Design management as a way of thinking

**Just what is design management,
and how can designers use it?**

Roel Stavorinus

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According to Kathryn Best (Design Management, AVA Publishing, 2006), there is no unequivocal definition of design management. She does come up with two objectives, however: familiarising managers with design, and familiarising designers with management. The second objective is to develop methods to integrate design into corporate environments.

Gert Kootstra (Design Management, Prentice Hall, 2006) is slightly more specific. He talks about training managers and designers in order to familiarise managers with the opportunities that design offers organisations, and to familiarise designers with corporate goals.

The second objective that he mentions is the development of methods to integrate design into business processes. In Kootstra's view, design management forms a bridge between management and design.

Approach routes   It's clear that there are three players: the organisation, the design manager and the designer. In addition, there are roughly two approach routes. There are large organisations that are convinced of the importance of design, such as Apple, BMW, Lego or Unilever. These organisations utilise design, design processes, design instruments and design thinking. Design plays a role in these organisations at every conceivable level. These large companies work with consultancies such as PARK, which specialise in managing design, and which speak the language of these large organisations in the broadest sense.

As a designer, you come into contact with this kind of organisation, and in these cases you will most likely notice that the client is experienced in applying design. For such clients, the benefits of design are beyond question; design plays an important role in the organisation, and there are established processes and trained staff. And all this, of course, has implications for the professionalism of the collaboration between you and the organisation. We might say that here we are dealing with the organisations at the very top of the design ladder.

The design ladder   For the great majority of organisations, however (and one undoubtedly deals with these more often), design is an abstract concept – if they are familiar with the field at all, that is. You come across organisations at all levels of the design ladder. Often, design management is not on the agenda. What you will usually find there, however, is design,

communication, marketing and product development. With any luck, the organisation concerned pays attention to branding and visual identity, or, if not, in any case to its relations with its stakeholders.

Suppose that as a designer, you receive a request relating to design and communication. What is the value of design management to you? What can you do with it? And, if it does prove useful: how do you make it applicable? This process starts with a far-reaching question: what kind of designer do you want to be? Not all designers need to use design management or become immersed in its principles.

A short-term ... Do you want to make beautiful things that stand alone and that, at the very least, have a short-term impact? In this case, it will suffice to embark on a project, bring it to a satisfactory conclusion, and move on to the next one. Your satisfaction comes from the creative end-result, from having contented clients, and from getting paid. With a little luck, the client and the designer will be pleased with one another, and this will lead to long-lasting collaboration. Perhaps it is easier to collaborate with other creative businesses, such as theatres, artists and architects, than with more corporate organisations, but that is a fact of professional life.

... or a long-term impact? Are you a designer who thinks that design can play an important role in achieving corporate goals? Are you convinced that the value of design to businesses, the power of brands, innovation, and operational management cannot be overestimated? And do you also believe that you are in a position to enable your clients to benefit from using design? Then the field of design management has much to offer. We might see design, project management and design management as three logical steps, all three with a different focus. As mentioned above, it usually begins with a request for a design.

An organisation needs a design for a logo, a newsletter or an annual report. Both the request and the final objective are clear. You just need to talk about the form and the execution, and then you have a fairly complete picture of what is required.

Underestimating projects The design is realised in a project. A project is an activity that has a start-date and an end-date. Sometimes projects take less time, sometimes more, but they always have an end. A project is already a more complex and extensive undertaking than the design request. At this level management issues are at stake, such as planning, time, quality, communication and information. The client and the other

parties involved in the project have to be in agreement on these. A project presents a multitude of risks and pitfalls, and, at the same time, it also presents many opportunities and chances to strengthen your relationship with the client. After reading books on project management, you might well start thinking that design agencies are too laid back in their handling of projects. Design agencies would certainly do well to take a more professional approach to more complex projects such as developing a new corporate image for a large organisation. Part of this problem lies with the agencies. An important part of the problem also lies with clients who frequently take such projects less seriously. It is not unusual for clients to want something too quickly, having put too little consideration and preparation into it, for the wrong reasons, with too little expertise and for too little money. These projects are often underestimated. That doesn't help, but it does form a nice bridge to design management.

<u>Left side of the brain, right side of the brain</u> **Design management offers a long-term focus: across projects and separate from projects. A design request and all the ins and outs of a design project offer a wealth of insights into the client's organisation, how the client assesses the value of design for their organisation, and where the opportunities for design are in the organisation – and, therefore, the opportunities for the designers and/or the design manager.**

As Kootstra suggests, design management is all about familiarising managers with design. This requires time. If you want to play a part in this as an external consultant, or as a design manager or designer, there need to be opportunities you can grasp to do so. And you need a relationship — a good relationship — to be able to play this part. Conversely, there is a need for time, and the will, on the part of the designer, to acquire knowledge about and insights into the organisation; and, even more, to learn to understand organisations. This corporate world is at odds with the creative world. It's a question of 'right side of the brain, left side of the brain'. A world of decision-making and spreadsheets, accounting and sales targets, effectiveness and efficiency, versus a world of analysis and concepts, form and aesthetics, innovation and inspiration. As Kootstra suggests, design management forms a bridge between design and management. Even more than a discipline, it is an attitude, a way of seeing, and an ambition. Design management has the potential to enable two worlds that have traditionally existed next to each other to engage with one another. When designers take up this challenge, they are in a position to truly contribute added value to businesses, while simultaneously giving their old profession a new future.

Illustratie: Cyprian Koscielniak
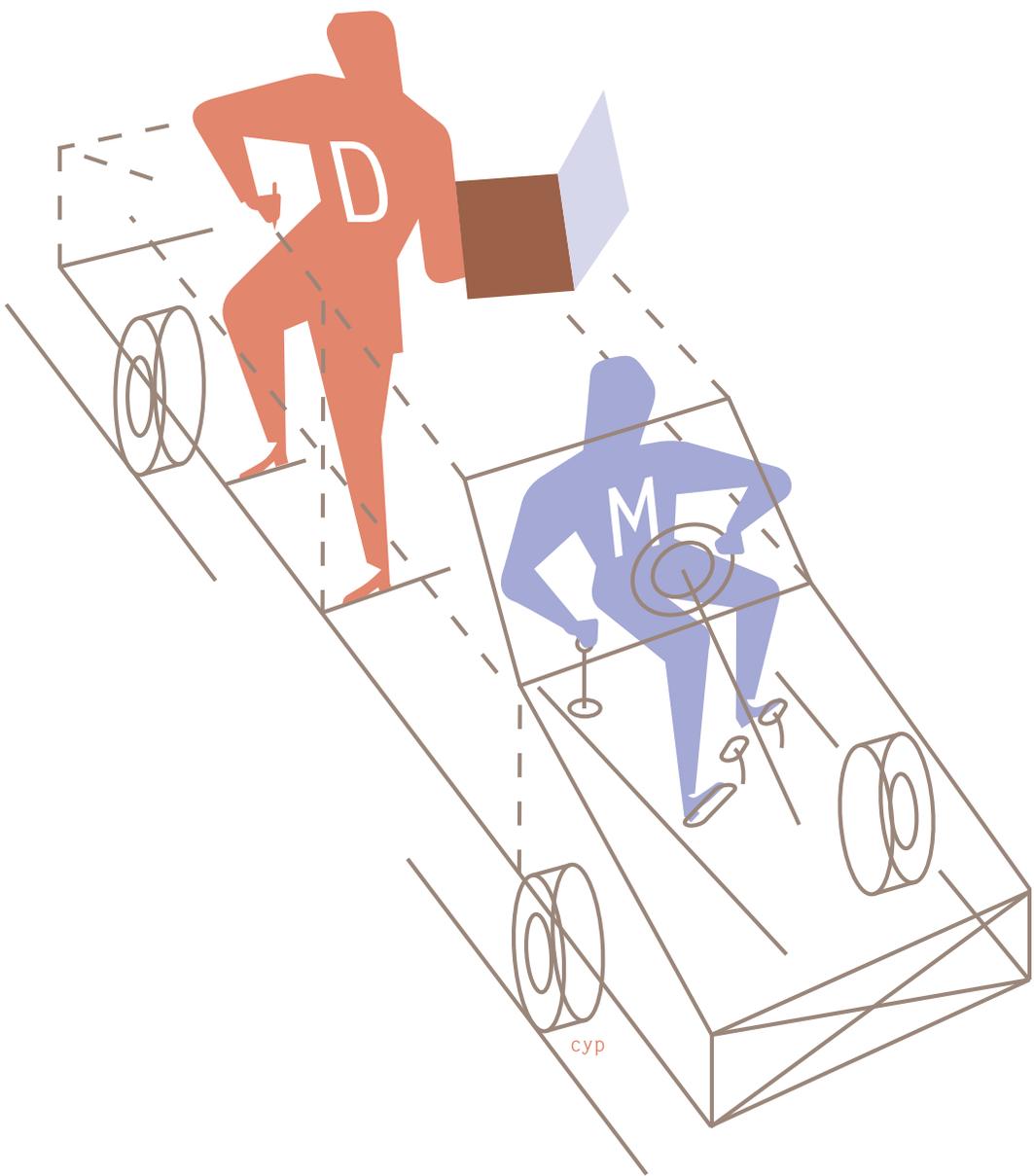
Roel is an independent Design Management consultancy specializing in graphic and corporate identity design.

Roel consults closely with their clients to help them achieve their company objectives by maximizing the role of communication and design within their business.
Roel acts as an advisor and intermediary for large and complex communication design projects. The consultancy helps both design agencies and business clients to make design-relevant decisions and to manage and monitor the process. Roel developed a special interest in internal communication and decision making.

Roel Stavorinus studied design and communications, communication management and design management. After working in several communication and marketing environments he started in the field of project management, account and strategy for design agencies.
In 2003 Roel started his own consultancy and slowly switched from working at the side of agencies to the side of organizations. At present Roel works for a wide variation of public and commercial organizations.

Roel publishes articles for the Association of Dutch Designers (BNO) on design projects, managing design agencies and the collaboration between designers and clients.

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