

Education and Manpower Bureau, Government of Hong Kong S.A.R.

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WHAT IS DESIGN?

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Brief:

To discuss the subject: what is design in terms of different perspectives (e.g. functions, form, context, etc.) of appreciating and appraising “visual arts with functions”.

Objectives

1. A general introduction to design and discussion of its processes and role in society.
2. An introduction to some of the main themes in the History of Design with the aim of providing a “tool-kit” of basic teaching material and analytical approaches.

Linguistic Problems with the word “design”.

A problem exists in English with uses of the word “design”, as in an apparently nonsensical sentence : “Design is to design a design to produce a design.”

Design is to design a design to produce a design.
Noun 1 Verb Noun 2 Noun 3

Noun 1 - indicating a general field of activity:

"In the 1930s, the Pennsylvania Railroad used design to project a dynamic corporate image."

Verb - indicating a state or action:

"Raymond Loewy designed locomotives for the Pennsylvania Railroad."

Noun 2 - indicating a plan or intention:

"Loewy's designs proposed a cladding, or skin over the locomotive, to create a dramatic external image."

Noun 3 - indicating the finished outcome:

"Loewy's locomotive designs had problems in everyday working practice."

The word “design” therefore can be confusing since its meaning alters as the context changes.

Design and Culture.

There has been a problem going back into early civilizations in which work producing anything is regarded often with contempt. Such attitudes are still found today. A leading American critic noted:

“While the tumultuous rise and global spread of American capitalism is surely a subject epic in scope and dramatic in detail, it is one that has inspired surprisingly few of our best writers. There has always been interest in the behavior of people who have money, but less interest in how money is made.”

Scott, A.O. “A Matter of Life and Death.” *The New York Review of Books*, December 17, 1998, p.38.

In contrast, a leading anthropologist and an economist have firmly identified the role of goods in creating contemporary everyday culture.

“The most general objective of the consumer can only be to construct an intelligible universe with the goods he chooses.

...

Goods, then, are the visible part of culture. ... Ultimately, their structures are anchored to human social purposes.”

Douglas, Mary and Isherwood, Baron. *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978, pp.65-6

“Psychologists in general have followed the lead of Freud and Jung by ignoring the place of things in the daily commerce of existence.”

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things*. Cambridge University Press, 1981, p.25.

Design and Professional Competence

Another interesting interpretation of design is by Herbert Simon, a Nobel prize-winning economist, who describes design as a basic intellectual activity that is an integral component of all professional work.

“Everyone designs who devises courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones. The intellectual activity that produces material artifacts is no different fundamentally from the one that prescribes remedies for a sick patient or the one that devises a new sales plan for a company or a social welfare policy for a state. Design, so construed, is the core of all professional training; it is the principal mark that distinguishes the professions from the sciences.”

Simon, Herbert A. *The Sciences of the Artificial*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, (Second Edition) 1981, p.129.

Consumption and Workmanship

One of the first people to identify concepts that explain some important differences of emphasis that help to explain design was another American economist, Thorstein Veblen, who drew a clear distinction between consumption, or the acquisition and possession of value, and workmanship, or the creation of value.

Acquisition was the target of his first major book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, published in 1899, in which he coined the phrase “conspicuous consumption.” This can be characterised as pretentious

uselessness. People spend money on what can be displayed as a symbol of wealth rather than what is of practical value.

In contrast, Veblen emphasized that one of the most important instincts contributing to human progress was that of the instinct of workmanship, which he regarded as being concerned "with practical expedients, ways and means, devices and contrivances of efficiency and economy, proficiency, creative work and technological mastery of facts."
Veblen, *The Instinct of Workmanship*. p.33.

Design as Art

Continuing difficulties exist in the relationship between design and art, with design frequently being considered to be a lesser form of art.

An example was an article in the *New York Times Magazine* of 1 Dec. 2002, in which several artist/designers were invited to redesign objects of everyday life chose by themselves. A ceramic artist, Jonathan Adler chose the toilet as his subject.

"I chose to redesign a toilet because even though everybody has one, they're always so dreary. I wanted to create a cheerful toilet. I was inspired by Dior's New Look, with its wasp-waisted silhouettes, from the '40s and 50's. The shape makes it a little cuter; the graphic element makes it fun. There are a number of functional issues that would need to be addressed for this to actually work, but the toilet really is the perfect arena for playfulness."

So, according to Jonathan Adler, a toilet should be "cheerful", "cute", "fun" and "playful".

Question.

Do you agree with Adler's attitude? Should objects become more and more concerned with fashionable change?

Basically, this concept of design as art is concerned primarily with form, in terms of factors such as Shape, Colour, Texture, Trends and Meaning, with the major design tools being Aesthetics, Styling and Decoration

Design is in fact composed of many sub-disciplines, some of which are:

engineering design, product design, industrial design, ceramic design, decorative design, graphic design, illustration design, information design, typographic design, advertising design, packaging design, brand design, interior design, fashion design, textile design, pattern design, software design, systems design, interactive design, etc.

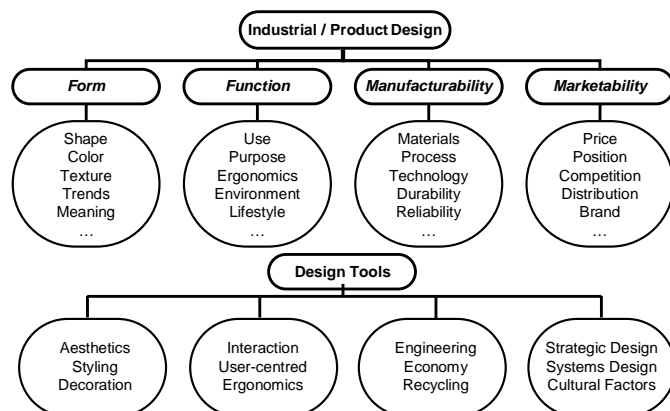
Some of these may be closer to art, such as textiles or illustration, which hinge upon individual and highly subjective judgements, but the majority are much more concerned with work in a business context that determines what they can do and how they can do it. This requires more than individual subjectivity and whim to be effective. Terms such as Cosmetic design, Applied art, Commercial art, and Decorative art reduce design to an unimportant element in a process where important decisions are made by others.

Design as a Complex Business Activity

In contrast, an example of design as a much more complex and serious activity, but no less creative, is the work undertaken by British designer, Ross Lovegrove, for Vitra, a Turkish sanitary ware manufacturer in which over a over a hundred products, including toilets, were designed. Ross Lovegrove and his team spend six months researching the needs of people, the state of the market, and the capabilities of the company before beginning designing. The series has completely transformed the company's market position and launched it as a competitor on international markets.

The concept of Design as a Complex Business Activity therefore requires a much more demanding range of approaches covering a wider range of relevant factors than the personal whim of designer in imposing a fashionable influence in an arbitrary manner.

Design as a Complex Business Activity



Research

The role of research in Ross Lovegrove's work is typical of much design work in the contemporary world.

Producers often have problems in knowing what new products to develop.

They may think they have a good idea, but how they know if other people will think it a good idea and spend their hard-earned money on it.

Various kinds of research can be used to clarify some questions in developing products:

- *Market research*
Which focuses on what others are doing.
- *Technological trends*
Which explores new possibilities in technology, although this can be expensive.
- *Social/cultural trends*
Investigates what is happening in society in terms of factors such as demographics, tastes and trends.
- *User observation*
This is concerned with discovering and understanding people's actual and latent needs.

While some designers are concerned with new technological applications, most are active in the last two forms of research into social/cultural trends and user observation.

Research does not dictate outcomes in a simple logical process, since designing involves a high level of tacit knowledge, derived from learning by doing, or experience over long periods. Research, however, can serve as a basis for creative solutions with very different characteristics, particularly more complex problems where the levels of difficulty are not easily comprehended by one person's subjective understanding.

A simple example is how to extract juice from a lemon. The process is uncomplicated:

- Cut and press a lemon.
- Separate juice from the pulp and seeds.
- Apply juice to further use.

Question: Which of the above lemon squeezers would you buy, and why?

Future Research Development

Some of the research being undertaken at the School of Design at HK Polytechnic University and which could be important in the future are:

Form

- Form factors
- Trends in form
- Ergonomic parameters

Processes and methodologies

- User observation
- Planning and systems

Organisational

- Management structures and design
- Market characteristics (global/local)
- Product life-cycles

Theoretical/Historical

- Design, society and culture
- Economic value of design

The importance of maintaining and improving design capabilities as a crucial tool in the knowledge economy widely believed to be the important wave of the future is evident in the manner in which many of Hong Kong's neighbours and competitors are building their strengths on a long-term basis. Japan has been doing this since the late 1950's, Korea and Taiwan since the 1970s. The trend in Taiwan's education system is clear:

Taiwan – Educational Development

Number of institutes offering ID degrees in Taiwan since 1964:

	<i>Diploma</i>	<i>Bachelor</i>	<i>Master</i>	<i>PhD</i>
1964-70	7	-	-	-
1971-74	4	2	-	-
1975-84	5	2	-	-
1985-89	8	3	2	-
1990-94	9	10	5	-
1995-99	9	11	7	-
2000-05	0	22	15	4

Design is not art but a professional business activity, requiring high levels of creativity for its practice, but also knowledge and rational problem-solving capability. The types of design abilities that we need to nurture in Hong Kong's young people are high skill levels, a strong sense of values, creativity and wide-ranging knowledge. They will need to be adaptable since the nature of design is already in a process of change.

Changes in the Roles of Designers

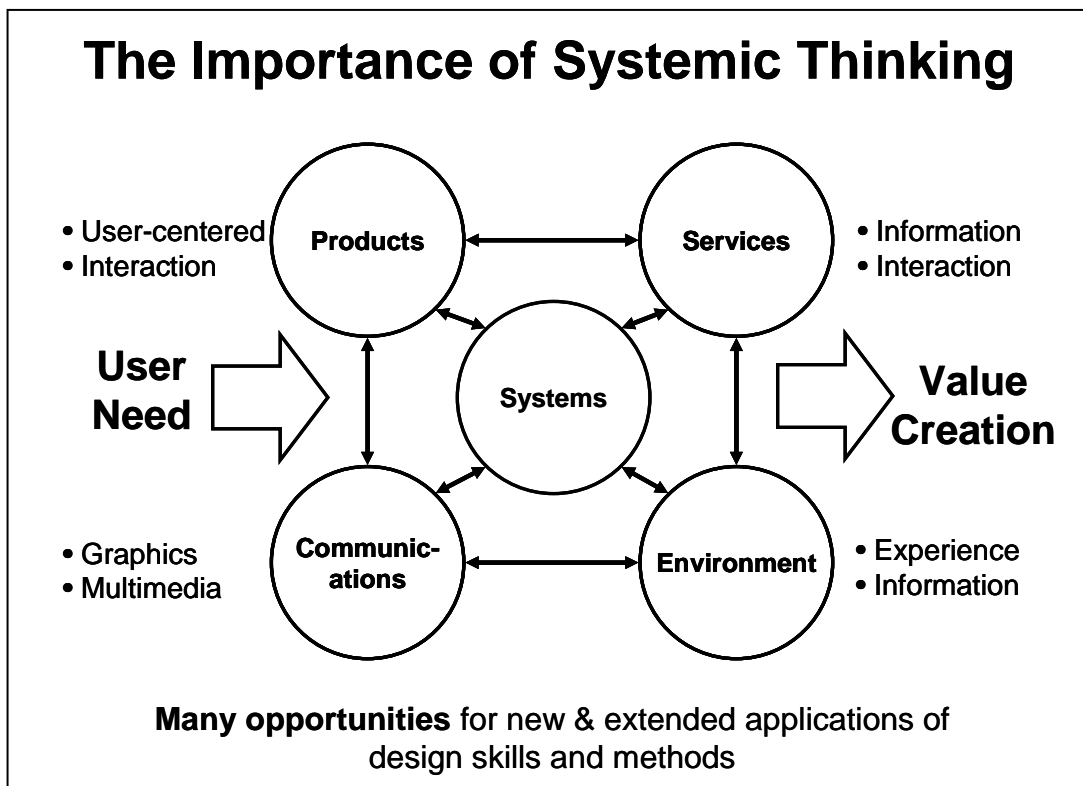
- Design has become divided into many specializations
- But at the same time, designers have to work with many other disciplines.

Two paths seem to be emerging:

- **A Conventional View**
In which designers create individual forms and leave it to users whether to buy or not.
- **A New View**
In which designers are increasingly creating systems enabling users to take vital decisions for themselves, supported by cheaper and small-scale technology, especially digital devices of all kinds.
- Both will continue to coexist for the foreseeable future, but the new view is expanding at a rapid rate.

What is meant by systemic design?

Basically, designers are concerned with creating and improving products, communications, environments and services. These can all be combined into systems.



Who decides what is value?

Is a business producer-centred or user-centred?

What is Quality in Design?

"Quality" in a product or service is not what the supplier puts in. It is what the customer gets out and is willing to pay for. A product is not

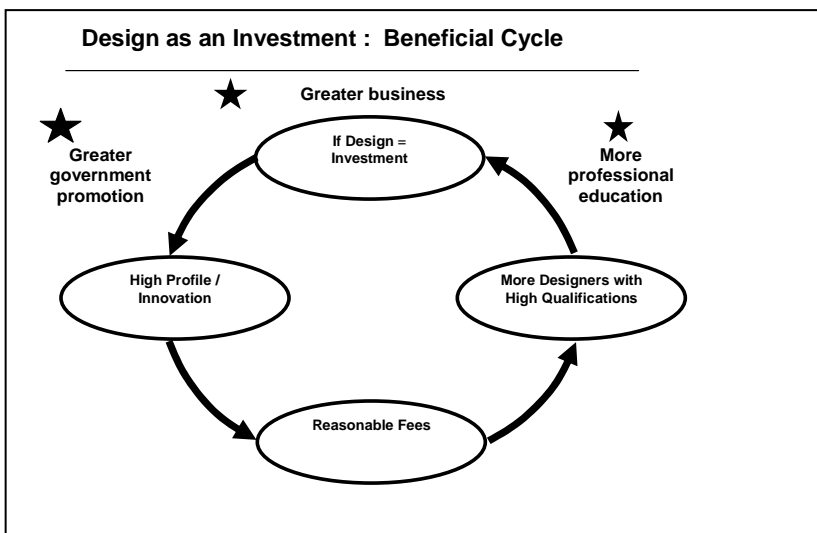
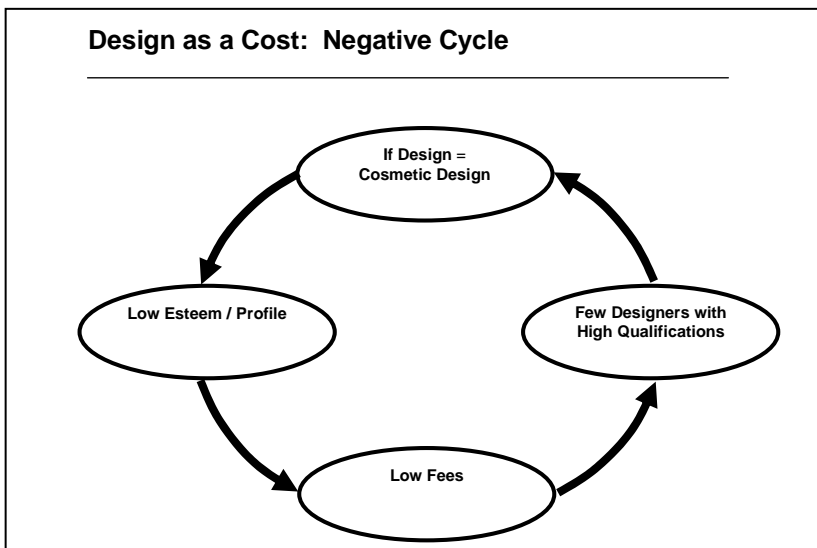
"quality" because it is hard to make and costs a lot of money, as manufacturers typically believe. That is incompetence. Customers pay only for what is of use to them and gives them value. Nothing else constitutes "quality."

产品或服务的“品质”不是由供应商加上的。这是顾客能从中取得又愿意花费的。一般生产商把产品欠缺“品质”的原因推作制造上的困难和成本高昂。这是不适当的。顾客只会购买对他们有用和有价值的东西。并没有其它可建立“品质”的因素。

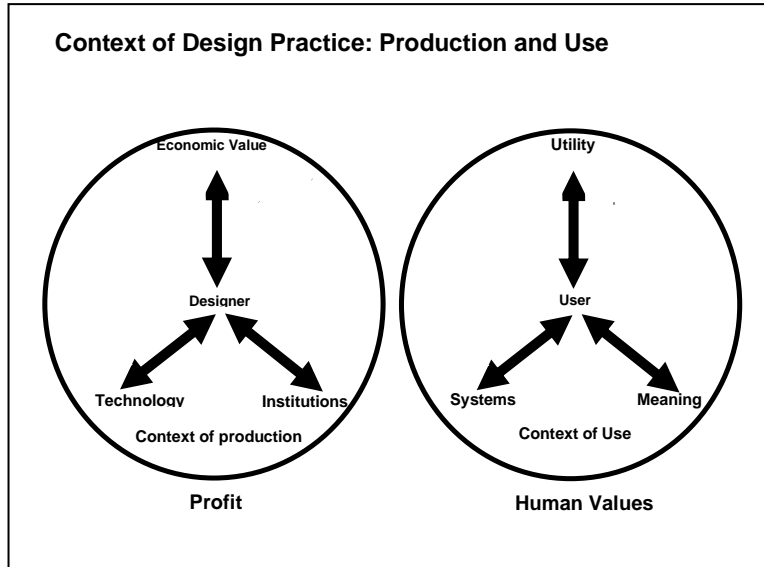
Drucker, Peter F. *Innovation and Entrepreneurship: Practice and Principles*. New York: Harper Row, 1986, p.228.

The major difference between art and design is who determines value. In the final analysis, judgments about art are made by the artist. He or she decides what is important or not. In design, what the designer thinks is not the major determinant, it is users who decide whether something has value or not.

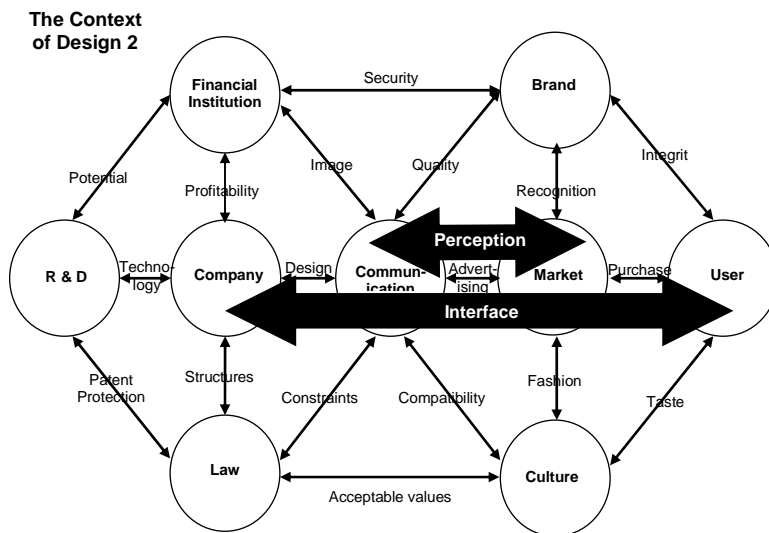
Whether design is used intelligently in a company depends very much on the attitudes of management.

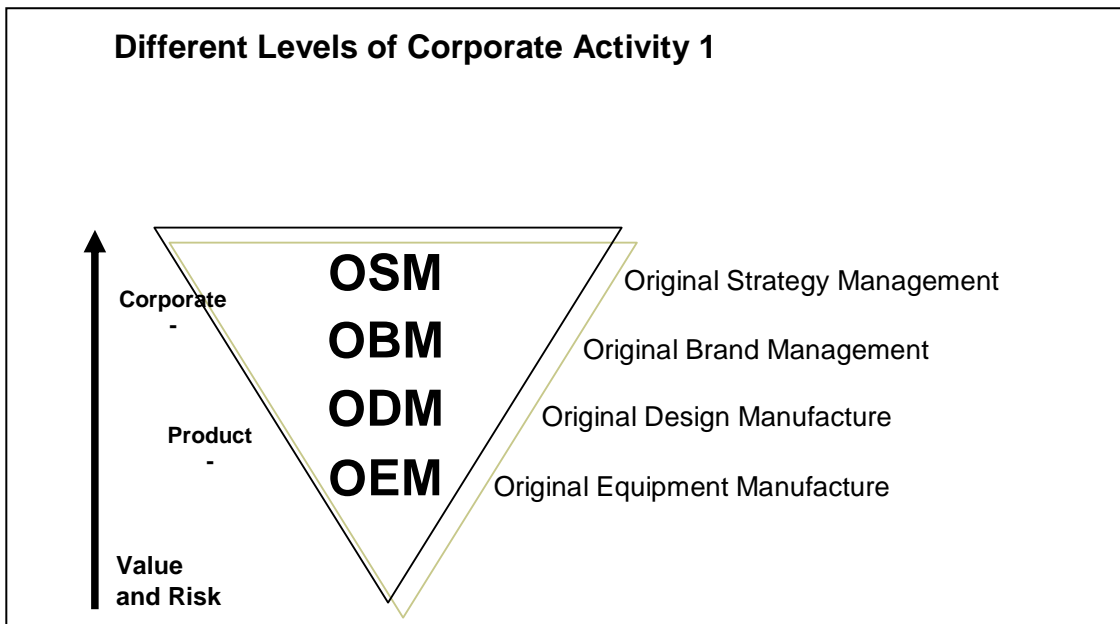
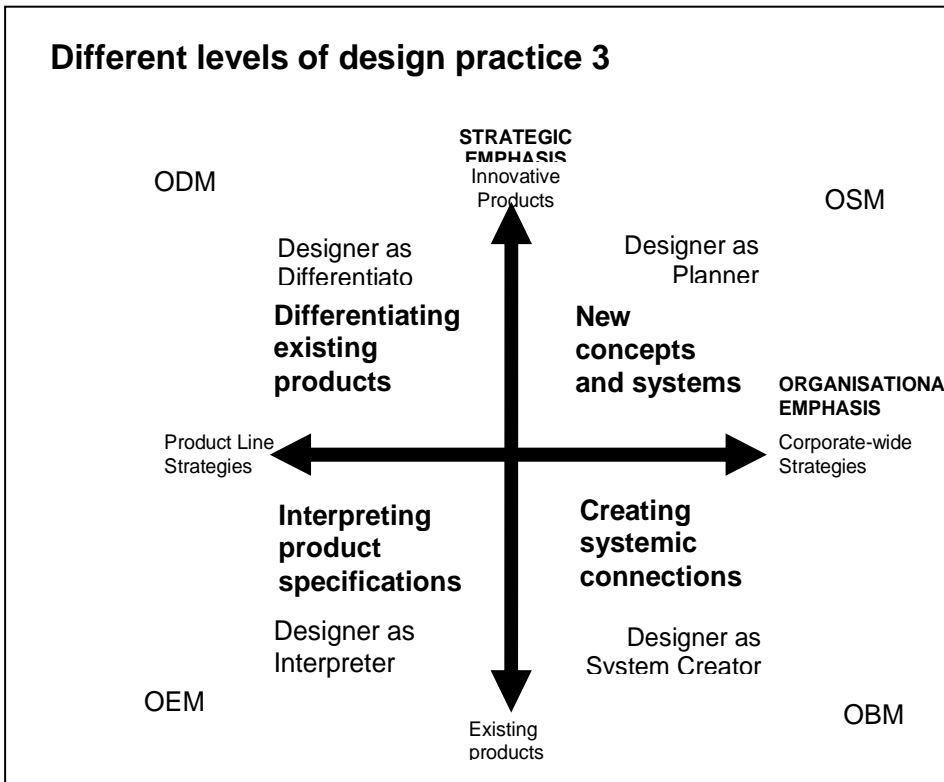


How then can the viewpoints of business and user be reconciled? There seems to be a clash between the human values involved in how ordinary people use products (buying a washing machine is not seen as a way to make the home more profitable) and how producers view making them – in which profit is an absolute necessity.



This in essence is the major role of design: generating products, communications, environments and services, and systems, which have enhanced human value in terms of such factors as ease of use, better performance, access to wider opportunities, and greater pleasure in use. Such qualities in the long run create continuing and sustainable profits. It is possible to have designs of benefit to society, economy and culture in terms of human value that is simultaneously economically valuable. In other words, there does not have to be a conflict between the two emphases of profit and human value.

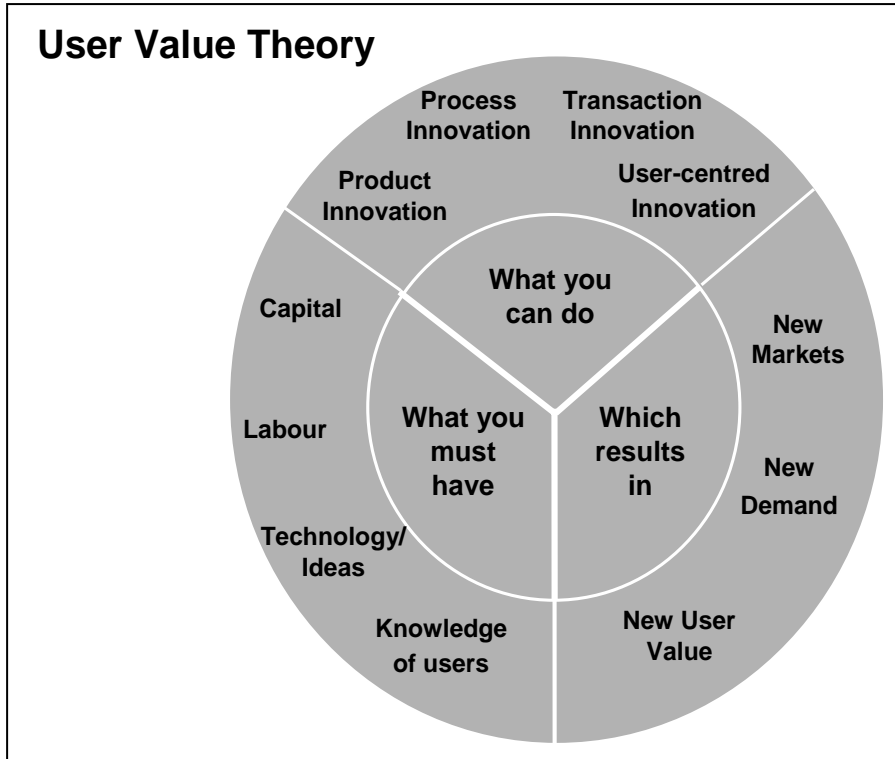




User-centred Design

One of the most important tools in contributing to the welfare of populations is the concept of User-centred Design, which means going beyond what people currently know and want. Instead it seeks to offer

what people never thought they could have or never knew they wanted, in ways that are sustainable and increasingly accessible to all.



“There is a lack of the creative will that has to be expressed in the company’s entire expression of life. That takes time, it takes years, it takes patience.”

“若要发挥创意于公司之全部，创意总是不足。这需要时间，需要年月，需要耐性。”

Jürgen W. Braun, Managing Director, FSB