7. Afterword

"Avoidance of difficulty or unpleasantness. Disavowal of extreme situations. Retreat into distraction. These appear to be the hallmarks of the fast-encroaching New Dark Ages". No, these words are not about the U.S. election results. They're a comment by Anne Marie Willis, editor of Design Philosophy Papers, on the state of design research. Having tried, via a mailing list, to engage 1,000 PhD design researchers in environmental issues, all that Willis encountered was "a small flicker of debate". Her conclusion: "There seems to be an inverse relation between the extremity of conditions, and our preparedness to contemplate them".

I don't agree. I was heartened at the TU Delft conference by the preparedness of academics and professionals to confront difficult questions. A lively debate is opening up not just about how we do design research but, more importantly, why we do it – and to what ends.

In 2005, for example, a new product was launched every three-and-a-half minutes. That's quite an impediment to what Brenda Laurel called "finding the void" – that neglected empty space where a novel product can be brought into existence.

For Kun Pyo-Lee, too, the designer's job these days has a lot to do with "identifying unspoken needs". Gillian Crampton Smith also pointed out that "one purpose of design research is the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances, artifacts". But although the speakers at Delft proposed novel ways to find

and occupy voids with products, there was an undercurrent during the informal discussions that questioned whether we should fill up all voids with products at all.

The importance of informal communication was a recurring theme. Many researchers and designers described their work as at least in part a social activity. And often informal. In one intriguing session, practitioners agreed that the composition of project teams is never as formal and static as is often presented. "People float in and out of projects all the time," someone said. The composition of a project team is dynamic, and changes continuously. As a consequence, we find that "a continuous flow of people that plays a vital role in spreading the word."

For Pieter Jan Stappers, these informal, associative, collaborative forms of research are the strength of the design studio, where different designers work, sometimes on different projects with different aims, but "constantly learning from the corner of their eyes, by peeking over each other's shoulders, and by commenting on and borrowing from all these little insights buzzing about the place."

Even in a heavyweight scientific institution like TU Delft, it seems, knowledge is preserved in people rather than only in artefacts or scientific papers. "Informal communication cannot replace formal communication," interjected one professor – perhaps anxious about the future of his job!

Multiple associations

The only problem with informal communication is that it is seldom costed properly when projects are being designed. The total cost of ownership (TCO) of a design research project would be higher in most cases if we made more realistic budgets for things like co-ordination and communication. These membrane-like activities are vital, but often don't get paid for, even though we do the work. (Or else, if we knew the true time costs, but could not get them included in the budget, then maybe we wouldn't do the project).

Designers, academics and companies tend to understand 'design research' in different ways. The words trigger multiple associations: technology scoping, market research, product development, trend forecasting. Five years ago, most of the academics would have said that these activities were not 'research' as they understood the term. But to judge by the Delft event, hard-and-fast distinctions between formal and informal knowledge are fast breaking down. A 'best practice', for example, is hard to document, or make objective. Practices, by definition, are rooted in a social and technological context. Remember all those new 'pure-play' business models invented by business school academics during the early dot.com boom? Nearly all these platonic concepts failed precisely because they were not rooted in a context. Academic research can draw our attention to new ways of working but I'm sceptical that academic research, by itself, can innovate methods out of context.

But the relative isolation from context apart, the academy has a role to play in reflection, criticism, and evaluation of the bigger picture. We need a critical debate about the concept of an 'un-met need,' for example.

If I reflect, after the meeting, on success factors for design research and the treatment of design knowledge, three things stand out for me. First, locate at least part of the project in a real-world context. I heard no convincing examples of purely theoretical design research. Second, design research should involve the innovative re-combination of actors among the worlds of science, government, business, and education. Third, if the results (and value) of design research are to be shared effectively, communication and dissemination methods need to be designed (and budgeted) in at the start. Stores of knowledge, put together by academic researchers, may be less useful in this context (remembering the recent failures of knowledge management) than *flows* of knowledge.

In the end, it is not a matter of either-or - academic vs. worldly research - but of both-and. This both-and conclusion raises tricky issues. *Systematic collaboration between academics and practitioners implies institutional and attitudinal transformation.* Does this transformation process need to be designed? This would be a worthy subject for a follow-up meeting.

John Thackara, May 2006