

## STRATEGIC DESIGN

*“Many of the troubling situations in our world are the result of design decisions. Too many of them were bad design decisions... We may not have meant to do so, but we designed our way into the situations that face us today.”*

*John Thackara*

What is it?

Strategic design is the work that takes place before the brief is written. It's the context for the design, the rationale for the design work and the vision for the design. Many design projects are far larger than just making something. To get to the designing part, so many decisions need to be made beforehand, and they need to be considered as a whole. This is what we mean by strategic design.

When companies consider a new product or service in the world, we help them explore the context for it. It means everyone has the chance to evaluate whether what's being planned is the right thing, or not.

A design strategy is what we create to make sense of what design activity should be. It's a kind of plan. A good design strategy connects up the bigger business or organisational objectives with the context in which they are operating.

What it does

Bringing in strategic design makes sure that what is going to be done has been considered within a business, environmental and cultural context. This bigger picture makes sure that the different activities and resources of an organisation can align together for the purpose of the design project.

Going through the process of strategic design forces the team to answer a series of questions, including:

- Can we make it?
- What else might we need?
- Should we make it?
- Can we make it for the price we need to sell it?
- What do we need to do to get it made?
- What are the long-term impacts?
- How do we manage end-of-life?

You can tell when design is not being thought about at a strategic level when:

- People in the business are working in tension and without any kind of coordination
- The brief may be changing throughout the development without any rationale that makes sense
- The design may not be as effective in the market - there are competitors that have made better or more popular designs
- Work may stop and start as the design work uncovers bigger issues that the company hasn't considered before.

Read on to find out more about how we bring strategic design to life for clients.



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### *How we do it*

We bring the different parts of a business together to explore and define a strategy together. Often on complex projects, many different departments of an organisation need to be involved, yet each has a different way of talking and doing what they do. Put simply, the marketing team have different objectives compared to the developer team. The business development team have a different set of values to the brand team.

We work often with teams on exploring the current business strategy, developing a new strategic intent, and then making that visible and shareable. We do strategic design either as a separate distinct project or as part of a wider project.

*Strategic Design work happens within many projects, and here are some specific example of work we have done*

#### *Nokia DNA project*

A strategic means to manage a rapidly expanding design language within a global mobile phone manufacturer. Starting with looking at the product design language, and extending into UX and UI, we helped the team take this from a tiny project into a cross-organisational set of guidance.

#### *Humanising Technology*

In this national project involving early stage technology startups, we worked with strategic designers - not product or service or communication designers - to expand what they could do with technology. This kind of thinking helped startup owners see a bigger picture; sometimes it changed how they talked about the tech, or how users were engaged in the process. This new perspective also helped the start-ups broaden their understanding of what design could do for them, and not just re-design their websites, or package their proposed products.

### *Innovation RCA*

When Innovation RCA has its successful first year and wanted to think through the strategic direction for the next year, we worked with them to co-create the strategy through a large-scale process that captures their intent. We combined this with thinking through the necessary operations to achieve their aims.

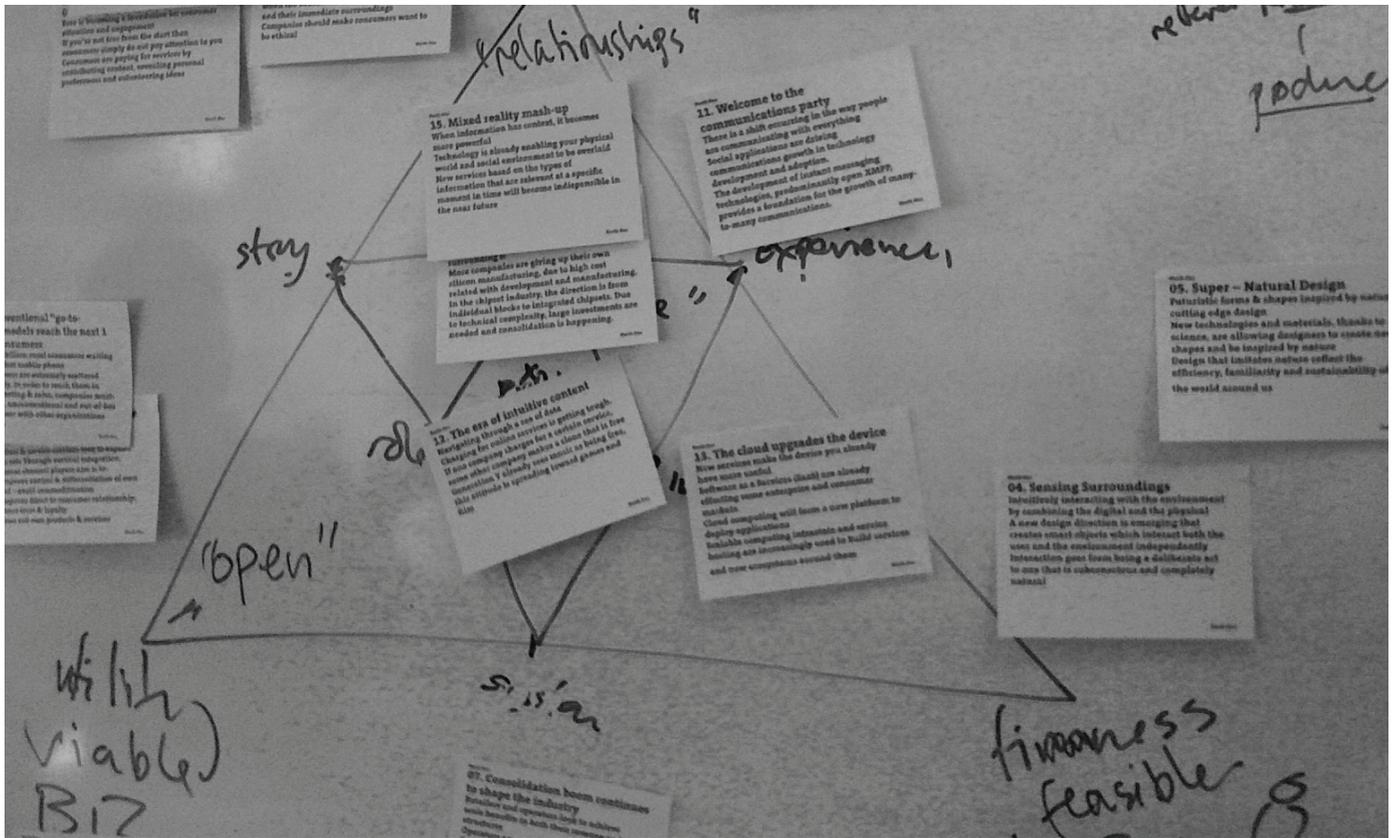
#### *Bath Legible City Framework*

Partnering with CityID, Plot has a long-running involvement with the ongoing Legible Cities Movement. City legibility sets out a broad strategic design context for people's everyday experience of cities — how easy places are to read, understand, and use. In early 2006, Bath's Legible City program kicked off with a range of city stakeholders using an open studio format to explore multiple strategic design factors. Activities included: archival research; vision, strategy, policy & business-case reviews; city reading & place analyses; benchmarking comparison, brand & identity assessments; and user-needs, city value-proposition & legibility framework development. The studio produced an initial wayfinding concept development sketch and an integrated plan of action that shaped the Council-adopted Public Realm & Movement Strategy for Bath City Centre: "Creating the Canvas for Public Life in Bath".

#### *What else does this work with?*

This kind of work fits well with Plot's other roles. We often combine strategic design with design research, in order to make sure that the user aspects of a project have been included. But this could equally be combined with business case research, market research or competitive analysis.

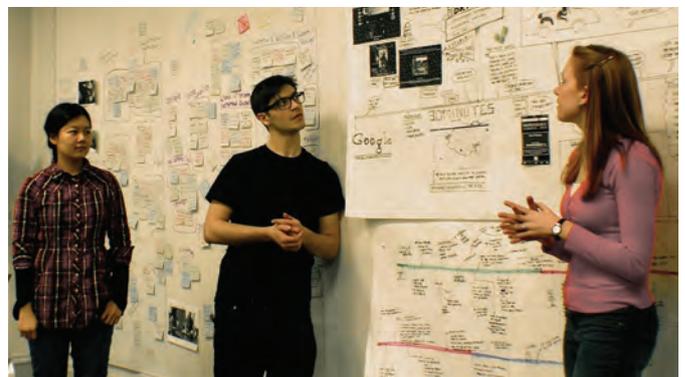




*"If traditional design is about giving shape to objects or buildings, then Strategic Design is about giving shape to decisions"*  
 Bryan Boyer

### Teaching strategic design

We also have developed classes that explore this exciting approach to taking design into the boardroom, for example Strategy Lab at Carnegie Mellon, and RMIT Design Futures. These classes teach business professionals and designers how to make design really count in a business or organization context.



*If you would like to talk to us about this work, or any challenges you have with the bigger picture of the design work you are attempting, or challenges you experience with how design works in your organisation, please contact us on 07966209615, or alternatively email [gill@plotlondon.net](mailto:gill@plotlondon.net)*

