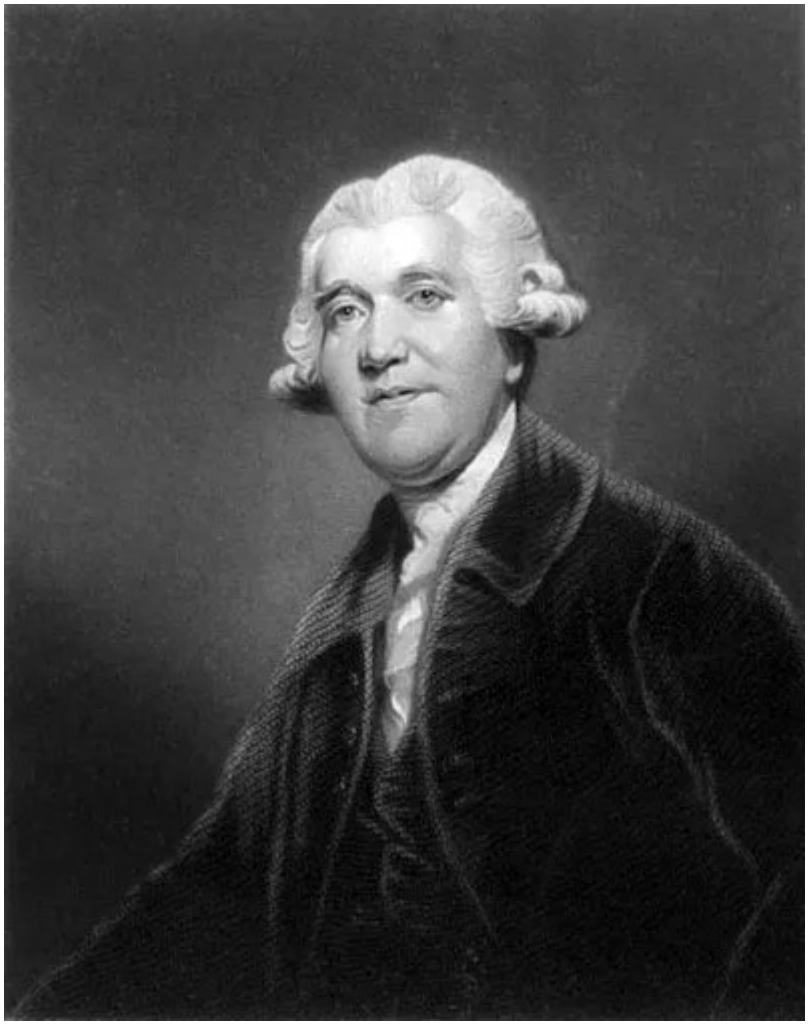
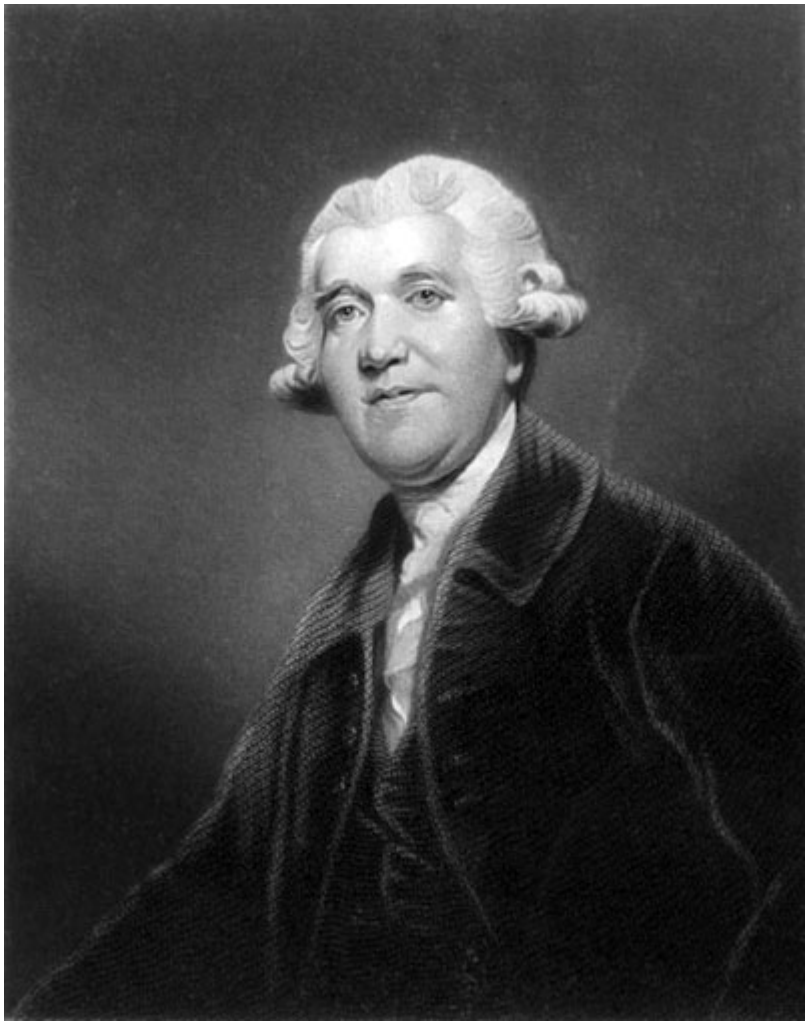
WHAT IS DESIGN THINKING?



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

We can certainly connect the emergence of the field of "design" with the growth of industrial manufacture in the nineteenth century – designers work with mass manufacturing processes in the industrial design of everyday objects. Design became a process separate from manufacture. Immediately implicated are the structures and cultures of modernity, class, gender, ethnicity – horizontal and vertical distinctions at the core of individual and group identities. Market competition throws emphasis upon innovation – developing artifacts that offer something new or different.



Wedgwood in 1770 – the first industrial designer

Then there are the different and sometimes competing design philosophies that have come to drive much design – notoriously, of course, modernist “form following function”.

More broadly, the term has come to be connected with particular skill sets and fields of application – architecture, software design – and often occurring in studio teams. Human-centered design emphasizes how understanding people’s interactions with things, their experiences of the world, is the key to good design. Human centered design focuses on improving well-being, whether through the ergonomics of a chair or a user-friendly interface for a piece of medical technology. There is usually an ethical orientation, with innovation tied to improving people’s lives. This is where “design thinking” comes in: it refers to the *transferable* process of innovation at the heart of design – a process for imagining and realizing positive change that can be applied to anything.

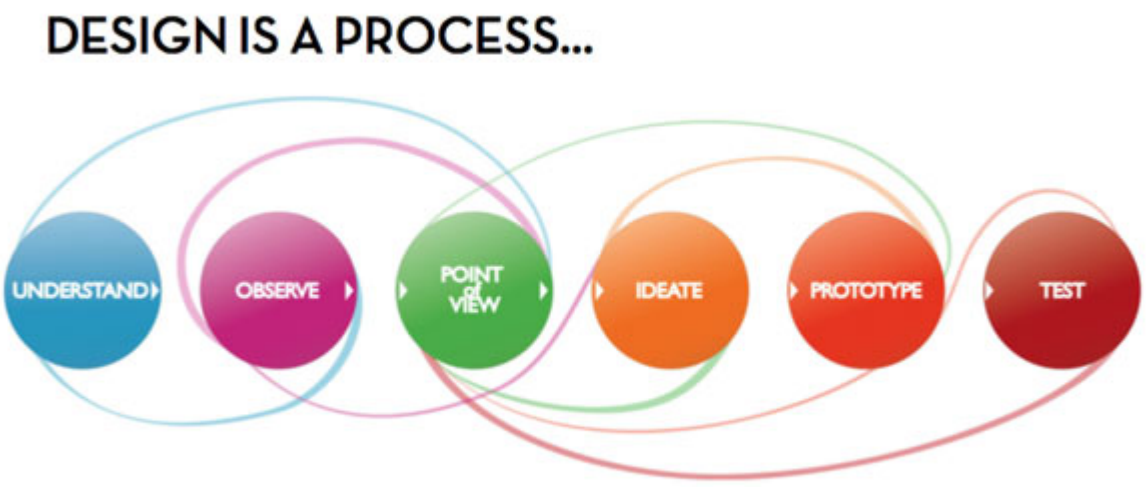
So Bill (Moggridge) describes a fourfold field of design:

design awareness – most people are quite expert in choosing assemblages of goods that help make them who they are and want to be – design awareness refers to awareness of how things are designed, as well as how to design our own lives

design skills – in industrial design and architecture these skills can be of a very high order and are developed in (studio) practice

design thinking – the systematic and problem-oriented process for generating innovation

design research – focused on understanding the design process, or referring to the research behind much modern design.



But Bernie (Roth) goes much further and identifies design with *living* itself, with an *attitude* or state of mind focused on innovation and change. We are all designers now. For Bernie, design is about making *plans for action*.

I am beginning to see where he's coming from. We live in a world concerned with change, not just the changes happening around us and to us. We are concerned now with our very *implication* in those changes – our sense of human culpability, blame for what is happening today accompanies a call to accept responsibility and to change our ways. Design thinking presents itself as a candidate for doing just this

– instigating change.

On this orientation towards change and the notion of “risk society” – [Link] – something I wrote about the crisis surrounding the destruction of the past.

A good proportion of our class is from Stanford’s Graduate School Business. Outsourcing has removed much manufacturing from the US. Many are looking to a new kind of industrial and business leadership – in the *creative process* at the heart of good business practice. Is not the new MBA an MFA? See the recent article on this in the New York Times [Link] – see also my essay with Jeffrey Schnapp on arts-based pedagogy – [Link].