

Out of Touch: Design organizations and design research in times of glocalisation

*“Where have all the flowers gone, long time passing?
Where have all the flowers gone, long time ago?
Where have all the flowers gone?”*

Marlene Dietrich

The situation for design could hardly be better. Politicians all over the world are now realizing that the “creative industries” are the key to knowledge economies. This fall alone there were design weeks all over the world, many of them in places which until now have not been on the design map – Bangkok, Singapore, Gwangju (Korea), Guangzhou (China), Monterey (Mexico), Eindhoven, Antwerp, or Palermo.

With all this political support, more and more diverse regions getting on the design stage, and a host of new technologies, we would expect an exploding diversity of creative ideas and approaches. However, the opposite seems to be the case: It looks as if it were design downtime. Since the beginning of the new millennium, there was no significant new design paradigm or approach. Instead, the past is rehashed. When there is significantly more input in terms of political support, more diverse players, and new technologies, but the actual output is not significantly changing, innovative potential must be disappearing somewhere in the system.

At the latest large design conference, Connecting 07 in San Francisco, Tim Leberecht, director of marketing at frog design, observed that “the conference felt rather old school in its definition of industrial design, like it was trying to preserve the past and fending off the blending of disciplines that is happening right under our feet”. While “the opening ceremony was a long-winded and largely self-congratulatory celebration of the two organizing bodies”, business was excluded: “The perspective of corporations, except for presentations by HP and Tesla Motors, was

greatly missing from all of the plenary sessions.” The conference “lacked an agenda or a distinct purpose. No new paradigm was born, no overarching theme emerged”.

Why this? There are clues in the history of design organizations. The first association of designers was the Society of Arts and Crafts in 1897. It had a distinct goal and vision, which, in tune with the problems of its time¹, culminated in a distinct design paradigm. The German Werkbund, founded in 1907 by Hermann Muthesius, an architect and critic of the quality of German industrial products, was already concerned with design for industry. The Werkbund had a considerable influence at its time: influenced by the Werkbund, the large retail chain Kaufhof took on the slogan “beauty and quality”. It also saw Peter Behrens, the first designer working for industry, responsible for branding, architecture, and products at AEG.

The history of the British Design Council is perhaps the most significant, as it provided the archetype for design organizations in Europe, Asia, and Australia. It was founded in 1944 by the British government with the goal “to promote by all practicable means the improvement of design in the products of British industry”. The Design Council

¹ The vision and purpose of the Society read: “This Society was incorporated for the purpose of promoting artistic work in all branches of handicraft. It hopes to bring Designers and Workmen into mutually helpful relations, and to encourage workmen to execute designs of their own. It endeavors to stimulate in workmen an appreciation of the dignity and value of good design; to counteract the popular impatience of Law and Form, and the desire for over-ornamentation and specious originality. It will insist upon the necessity of sobriety and restraint, or ordered arrangement, of due regard for the relation between the form of an object and its use, and of harmony and fitness in the decoration put upon it.”



started actively, giving design advice to manufacturers, organizing design exhibitions, and schooling the public to influence the public perception of what it assumed to be “good design”, a mission which at times amounted to aesthetic policing. It was also, as design historian Jonathan Woodham writes, a propagandist organization with a vested interest in promoting itself as successful. When, in the sixties, Pop came up as a new aesthetic and commercial movement, the Design Council held on to its post-war idea of “good design” and was increasingly seen out of touch. Over time, it became by its own admission “remote from the design community, viewed with indifference by much of industry”. A review to government ministers in 1994 finally resulted in the closure of the London Design Centre and all of the Council’s regional offices. Andrew Summers reengineered the organization until 2003. However, after his demise, the Design Council scrapped its most important design position, its design director, and was engulfed in a row where one of its directors, Hillary Cottam, a non-designer, was voted “designer of the year”. Today, no one in the active management of the Design Council has actual design experience.


At the outset, design organizations started as associations of active designers with strong paradigms and visions to change the perception of their times. After the war, design organizations were founded by government to strengthen industry. They had varying success, and over time, most originally mission-driven and activity-led organizations turned into bureaucratic administrations. Their history and the problems seen today illustrate the difficulties of design organizations in keeping up with a changing world. Bureaucratic organizations tend to have difficulties when dealing with innovation and creativity, and the same is true for design organizations. The dif-

ference is that design organizations can afford this less than others, as their very purpose is to advance a discipline which is at the center of innovation. In the last 20 years, design organizations in many countries existed on the periphery of economy as administrative offices, often primarily occupied with keeping records of their members. In the meantime, industry and business followed their own dynamics, with excelling businesses utilizing design out of their own initiative.

Therefore it was business management, not design organizations, which developed a range of methods to manage design in conjunction with marketing and new product development. Only in the last few years globalization started to affect design organizations as new players in China, India, South America and South Africa entered the stage, and a new market for supra-national design organizations emerged: design conferences and design endorsements for new members.

Design is now seen as a potential not only for industry, for whole regions. The creative sector is seen as paramount for the transformation to knowledge economies. But people in charge are not business managers, but public officials who often do not have access to the same repository of tools to assess quality and risk as design managers, and this is even truer when it concerns new, less experienced regions stepping on the design scene. Understandably, these regions seek to reduce uncertainty by turning to the old design organizations. But they are dealing with bureaucratic bodies which bring with them a considerable baggage.

Where are the new ideas for design? There are plenty, but they don’t enter the mainstream of design bureaucracies.



Today, design innovation happens in private foundations, design collectives, ad-hoc interest groups and in self-selected teams working across disciplines and technologies.

Not only do design organizations need a new alignment, but also design education organizations. The new demands of globally emerging creative industries require educational organizations to prepare students for a more complex and demanding world. One part of their remit is research. Research and theory are necessary – many accomplished architects and designers also had been theorists. Already in 1946, *The Economist* wrote about the need for sociological research to inform design. But there is now a tendency in academia to reduce design research to detached schemes instead of informing design as a discipline whose purpose is to work in the real world. The reason is that academic systems, under pressure to boost their scientific output, are increasingly rewarding design academics for papers written, but not on the basis of real-world measures. In this system, people who study design and want to get into academia have no incentive to first gain experience in the design industry. The goal is to remain in university, and to become a young academic. There, they are supposed to bring design students to a destination called design for the real world – a destination where they have never been themselves. With neither an understanding nor an incentive to produce results which are of actual use for economy and society, the result is an often isolationist stance where research papers are written for the sake of writing papers rather than to inform design for the real world.

For example, in a recent design course organized by design theorists, students were made to work on flowcharts to describe better service systems for senior citizens. The flowcharts got increasingly complicated as

students attempted to describe systems for finance; however they received no knowledge of standard methods for business finance planning, simply because these are methods developed by business studies and therefore “beyond the fence”. In the process of trying to achieve a simulation of real world systems without adequate tools, the students got lost in mushrooming confusion. To get some sense back into this, I arranged a meeting with their intended users. Only that made the students realize that their systems have been little more than descriptions of cloud cuckoo land, as close to reality as a castle in the air is to Versailles. Leonardo da Vinci put it like this: “Those who fall in love with theory without practice are like navigators who board a ship without rudder and compass, never certain where they are going”.

The disconnection of both design organizations and design research from actual design share an underlying reason: lack of organizational fitness. Business scholar Henry Mintzberg concludes that an innovative organization cannot be a bureaucracy, as it cannot rely on standardization for coordination. System theorist Dirk Baecker points out that bureaucratic organization abstracts human beings instead of understanding them as core actors. Phil Glanfield, director of the performance development team at the British National Health Service, quotes factors for organizational dysfunction such as inadequate leadership, isolation, process failure and poor communication. He finds lack of vision, an inability to develop shared objectives, and a reluctance to tackle known problems even in the face of extensive evidence.

Instead, management science proposes ad-hoc project teams consisting of highly skilled individuals. Innovative organizations have to promote diversity, accept volatil-

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ity, and need to be able to think outside the box. These are often "hot teams", usually self-selected, passionate and edgy. An example is Kaospilots, a successful entrepreneurial educational program off the beaten track of academia, where students learn with practitioners in real-world settings. The school is characterized by a lack of formal methods and is outspoken against rampant bureaucracy and academic ivory towers. It is significant that the Danish state had already withdrawn its funding, just to re-introduce it a year later after two of the largest Danish companies, Carlsberg and Lego, came to the rescue and provided interim financing for the school.

Design needs business and business needs design. Yet, hardly a design school offers a foundation course on basic business management for designers. Lately, there are essentially laudable policy initiatives to bring design students together with industry to work on real-world design projects. But without adequate preparation, this is like telling somebody to fly an airplane without a flight course. The lack of a course on basics of business in the design curriculum leaves students struggling to understand how companies work and companies often at a loss with what to do with the student output. Designers and business managers speak two different languages, leading to predictable misunderstandings. This situation will not be remedied as long as designers continue to graduate from design schools without understanding the fundamental basics of business.

Not bureaucracies and ivory towers, but the cross-pollination and active cooperation with a wide variety of disciplines advanced design methods in the last 20 years. A short selection shows the wide variety of disciplines which have contributed:

- CAD and design software comes from cooperation with computer science and software developers.
- Rapid and virtual prototyping comes from cooperation with engineering and computer science.
- Design management and design strategy comes from cooperation with business management and strategy.
- Insights on creativity optimization come from cooperation with psychology and business management.
- User research and advanced user testing comes from cooperation with marketing.

Also future methods to advance design will be based on new and different disciplines such as neurology and brain research for design optimization based on human cognition.

So what to do? Corporate funding often suffers from short-termism and the tendency to use the organization they sponsor as a canvas for their advertisement. State funding often does not have adequate measures to ensure that a given target is reached. Charities and member-funded organizations can be so occupied by internal convictions that they lose sight of the big picture.

I imagine design organizations of the future to be independent public-private partnerships consisting of a number of agile, strongly internally and externally connected, highly competent teams with a clear long-term vision and accountability. Design should happen by competence, not by committee. The impact should be measured, not in short-term financial terms, but in terms of actual contribution to enable design and innovation.

In general, design organizations and design schools should not be blanket-financed, but measured on appropriate

real-world terms: Not on self-congratulatory talk, but on their actual contribution on the basis of hard facts and opinions from the main stakeholders – design industry and business.

In academia, research must be directed to inform design and its new developments on the basis of real-world measures such as the actual effect of research on real-world design applications, the quality of industry collaborations, or the actual quality of education measured on the quality of student projects. This might move academia to stop isolationist tendencies and start working with multidisciplinary development teams across departmental boundaries.

To conclude, let us have a look even further back. In medieval times, there was no place for the visual arts among the seven liberal arts inherited from Antiquity. Painters were seen as craftsmen and grouped together with apothecaries who prepared the paints, while sculptors were grouped with stonemasons and goldsmiths.

It was a number of exceptional personalities uniting science and art, theory and practice who profoundly changed this view. In the mid-sixteenth century, Giorgio Vasari coined the term *rinascimento*, “Renaissance”, for his period – a time of departure for history, marking both the end of the Medieval Age and the beginning of modern times. He described *disegno*²– the root of design as we know it today – as intention, conception and its formal organization.

A change in outlook that profound would not have been possible without the vision and support of the Medici family, owners of the largest bank in Europe, who as dukes of

Florence made their city the epicenter of change for the period. Cosimo de Medici commissioned Vasari, a painter and architect who was not only an art theorist but also its first historian to conduct the first cultural campaign for the visual arts. Vasari designed the *Uffizi*, a masterpiece which became the world’s first public gallery. He “branded” his period as Renaissance. He promoted the visual arts by creating a catalogue of best practice with biographies of the architects, artists and sculptors of his period. He also understood the importance of education and founded the first art and design school in Europe to train painters, sculptors and architects: *the Accademia dell’Arte del Disegno*. The Academy was conceived very differently from the closed systems of scholastic teaching in the cathedral schools and monasteries of the medieval age. It was inspired by the Medici sculpture garden, the place which brought together some of the best artists of its time, and was based on the blend of science and art, theory and practice, in open discourse and informal teaching.

It was the combination of leadership, the will to innovation, the meeting of minds reaching across the boundaries of disciplines, and a capable management with a long-term view which made Florence to have such a profound impact on the development of intellectual history. We will need the same capabilities today to fulfill design’s current potential for positive change on a global scale.

² *Disegno* contained already most elements and competences we expect from design today. Federico Zuccaro, an influential painter in Europe at the time, distinguished between *disegno interno* and *disegno esterno*, the former meaning the inner idea, or concept, the latter meaning material expression, or form. At the same time in Venice, Paolo Pino described *disegno* as a process consisting of several competences, starting with *giudizio*, the judgment which improves with practice, followed by the outlining of a first idea to delineate the essence of the work, the ability to discern the beautiful, the knowledge of strategies and methods of practice and technique, and the assembly into a final composition with meaning.