

thought experiments in graphic design education: studio cinema

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In 2012, Daniel Eatock asked me and a few of my fellow (former) students to write about our experience with his laboratory at the University Iuav of Venice (MA in Graphic Design) in 2009. The text would have been published in a book exploring different approaches to design education. The laboratory was a unique experience, built in a participatory way, without a specific plan from the very beginning. Even if three years already passed, the experience of the lab was still fresh in my mind. I started thinking about what I would have written, and I talked about it with my boyfriend. With an education in social sciences, he had at the time a very faint idea of what design education was, which allowed the conversation to happen. That very conversation became then the final essay. I made also a drawing to accompany the text, picturing the "studio cinema" the essay is about.

A conversation between Benedetta Crippa, graphic designer, Daniel Eatock's student in 2009, and **Johan**, Benedetta's boyfriend, which happened on November 7th 2012, about June 15th 2009.

Hey Bene!

Hey! [...] Good news today. A professor of mine wrote me asking to contribute to a book about design education.

Sounds interesting. What about it?

Well, he has been my professor during my MA in Venice. We had a laboratory with him for three months. He is quite young, and it was a kind of unstructured, informal course, like "participatory". Some cool guys in London are making a book about design education, and he was asked to tell about his teaching experience in Venice.

But instead he contacted me and other students asking us to tell something about it from our point of view, which is, I guess, coherent with the philosophy of the course itself. I actually already have an idea for it. I was thinking of telling about a lesson we had.

Which kind of lesson?

Erh, as I said, the course was quite unstructured. I mean, he came the first day in the class, and said something like “hey guys, I don’t have any program about this at all. This year, the program is to build the program together, every day. And let’s see”. So, there have been some very busy and intense days, and other days instead we had no clue of what to do... everything was quite left to improvisation. So, that day as well, was not really a lesson... it was more like an experiment.

What happened?

Well, that very day we were supposed to watch a movie together, and all of a sudden he decided we would have built a *cinema* in the class. I mean, a movie screen. We had this tables in the room—you know, big, wood, heavy, art-school tables—and he decided to build the movie screen WITH the tables, putting them upright and projecting on them. Now, the tables were really heavy and everything... we started taking some of them, and put them upright... and we built a row with the first four tables. Then, he wanted to take another row of tables, and put it ON the first one! But I mean, the tables where more or less 5 cm tick. And very unbalanced. The legs where quite thin and light, the wood surface instead was big and very heavy. And we were supposed to put them on each other, on those five centimetres!

Mmm. Sounds a little bit dangerous.

Yeah, they were really hard to lift and so on. Daniel was really making the effort to put them together, with our help. He really wanted to make it. All of us except him, during all the process, were repeating all the time “this is never gonna work!”.

Somebody—me included!— got a little bit scared that everything could have fell down on us; somebody got bored; somebody could just not see the point of it and went home. I decided to stay, even if I was a little uncomfortable... I guess, just to be part of it. After a while, to fix the tables together, we decided to try to stick the legs to each other. First we tried with the tape... it was not strong enough. Then Daniel suggested to use some plastic foil, the kind you use for the food, and it worked very well, so we started stitching the legs together to keep the tables from falling down...

...Sorry. But, what all of this has to do with graphic design?

Wait, wait, I am getting there. So, now we had like, eight tables organized in two rows, it was like four metres wide and three metres high, occupying all the way to the ceiling, bothering the lamps etc. Actually it was the coolest movie screen ever. We couldn't even touch the tables. Even if the whole thing was quite stable, was still very delicate. Also, the tables were right in the front of the only exit door, so, if something had happened and somebody would have got hurt, it would have been difficult to get out, probably.

We ended up watching a terribly BORING French movie—in French—, I don't even remember what it was about.

You are right: from an outsider's point of view, this would have appeared totally nonsense. Nobody in the university board would have considered it as a design lesson. Right next door, there was a very classical, traditional typography laboratory, full of enthusiast students. Who would have approved our build-your-own-dangerous-cinema lesson?

But for me, that was one of the most inspiring and powerful lessons ever! That day really taught me something. It taught me to not give up. To have a propositive attitude, instead of a destructive one. To really make the effort to get something done, to imagine possibilities and realize them, even if you're scared and it looks crazy,

even everything and everybody around is telling you 'this is not gonna work'.

Also, to completely ignore the rules every now and then. If we had followed the university's guidelines, that 'lesson' would have never happened. If a member of the university staff would have been there, he or she would have never allowed us to set up a screen made of tables stichted together, as high as the room and mostly blocking the only way out.

But after all, that's what is at the very core of design. Imagine possibilites, overcome rules and prejudices, making it happen, despite of everything. I learned I had a lot to learn.

(with a smile) ...Well. This is very nice.

Ok, I have been talking too much... as usual.

2 days later

Johan, I have to work on that thing for my professor, and I think I will include you in it as well.

What?! Why?

Ehr, I am actually thinking about, sort of, transcribing the conversation we had, I think it might be interesting.

Why? I almost didn't say anything at all.

That's not true! First of all, it's a conversation, that is, a kind of exchange between me and you. Plus, you are the public, you are who watched this from the outside.

And above all, you asked the most important, the central question. What does all of this have to do with graphic design?

Sorry babe, what happened to the bottle of wine?

We were supposed to share it!

