

# Dark Matter and Trojan Horses: A Strategic Design Vocabulary

Dan Hill

**“Dark Matter and Trojan Horses” looks to understand the nature of wicked problems and how strategic design can play a crucial role in addressing them.**

Hill proposes that historic design efforts (aesthetics, minutiae) are wasteful and design should directly address larger issues. However, rather than an instructional guide, the book dissects wider contexts and system level strategies, extrapolating how individual projects / artefacts can play pivotal roles in shifting and reformatting systems.

Hill speaks of both analysis (through activity that creates learning) and synthesis (human centred design as a side effect of doing something). Hill’s criticism of current government paradigm leans on that there is too much focus on analysis (measuring), instead of synthesis (forming a coherent goal and process). He critiques the Design Thinking consultancy model for being too short-term for systems change and not being able to build capabilities within organisations, due to disincentives by not being re-hired for consultancy.

Hill constructs a framework of concepts demonstrating the different strategic levels where he considers design to operate:

- 1. McGuffin**
- 2. Trojan Horse**
- 3. Platform**
- 4. Layer** (see our glossary of terms).

These tools exemplify how a project seemingly based in “matter”/artefact can disturb and address the “meta” - the systems, contexts and socio-cultural frames in which

it sits. However, there is also an importance of balancing these issues - between developing the wider strategy, and continuing to work on “the particular”.

The book also discusses the roles in strategic design, and at which point players can be most impactful. It considers the importance of stakeholders, clients and the design team in creating a project which “breaks the mould”.

## **What are the strengths and weaknesses of the book?**

The book provides a simple and easy to read approach for addressing systemic change through design. Its main strength is that it creates a language for strategic design, naming and identifying key tools that enable wider perspective and push towards system-level change.

However, there is a lot of complexity hidden behind what seems easy at the surface. It is far easier to name the levers and outputs in retrospective, than to devise those projects and design meaningful interventions that trigger change in reality.

## **When / why / to whom?**

Hill started writing the book in 2011. As several systemic crises started to crack across the world, he noticed that these emerging wicked problems could not be solved without complete system redesign. Reacting to the shifting context of design - from aesthetics to systems / design thinking - the conceptual design tools are probably the most easily adopted by designers, though the message is written to all the decision makers (politicians, policy makers, industry leaders) in the world.

## **Glossary:**

**Wicked problems:** social / cultural issues which are complex and difficult to solve due to lack of knowledge, changing requirements and intersectionality with other problems

**The McGuffin:** a tool to motivate wanted action by driving other external outcome: e.g. a building to change legislation

**The Trojan Horse:** An artefact that brings multiple hidden strategies with it

**The Platform:** Offering a product that is user-centered, malleable, scalable etc. It allows the user to act within the platform, from matter to meta scale: e.g. a building offering a place for businesses and people

**The Layer:** Projects affect and deal with different organisational layers, some of which are fast and some slow. Understanding which parts need to be slow or fast is essential: e.g. cancer care, some innovative layers can be fast, the ones important to patient health should be slow

**Dark Matter:** “Invisible” aspects that design should consider, because they are impactful: e.g. Organisational culture, governance structures, legislation, market mechanisms, tradition and habits, national identity or incentive schemes

**Matter and Meta Designing:** Balancing the artefacts (matter) of a project and the context (meta) in which it lies: e.g. a café - which coffee? - uniforms? (the “how” / matter) and the context in which it lies, such as a digital culture centre for young people (the “why” / meta).