

Worlds in the Making: Design, Management, and the Reform of Organizational Culture

Abstract The introduction of design and design thinking into the management of organizations is at an early stage. Most of the research and applications of design have focused on attitudes, skills, methods, and techniques. These have been applied to tactical issues of the development of products and services, issues of organizational operations, and issues of the vision and strategy of organizations. But there is a principle that distinguishes design as a practice of management from other schools of management over the past century. That principle focuses on the quality of experience for all of those served by organizations, whether for-profit, not-for-profit, or governmental organizations. The design movement in management aims at organizational culture reform. It is profitable for organizations, but it also serves a deeper purpose in enhancing the lives of individuals. At its best, the design movement seeks to bring innovations – sometimes radical innovations – to organizations that have to adapt to new circumstances of economic competition, social expectation, and cultural understanding. This is the challenge to design anticipated decades ago by the famous designer George Nelson, when the tactical uses of design in product development was the center of attention. The new extension of design deeper into organizational culture offers the possibility of significant consequences.

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1 George Nelson, *Problems of Design* (New York: Whitney Publications, 1957), 76.

2 Stanley Abercrombie, George Nelson: *The Design of Modern Design* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 99.

3 For an account of the history of management, see Daniel A. Wren, *The History of Management Thought* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2005). A useful account is also provided by Claude S. George, Jr., *The History of Management Thought* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1968). See also Mauro F. Guillén, *Models of Management: Work, Authority, and Organization in a Comparative Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). The latter is particularly important for its discussion of religions in management and organizations, pointing toward cultural values.

4 For a discussion of the relationship between management theories and design theories, see Richard Buchanan, "Interaction Pathways in Organizational Life," in *Managing as Designing*, ed. Richard J. Boland, Jr. and Fred Collopy (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004). This collection of essays is the first example of close collaboration between management scholars, design scholars, and designers imaginatively to explore a closer relationship between traditional management theory and new uses of design in organizations.

"The modern world – any world in its own time – is always complex. It contains not only material that is truly of the immediate moment, but also innumerable memories of past worlds. There is also a constantly developing sense of worlds still in the making."

– George Nelson, *Problems of Design*

In 1957, the noted designer George Nelson published an essay entitled "The Designer in the Modern World." Though ostensibly about the designer, he later remarked that it was actually an essay about people. Prescient as his writings were in so many areas of design, this essay too contained an acute observation about life in the twentieth century, an observation that more than fifty years later has emerged as one of the central problems and challenges that face design in the twenty-first century.

"One of the most significant facts of our time is the predominance of the organization. Quite possibly it is the most significant. It will take time to realize its full effects on the thinking and behavior of individuals. In this conditioning process, few escape its influence."¹

At a meeting in the House of Commons in 1943, Winston Churchill famously remarked, "We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us." In light of Nelson's observation, we might say it slightly differently: we shape our organizations, and then our organizations shape us. Put simply, the challenge for design is how to influence organizations not only to affect the thinking and behavior of individuals, but also to have a *positive* effect on human experience in an increasingly complex world. This was the challenge faced by Nelson, himself, when he worked for the Herman Miller Furniture Company. He brought together a team of leading designers that included individuals such as Charles and Ray Eames, Isamu Noguchi, Robert Propst, and textile designer Alexander Girard. Together, they created a series of products that elevated Herman Miller to a leading position among similar organizations and, ultimately, to a leadership position among a wide array of organizations that regard design as a key intellectual property woven into the DNA of the organization. The products created by this team remain icons of excellent design for the period, and they remain as examples of the best that product design can produce in any period. In essence, Herman Miller became a "design-centric" organization, with design thinking at the core of corporate vision. When Nelson spoke of the company philosophy, he identified five principles, one of which stands out in the context of our current discussion: "Design is an integral part of the business."²

Of course, some variation of Nelson's challenge has been faced by all management theories from the earliest historical times to the beginnings of management thinking in the twentieth century, when the discipline of management was established and developed in a series of important theories and schools.³ Beginning with Frederick Taylor's theory of "scientific management" and Henri Fayol's school of "management process," each school has identified and explored a different cause or principle to explain the efficiency and effectiveness of organizations, and they have employed the identified cause as the basis for recommending actions and behaviors of managers as they shape organizations. In essence, they have identified principles that serve as the basis for design action by managers and by the organization either through planning or through the execution of plans.⁴ The literature in the management discipline is rich and detailed in the diversity of recommendations. The "human relations" school turned toward the people who carry out the work of the organization. The school

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