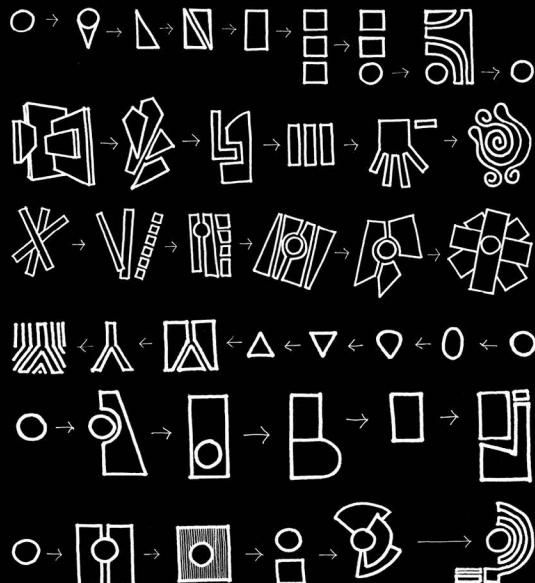


## INTERIOR DESIGN CONCEPT

Critical Practices, Processes and Explorations  
in Interior Architecture and Design



NATALIE BADENDUCK

# Interior Design Concept

*Interior Design Concept* combines a comprehensive introduction to design concept, with a reflective examination upon the various ways it can be understood, harnessed, and implemented.

Within interior architecture and design, the power of conceptual thinking to fuel creativity, innovation, and collaboration is evident in the use of design concept. Broadly accepted as an essential component in the design process, design concept is a notoriously elusive topic which has, until now, received little critical attention. This book offers a reevaluation of current academic ideas about design methodologies and the nature of inspiration, alongside brand-new data from an international research study to help clarify what creativity really means in the modern world. Topics addressed throughout this text will examine the functions and definitions of design concept, analyze how it may be identified and integrated within the design process, investigate from where ideas for design concepts can emerge and, lastly, consider how ideas about them might be communicated in various ways.

This book offers students, educators, and practitioners a concise explanation of what design concept is, why it plays such an integral role in the design process, and how it is utilized by interior architects and designers.

**Natalie Badenduck** is an Associate Professor of Interior Design at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Canada. She is a design educator and researcher who has worked with students in Toronto, New York, London, Glasgow, and Berlin. Her previous professional experiences include work in landscape architecture, interior and lighting design, public art, and architecture.



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# Contents

Preface and Acknowledgements	vi
Introduction	1
1 Functions of Design Concepts: Why Do Designers Use Design Concepts?	5
2 The Definitions of Design Concept: What Is a Design Concept?	30
3 The Identification of Design Concepts: Are There Different Types of Design Concepts?	67
4 Integration of Design Concepts in the Design Process: What Is the Design Process and How Might It Shape, and Be Shaped by, Design Concepts?	91
5 Generation of Design Concepts: Where Do Ideas for Design Concepts Come From?	121
6 Communication of Design Concepts: How Do Designers Communicate Conceptual Ideas?	159
Conclusion	194
Index	197

# Preface and Acknowledgements

Interior architects and designers affect the environments in which we exist every day, influencing our behaviour, relationships, and experiences. One important and often misunderstood aspect of the work of these individuals is their use of *design concept*, a notoriously elusive topic which has, until now, received little critical attention. My hypothesis is that one of the likely reasons for this might well be due to the broad, abstract nature of the term itself, which makes it especially challenging to define and, indeed, *confine* to a single research project (or book!). In an attempt to shed light on the topic, I devised a research study that would involve not only the review and integration of design-related literature, but would also seek to gain a better understanding of how design concept is defined, perceived, and utilized by an international group of interior design students, educators, and practitioners.

For this investigation, I organized and undertook a mixed-methods qualitative research study. This involved the collection of primary data in five cities – Toronto, New York, London, Glasgow, and Berlin – and within seven institutions – Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University), Parsons School of Design at The New School, FIT (Fashion Institute of Technology), London Metropolitan University, Royal College of Art, Glasgow School of Art, and Berlin International University of Applied Sciences – between September 2019 and March 2020. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with educators (12) and practitioners (13) and an online survey was completed by students (101) in each of these five locations. All primary data was then subjected to thematic analysis with

resultant findings informing the structure and content of this book. With specific regard to the integration of research within the subsequent text, it should be noted that the use of terms such as “this research,” “this study,” “research participants,” and the like all relate to these investigations and individuals.

The analysis of primary data and review of design-related literature revealed an array of complex understandings relating to design concept that extend well beyond the often cursory explanations found within recent publications on the subject. I have thus made every attempt to synthesize feedback from research participants with content from the larger, existing body of knowledge in an effort to provide a thorough account of the topic. Given that these disciplines are largely oriented around the construction of physical environments, the reader will come to notice that precedent projects are frequently referenced throughout the text in order to reinforce ideas presented in each section. Such projects are largely drawn from online competition sites, including those facilitated by Dezeen,<sup>1</sup> FRAME,<sup>2</sup> or the Aga Khan Development Network,<sup>3</sup> in which projects are reviewed and assessed by juries of design professionals. This method of selecting long-listed, short-listed, or award-winning precedents assumes some measure of perceived quality – however subjective – and suggests that such projects may serve as useful examples to illustrate the value of conceptual integration.

The vast majority of precedent descriptions outlined in this book rely upon content from these award sites or from those of the architects and designers behind individual projects. With this comes the necessary recognition that projects are often described in different ways for different audiences and that the use of these (sometimes rather brief) project descriptions undoubtedly fail to reflect the full depth of thought or development behind these hypothetical or built projects. It is assumed, however, that they do reflect the most essential ideas and concepts that each designer or team wished to convey, thus providing a means for analyzing how design concepts are integrated in the practice of interior architecture and design.

Another important aspect to highlight, both with respect to this book and the research that came prominently to inform it, is that they reflect

viewpoints that have been significantly and influentially shaped by Western intellectual, educational, and design traditions. This is plainly evident in the locations where this research was conducted – Canada, the USA, the United Kingdom, and Germany – and also in the literature that has been largely drawn from English language sources written by Western authors. Furthermore, my background as a white Canadian woman who has spent the vast majority of her life in the Global North – including all of my years in education and design practice – inevitably shapes my work and perspectives. Although I initially hoped to approach this research with the intention of expanding awareness about design concepts – including an attempt to integrate content, precedents, and insights from global sources – I would like to openly acknowledge, at this early stage, my limitations in fully understanding, recognizing, or adequately articulating ideas held by those with different cultural backgrounds or worldviews. As “design” is something practiced everywhere in the world, it is hoped that further research into the role of conceptual thinking beyond the largely Western perspectives presented in this text may be undertaken by other investigators and afford a more expansive understanding of the topic in the future.

This book would not have been possible without the support of many different people. I would like to extend my appreciation to those individuals at each of the seven universities who helped facilitate this research and to all of the faculty members who so warmly welcomed me into their departments during my month-long visits with them. It was a truly enriching experience to be able to witness such diverse, critical approaches to design pedagogy and to take part in the countless thought-provoking conversations in your offices, studios, and local pubs. Thank you all for your generosity in sharing your thoughts, insights, and experiences. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the students and design practitioners who participated in this study, affording me the opportunity to capture your perspectives and consequently provide a more complete explanation of design concepts. In addition to those directly involved with my research visits, I would like to express my appreciation to all those individuals who took the time to discuss my research plans or subsequent findings – from the brainstorming of initial research approaches, to the review of preliminary sketches of this book and the sample chapters along the way. Please

know that your insights, criticisms, and suggestions were of paramount importance in this book coming to fruition and it is all the better for it. Lastly, thank you to Routledge for recognizing the potential value of this project and for supporting the publication of texts which contribute to the growing body of knowledge within interior architecture and design.

## Notes

- 1 “Dezeen Awards,” Dezeen, accessed May 11, 2022, [www.dezeen.com/awards/](http://www.dezeen.com/awards/).
- 2 “About the Frame Awards,” accessed May 11, 2022, [www.frameweb.com/about-frame-awards](http://www.frameweb.com/about-frame-awards).
- 3 “Aga Khan Award for Architecture | Aga Khan Development Network,” accessed May 11, 2022, [www.akdn.org/architecture](http://www.akdn.org/architecture).

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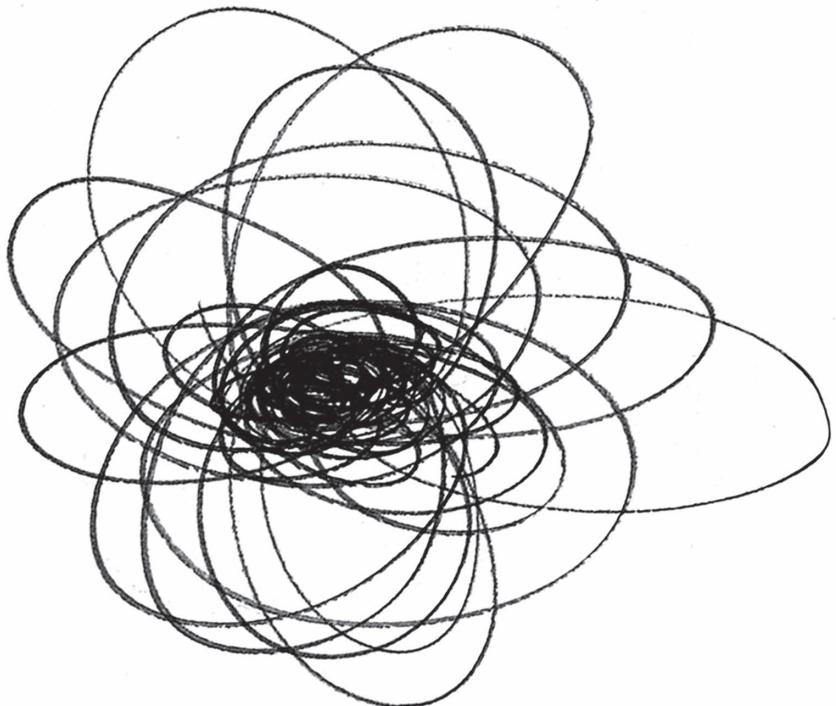
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## Introduction

Conceptual thinking is at the heart of many creative practices. Within interior architecture and design, the use of *design concept* powerfully suggests that conceptual thinking is an intimate and essential component that is often associated with innovation and creativity. Design concept is absolutely central to the education and practice of interior architecture and design and is something which designers often find themselves heavily reliant upon. Their ability to be original and imaginative, to generate unique and cohesive design responses, and also to communicate these all stem from a dependence upon conceptual thinking. Even if designers might individually choose not to employ such concepts, they will still be extremely familiar with them given their all-pervasive nature within the education and practice of interior designers. However, despite this integral role played by design concepts, there remains a great deal of confusion, uncertainty, and misunderstanding surrounding them.

This book directly addresses these problems. It offers an in-depth examination of the subject matter and draws upon existing literature pertaining to creative processes and design methodologies, as well as original data collected from an international group of students, educators, and practitioners. Topics addressed throughout this text will examine the functions and definitions of design concept, analyze how it may be identified and integrated within the design process, investigate from where ideas for design concepts can emerge and, lastly, consider how ideas about them might be communicated in various ways. Whether reading the book in its entirety or referring to individual sections for more in-depth information, one hopes that the reader will gain clarity about the material covered and that it will allow them to identify, develop, and refine their own perspectives on important questions in design today.

Chapter 1 offers an introductory discussion of design concepts and explores the many functions they serve within creative practices. These include their ability to imbue projects with greater *depth and meaning*, how they can be used to support *innovation*, channel *inspiration and creativity*, and to guide *decision-making*, how they can help people design with *intentionality* and promote *cohesion and focus*, as well as their capacity to enhance *communication* and foster *collaboration*. This chapter also addresses some criticisms of design concepts through a consideration of the most frequently raised issues associated with them. Namely, their

tendency to be *reductive and superficial*, their potential to stymie creative exploration due to the establishment of *restrictive and limiting* frameworks, their lack of responsiveness to context and existing problems resulting in *disconnected and abstract approaches*, and their exaltation of overly *intellectualized and individualized perspectives*.

Chapter 2 explores the myriad ways in which “design concept” can be understood and defined. This section includes an examination of existing definitions and introduces new “working” definitions as collectively expressed by an international group of interior design practitioners, educators, and students. These include *declarative definitions* that reflect understandings which are largely ideas-focused or description-based, and are introduced as *The Big Idea*, *The Nexus*, *The Alchemy*, and *The Story*. In contrast to these, *operational definitions* reflect process-oriented or action-based definitions of design concept and include the sub-categories of *The Stimulant*, *The Strategy*, *The Guide*, and *The Inquiry*.

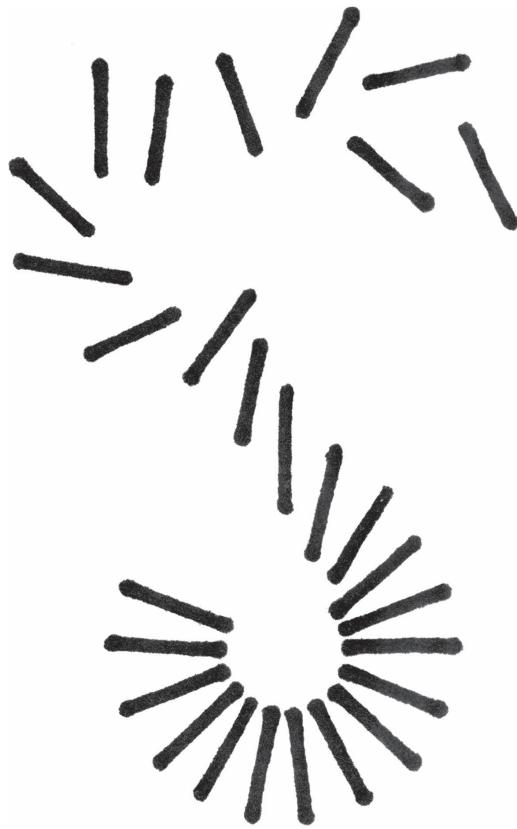
Chapter 3 acknowledges that not only are there many ways of understanding and defining design concept, there are also numerous ways in which they can be *identified*. This section aims to clarify the ways in which design concepts can shape the approach undertaken within projects and introduces an original framework that outlines five categories, or *Levels of Influence*. Each level within this framework – *Directed*, *Adaptive*, *Exploratory*, *Critical*, and *Speculative* – represents a respective ratio between the “conceptual thinking” and “execution” elements which are typically found within interior design projects.

Chapter 4 investigates the history and evolution of “the design process” and explores the ways in which design concepts can be both *informed by* and *influence* the design process through an examination of interactions between the two. This chapter introduces new design process diagrams that offer a broader range of potential approaches to the generation and application of design concepts, in an attempt to challenge previously held assumptions about both *how* and *when* they should be integrated into the design process. Written and diagrammatic descriptions outline the ways in which design concepts are clearly visible in *direct* processes, how they may *evolve* or *emerge* throughout the design process, or be combined and recoupled in countless ways through *compound* explorations.

Chapter 5 tackles the critical question – *from where do ideas for design concepts emerge?* Rather than offering a formulaic step-by-step guide for the generation of design concepts, this section acknowledges and embraces multiple sources of inspiration and approaches to concept development. This chapter also examines how design concepts can be generated *extrinsically* – from ideas that may initially appear disconnected or distant from the project itself but are then integrated through the reasoning, actions, and/or creations of the designer or team – and *intrinsically* – from ideas that emerge from within a project's context itself. Examples of how ideas may be generated from each are interwoven throughout this chapter. Lastly, *methods* of generating design concepts are also explored, including text-based, image-based, object-based, and hybrid strategies.

Chapter 6 aims to provide the reader with a sharper, deeper understanding of how various communication strategies can be utilized both to shape engagement with, and to advance explanation of, design concepts. This chapter explores various communication tools and techniques such as *visual* methods that involve the selection and curation of abstract and representational concept imagery as well as the creation of sketches, (parti) diagrams and drawings, *verbal* strategies that employ concept words, statements and narratives to relay ideas, and also *physical* approaches that utilize concept models and found or created objects to express design intentions. Additionally, there is an investigation into how *materials* can be used to convey visual, tactile, acoustic, or olfactory qualities through their selection and combination in material or “mood” boards as well as *hybrid* methodologies that judiciously integrate various tools and techniques.

In summary, this book strives to be a helpful, accessible guide for students, educators, and practitioners alike. It embraces a wide range of design perspectives as it seeks to ensure readers are neither overwhelmed with technical language nor left on their own to try and deepen their understanding and engagement with design concepts. It also hopes to serve as a springboard for conversation and collaboration about the ideas that shape our world as interior designers. This book ultimately seeks to provide a comprehensive and practical introduction to this often-confusing topic and to offer an explanation of *what* design concept is, *why* it plays such an integral role in the design process, and *how* it is utilized by interior designers.



1

## Functions of Design Concepts

Why Do Designers Use Design Concepts?

Design concepts are regularly discussed and utilized in the education and practice of interior design. This is largely owing to the fact that their integration within design processes has become broadly accepted and thus deeply ingrained within the discipline itself. This chapter will provide an introduction to design concepts by exploring the many functions they serve within creative practices, including: their ability to imbue projects with greater *depth and meaning*; the ways in which they help to channel *inspiration* and support *innovation and creativity*; how they can be utilized to design with *intentionality* and promote *cohesion and focus*; their ability to guide *decision-making*; and their capacity to enhance *communication* and foster *collaboration*.

Although design concepts may serve numerous functions within design processes, and are thus favorably viewed by many students, educators, and practitioners, it should be noted that they are by no means wholly embraced within the discipline. The latter half of this chapter will address criticisms of design concepts through a consideration of the most frequently raised condemnations of them, namely: their tendency to be *reductive and superficial*; their potential to forestall creative exploration due to the establishment of *restrictive and limiting* frameworks; their lack of responsiveness to existing problems and contexts revealed in *disconnected and abstract* approaches; and their exaltation of *overly intellectualized and individualized* perspectives. Such explanations aim to provide a balanced introduction to design concepts and offer insight into the ways in which they are perceived and utilized by designers.

## Depth and Meaning

Interior design has a profound impact on people's lives, influencing their behaviors, relationships, and experiences. Rather than simply addressing posed problems with clear-cut solutions, designers deeply contemplate an immeasurable range of factors in order to identify those that will advantageously guide project development. Such examinations result in a more complete understanding of design problems and afford designers the ability to move beyond simply meeting basic requirements. As stated by Ian Higgins in *Spatial Strategies for Interior Design* "[a] good interior will deliver



**Figure 1.2** Depth, meaning, and “going beyond.”

more than a straightforward practical solution and, to this end, an interior design project will often be driven by a big idea that is called ‘the concept’.<sup>1</sup>

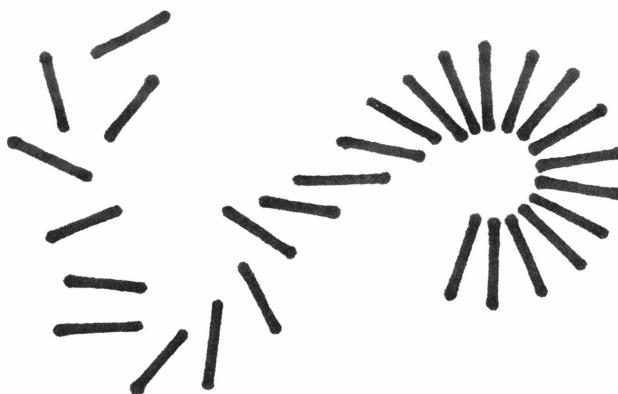
Many research participants observed that design concepts can lead to more thoughtful and meaningful outcomes, with an additional value beyond those provided by purely practical solutions. One design practitioner acknowledged that while many projects are designed solely to meet functional requirements, they “are never quite as good if there is no underlying concept. I think you can always feel it.”<sup>2</sup> Another London-based educator attested that designs lacking adequate conceptual foundations fail to “take the project[s] to another level, another place” and that although a project “may never *look* different, it may never *be* particularly different, or it may look ugly, it has that *value* underneath it, which is really important.”<sup>3</sup> The significance and *value* of conceptual integration is outlined by Stephanie Travis in her article “Conceptual Thinking: The Design Concept in Interior Design Education,” in which she describes that “[i]t is evident that without a strong concept, an interior design project becomes a space-planning exercise that includes the selection of materials and finishes.”<sup>4</sup> Such views reflect how design concepts are perceived as central, defining aspects of

interiors practice and that without them, the discipline risks becoming a purely superficial or aesthetic exercise.

Concepts may be utilized to fuel design inquiry, enabling designers to examine problems more critically and develop suitably responsive solutions. The various ways in which design concepts encourage thoughtful, contemplative ways of working were raised by a number of research participants. One Berlin-based educator described that “[a]s much as I believe in just drawing or producing stuff I also think that *thinking* about what you do, and conceptualizing is really helpful.”<sup>5</sup> As such, another function of design concepts is that they not only support a deeper examination of problems but also afford reflections upon the approaches utilized in solving them. Such consideration of individual processes and ways of working may be especially beneficial for students and novice designers to help gain a better understanding of their own practices. Many educators expressed this desire, with one stating that “I want the students to be able to understand what they do and why they do it. And for that, I think design concept – whether it’s done strategically or retrospectively, or however it comes about – I think it’s crucial.”<sup>6</sup> Viewpoints such as these reveal the ability for concepts to foster both a deeper understanding of problems and a greater command of creative practices with the potential to impact the design of interior spaces in profound ways.

## **Inspiration, Creativity, and Innovation**

Inspiration and creativity are notoriously inexplicable forces about which relatively little is definitively known. Despite this lack of a comprehensive understanding, it is viewed as essential by – and for – interior designers who require the ability to “produce, play with, merge, synthesize, and evaluate” ideas and also to innovate and create original solutions.<sup>7</sup> Design concepts are frequently recognized as instruments for channeling inspiration and stimulating creativity, with one practitioner succinctly stating that “I don’t think innovation is possible without a concept.”<sup>8</sup> This perspective reveals one of the reasons why concepts are so widely utilized within individual projects but also suggests the potential for conceptual thinking



**Figure 1.3** Inspiration, creativity, and innovation.

to have a much broader impact. Similar to conceptual artist Sol Lewitt's pronouncement that "[t]he conventions of art are altered by works of art,"<sup>9</sup> one can imagine how interior architects and designers may be able to re-conceptualize the defining processes, practices, and conventions of the discipline in order to alter its future trajectory.

Design concepts may be so readily associated with creativity due to their integration of imaginative and analytical modes of thinking from the initial phases of a design process. In this sense, right from the early stages of a project, concepts are used to take a broad view of a project's contexts in order to facilitate open explorations of potential design approaches while also integrating inputs about specific functional or programmatic requirements. This combination of what contemporary creativity researchers term "divergent" thinking ("that moves away in diverging directions so as to involve a variety of aspects and which sometimes lead to novel ideas and solutions")<sup>10</sup> and "convergent" thinking ("that brings together information [focused] on solving a problem")<sup>11</sup> can jointly facilitate the development of a wide array of potential solutions and critical analysis and exploration of them.<sup>12</sup> As such, design concepts may be utilized to capture and harness initial ideas, inklings, or inspirations via a process that encourages and supports innovation and creativity.

It should be noted that conversations about creativity are usually culturally specific. As described in *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Creativity*, "[r]epresentatives of various societies understand creativity in a variety of

ways, depending on cultural and historical background.”<sup>13</sup> Associations with creativity as something being possessed and exercised by lone individuals are especially evident in Western societies “with a predominance of individualistic values . . . dominated by the cult of novelty and the aspiration to self-expression.”<sup>14</sup> In contrast, “Eastern cultures underline the important role of skills, abilities, knowledge and appropriate techniques to achieve perfection.”<sup>15</sup> As this book is written within a Western educational and design tradition, it becomes clear why creativity is valued so highly and how this might impact perceptions of its centrality within the discipline of interior design. Although this lies beyond the scope of this text, it is worthwhile to reflect upon the ways in which cultural understandings of innovation and creativity vary and how such views may consequently impact design practices in different parts of the world.

### **Intentionality, Cohesion, and Focus**

It is generally accepted that the act of designing at “all levels of expertise implies having an intention.”<sup>16</sup> This understanding closely aligns with frequently cited views regarding the function of design concepts; namely, that they can be valuably employed to determine project intentions, establish objectives, and promote a sense of cohesion and focus. The process of defining conceptual directions involves the exploration of countless design approaches in order to select those which address the needs of a given project most effectively. As such, design concepts may be thought of as instruments for whittling down the vast number of potential solutions to a rather more manageable figure. Elise van Dooren describes this phenomenon in *Anchoring the Design Process*, in which she states that “[d]esigning is exploring and deciding within a potentially endless number of possibilities, to come up, in the end, with an internally coherent whole.”<sup>17</sup> This ability to provide a sense of cohesion within projects is one of the primary reasons that design concepts are utilized by interior designers.

This sentiment was also reflected by many educators and practitioners, including one faculty member who said that: “[i]t’s kind of understanding that many issues can be responded to in a number of ways and as a way



**Figure 1.4** Intentionality, cohesion, and focus.

to synthesize and focus – an approach, an idea, or in a larger sense a concept, would help you to do that.”<sup>18</sup> This perspective was also voiced by participants who described the ways in which design concepts help guide their processes, organize their thoughts, and clarify intentions, including one practitioner who stated that:

I start to base all of our decisions based off the concepts, which helps to narrow things down. When you have a problem and you need a solution there are usually like five or six, or 100 solutions. But if you have a concept, then you can always say which solution fits the idea that we’re working with. And it makes it much easier to decide. And so sometimes when we’re floundering around, stuck on a problem, we sit down and we talk about, okay, what is the concept of this project?<sup>19</sup>

Concept development that centers on primary ideas or driving intentions can also prove especially helpful for students and novice designers who may feel overwhelmed by the vast array of potential outcomes laid before them. In such cases, the process of generating design concepts can help

to alleviate the pressure to explore and integrate *any* and *all* potential solutions within a single project. Instead, design concepts may offer:

some idea of purity or things that go together and I think students often think that they have to do *everything* in one project. And to understand that a concept helps us to kind of stay focused, and you can save those other ideas for something else . . . I think what's really helpful in terms of "big idea" or concept is it keeps them on track.<sup>20</sup>

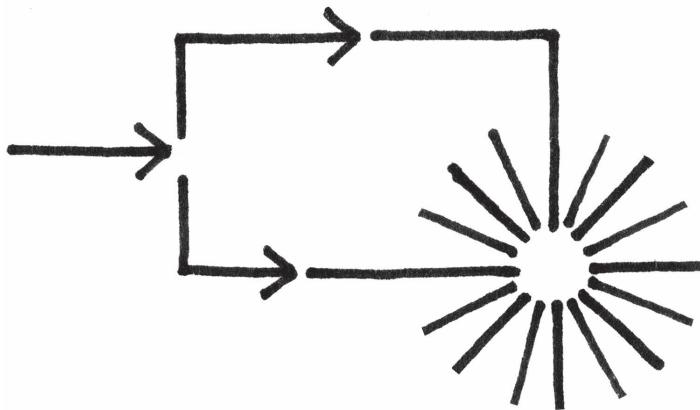
This perception that design concepts help ideas, strategies, and approaches to align with one another within project work was repeatedly expressed by many research participants. The majority of these individuals acknowledged that while it is possible to work creatively without design concepts, such projects risk becoming random agglomerations of ideas guided by personal taste or individual preference. This was described by one practitioner, as follows:

I think that [design concept] makes the project simpler, but more complex at the same time and the end result becomes much richer, because you're not just picking things randomly. It's not a Pinterest exercise – "oh, I quite like this" and "I quite like that" and "I'll put that" and "I'll put that" – just like assembling your favorite spaces that you've seen recently. It's answering back to a big idea. And you have to frame that first.<sup>21</sup>

It is thus evident that design concepts are regularly utilized to guide project development through the process of determining intentions in a way that focuses design approaches and results in more cohesive interior projects.

## Decision-Making

Design concepts may lead to the creation of more meaningful, innovative, and united interior environments but underlying each of these is the necessity to make decisions aligned with project aims. Consequently,



**Figure 1.5** Decision-making.

decision-making is one of the most important and commonly cited reasons for utilizing design concepts, with practitioners, educators, and students alike all describing the value of them in this respect. One practitioner indicated that although a concept “might be less or more fluid, I think it’s *the thing* that you use to make decisions.”<sup>22</sup> Another faculty member commented that:

If you figure out your concept you realize you don’t have to make any decisions. The concept will guide you, and things will fall together. If the concept is strong enough and you understand what your concept is then all your decisions are resolved.<sup>23</sup>

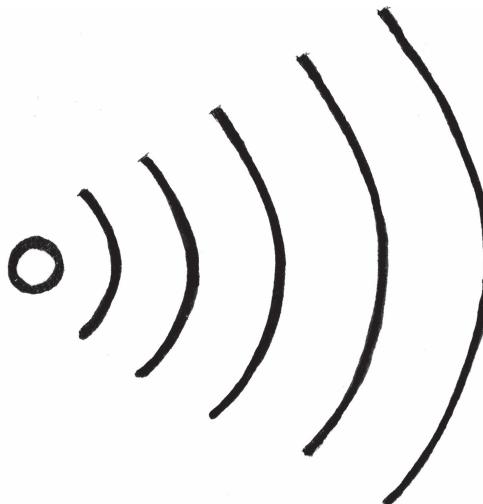
Such perspectives are also reinforced in Travis’s article in which she concisely states that “[m]ost importantly, it guides the decisions made in the design of the project.”<sup>24</sup> Evidently, design concepts can be valuably employed to assist in navigating the vast range of problems to be identified and solved throughout the design process.

The ways in which designers approach complex problems is documented by design researcher Jane Darke in her article “The Primary Generator and the Design Process.”<sup>25</sup> With specific reference to problem solving, Darke explains that designers often “find a way of reducing

the variety of potential solutions . . . to a small class of solutions that is cognitively manageable. To do this, they fix on a particular objective or small group of objectives, usually strongly valued and self-imposed.”<sup>26</sup> Here, one can see how design concepts, when thought of as “small groups of objectives,” may aid decision-making through the structuring of ideas and establishment of priorities. Such approaches might prove helpful in addressing multifarious problems but may also prove especially valuable in situations where problems are less clearly defined, or are yet to be identified. In such cases, designers often develop “strategies for augmenting insufficient problems, even if they are not always conscious of doing so,” as described by academic Kennon M. Smith.<sup>27</sup> Design cognition researchers also acknowledge the need for an additional structuring of ill-defined problems, including Grietjie Haupt who explains that:

In order to structure a design problem by redefining it, designers typically frame a problematic design situation by setting its boundaries, selecting particular elements involving people, objects, contexts and their relations for attention. In this way designers tend to impose coherence on the problem space that guides subsequent problem solving activities.<sup>28</sup>

The ability for design concepts to define boundaries, set priorities, and focus attention all result in frameworks that help shape design processes and inform decisions at various junctures along the way. This assistance to the decision-making process is especially noteworthy as concepts are often misperceived as tools that only have value for initial, “conceptual” design decisions. However, in reality, many research participants described design concepts as valuable *precisely* because of their ability to support decision-making throughout the lifespan of a project. In this sense, they may serve as reference points or places to return to when one is unsure of decisions or directions to take, something encapsulated by one practitioner who commented that a concept can provide “a framework for moving forward or for making other decisions as the process goes along.”<sup>29</sup> Clearly, design concepts can be utilized in various ways throughout the



**Figure 1.6** Communication.

design process – from space planning through to material selection and detailing—as well as with another pivotal component of design development—communicating and working with others.

## Communication

Another function of design concepts, which tended to be discussed only briefly in design literature but was more overtly commented upon in practitioner and faculty interviews, is that concepts facilitate communication. In order to manage the execution of projects, coordinate teams, or even merely to convey and promote ideas, designers require the ability to communicate clearly. As such, design concepts are regularly employed to frame discussions – particularly during the initial stages of a project. Part of this is due to the cohesion they instill within projects that can subsequently support the development of communication strategies. Such tactics often help relay intentions and approaches more smoothly as well as provide the opportunity for stakeholders to be more invested in the design process,

as a result of having a deeper and clearer understanding of it. This increased engagement with clients was described by one Toronto-based practitioner, who reflected upon the ways in which design concepts alter communication:

You're able to have, I think, more informed discussions with the client around why you've made the decisions you've made and why they are the best decisions for the goals and objectives we're trying to meet. It's the difference between defending, "well, I like red vs blue" versus showing the client why blue has the best intent for their goals that they're trying to achieve . . . And it's so much easier to defend something when it has a perspective and a strategy. Because when a client says, "I don't like that" it . . . You can sort of *elevate* the conversation beyond preferences to say, "well, this is why we did this, this is the result and this is how it reflects your objectives." It's a completely different discussion at that point. And so, the narrative really helps to enhance the sort of client management and I think really gives a very specific and focused point of view as to why we're making the design decisions that we are. And once you have buy in on that, clients just run with it.<sup>30</sup>

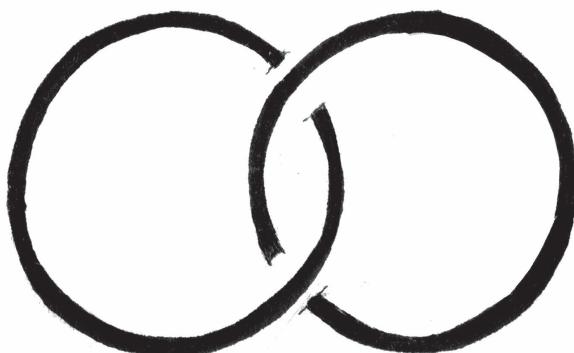
The necessity to convey ideas is outlined in *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Creativity* which acknowledges the essential role of communication – or *persuasion* to be more precise – in creative practices, describing that “it reflects the importance, in creativity, of not only being skilled at producing an outcome but also advocating for it, convincing others of its novelty and usefulness.”<sup>31</sup> Although not written with specific reference to design concepts, the importance of conveying and promoting ideas is equally pertinent in interiors. This is evident in external communications when designers seek to develop compelling and coherent narratives to pitch their ideas as well as with internal communications that require team members to come to shared, collective understandings of design approaches. This is especially valuable in interiors practice in which collaborators require clearly defined goals and objectives, as acknowledged by one Toronto-based practitioner:

I mean, in the built environment you're not talking about an art practice where a single practitioner has complete creative control over what's being done . . . you essentially have to hand your baby over to somebody else to actually realize the vision. . . . So you absolutely have to have something that you want everyone to understand and buy into because there are too many players to not have some kind of a plan.<sup>32</sup>

Design concepts are particularly well-suited for facilitating this kind of vital communication in that “enormously complex and sophisticated sets of ideas can be referred to using simple diagrams, catchphrases, or even single words.”<sup>33</sup> This ability for concepts to encapsulate and summarize ideas may well foster a greater understanding of project intentions, thereby enabling the promotion of potential solutions as well as more effective communication and collaboration.

## Collaboration

Interior design is a highly collaborative discipline shaped by teams with different backgrounds and specializations working towards common goals. In order to facilitate teamwork and clearly establish shared objectives,



**Figure 1.7** Collaboration.

designers regularly utilize design concepts. A significant advantage of employing concepts within collaborative projects is their ability to serve as touchstones that can be returned to throughout the design process by any member of a project team. This pragmatic aspect was described by one senior practitioner who stated:

It's important to have [a concept] because when you have a team of maybe five, seven people and they all need to execute different parts of a project they need something to be tethered to so that they don't go off and start either rethinking the idea or bringing solutions that don't necessarily enhance the design concept.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to the value they offer existing collaborators, concepts can also be helpfully relied upon as a means to integrate new members within project teams. This was raised by one studio director who emphasized the importance of clarifying concepts for the purposes of project management:

Because projects are really long-lived and nowadays your staff isn't as long-lived as the projects, it's *really crucial* that the very beginning phase is really well defined and really thought through, so that anybody can kind of go back and get a bit of an easy understanding of the *basis* of the project and the *soul* of it.<sup>35</sup>

The fact that design concepts are often valuable in supporting team member integration can also prove beneficial within educational settings, such as helping new instructors or guest critics familiarize themselves with projects in order to provide appropriate and relevant feedback. In general, collaborators with a shared understanding of design aims, intentions, and strategies will be better able to advance design ideas and consequently enhance the overall creative experience. By increasing the focus on collective design practices, an important transition is encouraged. This is elaborated upon in the article "Potential in Creativity: Individual, Social, Material Perspectives and a Dynamic Integrative Framework," which highlights the benefits of shifting away from typical notions of creativity, namely those

most often associated with the perceived qualities of individuals, and instead moving toward a more social model:

The social approach to creativity emphasizes the role of social interaction and communication within creative action. More than this, it postulates that creativity is, at all times, collaboration, given the fact that we do not only collaborate with others while creating something with them but also when building on the ideas and perspectives of other people as part of our own creative processes (including when alone). . . . As a consequence, the outcomes of creative work are considered, in fact, as co-creations, as they emerge out of exchanges between people rather than the activity of isolated minds.<sup>36</sup>

Communicating and collaborating with others remains embedded at the heart of the education and practice of interior design. In a discipline where students and practitioners are expected to be creative and innovative, and to regularly collaborate in order to achieve this, it is essential to consider the ways in which design concepts may facilitate such processes. This is one of the many reasons, as outlined in the chapter thus far, that design concepts are so pervasive within the discipline of interior design.

### Criticisms of Design Concept

While many consider design concepts as integral components of interiors practice, they are certainly not viewed in a universally favourable light. This is partially owing to the fact that concepts may be utilized, applied, and understood in vastly different ways, resulting in a multitude of opinions about them. Some individuals find themselves sitting squarely on one side of the debate or the other – grandly extolling the virtues of conceptual integration or firmly opposing the idea of it altogether. More often though, perceptions comprise a blend of attitudes and estimations that reflect the complex essential nature of design concepts themselves. An example of

this is embodied by one educator who expressed mixed views on the topic, stating that “in my teaching and in my approach, I think [design concept] is an amazing tool. But as with all tools it can lead you to the mountain or into the ditch, depending on what you do with it.”<sup>37</sup>

Criticisms of design concepts emerged in select interviews as part of this research study but are also evident in design-related literature. The majority of issues regarding design concepts fall into a handful of categories, with concerns most often raised about their *reductive and superficial* nature, their potentially *restrictive and limiting* qualities, their *disconnected and abstract* characteristics, and lastly their promotion of *overly intellectual and individualized* approaches.

### ***The Reductive, Superficial Nature of Design Concepts***

A common approach utilized in the generation of design concepts involves the whittling down of ideas in order to determine which are the most “essential.” This is often viewed as a necessary stage in the conceptual development process and one that leads to more cohesive and focused design approaches. However, this process also significantly risks sacrificing complexity and nuance due to the potential adoption of overly simplistic design considerations. Such concerns are central to the most commonly cited criticisms of design concepts – that they are limiting, reductive, and superficial. Similar apprehensions were raised by research participants who explained that design concepts may in fact hinder, rather than encourage, meaningful exploration and thus ultimately reduce the likelihood of achieving the most desirable design solutions. This perspective is also embodied in Randall Teal and Stephen Loo’s article “A Pedagogy of the Concept: Rereading the Architectural Convention through the Philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari,” in which the authors assert:

For students, [the] grounding [of concept] can be useful as it provides a way to think holistically about their design, tying together goals and intended effects in a communicable package. However,

this is the catch-22 of the concept in that, what it does well is to reduce or encapsulate in very limited ways – as shorthand, or catch phrases – the architectural potency of the work itself. At best, this quality makes concepts useful in providing clarity to both designer and client/critic. At worst, the concept becomes an actual obstacle to a full exploration, understanding and communication of the spatial, material, temporal and experiential aspects of a built environment; and most importantly, in its lowest form the concept becomes a self-limiting proposition, one that halts the generation of unanticipated and unanticipatable possibilities.<sup>38</sup>

Such criticisms draw attention to the necessity for designers to apply design concepts with thoughtful consideration and to be aware of the potentially detrimental impact of reductive approaches that risk oversimplifying complex problems. Such practices can inhibit nuanced creative development as areas of focus consequently become overly narrow, closing off the potential for deeper, more meaningful and contextually sensitive solutions to arise.

### ***The Restrictive and Limiting Nature of Design Concepts***

Additional criticisms of design concepts relate to their tendency to constrain exploration and stunt organic project development. This may result from an unquestioned reliance on design concepts and the requirement – perceived or actual – to develop and faithfully stick with them from the early stages of a design process. Such practices might thus ultimately *limit* creativity as designers become preoccupied with specific, pre-established ideas and fail to integrate new information in an adaptable, responsive manner as a process unfolds.

Insight into such approaches is offered by Terry Purcell and John S. Gero in their article “Design and Other Types of Fixation” which examines and identifies psychological tendencies of designers and specifically delves into their propensity to become “fixated” on particular ideas

or approaches. The term fixation is defined by the authors as a “premature commitment to a particular problem solution” that may result in a situation in which “the designer appears trapped by the characteristics of a possible solution that has been developed or an existing precedent solution.” Purcell and Gero continue in explaining that individuals may not only become fixated on perceived *solutions* but “particular set[s] of design decisions that the designer does not change.”<sup>39</sup> In such instances, the natural development and progression of approaches best suited to a given situation may be limited, potentially restricting the consideration of new possibilities.

Similar issues are raised in the article “Design Thinking: A Model Development Based on Archived Documents” by Abdullah Akpinar, Mengyuan Xu, and Kerry R. Brooks who reference the work of influential architectural historian and educator Colin Rowe and design researcher and educator Nigel Cross. Both Rowe and Cross discuss the challenges of a “blinkered approach” to design that may be taken by designers who “doggedly [press] on with a particular solution concept”<sup>40</sup> despite the fact that such ideas could very well foil effective problem solving. To this end, the authors highlight challenges directly relating to concerns raised by research participants about the ways in which an unyielding attachment to specific concepts may limit creative practices. The preoccupation with certain ideas may also prevent designers from being able to grasp the inadequacies of proposed schemes in an objective manner, such that “even when serious problems are encountered, a significant effort is devoted to make the initial idea work, instead of backtracking and adopting a fresh point of departure.”<sup>41</sup>

The loyal commitment to specific design concepts may provide a sense of stability or fixedness for designers seeking to anchor themselves within the notoriously complex and ever-changing realm of creative practice. However, such rigid determination risks limiting the natural progression of ideas that iteratively and organically build upon one another as one searches for solutions. In this sense, design concepts might almost be considered akin to “straitjackets” – an analogy used by a number of research participants – and thus can result in the truncation of responsive and natural project development.

### ***The Disconnected, Abstract Nature of Design Concepts***

Another frequent criticism of design concepts relates to their inherently abstract nature. For some, the process of generating concepts that are subsequently employed to guide design development risks creating projects that end up disconnected from the original problems they were intended to solve. In such cases, a design concept may result in “making a proposition look like a problem,”<sup>42</sup> by directing attention away from the problem’s existing contexts and refocusing it on more abstract constructs. For example, a team tasked with designing a car dealership may settle on a conceptual approach informed by seeking to reflect the experience of a road trip within the building’s interior – such as the integration of design elements and materials that imply a sense of movement or alternatively planning areas that can be perceived as “rest stops,” and so on. While this concept may be embraced by the client and also prove helpful to the design team in many ways, it can also introduce new problems to now be dealt with, potentially distracting or detracting from solving those pre-existing within the project itself. Designers following such concepts may thus, as Teal and Loo surmise, focus on solving their “invented” problems as opposed to those that are the most pressing in any given brief. In this sense, the *ideas* of a project may begin to eclipse identified needs or contextual realities in a harmful manner and may also result in concepts existing within the “superficial realms of justification, explanation, clarification and excuse.”<sup>43</sup>

### ***The Overly Intellectualized and Individualized Nature of Design Concept***

A final area of concern about design concepts relates to the overly intellectualized and individualized nature of them. Similar to apprehensions about their abstract qualities, criticisms about overly intellectualized approaches highlight the ways in which conceptual development may serve to distance designers from those for whom they are designing. As an intellectual exercise, “design” becomes differentiated from normal, everyday problem solving and can thus be considered substantially more complex

than that which an average layperson might reasonably be expected to understand. Consequently, nondesigners regularly exist on the fringes of design processes – if they are included at all – even when they are likely to be directly impacted by the outcomes. For some, design concepts represent classic illustrations of how intellectual design practices cater to the aspirations and whims of individuals – namely designers – while systematically excluding others from the process. The focus on intellectually robust or individually expressive designs is evident in many sectors of the interior design industry, as well as within other creative fields. While the full range of underlying causes for this are too numerous to be addressed comprehensively in this text, the modernist underpinnings of such approaches are worth briefly exploring at this juncture.

In the essay “Modernity and Design in the Arab World: Professional Identity and Social Responsibility,” Samer Akkach examines the history and evolution of conceptions of “design,” including an explanation of ways in which the Arab world came to shape European understandings about the topic. A crucial component of Akkach’s essay traces the demarcation between architecture and craft which – although originally conceptualized by Leon Battista Alberti in the 15th century – only became especially apparent in the 19th century.<sup>44</sup> This led to perceptions about the role of the architect shifting “from being a maker to becoming a thinker, from one for whom design is a way of life through making, to one for whom design is an intellectual commodity that can be exchanged through the transaction of ideas and meanings.”<sup>45</sup> Glenn Parsons similarly describes this transition in *The Philosophy of Design*, in which he explains that earlier notions of design as “embodied in the craftsman’s hands would instead be embodied in the Designer’s mind.”<sup>46</sup> The resultant chasm between “makers” and “thinkers” shaped by “systems of rationalization, specialization and division of labor that emerged in the industrial revolution”<sup>47</sup> was also furthered, according to Akkach, by architecture’s closer association with the arts. Thus, architectural design became more focused on the creation of novel, artistic expressions which over time came to be seen as superior to craft.<sup>48</sup> This division between craftspeople and designers and also the aspiration for design to be more closely aligned with the pursuits that prioritize creative expression reflect underlying uneasiness about the role of

conceptual approaches today. Although such criticisms are rarely specifically raised in relation to design's modernist antecedents, the foundations of the discipline are firmly rooted in this history.

The separation of design and craft, which resulted in design becoming increasingly removed from the contexts out of which it had formerly emerged, is also addressed in Akkach's essay. To illustrate, the evolution of this detachment traced through the etymology of the Arabic word for design that emerged alongside the formalization of modernist design pedagogies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>49</sup> According to Akkach, “[t]aşmīm came from the verb şammama which means ‘to decide firmly’, ‘to firm one’s mind’ and ‘to have an intent and conviction’ for completing a task and achieving an outcome.”<sup>50</sup> In many ways, one can see direct parallels to English definitions of design.<sup>51</sup> However, the root word of taşmīm provides perhaps the greatest insight into conceptualizations of design that emerged during this time period (and largely remain today as vestiges of modernism) – “[t]he root şamam, literally ‘deafness’, points, though indirectly, to the self-centred nature of designing as understood in the modern sense as a private act centred within the creative mind of the designer.”<sup>52</sup> This view of design as something disconnected from its social, cultural, or material contexts closely mirrors worries about the application of concepts within interiors practice and also reveals troubling frameworks within the very structure of the discipline itself.

The far-reaching consequence(s) of designers being so disconnected from the contexts within which they design cannot be overstated. At best, this may result in the creation of spaces that fail to comprehend or address challenges and requirements adequately. At worst, spaces are created with an utter disregard for the needs, knowledge, traditions and/or values of specific people and places, reinforcing social and spatial inequity. In this regard, Akkach challenges designers, particularly those based in the Western world where “[t]he issue of social responsibility . . . is now high on the profession’s agenda,” to “change their professional habits by moving away from seeing their design tasks as an act of self-realization.”<sup>53</sup> Consequently, this leads to a questioning and re-evaluation of not only the role of design concepts within design processes, but the processes themselves. Thus, it is extremely valuable for interior architects and designers to think about the ways

in which they practice, to consider how participatory, inclusive, or co-design processes may result in more inclusive projects, and lastly, to reflect on how such approaches may be used to reconceptualize the discipline.

## Conclusion

The functions of design concepts in the education and practice of interior design are wide-ranging and although concepts may serve many important functions, they are not universally accepted. Criticisms of design concepts reveal their complex nature and can lead to valuable reflection about their integration within design processes. Irrespective of whether individuals believe in the strength of design concepts or are instead more critical of their inclusion in design processes, what is undeniable is that design concepts are widely discussed and debated. This then leads to another question that is frequently raised within the discipline of interior design – *what exactly is a design concept?*

## Notes

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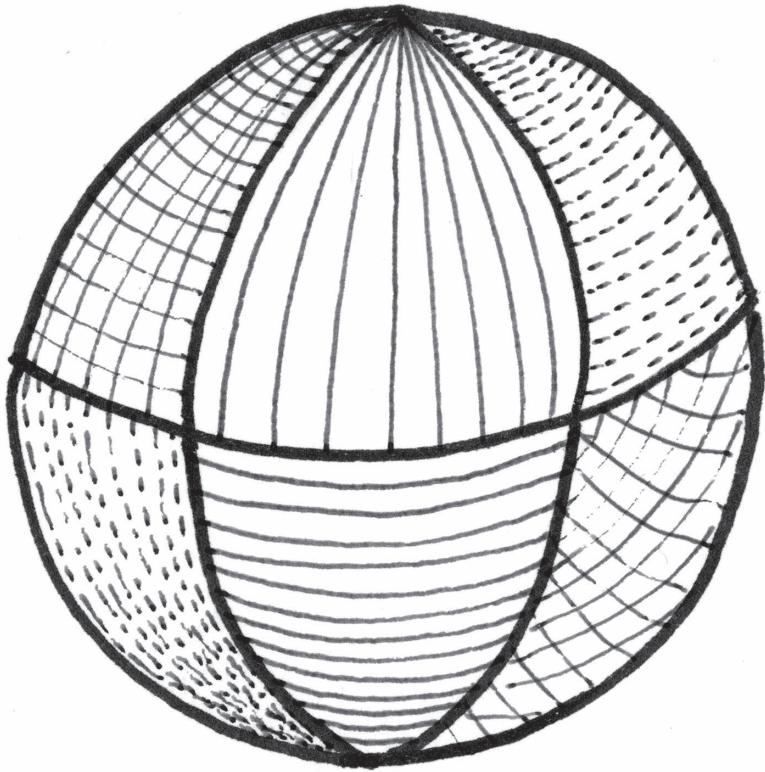
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- 12 Further information about the role of divergent and convergent thinking in creative design practices can be found in Chapter 4: "Integration of Design Concepts in the Design Process."
- 13 Izabela Lebuda and Vlad Petre Glăveanu, *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Creativity Research*, 1st ed. 2019 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 282, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-95498-1>.
- 14 Lebuda and Glăveanu, 282.
- 15 Lebuda and Glăveanu, 282.
- 16 Grietjie Haupt, "Learning from Experts: Fostering Extended Thinking in the Early Phases of the Design Process," *International Journal of Technology and Design Education* 25, no. 4 (2014): 485, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10798-014-9295-7>.
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- 25 Jane Darke, "The Primary Generator and the Design Process," *Design Studies* 1, no. 1 (1979): 36–44, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0142-694X\(79\)90027-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0142-694X(79)90027-9).
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- 27 Kennon M. Smith, "Recognition of Problem Insufficiency: A Proposed Threshold Concept Emergent in Student Accounts of Memorable Interior Design Educational Experiences," *Journal of Interior Design* 38, no. 4 (2013): 50, <https://doi.org/10.1111/joid.12018>.
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- 33 Bryan Lawson, *What Designers Know* (Oxford: Architectural Press, 2004), 110–111.
- 34 Practitioner PC.
- 35 Practitioner PB, *In Discussion with the Author* (Toronto, 2019).
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- 41 Akpinar, Xu and Brooks, 165.
- 42 Teal and Loo, "A Pedagogy of the Concept," 215.
- 43 Teal and Loo, 212. It should be noted that abstract approaches to design are often associated with Western Modernist design traditions and have greatly impacted the education and practice of interior design (and continue to do so).
- 44 Samer Akkach, "Modernity and Design in the Arab World," in *Design in the Borderlands* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 64.
- 45 Akkach, 63.
- 46 Glenn Parsons, *The Philosophy of Design* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 153.
- 47 Parsons, 152.
- 48 Akkach, "Modernity and Design in the Arab World," 65.
- 49 Akkach, 67.
- 50 Akkach, 68.
- 51 An outline of various definitions of design can be found in Chapter 2: "The Definitions of Design Concept."
- 52 Akkach, "Modernity and Design in the Arab World," 68.
- 53 Akkach, 73.

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2

## The Definitions of Design Concept

### What Is a Design Concept?

The near-ubiquitous usage of the phrase “design concept” in the education and practice of interior designers leads to the humble starting point of defining “design,” “concept,” and “design concept.” These descriptions aim to provide the reader with a better understanding of the subtleties and nuances contained within this commonly used phrase. At the outset of this chapter, definitions and terminology drawn from existing literature will be examined. These will then be expanded upon to capture the “working” definition of design concept, in other words, how it is defined and utilized within contemporary design practices and educational institutions. And so we begin, however unimaginatively, with a close scrutiny of both component parts in the term “design concept.”

The word “design” has a varied etymological background that can be traced back to Latin (*designare* – to mark out), Italian (*disegno* – a preliminary sketch for a literary work or drawing), and Middle French (*desain* – a plan, project) with estimated usage in these and other languages beginning in the 14th century.<sup>1</sup> Dozens of definitions presently exist that describe “design” as either that which has been designed or the act of doing so. Contemporary definitions found in the OED include a “plan or scheme conceived in the mind and intended for subsequent execution” and “a plan or drawing produced to show the look and function or workings of a building, garment, or other object before it is made.”<sup>2</sup> To gain a more contextual understanding of what design means to designers, however, one needs to look more closely at design-specific literature.

Herbert Simon, an early design process scholar defined design as “courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones” in his influential text *The Sciences of the Artificial*.<sup>3</sup> Chris Jones, an prominent figure in the Design Methods movement of the 1960s, contended that a suitably comprehensive definition of design was “to initiate change in man-made things.”<sup>4</sup> In *Designing Social Systems in a Changing World*, Bela Banathy provides a collection of definitions from various researchers, including “design is a solution to the sum of needs of a particular set of circumstances,”<sup>5</sup> “design is an imaginative jump from present facts to future possibilities,”<sup>6</sup> and as “a creative activity, design brings into being something new and useful that has not existed previously.”<sup>7</sup> Needless to say, these many ways in which the word “design” can be used, engaged,

and applied results in some blurriness as well as unavoidable challenges to truly define and create a consistent understanding of what it means. This is the first part of the challenge in defining “design concept.”

The word “concept” originates from Latin *conceptum*, meaning “that which is conceived,” as in pregnancy or ideas “conceived in the mind.”<sup>8</sup> Its usage has again been documented in different languages from the 14th century onwards, including in Middle French (*concept* – a mental idea or mental image), Dutch (*concept* – a plan, design, draft), German (*konzept* – design, plan) and Swedish (*koncept* – draft) in addition to Catalan, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese (*concepte*, *concepto*, *concetto*, and *conceito*, respectively).<sup>9</sup> As with “design,” a broad and diverse collection of definitions currently exist to explain and justify what this word means in the numerous fields in which it can be encountered. According to the OED, concept may be described as “something conceived in the mind; a notion, idea, image or thought” or “an idea underlying or governing the design or content of a product, work of art, entertainment, etc.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, the Collins English Dictionary describes concept as “an idea of something formed by mentally combining all its characteristics or particulars,” “an original idea, design, etc.,” “a central unifying idea or theme,” or, simply, an “idea, especially an abstract [one].”<sup>11</sup> These definitions begin to address the many ways the discipline of interior design engages the term “concept” which is regularly used interchangeably with “design concept” in design literature, texts, and casual discourse.

A perusal of design-related literature offers up the following definitions of “design concept” (or simply ‘concept’), including: “the core thought behind a design or the ‘big idea,’ on which all design decisions are based”;<sup>12</sup> “an abstract or general idea that might inform decisions taken during the design process so that the built outcome will be more cohesive”;<sup>13</sup> “a general strategy or approach for the solution of a design problem having specific circumstances [which] aims to conceive a response to solve a design problem in a very particular way”;<sup>14</sup> “the generative idea of a project articulated, as a whole, in discursive language and used as a point of verification or validation as the design progresses. At the most basic level, the concept articulates what the design is about and provides a measure for the effectiveness of certain design moves as the project unfolds”;<sup>15</sup> or, finally

“an idea, scheme or initiative that is used to provide an abstract or more pragmatic guide for the progress and process of a design project.”<sup>16</sup> These definitions describe what design concept is and suggest ways in which it might be applied, but despite these, significant confusion about the topic remains.

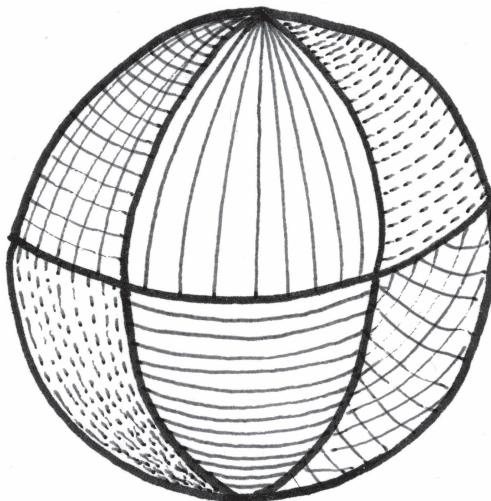
As the above cursory examination shows, there are clearly a wide range of linguistic perspectives to be found pertaining to these two connected ideas, and this proliferation only increases when “design” and “concept” are combined. To embrace the inherent complexity and nuances found within these descriptions leads to the acceptance that no single definition will be able to address the array of misunderstandings that may ensue. Consequently, rather than seek one elusive but satisfying definition “to rule them all,” this chapter aims to outline a broad range of descriptions and viewpoints. The exploration and inclusion of arguably synonymous terms, including those regularly used in the field of interior design – and those utilized in the closely aligned disciplines of architecture and engineering – will also be integrated. These varied descriptions and perspectives may also have the ability to connect and resonate with different readers which is one of the principal aspirations of this approach. As will become clear, just as there is no single definition of design concept, there is no single “correct” way of understanding or engaging with it.

Research into the creative processes of designers seldom focuses on the topic of design concept, if at all. Despite the perceived importance, which is evident in the frequent and ubiquitous usage of the term, this is especially true in the discipline of interior design. However, some scholars have identified key ideas in design processes that are arguably synonymous with how design concept is described and utilized within interiors. Jane Darke identified “primary generators” as ideas that were influential in the design process.<sup>17</sup> Gabriela Goldschmidt, in her investigation of cognitive and creative processes of engineers and designers, relies on protocol analysis (a method for breaking down and analyzing steps and thought processes of individuals and teams as they work through design problems) to examine the role of divergent and convergent thinking and highlights “critical moves” that stimulate creativity.<sup>18</sup> In *Creativity in Design: Analyzing and Modeling the Creative Leap*, Nigel Cross speaks of a “creative bridge,”

as opposed to a “creative leap,” to illustrate how ideas build upon each other in pursuit of solutions, with some being more central than others.<sup>19</sup> In viewing these terms as synonymous with design concept, and by exploring the different perspectives of Darke, Goldschmidt, and Cross, we can potentially attain a deeper, more informed understanding of the topic, inching ever closer to descriptions which have a more precise resonance for a greater number of designers.

One clear notion which is evidently united in the work of Darke, Goldschmidt, and Cross is the consensus that ideas and actions exist within design processes through interrelated, often quite complex, webs of thought, production, and creativity. Their research also acknowledges and confirms that certain ideas are more central (“primary”<sup>20</sup> or “critical”<sup>21</sup>) than others in generating meaningful solutions to design problems. The range of terminology and explanations offered by these researchers provide alternate ways of understanding and defining design concept but do not resolve the issues of confusion around the topic. The lack of clarity is, in fact, exacerbated when we consider that different terminology is used to effectively describe the same thing. This issue is further obfuscated by the fact that some designers prefer to entirely avoid using certain terms due to their negative associations with them (some educators and practitioners, for example, avoid using “design concept”). This book specifically utilizes and focuses on the term design concept because of its ubiquitous usage within the discipline of interior design. For the sake of clarity, alternate terminology such as “primary generators,”<sup>22</sup> “critical moves,”<sup>23</sup> and “creative bridges,”<sup>24</sup> all of which are arguably synonymous with the term design concept, will be correspondingly treated as such.

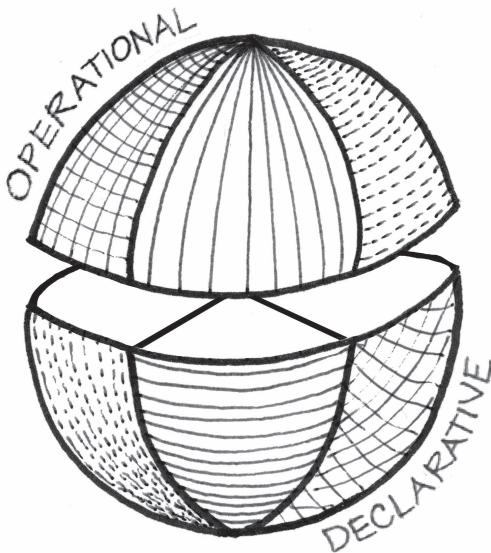
No single definition of design concept has emerged from existing sources or design literature. This will remain the case as we begin to explore data collected as part of an international research study to capture “working” definitions of design concept as articulated by interior design practitioners, educators, and students. The viewpoints of these research participants provide a reflection of what design concept means and how it is actively used in the education and practice of interior designers on a daily basis. Although there is no singular definition, this chapter introduces original **categories of definitions** that intend to offer a structure for



**Figure 2.2** Categories of design concept definitions.

deeper and more inclusive understandings of the topic. These new categories acknowledge definitions drawn from design literature, including those described previously, but are primarily informed by these recent research findings. This intention of categorizing definitions from respondents, rather than compiling them into a single description, is intended to embrace the fact that designers think, understand, and design differently. The intention of this chapter, and specifically these newly introduced categories, is that readers seeking a clearer understanding of design concept will be able to find a description or definition that resonates with them and proves insightful for their own individual creative endeavors.

Definitions have been categorized for the sake of clarity but it should be noted that these remain far from clear cut. Readers may observe some content which could be placed in more than one category (or subcategory) and this is absolutely the case. In fact, research participants frequently held multiple views on design concept (and how it may be defined) depending on whether they were directly asked to provide a definition as opposed to how they used it conversationally. This revealed their varied understandings and confirmed that definitions of design concept likely fall into more than one category, or to put it another way, that the lines



**Figure 2.3** Declarative and operational definitions.

separating categories can easily become blurred. Based on the research data there are two broad categories of definitions that duly reflect different facets of understanding. Respondents defined design concept in ways that may be understood as either **declarative** (description-based or ideas oriented) or **operational** (action-based or process oriented), with associated subcategories.

Many research participants view design concept as that which establishes the overt aims of a project. Just as a declaration is an “action of stating, telling, setting forth, or announcing openly, explicitly or formally,”<sup>25</sup> declarative definitions clearly outline that the ideas behind a process or project are the design concept. Someone who regards design concept in a declarative way may consider it to be the meaning, the “why,” the motive, or the overarching idea of a project, one which may be contemplative or philosophical in nature. These definitions focus on the ideas that define a project and are largely description-based. Declarative definitions can be divided into four subcategories: *The Big Idea*, *The Nexus*, *The Alchemy*, and *The Story*.

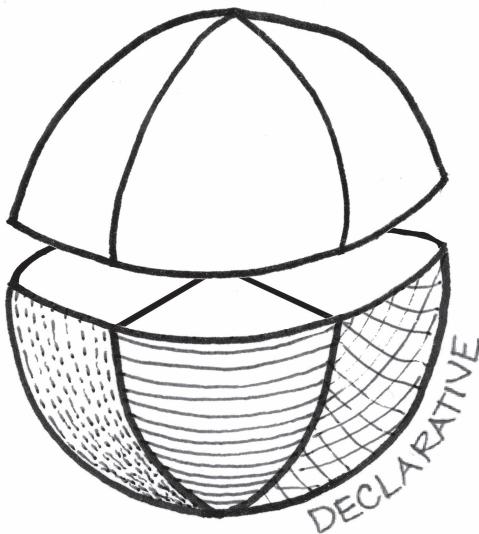


Figure 2.4 Declarative definitions.

### 1 The Big Idea

Many student, educator, and practitioner definitions of design concept can be classified in this first and most prominent subcategory – *The Big Idea*. Descriptions referring to *The Big Idea* (or some similar term) emerged in approximately 40% of all participant responses. In interviews, the use of *The Big Idea* as a descriptor for design concept primarily occurred when subjects were asked to provide a definition of the term. However, even when participants initially provided a different definition, they often used terminology related to *The Big Idea* at other points during the interview, reflecting a multi-faceted understanding of design concept and further reinforcing that there is no single way of thinking about or talking about it. Although not all participants used the specific phrase “the big idea,” many relied on synonymous terminology. These individuals described design concept as that which provides an “overarching”/“big picture”/“framing” of a “main,” “essential” idea for a project, or they simply defined it as “the idea,” the “core,” the “spirit,” the “soul,” or the “heart” of a project.

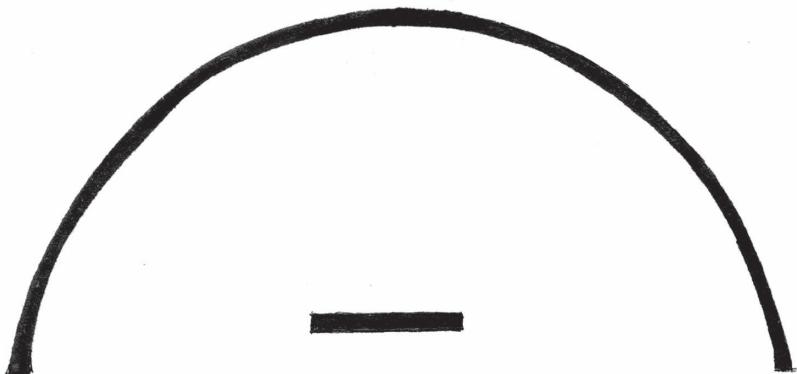


Figure 2.5 The Big Idea.

Behind the understanding of design concept as *The Big Idea* lies a somewhat contradictory operation that first involves the narrowing down and honing of ideas to identify which one(s) will be the most salient. In this sense, there is a process of distillation, refinement and “zooming in” that takes place prior to the “zooming out” of establishing an overarching approach, also known as *The Big Idea*. For example, if a design firm is tasked with designing a home for a busy family, they would go through various analytical steps in order to fully understand the needs of their clients and determine a design approach. Perhaps, as was the case with Möbius House by UN Studio (constructed in 1998 in the Netherlands), the designers would settle on the Möbius strip as *The Big Idea* which provided a means of exploring spatial relationships, volumetric development, and material articulation.<sup>26</sup> Or, they might realize that the compact nature of the building’s footprint – requiring adaptable, multi-functional spaces – would be better resolved with a *Big Idea* relating to that of a Rubik’s cube; this approach was developed and used by the firm Kingston Lafferty Design in their Dezeen-longlisted Ravensdale Residence built in Dublin, Ireland in 2020.<sup>27</sup> They might even integrate their client’s desire for a contemporary home which also encouraged a sense of play into the decision that a “hidden playground” would be the strongest *Big Idea*; as was determined by Campos Studio for a home in Vancouver, Canada

completed in 2017.<sup>28</sup> Each of these examples demonstrates the diverse outcomes that can be generated from projects with similar briefs and how *The Big Ideas* that were selected each led to very different design responses and outcomes.

These examples are intended to illustrate how central ideas may influence project work or design approaches. Descriptions of design concept that reference *The Big Idea* reflect a belief that there is a process of critical examination and that a distillation of ideas is necessary to establish project priorities and clarify design intentions. Understood in this way the design concept goes beyond fulfilling practical or programmatic requirements through the introduction of an overarching notion or framework to support decision-making. Those who view design concept as *The Big Idea* believe that it is essential in guiding design processes and also serves as a valuable tool for the concise communication of project aims.

Proponents of *The Big Idea* and other related definitions consider central ideas or notions (“core,” “soul,” “spirit”) to be clarifying and helpful in structuring one’s thinking and approaches to projects. By establishing the central values or ideas, it is believed a designer can navigate the design process in a focused, intentional manner. In this sense the design concept, or *The Big Idea* serves as a point of reference throughout the process to ensure one stays true to their initial intentions. This is especially valuable in professional practice when conceptual phases, which generally occur early on in most legislated design processes, are contractually agreed upon.

There are differing opinions on the number of “big ideas” that can or should exist within a single project but there is a degree of common acceptance that “it depends.” Relevant influencing factors for this include the designer and their processes, and the complexity and nature of the project itself. Some respondents believe that focus and clarity may be sacrificed if there is more than one “big idea.” Other designers attest that while the majority of their projects have one macro-“big idea,” there are often micro-“ideas” that govern the design of specific spaces or experiences within an interior.

An example of these macro- and micro-concepts was described by one of the research participants in their conceptual development for a spice manufacturer. *The Big Idea* developed for the design of a large campus-like collection of facilities was that of “traveling the world and experiencing different regions of it through the spices.” Due to the size and complexity of the project, this macro-concept was broken down into micro-concepts within each environment, influenced by factors such as architectural contexts, spatial requirements, or the types and levels of social interaction. As a result, each area of the “campus” was imbued with a certain quality or “flavor” that all related back, however tangentially, to *The Big Idea*.

Beyond findings from data collected from this research study, the definition of design concept as *The Big Idea* can also be found in design-related literature on the topic. Ian Higgins in *Spatial Strategies for Interior Design* states that “a good interior will deliver more than a straightforward practical solution and, to this end, an interior design project will often be driven by a big idea that is called ‘the concept’.”<sup>29</sup> Roberto J. Rengel also refers to design concept as *The Big Idea* in *Shaping Interior Space* where he suggests the potential for “big ideas” to exist with varying degrees of influence. Rengel explains, in his view, that “a concept consisting of a single idea is unrealistic in most cases” offering instead that “thinking in terms of a series of ideas pointing to one dominant approach is a more realistic proposition.”<sup>30</sup> In *How Designers Think: Demystifying the Design Process*, Bryan Lawson acknowledges that design concept is often understood as “the central idea” in a section of his book bearing this title. In Lawson’s view, a project may have a number of ideas shaping it, including “very few major dominating ideas which structure the scheme and around which the minor considerations are organised” or “sometimes [ideas] can be reduced to only the main idea known to designers by many names but most often called the ‘concept’.”<sup>31</sup> It is evident from both the literature and the “working” definitions captured in this research that *The Big Idea* is a term often used to describe the keenly sought notion of design concept.

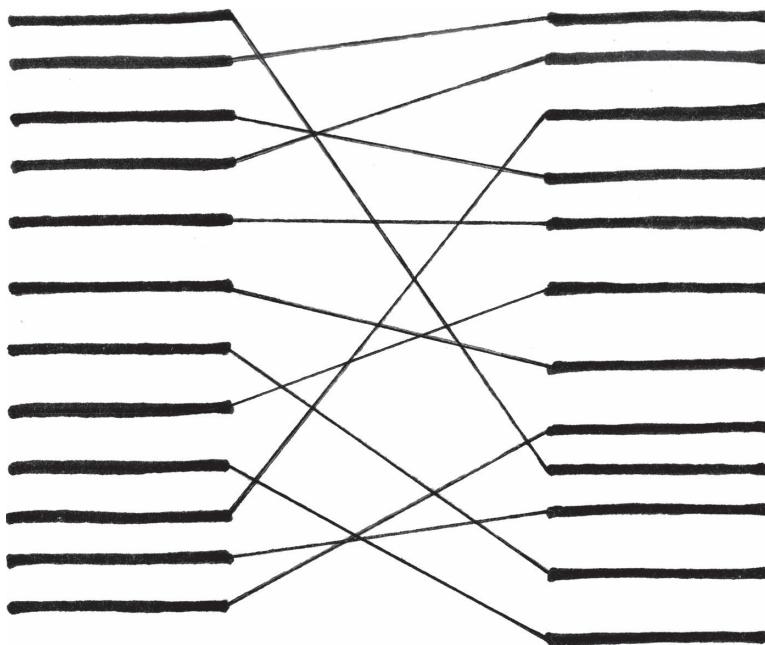


Figure 2.6 The Nexus.

## 2 The Nexus

A design concept may be viewed as that which ties the many aspects of a project together – from pragmatic to conceptual – acting as its connective tissue or *The Nexus*. In contrast to *The Big Idea*, and its overarching *external* structure within which to develop a project, *The Nexus* can be regarded as the *internal* structure, formed by the interweaving of existing conditions and future potentialities. Definitions that fall into this category describe the vital connection between “the problem” and “the solution” and how ideas generated from the former can be used to shape the latter, uniting the two. Alternative phrases integrated within this subcategory include: that which “bring[s] together,” “links” and “ties,” or the “fusion,” “connective tissue,” “linchpin,” or “thread,” in addition to important notions of “harmony” or “unity.”

Definitions of design concept as *The Nexus* differ from those of *The Big Idea* in their overt association between the details, problems, and contexts of a project and respondent creative or conceptual ideas. These descriptions highlight the ability for design concept to tie diverse aspects of a project together in potentially unique ways. Just as the warp and weft of a fabric can be manipulated to generate a seemingly endless multitude of textures and patterns, so too can the tying together of existing contexts and potential solutions be used to generate unique and colourful solutions.

Descriptions referring to *The Nexus* focus on the potential for solutions to exist *within* the problems themselves – the two simply need to be threaded together in appropriate ways. This contrasts with descriptions of *The Big Idea* in which ideas can potentially be introduced from any number of external sources, including those that may only be abstractly related to the project. One can imagine how this “groundedness” and specificity might please those with concerns about the nebulous and potentially reductive nature of design concept as *The Big Idea*.

An example of *The Nexus* may be found in a project completed for a university campus in Toronto, Canada. The design programme included requirements for meeting rooms and other gathering spaces ranging from solitary areas to those catering to hundreds of people. The architectural context of the existing interior included a range of ceiling heights which ultimately inspired the design of the space. Datums from the various spatial volumes were used as defining elements within the interior and were relied upon for functional zoning of activities. Spaces for solitary occupation or small meetings were located in lower ceiling areas with a greater sense of intimacy and enclosure with larger gathering spaces planned in higher ceiling areas. Materiality was integrated and transitioned to create the desired experiential qualities within each stepped space and was also informed by the datums which had become *The Nexus*. In this sense we see that the architectural context of a project was blended with the programmatic requirements to generate a responsive design solution.

Reference to *The Nexus*-related definitions emerged in many interviews, especially when respondents used metaphors to express their understanding of design concept. Images of linchpins, links, ties, glue, and thread were conjured up in the minds of participants as they sought alternate ways of describing their understandings. The metaphor of a thread was, in fact, the most often used to explain how design concept weaves or holds a project together, acting as a connector between myriad aspects of it. This thread metaphor can be extended to explain how a project lacking a strong concept to weave it together can easily succumb to fraying and unravelling, thus losing its direction, focus, or ability to rationalize its decision-making.

Although discussed much less frequently in design-related literature than *The Big Idea*, the recognition that it acts as the connective tissue of a project is revealed in Nigel Cross's *Creativity in Design: Analyzing and Modeling the Creative Leap*.<sup>32</sup> In his descriptions of processes of designers, Cross explains that

the creative leap is not so much a leap across the chasm between analysis and synthesis as it is the building of a bridge across the chasm between problem and solution. The bridge recognizably embodies satisfactory relationships between problem and solution.<sup>33</sup>

In this explanation we can clearly see that the interplay of problems and solutions, as woven together in a design concept, clearly aligns with an understanding of it as *The Nexus*.

### 3 The Story

For many individuals, design concept is expressed as that which establishes and clarifies the “meaning” of a project which may be articulated through a “narrative” or, more plainly understood as *The Story*. The function of design concept as *The Story* provides a framework for thinking about the unfolding of experiences within an interior and also supports communication about a project more generally – both within



**Figure 2.7** The Story.

and beyond a design team. Other words used to describe design concept which fall into the category of *The Story* include: the “meaning,” the “narrative,” the “storyline,” and the “message.”

Storytelling necessitates a focusing, a narrowing down of information to determine how best to craft a narrative by weaving important elements – characters, emotions, places – together. In this sense *The Story* contains some aspects of both *The Big Idea* and *The Nexus* but involves the articulation and development of ideas in a very different way. Distinguishing qualities of *The Story* relate to the potential that narratives offer to explore the granularity of human experiences, to engage with spatial progression or the passage of time, and crucially to capitalize on the power of stories to connect with and engross the audience. In other words, *The Story* is what allows people to feel and think and connect with projects in more meaningful ways.

The use of the term “narrative” within interior architecture and design has increased in popularity over the past few decades and a growing understanding of design concept as *The Story* reflects this. For designers, the use of narrative may serve to set priorities and help with decision-making on a project but, more importantly, it provides them with an ability to *engage* the audience in a more meaningful and memorable way. A compelling story is one of the most reliable devices for designers to transport their audience to an imagined world of spaces and experiences.

How language and *The Story* are engaged with will depend on the designer, their processes, and the projects themselves. For large, in complex projects that involve physical transitions through multiple spaces, narratives can be used to examine and explore the potential unfolding of interior experiences (with the added ability to consider factors that may impact experiences but are beyond the scope of a project – how someone is transported to a hotel, for instance, may impact their sense of arrival at their final destination). Storytelling that is used to think about the interconnection of interior environments also provides for a more sensitive consideration of movement, the passage of time, and physical progression through spaces. The level of detail that can be expressed and examined in a narrative presents the opportunity for a design concept to provide quite specific direction about the project and the totality of experiences within it.

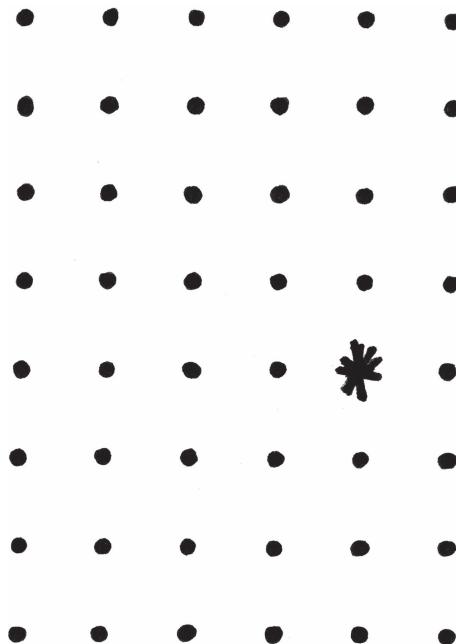
Depending on the project, *The Story* may include a description of the progression through interior spaces and experiences within them. Such descriptions, in turn, may inform literal progressions through physical spaces. *The Story* may also mine the psyche of imagined users within proposed spaces. Such imagined users, fictional characters or “muses” are frequently developed in the hospitality industry as stand-ins for potential real-life inhabitants. Informed by knowledge of target markets and demographics of potential users within a space, characters can be fabricated to tell *The Story* (or *Stories*) of a project in unique ways. While such “muses” could be thought of as similar to *The Big Idea* in that they create an external structure to guide decision-making, the degree of detail in character and narrative development sets them apart.

Interior designers are keenly aware of the fact that built environments have the ability to communicate. Spaces are continually sending messages which are received and perceived consciously or subconsciously by the inhabitants of them. An awareness of the complex nature of human spatial perceptions is one reason why designers remain able to design interiors that make people *feel* something and why people seek out specific environments to cater to different activities or to align with different moods. The recognition that communication exists in many forms, that meaning can be perceived in different ways, and that the interplay of these is continually engaged within design processes, collectively seems to lie at the heart of the interpretation of design concept as *The Story*.

#### 4 The Alchemy

Interviews with designers and a review of design literature reveal a significant amount of information about how these respondents and authors understand a given topic. In some cases, their positions are clearly stated. In others, some “reading between the lines” is necessary to uncover deeper beliefs or assumptions. Although not overtly stated in most interviews, a noticeable feature of some conversations suggested that the act of designing is guided and influenced by some unquantifiable, unknowable force. This ineffable quality has influenced certain individuals to portray design concept as *The Alchemy*. Alternative words or phrases that have been classified into this category include: “originality,” “magic,” “transcendence,” “the poetry,” “thinking outside the box,” and the quality of being “romantic.”

*The Alchemy* was far from a prominent description of design concept, but this interpretation underpinned something many participants talked about; namely, that there is something about the design process that is almost “magical.” It is something that can’t be easily dissected or explained, emerging from the designers and their processes with the potential to unlock transformative and ultimately unexpected solutions. *The Alchemy* is this “special” ingredient. When addressed in this manner,



**Figure 2.8** The Alchemy.

there is a greater focus on the creative, intangible aspects of design which acknowledge the potential for interiors to move beyond merely meeting the functional requirements and instead having the potential for a “deeper meaning” or transcendence.

*The Alchemy* begins to outline the role that individuality plays in the practice of interior design, as well as other creative disciplines. Each designer approaches a project from a unique position, informed by their education, ways of working and of processing information, values, perspectives, memories, and lived experiences. Combined with the role of teams and collaboration, creativity is thus given the opportunity to emerge. How designers solve problems and develop design concepts in order to achieve this serves to set them apart from one another and may become a reason why clients choose to employ particular designers. The value of creativity and the drive to engage it in the design process

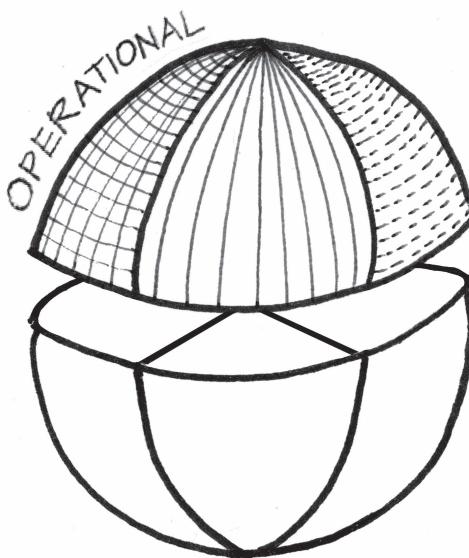
is something highly valued within the field of design, even if we do not entirely understand its inner mechanisms.

*The Alchemy* attempts to identify the mysterious force at work within the minds and processes of designers. In this sense, *The Alchemy* is often equated with those “lightbulb” moments in which “an idea is suddenly there, even seeming to come from nowhere,” as outlined by Arthur Cropley in his article “In Praise of Convergent Thinking,” published in the *Creativity Research Journal* in 2006.<sup>34</sup> The ability for design concept to support, capture, and channel creativity within a design project, in order to generate something transcendent and “greater than the sum of its parts,” resides within the understanding of design concept as *The Alchemy*.

Declarative definitions offer a range of views of design concept, depicting it as that which establishes and clarifies what a project is about. These declarations may come in the form of *The Big Idea*, which provides an external structure for a design process; *The Nexus*, which serves to connect aspects of the problem and solution; *The Story* which utilizes narrative to structure a design approach; and, *The Alchemy* which attempts to harness the unknowable force of creativity. Each of these categories helps to explain how respondents think about design concept.

Largely description-based, declarative definitions are essentially about the *ideas* behind a project. However, there is an alternative school of thought which needs to be considered and this introduces the second overarching collection of definitions, which are far less dependent upon ideas and instead more significantly enmeshed within the processes of design – **operational definitions**.

Operational definitions reflect a different, more active and engaged interpretation of design concept. To be operational is to be “engaged in or connected with active operations.”<sup>35</sup> For some individuals this definition is of critical importance to their understanding of design concept. Operational definitions of design concept are more likely to describe the project in terms of the design approach or mobilization of ideas. Although this category involves definitions of design concept that are more closely associated with action and active development of the projects themselves,



**Figure 2.9** Operational definitions.

they are also reflective of the inner workings of designers, addressing the motivating factors guiding them as they develop within their practices and expand their relationship with, and expertise in, design.

Those who describe design concept operationally relate more to the active, process-oriented side of solving problems and developing design solutions. For these individuals the design concept is in *the doing* – through finding and developing strategies or by using ideas as the impetus for the development of the project in specific ways or with the project as a conduit for the investigation of ideas. Subcategories of operational definitions include: *The Stimulant*, *The Strategy*, *The Guide*, and *The Inquiry*.

### **1 The Stimulant**

The potential within a design concept to serve as the creative driver for a project had been experienced by many respondents in this research. For these individuals, design concept was described as *The Stimulant*,

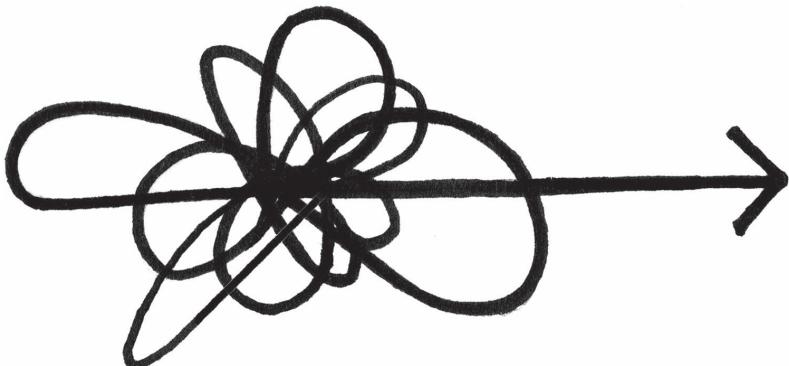


Figure 2.10 The Stimulant.

or that which is the forward momentum, motivation, “drive,” or impetus for creation. Thought of in this way, *The Stimulant* serves to motivate the designer or design team to develop a project in certain directions with the distinct sense that it enables the project to maintain progress and push onwards. Additional descriptors categorized into *The Stimulant* subcategory include: that which “motivates,” the “impetus,” a “triggering,” and the “inspiration.”

Descriptions of design concept as *The Stimulant* identify a sense of energy or propulsion that emerges in the process of designing. For respondents, *The Stimulant* possesses motivating qualities often associated with visualizations of forward movement, of being pushed onwards and giving an impression of being “driven.” This “drive” may be initially sourced from ideas either internal or external to the project itself but at a certain point a transition occurs whereby ideas engaged within the process begin to generate their own momentum. While some individuals may associate this explanation with the notion of inspiration discussed in *The Alchemy*, *The Stimulant* expands upon and provides the practical follow-through for ideas which may have emerged during flashes of inspiration.

Interpretations of design concept as *The Stimulant* are referenced by a number of authors, including Gabriela Goldschmidt in her investigations

into applied design practices. Utilizing research methods that enable the breaking down of design processes into a series of steps suitable for analysis, Goldschmidt identified what she determined to be “critical moves.” These moves and their motivational potential, were “primarily responsible for a process’ creative thrust”<sup>36</sup> within a project. These findings further align with respondent views of design concept as *The Stimulant*. Systematic investigations into design processes completed by Goldschmidt are reinforced by personal experiences of research participants and other creatives in their discussion of the nature of ideas and how some spark inspiration and drive processes forward.

Ideas that transform into *The Stimulant* of a project can be initially drawn from a wide array of places or potentially extracted from a designer or team’s way of working (where ideas for design concepts come from and how to work with them will be covered in greater depth in Chapter 5: “Generation of Design Concepts”). Some ideas may be internally motivated, or drawn from the context of the project itself. For example, in interviews with architects completed by Jane Darke – who coined the term primary generator – one of the respondents in her study described the project’s site as “a ‘generating thing.’”<sup>37</sup> This suggests the potential for individual aspects of a project to act as drivers or generative forces with the ability to push a project in specific directions. Whether the driver of decision-making is the site, the client, the history, or the culture of an area, it is quite common in the practice of interior design for a project to have a focus that, in turn, develops into a driving force behind a design process. In this case *The Stimulant* bears similarities to that of *The Big Idea*. However, *The Stimulant* is, by its very nature, more implicated in the design process, rather than existing as an overarching external structure around it, as is the case with *The Big Idea*.

The interpretation of design concept as *The Stimulant* may also be an important source of inspiration or “food,”<sup>38</sup> as described by architect Ian Ritchie. Ritchie describes the importance of motivating ideas and the need for designers to have a sense of purpose and nourishment in their work. Such motivating ideas not only offer a creative impetus but can also provide a rejuvenating boost when required. Bringing ideas to

fruition, whether as a student or as a practitioner is rarely an easy task. For students, it may appear that there are not enough hours in the day to meet project deadlines and practicing designers often feel similarly. Unlike most students, however, designers may work on projects that are drawn out over long periods, with creative intensities depleting with each passing year (or change order). During challenging times when the energy of a project team is depleted, the potential ability of *The Stimulant* to provide an added boost is certainly valuable. Ritchie illustrates this in his description of what may be considered *The Stimulant* as

the thing that nourishes, that keeps you, you know every time you get bored or fed up or whatever, you can go back and get an injection from it, and the strength of that idea is fundamental. It has to carry an enormous amount of energy.<sup>39</sup>

Just as *The Stimulant* can act as a powerful design tool within individual projects so too can this notion spill over into the personal and professional satisfaction and motivation needed by designers themselves. Many designers think of the development of design concept as an enjoyable part of the project. It is at the stage of conceptual development that a designer or team has the ability to develop autonomy over the direction of the design. One imagines it is not beyond the realm of possibility that *The Stimulant* may serve as an intrinsic motivator – shaped by the designer or the team themselves and providing a sense of purpose or reason behind a project or their work more generally – as opposed to extrinsic, which in this case we might conceive of as getting paid well for the work or perhaps winning awards.

## 2 The Strategy

A view of design concept that is focused on the methods, procedures, and strategies employed in bringing ideas to fruition can be interpreted as *The Strategy*. This is one of the more distinct subcategories of operational definitions in its direct connection with the actions and processes

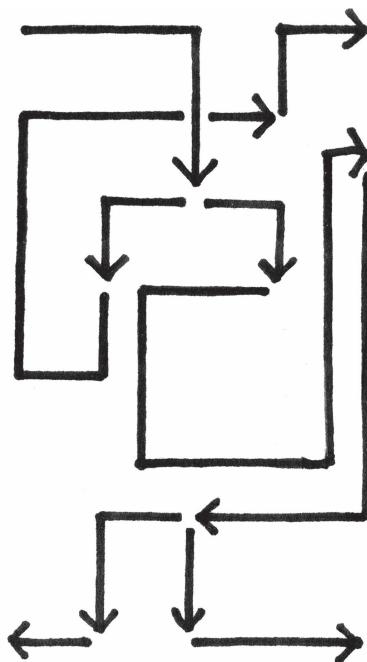


Figure 2.11 The Strategy.

of designing. Design concept understood as *The Strategy* can serve a variety of functions. It may be utilized to develop an approach to a design problem, to outline steps and procedures to follow, or provide a rationale to justify decision-making. Alternative words used to describe design concept in this way include: "methods," "procedures," "logic," "rationale," "criteria," and "rules."

Descriptions of design concept related to *The Strategy* place an emphasis on defining *an approach* over establishing *an idea*. Through focusing on the development of an approach, this may provide a starting point for a design process, something which is especially helpful for students or novice designers often unsure where to begin. Such strategies help to address one of the primary challenges of undertaking a new project – the daunting reality that there are seemingly endless possibilities of what one

might do. For those new to design, “official” design processes with outlined steps and stages (which will be expanded upon in Chapter 4) can be helpful, but they fail to address specific problem contexts or the unique qualities of designers and their teams. Unlike “official” design processes, strategies allow designers to integrate the many streams of information that make up a design problem and craft specific responses to them.

A sports analogy may be considered here to reinforce the difference between *The Big Idea* and *The Strategy*. As an example, one may think of a sports team’s “big idea” as “Winning.” The team may keep this in mind throughout a game and it will very likely impact the final outcome (something to which athletes and sports psychologists could attest) but *The Big Idea* of “Winning” risks failing to acknowledge the complexities that will emerge from situations as the game progresses. To have a strategy which incorporates ways of handling challenges as they arise duly provides an active processing of information that is both responsive and adaptive. In this sense, it is far from just the idea of “Winning” that will hopefully lead a team to success but the engagement of different responsive moves, techniques, and adaptive strategies during the course of the game.

*The Strategy*’s ability to continually engage with the conditions of the project is one of its principal strengths. In addition to the responsiveness and adaptability offered by *The Strategy*, it is also viewed as the “logic” of a project. Many participant definitions of design concept associated with this subcategory linked it to logic and rationality. Thus, *The Strategy* becomes the natural counterpoint to notions of the design concept as a nebulous, intuition-based aspect of a design process (something more closely connected with *The Alchemy* or *The Story*). There is an apparent polarity in this regard. Some educators and practitioners believe that intuition is a crucial part of design, while others, especially those drawn to design’s more rational and logical manifestations, may view it as lacking rigor and as prone to self-indulgence, solely used to entertain the whims of the designers themselves.

The roles of rationality and logic were often highlighted in descriptions of design concept within this category and presented themselves in

two ways. Firstly, rationality and logic may be employed to advance a project toward a solution informing steps, methods, or procedures; and, secondly, they may be relied upon to explain, rationalize, or justify design decisions that were made throughout. *The Strategy* can therefore be used as a generative force and also as a means of communication concerning a designer's process. Descriptions of design concept which reflect a preferential view of rationality and logic are heavily influenced by the assumption that rigor can and should be expressed through the measured and informed process of decision-making that arises from a lucid understanding of all aspects of the design process.

The expectation for designers to rationalize their methods or decisions, informed by empirical knowledge, contrasts with notions of mysterious creative underpinnings within design. In this sense, there is an implied assumption that designers must remain "in control" of their work and have a clear, cogent understanding of what they are doing and why they are doing it. Individuals who understand design concept as *The Strategy* believe most, if not all, design decisions should be justifiable, capable of being rationalized so as to provide evidence of a rigorous design process. In order to maintain such clarity and logic, a high level of awareness of one's own methods, ways of working, and critical reflection is required.

Although social scientist Donald Schön did acknowledge the mysterious power of intuition and what might be considered "magic" within creative fields, his writings on reflective practices are worth addressing. In his influential text *The Reflective Practitioner* Schön commented on the need for architects and designers to be engaged in their work and suggested that this occurs primarily through processes of active reflection.<sup>40</sup> This explanation resonates with the applied nature of *The Strategy* which involves constant assessment and responsiveness to evolving project contexts.

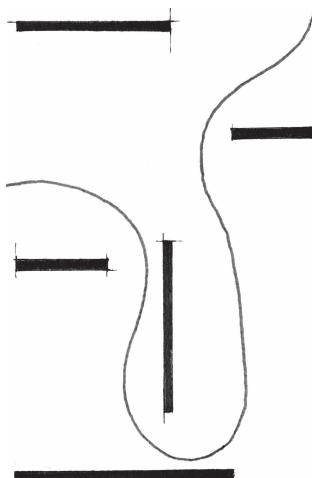
Some of these contexts may present ideas or opportunities that emerge from the design process itself. For example, if a designer is unable to fully understand the volumetric conditions or potentials within a space,

they may undertake a series of sketches or build a model. As a result of this process the designer may gain a better and more thorough understanding of the project and be able to reflect on potentials that they were unable to visualize or imagine prior to completion of their drawings or models. Depending on the unique characteristics of a project, designers will work through the challenges presented in different ways, relying on various methods of representation to foster greater understanding and reflection.

The requirement for critical reflection is one of the defining features of *The Strategy*. This applies not only to work that may be generated out of a design process (drawings or models, for example) but the consideration of the processes themselves. Individual designers or teams need the ability to reflect upon their methods and “ways of working.” While the approach each designer takes to solving design problems will be similar in many respects to that of their peers, the development of *The Strategy* offers flexibility in how each designer engages with their work and which methods best align with their aptitudes, interests and abilities. In this sense we see a clear deviation from standard design process models in which projects are to be developed in very specific, regimented ways. Here, again, *The Strategy* proves responsive not only to the needs of the project but also the designers themselves.

### **3 The Guide**

*The Guide* offers another interpretation of design concept as that which orients and directs a design process. It has been identified here as a distinct classification though recognition is required that it draws from, and exhibits similarities to, other subcategories. This is due to the fact that many respondents described design concept as *The Guide* and acknowledged that it may be identified and utilized in very different ways – for example, one designer may generate a narrative and treat that as a “guide,” while another may view their “big idea” as fulfilling a similar function. Thus, *The Guide* might be considered as possessing the potential to channel aspects from other categories, culminating in some



**Figure 2.12** The Guide.

type of amalgamation. Alternative terminology organized alongside *The Guide* include: that which is “leading,” “guiding,” or the “guideline.”

Comparisons have been most frequently drawn between *The Guide* and both *The Big Idea* and *The Strategy*. *The Guide* is similar to *The Big Idea* in its identification of critical ideas to influence project development but there is far less focus placed on identifying “overarching” or “essential” ideas. It is also similar to *The Strategy* in its engagement with specific aspects of individual projects and their changeable conditions but it is neither as responsive nor as adaptive.

A sports analogy may again be considered helpful to clarify the difference between *The Big Idea*, *The Strategy*, and *The Guide*. If one returns to a team’s “big idea” as “Winning,” this demonstrates their overarching intention for the game but will not specifically address the detailed “strategies” needed to win. Through employing these “strategies,” team members can actively engage with individual situations as they unfold, using specific tactics to do so. The middle ground which exists on this spectrum lies between the overarching thinking of “Winning” and the detailed utilization of “strategies” and provides what may be termed

an “approach” – playing offensively or defensively, for example. This approach is certainly suggestive of the type of strategies which might be utilized in order to win, but it will not go as far as dictating exactly which tactics to use. Instead, it indicates approximate boundaries to stay within.

*The Guide* builds upon the idea that it is helpful for designers to have a framework to organize and manage their creative processes. However, rather than the generic and formulaic stages of “official” design processes (discussed in greater depth in Chapter 4), *The Guide* instead suggests an approach that is responsive to project requirements and engages the abilities, aptitudes, and perspectives of individual designers. Thus, *The Guide* serves as something that provides a facilitating structure for a designer, but does not dictate *exactly* what to do or how to do it. In this sense we can see the influence of *The Guide* in providing direction that is suggestive, rather than prescriptive, in its nature.

In their article “A Pedagogy of the Concept: Rereading an Architectural Convention through the Philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari” Randall Teal and Stephen Loo raise concerns about the potentially reductive nature of design concepts and speak of the need for them to be intrinsically linked to the contexts of the projects and problems they are employed to help solve.<sup>41</sup> In this sense, these authors are rather more supportive of the idea of design concept as *The Guide*, than potentially abstract or reductive interpretations of it as *The Big Idea*. They support this view by quoting French philosopher Bruno Latour who describes a guide as that which “offers suggestions rather than imposing itself on the reader . . . it is directed at practitioners as a how-to book, helping them to find their bearings once they are bogged down in the territory.”<sup>42</sup>

One of the primary ways *The Guide* helps a designer or team to “find their bearings” is through the setting of priorities. Priorities, once established, can help to guide decision-making and allow a designer to navigate the many challenges presented to them. Although a higher level of experience may be required for designers to know how or what to prioritize within a project, as described by Bryan Lawson in *What Designers*

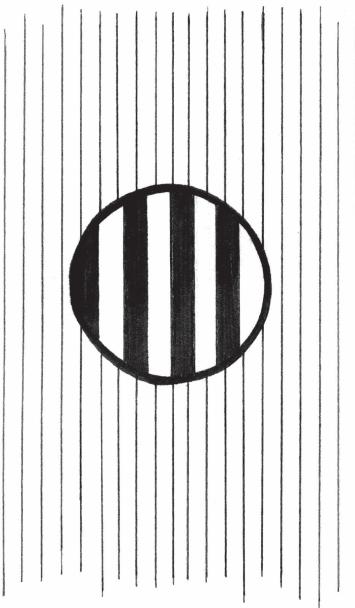
Know, once established they “appear to act as a major ‘filter’,”<sup>43</sup> which aids in project development.

An example of how *The Guide* may be used can be found in an interiors project for a new transit hub at Toronto International Airport in Canada. The design team for the project developed the idea of “Windows into Canada” and wanted to use the airport as a canvas upon which to represent the range of identities and qualities of the country. With the recognition that this “big idea” would need to be broken down and re-configured in different ways within each space, notions of a “Canadian mosaic” emerged. By relying on these guiding ideas, and the range of interpretations they provided within specific areas, the design concept served as a guideline, offering flexibility of expression within defined parameters.

*The Guide* may be established in response to the needs of the project, how a designer or team works, or shaped by their personal beliefs or values. In this sense, *The Guide* is often impacted by approaches to design that may be honed over the course of a career. Bryan Lawson describes the notion of this as “guiding principles” and explains that “these ‘guiding principles’ are sets of ideas, beliefs and values that operate for the designer spanning many projects rather than just one and in most cases develop in a coherent way over their career.”<sup>44</sup> Just as *The Big Idea* can exist at a macro- and micro-level, one may view Lawson’s description as an articulation of an ultimate, overarching or “global” influencing factor within a design process and one that may stay consistent over the years of practice. The individual and their “guiding principles” were mentioned in a number of participant interviews with the recognition that a designer’s core values or design philosophy will come through in their work and serve as *The Guide* within their projects.

#### 4 The Inquiry

For a number of participants, design concept was described as an investigative research tool which provides designers with the ability to



**Figure 2.13** The Inquiry.

seek and potentially find answers to a range of practical and theoretical or philosophical questions. Thought of in this way, design concept is defined as *The Inquiry*, which may also be described as the “questioning,” the “research,” the “thesis,” or the act of purposeful “exploring.”

Descriptions of *The Inquiry* often equate design concept with that of a thesis. Thus, there is a need to establish a specific proposition, point of view, or focus for investigations. A thesis may be derived from curiosity that emerges from initial project research or from the interests and preoccupations of designers themselves. Such preoccupations may be project-specific or representative of prolonged fascinations that are investigated over a number of projects and which shape a designer’s educational and professional trajectories. The ability for a design project or process to serve as a conduit for critical investigation is central to the understanding of design concept as *The Inquiry*.

In her lecture entitled “Arguments,” delivered at Columbia’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation (GSAPP), Sarah Whiting highlights the importance of developing a thesis in architectural projects.<sup>45</sup> One of the reasons for this is her belief that knowledge within architectural education requires both breadth and depth. In her view, not declaring a position or remaining ambiguous about one’s intentions reflects a lack of understanding or adequate depth of knowledge. For Whiting, the need not only to state a position and form opinions but also subsequently to act upon them is of vital importance. This “action” enables architects (or, by extension, designers) to develop ideas and projects with the potential for meaningful contribution to conversations within the discipline, rather than simply reflecting on them. *The Inquiry* can therefore be viewed as a critical aspect of “applied research.”

Determining a clear definition of “research” in the fields of architecture and interior design is a somewhat convoluted issue. As disciplines that exist beyond established structures and accepted models of traditional “research,” there are many opinions as to what may constitute it within these areas. However, there is broad acceptance that while conventional research methods and outputs are effective for many investigations, many more will need to utilize different methods associated with “applied research.” Such “applied research” of designing, creating, or constructing is often recognized as an equally valid form of research that critically investigates and generates new knowledge through the methods and practices of design. Thus, projects and design processes may serve as arenas for the examination of ideas and research outputs to reflect different ways that knowledge exists, is communicated, and understood.

With each project, a designer is granted the opportunity to engage with ideas and topics that may exist beyond the programme of requirements. In order to decide where they would like to focus their efforts, there is a necessary period of evaluation and contemplation. This may include the consideration of factors such as: programmatic requirements, project timelines and budgets, and the openness and support of clients (if applicable). Determining what is most interesting and where research

could feasibly be done in order to clarify positions serves as the basis for *The Inquiry* and provides a starting point for the design process. Through this investigation, designers may not only meet project requirements but uncover new ways of thinking about, working with, and exploring interiors.

*The Inquiry* helpfully connects with notions of creativity as an inquisitive process fueled by curiosity. Out of this arises the desire to discover, uncover, and better understand seemingly uncharted territories. The curiosity underpinning *The Inquiry* drives resultant examinations, project development, and helps to pose questions and determine additional points of investigation. In this sense, it is the inquisitive exploratory process that advances a project and is capable of uncovering further creative ideas and potential solutions.

The process of determining which questions to pose and what one would like to examine is similar in some ways to the notion of “problem seeking” that was initially described in William Peña’s 1977 book of the same name – *Problem Seeking: An Architectural Programming Primer*.<sup>46</sup> Peña emphasizes that instead of merely solving design problems, including those that may appear straightforward, there is always the need to delve deeper. Through a comprehensive evaluation of issues and factors shaping an environment, and behaviors within it, designers begin to shift from “problem solving” to “problem seeking.”

This in-depth process of analysis and investigation provides a more thorough understanding of essential problems and presents novel ways of thinking about how to address them. “Problem solving” is therefore replaced with “problem seeking.” The need to go in active search of problems to be solved and ideas to be scrutinized is also addressed in Bryan Lawson’s work when he states that “the central idea does not always appear easily and the search for it may be quite extensive.”<sup>47</sup> The potential for design concept to identify problems and unearth questions is evident in its manifestation as *The Inquiry*.

Interior designers affect the environments in which people live their lives, influencing their behaviours, relationships, and experiences. For interior

designers, the ability to design spaces that not only respond to pragmatic requirements but offer potentially transcendent experiences lies in the understanding and utilization of design concept. Definitions of design concept and proposed categorizations have been outlined in this chapter with the intention of supporting a deeper understanding of the topic. With this increased awareness arises the potential to use design concept to generate new ideas, to connect, to tell stories; to be creative, be inspired, be strategic, be guided, and use design as a tool for critical investigations.

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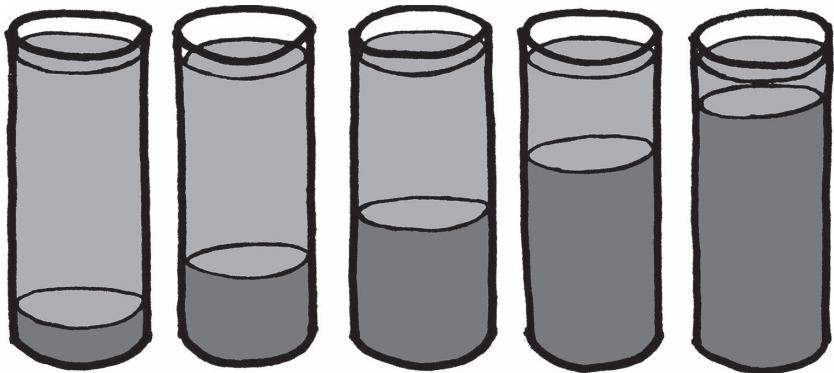
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3

## The Identification of Design Concepts

Are There Different Types of Design Concepts?

Interior design students, educators, and practitioners have varied understandings of design concept. This is evident in design-related literature and became especially apparent in conversations with the international group of designers who shared their perspectives, insights, and opinions as part of this research. Such diverse perspectives reinforce the fact that design concept can exist and operate in numerous ways and play an influential role, to a greater or lesser extent, within the work of interior architects and designers. This leads to another aspect central to the understanding of design concept – its *identification*.

Perceptions of whether or not a design concept *exists*, or can be identified as such, are largely shaped by expectations about the depth or level of influence it should exhibit. For example, a project that relies on an aesthetic style as its “design concept” – in the instance of “My concept is industrial” – would be regarded as a design concept by some individuals but not others. However, in reference to definitions offered in the previous chapter, even a project that imitates an aesthetic style (“industrial,” in this case) may still serve as a “guide” or help to “drive” decision-making. As a result, it is important to acknowledge that just as there are different ways of *defining* design concept, there are also different ways in which it can be *identified*.

## **Conceptual Thinking vs. Execution**

Individual determinations of what *should* or *should not* be considered a design concept generally reflect a perception of the necessary balance between theoretical and practical components. The relationship between these elements, hard as it may be to quantify, establishes the degree of influence a design concept has over the work of a designer or team. As every design project combines the theoretical with the practical, embodying a balance of conceptual ideas alongside the execution of them, the potential to create a classification structure emerges.

Artist Sol Lewitt, in his text *Sentences on Conceptual Art* stated that “the concept and idea are different. The former implies a general direction while the latter is the component. Ideas implement the concept.”<sup>1</sup> Lewitt’s

distinction between the “concept” and the “idea” in the work of conceptual artists offers valuable insight for examining the role of design concept in interiors. Roberto J. Rengel addresses something similar in his text *Shaping Interior Space* when describing the necessity for design concepts to address the “design idea” and the “design strategy,”<sup>2</sup> making a clear differentiation between the two. Graeme Brooker also distinguishes between “strategies” that are typically “realized through the deployment of tactics of devices”<sup>3</sup> in his book *Adaptation Strategies for Interior Architecture and Design*.

For the purposes of this investigation, Lewitt’s basic terminology will be relied upon, with “concept” being substituted with “conceptual thinking” and “idea” replaced with “execution” to compare how the balance between these elements impacts the subsequent identification of design concept. It should be noted that the separation of “conceptual thinking” and “execution” is *technically* and *practically* impossible, creating an artificial duality between cognition and activity. In reality, projects involve a blending of ideas and the application of them shaped in response to the needs and expectations of a project. Drawing from the work of Hans Joas, a preeminent German social theorist and author of *The Creativity of Action*,<sup>4</sup> Juelsbo, Tanggaard, and Glaveanu clarify that

it is not that people first make plans (mentally) and then carry out actions (in practice) with reference to the pre-formulated plan. Rather, thinking and acting are seen as two interconnected dimensions of human existence with thinking integrated in acting.<sup>5</sup>

## The Multiplicity of Design Concepts

Depending on the project and process of the designer or team, multiple concepts may exist within a single project. Such concepts may be used at different times, for different aspects of a project, and may be connected to one another to greater or lesser extents. Varied conceptual approaches may be generated for different areas of a space and at other times, an overarching concept may be developed from which others are generated.

This results in the emergence of “macro” and “micro” concepts. Multiple concepts can emerge throughout the design process and may exert varying levels of influence over different aspects of a design project.

One of the reasons for such multiplicities results from the multi-layered and complex nature of “ill defined”<sup>6</sup> problems designers are tasked with identifying and solving through the course of working on a project. In order to address these ill-defined problems with which most interior designers are faced, it is challenging or nearly impossible to confront them in a single step. Rather, the design process involves “solving multiple interrelated problems at different levels of abstraction.”<sup>7</sup> Design concepts can help designers better understand problems and grasp ways of potentially solving or addressing them at different levels.

Helping with problem solving is one of the reasons for the generation or application of multiple design concepts within a single project. This will depend on the design processes of the designer or team, as well as the requirements and expectations for the project. But often, “complex design problems can be tackled by decomposing them into multiple levels of abstraction,” as described the Liu, Chakrabarti and Bligh in their article “Towards an ‘Ideal’ Approach for Concept Generation.” The authors continue that this is because “to consider all these simultaneously in order to synthesize all possible concepts is difficult or impossible. . . . One possible way is to consider these variables a few at a time so that the complexity is reduced.”<sup>8</sup>

The breaking down of ill-defined problems and description of multiple concepts applied within projects is widely addressed in design literature. In the article “Creativity in Design: Analyzing and Modeling the Creative Leap,” Nigel Cross describes methods that “suggest that the overall problem should be decomposed into sub-problems, and then sub-solutions found and combined into an overall solution.”<sup>9</sup>

In his book *Shaping Interior Space*, Roberto J. Rengel writes that “every design project requires a main concept at the overall project scale. This main concept addresses the main design problems of the project and provides a dominant structure or idea that all other design ideas adhere to.” He continues that “while some main concepts may consist of a single idea, most consist of a handful of ideas that, together, constitute a single, or at least consistent, approach.” Rengel also reminds the reader of

the misconception that projects are shaped by singular “big ideas,” and that “thinking in terms of a series of ideas pointing to one dominant approach is a more realistic proposition.”<sup>10</sup>

In *Anchoring the Design Process*, Elise van Dooren describes that design concept (or, in their terminology, “guiding theme”) can exist at different levels of clarity within a project:

the picture emerges that the guiding theme seems to give direction at two “levels” at least. One level is having some kind of project-transcending theme. Designers take position: it is what in their opinion architecture and urban and landscape design is about. . . . The other level is a project related crystallization point; it emerges from the situation at hand.<sup>11</sup>

James Tait expands upon something similar in *The Architecture Concept Book*, in his division of “specific concepts” that “arise from the unique conditions and environment of a particular project” and “universal concepts [that] transcend transient project conditions” and “are timeless, embodying aspects of architecture that have always been, and will continue to be.”<sup>12</sup>

Research participants also describe the use of multiple, nested concepts within their work. The selection of those that become most influential depend on the contexts and complexity of the project. Although there are often multiple concepts present within a project, a number of educators (especially those working with novice design students) recommend students build their conceptual thinking abilities by focusing on identifying single concepts (typically those that are overarching/macro) and attempting to understand and explain how these function within their processes. From there, with experience, more nuanced approaches can be developed.

## Levels of Design Concepts

This section aims to clarify the ways in which design concepts can shape the approach taken in design projects by introducing a new framework outlining five categories, or *Levels of Influence*. Each level within this framework – *Directed*,

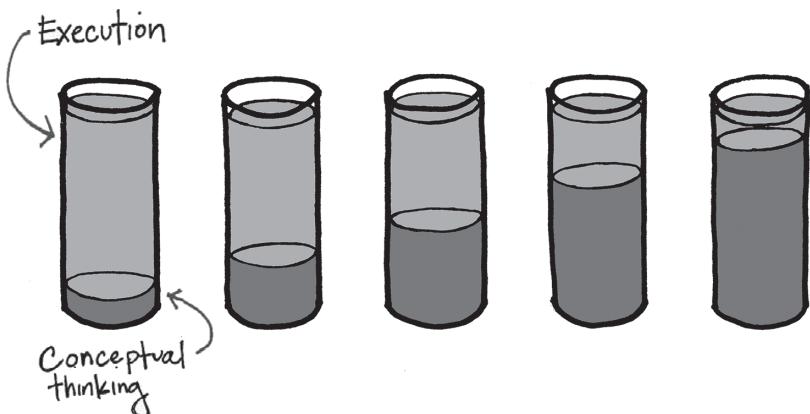


Figure 3.2 Levels of design concept.

*Adaptive, Exploratory, Critical, and Speculative* – represents the respective proportions between “conceptual thinking” and “execution” aspects found within interior design projects. These levels are intended to be useful for students in the task of concept generation and application, for educators in establishing project expectations, and also for practitioners in communicating and deciding on their conceptual approach with clients.

Ranging from *Directed* (Level 1) to *Speculative* (Level 5) these categorizations, like the definition, function, and perception of design concept itself, are not cut and dried. Firstly, they rely on the artificial/theoretical duality between “conceptual ideas” and the “execution” of them. Secondly, individual perceptions vary significantly and people may view concept in a very different way from the categorizations presented in this text. And thirdly, because multiple concepts generally exist within each project, they may not all fit within the boxes bounding each level.

It is also important to note that there is no correlative value assessment linked to the levels. Each “level” from 1–5 should not be seen to correspond with a Likert-informed rating system of “good” to “bad” or vice versa. There is a time and place to use concepts of all manifestations, impacted by the many internal and external factors shaping design processes and outcomes. Depending on the designer, project, client, or instructor, design concepts may be used in many different ways. If someone is tasked with

redesigning a bathroom, they will likely not require an underlying philosophical approach to the work, but if a student is developing a graduate thesis proposal, this may well be more along the lines of what is expected.

The established duality of “conceptual thinking” and “execution” also acknowledges that “thinking through doing” is important in the practice of many designers. External means of working, through craft, making, or material experimentation, are examples of extended cognition – or thinking that occurs beyond the mind through its interaction with the material world – and are central to the practices of many designers. Therefore, the levels attempt to categorize embodied and extended models of cognition and acknowledge that process, action, and making can themselves be a form of “conceptual thinking.” This not only acknowledges varying design practices but different ways of understanding and engaging with materials, spaces, and the world around us throughout the design process.

Each of the five *Levels of Influence* offers a snapshot taken at some point along the spectrum which represents the proportional relationship between “conceptual ideas” and the “execution” of them. The balance between these central aspects is broken down further through the explanation of four other defining features – *programme*, *precedents*, *predictability*, and *perspectives*. Design concepts may be identified based on how they are intertwined with the design programme, how precedents are utilized, the predictability of outcomes, and at what point the perspective of a designer or team emerges.

### **Level 1: Directed Concept (Application + Curation)**

Directed Concepts are guided or *directed* by external forces, most notably the design programme and selected interior and architectural precedents. In terms of the balance between “conceptual ideas” and the “execution” of them, this level of concept is not influenced as much by “ideas” as they are directed by the task at hand. Such concepts can support the development of pragmatic, functional design responses that effectively meet programmatic requirements. Due to commonly held expectations and extensive reliance on design precedents, this level of concept is also predictable and easily communicated in a concise manner. Concepts that can

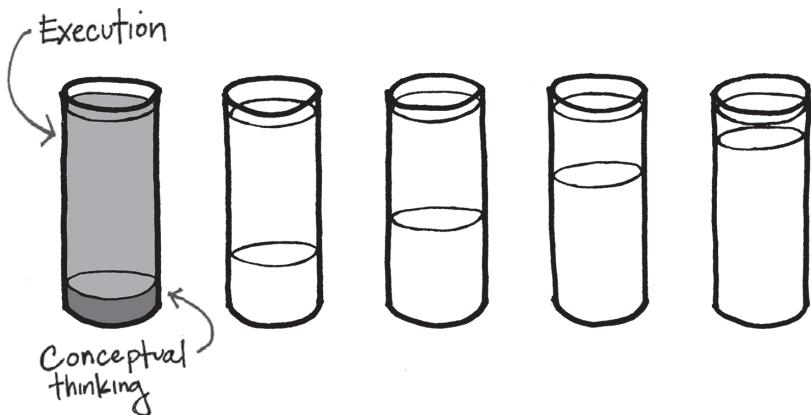


Figure 3.3 Level 1: Directed Concept.

be adequately described in single words – “modern,” “industrial,” “cozy,” and so on – are often at this level which involves the application and curation of specific design elements to create the desired aesthetics or experiential qualities. The perspective of the designer or team is rarely present at this level.

A Directed Concept may be described as pragmatic, in which programmatic requirements are accommodated within a functional approach to problem solving, one that is focused on meeting project requirements. This may include project briefs from a client or assignments from an instructor. At this level, ideas are generated and guided by the design programme, as provided to the designer or developed at the outset of a project. Little to no modification of a given programme occurs at this level as this type of concept is directly shaped in response to such criteria.

Inspiration for Directed Concepts is primarily drawn from interior and architectural precedents which are highly influential in the design of the project. Directed Concepts are heavily informed by aesthetics and design styles and may include the imitation of spatial or visual elements or the alignment with design trends. Spatial aspects may be copied or repurposed from other interior or architectural projects and often result in project outcomes that are predictable from the outset.

By referencing existing works, Directed Concepts may help the designer or design team make decisions related to curation, enabling the appropriate

selection and assembly of elements to evoke desired experiences or aesthetics. The translation of ideas from precedents is fairly straightforward at this level.

Examples of precedent applications come from descriptions of particular aesthetics – “modern farmhouse,” “industrial,” or “contemporary” – that serve to shape the approach taken in the work. This is valuable for a clear communication of design intentions and to best serve clients with specific aesthetic preferences. Another example of this level of aesthetic influence can be found in “Canyon House” by Studio Hagen Hall. Located in London, this residential project responded to the desires of the clients who wanted to “re-create their affection for Modernist Californian homes”<sup>13</sup> after spending time living in Los Angeles. In terms of aesthetics, the designers were able to make design decisions informed by aesthetics drawn from a very specific architectural period and mimic styling found within “Modernist Californian homes,” resulting in a desired outcome for the clients.

With a Directed Concept, project goals are established at the beginning of a design process and there is a clear understanding of project outcomes, specifically in regard to what a project will look like in the end. The relative predictability of project outcomes is one of the strengths of this level of design concept. This is due to the reliance on precedent work and also to the lower degree of abstraction. The relative simplicity of “conceptual ideas” informing this level of design concept are also potentially easier for designers to communicate and for clients to understand.

At this level, perspectives of the designer or design team are largely informed by precedents and are often secondary to the style of an established movement or desired aesthetic. Such adherence to styles or aesthetics helps to inform selections and prioritize decision-making for the crafting of specific interior experiences.

## **Level 2: Adaptive Concept (Interpretation + Modification)**

Adaptive Concepts begin to interpret and modify internal and external project contexts owing to the increased consideration of “conceptual ideas.” These concepts may result in a questioning of how programmatic requirements can be modified to best marry pragmatic and experiential

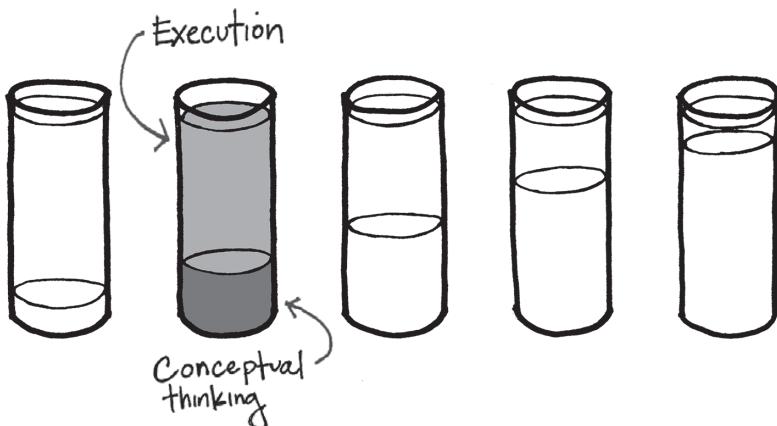


Figure 3.4 Level 2: Adaptive Concept.

components. Design research and ideas are integrated but often focused on the project itself, with limited expansion to abstract ideas or theories beyond the typology or field of interior design. Adaptive Concepts lead to the creation of relatively predictable outcomes due to their clarity of focus and sensitive interpretation of project requirements. The communication of this level of concept involves the integration and reliance on precedent projects as well as the “voice” or perspective of the designer that emerges at this level, such as those aiming to “bring the outside in,” to “provide a modern take on tradition,” or simply bring their personal style into a project.

An Adaptive Concept may be described as one in which programmatic requirements are accommodated with a responsive approach to problem solving that may include minor modifications of initial project requirements (outlined at the outset of the project) as a result of the examination or questioning of a brief. Although not a necessity for this level of design concept, part of the process of conceptual development may begin to assess and evaluate the conditions of the problem, alongside the exploration of potential solutions.

Adaptive Concepts differ from Directed Concepts in their level of modification and adaptation of source ideas and precedents into final proposals or spatial designs. As such, design concepts at this level begin to merge

specific aspects of a project and the perspectives of the designer or team with external sources of inspiration. Interpreting precedents and how they could best support design development is evident at this level of design concept. The CH House in Hanoi is an excellent example of the power of interpretation to inspire designers. In this project, completed by ODDO Architects, the designers looked to traditional housing typologies of the area as a starting point. From here, the designers chose the direction of creating a design that “aims to bring a breath of traditional spirit to modern life.”<sup>14</sup> Design decisions were aided by awareness and research into traditional building typologies, integration of nature, and ventilation, and these guided the approach in the site-specific response to meet project requirements.

Another example of this can be found in the large-scale transportation project completed by UN Studio. One of the many concepts guiding the development of interiors for the Doha Metro in Qatar described on the firm’s website as “preservation meets modernization.” As such, “traditional Qatari architectural features are reinterpreted to incorporate new, transformative qualities into stations.” Within the interiors “vaulted spaces establish a referential bridge between Qatar’s historic architecture and its future as a beacon of innovation and prosperity.”<sup>15</sup> We can see in this example how historic references were used as a starting point for the development of a design concept and later informed design decision-making. As opposed to direct translations of forms from precedents into the new spaces, forms were adapted in response to the needs of the programme.

As interior and architectural precedents are often used within Adaptive Concepts, in whole or in part, specific styles or aesthetics may guide design development. Adaptive Concepts largely rely on interior and architectural precedents but may combine aspects of them in unique ways. This begins to adapt source ideas through the integration of designer perspectives or styles. Precedents beyond the fields of interiors and architecture may also start to be selected and integrated at this level of design concept.

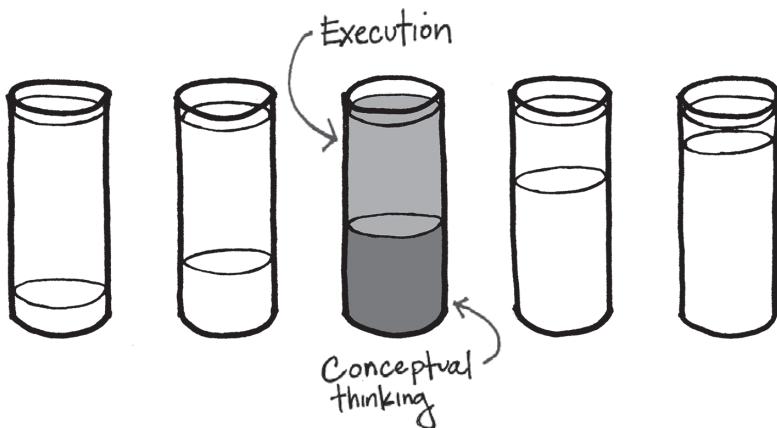
There may also be generic or overarching ideas about conceptual approaches “bringing the outside in” or “modernizing the old,” which can be accomplished in many ways depending on the project or the designer. Fortunately, due to the inclusion of a majority of interior and architectural precedents, clients and designers themselves have a fairly clear and easily

predictable idea of what design responses will be. Project outcomes are predictable at the beginning of the design process with desired aesthetics and precedent projects, guidelines, and other references used to selectively guide decision-making.

Chiang Mai-based practice Sher Maker was awarded the Interiors Project of the Year by Dezeen in 2021 for their indoor-outdoor office space built to house the design team themselves.<sup>16</sup> The Thai firm works closely with craftspeople to integrate in-depth knowledge of building practices and materials into their projects. Experimenting with how local materials and construction techniques could guide the design process prevented the design team from having any “idea of the exact language or shape of the architecture that [was] being formed.” Instead, they were aware of the approach they wanted to take, which local materials they would be able to use, and modified their project parameters to provide for the integration of knowledge from local craftspeople.<sup>17</sup>

A unique perspective of a designer or design team may start to emerge at this level of design concept. Beyond the reliance on mimicry of precedents or adherence to strictly controlled aesthetics or styles, Adaptive Concepts begin to introduce individual “voice(s)” into the project. Perspectives may emerge in the intentional approach to the integration of “conceptual ideas” or in the design style (or approach) of an individual or design firm.

The style or signature of a designer begins to manifest at this level. This may come through the unique combination of aesthetics and styles, as is the case with celebrity designer Kelly Wearstler. In the Madison Residence, located in New York City, the designer drew significant inspiration from the preexisting Beaux Arts architectural style of the building. “With this important cue as a guiding thread” design decisions were made to “echo the building’s history” as well as integrate a range of other styles. The project was described as having a “modern sensibility [that] thoughtfully lives within via an extremely sophisticated mélange of styles ranging from Chinese art deco to European mid-century masters, and contemporary emerging artists.”<sup>18</sup> The combination of styles and historical precedents that were updated and adapted into contemporary forms guided the design of this residential project that is reflective of the perspective, or style, of the designer.



**Figure 3.5** Level 3: Exploratory Concept.

### Level 3: Exploratory Concept (Translation + Integration)

Exploratory Concepts can be thought of as those that begin to question previously held assumptions within project work and allow the designer to investigate expanded ideas with respect to the potential of interiors practice. Designers may begin to search beyond the immediate fields of interior design and architecture for guidance, inspiration, and precedents. The process of developing ideas through making that occurs at this level may include the exploratory use of materials or testing alternate applications.

With Exploratory Concepts, the “how” of a project begins to be shaped by “the why,” or foundational conceptual ideas. A designer using an Exploratory Concept may review and reinterpret programmatic requirements, informed by the integration of pragmatic considerations and conceptual ideas. An example of this can be found in a retail showroom by Australian firm Woods Bagot in Melbourne, Australia. Sinuous wood interiors were inspired by both the name and manufacturing capabilities of the client, Sculptform. Utilizing the concept of a “working showroom” the designers modified aspects of the programme to merge front-of-house and back-of-house areas to embody “a performance of the production process.”<sup>19</sup>

The spatial layout and design shows how an Exploratory Concept can inform programmatic adjustments that ultimately impact design proposals.

Precedents and conceptual ideas at this level are drawn from diverse sources and disciplines or from individualized analysis and interpretation of precedents from interior design or architecture. As precedents are not limited to constructed environments, there is often less copying and more exploration of the potential(s) that exist within the creation of built environments to serve as physical translations of diverse source material, be that art, nature, or experiences.

Desired experience may shape design decision-making and serve as a driving force. An example of this can be found in the presumed translation of the experience of flying into the TWA Airport Terminal in New York. Completed in 1962, architect Eero Saarinen designed “more than a functional terminal; he designed a monument to the airline and to aviation itself.”<sup>20</sup> Although the actual source of creativity is unknown, this project’s inspiration may have been drawn from birds or airplanes in flight. The importance of an individual’s reading and translation of experiences and movement into built form is evident in the swooping, undulating forms of the architecture and interior spaces within.

Another example of how ideas drawn from beyond the fields of interior design and architecture can be found in the One/Split house in Taiwan. Inspired by the mechanisms of a camera, the interior renovation project was completed for a photographer client and designed by Chinese architecture firm Air Studio. Utilizing an Exploratory Concept allowed the designers to not only question typical spatial divisions found in traditional Taiwanese homes, but enabled them to challenge these ideas in the creation of an open plan live/work arrangement inspired by the layered diaphragms of a camera. The residence partially separates spaces by relying on frames, in order to “anchor” programmatic components in a linear arrangement that examines the potential for a space to be simultaneously experienced as both “one” and “multiple.” The “set of diverging frames”<sup>21</sup> that shapes this project leads to a minimalist interior that explores potentials for interior residential typologies.

An Exploratory Concept results in project outcomes that are shaped by interpretations of the programme, research, and the emergence of critical

thinking about the nature of the project or interior typology. As a result, outcomes may not be entirely predictable from the outset of a project, even if a conceptual idea has been established. This is due to the need for designers to experiment with and explore ideas as the project progresses.

If a student is using an Exploratory Concept they may not fully understand the implications of it until the final presentation, but if a designer is pitching to a client there will be a series of clarifying conversations about how ideas may be incorporated from various sources and how these may then lead to specific interior environments and experiences. Given that there is a less direct translation and application of precedents into the final form of the project or proposal, it may not be as clearly predictable.

The Taman Bima Library, a project shortlisted for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in the 2017–2019 cycle, provides a good example of how material and construction applications can be exploratory within the design process. This micro library designed by Indonesia-based SHAU Architects in the city of Bandung, Indonesia aimed to create accessible spaces for public use in order to create a place of gathering and also to combat low literacy rates in the country. Following material explorations, a façade design of repurposed ice-cream pails was used which created a comfortable interior through the integration of daylight (which could be modulated by the façade/buckets and provided for cross-ventilation). A pattern was created in the façade – one that directly connects to the relatively small interior space – using “zeros (open) and ones (closed), to present a binary coding of a message from a former Bandung mayor that translates as ‘Books are the windows to the world’.”<sup>22</sup> In this project, materials used in an unconventional manner led to the creation of an accessible and comfortable interior.

Perspectives of the designer or design team begin to emerge at this level, particularly through their individual interpretation and evaluation of programmatic requirements and precedents. Designers are more active in translating ideas from original sources beyond the fields of interiors and architecture, be it nature, film, or music, into the built environment. Through this process the designer can be thought of as something akin to the translator, with their presence being felt and visible in their work. Ideas continue to be sensitively adapted to best serve the needs of the project, but these may include the altering of original project requirements.

An additional example of this can be found in the Bait Ur Rouf Mosque located in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Bangladeshi architect Marina Tabassum explains that her process begins with a deep understanding of a project's site and the critical examination of programmatic requirements. As quoted in an interview about her work, and this project specifically, Tabassum commented: "we try to dissect the program" and "go back to the beginning and start something interesting."<sup>23</sup> This process led to the design of a mosque that was intentionally stripped of the architectural elements typically associated with the typology – including domes, the mihrab (prayer niche) and minarets (towers) – to serve as a clearer expression of what is essential within Islam. "I find symbols a distraction and I wanted to focus instead on the sense of spirituality."<sup>24</sup> Here we can also see how the perspective of a designer, informed by their processes, life experiences, and beliefs can affect the development of an Exploratory Concept.

#### Level 4: Critical Concept (Investigation + Redefinition)

This level of design concept involves the *critical* examination of interior design conventions and begins to question the nature of design in ways not evident in the previous levels. The sensitive study, evaluation, and

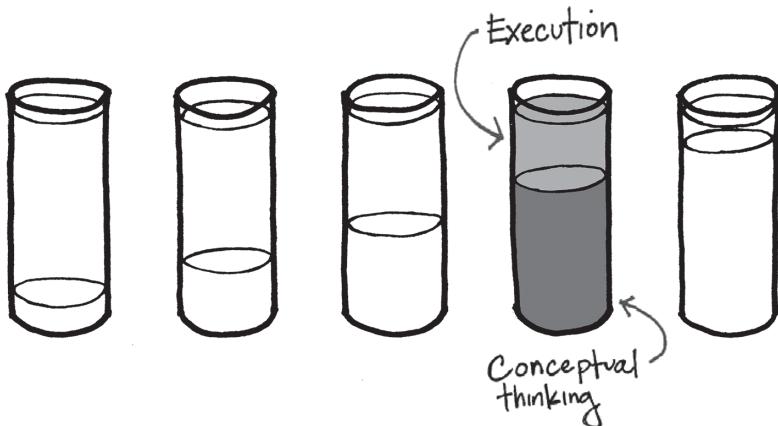


Figure 3.6 Level 4: Critical Concept.

(re)definition of design problems and programmatic requirements emerge most acutely in Critical Concepts. Theoretical underpinnings of Critical Concepts are shaped by a thorough development of ideas and perspectives. Such concepts begin to use the project as a vehicle for ideas, with methods and strategies utilized or invented with the specific intention of advancing ideas in a fusion of ideas and processes. Through the act of designing, the designer or team will redefine and explore potentials for an interior.

A Critical Concept may result in the project programme being significantly modified following a critical examination of the project, as well as through questioning and challenging the brief or previously held assumptions about the project or typology. This can be seen in the Villa Verde housing project on the outskirts of Santiago, Chile by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Alejandro Aravena.<sup>25</sup> Rather than simply give residents a traditional home with a standard layout and finishes, each family was provided with half a house. Residents then assessed what was best for them, how they wanted to live, and workshops were facilitated to support the participatory design process of the second halves of these homes in the neighborhood. The Critical Concept guiding this project analyzed and challenged many of the conventions of residential design. In the reconsideration and invention of a design programme and unconventional participatory design/build process, it provides an example of an inventive, Critical Concept at work.

Critical Concepts rely less on interiors or architectural precedents than previous levels do. This is especially true when it comes to application or recreation of styles or specific aesthetics. If these types of precedents are utilized, they may integrate spatial elements or configurations from very different typologies and unite them. In this sense the nature of interior typologies and conventional design approaches are examined, critically analyzed, and reimagined. Individualized interpretations and translations of ideas from original sources into the proposed work of an interior designer is one of the key defining qualities of Critical Concepts.

The integration of philosophical approaches or driving factors becomes evident at this stage and may lead the designer to more abstract approaches in their work that will involve the evolution and development of ideas that may not prove easy to predict at a project's outset. This is due to

the fact that abstract concepts can be reinterpreted in many ways as they are integrated into interior design processes and project work.

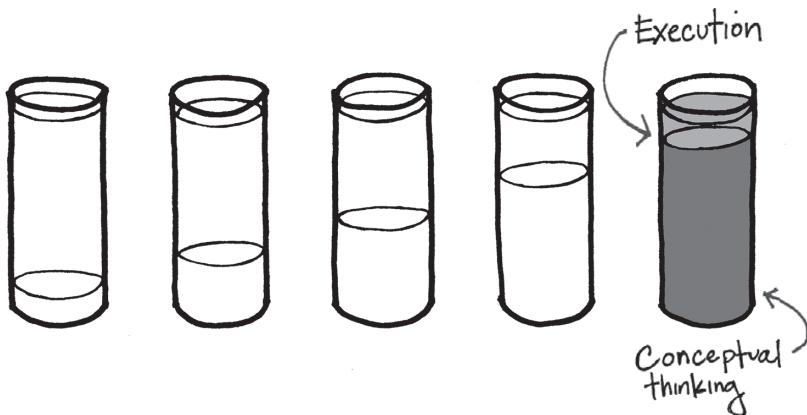
Experimentation with materials and methods of construction may result in the reinvention or modification of conventional practices. The work of Japanese architect Shigeru Ban provides a clear example of this. Through investigations into the potential of commonly found, easily sourced materials such as paper and cardboard, Ban and his team have inventively engaged materials, altering architectural responses and construction practices. Ban was awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 2014 for a body of work that included innovative disaster relief shelters and other projects built with unconventional material applications and construction techniques.<sup>26</sup>

The perspective of the designer or team is ever present at this level of design concept. Such perspectives may emerge through the individual interpretations and translations of conceptual ideas drawn from a range of precedents. They may also be informed by a philosophical approach to design shaped by research as well as the personal values or experiences of the designers themselves.

Through the design of the São Paulo Museum of Art in Brazil, the Italian-born architect Lina Bo Bardi defied the notion that museums should primarily be for elite members of society and instead aimed to create one that would “cater to the populist view that the museum and the site on which it stood should belong to the people and the city.”<sup>27</sup> In questioning conventional interior planning, Bo Bardi also “extended this discourse on art and politics into the main galleries” where works of art were intended to be displayed in an open space with each piece mounted on glass panels, creating a sense of “liberated chaos”<sup>28</sup> that redefined viewers’ relationships to the works of art, each other, and their surrounding space. Bo Bardi’s perspective offered a Critical Concept that challenged traditional museum design informed by social and political perspectives.

### **Level 5: Speculative Concept (Experimentation + Invention)**

Speculative Concepts focus on the primacy of ideas and result in projects that are often considered “theoretical,” or ones not providing a follow-through of ideas into physical form. These concepts involve both



**Figure 3.7** Level 5: Speculative Concept.

experimentation and invention, challenging preconceived notions about pragmatics or buildability. Research into a wide range of areas beyond design is more important here as a designer or team attempts to develop a philosophy and branch away from conventions. With a focus on nonconformist ideas, these concepts have the potential to further the practices of interior architecture and design. These concepts question the limits of our understanding of what we build, how we build, and how we think of the spaces we inhabit.

With Speculative Concepts, programmes are often invented or significantly modified in response to conceptual ideas, philosophical approaches, or theoretical frameworks. With the Speculative Concept “to escape rigidity, to encourage change,”<sup>29</sup> Gaetano Pesce designed an iconoclastic office that altered the trajectory of the modern workplace – introducing the notion of a mobile workforce in an interior stripped of private offices, assigned desks, or spatial hierarchies. Completed in 1994, the Chiat/Day office in New York City was described by *The New York Times* as “a remarkable work of art.”<sup>30</sup> Although many of the ideas tested in this initial prototype weren’t as successful as originally imagined, Pesce created a new reality for this type of space, leaving a lasting conceptual impact.

Speculative Concepts are largely unprecedented or involve the agglomeration of concepts, ideas, and philosophies drawn from areas beyond interiors and architecture as driving forces. They raise questions and will

perhaps ultimately fail, but there is a primacy of ideas at this level that becomes more important than the finalized project. For many designers, a Speculative Concept involves an extensive time commitment to research and there may be a significant degree of uncertainty regarding where the project may end up from the outset. Due to the speculative nature of the work, there needs to be a freedom of interpretation, expression, and invention permitted by either the client, instructor, or designer themselves.

In order to implement and test Speculative Concepts, project development may involve the experimentation with ideas on a smaller scale. As such, experimentation and application of ideas through prototyping is an important aspect at this level. Unprecedented processes may also be utilized, involving the experimentation with and invention of the means of production. Material applications and construction processes are distanced from previously held conventions.

This is evident in the work of researchers from the Swiss university ETH Zurich who are seeking to advance methods of construction through experimentation with robotics, drones, 3D printing, and other technologies. One of their completed prototype projects includes the 2018 Rock Print Pavilion,<sup>31</sup> constructed by a robot using solely stones and string. This experimentation with materials and alternative methods of construction led to the creation of a prototype that may shape the future of construction.

Perspectives of the designer or team may be expressed through established theoretical frameworks or manifestos that challenge the ideas and norms of the discipline. An example can be found in the 1960s manifesto written by the French architect Claude Parent in collaboration with the theorist and philosopher Paul Virilio which gave rise to *la function oblique* theory. *La function oblique* served as “a call to arms against the right angle and the horizontal plane, in favour of fluid, sinuous forms that would liberate space and the way we use it.”<sup>32</sup> This radical outlook was translated into few built projects, but offered a conceptual lens through which to view architecture and the design of interior spaces. The thought experiment of removing horizontal and vertical planes from an interior raises theoretical possibilities regarding how individuals might use and alter patterns of inhabitation.

Ranging from Directed Concepts through to Speculative ones, it is clear that design concepts can exist at different functional levels. The balance between “conceptual ideas” and the “execution” of them is evident in the design programme, role of precedents, predictability of outcomes, and perspectives of the designer or team. Depending on project requirements and the expectations of clients, instructors, or otherwise, designers may rely on concepts at various levels, or use multiple concepts within a single project. With the recognition that design concepts are integrated into design practice and processes in different ways, this leads to an examination of how concepts are integrated into design processes.

## Notes

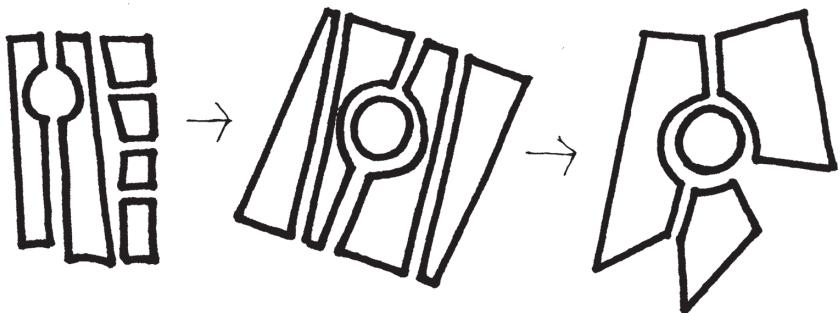
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4

## Integration of Design Concepts in the Design Process

What Is the Design Process and How Might  
It Shape, and Be Shaped by, Design Concepts?

Creativity is often associated with abrupt “lightbulb” moments of inspiration but, in reality, creative thinking and problem solving are highly process-oriented activities. In interior architecture and design, “the design process” is an encompassing term used to describe the various ways in which designers work and the stages they are recommended (or legally mandated) to progress through during each project. This chapter will outline the history and evolution of the design process and examine how it may support but also, more critically, *limit* creativity by acknowledging that creative processes are considerably more varied than these frameworks might lead us to believe. This chapter will conclude with an explanation of how design concepts can both be *informed by* and *influence* the design process through the examination of common interactions between the two.

“The design process” can provide a valuable framework that breaks down creative problem-solving activities into ordered, manageable steps and stages. Such frameworks can take on many forms, including those that define, categorize, and organize phases of creative processes in different ways. Julien Nelson and Marion Botella address this in *Creativity, Design Thinking and Interdisciplinarity* in which they explain commonalities found between various creative process models that are “generally linear in structure and comprise between three and seven stages.”<sup>1</sup> The authors describe that although different process frameworks employ variable terminology, most reflect a “consensus regarding the presence of four main stages . . . problem analysis, idea generation, idea evaluation, and communication.”<sup>2</sup>

Interior design process models often reflect similar structuring and are relied upon to guide design development and to determine what should be accomplished at each stage of a project. This can be especially helpful for students or novice designers who may be unsure of how to start or proceed with their creative endeavors. As a result, process frameworks are often introduced in first-year courses and then referred back to throughout an interior designer’s education. The reliance on design processes also extends into professional practice where it is utilized to support effective and consistent project management. Practicing interior designers may have their own individualized processes, or, depending on the jurisdiction,

licensing restrictions, or project type, may be legally mandated to align with a specific framework.

While standardized design processes may provide a valuable scaffold for project development – and have indeed been almost universally adopted within the fields of interior design and architecture as a result – they are regularly criticized for failing to address the individual, at times chaotic, nature of creative pursuits. Research participants frequently raised concerns about the restrictive, linear nature of the design process, especially in relation to the generation and application of design concepts. If creativity is, in reality, “more about mess than about methodology”<sup>3</sup> it begs the question – how and why did “the design process” become so influential?

## **Modernist Underpinnings of the Design Process**

Although humans have been designing and problem solving throughout history, research into what would ultimately be regarded as “the design process” arose in the 1920s out of a Modernist agenda to rationalize creative practices. The Modern movement, which spanned the late 19th century to mid-20th century, witnessed an era shaped by many forces – global destabilization brought on by devastating world conflict, industrialization and mass production, the rise of capitalism, as well as an increased interest in science and technology.<sup>4</sup> Impacted by the complex interplay of these forces (among others), it was also an era that exalted views of universality and objectivity.

Perception of universality during this period was notably informed by Western, often Eurocentric, perspectives resulting in the erasure of cultures, histories, and traditions falling beyond the presumed “universal.” As described by Arturo Escobar in *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*, “the hegemony of modern knowledge works to make invisible other knowledges and ways of being”<sup>5</sup> that exist beyond limited Western worldviews. Modernist investigations into creativity during this period reflect an utter lack of interest in, or

respect for, diverse creative practices. As a result, the ways in which different societies and individuals may have approached what is now considered “design” throughout history became largely supplanted by “rational,” “universal” approaches. Such thinking has left an impactful legacy on design pedagogy and practice.

The interest in rationalizing and standardizing creative pursuits began with examinations into the nature of creative practices themselves. One framework emerged out of such investigations that would go on to inspire the field of creativity research and remains highly influential “as a conceptual anchor for many [of these] researchers.”<sup>6</sup> This model, which was outlined by Graham Wallas in his book *The Art of Thought*<sup>7</sup> described four phases of creativity:

[P]reparation, in which a creative familiarizes themselves with the content and context of a situation to be responded to; incubation, in which the individual sits with and thinks about information gathered in the preparation stage; illumination, in which potential solutions emerge; and verification, in which solutions are tested to ensure they adequately respond to the needs of the situation.<sup>8</sup>

The acknowledgement and identification of distinct phases were an important turning point that would ultimately inspire the development of many other frameworks – some proposing subtle modifications to Wallas’s original as well as others significantly deviating from it.

As time passed and modernist attitudes persisted, greater trust was placed in rational approaches to creative practices. Relying on foundational understandings of creativity (such as those identified in Wallas’s early model) and objective, scientific methods, researchers began developing frameworks for “designers to approach problems of their time, which were thought to be too complex to be solved intuitively.”<sup>9</sup> In “Designerly Ways of Knowing: Design Discipline Versus Design Science,” Nigel Cross describes the “aspirations to scientise design”<sup>10</sup> that were shaped by Modernist views and became clearly embodied in design process research that was emerging by the mid-20th century. It is perhaps unsurprising that an era fascinated by objectivity and efficiency would bring about ideas and

investigative research into how designers worked, and how they should do so most effectively.

## The Design Methods Movement

The Design Methods movement began in the United Kingdom in the 1960s and was born out of a desire to harness the potential of human ingenuity through measured, predictable frameworks. As described by Cross:

The desire of [this] new movement was even [stronger] than before to base design process (as well as the products of design) on objectivity and rationality. The origins of this emergence of new design methods in the 1960s lay in the application of novel, scientific, and computational methods to the novel and pressing problems of the Second World War – from which came civilian developments such as operations research and management decision-making techniques.<sup>11</sup>

Advancements in science and technology shaped the Design Methods movement with one particular device having a foundational impact. The computer and the associated emergence of information-processing theories – specifically those relating to the potential for machines to supplant humans in terms of problem-solving abilities – were especially influential. The supposition that “human intelligence could be formally described by logical rules”<sup>12</sup> was becoming increasingly evident in the burgeoning fields of artificial intelligence and digital computing. Guided by this principle, computational research necessitated a translation of subjective, illogical, or unconscious thought patterns, such as those relied upon by humans when problem solving into objective, logical, or quantifiable metrics to be utilized by computers. This research accelerated in the United States during the Cold War (1947–1989) with increased funding for the military who were beginning to explore the potential use of artificial intelligence to “automate problem solving . . . from an intuitive process into a more rigorous science.”<sup>13</sup>

One of the individuals involved in research with the US military was the American political- and social-scientist, and future Nobel Prize winner, Herbert Simon.<sup>14</sup> Simon was fascinated by scientific approaches to problem solving with computers but was also intrigued by the potential for broader applications of such approaches within the social sciences. For Simon, the social sciences suffered from a lack of “the same kind of rigor and the same mathematical underpinnings that had made the ‘hard’ sciences so brilliantly successful.”<sup>15</sup> As a result, beginning in the 1960s, Simon focused his energies on expanding the use of logic-driven approaches to problem solving and decision-making within the social sciences, advocating for the application of “scientific rigor to social actions and processes, including design.”<sup>16</sup>

Simon published what would become his seminal text *The Sciences of the Artificial* in 1969.<sup>17</sup> The year after he delivered a series of lectures at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (to a largely engineering audience) entitled “The Science of Design.”<sup>18</sup> These lectures called for pedagogical transformations to design education supported by his argument that “academic respectability calls for subject matter that is intellectually tough, analytic, formalizable, and teachable” while stating that “in the past, much, if not most, of what we knew about design and about the artificial sciences was intellectually soft, intuitive, informal, and cookbooky.”<sup>19</sup> The legacy of this perspective remains central to contemporary design practice and pedagogy but was especially powerful for the design methods movement of the 1960s.<sup>20</sup>

The desire to formulate a scientific, rational approach to problem solving in design led to the generation of many design process models during this period. In order to maintain quality and predictability, these models were generally *prescriptive* in nature, in that they delineated what steps a designer should systematically undertake and what should be accomplished at each stage of a project.<sup>21</sup> Many of the approaches that would come to influence architecture and interior design were developed during this era and would be disseminated and communicated through different maps, systems, models, and frameworks. In this sense, the design methods movement has had a lasting impact on the education and practice of designers.

This impact is perhaps most evident in the legislated steps and stages found within professional bodies and their recommended frameworks.

A clear example of this is offered by The Royal Institute of British Architects' (RIBA) Plan of Work which was originally instituted in 1963.<sup>22</sup> RIBA claims that this model, which was updated in 2013 and again in 2020, offers a "definitive design and process management tool for the UK construction industry [that] is gaining traction internationally."<sup>23</sup> Through the use of a "simple and robust framework"<sup>24</sup> of eight stages (Strategic Definition, Preparation and Briefing, Concept Design, Spatial Coordination, Technical Design, Manufacturing and Construction, Handover, and Use)<sup>25</sup> the Plan of Work has significantly shaped the design and construction industries. This is one example of the many broadly prescriptive frameworks relied upon by legislative bodies in the fields of architecture and interior design to influence or regulate design processes.

### ***Criticisms of Design Methods***

While the Design Methods movement came to play an influential role in shaping the design industry, it has not been viewed in a wholly positive light. As early as the 1970s some of the original proponents of the movement were beginning to distance themselves from it, citing concerns with overly prescriptive frameworks that were increasingly disconnected from the *actual* practices and processes of design.<sup>26</sup>

One former Design Methods advocate, J. Christopher Jones, declared his "dislike [of] the machine language, the behaviorism, the continual attempt to fix the whole of life into a logical framework" that had become progressively central to the movement.<sup>27</sup> Another former champion, Christopher Alexander, stated that "I have been hailed as one of the leading exponents of these so-called design methods. I am very sorry that this has happened, and I want to state, publicly, that I reject the whole idea of design methods as a field of study."<sup>28</sup> Alexander was perhaps the most publicly critical of the movement, having also stated that "I've disassociated myself from the field . . . [and that t]here is so little in what is called 'design methods' that has anything useful to say about how to design buildings that I never even read the literature anymore. . . . I would say forget it, forget the whole thing."<sup>29</sup>

This original optimism placed in rational, prescriptive models faded as time passed, research developed, and the incongruity between design and scientific approaches became increasingly apparent. This was partially owing to the growing acceptance of the fundamentally open-ended nature of design problems and recognition that they may be poorly suited to prescriptive methods that “tend to focus on an extensive problem analysis, which [seem] unrealistic [for] ill-defined problems.”<sup>30</sup> In 1973, Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin Webber challenged the fundamental notion that rational, scientific approaches could be utilized to solve complex, ill-defined, or “wicked” societal problems in their article “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning.”<sup>31</sup> In this article, the authors contrast the “wicked problems”<sup>32</sup> facing those dealing with complex, indeterminate problems which lack “ideal” or “correct” solutions with the more clearly defined or “tame”<sup>33</sup> ones more commonly found in the fields of science or engineering.

A recognition that design problems could also be broadly understood as “wicked,”<sup>34</sup> and therefore fundamentally ill-suited for scientific problem solving, started gaining traction. Design scholars embraced notions of “wicked problems”<sup>35</sup> and it became a more commonly held view that “method may be vital to the practice of science (where it validates the results), but not to the practice of design (where results do not have to be repeatable, and, in most cases, must not be repeated, or copied).”<sup>36</sup> As such, perspectives about best practices for design problem solving began to shift.

The paradigmatic movement away from rational problem-solving approaches was also motivated by the realization that despite experimentation with numerous frameworks, little headway was being made in finding an “ideal” design process that would lead to “optimal” outcomes.<sup>37</sup> While disappointing research findings initially led investigators to “try harder,” guided by the belief that “imperfections in the methods they had developed were responsible for the lack of success,”<sup>38</sup> such disappointments eventually prompted a reevaluation of prescriptive approaches. This was partially influenced by the shifting understanding of the nature of design problems, but was also informed by suspicions that aspects of the design process may have been critically overlooked by prescriptive design method frameworks.<sup>39</sup> After many decades, there was an openness to return to “the notion that intuitive design thinking might not be so objectionable after all,”<sup>40</sup>

leading to the development of a movement that aimed to capitalize on a greater, more fluid understanding of the practices and thought processes of designers.

## Design Thinking Movement

The increased criticism of the Design Methods movement was partly due to the evolving understanding of the nature of open-ended (design) problems and the processes utilized in addressing them. Perspectives were also impacted by a transition within the Western world towards postmodernism, marked by an increased “scepticism about the claims of any kind of overall, totalizing explanation[s] . . . [or] master narratives”<sup>41</sup> that “gave cultural practices . . . legitimization or authority”<sup>42</sup> and resulted in the marginalization of individuals, groups, and worldviews that ran counter to them.

Charles Jencks, an influential postmodernist theorist and architectural historian,<sup>43</sup> stated that “[p]erhaps the biggest shift in the Post-Modern world is the new attitude of openness . . . not just a taste for heterogeneity which has brought this about, but also a new assertion of minority rights, of ‘otherness.’”<sup>44</sup> Jencks continues in explaining the postmodern connection with social movements of the 1960s and 1970s emerging out of an expanded awareness of diverse experiences, cultures, and perspectives that had been formerly excluded from the “universal” modernist narratives.<sup>45</sup>

The notion of “pluralism”<sup>46</sup> – allowing for the coexistence of a “multiplicity” of viewpoints and beliefs<sup>47</sup> – that arose during this time was partially fueled by the “instantaneous, twenty-four-hour ‘information world’”<sup>48</sup> that led to a greater acceptance of an “interpretative multiplicity . . . indeterminacy and heterogeneity of cultural meaning[s].”<sup>49</sup> When compared with the modern era that was largely shaped by industry, the postmodern age became increasingly shaped by *information*, resulting in “the sudden emergence of what looks like a new class, the replacement of the proletariat by the cognitariat.”<sup>50</sup>

With the increased access to information, liberation from (some of) the constraints of rational, modernist thought as well as a growing interest in the nature of cognition, the postmodern period significantly impacted

design research.<sup>51</sup> This is partly owing to the “new-found interest in the process of designing”<sup>52</sup> and furthered still by research methods developed during the “cognitive revolution of the 1960s.”<sup>53</sup> These factors came together and gave rise to a new area of study, as described by Goldschmidt:

Awareness of and attention to process in practice and in general cultural contexts, especially insofar as the creative process is concerned, coincided with the research agenda of cognitive science and cognitive psychology. This set the stage for the emergence of design thinking research, which was a new field of study but also the continuation of the Design Methods movement. It takes a confluence of social, cultural, scientific and technological developments to bring about profound paradigmatic changes in disciplines. For design research, this was the right time to move to the study of design thinking.<sup>54</sup>

The antecedents of the Design Thinking movement emerged in the 1960s and began gaining momentum during the following decades. As time passed and design research advanced, the identification of design as a specific area of study with a distinct body of knowledge became more broadly accepted. This would eventually lead to the promotion of design methodologies beyond the discipline itself, leading to the massive mainstream popularity and application of “design thinking.”

### ***“Designerly Ways of Knowing”***

Part of the reason designers and researchers wanted to distance themselves from the alignment with the sciences was the mounting evidence of the differences between the two. This was not exclusively related to the nature of “wicked” and “tame” problems<sup>55</sup> but also supported by research into the cognitive processes utilized when solving different types of problems. An example of this is supported by Bryan Lawson’s 1970s research findings that scientists and architects approach their work in fundamentally different ways, with “scientists as having a problem-focused strategy and

the architects as having a solution-focused strategy.”<sup>56</sup> Many other studies were conducted during this time period which led to an expanded body of knowledge and the acknowledgement that “design” not only could, but *should* be defined on its own terms.

This argument was outlined by Nigel Cross in his book *Designerly Ways of Knowing*<sup>57</sup> in which he described the necessary differentiation of design from other fields. He continued with this line of thought in stating that the “world of design has been badly served by its intellectual leaders, who have failed to develop their subject on its own terms.”<sup>58</sup> Cross’s continued advocacy is evident in his 2001 article “Designerly Ways of Knowing: Design Discipline Versus Design Science” published in the journal *Design Issues*:

[D]esign practice does indeed have its own strong and appropriate intellectual culture, and that we must avoid swamping our design research with different cultures imported either from the sciences or the arts. This does not mean that we should completely ignore these other cultures. On the contrary, they have much stronger histories of inquiry, scholarship, and research than we have in design. We need to draw upon those histories and traditions where appropriate, while building our own intellectual culture, acceptable and defensible in the world on its own terms. We have to be able to demonstrate that standards of rigor in our intellectual culture at least match those of the others.<sup>59</sup>

Design scholarship during this time resulted in an increased interest in, and understanding of, the different ways designers approach and navigate problems in ways unique to the discipline. The acceptance of different ways of working resulted in a shift away from top-down prescriptive methodologies promoted by the Design Methods movement. Instead, bottom-up descriptive processes began to emerge that were believed to more truthfully represent how designers *actually* worked as well as the thought processes behind their varied practices.<sup>60</sup> During the Design Thinking era attempts were made to understand exactly what successful designers were doing rather than dictating how they should work through the utilization of rigid frameworks.

### ***“The Reflective Practitioner”***

Herbert Simon emerged as a key figure in the Design Methods movement of the 1960s with his work on rational problem solving. By the 1980s, another scholar had prominently appeared on the horizon, offering an alternative focal point for the Design Thinking community. Donald Schön wrote *The Reflective Practitioner* in 1983, a text that would come to significantly impact research into Design Thinking that emerged and developed throughout the 1990s as Simon’s notions of rational problem solving began to be overtaken by Schön’s “reflection in practice.”<sup>61</sup>

In *The Reflective Practitioner*,<sup>62</sup> Schön argued that there is a fundamental disconnect between the “scientific basis of professional knowledge and the demands of real-world practice” which are often ill-served by logic-driven approaches.<sup>63</sup> In challenging modes of rational problem solving, Schön sought to uncover an “epistemology of practice implicit in the artistic, intuitive processes which some practitioners do bring to situations of uncertainty, uniqueness, and value conflict,” including within the discipline of architecture.<sup>64</sup> Here Schön begins to clarify the value of “reflection-in-action” in which knowledge that may not have been consciously identifiable is revealed through creative action.<sup>65</sup> *The Reflective Practitioner* presented an alternative viewpoint and argued that intuitive, reflective practices were “rigorous in [their] own right,”<sup>66</sup> a perspective that came to prove significantly influential within the Design Thinking movement.

Schön’s notions of reflective practice and an increased reliance on intuition – not solely logic, as Simon would have preferred – fundamentally shifted views concerning design and creativity that previously had been solidly anchored within the Design Methods movement. With an expansion of design-related research alongside a growing interest in capitalizing on the creative potential of Design Thinking, “new” approaches to problem solving began to be promoted within and also beyond the discipline. Beginning in the early 1990s, “design thinking” was being touted as a tool to support individuals and organizations in their quest to harness creativity and generate innovative solutions to any range of problems. One group commonly associated with the Design Thinking movement is the American-based design firm IDEO. Started in 1991 by Tim Brown and

David Kelley (who also went on to found the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford University, commonly known as the d.school), IDEO became hugely successful in their marketing of design thinking as “an ambitious attempt to actually uncover what guides creativity and innovation.”<sup>67</sup> The interest in design by nondesigners that resulted from the effective promotion of Design Thinking resulted in a proliferation of resources on the subject – lectures, courses, workshops, and texts – with an impressive range of claims about the power of Design Thinking to positively transform *anything*, a sentiment that persists to this day.

Design Thinking research began to identify components of creative processes that remain evident in contemporary creativity and design scholarship. Some of these arose from the acceptance of the important role of intuition and other unknowable aspects in design processes. Others appeared from the recognition that there are many subjective, individual approaches to design that limit one’s ability to create or uncover a single “ideal” framework for all circumstances. This inability to derive a single, coherent, and rational model largely has to do with the unpredictable and fundamentally nonlinear nature of design and its associated creative processes.

### ***Nonlinear Design and Creative Processes***

Rather than outlining a linear progression of steps, there is a general consensus among contemporary design researchers that the act of designing typically involves alternating between two “modes of thought” – divergent thinking and convergent thinking.<sup>68</sup> Although these terms are not new within the field of creativity research, they have become more commonly associated with design processes since the onset of the Design Thinking movement. As a researcher with a specific focus on design cognition and the processes of designers, Gabriela Goldschmidt attests that understanding the mutable relationship between divergent and convergent thinking is “particularly pertinent to the understanding of creative thought.”<sup>69</sup>

In relation to creativity research, divergent thinking can be defined as “thinking that moves away in diverging directions so as to involve a

variety of aspects and which sometimes lead to novel ideas and solutions.”<sup>70</sup> Cropley expands on this definition by clarifying that divergent thinking “involves producing multiple or alternative answers from available information” and that it “requires making unexpected combinations, recognizing links among remote associates, [or] transforming information into unexpected forms.”<sup>71</sup>

Convergent thinking, on the other hand, can be defined as “thinking that brings together information [focused] on solving a problem”<sup>72</sup> or, as Cropley clarifies, it “is oriented toward deriving the single best (or correct) answer to a clearly defined question. It [also] emphasizes speed, accuracy, logic, and the like and focuses on recognizing the familiar, reapplying set techniques, and accumulating information.”<sup>73</sup>

Although divergent thinking is most often associated with creativity, research continues to affirm the important role of convergent thinking. In design processes it appears that “[d]ivergent and convergent thinking are seen as occurring in cyclical phases” and that “[n]eurological evidence suggests that frequent shifts between defocused and focused attention to stimuli in memory activation, which equate divergent and convergent thinking, are a hallmark of creative thinking.”<sup>74</sup> As such, it becomes clear that the design process does not comprise a number of linear and logical steps but rather an oscillation between different “modes of thought”<sup>75</sup> that are used to address different aspects of design problems.

This is supported by Goldschmidt’s investigations into design processes in which she utilizes a research method known as “protocol analysis” that involves the “think-aloud”<sup>76</sup> verbalization of thought processes that individuals progress through as they are actively designing or problem solving. The talking-aloud protocol enables Goldschmidt and her team to understand the steps or “design moves”<sup>77</sup> that take place as a designer progresses through their tasks. These steps are then charted and “links”<sup>78</sup> are made between each step to monitor how ideas are connected to one another. Nonlinear patterns are evident in the analysis of design processes, but also the emergence of “critical moves”<sup>79</sup> that have a significant impact on the character and outcome of such processes. As described in Chapter 2: The Definitions of Design Concept, Goldschmidt’s “critical move”<sup>80</sup> is arguably synonymous with design concept. This leads to an explanation of the

ways in which design concept is both shaped by, and has influence over, the design process.

## Design Concept in the Design Process

Existing design process frameworks often acknowledge the impact of design concept through the demarcation of a distinct stage, typically during the early phases of a project. This logic presumes that designers generate design concepts at the beginning of a project that guide them through to completion. While recognition of the importance of conceptual development is valuable, the inclusion of it at its own specific stage can create misleading assumptions that if concepts are not resolved by a certain point, there will be very little subsequent opportunity to do so. The impact of this reasoning shapes interiors practice and is also apparent in design pedagogy. If students haven't resolved their concepts at an early stage of a project, they regularly experience pressure to do so, which often leaves them feeling stuck, confused, or unsure of how to proceed. This reflects a concerning trait of design process frameworks that limit awareness of the multifarious, changeable, and intertwined nature of design concepts throughout the lifespan of a project.

Interior design educators and practitioners who took part in this research often voiced their apprehensions about the overly restrictive, linear nature of design processes, especially in regard to the development of design concepts. While many participants stated that having *some* idea of a conceptual direction is helpful at the early stages of a project, others acknowledged that this might not always be the case. Certain educators explained that they do not expect students to have fully formed concepts until the end of the project and another voiced that students may not fully realize what their concepts *actually* were until years later. Such insights reflected discordant understandings and expectations regarding the integration of design concepts in the design process. The remainder of this chapter will outline different ways in which concepts may emerge from creative practices, including the variability of its expression within specific projects and the work of individual designers.

## Design Concept/Process Diagrams

This section introduces a new series of design process diagrams that offer a range of potential approaches to the generation and application of design concepts in an attempt to challenge previously held assumptions about both *when* and *how* they should be integrated into the design process. These diagrams deviate from the traditional procedural models of “double dips” or “process spirals” to focus specifically on design concepts and the various ways they can emerge, evolve, and express themselves. Rather than serving as *prescriptive* or *descriptive* models, the diagrams aim to be *suggestive* – encouraging more inclusive ways of thinking about design concepts and their integration within interior design processes.

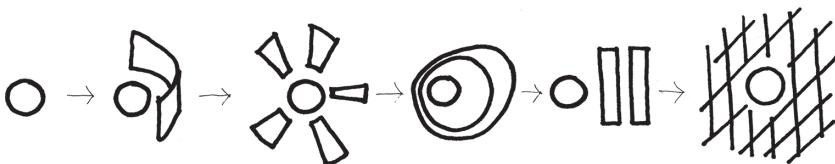
Although design concepts are often associated with the early stages of project development, they can actually appear in very different ways and at different times throughout. Some may present themselves *directly* when ideas are generated early on and then carried through the entirety of a project with minimal alteration. Other concepts may *evolve* from initial ideas in response to changing conditions or insights that surface during the design process. Conceptual ideas may also *emerge* from a design process in relation to what unfolds as problems are addressed, ideas are tested, and solutions generated. Lastly, design concepts may result from the cumulative layering of ideas that are combined and recombined in countless ways through a *compound* process.

### A Direct Process

The application of design concepts through a direct process aligns with conventional wisdom that they should be generated at the beginning of a project and then utilized for the remainder of the process. The reliance on this type of process is evident in interior design pedagogy through assignments that outline conceptual components required at the early stages of a project. It is also exceedingly apparent in the practice of interior design where designers are required to obtain client approvals of proposed concepts prior to moving forward. Due to contractual obligations, it is especially



**Figure 4.2** A Direct Process in which the design concept is executed with minimal change.



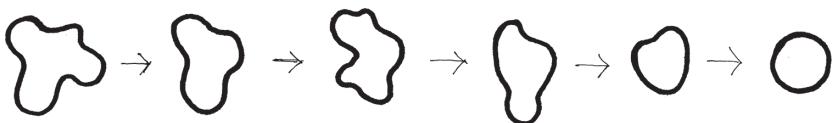
**Figure 4.3** A Direct Process in which the design concept remains consistent but the execution changes.

important in interiors practice for the concept to remain consistent and be executed according to what was agreed at the early stages of a project.

With a direct process, design concepts are clarified at the start of the project and used to guide subsequent decision-making, exploration, and communication. Although there is limited interest in modifying concepts once they have been established, designers often have flexibility in their *interpretation* of the concept as they transition through their design processes. For example, a proposed concept may draw inspiration from a stand of trees and connect that to notions of “containment and repetition” within an interior. This concept may be discussed consistently throughout the design process but as a designer moves forward with space planning, material selection, or detailing they may interpret “containment and repetition” in slightly different ways. In this sense, the concept remains consistent but its execution and how it is employed in guiding the design process, may vary.

### ***An Evolving Process***

Design concepts that are formulated through an evolving process include those in which conceptual ideas are established near the beginning of the



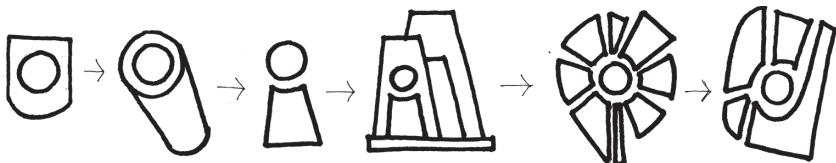
**Figure 4.4** An Evolving Process in which the design concept evolves as the project unfolds.

project but then continue to be modified throughout. This results in changeable conceptual approaches that may be communicated differently as a project unfolds. Evolving processes are very common in the education of interior architects and designers as students are developing their understanding of how best to integrate concepts into their work. As such, students may experiment with initial conceptual ideas that require feedback and subsequent testing prior to then determining a “final” design concept. Such activities may continue throughout the length of the project.

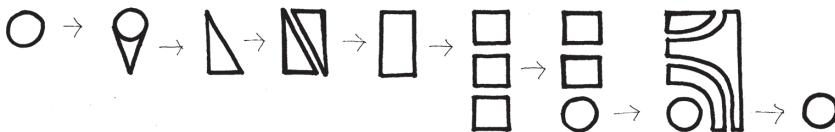
Evolving processes are much less apparent in the practice of interiors due to contractual obligations that often necessitate conceptual clarity from the outset of a project. Additionally, the utilization of such processes may be more unusual, or occur for a far shorter duration of time, owing to the degree of expertise of design practitioners who are adept at working with and evaluating the appropriateness and potential of specific concepts.

An evolving process supports the continual investigation of conceptual ideas as a project progresses, rather than simply establishing one at the outset and carrying it inflexibly forward (as seen in direct processes). This can be valuable as it offers designers additional time to contemplate, explore, and build upon preliminary conceptual ideas – adding depth and complexity to their thinking and the articulation of their concepts. Sadly, many practitioners do not have this luxury of time for extended conceptual experimentation.

An increased depth or complexity in design concepts may result from the ongoing accumulation or generation of new ideas throughout a design process. It may also be informed by the reflection and reevaluation of ideas that were generated earlier in a process and perhaps then abandoned. As the value of an idea may well not be immediately apparent when first created, revisiting past work may help trigger insights regarding how



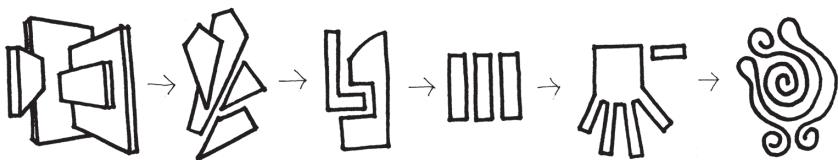
**Figure 4.5** An Evolving Process in which the design concept increases in depth and complexity.



**Figure 4.6** An Evolving Process in which previous design concepts are revisited.

previously overlooked notions may assist with project development. Reflecting on work created at the beginning of a project from a later standpoint within the design process enables designers to observe them from a fresh perspective and may usefully support the continuation and evolution of conceptual ideas.

The way designers work and the methods they employ in their creative practices may obviously reflect certain processes. Evolving processes are especially apparent in practices that are intertwined with making and material exploration(s). In such practices, the properties and qualities of materials, tools, or created artifacts impact possible directions and areas of focus, potentially informing or supporting conceptual understandings. For example, a student tasked with designing a temporary pavilion may be interested in exploring the potential of wood construction for such a structure. Out of this initial curiosity the student may begin to explore the possibilities of various wood products through experimentation – cutting, bending, layering, wrapping, and so on. As these material tests begin to suggest what might prove viable, the student can then continue to refine their conceptual ideas, equipped with a newfound knowledge of the potentialities various materials offer through the evolving process of engaging with them.

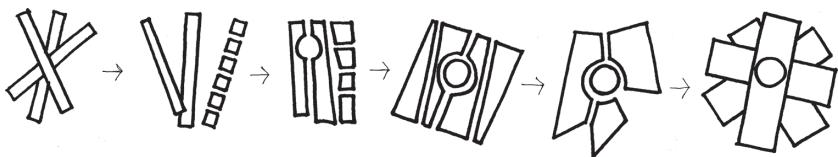


**Figure 4.7** An Evolving Process in which the design concept is informed by making and material explorations.

### **An Emergent Process**

Concepts can also appear out of a process that does not begin from a distinct conceptual starting point. In such cases, a designer or team may not have a clear idea of what their concept is from the outset of a project but move forward with the design process nonetheless. This may be the case for experienced designers who trust in their own creative processes to guide decision-making and design development without a focused or established concept. Emergent processes may also be utilized by students who need to advance in a project – most often due to time constraints – even if they have not been able to establish a clear concept but hope to find that one surfaces at some point during their process.

As opposed to evolving concepts which build from initial conceptual ideas, an emergent process may instead result in concepts that arise from the process itself. Such concepts may surface out of project explorations or research, material engagement, or through the processes of writing, sketching, or drawing. These methods are a select few of those utilized by designers who engage with the world around them and rely on their creative outputs (such as drawings, models, etc.) to support fresh and different ways of thinking. Such perspectives may then lead to the development of concepts resulting from an emergent process. For example, a designer may begin a project by creating a series of abstract sketches without any conscious direction, focus, or specific intention. As they progress through their project they may come to realize that the layered geometries that were present in their sketches are also surfacing in their project models, plans, and material selections, leading to a design concept that can be understood and “named” (or articulated) only at a later stage in their design process. The notion of emergent processes suggests the importance of



**Figure 4.8** An Emergent Process in which the design concept arises from the process itself.



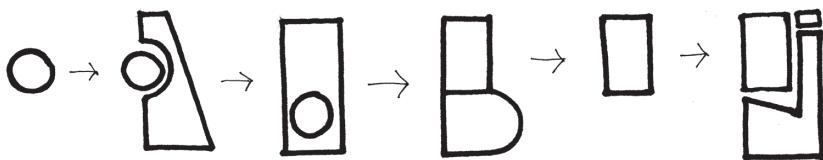
**Figure 4.9** An Emergent Process in which the design concept is realized with hindsight.

allowing concepts to unfold in their own due course with the acknowledgement that strong concepts are not at all limited to those that are generated and clearly identified at the very beginning of a project.

At times, a designer may not even realize they have been working with a specific concept. In these cases, it may be unconsciously derived and only then discovered or identified by someone else – as may occur in a conversation or critique session. This can often be the case when someone is too close to their work to comprehend the ways in which it is all interwoven and connected. Closely related to this is the emergence of design concepts through reflection and *hindsight*. Sometimes ideas are indeed generated at the outset of a project, but can only be seen or identified later on. These concepts may appear to designers as they review the work that has been done along the way and notice a connective thread. In such cases, a concept might only be articulated during final presentations even if that had not proved possible during the initial stages.

### **Compound Processes**

Design concepts generated from compound processes involve the combination, recombination, or merging of disparate ideas throughout the

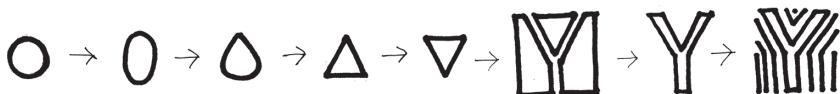


**Figure 4.10** A singular-sequential Compound Process in which one design concept leads to another.

design process. This may take on various forms, such as *singular-sequential* in which one concept leads to another; *multiple-sequential* in which one concept leads to many others; *branching*, in which conceptual ideas begin to impact different aspects of a project or process in different ways; and *merging* in which multiple concepts meld into one another.

Compound processes of the *singular-sequential* variety may result in concepts that drastically change from an initial approach as a result of what unfolds during a design process. In such cases a designer may develop a concept relatively early in a project but after experimentation and further reflection then realizes that it does not entirely work or that another, better approach is possible. For example, a design team may be inspired by a piece of music and draw conceptual ideas from it which informs the composition of spaces and choreography of activities within the interior. However, as the team makes further progress they may realize that their initial concept has limited them and therefore switch to something new, informed by realizations about the nature of the project and research that has taken place throughout their process.

*Multiple-sequential* processes involve the proliferation of a preliminary design concept that may transform into a series of new ideas and approaches. This type of process may result from a more informed understanding of the project context and thereby respond to a higher level of complexity revealed within a project. It may also be representative of a conceptual development process that is potentially straying off course or traveling in too many directions to remain beneficial to the design process. This requires consistent monitoring and reflection by the designer or team

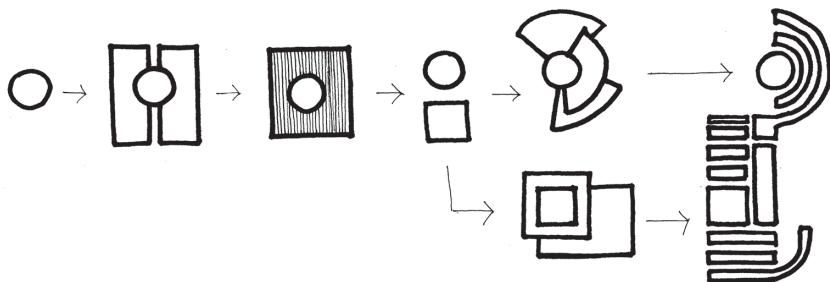


**Figure 4.11** A multiple-sequential Compound Process in which one design concept leads to multiple others.

to see if the expansion of conceptual ideas is genuinely proving helpful. An example of a positive expansion of design ideas might be illustrated by a designer who has generated a concept based on the experience of swimming – connecting to notions of buoyancy, movement, or temperature changes. As they move through their process they come to realize that beyond the experience of swimming, human interactions with water more broadly could be valuable to explore and integrate into their work. As such, initial ideas related to the experience of swimming are expanded upon to encapsulate the different ways we use water to nourish, cleanse, or restore. This demonstrates the ways in which compound processes can support the expansion of concepts from initial ideas.

Conceptual ideas that are used in various ways and come to impact a project and/or the design process can be considered to be *branching*. This may occur in a project when a concept is established from the outset but, as an understanding of the project expands or new problems appear, offshoots or subsets of the initial conceptual ideas become prominent and inform design development in different ways. In this sense, there is still a core “main concept” that was present from the beginning of a process but it is connected to different parts of a project in different ways, with aspects of the conceptual ideas shaping broad, overarching components or smaller detailed portions of a design project.

To illustrate, a student is interested in the body of work of a particular visual artist. Their initial conceptual ideas draw from the artist’s general approach to representation – for example, their use of colour blocking and their expressive brush strokes used to convey emotion. Ideas may be translated from the work of this artist into an interior in various ways, relying on a branching process. For instance, the emotional states most often conveyed in the work of the artist may inform the designer’s intended “feel” or “mood” of various interior spaces, or their expressive brush strokes

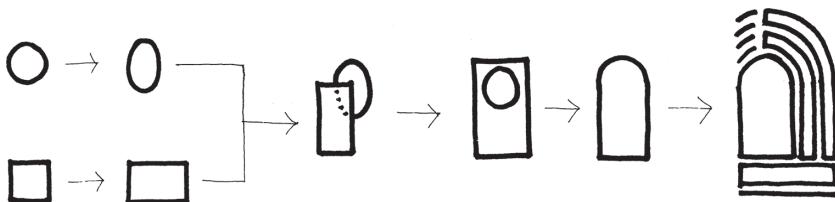


**Figure 4.12** A branching Compound Process in which design concepts impact different aspects of a project or process.

may underpin/support the selection of materials with a range of textural qualities. Colour schemes might be taken from a specific piece within the artist's oeuvre and then be used to guide the selection of wall, floor, and ceiling finishes. As each portion of the project is correspondingly informed by a different aspect of a core conceptual idea, one can see how a branching process may support designers in their project work.

The final expression of design concepts being generated through compound processes is that of *merging* in which multiple concepts blend into one another. This may ultimately lead to one grand unifying concept or simply a reduced number compared to those initially generated at the outset of a project. This frequently occurs with students who may at the start have many ideas which might pull them in various directions. As they begin to work with their many ideas, some of them will start to blur or merge into each other. The communication of these concepts may appear to be quite disconnected in the early stages but as the designer has more time to play and test their ideas, the concepts become more connected and are thus able to be communicated more cohesively.

For example, a student is working on the design of a community center within an existing building. At an early concept presentation they discuss their interest in three different areas – the historic architectural style of the building, the traces of past use and inhabitation left within the interior, and lastly, the importance of spaces for connection and to foster a sense of belonging within the community. As the project develops and the student has more time to work with, contemplate, and receive feedback on their initial



**Figure 4.13** A merging Compound Process in which multiple design concepts blend into one another.

concepts, they may begin to formulate a narrative that merges multiple ideas into a more cohesive design concept. By the final presentation, the student may be able to articulate how their project knits together the array of architectural features and past occupations to create a sense of place firmly rooted in a rich history of social connection and belonging within the community. This example illustrates how different ideas can merge into one another in ways that may not have been entirely predictable from the outset of a design process.

### ***Conclusion***

Design concepts can be both *informed by* and *influence* the design process, inextricably intertwining the two. The interplay between conceptual development and the design processes utilized by designers is varied and complex. One of the aims of this chapter was to communicate how design concepts can – and indeed must be allowed to – emerge and evolve in a variety of diverse ways. Another aspect was to highlight that design concepts do not purely exist within the strict paradigms that presently shape how designers are taught, or the norms within which they are required to practice.

This offers students, educators, and practitioners notions to reflect upon. For students, such ideas serve as a reminder that there is no “one size fits all” approach when it comes to honing their own ways of working and developing conceptual thinking skills. For educators, they may wish to consider

their framing of design processes and conceptual integration, especially in regard to course delivery and assignment expectations. Lastly, practitioners may begin to question and challenge the standardized processes that have come to dominate their working lives and so firmly shape their everyday practices. The generation and applications of concepts arising from various procedural approaches to project work enable a broader and more inclusive understanding of the topic and the ways in which it shapes the practice of interior design. The following section begins to address another area of central concern – how design concepts can be generated.

## Notes

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- 6 Eugene Sadler-Smith, “Wallas’ Four-Stage Model of the Creative Process: More Than Meets the Eye?,” *Creativity Research Journal* 27, no. 4 (2015): 342, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10400419.2015.1087277>.
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- 11 Cross, 49.
- 12 D. J. Huppertz, “Revisiting Herbert Simon’s ‘Science of Design,’” *Design Issues* 31, no. 2 (2015): 32, [https://doi.org/10.1162/DESI\\_a\\_00320](https://doi.org/10.1162/DESI_a_00320).
- 13 Huppertz, 32.

- 14 Huppertz, "Revisiting Herbert Simon's 'Science of Design.'"
- 15 Simon quoted in Huppertz, 30.
- 16 Huppertz, 30.
- 17 Herbert A Simon, *The Sciences of the Artificial*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1969).
- 18 Huppertz, "Revisiting Herbert Simon's 'Science of Design,'" 33.
- 19 Simon quoted in Huppertz, 33.
- 20 Kees Dorst, "Design Problems and Design Paradoxes," *Design Issues* 22, no. 3 (2006): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1162/desi.2006.22.3.4>.
- 21 Gabriela Goldschmidt, *Linkography: Unfolding the Design Process* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 19.
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- 24 "RIBA Plan of Work 2020 Overview," 1.
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- 28 Alexander quoted in Goldschmidt, *Linkography: Unfolding the Design Process*, 18.
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- 42 Butler, 13.
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- 44 Charles Jencks, *What Is Post-Modernism?*, 3rd ed (London: Academy Editions, 1989), 55.
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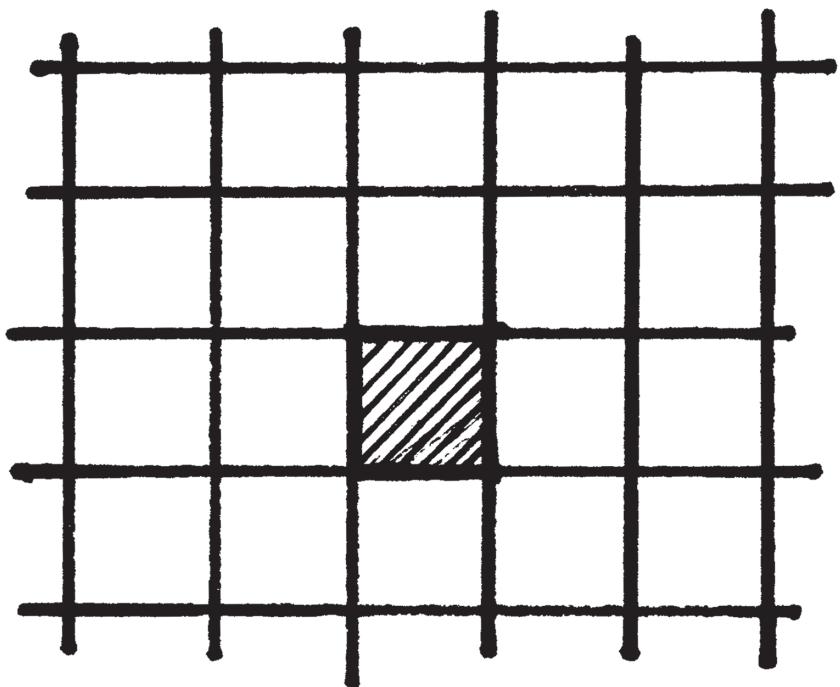
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- 59 Cross, “Designerly Ways of Knowing: Design Discipline versus Design Science,” 55. It should be noted that “evidence” of sufficient intellectual validity is largely viewed through the lens of Western academic thought and design education and practice. This fails to acknowledge the history of inquiry into what represents “design” in different forms throughout history and around the world.
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5

## Generation of Design Concepts

Where Do Ideas for Design Concepts Come From?

With an understanding of the functions, definitions, and manifestations of design concept, it is now possible to move onto another frequently asked question – *where do ideas for design concepts come from?*

In order to address this question, one must first acknowledge that it is challenging to provide a definitive answer. Some aspects of creativity – including individual processes, ways of working, and sources of inspiration – can be understood, studied, and documented, but there will always remain other component parts that are unknowable. Each person will approach a problem from a unique perspective informed by a multitude of factors, including their background, cognitive orientation, knowledge base, and life experiences.

As such, this chapter does not seek to provide a formulaic step-by-step guide for the generation of design concepts. Rather, it embraces a variety of creative processes and approaches to concept generation in interior architecture and design. Guidance provided within this section is primarily informed by interviews conducted with an international group of design educators and practitioners. Insights and perspectives shared by research participants are also supported with the integration of design literature, largely drawn from Western design and educational traditions. The overarching approach of this chapter is intended to be helpful for designers who may be unsure of where to begin generating design concepts in their project work.

## The Individual

When research participants were asked about the qualities of strong conceptual thinkers, they most often cited an openness to new experiences and ideas, and a readiness to draw upon these. This viewpoint is also evident in design and creativity literature. In their article “Concept Analysis of Creativity” published in the *Journal of Interior Design*, Elaine L. Pedersen and Kathryn L. Burton explore varied understandings of creativity within the discipline. This includes an investigation into its foundations, in which they clarify that:

Among the antecedents identified for a creative person are knowledge, experience, and a readiness for ideas. The broader the

knowledge base and variety of experiences to which design students are exposed the more fruitful will be their readiness for success as professional designers. Helping students learn to generate ideas is important, but, equally important is preparing them to recognize ideas and use ideas from a variety of sources.<sup>1</sup>

Gabriela Goldschmidt reinforces this sentiment in her article “The Designer as a Team of One,” in reminding the reader that: “Ever since Vitruvius’ first century treatise on architecture, we accept axiomatically that a designer must know a little bit about everything because design work requires varied knowledge and an outstanding capability for mental integration and synthesis.”<sup>2</sup> A similar notion is evident in Arthur Copley’s article “In Praise of Convergent Thinking,” which even more concisely describes that “knowledge provides a well from which ideas are drawn.”<sup>3</sup>

Bryan Lawson expands on this in quoting Herman Hertzberger, author of *Lessons for Students in Architecture*<sup>4</sup> who stated that

Everything that is absorbed and registered in your mind adds to the collection of ideas stored in the memory: a sort of library that you can consult whenever a problem arises. So, essentially the more you have seen, experienced and absorbed, the more points of reference you will have to help you decide which direction to take.<sup>5</sup>

The connection between knowledge, experience, and the generation of ideas also addresses why novice and senior designers may approach concept generation differently. This suggests that an individual’s approach to finding and developing concepts may very likely change as they gain experience within the discipline.

Life experience is a critical factor impacting one’s approach to design and conceptual development. In addition to this, an awareness of creative capabilities and what an individual is *interested* in can influence their design concepts. This may manifest in projects that explore similar conceptual ideas over the course of a career, which Bryan Lawson describes as a “guiding principle.”<sup>6</sup> This term refers to enduring fascinations a designer may bring to their work that are “sets of ideas, beliefs and values that

operate for the designer spanning many projects . . . and in most cases develop in a coherent way over their career.”<sup>7</sup> Designers who are able to explore overarching themes throughout their career may also find such ideas can serve as valuable motivational factors.

An understanding of one’s experiences, aptitudes, and interests can be used to support the development of individual ways of working. Such awareness of oneself and one’s personal approaches to design may also be relied upon in the generation of design concepts. This is especially true for designers who have experimented with different ways of working and who have honed their personal preferences over the course of many years. The acceptance of different approaches to design can be found in the outline of diverse methods described in Elise van Dooren’s book *Anchoring the Design Process*.<sup>8</sup> This text provides examples of different ways of working, which may be especially valuable to consider for the novice designer who mistakenly believes that there is a “correct” way to approach a design problem or generate design concepts:

Berlage, Le Corbusier and Richard Meijer worked with proportional systems and geometrical grids. Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee and Steven Holl translated musical compositions and sounds into visual, spatial and architectural configurations. Rem Koolhaas used montage to combine programmatic elements and quoted other architects in his work. [The Viennese design firm] Coop Himmelb(l)au created a formal configuration based on an explosive-like sketch, drawn with eyes closed. Aldo Rossi used meaningful spatial types. Venturi deliberately designed a composition with contradictory typologies. Hassan Fathy applied ancient construction methods in Egypt such as adobe. He also used traditional courtyards to provide passive cooling.<sup>9</sup>

These approaches provide insight into the myriad ways creativity is channeled and supported through individual methodologies. However, interior design is not a solitary profession. Designers regularly work and engage with others throughout the design process. Such processes of engagement shift the focus beyond individual notions of creativity to a more social

model,<sup>10</sup> suggesting that collaboration with others is a helpful venture for the generation of ideas and subsequent design concepts.

## Collaboration

The capacity for people to come together, pooling their life experiences and creative resources, presents fertile ground for conceptual development. Through collaboration, individuals are able to clarify, experiment with, and generate ideas in unexpected and fruitful ways. Such interactions may take place in studio courses between instructors or peers, with teammates or mentors, or with client or user groups. The recognition that collaborating with others is valuable for creativity and idea generation helps to shift away from the more commonly held individualistic view of creativity.

The social view of creativity is reflected in the responses of research participants (notably, interior design practitioners) who often spoke of collaboration as being central to their design processes. When asked where their ideas for design concepts come from, one respondent replied “My process is all about collaboration. So the idea or the kernel of an idea will come through conversations with my client.” Another respondent went on to elaborate that:

I rely on somebody else as the sounding board to push an idea somewhere else that you didn't think [of] yourself, or you couldn't take it somewhere else. That you can then pick up on and it's like – oh, yeah! I get that. That'll take me somewhere else. So you sort of ping pong a route that you wouldn't otherwise get to on your own, in your own mental way of getting it. And that's what I enjoy.

Ideas for design concepts may be generated by individuals or developed by those regularly engaging with others. Guided by past experiences, working styles, and design approaches, individuals and teams are challenged to meet the needs of a project and solve all of the problems that arise throughout the design process. How designers navigate these processes impact conceptual development and provide a background for

understanding how interior architects and designers may begin to think about developing their own design concepts.

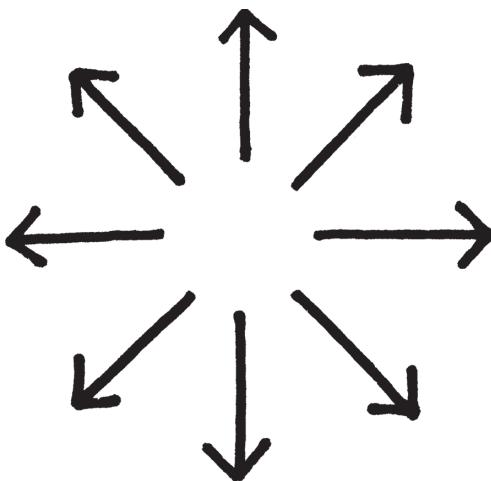
### ***Where Do Ideas Come From in the Practice of Interior Design?***

Ideas for design concepts can come from a range of sources – both knowable and unknowable. This is as true for interior design as it is for other creative disciplines. Research participants identified diverse methodologies and sources of inspiration that support the notion that there is no *single, correct* way to go through the design process or generate design concepts. However, despite the range of perspectives, responses suggest a consensus that concepts can be generated from *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* sources of inspiration.

#### **Extrinsic Generators**

When asking designers who participated in this research where ideas for design concepts come from, the most common response was – anywhere! This certainly proved true for the majority of research participants when asked about their creative stimuli. These may be drawn from art and design, nature, or even everyday interactions, observations, and life experiences. This is especially true for concepts that are derived in an extrinsic manner.

Extrinsic generators include ideas that may initially appear disconnected or removed from a project itself but are integrated through the reasoning, actions, or creations of the designer or team. This disconnected nature is one of the concerns mentioned by some research participants who hold negative associations with design concepts. A consideration that was raised by research participants is succinctly summarized by Stephanie Travis in her article “Conceptual Thinking: The Design Concept in Interior Design Education” in which she cautions that “[a] concept derived from an unrelated source should be created carefully, as without a connection or

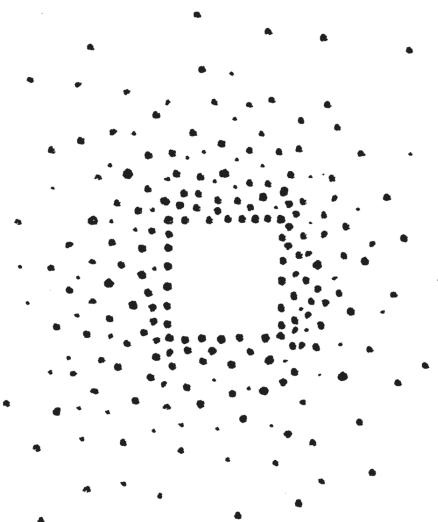


**Figure 5.2** Extrinsic generators.

some relationship to the project, the concept risks being random and could have a negative effect on the final design.”<sup>11</sup> But whilst developing ideas from seemingly “random” sources may leave some with a feeling of incoherence, for others this may instead offer a spark of inspiration that leads to the development of complex and meaningful concepts.

The most common sources for extrinsic inspiration, according to research participants, included observations, art, and nature. Keen observations of social interactions, spatial environments, and embodied experiences were often described as sources of inspiration for potentially rich design concepts. Many designers also spoke of deriving inspiration from the arts (in its various forms) and from the natural world, describing these as places to which they regularly return for ideas and inspiration.

Whether ideas are drawn from observations, art, nature, or any number of other extrinsic sources there is a need to understand and translate ideas “mined” (or extracted) from their original source ideas in order to use them as a generative driver for design concepts. In these cases, the designer can most accurately be thought of as a translator, thoughtfully transferring ideas from initial experiences or observations into proposals that relate to interior spaces, experiences, or interactions. A few notions that are helpful



**Figure 5.3** Abstract thinking.

to consider in the process of translating “extrinsic” ideas into contextually relevant and resonant concepts are the deployment of *abstract thinking* and the application of *metaphors*.

### ***Abstract Thinking***

Abstract thinking often surfaces in conversations about design concept, with some designers believing that such capabilities lead individuals to become better conceptual thinkers. The ability to think abstractly and translate ideas from one area to another is a valuable skill in design. In *The Language of Architecture*, Andrea Simitch describes that “[a] concept is rooted in simple abstractions, yet it initiates a process that usually ends with a complex design.”<sup>12</sup> What is required in the process of abstracting ideas and translating them from one form to another is a sensitive understanding (or close study) of the original to determine what is being drawn from it.

Initial concepts may emerge from simple notions but develop through a depth of thought and examination of how potential ideas may be translated and applied to interior environments. Abstract thinking may be informed by initial investigations into *functional properties* of a source object or system. For example, the way in which an oyster shell functions as a protective and adaptive structure, or how a button functions in providing temporary anchoring and attachment. *Physical properties* may also inform abstractions. For example, focusing on the textural variety and sculptural relief of tree bark or how a zipper includes a series of modular teeth in a linear arrangement. Ideas may also be drawn from specific *qualities of experiences*. For example, the feeling of weightlessness while swimming or the sense of anxiety that comes when writing an exam. Any of these could then be reflected upon for their potential usage as concept generators.

This is where the term “essence” is often employed in design pedagogy, with reference to distilling something down to its “essence” so that it can be used as a generative force within a design process. Determining what is essential will naturally vary depending on the designer. If all designers were provided with a tree as a starting point, they would not all be captured by the texture of the bark, for example. Some might be more interested in the natural geometries that emerge as a tree grows, or the annual growth rings and their possible connection with climate change, or the lived experience of sitting in the shade of a tree on a hot sunny day. Determining the “essence” is a personal process but can help a designer focus their explorations and potential abstractions or spatial translations, resulting in nuanced and complex design responses.

### ***Metaphor***

Closely related to the broader notion of abstract thinking is that of metaphor. It is another term commonly associated with the development of design concepts. In reality, metaphor provides another way of approaching abstraction. In their book *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explain that “[t]he essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.”<sup>13</sup> As is the case with

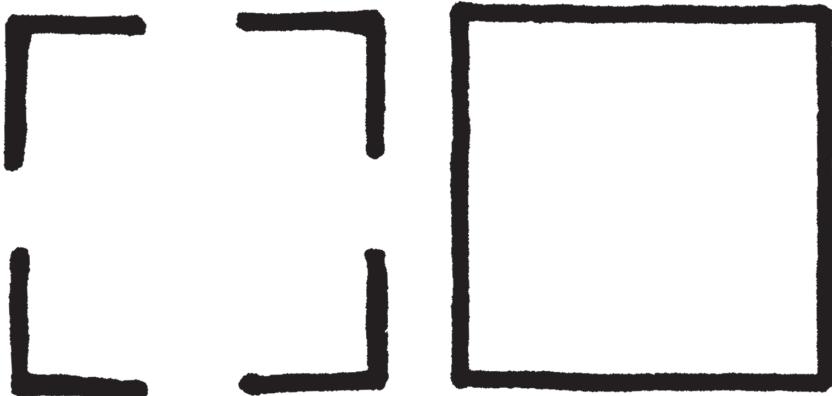


Figure 5.4 Metaphor.

abstract thinking generally, a metaphorical approach to generating design concepts allows a designer to examine how ideas can be transferred from one location to another, potentially shaping a design process.

In his *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy*, Max Black describes different ways in which metaphors can be used to structure language and understanding. An aspect of this which is of particular interest in relation to concept generation is how “metaphor selects, emphasizes, suppresses and organizes features of the principal subject”<sup>14</sup> that can then be used and applied to others. The selective, organizational structure of metaphors may thereby serve as a valuable tool for designers to generate design concepts.

### **Intrinsic Generators**

As one might imagine, a vast array of ideas and inspirations begins to emerge when a designer delves into a project. Design concepts that develop *intrinsically* may include those drawn from specific aspects of a project. This may include ideas that emerge from a project's context, such as: the geographic location or site, the design programme, functional requirements or activities, the building or typology, its history, users, client(s),

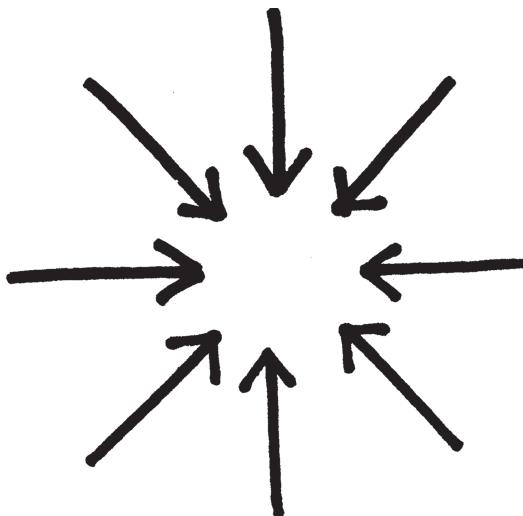


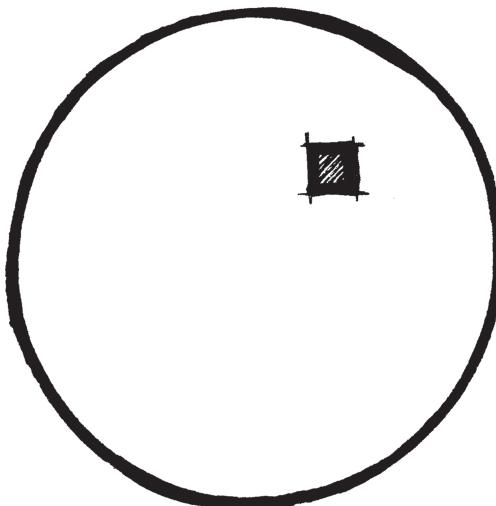
Figure 5.5 Intrinsic generators.

project-related research, or the design process itself. Deriving design concepts from the context of a project or process may serve as a valuable approach to generate contextually sensitive responses that may also have greater resonance and relevance for those beyond the project team.

The importance of engagement with the context of a project was voiced by many research participants and is also expressed in design literature. In Graeme Brooker and Sally Stone's introduction to their book *What Is Interior Design?* the authors describe how the practice of interiors is specifically and necessarily contextual. This is because “[t]he interior is bound to its situation; it is enclosed within a building, which is, in turn, contained within its context. The questioning of the existing [context] is central to the design process.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Geographic Location**

The location of a project can be a highly influential factor for designers to consider and may be used to inform the generation of design concepts. Designers often draw inspiration from the location of a project, not only

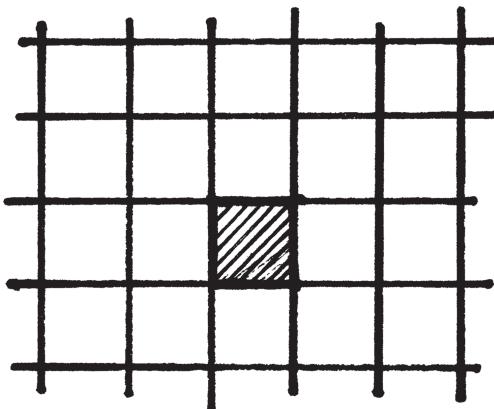


**Figure 5.6** Geographic location.

because there is the need to be sensitive to the context of the place but because it can serve as a rich source of inspiration. Natural, physical, or social aspects of the location may be used to inspire design concepts.

*Natural contexts* may include the geographic character of an area (including landforms and other natural features), resources, plant and animal life, or climatic conditions. *Physical contexts* relate to qualities of existing built environments and may include vernacular architecture and design, building practices and typologies, local building materials, or material applications as well as infrastructure, access, and connectivity that present themselves in different ways in urban or rural areas. *Social contexts* include a vast range of potential topics for investigation and include historical, cultural, political, social, religious, and/or economic conditions.

Japanese architect Kengo Kuma's team approached the design of Beijing retail store Shang Xia with an intention to "revive the cultural tradition of China, which has pursued the beauty of light and its unique brilliance."<sup>16</sup> The concept was inspired by a specific aspect of the cultural and material context of a geographic location and resulted in the design of a retail store that utilized a series of glass units to capture and modulate lighting in



**Figure 5.7** The site.

visually interesting ways. The intricacy, detailing and light quality rationalized by the team were derived from their understanding and contemporary interpretation – shaped by modern-day contemplations about the nature of craft, culture, and place – of the project’s geographic location.

### ***The Site***

Shifting from the expansive scale of the geographic location (a specific country, city, or region), to an evaluation of a project’s site (on a designated plot of land or within a specific building) may also trigger the generation of a design concept. This may include the identification of ideas drawn from the natural, physical, and social conditions of the site or its immediate surroundings.

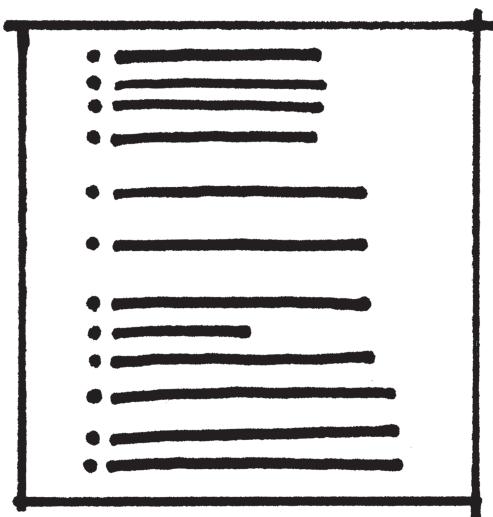
*Natural* elements may include landscape, views, environmental features, as well as changeable aspects such as sunlight or wind. The *physical* surroundings may include an evaluation of the local area or neighborhood contexts, the architectural milieu, constructed community identity, or surrounding buildings, locations, and types of nearby amenities, infrastructure, as well as past uses and the history or evolution of the surrounding area. Ideas generated from human or *social* aspects may include those drawn from an awareness of demographics, the observation of how people

use and navigate surrounding spaces, or an understanding of regulatory or legislative guidelines.

A project located near a former industrial district may reference ideas related to warehouse functioning or their aesthetics for the design concept.<sup>17</sup> Alternatively, a project located in a remote setting may be structured or designed around the views, local plant life, or how one might engage with the natural landscape. An interior may reference or draw inspiration from surroundings social histories or contexts, as was the case with the Liberation Café, located within an LGBT community centre in Los Angeles.<sup>18</sup> Architecture and design firm ORA created a warm and welcoming interior to align with the values of the community and channeled inspiration from the pride flag to guide interior finish and material selections.

### ***The Design Programme***

A design programme outlines and details the requirements of a project and is an excellent starting point for thinking about design concept. As a designer begins to establish or respond to a design programme, many



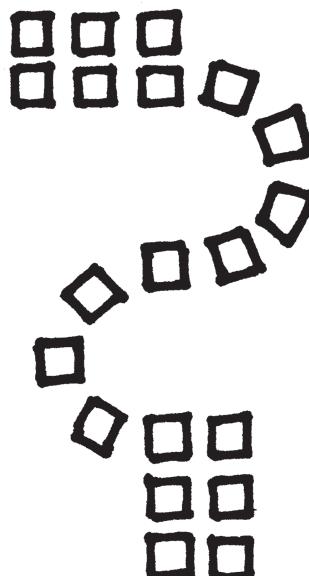
**Figure 5.8** The design programme.

steps are taken to examine and uncover the needs of a client or user group. Through the information gathering and programming phase of a project, many discussions and meetings are held in order to clarify project requirements. Even if a designer is provided with a design programme, the careful reading of it may reveal details to be extracted or highlighted and later translated and built into a design concept.

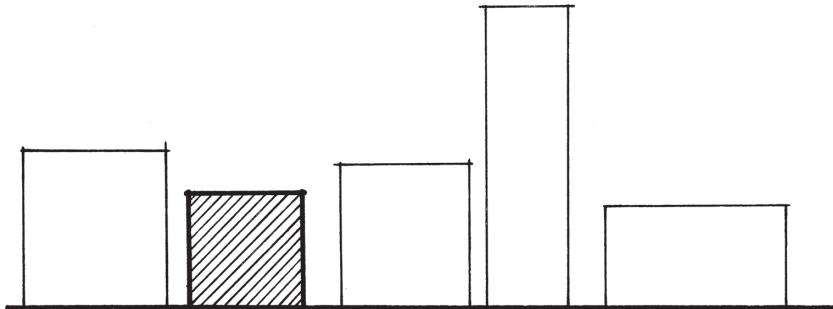
### ***Functions and Activities***

Closely related to the project programme are the functions and activities that will occur within the spaces of a project. Observing behaviours of people and imagining the multitude of activities that will take place within an environment can serve as the basis for a design concept.

Nigerian architect Kunlé Adeyemi drew inspiration from the choreography and movements of the human body in a project completed for a collection of dance and artistic groups in New York City. Prioritizing flexibility



**Figure 5.9** Functions and activities.



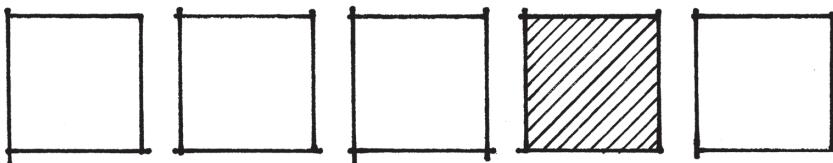
**Figure 5.10** The building.

for its various future uses, Adeyami and his team designed a “temporary space in which dancers move and reconfigure the structure in a fluid integration of architecture and choreography.”<sup>19</sup> This provides an example of how a conceptual approach can be informed by the activities and functions that will occur within a space.

### ***The Building***

Perhaps the most direct and immediate criterion that a designer will regularly consider is the context of a building, the frame within which their interiors will be located. Some buildings, due to their unique design or character, may provide suggestions of potential design directions. An examination of a building may include an analysis of its architectural features and geometries, its history and potential significance, materiality, construction methods, aesthetics, scale, proportion, volume, repetition, and symmetry, to name but a few.

A dramatic example of drawing ideas from the existing architectural context can be seen within the interior of the Zietz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa which opened in 2017 in Cape Town, South Africa. Working within the preexisting context of a former grain silo, Heatherwick Studio explored the potential for cutting into the existing structure, thereby revealing its dramatic sections and unique interior spaces.<sup>20</sup> An examination of



**Figure 5.11** The building typology.

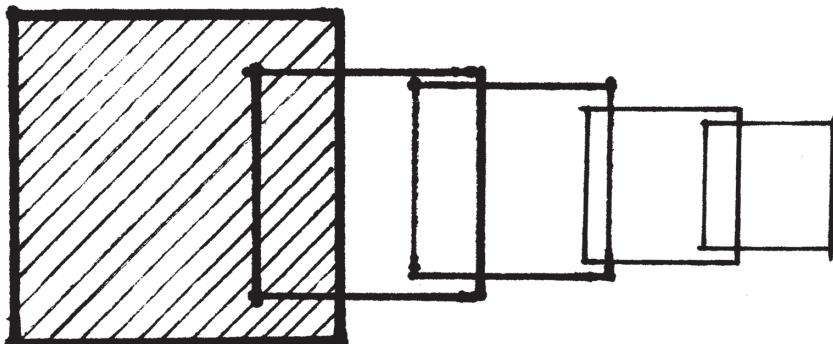
the potential for the silos emerged from a study of the building, resulting in a remarkably scaled and spatially dynamic interior space.

### ***The Building Typology***

An investigation into building and interior typologies may uncover strategies, design approaches, and provoke questions regarding how conventions can be challenged or ideas combined – integrating ideas and forms from different places. For example, a designer seeking methods to best integrate efficiency within a commercial kitchen layout may draw ideas from an industrial building typology consisting of manufacturing assembly lines. The examination of interior typologies may include an exploration of their history and evolution, design standards, or how defining aspects of typologies may be used to inform design concepts.

Following a catastrophic earthquake, the Mexican firm Dellekamp Arquitectos and Colombia-based AGENDA were commissioned to design a chapel to replace one that had been irreparably damaged. Based on a sensitive understanding of ecclesiastic architecture, the designers created a structure that followed planning conventions but

reinterpreted [the] section, embracing the congregation and eliminating the need for conventional facades, or any ornamentation beyond the structure itself . . . stripping-down allusions to traditional church elements, as in the altar area's curving, freestanding concrete wall, evoking an apse; or the vertical towerlike projection on the entry facade.<sup>21</sup>



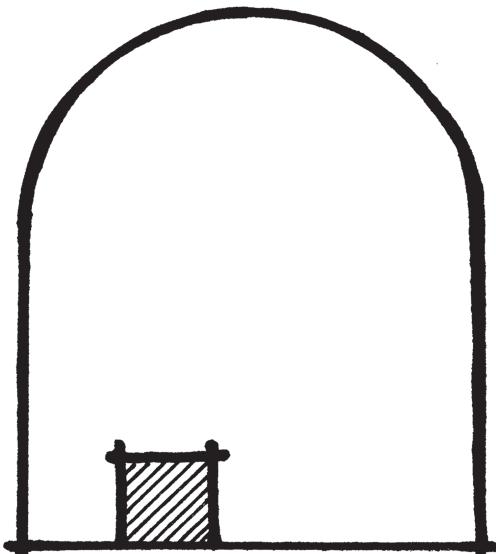
**Figure 5.12** History.

This precedent illustrates how ideas can be extracted from long-standing building typologies and reinterpreted in the designs of modern-day spaces.

### ***History***

Many research participants spoke of their design concepts being inspired by the history of a specific place, building, or typology. Through the process of investigating various histories associated with a project, ideas may surface which could then be reinterpreted and used for the development of design concepts. It should be noted that designers researching historical contexts take into account which histories have been recorded, whose stories have been documented, and what has, therefore, been carried forward into the future.

The approach taken by Rockwell Group for the design of a waiting room within the Moynihan Train Hall at Pennsylvania Station in New York City is an example of a project informed by historical references. As described by the designers themselves “our concept was inspired by the grandeur and glamour of classic train stations.”<sup>22</sup> The design concept, informed by the history, aesthetics, and associations with a specific typology, guided both material selections and planning approaches, providing an example of how ideas from the past can inform contemporary designs.

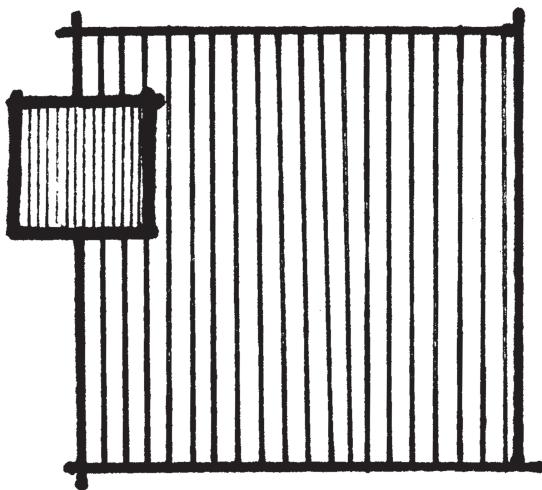


**Figure 5.13** Users.

### ***Users***

Designers may find inspiration from a deep understanding of potential users. This is common in user-centered design practices but is evident throughout the field of interior design where designers have a need to understand and provide spaces and experiences for people to inhabit. Based on potential user groups, a designer may orient a project or choose a conceptual direction that relates to the users or something particular about them.

The design of the Toy Department in Harrods' famous flagship store in London by Iranian-born British architect and educator Farshid Moussavi was naturally intended to resonate with the principal users of the space – children. As described by the architect “[t]he concept uses colour to encourage children to interact with the space in a similar way that children's books, such as Victorian pop-up tunnel books, require participation by their young readers.”<sup>23</sup> This example illustrates how an understanding of users,



**Figure 5.14** The client or brand.

including their interests and preferences, may serve as a starting point for conceptual investigations and development.

### ***The Client or Brand***

Designers may also absorb ideas for design concepts from the clients themselves – be they real or hypothetical, the latter being the case with the majority of design school projects in which clients are regularly fabricated to support specific learning objectives. This may include ideas sparked by conversations or those arising from an understanding of the client or a brand they represent – who they are, what they value, how they work, what histories and identities have shaped them, how this may alter in the future, and what their aspirations are.

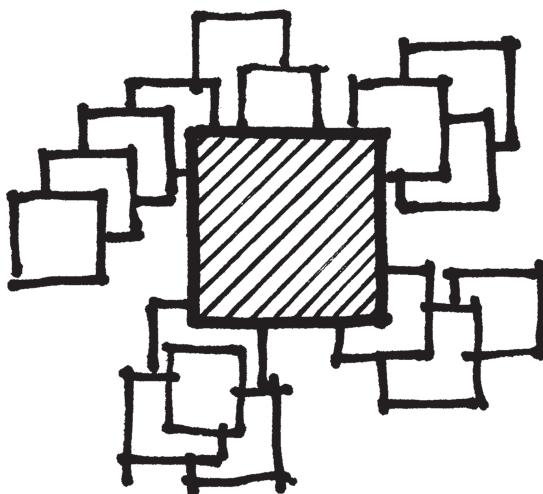
Design concepts based on client or brand identities are very common in the practice of interior design. Inspired by an awareness of the eyewear brand Opium, Indian architecture and interiors firm Renesa Studio were tasked with designing the interiors of a retail shop in the Mumbai airport. As

described by the firm, their concept offered “a clear spatial interpretation of the brand’s product identity” and led to the creation of a “store that conceptually references what eyewear does; tint or enhance the image.”<sup>24</sup> The resultant modular and interactive interior related to the functions of eyewear and also served to represent the brand through a conceptual approach to the shop’s interior design.

### ***Project-Related Research***

A significant aspect of the practice of interior design involves conducting research. This may take many forms and typically sees an investigation of a wide array of topics, ranging from large-scale historical and contextual explorations through to a more detailed examination of material specifications. Any research activities throughout a project may trigger an idea that can be transformed into a design concept.

In a second-year design studio, students were tasked with creating a transportable cabinet that could transform into a pop-up interior for given

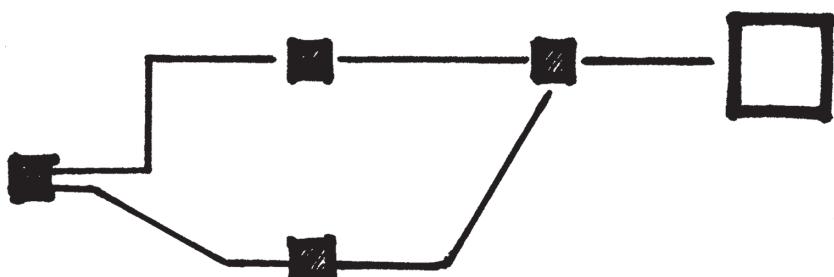


**Figure 5.15** Project-related research.

user groups. As students began to research different aspects of the project, one started looking into potential hardware solutions that could support the opening, closing, folding, and general transformation of the cabinet itself. As a result of their research, a piano hinge was selected. How this hinge functioned and the transformations it enabled then became a driver for further design development and allowed for the clarification of a design concept to emerge – expansion and contraction supported through a connective spine.

### ***The Design Process***

Ideas for design concepts may emerge from the design process itself via critical reflection upon it. By honoring the steps one has taken and examining what has been produced along the way (examples of these steps may include drawings, models, assemblages, writings, etc.), a designer will possess a significant amount of material from which ideas can be extracted. In this sense, one does not need a predetermined design concept in order to move forward with a project. Ideas can instead be revealed through *action*. It is through this process of active engagement, rather than by attempting to cognitively process everything beforehand, that potential strategies and design concepts are allowed to emerge in new and potentially surprising ways.



**Figure 5.16** The design process.

## Methods of Generating Design Concepts

Ideas for design concepts arise from a diverse range of sources. However, in the initial stages of a project it may be unclear which direction to take, where to seek ideas, or how best to get started. Consequently, interior design students, educators, and practitioners often rely on typical methods of generating design concepts in order to support their preliminary conceptual explorations. Research conducted revealed that designers often vary their preferred system in accordance with the circumstances; text-based methods are used to explore conceptual potentialities through the use of written language; image-based methods to enable the combination and visualization of imagined realities; and object-based methods to further sensory engagement and volumetric understanding. The following examples illustrate some of the multitudinous approaches utilized in the generation of design concepts.

### Text-Based Methods

Text-based methods for concept generation are frequently used by interior architects and designers. This is partially due to the undeniable power of language to structure our thoughts and understandings of the world around us. In this sense, language can be used as a driver or motivational factor within design processes and function *performatively*, as described by professor and researcher Andy Dong. In Dong's article "The Enactment of Design through Language" he describes how performative language shifts from acting as a conveyor of information to that which has influence over a design process – "language *does* design rather than merely *represents* design."<sup>25</sup> As such, "the design concept is explicitly and implicitly inscribed into language such that the language begins to structure the mode of its realization."<sup>26</sup>

For designers, this reinforces the notion that intentional language usage throughout a design process – and in the generation of design concepts specifically – can have a potentially powerful impact on the final

outcome. Most commonly, designers rely upon concept words and narratives to structure initial conceptual explorations. These initial text-based contributions may then be refined and expanded upon as a project unfolds. Designers may also integrate external literary passages that convey meaningful or evocative messages that they wish or intend to engage with in their work.

### ***Concept Words***

Conceptual explorations may commence with text-based brainstorming or mind mapping. This often involves generating a list of words that immediately pop into a designer's mind or those that surface after a period of reflection about the nature of the project. Extensive lists are typically narrowed down to facilitate more focused and effective investigations.

One design educator emphasized the importance of students using consistent and considered language throughout their design process in order to clarify their intentions. Part of the consideration of language arises from an understanding of definitions and associated meanings of selected words. This educator provided an example of a student focusing on the idea of "transparency" as a primary linguistic driver for their project. Beyond simply describing the project as being "about transparency," the student was asked to explore the variety of nuances, meanings, and potential conceptual directions that could be expanded from it. Through this process, the student investigated what other metaphors, verbs, and adjectives might be tangentially gathered from the idea of "transparency" and came to recognize how a single word could offer a number of different perspectives when looking at a situation and generating conceptual approaches.

The selection of specific words to guide the generation of design concepts is consistently utilized within the field, especially in the education of interior designers. Another educator described how they listen intently to the language used by students and then challenge them to find valuable and suggestive words from which they can work and then develop conceptual

ideas. This educator described the necessity for words to be sufficiently evocative to provide “friction,” rather than terminology lacking substance or potential depth (one could consider the range of understandings and potential spatial implications of the word “transparency,” as opposed to the word “shiny,” for instance). Language that has adequate complexity so as to be understood in multiple ways provides a foundation upon which a designer can begin to structure their own conceptual thinking.

### **Narratives**

Narratives can serve many functions within a design process. They may help in the generation of design concepts and design ideas or be utilized throughout a project as a communication strategy. In her article “Design as Narrative: A Theory of Inhabiting Interior Space,” Cathy J. Ganoe describes the ways in which narratives can be helpfully utilized by interior designers:

The characteristics of narrative that help to organize the complex world of people, entities and events through the language of stories provides a flexible framework for understanding and expanding the meanings of design. . . . Use of a narrative framework made specific to interior design can assist the designer in making wise concrete decisions about complex and abstract phenomena.<sup>27</sup>

The ability for narratives to provide a coherent structure with which a designer can work through a project means they may be a valuable starting point for conceptual exploration. The development of a project narrative can take many forms, such as storyboards which allow one to envision movement through spaces, or that of a graphic novel or short story describing emotional or sensory conditions. It may also take a more human-centered approach with the creation of specific characters or “muses” who the designer can keep in mind as they begin to envision environments. This specific process was outlined by one practitioner who described their firm’s approach to concept development as follows:

We spend a lot of time developing a narrative and in doing that we're looking at the location the project's in, who we think the end user will be and then we, most of the time, create a fictional set of muses – it might be a couple, it might be a person, it might be a group of people. And then we start to see the project through their eyes and what we think they need and what we think their likes and dislikes are, what their lifestyle is. And that starts to develop this kind of “bigger picture” direction of the project. That's where, for us, concept starts, is with really defining the human aspect.

Narratives may also be developed based on realities or histories, discovered or imagined, within images, objects, or places. In this case, designers may draw from a contextual understanding of specific aspects of a project in order to advance narrative development and design concepts. As one educator explained:

Narrative is a brilliant device because any building, any site, any place, there's stories to be told. And how you extract those stories – whether they are human stories, or whether they're building stories – how you extract those and then utilize those for your journey as a designer, I think that's a real skill.

The ability for narratives to draw from and respond to contextual factors as well as provide a structuring of ideas within a project is one of the reasons designers utilize them. The generation of design concepts may be aided by the potential integration or consideration of narrative development.

## **Image-Based Methods**

The use of images can be a valuable place to start the process of generating design concepts, which explains why they are relied upon by most designers. The near-ubiquitous usage of images in this capacity speaks to the powerful connection between the spatial language of interiors and the visual language of two-dimensional drawings, photographs, and other image-based materials.

### ***Concept Images***

The selection of concept imagery can be approached in different ways, depending on the designer, firm, or requirements of a project. Some designers avoid selecting images of any interior or architectural spaces as they begin to explore potential conceptual directions. Instead, these individuals select abstract images that represent specific qualities, moods, or sensory conditions. The evocative power of such images can then be harnessed and utilized in the development of design concepts. In these instances, a designer may begin their process by looking through collections of images until they identify ones that appeal to them, often relying on their intuition as to what is selected.

Designers may use interior and architectural imagery but crop or selectively employ a series of images to articulate very specific intentions of their design. One educator required their students to select conceptual images with the caveat that no image could be used directly as it was found. Thus, students were required to modify the image in some way. These modifications then became a jumping off point for discussions about intentions related to spaces and captured realities within the modified images.

Whether abstract or representational, imagery contains a lot of potential information that can be translated into design concepts. Anything from subject matter, to composition, to the quality of a print can serve as a source of inspiration. In this sense, images can be “mined” for potential inspiration – by examining what the image is representing, how it is communicating, and what it evokes in the viewer. They may also be used to generate narratives in the evaluation of their sense of anticipation, arrival, or, in broader terms, a journey.

### ***Collage***

The use of collage, as a subset of conceptual imagery, provides a means of removing the original contexts of images in order to create and conceive new visual and spatial realities. The parallels between this practice and that of interior architecture and design, which involves working with

component parts in specific ways to craft and assemble new realities, means that some designers create their own collaged images or compile a series of them. The creation of a collage involves the critical selection and composition of imagery, resulting in a deeper level of engagement with images than simply selecting them off the internet. This added level of intentionality may serve as a helpful stimulus for conceptual development as ideas are drawn from not only the images themselves but from the processes of selection, assembly, and composition.

### ***Precedents***

Precedents are examples of previous work and are most often found in photographic representations. These can be “archetypal” or *significant* projects or alternatively perhaps something unassuming observed whilst walking down the street. By extension, precedents may also be drawn from a vast range of sources beyond the fields of design. Previous approaches provide a logical starting point for ideation about potential design strategies in the future. Precedents serve as valuable resources for understanding project contexts and potentialities and can also help structure and guide design development. The reliance on, and awareness of, precedents is central to the practice of interior design. Thus, *how* precedents are used for conceptual development needs to be addressed specifically.

While interior and architectural precedents can serve as valuable sources of information and inspiration, designers must be *extremely* cautious in their potential (over)reliance on them for conceptual development. As one educator explained – “I think it’s more difficult to conceptualize from something that suggests an answer.” The use of spatial precedents runs the risk of directly copying existing designs, rather than developing new, contextually specific approaches. In their article “Design and Other Types of Fixation,” Terry Purcell and John S. Gero describe how designers may become stuck or “fixated” after being shown examples of how things had been done in the past.<sup>28</sup> This is common when design concepts are seemingly generated by viewing precedents as catalogue items to be selected from and applied elsewhere.

The casual misuse of precedents has been accelerated by social media platforms. This is one of the reasons designers may choose to avoid the use of representational imagery from interior and architectural precedents, especially at the concept development stage of a project. If one is to rely on precedents for conceptual inspiration, an essential requirement is critical analysis, reflection, and a clear sense of direction concerning how ideas may be reinvented or reinterpreted from the original source. In this case, a designer needs to be very specific and focused about what specific aspects of a project are being drawn upon and how they are to be uniquely interpreted and translated.

### **Drawing**

Designers rely upon diagrams, sketches, and drawings to convey information (as may be the case with vignette sketches or construction drawings), or be used as part of exploratory processes (as can be seen in loose, conceptual sketches, experiential drawings, or preliminary parti diagrams). They also support a greater understanding of what is being depicted – “[t]he act of drawing structures thinking and the coherent progression of ideas.”<sup>29</sup> The ability for designers to use diagrams, sketches, and drawings for the generation of design concepts lies in the potential for these mediums to carry a significant amount of information.

In “Generative Processes: Thick Drawing,” Karl Wallick advocates the use of drawing in studios and design practices because of their ability to contain and represent depth of thought. Wallick states that “generative drawings may go by many different names . . . but in all cases the name refers to properties of the drawing that have a larger sphere of influence than the drawing itself.”<sup>30</sup> He continues on to describe how these types of drawings have “significant intellectual and analytical thickness by joining influence, intent and investigation into a single active surface.”<sup>31</sup> With these considerations in mind, one can see how drawing in its many forms may serve as a valuable method for developing design concepts generated from the depth of thought and sources of inspiration within.

The extraction of ideas from drawings is described in Vinod Goel’s article “Creative Brains: Designing in the Real World” from *Frontiers in Human*

*Neuroscience*, which examines how designers rely upon various “symbol systems”<sup>32</sup> when solving design problems. Goel explains how drawings created at the early stages of a design process may be unclear or abstract but this vagueness is precisely what allows designers to question, explore, or extract ideas from them.<sup>33</sup> In this sense, the wisdom from within the drawing “is often discovered and emerges from the conceptual drawings after the fact.”<sup>34</sup> This helps to explain the value of generating sketches, diagrams, and other drawings from an early stage of a project in order to support conceptual development. It also explains how the function of drawings evolves throughout the design process.

### ***Diagrams***

Diagrams are used for their ability to narrow down the range of potential directions which designers can take. The parti diagram often emerges in discussion related to design concept, particularly in terms of its communication to others. The parti – derived from French, as in “prendre le parti [or] to take a decision, or a certain course, as in architectural design”<sup>35</sup> – is best known for allowing the concise graphic expression of design intentions but may also serve as a starting point for conceptual development. Due to their critical role in the communication of established design ideas, parti diagrams will be more thoroughly examined in Chapter 6: Communication of Design Concepts.

Diagrams attempt to capture, clarify, and convey ideas in a graphic manner, and parti diagrams are no different. As described by Randall Teal and Stephen Loo, “diagramming becomes a process of selection by rarefaction – a process of thinning possible influences via making . . . treated in this way, the goal of diagramming becomes one of making lines, which open up relations, and of discovering territories in the surrounding chaos.”<sup>36</sup> Diagrams can thus be used from an early stage of a project to help structure decision-making as even in their embryonic stages they often help a designer to determine potential areas of focus and refine conceptual approaches.

## Object-Based Methods

Just as text- or image-based methods may serve as a source of inspiration for design concepts, so too can object-based strategies. Many research participants spoke of developing conceptual ideas through the interaction with found or created three-dimensional objects, artifacts, or materials. Such items afford designers the ability to enhance their volumetric understanding and sensory engagement. These aspects can then be explored and discussed in relation to desired qualities of imagined interiors and may serve as valuable starting points for the generation of spatialized design concepts.

Objects and materials may be integrated into the design process as a starting point for conversation about form, massing, tactile, or sensory qualities. They may also be relied upon as a way of thinking through problems and processing information. In the article “Lost in Translation: Reconsidering Reflective Practice and Design Studio Pedagogy,” researcher and educator Inger Mewburn highlights the central role of making and engagement with materials. In this text, Mewburn describes that “knowing is not just ‘in the head’; it is built into the knowing manipulation of the tools of practice” and that “[r]epresentations, such as drawings and models, are ways for the design scenario to ‘talk back’ and help the designer decide on the next steps to take.”<sup>37</sup> The ability for physical objects and materials to support critical reflection and decision-making explain why they are so often relied upon in the education and practice of interior designers.

The position that material engagement is of value within creative processes is further supported by Giovanni Emanuele Corazza and Vlad Petre Glaveanu who describe that “it is undeniable that we tangibly create within a material world and as embodied beings”<sup>38</sup> and that “[a] material focus in creativity studies means recognizing the fact that ideas are co-constituted in interaction with the physical environment” (p. 85). Authors Tue Juelsbo, Lene Tanggaard, and Glaveanu (2017) also argue that “design is nothing without materials”<sup>39</sup> and advocate for a “socio-material”<sup>40</sup> model of creativity. This model shifts the focus from individualistic, cognitive understandings of creativity to one in which social interaction and material engagement are viewed as central components.

Decentering cognition as the only way of *thinking* or *knowing* recognizes that embodied experiences can shape design approaches. Sensory engagement is enhanced when working with objects and materials that enable designers to touch, feel, smell, or taste. As opposed to the flat, inert surface of a drawing or image, interactions with artifacts may provide a multi-sensory starting point for generating meaningful design concepts. As a discipline focused on intentionally crafting interior experiences, an increased level of sensory engagement from the early stages of a project may prove helpful for designers in developing, envisioning, and conveying their ideas.

Engagement with objects and materials may take on a number of forms. Some faculty members regularly task students with finding artifacts that serve as “analogous” objects, or those that somehow capture, represent, or trigger design ideas, to serve as a basis for discussion about potential design strategies and intentions. Other faculty encourage students to make quick “concept models” to represent spatial ideas and forms at an early stage in project development. Such models may function as three-dimensional sketches that force a consideration of volumetric and spatial conditions. Some students are taught to seek out unconventional or unspecifiable materials to use as representative stand-ins for ideas about sculptural, tactile, or other sensory qualities that may lead to the development of design concepts. Such materials may be found in any number of places – hardware stores, bike shops, recycling bins. Another faculty member has students investigate and imagine how objects may function or suggest solutions at varying scales.

Regardless of the approach, it is clear that object-based methods are commonly relied upon by interior architects and designers throughout their design processes. The ability for objects, materials, and artifacts to provide another way of thinking through problems, engaging the senses, and exploring potential design conditions and strategies all support the generation of design concepts.

## Hybrid Methods

Designers rarely, if ever, rely on a single method – be it text-, image- or object-based – for conceptual development. Most often they will combine or shift between techniques in order to best explore and cultivate their ideas

or intentions for a project. Just as there are many individual approaches and ways through the design process, so too are there a range of methods for generating design concepts that support different ways of thinking, working, and communicating.

Due to our common use of written and verbal language, text-based methods are commonly relied upon for initial conversations with clients and other nondesigners and this continues into brainstorming sessions within design teams. Although language is an incredibly valuable tool to initiate conceptual thinking, the need to move closer towards visual and spatial media is ever present. As a result, concept words, statements, or descriptions are almost always paired with, or supported by, images, objects, models, or materials. Imagery is often relied upon to support text-based explorations, but it may also be used to determine concept words or generate descriptions drawn from images themselves. As designers begin to develop and refine their ideas they often rely more on images and models to express their intentions more precisely.

Evolving ideas from text-based understandings to visual and spatial media can take many forms. Some designers pair preliminary concept words with images in a one-to-one arrangement. Others will create abstract images or collages. Each of these have a shared aim of taking words and transitioning them closer to the visual and spatial realm of interiors. The translation of text-based starting points into images or objects enables designers to both examine and represent their precise interpretation of selected terms. The curation of images or objects allows designers to highlight and reinforce how they intend to translate initial ideas drawn from text-based investigations into a visual medium and provides a rich starting point for conversation and continued development of a design concept or conceptual approach within a project.

## Conclusion

This chapter sought to describe the most commonly mentioned factors impacting the generation of design concepts, including approaches taken by interior designers. This is by no means an exhaustive survey of *all* of

the possible ways of generating design concepts. Methods beyond the typical text-, image- and object-based approaches often used by interior designers could also be utilized and investigated by those aiming to develop their unique conceptual approaches – film, dance, or movement and music come to mind as fields not specifically mentioned by research participants but likely worthy of further study and “play” in the experimental approach to design concept. As designers develop and generate design concepts in myriad ways, so too can they communicate their ideas just as diversely.

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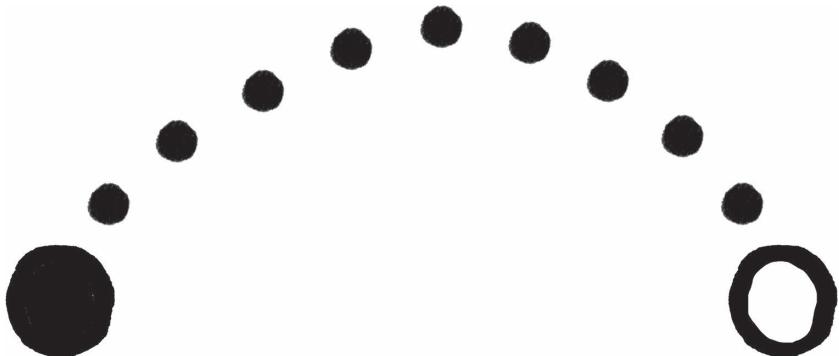
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6

## Communication of Design Concepts

How Do Designers Communicate Conceptual Ideas?

Just as there are many ways of understanding and utilizing design concepts, how they can be *communicated* is equally varied and nuanced. Designers draw upon a wide array of strategies to relay their conceptual ideas to different audiences – ranging from informal interactions with peers to more formal presentations with clients. This is one of the reasons why methods of communication are in a state of constant flux throughout the design process. Another reason is that as ideas develop and design strategies are employed, the understanding of how *exactly* a design concept informs specific aspects of a project becomes increasingly evident. This chapter will explore the variable nature of communication as it impacts the engagement with, and explanation of, design concepts.

## Communication Throughout the Design Process

Communication is naturally central to the education and practice of interior architecture and design, which involve extensive levels of collaboration throughout the design process. Typical examples of this might be students working with peers and instructors and designers working with teammates, clients, consultants, contractors, end-users, and the public. As individuals and groups come together, many different communication strategies are employed in order to facilitate the integration of diverse experiences and perspectives. Such strategies evolve throughout the length of a project and require consistent evaluation of best practices for effective communication.

The explanation of design concepts is integrally linked with a description of the design process itself. This is due to the fact that concepts are inextricably interwoven with the practices and processes of designers. The methods employed in expressing design concepts change throughout the design process as projects transition from looser “conceptual” stages through to planning and construction. Depending on the level of project development, a concept may require a greater explanation of its genesis, its evolution, or an account of the specific ways in which it has impacted decision-making. Thus, as designers work through a project, they may continue to reference a concept but will do so in very different ways through the use of variable communication strategies. For example, a gestural sketch may be perfectly

sufficient for an early-stage discussion but the means through which such ideas are translated into a constructed environment – via the detailing of millwork elements or specification of materials, for instance – will most often be represented by some form of standardized documentation typically shaped by conventions adhered to within the design industry.

The ways in which concepts are conveyed vary significantly but their capacity to support communication arises from their ability to organize and convert complex clusters of ideas into simplified, memorable forms. Articulating conceptual ideas throughout the design process – from initial idea generation with peers, to critiques with professors, and formalized presentations – allows designers to clarify key intentions, receive feedback, and refine their communication strategies. Continually relaying concepts, and practicing doing so in different ways, can be especially helpful for students or novice designers who may be unsure how best to express themselves. Building confidence in the explanation of conceptual approaches while also actively engaging in the design process can often serve as a valuable preparatory step for more formal presentations.

While students are often chiefly concerned with communicating their design concepts in final reviews and practitioners may feel pressured to sell their ideas in presentations to clients, the majority of communications relating to design concepts actually tend to be informal conversations. Most frequently, these occur as people interact with one another over the course of a project. This may include students working with classmates or instructors, or practicing interior designers working within project teams. The importance of regular dialogue was emphasized by a number of designers who took part in this research. As one individual remarked – “I think it’s about continual discussion and communication.” Another echoed this sentiment in their description of how conceptual ideas are communicated in their workplace – “[a] lot of talk, a lot of discussion goes on in this office.” Many of these designers believe that conversing with others helps them to better understand, refine, and advance their own ideas. Through regular communication, designers are also able to use other people as sounding boards, which was described as an invaluable tool for project development. One participant described the importance of running ideas by her colleagues as follows: “I’ll chat something through [and] then I very quickly

even know by just talking about it, whether it's correct or not. And often just chatting, communication, talking about it, sounding it out, you kind of know immediately whether it answers back to the key aspects of a project."

The ways in which designers express their concepts vary greatly and are heavily dependent on understanding which strategies might prove most effective for different audiences. Such strategies are also impacted by the level and complexity of the concepts themselves. Some concepts may turn out to be easier or more challenging to convey than others. For example, if one is utilizing a *Directed Concept* the designer may be able to describe it adequately in an initial meeting as "industrial" and then support this verbal explanation with visual precedent imagery in order to outline the direction of a project. Alternatively, if a designer is utilizing a *Speculative Concept* their explanations may require a significant amount of depth, elaboration, and background to introduce their collection of ideas, which are more akin to a thesis.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the level of complexity of the concept, the ability to articulate it in appropriately different ways to diverse audiences represents an important aspect of design communications that needs to be sensitively considered.

## **Internal Communications**

The ways in which design concepts might be discussed vary significantly when it comes to internal versus external communications. "Internal" audiences may include project team members, colleagues, peers, or collaborators as well as instructors or other reviewers who witness the evolution and development of a project and have a clear understanding of its background and conceptual underpinnings. Internal communications are likely to be less structured, more conversational, and often rely to some extent upon a shared knowledge base to streamline and simplify dialogue. Partially owing to the regularity and ongoing nature of internal exchanges, there is not generally the same necessity to simplify language or reframe and strategize *exactly* how one should best communicate ideas as may be expected in more formal, external communications.

The frequency and duration of internal communications may also support the development of a "shorthand" within projects in which individuals develop

their own ways of capturing and simplifying conceptual ideas. This may include the use of project titles, catchphrases, or keywords that aid in conversation and design development but may or may not be fully comprehensible to external audiences. Similarly, designers and teams also use what may be regarded as “secret concepts” which are understood and utilized by internal team members, but are likely never expressed in external communications. This may be due to an audience’s expressed or perceived lack of interest in concept development, as described by one research participant – “[s]ome clients really get into concept and others can be like you’re trying to tell them to start rubbing some magic stones.” Another designer elaborated upon this sentiment by commenting that “the degree that we reveal [the concept] is [based on] how much the client enjoys it.”

Designers may rely upon certain concepts in their processes that end up being paraphrased or explained quite differently to an external audience. This is evident in the utilization of “secret concepts” but may also arise from situations in which designers have employed numerous micro- or subconcepts that do not all require explanation in order for the main, overarching design concept to be effectively conveyed. In such cases, designers may decide to selectively restrict their communications in order to focus on the most important ideas propelling project development. These variable strategies reiterate the ability for design concepts to function in different ways within design processes. At times, they may well prove more valuable for designers than for external audiences, with communication strategies duly reflective of this. The identification of the most effective strategies for the communication of design concepts arises from an understanding of its role within a given design process and is also guided by the awareness of the knowledge base, interests, and expectations of various audiences.

## **External Communications**

As opposed to internal communications, external ones are generally more structured, are often more formal, and consequently necessitate a more measured, deliberate approach. External communications require

designers to sensitively consider how best to communicate with audiences that may have differing interests, backgrounds, and experiences, including people who may have limited knowledge of design. Correspondingly, many of those informal exchanges that take place in internal communications and rely upon shorthand and shared knowledge need to be reconsidered when it comes to engagement with external audiences. Understanding how communication strategies should be modified depending on the audience is central to the job of designers who are planning to present their design concepts. Tailoring the explanation of conceptual ideas to an audience's level of understanding can lead to accessible communications that "make people feel included and as if they have a voice in the system [that is] reflected in the design," as one senior practitioner and research participant highlighted.

As with many things, it requires practice to ensure that design concepts are accessibly communicated. Formal communications are often informed by feedback on the use of language, or the ways in which ideas were discussed previously, in *informal* conversations. For example, the way a designer initially outlines a concept might prove confusing to their colleagues until another approach is attempted and things become much clearer as a result. This could then facilitate the development of an accessible communication strategy for both informal and formal exchanges. Experimentation with various ways of articulating design concepts throughout a design process can support the consistent and precise use of language in order to convey *essential* ideas that are easier for external audiences to comprehend.

Many research participants described the importance of conversations about design concepts being accessible for the "average person." As one designer described, "if you could pull a person [off] the street and explain the concept [to them], then it's presentable." Some of this is achieved through the simplification and framing of ideas in ways that can be easily broken down and understood – these may be supported by verbal explanations, the integration of visual imagery, spatial models or materials, or even a hybrid combination of these. It is especially noteworthy when engaging with external audiences to consider what strategies enable the clear communication of potentially abstract, challenging notions and how these can be made accessible to those who may not have significant involvement or investment in conceptual development.

Beyond the discussion surrounding accessibility, it is important to consider the ways in which ideas can be relayed in a *compelling* and *engaging* manner. This will enable the audience to not only understand the design concept and resultant approach or intentions but also feel a greater connection to the ideas presented. The critical importance of this was emphasized by another research participant who stated that “[n]o matter how good your concept is . . . if you can’t play that back in an intelligible and interesting way to the client that they get and can understand, then it will slowly disappear from the project.” The best ways of relaying conceptual ideas will vary depending on the project, the team, and the concept itself, but it cannot be overstated how the development of any communication strategy will require a significant amount of consideration, planning, and reflection.

## **Reflective Practices for Communication**

Reflective practices can help to facilitate the creation of design concepts but are also valuable to employ in the development of communication strategies.<sup>2</sup> In design, such reflection involves the active review, consideration, and evaluation of project work ranging from conceptual approaches and individual processes to creative productions or outputs (which may include drawings, models, etc.). When it comes to the articulation of conceptual ideas and development of strategies for communication, it is naturally extremely helpful for designers to review their body of work. With hindsight, even seemingly disjointed ideas or processes may be understood as a united whole that can then be conveyed in an organized and coherent manner. Reflective practices may also help designers to more critically appreciate what they have accomplished and potentially afford them a deeper understanding of their own creative processes. With specific regard to the explanation of design concepts, such practices can also help clarify what aspects of a concept should perhaps be emphasized, based on what is most noteworthy in the work itself.

Designers may begin a project with a clear sense of what their concept is, but it is likely to evolve, or potentially even undergo a complete change, throughout the course of a design process.<sup>3</sup> While practitioners are often

restricted to ideas approved by their client at an initial concept stage, students generally have greater freedom to develop and present their work as a “complete” proposal in final presentations. Most students are exposed to reflective practices in some shape or form via requirements which promote the consistent articulation and exchange of ideas that are apparent in design pedagogy. Such exchanges are intended to embed an ethos of contemplation and intentionality in the practices of future designers and can be relied upon to support a deeper understanding of the ways in which design concepts evolve and influence various stages of a project. This understanding can then be channeled into the clear, concise, and potentially variable communication of concepts throughout the design process.

Reflective practices may also lead to the simplification or retrospective “naming” of design concepts that are identified with hindsight. One research participant who had worked within an internationally acclaimed practice spoke of the ways in which the firm proceeded with a design and then coined it after the fact. This style of naming process would often result in “big dumb concepts” that were memorable, attention-grabbing, and easily communicated. One project offered as an example involved the design of an urban streetscape with programming along its length that came to be described as being like a “shish kebab.” Although this concept had not been initially prominent at the project’s inception, or indeed even as the team made progress, later reflections upon the linkages between choices taken and the potential for an abstract, external idea to serve as a unifying concept emerged with hindsight. Thus, the overarching, macro-concept of a shish kebab – a stick with different sections repeated along its length, reflective of a linear planning arrangement – was identified as a compelling concept that subsequently came to be used for internal and external communications.

### **Storytelling and Narrative Development**

One frequently overlooked aspect of the work of interior architects and designers is their role as storytellers. Stories possess the ability to engage and entertain but also, on a more fundamental level, help people to

understand themselves, one another, and the world around them. Stories also enable a passage through time in the remembrance of things past and conveyance of ideas about imagined futures. As a discipline that draws from the past and present to enable the invention of future realities, storytelling is a powerful tool for interior designers to utilize in their communication of design concepts. Such communications allow designers to connect with their audience through an expanded comprehension of the reasoning behind specific design approaches, strategies, or conceptual directions. Stories also provide designers with the ability to explain “not just what has been done [or] how it has been done” but *why*. This was raised by one faculty member who described the need to describe “the why” as an integral part of explaining design concepts. Considering the way in which concepts can be interwoven along with explanations of project requirements and proposed designs to construct compelling stories or narratives may help some designers to better craft their approach to communication.

Many designers believe in the strength of narratives for generating and expressing conceptual ideas. As stated by one faculty member, “utilizing narrative to tell stories about humans or buildings is a brilliant device.” Narratives may provide a connecting framework that weaves disparate aspects of a project together into a recognizable whole. Consideration of narrative structure or storytelling strategies may also be used to support the cogent organization of information. Some design concepts are ideally suited to narrative frameworks, especially those that might lend themselves to an unfolding journey or progression. While not all concepts will naturally align themselves in such a way, it can still be beneficial to think about how stories can be used to engage audience members and foster a deeper understanding of conceptual approaches that will ultimately impact proposed spatial and experiential conditions.

An acknowledgement that architectural spaces impact human experience is fundamental to the practice of interior design. As tools that support and inspire design development, design concepts also have a very direct impact on experiential qualities within interior environments. Throughout a design process, consideration must be paid to the ways in which various design concepts will impact these spatial experiences. As such, attempted explanations of sensory conditions are essential for comprehensive

storytelling within design presentations. This often proves especially true during the initial stages of a design project when clients or other involved parties are selecting between numerous conceptual approaches. Drawing direct connections between conceptual ideas and proposed experiences within interior environments under consideration is a valuable communication strategy for interior designers to employ.

Designers may describe certain key “touch points” within a space and elaborate upon envisioned trajectories through interior environments which are intended to evoke specific emotions or experiences. An example of this was provided by one practitioner who outlined the ways in which narrative descriptions of sensory qualities were used to illuminate intentions behind the design of a high end beach resort. The concept of “barefoot luxury” was introduced to the client and then unfurled through the detailed explanation of spaces and experiential journeys that guests might take throughout the sprawling complex – from the sense of anticipation and intrigue at points of arrival, to feelings of comfort and connection (reminiscent of a family home) in the restaurant and lounge, to qualities of relaxation and escape within private suites. As the designers shared their proposal with the client, they conveyed the journey through each space with reference to specific embodied experiences. Each of these connected to notions of “barefoot luxury” and enabled the team to accurately convey their interpretation of the concept and resultant design intentions.

Illustrating design concepts through the explanation of experiential journeys allows people to imagine themselves into proposed interiors, clarifying not only what these may look like but how they might also *feel*. This approach can enable a more complete understanding of design intentions through the grounding of potentially abstract notions within corporeal expressions. In this sense, conceptual schemes can be translated from hypothetical realms to those that can be actively imagined by way of embodied experiences. Designers may approach the explanation of linkages between spatial and experiential qualities in different ways. Some find it helpful to describe intended spatial experiences through the explanation of design elements and principles – the scale of spaces, the quality of light, the integration of colour, and so forth. There are many ways of expressing how design concepts influence spatial experiences and the exploration of

these may prove a fruitful departure point for the development of specific communication strategies.

## Hybrid Communication Strategies

Depending on the particular qualities and approaches of individual designers and teams, each will adopt methods to best express their ideas, explain their processes, and engage different audiences. While there is great variability in the ways design concepts tend to be conveyed, partially owing to the diversity of cognitive orientations and communication styles, there are some common practices worth noting at this juncture. Visual media – including imagery or photographs, sketches, drawings, and diagrams – are most frequently associated with interior design communications, including those specifically intended to express conceptual ideas. These methods are, in fact, near-ubiquitously utilized within the discipline but are rarely, if ever, done so in isolation. Visual communications are almost always accompanied by written or spoken descriptions or augmented through spatial or material clarifications by way of three-dimensional artifacts or physical materials. During early phases of design, such media may be compiled into “concept packages” but as a project develops, ideas may be elucidated through different combinations of visual, verbal, or physical expressions. Irrespective of the design phase, explanations of concepts habitually rely upon hybrid communications for the most nuanced and flexible expression of design ideas.

When asked about approaches to communication of design concepts, the majority of research participants in this study outlined hybrid methodologies. As one participant stated, in the “best case, [the] communication of concept is verbal, written and visual.” This sentiment is also reflected in Stephanie Travis’s investigations into design concept in which she asked interior educators “[w]hat tools do your students use to develop and express their concepts?”<sup>4</sup> The responses highlighted a diverse range of communication methods employed by interior design students. These included the utilization of concept statements (87.7%) and concept sketches (92.3%) while others tended to rely on concept/mood boards (63.1%) and

three-dimensional concept models (70.3%).<sup>5</sup> Approximately one third (32.3%) of Travis's respondents also identified additional strategies, including: "verbal dialogue; graphics; concept matrices; generating diagrams; form-generating strategies; word association; multimedia presentations; computer renderings; video; music; literary references; and poems."<sup>6</sup> Such findings clearly illustrate the recurrent need for design concepts to be expressed using varied, hybrid communication techniques.

Regardless of the preferred communication strategies, all explanations of design concepts necessitate the clarification of interpretations and intentions. This is especially true when describing potentially abstract ideas in which designers need to clearly outline the ways in which design approaches and outcomes will be impacted. On some level, this may be considered an intermediate step in the eventual translation of conceptual ideas from any number of sources of inspiration into the spatial language of interiors. The complexity of translating ideas from one form to another, and the need for a combination of communication strategies in order to do so, is outlined by Fiona Doloughan, in her article entitled "The Language of Reflective Practice in Art and Design." In this text, Doloughan describes that "the language of the creative arts is necessarily metaphoric, multi-layered, and qualitative, and that the rendering of multi-modal projects requires access to a range of meaning-making resources."<sup>7</sup> As such, designers need to recognize the "multi-modal"<sup>8</sup> nature of their creative practices and consider the varied communication strategies that can be employed to best express their ideas, especially in relation to the communication of design concepts.

Some designers enjoy a greater degree of freedom in expressing themselves and their ideas than others. For practitioners, certain firms or clients may well be prescriptive in their communication strategies, with some outlining standardized practices, approaches, or expectations. For students, the ways in which they are taught how design concepts should be explained or expressed may be dictated by project requirements or instructors. Many educators who took part in this research articulated their desire for students to reach a point in their education where they themselves begin to decide how to best communicate their own work, including the ability to assess which images, drawings, objects, or descriptions might

be most effective in conveying ideas. However, this is a very challenging prospect at the beginning of a student's educational journey, especially for those unsure of how best to express themselves. In such cases, additional guidance will likely be needed. This is one of the reasons why most educators provide some form of framework or submission requirement that can be utilized to structure a clear and fulsome communication of conceptual ideas. These enable students to decide how they wish to convey their conceptual ideas based on conscious, informed decisions within the parameters of a project brief.

Working with hybrid communication strategies enables designers to relay a significant amount of information to an audience – whether it be done via informal conversations with colleagues or formal presentations to clients. As such, it is important to be mindful of the ways different media can be strategically employed to help *clarify* ideas through consistent communication. One crucial aspect of this involves consideration of how verbal, visual, spatial, or physical expressions can be “read” as a cohesive whole or made to “speak the same language” with intentional and consistent expressions of qualities aligned with the design intentions. This may include anything from the selection of abstract conceptual imagery to the graphic design and font selection of presentation documents. In this sense, the concept may be used to inform multiple facets of a presentation strategy. An example of this was described by one London-based designer whose firm had created a design concept for a children’s store that related to the notion of stories unfolding throughout interior spaces. This concept then informed the development of communication strategies in which an illustrator was hired to produce a children’s book that outlined this design approach as part of the initial concept presentation to the client. In this instance, the communication of design intentions was fundamentally intertwined with the conceptual approach, going beyond a routine or indistinguishable description of ideas.

The ability for designers to interweave ideas through the utilization of hybrid strategies acknowledges the reality that different modes of communication can convey information in very different ways. When used strategically, these methods can be combined to provide a deeply nuanced description of design concepts and demonstrably outline its impact on

subsequent design approaches. Although nearly all communications in interior design involve the mixing of various strategies and media, the remainder of this chapter will outline some of the ways in which design concepts are regularly conveyed through the utilization of verbal, visual, and object-based strategies.

### **Verbal Communication of Design Concepts**

The utilization of verbal strategies in the communication of design concepts naturally relies upon the shared comprehension of written and spoken language. Reliance on verbal explanations to convey conceptual ideas can be incredibly beneficial for students or novice designers who may not yet be able to confidently switch between various modes of communication. Such descriptions are also valuable when presenting to audiences who may lack sufficient visual or spatial literacy to grasp ideas captured within two- or three-dimensional representations alone. This is one of the reasons why text-based descriptions are often paired with images or objects to reinforce interpreted meanings and design intentions. Although pervasive use of verbal language can be helpful, it may also present challenges with regard to accurate communication of abstract, conceptual, or spatial ideas.

Concerns about the primacy of text-based communications within creative industries were raised by Fiona Doloughan who expressed the view that the “privileged position held by verbal over visual and other modes of communication . . . has serious and challenging consequences” for the clear expression of ideas that cannot be adequately explained through exclusively verbal approaches.<sup>9</sup> This limiting tendency of verbal language when describing conceptual ideas was also highlighted by Randall Teal and Stephen Loo, who observe that:

Ultimately, no matter how skillfully, richly and fluidly one engages the metastability of a concept, in design there is still the ever-present demand for lucid description and elucidation by instructors, clients and peers [and that s]uch demands remind us that effective language is elusive.<sup>10</sup>

This elusive nature of language is commonly understood by writers, who struggle to find the ideal words to express their inner thoughts and feelings with total precision. This challenge also presents itself for interior designers who are required to describe their ideas to various audiences accurately and succinctly. Whether designers rely on ideas unfolding through informal interactions, utilize concise descriptors such as concept words or statements, or instead develop more deeply nuanced communication strategies akin to theses and manifestos, there must always be mindful and selective use of language. In verbal expressions of design concept, it is also valuable to consider how consistency can be integrated into project communications through intentional language usage. As one practitioner stated

[w]hen it comes to presenting an idea to the client, I think you are often more solid in your approach by limiting language that helps them understand what it is you're talking about. . . . I think anytime you can talk about [an idea] and possibly name it in the same way, it strengthens it.

Furthermore, when designers are deciding on descriptive language for the explanation of conceptual ideas, they should also bear their audience in mind and thoughtfully anticipate potential connotations or associations these individuals might have with specific words or phrases. Working within project teams composed of individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds may prove advantageous in this regard.

The majority of communications about design concepts are conversational, especially within project teams. However, at the culmination of a design process – or at intermittent stages throughout – formal presentations of design concepts may be required. In such situations the use of language is typically quite controlled in order to convey conceptual approaches with consistency and cohesion. Although there are numerous ways to verbally communicate design concepts, two of the most common methods include the crafting of “concept statements” and the selection of specific concept words. These approaches are particularly evident in interiors pedagogy in which instructors regularly outline criteria for communication, but are also

apparent in professional practice as practitioners strategize how to consolidate and summarize conceptual ideas most effectively.

### ***Concept Words***

Keywords are a natural starting point for the explanation of conceptual ideas and are thus frequently utilized to present design approaches. As such, designers often select “concept words” that encapsulate and represent their conceptual thinking and continually refer back to these in communications about their work. Such words may be determined at the beginning of a design process and used to guide decision-making or may be later identified with hindsight, prior to formal presentations. Concept words rely upon the suggestive nature of language that enables the succinct expression of complex ideas and are often combined with visual or spatial media to add depth and clarify meaning. The selection of specific words can assist both designers and nondesigners in forming mental pictures about something yet to exist, based on the ideas that are driving a project’s development. For example, a conceptual approach based on “integration,” “angst,” and “energy” will very likely lead to different outcomes compared to one anchored around “isolation,” “serenity,” and “inertia.” There are typically multiple keywords used to describe design concepts, but this will depend on the designer, team, or complexity of the project or concepts (although having any more than three to five runs the risk of a loss of focus).

The clear advantage of identifying and utilizing individual concept words when explaining design concepts is that they are concise and memorable. While they do not capture all of the subtleties and depth of lengthier descriptions, they are able to provide significant amounts of information about what ideas may be informing design processes. An example of this was provided by a practitioner who spoke about a project they had worked on that involved the renovation of a historic site. The design team was drawn to the worn, roughly hewn surfaces within the existing building and began to explore the potential of these coexisting alongside slick contemporary materials and details. By the time it came to the presentation of their

proposal to the client, the team had distilled their concept to that of “Raw and Refined” and used these keywords to clarify design intentions.

The disadvantage of concept words is that they are rather blunt instruments that can fail to convey subtleties within outlined approaches. Consequently, designers will often work with a combination of memorable concept words and then expand upon these in various ways through further conversation, engagement, and communication. At times, even if designers uphold lengthy, in-depth concept explanations, they may well still rely on keywords. This is because the brevity of concept keywords makes them ideally suited for conveying the essential qualities of a project into short distilled titles, as illustrated by “Raw and Refined” or the earlier example of “Barefoot Luxury.” Concept words can also be usefully employed to establish catchphrases or a shorthand for designers and teams in order to trigger their memories and help them to retain their focus as they work through a project.

### ***Concept Statements***

Perhaps the most common of all conceptual communication formats, especially in the education of interior designers, is the “concept statement.” Similar to design concepts themselves, there are very few agreed understandings about what *exactly* concept statements are or the *exact* forms they should take. Instead, there is a general aspiration for such statements to distill conceptual ideas into a verbal expression (usually written) that allows designers – and especially students – to explain their intentions and approaches clearly and concisely. As described by Roberto J. Rengel in *Shaping Interior Space*:

The point of a design concept statement is to tell the audience, as efficiently as possible, about the designer’s approach to solve the problem. . . . The main thing is that the design concept statement needs to address what you will do (or have already done) to solve the design problem.<sup>11</sup>

Concept statements are widely relied upon in interiors pedagogy, although numerous practitioners and educators who took part in this research did raise concerns about them. This was coupled with the fact that the majority of practitioners claimed not to use concept statements *per se*, but instead rely more heavily on conversational engagement. Educators also recognize the challenges students have in generating such statements. This is often reflected in written descriptions that unfortunately border on the nonsensical, arising out of attempts by students to craft profound or overly poetic declarations. One faculty member commented that both the rationality and authenticity of students' work seem to dissipate as they pen their statements and get "caught up in the language when writing [them] and the concepts no longer make any sense." Another educator pleaded for concept statements that "just tell me what it means and what it means to you." Additional educators underlined concerns about the overreliance on such statements, especially for students who generally struggle when verbally expressing themselves. This may be particularly problematic for multilingual students whose first language is not English. In either case, the amount of time allocated to creating a clear and cohesive concept statement might well be better spent refining other aspects of a project that could potentially express ideas just as clearly via another medium.

The structure of concept statements varies significantly but there is a broad consensus among interior design practitioners and educators that such descriptions should be short and succinct. Some instructors provide specified word counts, stating that ideas should be straightforwardly described in, say, 25 words, 50 words, a single sentence, three sentences, a single paragraph or a few minutes of verbal delivery. Other faculty members provide more prescriptive outlines that precisely define the required constituent parts. These may include prompting student explanations with a series of questions. Examples of these may include: What are the essential ideas that define your concept or motivate your project? Where did the initial ideas for your concept come from? How precisely does the concept relate to the project's context? How has your concept informed decision-making throughout this project (so far)? How might human experiences be impacted by your conceptual approach? Upon reflection, students may then be asked to integrate their answers to these questions into

their concept statements. Such queries are intended to promote reflective practices, resulting in a more profound understanding of one's own creative processes which can then be channeled into statements that clearly convey the motivating ideas and intentions.

While the length and format of concept statements vary, it can certainly be valuable to consider the qualities shared by those that most effectively convey conceptual ideas. Rengel acknowledges a range of potential approaches here and goes on to define three aspects he believes are present in the most effective instances. Firstly, “[d]esign concept statements are more about the design solution than the design problem”<sup>12</sup> – going beyond a mere description of programmatic project requirements and, instead, outlining the ways in which conceptual approaches have impacted spatial designs. Secondly, “[d]esign concept statements are selective”<sup>13</sup> in that only the most important or *essential* ideas are identified and communicated. Thirdly, “[d]esign concept statements are economical” – or precise in their selection and use of language, resulting in brief and concise articulations.<sup>14</sup> These qualities highlight the importance of expressing design concepts in a manner that is forward-looking, discerning, and concise.

When writing concept statements, designers may also want to consider the ways in which clearly articulated and refined ideas can help them not only connect with various audiences but helpfully facilitate creative practices. Concept statements are most often associated with the *communication* or presentation of design ideas but can also be utilized by designers throughout the design process to ensure the consistent integration of conceptual ideas. With these various functions in mind, it is therefore valuable to consider how such statements can be *specific*, *evocative*, *suggestive*, and *actionable*.

*Specific* statements clearly describe particular conceptual approaches taken by a designer or team. They may be thought of as establishing the defining qualities of a project or illustrating what differentiates one design proposal from another. For example, if a number of teams were tasked with designing a “patient-centered” medical clinic, they would each develop design concepts, suggest strategies, and generate solutions in different ways. In order to convey specific intentions, designers need to move beyond generic descriptions of “patient-centered” designs that merely

address programmatic criteria and instead clarify their individual positions. For instance, one team may describe their conceptual intention to create spaces that “redefine relationships and restore confidence through integrated viewpoints.” Another team may explain how they intend to “explore the unison between circulation and compartmentalization.” These respective concept statements could then go on to illuminate how each approach might lead to the creation of unique “patient-centered” spaces guided by specific approaches and strategies.

*Evocative* concept statements convey design intentions via the use of engaging language that resonates with audience members and captures their attention and imagination. For example, if a group of students presents their designs for a performing arts venue to a group of stakeholders, they may consider how to express their ideas most dynamically through the use of specific language, metaphors, or experiential descriptions in order to connect with audience members. One student might propose a design composed of “fluid, curvilinear spaces that are reminiscent of the human body in motion.” Another may also draw inspiration from notions of movement for a conceptual approach drawn from “kinetic and static experiences in which directional pathways of frenetic activity are contrasted by nodes of peaceful gathering.” A third may draw on the nature of collective viewing experiences and their ability to captivate and unite through a conceptual approach guided by notions of “beholding and connecting.” These examples show how accounts of design concept can reach out to an audience and be described in ways that are resonant and evocative.

*Suggestive* statements allude to the ways in which a design concept may impact interiors while avoiding prescriptive explanations that describe *exactly* what the space will look like or why each decision has been made. For example, a designer may *suggestively* outline their conceptual approach to the design of an urban office space by stating that:

This design is inspired by the ways in which people walk and bike through the city. When walking, there is a sense of rhythm and the slower speed enables you to absorb more of the details and textures of the environments around you. When biking, there is a sense of

perpetual motion in which your surroundings are observed as fragmented, blurred impressions. For the design of the office, individual work areas with fewer interactions and less movement will draw from the slower, more reflective pace of walking that involves a more intimate connection with the surfaces and details of one's environment. As such, these spaces will be demarcated by highly textured or intricately patterned materials with repeating forms and geometries composed to create a sense of visual rhythm and tactile engagement. Faster-paced, more active areas for meeting, gathering and collaborating will be informed by the experience of cycling. Such spaces will highlight the activities themselves and allow the surrounding spaces to fade into the background, with subtle patterns, smooth textures and the selective integration of brief "glimpses" of colour.

By way of clear contrast, a *prescriptive* explanation of this same office space might describe:

The office is divided into five main spaces, with a clear delineation between public and private. The first two spaces are public with reception and collaborative zones. Public spaces have more room for circulation and allow a greater number of people to gather. Finishes in these areas will consist of plain, minimally textured surfaces and materials, including . . . The private areas are divided into three distinct zones for offices, open workstations and individual work rooms. These spaces are designed for less movement and to accommodate fewer people. Visually interesting, highly textured and tactile materials will be applied in these areas, including . . .

These examples illustrate the ability for suitably suggestive concept statements to outline the *why* behind a design, not simply the *what* or the *how* offered by a prescriptive explanation. Ideally, if a concept has been effectively relayed, audiences should be able to intuitively grasp the design approach and be able to draw their own connections as to why certain

design decisions were taken and how these were informed by the overall concept. Suggestive statements also allow designers to communicate their intentions without being tied to specific outcomes (“five main spaces,” for example). If a designer is *suggestive*, rather than *prescriptive*, they will establish clear parameters that allow ideas to evolve and develop and thus be interpreted as required to align more effectively with the needs of a project or process. This can be especially helpful when a concept statement is presented at an early stage of a design process and then utilized as a driving factor for a project as it unfolds.

*Actionable* statements describe how conceptual thinking can be applied within a project, removing it from the realm of abstraction. This supports audience understanding and also helps designers to identify the concrete ways in which concepts can shape their design strategies and approaches. For example, a designer may start with a description of their concept for a retail store as “a structured disguise.” On its own, this is almost entirely meaningless and fails to communicate the ways in which conceptual ideas may inform the subsequent design of interior spaces or experiences. However, if this description were to be expanded upon to explain how “a structured disguise” plays upon notions of voyeurism within the space in the examination and control of sightlines and determination of degrees of openness and enclosure, the audience and designer themselves may be able to advance with a clearer idea of how conceptual approaches will influence the design.

The verbal expression of design concepts through conversations and the selection of concept (key)words or concept statements can help designers articulate their design intentions to various audiences. Ideally, such expressions help to foster a shared understanding of the conceptual underpinnings of a design. While verbal communication strategies are very effective in conveying conceptual ideas, they certainly have their limitations. Due to the visual and spatial nature of interiors, verbal descriptions can only achieve so much in clearly and accurately conveying design goals. Thus, visual communication strategies are also frequently employed to support verbal descriptions for a more nuanced, “multi-modal”<sup>15</sup> representation of design concepts.

## Visual Communication of Design Concepts

Besides verbal language that serves as a foundation for everyday exchanges, visual communications – in the form of images, photographs, sketches, drawings, or diagrams – are the dominant tools utilized for the explanation of design concepts. One of the primary reasons for this is that visuals provide an essential bridge between the omnipresent verbal exchanges of everyday life and the spatial language of interior architecture and design. Visuals provide powerful tools for conveying information beyond the limits of verbal language, making them especially helpful for external audiences and nondesigners alike in obtaining a deeper understanding of what is being said and proposed. Throughout the design process, designers are constantly required to translate their ideas into words, images, and built environments. When it comes to the development of communication strategies, designers must identify what aspect of an idea can be most effectively relayed through verbal, visual, or spatial means and consider how these can be understood overall as a cohesive whole. Consequently, designers must be particularly mindful of the ways in which visuals can be used to enhance verbal explanations and facilitate a more nuanced communication of design concepts.

Designers may rely on a combination of visuals to convey different aspects of their conceptual ideas. Selected methods will vary depending on the individual approaches of a designer or team, the standards established by a design firm or instructor, as well as the requirements of a specific project or phase within the design process. The methods employed in expressing design concepts tend to change as a project transitions from looser “conceptual” stages through to planning and construction. Some of these are impacted by conventions within the design industry which necessitate the use of specific documentation at various stages. For example, a gestural sketch may be perfectly sufficient for an early-stage concept discussion but the ways in which such ideas are to be translated into a constructed environment – through the detailing of millwork elements or specification of materials, for instance – will most often be represented through some kind of standardized documentation later in the process.

This highlights the malleable, responsive, and contextual nature of communication strategies within the discipline.

Designers may use any number of visual expressions to illustrate their design concepts. While uniquely individual approaches are actively employed by certain designers, the majority of projects convey conceptual ideas through the integration of abstract or representational concept imagery, sketches, and diagrams.

### ***Concept Images***

The vast majority of interior design projects require the eventual translation of conceptual ideas into spatial environments. In order to achieve this, designers iteratively explore, experiment with, and generate ideas in collaboration with others throughout their design processes. Such practices necessitate clear communication that is almost always supported by the integration of visuals. Images are incredibly effective tools that designers can employ to clearly articulate their ideas. However, if not thoughtfully selected and incorporated, images may also confuse conceptual explanations by sending mixed messages and/or establishing misleading expectations concerning project outcomes. Therefore, designers must be aware of the potential power of images and employ them intentionally and with care. Many visual techniques are utilized by designers to communicate with their various respective audiences but one of the most common is the transmission of conceptual ideas through the use of abstract or representational concept imagery.

Abstract concept images may be selected for their ability to convey specific moods, experiences, or qualities – photographs of a rainy day, a crowd of people, or a particular piece of art, for instance. Such images generally sidestep the direct representation of interior or architectural spaces but rather embody conceptual ideas that will be interpreted and translated into the spatial language of interiors. These types of images are considered “abstract” or “conceptual” in that they signify *ideas* or *notions*, as opposed to representational images that illustrate the actual physical appearance of interior or architectural precedents. Abstract concept imagery is preferred

by many designers because of its ability to highlight specific atmospheric or experiential qualities that are likely to resonate with various audiences. As stated by one practitioner, “we are always looking for images to capture the right mood.” The judicious selection of abstract or conceptual imagery can effectively convey ideas and begin the process of translating them into a visual language that can facilitate a shared understanding of project goals, as well as help designers work in a more focused manner. As such images are almost entirely devoid of any interior or architectural spaces, they may also help to circumvent any direct replication of existing projects – a concern that is frequently raised with the utilization of representational imagery.

While some designers prefer to eschew the use of interior or architectural imagery in their explanations of design concepts, others embrace these as a core component of their communication strategy. Representational images capturing the physical appearance of spaces, materials, or design features might be employed to convey specific aspects of a design concept – for instance, photographs of textiles, plaster walls, or suspended ceiling elements. Such images can provide inspiration for designers as they work on a project and thereby facilitate a clearer understanding of potential design directions or possible outcomes for an audience. Representational imagery may also be selected which is similar to that of abstract ones, with designers choosing images that convey specific moods or which seek to capture certain atmospheric qualities, most often illustrated through interior or architectural precedents – such as a smoky bar, a bustling train station, a dilapidated farmhouse, or perhaps a sleek, modern interior.

The integration of precedent imagery during initial concept stages can be damaging to the creative process in the sense that designers who may be seeking “inspiration” are, in fact, at risk of copying existing work. This has become especially pronounced with the enormous proliferation of digital and social media platforms that have hugely impacted design disciplines over the past decade. Selected precedent images shown to audiences as visual representations of conceptual ideas risk misleading them into thinking a project will look a certain way upon eventual completion. Numerous interviewees cited these concerns as their primary justification

for avoiding representational imagery that “can take clients off in a direction too quickly,” as one practitioner phrased it. For these individuals, if such images are to be incorporated into their communications at all, they will be done so *extremely* selectively – perhaps only showing cropped images that isolate specific qualities of light, texture, or massing within existing precedents. In these instances, it becomes especially important for designers to offer rationales as to why certain images have been selected and what aspects of a design concept they represent.

The need to convey the complexities of design concepts through imagery often results in the selection of many abstract and/or representational images. Images have the undoubted ability to relay significant amounts of information but it should be noted that “more” does not always translate to “better.” In fact, the greater the number of images designers integrate into their communications, the more they risk sending a presentation in potentially divergent and confusing directions. Consequently, images must be sensitively selected or at least narrowed down to (only) the most salient ones that can be perceived collectively as a cohesive whole. This requires adequate reflection about the qualities of each image, consideration of what each image is “saying,” and what part of the project’s story is conveyed through its use. As interpretations of visual imagery can vary significantly, it is often helpful for designers to receive feedback from their peers or collaborators in order to better grasp the range of potential impressions which certain images may or may not elicit prior to formal or final presentations. When mindfully selected and integrated, concept images can play a significant role in the clarification, development, and communication of design concepts.

### **Sketches**

Another valuable tool in the communication of design concepts are visuals that are specifically created for individual projects. Due to the speed with which sketches can be generated as well as their effectiveness in conveying design ideas, they are often the earliest form of visuals to emerge within the design process. They are also regularly used throughout the course of

a project to support the gradual translation of abstract ideas into built form. As described by Andrea Simitch in *The Language of Architecture*:

Conceptual sketches facilitate a continuous critical conversation between abstract concept and the form that the concept can embody. While thumbnail sketches and early conceptual drawings are initially loose and open ended, often without scale, proportion, or specificity, it is through the reiterative process of enactment, critical response, evaluation and modification that a sketch – and its latent design – becomes increasingly more specific.<sup>16</sup>

Sketches may take any number of forms, but are typically defined by their imprecise or unrefined qualities, especially when compared to drawings that involve considerably more care and effort to create. The gestural nature of sketches makes them especially well-suited for expressing conceptual ideas that may be equally vague, particularly in the nascent stages of a project. As described by one practitioner “a good concept is a concept you can show in a quick sketch.” Part of this is owing to the fact that such ill-defined depictions provide considerable latitude for the viewer’s imagination to fill in the gaps and creatively envision potential realities that may arise as a result of swift representation. In this sense, sketches are highly suggestive in nature, illustrating what *could* be without the kind of photo-realistic reference points that leave little to the imagination and inflexibly establish project expectations.

Designers may rely upon sketches as part of their communication strategy when relaying conceptual ideas that are yet to be fully formed or completely determined. They may also be utilized to represent spatial qualities, embodied experiences, or design intentions arising from clearly defined concepts but in spaces that have yet to be designed, thus limiting the potential for integrating floor plans, models, or any three-dimensional renderings, which will very likely occur at later stages. The ways in which sketches are utilized to support the communication of design concepts vary significantly but their ability to convey certain aspects of design approaches makes them especially valuable within the discipline of interior design.

### ***Parti Diagrams***

In addition to concept images and sketches, another form of visual expression that often emerges in relation to design concept is the diagram. Diagrams might be similar to sketches in their swift communication of ideas or alternatively may be painstakingly crafted in order to clearly illustrate the inner workings of a design process or approach. When it comes to conceptual communications, one particular diagram plainly stands out as a visual representation that numerous research participants described as being synonymous with design concept itself – the parti. Parti diagrams are regularly discussed in conversations regarding design concepts, especially with those who have an architectural background. This is not to say that parti diagrams are not discussed within the education or practice of interior designers, but this appears to occur less often. Regardless of the relative frequency of use between architecture and interiors, the parti diagram is an important visual communication strategy well worth addressing at this juncture.

There is often uncertainty about what *exactly* a parti diagram is. This is likely due to the abstract nature of it as a representation of conceptual ideas and the fact that it can take on many forms – including the diagrams interspersed throughout this book in order to relay ideas in a nonverbal language. Similar to design concepts themselves, parti diagrams represent a sometimes bewildering prospect to students and novice designers who may likely be unfamiliar with the process of translating thoughts, ideas, or verbal expressions into diagrammatic forms.

*The Oxford Dictionary of Architecture* defines parti as a “choice, means, or method . . . [and that] the parti is [an] assumption made that informs a design as well as the choice of approach when realizing the scheme.” Deriving from French, “[p]rendre le parti is to take a decision, or a certain course, as in architectural design.”<sup>17</sup> In *The Language of Architecture*, the explanation of how these diagrams integrate within a design process and how they are used to develop and communicate ideas is described as follows:

[T]he parti is typically derived only after the concept has been determined; it relates to the disposition of elements within the totality of the

project. The “parti diagram” is generally a succinct diagram – in plan, section or three dimensions – of the strategy the designer will use in the development of the concept. While a concept is largely rooted in abstraction, the *parti* is rooted in the practical application, a knowledge of precedents, a strategy of programmatic distribution, and the sense of an eventual necessity to explain a project to others.<sup>18</sup>

Stephanie Travis also provides a description of parti diagrams in her article “Conceptual Thinking: The Design Concept in Interior Design Education” in which she outlines:

The challenge is to visually represent an idea in its abstract form. This simple, graphic drawing will become the basis for [a] design. The project will not be a literal representation of the parti diagram, but the architectural spaces will have developed using it as a guide.<sup>19</sup>

From these definitions one can see the relatively direct parallel between the functions and understandings of design concepts.<sup>20</sup> A parti diagram essentially allows designers to depict their ideas and can thus helpfully facilitate the translation, resolution, and communication of potentially abstract notions. The examination of diagrammatic approaches to the representation of conceptual ideas requires a significant degree of reflection and experimentation. Importantly, this process necessitates the identification of the most essential ideas driving a project in order to then visually represent these in concise, diagrammatic forms. Such diagrams may be useful for designers seeking another medium through which to convey their conceptual ideas and can also helpfully aid them in their design processes as they clarify the most important qualities of their approach.

## **Physical Communication of Design Concepts**

Verbal and visual strategies are consistently employed by interior designers to further their design processes and convey conceptual ideas. While design concepts may be communicated using these strategies alone, the

Integration of three-dimensional, tangible objects offer further means of re-laying ideas and connecting with audiences. Such artefacts offer the ability to interact, touch, feel, and perceive in ways simply not possible through the exclusive use of verbal or visual expressions. Translating concepts into three-dimensional forms helps to position ideas ever closer to the spatial reality of interiors. This often proves helpful for designers in advancing their ideas and also for audiences in comprehending design intentions. In the communication of design concepts, commonly utilized artefacts include concept models, found or created objects and materials.

### ***Concept Models***

Concept models can take many forms, but are generally less concerned about the accurate depiction of interior or architectural spaces and rather more about the abstract, spatialized representation of ideas. As described by Andrea Simitch, “[t]hese models do not attempt to represent a realistic representation of a design, but instead to suggest ways in which a design’s components might act and interact.”<sup>21</sup> Such models may be used in combination with verbal and visual illustrations but are especially valuable for the expression of spatial, material, and volumetric qualities. The level of resolution of concept models varies significantly. Some may be generated quickly from materials near at hand and are used to test ideas – more akin to a “sketch model” – while others may require a significant degree of craftsmanship and a more refined approach to material integration. Regardless of the level of resolution, the creation of three-dimensional artefacts can help support design processes and, perhaps more importantly, foster a greater degree of spatial awareness for novice designers and non-design audiences alike. This allows for a shared and improved understanding of the ways in which conceptual approaches may impact the design of interior spaces.

Concept models often introduce new ways of thinking about and working through design problems in an embodied manner. When faced with building a physical model, even an abstract one, there is still a significant amount of learning that takes place from uncovering the nature, properties,

and potential of different materials. Although computer modeling allows designers to quickly generate three-dimensional visualizations, the two-dimensionality of representations on a screen and accompanying lack of physical engagement sometimes still limits the general understanding of volumetric conditions or expansion of spatial literacy. Thus, any exploration of design approaches and communication strategies that utilize the creation of physical, rather than digital, models is a method worthy of consideration by designers and their teams. Insights garnered from the process of generating physical concept models may inform the generation and development of design concepts and most certainty aid in the communication of them to others.

### ***Objects***

Objects – whether found or created – have the ability to communicate significant amounts of information through their weight, massing, form, materiality, or tactile qualities. They are similar to models in their ability to communicate through their physical presence but – unlike models – may also serve as mnemonic devices capable of triggering associative memories. For example, if a designer were to bring a piece of driftwood to a meeting as a way of framing conceptual discussions, audience members may enter this conversation with preconceived notions and associations regarding the object itself. This can be duly used to a designer or team's advantage if they are capable of successfully articulating the ways in which a given object relates to conceptual approaches.

As one educator and practitioner explained it, objects are valuable because they provide “something to talk about throughout the process – more than a blank piece of paper or a large theory.” Perhaps the framing of the above meeting’s conversation about the piece of driftwood relates to the location of the project and thereby initiates a discussion about the power and significance of specific location. Perhaps conversations will then center on nature, life cycles, and the beauty of transformation. Perhaps the physical presence of the piece itself – its surfaces, curves or undulations – will become a starting point for subsequent conceptual explanations. Regardless

of the exact topic of conversation, the point is that objects can be used to encourage and frame conversations in ways that may prove extremely useful for certain designers or specific projects. This is especially true for found objects – film cameras, car keys, pine cones – but may also be the case for objects created as part of the design process itself. The identification of precise qualities within physical objects involves abstract thinking and the ability to translate ideas from one form to another which, when integrated effectively, can help designers clarify, reinforce, and communicate their concepts.

### ***Materials***

Materials impact the visual, tactile, acoustic, and olfactory qualities of interior environments and enable designers to craft highly personal experiences for the inhabitants within them. Just as with other models and objects, the physicality and tactility of materials serve as engaging tools for communicating conceptual ideas. As such, the integration of physical materials within the communication of design concepts can help define intentions accurately and effectively. When an audience is permitted to engage their senses through interaction with materials and when a designer can explain the relation to a concept, it opens the door to a more cohesive and absorbing story, one that can inform decision-making in the crafting of memorable experiences. Materials may be integrated into presentations in a variety of ways and may include specifiable (particular stone samples or flooring types, for instance) or nonspecifiable items not typically used in interior spaces (candy wrappers or shoe laces, for instance). These may be incorporated within concept models, be evident in found or created objects or, as is quite often the case, be placed alongside other materials to express design intentions.

Material boards or “mood boards” are commonly used in the education and practice of interior design. These may be exclusively composed of materials or alternatively expanded to integrate conceptual or reference images and objects. As the descriptor “mood board” suggests, the selection and curation of materials, images, and objects are intended to transmit a “mood” or express certain experiential qualities aligned with a particular conceptual direction. Assessing various qualities of materials

to determine how each might individually relate to the concept and also how all of those selected consistently convey design intentions is of the utmost importance in the curation of such compositions. Designers should actively consider what each material contributes and speculate how each may support the explanation of the design concept or spatial. As yet one further means of communication, designers must consider the ways in which material boards can be utilized to tell additional aspects of the story in ways that are sometimes not possible through verbal, visual, or other physical impressions.

## Conclusion

Designers spend a great deal of time generating and integrating conceptual ideas into their practices. In order to convey these ideas and design intentions in meaningful and effective ways, the sensitive consideration of communication methods is pivotal. It is valuable for designers to recognize that various verbal, visual, and physical media have the clear potential to transmit very different types of information and consequently employ these with care and intention. The methods of communication presented in this chapter provide an outline of some of the most common and frequently used techniques for conveying conceptual ideas. This exploration of different ways to express ideas may often lead to more inventive and effective strategies aligned with a designer or team's preferred approach to designing, understanding, and also expressing themselves. This allows conceptual ideas to be both better understood and relied upon as a crucial aspect in the education and practice of interior architecture and design.

## Notes

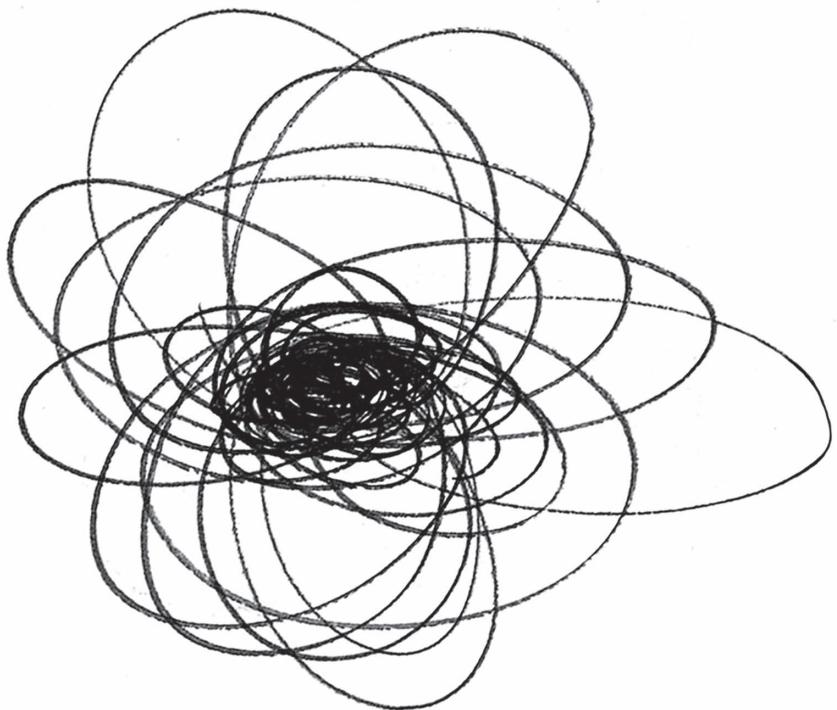
- 1 Chapter 3: Identification of Design Concepts provides an explanation of Levels of Design Concept, including the description of "Directed" and "Speculative" concepts.
- 2 The notion of "reflective practice" is introduced in Chapter 4: Integration of Design Concepts in the Design Process and also discussed in Chapter 5: Generation of Design Concepts.

- 3 The evolving and changeable nature of design concepts throughout the design is discussed in Chapter 5: Generation of Design Concepts.
- 4 Stephanie Travis, "Conceptual Thinking: The Design Concept in Interior Design Education," *Design Principles and Practices: An International Journal – Annual Review* 5, no. 6 (2011): 682, <https://doi.org/10.18848/1833-1874/CGP/v05i06/38236>.
- 5 Travis, 682–83.
- 6 Travis, 683.
- 7 Fiona J. Doloughan, "The Language of Reflective Practice in Art and Design," *Design Issues* 18, no. 2 (2002): 62, <https://doi.org/10.1162/074793602317355783>.
- 8 Doloughan, 62.
- 9 Doloughan, 61.
- 10 Randall Teal and Stephen Loo, "A Pedagogy of the Concept: Rereading an Architectural Convention through the Philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari," *International Journal of Art & Design Education* 37, no. 2 (2018): 214, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jade.12095>.
- 11 Roberto J. Rengel, *Shaping Interior Space*, 2nd ed. (Fairchild, 2007), 140.
- 12 Rengel, 141.
- 13 Rengel, 141.
- 14 Rengel, 141.
- 15 Doloughan, "The Language of Reflective Practice in Art and Design."
- 16 Andrea Simitch, *The Language of Architecture : 26 Principles Every Architect Should Know*, ed. Val K. Warke (Beverly, MA: Rockport Publishers, 2014), 24.
- 17 "Parti," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), [www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191918742.001.0001/acref-9780191918742-e-3374](http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191918742.001.0001/acref-9780191918742-e-3374).
- 18 Simitch, *The Language of Architecture : 26 Principles Every Architect Should Know*, 24.
- 19 Travis, "Conceptual Thinking: The Design Concept in Interior Design Education," 691.
- 20 Chapter 2: Definitions of Design Concept provides a comprehensive outline and categorization of definitions of design concept.
- 21 Simitch, *The Language of Architecture: 26 Principles Every Architect Should Know*, 24.

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## Conclusion

Design concepts frequently appear in discussions about the education and practice of interior architecture and design and are regularly integrated into related creative practices. In spite of being so widely utilized, concepts very often present a confusing prospect for individuals unsure of what *exactly* they are or how they might best be engaged with. This book has thus repeatedly sought to explore the nature and significance of design concepts through the review of literature, the integration of insights gathered from an international group of students, educators, and practitioners, and via the introduction of innovative frameworks to examine and explain the topic more precisely. It is sincerely hoped that after finishing this book, readers will have a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the *functions* of design concepts, the variety of ways they may be *defined* and *identified*, how they might shape, or be shaped by, *design processes* and also have a greater awareness of the range of methods and strategies that may be utilized in the *generation* and *communication* of them. The detailed explanations presented in this book aim to empower individuals to identify and refine their own interpretations and perspectives as well as appreciate a diversity of other viewpoints. Such progress not only increases the likelihood of more nuanced and productive conversations and engagement, but may also allow students, educators, and practitioners alike to display greater confidence when harnessing the power of design concepts in their work.

The recognition that design concepts can be perceived and utilized in vastly different ways is a critical realization to be grasped in order to gain greater purchase on the subject. As tempting as it may be to reduce or simplify explanations of design concepts and thus suggest there are definitive interpretations of “correct” strategies to be used, one will swiftly find that such approaches hinder understanding by failing to address the complex realities that will be encountered. As this book reiterates, it is plainly evident that design concepts exist and manifest themselves in many and different ways. This is not to say that one would be mistaken if choosing to focus on specific aspects or explanations of them, but instead seeks to highlight the importance of acknowledging just how many ways of understanding, articulating, and employing design concepts there actually are. This acceptance will likely foster confidence in individuals who may consequently

come to possess a sharper and more effective grasp of the topic. This is especially applicable in the case of students and novice designers, but is likewise of clear potential value both to educators – enabling them to better help students find their own personal approaches to conceptual development and to support their experimentation – and also for practitioners in determining expectations within their own project work.

Interior architects and designers clearly play a central role in shaping the environments in which people live their lives. The continually changing nature of the design industry – impacted by everything from increasingly visible roles for social media and AI to ever-shifting social, economic, and environmental contexts – inevitably places a heavy burden on designers to generate appropriate design responses which are not only creative, but analytical and strategic. One of the principal ways that designers can work to combine such modes of thought is produced by conceptual thinking. This book has sought to introduce and analyze various defining features of design concepts and was written with the aim to shed light on a deeply confusing topic, while also serving as a starting point for conversation and further research. Some areas that may be of particular interest for the future include how concepts are understood and utilized in other creative fields, the ways in which they present themselves in collaborative, co-design efforts, as well as an examination of non-Western perspectives. Insights gleaned from these areas would almost certainly offer an even more valuable appreciation of the subject. Ultimately, only by engaging with individuals involved in and impacted by design processes around the world will a deeper, sounder understanding of the topic be attained that truly enables designers to harness the potential of design concepts. One hopes to see this before too long.

# Index

Page locators in *italics* indicate a figure.

- 3D printing 86
- A Pedagogy of the Concept:  
Rereading the Architectural  
Convention through the Philosophy  
of Deleuze and Guattari (Teal/Loo)  
20, 58
- ability: to communicate 15, 46, 162,  
189; narrative 145–146
- abstract: concept 185; ideas 76, 168,  
170, 185, 187; images 147, 153,  
171, 183; thinking 128, 190
- Adaptation: Strategies for Interior  
Architecture and Design*  
(Booker) 69
- adaptive concept 75–76
- AGENDA 137
- Adeyemi, Kunlé 135
- Akkach, Samer 24–25
- Akpınar, Abdullah 22
- Alberti, Leon Battista 24
- Alchemy, The* 46–48, 50, 54
- Alexander, Christopher 97
- analogy 22, 54, 57
- Anchoring the Design Process*  
(Dooren) 10, 71, 124
- Aravena, Alejandro 83
- architecture, interior 2, 69, 195
- Architecture Concept Book, The*  
(Tait) 71
- Art of Thought, The* (Wallas) 94
- artistic expressions 24
- Banathy, Bela 31
- Berlage, Hendrik Petrus 124
- Big Idea, The* 40–44, 48, 51, 54,  
57–59
- Black, Max 130
- Bo Bardi, Lina 84
- Botella, Marion 92
- Brooker, Graeme 69, 131
- Brooks, Kerry R. 22
- building/buildings: typology 77, 130,  
132, 137
- Burton, Kathryn L. 122
- Campos Studio 38
- client or brand 140
- cohesion 2, 6, 10, 11, 15
- cohesion and focus 10, 11
- Cold War 95
- collaboration 17, 19, 47, 125
- collage 147–148
- Collins English Dictionary 32
- communication: concise 39, 43, 114;  
strategies 160, 169, 180, 189;  
text-based 172
- compound process/processes 106,  
111, 112–115
- concept: development 4, 11, 145,  
149, 163; images 147, 182, 186;  
statements 175–177; words  
144, 174
- conceptual thinking 2, 69, 72–73,  
115, 145, 174, 185

- Conceptual Thinking: The Design Concept in Interior Design  
Education (Travis) 7, 126, 187  
convergent thinking 9, 103–104  
Corazza, Giovanni Emanuele 151  
creative bridges 34  
creative process/processes 19, 33, 92, 100, 103, 183  
creativity: approach to, social 19, 122, 124; contemporary 103–104; notions of 62, 94, 125; stimulating 8, 9, 33  
*Creativity in Design: Analyzing and Modeling the Creative Leap* (Cross) 33, 43, 70  
*Creativity, Design Thinking and Interdisciplinarity* (Nelson/Botella) 92  
critical: analysis 9, 149; concept 82–83; moves 33–34, 51, 104  
criticisms 19, 21, 23, 26, 97  
Cropley, Arthur 48, 104  
Cross, Nigel 22, 33–34, 43, 70, 94–95, 101  
  
Darke, Jane 13, 33–34, 51  
decision-making 12–14, 68, 75, 150, 190  
declarative definitions 36, 37, 48  
depth and meaning 6  
design concepts: ability 14, 17, 42, 48, 60, 63, 185; categories 34–35; challenges 22, 32, 53–54, 56, 172; criticisms of 19–21, 26, 97; defining 31–32, 34, 68; detachment, evolution of 25; disconnected, abstract nature of 23; function of 8, 10, 15, 26; ideas for 122, 125–126, 142–143; identification of 68–69, 100; individualized 23; levels of 71, 72; meaningful outcomes 7; methods of generating 143; multiplicity 69; overly intellectualized, individualized 23; process diagrams 106, 150; reductive, superficial nature of 20; restrictive, limiting nature of 21  
Design Methods movement 31, 95, 99  
design methods, criticisms 97  
design process: communication 160; design concepts in 92; modernist underpinning 93  
design programme 73–74, 87, 134  
Design Thinking movement 99–100, 102–103  
Design Thinking: A Model Development Based on Archived Documents (Akpinar *et al*) 22  
*Designerly Ways of Knowing* (Cross) 94, 101  
designers see interior design  
*Designing Social Systems in a Changing World* (Banathy) 31  
*Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Escobar) 93  
diagrams 106, 150  
direct process 106, 107  
directed concept 73–75, 162  
disconnected 3–4, 20, 23, 25, 97, 114, 126  
divergent thinking 103–104  
Doloughan, Fiona J. 170, 172  
Dong, Andy 143  
Dooren, Elise van 10, 71  
drawing 149  
  
emergent process 110, 111  
engineers 33  
Escobar, Arturo 93  
essence 129  
evocative concept 178  
evolving process 107–109, 108–110  
execution 3, 15, 68–69, 72–73, 87  
experimentation 84–86, 98, 108, 112, 164  
explorations: compound 3; conceptual 129, 141, 143–144; material 81, 110  
exploratory concept 79–80  
extrinsic generators 126, 127

- Fathy, Hassan 124  
 finishes 7, 83, 114, 179  
 functions and activities 135
- Ganoe, Cathy J. 145  
 geographic location 131–133  
 Gero, John S. 21–22, 148  
 Glăveanu, Vlad Petre 69, 151  
 Goel, Vinod 150  
 Goldschmidt, Gabriela 33–34,  
   50–51, 100, 103–104, 123  
*Guide, The* 56–58
- Harrods 139  
 Haupt, Grietjie 14  
 Heatherwick Studio 136  
 Hertzberger, Herman 123  
 Higgins, Ian 6, 40  
 hindsight 111, 111, 165–166, 174  
 history 138  
 Holl, Steven 124  
*How Designers Think: Demystifying the Design Process* (Lawson) 40
- idea evaluation 92  
 idea generation 92, 125, 161  
 IDEO 102–103  
 imagination 178, 185  
 individual: methodologies 8, 12,  
   35, 72, 84, 103, 124, 153, 182;  
   projects 8, 52, 57, 184  
 influence, levels of 40, 68,  
   70, 73  
 information, sources of 44, 46, 54,  
   148–149, 171, 174  
 innovation 8, 9, 10, 77, 103  
*Inquiry, The* 59–62  
 inspiration, source of 4, 51, 77, 122,  
   126, 132, 147, 151, 170  
 intellectualized, overly 3,  
   6, 23  
 intentionality 10, 11, 148, 166  
 interactions 92, 113, 125–127, 152,  
   160, 173  
 interior design, practice of 6, 19, 51,  
   85, 126, 141, 167
- interior spaces 80, 86, 113, 127, 136,  
   180, 188, 190  
 intrinsic generators 130, 131
- Jencks, Charles 99  
 Joas, Hans 69  
 Johnson, Mark 129  
 Jones, Christopher 31, 97  
 Juelsbo, Tue 69, 151
- Kandinsky, Wassily 124  
 Kelley, David 103  
 Kingston Lafferty Design 38  
 Klee, Paul 124  
 knowledge: professional 102; shared  
   162, 164  
 Koolhaas, Rem 124  
 Kuma, Kengo 132
- Lakoff, George 129  
*Language of Architecture, The*  
   (Simich) 128, 185, 186  
 Lawson, Bryan 40, 58, 123  
 Le Corbusier (Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris) 124  
 Lewitt, Sol 9, 68  
 licensing 93  
 life experience 123  
 Loo, Stephen 20, 23, 58, 150, 172
- materials: locally sourced 78, 84;  
   objects and 151–152; physical  
   169, 190  
 Meijer, Richard 124  
 memory 104, 123  
 merging 111–112, 114–115  
 metaphor 129–130  
*Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff/  
   Johnson) 129  
 methods: communication 169, 191;  
   design 95–97; hybrid 152;  
   image-based 143, 146, 151;  
   object-based 151; research 51, 61,  
   100; text-based 143, 153  
 Mewburn, Inger 151  
 micro-concepts 39–40, 59, 70, 81

- Mobius House 38  
*Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Black) 130  
Modern movement 93  
Modernity and Design in the Arab World: Professional Identity and Social Responsibility (Akkach) 24  
Moynihan Train Hall 138  
multiple-sequential process 112, 113  
Museum of Modern Art, São Paulo 84  
  
narratives 145–146  
natural elements 133  
Nelson, Julien 92  
*Nexus, The* 41–44, 48  
Nobel Prize 96  
nondesigners 24, 103, 153, 174, 181  
nonlinear design 103  
  
objects 151, 189  
operational definitions 3, 36, 48, 49, 52  
  
*Palgrave Handbook of Social Creativity, The* (Lebuda/Glăveanu) 9, 16  
Parent, Claude 86  
Parsons, Glenn 24  
parti diagram 150, 186–187  
Pedersen, Elaine L. 122  
Peña, William 62  
perception 12, 68, 72, 93  
perspective, individualized 3, 6, 20, 80  
persuasion 16  
Pesce, Gaetano 85  
*Philosophy of Design* (Parsons) 24  
Potential in Creativity: Individual, Social, Material Perspectives and a Dynamic Integrative Framework 18  
precedents 73, 75–77, 80, 148  
predictability 73, 75, 87, 96  
primary generators 33–34  
  
problem analysis 92, 98  
processes: cognitive 100; compound 106, 111–112; creative 58, 103, 133; design (see design process); evolving 108–109  
properties, functional and physical 129  
Purcell, A. Terry 21–22, 148  
  
reductive and superficial 3, 6, 20  
reflective practice 102  
*Reflective Practitioner* (Schön) 55, 102  
Renesa Studio 140  
Rengel, Roberto 40, 69–70, 175m 177  
research 34; participants 7–8, 22, 34–36, 40, 71, 93, 122, 126, 138; project related 131, 141  
restrictive and limiting 20–21  
Rittel, Horst W.J. 98  
Rock Print Pavilion 86  
Rockwell Group 138  
Rossi, Also 124  
Rowe, Colin 22  
Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) 97  
Rubik's cube 38  
  
Schön, Donald 55, 102  
*Sciences of the Artificial* (Jones) 31, 96  
*Shaping Interior Space* (Rengel) 40, 69–70, 175  
Shigeru Ban 84  
Simich, Andrea 128, 185, 188  
Simon, Herbert 31, 96, 102  
site 133  
sketches 184  
Smith, Kennon M. 14  
solutions: innovative 102; perceived 22; potential 9–10, 12, 14, 42, 62, 94  
*Spatial Strategies for Interior Designers* (Higgins) 6, 40  
specific statements 177  
speculative concepts 84–86

- statements *see concept: suggestive*  
178, 180
- Stimulant, The* 49–52
- Story, The* 43–46
- Strategy, The* 52–55, 187
- students, interior design 68, 71, 123,  
143, 169
- superficial realms 23
- Tabassum, Marina 82
- Tait, James 71
- Taman Bima Library 81
- Tanggaard, Lene 69, 151
- Teal, Randall 20, 23, 58, 150, 172
- terminology 31, 34, 37, 57, 69, 71,  
92, 145
- translator 81, 127
- Travis, Stephanie 7, 126, 187
- TWA Airport Terminal, New York 80
- UNStudio 38
- users 139
- verbal strategies 172
- Virilio, Paul 86
- Wallas, Graham 94
- Wallick, Karl 149
- Wearstler, Kelly 78
- Webber, Melvin M. 98
- Whiting, Sarah 61
- wicked 98, 100
- Woods Bagot 79
- World War II 95
- Xu, Mengyuan 22
- Zietz Museum of Contemporary Art  
Africa 136