt this collaborative practice more comfortably and become more willing to surrender to where the process may take us. As practitioner-researchers, the authors of this paper have evolved and continue to evolve design practice through the process of learning. This is a key characteristic and a benefit of graduate education for practicing designers – the process of learning enabling the practitioner to evolve and change their practice in unforeseen ways.

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