

Brave new design world

By [Terry Levin](#)

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The last week in February has become synonymous with the [Design Indaba](#) Conference, the event held at the Cape Town International Convention Centre (CTICC) as an annual showcase for the superheroes of global design thinking.

With information and media channels currently at critical mass, clarifying the state of design today has become more important than ever. Many of the speakers on day one of the conference, demonstrated how design thinking is showing the ways for business and even governments to balance traditional best practices with new uncharted technological territories.



Ben Terrett. Photo by: Terry Levin

Designing for service delivery

The function of some designers, such as Ben Terrett ([@benterret](#)), who goes by the impressive title of head of design at the UK Government Office, is so respected that he has been entrusted with the job of restructuring the current 2000 UK Government departmental websites into only one! The new simplified system, which has been signed off by all departments concerned, is in the process of being designed "with a relentless focus on user needs".

Design for transformation and transparency

Although a mammoth task, it is hoped that the new info system will match the great British heritage of public service graphic systems - the London Underground map designed by Henry Charles Beck in 1931 and the London Road Transport signage designed by in the late 1950s and 1960s by Jock Kinnear and Margaret Calvert, both systems demonstrating in their simplicity a radically reductionist approach of using only one typeface and both having been adopted as standards recognised around the globe and unchanged for decades.



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Repositioning the image of designer as global civil servant, the software designed for GOV.UK is available at [github.com](#) as open source - which means it can be used by any government anywhere. Honolulu has been the first to copy. Check out the steps to designing for transformation and transparency at [www.gov.uk](#).



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These new kinds of "service design" are also acting as a civil-service reform plan and one which, due to its streamlined efficiency, is estimated to be saving the government a staggering 1,7-1,8 billion GBP per annum, being called "the UK's most important project of 2012" by *Design Week* magazine.

Design for leadership

To further underpin the idea of contemporary design being more about transformation than decoration, closing speaker for the day John Maeda ([@johnmaeda](#)), president of Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), seeks to identify the balance between traditional and new creative leadership tools, citing the example of Gordon Mackenzie, who worked at Hallmark cards for 30 years and wrote the landmark book *Orbiting the Giant Hairball*, as a guide to managing creativity in business.

Maeda also evaluates the pros and cons of various management styles - from startups to end-ups, from hierarchies to heterarchies - in pursuit of the optimum balance for current business, technological and communication environments.

Start-ups	End-ups
Want to be something	Already are something
Agile	Stable
Culture is forming	Culture has formed
Have little	Have lots
Have little to lose	Have lots to lose
Try something for the first time	Tried everything and know what works
Unproven	Proven
Do what needs to get done	Clear roles and responsibilities
Flat structure with empowerment	Hierarchical structure with rules
May come and go	Stand the test of time
Hierarchy	Hierarchy

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These are the philosophies that have seen him address the World Economic Forum in Davos and be named among *Esquire* magazine's "Top 75 most influential people of the 21st Century".

Design for education

Maeda is also credited with championing the groundbreaking STEM TO STEAM Policy at congressional level in Washington DC - lobbying to include art and design into the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math - or traditional STEM curriculum.

Design for futures

From the accounts of thought leaders such as Terrett and Maeda, we can see how designers are starting to wield more influence, providing the creative tools necessary to transform 21st century economies and drive innovation within institutions, corporations and civic infrastructures.

Comments Maeda: "Designers tell a story that matters, in a voice that matters". Design overcomes hierarchies, uses new media channels to convey vital information in new ways that inspire trust and integrity - these are the domains of the 21st century designer and design education.

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