An aerial photograph of the Tokyo skyline at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, pink, and blue. The city is densely packed with buildings of various heights. The Tokyo Tower, a red and white lattice tower, is prominent in the center-right of the image. A semi-transparent dark grey rectangle is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing white text.

Some
thoughts
about the
problematic
term "design
thinking"

Erik Stolterman

Three schools of thought about designing

Yesterday in my class I was asked by a student if there are any major schools of thought when it comes to design, in particular, how to understand designing (that is as a human activity and process). I really liked the question. I did answer the best I could right there, but since it was not something I have really thought about, it was just a tentative answer. I said that there are at the moment three major schools of thought when it comes to designing.

The first school of thought is very close to what I teach in my class, it is based on a broad understanding of design as an activity that is defined by such thinkers as Schon, Rittel, Cross, Krippendorf, Nelson & Stolterman, etc. It is a school of thought that sees designing as an open, complex and highly non-linear process determined by the particular situation and governed by the designer's judgment.

The second school of thought seems to see designing as a process that is in need of more structure and explicit rationality, as a process that is in need of being 'formalized' and maybe even 'scientized'. Attempts to achieve this can be found in almost every design field and is quite common among design researchers who see as their task to improve designing by increasing its predictability usually by becoming less dependent on the designer's judgment.

Three schools of thought about designing

The third school of thought is what is today commonly called 'design thinking'. It is mostly found in the business world and in academic fields that has no tradition of design. Design thinking is in many ways a highly simplified version of the first school of thought mentioned above (with some aspects of the second school). It has reduced designing to a simplistic process consisting of some phases with attached tools or techniques. Design thinking usually portrays designing as a process where the steps and phases and its iterative nature in combination with some very simple 'tools' is the core, while the designers judgment is not seen as crucial. Usually this school advocates for crash courses or workshops as a way of mastering designing. This school of thought has been highly successful in making designing popular in the business world and in academia. It has raised the awareness of design as its own tradition, however, in many cases by promising too much and delivering too little.

Ok, so this is the answer I gave the student in my class. I have not really thought more about it. It is obvious though, that these schools of thought only relate to a specific aspect of design, that of design as a process, as designing. But even so, I think it is something that would be really exciting to develop more. It would be a great help to all of us to are navigating the world of design theory. Maybe something that could lead to another book!

The deceitful nature of design

I am reading here and there in Vilhem Flusser's book "The shape of things--a philosophy of design". Flusser is a thoughtful scholar with deep knowledge of the classics in many areas.

I was just struck by a section where Flusser elaborates on what design is. Flusser uses the notions of 'deception and trickery' as core in his definition. He says that when we design we create something, a machine, that tricks nature in our attempt to 'making a new form of culture possible'. With the use of technology and design we can create machineries that make the impossible possible, things that nature can't produce. But with this ability to deceive nature, comes responsibility. And this is where I found the quote that in a brilliant way describes the role of humans as designers.

"This is the design that is the basis of all culture: to deceive nature by means of technology, to replace what is natural with what is artificial and build a machine out of which there comes a god who is ourselves." (Flusser, p 19).

This is both a wonderful and scary description. If by design, we humans approach a god like state, we as a consequence take on god like responsibilities. Who wants that responsibility? Who wants to be a god?

And Flusser continues. He brings in the question of value. He is warning us about the loss that design leads to. He writes:

"..a new perspective opened up within which one could create more and more perfect designs, escape one's circumstances more and more, live more and more artistically (beautifully). But the price we pay for this is the loss of truth and authenticity."

The deceitful nature of design

It is interesting to note that to Flusser, in this quote, living artistically and beautifully is not the end all, the final goal or the life we should aspire to live. Instead, he argues for the 'truth' and 'authenticity'. This shift is something that others have pointed to, for instance, Borgmann in his 'device paradigm' theory. This relationship between the two theories become obvious when Flusser discusses 'value' and uses the cheap plastic pen as an example. He argues that when design replaced 'truth' and 'authenticity' with "perfectly designed artifacts" we find ourselves in a different world. (This reasoning is similar to Borgmann's device paradigm. When Flusser writes "all these artefacts become as valuable as the plastic pens, become disposable gadgets." it resonates with Borgmann's idea of 'devices'.)

Flusser then states that this explanation of what design is, is aimed at "exposing the cunning and deceptive aspects of the word design....because they are normally concealed." I find this examination of the 'deceitful' nature of design desperately needed today. The explosive growth, interest and glorification of design has led to a situation where the expectations are exaggerated, the process is drastically simplified, the philosophy and nature of design is neglected. This glorification and neglect will inevitably lead to serious disappointments and backlashes. Flusser's examination and Borgmann's philosophy gives us tools to in a more sober way examine our designed world and the role of design.

The problem with 'crash courses' in design thinking

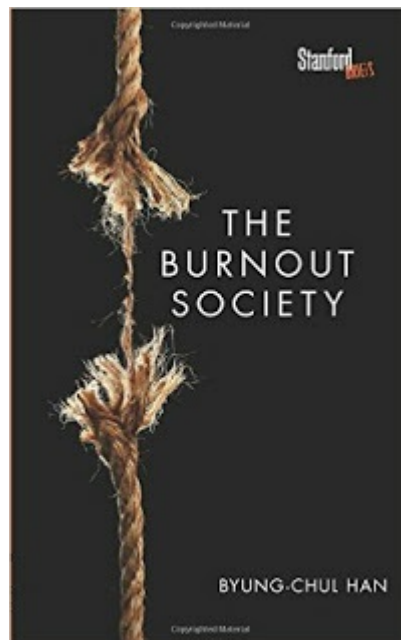
It is obvious that 'design thinking' as an approach to change has never been more popular than now. Everywhere on the web it is possible to find workshops and courses, and even 'crash courses' that will make anyone understand and appreciate the 'methodology' of design thinking. This is an unfortunate development. No one will be able to think and act as a designer after a 'crash course'. But this is not what I see as the problem with this development. The major issue is that it will lead a large number of people to believe that 'design thinking' is some kind of simplistic step-by-step method that is possible to apply to all kinds of situations and problems. The inevitable consequence will be a large number of people frustrated with what they think is 'design thinking' and they will turn to some other approach with the hope for another quick fix.

There are no quick fixes. There is no simple approach that is possible to understand and learn in a 'crash course'. As with any human approach that has evolved over centuries design is not something that you can 'use'. It is obvious to most people that a 90-minute 'crash course' in the scientific methodology is not going to make it possible to conduct any form of advanced or even useful science. "Crash courses' may have their place and a role to play, but it is a way that will make it possible to "take away some of the basic principles of Design Thinking and start to adapt them into your personal and professional routines".

Design thinking can of course be learned. But it takes time, training and practice. And instead of 'learning' a stepwise methodology, a 'crash course' may be a way to introduce the foundational ideas behind design as an approach in a way that makes it possible to understand what it is, how it differs from other approaches and what it takes to actually perform design thinking. However, this requires maybe a bit more by those who offer these courses than what is the case today.

Today's simplistic glorification of design and "The Burnout Society"

I am reading the book "[The Burnout Society](#)" by Byung-Chul Han. It is a very short book, only about 50 pages. Han is a Korean-born philosopher, now active in Germany. He has published a series of short books. I read this book as a serious critique of our modern society which Han gives different names, for instant 'the achievement society'. He argues that modern society has developed a culture where we believe we can do anything, "yes, we can", where we are measured based on our achievements. He makes the case that people get sick and depressed not because they are burdened by what he calls disciplinary responsibility "but the imperative to achieve: the new *commandment* of late-modern labor society". People get burnout because of "creative fatigue and exhausted ability". We suffer from the "violence of positivity" that "does not deprive, it saturates; it does not exclude, it exhausts." Han argues that we need more 'negativity', we need more "deep, contemplative attention", that is, less achieving and more reflection and to reach this we need "profound boredom" (p.12).



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Today's simplistic glorification of design and "The Burnout Society"

I find this book fascinating, even though I only read a few chapters, am looking forward to the rest. So, what does this have to do with design and the philosophy of design. Well, it is obvious to me that the character of the modern society that Han critiques includes the qualities that are commonly revered by those who advocate design, such as the ideas to design artifacts and systems that improves our ability to "do things" quicker, more effortless, removed from the restrictions of time, place and community. Designers commonly desire the creations of designs that are engaging, exciting, and positive. Almost everything that is part of today's simplistic glorification of design as the solution to every problem is based a philosophy that resembles what Han is critiquing in his book. I find this extraordinary refreshing and highly needed.

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Do design researchers really know the work of Donald Schön?

It is well known that Donald Schön is one of the most influential design scholars in the last few decades. His ideas are often referenced and we can almost always assume that most people engaged in research about design is aware of these ideas. However, there is this suspicion that I have heard from several colleagues over the years that even though Schön is commonly referenced, researchers do not necessarily read his work carefully.

My PhD student Jordan Beck has together with a colleague, Laureline Chiapello, published a great paper in which they have examined how design researchers cite the work of Schön. The results are quite fascinating and actually confirm the suspicion mentioned above. From other work (Chai and Xiao 2012), we know that Schön is the most cited author in design research (at least in the venues examined). But how is Schön cited and for what purpose?

In the article "[Schön's Legacy: Examining Contemporary Citation Practices in DRS Publications](#)" by Beck and Chiapello, it becomes clear that most citations are fairly superficial and almost none of the researchers engage critically or scholarly with Schön's ideas. After their serious examination (described in the paper) they write:

"We found very few instances of citations that function as critical engagements with Schön's work or those that function as building upon his work. Moreover, where supporting and credit functions are concerned, we found that scholars tend not to expand on or discuss the concepts or works they cite. For example, "reflective practice" or "reflection-in-action" may appear in a text with no additional explanation or discussion" (Beck and Chiapello, 2016).

Do design researchers really know the work of Donald Schön?

They discuss what these findings may mean and comments:

"Does a lack of critical engagement and building citations mean that the scholars publishing at the DRS conference are less interested in argumentation or cumulative knowledge building?" Based on these findings we may ask the question if this is a problem for the field or not? Personally I find it disturbing that the most cited author in the field is 'used' in this way. It suggests that there is an unwillingness to engage with fundamental theoretical assumptions. Even though I am personally someone who deeply appreciate Schön's ideas, these ideas can not be left alone. They have to be challenged and critically engaged with. Who will do that?

Do design researchers really know the work of Donald Schön?

Want to read more?

This is a first attempt to create a small ebook based on some of my blogposts. My blog is here:

<http://transground.blogspot.com/>