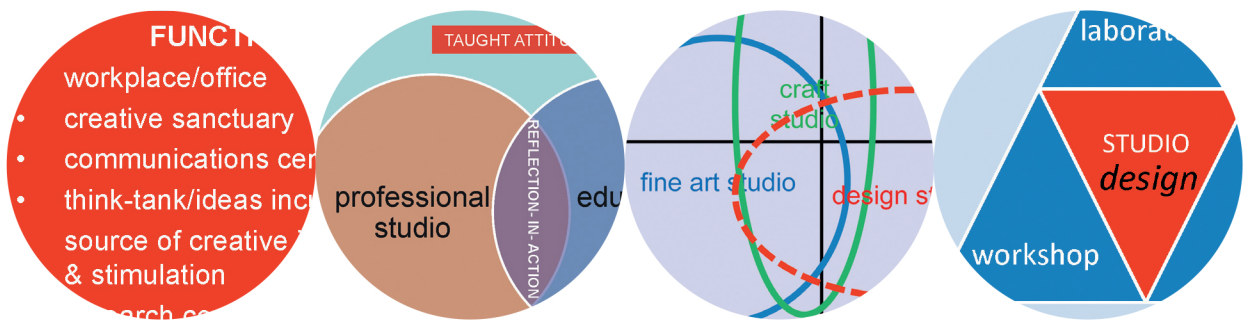


KEYNOTE

MAKING SPACE – THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF THE CREATIVE ENVIRONMENT



'FUTURESCAN: COLLECTIVE VOICES' SET OUT TO EXPLORE THE FUTURE OF FASHION AND TEXTILES EDUCATION AND WITHIN THIS CONTEXT REFERENCED THE 'RAPIDLY CHANGING LANDSCAPE', WHICH I HAVE CHOSEN TO TAKE ALMOST LITERALLY AND FOCUS ON THE LANDSCAPE OF THE 'CREATIVE ENVIRONMENT' – WHETHER THIS BE THE STUDIO, WORKSHOP, FASHION HOUSE OR ANY OTHER VARIATION.

My interest is primarily because very little research has ever addressed this territory, being generally more concerned with what happens within it (i.e. the design process), or has focussed almost exclusively on the educational, rather than professional creative environment. For example Donald Schon's influential 'The Design Studio: An Exploration of Its Traditions and Potentials' published in 1985, is an excellent exposition on the creative environment, but concerned exclusively with the student rather than professional practitioner. I would suggest that the knowledge gap with respect to the latter is of crucial importance to the former and will argue that there is a well established symbiotic relationship between the two. Hence my theme is the broad culture of the creative environment, and its future. Whilst Futurescan specifically addresses fashion and textiles, I have deliberately explored the creative environment in its widest context well beyond this territory, because I believe that a broad survey will deepen our understanding

of the more specific concerns within which the fashion/textile environment sits. Also, whilst the studio could be considered synonymous with the creative environment, I have chosen to define the former as a subset of the latter, to encourage a broader consideration of possibilities.

To underpin this debate, I have supplemented my working knowledge of creative space based on my forty plus years in the art/design H.E. sector, with a broad survey of its contemporary form and functions. In the end, I'm sure none of us would be so deeply committed to visual culture if we didn't also believe that the quality of our working environment wasn't intimately connected with our senses, emotions and responses. And as a result, is fundamental to our professional lives, whether as students, academics or practitioners. Some deeper knowledge of the physical working landscape – its diversity, how it works, what it offers and where it is going, should thus be an essential part of our researched knowledge base.

Whilst considerable ingenuity, enthusiasm and resources are devoted to designing the varied environments associated with creative activity, my suspicion is that because they surround and engulf us, they rapidly disappear from our consciousness, displaced by a focus on the demanding activities they accommodate. This lack of awareness is also reflected in the paucity of related research as noted by Shaughnessy:

“The graphic design studio its layout, its management, its psychology and its physical appearance – is curiously absent from design commentary. You can find writing on every aspect of design, but the studio itself receives scant attention.”

He goes on to speculate on the reason why, arguing that it is the sheer variety and complexity of environments that gets in the way of serious analysis.

“... the place where most designers work, and where nearly all design emanates from, remains a no-go area for serious commentary. It's easy to see why: studios are messy things: they're formed by the people who work in them and therefore have multiple personalities.”

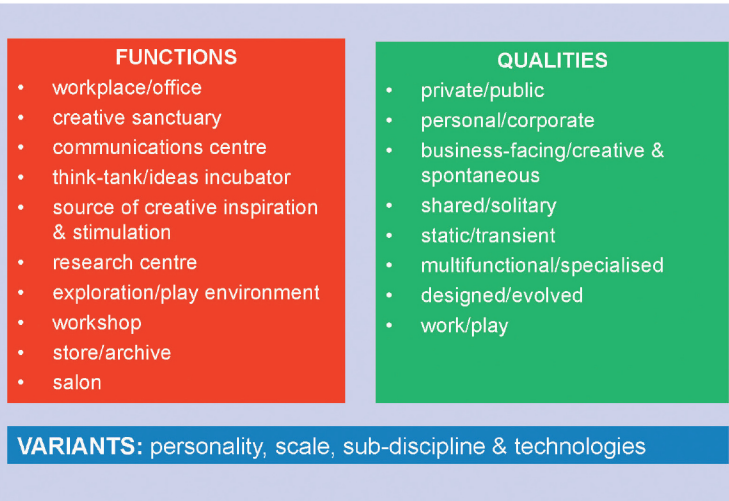
Shaughnessy, A., 2009, pp.3–5.

I would add that this lack of research is by no means confined to graphic design but affects the diverse range of spaces within which artists, designers, performers and other ‘creatives’ operate. They can be consciously designed or unconsciously anarchic, a place of spiritual isolation or boisterous teamwork, a retreat or a showcase. Planned or not, successful or not, the common factor is a space which is intended to optimise creativity and outputs. It is thus no coincidence that the French term for studio, ‘atelier’, can be used to denote both an artist's or fashion designers studio, but also has more complex historical connotations of being ‘the home of an alchemist or wizard’.

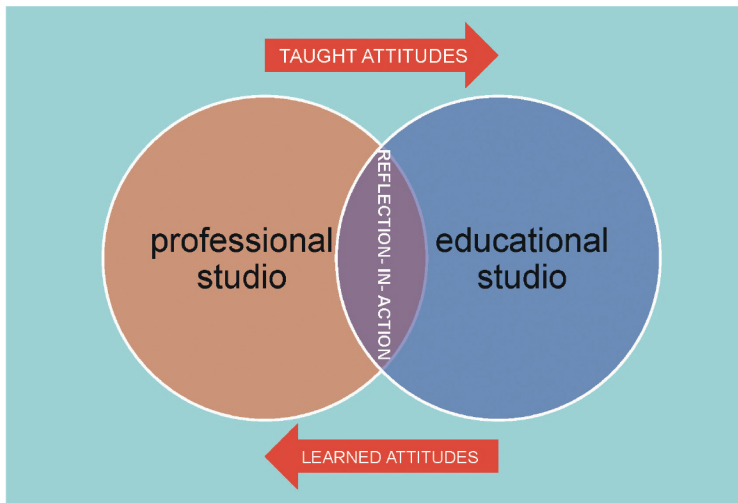
Whether a studio, performance space, workshop or design office, such spaces simultaneously address practical and operational needs, whilst having a symbolic and often inspirational purpose. In reality some practitioners who are particularly attuned to the relationship between the environment and the individual, often go to enormous lengths to arrive at stimulating but highly controlled working environments. Conversely, others will set out to minimise the significance of the environment in order to prioritise the work itself and often appear to thrive on highly personal, ‘creative chaos’, which nevertheless can energise the design process in a different way.

In addition to this broad spectrum of choices, the difficulty of analysing the phenomenon is compounded by the lack of formal research devoted to understanding the historical, socioeconomic and psychological context of the creative environment. Whilst I won't pretend to fill this extensive gap, perhaps it is possible to stimulate deeper enquiry into this fascinating area, in the hope that greater understanding will make both creative work and learning more fulfilling and effective.

Further reflection suggests that although the creative environment might be largely defined by a core process (e.g. designing), it is increasingly augmented by a range of auxiliary functions. These might include the creative environment as a brand, network nerve-centre, showroom, information centre, production

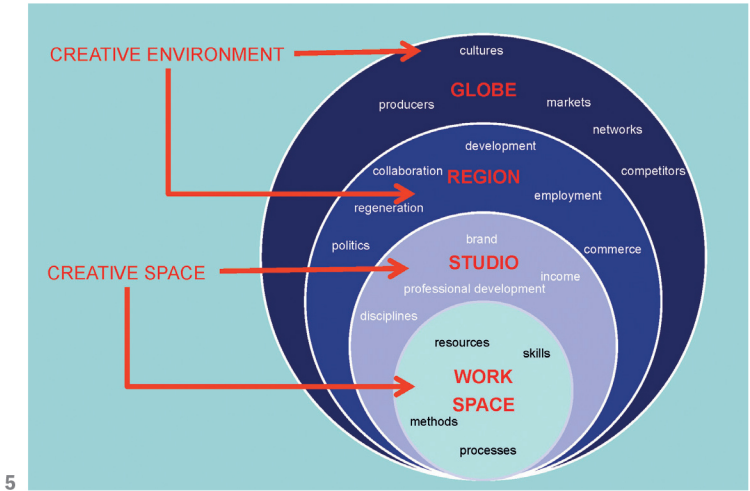
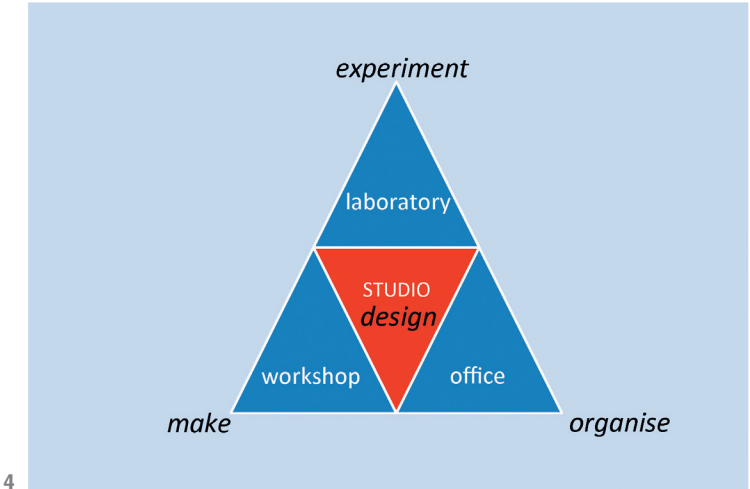
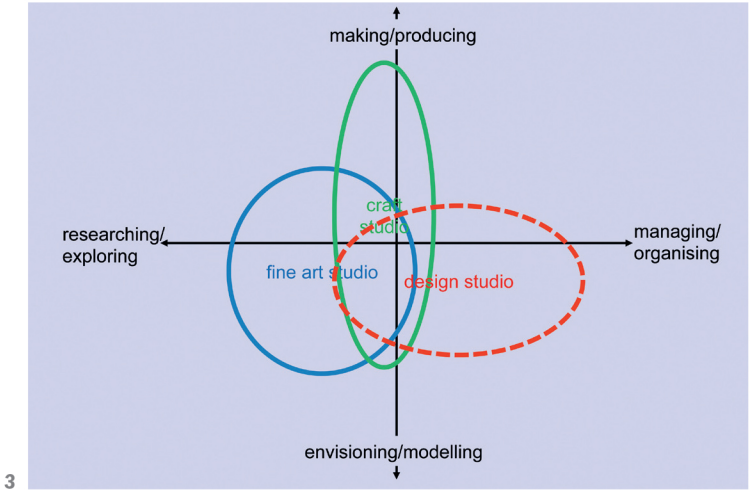


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...ALTHOUGH THE CREATIVE ENVIRONMENT MIGHT BE LARGELY DEFINED BY A CORE PROCESS (E.G. DESIGNING), IT IS INCREASINGLY AUGMENTED BY A RANGE OF AUXILIARY FUNCTIONS. THESE MIGHT INCLUDE THE CREATIVE ENVIRONMENT AS A BRAND, NETWORK NERVE-CENTRE, SHOWROOM, INFORMATION CENTRE, PRODUCTION UNIT, MERGED HOME/WORKPLACE AND EVEN AS A RETAIL OUTLET, NIGHTCLUB OR CORPORATE STATEMENT.



unit, merged home/workplace and even as a retail outlet, nightclub or corporate statement. As this might be a somewhat complex relationship, it again seemed odd that no real research has examined or tested at least some of the many variations. Certainly this lack of research into the creative environment is not mirrored elsewhere in other types of work space. Offices, factories, laboratories and retail outlets have all been rigorously analysed and remodelled continuously, often simply to improve efficiency, but sometimes to enrich the quality of working lives, usually on the assumption that the latter will improve the former anyway. These efficiency gains can also operate in tandem with spatial qualities that reflect both organisational and personal values as Turner and Myerson suggest:

"The culture of the organisations within which we work determines to a significant extent how effective, successful, and fulfilled we are in our professional lives. Organisations become the family of our working lives, and their physical surroundings become our professional home."

Turner, G. & Myerson, J., 1998, pp1.

This notion of the creative environment as a 'professional home' i.e. a place that is aligned with our personal needs – both intellectual and emotional, is associated with an additional difficulty – that of tackling a subject where the sheer diversity of purpose and characteristics also discourages serious analysis. Figure 1 provides an indication of this range.

The table also highlights the duality of many of these often opposing

characteristics, particularly where design processes sit alongside more orthodox organisational functions. This suggests design parameters that include flexibility, adaptability, multi-functionalism and duality, but perhaps these also have to be reconciled with a stable thread of visible core values.

The relevance of 'the studio' in this debate is fundamental and it is seen as a kind of self-perpetuating system, particularly in relation to the educational sphere. Whilst my immediate interest is primarily with the professional environment, I would argue strongly that it is the educational studio that partly accounts for the historic form, purpose and longevity of its professional counterpart. Generations of students in the creative arts have been taught within a very particular learning environment, and largely according to the principles of the traditional atelier system. It is perhaps inevitable therefore that at such a formative period in their development, undergraduates should absorb attitudes to the creative environment that they readily transfer into their later professional lives. Even as now where the digital has displaced many of the traditional accoutrements of the studio – drawing boards, slide viewers, model-making facilities etc, the underlying mix of the social, the personal, the creative and the practical is likely to result in a view of the academic environment that is readily transferable.

Figure 2 summarises this symbiotic relationship between the educational and the professional, suggesting a two-way process in the sense that Schon's 'reflection in action' model is based on

the professional practitioner as teacher paradigm. Thus the form and purpose of the educational environment are informed by the presence of the studio tutor, often a part-time practitioner or as someone who has conducted practice in a previous professional life.

This synergistic relationship between creative practice and education is further evidenced through the definition and derivation of the word 'studio' itself. Defined by the Oxford Online Dictionary (2013) simply as 'a room where an artist, photographer, sculptor, etc. works', its origins lie in the early 19th century Italian based on the Latin 'studium', which can also mean 'zeal, painstaking application'. Thus the studio embodies a relatively driven and passionate form of envisioning and making, aligned with aspects of reflection familiar in Schon's work, whereby the traditions of the studio are perpetuated through educational/professional synergies aligned with creative practice.

Figure 3 represents one way of simplifying the complex variation in creative environments, in relation to the different generic functions conducted in three related and critical areas of activity – fine art, the crafts and design. The model identifies overlapping territories and distinctiveness and paves the way for the development of an analytical tool for reimagining future creative spaces. This model may also be useful when considering some of the changes that are likely to affect the nature of the creative environment in the near future. For example, the emerging technology of additive manufacture may well begin to pervade some

design studios, reuniting design with production, uncommon since the dawn of the industrial revolution. The model might also help to plan those creative environments that increasingly address more than one traditional practice domain. Again an example might relate to the emergence of a generation of designers who are consciously blurring the distinction between designs as one-off, low volume and mass manufacture. This includes Influential designers such as Hella Jongerius for example, who moves seamlessly between mass market products (e.g. for IKEA) and, low volume/one-offs in the contemporary craft tradition. A creative environment designed to accommodate and integrate these traditionally separated environments might look very different from the traditional studio.

In practical rather than territorial terms, the design studio can also be thought of as a hybrid environment, combining three existing core activities with their spatial counterparts as in figure 4. The pivotal roles of experimenting (requiring research, modelling, sketching, testing, trying out etc.), making (products, prototypes, maquettes etc.) and organising (directing, administrating and planning), are seen as the primary activity subsets to be integrated into the environment as a whole. This can either be as discrete separate entities to create an entirely planned and 'functional' environment and/or as part of a homogenous, integrated environment. Again such a model can function as both the basis of research analysis when examining the nature of the creative environment and also as

a creative design tool when planning the same.

There is also a wider context for the creative environment which, by viewing individual studio space and geographic location as a continuum, helps to clarify how it operates on the global stage, particularly in a world which has emulated McLuhan's (1962) 'global village', through advanced communication and information technologies. Figure 5 illustrates this proposition and identifies some of the connections that interior space makes with the external world – local, regional and global. Again there is tremendous variation here, for example between a creative space in a trend-setting locale, surrounded by a local catchment of creative enterprise (e.g. Hoxton, London) and a geographically isolated agency, but one with access to a digital network of global players.

Similarly, the positioning of personal space within a larger communal environment (e.g. an individual workstation within a large practice) is viewed as part of this continuum and could equally form part of the design agenda when planning a new medium- to large-scale environment. Multinational car companies often exemplify this continuum when locating studio activities close to a particular plant, supplier, market or team. Advanced global communication systems now facilitate seamless co-creation and co-designing processes, within a virtual global digital network that increasingly feels like a single creative environment, even though operating across multiple studios and locations. This personal/global continuum can also lend itself to

novel ways of planning and linking the various studio functions on a much broader canvas. For example by questioning the local and regional potential of a design office move and linking the immediate practical needs of a studio with the wider effects of urban regeneration, regional industries as potential clients and global outreach for promoting services.

The diagrammatic models (figures 1-5) illustrate the possibility that the complex and highly variable nature of creative spaces can be simplified and contextualised, in a way which makes them more suitable for analytical research, leading to the development of planning tools based on the results. Whilst I have kept the focus of creative spaces deliberately general, there is no doubt that the specific needs of fashion and textile spaces would also be suited to this approach.

Following these largely theoretical models, perhaps we should scrutinise the contemporary reality more closely. Having examined many examples, it is clear that the contemporary creative space fulfils an ever expanding range of functions, aspirations and needs. It can exclusively embrace individual goals or fulfil the diverse needs of the creative team, physically comprise endless layers of creative detritus or be dedicated to monastic minimalism. It can be intended solely for hatching new ideas, or align creative thinking with physical making. It can be driven by new technologies or be focussed on timeless traditions. In short, the modern creative environment is defined primarily by its sheer diversity, flexibility and distinctiveness compared with other workspaces.

In contrast the educational counterpart to the professional studio has changed little in half a century, with the possible exception of accommodating larger numbers and absorbing some new hardware. On one level there are good reasons for this inertia. Teaching/learning styles vary from one year group to the next and from one tutor to the next. Projects, the curriculum and assessment processes also vary. Students come and go and even funding arrangements now change from year to year. It is little wonder that the student environment, far from moving with change, accommodates it through basic flexibility. This is usually accomplished by adopting a white cube solution, in which the space is a blank canvas on which components and equipment are rearranged on an annual basis. Clearly this tradition suits general rather than particular needs – a process of rudimentary space planning rather than customised interior design. No doubt this approach solves the immediate logistical problem of providing the basics, but it does raise interesting questions about the nature of a visual learning culture and whether this type of environment actually optimises creative learning. In contrast, the professional counterpart has emerged as quirky, variable, customised, innovative and driven. Another question is therefore whether this growing mismatch between the education and practice detracts from the graduate's ability to identify with and be prepared for this shift to the professional environment and whether the sector should do more to reduce this gap. Despite the fragile economy, change in art/design H.E. is gathering

momentum with the advent of student fees, new modelling technologies and investment in new building and refurbishment; we should therefore take the creative learning environment more seriously. Research which could usefully underpin a serious rethink might take several forms – from user research amongst professional practitioners to identify wants, needs and trends, to curriculum analysis, student attitudes/expectations and specialised solution modelling in relation to this. Advanced research could even include a network of participant institutions supporting unique test spaces which could engage with a range of projects and provide a highly adaptable, and intelligent 'studio set' as an experimental practice/research environment.

In this short discussion of the role and nature of the creative environment, I hope that I have demonstrated both its variety and some of its commonalities. I have deliberately conducted a broad sweep in terms of design function, in the full knowledge we are concerned here specifically with the interlinked worlds of education, fashion and textiles. Nevertheless I would argue strongly that these specialised areas are undergoing both operational and cultural shifts and that a greater, more informed understanding of the creative space in its widest terms, is essential for improving the design process. I remain fascinated by the symbiotic relationship between the educational and professional design environments and hope that my thoughts help to trigger research into this critical but neglected area.

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FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1: The creative environment – functions and paradoxes.

Figure 2: Learning and professional environments – a symbiotic relationship.

Figure 3: Positioning the design studio.

Figure 4: The design studio – functional domains.

Figure 5: The local/global context.