

When Kyle Cornforth first walked into IDEO's San Francisco offices in 2011, she felt she had entered a whole new world. At the time, Cornforth was a director at the Edible Schoolyard Project, a nonprofit that uses gardening and cooking in schools to teach and to provide nutritious food. She was there to meet with IDEO.org, a new social-impact spinoff of the design consulting firm, which was exploring how to reimagine school lunch, a mission that the Edible Schoolyard Project has been working toward since 2004. But Cornforth was new to IDEO's way of working: a six-step methodology for innovation called design thinking, which had emerged in the 1990s but had started reaching the height of its popularity in the tech, business, and social-impact sectors.

Key to design thinking's spread was its replicable aesthetic, represented by the Post-it note: a humble square that anyone can use in infinite ways. Not too precious, not too permanent, the ubiquitous Post-it promises a fast-moving, cooperative, egalitarian process for getting things done. When Cornforth arrived at IDEO for a workshop, "it was Post-its everywhere, prototypes everywhere," she says. "What I really liked was that they offered a framework for collaboration and creation."

But when she looked at the ideas themselves, Cornforth had questions: "I was like, 'You didn't talk to anyone who works in a school, did you?' They were not contextualized in the problem at all." The deep expertise in the communities of educators and administrators she worked with, Cornforth saw, was in tension with the disruptive, startup-flavored creativity of the design thinking process at consultancies like IDEO.org. "I felt like a stick in the mud to them," she recalls. "And I felt they were out of touch with reality."

That tension would resurface a couple of years later, in 2013, when IDEO was hired by the San Francisco Unified School District to redesign the school cafeteria, with funding from Twitter cofounder Ev Williams's family foundation. Ten years on, the SFUSD program has had a big

impact—but that may have as much to do with the slow and integrated work inside the district as with that first push of design-focused energy from outside.

Founded in the 1990s, IDEO was instrumental in evangelizing the design thinking process throughout the '00s and '10s, alongside Stanford's Hasso Plattner Institute of Design or "d.school" (which IDEO's founder David Kelley also cofounded). While the methodology's focus on collaboration and research can be traced back to human-factors engineering, a movement popular decades earlier, design thinking took hold of the collective imagination during the Obama years, a time when American culture was riding high on the potential of a bunch of smart people in a hope-filled room to bend history's arc toward progress. Its influence stretched across health-care giants in the American heartland, government agencies in DC, big tech companies in Silicon Valley, and beyond. City governments brought in design thinking agencies to solve their economic woes and take on challenges ranging from transportation to housing. Institutions like MIT and Harvard and boot camps like General Assembly stood up courses and degree programs, suggesting that teaching design thinking could be as lucrative as selling it to corporations and foundations.

Design thinking also broadened the very idea of "design," elevating the designer to a kind of spiritual medium who didn't just construct spaces, physical products, or experiences on screen but was uniquely able to reinvent systems to better meet the desires of the people within them. It gave designers permission to take on any big, knotty problem by applying their own empathy to users' pain points—the first step in that six-step innovation process filled with Post-its.

The next steps were to reframe the problem ("How might we...?"), brainstorm potential solutions, prototype options, test those options with end users, and—finally—implement. Design thinking agencies usually didn't take on this last step themselves; consultants often delivered a set of "recommendations" to the organizations that hired them.

At the same time, consultancies like IDEO, Frog, Smart Design, and others were also promoting the idea that anyone (including the executives paying their fees) could be a designer by just following the process. Perhaps design had become "too important to leave to designers," as IDEO's then CEO, Tim Brown, wrote in his 2009 book *Change by Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation*. Brown even touted as a selling point his firm's utter absence of expertise in any particular industry: "We come with what we call a beginner's mind," he told the Yale School of Management.

This was a savvy strategy for selling design thinking to the business world: instead of hiring their own team of design professionals, companies could bring on an agency temporarily to learn the methodology themselves. The approach also felt empowering to many who spent time with it. We are all creatives, design thinking promised, and we can solve any problem if we empathize hard enough.

But in recent years, for a number of reasons, the shine of design thinking has been wearing off. Critics have argued that its short-term focus on novel and naive ideas has resulted in unrealistic and ungrounded recommendations. And they have maintained that by centering designers—mainly practitioners of corporate design within agencies—it has reinforced existing inequities rather than challenging them. Years in, "innovation theater"—checking a series of boxes without implementing meaningful shifts—had become endemic in corporate settings, while a number of social-impact initiatives highlighted in case studies struggled to get beyond pilot projects. Meanwhile, the #MeToo and BLM movements, along with the political turmoil of the Trump administration, have demonstrated that many big problems are rooted in centuries of dark history, too deeply entrenched to be obliterated with a touch of design thinking's magic wand.

Today, innovation agencies and educational institutions still continue to sell design thinking to individuals, corporations, and organizations. In 2015, IDEO even created



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its own “online school,” IDEO U, with a bank of design thinking courses. But some groups—including the d.school and IDEO itself—are working to reform both its principles and its methodologies. These new efforts seek a set of design tools capable of equitably serving diverse communities and solving diverse problems well into the future. It’s a much more daunting—and crucial—task than design thinking’s original remit.

The magical promise of design thinking

When design thinking emerged in the ’90s and ’00s, workplaces were made up of cubicles and closed doors, and the term “user experience” had only just been coined at Apple. Despite convincing research on collaboration tracing back to the 1960s, work was still mainly a solo endeavor in many industries, including design. Design thinking injected new and collaborative energy into both design and the corporate world more broadly; it suggested that work could look and feel more hopeful and be more fun, and that design could take the lead in making it that way.

When author and startup advisor Jake Knapp was working as a designer at Microsoft in the 2000s, he visited IDEO’s offices in Palo Alto for a potential project. He was struck by how inspiring the space was: “Everything is white, and there’s sunlight coming in the windows. There’s an open floor plan. I had never seen [work] done like that.” When he started at Google a few years later, he learned how to run design thinking workshops from a colleague who had worked at IDEO, and then he began running his own workshops on the approach within Google.

Knapp’s attraction was due in part to the “radical collaboration” that design thinking espoused. In what was a first for many, colleagues came together across disciplines at the very start of a project to discuss how to solve problems. “Facilitating the exchange of information, ideas, and research with product, engineering, and design teams more fluidly is really the unlock,” says Enrique Allen, cofounder of Designer Fund, which supports startups seeking to harness