Realising the geo/graphic landscape of the everyday: a practice-led investigation into an interdisciplinary geo/graphic design process

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REALISING THE GEO/GRAPHIC LANDSCAPE OF THE EVERYDAY: A PRACTICE LED INVESTIGATION INTO AN INTERDISCIPLINARY GEO/GRAPHIC DESIGN PROCESS

CREATIVE DISCIPLINE: Graphic design

RESEARCH METHODS:
- Literature review
- Ethnography
- Action research

NUMBER OF DESIGN CASE STUDIES UNDERTAKEN BY THE RESEARCHER: 9

LENGTH OF THESIS: 75000 words

EXAMINATION FORMAT: Thesis and oral examination

DURATION OF STUDY: 3 years and 4 months full time

EXPERIENCE OF DESIGN PRACTICE BEFORE START OF PHD:
- Foundation course in Art & Design
- BA(Hons) Graphic Design
- MA Typo/Graphics
- Freelance graphic designer (10 years)

PERSONAL MOTIVATION FOR UNDERTAKING PRACTICE DURING PHD:
- Fundamental belief that creative methods can be used within the research process
- To define a geo/graphic design process that establishes the potential of print based creative research methods in cultural geography and the social sciences more generally
- A desire to further develop my own practice within a theoretical framework

AIM OF THE RESEARCH:
At the time of the PhD, the use of creative methods within cultural geography was on the rise, yet few, if any geographers saw the potential in print-based graphic design in relation to the understanding and representation of everyday life and place, preferring to draw on media such as film or sound, framing such work within the context of ‘art.’ The aim of the research was to propose and define an interdisciplinary geo/graphic design process that would also reveal typography and the form of the book as capable of creating multi-sensory, interactive spaces of exploration for the reader.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:
- Can print-based graphic design be profitably utilised within geographic debates about the understanding and representation of place?
- What might constitute a geo/graphic design process?

OBJECTIVES:
- Undertake a literature review with respect to the contemporary understanding of everyday life and place; the problems of representation within such definitions; the use of creative methods with cultural geography; and, a theoretical approach to the understanding of typography and the form of the book, in order to define a methodological framework for the interdisciplinary study
- Develop a series of design test projects, the analysis of which enable the articulation of the geo/graphic design process

Use of photography to document place

Cultural probe pack

Sketchbooks used to capture reflection in, and on, action
SUMMARY:
Contemporary geographic definitions of place describe it as something that is open, not static, as on-going and relational, with much of our everyday experience resisting capture. To contend with this, many geographers have begun to draw on creative methods such as film-making or sound recording as a way to contend with such issues. However, it seems print is perceived as incapable of offering the researcher similar opportunities, being seen as too ‘fixed’ in nature. Synthesising theory and practice from both graphic design and cultural geography, the PhD proposes that the ‘geo/graphic design process’ offers a further creative method in relation to the understanding and representation of everyday life and place. The process was developed through an analysis of nine ‘design test projects’, each generated and inspired by ethnographic research undertaken in the London Borough of Hackney. The analysis of each of the test projects was undertaken using action research and the finding established the key elements of the practice-led research, thus enabling the articulation of the specifics of the geo/graphic design process.

RATIONALE FOR THE INCLUSION OF DESIGN PRACTICE UNDERTAKEN BY THE RESEARCHER:
The research focus was the use of creative research methods within cultural geography and the potential of print based graphic design to be able to contribute to the understanding and representation of everyday life and place, therefore, the use of practice was inherent within the research question.

HOW THE PHD DESIGN PRACTICE DIFFERED FROM THAT OF COMMERCIAL PRACTICE:
In some ways, I would say the PhD design practice didn’t differ greatly from that of commercial practice, as the aim was to draw on the traditional process of graphic design and recast it as having potential within a different field. However, as the practice was undertaken within an academic context in order to define and develop a new methodological approach, there clearly were some differences.
• In professional practice, a client would usually require one solution to a brief. Here, nine different test projects were developed so that different approaches and responses to the understanding and representation of place through geo/graphic means could be analysed.
• In a professional context, it is the design work that is the end result, as this was practice-led research, the design test projects was part of a process to develop and define the specifics of the geo/graphic design process.
• Clients set briefs and deadlines. In relation to the PhD, and the generation of the design test projects, the specific ‘briefs’ were developed through the ethnographic research, and although none of the individual projects took an overtly long period of time, the parameters for both initial brief and deadlines were wider than in most commercial work.

THESIS AVAILABLE AT:
http://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?did=1&uin=uk.bl.ethos.543446

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