

## DESIGN IN A NEW TERRAIN

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*"The world just came together so quickly.  
We have little understanding of its true  
diversity . . ."*

*Tim El-Hady, Aspen 2010*

*"We are forcing the past as a solution set.  
But the past as a solution set is not a viable  
option. We need a new tool set."*

*John Rendon, Aspen 2010*

We all recognize that we are in a unique moment in our evolution because of the exponential increase in information and interconnectivity of everything around us, and the human responses to these. It is a Cambrian moment as we move from understanding static societal building blocks to flows of exchanges, from rigid organizational structures to dynamic networked relationships, from thinking systems to thinking ecosystems. It is a moment of intense diversification and evolution. We are seeing an efflorescence of new things, new practices, and new kinds of relationships across all sorts of boundaries.

To create new things that resonate in a 'world that has just come together so quickly' — one in which true diversity is now in play — and to think about designing for change in this world, we need a new tool set. I want to talk about a new tool set conceived out of design, nurtured through need, and poised to act in a context that we expect to be ever-changing and complex.

**Design has always been a visionary pursuit** and a visionary practice, — one that projects the future while remaining deeply grounded in the past and the present. The link between vision as a mental activity —

imagining a future — and its accomplishment in the world — the building of the imagined future — is design.

Design is **optimistic**. It brings new things into the world. Designers take on problems, model them, frame them, and create responses through the distribution of stuff - real, virtual, or conceptual/strategic - in space. Designers are by nature opportunistic. They create openings from which to make things. When there are no clear and present problems defined, they go out and find them embedded in the intricacy of everyday life. By problems, we do not mean only things problematic, but also opportunities for working on the questions, puzzles, and enigmas that are inherent to human existence.

Visionary, optimistic and opportunistic, design is different than instrumental problem solving. Instrumental problem solving works to solve defined problems. Design works within a rich mental space in which problems are the impetus for work that converts ideas into things that are integrally linked to human behavior, perceptions, values and desires. As such, design may or may not *solve* problems *directly*. It engages the life around problems. This distinguishes design not only in its focus, but also in the methods and practices it engages. It requires a different set of skills and capacities, a different disposition, and a different set of instincts. Quite simply, design has a different DNA.

**I start with architectural (landscape and urban) design** and do so for two reasons. Firstly, architectural design is about

creating new contexts to inhabit. Although design has generally been deployed for designing things, which we understand as *content in the world* – from things to spaces, to buildings, to cities, to territories – if we shift from thinking about design as only making content to the way in which architectural design operates to make *contexts*, then we can envision scaling up one more step to work on influencing evolving contexts through an ecosystemic intelligence.

By ecosystemic, we mean more than dealing with the environment. Deep ecosystemic awareness recognizes the fundamental interdependence of all phenomena as both matter and meaning. Ecosystemic thinking is about the whole system in all of its complexity: ecologically, economically, politically, socially, culturally, and materially.

Ecosystemic thinking must also consider the natural paths and processes of things and of the systems in which those things participate. These paths and processes are not pre-determined or fixed. They exist as cycles and flows embedded in time. Therefore, *designing ecosystemically* would require shifting focus from objects to contexts to contexts as trajectories of flow, or evolving contexts.

If we think about design through the lens of ecosystems, we can understand that by altering the *context* in which things reside, one influences how those things – the *content* – behave and what they mean. Understanding that contexts are ever-evolving means that one can catalyze new practices, new perceptions, and new relationships; and by creating new contexts, we can open up radically new possibilities.

Secondly, I start with architectural design because it has unique purchase on the skills, tools, and methods that might make up the tool set equipped to think and design ecosystemically – to think and design in complex, changing environments and on problems that lack single, knowable solutions.

Beyond design for making things (good design = elegant useful things), and design for innovation (good design = distinctly new elegant and useful things), design has the capacity to shape contexts as frames for things to happen; framing contexts writ large on the level of multiple, time-based ecologies – social, economic, political, environmental, and cultural – from material contexts to institutions to systems of action/change and even the contexts surrounding some of our most intractable challenges.