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Neodesign: The Loss of Craft, Imagination and a Playful Attitude

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Abstract: Since around the turn of the millennium, a "New Design" ethos gradually emerged. It is a reformulation of design entrenched enough to warrant a term of its own: *Neodesign*. Repackaged as a procedural, risk-averse, sandboxed version of the design process, aimed especially at non-designers, Neodesign has nevertheless come to be seen as the measure against which design practice is measured outside of design practice. In this paper, we argue that craft, imagination, and playfulness are crucial aspects of what makes design *design* and, arguably, one of the reasons why the discipline has been well-received in business circles. We further explore the paradox that, in dispensing with these components of design practice, the sandboxed version of design is threatening the pedagogical practices that make design unique and which inspired business organisations to adopt them in the first place. We take stock of the last three decades and discuss, sometimes polemically, what has been lost and added by this new design ethos and how the loss of craft, imagination and a playful attitude are affecting design education, as well as industry practice.

Keywords: *New design; imagination; design education; craft*

Introduction

In recent decades, thanks to the confluence of socioeconomic, cultural, and technological changes that are often ascribed to neoliberalism, a new kind of design or, more precisely, a new conceptualisation of design, has emerged. Among many other changes, the consolidation of neoliberalism brought a cultural shift that privileges individualism, private enterprise, and the notion that human progress is tantamount to untethered economic growth. Neoliberalism thus made fashionable the belief that progress is a consequence of perennial innovation—mainly understood as successfully commercialised invention—and that, in turn, the main driving force of innovation is the creativity of the entrepreneurial mind.

The deregulation of markets, globalisation of economies, and financialisation of corporate capitalism that neoliberalism spearheaded were largely enabled by the evolution of information technologies, particularly computational technologies. The emergence of personal computing and the rise of figures such as Steve Jobs, who strategically integrated branding and design into their business operations, arguably fostered a strong feedback loop between graphic and industrial design, HCI, and business, coalescing into what we now recognise as the "tech industry".

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In such an ecosystem, design first came to be seen as a powerful instrument for making computational technologies accessible and desirable for laypeople—i.e., as a means of "injecting some liberal arts" into computational things to make them appealing and understandable for average consumers, as Steve Jobs (1983) put it. The field of design thus fragmented into a plethora of new specialisations and labels to meet that demand, such as interaction design, product design, service design, and experience design, amongst others (Stappers et al., 2024). In the process, designers came to be increasingly exposed not only to the methods and philosophies of the nascent tech industry but also to the language, practices, and expectations of financialised corporate culture. Design, in turn, came to be increasingly regarded by that corporate milieu as a tool for developing and harnessing creativity, even in situations that are not necessarily about design as it had been traditionally regarded, but rather about business or management. Thus, the expectation was that design should shift from making concrete things or interfacing humans with technologies to applying designerly ways of understanding and addressing problems to management and social issues (Dorst, 2015)

This reconfiguration of design by its intermingling with neoliberal cultural sensibilities (abstractly informed, methodologically by academic design research) eventually coalesced into what is now largely referred to as Design (*as*) Thinking. In the professional arena, particularly in financial, technology, and business consulting environments, this strain of design usually manifests as a collection of methods for summoning creativity and (hopefully) innovation. Whereas in academic contexts, particularly within design research, it has increasingly manifested as a push against traditional disciplinary-embedded, craft-based, and intuition-focused conceptual design pedagogy—i.e., what henceforth we will be referring to as the "art school model". The art school model originated in Britain in the first half of the 19th century as a state-funded effort to meet the needs of emergent industrialisation by improving the skills and technical knowledge of workers in craft trades (Banks & Oakley, 2015, p. 42–43). In France, the *École des Beaux-Arts* pioneered the *atelier,* or studio, for architectural training, which eventually spread across Europe and the Americas (Goldschmidt et al., 2010) and remains, for the time being, a cornerstone of design education (Ferreira et al., 2016).

The overall impact of neoliberalism on design practice and education has been amply discussed in existing literature (Julier, 2017; Stein & Moore, 2024; Stern & Siegelbaum, 2019), as have the shortcomings of corporate innovation-focused Design Thinking (Cook, 2019; Fridman et al., 2022; Hernández-Ramírez, 2018; Kimbell, 2011). However, we believe that these changes have reached such a state of acceptance and consolidation—manifesting effectively as an ethos, a normalised disposition—that they necessitate a cohesive analysis reinforced by a unified conceptual understanding. Therefore, we have decided to call this new conceptualisation of design *Neodesign*.

As we see it, the Neodesign ethos genuinely regards designers as promising candidates for the upper echelons of the corporate world. However, to be genuinely successful in a technology-driven future, to gain corporate mobility, and to become senior managers, designers are expected to *evangelise* rather than do design. Thus, for Neodesign, the emphasis of design should be fundamentally to think about the process rather than doing the craft—that is, following a recipe over critiquing the possibilities. Indicative of this reconceptualisation of the designer as an "MC" are views of influential figures, such as Don Norman (2016, p. 354), who suggests that designers should take on the role of strategists, cultural critics, consultants, and advocates for users, rather than being makers of "pretty things". "Design is the interface between technology and people", Norman (2016) aptly writes; however, he then implies that such a function is too important and too profitable to leave it to studio-trained designers. In his view, the art school model of design education has too much design in it, meaning that it has "no deep appreciation of people or the social sciences, no deep understanding of science, mathematics, or engineering—the essential backbones of technology. The training is that of a craftsperson mentored by skilled craftspeople. It is design, design, and design." (2016, p. 343). In summary, if designers are to become genuine decision-makers, design education should be rebooted and a crucial step in that process is recanting—and denouncing—the old ways of craft.

Once subsumed to such corporate modes, design has metamorphosed into a "process-heavy measurable function" (Madsen, 2024). Rather than crafting things and experiences, designers are now expected to spend the better part of their time on checklists and meetings. This is particularly the case in tech companies, where design workflows now comprise a myriad of structured tasks that were initially developed in the service design industry to provide hard evidence about users' needs (Madsen, 2024). However, the introduction of this panoply of business-oriented methods has come at the cost of downplaying the skills that Neodesign derisively refers to as "craft," and which have been at the core of design education since the Bauhaus. Moreover, far from being awarded roles at the C-suite level, professional designers in corporate settings now mostly find themselves locked in a marasmus of "total bureaucratisation" (Graeber, 2015). Their jobs are governed by: "tight, curated titles, specific and terse domains of responsibility, certificates you can obtain for buying a course to certify your creative character and verify your ability to operate the pre-qualified commercial software heavy machinery that is required for a specific role, at a particular level". (Bleecker, 2023, p. 29)

By prioritising structure, step-by-step repeatable methodologies, and process-based interpretations of design situations, Neodesign has all but banished a crucial skill from the field: imagination. Consequently, it is losing the criticality, playfulness, and experientialism that once characterised design. To put it bluntly, Neodesign has created an aseptic, sandboxed, self-referential and unimaginative subset of design—an ever-growing collection of derivative, colour-coded methods, frameworks, and models that are easily absorbed by non-designers, particularly those from the corporate world.

Ironically, Neodesign still claims to be radical. It positions itself as a source of creativity and a potential instigator of innovation. It purports to tackle the world's most pressing problems from a humanity-centred approach, but instead Neodesign has evolved into a pastiche of design, commodified and easily packaged into short professional development courses. Instead of empowering designers—as no doubt was genuinely intended by Norman and others—Neodesign has contributed to de-skilling practitioners and allowed bureaucracy and managerialism to colonise and appropriate design practices. Instead of empowering designers to become organisational leaders, Neodesign has provided upper management with the means to cosplay the role of creative agents.

This situation, we argue, manifests paradoxically due to design's strengths *and* intrinsic susceptibilities as a discipline. While neoliberalism has forced challenges onto the pedagogical character of most other disciplines, there appears to be a unique vernacular existential trope within design circles that asks, "Why is it always design?" Design is unique in that it offers problem-solving alongside aesthetic "feelings" and intuition-based methods and outcomes. Thus, the art-school model of design promotes a skillset that can be perceived as nebulous which—together with Neodesign's embracing of the democratisation of the practice—contributes, as Fishel (2008) suggests, to the perception that design lacks rigour. Therefore, "Everyone's a designer… it's a job that looks fun, so how hard could it be?" (2008, p. 58). Such perceptions are perhaps an unintended side effect of the special status that design, as a disciplinary domain, has forged for itself, separate from the arts and sciences (Cross, 1982; Lawson, 2004), yet also due to its preeminence in welcoming non-designers into the fold. Consequently, design has become a kind of placeholder for expectations about its own disciplinary vulnerability and definition as an undisciplined and unregulated practice that can be easily simulated and co-opted. Among designers themselves, this can manifest as an insecurity that questions the practices that they themselves carry out, even to the point of querying their own job titles (Meron, 2021).

Positioning

In this position paper, we reflect on changes that design as a discipline has undergone in the past couple of decades. We argue that, as a consequence of the assimilation of design by business, design curricula are becoming less focused on fostering imagination as a core design principle—and more on repositioning designing as a formulaic process. This rebranding opened doors to and co-opted design, ultimately also leading to its colonisation by non-design professionals and the commodification of its practices, resulting in a homogenisation and degradation of its practices.

Alongside this, we discuss the curious lack of opposition to this dilution of practice within design education—perhaps in contrast to designers in industry, where the Neodesign ethos has arguably led to a crisis of identity and disciplinary authority among many practitioners. We contend that, as Neodesign came to define the narrative and become a kind of standard of what the future of design should be, it has led to a radical shift in the focus of design pedagogy. Consequently, instead of nurturing imagination as a fundamental design principle, students now find themselves encouraged to regard and approach design as a collection of methods and techniques not unlike those dominating business schools. This can result in playfulness, critical thinking, reflection and experimentation being proceduralised, transforming design practice into a pastiche of design imagination.

We should note that we are not naively negating the inescapable symbiotic relationship between design and business. On the contrary, both authors emerge from industry and continue to enthusiastically teach for it. The paradox that needs addressing is that—granting that design and its practices are so unique that they have inspired (and been adopted by) industry, organisational, and business-focused educational disciplines—so many of these evidently efficacious design practices and methods are being actively disregarded, diluted, or even replaced by contradictory approaches.

We also acknowledge that the ideas we put forward here for discussion remain under development. We recognise they might be viewed as polemical and risk being seen as lacking substantiation. However, we believe that with the emergence of Generative AI and the aggressive way that the tech industry is pushing for its adoption, the field of design, like every other creative domain, is at an important crossroads and that it needs to take stock of its current state, to determine where it will go from here.

Design—Between Creativity and Technique

The historical relation between designers (as creators or craftspeople) and technicians (as producers and developers) is interrelational and phenomenological. At different stages of the information revolution, the authoritative agency of each practice in the creative process has risen and fallen according to the preeminence of dominant technologies. Thus, reflecting the strong human-technology relations that pervade design, where the introduction of a new technology shapes industry roles and vice versa. This has had an impact on how design is perceived and also has influenced its perceived economic and cultural roles.

In the diagram below (*Figure 1*), one can visualise the ebbs and flows of contemporary design history as a kind of dialectic strife between creative and technical disciplines for primacy over the design process. That is, the degree to which each stage of technological development has given more agency during the design process to either designers (as creators or craftspeople) or technicians (as producers or developers).

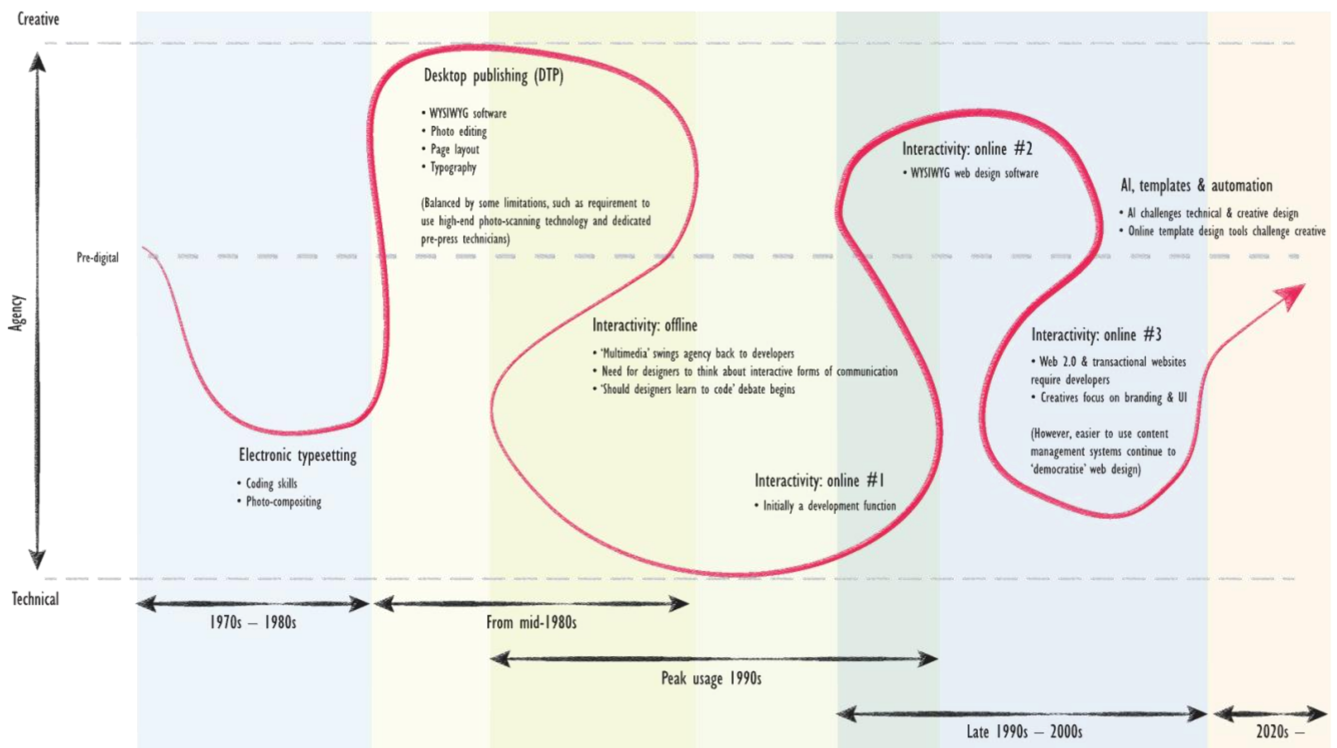

Figure 1: The dialectic flow between the agency of technicians and the agency of designers across the recent history of design.

As Figure 1 illustrates, at different stages of the information revolution, technologies have alternately preferenced one or the other disciplinary skillset, often at the expense of (at least partially) disenfranchising the other – although, in practice, many of these stages of technological development overlapped and often included hybrid technologies that coexisted for a time (Meron, 2024). In combination with economic, social and cultural factors—coming to an ideological pinnacle with the challenge from Neodesign—it is little wonder that design as a discipline can often exhibit a kind of existential anxiety about itself. More so when one considers the academic narrative that underpins the origins of Neodesign.

One of the reasons Neodesign's "enframing"—to borrow Heidegger's (1977) terminology—has gained traction and been allowed to influence design practice and education, is design's historical disciplinary insecurities about its epistemological and methodological pedigree in relation to the "hard" sciences. Design, unlike other related established professions such as architecture or engineering, had often been perceived as lacking rigour, objectivity, and consistency, particularly in its methods. In the early 1960s, the Design Methods Movement (DMM) aimed to address this issue and elevate the scholarly authority of design, making it more "scientific" by attempting to formalise design methodologies (Langrish, 2016). While the DMM was not entirely successful in achieving this objective, it did popularise the notion that there is a unique "designerly" (Cross, 1982) way of thinking that is distinct from both scientific and artistic epistemologies (Archer, 1979). Over the years, this idea reinforced the belief that what design

methods lacked in predictive power and reproducibility, they compensated for with creativity and novelty. In other words, by characterising design as a third epistemic culture, what was once regarded as a weakness within the Western positivist tradition transformed into a strength as postmodern discourse coalesced. The fusion of design thinking with creativity, combined with the fetishisation of creativity by the neoliberal mindset (Gormley, 2018; Ward, 2013), set the stage for Design (as) Thinking to emerge as the dominant conceptualisation of what designing ultimately involves.

Design Thinking as a symptom of Neodesign

Given that much has been written for and against Design Thinking (Cook, 2019; Dorst, 2011; Hernández-Ramírez, 2018; Kimbell, 2011, 2012), we did not want to over-dwell on its critique. However, when talking about contemporary perceptions of design, it is unavoidable to acknowledge the influence that Design Thinking has had on the field. This applies not just in design discourse but also, as Nathan Crilly has noted, that Design Thinking comes second only to "systems thinking" in the Scopus database for scientific literature (2024, p. 10), to design education.

We see the rise of Design Thinking in the 21st century as symptomatic of the hegemonic role that the Neodesign ethos has gained in the corporate world and, more importantly, within design education, where it has often come to supersede the art-school model that prevailed until the 2000s. We regard this shift as a triumph of procedurality over criticality and as exemplary of the dialectical tension between traditional design approaches and the managerialised constructs of Neodesign. As Natasha Jen (2018) (in)famously denounced, Design Thinking seemingly omits an essential dimension of design itself: critique. Similar concerns have been expressed by other voices. For example, Tim Seitz has challenged it for being theoretically weak and offering limited scope for reflection or critical analysis (2020), while Anne-Marie Dorland (2017) has noted how the narrative of much Design Thinking discourse bears little in common with the actual work of professional designers, informing disciplinary tensions between Design Thinking and professional design practice.

Indicative of the growing influence of Design Thinking, and therefore of Neodesign, is that traditional design skills such as sketching, critique, reflection, intuition, and imagination appear to have been largely supplanted by performative and procedural methods, riddled with corporate language and measured against business expectations. The result—regardless of the fact that "design problems" seemingly continue to be the main motivator of design education—is that design students are increasingly trained as *functionaries*. That is, implementers of formulaic processes guided by narrow, pre-determined expectations who *perform* design methods, as opposed to creative thinkers who thoroughly engage their imagination to make things that genuinely address relevant human issues.

The narrow pedagogy of Design Thinking

The teaching of Design Thinking in higher education can seem fragmented, and its content nebulous. Within business schools (or business units within higher education institutions), the Design Thinking approach appears circumscribed to short, professionally-oriented courses, invariably drawing from the corporate-influenced model. For example, Harvard's (2024) Design Thinking and Innovation course runs over a seven-week period and emphasises "structured methods", "breaking cognitive fixedness", and developing "a strategic innovation toolkit". This unit is said to benefit (among others) Innovation Managers, Entrepreneurs, Product Managers, and Marketers, with the promise of fostering "…an innovation mindset and toolkit you can use to guide your team or organization's strategy". The methods promoted largely align with the "DT2" format (Cross, 2023), such as "applying a human-centred approach to design techniques".

The teaching of Design Thinking in design schools is generally more difficult to survey and analyse, partly because detailed syllabuses for degree units are not as readily available as those of short professional development courses. However, one must wonder about the paradox of design students being taught, directly or indirectly Design Thinking in the first place. Design Thinking emerged from the repurposing of the existing practices of designers so as to be accessible to non-designers. This raises the question of what value can this teaching have for design students, given that it constitutes a reduced simulacra of design? As Figure 2 illustrates, Design Thinking is already largely a performative and narrow subset of design practice and, when introduced into the classroom, further constrains students' ability to explore alternative ways of doing design. The recipe-like modality of Design Thinking, which promotes an instrumental view of the design process, as something with pre-defined stages that warrant specific techniques drawn from a "toolbox", fosters an approach to designing in which students mimic the outward forms of professional practice without understanding their underlying purpose, expecting that this replication alone will produce successful outcomes.

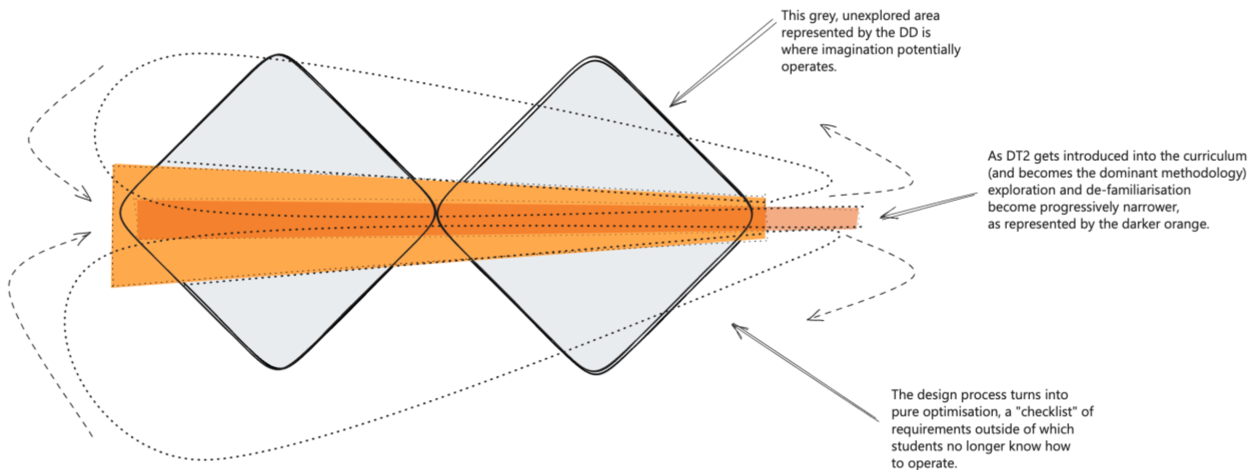

Figure 2: DT2 is already a limited subset of design. When introduced as a method in educational contexts, it further limits students' capacity to imagine and explore the design space.

Positioning Imagination, creativity, and perceptions of design value

Design, once taught as a professional, discipline-focused, reflective and creative practice within art schools (Banks & Oakley, 2015), has increasingly been co-opted and repositioned as a homogeneous, self-contained business practice. This has partially been achieved thanks to the reconceptualisation of design as a third pillar of knowledge, associated with a number of design theorists from the late twentieth century, most prominently Nigel Cross in his work "Designerly Ways of Knowing" (1982). Design education and, in many instances, professional practice have also been significantly impacted by the "businessification" of design, with some design practices being absorbed and others largely omitted (Harland & Meron, 2024). As a result, many designers—especially in fields like graphic design—have experienced a crisis in disciplinary confidence (Meron, 2021).

The fear of the loss of agency on the side of designers (spurred also by technological developments, as more recently exemplified by Generative AI) appears to have partially driven the adoption of business-oriented practices, paraphernalia, and discourse, at the expense of seemingly less "serious" industry-valued skills such as creativity, criticality, reflection and… imagination. Ironically, however, those skills are unashamedly promoted within the promotional literature of business-focused Design Thinking courses. Indeed, while designers from the early 21st century onwards began recasting themselves as consultants, abandoning the playful and reflective practices that made them apt problem solvers in the first place, supposedly "serious" business people were unashamedly embracing their creative ideas.

To illustrate the point, one of the authors of this paper has experience of clients preferring designers who dressed according to their stereotype (classically in black jeans and black t-shirts), in contrast to designers who tried to impress them by wearing suits and speaking the language of corporate practice. The businesses wanted practitioners who thought differently (as designers), rather than pretending to be business-people (skills that they already possessed). Thus, paradoxically, this attempt by designers to fit within the business-dominated zeitgeist has led some designers to repress precisely what the industry valued most: their capacity to imagine. It is a misstep seemingly being repeated pedagogically by many university design curricula, which privilege methodological proficiency and the appearance of rigour over imagination and playfulness.

The interplay of imagination and judgement

Imagination is not a term extensively used in design—it is far more probable to encounter terms such as creativity, critique, or reflection in the literature. Nonetheless, as we will see in this section, imagination plays a crucial role in the creative process at large. The creative exercise of the imagination involves exploring a particular subspace of possibilities guided by existing models and recognised constraints (Hills & Bird, 2018). This exploration, however, is not random but directed by existing frameworks and limitations that end up shaping the creative output—the tradition or paradigms we mentioned earlier. Creative activity frequently involves the interaction between imagination and other distinct processes, such as inspecting an artefact. This interaction highlights that creativity is not an isolated mental activity but is often intertwined with practical and analytical tasks, the kind that involve "negotiating with the materials," to paraphrase Schön (1983).

The exercise of creativity is invariably accompanied by *judgment*. Judgment involves rejecting paths and ideas that fail to address the problem at hand and ensuring that the creative output satisfies the necessary constraints, needs, and desiderata that determine the quality of the solution to that problem. However, as Hills & Bird (2018) emphasise, that process of tempering creativity through judgment is rarely as straightforward as depictions of the design process (including the Double Diamond model) seem to imply. Rather, it is interactive and iterative, involving repeated exercises of both imagination and judgment at various stages of development. Judgment is exercised not only on the finished product but at every stage of its development—hence the importance that "crit" has for design, as Jen (2018) and others have noted. Iterative judgement ensures that the creative output is continually refined and improved. Consequently, in relation to creativity, imagination has two crucial uses: first, finding ways to simultaneously meet a number of constraints, and second, bringing together ideas from different domains, forging a new type of thing. This dual function of imagination underscores its importance in the creative process. By navigating constraints and integrating diverse ideas, the imagination can produce innovative and valuable outcomes.

Creativity, however, is not inherently about value. To create value, the imagination must be focused on a range of possibilities guided by previously successful attempts at producing value. This implies that creativity is not just about generating novel ideas out of the blue, but also about ensuring that those ideas have genuine practical and aesthetic value. The disposition to produce many novel ideas through the imagination, coupled with the motivation to bring those ideas to fruition, is what ultimately characterises a creative enterprise as such.

Hills & Bird (2018) argue that creativity tends to produce works of value only when two additional conditions are met: a tradition of valuable models and exemplars and good judgment to discern which of the new ideas produced by the imagination indeed have value. The tradition of models and exemplars provides a rich source of inspiration and guidance for the creative process. These models serve as benchmarks against which the new value can be measured and refined.

In summary, creativity is a complex interplay between imagination and judgment. It involves exploring possibilities within a framework of models and constraints, interacting with practical and analytical processes, and continually refining ideas through iterative judgment. The imagination's ability to navigate constraints and integrate diverse ideas is crucial for producing innovative outcomes. However, for creativity to result in valuable works, it must be guided by a tradition of valuable models and exemplars and tempered by good judgment. This intricate balance between imagination and judgment is what ultimately defines successful creative activity.

Imagination is guided by aesthetics, which in turn is informed by craft

As Hauser et al. (2021) note, design operates at the intersection of what a thing is (e.g., an artefact for drinking) and how that thing presents itself to the intended user (e.g., a glass cup for wine). It is because of this interplay that the designer's role is different from that of an artisan or technician, as a designer determines what an artefact *expresses* to its audience or user, and that expression, in turn, will determine how and when the artefact will be used and what kind of experience it could elicit. The "how" necessarily encompasses a broad range of possibilities, making it a complex challenge that does not lend itself easily to formulaic approaches. Therefore, to navigate the vast space of possibilities, designers employ various strategies, including imagination, as well as aesthetic considerations. "Aesthetics" here refers not only to the appearance, but mainly to the underlying logic or framework determining the "why" behind a particular design (Hallnäs, 2011).

Aesthetics goes beyond just the visual appearance of objects; it serves as a fundamental principle and a framework for the design process. Essentially, a specific aesthetic helps to determine what can be considered a suitable solution to the "how" question, guiding the identification of what qualifies as "good" design and, in some cases, even the "best" design among various alternatives. While a prevailing aesthetic may shape much of the design within a particular domain—such as a company, region, or market segment—it remains just one of many possible approaches. It is an aesthetic, with a lowercase "a", rather than an absolute "Aesthetic" with a capital "A" (Hauser et al., 2021, p. 4).

Imagination, between structure and non-sense

There is a substantial body of academic research examining the connection between creativity and design. As previously mentioned, the prominent role that Neodesign has achieved in business and academic contexts stems from the way it repackaged design as an instrument *for* creativity. However, creativity necessarily relies on imagination. In fact, imagination can be considered "the cognitive source of genuine creativity," as Hills & Bird (2018, p. 3) have noted. Despite this, the importance of imagination for design practice and knowledge creation is often overshadowed by the emphasis on "design creativity" (Folkmann, 2014).

Imagination is a complex notion that intertwines with many phenomena, and as such, it lacks a single definition. Nevertheless, at the most fundamental level, we can agree that it constitutes the "ability to produce a particular type of mental representation" (Hills & Bird, 2018, p. 3). This ability is crucial for most cognitive activities since it "allows one to test ideas, consider the perspectives of others, and move from what is to what might be […] it makes possible all our thinking about what is, what has been, and, perhaps, most important, what might be" (Tsai et al., 2022, p. 843).

Imagination is about something that is not given, "that exists as a possibility" (Folkmann, 2014, p. 7). And therein lies the crux of its relationship with design, given that—as Redström (2020, p. 89) has noted—design is about "making things possible", both in terms of artefacts and knowledge. It does so by allowing one to "scan, consciously or unconsciously, some subset of the space of relevant possibilities" (Hills & Bird, 2018, p. 3) that would, for example, lead to the solution of a problem. However, imagination never operates in a vacuum but rather *against* existing cultural frameworks and norms, i.e., a "tradition" (Hills & Bird, 2018, p. 5) or "paradigm" (Kuhn, 1996) that governs expectations, constraints, and possibilities. Therefore, it can be said that imagination always proceeds in a dynamic interplay between structure and chaos or, as Folkmann (2014) puts it, between "synthesis" and "dispersion".

Deeply rooted in the Romantic tradition is the notion that imagination allows the mind to connect disparate things, to synthesise them into something new and original, and thus creative—i.e., "combinational creativity" (Boden, 2013, p. 438). This view of imagination as a synthetic activity is also deeply rooted in the concept of design as a dynamic process that alternates between divergence, transformation, and convergence, where analysis, evaluation, and synthesis converge to yield a novel solution for a problem. Perhaps the most well-known visualisation of these ideas is the Double Diamond diagram developed by the British Design Council (Ball, 2019). However, the Romantic (and earlier traditions) also recognised a dimension of wandering, chaos, and even madness in imagination, where the mind can venture far beyond the constraints of tradition (Gaut, 2010). Here, imagination is about *informing* a new structure. However, in this wandering, imagination can also steer the mind astray, leading it away from rationality (Folkmann, 2014). When going towards dispersion, imagination is driven by instinct and intuition, taking the mind to the "world of the ineffable" (Bleecker et al., 2023, p. 29), a territory of non-sensical things not yet shaped by rationality. Imagination at this extreme is fundamentally chaotic.

As Folkmann (2014, p. 10) argues, the literature about design creativity has excessively focused on the synthetic dimension (the convergence towards a solution) whilst ignoring the dispersive dimension of imagination. Moreover, it has also tended to portray the relation between the two (and thus between order and chaos, convergence and divergence) in a linear, alternating fashion, as one naturally leading to the other. Yet, these two dimensions may not just be co-dependent but also co-existent. Folkman also contends that turning one's attention towards the dispersive dimension and regarding it not as something to be avoided but rather as something productive might be advantageous. This shift in perspective allows us to view knowledge generation in design not just as a process of form-giving (of creating order and coherence), but also as the result of dispersion and exploration towards the limits of the known and beyond. After all, designing is necessarily about bringing new things into the world and making things possible, and this implies investigating how we go about design, how we make the making, and inquiring which things are truly worthy of mass replication (Redström, 2020).

For Folkmann, the "mental setting" that designers experience when contemplating how an intention or idea might link to an outcome can be described in terms of a Kantian aesthetic schematisation, where the concepts for the design are perpetually examined in a process of endless approximation (2014, pp. 13–14). This process functions as a kind of negotiation of the known (the starting point) with the unknown (the imagined idea). A form of cognition that implies an open search of concepts to fit a given (imagined) appearance, and to give that appearance the conceptual construction of a form. The process starts with the known (i.e., the tradition); then, the imagination idealises something different (rejecting the tradition) and attempts to ground the new idea or appearance using adjacent known concepts. Eventually, the known (but unfit) existing concepts are dissolved with the help of experimentation and exploration (dispersed imagination), leading to chaos and dispersion, but then synthetic imagination takes hold and leads to a new organisation of meaning and form, a new solution that is necessarily different; a thing that hitherto not a *formed* thing.

Neodesign claims to actually foster that dispersive imagination; however, its structured nature (the steps, the fixed metaphors, the recipe-like methods, the formalisation of playfulness) more closely resembles a ring-fenced simulation. Absent is the critical exploration of possibilities available in the messiness of design reflection, criticality, and aesthetic judgement of the kind that has traditionally formed the core of the art-school model of craft-centred design education.

It is a gap created by influences outside of design pedagogy. However, it is also a self-inflicted reduction of authority and agency by design itself, as much by omission and inaction as by a lack of disciplinary self-confidence.

Conclusion

In Douglas Adams' *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* (1980), the protagonist, Zaphod Beeblebrox, comes across a piece of technology known as the "Total Perspective Vortex". The Vortex is designed to project the entirety of the universe to anyone engaging with it, altering their entire perspective on not only the universe but also themselves. In Beeblebrox's case, he is only exposed to a simulation of the Total Perspective Vortex, allowing him to emerge unchanged or even more convinced of his original perspectives. Leaving aside the literary absurdities of Adams' narratives, the story can serve as a parable for Neodesign—as a simulated form of design that has abandoned its essence.

As educators trying to help future designers prepare for emerging technological developments, we believe it is imperative to retain the messy, reflective, imaginative, and critical challenges that have long elevated design above other disciplines, over the formulaic absolutes of Neodesign. In a creative landscape facing challenges from artificial intelligence (AI), the Neodesign ethos manifests as a pastiche of design. Much like generative AI is a mimicry of human cognition, existential engagement, critical reflection and emotion, Neodesign is a simulacrum of design's essential practices—reproducing processes that allude to criticality and imagination, yet with those practices rendered as a façade. Consequently, design as a critical practice is weakened, and its practitioners lose agency in the creative process (regardless of the job titles that Neodesign assigns them). Moreover, Neodesign manifests as a practice ready-built for AI—easily compartmentalised, reproduced and repurposed without the need for reflection or critique. This procedural alignment with AI's operational logic underscores Neodesign's departure from core design approaches, which are rooted in critical inquiry, imagination, and intuition.

Milton Glaser is reported to have said, "There are three responses to a piece of design—yes, no, and WOW! Wow is the one to aim for" (3DW, 2020). The realities of design in industry, especially for those without the status of Glaser, are that such creative luxuries are not always achievable. However, they are an aspiration for which design was once premised upon—at least pedagogically—even if the creative constraints of the 'real world' were later accommodated. To reiterate, the problem is not that Neodesign exists, but that it has reduced to a veneer – or omitted entirely – the richness, depth and criticality of much of the design practice that it has long borrowed from. Consequently, our critique does not diminish the evident symbiotic relationship between design and industry. The challenge is to more appropriately interweave modes of business with modes of designing that already harness imagination and, therefore, creativity.

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