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# The Big Five - Globalization, Urbanization, Demography, Environment, Technology

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Abstract: In this paper I would like to present a project involving an exhibition named *"Occupation: Designer | Awareness and Action"* that I curated in 2014. The exhibition discussed the role of the contemporary designer as a conscious and responsible member of global society incessantly defining his/her attitude to sustainable growth. Projects comprising the exhibition were grouped under five headings highlighting key problem areas of the contemporary world: GLOBALISATION, URBANISATION, DEMOGRAPHY, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY. The structure of the exhibition later became the basis for the "Contemporary Design" course for Faculty of Design students. The five headings are filters for the perception of our modern world and its array of problems. Each year, five groups of students embark on new research, mapping, analysing and defining problems, to then look for the most powerful strategies applied by contemporary designers, and finally to create presentations of best design corresponding to *"The Big Five"*.

***Key words: globalisation, urbanisation, environment, demography, technology, education, awareness, sustainability.***

## 1. Educating Designers Sensitive to Problems of the Contemporary World

Design teaching curricula are constantly evolving in emulation of the incessant evolution of problems we are facing. Not only does such changeability of the modern world (Dencik, 2005) complicate the process of grasping the essence of such issues – it also lies at the root of increasing difficulties in presenting design to students in the context of complex phenomena affecting the condition of modern man and his environment. Furthermore, preserving a relative equilibrium and objectivity under such circumstances is a major

challenge; once problems themselves are presented, the move carries no obvious suggestions connecting them to specific design work solutions (project strategies) or to exact answers. Numerous designers and theoreticians have been compiling lists of issues worth design authors' attention. Professor Victor Margolin presented one such list at the Cumulus 2013 conference in Kalmar: *"To invent a new action frame is not only a matter of changing values. It is necessary to change strategies well. I would like to mention here eight conditions that call for a new strategy of action on a global scale. First: Population Growth. More people on the planet require more resources and a different means of distributing them. Second: More older people who require care and financial support. Third: Climate change. Fourth: Increased consumption of natural resources. Fifth: A global financial system that is out of control. Sixth: An unacceptable gap between the rich and the poor worldwide. Seven: A reduction of jobs due to new robotic and expert systems technology. Eight: Fundamentalist religious beliefs that divide the world's peoples. What is to be done?"* (Margolin, 2013)

Books on contemporary history of design published over recent years also include deliberations attempting to capture latest challenges design faces in the context of technological as well as social and economic changes (Fiell, 2013). Yet books provide no opportunity for seamless updates of problem maps and corresponding solutions. Moreover, it is common knowledge that passive absorption of information recorded in books and presented by the tutor has ceased being the optimum form of teaching a long time ago. In all probability, only online media are capable of keeping up with the speed of changes and developing the related discourse. Nonetheless, in a world of considerable overproduction of information students have to be issued tools helping them filter.

Under such circumstances, the delivery of classes targeting the best possible form of presenting young designers with the complexity of project issues they will soon be confronting is a major challenge. I found myself lacking ways of ensuring that "Contemporary Design" course students would be active and self-sufficient in mapping and weighting contemporary problems, interpreting contemporary design in light of the same, defining effective project strategies, and consciously highlighting and commenting on choice solutions.

## 2. Experimenting with Active Forms of Delivering a Course

In 2013, I decided to experiment with delivering classes with the use of Problem Based Learning (PBL) rules. Students were to begin with problem mapping (in a very broad sense of the term) followed by issue categorisation and description of how designers operate in specific contexts, and – finally – the identification of best solution examples. Students

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were grouped in teams of three of four, and worked independently for four months supervised by the tutor. The initial chaos bred very interesting problem areas, with students defining project strategies they found most important (such as *"design for all"*, *"craft revival"* and *"invisible technology"*). The chief value of the experiment was that of students working independently to identify the need, the issue which triggers specific design activities.

Students were enthusiastic in debating evident equilibrium turmoil circumstances, such as the contrast between the obesity struggle in some parts of the world versus the efforts to combat hunger in others; the expansion of global brands as a threat to small manufacturers; growing cities which paralyse transportation and cut residents off from nature; ageing societies in highly developing countries and the resulting process of redefining the third and fourth age; lack of tolerance and the resulting barriers faced by immigrants seeking normal life beyond homeland; increasing dependence on technology resulting in the lack of true control over basic appliances coupled with the rule of rapid goods exchange resulting in excess resources, energy, and water used in production. After the first edition of the course, I realised that a certain framework might be useful in order for student research to become more targeted. Specific problem areas began taking shape – they could well become an appropriate structure serving the purpose of such classes.

## 3. Exhibition Scenario as a Method of Curriculum Structuring

In 2014, I prepared an exhibition focusing on the profession of the designer – or, to be more specific, his/her responsibility and tasks in light of contemporary problems. While the exhibition was not large, it inspired me to analyse the course scenario in detail and to draw conclusions. I arranged the exhibition according to a very rigid structure based on five headlines: GLOBALISATION, URBANISATION, DEMOGRAPHY, ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY – the so-called "Big Five". The headline areas had been outlined in the course of classes with students. Such processes as globalisation and urbanisation, demographic changes, use of the environment and technological development, all of which incessantly modify the image of our world, are not negative in and of themselves. Yet these *"megatrends"* (as dubbed by some) overlap, impact one another, and serve to create a vision of a contemporary world devoid of balance – while designers are naturally sensitive to circumstances of missing equilibrium.

As a discipline focusing on what objects should be like rather than on what they are, to quote Herbert Simon (Simon, 1996), design is naturally entwined in all aforementioned contexts. Designers see problems as challenges, as impulses leading them to the process of seeking and creating new solutions. They interpret issues in a form and manner typical for

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their profession, and strive to reach so-called positive change. New solutions most frequently commented on by young designers highlight the slow life concept – with focus on locality, nature, renewable energy, activeness, and sustainability. Occasionally, comments are critical, and serve the purpose of raising specific problem awareness; at other times, attempts at actual solutions (finished products or systems) are at stake. Circumstances notwithstanding, thinking out of the box remains the crucial factor. The *"OCCUPATION: DESIGNER"* exhibition enabled the introduction of a yet another filter: separation of *"awareness raising"* design (to indicate the problem) from *"problem solving"* design, active forms which improve the *status quo*. Such was the origin of the *"OCCUPATION: DESIGNER | Awareness and Action"* exhibition, resulting also in a fully formed curriculum of an active and structured "Contemporary Design" course. A commentary on selected problems, the exhibition cast the designer in a role of a conscious and responsible global community member, continuously defining his/her attitude to sustainable development concept-related slogans.

## 4. The Exhibition – Harmony of Design, Logo, and Space

Moreover, the exhibition was enhanced with graphic design by Jakub Marzoch and Małgorzata Pieniak. The logo expressed a split suggested by the structure applied, all problems dissected to identify ever smaller components allowing appropriate categorisation.
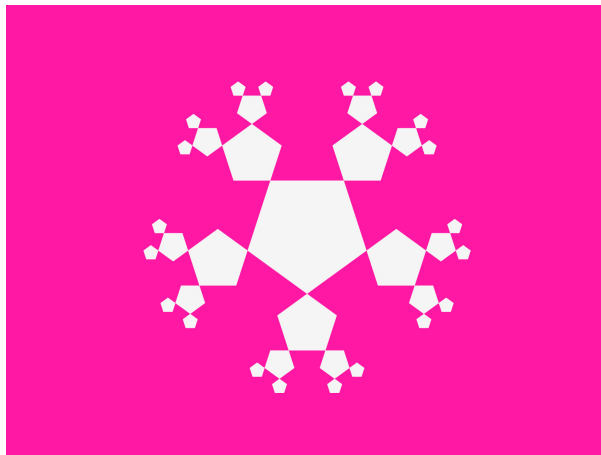


Figure 1. Logo of the "OCCUPATION: DESIGNER | Awareness and Action" exhibition, design by Jakub Marzoch, Małgorzata Pieniak, 2014.
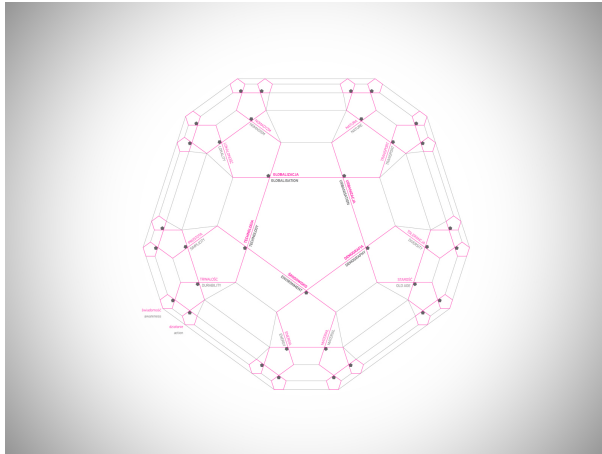
Figure 2. Design of the map depicting the exhibition's structure, reference to the exhibition logo, design by Jakub Marzoch, Małgorzata Pieniak, 2014

Additionally, the entire exhibition space showed the partitioning exercise resulting from filters applied. The exhibition comprised twenty projects, four per each of the five identified areas, with two issues per area. In case of the *Globalisation* headline, for example, *"nomadism"* and *"locality"* were the two issues defined. Two projects were assigned to each issue, one *"awareness raising"*, the other *"problem solving"*.



Figure 3. Exhibition space in the Salon Akademii gallery at Traugutta No. 23, Warsaw; the exhibition was shown from April 10th until May 17th 2014.

The following thesis was formulated with regard to the "locality" issue: corporate activity, global market creation and uniform production all result in a process of homogenising culture, among others. Designers are enthusiastic about joining activities leading to rediscovery of local culture values.

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*"Tradition for Fashion"* by Jevgenija Jurkeviča was an *"awareness raising"* project referring to locality. The Suwałki region is Poland's easternmost province where local traditions are still cherished. The dress was made in the course of a one-week workshop, the designer learning handicraft typical for the region. She chose a basket weaving technique for her prototype, the frame created first as a supporting structure for the woven dress. The form itself resulted from the author's observation and interpretation of shapes and images encountered during the workshop.

The activity chosen by the designer targeted an encounter with traditions of the region and options of their contemporary use rather than a solution to a specific problem. The project involves a light dress peeking out from beneath the top massive part of the attire, contrasting with the rigid structure. The designer consciously engages in dialogue with traditional handicraft methods. This is no monument or caricature of tradition, but the result of a parallel bond between traditional technique and contemporary creation.
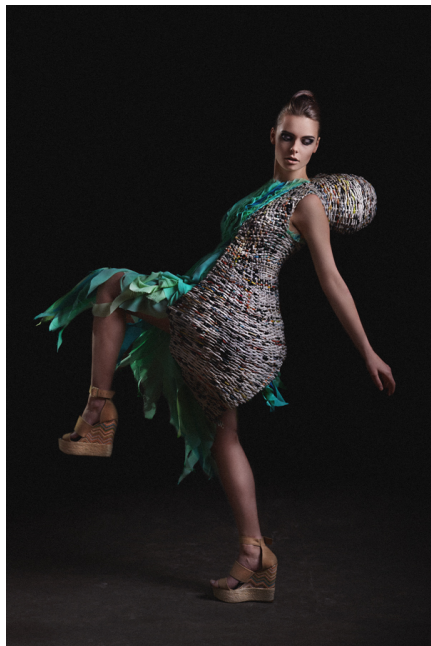


Figure 4. Globalisation, locality, "awareness raising" project: "Tradition for Fashion", design by Jevgenija Jurkeviča, 2012.

*"Awateef"* was a *"problem solving"* (*"action"*) project designed by Marta Florkowska-Dwojak, Magda Juszczak, and Maya Ober (*Knockoutdesign*). Kfar Manda is a Palestinian village in Galilee, Israel, with the highest unemployment rate in the region. When a Jewish-Arab non-profit organisation set up a wicker weaving centre in the village, local residents gained an earning opportunity – moreover, the initiative served to promote the vanishing basket weaving tradition. Regrettably, the goods produced had a hard time competing with cheap commodities imported from the Far East and Africa. The

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*Knockoutdesign* studio decided to analyse the weavers' work to find out whether process optimisation and production quality improvement would be an option. It was concluded that neither manufacturing form nor process were repetitive. Designers



Figure 5. Globalisation, locality, "action" project: Awateef, design by Marta Florkowska-Dwojak, Magda Juszczak, Maya Ober / Knockoutdesign, 2011.

suggested that a semi-mass production technology be applied. They designed a set of special-purpose components – aluminium rings and discs – allowing standardisation and quality control with no loss to craft value. The new system enabled the design of new objects formerly not produced by Kfar Manda craftswomen, such as lamps and vases.

*"Nomadism"* was the other issue forming part of the *Globalisation* headline, with the following thesis formulated: people are increasingly less bound to a specific location. Career development options are conducive to frequent job change and to mobility. State borders are no longer a barrier. Home is where people are.

Nina Woroniecka, Faculty of Design student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, referred to the issue in her final diploma work, delivering an *"awareness raising"* project. The author blended the topic of frequent moving with minimalist tendencies: occasionally, choice rather than necessity are the driving force behind limiting the number of possessions. It is part of a conscious lifestyle in counterpoint to thoughtless consumption.

Figure 6. Globalisation, nomadism, "awareness raising" project: Nomad (Nomada), design by Nina Woroniecka, 2013

It is a perfect match for mobility and lightness, carrying no bond to place or objects. The coupling of the two concepts resulted in *Nomad* (*Nomada*): a set of furniture that fits in the boot of a passenger car. The author points to a philosophical-cum-functionality issue. The interior of the set when packed leaves space for the user's other belongings – as a result, all possessions form a single compact package, easy to move to a new location. The project implies consideration of what a home means and what is required to create one while suggesting a practical solution to a common application and usage problem.



Figure 7. Globalisation, nomadism, "action" project: Blow Sofa, design by Agata Kulik-Pomorska, Paweł Pomorski, 2013.

*Blow Sofa* by Agata Kulik-Pomorska and Paweł Pomorski was a *"problem solving"* (*"action"*) project. For contemporary nomads, objects of daily use are the most tedious burden, furniture in particular: large, heavy, difficult to pack. *Blow Sofa* is made of paper inflatable bags – simply inflate and use. Its functionality involves a number of key features: it is easy to fold, its steel rod frame and deflated cushions flat, making it handy and inexpensive. Additionally, it is made of fully recyclable material. Given its size, it

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requires a bare minimum of material. The sofa is soft thanks to a springy inflatable bag substituting chemical upholstery foam used in conventional sofas. It is easily collapsible and movable. The product is now manufactured and is available on the market. It was awarded a prize at the Red Dot Design 2013 competition.

The examples presented apart, the *Urbanisation* area comprised such issues as *"nature"* (contact with nature) and *"transportation"* (action to introduce sustainable forms of transportation); the *Environment* headline included *"energy"* (new sustainable energy sources) and "material" (the use of new and the processing of used materials); the *Demography* area focused on *"old age"* (prolonging the activity period for the elderly) and *"tolerance"* (for different cultures in relation to migration); "simplicity" and "durability" were identified for the *Technology* headline.


## 6. *"Contemporary Design"* Curriculum and the *"Big Five"*

Headlines serving as exhibition structure have become the foundation of the "Contemporary Design" course I tutor for third-year B.A. students at the Faculty of Design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw.

GLOBALISATION, URBANISATION, DEMOGRAPHY, ENVIRONMENT, and TECHNOLOGY have become filters used by students to perceive the diverse issues of the contemporary world. The course begins with an open debate concerning all the five areas. The students are then grouped in five teams, each charged with one headline for detailed analysis. Each area allows dozens of issues to be identified and described in a fascinating field for new design themes and problems awaiting solutions. Students spend two to three weeks studying the assigned area, and are free to choose their own reference sources, by no means all of them online. They close this stage by identifying so-called red alert spots: circumstances conducive to action taken by designers. Subsequently, another two to three weeks are spent on possibly detailed research work concerning the context (causes and effects) of problems identified, and on project strategies actually or potentially applied in said context. Another two to three weeks involve a search for most interesting examples of project interventions corresponding to identified issues. Groups meet their tutors every week to discuss research in progress. Each stage is summarised in a discussion with all five groups attending – many of the issues discussed are interrelated. The entire course closes with a series of five one-hour presentations, each group becoming an expert team responsible for a given problem area; the expert team explains all crucial issues identified as part of the problem area to other groups, and presents its most interesting and effective projects.

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Figure 8. Students Working on Problems Assigned, Faculty of Design, Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, 2015.

## 6. Conclusions

Improvements to the teaching curriculum involving the *"Big Five"* are a work in progress. Each year generates more conclusions resulting in specific improvements. What I find most important is that students are given an opportunity to independently analyse contemporary design with attempts to study it from a problem perspective while developing their own sensitivity and detailed perception of reality. Their commitment and commentaries are the most crucial component. *"We began considering the purpose of designing"*; *"these classes have opened our eyes to what design is and what it could be"*.

I am deeply convinced that off-the-shelf sets of terms and concepts and ready-made sets of designs presented to students will offer them a much more narrow comprehension of contemporary design when compared against *"Big Five"*- based analysis.

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