

Strategic design – A viewpoint about to change

Abstract

In a context where design and other disciplines are facing complex challenges requiring multi-disciplinarity, strategic design as a discipline comes as a term to showcase how designers can contribute more strategically to organisations and society. In this article, I look at definitions of strategic design and how the design role is changing to a more strategic role. This change in the role of designers comes as a response to the more complex problems designers are tackling. I present two examples of frameworks that represent this change of role for designers – Danish Design Ladder and the Design Maturity Model. I also reflect on how these changes in the role of design impact the skillset designers need to have when transitioning from academia to working life. Finally, I point out to how strategic design will be more critical in a society where problems are complex and multidisciplinary is needed.

Keywords: Strategic Design, Role of Design, Design Skills.

While my colleagues here at LAB University of Applied Sciences report their projects in the other chapters of this book, I am writing this chapter just a few weeks after starting as Chief Specialist in Strategic Design Innovations. Thus, instead of reporting the interesting meetings, projects and people I have met recently, I prefer to write my current viewpoint on Strategic design. As the title suggests, this is a temporal viewpoint that (most likely) will change over the next years. As design, and all other disciplines, are in flux, there is no reason to believe that definitions of strategic design will remain fixed in the future.

I divided this article into three parts: First,

I look at past debates on strategic design in design publications (both academic and professional literature). The goal is to cover the discussions on the topic and why strategic design is relevant. Second, I present the challenges of moving design to a more strategic role for design education and practice. Finally, I briefly point out which topics will be relevant when doing research in strategic design.

What do we talk about when we talk about strategic design?

Strategic design comes as a term that encompasses designers' ability to act more strategically inside organisations. In practice,

designers are engaged in the earlier phases of product/service development (e.g., research, business case, problem setting) instead of only delivering products/services outcomes (e.g., interfaces, service blueprints). Among the many definitions for Strategic design found in the literature, I bring two examples below:

“Strategic design is a design activity concerning the product-system; the integrated body of products, services and communication strategies that either an actor or networks of actors (be they companies, institutions or non-profit organizations etc.) conceive and develop so as to obtain a set of specific strategic results”. Anna Meroni in the article *Strategic design: where are we now? Reflection around the foundations of a recent discipline* (Meroni 2008, 31).

“Strategic design is defined as designers' ability to influence decisions and set direction over issues that affect the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of an organization, such as development and communication of a brand's core values, positioning, and creation of new markets”. Pietro Micheli, Helen Perks and Michael Beverland in the article *Elevating Design in the Organization* (Micheli et al. 2018, 630).

These definitions of strategic design cover the changes in the type of work designers do and deliver, from outcome-based (e.g., a packaging) towards strategic design. Many scholars have repeatedly pointed out the fact that design and the role of design is expanding

(e.g., Meyer & Norman 2020). Specifically talking about the graphic design profession, I previously covered how graphic designers are now expanding their contributions from visual outcomes towards more strategic deliveries (Dziobczenski & Person 2017; Dziobczenski et al. 2018a; Dziobczenski et al. 2018b; Dziobczenski 2021; Dziobczenski 2022).

The nature of the problems designers face shapes the changes in the design profession. Problems are complex and require designers to collaborate with a number of disciplines in order to solve them. On this topic, Ken Friedman has listed four groups of challenges that affect the work designers do (Friedman 2019): (1) Performance, (2) Systemic, (3) Contextual and (4) Global challenges. In short, the types of challenges evolve from Performance towards Global in terms of the scale and stakeholders involved in the challenge: while in Performance challenges, designers are building tangible (e.g., interfaces, products) or intangible (e.g., services) outcomes, in Global challenges designers are working together with other disciplines to tackle, for example, the sustainable development goals defined by the United Nations (United Nations 2016). For example, climate change is a current topic that will not be solved by designers (or other professionals) alone. Still, it will require collaboration from multiple disciplines in order to address such a massive challenge.

In a world where problems designers face is becoming more complex and requiring designers to collaborate with other disciplines, the role of design is also broadening (e.g., Micheli et al. 2018; Perks et al. 2005; Ravasi & Lojaco 2005; Valencia et al. 2013; Valtonen, 2005). This expansion of the role of designers

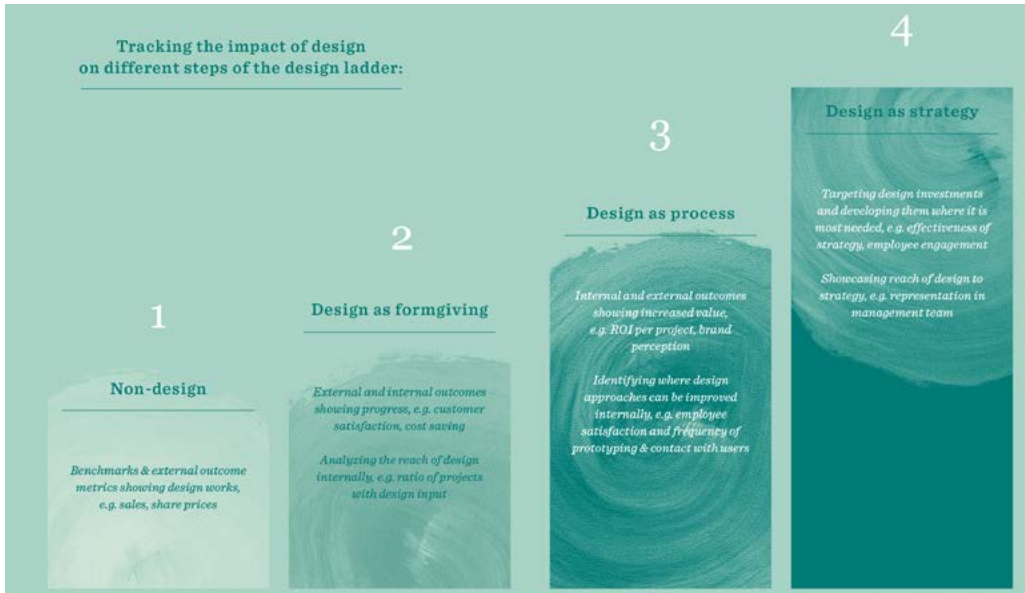


Figure 1. The Danish Design Ladder (Ramlau, 2004). Image source: Björklund et al. (2019)

has been described in frameworks such as the 'Design Ladder' (Figure 1), developed by the Danish Design Centre (Ramlau 2004) and the 'Design Maturity Model' (see Figure 2 on the next page) by the design software company InVision (Buley et al. 2019). Here is a summary of these two models:

- The Danish Design Ladder is a four-step model, which was built by analysing how Danish organisations adopt design practices: (1) No use of design, where other professionals instead of designers do design, similar to what was described by Gorb and Dumas in their classic article 'Silent Design' (Gorb & Dumas 1987); (2) Design as styling, where design is used as an aesthetic add-on at the end

of the development process; (3) Design as process, where design integrated into early phases of the development process; and (4) Design as strategy, where design is a central element for reaching organisational goals.

- The Design Maturity Model classified organisations in five categories: "(1) Producers, where design is what happens on screens; (2) Connectors, where design is what happens in a workshop; (3) Architects, where design is a standardized scalable process; (4) Scientists, where design is a hypothesis and an experiment and (5) Visionaries, where design is business strategy" (Buley et al. 2019).

In sum, strategic design expands the way designers work and impact society: from delivering outcomes only to engaging in earlier phases of product and service development, represented by the expression of 'designers getting a seat at the table' (e.g. Boztepe 2018). This transition represents a significant expansion in the design profession, responding to increasingly complex challenges (see, e.g., Friedman 2019). Frameworks

such as the Danish Design Ladder and the Design Maturity Model further highlight these changes from delivering outcomes towards contributing to strategy. Moving on, I want to discuss what this role change for designers means for design practice and design education. In other words, how do these changes affect the work designers do, and how do we train designers at LAB University of Applied Sciences and other institutions?

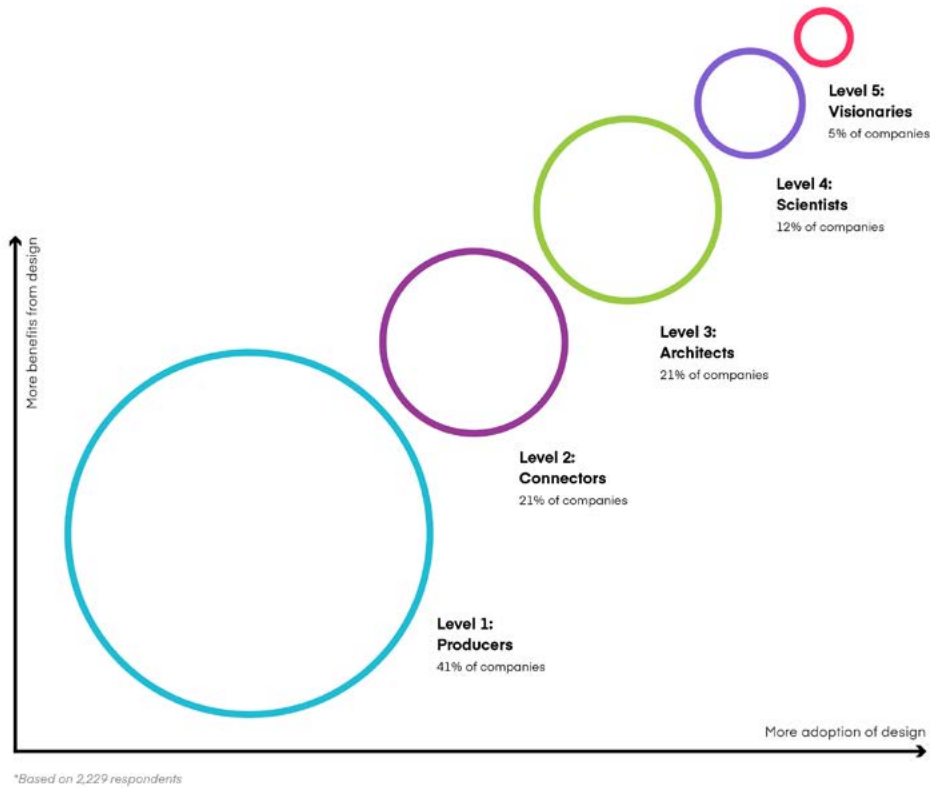


Figure 2: The Design Maturity Model by InVision. Here, the image shows the percentage of organisations in each of the five levels. Source: Buley et al. (2019).

Strategic design in design practice and design education

Designers often start their careers as technical specialists with functional expertise. However, for strategic design to work, they have to be able to join cross-functional teams and act as influencers who champion design. (Micheli et al. 2018, 649)

In the article *Elevating design in the organisation*, Micheli et al. (2018) point out six major practices for moving design towards a more strategic role: (1) top management support, (2) leadership of the design function, (3) generation of awareness of design's role and contribution, (4) interfunctional coordination, (5) evaluation of design and (6) formalisation of product and service development processes. All these practices suggested by the authors present challenges to how designers work and the skills they have. For example, in order to get 'top management support', designers need to expand their argumentation from only design-driven towards business-driven. As recently reported by McKinsey & Company, in the article *Redesigning the Design department* (Cooney et al. 2022), designers often complain that other fields do not understand their roles, but also designers have challenges understanding business and communicating their value properly.

All in all, different practices and roles for designers shape the skills designers have. In my studies on the skills sought by organisations when hiring graphic designers in the UK (Dziobczenski & Person 2017), Finland (Dziobczenski et al. 2018a) and Brazil (Dziobczenski et al. 2018b), I noted that the number of requests in the job advertisements varied from 35 to 40. These requests were then categorised into different types of skills,

starting from design-related skills (e.g. typography) and moving to skills outside the design realm (e.g., business orientation). Figure 3 on the next page presents the requests by organisations in Finland and the percentages of presence in their job advertisements.

This broad and varied list of requirements in the advertisements represents the challenge design graduates face when moving from academia to working in organisations: do they have the skills required by organisations? Is there an 'education gap' (Todd et al. 1995, 20) in design, where the skills graduates have are not aligned with the skills required by organisations? Design educators and institutions are responsible for preparing students for the jobs they will face when graduating from their studies. Also, designers 'should be aware that design is a profession that requires constant learning and, therefore, monitor developments in the profession on a regular basis.' (Dziobczenski, 2021, 132).

What comes next for design and strategic design?

In this article, I looked at how design is expanding towards a more strategic role in organisations. This expansion of the role of design in organisations is documented in frameworks such as the Danish Design Ladder and Design Maturity Report. With this expansion of roles, the skills requested by organisations also expand. For example, in order for designers to be more 'business-oriented', they need to learn about business.

In this environment, where design expands its role and contributions to organisations and society, design education institutions in Finland and abroad have the role of supporting their graduates in the transition

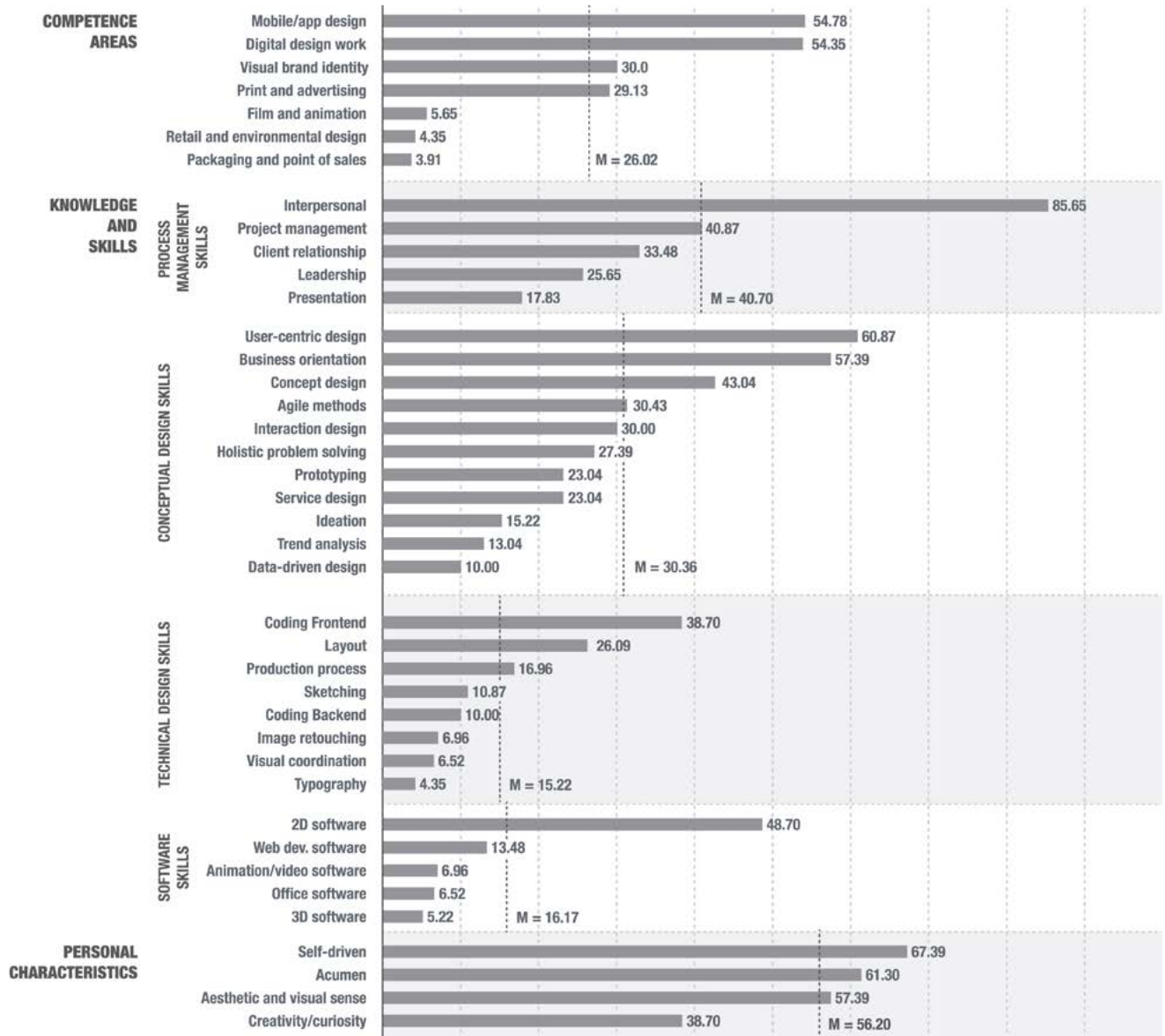


Figure 3. Requirements stated in job advertisements by companies in Finland. Source: Dziobczenski et al. (2018a)

from academia to working life. Students graduating from design educational programmes will face the challenge of tackling complex problems and working in multidisciplinary teams. In order to do that, they need an appropriate skillset. Design practitioners and educators are responsible for reviewing the skills required in working life and dedicating time to develop them.

But then, what comes next for design and strategic design? Strategic design will be more critical in a society where problems are complex, and multidisciplinary is needed. To cite a few examples, climate change and the ethics of using artificial intelligence are

challenges that require the collaboration of multiple professionals and disciplines. Strategic designers have the ability to work not only as strategic problem solvers but also as strategic facilitators for solving complex problems together with engineers, business professionals and a varied range of professionals.

Coming back to the title of this article - Strategic design – A viewpoint about to change – I am curious and excited about how design will change. My work here at LAB University of Applied Sciences will promote strategic design for a more impactful contribution to organisations and society.

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