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Viewpoint

De-Colonizing Design Thinking

What Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe salvaged for his castaway home was far more than a ship's hold of materials, tools and animals, and far less material to behold (Figure 1).[1]

What Crusoe's raft invisibly brought from his sinking ship was his British culture. The sailing ships of the times were container vectors of cultural colonization. Their brain-holds carried their home-nations' colonizing beliefs, values, ideas, motivations, and empire-building technologies. Crusoe's island settlement inevitably mirrored his home island origins, and was built from of the patterns of his socially constructed inner world.

Historical distance has sharpened our modern awareness of the consequential pros and cons of colonization. And after some hard lessons learned, the spreading tide of physical empire building has turned toward a de-colonizing ebb.

Not so, however, for the modern electronic colonizing vectors that continue to sail, fully value laden, effortlessly and instantly onto every island outpost in the world. And not so too of the ways that root-metaphors born out of an industrial past continue to invisibly hinder our ability to cope with modern ecological crises. C.A. Bowers calls these taken for granted metaphoric conditions that freeze our conceptual thinking in a previous era "the colonization of the present by the past."[2] This essay explores another situation in which there is a tendency of one way of thinking to colonize another.

Two Thinking Cultures, Two Thinking Worlds

In this thought experiment, scientific thinking and design thinking are likened to different countries with their own unique cultures, distinctive outlooks, purposes, processes and products. Scientific thinking, which focuses on the manufacture and export of empirical truth and knowledge, is the more successful and dominant culture. Doing science is a process of distilling useful and reliable factual knowledge of how things are and how they work. The less well-understood dominion of design thinking is oriented and targeted to a very different, if equally immodest end. Its focus is on the creation, development, remodeling, manufacturing, and meaning of all human artifacts.

The two cultures are symbiotic. They use and depend on each other's products. They share a common language that each naturally bends toward its own ends. But today they remain far from equal partners – and like all unequal traders, their relative inequality causes them to interact in a somewhat unequal manner. The assumption here is that a closer look will reveal the ways in which the dominant, empirically-oriented partner is unconsciously privileging the source meanings of its own root metaphors to define and characterize the other's culture. Awareness of that colonization becomes the necessary prerequisite to uncovering and legitimizing the unique meanings that underpin and identify design thinking.

http://www.journals.elsevier.com/she-ji-the-journal-of-design-economics-and-innovation
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Figure 1 This shipwreck illustration is from a short work entitled *Robinson Crusoe, My Journals and Sketchbooks*, illustrated and written by Michel and Anie Politzer.

Metaphors under the Microscope

The following explores the differing "in-country" meanings of four root metaphors that the two cultures share: *problem*, *intervention*, *limits*, and *satisfice*. This is a short sail and a bare beginning. No doubt there are many more metaphors to uncover that are masking meaning in design thinking, and deserve reconsideration. I'll establish what I believe to be the dominant and taken for granted usage of each concept, and then describe the concept's situated meaning from the design thinking point of view.

Both points of view being considered are deeply embodied perspectives – by which I mean deeper cultural immersions than the mental shifting of gears that Daniel Dennett calls "stance."[3] I think of it as the difference between being born into a country and its language, and travelling there. For example, only her very Swiss friends would comprehend why the ever so talented, brilliant and wealthy Heidi would take up prostitution. "Well, you know Heidi," say those friends, "she has suffered some major expenses recently and would never touch her capital!" A radical, experimentally-grounded empiricism is embedded in, and holds just as tightly to its objective and logical rationality.

Problem

1. Def. gen. – Something "thrown forward" that needs attention and needs to be dealt with or solved.
2. Def. sci. – Something to be solved empirically through reasoning.

This latter scientific conception of a problem, which dates back to Plato, remains the dominant darling of our Modern times. These are the kinds of problems that are associated with the hard sciences. They welcome the precision of mathematical description and can be disassembled like clockworks under analytical decomposition. They observe a hard and strict rationality. The modern ideal of an experimentally-based scientific problem is one that can be rationally pursued and rationally resolved into a useful, reliable, verifiable, falsifiable addition to an ever-expanding body of factual knowledge.

As seen from this scientific ideal, the problems taken up by designing look both trivial and perverse – trivial in the sense that they explain nothing profound about the universe, and perverse in their stubborn and irrational human complexity. Design problems through this lens are not tidy. Their