

A taste for practices: Unrepressing style in design thinking

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The current vogue for design in management discourses results in abstractions of the design process that repress the role of aesthetic judgments. This paper offers an explanation as to why design-as-styling is being neglected or concealed, and then explains what is at stake. It theorizes that a key aspect of the agency of designing, as the creation of artifacts to facilitate activities, lies in this taste literacy of designers. The framework for the argument of this paper is Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' and the notion of 'style' as proposed by Fernando Flores and his coauthors. The paper argues that designers are hermeneutists of proximal taste regimes, for the possibilities of new styles of action.

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It is strange that in all the current talk about “design thinking,” almost no reference is ever made to the work of the Design Thinking Research Symposium, which has been collating and initiating innovative yet careful and extensive research into the nature of the design process for two decades; nor indeed has much reference been made to any of the research published explicitly in relation to the cognition of expert designers - for example, Lawson (1980, 2004), Rowe (1987), and more recently Lawson and Dorst (2009) (though this series of omissions from the literature has been addressed in Nigel Cross's recently published *Design Thinking* (2011)). What is being promoted as “design thinking” seems content to extrapolate from the internal reflective practice of a design firm (IDEO, in the case of Brown, 2009) or from a selection of interviews with design principals by management educators (in the case of Martin, 2009). What is lost in this exporting of design thinking from designing?

I Refashioning design thinking

It might seem that “design thinking” [double quotation marks from now on will signal the current popular discourse of design-based innovation and management, as opposed to research into the cognitive processes of designers designing] is design minus the material practice (Burdick, 2009; Kimbell, 2009). However, “design thinking” is foremostly defined as the sort of action research that comes from failure-friendly, iterative prototyping in contexts of

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immersive social research. Without referencing any of the research of designing, “design thinking” does acknowledge that this experimentalism involves a kind of problem-definition/solution-proposition co-evolution — see for instance Jennifer Riel’s box-insert in [Martin \(2009: pp. 94–5\)](#) on design as wicked problem-setting. So there is a practice to design thinking.

What must be removed from designing to make it appropriable by managers is rather, it seems: aesthetics, by which I mean, anything to do with form-giving, the pleasing appearance and feel of a design. Roger Martin’s *The Design of Business* makes no reference at all to aesthetics. It quotes with approval Hugh de Pree discussing the authority granted to designers over the development of the Aeron Chair, now an iconic form, that “Designing... comes to grips with the very essence of a problem, from the inside out, as opposed to ‘styling,’ which concerns itself largely with the distinctive mode of presentation or with the externals of a given solution.” (2009, 113) Tim Brown’s *Change by Design* opens with a first chapter that is explicit about the need for strategic design to displace design’s aestheticism: “Getting under your skin, or How Design Thinking is about more than Style.”

At one level this is understandable. If “design thinking” is primarily ‘design for non-designers,’ then “design thinking” must be able to be done without becoming a designer, without having to adopt the lifestyle, working environment and habits of designers; for instance, their penchant for being concerned about fashionable appearances, their own and that of everything around them. But in another way it is strange that almost none of the 4–7 dot point lists circulating about what is involved in being a design thinker — see for example the compilations of [Wroblewski \(2006, 2007, 2008\)](#), which at least include pattern recognition and visual story telling — mention any of the habits of designers; forever browsing different media for a sense of different formal trends in different areas of design; making large collections of liked and inspiring examples (on this see [Keller, Visser, van der Lugt, & Stappers, 2009](#)); constantly critiquing with a distinctive lexicon the aesthetic quality of the designed output of partners, peers and students (on this see [Strickfaden & Heylighen, 2010](#)).

1.1 Constraining styles

Even if current promoters of “design thinking” as strategic management had consulted the findings of groups such as the Design Thinking Research Symposium, they would not have been clearly redirected toward the aesthetic side of designing. Style is a primary concern of Rowe’s, but as a morphological constraint of particular design disciplines and the cultures within which they are practiced, rather than as a variable that is distinctive to the problem-responding done by designers (see also for example, [Chan, 2001](#)). Lawson has long argued that style is an imposition retrospectively read onto completed designs by critics rather than a concern manifest in grounded theorizing of the design process. For Lawson, aesthetic styles may be sources

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