



Writing Visual Culture

Histories of Design Research Failures

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Abstract

Design Research Failures is a design research project that facilitates conversation, reflection and action around the question: "In what way has Design Research failed in the last 50 years?" In this article, the project is further discussed as a potential vehicle for making and unmaking design history in various ways. As a call for action for design historians to engage in this exploration, two examples of such possible engagements are included, one by Kaisu Savola and another by Ben Highmore.



'In what way has Design Research failed in the last 50 years?'

This is the central question posed by Design Research Failures (DRF), a design research project that started out as a successful response to the Design Research Society's (DRS) 50th Anniversary call for projects that 'further our understanding of the origins of design research as well as the role that the DRS has played in its development'. After taking the format of an interactive exhibition at DRS2016, DRF developed into an online conversation platform at <https://designresearchfailures.com/>. The project has also had a presence at RTD2017 (Edinburgh, March 22-24) and PhD by Design 2017 (Sheffield, April 3-4), and has further been presented at NERD, New Experimental Research in Design (Braunschweig, June 15-16) and DHS2017 (Oslo, September 7-9). Finally, on November 23, 2017, the first spin-off satellite DRF event was held as part of the Public Innovation Week (La Semaine de l'Innovation Publique) in Nantes, as a way to engage local stakeholders in reflecting on the way in which the approach of designing policies and public action has failed.

In the frame of DRF, addressing failures is not about reflecting on 'why didn't we?' but instead taking a shortcut towards 'why don't we?' In this sense, the project is about nothing less than anticipating and co-creating the future of the design discipline. However, while every response to the central question posed is constructively forward facing, it is also deeply rooted in design history. Just like each response effectively challenges our notions of what constitutes failure and in reverse success, so does it confront us with our historical understanding of the design discipline.

One of the key objectives for DRF is to continue to facilitate an inclusive, open-ended conversation characterized by fruitful dissensus, rather than aiming for a single conclusive answer (*this* is how design research has failed in the last 50 years). In this pursuit design research is embraced in its entirety and diversity: across gender, age, race, geography, politics, religion, institutions (or lack thereof), academia + industry + third sector. A part of this goal also concerns involving voices from the many different corners of design research. From a design research perspective, design history is one such corner, and it is positive to note existing DRF responses with a distinct design historical angle (such as Danah Abdulla's response: "It has failed to acknowledge design's role in colonialism" (2017)), along with responses from design historians, such as Alison Clarke (2016).

However, other forms of possible engagement between the field of design history and DRF exist beyond this most immediate connection. At a recent design research



conference, a colleague suggested that each DRF response could act as the basis for a design research PhD call/position (in particular practice-based, addressing the research question through practice (Frayling 1993; Koskinen et al. 2011)). To this I would add that each response too could act as a lens for the making/unmaking of design histories. These two potentials are of course interrelated. For the PhD student in design (or we could say the design researcher), each response offers a sense of urgency coming from within the discipline, and consequently a design space ripe for critical action. To illustrate this point with the example of Danah Abdulla's response above, the PhD student could e.g. be faced with the task of prototyping a decolonized design practice. For the design historian, it appears to me that each response offers a possibility to explore how we got to this point (addressing both the issue at hand and its identification as a failure). Sticking with the example of Danah Abdulla, this could be a matter of exploring design's role in colonialism, as well as the lack of acknowledgement and critical reflection on this dynamic from within design. While some of the issues brought forth through such studies might already have been adequately covered in design history, there might too be novel design histories to be explored. Further, even with significant scholarship on a certain topic, it might be interesting to reflect on whether the findings have adequately been fed back to design practice, design research, and society at large. In this case, DRF could offer a possibility to connect the already existing dots.

Of course, one could also look at the entire project as a designed unfolding discourse, and consequently study data such as the chronology in responses being submitted, the emerging gravity around certain issues and topics, and new responses that effectively counter existing ones. To this one could add comments on responses posted on the DRF site, analytics from social media, and of course all sorts of analyses of the traffic on the DRF site (demography, site usage etc.), coupled with the material from the various DRF exhibitions and workshops, to end up with some sort of x-ray of an unfolding design discourse, a sort of history in the making. In her article "'Make Us More Useful to Society!': The Scandinavian Design Students' Organization (SDO) and Socially Responsible Design, 1967–1973', Ida Kamilla Lie writes:

As emphasized by Guy Julier (2015: 154), "design activism and social design must ... be regarded as representing discursive moments that are bound to their historical circumstances." The SDO's activities in the late 1960s constituted such a "moment," providing what we may call a window of opportunity for the development of social awareness within Nordic design discourse, as well as for enthusiastic experimentation with collective, collaborative design methods (Lie 2016: 355).



To me, the 50-year anniversary of the DRS—standing at a turning point simultaneously looking towards the past and the future—is in a sense symptomatic of the larger design research field. Responding to this moment in time, DRF is about designing a space for collective disciplinary introspection, a self-reflective pause, in order to anticipate and co-create the future. I'm very curious how design historians would engage in this specific moment, whether it presents an opportunity for direct engagement or a subject of study, and if the project somehow resonates with the current issues in design history, as experienced at the 40-year anniversary of the DHS.

Design historians have an incredibly valuable perspective to add to the question of how design research has failed, and my hope is that DRF in turn offers an interesting, alternative lens for the making of new histories as well as the unmaking of established ones, with the potential of bringing new perspectives to the fore. Below are two examples, first Kaisu Savola responding to an anonymous DRF response from PhD by Design 2017 and second, Ben Highmore responding to Jeremy Myerson's Pre-DRS2016 DRF response. My hope is that these initial examples will inspire more future engagements between DRF and design history.

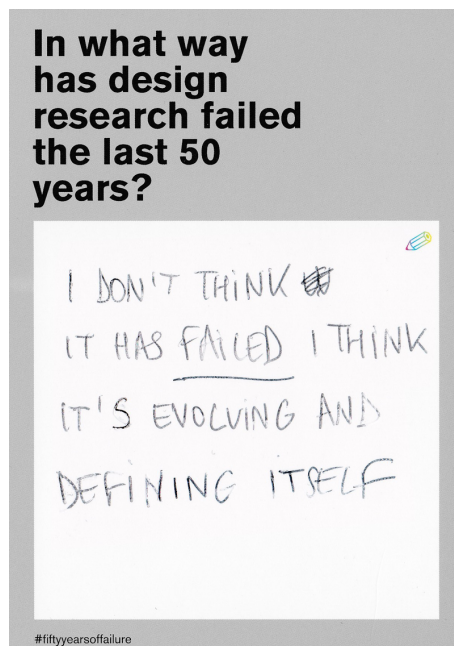


Figure 1 – Anonymous DRF response from PhD by Design 2017. Graphic design by Marije de Haas, handwriting by anonymous conference participant. Copyright by Søren Rosenbak.

Contribution by Kaisu Savola, PhD Candidate, Department of Design, Aalto University School of Arts, Design. Responding to an anonymous DRF response from PhD by Design 2017: I DON'T THINK IT HAS FAILED I THINK IT'S EVOLVING AND DEFINING ITSELF.

I chose this statement not because I agree or disagree with it but because it made me realize how impossible it is to think of history in terms of successes and failures only.

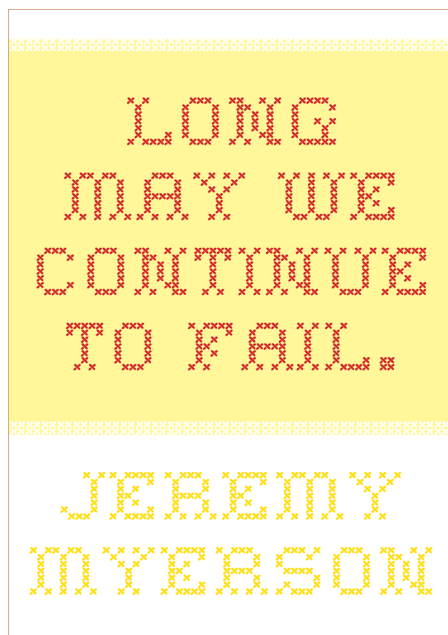
Success to some means failure to others, and the other way around.

For example, the history of contemporary consumer culture is full of successful businesses producing successful products while failing to take care of the environment or distribute wealth equally.

I'm not sure if it is the historian's place to decide what is a success and what is a failure to begin with.

The most interesting thing for a historian is to discover the system that produces and allows for these so-called successes and failures.

The system needs to be understood before it can be changed.



**Figure 2 – DRF response by Jeremy Myerson. Graphic design by Marije de Haas.
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Contribution by Ben Highmore, Professor of Cultural Studies (Media and Film, Centre for Material Digital Culture) and Reader in Media Studies (Centre for Photography and Visual Culture), University of Sussex. Responding to Jeremy Myerson, Helen Hamlyn Professor of Design, Royal College of Art & Director of The WORKTECH Academy, Unwired Ventures Ltd.: Long may we continue to fail.

I have almost zero experience of anything that is officially named as 'design research' (I examined a PhD on the topic at the RCA – it was about 'design research'). So, I'll have to take your word for it that 'failure' has been its fate. I'm intrigued by Jeremy Myerson's response. My response is probably somewhat tangential.

As a teenager, I worshipped at the altar of Samuel Beckett: 'birth was the death of him'. For Beckett success was never a quest: fail again, fail better. Beckett was good at managing expectations. It makes you wonder what could success be, apart from something monstrously inhuman. If life is made of death and mess, of fragile relations that are maintained for a time and then lost, if entropy is the only true philosophy of nature, then 'success' would be an attempt to halt life itself.

I've always been intrigued by experiments in social life: collectives, communes, co-operatives, experiments in education, of medicine and health (the Peckham Experiment). These projects often burn brightly for a decade or so and then are either drawn back in the



mainstream or disappear. They are seen to fail. We are constantly told that are social worlds are failures (multiculturalism, 1968, welfare socialism). Where are our examples of success? Perhaps today we need to rethink how we measure success and failure, and think about the qualities we would like from our failures.

Perhaps the only way forward is to gird your loins and not treat 'failure' as failure. Social experimental design (of forms of life) may only ever fail. Don't try and succeed, just try and fail better.

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