# A Power-theoretical Approach to Meaning-making of the Design Profession

A Case Study of the Design Profession in the Design Museum London

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to examine socio-cultural and political interventions in meaning-making by the design profession by investigating members of that profession as an audience in a design museum. Professional meaning-making in this study is addressed from the viewpoint of theoretical understandings of the way in which the design profession makes meaning and gains knowledge. In particular, the study examines the interventions embedded in professional meaning-making by employing three of Bourdieu's concepts, namely, 'field', 'habitus', and 'practice'. In doing so, it suggests why the world of design and relevant institutions including design museums are so closed and private, and showed some ways in which meanings differ according to social position, emphasizing the notion of social class divisions in structuring meanings. However, this power-theoretical approach to meaning-making is criticized for seeing people as passive recipients of knowledge and as differentiated agendas rather than active producers. The latter part of this article will, therefore, investigate the limitations of theories of practice, which provide links between the field and the formation of meaning-making through the field.

Keyword
design profession, meaning-making, power-theoretical approach

## 1. Introduction

Studies of the design profession from a sociological perspective differ from those within design theory. N. Albertsen, the Director and Associate Professor at the Aarhus School of Architecture in Denmark, said in a lecture entitled 'The City between the Disciplines' in August 2000 that if design theory considers the 'how'-questions of professional practice, then the sociology of professions is concerned with the 'why'- questions, and those of a social kind (including the practice and work of professions) (Albertsen, 2000). Although design theory has contributed to the examination of the conditions of the production and reception of design works, there are some reservations about its ability to explain the set of behaviours, knowledge, values, expectations and perceptions that form a 'frame of reference' that influences designers' work. The sociology of professions, however, focuses on these aspects of professional activities that shape overall social mechanisms in the professional field and in society (see Parsons, 1951; Hughes, 1971, 1994; Bourdieu, 1986; Abbott, 1988; Larson, 1994; Durkheim, 1997).

The concept of meaning-making is widely employed and, historically, has multiple origins in sociology, anthropology and other social sciences. In response to this theoretical background the concept takes as a starting point, the idea that humans constantly seek to make sense of the world around them and that the placement of meaning is a goal in itself, a motivation to action and a motive for argument. In constructing meaning in their profession a designer draws on a number of values, expectations, and perceptions which are peculiar to them. These constitute the frame of reference. In light of this, the use of meaning-making approach is essential to reaching an understanding of the way the design profession functions. What follows is a deconstruction of frame of reference into its constituent parts and an examination of them.

## 2. Overview of Theories of Practice and Meaning-making

### Field

Anyone who has occupied a position in the design profession will recognize a reflection of her/his own experiences in the French sociologist and activist Bourdieu's account of the structure of a 'field'. He has given us an influential analysis of the conditions by which one is authorized to enter a field and compete there for cultural and symbolic power. In particular, his inclusive conceptions of 'field', 'habitus', and 'practice' give considerable descriptive and explanatory power to the analysis (see Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1989, 1990a, 1991, 1993a). Furthermore, his sub-conceptions of 'academic, cultural, social and symbolic capital' are also indispensable to an understanding of the different forms of power that constitute class relations within a field (see Bourdieu, 1985, 1989, 1990a, 1993b).

For Bourdieu, the modern social world is divided into what he calls fields. According to Bourdieu's definition of 'field' in *Sociology in Question* (1993a) he conceptualizes a field as the arena in which competition operates between social agents. Accordingly, he maintains that every member of a field competes with other members for positions in the field. This way of viewing fields provides an insightful proposition - that individual positions do not exist without a field for them to exist in. That is to say, the professions of design, which will be described, can only exist because the field of design has already been constructed. In the same way, in order to give it a role and a label, for example, 'product' designer, a particular field should exist first.

Another Bourdieuian way of looking at the field is that there is a 'social space' in which an individual's behaviour is played out (Bourdieu, 1985, 1989, 1993b). For instance, culture is the space over which society's symbolic battles are fought (Bourdieu, 1989: 14-25). Thus, according to Bourdieu, this space builds covert and implicit barriers to prevent access to the upper class in order to support the existing class system by raising an obstacle to hinder social movements

between classes (ibid.). Consequently, the upper classes can keep control of their power and retain society's material and symbolic rewards. That is to say, the competition for social status and power is critical as every social position battles to wield a higher degree of power. This principle can be applied to the field of design. On the one hand, the expanded nature of the field of design requires that design students learn about more and more subjects and on the other hand requires them to specialize in order to enter the field. Bourdieu acknowledges that new positions in the cultural field always have potential. However, what is at stake in entering the field or acquiring a position is the field's structural relations with other social positions 'that are both occupied and manipulated by social agents which may be individuals, groups or institutions (Bourdieu, 1993b: 29). In this regard, it is obvious that the notion of the institution corresponds to Bourdieu's notion of the field, not just referring to physical organizations such as galleries, museums and art and design schools, but also more inclusive social systems embracing these organizations.

### Habitus

Within Bourdieu's notion of field, his word 'habitus' means 'a socially structured, and structuring structure' (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990a: 76-86). In other words, it is a structure of understandings about the nature of things that structures psychological phenomena and is itself structured by social practices. Furthermore, the concept of habitus has the function of unifying symbolic behaviours entering the field or competing for social status and power, as mentioned above. According to Bourdieu, all of one's symbolic behaviours in the field depend not only on their position in the field but also on the habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990a). He sees the relationship between field and habitus as one of 'ontologic complicity' (Bourdieu, 1991: 47) and maintains that the relation between habitus and field operates in two ways; on the one hand, they are in a correlation of conditioning; that is, the field constructs the habitus, which results from what a field or hierarchy inherently requires from members of the field; on the other hand, they are in a correlation of knowledge or cognitive structure: that is, 'habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense and with value, in which it is worth investing one's practice' (Bourdieu, 1989: 44).

When the habitus is established an individual works as an agent under the influence of the habitus. Such phenomena enable the reproduction of the objective conditions of which the habitus is born. Likewise, when people enter a museum (an institution) they bring their habitus and relation to broader social structures with them. In completing organizational tasks people act on the basis not only of formal organizational rules, but also of the habitus.

The actor or self can also draw upon Bourdieu's concept of habitus. In interaction-theoretical approaches to meaning-making it has been recognized that meaning-making in a museum can influence a person's identity and their sense of self. Approaches of this type suggest that visitors use museums for 'identity work', defined as '[…] the processes through which we construct, maintain, and adapt our sense of personal identity, and persuade other people to believe in that identity' (Rounds, 2006: 139). However in a power-theoretical approach the habitus, unlike the self, is structured by the objective conditions in which the individual develops (Hallett, 2003: 130). These objective conditions inculcate dispositions and tastes that reflect the individual's position in objective social space and these tastes and dispositions structure the individual's subjective actions, experiences and meaning-making (ibid.). In this way, the habitus enables and constrains meaning-making, while 'the self remains a characteristic of the situation' (ibid.: 132). Therefore, the habitus is not a 'self' literally.

### Practice

Together with field and habitus, Bourdieu stresses that we can understand the operation of the habitus better by observing the enactment of dispositions in 'practice' (Bourdieu,1977). He maintains that 'a person's practice – their

"corporeal hexes" and their "style of expression" (Bourdieu, 1988: 56) is the empirical manifestation of the dispositions located in the habitus' (Hallett, 2003: 130). Likewise, when people enter a museum they bring their relation to the broader social order with them and each individual's practice within the museum is informed by the habitus.

Practice, Bourdieu explains (1988: 97), 'always implies a cognitive operation, a practical operation of construction which sets to work, by reference to practical functions, systems of classification (taxonomies) which organize perception and structure'. For Bourdieu practices therefore play an important role in the reproduction of classificatory schemes that are cognitively acquired and subjectively modified by a social agent. Likewise, Bourdieu's concept of practice is tied to his view of the broader social order, providing a link between micro actions within fields and macro social structures. The starting point, when exploring individuals' practices using a Bourdieuian approach, is to consider who wins the higher position in the field and obtains power in the social structure.

As Bourdieu argues, 'the artistic field is a field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces' (ibid.:30). In order to investigate the field of design and social practices within the field, this study takes architecture as an example of a profession within the wider field of design. In his book, entitled *The Favored Circle: The Social Foundations of Architectural Distinction* (1998), G. Stevens denies the possibility of an absolute and objective evaluation of an individual's achievements. Instead, he maintains that the relative fame of architects actually depends on power relations, which determine who has social, cultural and economic superiority. In order to analyze this, Stevens applies Bourdieu's concepts of 'field' and 'habitus', 'symbolic capital' and 'taste', and through the contribution of Bourdieu's theoretical attainment, analyzes historic patterns to show how elites have been produced within the field of architectural distinction, which includes practice, theory, research, education, institutions and society, etc. In particular, he refers to the 'star system' in architecture, whereby other architects respect, admire or even support the system at the same time (both explicitly and implicitly).

In the same publication (1998) Stevens illustrates how architectural education has played a role in the creation of architectural elites and the reproduction of the 'star or celebrity system' as a kind of mythology of the hero. According to Stevens educational institutions are a kind of incubator that cultivates the social class system. From this point of view the design profession, like the architectural profession, can be contextualized within an institutional structure that produces power relationships. This kind of power exists only in societies in which elite membership is legitimized or acquired by professional status. Considered in this way this power can be understood as a specialized form of privilege that has control within the industrial state. The profession's power over the museum and its exhibits has the same form.

The museum ritual can from this perspective be viewed as a mode of practice. Just as Bourdieu's conception of social space is one in which social practice emanates from the cultural knowledge system (1977: 96-158)[1], the following discussion attempts to conceive of the museum environment as a form of social ritual practice that operates in social space. For Bourdieu, rituals may be a means of expressing social and, implicitly, power relation s.[2]

In her overview of the studies of ritual today, in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* C. Bell suggests (1992) that all existing theoretical discourse on ritual is based on the opposition between thought (such as beliefs, symbols and myths) and action (the enactment of such cultural templates). Bell argues that this basic distinction has generated homologized structural patterns in ritual theory and

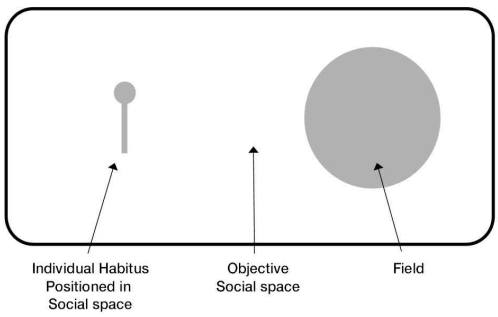
1) Bourdieu argues (1977: 219) that knowledge is not equally distributed between the members of a society and that distinctive forms of cultural knowledge exist in social space.
2) Although Bourdieu does not focus on ritual in his larger work on social knowledge, his continuing passing references to ritual have caught the eye of a number of people interested in ritual.

rejects the related ideas of, for example, V. W. Turner's 'communitas' (1969) or C. Geertz's 'fusion of ethos and worldview' (1966). Bell focuses on the notion of ritual practice inspired by Bourdieu, as 'a term that is designed to represent the synthetic unity of consciousness and social being within human activity, to be a powerful tool with which to embrace or transcend all analogous dichotomies' (Bell, 1992: 76). Such a theoretical replacing of ritual on the map of practice underlying the functioning of strategic power has significant implications for its study. Bell suggests that 'ritual systems do not function to regulate or control the systems of social relations. They are the system' (ibid.: 130). Elaborating on Bourdieu, Bell goes on to present a notion of ritualisation, which is 'the natural logic of ritual, a logic embodied in the physical movements of the body' (ibid.: 199). In other words, ritual is undertaken only in those perfect scenarios when it is strategically the most effective option among competing agents.

Bourdieu's notion of social practice is also clearly of importance in understanding museum visitors' meaning-making, in that visitors are positioned relatively passively in relation to the knowledge displayed: that is, visitors are supposed to absorb this knowledge without questioning it at an institutional level. The museum arranges its objects and spaces in a symbolic way, to lead visitors to engage in aesthetic and social rituals. A series of approaches to discourse on rituals in relation to meaning-making reinforces this view. In the language of D. M. Ruiz in *The Four Agreements* (1997) ritual functions as a resource to enable us to make meanings under the agreements that we have made for ourselves and our relationship to the world. Parkes also maintains that 'rituals are practices that cultivate who we are' (Parkes, 1995: 93) whereas Plutschow believes that rituals relate '[…] to reality in a multi-dimensional symbolic way, making life meaningful by reaffirming one's understanding of life' (Plutschow, 1999, cited in Brown, 2007: 62). Kluckhohn argues, in line with Parkes, that the meanings of rituals depend on the interpretation of those who practice them (Kluckhohn, 1949).

## 3. An Application of Bourdieu's Model of Society into Meaning-making of the Design Profession

With his major concepts such as 'field', 'habitus' and 'practice', Bourdieu's work has become central to contemporary understandings of society and culture. In line with these concepts, his view on the relationship between meanings and society is critical to an understanding of meaning-making. Bourdieu describes society as social space that displays all of the concepts' boundaries and, in this way, takes a visible perspective on society. In *Social Space and Symbolic Power* (1989), with in the context of his discussion of meaning, Bourdieu maintains that meanings, firstly, exist not in a symbolic system but in the social space itself and are thus placed outside the minds of people or the agent; secondly, none the less, such agents also exist in space and more over construct the space themselves. In other words, social space is not just an objective site that can be investigated by neutral researchers, but is actively defined by individuals' practices and beliefs (see Figure 1). Bourdieu describes this view of meaning-making, marking out a position that he terms 'structuralist constructivism' (Bourdieu, 1989). This has also been called 'generative structuralism' by other researchers (e.g. Vandenberghe, 1999). This is named after Bourdieu's belief that objective structures that support meanings are generated by people's everyday practices.




[Figure 1] Dispositions reflecting a positioning in border social space carried into the field (drawn

from the original figure of 'Dispositions reflecting a positioning in border social space carried into the organization' depicted by T. Hallett, 2003)

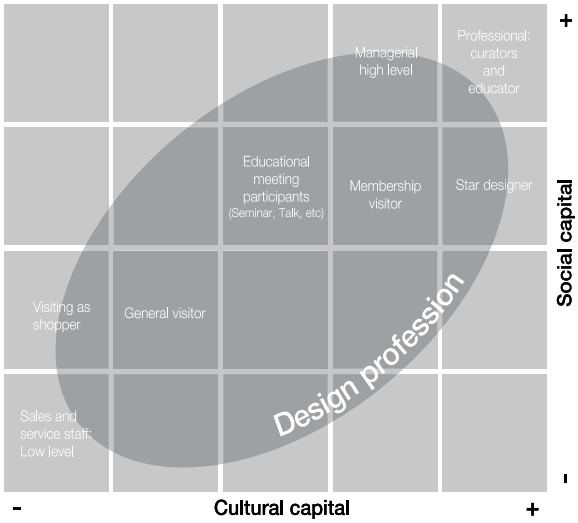
In this figure, social space is an 'objective social structure existing independently of the conscious will of agents', while 'guiding and constraining their practices or their representations' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 122). However, Bourdieu posits that people are able to move through this social structure, supposing that these movements are manifestations of the habitus (ibid.). The habitus is also controlled by the objective conditions, by inculcating dispositions and tastes that reflect the individual's position in objective social space. According to Bourdieu, the operation of the habitus can be understood by observing the enactment of 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures' (Bourdieu, 1977: 22) in practice. The individual's practice involving even subjective reactions followed by emotional experiences is structured by these dispositions. Likewise, their meaning-making process also acts on a set of dispositions acquired in their relation to social structures.

Bourdieu admits (1990a) the fact that people do have an active apprehension of the world and accordingly shape their own vision of it, which situates at the extreme end of the subjectivists' view, such as phenomenologists or ethnomethodologists. Bourdieu points out, however, that even the subjective and active apprehension and construction of a vision of the world is only restricted by the objective structure that he stresses (ibid.). This notion is significant and constitutes a large part of Bourdieu's methodology.

In this respect, Bourdieu's space is not an actual and physical space, but a conceptual, intermediary and symbolic space in which the individual develops (their position in social space). Individuals do not exist because of their present location in social space. They are just defined by their class or groups in their habitus. In Bourdieuian terms, the class is a group of people occupying similar positions in social space (Bourdieu, 1994: 1-16). Bourdieu therefore argues that society can be identified through a two- or three-dimensional space in which the class and groups are situated (ibid.). The variables that determine the dimensions are 'economic capital, cultural capital and social capital' (see Bourdieu, 1986, 1989, 1990a). According to Bourdieu society can be seen as a social space in which individuals relate to each other (primarily) depending on their 'economic capital, cultural capital (such as credentials, titles, tastes, dispositions), and social capital (such as networks)' (Bourdieu, 1990a). In this space, classes or groups are positioned relationally, as being above or below each other in terms of the capital they possess. In this way, the concept of capital is used to model society in which social agents such as classes, groups and institutions are positioned (Bourdieu, 1984, 1988). Since social agents in each field are struggling to get more of each variable - more economic capital, more social capital, and more cultural capital - society typically generates dominant and subordinate classes. The capital is determined by the degree of 'the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu, 1986: 249). That is, the capital is determined by a varying degree of social participation. In this sense, participation in design and the field of design, like other forms of social participation, can be seen as a form of a capital that serves to reproduce class hierarchies and societal structures of domination.

However, whilst Bourdieu emphasizes that economic capital dominates cultural and social capital, he tends to disregard the importance of social capital and cultural capital in the formation of society. Even in his museum visitor studies, for example, Bourdieu and Darbel's classic 1991 study of European art museum audiences, *The Love of Art,* economic capital featured widely. However, apart from the economic issues the relationship between social capital and cultural capital is of

particular importance in terms of visitors' true engagement and participation, which contemporary museums aim for. In recent times, the concept of social capital has become important in museum studies and especially in debates about visitor participation. For that reason, an attempt has been made to analyze social space in the case study museum using axes composed of these two factors – social capital and cultural capital - which are mapped as individuals' roles that classes occupy contextually in the museum (see Figure 2).




[Figure 2] Social space in the Design Museum London mapped as spatial and contextual roles

In this map, the positions of design profession visitors are placed according to the two capitals. One of the interesting findings from this map is, first, if cultural capital is used to increase social capital (through participation in events that have been deemed worthwhile or useful) it could well alter one's networks and subsequently one's work and even leisure activities. This could in turn affect one's stock of cultural capital through a continuing education process that Bourdieu fails to acknowledge. Visitors, such as members of the museum (called 'Friends of the Design Museum'), or regular attendants of a special event could fall into this category.

The second thing worth noting from the map is that the decisive factor that makes the class's social inclusion possible is accessibility to knowledge. In their recent work, *Revolutionary Wealth* (2007), A. Toffler and H. Toffler, American sociologists and futurist thinkers, argue that knowledge has become the principal means of creating wealth and power. That is, class dominance is determined by how much a class controls knowledge. However, this does not mean that one's knowledge is always contingent upon one's economic value (Toffler and Toffler, ibid.). This is a more emphatic concept than Bourdieu's, whereby economically dominant classes control power and knowledge. The quality of meaning-making would also depend on the ability to access information or knowledge.

Lastly, it can be said from the map that the contents of museums, including exhibits, labels, design settings and education programmes, are materialized by those who possess greater social and cultural capital. For instance, in a contemporary design museum a designer product selectively exhibited gets a culturally higher position than other products. The process works both ways, between cultural producer (a curator or a designer in this case) and cultural consumer (visitor/audience in this case). On the other hand, there are occasionally special exhibits that cannot be explained by the logics of utilitarian or class interests. These may relate to the individual interests of curators. Even so, these exhibits cannot be properly understood without reference to their habitus, for example, their 'institutionalized' habitus.

Bourdieu's work has alerted museum research to the links between space, (not only physical but also symbolic) power, and knowledge. Thus, the environmental agendas of the museum, associated with institutionalized power, have been explored by recent museum researchers such as S. Macdonald, T. Bennett, N. Dias, T. L. Teslow, A. Barry, P. Harvey, M. Bouquet, and K. Arnold in *The Politics of Display*, first published in 1998. In particular, Macdonald, who attempts to theorise the subject of the spatial capacities of museums, argues: 'museums not only exist within a particular time and space, they also help articulate particular temporal and spatial order' (1998:8). Within this social order approach, political power struggle between the museum and visitors is a critical concern. Although Bourdieu is not a specialist in

politics, he is a specialist in society as a whole, of which politics is but a part. So when his concept is applied to museum meaning-making, he would define it as a political action and award priority status to subjective points of view and life experience. This point of view also legitimates knowledge obtained not from the new information offered by the museum, but from personal experiences that were rarely considered in traditional museum research.

## 4. The Limitations of the Approaches

Of central importance in Bourdieu's thinking is the intertwining of theories about society with his theory of field. However, his theory of practice has some limitations. The first flaw in his theory of practice is that his approach can be regarded as deterministic, in that meanings are also determined as being subject to social force. Bourdieu's theory of practice suggests that power and resources are substantively unequal between the weak and the strong and that as a result the weak's own meanings are, in fact, treated as meaningless. That is to say, advocates of the theory of practice are skeptical about meaning-making.

Secondly, Bourdieu overlooks the importance of the existence of the territory outside the field. Bourdieu argues that social existence is only conditioned on entrance into an established field (Bourdieu, 1993b). While analyzing the design museum as a particular field (or sub-fields) is not new, his theory of practice is less comfortable with the idea that the design museum experience impacts on all visitors situated in various social spaces – not only in the field but also out of the field – simultaneously. Bourdieu also did not address what for some is the urgent problem of how to exit the field. Otherwise, practices within the field reproduce meanings which are only meaningless. In addition, they can never be personal but just belong to the field itself. This notion is an important turning point in considering meaning-making.

At this point, it might appear to be better to invent new institutions or kinds of institution rather than accepting and acknowledging existing institutions, established by people with powerful positions in the field, because these existing institutions cannot play an educational role under the hierarchical structure of the field. We might, in response, also ask whether there is an alternative role for the design museum and whether the meaning-making process operates only in this field.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

In spite of the limitations of his argument Bourdieuian analysis of meaning-making is full of suggestions. First of all, he suggests that making meaning is meant to achieve 'cultural competence' (Bourdieu, 1993). Likewise, cultural capital can be described as cultural competence. Along with economic capital, cultural capital carries legitimacy that Weber calls 'the psychological reassurance of legitimacy' or the 'feeling of worthiness' (Weber, 1993: 107). While the legitimacy in economic capital is generally regulated by governmental and financial institutions, the legitimacy of cultural capital is mainly controlled by educational and artistic institutions. For Bourdieu, therefore, developing meaning-making would imply an individual's ability to take advantage of cultural capital and especially to be able to interact with others through culture.

A power-theoretical approach suggests that the most fundamental aspects of people's practices are socially structured. In other words, the meaning influenced by the practices of people within society is also structured. These practices are obviously different from the interaction-theoretical approach, which argues that practices 'concerned with production and the exchange of meanings help people to give and take meanings between members of society or a group and consequently have social effects' (Hall, 1997: 22) or that the practices give members of the group their sense of identity, of who they are and with whom they belong (Silverman, 1995: 161-170).

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