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A PHILOSOPHY AND PROCESS FOR
FUNCTIONAL VISUAL COMMUNICATION

ERIC KARJALUOTO

THE DESIGN METHOD

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VOICES THAT MATTER™

Design is a search for natural form and is an evolving process. The final result can, in retrospect, feel implicit. Structure is everywhere—particularly in design. By thinking in systems, you adopt a viewpoint that allows you to start with the largest concerns first and then zoom in to the smallest ones. There’s an efficiency and ease that comes from doing this. Once you have the main design concerns in place, you are free to just fill in the missing parts. And as long as the primary and secondary pieces fit together properly, you’re more likely to create suitable design.

Up Next

Now that you’ve explored systems thinking and learned about its benefits, I’ll help you apply this perspective to your design work. In the next chapter, I’ll introduce The Design Method we’ve developed at smashLAB and discuss the working principles involved in this process.

CHAPTER 4

Introducing The Design Method

The Design Method is a framework you can implement in every design project to achieve appropriate results. This blueprint helps you gain understanding, craft a plan, develop ideas, and ultimately produce and apply them.

Presenting The Design Method

The Design Method is a philosophy and approach that lends clarity to and facilitates your work. It helps you understand the situation and problem, and then allows you to determine what the design solution needs to do. The method walks you through an increasingly detailed series of stages. This top-down approach prevents fumbling around with styles, instead enabling you to shape your choices around what your design and client actually need.

Many design process philosophies exist. Some are rigidly structured and driven by rationalism; others take a more emotional approach and favor improvisation. Some rely heavily on observation; others encourage an approach in which designers and users collaborate closely. Some divide the process into seven stages; others pick six, and still others three—heck, I think they come in all sizes. In fact, crafty agencies treat the design process as a marketing gimmick and put great effort into creating proprietary names and pretty flowcharts illustrating how their “unique” process works. (You can likely imagine what I think of this last practice.)

It's hard to say that any one process is better than the rest. Each has a place for some client, designer, situation, or discipline. The important point is that you employ a process that suits you and your clients, and work it consistently instead of just winging it and doing what feels good at the time. (I did that once, and as a consequence, I now have a tattoo of Selena Gomez and a puppy on my left thigh.) If you help clients communicate messages, ideas, values, and the like, you'll find The Design Method to be particularly suitable to your needs.

The Design Method shares similarities with other processes, although it's also different in many ways. It's rational and ordered, overwhelmingly straightforward and logical, but it also involves using your intuition. It requires an involved dialogue with clients; however, it doesn't ask them to perform tasks they are neither trained nor equipped for. It doesn't assume that the initial specifications are the right ones; instead, it begins with research, observation, and questioning in order to evaluate what deliverables are most suitable. The method is rooted in how a studio works, not isolated theory. The result is process stages and approaches that work better in practice than in a textbook. You'll find that this applied view shapes the process

stages, recommendations for work habits and practices, and the language I use to describe this method.

The particular slant of The Design Method is informed by a *communication design* standpoint. The reason I mention this point is that some of the approaches used in product design, for example, aren't directly transferrable to what brand, graphic, and communication designers do. Communication is key to our work at smashLAB regardless of the form it takes. We might build a visual system, website, content strategy, application, or signage system; in each case, we are helping to create or facilitate communication.

Certain design approaches are sensible on paper but difficult to incorporate in actual practice. The Design Method is applied and works well for designers who need to solve often ill-defined visual communication problems. In fact, this method has evolved at our agency over nearly 15 years of daily practice. We've experimented with several approaches in the past and learned from each of these tests, adding what worked to our process. We didn't come by these learnings easily: By taking so much time to sort out this method, our agency has become increasingly productive and successful—more than that, our clients get effective work because of this approach.

To apply this design methodology, you must agree to follow the stages laid out later in this chapter. Don't try to skip a step, get fancy, or make your process any harder than it needs to be. Just follow the process as intended; I promise this approach won't lead you astray. Every day I apply this method, and it continues to delight me. Although The Design Method may seem, and actually is, deceptively simple, it has never failed me when I followed its well-ordered steps.

The Fundamental Stages of The Design Method

Most design processes share a number of common stages and tasks. In The Design Method, all activities are organized into four broad stages, which I'll outline in a moment. These stages are defined quite generally so you can grasp the core activities, and then shape presentation and details according to your specific needs. You'll determine your own working phases and create corresponding documentation based on these steps. You might also develop small leave-behinds, booklets,

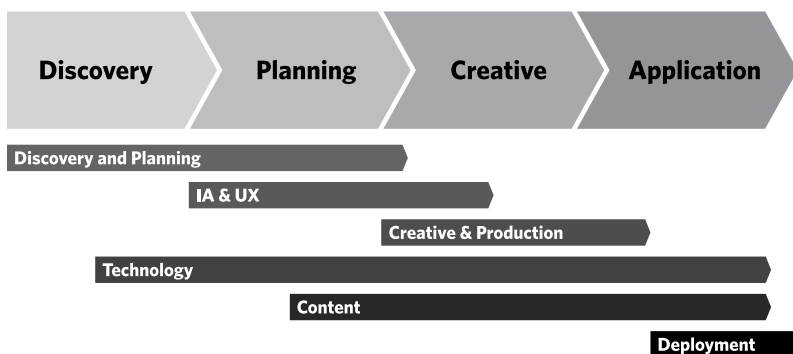
diagrams, visualizations, videos, or slide decks that help your clients understand the way you'll work with them.

Some methods have organized their work into a few broad stages, such as *Reflect*, *Observe*, *Make*, and then *Repeat*. Others seem to like alliteration, and use the groupings *Define*, *Design*, *Develop*, and *Deploy*. Still others sound more scientific, starting with *Discovery*, and moving into *Interpretation*, *Ideation*, *Experimentation*, and *Evolution*. Regardless of how you present your process to clients, odds are that you'll be working through a few common stages. The Design Method is based on these stages, which from here on become this book's area of focus. They include the following:

1. **Discovery.** Gathering data and becoming familiar with the situation through observation and analysis.
2. **Planning.** Identifying key needs and issues, and developing a strategy and actionable plan to address these concerns.
3. **Creative.** Exploring conceptual options and potential design directions, and organizing these possibilities into a clear vision.
4. **Application.** Implementing the approach and building out design elements along with testing, measurement, evaluation, and refinement.

The point of identifying these fundamental stages, and working within them, is to lend structure to your design process. But in actuality, these stages sometimes bleed into one another. Although Discovery starts the process, you never stop learning about your clients and their needs. Planning, too, is most exhaustive at the beginning of projects, but you'll continue to plan smaller points throughout your project. The Creative and Application stages involve a cyclical set of tasks: You'll hatch ideas, develop prototypes, run iterations, test your approach, and refine your design. Following these stages will help you mitigate whims that would otherwise leave you bouncing through projects at random.

Although the overlapping aspects of these stages may turn out to be murkier than you like, design isn't that absolutely segmented. This lack of clarity has become even more prevalent in recent years and relates, in part, to how many design projects are now digital in nature. A digital setting allows you to assess results, adjust, and redeploy more rapidly and inexpensively than other settings in which changing



The Design Method relies on four key process stages; however, the working phases you employ are informed by the kind of design you do and the project milestones you establish.

and redeploying items increases time and cost. The management of American Airlines, for example, probably wouldn't be keen to change its identity a week after launching its redesign. After applying the new visuals to all of its airplanes and branded materials, such a task would be substantial regardless of how the new treatments were received.

You'll likely personalize the language you use to describe your working process and how you segment your work modes. That's fine. Part of doing so will involve the kind of design you perform for your clients. Additionally, you may find it useful to determine the actual working phases, or service items, your projects require. Doing so will help you add detail to how you estimate, schedule, bill, and manage projects. You'll have to do this on your own because no one else knows the size, type, or scope of projects you work on.

At smashLAB, we generally break down our working phases into: *Discovery and Planning*, *Information Architecture and User Experience*, *Creative and Production*, *Technology*, *Content*, and *Deployment*. The phases we use make provisions for interaction design projects and content creation, because they are a big part of what we do for our clients. Again, these working phases are more specific than the process stages described in The Design Method. Process stages and working phases are different in that the former identify broad actions, whereas the latter are used to estimate project requirements and correspond with billable service items in our time tracking.

For most designers, crafting visuals feels more like design than knowledge gathering does; therefore, you might be inclined to