

*New Design, New Philosophy, the Speculation of
“Design” is Power, the Dark Side. Critical thinking
through Negotiation, Politics and Leadership*

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Critical Speculations: Design Discipline as Paradox.

Design has witnessed a transformation in its validity, scope and methods.(Cross, 2001)(Findeli, 2001)(Lawson, 2006). As a consequence, the attention shifted from the process involved in the practice, to the design as a mindset and attitude and more recently to the disruptive potential of the design approach. Nevertheless many issues that stay at the very foundation of the design as a discipline have been neglected or simply have not been taken into consideration. Perhaps one of the most powerful, and not fully understood, definitions of design comes from Victor Papanek and states that “design [is] a conscious effort to impose meaningful order”(1985). Interesting enough the definition refers to an authoritarian act of imposing rather than finding a meaningful order. The context in which design activities evolve will therefore be shown as a stimulus and not a determinant in the thinking process, emphasising the autonomy of the constructed thought in continuous change according to the circumstances (Maturana, Varela, 1992).

This Proposal starts from the hypothesis that design has an unexplored dimension that refers to the power dimension that can be exercised through design. This assumption helps us focus on the “dark” side that deals with the politics and power play, that has a major influence in the actual design process.

This change in perspective helps to stress out a common view about “design” as an act of a sub-servant discipline, reacting to ideas from economic, societal and industrial systems rather

than influencing them. Instead, by changing viewpoints, becomes a carrier of power, capable to create disturbance and radically influence other environments. In this process of experiential learning the adaptive capacity is built by reducing the delay between anticipation, decision and action correlating the holistic perception of circumstances with their consequences.

This speculation seeks to explore and open a critical conversation about these research questions:

How to acknowledge, anticipate and negotiate the power flow in the design discipline?

How to understand the cycle of power activation, manifestation and preservation?

How to coach and empower an adaptive, leading and learning vision in design education?

The argument is based on the assumption that the act of “change” doesn’t have a positive or negative meaning, but it is simply necessary and present in each social and organizational system. In this respect the thesis supports the concept of antifragility, defined by N. Taleb as the capability to embrace randomness and uncertainty generated by the creation, preservation and destruction of power and being capable to navigate rather than oppose them (Taleb, 2012).

Seeking relevance in randomness is perhaps best expressed in Sun-Tzu’s words: “[i]f we do not know what we need to know, then everything looks like important” (Sun-Tzu, 2013).

The proposal will unfold in three parts and the concept of power is introduced and studied in three instances: its potential, manifestation and preservation in a cycle immersed within a self-generated, autopoietic system (Varela, 1984). One of the main concerns is to argue the importance of the study of power in design from a multitude of perspectives, integrating theoretical insights from biology, psychology, sociology, social and political science with organizational and war theories.

Singularity 1

First concept concentrates on the visibility of the power dynamics within a autopoietic system and the discovery through observation of the characteristics and quality of the interactions within the system. The **power** is explained in its latent dimension of concealed or underlying patterns of potentials (Rummel, 1979), which await the creation of proper tensions. It is underlined how an important role is played by the figure of active observer, determining the perception of the potentiality and influencing the level of entropy by introducing a factor of disorder. This helps anticipating the emergence of design leadership role.

Singularity 2

Second concept introduces the activation of power and the conflict process that plays a role in the passage from the latent mode to its manifestation. In this chapter the role of the leader will be shown as determinant for the activation of power. The different types of leadership will be explained not only in terms of engagement but also in terms of influence, manipulation, and creating perturbation and controversy (Latour, 1988) for the scope of inducing a power flow and provoke its manifestation. This brings forward one of the principles of martial arts that makes use of the force displaced by the opponent to create a momentum in one's own advantage.

Singularity 3

Third concept tackles the tensions put in movement by the power or more precise the manifestation of such forces in provoking actions. In this part the following questions will be addressed: first how to influence and control the manifestation of power with criticism, second how the critical perception and cynicism (Sloterdijk, 1988) can change the meaning of the power manifestation, and third how to propose new meanings in the state of ambiguity and entropy created as a consequence of the manifestation. Criticism is shown as an important element to induce conflict, which acts as a balancing element between disruption and destruction. In this circumstance design leadership can be seen as providing navigation insights rather than tracing clear directions. The main difference between the two concepts stays in the versatility and adaptability of the navigation metaphor that introduces the importance of imagine anomalies and chance seeking (Bardone, 2012) in the leading-learning process.

Divergent Conclusion, a critical Speculation.

The conclusion proposes a different meaning of the design that as a provocative activity that most of the time induces conflict and creates problems. To better understand this perspective we need to accept the critical thinking framework how change provoking processes have to be supported by EMPOWERMENT activities in design research and EDUCATION. This paradigm shift helps us to see “design is power” as particularly relevant at advanced COACHING levels (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980). This allows to draft an unfinished model for ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP (Heifetz & Linsky, 2009) and experiential leading & learning training (Cooksey, 2003). By comparing the different methods in design research it is suggested that the theoretical results of the discussion can contribute to an upcoming generation of design research methods that focus on learning and leadership. Finally it is suggested that future

work exploring the nature of power flow in design, can take into consideration the paradoxical facet of design like ANTITHESIS between its POTENTIALITY and the PRESERVATION OF CHANGE (Agamben, 1999). (Figure 1)

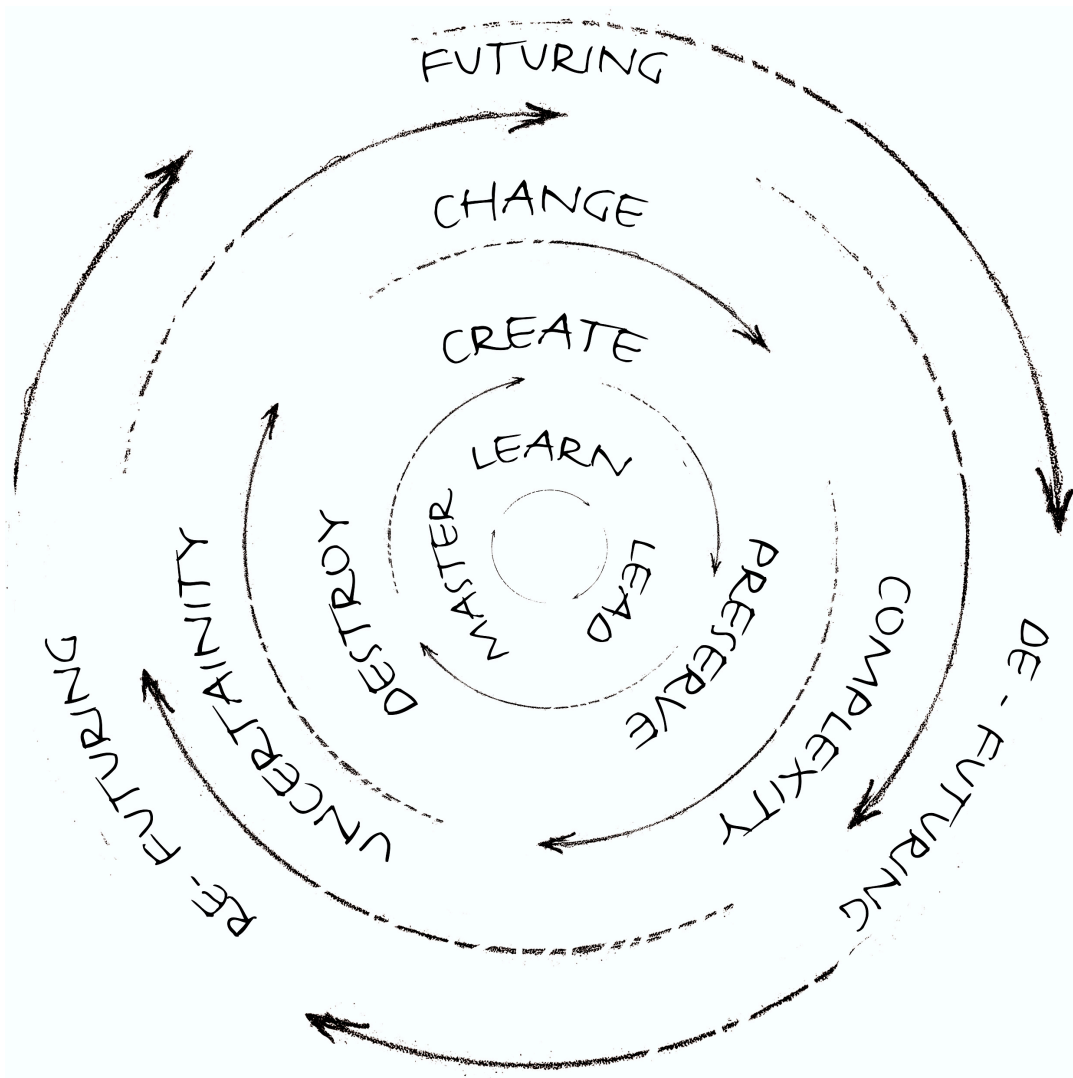


Figure 1. “power flow in design” awareness for future critical leaders.

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