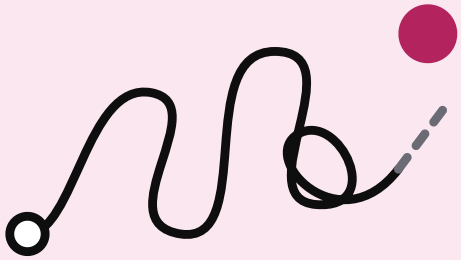
Concept

Wicked problems

Problems with no definitive formulation and no correct solution. Each way of framing them leads to a different solution, and each attempt changes the situation.



In Spanish
Problemas perversos

Origin
Rittel and Webber (1973); earlier, Churchman (1967)

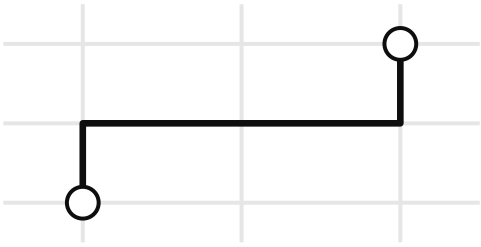
What problem it addresses

It explains why many social and design problems can't be solved with a linear method. It gives design a name for arguing that defining the problem is already part of the work.

An example

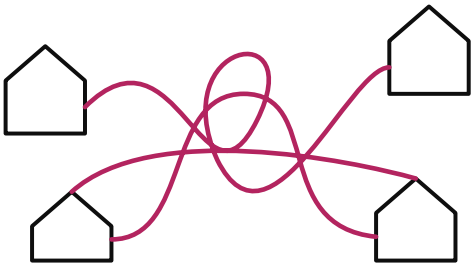
An illustrative example: two briefs for the same city.

Tame problem



Find the shortest route between two stops. **There is a right answer and you know when you're done.**

Wicked problem



Reduce the housing shortage. Each way of defining it points to a different solution. **There are only better or worse answers.**

Rittel and Webber saw that social planning looks like the second case. Buchanan brought the idea into design thinking.

Why it happens

1 

There is no definitive formulation, so understanding the problem already means starting to solve it.

2

There is no clear end point; it could always be improved further.

3 

Every attempt leaves a mark, so you can't try and undo without consequences.

Applications in design

Use it like this

Use it to explain why a project needs to explore and redefine the problem before locking requirements.

Avoid

Isolating a measurable part of the problem, solving it and presenting the whole problem as solved.

Don't fall for it

A wicked problem is no excuse for not deciding. Every proposal has consequences; own them.

10 traits

What the research says

Rittel and Webber listed ten traits that set these problems apart from tame ones, such as having no stopping rule or each one being unique (Rittel and Webber, 1973).

●●● **Solid evidence.** Churchman published the term earlier, in 1967, and credited it to a seminar by Rittel. It is a conceptual framework, not an effect measured in an experiment.

Connections

Used in

- Design thinking
- Systemic design

Related to

- Problem–solution co-evolution
- Problem framing
- Four orders of design

Authors and works

1967	**C. West Churchman**	Introduced the term in an editorial and warned that solving only part of the problem and calling it solved is misleading.
1973	**Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber**	Described the ten traits that set wicked problems apart from tame ones in planning.
1992	**Richard Buchanan**	Brought the idea into design thinking and used it to explain why design works with indeterminate problems.

Sources

Original sources

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- Churchman, C. W. (1967). Wicked problems [Editorial invitado]. Management Science, 14(4), B141–B142. View source (https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.14.4.B141)
- Buchanan, R. (1992). Wicked problems in design thinking. Design Issues, 8(2), 5–21. View source (https://doi.org/10.2307/1511637)

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