

# What design is and why it matters

By Mat Hunter, Chief Design Officer

There are countless definitions of design, as you might expect of a creative endeavour. Some aim to categorise design, to explain how it is different from or related to other activities, while others try to inspire good design.

Here's a simple definition from our former Chairman, Sir George Cox in the :

Design is what links creativity and innovation. It shapes ideas to become practical and attractive propositions for users or customers. Design may be described as creativity deployed to a specific end.'  
The Cox Review

Most of the results of design are visible, and that lends itself to another simple definition: 'Design is all around you, everything man-made has been designed, whether consciously or not'.

The question therefore isn't so much 'what is design and why does it matter?' but 'how can I use good design to make the world around me better?'

## How is design different from other activities?

Perhaps the most obvious attribute of design is that it makes ideas tangible, it takes abstract thoughts and inspirations and makes something concrete. In fact, it's often said that designers don't just think and then translate those thoughts into tangible form, they actually think through making things. This ability to make new ideas real from an early stage in developing products or services means that they have a greater chance of becoming successful more quickly.

Another, sometimes less obvious, attribute of design is that it is human-centred. Designers are sometimes caricatured as self-obsessed, but the truth is that really great designers care hugely about the real people who will use the product, service, building or experience they are developing. This focus on users inspires great ideas and ensures

that solutions meet real needs, whether the users are fully aware of them or not.

This pragmatic process of making ideas tangible and then trying them out with users means that design has a particular ability to make things simple. Anything that is too complicated to understand, communicate or operate is soon exposed. Perhaps this is why really great design can seem as obvious as common sense.

Finally, design is collaborative. The dual qualities of tangibility and human-centeredness mean that the design process is very good at engaging others. Design processes are increasingly being used as a way to enable groups of designers and non-designers to work together to tackle big issues.

## How do designers design?

Every designer has a slightly different approach and different also have their own ways of working, but there are some general activities common to all designers. At the Design Council we like to illustrate this with a 'Double Diamond' model.

Divided into four distinct phases, , , and , it maps how the design process passes from points where thinking and possibilities are as broad as possible to situations where they are deliberately narrowed down and focused precisely on distinct objectives.

### Discover

The first quarter of the double diamond model covers the start of the project. Designers try to look at the world in a fresh way, noticing new things and seeking inspiration. They gather insights, developing an opinion about what they see, deciding what is new and interesting, and what will inspire new ideas. Specific methods include: , and

### Define

The second quarter represents the definition stage, in which designers try to make sense of all the possibilities identified in the 'Discover' phase. Which matters most? Which should we act on first? The goal here is to develop a clear creative brief that frames the fundamental design challenge to

the organisation. Key methods during the Define stage are: and .

### **Develop**

The third quarter marks a period of development where solutions are created, prototyped, tested and iterated. This process of trial and error helps designers to improve and refine their ideas. Key activities and objectives during the Develop stage are: brainstorming, prototyping, multi-disciplinary working, visual management, development methods and testing.

### **Deliver**

The final quarter of the double diamond model is the delivery stage, where the resulting product or service is finalised and launched. The key activities and objectives during this stage are: Final testing, approval and launch and Targets, evaluation and feedback loops.

The creative process is complicated, making it difficult to capture simply but this sort of explanation can at least help make it appear a little less mysterious.

### **How do organisations use designers?**

In the most advanced organisations design is used at every level of the business from high level strategy, helping to find new opportunities for growth, to detailed implementation, ensuring that every experience that a customer has is as productive and engaging as it can be.

The key to using design effectively at any level is the creative brief. The brief defines the challenge, the problem to be solved, the opportunity to realised. Writing an effective brief is a creative exercise in its own right.

This brief is then tackled by a chosen design team. Some organisations choose to have in-house design teams, while others use external design agencies. Most use a mix of both. Here are more thoughts on

### **The (Triple) bottom line**

At the Design Council we are passionate about using design to tackle some of the big issues in the

world, from and to the and supporting . At the same time we work to the UK's manufacturing and service companies, helping them use design to make their offerings world-beating. And finally we work to measure the results of success – for instance how financial performance improves through effective use of design – to persuade others of the value of good design and the perils of bad design.

We think of it as a 'triple bottom line'. How does good design benefit people, how does it benefit the planet and how does it generate profit for business?

### **How does this affect designers?**

They think about how their work affects the people who will use it, both as individuals and as part of society. Designers often involve a wide variety of people in design projects.

By learning about the resources needed to produce a product or deliver a service, designers can create a solution that minimises the impact on our environment.

Designers work with manufacturers, marketeers, intellectual property advisors and business consultants to ensure their ideas can make a profit.

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