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## Design leads us where exactly?

### Leading by design at Rich Mix, a new cultural venture in London

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#### Themes

The paper considers issues in designing public engagements with digital media using networked technologies in contexts where organizational goals are not clear and the design problem is not framed. The paper considers the difficulty of designing for/with multiple stakeholders where there is not, at first, a defined user base (or audience) or set of needs. While digital media technologies, especially large screens with different kinds of content and different kinds of interaction, are now built into many parts of the built environment from high streets to corporate foyers to schools, hospitals, museums and cultural centres, there are no clear models of what constitute successful public engagements. Artist projects have as much relevance here as corporate communications objectives (Kimbell, 2004).

The paper reflects on these issues and proposes models for public engagement with digital networked media drawn from the author's experience of being offered an opportunity to 'lead by design' to create a digital media space for the general public, located in a new cultural venture, Rich Mix, in east London. Rich Mix is a new cultural building and enterprise serving London's many communities. The building work is currently underway and the centre will part open to the public in spring 2006. It combines showing and performance spaces, managed workspaces for creative industries, training and education spaces, cafes and bars and also houses a three-screen cinema. It is funded by a mixture of public and private resources including UK government agencies (London Development Agency and Arts Council, England), local government (London Borough of Tower Hamlets) and charitable trusts.

The organization's CEO and a consultant producer initially invited artists and designers with skills in digital and interactive media to suggest how they might go about creating Rich Mix's digital space. The author's design-led approach was taken up, which went forward into an interdisciplinary research and development process that she lead, including envisioning, concept development, iterative testing of ideas including with end users/audiences, and finally installation, involving a wide range of people and practices. Drawing on existing theories of design management and design thinking, the author articulated a set of questions, firstly, to assist



with the framing of the design problem, and the creation of an appropriate design strategy; and secondly, as a practice-led research project within the context of her academic research fellowship. These questions are: What effects does a design-led approach have in attempting to solve complex, unframed problems in contexts such as Rich Mix? Who needs to be involved in designing engagements with interactive digital media in public spaces? What are the limits to design thinking and design leadership?

### **Contribution**

The contribution will take the form of a reflexive case study of a design-led process for one of the public spaces at Rich Mix. It will combine a theoretical background with empirical practice-led research by the author in which her role was lead designer on the project. In her definition of her role, the author was responsible for framing the conversation about the problem, creating the design strategy, shaping the design team, determining the approach and initial design research techniques and maintaining the coherence of the design solution; all of these aspects of role and strategy were discussed and agreed with the arts producer working as a consultant to the organization. Together the author and the producer had joint responsibility for the success of the design project from strategy to scoping to delivery.

The premise behind this part of the building – currently known as the Rich Mix News Room – is that it should enable visitors to the building, and those who are connected via the internet, to determine or in some way affect the digital content displayed within this space. The design problem is enacted at several levels. Design leadership and management must establish what is for visitors; how they engage with it; how it is to be designed, produced and installed; how much it costs; how staff are to engage with it and support it; and how it interfaces with the rest of the Rich Mix building, organization, the various audiences and communities within the locality and beyond, and those accessible via information and communications technologies. Within design terms, this problem can be seen as spanning several disciplines including interaction design (what people will do in the News Room, why and what realities it will produce), user interface design (how they will engage and use it), interior design (how it is laid out and what building resources it makes use of), identity and visual design (what it will look like and its personality) and organizational design (what resources are required to design, produce and staff it) as well as areas conceived of as part of any organization such as finance, marketing, operations and intellectual property management. This is clearly a complex set of questions and issues, which raises the question about the limits to design leadership and design thinking.

### **Evidence**

The evidence used in making the argument will include

- artefacts produced during the design process from problem framing to the installation
- artefacts demonstrating how design research was undertaken (observation, sketching)
- artefacts showing how concepts were developed and tested concepts (scenarios, modelling, experience prototyping, other prototyping and user testing)
- notes from discussions as ideas evolved about how to frame the design problem; who needed to be involved including different kinds of public; different kinds of specialist including designers, software engineers, IP lawyers and so on



- interviews with key participants in the process
- notes from the author's blog.

### Structure

The structure of the argument is as follows and is based on recent academic work in design theory and design management including:

- The idea that design leadership involves shaping the conversation (Hargadon, 2005)
- The idea that design should and can frame the problem in complex contexts with multiple disciplines and perspectives (vanPatter, 2004)
- The idea that designers have particular kinds of abilities and knowledge but that design problems are indeterminate (Cross, 1995, and Buchanan, 1995)
- The idea that design-led research can make a valuable contribution within innovation especially in the area of information and communications technologies (Gaver, 2000)

These ideas informed how the author framed the opportunity at Rich Mix and at the time of writing are being tested in practice. As is common with UK arts organizations with some public funding, working on the ground is complex and chaotic, especially when involving the design and fit out of a building, a fast approaching deadline to partially open the building (in April 2006), lack of leadership team attention, a lack of financial resources, and a rapidly growing organization.

### The likely contribution/findings

It is difficult to state exactly what the findings will be since the designing activity is currently ongoing. Initial findings are these:

- **The effects of a design-led approach.** Framing the opportunity as a 'design-led' process, rather than using terms like 'strategy' or 'innovation' will have shaped the discourses about the project among Rich Mix staff, stakeholders and other designers. The News Room development was one of several projects initiated within the 'creative' strand of Rich Mix's fit out. The decision to use design research and communication methods to both develop ideas and communicate them will have affected their reception and adoption.
- **Who needs to be involved.** While the project at Rich Mix was from the beginning conceived of as an interactive digital media project within a physical space, it was not clear who needed to be involved to develop the strategy and undertake different kinds of designing activity within it. Through collaborative question-making sessions (called 'think and make tanks' led by the author) it became clear that these different practices could contribute to the design and production of the News Room: interaction design, interface design, interior design, furniture design, exhibition design, communication design, information design, and software development, as well as writers and editors. From the beginning, the process was structured on the assumption that to some extent members of the Rich Mix staff and community activists, and target end users, would also be involved.
- **The limits to design leadership and design research.** Framing the opportunity as a design problem, within which a 'designer' had a leading role working in close collaboration with a



‘producer’, resulted in the following division of responsibility. The designer took responsibility for design strategy and articulating the core concepts, user needs and interaction models, plus designing the process to take the project forward including engaging with other designers. The producer took primary responsibility for liaison with the organization’s CEO and COO and other colleagues, although key documents were created together. The designer created the budget for the design and build costs. The post-installation costs and ongoing support costs for the project were analysed and estimated jointly. This brief summary is intended to communicate the scope and complexity of the project. If a person educated as a designer is involved in analysing the future operations management issues of a new public space, does this fall within design practice, or is this simply management and does this distinction matter? Does ‘design thinking’ enable designers to make valuable, realistic forecasts about such things and lead, or support, decision making? Secondly, to what extent can design research techniques such as scenarios, or creating user journeys, articulate these future needs?

The process is ongoing. The Rich Mix News Room is expected to open to the public in October subject to partnership funding being finalized. By the final date for submission of papers to the conference, the author will be able to articulate clearer findings and support them with evidence from the research.

## References

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