Even as a melody is not composed of tones, nor a verse of words, nor a statue of lines - one must pull and tear to turn a unity into a multiplicity - so it is with the human being to whom I say You. I can abstract from him the color of his hair or the color of his speech or the color of his graciousness; I have to do this again and again, but immediately he is no longer You. (Buber, 1923, p.59)

In Western education, we gradually learn to think analytically, to resolve complex things into their constituent parts. But those “parts” depend entirely on one’s definition of a phenomenon; like a hungry dog at a picnic, we see only those things we wish to consume. It is true that a building is made up of physical materials, which can be listed and specified. But a building is also made of money and politics; of culture and history; of relationships and business practices; of fears and dreams. No one can say that their mode of analysis is the “correct” one; they are all simultaneously correct, and simultaneously limiting. We choose one or a few to discuss based on our own interests, and the interests of those to whom we wish to speak. The thing is commodified, converted to the currency of our particular market.

And this is not only true of objects; it is equally true of circumstances and people. Each of us is part of a demographic, and a compilation of physical behaviors and of expressed attitudes. But we are also a thick compendium of history, the accumulated
record of lives. In order to name someone a student, or a woman of color, or an interior designer, we must decide on a categorization system – and eliminate “extraneous” information.

What if we were to believe that nothing about our lives was extraneous? What if we were to believe that we have hyper-developed our analytical capabilities, and have reduced our capacity for care?

Places as Indivisible Wholes

The 1961 movie *The Hustler* is typically remembered as a story of hubris and loss, of failure and rebirth, and of a very handsome young Paul Newman. But one of the elements that gives the film its power is the primary setting, a dark poolroom in New York. Ames Billiards is not merely the neutral stage set before which a drama is played; it has its own crucial role to play in the story. Were the story set in the poolrooms of the 21st century, hidden in strip malls under decaying ceiling tiles and buzzing fluorescent lamps, Eddie Felson would be a different kind of character—less literate, more brash, resentful of the Filipinos and Latinos who were squeezing him out both in pool and in the labor market—and *The Hustler* would be a different tale. But at least in part because of the poolroom’s physicality, the film speaks of a former age of grandeur, of great skills and expensive tools being slowly rendered obsolete, and of the empire of Minnesota Fats, who rules that grand, decaying palace like Louis XIV.

Walter Tevis’ original novel from 1959 (calling the poolroom “Benningtons” and setting it in Chicago) takes its opening chapter to tell us the story of the room’s emergence from quiet morning to sharp-focused evening:

*A poolroom in the morning is a strange place. It has stages; a daily metamorphosis, a shedding of patterned skins. Now, at 9 A.M., it could have been a large church, still, sun coming through stained windows, wrapped into itself, the great tables’ timeless and massive mahogany, their green cloths discreetly hidden by gray oilcloth covers. The fat brass spittoons were lined along both walls between the tall chairs with seats of honest and enduring leather, rump-polished to an antique gloss, and, above all, the high, arched ceiling with its four great chandeliers and its many-paned skylight—for this was the top floor of*
an ancient and venerable building which, squat and ugly, sat in eight-story insignificance in downtown Chicago. The huge room, with the viewers’ chairs, high-backed, grouped reverently around each of the twenty-two tables, could have been a sanctuary, a shabby cathedral.

But later, when the rack boys and the cashier came in, when the overhead fans were turned on and when Gordon, the manager, would play music on his radio, then the room would adopt the quality that is peculiar to the daytime life of those places which are only genuinely alive at night—the mid-morning quality of night clubs, of bars, and of poolrooms everywhere—the big, nearly empty room echoing the shuffling of a few feet, the occasional clinking of glass or of metal, the sounds of brooms, of wet rags, of pieces of furniture being moved around, and the half-real music that comes from radios. And, above all, the sense of the place’s not yet being alive, yet having now within it the first beginnings of the evening resurrection.

And then, in the afternoon, when the players began to come in in earnest, and the tobacco smoke and the sounds of hard, glossy balls hitting one another and the squeaking sound of chalk squares pressed against hard leather cue tips would begin, then would start the final stages of the metamorphosis ascending to the full only when, late at night, the casual players and the drunks would all be gone, leaving only the intent men and the furtive, who watched and bet, while certain others—a small, assorted coterie of men, both drably and brightly dressed, who all knew one another but seldom spoke—played quiet games of intense and brilliant pool on the tables in the back of the room. At such times this poolroom, Bennington’s, would be alive in a distinct way. (Tevis, 1959)

“...this poolroom...would be alive in a distinct way.” Indeed so, as all rooms, all places, are alive in a distinct way if we allow ourselves to slowly absorb them, to have them whole. “Bennington’s” is to “poolroom” what “home” is to “house:” the specific case, the precise image, the material repository of habit and ritual. And it is exactly those stories that make places—and research about places—matter so deeply to us. The stories themselves deserve focus in our creative work, and in our scholarly attention.
Looking, Writing, and Designing as Dialogue

The norms of most professions stem from a reliance on analytical and deductive logic: setting premises prior to entering the descriptive space, a heightened precision of terms (not merely “women,” for instance, but “single mothers of pre-school children”), arriving at the jobsite with a hypothesis awaiting resolution. We know that we cannot fully render an experience, so we pre-define those elements of a phenomenon to those that we find most important (itself a deeply subjective positioning, having to do with one’s own values, life history, and current/desired identity within the broad array of professional roles and traditions). We look specifically at one isolated set of relationships between closely defined elements - relationships between, say, housing population density and “neighboring behavior” among women homemakers, or between noise and the stress experienced by elementary-school children. This deductive approach is antithetical to storymaking; it results in what writers often call “flat characters” who portray only a limited palette of action and thought. It is that approach that allows a doctor to see us as a presentation of symptoms, a banker to see us as a balance or a risk, a teacher to see us as a grade or an element of classroom management; and thus to miss a broader range of possible ways of working.

Deduction - beginning from theory and moving toward the specific - can often result in multiple participants who speak past one another, not sharing interests or even vocabulary with others who are equally involved in the phenomenon at hand. Architect and teacher Bill Hubbard Jr. claims that a building is the site of multiple discourses, and that disagreements about whether a building or a place is “good” are most often disagreements about which of these unstated, perhaps even covert discourses takes primacy. He names three common discourses: the designer’s discourse about order, the investor’s discourse about results, and a broader public array of discourses about values (Hubbard, 1995). These divergent discourses, and others, arise in every streetscape, as different of us look at the places around us and apply our own concepts and criteria to form an unspoken, subconscious evaluation of “goodness.” And they are the products of deduction, of narrowly defining “what matters” about places (order and geometry, productivity and economic return, or reassurance and cultural familiarity) in ways that reduce their complexity and potential.

Sometimes, those tacit discourses and evaluations are made overt. In a study of how designers and laypeople rated major 20th century buildings, the researchers found that not only did the two groups rank the buildings differently, they also used
incompatible reasoning sets to achieve their rankings (Groat & Canter, 1979). The architects discussed the buildings in formal and compositional terms (employing Hubbard’s discourse of order); the accountants framed their responses in how closely the buildings’ images matched their cultural expectation of use types (“an attractive bank” or “a typical government building,” comments that reflect Hubbard’s discourse of values).

An inductive project leads to a different kind of looking. The inductive practitioner walks into a circumstance that seems likely to be fertile (for instance, if one wants to study how physical spaces influence the relationships between teenagers and adults, a high school seems likely to be fertile), and then suspends judgment and tries as fully as possible to just sit openly. One cannot know in advance which elements of a situation will come to the fore, but certain elements will rise to attention and occur in what will turn out to be knowable patterns. Our questions become more sophisticated simply by watching, thinking, and discussing what we see with those around us. In my case, elements of social class in teen (and teen-adult) spatial life became more central than I might have expected. Had I come in wanting to know about the difference in social gathering between teens with and without cars, I could certainly have learned that... and would have missed almost everything else.

Israeli philosopher Z.D. Gurevitch argues that the ethics of dialogue entail three responsibilities: the responsibility to speak, the responsibility to listen, and the responsibility to respond (Gurevitch, 1990). The deductive stance violates that ethic. The researcher is allowed to speak, but not the “subject,” who merely consents to have behavior or questionnaire answers observed, recorded and tabulated. And once those data are safely stored, there is no response to the subject, no conversation about meaning or values. In fact, by reduction of person and place to predetermined variables, there is no value given to the specific individual; no dialogue is desired, or even possible.

The practices of deductive examination and inductive encounter each privilege a different kind of knowledge and a different practice of knowledge creation. I mistrust deductive examinations of social life at least in part because I find them demeaning – rich, complex people diminished to behavioral units for scientific consumption. It is dialogue that animates me to study. I find people in their places to be infinitely interesting, isolated behaviors far less so. And in dialogue, research participants and I come to a greater richness and mutuality of understanding of what a phenomenon
is, what it means, why it matters. We actively challenge and elevate one another, intellectually and emotionally.

We must also consider the fact of writing as another act of dialogue with its own ethics. When we write, we are entering into a rhetorical circumstance that has a particular audience and motive. If we are writing for a deductive community which holds definitions and theoretical structures similar to our own, then the norm of problem statement-literature review-hypothesis-methods-evidence-discussion, all contained within a peer-reviewed journal, makes sense. It upholds a community norm, participates in the collective economy of tenure and promotion, and reifies a certain set of behaviors for a coming generation of scholars to inherit.

The inductive or dialogic researcher cannot do that, for several reasons. One is that several elements of the deductive template are missing or transformed - there was an informed curiosity rather than a hypothesis, the methods were probably messy and ad-hoc, most of the literature review (if it was any good) came after entering the field in response to phenomena as they were discovered, and the evidence and discussion are deeply interwoven. A second reason is that the original dialogue, that with one’s research participants, has not ended and may never end. Taking that dialogue out of its native language and making it inaccessible to one half of the dialogic pair through focusing only on its narrow disciplinary “relevance” feels at the least ungenerous, and perhaps a breach of trust (Childress, 1998). And a third reason is that the nature of evidence is different: narrative rather than summary, authorial rather than dispassionate, and with the “moral of the story” embedded within rather than attached after the fact.

The inductive researcher is actually trying to broaden the dialogue in some ways, putting one group of people (the research participants) into a form of deliberation with a third group, a body of readers interested in learning about the lives of others and using those stories to illuminate or question or endorse their own. The reader is invited into the encounter as another guest, guided by the writer to see an approximated experiential wholeness as the participants and the researcher came to understand it.
The Absence of Dialogue in Design and Design Research

Many of the professions - medicine, law, psychology, social work, education - suffer from what has been called the two-community problem, in which a research community complains that practitioners don’t pay sufficient attention to research, and a practitioner community complains that researchers don’t understand the complexities and realities of practice. But the two communities are more similar than they realize, and those similarities are the core of the problem.

In the early 1970s, Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber introduced the concept of *wicked problems*, problems that can only be subjected to judgment rather than rules (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Rittel and Webber claim that wicked problems have a number of identifying characteristics that make them inaccessible to mechanistic thinking, among them:

- there is no definitive problem formulation, but each formulation of the problem matters because it largely names the available solutions;
- there is no stopping point;
- there is no way to effectively practice or simulate one’s response to the problem;
- each problem is contextually unique, so that resolutions from one context do not fully resolve similar issues in another context;
- it is impossible to say what is the problem and what is the context of the problem, so fully are they intertwined; and
- each attempted solution has deep ramifications, so that “the planner has no right to be wrong.”

The design practitioner works in the world of wicked problems. An architectural question such as “What is a good college dormitory?” cannot be answered, because it is merely a consequence of larger and equally unanswerable questions: “What is good college social life?” “What is satisfying housing?” “Where does learning happen?” and dozens of others.
In their professional practice of community development (which they specifically call “placemaking”), American design researchers Lynda Schneekloth and Robert Shibley pursue a dialogic method.

Placemaking is the ongoing work of transforming the places we find ourselves into places in which we can truly dwell as individuals and communities of people... What is profoundly important about a critical practice of placemaking is that it not only changes the world - unmaking places as much as making them - but that it makes communities and connects people with each other. In other words, placemaking is not just about the relationship of people TO their places; it also creates relationships AMONG people in places. (Scheenkloth & Shibley, 2005).

Their practice is framed around opening the rich possibilities of dialogue rather than pre-framing a conversation around expert concepts and practices. The first and perhaps most central place that they make is that civic place in which diverse people can come together across lines of difference. Their attention to the physical, logistical and political realities of dialogue help people recognize their common concerns and develop richer arrays of possible resolution than they would have if they had remained in their own racial, class, age or professional isolation.

Others have found a similar outcome—that the more we embrace the wickedness of our problems, the more successful we seem to be. The political scientist Philip Tetlock examined twenty years of political punditry, looking at over 80,000 predictive statements to determine the accuracy of the analysts’ forecasts. He found that almost all of the pundits were poor predictors, because they tended to believe the models and expertise they’d constructed rather than the facts on the table. But Tetlock also found that those who specialized most strongly performed least well. Using Isaiah Berlin’s formulation of the hedgehog and the fox, he discovered that the foxes, wide-ranging and generalist, were much more likely to be correct in their predictions than the deeply burrowing specialist hedgehogs (Tetlock, 2006). When we acknowledge the complexity of what we face, and bring judgment rather than rules to its resolution, we seem to do better work.

But design practice is a business as well as a mode of thought, and businesses need to specialize in something in order to sell it. So many practitioners, out of economic necessity, attempt to tame their wicked problems into fields of specialty with
answerable questions: how to maximize dollars of sales per square foot of leasable floor area, how to design a prison to meet the staffing standards of the state’s prison-guard union, and so on. We can say that design templates or even whole “building types” are repeated because they “work,” but only if we define success narrowly and from the points of view of one or a few participants.

If design professionals begin from wickedness and become tame in their specialization, so too do most design researchers. Too much design research has been marked by tameness driven by a desire for analytic precision (“generalizability,” “validity,” “reliability,” “falsifiability,” and so on) that actively and intentionally eliminates most of the complex problem environment. And our structures of academic advancement encourage the same definition of specialized expertise, rewarding the disciplinary hedgehog drilling down rather than the broadly educated fox looking around.

In the cases of both design and design research, the everyday inhabitants of design are often left to the side while each community pursues its own minimized project. Designers have clients who represent a small spectrum of the project’s ultimate use community but who exercise substantial control through their powers of initiation and funding. Designers also have codes to follow, which eliminate negotiation and dialogue around specific instances in favor of a baseline of “protection” that can generate innumerable poor outcomes (Ben-Joseph, 2005).

The research community is invested in notions of objectivity that actively stand in opposition to personal investment in the lives of our participants. Our field’s writing guidelines, as laid out in the APA Manual, work to eliminate any sense of humanity and individual investment in the work. A sentence such as “This study was designed to examine the relationship between the proportion of vacant storefronts on a business street and pedestrian trips to transit centers” is a passive-voiced, third-person attempt to make authorship irrelevant. Even our citation methods, in which the author’s name is reduced to a last name and an initial, are intended to make the author into nothing more than a locational device for finding articles. “Rubinstein, N.J.” never wrote anything, but my friend Nora did. As my former journalism professor David Littlejohn once told me, “People read particular writers because they think there’s an interesting person there.” We read Alain de Botton and Joan Didion not merely for their content, but more centrally because we are presented with a whole person framing compelling ideas in a captivating way.
The economic and legal structures of professional-client relationships, and the academic structures of research objectivity and specialization, both act to suppress dialogue with inhabitants and readers. To use Gurevitch’s formulation, we may speak, but only within our roles and not as ourselves. We may listen, but only to a narrow frequency from within the broad spectrum of life. And if speaking and listening are both delimited, are both defined as the work of a partial rather than a whole person, the possibility of response disappears altogether.

Pursuing a Dialogical Practice

*We see things not as they are, but as we are.* — Anais Nin

Powerful design responses come from addressing a problem’s wickedness straight on, working with larger systemic questions more centrally than the smaller and more immediate ones. A good example is that of the South Mountain Company design-build firm on Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts. Architect and founder John Abrams has worked to build a corporate structure that fosters deliberation - all of the employees are eligible for ownership after five years, an ownership that has not only economic outcomes but also full decision-making participation. And they limit their design and construction work to the Martha’s Vineyard community, believing that they have not only a deep understanding of the ecological and social nature of the place, but also a responsibility to uphold and improve the community to which they belong (South Mountain Company, 2010).

South Mountain’s dialogues are ongoing, connecting time as well as people and place. The company prides itself on buildings intended to last for hundreds of years, and have conducted renovations to houses they originally designed, in order to meet changed family needs. One of their practices was noted by Stewart Brand in his book *How Buildings Learn* (Brand, 1994); during construction, once the framing, electrical and plumbing systems are installed but before wall sheathing hides it all, the construction team photographs every wall assembly and important construction detail and keys each photograph to an annotated floor plan. Owners who later want to do small modifications themselves can simply refer to the photographs in order to make changes without risk of larger system damage. This acts as a facilitator of a dialogic relationship between homeowner and home, and stands in strong contrast to most houses, the workings of which are largely unseen and mysterious to their residents.
Abrams recounts one of South Mountain’s efforts, a small house from the 1980 for Madeline, a recently widowed librarian. The design team advised her on property purchase, site strategies for energy conservation and noise reduction, financing and federal programs, and energy-use analyses, as well as the normal services of design and construction. Madeline loved that house for fifteen years.

In the mid 90’s she met an older man named Edwin Heath, re-married, and reluctantly moved to Florida, where he was accustomed to the gentle climate. With a heavy heart Madeline sold the house, but she always stayed in touch with the buyer, a woman named Tillie, because the house was such a part of her. Tillie loved it too. Madeline was glad of that. (Abrams, 2010)

When her second husband died, Madeline returned to Martha’s Vineyard, finding a new home (with South Mountain’s help) in an affordable housing complex. On her return, she visited Abrams at the South Mountain office.

After touring, we sat down in my office to rest, to talk, to have a glass of water. She said, “John, I don’t know if I’ve ever told you this, but you and the others didn’t just build me a house. It was so much more. I found myself in that house. I loved everything about it, and everything about being there, and every day I lived there I found myself again, in some other way, and found something else in the house to bring me pleasure.” That’s what she said. (Abrams, 2010)

The South Mountain team, and Madeline (and Tilly, and the neighbors) built far more than a house. They constructed a thirty-year relationship between designer, builder, owner, subsequent owner, and landscape. They built a place.

I’ll use my own work as an example of attempted dialogic practice in design research. For my dissertation/first book, I spent four years living in a small Northern California community, nearly two of those years in daily contact with a group of local teenagers (Childress, 2000). I attempted to listen to the full lives of those kids, to share with them my thinking about what I was seeing and hearing, and to talk through not only our perceptions but also what we thought those facts meant. In the process, many of us became friends—not only on a one-on-one basis between me and each participant,
but also between kids who at first only had me in common but who then came to

discover commonalities.

In many cases, that friendship has spanned years since our face-to-face encounters. Sixteen years after I first met her, I’ve just attended the wedding of the girl I called Ida—then a high-school junior, now with a Masters in Environmental Management, two research years in Antarctica, and at work on urban creek restoration. At her wedding, I encountered another of my core participants, a serious young woman now wondering about how her marriage and work life hold together. That morning, I had already sought out a third at the farmers’ market, a young man who has left behind his high-school “career” of raising marijuana and foraging for psychoactive mushrooms for a satisfying adult career as an organic farmer (and whose work I had eaten the night before in a wonderful salad). Two days before that, I had dinner and exchanged books with one of the teachers in the school, now divorced, a successful poet, about to return to his native Scotland to care for his disabled mother. We sat after dinner in my B&B room, and he and I and my fiancée talked and read to each other until late in the night. These relationships are not how “researchers” and “research subjects” interact, but they are an everyday extension of dialogue.

The successes that are born of these dense and ongoing relationships are more than personal; they are the same as the successes of the book as an intellectual and social object. It has spurred discussions among non-participants about how their own lives are similar to and different from the kids of Curtisville. Adult readers have told me that it helped them understand their own kids; young readers have told me that it helped them understand their own lives. In the city of Curtisville, it was used as required reading for the school board and for the recreation committee as they made plans for their community. As one reader told me, “You could have just told me about the ways that their days were compressed and determined, but here I could really see it, and it mattered to me.”

Those relationships have also brought about a second book, about one of the boys from that high school who subsequently struggled with his emergence into adult life (Childress, 2010). Living with him and his housemates for a month was a revelation in the structures and definitions of adulthood, and caused me to question my own adult identity—career, marriage, even body. A dialogue that does not hold the possibility for change—for everyone involved—is not really a dialogue at all.
In the cases of the South Mountain Company and my own research, we actively set aside the norms of our professions, deciding that the messiness and struggle of the wicked problem was more than rewarded by the possibilities afforded by wholeness and dialogue. In so doing, we have each had to invent the “business model” that facilitated our ways of work. South Mountain Company has had to invent collective ownership structures that allow for full participation, and because of their goal of sustaining Martha’s Vineyard, many of their staff have held elective or voluntary offices in the island’s governance. And I’ve found a home outside the disciplinary tenure track, in an independent professional college where the life of the mind and the life of the world are intertwined for students, instructors and educational leadership. If we’re all going to work hard, we ought to work hard at things that matter to us and to others.

Where does analysis belong?

*If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.* — Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Along with being a writer and an academic dean and a SARUP doctoral alumnus, I also play pool and am a certified pool instructor. As an instructor, I break the skills of the game down into many constituent parts: stroke mechanics, speed control, visualization, eye patterns, collision angles, spin and friction. I use analysis to make the game seem possible to someone who is learning, who just wants to be able to make a ball go into a pocket more reliably than she could before.

That kind of thinking is also what I engage in when I practice. I set up drills and try to make one shot a dozen times, each time making the cue ball do something different after each shot. Can I make this shot and stop the cue ball dead in place? Can I make this same shot and draw the cue ball backward two inches? Eight inches? Four feet? What’s the recipe of stroke speed and spin I need to accomplish each outcome?

But that’s not how I think when I play. During a game, the table becomes a storyboard. It’s a surface of opportunities and dangers, a sequence of tests and approximations, failures and rewards. It’s an occasion of pride, or of disappointment. It’s a study of my opponent, his attitudes and weaknesses, the ways that his strategies differ from
my own. It’s a memory of the table—knowing that one pocket is soft and will accept approximations, that another is brittle and requires precision, that banking a ball hard into a rail reduces its angle of reflection. It’s knowing (and not thinking about) the hundred dollars that will come to me with victory, or that I will surrender if I fail. It’s knowing (and not thinking about) the spectators judging my skill and decisions, some of whom will be subsequent opponents.

And it’s aesthetic. The balls are bright and perfect, the cloth unvarying, the click of ball on ball as sharp and specific as Brubeck. My cue is a marvel of decorative woodworking, and screws together with microscopic exactness. The room is dark and the table lights are bright, focusing our attention on the island of play.

If I thought only like an instructor or a student, I’d never really care enough to play the game. It’s only that indivisible blend of narrative, the ecology of experience, that makes the game compelling.

So too with design and design research. We can use analysis to help teach novices to understand and appreciate the gross structures of our work, breaking design apart into structure and space and services, breaking research apart into theoretical schools and areas of specialization and methodological opportunities. But that’s all training, and not the game itself. We can’t do our best work with those broken and dispersed fragments. Real understanding requires that we reassemble our stories of people and places with respect, through collaboration with co-narrators who care deeply about each other’s welfare and about the places that shape and enable all of our lives.
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