

Evolution: Art and Design Research and the PhD

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The Doctor of Design Program is situated within the Advanced Studies Program at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design, informally referred to as ASP and GSD, respectively. The acronym for the Doctor of Design degree is DDes. This acronym occasionally finds me in rather strange discussions about root canals until I explain that it actually stands for Doctor of Design—this is very effective at quickly summing up the discussion with, at most, polite but confused questions about how many ways someone can design dentures. Thus, my first lesson as a doctoral student was not in research methods but rather in terminological politics. This was an abrupt, and fortunately short, lesson, which I believe was an effective entrée into the practice of scholarship under the aegis of design.

Those who pursue the DDes propose a focused area of research prior to acceptance. This positioning statement, a professional degree, and a mass of supporting material that proves existing competence in the area of proposed research offer the baseline for considering a qualified candidate for the program. Accepted students engage in two consecutive terms of coursework. Within the first year of residence, students deliver a formal research proposal to a panel of GSD faculty and often to additional

experts from a broad spectrum of professional and scholarly domains. If successful, the student, now candidate, will form his doctoral committee from those present, with the student's advisor typically taking the role of committee chair.

One feature of the GSD's DDes program that distinguishes it from other doctoral programs is the period of coursework and the subsequent research period, which are short and intensely focused. At the time of my entry into the program in 2004, a student, then candidate, was expected to execute his proposed research and to publish and defend his dissertation within three years, ideally two years. This policy was developed with the express goal of quickly contributing emergent knowledge to the disciplines of design through applied research. It reflects what communication and diffusion scholar Everett M. Rogers might have considered a pro-innovation bias: Simply put, if it is an innovation then information about it generally should be diffused throughout relevant communities and a significant portion of these communities should adopt it in some form.¹

That is not to say it was a bad policy—in many cases the speed with which a candidate was expected to complete their work was ideal for mid-career professionals and a select group of more traditional academics who had very focused research agendas that fit within the existing models for what design education has been at the GSD—namely design education in the service of the fields of architecture, landscape architecture, urban design, and urban planning.

Therefore, on one hand this policy reflected what I still believe to be a valid assumption that, given the increasing pace of change in most fields, applied knowledge is best served piping hot. On the other hand, as I found out, it is not always feasible, and is

¹ Rogers discusses this and other biases within the context of his “Diffusion of Innovations” theory, which is explained most clearly in his book of the same name.

never easy, to complete research on a topic that might be latent for those who would consider themselves practitioners in a field of design and may even be considered marginal to those whose position themselves as practitioners, scholars, and critics within the academy from which future design practitioners are expected to emerge.

In fact, both the rapid and overt, and the slow and latent, are critical to fostering intellectual discourse within and across the expansive and expanding spectrum of fields that would find value in a word like design, which we see today. This is the first point that I feel is important to address as we consider the evolution of doctoral activity in design.

The second point that I would like to contribute to this discussion is that of diversity. The model for doctoral education in design that I am presenting thrives on an unusually high level of diversity and requires a consistent and talented pool of applicants to draw on as well as a broad network of external domain and disciplinary experts to support its students' research goals. The research topics chosen by my colleagues, who, as previously stated, were selected by an admissions committee fully aware of our intent, were extraordinarily diverse, as were our backgrounds and personal histories. There are important costs and benefits that a community such as this one presents to each individual member. In a very positive way, it is exciting and challenging to present one's research to a group of colleagues who are each chasing a different white rabbit. But it is daunting to consider what common methods might be introduced to such a community in the beginning of their chase so as to foster the kind of discrete discovery and knowledge contribution that is expected when the chase ends. In many cases I found that there simply was no common method or practice that could be derived from any two physically

adjacent yet intellectually distant colleagues in this environment. It is at the institution's expense not to try and capitalize on what might be a mere tangential point for a candidate who studies, for example, technology and pedagogy in the context of design. But it is an expensive proposition to expect any institution to try and capture the work of a single researcher who may eventually leave the institution with only the requisite document to be catalogued amongst an array of other documents from the equally diverse cohorts of the past. Some may point out that this is the duty of the historian who ascertains, from an appropriate critical distance, how to codify years of historical contributions. But in an era of complex interdependencies and transdisciplinary action the most difficult task of all may be finding an appropriate vantage point from which to document these sometimes fleeting engagements with the notion of "method."

The program has evolved significantly since its inception, generally tracking the expansion of professional design activity in the built environment as it has evolved from a paper-based practice with few connections to domains such as computation, to a range of integrated and highly diverse fields each with their own digital conduit. It continues to diversify through the acceptance of candidates with a broad range of interests and expertise. At its intellectual core the program remains close to the GSD's own focus on architecture, urban planning, urban design, and landscape architecture, but through the contributions of this diverse community that has reached into the physical sciences, the arts, law and policy, and emergent and evolving domains such as Human-Computer Interaction, mobility, computational and artificial intelligence, and cognition, the GSD itself is now finding the energy and the grounding to change without, potentially ahead of any of its disciplinary foundations. I am encouraged by this but continue to wonder

whether I participated in a program that isolated me enough to find my own path or that surrounded me with a community that opened the path for me.

In the GSD I found an institution where I could examine design as an industry, a practice, a pedagogical framework, and perhaps a philosophy. In reflecting on my experience I have realized that much of my time was spent trying to find the center of an asymmetric domain, until I realized that there was no center and that what I was studying was not a domain but domains that have brushed against one another long enough for me to develop an argument for their relevance.

Very early in my time at the GSD I read that the real education of a doctorate is learning to hate something that you love. My experience and my lessons left me with quite the contrary perspective but perhaps no more satisfied. The tangible contributions I hope I have made continue to drive and confound me in my current research. I can only hope that they will continue to do so and, perhaps more importantly, that I will find ways to guide my own students to the frustrating and confounding delight of the doctoral charge.