

THE DESIGN OF PROSPERITY SUMMIT

The need for a new attitude to the future, to how society, business, politics must change to allow for the many radical changes in the environment, in the structure of energy production, in population expansion, and wealth distribution is what triggered Simonetta Carbonaro, Professor of Design Management and Humanistic Marketing at the Swedish Textile School of the Borås University College to set up this very ambitious and exciting conference, inviting a wide range of personalities from the worlds of economics, science, social sciences and art, all very aware of the crucial issues that await us, to discuss and suggest possible guidelines along which one may begin to address these very delicate issues.

Simonetta Carbonaro is not new to these kinds of exploits, she is a firm believer in the need for change and innovation to be introduced in many walks of life, but particularly in production and design processes. It is in these areas that real dynamism and readiness for change can be found, and consequently this is where, in all likelihood, many of the world's problems must find their solution.

It is also not surprising that this conference is to take place in Sweden, a country that was one of the first to embrace the concepts of the modernist age including industrial production, developing extremely successful designs and production processes in the 50's and 60's where very utilitarian precepts were matched by simple, functional yet at the same time strikingly poetic designs. Sweden is also a country that believes in the collective well-being of its people, and its politics and policies cater for the essential needs of the entire population. Thus Sweden is one of the first countries to institute an official sustainability program within its own government initiatives, witnessed by events such as the 2005 Conference on Sustainability in Malmö for example. Lastly, besides having a very open-minded outlook towards the various points of view and perspectives introduced by globalisation, it is also among one of the first countries to seriously address these issues and to begin establishing policies within its own boundaries aiming to counter the growing depletion of fossil fuel reserves, widespread environmental damage, global warming and the consequences it brings with it.

But this is not just another conference about the environment, or global warming, or any other specific issue, this conference is about method, about how these issues can and must be tackled by fostering a wide range of different approaches, and most importantly the stimulus provided by artists, sociologists, philosophers and theologians as well as economists, scientists and enlightened entrepreneurs. The very careful selection of the panel of speakers illustrates this very point.

If Jeremy Rifkin's ideas on the development of hydrogen fuel cells and a widespread energy production network backed by a humanist view of future political and economic development were good enough to earn him the role of advisor to the EU Commission, to the Leader of the German Federal Government Angela Merkel, as well as to the Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi, and allow him to contribute to the shaping and policies of Europe, Oliviero Toscani's world celebrated Benetton United Colors' advertising campaign probably did as much for racial and human rights equality. His provocative advertising statements, which focused attention on dramatic world issues such as the death penalty while still advertising a brand, just prove how much we need to be told something meaningful, even when we act as consumers. Oliviero Toscani is convinced that there is no communication without some form of risk, the risk of being misunderstood perhaps, but also the risk of trying to say something worthwhile, in every situation. This credo is perhaps very important for the world of design today, but also to almost any human activity. A case in point, Nathalie du Pasquier, a successful designer and founder member of the legendary design group Memphis in Milan, decided that design (for her but perhaps in general) was past and now was the time of Art.

From then she completely abandoned designing and turned to painting. A need to communicate that could not be kept down. Is there a lesson for someone here?

Design and production are currently facing a dilemma. It is becoming increasingly difficult for marketing to pander to the wishes of its clientele rather than address its needs. And many of these needs in the affluent west are already catered for, and what with all the turmoil wrought by 9/11 and the collapse of the e-economy, marketing strategies now find they have to be linked to the prospective of a future prosperity, towards a kind of consumption that makes “sense” – that has its purpose - for those engaging in it. This is why Toscani’s message has been so successful. People start to feel there is more than just consumption in their act of purchasing nowadays. According to Simonetta Carbonaro “consumers today are simply discovering that they have learnt to chose, to select, to evaluate and judge consumer objects on the basis of their moral, civil and even religious values, that had not been wiped out by the last two post-modern decades as we had been led to believe, but had just lain dormant, simply in order to understand how, when and how, if reinstated, they could help point towards a personal, yet not individualistic, satisfaction”. And this is a need. As Raymond Pannikar, co-director of the Parliament of World Religions and another of the conference speakers states, people are more likely to need to encounter joy and beauty, rather than wealth that is no guarantee of happiness. By the same token Lucy Orta, an English artist and conference speaker who develops work in a very social context has felt the need, right from the outset, to provide shelter for those who have none, and this has led to the creation of “habitents” and “refuge wear”, highly technological and functional articles designed to provide the homeless with a minimum of comfort and some kind of wearable “home”. She has also been engaged in artistic activities involving large scale recycling of discarded food, which she has converted into jams and sauces and then served to the French most prominent people, business and politics decision makers. In order to do this she has designed mobile recycling kitchens, which enable one to recycle many food materials on site. These objects, despite their functional purpose, are nevertheless thought provoking art works.

Safia Minney on the other hand seems to addressing the same issues yet from a different angle. She turned her concern for others into a viable business by setting up her Fair Trade company and a fashion label called People Tree. She is largely responsible for putting to rest the concept that Fair Trade products are necessarily expensive for what you get (a form of charity) and usually devoid of style. Her clothes and accessories are sold in over 30 stores throughout the world, stocked by major world brands such as Topshop and Selfridges and have been the recipients of many design prizes. Her companies work in partnership with local producers and guarantee employment and ensure proper working conditions for workers in the more remote corners of Asia, Latin America and Africa.

If these are the very down to earth, practical ways by which the problems of global production and wealth redistribution can be addressed, Derrick de Kerckhove, John Thackara and to some extent Joe Friggieri work on a more theoretical level. Derrick de Kerckhove is director of the McLuhan Program in Culture & Technology and Professor at the University of Toronto and has dedicated much of his recent work to understanding the ways in which technology and society interact and how the e-culture, despite the dot.com collapse, is nevertheless shaping the way we live and act particularly in the political and social arena. De Kerckhove was born and brought up for the first part of his life in India and Pakistan, so he is very aware of the gulf that separates the haves and have nots of this world and this has coloured his approach to new technologies. The development of social software and the sharing of information via the net according to De Kerckhove leads to a shift from production to service and maintenance of information. The effects of this shift are still in their early stages, it is difficult to understand where this transformation will take us, but De Kerckhove believes that information processing systems or psychotechnologies as he terms them,

being based on language and its manipulation will in the long run affect the way we think (and act!). Just as the “connected” society, through access to blogs, chats and forums will gradually develop some form of coherence and political relevance which in the global age may lead to some forms of virtual democracy developing in certain areas.

John Thackara on the other hand believes that our communication structures, even the architectural layout of our towns and cities should and will change by developing structures providing two-way communication, an interactive approach to urban planning rather than the one way traffic provided by stadiums, auditoriums, museums and conventions centres. As a designer he believes in the need for wide ranging collaboration between planners, policy makers, designers, producers, but also the citizens themselves and even artists who can bring certain problems into focus in a much more radical way. An approach that is very likely to be approved by Joe Friggieri, the Dean of the Philosophy Faculty of the University of Malta (but also a writer, a poet and theatre director) asks himself whether hope and beauty can be designed and add sense to people’s lives. He will argue that this is possible through a short dissertation and a reading of one of his short tales that perhaps will be even more enlightening.

All these extraordinary speakers gathering together at The Design of Prosperity Summit in Borås certainly have different attitudes, different approaches, and perhaps different goals, but their particular brand of optimism or provocation can bring issues into focus, and this is what the world, but also the productive strands of society are certainly in need of.

There is perhaps no need to explain further, the conference offers a very broad, yet specialised outlook on the problems facing designers, businesses, manufacturers and policy makers in a way that should lead to very lively discussion and hopefully a few pointers as to where to go from here. Clearly the problems at hand are not likely to be solved overnight, but that this meeting may introduce seeds for further discussions of this sort, and a method of discussion that allows as many possible, even contrasting viewpoints and approaches is certainly to be hoped for, and if its organiser, The Swedish School of Textiles and its pioneering Design Management and Humanistic Marketing Research Team have anything to do with it, it is unlikely that anyone will go away empty handed.

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