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Thinking about “Design Thinking”

By Fred Collopy

Design Thinking sits squarely in a Cartesian world of divided minds and bodies in spite of the fact that recent advances in evolutionary theory and cognitive science point to the inseparability of what is called the “hand-brain complex.”

Anne Burdick, *Design Without Designers*

I grow more bothered by the week with the phrase “design thinking.” I know full well that I am fighting a losing battle, but I think it is an unfortunate term for describing what designers have to offer to other disciplines, which seems the most common reason for using the term. As is a way of talking about what designers can contribute to areas beyond the domains in which they have traditionally worked, about how they can improve the tasks of structuring interactions, organizations, strategies and societies, it is a weak term.

The phrase has gained currency in part because it suggests that there are multiple kinds of thinking. Design thinking serves as a complement to analytic thinking, critical thinking, conceptual thinking, and other forms or modes of thought. Most often it is the first of these “analytic thinking” that is the target concern of design thinking’s advocates. They argue that analysis does not provide everything that is needed to cope with the complexities that face us. Deduction (the logic of necessity) and induction (the logic of probability) need to be supported by abduction (the logic of possibilities). The former two logics are in wide use by analysts, but the latter one has been the province of designers. And there are other aspects to the designer’s way of thinking that would benefit organizations and society as well.

I am in agreement with these observations. But they stop short of the real contribution that could be made. For it is not in the modes of thought that designers most distinguish themselves, but in their actions. Designers act differently than analysts or decision-makers. Design is an extreme activity. It tends to call on all of the faculties of those engaged in it. It is contextual. It is embodied. It uses the whole person’s mind and body, left brain and right, hand and heart, analysis and taste. And it never gets enough of any of them.

I think that the reason we find ourselves here is because so many who have created and nurtured the design thinking notion have as a principal point of departure Rittel's ideas of design as a means for attacking wicked problems. In Rittel's view design is essentially a planning process. It is understandable that much design is best conceived in this way, since the costs associated with making changes can often be exceedingly great once the execution of a project gets underway. It is probably no accident that the original use of the phrase design thinking was as the title for a book written by an architect (Peter Rowe). But there are other theories of design, and many design domains, where the separation between the designing phase and the implementation phase is not so extreme. In those types of design there is less distinction between thinking and acting. Many of the problems being explored by those interested in moving design into other arenas are of this variety.

Another unfortunate problem with the phrase design thinking is linguistic. By making design into an adjective we relegate it to the role of a moderator. One of the things that Dick Boland and I enthusiastically commented on in our early writing about design was the vitality of the very word itself, given its noun and verb forms. I think it is so much more powerful, demanding, and relevant to invite lawyers, doctors, politicians and business people to design rather than to engage in design thinking. I think that the product of the former is more likely to be perceived as — and to be — an actual design, rather than a plan, a report, an idea, or some other conceptual or intellectual byproduct.

The relationship of action and thought, of hand and brain, is captured nicely by Maya Lin in her book *Boundaries* where she declares: "I think with my hands." And in *Sketching User Experiences* Bill Buxton puts the act of sketching at the very center of design. For him, design "gets down and dirty" and its archetypal activity is sketching. "I am not asserting that the activity of sketching is design. Rather, I am just making the point that any place that I have seen design, in the sense that I want to discuss it in this book, it has been accompanied by sketching."

So if thinking is at the center of the activity that we want to encourage, it is not the kind of thinking that doctors and lawyers, professors and business people already do. It is not a feet up, data spread across the desk to be absorbed kind of thinking. It is a pencil in hand, scribbling on the board sort of thinking. And while that may be obvious to those close to the process already, I am afraid it is not what folks conjure up when they first hear the phrase design thinking.

Language matters. I cannot help thinking that we are selling our ideas short given the momentum behind the current choice of language. And I wonder, how much designing and/or thinking has actually gone into "design thinking."