FAST COMPANY

So You Say You Want a Definition—What is Designing?

By Fred Collopy

I have found it is useful to think of definitions of design, designing, design thinking as "stepping stones" that help us move the conversation along, rather than straight jackets defining what is in and what is out. In that sense, they are perhaps not really definitions at all. But then language is like that, always begging to be more than it is at the moment.

At the Weatherhead School our faculty has made a commitment to incorporating design throughout our curricula. As you might guess, this is a rare thing for a management school to attempt, so there has been a good deal of discussion about just what it means.

There are those who have argued that it means nothing at all, because "design is everything." For them, I quote the design historian and theorist Ralph Caplan. "Design is not everything, but it somehow gets into almost everything." Others argue that it is "next to nothing; it's not innovation (coming up with the ideas), it's not implementation (working out the logistics), it's not entrepreneurship (coming up with the money). So, it's next to nothing; styling perhaps."

Still, as a faculty they have agreed to go on the journey. And things have, in the two years since we set this course, progressed in amazing ways. The outcome of one conversation was that we agreed to accept the stepping stone theory of defining. We cooked up three workable definitions that taken together have satisfied an amazing variety of professors (not an easy group to satisfy as a rule).

Design is the process of finding and solving non-routine (wicked) problems, often with a focus on bringing new products or services to market.

Design is the intentional assembly of systems with interacting parts to achieve some objective.

Design is a collection of methods and techniques, often drawn from the fine arts, to creatively solve problems.