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What if Disruption Could Increase Creativity?

The Potential of Power and Influence in the
Design Strategy

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What if Disruption Could Increase Creativity? The Potential of Power and Influence in the Design Strategy

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Abstract: Either dealing with products, communication or services, design projects present an increased complexity that calls for the collaboration of multidisciplinary experts (Sonnenwald 1996)(Brereto et al. 1996)(Larsson 2003). This generates a large pool of creative ideas coming from different perspectives, which have to be stirred towards a concrete outcome. In the same time an important factor that leads to a successful project is the team management and the apprehension of the frictions that could influence the creative flow of the collaboration (Sawyer 2008) (Gulbrandsen 2004). After a review of several literatures which have taken into consideration the importance of conflict mitigation and the role of designers as process facilitator in the creative team (Skov 2002)(Pinilla 2006), the paper intends to address the following question: what if the exercise of power and influence could lead to more innovative solutions, revealing meaningful contributions otherwise discarded in the effort to reach consensus? The main objective of the paper is to propose a different perspective on the creative design management, suggesting that controversy can be seen as an important factor, which has the potential to control the leadership within the team and reveal new alternatives in the design process.

Keywords: disruption, design strategy, creative destruction

Introduction

Moving from its historic background rooted in the philosophy of Bauhaus, design has become a system of thinking successfully applied in the management and business innovation (Cross 2001)(Findeli 2001)(Lawson 2006). Some of the best known examples are the collaboration between the design firm IDEO and Rottman's School of Management, and the D.School at Stanford University. The experience gathered from the application of the design thinking approach in the corporate world, has been reported, almost in parallel, from two different perspectives by Roger Martin (2009) and Tim Brown (2009). The design thinking paradigm has been outlined for its creative contribution in the multidisciplinary teams emphasizing the role of the designer as a mediator or facilitator in the relation with the clients (Ventura 2011).

In this process one of the most important creative factors was the designer's capability to acquire an experiential knowledge and transfer it in the form of conceptual models. This type of approach allows designers to manage the complexity of the projects and tackle its constraints. While initially the term design management referred to the relation between the designer and the client, furthermore the term acquired different interpretations according to the position of the designer with respect to the institution, as an external agent or as integral part of the management team (Best 2006) (Gloppen 2009). Depending on the circumstances designers have to reconcile the tensions between client's demand and brand image and the personal imprint on the final outcome (Cautella and Zurlo 2011), designers' capabilities and skills gained an important leadership role in envisioning management strategies at institutional level (Gloppen 2009).

Considering all the above, the paper argues that the true potential of the design approach is not to level the differences and to bridge the gaps of understanding, but on contrary to generate disruption and engage a profound transformation by challenging unanimously accepted rules and conventions. In this sense the design is seen not only as an attitude imbedded in the skills of the business professionals (Bolland and al 2008) but, as Michlewski, (2008) points out, as an added value brought by designers to the organizations in which they are integrated.

In the academic context the attitude towards change has a direct impact on the performance of the design students and their preparation to face the challenges outside the school, by teaching them to question the given norms and learn to disobey (Suteu et. al. 2013). Further on, the internal dynamics of large academic institutions, as Becher and Trowler (1989) have shown, can be seen an extremely challenging environment in which the strategy of survival is prevailing in many cases. This has been echoed by Maiocchi (2011), who argued that the preparation of young design professionals is strongly influenced by the internal and external interferences and whom proposed an interpretation of the social dynamics in the academic system from an anthropologic perspective.

The paper brings to light the psychological factors of the design strategy within the teams with a particular attention towards the power play and the influence exercised by designers. It is necessary to underline that the term “strategy” is considered with its original meaning that delineates a plan of actions designed to achieve an overall goal.

From Design Management to Design Attitude

The Function of the Design Activity

Perhaps one of the most influential design writings is Viktor Papanek’s “Design for the real world” (1985). Years before the sustainability concern at global level, Papanek signaled the importance of the design as a discipline, and the radical changes brought by it in an almost imperceptible way. Far from being in awe for the versatility and the potential of the design professionals, Papanek acknowledged design as a danger and pointed out the enormous responsibility designers have. This way of reasoning comes from being conscious of the artificial alienation from the innate human capability to create tools for specific personal needs, making use of the resources at hand. In order to pinpoint that design has to be meaningful and therefore functional following relevant user needs, he proposes six dimensions of function.

These are: the METHOD or the interaction of tools, process and materials in the making of a product; USE and the relevance of the product designed, NEED and making the clear distinction between the personal preferences or desires and the final purpose of the artifact produced, TELESIS, or how to plan the process as to reflect the “times and conditions” from the environment; the ASSOCIATIONS suggested by the product and the meaning the product might acquire accordingly, and finally the AESTHETICS and the pleasurable meaning and the beauty of the product (Papanek, 1985).

It is important to stress out that although the model proposed by Papanek was initially developed from the product design perspective, it essentially applies to a system of thinking specific to all areas of the design discipline. His visionary ideas and the concern for the threats of the meaningless practice of design, have been further on amplified by Margolin, in the context of sustainable design agenda:

The primary question for the design professions thus becomes not what new products to make, but how to reinvent design culture so that worthwhile projects are more clearly identified and likely to be realized (Margolin, 1998, 86).

Both Papanek and Margolin stress out the need for a radical paradigm shift, in the design discipline, reacting to the traditional approach and introducing new starting assumptions in considering the meaning of design. In this respect we argue that the starting point for a change of mentality in the design culture is what Papanek calls the TELESIS dimension which “must reflect the times and conditions that have given rise to it, and must fit in with the general human socio-economic order in which it is to operate”. In the present crisis conditions, the role of designer is to capture the stimuli coming from the surrounding environment and deconstruct the circumstances rather than attempting to fix irrelevant problems.

First and foremost the challenge this paper intends to tackle, is the change in the imaginary of “good design”, reconsidering the disruption brought by the design approach, and demystifying the beneficial potential of the design thinking. This is in order to dismantle a stereotype and trying to offer an alternative reading lens for the function and meaning of the design activity.

Consensus Versus Disruption in the Real World

The complexity of the project teams triggers important communication issues and therefore a continuous negotiation process. Many literatures have reported the important role of the designer in integrating the specific disciplinary knowledge of the participants in a collaborative dynamic (Sonnenwald 1996). In particular Brereton stressed out the role of social interaction and the impact of consensus in shaping the final product (Brereton et. al. 1996). The importance of creating shared meanings, brings forward the continuous negotiation process in the creation of a shared understanding, and as Larsson (2003) shows, design is a social activity, in which the common ground has to be built and re-built according to the social circumstances in the working environment. In this context partially shared territories emerge on temporary basis (Gregory 2001) and boundary objects or negotiating artifacts give shape to the object of design (Buciarelli 2002).

In this case the negotiation process can be seen from two different perspectives: first as a collaborative process with a fairly stable characteristic, in which consensus prevails, and that encounters occasional breakdowns, and second as a state of unsettlement in which consensus is seen as a temporary agreement. The breakdown is intended as outlined by Flores et al. as

...any interruption in the smooth unexamined flow of action. It includes events that participants might assess as negative (as when the pen you are writing with runs out of ink) or as a positive new opportunity (e.g., a stray useful thought that interrupts your flow of writing or a friend knocking at the door)” (Flores et al. 1988, 156).

While the first perspective is usually preferred in the design collaboration literature, it also presents an idealistic facet of the reality. The second perspective however, comes closer to the actual struggle encountered in real-life situations in which the circumstances are in a continuous flow. It is at this point that the disruption has to be understood as a liberating factor, unleashing tensions and making place for creativity. To better understand the emergence and impact of conflict it is necessary to consult the group creativity findings and reveal the potentially beneficial aspects of conflict.

Charland et. al. show a critical view of the design thinking promoters such as IDEO design firm, that explicitly asks participants in brainstorming sessions to avoid criticism. They argue that groups that share an optimal relational experience tend to avoid conflict and therefore display a lack of competitiveness. The danger of this type of group dynamic stays in the leveling of controversial issues and the flattening of differences. The minority dissent rooted in cognitive conflict is shown to enhance creativity and group performance. Moreover as Nemeth et al. explain “people exposed to minority dissent search for information on all sides of the issue; utilize all strategies in the service of performance; and detect solutions that otherwise would have gone undetected” (Nemeth et. al. 2004 368).

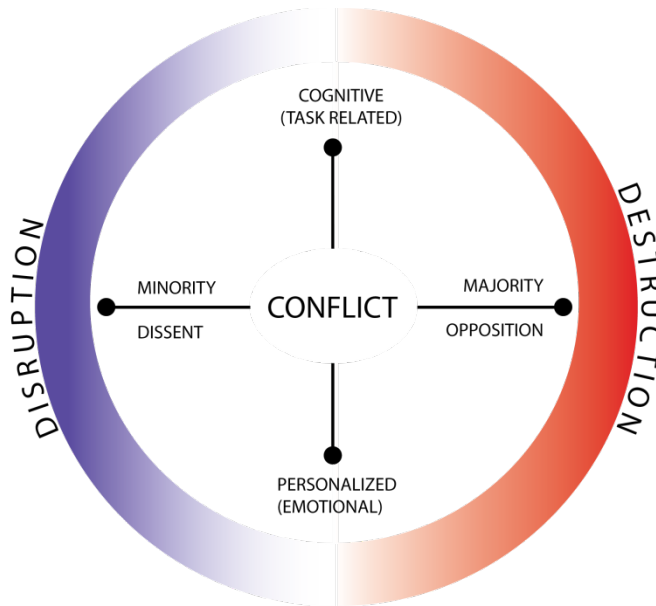


Figure 1: Conflict as an Important Leverage Node Between Disruption and Destruction

Seeing all the above the paper suggests that the potential of disruption has to be leveraged according to several parameters such as minority or majority dissent of the participants and cognitive or task and personalized or emotional conflict. The delicate balance of the conflict factors sets the boundary between the disruption of a creative flow and its complete alteration or destruction. Acknowledging this differences helps to envision and anticipate to some extent the potential failure of a design leadership strategy and increases the level of control over the process.

Creative Destruction as a Design Attitude

In order to better understand the potential of dissent and controversy as a factor of change at a larger scale, it is necessary to make reference to the term “creative destruction” coined by Schumpeter (1942). In brief, creative destruction refers to the incessant product and process innovation mechanism by which new production units replace outdated ones (Cabbalero and Hammour 1996) and in the context of this paper it delineates a phenomenon that might occur spontaneously as well as being consciously provoked and controlled. This last stance is the terrain in which design moves from a way of thinking to become a pro-active critical attitude geared towards questioning the outdated patterns of thinking. To sustain this argument, Abernathy and Clark bring forward one of the best examples in the history of the design practice, the T Model by Ford, built in 1908. In this case the breakthrough design is integrated with a new way of technological thinking but also a breakdown of the existing linkages between producers and costumers, and the disruption of the obsolete competencies (Abernathy and Clark 1985, 8-9).

The same principle applies in the recent example of the hospitality platform Airbnb which reached a stock exchange value of \$ 10 billion, surpassing the Hyatt Hotels Corporation (Harpaz 2014). As in the historic example of the T Model, the company disrupted the obsolete market dynamics by introducing an innovative business model, with a value proposition that identified and addressed up to date user needs taking advantage of the ubiquity of the digital technology.

We look at this kind of radical change in terms of a cyclical renewal that can only occur in determined circumstances. The design attitude has therefore to be seen having three different contributions: first as identifying the necessary circumstances that will allow the change, second

providing the stimuli that will enable the disruption and third controlling the creative destruction process. At global scale socio-economic situation invites a reflection upon the insights coming from Schumpeter's view on the crisis:

...depressions are not simply evils, which we might attempt to suppress, but...forms of something which has to be done, namely, adjustment to...change (Schumpeter 1934, 16).

The quote above reflects the imaginary of a constant struggle, a fight for re-shaping a local and global ecology even before attempting to seek balance between the living organisms and the environment in which they inhabit.

Design as a Strategy of Disruption

Contrasting the design thinking approach, the design attitude operates as a deconstructive strategy in itself and not as a tool employed to reinforce the managerial skills. By using the lateral thinking specific to the design training and seeking the meaning of the conflict situations, the design principles have the potential to develop the necessary communication codes that enable control and leadership of the creative destruction process. More specifically thinking of design as a pro-active attitude empowers designers to take leadership and use design not as an accessory to support the established norms but as a strategy of disruption that can open opportunities for change.

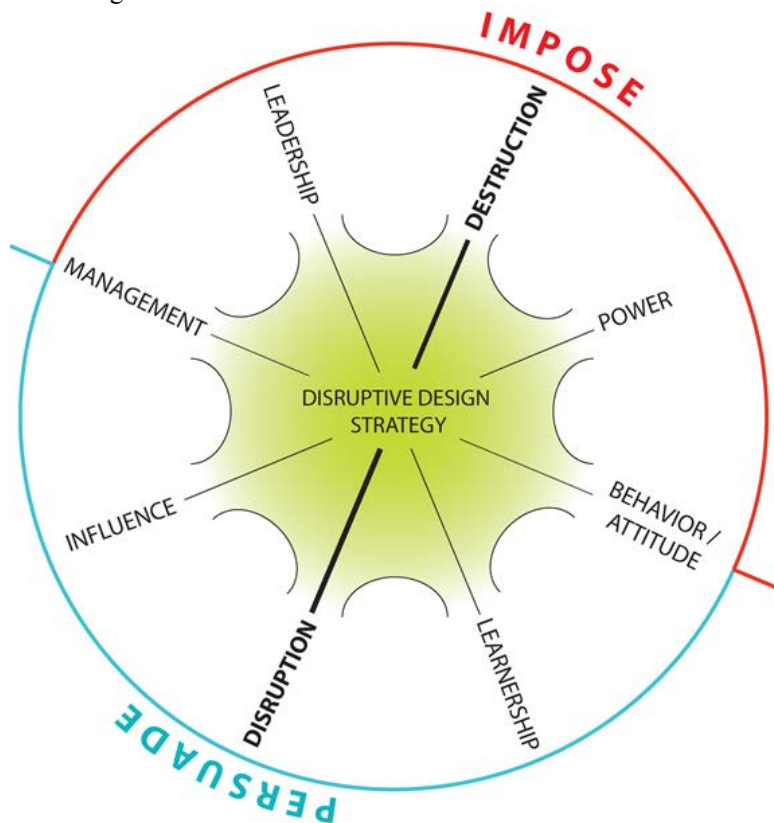


Figure 2: Disruptive Design Strategy and Tensions

To fully understand the potential and limits of a disruptive design strategy it is useful to divide the possible actions into two different modalities (fig.3). The disruption, means in this sense an alteration of the present norms and rules in order to influence and manage the territory of intervention through persuasion, and requires indirect actions that are not necessarily explicit. This kind of process calls for the continuous adjustment to the changing conditions, learning how to maintain the advantage no matter the circumstances. An aggravation of the conflict brings to the complete destruction of a reasoning system. In order to achieve destruction and therefore a radical fracture with the old norms, an attitude of leadership has to prevail through the imposition of power. Contrasting the management of the internal dynamics of the group, the leadership behavior and attitude aims at a more rapid change.

In Design for the real world, Papanek uses the concept of Telesis to explain how products have to reflect the true conditions of the environment and translate them into meaningful design concepts. He gives as an example the crude appropriation of the Japanese artifacts without caring for the behavior and affective value embedded in them, merely following a fashion trend (Papanek 1985).

In sociology though, the term, defines “the progress consciously planned and produced by intelligently directed effort” (Ward1906, 181). The progress of the disruptive design strategy is shaped by the tensions between several factors such as the exercise of power and influence, the behavior and management that are related to a negotiation of professional design principles and way of reasoning. For this reason the actual context in which this negotiation occurs is more related to the specific historical moment of global crisis rather than an actual precise working environment such a firm or an agency. The physical context in this sense influences and provides stimulus but is not determinant in the disruption process.

Design Leadership, Balancing Power and Influence

This setup of a larger historical framework allows a speculative parallel between the struggle of the design process in the context of the current crisis of the production, distribution and managerial models and the presence of political crisis and conflict. This concerns global strategies of change such as the ones applied in warfare and includes the tactics that help exercising local power. The difference between strategy and tactics is particularly relevant in the context of the design management and leadership where, roughly put, the capability to plan has increasingly become equally important to the skills involved in “doing” or craft. What is most important in creating a strategy is perhaps the actual structure behind it. The kernel of a good strategy, as Rumelt explains it, can be drafted according to a basic pattern that follows three main steps:

1. A diagnosis: an explanation of the nature of the challenge. A good diagnosis simplifies the, often overwhelming, complexity of reality by identifying certain aspects of the situation as being the critical ones.
2. A guiding policy: an overall approach chosen to cope with or overcome the obstacles identified in the diagnosis.
3. Coherent actions: steps that are coordinated with one another to support the accomplishment of the guiding policy (Rumelt, 2011, 9).

This very concise synthesis doesn't include the management and implementation of the overall strategy and the consequences triggered by adopting it. One of the main issues coming from that is the inherent use of power as the essential element needed to catalyze intent into action (Bennis and Nanus, 1985, 6). Moreover the politics involved in exercising power is, as Pfeffer underlines one of the most delicate, feared and criticized aspects of managing and

governing organizations. He argues that not only power is the main agent of change and renewal of an organizational system but that innovative processes require politics - in either an implicit or explicit manner:

There are politics involved in innovation and change. And unless and until we are willing to come to terms with organizational power and influence, and admit that the skills of getting things done are as important as the skills of figuring out what to do, our organizations will fall further and further behind (Pfeffer 1992, 32).

From this perspective the author challenges two of the most common organizational management strategies, the hierarchical, authoritarian system, and the organizational culture based on creating a common vision and argues that both models somehow fail to engage into innovative changes within the organization. While in the first case the authority is no longer credible and lost its effectiveness the second model is difficult to implement in the case of increasingly heterogeneous organizations and agencies, with a considerable gender, ethnic and race diversity. He proposes the implementation of an alternative management strategy based on the implementation of power and influence in several steps:

- Decide what your goals are, what are you trying to accomplish.
- Diagnose patterns of dependence and interdependence; what individuals are influential and important in your achieving your goal?
- What are their points of view likely to be? How will they feel about what you are trying to do?
- What are their power bases? Which of them is more influential in the decision?
- What are your bases of power and influence?
- What bases of influence can you develop, to gain more control over the situation?
- Which of the various strategies and tactics for exercising power seem most appropriate and are likely to be effective, given the situation you confront?
- Based on the above, chose a course of action to get something done. (Pfeffer 1992, 44)

Considering the above guidelines, it is necessary to stress out how the power and influence paradigm presented above, follows closely recommendations for the structure of a good strategy mentioned before by Rumelt. This is even more interesting when considering Pfeffer's claim that "the use of power and influence [puts] and emphasis on method rather than structure" (Pfeffer 1992, 44). The comparison of the two models brings forward the close attention given to individuals' behavior and the social environment in which they interact, and the readiness of the leader to adjust to the unfolding events.

Paradoxically the scenario outlines an anthropocentric facet of power leadership, in which the dominant advantage has to be constantly negotiated by the leader according to the circumstances. The exercise of power and influence implies an increased responsibility and the capability to assume and maintain a competitive advantage. Finally Pfeffer shows how it is possible to wield power and influence without necessarily having or using formal authority. For this purpose an important distinction has to be made between managing incoming situations and adopting a proactive attitude and behavior, based on power and influence and geared towards the

disruption of outdated organizational paradigms. The role of the leader and the typology of leadership that can support creative destruction has to integrate an adaptive behavior specific to transformational leaders.

Leadership and Learnership

Several organizational management literatures have outlined the different forms of leadership and the emergence of the transformational leadership based on a ongoing process of learning (Atwood and Mora 2010) and contrast it with transactional leadership, based on transactions between managers and employees, conducted according to the personal interest of the leader (Bass 1991, 20) (Tucker, 2004). Enlarging the frame of action, the distributed leadership model aims to include different hierarchical levels within the organization and bridge interdependency between various leaders (Spillane 2004). The learnership model proposed by Cooksey (2003) (fig. 3) is perhaps the most relevant to help draft a definition of the role of leader that exercises a disruptive design strategy, and that is because it emphasizes the importance of the adaptive behavior as an asset of the leader. This gives an important value and attention to the emergent leaders and the capability to become a leading figure no matter the level of experience within the organization.

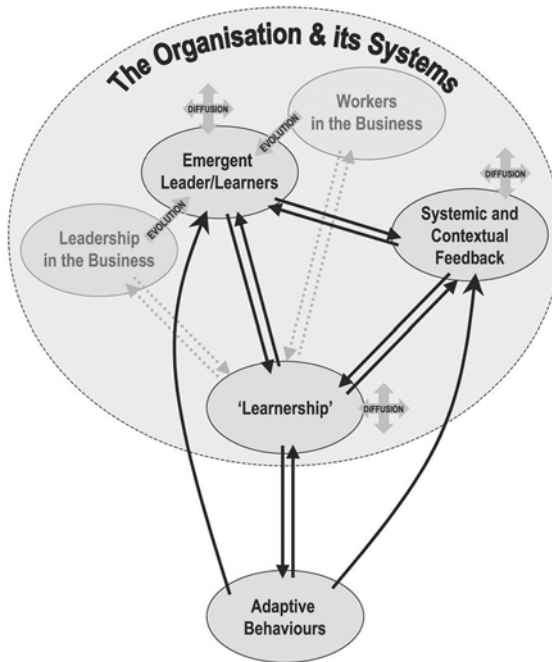


Figure 3: Leadership / Learnership model, (Cooksey 2003)

This is also pointed out by Bass who enlists some of the main characteristic of the transformational leader characteristics such as charisma, inspiration, personal stimulation and individual consideration of the employees. It is important to note that the exercise of power and influence as shown in Pfeffer’s management strategies requires the above qualities in order to be effectively implemented and the learnership capabilities to be consistently maintained.

Conclusion

Why Disruptive Design is Power

Taking a step aside from the imaginary of design as a process of mitigation and concealment, the present paper had two objectives: first to pinpoint the state of global crisis and the necessity to adapt to the failure of the outdated mass production and organizational systems and second to advance, literary a call for arms to reconsidering the true nature of the struggle in the context of the design discipline. For this reason, the disruptive design paradigm has been introduced as an alternative, radical strategy that can induce change.

Starting from criticizing the somehow limited impact of the negotiation in terms of mitigation of conflict it was shown how in the process of reaching consensus, many of the most innovative and courageous ideas might be discarded for the sake of the mutual understanding. This changes however if the focus shifts on the opportunities brought by conflict, and the breakthrough triggered by breakdowns in a system. Enlarging the perspective, the balance between disruption and destruction have been represented in terms of a network of tensions between different factors such as management and behavior / attitude, leadership and learnership, power and influence. These constitute the parameters that help understanding the strategies, tactics and actions as well as draft the typology and role of the leader in the implementation of the disruptive design paradigm.

Although for the purpose of the paper the organizational management has been taken into consideration, the argument can be extended to social or cultural systems. To sum up, the importance of the mere awareness about a state of crisis and emergency at small and large scale, has been brilliantly outlined in 2004, the Canadian author Jane Jacobs, in her seminal book "Dark age ahead". Talking about the emergence and failure of cultures in a historical perspective she writes:

...if the hazard is rot from within a dominant culture, or its failure to adapt, obviously the pressing immediate task is for the society to be sufficiently self-aware to recognize the threat of accumulating cultural weaknesses and try to correct them, and so stabilize its complex cultural network (Jacobs 2004, 174).

In our case, the culture of design is more and more threatened from within; it is only through engaging in a radical, disruption that the accumulated weaknesses could be evaluated and dealt with.

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