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Not all “Designers are Wankers”: Connecting design, enterprise and regional cultural development.

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Abstract

This paper reports on how a University’s *Designer in Residence Scheme* has contributed to both the local cultural and economic regeneration of the design sector in the North East of England. This case study specifically reflects on how the schemes ‘practitioner mentoring’ has created a significant community of practice through the collaborations of a Design School, Enterprise Campus¹ and regional development agencies.

British design education is often bemoaned by the creative industries for failing to properly equip graduates for the ins and outs of the business of design; whilst at the same time it has become a truism of British industry that it innovates but does not make and sell. Northumbria University’s Designer in Residence scheme was established with a view to addressing both of these issues.

A modern university is not wholly or even mainly just an academy. It could rather be seen as a context for the non-academic acquisition of higher-level practical skills, especially in creative fields. This is quite a different activity from the conventional teaching and tutoring process in which most universities, even today, are educationally landlocked. The industrial workshops, studios and ateliers that used to provide the context for this practical skills development no longer exist. It could be argued that they anyway never offered the grounding in independent, effective, self-management that a present day design sector needs. In the Designer in Residence Scheme such independence is routinely imparted and acquired by succeeding ‘breaking waves’ of designers.

As academic partners on the scheme, the authors reflect on the value and methodologies of the initiative evolved throughout its ten-year span, focusing on the nature of the community of practice established between successive residents, academics and Enterprise Campus and crucially how the designers have owned the process of developing directional design practice. This creative dialogue has resulted in a number of key findings to be discussed in this paper on the relevance and value of design enterprise to regional development, cultural identity, and economic growth. The paper concludes by discussing the value to Higher Education in developing an integrated approach to the culture of design, enterprise and manufacture.

Keywords: design practice; enterprise; manufacture; collaboration; regional development

¹ ‘Enterprise Campus’ is a facility of Northumbria University. It provides assistance to Students and Graduates in the creation and development of their own businesses.

Introduction

“For developed countries who cannot compete on natural resources and low labour costs, success demands a more service-led economy and high value-added industry. In the 21st Century, our natural resource is our people – and their potential is both untapped and vast.” (Lord Leitch, 2006).

It is widely accepted that design innovation has an integral and vital role to play in the health of British industry, indeed our ‘creative industry’ is often cited as the last great competitive edge we have in a global economy of increasingly resurgent new economies (Bayley 2010). The Cox Review of Creativity in Business (Cox 2005) spawned numerous studies and initiatives aimed at highlighting and better exploiting the potential of creative industries within the UK economic and cultural landscape. Viewed together a large number of these documents place a common emphasis on the importance of up-skilling to enhance the UK’s industrial competitiveness and also serve to reinforce the perceived tensions that exist between education and business particularly in terms of skills and employability (Leitch 2006). The broad tenure of ‘High-level skills for higher value’ (Design Skills Advisory Panel 2007) was to highlight and address the skills gaps in schools, colleges and universities and the design industry and in their subsequent ‘Design Blueprint’ (2008) these gaps are specifically identified as being related to design graduates having a lack of business and professional skills and the need to bring design education and industrial practice closer together. A lack of professional experience in design graduates. Whilst many of the reports findings and proposals are pertinent and relevant, little real change has been enacted in a way that serves to alleviate these tensions at grass roots level. The creative industries still bemoan Higher Education for failing to properly equip graduates for the machinations of the business of design, whilst education often feels that industry is often contradictory in that it expects graduates to be creative mavericks’ that whilst possessing huge technical competences on the one hand at the same time have a deep understanding of business and related skills commensurate with making them capable of commercial exploitation from day one of employment. In order to begin to bridge this divide Northumbria University’s School of Design established its Designer in Residence Scheme of practitioner mentoring to exploit and develop the commercial design potential of its graduates to draw support from the design profession and regional development agencies.

The creative North East

If the UK as a whole is accepted as being relatively poor in terms of its investment in the value of design then the North East of England could be said to stand out as a dubious beacon in this landscape *“Only 6% of North East businesses see design as integral to their operations. Only a further 19% see it as significant. UK averages 15% and 22%. Nowhere else are businesses less positive about design.”* (Design Council 2007) Whilst design as a commercial activity in the region has historically maintained a low visibility and therefore sustained limited commercial and cultural impact, the region’s universities annually produce hundreds of highly skilled design graduates with the vast majority being forced to leave the region to gain employment. One of the prime objectives of the Designer in Residence Scheme has been to retain graduates in the North East and thereby contribute to the growth of design as a cultural and commercial driver within the region. Northumbria University’s school of design is not alone in its wish to improve this situation with recent initiatives such as Design Event and Dott07 proving that there is both a cultural appetite for engagement with design and the beginnings of a diverse community of design practitioners fighting to establish themselves and their businesses in the region. Prior to the recession the North East increased its productivity in the creative and cultural industries by 2% compared to a national decline of

7% and in its 2009 regional plan for the North East Creative and Cultural Skills are optimistic for a return to growth as the UK economy begins to recover.

Designers in Residence

The Designers in Residence (DIR) scheme is a 2-year post-graduate initiative designed to support Northumbria alumnae wishing to develop their own professional design practice. It is run within Northumbria University's School of Design by BA (Hons) Three Dimensional Design staff for graduates from this programme with its professional practice being centred on the activities of furniture and product design. The signature of the scheme is perhaps its particular engagement with the design of products that both celebrate the value of traditional craft manufacturing qualities but which are also contemporary, rich in narrative and market ready.² The DIR scheme in its current form was formally established in 2000 and since 2003 has worked closely with Enterprise Campus to develop the provision of resources for its activities, particularly to support residents to show their work at national and international trade fairs. Residents are given enterprise start up support to encourage them to view their practice not simply as a creative activity but also as a commercial enterprise capable of generating income and employment for themselves and others.

One of the key opportunities available to graduates who undertake the scheme is to exhibit work both nationally and internationally. This not only gives residents a unique opportunity to develop a real understanding of the market for their products/services, an awareness of competitors, how to reach and interact with potential clients, but also raises the profile of the School, the University and its staff. Support for the residency has facilitated regular participation at national trade shows such as 100% Design - part of London Design Festival and the International Furniture Fair at the NEC Birmingham. Internationally the scheme has shown in the Salon Satellite at Milan Furniture Fair. In 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007 Northumbria University's Designers in Residence were the only UK based designers to be selected to exhibit in the 'new designers section' of the Stockholm Furniture Fair. The scheme is currently working to progress this activity into North America and intends to show work at the 2011 International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York.

2010/11 marks a particularly apposite point to reflect on the value and methodologies of the initiative evolved throughout its ten-year span, particularly the nature of the community of practice established between successive residents, academics and enterprise campus and crucially how the designers have owned their own transformation from design graduates into creative entrepreneurs.

Methodology and findings

The Designers in Residence scheme has so far supported a total of 30 graduates and from this group 12 were selected for detailed analysis. The group was selected to reflect the full range and nature of activities undertaken on the residency and their tenure spans the full ten years of the schemes existence. Qualitative evaluation was gained by developing a structured series of questions to use in a recorded interview with each of the participants. Questions were developed to ensure that reflections were made on their experiences at key stages of the residency i.e. the beginning, midpoint, end and beyond. Findings ultimately also gave rise to a retrospective exhibition of residents work at 100% design.³

1 Beginning – why do the residency?

² Richard Sennett argues for the importance of recognising and valuing modern craft skills in his book 'The Craftsman' (2008)

³ Retrospective of Designers in Residence at Northumbria (Stand F111) at 100% Design. 23rd -26th September 2010

“I loved being a student in the North East. The residency is a great incentive to stay”
participant 3.

“... after graduation I realised I didn’t want to work in isolation but in a both creative and supportive environment” participant 6.

“The cost of hiring or buying the equipment I need is unrealistic at this stage.” participant 7

The responses to questions reflecting on the beginning of the residency made it clear that the designers had been actively looking for reasons to stay in the northeast having enjoyed their time in the region as students. The example set by residents to undergraduates revealed the idea of business start-up not as something to aspire to later in ones career but as an option immediately after graduation. The dialogue between students and residents working in the same physical spaces can lead to the growth of informal relationships and support networks that go beyond the structure of the academic degree programme. The practical benefits of access to facilities in the designing and making of prototypes allow the designers to utilise the facilities with which they became familiar as undergraduate students.

2 Midpoint – getting it out there?

“Working towards exhibiting with other residents at the Stockholm (furniture fair) is great. It’s a real deadline! We are all doing different things and looking for interest from a variety of different people at the event but we seem to be working towards the same thing”
participant 3

“I’m learning things about professional practice at my pace and when I need it... its real, not pretend anymore” participant 6

“I can’t imagine a job I could have applied for that would have given me this much experience of design and business in just one year. I’ve developed a product and launched it at an international furniture fair, worked to commission, worked alongside others doing similar things and received advice from both business people and designers with regard my own ideas.” participant 7

The responses to questions reflecting 14 months in to the residency made it clear that supporting design entrepreneurs in the creation of their businesses when they need it leads to very meaningful learning experiences. The act of ‘doing’ business rather than dwelling on theoretical models out of sequence leads to valuable insights into what is required of making a living from design. The interviews made clear the value of participation at regional, national and international trade fairs.

3 End – was it worth it?

“As a designer I have learnt by ‘doing’, for example when I’ve designed a chair I made prototypes and tested them. The model of learning about the business of design by ‘doing’ it, therefore, really suits me” participant 3

“I’ve had experiences that had I tried to do this (set up a furniture and product design business) on my own I simply would not have been able. I’ve travelled to interesting places showing work to potential clients, had practical advice when I have needed it and been able to use specialist equipment and workshops without the hassle of hiring or buying it. The best thing is that it will be easy to stay connected with that community that surrounds the

residency because I am in contact people that have been through the residency before me and over the last year I have worked with people just coming on to it". participant 6

"It has given me a couple of years to really focus on product development. There was no other way I could have developed the Louis (furniture) range at that time". participant 7

The responses to questions reflecting on the full 2 years of the scheme clearly reveal the value of learning via professional practice. By the end of the residency designers recognise the lasting benefits are the not physical resources to which they have had access but the connections made with both the market place and the support network of people of which they are a part.

4 Beyond – what next?

"Although we have sold products to many parts of the world: London, Seoul, New York, ... we are staying in the North East. The contacts we have made over the last few years mean there are practical reasons to stay here. Studio space is readily available and we have a network of specialist manufacturers from upholsterers through to steel fabricators almost on the doorstep. The creative scene in the North East is still relatively small but we are part of something that is growing. ". participant 6

"Although I've left the region to follow up business opportunities I began exploring as a resident I am still connected to it via the network of designers that have come through the residency". participant 7

In 2004 Dan Ziglam & Elliot Brook completed two years of the Designer in Residence scheme and with the support of Northumbria's Enterprise Campus initiatives were able to attract support from a number of regional organisations including the Arts Council and Business Link to establish 'Deadgood'. The company acts as exemplar of the value and potential of the scheme, not just in terms of their own successful business practice but also in its contribution to the nurturing of subsequent residents through mentoring support and commercial development of products under the Deadgood brand.

Deadgood have not only sustained healthy profitability and growth but have also built a reputable and high profile name for design innovation. This commercial side of their business is complimented by a genuinely altruistic approach whereby they will champion and develop the work of other complimentary but less well established designers. In 2005 they established the design event 'Launch'⁴ as a response to the lack of opportunity to promote themselves as designers within the North East. Over a three-year period 'Launch' positioned itself as one of the regions leading design showcases, promoting the latest products from over 50 emerging designers and creative businesses. These annual exhibitions contributed to the development of a more visible design culture within Newcastle upon Tyne and attracted over 3500 visitors helping generate new business for the local creative community and raising the profile of North East based designers to both regional and national audiences.

"What can I say? Launch is beautiful and if you could bottle it, you'd take it home! It isn't just an exhibition, it's an experience." ⁵

⁴ <http://www.deadgoodltd.co.uk/NewsDetail.php?id=6> (last accessed 13.01.11)

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In September 2008 Dan & Elliot secured £150K of seed funding from the North East Finance 'Design & Creative Fund' and officially incorporated Deadgood Trading Limited to specialise in the design and distribution of furniture and interior products. Since then they have begun to build a portfolio of intellectual property from a number of leading young British designers, have established an exceptionally strong brand identity and have started to carve out a niche within the luxury domestic and high specification commercial markets. Deadgood's commercial client list currently includes the NHS, ING, Manchester Airport, Liberty of London, Lane Crawford in Hong Kong and La Rinascente in Milan.

Conclusion

The research project set out to identify how a community of practice established through the collaborations of a Design School, Enterprise Campus and regional development agencies has contributed to both the local cultural and economic regeneration of the design sector in the North East of England. The value of the DIR scheme is ultimately evidenced in the success and reputation of the designers who have been through it. They demonstrate their excellence not only in the physicality of their creative outputs but more importantly in the way that they are able to recruit support from the commercial world to profitably create and widely distribute ideas and products. Whilst in pedagogic terms the residency has contributed to a culture of undergraduates understanding the opportunities that exist within the region for design that has an international reach and profile.

As Roger Candy Of Northumbria University's Enterprise campus states, "Our approach is to progress the start up companies of students and recent graduates to full trading as soon as possible. ... We are aided by the nature of the academic culture in the University. Northumbria is highly vocational. This means that - especially in relation to design and other creative fields - a large proportion of learners have vocational skills that they can rapidly employ through establishing their own companies." (Candy 2009)

The research identifies that participating in shows/trade fairs is central to the success of the residency as exhibiting products gives structure to the process of targeting specific audiences for the businesses/ enterprises created and supported via the scheme. The learning experience for the designers is invaluable not just in terms of meeting clients but also understanding the process of preparing, constructing and manning the events and then following up business generated. These are not theoretical exercises but direct links to customers and industry. Ben Evans director of 100% Design argues "The simple premise about most showcasing events is by concentrating activity by date, geography or type, you dramatically increase your chance of talking to the people you want to talk to and those you don't yet know. Audiences are everything and everyone wants new audiences."⁶

Preparation for these activities gives real deadlines and meaningful frameworks to the mentoring process and become 'event hubs' that give focus to designer's activities throughout the tenure of their residency and perhaps more importantly maintains links between the various members of this community of practice not only whilst formally on the scheme but beyond into their professional careers.

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