

Forums without Principle : Design Conferences and the Fuel for Business as Usual

inForm
AIGA / Chicago
Volume 14, Number 3, 2004



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A JOURNAL OF DESIGN AWARENESS PUBLISHED BY AIGA CHICAGO 2004 VOL 14 NO 3

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Forums Without Principle



Design Conferences and the Fuel for Business as Usual

ADAM KALLISH

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The author would like to thank the individual representatives of organizations that responded and agreed to be quoted in this article. The topic of conferences to membership organizations can be a sensitive subject, yet participants commented directly and sincerely for this article.

One afternoon, while sorting through my mail in non-descript 24 lb. white envelopes, I noticed a futuristic brochure for the "Design + Culture 02" conference with the sub-title: "Unite Disciplines, Defy Boundaries, Free the Planet." Its rhetoric made me ponder—yes, I believe in uniting disciplines (through a variegated form of consilience); yes, I like to defy boundaries (by being an interloper); but "Free the Planet?" From whom? This conference featured a familiar list of marquee presenters and promised a slate of polemical presentations with titles such as "Reflection to Reflex Action." Would this help me free the planet?

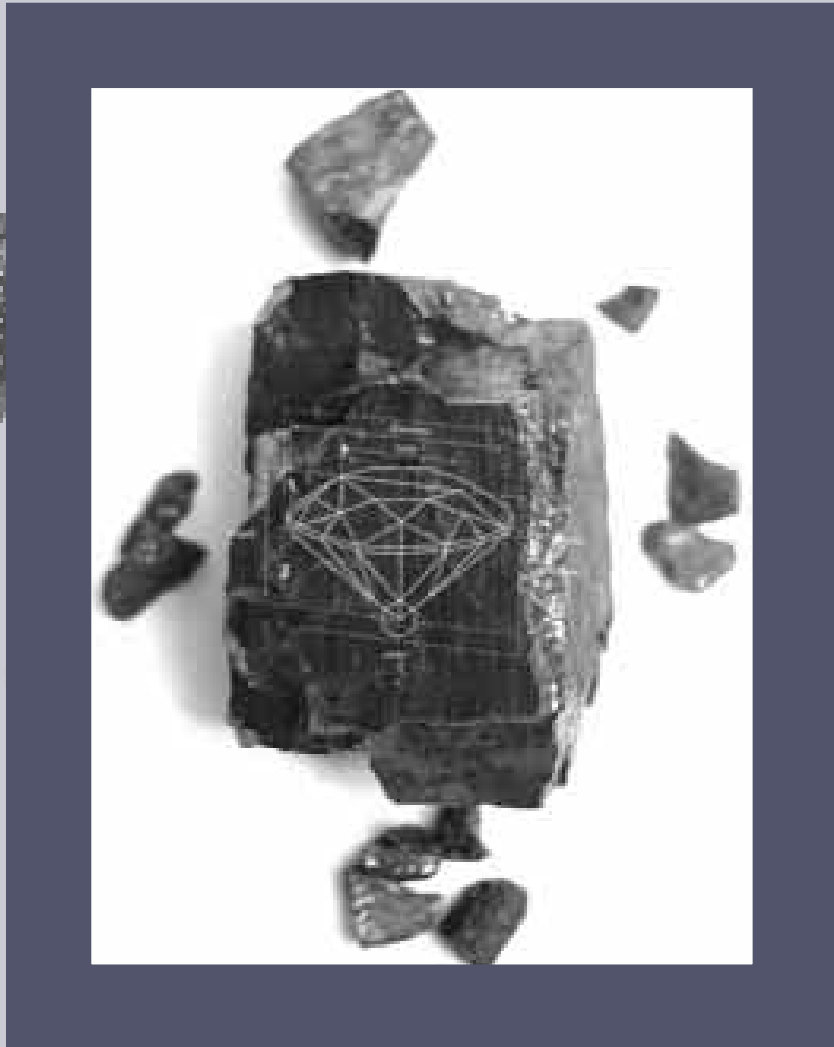
Conferences are typically created in response to a particular challenge facing a specific community, or to achieve the lofty goal of bringing people together to converse on important matters. They are several parts pilgrimage, voyeurism, activism, continuous learning and networking. For many organizations, conferences are the only vehicle to create a sense of community where shared matters can be discussed. Professional design organizations and academic institutions that cater to specific attendees have traditionally offered design conferences, but in recent years the ranks of conference sponsors have expanded to include design magazines, paper manufacturers/distributors, and professional conference management companies.

In design, conferences showcase contemporary ideas and trends, using rhetorical devices to make events

seem pivotal or revolutionary in order to increase interest and attendance. Bryn Mooth, editor of *How* magazine, which caters to mainstream graphic designers, summed it up this way: "Working with difficult clients, maintaining creative energy, dealing with business difficulties—designers seem to crave that connection with other people who've experienced the same things. This definitely influences how we structure future events." To appear as broad-based as possible, conferences have transformed themselves into large design dialogues composed of interactive, brand, and strategic management events. What is also evident is that conferences have become a business, catering to an increasingly blurry creative community that continues to grow and merge with other disciplines.

According to Bob Vogele, one of the original participants of the longest running design event, the Aspen Design Conference, Chicago industrialist Walter Paepcke founded the event as a way of bringing business and designers together—to the benefit of both. In 1951, the first conference topic, "Design as a Function of Management," was chosen to ensure the participation of the business community. After several years, however, business leaders stopped attending because the increased participation of designers changed the dialogue, focusing it not on the need for collaboration between business and design, but rather on the

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business community's failure to understand the value of design. The Aspen Design Conference still continues to this day, inviting attendees to "join people passionate about design for four days and nights in a setting of unparalleled beauty. Examine the role of design in the context of a changing society. Have fun. Bring friends and colleagues to talk design."

The AIGA sponsors regional conferences such as "Grow," and a business conference called "Gain." Their biennial national conference, now called "Voice," was recently described in this way: Twelve hundred designers descended upon the nation's capital to talk passion, power and politics and party hard. A world-class roster of socially-engaged and idiosyncratic voices [was] invited to demonstrate their potency as creative practitioners and as human beings." I was left to wonder if these idiosyncratic voices created a coherent experience, one that made AIGA stronger and the individual participants more focused.

On an international level, design conferences have been sponsored by the International Congress of Graphic Design Associations (ICOGRADA) and International Congress of the Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID). Some of these conferences were sponsored in association with the United Nations to address issues of

sustainable development and discuss how design could play a key role in the creation of sound design solutions within a social construct. While these conferences were positive in their intentions and some good came from them, on the whole many of the agreed-upon goals were never met because there was no credible operational plan and the goals were therefore not sustainable.

While conferences are a valuable and legitimate vehicle for individual professionals, the larger question is: Are conferences creating a better understanding of how design should be practiced and how it should be integrated into the larger business and social fabric that we wish to influence? Is it even possible for a conference to create guiding principles that influence the behavior of its participants? The success of a conference depends on who is doing the evaluating.

The question that many potential conference attendees ask is, "Will this be the conference where I find what I have been looking for?" Or, "Will there be a consensus on an important topic that I can be part of?" There are emotional and rational expectations that face an attendee and these are amplified by conference organizers who shape rhetoric through obligation, curiosity, or fear.

Mooth characterized successful as conferences "those that enable connections without being cliqueish, and offer meaningful information without being impractical. I've been to small local events that succeed, and huge national events that fail. It depends on what attendees expect—and what they're promised."

For membership-based organizations there are many design opinion leaders who consistently attend conferences. They are critical because they create a continuity of knowledge and history. Fluctuating participants are often motivated by curiosity or fear of a particular subject area in which they want to acquire knowledge in order to continue to be professionally relevant.

Most conferences need the following ingredients to be viable: A hot issue or topic, rhetorical language that plays on a number of levels and a venue that offers an interesting backdrop. In addition to the key personalities who provide the right veneer, most conferences also include some reference to skill development and social activities that allow peer networking—informal employment components. These factors are blended together, and depending on the type of conference, they are marketed to potential attendees in the right dose to assure registration.

Three elements in particular seem to fuel this trend: Brand, technology and marketing:

1. Brand went from something that described a packaged good to an all-encompassing concept that became a touchstone for life itself. Because this term became a code-word for competitive edge, many organizations realized that if they exploited brand, they could create more conferences through a diversity of media, market and ideological issues.

2. Technology and the digital revolution have blurred the distinctions between front and back end where conferences showcased the best of particular digital media with the proper amount of incendiary rhetoric. Design was relegated to the role of

creating needed production assets, or improving the overall look and feel of digital solutions.

3. Marketing, which used to be a stable domain of advertising agencies, public relations firms and direct marketers, has subsumed design within integrated marketing, a discipline that encompasses a very large and diverse set of professionals.

To better understand their rationale and motivations in developing conferences and what impact they hope these events will have on the future behavior of their participants, I contacted several key individuals who are responsible for developing conferences:

Kristina Goodrich, President of Industrial Design Society of America (IDSA)

Ric Grefé,* Executive Director of AIGA

Victor Margolin, Professor at University of Illinois at Chicago

Bryn Mooth,* Executive Editor of *How* magazine

Martin Pendersen, Editor of *Metropolis* magazine

Kim Rivelle,* Institute for International Research (IIR)

Adèle Naudé Santos, President of the Aspen Design Conference

John Tobin,* Vice President of the Design Management Institute (DMI)

Thierry Van Kerm, Director of the IcoGrada Secretariat

Richard Wurman, TEDMED

* Responded

Each organization has either a specific membership market delineated by design discipline or access to cross-market participation.

I augmented the interviews by visiting specific design membership Internet sites. Online access to information has helped facilitate communications on conferences because it has helped planners to accelerate marketing messages and registration



transactions. Web sites have also allowed organizations to document conferences and deliver conference activities to several locations simultaneously through streaming video ("Living Surfaces" had done this for overflow registrants). *How* magazine says the internet "has definitely shaped how we share information—not only is it our best promotional vehicle for our events, but it allows us to post content and background from individual conference sessions and to connect attendees via a discussion forum.

One could draw parallels between the growth of the Internet and the explosion of design conferences, a confluence of factors that has created a perfect launching and landing platform for conference organizers. Yet, as Kim Reville of the IIR has said, "As far as the Internet (and webinars) is concerned, our level of attendee would not sit in front of a computer for two days." John Tobin, vice president of DMI has commented that the Internet has created opportunities for webcasts and posting of conference presentations to participants, but DMI has not increased their number of conferences due to the Internet.

Many of the respondents agreed that there has been a substantial

increase in the number of design conferences, and that these conferences often compete for the same pool of attendees. Ric Grefé took it further by stating, "It appears that a number of conferences have been initiated with revenue as the principal goal and without a clear sense of curatorial purpose." Contrasting this comment, Tobin asserted that there are not too many design conferences, and, "overall we believe the quality has improved over time."

Grefé commented that AIGAs conferences are targeted at opinion leaders and seasoned designers, though a larger diverse group participates. AIGA conferences are structured to "help attendees think beyond the bounds of daily routine as a result of the conference experience and, hopefully, to feel stimulated in pursuit of new directions." He also stated that: "Good conferences should stimulate attendees by seeding ideas in different ways to approach creative challenges, exposing them to others' views toward complex problems, demonstrating great design as a source of inspiration, introducing unmitigated fun to a busy schedule, and making them feel proud to be part of a remarkable pro-

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Conferences, while a function of membership based organizations—are also a business.

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fession with the power to change economies, culture and society.... Conferences are not seen as end-experiences. They are seen as the beginning of a thread of discussion within the profession."

Tobin further commented that attendees benefit from the "exchange of ideas through presentations and structured discussions, and the facilitation of networking," and that DMI's conferences "provide a valuable service to attendees that directly results in improvements in how they contribute to the effective management of design within their organizations."

The role of sponsors such as employment agencies, magazines, and corporations may implicitly skew a conference, creating a situation where attendees become "customers" and inject a shifting agenda with conference attendees. Also, organizations whose main source of revenue comes from conference receipts rely on these events as a business stream. Grefé acknowledges that AIGA's conferences "have accounted for substantial contributions of revenue in past years," but that "membership dues should be the most important source of revenue—otherwise the purpose of the organization may shift away from serving members." For example, IIR, an independent business information company, focuses primarily on training

and events. It has a large footprint with marketing conferences, and through its Design Alliance arm caters to specific design communities. Most organizers echoed these comments from Mooth:

"Sponsors are involved in the 'HOW Conference' primarily as exhibitors in the Resource Center; likewise with the business conference, albeit on a smaller level. Some sponsors choose to conduct demonstrations or educational seminars, or host receptions during the event, but those activities are not part of the main conference program and are offered to attendees free of charge. Sponsors do not influence primary conference programming."

For conference organizers, the success of a particular conference may depend on whether or not an event made a profit and created the right "buzz" to its members and the press. Sponsors qualify a conference as a success if their name and recognition gets the right "spin" to increase their influence or value. DMI "[has] an evaluation form that is consistent in format for all of our conferences, and data is tabulated in a spreadsheet to provide comparative data for all conferences. We also evaluate the conference based on attendance numbers and profitability." For atten-

dees, the success of a conference is determined by whether or not the social activities, venue, people and content were inspiring enough to carry them another year.

Conferences—while a function of membership based organizations—are also a business. Rivielle stated it more directly, "The conference industry is well versed in the risks associated with producing events. As the supply of conferences outweighs the market needs for those events, more and more of them need to be cancelled. The cost of canceling an event can be quite severe." Tobin also noted that, due to scarcity of participant budgets, DMI has been reducing fees and introducing smaller, regional conferences.

The Limits and Possibilities of Conferences

Over the past fifteen years, I have attended approximately thirty diverse conferences. While these gatherings were interesting, I have been left with a sense of unease at the increase in frequency of design conferences and the disproportionate decrease of progress in the shape, practice and footprint of design. If we took at face value all the prognostications and rhetoric generated at design conferences, we would be left with the impression that design is the central force in business and society, one that is above the failings of the consumer and profit-minded environment that we interact with. In a world where discourse is reduced to opinion and editorializing, design conferences and their participants at times take rhetorical propaganda to new heights that cannot be realistically proven or acted upon. Yet, proving this rhetoric to be realistic may not be their function.

What design conferences usually avoid, or cannot create is what professor Jay Forrester from MIT calls a "problematique," or problem statement, which could be changed and developed over time to incorporate new data.¹ While design conferences claim to be a forum on

important issues that face designers, the unfortunate reality is that they become forums for disconnected and questionable hypotheses with few guiding problematques to ground participants.

Victor Margolin, author of the book *The Politics of the Artificial*, and a frequent conference attendee, speaks of a lack of a "single design culture in the United States or elsewhere within which connections between views and positions could be easily made." He goes on to state that "issues and problems tend to be framed in terms of isolated conversation communities, groups who evolve their own terms, frames of reference, rhetorical strategies, and issues and speak primarily to each other."²

The design world in general and graphic design in particular recognizes that we live in a world of highly complex problems requiring teams to develop solutions. At present however, a designer's education and subsequent professional mindset are still firmly in the "I" world of individual achievement, not the "we" of networks and collaboration. The emphasis on the individual is reinforced by conference organizers who stress individual personalities and individuality with the guiding mindset that "the art of design is a solitary act, and the business of design is a competitive field."

This may be due in part to a designer's lack of confidence, insecurity in sharing "control" and not having the language to collaborate well with others. A majority of graphic designers are taught little about verbal communication techniques to collaborate and much of general design practice is based upon personal knowledge that is not codified and cannot be coherently shared with others. Therefore, there are few common principles that bind graphic design, and it is unrealistic to think that these principles could link other

design disciplines together. Tobin pointed out that DMI conferences "are not intended to produce structured findings; however, the interaction and the viewpoints expressed at conferences definitely affect the organization's goals and initiatives."

If you multiply findings by the number of conferences, the design communities are left with many options, but there may be questionable clarity. Margolin observes that "because there have been no shared standards that define professional development, nor has there been a common knowledge base to ground a definition of what graphic design is, its development has been largely intuitive and does not conform to a common set of principles shared by all designers."³ This situation is a goldmine for conference organizers because they can essentially create hybrid events that include a cacophony of interesting people and topics, with little that bind them together in terms of pragmatic application. The only accountabilities lie in making the conference interesting, not in creating or addressing a shared problematique over time.

Design, by its very nature, is synthetic and expansive, making connections to seemingly unrelated phenomena. Sustaining these connections to something that is meaningful and useful to a majority of designers is another issue. Designers, like most human beings, would like to see themselves as protean figures. But for most of us this goal is unrealistic. At many design conferences, we find a cacophony of ideas spun out from concepts borrowed from other professions. Established mythologies continue to be propagated. A recent invitation for AIGA Gain announces that "the strategic integration of design, marketing, communication and product development are critical in moving beyond the universal branding concept that defined the last economic cycle." Unfortunately, design, marketing and other creative

disciplines do not have a shared language that allows them to effectively collaborate, and each sees the other as part of their domain.

What my search into the world of conference development and management reveals is the fractured state of the design and marketing world, a state mirrored by the plethora of conferences aligned with creative functions or media formats. While they share needed information, they also propagate stovepipe thinking, which squanders the very limited resources of professional design organizations. Rivielle noted that IIR has approached design organizations to collaborate and pool resources:

"More and more events are being offered at a time when budgets are cut and travel is limited. It's becoming increasingly more difficult for business professionals to choose between events as they find themselves inundated with conference literature on events that are often similar in content. I propose more strategic alliances in the community across associations, publications and conference organizers whereby the pooling of resources would result in a reduced number of very well attended forums to be grown from year to year."

There are legitimate reasons to develop and attend conferences, which fulfill a need for people to meet face to face to discuss and exchange ideas, trends and skills. What seems to be missing is the presence of measurable and meaningful results that benefit the design community—beyond short-term inspiration. In the end, graphic designers are left with an explosion of conference choices, many interesting themes, few tools that can help a group or individuals, and no real plan to help advance the practice of graphic design. What's needed is a critical review of conferences with regard to their rationale, structure and ability to benefit a design discipline. Otherwise

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they will continue to be composed of titillating collections of rhetorical statements that stay within the realm of collective entertainment—forums without principle.

Design organizations are limited in affecting policy or even the actions of its membership. Design conferences are opt-in, open enrollment events which are aimed at exposing members and participants to ideas and concepts which may have a limited effect on follow-on activities that could lead to larger collective efforts. Given the new realities of doing more with less, it may be time for the design community and its design organizations to pool their limited resources and cooperate on initiatives to strengthen the visibility and practice of design. There could be several scenarios to consider:

1. Multiple design organizations could coordinate on specific initiatives that would benefit their combined memberships or communities by improving the visibility and practice of design.
2. Specific trends can be defined to integrate and strengthen the practice and visibility of design.
3. Specific workshops could be held at conferences to address or define initiatives that could be developed over time through communities of interest in association with organizations.
4. Web-based tools, such as weblogs or intranets, could be developed for use in real-time communications to help support a distributed work community and encourage the easy exchange of ideas.

AIGA has moved in the direction of scenario #1 by subdividing its conferences by communities of interest. AIGA currently offers "Grow," "Gain,"

and "Voice." Conference organizers and conference participants need one another to work in a directed fashion to solve chronic problems or provide performance tools that can help design be relevant to peers, clients and society at large. Both parties need to keep each other accountable and focused by maximizing what each needs from the other—resources and support from design organizations and skills and market experience from professionals.

Non-membership based organizations such as paper companies and conference developers should support specific initiatives and stop creating superfluous design conferences. This is critical if design is to slow or reverse its downward slide of commodification and unfocused intellectual diffusion.

Professor Wayne Baker of the University of Michigan has raised questions about the possibilities and limits of social capital. His premise differentiates traditional networking from social capital which "depends on the resources of the people and organizations in a network, the configuration or structure of the social network, and the strategies to tap into these resources." Social networks can build cooperation, norms of engagement and a spirit of trust. The composition and focus of the network can create opportunities for mutually beneficial change. Unfortunately, conference organizers and attendees confuse networking with creating a network, which is currently lacking within design. Design organizations, while well-intentioned to serve their constituencies, cannot advance the field of design due to their inability, or lack of interest in reaching across to other organizations to develop a shared problematique or agenda to focus resources and people.

AIGA, DMI, Society for Environmental Graphic Design, American Association of Advertising Agencies, American Institute of Architects, ICOGRADA, ICSID, IDSA and other organizations should formalize the lines of communication among one another. This will require clarity of purpose and an understanding of what their memberships would gain by coordinating their efforts. Identifying benefits of how design as a whole (and as a series of individual disciplines) can interact with business organizations (profit and business motive), governmental entities (policy motive) and non-governmental entities (social motive) will better position design as a credible force for change and give individuals the direction, language, tools and networks to be successful.

Until then, design conferences will continue to grow to serve the ever-increasing diversity of attendees—from traditional graphic designers to creative strategists. This "big tent" inclusion strategy that houses many skills, operational contexts and goals is interesting, but will continue to have limited effect on attendee behavior and collective benefit. The continuing problem facing graphic design is not that there is too much individual capital, but that we lack the networks required to build stronger social capital. Developing a "problematique" that would focus energies and conversations would go farther in empowering designers and increasing the visibility and inclusion of design on a larger world stage. But are we capable of creating one?

References:

1. Margolin, Victor. *The Politics of the Artificial* (University of Chicago Press : Chicago), 2002. Page 81
2. Ibid, page 15-17
3. Ibid, page 197