

# **The Lightness of Management Learning**

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## **Abstract**

Design or integrated thinking increasingly features in discussion of the future of business education that seeks to innovate new models different from the functionalist, modernist silos of the past. The impact of the Global Financial Crisis and the attribution of responsibility for it, in part, to the conventional knowledge reproduced in Business Schools, have provided an incentive for innovation. The paper reports a case study of one innovation process in a Business School, with the aim of investigating its basic tenets and questioning its assumptions. First, at a general level, we illustrate how Business Schools attempt to become more global, integrated and innovative; second, we elaborate the context of the research, showing how global ideas become translated into local institution by mean of specific representational devices; third, on the basis of the empirical material, we characterize the effects of these processes as one of ‘lightness’, defined not in terms of mass or density but the translucence of three relevant representational devices: curriculum, branding and building. Translucence poses critical issues for this model of management learning but it may also offers opportunities for resistance to normalizing tendencies.

## **Introduction**

Once upon a time, not so long ago, the image of what a global research-based Business School should be was largely shaped according to various United States norms, whether the model was Stanford, Wharton, Harvard or elsewhere. Today, this is no longer the case. While

North American clones, such as INSEAD or LBS still flourish, there are now rival models emerging based on ideas that have either been either borrowed from elsewhere or are self-consciously different from the modernist, functionally shaped and silo models of the recent past. Some Business Schools, such as Aalto, Rotman and the University of Technology, Sydney, are becoming more oriented towards the potential of creative design for business practice. The turn towards “design” or “integrated thinking” is strategic in this process (Brown 2008). Keywords such as “experiential learning”, “integration”, “creativity”, and “design thinking” are increasingly put forward in these School’s marketing materials and curricula, serving to become an important interpretive repertoire for management education in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC).

If it is too early to discuss the new “creative class” of business leaders rising from this process, it is nonetheless the right time to explore the process itself. Some of the issues implied in these changes have already been tackled – see for instance Alvesson and Spicer (2012) on the relation between critical thinking and creativity; Czarniawska (2008) on the ambiguity of design in organisation and the well informed and comprehensive critique of Berti (2013). However, the global relevance of changes in business education has yet to be explored: new local and global configurations are being established, new present and future responsibilities forged, new flows of knowledge creation, people, investments and power are being put in place. With this paper the ensemble of processes from which a new global space of Business Education is rising will be investigated in order to question their rationale and highlight their shortcomings.

The paper is organised around a premise and two sets of questions. First, our premise flows from an interest in the ethos of the new model of business education here investigated, which is characterised by the Business Schools' effort in becoming more globally connected, integrated, and innovative. Second, we will ask how this particular model is concretely enacted within a local organisational setting (UTS): what are the tangible enactments – both

discursive and practical – through which a locale becomes interconnected with the new global space of business education? On this empirical basis we will ask then how this “new” model of business education is possible. We will argue that the power of this model relies on its 'structural lightness', namely in its capacity to travel fast and adapt. While the model is in some ways critical of the old modernist models it is not characterized by a great deal of critical content in any substantively political or theoretical mode; nonetheless, the model's increasing success is, in the end, the matter to which close attention should be paid.

### **Becoming global**

The relation between a peripheral locale and the “global” space of business education are not straightforward. At risk of stating the obvious, the local and global are linked by complex processes of co-formation (Swyngedouw 1997; 2004) and should not be understood as separate realms. Rather, “global” and “local” should be understood as “point of views on networks that are by nature neither local nor global but are more or less long and more or less connected” (Latour 1993:122). Obviously, this is not to say that the “world is flat” (quite the contrary!), but simply that the process of globalising is “only” an intensification of the cultural, economical, material and immaterial flows that already connect different locales in a non-Euclidean way (Amin 1997; Castree 2002; Sheppard 2002; Whatmore and Thorne 1997). It is, to put it differently, a relational process through which new scales of interaction are produced (see Amin 2002; Marston 2000; Massey 1994). Globalising, moreover, is not only the process by which a locale increases its inter-scalar connections but also the process by which the network itself increases its reach, becoming more relevant and powerful (Murdoch, 1998; Latour, 1988), producing global unevenness rather than flatness (e.g. Harvey 2006; Massey 2007; Nagar *et al.* 2002; Cupples 2012; Mendieta 2001; Žižek 2011).

Business Schools establish networks and inter-scalar connections in much the same way as described above. They put forward teaching curricula and marketing activities that connect different locales, people and ideas, contributing therefore to the creation of a particular space

that, despite its heterogeneous composition, can be labelled as the 'global space of management education'. As is per any kind of network, the reach of this space exceeds its blurred boundaries, bringing to the fore cultural and economical effects that encompass heterogeneous domain of life. The interconnectedness of this space with the 'outside' world became evident on the aftermath of the GFC, when Business School have been put on trial as a result of the perception by many commentators that their teachings, particularly in finance and economics, were a contributory factor inducing the extravagant irrational exuberance that has bankrupted major economies globally. In other words, it suddenly became evident that what was thought in the class, researched in the office, and advertised on the media, contributed to the establishment of relations, practices, and paradigms spread globally. In this sense, academic and non-academic commentators have argued that the causes of the crisis should not be sought in the “failure of capitalism” but in the predominance of “theoretical finance” which has been “the status quo prevalent inside business schools for the past 50 years” (Triana 2009; also Bennis and O’Toole 2005; Holland 2009). The fault line resides in how business has been taught, with too much predominance given to mathematics and statistics, leading to an over-financialization and technicism of economic theory and the transactions it legitimated (Giacalone and Wargo, 2009) as if being a master (or mistress) of business was merely a matter of applying a-contextual quantitative techniques. The ethics of the head masters of business are also in question. Commentators have highlighted the role played by top business researchers in offering consultations precisely to those firms that played a critical role in the crisis, without acknowledging this either in their résumés or their research publications (Charles Ferguson’s prize-winning documentary *Inside Job* has portrayed a couple of these cases, in particular Columbia Business School’s Dean). Some Business Schools, in response to the criticism that they contributed to the creation of a “global” threat in the past, are attempting to redesign the global space of management education, busily adding an additional and innovative rationale to their practice.

## Becoming integrated

The need to find new answers connects with currents that were already flowing prior to the GFC but have intensified after it. One of these has been the notion of “design thinking”, proposed by Buchanan (1992) more than two decades ago. For Buchanan design thinking is “an intellectual approach to problem framing and solving that can be used whenever we are facing complex, ambiguous or undecidable situations” (Berti, 2013:158), those problems referred to as “wicked”. Taken in this sense, *design* is emancipated from its original contexts (industrial design, architecture, etc.) and becomes an approach, an imperialism, a *modus operandi*, that is transferable to all other domains: “design encompasses all human action that is not a repetition or a mapping of a previous action” (Gustafsson 2006:236). Different contributors have proposed introducing design, as a way-of-knowing (Cross, 2001), into the study of business-related matter. Management is to be seen as “a dynamic process leading to impermanent outcomes, and iterative engagements with *designing* and *organizing* that embrace ephemerality and constant improvement” (Jelinek, Romme, and Boland 2008:219; emphasis in original). Strong claims are made for the intercourse of the two domains of design and management, (see for instance Romme 2003, and his triangulation between science, humanities, and design), while design approaches are increasingly seen as tools with which to fill gaps in current business practices (Best, 2006; Brown, 2008; Martin, 2009).

Following this current there has been a flow of activities aimed at re-designing teaching and learning curricula. One prime mover has been the example of the Rotman School in Toronto, whose promotion of *integrative thinking* as the cornerstone of its MBA “aimed at fostering the capacity of MBA students to integrate various functional perspectives to meet the complex business challenges of the 21st century” (Latham 2004:4). Another cornerstone has been the renaissance of the idea of *abductive logic* as “the logic of what might be” (Dunne and Martin 2006:513) replacing the abstracted empiricism of what indubitably is the case. Both ideas resonate with the three distinctive “modality of impossibility” of design thinking

identified by Buchanan: impossibility of rigid boundaries between disciplines; impossibility of relying on any one of the sciences (natural, social or humanistic) for the solution of wicked problems, and the overcoming of all perceived impossibilities by “better design thinking” (1992: 20-21).

Smooth integration between disciplines, and flexibility of thought, are therefore contributing to the creation of a new space of management education characterised by the institutionalisation of discourse around management and design. The inter-scalar relations forging this space are occurring in both academic debate, as signposted in the production of special issues of academic journals (Bate, 2007; Dunbar and Starbuck, 2006), books (Boland and Collopy, 2004; Martin, 2009) and in conferences (such as EGOS 2012, “Design?!”) as well as in the changing flows of Business School’s practices.

### **Becoming innovative**

Besides integration and abductive logic, more recently Harvard scholars Datar, Garvin and Cullen (2010) have introduced a new set of keywords for 21<sup>st</sup> century Business Education: “critical thinking”, “creativity and innovative thinking”, and “experiential learning”, connecting with and expanding Rotman’s pointers for design thinking. The re-design of teaching curricula is accompanied by an increasing amount of parallel activities – marketed as 'innovative' - aimed at complementing current educational offers (with specific attention to executive-level students)<sup>1</sup>. These activities are aimed at fostering Business Schools' students to get more acquainted to design principles, creative thinking, and integrative approaches – contributing therefore to the solidification and expansion of the aforementioned space. To cite but a few, examples include Harvard’s “xDesign” lab and conference; Stanford’s “Innovation Master Series” and “Design Thinking Boot Camp”<sup>2</sup>; Case Western’s Weatherhead School of Management “Manage by Designing” initiative, launched in 2002;

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Stanford’s three-days executive “Design Thinking Boot Camp” costs \$10,000 per person (<http://www.gsb.stanford.edu/exed/dtbc/> - Retrieved in February 2013)

Rotman School of Management, with its new “Rotman Design Challenge 2013”;<sup>3</sup> and Yale School of Management, which is catching up with a student club on “Design and Innovation”.<sup>4</sup>

Besides innovating their curricula, Business Schools are also re-inventing their brands, through a process that we could call “re-branding through re-building”. The process consists in increasingly building “bigger and more-elaborate campuses to attract applicants and professors and climb higher in magazine rankings” (Staley, 2010). If the relation between Universities and big architectural projects is nothing new (Wiewel and Perry, 2008), Business Schools are engaging with signature architects to provide a distinctive “costumer experience” as a core part of their new brand (on the tenets of the *experience economy*, Pine and Gilmore 1998). In this sense, it is as if their new externality is called to confirm that what is folded within will also break with convention. The design of the new buildings for Case Western School of Management by Frank Gehry in 2004 was the first relevant example of this process:

“The Lewis Building reflects the spirit of Weatherhead’s innovative approach and clearly places Weatherhead in the vanguard of business education. It redefines the way a business school should look, just as Weatherhead redefines the way management education should be taught”<sup>5</sup>

Business education and signature architecture are not only subsumed in the rhetoric of branding in Weatherhead. Similar claims have been associated with the Dixon Jones’ designed Saïd Business School in Oxford, David Adjaye’s Skolkovo School of Management in Moscow, KPF’s Chapman Graduate School of Business at Florida International University Business School, the new Knight Management Centre at Stanford, the forthcoming Tata Hall

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A competition that “brings together top talent from leading business schools around the world to solve a business design challenge posed by an innovative and forward-thinking sponsor” (<http://www.rotmandesignchallenge.com> - Retrieved in March 2013)

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Source <http://weatherhead.case.edu/about/facilities/lewis/default.cfm> - Retrieved in May 2013

at Harvard (dedicated to Executive Education), as well as a number of other institutions around the world. Having set the initial benchmark, however, Gehry design remains the global standard.

## **The UTS Business School case**

### ***Context***

“Advance knowledge with impact through integrative thinking for next generation leaders in  
a globalizing world”

(UTS Business School’s vision)<sup>6</sup>

UTS Business School is at the forefront of the flows already discussed. New architectural designs will shortly envelop new curriculum designs implementing aspects of integrative thinking. In this sense UTS’ case allows one to investigate how a Business School can join, reinforce, and peculiarly contribute to the global space previously described. Only through such grounded analyses will it be possible, in the end, to say something meaningfully about that space and its relative model of management education. The materials that follow are a part of the outcome of several months of ethnographic observation of the School’s changes (from September 2011 – May 2013), as well as the reconstruction (through interviews and secondary materials) of the early phases of the process. The field material includes the direct observation of project management meetings related to the delivery of the Dr Chau Chak Wing building; the observation of events promoted by the Business School to sustain its vision; collection and observation of relevant emails; semi-structured interviews with most of the key actors involved in the change as well as the collection of publicity and other available material. The materials have been analysed using open-coding techniques with CAQDAS software,<sup>7</sup> in order to manage the large amounts of data from diverse sources. In coding and analysing the materials, we have followed three criteria: first, identifying the (conscious and

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Source: <http://www.business.uts.edu.au/about/mission/> - Retrieved in September 2012

<sup>7</sup>

Computer Assisted/Aided Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS)



unconscious) flows characterising the new space being created as that of Business School practice; second, describing these practices in terms of their rationale and effects; third, seeking patterns in the ways that these practices share intrinsic characteristics.

The materials analysed present two set of interrelated, although sufficiently distinct, practices. The first is the practice of *translating* the flows characterising the new global space of business education into the old organisational setting of the school. The second is the deployment of *representational devices* whose elements and artefacts concretely identify the School's effective translation. Translation is a term that has a particular provenance for Czarniawska and Sevón (2005), which we follow. As ideas travel they never stay the same as they change locations: their movement always entails translation so that, through the very process of being in process, they change. Ideas are inherently indexical and as they are indexed in new contexts they are translated anew, with different inflections, each time. The notion of representational devices we take from Callon, Millo and Muniessa's (2007) account of devices as the various sorts of technical instruments that intervene in the shaping and reshaping of a given phenomena.

### ***Translating***

The arrival, in 2008, of an externally appointed Dean (RG) marked a significant difference for UTS Business School. RG had a clear idea of how to pursue UTS' main goal (to become a "world leading university of technology"): "How would we do that? We'd do that by linking creativity, technology and innovation. That's really the ethos of the place" (RG, 2011, Interview). In the Dean's rhetorical language we can already foresee a translation of the Business School into the space being characterized by a focus on the integration of creativity, technology and innovation.

Before ideas can be effectively translated in a new context they have to be introduced into its space. The introduction of new ideas emerging from design thinking was effected through the initiation of a "strategic conversation" to which members of the business Faculty were invited.

These conversations canvassed a “wide range of initially unstructured thoughts and views [...] to create shared interpretations of the world in which the majority of individual insights can find a logical place” (van der Heijden 2005:43). The conversation was conducted and facilitated by a company, Second Road, which describes itself as “A Strategy + Innovation firm unlocking and empowering imagination and intelligence”. The conversation promised “canvassing everything from how the post-crisis world would re-shape business to what kind of structures and programs would help us build a more ‘integrative’ approach to business education” (Business School Media release). During the conversation key-points of change for the Business School were codified: the need to break down the boundaries between disciplines (moving from “silos” to an integrative approach); the need to increase external engagement with significant agencies in the business community, as well as the necessity of bringing design thinking into the teaching curriculum (Second Road, Interview). Prior to the appointment of the new Dean design thinking was not on the agenda. That it was on the agenda of the meeting was by virtue of co-design by the Dean and the consultancy.

The innovation of design thinking as a part of the strategic conversation interpellated a history heavy with the legacy of UTS’ foundations as a vocational and technically applied institution whose business curriculum was quite orthodox. Design thinking promised a break with past prescription, with orthodoxy, in the name of innovation, the shock of the new. During the workshops the participants were affected in a number of ways. First, on the discursive level, they were exposed to powerful keywords such as *change*, *innovation*, and *creativity* (Clegg, 1987) that, by virtue of the conversation, could be claimed as a co-production. The claim of co-production eclipsed the professional staging that produced its effects whereby the academics assembled for the strategic conversations were introduced to a consultancy whose mission and vision was strongly focused on the terms being translated.

Second, Second Road’s engagement involved the faculty in group-based activities, focus groups, and brainstorming sessions. In these encounters the grounds for deliberation were

already framed in terms of the priorities staged by the Dean and Second Road. Second Road's approach is simply stated.

“Deep, systemic organisational engagement ... is best done through the process of conversation-based co-creation. The tapestry of a company's culture is woven from stories. When leaders truly engage employees in building a shared story of the future, everyone helps to drive change. We use the power of story, inquiry and conversation to help leaders liberate and mobilise the creative energy that forms communities of action.” (<http://www.secondroad.com.au/consulting-services/strategic-innovation/>, accessed 06.01.14).

Stories of the future were developed that were informed by notions of integrative thinking and the difficulty of achieving this in a Business School whose fragmented and segmented spaces seemed designed to obstruct rather than facilitate integration.

The second step in the translation process occurred with the insertion of a new figure into the flux: Frank Gehry, through an existing relation enjoyed with one of the Second Road personnel, MT, who had known him in North America. The serendipitous emergence of the relationship with Frank Gehry was possible because the new Dean had successfully made a case to the university for a new building for the School in order to see the translation of a new discourse of design and innovation into practice. MT, as a member of Second Road, was a key co-partner in the staging of the new discourse and through the connection with Gehry initiated the next stage, inviting Gehry Partners to discuss the site and design of a new building: the Dr Chau Chak Wing building

The relation between the School and Gehry focused the discourse around integrating design and creativity into business education by positioning the existing building as the obstacle to its accomplishment and a new building as its facilitator. Thus, the building could be the vehicle for translation of new discourses throughout the Business School and University. After the University Council's decision-making had been successfully enrolled, ad-hoc

workshops between Gehry Partners and a selected group of School staff facilitated further internal School translation. The design condensation of this process is summarized in Frank Gehry's description of the Dr Chau Chak Wing building as a 'tree house', which implicitly contains all the keywords of the new Business School discourse: "It's going to have this trunk, which is the *interactive, open spaces* and it's going to have the tree houses in the branches and *they'll all be connected*" (UTS Media release; emphasis added). Last but not least, the presence of Gehry Partners in the network allowed the School's managers to connect to other prominent locales of new space, including Case Western's Weatherhead Business School and MIT in the US, where Gehry had previously designed buildings. Travelling to those places and meeting with Deans and staff, the School's management were producing new, horizontal, scales of interaction that strengthened the translation process described so far.

### ***Representational devices***

The translation of ideas just described would not have been of any significance without the production of tangible, or at least performative, elements able to signify and represent the organisational setting: the Business School needed representational devices to make its presence tangible in the new space being brought into being by the flow of design processes. There are at least three such representational devices worth highlighting.

#### *New curriculum*

First, the revision of the School's teaching curriculum. The new Bachelor of Business degree, which is already in place, falls into this category. As its proponents put it, the aim of the degree is to move from

“‘I-shaped’ graduates with an inability to think outside the silo towards a more ‘interdisciplinary’ focused curriculum which retains the disciplinary expertise while also involving a synthesis of disciplinary knowledge that produces the so-called ‘T-shaped’ graduate” (Bajada and Rowan 2013:386).

The degree is build around the thematic content of “creativity, ethics and sustainability” (Interview with CB, Head of Bachelor degree courses). The innovations in this degree are important and contain relevant aspects to which we will return later. However, since most of the new global space of management education is focused upon MBAs and Executive education these will be the focus for analysis (note that the Dr Chau Chak Wing building will host *only* post-graduate and executive students). The revision of the MBA programmes begun in 2010 and is still underway. The process aims at establishing a new MBA for Executives and a new “Global MBA” (taught in joint-venture with other institutions). The rationale for this revision was set mainly at the Deans’ level as CB, Dean of the Postgraduate courses, explains:

“Well we’ve looked at the Yale model, we’ve looked at Stanford, we’ve looked at Harvard. We’ve looked at the big American models and some of our home grown ones here as well, and really tried to develop something that’s a bit hybrid and different from our current MBA. So we want things that are much more thematic in the way that they approach understandings of business. This has been informed by quite an influential book that’s been around, called *Rethinking the MBA*. This is really around the conceptual framework of knowing, being and doing” (CB, Dean for Postgraduate courses, Interview).

The rationale, which stressed the knowing, doing and being ethos proposed by Datar, Garvin and Cullen, was closely aligned to a framework for design thinking. Within this framework, the “knowing” component stands for the interdisciplinary re-assessment of “the facts, frameworks, and theories” that are thought and taught in Business Schools; the “doing” part is related to the development of the “skills, capabilities and techniques” that make up the practice of management, for which it is believed that design thinking and creativity will be fundamental (in order to assess the ‘wicked complexity’ of today’s business world); while the “being” is related to the “values, attitudes, and beliefs that form managers” (Datar, Garvin

and Cullen, 2010:7; for the adaptation of this model into the Australian context see also Hall, Renu, and Green 2013). The process by which the new MBA Executive degree was conceived is clearly illustrated by one of its participants:

“Like we were told, this is what this degree should be, do it. It should be about integrated thinking. It should be about creative problem solving, so it should really challenge students to do things differently, following a design thinking principle and all that... there was a big vision about this degree and it was always there when we were designing it. So we always came back to that vision: this is what we have been asked to do. When people start to talk about, you know, what could the problems be – we always came back and said, well, but this is what we were asked to do, following these principles, so they were always there, in the foreground” (NN, Lecturer in the Business School, Interview)

As NN stated, the process was not free of conflicts, since teachers of maths, statistics and finance claimed that these foundational subjects could not be taught in an interdisciplinary manner. However, the framework of the new degree was so explicit and strong that in the end the representation of an apparent consensus was almost unavoidable: “this is what we have been asked to do”.

### *New building*

The new teaching curriculum is not the only relevant device. MBAs will indeed be hosted in a space “unlike any other learning space in the world”, the Dr Chau Chak Wing Building (Figure 1), the aforementioned Frank Gehry designed facility that takes its name from a Chinese (naturalised Australian) businessman who donated \$20 millions AUD for the building plus \$5 millions in scholarships.

Figure 1 - The first three pages of the 2012 brochure promoting the School's Executive MBA.

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*Note:* The third page, on the right side, represents Frank Gehry's original sketch for the Dr Chau Chak Wing Building

*Source:* Courtesy of UTS Business School

The building subsumes in itself various aspects of the processes we are describing. First, the building is already considered to *be* an icon before it is built. Its iconic quality is represented by the use of rhetorical language and ad-hoc managerial practices that position the most important feature of the new global space of business education: the need for a new approach to business education for students and the wider business community. In the words of its major proponent, UTS Business School is heading in "A unique and distinctive direction because we have a very unique and distinctive building" (RG, speaking to a public meeting in June 2013).

Second, according to the official discourse the building has been designed "from the inside to the outside". The building is itself envisaged as a device rather than merely a shell, shelter or housing. The aim has been to create particular kinds of spaces that allow for "trans-disciplinary approaches and group problem-solving" (SA, UTS Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Teaching, Learning and Equity, Interview). The internal spaces of the building situate students and instructors in oval-shaped teaching spaces staging theatre-in-the-round enabled by wall-to-wall digital screens powered by the latest technologies; seminar rooms with flexible arrangements, that allow for easily shifting from lecture to group work, with numerous social and study spaces for informal collaboration, mingling and cross-fertilization. In this sense, the interiors of the "tree house" have been designed as a

device for accommodating the needs for interdisciplinary work and flexibility, translating into the built environment the new *ethos* of business education. For an older generation of architects, influenced by Le Corbusier, buildings were to be envisaged as machines for living; the Dr Chau Chak Wing Building is envisaged as a device for integrating, innovating and imagining difference.

Both the external iconic structure and the internal spaces aim to create an overall “experience”. During the design phase, project managers paid considerable attention to what NO, UTS’ main Project Manager, calls the “Gehry feeling” of the building (NO, Informal discussion). The Gehry feeling is expressed both through the two facades of the building (one undulating and folding, fabricated in a complex brick veneer, the other made of juxtaposed glass) as well as through the quality of finishes and other design elements (Figure 2). These include the presence of elaborate design solution (such as a curvilinear staircase at the main entrance of the building); terraces with views over Sydney to Darling Harbour; ad-hoc commissioned art pieces; the use of quality timber for the main seminar rooms; state-of-the-art IT and AV facilities as well as the presence of numerous and well furnished “lounge” areas for informal work and relaxation. Externality, internality, and the experience that they will provide function as devices representing the innovations envisaged within.

Figure 2 - Model of the Dr Chau Chak Wing building

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*Source:* Courtesy of UTS

### *New branding*

The third and last device is related to branding: the School is producing new publicity materials to advertise its new course and new building, which include street advertising, gadgets, media releases, ad-hoc publications, as well as public and internal seminars (under titles such as “Creative Industries, Future-ready Graduates – the role of universities”). Public



events such as “Re-thinking the MBA”, in which the main speaker was Datar, flown in from Harvard, have occurred. The Dean of the Rotman School of Management in Toronto was also flown in to address a crowded room of business people and university staff in the Bennelong Function Rooms of the Sydney Opera House. These artefacts, visitors and discourses were staged as devices representing how the new organisational setting of the School was in the process of “opening up” to and further connecting with select emerging global spaces of business education.

The use of these devices built on an earlier stage of conscious branding by the School. Prior to the events being detailed here the School had already spent a considerable amount of time and resources to obtain accreditation with the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB)<sup>8</sup>, to ensure “students and parents that the business school is providing a top-quality education”.<sup>9</sup> In publicising its accreditation by an internationally recognised private body, the Business School legitimates its role in global business education. The effects are already evident in the business environment (Figure 3), but will definitely be more evident when the Dr Chau Chak Wing Building is completed.

Figure 3 – A 2012 Accenture’s advertising reprises that of the 2011 Business School campaign

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## **Lightness**

The emergence and diffusion of the new space for management education is infused by “structural lightness”. Lightness, of course, has a double meaning: it refers not just to the mass, density and weight of a phenomenon – it also refers to its translucence. By this we mean to represent the translucence that characterises the new global space of management

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<sup>8</sup> AACSB used to stand for American Academy of Collegiate Schools of Business. The name change is a further sign of globalization as Business Schools from outside North America increasingly sought accreditation. The name changed, the initials stayed the same, and the practices evolved to encompass a greater range of variation in models on the basic North American vehicle of the Business School.

<sup>9</sup> Source: <http://www.aacsb.edu/accreditation/aacsb.asp> - Retrieved in May 2013

education, allowing translations to travel rapidly through it to be represented by new devices. The heavier the textual and other particulars of ideas that travel the more problematic is their translation into new contexts. Conversely, the lighter they are the more they travel and adapt. The critical point that we are making is that looking within this translucence of flows, and tracing the relations that they make up, one can address how UTS Business School is translating and producing representational devices that attest to its homology with the new global space of business education, in a way similar to other prominent Business Schools around the world, allowing for a critical understanding of this space.

The new space of management education is characterised by a translucence that denotes a lack of reflexivity: translation passes right through the space without inflection, reflection or obstruction. The evidence can be found both in the current academic literature in Business and Organisation Studies and in the processes through which the new space is forged. In the first case we couldn't find, apart from the sporadic interventions cited at the beginning of this paper, any *substantial* critique of the central integration posited between management and design.

At the level of practices it is possible to find a few voices that are critical of the whole change, as the UTS case shows. Corridor discussion about the Dr Chau Chak Wing building often comment "we could have used that money differently" or question whether "we really need it?" Stronger critiques have arisen in relation to the re-design of curricula. The following is for instance an attack on the integrative approach to learning, coming from a senior academic belonging to one of the hard-core business discipline (accounting):

"You know, I think, Business – a Business problem – the word Business represents a whole set of issues and some of those issues relate to different disciplines... A business is a team just as a soccer team ... does not consist of eleven goalkeepers. Goalkeeping is a very specific skill. [...] And you know, a business is much more complex than a football team. And so... if Business schools start to really loose the

roles of disciplinary foundations ... I think that those Business School will actually loose standing” (ST, School’s Dean of Research, interview).

Muttering and discontent there may be, as with any change; however, no *organised* voice of dissent has emerged in any of the *translating* and *representational devices* brought forward by the School. No one, in other words, has put forward an alternative vision for the School or organised action around it: the critical voices, amongst which the present authors must be included, are *de facto* aligned to the mainstream. The reasons are numerous. First, change is seen as unavoidable, canonically, with the current process just one of many changes that have to be endured: the new dean, the new building; the new branding; the new curriculum were a perfect recipe for change. Second, the organizational changes being promoted are not revolutionary but do introduce a new rhetoric with which interests can be aligned in some cases while in other cases the norms of disciplinary formation will serve to limit the changes required (Dawson, 2003). Third, those academics employed in stable academic positions tend to delegate political affairs to the Dean’s level, knowing that both material and status rewards go to those who research and publish successfully while younger academics are usually more concerned with their career prospects than the form of the institution, one which they take for granted. Fourth, since what the School is doing is derived from “successful” models and is depicted as making the School become a “world leading” institute, no one seems willing to question a process to which a great deal of legitimacy attaches. Finally, there is a healthy cynicism that the whole process is more a ritual of representations than anything that will practice in a deep way; there are no specific control modes to ensure that personnel research anything prescribed and, as teaching is supposed to be informed by research, the content chosen can always be legitimated, so long as it pays ritual deference to the curriculum in which it is embedded, all will be as ever it was. While there are many controls over documents and statements there is little control over implementation in the classroom or research practice. In the end, the process of change seems smooth enough because it is

sustained by a fashionable and winning discourse; it has been strongly legitimated institutionally and it will provide the School with a signature architectural building, it does not require traumatic restructuring to take place and could deliver significantly improved financial and quality outcomes in terms of student inputs. If critical thinking is about “a questioning rather than an acceptance of the world as it is” (Marcuse 2009:185), we found little of it in play at UTS Business School.

That the process, on the whole, is largely unreflexive tells us something about the translucence of the materials being translated, their lack of substantiality, and their lightness. In what follows we describe different elements characterising the lightness of the new space of management learning, being those related to the changes in curriculum, the specific effort in branding and the new attention on a particular kind of building.

### *Curriculum*

It is at the postgraduate and executive level that much of the reforming attention is focused, as we already said. Under Datar’s *et al.* framework, *being* is mainly understood as a way of developing leadership skills; as a general set of ethical principal to follow to be *right* (and ready) for the current global business scenario. However, ethics are *never* detached from context (Flyvbjerg, 2001) and its dynamics (Deroy and Clegg, 2011). Arguably, ethics concern not a set of immutable principles that can be learnt from a book but entail wisdom embedded in networks of practices that are always contextual and contingent (Popke, 2009). In a Spinozian sense ethics always depends on the situated “nature” of events and practices for dealing with them (Negri, 2004). In this sense the ethical principles taught in Business School will always be related to the kind of context that Business Schools reproduce. The question then should be not what kind of ethics do business leader need to manage more responsibly (the *being* of Datar and his colleagues) but what kind of context do Business Schools provide; what kind of context they reproduce with their practices; what kind of ethics may emerge from these? If, in other words, for Aristotle the role of the leader is to create an

environment that allows everyone's potential to be expressed, we should not forget that the leader is affected by the context in which leadership and its virtues are enacted (Rego et al 2012). Only a *practical* and *factual* questioning of that context would be able to provide, in the end, *new* practical wisdom.

It would be unfair to state that the new curriculum that is being sketched for business education is deprived of *any* critical content. A closer look at the new Bachelor of Business at UTS shows a serious attempt to allow students to think critically about canonical management theory. The new capstone subject on "Integrating Business Perspectives", for instance, criticises Friedman's neoliberal policies, while other subjects stress the need to not "take for granted" the claims of classical management theory.

If, on the one hand, there are interesting attempts to bring more critical thinking into mainstream management curricula on the other hand these are necessarily restrained (because of the contextual nature of ethics) by the practices that form the new global space of business education. These practices are a substantial reproduction of the basic tenets of the contemporary corporate world: they promote a culture of success based on power, money, and glamour, representing a void of substantially new content (see below). Ironically enough, "experiential learning" is all about this: the kind of context you experience teaches you the kind of businesswoman/man you are likely going to be – no matter what your brand new innovative curriculum says.

### *Branding*

At its most basic level, becoming a "world class" Business School means being recognised as one of the few dozen institutions that can proudly appear at the top of Global MBA rankings, such the highly-regarded ranking promoted by the Financial Times (FT). However, in trying to achieve such recognitions, Business Schools reproduce a traditional model of business that, in the end, contributes to the translucence and lightness of the new space of management learning. Rankings involve the commensuration of the qualitative into the quantitative, in a

process in which reactivity to the measures used can become self-fulfilling prophecy, encouraging schools to model themselves on those features that rankings measure (Espeland and Sauder, 2008: p.15). The fictions contained in producing the numbers become ever more real in their effects as legitimization devices by allocating resources to what the rankings measure and value, as well as redefine work and policies in a strategic reorganization by institutional isomorphism: seek to copy those admired elements of other similar organizations that rank highly in one's environment. Various strategies can be used to try and boost standing in the rankings. The main one is 'gaming', the manipulation of rules and numbers to manage appearances without making substantive changes to what the rules and numbers are supposed to depict. What is likely to be gamed in the new environment? The most relevant of the FT's evaluation criterion is the "average alumnus salary three years after graduation", which is self-explanatory.

Salaries are not the only measure but if one disregards academic publications for a moment the other relevant factor that the FT takes into consideration in assessing Business School's performances is equally revealing of the underlying logic of ranking. Schools need to be accredited by organisations such as AACSB.

According to the AACSB, students should choose AACSB's accredited institutions for instrumental reasons because they have "graduates that receive higher, more competitive salaries"; "have employers that only hire their graduates"; and "have more access to recruiters".<sup>10</sup> In this sense AACSB's accreditation could arguably be seen as "more of a group of foxes guarding the MBA henhouses than a beacon of leadership and force for catalytic change" (Navarro 2008:120). The accreditation seems to work as a club that grants prestige to its members (allowing access to the FT rankings and providing for better business exposure), while at the same time offering them the opportunity of playing an attractive card to their clients/students.

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Rankings and accreditations are two of the ways through which Business Schools brand themselves, and they comprise an important part of the current space of management learning. Their translucence is evident: they do not critique the existing model of assessment, they put emphasis on already established and problematic values (the greed for money), and they work through 'gaming' expected changes or result.

### *Building*

The Dr Chau Chak Wing building is going to reinforce, rather than diminish, the strength of the “practical wisdom” brought forward by the new curricula and branding through accreditation. The reason is not only related to the power of its branding but also to the power of the aesthetic experience that the building is going to offer. Instrumentally, it speaks volumes. Objects such as specifically designed furniture, comfortable lounges, a Frank Gehry designed café, quality timber, glasses, steel, artistic pieces, all have agency (Latour, 2005). At the most basic level they represent a new brand and a change, as has been noticed in the case of corporations (van Marrewijk, 2009). However, at a more substantial level they carry an *affective* power (Anderson 2012), namely the power of affecting others in the unconscious emotional background that characterise everyday social life (Anderson and Harrison 2010; Thrift 2004; Latour and Lepinay 2010). Objects like those that will populate the building “do not just provide evocations of times past or moral reckonings but affective senses of space, literally territories of feeling” (Thrift 2010:292). They evoke *a* particular kind of imaginary and solicit *a* particular kind of emotional response, associated with the contemporary figure of the glamorous and successful entrepreneur (for the relevance of *glamour* in this context see Thrift, 2010). In other terms, the building will provide postgraduate and executive students with a shared creative feeling that echoes the contemporary corporation as flexible, prone to change, and cool: a vitalist reinforcement, rather than challenge, to the logic previously described.

### **Resistances**

New discursive and material scalar connections are being established and the flow and translation of ideas, people, and practices is substantiating the new global space of management education (characterised by the Business Schools' effort in becoming global, integrative, and innovative). UTS Business School populates and reproduces that space, through translation processes refining its curriculum practices; constructing a new building and engaging in branding as the mechanisms for and of translation.

With our discussion of the new space of management education and our detailed analysis of UTS' case, we have shown how the new lightness of management education both seduces through clever branding and shaping of physical spaces as well as attempting to bring critical thinking into the curriculum. Nonetheless, the core tenets of canonical capitalism (power, money and glamour) remain implicitly reified in overall institutional practices and in the buildings that shelter them.

Implicit reification is open to deflection, however. Trading on lightness and translucence is a double-edged device that offers opportunities for questioning business education. If integrated and design thinking means that the taken-for-granted way of providing content for a business education is up for grabs then the legitimization of a questioning approach offers an opportunity for difficult questions to be raised. Notions of integrated and design thinking do, potentially, create different spaces of translucence, spaces in which discursive assumptions embedded in curricula can be challenged because they do not stipulate a transcendent point of departure but a light space that may contain many potential lines of flight. In this respect, at least, the new design of teaching spaces as theatres in the round in which the visibly hierarchical and panoptical arrangements of convention are replaced by synoptical and multiple points of view is an opportunity for new approaches to knowledge transmission to flourish in which the elements characterizing the new space as a “light” structure may be redefined.



A new practical wisdom, potentially able to change business practice may emerge from the translucence created. However, this cannot be automatic. A process of continuing critique will have to be encouraged in the curriculum through thinking about new, different designs for practice; while branding has been dramatically re-thought, in order to become detached from the reproduction of problematic sets of values it will require continual revision and refreshing and with regard to the new built space, iconic as it may be, aesthetics are not detached from ethics, particularly in contemporary form of capitalism. A building designed for openness and flow means less hermetically sealed compartmentalization only in principle; in practice it depends on the power/knowledge relations struggling within and around it.

Critical attention to potential sources of translucent change as well as those other elements making matters opaque, such as disciplinary formations, sponsors' agenda-setting and students expectations, will be needed in order to analyse in what ways something new and different is being brought to the fore rather than just 'spinning' an old problematic. A good example in this sense is the uncanny dedication of many faculty in providing (mostly undergraduate) students with non-conventional sources of knowledge or the critical work done by some academics to show the links between Business School and capitalistic crisis (e.g. Olaison, Pedersen, and Sørensen 2009). More generally, as Clegg, Jarvis and Pitsis (2013: 1258) recommend in their conclusions, universities used to be thought of as a unique social space for reflection and learning, providing a public good, and business schools, be they public or private, are not excluded from that role. Creative thinking can help achieving the acknowledgement of this role, granted that it is set free from the normative, canonical chains currently binding it in the majority of Business Schools.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have described the principal tenets of a new space of business education. This global space is characterised by explicit reference to design thinking, experiential learning, and creativity, as ways through which managers, actual and putative, can better

confront the contemporary context. We have provided an account situated in one of those business schools seeking explicitly to change the way they brand themselves, not least through the design of expensive facilities by signature architects. Ironically, the present building of the Business School is housed behind the carefully preserved facades of an old fruit and vegetable market, dating from a time in the nineteenth century when the market was less a metaphor and more a place of truck and trade, when bricks and mortar spoke of no more than a functional place from which to sell produce. Today, in the new building, bricks and mortar represent a folding, floating, iconic signification inserting the Business School into a space rooted in downtown Sydney but capable of glamorous projection globally. The iconic building is intended to open the doors to a global market of metaphorical possibilities for which design thinking is supposedly the key.

To be serious about the nature of their post-GFC challenges Business Schools do need to address that what they do is not defined *a priori* and is not immutable but emerges from the effects of their practices and from the kind of context and space these practices produce. In this sense, a strategy of lightness, of translucence and indexical openness has double political significance. On the one hand it allows old, problematic models of business education to be maintained, with consequences which recent history affirms; on the other hand it also contains the possibility of change through practices that can modify the effects of the old problematic. As scholars in the field of Critical Management Studies (CMS) are increasingly aware, “taking risks and making choices that would achieve some consistency between what we say and what we do, are essential elements of critique” (Fournier and Smith, 2012). Working with translucence requires being exposed, aware, indeed, it requires a degree of institutional reflexivity. For us, being reflexive about the spaces we work in and we contribute to reproducing is a step forward to a different mode of management learning.

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