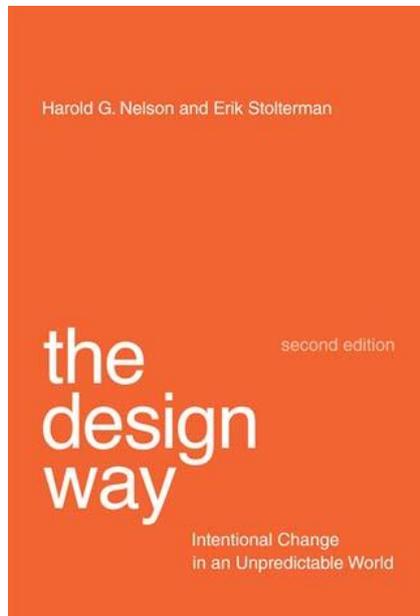


Salvatore Cucchiara

Book Review:

The Design Way

Intentional Change in an Unpredictable World (second edition)



Harold G. Nelson and Erik Stolterman. (2014).
The Design Way: Intentional Change in an Unpredictable World (second edition).
Cambridge MA: The MIT Press

The premise of *The Design Way* is that in today's rapidly changing world, current intellectual traditions are becoming increasingly inadequate – if still important – approaches to managing human affairs. For example, hard and soft sciences can help us understand how the world works, but generally offer little guidance on intentionally changing it. To address this shortcoming, the authors advance design as a distinct tradition that finds its key feature in making a novel idea concrete.

Accordingly, the main purpose of the book is to formulate a “philosophy” of design as a unique approach, on par with other approaches such as science and the arts. It is important to note that the authors do not see this philosophy just as an intellectual exercise. Rather, the value of this philosophy is in encouraging designers and others to participate in the creation of a design culture – a “crucible” that can nurture and protect both the activity of design and those involved in it.

The Design Way consists of five sections. In the first section, the authors argue that design is a “natural and ancient human ability” that the rise of analytic and reductive modes of thinking has relegated to the margins. Unlike other intellectual traditions, which generally situate themselves in the realm of abstract thinking, design integrates abstraction with productive action. Fittingly, Nelson and Stolterman identify Hephaestus, master blacksmith of the Greek gods, as the archetypical designer.

The second section of the book explores the foundations of design, that is, its most important principles. For example – the authors argue – design centres on creating something real (an “ultimate particular”) on the basis of an ideal image and within the material constraints of the world. Design is also predicated on a service relationship, whereby one party provides an ultimate particular to another party. As a form of inquiry, design is systemic insofar as it involves multiple inputs and requires an understanding of the complex

relationships that exist in the environment. Finally, a design product is itself a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Nelson and Stolterman then discuss the fundamentals or the core concepts of design. Foremost among these concepts is that of desiderata (desires), which trigger the design process by helping to name intentions and expectations. Interpretation, on the other hand, enables designers to find out where they are and if they can move in the desired direction. Finally, judgment helps designers to make choices and, therefore, overcome paralysis. Other important fundamentals that the authors discuss include imagination and communication, composing and connecting, and craft.

The fourth section of the book, entitled “Metaphysics,” deals with the good and bad aspects of design. Design can move people and evoke energy, but it can also result in unsettling consequences, whether intentional or unforeseen. For better or worse, designers’ choices always-already take place in the absence of perfect knowledge, as no-one can envision or predict the future with absolute certainty. However – the authors argue – this does not absolve designers of their responsibility; rather, the ultimate guarantee of design rests with the designers’ own character.

What does a “design character” involve? In the last section of their book, Nelson and Stolterman argue that becoming and being a designer require the cultivation of a specific mindset, along with the acquisition of a relevant tool-, skills-, and knowledge-set. This mindset encompasses personal attributes that would be considered excellent qualities, such as being collaborative and attentive to others’ desires. However, the book falls short of an explicit discussion of what a design mindset would look like, in favour of indirect pointers disseminated throughout the five sections.

Altogether, *The Design Way* is an important addition to the design literature. For one, this book fills a significant gap by providing both a basic structure and a common language to conceptualize design. Nelson and Stolterman’s book also integrates systems thinking into the design tradition to an extent few other books have. As design moves to more abstract and multi-disciplinary areas like public policy, systems thinking offers a way to address messy situations without leading to paralysis. For designers, *The Design Way* charts a path to navigate complexity in the design of real additions to the world.

A promising line of future inquiry for the authors would be a systematic exploration of the ways in which design has been viewed and taken up. Like much of the literature, the book approaches design mostly as a methodology to deal with the world. However, this approach is only *one* way to view design, alongside such conceptualizations of design as, for example, a set of techniques and as a mindset. A survey of all these conceptualizations would enable not only a better understanding of the contested terrain of “design”, but also a comparative evaluation of the different possible ways to view design itself.

To their credit, the authors recognize the limits of viewing design simply as a methodology requiring a philosophy. At the end of their book, they break important ground by discussing design as a mindset – that is, a way to be, act, and think in the world. This discussion is only inchoate, making it a good and almost natural starting point for a potential subsequent book.

In sum, *The Design Way* is a foundational book in the field of design, not only for the rigorous conceptual investigation it puts forward, but also for the way it intertwines design with systems thinking. Nelson and Stolterman’s book can be dense and challenging, but reading it is definitely worth one’s time.

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