Design Heresy
The Problem of the Brief

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Abstract
This paper critically examines the concept and role of the design brief in design epistemology, highlighting its inherent limitations, while addressing the agency and challenges of 'unknowing' in Design. Traditionally seen as a contextualized issue to address, the design brief is often shaped by established norms and values, framing problems in ways that align with dominant societal groups. This framing encourages a positivistic approach and assumes that design should move towards a single 'right' solution for a better world. However, this perspective disregards the complexity and diversity of our contemporary world and overlooks how the brief is itself a normalizing process in design. We argue for an alternative understanding of the design brief as a political agent for embracing unknowing in design as a means to challenge the boundaries of accepted knowledge and to engage with the world's complexity.

Keywords
Design brief
Post-normative design
Plurality
Design epistemology
Design philosophy

What Is a Design Brief?

This was the question we were asked on the first day of a PhD Summer School in Design by a student introducing herself with a background in Economics. Initially, it sounded like a very pragmatic invitation to clarify the request for delivering specific content. Or, better, this was how we immediately interpreted it, being fully immersed in our role as faculty. Actually, the question led us to reflect on the conceptual and process ambiguity that the term 'design brief' has in design practice and how this connects to design's role as an agent of political change. In what follows, we offer a series of critical reflections on the dominant framing of the design brief, paying particular attention to its affordances while also underscoring where work still needs to be done, specifically on the nature of problem formation. Methodologically, this piece serves as a philosophical meditation on the brief as well as an invitation for its further development. If, at times, we take disciplinary and methodological liberties in our analyses, then this is an effort to move past certain well-worn divisions (e.g., between Design and Philosophy) and experiment with possibilities for imagining what the design brief could be — a genuine problematic — and even how it might function as a political intervention.

In the fields of Design, but not limited to them, the design brief is commonly intended as a statement whose form may vary from a sentence to a structured document, articulating a project's objectives, requirements, and constraints. It is the initial input of any design process framing the project's purpose, goals, and boundaries. There is no clear or univocal definition in the literature. In the applied context, from Product Design to Graphic Design, a design brief is referred to as a set of assumed specifications to be respected by an artifact that is expected to be designed (Jones & Askland, 2012; Meron, 2019). It reveals a strong problem-solving attitude, focusing on ('know-how') knowledge dimensions, where the design practice is intended as a mechanical action and its results 'right', 'finished', 'quantifiable', and 'measurable'.

In Strategic Design and its use of design thinking, the design brief is intended more generally as the definition of objectives set for a design-driven practice (Zurlo, n.d.). In Design Management, the focus is on considering the desires of all the stakeholders involved in the projects (Phillips, 2014), in particular, the client's perspective. In fact, a project's brief is the result of a briefing activity as a negotiation of preliminary knowledge and requirements between the designer and the client to build "a mutual understanding of what a project will be about" (Paton & Dorst, 2011, p. 575), and therefore identifying target user groups, expected outcomes, needed efforts and resources. As it includes insights from market analysis and stakeholder expectations, the design brief is oriented toward a problem-setting approach, aiming to drive the designer toward an anticipated and implied solution, acting at the 'know-what' knowledge level.

In Design Pedagogy, both in the academic context and executive education, and in the scholarly Design Research, a design brief is the description of a contextualized issue to be addressed. In particular, in a metadesign approach (Magnaghi, 1973; Van Onk, 1965; Manzini, 1990; Deserti, 2003; Collina, 2005), understood as "the design of the design process" (Deserti, 2003), the aims are clear:

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"[understand]the social and cultural issues in which the users' values, beliefs, and needs are rooted" (Celi & Colombi, 2020) in order to ground design practice in new meanings. This 'know-why' dimension leads to a problem-finding approach where the design practice can design open-ended problems, choosing the methodologies, tools, and resources as the context shows more appropriate. In this regard, there is a co-evolution of the problem and space (Maher et al., 1996), and their mutual fitting is constantly adjusted. Cross (1997) talks about a key concept that bridges problems and solutions. Schön (1983) refers to "problem framing": "In real-world practice, problems do not present themselves to the practitioner as givens. They must be constructed from the materials of problematic situations which are puzzling, troubling, and uncertain" (Schön, 1983, pp. 39-40). "A designer," Schön continues, "forms a representation of some initial design situation, framing a design problem that includes, when it is 'well formed,' elements from which to construct design options, a description of the situation in which options may be enacted as moves, and criteria sufficient to evaluate the effectiveness of proposed solutions" (Schön, 1983, p. 111).

However, while it serves as a kickstarter for both the design process and design research, the brief's role is not neutral. The very term 'problem', which we go on to discuss in more detail below, and is often used when referring to a brief, is critical. In the dominant discourses of Design, the use of the problem has clear, etymological connections to the Latin problēma, or 'proposed question' and even stronger connections to the ancient Greek, próblēma (πρόβλημα), or 'protrusion, promontory, obstacle' from the verb probállein (προβάλλειν) 'to throw or lay before'. Here, the problem is an obstacle placed between the will and the objective, making it difficult to reach the latter. The term implies a pre-existing issue waiting to be uncovered, identified, and solved by a designer. It suggests that the issue is an independent challenge that can be addressed on its own. Regardless, the term conveys a negative meaning, implying a positive role for the design practice in its ability to improve a situation.

In all the definitions, whether they focus on solutions, are oriented toward needs, or are rooted in accepted norms and institutionalized values, the design brief is biased toward this conception of the problem: namely as an obstacle to be overcome with design solutions. When the brief is used to frame the project's objective or define pre-identified requirements, it influences subsequent decisions and directions in ways that can shape, or even limit, the scope and possibilities of exploration as it implicitly prioritizes certain pathways while sidelining others that might hold significant potential. This approach limits designers' ability to engage in an open-ended investigation, which is particularly crucial in design research aimed at expanding knowledge through inquiry, experimentation, and reflection.

On the other hand, a need-oriented brief not only prevents Design from uncovering unmet or unknown needs but it also introduces a confirmation bias that guides the research process toward validating the initial assumptions or solving for a predetermined end. Instead of allowing space for unexpected insights, the design brief can impose a rigid framework based on normative beliefs and their institutionalization, the standardization of values, and the uncritical acceptance of rules. Designers are discouraged from questioning

initial assumptions or considering alternative perspectives. This is particularly problematic in the case of Design Research as a brief constructed around assumptions, stereotypes, and norms that reflect the biases of those in power reinforces the status quo rather than challenging it. The positivistic and monolithic approach to Design, which assumes there is one ideal and 'right' way forward, focuses on optimization and efficiency as defined by dominant groups to the exclusion of marginalized perspectives.

The recognition that there are other ways of framing and knowing problems and their possible solutions could not be more important than it is today. As the human species confronts an existential crisis that it is partly responsible for designing, and we come to terms with the fact that the solutionism driving technoscientific modernity will not solve this problem, then we require a multiplicity of ways of framing, understanding, and intervening in this problem. As we discuss below, the problem-solving mentality and the problem-finding one rooted in a single set of values has become a mechanism for maintaining political and cultural control. The uncertainty that characterizes the present, constituted by a multiplicity of actors, desires and concerns, calls for challenging deterministic knowledge systems and requires Design Research to interrogate the multidimensional present. The uncertainty we live in demands a certain kind of "unknowing" (Marenko, 2024), an epistemic position that allows us to loosen the normative hold of knowledge practices (e.g., the problem-solution dyad that's reinforced in the design brief), and opens up possibilities for other ways of knowing. Thus, if this proposal is connected to a more general attempt to decolonize knowledge practices (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013), then it's because we're interested in how 'know why' becomes 'know-other-whys' or, better, 'know-otherwise'.

Before turning to the specific role the design brief has in this context, it's useful to recall Winograd and Flores (1986) on the background and the problem. They state "[...] background is a pervasive and fundamental phenomenon. Background is the space of possibilities that allows us to listen to both what is spoken and what is unspoken. Meaning is created by an active listening, in which the linguistic form triggers interpretation, rather than conveying information. The background is not a set of propositions but is our basic orientation of 'care' for the world" (p. 57). And also "A 'problem' always arises for human beings in situations where they live — in other words, it arises in relation to a background. Different interpreters will see and talk about different problems requiring different tools, potential actions, and design solutions. In some cases, what is a problem for one person won't be a problem at all for someone else" (Winograd & Flores, 1986, p. 77). Similarly, we're interested in the myriad of ways in which a design brief, following Winograd and Flores' reasoning (1986, pp. 147-150), is oriented towards: (i) choosing from a range of possibilities outlined by the original framework, (ii) generating new possibilities and therefore altering the dimensions of the existing ones, (iii) redefining the framework and a new set of possibilities; and (iv) rejecting the initial framework. This constant and continuing adjusting and reframing perspective defines the design brief as a dynamic tool of ontological design as "a conversation about possibilities" (Escobar, 2018, p. 110) for design research and practice.

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The Post-normative Brief

Given historical and conceptual framing of the brief, what does it mean, specifically, for the brief to allow design to become an agent of plurality? If the brief involves 'choosing' from a range of possibilities, which then enables the proliferation of other possibilities and even new frameworks altogether (Winograd & Flores), then the act of selecting and choosing cannot be taken for granted. Or in other words, we need to investigate how the problem is generated in the first place.

Of course, in the last several decades there has been no shortage of research on problems that do not have pre-determined solutions. These are the so-called "wicked problems" (climate change, poverty, hunger, etc.) that are too complex to be eliminated and so demand effective management (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Here, the emphasis is on making quantifiable progress toward managing the complexity of problems by taming their "wickedness" (Reinecke, 2016). While we're in full agreement that these problems are some of the most pressing concerns today, we also think that there's been too little attention in Design concerning the very nature of problems that don't go away. Do they have certain characteristics? Have they always been there or are they created? In other words, what are the ontological parameters of the problem? And how might this understanding contribute to reframing the problem in/of the design brief?

The French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, argues that genuine problems are paradoxical: on the one hand, they don't go away with solutions, but on the other hand, they don't come readymade or pre-formed either. Problems are there, as horizons, but nevertheless need to be constructed *as* horizons. Deleuze contends that problem formation is itself a creative practice, a technê, with political and ethical stakes. He famously characterizes the "problematic" in Difference and Repetition (1994 [1968]) as something that is not pre-given and that cannot be taken as an object of positive knowledge. This is because the problem transforms depending on who articulates it and to whom it's addressed. Consequently, the problematic is not one thing but is rather a field of strains and pressures whose ontological structure is inherently multiple (a multiplicity), since it changes based on how it's framed. The problem is therefore different depending on whether it's articulated by an architect, an artist, or a philosopher. This is not a "problem" to be overcome — via some grand, unifying gesture — but it rather expresses the fact that the problem is a dynamic field that resists epistemological certainty (Deleuze, 1994, pp. 162-165).

But because there's no shared or unified conception of the problem, there's also no single horizon for solving it. By crafting a problem in a brief, a set of possible solutions become available. It's in this way that the problem is itself generative: it creates the conditions under which we can imagine solutions. Problems are not just created then — they're creative. Solutions thus depend upon problems for their formation. In their last co-authored book, What is Philosophy? (1994 [1991]), Deleuze and Félix Guattari write just this: "A solution has no meaning independently of a problem to be determined in its conditions and unknowns" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 81). Hence, the solutions available are only as good or as interesting as the

problems that condition them. But then, in the following sentence, they write, “but these conditions and unknowns have no meaning independently of solutions” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 81). It’s not simply that the problem articulates the horizon for solutions, but solutions transform the very nature of the problem. For them, this means that problems and solutions dynamically evolve through reciprocal determination (see Deleuze, 1994, pp. 157-167).

For us, however, this dynamism suggests that the design brief needs to be created in such a way that the problematic is transformed by means of its own solutions. More than this, it means the brief’s own problem (its original formulation) is understood as having been conditioned and determined by a field of prior solutions. The brief did not take shape ex nihilo — it has a history that shaped its own formation. Thus, the ‘act’ of crafting a problem in a brief is relational and done against a much wider and complex backdrop of historical and political conditions. For example, the fact that the design brief has, historically, been understood as solution-oriented precipitated the emergence of other briefs — as problem solving, etc. This history has led to the normalization of the design brief as a problem-solving mechanism that shapes the remit of Design. Our suggestion is that the dynamically evolving brief works against this normalization.

Following Georges Canguilhem’s work on normalization and normality (Canguilhem, 1974), Michel Foucault argues that normalization is inherently political. This is because normalization concerns the subtle operations of power that foreclose other possibilities for relating to a model or standard. These standards are the “norms” constructed by various regimes of power (sovereign, disciplinary, biopolitical, etc.), which determine the adequacy of various actions for reproducing power dynamics. Now, Foucault’s own ideas about the norm developed throughout his career, evolving from Discipline and Punish (1977 [1975]) to his lecture course Security, Territory, Population (2007 [1977-78]). But by the time he delivers his lecture course in 1977 and 1978, he’s working simultaneously with the notions of the norm and normalization, and there’s considerable debate in the Foucault scholarship about how these terms operate. Generally, however, normalization concerns how bodies and populations come to adhere to the norm. Here’s Foucault: “normalization consists in trying to get people, movements, and actions to conform to this model, the normal being precisely that which can conform to this norm, and the abnormal that which is incapable of conforming to the norm” (Foucault, 2007, p. 58).

If there’s confusion in Foucault’s text, it generally concerns the introduction of a third term, “normation”, to describe how disciplinary techniques are used to get bodies to conform to a norm, as opposed to the normalization that occurs in biopower specifically. However, a closer look at Foucault’s late lectures reveals that the norm is crucial for legitimizing modern power relations, and normalization and normation function similarly insofar as that they are what “make normal” (Taylor, 2009, p. 52). In other words, normalization (and normation, which Foucault never really develops) is characterized by those techniques (dispositifs) that “get people, movements, and actions to conform”, and thus, what is “normal,” is whatever is able to conform to the norm. It’s precisely this conformity that repro-

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duces power relations — their circulation and intensification — and allows them to become "sedimented" into a society. Sedimentation via techniques of normalization is ultimately what leads to the "naturalization" of norms and their acceptance as the basis for determining what is abnormal and hence unnatural in a society (Taylor, 2009).

Returning to the design brief, not only does it articulate the problem for design to solve, but it also sets the boundaries for what does and does not count as an acceptable response to it. It's in this sense that the brief is itself a technology that reinforces certain standards or norms in the Foucauldian sense. For instance, conceived as a device that maps solvable problems, the brief becomes an effective technique or dispositif of political and economic regimes where power is extended and intensified through scalable solutions (hence, the asymmetries of capital that flow into engineering fields that solve problems instead of the humanities or even the fundamental sciences that pose them). In these spaces, the brief also serves to normalize the role of Design: a set of methods, often emptied of content, that can be repurposed for solving problems in any domain—from plummeting retail sales to the loss of biodiversity in wetlands. The widely held assumption that Design is in the business of problem-solving, and that students should be designing methods for solving problems instead of designing generative questions, is evidence of successful normalization. Practices that fall outside of this remit, and that don't have a clear brief for solving a problem, are marginalized or seen as mere art, and are certainly not Design qua science of problem solving (Simon, 1968).

The brief, then, is a technique for normalizing this so-called 'science' of problem solving: it articulates where and toward what designers should be directing their attention, namely toward solutions that can eliminate the problem (as an obstacle). And this technique has itself undergone normalization; this is so much the case that to venture that the design brief does anything but this risks being charged with design heresy. But that's precisely what we aim for: a brief that generates problems, that enhances them, and vivifies them. And perhaps most provocatively, we argue that the brief has neither a beginning nor an ending: it's dynamic and evolving. The problems a brief formulates have their own history, they're shaped by briefs that came before them, and they are in some sense a response to this history; and yet, the brief generates solutions that change the nature of the brief's problem. In this heretical version of a brief, the solution is never an end point, but always in the middle of things, between what it's conditioned by and what it conditions, namely problems that change over time.

For example, in Spring 2024, we taught a PhD Studio on normativity and post-normativity in Design at the Politecnico di Milano. The brief was crafted so that, after a series of seminars on normativity in philosophy and design, students were tasked with (i) researching the formation of a norm (the political history of its production, how it materializes, what it does exactly, etc.), and then (ii) redirecting the norm. Essentially, by treating a norm and its normalization as 'material' for design research, students could expose the norm's artificiality (that it was produced, not given), and then begin the process of denaturalizing it — or artificializing the norm. What the researchers quickly realized, however, is that the content of the brief

(the critique and redirection of normalization) was in direct conflict with the form of the brief, namely a normalized technique in Design. Consequently, the design 'solutions' all ended up taking the naturalization/normalization of the brief itself as their content, thereby redesigning the problem of the brief.

Of course, this is but one example from a design studio where the problem fundamentally transforms by means of the solutions it generates. Still, and more significantly for us, this experience also serves as a lure for further research on the nature and scope of briefing in design pedagogy. While this research has yet to be formally conducted, the ingredients for its development are beginning to take shape from these preliminary observations. And in this context, we want to underscore that by re-problematizing one's own starting place via solutions, Design comes to learn that the problem was never fully grasped. And this is what the brief can potentially do for Design: orient Design toward its continued problematization. Another way of putting this would be that design epistemology doesn't stop being a pedagogy. This is because Design is continually learning about other ways a problem might become relevant, and that solutions are only ever further differentiations of the problem[1]. This is also what Deleuze insists: we need a pedagogy of the problematic (Deleuze, 1994, p. 165). And this is perhaps nowhere more needed than in Design and the technicities that normalize it. The philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers (2023) insists that we have to resist the temptation to know in advance how a problem is or will become meaningful to a community, a population, an ecosystem. Which is to say that we are not authorized to disqualify the potentials for a situation to make sense to others (Nocek, 2018). But this is precisely what the brief has historically done: turn the problem into an obstacle rather than an opportunity for learning about how design solutions come to have radically divergent meanings—an efficient solution for one, is a devastating problem for another. The fact is, design solutions enrich our understanding of tensions and contradictions that animate a problematic field, but they do not eliminate it.

It's in this sense that the brief can function as a political tool: it can be a technique for opening Design up to the forms of pluralism foreclosed under extant regimes of technocratic management and solutionism. But as it stands, the brief plays right into the hands of these power dynamics, enabling Design not only to benefit from this system but to also grease its wheels—ensuring that it's squarely focused on innovative solutions at all scales. What we're proposing instead is that the brief functions as a form of resistance, or even a mode "counter-conduct" (Foucault, 2007, pp. 200-203), because it's immanent to the dominant systems of power. It's precisely insofar as the brief is one of Design's most powerful techniques of normalization that it's also primed to redirect it at the same time, to participate in the "struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others" (Foucault, 2007, p. 201). To conceive the brief as a problematizing technique not only counters the brief's normalization, but it also opens the possibility of Design becoming a genuine pluralizing agent.

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We want to note here that there are countless examples from design research where learning, unlearning, and relearning are inherent to the research practice. See Madina Tlostanova (2017) arguing that design should not be seen merely as a problem-solving tool but as a fundamental ontological force that shapes human experience, subjectivity, and the environments we inhabit. Also see Daniela Rosner (2020) on design functioning as a critically fabulating activity that needs to be responsive to and responsible for its pluralizing.

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Counter-briefing

By problematizing the very notion of the design brief, in particular the presumption that it maps a problem as a fixed and solvable entity, Design becomes an agent of unknowing that resists converging toward an outcome. So conceived, the brief makes continuous questioning and reframing possible, not only of the assumed starting point but also of the norms that allow us to understand the problem in the first place. In this way the design process serves to reveal the underlying tensions and contradictions that lead to new insights; and in doing so, the process sheds light on the various contexts set aside, ignored, or explained away due to the normalization of Design as a problem solver.

As we've argued throughout, the brief is a normalizing technique, and by questioning/problematizing its own operations new possibilities become imaginable for Design. Hence, 'knowing other-whys' in Design become possible through exploring the 'what-ifs' —what if the brief were conceived otherwise? What if the brief were directed toward problem exploration and reformulation and not solutions? What if...? Under such conditions, would Design be capable of opening itself up to the multiplicity of ways that a problem can be grasped and determined? Would this not also mean that Design actively promotes instead of forecloses the possibilities for a situation to matter, to be meaningful. It's precisely this proliferation of knowledges and meanings that do not stop re-problematizing solutions.

In any case, the proposal is that this iterative, exploratory approach, which involves uncovering the overlooked dimensions of complex and evolving problems, can become a transformative model for learning. The design process is not simply a means to reach correct or finite solutions; rather, it is an ongoing inquiry that pushes designers to always be learners (epistemology is pedagogy). Here, the design brief is not a rigid blueprint but a flexible guide; and instead of only encouraging designers to research through design to produce new knowledge (Frayling, 1993), the brief also primes them to design a research process that deconstructs the a priori foundations of knowledge. This does not mean giving up on designerly ways of knowing (Cross, 2001), but it means enriching them through the destabilization of Design's own epistemic certainty.

In Design Research, this approach challenges traditional methodologies by positioning solutions as critical tools for further investigation rather than definitive conclusions. Each design outcome fosters a deeper understanding of the problem at hand, prompting questions that drive further inquiry. This epistemological stance — a continual learning process rooted in questioning and reflection — establishes design research as a unique field that values process as much as product, challenging the static conceptions of knowledge and the idea that research builds on the top of previous knowledge, advancing it.

In this light, the agency of design is characterized by its capacity to transform our understanding of problems through a process of continuous problematization that challenges the dynamics of power that normalize values, concepts, behaviors, and situations. This normalization extends to Design itself, as well as technologies, like the brief, that turn the practice into an instrument of the dom-

inant systems of power. As a consequence, the responsibility of Design lies not in its ability to solve problems and build better futures (Rosner, 2020; Mitrovic et. al., 2021), but in being accountable to the pluralism that it fosters in the present. This accountability opens the space for ethics within design problematization, something that requires new modes of ethical engagement and evaluation in Design. Even if this is not the space to raise the question of ethics, it's nonetheless a consequence of the conception of Design we're putting forward. In the end, however, what we're suggesting is that to imagine such a role for Design requires a new architecture of the brief. While this architecture may sound heretical to some — what's to become of Design if it doesn't aim at solving problems? — such heresy is the only way to resurrect a field buried by the strategic political and economic logics of optimization.

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