

# Design Communication: Systems, Service, Conspiracy, and Leadership

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Description and explanation do not prescribe what actions ought to be taken in any design situation, what solutions are best for any perceived design problem or what creative insight should be innovated. The most careful scientist using the most accurate instruments, calibrated to the closest tolerances cannot observe what, by definition, proceeds from human imagination as an outcome of intentionality and purpose (*telos*). The reasoning and logic of accurate description and explanation are not the same as the logic and reasoning used to determine what is desired to be in existence that is not already found in existence. The rules and principles of observation and description cannot transcend their own context and become an epistemological link to other frames of reference and designs of inquiry that may have their own rational structure or internal logic.

Prediction and control do not justify using any means towards any ends for the same reason. The deontic term *ought* is not equivalent to the instrumental term *can*. If something ought to be done in a certain way for a certain outcome it is not justifiable only because it can be done. For example, technology in the Western world often falls into the trap of assuming that something ought to be done because it can be done. The assumed link is typically lifted from a frame of reference of an economy where money as the measure of value and economic return on investment stands in for any deeper ontological aspiration. If not economic, the link is aesthetic; it is done because it is pleasing to make something that is "cool" in the vernacular of the high tech world

## 2. DESIGN

The fruits of objectivity or rational discernment and technologic expertise, even communicated from a systems perspective, are necessary but insufficient for determining intentionality and purpose in a designed response to the human condition. Despite this the primary strategy for preparing for change and action is to engage in studies and research resulting in comprehensive reports. These studies and research programs, which consume an immense amount of time and money, cannot provide the necessary link to action, change or design. They cannot point to what should or ought to happen, thus the reports gather dust while requests for more research and studies are made in the hope that more information can somehow be transformed into wisdom.

The natural link to intentional action based on firm ontological understanding is design. Design is a comparatively underdeveloped tradition of inquiry and action but is possibly the first form of human inquiry. Humans have designed their cosmologies from the beginning. Design inquiry and action is not limited to the common contemporary definition of design as a process producing physical artifacts or structures with unique appearances and specific utility. Rather, design is an approach to human agency in a complex world and is inclusive of many fundamentals based on specific foundational ideas. One of the foundational ideas, underpinning design as a comprehensive human capacity, is that of systems thinking.

## 3. SYSTEMS

The term *system*, used both as a description of an embodied way of thinking (as in systems thinking, or the systems approach) and as a description of the thing which is being thought about, is like the term design; both a verb and a noun. As a noun, the Greek origin of the term system is *sustema*, meaning ‘a composite whole’, while the verb is a derivative of the compound term *sunistanai* which means ‘to bring together’ (*sun* – ‘together’ + *histanai* – ‘to cause to stand’). Thus a systems thinking approach reflects a desire to know how things are *caused to stand together* as a composition or whole and how to be an agent in that process. Design is a *process of creative thinking and innovative action*. Systems thinking and design action is thus about how people and things are *caused to stand together through an*

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*intentional process of creativity and innovation.* The animator and medium of such a causal chain is *design communication*

Systems scientists – those who describe and explain the interrelationships of things (concrete and abstract) and people in the world and the compound qualities which emerge as a consequence (i.e. systems and compositions) – need to be in a deliberate instrumental relationship with those who reside in social systems. The role of change agent is operationalized and justified by the facilitation of design communication with those who populate the social systems so carefully researched and documented by systems scientists. The fruits of objective and rational discernment, even from a systems perspective, are necessary but insufficient for determining intentionality and purpose in designed responses to the human condition. There is a need for collaborative design communication among those who work to change systems by design, systems designers, and those inhabitants of the systems that are being changed; the clients. Stakeholders, those affected by any change who are not clients, and stockholders, those invested in the outcome of any change but not directly served by the change, must be included as well. Taken together, these roles and relationships define a design capable system.

## **4. SERVICE**

The interrelationship that binds, animates, and defines a design capable system is *service*. Service is a contractual relationship where purpose and intention is blended with instrumental skill and judgement (Nelson and Stolterman 2000). Service is a word that has many meanings in different contexts. It has a sense of ennoblement at the same time that it has negative connotations for the reasons given by James Hillman (Hillman 1995):

Service offends deep strata of human dignity. We may all want service, but who wants to give it? For service still means menial service (not banking, brokering, telephoning, teaching, installing, diagnosing or writing). The first trouble lies in the word, which invites in its cousins—serf, servile, servant, servitude, servility, all descendants from the common Latin ancestor, *servus*, slave. Service, as it is defined in our culture, is hardly empowering, or empowering only to those persons who can command service and the system for which we slave.

James Hillman

*Service*

**Kinds of Power**

Pp. 66-67,

In education one studies the liberal arts, not the servile arts, a representative and enduring cleaving of mind from body and spirit from matter. It is representative as well of the aversion and fear of submissive relationships of control, in contrast to control over one's own self interests. Service is perceived as putting one's self in an inferior role at the beck and call of demands issuing from above or below depending on your station point.

These service relationships are without much appeal to anyone except martyrs or those who willingly enjoy sacrificing their own self-interest for the benefit of others. However, service can be seen in a more positive and more appealing light, as there are other systemic, service relationships that do not require self-sacrifice or martyrdom.

Service can be defined as a self-referential, systemic relationship as in *self-serving*. In the search for truth (scientific, artistic or religious) one serves one's own purposes i.e. artists express their own feelings and emotions while scientists follow their own curiosity and passion and *believers* search for a true god(s) and metaphysical invariance.

From a design perspective, service is defined as *other-serving*. Design service is the quality of empathy, embodied in design communication, which is mutual rather than unilateral. Service, from a design perspective, is very different from the kind of empathic relationship employed in *helping* or *fixing* as explained by Rachel Remen ((Remen 1996)):

Serving is different from helping. Helping is based on inequality; it is not a relationship between equals.... Service is a relationship between equals.... Helping incurs debt. When you help someone they owe you one. But serving, like healing is mutual. There is no debt.

Rachel Naomi Remen  
*In the Service of Life*  
**Noetic Science Review**  
pp 24-25

Design service is defined by the contractual (formal or informal) relationships of mutual and diverse benefit. In a relationship where there is an exchange of value of equivalencies there is no inequity, inferiority, domination, obligation, or unilateral control. Design, as service, is dependent on the presence of an authentically empathic communication system.

## **5. DESIGN AS CONSPIRACY – A BREATHING TOGETHER**

Design is best operationalized through the interaction of a rich compound of individuals, a social system, composed of diverse interests and roles that are closely interrelated through collaboration, motivated by design service so as to create a *conspiracy* (i.e. *a breathing together*) of intent. This compound is not a blended mix but is a mediated complex of differences and diversity. Design is often portrayed as an act of the creative individual. Or on occasion, design is seen as the actions of unique individuals – working together on a project that demands creativity and innovation (in the same way that jazz is an expression of individual musical skills of excellence and intellectual capacity within an ensemble of similarly diverse individuals). This conspiracy in design integrates the gift of individual creative insight with the collective capacity for service through collaboration and inclusion. Both individual creativity and collaborative strength are satisfied in the process.

Design conspiracy is dependent on motivation that arises from human desires (*desiderata*). Design however is too commonly defined as problem solving or, at best, creative problem solving. There is a problem with problems however. Problems that are easily defined are trivial while those of consequence are impossible to define or in the words of Horst Rittel it is the

difference between *tame and wicked problems* (Rittel 1972). Unfortunately nearly every action taken by any group is based on justifications spelled out in *problem statements* that assume wicked problems or tame problems are the *raison d'être* for agency.

Design's potential is sub-optimized when the trigger for action comes from within a problem focus. Delineation of design problems are derived from the perceived needs of clients or from the imagined needs of customers, end-users or consumers by surrogates. Needs are responses to that which is missing, broken, hated, feared, hurtful, craved or frightening. When need and the concomitant negative impulses of problem solving replace desire, communication degrades from conspiracy to collusion.

Design activity is further weakened by the separation of clients, end users, stake holders, decision makers, customers, producers and designers into isolated categories. Communication is reduced to keeping one another informed, but at arms length, through formal or legalistic exchanges of information. However when design action is characterized as the activity of a conspiring social system, unified through intention, focused on service, animated by a process of creativity and innovation, a different conceptualization of design communication emerges. Design communication is, by necessity, multifaceted and supportive of imagination (creativity), empathy (service) and production (innovation).

## 6. DESIGN VOICE AND DESIGN LISTENING

The *design voice* is an essential element in design communication. Clients, surrogate clients, end users, or customers are served by enabling their *voiced* desires and needs to be expressed at whatever level of clarity they have the capacity for. Designers need to have a *voice* in order to provide access to the imagined realm of possibilities within their minds by others. Those who transform design concepts into reality need to have a voice that conveys what is being heard as *the world speaks back*, requesting modified actions in response to imposed intentions.

Design voice does not consist simply of spoken or written words, sentences and texts. Conversation and the more formal process of dialogue are essential to good design communication but when the desired possible is too large and complex for words there is a need for a means of

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communication that go beyond the imposed silence on words or *logos*. The design conspiracy is more than whisperings and shared confidences. It is an exchange of hopes, desires, and possibilities that flow among collaborating minds, hearts and souls; a *diathenic graphologue*.

Diathenic graphologue (*Grk; letting something be seen through its image*) is a means of communication that is transcendent of logos. It is not limited to drawings, pictures or graphics but is inclusive of any means appropriate for communicating the essence, nature or quality of something as a whole. A representation of a whole through process, flow, form, shape, space, compound, pattern or a composition, whether imagined or encountered in the experienced world. Diathenic graphologue utilizes every type of sound, sensation and visual signal accessible to human cognition. Images, symbols, signs, and other representation systems of the imagination, carry the greater share of the burden in design communication in distinction to the role words alone can play.

Having voice is of little consequence if nothing is being heard however. A great deal of attention is given to making sure everyone has a voice in participatory situations, as found ideally in design projects and other forms of democracy. Energy and time is put into *claiming one's voice* so that one is in *good voice* when it counts. The same attention has not been focused on behalf of *listening*; claiming responsibility for it and becoming good at it. Design listening involves the ability to hear what has not been said as much as it involves the ability to hear what has been clearly stated. It is about hearing what is pressing for expression as much as for what has been expressed.

Design listening is not just about hearing and registering utterances in the manner of a mere facilitator, but is inclusive of an embodied empathic understanding of that which has been encoded in the voices of those to be served. Design empathy transcends mere sympathy and other stand-ins for true empathy through its synthesis of voice and listening. A synthesis that is essential in design service.

## 7. **DESIGN LEADERSHIP - COMMUNICATING DESIGN DIRECTION**

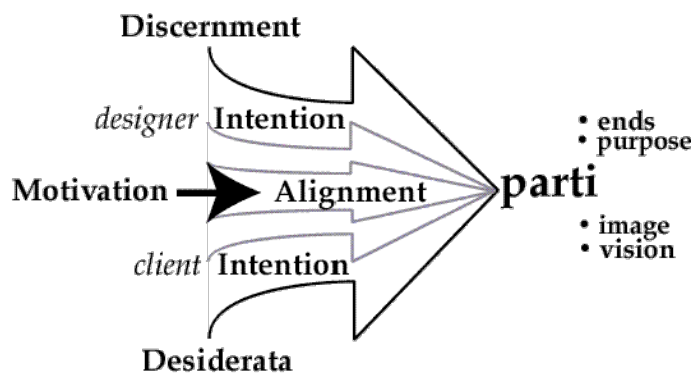
Good leaders are designers. Leadership, as a designed outcome of design service, is a composition of interactions among human beings who are intentional in their approaches to change through design communication. This composition is a rich mix of systemic relationships in alignment with guiding purposes. This makes it distinct from the types of leadership that are vision driven, where communication is focused on transmitting vision to the non-visionary.

Leadership, as a relationship-based design attribute, is founded on both systems thinking and design action. Design leadership is distinguished as the emergent quality of people in effective design communication rather than in roles of authority. Where one stands relative to other people in a leadership relationship is important both abstractly and concretely in relationship to communication. When people stand or sit across from one another conceptually, as in positional seating arrangements of typical organisational meetings for instance, there is an impulse to communicate through confrontation rather than collaboration. This may be appropriate when the intended outcome of the meeting is a solution to a perceived problematic situation but it is not an appropriate strategy, abstractly or concretely, when the desired outcome is dependant on creativity and innovation as is the case in design.

Standing or sitting in front of someone blocks their view and yours as well. Individuals standing next to one another scanning the same field of vision for opportunity, looking in the same direction at a horizon of possibilities form design teams. Design communication takes on a different quality when the dialogue is with others looking into the same unknown rather than in a face-to-face passing of abstracted data and information.

Design leadership can be expressed through the animation of an arrow of time configured as a process of design communication made up of elements related to each other, in distinctive temporal phases (see Fig. 1). The outcome of the process is the revelation of a unique *parti*, a seminal, meaning-making image pulled from out of the immense *terra incognita* of human purpose that is thrust back into the *mysterium tremendum* of human

experience as a small contribution to shared wisdom through created meaning. When being developed into a design concept, the *parti* is transformed along two dimensions of understanding. One is a vector whose aim is towards *telos* ( human aspiration in the case of design) via purposes and ends. The other is a vector revealing the *heart and soul* of the design concept via image and vision. Vision, in this case, is entirely different from the way the term is commonly used in that it is the cause for leadership and not the consequence of leadership.



*Fig. 1* Design Process

The elements brought into relationship by the dynamics of the design process, an arrow of time, include desiderata, motivation, intention, appreciation and alignment. Although *alignment* is the seminal emergent quality of design communication, the other elements are essential to the integrity of the design process as well.

*Desiderata* focus on desires rather than needs which is a way to reinforce the avoidance of design as a problem-focused concept. The ability to express desires as triggers for change are atrophied or under developed in most of our collective endeavours including government, business, volunteer civic and social organisations. *Motivation* focuses on making explicit the reasons that we engage in design from a positive impulse for change. *Intention* refers

to the ultimate aim of the process that is an a priori agreement (designing in this case). *Discernment or appreciative judgement* is the context of any design project made explicit. It is a determination of what is to be treated as background and what is to be dealt with as foreground (Vickers 1995). It is a judgement of what is to remain unchanged in the process of designed change. It is also the crucible that contains or holds the creative energy of intense design activity and determines the nature of what is possible.

## 8. DESIGN COMMUNICATION

As mentioned above, *alignment* is the emergent quality arising from the integration of design leadership with design communication. It is similar in purpose to the concept of cybernetics in systems science. Alignment is the result of the successful cyclic transitions of design communication through three different modalities of communication including; conversation, dialogue, and diathenic graphologue plus the closure-seeking transition activity of implementation (see Fig. 2).

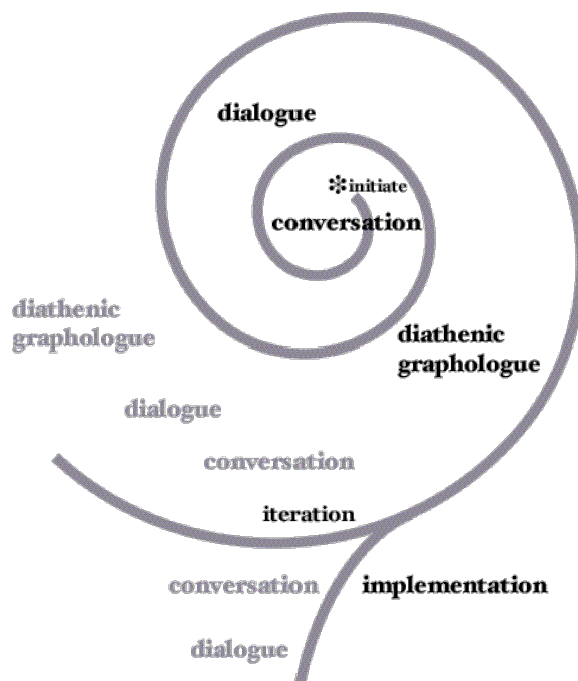


Fig. 2 Phases of Design Communication

The three major phases of design communication, design conversation, design dialogue and diathenic graphologue, can be iterated as many times as considered adequate or brought to conclusion when deemed appropriate to initiate the innovation phase. Each of the three phases consists of an open beginning, ending in a commitment to particular outcomes. The design communication process and the attendant sub-processes are both cyclic and sequential emergent (see Fig. 3).

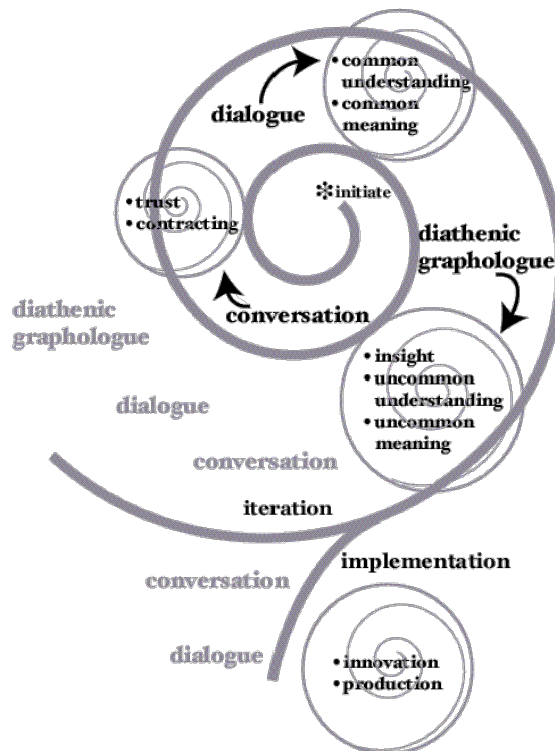


Fig. 3 Design Communication as Cyclic and Sequential Emergent Processes

Design conversation (*a turning together*) serves the function of establishing trust as the necessary condition for the essential process of contracting (formally or informally) for design services. The design contract defines a common intention or aim for the subsequent communication stages. Formal dialogue (*meaning through words*) is a process that establishes common understanding for those participating in the design process (Senge 1990). With the establishment of common understanding or

common ground, there is no expectation that it is necessarily a representation of a set of truths. It just means that there is agreement among everyone involved on the meaning of those things that have been the focus of their discussion. Common understanding gained through dialogue can come to the collective in successive measured steps or in a sudden bifurcating insight. In the latter case, each individual in the dialogue reaches the same shared understanding at the same time as everyone else.

Diathenic graphologue is the means by which *uncommon* understanding is reached among a collective and diverse group of individuals who have successfully established themselves upon some common ground sharing a common intention. The uncommon is represented through images presented in a rich variety of systems of communication. Cognitive art is the more common and well developed (Tufte 1990) but is representative of just a small part of what has been used traditionally by cultures and communities of people faced with new or novel possibilities in life. Communication in this mode is successful when the uncommon has been transformed into the common, through a renewed contracting process and a reengagement in dialogue at a different level of intention.

Innovation, as a creative form of implementation, is the act of bringing the imagined into the real world and making it a part of the larger experienced reality of others. It is the final stage in making the uncommon common when the design outcome is considered adequate and appropriate to the original contracted intention.

Even after innovation has been successfully carried out, design communication continues. The artifacts, the organizations, the tools the environments, all the things we create, begin to speak back and through their own voices affect more changes in our lives. They begin to redesign who we are, what we believe to be reality, what has meaning or value and what becomes the historical record of our lives.

## **9. CONCLUSION**

Design communication is a complex multifaceted interchange among a diverse and complex collection of people in a variety of design roles who are aligned by a common intention, standing on common ground, reaching uncommon understandings together and making the uncommon a common

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reality through practical design action. Design communication enables possibilities to become realities in everyday life. It allows the collective to benefit from the creative gifts of individuals and it allows individuals to find commonality of purpose and intention with the collective. It allows the imagination to take form in real life. Good design communication not only enables the meeting of minds but the inclusion of hearts as well. It is the armature of a new form of leadership that is based on empathic service through creativity and innovation.

Design communication is part of the rich complexity of a tradition of creating that which does not yet exist from out of the desires of people expressing their potential as humans more fully. Design is distinct from the other traditions of inquiry and action such as science, art or technology. Although it is common in everyday life it remains under developed professionally and academically. Although it is a very old tradition it is being newly rediscovered and made visible in contemporary life (Banathy 1996). Design capability and competence must become an integrated aspect of our institutions and organisations. Social systems that have the immense power and resources to bring dramatic change to our lives, but often without good reason and with undetermined value. Design, as an option, is concerned with evoking good reason and producing things of value.

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