

E.C. Mare
Whole Systems Design
Autumn 1999

Reflection on Individual Design Learning Project

This was a very enjoyable assignment and proved to contain many hidden, valuable, and unforeseen lessons.

The assignment assumed, in simplified form, all the major elements of a contractor/client design scenario: interview, investigation of desires and needs, interpretation of specific objectives and goals, creation of a contract, the actual design work producing an artifact, presentation of the design, and evaluation of the fitness of the design to meet stated objectives. This was the first time I approached a design scenario with such a detailed conceptual focus.

Among the lessons learned:

- 1) Contractor and client form a *relationship*: all relationships are an agreement of sorts. I was indelibly impressed with the need to consciously *nurture* the contractor/client relationship, as is necessary in any relationship.
- 2) I was also impressed with the need for clear and open *communication*. Contractor must be responsible for initiating and sustaining a meaningful dialogue that in the end may prove to be quite intensive as well as extensive. I learned this lesson by failing to appreciate the depth and breadth of communication required. In my design scenario, I discovered that I approached the initial interview rather shallowly and haphazardly. I assumed I knew what the client wanted and needed, what was best for her, just because I was more knowledgeable about the subject. At the time of presentation, it became clear that I had been dictating to the client what she needed, all based on very sound principles, but not exactly what she had in mind. I've grown accustomed to working on my own designs and doing just what I want – this will not work in a relationship!
- 3) This brings up the final major lesson: the need for the designer to develop acute listening and strategic questioning skills. The designer is, after all, a *facilitator*, present to draw out information, desires and needs that the client may not even be aware of. The client is often approaching the meeting with a dim sense of what she specifically wants, often taking the form of a vague emotional desire. The client's ultimate satisfaction is the measure of success, and for this to occur the client's desires need to be deeply heard and felt.

In a sense, all three of these lessons are part of the same issue: Contractor and client form a special relationship which requires its own special kind of understanding. All

meaningful relationships require clear and open communication, and in order to be a good communicator, one must be very adept at listening, able to draw out the best in the other.