

My Design Philosophy – Design as a Pursuit of Perfection

Sijie Yang

Even if design is beyond a fundamental activity of mankind, substantially it has to be brought into this world by people. In fact, a designer is nothing more than a human being. Humans all have needs, desires, and dreams, although they differ from individual to individual. What we think and do is shaping the world we live in as well as who we are as people. Likewise, a designer grows with his design, and the vice versa. Why is this mutual relationship meaningful to us? Because we always want to be better men who are able to create a better world in which this loop of self and surrounding improvement can be sustained infinitely. In other words, ideally we want everything, including ourselves to be perfect since nothing can be good enough forever under any circumstances. It is a need, a desire, a dream or even a fantasy to achieve perfection. But design makes it feel achievable eventually due to it enables people to push the limits again and again and get close to the boundary of innovation ^[1] where the hope that keeps us moving into the future arises. Right here, designers come into play. If you're looking for the greatest potential in design, you should look for designers who have the greatest potential in themselves. By potential, I mean the inherent evolving quality of pursuing perfection in oneself. Such quality motivates people to embrace, explore, communicate with, reflect on and change the reality through design and redesign. In my design philosophy, design itself is a pursuit of perfection after all.

Why we use design to pursue perfection

Change by design, and design for change. People are constantly changing their thoughts, attitudes, strategies, emotions, actions and expectations towards the variant situations they are in. However, there are barely the best solutions that can meet every single requirement so that a perfect experience would be produced all the time. This is also why customers tend to appreciate expensive products and services over the cheaper ones, because they provide better experience via more comprehensive understanding of clients' special appetite in perfection, even though people are not necessarily going to pay for them. Now that nothing can be regarded as absolute perfection but we treat that as a desirable vision, which stands for solving problems, meeting needs, improving situations or creating something new or useful ^[2], there will always be a call for change, sooner or later. Design starts with intentional purposes, regardless of the fact that actual consequences are expected or unexpected, desirable or undesirable, enough or not enough. Change comes along with the existence of a design piece which influences someone at somewhere during some period of time to some extent. More or less, it makes a difference once people encounter design, no matter in a cognitive, emotional or practical manner.

Design is an integrative tradition as well as discipline. At the beginning of *The Design Way* ^[3], written by Harold G. Nelson and Erik Stolterman, design is described as a traditional human activity as well as a natural and ancient human ability. As

human beings, we continuously create things that help reshape the reality and essence of the world as we know it. When we create new things – technologies, organizations, processes, environments, ways of thinking, or systems – we engage in design. The authors point out that design, in its genetic sense, is the first tradition among many traditions of human inquiry and action. The nature of design as the first tradition places it at the intersection of several large fields, including thinking, research and practice in sciences, arts, professions, services, technology and engineering. Each design domain requires a broad range of skills, knowledge and awareness. All of them together equip us with the confidence to depict a perfect picture in our minds, to come up with an idea of what we think would be an ideal addition to the world, and to give real existence – form, structure, and shape.

Design invents the future. Design knowledge is of and about the artificial world and how to contribute to the creation and maintenance of that world ^[4]. The unknown and unpredictable nature of the future endows humanity with imagination, meanwhile the creative and practical attributes of design enable us to realize our dream and make expectations come true. Here we see the hope of living for the future. For instance, as a customer, he or she hopes to use better products and receive better services in order to have better user experiences which constitute a considerable portion of the entire lifetime experience. Similarly, as a company, people hope to build better products and provide better services which are capable of producing better user experience and winning greater chance for the company to gain profits. As a designer, personally I hope

to be able to make better design come into being for the sake of better quality of our lives. The more hope generated by design, the more we care about the future. If hope gives us the reasons to move on and care allows us to express human emotions since we need to, eventually we're looking for a perfect balance between the two through design.

Achieving perfection is the ultimate goal of design. As human beings, perfection is what we strive to obtain in the future. It represents the very best vision of human life, including almost every aspect that involves in design and its consequences, range from basic needs, everyday experience, to advanced desires. We always want the current situation we're in, and the present world we're interacting with to be better. However, it will never come to an end that we stop pushing through the complexity of reality as not even one piece of design can be seen as absolutely perfect forever, no matter it is a small artifact or an entire system. As long as we change our perspectives of defining perfection because of the influence from the development of technology, education, politics, culture, society and even tradition, new room for not only improvement, but also innovation will emerge. Unexplored space creates underlying opportunities which enhance people's belief in possibilities of making things better even more. Over and over, perfection is distributed and concealed into all kinds of possibilities, showing up right behind the mist of hope. It seems that every time when we get close to the edge of horizon, while we are peeking into the future, perfection is somehow pushed further away, nonetheless, this is how design works and motivates us to bring life to a higher level.

How design works to pursue perfection

Design is an everyday service which aims at solving problems, leveraging opportunities, and improving situations to create new reality and invent the future by making change and coping with change. Again, stripped to its essence, design can be defined as the human capacity to shape and make our environment in ways without precedent in nature, to serve our needs and give meaning to our lives ^[5]. On a detailed level, as the primary object to be perfected, life is entirely conditioned by designed outcomes of one kind or another. While the influence of context and circumstance may be considerable, the human factor is present in decisions taken at all levels in design practice. In practice, basically we are guided by the ambition to imagine a desirable state of the world, playing through alternative ways in which it might be accomplished, carefully tracing the consequences of contemplated actions ^[6]. It is not only about initial decisions or concepts by designers, but also about how these are implemented and by what means we can evaluate their effect or benefit. Because design is not restricted to the forms of decision-making and problem-solving, and the unexpected expansions ^[7] of the initial concept is inevitable during the entire design process across the full range of domains required for any given outcome.

As one of the fundamental activities of creating human world, design enables designers and clients to align their intentions of fulfilling needs, meeting expectations, and achieving desires. In order to align intentions of different parties who are involved in design process, people need to communicate, empathize, and make judgments based on the common

ground established upon the shared vision of perfection. In the end, choices have to be made as respond to the tradeoffs for constraints which are seemingly the enemies of reaching perfection. However, the truth is quite the opposite since it is constraint that stimulates the growth of our capacity for procedural rationality ^[8] which triggers our increasing understanding of perfection. It doesn't mean the more the better, not the less the better. It should be indicated as the delicate but also robust balance between micro and macro systems, between an entity and its details, between ideal and reality. For a designer who is experiencing perfection in the flow of design, such balance exists between his or her reflection-in-action ^[9] and reflection-on-action. Design doesn't necessarily make things become perfect pieces themselves, actually it also helps us build and maintain the connection with perfection. Directed by this connection, design essentially determines the quality of human life by enhancing, establishing and producing meaningful relationships between people and desirable outcome through externalization, materialization and embodiment of design concepts.

What designers do to pursue perfection

Design refers to a process (figure 1), and the process is goal-oriented. Finally, the goal of design is achieving ultimate perfection. There is one thing that needs to be pointed out here. The actual outcome doesn't equal to perfection, but it represents particular intentions of obtaining perfection and efforts that people spend on reaching perfection. Iteration plays an important role of promoting the output of this process closer to the perfect vision.

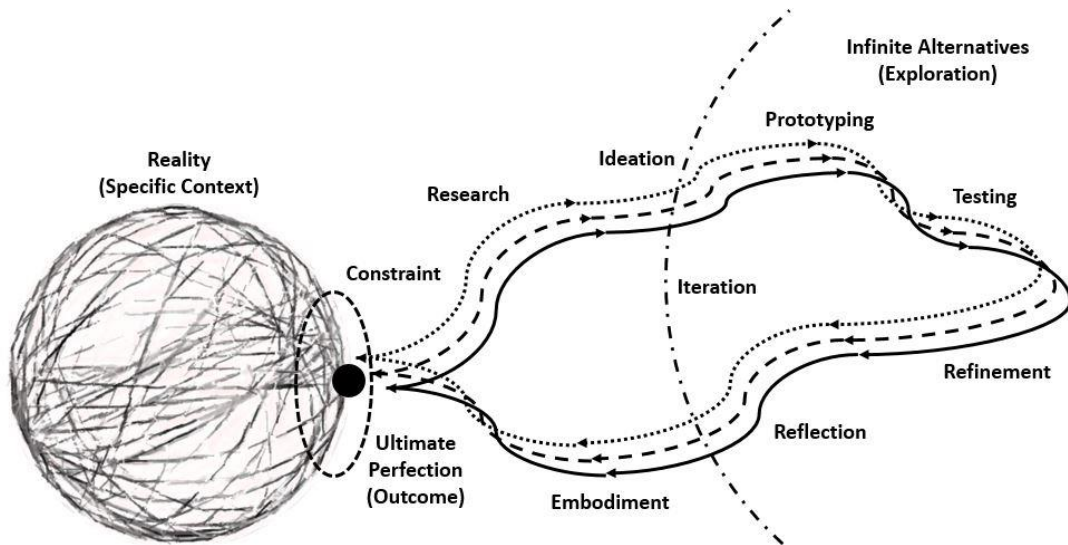


Figure 1. The Design Process of Pursuing Perfection

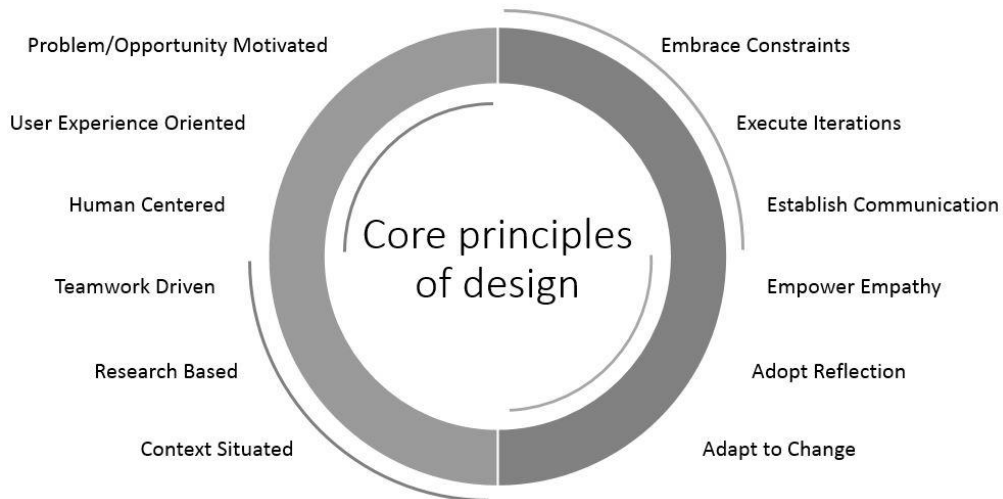


Figure 2. Core Principles of Design

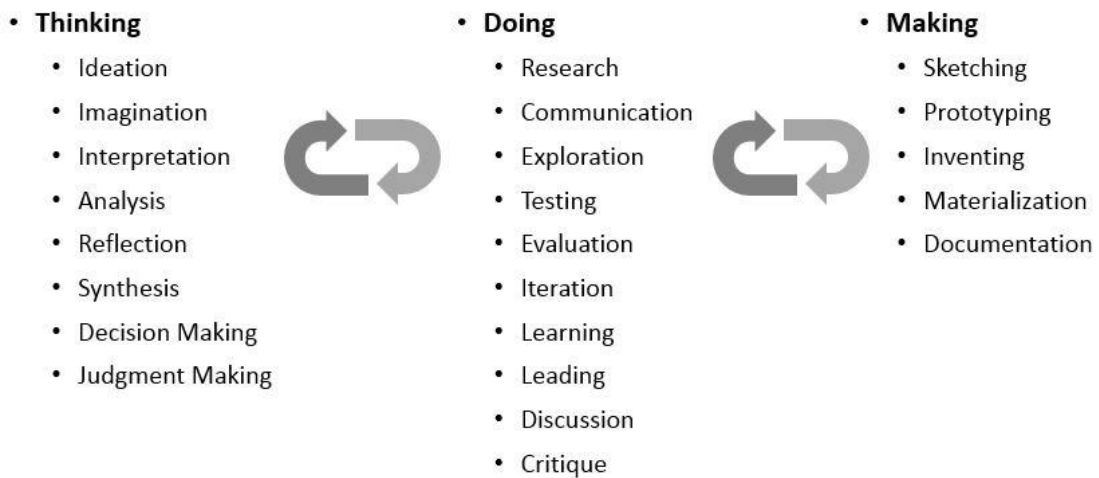


Figure 3. Design Activities

Achieving perfection is a difficult and complex job. So we also need some principles (figure 2) to guide our thinking, doing and making (figure 3). One principle or one design activity alone cannot guarantee the success of design at all, let alone the achievement of perfection. But all of the principles and activities together augment our ability of catching the shadow of perfection.

In actual design process, designers often learn from earlier trials to reframe alternatives and even the problem itself. Learning is the way to improve our capability of constantly examining, defining and approaching to perfection. All such learning depends on the designer's perception of the earlier trials and the present one, and on his or her appreciation of the significance of the earlier trails – their implications, potentials, constraints as well as the ultimate perfection. Moreover, each design project helps to prepare the designer for future projects. How well a designer could learn and prepare for the future mainly rely on how sufficient he or she reflects on both the past and ongoing experience. Reflection is a profound inquiry into perfection. It is primarily how designers grow with their engagement with design, how they accumulate design vocabulary and how they build their repertoires. Why is learning and reflection so important in terms of pursuing perfection in design? An overwhelming reason is that design happens in systems – machines, buildings, computer programs, or human organizations, for example – where a change in the position, features, or functions of one element can produce significant changes in other elements and in the system as a whole ^[10]. People have to learn and reflect so as to be aware of the

subtle interplay with all kinds of systems.

Apart from that design as a service which embodies people's appeal for a better world, design as a pursuit of perfection is also a form of leadership. Designers take the responsibility of not only crafting the perfect vision of design, but also leading the general public to the desirable outcome by fulfilling the ultimate perfection as much as possible. Is there a meaningful way that allows designers to communicate their ultimate vision of perfection to the audience, such as clients, end-users, and other stakeholders? Storytelling is the perfect tool to convey and examine the anticipated perfection of human experience influenced by design. Last but not the least, failing to involve social participation will cause a direct consequence that the design process cannot fully instill the final vision and give the expected direction to inquiry while at the same time it leaves design structure open to transformation. All in all, for every single designer, pursuing perfection in design is always quite a challenge.

How I pursue perfection as a designer

Design, as known as an interdisciplinary activity, brings all kinds of potential into our world which consists of reality and fantasy. These infinite possibilities give us hope, reasons and motivations to pursue the achievement of bringing our lives to a higher level. But can we ensure that we get what we want in the end? Sometimes yes, whereas not always simply because the outcomes all have unpredictability in nature. Apparently if there is absolutely no unexpected or surprising results, there is no room for imagination, no room for expectations, and no room for design. For us, human beings, as long as we are alive,

we tend to predict the upcoming situations for the sake of fulfilling our will about the future, even if just the next minute. That fundamental willpower drive us to design. Design enables us to explore alternatives, solve problems and improve current situations. As time goes by, our lives, our surroundings and ourselves are influenced by design, or even beyond influence, everything is designed and redesigned either directly or indirectly. This is a design world. As an individual who wants to be a designer, I seem to be supposed to have more potential and responsibility upon the design world, including my own life, at least while I am doing design. Here comes the challenge, I need to be capable of handling unpredictability in order to be qualified as a designer. How do I do it? Instead of fighting against it, I choose to embrace it with my full will for intentional purposes – achieving perfection in every design project. Design is the effort of activating the transformations from mediocre to outstanding, from common to unique, from universal to particular, from chaotic to organized, from defective to perfect. Perhaps they sound impractical, however, like what Donald Schon said, *we must learn to understand, guide, influence and manage these transformations. We must make the capacity for undertaking them integral to ourselves and to our institutions* ^[11]. Our pursuits of perfection are the lights over the path through which we may find the right direction that leads to where we want to be. It's not guaranteed that we will definitely arrive at the destination, however, the stronger our willpower is, the brighter that path towards our design goals will be.

Either good or bad, life changes with the alteration of our perspective, the world will

be different because we shift our angles, and people feel no longer the same due to the transformation of their attitudes. Seeing things differently accounts for all kinds of consequences we encounter, enjoy, and suffer. It's just as simple as that. However, just like the most impactful design which seemingly exists in an ultimate simplicity but also requires considerable amount of efforts and investments from designers, changing perspective is also easier said than done. If we say any design would change the world more or less to some extent, then designers must have had conscious intentions of making a difference at the very beginning. Whereas the variant nature of design process usually takes people to unpredictable results which may go either beyond our expectations or against with our initial purposes. Subsequently, how do we feel about and deal with the outcome depend on the particular perspective we hold, not the one we may want to have eventually. Being aware of this perhaps doesn't matter at that moment, because our willingness to make the right judgments are more likely to be overridden by instant emotions that respond to those undesirable perspectives. Is there a way to increase the chance that we gain more positive perspectives during design process? I think the answer is resilience. It even allows us to take situated actions even to a maximized degree. Good design isn't born from nowhere and bad design won't be the end of the world. Again, as long as there are any possibilities that fresh perspectives can be found, there will be hope in design or redesign and there will be hope in reaching perfection. Starting over accordingly sometimes means rebirth. That being said, the key of being resilient is to accept whatever your design process results in and

carry on with a peaceful mind. This is not easy to achieve at all so we came here, at IU, to temper ourselves through the baptism of HCI/d program. Such journey won't end with our graduation, but continue throughout the lifetime as a designer. The more experienced, confident, and reflective we're, the more resilient we'll become. Also, resilience enables us to go with the flow, not only in design career, but also in our personal lives. Constantly enhancing our understanding of the power of perspective and resilience, we're on our way of becoming successful designers.

In addition, we need to be really careful about the distinction between doing design projects which are intended to serve other people and fulfill their needs, and living in a design world in which we make our judgments and create own values by taking a standpoint of design. In other words, there is a difference between pursuing perfection for others and for ourselves. If we confuse ourselves by taking the criteria which is supposed to be applied in professional settings into our personal lives, our core belief of design will be strangely questioned by external judgments. This could be a serious issue because it would jeopardize our self-confidence and unique ways of design thinking. What ought to happen is quite the opposite. We should be able to bring our design philosophy into design practice. Making judgments based on our informed design capabilities rather than relying on opinions given by other people. This may be hard due to the reasons that we are not designing for ourselves, whereas good design results from not only listening to the external feedbacks, but also listening to the voice which integrates processed mental materials with coming in information.

Ultimately, we need to get along with ourselves and enjoy our lives as professional designers, and more importantly, as human beings. This is my personal pursuit of perfection.

Further readings and references

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