The Crutch of Abstraction, or, What is It, Really?

I have now arrived at an age to have made plenty of mistakes:

Gross, Youthful Indiscretion:
- Renting a Vespa in Central Rome on Friday at 4pm in order to drive a very charming British doll to the beach, but w/out any knowledge of how to use a motorbike, yet alone at 60kph w/a passenger aboard in traffic.

Scraps and Bruises of the Professional Internship:
- Getting in way too deep, w/ too much responsibility on project and not knowing enough to ask for help
  or
- Working for a jerk and not quitting

But, really, these were not so much mistakes as a part of living. There really isn’t a lesson- other than the assurance that we all do stupid things, and if we survive, we generally learn to manage the situation in the future. The stupidest thing I have done, as a designer, in situation where I was fully in control and fully within my competency, involved the design of a boardroom table.

In 1989, I was working as a young architect, (working for the jerk) and, as a team member designing a corporate campus for the supercomputer company, Cray Research. I was assigned the plum job of designing the boardroom table. The budget was modest but the CEO was an extremely elegant, sophisticated man named John Rollwagen, and he trusted me. So, I was in a good spot. Additionally, I had connections w/the local designer and highly skilled craftsman- Dan Cramer- who in turn had an in w/the Weyerhaeuser company in Minneapolis. Dan suggested to me the potential of a huge solid wood top because he was able to cherry pick absolutely huge (18'+), clear fir boards from the “private reserve” at Weyerhaeuser. Everything went swimmingly- I arrived at fine Cartesian scheme, solved a number of difficult technical issues (wood expansion and contraction of 1/2” annually), the budget and schedule were well under control. Dan selected the lumber, slip matched for grain and color and edge glued up two absolutely huge 16’x 4’ tops- the limits of technique and material.

These two boards were extraordinary things to experience- solid wood: a supreme distillation of many, large, old trees. When, nearing, completion, Cramer called me- he had cut each half ellipse, shaped the waterfall edge, and second-sanded the two halves. He asked me: was I sure that I wanted the entire ellipse quartered? Of course! The design had progressed rationally from the initial conceptual sketch though development of an anodized aluminum x-y base w/paired symmetrical legs supporting each quadrant... The dumbest thing I ever do as a designer is to be blinded by my own abstractions (I continue to do it daily). I cut two magnificent boards in half for the sake of an intellectual construct; I was unable to recognize the profound and simple beauty in the experience of those two massive wood planks.
Today, I work in a studio as a designer and craftsman—primarily furniture and furnishings. I am able to get my arms around and make or control a great portion of my output. A large percentage of my work now results from design though direct action. One of my better recent efforts is a small cocktail table (sold here in town at Redlurered). To compete in retail against high volume overseas manufacturing, my designs must be very simple to make. The exceeding clever aspect of the Smarty is the visually pleasing intersection of pure forms that allow a simple and direct mechanical connection. I am often asked how the circular slot is made—sophisticated people ask me this expecting some CNC machine process. But, the method is simple—dumb really—resulting from my prototyping using a common hole-saw. You can buy one at a hardware store. It both cuts the slot and drills the hole for the threaded truss rod which links the base and at the top in compression. I designed—made these connections—through the direct experience of things.
Another lesson in Directness, relevant to all here tonight is one of scale: How Big is It? Computers are common to us all, and a fabulously powerful tool for representation. The highly malleable audiovisual output is created through massive mathematical abstraction—accessed and controlled by an iteration of the 19th century typewriter. Inelegant, yes, but ubiquitous and fully incorporated into our lives. This present computing process has become convention because it provides so much generalized potential for all of us. The layer upon layer of translated, transposed abstraction is part of the deal we have all made in exchange for speed. And with speed, scale becomes relative. Because of this, the Achilles Heel of computing is the accurate conveyance of scale.

So, Keep by your desk a scaled ruler, a tape measure, and a World Atlas (a book w/maps). They are also tools of abstraction, but are many steps closer to our lived and experienced reality. Train yourself to ask always: How Big is It, Really? Remember that the designer’s success—any success is rooted in the visceral understanding and manipulation of scale.

Do not be lulled into sleep—numbed from a real experience—by the abstract concepts you leverage into physical reality.

Train yourself to ask always: What is It, Really?

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