

only becomes apparent when we study designers in actual practice and talk to them about their process. I held a series of discussions with a number of leading architects that were used as part of my research for *Design in Mind* (Lawson 1994). Those conversations will help us here.

When the architect Ian Ritchie was describing his work he made it very clear that conversations within his team and with other players such as the client were central to his way of working.

The first move is to talk through the brief, understand what has led to it, understand fundamentally what it is about and that conversation is primarily about building up a level of confidence, of trust. That is the very first move and it's nothing about buildings, it's not about solutions or ideas about buildings.

We shall return to Ian Ritchie's design conversations in due course. What is interesting here is the way in which Ritchie clearly emphasises the importance of his conversations with the client and in this case is quite explicit about using a language that is not about solutions.

First we should introduce a more fundamental way in which design can be seen to be essentially a conversational process. We can even imagine design to be a conversation when performed not by a team but by an individual designer. Donald Schön first suggested this idea when he talked of how a designer 'has a conversation with a drawing' (Schön 1983). In Schön's view, design drawings are part of the mental process of thinking about a design. In this view of design the designer performs the act of drawing not to communicate with others but to pursue a line of thought. As the image of the drawing develops it enables the designer to 'see' new possibilities or problems. More recently we have seen designers using computers and as a result having 'conversational' interactions with their computers about their designs. In the second and third editions of this book I included chapters on designing with drawings and designing with computers. In this edition both those chapters are replaced by this one. Since the third edition of this book I have also written much more extensively on the nature of design drawings and the way knowledge is encoded in them. I have also explored the problems of interacting with drawings or models in computers (Lawson 2004). In this chapter then we shall explore the whole idea of design conversations whether they are between people, between designers and drawings or computers or even carried out reflectively in the minds of individual designers.

Conversations and narrative

One of the most common forms of conversation is that of narrative. As we saw in Chapter 12, narrative can be used as a design tactic. The idea of telling a story in order to develop and give consistency to a design is quite popular. Some researchers from a linguistic background have begun to explore design conversations and concluded that the 'base mode of the conversation is narrative' (Medway and Andrews 1992). Although as designers talk to each other they move through more than one style of conversation, they usually return to a style similar to that of telling a story. We shall therefore begin our investigation by exploring the idea of narrative in order to see how this progresses our understanding conversations in design.

It is not uncommon for narratives to begin with some 'scene setting'. Although of course this may happen at several points in a story, nevertheless it is more common early in the piece. Scene setting most obviously involves describing the situation and the characters or *dramatis personae*. Major characters must not only be named and introduced but also given some characteristics that will enable us to interpret their utterances and actions. This also happens in design. We shall return to the design conversations of Ian Ritchie to explore this further. The first example is from his project for a new railway station for London Underground.

We had a conversation yesterday about some smoke vents for the London Underground station which we designed. Obviously these are major features in a project like this.

So the story begins and the designer introduces us to some characters, smoke vents, and tells us that they will be significant in the narrative, or in this case the design. He then describes how the design team conversation explored the nature of these characters and effectively developed 'personalities' for them.

We came down to air and it wasn't the kind of pragmatic issues and practical issues about how to move air, would air provide us with a central notion of how we could then develop a concept for a building. Is it dirty? Is it clean? What's the hierarchy of the air that's coming up the down pipe? That was finding, if you like, a kind of poetic notion, before we even think about a building or a concept for a building.

This seems rather like an author trying to work out how a character would behave in a dramatic situation given a particular background, personality and motivation. In another example Ian Ritchie was talking about how he arrived at the forms he used for his