TO PH-D DESIGN ONLINE CONFERENCE, NOVEMBER 24, 2003

Dear everyone,

I would like to thank Ken for inviting me to this extraordinary event and all of you for making the event so exciting. I would also like to congratulate Richard Taylor and his colleagues for developing their unique proposal and to thank them for making it available to us for discussion. Finally, I want to apologize for coming late. The reason was that I was writing an article for the conference "Visions of Possible Worlds" in Milano with deadline last Thursday. After Thursday I was reading your contributions until late at night, feeling enthusiastic about a variety of issues that were raised, and even more so at the sight of not only a large new design school, but indeed of a whole new academic field of design taking shape.

Having read your contributions I concluded that my engagement with the Visions conference was perhaps not entirely a loss for this conference, because the vision (or I should perhaps rather call it the "strategy") I am presenting there may help us resolve an issue which was also raised by this forum and which I believe is quite central for our task. This vision or strategy I would now like to share with you. But let me first introduce myself.

My name is Dino Karabeg. I began as a researcher at the Rudjer Boskovic Institute in Zagreb working in environmental system modeling. I did my doctoral work in computer science/algorithm theory at UC San Diego and worked for a period of time in several universities in the US and France. Parallel to my academic interests I maintained an active interest in what I would call "basic issues in human life" such as the nature and the dynamics of well-being or happiness, which ultimately led me to ideas about design I want to propose to you. Since 1992 I have been working as an associate professor at the University of Oslo Informatics Department, actively developing those ideas.

The Visions of Possible Worlds conference program committee has asked us to create a vision of a sustainable world, and explain how designers can help realize that vision. The subtitle of this conference is "A new social role for designers and design schools." It is implied that we are living in a world which is not sustainable and has to change, and that this gives us designers and the approach to design we are teaching a new and highly sensitive social role.

The UCI-SD proposal has already been criticized by this forum for not giving enough attention to this very central aspect of design, for being focused too much on "economy" and too little on "design". The "design for sustainability" issue was raised here by Chris Rust and eloquently advocated by John Broadbent who said: "...we are experiencing a convergence of huge proportions between evolutionary lineages - physical, biological, sociocultural, technological etc - in a way that is bringing evolutionary

processes within the timeframes of design. This merging truly transforms the role of design, to that of a sociocultural evolutionary guidance system. Design is no longer solely a part of evolution, it must henceforth guide evolution.(...) This is the basic task behind sustainability.

The stakes are far too high for design to fail socioculture!"

Let me paraphrase John's idea in order to explain my proposal. We are living in the midst of transition from one stable cultural form, the traditional culture, to a new one. The traditional culture was able to develop its "designs" gradually, through spontaneous evolutions, by testing them through many generations of use. Our modern culture is changing too fast to be considered as a functioning tradition. Therefore we must adopt design as the very principle of development. (I define "design" simply as "the alternative to tradition." Design is to tradition as creation is to evolution.)

And now about my vision. I believe that "sustainability" is a rather unfortunate term which focuses too much on maintaining the status quo and diverts attention from the truly attractive possibilities. Having spent about a decade on examining those possibilities, I am convinced that a new phase of evolution is now possible to us, similar to the Industrial Revolution, but rooted in insights about the human and the cultural rather than the bio-physical world. Given a bit more time and space I can show that the same destructive forces are acting on our culture as the ones which imperil our bio-physical environment. Those forces imperil our well-being. They largely diminish and sometimes even reverse the positive effects of the development of science and technology. On the much more positive side, we can draw much higher benefits from the technology by developing the culture which is able to consciously use the technology.

And now my strategy: To realize the above vision, I am proposing simply to apply design to information, and use the resulting information consciously to guide both design and consumer choice or marketing. Design as such cannot guide the "socioculture." Information can. At present our choice of information is largely guided by spontaneous interests and attention grabbing and the supply of information is largely guided by this sort of demand. We need a more conscious approach to information in order to empower a more conscious approach to design and consumption.

The traditional culture was able to guide people's choices through traditional prescriptions (of diet, clothing, social conduct, values, religion etc.). In our culture the traditional prescriptions no longer work. We need explicitly stated and reliable information to guide our choices. Science, media news and other traditional informing styles cannot give us such information. Therefore we must design a completely new way of creating and using information.

I invite you all to reflect about the possible consequences of conscious or informed choice on our values, consumption patterns and design. I believe that those consequences would be quite dramatic.

The approach I am advocating has already been hinted at here by my information design colleagues Rune Pettersson and Karel van der Waarde who said: "I cannot see how the four fields can develop without the field of 'Visual communication' or 'information design'." I would only add that our traditional 'information design' must also be redesigned to serve the larger purpose of orienting our design and consumption habits. Can the way we create and use information indeed be designed?

David Sless suggests that this is already happening when he says:

"If design is to make a distinctive contribution to reshaping the academy rather than the other way round, then I think we need to assert and argue that science and engineering (and philosophy— my own particular hobby horse) are 'crossing a major threshold' into design. Indeed, I think in many areas that has already happened."

Since this opinion has been disputed as overly design-centric and optimistic, I would like to offer an argument in its support. As many of you have already done, I will be calling Einstein to the witness stand.

Einstein begins his Autobiographical Notes [1] by an account of the 19th century physics (which we learn at school and still largely consider as "the scientific worldview"). He characterizes it as founded upon the belief that "God created the Newton's Laws." He summarizes its successes, explaining why the scientists ended up believing that the Newton's Laws indeed were the picture of reality. Einstein continues by naming a variety of anomalies which could not be solved within the Newtonian worldview. He concludes this list by saying the following:

"Enough of this. Newton, forgive me; you found just about the only way possible in your age for a man of highest reasoning and creative power. The concepts that you created are even today still guiding our thinking in physics, although we now know that they will have to be replaced by others rather removed from the sphere of immediate experience, if we aim at a profounder understanding of relationships."

My point is that we are moving from the worldview in which (scientific) information is an exact picture of reality, to the worldview where information is something we humans are creating and which determines our worldview. Einstein understood that Newton (and science in general) was not discovering God's laws but creating (or should I say "designing") concepts and through them the "scientific worldview." This gave Einstein the freedom to do the same. He created his Relativity Theory by redesigning Newton's intuitive concepts.

Einstein, of course, remained a physicist, he was not strictly speaking a designer. His task was completed when he redesigned "time," "distance," "mass," "energy" and other traditional concepts of physics. For us designers, however, he left the door open for carrying the project even further and designing the concepts and methods for an approach to information which can empower the new design and the design-based culture.

In the University of Oslo Information Design Group we have been developing research and teaching practices as well as concrete solutions which can serve as a prototype for the proposed combined approach to information and design. But the strategy I am proposing can be only realized by a number of people representing a variety of backgrounds and talents. We will be very glad to share our results and experiences, as well as further work, with those of you who may be interested, or may already be working along similar lines.

This proposed symbiosis of design and informing might help not only the design, but also the economy, and in that way abolish the "design vs. economy" division. The world economy in general, and the Californian economy in particular, are plagued by saturated markets and slow growth. An informed approach to marketing and design can create new markets and new products and services, and in that way lead to a variety of new business opportunities.

REFERENCES

[1] Albert Einstein: Autobiographical Notes. Open Court, 1992. The quoted paragraph is on page 31.

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