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Redefining Design

From occupation to driver of innovation.

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Contemplating *Design*

As someone who sees design as a *strategic way of doing things*, I have often contemplated the meaning of *design* in order to better explain how the *design approach* can lead to more creative and innovative ways of solving problems. One can begin to define design as *a plan for things, an order to things and thoughtfulness in the way things are considered and conceived*.

Such a definition goes contrary to the conventional wisdom that categorizes design as an aesthetic attribute – or feature – of a product, service or visual communication. It is my contention that design has been misunderstood and incorrectly categorized, with more emphasis placed on the result of a design effort than the actual process behind it. In misunderstanding the definition and role of design, and thereby limiting

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the practice and process to a very narrow area within the overall business process, we have effectively locked up – and locked ourselves out of – an extremely powerful *way of doing things* (instead of simply a way of making things or experiences beautiful).

While few enterprising individuals and corporations – lead by visionary leaders – have unlocked the power of the *design approach* and have used it to launch innovative products, brands and cultures centered around a core set of ideas properly executed, a great majority of us have yet to understand and benefit from the true power of design.

This document will define design beyond its aesthetic component and provide an overview of the *design approach* as method for driving innovation.



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Design as an Everyday Phenomenon

Every day, we plan our daily activities, struggle to bring order to chaos and conceptualize strategies for addressing a number of challenges. *As a plan for things, an order to things and thoughtfulness in the way things are considered and conceived*, there is great power in design – power that can enhance people’s lives, whether or not they are formally trained designers.

The design approach can benefit people from the homemaker looking to lessen the agony of washing dishes to the corporate executive looking to launch a hot new product that not only sells itself, but has everyone talking about it.



From *Occupation* to *Approach*

Although the occupational title of *designer* is traditionally only bestowed on the few individuals who have formally attended a design school, or apprenticed for a working designer, almost everyone has at some point engaged in the act of design. Unfortunately, we have pigeonholed *design* as an occupational practice without giving any thought to unlocking and disseminating the universally useful *process* that underlies the occupational practice, which can immediately propel innovation if applied to any other practice.

As a professional discipline, the practice of design is very young – less than a hundred years old – and has to this point been primarily used as a tool by business to promote its products and brands. Up until the mid

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1980s, the occupation of design remained an exclusive and mysterious practice.

Advances in technology, the popularity of the personal computer, the introduction of PostScript printers, digital fonts, desktop publishing, television shows on home building and interior design, retail attractions like Target, Ikea, the Apple store and the popularity of the web design profession during the dot com boom all helped to popularize the occupation of design, turning it into a cultural phenomenon.

Today, design is more popular than ever, yet it still remains somewhat mysterious and hard to define. The simple fact that the occupation of design encompasses a wide range of disciplines and professions from graphic design to industrial design, interior design, communication design, web design and so on makes the definition of the term even harder to nail down because it is usually associated with an occupation, or the result of a design effort associated with a design occupation such as one of the aforementioned.

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I have spent the last ten years identifying and analyzing the *design approach* in order to strip design down to its essence so that anyone can understand and benefit from its power to help us make the world a better place.



Design Demystified

We often confuse design with two related practices: craftsmanship and decorating. It is generally thought that designers make things beautiful or make things well. While this is generally true when referring to a finished product or solution conceived by an occupational designer or design firm, design is more about *the thinking that goes on behind the scenes as a result of dedication to honing one's craft* than it is about the literal execution of a solution.

For example, consider the design of a swimming pool. The pool designer conceives (creative and strategic thinking) of the look and feel of the pool, determines the color scheme, draws (craftsmanship & decorating) the blueprints and hands them to the contractor – who hires a construction crew to construct (craftsmanship)



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and put the finishing touches on (decorating) the pool. The designer who conceives the pool doesn't literally build the pool, but we can still say that the pool is designed by the designer and not by the contractor. In this example, the design originates from a *conception* which I am defining as a combination of *creative and strategic thinking*.

However, the thinking alone is not enough because the *experience of honing* one's exposure to, interaction with and understanding of design affects one's ability to think more effectively as a designer.

Unless we are to assume that only those who are formally trained in design or have apprenticed with a designer are capable of creative and strategic thinking, we have to agree that a most important aspect of design is available to anyone with the mental capacity to think creatively and strategically.

Of course, some are more creative and effective at combining creativity and strategic thinking than others,

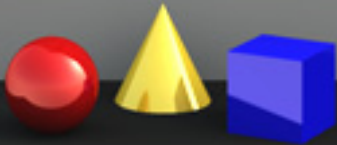
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and those not as effective at first can grow in their ability with time and dedication. Like with craftsmanship and decorating skills, creativity and strategic thinking skills can be fostered, learned and mastered – just like any skill.



A Creative Problem Solving Process

Having established a clear distinction between design, craftsmanship and decorating, I propose a more refined understanding of design – seeing it as *a process through which an observed or conceptualized phenomenon is contemplated and addressed with a solution.*

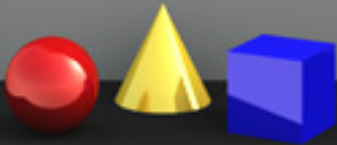
Upon analyzing this process further, **I define design as a *creative problem solving process*** such that:

Creative. We all have unique life experiences. Each of us is capable of drawing upon our unique world view – which translates into our uniquely creative point of view. Creativity is at the heart this life experience. It is a divine tool that can change the world and is available to us all.



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Problem. Problems, obstacles and challenges confront us all, and we have the opportunity to draw upon our uniqueness and creativity to overcome them all –turning adversity into opportunity. For every problem, obstacle and challenge, there are as many possible solutions as there are unique points of view.

Solving. We apply our creativity – in the form of conceptual ideas – to resolve the problems, obstacles and challenges at hand.

Process. Upon testing our concepts, we either decide that they successfully solve our problems, obstacles and challenges – thereby concluding the process; or decide that they do not – thereby repeating the process until we arrive at a solution.

The *design approach* is inherently built into this definition of design.



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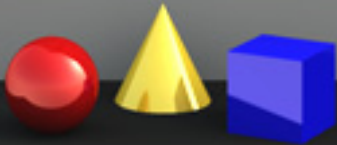
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The Role of the Designer

If the ultimate goal of the *design process* is to overcome problems, obstacles or challenges, the desire is ignited when we *become aware and ask questions* for the purpose of making things, experiences – and ultimately life – better. Asking questions alone, however, isn't enough. The astute designer not only identifies problems and asks questions, but also sets out to resolve them.

The *role of the designer* – therefore – is to be aware, identify problems, ask insightful questions and engage the *design approach* to solve the problems that plague us all – in order to make life better.



Each of Us, a Designer

Each and every one of us, regardless of our background and training, is a designer. We are constantly in the process of asking questions, identifying and attempting to solve all kinds of problems in creative and innovative ways. Some of us are better at it than others, and some of us are unaware that we are applying the *design approach*.

We should not accept *the way things are* as they are, if they can be made better. There is a better way to build our homes, wash our clothes, teach our children, communicate with the world and share the very best of what this experience has to offer us, and the *design approach* is the tool that each of us can use to achieve these goals.

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For the first time in history, we have the means of production at our fingertips. The power of the personal computer combined with publishing software and the reach of the internet allows us to create, brand, publish, promote and disseminate all kinds of information, entertainment, products and services – a capability that until recently was limited to the wealthy and powerful corporations, publishers, and governments of the world.

Today, we can all be designers – trained in the fundamentals, expressive in our creativity, inquisitive of the world around us and able to tackle the problems of everyday life.

So now the question becomes, “If I *am* a designer – what can I do to turn my dreams into reality, how do I start, what do I do next?”



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Question Convention & Innovate

First of all, realizing that you are a designer immediately breaks down any walls you may have erected between your logical and creative mind. You have the right – and the power – to draw upon your unique individuality and think creatively in order to solve the problems you face in your daily life. The *design approach* belongs to each of us – and it is an extremely powerful tool which can be applied to all aspects of life; for the purpose of making things better.

Second, acknowledging that you are a designer opens up an infinite world of opportunities to you. Our educational system teaches us that there is only one correct answer, and that the person with the right answer wins. This is not so in the real world. There are many possible solutions to any one problem, and only



by being aware, asking the right questions and applying the *design approach* can we discover the answers that are custom-tailored to *our* individual needs.

Lastly, the power to design is the power to create. It is a divine power that allows us to get in touch with the creative side of our minds, allowing us to turn our dreams into reality. Seek out professional designers or design educators who evangelize design and are willing to share their process and knowledge with you. Be open to revisiting the inquisitive and creative mind you may have left behind in grade school.

Should classically trained designers feel threatened if anyone can be considered a *designer*? Certainly not. Those of us who are lucky enough to have been trained (whether in schools or by mentors) in the *professional* tradition of design should see ourselves as stewards of design. We are the beacons who should be pushing the envelope, teaching, inspiring, promoting and helping to ignite the creative impulse in everyone.

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Become aware, begin asking questions and employ the *design approach* to make things better. By doing so, you will each contribute to making the world a better place – one designer at a time.

You are a designer. There are many problems to solve.
How will you change the world for the better?

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About the Author

Raymond Pirouz is an author, designer, strategist, thinker, technologist, educator, massively multiplayer and virtual world observer, CSR and progressive politics advocate.

Please learn more by visiting Raymond Pirouz at <http://www.raymondpirouz.com>.



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