

Improving Design Without Destroying It

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Design has over the last decades gained a growing reputation as a promising approach of change and innovation. In the last few years, design has attracted attention not just from traditional design fields but also among professionals and academics not trained in design thinking or in the design process. Many organizations today believe that design might help them solve problems that they have not been able to handle with other approaches. Managers and leaders recognize that design is a different way of doing things that can lead to other outcomes than what their “normal” approaches can.

Even though the interest in design has grown, there is still a huge uncertainty of what design as an approach really mean and what it requires when it comes to competence, methods, techniques, and process. There is also an uncertainty on how to measure success when it comes to design? On a superficial level most people understand that design is not about solving well-defined problems but there is a lot of uncertainty about when to use design, how to use it, and how to measure if it is done well.

In this presentation, design is understood as a broad concept describing the activity of forming and shaping new artifacts, processes, systems or symbols that people see needed in the world. It is a process that starts with a problem, challenge, or opportunity, and that continues through a design process until a final design is well defined.

Design as an approach can be seen as a tradition of intentional change grounded in the ever-ongoing human activity of molding, shaping and forming the human living environment and conditions. Over time, this tradition has evolved into distinct professional design fields such as architecture, product design, graphic design, urban design, fashion design, and later into areas such as interaction design, organizational design, instructional design, game design, etc.

Over time, design has developed some distinct characteristics and as an approach it provides particular values that are different from what other approaches can deliver. Design is focused on the creation of the not-yet-existing. The design process is open, flexible, creative, and highly sensitive and intensely engaged with the *particular*, in the form of the particular client, situation, users, conditions, limitations, etc.

Even though the design process is appreciated for the kind of results it can deliver there exists a fairly strong uneasiness with the design process and its evasive character. Viewed for instance from the perspective of other established traditions, such as science and engineering, the design process has been seen as strange and difficult to understand. The design process does not have an easily recognizable logic and rationality which makes design seem to lack rigor and discipline. This unease has led to many attempts to transform or 'improve' the design process into something that would better answer to the expectations applied to other approaches of change, such as a well understood logic, a clear rationality and well defined rigor. These improvement attempts have been mainly done by people who do not have a deep understanding of design as a process. At the same time, there are also attempts to improve design and the design process by those who more deeply understand and accept the unique characteristics of design as an approach. Taken together, all these improvement attempts are based on the assumption that the design process *can* be improved and that improvements of the process will lead to better design outcomes.

Even though I will make the case that improving design is possible, I will also argue that it is easy, while having good intentions, to destroy the very core of what constitute the value of design as a unique approach of change. For instance, attempts to make the design approach more efficient might destroy some of the qualities that make the design process innovative and flexible. In the presentation I will in some detail examine what kind of improvement attempts might be destructive to design but also explore if there are any 'safe' alternatives to design improvement. I will argue that there are ways to improve design that will not destroy the value of design and I will outline some of the underlying principles guiding such initiatives.

As an overall conclusion I will argue that any attempt aimed at improving design has to be based on a deep understanding of design as a practical approach of inquiry and action that can deliver certain outcomes but not others. I will introduce the notions of *rationality resonance*, *improvement intentionality*, and *measure of success* as three core concepts that might be useful for anyone aspiring to improve design.