The Rise of Design Thinking

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The creative economy is described by media entrepreneur and analyst John Howkins as ‘the fastest growing business in the world’ and reflects the growing power of ideas – and how people make money from ideas. It is driven by the view that ‘twenty-first century industries will depend increasingly on the generation of knowledge through creativity and innovation’. The activities concerned with the generation or exploitation of ideas, knowledge and information are seen by global companies and global economies as becoming increasingly important to economic, and societal, well-being – individually, locally and globally.

Design is one of the fields contained within the creative industries. In 1950, Thomas Watson, CEO of IBM, recognised that ‘Good design is good business’. Good design generates social and economic value, makes the world a better, more interesting place, and enhances the quality of our lives. A design (noun) has form and function; it is the outcome of the process of designing. To design (verb) is to plan, to create or to devise. It is a process, a practice, and a way of thinking. Technology is enabling a shift of balance between industries based on the mass-production and manufacture of tangible products, and those aligned with the on-demand delivery of intangible services. This shift is reflected in design, with debates moving beyond ‘design as style and aesthetics’ to the design of the process, the design of the experience, design as a catalyst for innovation, and design as an enabler of cultural and creative change.

We are, literally, surrounded by design, in the culture of everyday life and in the communities, objects, spaces and systems we come into contact with every day. As a people-centred, problem-solving process, design has become fashionable as a way to address challenges facing both public and private organisations. By putting people at the core of how products, services and systems are designed, design as a methodology is well positioned as a way to bring ‘fresh thinking’ to current debates about whether our existing (and collapsing) systems should be restored, redefined or redeigned - systems which ultimately define people’s daily interactions and influence the quality of their life experience.

The application of a ‘designerly’ way of thinking could help stimulate more human-centred strategies for growth and development, such as how to improve the quality of our daily lives, how to envision more desirable futures, and how to unlock value within ‘doing more with less’ (especially in our production, consumption and distribution networks). It is an approach that could also help identify a different, or better, way of doing things, of reconnecting everyday life back to what people really value and, ultimately, back to our own core human values. Design thinking is, therefore, a people-centred transformational process.

Kathryn Best is Research Professor in Design Management at Inholland University of Applied Sciences. She is author of Design Management: Managing Design Strategy, Process and Implementation (AVA 2006), and The Fundamentals of Design Management (AVA 2010).