Essay II · Publications

Design as Possibility

A Philosophy of Organizational Architecture

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ABSTRACT

This essay sets out the design logic behind Division Group's transformation work. It argues that organizational transformation is not only an execution challenge but a design problem: the problem of giving change a form capable of carrying it under real conditions. Drawing on Managing as Designing and related organizational literature, the essay treats design not as an aesthetic layer added to change, but as a strategic discipline for shaping the architecture through which governance, coordination, sequencing, and implementation become coherent in practice. In Division Group's work, this takes the form of developing and leading transformation models for complex programs. While aspects of the client organization may become subjects of design in particular mandates, the primary concern here is the architecture of the change effort itself.

Introduction

A recurring problem in organizational transformation is that strategic ambition exceeds the architecture available to carry it. Programs are launched with urgency, but the conditions required to make them work — governance, sequencing, coordination, and decision-making — remain weakly formed. The result is change that is declared but not designed: rollout without structure, communication without traction, strategy without a coherent means of execution.[3] [7]

One symptom is especially telling. When transformation efforts encounter sustained resistance, the first diagnosis is often a failure of communication: the case for change was not explained well enough, buy-in was insufficient, or the culture proved resistant. Sometimes that is true, but resistance is also a design signal. It may indicate that the program's visible structure has

drifted away from the priorities, constraints, and working realities of the people expected to carry it. Formal structures may appear coherent while failing to hold in practice. These are not merely persuasion problems, but failures of architecture. A design perspective treats them as structural problems to be worked on directly, rather than as symptoms to be managed through more messaging.

This essay argues that transformation should be understood not only as a managerial or operational challenge, but as a design problem. The argument draws on the central insight of Managing as Designing: that management under conditions of uncertainty is not only a matter of selecting from existing options, but of creating forms capable of supporting action.[1] At Division Group, that insight informs how transformation is framed and led.

The claim needs to be stated precisely. The primary design object in this essay is neither the client organization in its entirety nor the temporary arrangement of a live program in isolation. It is the architecture of change itself: the transformation model through which a certain class of complex programs is governed, interpreted, coordinated, and carried into implementation.

Where assignments extend further into the client organization's structure, that extension follows from this foundation.

This essay should therefore be read as a practitioner position paper grounded in organizational and design literature. Its purpose is not to offer a comprehensive academic review, but to clarify the conceptual basis of Division Group's design philosophy in transformation work.

Design as Invention and Transformation Architecture

Boland and Collopy distinguish a design attitude from a conventional decision attitude. The latter is concerned with analysis, selection, and optimization among existing options. The former is concerned with invention: the disciplined creation of forms suited to conditions that established routines cannot adequately meet.[1]

The concept of wicked problems helps explain why. Buchanan, drawing on design theory, identifies a class of problems that cannot be fully specified in

advance, where each attempt at a solution changes the nature of the problem itself, and where there is no definitive test of whether a solution has worked.[3] Organizational transformation exhibits precisely these characteristics. Its conditions shift as it proceeds. Its human and structural dimensions interact in ways that resist prediction. The decision attitude — built for problems that can be bounded, analyzed, and optimized — is structurally unsuited to problems of this kind. It does not fail through poor execution. It fails because the problem exceeds its design.

This distinction matters directly in transformation work. Many change efforts falter not because effort is absent, but because managerial habits inherited from stable contexts are treated as sufficient for situations they were never built to handle. The decision attitude is not wrong in itself; it works well when options are known, constraints are stable, and execution is routine. Transformation is none of those things. Leaders respond by tightening plans, revising reporting lines, or increasing communication, while the architecture through which change must move remains weak, fragmented, or improvised. Governance lacks clarity, interfaces shift, decisions stall, and accountability diffuses. The result is activity without traction.[4 7]

Division Group's approach begins from this position. Transformation is not treated simply as a set of tasks to administer, but as a process that must be deliberately given form. Design, in this context, does not mean novelty for its own sake. It means giving workable form to complexity: building arrangements coherent enough to guide action, flexible enough to absorb uncertainty, and robust enough to sustain progress over time.[3 4]

But workable form is not only a structural achievement. It is also an experiential one.

Design as Emotional Architecture

Consider a steering committee that formally holds transformation authority. Its mandate is documented. Its membership is senior. Yet in practice its decisions are repeatedly qualified, reopened, or displaced through informal channels elsewhere in the leadership hierarchy.

Program teams notice the pattern quickly. The formal structure says one thing; the actual distribution of authority says another. Attendance becomes procedural. Preparation deteriorates. The committee still meets, but it no longer governs.

This is an emotional architecture failure before it is a governance failure. The mechanism remains in place, but the experience of using it has lost credibility. The problem is not uncertainty about who decides, but that the structure, through its own operation, teaches participants not to trust it. Once one central mechanism is exposed as merely formal, doubt spreads outward: what else in the program carries authority on paper but not in fact?

What Division Group calls emotional architecture is an interpretive term for the deliberate shaping of program structures, rituals, and decision environments so that transformation becomes intelligible and credible to the people expected to work within it. The concept draws on Weick's account of sensemaking and on Schein's treatment of culture as embedded in organizational structures and practices. In that sense, transformation structures carry symbolic as well as functional consequences. They shape not only how work is organized, but also how legitimacy is signaled, how trust in the program is reinforced or undermined, and how values become visible — or disappear — in practice.[5] [6]

Programs are not encountered only through governance documents, milestones, and reporting lines, but also through rhythm, atmosphere, symbolism, and the felt quality of authority. A steering mechanism communicates more than who decides; it communicates whether decisions will hold. A meeting design communicates more than how coordination occurs; it communicates whether contribution matters. A transition process communicates more than that change is under way; it communicates whether the program understands what it is asking of the people involved.[5] [6]

This emphasis is consistent with the broader architectural sensibility reflected in Gehry's contribution to Managing as Designing. Form is never merely surface, but a response to complexity, ambiguity, and human use. In transformation work, that means the structures carrying change must be designed not only for operational soundness, but for experiential credibility: they must make the program intelligible, serious, and usable to those expected to act within it.[2] [5] [6]

Recognizing that is necessary, but not sufficient. The question that follows is how a program detects and corrects those failures before they compound — which requires something beyond structural design. It requires a method.

Design as Inquiry and Iteration

Transformation cannot be designed well through formula alone. It requires disciplined inquiry: the ability to frame problems accurately, surface assumptions, test emerging arrangements, and revise them in light of what the program reveals. In that sense, Division Group's approach is iterative rather than prescriptive.[3]

The point is not to begin from certainty, but to make assumptions visible and expose them to examination. In transformation work, that has a practical meaning. A governance model is not just an organizational diagram, but a designed arrangement of roles, interfaces, decision rights, and escalation pathways that makes specific claims about how the work will hold under implementation pressure.[4]

Those claims are testable. Once a program is live, they are tested by use: whether decisions are taken at the intended level, whether coordination mechanisms hold or are bypassed, and whether escalation exposes structural gaps the original design failed to anticipate. Iteration, in this context, is not flexibility treated as a virtue in the abstract, but the disciplined adjustment of program architecture in response to what the work itself discloses — treating governance arrangements as claims to be tested rather than structures to be defended.

In Division Group's practice, that means working through governance artifacts — decision structures, governance frameworks, escalation pathways, role clarifications, and cross-functional coordination mechanisms — not as ends in themselves, but as devices for making the transformation model discussable, testable, and revisable under live conditions. Their value lies in forcing assumptions into view before they harden into failure. They give abstract intent operational form and make it possible to review, strengthen, or amend that form before the program pays more heavily for its weaknesses.

This is also where the model-building ambition becomes clearer. The aim is not only to lead a single program well, but to develop a more durable

transformation model for a certain class of high-stakes change efforts, one that can inform future programs facing similar conditions of complexity.

Designing for Credibility and Movement

> *Consider a steering committee that holds. Its decisions are taken at the level where authority is formally located, and they remain taken. Program teams bring material prepared to be tested, not defended. Escalation routes are used because they resolve rather than defer. Over time, attendance becomes substantive rather than procedural, because participants have learned through experience that the forum does what it says it does.*

This is not only a governance achievement, but a design achievement. The forum works not merely because its mandate is clearly written, but because its operation — the rhythm of its meetings, the quality of the decisions it produces, and the consistency between what it signals and what it delivers — has been shaped to reinforce its own authority. Participants do not need to be told the committee matters; they can feel that it does.[5] [6]

That alignment between a structure's declared purpose and its experienced reality is what makes movement possible. When participants find a transformation's logic coherent and its mechanisms genuinely enabling rather than merely formal, the program acquires momentum that governance documents alone cannot produce. People contribute more fully when they trust that contribution will reach somewhere. They carry the program's logic outward when they experience it as their own.

Designing for meaning, in this sense, is designing for that alignment: shaping forums, coordination routines, and transition mechanisms so that the program remains coherent in use. The result is not harmony or the absence of difficulty, but a structure in which the work of transformation remains intelligible and the effort it demands feels directed rather than dispersed.[5] [6]

Conclusion: Shaping the Architecture of Change

To treat transformation as design is to recognize that change is carried not only by plans, but by form. Leadership is expressed not only in making decisions, but also in shaping the architectures through which collective action becomes possible.

That realization carries a specific implication for transformation leadership. If the architecture of change is where strategic intent becomes executable or fails, then shaping that architecture cannot be treated as a purely technical matter to be delegated. It remains a core leadership responsibility. The executive who commissions transformation but disengages from its architecture leaves unaddressed the very conditions on which execution depends. To lead transformation well is therefore to take responsibility not only for what change is intended to achieve, but for the form through which that intent must travel.

That, in this essay, is what design as possibility means: not novelty for its own sake, but the deliberate construction of an architecture capable of carrying change under real conditions. Communication can be intensified, timelines compressed, and leadership visibility increased, yet programs still fracture when the underlying architecture is too weak to bear the demands placed upon it. The transformation model is Division Group's practical response to that problem: a repeatable, transferable architecture for a certain class of high-stakes change programs, grounded in the proposition that what makes transformation credible, workable, and durable is not only intention or effort, but form.

KEYWORDS

design attitude · organizational architecture · architecture of change · transformation model · emotional architecture · program governance · experiential credibility · design inquiry · Managing as Designing · organizational transformation

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