On Designing Change

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The effectiveness of a leader is related to the continual improvement of the leader’s mental models.

Hanover’s Credo on Mental Models
Peter M. Senge, The Fifth Discipline

Perspective is the gift of a new mental model for seeing something familiar in a new way, allowing discovery beyond the boundaries of our existing reality to expand our worldview. We risk losing perspective when we focus too narrowly or dialogue too exclusively.

The demands of educating today’s emerging design professionals necessarily fixes our focus on the more immediate issues facing graduates such as professional qualifications and credentialing, professional identity and the growth of professional associations. But, although such issues are important to the evolution of the discipline, too much emphasis on professional practice can lead to myopia, limiting the ability to step back and discover a larger sense of self and one’s place in the world. By focusing too closely on the traditional practice of interior design, we risk losing perspective on our broader roles as educators, scholars, and practitioners—and ultimately on the goal of higher education—which is about cultivating an informed citizenry capable of leading change (Diamond, 1998). Perhaps it is time to expand our focus from designing the material world to designing change.

The future is uncertain. Global warming, toxic waste, and quality-of-life inequities threaten our very existence. With 49.1 percent of the total U.S. greenhouse gas emissions attributable to the building sector alone, the next generation of designers has a significant role to play (Architecture 2030, 2010,) not only in reducing emissions but also in rethinking cycles of production and consumption. These issues sometimes seem far removed from day-to-day practice until we remind ourselves that we are not only designers but also consumers and voters with both professional and personal influence.

As designers we are also armed with a unique way of thinking: inherently generative, proactive, and focused on creating new possibilities for the future. Our profession is one which promises hope. We are skilled in what DeBono (1992) refers to as operacy, the ability to construct, to create, to do, as opposed to the skill of numeracy (quantifying) or literacy (processing through the written word). There is a growing respect worldwide for design thinking, particularly in the business community, where leaders such as Toronto’s business school dean, Roger Martin (2009), Stanford’s design school director George Kemel (Tischler, 2010.) and business and technology author Daniel Pink (2006) all extol the uniquely holistic and integrative thinking processes of designers. Business has finally embraced Senge’s concept of Leader as Designer, first presented in 1990, in his now seminal book, The Fifth Discipline. The high stakes question before the design community now is are we ready to embrace the idea of Designer as Leader, and if so, what exactly might that mean?

From Leader as Designer to Designer as Leader: A Shift in Mindset

Recent scholarship on design and leadership provides some of the answers. The following insights, drawn from The Designing Change Project (Danko, in progress), explore the ways that design supports socially
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responsible entrepreneurship. The voices captured in this narrative study represent a new breed of activist entrepreneurs who are redesigning business as an engine of social change. These leaders see the traditional for-profit/nonprofit business divide as not only artificial, but outdated, and are actively seeking ways to fuse social mission with economic enterprise to create meaningful change. Their definitions of design and views on design leadership speak to the ever increasing relevancy of design thinking and practice in today’s world.

The following activist entrepreneurs define the impact of design in their organizations:

Design is everything we do. It’s not just our service offering. It’s not just the systems we design for customers; it’s the organization that we design to be able to provide those services. We made conscious design decisions at the start and every day in how we continue to grow and build. (Rob Erlichman, Founder and CEO, Sunlight Electric, a photovoltaics company with a major focus on sustainable food, business and agriculture)

Design for me is the process of getting to happy—visually and functionally. What are we telling the consumer? What’s our carbon footprint? Is it environmentally as good as it can be? Have we achieved the required commercial objectives? Good design takes all those things into account and comes up with the optimal balance of those many elements. It’s not abstract. It’s not art. (Trish Karter, Cofounder and CEO of the Dancing Deer Baking Company, a company dedicated to natural baking and community development)

My definition of design has evolved from being about the product, to being more about the brand. Design encompasses something greater. Design is experiential. You can have a beautiful thing, but if your experience with it is not functional, is not easy, and if it doesn’t make you love it, then is it really good design? (Brady Wilcox, Design Director, ducducNYC, a designer and manufacturer of sustainably produced, high quality kids furniture)

Design is a very good way to crystallize your thinking, to challenge yourself at each step ... design is really a way to test the business model that you are developing. (Randi Allen, Founder, Girls Explore, a company that nurtures self-esteem in young girls through dolls of women leaders and heroines)

Design can mean anything from what the shop looks like, to how the systems work. (Sinclair Beecham, cofounder, Pret A Manger, a natural “fast food” company that supports healthy eating on the go and a strong supporter of City Harvest)

Design ... it’s your deep rooted creative process. It’s what’s left after all the layers come off ... it’s about the real poetry, the real art in making the company work. (Bená Burda, President and Founder, Maggies Organics, Fair trade clothing and accessories made with certified organic fibers)

The theme that consistently emerged from this series of interviews centered on design as a strategic business tool to test clarity of focus and to reconcile creative tensions—a deeply rooted and sometimes even poetic process—or as simply connectivity: “everything we do.” These are just some of the personal definitions of design offered by the social entrepreneurs we interviewed. Each of these leaders sees design as both process and product; each of them acknowledges the duality of tangible and intangible design qualities, and each of them speaks, directly or indirectly, to whole-systems designing. This
Approach embraces both the social systems of the organization and the physical systems of the product interventions—everything from the shop to the shopper to the behind the scenes management systems. This whole-systems view of designing focuses on the interrelationships between the many elements of business instead of on the individual parts. These leaders evidence an integrative understanding that the design decisions made at the start have a ripple effect on business process and product, growth, and change. This whole-systems view of designing and leading change represents a shift in mindset. These leaders clearly embrace the role of designer and see design as tool for leading change.

Systems thinking is inextricably tied to designing change. Why? Because design does not occur in isolation, design takes place in the context of other activities and other systems of influence. It therefore acts upon and is acted upon by other systems including behavioral systems, social systems, physical systems, and natural systems. Systems thinking naturally overlaps design thinking in that both are

- holistic—focusing on seeing interactions and patterns of change rather than static snapshots;
- expansive and constructivist as opposed to reductionist;
- focused on interrelationships and interconnections;
- embracing of multiple viewpoints and multiple stakeholders to achieve optimal performance;
- respectful of complexity and recognize the limits of knowledge; and
- dynamic and iterative versus static and linear.

Banathy (1996) describes systems designing (for social systems) as transformative: “a future-building, decision-oriented, disciplined inquiry where the aim is the creation of a system that will bring to life our aspirations” (p. 71). Business organizations today must be considered as part of a wider ecological system, a focus which encourages expansionist thinking that incorporates human values as an important factor impacting the system (Banathy, 1996). These defining qualities of systems thinking drive Trish Karter’s approach at Dancing Deer Baking Company:

*The intersection of design and leadership is knowing who you are and how you’re going to express that in the world. Everything you do gets translated by design. It’s not just about the packaging design or the design of the organization. It’s about the design of the future.* (Trish Karter, cofounder and CEO of the Dancing Deer Baking Company)

Her views on design leadership reference key aspects of systems thinking and also speak to core values and legacy. For Karter, the intersection of design and leadership centers on values consciousness: a clarity of purpose with the ultimate aspiration of influencing the world through those values. The Dancing Deer Baking Company has won awards not only for the quality of their baked goods but also for their commitment to supporting the homeless, community development, and economic urban renewal as well. At Dancing Deer, design leadership is systemic; for example, environmental stewardship guides packaging decisions just as it is evident in designing a new production facility located in the urban core of South Boston. Karter translates her values, vision, and voice through design from intangible goals into tangible realities. For this innovator, the broader purpose of the company goes well beyond commercial success to leave a mark on the design of the future. Her thinking inspires us to ask ourselves:

- Are we asking students to design interiors or to design the future? Is the built environment understood as part of a dynamic system? Are we asking our students to reflect on how single interventions can be evolved into systemic change?
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social change.

- Are we asking them to consider how to create change that can outlast a single project? Are we positioning them to consider what Nadler and Hibino (1998) call the “Solution after Next”?
- Are we developing values consciousness in our students—a critical first step in leadership development, along with the development of skills and competencies?
- What is our conceptual framing beyond the “design project?” Are we helping students to map a sequence of smaller steps toward a broader vision? Can we groom the designers of the future to see themselves as part of a framework, creating a new mental model of change?

Summary
As a design educator and researcher on design leadership, these are the questions I aspire to answer. Although these questions do not focus directly on interior design definitions and professional practice issues, they do globally connect those issues to designing change. In the end, I admit that I am less concerned about what my students call themselves than whether they embrace the challenge of designing change. Can I help them find the courage to challenge existing paradigms and norms, to ask the tough questions, to seek systemic impacts, to communicate values, to empower others, and to create meaningful opportunities for growth and change?

Research tells us that our students will likely change jobs five times in their careers and change industries three times in their lifetime (Sapp, 2008). Graduates leave colleges and universities trained in specific disciplines, but we know (and hope) they will contribute to society beyond their fields in a myriad of ways during the course of their professional lifetimes. Our design graduates need to see design from a systems viewpoint and have the confidence to realize that through the practice of interior design, they can contribute to meaningful social change. To do that, they need perspective on design, on leadership, and on the processes of change.

If you can create the kind of design that can outlive a person, that can become something from which a decision tree can evolve, then you will have a design-based vision that can carry on. (Amy Domini, Founder and CEO, Domini Social Investments)

References
Professor Sheila Danko, Chair of the Department of Design and Environmental Analysis, has a multidisciplinary design background in industrial, graphic, and interior design and in architecture. Her scholarship focuses on the intersection of design and leadership, expanding the concept of design beyond material artifact to include an understanding of how design thinking and practice—both process and product—can be a tool for leadership and social change across a wide range of disciplines. Questions include: How does design support strategic business planning and sustainable business practice? How do leaders in socially responsible businesses define and operationalize design? How do we educate a new generation of leaders to embrace whole-systems designing and holistic leadership? Professor Danko’s work on narrative inquiry in design education and practice examines the art of storytelling in relation to creative problem solving and product innovation. Her work on using narrative method in design education has become an online course in the Interior Design Educators Council Academy. Professor Danko has received industry, academic, and fellowship awards and was named a Cornell University J. Thomas Clark Professor of Entrepreneurship for her research entitled “Values-Led Entrepreneurship by Design.” She received a best paper award at the INTENT/International Entrepreneurship and Training Conference in the UK for scholarship which related design education to social entrepreneurship; a bronze award in the Nagoya International Design Competition in Japan for her submission entitled “Restorative Composites,” which proposed a new line of architectural finishes using recycled textile waste; a Polsky/Foundation for Interior Design Education and Research Endowment for her study in creative design process and its linkages to design education; and an American Society of Interior Designers/Wool Bureau Natural Fibers Fellowship for her design work exploring nontraditional applications of fiber to interior architecture. Before coming to Cornell, she was a principal in her own design practice; her clients included Herman Miller, Dansk International Design, and Corning Medical and Scientific.