DESIGNING BENEATH THE SURFACE

The layers of AI Experience

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User interfaces

Where users direct and oversee AI behavior, evolving from an input surface to a command center as the model works more independently, guided by its harness and the user's context.

Context

User inputs sent directly via prompts, uploads, configurations, and connections at first, and expanding to include knowledge inferred from behavioral patterns, integrated systems, historical interactions, and the content it has permission to access.

Harness

The operational layer that determines what the model can access, use, and do, allowing the AI to complete tasks independently, while remaining governed by constraints and user preferences.

Model

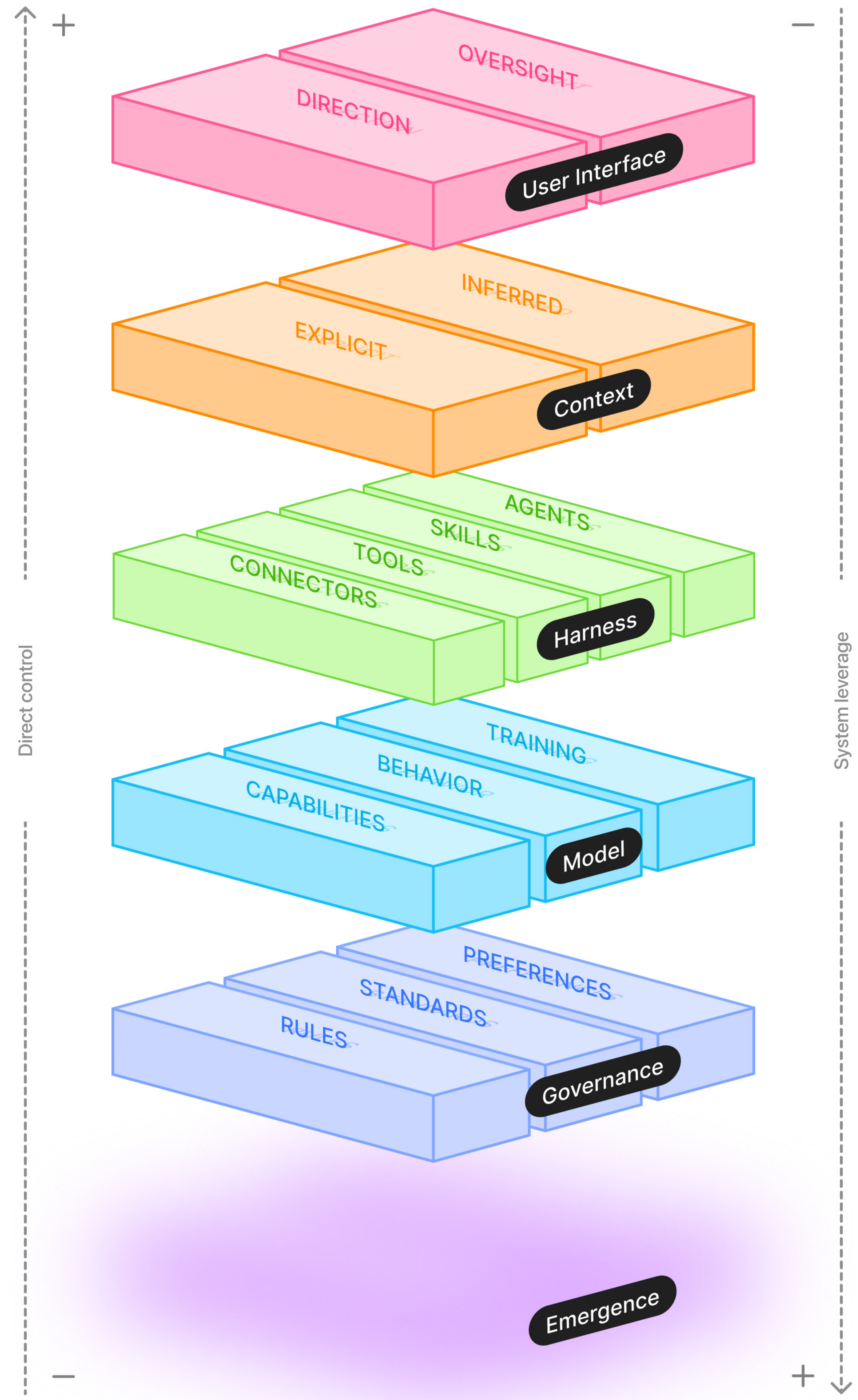
The training, capabilities, and behavior that determine which tasks and modes the model excels at and shape how it performs in practice.

Governance

Rules, standards, and preferences that determine what data the AI can access, what it's allowed to do, what it must refuse or explain, and where humans remain in the loop.

Emergence

The variance and unknown behavior that appear when probabilistic systems operate in the real world. Designers cannot eliminate emergence, but they can design the conditions that make unwanted behavior easier to observe and correct.



The changing role of design

Rather than relying on static interfaces built by strangers guessing their intent and constraints, people can now interact with software through conversation, contextual cues, adaptive logic, and personal instructions, interpreted through a model.

This points toward a future where people have more agency in their relationship to technology and more ownership over their own experience. Where usability and information architecture once shaped how people interacted with software, engagement is now constrained by how well the system can infer intent without constant direct input.

The role of design is shifting toward facilitating that exchange, helping AI understand the user faster, adapt more accurately, preserve human command, and move toward outcomes that solve real needs with less wasted effort.

DESIGNERS AS AMPLIFIERS
Influencing Scale

In a world where trust is a constraint, brand becomes a moat. Great brands create communities around products, giving users a sense of belonging or status. Since the adaptive nature of AI gets stronger the more people use it, strong brand affinity can shorten the context-building cycle by easing the intimidation factor of technical adoption, role transformation, or workflow changes.

DESIGNERS AS BUILDERS
Influencing Speed

The faster we can ship, the faster we can learn, iterate, and deliver something people want. Speed in of itself is becoming commoditized, and designers who build give companies an advantage by shortening the cycle between ideation and delivery. Designers involved in delivery can also help facilitate the exploration of multiple potential directions in parallel, decreasing risk, and enabling companies to take bigger bets.

DESIGNERS AS ARCHITECTS
Influencing Systems

The more the user engages with AI, the more of the experience gets managed below the interface through contextual understanding, skills, and agentic workflows, and by the model itself. The deeper designers work in the stack, the more leverage their input has on the final product. Service designers might influence corporate policies, model designers and researchers might define the success criteria informing rubrics and evals, and product designers might seek out new patterns to allow the user to orchestrate agents at scale without sacrificing control.