

A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO PRODUCT DESIGN FROM A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

“*Buy an identity or surprise your senses*” are in short a few from the results of the course “Design for a specific Theme” by 4th grade students Industrial Design Engineering at Twente University. The theme in the title of this course is philosophical, based on the theory of globalization of German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk.

It came out that the structure of this course was particularly suitable for the conversion of such abstract themes in tangible product design. This paper describes the structure and the associated teaching methods, gives examples of student results and discusses the points of interest and application possibilities for this type of course.

Keywords: Design education; Philosophical Issues; Peter Sloterdijk; Globalization

1 INTRODUCTION

The focus of consumer product design is shifting from primarily offering functionality, towards experience and emotion driven product characteristics [1]. According to the theory of product phases [2], products will end in a phase characterized by individualization or awareness. Where the affective, emotional and abstract product values, become more and more important [3, 4]. Individualization and awareness are, not accidentally, also high up in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Different authors have different ideas about how to implement this emotion and affection in product design. Some of them even argue that affectivity is not influenced by the design at all, but only through the meaning that the user attaches to the product [5].

To get our students familiar with this more abstract thinking about product concepts, we started the course “Design for a specific Theme”, in association with advertising agency KesselsKramer, in 2003. In the academic year 2006-2007 the course was fed with a philosophical theme. This type of theme was chosen because we think it is not only important that the students practice with emotions and meaning, but also that engineers are aware of the societal consequences of product design and the matching responsibility of the designer. Besides all that, it is also a means of getting different assignments than the obligatory mobile phones, coffee-makers or mp3-players.

De students were at first hand working in creative sessions on a broad view of the subject and from there on formulated their final assignment themselves. The assignment had to prove the existence of a vision on the theme. In close cooperation with an industrial design office (D’Andrea & Evers Design from Enter, the Netherlands) the students went through an intensive program around a series of workshops.

2 PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

The philosophical perspective comes from Peter Sloterdijk's book "Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals" [6]. In his book Sloterdijk pictures the spoiled western people who imprison themselves in their own safety environments. The Crystal Palace at the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London functions as a metaphor for the convenient lives of the civilians of western capitalistic countries. A gigantic greenhouse, aimed on shutting out and neutralizing all danger and unexpected circumstances. According to Sloterdijk western people are so used to this conditioned climate that they are no longer able to cope with adversity, misfortune, calamities or even real danger [7]. In line with this the modern world is regulated, organized and every possible good is for sale. This invokes on the other hand a complex need, or longing for real experiences, with real emotions and real danger. All this, of course, guaranteed to have a happy end. In the lectures this concept was explained with an example from daily traffic. If you live in the Netherlands the traffic is extensively regulated with separate lanes, speed bumps, traffic lights, signs and roundabouts. This reduces traffic accidents, but also can make you feel dull. Traffic in China or India is very different. When immersed in this crowded, lively and dangerous surroundings every day, you don't feel much like going bungee jumping (or other western extreme sports) when you come home.

Peter Sloterdijk was chosen as a philosopher because he is contemporary and in his trilogy "Sphäre" [8], he has shown that his theories on society are based on a close connection between the social aspects of society and the way our surroundings are organized and designed [9]. And these surroundings are inevitably influenced by our design activity. In this way it seems relatively easy to combine Sloterdijk's theories with product design practice.

3 STRUCTURE OF THE COURSE

The course was set out as project oriented education [10], where the students were working in groups of four. In project oriented education the course is arranged around an open-end assignment, in this example defined by the theme. The project oriented education focuses explicitly on the development of the students and their competencies by placing the students in a realistic engineering environment [11]. The educational input given in the courses directly supports the student's execution of the project. The total duration of this course was 3 months, part-time with a total workload of 5 European Credits. The course is optional in the curriculum, open for 3rd year Bachelor students and 1st year Master students. In this edition of the course the total of 12 participants was evenly divided over these two types of students.

The course was set up around a couple of workshops and lectures. In between the students progress was reviewed in project-meetings with the supervisors. The first three days of the course were hosted by the design office D'Andrea & Evers Design.

The project started with a 'do-together' workshop. This brainstorming-like workshop is developed by the advertising agency KesselsKramer (based in Amsterdam) and inspired by their own 'dO-project', "The ever changing brand that depends on what you do" [12]. This dO-approach focusses on the idea that a product is not complete unless the user has added something to it. In this way becoming more involved with the product. KesselsKramer laid out a workshop where the participants have to fill in questions assigned to a statement. These questions vary from: "What kind of product, service or event could support your 'dO-mission'?" to "What audience will be interested in your new idea?" At different stages in the workshop the students have to stop and exchange, so they will be working on the development of each others ideas. The statements in the

workshop were derived from the work of Peter Sloterdijk. Some examples are “TomTom and GPS don’t bring you to unexpected places”, “Convenience food is deadly boring”, “People get lazy because products function better and better” and “Safe cars cause false security”. At the end of the one-day workshop the groups had to present their product idea and associated communication strategy to the other participants.

The second day at the design office the students learned more about the theory of Peter Sloterdijk in a lecture with discussion, and they were invited to come up with more statements. After that the students had to develop their own assignment, based on a chosen statement and they were asked to illustrate this with relevant imagery (figure 1-4).



Figure 1-4 Students (at) work in the starting workshop

At the end of the concept phase, each group had to present three product ideas at the design office with the use of concept boards (figure 5-6).



Figure 5-6 Presentation of concepts with concept-boards

By using an A2 size concept board for each idea, the students are forced to present their idea in one simple overview, emphasizing on the main topics. Students practice making

concept boards in a one-day lab-training. The presentations themselves were again held at the design office to put the students in a realistic environment, applying as much to the project oriented educational philosophy. Finally one concept was designed in more detail, ending with the making of a model, maquette or prototype.

4 ASSESSMENT

At the end of the course the groups had to present their work to the audience in a 15-minute (computer) presentation, accompanied by a demonstration of the models or maquettes. They also had to deliver a small portfolio, explaining the background of their final solution and containing some detailed information on the final design. The groups were evaluated by two staff members and two members of the design office and rated for the quality of the concept idea, the concept boards, the portfolio, the model or maquette and the final presentation.

5 RESULTS

As philosophers try to explain the world we are living in, the students were free to choose whether they agreed with the developments described by Sloterdijk, or were in favour of stimulating some counter reaction. The next two described results are a good example of both strategies: one that tries to counteract on the philosopher's theory and one that embraces it.

5.1 Sneak-preview food

This is an example of an assignment and outcome that wants to react on the identified development. The students wanted to give back some real experience to the consumer, where he has to rely on his own judgments.

The result 'Sneak preview food' challenges the consumer to look at food in a new way. The anonymous packaging will not provide the user with direct signals about the taste of the product. So he is forced to trust his own senses in the perception of the product. On the other hand the "sneak preview food" is a strong brand-identity that will stand out from the crowd in the supermarket (figure 7).



Figure 7 Sneak preview food prototype

This concept fits perfectly in the philosopher's theme because it challenges the consumer to really experience something, without relying on the pre-defined, safe way of consuming. So not the "this food tastes good because it is from brand X"-experience, but judging the taste for yourself. With the possibility that it eventually will be less

tasteful than you expected. Sneak preview food is still offering convenience, but with a new context, in a way the people get more involved with the food itself.

5.2 Identity-store

Within this project, the students asked themselves; “How can we make immaterial values buyable?” When according to Peter Sloterdijk everyone is busy to abandon every possible risk, why not control the risk of having the wrong image?

In their conceptual shop, instead of buying clothes, you will buy a piece of identity. The clothes in the shop are not primarily defined by the brand marketing of the manufacturers, but by the people who actually bought the items. This effect is reached by taking a (Polaroid) photograph of every customer that is added to a ‘wall-of-fame’, associated with the product he bought. In this way everybody becomes part of the definition of the group. Someone even suggested to have the people pay for the removal of their photograph, when the composition of the group is changed in a way they do not want to be associated with anymore.

The shop is styled like an Art-gallery where the group definitions are more important than the clothes itself. The fitting rooms are grouped around a runway to emphasize on the art and fashion background of ‘being someone’, inspired on popular television programs like “Idols” and “America’s next Top-model” (figure 8-10).



Figure 8-10 Identity store

6 DISCUSSION

By the choice of the theme, the focus of the course came on societal issues. Because of the philosophers “explanation” of contemporary developments in society, the students proved to be very successful in translating abstract ideas in real-life product concepts. The brainstorming sessions in the beginning of the course, powered with the statements, proved to be a good introduction in the theme. And the students also gained good insight into the ideas of Peter Sloterdijk. After that the students were able to build their own assignment, combined with taking their own position within the discussion. In this way we think that the approach will be useful to get students familiar with other abstract themes as well.

An important benefit from the dO-together workshop was the notion of the importance of selling your product idea. Because the workshop is set-up by an advertising agency it emphasizes on having a communication strategy together with your product idea. It showed that this communication strategy sometimes had a big influence on the product

concept itself. It is very useful to develop these together, especially when relating to new product concepts that aim at influencing people's behaviour.

It also appeared that the students were very motivated by this particular approach, more than other year's editions of the program, which were executed with more defined (product) assignments. This of course can also be due to the fact that the students could work on assignments they formulated themselves.

What is important is that with the focus on societal issues, the emphasis came on the ideas behind the product concepts, instead of the products itself. The latter appears to be very suitable for the design practice nowadays, where more and more attention is given to abstract concepts, such as brand-identity and authenticity. Or the idea of product invoked emotions [3] and the concept of giving meaning through design [13]. All in all we think that the students, after completing the course, will be better in embedding their design work in a contemporary environment.

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