RoundTable around the Design PhD beyond Academia: Multiplier Event in New York (E1)

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The findings of this report served as a basis for the Provocations tool.

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Topic & Need

Historically, a PhD was a prerequisite solely for university teaching roles. However, in recent times, it has evolved into training for a spectrum of research-related positions across companies, governments, and various institutions. Over the last three decades, the PhD in Design has not only expanded in size but has also solidified its position. Therefore, we find ourselves at a critical juncture to establish a more robust connection and tangible impact on society. In response to this opportunity, three roundtable discussions were organised to delve into the multifaceted dimensions of Design PhDs and their value beyond academia. Our need was to gather insights and share perspectives with external stakeholders, understanding the value they ascribe to PhD in Design education.

The Multiplier Event in NY (E1) was a two-day event focused on exploring the future of the Design PhD beyond academia. Particularly, E1 investigated the value of a PhD in Design in research-based organizations and industry companies to gain insights about what a PhD in Design is, what its value is, and what its value could be within the two sectors.

E1 was intended to expand the discussion about the PhD in Design beyond the academic sector. The PhD is recently recognized as a study path that trains students to become independent

researchers in companies, governments, and other institutions. This is particularly true for the Design discipline, consolidating its role in many sectors. While academics know that the Ph.D. in Design has gained size and positioning over the past three decades, and society is undergoing a pivotal moment of change, collecting thoughts and insights from non-academic sectors enables the creation of a more vital link with more tangible impacts on society.

Goal

E1 aimed at exploring the value and impacts of the Design PhD beyond academia through stimulating conversations with expert stakeholders from research-based organizations and industry companies. While engaging stakeholders in open discussions on the topic, the event aimed at expanding the research network beyond academia to enable cross-sectoral fertilization over time.

Method (how we worked)

E1 took place in two focused roundtable discussions, one per day for 3 hours, between DoCS4Design's academics and selected stakeholders.

Participants who joined the roundtables came from research-based and industry realities and were engaged separately to allow academics to surface and map different mental models and applications of the Design PhD throughout the two sectors.

Although participants from the two sectors were engaged in separate discussions, the two days were held under the same general format:

- Providing stakeholders with a definition of the PhD in Design from the academics' perspective
- Let each participant introduce themselves, their work, and their perspective on the role of Design & Research in their organization
- Exploring similarities and differences in perspectives through an open discussion
- Wrap-up and setting of the next steps

Roundtable on day 1 was hosted at Parson School of Design, The New School, while roundtable on day 2 was hosted at the business club Spring Place. Both roundtable discussions hosted a limited number of participants, providing the opportunity to share views, consider the views of others, and engage in meaningful conversation.

Participants who joined Roundtable on day 1 represented the research-based organizations and were the following:

- Mariana Amatullo from Parson School of Design, The New School
- Ingrid Calvo Ivanovic from the International Colour Association
- Miodrag Mitrasinovic from Parson School of Design, The New School
- Bill Morrish from Parson School of Design, The New School
- Oscar Sosa Lopez from Parson School of Design, The New School
- Eduardo Staszowski from Parson School of Design, The New School
- Lara Penin from Parson School of Design, The New School
- Georgia Traganou from Parson School of Design, The New School

Participants who joined Roundtable on day 2 represented the industry and were the following:

- Alessandro Cajrati Crivelli (Est4te Four, Spring Place), Founder and Managing Partner
- Andrew Haarsager (Cartier), Head of NYC Retail Innovation Lab
- Harold Hambrose (Zenda LLC), Chief Design Officer
- Johanna Hambrose (Zenda LLC), CEO
- Jamie McPike (Google), Staff User Experience Researcher
- Nicholas Paredes (JP Morgan), Executive Director UX Engineer's Platform & Experience
- Scott Pobiner (Deloitte), Specialist Leader, Head of UX Strategy, Strategy and Analytics Practice
- Mauro Porcini (PepsiCo), SVP & Chief Design Officer

All participants were selected strategically depending on their experience in Design research and/or in relevant decision-making job positions to allow for a constructive debate and sharing of thoughts around the main event topic.

The two roundtable events in New York were designed for limited attendance, typically ranging between 10 and 15 participants, constituting a diverse mix of both academics and non-academics.

The structured format of this roundtable(s) included:

Brief Introductory Presentation: a concise presentation, not exceeding 15 minutes, provided an overview of what a PhD in Design entails and set the rationale for the ensuing discussion.

Moderated Roundtable Discussion: external participants were granted 10 minutes for individual introductions, presenting their work and perspectives on the role of design and research in their organisations, with the option to utilise supporting slides. Following these presentations, a moderated roundtable discussion spanned approximately one hour, enabling external participants to delve into the main discussion topic.

Dedicated Research Networking Time: especially in this dissemination event, a portion of the roundtable was allocated for research networking. This intentional inclusion allowed participants to connect, exchange ideas, and forge potential collaborations.

The formats aimed to maximise the depth and breadth of insights, ensuring a comprehensive discussion among the participants.

Outcomes

The two roundtable discussions were driven by the following main question: what is the value of the PhD in Design? Collected insights from the two roundtables are reported in the table below.

Tab.1: the insights that resulted from the roundtables discussion.

Collected insights	
Roundtable ACADEMICS	**Roundtable INDUSTRY**
PhD in Design is a space for experimentation that organizations can benefit from as organizations' traditional practices meet Design Research	PhDs in Design are people able to solve problems as Design is a risk reduction mechanism and the PhD is a way to reflect on new fields and build a critical view

PhD in Design is the way Design meaning and actions can be codified as Design practice is a discipline hard to be defined	PhD in Design is a community builder as it strengthens the Design ability to speak many languages
PhDs in Design are leaders who can advocate for the role of Design in organizations and society as PhDs in Design can turn intangible issues into tangible actions	Having a PhD in Design in a big company helps justify your ideas and positions to others as the PhD in Design and its modus operandum relies on theoretical foundations
PhD in Design is a pervasive activity that can maintain open spaces of intervention as PhD in Design means applying critical thinking at the system level	PhD in Design reflects the ability to connect elements in complex contexts as it visualizes companies' processes and makes sense of them
PhD in Design is the most elite form of Design as a very small percentage of people are aware of what a PhD in Design is about	The role of the PhD in Design needs to be clarified to companies as companies often believe the PhD in Design mostly deals with beauty and aesthetics

General considerations are that both roundtables led to similar insights regarding the need to raise awareness among different sectors' stakeholders about the values that the PhD in Design can bring to the working environment and society. Academia is considered the main one responsible for bringing consistency about the value of the PhD in Design beyond academic borders so that people in companies and organizations can make full sense of relevant resources for the well-being of society. However, to integrate Design knowledge productively beyond academia, it is necessary to understand if we can measure Design. Or, even better, what in Design can be measured.

Impacts

Results collected from the roundtable discussions are expected to have a genuine impact on how top Design Schools educate future generations of Design research leaders. Beyond education, the ME1 event led to the interest from both the research-based and the industry sides to stay updated on the next steps that will be undertaken to raise awareness about the value of the PhD in Design. This interest led to the hypothesis of creating a hub of companies, academies, and organizations that collaborate in defining and updating the value of the PhD in Design over time as well as to bring PhDs in Design beyond academia.

Materials

- Call for participants
- Invitation letters for participants
- PPT Presentations "What is the value of the PhD in Design".
- A slideshow for the introductory presentation
- Minutes from roundtables
- Photos of the two events

Feedback/Evaluation

The discussion held in New York City yielded numerous insights, particularly in the context of interactions with industry companies. Unfortunately, the lack of recording and the non-participation of PhD students during this phase represents a missed opportunity.

The Multiplier Event in NY successfully brought together diverse perspectives discussing the value of the PhD in Design, sparking rich discussions that exceeded our expectations. Participants provided positive feedback, appreciating the opportunity to engage in cross-sectoral dialogue. They highlighted the event's effectiveness in broadening their understanding of the PhD in Design's role in various sectors.

While the event objectives were largely met, suggestions for future improvements included more engagement sessions to allow deeper exploration of topics and more diverse representation from different industries. The dynamics of the discussions were engaging, with moments of enlightening exchanges that underscored the need for continued dialogue between academia and industry.

This event has laid a foundation for future research collaborations and has sparked interest in creating a hub for ongoing dialogue and development of the PhD in Design's role in society. Overall, the event was a success, with valuable insights for both academia and industry, though there is always room to grow and evolve in our approach to these critical discussions.

References

Stappers, P.J. & van Boeijen, A.G.C. (editors, 2022) PhD in Design – A Map & Glossary. Docs4Design project.

Credits

The Multiplier Event in New York was conducted by Carnegie Mellon University, Illinois Institute of Technology, and Politecnico di Milano.

The report was edited by: Caterina Dastoli, Deaa Bataineh, Jonathan Chapman, Carlos Teixeira.

All partners contributed to the output:

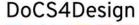|	
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Appendix: Invitation

INVITATION TO A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

What is the value of a Design PhD beyond academia?

Dear relation,

We are writing on behalf of a network of six, world-leading universities offering PhDs in Design (Aalto CMU, IIT Institute of Design, Imperial College London, Politecnico di Milano, and TU Delft).

We are working together on EU Funded research exploring the future of the Design PhD. As part of our work together, we are holding an event in **NYC on April 12 (2–5pm) / April 13 (2–5pm)** to explore the impacts of Design PhDs beyond academia. We would like to invite you to join us at this event as a **keynote participant**.

Through short presentations, roundtable discussion, and research networking, we hope to **surface and map different mental models and applications of the Design PhD** — what is it, what is its value, and what could its value be? This will be a focused discussion between academic and non-academic expert stakeholders. We anticipate no more than 20 participants, providing the opportunity to share views, consider the views of others, and engage in meaningful conversation.

In addition to providing an **excellent networking opportunity**, insights from these stimulating conversations will shape the future of the Design PhD. In this way, the results of these conversations will have a genuine impact on how top Design Schools educate future generations of design research leaders.

We hope you will consider contributing your valuable perspective to this important event.

Best wishes,

On behalf of the cooperating team at Industrial Design Engineering - TUDelft

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