



**Dr. Grace Lau**

**Curatorial Director, Fine Art Asia**

***A pioneer of creative thinking and an integrator of ideas and approaches for strategic innovation in developing business, creating exchange, and empowering user engagement; with a proven track record in driving cross-disciplinary research that generates results and impact convergence of ideas and development of new business models and services.***

***With diversified background in design and business; Grace is distinguished for an entrepreneurial mindset, creative problem solving, and was known to be able to offer innovative solutions to operational challenges and leverages decisiveness to implement solutions while minimising risk and maximising performances.***

# **The Dilemma of a Female Designer/Academia/Curator/Project Director/Researcher/etc. - juxtaposition of viewing design in a designerly way versus a casual perspective**

*Dr. Grace Lau*

## **Abstract**

The paper presents the intersection of perspectives of a female professional, who wears the many hats of a teacher, a curator, a project manager, a researcher in her work-life at the same time a wife, a mother and a friend (to many people) in her personal-life, by mapping her life journey and approach to life to a research model she created for a user-spatial-interaction study on female business travellers in boutique hotels. The paper attempts to bridge the two distinct perspectives and to show how expandable a design research model can go beyond its designated perimeter; or even further to make relevance in simple things of our everyday life.

In exploring how the two perspectives intersect and correlate, the paper further reflects on the significance of design training in a one's life, and examines how design training can impact a person's approach to life. The author attempts to explain how such approach is able to facilitate her navigation between work and personal life, from being a visionary leader in office, an inspiring tutor in the design studio to a mother who leads her kids to creating fun things, admire the fine things in life, to finding their own career paths; ultimately helping her strike a good balance and building a fulfilling life experience. The paper ends with a brief note on the challenges

of being a woman in an industry dominated by men and how any difficulties can be overcome by 'design thinking'.

All in all, the paper aims to inspire other women.

**Keywords:** Dilemma, designerly way, design thinking, emotions, experience design, female designer

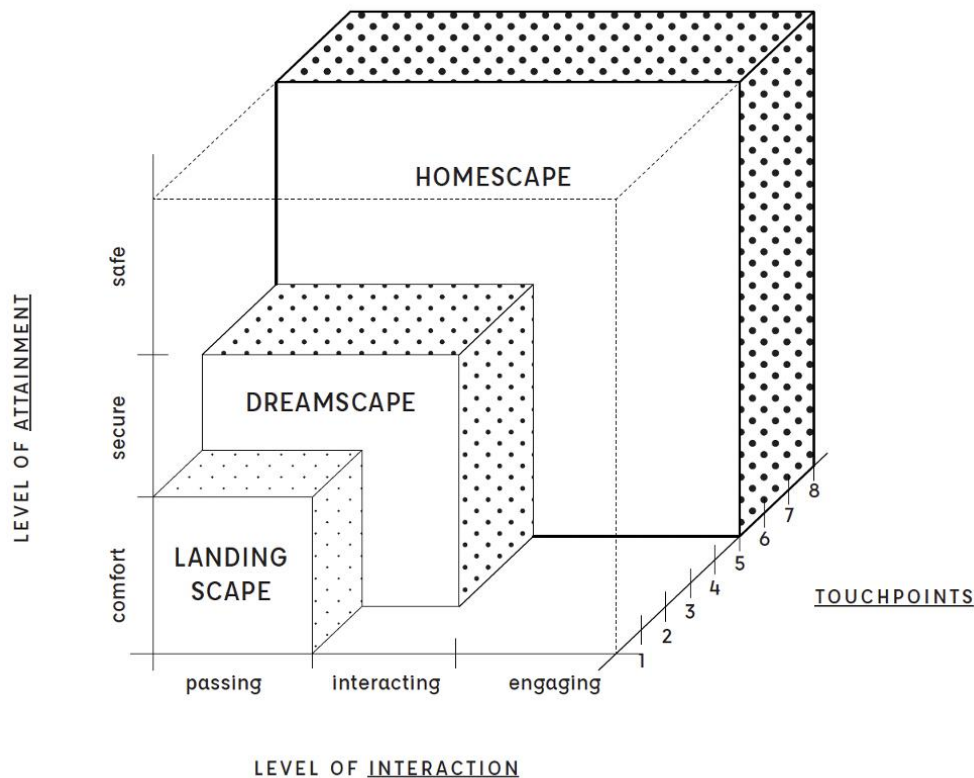
## Introduction

For a long time, design has been viewed as a problem-solving process and design training used to be discipline-focused. But as design continues to evolve influenced by technological advancements, societal changes and emerging challenges, the role of design becomes more integral to various aspects of society, culture, business, and technology. The evolving landscape of design emphasises collaboration, innovation and inter-disciplinary crossover and exchanges (Kramer 2024); more importantly, empathy for understanding the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another person through recognising and connecting emotions.

Trained as a communication designer, major in advertising design, I started my career in advertising. Yet the time working at different global 4A's agencies allowed me to learn about other kinds of industry like banking, insurance, retail and telecommunications. Knowledge I gained was out of the remit of the curriculum of a conventional design programme. The opportunities have also allowed me to see how design and business work together. The realisation prompted me to apply for a Master Degree in Business Administration and from then on, my world opened up with a lot of opportunities than simply designing. My years in the university creating new academic programmes, while serving in the executive

committee of an industry organisation curating and designing exhibitions on design and business and coordinating events for industry collaborations, somehow started a surge of energy and motivation in me to connect things from different facets, sectors, practices to create things bigger than expected. Layered ideas, diverse perspectives, detailed planning with iterative process building onto interdisciplinary connections and collaborations are in my work DNA as well as my personal philosophy as I believe by cross-referencing and bench-marking I can foster a richer content and a better experience.

The tranXperience Matrix (fig. 1) I developed for the study of my PhD research on female business travellers in boutique hotel is a complex three-dimensional model that has incorporated attributes from spatial study, interior design, and emotional design. The model illustrates how two-dimensional theories can be connected to three-dimensional ones, presented in a volume of three 'roomscales' that builds up the complete homey experience of a hotel stay. The construction of the Matrix supports the idea that emotions can be used for establishing the connection between inhabitation and geometric spaces – that reinforce the concept of how "inhabited space transcends geometric space" (Bachelard 1958). The model was a result of a two-tier research engaging ethnographic and phenomenological approach, built on similar parameters which can be easily referenced across each other.



**Fig. 1 tranXperience Matrix**

While the model is built on a robust academic framework and structured in a very definitive way based on various disciplinary concepts and theories, it could possibly be viewed as a map for a personal life journey. The touchpoints correspond to the choices we make in life and people we meet along the way and the emotional attainment relates to our sense of achievement and level of satisfaction gained from making our way through life experiences. The three 'roomscape' that build up the complete homey experience of a hotel stay can be analogies to stages of life containing emotions, experience and things we encounter. As explained earlier, the model is a complex one and allows for cross-referencing of ideas and concepts from different fields and disciplines, the complexity of it is indicative of my philosophy of life and reflective of my comprehensive and diverse background. The following will explain each of the 'roomscape' and how each of them denote a life-stage by looking at it from a less academic (casual) perspective.

## **Landing Scape – where life begins**

The Landing Scape is defined by emotions of comfort, the contents of the scape align with the theory of Territoriality and Existential Space in the creation of a territory and the definition of an initial existence; interaction is mainly by visual contact. Applying it to the research of female business travellers in boutique hotels, the Landing Scape is the area where the guests stepped into the room, the very small space where the door opens to the interior of the guest room. Looking at the model in my casual perspective referencing it to my life journey, my landing scape is the School of Design, Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

As I landed at the School of Design, what I saw as I entered the design studio on the first day is comparable to the visual impact of what the female guest encountered at the guest room on her entrance. The set up of the initial space in a guest room can elicit a sense of comfort when the female guest gets visually intrigued by an initial touch point such as a nice side table and a painting on the wall that prompts the guest to feel comfortable about the room setting. The touchpoints meant to prompt the guest to roam around and connect with the room further. Similarly, the setting of the studio, the drafting tables and the posters pinned up on the walls create a 'good first impression' and makes me feel that I am then a member of the design community and prepares me emotionally to start my design education at the School.

## **Dream Scape – where things get manifested**

The Dream Scape is defined by a higher level of feelings of security and interaction that involves a contact between the guest and objects in the guestroom. The Dream Scape, echoes the reflective level of emotional design theory, is meant to be an area of

**imagination and 'dreaming'. It is where new ideas balance the sense of familiarity about objects and the space to create 'delight'.**

**Referencing the academic perspective to personal one, my development in the Dream Scape involves a lot of touch points, a lot of changes and moving across fields and industry landscapes. In the process, I incorporated ideas I learnt from other practices to create enhancement to the original concept of the thing I work on. Like a biennale was turned into a retail opportunity, ultimately setting up a twin-cities brand and the establishment of a design hub for nurturing young talents. In this scape, I attained a high level of security by mastering the skills of analysing options and resolving dilemmas.**

**Apparently, designers are often in dilemma working through the design process to identify the most relevant solution(s); dilemmas are a natural part of the design landscape. 'Dilemma' was one of the first words I learnt at the School of Design, and it's also one of the things we were taught to deal with using all the skills and knowledge during the course. When entering the Dream Scape of my personal life, the experience I acquired working in the different positions are like those touch points in the guest room that interact with the female guest to allow her to establish a sense of familiarity while opening up vaults for imaginations. In life, I may fall into dilemmas when faced with options, but they also give me the sense of security as I know I have abundance to play around with.**

### **Home Scape – where things settled**

**The Home Scape is where the Level of Attainment and the Level of Interaction is highest. The touchpoints contained in this scape are able to trigger the emotion of being safe (or settled). As a concluding scape, this scape allows for personalisation and**

creativity to allow for maximum experience. This is where emotions attainment is at its ultimate level for the experience we aim to create for any space. Relating it to life experience, it's the level where we obtained the biggest joy to what we have been trying to achieve out of all the work that we have done and the paths we have roamed through.

The importance of relating design to life and the extension of our understanding for how design works is not just limited to the context but to life in general in order to match up to the idea of how design can make our lives better. If the Home Scape represents a state where female business travellers feel most safe in a guest room with all the relevant touchpoints and the kind of emotions to be stimulated out of all experiences, the Home Scape is where I am fully capable of manipulating what I have acquired and be able to handle dilemmic situation by pulling the kind of skills, knowledge, ability etc. to resolve conditions and look at things from different perspectives and share this understanding using different 'languages'.

## **Conclusion**

The parallels between the designerly perspective and that of the casual one reveal a shared commitment to understanding human, be empathetic, be adaptable and to promote partnership (or collaboration). Most importantly, by attempting to connect an academic research model to a personal life experience, it is able to instate that design may not be delineated by disciplines. It also demonstrates that concepts can expand beyond and extend across disciplines; a piece that exemplifies how PhD in design can be a drive to "shift object-centred paradigm to design practice characterised by systems" (Meredith 2008) – from the taxonomy of hotel to ontology of hotel living, extending into ecology of objects,



emotions and activities, and arrive at the axiology of values; and helps to project about design indicators of priorities.

### **P.S. - Design Thinking**

Theoretically, design thinking refers to the set of cognitive, strategic, and practical procedures used by designers in the process of designing. Design thinking is also something related to survival and breakthrough for when we try to explore alternatives and to innovate. On the aspects of how design training can impact a person's approach to life and the challenges of being a woman in an industry dominated by men and how any difficulties can be overcome by 'design thinking', I recall that my final years in the design school has been particularly challenging, with me being the only girl in the advertising major of seven students. That actually may have prepared me to grow and survive in the male-dominated industry. Learning to speak their language and admire their values have been a major part of the everyday life in the design studio. Sometimes I just have to shape-shift into a 'male-me' and dress in a more gender-neutral way or join them as they gobble down a fibre drink before class in the morning. But apart from tackling the physical and technical side, I found a better way around taking a ride down the emotional track. My trick was to introduce my girlfriends to them so my best friends became their girlfriends and then, I have my allies! Exactly, by integrating design thinking with the practice of 'thinking out-of-the box' can lead to innovative solutions; for designing and surviving life situations!

## **References**

**Bachelard, G. (1994). *The Poetics of Space*. Beacon Press.**

**Bernard, R. (2012). *Social Research Methods*. Sage.**

**Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. University of California Press: Berkeley.**

**Borras, M. (2008). *Hotel Spaces*. Raport Publishers: U.K.**

**Boztepe, S. (2007). *Enacting Research Methods in Information Systems*. V. 3. Oxford University: U.K.**

**Busch, A. (2003). *Geography of Home*. Princeton Architectural Press: U.S.**

**Christopher, A. (1977). *A Pattern Language*. Oxford University Press: U.K.**

**Clare, C. (2006). *House: As a Mirror of Self*. Nicolas-Hays, Inc.**

**Crawford Ilsa. (2005). *Home is Where the Heart Is*. Rizzoli: U.S.**

**Creswell, J.W. (2013). *'Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among the Five Approaches'*. Thousand Oaks: U.S.**

**Dolins, F & Mitchell, R. (2010). *Spatial Cognition, Spatial Perception*. Cambridge University Press.**

**Edney, JJ. (1974). *Human Territoriality, Psychological Bulletin*. V. 81, 959-975.**

**Gardenfors, P. (2004). *Conceptual Spaces: The Geometry of***

***Thought. The MIT Press: London.***

***Genzuk, M. (1999). A Synthesis of Ethnographic Research, Center for Multilingual, Multicultural Research. University of Southern California. [Viewed April 2016]. <[http://www.bcf.usc.edu/~genzuk/Ethnographic\\_Research.html](http://www.bcf.usc.edu/~genzuk/Ethnographic_Research.html)>***

***Gifford, R. (2007). Environment Psychology. Optimal Books, 166.***

***Giorgi, A. (2012). 'The Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Method'. Journal of Phenomenological Psychology. V. 43, 3-12.***

***Graeber, D. (2001). Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams. Palgrave: N.Y.***

***Hall, E. T. (1990). The Hidden Dimension. Anchor.***

***Izard, E. (1972). Patterns of Emotions. Academic Press: N.Y.***

***Kellert, S.R. (2005). Building for Life: Designing and Understanding the Human-Nature Connection. Island Press Washington.***

***Krammer, M. (2024). 'Taking An Interdisciplinary Approach to Innovation'. All Things Innovation. [Viewed Dec 2024]. <<https://allthingsinnovation.com/content/taking-an-interdisciplinary-approach-to-innovation/>>***

***Lau, G. (2014). 'Better Than Home: the cultural value of homeliness in female travellers' Asian hotel experiences through analysis of user and object relationship in guestrooms'. Conference proceedings of The Situation Conference. RMIT, Melbourne.***

**Lefebvre, H. (1974). *The Production of Space*. Willey.**

**Meadows, H. (2008). *Thinking in Systems*. Chelsea Green Publishing.**

**Pallasmaa, J. (2005, 2012). *The Eyes of the Skin*. Academy Press.**

**Relph, E. (1976). *Place and Placelessness*. North Western University Press: London.**

**Scherer, R. (1982). *Emotion as a Process: Function, Origin and Regulation*. Social science information. Sage.**

**Scherer, R. (2005). *What are Emotions? And How Can They be Measured?* Social Science Information. Sage.**

**Sheets-Johnstone, M. (1999). *The Primacy of Movement*. John Benjamins Publishing Company. Philadelphia.**

**Sommer, R. (2008). *Personal Space*. Bosko Book.**

**William, J. (1884). *What is an Emotion?* First published in Mind. 9, 188-205.**