Disruption by dissociation: exploring human-centred design through transformative engagement in the spatial design studio

by

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Disruption by dissociation: exploring human-centred design through transformative engagement in the spatial design studio

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Abstract

This study explores the use of hybrid ways of engagement in the spatial design studio, as a disruption to complement the traditional methods of design inquiry. Through normative dissociation, an empathic approach to investigation is adopted in order to take a human-centred perspective, where users are considered as part of the understanding of complex spatial design issues. The use of a plug-in workshop facilitates the qualitative data collection, analysis and synthesis, without coding, as a four-hour workshop inserted into an active studio project. Four programmes in interior architecture at tertiary institutions are purposefully selected in the third year of study. These are considered biopic investigations and form the basis of the research as an indicative study, which is data driven.

A constructivist paradigm allows for interpretation of data findings according to the three research questions in order to make meaning of the evidence collected in situ in the design studio. This approach allows the researcher to triangulate thick descriptions with observations from research assistants and students' own primary work. The plug-in workshop requires students to step outside their comfort zone and adopt the perspective of particular users or communities. This troublesome action asks them to shed their own preconceived ideas and bias in order to make meaning of complex social scenarios, often unfamiliar to them. Threshold concepts emerge as part of a transformative journey.

The study acknowledges that transitions in worldviews are not easy and that more exposure, experience and skills are required, especially at an educational level. However, it is important to reveal and expose designers to situations where fluid and unpredictable living scenarios define how we live and interact in an increasingly complex world. The contribution of the research emerges from the speculative and provocative approach, asking difficult questions pertaining to a transformative spatial design milieu. This equips students with softer skills to be present and to act respectfully with an attitude of mutual learning as citizen designers on behalf of communities and people.

Keywords

Disruptive practice, normative dissociation, empathy, transformative learning, human-centred, design values, ethics, design citizenship

PREFACE

With the sound of the wind through the trees,

in a shady spot, we discuss once again,

the potential that lies beyond.

Thank you to my supervisor, Dr Carin Combrinck for your patience and for the question that set it all in motion: “What do you need to do now?” The answer was clear – I had to *make* something… In an instant, the focus shifted from *what*, to *how!* This changed everything.

More questions,

- *provocations*

cutting through everything, revealing.

What lies hidden, should not go unnoticed.

Prof Dr Hennie Reynders, thank you for your willingness to be co-supervisor and for the engaged conversations that ensured the essence of the investigation stays true. Your insight and critical voice are valued beyond words. Thank you for inviting me to facilitate a workshop with your students in Chicago.

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To my colleagues, family and friends, a heartfelt thank you.

For Rudolph, Karin and Petra

In memory of my beloved father and mother
Andreas van Aswegen (1948-2008) and Petra Hester Alberts (1949-2020)

DECLARATION

I, the undersigned author, declare that the applicable research ethics approval has been obtained for the research described in this work and that I have observed the ethical standards required in terms of the University of Pretoria's Code of Ethics for Researchers and the Policy Guidelines for Responsible Research.

The thesis is submitted in fulfilment of part of the requirements for the degree Philosophiae Doctor in Interior Architecture at the University of Pretoria. No part thereof has already been, or is currently, being submitted for any other degree or examination at any other university.

Anika van Aswegen

2021

RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS RELATED TO THIS STUDY

Book chapter

Van Aswegen, A. 2021. 'Refocusing the interior lens: other methods of critical and creative inquiry in the architecture studio'. In Smith, C (ed). *Progressive studio pedagogy: examples from architecture and allied design fields*. Routledge Design Pedagogy Series. London: Routledge, pp. 54-77.

Conference paper in proceedings

Grobler, A. 2018. 'Relational encounters: meaning-making of the intangible through emotional attachment'. In Proceedings: *The Stories of Interior: Multiple Perspectives on Interiority, [in]arch international conference*, Indonesia, 30-31 January 2018, Universitas Indonesia, pp. 111-120.

Conference paper presentation

Van Aswegen, A. 2019. 'Refocusing the interior lens: other methods of critical and creative inquiry in the architecture studio'. *AMPS Education, Design and Practice: understanding skills in a complex world*, 17-19 June 2019, Stevens Institute, New York/New Jersey, USA.

Journal article currently under review

Van Aswegen, A & Combrinck, C. Towards a relational approach to transformative pedagogy in spatial design

this is an interdisciplinary study
it is speculative
it does not attempt to solve any problems
or create any toolkits, guidelines, or models
this study asks questions
it probes and explores
it investigates how we engage with design challenges
it does not give answers
but
it shows what can happen
if we challenge outdated old grooves
through disruptive action
this study cares to make a difference
it hopes to reach beyond the surface
to enable change
it puts people first
by embracing various voices
it asks who, how, why
this is a provocation

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ABBREVIATIONS

Dℓ T	Designerly thinking
DT	Design thinking
GDC	Greenside Design Center
HCD	Human-centred design
UJ	University of Johannesburg
UP	University of Pretoria
SAIC	School of the Art Institute of Chicago