

*Present Value • March 9, 2018*

# A Conversation on Design Thinking

Last month, we convened our Senior Advisors to a roundtable on design thinking. Facilitated by ESI Senior Vice President Lee Huang, we discussed what design thinking is and how we could infuse it more systematically into what we do, from the inception of a project to the delivery of a product. Off the record, the conversation yielded some great nuggets of wisdom. To expand on this conversation, we asked our resident experts in design, [Hilary Jay](#), Natalie Nixon and Benjamin Olshin, to answer a few questions about the state of the field and how it could be leveraged moving forward.



The following is an excerpt.

## **How do you define “design thinking”?**

**Hilary Jay:** To do that let’s begin with defining design, a confusing word at best. Both noun and verb, design includes the act of designing and a thing itself. To design describes a process, an approach, a way of looking at a problem, a method of inquiry. For the purposes of this discussion, we can limit our line of inquiry to the for- and non-profit business world, as opposed to, say, realms of psychology or politics or entertainment. But regardless of subject content, design thinking is an inquiry-based system that results in empathetic, evidence-based, humane-centric

solutions. The phrase “design thinking” or “design thinker” are weak terms, unfortunately and often cause confusion in that they do not adequately describe the proposition or value of the act. Additionally, “design” carries the stigma of fashion and aesthetics, seemingly flimsy and inconsequential occurrences or products. When we define design as the single thread that runs through everything, the weight of both noun and verb grows exponentially. Design is political as a country’s flag; complex as any city plan; religious as every icon; romantic – or narrative – as the Seven Wonders of the World. Design is the basis, the bottom line, from which all else springs.



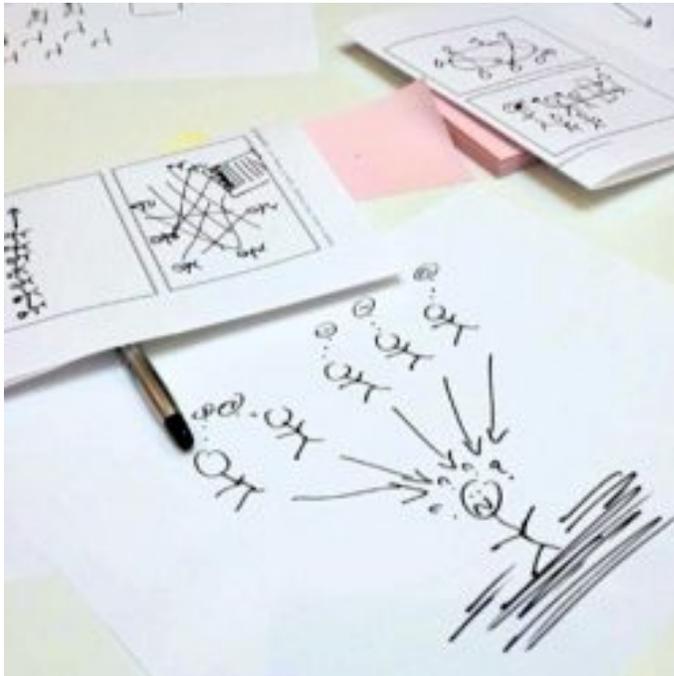
Given that foundation, we can approach design thinking through the following principles: empathy for all users, disciplined and repetitive prototyping, tolerance for failure, and stamina for process. Taken together as a process of inquiry, companies of any size and/or IRS designation can arrive at qualitative and quantitative solutions for creating fluid,

responsive, and ultimately intuitive organizations and organizational cultures. Design thinkers are in fact designers themselves, though not in the traditional sense. Their work is to establish an elegant mash-up comprised of researched facts, cultural mores, established stakeholder values, empathy for the users, and finally, repeatable, verifiable results. The design thinker sees connections that may be less than apparent to the uninitiated eye. “The secret to all victory lies the organization of the non-obvious,” alternatively credited to Oswald Spengler and Marcus Aurelius. In other words, the value of ferreting out seemly disparate associations (aka the design process or design thinking) leads to unique, client-based solutions. The goal of design thinking is the elegant solution, a term employed by engineers, mathematicians, and software developers, to describe resolutions that are both simple and effective, and that meet the greatest number of desired criteria.

### **Where has it made a difference?**

**Hilary Jay:** Obvious responses aside (Apple, Nike, UPenn real estate expansion) we can look to our neighbor at Jefferson, Dr. Stephen Klasko, and his response to fixing a broken healthcare system. He started with the fundamentals: inside medical school classrooms and in the hospital emergency room. Consider, what do

a medical school and a design and liberal arts university have to do with one another? Natalie will undoubtedly have a lot of thoughts on the merger of Thomas Jefferson University and Philadelphia University. By joining forces, the single entity offers awesome empathy-based, design-centric medical education. Klasko nailed that while working at the hospital level to reinvent the ER experience for doctors, nurses, patients, and family members. In this place of high anxiety and elevated blood pressure, research is being done to quell emotional and physical discomfort, raise service efficiencies, as well as health outcomes. To achieve this,



all ER functions are being assessed: work, traffic and space flow, procedures and policies – all the things stakeholders require to be intuitive, accessible and effective.

### **What do you see as future opportunities in the field?**

**Hilary Jay:** I imagine you might get by now that my worldview is that success is a matter of design. We can't brush our teeth, apply our makeup, dress ourselves, get to work, gather for a meeting or share thoughts effectively, efficiently or even joyfully (yep,

that's important!) without design. Everything is design, or designed. There is no future without it. But more to what the question might be getting to, there are whole new industries emerging that will prosper by design. Take the marijuana industry. The depth of needs is vast: from the consumer to the grower, the dispensary owner to the medical researchers, product distributors to banking industry. And many more fields like media, marketing and advertising; real estate development, construction, material suppliers; educators on all levels; facilities and research will have tracks – if they don't already – in the successful creation of this industry. What are we waiting for?