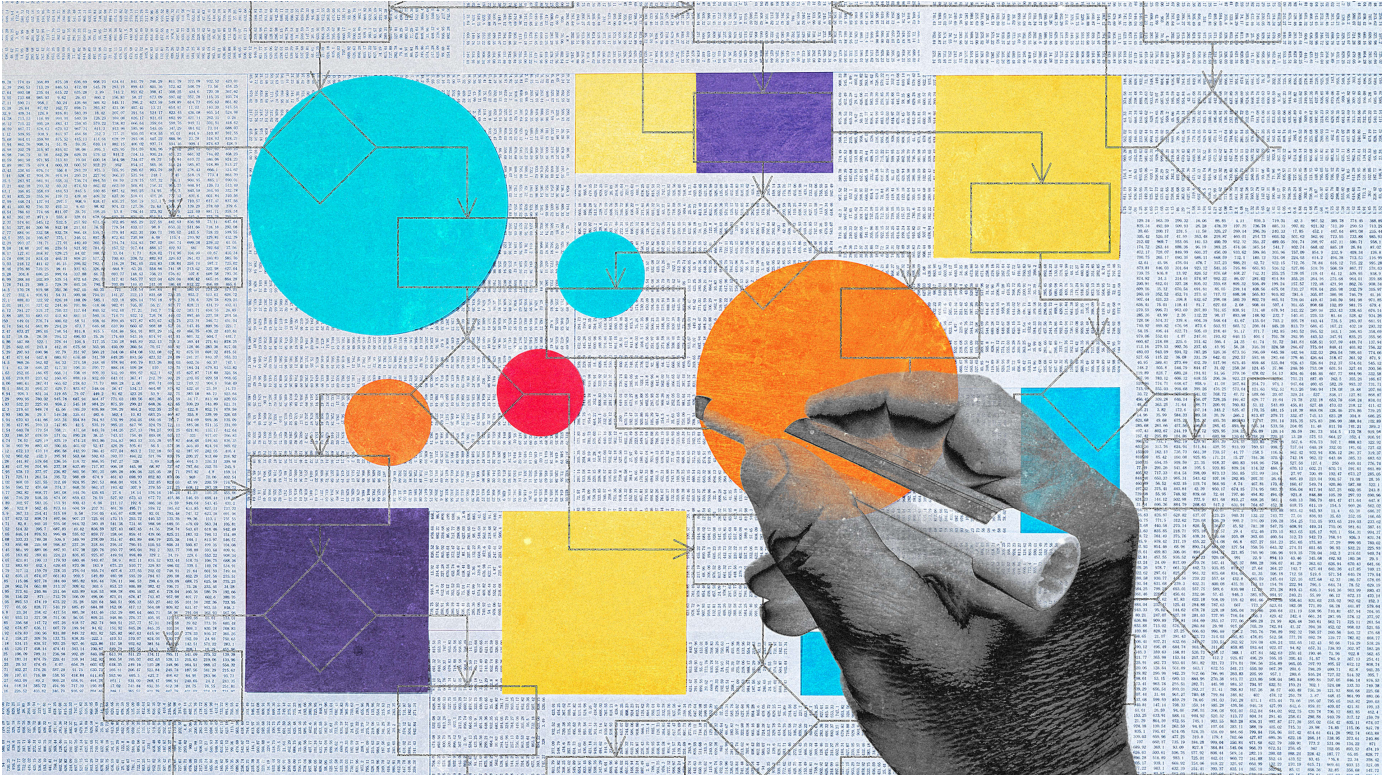# Is the rise of strategy the death of design?

[Jarrett Fuller](#)

Sometimes I think the history of graphic design is a history of finding new terms to define *graphic design*. In the 100 years or so since the term was first coined, designers have been looking for an out. We've tried calling ourselves visual communicators and communication designers, information architects and brand designers. As areas of practice have moved increasingly online, new titles have gained prominence, like digital designer, product designer (which is not, confusingly, the same as industrial designer), or experience designer. Then, of course, there are the

hierarchical titles like art director, creative director, or the coveted [chief design officer](#).

Lately, though, there's been a new title on the rise that is, to me, the most interesting in this decades-long attempt at rebranding: the strategist. Look at the way most branding agencies describe themselves today and "strategy" now gets top billing. Design is out. [Strategy is in](#).

"We know when the economy tanks, branding, marketing, communications are some of the first things to go for some organizations," says Sarah Hromack, an independent digital strategist who's worked both in-house at organizations like the Whitney Museum and Pratt Institute as well as with design studios. "Strategy is a way to add value and assurance that the work has a strong, well-researched set of ideas behind it."

The incorporation of strategy is more than a rebrand; it's a rethinking of design's role in culture and business. If design was previously about creating containers for content, strategy allows design to dictate both the container and the content itself.

The history of strategy

At the beginning of his book *Strategy: A History*, historian Lawrence Freedman recounts a history of the word *strategy*,

providing various definitions from its emergence in wartime. "Strategy," he writes, "remains the best word we have for expressing attempts to think about actions in advance, in the light of our goals and our capacities." Later, he describes strategy as "being about maintaining a balance between ends, ways, and means; about identifying objectives; and about the resources and methods available for meeting such objectives."

Perhaps like the word *design*, *strategy* is a word that is best used with a prefix. In design studios, you might see people working on anything from design strategy to content strategy, brand strategy to digital strategy, or product strategy to organizational strategy. Each of these might tackle a different, specific task: Content strategy focuses on editorial and voice, whereas product strategy determines the interactions and function of an app. In each case, the strategy sets an intention for both the design project and how it might live in the world.

"Strategists serve as a bridge between the designers and client. They have to speak both languages," Hromack says. "They are thinking about the impact of the project on the organization, out in the world, across various channels, and into the future."

Strategy as a guiding principle

Design has gotten more complex. Over the past decade, design of all types—whether graphic design and branding or industrial and product design—has moved from singular, discrete artifacts (a book, a website, a phone) to systems (brands, networks, services). The designer's role is no longer to simply shape the object; they must also consider how an array of objects, formats, and platforms fit together. How does the logo work as an app icon, within an interface, on the side of a billboard? How do these individual pieces, whether an interface element or a visual identity, cohere into a brand? How do you create a holistic, coherent experience across a range of platforms? Strategists, Hromack told me, are the ones who can step back and say, "Here's what this relationship can look like. Here's how these tie together."

But strategy is more than just the organization of systems; it's also how those systems connect to a larger mission. "Strategy is the articulating, in a very clear way, of a stance that is projected to the public," Michael Rock, a cofounder and creative director at the New York-based design firm 2 x 4, told me. "It says what a brand is about and what it isn't."

Rock uses the white cords of the first iPod earbuds as an example. Every other company's headphones were black, but when Apple launched the iPod in 2001, it was packaged with those now-iconic white earbuds. Apple's brand is to project minimalism and simplicity (to "think different"), and

this was embodied with those white cords. That design gesture—a simple color change—became the lead image of an ad campaign for the then-new iPod, immediately separating it from the range of MP3 players already on the market.

"Strategy is the mission, the vision, and the values of an organization, and that impacts everything from internal corporate structures to how that organization shows up in the world," Susan Sellers, another 2 x 4 cofounder, says. "That work usually precedes design. At a certain scale, if it doesn't precede design, you have some really serious problems."

With its Pods, Apple's "think different" strategy was manifested across the brand values, the physical design of the product, and then the marketing campaign around that product.

Strategy manifested

Design, or the actual production of things, is the realization of strategy in the world: the ideas made artifact. "There is a point in the studio where you have to make graphic choices, and those are motivated by the strategic direction," Rock says.

2 x 4, which was founded in 1994, began incorporating

strategy into its client offerings nearly 25 years ago when it started working with AMO, the research arm of Rem Koolhaas's Office of Metropolitan Architecture. With Koolhaas, the studio incorporated long research phases into its process before the design even began, including brand positioning, diagramming, and cultural critique.

2 x 4's founders realized this research had value for their clients, beyond the project they were hired for. They started hiring more people to focus on this side of the project. These employees were first hired as "researchers," until strategy became a key vertical in the studio, alongside brand, environments, and digital. While the entire studio overlaps with strategy, it now has around 10 full-time strategists, and strategy makes up 30% of 2 x 4's business.

"Early on, clients would come to us with aspirations instead of projects," Sellers says. "We always approached this work from the point of view that this isn't about making a brochure that's blue, but repositioning an idea in some new way."

A post-design-thinking world

This shifts design—and the work of design studios—away from having a typical problem-solver relationship with clients, and toward cultural invention, which is much more abstract. In the conversations I've had, most strategists don't come from design backgrounds. Instead, they often

have degrees in history, cultural theory, philosophy, or writing. I've come to see strategy as the next evolution in a post-design-thinking world. Whereas design thinking was reduced to a series of steps—a template that could be borrowed and applied anywhere to solve specific problems—strategy makes space for redesigning the entire process to push new ideas into the world.

In the early 2010s, for example, a group of designers working for the Swedish government, under the name Helsinki Design Lab, started referring to their work as "strategic design," contrasting it with design thinking as not a rigid process but a process that evolves when put into specific contexts.

"Strategic design is a way to specify the intentions that we want to accomplish and steward efforts towards the realization of those aims," they wrote in their 2011 book, *In Studio: Recipes for Systemic Change*. "For the strategic designer it's not a question of thinking or doing, but what to think about and how to do." For the Helsinki Design Lab, strategic design is a bridge between the vision and the plan. It's a way to ask big questions of the systems that organize society and then attempt to design ways to articulate new ideas about those systems.

Following the past few years of tech layoffs and the rise of artificial intelligence image generators, the design fields feel

like they are in a precarious moment. The moment is ripe for questioning the systems in which we operate. Perhaps this is why there is a reaching for new terms. I propose, instead, a reevaluation of the original: The simplest dictionary definition of *design* is "to formulate or plan for." The incorporation of *strategy* into the design field, then, is not a rebrand but rather a return. Which is just another way of saying "Design is strategy and strategy is design."

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