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Article abstract

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Design Studies in Canada?

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Dans ce bref article, nous traçons l'histoire de l'enseignement du design au Canada pendant les quarante dernières années et la comparons avec celle au Royaume-Uni, où l'on a assisté à une croissance significative des études du design et des programmes d'histoire du design. Nous soutenons qu'il est impératif de créer de nouveaux programmes d'études du design au Canada afin, d'une part, de renforcer l'éducation pratique en design et, de l'autre, de retenir les jeunes chercheurs et chercheures.

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Should design studies be considered an important component of design education? What is design studies? The definition of this field itself has been hotly debated and can encompass all aspects of design. I see design studies as the study of the theory, history, and context of design, and in this limited space I will address its place in Canada only in relation to graphic design education.

The existence of design studies as an organized field of study has been acknowledged since 1960 with the Coldstream[1] report in Great Britain, which discussed a breakdown between studio specializations and "history of art" as a necessary element of study and assessment. This report legitimized art and design degrees mainly through the inclusion of humanities as an integral part of the degree process.[2] The teaching and study of design history within art and design programs in England is one result of research conducted by the British National Advisory Council on Art Education in the 1960s. One of the council's aims was to make art and design education a legitimate academic activity, and introducing a historical perspective was part of their strategy. Design studies became recognized and developed as a discipline, one could argue, out of the roots of the Coldstream Report. But despite Canada's long history of design education, and despite the best efforts of many dedicated educators and scholars, we have not succeeded in establishing and developing design studies. This important field desperately needs to be supported at institutional and governmental levels. Otherwise, we risk losing students to countries with established design studies programs. We also risk producing designers with a haphazard knowledge of design history and theory.

While elsewhere the rise of design was accompanied (after some delay) by a rise in design studies and associated scholarly associations (such as the British Design History Society, founded in 1977), in Canada this was not the case. And despite the attention (however marginal) given to Canadian design history in widely used international survey texts including Josef Müller-Brockmann's *A History of Visual Communication* (1971), Philip Megg's *History of Graphic Design* (1983), Richard Hollis's *Graphic Design: A Concise History* (1994), and Victor Margolin's forthcoming *World History of Design*, there is little in the way of apparent interest in Canadian universities in the history of Canadian design. A few scholarly texts have begun to chart the field, such as Robert Stacey's *The Canadian Poster Book*, Alan C. Elder's *Made in Canada: Craft and Design in the Sixties*, Brian Donnelly's "Locating Graphic Design History in Canada," and *Le design au Québec: Industriel, graphique, mode* by Marc H. Choko, Gérald Baril, and Paul Bourassa. Collecting

1. John Vernon Lord, Hywel James, and Gillian Naylor, "Post-War Curriculum and Assessment: Coldstream, Summerson, Art History and Complementary Studies," *Art and Design at Brighton 1859–2009: From Arts and Manufactures to the Creative and Cultural Industries*, ed. Philippa Lyon and Jonathan Woodham (Brighton, 2009).
2. Ibid.

institutions such as The Design Exchange, as well as the newly founded Canadian Design Studies Network (as a UAAC-affiliated society), also represent important steps forward. But there is no educational framework on which design studies can build. We need to implement changes. If design students encounter a more useful and robust experience of history and theory in their field, this might result in more of them choosing to pursue design studies as a career; and if they can do this without leaving the country, we might find that they are more likely to work on Canadian topics.

I am not alone in suggesting that design studies is a necessary component of design education and recognized by many as a liberal arts discipline. As Frank Baseman writes,

> A strong foundation in liberal arts helps to foster ... intellectual rigor, which will result in stronger thinkers.... With the advent of computers and their associated technologies, "Anyone can be a designer." As design educators we see it all the time: the kid who had Photoshop in high school and so uses all the filters and effects because they look cool. But if there is no content, there is no meaning.[3]

And Sophia Parker also sounds a warning:

> Design education leaves little space for critical thinking about the deeper purpose of the discipline. It is in danger of creating generations of design technicians who respond to briefs rather than, to borrow Richard Sennett's phrase, craftsmen and women who consider the consequences and significance of that which they make. Design's response to this challenge must not be to disappear into debates about ever-more obscure and specialist disciplines. The real energy is in collaboratively building a new agenda; a shared ideology and working principles for design in the modern world.[4]

The apparent hesitation of Canadian institutions to recognize design studies as a field through degree programs[5] and the absence of a system for creating faculty qualified to teach the material have resulted in a catch-22: it is very difficult to obtain governmental approval for design studies programs because of lack of qualified faculty and of evidence of student desire for such programs. The often-uncomfortable relationship between studio programs and existing design studies courses is another factor holding back the fuller development of design studies. If we are to positively address the lack of design studies in Canada, we must first identify what is happening within our educational institutions. With this paper I seek to initiate a discussion of the state of the field as a first step toward developing a system that is able to educate new generations of design scholars, who can then help to build design studies on Canada and can produce first-rate scholarship on Canadian design history and Canadian designers.

As it stands now, the first introduction to design studies for Canadian students usually comes through a foundation-year course in studio or through introductory survey courses in visual culture. In my experience, these introductory courses remain closely parallel to a traditional art historical approach, complete with a massive chronological and canonical history and slide tests as a form of assessment. I have, first as a student and then as an educator, consistently encountered situations in which design material is introduced in a partial, marginal way in relation to traditional areas of "fine art." This is in spite of the fact that many institutions have seen an upswing in the number of students enrolled in design degrees. The Ontario College of Art and Design

3. Frank Baseman, "Liberal Arts Is Old News," *The Education of a Graphic Designer*, ed. Steven Heller (New York, 2005), 20.

4. Sophia Parker, "Social Animals: Tomorrow's Designers in Today's World," *RSA Design & Society*, 2009, p. 6, http://socialinnovation.typepad.com/files/social-animals-tomorrows-designers-in-todays-world-by-sophia-parkere.pdf.

5. I have conducted a thorough survey of universities in Canada, and with the exception of McEwan University none appear by title to offer a degree in Graphic Design History/Studies. I have also consulted provincial quality assessment boards' both completed applications and those under assessment and was not able to locate any history/studies degrees involved in this process, with the exception of OCAD U whose BA in Visual Culture with a focus on design studies was withdrawn.

6. See "Creativity Counts: OCAD University 2012/2013 Annual Report," http://www.ocadu.ca/Assets/documents/annual-report-2012-2013-accessible.pdf, and ACAD, "Annual Report, 2013–2014," http://issuu.com/acad/docs/acad_annual_report_2013_2014.

7. Rosanna Tamburri, "Universities of Art and Design Adapt to Show the Value of their Degrees," *University Affairs/Affaires Universitaires*, 29 October 2014, http://www.universityaffairs.ca/news/news-article/universities-art-design-adapt-show-value-degrees/.

8. Tara Vinodrai, "The Place of Design: Exploring Ontario's Design Economy," Working Paper Series: Ontario in the Creative Age, Martin Prosperity Institute, 2009; available at http://martinprosperity.org/media/pdfs/The_Place_of_Design-TVinodrai.pdf.

9. See Vinodrai, "The Place of Design," as well as Statistics Canada, "Specialized Design Services, 2009, http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2011/statcan/63-251-x/63-251-x2011001-eng.pdf, and Statistics Canada, "National Household Survey (NHS) Analytical Products, 2011: Education in Canada: Attainment, Field of Study and Location of Study," Table 2: Number and proportion of adults aged 25 to 64 by top 10 fields of study, for selected levels of educational attainment, Canada, 2011, http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-012-x/2011001/tbl/tbl02-eng.cfm.

10. Graphic Designers of Canada, "Canadian Design Programs," https://www.gdc.net/education/schools.htm.

11. Ibid.

12. D. Soucy and H. Pearse, *The First Hundred Years: A History of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design* (Fredericton, 1993).

13. http://www.etudier.uqam.ca/programme?code=7779

14. Graphic Designers of Canada, "About GDC," https://www.gdc.net/about/about-gdc. This was similar to the earlier established 1914 American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA). AIGA, "AIGA 100," 2014, http://www.aiga.org/AIGA100-at-MODA/.

University (OCAD U) reports 2,513 students enrolled in the BDes degree, compared with the 1,816 in the BFA degree. An Alberta College of Art + Design (ACAD) report stated that out of their 191 graduates in 2013–14, fifty-two graduated with a BDes in visual communication design, the most students to graduate from any of their eleven areas.[6] Ron Burnett of Emily Carr University asserted in October 2014 that, "in 1996, a majority of students were enrolled in the visual arts. Today about 35 percent of the students are pursuing degrees in the visual arts, 40 percent are in design programs—the fastest growing area—and the rest are in media."[7] Yet the presence of design in the margins of visual culture and introductory survey courses suggests that design studies still sits uneasily in relation to art history and studio. If design is surpassing traditional areas of fine art in enrollment numbers, then why are those areas being allowed to set the agenda for the education of future designers? I argue for another approach, one more aligned with studio.

The contribution of graphic design in particular to the economic health of Canada has been demonstrated.[8] One need only look at the enrolment numbers of students pursuing degrees in graphic design, or indeed the statistical data concerning the contribution of graphic designers to the GDP, to see that graphic design is a force to be reckoned with.[9] The evidence shows the success of studio-based programs in producing employable graphic designers, many of whom have begun to make an impact in the international arena. These graphic designers need design studies programs! According to the Society of Graphic Designers of Canada[10] there are currently twenty-three institutions across eight provinces offering undergraduate degrees in graphic design, and seventeen offering graduate degrees. Only one of these institutions offers a dedicated design studies program (MacEwan University).[11] The rest of the programs are studio-based, with the design studies component of the degree either offered by the studio staff as part of the curriculum or by service departments.

In fact, the history of design education in Canada emerged from its art schools, with the creation of design departments at ACAD (1926), at the Vancouver Art School of Decorative and Applied Arts (a precursor to the current Emily Carr University) in 1927, at OCAD U (1945), at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD; late 1960s)[12] and at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM; 1974).[13] The growing recognition of design's significance within Canadian colleges and universities paralleled developments in professional associations. For instance, the Society of Typographic Designers of Canada, which later became the Society of Graphic Designers of Canada, was formed in 1956 and received a federal charter in 1976.[14] The independent Société des graphistes du Québec was founded in 1972.

My interest in the relationship between design studies and studio-based work originates in my own experience. When I began my education in 1995 in art history, I attempted to take courses specifically related to the history of design, but found there were none. My interest coupled with a personal practice in graphic design led me to complete a graduate degree in design at NSCAD. I hoped then to pursue a PhD in design studies, but this proved impossible—within Canada, where all the PhD options called for me to modify my project so that it might function within an art history or communications

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department. So, I looked abroad and completed a PhD in Design, Historical and Critical Studies at the University of Brighton, which led to a teaching job in design studies in the United Kingdom, before I ultimately returned to Canada. I had hoped that the situation of design studies in Canada would have changed in the eight years since the completion of my master's degree, but to my disappointment I found that it had remained much the same.

I observed that instructors teaching design studies in the United Kingdom[15] were able to establish specific streams that supported and enhanced the studio curriculum, starting with a first-year survey and then becoming more specific throughout the four-year degree. In my experience, mainly through a close relationship with studio staff, there was room to align the curricula as well as embark on joint projects and assessments. This allowed for students both to see staff as a united front and to actively apply material covered in design studies lectures to studio projects, and vice versa. They could then continue at the graduate and postgraduate levels in either studio/practice based degrees or in theory. We owe our students here a similar level of engagement and alignment. Within Canada we may encounter the occasional program similar to what I experienced in the United Kingdom, but the curriculum is mandated and run by studio staff (NSCAD, UQAM). Other institutions follow a liberal arts model with varying degrees of design studies included in both survey courses and/or particular course offerings (OCAD U, Emily Carr, ACAD). Whether design studies should constitute core courses within a design studio curriculum or external "breadth" courses (as most art and design schools designate them) is important and attests to the need for dialogue among those involved in design education.

The ownership of design studies courses has ranged from designers to art historians to design historians; currently in Canada this ownership is mixed. For design studies to continue to gain legitimacy as a field in its own right, there needs to be a foundation of specialist knowledge beginning at the earliest stages of an undergraduate education. This would equip students who choose to pursue graduate and postgraduate study. There is a unique opportunity within an art school setting to create a unified approach to design education that focuses on a true exchange between studio and design studies. I believe this would lead to strengthening both these fields in Canada today.

Who is best equipped to set the agenda for the development of design studies programs in Canada? Canadian institutions offer an exemplary level of practice-based education in graphic design, as is evident from students' success within industry; therefore, design programs may see nothing amiss with the current role of design studies within studio education.[16] Since current programs have no urge to build up design studies, there is the potential to create an adversarial relationship between those with current ownership of design studies and those who wish to expand and delineate the field.

It cannot be said that design is not valued in Canada. If we want to build design studies beyond its current marginal position in order to produce better and better designers, theorists, and educators, we must begin at the undergraduate level and with the establishment of a first graduate-level design studies program offering masters' degrees and, soon after, PhDs. The

15. University of Brighton (2004–06) and the Edinburgh College of Art (2006–11).

16. Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, "Ministerial Statement on Quality Assurance of Degree Education in Canada," 2007, 1, http://phase2.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/95/QA-Statement-2007.en.pdf.

graduates of these programs will then be able to build more coherent undergraduate design studies courses, both within studio-based design programs and as components of parallel undergraduate streams with their own first-year survey courses. There must be a dialogue among all those involved within design education. At the ministerial and governmental levels, there must be transparency of data concerning student enrollment and retention. Between institutions, there must be a means of sharing data and best practices. At the institutional level, studio and liberal arts faculty must forge relationships as a means to developing shared and complementary curricula. Our work begins with the joining together of those involved in this field to establish networks, associations, curricula, and programs, in order to force the recognition of the field and to push for the change that is needed within the educational system. If the designers can do it, as shown by the successes of this field, can the theorists and historians of this country not do the same? ¶