Chapter 15

(more) Soft Assertions: A Progressive Paradigm for Urban Cultural Heritage, Interior Urbanism, and Contemporary Typologies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the shifting landscape of disciplines and professions, with particular focus towards “Spatial and Experience Design.” In spite of trends and increasing examples of the erosion and overlapping of disciplinary and professional boundaries, there is a need for some sort of disciplinary and professional definition. There needs to be a body of knowledge and skills defined and practiced and routes to circumvent them. This is especially relevant in a world of inter-, multi-, and trans-disciplinary work and comprehensive creative practices. The chapter examines core aspects of spatial/interior design and how this may intersect with other related disciplines and practices. An articulated interior urbanism creates clear areas of contribution from “interior” designers within the city. The chapter explores these cross-fertilizations through the curricular use of intensive design workshops (often of one-week duration) with a singular focus of the student’s attention; selected student works from two such workshops at Politecnico di Milano are included.

FOUNDATION AND INTRODUCTION

All That Is Solid Melts into Air
Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 1848, Communist Manifesto

The second decade of the twenty-first century continues to see the questioning of definitions and boundaries. In the realm of design, this questioning typically manifests in the erosion or erasure of strict disciplinary and professional domains. Additionally, collaboration amongst disciplines and professions has become common practice. Multidisciplinary practices are more the norm, especially at the global...
scale, with the offering of comprehensive design services and extensive design and technical muscle. This combination of depth and breath are considered to be a strong asset, if not a simple requirement in much of the creative practices of today.

Along with comprehensive practices and/or highly collaborative situations, we also find the co-opting of once distinct academic and professional boundaries. We see disciplinary collisions and leap-frogging in the worlds of practice and education. The extent of creative practices that have a full array of collaborating disciplines, inclusive of art, foster not only multidisciplinary practice and education, but also the emergence of true transdisciplinary work. Education, disciplines, and creative practice are dynamic things, and must remain relevant and responsive to place and time.

Of course, the combining of art and design, and multidisciplinary processes and work, is hardly new. Recent and popular research in this includes Walter Isaacson’s book on Leonardo da Vinci, where he writes in the second page:

_I embarked on this book because Leonardo da Vinci is the ultimate example of the main theme of my previous biographies: how the ability to make connections across disciplines – arts and sciences, humanities and technology – is a key to innovation, imagination, and genius. Benjamin Franklin... was a Leonardo of his era: with no formal education, he taught himself to become an imaginative polymath who was Enlightenment America’s best scientist, inventor, diplomat, writer, and business strategist... Albert Einstein, when he was stymied in his pursuit of his theory of relativity, would pull out his violin and play Mozart, which helped him reconnect with the harmonies of the cosmos. Ada Lovelace... combined the poetic sensibility of her father, Lord Byron, with her mother’s love of the beauty of math to envision a general-purpose computer. And Steve Jobs climaxed his product launches with an image of street signs showing the intersection of liberal arts and technology. Leonardo was his hero. “He saw beauty in both art and engineering,” Jobs said, “and his ability to combine them was what made him a genius.”_

Walter Isaacson, 2017, Leonardo da Vinci (text emphasis added by the author)

Isaacson’s writing on Leonardo’s Florence in the same book is also interesting and relevant to this chapter. He writes about the merging of disciplines and professions, and of skills and ideas, that were the expected norm of the most advanced figures and undertakings of the time:

_The city’s cathedral was the most beautiful in Italy. In the 1430s it had been crowned with the world’s largest dome, built by the architect Filippo Brunelleschi, which was a triumph of both art and engineering, and linking those two disciplines was a key to Florence’s creativity. Many of the city’s artists were also architects, and its fabric industry had been built by combining technology, design, chemistry, and commerce._

_This mixing of ideas from different disciplines became the norm as people of diverse talents intermingled. Silk makers worked with goldbeaters to create enchanted fashions. Architects and artists developed the science of perspective. Wood-carvers worked with architects to adorn the city’s 108 cathedrals. Shops became studios. Merchants became financiers. Artisans became artist._

Walter Isaacson, 2017, Leonardo da Vinci (text emphasis added by the author)