Discursive Design:

Critical, Speculative, and Alternative Things

Bruce M. Tharp
and
Stephanie M. Tharp

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Good design provides solutions to problems. It improves our buildings, medical equipment, clothing, and kitchen utensils, among other objects. But what if design could also improve societal problems by prompting positive ideological change? In this book, Bruce and Stephanie Tharp survey recent critical design practices and propose a new, more inclusive field of socially minded practice: discursive design. While many consider good design to be unobtrusive, intuitive, invisible, and undemanding intellectually, discursive design instead targets the intellect, prompting self-reflection and igniting the imagination. Discursive design expands the boundaries of how we can use design—how objects are, in effect, good(s) for thinking.

Discursive Design invites us to see objects in a new light, to understand more than their basic form and utility. Beyond the different foci of critical design, speculative design, design fiction, interrogative design, and adversarial design, Bruce and Stephanie Tharp establish a more comprehensive, unifying vision as well as innovative methods. They not only offer social criticism but also explore how objects can, for example, be used by counselors in therapy sessions, by town councils to facilitate pre-vote discussions, by activists seeking engagement, and by institutions and industry to better understand the values, beliefs, and attitudes of those whom they serve. Discursive design sparks new ways of thinking, and it is only through new thinking that our sociocultural futures can change.

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Series Foreword viii
Acknowledgments xii

Part I: Discursive Design: In Theory

Introduction

1 Why Write Such a Book? 5
2 Why Read Such a Book? 17

Background

3 So, What's Wrong with Design? 31
4 What Is the Four-Fields Framework? 43
5 What Can and Can't a Four-Field Approach Do? 57

Foundation

6 What Is Discourse, Discoursing, and Discursive Design? 73
7 What Isn't Discursive Design? 83
8 How Do Discursive Objects Communicate—In Theory? 101
9 How Do Discursive Objects Communicate—In Practice? 111
10 What Are the Domains of Discursive Design? 121

Theorizing Practice

11 **Intention:** What's a Discursive Designer to Do? 135
12 **Understanding:** What's a Discursive Designer to Know? 153
13 **Message:** What's a Discursive Designer to Say? 165
14 **Scenario:** How Does a Discursive Designer Set the Stage for Discourse? 185
15 **Artifact:** What's a Discursive Designer to Make? 211
16 **Audience:** To Whom Does a Discursive Designer Speak? 235
17 **Context:** How Does a Discursive Designer Disseminate? 253
18 **Interaction:** How Does a Discursive Designer Connect? 269
19 **Impact:** What Effect Can a Discursive Designer Have? 285

Conclusion

20 What's Wrong with Discursive Design(ers) Today? 301
21 Where's Discursive Design Headed? 315

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Part II: Discursive Design: In Practice

Introduction

22 Introduction: In Practice 343

Discursive Designing: Nine Facets

23 **Intention:** In Practice 347

24 **Understanding:** In Practice 365

25 **Message:** In Practice 381

26 **Scenario:** In Practice 401

27 **Artifact:** In Practice 421

28 **Audience:** In Practice 441

29 **Context:** In Practice 455

30 **Interaction:** In Practice 473

31 **Impact:** In Practice 489

Case Studies

32 **Case Study:** Global Futures Lab 501

33 **Case Study:** (Im)possible Baby 519

34 **Case Study:** Umbrellas for the Civil but Discontent Man 531

Glossary 545

Interviewees and Interlocutors 557

Image Credits 561

Bibliography 581

Index 603

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Series Foreword

As professions go, design is relatively young. The practice of design predates professions. In fact, the practice of design—making things to serve a useful goal, making tools—predates the human race. Making tools is one of the attributes that made us human in the first place.

Design, in the most generic sense of the word, began over 2.5 million years ago when *Homo habilis* manufactured the first tools. Human beings were designing well before they began to walk upright. Four hundred thousand years ago, they began to manufacture spears. By forty thousand years ago, they had moved up to specialized tools.

Urban design and architecture came along ten thousand years ago in Mesopotamia. Interior architecture and furniture design probably emerged with them. It was another five thousand years before graphic design and typography got their start in Sumer with the development of cuneiform. After that, things picked up speed.

All goods and services are designed. The urge to design—to consider a situation, imagine a better situation, and act to create that improved situation—goes back to our prehuman ancestors. Making tools helped us to become what we are—design helped to make us human.

Today, the word "design" means many things. The common factor linking them is service, and designers are engaged in a service profession in which the results of their work meet human needs.

Design is first of all a process. The word "design" entered the English language in the 1500s as a verb, with the first written citation of the verb dated to the year 1548. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines the verb "design" as "to conceive and plan out in the mind; to have as a specific purpose; to devise for a specific function or end." Related to these is the act of drawing, with an emphasis on the nature of the drawing as a plan or map, as well as "to draw plans for; to create, fashion, execute or construct according to plan."

Half a century later, the word "design" began to be used as a noun, with the first cited use occurring in 1588. *Merriam-Webster's* defines the noun as "a particular purpose held in view by an individual or group; deliberate, purposive planning; a mental project or scheme in which means to an end are laid down." Here, too, purpose and planning toward desired outcomes are central. Among these are "a preliminary sketch or outline showing the main features of something to be executed; an underlying scheme that governs functioning, developing or unfolding; a plan or protocol for carrying out or accomplishing something; the arrangement of elements or details in a product or work of art." Today, we design large, complex processes, systems, and services, and we design organizations and structures to produce them. Design has changed considerably since our remote ancestors made the first stone tools.

At a highly abstract level, Herbert Simon's definition covers nearly all imaginable instances of design. To design, Simon writes, is to "[devise] courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones" (Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial,* 2nd ed., MIT Press, 1982, p. 129). Design, properly defined, is the entire process across the full range of domains required for any given outcome.

But the design process is always more than a general, abstract way of working. Design takes concrete form in the work of the service professions that meet human needs, a broad range of making

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and planning disciplines. These include industrial design, graphic design, textile design, furniture design, information design, process design, product design, interaction design, transportation design, educational design, systems design, urban design, design leadership, and design management, as well as architecture, engineering, information technology, and computer science.

These fields focus on different subjects and objects. They have distinct traditions, methods, and vocabularies that are used and put into practice by distinct and often dissimilar professional groups. Although the traditions dividing these groups are distinct, common boundaries sometimes form a border. Where this happens, they serve as meeting points where common concerns build bridges. Today, ten challenges uniting the design professions form such a set of common concerns.

Three performance challenges, four substantive challenges, and three contextual challenges bind the design disciplines and professions together as a common field. The performance challenges arise because all design professions

1. act on the physical world;
2. address human needs; and
3. generate the built environment.

In the past, these common attributes were not sufficient to transcend the boundaries of tradition. Today, objective changes in the larger world give rise to four substantive challenges that are driving convergence in design practice and research. These substantive challenges are

1. increasingly ambiguous boundaries between artifacts, structure, and process;
2. increasingly large-scale social, economic, and industrial frames;
3. an increasingly complex environment of needs, requirements, and constraints; and
4. information content that often exceeds the value of physical substance.

These challenges require new frameworks of theory and research to address contemporary problem areas while solving specific cases and problems. In professional design practice, we often find that solving design problems requires interdisciplinary teams with a transdisciplinary focus. Fifty years ago, a sole practitioner and an assistant or two might have solved most design problems; today, we need groups of people with skills across several disciplines and the additional skills that enable professionals to work with, listen to, and learn from each other as they solve problems.

Three contextual challenges define the nature of many design problems today. Although many design problems function at a simpler level, these issues affect many of the major design problems that challenge us, and these challenges also affect simple design problems linked to complex social, mechanical, or technical systems. These issues are

1. a complex environment in which many projects or products cross the boundaries of several organizations, stakeholders, producers, and user groups;
2. projects or products that must meet the expectations of many organizations, stakeholders, producers, and users; and
3. demands at every level of production, distribution, reception, and control.

These ten challenges require a qualitatively different approach to professional design practice than was the case in earlier times. Past environments were simpler. They made simpler demands. Individual experience and personal development were sufficient for depth and substance in professional practice. While experience and development are

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still necessary, they are no longer sufficient. Most of today's design challenges require analytic and synthetic planning skills that cannot be developed through practice alone.

Professional design practice today involves advanced knowledge. This knowledge is not solely a higher level of professional practice. It is also a qualitatively different form of professional practice that emerges in response to the demands of the information society and the knowledge economy to which it gives rise.

In a 2010 essay ("Why Design Education Must Change," *Core77*, November 26, 2010), Donald Norman challenged the premises and practices of the design profession. In the past, designers operated on the belief that talent and a willingness to jump into problems with both feet gave them an edge in solving problems. Norman writes:

> In the early days of industrial design, the work was primarily focused upon physical products. Today, however, designers work on organizational structure and social problems, on interaction, service, and experience design. Many problems involve complex social and political issues. As a result, designers have become applied behavioral scientists, but they are woefully under-educated for the task. Designers often fail to understand the complexity of the issues and the depth of knowledge already known. They claim that fresh eyes can produce novel solutions, but then they wonder why these solutions are seldom implemented, or if implemented, why they fail. Fresh eyes can indeed produce insightful results, but the eyes must also be educated and knowledgeable. Designers often lack the requisite understanding. Design schools do not train students about these complex issues, about the interlocking complexities of human and social behavior, about the behavioral sciences, technology, and business. There is little or no training in science, the scientific method, and experimental design.

This is not industrial design in the sense of designing products but rather industry-related design, design as thought and action for solving problems and imagining new futures. This MIT Press series of books emphasizes strategic design to create value through innovative products and services, and it emphasizes design as service through rigorous creativity, critical inquiry, and an ethics of respectful design. This rests on a sense of understanding, empathy, and appreciation for people, for nature, and for the world we shape through design. Our goal as editors is to develop a series of vital conversations that help designers and researchers to serve business, industry, and the public sector for positive social and economic outcomes.

We will present books that bring a new sense of inquiry to design, helping to shape a more reflective and stable design discipline able to support a stronger profession grounded in empirical research, generative concepts, and the solid theory that gives rise to what W. Edwards Deming described as profound knowledge (Deming, *The New Economics for Industry, Government, Education,* MIT, Center for Advanced Engineering Study, 1993). For Deming, who was a physicist, engineer, and designer, profound knowledge comprised systems thinking and the understanding of processes embedded in systems; an understanding of variation and the tools we need to understand variation; a theory of knowledge; and a foundation in human psychology. This is the beginning of "deep design"—the union of deep practice with robust intellectual inquiry.

A series on design thinking and theory faces the same challenges that we face as a profession. On one level, design is a general human process that we use to understand and to shape our world. Nevertheless, we cannot address this process or the world in its general, abstract form. Rather, we meet the challenges of design in specific challenges, addressing problems or ideas in a situated context. The challenges we face as designers today are as diverse as the problems clients bring us. We are involved in design for economic anchors, economic continuity, and economic growth. We design for urban needs and rural needs, for social development and creative communities. We are involved with environmental

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sustainability and economic policy, agriculture, competitive crafts for export, competitive products and brands for micro-enterprises, developing new products for bottom-of-pyramid markets and redeveloping old products for mature or wealthy markets. Within the framework of design, we are also challenged to design for extreme situations, for biotech, nanotech, and new materials, and design for social business, as well as conceptual challenges for worlds that do not yet exist such as the world beyond the Kurzweil singularity—and for new visions of the world that does exist.

The Design Thinking, Design Theory series from the MIT Press will explore these issues and more—meeting them, examining them, and helping designers to address them.

Join us in this journey.

Ken Friedman
Erik Stolterman
Editors, Design Thinking, Design Theory Series

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Bruce and Stephanie Tharp run the design studio Materious, established in 2005, where they have done work for such companies as Ligne Roset, Moët Hennessy, the Art Institute of Chicago, Crate & Barrel, and Kikkerland. They are both Associate Professors in the Penny W. Stamps School of Art & Design at the University of Michigan.

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Design Thinking, Design Theory series

Designed by Matthew Terdich and Ashley Nelson

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"Discursive design makes us think, talk, and question. This fascinating book offers designers both a theory and a tool for exploring what and how to communicate. I love this book!"

Ellen Lupton,
author of
The Senses: Design Beyond Vision

"*Discursive Design* offers an important contribution toward understanding modes of design practice that function outside a commercial design paradigm. Through a compelling synthesis of literature, theory, and annotated design examples, Bruce and Stephanie Tharp introduce and negotiate a range of work conceived and actioned to leverage design's discursive agency. They do this with a critical lens that questions the impact and limitations of a discursive and critical practice. This book should be key reading for anyone working to understand the boundaries of orthodox design practice."

Matt Malpass,
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Central Saint Martins,
University of the Arts London;
author of
Critical Design in Context: History, Theory, and Practices

"At a time when design is becoming increasingly eclectic, expansive, and ambitious, *Discursive Design* makes a timely and constructive contribution to the debate about its future by charting the opportunities and challenges that designers will face as they engage with ever more complex and urgent social, political, and environmental issues."

Alice Rawsthorn,
author of
Design as an Attitude

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