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Afterword: Product Strategy

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PROJECT STRATEGY

INDUSTRIAL DESIGN LAB 2013

DARIO RUSSO



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Afterword

Product Strategy

For the past three years, we have been organizing workshops for the purpose of designing various elements of “corporate image”. The project was a collaboration between the Department of Architecture at the University of Palermo and local companies. In 2011, I was invited by Professor Russo to address some aspects of images for promoting product design.

From a technical aspect, the challenge with such a workshop is the ability to address all the stages; that is, moving from the conceptualization stage to the design of an integrated image. A workshop, by nature, is a short, but intense course that generates inspiration by the participants, leading to their professional growth. The workshop is also an attempt to develop creativity for accelerating the learning process. According to Paul Arden "Creativity is imagination, and imagination is for everyone." He also asserts that, "To be original, look for inspiration from unusual sources ." This is the principle we applied in with respect to our workshop participants.

The Workshop within a Social Context

The entrepreneurs who participated in the workshop understood the importance of collaboration with the academic institution. Joining forces is of fundamental importance as there is a mutual and indisputable benefit from the synergy between entrepreneurs and academia. With this form of collaboration, businesses will receive an injection of energy, ideas, and creativity that enable them to consider producing new items. Companies have much to gain from research and design through institutional partnership as they are provided with the opportunity to see their work being commercialized. Students, who are recipients of the university-business partnership, also have much to gain from their interface with businesses. Under the supervision of their professors, students are able to provide creative ideas to local businesses. Students gain experience with real issues such as budget, dead-line, and product feasibility. Furthermore, while interacting with entrepreneurs, students are able to network. This is a period where the potential employer learns about the type of knowledge and skills that the students may bring to the work environment; which may result in a job offer. From a social perspective, the workshop addresses the issue of economic sustainability as Italy faces the challenge of retaining local talents.

Currently, one of the problems faced by many Italian universities, is the lack of engagement

with the workforce. This has resulted in a gap between what is taught in the classroom and the actual practice within the industry. Universities in the United States, for instance, have for a long time understood the importance of this relationship. There exists a sort of "speed-dating" between companies and students interns in the United States. This form of "dating" determines whether or not there are grounds for a long-term future relationship. With this type of relationship, they are given the chance to work with businesses as temporary work while continuing their education (usually a semester or two) without major commitment. In practice, career placement strategies through university career centers and academic departments provide students with the chance to work as paid interns for companies of various sizes. This allows students to build a solid employment history, which is reflected on their resumes. With this experience, students gain the chance to have numerous contacts within the companies before graduating from university. In many cases students are offered full employment while still attending school.

The Workshop Project

In the workshop, students experienced all planning phases, and became knowledgeable of the work-flow. Students are encouraged to work in team; however, in this setting, the problems that young designers encounter include: 1) underestimating operational difficulties when moving from the concept to the final product, and 2) following the rule (theory) so closely to the extent where it inhibits their creativity. By focusing only on the form, and omitting the content can be a serious mistake. As Gregory Heisler states, "I took a lot of 'the operation's a success, but the patient died' pictures... I had a perfectly executed boring-ass picture that I had done." In essence, it is important to communicate effectively, and to be emotionally engaging.

Russo expresses that, the violation of the rules of graphic in the first place by the International Typographic Style array Swiss [...] in Carson assumes a very significant emphasis [...] Our argument, however, is that Carson does not follow any rules preconceived nor forms of sorts: his work, influenced by the media circuit constantly in progress, it is fluid and consequent digital tools that produce it." On the other hand, we are bombarded with images of all kinds, which become almost invisible to our eyes when they do not have the ability to appeal to the viewer, or capture our attention with intelligence. "The viewer wants to be drawn into another world," one in which the goods and brands are not only a symbolic value, but have the ability [...] to lead in a modern fairy tale where semantic and emotional rules apply different from that of the real life." Oliviero Toscani ingeniously broke the rules of advertising. Working for Benetton, he was able to construct subjects and objects in a way that essentially sells the brand without advertising an actual product. In his

work, the products are not in the scene; instead, they are replaced by images that address social issues. The images include the atrocities of war, diseases, etc. With this approach, customers began to associate Benetton with socially conscious themes, which were some times controversial. Toscani states that "advertising is the most powerful form of communication in the world. We need images that induce people to think and raise controversy [...] We must have the courage to make mistakes. What we do is a challenge, an act of courage [...] I do not sell clothes, I am a photographer ." I present Toscani's work as a model for innovation, to implore students to embrace creative challenges, and to distinguish themselves by creating an original concept.

In this workshop, students learned how to, in a limited amount of time 1) focus on a specific project, 2) develop creativity and ideas, 3) propose and discuss various solutions, 4) work as a team, and 5) collaborate in the spirit of mutual respect and encouragement. At this stage, brainstorming and experimenting are of utmost importance. It is through discussion and debate that they were able to find solutions. One does not have to wait for inspiration, according to Chuck Close. He warns us that, " the amateurs wait for inspiration, the rest of us arrives and gets to work [...] the best ideas come during the work process , they come out of the work itself [...] if you're trying to imagine sitting a great artistic idea , you could sit there for a long time before anything happens . "

Students are presented with problems that an entrepreneur with limited resources must solve in a short amount of time to finalize a project. For instance, the choice of materials is based on cost and availability. The students are forced to consider the less 'attractive' side of the work; in that, they must be able to deal with point of views of business in which maximizing profit is more important than the pleasure of diffusing objects of aesthetic value.

Regarding the creation of photo images, my first goal was to make students understand that photography is often times fiction. It is therefore important to make students think in terms of pre-visualization, showing them how the choice of photographic lenses, the perspective, and how it can radically change the perception of the size of an object, and its materials. A scale model can be photographed in a realistic way. This was one of the tasks that we accomplished for some pictures for the catalog. It was done to avoid rendering because it would be time-consuming and more complex. An intense pre-visualization makes it faster and easier when shooting . Ansel Adams tells us: " The harder you work and luckier you become ." This suggests that initial hard work makes the shooting easier. Luck is not enough it also required considerable discipline in the execution. As Dorothea Lange states, "photographers stop photographing a subject too soon, long before they have exhausted the possibilities." As photographers, our work is based on continuous problem-solving, a process of selection and choices, techniques, and content. It is not enough to be

technically perfect, we must also communicate effectively and arouse emotions.

Returning to the issue of photography as fiction, in many cases we worked with models in 1:10 scale that we have photographed so as to make them look like real objects in 1:1 scale in a realistic context. To do this, we played with perspective, focal length of the lens, and camera angles. One of the most successful examples is the Iconoclast table, made in 1:50 scale and contextualised within the Department of Architecture, avoiding any reference that reveal the real size. The table is photographed from the bottom up to make it appear larger than it really is.

One of the most complex parts of the workshop was the shooting of food. Food photography is from a technical point of view is one of the most difficult fields. This is in part, due to the nature of the products and their shapes. Lighting, a key element in all fields of photography, becomes even more important and complex when working with food. Not only does the photographer need to consider the preparation of the dish, and the right composition, but he should understand the importance of illuminate in manner without creating unpleasant and unwanted reflection. Above all the image must aspire make the food very desirable. The right lighting makes even a simple dish irresistible the wrong light makes it seem inedible. Food photography, a form of Still Life is a labor intensive, complex and require high quality involvement. Light, appearance of this type of subject, atmosphere, choice of focal point, and lenses have to be taken care of in a very meticulous way to obtain the ideal result. Post-production work is often necessary after the shooting in order to enhance image. An excellent Still Life image cannot simply *look good*, it must also have a good *smell, delicious*, and the right texture. It must be seductive, making me want to eat, suggesting to the observer : "Take me, smell me, and taste me." The image cannot simply be technically correct, but must also appear three-dimensional, colorful, charming, inviting, without altering the actual color of the food. For this reason, the correct white balance is extremely important to accurate represent the color.

My suggestion to students is to use the simplest approach. They must attempt to create great images using 'simple' lighting. During the workshop, the photoshoot was quick because as a requirement, we worked with real food that dissolved over a very short period of time. All important as additional challenge to students' problem-solving skills, this photos were taken in random order as the dishes cam out of the restaurant kitchen. This workflow is not recommended in food photography because food is subject to rapid physical changes.

In general, when time is not a critical factor, I like to use the approach I call the "the genius", referring to the famous film directed by Mario Monicelli, "*Amici Mie*". In this movie, one of the actor defines the term "genius". "What is genius? It is imagination, intuition, and decision-making, and speed of execution." Following this approach, we photographed most of the objects of the

company, Trattotempo, applying one of my favorite photographic styles: improvisation. The "fearless hunting" of anything that can help to create an image of great effect. This can be a place, a person, or an object, which can be used in relation to the subject that I intend to contextualize. Following this cynical logic, I work with the students, to desecrate a church, to enter unnoticed in a place not open to the public, or to randomly involve bystanders who can strengthen the images. We proceed with determination and the speed necessary to be effective. The 'image hunter' never give up, and looks around with tenacity, delves into the intricacies of the city in search of something that makes a difference; something that differentiates a average photo from an *image*. An element is able to give you a punch in the stomach, something that Roland Barthes refers to as "quid".

In this workshop, we cover, in few days, several fields of photography. This was biggest challenge for the students because each field requires its own specific technical knowledge and a different approach. Working under these conditions, forces the students to create an action plan with specific objectives and creative strategies. Working with such level of intensity, requires discipline which leads the development of instinct, intuition, and the ability to focus. The combination of goals and desires to create an articulated vision is paramount. When you finally reach the desired result it is the time to share it with the world. As Ted Grant says, "You can have the best job in the world, and if you don't put it in front of people you'll never get anywhere ."

On the last day of the workshop, a survey was conducted by Professor Petulia Blake to identify students' strengths and weaknesses. Based on the students' responses, the main challenges they encountered were often of a technical nature, particularly on the knowledge of the software used in different stages. In some cases, they had no knowledge of relevant features of the camera. This limited their ability construct the images they had envisioned. Their responses demonstrated that a concept or an idea may be good, but, mastering the tool is critical in order to add value to the end result.

Implications

There is an exodus of talents from Italy who seek opportunities elsewhere and more research is required in order to identify ways to connect academic with the business. Also, as strong career development agenda must be created within the university, further research would help universities to offer my service to students who are vital resource for economic development. It is imperative to identify barriers to establishing caree services in Italian universities.

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