



WICKED PROBLEMS

DESIGN CAN HELP FIND NEW SOLUTIONS FOR COMPLEX PROBLEMS, BUT MORE ATTENTION NEEDS TO BE PAID TO THE INTERFACE BETWEEN THE DESIGN PROCESS AND POLICY-MAKING. IN THE NETHERLANDS, FORWARD-THINKING CONSULTANTS ARE GIVING FORM TO THIS COLLABORATION BY HOLDING AN INTERMEDIATE POSITION.

by
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WICKED PROBLEMS AND CONSULTANCY

As consultants for a notable Dutch management consulting firm, we are hired to consult about issues such as the way public space functions, how health-care could be improved or how the employment rate could be increased in areas with demographic decline. These are issues that nobody fully understands, nor can claim ownership to and despite the red flags of past failures, the tendency remains to use the very techniques and approaches that have been proven inefficient in the past. In most cases, the result is that what is allowed doesn't work and what works isn't allowed. In consultancy we call these cases wicked problems.¹ Why not create space for the unproven and unorthodox approaches, rather than looking for the 'silver bullet'?

A CONSULTANT WITH A DOUBLE LIFE

Besides my job as a consultant, I have a second life. A life that brings me to galleries and concert halls more often than industry trade shows or other classical business forums. Perhaps its because I founded two record labels, organized pop festivals and toured around the world with my bands. Throughout that process, I got interested in arts and design and met artists and designers I really admired. A few years ago, I discovered that the two worlds I'd been trying to keep separate weren't so different after all. I started to notice that some designers investigated the same topics as I did. The difference between us was simply that we asked different questions, drew different conclusions and reported in a totally different way. I felt the urge to introduce this creativity, the design approach, in my consulting assignments. Together with some other colleagues who also have a background in the arts, we now successfully combine old school consultancy with artistic research. Thereby, we are the intermediate between the artist or designer and the contractor.

WHAT DESIGN CAN DO

This article is not about all artists and designers in every situation, rather, it focuses on those who wish to use their skills and knowledge in order to have an impact on complex problems. While investigating what art and design might add to our practice,

we came upon interesting examples of how art and design helped—or tried to help—to create a better world or a better understanding of wicked problems. However, we noticed that while many attempts are artistically interesting, they don't have an actual impact. In many cases this is due to the fact that we have not yet developed an arena where 'design thinking' can have a real social impact. Indeed, there is little dialogue between the artistic field and other stakeholders, policy-makers and scientists, which often make creative ideas sterile from a change standpoint. It's a shame, because the interaction could clarify the perception of wicked problems while helping in finding new ways to solve them. Below, I will explain the possibilities of this arena.

SOME CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS REGARDING DESIGN IN RELATION TO WICKED PROBLEMS INVESTIGATIONS AT THE HEART OF THE ISSUE

The designer's aim should be to understand the foundations of the issue, by understanding the language of the others involved. Artistic research is not often done at the heart of policy-making or in a scientific context. So, I decided to team up with No Academy², a practical research program based in the Netherlands, to see how artistic interventions should be designed and contracted in relation to the practice of other stakeholders.

No Academy is a one-year program for artists who have already fulfilled an arts education and wish to make an impact on social issues. Artists in No Academy work one-on-one with experienced 'masters'. Working with partners, (semi-)public and private parties to address their biggest challenges as part of the program gives the artists real-life experiences to channel their creative skills and to come up with tangible solutions.

While unorthodox in its approach, No Academy successfully creates an artistic space to work out problems and design interventions. In close collaboration with the partners, sharing the artistic process alongside the results helps both artist and client share perspectives. Together we find out what this approach means for their everyday behaviour and practice.

I noticed that the world of policy-making is often a blind spot for designers. So I wondered: how can

designers ask other stakeholders to relate to them when the designer can't relate to the practice of the stakeholder? I also noticed that there is a widespread belief that working with, or in, the centre of policy-making threatens the autonomic position of the designer or the artist and should therefore be avoided. I find that strange. There needs to be open communication for the designer and the stakeholder to come to an understanding. If they don't build a relationship they won't have a connection, and therefore, art will stand isolated and won't be able to contribute useful insights with the others involved. Within our work as a consultancy firm and within No Academy we have been exploring how artistic research can be incorporated at the heart of an issue, the following is an example.

OPENING UP THE IDEA ABOUT CHANGING A CITY'S BRAND

Tabo Goudswaard, one of the artists I worked with at No Academy, did research on the identity of Gouda³, a city famous for its namesake Dutch cheese. Due to a number of incidents on public buses, Gouda had, within the Netherlands, lost its romantic connotation and had become mainly known for the terror issues with young, third-generation migrants.⁴ The public debate grew to be out of control after some right wing politicians suggested to send in the army. When social tension occurred in other cities, the local authorities would state that they "would not become another 'Gouda'".

The city-council of Gouda, concerned that the city would not overcome its reputation, or worse, live up to its aggrandized infamy, sought to ameliorate the situation. Among other things, they launched a promotion campaign entitled "Say Cheese Gouda", encouraging the pleasant image they wished to restore. Needless to say, it didn't change much, people kept associating the city with the violent youngsters.

Goudswaard's research showed that a positive identity shift should start with acknowledging what the city had become. He created objects that could add to that process of acceptance. One of the objects was a monument for a bus stop that had been removed after some incidents. It marked the problems that had been and became a place where a discussion could be born regarding the city's new image. At first the municipality wasn't too happy with the idea, but, after explaining the research and the positive function the objects, they concluded that 'one should first accept what one has become, before becoming what one wants to be', and the door opened for a new perspective in the city's strategy to brand itself.

PUTTING AN EMPHASIS ON THE WORK, NOT THE PROCESS

Another observation is that designers and artists tend to emphasize the output rather than the artistic research. In the design process the tension between how things are perceived and how things could be is investigated. Both the designer as well as the contractor should realize that in the course of the project there will be tensions in the processes. We try to do it differently: the thought process of the designers is introduced and remixed with the thought process of the policy-makers or other stakeholders—without one of them being preferred.

In some cases this is an insurmountable task, but very often the discussion about the tensions between the different perspectives helps us become receptive and change the perception of the issue. From there we find new solutions.

ACCESSIBILITY OUTSIDE THE DOMAIN OF THE ARTS

The final observation about the impact design might have on wicked problems is that the work of art, or the artistic process, is often not accessible outside the domain of the arts: i.e. the gallery, the academy or the museum. Sometimes art work is placed in a public space, where people are challenged to relate to it, but often there is no true confrontation with stakeholders. Don't get me wrong, I've seen brilliant artistic research that, in a very clever way, gained social, spatial and even economic insights for the artist. But the research was done from an atelier and the presentation of the results was held at an academy. I was disappointed to find out that it was not discussed outside the academy with other stakeholders, where it could make an impact on the issue. If stakeholders never understand the artistic approach, they will never change their mindset or be challenged to change their behaviour.

CRITICAL OBSERVATION REGARDING CONTRACTORS

I believe that art and design has the power to find solutions to wicked problems. I already mentioned some observations I made about the difficulty, in the artistic domain, to make astute interventions and successful collaborations. On the other hand, potential contractors are facing difficulties making a strong connection as well. In their search for creativity and innovation, the public and private parties request designers and artists. We have great examples of success, but there's also a lot of disappointment. The final product turned out different than expected: it was either incomprehensible or couldn't be related to the initial question. Easily, the

artist is dismissed as someone who didn't get it. In my opinion, in order to be a good contractor, in the context of wicked problems, there needs to be a new set of rules. Rules that we are not yet familiar with.

DOES THE WORLD REALLY NEED ANOTHER CONSULTANT?

At the Design Academy Eindhoven, in the Netherlands, there is a sign above the door asking: "Does the world really need another chair?" I asked myself a similar question: Does the world really need another consultant?

Of course, some artistic interventions are as sharp as a knife and some designers manage to translate their intervention into the context of other stakeholders resulting in new perspectives and different behaviors. There are contractors who manage to create artistic space in the assignment and understand how it can be translated to their own practice. However, most artists and contractors lack these skills. Is this a shortcoming? No, I don't think so, on the contrary, it's very possible that this is why they are so good at their job. It would be unwise to expect that a designer can also be a specialist in change-management, or that a good policy-maker would understand how an artistic process or 'design thinking' works.

In our assignments we ask the contractor the initial questions: What is the problem? Why did it get so complicated? What have you already tried, and why didn't it work? We think that the more complex a problem is, the sharper the intervention needed and therefore more artistic space needs to be created. But what is artistic space? What does it look like in a policy-making or corporate environment? How is it created and preserved? We take the initiative to have this discussion at the beginning of a collaboration because, from experience, we know that this step is usually skipped. During this conversation 'silver bullets' are never promised.

In order to link the world of the artists and that of the contractors, there should be at least one person with sufficient knowledge of both worlds. That's why we use the term 'boundary spanner' for the position we hold. I know the interests, organization structures and decision making processes of the contractors. I also understand the importance of artistic space and how it can be created for the artists we work with. But, by definition, I am neither an artist/designer nor a policy-maker. My own interest is to create a process that makes a connection, which then enables artists and designers to actually make an impact.

A LEAP FORWARD

With the world going from one crisis to another, I noticed, both in the public as well as the private sector, the urgent need for new ideas and approaches. A fairly large group of artists and designers are trying to connect with new contractors. Sometimes it's driven by money, but more often it starts by artists interacting with contractors and vice versa.

So new associations are being developed all the time. New art educations, such as No Academy in the Netherlands and the Art in Context program in Berlin, are a logical result of this era. Whether these new relations turn out to be sustainable will depend on the strength of the connection. We aim to develop a new practice, with designers and contractors, in which artistic interventions lead to a sustainable change. Gaining trust in each other and confidence in the collaboration will be an ongoing process. As I said before "what works, isn't allowed". While our portfolio continues to grow, the confidence that we are building something special and something that works, grows—on both sides.

Initiatives like No Academy or the Art in Context post-graduate degree at Künste University in Berlin are great vehicles for artists who seek to position their work in the context of society. And as John Kolko advocates in our pages (*this issue, p.12*), the need to understand systems and make sense of complexity has never been as acute as it is today. Businesses and governments will need to elevate and amplify that thinking with action, by leveraging a more diversified range of talents, skills and mindsets. The kind of thinking that reaches across cultures and boundaries. *Twynstra Gudde* commands respect for being progressive on that front and other consulting groups should pay attention. — AR

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