

Social responsibility of designers as a necessary component of the curricula of the Faculty of Design

M.Sc. Veronika Gruden

Faculty of Design, Associated Member of University of Primorska

Department for Design Management

Prevale 10, Trzin

veronika.gruden@fd.si; www.fd.si

Abstract

Globalization combined with increased transparency of corporate operations has among others revealed many issues of how organizations manage their corporate image in the field of branding. Socially responsible (SR) design has developed side by side with corporate social responsibility as a strategy to improve products, profits and brand equity. On the other hand, through dialog with the civil society, the purpose of design has expanded to meet new challenges - to develop strategies that lead to sustainable business and product models. Designers should realize that every product and service they bring to the market has some impact on global environments and resources. In the article we report about research that examines some of the initiatives that address these challenges in the curricula of Faculty of Design, as we may argue that SR is in part derived from the individual ethical values of designers, but it is also a response to the needs of their clients and their society. The main purpose is for students to learn about the importance of socially responsible design and be able to participate in SR projects – as designers and members of design or management teams, as well as to critically evaluate the added value of concepts, products and services for the society as a whole.

Keywords: social responsibility, design, education, curriculum, design management



1 Introduction / Managing design

The concept of social responsibility (SR) has gained its importance and popularity with the global rise of »sustainable development« concept. Being socially responsible includes recognizing the needs of the group to which the person belongs. From a narrow point of view, corporate social responsibility (CSR) is defined as a company's activities related to its societal and stakeholder obligations (Cooper, 2005, 12). From the broad views of CSR this concept has evolved including the normative and philosophic issues regarding the role of the company within the society as a generator of benefits. While individual businesses define CSR in their own terms, it is essential to emphasize that CSR has developed as company's obligation to consider its entire role within society, as well as its long term future – to ensure that it will also contribute to the creation of a better world. Here is the key point of connecting SR with design, which is by definition, launched by designer Richard Seymour during the Design Council's Design in Business Week 2002, '*making things better for people*'. It emphasizes that design activity is focused first and foremost on human behavior and quality of life. By Cooper (2005, 10) socially responsible design has developed side by side with corporate social responsibility (CSR) and widening of the definition of sustainability to encompass social, economic and environmental issues. Papanek (1991) argues that sustainable designers have to deal with environmental issues (the output of greenhouse gases, acid rain, pollution of soil, habitat and species decimation, etc.; so they are able to realize that every product and service they bring to the market has some impact on global environments and resources.

2 Managing design in relation with CSR

In order to understand what constitutes responsible design, as Madsen (2005, 38) argues, designers and design managers must know what is to be done (ends), how to do it (means) and the limits within which they can act (constraints). Design significantly informs a diverse range of cultural forms, processes and social understandings which have historically separated the meaning of »designing« from »making« (Sparke, 2009). Most often socially responsible design doesn't have a strong theoretical orientation. Rather it develops through trying to solve everyday problems or address local needs. This pragmatic approach, followed by Mangold, is often recognized by the constraints of time, money, evaluation, and engagement, but seeks to find ways to address specific needs and create better living environment. Cooper (2005, 12) argues that design's response to social responsibility, like business response has mirrored the great activist movement. In the 1960's designers began actively to consider design's wider implications for society; so several approaches emerged: green design, consumerism, responsible design, ethical consuming, eco-design, sustainability and feminist design. By Julier (2008) design culture is the co-determination of objects, spaces and images by designing, production and consumption. Consumers, producers and designers have to consider the responsibility of their decisions in relation to design objects in the world of diminishing resources and climate change (Melles *et al.*, 2011, 143-158). But it is also necessary to emphasize that the final output of design efforts is not always the product or service, but also the *business model* in which those products and services are delivered and managed. Kusz (2005, 32) argues that without a viable business model that meets the needs of the marketplace and the stakeholders that design serves, the efforts to provide optimal solutions will be shattered.



Picture 1: Socially engaged posters



Source: Faculty of Design, 2nd and 3rd year students of Visual Communication course

2.1 Social responsibility of designers

As Brigitte Borja de Mozota (2003, 31) argues, sustainable design is designing from waste and mess, rather than cleaning up afterwards you have made a mess. By McDonough and Braungart (2002), designing for sustainability satisfies the needs of the present without compromising the future. We can say that SR is in part derived from the individual ethical values of designers, but it is also a response to the needs of their clients. In discussing SR of designers, there are at least three different levels for us to consider. The first level has to do with their professional behavior in daily business interactions. The next level deals with specific professional expertise needed in such areas as accessibility, usability, consumer safety, and environmental practices. This leads us to the third level, which is about overall professional values—a broader framework of moral principles and obligations in life. They are obliged to fulfill these obligations related to their work, obligations to the society, to clients, to employers, to third parties and to each other. For designers and design managers those norms can be used as standards for responsible behavior by those who work in the field. If design is to continue to play a role in corporate strategy development, it is essential that designers and design managers become literate in the area of sustainability and corporate social responsibility.

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Picture 2: The students' view of sustainable living conditions



Source: Faculty of Design, 2nd year students of Interior Design

2.2 Cooperation with civil society and/or end users

It is through the dialog with a civil society that the purpose of design has expanded and evolved. Melles et al. (2011, 143-158) believe that many professionals share the goals of designers who want to do socially responsible work; therefore they propose that both



designers and helping professionals find ways to work together. In these socially responsible projects, design is seen as the mean to empower the user and in this so called “user centered co-design approach”, designers attempt to develop products (and/or systems and services) that address the holistic needs of society as well. This can really only be achieved by understanding the user (and their needs) within their social and economic context.

Picture 3: Cooperation with the community - transforming train stations into event spaces



Source: Faculty of Design, GIDE Association 2009/2010. Awarded project of students of Interior Design – Multi-local communities

3 Design Education

As designed objects surround us in form of the buildings in which we live, the furniture we use for comfort, the packages that contain the food we eat and numerous other stuff we use daily; we can say that everyone in the society is affected by the ubiquitous nature of design. Design aesthetics personalize and enhance the utility of the object and suggest meaning. The basic design decisions such as what to wear, how to do your hairstyle or make up, identify who we are to ourselves and to others. By Vande Zande (2011, 26) students find relevance and interest in the study of design because design is an integral part of their lives. Heskett (in Vande Zande, 2011, 26) argues that design may be defined as the human capacity to shape the environment in ways that serve our needs and give meaning to our lives. Design education examines processes and decisions made in the creation of everyday objects. In order to be better prepared to make design-related choices, students need to understand that design requires building conceptual understanding and certain sets of skills. This process provides a cognitive framework of analysis, synthesis and evaluation that is used by many professionals to create solutions to design problems (Vande Zande, 2011, 27). In design-focused curricula of Faculty of Design students learn about this process, which starts with defining a problem and moves to researching, brainstorming, developing a prototype (if possible), presenting and finally revising the concept drawing or model.

Certainly social and environmental issues are important components, when it comes to operation of the Faculty of Design, in addition to compliance with standards, transparency and academic and business ethics. The sustainability issues are included in educational, artistic and scientific activities as well as in relations with all stakeholders. We are focused on sustainable development in terms of awareness of how important this aspect is for our future. The principles we are following are integrated in the work with the students:

1. Encouraging the use of natural, biodegradable and indigenous materials,



2. Encouraging the three R's (reducing, reusing, recycling),
3. Minimizing waste in production (the principle of "zero waste design"),
4. Minimizing the number of parts and the size of the product or packaging,
5. Applying energy efficiency,
6. Making sense for community.

Picture 4: Metamorphosis - Recycled chairs and dresses from waste materials



Source: Faculty of Design, 2nd year students of Interior design course and 1st year students of Textile and Fashion course

3.1 The curriculum of Faculty of Design

Teaching design as SR pushes students to think about the ways how design might improve the world. We are aware that many designers are using their knowledge and skills to encourage healthier lifestyles, increase accessibility to resources, and improve the Earth and human welfare. At Faculty of Design we have observed that SR lessons in design curricula can help students explore how sustainable design contributes to a healthy environment and involvement; such design projects prepare students to take a more active role in shaping the society that surrounds them. From the start the Faculty of Design has been using a *d' school* principle, which is a creative process that helps us design meaningful solutions in the classroom, at our faculty, and in our community. As designers make decisions daily with regard to the use of resources and the lifecycles of the product and services, it is important to know their users and care about their lives. That is how they can create useful and SR innovations. Design thinking is a methodology used by designers to solve complex problems, and find desirable solutions for clients. Through design thinking process we can design the way you lead, manage, create and innovate. The design way of thinking can be applied to systems, procedures, protocols, and customer/user experiences. A design mindset is not problem-focused, it's solution-focused and action-oriented towards creating a preferred future. Design thinking seeks to build ideas up, unlike critical thinking, which breaks them down. Design thinking draws upon logic, imagination, intuition, and systemic reasoning, to explore possibilities of what could be, and to create desired outcomes that benefit the end user (the customer). Through design thinking process students develop design competences that lead them to analytically view both old and new ideas, methods and products. Properly applied, these competences can teach students how to promote the use of design to care for and sustain our environment, improve societal conditions, and respect diversity.

4 Involvement in SR projects



Faculty of Design has participated in a number of international projects, where the main focus was improving the quality and comfort of living of vulnerable groups of population (people with disabilities, children, unemployed...).

Picture 5: Cooperation with the Institute for the rehabilitation after head injuries and The Safe House project – Student Organization of University of Ljubljana



Source: Faculty of Design, mentor and students project, November 2010, 2011, 2012

4.1 A practical example 1 - Creative industry sector entrepreneurial capacity building in the cross border territory (Creative Startup)

The project addressed the problem of insufficient use of the creative industries sector's potential for the increase of the global results of the entrepreneurial sector in cross-border area of Croatia and Slovenia. The project offered a platform to the development of the solutions for increasing the capacities and the visibility of the creative industries sector, with the emphasis on creative entrepreneurs-beginners with precarious status, who are just entering the labor market or starting their own business. The particular cross-border objective of the project was to create and implement joint cross-border system of management, as well as sharing of the resources of the creative entrepreneurs-beginners with precarious status, with an aim to promote their global competitiveness in the Slovenian and Croatian market as well as on other EU markets; this was aimed to be achieved through the following secondary objectives:

- Awareness raising about the sector of creative industries and the promotion of its values;
- Education and information of target groups on how to raise competitiveness while accepting the actual scientific and technological trends;
- Partnerships building while creating joint strategies for the development of the creative industries sector in the Slovenian – Croatian cross-border territory, as well as on EU markets;
- Promotion of products and services of the target groups, as well as the results of the project.

Specific activities were organized to raise awareness regarding the economic potential of the creative industries sector. Besides the analyses of the sector, design of policies and education, special information and promotion events were organized, which ensured that different stakeholders (students, young entrepreneurs, investors, media, governments) become aware about the potential of the sector and able to contribute to its growth.

4.2 A practical example 2 - Active and quality aging at home (A-Ou-A)

The basic aim of the project is to ensure a healthy and active aging population. Within the project “Active and quality aging at home” the participants are offered free services in physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, dietetics and nursing. The project partners the Municipality of Ljubljana, Institute for Kinesiology Research, Municipal Federation of Pensioners Ljubljana, Medical Faculty, the Faculty of Design and the Norwegian partners are offering different forms of assistance, education, counseling and recreation for the quality of life in the home environment. Their task is also to educate volunteers and other counselors to perform these services. The Faculty of Design has participated with presentation and counseling regarding different options for adapting housing for greater security and autonomy of living of the elderly. Within the project the students internalize the concepts, principles and rules of interior design with emphasis on group of elderly population, sustainable living, sustainability and use of knowledge in new situations through planning and thinking processes.

5 Conclusion

As we have seen previously many companies are setting their own agendas for CSR. However, if they are to turn these ideas into reality, design must be an essential part of it. At design faculties we try to teach students that the problems they are trying to solve are rarely their own and therefore a design lesson based on sustainability is a way to focus them on an urban issue, leading them through the process of design thinking, with researching background information as a basis for creating a modified or even new solution. Whether the products the students create are put into the use or not, that does not affect the benefits gained by analyzing the social, economic, aesthetic and political issues that surround the design problem. On the other hand we must not forget about organizational design and practice such as ethics, ethical conduct, and the primary values and beliefs of the organization and employees and the necessity to become part of the culture. Also without a well-considered business model, the potential of the concept, system or product can be easily destroyed. But since we have learned that designers have more opportunities to influence sustainability than many others, the question we have to ask ourselves is simple: are organizations willing to support principles of sustainable design?

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