

Old Issues Never Fade

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I was delighted to receive information about the DEGW Foundation, the DEGW Archives at Reading University, and the initial symposium. The Archives have found a wonderful home. What a fitting tribute to Frank Duffy, and to John Worthington and the many others over the years that made DEGW such a unique firm. While I have not been in touch with Frank for a few years, I often think about him, and how much I enjoyed—and learned—in the year I spent with DEGW almost thirty years ago; and the many times we have worked together since then. Frank has had an enormous influence on my own career and thinking about design. And for that I am deeply grateful.

The DEGW Charter, written thirty years ago, captures the fact that, from its inception, DEGW was fueled not by a focus on the form of the built environment or the fees planning and designing it could generate, but by intellectual curiosity and an abiding concern for the culture—informal values, norms and expectations --about DEGW's relationship with its own employees and how that should translate into relationships with clients. DEGW's own offices in Balstrode Place, where I worked for a year, reflected that set of values extraordinarily well. Inexpensive furniture, no status perks for the partners, all the company books open, regular thought-provoking seminars by people from all sorts of backgrounds located in or passing through London. Equally embedded in the practice was the Charter principle that "Learning systematically from experience is not only a principle investment, but an insurance against self-delusion." DEGW was a pioneer in embracing and advocating for what's become known as "evidence-based" design; that is, a fervent belief that the process that shapes design and the methods for assessing whether or not it achieved its stated purpose for individuals, teams, and organizations benefits from careful, systematic assessment of who will be using the space, for what purposes, in what social and organizational context, and to what end. That is a lasting legacy and lesson. Long before other architecture and design firms, like IDEO, started hiring psychologists, ethnographers, nurses, and others not trained as "designers," DEGW welcomed people like me and others from outside the design professions into the DEGW fold. DEGW's Charter principles were unique for design firms thirty years ago, and are every bit as relevant today..

I think it safe to say that the architecture profession, and the design community more widely, has not as widely embraced these principles as much as we might like. I think it also fair to say that the comment I made three decades ago about design firms paying

insufficient attention to problem-definition, in contrast to problem-solving, also still resonates

I commented then, “While problem-solving is mentioned, I was surprised that nothing is said directly about problem-definition.” Quickly jumping to and focusing on solutions, often the solution the client has identified without much consideration of the underlying issues, lives on. Many designers contribute to this by thinking, along with the client who has already identified a shortage of space as the problem by engaging an architect, that essentially any problem can or should be solved by *physical* design. Insufficient classroom space (the problem) on university campuses, for example, is viewed as requiring new classroom construction (the solution). An alternative problem definition (reluctance of faculty and students to offer and take classes before 10am and after 4pm) might generate a faster and less expensive remedy (incentivizing, perhaps with bagels and coffee in the morning, different behavior).

Deeper insights into the nature of underlying problems require a systems perspective. The starting point is not design per se. It is identifying and understanding the system within which the problem appears. Fritz Steele and I call this analytical process the study of “organizational ecology.” That involves understanding, along with physical design, the dynamic and interdependent relationships among the demographics of the users, organizational culture and management practices, technology, work practices, the financial health of the organization, and the economic and political context. Doing this takes time, and costs money, money that clients may balk at investing. It also takes a multi-disciplinary team in which designers may not be the orchestra’s conductor. Designers cannot force clients to take the time or spend the money to engage in a systems analytic process. But as a fundamental *principle*, designers should *strive* to convince clients that, ultimately, this kind of systems-oriented problem-defining process, whether or not it shortens the time and the initial cost of the process and project, is worth the time and effort. It is like the difference between having a custom suit tailored to mask a weight gain and using education, diet and exercise to lose weight as part of a lifelong healthy lifestyle.

DEGW forged a direction and started an intellectual journey. My hope is that the DEGW Foundation and Archives will become a living legacy to stimulate the design community’s continued thinking about how, in addition to form, function and fees, our built environment and the *processes used to shape and evaluate it*, can serve a higher human, organizational and community purpose.