

Personal Design: The Place of Home Economics in the Design Structure

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The ghost of William Morris has held a strangle-hold over the visual and creative education in our schools for the past three quarters of a century. Despite the much heralded movement away from the Arts and Crafts to Design teaching there seems a reluctance, or inability on the part of curriculum planners to break with the past. Nowhere is the narrow Faculty organisation prevalent today doing so much harm as in departments of Home Economics. For there lies the seed of an expensive untapped potential.

It is possible to note several revealing factors about current Design Faculties and the departments of Home Economics/Domestic Studies within them.

- (i) Domestic Studies is often isolated from the other Design materials subjects. Physically, in fragmented buildings and/or ideologically as a throw back from pre-integration days.
- (ii) When integrated it is often in an unproductive, stagnant co-operation, be this a result of time-table constraints, lack of facilities or simply uninspired opportunities.
- (iii) The attitude to Home Economics by sections of the school society is, in many cases, markedly traditional. The subjects aim is often interpreted as being to instil students either a) An essentially anachronistic role or function in life or b) The "virtues" of good citizenship. The former seeking to define and consolidate the woman-home relationship and the latter imposing the socially acceptable norm.
- (iv) Domestic Studies/Home Economics is in many schools predominantly orientated towards girls and as such is misplaced in co-educational system.
- (v) Home Economics is often cut off from the main-stream of the design effort in a school. This is mainly due to the conformity of the other subjects in their

attitude to materials; that is, they define, in advance, the medium through which they will work. By being called 'materials — subjects' they seem to believe they have a monopoly of the qualifications for the title of Design subject. And yet this is quite the reverse. For, too often, reorganisation has merely broadened the restrictive system to which they belong, leaving the fundamental philosophy intact.

But this is not to say that Home Economics is the model on which to base restructuring. Far from it. Even an exhaustive organisation for Domestic Life as outlined in the School's Council project work remains too narrow and defined a discipline, although many Home Economists would dispute this. Design Education should at all times seek to provide as wide a range of experience and critical decision as possible. This cannot be encouraged when based on the present scheme of Faculty structures, which includes static subject areas like the domestic situation or a restrictive medium of expression like a group of materials. For one firmly defines and thereby constrains the flow and mobility of ideas while the other, by limiting the available vehicles of experiment so limits possible achievements.

Design, perhaps believing itself to be the descendent of the liberal and progressive art movements, is eager to assume the role of educational innovator. The constant introspection and re-direction associated with the Arts has, however, by-passed our schools, excepting of course the natural osmosis of feedback. There has been little deliberate, predetermined reevaluation in craft teaching. Indeed, it is to the more academic subjects to which we must look for examples of an awareness of their own role, aims and policies.

There have been several notable dimensions opened up in Geography for example, particularly at higher education levels. In the field of Human Geography a need was

accounted for in the introduction of economic, social, and urban-geography topics and others. Such a need exists in Design. This is amply illustrated by the recent Schools' Council work. This and the example of other subjects have shown the way, but there remains a long way to go.

Instead of basing itself around the static, the tangible — that is a stringently defined study area or material with which to work — Design should revolve around the idea. To this end problem-solving was a preliminary step. The idea, the thought process, decision-making should be given a dynamic or evolving theme on which to work. And this is where Home Economics could provide so much of the initial momentum in the organisation of a system. Instead of being assigned to the 'Home' and merely encouraging personal responsibilities it could be based on the 'Person', and so focus on personal approaches and interpretations in Design. A Personal Design; what would this mean?

1. By necessitating an individual approach to whatever field of study was chosen it would encourage a continual revaluation and reappraisal of problems and solutions by each student.
2. It could mould together, for example, all the Schools' Council areas of investigation. And in broader terms, it would encourage students to think of Design as a unified concept rather than an amorphous string of independent subjects. This would then prepare them for an understanding of the inter-relationships of what could best be termed Human Design, that is a study of Man and his created environment.
3. It would promote the central ingredient of problem-solving.
4. By involving work done on an individual basis it would encourage each student to give expression to his/her thoughts, ideas, methods. This would be prefer-

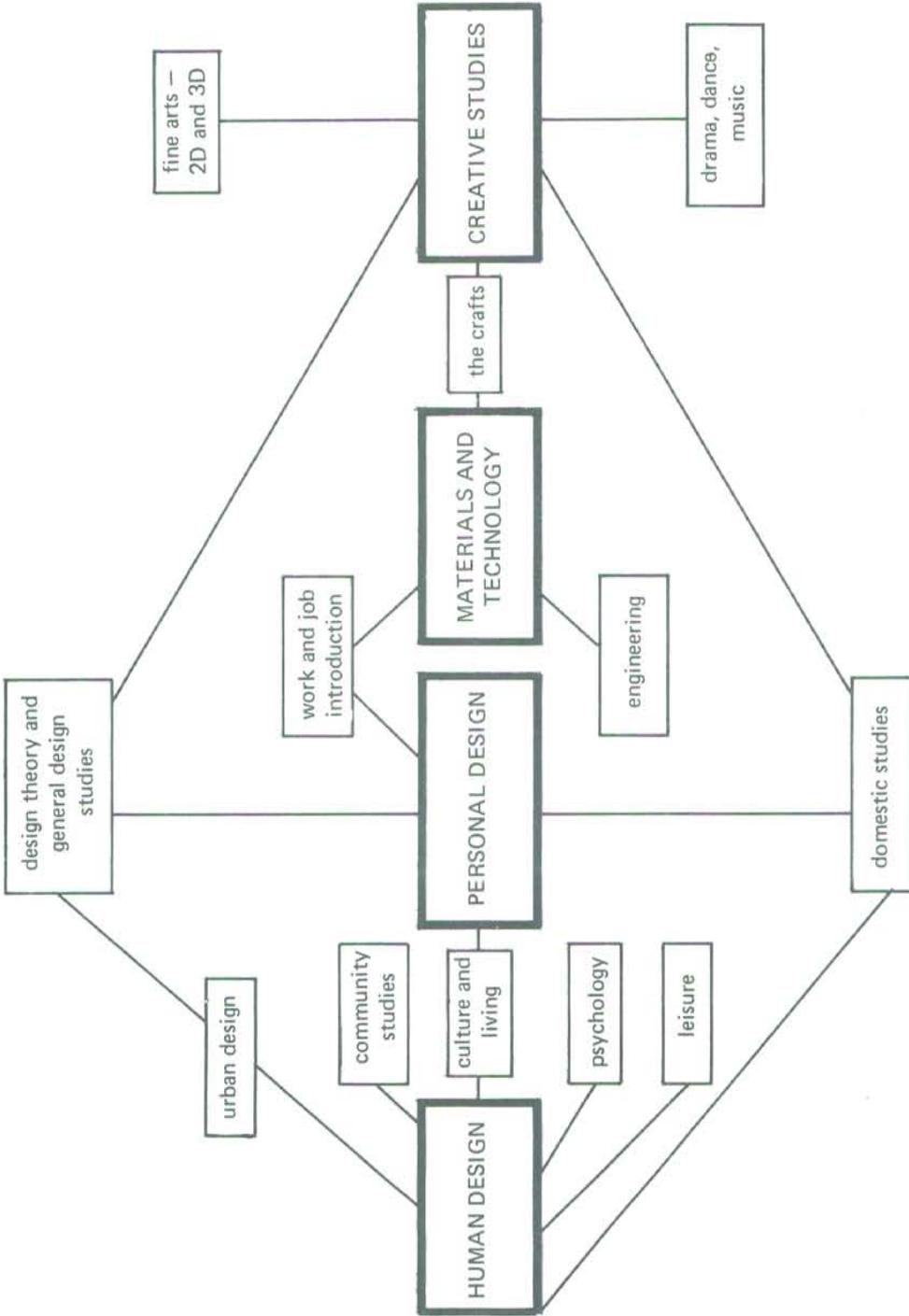
able to much of the group project work so lately in vogue. For particularly in large schools the involvement and decision-making of the individual must be fostered. The increasing stresses of modern living necessitate an attitude and ability on the part of each person to contribute and express his/her opinions. It is feared that too much group work in schools would provide an opportunity for a resignation at this early age of the will to decide.

So a Personal Design course would employ individual approaches and individual decisions. Planned in conjunction with a Human Design course it could form the basis for an evolving study area centred around ideas and interpretations. Home Economics would provide the foundations for such a course as it already includes personal attitudes to living, working, contributing to the community, leisure and so on. But more important is its cosmopolitan approach to media and materials, for this would be at the heart of the restructuring. The Faculty would move away from the materials-based organisation and become an ideas-based system. This would then cut across the boundaries set by materials, treating them alike on their merits. The result would be that ideas would necessitate materials and not vice versa, as seems in the case at present. From this premise would evolve the departmentalising of the Faculty.

No longer Two-Dimensional Studies, Light Craft, Home Economics, etc., for these are essentially devisive labels. The Schools' Council work could be taken to its logical conclusion in the formation of four multimedia areas of investigation, each revolving around problem situations.

Personal Design

To include those problems relating to the individual, the student who is doing the actual work. These would include fields such



as the domestic situation, vocational work, psychology, leisure, etc.

Human Design

To include topics particularly relevant to Man as a group identity and also to give a different perspective to some items dealt with in Personal Design; for example, community studies, urban design, consumer and economics information, design for living, energy discrimination.

Creative Studies

Specifically to provide a platform for and to promote the intuitive, inspired approach to the more expressive, personal arts. This would include sculpture, two-dimensional design and artwork, drama, music, dance, the crafts.

Technology and Materials

To maintain the high standards of investigation into materials, their uses, characteristics and efficiency that many specialists believe, with some reason, is not being fully explored in the Design framework. Also this department could encourage the close necessary link with the sciences. To include technical studies, engineering, motor maintenance, materials research, ecology, design theory.

Nearly all Home Economists with whom I have discussed these suggestions have misgivings about abandoning the domestic situation. The belief is held that this should be and indeed is being expanded to give a comprehensive home life introduction. This it is obviously doing; but the point is that it could be doing a great deal more by expanding personal knowledge and experience in a multitude of areas. Again, Home Economists at county level and at individual school level rightly believe the domestic science to be of great importance in life; this is so. But surely one should attempt to educate and expand on ideas at a macro-design level using micro-

design examples and testing areas. This would be preferable to dealing with individual outlets and hoping ideas and approaches evolved from there.

Such a structure would provide the basis for a broader Design education, because not only does it allow a much freer personal involvement but also each department would, in its natural study area, interlock with work and knowledge being employed 'on another plain' in at least one of the other departments. A redirection like the one outlined above is essential if Design teaching is to free itself from the shackles of materials and convergent study channels. The impetus given by founding a structure on the idea and its interpretation will allow Design Education to make genuine headway in more valid dimensions. In fact, the importance of place given to the methods of the individual and the way in which personal approaches would be given credence might well appease the late William Morris, enough for him to rest and let Design thinking take its natural course.

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