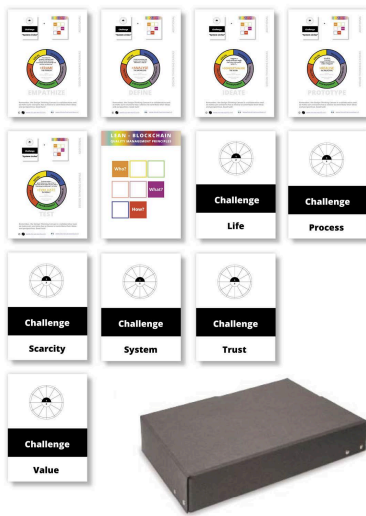# SYSTEM ARCHITECTURE TOOL BOX

Companion Booklet – Consideration Circles

How to use this booklet

The Consideration Circles are designed as **break-out perspectives** within system architecture work.

They are not methods, steps, or solutions.
 Each circle offers a **temporary lens** to slow down thinking, surface tensions, and question assumptions.

You can:

- use one circle in isolation,
- switch between circles,
- or return insights to the central **STEEP System Design Thinking canvas**.

This booklet explains **why each circle exists**, **what it reveals**, and **how to use it meaningfully**.

1. LIFE — Consideration Circle

The primary condition of all systems

Why this circle exists

Most system design starts with structure, efficiency, or performance.
The Life Circle exists to ask a more fundamental question first:

Can life actually thrive in this system?

Life is not treated here as a value, goal, or outcome, but as a **precondition**.
If human and relational conditions collapse, no system — however efficient — remains viable.

Core tension

Life quality emerges from a **dynamic balance**:

- between autonomy and interdependence,
- between responsibility and awareness,
- between individuality and togetherness.

Too much focus on control erodes trust and vitality.
Too much freedom without structure leads to fragmentation.

How to use this circle

Use the Life Circle:

- at the start of a system inquiry as an ethical orientation,
- during moments of conflict or overload,
- or as a reflection point before major design decisions.

Focus on **tensions**, not solutions.
Notice where life is strained, reduced, or unsupported.

Relation to the STEEP canvas:

Insights from the Life Circle act as a **reference layer**.
They help evaluate whether proposed social, technical, economic, environmental, or political choices genuinely support the quality of life.

2. VALUE — Consideration Circle

What is created, exchanged, and protected in a system

Why this circle exists

Many systems reduce value to money, output, or efficiency.
This circle exists to reveal that **value is always plural**.

Human, social, ecological, cultural, and economic values often coexist — and conflict.

Core tension

Value creation always involves **trade-offs**:

- between short-term and long-term value,
- between private and collective benefit,
- between measurable and intangible value.

Ignoring these tensions leads to value destruction disguised as optimisation.

How to use this circle

Use the Value Circle to:

- map different forms of value present,
- surface what is prioritised and what is neglected,
- discuss who benefits and who bears the cost.

Do not try to resolve tensions immediately.
First, make them visible.

Relation to the STEEP canvas

Bring value tensions back to STEEP to inform design choices.
This prevents technical or economic decisions from silently overriding other forms of value.

3. SYSTEM — Consideration Circle

Where and how to intervene in complex systems

Why this circle exists

Many interventions fail not because the intentions are wrong, but because they operate at the wrong level of **depth**.

This circle helps distinguish between:

- surface adjustments,
- structural changes,
- and paradigm-level interventions.

Core tension

Shallow interventions create quick results but little change.
Deep interventions reshape meaning but require patience and courage.

Confusing activity with leverage leads to frustration and fatigue.

How to use this circle

Use the System circle to:

- reflect before acting,
- question whether proposed actions match the nature of the problem,
- explore alternative intervention points.

Avoid jumping directly to solutions.

Relation to the STEEP canvas

Insights guide **architectural choices** within STEEP, helping teams align effort with real leverage.

4. PROCESS — Consideration Circle

How work, flow, and coordination actually happen

Why this circle exists

Processes shape everyday experience.
They determine stress, waste, frustration, and dignity in work.

This circle exists to make **invisible friction visible**.

Core tension

Efficiency without care creates harm.
Care without flow creates stagnation.

Optimising parts of a process can damage the whole.

How to use this circle

Use the Process circle to:

- observe flow, delays, and handovers,
- identify waste beyond cost alone,
- notice where human effort is strained or ignored.

Look at what actually happens — not what the process diagram says.

Relation to the STEEP canvas

Process insights inform technical and organisational redesign, ensuring flow supports both performance and people.

5. TRUST — Consideration Circle

The condition that enables coordination beyond control

Why this circle exists

Systems often replace trust with rules, controls, and monitoring.
This can stabilise behaviour — but at high cost.

This circle exists to explore **how trust is built, lost, or substituted**.

Core tension

Too little trust leads to control and bureaucracy.
Blind trust leads to vulnerability and risk.

Healthy systems balance transparency, accountability, and autonomy.

How to use this circle

Use the Trust circle to:

- examine governance and decision-making,
- distinguish trust from mere compliance,
- explore where trust could replace control.

Relation to the STEEP canvas

Trust insights inform political, technical, and economic design choices — especially around governance and data.

6. SCARCITY — Consideration Circle

How limits and perceived scarcity shape systems

Why this circle exists

Some limits are real.
Many scarcities are **produced by assumptions, incentives, and structures**.

This circle helps distinguish between:

- factual constraints,
- mental models,
- and institutionalised scarcity.

Core tension

Real limits require responsibility.
Scarcity thinking often amplifies fear, competition, and short-termism.

Confusing the two leads to poor system design.

How to use this circle

Use the Scarcity circle to:

- question assumptions of shortage,
- explore circular or regenerative alternatives,
- reframe constraints before redesign.

Relation to the STEEP canvas

Scarcity insights reshape economic, environmental, and political choices, preventing artificial constraints from driving design.

Closing note

The Consideration Circles are not answers.
They are **architectural pauses**.

Used well, they slow thinking just enough to allow better questions —
and better systems — to emerge.