

RSA Design & Society. *Social Animals: tomorrow's designers in today's world* by Sophia Parker. A report on the RSA Design Directions project **THE VISIT**. Picture this: Ruth, a design student who graduated in 2010, took on a job with the Youth Offending Service (YOS) in a local council. Working alongside trained practitioners at first, she gained an in-depth understanding of the way things worked from their perspective. Once she had earned their trust, she persuaded them that she should go and spend time with the young people with whom the service worked. In particular she was interested in the 'extreme' cases, those young people who were prolific offenders, many of whom had already had periods in prison. Over the four months that she spent operating in this way, Ruth worked hard to visualise what she was learning; the relationship maps, the emotional journeys, the moments of interaction between the Youth Offending Service and each young person. She started to see some very quick and simple things that could improve the service and help keep the young people engaged and willing to participate in the various education and rehabilitation programmes on offer.

But while Ruth was excited about the big impact these simple things could have, she was also aware that her work was revealing more challenging findings about how custodial sentences were making young people more likely, rather than less likely, to offend. She could certainly see how her design skills might help improve relationships between the YOS and young people. But she could also see how a designer might help to remodel the entire system of services, environments and current products so that they were focused on rehabilitation rather than containment and punishment alone.

Foreword

Building on a long history of influential work in education, from professional qualifications to the school curriculum, the RSA initiated a new project in 2008: the Prison Learning Network. Working with key figures in the criminal justice system, it seeks to contribute to policy, practice and public debate around offender learning and skills. Out of new relationships with stakeholders in the prison service grew the idea for perhaps our most challenging student design project yet: *The Visit*. Since 2003 Design Directions, a national student awards scheme and the RSA's principle design vehicle, has challenged young designers to apply their skills to difficult social issues. In 2009 the bar was raised by a brief that asked them to propose not a product, but a service: a new way of thinking about the prison visitor experience in response to a deep study of user experience.

In the following pages Sophia Parker has described the tensions and contradictions of service design, the most appreciable design movement of our times. While design has risen up the agenda of public services, public servants – naturally – have little experience of using design, and design schools lack confidence in preparing designers for a role in public service. Students working on *The Visit* discovered many obstacles specific to prisons: the inherent inaccessibility of users, the political sensitivities, the critical security issues – and the fact that prisons are simply not a part of daily experience or conversation of most people. Yet 68 students from 28 Universities rose to the challenge. Among many strengths the jury found in the shortlisted entries, Sophia Parker points out the benefit of their 'intelligent naivety'; their readiness to ask questions that someone with specialist knowledge would automatically dismiss.

The RSA would like to thank the individuals and organisations who supported *The Visit*: first and foremost Philip Emery and Kalyx, whose sponsorship enabled the project to happen – *The Visit* was an enhanced Design Directions *Plus* brief, into which we built new elements of professional mentoring and stakeholder workshops for finalists; the judging panel, chaired by Lady Vallance, who generously contributed their time to evaluate each of the submissions; Alex Nisbett and Joe Heapy at Engine Service Design, and Patricia Somerset at PACT (Prison Advice and Care Trust) were generous with their advice and creativity during the whole process, from writing the brief to designing the workshops. We thank our stakeholder workshop participants for giving us the privilege of their insights for the best part of a day: Angus Mulready-Jones, PACT services manager, HMP Wandsworth; Laura Beard, PACT family services manager HMP Brixton; Chris Johnston co-director at Rideout; Ann Thomson interventions and diversity manager at Bronzefield Prison and DI Justin Greig and DS Jason Keen from the Metropolitan Police. Finally, thanks to the prisons that made exceptional efforts to accommodate student visits; and to all the families, visitors and support workers who shared views and experiences.

The RSA is working with leading design educators to ensure that Design Directions continues to feed the supply of young professionals who, while having all the formal skill and practical optimism we expect of design, are inclusive in their processes and able by their influence to help other people and communities to be more resourceful.

Emily Campbell
Director of Design, RSA

However, it was hard for Ruth to know who to talk to about getting this project off the ground. No one seemed responsible for how the various elements of the youth justice system fitted together. While it was relatively easy to demonstrate the impact of design thinking and skills on discrete aspects, it seemed an impossible task to gain traction on the broader, more systemic questions. Equally, Ruth had been working at the council long enough to know that few people would recognise how design could help to tackle these bigger and more fundamental questions. She struggled to put the potential of design into words. Her sense was that the management consultants too often offered the same fixed 'solutions' that could be modelled and predicted with certainty (although Ruth didn't buy this, and nor did the professionals of the YOS).

As a designer with a social mission, Ruth is driven by a sense that design can no longer be about making more stuff to consume. Like the members of the YOS team, she cares deeply about empowering people to take control of their own lives. Her work at the local council has reinforced these values, as she observes the way in which many public services have been robbed of their humanity by the requirement to deliver mass solutions at scale. As she works with the young offenders, she sees that in many cases their anger stems from a sense that they are not being seen or heard. She is struck by a pervasive sense of frustrated powerlessness on the part of these young people.

Ruth's work in 2010 is a long way from where she began, designing consumer products like kettles and saucepans. And yet her skills have remained remarkably constant. Ruth is a problem finder as well as a problem solver. She is a facilitator of others who understand the issues, as well as an autonomous designer of solutions. She has a practical desire to make things real, as well as a powerful visual language that helps her and others she works with to understand complexity without oversimplifying the situation. Her well-developed interpersonal skills and sense of empathy bring young people's experiences of services to life. It's also true, however, that she sometimes lacks the political antennae needed to navigate the complex interplay of perceptions, assumptions and reality when it comes to dealing with crime, particularly youth crime.

Despite these valuable skills, the truth is that Ruth can't put into words half of what it is she can offer public servants like those she is working with. She finds herself 'winging it' a lot, drawing entrepreneurially on her design education, and trying hard to translate things she learnt about product and industrial design into this new setting of the public sector. She feels lonely often, and longs for a support network of fellow designers to keep her thinking fresh and her energy up.

If Ruth sometimes feels a bit lost in her situation, it is equally true that the public servants of the local council often struggle to know what to ask for Ruth's help on. They know that she's a great person to have on the team when a problem needs solving, and that she is open and

collaborative, with what appears to be an instinctive grasp of who needs to be in the room, when, in order to make decisions stick, and for change to happen. They can see she is desperate to work on some of the more strategic issues around youth offending, but equally know that her lack of professional qualifications in the field make it very difficult to imagine asking her to play a key role in the system redesign work.

Design began to emerge as a discrete discipline, distinct from engineering, arts and crafts or architecture, over the early years of the 20th century. Born in an era of mass production and consumerism, it has historically been driven by the desire to create products that enhance everyday life, and goods that bring beauty and pleasure to consumers. Businesses have worked with designers to give them a competitive edge through the creation of things that people want to buy for their usability and desirability. The products – and more recently, the services – themselves came to define design, rather than the place of those products and services in the wider world. The designed-in obsolescence of many modern products reflects a wider set of cultural values where wealth is measured not only by consumption, but also by the things that we throw away each day to make room for the new.

Ruth is one of a new generation of designers who are beginning to question the way in which their professional discipline has evolved over the years. Young designers are coming of age in a world where increased consumption is no longer seen as the ultimate marker of growth. They have grown up during a period where the pace and demands of modern life are increasingly being seen as unsustainable, in both social and environmental terms. In this context, they are beginning, in ever-greater numbers, to question the idea that design is primarily about material culture, or the business of making things.

Defining the boundaries of the discipline in the early 21st century is rather like trying to direct the wind: product design is just one facet of an industry that is expanding into many new territories, from communications to business strategy, and from services to sustainability. These latter two represent the fastest-growing spheres for design. In the process of that growth, designers working on services and sustainability are, like Ruth, beginning to think much harder about the consequences of their work; the meaning of design in a world where landfill sites are overflowing, and where the profits of growth are so unequally shared between people.

For some, the move of designers into the service industries has been a cause for cynicism. As the notion of ‘service design’ gained traction in the industry, a schism emerged between those designers who heralded it as the future, and those who saw it as a dilution of the purity of the discipline.

For others, the opening up of services to designers was little more than a shrewd business move. Over the years, design has proved to be an agile industry, capable of adapting to changing consumer and client

demands, and in the early years of the 21st century, the service economy is significant and growing. Manufacturing accounts for a mere 16 per cent of the UK’s GDP whilst the service industries make up 75 per cent.¹ In the future, like most other parts of the developed world, the UK’s wealth will rest in service industries, along with the creative industries and those areas of manufacturing like biotechnology where the edge comes from innovation rather than price.

In a globalised economy, services touch every part of our lives. Over 20 million of us work in the service industries, from supermarkets to nurseries, and from travel agencies to banks and mobile phone companies. Even when we are not engaging directly in them as employees, consumers or citizens, services matter: they are fundamental to the production, distribution and consumption of everyday items that we buy and use. In this context, designers would be missing a massive and expanding market if they chose not to deploy their skills in relation to services as well as goods and products. In many ways it is surprising that a mere 6 per cent of UK design firms say they focus solely on service design.²

As I argue in this pamphlet, there is another way of understanding the significance of service design to the design industry’s development. Far from seeing it as a smart bit of commercial positioning, or an attempt to turn designers into management consultants, a small but significant minority of service designers are reflecting on their work, and beginning to articulate a new agenda for design. This agenda is more concerned with people and the planet than it is with products and services. It is as interested in intangible behaviours and relationships as it is in more tangible objects and materials. Fundamentally, it has a social purpose that questions the still-dominant mindset of the industry. Rather than seeking to create more services that can be sold to people, this group of service designers are asking how they can create services that reduce waste, and meet goals in the most sustainable, local and humane ways possible.

If the designers leading this revolution remain few in number, they can be found concentrated in a very particular part of the economy: public services. In themselves, public services are a growing part of our service-dependent world, despite the gloomy outlook of the recession. Public spending has doubled to £600bn over the last decade and now accounts for 20 per cent of GDP. Health, education and social care are set to overtake the automotive and financial service sectors in terms of their impact on the economic prosperity of the UK in the next few years.³ There are still few designers to be found working in these spheres, but those that are have the potential to change the way we think about design in the future.

It is not just the small cohort of public service designers that are questioning the future of their profession. Even more significant than the visionaries scattered across design education are the students like Ruth. These students are turning away from work that has little regard to its impact on the wider world. The shift is not universal, but the new

It’s just about man management and strategy, isn’t it?
—Tutor

1. www.earthtrends.wri.org (accessed 12th May 2009)
2. *The Business of Design* (Design Council, 2005) www.designcouncil.org.uk
3. See 2006 Budget

generation of ‘social designers’ are fizzing with energy and passion as they seek to define a new direction for design, with and for people, in the context of a world where resources are finite. They are inspired by the potential power of design, but despair of its current practices and philosophy.

The RSA Design Directions scheme⁴ has acted as a magnet for these students, offering them a chance to apply their skills to social needs. For many, it is the first time they have considered the application of design in this context, and the work proved to be as enlightening as it was challenging.

Adopting a new mindset will always be challenging, but many of the young social designers also describe how their design education thwarted their attempts to embark on a journey of discovery about where and how they could use their skills. Degree courses are often failing to equip these students adequately for the new environments they wish to work in.

Design education is at risk of failing its socially-driven students on two counts. First, it is not giving them the language and techniques to enable them to operate effectively in contexts where not all solutions come in the form of 3D products, or packages that can be bought, sold and delivered to passive customers. Second, design education leaves little space for critical thinking about the deeper purpose of the discipline. It is in danger of creating generations of design technicians who respond to briefs rather than, to borrow Richard Sennett’s phrase, craftsmen and women who consider the consequences and significance of that which they make.

Design’s response to this challenge must not be to disappear into debates about ever-more obscure and specialist disciplines. The real energy is in collaboratively building a new agenda; a shared ideology and working principles for design in the modern world.

All emerging disciplines make tentative steps as they feel their way towards a coherent philosophy and set of practices. But those steps could be bolder if more were done to bring together students, working designers, and visionary tutors who are each, in their own spheres of action, reaching towards a new agenda for design. This connectivity is beginning to happen, through networks such as the Designers Accord,⁵ the Service Design Network,⁶ Doors of Perception⁷ and Design21.⁸ But if we are going to turn these networks into a global movement, it is time for design educators to get involved themselves. They have a crucial role to play as design thinkers in their own right, as well as a responsibility to give students the reflexive and critical skills to shape a post-industrial design industry.

It’s made me think really hard about whether I want to design more crap stuff for people to buy and then throw away.—Student

I think I wanted to do service design before I realised it existed. I went off to my placement really lost, feeling unsure who to talk to as I couldn’t find the language to express my interests.

All I knew is that I thought I was going into design to learn how to make kettles, then I had a moment of wondering ‘what am I doing here?’

—Recent design graduate

Social design is a mindset, not a curriculum.—Student

The reflections and observations in this pamphlet emerged in response to a brief set by the RSA for students as part of its Design Directions scheme:

Design a service or other solution around the experience of the prison visit and the challenges of maintaining meaningful family relationships with partners and children.

Students were invited to consider how design could support the idea that better contact between prisoners and their families appears to reduce rates of re-offending upon release.⁹ Part of the challenge was to demonstrate how their solution would address the needs of the family and the prisoner, whatever form it took.

Devising the brief was in itself a collaborative endeavour between the RSA, design educators, practising service designers and the prison sector. The RSA team worked with the innovative prisons provider Kalyx, and leading service design company Engine,¹⁰ to develop the brief and plan how Design Directions could generate valuable ideas. The students were given extensive resources – websites, videos and suggested reading – to help them make the most of the limited time they could spend on this project.

The complexity of the brief, and the lack of real-life experience most of the students had of prisons, meant that immersion in the context for which they were designing was an important part of the process. The Design Directions team worked with local prisons to set up visits to support the students’ research.

Over 60 responses to the brief were submitted, and it was clear from the students’ work that the project had been rewarding, but also difficult and moving. The entries revealed the limited extent to which design schools can currently equip students to work in uncommon contexts. In response to the brief, many of the students relied on their own ingenuity and adaptability, rather than any more structured teaching about service design.

To support a deeper process of learning, the RSA also created opportunities for mentoring and ideas development for the students. The panel of judges was chaired by Lady Vallance, who has a number of roles in the public, private and voluntary sectors and is currently a magistrate on the inner London Bench. It also included a London prison governor with responsibility for visits, the head of learning and skills at Kalyx, which operates several private prisons in the UK, a senior manager from a voluntary support organisation, and service designers. They shortlisted six entries, and each of these students was offered a mentoring session with experienced public service designers at the Engine studios. As well as coaching on how to present their ideas compellingly, these sessions were an opportunity for the students to think about how they might take their ideas further.

4. www.rsadesigndirections.org
5. www.designersaccord.org
6. www.servicedesignnetwork.org
7. www.doorsofperception.com
8. www.design21sdn.com

9. Chapter 29 – ‘Prisoners’ families’ by Alice Mills and Helen Codd in ‘Handbook on Prisons’ Edited by Yvonne Jewkes. Willan Publishing, 2007
10. www.enginegroup.co.uk

In keeping with the emerging practice of participatory co-design, the finalists were also invited to facilitate their own stakeholders' workshop. They led sessions with small groups of prison staff, family support and volunteer organisations, and police closely involved with prison services, to draw out knowledge and insights, get feedback on their proposal and strengthen their ideas in advance of the final presentation to the judges.

Actually visiting the prison really made me rethink my project... I had to re-evaluate everything I'd written before.
—Student

I can see now that a prison system isn't a system in the way a designer would think of it.—Student

It's not relaxing sitting there talking to him like that. I can never think of what to say to him.—Prisoner's partner

The kids don't like it, it's horrible, and sometimes they'll ask before it's over, 'Mam, can we go?' And then I feel awful for Dad.
—Prisoner's partner

For the students, this kind of expert support has been a powerful experience; the research opportunities, mentoring sessions and stakeholder workshops have underlined how these forms of engagement can make a good idea even better. All the projects grew and evolved through these interactions, and the students themselves have developed a more sophisticated understanding of their role and task as designers.

The six shortlisted entries are powerful illustrations of the kinds of challenges that confront today's design students when they are given a brief about such a complex social issue.

Many of the student entries grew out of the fraught and charged interactions between prisoners and their families during visits. Their solutions focused on the human dimensions of the visit experience, and in particular on how the conversations that took place within the prison environment could be made easier, more intimate and less upsetting.

Two of the shortlisted entries picked up on this theme and focused specifically on improving conversations between children and their imprisoned parents. 160,000 children find themselves in this situation¹¹ – more than the number of children experiencing divorce – and they often find prisons traumatic and difficult.

One solution was a journal, to be filled in by the prisoner and their child. The key insight behind this was that limited visiting allowances can make it very difficult for imprisoned parents to play any kind of constant role in their child's life. The book passes between parent and child, each of them taking turns between visits to document what they're up to, using pictures, words, activity cards and storytelling, to then share at the visit. Not only does this solution create a sense of greater involvement in each other's lives, it also means that on the day of the visit, conversation is easier and more natural.

Another finalist's insight was that imprisonment curtails parents' means of expressing their love for their children, and that frequently interactions between prisoners and their kids are characterised by guilt and anger. The student argued that the giving of gifts is an important way of showing love and affection towards someone. His solution was a service, based on prisoners using educational opportunities and a points-based system to make or save up for gifts to be delivered to their children at home.

If some of the entries focused directly on how to make difficult conversations easier, others were interested in how the prison environment itself could be improved. It only takes one visit to a prison to recognise the impact of this environment on people's moods and

The environment tells you how much you're worth, how much you're valued.
—Prison visitor

It makes you feel horrible, like you have done something too. They watch and make you feel guilty, you don't get used to it.—Prisoner's child

I am a prisoner because my son is a prisoner... I want a grim thing to be as painless as it can be... I've done nothing wrong and I deserve to be treated with respect.
—Prisoner's parent

behaviours. So often environments are the forgotten elements of public services and yet some of our most profound and charged interactions take place within the four walls of public institutions, with all the fixtures and fittings associated with them.

The students could see that spaces were far from neutral: they had a huge impact on the visit experience for families and prisoners. For example, the table placed between visitor and prisoner both made conversation more intense than it might otherwise be, and created an emotional barrier.

Two of the shortlisted entries that explored the issue of environment made sophisticated connections between the actual space of the visit, and other kinds of architectures – information, objects, dialogues and processes – noting how they all interacted to create the experience; and therefore how they would all need to be changed if this experience were to feel different.

For example, one proposed a system of 'pods' that offered enhanced privacy without compromising on security, and enabled families to interact in a more comfortable and 'home-like' environment. The pods were graded, with superior-grade pods offered in return for prisoners' compliance and achievement.

Another student extended the notion of the visit, recognising that the family's journey leading up to the visit was itself stressful, and that minimising this stress would increase the chances of a positive visit. Her solution took a holistic approach to thinking about the many touchpoints that make up the process of reaching the visits hall: from interactions with staff, to the use of signage, to information provision, to the use of colour and decoration. By aligning all these touchpoints, and seeking to make each of them less impersonal and more human, her idea set out to ensure that families arrived at the visit calm and relaxed.

Part of the strength of these entries was the way in which students engaged with the significant constraints imposed by security. They were designing with careful regard to what was feasible as well as what was desirable; what was practical and easy to implement as well as the ideal.

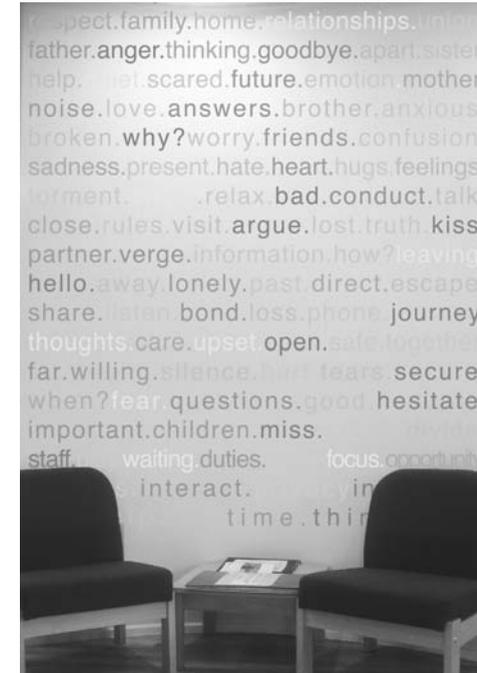
However two of the shortlisted entries set out to challenge some of the existing practices and processes of the prison visit. For example, one proposed a solution that introduced virtual visits via a secure internet connection. He argued that the current visit experience would never be enough – however much it could be improved – to sustain family ties in itself. As well as the emotional benefits of being able to stay in touch more informally, the virtual visit eliminates the risk of things being 'passed', and such a system would also increase the chances of staying in touch where the prisoner is held a long distance from home.

The other proposal was a gardening project similarly reflecting another finalist's conclusion that more systemic reforms will be needed to strengthen relationships between prisoners and families. Her solution, which enables prisoners and families to nurture a garden, learn to cook and then eat together, would require changes in the layout, culture and routines of prison life.

11. www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk

These entries led to a revealing debate within the judging panel about how the value of design is understood, and where design skills might best be deployed. While some judges felt these entries had not grappled enough with the context of the prison, others argued that what the students were visualising could be part of re-imagining the prison itself. Given that in the next decade, at least six if not more prisons are due to be built, the value of design in modelling and prototyping future possibilities, as well as current ones, is hugely significant, if not yet recognised as important.

The students, meanwhile, had clearly wrestled with a range of issues. One significant challenge was how to 'sell' ideas in terms of multiple benefits flowing from single solutions: for example, educational opportunities as well as better family relations. They worked hard to deal with attitudinal questions about how society should deal with crime, as well as the practical questions of the brief. As the next chapter shows, there is still some way to go before these skills are fully embedded in today's design education.



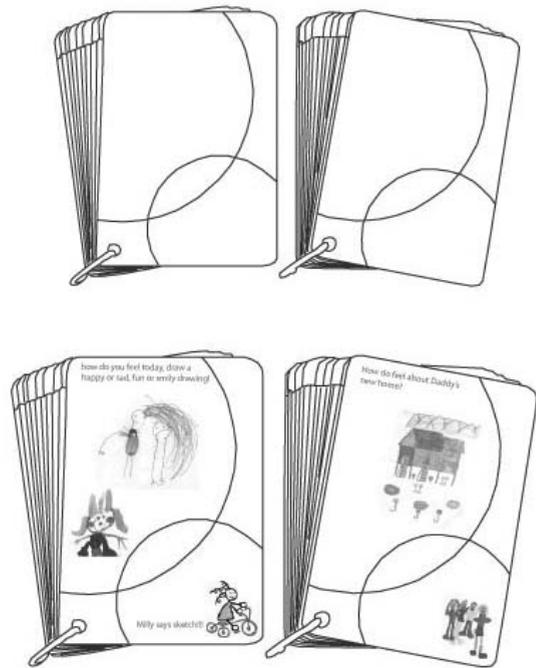
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2

1. Relax is a package of typographic, graphic and audio-visual interventions that give definition to spaces, staff and procedures and make the visiting environment legible and non-threatening. Winning entry by Georgia Stylianou.

2. In the Cooking Day system offenders tend their own kitchen garden and use the produce to prepare a meal with and for their family on special visit days. Highly commended entry by Oh Young Lee.



3



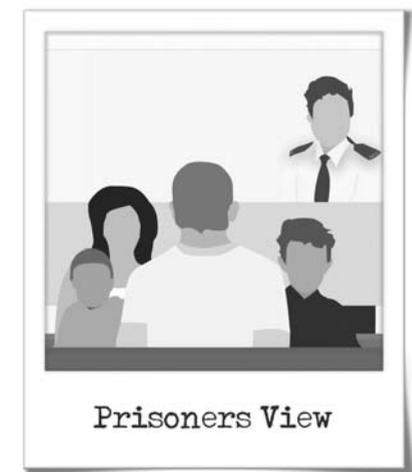
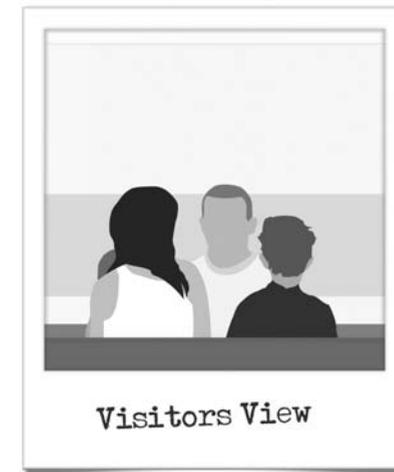
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3. The Link Book is a journal shared between child and imprisoned parent, to which both contribute using a series of themed activity cards. Shortlisted entry by Sophie Blowfield.

4. The Remote Visiting Unit was conceived originally as a facility stationed in public places for electronically-enabled remote 'visits'. It developed into Reach In, a laptop resource with a basic interface that mimics familiar ATMs and mobile phones. Highly commended entry by Marcus Hanratty.



How FREE Pods can be assembled in close proximity to each other and still create a sense of privacy.



5

5. Snug/Free Pod aims to create a more private space within the visit hall. It is an incentive-led scheme in which the offender is 'host' and the visitor the 'guest'. Spaces are graded and allocated as rewards for achievement. Shortlisted entry by David Lister.



6

6. With Love is a service allowing the offender parent to recreate part of his or her normal parenting role by giving their child a present. The gifts range from toys – for example board games that stimulate conversation – to experiences like a drumming lesson. Shortlisted entry by Jonathan Oldaker.

If you separate out service design as a new course, the risk is that we'll just produce cookie cutter design students who won't ever bend.
—Recent design graduate

You don't necessarily need to design another widget, there are other ways of looking at solutions.—Tutor

You really need to understand your topic and don't be afraid if the solution is a 3d product after all, those skills are still important, but even more important is to open your mind and do the best solution, whatever form that takes.—Student

It's not about product design or service design, it's about good design with a social brief.—Tutor

Think back to Ruth's story, or the work of the students on the Design Directions prison visit project. Their experiences of working in a public service environment underlined the value of their traditional product design skills in a different setting.

Many design schools are now engaging with the question of how to prepare their students to work in more service-based environments; but few schools have reached the point where service design is given any kind of parity with product, industrial or communications design training. Even fewer schools are creating time on their courses to encourage students to reflect on the deeper purpose of design and its role in shaping the world in which we live.

None of the tutors or students who got involved in the RSA Design Directions project believed that service design should be treated as an entirely separate discipline.

We need to stop defining design by the form of the solution; instead the emphasis needs to be on shaping design education around a wider set of questions that focus on the role of the designer in solving complex problems in a globalised world. Solutions may require products and services, but students also need to be equipped with a broader range of skills – in strategy, communications and research – and encouraged to think more laterally about the sites and spaces in which those skills could be used.

While the Design Directions briefs highlight the importance of teaching particular skills to equip students for new contexts, the students' reflections hint at a deeper shift that is needed in design education. Ruth, and other students like her, are beginning to ask how design can enable human agency and create more sustainable solutions. They are searching for an education that helps them to explore these questions.

Building on conversations with some of these students, as well as leading tutors in the field, there are six challenges for design education. These challenges describe the new skills that require further development if students are to be prepared to operate as social designers in the future.

1 Developing actionable insights

Research – and user research in particular – has been a long-standing element of good design. From the massive growth in market research techniques after the Second World War, to the human factors movement of the 1950s, to the surge of interest in interaction design in the 1980s, the importance of user insights has been a constant in design work for as long as the industry has existed.

The user-led design movement has really blossomed since the 1990s, when leading design firm IDEO began to talk about 'empathic design', cataloguing a range of techniques borrowed from business, research,

You have to use certain techniques to draw people out – you can't be shy, you have to interact with people, understand where they are coming from.—Student

It's hard, but you have to be a visitor and a designer at the same time: a visitor to ask the emotional questions but a designer to pull out the insight – that means you need to take a step back. It's not just about being someone's friend.—Student

The risk is that we've bred the ego out of designers too much – they get so carried away with what users want that they forget to do the design bit... sometimes research can feel a bit comforting, it's too easy to hide behind. The real challenge is in the translation, and it's here that the capability of design should manifest itself.—Tutor

Designers and the people they work for need to realise that designers don't have all the answers.—Public service designer

We warn our students that these public service design briefs are more risky because it will be harder for them to get the data they need if you need information from users.—Tutor

marketing and international development, but incorporated into their distinctive design process.

Service design arguably relies on user research even more than product design. Services are intangible, their value being created only in the moment of interaction between a person and a service. It is only through deep immersion in this experience that service designers can capture the latent and tacit dimensions of the experience, as well as its more visible aspects.

As a number of the students noted, this kind of 'deep' user research made new demands of them, in terms of empathy, emotional intelligence, and a willingness to look beyond the most obvious dynamics at play, whilst maintaining a design mindset.

The responses to the brief submitted by students showed an impressive amount of research work, both in terms of immersion in the experience, and background reading. However designers need to go beyond conducting research: they need to translate that research into actionable insights, and there was much less evidence of know-how in this work.

2 Doing co-design ethically

The move towards co-design, where the designer takes on the role of facilitator as well as form-giver, gives even greater weight to the significance of how user research and engagement is taught on design courses. Practising co-designers do not simply see people as research subjects, but as active participants in the design process, whose time and contributions need to be recognised and honoured.

Conducting this kind of participative user research and inquiry on social issues presented students with a new set of challenges, both practical and ethical.

For example, finding the right user participants on a mental health project requires more time to set up than asking people to test out a new design for a consumer good. This kind of time is often not available alongside the demands of the curriculum. So the fact that the Design Directions project lasted, on average, four weeks meant that the two weeks it took to set up prison visits significantly limited the time students could spend on converting research into actionable insights and proposed solutions.

The ethical dimension of co-design work is even more significant than these practical constraints. Tutors commented that their students were sometimes a little insensitive in how they approached this kind of work, failing to consider the implications of drawing people into the design process as active participants.

Social science and marketing disciplines have spent years developing ethical codes of practice, but none of these have yet entered the lexicon of designers. The risk is that without careful consideration of design ethics, students will treat potential participants instrumentally, and fail to recognise that participation will have an impact on those people's lives one way or another.

We don't have a standard mechanism for doing co-design research.—Tutor

I think this (ethical debate) is an enormous absence in design discourses.—Tutor

How do you prototype a service? You can't really. Services are about relationships, and relationships take time to develop – compare that with a consumer product where the process is test-refine-test – it's much harder to do a sticks and sellotape version of services.—Student

Why is it that I can't find a student who really understands what prototyping is and what it is for?—Public service designer

12. A Pattern Language: towns, buildings, construction, C. Alexander, S. Ishikawa, M. Silverstein (OUP, 1977)

3 Making things real

In product design, the process of making an object requires the designer to understand the interactions between the potential object and the user of that object. The process of modelling and prototyping enables the designer to refine and improve their ideas, to maximise the object's usability, feasibility and desirability.

In social design, the picture is much more complex. Designers need to take account of interactions between people, between people and products, between people and services, between services and products, and between all these elements and the wider environment. To compound this complexity, many aspects of this work are not tangible in the way products are, so designers need to find new ways of giving them form.

Why do these skills of visualisation matter so much? To design or redesign something requires that people understand first how it works currently. Design's ability to give abstract and complex issues a form is what marks its distinctive contribution to the work of empowering people to take action. As Chris Alexander has argued, this kind of model building helps people to understand dynamic systems, and to visualise otherwise invisible patterns and flows which reveal how things could be different.¹²

But it is not only the designer's ability to visualise things that matters when it comes to making things real. It is also their skill at moving from research, to actionable insights, to a process of prototyping potential solutions. The difficulty of prototyping service-based ideas was a frequent theme of conversation with students participating in the Design Directions work. They were attempting to draw upon what they had learnt from their product design training, and simply apply it directly to service projects. This, they found, was not easy.

One design school was experimenting with virtual prototyping, in collaboration with their engineering colleagues, to find new ways of teaching this core design skill in relation to less tangible services, as a key part of the curriculum. But this is an area that requires a great deal of further development as part of any future design curriculum.

4 Seeing the bigger picture

The judging panel of the Design Directions prison visit project frequently commented that the students had failed to engage sufficiently with the multiple dynamics of the prison system. Not only are there multiple stakeholders – prisoners, their families, officers, volunteers, to name a few – but there are also wider social, political and cultural forces shaping what is possible. The public service context demands that students find new ways of making these forces integral to their solution.

One of Ruth's biggest weaknesses was her failure to engage in any particular depth with the politics that surround the allocation

*Design practice has done a marvellous job of inventing practical skills for drawing objects... but what has always been missing from these marvellous drawings... are an impression of the controversies and the many contradicting stakeholders that are born within these.*¹³
—Bruno Latour

We've got to think about how we communicate the value of our work.—Student

of limited resources. The prisons context is particularly laden with political tension, with competing views on rehabilitation, reform and punishment. Public perception often drives decisions as much as reality, and so when designers fail to engage with these dynamics they risk their ideas being dismissed as unrealistic or impossible to implement.

Part of the solution is to create more opportunities to immerse designers in settings where politics are more of a motive than profit. Initiatives like the Real Work Experience,¹⁴ set up by Thinkpublic¹⁵ and being designed by a group of Bristol students, aim to connect design students with organisations and places where they can test their skills in 'social' settings. This exciting development will allow students to immerse themselves in the everyday life of public services, with all the political messiness that entails.

That said, design must continue to make the case for the value of 'intelligent naivety' – the ability to see and question norms and practices that have become invisible to those people working within a particular setting. Design schools need to train their designers to become skilled at quickly learning the languages of new settings, whilst maintaining the valuable role they play as outsiders.

5 Selling the idea

In responding to the prison visit brief, many of the students had grasped the concept of the visit as a journey; however, in presenting their work, only a few found really powerful ways of communicating this concept through story boarding and mapping. It is clear that they were not familiar with the language and the visual methods of practising public service designers. Again, this points to the importance of equipping students with a powerful and confident visual language.

The students shortlisted for the prison visit brief all benefited from Engine's encouragement to think in terms of propositions rather than simply concepts.

Design Directions reveals that design education does not necessarily build student skills in developing business cases and propositions; in communicating their ideas in terms of benefits to users, providers or society more widely.

In fact, Design Council research has shown that while 93 per cent of designers see these business skills as essential to their work, only 54 per cent of heads of design schools share this view.¹⁶ The emergence of a number of business and design postgraduate courses suggest that the winds of change may be beginning to blow, but there is still some distance to go in helping students understand how to turn their ideas into propositions that people might actually invest in.

*Designers need to be called upon not only to conceive objects, but also to devise scenarios and strategies.*¹⁷
—Paola Antonelli

They are not always using these [more strategic] skills in the real world – the higher-level skills around strategic thinking and working with people aren't fully appreciated... it's really important that we don't just teach students to respond to briefs.
—Tutor

After I graduated, I went for an interview with a council. When they asked your degree, you say product design and you know what they are thinking. It would be different if I'd done sociology.
—Recent design graduate

Design wants to explore new territories, but it mustn't lose its heartland.—Tutor

17. 'Design and the Elastic Mind', Paola Antonelli in Seed Magazine, seedmagazine.com

18. A survey of UK businesses shows that design is increasingly being embraced as a core part of strategic capability; of those firms who see design as integral to their work, 84% believe their competitiveness has increased, and 79% think that design's role in this has grown over the last decade.

6 Finding problems as well as solutions

Traditionally, designers are taught to respond to briefs and come up with solutions. They are problem solvers. However there has been a growing emphasis in recent years on the notion of designers as problem finders as well as problem solvers. In other words, design can help organisations to define the nature of the problem as well as how to respond to it. Like other design firms, many public service design agencies are working 'upstream', defining their brief in collaboration with their clients; doing what one tutor called 'fuzzy front-end thinking'.

The inroads that design has made to strategic teams in commercial businesses have been far greater than similar work in the public sector.¹⁸ Here, the pressure public servants are under to improve operational efficiency rather than review strategic questions, means there is far less appetite for using designers – or indeed other forms of expertise – to think big.

But as budgetary pressures grow, so too will the pressure to find fundamentally new ways of delivering public services. Public servants are increasingly recognising that the process of defining and redefining the problem is a rich source of innovation potential, but only a small minority are then going on to commission designers to help in this process.

This situation was frustrating for students with ambitions to have social value, who found that their career choices were much more limited than their vision for how they could put their design training into practice.

As the market grows and diversifies, designers need to assert with greater confidence the distinctive value they can bring to strategic design in public services. Working on social design projects and public service issues is not about ditching core design principles and becoming the next generation of management consultants with some drawing skills. It is about enhancing the skills that are so central to the design discipline, and using them in more open and participatory ways.

13. *A Cautious Prometheus? A few steps toward a philosophy of design*, Bruno Latour's keynote speech to the Design History Society (2008)

14. www.therealworkexperience.com

15. www.thinkpublic.com

16. *The Business of Design*, op cit

When it comes to the end of year graduate show, everyone's still going to be drawn to that great-looking chair. —Recent design graduate

Most of the schools are behind the times – students want more but the measures and assessments are out of step with the commitment to service design, as they are still very focused on 3D. —Student

No one has cracked this question yet (of how to grade service design projects). We'd discourage attempts by students to do this kind of work at the moment, as there's no mechanism to reward it yet. —Tutor

While a handful of design educators are thinking hard about how to develop and embed these kinds of skills into their courses, it remains the case that the current curricula, placements and grading systems of most courses are still grounded in a design paradigm that is dominated by product and industrial disciplines.

It won't be easy to simply graft the principles outlined in this chapter onto existing design courses. Many of the students and indeed some of the tutors commented on the importance of redesigning design education more fundamentally to reflect the emerging agenda around social design.

Two issues in particular came up repeatedly for the students. First was the need to reappraise grading and marking systems. These will need to incorporate assessments of the extent to which students have appreciated the user experience: the sophistication of the personae and journey maps they created; their engagement in the complex dynamics between different users of a single service. And as one tutor argued, more work needs to be done to create marking systems that recognise the success with which students turn their research work into usable design knowledge, a positive user experience and a better outcome.

The second issue was centred on the breadth of placements and live projects on design courses. The vast majority of these are still concentrated in more traditional design spheres, and schools will need to do more to build relationships with local councils, government agencies, and charities to broaden the opportunities and contexts in which student designers can test themselves. Engine and Kent County Council are prototyping one way of making this real, through a joint internship that is offered to a design graduate. Design schools seeking to broaden out opportunities for their socially motivated students could easily adopt the model that is being developed here.

So, there is much that could be done to ensure that design education meets the desires and ambition of its cohort of student designers with social agendas. But at the heart of all of this is the need to create a design education experience that, as well as building skills, encourages budding designers to think about what they are doing, why they are doing it, and what impact it might have on the wider world.

If industrial designers are beginning to reappraise their profession, the emerging philosophy of service design – particularly in those projects concerned with social issues and public services – is also contributing to debates about design's future direction.

Along with mounting anxiety about environmental sustainability, service design is concerned with finding ways of empowering people to take action themselves. This is about designing people *in* to solutions, rather than ignoring their significance and designing them out; it is about seeing the social fabric of local communities as the site and source of solutions rather than the destination to which public services are delivered.

Too much energy has gone into defining ever-more specific sub-categories within the discipline of design. Much more exciting than a raft of new service design modules and university courses is the momentum gathering behind design processes that put people and planet before products.

Designers need to work together – looking both to history and the future – to create a set of practices that will make design fit for the modern world. This chapter's title is taken from the original Bauhaus manifesto which argued, in 1919, that craftsmen – designers, in today's terms – needed to take as much responsibility for the meaning of what they made as for its form. The context of industrial mechanisation has changed, but 100 years later and in our times, the sociologist Richard Sennett presses for debate about the consequences of what we make.¹⁹

But just as it is important to look back to the past to shape this new agenda, so the design industry must look to its future. The social impulses of students like Ruth, and countless others who worked on RSA Design Directions briefs, are the seeds of this future.

These students have grown up in a world where inequality and environmental damage have been constant and exposed, and where the impact of global forces on daily life is becoming more apparent. Technological advances mean that they are more connected with others anywhere in the world, and more accustomed to open, collaborative and virtual ways of working. Culturally, their values are less deferential to ancient social conventions than their parents' and grandparents' were.

As these students question whether or not unfettered growth and relentless consumption are the best proxies for success, they have the potential to develop a new orthodoxy for design; to recast the character and re-shape the place of design in the 21st century. The potential and power of design in helping us to live better is enormous. The question now is whether or not design education, and the professionals it discharges into the world, will step up to the task ahead.

I genuinely think that the push is coming from the new talent pool. We should keep our eyes on them as I think they are going to change our futures right under our noses. —Public service designer

¹⁹ *The Craftsman*, R. Sennett (Allen Lane, 2008)

The author

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