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# SRD Change: Showcasing graduate projects that provoke sustainable changes in design thinking and practice

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## ABSTRACT

Every year since 2004, the Society for Responsible Design (SRD) in Sydney has been exhibiting graduate design projects which address issues of environmental change and responsibility, social equity and community ideas. This insightful exhibition, initially launched as ChangeX and now known as SRD Change, showcases exemplary graduate projects that inspire, provoke, and challenge conventional expectations of the design industry and businesses recently attuned to corporate responsibility. Works are selected from a diverse range of design disciplines across Sydney's leading tertiary institutions. Design is reclaimed here as a tool for satisfying genuine human needs in ways that are both practical and imaginative, posing a compelling alternative to the contemporary (mis)use of design as an elitist, profit-driven enterprise fuelling unsustainable levels of consumption.

Confirming the importance of higher education as an integral element to enabling meaningful change, SRD Change celebrates the culmination of a collaborative process, uniting the wisdom and knowledge of design educators, the working expertise of design professionals and the new creative enthusiasm of final year design graduates, through projects that promote fresh ways in which society can be made more sustainably aware and responsible.

This paper reviews the SRD Change process, documents the highs and lows of the exhibitions, the value it provides to participant graduate designers, and its contributions in furthering design education for sustainability.

## INTRODUCTION

The Society for Responsible Design (SRD, [www.srd.org.au](http://www.srd.org.au)) is a not-for-profit, volunteer-run organization of designers, academics and people who

appreciate the significant role design plays in creating a sustainable future. Established in Sydney in 1989, the society has members across Australia and has evolved into an umbrella organization including the original SRD (primarily industry-focused) and Change Design (formerly EcoDesign Foundation, EDF, primarily education-focused).

One of the major undertakings of SRD, in its mission of promoting the value of design towards a sustainable future, is hosting and presenting the graduate design exhibition series known as SRD Change, which had its beginnings as ChangeX. We wished to demonstrate that “designers have an unprecedented opportunity to use their skills to make meaningful, sustainable change in the world” (Shedroff, 2009). To illustrate, these exhibitions present a variety of sustainable graduate projects that question conventional expectations by using design ingenuity to challenge current global issues, similar to, but originally predating the *Massive Change* shows that premiered late 2004 in Canada (Berger, 2009).

## I. CHANGEX

The concept for a sustainable graduate design exhibition was initiated in late 2003 by two Sydney-based design graduates, Tessa Rapaport and Karl Logge. They co-developed this concept into the ChangeX event with Anita Marosszeky and Greta Werner, assisted with input from members of the EDF which had recently merged with SRD. ChangeX was intended to be an annual exhibition and discussion platform for promoting the work of new design graduates in addressing issues of environmental sustainability, social equity and community issues. As a graduate-led, curated, and coordinated project, it was also aimed at providing professional development opportunities for young, critically engaged designers. Originally ChangeX was a commentary on the lack of representation for responsible

design in the Sydney design scene; in fact the ChangeX parodied the title of Australia's premier design and architecture event at that time.

The ChangeX exhibition required a significant coordination and organizational effort among the team members involved. Aside from the enormous task of selecting participants for the shows and looking for speakers for the forums and consultants for the workshops, the team had to produce a printed catalog and a website. Moreover, independent funding for the exhibitions had to be sought from external sponsors due to the insufficient capital available from SRD. Particularly for the inaugural exhibition, sources of financial and in-kind sponsorship were hard to find and time-consuming.

Despite receiving some sponsorship the initial exhibitions remained productions with shoestring budgets. This however seemed to work well with the frugal student experiences of the earlier exhibition teams, as well as the "do-it-yourself" and "reuse" ethics encouraged through these exhibitions. It was acknowledged however that the low-budget location and promotion were limiting the audience and exposure of the works. In determining the exhibition venue the ChangeX committee wanted to ensure that it was a relatively central and neutral space, accessible by public transport, and did not favor any one educational institution.

The timing of the exhibition was of more concern to the ChangeX team, recognizing that graduating students would be very busy with their own end-of-year exhibitions. By holding the exhibition early the following year, it was hoped that potential participants would be more responsive to the small effort required of them to further exhibit their work.

To scout for participants the ChangeX team attended

the university degree shows, obtained catalogs of the works on display, talked with potential exhibitors, and collected suggestions from design academics. It was important that the show reflect a range of design disciplines and projects showing thorough engagement with sustainability through their briefs and materialization.







The evolution of ChangeX and the subsequent SRD Change series are shown in Table 1.

## II. SRD CHANGE

In 2007, with mergers completed, senior members of the SRD, under the leadership of convenor Greg Campbell, began directing the exhibition process for the ensuing years. During this time, the event was rebranded as SRD Change. The exhibition series had grown from a predominantly graduate-facilitated activity to a professionally-led one. Due to its "organic" nature the exhibition is itself ever-changing, evolving from the unique blend of multi-disciplinary skills and design perspectives of the group. The lessons are to successfully massage the varying design approaches into a final group product that is agreed upon as a working whole. The graduates benefit by working as if in a real life design studio context, with the SRD and their graduate peers as clients, who initially have a limited brief and budget for the design goal, and must combine differing perspectives of process to attain the end product through compromise, negotiation, brainstorming, creative juggling of ideas, skills and resources to complete the task.

From an outsider perspective, the value to these graduates is the sense of achievement and pride of the final exhibition, which arises from the development and

Table 1. Evolution of SRD Change/X. Data compiled from annual SRD Change catalogs (SRD, 2004; 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009).

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
						
Brand	ChangeX	ChangeX	ChangeX	SRD ChangeX	SRD Change	SRD Change
Exhibition 1	Apr 23-27, Medium Rare Gallery, Redfern	Mar 17-20, LaunchPad Gallery, Surry Hills	Mar 3-21, Pine Street Gallery, Chippendale	Jun 1-3, GREX Australian Technology Park, Eveleigh	Sep 23-28, TAP Gallery, Darlinghurst	Oct 12-17, Deutsche Bank Place, Sydney
Exhibition 2			Jun 9-11 Rosehill Gardens Exhibition Centre	Sep 22, Eden Gardens, North Ryde	Nov 7-8 GreenTech, Darling Harbour	Jun28-Jul 1 (2010) CONNECTED2010, Kensington
Exhibition 3				Oct 14, Village Fair, Lane Cove	Jun 6-7 (2009) The Corso, Manly	
Workshop/ Forum	Apr 24, Medium Rare Gallery, Redfern	Mar 19, LaunchPad Gallery, Surry Hills	Mar 12, Pine Street Gallery, Chippendale	Mar 14, University of Sydney, Darlington		Aug 15, UNSW College of Fine Arts, Paddington
Forum Theme	Designing for Change	Not For Sale: Redefining Design Culture	Leftovers: the Bits in Between Design	Grow your concept and design for change		Inspire... Provoke... Change + Live Futures 2020: A world of convergence
Website	<a href="http://www.changedesign.org/changeX2004">www.changedesign.org/changeX2004</a>	<a href="http://www.changex.org/2005">www.changex.org/2005</a>	<a href="http://www.changex.org/2006">www.changex.org/2006</a>	<a href="http://www.srd.org.au/changeX">www.srd.org.au/changeX</a>	<a href="http://www.srd.org.au/change">www.srd.org.au/change</a>	<a href="http://www.srdchange.org">www.srdchange.org</a>
Participants	20	16	17	20	24	27
Disciplines	4	5	5	9	7	8
Prizes				\$ 4,000	\$ 5,000	\$ 7,500

incubation of their collective, creative ideas and provides an additional opportunity to re-exhibit their designs to a wider and varied audience. SRD Change events can also broaden the horizon for graduates in managing the integral parts of event management, necessitating their direct involvement in marketing, advertising, copywriting, image creation, budgeting, time-management and decision-making, all working within the group dynamic roughly corresponding to real working experiences.

This environment tends to stretch the graduates creatively, through the necessity of improvisation, teamwork and competition. Graduate feedback (Box 1) specifically notes the benefits of this interaction with peers, the like-minded aspiring design professionals. Other feedback suggests the opportunity to re-exhibit with a sustainable focus to different audiences, gives more credence and value to their graduate design work.

Certainly, the commitment of the SRD Convenor, Greg Campbell, and the SRD Executive in supporting a more professionally-oriented approach for the SRD Change exhibitions since 2007, has seen the positive growth in audience exposure, business sponsorship and much wider student and academic support.

SRD Change events have gained significant media coverage, with articles featured online in such sustainability and design blogsites as TreeHugger ([www.treehugger.com](http://www.treehugger.com)), one of the top 25 blogs in the world), Dexitner ([www.dexitner.com](http://www.dexitner.com)), global design-related news and events), Australian Edge ([www.australianedge.net](http://www.australianedge.net), online showcase of Australian creativity), and Bindarri ([www.bindarri.com.au](http://www.bindarri.com.au), Australian creative works for positive change). They are also featured in major newspapers, several interviews on ABC Radio National and community radio, TV interest and online magazines. In 2009 an international link was established with the Teach-In 2012 Imperative ([www.teach-in.co.uk](http://www.teach-in.co.uk)), which involved live presentations of sustainable design thinkers at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London being simultaneously beamed around the world.

Many suggestions and requests have been made to take SRD Change shows to Europe and beyond. Two visitors commented that our exhibits would be well received in the Terra Futura in Florence and in the "ReMade" in Tuscany; however, funding has been a major limiter as expected.

Any successful business needs to nurture and develop healthy relations with like-minded groups and business. While the focus of ChangeX was more local, the new direction of SRD Change is developing links with corporate business and international fairs. In 2007 the exhibition was showcased in GREX, the Australian International Green Build and Renewable Energy Expo, held at the Australian Technology Park. SRD Change 2008 was rerun at the GreenTech Show at the Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre. The exposure of the projects to thousands of professionals and to the general public confirmed the greater value and credentials of the SRD Change process to the corporate world, culminating in exhibiting at the spacious Deutsche Bank Place in the heart of Sydney's financial district in 2009, provided by

gold sponsor Investa Property Group. This year also attracted new sponsorship from another international business with Deutsche Bank, further highlighting the value of forward thinking and the benefits when multiple partnerships foster positive exposure to the concept that making business profitable includes responsible design. SRD Change was also regularly invited to showcase in local community sustainability expos, such as at Ryde Council and Lane Cove Council in 2007, and Manly Council in 2009.

### III. OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING

The SRD Change process offers various avenues of learning for design students, primarily through the staging the exhibitions and their parallel events.

#### A. SRD Change Exhibitions

Participants shortlisted for the exhibitions are sent an invitation email saying that their work is in high consideration for inclusion in SRD Change. The event is pitched as a chance to make a difference with graduate designers from other design streams, and the prospect of increased exposure for their work. Graduates are asked to send back a brief explanatory paragraph of their work, highlighting its greener aims; as well as expressions of interest in organizing and staging the event. Participants are entitled to win various prizes, such as design software suites and cash (in 2009 these totaled \$7,500).

Planning and volunteering for roles in teams occurs during early informal meeting of interested exhibitors. Teams addressed: the exhibition identity (the original logo has been historically adapted to show continuity of the series); fundraising via distributing sponsorship packs and direct contact; exhibition design and layout; promotional posters, invitations, press releases, advertising; coordination of the catalog design, templates and assembly; hospitality and catering during the event; website design, production and management; and logistics management and administration. Weekly meetings follow until the event. It is emphasized that senior SRD members are "assistant managers" in the process, the participants are supposed to run the exhibition.

Since the launching of SRD Change, 124 graduates from 7 tertiary institutions across New South Wales have participated: College of Fine Arts (COFA), New South Wales Institutes of Technical and Further Education (TAFE), University of Canberra (UC), University of New South Wales (UNSW), University of Sydney (USyd), University of Technology Sydney (UTS), and University of Western Sydney (UWS). Table 2 and 3 shows that UNSW and industrial design have the biggest number of participants in the SRD Change exhibitions so far.

Table 2. Total participants by school. Data compiled from annual SRD Change catalogs (SRD, 2004; 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009)

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	Totals
COFA	8	3	5	2	6	3	27
TAFE		2					2
UC		1					1
UNSW	2	4	4	8	5	8	31
USYD	1		2	5	8	5	21
UTS	9		4	4	4	8	29
UWS		6	2	1	1	3	13
124	20	16	17	20	24	27	124

Table 3. Total participants by discipline. Data compiled from annual SRD Change catalogs (SRD, 2004; 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009)

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	Totals
Architecture	1		7	7	5	7	27
Art Education			1				1
Design	8	2	3	2	6	3	24
Design Computing				1	4	2	7
Fine Arts		1	1				2
Fashion & Textiles				1	1	3	5
Furniture		1					1
Industrial/Products	6	7	5	5	4	7	34
Interiors				1	2	2	5
Landscape Architecture				1	2	1	4
Planning				1			1
Visual/Graphics	5	5		1		2	13
124	20	16	17	20	24	27	124

### B. SRD Change Catalog

Each year, all participants are involved in design & production of the exhibition catalog. A new template is devised and each participant collaborates by laying out images and text of their work. The entire publication is then completed by that year's editor. In the first three years all catalogs were produced in monochrome and later in full-color, always on recycled stock with high post-consumer waste content and low-emission printing processes as recommended by their green print consultant DesignOz (SRD, 2004; 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009).

### C. SRD Change Forums

Complementing the SRD Change exhibition series are the forums (see Table 1) wherein panels of academics, designers, students and practitioners speak and offer critical perspectives on various aspects of responsible design. The theme changes yearly and these have included discussions on:

- how design can be used as a tool for positive social change within the professional sphere
- why we need to challenge the fundamental values and motivations of today's design industry
- how designers can play a role in bringing about a more inclusive, collaborative design community
- how mainstream design culture could become more responsibly engaged with the contemporary world.

### D. SRD Change Workshops

Another valuable avenue for learning sustainable design thinking is provided through the design project

workshops, wherein graduating design students are given opportunities to discuss their final year projects with design professionals, educators and consultants from a broad range of design disciplines, as well as with other design students. The aim is to tease out ideas, develop sustainable directions, and ensure that their projects are started off on a solid and confident theoretical footing. The workshops have since then broadened to include third year students who are considering sustainable design projects for their final year.

## IV. GRADUATES' REFLECTIONS

To celebrate its 21<sup>st</sup> year of promoting responsible design, in 2010 the society emailed all SRD Change alumni with an interest in finding out how exhibitors have furthered their aims and works for sustainability, and how their involvement in SRD Change may have helped to evolve their professional and/or lifestyle practices. This inquiry was aimed at reflecting on where the exhibitions have come from, what has been achieved so far, and where they are heading to. Of the 124 participants emailed, 23 or 18.5% responded.

Asked about the benefits of being involved in SRD Change, alumni mentioned such keywords as interaction, exposure, opportunity, skills learnt, honest opinions, and fresh perspectives. In particular, they highlighted the value of SRD Change as (see quotes on Box 1):

- networking with a wider variety of like-minded professions [10 respondents]
- learning how to collaborate with other designers by exhibiting [6]
- promoting sustainability through the community [2]
- learning about different areas of sustainability through the other student projects [2]
- exhibiting gave a sense of recognition and reinforced the value of one's work [2]
- developing better understanding of sustainability issues for design [2]
- learning how to organize an exhibition [4]

On how they carried through sustainable design practice into their professional careers (Box 2), the graduates responded that they:

- build responsible design objectives into the bottom line of their work, and encourage other stakeholders to do the same, such as during the development stages, choosing materials, contractors, and clients [6]
- work for a company that encourages Green Star accreditation [4].

Getting in touch with the alumni also provided valuable feedback for the continual improvement of the SRD Change exhibition series (Box 3).



Box 1. Quotes from graduates on the value of participating in SRD Change.

"I enjoyed meeting other designers (students) from other universities, yet being involved in something outside university."

"So much of the time, universities are operating in competition with each other and there seems to be minimal dialogue/collaboration which seems a shame. ChangeX was a great forum for bridging those inter-institutional/faculty gaps."

"[A] great way to see how these events come together and be involved at every level."

"It gave me the experience of taking my project to the public... bringing thought and clarity for future projects."

"To be a part of a non-for-profit organization concerned and focused towards about creating and discussing sustainable design was a new and interesting experience."

"I felt quite special being invited to participate... I had been to the exhibition the previous year and was excited about having my graduation work re-exhibited."

"I'm not sure my knowledge, skills or experiences from SRD increased my understanding of and interest in responsible design. I have most definitely taken on the exhibition curation and co-ordination skills, project management skills and with a better understanding of the importance of interpersonal relationships in a work environment."

"ChangeX for me was an opportunity to see other professions pursue sustainability and work collaboratively with them."

"I think the best thing about the process is getting the students involved from the start to finish to design and promote their own work for the exhibition."

"...the detailed thought involved ...it has inspired me to take a much wider look at the choices we make and their impacts."

Box 2. Quotes from graduates on how they carried sustainable design into their professional careers.

"A chance for my work [place] to become involved through supporting the exhibition."

"It has been difficult to introduce this into a large corporation that is driven by budgets and performance. However as I move up within the company it may be easier to introduce this."

"I don't get much of a chance to apply any social responsible principles in my work. I try when I can not to chose environmentally unsound finishes... but apart from that I don't get much of a say."

"I have since joined Australia's top architectural firm and there is definitely a responsible cause towards sustainable design... For this, I am proud to be part of the firm as it allows me as a young designer to bring forth ideas of sustainable practice to a practical environment... I am definitely looking towards completing the Green Star [accreditation] in the very near future."

"I constantly look at stripping off the fat in all my design work, making things simple and have requirements such as recyclability answered from the beginning of any project."

"I am currently completing my PhD. My research investigates and theorizes around key international UN initiatives which are engaging with children as participants in the creation of more sustainable child-friendly cities."

"Yes, I still try to build responsible design objectives into the bottom line of my work. I have recently established a design studio to help young product designers further this."

"Since ChangeX I have been involved with Emergency Architects, developing a maintenance manual for schools across the Solomon Islands."

"The cross-discipline aspect of ChangeX allowed me to start and now continue this art practice... [the experience also] helped me get jobs."

Box 3. Suggestions from SRD Change alumni.

A forum to discuss a specific topic or a team situation to solve a set brief, possibly linked with larger event. {3}

A PR person / exhibition designer should be used for widening the promotion of the event. {3}

The lack of commitment from group members and exhibitors added at the last moment is very frustrating. All exhibitors should be involved in their year, and there should be follow-through for the next year. {3}

Opportunity for further networking as well as reconnecting the alumni, rather than just having a social gathering of the alumni. {1}

Connect with broader audience earlier, eg different years from different institutions. {3}

A fundraiser dinner or trivia night spanning all professions. {2}

A casual event where updates on past participants is shared. {2}

It is frustrating that awards were not presented on the opening night for public recognition. {1}

Lack of commitment from group members. {2}

Minimize long meetings. {1}

Need to maintain connections between sponsors and participants. {1}

Wanting more constructive professional dialogue about work. {1}

Green-washing is so common these days that authentic and credible events need to go further to attract attention. {1}

Streamline the process by providing rough templates from previous years for websites/graphic and marketing collateral and installation materials so that there are less explorations and more refined outcome. Also, in providing only specific people with the information they needed to know, the process would be simplified. {1}

## V. THE ROAD AHEAD

The society hopes to be able to continue running the SRD Change exhibition series for many more years to come. The positive feedback from graduate participants and corporate and industry visitors are always encouraging and affirm that our concept of provoking sustainable changes in design is being well received. We also hope to grow the concept further by:

- embedding aspects of SRD Change and its ancillary events into the key teaching programs at partner universities
- developing new sustainable project briefs for final year students to put on offer to partner universities
- engaging high school students in Design & Technology
- actively supporting more ambitious social solutions, such as service design, co-design and social innovation that expand the potential of design to influence positive change
- including more design disciplines
- offering a significant prize, such as industry internship or a travelling scholarship, to the best exhibits

Part of the rationale for presenting this paper is to reach a wider educationally-focused audience with the brief that this exhibition concept can be replicated at local, state, national or international scales. "Promoting design + sustainability as symbiotic solutions for our future" is a phrase SRD has been using for several years to convey the potential of this partnership at all levels. SRD Change exhibitions continue to display the examples and results of this necessary paradigm shift in design thinking and activism.

SRD Change provides a significant opportunity to value add on the "stream of ideas" coming out of the universities. It provides a public platform to communicate and disseminate sustainable designs that "inspire, provoke

and challenge” and create starting points for others. As SRD Change continues to multiply and diversify the virtual and physical platforms for exhibition and discourse, this value will be further enhanced.

Our research showed there are substantial benefits for the graduates involved in delivering the exhibition and related events. In addition to putting their portfolio ideas within reach of a broader audience, students develop skills in collaboration, teamwork, event organization and the formation of strong communities of practice that transcend disciplinary and institutional divisions and support their transition to the professional domain.

Sustainable design is becoming a mainstream professional practice. In light of climate change and the rapid changes to current styles of living that it demands, the professions will increasingly look to design graduates for inspirations and directions. This will shift the landscape of what is possible for design and will test the capacity of young designers to provide leadership and affect organizational change. SRD Change represents the evolution of sustainable design ideas within the exploratory space of the university, projecting them into a public sphere. It thus provides a barometer of the future influence of design.

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