



# DISRUPTIVE TECHNOLOGIES IN BUSINESS & DESIGN CULTURE

interview with **KATE ARMSTRONG** (*Director of SIM Centre at Emily Carr*)

**DEBORAH SHACKLETON:** We're here with Kate Armstrong who is the director of the SIM Centre at Emily Carr. I'll start off by asking you Kate, what is the SIM Centre?

**KATE ARMSTRONG:** SIM stands for Social & Interactive Media. The centre is devoted to looking at and facilitating applied research projects in the area of social and interactive media. Essentially I am interested in the internet, and in looking at the different ways that the internet restructures aspects of contemporary culture and life. It's a broad umbrella but the focus is on forging partnerships between industry partners and Emily Carr faculty and students.

**So then how does the centre operate in terms of university culture and industry culture? In my own experience, sometimes they are not speaking the same language so how do you navigate that space?**

I think that one of the opportunities for the centre, in terms of function, is to facilitate those conversations and the differences that are evident there, and to find a way to match the interests of faculty and the needs of companies. Sometimes companies have something they want to think through or examine in a way that isn't possible in the framework of their everyday operations. So it's an opportunity to take those situations and match the companies with the really creative people at Emily Carr. People here have amazing ideas and can sometimes help companies innovate by applying those ideas in the context of business culture.

**How is the reception of art and design in business culture?**

I think that increasingly, people recognize that design is fundamental to the success of business. Design and art drive innovation, and innovation is a necessity. So it's part of the conversation for sure. Having said that, I think that every situation is different. So there's an ongoing challenge to both create value and communicate that value and articulate what those opportunities might be.

**In terms of the centre, if someone were to come along and say, well, what are its core strengths? How would you frame that?**

I think in the past, there has been a focus on electronic publishing and e-books, and that continues to be a really interesting area, but at the same time I am also thinking about new directions. For me, the internet is the predominant condition of contemporary culture, and it produces

new frameworks for understanding everything from human relationships, to how we use space and share resources.

**Can you talk a bit about a couple of examples of projects where you have overcome some of the challenges and you've got this synergy happening between the academic and the business cultures?**

There's a really fantastic and exciting project right now that we're working on with the Mozilla Foundation. Mozilla is built the Firefox browser. As an organization they're devoted to advancing dialogue about transparency and privacy on the internet, and on promoting the open web. Amber Frid-Jimenez is an Associate Professor at Emily Carr in the Faculty of Design + Dynamic Media and she is working with a team of Emily Carr students and developers from Mozilla. Their project is to redesign Collusion, which is a plug-in for Firefox. Collusion shows how your data, when you're browsing the internet, is being tracked and sold to advertisers. Their objective in this research project is to explore different ways to communicate the meaning of the data so that people have a greater understanding of how they're being tracked when they browse the internet and what that means for their privacy.

**So as one person who is being tracked, I would see visualizations of this and see patterns and themes that occur so that data would seem almost like I can touch it and feel it?**

Absolutely. They're in a stage now where they've produced three approaches to this visualization. There's a new blog post at [simcentre.ca](http://simcentre.ca), which describes the project in more detail. But they are working through how to display this information for user groups who have different objectives and different levels of familiarity with issues of privacy on the web.

**If I was a potential client how would we start that process? I have a problem or I have an area that is small but it has bothered me for a really long time and I'm a technology company. So what happens when I come to Emily Carr to the SIM centre?**

There's a variety of different things that can happen. Maybe a company already knows what kind of problem they want to solve and they need to get outside their relentless cycle of production in order to solve it, so they engage us as a way to expand their capacity for innovation. We can put together a small, faculty-led team that can develop these ideas. Or

the process can be driven by faculty, relating to the interests and directions that somebody is working through in their own work and practice, and we can work together to find an industry partner. And there's also an opportunity to work in the context of curriculum, so that larger groups of students can work through and articulate design approaches relating to a problem that a company has. All of the projects are very different, so I think it always begins with a conversation.

**So your projects, in terms of timelines, probably are more longitudinal than vertical. Would that be fair that they are looking at months and year time-lines as opposed to six weeks?**

They could be short. It could really vary. There are a lot of things that are possible.

**In terms of thinking about the province and how its been growing and evolving in relationship to the tech centre here and so on and the businesses that say, in health, that are technology based diagnostic firms, that kind of thing. So if you think about this practice based research where do you see it being disseminated?**

I think that there are a variety of outcomes that can happen in the course of this research and it's really specific to the exact project. In the past there have been events and publications, exhibitions, product re-designs, data visualizations, a variety of outputs. And I think that in dissemination there's a role for publication that I want to explore further and expand a little bit. We also run a blog that has on-going

updates about the projects that we are involved with. In terms of the larger sector I think it's kind of funny, because social and interactive media on one hand brings to mind interactive media companies, and on the other hand there is a social layer in almost everything. The influence of the internet is so wide and variable that there are opportunities to partner with a lot of companies you might not immediately think of in the context of social/interactive media but that involve those elements. For the most part we work with small and medium sizes that are BC based. But beyond that it's hard to really characterize.

**So if you were looking back at the SIM centre 5 years from now, what do you see? Emily Carr is looking towards Great Northern Way campus and so on. What do you envision? Do you see it as a hub? Or what shape do you imagine it to be?**

I like the vision of it as a hub. I'd like to increase the visibility of the centre, and to expand its influence, and I'd like to see it become more deeply engaged with the interests of faculty. I'd like to find a way for those conversations to be deeper and for them to move across different disciplines within the Emily Carr community. I'd really like to see the SIM Centre be a place where the innovative and disruptive capabilities of the internet are explored and expanded, because I think that's an important element of culture and that Emily Carr should be a part of that.

*Interviewed by Deborah Shackleton*



**The SIM Centre aims to connect industry with art and design culture through collaborations with Emily Carr faculty and students. By working together, the goals of each sector can reach a more fulfilling and innovative solution.**