

THE POLITICS OF DESIGN —
THE T CHARACTER REVISITED

Ioachim Oudaans
ROOMSCHE MOGENTHEID
In gefag en staat-bekleding der
OUDE KEIZEREN &c.



TOT AMSTERDAM
Voor FRANS KUYPER ANNO 1664.
Met privilegie.

Topic – how to be interdisciplinary – and more

Quick recap.

For some time I have been interested in the notion of the “T character” – an attitude or disposition, a skill set, that facilitates the kind of interdisciplinary practice that is the heart of good design, bridging the different expertise and interests in a team.

This is how I put it last year [Link]:

Real world problems don't fit into neat disciplinary categories. We hear much about the importance of interdisciplinary or even transdisciplinary work. (Multidisciplinary implies keeping the disciplinary distinctions we need to bridge?)

Stanford d.school 's mission is to promote design thinking as such a bridging field. And one that involves close attention to the human component in addressing real world problems.

Tom Kelley and Tim Brown have outlined the character types they think are the heart of design thinking [Link]. The kinds of people who contribute to innovative design.

One is the “T” character – able to combine in-depth knowledge of a particular field or method (the vertical in the “T”) with an ability to connect across specialist expertise (the lateral). And Tom and Tim

identify design thinking with this creative, human-centered work of connection.

I have described how design thinking is a kind of pragmatism [Link] and this notion of a “T” character intrigues me. I want to sharpen up the idea, but am not sure how. Is it really a character type?

Well, yes and no.

Bridging different interests is all about diplomacy and translation, sensitivity, being mindful of others; it is about *representing* different interest groups.

Last summer, at EPIC (Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference) in Tokyo [Link], I suggested that we should think of the things we design as

... assemblages, bundles of materials, features, potentials, affordances, values, even different times – think of how they gather and connect people and possibility.

Message – think of the human as being distributed through these assemblies and gatherings.

(This is why it is so right to hold that better design will come from an emphasis not so much on a particular product as on what it may offer – focus more on

experience, interaction, service, platform – the assemblages.)

A word that means “thing” and captures all this is the Latin RES.

And it is entirely right to think in a collective way – RES PUBLICA is the commonwealth, the state, the assembly of the people and their goods, cultural and political ecologies. Keep in mind the *missing masses* in these assemblies that are our human being – not just things, but other species too, plants, animals, bacteria, viruses.

Have a look at the range of meanings and usage of RES –
[Link]

In such an ontology of distributed human being, the apparent substantiality of a person or artifact is simultaneously vacancy, emptiness, openness perhaps; and the past haunts, present in its absence. We are no longer faced with the problem of connecting, for example, tangible and intangible, materials and immaterial values, pasts and presents, functions and emotions, people and their goods: these are already

connected. The task is to discover how.

Under such an ontology, how do we perform research?
What is the way, the DŌ of ethnography, in the terms of the conference theme?

- look to the **qualities** of human being – the quiddities and haecceities, the qualities of sustainable human living, and tell their story, lest we forget
- methodology – don't look for tight systematics – plunge **IN MEDIAS RES**, into the imbroglios – be pragmatic and opportunistic
- the challenge is one of **re-presentation** (in the political sense too), of giving voice, speaking-for, witnessing
- consider research (ethnographic, design, contextual, whatever) as **intervention** in the RES PUBLICA
- intervention in cycles of ideation/design/manufacture | exchange and distribution | consumption | reuse | discard – a **political economy**

RES PUBLICA

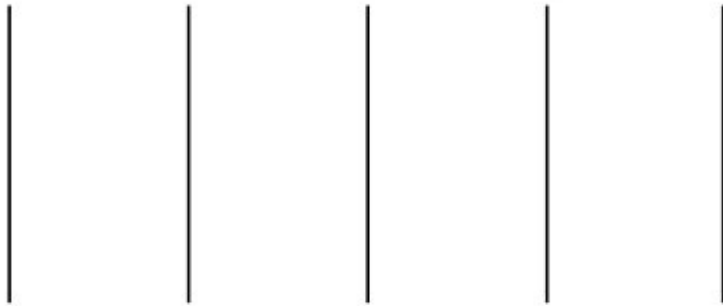
(constitutional arrangement)

social relations | representation

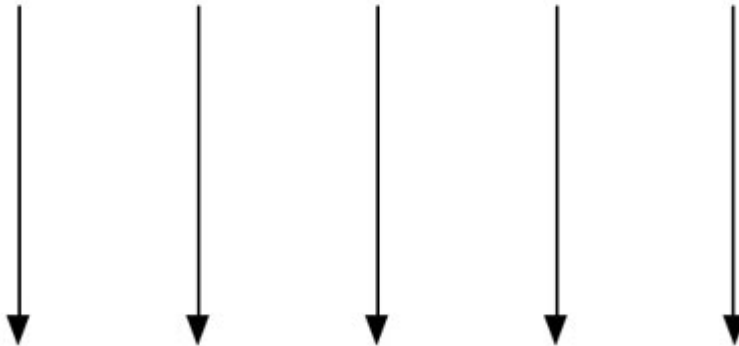
PRAXIS

(thoughtful/informed practice)

← theory | design process | iteration →



specialized expertises



problem | design brief | challenge

ISSUES

(articulating themes)

MINDFULNESS

Here then is a diagram that aims to capture this. Experts in teams drill down into a design problem. One connection is precisely the messiness of problems – they

don't fit into disciplines. And things don't fit either. Issues and themes offer connection – this is often how we configure messy spaces – according to themes such as sustainability, or health and wellbeing (see my comments on the Durham conference last year on “Water in Antiquity” [\[Link\]](#)).

Design thinking, as an iterative process or pragmatics [\[Link\]](#), offers a connecting medium. And theory enables translation across radically different fields. Praxis is a term that refers to such thoughtful practice.

Crucial also is how we get on with others, a constitutional arrangement that enables sensitive, mindful respect and care for others.

This is the human in human-centered design

I was going to talk about this at the COINs (Collaborative Innovation Networks) Conference in Basel last week [\[Link\]](#), but a family emergency stopped me going. There are some fascinating matters being raised in relation to this political economy of design by social software – collaborative and cocreative authoring worlds.

Ioachim Oudaans
ROOMSCHE MOGENTHEID
In gesag en staat-bekleding der
OUDE KEIZEREN &c.



v. Dalen Sculp.

TOT AMSTERDAM
Voor FRANS KUYPER ANNO 1664.
Met privilegie.