

## Absence of Structure

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**Abstract:** *In mainstream design practice, the disciplines of interior design and landscape architecture most commonly come together in the context of an architectural project. In a typical project team, the two professions will not readily intersect or overlap as the architecture is always in-between, and although they may consult with each other, the two disciplines may not necessarily collaborate.*

*Collaboration is more than simply teamwork and the necessary consultation that takes place amongst members of a project team. True collaboration between disciplines occurs when practitioners consciously step beyond their professional boundaries and engage in a new process of design that is informed by their collaborators from other professional areas.*

*Focusing on the experiences of the interior design and landscape architecture members of two teams in a recent design competition the paper investigates what can occur when interior and landscape practitioners work together as members of multi-disciplinary team to address a series of design briefs that are not necessarily architectural, but are deliberately open, experimental and address a multitude of scales.*

**Keywords:** *collaboration, interior design, landscape architecture*

### The dominant mother

In the hierarchy of creative professions concerned with the design of the built environment and the forms, objects and materials that fill it, the practices of interior design and landscape architecture share some characteristics, yet rarely intersect. In mainstream commercial design practice, interior design and landscape architecture practitioners most commonly come together as members of a project team in the context of an architectural project. The development of the design professions in this country has most closely followed and been significantly influenced by the British traditions of exclusive knowledge and institutional control, regulation and protection. Within this paradigm, both landscape architecture and interior design historically developed from occupational areas relatively separate from architecture (Bell, 1999 and Saint, 1983), yet in contemporary practice they both frequently occupy a position under architecture's professional primacy.

Saint (1983) presents a history of architecture as a profession that has struggled with the attribution of authorship where collaboration has always been a problematic proposition due to the contradiction implicit in architectural practice, as both individual and collective.

Architecture as the *mother* has simultaneously nurtured and dominated the practices of landscape architecture and, to a greater degree, interior design. As it has with other occupational areas the architecture profession has provided great opportunity for the development of the two professions, while at the same time imposing a certain degree of anonymity upon them. When a project brief is primarily architectural and utilises any of the common forms of project procurement, landscape architecture and interior design practitioners are usually appointed as secondary or sub-consultants to work under the direction of the primary architectural consultant. Previous research undertaken by the author indicates that some architects only work with interior designers when they need additional resources, or when specialist skills are required. This arrangement is more akin to the hiring of services, with various team members acting under instruction without a significant shared contribution to the design process (Cys & Ward, 2003, p. 5). In some cases, landscape architects and, more frequently, interior design practitioners are employees within the architectural practice that is the primary consultant. This situation can further exacerbate the obscurity of the contributions of landscape and interior practitioners in contemporary design practice.

In the highly competitive area of architectural commissions, with relatively short time allowances and low fee percentages for the design phases of a project, it is not uncommon for interior design and landscape architecture consultants to supply their design expertise (as a provisional sum) after the bulk of the architectural, engineering and services design, development and documentation is complete. Such a situation separates the interior and landscape practitioners' design contribution into 'packages' that do not occur in concert with the rest of the project.

Physically and professionally, architecture stands between the landscape and the interior, contributing to lay recognition of landscape architecture as being only concerned with the space immediately outside of [someone else's] architecture and interior design (or 'fitout') as being only concerned with the space inside of [someone else's] architecture.

### **The c-word**

It is architecture that brings the practices of landscape architecture and interior design together, yet the characteristics of this architectural context can in fact prohibit the overlapping and intersection of the two disciplines and arrest design collaboration. Landscape architects and interior designers may consult with each other as members of a project team, yet collaboration is not promoted. Although concerned with mainstream practice as its subject, this paper does not subscribe to a mainstream definition of collaboration. The words

'cooperation', 'consultation' and even 'partnership' are more accurate descriptors of the processes that occur in mainstream design practice. The term 'architects-in-collaboration' for example, more often than not describes complimentary partnering that occurs between practices to become more competitive in the qualification and selection process for commissions. Some practitioners describe the collaboration that occurs in this situation as a division of responsibility for certain stages of the project based upon the expertise of the partnered practices (Cys & Ward, p. 1). In response, this paper considers collaboration as a multi-disciplinary design endeavour that may occur at the conceptual and development stages of a project and defines collaboration in terms of both process and outcome.

Collaborative design is not just a collective or teamwork methodology, nor is it simply the necessary consultation that occurs amongst members of a project team. 'True collaboration between disciplines occurs when practitioners consciously step beyond their professional boundaries and engage in a new process of design that is informed by their collaborators from other professional areas. A collaborative design process requires designers to recognise, understand and practise a way of designing that is not necessarily their own. In successful collaborations, the designed outcomes will reflect this process by embodying the extension of skills beyond the collaborators' individual disciplines' (Cys & Ward, p. 2). This type of collaboration is consciously chosen, deliberate, often marginal and highly experimental. As a result, true collaboration rarely enters commercial interior design and landscape architecture practice in the context of architectural projects. The structure of standard project procurement processes do not provide opportunity for such collaboration and the inflexible nature of submission and selection processes for large projects, particularly public projects, do not readily allow for the deliberate commissioning of collaborative design practice.

In published literature, collaborations occurring within the visual arts disciplines are well documented. Green (2001) acknowledges the deliberate nature of collaborative practice suggesting that collaboration must be intentionally planned and equally desired by the collaborators. Green also recognises the sensitive issue of authorship for artists who, as with architects have been traditionally represented as singular figures where the emphasis is on the individual. Most pertinent to this discussion on design collaboration is Green's observation that the collaborations of modernist art 'were often linked with the marginal' (p. xvi) and developed from within an alternative stream within the visual arts. Other commentators such as de Freitas (2004) propose that art (and design) collaboration '...has changed the nature of cultural production and spawned new, hybrid practices' (p. 2). These positions suggest that visual arts collaborations generally develop outside of more stable and conventional modes of practice.

Another revealing interpretation of collaboration, this time between architecture and the visual arts, is provided by Fernie (2003) who identifies collaborations that represent a shift away from individualistic practice by some contemporary architects who work with artists '...on an equal footing, making buildings, conversations, exhibitions and books together from the initial stages of a project's life' (p. 102). Fernie acknowledges that the success of these collaborations is linked to the recognition by both the architect and artist that their respective disciplines are distinct. 'What is important about these collaborations is the fact that the artists involved are not, and have no interest in being, architects and vice versa. There is no da Vinci-like desire to blur boundaries and morph from artist to architect to engineer' (p. 102). Such an approach to collaboration is perhaps difficult to apply to the relationship between architecture and its two kindred disciplines of landscape architecture and interior design, where there exists an ever-present desire from both parties to blur professional boundaries, if indeed they are recognised in the first place.

Unlike collaborations between visual artists and collaborations between designers and artists, literature concerned with multi-disciplinary collaborations within the various design professions is scarce. Carter's *Material Thinking* (2004) is possibly of most direct relevance although it too focuses largely on his collaborations with artists rather than on practitioners from the design disciplines. Carter's discussion of collaboration recognises the need for the collaborators to engage willingly in a deliberate practice that is free from the constraints of traditional professional structures and '...to abandon the statuesque poses associated with *orthotic* thinking and to be light-footed' (p. 179). There is also a suggestion of the potential of the collaborators to combine their knowledge and skills to create with new and different processes, just as the materials that are the stuff of their making may combine to 'rejoin themselves in different ways' (p. 187).

There appears to be more literature about collaborative design practice in educational research, particularly in relation to design studio pedagogy. The majority of published material in this area however, describes collaboration in studio projects predominantly in terms of the problematic nature of teamwork and communication between students from different disciplines. It rarely addresses the nature of the collaborative design process that occurred or the qualities of the studio outcomes. (for example Russ & Dickenson, 1999 and North, Stirling & Ellis, 2000). Literature that is far more revealing about the collaborative process and its effect on design outcomes describes studios in which the project brief falls outside the immediate professional territory of the participating students. Magee (2000) discusses an urban design project for an architecture and interior design collaborative studio and Samuels (2001) discusses a set design project involving the collaboration of architecture students

with a photographer, a video artist and two actors. Dealing with a design brief outside their immediate area of specialisation required students in both of these studios to step beyond their 'professional territory' and reportedly encouraged students to appreciate the issues on which other disciplines placed emphasis, therefore allowing them to learn about other ways of designing.

The practices of landscape architecture and interior design do not readily come together in a truly collaborative sense in the context of the early conceptual design and design development stages of mainstream commercial practice. It could be suggested that in fact there is no need for the two practices to collaborate as the architecture physically separates the professional and physical territory of the two disciplines. The historic characteristics of architecture as the dominant profession and the restrictions of project flexibility in mainstream commercial practice may also restrict opportunities for design collaboration. In addition, it is possible that the closeness of each of the two professions in question, to the architecture that is the common catalyst for their involvement on a project team, also limits collaborative creativity amongst all three disciplines.

### **Unowned space**

What then occurs when landscape architects and interior designers participate willingly in a multi-disciplinary team to address open and non-architectural project briefs which require them to propose conceptual design outcomes?

During 2004, a multi-disciplinary collaborative design competition was held in Adelaide, South Australia. The competition, called the *match* tournament was conceived and organised by the South Australian Collaborations Steering Committee, a committee comprised of representatives of eleven of South Australia's arts and design based organisations: Applied Ideas, ArtsSA, Australian Graphic Design Association (SA Chapter), Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (SA Chapter), Community Arts Network SA, Contemporary Arts Centre of SA, Craftsouth, Design Institute of Australia (SA Chapter), Planning Institute of Australia (SA), Planning SA and the Royal Australian Institute of Australia (SA Chapter).

Entry to the tournament was open to members and associates of each of these organisations (that is, design and arts practitioners). The registration process required participants to nominate their own discipline area as well as up to three other disciplines with which they would like collaborate. Once the registration period closed, participants were placed by the organisers into multi-disciplinary teams of four based upon their discipline preferences. All teams represented a range of disciplines and no team had more than one member from a

discipline. Between April and November 2004 the teams competed in four 'Design Challenges' that required multi-scaled conceptual responses to Adelaide-focused design briefs.

- Design Challenge 1 was for teams to use a restricted list of food-stuffs to parallel building materials and demonstrate a reference to built forms/structures.
- Design Challenge 2 required teams to design an illuminated piece of street furniture to be located under Adelaide's Morphett Street Bridge, an acknowledged blighted inner city public space.
- Design Challenge 3 was to design a transportable shelter for a person without a home. The proposal required teams to address a specific location within the city for their shelter.
- Design Challenge 4 required teams to propose creative ways of maximising community and economic activity within Adelaide's Riverbank area, a prominent public space regarded as Adelaide's arts and cultural precinct.

Teams were given six to eight weeks to develop their design solution for each Challenge. At the conclusion of each Challenge, the team proposals were judged, scored and publicly exhibited. The core judging panel consisted of three judges – an architect, a landscape architect and an interior designer. Each had demonstrated significant experience in collaborative practice and judged all four challenges. A different specialist guest judge with expertise specific to each brief was invited to judge each Challenge.

104 practitioners initially registered to participate in *match* and represented a range of design and visual arts disciplines including planning, urban design, metal/jewellery design, graphic design, new media, theatre and set design, furniture design, exhibition design, sculpture, painting, architecture, landscape architecture and interior design. Of the 104 participants, eleven were landscape architects and eight were interior designers. An analysis of preferred team member discipline that participants wished to be placed in a team with showed: the landscape architect practitioners' most frequent request was to work with exhibition designers, followed equally by architects, interior designers, lighting designers and new media designers. Interior design practitioners most frequently nominated graphic designers as the discipline they would most like to be placed in a team with, followed in equal frequency by landscape architects, urban designers, metalwork/jewellery designers and new media designers.

Of the original twenty-six teams, four contained both an interior designer and a landscape architect. Two of these four teams (Team A and Team B) completed all of the tournament's four challenges. Team A comprised of a landscape architect, an interior designer, an architect and a sculptor (installation and public art). Team B comprised of a landscape architect, an interior designer, an architect and a glass/ceramic designer. At the conclusion of the tournament, the author invited the landscape and interior practitioners from both of these teams to complete a written questionnaire evaluating their experience of working collaboratively with a practitioner from the other discipline. The questionnaire asked the interior and landscape practitioners to describe the collaboration that occurred with the member of the other discipline in their team; to evaluate their experience of this collaboration; to identify how this collaborative process was evident in the design outcomes produced for each challenge; and to comment on how this collaboration was different from the way they normally practised.

The respondents' descriptions of the collaborative process within the two teams commonly referred to 'numerous team discussions', 'collective working sessions' and 'equal contribution'. The interior designer and the landscape architect from Team A both commented that the collaboration they had with each other was equal to the collaboration that they experienced with the other members of their team. 'The collaboration between us was always part of the team effort' (Team A interior design respondent). The landscape architect from Team B commented that the interior design practitioner in his team '... didn't fall into the typecast interior design bias' he had before participating in the *match* tournament and that he had been 'motivated' by his contact with the interior designer in a positive sense (Team B landscape architect respondent).



Figure 1: Team B, Design Challenge 3 (portable shelter).



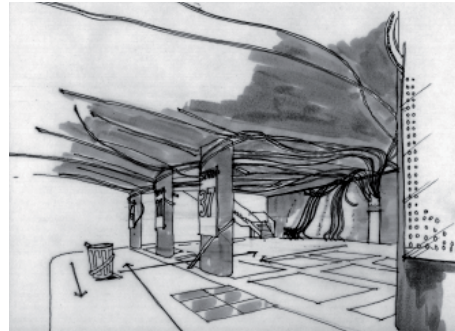
Figure 2: Team A, Design Challenge 3 (portable shelter).

All respondents evaluated their experience of collaboration with the member from the other discipline as a successful experience from which they felt they learnt a great deal. The landscape architect from Team A commented she and the interior designer in her team ‘...were able to discuss ideas without feeling like we were stepping over the line all the time’ (Team A landscape architecture respondent). The respondents commonly described the enthusiasm and commitment of their fellow team members as contributing to the success of the collaboration.

When asked how the collaborative process was evident in the design outcomes proposed by their team, two of the four respondents described their design proposals as reflecting the fact that the collaboration encouraged team members to move beyond their individual professional boundaries. ‘The group was cognisant of the key elements of each other’s respective design fields – so we did not just contribute to the final result based on our particular discipline. At times though we did share our approaches to design and our respective “tools” of trade or philosophies...’ (Team A interior design respondent). The landscape architect from Team B provided a specific example of the manifestation of the collaboration in their team’s design proposal for the second Challenge (Figure 3): ‘Challenge 2 had a strong sculptural element. None of us are sculptors but we were talking a lot about form and shape and the proposal is based on the human hand’ (Team B landscape architecture respondent).



*Figure 3: Team B, Design Challenge 2 (street furniture).*



*Figure 4: Team A, Design Challenge 2 (street furniture).*

All respondents saw the collaboration as being different from the way they normally practised. Two of the respondents identified the activity of all team members (from different disciplines) responding to exactly the same brief at the same time as being quite different from the way they would normally participate in a design project. Another respondent

described his normal experience as a project team member in commercial practice as being highly influenced by fee and contractual structures that resulted in the project consultants '... trying to keep their professional territory to themselves'. He described his team's collaboration as '...generally operating across the board – straddling across all areas – rather than sticking to our professional areas' (Team B landscape architect respondent). This respondent also described the conceptual design and making process that occurred within his team as being quite different from his everyday practice. 'It was more workshoppy. We actually did things in the group together rather than have a meeting and then run away to work on our own'.

### **Absence of structure**

The *match* tournament provided an environment that was relatively artificial compared with most participants' everyday professional practice. As indicated by the tournament aims, this was quite deliberate and attempted to encourage the innovation and experimentation of practice (process and outcome) that comes from multi-disciplinary design collaboration. Despite the high attrition rate, teams such as Team A and Team B that completed the tournament were highly successful in their collaborative working processes as well as in the innovation and experimentation demonstrated by their design process and outcomes.

For the interior designers and landscape architects who participated in the competition, the collaboration provided an alternative way of thinking and making; a different way of practising design. The responses of the landscape architects and interior designers from the two *match* teams confirms much of what has previously been discussed about creative collaboration. The potency of experiencing a multi-disciplinary, collaborative, non-architectural project for interior design and landscape architecture practitioners, however, should not be overlooked. Such collaboration offers practitioners from these disciplines respite and freedom from what can often be a subjugated professional position in mainstream practice. It may also nourish their creativity and build their confidence to seek practice opportunities removed from conventional physical and professional structures.

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