

Design thinking: Simplicity is the answer to complexity

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Back to Basics

Today, in a very overloaded information environment everything become complex because we are dealing with a complex set of information, multi-layered meaning and convoluted responses. We just overlook the fundamentals because they seem very simple and “basic”. But simplicity in reality is the answer to complexity. Basics has the power to solve any complex problem. When you evolve as a designer you learn so many things, new models, tools, techniques. learn so many things, new models, tools, techniques, in fact you have the whole arsenal to deal with any deal with the complex problems. But somewhere in the process we lose the discretion to apply that arsenal. Even for a simple problem we start thinking with a complex mind. In this article I will take you through the basic definition of design and its disciplines, especially Graphic Design. We will also understand the design process, its approaches and design methodology.

DESIGN IS EVERYWHERE

Just look around yourself. Look at nature. You will discover that there is a design in every aspect of nature. The whole universe comprises of an intricate design. It is so unique in itself that it leaves us spellbound. We can see how everything works in complete synchronisation and harmony to each other. There is a design in everything around us. From a simple chair we sit on, to a complex washing machine, computer, microwave or a water filter, there is a design in everything. The tall buildings and the Metro trains you see around yourself, all follow a design. Everything, whether manmade or natural, has a design.

You will see that design has been defined in a number of ways by different people. And this is what happens when we talk of something that is creative. Some of these definitions try to classify design, while others try to explain how design is different from other activities. Some other definitions also try and explain what good design is.

Now, what is design? Let us see what some famous people have to say about this. Steve Jobs, founder of Apple Inc., said, “Design is not just what it looks like or feels like. Design is how it works.” According to Charles Eames, a famous industrial designer, “Design is a plan for arranging elements in such a way as best to accomplish a specific purpose.” Let me now give you a simple definition. Design is what links creativity and originality.

It is design that shapes ideas to become practical and attractive options for the users. When creativity is organized towards a specific end, it is nothing but design. It is a methodical thought-out plan of action for a specific objective. And what is the objective here? It is the creation of an object, a system or a logistic.

So now we have put it in simple terms – whenever we create an object or want to achieve a particular objective, we follow a systematic approach and procedure, which is called design. Design is defined in different ways in different fields. Sometimes design is directly associated to the manufacturing of an object for example in jewellery or engineering industry. And at other times, it is part of development of a process or a system like in management, communication and graphic design.

Also, as design differs in every field, we cannot say that it consists of a single process or a single language or a universal code of conduct. Design basically allows us to approach the chosen subject with different philosophies, ideas and thought processes. Just as a person who designs the packaging of the products available in the market, is called a Graphic designer, similarly, the person who is designing or establishing the processes or systems is called a designer.

Design is you

Design is Creative. Designing depends completely on the creativity of individuals rather than the scientific methods and procedures which ensure validity of results. Every design differs in nature. Design is viewed as a craft and an art. It is a strategy towards problem solving and differs with every individual designer.

Design always has a purpose. It has an objective to fulfil. It cannot exist without a purpose. The clarity of the end goal is useful for everyone involved in the design process in any organisation. Design is done with deliberation. Designs don't just happen. They are made to happen. There is no chance factor in design unlike in other processes like the process of observation. This motivates the designers to think at a higher level.

Design process draws from different areas. It brings together people from different walks of life. Design is an applied task which does not have one single correct answer like in science. Feedback from others is also an important part of the design process which provides the necessary process review. Hence, we can say that design is collaborative in nature.

Design is based on ideas and thoughts of different people. It has to deal with multiple variables at one time and work towards a solution. This gives it a complex nature. The design process includes testing of the design cycle many times. This is so because there is always a probability of failure. As we have seen Design is very complex in nature depending on an interplay of multiple variables at the same time. A wrong estimate of any variable may lead to failure of Design. Trial and error are an integral part of Design.

Design depends on actually how we think and how we develop solutions to real life problems. Design is authentic in nature. It ensures that real solutions are provided to the user. Problem solving is an important part of the design process. A design deals with finding solutions to problems - which may be creative, realistic or monetary in nature. But the problems are temporary. Problem solving requires working through the different elements of a design. It is not just about making a hypothesis about what the problem is, but about finding a solution to the problem.

From idea to reality

One of the most apparent uses of design is that it makes ideas tangible. Abstract thoughts are converted into substance. In reality, designers give form to their imaginations. Their thought process traces the entire process from the idea stage to its crystallisation in material form. This increases the success probability of the product or service being developed. Another characteristic of design is that it is oriented towards the end user. A good designer always focuses on the actual users who will use the product, service or the process being developed. This ensures that the ideas lead to real solutions for the user.

Design uses a practical and realistic approach in making ideas tangible and then testing it with actual users. This approach gives it the ability to make things simple. Everything that is too complex or difficult to understand and communicate gets discarded in the natural course of the process. Although the nature of design in itself is complex as it has to deal with many variables at the same time, yet it has the ability to simplify things for the end user.

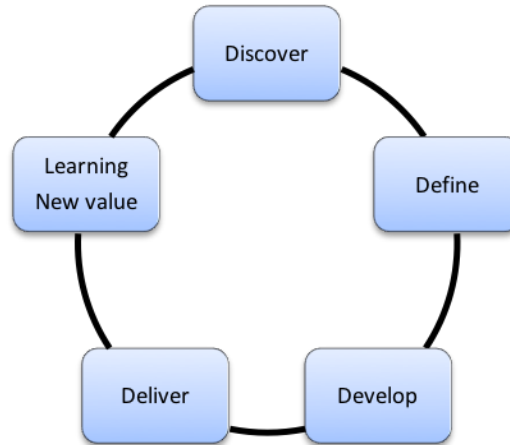
One of the important attributes of design is that it brings together the designers and non-designers and makes them interact and brainstorm to come up with solutions to important issues. This nature of design is collaborative due to the two factors - making ideas tangible and being user oriented.

Design never ends

Design is a process that is used to solve problems. It cannot be defined by a single activity. One may or may not be aware of the process while working, but the fact is that a designer is always working under a set of activities that define the process of Design. Each step of these activities helps in refining the process or adds a new aspect to be taken up for consideration. A designer always tries to perfect the process. Many times, it is through trial and error. If there is an error, the design is modified, and a lesson is learnt from the previous effort. It is a continuous process.

We all know that design involves creativity. Hence every designer has a different approach towards design. They have their own specialities and their own ways of working. But if we see in a general sense, we find that they all follow certain practices.

These common practices can be divided into four different segments, which are



These four activities define the design process as it passes from abstract ideas and innumerable possibilities to clear cut objectives with definite implementation.

Let us now understand what these four activities mean.

1. Discover

The first activity is –to discover. This indicates the beginning of the project. Here the designers take a fresh perspective towards the things around them and seek insights and motivation from them. They come up with new and interesting ideas. They gather information and build understanding of content relevant to the design. The techniques used in this segment are basically research oriented like market research and user research. Research examines things like existing designs, conditions for use, components that make up the product and materials that the product will be made of.

2. Define

The second activity is – to define. This is a very critical segment. Here the designers bring clarity by putting their objectives in definite terms. All the possibilities in the first stage are defined in tangible form. Priorities are set. The context and conditions for the design are defined. What is being created and what is the intended outcome are clearly stated. The constraints and the guidelines for assessment for the success of the design are defined. A creative brief is developed which is precise and to the point.

In this segment, a number of questions need to be answered by the designer. For example; What is my aim? How am I going to achieve it? Who is the target audience? When will the design be delivered? What procedure needs to be followed? What is unique in my design? Where will I execute it? etc

3. Develop

The third activity is – to develop. Here, the design is developed as a solution. A working model is created and put to test. This can include tangible three-dimensional objects, sketches or drawings that are very clear about the dimensions and other design considerations. The testing of the design process is repeated again and again till the design is improved and perfected to achieve the desired objectives. Here, prototyping provides an opportunity for testing some of the proposed solutions without going to the expense of full development. The techniques used in this segment are - brainstorm, prototyping, multi-disciplinary working, visual management, development methods and testing.

4. Deliver

The fourth and final activity is – to deliver. Here the design is finalised and launched. It involves all the implementation activities. Further, here it is observed whether targets are achieved or not. Sometimes the message being put across is not understood or acknowledged by the audience due to differences in how people receive or interpret information. Hence, evaluation and feedback are an integral part of the activities in this segment.

As we observe again and again, the design process is very creative in nature. It is only to facilitate our understanding that it has been simplified in such a manner. It is a complex process.

Design is needed at many levels in a business organisation. It is not only used in formation of strategy at the highest level, but also for finding new growth prospects and implementation of projects. Design is used so that the customer gets a fulfilling experience. The design process explores the wider themes in order to find the best solution.

For a design to be effective, the most important factor at all levels, is the creative brief. The creative brief outlines in a precise manner, the problems, their solutions and the opportunities to be tapped. Writing a creative brief, that is clear, concise and communicates effectively, is of utmost importance. When the creative brief is ready, it is handed over to a design team. Some organisations hand it to external design agencies while others have their own in-house design teams. Once the design team gets the brief, the designers use different methods to communicate it effectively to the target audience. They draw on various sources like historical references, cultural and moral values, language, lifestyle, symbolic representations, important current events etc. These varied sets of influences can be both from the past or the present. Sometimes the influence can be very profound, at other times, it is partial or even subtle.

A Design communicates in different ways and works on many different levels. Symbols and signs are often used by designers. Semiotics or the study of symbols, signs and significations, helps the designers convey their message to the target audience in an effective manner. It helps in conveying various layers of information to the user instantly. Designers, sometimes use street signs, everyday language and slangs popular amongst certain groups so that these groups of particular communities are able to identify themselves immediately with the concept being presented to them.

Graphic Design is a visual dialogue

Graphic design is a visual arts discipline that is creative in nature and which encompasses many areas. It may include many creative aspects like art direction, typography, page layout, information technology and others. This means, that for specialising and practising, a designer has a variety of areas to choose from.

Graphic design takes inputs in the form of ideas, concepts, text and images. It then uses some medium like the print or electronic medium and presents these in a visually attractive form. It structures the content and puts it in such a way, that the message in the ideas and concepts are understood and are completely communicated to a specific target audience. A designer works towards achieving this aim.

Every design may differ in its nature. Some design may be very theoretical and thought driven, while another may be very emotional. Yet other designs may be very artistic, sensitive or opinionated in nature. Graphic design also has the ability to present humour graphically. Humour is often very memorable and aids retention of the message by the audience.

As we have already seen that Graphic design encompasses many areas, hence we can say it is a multidisciplinary process that sources from many creative quarters. Some people view Graphic Design as a craft, especially as seen in the traditional printing and publishing process; while others see it more as an art. This fine line of distinction between the two is important in how we view the design.

Graphic design, as a craft, is an essential element of the production process in the printing and publishing industry. It involves preparation of text, images and other content for publication design. On the other hand, graphic design, as an art, communicates ideas and concepts to the target audiences through remarkable designs of images and layouts.

As our society became more and more industrialised, the printing industry also became more mechanised. It was able to give higher production outputs and print runs. Type and typesetting methods changed bringing drastic changes in the printing and production processes. This facilitated faster production.

Like all other areas in our life, graphic design has also evolved with technology at many levels. Design is greatly influenced by technology, especially in the production part. It is because of technology that different media are available for designers to choose from, for their work. Technology affects our society as a whole. It also influences how styles and art develop over a period of time.

One of the aspects of graphic design is typography. It is through typography that an idea is developed into a visual form. It is one of the most important elements of design. It defines the design's character and its emotive aspect. To

what extent the idea gets communicated to the audience and how they respond to it depends completely on the visual form that develops.

DESIGN MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Some people think of graphic design only as a trade. Now, that is a very narrow and conservative way of looking at it. We must first see what kind of approach the graphic designer takes in the design and then only we can understand his role in the production process. Basically, a designer has two responsibilities to meet in the whole process. One is, conforming to the brief given for the design and the second is implementation of the job.

Designers can take up various kinds of responsibilities in diverse situations in various types of companies. They can also work alongside other creative experts and get involved in different activities. Every designer has his own style and is influenced by certain philosophies and cultures. Graphic design has integrated itself with new technologies. It has evolved and kept in tune with the changes in the society. It has been able to communicate with different sections of audiences.

The role of graphic design in social responsibility is very important. It helps in altering the behaviour and conduct of the people. With many burning issues in our society like poverty, corruption and female foeticide, the design industry has taken the lead in questioning the people's moral viewpoint in such issues. The different organisations in the design industry also encourage and promote their own ethical stand to direct their organisation's activities.

With the advent of industrialisation and consumerism, there was an increase in demand for a variety of products. This resulted in very strong competition between manufacturers of similar products. Here effective Graphic Design became all the more important since product packaging and advertisements had a limited role to play in connecting with the customer.

Every product is now fighting to create its own identity and brand value in the consumer's mind. Identity and branding are two different concepts. Identity relates to the level of service and quality of an organisation. On the other hand, branding is a process of giving visual expression to this identity. Graphic design helps a company to cut through the clutter of communication across various media and establish its own identity in the market.

Graphic design is influenced by prevalent knowledge and aesthetic trends. These trends, which portray the outlook of the society as a whole, affect the work of graphic designers. Graphic design is dynamic in nature as it changes with our viewpoint of the evolving social environment. This is apparent in various art movements that took place such as Modernism, Postmodernism and De-constructivism. Eventually graphic design evolved as a creative discipline with the help of these trends. This unlocked a whole new paradigm of creative possibility for the Graphic Designers and gave them new tools to deal with challenges in design.

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