the art of co-design

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A guide to creative collaboration

CALLAN
JESS

We recognise and appreciate the lived experience of collaborators across our co-design teams, partners and clients. Their expertise, creativity and insights inform and inspire our ongoing practice.

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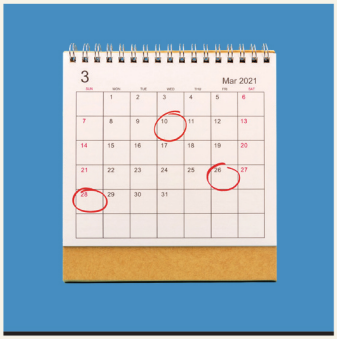

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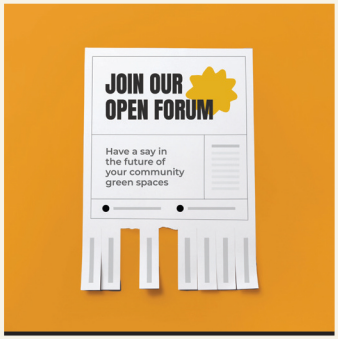

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why we co-design

When I started working as a designer, to be successful seemed to require simply having a strong empathy and connection with consumers. Back then, the process of "problem-framing" and designing "solutions" was very much driven by the idea of stepping into someone else's shoes. However, when faced with particularly challenging design problems, I often wondered: "what if I could just ask the people I'm designing for what they *really* need and want?" At the time, it didn't feel like an appropriate thing to do; how could I be a credible designer if I was relying on others to come up with the solution for me? On the other hand, maybe this approach could lead to something much better than what I'd come up with singlehandedly.

While designers typically wear a "design guru" hat, I felt very conflicted in such a role. We seldom have all the answers and do a lot of guessing. As I ventured into new sectors, particularly into social change, I kept wondering if there was another way to design – something that could allow us to understand, care and innovate even more. I was heartened when I found it. Designing with people at the centre of a design, not simply designing for them: *co-design*. It seemed like a lot of people were contemplating this approach at the same time. After exploring it, I have never looked back. It just feels the right way to design – and I'm consistently struck by how ingenious the outcomes continue to be. Co-design has allowed me to engage with people in profound ways and work on problems that seemed unsolvable. I've had the opportunity and privilege to collaborate with diverse groups of people – people processing trauma, people living with a disability, young children, and those experiencing homelessness – addressing their unique challenges to create change.

Working with these collaborators means engaging with *true* experts – those with lived experience. As a designer, I now find myself creating opportunities for others' voices to be heard. My role is to ignite their creativity, working together to solve the problems that affect them. I facilitate, interpret, suggest, provoke, and support collaboration, using my creativity at key points, but supporting others to take the lead. Co-design is a hard process to explain, which is why this book exists. It's our passionate attempt to demystify something people can be apprehensive or skeptical of, until they are part of the process in action. Co-design is a future-focused, rewarding, and unpredictable new field of design – I hope this book excites you about its possibilities!

My evolution from capital-D Designer to co-designer has been humbling, heartening, curious and surprising. I cut my chops as a graphic designer, imagining I'd be pushing pixels in a design studio from 9-5. It wasn't long before I started to feel disenchanted with the work I was doing – I was finding myself making arbitrary decisions in isolation, struggling to find meaning and connect with a "why". Around this time, I was approached by a research team who was developing a mental health toolkit with the largest youth phone counselling service in Australia and needed a design lead. Weeks later I was unexpectedly thrust into a confronting and captivating two-year crash course in co-design. Suddenly, I was facilitating my first collaborative workshops, working alongside 30 young people, counsellors and psychologists to bring their ideas to life.

My first experience with co-design sparked as many "aha!" moments as "huh?" moments. On the one hand, I was hooked. I found it impossible to return to my old way of doing things – I loved untangling complex problems, I loved working alongside the people who experienced those problems first-hand, and I loved creating tools and spaces that empowered people to reflect on their experiences and express their ideas. At the same time, I felt ill-equipped as a co-design facilitator. I quickly noticed that the more playful, creative and subversive the activities, the more participants felt comfortable experimenting with new ideas. However, I had no idea how to craft compelling co-design spaces, let alone which methods to use and why. I wanted to dig deeper into the kind of methods and tactile tools that could support meaningful (and fun!) creative collaboration, while also inspiring usable and sustainable solutions. Our *"A-Z of methods"* is my labour of love, something that would have saved me a few years of trial and error at the beginning of my co-design crusade.

I've since found a home in healthcare, with no shortage of wicked problems to explore. Whether I'm working with people in the last months of their lives or children with juvenile arthritis, my role is to create an engaging co-design experience, listening and adapting to their needs. What excites me most about co-design is the chance to take a humble step back and get the basics right: to be curious, ask thoughtful questions, and discover unexpected opportunities to improve some of the most emotionally affecting moments in a person's life. At its best, co-design isn't just about creating shiny solutions – it brings people with shared lived experience together, creates communities and turns challenging experiences into meaningful change. I hope that our enthusiasm for co-design is infectious, and that you put down this book feeling curious, crafty and full of new ideas.

who we are

The Art of Co-design emerged from a research project within the Centre for Childhood Nutrition Research in Queensland, Australia. The centre was founded on an ethos of community engagement, child and family-led innovation and creative problem-solving, making co-design a natural fit. We were tasked with working alongside the centre's nutrition researchers to develop a series of co-design resources, creating the tools they needed to apply co-design to their projects, authentically and ethically. In our quest to meet the needs of healthcare researchers, we realised that many other contexts were also craving practical co-design resources. Before we knew it, we had created a universal co-design handbook, rich with creative methods that could be adapted to any context.

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studies the cognition of creativity and brings these ideas into the world of education

PROJECT TEAM

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is a leading expert in intuitive interaction, conducting research with a diverse range of people, from children to the elderly

PROJECT TEAM

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brings innovation to the child and community health sectors through citizen-led design

PROJECT TEAM

This book builds on our team's collective knowledge of co-design practices and methods, developed through years of collaboration with diverse groups and communities. In creating this handbook we embarked on a systematic review of co-design literature and resources, reflected on our own research and community projects, and facilitated co-design workshops with researchers and health professionals to understand what tools they needed to bring their own co-design projects to life. We think of this book as a celebration of emerging design methods and the potential of collaborative design. It's the resource we wish we had when we were starting out: a no-nonsense, flexible and practical guide to making co-design work in the wild. Alongside this book, we have also created an online resource that is freely available, making co-design accessible to all: **www.co-designer.co**

Jessica Cheers
advocates for the use of playful, creative and provocative methods in untangling complex problems, and is currently on a crusade to humanise healthcare through co-design

AUTHOR + DESIGNER

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why co-design?

If you're here, you've likely heard the word "*co-design*" before. Co-design is growing in popularity, yet in many cases it's still poorly understood. The following section covers the co-design basics: *what* it is, *where* it came from and *why* it's worth doing.

what is co-design?

co-design is designing with people, not for them

CO-DESIGN HAPPENS WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE DIRECTLY AFFECTED BY WHAT IS BEING DESIGNED

Co-design celebrates people as experts of their own lived experience

CO-DESIGN CREATES SPACE FOR PEOPLE TO RESPOND TO THE PROBLEMS AND OPPORTUNITIES THAT AFFECT THEM

Co-design is a design-led method of collaboration that uses creative and participatory methods

Co-design is inherently complex, messy and exploratory

CO-DESIGN IS A CRUCIAL APPROACH TO ADDRESSING COMPLEX ISSUES AND SOLVING 'WICKED' PROBLEMS

co-design is being used to innovate systems, services, initiatives, buildings and products

co-design is happening more and more in government, health, education and business sectors

what does co-design look like?

Co-design starts with a core co-design team identifying a challenge or opportunity, then assembling relevant people (i.e. stakeholders) to collaborate. This generally occurs within *creative workshops* with representatives of a stakeholder group or mixed stakeholder groups. The workshops, led by a facilitator or facilitators, consist of linked activities, based on reflective and generative methods. These activities often involve sketching and making to bring about insights and ideas which the co-design team can review and respond to. Follow-up co-design sessions then allow a project to be further developed and refined, using diverse methods.

While *in-person workshops* are the most popular in the field, they are increasingly being held *online* or in a *blended* format (with a combination of in-person and online participants). As well as these *synchronous* workshops, co-design projects often make use of *asynchronous* co-design activities that stakeholders can complete in their own time, offering additional opportunities for creative collaboration.

While it is common for a co-design team to engage stakeholders extensively in the ideation and prototyping process, it is less so that they are actively involved in developing and implementing solutions. This more holistic approach to co-design is being increasingly pursued, however, as it is seen as a more ethical way to collaborate. There is growing evidence demonstrating this leads to more successful outcomes.

what is co-design similar to?

consultation

extractive

design thinking

is a series of strategies and practical processes allowing designers to prioritise a consumer – or user – when developing products and services, and many of these methods are now used within co-design

focus groups

are a way for organisations to engage stakeholders around specific topics, limited to direct answers and conversation with little opportunity to creatively develop outcomes

PAR

or "participatory action research" infers a continuous partnership with stakeholders – it is sometimes seen as a larger level of engagement than co-design, which is often project-based

There are a number of other approaches that are based on stakeholder engagement and employ similar methods. While definitions for each are not entirely agreed upon, below are some of the most commonly used terms. In comparing co-design to other types of engagement, it's important to recognise that co-design sits on a spectrum of approaches for working with stakeholders. While not as collaborative as co-design, these are still valid and valuable ways for partnering with stakeholders.

co-design

empowering

open design

is a movement that is centred on collaboration occurring through the use of publicly-shared design information, such as open-source software

co-creation

encompasses any act of collective creativity, and typically involves "one-off" events rather than ongoing collaborative partnerships

co-production

infers an ongoing and continuous partnership with stakeholders; it is sometimes seen as a larger level of engagement than co-design, which tends to be project-based

where did co-design come from?

While co-design is synonymous with innovation today, its foundations emerged decades ago. Co-design has been championed by people across the world in a range of contexts. This is a brief origin story, describing three snapshots in time.

60s - 70s

The origins of co-design have been linked to widespread moves, throughout the 1960s and 70s, to integrate community views and opinions into decision-making processes. Specific participatory design methods emerged in Scandinavia in the 1970s with the development of cooperative design, which came with unique techniques and approaches to engage stakeholders in design processes. Cooperative design was based on collective problem-solving, allowing workers to have input into the technology systems that they used every day.

80s - 90s

Following early success, the ideology and approach of designing with, not for, has continued into sectors such as education, health and software design through the 1980s and beyond. Methods like future workshops and low fidelity prototyping emerged during this era, promoting speculative and hands-on approaches to collaboration.

today

The benefits of this collaborative approach have been proven, and it has been applied to an array of organisations, industries and contexts. Today the process has evolved to be called “co-design”, and it continues to grow in scope and possibilities. Co-design projects now routinely engage multiple stakeholder groups in collaboration, including consumers, community members, staff, industry experts, potential users and policy-makers.

why do we co-design?

IT PRODUCES SOLUTIONS THAT ARE MORE LIKELY TO MEET USER'S NEEDS

it creates more sustainable solutions

it supports community buy-in and builds relationships

it allows for unforseen and unexpected needs and priorities to be met

IT CREATES AN ENVIRONMENT FOR ONGOING COLLABORATION

IT'S INCLUSIVE RATHER THAN TOP-DOWN

it supports organisations to build empathy

it promotes creativity and novel solutions

it leverages collective intelligence

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being a co-designer

Co-design is not just a collection of tools and methods, but an approach to collaboration that relies on shared values and mindsets. The following section steps into the mind of a co-designer, highlighting ***12 values*** and ***5 designer*** mindsets that underpin any successful co-design team.

values

Great co-design teams are built on shared values. We've found the following to be the most essential to creative collaboration.

respect

Co-design is built on a foundation of mutual respect: observing people's feelings and rights, and accepting them for who they are regardless of differences. Sometimes respect may be represented in co-design through payment for a participant's time. Respect also means acknowledging and recognising people's contributions.

valuing lived experience

A person's lived experience is just as important as an expert's knowledge and experience. Everyone is an expert on their own experience, and working with people with lived experience can be just as valuable as working with experts in a field.

equality

Equality means recognising the value of all knowledges and working together as equals for the common good. This may mean consciously breaking down traditional power relationships and hierarchies between different stakeholder groups. For example, in health, it may entail ensuring both clinical staff and those with lived experience of a health condition see each other as equal experts, with knowledge and skills that are complementary.

inclusiveness

The more diverse voices engaged in co-design, the richer and more productive the process will be. This means continually asking "who's missing?", including marginalised groups, and seeking diversity in relation to age, gender, socio-economic situation, cultural background and abilities. A co-design team should establish an environment where all feel truly welcome.

trusting relationships

Through embodying respect and promoting equality, co-design builds relationships based on trust, establishing a strong foundation for ongoing partnerships. Relationships are integral to a successful creative problem-solving process, increasing the openness of people and encouraging authenticity, honesty and vulnerability.

shared decision-making

Without sharing decisions and power within a project, there is no co-design. Letting go of control as a co-design team and allowing participants to be equal partners in the decision-making process is crucial to enacting the principle: "nothing about us, without us".

strength-based

Strength-based approaches focus on an individual's strengths, and not on their deficits or weaknesses. This means framing things from a positive perspective, viewing people as resilient, resourceful, and strong. Taking this approach throughout co-design supports the wellbeing of participants and creates an environment free of critique or judgement.

capacity building

A natural result of the co-design process is that participants are likely to feel an increased sense of creative confidence, while also learning about the topic being explored and the process of co-design itself. In this way, co-design can be mutually beneficial, assisting a co-design team in finding a solution while also equipping participants with new skills and knowledge and expanding their sense of self. Participants may go on to co-author research outcomes, become co-facilitators on subsequent projects, or even lead their own co-design teams.

everyone can be creative

Everyone can be a designer, and everyone can contribute meaningfully to solving problems that relate to themselves in innovative ways, given the right resources, tools and supports. This is the role of the co-designer: to create environments in which a participant's natural creativity can flourish.

playfulness

Cultivating a playful collaborative environment creates space for innovative and unexpected ideas to emerge. The design process can be intrinsically fun, exciting and exuberant, and even serious issues can be explored in playful ways. Play can emerge through the tone of the facilitator (upbeat and enthusiastic), the way the environment is created (in a relaxing, colourful and tactile space, considering elements like background music) and in the way activities are designed.

authentic collaboration

Co-design means making together and working towards a collective solution. Co-design methods should not be about relaying information but facilitating discovery and supporting active participation in the design process. An ethos of "designing together" should be core to project design, avoiding tokenism and superficial participation. Participants should be engaged authentically throughout all stages of a project, from ideation to implementation.

trauma-informed

Trauma-informed approaches prioritise wellbeing by acknowledging that many participants' lived experienced may involve traumatic events. People are then engaged in ways that consciously avoid upsetting or further traumatising them. There is an ethos of "do no harm" and this means ensuring people feel safe, promoting trust, providing transparency, offering support if needed and giving participants autonomy over their involvement at all times.

mindsets

This "designerly" mindset can come naturally to some, while for others it can be at odds with how you work and live. You don't need to be a designer to be a co-designer. However, making a conscious effort to embrace these mindsets – no matter how new and unfamiliar they may feel – will lead you to be more and more comfortable with co-design.

risk-taking and "flearning"

Co-design is an exploratory and iterative process, where we assume that nobody has all the answers. A co-designer needs to be comfortable taking risks, trying things out and seeing what emerges. Many of the best ideas emerge from failures, and knowing what *doesn't* work is crucial to creating a solution that *does* work. We call this "flearning": learning through failure. If you're not prepared to take risks and be wrong, you won't be in a position to innovate.

learning through doing

Co-design, first and foremost, involves action – it's a cycle of creating, evaluating and re-creating. It is not a process driven by talking, but actual doing. It typically involves hands-on designing at the start of the project then testing aspects on an ongoing basis. There should be an emphasis on creating tangible outcomes throughout the entire process, not simply conversations and sharing. This helps to move a project out of "planning paralysis" and ensures that participants play an active role in designing and prototyping solutions.

curiosity

Curiosity is key to navigating the co-design process, ensuring you are open-minded to different perspectives, opportunities and possibilities. The co-designer must be excited to discover new things, leading with a child-like, beginner's mindset that is free of pre-existing agendas, expectations, and prejudices. Curiosity disrupts outdated paradigms, creating space to uncover opportunities for innovation.

optimism

To steer a co-design project through messiness and ambiguity, the co-designer must be optimistic that a solution will emerge. This means trusting the process, courageously leading the team through each design phase, and inspiring trust in others. A "can do" attitude where 'anything is possible' is essential to leading a co-design team through what is likely a new way of approaching things.

embracing ambiguity

Co-design is inherently messy, complex and full of unknowns. You may have to navigate complex relationships between stakeholders, conflicting values and the ambiguity of not knowing what the outcomes of the process will be. A co-designer needs to be comfortable with the uncomfortable, sitting "in the grey" while insights emerge. Cultivating a mindset that's adaptive and responsive, rather than rigid, will allow your team to embrace the messiness as it comes.

In today's world, where we face countless complex challenges, co-design has emerged as a promising approach to inspire more impactful and innovative solutions. However, many people still struggle to understand what co-design really is and how to put it into practice.

The *Art of Co-Design* is a practical and comprehensive handbook that demystifies creative collaboration. It covers the core foundations of co-design, guiding readers through the process of planning a project and bringing it to life. It provides the ingredients to create respectful, equitable and trauma-informed co-design spaces, with tips to encourage curiosity, creative play and shared decision-making. Its extensive *A-Z of Methods* includes a wealth of spirited, subversive and surprising methods, perfect for inspiring novel solutions.

Whether you're a change-maker, leader, researcher, designer or just a little co-design-curious, if you're excited by the potential of co-design – this book is for you!

about the authors

Jeremy Kerr, Jessica Cheers, Danielle Gallegos, Alethea Blackler, and Nick Kelly are designers, researchers, authors and academics. They have collectively led over 50 major and multi-year co-design initiatives worldwide in sectors such as health, education, business, technology design, and social change.

The Art of Co-Design represents the culmination of the authors' creative research partnership, aiming to provide a definitive resource for learning and implementing co-design.

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