

The mechanisms of value transfer in design meetings

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Values play an integral role in design: they inform the kinds of trade-offs the designer makes when considering different solutions; they create a basis for the client to assess how a particular artefact may fit into their lives; and they are an important part of negotiating a common understanding in collaborative design settings. In this paper, we examine the interactions in meetings between architect and client to better understand how different values are brought into the design discourse. By analysing the verbal content and non-verbal communication between the architect and client, we identify patterns of discourse that imbue design problem-solving with the language and concepts that express values. From this analysis, we develop a theory of value transfer and describe the social mechanism that facilitates this transfer during design negotiation. This work provides an observational basis for understanding value transfer in the context of collaborative design and is relevant to design domains beyond architecture.

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Values play an important role in design; tracing back to the Roman architect Vitruvius, the values of ‘firmitas, utilitas, venustas’—stability, utility and beauty—were imbedded in the early codification of architectural practice (Pollio, 1914). Looking beyond architecture, design practice, from industrial design to interaction design, is deeply steeped with questions of values. It is through the process of design that values are exposed and negotiated in the search for potential solutions. The presence of different values in turn affects the adoption, use, and social impact of a particular designed artefact.

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The kinds of design inquiries that encourage a broader consideration of values in design have only emerged in the last decade. Going back to the early 1990s, Lawson (1990) and Rowe (1995), for example, have each contributed to work



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focussing on design process and the act of designing. These works largely considered design as an individual activity performed by a designer and as such, do not provide a good perch for considering the collaborative nature of design. But by the middle of the 1990s the notion of design as a collaborative activity had become a topic of study. During this period, [Brereton et al. \(1996\)](#), [Cross and Cross \(1996\)](#), and [Radcliffe \(1996\)](#) all studied the affects and mechanisms of team-based design; yet in these studies, the focus was still on small teams of designers and not on the interaction designers have with clients or other stakeholders.

Looking specifically at visual design, [Frascara \(1995\)](#) and [Tyler \(1995\)](#) addressed the role of values and audience. Frascara considered graphic design primarily as an activity of persuasion and asserted that graphic artefacts should be considered on more grounds than aesthetics alone. Tyler echoed a similar view in the scope of visual communication design, and further discussed how the values of the audience influence their interpretation of the design and the persuasive power it possesses. Both of these views are borne of a semiotic understanding of visual design and the rhetoric of the image ([Barthes, 1977](#)). By considering design in this manner, Frascara and Tyler each elevated the discussion of design to include the human values expressed by the designer and interpreted by the consumer.

Despite these moves to acknowledge the human values imbedded in a designed artefact, the fact that these values are an integral part of the process continued to be overlooked. In [Brereton et al.'s \(1996\)](#) Delft Protocol analysis, designers were noted to make appeals to values, for example Kerry, one of the designers working on the design of a bicycle rack, made an appeal to elegance. This appeal to a design value was bold, yet at the time, there was no deeper analysis of how appeals to such values contributed to the design. Similarly, Cultural Probes have received much attention in the interaction design community for their ability to generate inspirational responses from a user population, yet there has not been much investigation into how the results of the probes are incorporated into the design process ([Gaver et al., 1999](#)). In both cases, the presence of different types of values is tacitly understood, but the role those values play during the act of designing has not been thoroughly investigated.

Much of the work considering human values comes at a time when the broader field of design is in the middle of an evolution: the consumer is becoming a 'co-designer' ([Sanders, 2005](#)). This change indicates a shift in how values are reflected in the design process. Where a consumer once took what was given, the co-designer is empowered to accept and reject design choices much earlier in the process, thus exercising an increased influence on the shape of the final product ([Sanders, 2006](#)).

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