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## (Re)thinking the basics of design: Can fairytales be teaching tools?

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### Abstract

Discussing the basics of design can be considered as one of the main issues in trying to understand the fundamentals of the first year design studio. Particularly the first semester of basic design studio teaches basic design concepts such as types of relationships, types of organizations, frame of references and Gestalt principles. All of them are used to teach students to understand the essence of the problem and are utilized to create their own solutions and their design language. It is an impetus process in which exercises are based on basic design concepts and creativity. In general, the concept of creativity is used in the production of an artwork; however, assuming that creativity is a skill that can be improved in a design process, it can also be considered that creativity is a contributory teaching tool. From this perspective, this study aims to find out if basic design concepts affect design of the first year students in relation to creativity. For this purpose, as a final work, students were asked to design a given field in the light of a fairytale. Whether the use of basic design concepts gives an impulse to the creativity of the students and this creativity turns into a successful design are matters of analysis. The study was conducted with the first year students of Interior Architecture and Environmental Design from Atılım University, Ankara, Turkey. The experts evaluated the final works of the students within the framework of basic design concepts and creativity. Results of the study showed that creativity of the basic design work depends on the number of used basic design concepts, which can be concluded as creativity of the first year students can be improved by teaching basic design concepts in basic design education.

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### 1. Introduction

Firstly, it is valuable to examine the process of the first semester of basic design studio briefly to understand the logic of this study. Improvement of an abstract way of comprehending and examining design concepts as well as built and natural environment was one of the main scopes of the first year design studio. For this purpose, the structure of basic design studio is composed of two dimensional (2D) and three dimensional (3D) exercises. 2D exercises were mainly composed of visual field organization<sup>1</sup> principles, techniques and concepts via geometric shapes from the simple to the intricate. These exercises were mainly revolves around abstraction, pattern, texture and color studies.

3D studies are one of the other main components of basic design education, which were based on spatial configurations in relation to the concepts of basic design such as types of relationships (abstract and concrete relationship, solid-void relationship and geometric relationship), types of organizations (harmony, contrast, balance,

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the study “organization” is used as a unified arrangement of parts; the activity or result of distributing or arranging objects or things orderly or methodically.

order, unity, repetition and dominance), frame of references (control of the design field and proportion) and Gestalt principles (closure, similarity, proximity, continuity and whole-part relationship). An understanding of spatial typologies and relations by using linear, planar and solid elements were developed. Shifting the skills and design principles gained from 2D to 3D was significant, because in three-dimensional world solid-void relation directs the composition rather than figure-ground relation.<sup>2</sup> In addition to 3D geometric solid-void organizations, color and texture use in 2D and 3D space was analyzed during the first year design education. Exercises were generated to develop workmanship skills of the students such as drafting, model making and drawing, because development

of presentation and communication skills of students' is essential during design education. In the beginning of the first year, students have started to make 2D organizations using the concepts of basic design. Then, students have initiated 3D exercises by means of experience they have gained during 2D exercises.

Students were expected to solve 2D and 3D design problems during basic design studio. One of the main concerns of design education is the development of creativity (Casakin and Kreidler, 2008, p. 491) while teaching concepts of basic design. It was assumed that the idea of fairytale as a final work can promote creativity of the students and can give the opportunity to use the basics of design. Producing designs, which were creative and appropriate, were expected of students. In the end of the first semester of basic design studio, assessment in the form of jury, which was composed by instructors, was carried out for the final work to understand when a basic design work was conceived as successful.

## 2. A literature review on creativity, basic design concepts and basic design education

The literature on creativity is affluent. Studies have been mostly conducted on how to improve creative thought process (Cross 1984; Runco 2004). Creativity has historical, cultural, and social bounds, whereas in this study the concept of creativity is examined as an ability, which can be developed during basic design education. It is plausible to claim that creative thought should not rely on only talent or chance; it is something beyond. Developing creative thought is one of the main aims of the first year design studio, which introduces and teaches high school students the concept of abstraction. In that sense, design education must teach students to motivate their own creativity (Iashin-Shaw, 1994). Horng et al. (2005) in his work clarifies that the creativity must be a foremost issue in new teaching approach. Gaining a better insight in regard to the creativity is the concern of basic design education.

Jeffries (2007) as well asserts that the creative thought must be increased by teaching methods in the design education. Studies on creativity highlight that well-defined (design) problems can promote the creative design process and, thus, "creativity, as a concept of bringing forward new ideas, is seen by many as the driving force in the design process". (Kowaltowski et al., 2010, p. 474). The very purpose of basic design education is to guide toward the integration of finding the appropriate answers to the design problems by producing original ideas, and using the concepts of basic design. Hence, these concepts are considered as guidelines of motivation for design creativity. In this process, generating new ideas is considered "as becoming sensitive to a question" (Kowaltowski et al., 2010, 457) which can be also assumed as solving basic design problems smartly.

Basic design education has been mainly discussed in relation to not only creativity but also Gestalt theory because principles in Gestalt theory have devised ways of problem solving and creativity. For instance, Arnheim's study titled as *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (1954) and G. Kepes' study titled as *Language of Vision* (1944) are the essential sources in trying to comprehend the basic design concept within the concept of creative thought which have enduring influence on design education. Gestalt theory plays a significant role on student's learning in basic design studio. It creates a ground to generate a visual representation because it is based on whole and part relationship, which is the major concern of the first year design education. Basic design studio teaching based on the discussion of visual representation of the surrounding which is composed of not only types of relationships, types of organizations, frame of references, Gestalt principles but also creativity. J. Itten's work *Design and Form; The Basic Course at the Bauhaus* (1964) and K. Bates' study *Basic Design Principles and Practice* (1949) are also essential references in basic design education. Itten argues that creative ability should be improved by teaching methods and he claims that the aim of basic design teaching should be "to build the whole man as a creative being" (1964, p. 10). Bates concentrates on "do-it-yourself movement" (1949,

<sup>2</sup> Figure-ground relation is the location of all objects with reference to a background in 2D organizations. For definition of solid-void relation, see 3.3. *Tools of assessment* section.

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