

Fall 2019 at the Department of Design, University of Texas at Austin.

STINT Teaching Sabbatical, Final Report



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Preparing for the Teaching Sabbatical

We were four persons spending the fall in Austin, besides myself my husband Thomas, and our two sons Otto (13) and Viggo (11). The preparations for our trip started already in January. We spent many hours on Google Maps and other websites, trying to figure out the topography of the city, the location and quality of schools, and how to commute to campus. Kate Canales, head of the Department of Design, and mother to kids roughly the same age as ours, provided guidance on schools and commuting. We settled for renting a house close to Campus in mid-February, and once this decision was taken, we could get in contact with our kid's schools. I visited Austin late March to meet with my future colleagues and plan my teaching, and at that point I also visited our house and had our children signed up for their respective schools. During my March visit I sat in on classes, met with students and explored the campus. I also had a meeting with Kelcey Gray with whom I was going to teach, even though we did the most part of our planning later, via GoogleDocs and Skype.

The preparations also involved getting Visas, which we did through the American Embassy in Copenhagen, checking that our children had all the immunizations required for attending Texas' schools, un-registering the children from their Danish school, and renting out our house: five months in Texas is a year-long project! The STINT workshop in Stockholm early February was helpful, and I appreciated getting advice from Henrik Bogdan and Eva Strandell, and getting in contact with Maria Ekelin from Lund. Both Maria and me ended up staying quite close to where Henrik and Eva had stayed the year before, a few kilometres north of campus.

We travelled to Austin early August, well aware that the weather was hot and humid – but considering that we needed some time to settle in before school starts, and figure out how to deal with banking, telephones, and car rental. Schools started around August 20, at the same time as a week of faculty meetings at UT, preparing for the start of the semester August 27.

Cover photo: Most of the faculty and admin staff of the Department of Design, after Christmas Lunch 2019. Bottom row from the left: Kelcey Gray, Monica Penick, Kate Canales.

University of Austin at Texas

The University of Texas is a state university consisting of 12 nodes in different cities, but where University of Texas at Austin is the “flagship” university. UT Austin has around 50000 enrolled students. It has developed from a regional university to one of the large US universities over the last 30-40 years.

As a state university UT has a responsibility for education and social development in Texas. In 2019, the top 6% of students in all Texas high schools get admitted to UT automatically. This regulation, as all affirmative action to increase minorities’ participation, is controversial¹. Since the introduction in 1997 the percentage of Hispanic, Asian and Black students in the student body has increased. More than half of Texas high-school students are of Hispanic descent, at UT their share is around 20%.



UT campus. The two tallest buildings are the football stadium (mid left) and the UT tower.

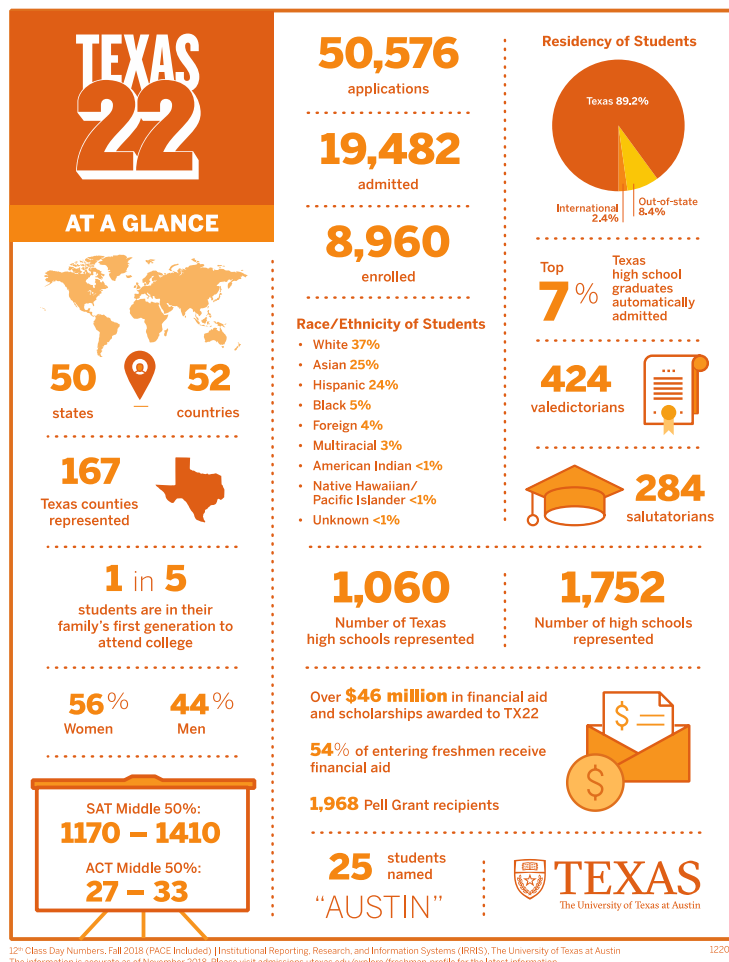
Texas residents pay less tuition than out-of-state students, around 11000 USD per year for Texas residents, and 36000 USD for non-Texas residents. Undergraduate students from low-income families can get a so-called Pell Grant to waive tuition costs. Around one fourth of the first-year students get this grant, and half of the students get some type of economic support. Fall 2018 a cohort of nearly 8960 first-year undergrad students were enrolled, 90% of them Texas residents.

Introducing the Department of Design at UT Austin

My host institution, the Department of Design (DD), has undergone a lot of change during the last three years. Formerly the design education was part of the Department of Fine Arts. Three years ago, a new School of Design and Creative Technologies (SDCT) was formed, encompassing design (both

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/24/us/politics/supreme-court-affirmative-action-university-of-texas.html?searchResultPosition=4>

traditional graphic/product/interaction design and new interdisciplinary design approaches as design thinking, integrated design etc.). The other half of SDCT is the institution for art and entertainment technology, offering education related to computer games (graphics, animation, sound design and programming).²



A graph describing the 2018-2022 cohort of undergrad students.

The DD has grown from 6 to 16 teachers during the last few years, and many of the new teachers have a background in Design Thinking, or experience of working with design consultancy. Within the Department, the Institute of Integrated Design works primarily with graduate level courses intended for a university-wide audience with focus on creativity, design processes and design thinking. The Bachelor of Fine Arts in Design is labelled a preprofessional program: *"a pre-professional degree program encompassing typography, image creation/manipulation, interaction design and 3-D design that is intended to prepare students for employment in the field of design."*

² <https://news.utexas.edu/2016/03/08/design-industry-leader-to-integrate-design-studies/>
<https://designcreativetech.utexas.edu>

Where the BFA track is more of a traditional design education with focus on materials and visual expression, a new track, a Bachelor of Arts in Design, was added a few years ago. Monica Penick, the Director of Studies, tells that the hope is to have more students with a double major (for example design and business, or design and Japanese) through the new degree. A new MA in Health and Design in collaboration with the Dell Medical School is planned for the academic year 20-21. Preparing for the new MA was one of the themes of our faculty meetings.

To summarize, DD is at the crossroads between an older, more art-oriented notion of design, and a newer notion of design in a wider interdisciplinary context. This can be seen against the backdrop of the city Austin, a rapidly expanding tech hub (Apple, Facebook, Google, Dell) with many design consultancies (IDEO, Frog) and a world-renowned trade show/festival within new media and the arts (South by Southwest, SWSX) held every year. Key persons in this development are the dean of the College of Fine Arts, Doug Dempster, and the leader of the SDCT, Doreen Lorenzo.

The development within the Department of Design somehow reflects the early years of my home institution K3, which started twenty years ago by merging design, art, media and communication studies, and interaction technology. We offer BA degrees in Graphic design and Product design within the framework of a “standard” BA, not the arts BA degree that Swedish art academies offer. However, many of the teachers and a good portion of our students have their view of design shaped by a background in arts and art education. At UT this polarity was reflected in the very buildings where teaching took place: The Fine Arts building houses many printing presses, surfaces intended for pinning up ongoing work, workshops and studies. The Design Building has glass walls separating corridors and lecture rooms, the latter furnished with furniture and rugs visibly not intended for using color, glue, wet or messy materials.



Corridor in the Arts building used for informal exhibition of student projects. Photo: Christel Brost.

Tasks and responsibilities at UT

My main task was to teach the class DES321, Images in Communication, co-taught with Kelcey Gray, professor of practice. I also participated in faculty meetings in the department, and I took part in introductory meetings for new faculty at the College of Fine Arts and the School of Design and Creative Technology. I also took part in the Sophomore Reviews, and sat in on colleagues lectures or acted as guest critic at students' presentations.

Teaching

Images in Communication is one of 38 Design (DES) classes provided by the Department of Design. The students were "sophomores", in their second year, typically 19-20 years old. Most of them were in the BFA program. A few came from Fine Arts or Entertainment Technologies departments, taking the class to strengthen their visual skills.

DES 321 - Images In Communication

Description
Studio course. Explores the selection and creation of images appropriate to specific communication goals and contexts, such as promotional images, infographics, logos, instructions, and/or narratives. Prerequisite: Studio Art 301C, 302C, and 303C; or Design 308 or Art History 304; and credit or registration for Design 309. Designed to accommodate 35 or fewer students. Offered on the letter-grade basis only.

Recent Professors
[K. Gray](#), [A. Beaton](#), [A. Beaton](#), [J. Williams](#), [K. Dreier](#)

Schedule Planner
[Add DES 321 to your schedule](#)

Recent Semesters
Fall 2019, Fall 2018, Fall 2017

Offered
MW

Avg. Sections
3

Class information from the Coursicle homepage.

Images in Communication was offered in two sections, 11-2 pm and 2-5 pm, meeting on Monday and Wednesday. Initially I was proposed to teach one of the sections, but together with Kelcey Gray, the teacher of the other section, we decided to co-teach both sections. We split up the work so that one of us was always the main responsible for the workshop/project, whereas the other "sat in" and acted as a co-teacher. 11 students attended the noon section, and 20 students the afternoon section.

The class Images in Communication had focus on creating images and visual materials for a variety of contexts, starting with hand-drawing and sketching, leading up to Adobe Illustrator/Photoshop and with an output either in print or as a digital image. Students at the Department of Design are expected to bring their own laptop to class. The class offered workshops and tutorials, plus short

assignments during class time, alongside with two longer projects that students were expected to work on outside of class, but with regular check-ins and feedback opportunities.



Student projects from a workshop on Gestalt Theory: “Pixi Books” with focus on illustrations building on geometric shapes and contrast.

Relation between analysis and reflection to design practice

The second class project, that I was responsible for, was devised as a longer design process including research: reading up on spatial visualization skills and why these should be practiced, developing a game prototype offering opportunities for practicing spatial skills to school children, testing the prototype with learners in 6th grade, video-documenting and analysing the footage, planning for a new iteration of design. This was a challenge in many ways: we had to go outside the timeslots for our class in order to fit into school’s schedule, students had to spend more time researching and analysing, and less time creating prototypes. The reception among students was mixed – many of them had taken the class to improve their Photoshop and Illustrator skills, and this project clearly took them beyond that. My impression is that the UT design students are more intent to see reading, writing and analytical work in connection with certain (“theory”) classes, whereas creative

work is done in other classes where students should not have to do that much research. However, the project led to some nice and highly playable games.

Grading

The class was assessed through workshop participation, the two projects, and a process book detailing the projects and assignments throughout the course, and reflecting over the learning. These four moments were awarded 100 points each. Grading also took account of students' attendance: with more than three unexcused absences, the final grade goes down one grade. A 100 point/percentage scale that corresponds to a 12-degree letter grading system, where the last four grades (D and below) in practice means that the course is failed. The lowest grades we gave were a bit over 80% (B-). In general, students were eager to fulfil their engagements, and anxious about getting a bad grade.

PROJECT 1: 100	
PROJECT 2: 100	
WORKSHOP/PARTICIPATION: 100	
PROCESS BOOK: 100	
TOTAL: 400 POINTS	
—	
A	370+
A-	360
B+	345
B	330
B-	320
C+	305
C	290
C-	280
D+	270
D	250
D-	240
F	BELOW 240

Grading scheme for the DES 321class. Four assignments were awarded a maximum of 100 points each. The final letter grade is calculated as a percentage of the points. Three “unexcused absences” result in a lower grade. My impression was that the C and D grades were not widely used. As in Malmö, we posted comments and motivations for the grades in Canvas.

Course evaluation

Course evaluation focussed on evaluating the teacher Course evaluations were managed from the university centrally, and the focus were mainly the teacher's contributions and behaviour.

Sophomore Reviews

The very last days of the semester were dedicated to Sophomore reviews. Students were free to sign up for Sophomore reviews, and teachers explained that for the moment, these reviews had little practical significance (not demanded for starting next semester) but were more of an occasion to discuss individual student work in a small team of teachers. Students exhibited their work early afternoon, after which the review team (2-3 teachers, and those from the other teams) could look

through the work. The following day, the student made a short presentation of her work, followed by a discussion (strengths and weaknesses, possible directions to go or classes to sign up for). The team of reviewers formulated a feedback sheet to the student with a general assessment of the student's level (expected, above or below expected) and some comments. For students this was important, even if some complained that they had to stay several days extra in Austin instead of going home to their families. The format of the reviews, conceived by Jason Wilkins, worked very well, and I appreciated the opportunity to discuss with colleagues that I had not been co-teaching with.

Faculty meetings

Faculty meetings were, most of them, introduced as *prototypes*: prototype for a brief meeting on feet, or for a longer meeting with prior reading, or for a meeting including the wider neighbourhood of the Design Department. This was kind of fun, but also a signal to pay attention to the format of meetings, and that there was a willingness to change and develop these. I appreciated this constructive attitude to work on the format and have an open mind how to make the best use of the time all faculty are together – including time for playful or enjoyable activities.

Research seminars and music class

At last, some of the activities I engaged with outside my department. I participated regularly in seminars (video analysis, ethnographic work) with a research group at the Moody College of Communication led by Professor Jurgen Streeck. This was very satisfying since Streeck's research was a strong source of inspiration for my PhD thesis. I attended the class MUS329E, "introduction to electronic media", at the Butler School of Music. It dealt with electronic music, both technically and aesthetically. It was a graduate level class, and the teacher is a doctoral student. We were about 10 students following the class, from sound engineers to composers and instrumentalists.

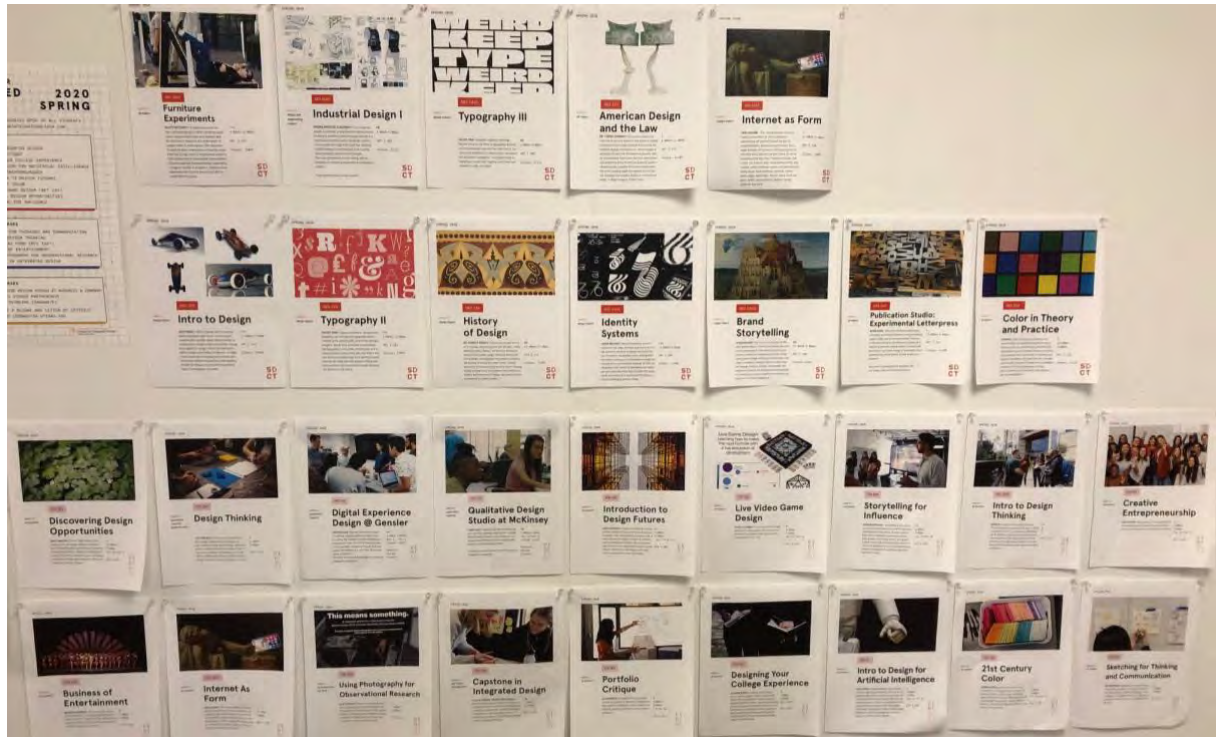
Lessons learned and comparisons with my home institution

One of the observations we did – and I cannot say whether it is specific for this particular university and these particular schools (located close to campus) – is that the rate of change is slow, and there is a strong continuity between middle school and university. The 7th graders had the same format course syllabi, learning aims, grading matrix and teachers available at "office hours", as the university students. Teachers had office hours for s My son's math teacher expressed it like this: *It's better if you only have learn the business of school once, so you can focus on subject matter after.*

Course structure: rigid and flexible

A design student was supposed to take five three-hour classes per week, adding up to a workload of 15 class hours, independent work not included. The class I taught counted for 6 weekly hours. Different classes had different prerequisites, but within this students could tailor-make their own schedule for each

semester. There were around 50 sophomore students, that got together in some classes and separated up in different groups in other classes. It seemed to be a comfortable mix of “belonging” into one track of design education at the same time as breaking out and meeting students from neighbouring institutions in some of the classes.



Posting classes offered for the upcoming semester.

Before signing up for the spring semester classes students are supposed to discuss their course of study with an advisor. As time to sign up for classes approached in mid-November it was clear to my students that there was still no advisor to help them. The week when applications were due for the spring term most were anxious about their choices, and it was the given topic of discussion that surfaced again as soon as there was a micro-pause in the classroom.

The choice for the students is made possible by a rigid substructure – every class is moulded in a similar shape with weekly time-slots, there is a digital tool for students to build their weekly schedule, and for each class there is a series of prerequisites (class X and class Y cannot both be part of a degree, class X has to be finished before class Y etc.). Teachers were warned against engaging students in activities outside of the allotted timeslots. In short, a system as flexible as rigid. On the positive, DD students get considerably more hours of teaching compared to K3 students, and they also meet their classmates more since attendance is mandatory. Another reason for students to spend time on campus were the studio spaces and workshops for carrying out design projects.

The culture of donations

I was not aware how deep the structures of fundraising and donations permeates both educations and cultural life, and educational institutions from elementary school to universities and presidential election campaigns. Our children went to public schools, but throughout the semester fundraising projects and events were launched regularly. One of the more colourful instances was when the principal John Hewlett of Lee Elementary promised to shift work with the PE teacher for a day at a certain level of donations, and at a higher level of donations, sleep one night together with the chicken in the schoolyard chicken coop. The chicken coop fundraising level was not attained this year.

At the university, fundraising effort targeted not only wealthy Austinites, but also active students, alumni and faculty. Most of the buildings on campus, and sometimes entire institutions, carry the names of rich benefactors. The petrochemical industry is visibly present through oil pipes displayed as art pieces.



One of several places at campus with oil pumps, valves and fittings.

However, there is not necessarily a match between the sensibilities of donators and the openings at the job market, or generally, strategies for higher education. At the Faculty of Fine Arts this could be seen in the Opera Center at the Butler School of Music, by and large built through donations by buy the wealthy

Butler family. I sat into meetings where the professional openings of opera students were an issue. While researching this I found that UT and the College of Fine Arts actually turned down a 33 million dollar donation from the Butlers in 2008, since it came with a requirement to disconnect the Butler school of music from the College of Fine Arts. The university saw potential in having more exchange between the institutions.

It is interesting to look at the measures taken to expand and professionalize the Design Department in context with arts educations where the professional perspectives are weaker, but where the topics of teaching attract donations, and consequently are constrained by these donations.

Power relations and Canvas

As a university teacher I had considerably more power over students compared to a Swedish university. One reason for this is the grading system where many aspects of student behaviour get assessed, and thus influence on final grade. A second reason might be students' young age: compared to our students in Malmö, who are older and in many case have families of their own, Austin students were more ready to do what they are told to do – and frustrated if the teacher isn't able to tell them this. A third reason might be the Canvas platform, which was used for grading and for keeping record of attendance. As soon as a student was late, or absent, or late uploading an assignment, the red alert color on the Canvas site started blinking. I was several times approach by students excusing themselves for mishaps I was not aware of, but Canvas was. In this sense, Canvas also actively disciplines teachers into a role of authority.

The UT undergraduate program has some traits that resemble a Swedish "gymnasium". First, the majority of students enter directly from high school at age 18-19. The university requires from all bachelor level students a number of mandatory classes in foreign languages, American Government, American History, Mathematics, Science and Technology. The University has a strong focus on having students pass their BA in 4 years.

The role of academic research in design education

An interesting contrast between K3 and DD is how design research is discussed. At K3 students mostly meet design research in the context of research studies and academic practice. Teachers and doctoras students that engage with design research do so in the context of research projects. At DD, design research was primarily framed as a professional skill. Furthermore, the way design research methods was taught was through quite formalized, paper based "tasks" that students should carry out according to instructions: brainstorming, interview, site visit, scenario building. The approach to design research is probably informed by teachers' background in design consultancies, and beyond that by Stanford D-school and the Design Thinking movement. For me this was a kind of revelation, and I have had to recognize how I have internalized efforts to mainstream design education with academic formats – a task at core of my teaching for the last 10 years or so.

Items to bring home and possibly implement at MAU

It was inspiring to see how students can select classes and personalize their education – but this is made possible by a draconian hourly system of fixed weekly timeslots. Lunch break was not included in the timeslots, so both students and faculty brought food into the lecture rooms. The conclusion however is that this flexibility is achieved through a rigorous system for scheduling.

Office hours. All class teachers have to make themselves available to students for at minimum 2 hours per week. From Middle School I learned that students' knowledge about how and when to use office hours varied: a few knew they could come for extra learning support and teacher supervision, whereas other assumed that it was connected to students not performing well enough. At the Department of Design, a few students used office hours regularly for extra supervision and support, other used it to ask for clarification about their grades. Anyhow, I think office hours is something that we can and should implement at K3, especially as teachers' offices are quite far away from students' studios. It could help diminishing the barriers if there were hours were students were invited to turn up.

On the contrary, I would like to share some of our K3 experiences with the colleagues at DD. We have worked for years on stitching together different approaches to design education, and widening the scope of reading and reflecting in writing in relation to design practice.

For my own practice, I will continue to work on integrating design teaching and research (in my case, video analysis of how designed artifacts are used). It was new for me to carry out a project that included prototyping, video analysis and iteration of the prototype – it seems obvious now that I should try the same thing at home.

I had a colleague from Malmö, Christel Brost, visiting in December. Together we had a meeting with Kate Canales, the head of department, about future collaboration. We will try to start a “virtual exchange” this fall, where student groups work together on a project. In a longer perspective, both institutions are positive to student exchange.

Recommendations for future STINT fellows

Some of the things that made my teaching sabbatical so rewarding was the shared office space, where I had plenty of opportunities for informal discussions with my colleagues, and the fact that I co-taught the class with a local teacher, giving both of us plenty of opportunities for mutual learning and follow-up discussions. Besides that, I can warmly recommend UT, and the city of Austin as a place to spend a semester. Weather is very hot and humid during the early fall months, but it gets better later on. It is a nice, open-minded university city with a rich cultural life. Austin was also a good place for bringing family,

and our kids were very happy with their schools Lee Elementary and Kealing Middle School – not the least the outstanding orchestra teachers of Kealing.

UT Austin has appointed Lena Suk as coordinator for STINT guest faculty. Maria Ekelin and I met with her twice during the semester for informal discussions. On preparing for my trip I fell upon Lars Gustafsson's book *Tennisspelarna*, which gives a diary-type account of a semester spent at UT Austin in the beginning of the 1970-ies. I gathered some very practical advice in it (like planning for outdoor activities before sunrise to avoid the heat), and also some UT history, so I wanted to mention it as recommended reading.



Kealing Middle School orchestra with teachers Ms. Horrell and Mr. Jarrott

Finally, a warm thank you to STINT for this opportunity, with so many positive effects for all four of us. And an equally warm thank you to the faculty of the Department of Design, who made me feel welcome and at home right from the start.

Kastrup 2020-01-28

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School of Design and Creative Technology:

About the Butler School of Music

<https://www.kut.org/post/conflict-vision-ut-music-school-director-resigns>

<https://www.austinchronicle.com/arts/2008-03-28/606055/>

<https://thedailytexan.com/news/2012/09/21/ut-avoids-separation-of-butler-school-of-music-from-college-of-fine-arts-by>