Managing as Designing

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AND FRED COLLOPY

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Designing for Thrownness

Karl E. Weick

DESIGN IS usually portrayed as forethought that leads to an intention. But on closer inspection, design may be less originary than it looks. One reason is because beginnings and endings are rare, middles are common. People, whether designers or clients, are always in the middle of something, which means designing is as much about re-design, interruption, resumption, continuity, and re-contextualizing, as it is about design, creation, invention, initiation, and contextualizing. What separates good design from bad design may be determined more by how people deal with the experience of thrownness and interruption than by the substance of the design itself. All of these complexities are likely to be given more attention if we stop talking about organizational design and start talking about organizational re-design. The reframing involved in such a shift is illustrated by Adrienne Rich's description of life as music and Martin Heidegger's description of life as thrownness.

Here is Rich's commentary on being in the middle: "No one ever told us we had to study our lives, make of our lives a study, as if learning natural history or music, that we should begin with the simple exercises first and slowly go on trying the hard ones, practicing till the strength and accuracy became one with the daring to leap into transcendence, take the chance of breaking down in the wild arpeggio or faulting the full sentence of the fugue. . . . And in fact we can't live like that: we take on everything at once before we've even begun to read or mark time, we're forced to begin in the midst of the hardest movement, the one already sounding as we are born" (Rich, 1979).

Karl E. Weick, *Department of Psychology and School of Management, University of Michigan.*

Heidegger captures his own version of Rich's insight by unpacking the word *geworfenheit* (*werf* = to throw, *geworfenheit* = being thrown), which has been translated as "thrownness." Heidegger treats being-in-the-world—Rich's taking "everything on at once"—as "the prereflective experience of being thrown into a situation of acting without the opportunity or need to disengage and function as detached observers" (Winograd and Flores, 1986, p. 97).

Two examples of thrownness are the plight of a chairperson at a contentious meeting and the plight of the incident commander at the scene of a disaster. At a contentious meeting, such as trying to decide whether to adopt a new computer system, the chairperson is thrown into the midst of a garbage can organizing process of ongoing agendas seeking support and animosities looking for an airing, without much control or sense of history and with little opportunity for detached contemplation or any assurance that detachment would help anyway. Here's what it feels like to be a thrown chairperson:

1. You cannot avoid acting. Your actions, including the action of doing nothing, affect the situation and yourself, often in ways that run counter to what you intended.
2. You cannot step back and reflect on your actions. You are thrown on your intuitions and have to deal with whatever comes up as it comes up.
3. The effects of action cannot be predicted. The dynamic nature of social conduct precludes accurate prediction, and rational planning is not much help.
4. You do not have a stable representation of the situation. Patterns may be evident after the fact, but at the time the flow unfolds there is nothing but arbitrary fragments capable of being organized into a host of different patterns or possibly no pattern whatsoever.
5. Every representation is an interpretation. There is no way to settle once and for all that any interpretation is right or wrong, which means an "objective" analysis of that into which one was thrown is out of reach.
6. Language is action. Whenever people say something, they create rather than describe a situation. This means it is impossible to stay detached from whatever emerges unless you say nothing, which is such a strange way to react that the situation is deflected anyway (adapted from Winograd and Flores, 1986, pp. 34–36).

An analogous situation is that of an incident commander at the scene of a disaster. Imagine being the first commander to arrive on the scene at the burning World Trade Center on 9/11/2001. Just such an arrival was captured on film by French documentary filmmakers Jules and Gideon Naudet. What is evident on the film and in other occasions of incident command is the challenge of thrownness. Rhona Flin (1996), a leading researcher of incident command, argues that the challenge for the incident commander is to continually make sense of an unexpected and dynamic situation that is characterized by unfamiliarity, scale, and speed of escalation (p. 105). She says that a person thrown

into a fire scene faces (1) extremely difficult decisions, (2) ambiguous and conflicting information, (3) shifting goals, (4) time pressure, (5) dynamic conditions, (6) complex operational team structures, (7) poor communication, and that (8) every course of action carries significant risk (p. 37). The situation of the commander is not all that different from the situation of the chairperson, and neither situation is all that different from that of designers and clients in general.

In situations such as these, designing unfolds in a world that is already interpreted where people are already acting, where options are constrained, where control is minimal, and where things and options already matter for reasons that are taken-for-granted. These taken-for-granted reasons are lost in history and hard to retrieve, if retrieval were even an issue. The question "why are we doing this" seldom comes up in the mood of thrownness because acting with what is at hand is primary and detached reflection secondary. Regardless of whether designing occurs in the context of living a life without a rehearsal or creating a building that is a work of art or crafting a meeting that doesn't explode or coordinating people to control damage, the common thread is that people in each setting share a mood of "disclosive submission" to the world (Dreyfuss, 1995, p. 173). In such a world, understanding occurs through acting, not through isolating and categorizing phenomena, and people act their way into understanding. This is existentialism with a twist. If existence precedes essence, then thrownness is existence whose essence is gradually disclosed as a small subset of all possible options for expression and interpretation. The tiny subset that defines "essence" is the residue of a larger set of possibilities edited down by culture, institutions, socialization, habitats, and labeled experience. Designers thrown into the middle of a contentious meeting, or a nation's nightmare, or a business school's aspirations, or a Spanish city seeking renewal will cope more or less adequately in a preinterpreted world depending on how skillful they are at bricolage, making-do, updating transient explanations, staying in motion in order to uncover new options, improvisation, and tolerating ambiguity. The same varying success in coping holds true for other participants who are thrown into the preexisting designs of a meeting, the crumbling Trade Center, the Peter B. Lewis building, or the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao. Thrownness puts a premium on recovery, resilience, and normalizing, without calling attention to the fact that these moods are at a premium.

The concept of thrownness seems useful within a vocabulary of design because it articulates the context within which designs will be more or less effective. The concept does this in at least five different ways. First, if we take thrownness seriously, it means that designing starts with a different set of back-

ground assumptions. The mind-set is not one of designing as if one faces a blank slate and a greenfield site, but instead it is designing as if one faces a population thrown into a determinate situation characterized by limited options, unreflective submission, continuous acting, occasional interruption, unquestioned answers, ready-made categories for expression and interpretation, and disjunction between understanding and explanation. Second, thrownness suggests that design is incremental even when it aspires to be much more. It is incremental because designers are thrown into an already interpreted world of the client, a world that they typically extend rather than upend. Design is also incremental because clients assimilate and normalize new design and bend it to whatever is already underway so that their action can continue. Third, good design gains meaning from its resonance with the condition of thrownness, which means that good design counteracts some of the features of a "determinate situation" mentioned earlier. The counteraction created by good design may enlarge a limited set of options, reduce blind spots, facilitate brief reflection, reduce the disruptiveness of interruptions, encourage trial and error with safety, refine primitive categories into a more nuanced set of distinctions, and tighten the coupling between existence and interpretation. Fourth, good design supports the mood of thrownness. Support means that the experience of thrownness is enriched when improvised actions are rendered stronger and more appropriate. In the case of a contentious meeting, for example, good design takes the edge off thrownness by providing affordances that make it easier to generate wise action, reflection-in-action (Schon, 1987), action that can be fine tuned and reversed so that prediction is unnecessary, increased situational awareness with decreased dependence on stable representation, richer interpretations, and more differentiated and nuanced language. Another way to describe support is in terms of what Frank Gehry calls "handrails." Handrails are familiar details in an otherwise strange setting that give people a feeling of safety and heighten their willingness to wade into someone else's preinterpreted world and try to become more attuned to what is already underway in it. Fifth, the assumption of thrownness in a preinterpreted world spotlights the potential value of design that stirs up those preexisting interpretations, throws some of them up for grabs, and encourages people to redecide what matters.

Frank Gehry's architecture is interesting when viewed through the lens of thrownness because it is compatible with so many of its tenets. A Gehry building does not start with a clean slate, it incrementally extends preexisting tendencies, it counteracts thrownness by enlarging the determinate space, it enriches thrownness by inviting improvisation, it softens thrownness by including handrails, and it unsettles the preinterpreted by inviting people to ask, "What does this mean, how do we mean?" Exposure to a Gehry building is a

microcosm of thrownness. That exposure engages "the prereflective experience of being thrown into a situation of acting without the opportunity or need to disengage and function as detached observers," (Winograd and Flores, 1986, p. 97) but that exposure does not wholly forestall disengaged reflection. Neither does life.

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