

POSITION STATEMENTS & RESOURCE REVIEWS

BECAUSE THERE'S ALWAYS
A SPACE INBETWEEN*

Stephen Banham

It's a well known fact that oil and water don't mix. This simple premise is of course the basis of printing. One occupies the space the other leaves empty. The reader of a design journal such as this would know what beauty is possible from this most simple of principles. What appears to be a perfect and seamless image is in fact a miniscule, in fact microscopic, division of these two elements.

Of course this only works because we choose to ignore these tiny divisions in order to achieve the 'bigger picture' of the image itself. This idea of creating infinite possibilities through smaller differences has often reminded me of the vexed relationship between design academia and the industry. Put simply, great things can come out of exploiting some fundamental differences.

* Title is derived from the 1991 Williams Borroughs album '*Spare Ass Annie*'.

In my own experience as a design practitioner undertaking post-graduate research the space this has created has been a space for reflection—the opportunity to create a pause where one can take this bigger view and seek clarity and direction. Even since completing this research some years ago, it has set in motion a habitual reflection that has created spaces between and within projects.

In many respects, these reflections upon practice have become a form of strategic planning – something most practitioners, particularly those who run their own ‘shop’, would consider to be absolutely necessary for the smooth running of a practice. So why isn’t the reflection that post-graduate research creates considered to be of equal worth? The simple answer would be economics. For industry, design research doesn’t appear to hold the same direct opportunities for financial benefit that a well-planned studio strategy may have. But this distinction may be increasingly called into question – why can’t a critical reflection on practice (practice-led research) be seen as offering favourable economic outcomes as well as research outcomes? In a saturated and highly competitive marketplace that graphic design has been (at least for the 20 years I can recall), the potential to explore and create perspectives that differentiate oneself could surely be an applicable and viable process.

Enter the hybrid – the kind of practitioner who is both at ease with the ever-changing demands of commercial practice as well as being engaged on a critical, academic and even philosophical level. These two capacities are entirely complimentary – keeping their essential differences whilst creating something else, something bigger than merely the combination of the two.

The hybridised designer/academic is certainly not a new phenomena. Since the beginnings of graphic design as a ‘trade’ educational institutions have been staffed by practitioners (sadly too often past their prime). But these associations have usually been in the spirit of bringing an ‘applied’ aspect to their more theoretical base rather than seeing teaching and learning as a progressive and explorative component of design practice itself.

So what else is there to be gained from this hybridisation of the designer / researcher? Endless possibilities that’s what. One of the most liberating aspects of graphic design practice has always been that it can be sculpted into anything you wish it to. The relative transience of projects (certainly compared to other creative fields such as film-making and architecture) encourages learning from project to project, year to year, even day to day – in part responding to external forces (clients, economics etc) but also from opportunities for self-generated projects.

The fact that the youthful field of graphic design remains ill-defined to a wider community is a distinct advantage in a re-thinking of the relationship between design practitioner and researcher. It allows one’s own experiences to influence future directions and perspectives without the weight of heritage bearing down.

But the opening up of possibilities is perhaps best enabled by the creation of spaces for reflection – time to reflect upon the inherent tensions between the industrial and academic spheres; pre-determined forms against the unpredictable research outcome; the acceptance of convention methodology or its constant critique; shorter term economic needs and decisions compared to longer-term speculative vision; external client-led decisions contrasting a self-generated autonomy – depending on your perspective these are either points of potential conflict or fruitful differences. The truth is of course that we

need both. The spaces between only exist when the rest is occupied by something else. It's the water and oil principle again.

Having started a practice in 1991, operating under of strategy of dividing the time between publishing, education and commercial projects, this hybridity seemed absolutely natural. But upon reflection even the terms used at the time – 'dividing the time' – spoke volumes of an underdeveloped awareness of how they could in fact mix and add a great depth to each other.

For the hybrid the considerable commitment to undertaking a Masters of PhD in design research is perhaps best viewed as an addition to a practitioner's skill-set rather than as a qualification solely sought after by career academics. Skills of reflection and criticality, particularly when applied directly to design practice, have the potential to not only redefine and expand the notions of what graphic design can be but also go some way to create a greater synthesis between industry and academia. So that when they come ultimately come together, as in the case of the hybrid, these smaller differences can offer a wider perspective through which graphic design may become a much bigger and fuller picture.

Author's biography

Called a 'typographic evangelist' by *Eye* magazine, Stephen Banham is founder of Letterbox, a typographic studio based in Melbourne, Australia. Banham has written and produced twelve publications on typography, notably the *Qwerty* series (1991-96), the *Ampersand* series and *Fancy* (2004). Since 2005 he has run a very successful public forum series on graphic design and typography known as *Character*, the most recent of which hosted the Australian premiere of Helvetica.

His design work has been covered in almost every type annual as well as magazines such as *Eye*, *Emigré*, *Adbusters*, *Face* and *Typo* amongst many others. He has spoken at international design events from Barcelona to Beirut, New Zealand to New York. Coupling a love for words as well as what they look like, he has written for various international typographic magazines. He has been a lecturer in typography since 1991 and holds a masters in design research.

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Citation: Banham, S. (2007) Because there's always a space inbetween, *Position Statements & Resource Reviews*, online at: <http://www.agda.com.au>