

THE THEATRE OF DESIGNING WITHIN ORGANISATIONS

TONY WEIR
INPLAY ARTS PTY LTD
TONY.WEIR@INPLAYARTS.COM

ABSTRACT

‘Design Thinking’ is many things to many people. This is so among those broadly within the ‘design community’; there is even more variety among people in organisations that are taking on design as a means towards innovation and/or organisational development. Two trends – towards doing design ‘in-house’, and towards design of environments and organisations over and above products and services – are testing the limits of what the work of design thinking is and can achieve. Traditions of theatre-making may give a perspective that resolve some of the tensions in design and can offer new possibilities for organisations seeking to create a future collaboratively.

THE ZENITH OF DESIGN THINKING

Design in organisations is at a high water mark. Robert Fabricant outlines some dynamics of the (largely American) design industry, including the industry consolidation taking place as large corporates take on increasing numbers of design graduates and even whole design firms (Fabricant 2014). He reports on rumours "that IBM offered a job to every single CMU grad this year in the interaction design program". Pioneering user experience consultancy Adaptive Path recently closed as an independent consulting firm to become a part of Capital One (Garrett 2014). And Johnson and Johnson, Pepsico and Philips Electronics NV have all recently established the position of Chief Design Officer. This evolution in both business organisations and in the design community poses some fundamental questions about the possibilities and limits of design as an activity and approach to organisational situations.

This paper seeks to explore those limits by highlighting some fundamental contours of ‘design’ as an activity, and how they interact with the evolution of what has become known as ‘design thinking’ in enterprises and organisations. Then, by placing some traditions of theatre-making alongside, it asks what alternative possibilities might be available through this way of ‘doing’ organisational evolution.

AMBITIONS OF (AND FOR) THE DESIGN PROJECT

It is difficult to pin down design, or the set of ideas and practices of ‘design thinking’. The terms and approaches have many histories, from academic reflection - for example Simon in design as a method of thinking (1996), Rittel And Webber’s in the role of professions confronting ‘wicked problems’ (1972) and Buchanan in bringing design thinking explicitly to this genre of problems (1992) - to public planning practice - for example in the ‘Scandinavian Approach’ to participatory design (Gregory, 2003). There is a proliferation of methods and heuristics - many collections of principles are posted online: Keith (2011) lists a range from personal principles to hardware design, centred on the field of software design, while Meetod (2013) lists 68 (and growing) sets for user experience.

This is a field of theory and practice that is far from fixed. Nonetheless it maintains a loose sense of coherence around maxims like ‘user participation’, ‘usefulness’, ‘usability’, ‘aesthetic beauty’ and so on. Proposing any such terms as the centre of design thinking would be contentious, but the terms of that contention would most likely allow participants to conduct conversation around a shared topic.

And while there may be some coherence among what might be termed ‘design thinking industry professionals’, there is little such alignment among organisations at large. There, design thinking often sits as a term among many instrumentalities, like (for this fashion season of 2015) Six Sigma, Lean and Agile Development. That is, it is a means to an end - often a business end. In this way of thinking, the intricacies and inner workings of the field are less interesting than the results it promises. Often it is thought of as a ‘method’ or a ‘methodology’

by which it is hoped to create more value for the organisation, or in the case of not-for-profits or governmental agencies, to increase the received value of services. Managers, without a background in the many shades of design thinking, simply want a way to create better results.

Thus there are these two communities for whom 'design thinking' serves as a 'boundary object' - a terminology that is shared, but with quite different associations and ends in mind. In this context, two trends observable in history of design over the last 15 years or so pose interesting questions for the limits of design thinking for organisations. One comes from the tendency of organisations to try to reduce costs and maximise their use of capital; the other comes from the appetite of the design 'industry'.

First, there is the tendency to bring design capability within the organisation. Design thinking, in its various flavours, came to maturity as a consulting offering, seen in the rise of firms like IDEO, Adaptive Path and many others. But, partly as a result of success in engagements, partly because of the structure of consulting fees, organisations have been bringing design 'in-house', through hiring individuals, acquiring whole organisations or educating their own people. This is by no means a straightforward path. Brown and Wyatt highlight some of the impediments that enterprises face in embracing design thinking, ranging from low uptake in the organisation, to resistance of a human centered approach, to simply fear of failure (Brown & Wyatt 2010). Howard illustrates some of the difficulties of introducing design thinking to a strongly analytical culture, emphasising that the main issues arise not at the level of conceptual understanding, or even of value and belief in the approach, but in the messiness of practice (Howard 2012). Regardless, the effort continues, and, with design thinking 'cultures' developing in large organisations, it may meet with a measure of success.

The other trend comes from within the field of design practice, and it is useful to borrow a schema from Richard Buchanan to consider it. Buchanan (2001) conceives of four 'orders of design': design of symbols, of things, of action and of thought. In broad terms these are exemplified, respectively in Graphic Design, Industrial Design, Interaction Design and Environmental Design. Over the last decade or so, design firms have been exhibiting a greater appetite to work within organisations beyond the design of objects and services, in the design of elements like business models and strategy. A firm like IDEO, from making its mark in the innovative design of objects, now puts notions like organisational design and business design at the centre of its work (IDEO 2015).

Something interesting occurs at the intersection of these trends. Where organisations are aiming to own more of the design process, and where the scope of design is the organisation itself, some of the limits of design language are tested, notably the notions of an 'object of

design', a 'designing agent' and the 'prototype'. While these may appear to be abstract objects, it also poses an embodied question: how does a group of people move into the future that is substantially different from the present with a sense of coherence as a community?

FUNDAMENTAL CONTOURS OF DESIGN

To tease out the issues a little, let us consider some of these fundamental contours of the project of design thinking. First is the notion of an 'object of design'. This is an idea treated explicitly by Buchanan (Buchanan 2001), but implicit in much of design thinking literature. Buchanan aligns 'symbols', 'things', 'action' and 'thought' as the objects of design in his four orders. This, as Segelström points out, moves design from 'being decorative to become a perspective on solving complex problems' (Segelström 2010). While this notion of an 'object of design', where the object may be a thought or an action, quite apart from a physical thing, is useful in broadening the scope of design activity, it cements in place one of the basic lineaments in the structure of design thinking - that the thing designed is structurally an 'object' in relation to the designing agent. I design something that is not me, the designer. As such, while I may be designing a business model, I am in many respects very like a potter throwing a vase - the outcome of my work stands separate from the one who designed it. This is not problematic in itself, but it becomes so when design becomes a part of organisational practice, because there it amplifies a tendency of practitioners of organisational strategy and development who often work as if they 'could survey the patterning of relationship from outside the process of relating' (Shaw 2002). That is, it amplifies the tendency to see the work of strategy, organisational development and the like as something quite apart from the activity of those working on them, as if there is no political involvement involved in what is created and how it 'implemented'.

Another tendency inherent this conception of an object of design is to think of the thing to be created as coming into the world 'fully formed' as it were. Of course, within the design vocabulary there is the concept of a 'prototype', but in that language itself is the demarkation of the 'false start' from the ideal object. The conception of a prototype is (arguably) well and good in the domain of object design - the potter can smash a faulty attempt at a new design with little loss to the world. Even in the domain of service design, the prototype can work to an extent - in simple situations, one could imagine creating a service centre in rough materials, with willing participants to test the way this enables interactions - this is commonplace in design projects. But in the domain of environments there is no such luxury - there is nothing to work on in strategy or organisational design that is 'outside' of the real, operating system: any 'first attempts' (prototypes) become an irreversible part of the unfolding history of the organisation.

Design can doubtless overcome this kind of challenge to its limits and possibilities. It is a field still in formation,

and is discovering its language even as it adapts pragmatically to new challenges and new scopes of work. Maybe a prototype, when in the context of strategy design, has properties quite different from prototypes as we have known them. But really, if you follow that logic, if the label 'prototype' becomes more and more metaphorical, more and more a connotation rather than a denotation, why call it a prototype at all? Why not give it some other term, closer to the actual work taking place? And this taken to its conclusion, why call it 'design'? Why not something more like 'working our way to what we will do next'?

As will be explored below, the field of theatre practice may have more useful ways of naming this kind of 'performing our way into the future'.

THE CASE OF PIPES CO

These questions were raised in the case of a consulting project: the two main entities were a medium sized organisation, and a small consulting firm drawing many of its methods from the field of design. In the spirit of a theatrical approach and to get a sense of the context, let us look through the cast of characters.

Pipes Co

- Board, under a new chair
- CEO
- CFO
- Commercial Manager
- People and Culture
- GM Paint Products

Unfilled roles, to be staffed in coming months

- Executive, Supply Chain
- Executive, Supply Chain
- Executive, Customer Experience and Innovation

Second Road Consulting

A team of four or five, the author included.

Pipes Co - a mid level public company, employing about 1500 people. Its business is the supply of goods to retailers and other distribution channels. Let's say for this story that their stock in trade is house paint, painting accessories, plasterboard and various tools. The company is structured as two divisions: Paint Products and General Building.

Pipes Co was a family owned company for much of its history. It made various acquisitions of other companies that seemed to be good value at the time. However, apart from being in the same general sector of the economy, the various companies acquired had little in common, and the parent company was more of a diversified holding company than a single business with a unified business model.

About a decade ago, Pipes Co became a publicly listed company, and its board became more active in the direction of the company as a whole.

For many years leading up to our current scenes, Pipes Co had maintained a small head office. Divisions ran more or less independent operations, referring their monthly results to the CEO and CFO (supported by a small administrative team). Part of the outworking of the this consultancy period was an interest in enlarging the 'centre' of the business - the head office functions. Executives in 'People and Culture', 'Supply Chain' and 'Customer Experience and Innovation' would be sought, internally or externally. There would be changes necessary in the corresponding areas of divisions, but none that were thought to be confronting or disruptive. And in conjunction with the new staff, an Executive Leadership Team (ELT) would be set up, taking on much of the work and decision making that had hitherto been taken on by the CEO/CFO dyad.

Second Road - a small consulting firm specialised in organisation-wide strategy and innovation. The company draws strongly on design thinking, but has its roots in the humanities, particularly the fields of rhetoric and poetry.

Scene 1

It was a regular board session. Alan, the CEO of Pipes Co was playing out one of the less common, but predictable rituals: he and his Chief Financial Officer had identified a company to acquire - it was on offer at a good price - and he had to present a case to the rest of the board for approval. The board would sign off, and the CEO and CFO would set the wheels in motion for the acquisition and integration of the target company. This ritual had been played out every couple of years throughout the company's history.

But at this meeting, with new board membership, everything changed: the board emphatically did not give their approval. They said that regardless of revenue projections, they could not understand how the target company would contribute to an overall picture of Pipes Co; moreover, they felt they had not received from the CEO a coherent account of that overall picture.

Scene 2

This precipitated a long period of work, examining and articulating this overarching story of the business, a story and meaning that emerged through the slow conversation between the CEO and the board, and a faster and more chaotic conversation among people in various parts of the business. By 'slower' and 'faster' here I do not mean that a coherent meaning emerged earlier or later; I simply mean the conversations themselves had a slower or faster rhythm of back and forth, gesture and response.

It is worth drawing attention here to an idea of 'innovation' that sheds some light - particularly because neither the board nor the business leaders had in mind that what they were doing was an effort to be innovative. Buur and Larsen suggest an understanding of innovation as "the emergence of new meaning in conversations among the diversity of stakeholders" (Referenced in Gottlieb, Larsen and Sørensen 2013). This is a case that draws attention to the corollary of this notion: that new meaning emerging from conversations among diverse stakeholders will be accompanied by other behaviours and artefacts that we would recognise as 'innovative' in a context. In this case it innovation was prompted in the patterns of leadership and organisation in the company.

Scene 3

All of this was taking place within the context of a relationship with a small consulting firm. As in such projects, the full scope of work and ambition was considerably broader, with a particular interest in the way reporting was passed from the business divisions to head office and to the board. Also, the work was being done under a broad methodology of design. Thus, for instance, in reporting to the board, the first attempt at reporting information in a new format was done so within the language of 'prototyping'. Prototyping with high stakes (management often has little latitude in 'experimenting' with the board), but prototyping nonetheless.

Similar design-related work had been done towards creating the ELT. A draft 'ELT Charter' had been circulated, which included principles like:

- what we want our culture to be
- what we want to talk about in meetings, and avoid talking about
- what rhythm we want in meetings, what topics to include, etc.

This was all valuable as far as it went, but the group seemed to reach a dead end in talking about what would happen next. It is difficult to pinpoint precisely what their difficulty was, it was simply, and elusively, in 'getting started'. In particular, there was a sense that they could not afford to make a mistake. Whatever they enacted would become a part of the fabric of the company: it would either break or reinforce the pre-existing pattern of strong control from the CEO. And, with the CEO present, it was difficult to simply drop the known way of working and to start something new: to do so seemed artificial.

Scene 4

There was no clear solution on how to make a break with the past. There was a sense that things were slowing down.

Pipes Co and Second Road were holding regular company/consultancy meetings held to check up on

progress in the broader program. Not in the 'official business' of the meeting, but in breaks and in the aftermath as a few from each organisation lingered, wondering together about moving forward, a theme of conversation began to emerge: the theme of theatre. This emergence was not 'clean' – rather it was the coincidence of a few scraps: that the Charter was taking the function a bit like a theatrical prop (drawn from Shaw's work 2002), that the Pipes Co participants *were in fact* the embryonic ELT and should *act* as such, that they could 'stage' an ELT meeting, that the consultants should be separated, more like an audience keeping the ELT 'honest'.

An idea was proposed: to schedule the following company/consultancy meeting in the normal way, but to conduct it differently. A session of a few hours was reserved in the day as a 'rehearsal' of an ELT meeting. The room was laid out in a way that would enable a physical separation between the ELT and the consultants, to discourage falling into the patterns of conversation of past months. The ELT began their conversation hesitantly, about new projects in the wings, and then about the nature of innovation and how to move from the germ of an idea to business success. Before long, the consultants were ignored and the conversation was taken up with more energy. By the end of the session, all could see plainly that it had not been a rehearsal at all - it had simply been the first ELT meeting, but without the awkwardness or fanfare of a 'first meeting'. The language of 'rehearsal' and the carefully 'staged' session (carefully in precisely the lack of 'staginess') encouraged a way of moving forward together that had proved a sticking point for some months.

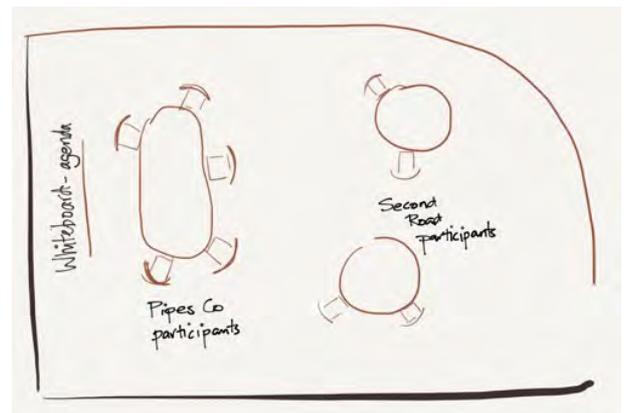


Figure 1: The simple division of the company/consultant meeting – note that the position of the agenda whiteboard encouraged the Pipes Co group to direct their attention away from the rest of the room – it put the consultants 'upstage' from the action. Also that the chair positions for the consultants put them out of a direct line with the Pipes Co table – neither facing it directly nor with backs to it.

Denouement

The ELT went on to meet regularly and without the consultants involved – there was a rapid move to the new structure in Pipes Co, and more importantly, to the *activity* of work in that structure.

It would be tempting to say that the consultancy brought something like a 'theatrical framework' that helped to move things forward, but that would be claiming too much. It was theatrical, yes, but it was the spontaneous emergence of this possible way of working together that gave effect to the practice of the small community that became the ELT.

THEATRICAL PRACTICE

Given the provisional and emergent nature of use of a theatrical approach in this case study, it seems that enquiring further into the discipline of theatre practice may be profitable for work in enterprises. This discipline offers a language and an approach that dissolves some of these issues prompted by the performance of design within organisations. At the outset, this is not trying to use the theatre paradigm to usurp the work of design. Rather it is an attempt to bring a rich language from a long established discipline to bear on the situation of the intersection of the evolution of organisations, and the aspirations of a loosely coherent design thinking community.

Certainly this is an ambitious undertaking, and only the broadest brushstrokes can be made for now. The links, or the overlap between theatre making and organised human enterprise do not have the kind of rich profile that design enjoys. But there are hints of what an expansive understanding of theatre practice might afford.

In relation to design practice, theatrical practice often plays a subordinate, or instrumental role. Particularly in the field of service design, theatre can play an extremely productive role. Where interactions need to be 'made real' to be reflected upon and improved, a theatrical approach, adept in taking on new and experimental roles and relationships, can aid designers move from first thoughts to refined hypotheses. Theatre can also add dimension to early user testing and the development of 'personas' that help with design ideation.

But what if we bring theatre to bear on organisational situations more at the level akin to Kenneth Burke's work on 'dramatism' (Burke 1945), where human communication is seen as a form of action, and human actions and motives fall within the ratios of dramatic elements of act, scene, agent, agency and purpose. To explore such an all-encompassing vision of a role for theatre in human action we need to explore some of its primordial manifestations and to ask what affordances it provides for (non-theatrical) human enterprise.

Play, mimicry, and ritual are all possible directions for research, but here I will touch briefly on a somewhat later expression - the contemporaneous rise of theatre and democracy in Athens. Chou and Bleiker argue that democracy and the performance of tragedy shared a symbiotic relationship (Chou & Bleiker 2009). They argue that the period of the birth of democracy was a volatile time, involving "the precarious balance between self-institution and self-limitation [which] explains both

the potential and potential deficiencies of democracy" (ibid.). Anne Bogart takes up the theme in her examination of the place of story in community (Bogart 2014). She paints a picture of the Athenian society where "theatre-making and theatre-going were attempts to find common ground, to come together and collectively consider, via metaphor and storytelling, issues that were very difficult to grasp in daily life" (ibid).

This kind of account of the role of theatre in society provides strong possibilities for a theatrical account of the kind of work that goes on in design, and even to resolve some of its tensions. We could frame the designer not in the frame of 'artisan-maker' but as 'storyteller-animator'. We could frame a community of people coming together for an explicit design effort to be like a company of actors and surrounding theatre contributors, working together to create a new story.

Of particular use might be to comparison between the nature of a prototype and that of an object of art, particularly a theatre piece. The prototype is a low fidelity model of possibility, destined to 'fail' - to be broken, literally or figuratively, as its limits are explored and transversed. It is meant for hard use, then to be put behind in pursuit of the ideal object of design. The object of art is quite different. It provides a image of possible ways of relating and behaving together, which will provoke thought and conversation about how we live together. More deeply, it creates a visceral *experience* of possible ways of being and relating, through the ordinary human impulse of empathy that makes the coherence of performance/audience possible. But the 'failure' of a piece of theatre is quite different from the failure of a prototype - the theatre is not meant to be 'taken seriously', as an actual version of community, but as 'pretend', taking its etymology seriously, as a reaching forward to hold (lightly) to what we might become.

This way of thinking about theatre is potent for the organisational project of organising and finding a way into the future. Shaw (2002) describes an account of organisational evolution in terms of following the patterns of ensemble improvisation. This she takes as more than a metaphor, basing it on a shrewd understanding of the practice of improvisation - patterns of listening and responding to an unfolding context that simultaneously shapes and constrains the participants.

This way of working does not displace design thinking in organisational work. But it does pose the question of whether there are circumstances where the work that is actually taking place and the work that needs to take place, might not be better described as a theatrical act, with all of the affordances that this entails.

One question stands out, particularly in the framing given to design from the perspective of an organisation, notably one with financial imperatives. Would a theatre-based account be equally in danger of becoming 'instrumentalised' by business - of having to be a servant

to the money? On one hand the outlook is gloomy, in that people seem to place themselves under such subjections at the earliest opportunity, and there is nothing in theatre that would perforce prevent this. But on the other hand, the history of theatre does offer a model of symbiosis with, rather than subjection to, parallel political processes. Because theatrical exploration is a part of the unfolding understanding of 'how to go on together' (Shaw 2002), it will always have the potential to outflank the singleminded forces of economic logic. Which fate it will follow is an open question as the field is explored.

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