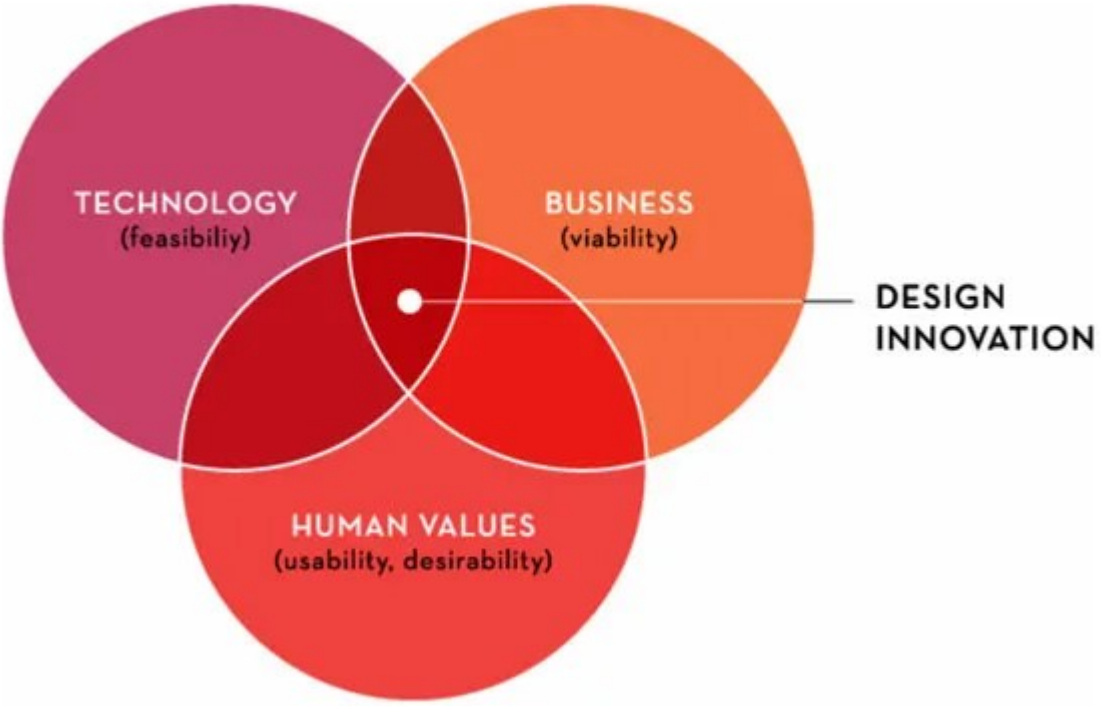
DESIGN AND BEHAVIOR



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

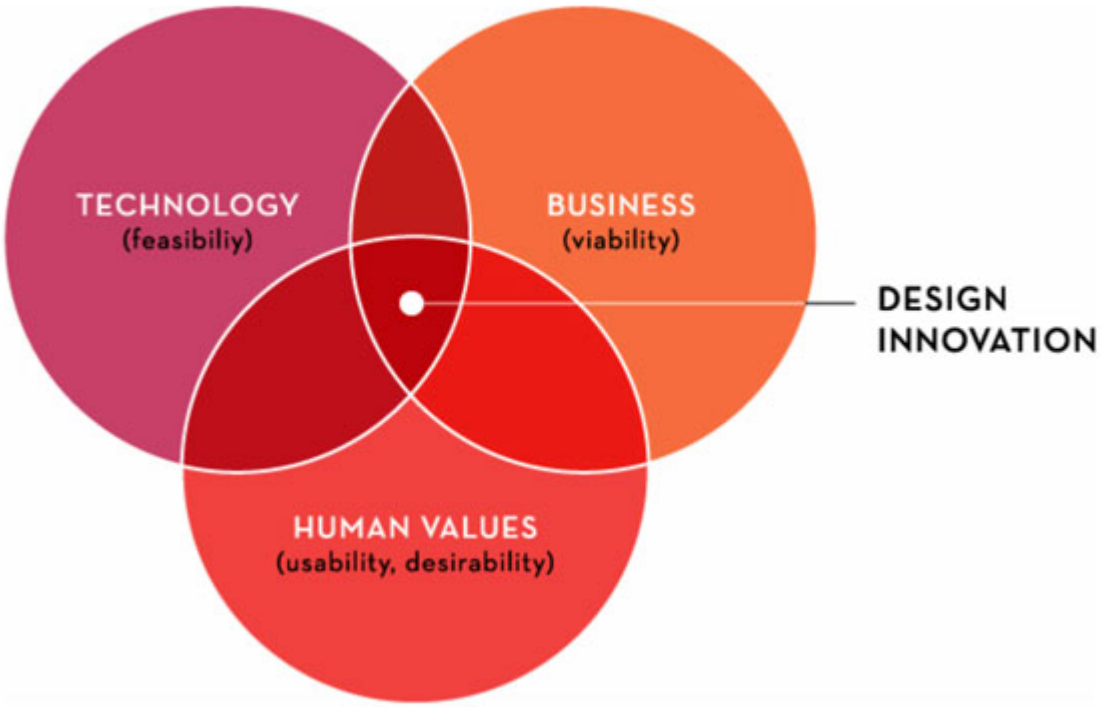
Leslie Witt of IDEO came to talk to us about design and behavior change on January 13. Last week I also posted a comment about Banny Banerjee's exhortation to use design to change behavior [Link].

Leslie began with a convincing scenario that people today so often want or need to change – in relation to health, finance, the environment, for example. (I have mentioned this orientation in relation to "risk society" – [Link].) This, Leslie described, is a market opportunity. Human centered design can help bridge the gap between desire and action. Give people the tools for changing their lives. Unfit? Use this!

She outlined some very sound opportunities or tactics for inculcating change, rooted in behavioral psychology. "Speak joy not fear" (make change positive); "create crowds" (and so exert peer pressure); "show, don't tell" (don't preach); "remove choice" (make change obligatory).

These tactics, or tropes, are a kind of rhetorical field – ways of developing convincing arguments. And isn't all design an (implicit) argument for the "good life"?

We are at the heart of human centered design – the human component.



Our graphic says "values". What does this mean?

Bill has outlined for us the key components, the key "human factors" in human-centered design:

1. physiology
   (get measuring! – headphones have to fit human ears)

2. anthropometrics
   (get counting! – the old nineteenth century project of quantifying the human, gaining statistical control over aggregate features, and now relating to matters such as ergonomics)

3. cognitive psychology
   (matters such as human-artifact interaction).

Then Bill mentioned all the issues surrounding

4. connectivity and interaction – the way people get on with something – the psychology of people's experiences with things.
   We have seen how the likes of Don Norman, cognitive scientist and design commentator, pioneer of human factors in design, has come to emphasize the *emotional* relationships we have with things.
   Design Thinking does offer some fabulous ways of engaging with people and learning about them – wonderfully sensitive, emotionally empathetic, indeed human centered. (Outlined on our web site – [Link])

   And I have to ask – is it only about behavior and psychology? I have to argue that very often the real need is to change society and culture; human behavior is so much more than simply what people do.

   Here I am into those vast arguments about action and intention, about the structural constraints and contexts for human action in the world.

   We may well want to address the stresses of contemporary urban middle class life in the US. This can be treated as a design issue. Design artifacts that will make time management and multitasking less onerous. Our first class project was to do just this – address a specific concern in a class partner's daily life – food and diet, exercise, family etc. Research, interview, observe and dive deeply into the concern, draw empathy maps, identify point of view, brainstorm solutions, prototype and get feedback, repeat the cycle, evaluate. We came up with some very creative results – even after just a few weeks at this process.

   The social scientist in me saw that most concerns were about senses of personal responsibility in a neoliberal world that emphasizes individual choice. They focused on work practices and alienation, career expectations, performance measures arising out of the distribution of competitive advantage in an institution like Stanford. Behavioral change may be able to alleviate the impact of all this on an individual. It could equally strengthen these structures. Design that offers enhanced opportunity and functionality in taking personal responsibility for changing daily experience, for example, may well weaken social ties and support networks that are crucial to individual well-being.

   How can design thinking take in this broader scope? I immediately think of the

political purpose behind some of the great design movements of the last couple of centuries. William Morris and Arts and Crafts, the modernist optimism and social engineering of Bauhaus.

Politics and philosophy, dreams and utopias, are a key to design thinking.

Society is more than an aggregate of individual behaviors.