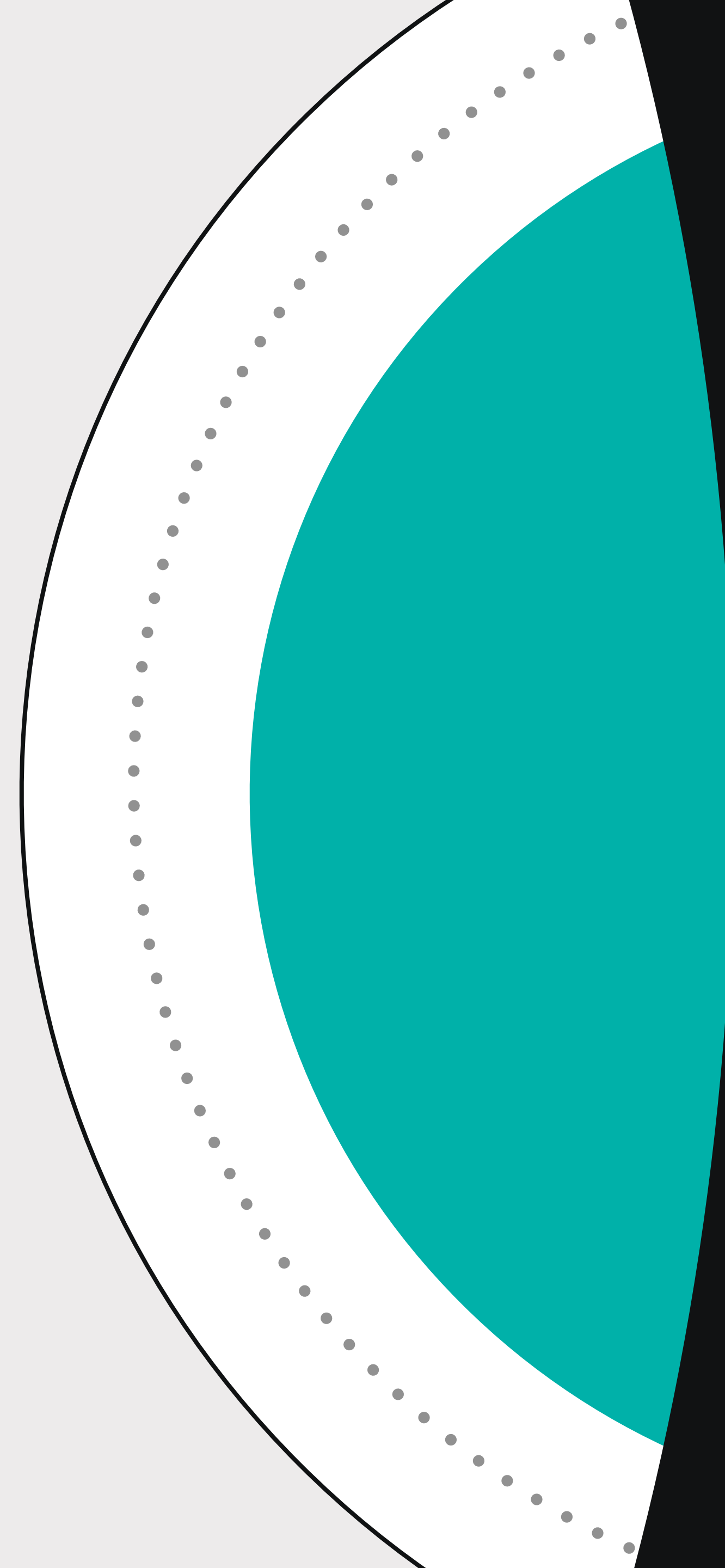


PART 2 OF 3

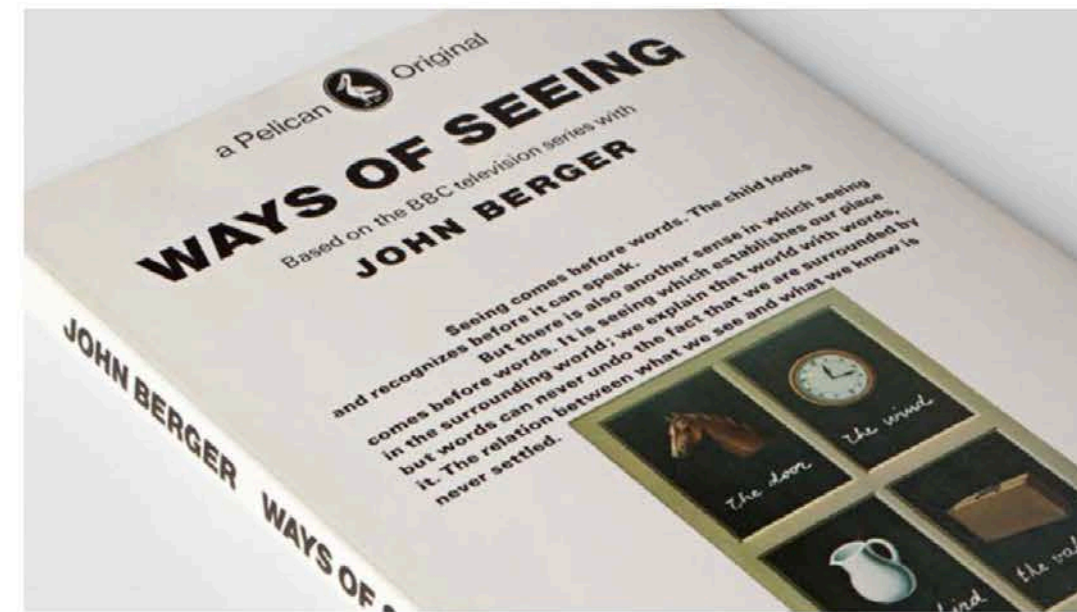
MESSAGE-CONTENT & MESSAGE-FORM

ON THE FORMAL COMPOSITION AND ENCODING OF
MEANING BY DISCURSIVE DESIGN

A Lecture Series For SI 658 Information Architecture
By Jason Hobbs (2025/02/20)



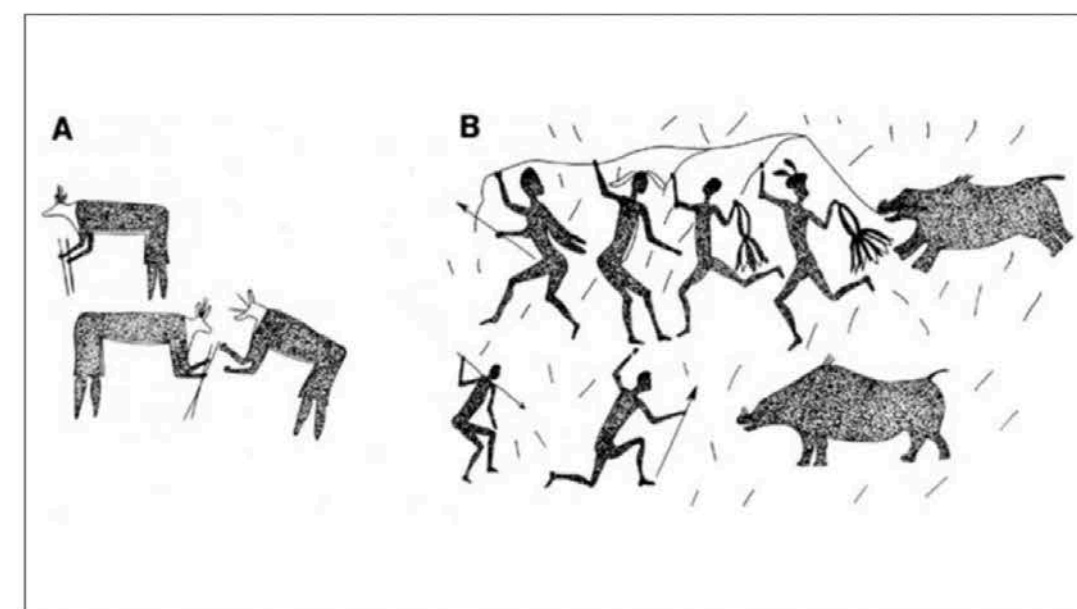
This talk should be understood as emerging from **ways of seeing** alternate to those which currently dominate how IA (and Design) is conceived and defined.



Source: https://www.maharam.com/stories/rock_john-berger-ways-of-seeing

It was here too that I was introduced to John Berger who wrote this book in the 1970's. He is noted as providing a Marxist critique of the history of western art. For the most part he has informed my thinking on Art and he is a primary reference in this presentation.

....



Source: <http://www.mdpi.com/2076-0752/3/2/215/html>

I believe that Art is centrally concerned with the human condition. These therianthropic rock art forms (beneath 'A' in this image)[1] reveal humans transforming into animals, vice versa or just human / animal forms.

Is it possible that these forms allude to a spiritual dimension of human experience? Do they allude to the codependent relationship between man and nature?

1. Orpen's 1874 copies of the rock art at Melikane (a) and "Mangolong" (b) (Sehonghong River, Lesotho): (a) shows "rhebok men" who could tame "eland and snakes"; and (b) "submerged" men and women capturing a "rain animal" that is also a snake.

The manner in which DD identifies three design acts - the design of content, a form for this content and a resultant artifact - contributing to a whole object, bears a striking resemblance to the description of IA by Hobbs and Fenn (2019, p. 276). Indeed, an information architect could be heard saying these exact words by Tharp and Tharp: "This structuring and shaping of information is as important as the shaping of the artefacts themselves" (Tharp & Tharp, 2019, p. 169).

This likeness is illustrated in Figure 2.14, where (*i*) indicates an *external being* for a design artefact of which the message-form / semantic formation is an observable part, and an *internal* aspect where the message-content / structural logic tacitly exists in mutual dependence to the message-form / semantic formation.

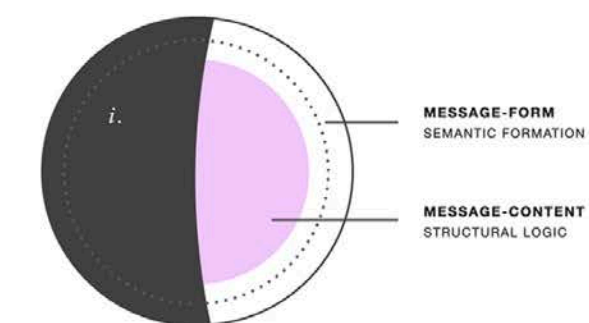


Figure 2.14 Discursive Design and Information Architecture – conceptual overlap (Author)

DD brings an acknowledgement of meaning-making to IA and Design in general:

Our investigations show that few designers are aware of this value, yet we feel this particular arena can help them nuance their approaches and achieve more sophisticated and effective communication of their discourse (Tharp & Tharp, 2019, p. 169)

DD and the sense- / meaning-making conception of IA share the view of a constructed social reality. Where it appears that they differ however is of great importance.

iii.

Discursive Design

Critical, Speculative, and Alternative Things



Bruce M. Tharp
and
Stephanie M. Tharp

Discursive Design

Critical, Speculative, and Alternative Things



Bruce M. Tharp
and
Stephanie M. Tharp

Discursive Design (DD)

An umbrella term¹ for various contemporary approaches to Design.

¹ Their joke. Not mine.

Discursive Design

Critical, Speculative, and Alternative Things



Bruce M. Tharp
and
Stephanie M. Tharp

Discursive Design



Critical Design
Discursive Design
Speculative Design
Design Fiction

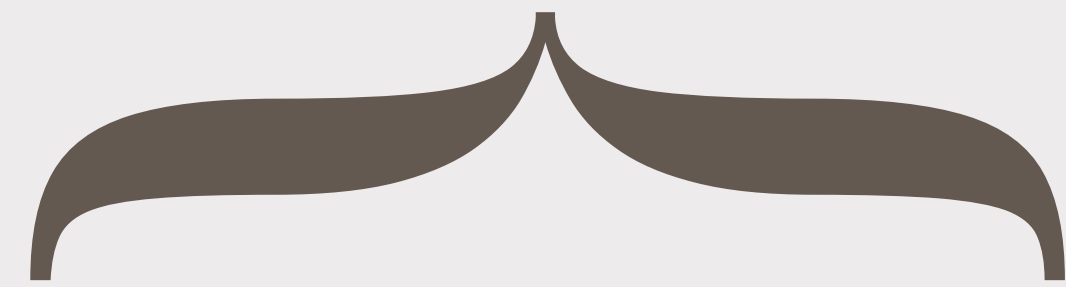
Discursive Design

Critical, Speculative, and Alternative Things



Bruce M. Tharp
and
Stephanie M. Tharp

Discursive Design



Critical Design
Discursive Design
Speculative Design
Design Fiction

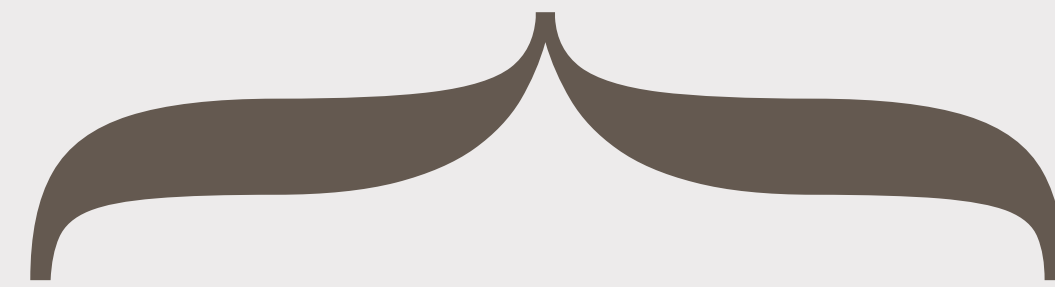
Discursive Design

Critical, Speculative, and Alternative Things



Bruce M. Tharp
and
Stephanie M. Tharp

Discursive Design



Critical Design
Discursive Design
Speculative Design
Design Fiction



Adversarial Design

Anti-Design

Contestational Design

Critical Design

Critical Jugaad

Design Fiction

Discursive Design

Dissident Design

Guerrilla Futures

Interrogative Design

Radical Design

Reflective Design

Speculative Design

Speculative Re-design

Tactical Media

Un-Design



“...discursive designs intentionally and primarily act as **particular communicators - calculated carriers and deliberate embodiments of systems of thought or knowledge.** Discourse is not merely a consequence or possibility of an object’s existence - something that a discursive design shares with all artifacts. Instead, **discourse is why it exists.”**

They share:

1.

A non-functional (utility) position on the point and purposes of the design **artefacts** they make

2.

More or less tacit agreement on the role and mechanics of **meaning-making** in artefact creation

They share:

1.

A non-functional (utility) position on the point and purposes of the design **artefacts** they make

2.

More or less tacit agreement on the role and mechanics of **meaning-making** in artefact creation

"Discursive Design is a tool for conveying ideas – with the artefact serving as a means to that end"

The Rain Project (2011) by Alice Wang

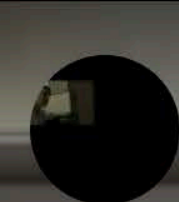


“Alice Wang was concerned with the causes and effects of environmental pollution, and created the **Rain Project**, where she made popsicles and other foods with the rainwater of different cities. She handed these out to people on the street to consider eating and to provocatively express her message.”



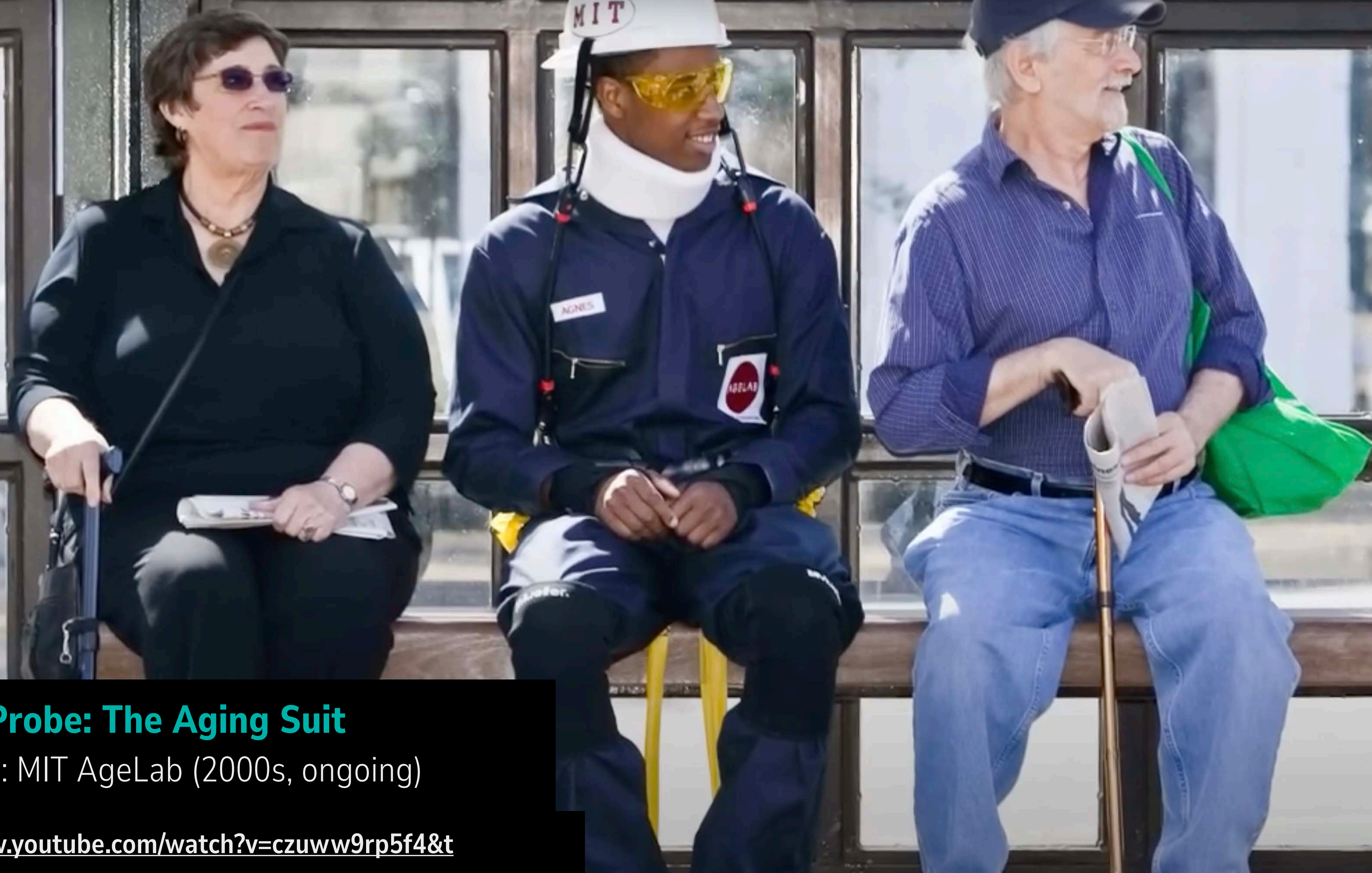
Snow Global (2011) By Neil Conley





1.
Which isn't to say that discursive designs can't serve a functional role too.

MORE VIDEOS



Design Probe: The Aging Suit
Project by: MIT AgeLab (2000s, ongoing)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czuww9rp5f4&t>

Aims in DD

REMIND

Reinforcing a
discourse

PROVOKE

Inciting reactionary
responses

INSPIRE

Motivating positive
thoughts or feelings

PERSUADE

Convincing the
audience of a position

This may come as a bit of a surprise (or not!) to people unfamiliar with the field of design,

**OUTSIDE OF
BRANDING, WE
DON'T TALK VERY
MUCH ABOUT
'MEANING' IN DESIGN.**

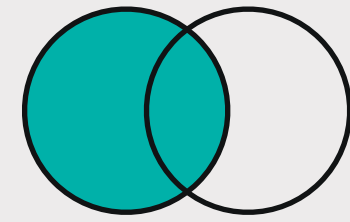
They share:

1.

A non-functional (utility) position on the point and purposes of the design **artefacts** they make

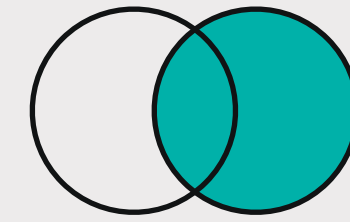
2.

More or less tacit agreement on the role and mechanics of **meaning-making** in artefact creation



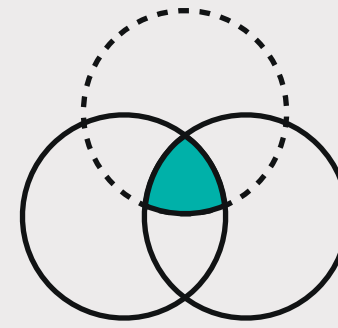
MESSAGE-CONTENT

The idea, theme, or concept that the design communicates. It represents the subject matter or intended meaning.



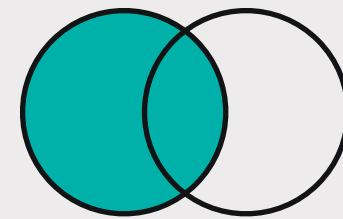
MESSAGE-FORM

The medium, material, or aesthetics that convey the message. Physical or digital attributes and the way it is experienced.



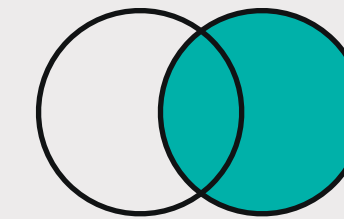
META-DISCOURSE

The broader reflection or commentary that the design facilitates about design itself, culture, or societal norms. It prompts deeper engagement beyond the object itself.



MESSAGE-CONTENT

The idea, theme, or concept that the design communicates. It represents the subject matter or intended meaning.



MESSAGE-FORM

The medium, material, or aesthetics that convey the message. Physical or digital attributes and the way it is experienced.

**IN DD THE MEANING BEHIND OR WITHIN A DESIGNED ARTEFACT
IS GIVEN PRIMACY OVER THE DESIGN ARTEFACT ITSELF.**

Message-Content
**OIL SUBSTITUTED
FOR SNOW**



Message-Form
A SNOW GLOBE

Meta-Discourse

Idyllic landscape vs polluted environment

Message-Content
**OIL SUBSTITUTED
FOR SNOW**



Message-Form
A SNOW GLOBE

MESSAGE-CONTENT

Message-content is introduced to refer to the discussion of some aspect of a subject-matter to be communicated through an artefact. What subjects and communication methods may be addressed or used is not prescribed in any way in DD.

A discourse is “...understood as a system of thought and knowledge,” (Tharp & Tharp, 2019, p. 168) which, so framed, gains form through its relationship to other voices and discourses in the world. This background to an object’s message-content is referred to as the meta-discourse (Tharp & Tharp, 2019, p. 169). Thus, the content of a message is directed towards eliciting a response from the user which could vary from reflection on the topic, all the way through to mass action.

Although the content is not prescribed it is understood as more than just saying something. The content presents a point of view on a topic or subject, an argument or a consideration, which is why it is referred to as a discourse and not mere content.

MESSAGE-FORM

As a system of thought and knowledge in relation to others, such content may be multi-layered and multi-dimensional in its composition and thus it requires crafting. Not crafting through the artefact but the crafting of the composition of the content.

Tharp and Tharp provide a more specific analysis through the concept of message-form (2019, p. 169) for which they identify ten types: analysis, description, classification, definition, comparison, analogy, narration, process, and cause and effect.

Analysis

is a message configuration where complex things are reduced into simpler parts and components.

Description

is a way of “picturing images” and arranging them in some kind of logical or associational pattern.

Classification

is a means of grouping or sorting things and arranging them systematically on the basis of shared qualities.

Exemplification

is a means of illustrating a general concept through the use of examples.

Definition

is a means of setting boundaries and limitations in a way that expresses something’s essential nature.

Comparison

is a means of examining two or more things in order to determine their similarities and differences.

Analogy

is a means of extending a comparison; asking the audience to infer that if two things are similar in some respects, that they may be alike in others.

Narration

is a means of expressing a sequence of actions or events in time, eliciting facts or particulars of an incident or experience.

Process

is a means of expressing a series of actions, changes, functions, steps, or operations that result in some particular end or conclusion.

Cause & Effect

is a means of expressing a force that influences an action, event, condition, or some result; there is an agent and the change that it brings about.

Classification

is a means of grouping or classifying things and organizing them systematically on the basis of shared qualities.

Exemplification

is a means of illustrating a general concept through the use of examples.

Definition

is a means of setting boundaries and limitations in a way that expresses something's essential nature.

Illustration

is a means of expressing the essence of actions or events in time, eliciting the particulars of an event or experience.

Process

is a means of expressing a series of actions, changes, functions, steps, or operations that result in some particular end or conclusion.

Cause & Effect

is a means of expressing a force that influences an action, event, condition, or some result; there is an agent and the change that it brings about.

(Tharp & Tharp, 2019, pp. 171-181)

An aspect of the application of message-forms is to explore the message-content through the different lenses of the form types, to play with the structure or organisation of content such that arriving at a particular message-form, is a considered act.

The content becomes designed by taking a form.

The message-content is then fused within an artefact through the chosen manner in which the message-form is structured as the artefact. The artefact – and media, material and so forth – takes its cue from the message-form and so the message-content becomes the artefact.

The designer
...compos[es] objects
to convey ideas

(Tharp & Tharp, 2019, p. 170)

THREE EXAMPLES FROM DESIGN FICTION

	Message-Content (Theme/Concept)	Message-Form (Medium/Experience)	Meta-Discourse (Broader Reflection)
1. Mitigation of Shock	Climate crisis adaptation.	Immersive physical installation.	Critiques systemic inaction; explores DIY resilience.
2. Hyper-Reality	Augmented reality and algorithmic control.	Visually chaotic first-person film.	Challenges techno-optimism; warns of digital oversaturation.
3. Corner Convenience	Future consumer culture shaped by technology.	Fictional store with speculative products.	Critiques surveillance, consumerism, and corporate influence.



Superflux's 'Mitigation of Shock' (2017, ongoing)

Message-Content: The project speculates about how people might adapt to a world impacted by climate change. It envisions a future London apartment redesigned to function in a world where food scarcity, resource shortages, and extreme weather are the norm.

Message-Form: The physical installation includes DIY hydroponic food systems, survivalist tools, and hacked appliances, making the speculative scenario feel immediate and tangible. Visitors can interact with the space as though they are living in the imagined future.

Meta-Discourse: This project challenges current attitudes toward climate change adaptation, suggesting that individuals may have to take matters into their own hands. It critiques the lack of systemic action by governments and corporations while questioning how design could prepare people for radical lifestyle shifts.



stand here

info

DOUBLE POINTS FOR THE NEXT 2 MINUTES

special offer special offer

FRUIT

+20 points



COCONUTS

\$2.20

buy one to UPGRADE YOUR KENNEL



x2

RICE

you deserve to look fabulous
**LOSE WEIGHT
FEEL GREAT!**

i

try it



TOTAL \$0.00

éxito

POINTS level 99

MY SHOPPING LIST

- Half watermelon
- Alpinette yoghurt
- 200g cream cheese
- 1 Quart milk
- Orange soda

recipes





Keiichi Matsuda's 'Hyper-Reality' (2016)

Message-Content: This short film envisions a hyper-augmented future where digital overlays, gamification, and algorithmic systems dominate everyday life. It questions how personal agency might be shaped (or diminished) by data-driven environments.

Message-Form: A highly immersive, first-person perspective shows the protagonist navigating a city where virtual layers—ads, notifications, and rewards—completely saturate their vision. The aesthetic is vibrant, chaotic, and unsettling.

Meta-Discourse: The film critiques techno-optimistic visions of augmented reality by demonstrating the potential for digital oversaturation, loss of privacy, and algorithmic control over behavior. It forces viewers to question the role of digital augmentation in shaping lived experiences.







Julian Blecker's 'Corner Convenience' (2013)

Message-Content: This project speculates on a near-future convenience store stocked with fictional products that reflect the potential consequences of technological, social, and economic changes. Items include AI-enhanced beverages, biotech supplements, and privacy-defeating personal devices.

Message-Form: A physical storefront installation and a catalog of speculative products serve as an entry point for audiences to engage with and consider how emerging technologies might shape consumer culture.

Meta-Discourse: It critiques consumerism, corporate control over technological development, and the normalization of surveillance in everyday products. By situating futuristic concepts within the familiar context of a convenience store, it highlights the subtle ways that technology integrates into daily life without users necessarily questioning its impact.

An individual artefact can be comprised of multiple message forms and the final design object or work of design may be comprised of more than one artefact where, the work **“...leverage[s] elements of the semantic environment that all contribute to a meaningful communication event”**

(Tharp & Tharp, 2019, p. 170)

iii.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Exploration of the theoretical relationship between Information Architecture and Design Thinking began for the author, and research partner **Terence Fenn**, over a decade ago. Almost all of the foundational propositional theory to be found herein may be traced back to this very fruitful, productive and enjoyable collaboration.

Terence is further acknowledged for identifying the potential to be found in the conceptual relationships between information architecture and Discursive Design, and Vygotsky's psychological tools. The recommendation to develop a critical discourse about information architecture emerged in discussion with Naude Malan, who is credited for the suggestion.

Thanks are given to my supervisor, Marc Edwards, for various reasons but above all, for his patience. In addition, the various staff of the University of Johannesburg Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture and those within the Multimedia Department are thanked. Yumna Motala's assistance with the document was sanity saving.

This dissertation would not have been completed without the various forms of support provided by my mum and dad (Janine and Mike Hobbs), Rayanne Jacobson and, when the going got rough, Naude Malan.

The design project conducted with and for the Ubuntu Addiction Community Trust was never merely a means towards the ends of this dissertation. In fact, the Trust was the inspiration for the research project as a whole. David Collins, Leigh-Anne Brierley, all the staff and awesome addicts at 41 Pretoria Street, Johannesburg, thank you. I check out with joy.

PART 2 OF 3

MESSAGE-CONTENT & MESSAGE-FORM

ON THE FORMAL COMPOSITION AND ENCODING OF
MEANING BY DISCURSIVE DESIGN

A Lecture Series For SI 658 Information Architecture
By Jason Hobbs (2025/02/20)

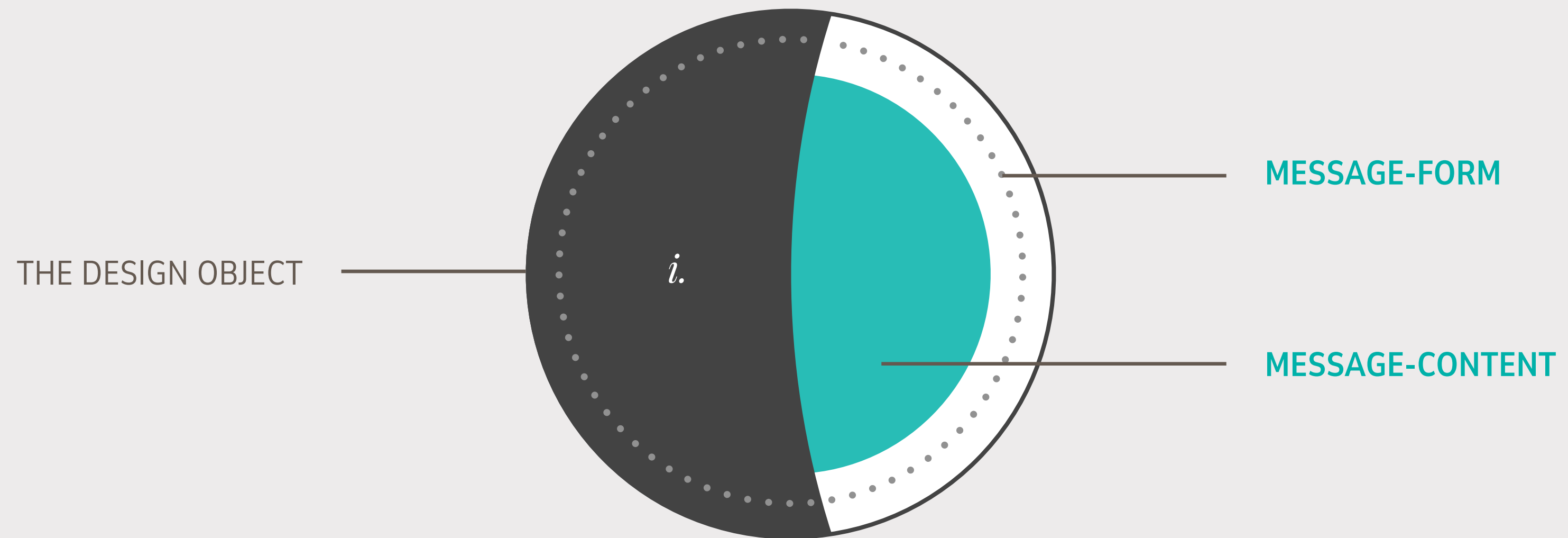
PART 1 OF 3

STRUCTURAL LOGIC & SEMANTIC FORMATION

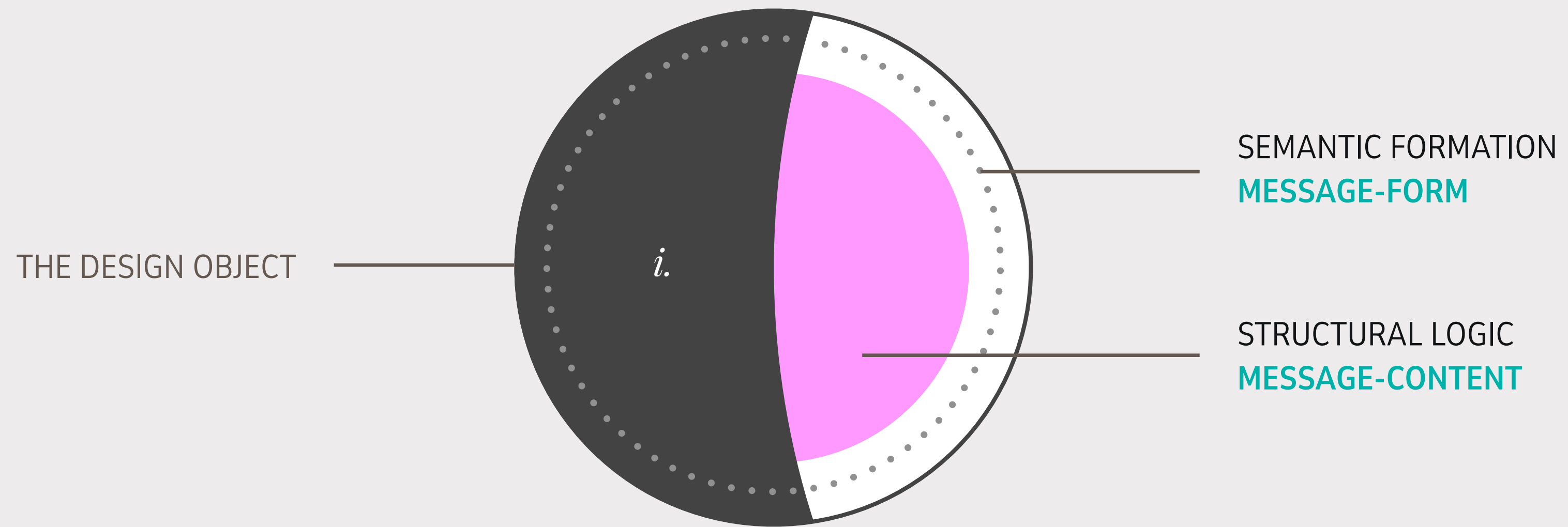
ON THE FORMAL COMPOSITION AND ENCODING OF MEANING BY
CONCEPTUAL INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE

A Lecture Series For SI 658 Information Architecture
By Jason Hobbs (2025/02/20)

This likeness is illustrated below where (i.) indicates an external being for a design artefact of which the **message-form / semantic formation** is an observable part, and an internal aspect where the **message-content / structural logic** tacitly exists in mutual dependence.



This likeness is illustrated below where (i.) indicates an external being for a design artefact of which the **message-form / semantic formation** is an observable part, and an internal aspect where the **message-content / structural logic** tacitly exists in mutual dependence.



An information architect could be heard saying these exact words by Tharp and Tharp:

“This structuring and shaping of information is as important as the shaping of the artefacts themselves”

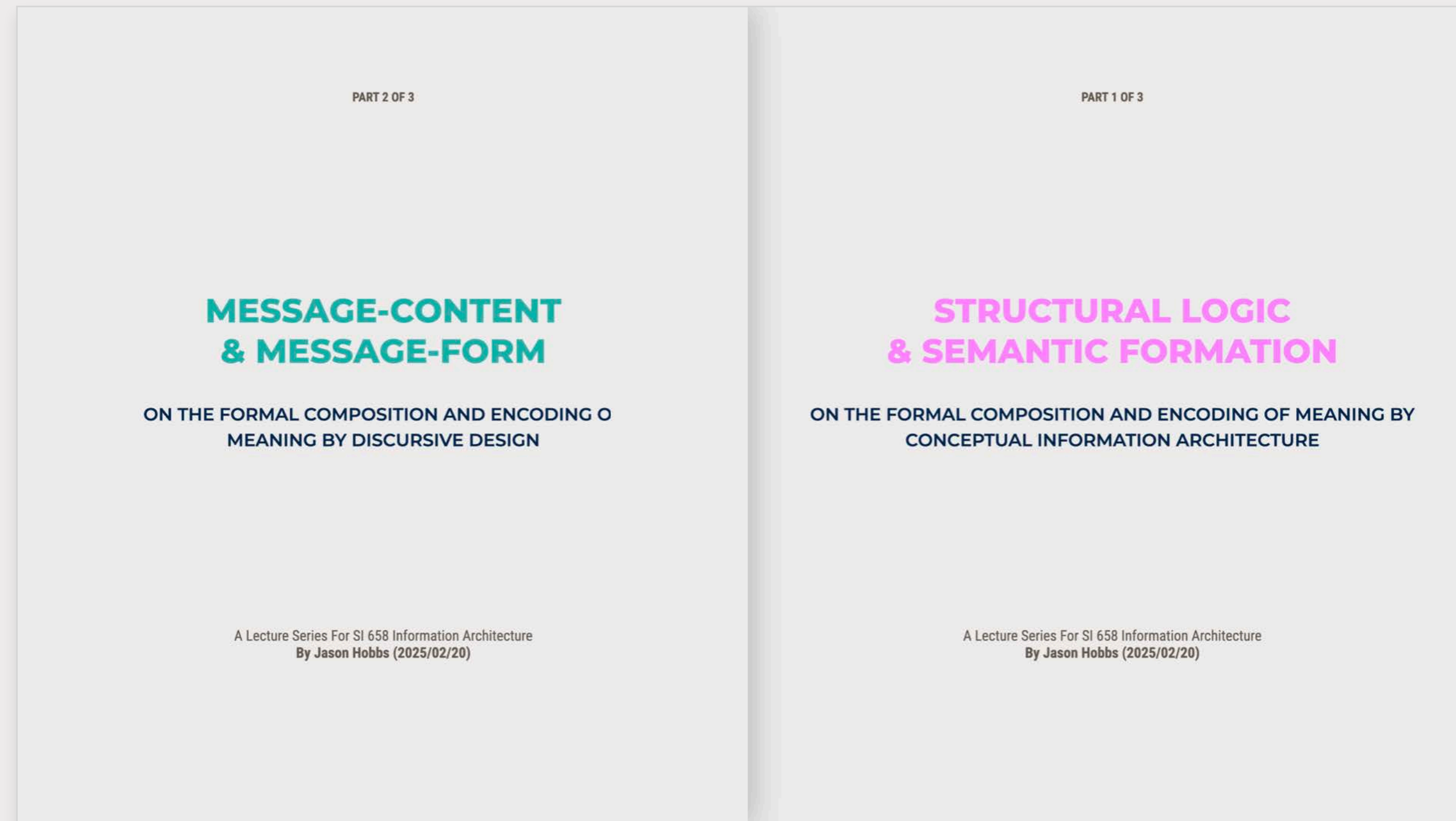
(Tharp & Tharp, 2019, p. 169)

DD brings an acknowledgement of meaning-making to IA and Design in general:

“Our investigations show that few designers are aware of this value, yet we feel this particular arena can help them nuance their approaches and achieve more sophisticated and effective communication of their discourse”

iii.

Similar. Not the same.



You may recall the opening slide from my first talk.

This talk should be understood as one emerging from a second intellectual culture to be found in the field of IA.

JOURNAL OF INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE

SPRING 2021, VOL 6 ISS 1 — Landscapes

Jason Hobbs
Footnotes to “Re: The Future of Information Architecture”

Introduction

The article “Re: The Future of Information Architecture” was first published on September 24 2019 (Hobbs 2019). Although written in relation to the dissolution of the Information Architecture Institute (IAI), its content presented a reflection on the field at that time with an eye to the future. The present article serves three purposes: preservation and historic record of the original text; documentation of concerns facing the field at that time, with regards to its institutional status; and as a commentary and further conceptual elaboration roughly two years past the dissolution of the IAI.

Distinct from a **first culture view** of IA as an applied LIS primarily concerned with the web and bounded objects, such as websites or mobile apps, **the second intellectual culture** views information architectures as existent phenomena in the world, which predate digital technology and the Internet.

This second view recognises information architectures as **capable of affecting the human condition** in terms far broader than those we associate with a first culture concern limited to discreet, bounded digital objects.

DD AND A SECOND CULTURE CONCEPTION OF IA SHARE
THE VIEW OF A CONSTRUCTED SOCIAL REALITY. WHERE
THEY DIFFER IS OF GREAT IMPORTANCE.

Information architectures are structures of meaning within which humans practically exist, as the example of classification by race applied in apartheid South Africa testifies to.





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Maximise

Make the most of your Volkswagen

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Your warranty & Finances
Repairs | Car care

Just bought?
Start here to get going



Repurchase

Fast track towards your new Volkswagen

- > Plan your car package
- > Evaluations & Trade-ins
- > Contact your dealer
- > Refinancing



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Reliable and cost-effective transportation solutions.	Life really is easier with Volkswagen Fleet.	View our parts and accessories microsites.	All about our present and bright future.

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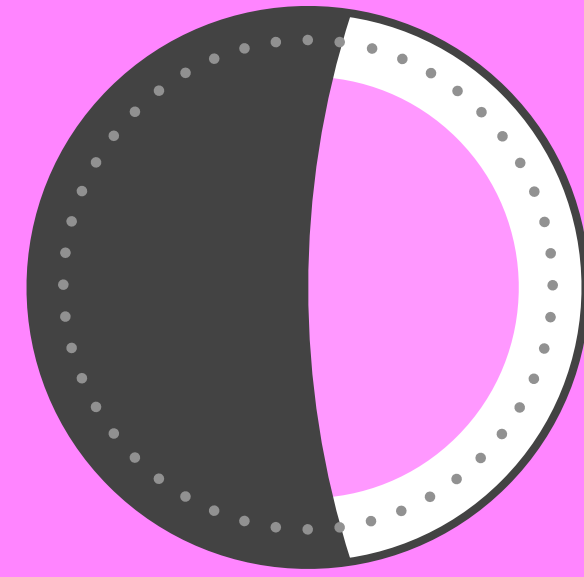
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...as well as seemingly mundane operations such as the lifecycle of interactions associated with your owning of Volkswagen vehicle.





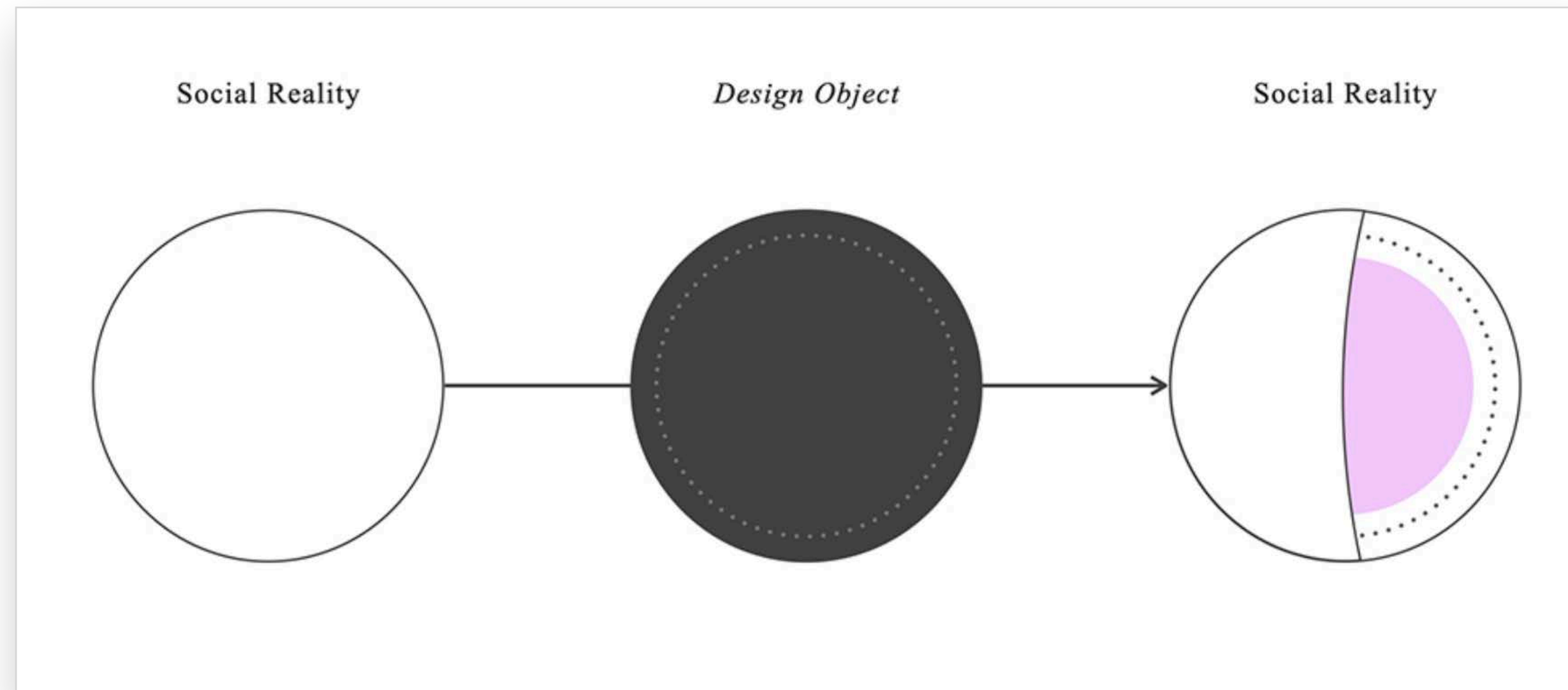
Contrived-Ontology

Contrived-Ontology

The notion of a contrived ontology refers to the meaning contained in a structural logic / semantic formation as coming to stand for an intentionality, or internal meaning, in objects made and which find their way into the world.

Any human made object whether by design or not, is considered (in this theory) to contain such a meaning, whether tacit in the making or not.

This then is a further distinction to DD where message-content and message-form only present if they are designed to.



Contrived ontology as a tacit aspect of any design and how it is party to any mediation of (social) reality.

When that which is entailed by a design object's being in the world is socially accepted, so too is the contrived ontology accepted as a construct within social reality.

i.e. use is tacit acceptance.

So what happens...

when makers* don't realise
there is meaning in the IA in
their work?

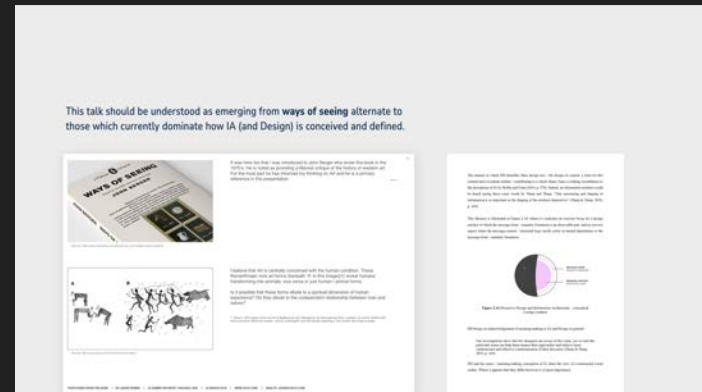
and when users don't realise
that use is a tacit acceptance of
that meaning in society?

* not just designers

END OF PART 2

REFERENCES & BIBLIOGRAPHY

SLIDE 2



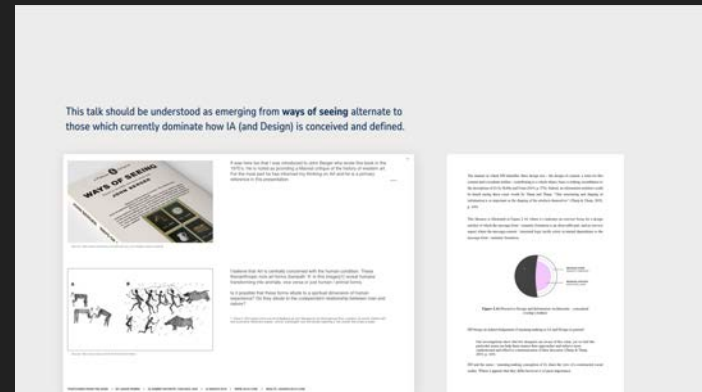
Hobbs, J. (2018). Postcards From The Edge. Presentation at the IA Summit, Chicago. Available: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344596828_POSTCARDS_FROM_THE_EDGE



SLIDE 18

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czuww9rp5f4&t>

SLIDE 2



Hobbs, J. (2021). Applying Information Architecture In Design Thinking : Ideating Solutions To The Wicked Problem Of Addiction. Dissertation, University of Johannesburg. <http://hdl.handle.net/10210/485650>



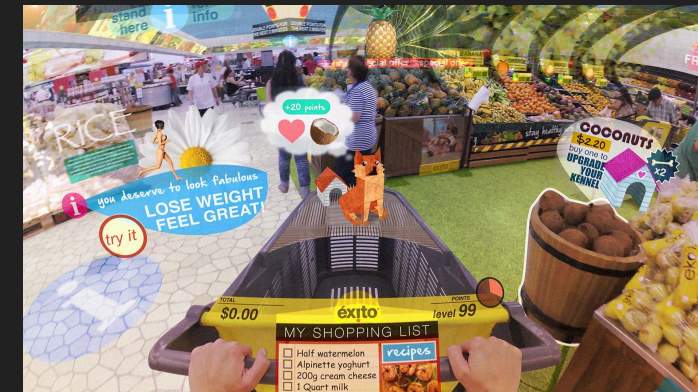
SLIDE 23

<https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/in-practice-superflux>

SLIDE 4



Tharp, B. & Tharp, S. (2019). Discursive Design: Critical, Speculative, and Alternative Things. s.l.:MIT Press.



SLIDE 29

<https://www.shortoftheweek.com/2016/09/27/hyper-reality/>

SLIDE 15



Conley, N. (2011). Snow Global. Available: <https://www.core77.com/posts/19462/things-that-look-like-other-things-neil-conleys-glasswares-advocate-transparency-transparently-19462>



SLIDE 32

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNcFvgG9YeE>