



Exploring the limits of design. In parallel to the professional track of the CUMULUS conference *Borderlines - Pushing Design Over the Limit*, an exhibition was set up with special objects from the participants' home countries. The idea was that the juxtaposition of a wide variety of artefacts would generate new interfaces of meaning and thus new contexts of meaning capable of sparking new creativity.

Foto: Mads Nygaard Folkmann

On the Threshold to a New Design Perception

- Conference on the Challenges of the Future

In an increasingly complex and globalised world where we have to grapple with new economic, social and climate-related challenges, it is important to ask about the possible role of design. And not least, to ask what sort of design perception is required if design is to fully take on the 21st century. That was the basis for the latest Cumulus conference: *Borderlines - Pushing Design Over the Limit*, which took place in Genk in Belgium on 26-29 May 2010.

By Mads Nygaard Folkmann

The Cumulus collaboration itself is testimony to the importance of the debate about design today. Cumulus began as a smaller platform for collaboration on education and research among schools and universities that offer education programmes within the fields of art, design and media. Today the collaboration has developed,

and the approximately 250 participants at the conference in Genk came from all over the world. The challenges for design are an issue throughout the world and are most meaningfully debated in an international forum where ideas and experiences can be exchanged across the board.

“Design is a way of asking questions”

Design Across New Borders

The theme of the conference was that the future calls for a flexible and dynamic understanding of design. With an open discussion about the role of design as a special approach to developing solutions and transforming creative processes to innovation



Re-industrialisation. Genk, which was the venue of the conference, is a mining town like many throughout Europe, and like many other mining towns it is faced with the challenge of reinventing itself. Therefore, the mine Winterslag, which is situated 3 km from the centre, is being converted for creative industry purposes under the new name C-Mine, the C a reference to the Flemish word 'creativiteit': creativity. C-Mine houses the Media & Design Academy of Limburg Catholic University College. The mountain in the background is manmade; it consists of the depleted ore that was taken out of the mine, which was mined to a depth of 800 m. Photo: Mads Nygaard Folkmann

– that is, as a particular mindset, *design thinking* – we will be better prepared for the future.

These points formed the main theme of the opening speech by Willy Indeherberge, rector of Limburg Catholic University College, KHLim, the host institution for the conference.

“We may view design as a tool for enabling something new that is capable of arousing wonder and curiosity – akin to the Renaissance concept of the cabinet of curiosities, where objects and rarities were connected in new ways,” he said.

“This cabinet of curiosities was a catalyst for creativity, and today we can attempt, in a sort of modern Renaissance, to utilise the global perception about what is possible in order to expand our understanding of design and tap into the full range of human talent. Concepts such as co-creation and co-production are becoming increasingly important; the creative potential must be realised, so that future challenges can be addressed in a collaboration involving designers and users as well as strategic partners and stakeholders,” Willy Indeherberge explained.

Thus, the conference was intended as an experimental exploration of how we can use design and especially how design can be taken into unknown territory and used to explore new frontiers.

At the Brink of Re-Industrialisation

The conference location in Genk added a very concrete aspect to the issue of seeking possible answers to future challenges. Genk is an old mining town, and after the closures of the town's two large mines in the 1980s Genk has had to reinvent itself as a town and as a centre for business and industry. The town is facing changes in a process of *re-industrialisation* that involves a growth in creative industries and in the infrastructure of small and medium-sized companies that not only characterises the town but the entire region.

The town's mayor, Wim Dries, pointed to the potential that lies in seeing problems as possibilities.

“Genk has a strong industrial legacy, and that makes the process of transition difficult,” he said.

“But we are well into the process of converting the former mine Winterslag to the creative and inspiring area C-Mine, where education, small businesses, cultural experiences and recreation interact. In the town's administration we aim to act as a mediator of education, urban development, and business and economic development,” he explained.

Thus, KHLim's Media & Design Academy in Genk is located in C-Mine, which also formed part of the conference venue.

The Critical Potential of Design

One aspect that was particularly highlighted at the conference was critical design, that is, an approach where design is used in an experimental and explorative effort to test possibilities and limits to design. As Virginia Tassinari, a researcher at KHLim's Media & Design Academy in Genk, explained, critical design is where criticism goes from being theoretical to being concrete and tangible – and thus unfolds as an ethical praxis that also points to new possibilities of action.

Clive Dilnot, a professor at Parsons The New School for Design in New York, also pointed to the special potential in design as a critical praxis.

Curiosities. In the late Renaissance the curiosity cabinet emerged: a collection of rare and curious objects that might spark wonder. Since creativity can often be aroused by an original experience of curiosity or wonder, the curiosity cabinet was used at the conference as a model for a way of actively generating development.

Photo: Mads Nygaard Folkmann



“Often the design discipline perceives itself as subordinate to other interests, which means that design is not perceived as a discipline that raises new problems,” he explained.

“But that is precisely what design can do. Design can be used to rephrase issues. The unique aspect of the critical design approach is that design does not offer negative, analytical criticism but *affirmative criticism* that is open to change and new possibilities,” he explained.

Alternative Solutions

According to Clive Dilnot, design is particularly capable of offering critique by demonstrating how a problem is best solved.

“This is not a criticism that simply points out that something is wrong. Instead, good design solutions can be said to offer implicit critique of bad potential solutions. For example, I see OXO good grips’ ergonomic potato peeler as an implicit criticism of all the potato peelers that wreck one’s hands in use,” he said. In his discussion of critical design he also pointed to the subsequent presentation by Fiona Raby, a partner in the design firm Dunne & Raby in London and one of the pioneers in working with design as a combination of critical debate and proposals of concrete solutions.

Fiona Raby pointed out that the debating, critical dimension is always a part of design.

“Design is a way of asking questions,” she said.

“Design lets us develop alternatives – it is a tangible way of challenging orthodox thinking. In fact, what happens in this process is simply what is expected of many designers: an expansion of the original brief. It is simply a part of designers’ creative process to take a critical approach and challenge the possibilities of design,” she said.

Looking Behind the Future of Design

With the many presentations, both in the plenary sessions and in smaller groups, and with many meetings in work groups throughout the conference, the event was testimony to a desire and an ambition to take on the challenges for future design. This related in particular to the understanding of design as a discipline that is able to openly explore new territory while also tying the results of this exploration together into actual design solutions.

The conference offered an opportunity to get behind the scenes of design and current development trends. Instead of simply recording a trend, the research perspective was used to discuss the premises of the future development of design.

Monuments to industrialism. The Winterslag mine is no longer active, but the tower is still there and has now been listed along with other buildings in the C-Mine area that are to be preserved for posterity. Thus, the area is yet another example of the industrial culture that we need to preserve as we also bring it into the future. A corresponding Danish example is the Carlsberg brewery area in Copenhagen, where production has moved out, and a new urban area is being developed around the historic buildings.

Photo: Mads Nygaard Folkmann



Cumulus is an international association of universities and colleges of art, design and media.

In 1990, The Danish Design School was one of the co-founders of the Cumulus community, which at the time numbered six members. In 2009 there were 150 members, representing 42 nations, and at the conference in Genk 20 institutions took part as potential members.

The objective for Cumulus is to build and maintain a dynamic and flexible academic forum to bring together leading educational institutions from all parts of the world.

Two annual conferences are staged within the Cumulus framework. In addition, the work is organised around seminars, workshops and working groups.

Link to CUMULUS: www.cumulusassociation.org

Information on the conference: www.cumulusbelgium.be

Host institution: www.khlim.be

C-Mine: www.c-mine.be

DANISH CENTRE FOR DESIGN RESEARCH

The Danish Centre for Design Research DCDR comprises the design researchers at the Aarhus School of Architecture, The Danish Design School, Designskolen Kolding and the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Architecture. The DCDR aims to contribute to establishing a strong design research environment in Denmark and to strengthen the exchange of knowledge about design research and facilitate the identification of potential areas of collaboration for researchers, schools and enterprises, on a national as well as an international level.

MIND DESIGN

Mind Design, DCDR Webzine is published once a month and features articles and interviews about current Danish and international design research. Mind Design aims to present design research and research findings from researcher to researcher as well as from researchers to design practitioners in general. The webzine is free of charge. Please see www.dcdr.dk/uk/minddesign.

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