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## ON BEING A DESIGNER, AND NOT DOING DESIGN

I design by listening. That claim suggests the posture I hold while working on a design task. I take a listening posture, a looking posture. This posture is critical in describing how I work at design. Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous exclamation "Look, don't think!" resonates with me.<sup>1</sup> I do not aim to think about the design task; but rather practice design thinking. The language of "to think about" suggests a separation between me as an object and the design task as an object. I think it more helpful to see neither as objects, but both as processes. Both are dynamic then, and not static.

For me, design thinking, with its premium on processes, is the hallmark of a successful designer; wherein successful design thinking embodies listening, looking, paying attention, and responding. Conversely, when I am focused on the design task as though I'm separate from it, I lose the ability to flow<sup>2</sup> in design thinking.

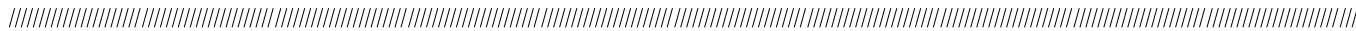
An advantage this posture offers is that I do not seek to impose my will over the design constituencies. Rather I aim to negotiate with context, demographics, parameters, technology, and budgets to arrive at solutions. This localizes my work per each context. Of course, I always hold some agenda. However, my agenda is best described as shifting, evolving, and revealing. It is not abstracted and then applied to any context. Instead the agenda is born from the union of a particular context and the process I am.

I find design to be a process of discovery. As Albert Szent-Györgyi von Nagrapol said, "Discovery consists of seeing what everybody has seen and thinking what nobody has thought."<sup>3</sup> I understand the quote to suggest that all the solutions are always before us. It is our task to pay attention. And what does it mean to pay attention other than to listen? Thereby design thinking involves more receiving and responding than prescribing and acting upon a task.

In this construct, design is a process of revealing knowledge. The object that results of the process is the record which aims to prevent forgetting the discovery. Objects are residue of process. Though leftover of the process, I've come to realize that objects serve to connect the process that is me to the process that is you—ergo communication.

Therefore, I work at falling into design, into solutions. This falling is not a haphazard stumbling (although stumbling isn't all together bad, if that happens we name it *serendipity*). Instead it is a deliberate pursuit of falling. I've learned to pursue falling by releasing my grip on forcing a result and allowing myself to be gripped by the process of discovery.

More concretely, I get into action. One rarely falls by standing still, so to push the metaphor, I start walking, searching for the moment to fall. Activities such as playing, researching, making, and thinking with my hands have each proven to be conduits for falling. However, they cannot be understood to cause it. It can happen, but you can't do it.



Design is an iterative process: discover, reflect, apply, discover, reflect, apply, and so on. The order is not critical; and the distinction between the elements of the process is often difficult to determine. Many cycles of this process occur throughout the development of a project and are rarely linear.

In metaphor, the process is more like the growth of a tree than the stacking of stones in a cathedral. Development occurs as conditions permit not at the prescriptive will of a designer.

If the above is accurate, then doing design is an impossibility. Doing design is more along the lines of gripping the process rather than being gripped by it. I can only, we can only, be designers. Design is not what we do, rather it is what happens when we pay attention, when we listen, when we look without thinking about, and when we fall into design. When we “be” designers, solutions emerge from a process of discovery. Good design, then, emerges from the process of being, rather than doing. In the end, good design is good living.

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstien. *Philosophical Investigations: The German Text, with a Revised English Translation 50th Anniversary Commemorative Edition*. Wiley, 2001

<sup>2</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. New York. HarperCollinsPublishers, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Irving John Good. *The Scientist Speculates: An Anthology Of Partly-Baked Ideas*. Heinemann, 1962.