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PURPOSE OF DESIGN

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The purpose of design provides the premise for the formation of a design ethic ... that is, how we determine if an entity, something that has been or is being designed, is good or bad. It also serves to validate that ethic in that it gives it lasting substance and frees it from the whims of style or the self-serving desire to feed one's ego or to simply get attention.

This premise, however, can not be fully understood or appreciated without first understanding the definition of design. The definition of design serves as the context for the purpose of design. In a very real sense, each serves as the corollary to the other.

DEFINITION

The word "design" is commonly used as either a noun or a verb. As a noun, "design" generally refers to some object or other entity. As a verb it is usually used to refer to a process, or series of activities. For the purpose of this definition the word "design" will be used solely as a verb, thus drawing attention to the fact that design is a process.

Simply put ...

"Design is the thought process comprising the creation of an entity."

This definition, which is fully discussed in a separate article on the Definition of Design, addresses the comprehensive nature of design, in that all "entities" (objects occupying space, events occurring in time, ideas that guide us, even relationships between people) can be designed. This is a very broad definition. As such, it embraces just about everything we do, touch, or brush up against.

Given this definition, the design process is not limited, as so many of us have been led to believe, to that narrow class of objects or events that are supposed to have some sort of special "aesthetic" appeal. Nor is it limited to a special class of professionals (planners, architects, graphic artists, industrial designers, etc.) that we typically call "designers."

In truth, we are all "designers."

We are all engaged, in one way or another, in creating (or co-creating) the entities in and around our lives. Furthermore, and this is very important, we must see ourselves first and foremost as designers and then as professionals, civil servants, educators, or whatever other "roles" we play. If we see ourselves only in these "roles", and not as "designers", we live our lives *at the effect of what is coming at us*, as opposed to *at the cause of what is coming out of us*.

While this definition of design is very powerful, it provides no ethic. In other words, by this definition of design we cannot tell whether the entities we are designing (be they objects, events, concepts, or relationships) are good or bad. We need to understand the purpose of design in order to determine if what we are designing or evaluating is good or bad.

PURPOSE

It is interesting to note that the purpose of design is always the same, that is ...

"The purpose of design is to facilitate life."

Simply put, if a design (using “design: here as a noun) facilitates life then it is *good*, if it inhibits life then it is *bad*, if it does neither then it is *neutral*. While this is a very simple ethic, or at least it appears such at first glance, we must constantly remember two things, what it means to *facilitate* and what we mean by *life*.

Let’s first look at the word *facilitate* ...

The word *facilitate* means to empower, to enable, or to assist, but not to dictate ... as was sometimes assumed by the utopian designers of the early 20th century. Utopian design ... based on the notion that the designer knows what is best ... is really dictatorial design and is often a form of imprisonment, in that it shackles its users to a particular behavior pattern or to a singular point of view. The purpose of good design is not to imprison but rather to enrich ... to enrich (that is, to facilitate) the lives of those using the design.

What do we mean by *life* ...

There are four aspects of *life* I would like to bring to our attention. First, all living systems are open systems. Second, all living systems are interdependent systems. Third, all living systems are self-organizing. And forth, all living systems make use of feedback loops (feedback networks) to manage themselves.

Open systems require the input of an energy source, for example food, oxygen, and sunlight, in order to sustain themselves. They also output stuff ... if this stuff can be used by another living system it is called product, if not it is called waste. It is important to acknowledge that all living systems are open and require a continuous input of resources, and that they constantly produce some type of output.

As such, living systems are not independent systems, nor are they dependent systems, but rather interdependent systems that rely on neighboring systems for their survival ... for supplying their input and for processing their output. As we carry these links forward it is not difficult to see that all living systems are interdependent, in one way or another, with all other living systems.

Living systems are also self-organizing. Self-organizing systems respond to their environment to acquire and process the resources they need to sustain themselves, to maintain and reproduce their individual and collective vitality, and to protect themselves from harm. More advanced living systems are also able to retain information (learn), so they can handle similar situations more effectively. Higher forms of life ... like man ... I’m assuming man is a higher form of life (some of my friends will debate this) ... also have the vision and ability to modify their environment. All living systems are self-organizing to some degree or another.

The forth thing we should be aware of is that all living systems use some form of feedback to control resource acquisition and processing (as an open system), and to manage the adaptation and modification of their environment (as a self-organizing system). These feedback systems are not simple loops but rather complex, highly interrelated communication webs, sometimes (oftentimes) difficult to trace and understand. In fact, one of the classical pursuits of science has been to understand the presence and nature of these feedback networks.

On the surface, this statement of purpose ... that the purpose of design is to facilitate life ... appears to be quite simple. We can easily say ... if a design facilitates life it is *good*, if it inhibits life it is *bad*, and if it does neither it is *neutral* ... but, in reality, it is not that simple.

The question we really need to ask is, “Who’s life?”

Are we talking about the life of the designer, or the design team? The lives of those commissioning the creation (design) of an entity? The lives of those destined to use the entity? Are we talking about human life? Are we talking about the life of a particular species, or life in

general? This question, "Who's life do we facilitate?" is very important and often leads to unexpected complexity?

The question becomes even more complex when we think about the contrast between the duration of life and the quality of life. Do we design an entity to enhance the duration of life? Who's life? And/or do we design the entity to enhance the quality of life? Who's life?

The answers to these questions are not simple, surely not singular, and often not static. In many cases, both the questions and answers, as related to a particular entity, change over time. While this complexity, as it intensifies, has the potential to give us pause, or even overwhelm us, it is always important to remember the simplicity of our original statement of purpose, namely ...

The purpose of design, of all design, is to facilitate life. If the entities you design facilitate life they are good, if they inhibit life they are bad, if they do neither they are neutral.

The challenge for all of us is to be *good* designers.