

# *Situations of Significance: Late Modern Design Thinking*

*May God us keep  
From single vision  
And Newton' sleep  
William Blake<sub>1</sub>*

In the latest novel by Dennis Palumbo<sub>2</sub>, a woman enters the office of clinical psychologist Daniel Rinaldi and announces that she intends to kill herself at 7 o'clock unless he can convince her otherwise. It is a classic clinical situation, if a bit overly dramatic. Something significant has come up in her life that requires Rinaldi's expert, thoughtful, and caring assistance. The situation is significant to both parties. They both believe that saving her life matters. It is a situation in the sense that a state of affairs or set of contingent circumstances has arisen that has brought an agent and a client together to work toward changes for the better.

My thesis here is that this model of clinical work, the agent-client work of resolving significant personal situations, isn't just confined to therapy in psychology. I believe the agent-client model also holds for larger social situations of significance that expert designer-stakeholder groups attempt to resolve through professional designing. I'm assuming that an improved understanding of design, designing and design thinking can be gained by a much closer look at what each of the parties brings to the table.

Designing here is conceived as a general social process for transforming perceived situational deficiencies and qualitative differences into preferred situational outcomes. Situations are significant and meaningful when they are centered in the beliefs, perceptions, perspectives, needs and outcomes that satisfy the people involved.

The important commonality I find in both scales of the model is the partnership of two differently constructed domains of knowledge at work. I'll call the one intimate and normative knowledge, and the other empirical knowledge. What I mean by late modern design thinking is the recognition that both are legitimate thinking paradigms that must be accounted for in *each* of the parties. Both and their complex interactions are required to fully understand and satisfactorily resolve significant situations.

In Emma, Jane Austin tells us that,

“It is very unfair to judge any body's conduct, without an intimate knowledge of their situation. Nobody, who has not been in the interior of a family, can say what the difficulties of any individual of that family may be.”<sub>3</sub>

In the novel, Dr. Rinaldi's method at uncovering that intimate knowledge is to build a coffin-like enclosure out of the books in his office, have the woman lie down in it and then imagine herself at her funeral, able to look up from the dead into the passing faces of the people in her life and hear their thoughts. In this imaginative way, he gets her to open up her world of painful and unsuccessful relationships. The roll playing enables her to gain some insight into both her and her significant others' perspectives on things. An increased awareness, articulation and evaluation of what had become a crisis of personal differences become the necessary groundwork for projecting possibilities for resolution, personal growth and change. At 7 o'clock, he asks her if she would be willing to come back again the next day and consider whether to live or die again.

One imagines the influence of the late-modernist books and thinkers that make up the literary and philosophical walls of her coffin in this situation. Their covers read Austin, Sartre, Heidegger, Lakoff and Johnson, Nietzsche, Berkeley, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, Dewey, Rorty, Lee and the like. She is literally being surrounded by their thinking and touched by their thoughts.

In one of the existential volumes, John-Paul Sartre holds that,

“there is freedom only in a situation, and there is a situation only through freedom....There can be a free-for-itself only as engaged in a resisting world. Outside of this engagement the notions of freedom, of determination, of necessity lose all meaning....<sup>4</sup> And,

...if it's true that man is free in a given situation and that in and through that situation he chooses what he will be, then what we have to show in the theatre are simple and human situations and free individuals in these situations choosing what they will be.... The most moving thing the theatre can show is a character creating himself, the moment of choice, of the free decision which commits him to a moral code and a whole way of life.”<sup>5</sup>

The existentialist view is that situations are fundamentally about freedom and choice. On this view, the belief system of both agent and client are in alignment. The woman believes that she is free to choose what she will become. The therapist agrees. If Rinaldi believed in scientific determinism, he would not have become a clinical psychologist.

Furthermore, design teams and stakeholder client situations are no more deterministic and no less free. The parties in transformational situations enter into the process of designing believing in the possibility of improvement and change. Both individuals and groups commit to and engage freely in searching for, evaluating, preferring and choosing what they believe to be satisfactory solutions.

In another of the books, Martin Heidegger writes about the significant nature of this kind of engagement. To Heidegger, it is a portrayal of full-blooded human beings immersed in their worlds of meaning. People and the things of this world are put into direct contact through the phenomenon of attention. And it is through this attentional connection that humans:

“...*come into presence* — ...not presence in the physical sense, but rather in the sense of how we are engaged as living, experiencing human beings... what he famously described as our “being in the world.”

“The thought is that this worldly presence matters for how things actually unfold, well beyond any physical or physiological processes that would purport to be the ultimate basis for human activity. So, for example, when we feel that someone is really listening to us, we feel more alive, we feel our *true selves* (emphasis added) coming to the surface — this is the sense in which worldly presence matters.”<sup>6</sup>

But what is the truth of our “true selves” and the knowledge of what Jane Austin called “intimate knowledge?” And why are the taken for granted meanings of the concepts of truth and knowledge not well fitted to the representational and interpretive needs of the human experience that so clearly matters in significant situations?

The answer given by such late twentieth century pragmatic thinkers as Richard Rorty<sup>7</sup> and others is that our representations of the world are not true mirrors of reality. And that it is important to take note of and account for the ways in which the mind brings its own filters, content and agendas to the construction of reality.

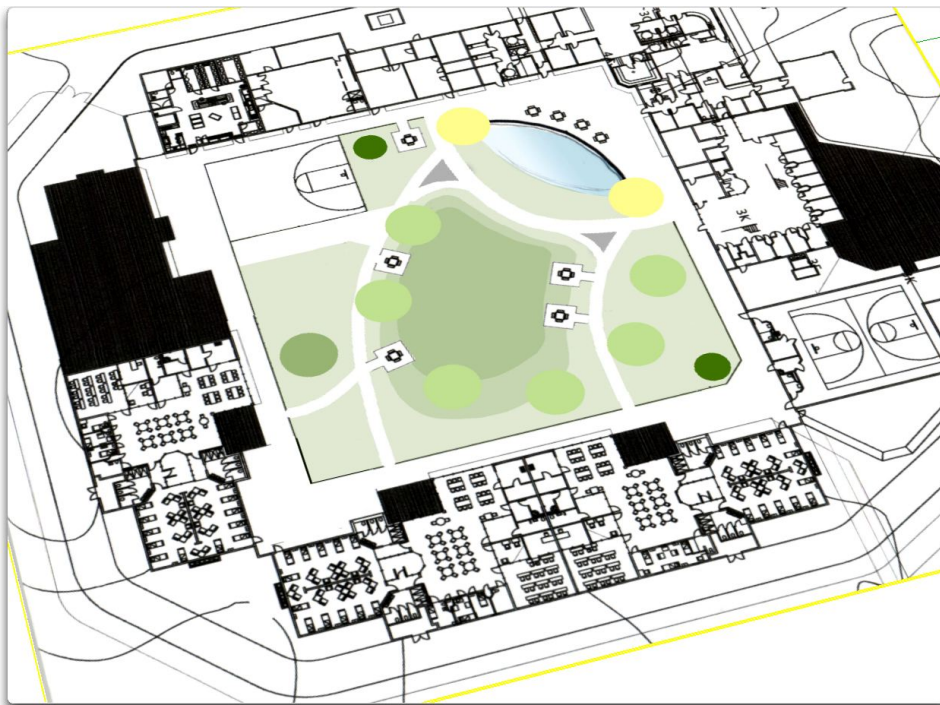
Rorty believed that the paradigm of objective empirical knowledge had remained dominant and unquestioned for so long mainly because it had proved so fruitful, but that it wasn't the only way we were in or related to the world. As the dominant modern paradigm, it had become the entrenched arbiter of what constituted legitimate knowledge and was overdue for philosophical reconsideration. This assault on foundational objectivity is mirrored in all of the above-mentioned continental philosophers but also in the more recent finding in cognitive science.

From Lakoff et al. we learn that the mind builds categories out of its own beliefs and perceptions such as the Australian Aboriginal Dyrbal's, “Women, Fire and Dangerous Things;”<sup>8</sup> that language is highly metaphoric and bodily derived; and that we think through the frames that reflect the world views of our personal dispositions, experience and socialized conditions. In his *All New Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*, he writes:

“Our understanding of the world is part of the world. Our conceptual framing exists in physical neural circuitry in our brains, largely below the level of conscious awareness, and they define and limit how we understand the world. The world is thus in many ways a reflection of how we frame it and act in those frames creating a world *in significant part* (emphasis added) framed by our actions.”<sup>9</sup>

He gives the practical example of how one frames the idea of a pension, whether one accepts the commonly held view that it is a benefit, a gift, something for nothing, or delayed pay for work already done.

Some years ago now, I was hired to redesign the one-acre open space inside a young women’s prison. With encouragement from the prison warden and staff, I transformed a flat, desolate, muddy ground with narrow walkways at the edges of the buildings (with signs that said, Don’t Touch the Walls) into the place below.



Young Women’s Correctional Facility, Albany, Oregon, 2007

Today there are curving walkways wide enough for two people to walk side-by-side, no shrubbery to hide behind of course, but flowering trees, places to meet, sit and talk, local sports, and a shallow sky and moon-reflecting pond with the sound of running water. A few years after it was built, a new warden with a different outlook took over and informed me that she considered the design wholly

inappropriate for their situation. The prison environment “was not meant to be a resort” and should reflect its proper role, which was to “contain, control and punish.”

It is easy to compare this with the extremes that exist in the therapeutic relationship where there are widely divergent beliefs about the relative benefits of drugs vs. emotionally transformative discussions. There are worlds of difference between the empathetic therapist vs. the patriarchal and narcissistic “mansplainer,” who feels called to overlay his reality on hysterical women; or the architect as emic and etic agent vs. the true believers who advise, “Take two patterns and don’t call me in the morning.”

Nietzsche believing that, “Man is the valuing animal,” called this kind of framed thinking, Perspectivism. In a famous passage he asks:

“What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now only matter as metal, no longer as coins.”<sup>10</sup>

Rorty proposed that we consider that are different ontologies for the different ways we are in the world, and asserted that there was no basis for believing that there was only one official vocabulary for its description. On this view, knowledge was more than just what could be gained through the methodological interrogation of nature to discover how things are and how they worked. In a domain specific way it could also represent an understanding of the more intimate personal and social kinds of knowledge related to presence and experience. The meaning of truth, as a one to one correspondence between description and empirical reality, needn’t be the only way to think about it. It could also be recognized from an experiential perspective as a social integration of views from different vantage points and as a correspondence between the setting of goals and their realizations.

The interplay of these two kinds of knowledge in the relationships between therapist and patient and designers and their clients is instructive. The professionals in each case bring the expert knowledge, skills, tools and experience from their respective fields to the transformative situation, but they also bring the frames and perspectives that make up who they are and how they filter what they see and hear.

Patients and clients bring their perceptions and stories of the qualitative gaps, holes, deficiencies and discrepancies in their worlds to the situational relationship

in search of the professional help that they need to change situations for the better. They also bring the facts of their present lives, places and circumstances, which must figure fully in any remodeling. Late modern design thinking means embracing both realities and the legitimacy of the vocabularies that both contribute to situational resolution.

Late modern design thinking means being able to hold more than one ontology in mind at a time. There is a need for a more focused attention and much better representation of what people believe in, value and how they perceive their world in significant situations. But an expanded awareness of frames and perspectives need not exclude an empirical interest in how things are and how they work.

At the core of an experiential and valuing ontology is the relational whole of attentional interests and things. Not ideas about things in and for themselves, but how things are attentionally brought into a world of valuing relationships and meaning. On this view qualities are what ones sees in a thing, feels and is moved by a thing, is inspired, transported or repelled by a thing, not its molecular structure or tensile strength.

In this ontology, thoughts and feelings about things are always from a point of view. This way of thinking is “touched upon as far back as Plato’s rendition of Protagoras,” and more fully developed in Nietzsche’s Perspectivism. Nietzsche held that an objective view reality was impossible because “no evaluation of objectivity can transcend cultural formations or subjective designations.” He claimed that,

“People always adopt perspectives by default – whether they are aware of it or not – and the concepts of one’s existence are defined by the circumstances surrounding that individual. Truth is made by and for individuals and peoples.”<sup>11</sup>

Contemporary philosopher, Emily S. Lee, when asked about her interest in phenomenology to explore matters of race and gender replied:

“Well, I’ve always been interested in how people can live in close proximity, share experiences, even within a family and yet draw very different conclusions from the experience. So when I began reading the French philosopher M. Merleau-Ponty’s “Phenomenology of Perception,” I really appreciated his care and attention to how this phenomenon can occur. Because an experience is not directly drawn from the empirical circumstances; it is also structured by the accumulated history and aspirations of each of the subjects undergoing the experience, Merleau-Ponty’s work helps to systematically understand how one can share an experience, and yet still take away different conclusions.”<sup>12,13</sup>

And that experience isn't immediately or all consciously present. At the societal level of cultural evolution and change, Paul Wilson in TNR writes about Vaclav Havel, the novelist and politician, that

“...he came to see art, and drama in particular, as one of the chief instruments by which a society becomes aware of itself and thus becomes capable of change.”<sup>14</sup>

Rarely do design workshops have their clients lie down in coffins to tell their stories. But it is common to take stakeholder groups through a series of tailored exercises that help them vivify and reify their interests, intentions, hopes and ideals. Relevant experience, in spite of what the language turners would have us believe, rarely comes tidally packaged in paragraphs of integrated discourse. And so design workshops feature all manner of techniques to surface and showcase frames of experience and points of view. These can take the form of everything from snow cards to briefs to anecdotes, to manifestos to roll playing to diagrams, drawings, photos and conceptual models depending on the makeup and needs of the people involved.

Not all significant situations that are ripe for adaptive resolutions are, like the novelistic example, personal survival situations, or on the scale of social change in the Czech Republic. Most are well below the societal project level of climate change, regime change, nuclear winter, overpopulation or the “forgetfulness of being.” Most, that require some form of professional designing, have to do with the mid-level life support and enhancement situations of an evolving culture.

But there is a gap in the needs and tools of design thinking to fully engage all scales of emergent socio-cultural problems. The empirical paradigm is firmly established and offers solid support. Missing or underweighted are the representations of what it is that people believe and care about, their owned and intimate knowledge, and how this effects their perceptions, actions, preferences and choices. What seems clearly needed now is a more focused attention on how it is and why it is that situations are significant, what it is that adds up to give them meaning, and the further development of a late modern design thinking partnership that help designers further actualize the underrepresented qualitative dimensions of being in the world.

Late modern philosophers have seen this as an epistemological Armageddon, a clash of realities, the new ways of thinking about being in the world invalidating the old. Rorty, for example, says of science: "I tend to view natural science as in the business of controlling and predicting things, and as largely useless for philosophical purposes." And that science is good “exactly in so far as scientific practice has succeeded in establishing institutions conducive to a democratic exchange of view.”

But late modern design thinking need not enter into philosophy's epistemological wars and can pragmatically employ the fruits of its expansive thinking about knowledge, truth and freedom. Knowing in late modern design thinking is being invited to step beyond being divided into apples vs. oranges to become apples and apples, of the kind that Yeats described, when apples are more than one:

The silver apples of the moon  
The golden apples of the sun.<sup>15</sup>

Jerry Diethelm - April 2015

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