

Frame Creation and Design in the Expanded Field

Abstract Design-trained people have access to a very broad range of professions. Yet there is something paradoxical about this development: ostensibly, many of these highly successful people have moved out of the field of “design.” This phenomenon deserves deeper consideration: how do design practices spread across society? What key design practices are particularly relevant to the problems of today’s society? Should what these people do still be considered design? To answer these questions, first we need to understand various ways that practices can be adopted and adapted from one discipline to the other. Problem framing emerges as a key design practice that can be adopted and adapted to other fields, and one which provides a valuable alternative to conventional types of problem solving. An example will illustrate how this frame creation allows practitioners to approach today’s open, complex, dynamic, networked problems in new and fruitful ways. The paper goes on to argue that the practice of frame creation is still part and parcel of the domain of design, and explores how design can develop into an expanded field of practice.

Keywords

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Introduction

Design is becoming a real force in the world. Nowadays, design-trained people have gained access to a very broad range of professions, and together they wield enormous influence from positions in senior management, government, and academia (e.g., two Asian cities with populations in the millions have mayors with a background in design). This is clearly a great success, not only for the individuals concerned, but also as a testament to the quality of design practices and the relevance of design education in contemporary society. But there is something paradoxical about this development, too: highly successful people have moved out of the domain of “design” proper (to become “mayor,” etc.), ostensibly indicating that the growing influence of design seems to be traveling beyond the confines of traditional (parent) design disciplines. Similarly, a growing number of non-designers are successfully picking up and using design practices to solve problems right across society.¹

This phenomenon is worth deeper consideration. Which design practices are so relevant to the problems of today’s society? How do these design practices spread across society? Should what design-trained people do outside the domain still be considered design – even if their jobs do not have “design” in the title? Which design practices can be picked up and applied by non-designers? What do these developments mean for the future of design practice, the design professions and design education, when the “design” field of operation is so radically expanding?

To answer these questions, first we will need to understand different ways in which design practices can spread from one discipline to the other, and how such practices come to be adopted and adapted in the context of other professional arenas. Then we will take a step back, and ponder the nature of design thinking. This will help us understand the value of design practices, and see why design approaches and practices are now being picked up so avidly as an alternative to conventional types of problem solving. In doing this, we will have to look beyond the skills and abilities used in conventional design practice, and beyond what designers have in common (as this could land us with the lowest common denominator). Thus, in this paper, I have chosen to take the core reasoning process that underlies design (abduction) as a starting point that leads us to concentrate on the corresponding design practice of problem framing. I will then model the practice of frame creation in detail, and through an example, will show how this practice allows non-design practitioners to approach today’s open, complex, dynamic, networked problems in new and fruitful ways. I will then go on to argue that the practice of frame creation is still part and parcel of design, and explore how we can develop design into an expanded field of practice.

The Spreading of Design Practices: Adopting and Adapting

How does a profession spread, how do its practices jump to other disciplines and parts of society? Basically, we can distinguish two processes: (1) When practices, techniques and methods are picked up and applied without substantial change (or much thought), we can talk about them being *adopted* by a practitioner in another field. Their adoption typically does not raise any new discussion or instigate development in the ‘parent’ field. (2) When core principles are transposed to other fields by practitioners abstracting from everyday design practices and connecting these fundamentals to the corresponding needs in the target field, the actor must delve much more deeply into the practices, and *adapt* this understanding to the new use context.²

A good example of both these processes can be found in the context of the transdisciplinary curriculum for the UTS Bachelor of Creative Intelligence and

1 Adam Thorpe and Lorraine Gamman, “Design with Society: Why Socially Responsive Design Is Good Enough,” *CoDesign* 7, no. 3–4 (September 1, 2011): 217; Kees Dorst, *Frame Innovation—Create New Thinking by Design* (Boston: MIT Press, 2015).

2 See the definition of practices in Manfred A. Max-Neef, “Foundations of Trans-disciplinarity,” *Ecological Economics* 53, no. 1 (April 1, 2005):

5. For an application in the context of Human Centered Design, see Brouwer Van der Bijl et al., “How Deep Is Deep,” in *Proceedings of the Colors of Care*, eds. Juan Salamanca, Pieter Desmet, Andrés Eduardo Burbano Valdès, and Geke Ludden (Bogotá: Ediciones Uniandes, 2014), 280.

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