The Non-denominational Design Studio : Lessons for the Proficiency of Organizations
CHI Workshop Submission – 1/25/04

Design : the intentional transformation of an existing situation into a preferred situation.

From this definition of design, we (as individuals and as organizations) understand most of our daily life activities -- both professional and personal -- to be related to design. If we care about the quality of our life, we desire these daily efforts -- our intentional transformation of the situations we encounter -- to be as effective as possible. We want to accomplish the most possible with the resources available. When this involves familiar situations, we are comfortable. We find familiar problems and we solve them by applying familiar tools. If we are accomplished and creative, our solutions are very good.

The real world, however, tends to present itself not as familiar well-formed problems, but rather as messy, indeterminate situations. If we respond to these invariably unique situations by trying to see in them only conventionally familiar problems, our efforts will prove either lacking or completely useless. We all have found ourselves in this position. We have gone back and started over, we have re-doubled our efforts, we have checked our math again and again -- and the answer is still wrong. Regardless of how creative we are as problem solvers, we fail. This is inevitable. In our haste to find a familiar answer, we have "named" -- and are trying to solve -- the wrong problem.

What we learn from such failures -- if we desire to learn from them -- is that true creativity is based not in the solving of the problem, but in the naming of the problem we will apply ourselves to solving. The recognition of this distinction leaves most of us uneasy. Although we have excelled at solving known problems, we have had little experience with -- and even less encouragement for -- reflecting on whether we are solving the "right" problem. While we can see that to be the best designers possible we must develop this ability, we have no solid idea how to proceed to do so.

We need a new set of principles and perspectives to guide us in exploring this larger context - this realm of messy, indeterminate situations. We need a new set of principles and perspectives that are "non-denominational" -- that are broader than those of any specific discipline, that are owned by no one discipline and which can belong to and be understood and mastered by each and every one of us.

CHI – pg.2—1/25/04

I have worked for many years in a wide range of cross-disciplinary design collaborations -- in the built environment, in curriculum development, in public policy, in the delivery of services and in the augmentation of organizational capabilities. These collaborations have always been conducted with intelligent, enthusiastic people who are eager to share their expertise. In nearly every experience, the dynamic of the working process has tended toward quickly deconstructing the "messy, indeterminate

situation" into comfortably known problems. These processes are driven by the participants's eagerness to contribute their expertise. They begin, in effect, with the solution and then edit the situation to yield problems that fit their tools and techniques. This is not a path to systemic effectiveness, nor is it a path to the elegant expenditure of resources.

While I hold graduate degrees in both engineering sciences and architecture, my most important role in these collaborations has invariably been that of generalist: translator, facilitator and integrator. In this role, I have struggled to find a comprehensive and effective way to check this headlong rush to the "known" and redirect the collective enthusiasm and ability into a conscious and fruitful exploration of the "unknown."

I have become intrigued with how organizations -- both permanent and temporary -- sense and explore the messy, indeterminate situations in which they exist and how they extract from those situations the problems they choose to confront.

My work has become the development of a broad and integrated range of perspectives and principles that can be understood to underlie and precede traditional higher-order discipline-based design. These perspectives and principles are necessarily "non-denominational" -- that is, they are not restricted to or claimed by, nor solely comprehensible to any specific group or discipline. For that reason, I call them and the practice derived from them "non-denominational design." It is a practice accessible to each and every one of us and to each and every organization in which we participate.

I have found non-denominational design to be an effective foundation for robust collaborative practice. Its strength and effectiveness are supported from complementary sources: one internal: reflective practice, and the other external: Universal Design. The former, through reflection-in-action, fosters the continuous broadening of the designers's appreciation of both the situation with which they are struggling and the nature of their process for engaging in that struggle. The latter -- also a process of continuous awareness and interaction -- brings to the designers's assistance the interests, perspectives and experiences of the world external to their own.

CHI – pg.3—1/25/04

I work with organizations to develop their non-denominational design capabilities. This effort begins with the creation of an in-house "non-denominational design studio" -- a space that enables collective exploration of systemic relationships and change. This design studio exists simultaneously as a physical, a virtual, an intellectual and a cultural space. It is a shared set of perspectives on the critical importance of designing robust design processes and is a shared awareness of behaviors that are congruent and incongruent with the effective pursuit of good design. Most importantly, and most problematically for its initiation, it is a space free of the roles and responsibilities and the hierarchies and accountabilities of the day-to-day "implementation organization." It is a set of activities that function laterally across the traditionally vertical process of conventional organizations. Through its purpose being "doing the right thing," the non-denominational design studio complements and significantly strengthens the conventional process-- whose primary purpose is "doing the thing right."

From this foundation, these organizations are able to undertake productive –- and otherwise unimaginable -- explorations of critical, but previously undetected or consciously avoided, "messy, indeterminate situations."

I have explored cross-disciplinary collaborative design, based in these practices of the non-denominational design studio, with undergraduate and graduate students from many disciplines, NASA personnel, and public and corporate organizations and their leaders. Most have found the approach to be highly appropriate, highly engaging and highly beneficial.