

JULY 2006

SPONTANEITY AND PROCESS: WHO'S THE DADDY?

Perhaps you think you are too creative for process? Perhaps you think spontaneity rules? Are you a design buyer looking for answers and freak at the mention of the P-word?

Process: there, you've read it. Process. Oops, done it again. Go on, it can't hurt. Process; see, it can surprise you! If you are at all put off by the do-good taste that the P-word leaves in the mouth, think again.

As an experiential communications agency, how do you sell time? Convincing a client to part with money to design a new product, retail outlet or brand identity is, arguably, the core business activity of many a profitable design agency. It is done with words, sketches, artwork, models and film. In fact, a whole range of media is available. Convincing a client to do the same for a period of time, an experience requires an additional and unique medium: belief.

This is the challenge for experiential communications.

"It'll be fine... it'll be alright on the night... it will all come together... believe us." This might be called trust by some people when dealing with their long-term clients. But in order to beat the competition, fresh territory has to be constantly conquered where previously no track record exists. Reassuring phrases just won't cut it. Of course you need spontaneity, a creative answer, but you also need a plan; you need deadlines, deliverables, checks and measures.

You need a process.

One morning, a composer woke up with a tune in his head and spontaneously penned 'scrambled eggs' in literally minutes. After what could be called a process, it morphed into the world's most played radio song of all time. We know it now as 'Yesterday.' Recently at Tate Modern, Herzog and deMeuron's exhibition revealed table upon table of design process artefacts that demonstrated their architectural craft. Often thought of as the throwaway aspect of creative work, these were the sketches, quick drawings and doodles. Scores of blue foam models, all describing similar forms, each presented an adjustment of edge, structure or profile, laboriously seeking out a possible improvement over the last. Found objects and copies made in different materials explored what more could be revealed of their structure, texture or aesthetic. In-car footage of recesses explored the culture, pace, setting, people and feel of a location, along with recordings of conversations. Here were models of so many variations; from simple blocks to full scale sections of steelwork; ideas on how to represent a contoured chamber, to exacting and representative realisations.

There was so much you wanted to absorb. You knew no book could do it justice and the fact you couldn't take photographs made you work harder at looking, as if to burn some of the content onto the back of your retina. The overriding impression was one of absorbing, truthful integrity, where the honesty of failure and the repeated 'try and try again' process ultimately delivered a satisfying experience. You didn't need to see a photograph of the finished building because you knew the heart and soul was already in the design. All the work on show was most probably results of spontaneous actions, but all caught up in a process that ultimately will provide a stadium, a library or a complete urban infrastructure.

Anyone watching a DVD today can not simply view a 90 minute popcorn meal. The 'menu', once simply the domain of a few language options and a static credits list, now provides for the apparent hunger to devour all aspects of how Smeegle can leap from rock to rock, whilst getting all 'oooh precious' about it. At will, you can now go behind the scenes, watch documentaries on 'the making of', review storyboards, witness the secrets of special effects and watch it all over again with the back-seat commentary of the producer, director, actor, cinematographer et al. Deleted scenes are repackaged with a second chance, 'Director's Cuts,' just to let the studio know that the director was right all along.

Where has this demand for all the background content come from? Why are we not happy to just be told the story?

Where film has led in revealing process, literature hasn't even started. Deleted chapters from Pride & Prejudice anyone? Publisher's cut of the Da Vinci Code? Special effects commentary for Genesis? But how long can we hold off? How long for example, until the original Harry Potter notebooks, with all the characters, plots and potions are revealed in their raw, unpolished originality?

Which brings us back to Scrambled Eggs. Who is not intrigued by seeing the original penned article of a song's lyrics? Some are now held as national treasures in the British Museum. If you are still buying CD's, some bands still bother to publish the original jottings of running orders, title options and key changes as a way of revealing much more of the artist. Of course, this could disappear totally if downloads become the only format of expressing the construct method of a track.

Architecture, film, music, literature can all deliver final, polished, outstanding works. We will all soon witness the achievements in the Herzog de Meuron Beijing Olympic stadium and have another cinema story to retell at work the next day. But for you to be able to witness these, somebody further back up the line has had to buy-in to an unfinished symphony and believe the spontaneity of the pitch can be secured with a bullet-proof process. Money on the table commitment to pieces of blue foam and a storyboard: now that's believing in process.

I think there is a huge appetite to devour the content of process, I just don't think we like to admit it. But if you were buying a piece of experiential communications, wouldn't you like to see some process?

Karl Elliott
Creative Director
PCI FITCH