CONVERGENCE: Managing + Designing Position Statement

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For the past decade, I’ve been engaged (with others) in a project that I think aligns well with the idea of managing + designing convergence. It’s a project oriented about equally toward research and course development.

In research, we’ve used an inductive, theory-building approach based on case studies (Eisenhardt, 1989), about 35 so far, across a range of activities, from the arts, to entertainment, media, process improvement, product development, and scientific discovery (e.g., drug development). In each case, we examine people’s efforts to create value (commercial, aesthetic, or other) by “making things.” The act of making has been the organizing focus of our work, which has so far resulted in a book, Artful Making: What Managers Need to Know About How Artists Work (2003, Financial Times Prentice Hall, honored by the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas with the 2005 Elliot Hayes Award) and a few published articles (e.g., “Bridging the Gap Between Stewards and Creators,” MIT Sloan Management Review, winner of the 2008 Beckhard Prize). We anticipate, however, that the bulk of research outputs from the project will appear in the next two to five years; e.g., a Stanford University Press book tentatively entitled Making Special Things: On the Role of Aesthetics in Business Competitiveness (scheduled for 2011 publication) and a series of academic papers, intended to harvest insights from our case database.

In course development, we’ve developed teaching cases alongside many of our research cases and created a course called Managing in the Creative Economy, composed of almost entirely new materials. The course is organized around distinctions that emerge from our research between creative and industrial modes of value creation, and associated differences in management principles, processes, and practices, as explained in this excerpt from the course description:

Since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, managers have continuously refined their understanding of how to create intended business outcomes with better reliability and efficiency. Resulting management principles, processes, and practices have been very successful in creating societal wealth and raising the standard of living in developed economies. More recently, a variety of factors, including technological advance and globalization of labor markets, has directed attention to a different set of principles, processes, and practices: those that lead to “creative” outcomes. “Creative Economy Firms” (CEFs) produce value, not through an emphasis on producing similar outputs efficiently, but through their emphasis on generating novel outputs more valuable than their predecessors. This course examines the nature of work and management that consistently produce valuable creative outcomes. We find examples in many increasingly important industries (design, entertainment, media, pharmaceuticals) and in expanding enclaves (product development, even manufacturing) within industrial firms. By analyzing cases across industries and organizations, we discover a core of common practice that serves as a basis for the development of a theoretical framework with strong practical relevance.

The course includes several cases that examine design firms or design oriented companies (e.g., Bang & Olufsen, BMW, e-Types, Vipp). It has been taught once at Harvard, and three times at Copenhagen Business School.

The course’s organization and content also point to differences between the approach we’ve taken and the idea of managing + designing convergence. In addition to design oriented cases, we include cases on media and video game companies, a string quartet, a pair of theatre companies, the Miles Davis Quintet, and a process improvement team inside an aerospace company (Boeing). We arrive at principles, processes, and practices, in the research and the course, that align well with the “design attitude” (Boland and Collopy, 2004), but across a range of activities much broader than design. This, and the fact that our collaborators (e.g., Lee Devin of Swarthmore College) have often been from fields other than design, have lead us to a broader framing than “managing + designing.” While we have not been entirely consistent, we’ve tended to frame our work in terms of differences between:

- “Value from similarity” and “value from difference” (Devin and Austin, forthcoming);
- “Industrial making” and “artful making;” (Austin and Devin, 2003);
- “Planning-based” and “agile” development (Austin and Devin, 2009).
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To our way of thinking, architecture and design are two fields among many in which making activities seem organized in accordance with “artful” principles, processes, and practices, which include:

- Iterative rather than sequential work process structures;
- Openness to variation (even random variation) as a source of novelty;
- Resistance to labels such as “failure,” or “mistake” or “waste” to describe unselected variants (outcomes); “failures” framed in learning terms;
- Complex attitudes toward customers, their needs and “requirements,” that balance those with a need to maintain the “aesthetic coherence” of outcomes (Austin, 2008);
- A tendency toward collecting ideas not motivated by a desire to economize through re-use;
- Motivation to create difference; disinterest in repetitive work and outcomes (while acknowledging the importance of repetitive practices to maintain “technique” – e.g., a jazz musician playing scales).

So, although I’ve got considerable enthusiasm for the ideas I perceive as associated with the idea of managing + designing convergence, one issue I’d raise is whether this is the best (or most general) framing.

To some extent, this is a matter of what communicates well with managers. If managers have an easier time relating to design, rather than, say, theatre ensembling, that would argue for design as a frame for communicating our thoughts. One could argue as well that design is quite a general activity, a part of many other kinds of making, a stage in making that would have traditionally come before production. But to some extent it is this traditional notion of a process separated sequentially into design and production stages that the idea of managing + designing calls into question. And there are other pairings that we should probably consider as possible frames in this discussion: exploration versus exploitation (March, 1994), for example. Is “design attitude” merely “exploration attitude”? Is “artful making” merely “explorative making”? I don’t think so, actually, but I think our discussions might benefit from engaging these issues of framing.

REFERENCES