

Plural Professional Identities

This past year has had me reckoning with my professional identity on multiple occasions. While on a job hunt for the summer, I was required to identify my field of interest, from lists that included design strategist, architectural intern, graphic design intern and so on. This was my first time having to contend with choosing a singular role to work in. With the pandemic came hiring freezes, which propelled me to work on personal projects which included my website, where I was once more required to title myself. Calling myself an 'architect' was not enough; after all, I also actively write on travel and architecture, create collages for my Instagram page and have an appetite for intellectual stimulation. I tossed around options for titles, including 'creator' which was too vague and 'designer' which implied skills I didn't have. The theme of the year continued as I was required to choose alternative path(s) for this class. My second paper had an apologetic and confused tone, with me justifying how I had technically chosen 'author' but couldn't bring myself to commit to it. These repeated encounters evoked questions in me - If I don't want to commit to it, who do I want to be? Or more accurately, who all do I want to be?

To contend with these questions, I looked back into the ideas I was drawn to in the class. Through the course, I found myself identifying journalism, research and academia as broad areas of interest worth pursuing. I found it prudent to understand why I was drawn to these paths in specific and what promise they held as a practice model for me in the future. Some of the very first profiles I found myself drawn to were the likes of OASIS Studio and the Storefront for Art and Architecture. (Progressive Architecture, 1987) The former was a space for creatives to collectively work and the latter was a space for critical conversations. While I found that they were very much related to architecture, I did not find promising their viability as a standalone practice model given the targeted audience within a profession already alarmingly considered irrelevant. Some digging led me to Office Hours by Esther Choi, a virtual mentoring initiative that features design creatives who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of color (BiPoC) and is also exclusively catering to young BiPoC designers. (Suri, 2020) I found some resemblance to Storefront, both supporting the design community through an identified niche of discourse. On interviewing Choi on her work with Office Hours, I understood that there is a real need for such mentoring initiatives within an academic

setting that facilitates and perpetuates white supremacy. I asked her if being exclusive to a BiPoC audience still perpetuates the label of the 'other' and whether an all inclusive, utopian community was worth striving for. She argued that Office Hours was already utopian, presenting a space where BiPoC never had to feel like the other. She continued, describing utopia as a critical response to flaws identified in our current societal setting. As I mulled over her response, I came to realise that I am drawn to these efforts for their ability to challenge and offer new ways of operating in society. Esther Choi's efforts with Office Hours is an example of social entrepreneurship, where one uses their specific training and skill sets to challenge and better conditions within their area of interest and work.

I also found myself drawn to Soft Surplus, started by Dan Taeyoung, Melanie Hoff and Austin Wade Smith, and now supported by many others. It is not unlike OASIS Studio in its premise, both being collective spaces for creatives. Following ideas of an intentional community (Köerner, 2019), the social collective models alternative ways for people to work together. To me, it demonstrated the way an architect could conceive of another way for society to operate, challenging and rejecting the ways we currently conduct social negotiations. Both Choi and Taeyoung's work demonstrate change through action and yet are so deliberate in thought and intent. This space, where thinking and doing overlap to create new possibilities is lucrative for me, leaning into my idea of actionable insight - where observations and insights are used to fuel new ways to act.

Post my conversations with Choi and Taeyoung, I found myself also realizing that the work they do requires a certain conviction, which led me to probe into one's individual value systems. Evident from their conversations and work, ideas of justice and inclusivity are apparent, indicative of their intent to make a positive difference in the world. (Barrett Values Center, 2020) It is also clear that these values inform the kinds of work they take on, peers they interact with and so forth. A similar example would be that of Kyle Hoff, who was bothered by the waste generation of the furniture industry and used his skills and area of expertise to address the issue.(Floyd Detroit, 2020). They illustrate the kinds of people and companies I could see myself working for in the future; those with a clear intent and motivation; a passion for learning that invites collaboration, which in turn offers potential for personal and professional growth by active contribution and participation. (Barrett Values Center - Desired Org. Values, 2020). Independent of the work environment I may find myself in, I also see myself constantly striving for personal growth, looking to learn and more often, unlearn

and challenge my own conditioning. This reminds me of Dan Taeyoung, who repeatedly titles himself as a learner and looks at every opportunity and interaction as one that informs his process further. Resonating with these ideals, I reason that most of my personal values lie within the realms of self improvement is because I am constantly asking myself how I can improve and use my renewed skills to do some good in this world.

Self improvement rejects ideas of stagnation and comfort within a role, informing my need to constantly juggle and move between roles, each informing one another. My past work experience also saw me work my way up into roles of a lead architect, social media manager and intern mentor, each catering to varying values and intents. This makes me turn away from big sized architectural practices like Gensler, where employees can get pigeonholed into specific roles and areas of expertise, despite the allure of stability.(Kubany, 2000) In parallel, it also makes me wonder about the logistics of partaking in multiple interests, one taking precedence over the other, leaning into the idea of a main hustle with multiple side hustles. Responding to these concerns, Choi spoke of how a singular professional identity is becoming increasingly irrelevant, a neoliberal idea that no longer accurately represents the interests of the 21st century individual. Both Choi and Taeyoung are examples of individuals whose interests, skills and values define the work they do, all of which falls under their 'practice' and oeuvre. They are also both academicians, write regularly and have multiple ventures that cater to their varied interests, modelling a multi-faceted professional identity that I would like for myself. Their career paths provoke me to reject the singular role of an architect as the designer or architecture as a service based profession for one or more titles that are more expansive and inclusive of my interests. An example of such a career path would be Thomas Fischer, who posited alternate ways the profession could model itself.(Pressman, 2006) This is an instance where his interests in the state of the profession, combined with his expertise in research and unique position in academia all converged to offer insights and new perspectives on existing conditions.

Currently my aspirations beyond design lie in writing, academia and social entrepreneurship, all being values driven and are founded upon my skills. Academia offers space for intellectual stimulation and strategic thinking, catering to my need for personal growth. Combined with research, it is a space of constant insight and incremental learning. It also has the added benefits of a stable income and possible job security. Robert Douglas referred to the architectural profession as

a source of problem solving skills. (Douglas,2006) Studios in architecture school are almost always centered around an existing premise in society and postulate ways to challenge it through design. I see myself enjoying being in an environment where people are always strategizing about ways to better the world. The downside of academia, however, would be its time and energy demands, often not leaving enough space and energy for other pursuits.

Tangentially, writing is a realm that is often deadline intensive, similar to architecture and so I find myself comfortable tackling. The act requires one to learn more about topics, in line with my values of self betterment. It is also an audience centric medium, where insight and information can be dispelled into the world. Through text, one has the ability to change mindsets without directly interacting with people, making it an excellent medium for an introverted personality like me. (Briggs, 1987) Contrastingly, the role also requires one to market themselves and put themselves out there, making it difficult for reserved personalities. The financial promise is also dependent on multiple factors and is not as straightforward or stable as one would like.

All the profiles I have referenced earlier are examples of social entrepreneurship and I could argue that both writing and academia are subsets of this too. Both paths have direct impact on people's minds, offering social change through education and mass communication. Endeavours like OASIS studio or Soft Surplus would allow me to exercise my design skill sets while those like Storefront or Office Hours would require more intellectual input. This is to say that I am interested in engaging in other forms of social entrepreneurship, a path that requires taking stock of available resources and acting with those resources.

On a conclusive note, I find that both teaching and writing allow me exercise my values on a regular basis and are stepping stones to me identifying what I could comprehensively call my practice. Dan Taeyoung's parting piece of advice was to get comfortable distancing myself from the label of an architect, a move that would allow other career trajectories to surface. After all this soul searching, I have decided that 'creator' definitely allows me to exercise my agency through my experiences, expertise and skill set and does not limit me to a medium through which to enact. For that reason, I assume the titles of designer, creator, thinker and writer for the time being, fully expecting more to follow.

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