

Ljubljana Design Festival, 23. – 24. Oktober 2008

## **Where do we go from here, when change is the only constant?**

Ladies and gentlemen:

When I was invited to the Ljubljana Design Festival in spring to speak about this year's topic „Experience“, I chose to talk about my own experiences and observations and project those observations against the forthcoming challenges for designers in general.

So my agenda is the following:

- how design lost it's touch to society
- how can design regain a valuable position in society ?
- design and politics
- example „melt“
- resumé

### **1. How design lost it's touch to society:**

Why do I go back on my introduction to the Bauhaus 90 years ago? Because I want to show that design in the European tradition always had various dimensions which got lost in the 1980's of 20th. century:

Let's face it: the Bauhaus and the Ulm school were reactions to worldwar 1 and 2, the agenda of both schools was deeply influenced by the trauma of a worldwar and both school taught design as a way of shaping a better society. Thus their approach was highly political and it was almost logical, that both schools became problems with their local governments and both schools were closed mainly for political reasons.

Even so both schools had a very short span of ten years, they highly influenced the way, the postwar designer were educated:

Design as a discipline, connecting ethical values and aesthetics with industrial innovations, creating a better life, a better society.

Then came the IT Revolution:

In 1982 the Unesco called out the year of the computer, I designed the world's first laptop computer and in 1983, the American Time Magazine did not name „**its annual man of the year**“ but named the Computer as „Machine of the year“.

The computer and later the internet started the acceleration of all industrial processes, industry became globalized as well as the markets. Thus marketing, a discipline, developed in the USA after 2nd worldwar suddenly became the dominant factor in product planning, product innovation and product design.

But marketing is a unethical discipline as Peter Ulrich from the the St. Gallen University in CH marks. Marketing doesn't know good or bad, helpful or unhelpful

products, good or bad design, marketing only knows markets and sales figures and thus design changed its basic character in the course of the 1980's and 90's from an independent specialists to a profession, that supports marketing selling more products and designing cool corporate design.

The IT revolution and the acceleration of industrial processes also changed the design process: in the analog times, design was imbedded in a serial process. In the digital age everything happens in parallel processes, everybody is connected and linked. More faster, more formats, more ways - is the operative environment, design functions within. To make a long story short, in this permanent race, design lost its cultural notion.

## **2. How can design regain a valuable position in society?**

The question to me is how we as designers can regain a valuable position in society (not just for marketing)? It is not easy to answer the question - what does valuable mean:

The British philosopher and Nobel Prize winner Bertrand Russell wrote in his unpopular essays 1950:

Change is scientific,  
Progress is ethical.  
Change is undoubtable  
Progress is questionable

So the answer to this question lies in the ethical and sociocultural sphere, it certainly has various dimensions. We all think that the cultural dimension of design has deteriorated in view of our global economy and global village but it is exactly the globalisation which might open new doors to design:

My oldest son brought back this shopping bag from India, where he found it on a street market. To me this bag wonderfully displays, how design can play with global and local patterns at the same time.

The bag is inspired by bags from China, which of course are copies from the USA. So this bag is a copy of a copy, but the way it is crafted is so typically Indian, that it is unique: The material is very rough cotton, not plastic and the logo is hand-drawn with those very cheap marks from China, and have a look at the decor stripes around the Nike logo: That is true Indian culture, So this bag is unique by bringing together an originally American brand, with Chinese copy products and Indian heritage.

The point I want to make, is that design should pay more responsibility to any society's „Cultural basement“ or heritage. Design has lost its cultural connotation in the last 20 years and it is a good thing to work against the „Mc Donalds culture where every hamburger looks and tastes the same in any country in the world.

## **3. Design and Politics**

Speaking generally, the biggest challenge for designers are our shortening resources and its consequences for society in general: I am always wondering why

designers do not engage in this discussion. The current architectural bienale in Venice is all about the role of architecture in view of the energy crisis and we as designers do absolutely nothing, we don't even think.

The simplest question would be:

How can we add value to products when we know, that 80% of all resources-related decisions are made during the design process.

Ofcourse that means that design must get involved with politics which it always was in it's best times during the bauhaus phase and the ulm school.

I am one of the curators of the foundation of the ulm school and for three years we are running now the program

„designing politics - the politics of design“

In our application for the competition we were writing:

Given the large current and future challenges, the social responsibility of the designer is more timely than ever. Submitted projects should address the large global, national, regional and local issues in the field of design, politics, society and culture, in particular the human and creative power of judgement.

What kind of freedom and research is essential?

Not only to reflect the political responsibility of the designer, but also make it visible?

#### **4. Example „melt“**

I brought something with me for the conference, it is not a project, just an idea in view of the current discussion in Europe about nuclear power.

Designers must position themselves in the political discussion and they must cover those topics, where politicians and industry have lost the debate for instance about future energy sources.

I am by no means a nuclear power aficionado but I deeply disguise the triviality of its public debate: It is either yes or no to nuclear power, either hate or love, either “industrial cartel” or “green anarchy”. A rational discussion about technology and the man-machine-interface (MMI) of nuclear power plants does not and can not take place. However this discussion must start one day and it will become also a design discussion, since many technical problems in nuclear power plant start with a MMI problem.

A fictive computer game should be designed to eliminate our mental roadblocks. The game, I call it “*melt!*” is about controlling a nuclear power plant, similar to gaming software like autopilot: The simulation of flying a plane is not so different from controlling a power plant.

The control engineering of both systems depends solely on physical parameters and the interactive communication through a logical and intuitive MMI. Playing “*melt!*” could create awareness for the complexity of nuclear technology without playing down any risks. Thus “*melt!*” should start a non-political discussion about how

technological innovation and design can improve the transparency and security of nuclear power in order to regain trust. *“melt!”* should also create awareness among designers that design is not just a discipline, castrated by industry and solely adding hollow aesthetics along its marketing-mix strategy.

## **5. Resumée**

So far nobody has a clear understanding of how exactly the forthcoming changes will affect our daily lives, specially in view of the current financial crisis, but we feel that the years of unlimited consumerism and a purely market orientated design-approach are over. Since the 70<sup>th</sup> of the last century, design has given up it's role of being a critical but inspirational political force, pointing at nuisances in society by offering alternatives through the means of design. Designers and design schools in western Europe and the US have given up this position. They have surrendered to a globalized economy and a global market that seems to dictate our entire private and professional life.

In order to cope with shortening energy resources, we don't just need more coal or nuclear power instead of oil. We need an entirely new set of (moral) values that help us to cope with the new situation of living with “less”. But where does the “design” for the new way of living with less come from? Politics? No, because politicians in our media-driven society will always be afraid of loosing voters with unpopular steps against consumers and industry lobbies (instead of promoting a fundamental shift of paradigms, they fight about minor tax subsidies for heating and gas). Industry? Partly yes, because markets are very dynamic and industry reacts quickly to any changes, but only in a linear way.

Actually we don't know, where the inspiration for changes will come from, because we don't know, how our alternatives look like. Designers must create these alternatives as scenarios to help people understand, how these changes will affect them and what options they have. Experience shows that the sooner we start, the more alternatives we might have. It will need experience and bold new thinking at the same time to create these scenarios and it will be our biggest task to overcome our experiences, to leave them behind and to reinvent ourselves, stepping into new territory.

**end**