DESIGN THINKING
A REFLECTION THROUGH ITS ORIGIN, EVOLUTION AND (NON) DEFINITION

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ABSTRACT

The term Design thinking (DT) has been defined as a methodology, innovation technique, mindset and even a discipline, and such haziness around the concept triggers questions about its real value and contribution. It is often associated with a creative problem-solving approach, that delivers innovation through an iterative and user-centered process based on multidisciplinary team work, and that can be applied in the most varied of fields. The extensive promotion of all these characteristics provoked a reaction encircling the term, that has been a subject of large discussions between scholars and practitioners, and broadly explored in press. DT is usually considered as a rather new concept, although the discussions surrounding the term started decades ago and contemplate a wider frame, implying that the blurriness encompasses not only the definition, but also where the roots are. All the different points of view and polemic regarding the concept resulted in a lack of common definition to the term, and a fragmentation of the discourses intertwined to DT.

This thesis aims to make two main theoretical contributions. First, trace the evolution of DT within the history of design theory, identifying the main authors, movements and schools that influenced the concept, and how they relate to each other. By identifying the constellations in which the term emerged, it is possible to synthesize common definitions and determine a set of theoretical characteristics that compound the concept. Second, by understanding the current practice and the principles underpinned, it is possible to investigate the intersections and dissonances between the DT discourses, and how disconnected they really are. Looking for a normative answer to what is DT is not the aim of this thesis, but rather to explore its history, understand the ongoing panorama that encircles the subject, and identify the entangled value of the concept to design and other disciplines.