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Author(s): Mark Frederickson

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Design Juries: A Study in Lines of Communication

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M. P. Frederickson graduated from the University of Arizona with a B. Architecture degree in 1972; received M. Architecture from the same Institution in 1976. He has received Fellowships for research in design education from both the University of California/Los Angeles, and Edinburgh University, Edinburgh, Scotland. He has worked as an Architect/Planner for Peace Corps in Venezuela, (1972-74), lectured in Landscape Architecture with Michigan State University (1977-79), lectured in both Landscape Architecture and Architecture with the University of Arizona, spent several years in the Middle East, first as a Senior Fulbright Professor of Architecture with the University of Jordan in Amman (1979-81), then as a visiting Professor with the American University of Beirut in Lebanon (1981-82), and then with the King Fahd University in Saudi Arabia (1984-1988). He is currently teaching Landscape Architectural Design at UCLA, while completing a Ph.D in Design Education with UCLA's Graduate School of Architecture and Planning.

This study assesses impediments to lines of communication recurrently found to be operational in design juries, i.e. student to juror, juror to student, juror to juror. Unfortunately, discourse within design juries can be easily blocked or distorted, and can become one-sided and one-way in nature. The following is a brief description of elements in this dialogue that can and often do go awry.

Keywords: design education, group behavior, creativity, learning, studio instruction, group leadership.

Introduction

Most design educators have experienced a number of very different jury environments, often highly charged emotional experiences for both student and juror. They often provide a hearing for new ideas, and offer a process for generating alternative approaches to the design problem(s) being discussed. They can encourage the student and the juror to explore and discuss new philosophical approaches to design and criticism together, and of course they provide a forum for the presentation of design projects. The jury gathers data (listens to the presentation and reviews the drawings and models), synthesizes this information and then offers evaluative feedback to

the student. Juries can also provide lessons for the student in the realities of "due dates", in scheduling work efforts, and in the need for the development of clear concise verbal and graphic presentation skills. They represent an attempt to simulate the real world demands placed upon the practicing professional architect, landscape architect, urban designer, or interior designer.

Unfortunately juries do not always go as planned; things can go wrong and the environment can quickly become unproductive and even hostile and destructive. Research in group behavior, as well as our own protocol data on juries, indicates that design juries rarely operate at, or even near, their full potential for the efficient and enlightened education of students.¹ These findings also concur with H.J. Anthony's pioneering research concerning the perceived effectiveness of design juries by both jurors and students.² Our own survey data, while in general agreement with Anthony's findings, also indicates a prevalent belief among architectural educators that the fundamental concept of 'the jury' as an effective vehicle for design education is valid although flawed. Our research has therefore proceeded under the assumption that design juries, despite certain known imperfections, will continue to be integral components of a wide majority of design school curriculums in the foreseeable future, and hence merit our attention.

Our current research on design juries is arranged into three basic areas of study: the first asks about the sort of elements in a jury's lines of communication can go amiss, what are the ramifications of these problems, and why they occur.

A second area of interest evaluates possible remedies to intra-jury communication obstruction, and also explores methods of facilitating communication among jurors and students.

The third topic of interest to our research discusses possible fundamental revision to existing methods of design education and provides suggestions for further research and development in related areas of study. This article addresses the first of the three areas.

Our basic approach to this type of research involves several different methods of data

collection and analysis. Included among these is an essentially ethnographic analysis of video-tape films of juries in several different schools of design (including both architecture and landscape architecture programs), which were also filmed in a variety of different jury situations (schematic, design development, final, first year, fifth year, etc.).

Pre and post jury interviews of many of those same jurors and students filmed are also currently being administered. We are currently surveying design faculty in a number of U.S. schools of design with questionnaires concerning their experiences with, and points of view on, the efficacy of design juries as an educational tool.

Student to Juror Communication

The studio environment provides the student with the opportunity to experiment with new design philosophies and procedural approaches to design. The jury should offer a forum in which to express these sometimes rather unfamiliar verbal descriptions of design procedures and form generators. The jury can in many ways simulate the professional world by preparing the student to both explain and defend the relevant design ideas to an interested audience, and to also accept and adapt meaningful comments into a stronger overall project. Unfortunately "student to jury" lines of communication are easily blocked or distorted, and can become one-sided/one-way in nature. Below is a brief description of elements in this dialogue that can and often do go wrong.

Defensiveness and Hostility

It is an arduous task set before the student to verbalize clearly and concisely one to eight weeks of three-dimensional thought into a ten to twenty minute presentation, and yet more difficult to then defend this same project to an audience of practiced and highly skilled professionals. This experience can be especially demanding when the jury environment is perceived by the student to be hostile and critical in nature. Many students operate under the assumption that, "I have ten minutes to talk while the jury looks for something to criticize, and then the jury has twenty minutes in which to score points; during which time it is usually safer for me to acquiesce and remain silent."

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The student often enters this situation tired and certainly a bit nervous after days of intense work in the development of the design and its graphic presentation. Typically the student has been concentrating on the two and three dimensional aspects of the design and giving little thought to the verbal presentation and subsequent defense of the project. Frequently the only verbalizing the student has undertaken occurs in diagrammatic or shorthand discussion of certain design elements during prior desk critiques with the design teacher. In these situations both parties are quite familiar with the project and little comprehensive verbal delineation is needed.³

Quite naturally the student will often be feeling a bit unfamiliar and uncomfortable with these relatively new design concepts or philosophies. As the presentation proceeds, confidence may ebb, and therefore the student becomes somewhat anxious and potentially defensive, yet struggling for the means to verbally explain and defend the conceptual origins, purpose, and developmental history of the design.

The tendency here can be for the student to play it safe and concentrate the presentation on mundane details already explicit in the drawings, to repeat points nervously, to spend time on matters irrelevant to the purpose of the design exercise and the jury's purpose (agenda). The student might nervously block out previously planned remarks, cutting explanations short, finally sitting back feeling foolish, and listening to subsequent comments and questions that might have been easily explained had the introductory statements been more successfully presented. Consequently, the pace of the presentation usually slows, the student's tone of voice loses its assurance and becomes almost apologetic, and a very unproductive and awkward situation can follow. It is a precarious situation in that the jury may become bored, inattentive or impatient to speak, interruptions may begin, and the audience is essentially lost, with the presentation sidetracked or prematurely cut short by jury comments and or leading of the student.

The student can certainly sense these problems converging head on, which leads to an increasingly anxious, defensive, and potentially hostile attitude toward the jury. At this point communication is on its way out the

door; one-way dialogue ensues, and learning and listening become very difficult as hostility and defensiveness have replaced rationality and receptivity.

A common post-jury remark by students reflects this situation well: "They did not really listen or understand me".⁴ What a sad commentary on any jury, whether the remark is true or false. Of course several different factors can contribute to this type of circumstance:

- the student was ill-prepared and therefore unaware of which elements should be discussed, what the jury needed to hear, what the jury wanted to hear.
- the jury was impatient and rather than listening, concentrated on what they would say; they were 'out hunting' for weaknesses in the drawings during the student's introduction.
- the student never fully developed nor understood the design and therefore could not clearly explain it to others.
- both parties were unaware of one another's needs/desires.

What does the student need in this situation? 1) A fair opportunity to express ideas. 2) A way to safely express doubts about the design. 3) A safe way of soliciting assistance, along with the assurance that the jury is there to educate and offer options and not to necessarily challenge or destroy the student's self-image. 4) Honest, constructive commentary. 5) A sense that the process was well run and fair. 6) A proper grade.

The third item listed really speaks of an individual's 'fear of change', a very powerful and protective emotional defense, one which is obviously intensified in critical environments such as many juries offer.⁵ These fears can cause the student to become defensive when faced with an overtly judgmental jury. In many instances, design requires that measures of the designer's personality be displayed throughout, and that the designer (student) then be asked to defend this personal display of values and attitudes in front of what is perceived as a disparaging board of reviewers. When the design is critically judged in an insensitive manner, the student can not help but feel under attack as a person, his or her self-image is also being directly challenged as the jury is surreptitiously asking for a personality change to fit the jury's points of

view. The jury has powerful leverage over the student that is manifest in the form of grades and more importantly, in the approval or disapproval of the student's design efforts. And, what is more, these judgments are most often passed in front of a group of the student's peers, who are also perceived as potential judges of the student's 'worth,' and therefore another indirect challenge to self-image.⁶

Once again, situations such as this can increase defensiveness and hostility, and reduce the student's general receptivity to learning. The student might overreact to comments perceived as criticism, or may feign indifference toward the jury's opinions and therefore antagonize the jury as well. The circular dynamics of this process can be devastating to an environment ostensibly conducive to creative thought and the sharing of information.

Listening

The preceding situation naturally leads to a discussion of students' listening skills in jury environments. An anxious and fatigued student, with defenses up, is not in an optimum frame of mind to listen sensitively to the comments of others.⁶ Often the defenses are raised days before the juries actually occur. One prior unsatisfactory experience or the observation of one especially critical jury prejudices the attitude of the student prior to the actual jury itself. Architectural education does not typically concern itself directly with the development of student listening skills. These skills are assumed to just 'be there' when the appropriate time arises. They are not perceived as professionally relevant skills that can be learned or enhanced. The curriculum often emphasizes individuality to the extreme, with only token amounts of teamwork required in design.⁸ There is also little use of clients in the design process, whereby students might hone their listening skills. These attitudes toward teamwork and listening certainly do not approximate the real professional world's demands of the Architect. It is difficult to imagine any building, from residential to very complex scales, that was not in some way the product of team thinking.⁹

Observer/Actor Perceptions

Another issue that merits discussion here is the phenomenon of student 'excuses,' as they are

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most often perceived by the faculty or jury. Jones and Nisbett have undertaken interesting research into the wide gap which commonly occurs between the opinions of 'actors' (students) and 'observers' (teachers).¹⁰ The student will often speak of environmental obstacles as reasons for a poor performance, i.e. "I had other homework", "I was too tired to concentrate", etc. The teacher, on the other hand, even though apparently outwardly sympathetic, will most often attribute the student's poor performance to either lack of ability, laziness or perhaps to neurotic ineptitude. Faculty tend to believe that students look for excuses or seek to blame others for personal problems.

The research findings of Jones and Nisbett demonstrate that other powerful cognitive factors may be operative in this situation as well. Although a detailed explanation of their findings is beyond the scope of this paper, they did conclude that, "Actors tend to attribute the causes of their behavior to stimuli inherent in the situation, while observers tend to attribute behavior to stable dispositions of the actor. This is due in part to the actor's more detailed knowledge of his circumstances, history, motives, and experiences. Perhaps more importantly, the tendency is a result of differential salience of the information available to both the actor and observer....The observer often errs by over attributing dispositions, including the broadest kind of dispositions - personality traits. The evidence for personality traits as commonly conceived is sparse. The widespread belief in their existence appears to be due to the observer's failure to realize that the samples of behaviors that s/he sees are not random, as well as to the observer's tendency to see behavior as a manifestation of the actor rather than a response to situational cues."¹¹ Here again, the information exists between the two parties but is perceived in fundamentally different ways. Would better listening skills for both parties, not help alleviate this problem?

Juror to Student Communication

Potentially the juror to student lines of communication are some of the most productive in the entire jury process. They can carry indicators, insinuation, advice, approval, concerns, motivation, attributional feedback, as well as a myriad of design ideas and alternative

approaches to the challenges at hand. To educate and to learn certainly require that these lines of communication should be two-way in nature. Therefore the jurors need to demonstrate sensitive, well-developed listening skills, as well as manifest the ability to express themselves verbally in the communication of three-dimensional ideas and concepts.

In my experience unfortunately this is not always the case. Listening is an underdeveloped skill in architectural education, as it is in many other forms of education as well. We often emphasize individuality at the expense of team-work, and isolate design problems and their programs from any social context that demands sensitive listening skills. We most often train our students to 'speak' graphically, ("let the drawings do your talking"), and we often disregard the need for our students to have real dialogue with clients concerning the client's needs, aspirations, aversions, anxieties, etc. These attitudes are quite naturally carried into the profession and in turn, back into the faculties of our schools of architecture. It is an arrogant deficiency, and one that should be examined with change in mind.

Juror Self-discipline

Students often struggle with the verbalization of new concepts, (ideas likely to be quite familiar to their audience of jurors). At this very moment when the jury can become bored and easily diverted from the task at hand, the student most needs their indulgence and attentiveness. The student may be a bit fearful of expressing points of view, especially when these views might run contrary to some juror's known philosophical learnings, but hidden within these sometimes hesitant presentations can be numerous messages and cues about the real meaning of the design and real concerns of the student. The juror must therefore listen with skill and sensitivity. Unfortunately jurors often become inattentive, and bow to the pressure of 'finding something to say', or to their habitual search for 'errors.' I have known a number of jurors who openly admit to the use of review procedures that essentially ignore the student's opening statements. As the student is speaking, the juror's eyes are roving the drawings and models fault-finding. Carl Rogers has written at length

about these problems, and suggests that fault-finding is an almost instinctive approach to communication. We often judge and evaluate long before we have given a fair hearing to what the problem and its accompanying issues really are all about.¹² Many jurors will almost immediately raise a fifty percent audio screen to the student's explanation while looking for something to evaluate negatively (inconsistencies, contradictions, errors), rather than trying to understand and build upon the original intentions of the student and the design. As mentioned before, students sense this and quite naturally become defensive and hostile at this show of disrespect.

One final point concerning juror to student communication that will be discussed in more detail later, occurs when jurors debate or harangue one another through the student currently presenting. Many times the comments are only peripherally relevant to the student's design, and therefore become a potentially confusing tangle of criticism. If the student's design teacher is not present or the jury does not 'protect' the student in these situations the whole point of the jury as an educational agent disappears, with the student further alienated from the process.

Juror to Juror Communication

As previously suggested, jurors frequently attend juries armed with hidden agendas. The jury can be seen by some jurors as a potential forum in which to propound a certain philosophical approach to design, or to respond to previous statements made by other jurors at other times. Other relatively common misuses of the jury format occur when attempts to discourage divergent opinion within the jury itself are made. Flattery and showing-off to attending high administration figures or prominent visiting jurors is another artifice that often will set aside educational goals, and divert the jury from one of its primary purposes - to serve and educate the student.

Defensiveness/Hostility

Old and unresolved hostilities among jurors can distort the meaning of certain comments, and arguments can occur without a harsh word ever being spoken. Unfortunately the student is often listed among the casualties of

these 'quiet little wars'. The offending juror will be seen as speaking to the other jurors through the student, or as unduly criticizing another critic's students because their work reflects the unappreciated elements of said critic's design attitudes. I have witnessed on numerous occasions a student being harshly criticized due to a 'turn about is fair play' attitude which is reflected in the following statement: "In yesterday's juries you were unfair to my students, so today" These premeditated agendas serve to block communication; the juror with a pre-planned response listens neither to the student nor to subsequent juror remarks. The result is obvious in the amount of energy diverted from the tasks at hand: to educate, learn, share, debate, listen, and respect. It is a selfish indulgence on the juror's part and a wasteful misuse of the jury's energy and expertise.

What do jurors want or need from the jury experience?:

- nourishment from the event in the form of recognition, and respect from both students and peers, (a good grade).
 - a fair hearing for their ideas and attitudes
 - an opportunity to educate.
 - an opportunity to learn and expand their own thinking on design and education - to grow and to change.
- These goals are, in most ways, compatible with those of the students.

Rivalry

Perhaps intra-jury rivalries coupled with the need for personal recognition cause some of the most severe problems in the juror to juror line of communication. By not listening sensitively to fellow jurors while 'out' searching for design weaknesses, and by responding to the subtle competitive urge often felt among jurors to be the first to uncover and draw attention to 'profound design deficiencies', the offending juror drains the discipline and cooperative energies of the jury. By not cooperating and building upon one another's remarks and ideas, the cumulative effect of the jury can be summarized as a series of incoherent and rather negative criticisms passed on to a distracted, and threatened student. The concept suggested here is not only to allow a fair hearing for all juror ideas, but to also build on each idea momentarily to see its potential for

development more clearly. The student will eventually be presented with a series of delineated ideas which may or may not be chosen for further exploration. This is therefore not a call for jury consensus, in fact it is a warning against striving for consensus. Perfect accord is not needed by the jury nor by the student, and is probably non-productive in the long run. Allow diversity of opinion to exist, learn from these differences. This in itself is an effective demonstration of respect for one's peers and students.¹³

The need to convert others to our way of thinking seems almost instinctual at times, and it can be very difficult to evaluate projects developed in a manner, philosophy, or style not of our persuasion. Alteration of this behavior is difficult and time-consuming but certainly quite possible, and without a doubt it is the responsibility of every design educator.

Boredom

Boredom can also affect 'juror to juror' dynamics as well as 'student to juror' communication. Not so surprisingly, it is quite possible for jurors to bore both colleagues and students. When the discipline required to listen carefully to the remarks of fellow jurors wanes, repetition of antecedent comments or discussion of tedious issues irrelevant to the current discussion can occur, diverting and depleting the energy of the jury.

It is also relatively easy to forget that juries are an opportunity for educating a much larger audience than just the student presenting. In many traditional jury formats the largely unseen uninvolved student audience goes unacknowledged. We are missing the opportunity to directly involve them in the jury process. Since the logistics of their verbal participation in the jury might be questionable, would it not be possible for them to be required to demonstrate graphically a fundamental understanding of each project and to submit written evaluations of every project in post-jury discussions?

Listening

As in earlier discussion, one of the key issues in 'juror to juror' communication seems to involve listening to one another and to the student. Attorneys listen for weaknesses, con-

traditions, inconsistencies and errors; should this be our exclusive purpose as jurors as well? Jurors are not merely data gathering, but should also be listening for cues to the authentic feelings and attitudes of the students, and of the other jurors as well. Half of the battle is to understand what exactly is being communicated, and the other half is concerned with convincing the speaker that it is acceptable to explore and make mistakes, without loss of respect. Avoiding interruptions is essential.

Along similar lines, Synectics research has also demonstrated that the comments of female members in male dominated groups regularly do not receive the attention they deserve. It is my experience that this is frequently the case in design juries as well.¹⁴

Leadership

The preceding naturally leads into a discussion of the need for effective leadership in juries. Twenty years of research in group dynamics has led the Synectics group in Cambridge to stress the role of leadership in enhancing the productivity of task oriented groups.¹⁵ To date, our research indicates that similar leadership dilemmas can and often do arise in juries as well. The following is a brief discussion of the various elements of juries that can go awry without effective leadership.

In jury situations the role of leader is often undesignated or assigned by default, and this lack of definition can lead to confusion and competition for the leadership role. Synectics has found that a great deal of energy can be expended in these activities, thereby diverting the group from its intended goals. Synectics has observed that in any meeting without a firmly designated leader two or three individuals tend to vie for the leadership role, with the most forceful usually winning temporary leadership, subject to continuous challenges. This type of behavior obviously discourages sensitive listening, increase interruptions, and generally encourages a disrespectful and selfish atmosphere unless it can be moderated by some intervening constructive force.

The ability to facilitate a jury's movement toward productive goals is a learned skill requiring initial insight into the need for effective listening skills, practice, patience, and then again more practice. Unskilled leaders

can sometimes unwittingly misuse their position to promote their own ideas and agendas with the jury and students, thereby denying other participants a fair hearing for the presentation of their ideas. Often this will occur accompanied by politely masked verbal manipulations of the participants, and of course the motives of these attempts are readily transparent to most parties involved. These manipulations will in turn lead to a reduction in the leader's credibility. These insincerities are most often perceived by the juror as an attempt to win converts and as a challenge to their own ideas and beliefs.¹⁶

By default, many juries allow various eclectic versions of 'Robert's Rules' to become the leader of the proceedings. As the Synectics Group has pointed out, these rules of group behavior are designed to keep order and to allow conflicting views to be stated and defended; they are not designed to encourage creative group ideation, and an atmosphere conducive to open and free speculation. Synectics research has again demonstrated that time after time 'Roberts Rules' pressure the outcome of group achievement toward mediocrity, and that can allow for a leadership which is careless with the ideas and feelings of the other participants. This in turn, can set up a milieu of contagious disrespect where each juror begins to see the proceedings as a contest where if someone wins - someone else loses.¹⁷

This carelessness with the ideas of others can occur in another way when unformed/undeveloped ideas are immediately dismissed by the jury and the leadership as 'impossible' or 'crazy'. The jury often expects complete and tightly developed ideas which are presented in one clean statement, (this is especially unrealistic in preliminary reviews). The problem is that many good ideas initially arrive in undeveloped form, and therefore do not receive the attention they deserve. More superficial or conventional ideas and concepts then become the jury's focus; ones that are quickly completed, easy to comprehend, and easy to defend.

Group Think

Juries can develop certain unified group behaviors and attitudes over a period of time

working with one another. Potentially this familiarity can be quite helpful in short-cutting a lot of polite 'getting to know you' type behavior. A familiarity with one another's strengths and attitudes can be quite useful in a jury situation where each juror respects the other's areas of expertise and interest, and can then begin to build upon each other's ideas, and thereby more effectively educate the students.¹⁸

This 'group attitude' can also cause several problems for the jury and for the students as well, particularly when jurors have worked together over a long period of time. The jury can begin to develop an illusion of unanimity. Through subtle self-censorship they begin to assume that all jurors truly agree with the procedures used, ideas discussed, design approaches taught, curriculum decisions implemented, etc. As described in Irving Janis' *Group Think*, this self-censorship can be quite powerful, with direct pressure being brought to bear upon any examples of 'deviant' thought.¹⁹ Over time, this type of behavior can contribute to the formation of the group illusion of invulnerability and morality. The resulting behavior is one of formulaic thinking and rationalization, a situation quite detrimental to the cultivation of individual or group creative thought and behavior.

These problems occur much less frequently in environments where self-expression is encouraged, where mutual respect among all members allows all ideas a fair hearing, and where sensitive listening and effective leadership are the norm.

Although the preceding analysis of a jury's lines of communication may appear pessimistic in nature, and filled with worst-case scenarios, the resolution of these examples of deleterious behavior involves just a few very basic concepts, with which we are all familiar: respect for others, the ability to listen to and understand the attitudes and feelings of others, and sensitive and effective leadership skills.

As educators, we are often quite hesitant to acknowledge that we are remiss in the application of any of these attributes concerning our students and colleagues. Unfortunately, research from most of the above sources,

including our own, indicates that we most often neglect these principles of common decency when operating in group environments. The power of these skills to produce creative thought and behavior, and to diminish counter-productive habits is profound. There is a tendency to underestimate this material, in that listening and respect are assumed to be 'just common sense'. It is difficult to perceive oneself as disrespectful, or as someone who is consistently careless with the feelings and ideas of others. Unfortunately, both our own research findings and personal teaching experiences over the past fifteen years support the contention that irresponsible behavior can and often is habitual and virtually unconscious, and therefore requires time, patience and devotion to rectify.

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