Main shortcomings of design thinking

Source: Jack Martin Leith / ChatGPT

Overview

Design thinking is widely adopted, but both design firms and end-user organisations report recurring shortcomings – especially once it moves from workshops into real operating contexts.

1. Superficial adoption ("design thinking theatre")

Design thinking is often reduced to Post-its, canvases and workshops, creating performative signals of innovation without structural change. This leads to cynicism and limited lasting impact.

2. Weak link to strategy and decision-making

Design thinking projects tend to be untethered from the organisation's overarching strategy, and their fit with other programmes of work is often unconsidered.

Insights generated through design thinking commonly fail to influence strategic priorities, budgeting or governance, leaving valuable ideas unused.

3. Over-emphasis on empathy, under-emphasis on power and constraints

While empathy is prioritised, organisational politics, regulatory constraints, legacy systems, and economics are often ignored, resulting in impractical solutions.

4. Poor handling of complexity and systemic problems

Design thinking struggles with multi-stakeholder systems, long time horizons, and systemic interdependencies, leading to oversimplified outcomes.

5. Workshop bias and short-termism

The method often prioritises fast workshops over deep, longitudinal understanding, resulting in shallow insights.

6. Ambiguous ownership after the idea phase

Post-ideation, responsibility for implementation is often unclear, causing promising concepts to stall.

7. Talent dilution and deskilling

The spread of simplified design thinking tools can undervalue deep design expertise and reduce designers to facilitators.

8. Cultural misfit in some organisations

Design thinking assumes psychological safety and understanding of ambiguity, which many hierarchical or regulated organisations lack.

9. Measurement and ROI ambiguity

It is difficult to directly measure the impact of design thinking, making it vulnerable during budget scrutiny.

10. Moral and ethical blind spots

Design thinking may optimise harmful systems by focusing narrowly on users without broader ethical considerations.

Core critique

Design thinking is strong at generating insight and creativity but weak at addressing power, scale, and long-term systemic change.