



Making Design Research Visible

Nigel Cross 

School of Engineering and Innovation, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK
(nigel.cross[at]open.ac.uk)

Abstract: Design research now has an established history extending over more than 60 years. The current robust state of the field indicates that there has been real development and consolidation, including the establishment of academic journals. Most significantly, design is now recognized as an academic discipline. Disciplines need good journals in order to flourish — research has to be made visible.

Keywords: design discipline; design research

In the small, English-speaking North Atlantic region of the world, the starting points for our current conceptions of design research lay in the early conferences and societies that appeared in the 1960s. (In other parts of the world, some were a bit earlier, some a bit later.) The Conference on Design Methods in London in 1962 led to the founding of the Design Research Society (DRS) in the UK and the Design Methods Group (DMG) in the USA in 1966. This estimable journal, *Visible Language*, pioneered the publishing of research in communication design in 1967 (as *The Journal of Typographic Research*), around the same time as the DMG began its modest *Newsletter* but a full 12 years before the DRS journal *Design Studies*. A common feature of these design research-related conferencing and publishing initiatives of the 1960s was, firstly, the perception of design as a process, i.e., a cognitive skill rather than an intuitive talent, and secondly, the perception of design as an academic subject, i.e., knowledge-based, beyond being learned just as a practical art, and therefore capable of being taught, studied and researched alongside other academic subjects. These two perceptions led to their combining into an overall perception of design as an academic discipline.

@: [ISSUE](#) > [ARTICLE](#) >

Cite this article:

Cross, N. (2025). Making design research visible. *Visible Language*, 59(1), 1–4.

First published online April 27, 2025.

© 2025 Visible Language — this article is **open access**, published under the CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.

<https://visible-language.org/journal/>

Visible Language Consortium:

University of Leeds (UK)

University of Cincinnati (USA)

North Carolina State University (USA)

After all these 60+ years of design research, the achievements may seem to be fairly modest. But younger design researchers today might find it difficult to imagine their field as it was in the 1960s as the new approaches and attitudes to design began to appear. There were none of the journals we now have; no design research conferences or societies; no postgraduate and certainly no PhD research programs in design; no concept of design as a discipline.

I believe that this concept of design as a discipline is the most significant outcome of those very early developments. Design graduates are now better educated, more self-aware about designing and the design process, how to be a designer and the contribution designers make to society. Going beyond that, developing design as a discipline has made it possible for design to interact on an equal basis with many other disciplines, from computer science to cognitive science, anthropology to psychology, sociology to philosophy, all leading to positive feedback loops that now make design research very different from its early starting points.

Disciplines begin to emerge when a few pioneers start to recognize some common interests that suggest possibilities for new approaches, methods and interpretations. They usually develop from within established university departments and traditional “parent” disciplines. That is why emergent disciplines can initially create frictions and attract criticisms, can be difficult and challenging, and can take time to become established. We can recognize all these features in the history of design research.

Emerging disciplines are characterized by their initial novelty and the challenges they face, with rather slow early progress. A period of more rapid growth follows, marked by increases in publications, with new journals and outlets (especially conferences) for presentation, discussion and dissemination of new research. These developments eventually lead to influence within the established parent disciplines and both internal and external recognition of the impact of the new research. Eventually, the emergent discipline establishes its own internal coherence that connects and combines the research methods and outcomes, and the viewpoints that arise, all of which enables connections with, and influence upon, other disciplines and more distant practices. Again, we see this connecting process in the early and the more recent history of design research and the foundations of the discipline of design. We have also seen the emergence of design out of parent, domain-specific departments into self-standing interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary departments, schools, faculties and even colleges of design.

The current state of design research is the outcome of this more than 60 years of growth and development. The major, established and widely-recognized disciplines of study may have much more substantial histories than that, but they all began somewhere and

somehow: they all arose from modest beginnings and took many decades to mature. Design research is no different.

One thing that is clear from the history of disciplines is that they need communication to foster, aid and cement their emergence and growth. Conferences have been important in establishing early communication, but the classic form of mature communication, of course, is the academic journal, which not only publishes communications and disseminates new knowledge but also constructs and curates the field and sets a discipline's standards. It is this responsibility that is undertaken so willingly and conscientiously by journal editors and their bodies of reviewers.

A few years ago, I signed off my editorship of the journal *Design Studies* with a special issue on the theme of "Design as a Discipline" (volume 65, November 2019), which had been a fundamental starting point for the journal, 40 years before. Looking over the set of diverse and erudite papers in the special issue on the state of design as a discipline, and reflecting on the 40-year history they conveyed, I asked in the issue's editorial "what do we see?" and responded:

What emerges is a strong sense of academic achievement and the establishment of a genuine discipline of design. There are some caveats and concerns, but the overarching message is very positive. We see the identification, articulation and clarification of the discipline's knowledge bases, underlying skill-sets and values. We see both diverse and quite focused research programmes that have been pursued with rigour and imagination. Overall, there has been a movement away from early, technically-orientated approaches to reforming the methods and processes of design, towards a comprehension of design as a cognitive and social, creative reflective practice. There are still the same objectives related to improving design activity and design outcomes, but more by understanding and developing human design skills, rather than replacing them with artificial rationality. (Cross, 2019, p. 5)

Unfortunately, not because of any weakness in the design research community but because of a publisher's disruptive actions, the future role of *Design Studies* is now uncertain (DRS, 2023). But *Design Studies* has not been the only journal responsible for the development of that encouraging view I gave above, and the very presence of so many other journals reinforces the view of a meaningful discipline having been established. The key point is that the underlying research base of a discipline has to be made visible, it has to be communicated, i.e., we have to publish, and that publishing has to embody, reflect and develop the standards of the discipline.

References

- Cross, N. (2019). Editorial: Design as a discipline. *Design Studies*, 65, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2019.11.002>
- Design Research Society (2023). The future of Design Studies. <https://www.designresearchsociety.org/articles/the-future-of-design-studies-update>

Author

Nigel Cross is Emeritus Professor of Design Studies, The Open University, UK. He has considerable experience as a design teacher and an international reputation as a design researcher through books such as *Analysing Design Activity*, *Designerly Ways of Knowing*, and *Design Thinking: Understanding How Designers Think and Work*. He was a founding editor of the journal *Design Studies* in 1979 and its editor-in-chief from 1984 to 2017.