

## **2017 Baker Artist Awards**

### **Sample Excerpt from *Think Wrong***

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#### **Pie Lab: Thinking Wrong in Action**

This is a story about thinking wrong. This is also a story about pie.

Our story begins in March of 2009 when a group of 14 young designers gathers in Belfast, Maine for a Project M Blitz. The Blitz gets them out of their comfort zone and into a highly charged, multi-day Think Wrong practice. This practice is crucial for you and your work, but we will get to that in a minute.

So here are these designers, freezing in Maine's version of "spring," and they have the task of generating a shared project that could potentially do some good in the world. They need to do it quickly, because this is a Blitz after all, and as the word suggests, lightening fast is the name of the game. They only have a few days, but they can't figure out how to proceed. They're stuck, and being stuck, they do what all good souls do. They go to the bar.

Earlier that day, the group had performed a Think Wrong drill where they answered the question: What is your secret talent? One graphic designer responded that she was really into pie. "Obsessed," was the word she used. She loves pie so much, in

fact, that she orders a slice right then and there at the bar. Which is weird, right? Pie at a bar? But that's the level of commitment that this young woman has to fruit encrusted in pastry dough. Plus, this is Maine. They serve pie at bars.

Which gets the group thinking: Really, who doesn't like pie?

This next part is going to sound cliché, but it's true: Someone finds a bar napkin and they start sketching ideas. The group develops a simple hypothesis. Pie makes people happy. Being happy makes a person comfortable. Pie and coffee in the right setting could get people talking. Get people talking and you learn things. Learn things, and you can help foster activities that effect positive change in a community.

It just so happens that March 14 is coming up—3.14, or  $\pi$ —and so they hatch a plan to host a free pie event in Belfast on “pi” day. They invite the town for a slice and a cup of coffee.

Now John is the first to admit that he thinks the idea is bonkers. How is free pie possibly going to manifest into a successful project for the greater good? But the designers are really engaged. This isn't a half-assed effort. So John keeps quiet and let's them do their thing and when March 14 rolls around it's a hit. People show up. So do newspaper reporters and television crews. John picks his chin up off the ground so that he, too, can eat some pie.

The success of the event gets the designers thinking again. What if there were a permanent home for pie and conversation aimed at stimulating community engagement?

This is the genesis of PieLab. The premise is quite simple:

PieLab = a neutral place + a slice of pie.

A neutral place + a slice of pie = conversation.

Conversation = ideas + design.

Ideas + design = positive change.

They debate where Pie Lab might have the most impact and they decide to open a pop-up version in Greensboro, Alabama. Project M and John have a long relationship with HERO, a nonprofit run by Pam Dorr. HERO is a catalyst for community development in Greensboro with the goal of ending rural poverty. Pam says yes, by all means, come open PieLab in Greensboro. In fact, I'll give you a place to do it. (Wrong thinkers love people who say "yes.")

That May, five of the designers drive south to set up shop in a small building, which is owned by HERO and located near the town's Main Street. It looked a bit like a one-room school house.

It's important to understand what these designers are heading into. Greensboro is the county seat of Hale County, one of the poorest places in America. The median household income is about \$25,000. It was incorporated in 1823 and named for the then-famous Revolutionary War hero Nathanael Greene, who was known for saying, "We fight, get beaten, rise, and fight again."

The quote could be the mantra for Greensboro. That same ebb and flow of undulating fortunes has defined this rural Southern town. It has thrived, it has suffered, it has prospered from industry, lost it, and been hobbled by poverty. And it has fought, not just for its very survival, but also within its ranks. It is a town riven by race, class, and economics and marked by polarizing contrasts. It is home to affluent, majestic antebellum-era houses, but it is also where, in 1936, Walker Evans and James Agee took photos and wrote about dire poverty for the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. It is a place of long-held prejudices and civil rights activism, where, in March of 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a rousing speech at a local church and then sought refuge from the Ku Klux Klan in a neighboring house. Greensboro is steeped in the past, but it also home to the forward-thinking experimental architecture coming out of the Rural Studio co-founded by Samuel Mockbee.

In 2009, HERO was one of the few active businesses on Greensboro's Main Street. Vacant storefronts gave the place a ghost-town feel. Some buildings no longer had innards; they were just front-facing walls propped up by pilings. It was a Potemkin city, with a façade of commerce but no real business.

The five designers arrive with very little money or readily obvious resources, but they are resourceful. They build out the first floor of this modest building on the cheap, buying plates and silverware from thrift stores, sourcing fruit and pecans for the homemade pie from local farms, and building one long, shared family-style table from reclaimed wood. They make it a rule that pie is never for take-out. You have to eat in. As PieLab co-founder Brian Jones says, "PieLab provides a neutral environment in a traditionally segregated town where people from every race and class are welcome to sit together and talk candidly about whatever is on their mind."

And that's just what happens. They put out a sandwich board advertising PieLab and immediately, people show up. It's such a success that the designers take the next step and, with the help of HERO, open a permanent shop on Main Street funded through a Kickstarter campaign. PieLab becomes the first new business to open on Main Street in years. They serve pie, but they also host events. Community groups meet there. Classes form. They support local pecan suppliers. It's more than pie; it's community building.

In the coming years, PieLab is nominated for a James Beard Award. It is lauded in publications from *The New York Times* to *Southern Living* to *Fast Company*. Most exciting, though, is the ripple effect it has on Greensboro. Today, Main Street is witnessing a rebirth. New businesses are opening. A historic hotel, long vacant, is under renovation. PieLab is a concept so resonant with people everywhere, that tour busses now transport people to Greensboro just for the chance to eat a piece of pie there.

How did this happen?

How did a cocktail napkin sketch, very little money, and pie served in a pop-up shop turn into a permanent business on Main Street? How did PieLab become an economic catalyst for a struggling town and a cultural phenomenon capable of ameliorating long-held biases amid people who normally wouldn't associate with one another?

It's simple. PieLab is thinking wrong in action. The idea is bold yet it evolved through a succession of small bets that minimized risk and allowed the founders to learn as they went from the very people that they hoped to serve. It involved getting out of their comfort zone to let go of their thinking, and it involved a clever use of existing resources. Pie Lab also happened quickly. They moved fast, learned from their successes and failures, and kept evolving.

PieLab may have started in a seemingly random way—as a concept sketched on a napkin over pie and beers at a bar—but the truth is that the idea was born out of a well-honed series of six practices and exercises that we have developed and tested over the years, both at Future, and through John’s work with Project M. And this is what we’re here to teach you.