

# All Together Now

## Communication networks and collaborative spaces

By Rachel Abrams

### TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1 Design professionals as creative collaborators
- 2 Collaboration as an architecture for cooperation
- 3 Collaboration as a space, an empty vessel or forum where creative individuals' ideas and contributions come together
- 5 Collaboration as problem-solving practices to facilitate creativity within these frameworks and spaces
- 5 Collaboration in context
- 6 Acknowledgements

These days, anyone who is anyone has to be working with someone. If the editorials of just about every business magazine are anything to go by, we're all at it. We all just want to be together. Times are uncertain; we're putting in long hours. We need some security and some excitement; some autonomy in company we trust; we want to see ourselves in our work, but we also need to share the load. So we've found each other.

The more global and macro the marketplace becomes, the more local our responses. We're looking to the person across the desk for guidance and affirmation. As work has changed, the workplace has adapted too. Workspirit is the response of European furniture manufacturer, Vitra. In volume 8, Vitra's CEO, Ralph Fehlbaum observes:

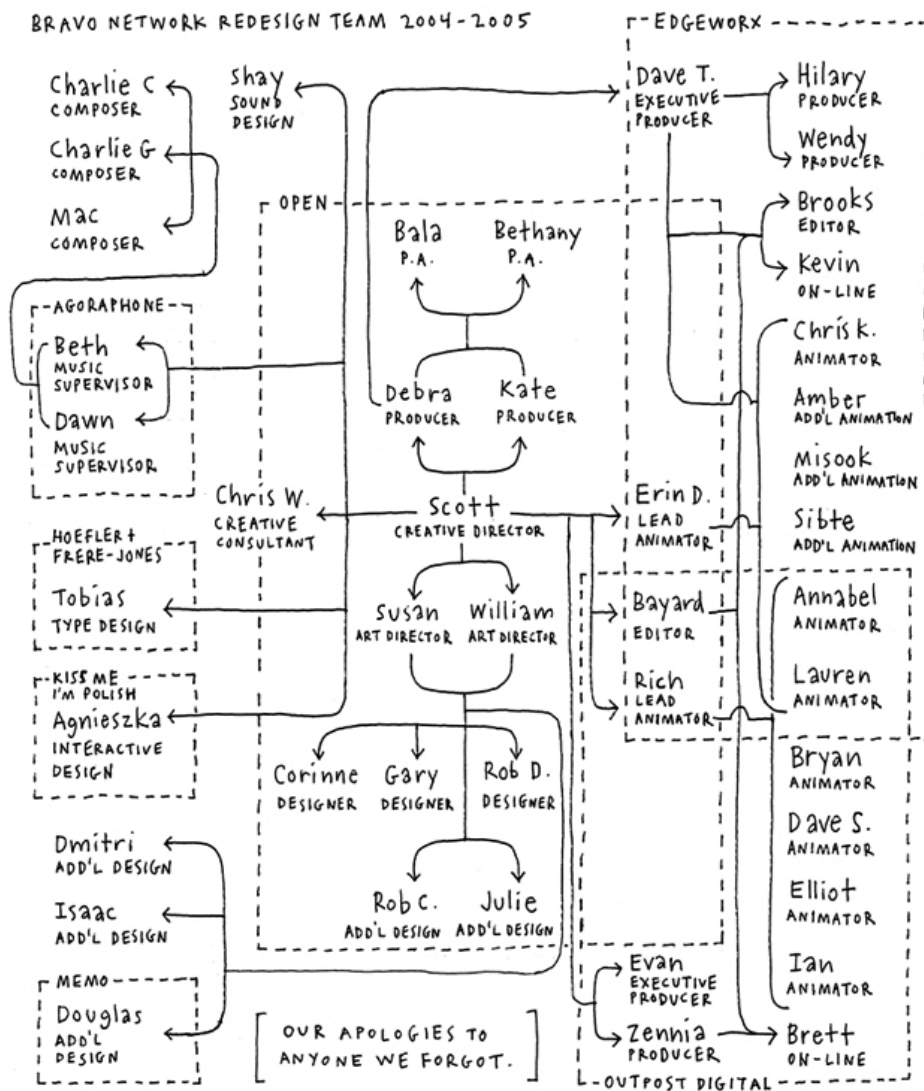
"Contemporary work demands collaboration, communication, speed, interaction, teamwork, and creativity.

"...The old office was based on a Taylorist notion of dedicated tasks, standards and hierarchy. The new office demands the networking of intelligent, autonomous individuals as a prerequisite to problem solving."

### Design professionals as creative collaborators

John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid observe in their updated introduction to the Social Life of Information [[www.sociallifeofinformation.com](http://www.sociallifeofinformation.com)], "Centripetal social needs, which call people together, compete with centrifugal technologies that allow them to move apart."

Behemoth interactive agencies, like Marchfirst, were burned out in the white heat of the no-collar 1990s. Since then, projects have become increasingly interdisciplinary, technically mediated and experiential. Complicated, strategic projects still require teams of interdisciplinary thinkers, and interdisciplinary teams require specialists trading on their core competencies. Adapting to the complexity of these projects, loose networks of smaller agencies and individual designers have emerged.



A map of Open's team for the Bravo Network redesign project. Illustration by Scott Stowell.

Scott Stowell's Open is one of those boutique design shops. As the name suggests, his creative allegiances extend beyond the four walls of his studio. Re-designing the network graphics for pop-culture cable television channel, Bravo, recently, Open took the requisite multi-lateral approach with animators, sound designers and film-makers. While Stowell's team handled the design strategy, they enlisted the acoustic expertise of music supervisors, Agoraphone, to brand tunes for the channel. Filmmaker, Chris Wilcha, consulted on creative concepts.

Meanwhile, Eddie Opara and George Plesko, a pair of Yale-educated graphic designers, typically share web, print and motion graphics projects as The Map Office. Likewise, Jared Schiffman and Phillip Tongson, both MIT Media Lab alumni, are partners at Potion. This year, these four have come together to establish design network, Constellation. Manoeuvring between print, motion graphics, web, information architecture and environmental design, they 'weave visual design and technology with architecture to create compelling experiences'.

The structure is flexible: Whoever wins the work leads the project. As individual design stars in other collaborations, Opara developed the gigantic motion graphics for the skin of the Morgan Stanley Building on Times Square, under contract with Imaginary Forces; Tongson worked with Small Design Firm to install a Dynamic Poster, Timeline, and the AsiaTables for New York's Asia Society. Having recently completed a portfolio site for fashion photographer, Carlton Davis, the Constellation team are collaborating to produce tangible media and site-specific technology for other landmark museums and restaurants in New York into 2006. As their clients in government, cultural institutions and high-end retail demand diverse, complementary skills, they anticipate that, configured as an even broader Constellation, a loose federation of other designers, technologists and researchers will shine alongside them.

Conference circuit chatter suggests that other designers are paying attention to studios like Constellation, as are design educators. This new collaborative environment is changing how we understand creativity. In response, both design curricula and professional practice are gravitating to an interdisciplinary model, where the “creative” work is defined as understanding and directing the whole, as much as crafting individual elements.

Interdisciplinary modules are now a staple of prominent design programs: Art Center, in Pasadena, California, has developed Transdisciplinary Studio (TDS) workshops to give students opportunities to contribute their discrete disciplines to collaborative projects. Similarly, Ohio State University offers Industrial, Interior and Visual Communication design within one department, to prepare students for the complexity of design work they’ll encounter after graduation.

Professor R. Brian Stone is an Assistant Professor, instructing faculty at Ohio State University, Department of Design. As he puts it, “Interdisciplinary collaboration is an essential skill when dealing with complex problems such as environmental sustainability, universal access, craft and technology, and sensitivity to local cultures in a global market... Technically, functionally, cognitively, and aesthetically, a convergence of our collective expertise will be necessary.”

#### AIGA WEB SITE DESIGN FORUM

R Brian Stone, Blurring Boundaries: Interactive Multimedia and Interdisciplinary Convergence, AIGA web site Design Forum—<http://designforum.aiga.org>

Regardless of expertise or output, many creative collaborators share some common motivations for and approaches to working together. Collaboration meets three needs: To exchange constructive criticism and refine or define work-in-progress, to participate in an architecture of cooperation that networked communications provide, and to manage and organize ourselves within these contexts to facilitate creativity.

Reaching out to others to define and refine work-in-progress:

While today’s creative work necessitates collaboration, creative people also seem to be increasingly seeking it out. Why?

When all goes well, working together is more enjoyable than solitary endeavour and, according to Dan Miller, musician and one fifth of 20 year-old Brooklyn band, They Might Be Giants, it can be more effective too. “Knowing your roles can be a very efficient way of working. Playing to your strengths is a great way of actually finishing something. . .Long term collaborations have a way of distilling down to your talents...It’s hard to keep things fresh but it’s worth the effort.”

Jake Barton, founder of interactive exhibit design consultancy, Local Projects, believes in strength in numbers: When he is hacking through the thicket of figuring out what it is he is making, dialogue is infinitely sharper than judging and editing oneself.

## Collaboration as an architecture for cooperation

Another way to define collaboration is as a framework that creative individuals employ to articulate their ideas, or a network, an open structure or format that creative individuals jointly inhabit to refine their efforts:

Project Path, a web-based collaborative project management tool, is a system that knows its place. The staff of Topic, a quarterly magazine that explores a different theme with each issue, swears by it.

As a magazine, Topic sets itself peculiar challenges. For a start, producing each issue is an extra-curricular activity for almost all the staff. Only the editor-in-chief and managing editor and a couple of others are regulars at their tiny office on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, so the web space is Topic’s HQ.

Then, each article focuses on the experience of a featured person; the account is always written in the first person. Ellen Carpenter, a senior editor at Topic, must reach out to a huge network to contact and shadow the subject of a feature as she develops the article with and about them. She also collaborates with twenty or so roaming editorial staff and any number of far-flung contributors on this web-based application to marshal everyone’s feedback.

To bring Topic’s wacky anthropology to the page, the reticulations of networked communication bring her into direct dialogue with the circus of curious characters featured in each edition. Whether the team is prospecting for interviews, or editing dialogue with an American weapons inspector, the inventor of the Karaoke machine, or competitive eater, Crazy Legs Conti, Project Path is the perfect host.

Compared to the high production values and beautiful art direction of the magazine, Project Path's utilitarian format seems stark at first glance. Up close though, the fresh air of the browser's white space gives the ideas oxygen. Ellen finds it very easy to use. She describes the tasks she performs on the Topic site in terms of where she wants to go. The system has been customized to suit the team and the scale of periodical projects they produce. Everything is archived in extensible format along the way. The whole team uses Basecamp's Project Path to plan out an issue, to post, review and comment on story ideas, pitches, first drafts, edits, final drafts, photographs and layouts. Ellen is so familiar with the tasks she performs there regularly, she barely reads the buttons on the page to navigate and concentrates on the body copy of the screen instead. Urgent postings attract her attention like a poke in the arm, and, in the same way you'd think twice before yelling across the office, she is cautious about posting quick questions to the whole group, though she knows she could.

To this large working group of young editors—this family of transaction—Basecamp Project Path offers a solution to working at distance. And, in case they lose a grip of the outside world they're covering in the pages of the magazine, they meet for the occasional face-to-face editorial meeting and potluck dinner, to remind each other what they look like.

As Basecamp's Project Path suggests, software that sits between people interacting with one another must assume its necessary role as translator between two complex human processors, to thrive in its inherent 'in-between-ness'. It must respect the agency of its users, by being deferential to, and facilitating, rather than obstructing, their critical thinking. Josh On, creator of socially provocative web sites, They Rule and Communiculture, puts it plainly, "Make simple tools with transparent functions that people can use in clever ways. [Get] the balance right between how much structure the designer hardwires and how much freedom the user has..."

## **Collaboration as a space, an empty vessel or forum where creative individuals' ideas and contributions come together**

A mobile audio studio located at Grand Central Terminal, at Ground Zero, and touring the country, the Story Corps project records millions of ordinary Americans' spoken anecdotes for posterity. The project demonstrates that the same audience that accesses information can also add to the experience for others. The illuminated booth is simply a space for co-authorship between members of the public, and part of a larger oral history experience. With due consideration to its audience, it warms up the newcomers, and motivates pairs of prospective visitors to participate fully and honestly. On the web site, visitors read a value statement and lists of sponsors to establish authenticity and engender trust. Reassured, visitors familiarize themselves with others' earlier submissions and learn what to do in this collaborative space. So whilst the space is prescriptive, the interaction within it is freeform. Its popularity testifies to its creators' awareness of and sensitivity to that balance.

A designer of a system that facilitates interpersonal interaction will be aware of its reflexivity; that as the software, or furniture, or methodology lives in the world, it engages its users in a conversation. This dialogue can inform and ultimately improve the system of use itself; designers may even become accountable for the frameworks they create for others to interact.

In 2004-5, high school kids took part in Conqwest, a citywide treasure hunt played with cell phones in several cities in the western United States. Its lead developer, Kevin Slavin, then at SS+K, and now founding partner at area/code, observed that as the game was played from city to city, players in one place were forwarding their hints and tips to kids in another. Tracking these workarounds, Slavin responded, treating the feedback as cues to improve the software. As Conqwest arrived in subsequent cities, its software was increasingly refined.

Slavin jokes that collaboration is "when everyone agrees with me." If he is to have his way and all his collaborators are too, the team must strive to build consensus continuously, cyclically, towards final iteration.

Communication technologies redefine the place and pace of working alone and in collaborative groups. Software is assistive if it supports, rather than interferes with interpersonal relations; it must respect how, when and where people variously work together. Just as individuals are called upon to be themselves—contributing skills, drawing from experience, making themselves available, behaving nicely—networking tools must do likewise. Lucy Suchman is a Professor in the Centre for Science Studies and Sociology Department at Lancaster University in England, and formerly a researcher at Xerox PARC. She has taken a consistently anthropological approach to human computer interaction. In her opinion, when designing software that facilitates collaboration, she believes it is important to leave people enough “discretionary space to exercise the kind of judgment they need to exercise to really get the work done.”

## **Collaboration as problem-solving practices to facilitate creativity within these frameworks and spaces**

In the “The Rise of the Creative Class”, Richard Florida observes,

“...Perhaps the biggest issue at stake in this emerging age is the on-going tension between creativity and organization. The creative process is social, not just individual, and thus forms of organization are necessary. But elements of organization can and frequently do stifle creativity.”

In a network culture, creative people can organize themselves quite easily over distance and time, but even in small groups with distinct roles and responsibilities, hierarchy may still persist. This needn't go away, it must simply be acknowledged. To sustain collaboration over the lifecycle of the project, there must be equitable dialog across disciplines, no matter what the pecking order within the team. Here, collaborative software underpins an “architecture of cooperation”. It enables participation, augmenting constructive interaction between individuals. In seeing it this way, we're less likely to mistake the tools for a substitute team member, a surrogate for unassigned headcount.

Likewise, the spaces we occupy to work collaboratively can be similarly defined. Furniture designers, the Bouroullec brothers, describe Joyn, their configurable collaborative office furniture, as

‘...A common tool for communal work... a landscape to provide a living setting for these people, because one ‘lives’ in one’s office’.

Basically a large table for fifteen people, Joyn looks like Swedish candy: With clean lines, a tasteful palette of elements in juicy colors can be installed and arranged to raise and lower the degree of privacy. Erwan Bouroullec is emphatic,

“Our goal is not to create a perfect work environment ...[nor] restrict anyone with a predefined framework... Our design offers the potential to support a way of life that already exists elsewhere.”

From a software perspective, Josh On concurs:

”The meaning of the space is constructed through its use. Through simple tools the users can create their own meaningful space.”

## **Collaboration in context**

Creative collaboration isn't reducible to a simple framework, an empty vessel or a mode of social practice or of transaction with technology; in practice it is all of these: a mode of interaction, following an intentional process, situated in context. We are communicative creatures: we write things down, we talk and, seeking conviction or confidence to act, we thirst for feedback. We exchange, rearrange, schedule, assign and record activities on paper, emails, spreadsheets, diagrams, speakerphones, Gantt charts and groupware. Paper is easier to use; digital makes for a better file cabinet.

We are inspired to collaborate because we want to. Informally, working alongside people we like and respect allows the process can flow, lets us lean on each other's strengths and overcome our shortcomings, sing in unison to the client, and share the successes of jobs well done.

We also collaborate because we must. Whether we're hired as artisans or as corporate employees, our roles in complex projects are specialized, many of our tasks unavoidably regimented. Efficiency demands that we don't take the time to master something that someone else, a budget line item and a phone call away, has already perfected. It is worthwhile to acquire skills on a job, but more often than not, that transferable nicety is not billable, and must retreat to the realm of 'personal development'.

As a mode of practice, collaboration isn't new, but evidently it is adapting to the demands of our economic and electronic age and of our creative professions. The success of multi-player networked games like Conqwest, transactional spaces like StoryCorps and Project Path attest to that. Collaborative environments like MIT Media Lab's Treehouse, open up newly administered spaces for group interaction, to become frameworks for altering—and even improving—social exchange: Social networks, LinkedIn, Friendster and meetup.com, retail auctioneers ebay, photo community Flickr and self-policed wikipedia suggest the participatory audience is out there too. Unsettled and excited by globalization, individuals are poised to come together, many-to-many, to reinforce collaborative ties and cross disciplines.

Communication networks augment and extend existing practices; collaborative spaces transform, rather than replace, them. If the collaborators are smart, but the software is not, creative minds will forego the software and think of some other way of doing without it, but if the collaborators are smart and the software is smart too, the possibilities for creative innovation facilitated by technology are boundless.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to creative collaborators Ellen Carpenter, Eddie Opara, Dan Miller, Kevin Slavin, Jake Barton, Adam Greenfield and Yael Reinharz who took part in an initial roundtable about this Topic in June 2005 in New York City. Many thanks to Mike Berk, Julian Weldon, Angela Wolak, David Womack and Alice Twemlow.

## RESOURCES

- Claus Otto Scharmer's interview with Lucy Suchman, Dialogue on Leadership—[www.dialogonleadership.org/Suchman-1999.html](http://www.dialogonleadership.org/Suchman-1999.html)
- R Brian Stone, Blurring Boundaries: Interactive Multimedia and Interdisciplinary Convergence, AIGA web site Design Forum—<http://designforum.aiga.org>
- Josh On, Computer Related Design MA thesis, Royal College of Art 2000—[www.futurefarmers.com/josh/rca/report/](http://www.futurefarmers.com/josh/rca/report/)
- Alan Cooper, The Inmates are Running the Asylum, Why High Tech Products Drive Us Crazy, and How to Restore the Sanity, 1999
- Richard Florida, The Rise of the Creative Class, 2002
- John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid
- The Social Life of Information, 2000
- Workspirit 8, Vitra
- Lucy Allais, Interview with the Bouroullec Brothers at [www.bouroullec.com](http://www.bouroullec.com)
- Constellation  
(website tbd – [www.theconstellationoffice.com](http://www.theconstellationoffice.com))
- [www.themapoffice.com](http://www.themapoffice.com)
- [www.potiondesign.com](http://www.potiondesign.com)
- Open design—[www.notclosed.com](http://www.notclosed.com)
- StoryCorps—[www.storycorps.net](http://www.storycorps.net)
- Basecamp Project Path—[www.basecampHQ.com/](http://www.basecampHQ.com/)
- Conqwest—[http://semacode.org/apps/gallery/2004\\_10\\_09/](http://semacode.org/apps/gallery/2004_10_09/)
- [www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)
- [www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)
- [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com)
- [www.friendster.com](http://www.friendster.com)
- [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachel Abrams is an interaction designer and writer. She is a senior content strategist at Imagination, the global, multi-disciplinary design consultancy. She is based in New York City. Email: [collaboration@pobox.com](mailto:collaboration@pobox.com)

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit: [www.adobe.com/designcenter/main.html](http://www.adobe.com/designcenter/main.html)

Better by Adobe.™

Adobe Systems Incorporated  
345 Park Avenue, San Jose, CA 95110-2704 USA  
[www.adobe.com](http://www.adobe.com)

Adobe and the Adobe logo are either registered trademarks or trademarks of Adobe Systems Incorporated in the United States and/or other countries. Mac and Macintosh are trademarks of Apple Computer, Inc., registered in the United States and other countries. PowerPC is a registered trademark of IBM Corporation in the United States. Intel and Pentium are trademarks or registered trademarks of Intel Corporation or its subsidiaries in the United States and other countries. Microsoft, Windows, and Windows NT are either registered trademarks or trademarks of Microsoft Corporation in the United States and/or other countries. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners.

© 2005 Adobe Systems Incorporated. All rights reserved.  
Printed in the USA 10/05

