



Johan Hjerpe: FANTASTIC PERSPECTIVE

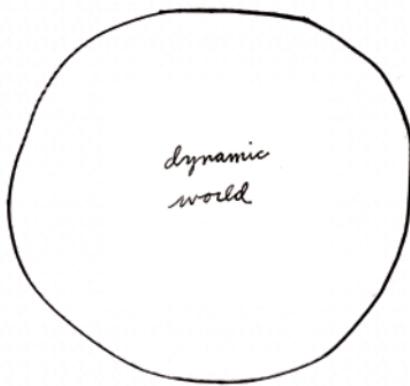
Johan Hjerpe is a designer and organizational thinker based in Stockholm, Sweden. This outline is an early version of a tool developed through a larger effort by a group of people from different fields working together to effect systemic change, who are collectively known as the Fantastic Society.

Cover: The dynamic world.

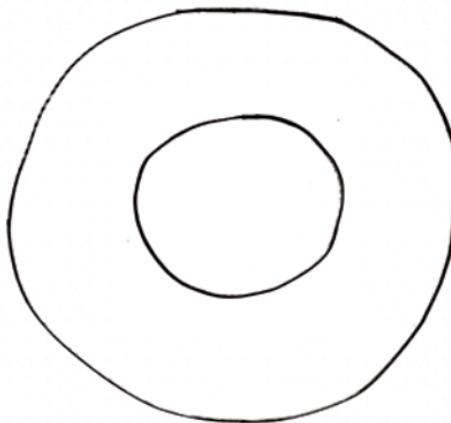
When embarking on a project designed to make some kind of change in society, however large or small, we are aiming to generate and insert something within a complex soup of actors and relations, wills and powers, beliefs and daily routines, age-old institutions and nascent structures—all of which we commonly refer to as “everyday life.”

It is often easy to spot malfunctions in the way things are organized, but when something is clearly wrong and seems to require correction, this may also mean we’re not seeing the full picture. A simple fix would likely set off a chain reaction of losses for the current benefactors of status quo; and while loss might serve them right, anyone wanting to produce deep and meaningful outcomes shouldn’t pay much heed to the concept of “losing.” Considering things in terms of winners, losers, take-overs, vengeance, etc., only serves to perpetuate a state of permanent volatility that produces little beyond a terminal power game.

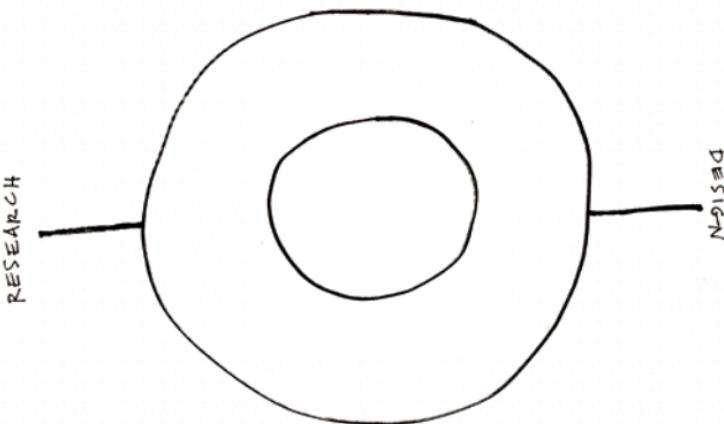
Let’s sketch a model designed to alter the structure of social coexistence in the long term. We begin with our primordial state: the dynamic world unfolding in real time.



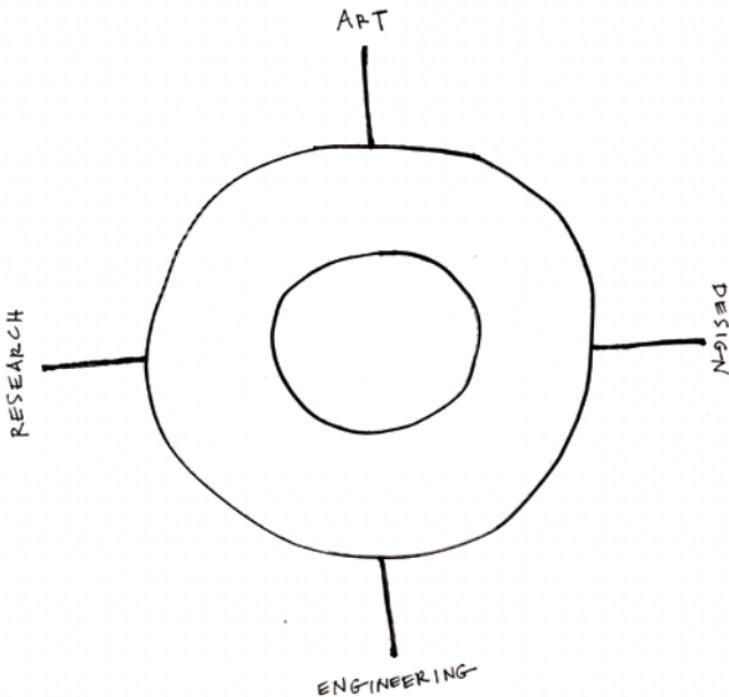
Next, draw a circle at the center. This is the project space. Think of it as a place for reprieve from quotidian busy-ness. We are here to observe the dynamic world from the inside, to discover patterns and propose changes before reemerging into the flow.



Now add a horizontal axis that spans two poles. For the purposes of this example let's start with RESEARCH and DESIGN. Research refers to any kind of information gathered along the way that we might deem useful. Design refers to the activity of shaping something for use within a given human culture, such as a lump of clay pressed into the shape of a mug for a Japanese tea ceremony. This definition is loose enough to embrace graphic design, industrial design, service design, architectural design, and so on. All involve both cognitive and physical processes.



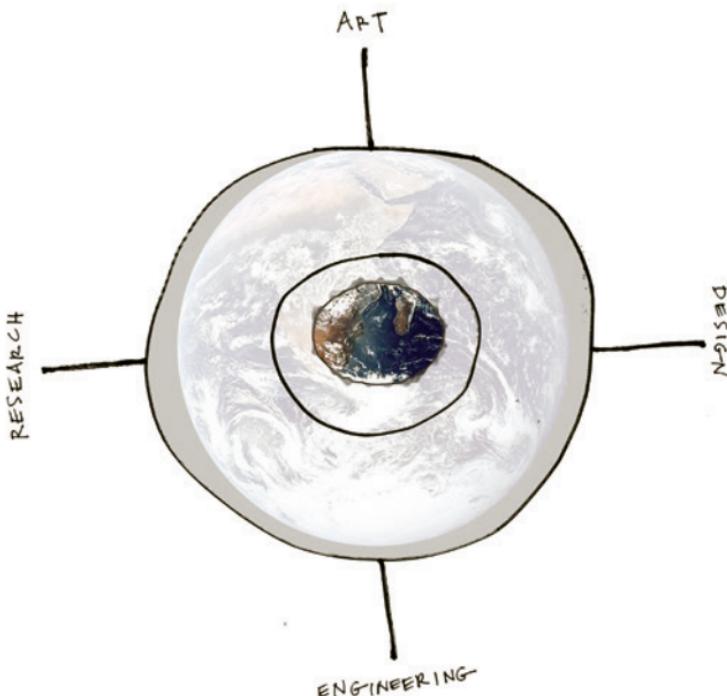
At the bottom of a vertical axis, add ENGINEERING to cover both technical ability and craft skill. This pole draws knowledge about energy and mass from research, and knowledge about humans and societies from design. It might be articulated in the form of drawings and plans, or reside in the latent intelligence of an experienced hand. Keep in mind that no pole is discrete: “applied research,” for instance, sits somewhere between engineering and research, and “technical development” somewhere between engineering and design. Engineering is the realm where policy is structured and enacted. Once we define a target, it aims to propel us there as expediently as possible.



Due north from engineering we locate ART. This is where the aims of engineering are put into question. It's the spanner in the works—a place to strive for transcendence, certainly, but also where humanity is captured in all its beauty and ugliness, humor and despair. Here we

compose stories of diversion, resistance, critical awareness, and with any luck the disruptive spanner might morph into a useful cog. Art affords the project a certain *spirit* of making and doing.

By their own particular ways and means, all four disciplines are trying to approach the dynamic world exterior to their native character, but each typically moves instead towards the EDGE of the project space, towards the furthest reaches of their practice—into specialization and hence AWAY from the other domains. Paradoxically, then, this common interest in the dynamic world is precisely what pulls the project apart.



To counter this unsatisfactory situation we now *pierce* the project space. This hole is a lens through which we see the dynamic world as made visible in myriad representations: words and pictures, statistics,

and other models. Like the recollection of a dream or a face fleetingly observed, the vision seems clear until you attempt to hone in on the details, or, if you focus instead on a specific detail the surroundings become blurred.

While a fully detailed view is beyond our capacity, and this may be frustrating, the lens is our portal for exchange. The world is full of structures and artifacts that were once prospective projects themselves. They are present in physical and mental space, and thus part of the way we move and think. On our side of the lens sit the project's participants, and during its course this view is their "everyday life"; the full complexity and messiness of the dynamic world is present right there at the center of the endeavor. Our embodied, real time experience works in tandem with the representations of the dynamic world; it provides us with the tacit insight gained through awareness and introspection. And when a participant senses that something doesn't resonate, this sense often points to a lack of precision in the ideas being produced, or a dimension thus far omitted from the project's development.

All this exchange and reflection results in a general gravitation towards the center of the project space. Since it is conceived as a place for encountering others, the center holds knowledge about social dynamics and power. It is the home of POLITICS. To withdraw from a perspective we are accustomed to—and therefore to some extent blind to—is not easy. How might the model help us to shift our vantage within the project space?

Say our goal is to consider ways of organizing production other than through employment and paid labor. Let's consider an example from Dougal Hine, who departs from a position in the project space somewhere between politics, design, and social engineering via historical research. In his essay "A Five Hundred Year Moment?" (2014), Hine takes us to medieval Florence. A rich cloth merchant instructs that upon his death his fortune should be distributed among the city's least fortunate, specifically "the orphans, the widows, anyone who had been the victim of a recent act of God (in other words, a serious injury or illness), the heads of family totally dependent on wage

work, and those compelled to pay rent in order to have somewhere to sleep.”

Note the last two types. A steady job that afforded the luxury of rented accommodation, though eminently desirable today, was once considered a misfortune on par with a serious illness! Tracing how we got from then to now, Hines discovers that working day in day out as the permanent employee of a company only became a desirable fate over many generations of social change.

In the late 1700s, certain commentators made the case for putting children under work-like conditions from an age as young as four in order to habituate them to constant employment. In this same vein, mass education was designed to help acclimate society to the notion of an industrial workforce. In short, only 300 years ago it was quite normal to have an entirely different—even wholly opposite—conception of the status of permanent employment. And so we return back through the hole of our project space with the benefit of Hine’s shifted vantage, less immersed in our own condition and newly equipped with insights about another order, along with the thinking that gave rise to it.

Any project is in danger of perceptive limitation. The more narrowly focused on a specific goal, the less capable the participants are of a broader, more systemic worldview—such as an architectural project that explicitly seeks the status of an iconic building, and in so doing likely ignores, or at least relegates, its social consequences.

These active forces in the dynamic world are not only something the project “encounters”; they reside equally **WITHIN** the project itself. Consider an experimental cultural project subsidized by some form of top-down funding body. Consciously or not, the project’s participants are likely to second-guess whatever might please or displease whom-ever’s finger is on the kill switch—which then already inhibits and limits the process and its potential outcome.

It is simply not possible to be aware of every dynamic at play, not least because once a project is underway its very existence will (and ought to)

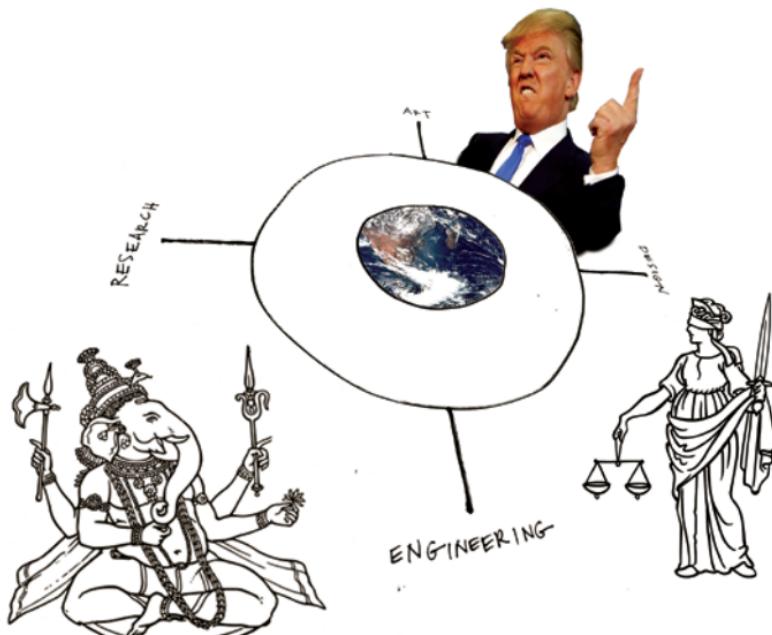
alter the dynamic into which it has pitched itself. It initiates a process of call and response that implies constant recalibration. Imagine the creation of a new healthcare system. Financing is set, and likewise a plan for political adaptation; subsystems are included in the design and adjacent ones taken into account; feedback loops are in place. People from all walks of life have been asked about their health issues and what they expect from the new arrangement. Possible loopholes, ways of cheating the system, and deterrents to these are incorporated into the plan ...

And yet, without having encountered an account like Leslie Jamison's essay "The Empathy Exams" (2014) during an excursion to the art pole, the whole construct might overlook some of less patent difficulties in attempting to institutionalize empathy. Jamison draws on her unique perspective gained while working as a "medical actor," which involves assuming the characteristics of specific conditions for med students to diagnose, as well as her own personal experiences of institutional care. And it is precisely the contrast between the carefully constructed fiction designed to teach doctor-patient psychology, and her all-too-real mental journey during an abortion and a heart surgery, that makes for a devastatingly sharp account of the difficulties involved in educating empathy. Again, the ability to move across wildly contrasting positions in the project space proves crucial.

Now we invite to the project space a number of imaginary observers: Athena, followed by Aphrodite, Hephaestus, Persephone, and other Greek gods. Should it suit the project better, invite Hindu ones. They are here to guard the project's depth, breadth, and longevity. If our four stated positions of research, design, engineering, and art guarantee multiple dimensions, and our central lens allows us to take in worldly dynamics, then the gods make sure we don't forget to add mortality, pride, sexuality, impulse, and other eminently human attributes into the mix.

We could use the model to anticipate the potential influence on our project of human desires channeled through the framework of nationalism, a proven and powerful strategy very tempting to political actors. An effective nationalist movement can result in a bump in popularity for

a given nationalist group, but will also inspire a rise in nationalism generally. In this respect, the gods are currently providing in line with a millennia-old framework of human nature, but history instructs that we should beware of development projects promising bright futures while rallying dark impulses. Might the tools of systems designers, like our model, be useful for counteracting this trend? For example, by building a positive solution that nevertheless makes room for dark impulses, one might proactively incorporate an inalienable part of human nature, rather than abandon it to exploitation by less-balanced actors.



As systems thinker Donella Meadows points out, systems typically won't distinguish between the long-term and the short-term. A decision made today might overthrow everything immediately, while those from previous generations are still affecting us. Previous knowledge is embedded in the tools we use, extending our capabilities far beyond our physical constraints. We inhabit the structures of previous projects,

and though these deserve our appreciation, the sheer momentum of this vast accumulation also makes it difficult for any individual project to shift the overall direction of historical activity. When a new movement expresses its anguish that “the world is against us,” it is in this sense quite true. *Pivotal moments* are rare occasions of discernible change despite far longer periods of converging events, like an earthquake that suddenly shifts tectonic plates.

The further we withdraw from the real time, dynamic world at the outset, the longer the journey back will be.

In sum: we are simultaneously trying to generate *difference* (the impact of the project) and *integration* (the way the project fits into the world) in a single act. The project must interact intensively with its surroundings in order to socialize itself, or otherwise socialize its surroundings according to the new vision. This activity is nothing less than an attempt to impose the fantastic onto the world as we know it.

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