

# I.D.

## 40 Transformative Design Projects And the people behind them\*



\* Like the Dutch design laboratory  
> [Job # 05450478.02](#)  
Supermaker, page 60

Reviewed by Ernest Beck

# Deep Thoughts The contemporary vogue for design thinking ratchets up to new heights.

CHANGE BY DESIGN: HOW DESIGN THINKING TRANSFORMS ORGANIZATIONS AND INSPIRES INNOVATION

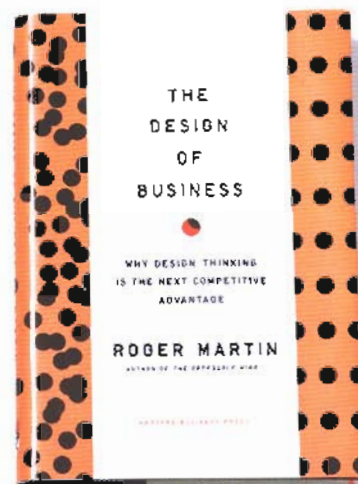
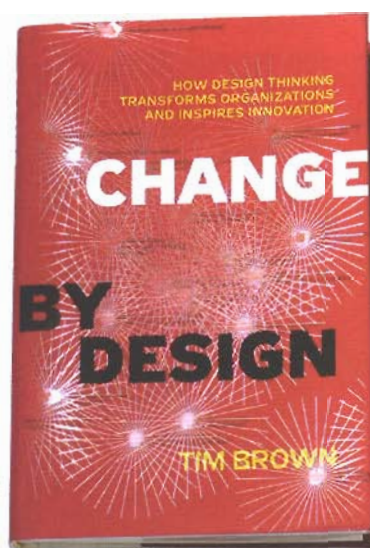
By Tim Brown  
HarperBusiness, New York  
272 pages; \$27.99 (hardcover, e-book)

THE DESIGN OF BUSINESS: WHY DESIGN THINKING IS THE NEXT COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

By Roger Martin  
Harvard Business Press, Boston  
256 pages; \$26.95 (hardcover)

In an episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Larry David goes to battle with a plastic package. Even with the help of two knives, a screwdriver, and his bare hands, David can't open it. As a design-conscious consumer, I too have howled in frustration at poorly designed objects, from leaky sippy cups to impossibly uncomfortable chairs. With all those smart, creative designers out there itching to work their magic, why is there so much stuff that just doesn't work?

Perhaps it's because not enough of them have embraced the gospel of *design thinking*. It's no longer enough for designers to wrap a laptop in tactile titanium. Now they must also determine—often with the help of ethnographers and other nondesigners—whether we really *want* a titanium laptop, and if so, what it says about us and our “consumer journey,” as Tim Brown, president and chief executive of the design juggernaut IDEO, calls it. This



process is design thinking, Brown explains in his new book, *Change by Design*, which charts design's evolution from “the creation of products to the analysis of relationships between people and products, and from there to the relationship of people to people.” To show how it's done, Brown describes how IDEO watched kids brush their teeth, then designed toothbrushes for Oral-B with rubber handles, bright colors, and turtle forms—a huge hit, he says.

It turns out, however, that entrepreneurs have been design thinkers for some time, apparently without the help or expensive fees of design firms. British engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel, creator of the Great Western Railway in 1841, was a design thinker, according to Brown. So was fast-food revolutionary Ray Kroc of McDonald's fame, according to Roger Martin in his new book on design thinking, *The Design of Business*. And then there's Cirque du Soleil founder Guy LaLiberté. He transformed the old three-ring circus—with its sad animals and tacky cardboard sets—into a \$600 million annual business, using “the magic and spectacle” of acrobats, contortionists, and a singular theme (at dramatically higher ticket prices).

LaLiberté didn't research the potential size of his market. But he was a design thinker because he knew from experience what the audience wanted and instilled in his troupe “an environment of creativity and innovation.” The problem, explains

Martin, who is dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, is that most companies don't go the Cirque route, instead clinging to the status quo and “reliability over validity.” Corporations that do embrace the new ethos gain a competitive edge, Martin concludes, pointing to the consumer-goods giant Procter & Gamble, whose roster of megabrands (think Swiffer and Mr. Clean Magic Eraser) boomed following a design-thinking shake-up that saw designers embedded at all levels of business.

These twin books, in which Brown and Martin somewhat eerily cite each other as design gurus, codify design thinking with a raft of managementese. If business needs buzzwords to make a fuzzy idea like design thinking palatable, here's a bundle—from Martin's “knowledge funnel” to Brown's “convergent” and “divergent” thinking. To me they're just fancy ways to ask kids what color toothbrush they like best. Long ago the formula for success was simply to build a better mousetrap. Today's innovators are still **building** them, whether with GPS systems or sustainable materials, whether they're designing toothbrushes or circus acts. Call it what you will—if the result is a better cheese grater or delivering water to a thirsty world, I'm all for it. Just remember to add the perforation to the package.

*Ernest Beck is a freelance writer based in New York.*