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The FAD Certification of Design Quality: fostering good design practices

abstract

The *Foment de les Arts i el Disseny* (FAD) aims to recognize good design practices in companies and organizations that exhibit superb examples of interior and graphic design, and that they do so as part of the market process. In this paper, FAD and Applus+ present the FAD Certification of Design Quality (FCDQ) as a "seal" to certify these practices. The FCDQ does not attempt to give an objective, closed definition of *Design,* nor a complete list of "parameters". It frames the problem by means of a number of overlapping features that must be taken into account in order to embark in a *good design practice*, and places the evaluation in the hands of trained professionals. Auditors guide establishments and, once this quality has been achieved, ensure that it is maintained over time. We believe that this is the first time a third-party certification in design quality is proposed.

keywords

certification, design quality, FAD

Introduction

The Foment de les Arts i el Disseny (FAD), a century-old non-for-profit organization, from Barcelona is dedicated to "the promotion of the use of Design in the industry and trade, as a method of planning and executing their products and services and the environments where they are sold, consumed and enjoyed" (FCDQ 2013:preamble). FAD believes that design improves the quality of objects, spaces and processes –and, therefore, citizen's quality of life; that design also provides better functionality and usability, environmentally sustainable processes and objects; and is always a display of prestige and progress.

In 2007, FAD's Design Observatory began to study the use of Design in Spain in all economic sectors, demonstrating the importance of design in the innovation process (FAD 2009). Similarly, studies from other international organizations (Design Council 2003; NAEH 2003; Premsela 2005) recognize the importance of Design, which is encouraged by the European Commission (Innovation Union 2010). One surprising finding was that the retail and tourism sectors were the least involved in applying design to their products: indeed, Barcelona is internationally renowned for its Design, and Spain is one of the Top 10 tourist destinations worldwide (UNWTO 2013, p.6).

These findings encouraged the specialization of the study in the area of tourism (hotels and restaurants, or *"hosteleria"* in Spanish) with a second study (FAD 2011), which confirmed that the incorporation of design in hotels and restaurants yields good results (greater user satisfaction, 67%; increased number of clients, 44.5%). As a result of this second study (and of the relationships built with the Hotel Guild of Barcelona), new approaches to "fostering design" and new ways to collaborate were sought.

Context of the project

In an advanced market society, an ideal system to promote and drive processes and products towards the so called "good practices" is to reward such practices with a "certification": a quality seal for those companies and institutions that implement and promote them, and make services and goods available to the public that demonstrate certain qualities.

Certifications differ from other forms of "awards" (prizes, medals). The latter are awarded to institutions or persons selected from a pool of candidates that meet certain requirements, on a periodic basis (i.e. "Annual Academy Awards"). Awards usually have a jury –or a body of professionals– that shortlist, nominate and decide the winners. Conversely, a certification is a proof that certain product or process has a strict conformance with a set of standards or requirements, established by some normative body ("Norm"). A group of auditors-evaluators scrutiny the organization's products, under its own request, and certify whether it complies with the standard.

First-party certifications "rely only on self-monitoring" by the organization (Nadvi & Wältring, 2004). Second-party certifications, "shift monitoring to the user of the product or service or, alternatively, to trade bodies who monitor on behalf of their members". Third-party certifications, such as the case described in this paper, "transfer monitoring to neutral and independent auditors". Examples of third-party certifications include the ISO9001, or the star hotel rating system.

Many well established and renowned first- and second-party awards and prizes are known: the Gute Form, Compasso d'Oro, Design Centre Design Awards, etc. –too numerous to be cited here. FAD is, precisely, the organizer in Spain and Portugal of several long-standing design prizes (Architecture and Interior Design FAD awards, Delta-FAD, LAUS, etc). But no sign has been found in the international market of a certification with a third-party scheme: therefore, we believe that FCDQ is a first timer and so far unique, and we present it as a novelty and as the basis for discussion.

Writing the Certification

The FAD Certification of Design Quality (FCDQ) was born in 2012 with the goal of improving the overall quality of the Spanish hotel industry. The focus on the hotel industry owes to a series of contingencies –e.g. previous FAD studies (FAD 2009) and collaboration with the Hotel Guild–, and also the scope of the certification was narrowed down to the areas of graphic and interior design.

To confront the task, FAD signed an agreement with Applus+, leading Spanish company in certifications, who contributed with its know-how: they have helped in writing the certification, adding the objectivity and structure that the drafting of this standard requires. The credibility of a certification is directly linked to the credibility and reputation of the auditing organization. Thus, Applus+ also participates in the evaluation processes: if FAD has an unquestionable reputation in the field of Design, the same is true about the rigor of Applus+ in certification.

The certification process must be as transparent, objective and clear as possible. Therefore, two major documents have to be produced with objective and clear criteria, and must be publicly available before, during and after the certification process. First, the

procedure by which the certification is obtained, with all the steps that any organization must follow to access and pursue the certification process, and with clear indications of the possible outcomes and the different paths that can be taken. Second, the "norm", that must state the set of criteria which have to be complied in order to obtain the certification. FAD experts in graphic and interior design and auditors from Applus+ worked together on the two documents: *"Norm"*, including the philosophy of the certification in the preamble; and *"Description of the Service"*. After corrections and revisions, both documents were evaluated by the legal departments, and approved by the Boards of both Organizations.

The Certification of Design Quality was presented in May 2013 to the public and the press in Barcelona, with the intervention of the city's deputy mayor and the Catalan business minister, together with the presidents of Applus+, the Barcelona Hotel Guild, and FAD.

Criteria of the certification

One of the central questions that needed to be answered to draft the FCDQ was: "What is exactly a *good design*"? Or perhaps, "what is a *good design practice*" so that, once an organization gets involved in it, has many chances of attaining a "good result"? Design cannot be reduced to a set of parameters, nor can they be numerically specified, so the challenge was the "parametrization" model (if it can be called this way) of hotel design and the delimitation of thresholds between *compliance* and *"non-compliance"* (terminology used in certification jargon).

Here, a clarification is necessary to avoid misinterpretations: the terms *"good"* or *"bad"* *design* are not intended to be value judgments (or even ethical or esthetical categories!). They were used to address a greater audience, not necessarily proficient with the terminology and conceptualization of design. In the Norm (and also in this paper) *"good design"* is an indication of compliance –i.e. being above the threshold– to obtain the certificate.

The Norm is based on ideas of design that follow the existing literature (Rowe 1997; Cross 2006; Buchanan 1992; Margolin 2010). Different from the '60 approaches to design – "problem solving" and "information processing" (Simon 1969)– Design is today seen as a complex process involving complex human thought (Rowe 1987; Roozenburg 1993: 5). Design processes, as such, try to fit together a number of (sometimes overlapping) *criteria* that must be taken into account to produce a *successful design* or, better, to embark in a *good design practice*. Design is considered *the technique* or *methodology* that achieves desirable solutions to multifaceted problems (Buchanan 1992), probably incorrectly or insufficiently formulated. Engineers, graphic designers or architects *"design"*, when they plan products, objects or processes to satisfy the desires of their customers (Lawson 1997), both in terms of functionality, price or look. The outcome is then just the "most suitable possible solution", once a problem or a need is laid. If this technique is applied correctly, with professionalism, consistency, social and environmental awareness, and with the desire to contribute to the improvement of society, it comes close to what we have termed "good design". Then a *good design practice*, more than a *good design*, is a methodological problem: it is about "taking things into consideration", evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of several options, of repeatedly asking oneself: "what-if?" (Roozenburg 1993)

Thus, the Norm is tailored to address all the issues that "must be taken into account" rather than prescribing design values. The FCDQ approaches the question of "parameterization" with a list of criteria that have to be considered, in a hierarchical arrangement, itemized and deployed in each of the disciplines (interior design and graphic design) in numerous sub-criteria. It will be usually up to the designer to evaluate, balance and decide how much to respond to these criteria, which to respond to and which to discard altogether".

The top categories are as follows (see the Norm for a complete description):

Function: An object is specifically designed to fulfill particular functions.
Personality: All objects respond to an (ideological or aesthetic) intention, and customers and designers agree to grant every design a "representativity".
Target public: products are intended to be sold or rented, and must meet the language and needs of the audience to which the product is targeted.
Structure: Design gives, first and foremost, a structure to that which had none before.
Consistency of the whole: A design is an integrated and coherent project, where all the parts and pieces are read within a single idea, a single concept generating the whole.
Innovation: All design is necessarily innovation, is unique and personalized.
Sustainability: Designs propose solutions that solve functions, address the needs of users, and do so in observance of the limitation of resources of the client and society.

Evaluation process

The certification puts the load of the evaluation on human evaluators, experts trained in interior and graphic design that will physically visit the premises to evaluate them, point by point. The process is simple: it starts when the company submits an application with a questionnaire and visual materials (building plans, sections; photographs, graphic material, etc), which the auditors asses to rule out businesses with considerable deficiencies. A *pre-approval* report is then issued, with a statement of "acceptance-" or "non-acceptance" to the second phase. In this latter case, the organization is offered a consultancy session to help them understand their lacks and needs, and the potential improvements that can be undertaken. But if entry into the second phase is granted, a visit of the three evaluators is programmed, where all the particular aspects in the Norm are going to be carefully evaluated. As a result, a detailed report will be issued with a reasoned decision:

"Positive": evaluation is absolutely compliant. No further recommendations or indications of improvement.

"Positive with recommendations": evaluation is positive; but some suggestions to correct slight deviations from the Norm are made.

"Negative, with a possibility of short-term improvement": evaluation is not positive due to severe infringements to the Norm. The report lists the deficiencies that need to be addressed, and a deadline to correct them. Duly correction of these deficiencies could upgrade the result to "positive" or "positive with recommendations".

"Negative": evaluation has identified serious breaches of the Norm, without an easy way to fix them. Not yet ready to receive the certification.

Far from being just an evaluation, all the tracks in both phases tend to redirect the owners and the company back into *good design practices*, be it on their own, or with the help of the right design professionals.

As of today, four hotels have volunteered to go through the certification process, and have all obtained the FCDQ as excellent designed hotels.

Conclusions

The FCDQ is a proposal to encourage hotels to acquire design as a value-adding methodology. However, it is not without polemic: some have argued (even within FAD itself) that this organization shouldn't emit value judgments about designer's products or even its associates'. The most general doubt is about the capacity of a written text to give criteria or parameters about such a complex task as Design. These questions are probably legitimate, and have sense to some degree.

But certification is a well established process to evaluate "quality issues" in industry, trade, public administrations and many more sectors (Applus+, for instance, has a vast experience). To FAD, the certification is a means to achieving the "promotion of good design practices", and all possible cautions have been taken to ensure that the process is neutral, objective and credible: approved by the Boards of FAD and Applus+; endorsed by experts in Design; compared with similar initiatives and certifications; and tested with four exceptional hotels, as test beds for the whole certification.

The authors acknowledge that this proposal has –unwillingly– crossed certain borders, carefully maintained and protected, that were felt as the sole domain of designers. The debate is now open, as the certification process reaches the market and begins its trajectory. Academic and disciplinary discussion, but also market success and the passing of time will determine whether this is a righteous proposal.

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