

Morteza Pourmohamadi



BEFORE THE SOLUTION

Living Design Beyond Tools and Templates



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B/S

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To my father, for my daughter.

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*Learn to make masks from me, so that one day,
you may re-create yourself.*

- Muhammad Iqbal,
Zabur-i-Ajam

If you have ever been part of a complex problem-solving task, in a design studio, a classroom, or a boardroom, you may know the feeling. You are standing in front of a wall covered with notes, maps, and sketches, the remnants of a long day of research, discussion, testing, and presenting. The process has been followed. The templates are filled. The methods are recognisable. Nothing is technically wrong. And yet the work feels thinner than expected, as if the exercise has been completed but the design has not fully arrived.

I have seen this moment many times. Sometimes it happens to students who use all the right tools and fill all the right templates, only to arrive at a trivial solution. Sometimes it happens to young designers in agencies, watching senior designers arrive with better ideas that seem to have formed somewhere outside the meeting room. Sometimes it happens to decision-makers who bring design thinking into every project but still struggle to show where their deeper contribution lies. In each case the question is slightly different, but the unease is the same. If I am using the right tools and following the right process, why does the work still feel ordinary?

This book begins from that unease.

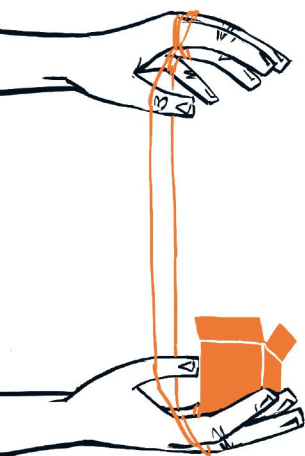
Schön¹ showed that designers work in a particular kind of conversation with situations. They do not simply apply rules to problems. They move, notice, respond, reframe, and act again. What makes design different is not only the tool in the hand but the mode of attention behind it. This idea was not entirely new. The Bauhaus had already argued, in its own way, that design education was not only about drawing, making, and arranging forms. It was also about shaping a way of seeing, working, and living.

The lives of many designers suggest the same thing. Design for them is never fully confined to the studio. It becomes a

PREFACE

1- Schön, D. A. (1983).
*The Reflective Practitioner:
How Professionals Think in
Action*. Basic Books.





way of moving through the world, connecting the projects they work on with the problems, materials, behaviours, and situations they notice elsewhere. The studio matters, but it is not the whole territory of practice.

This kind of work asks for more than technique. It means framing uncertain situations, imagining alternatives, judging possibilities that are still incomplete, and moving between what exists and what could exist. As designers grow more experienced, it is not only their technical skill that changes. Their habits change. Their attention changes. Their sense of what matters changes. They begin to collect information differently, question differently, tolerate uncertainty differently, and notice possibilities where others see only routine.

Yet this deeper view of design has been challenged by the way design has been packaged in recent decades. Agencies, consultancies, institutions, and educators have needed to make design visible, teachable, sellable, and repeatable. There is nothing wrong with that need. Design often has to be presented to clients, taught to students, and coordinated across teams. The problem begins when the presentation becomes the practice. Tools, templates, canvases, workshops, and signature methods become mistaken for design itself. They are not.

Tools, templates, and AI keep getting better at producing polished outputs at speed and scale. They can help a team begin, organise, communicate, and move together. But they cannot replace the deeper work that gives design its force. They cannot decide what is worth noticing. They cannot tell you which problem deserves to be held longer. And they cannot build your judgement, your taste, your courage, or your capacity to stay with the discomfort before a good idea appears.

Many books discuss design while you are inside the brief,

working through the process, moving from problem to solution. This book is more interested in what can be practised between those moments. How can you hone your skills when there is no client, no studio task, no deadline, and no formal process to follow? How do you grow as a designer in the quiet periods, so the next brief lands on stronger ground?

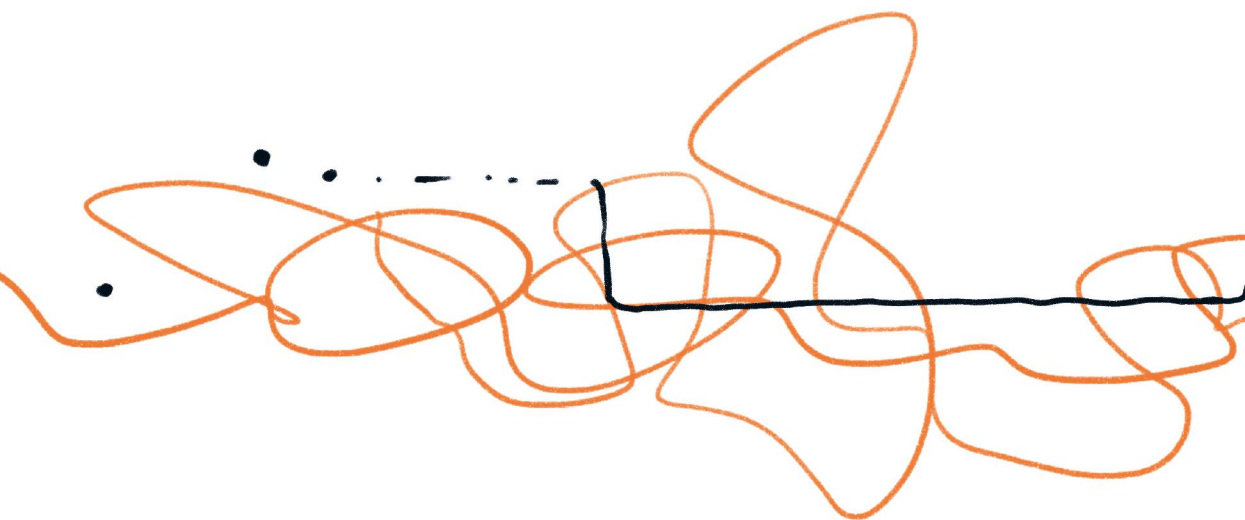
In Gary Hustwit's² documentary *Objectified*, Marc Newson stands beside a table covered with objects he has collected. A small card warns others not to touch the pile. Newson explains that these are things he finds interesting, things he wants to keep around and look at. Then he says something more revealing: "Sometimes these are the materials I'm looking for an excuse to use." That sentence matters. It shows design before the brief. It shows a designer preparing the ground before there is a project to justify the preparation.

This way of practising design does not require a brief, and it does not require you to carry the title of designer. You can practise it in a studio, in a boardroom, in a kitchen, in a supermarket aisle, or while waiting for coffee. Designing goes beyond tools and templates and becomes a way of living with problems and solutions, with knowledge and uncertainty, with other people, with the AI now in every studio, and with yourself.

This book offers practices in that spirit. Not rules to obey, and not a universal method to apply, but ways of noticing and behaving that can gradually become your own. The anecdotes come from three decades of experience in design studios, lecture halls, company boardrooms, and government offices, but also from the small moments of ordinary life in cafés, hospitals, restaurants, and shops. This is how I understand Iqbal's verse. At first, we imitate, repeat, follow, observe, and rehearse. We try on masks that do not yet feel fully ours. But through practice, judgement, and use, something changes. What began as a mask slowly becomes a face.

2- **Hustwit, G. (2009).**
Objectified [Film]. Swiss
Dots.

If you finish this book and your process looks almost the same, but your way of seeing has shifted, then the book has done its work. If you find yourself noticing differently, asking better questions, staying with uncertainty longer, collecting with more care, and recognising the moves that matter before the method begins, then you are not only learning to work as a designer. You are learning to live as one, already at work in the quiet before the brief, before the solution.





Chapter 1



LIVING WITH DESIGN

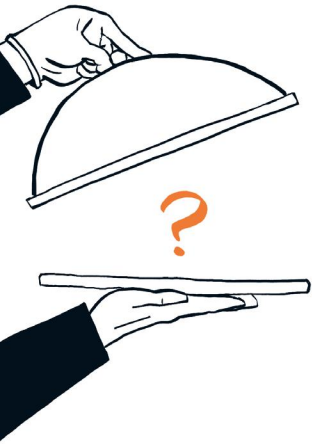
Like many Iranian kids my age, I split my days between school, computer games, and my father's business. He ran a small carpet-weaving workshop back then, and my job was to copy knot patterns from a reference drawing onto smaller panels for the weavers. The reference, hand-drawn by a master artist, carried colourful motifs across a large sheet of graph paper, and I transferred them to smaller sheets in gouache, dot by dot. The weavers turned my copies into intricate Persian carpets, one knot at a time.

I was twelve when I discovered a connection between the games I played and the carpets. The pixels on the television screen were the same as the dots on the graph paper. Using the skills and tools I already had, I started copying scenes and characters from *Mortal Kombat* and *Street Fighter* onto sheets of paper. My friends bought them for small change. It did not take long before I was rearranging scenes and creating new characters out of the parts of the old ones. To me, it was all play. But underneath this play, something else had started. There was no client, no studio, no method, and no one calling me a designer. Yet when I look back at that boy hunched over the graph paper, deciding which fighter's stance to borrow and which background to redraw, I recognise the work. I was designing. The harder question is when the designing began and how anyone could tell.

The play kept widening into computer animation in 256 colours, made with Autodesk Animator and 3D Studio under DOS. It was only when local television broadcast one of my animations that I felt the power of what I was doing. With my father's help I started a graphic design business, making ads, prints, and packaging for local companies. Those were the most exploratory years of my life, when I tried everything, hardware and software. At eighteen it was time for university, and I chose industrial design.

After six years of learning to design by experiment and play, I found the university curriculum shockingly constrained.





1- Simon, H. A. (1996).
The Sciences of the Artificial
 (3rd ed.). MIT Press.

There are only so many times you can hear that this is how it is done, that you cannot do things differently, and that you should just follow the process. Out of that contrast came the question this chapter is built on. When is design happening?

We usually recognise design after the fact, when there is a chair, a poster, a service, an app, or a system to point to. The product gives the activity its name and lets us say that this was designed. When design consultancies rose to prominence across the twentieth century, they presented it as a process instead, something that happens whenever the right steps are followed. Or perhaps design is defined by its problems, the open-ended, ill-defined kind with no single right answer. Product, process, problem, each gives us a handle to grasp design by, and we tend to name it by whichever of the three is easiest to hold.

But each of these handles can slip from our grip. What if the problem is closed, with one right answer, and someone still finds an inventive way to solve it? What about the expert who moves through ordinary life solving problems with flair, handed no brief and following no method. Is that not design? And the team you find in a studio researching, arguing, taking notes, wandering the room, doing something that looks suspiciously like wasting time, are they designing or not?

Simon¹ drew the discipline's widest boundary when he described this work as devising courses of action aimed at moving situations from how they are to how they ought to be. Take that boundary at its word and design stops being the property of a profession. The parent who rearranges a kitchen shelf so small hands can reach their own cup is inside it. So is the shopkeeper who moves the umbrellas to the door on a rainy morning, and the commuter who redraws their route around a closed station, and anyone who has ever delayed sending a message until the moment it would land well.

The title is recent. The act is ancient and common, and it asks almost nothing to begin, a pencil, a problem, and a few

minutes of attention, which puts it within reach of anyone in the smallest corner of a day. The same plain act, done deliberately and held to account, sits at the heart of a deeply respected profession, not different in kind from the parent's or the shopkeeper's, only more concentrated. And few skills could be more worth training in a world where problems keep arriving without precedent. When the past stops being a guide, design is the difference between merely coping with the world and shaping it into something better.

I never stopped asking when design is happening. Twelve years after I first arrived in Tabriz as a student, I came back to found the country's first faculty of design, and the vision behind that school was the best answer I had at the time. A great deal has changed since, in me and in the field, and the answer has kept moving. But design, at its core, remains one of the most human things we do.

The rest of this chapter follows that question into the work. We begin with the connective tissue of design, the way it joins one field to another and lives in the relations between things and people more than in the things themselves. The same connection runs through time if we consider design as an archaeology of the future, interpreting the present from how people use its objects and laying down the layer a later world will read from the ones we create. Because everything in this web of connections is tied to everything else, no choice comes free, so we turn to the sacrifice folded into every act of judgement. From there to agency, the nerve to treat the made world as a draft you are allowed to redraw, and then to the responsibility that agency carries, to what a design does to the people it reaches once it has left the desk. Then to the hope folded into every act of design, the wish for a better world held before there is any way to reach it, and the quiet beauty that lives in the wishing. We close where the question was pointing all along, where process runs out and judgement has to carry the rest.

What makes you a designer? Following methods, using tools and filling templates are part of it, but process is not practice. Design is a deeply human capability, now practised through systems that take agency from the designer and produce results that look right but lack understanding.

Design lives in everything that comes before the solution. How you sit with a problem before reaching for a template. How you let an idea change the question instead of refining the answer. How you decide what to ignore, and how you stay in charge when AI sits beside you.

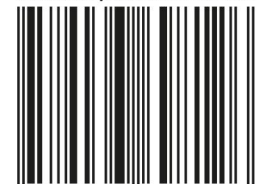
Drawing on more than two decades of practice, teaching and research, *Before the Solution* turns these habits into things you can train, between projects, without a brief.

Producing solutions will keep getting faster and cheaper. Living with problems, with AI, and with others is the part that stays yours. To keep it is to live as a designer, not just work as one.

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