

From design to Design

What is design? A simple question, yet not asked often enough. The greatest promise of design to play a fundamental role for our future is its inherent ability to rethink itself. Yet this is what often seems most difficult. Design should be about expanding boundaries rather than constricting them. In my recent work with designers and students, I found two typical problems which will be the starting point of today's investigation.

In teaching design I often find too little effort spent on actually understanding an issue before designing commences. For instance, at a recent design workshop on tourism and hospitality, a student asked what kind of tourism this workshop is all about. Travel for leisure? Travel for business? Travel with or without family? I returned with another question. Is travel as a human experience really neatly divided into travel agency categories? Is it useful for designers to take categories which have been made by travel agencies to serve travel agency purposes?

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Two main problems are right at the onset of a design process. Firstly, often there is a lack of consideration for the very situation you as a designer are in, right here and now: As a part of a particular culture, in a defined time with its own state of knowledge, its categories of thinking, its biases, its stereotypes. The designer is a part of all of this. Being and working in a particular situation of a place, a time, a culture, a state of things is inevitable. It is all around, a given, which makes it difficult to get aware of it.

The second problem is a widespread preoccupation with the result. All thinking seems to be directed at the product which is imagined at the end of a linear progression of operations. But the design process is not linear. It is a dance with two steps forward, one step back, an oscillation between large, structural ideas and small detail, between general considerations and specific ones.

» **Design is reinventing, including itself.**

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Mario Gagliardi vil i hvert nummer af inform lounge edition skrive om et selvvalgt emne under overskriften "Mario Gagliardi On Design". Alle artikler vil være på engelsk.

I have a standard activity for people in my workshops: The task to define “design”. The method must be adequate to the task, but is up to the participants. In nearly all cases the group comes up with what I call the “Aschenputtel Method” (Aschenputtel is known in English as Cinderella): Put the good lentils in the pot, the bad ones are for the pigeons. They are collecting descriptions and end up with a collection of attributes labeled “design”. It can read: Design is not art. Form follows function. Form follows fiction. Design is innovation. Design is kinky. And so on. Now I will put one item into that pot which reads: Design is reinventing, including itself. This pot (it can be a list, collected Post-it notes, etc.) called “design” now contains one item which will make itself obsolete any time soon.

This one item shows that the result of what was collected is perhaps not “design”. It is traces of design, design sawdust, if you may. These traces are produced, constantly, and in various other forms as well: snippets of design discussions, highlights from presentations, notes of meetings, scribbles, prototypes, diagrams, plans, etc., etc. All of which is not design but traces of a process called designing. Design is defined by its process, just as science is defined by the scientific method or art by the artistic process. Collecting its traces is not going to make up its definition – that would be like collecting driftwood to define a river. Design is a stream of human and machine-made activities with its own internal dialogue. It is a succession of activities over time, leaving traces such as sketches, mock-ups and products.

The product is mostly seen as the finalization of the design process, and thus it is a preoccupation happening at the start. I prefer to see the product as another trace of the process. Inevitably, at some point, rather sooner than later, it will hit the trash bin. Obsolescence is, more often than not, consciously planned and built into products as part of product strategy. Any product will age, get obsolete and finally decompose. The advantage of seeing the product as another trace of the process is twofold: It opens up the view for the entire lifecycle of the product, and it puts more emphasis on the transitions within the process, where the most in terms of design quality can be gained - or lost: All-too often a brilliant concept ended up giving away all of its qualities through a bad execution.



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Start and end of a design process are arbitrary markers in a succession of operations and events of which a particular design project is just a part. It is a conversation, even when there is no direct interaction happening. When a company develops a product, the product development team will refer to the competition (its products, its production processes, its implementation of technologies etc.) even when nobody in the team ever talked to the competition. Referring to the competition is an inevitable function of a system called “market”.

Why is it that the definition of design, and, at the core of it, the very understanding of the problems a designer is facing in a design project, seems often so difficult? I think it is in the very nature of the discipline. People like to categorize because they believe that categories are somewhat persistent and fixed and thus more “true”. However, it is not the case that categories are fixed and processes are changing. It is the other way round. The process is a constant (which, sure enough, is all about change), while it is the categories which change. Categories are everywhere and readily available; they are perception tools serving defined purposes. Taking available categories without being aware of their intention is just as good as taking a vacuum cleaner to cook omelets. What is more important, and more difficult, is to arrive at an understanding of a problem beyond ready-made categories.



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Applied art schools at the end of the 19th century categorized design into materials used (such textile design or ceramics design). In the early 20th century, this was changed to areas of expertise such as graphic design, later growing to interactive design, or industrial design, becoming product design in the nineties, often being relabeled industrial design again these days. The design process of a Leonardo da Vinci – or what is known of it – is still perfectly usable today; the taxonomies and categorisations of the 17th century are not.

Definitions are arbitrary, depending on a current state of knowledge, or even not quite: Genetics prove that there are various connections in diseases which reach across the boundaries of organs. But doctors today still work within categories which are 400 years old, based on organs. For instance, inflammations in the mouth tend to indicate that there is an inclination to inflammations in the intestinal tract, but the categories of medicine make it difficult to help a patient: Inflammations in the mouth are the concern of dentists, while for inflammations in the digestive tract a patient has to go to another specialist. Organs were the obvious choice for classification in terms of form and function 400 years ago. There was no way to see a DNA, but genetics is what holds it all together.

Every category is preemptory. Defining by exclusion - the Aschenputtel method, i.e. something is this and not that – even can lead to dogmas such as form follows function, a sentence coined by Louis Sullivan in nearly poetic intentions and later made to a formal doctrine by Dieter Rams. Dogmas can lead to arrested development. In design, the Ulm dogma was unlocked by the likes of Alchimia and Memphis, leading to a fundamentally new view of design.



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Dogma is a defensive reaction to the fluid nature of processes: The brain builds patterns from what surrounds it in order to recognize something when it encounters it again. The more often these patterns are used, the more tenaciously they get fixed in our thinking. A fluid reality presents ever new patterns, demanding constant activity in learning and un-learning, realizing and un-realizing, cognizing and re-cognizing. As Leonardo da Vinci said: "Art is never finished, only abandoned."

Creativity does not thrive within categories, but beyond, and design thinking presupposes thinking about design. Design is a meta-process – a process which creates, defines and redefines itself. Its definition is in flux, and as a consequence, its complexity is often not understood. Observable effects are the ongoing conflict between design and marketing which is extrapolated in the reasoning of marketing to dwell solely on existing facts.

The indeterminacy of design leads to constant difficulties to explain itself in terms of disciplines which are not its own. But contrary to popular belief, I think that design's seeming lack of definition power is not a liability, but an underused advantage to stay fit for upcoming challenges. Designers often speak about feelings, hunches, and a desire to get to the essence of a problem. And often it is indeed the hunches and intuitions which provide a better ground for design processes than data and rationalizations. The reason is that intuition may (not must, of course) be an insight happening before the categorization of language sets in.



The past can be the most valuable inspiration for the future, but old categorizations and definitions are insufficient to tackle new realities.

Witness the rapid emergence of new lifestyles, languages and cultural behaviors in today's globalized world and the rapid reaction by designers to feed demands and react on things as complex and fluid as, for instance, new cultural usage patterns of mobile phones. Most interesting in this respect are emerging economies and quickly evolving cultures and sub-cultures. Intricate human cultural behaviors are emerging and evolving all the time, and they are not adequately addressed by tools which have (or perhaps not even) been suitable to older, different realities. The past can be the most valuable inspiration for the future, but old categorizations and definitions are insufficient to tackle new realities.

How to manage this design process when it is not linear, not focused on a final product, and not really starting or ending? In fact not fundamentally different from any other managed process. There are also visions, milestones, meetings, and results. The point here is that managing is not about stifling and controlling. The very essence of managing is to open a situation for possibilities. Opening a situation in the design process also means refocusing on the process and taking off focus of the product as the final result. It seems indeed a paradox, but the result of a design process usually gains in quality and depth when it is not envisioned as the end result from the start. Designing, in fact, never ever stops.



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design will be Design (with a capital D).**

What about the definition of design in the future? The output of design – the traces of its process – today will not be the output of design tomorrow. Whole new disciplines are built around new possibilities. Interactive design, for instance, is a discipline which is possible at all only since some ten years. Contemporary design processes are construed more explicitly than the design process of, say, a Charles Rennie Macintosh, including activities such as building meaning, creating tools for understanding, or initiating conditions for complex systems. Today,

evolutionary algorithms help to build better profiles for tires; Tomorrow, intelligent structures will assemble by themselves. All of this lets me reckon that in the future, design will be Design (with a capital D).

Ultimately, of course, all management, and all design, depends on mastery, and the ability to convince your client. Let me end with a little episode from the Renaissance, a time when creative horizons rapidly expanded. Michelangelo, the hero of this story, was infamous for hardly ever finishing a project.

12 days after the proclamation of the Republic of Florence, Michelangelo was commissioned by the governor of Florence, Piero Soderini, to create a sculpture to celebrate the victory against the Medici. The 18 feet block of white marble Michelangelo used was originally blocked out in the quarry of Carrara, and another artist, Simone da Fiesole, after having worked on it, abandoned the job, leaving the block with bruises and large hole in its center. Vasari said about Fiesole that he “managed to work so ill, that he had hacked a hole between the legs, and it was altogether misshapen and reduced to ruin.” Michelangelo however, short of other available possibilities, had another look, took the block, and ingeniously used what he had available. He hammered away for 3 years. When he was finished, governor Soderini came by and, in the words of Vasari, “having seen it in place, was well pleased with it, but said to Michelangelo that it seemed to him that the nose of the figure was too thick. Michelangelo noticed that Soderini was beneath the Giant, and that his point of view prevented him from seeing it properly; but in order to satisfy him he climbed upon the staging, which was against the shoulders, and quickly took up a chisel in his left hand, with a little of the marble-dust that lay upon the planks of the staging, and then, beginning to strike lightly with the chisel, let fall the dust little by little, not changing the nose a whit from what it was before. Then, looking down at Soderini, who stood watching him, he said, “Look at it now.” “I like it better,” said Soderini, “you have given it life.”

The sculpture was David.