



Standards and design at Goldsmiths University



I'm a lecturer in the Design Department at Goldsmiths. I teach on the BA in Design and the MA Design Expanded Practice. My research explores how narrative, materiality and visual culture are involved in the production of space.

Relationship between standards and design

The Department of Design at Goldsmiths is internationally renowned for its inventive, experimental and critical engagement with social and cultural life and the role of designers and design therein. We have enjoyed a long history of redefining the discipline of design and how design studies combine with practice-led research-through-design. We are interested in understanding how design can address and affect change within contemporary society, and champion a post-disciplinary approach, which allows students to transcend traditional design disciplines and develop work that pushes the boundaries of what design can be.

"I'm interested in the relationship between standards and design"

I'm interested in the relationship between standards and design, and how they invisibly shape our world and the everyday things, methods, and rules we live by. I think that by becoming aware of how standards are made, updated and evolved, allows designers to understand the complicated networks and systems behind a simple object. In particular, the process of standards-making in relation to design by committee – a colloquial term in the design industry for a concept that's been watered down due to too many voices. The designer as the sole genius with a vision still pervades in the industry as the example of how good design is realized, so I'm interested in how standards are made through a collective design process involving many experts, and how this role is 'performed' or voiced in forum-type spaces.

Teaching standards and standardization

In 2018 we ran a MA design brief that looked to critically engage with the world of standards in order to understand, and then subvert, reimagine or 'hack' into existing standards. Some of these were de-facto standards, but some of them were specific de jure standards. We asked, if you could reimagine a standard, what possibilities could that lead to for design,

and what impact would that have on the world? Over the course of 8 weeks, students developed design projects that re-imagined an existing standard in order to produce new objects or methods of action. They hijacked the written and visual language of standards-making to develop their design in detail and finally, disseminated their new standards to a public audience.

A BSI guest talk on the reality of the standards world was used to kick-start the design brief. BSI's British Standards Online (BSOL) was useful for giving students access to the original standards, and brought an understanding of the detail, language and visual communication of this material. We also encouraged the students to find physical evidence of standards in the world around them (from the small print on the base of a product to a label inside a cardigan) and document these findings, thereby joining up the literature and its material effects.

It was a real eye-opener for the students to learn about the process of how standards are made and the detail that one standard could contain. Hijacking the format and language of standards as a process to generate ideas – vocabularies for instance – was a surprising and productive design methodology. Learning about the international network of standards-makers, their global effect on the material world, and the politics and power surrounding this was also something they found fascinating.

Importance of standards knowledge

Through the design brief students became more aware of the standards and regulatory processes that go on behind the scenes for the everyday things that we see and interact with, and the potential implications on design. For any designer concerned with asking questions of the world, this is important. We encourage our students to know the rules in order to understand how they might break or subvert or reimagine them. I believe there is great creative potential for designers to explore, visualize and tell unexpected stories about the effects standards have on everyday human interactions.



Learn more at: www.gold.ac.uk/pg/ma-design-expanded-practice



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About BSI Education

Universities make a significant contribution to standardization by teaching about standards, contributing academic research, and being standards-makers. BSI Education builds relationships and creates programmes with universities to help raise awareness of the benefits of standards to society and the economy and to encourage and increase participation in standards-making.



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