

SESSION 1

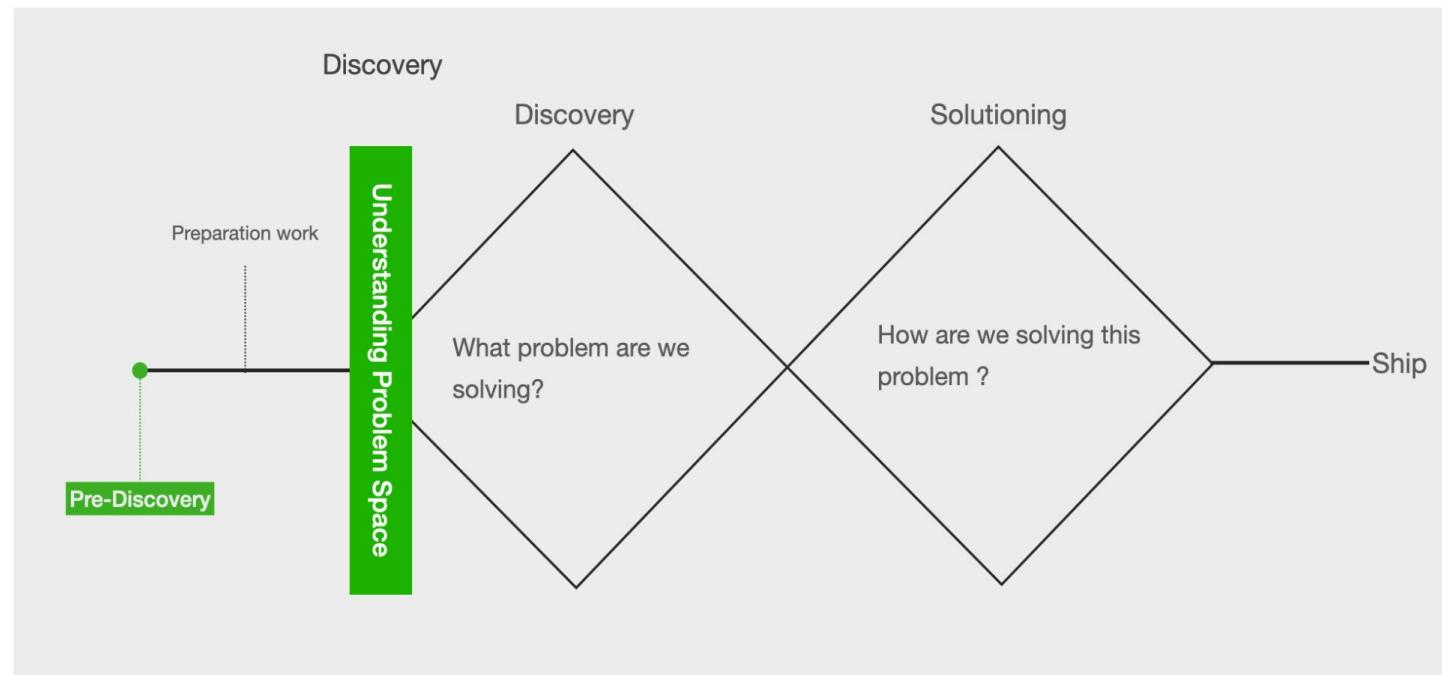
Navigating Ambiguity

Design Thinking for MBAs

Wednesday, January 21, 2026 | Instructor: Patrick Ray

Welcome

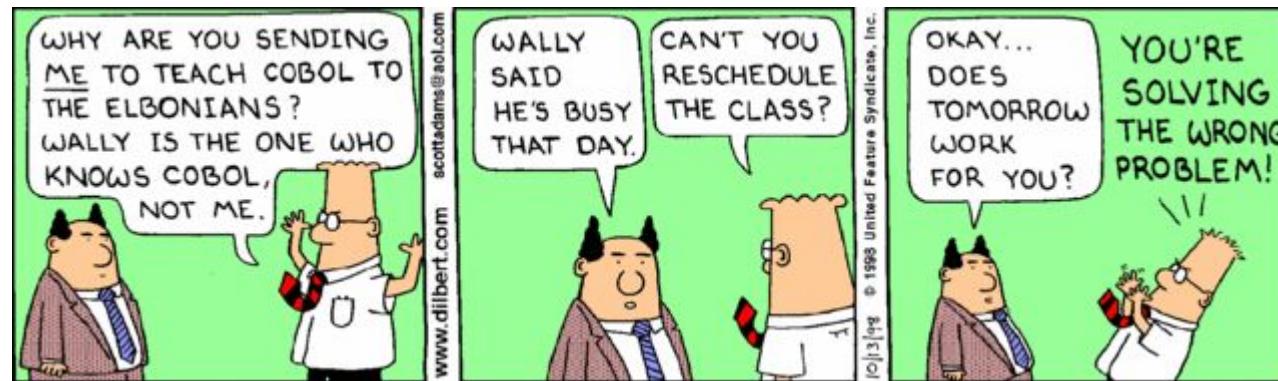
- This class will feel different from typical MBA courses
- We start with **problems**, not solutions
- Ambiguity is not a bug, it's a **feature**



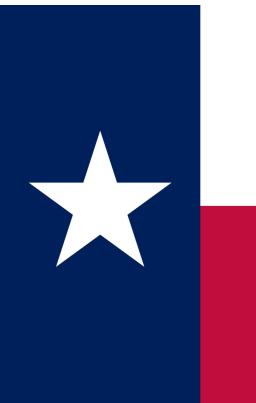
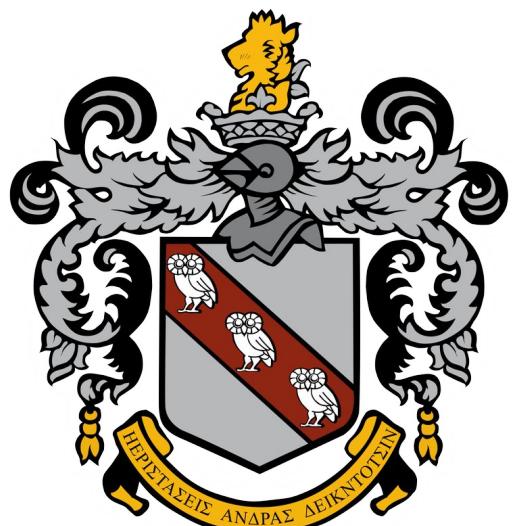
Problem > Solution

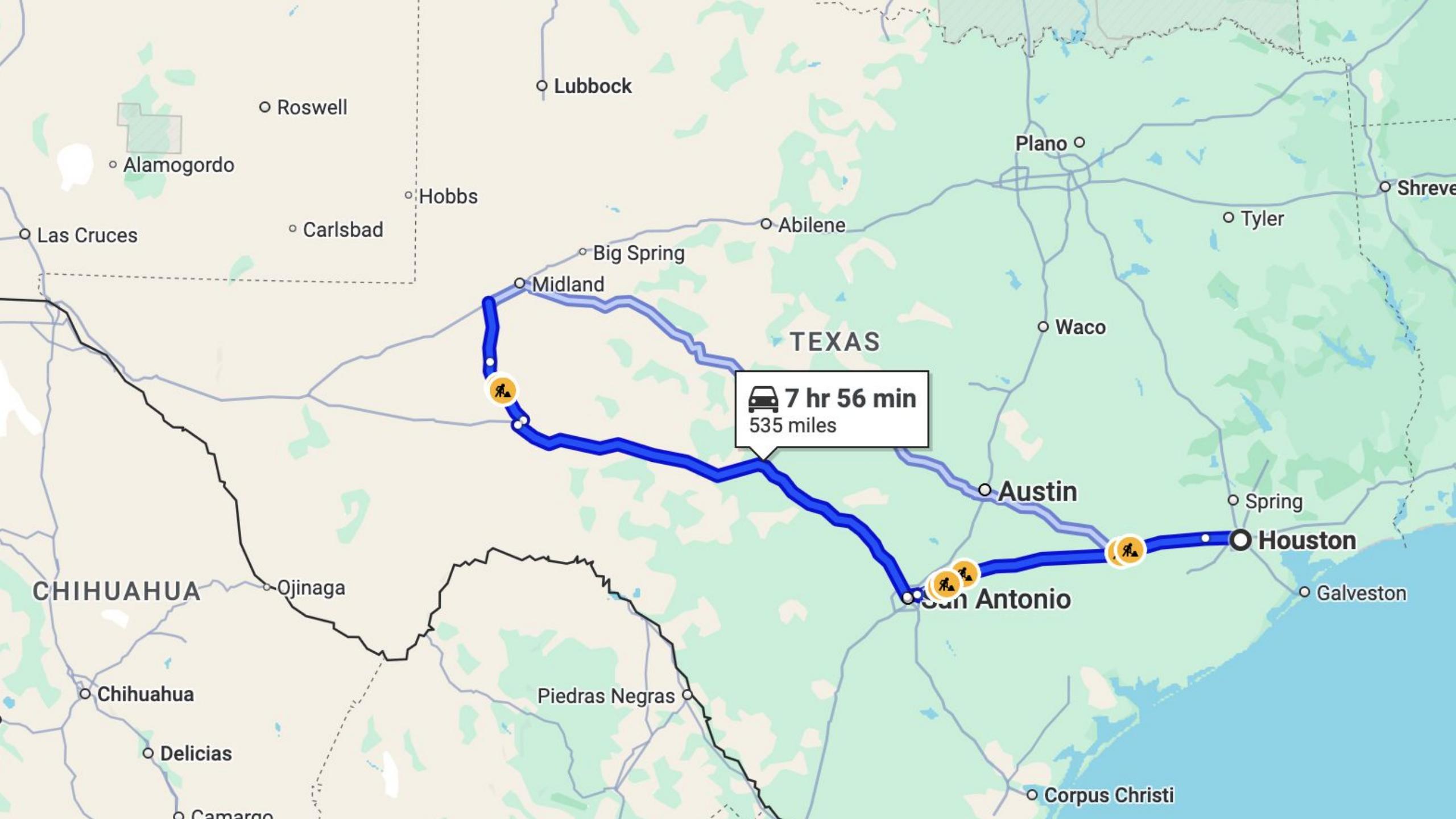
Most failed products come from solving the wrong problem.

Our job: Learn to live in the problem space longer than feels comfortable.

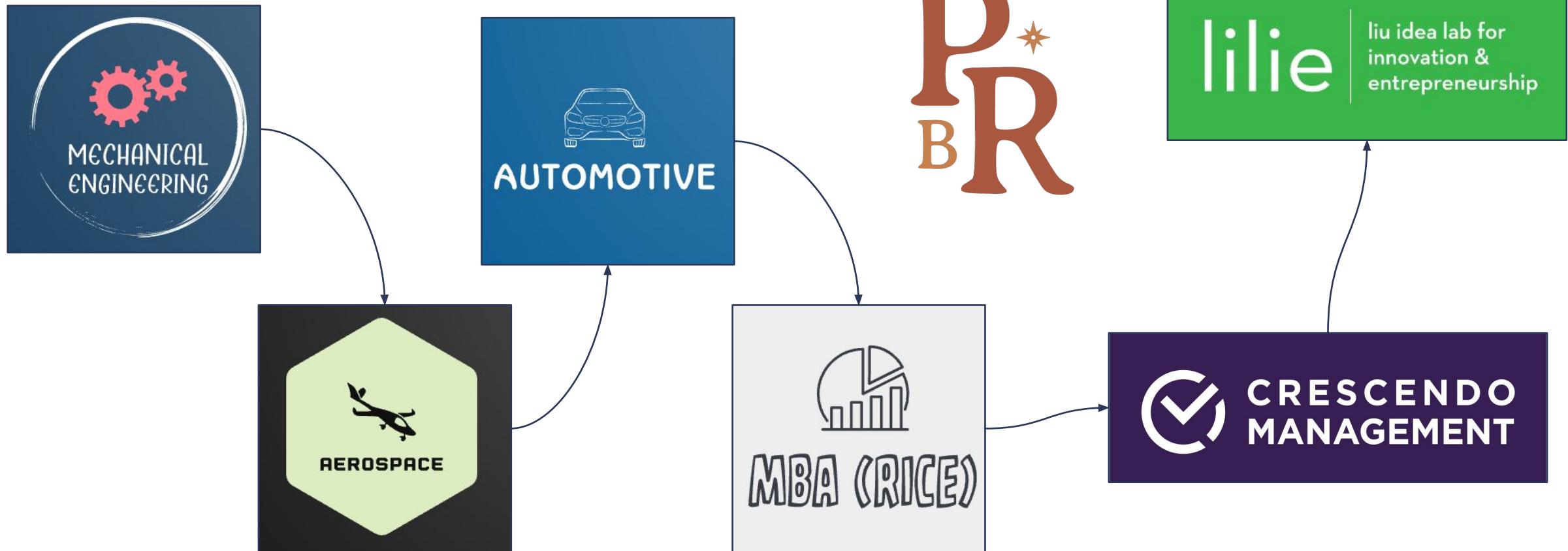


About Patrick Ray:





About Patrick Ray:



Design Tapas Menu

1. Trader Joe's (10 min)

Practice spotting needs from observation

2. 30 Circles (10 min)

Rapid ideation and reframing

3. John Venn (5 min)

Where design thinking begins

4. Story of Your Name (5 min)

Community building through storytelling

5. Why? Interview (10 min)

Practicing deep listening

6. 3 Things (5 min)

High-energy icebreaker

7. 2 Truths 1 Lie (5 minutes)

Just For Fun!

7. TaDa! (10 minutes)

Learn From Others, Experiment Rapidly

Activity: What Needs Do You See?

Take 2 minutes. Observe silently.

What needs do you notice?



\$16.5



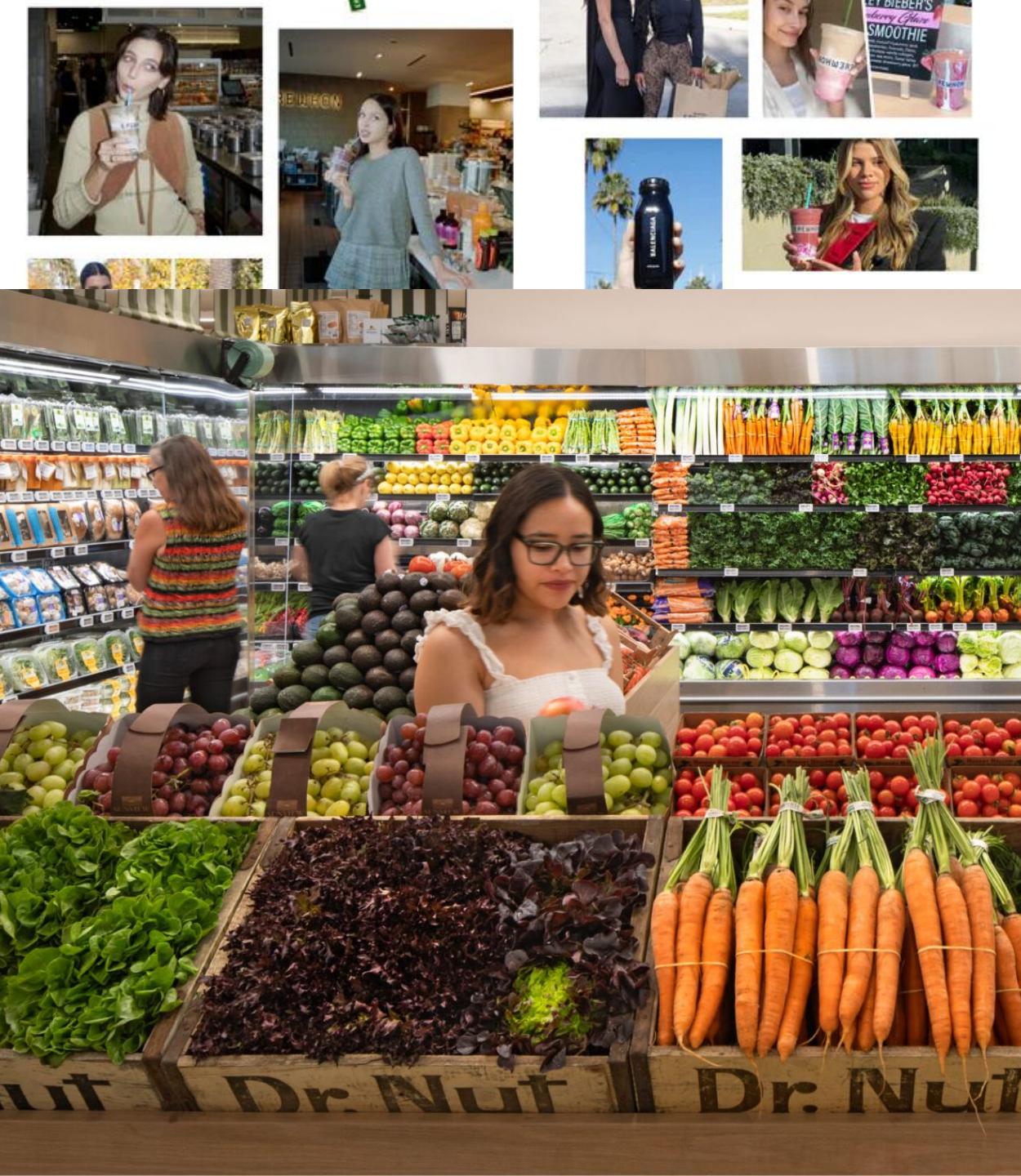
\$30



\$19



\$65



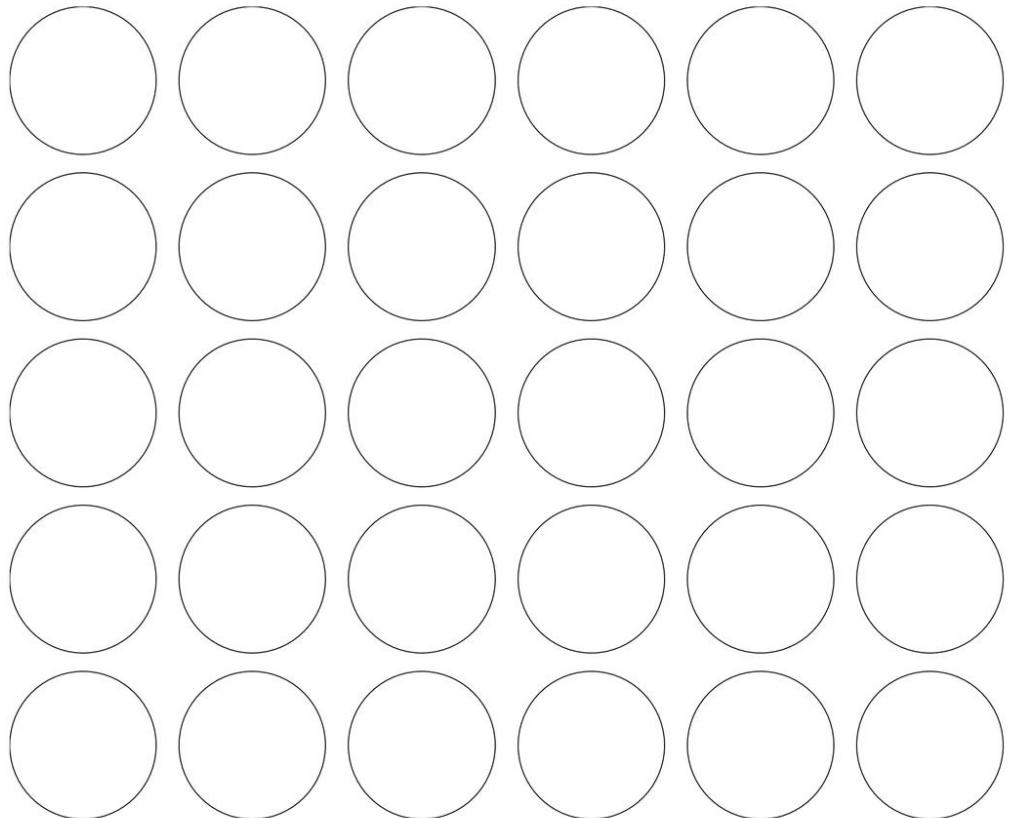
What Did You Notice?

- What needs did you identify?
- Whose perspective did you take?
- What surprised you?

Infinite needs exist in the world—designers choose which ones to pursue

30 Circles

- You have **60 seconds**
- Turn as many circles as possible into recognizable objects
- Go for **quantity**, not quality
- Ready? Go!

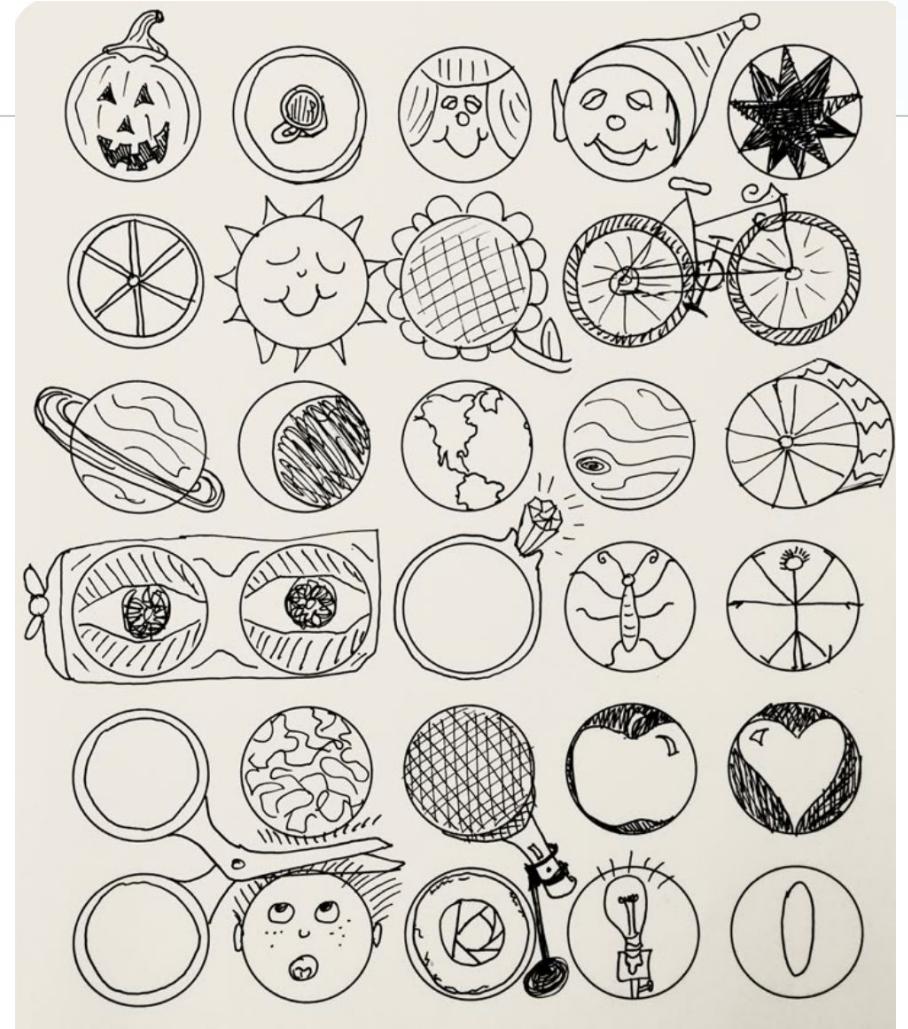


What If We Reframe the Challenge?

Assumption: Each circle = one individual object

Reframe: What if multiple circles could be one idea?

Reframing opens new possibilities

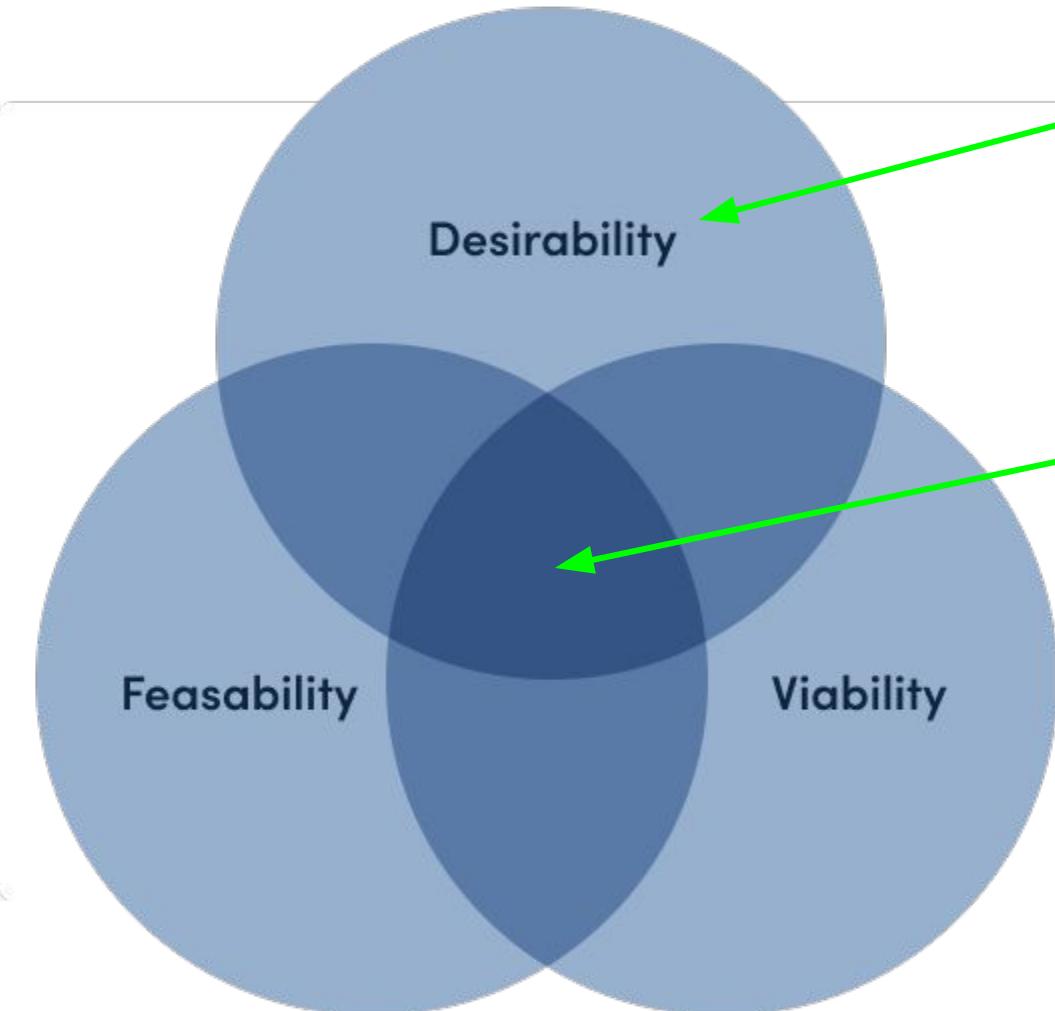


2 Truths, One Lie

- Faculty shares 2 truths, one lie
- Class votes on which one is the lie



Where Design Thinking Begins



In Design, we start here.

Innovation lives at the intersection, but we begin with human needs.

Why might businesses ignore desirability?

Activity: Story of Your Name

- Find a partner
- Each person shares: **How and why did you get your name?**
- You have 2 minutes each

Stories reveal values and emotion. In user research, your goal is to surface interesting stories.



Activity: The "Why?" Interview

Round 1 (2 min each)

Interview about a topic (e.g., morning routine) using **ONLY body language** and nodding. No words. Interviewer can ask only the initial question.

Round 2 (2 min each)

Same topic. Now you can ask "**Why?**"

Design Ability #1: Navigating Ambiguity

The capacity to engage productively with uncertainty—seeing it not as a barrier but as creative space

Why it matters:

- Real problems don't come with clear boundaries
- Best insights emerge when we sit with confusion
- Ambiguity is where **innovation begins**

Activity: The "Why?" Interview

Debrief:

- What happened during awkward silences?
- Designers listen more than they talk. When you give the gift of space, people open up.

Activity: 3 Things

- Form small groups (3-4 people)
- Person A names a category (e.g., "things that are red")
- Person B names 3 things in that category as fast as possible
- Group chants "3 Things!" while pounding fists

Activity: TaDa!

- Partner Up
- Round One: Each pair counts to 3, switching off saying each number. “1,” “2,” “3,” “1,... Go as fast as you can!
- Round Two: Same as Round One but replace your 1’s with claps!
- Round Three: Same as Round Two but replace your 2’s with snaps!
- Round Four: Same as Round Three but replace your 3’s with stomps!

Rule: Anytime you mess up in your duo, you both throw your hands in the air and yell "Ta-DA!"

McNair Hall: Where Old Meets New

Newly renovated building + old patterns = natural friction

When new construction interfaces with existing spaces, ambiguity emerges. Systems collide. People adapt.



Find 3 Examples Where...

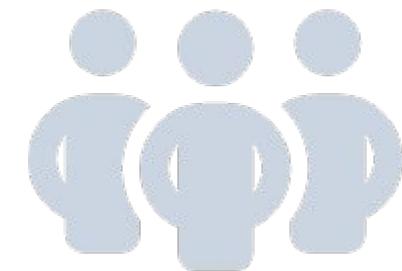
1. The renovation created **NEW ambiguity** or confusion
2. Old problems were solved but **NEW problems emerged**
3. Temporary workarounds are still in place

Rules

- Stay inside the building
- Document with notes/photos
- **Observe—don't solve (yet!)**
- Return by [TIME]

What Did You Discover?

- What surprised you?
- Where did YOU feel uncertain or confused?
- What patterns did you notice?
- How did it feel to just observe without proposing solutions?



Weekly Assignment: Find the Duct Tape

Designers start where systems break down

*"Duct tape" = temporary fixes,
workarounds, desire lines—evidence
that a system isn't fully working as
intended*



Weekly Deliverable (Weeks 1-6)

1. Photo, sketch, or detailed description
2. Context paragraph (150-200 words)
3. Behavioral description: Who/How often?

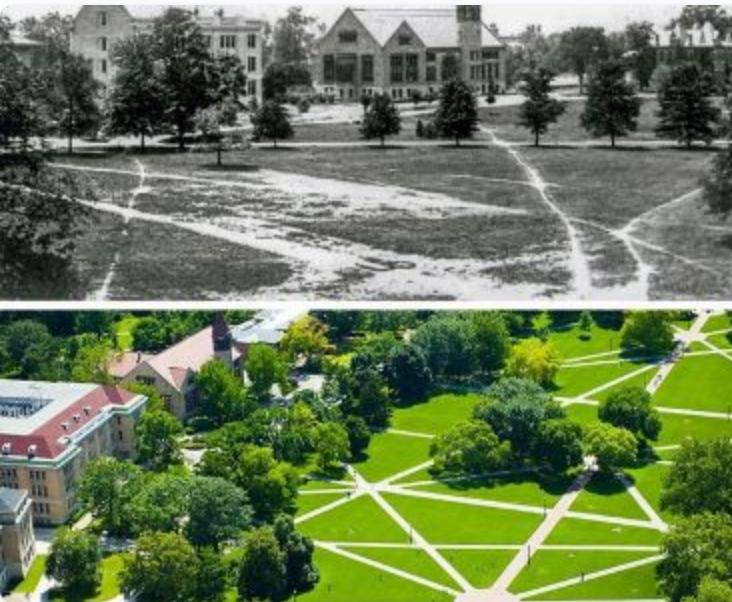
NO SOLUTIONS

Just document what is.

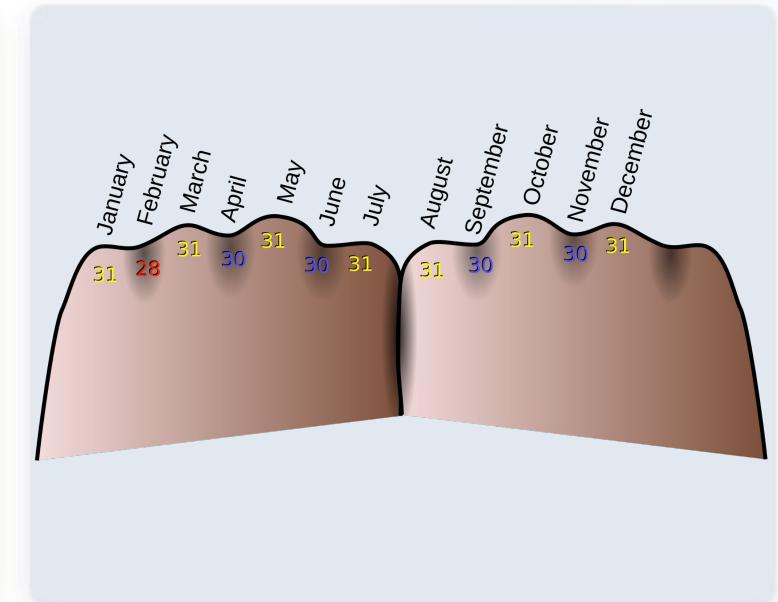
Examples



Literal Fixes



Desire Lines



Social Workarounds

All of these reveal unmet needs

Due Monday, Session 2

- Find the Duct Tape Entry #1
- Problem Reflection 1 (500 words) on your experience exploring McNair Hall

Next session: We return to observe with even stricter rules—separating what you SEE from what you ASSUME

See you Monday!