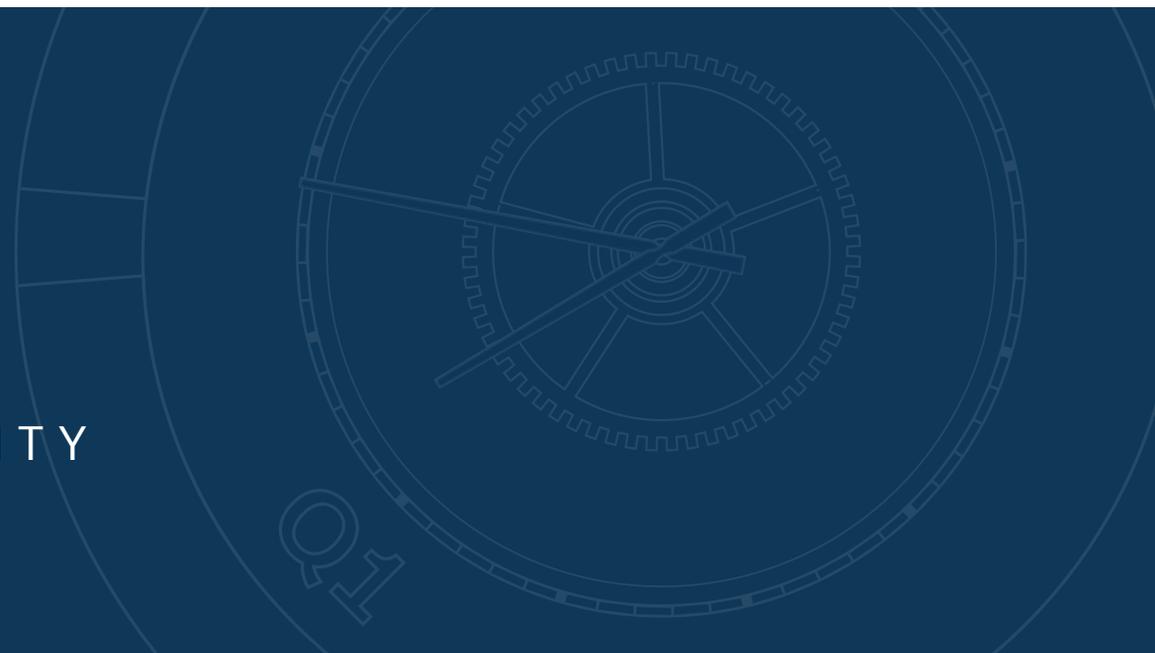


CERTAINTY AND RESILIENCE STORIES AND SURPRISE



PRAGMATIC DESIGN

Q1: RESILIENT SECURITY





Certainty and Resilience Stories and Surprise

Michael LeFevre

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DI's managing editor Michael LeFevre calls on a chorus of voices outside the industry to challenge the "illusion of continuity," build understanding and confidence – and help us live better.

The Many

Leading a design firm through uncertain times can be likened to writing fiction. To recall our DesignIntelligence Q3 2022 editorial theme, when we are leading we are world building. Through our actions as leaders, we are responsible for creating worlds more certain than they would be without us. This duty applies in our project and systems designs, policies and beliefs and in our actions. But in unsteady times, and with a following of passionate, intelligent teammates and clients, one leadership secret is to give our followers some credit — and some room to move. Let them lead, too, to the extent they can. A team led by many is stronger than a team led by one. To demonstrate, I call on many voices outside the fields of design and construction to illuminate our leadership quest.

A well-known management maxim holds that dogmatic, unyielding, micromanaged visions won't hold meaning for all participants. Even more so, they may not be flexible enough to accommodate the inevitable chaos events they will face. Leaving things open-ended or interpretable by followers offers strategic strength. An intentionally vague agreement or understanding leaves the doors open for individuality, change and diverse interpretations and actions.



The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.

- F. Scott Fitzgerald



Connection and Stories: Purpose

As a participant in democracy, I believe in the power of its diversity and freedoms. As we recover from the challenges of recent world events such as COVID-19 and economic uncertainty to seek new leadership directions, I observe our return to time-tested methods, namely stories and human connection. Having been forced into isolation by a pandemic, seeking to emerge stronger than before, we rely on the power of our connections and the stories we tell to establish new directions. But how can stories hold power? What is their purpose?

In a recent Esquire magazine interview, author George Saunders poses an answer to these questions: “I always assumed that the point of someone telling you a story was to help you live better.” Doesn’t that seem like a good practice for firm leaders as well? Isn’t that our job as designers and builders, and leaders and mentors, to help our colleagues live and practice better? The value of tribal stories has been well documented by leadership gurus ranging from Herman Miller’s Max De Pree to Tom Peters. We should tell more of them.

Division (in a Nonbinary World)

Our political climate has been altered by recent world events and the communication systems that distribute them, such as Twitter, email and podcasts. So much so that many of us feel challenged to express our beliefs or lead according to those beliefs for fear of alienating friends, family, clients or colleagues. We lack confidence. We are insecure. But things are seldom black and white. They’re rarely binary. We think of facts as facts, but sometimes it’s not so simple. Things have meaning in context and change meaning over time. True understanding requires nuanced discussion, listening and empathy — and can restore confidence.

Years ago, I attended a speech by political pundit George Will. He began his remarks by explaining, “The world can be divided into two kinds of people, those that divide the world into two kinds of people and those that don’t.” It’s been my experience that architects, as a class of people, are often good at entertaining multiple concurrent options and considering the merits of multiple shades of gray in decision-making. We can usually handle more information and uncertainty than other disciplines can. We are also purported to have good planning skills and the ability to zoom out with perspective and see and process things at multiple scales. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s oft-used quote comes to mind: “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function”

In contrast, having also spent years working inside a construction organization, I observed that construction professionals were, in general, more inclined to reach decisions quickly. My observation was that this seemed to be driven by a prevailing sense of urgency and more highly developed risk-management skills. While the contractors wanted to get the issue resolved and move on, we architects saw it as our duty to explore further and present more options. Who was right? We both were, in various contexts. In hindsight, we were driven by different belief sets and cultures. Now, as teams become more diverse, these default tendencies and the lines of responsibility between designers and builders are blurring. My hypothesis is that this will result in more nimble, intelligent, adaptable teams. Conflating both these skill sets, when things change, we will be able to pivot more quickly and think more broadly. Being open to more possibilities will make us more secure in our futures. We’ll be more resilient.



In improvisation, discovery is better than invention, because you’re doing it together. The idea there is that it’s a relationship. Together, you’ll discover something that neither of you could have found alone.

- Stephen Colbert



Surprise and Certainty

One of our jobs as designers is to surprise the people who use and experience our buildings, to delight them with new syntheses. Each building is an improvisation of sorts. If we give them the expected, the predictable and the mundane, we have failed per our own self-set metrics. But in our roles as leaders, planners and builders of certainty, our job is slightly different. When we are responsible for creating secure, resilient organizations, our duty is to conceive and share visions, along with cultures and environments that support and enable them. When we shape these worlds as too familiar, fixed and unyielding, they lack the humanity, surprise and flexibility to adapt to changing contexts they'll face. They offer limited opportunities for the rest of our teams to buy in and lead themselves. The best leaders allow for individual freedom and creativity within secure, safe frameworks. When surprises come, if we are expecting them, we are better prepared to react. When they come from a collective, they can make us better.

For supporting evidence, let's look to related disciplines, starting with comedy — and the advice of Stephen Colbert: “In improvisation, discovery is better than invention, because you're doing it together. The idea there is that it's a relationship. Together, you'll discover something that neither of you could have found alone.”

Writers serve as leaders as well, in their creation of fictional worlds. Just as architects and builders attempt to see the future and enable future outcomes, writers need some structural idea to guide their work, but not to determine every last beat in advance. Such goals for prescribed plans can lead to “planner's block” or fear of predicting the future, akin to writer's block. Fear of perfection or certainty can freeze us into inaction. David Foster Wallace describes this condition as “a case of having stupidly elevated expectations.” We're not perfect. Our plans don't have to be either. In fact, they are better when they allow the input of others and the possibility of change.

To escape the kind of catatonic states that result from the quest for absolute certainty, perfection and the fear of failure, George Saunders tells us: “Have a plan — and be willing to abandon it. [In your quest for those discoveries and surprises] don't fight back. Enjoy what you can ... Just type some crap. And go for a walk. And when you do that and then go back to it, you'll find the story has gotten smarter than you are. It gets wiser, it gets kinder, it gets funnier.”

Our purpose as leaders is to clear the path our collective futures will take and set the direction, not singlehandedly knock down each limb we'll encounter along that path. We'll know those and deal with them when we come to them (or our teammates will).



Rotating in the palm of the mind the unsolved mysteries of nature in order to examine them from revelatory new perspectives, perspectives blind-spotted by our present assumptions... counterfactuals are the science of otherwise.

- Chiara Marletto



Counterfactuals: The Science of Otherwise

In the October 2022 issue of the Marginalian, Maria Popova investigates “A General Theory of Possibility: The Abstract Art of Otherwise and the Physics of Resilience.” Her opening premise lays the groundwork for an intriguing series of thought experiments:

“As always happens with contradictions, something in the assumptions has to give ... Declaring something impossible leads to more things being possible.

The great gift of science is that it continually reveals to us what is real, unpeeling the wallpaper of our knowledge to reveal newer and newer layers of nature, deeper and deeper strata of reality. The great peril of science — this eternal impulse of human nature — is that the human mind continually limits what is possible, erecting walls of assumption between itself and the reality of nature. And yet the entire fact of life — your individual life, and mine, and life itself as a feature of the universe — is a matter of probable impossibilities.”

Popova goes on to ask:

“What distinguishes helpful changes in the recipe from unhelpful ones? It is a particular kind of information: information that is capable of keeping itself instantiated in physical systems. It is resilient information.

‘Knowledge’ merely denotes a particular kind of information, which has the capacity to perpetuate itself and stay embodied in physical systems — in this case by encoding some facts about the environment ... Knowledge is the key to resilience ... In fact, knowledge is the most resilient stuff that can exist in our universe.”

In a world of increasing uncertainty, new skills are required to cope. Using resilient knowledge is just one specific example of how to remove the paradigmatic limits we place on ourselves. Such instances are examples of the counterfactuals Marletto describes. To consider such evidence, Marletto asserts:

“We must hone our skills at rotating in the palm of the mind the unsolved mysteries of nature to examine them from revelatory new perspectives, perspectives blind-spotted by our present assumptions ... counterfactuals are the science of otherwise.”

Such a capacity can help us deal with what Hidden Brain’s Shankar Vedantam calls “the illusion of continuity,” the mistaken assumption that things will be the same in the future and that we ourselves will be the same. One thing is certain: neither it nor we will be.

Plan B? Planet B?

Design and construction leaders of the future wear heavy mantles for setting future directions. If we carefully place all our eggs in a single basket, we leave little room to react and adapt to change. If we ignore the inputs of our team members — each with different lived experiences, skills and knowledge sets than ours — we leave scant opportunities for the power of a collective. Good leaders always have a Plan B and more. We must be resilient in the systems we set up. But as creators of the earth’s infrastructure, we must remember in our visions, beliefs and actions, there is no Planet B. We must be smarter and better than before in designing, building and living on the one we have.

We can be certain of that.



I always assumed that the point of someone telling you a story was to help you live better.

- George Saunders



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