



Kuroguro Presence: A Conceptual Design Collaboration

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Introduction. Design is concerned with improving an existing reality into a better one, and collaboration adds complexity to a design project. Conceptual design is the initial phase of the design process, which defines the outlines of function and form. Usual artifacts of conceptual design are mood boards, sketches, and models. The potential benefits of integrating work of designers with various skillsets, backgrounds, experiences, priorities, hierarchies, could be summarized as “the capitalization of collective design intelligence” (Frascara, 2008, p.10). This case study explored how a team of three fashion design instructors and practitioners developed a collaborative conceptual design, aiming to improve their teaching methods and upskill their craft via learnings from their own social interactive practice.

Background and Context. The three faculty members, from a US university, have similar yet different expertise, and all of them teach conceptual design development within various fashion design related classes. One faculty member is a passionate collector of Arts and Crafts period pieces, and his collection greatly influences his practice as a metalsmith, predominantly using copper, brass and sterling silver sheet goods, mixed with semi-precious faceted stones, glass, leather and fabric. Another faculty member has knitting and fiber arts expertise, with focus on seamless knitting technologies and biomimetic inspired activewear design. The third member of the team is a curator of a historic costume collection, with extensive knowledge of fashion history, along with patternmaking and draping practice for his own high-end label. The unanimous findings, from the team’s combined decade’s long experience of teaching and evaluating students’ conceptual design development processes, were that not enough time is being spent experimenting and investigating design possibilities. Students often engage into final prototyping without a clear concept, leading to waste of materials, time and energy. Sohn & Kim (2016) found that collaborations inspired student’s critical thinking skills for making decisions within a design team. Aiming at improving their teaching methods, the faculty team decided to develop a collaborative conceptual design, therefore reevaluating their own practice.

Experimentation. A design concept is generally acknowledged as being a framework for all design decision taking place during a creative process (Lawson, 2006). Concept development starts with defining the problem, then researching the ideas, therefore involving both verbal and visual communication. Almost all design emerges by “transforming, combining and adapting elements of previous designs” (Eckert & Stacey, 2000, p. 524). The faculty team used a shared Google document to build on each other’s ideas, and collect the research into an evolving digital mood board. A timeline of two months was set to ensure efficiency of the process. Texting, messaging, emailing and exchanges of social media references were frantic, until the initial ideas morphed into something unanimously agreeable. The four stages of collaborative design proposed by Salonen (2012) (Discover, Define, Develop and Deliver), were confirmed within this study, however, method without imagination would contribute very little to the creative

design process. Several times, the conceptual design development was thought to be finished, but then one faculty member would introduce a different idea or perspective, which took the deliverable in a different direction. These magic-like, highly inspirational events, summarized by “Wait, I have a better idea!” prompted several face-to-face meetings, where sketching and draping on dress form documented the changes. The meetings were structured similar to professional critiques, with debating until agreement on solution was reached. The only times the team members worked individually, were when craft exploration was involved, but most of the time, individual decision making was avoided.

An initial brainstorming design brief focused on mapping out and engaging the expertise and resources of all members, with keywords like ‘transformation’, ‘heritage’, ‘shape’, as well as discussing current fashion industry topics. Available materials were gathered, and ideas of technology and modern shapewear were shared. A historic big sleeve pattern was found desirable and added to the mix, along with a salvaged antique French lace, and a heavy wide stripe black satin fabric. A discussion on timeless fashion, elegance, current menswear influences, along with consumer color psychology, led to agreement on a neutral palette, dominantly black. The textural interest of the metal work was complemented by quilting studies on bra cups. Several muslin mock-ups were made. Choice of materials and techniques were constantly questioned. The find of a Japanese story, that of princess Takiyasha the Witch and the Skeleton Spectre, infused the team with new inspiration, and some materials were eliminated. New keywords such as ‘mystery’, ‘power’, ‘presence’, ‘deep black’ (translated into *kuroguro* in Japanese), were interpreted into fabrication solutions (such as power stretch heavy knit spacer fabric). The fabric solutions led to experimental patternmaking strategies, such as kinetic theory draping (Lindqvist, 2015). The metal work design was inspired by the illustration of the Japanese story, the skeleton presence attached to the over garment, and the front serving as a bra wire design. The mood board that documented the entire process and tracked the steps is shown in Figure 1.

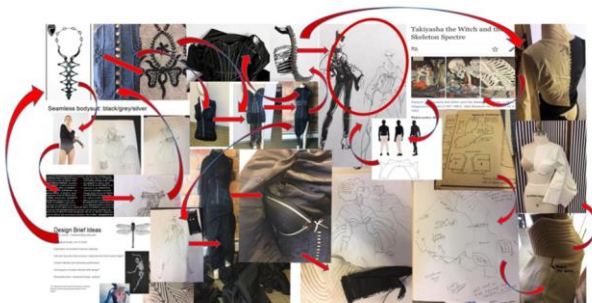


Figure 1. Mood board showcasing collaborative conceptual design process.

of the design concept. The team will furthermore construct the ensemble conceptualized via this collaboration, and reflections on the outcome will serve as teaching resources. This project also encouraged skill- building and contributed to the research knowledge of collaborative design process (Cobb et al, 2014)

Conclusion. While looking for inspiration, faculty members drew extensively from personal educational ideology, shared design culture, and socio-cultural contexts, confirming Strickfaden et al. (2015) framework. Continuous dialogue was found to be crucial during the research process, therefore teaching conceptual design should allow for several discussions and face-to-face critique meetings. Incorporation of material exploration was determinant for the feasibility

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