

Reflections on being a designer

David Cockayne
selects four
excerpts from '150
Reflections on
Being a Designer'

The following quotations are reproduced from *Reflections on being a Designer* by kind permission of the author. Kees Dorst is a Dutch design scholar, educator, consultant and designer. The book is a collection of 150 essays designed to stimulate designers into thinking about what they do, how they do it, why and to what effect. It is an absorbing, provocative and hugely enjoyable read; each essay is no more than a page long and can be absorbed at the reader's leisure as well as being mined for support and wonderfully clear thinking. This book is highly recommended for any designer wanting to reflect on his/her practice; for educators and students, and for everyone who works with designers in the hope that it will make the process of design clearer and easier to understand. These excerpts complement the previous article by Michael Spencer.

The Design Ability

What abilities and skills do you need to be a designer? We have seen that naive design is similar to common sense reasoning and is something that most people can do. But what do we expect professional designers to be good at?

Nigel Cross (design researcher and educator) has been focusing on these questions, and has made a list of eight core design abilities that all designers must have. According to him, designers must have the ability to: (1) produce novel, unexpected solutions by (2) applying imagination and constructive forethought to practical problems, (3) using drawings and other modelling media as means of problem solving. In doing this, they need to be able to (4) deal with uncertainty and decision making on the basis of limited information, (5) resolve ill-defined, 'wicked' problems by (6) adopting solution-focusing strategies, (7) employing productive/creative thinking and (8) using graphic or spatial modelling media.

This is an impressive list with a wide range of necessary skills. Other such lists exist which define design in even wider terms, and include competencies like *integrating technologies*, *social and cultural awareness* and *self-directed learning*. These inventories of design abilities are important, because they are used to set the curriculum for design education and, by implication, to define the kind of designer that is being trained in a design school.

Some of these abilities can be learned or taught in a fairly straightforward way. There are drawing courses and clever tricks to stimulate creative thinking. If you take the courses and

apply the techniques, you can become quite proficient. Unfortunately, not all of these basic design abilities can be learned easily. Some design abilities are very complicated (*resolving wicked problems*.) It is even hard to imagine how one could develop such skills at all, or are they deeply rooted in the personality of a designer (*dealing with uncertainty*.)

They defy education, but could instead be used to select students applying for design courses. If we are sure that these are the essential qualifications, that is.

Inside Design

Design can be captivating. If all goes well, the design problem is interesting, your ideas flow nicely, and you are in another world. Nothing exists except your own thoughts, decisions, sketches, doubts. The work seems to hardly take any energy, and to have its own dynamics. This feeling of flow is really addictive. Getting your teeth into a design problem and coming up with good ideas can be a real kick. And there is real sorrow in having to take leave of an idea that looked promising but turned out to be less than satisfactory.

Design is such a diverse profession that it becomes very much like life. You use everything you have to solve a design problem: all your knowledge and personal experiences, your creativity, and your powers of thought. It engulfs you completely. You become sensitised to the kinds of things you are designing, whether it be buildings, constructions, products or graphics. Being a designer changes the way you look at the world. Design is more than a profession, it is a way of life.

This is what design looks like from the inside. From the outside, design is a strange profession; the creation of novel things by means of an incredibly messy process that is hard to control and difficult to rely on. The marked contrast between the inside and the outside point of view causes no end of misunderstandings between designers and the outside world.

How Not To Design

Hard as it is to say how to design, it is easy to say how *not* to design. Apparently, what constitutes a successful way of working depends very much on the specific design problem, the situation and the character of the designer, but failure and incompetence are universal.

OK, how do you fail as a designer? Well . . .

- Always cling to your first idea.
- Jump into the details immediately.
- Solve one aspect of the problem first.
- Ignore a stakeholder, preferably a vital one.
- First design the form, then sort out how the thing should work.
- Promise too much to the client, really inflate his expectations.
- Don't listen to your client, lie to him if necessary.
- Be inflexible in your ideas and approach.
- Try to surprise your client with a completed design.
- Ignore any tests that say the design might be below par.
- Wait for inspiration.
- Stay 'fresh' by not gathering information.
- Do not plan (because that takes too much time.)

And so on.

This is a good but uncomfortable exercise in self-reflection. It is strange to realise that we are all sinners, some of the time...

Means and Ends

It is really important in a messy process like design, not to confuse the means and the ends. That is why most methods for controlling the design process start with the formulation of something like a *problem statement*. This contains the aims of the project, in very concrete terms. A problem statement is often difficult to

formulate, but it pays to spend some time on this, because you can only work efficiently if you know what your goals are.

If you don't have a problem statement, or if it is too vague, you will encounter conflicting opinions about what the problem is later on in the project. This typically happens at the conceptual design stage, when design ideas have to be evaluated and selected. If the designers within the team have all been solving a different problem, they will never agree on what the best solution is; their criteria for what the design should be are widely apart. The ends do not match, so the design proposals (which are a means to attain these ends) won't match either.

It will be impossible to choose the best solution. You then get into a discussion where every designer will defend his own pet idea, and by implication his or her view of the design problem. After all the work they put into it, they will probably not be very open to the suggestion that their idea is a great solution, but for the wrong problem.

This can lead to unpleasant fights among otherwise very nice people.

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