DESIGN THINKING – HOUSE MD AND THE EUREKA MOMENT



This post is in a series of commentaries on a class running at Stanford, Winter Quarter 2010 – "Transformative Design" ENGR 231 – [Link]



The diagnostician – a contemporary archetype – Gregory House MD [Link]

Design thinking is problem oriented and human centered. The aim is to identify needs, often not even recognized and requiring deep research in their definition, then to adaptively, iteratively develop a design solution to address those needs. There is a series of techniques and methods that might be applied at different stages of the design process, but there is no linear, standard or even predictable methodology. The process is pragmatic and opportunistic. A couple of the class have voiced some concern over this, asking when might it be right to use certain techniques, regarding observation of behavior, for example. The IDEO card deck, covering 51 ways of being human centered, may be dealt in any number of ways. There's an indeterminate art to deciding when to do what.

At a certain point(s) in the design process, again indeterminate, there comes synthetic, holistic insight – the "aha" or "eureka" moment(s), when the research comes together and a solution, not necessarily the right one though, presents itself.

I said – “is this is like medical diagnosis?”. Moving from symptoms of a problem through tests to diagnosis and treatment; and with a fundamental underdetermination of the decision – hunches, rooted in deep experience, are crucial.

House MD deals in the most intractable of cases. Even the tests often fail to give any clear indication of what the problem is. He breaks the rules because, ultimately, there’s no right way to do all this. Then something, usually completely disconnected with the case, triggers a eureka moment of insight and House delivers the diagnosis. He’s supreme at pulling everything together, at synthesis.

My design colleagues say this is too teleological and centered on getting the right answer, whereas the best design might instead open up all sorts of possibilities. My response is to precisely point to the pragmatic character of design, that while human centered research may well reveal the nuances of human tasks and behaviors, in the end a choice has to be made to make something, a diagnosis has to be made and a product delivered. Otherwise there’d be no economic viability.

Charles Peirce subsumed the likes of diagnosis under what he called abductive reasoning. I dealt with abduction in comments on archaeology, art history and connoisseurship in my book about Classical Archaeology – [Link]. The Wikipedia article on abductive reasoning is quite good – [Link].

Of course House is Holmes, based in part on Conan-Doyle’s encounter in Scotland with medic Joseph Bell.