

Some Project Guidelines and Thoughts about the Program

By Matt Kahn

[Author's Note: The content of this statement is the result of working with and thinking about the Graduate Design Program as it has developed over the years. The views presented are my own. While I feel great rapport with my colleagues past and present, there is no intent here to represent a formal consensus. - Matt Kahn, 1993.]

The identification of a subject for your Master's Thesis has to be the most important academic decision you will make this year. On it rides the quality of your experience with the program—a strong vehicle will tap hidden as well as obvious resources and yield substantial growth, a weak one will barely skim the surface and contribute little to your development. Regardless of the process for selection (which has varied in the program from year to year) it is essential to entrench some basic values that will channel your thinking as you consider alternatives and bring a thesis concept into focus. The following observations and questions are intended to pinpoint such values, to stimulate your thinking, and to raise your personal standards.

Recently, we have discussed the difference in implied orientation between a Master's Thesis and a Master's Project. Clearly I do not suggest a written thesis in the traditional academic sense but rather a body of work in which philosophical content (point of view) is inherent. This “switch” should not be a burden to you but rather offer a yardstick by which your concept may be measured (hold it up against project, then thesis and see where it fits).

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The Graduate Design Program at Stanford represents the union of two programs: Product Design in the Mechanical Engineering Department and Visual Design in the Art Department, both of which function independently on the undergraduate level. Faculty, like students, have been drawn from both quarters at Stanford and elsewhere, so that a single governing philosophy for the program cannot be defined. Indeed if we have a unified viewpoint it is not to define one—this despite the fact that the immature student is often uncomfortable without obvious doctrine. In this context then the following questions should be asked as you consider a Master's Thesis:

1. Is the concept well suited to our broad-based university program (design education) or would it be better undertaken in a more conventional trade school atmosphere (design training)?
2. Is there a component of idealism in your thesis or is it purely pragmatic with marketability the *only* barometer of need, the *only*

measure of success?

3. Does it appear to be less sophisticated in content than in technology? Is your thinking dominated by rules and tools? (Stuffy)
4. Does it appear to be less concerned with content than with novelty or effect? (Superficial)

Historically, “need-finding” has been the catalyst for project identification born of the innovative thinking of John Arnold and, after him, Bob McKim, wherein students of product design were not assigned thesis content but required to ferret out their own. To define and understand need is as essential to our program today as in the past; criteria and process however are constantly evolving. Ask yourself then:

1. Did you arrive at your thesis idea solely through your personal experience? Are you among those who need your “product” or, if not, can you establish a real empathy with the needer(s)? Or, conversely, do you find that you are emotionally indifferent to them?
2. Is the audience for your concept vast, sizable, limited or intimate? (At one time the first two of these would have been preferred, but today a good case can be made for each of the four, provided you understand where you are coming from.)
3. Thesis, defined merely as project, as been too easily identified as a work that is “ready to go” immediately upon completion. In the context of our educational “long view” however, is it not also acceptable that needers might take some time to comprehend and respond to the benefits of your original thinking? Or even that your concept be “utopian”, a highly constructive study that take a very long view with regard to public acceptance?

NOTE: Need-finding has been perceived by some as demanding a block of research time that must precede the main body of the work since the thesis should be based upon it. This idea is simplistic and often counter-productive since it implies a frustrating delay in the design process and resistance to impulse and early experiment. Rather, you should integrate need-finding with design exploration. From the beginning and throughout, trial design should be used as the tool of need investigation. This deepens the understanding of need in terms of its *design potential* and is what I mean by “use design to design”.

Once identified, needs then describe problems to be solved. This again may be too limited a view. Implicit in this is that the essential designer function is corrective or remedial—that designers necessarily right wrongs and that need = problem or deficiency. This is not to suggest that the wealth of purposeful design in the medical context (for example) is somehow invalid academically or professionally but rather that design is *equally* valid when it builds upon positive conditions—taking advantage of inspiring opportunity with or without the

attending “problem”. Much of what we call art (i.e., poetry, music, painting) does this, that is, it addresses the overall human need for enrichment which often goes unidentified until one is confronted with a moving work. At this point need and solution come together—“invention is the mother of necessity.”

Our program is concerned with the synthesis of art, technology and use. This is probably what many of us mean by design. To the extent that this is true the designer should share in the gratifications and responsibilities common to the arts. It will follow then that the design student who would understand design as an art form will pursue a master’s thesis that has a high potential in this respect. One in which utilitarian concerns are broad enough to permit wide and personal interpretation—one in which the “problem” is chosen because in “solving” it, original form might be evolved that could not come about in any other way. With this in mind ask yourself:

1. Shouldn’t fantasy be at the core of your design process? Should it not also be very evident in your finished project?
2. Are you willing and able to pursue design aesthetics early on, prior to the support of a database?
3. Naturally, your work will be “beautiful”. Is this quality of form essential to its effectiveness? Is it a valuable attribute if not central to success? Or (unacceptably) is it insignificant to your concept?
4. Or on the other hand: is your concept so dominated by personality that you would confine your “art” interest to your concerns with personal style, denying other well springs for form? (Charles Eames once told me that he didn’t care for professed designers as such, he just liked people who were interested in things.)
5. Should “quality for form” be a constant consideration during your project’s development? Or would you relegate it to a late, fine-tuning stage when the work would be colored and styled? Or should it never be directly considered by rather presumed, as the automatic bi-product of your rational solution?
6. Given the view that the designer, as artist or part artist, deals with emotional content on both a personal and public level, he or she must develop vocabulary and objectives that go beyond conventional cliché. The modish application of a handful of candy pastels and deco-geometry resulting in look-alike “fun” objects is hardly enough. Such styling devices are like viruses that neuter the project, thus denying its natural sources for form, replacing them with look-alike clichés. Form that is born within projects, however (rather than imposed upon them), is likely to be quite unpredictable, fresh and uniquely relevant.

Similarly, inner content is less tangible or easily articulated and measured than the more immediate objective of physical service or communication, which should inspire, but may so easily eclipse it. Still, wittingly or not, we express our insight (or lack of it) through design as surely as do manipulators of words or pictures and so it is an area of prime concern. If one had only your thesis, its process and conclusion, by which to know you and your work, which of the following characteristics do you hope would seem apt? Which ones do you wish to avoid? Add some words of your own to the list:

positive audacious clear

rebellious original joyous

reflective eccentric provocative

systemic sensitive intuitive

tender guarded naïve

correct independent mature

spirited withdrawn forced

timid mysterious searching

A few words here about process:

Works of high and often complex quality arouse our curiosity as to how they came about and so we are moved to investigate and perhaps to emulate the create process. It is usually a mix of many things such as physical methods, i.e. drawing, model building, investment in

material, craft and technology. It may involve field research, personal reflection, brainstorming, scholarship, interaction with users, colleagues and certainly clients. Any or all of these factors will differ greatly from person to person in weight and sequence—we often hope that by working in original ways we may better beget original results. Certainly, as I urge you to “use design to design” I would influence your process. But none of this is an end in itself! Too often we find designers, architects, and design students pointing to process not as an insight to or basis for the excellence of work, but as an alternative to it. While the quality of the search is essential, it is significant only as manifest in the result and creditable only there.

Woven though all of the foregoing observation on the program is the one project and one product with which we are really concerned—that is, you yourself. Everything we undertake to do is intended to nourish you as a designer. Sometimes the most beneficial learning experiences will not resemble the by-the-book assignments and procedures you may have anticipated. As I have noted, the Stanford program takes a larger and longer view. In this spirit should you thesis concept be:

Safe?

Challenging, but clearly accomplishable?

Courageous, if risky?

You are making a heavy investment in time and money, which should be matched by a comparable investment in thesis substance, one that has the meat and fertility to sustain you throughout. Choose an area in which you are a “natural”, one to which you already bring talent and expertise; but an area, too, that gives you room and impetus to grow. Our faculty and their objectives are professional. We mean to build professionally applicable capabilities in you. High professional standards are compromised, however, by thinly commercial projects that are burdened by vocational anxiety. Such projects separate students and faculty and divide students from one another. We are a very unique design community in which students and faculty alike have much to offer one another. The dialogue between us is a major part of our learning and is at its best when thesis content brings out the best in each of us.

Finally, you will know that you have come up with a great thesis idea when you are:

- genuinely proud of it rather than defensive about it.
- inspired to commit to it; time, energy, soul.
- aware of the group's excitement with your intent.
- anxious to move.