DESIGNING FOR CHANGE?





Our class in Stanford d.school is “Transformative Design” [Link] – design that makes a difference – design that changes things.

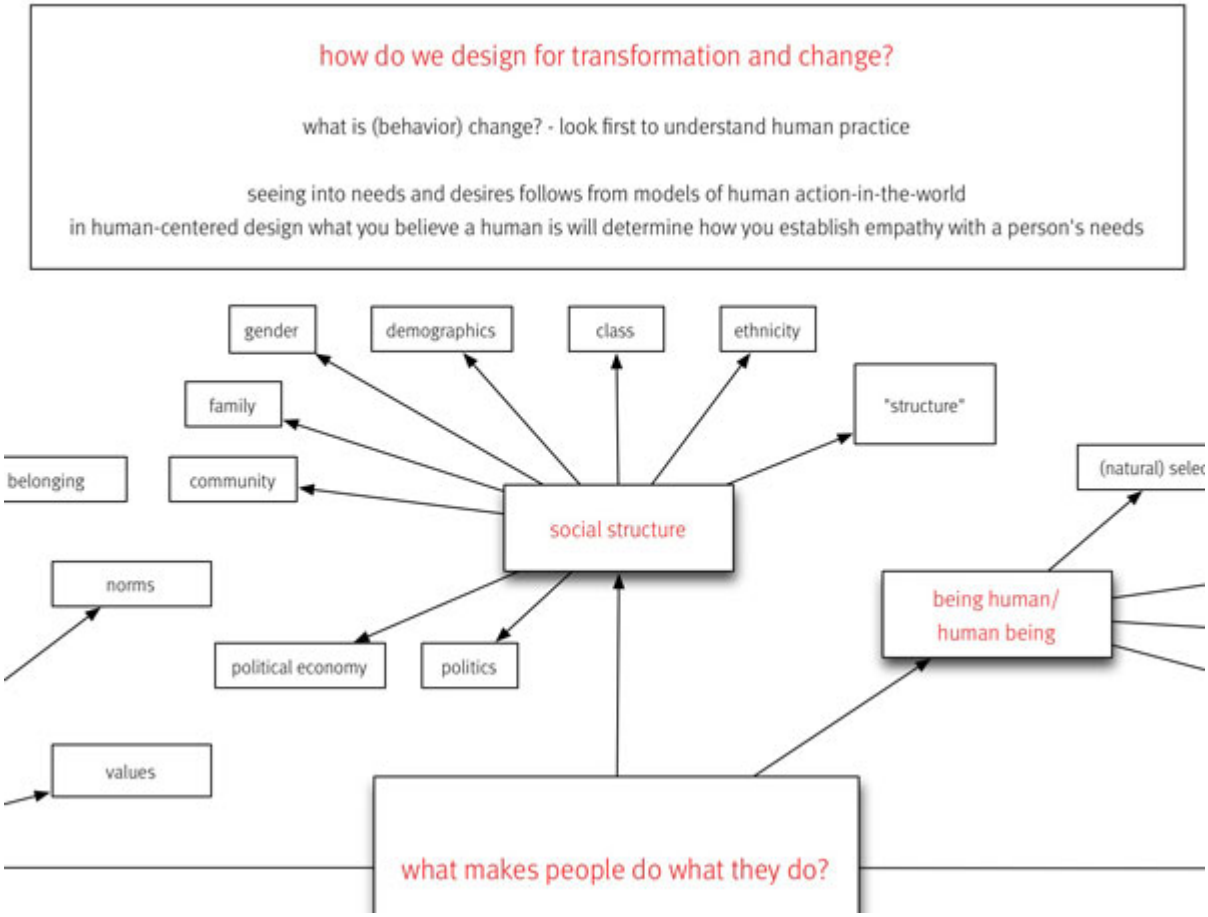
If we want design to change what people do, we need to understand why people do what they do.

While this is a very broad question that has generated many responses in many disciplines, it is not too difficult to gain some orientation by considering basic (philosophical) standpoints on what it is to be a person, and connecting these to research methods and theories.

Sociological standpoints, for example, emphasize how people are embedded in networks structured according to factors such as class and ethnicity. A cultural anthropologist may focus more on the way people make sense of their world, as lived, experienced, or imagined. The sociologist and cultural anthropologist differ somewhat in what they emphasize in attempting to understand why people act the way they do.

Human centered design has emerged through closer attention being paid to the way people get on with things – use, interaction, experiences of artifacts and their associations. This has mostly involved a focus upon psychological factors, ranging from ergonomics and ease of use, to the character of communicative interaction between people and things. The premise, implicit or explicit, is that what really matters in understanding people's actions are these immediate experiences of perception, cognition and interaction with the material world – what should be called *behavior*, in contrast to *action* or *practice*, concepts that include broader factors such as agency and intentionality, and the ways that people reflect upon their own behavior. See my comments on a previous run of the class – [Link]

Today I presented a diagram that covers this question of what matters in understanding why people do what they do as a way of broadening our perspective.



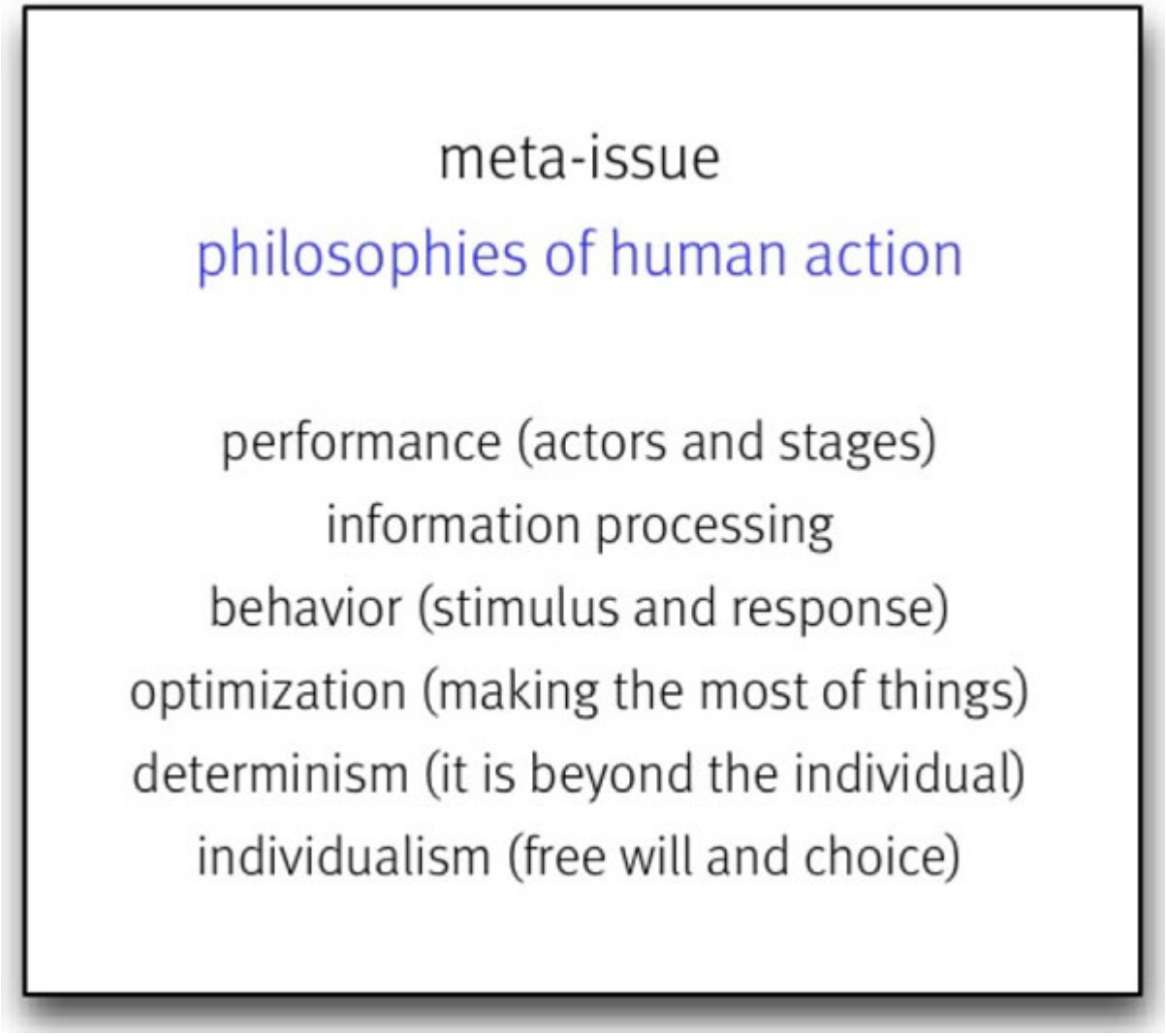
(click on the diagram and then again in the new window to get the full picture)

It is easy to map onto the diagram different views of what makes people the way they are, and what is important in designing things for people.

Mention has just been made of cognitive science and its focus upon behavior. Understanding craft and vernacular architecture, for example, involves factors mainly to do with tacit knowledges, tradition and heritage, while urban planning usually focuses upon wider macro and structural issues.

Broad orientation can be gained on different approaches to design by locating them on the diagram. Classic twentieth century designers often focused more on styling artifacts; the most distinctive connected style to a philosophy or ideology of design (like the emphasis upon function and clean minimalist form promoted by Bauhaus), or a palette or “look” (Art Deco, for example). The Arts and Crafts movement connected style to the political economy of making and materials (in a criticism of mass-produced goods and experiences). Both were quite utopian, considering that orientation upon the future in relationship to the past and its heritage or legacy is a crucial component of the modern world.

I emphasize the importance of underlying notions, models of humanity, of what it is to be human.



Are we social actors performing roles, information processing systems, intentional individuals looking to exercise freedom of will and choice, or locked into determining forces and structures of society and culture? Do our intentions and emotions even matter in the big picture?

There is another, not on this list. A model of the human as hybrid, as machinic assemblage, as distributed through social and material worlds, as

cyborg

Confusing and disturbing distinctions between humans and things.

I will take this up in another post – [Link].