The DEGW Archive – A personal narrative of a serendipitous career

George Cairns, QUT Business School, Brisbane, Australia

Introduction – Starting a Journey of Open Inquiry

Invited to make this short submission, I pondered giving an overview of my experience with DEGW, but decided that major projects will be covered by others in the Archive. So, I offer a personal account of how DEGW opened the door that led me from working in a small architecture practice in Glasgow to become Professor of Management and Head of School, first at Essex University in the UK then at RMIT University in Australia – a career that has by and large followed chance, not a plan. Having dropped out of architecture studies in my early twenties and been unable to return for personal reasons, I found myself completing my Part II and Part III Examinations in Architecture in my late thirties – along with a PhD that I had been invited to undertake on the Glasgow School of Art building as an extension of my Part II Dissertation. In preparation for my Professional Practice Examinations, I was advised to move from being a big fish in a small pond – Associate in a three-person practice – to join a larger organization where I would gain wider, and more 'professional' experience. My attention was directed to an advert from DEGW Scotland, who were looking to engage short-term contract staff. Knowing nothing other than that this was a large organization (such was knowledge in my pre-Internet days), I applied, was interviewed and invited to join as a full-time member of staff. As such, I became immersed in the knowledge community of DEGW.

The Journey Unfolds

As I completed my qualification and registration as an architect, I assumed greater responsibility on major fit-out projects, including new call centres for British Airways in Glasgow and Newcastle. However, my interest had been sparked by observing the earlier stages of the design journey; the consultancy process of understanding the business case, exploring user needs, and developing the strategic briefing documents that informed the design solutions that I was charged with overseeing in implementation. Also, I became interested in the concept of post-occupancy evaluation, and the question of how, and later if, design worked to improve user experience in the workplace. I quickly found that DEGW provided an environment in which this interest was converted to experience. However, the organization also provided the chance that led me into the academic world.

DEGW Scotland CEO, Peter Jennett, was taking extended leave to sail the Atlantic and asked if I would deliver a series of lectures on Strategic Design at Strathclyde University. I accepted and went with trepidation to face my first ever 'audience' – I think I talked *at* them, not with them, for the first few weeks. However, I enjoyed the experience so much that, when I was approached directly the following year, I told Peter that he was too busy to do it, and that I would happily deliver the course.

The content of Strategic Design was, of course, based on DEGW thinking, on developing business cases, user briefing and design strategies. This approach was viewed by some of the full-time academics as anathema, prostituting architectural purity to the interests of capitalism. While staff tutors appeared apathetic at best, antagonistic at worst, I found that students were very open to discussing and writing about the issues raised in the course – valuing what they saw as offering additional rather than alternative perspectives on design activity and on architecture as a career.

Around my third year of being a part-time academic and full-time consultant with DEGW, I was invited to apply for the post of Lecturer in Design Management and Practice, becoming a full-time academic and retaining a part-time link to DEGW. With my experience and examples from DEGW, I was soon invited to participate in the Strathclyde Graduate Business School's Master of Facilities

Management, with support from both the School of Architecture and DEGW. Over time, I transitioned from being an architect academic who taught in business to become a business academic who did some teaching in architecture. In the Business School, I became involved in MBA teaching and was introduced to the concept of 'scenario planning' as a method of strategic inquiry. It struck me that scenario method had much in common with design – or, at least, design as I understood it – as a process of exploration of possibility and potential through divergent thinking to seek the best option for a complex problem, rather than the 'right' answer to a bounded one.

Beyond DEGW

Once embedded in the Business School, time pressures led me to cut links with practice. However, as I read more about management and organization theory in academic literature, I realised that these fields were almost devoid of consideration of the physical environment of work. The 'human relations' school of thinking perceived the physical environment as a potential hygiene factor, but not a motivator. Over time, I extended my personal research and critical thinking on the relationships between end users, their organizational context and their physical environment.

Developing theoretical discussion in papers in top social science (Cairns, 2002) and built environment (Cairns, 2008) journals, I engaged with the multiple facets of the 'social construction of reality' (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In doing so, I contemplated the role of power in determining which realities are formalised in organizational contexts to the exclusion of others. Here, I drew on the lineage of philosophies from Foucault, back through Nietzsche to Aristotle. My thinking now challenged ideas from DEGW on the nature of the 'new' or 'changing workplace' (Duffy, 1992, 1997).

While most of my work in recent years has revolved around developing and testing theory and methods for scenario inquiry, I recently returned to consider the potential role of design – specifically what I term 'designerly thinking – to inform effective social innovation (Cairns, 2017).

Reflection

My period of formal engagement as part of DEGW was relatively short in a career that spans over 45 years, two continents and an eclectic set of published outputs. As pointed out above, several of these works challenged what I had learned within DEGW. However, I would openly acknowledge that my own thinking developed out of my DEGW experience, and my work cannot stand without reference to the DEGW canon. In addition to prompting my critical thinking on design and architecture, DEGW provided the impetus and opportunity for me to enter the academic realm of management and organisation studies, and the stimulus to continue a journey of open inquiry even now. I am delighted to remain part of the global DEGW community, some twenty years after parting.

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