

# **Domisilium Studio's Design Process in Producing Projects That Express Identity**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The role of Interior Design contributes greatly to the daily life of human beings, i.e. providing residential designs that deliver comfort, or designs that help businesses in commercial places, and designs that increase productivity in a workplace. With the increasing awareness of the importance of this role, many interior design firms have sprung up that offer similar services without having a clear identity of what differentiates the design nor design firm work culture that brings the designs. Hence, it is essential for a design firm to have an identity reflected in their work culture within the design process and the design they produced. This in turn will give the clients clear considerations when choosing a design firm, while on the other hand it will strengthen the design firm's opportunities to generate projects that express identity both within the design process and the design produced. This paper discusses how Domisilium Studio generate design projects that express their identity, which are, reflected in their work culture within the studio's design process, and the design the studio produced. Data collections were carried out with ethnographic interpretive method, while the analysis was using collective case studies. The aim of this paper is to generate knowledge on how an interior design firm working culture produced projects that express the company identity.

Keywords: Interior Design, Design Firm, Design Process, Design Identity

## **INTRODUCTION**

Domisilium Studio (DS) is an interior design firm that has been established in 2009 and is in West Jakarta, led by Hamphrey Tedja dan Santi Aloysius (<https://www.domisilium.com/studio/>). DS is well known for inventive commercial design (i.e.: retail, café, gallery, etc.) and high-end residential spaces. DS design has won several awards (i.e.: Kohler Bold Design Awards 2018). In terms of organizational structure DS principals were helped by associate designers (consist of senior designer, junior designer, intern) and HR & administrative staffs. Every designer is trusted to collaborate with clients and handle the whole design process from the initial meeting to construction drawings. Impressed by DS's portfolio, the author joined DS in an internship program. The author then discovered 3 principles that

formed DS's identity: (1) FUNCTIONAL, DS put a great emphasis on function in their design, (2) IMPACTFUL, DS believed that design should create an impact on its users, brands, clients, and the world of design, and (3) CLIENT RELATIONSHIP, DS sees their clients as partner and a "member" of the design team, which generates a sense of ownership and uniqueness based on the client's perspective.

These principles are supported by the 4 DS's working culture: (1) Designer-Principal Relationship, (2) Presentation Skills, (3) Variation of Perspectives in Design Process, and (4) Leadership that Leads. The aim of this paper is to generate knowledge on how DS's working culture produced projects that express identity formed by DS's 3 principles.



Image 1 Domisilium Studio. (Source: <https://www.domisilium.com/studio/>)

## LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Piotrowski, (2014) design firms must develop messages that set them apart from competitors. It can be a distinctive process, an area of expertise, or principles. Main theories that will be used to dissect the three DS's principles that defined DS's identity, which are: Impactful, Functional, and Client Relationship, are as follows:

A) DS's three principles are best describe by Lawson (2005) three guiding principles, in which he argued that design principles should addressed:

1. The Future: the design produced should be impactful and remain relevant in the future. Impactful design should be able to solve current and future problems.
2. The Client: The task of a designer is not only to fulfill the client's wishes and need, but to observe and provide what the client never thought they wanted and needed.
3. The Users: People who use the space owned by clients and designed by designers can be said to be the users. Different types of users involved in the designed space will have different needs. The sensitivity of designers is required to position themselves through the user's lens to discover their needs.

B) Coleman (2002) three attributes that determine a good relationship between designer and client, added to explained DS's three principles, which are:

1. Understanding: Clients are human beings who want to be heard and understood. They want to work with designers who listen to what they have to say receptively, empathetically, and actively.

2. Value: Client seeks optimal solutions that can provide value and impact for their goals.
3. Success: Clients demand results. Designers expected to deliver design that achieve the client's needs or business goals.

DS's working culture it will be dissected through Coleman (2002) 'shared vision'. Coleman argued that in initiating the design process, it is essential to construct harmony and unifying perspectives among all stakeholders, which are principals, designer team, clients, and external vendors. By uniting these creative thoughts, it will create a commitment to the projects implemented. According to Coleman (2002) there are 3 dimensions to achieve shared visions: (1) an attempt on brainstorming a complex problem, where the design team will hold a session with the client by inviting several representatives to participate, (2) coordinating actions on a design team to form an 'operational trust', in which each team member can entrust the actions of his partner to complement the team's work, and (3) a realization of designers to lay low their ego or personal perspective.

## METHODOLOGY

The author used ethnographic research with an interpretive method approach (Geertz, 1973). This approach was chosen because it is suitable to the author's situation, where as the author did internship in DS for 10 months as an insider researcher. Ethnographic research with interpretive method used field noted to collect in-depth data to understand and interpret the behavior of the subject in one environment, through detailed descriptions (Ihromi, 2017; Neuman, 2020). The in-depth data of DS's working culture gathered during DS's design process would be analyzed with a collective case study approach (Yin, 2014). The author used 2 case studies, one residential project and one commercial project.

## RESULT & DISCUSSION

The discussion is divided into two parts. The first part is to analyze the influence of culture on the design process in generating the three identities, resulting in syntheses. And the second part is to analyze the dynamics of the syntheses in two DS's projects, to conclude DS's design process in producing identity.

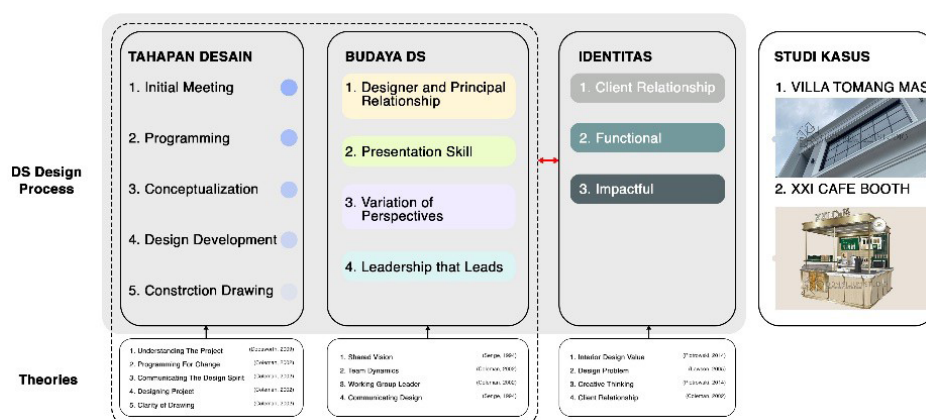


Image 2 Research Framework. (Source: Delfino, 2022)

## 1. Analysis Of Work Culture in The Design Process

### A. Synthesis A1: Initial Meeting

DS starts by preparing their designers with a “monthly meeting”, a course that hones the designer’s verbal skills (Dodsworth, 2009), bolstering DS’s work system that gives the designers a responsibility to carry out the whole stages of the design process in a project, giving them opportunities to devote the fiery spirit of a “young” designer’s creativity and critical thinking, to be collaborated with the client’s perspectives, and Principals experience, forming an operational trust (Coleman, 2002). Getting on the same page regarding the objectives and constructing commitments. Leveraging the trust and the equity that are provided by the principals paves the designer’s way to develop creative, bold, and relevant designs (Coleman, 2002). The initial meeting stage sets up a strong foundation that is assisted by in-depth data.

**Table 1 Findings of the DS’ Work Culture in Initial Meeting Phase. (Source: Delfino, 2022)**

A1	Culture	Main Component	Detailed Components
Findings	Peer Designer & Principal Relationship	Trust	In-Depth Understanding
		Equity	Collaboration Chemistry Innovative Solution
	Presentation Skill	Monthly Meeting	Verbal/Comm. Skill
			Relation Building Skill
	Variation of Perspectives in Design Process	Shared Vision	Impactful
			Aligned Vision
	Leadership that Leads	Unautocratic	Aligned Operation System
			Initiating Critical Discussion Creative and Relevant

### B. Synthesis A2: Programming

Table 2 indicates the dynamics of work culture and design stages in forming DS’s identity. The guidance provided by the principals and senior designers in educating and spurring the critical thinking of the design team, are done by demanding and questioning every design decision taken by the designers. The principals insist that every decision must be based on variables of how the design may offer impact and novelty to its users (Piotrowski, 2014; Coleman, 2002), starting from the programming stage.

Unifying the conceptual thinking of “young” designers, with the experience and critical thinking of the principals, paves the way to generate designs that are both aesthetically pleasing and functional. Assisted by the designer’s skills that are acquired through “monthly meeting”, to devote the designer’s creativity in collaboration with the client’s perspectives of function and significance, enables to produce programming that is precise to the client’s needs, in other words Impactful (Coleman, 2002).

**Table 2 Findings of the DS' Work Culture in Programming Phase. (Source: Delfino, 2022)**

A2	Culture	Main Component	Detailed Components
Findings	Peer Designer & Principal Relationship	Mentor & Educator	Defining DS Work Culture and Design Quality
		Trust	Agent of Change
			In-depth Data & On spot Interpretation
	Presentation Skill	Close Relationship w/ the Client	In-Depth Data
			Potential Collaboration
			Opening possibilities for Designer Creativity
	Variation of Perspectives in Design Process	Impactful	Collaborative Design mindset
		Two Ways	Critical in Design
	Leadership that Leads	'5 W: Why? Why? Why? Why? And Why?	Initiating Critical Thinking

### C. Synthesis A3: Conceptualizing

Table 3 shows how DS's work culture prepares their designers to construct chemistry with the principals, assisting in achieving a single mind (Coleman, 2002). A single mind enables both parties to display the creativity of everyone in harmony and possesses sensitivity to determine when to dampen their designer's ego (Coleman, 2002). It enables dynamics triangulation perspectives between designers and Principals in brainstorming conceptual narratives that are not literal. Narratives that are open end with the aim of designers having the freedom to explore them in their own interpretation, balanced by the critical thinking, principle, and experience of the principal in guiding the designers through shared vision designing impactful concepts.

**Table 3 Findings of the DS' Work Culture in Conceptualizing Phase. (Source: Delfino, 2022)**

A3	Culture	Main Component	Detailed Components
Findings	Peer Designer & Principal Relationship	Built on Chemistry	Balanced relationship and personal ego
	Presentation Skill	Soft Skill-Single Mind	Intuitive and Creative
			Collective and Impactful
	Variation of Perspectives in Design Process	Triangulated Perspective	Explorative Design
			Impactful Design in business perspectives
	Narrative	Emotional Design	
Leadership that Leads	Anti-template	Aim on authenticity	

### D. Synthesis A4: Design Development

One of DS's unique characteristics are represented as two principles/values in the design hierarchy (table 5) (Coleman, 2002). Principal SA is very observant in



exploring the composition of shapes, colors, and details with the aim of offering a design that narrates and affects the emotions of the users. On the other hand, Principal HT is persistent on functions and technical matters. Both perspectives are unified along with the creativity of the “young” designer (Coleman, 2002), resulting in a design that is in accordance with the principles of DS. Generating outré design, offering a responsive design that will have an impact on the aspects of function, health, and welfare of clients and users.

**Table 4 Findings of the DS' Work Culture in DD Phase. (Source: Delfino, 2022)**

A4	Culture	Main Component	Detailed Components
Findings	Peer Designer & Principal Relationship	Built on Chemistry	Designers' understanding at macro and micro level
		Honesty and To the Point	Single mindset
	Variation of Perspectives in Design Process	Shared Vision	Innovative and Relevant Design
		Attention to Detail	Detailed Design
		Technical Specialization	Buildable Design
	Leadership that Leads	Harmonious Design	Detail as value
			Different, authentic

### E. Synthesis A5: Construction Drawing

Designer's sensitivity to detailed designs is continuously demanded by the principals up to the final stage, without any division nor outsourcing drafter. As a way for DS to educate their designers, who are responsible for the designs being generated, who are competent to produce detailed designs because they have mastered the technique of construction and the knowledge of the various types of materials used. This knowledge provides opportunities to construct relationships and carry out experiments between designers, contractors, and vendors (Coleman, 2002), which opens opportunities to deliver novelty and impactful design without being constrained by budget.

**Table 5 Findings of the DS' Work Culture in Construction Drawing Phase. (Source: Delfino, 2022)**

A5	Culture	Main Component	Detailed Components
Findings	Presentation Skill & Variation of Perspectives in Design Process	Designers' role	Design Accuracy
		Collaboration	Experimental Design
	Leadership that Leads	Designers' responsibility	Collaborate w/ vendors
			Optimal Design

## 2. Analyzing The Syntheses in Generating Identity In Study Cases A. Residential Study Case: Villa Tomang Mas Project



Image 3 Villa Tomang Mas Project. (Source: Delfino, 2022)

Initially, the existing building was an old house that had not been lived in for a long time, resulting in bad conditions. ED, as the client, wants to revitalize the building into a rented house (Coleman, 2002), without replacing the main structure to keep the budget low. ED also shared his background that he is a contractor and wanted to reduce the revitalization costs by using his work team (Coleman 2002), consisting of a few carpenters, blacksmiths, and an artisan for ornamental plaster.

To reduce the cost, ED wishes to use his stock materials, such as hollow steel pipes and plates (Lawson, 2005). The conceptualization was initiated based on the question “How to utilize existing material and human resources to present a sense of elegance and luxury in material simplicity?”. Therefore, inspired by French classical architecture, which emphasizes sturdiness, luxurious, and elegant elements by only using subtle colors and materials (Lawson, 2005).

As the existing structure was not replaced, the author as the designer in charge frequently collaborated with the worker on-site to discuss every design decision taken (Coleman 2002).

To utilize the existing materials, the designer also spends a lot of time brainstorming with the blacksmiths to achieve a shared vision (Coleman, 2002), which responding to the constraints of material and budget, as a potential to explore and fabricate designs that offer novelty and impact. On the other hand, prototypes of various crown molding sizing produced by the artisan of ornamental plaster in a two-dimensional media and a 1:1 mock-up, are to be discussed with HT (Principal of Operation) and workers on-site if the existing structure can withstand the weight of the crown. If the prototypes are possible from a technical point of view, then it will be discussed with SA (Principal of Interior Design), whether the scale is in the right proportion to express a sense of elegance and simplicity.

## **B. Hospitality Study Case: XXI Café Booth**

XXI booth is a hospitality project with Cineplex 21 Group (abbreviated as XXI) as the client. XXI desired to create a popcorn booth apart from their theater, welcoming consumers to savor the taste of the buttery popcorn for day-to-day activities.



**Image 4 XXI Café Booth Project (Source: Delfino, 2022)**

Previously, XXI had implemented their booth at several malls, despite that, they wanted to rebrand the booth design to improve the expression of the brand value, which defines elegance, and subtle luxury, while still including the corporate color.



Aside from aesthetics needs, the operational division expects an improvement in XXI staff's activity flow and accommodates the placement of all the appliances. The opportunity was given to the author as the designer to interview one of XXI staff on-site, analyzing the existing design programming (Coleman, 2002). DS shows understanding (Coleman, 2002) to each collaborator, by inviting them to the design process, understanding, and responding actively to achieve consensus. The collaboration between XXI, DS's designers, and Principals during the conceptualization of the rebranding of XXI Café, tries to equate the same perspectives (Coleman, 2002).

Expressing through designs that look luxurious but elegant, not the nuance of luxury that may make consumers afraid to approach them, but the balance of it which generates a feeling or emotion that the products being sold do not have a cheap quality, while still attracting attention and welcoming consumers. Through the understanding in thinking and conveying the client's opinion, "designers, Principals, and XXI staff on-site, giving opportunities to pinpoint relevant problems and needs in each sector, as a result, it can become a relevant data for the design foundation to solve the existing problems (Coleman, 2002). Portraying DS's designs that impact clients, stakeholders, XXI staff, and especially the businesses.

## **CONCLUSION**

We can conclude that DS's working culture (designer-principal relationship, presentation skills, variation of perspectives, and leadership that leads) produced DS's principles (impactful, functional, and client relationships) in which reflected in DS's design process and design produced. These in turn will form DS firm identity, in which is not in the form of design style, but emerged as a system of an idea, notion, or perspective, and a way of responding and seeing things, through normative thoughts or principles, to inspire and offer changes.

Answering the aim of this paper, in which to generate knowledge on how DS's working culture produced projects that express identity formed by DS's 3 principles, it can be seen in image 9 below. The sequential process depicted in the image shows that every stakeholder in the design making must collaborate to form a shared vision, thus enhancing the client relationships experience. Consequently if the designers team have variation of perspectives aiming on achieving functional design and guided by leadership that leads, in the end it will create meaningful and impactful designs.

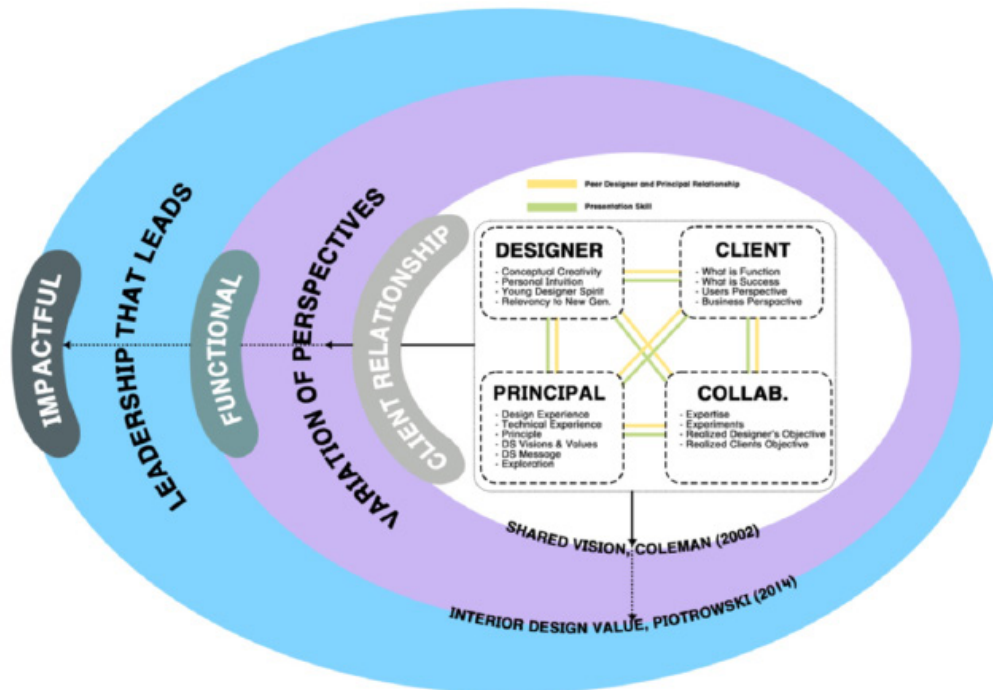


Image 5 DS' Identity Design Framework that Generates Impactful Design.  
 (Source: Delfino, 2023)

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