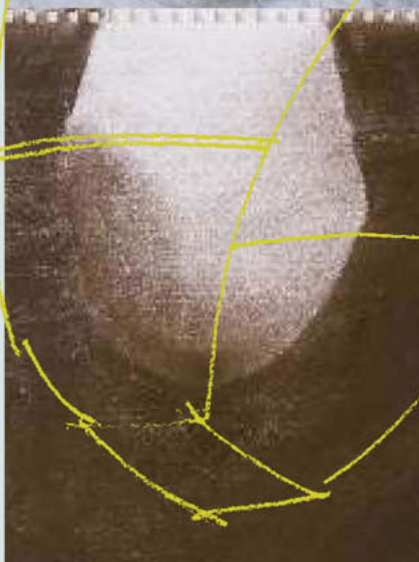


THE ROLE OF DESIGNER AS MEDIATOR BETWEEN CULTURE AND NATURE

By Suné Stassen



CROSS POLLINATION

Karen Suskin is a true change agent. Her commitment and passion for design education and her exhaustive search for new and more integrated ways of doing design have lead to the development of a creative and innovative teaching practice. A practice shared in Cross-Pollination. "The Cross-Pollination workshops explore the role of designer as mediator between culture and nature and endeavour to understand nature as a powerful source to stimulate an organic type of thinking that is fluid and flexible. A thinking which enlivens the ability to perceive connections between things – the connection to us, others and that of the environment," she explains.

As an interdisciplinary designer, educator, multimedia artist, Karen can be found exhibiting her art work at major venues one day, and on another day mentoring and motivating aspiring designers to change their manmade world into one that is more inclusive, collaborative and sustainable.

"Designers, like all citizens, are required to become agents of change," she says. But in most formal institutions "personal development is not given the attention it deserves and this is a critical component of the work that I do. Cross-Pollination confronts prevailing conventions and urges participants to find more authentic and integrated ways in which to arrive at the outcome" explains Karen.

She has always followed a sustainable path, long before the rest of us became aware of the necessity for it. One of her largest creations was the construction of her straw-bale

home 12 years ago. She achieved this with the help of husband Anthony, family and a small local workforce.

Karen explains that Cross-Pollination addresses change within and outside the design studio. Its teaching methods are aligned with David Sogge who said: "learning has to move to the heart of practice."



So what exactly is Cross-Pollination all about? "The shift we are experiencing in design is a response to a complex mix of some of the negative features of modern life like over-consumption, depleted natural resources, alienation from nature and anti-social behaviour. A manifestation of this shift is the radical changes taking place in nature herself – we are being rocked out of our complacency by global climate change and ecological catastrophe.





The problems we face have been caused in large measure by the disconnected way in which we think about, do and relate to the world. We can no longer afford to view life through the familiar lens of materialism alone, but must evolve to a way of thinking that recognises nature as our teacher. We must expand our field of vision to encompass the living world as our university. By returning to nature's genius, we may find that we can craft interconnected and intelligent design solutions, which benefit both people and nature" says Karen.

Karen explains that the Cross-Pollination series of workshops that she presents is really a response to the above and an invitation to all who want to explore and develop new ways of thinking, learning and doing design in a more connected and intelligent way. "The challenge is to make space for the emergence of new insights through developing our self-knowledge and consequently expanding and enhancing our engagement with the world which we inhabit."

So who exactly is the Cross-Pollination audience? Cross-Pollination creates a forum for design educators interested in exploring better practice to come together to develop their personal skills as well as a sense of camaraderie within their field of expertise. The workshop series is relevant to all design educators committed to self-study and building future capacity. "Support is given for developing new learning systems, developing partnerships and future networks in the form of cross-institutional collaboration, envisioning and re-structuring of a department, or developing an institutional working

group. The other area that Cross-Pollination focuses on is the emergent design student" says Karen.

The student programme helps designers understand that the primary function of design is not perfecting form. This definition is far too narrow and completely ignores design's vital connection with cultural life and nature, hence the title of the workshops. Karen says that design education cannot be excluded from this mismanagement and material manipulation. She continues: "there is enough evidence that we are doing something wrong. Cross-Pollination creates a forum in which to learn individually and collectively, and where the principles of self-organisation and transformation are explored."

Cross-Pollination is part of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology's design programme and is presently being offered to all design institutions across disciplines nationwide. Karen, Haldane Martin, an industrial designer, process art and social facilitator Helen van Zyl and two social development practitioners Alan Kaplan and Sue Davidoff, facilitate a week-long residential process. This takes place bi-annually in a wilderness area outside Cape Town where students and professional designers from diverse disciplines participate in an extended creative process, inspired by close observation of nature.

So why is it so important for designers to become agents of change? The current ecological crisis and the social dilemma we are facing call for a different type of action.

"Through ecological catastrophe it is clear that our existing world is unsustainable and that nature is nudging us towards some sort of shift which could be that of inner responsibility and outer sustainability," says Karen.

"Humanity is crossing a major threshold. The boundaries that surrounded consciousness centuries ago are no longer fixed, and it is not only the physical world which implies reality. Instead of sending voyagers to discover unknown continents, the exploration of inner frontiers is taking place" (Lievegoed, 1985:223). According to Karen, this less travelled and rather uncertain path summons us as designers to become agents of change.

It's moving from an intellectual, conventional materialistic outlook that views the human being as '**ego system**' to an outlook that views the human being as '**ecosystem**' which includes man and nature as mutually interdependent. "Only then do I believe will we find a more life-engendering way of doing design in the future."

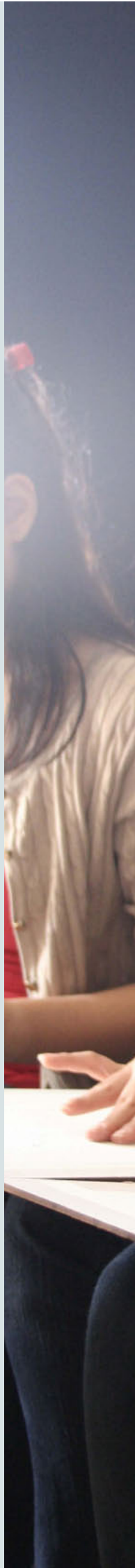
How do we do this? This is achievable through establishing different methods of teaching. Designers must engage in a learning journey, which enables them to gain a grasp on the complexities and the relations between man and nature and all the delicate nuances between. "It's a new way of developing a 'living thinking' approach which is as flexible, agile and adaptable as Nature herself. This entails accurately and sensitively 'reading' or observing the connecting patterns that make up the dynamics of life," says Karen.

In rising to the challenge of change, Karen says that "design education must address its present traditional definition of knowledge and ask: How do we shift educational systems from traditional knowledge and the **known** to being in the **knowing** and liberate design from its own ingrained patterns and entrenched habits? Furthermore, in accepting the less recognised modes of perception such as intuition, inspiration and imagination, I believe the design process will unfold in more organic, conscious and connected ways."

"Once the designers are equipped with this knowledge and understanding, it should become second nature for them to develop their own experiential pathways and align their personal potential and ability to harness creativity with purpose-filled intention and innovation."

As William Blake so beautifully said: "To see a **world** in a grain of sand, and **heaven** in a wild flower..." suggests the unity of micro and macrocosm and establishes the possibility for designers to experience the world as an interconnected whole. Our modern way of living and modes of gathering knowledge has numbed our ability to mobilise our thoughts. We need to learn again how to understand the fine relationships between things and find new methods to partner them so that we can create a true overview of the needs of the world. "Only now we can truly move towards a human agency that can positively contribute to meaningful change," explains Karen.

"The lawfulness we experience in nature is a golden thread that runs through the









Cross-Pollination programme and guides understanding towards our own individual purpose and that of humanity. I believe this is the way to empower designers in leading design to the heart of a sustainable future."

The intention of Cross-Pollination is that each designer finds the courage with which to cross self-imposed boundaries and discover a living balance between their holistic mode of thinking – which includes imagination, intuition and inspiration and acknowledge these faculties as trusted modes of cognition – alongside the complementary analytic and rational mode of thinking. "This way we can reground our knowing through lived experience, enabling us to find new ways of being in the world in the future. "“Now the design process becomes more conscious and our actions all the more responsible,” explains Karen.

She says that the six modules included in the workshops are “sensitively designed to embrace change and redirect attention from the **object** or end product to the **process, the journey**. The designer is cautioned not to try and fix the design result prematurely with a solution, but rather understand

to their best ability the experiential nature of each process and create space for a deep emersion into each project."

Although the studio space is informal and the workshops broadly experiential, the course is highly structured and disciplined. The creative process will stimulate both personal and collective dialogue around new ways of thinking that is in tune with issues such as social revitalisation, ecological sensitivity and new economical development.

And the difference between the Cross-Pollination methodology and that of biomimicry?

Karen concludes: "I see Cross-Pollination as a universal approach to design that doesn't only consider the technical aspects of design challenges, but also the transformation of the designer and his/her relationship to society and the environment. Cross-Pollination shares the values and life principles subscribed to by biomimicry, and both are inspired by a vision of a just and sustainable world. Cross-Pollination is an integrated approach to design that strives to avoid creating the problems that require technical solutions." <