ON BEING A DESIGNER, AND NOT DOING DESIGN

We can design by listening, which suggests a working posture for designers—a receptive attitude of observation. This is a critical description of how we must work. Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous exclamation "Look, don't think!" serves as a guide.[1] Rather than thinking about the design task, we can design-think. The very language of "to think about" suggests a separation between two objects, the designer and the task . But the two are not separate; they're dual dynamic processes that shape and inform each other.

To me, design-thinking—with its premium on processes—is the hallmark of a successful designer. Successful design-thinking embodies thoroughly paying attention, and then—and only then—responding. When we focus on the design task as though we're separate from it, we lose the flow[2] of design-thinking.

An advantage of a listening posture is that we need not impose our will over the design work. Rather we can negotiate with the unique requirements of each project to arrive at solutions. This makes each project distinct, resulting from its unique journey. Of course, we all hold an agenda, but we must aim for ours to be evershifting, evolving, and revealing. Such an agenda is born from the unique anatomy of each project combined with our own peculiarities as designers.

Healthy design presents itself as a process of discovery. As mathematician Albert Szent-Györgyi von Nagyrapol said, "Discovery consists of seeing what everybody has seen and thinking what nobody has thought."[3] The quote suggests that all the solutions are always before us. It is our task to pay attention—to listen. Design-thinking involves more receiving and responding than prescribing and acting.

Within this framework, design is a process of revealing knowledge, and the objects that result are residue of this process. While primarily leftovers, we come to understand that the resulting objects connect us, and allow us to communicate with each other.

We can work at falling into design, and into solutions. It's not a haphazard stumbling, although stumbling isn't altogether bad. When we stumble into solutions, we call it serendipity. Still, our falling can be a deliberate pursuit. We can learn to pursue falling by releasing our grip on forcing a result and allowing ourselves to be gripped by the process of discovery.

More concretely, we must take action. One rarely falls by standing still, so to push the metaphor, start walking, searching for the moment to tumble forward. Playing, researching, making, and thinking with

one's hands are proven conduits for falling. Yet they can't be understood as the cause. Know this. It can happen, but you can't do it.

Healthy design is also an iterative process: discover, reflect, apply, discover, reflect, apply. The order isn't critical; and the distinction between the elements of the process can be difficult to determine. Many cycles occur throughout the development of a project and they're rarely linear. Instead progress happens as a spiral or corkscrew. Each time we return to discovery, or application, or reflection, we arrive in a new place, having gained perspective and understanding.

"Good design, then, emerges from the process of being, rather than doing. In the end, good design is good living."

The process is more like the growth of a tree than stacking stones to build a cathedral. Growth occurs as conditions permit, not at the will of a designer.

If this is true, then doing design is an impossibility. At most, we can only participate in the unfolding process of design. Doing design is attempting to grip the process rather than be gripped by it. One can only–we can only–be designers. It's not what we do. It's what happens when we pay attention, listen, when we look without thinking—when we fall into design. When we "be" designers, solutions emerge from a process of discovery. Good design, then, emerges from the process of being rather than doing. In the end, good design is good living.

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations: The German Text,* with a Revised English Translation 50th Anniversary Commemorative Edition. Wiley, 2001.

2 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention.* New York. HarperCollins Publishers, 1996.

3 Irving John Good. *The Scientist Speculates: An Anthology Of Partly-Baked Ideas.* Heinemann, 1962.