

**Moving from particular to general:  
Building collections  
to build knowledge in design  
A rationale for COVIC**

On one hand,  
**each design situation is particular,**  
with a specific context  
(stakeholders, goals, constraints, place, time, etc.).

And because of its particular nature,  
generalizing from any one design situation is difficult,  
since other design situations may be very different.

That's why, in design, the answer to many questions is:  
**it depends.**

On the other hand,  
**scientific knowledge is general;**  
it applies across many individual contexts;  
and it has predictive value.

This split between particular-general has consequences:

- Design practice remains specific
- Design has not developed a body of knowledge
- Design has little 'theory' and few models

What's more,  
**design historians tend to follow an art-history approach,  
focusing on individual artifacts + heroes who made them.**

They cherry-pick very particular samples of already particular work,  
while ignoring the broad population of working designers.

While the Hope Diamond might be beautiful,  
it's unlikely to teach us much about geology.

**One path forward is to build collections —**  
sets of particular artifacts —  
in which we may find patterns  
and from which we may begin to generalize —  
to build theories.

In fact, building collections is a traditional step  
in building knowledge.

Collecting is part of the origin of geology —  
and everything from anthropology to zoology.

**The COVID-19 Online Visualization Collection (COVIC)  
is an example of what may be an emerging trend.**

Other broad collections of design artifacts include:

The People's Graphic Design Archive, Louise Sandhaus, CalArts  
<https://www.peoplesgdarchive.org/>

AIGA Design Teaching Resource, Annabelle Gould, UW  
<https://teachingresource.aiga.org/>

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