

THE VIEW WHEN STANDING ON YOUR HEAD

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The last few articles I've written for designindustry have been a reflection on five years of working with companies in the field of design strategy and management.

You see certain things time and time again, you read of the experiences of others that echo these observations, and if you are lucky – as I have been - you get the opportunity to test out your hypotheses in real-life business situations.

Unlike everyone else I talk to - they all seem, by their own account, to be evenly balanced between 'left brain' and 'right brain' thinking – I'm more of a left-brained kind of chap, with a couple of right-brained tendencies thrown in. I've learned that I must push myself to be creative and not to suck the life out of things. I get it right sometimes, and sometimes I don't.

And I've seen that those I respect within the business community have also recognised that they have certain natural tendencies that manifest in strengths and weaknesses of which they are ever-vigilant. The wise are self-aware and humble in terms of design strategy and do not presume to be all things to all people. They surround themselves with the unlike-minded and listen hard. This all makes good sense now based on what I believe to be my reasonably solid grasp of design principles.

But it's been one heck of a journey of discovery to arrive at these principles.

And, I believe, it is a story worth retelling here to provide some context for designindustry's unwavering commitment to following and espousing these principles.

When I joined the company as a contractor in 2004 I knew little of Design (with a capital 'D'). I had come from a management consulting background and knew business well, but considered myself fairly ignorant in terms of Design. In fact Design, to me at the time, more or less meant the physical form of a consumer product.

So, as with any new assignment, I immersed myself in this new world and read everything I could get my hands on. I craved knowledge of this exciting new world if, for no other reason, than to chase off the feelings of being unprepared and inadequate. I did not know the language, norms or customs of this curious subculture and sought desperately to make sense of it all.

And so as I read book after book and article after article about design I found my left-brainedness (no, it's not a real word, but you know what I mean) constantly drawn towards the frequent referencing of 'design principles'. I read how good design is in accordance with certain universal principles, and that well-designed products and services owe their success to design processes guided by 'the principles of good design'.

This was heartening to me. I felt that the understanding and application of these principles would no doubt take years, but that a set of universal principles (or at least a set of agreed core principles with some disagreement around the fringes) would be a good starting point on the road to enlightenment.

But this list was elusive.

Certain sub-sets of the design community – notably graphic design and web design – had such principles but in terms of broader design strategy, no coherent principles could be

found. So began a year-long wade through the world of design with a view to finding the elusive (or illusive) design principles which were constantly referred to as one might refer to God, but with the same lack of meaningful agreement as to the actual form.

Many long discussions with Dorenda Britten and others gave rise to initial criteria for constructing these principles.

They must be universal: applying to both product and service design. They must be comprehensive: at least touching on all the major considerations in undertaking proper design activity. They must reflect both process and outcome: how to do it and what the result should be. And they must be accessible: easily understood by laymen, not just the professional designer.

It was this last point that would be the most controversial, but I'll come back to that.

Long discussions over strong coffee between Dorenda and I resulted in some progress, but the art of describing good design is a difficult one. The trick was in turning this task on its head and describing bad design.

Bad design, we easily concluded, was formed by a narrow process, jumping to swift conclusions. It builds on an ill-defined notion of need and rushes headlong towards a pre-supposed outcome. It ignores anything outside the sphere and experience of the designer, and is judged based purely on gut-feel and personal preference.

Bad design thinks not of the end user, but tends to be focused on advancing the designer's career ambitions. It is based on the latest trends (which may or may not have passed). It is opportunistic rather than strategic. It is based on short-term profit gouging, rather than anything sustainable and responsible. It favours form heavily over function, doesn't always successfully do what it was designed to do and is unnecessarily complex.

The trick to understanding good design, we felt, was in describing the elements of design that fail when design goes wrong.

And so the first draft of the designindustry 10 Design Principles was completed within a day or two. Some may suggest that is evidence of superficiality, but it was merely the culmination of a year of research and soul-searching. And anyway, Neil Finn says he writes most of his songs in under an hour, so perhaps there is a precedent for such quick action resulting in something of worth.

Since the creation of these principles four years ago, very little has changed about them. The descriptions have been slightly reworded and the single word names for some of the principles have been refined. But the core understanding of the process and criteria for good design has stood the test of time and has been the articulation of design thinking on which this company has been built.

But, as I mentioned earlier, it was this very articulation which landed us in trouble.

You see the design community can tend to be an insular one. I have often referred to it as the 'priesthood', as have a number of others standing on the fringes of this community. And, like its namesake, it strongly resists the revelation of its secrets. I have seen firsthand the vitriolic response from designers when one dares to endeavour to boil design down into principles.

I understand this annoyance, and the fear that drives it. To rob design of its ethereal nature risks robbing it of its soul and power. When such an attempt comes from an outsider such as myself, the mere suggestion causes some to be outraged. When it comes from an insider like Dorenda, it is seen as the worst kind of betrayal.



In fact the cartoon shown above was one prominent designer's response to what I was doing in trying to explain design. He felt that I (the analyst) would 'blow away' the frail designer, and indeed the design community. This would be the last thing I would want to do!

But I am a design evangelist. I believe the foundations and principles of design must be available to all, and can be understood by all. This does not make any person who 'gets' the basics of design an expert, nor does it negate the need for designers, but it does begin to mainstream a discipline that has been misunderstood by most businesses, butchered by many and mastered by very few.

The principles are a way of making sense of something that is extremely complex. They serve as touch points for a designer to ensure they do not fall prey to the natural tendencies of the design process. They are a framework on which to build an understanding of the intricacies and nuances of designing great products and services.

This is the work that design industry does.

It straddles the typically right-brain dominated world of design and the typically left-brain dominated world of commerce and translates between the two. It helps companies to understand how design works and what value it can offer, and works with them to address their design-failings and recognise good design processes and outcomes.

Everything we do is anchored in these principles, and everything we have achieved is based on helping companies to embed them. They are an invaluable toolbox for channelling creativity through the bounds of business reality.

Despite what some of the design-elite think, design can be defined and it can be understood by anybody.

If you don't yet understand it, now's a good time to start your own journey.

