

**BASICS**

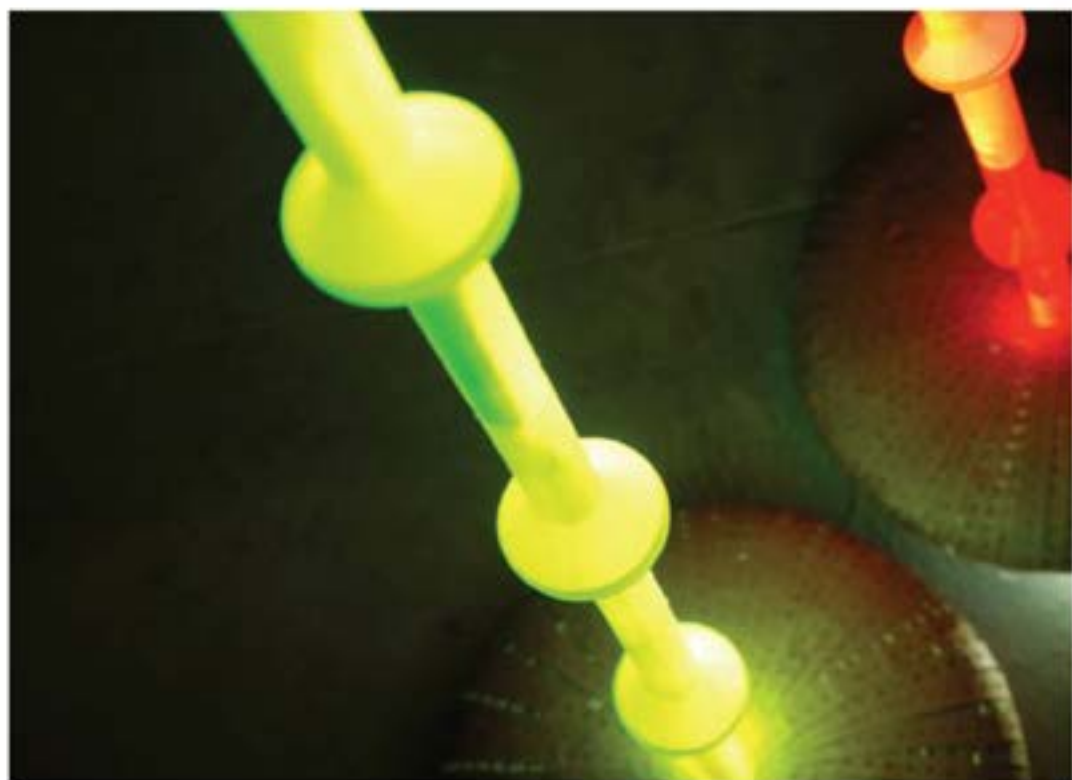
**PRODUCT DESIGN**

**David Bramston and YeLi**

# Idea Searching for Design

How to Research and Develop Design Concepts

Second Edition



B L O O M S B U R Y

**BASICS**

**PRODUCT DESIGN**

1

**David Bramston  
and YeLi**

# **Idea Searching for Design**

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**Matthias Pliessnig**

Platinum (Beirut Lebanon)

Photo credit: Ieva Saudargaitė

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Diverse conscious and subconscious experiences provide a unique, ongoing mental catalogue of references capable of assisting the generation of ideas if encouraged to do so. A continual journey of experiencing the familiar along with the unfamiliar naturally broadens the imagination.

All experiences are viable encounters for this purpose, and often it is those that at first appear to be too abstract or irrational which become the essential catalyst for the most interesting suggestions and directions in the end.

Everyone has their own set of experiences, and an opportunity to engage in dialogue with others who are both within and beyond one's immediate circle of associates encourages creative variance and can further stimulate authentic thinking. In the initial stages of idea generation everyone is different, and everyone has a different take on things due to the exclusivity of their personal backgrounds.

The ability to engage the senses as critical tools and to attempt to see things in an alternative context rather than being mentored or escorted by any inherent mental baggage and preconceived values encourages original thought. The French novelist and social commentator Marcel Proust (1871–1922) recognised the importance of “seeing with new eyes,” a view echoed by Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), who commented that “it is not what you look at that matters it is what you see.”

The ability to see what others overlook is a trait of many successful designers. David Kelley at IDEO believes it is possible to see something original in a situation that has perhaps become too familiar, and it is this capacity to discover and take inspiration from everywhere that is so important. Things do talk if the observer is prepared to listen.

The Mitate lamps designed by Studio Wieki Somers (2013) combine culture and

objects in arrangements that communicate multiple messages to the observer. This reinterpretation of meaning manages to challenge conventional perceptions.

Taking a risk and having a “dare to be different” attitude is necessary if boundaries are to be pushed. The creative designer must aim to occupy the unfamiliar territory that is beyond their usual remit.

The ideas and outputs of designers such as Yvonne Fehling and Jennie Peiz, with works such as *Still Lives* or *Stuhlhockerbank*, are distinctive, experimental, and intriguing. The blurring of conventional and unconventional practices and an ability to think differently with a curious mind redefines the boundaries and questions values. Approaching a problem from an alternative or lateral direction, while remaining in control, assists in the attempt to see things from a removed standpoint.

The Eigrub lamp for Kartell designed by the Japanese studio Nendo (2014) concentrates on the space that surrounds the designed object, creating a void in the form of the original Bourgie lamp by Ferruccio Laviani. Exploring the unexpected is both challenging and revealing. Ideas do not have to be overly complicated to be alluring and wonderful. It is important to try and keep the thinking process simple.

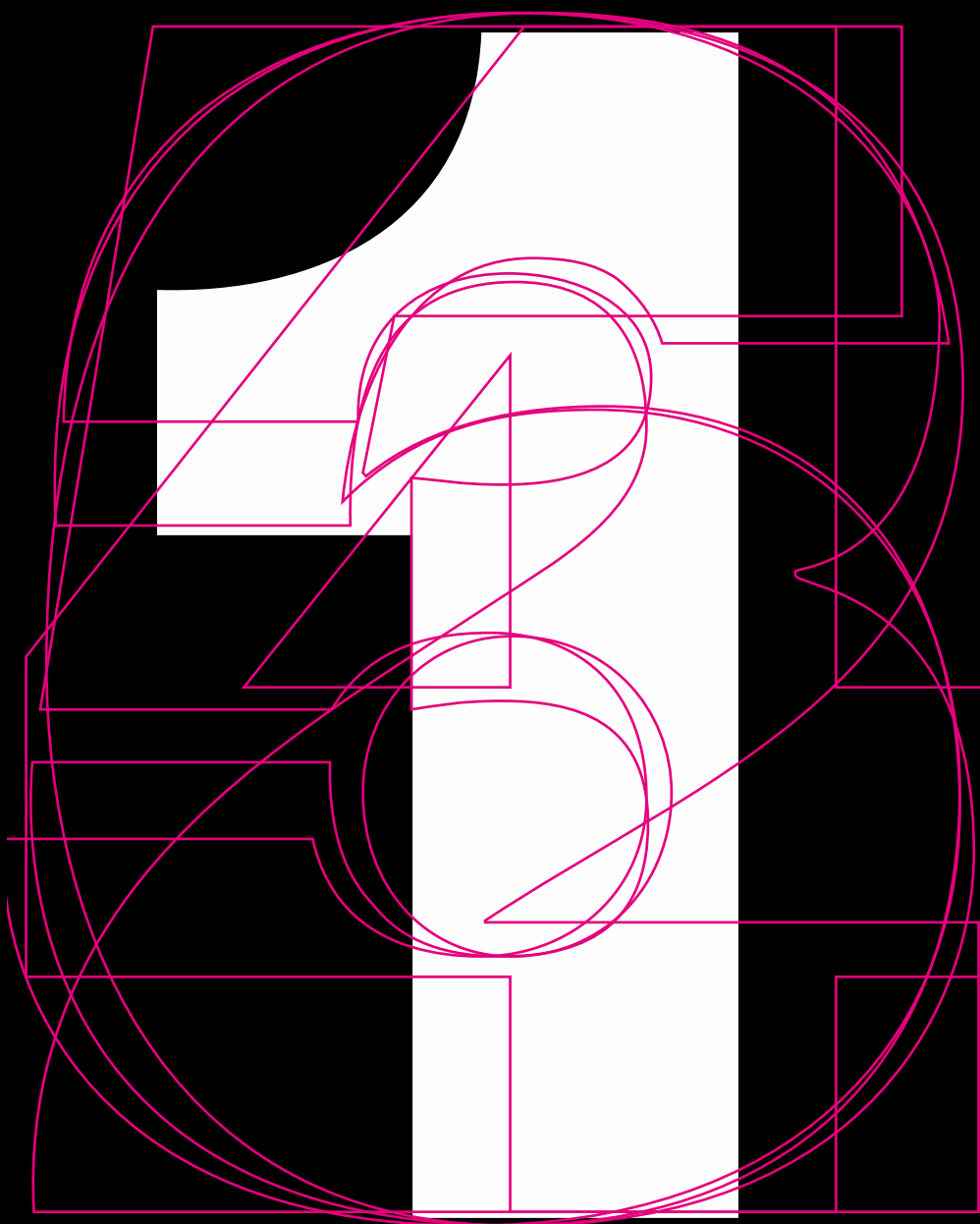
Interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches provide an insight to alternative means, methods, and ideas. The cross-pollination of ideas between creative disciplines or seemingly unrelated disciplines triggers the imagination. It is not always essential to understand what is being observed initially, as it may still prompt thoughts and opportunities. Being outside a comfort zone introduces original cultures and experiences. The exploratory, challenging, and incredible works of designers such as Jannis Huelsen and the Xylinum stool can introduce unexpected elements and inspire atypical thinking.

Idea generation should not be an arduous journey but rather an exploratory path, a pleasurable adventure, where the failure and collapse of a thought is recognized and ultimately considered as contributing to a success. The confidence to make a mistake is a valuable characteristic of many experimenters in the search for a viable outcome and was recognized by Danish designer Verner Panton (1926–1998), who stated that “a failed experiment can be more important than a trivial design,” a sentiment that echoed

French sculptor Rodin, who originally stated “nothing is a waste of time if you use the experience wisely.”

*Idea Searching for Design* has engaged international artists, designers, and educators to explore a broad array of methods and practices associated with the practice of idea generation. The process is often eclectic and sometimes visceral, where ephemeral practices continually inspire and steer thought and process.





Personal experiences contribute to a broad array of creative triggers that can influence a design journey. Continually absorbed, seemingly random encounters and experiences can become pivotal in identifying credible and compelling directions for the curious.

Embracing eclectic practices and appreciating that inspiration often assists with the generation of ideas.

“You can’t experience the experience until you experience it.”

**Bill Moggridge, co-founder of IDEO and Director of the Smithsonian’s Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum**

## Experiences

### Prior experience

Experiences that are encountered repeatedly create a knowledge base that can be called upon and used in the generation of ideas. The more experiences that an individual encounters, the greater and more diverse mental references become, all the better for suggesting lateral connections. However, the same knowledge can also become a hindrance if an individual is unable to redefine its meanings and is incapable of seeing objects in an alternative or imaginative context. It is always necessary to approach the design process with an **open mind** and to be prepared to experiment and appreciate objects in a new way. A closed mind only harbors a restricted, desolate, and unproductive imagination.

The imposing and compelling Mitate lamp collection created by Studio Wieki Somers echoes traditional Japanese culture, making individual references to subjects such as geisha girls and Japanese gardens. The multi-layered approach embraces these elements while also making the transition to create a contemporary collection in which the individual works have a specific lighting identity. The

capacity to manipulate different perceptions and communicate an array of meanings within the complete collection is also evident at the component level, where familiar objects are used in unexpected arrangements and adopt a variety of contexts. The cross-pollination of culture and experiences captures the imagination in a manner that might not be so evident if the mix of references were absent.

Traditional craft, contemporary design thinking, and an array of experiences provided the platform for the inspirational collection.

Dutch designers Wieki Somers and Dylan van den Berg (Studio Wieki Somers) challenge convention in their creative approach to design. Collections including Mitate (2013) and Chinese Stools (2007) demonstrate an ability to engage in tangential thinking and to confront entrenched perceptions of everyday objects to reveal the previously unseen.

The Mitate lamps represent the principles of the samurai code of honor:

1. Gi (cord lamp) > right decision
2. Rei (shields lamp) > right action
3. Makoto (reflection lamp) > truth
4. Jin (fabric lamp) > compassion
5. Yuu (mirror lamp) > bravery
6. Meiyo (mesh lamp) > honor
7. Chuugi (black hole lamp) > devotion

**Figure 1.1**  
**Studio Wieki Somers, Mitate lamps, 2013.**  
 Exhibited at Galerie Kreo, Paris.  
 Photo: Fabrice Gousset.



The juxtaposition of traditional and contemporary elements, the combination of purity and complexity, and the various ritual and convivial aspects of the lamps offer multiple opportunities for interpretation.

The ability to absorb and understand potential influences and subsequently rearrange and use them in an original direction is a trait that enables creativity, such as in Mitate, to emerge.

**Figure 1.2**

**Studio Wieki Somers**, Jin (fabric lamp).

Photo: Fabrice Gousset.

**Figure 1.3**

**Studio Wieki Somers**, Mitate lamps, 2013. Detail of feathered pull-switch. The shrouded feather is revealed when illuminated.

Photo: Fabrice Gousset.



1.2



## Primary research

Understanding or identifying a problem usually requires an active “go do” approach to make important and meaningful connections and subsequently to place them in a relevant context. It is necessary not to be judgmental or biased toward any preconceived ideas, but to retain an open mind, absorb information, and be prepared to discover and accept the unexpected. Outcomes that contradict or challenge personal or broadly acknowledged views and understandings are of particular interest and should be carefully appraised.

**Primary research** can be conducted using a diverse range of methods, but the fundamental aspect should always be going out and asking questions, or observing direct from a reliable source (although this does not have to be limited to the most obvious source).

Assumptions can influence the process inappropriately, and so any initial approach should be broad and simple. It is the views of others that you are seeking, and not always the affirmation of a personal view.

Designing in isolation, without inspiration, and assuming that progress can be made without engaging in some form of primary research can be detrimental to the overall creative process.

The Chinese Stools collection could not have been created without direct observation of and interaction with, Chinese workers.

The **eclectic** street seating that is used, repaired, and crudely modified by workers in Beijing with access to very basic resources echoes the story of the workplace and the individual. The collection of stools with their curious appeal was purchased by Studio Wieki Somers and transformed into a more substantial aluminum collection.

The collection retained the individual identities and the ability to portray an intriguing story of street life.

1.4

**Figure 1.4**

**Studio Wieki Somers**, Chinese Stools – Made in China, Copied by the Dutch, 2007.  
Photo: Pien Spijkers.



## Journals and blogs

Creative journals and blogs provide a valuable source of reference and an array of opinions on contemporary issues. They direct and introduce ideas, engender contemporary values and thoughts, and reaffirm opinions on an international platform.

The articles and posts can stimulate unrelated ideas and directions if approached with an open mind. Journals and blogs are often visually focused and therefore encourage an international audience. Design is undoubtedly a sensory discipline, and in particular a visual discipline, and many triggers can be sourced from design journals. Even articles from overseas journals that an individual might not directly understand can still be inspirational and open up areas that have not previously been encountered. The potential to access journals and blogs authored by creative individuals with different cultural experiences and backgrounds is important, and it is not necessary for such publications to be directly related to a particular discipline. Probing articles in contrasting disciplines can readily trigger experimental thought and opportunities, since this becomes a forum of unfamiliar information and attitudes.

Accessing journals and blogs is not a replacement for primary research, but it is a necessary and accessible supplement in nurturing design ideas, and it can also become a useful time capsule for any subsequent retrospective analysis or comparison.

International, **interdisciplinary**, and **cross-disciplinary** journals and blogs provide a valuable source of visual reference, in which the discovery of unusual items and associations prompts tangential directions and proposes many lateral connections. Such exposure can introduce previously unconsidered thoughts.

For example, the elegant and fragile pink ceramic shoes documented by photographer and blogger Laura McCarthy suggest a range of conflicting characteristics, such as breakable plasticity, delicate strength, tough preciousness, and craftsmanship. The ballet shoes also prompt many sensory characteristics and visual directions that could ultimately inspire a very different genre of objects.

Influential design journals include:

*Abitare, Egg, MODO, ID, Metropolis magazine, Kult, FRUiTS, DEdiCate, frieze, dwell, icon, MONUMENT, INNOVATION, vanidad, domus, wallpaper, TWILL, mix, newdesign, Design Week, AZURE, surface, milk, FRAME, b0x, MARK, Design, intramuros, Blueprint, Artform, Aesthetica, Vogue Lowdown, and W magazine.*



**Figure 1.5**  
The Pink Ceramic Ballet Shoes.  
Photo and blog: Laura McCarthy.



## Scrapbooks, notebooks, and info dumps

Formulating a scrapbook is in many ways a personal and organic process. It should be a diary of creativity, a record of thought-provoking encounters that are created through the accumulation of interesting curiosities, an accessible place to store references.

Scrapbooks ultimately evolve into a comprehensive, tangible archive of thoughts where items of interest, which may or may not be directly related to a particular investigation, should be included as they have the potential to become a creative trigger and central to the development of an idea at a later stage. As with so many elements associated with idea searching, the development of a scrapbook and the collection of interesting **artifacts** need to be ongoing activities that capture and document experiences that fuel the imagination. Gathered references might be interesting for a particular characteristic and do not necessarily need to be considered in their entirety. It is often the accumulation of multiple references from very varied and seemingly unrelated sources that contribute to the eventual makeup of an original outcome.

The references in a scrapbook are often personal, and can individually tell a set of

exclusive short stories. The gathering of a large number of seemingly eclectic artifacts from varied sources prior to, or during, the initial stages of a design journey creates the opportunity for an **info dump**—an arena of objects that can be openly discussed in the search for inspiration. Different objects, as diverse as flea-market ceramics, yard sale toys, or a kitsch plastic dancer may be informally discussed and considered within the info dump. The characteristics of the references are often more important than the overall reference.

Notebooks and sketchbooks further support the gathering of interesting observations, and need to be continually maintained to provide personal reference material, which is again capable of supporting possible idea generation.

The search for ideas and references that provoke creativity is a continual activity, an addictive journey for the inquiring mind, rather than a practice that only commences at a given juncture.

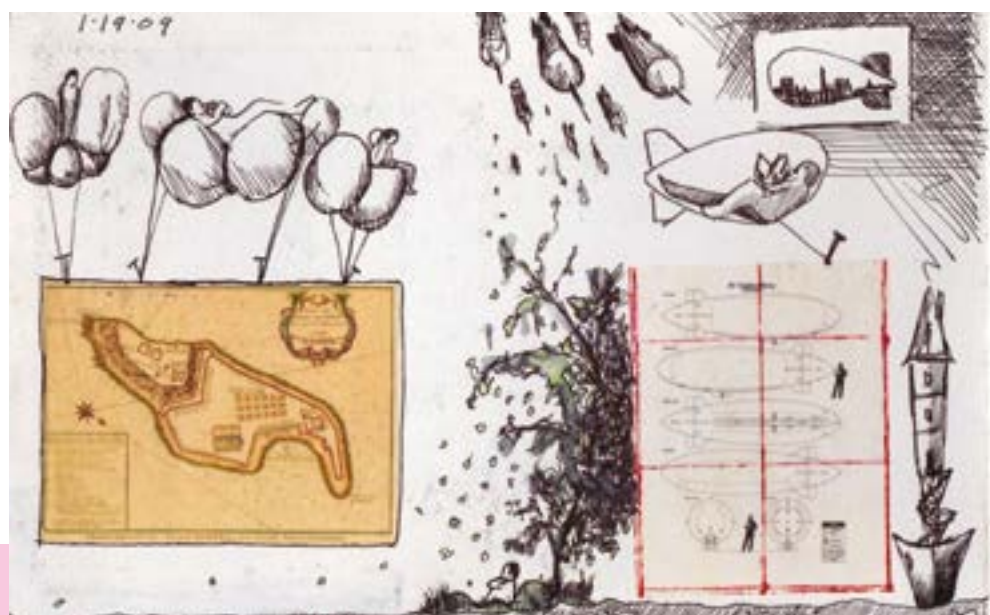
The process of initial idea generation is not always as simple as a switch-on and switch-off process. Capturing the idea prior to its departure is so important. After an idea has left, unless there is a visual trigger or prompt to assist its recall, it may be lost indefinitely. Since an idea is so potentially valuable it is imperative to secure it.

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Figures 1.6a and 1.6b  
Matthias Pliessnig, sketchbook entries.



1.6a



## Notebooks

Simple, communicative marks created by artist-designer Matthias Pliessnig suggest a potential idea. The essence of the thought is beautifully captured with just a few lines and remains clean and pure rather than being stifled and overworked. Personal notes are scattered throughout the imagery and are balanced with more subconscious references and details. The creative shorthand guides the mind in a particular direction.

As multiple thoughts can arrive simultaneously they need to be recorded effectively, and so concise representations in a notebook provide the necessary trigger for exploring them later.

In addition to the ideas in his sketchbook, Matthias Pliessnig also explores initial thoughts through the creation of simple sculptures, which are

referred to as “**adlibs**.” Generated from basic objects found in the workshop such as pins, thread, crayons, and offcuts, the adlibs allow for thoughts to be explored physically and for the mind to play. The adlibs might not directly inform future developments, but as a creative activity they will undoubtedly make contributions to the practice of **lateral thinking**.

The combination of many triggers provides a valuable reference for development.

**Figure 1.6c**  
Matthias Pliessnig, sketchbook entries.

