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Book Review: Design Attitude by Kamil Michlewski

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Published in:
Design Journal

DOI:
[10.1080/14606925.2016.1130442](https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2016.1130442)

Publication date:
2016

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Valentine, L. (2016). Book Review: Design Attitude by Kamil Michlewski. *Design Journal*, 19(2), 373-377. DOI: 10.1080/14606925.2016.1130442

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Design Attitude by Kamil Michlewski published by Gower Publishing Limited (2015)

Book Review by Dr Louise Valentine, University of Dundee, UK.

With the job of a design researcher comes a responsibility to engage, dynamically, with a wide range of design writings (e.g. design thinking, theory, history, methods, process, philosophy). And, recently with the rise in prevalence of design thinking and service design for example, you could be forgiven for believing that (at a glance) Kamil Michlewski's book, 'Design Attitude' is simply another addition to this now relatively well-versed popular conversation. Yet it would be amiss to do so. You see, Michlewski does something different; he offers a genuinely alternative dimension to the design dialogue with an emphasis on the cultural dimension rather than process, tools and learning style – the ecosystem that is people, their nuances, behaviours, relationships, values, mind-sets and languages.

The book has three parts: design in context; 5 aspects of design attitude; and design attitude in action. Part 1 is a neat, introductory three chapters dedicated to characterising what is meant by 'design', the 'professional culture of design', and 'designers', with a focus on their intelligences. Here, there is a short, carefully selected and meaningful reference to design's histories, its opposing theories and methodologies. There is a pertinent discussion of the layers of intelligence, which emerge through designing a dynamic relationship between an individual's 'characteristics, skills and attitudes'. And, to qualify 'the makings of a designer', three theoretical perspectives – architectural/education, psychology and design management – are used. In doing so, Michlewski describes and explains the basics of the discipline with a turn of phrase and a tone of voice that is magnificently digestible. This is no mean feat given the relatively challenging concepts being referred to (culture, design, management, research) and the seminal work of significant academic players whose work he uses to help frame and characterize a new relevance for design as modern leadership in organizational culture. In establishing this firm basis, Michlewski sets things up for discussing the specifics of 'design attitude' in Part 2.

There is a palpable confidence from the author, which manifests itself through carefully positioned, pertinent questions. It guides us (as a reader) through his line of thought yet also invites us (as reader) to roll our sleeves up and get involved in the conversation too! As a professionally trained designer, I recognize this quality and approach as the natural demeanour of a designer. Michlewski, of his own volition, says he comes to design from a management perspective, yet through his approach to questioning he captures a vital playful quality and rhetorical dimension to the conceptual thinking being presented through his book. In design, this inherent prerogative and framework, when seeking to scope a situation, is used to encourage

openness to learning from others, and an agility to move freely to a previously unknown connection in a situation. In bringing this to his writings Michlewski achieves a level of authenticity, which is often lacking in design literature.

'Design Attitude' is characterized as a culmination of five shared values, and they are: 1) Embrace uncertainty and ambiguity, 2) Engaging deep empathy, 3) Embracing the power of the five senses, 4) Playful dimension of bringing ideas and strategies to concrete life and, 5) Engage and reconcile diverse perspectives.

Part 2 takes every one of these five values and distils them in a dedicated chapter. Reading them - individually and collectively - felt perilously close to reading a personal psychiatric report: an account of why I (designer researcher) behave the way I do and why others (people, organisations, cultures) have nothing to fear, rather something valuable to learn. The skill, he suggests, is being able to relax into the high levels of discontinuity and perpetual not knowing that I (design) may instil in them, and value this as a positive. The attributes of a designer included throwing caution to the wind, an insistence of achieving close proximity to reality - not assumed or second-hand conditions - having seemingly scant regard for traditionally viewed notions of 'expertise'. Perhaps the most testing of characteristics is the perpetual engagement in an inside-outside battle of extreme freedom of thought versus a tightly controlled and focused choreography of the many dancers charged with executing one's brainchild.

The deeply probing, agile, empathetic, yet intrusive exploratory approach is a natural disposition of design culture. Michlewski deals with this head-on as he has no intention of diluting it or fervently promoting it. He objectively explains its inherent value and potential relevance to high level innovation for all organizations by citing successful examples of innovation (3M Post-it notes, penicillin, 'light in a bottle' for example), the results of his recent quantitative study, and by engaging directly with executives in organizations deeply engaged in design – Apple, IDEO, Wolff Olins, Philips and Nissan. Complementing this is an array of factual stories about internationally recognised companies and products that employ design and designers. They too are used to exemplify design attitude. For Michlewski, 'design attitude...is a way of being...not an innovation panacea...not a quick fix, off the shelf solution to increase competitiveness or creative proficiency of an organisation...[but] a deeply held set of beliefs, attitudes and mental models; a cultural footprint left by the professional culture of designers; a way of doing things and a way of making sense of the world around us' (xxi). Here, visualization, wit, playfulness and humility are discussed as important tools supporting its development and maturity when engaged in human centred, complex problem solving.

In Part 3, attention focuses on 'design attitude in action' and here, acknowledgment of the design profession's strong growth in the past decade is highlighted. In particular, powerful international examples of the impact and value of design culture dominate this final section. To let you appreciate Michlewski's sensitivity in decision-making when selecting examples of design attitude, let me share this excerpt:

'Ode is an innovative product with dementia sufferers as its target audience. A team of British designers had focused their deep empathy and observed weight loss is common to most people with late-stage dementia and can also be an early indicator of the condition's onset. They've identified that malnutrition costs the NHS around £13 billion a year compared to £5.1 billion for obesity, yet there were no products specifically focussed on using scent to stimulate appetite in people with dementia. Their design attitude, to focus on an underused sense, together with the willingness to create a new meaning in a complex set of circumstances, enabled them to create this product (2015:160).'

This is one of a broad range of contemporary innovations employed to expose the use of beauty and mindfulness by professional design to positively intervene in the everyday lives of human beings (both personal and professional). Relationship building and questioning the world around us *as-it-is*, using every sense to inform a situation, irrespective of how abstract or inconsequential it may appear on its own, is where Michlewski chooses to close: focusing on why and how professional design achieves deep empathy and engagement for high impact in organizations. There is no love lost for marketing departments and to a lesser degree, engineers, in terms of why design has yet to achieve a consistent place on executive boards. Indeed, articulation of the power balance between marketing and design is a point very well made as it identifies an opportunity for change and how to achieve it: from design as subculture to culture in organizations; and, from designers with low internal decision making responsibilities to designers as leaders with more strategic internal decision making. This is a vision we all recognise in the design profession and are continuing to work towards.

The eminent Richard Buchanan in his writings for the foreword of 'Design Attitude' draws attention to the need to pay 'closer attention to the values of design culture [as it] will enhance all forms of education' (Buchanan cited in Michlewski, 2015: xv). Is design more than a series of steps that anyone can follow on the road to innovation? What attitudes and values are the foundation of imagination and

creation in design? What makes designers unconventional and valuable in organisations? These questions underpin Buchanan's high praise for 'Design Attitude'.

'Design Attitude' by Kamil Michlewski is thoroughly interesting and enlightening! It is a book about the values of designers, the transformational intentions of designing and design research, with a critique on how design attitude, rather than designerly attitude, becomes pertinent in collaborative workings. Irrespective of how little or how much you feel you know, it is a *must* read.

This is a book about people who are designers by profession and it seeks to contribute to the design thinking debate by examining how design impacts organizations. For the professional design community, yes, arguably you will recognize much of what is being said but you will also learn more, because of the relationships being articulated and the contemporary examples of practice being used to support each point made. Indeed, the array of references at the back of the book (pp199-238) are themselves significant, offering a hugely useful resource to students, academics and managers alike, seeking to know more about the value of professional design culture. And for the general enthusiast, the newly appointed manager or chief executive, you will gain inspiration and simple access to why design - its professional culture and designers - is a necessarily provocative, modern day compass for innovation and wellbeing in any organizational setting.