

## The Core — Getting the Right Design

The essence of a design is its core. It is the design's DNA, its nucleus. In architectural design, it is called the *parti*, presented in the form of a basic diagram or statement. Without a core we have no design, or rather, we will likely focus on an irrelevant aspect of the design; naive designers frequently do this.

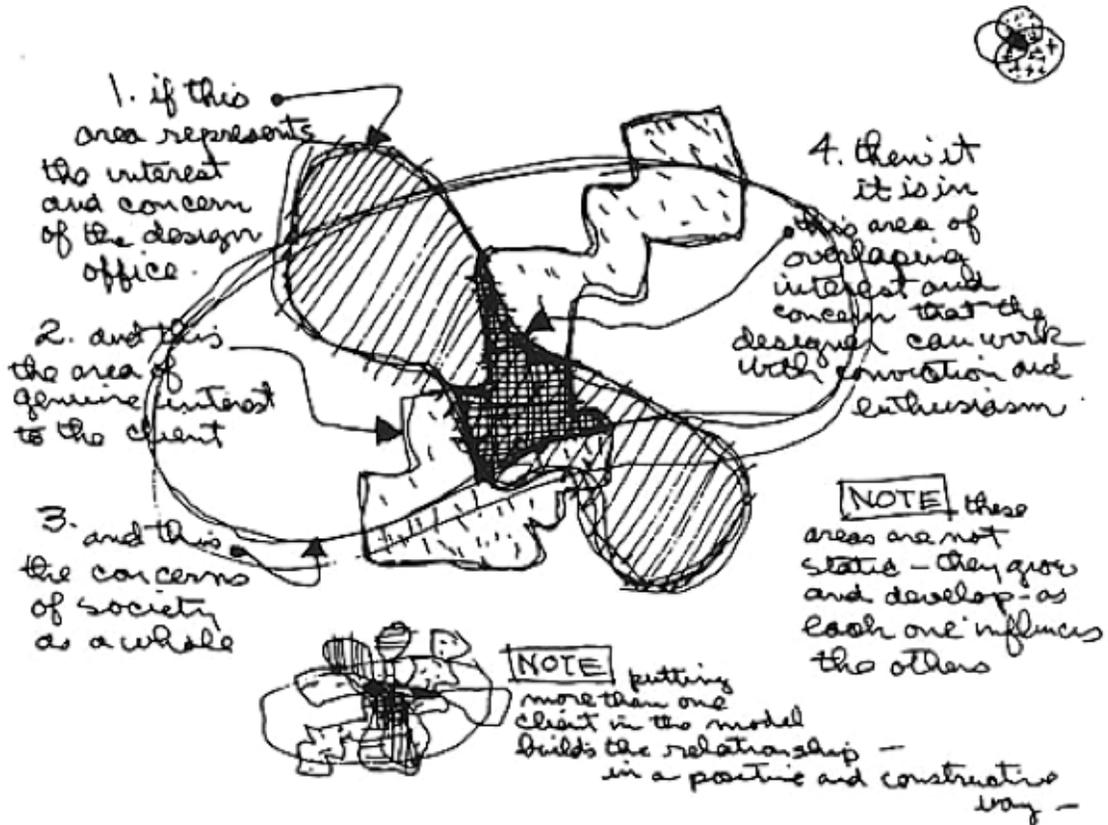
*Airbnb.com* understands the core of its design. Joe Gebbia and Brian Chesky, the company's founders, began a company that allows one person to rent temporary space from another person — the entire home or apartment, or just a bedroom or couch. Think about it — from the host's perspective, allowing a complete stranger to sleep in your home, to gain access to your possessions, and to hope that nothing will be stolen or destroyed; and from the traveler's perspective, to journey to a distant destination, to gain access to the host's space when you arrive, and to sleep in that space while the host may or may not be there. Sound crazy? Many investors initially thought so, but not any more.

Gebbia and Chesky understood that establishing *confidence* and *trust* among the traveler, host, and company was critical to their success. Every aspect of their design — from discovering and booking accommodations to establishing a “relationship” between the traveler and the host — maintains the confidence and trust of its users. These feelings are similar to the confidence and trust that travelers experience when they book a hotel reservation with Hilton, Hyatt, or Marriott. Airbnb's marketplace exchange works because they designed a site that focused on this core idea, the fundamental need of their users and a critical component of their business. All other features, including future features are subservient to confidence and trust; that is, the Airbnb core drives the form and function of all features. Without this core, the company would be another craigslist or worse; instead they are a multibillion dollar company. Their design core influenced everything that followed.

The design core establishes a point-of-view, a non-neutral perspective. This perspective becomes the design team's mantra, understood and repeated by all who work on the project. The core, however, is not the design per se, nor does it translate into a single design. Rather, the design core can manifest itself in the form of numerous and different designs. Ultimately, the team must evaluate these alternatives and choose the interactive experience that best meets the needs of the target users, as well as any constraints imposed by the stakeholders (internal or external); some of these constraints may be technical.

Charles Eames, famous twenty-first century American designer, defines the design process in a 1969 sketch. Employing an irregularly shaped Venn diagram, Eames describes the “overlapping [*sic*] interest and concern that the designer can work with conviction and enthusiasm.” The

overlapping spaces are the “interests and concern of the design office, the area of genuine interest to the client, and the concerns of society as a whole.” It is within this overlapping conceptual space we find the design’s core.



Statement of the Eames Design Process by Charles Eames for the Louvre Show. "What is Design," 1969

Microsoft Office Word is an extraordinary word processor; like the suite of Office desktop software it has many powerful features. But transparent collaboration is not one of them. Anyone who has co-authored a document encounters numerous problems — managing multiple versions of the manuscript, integrating text from one person’s document into another’s, sending versions to your co-authors via email attachments. It doesn’t take long before the original document morphs into multiple files distributed across all the authors. Enter *Google Docs*.

Simultaneous collaboration and document management are the core of the Google Docs design. Only one document file exists “in the cloud.” And whoever created the file can

share it with one or more people, each specified by their email address. As each person works on the document, the document is changed and saved automatically. Moreover, more than one person can edit the document at the same time. You can see who is editing the document and the changes being made.

Like with Airbnb, the design core for Google Docs is not the design itself but rather a perspective, a clarity, that manifests throughout the design. The design core, presented as a 2007 youtube video animation, *Google Docs in Plain English*, illustrates the problem and how Google intended to solve it. The *actual* design of Google Docs (now called *Google Drive*) was the result of numerous design and development iterations. But the connection between the video animation, the design core, and the current design is unmistakable.

Postscript. In the summer of 2013, while writing this book, I used Airbnb to find a place to stay in Seattle. I found a room in a beautiful cottage, “The Waterfront.” Everything worked as advertised; I established a strong and enthusiastic connection with my host. When I arrived, she greeted me warmly, and my room appeared as it was pictured, along with bottle water and two bowls of freshly picked cherries and peaches. My ten-day stay provided the relaxation I needed because of the confidence and trust delivered by a series of transactions. Airbnb’s design fed *my* core!