

## Design thinking: Everywhere and Nowhere, Reflections on The Big Re-think

Posted by Kevin McCullagh | 29 Mar 2010 |

It's a sign of the times when *The Economist*, the house journal of the global business elite, holds a conference in London on 'design thinking' (official Big Rethink site [here](#)). Having attended the conference, produced in association with The Design Council and held over 11-12 March, I was left wondering one thing: why is design thinking such a hot topic with business leaders, given that it leaves so many designers cold?

The conference's brilliant chair, Vijay V. Vaitheeswaran, a global correspondent for *The Economist* and author of *Zoom*, began by throwing down a hefty gauntlet to design. He explained that the world faces crises on many different levels, not only economic and environmental: politicians and corporate leaders are also experiencing a profound crisis of trust and legitimacy. This, in turn, has triggered a loss of confidence in the old ways of doing things and has led business and governments to cast around for new ideas. As design thinking is offering itself up as a process to solve many of these problems, what has it got to offer? Gulp!

So, how well did the conference fare, given such a preamble? The short answer is that the speakers largely sidestepped the crises—and sidestepped, too, the subject of design thinking.



Vijay V. Vaitheeswaran.

### **The big sidestep**

The format didn't help. There were too many rapid-fire sessions. Some were only 10 minutes long, leaving little time to develop much more than a sound bite or two. The Work Foundation's **Will Hutton** took a few bad-tempered minutes to tackle the economic crisis and make the case for more investment in R&D. The Economist Intelligence Unit's Robin Bew concisely delineated all the crises, but, sadly, had been briefed not to show any graphs. Would that really scare the designers?

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A number of speakers, mostly from outside the world of design, addressed sustainability. They rehearsed familiar themes (cutting waste, apparently, can also save you money!). Tellingly, they made few connections with design thinking, apart from Jeff Denby. He made a memorable presentation on his sustainable underwear **brand**, and its on-trend ethical marketing practices.

Some of the case studies on innovation addressed traditional design themes, but most didn't touch design thinking. An exception was the speech by UK Design Council CEO **David Kester**. He showed how the Council and **Richard Seymour** had **coordinated** a range of interested parties and design agencies to develop staff- and patient-centred design concepts to improve hygiene in hospitals.



David Kester.

The main attempts to connect design thinking with the grand themes of the conference were the workshops in the afternoon of the first day. Here, we tackled some board-level leadership issues like purpose and the business models of struggling UK companies and institutions like Royal Bank of Scotland and the National Health Service. However, most delegates found these a frustratingly superficial exercise, doing the cause of design thinking little service.

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To understand this paradox, we need to look back at why business and political leaders have become so enamoured with design, and why so many designers struggle with the concept of Design Thinking.

### **Leaders fall for designers**

When I took my first design job in a consultancy back in the eighties, business leaders considered design an optional and mysterious activity practised by a small cult of polo necks in Milan, London and New York. Today, by contrast, design is global, rarely off the TV, and a popular subject at college. It has also expanded its scope from products and graphics into interactions, experiences, services and, more recently, 'social change.'

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In hindsight, the 10 years between 1997-2007 were the real boom years. Three events in 1997 set the scene for design's rise. Steve Jobs returned to Apple, which soon became the totemic case study of how to out-innovate the competition through smart design. The days of putting the case for the importance of design were replaced by CEOs wanting to be the Apple of their category.



*Participants of The Big Rethink's workshops.*

In 1997 Tony Blair's New Labour was elected with a mandate to modernise Britain, and quickly elevated something called Creative Industries to the forefront of a policy focused on the shift to a service-based knowledge economy. This was a strategy that would be replicated around the world in the form of countless policies for the creative sector. In the process, innovation came to be reduced to creativity—and the idea that scientists and technologists are themselves creative was completely lost.

The third event was the death of Princess Diana (bear with me on this one). The public outpouring of grief for this global emblem of vulnerability marked the arrival of a new culture of emotions. Western societies now had more therapists than policemen, watched Oprah and encouraged its citizens to 'express themselves.' This cultural shift from the head to the heart provided a fertile context for designers to be re-conceived

by leaders as the authentic points of connection with impulsive consumers and voters—who were losing trust in their leaders.

### **Rise of design thinking**

The notion of design thinking, which began to be discussed in design circles in the mid-noughties, marked a high water mark of design euphoria. First, **Roger Martin** inspired it. His concept, 'Integrative Thinking,' suggested that the best leaders integrate left-brain, analytical thinking with right-brain intuition.

Then, design thinking was brought to life in **stories** about IDEO's **T-shaped designers** by Tim Brown, the consultancy's CEO and president. Brown triumphed at the Global Economic Forum in Davos in 2006. After that, the then assistant managing editor of Business Week, a design buff named Bruce Nussbaum, **rallied** for the cause.

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In fact, design thinking always meant different things to different players. For some it was about teaching managers how to think like designers; for others, it was about designers tackling problems that used to be the preserve of managers and civil servants; and for others still, it was anything said on the subject of design that sounded smart. To most, it was merely a new spin on design. All its proponents were, however, united by their ambition for design to play a more strategic role in the world than 'making pretty.' Who could argue with that?

### **Designers fall out with Design Thinking**

Today, as business and governments start to take design thinking seriously, many designers and design experts are distancing themselves from the term.

While I have often been **dubbed** a design thinker, and I've certainly dedicated my career to winning a more strategic role for design. But I was uncomfortable with the concept of design thinking from the outset. I was not the only member of the design community to have **misgivings**. The term was poorly defined, its proponents often implied that designers were merely unthinking doers, and it allowed smart talkers with little design talent to claim to represent the industry. Others worried about 'overstretch'—the gap between design thinkers' claims, and their knowledge, capabilities and ability to deliver on those promises.





Anna Rafferty of Penguin (top) and Joe Ferry of Virgin Atlantic.

Still, when design thinking began to get a name for itself, most seasoned designers merely considered it harmless hype. But as the hype gathered pace, attitudes began to change. Meanwhile, dark economic clouds gathered. The idea of design as a silver bullet started to lose its currency before the financial crisis, but once the recession bit, the questions for design thinkers sharpened.

***If we are to make the most of the new opportunities thrown up by the interest of business and political leaders, we need to start by firming up on what we're talking about.***

In 2009 while contributing to a **book** on the management of design, I polled a few handfuls of design managers about design thinking, and detected a new realism in the air. One design director reflected on the boom years with a raised eyebrow and the

comment 'Even Turkeys can fly in a tornado;' but when the tailwind dropped many designers who had talked their way into high flying positions were left gliding. Greater exposure to senior management had left many... well, exposed.

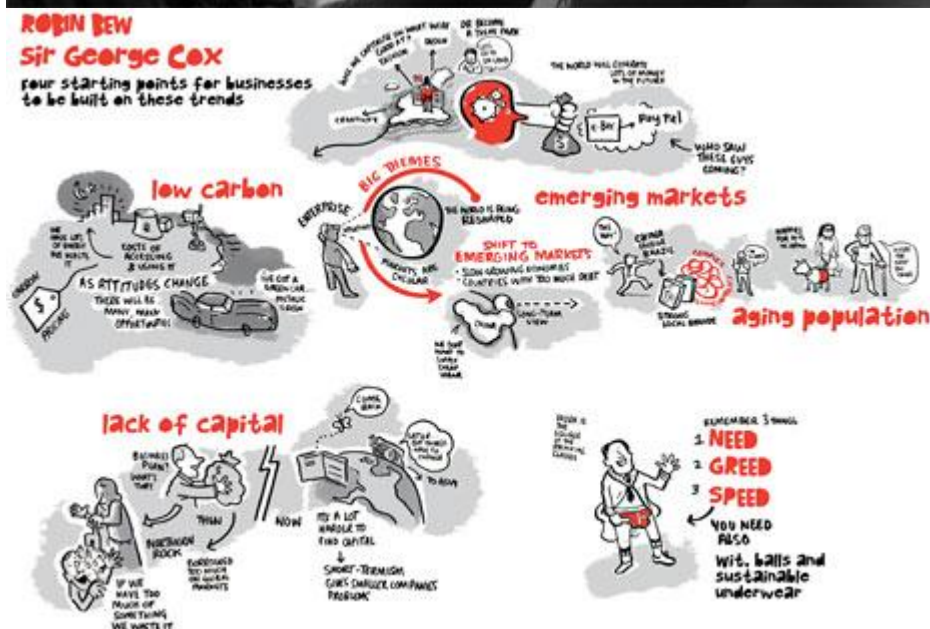
The concern was that too much time has been spent trying to outsmart the MBAs, and that design managers had lost their focus on delivering great design. The most common response to this feeling of over-stretch was to regroup and get back to basics, with many design managers pining just to roll up their sleeves and get back to designing.



ROBIN BEW

Sir George Cox

four starting points for businesses to be built on these trends



Conference scribing by *Cognitive Media*. Download the full pdf [here](#).

Time to Re-think

From a personal point of view the most useful thing about the conference was that it brought into sharp relief the chasm between post-recession realities and how stuck in past design still is. After all, what's notable about the design thinking debate is not so much how design practice has changed, but rather how the audience for design has changed and raised its expectations. Sure, user research has been more formally integrated into our methods over the last decade and folks like Tim Brown have done us all a great service by articulating what we do in a clear and cogent way to non-designers. But as Bill Moggridge acknowledged to me at an [event](#) in 2007, 'design thinking is a new story, not a new process.' This amounts to old thinking, for new times.

#### Precision over Woolliness

If we are to make the most of the new opportunities thrown up by the interest of business and political leaders, we need to start by firming up on what we're talking about.

***A focus on output quality also challenges a key tenet of design thinking—that managers can think like designers.***

[Helen Walters](#), the new editor of Innovation and Design at Bloomberg Business Week, recently tweeted that we 'need [a] better definition of design thinking, more widely understood. Wild west of interpretation right now.' In her [review](#) of the Aspen Design Summit she warned:

those looking for a prescribed way to implement design thinking are destined to be disappointed. It's a messy, opaque process that depends as much on group dynamics as intellect or insight....the process was more important than the product.... the idea that people need a way to engage in multiple places within their community

She puts a finger on a new role for designers that many will not be happy with—facilitators of a public engagement process, in which the design of high quality new products and services comes second.

For those who want to start re-thinking and innovating in how design should change, the two stars of the conference—Roberto Verganti and Vijay V. Vaitheeswaran—gave some pointers.

#### Quality over Quantity

Verganti, Professor of Management of Innovation at Milan Polytechnic and author of [Design Driven Innovation](#), argued that after two decades of designers successfully selling themselves to business, most companies use designers and therefore design on its own provides no competitive advantage. Just as companies competed on product quality in the eighties, and now it is an accepted standard, design is now just a ticket to the game. This is backed up by the [lack of data](#) to prove that design leads to profit. The point is not to argue for more design (he does not use the term design thinking), but how to deliver great design. In a fascinating conversation over drinks he also argued that there is a process that senior managers can follow to improve the quality of their companies' design, that does not rely on the gifted judgement of a Steve Jobs or an Alberto Alessi.





Roberto Verganti.

A focus on output quality also challenges a key tenet of design thinking—that managers can think like designers.

On one level they can. Let's agree that all of humanity are designers, and that design is one of the things that separates us from the apes. As Jonathan Ive **put it**: 'Design is not important. Good design is important.'

First, when we talk of designers, we usually mean professional designers, who have reached an accepted level of competence. They have survived a Darwinian selection process (there are far more graduates than jobs) and have clocked up well over 10,000 hours of practice on projects. We should remember that designers learn by doing, not by learning and practising a theory, designing involves a lot more tacit knowledge than in other areas of business. It's therefore hard to believe that senior managers can change their thinking habits of a lifetime after a workshop or two working with designers. And, to be frank, to suggest as much devalues what designers do.

***'Designers have become less visionary. They have spent the last 10 years getting close to consumers and trying to become businessmen, and have lost their visions.'***

Second, a key factor in creating good design that really does make a difference is great designers. These talented individuals are few and far between and provide critical competitive advantage. Let's forget about design thinking as a magic process, and focus on how designers and managers should best work together to deliver great quality outputs.

#### Vision over Users

**Roberto** also showed that he was more up to speed with the latest thinking than the design thinkers. He is direct: 'Radical innovation does not come from users.' This is a point that Don Norman, a previous champion of user-centredness, now also **makes**. Roberto's research shows that the developers of the Nintendo Wii didn't get close to users, they got close to interpreters: media people, artists, designers, sociologists, retailers, suppliers,

etc. The key to seeing the future first, Roberto argues, is about finding the right interpreters. That said, while designers talk radical innovation, they are mostly involved in incremental innovations. In that domain, we are right to expect that insight into users has a role to play.

Verganti pressed his point home with a tough truth. 'Designers have become less visionary. They have spent the last 10 years getting close to consumers and trying to become businessmen, and have lost their visions.'

Ouch.

#### Balance Left with Right Brain Thinking

Vijay also had some unwitting lessons for ambitious designers. In fact, I would willingly have foregone most of the speakers just to listen to his penetrating questions and clever asides. Like Roberto his background combines left brained engineering with right brained exploration of meanings. He trained as an engineer at MIT before taking a brand manager job at P&G, and has reported for The Economist on a range of regions and industries.

The ideal of design thinking as laid out by **Roger Martin**, is to 'balance [left brain] analytical mastery and [right brain] intuitive originality in dynamic interplay'. While this is a founding principle my company, it has to be said that analytical thinking is not typically a designers' strong point. This was born out by one of the star design thinkers nonchalantly declaring that 'numbers just go over my head', from the conference platform. We are not taught this in college and it is not particularly highly valued in design studios. From my experience even the smartest designers have to be schooled in analytical rigour and robust reasoning. So designers are actually not great exemplars of the balanced thinking that design thinking takes its name from; and as Adaptive Path's Peter Merholz argues in this [post](#), designers have much to learn from the left brain types.

#### Knowledge over Emotion Conviction

Vijay often challenged speakers by marshalling a killer fact. Well, we need more killer facts in our business. Another rebalance designers should consider is becoming more worldly and knowledgeable in areas outside design. Too often designers weaken their case by not having a firm grasp on the big picture.

In a discussion with Richard Seymour in a break towards the end of the conference, he sighed. 'As ever, we always learn most from the academics and suits.' Yes, analysts rather than design thinkers gave the most guidance on the future of design.

Whether we call these new directions design thinking or not is another matter. It was the product of the design bubble, and the next decade will demand less spin and more delivery. How does thoughtful design sound?

See Core77's live coverage of the Big Re-Think [here](#).

All images courtesy of [The Economist](#).