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The Materials of Design Strategy

As with all professionals, designers are defining a space for themselves that can't be relegated to a machine. One of the places they are finding comfort is in the context of strategy. Strategy is embodied, interpretative, and always contextual, and these are qualities that are proving impossible for an LLM to mimic. If a designer is going to contribute to a design strategy, I think they need to have a refined level of craft and an intimacy with material.

A material can be purposefully manipulated to create something valuable. In painting, material includes paint; in ceramics, it includes clay. Materials don't need to be physical—it's been argued that the material of interaction design is behavior [1].

But what are the materials of design strategy?

There are at least two: an organization's existing products and the attitudes and values of the designers in the organization. That's fairly abstract, so I will make these ideas tangible by leveraging a classic articulation of the craft of business strategy by Henry Mintzberg, published in 1987 [2].

PRODUCTS AS MATERIAL

In his argument for a craft of business strategy, Mintzberg describes that leaders need to have an intimacy with the material of an organization, that is, a deep knowledge of one single business, not of some general quality of *all* businesses. Mintzberg uses a grocery entrepreneur as an example: Sam Steinberg, who ran the largest supermarket chain in Quebec. Prior to selling the company for \$1.3 billion in 1989 (\$3.6 billion in today's dollars), Steinberg was "intimately



involved with all of the details of his business, [spending] Saturday mornings visiting his stores" [2]. This executive was physically immersed in the business. To gain that intimacy, he knew details of the day-to-day business operations. More specifically, the substance of his strategy was the business operations themselves.

The parallel material in design strategy is a company's products: These are the things that can be manipulated, but doing this effectively requires tacit knowledge, which is learned through experience. This happens by using the products a lot, just like when Steinberg visited his stores each Saturday. The material of design strategy is what a company's current products do, how they do it, and how people experience them.

For example, a common strategic challenge designers face is merging multiple products into one. When one

company buys another, or when two feature sets are going to be combined, a design strategist needs to come up with a plan for the integration. Simply saying "we'll have a unified product" doesn't make it so; they need to design something to explain the approach. But the strategist isn't doing interaction or visual design work. They are crafting the plan for integration. Craft requires intimate knowledge of the material: the products themselves. This "knowing" is at a detail level, such as how a reset password flow feels, or how long a workflow takes to complete, or the specific hex values of colors used to direct a user's attention. The only way to gain this knowledge at a tacit level is by using the products continually, which develops the experience necessary to treat those same products as materials.

I had a client who led design at a very large company, and I was astounded to learn that they had never used their own products. They argued that they had too many products, with too many features; they had too much to do, so they prioritized other activities and delegated product understanding to their product leads. But if one of the materials of design strategy is the products a company has made, then it's impossible to competently manipulate that material without knowing its strengths and weaknesses. Without using the products themselves, it's impossible to know what the material can do and how far it can be flexed and pushed without breaking.

VALUES AS MATERIAL

Mintzberg also indicates that a business strategy is often formed in a "grassroots" style. Strategies, he explains, "grow like weeds in a garden" [2]. They become established "when they become collective, that is, when

It also requires spending hands-on time with designers, not just design managers. In an organization with hundreds of designers, this may not feel possible for someone in leadership, and it's tempting to look for some sort of proxy, to try to identify a scaling amplifier, such as a design system or layers of dependable creative directors. But counterintuitively, this serves to further separate a design strategist from the material—it inserts a level of abstraction between the potter and the clay. Just as Steinberg prioritized visiting his own stores on weekends, a leader who is setting design strategy can elect to spend their time on what they value. To manipulate the *material of the designers* requires showing a meaningful competence in designing. A designer who cannot make things will have a hard time changing the hearts

Product design, in an organization, has patterns as well. These patterns have often grown out of the history of a company's digital strategy (or, as is often the case, lack thereof). The ways a set of products look, feel, and act at a large bank have emerged over as long as the bank has had digital products. One isn't bound to those patterns in the future, but the patterns exhibit evidence of strategic inertia. As any creative leader has learned, pushing a step change in a visual aesthetic across an organization, or trying to create and leverage a new set of

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