Two distinct aspects of design—as taught at the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS), Fort Leavenworth, Kan. — are the spirit of design and the practical, methodological approach contained in the Army design methodology (ADM). The spirit of design is not concerned with specific processes or particular methods but is a way of thinking that appreciates the interconnectedness, complexity, and uncertainty in the world. Embracing the spirit of design conditions Army planners for the unpredictability that defines their operational environment. The ADM is the Army’s practical approach for dealing with that unpredictability—it provides planners a common lexicon to enable effective collaboration and communication. Although the ADM enhances planning, Army planners must remember that design is not a perfected military decisionmaking process.
2.0, but it is a way of thinking about a complex operational environment.4

To highlight these aspects of design, this article applies a framework of environmental framing, problem framing, and operational approach. This framework, derived from Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 5-0, The Operations Process, will clarify the approach SAMS uses to teach design, convey the value of design for military planners, and illustrate the pitfalls of allowing the practical aspects of the ADM to overtake the spirit of design.5

Environmental Framing

The obvious question when trying to appreciate design is, “why design?” The answer comes from the difficulty of understanding the confusing sociopolitical environments in which humans live and the need to explore these spaces for understanding. An operational environment is an open system characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and interdependence.6 During operations, Army forces are not an external audience viewing the environment but an integral part of a system; their actions will affect the system in indeterminate ways.7

Although there is purposefulness within a system (i.e., all the parts that make up an environment), we cannot achieve complete understanding of it. Moreover, we often are incapable of determining cause and effect due to their separation in time and space.8 While we would like to bask in the comfortable warmth of certainty, our overconfidence is a symptom of hubris that could lead to tragic failure. Even when we believe we know the problem and respond appropriately to our understanding, we often are reacting to superficial symptoms and not to the underlying problem. As we improve our understanding, we slowly uncloak the veil of ignorance that has rested comfortably upon us.9 Although our understanding increases and our confidence grows, changes in the environment can make our understanding fleeting and can cause us to fall victim to an enemy more insidious than ignorance—the illusion of understanding.10

Problem Framing

Even if military planners could understand the complex nature of their environment and appreciate the dynamic challenges it poses, forces still would have to do more than achieve understanding—they are tasked to do something, to achieve objectives. The problem is that in their pursuit of doing something, they often introduce thoughtless action into this complex system. Our thoughtless action not only can result in failure to achieve objectives but also can lead to further chaos within the system.

This is our conundrum: How do we ensure purposeful action to achieve our objectives within a complex and dynamic open system that is unpredictable and that is made more complicated and indeterminate by our actions? In addition, once planners appreciate the complexity of the environment, how do they convey their understanding of the environment to others so the unit builds and maintains a collective understanding that enables purposeful action?11

Operational Approach

To help planners appreciate their operational environment and understand the various problems it poses, SAMS embraces a dual-pronged approach. Instructors aim to develop within students a deeper appreciation of the spirit of design while providing them the practical tools that the ADM offers. Although SAMS provides a block of instruction focused on design, the instructors and cadre teach the spirit of design (call it a line of effort) throughout the curriculum. They consistently encourage the adoption of design principles and challenge students to ask why in order to increase understanding and enable purposeful action. This comprehensive approach toward inculcating the spirit of design in SAMS students is understandable when one considers that design is not a process but a way of thinking. Once SAMS students understand the spirit of design, they realize this way of thinking should not be turned on and off like a light switch but kept active throughout the operations process (during planning, preparing, executing, and assessing).

The practical aspect of the ADM (a second line of effort) is taught exclusively during the “Design of Operational Art” block of instruction at SAMS. Although the practical aspect is useful, the purpose of the ADM is less to educate the mind for uncertainty than to train staff officers on planning methods and language to communicate understanding.

The SAMS dual-pronged operational approach of combining the spirit of design and the practical aspect of the ADM should result in thoughtful and humble leaders. They will become mindful of the herculean task of striving for continued understanding and communicating their understanding to others.
The Need to Know Why

German philosopher Friederich Nietzsche famously quipped, “If you know the why, you can live any how.”12 Within Nietzsche’s simple yet eloquent statement is the acknowledgement that the how is not as important as the why in determining purposeful action. Unfortunately, all too often as military professionals we are predisposed to embracing the how. The Army takes pride in its ability to collect and promulgate tactics, techniques, and procedures and lessons learned. It always searches for optimal solutions to perceived problems. Enamored with finding out how to solve a problem, and encouraged by doctrine replete with examples of the best processes, steps, and guidelines to quench the soldier’s voracious appetite for action, the soldier often fails to answer the why.

Previous experiences become problematic when soldiers try to develop understanding through the perfection of a process and not through appreciation of the environment. In contrast, the spirit of design embraces a humble way of thinking that accepts the human inability to achieve complete understanding. The strength of design lies in appreciating the possibilities within an open system rather than embracing a specific process.

Although the practical aspect of the ADM can provide utility if its purpose and value are understood correctly, it is important to appreciate that no planner “perceives more than a tiny patch of the vast tapestry of events,” and no process or methodology will change this fact.13 This humbling notion should remain in every planner’s mind to ensure he or she does not confuse the spirit of design with the practical methodology of the ADM. Perfection of process does not equal perfect understanding.

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We Recommend

Strykers in Afghanistan
Kevin M. Hymel, Combat Studies Institute

With the Taliban threatening Kandahar city in the summer of 2009, the Soldiers of the 1st Battalion, 17th Infantry – part of the first Stryker brigade to deploy to Afghanistan – mounted a series of actions to destroy insurgent power in the region. Strykers in Afghanistan tells the story of the battalion’s initial operations, focusing on its difficult fight for the Arghandab Valley. The valley, located near Kandahar city, was a Taliban safehaven characterized by dense orchards and irrigation canals.

This study by the Combat Studies Institute recounts how the men of 1-17 IN took advantage of their equipment and adapted their tactics in the face of a determined foe defending complex terrain. To download a copy, please go to: http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/CSI/