

# THE VALUE OF DESIGN RESEARCH

DESIGN AS POWER. AN EXPLORATION INTO THE DARK SIDE OF DESIGN

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## ABSTRACT

The paper presents an alternative perspective on design, that starts from the hypothesis that design has a still little explored, that do not refer to the way designers work or think but to the power dimension that can be exercised through design. This assumption helps to focus on the contrast between the "visible" side of design that involves all its conceptual or practical manifestations, and a hidden or "invisible" side that deals with the politics is usually understated or neglected. In order to understand the balance of power we introduce insights from war theory (Rummel, 1979) (Clausewitz) (Sun Tzu) explaining its different phases as follows: 1. creating an awareness towards the presence of power, and the way power is communicated 2. activating its mechanisms, 3. enabling the manifestation of power, 4. understanding the effects and consequences seen as a readiness to accept the unknown (Taleb, 2012). We argue that the introduction of a new way of looking at the design practice is possible by becoming aware of the latent presence of power, manifesting it through communication and embracing the inevitability of unexpected changes.

*Keywords: design, power, knowledge, leadership, dark side, empowerment.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays we are used to think of "design" in terms of the quality and beauty of the tangible or intangible artifacts that are generated by an industrialized system. Being objects, graphic representations, interfaces or services, the main difference between craftsmanship and design stays in the replicability and scalability of the proposed solution measured against an existent market and its hierarchical dynamics. This implies an order that on the surface seems to be naturally stirred by the so-called "taste", or a series of trends that reflect the preferences of the overall public; however, looking closer, all the design production involves a carefully controlled balance driven by economic, political and social interests.

This change of viewpoint puts design in a historical perspective in which methodological, political, and theoretical positions co-exist and are intertwined (Dilnot, 1984). While a lot has been written and said about the emergence and evolution of the design as a social phenomenon, (Dilnot, 1982) as an agent of social change (Manzini, 2009), as providing a way of thinking and researching (Cross, 2001) and reinforcing the strategies of managing creative groups (Brown, 2009), the telluric movements generated by power are usually less known, tending to detach the discipline from its political dimension. Politics instead, are always present in all instances of the design profession, at many different levels, being traditionally hidden by the discourse on form, function, and process. To weight this statement it is enough to think of an example from the pre-industrial era, even before the appearance and consolidation of the industrial design as a concept.

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The year 1754 marks the publishing of the first and arguably one of most influential design books. *The Gentleman and Cabinet Maker's Director* is the first publication to illustrate the details of the craftsmanship with elaborate instructions on the replication of a furniture style.

The book had an impact not only in the practice of a craftsmanship but more important in a way of thinking about a traditionally established process (Craske, 1999). By making visible his craftsmanship secrets, Chippendale was the first to *colonize* the market with a way of thinking through a communication artifact. Not only, the influence of this type of attitude is even more important in the historical perspective, by being the first "commoner" to lend his name to a furniture style, since previously all furniture of high craftsmanship bare names of British monarchies such as Tudor or Louis XIV. More than the mere recognition of the contribution to the furniture making, this fact sets up a precedent for the concept of brand identity and how the name can be detached from the physical person and place in which it was created (Bryson, 2010). To give a concrete dimension of the impact in money value, it is enough to think that a Chipendale furniture piece made in 1756 by a low profile furniture maker after the original plates, in Boston Massachusetts, sold in 2007 at Sotheby's New York auction for nearly \$ 3,3 million. Although Chippendale furniture pieces are nowadays recognized as museum pieces, it is Thomas Chippendale's shift in attitude that needs to be recognized for its truly powerful political value and its influence worldwide.

## 2. Seen and unseen - contrasting perspectives

### 2.1 VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE IN DESIGN

A lot has been said about the emergence of the design as a discipline, its beginnings in the flourishing period of the industrial revolution its development into an self standing discipline and the acceptance of its role and impact in the socio-economical life. In 1936, with his seminal work "Pioneers of Modern Design", Nikolaus Pevsner was perhaps one of the first to point out the importance of the design in the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the social meaning that design acquired, detaching itself from both art and architecture (Pevsner, 1936). Without intending to emphasize on the initial aspects of the emergence of the design history as a branch of design, it is interesting to underline the interpretation of the notion of "history" as a link between the man made artifacts and society. As Dilnot explains:

...for Pevsner, history elucidates, through the exploration of design, the relation of designed things and design attitudes to society.

(Dilnot, 1984, p.7)

As previously shown in several literatures (Heskett & Giorgetta,1980), (Pevsner, 2005), (Lawson, 2006), design evolved from craftsmanship to industrialisation and serial production becoming what is presently called "industrial design". This transition brought an increased competition that imposed new meanings and added reasons for convincing customers to buy one product instead of another. The products started to exhibit shapes and styles able to communicate emotions to users; it is what we now call Design. A new era started, the post-industrial

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phase and post-capitalist: industrial production capability and capitals are, in some way, a commodity.

In the same time, the market globalisation, joined with the large diffusion of internet increased accessibility to information and democratized communication to a large extent. This way of using communication as a service tool, changed the rules and introduced new challenges. We are now witnessing a common trend, which individuates an unprecedented global crisis. Challenging this view, we can also consider the possibility that we are simply within a paradigmatic change of the behaviour of a new economy that dismantles itself in order to be renewed. As a consequence, the role of the design in this process is not marginal, and most of the time creates debris rather than innovation, as it is recalled in the words by Victor Papanek:

Advertising design, in persuading people to buy things they don't need, with money they don't have, in order to impress others who don't care, is probably the phoniest field in existence today. Industrial design, by concocting the tawdry idiocies hawked by advertisers, comes a close second.(Papanek 1984, p.ix)

This introduces the necessity to weight the disruption of an already corrupted process that most of the time is essentially self-referential. Perhaps one of the most powerful, and not fully understood, definitions of design comes from Victor Papanek and states that "design [is] a conscious effort to impose meaningful order"(1985). Interesting enough the definition refers to an authoritarian act of *imposing* rather than *finding* a meaningful order.

One of the most important factors that pushes forward any system in all its multifaceted dimensions is the flow of power induced by the interactions within it, and that in the case of design, is not always acknowledged and articulated.

### 2.2 ACKNOWLEDGING THE "INVISIBLE" SIDE OF DESIGN

Papanek's statement quoted above helps to introduce the undeclared presence of power and politics as a intrinsic feature of the designed artifacts. This way of looking at design objects, structures and systems has been previously investigated, by Winner (1980). Taking the example of the American architect Robert Moses and his bridges over the parkways on Long Island, New York, Winner recalls the radical (racial) prejudice hidden within the built structures as "a way of engineering relationships among people"(pg.123) and impose a political meaning to the designed structure.

From the manifestation of the atavistic physical or psychological power to the socially filtered intellectual power, the evolution of the human beings depends on their capability to react and negotiate the incoming struggles. The example shows how the quality of social interactions occurs through communication mediated by designed artifacts. These artefacts could facilitate or impede the access to information and knowledge controlling the ubiquity of power. As explained by Foucault:

[...] in thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking rather of its capillary forms of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives. The 18th century invented so to speak a synaptic regime of power,

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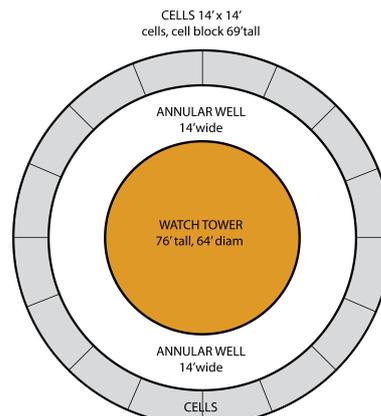
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a regime of its exercise *within* the social body, rather than from *above* it. (Foucault,1980, pp.).

Pinpointing a particular historical change, Foucault draws attention to a different form of leadership that emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. While the decline of the coercive power of monarchy has been discussed extensively, what is particularly relevant is how this type of sociological change had made a shift on the meaning of the communication messages carried by the manufactured artifacts. Chippendale and Moses provide two contrasting examples of the capillary exercise of power. In this sense the manifestation of power has to be inscribed and understood in its sociological context, in which the access to information and distributed awareness implies an increased control over communication. In order to acknowledge the invisible but also central importance of the politics, Foucault stresses out the importance of the searching the meaning of material or tangible layer:

The making visible of what was previously unseen can sometimes be the effect of using a magnifying instrument. [...] But to make visible the unseen can also mean a change of level, addressing oneself to a layer of material which had hitherto had no pertinence for history and had not been recognized as having any moral, aesthetic, or historical value. (pp. 50-51)

This process of revealing the political power communicated and exercised by the built structures, is brought to extreme in Bentham' panoptical design(1789), (Foucault,1977;pp195-227). In brief, the panopticon system (fig. 1), gave prison guardians an increased visibility to multiple cells at any time and most important induced doubt and uncertainty in the surveyed inmates. The system therefore is based on the power of observation by the only presence of the surveillance artifact and even in the absence of the actual surveyor, transforming the observation from a prison norm to a behavior distributed amongst the prisoners. As Foucault stresses out, the mere disregard of the importance of this tangible, material level represented, in this case, by the built structure, was enough to obscure its immense importance as a mechanism of power. Extrapolated from its original context, we can also consider the initial metaphor of "the dark side of design" precisely in these terms, as an always present facet of the design system, that remains unseen not because is hidden but because is usually disregarded. By this it is intended the whole mechanism of power and influence that founds its expression in design. We therefore argue that no matter the physical dimension in which industrial design manifests, the artefacts produced are communication objects, able to conceal power and manipulate masses as much as a rhetoric discourse of any political leader.



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Figure 1 –The diagram of the panopticon layout designed by Bentham (1791)

If the study of power and the exercise of power in a creative environment such as the design system, is informed by the philosophical considerations of Michel Foucault, we suggest that the mechanisms of power can better be explained by introducing the vocabulary and concepts present in military literature. This type of investigation, into an apparently remote area of research, can help clarify the concepts of strategy, tactics, conflict and power manifestation in the field in which they originally evolved.

### 2.3 OPENING PANDORA'S BOX: WHAT LAYS IN THE SHADOW AND AT THE CORE OF THE DESIGN PRACTICE.

As shown previously, design research has been so far concerned with the categorization of the design as a *discipline* with predefined methods and tools, which produced some sort of quantifiable outcomes. What is still missing though, is precisely an overview on how design behaves more like an uncontrollable living being that reacts to the inside and outside stimuli in an unpredictable and therefore *undisciplined* manner that doesn't abide to pre-established regulations. In a way we can think of a partially unmarked territory that has to be discovered while explored, and whose exploration can only be partially planned. This territory inscribes the study of the meaning and power communicated through artefacts, being material or virtual. To underline this hidden but central quality of design, it is necessary to remind it as an activity strongly related to technology, in which technologies are looked at as ways of building order to our world (Winner, 1980; pg.125).

Delineating the boundaries of a different design research perspective focused on the mechanisms and meaning of power within design, allows understanding of the design practice not as a monolithic entity confined in time, but as an activity in a continuous flow of changes guided by internal and external social, political and economic forces.

In order to better understand the potential of change at a larger scale, we will make reference to the term creative destruction coined by Schumpeter (1942). In brief, creative destruction refers to the incessant product and process innovation mechanism by which new production units replace outdated ones (Cabbalero & Hammour, 1996) and in the context of this paper delineates the a phenomenon that although might occur spontaneously, could be consciously provoked and controlled by the exercise of power. This last stance is the terrain in which design moves from a way of thinking to become a pro-active critical attitude geared towards questioning the outdated patterns of thinking. We look at this kind of radical change in terms of a cyclical renewal that can only occur in determined circumstances. The design attitude has therefore to be looked at as having three different contributions: first as identifying the necessary circumstances that will allow the change, second providing the stimuli that will enable the disruption and third controlling the creative destruction process. At global scale socio-economic situation invites a reflection upon the insights coming Schumpeter's view on the crisis:

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'...depressions are not simply evils, which we might attempt to suppress, but ... forms of something which has to be done, namely, adjustment to ... change.'

The quote above reflects the imaginary of a constant struggle, a fight for re-shaping a local and global ecology even before attempting to seek balance between the living organisms and the environment in which they inhabit. It also helps us to shape a zone in which the power is exercised, drafted by tensions and frictions. If crisis situations are shown as a way to adjust to new paradigms, we argue that design is a potential marker that signals the flow of change inducing a reaction and therefore acting as a mechanism of power.

### 3 THE EXERCISE OF POWER

#### 3.1 LATENCIES AND THE PRESENCE OF POTENTIAL POWER FORCES

Among the concepts listed above, perhaps one of the most important is how the power is exercised from within the system and how to read the strategy behind the power manifestation. The war theory in this case can help reveal the vocabulary of the military strategy that enable the control of the army and enforce the image of the leader. In particular in this case, from the perspective of the thesis, it is interesting to concentrate on the figure of the charismatic leader who has a profound understanding of the owns' army material and immaterial resources and how to counter them against the enemies'.

Here arises the question of awareness and concealment. The art of concealment and deception stays at the heart of any strategic movement geared towards the exercise of power. Early on in the paper the paradox of visibility and concealment was outlined in the panopticon scheme, in which the guardians' movements and intentions to observe a particular cell were concealed by the central tower, inducing in this way a state of constant doubt and uncertainty. The same strategy is revealed at behavioral level by Sun Tzu in the art of war :

[...] when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near. (pg. 38)

This delineates two axes on which the power is revealed and exercised. The plans and strategic considerations are balanced by the tactics established according to incoming circumstances on the battlefield, in the same way in which awareness and certainty about the resources at hand, lead to decisions that have to be concealed by inducing doubt in order to gain advantage (fig.2).

We can consider the plans, actions, certainty and doubt the parameters that determine the zone in which power is exercised. This allows us to move on and consider the factors that actuate the power mechanisms. Leaving aside for now the military ground, everyday life gives us endless occasions to verify the relevance and validity of the art of war principles.

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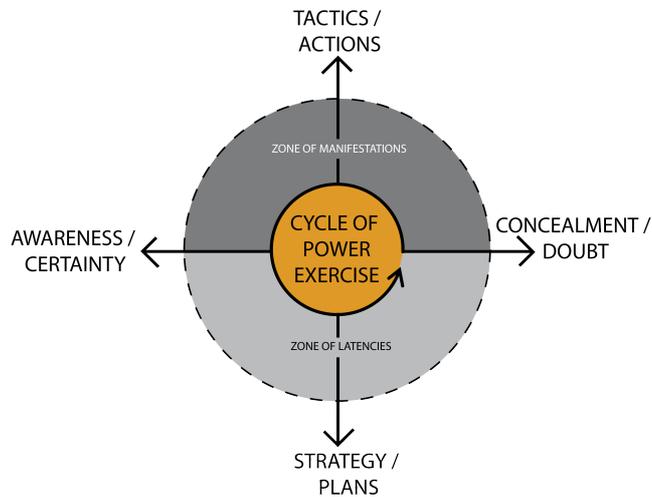


Figure 2 –The parameters that set up the background for the exercise of power.

This is to say that power is not necessarily related to war but pertains all the aspects of our life. Although the potential power forces are always present in latent state, their activation is linked to the emergence of a conflict situation.

### 3.2 THE ACTUATION OF POWER

At this point it is necessary to take a closer look at the complexity of conflict and what this implies in terms power balance. For this purpose conflict has to be shown as a process that, as Rumell explains, can be divided in five main phases:

... The first is the transformation of sociocultural (conflict) space into opposing interests. The second involves the will's choice to manifest opposing interests and a consequent situation of uncertainty. The third is the resulting balancing of powers, which may be manifested as conflict behavior. The fourth is the balance of powers, the structure of expectations. And the final phase is the disruption of expectations by some trigger event that renews the cycle: disruption creates uncertainty calling for balancing and the creation of a new structure of expectations.

(Rummel, 1979)

In a simple representation, the motives of conflict can be placed in the latency level and seen as premises for creating a *situation of uncertainty* (fig.3) and the passage towards the manifestation level.

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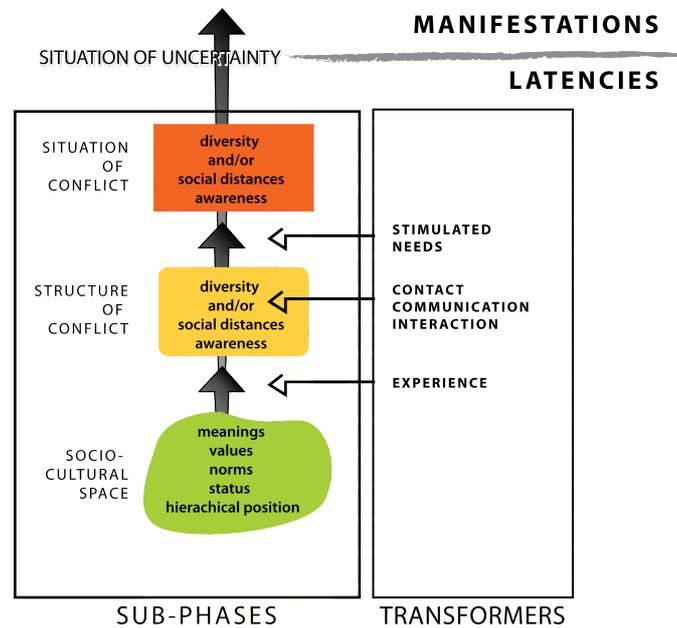


Figure 3 –The first phase of the process. The latent conflict. Modified by the author after fig. 29.2 in Rummel, R. J. (1976).

### 3.3 THE MANIFESTATION OF POWER

Interesting to remark the potentially growing conflicts are always present in any social system, their manifestation can be seen as a sign that individuals within groups, or societies have reached a level of awareness about each other and therefore social interactions occur through communication. From this perspective conflict does not have a negative connotation but is shown as an inherent component of information exchange. One of the key points revealed in this process is the role of communication in raising the awareness on the diversity and / social distances and in general on the presence of differences in social cluster. The fine balance that triggers the manifestation of power passes through a communication system that can be controlled *through design*. This brings us closer to the main claim of the paper that *design is power*, moreover showing the need to start thinking at the design profession as carrying the right tools to create the incentive for power manifestation.

One of the main ingredients that can change the course of a situation, being in a working team or in a larger social context, the observation of the dynamics of social interaction is the key point for understanding the strengths and weaknesses of a system. Observing and deciphering the stimuli coming from within the system constitute one of the main capabilities of a design professional. Imbedding the response to these stimuli into the communication artefacts – either tangible or intangible – allows the control of the environment from which they emerge and therefore the manifestation of power.

This consideration enables the link to the panoptical model shown in the beginning, and reveals the obsolete nature of the centralized control. While in the initial diagram the presence of the inner control tower was necessary, we argue

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that design artefacts generated an advanced form of control based not on fear but on the desire to become in accordance to an idealized model. By using without questioning, the designed artefacts the individual members of a social system, unconsciously abide a sophisticated form of control of their behavior and way of thinking.

## 4 THE POWER OF DESIGN UPHEAVAL

### 4.1 THE READINESS TO ACCEPT UNKNOWN

Having seen how design artefacts act as instruments of power, the question is how to induce a state of uncertainty and doubt in order to provoke change. If previously it was shown how power and control manifests through design at capillary levels, next it will be shown how design has the power to create conflict and segregate incipient malfunctions from the living social system by creating chaos. To better understand this claim, it is necessary to consider the velocity of change and most important the unpredictability of crisis. In this concern Taleb coins the term "antifragility" (Taleb, 2012) as a way to define the capacity of complex systems of "absorbing" the impact of changes. Referring in particular to the economic system and the drastic modifications that occurred in the last decade, he underlines the presence of growing problems somehow hidden by the lack of awareness or simply unidentified in their early stages. It is enough to think of some of the most unfortunate events of the last 10 years such as the fall of the communism or the 9/11 to understand the general lack of readiness for the unpredictable and the crucial delay to accept unprecedented and unknown change mechanisms.

Acknowledging the signs of change to come through creative intuition, and attentive observation of all the signs coming from a given environment is one of the primary skills that designers unconsciously learn to cultivate. The disruptive design approach and strategy can be seen as a way to alleviate the shock of major crisis by inducing minor conflict situations. Having seen the shock induced by change in society in general, a disruptive design strategy is also based on the politics of the organizational system in which it manifests, and that enable the activation of the innovative change (Pfeffer, 1992).

To better explain this type of strategy one can think of the analogy with the telluric movements and the way in which small quakes release the tensions that otherwise would accumulate in a major earthquake. While as shown before design penetrates into the everyday life, it also has the potential power to induce disruption in a mainstream behavior of unquestioned acceptance, favouring an attitude of readiness and openness towards the unknown.

### 5.2 LEADING FROM WITHIN. EMPOWERMENT AND COACHING FOR ANTIFRAGILITY

Although the importance of observation and adjustment to the incoming situations is essential to create an antifragile attitude towards change, the main difficulty in achieving the state of readiness comes from the fear to acknowledge what lies in the shadow of evidence. A conscious training in observing all the unseen details of an organization includes the politics that lead the leadership of power. Several organizational management literatures have outlined the different forms of leadership and the emergence of the transformational

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leadership based on an ongoing process of learning (Atwood & Mora, 2010) and contrast it with transactional leadership, based on transactions between managers and employees, conducted according to the personal interest of the leader (Bass, 1991, pg.20) (Tucker et al., 2004).

We suggest that training to understand the forces imbedded into the design activities and management, implies learning through trial and error first and foremost the art of navigating within the politics of organizations, the leadership attitude. Far from being a marginal skill, the political ability to activate and control the manifestation of power has to be seen as intertwined *within* the design practice. Being the design practice an activity based on the manipulation of the material – tangible or intangible – level through the use of technology, as Winner stresses out:

If our moral and political language for evaluating technology includes only categories having to do with tools and uses, if it does not include attention to the meaning of the designs and arrangements of our artefacts, then we will be blinded to much that is intellectually and practically crucial. (pg.125)

## 5 CONCLUSION

Putting in contrast the democratization of access to knowledge brought by Chippendale to the racial impediments created by Moses bridges and the controlled behaviour induced by the Bentham's panoptical scheme, the paper has shown how design carries on an intrinsic potential to stir the manifestation of power. To argue this statement, we have chosen Foucault's consideration on the evolution of the power manifested within a system and the impact it has on the spread of the distributed control.

In particular the panopticon model helped introduce a more detailed description of the incipient phases of the manifestation of power and led us to the identification of the phases in which this links to the design environment and the practice of the design profession. We argued that, **first** design acts as a communication medium through the artefacts that it generates and that in this way triggers a diffused form of control on the behavior and way of thinking of the users. In a **second** instance design also has the potential to create disruption by balancing the type of communication messages in the social interaction and inducing a raise in the awareness towards the political aspect that lead to change in any organizational system. In the **third** instance, given the latent presence of power in the design environment it is necessary to envision the fluidity of the design practice and the penetration of the political aspects in the design practice at a very fine level. Rather than being disregarded and hidden, the politics of design ask for the coaching of a new type of leaders that will embrace the readiness to adjust to unknown incoming situations, weighting design as a manifestation of power.

Finally we suggest that future work could investigate the raise of the new type of design research focused on power as the core of the design activities. This will enable the development of new strategies of coaching for antifragile leadership and empower designers to think of themselves not only in terms of practitioners but also as generators of disruption and change. The research described why leaders sometimes behave in corrupt ways. Many instances of corruption can be

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understood as reflecting an important motivational conflict that plagues leaders — the conflict between doing what's right for the group versus what will protect their own power.

Leaders at all levels have access to power; often that power goes unrecognized or underutilized. Previous research in this area has identified seven bases of power that leaders may leverage:

The power of position is the formal authority that derives from a person's title or position in a group or an organization.

The power of charisma is the influence that is generated by a leader's style or persona.

The power of relationships is the influence that leaders gain through their formal and informal networks both inside and outside of their organizations.

The power of information is the control that is generated through the use of evidence deployed to make an argument.

The power of expertise is the influence that comes from developing and communicating specialized knowledge (or the perception of knowledge).

The power of punishment is the ability to sanction individuals for failure to conform to standards or expectations.

The power of reward is the ability to recognize or reward individuals for adhering to standards or expectations.

In all instances the balance of the above-mentioned modalities implies learning to adapt to incoming circumstances. This learning process marks the passage from the capability to lead by expressing power to becoming a master (maestro), through the preservation of power. Rather than actuating the potential the true leader has the wisdom and power to maintain the potentiality and delay the activation of power mastering the contrasts:

If potentiality were, for example, only the potentiality for vision and if it existed only as such in the actuality of light, we could never experience darkness (nor hear silence, in the case of the potentiality to hear). But human beings can, instead, see shadows (to skotos), they can experience darkness: they have the potential not to see, the possibility of privation. (Agamben, 1999; pg.181)

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**1<sup>st</sup>** author wrote parts 3 and 4 and 5

**2<sup>nd</sup>** author wrote parts 1 and 2

# THE VALUE OF DESIGN RESEARCH

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