The Best Design Policies Are Local: A review of the Shaping the Global Design Agenda Conference

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Photo: Ornella Orlandini | Torino World Design Capital

Review by Mark Vanderbeeken (Experientia) and Marcia Caines (Cluster)

The days after the American presidential election are clearly a period of reflection. Newspapers and magazines are full of thoughtful articles, and conferences seek to define the new agendas and directions for our world to move towards.

The World Economic Forum gathered about 700 global thought leaders in Dubai for a summit on some of the key issues on the global agenda.

An international conference in Turin, Italy, last week had a much narrower focus, and tried to outline what constitutes **good design policy**.

The event, which was organised by Torino 2008 World Design Capital in collaboration with **Michael Thomson**, director of Design Connect (London), comes at a time when a major discussion is emerging internationally on design policy and innovation.

Now also the European Commission is looking at design as a tool for innovation, in the hope of creating a shared European design policy, while the Italian Government is working on the same for Italy.

Shaping the Global Design Agenda brought some of the main design policy thinkers and stakeholders together in one room.

Michael Thomson
Photo: Ornella Orlandini | Torino World Design Capital

> *"This is the first platform [on design policy] where different nations from around the world can share their knowledge, insights and challenges and learn from each other, in order to effect better policies in their countries or trading blocks (EU),"* said the cordial and gregarious Thomson during his introduction.

> *"By bringing together many stakeholders within this previously unacknowledged international community of practice, we hope to influence nations to build better design policies that will promote social, economic and sustainable goals, practice and behaviour, will improve societies and not least, will enable the growth of design as a common language for all."*

The presentations were aimed at sharing best practices, with presenters relaying their own approaches, both good ones and questionable practices, and with the designers making the strongest and most impactful pleas.

Torino World Design Capital organised in parallel International Design Casa, a series of exhibitions where fifteen countries showed off their design context in ten amazing venues across the city (provided free of charge by the city), and a handover to the next World Design Capital: Seoul, Korea.

The International Design Casa and the Design Policy Conference are 'signature' events of ICSID/IDA's World Design Capital project and will therefore be repeated in Seoul in 2010.

This article below is not a direct conference report, but a reflection by two observers--**Mark Vanderbeeken** of Experientia, supported by **Marcia Caines** of Cluster--who care about design and policy, and are opinionated in their ideas about the matter.

Thanks also to Michael Thomson whose notes were very helpful in compiling this article.


Peter Zec
Photo: Michele d'Ottavio | Torino World Design Capital

Design's Role in Urban Transformation
Peter Zec, the founding chair of the World Design Capital project, was one of the introductory speakers and he brought a distinctive marketing message, which was surprising given the fact that Turin, Italy, as the first World Design Capital, was anything but a marketing project.

According to Zec, ICSID's new initiative can help cities better position
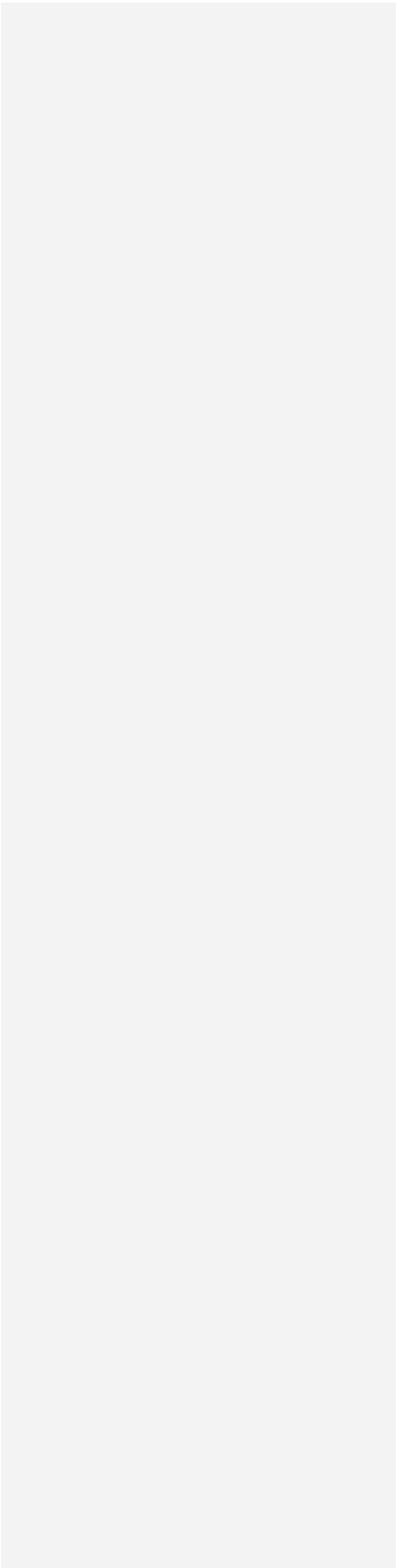
themselves, gives them a better image and increased visibility, attracts investors and creative people, improves their quality of life, and will set up new public-private partnerships.

That may all be true, but we were always told that the title of World Design Capital is conferred to cities that use design as a strategic tool in their transformation.

Turin, Italy is a good example of this transformational capacity of cities. The story of Turin is a strong and exemplary one, and it was a strange omission for it not to be told at this Turin conference, especially since it is so instructive for future World Design Capitals, and for design policy in general.

Turin transformed itself not through marketing and image building, but through a concerted and long-term investment in its very infrastructure.

The first stage of this transformation was urbanistic: a new strategic plan set out the future urban development of the city, moved a lot of the public services from the historic city centre to a new boulevard about 1 kilometre west, and stimulated the transformation of old industrial areas into new mixed work/living/entertainment areas. Add to that a new metro system, restoration and pedestrianisation in the city centre and you realise how much the city physically changed.

A second stage, which started a bit later, has been Turin's commitment to culture and the arts, with the city organising a wide range of initiatives, many of which of international standing, which attracted large amounts of visitors and made creative people interested and eager to move to the city.

The third stage is the organisation of major events -- including the 2006 Winter Olympics -- which actually crowned the achievements of the city, rather than created them. This also applies to the 2008 Torino World Design Capital project.

In and by itself this 2008 initiative wouldn't have meant much without the approximately 20 years of strategic planning and activities that preceded it.

The transformation of Turin therefore has been a huge and long-term undertaking, which was done with great competence, and which we -- as Turin inhabitants -- sometimes take so much for granted that we forget to tell this story.

Fortunately we now have people in town like Bruce Sterling, who became excited about the transformational power of this city, and who has been an articulate and thoughtful spokesperson for the story of its change.

It remains to be seen how the city will weather the global economic storm, which is now blowing its ice-cold winds down the Alps, but at least Turin is much better prepared than many other cities that didn't have such foresight and commitment to change.

Song Weizu
Photo: Michele d'Ottavio | Torino World Design Capital

Design as a Lubricant for Industrial Growth

Song Weizu is the secretary general of the Beijing Industrial Design Promotion Organisation. Weizu is not a designer, but a very committed civil servant, and that defined his entire presentation.

His vision was the state vision -- design is a lubricant for industrial growth -- yet it was strangely refreshing to have it spelled out so clearly and to hear a detailed overview of what is actually going on in the Chinese design world, purely in terms of implementation and numbers.

His talk was also revealing. The economic crisis has demonstrated to China that simple production for Western countries is not enough. China wants to create its own products and industrial design is therefore more crucial than ever. They now have 500,000 design graduates, but "we still need to learn." China is working on a design policy and design centres are sprucing up all over the place.

Weizu was not hiding the facts. The good stuff was there, but also the bad: "We are still behind". His honesty was appreciated and made his talk -- given the big numbers of Chinese demographics-- even more powerful.

"We are heading for a quantum leap in the next five to ten years."

Photo: Michele d'Ottavio | Torino World Design Capital

The West is inundated with cheap Chinese design, but China has a wonderful and deeply historically engrained design sensitivity. We just donâ€™t see it very often outside of China.

This will change. The Beijing Olympics were a striking example of what the Chinese can do. Take a look at the website. Check the opening ceremony again. The design was spectacular.

We in the design community often tend to think of the world as consisting of a Western sphere that is superior in design, and China/India as the factory. Weizu's discourse highlights how wrong we are.

How do we engage with the Chinese design culture? How can it become a win-win for both? How can a design policy relate to this?

Human-Centered Design as a Long-Term Investment

One of the strongest presenters was **Yrjö Sotamaa**, president emeritus

and professor at Helsinki's University of Art and Design (recently featured on Core77 and also interviewed on the Torino World Design Capital website).

In a keynote speech, he described the very impressive design innovation strategy that was developed by the Government of Finland.

Sotamaa is a designer and it shows. The man is a passionate Fin. Very understated, very deadpan ironic, and very committed. As the former president of Finland's top design school, he managed the incredible: convince the government to make design a central part of their innovation policy and then convince the three top universities -- the business, design and engineering universities, each with their 100+ years of history -- to merge into a new innovation university: human-centred, project-based, multidisciplinary, English-spoken.

Just begin to imagine the territorial fights to merge the three best universities in any other country, and you start realising this wasn't an easy battle.

Sotamaa knows this. It is a battle won, but not yet over. He has some mental scars. The Aalto University will start up in the autumn of next year. Sotamaa is proud. He should be.

It all started in 1997, when Finland realised that it wasn't prepared for the future, that the competencies of designers were not meeting the requests from the corporate world.

In 1999, Sotamaa and his network of relations managed to get a sentence into Finland's government programme (which really is a high-level policy document) that said: "integrate design into the national innovation system".

Those seven words changed everything, because design suddenly moved from the cultural world (where design was all about aesthetics) to the innovation realm.

The first step was a 30 million euro research project (which had the politically correct name of "design technology programme"); the second a programme of bringing design thinking into companies -- with an emphasis on user-centred design; and now Finland is about to launch the third and most impressive one: the previously mentioned innovation university.

The latest Finnish government programme reflects Sotamaa's success: design is now required to be permanently on the agenda of all Finnish research and economic organisations.

Design in Sotamaa's mind is user-centred design, with user needs and contexts defining the innovation agenda. It is about design for all and design for non-conventional contexts (e.g. healthcare, local politics, etc.).

So the university he helped conceive is one where designers will day in day out work with engineers and business students on developing user-centred solutions within multidisciplinary projects. Aalto University is all about project-based learning.

It is a courageous move for a small country, and one that undoubtedly will inspire other countries and regions as an example to be followed. It will definitely also prove to be one of the foundations of Finland's long-term economic and social wellbeing.

Design Ought to be Bottom-Up and Socially Involved
David Kester (bio) is the chief executive of the UK Design Council. His presentation was unusual in one remarkable respect. It is the first time I heard a policy person making a user-centred presentation.

Kester explained that he advocated a design-lead approach to policy making, and followed up by introducing four people and their needs: Paul, who is working in the public sector, Caroline, who is a head master, Cheryl who runs a healthcare business, and Pradeep who is in charge of a design company.

The Design Council's approach therefore is all about co-creation with these individuals. This take on co-creation and user-centred design is extremely laudable, and poses a challenge for policy makers: how to integrate participation and user-involvement in a complex and abstract thing such as policy making?

The Design Council, the oldest design organisation in the world, is renowned for spearheading some of the most innovative approaches in design (e.g. service design, sustainable design, design for crime reduction).

Some of the design world's most inspiring people have been working at the Design Council: Hillary Cottam, Richard Eisermann, John Thackara, etc. The Council's public and community engagement is beyond par, and has influenced an entire generation of designers worldwide.

Now these people are influencing design policies elsewhere. Hillary recently had a write-up in the New York Times, Richard is influencing the Belgian government policies, and John is working directly with the North-East region and the city of Saint-Etienne in France (not to mention his many, many indirect influences as author, speaker and event organiser).

The Identity of Design
Ibrahim Al Jaidah, who is the managing director of the 400-person Arab Engineering Bureau in Doha, Qatar, conveyed eloquently and passionately his frustration with the dramatic transformation of his region.

His presentation started off with pictures of Doha in 1950, full of sustainable architecture developed over many generations in an extreme and hostile desert climate. Small windows kept the heat out, and huge air intakes created natural ventilation systems. There were shaded internal courtyards and naturally functioning hot air exhausts.

Then oil came and the Persian Gulf changed dramatically. Now starchitects build their totems without any consideration of what is sustainable or culturally relevant. Developers create new artificial islands, villas with lawns (rather than courtyards), and glass curtain wall towers facing the 50-degree heat.

Qatar may be a kingdom, but in fact it is a developer-led society. There is no design policy and the Qataris are a minority in their own country.

Al Jaidah pleaded for a rethink. He showed some examples of international architects that had actually reflected on the Qatar context and created buildings that were (somewhat) respectful of that. Architecture and design are cultural instruments, according to Al Jaidah. They construe a cultural identity in people. And in Qatar, this cultural identity is bland and non-reflective of the environment. Qatar is rapidly becoming a no-place.

Al Jaidah's presentation was strong for a number of reasons. Not only was this a man driven by a passionate conviction in his ideas, and a deep sense of social responsibility and ethics, but he also voiced concerns that are by no means specific to that region.

We live in a world where cultural identity is promiscuous and fragile. Design policy has a role not only in protecting that identity, but in finding ways to renew it, to give it a new meaning, a new direction. Just like Slow Food did for agriculture and our dinner tables, we need a new

culturally sensitive design policy, that doesn't aim to preserve a pastiche historic identity of a place, but allows a region or city to be invigorated with new meanings and innovative culturally-relevant directions.

Yet, it remains a question if this wonderful, courageous and deeply committed man in Qatar isn't really coming too late with his plea. Qatar and Dubai have hardly anything in common anymore with what they were in the fifties. But Al Jaidah has no choice now but to forge ahead. We hope that he can create a movement, a network, an entity to shape these ideas -- something perhaps that goes beyond Qatar and touches people globally. He seems to be capable of it. The alternative -- becoming a frustrated observer of a home country he doesn't recognise anymore -- is definitely not acceptable.

Perhaps the current slow down, the breaking of the Dubai bubble, will allow him now to advocate his ideas to a more susceptible local audience.

Public Participation in Design for Sustainability
Fumio Hasegawa is an economics graduate of Nagoya City University, and has been employed by the City of Nagoya since 1975 of which he is now deputy director general.

Hasegawa began his presentation by illustrating the fascinating history of the City of Nagoya, from the construction of its castle 400 years ago, to the devastation of World War II and the 1959 Ise Bay Typhoon, to its remarkable turnaround in becoming a prosperous industrial city, home to Toyota, Brothers Industries and more. It is a city with a strong cultural identity and the will to change.

In 1999 Nagoya launched the "Emergency Announcement for Garbage Awareness," a campaign to reduce waste without having to construct a new landfill on the tidal wetland of Fuji-Higata. To achieve this goal, the City of Nagoya called for public cooperation in a huge recycling operation. The target was to reduce waste by 20%. They managed to reduce it by 60%, and the preservation of the tidal wetland was ensured. This successful campaign has made action on a more sustainable future a priority for the city and its citizens.

Of course, this required the tenacity and efforts of city actors like Hasegawa with the support of local government and industries. Yet the collaborative approach in involving the public was quite innovative. Hasegawa explained that it is important to plan how to deliver information to the public, and not hide the problems but to explain them.

The City of Nagoya provides an excellent example of a win-win approach, where the combined efforts of citizens, private organisations, and public entities can, in the face of a crisis, lead to more sustainable behaviours, social well-being and a more promising future.

Shaping Design Policies
So what is a good design policy? We heard the Finnish example. Italy, as the design nation par excellence, also had something to say.

Andrea Granelli is a dynamic person that I got to know at Interaction Design Institute Ivrea, as he was the former CEO of Telecom Italia Lab. Granelli is the son of a well-known and well-respected Italian politician. A substantial section of his website is devoted to his father. Andrea is now a consulting advisor for the Italian Minister of the Economy.

Granelli has an eclectic background: he followed a course in classical studies and a degree in computer science and completed his education with a post-graduate specialisation in diagnostic methods in psychiatry. He ended up in marketing, head of a major research institute, and is now

a dedicated consultant.

In his presentation, Granelli conveyed the ideas of **Claudio Scajola**, Minister of Economy, whom he was representing. But I couldn't help noticing Granelli's commitment to innovation (the "new design frontiers") that he is respected for: design in his mind is also service design, experience design, interface design, and design as a strategic tool for business innovation.

What else is Italy doing in this direction? How is Andrea's personal philosophy influencing Italian design policy? What could be the distinctive Italian contribution to these fields? What is the future Italian design policy, currently in the making?

We are curious and eager to give a hand. Perhaps the way to find out is also to look beyond Italy, e.g. at what the European Commission is aiming at.

Peter Dröll is the EU's head of Innovation Policy Development and the EU is actively seeking to develop a shared design policy framework.

This breakthrough development was apparently in part triggered by recent discussions that Michael Thomson, in his capacity as the current President of BEDA, the Bureau of European Design Associations, conducted with José Manuel Barroso and Günter Verheugen, respectively president and vice-president of the European Commission.

According to Thomson, the very top of the EU is for the first time taking design very seriously as a strategic and tactical component of innovation policy, and as a tool to increase Europe's competitiveness and sustainable growth. This EU commitment will definitely allow Europe to better protect its position as a world design leader.

The EU innovation policy has up till now, said Dröll in his Turin speech, been largely mainstreamed in European policy and through the regional funds 85 billion euro is applied to research and innovation.

The European Commission is now seeking to evolve the next generation innovation policy approach, and to include alternative models than only R&D interventions. Open Innovation and Mass Innovation could be valid approaches, since more and more users rather than manufacturers drive innovation.

Another approach will be to put society (and societal needs) at the heart of the innovation policy, with design and designers acting as agents of change. Dröll pointed out that it might be good to make a link between innovation policy and the UN Millennium Goals or even initiatives such as micro-credits.

Even though some people might see such an approach as belonging to social policy, it is in fact innovation policy. After all, it is the social agenda that provides the strongest rationale for action at the EU level, and where there is the greatest need for public rather than market intervention.

In fact, Dröll said, there is no consensus yet on what design means in the EU context, and a process is needed to generate such consensus.

Design clearly has a key role to play in this next generation innovation policy, and European policy should therefore support design as a tool for innovation.

The European Commission will shortly issue a **consultation document on design** that will be published as what is technically called a "Staff Working Document" during the European Year of Creativity and Innovation in 2009.

This document will provide analysis and economic evidence, describe

the differences in addressing design as a tool for innovation, and address methodological issues to make it easier to measure and compare design's impact on European economies. It will also aim to raise design awareness and facilitate dialogue between the member states.

With this document the Commission hopes to achieve the consensus that Dröll was referring to. Only then the EU can elaborate effective European policy on design as a tool for innovation, that could guide EU Member States on national design promotion strategies.

Discussing Economy, Society and Systemic Global Challenges
Three panels accompanied the conference and went from current practice ("the comfort zone") to some of the biggest global challenges mankind is facing.

Introducing the **first panel--on design and economy**--the panel chair **Jean Schneider** of APCI (French design support organisation) inquired about effective policy models, that encourage the use of design by business, and SMES in particular, that are adaptive to the changing innovation paradigms, and that could also promote non-technological, user-centred innovation.

Photo: Michele d'Ottavio | Torino World Design Capital

Reacting to Schneider, **Giselle Raulik-Murphy** of Design Wales stressed that countries need to come up with their own models, rather than copying the ones implemented elsewhere, as local contexts and needs are often quite different.

Jan R. Stavik of the Norwegian Design Council has been very effective in setting up a national design policy, but underlined that senior civil servants and politicians are often very unfamiliar with the innovation potential of design and Stavik advocated the need for education.

Two unusual design policy models came from Asia.

Mika Takagi of the Policy Office for Design of the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry is conducting a three-year plan called the 'Kansei Initiative--from 'Manufacturing' to 'Storytelling''. This significant programme will promote design as a new competitive advantage of Japanese industry, in order that manufacturing can satisfy not only the material but also the emotional fulfilment of users.

Sun Yixian of the Art Design College of China highlighted the potential of design for crafts, which in rural China is still a very important and culturally rich tradition.

The **second panel debate--design and society**--sought to illuminate

design's relevance to societal issues such as ageing populations and social exclusion, and explored what design strategies might catalyse better cities, better healthcare, and better services for communities and individuals.

Photo: Ornella Orlandini | Torino World Design Capital

Ezio Manzini [pictured above] of the Milan Polytechnic kicked off with a presentation on how design can change consumer behaviours and create sustainable approaches to the everyday.

Photo: Ornella Orlandini | Torino World Design Capital

Sustainable innovation was also very much on the mind of **Leimei Julia Chiu** of the International Design Centre in Japan, whereas two other panellists -- **George Poussin** of UNESCO's Creative Industries section and **Robert Jan Marringa** of Design Connection Brainport, Eindhoven, The Netherlands -- very much stressed the role of creativity in social change.

Dorenda Britten of New Zealand's designindustry, a consultancy company designed to bridge the gap between creativity and business implementation, came back to the theme already introduced by Jan Stavik earlier: education. Also the business world needs a better understanding of design and Britten pleaded for more design education in business schools.

Joachim Spangenberg of the Sustainable Europe Research Institute chaired the **final panel--on design and complexity**-- that sought to explore how nations can work together to build networked design policy in order to address some of the systemic global challenges we are facing as a planet.

Spangenberg asked some very simple, yet very compelling questions. Are we prepared for life after growth? How to live a dignified life without the veil of the growth ideology?

Sustainable design thinker Ezio Manzini highlighted the power of scenario thinking, to imagine how we can make our world differently, whereas Ibrahim Al Jaidah continued on the lines of his earlier keynote speech, by stressing that we need to redefine ways in which policies can be created to make future development address these challenges.

Steinar Valade-Amland, who is the director of the Association of Danish Designers, emphasised the power of a design approach to addressing such problems, as addressed in the association's manifesto, "The increasing vital role of design."

The conference also saw the handover of the title of World Design Capital from Turin to Seoul, as well as the launching of the bid process for the World Design Capital 2012.

Photo: Michele d'Ottavio | Torino World Design Capital

Some Concluding Thoughts
The developed world has a strong responsibility in sharing knowledge, resources, responsible behaviour and know-how with emerging countries. But our track record isn't that good. Our "We know best, follow us" attitude has left indelible scars on society and the planet.

How can the West avoid making the same mistakes again? How will emerging underdeveloped countries avoid making them too?

Even the scale of the job is enormous. As Yrjö Sotamaa pointed out, Finland's population fits into a quarter of the city of Shanghai.

While in Europe we are developing exciting new innovative user-centred projects such as those demonstrated by the UK Design Council, other countries are just getting to terms with the fact that design is a priority on their policy agenda. Song Weizu clearly said that until yesterday design wasn't exactly a priority on the Chinese policy agenda as other matters were at stake.

The ten countries that will contribute most to world population growth over the next 30 years are India, China, Pakistan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Indonesia, United States of America, Bangladesh, Zaire, and Iran - in that order!
(Data from the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis--IIASA).

The changes there are bound to be so dramatic that we do need to design a democratic, global dialogue with and between these cultures and societies, so that they can all learn from each other and from some of the best practices worldwide.

Creating good design policies is not a simple thing to do. As Giselle Raulik Murphy of Design Wales so pointedly said, we don't need a one-size-fits-all design policy with one country copying what goes on in another.

We don't need global design policies. Design policies need to be locally relevant, but they also need to take into account local needs, local cultural knowledge and sensitivity, and local infrastructures.

The Turin event was clearly just a (very good) beginning, with much ground still needs to be covered.

Photo: Michele d'Ottavio | Torino World Design Capital

Yet, this conference, which was not so well attended (let's continue being honest), was definitely a milestone and Europe's momentum is good. Our final compliment goes to the organisers, Michael Thomson and his associate programme director Christine Losecaat, the Torino World Design Capital team, and to Zup Associati, the design team who gave the conference and the conference materials such a fresh, consistent and inspiring look and feel, with a distinctly Italian flavour.

Reading Up
If you are interested in design policy, check out the Design Policy group on Yahoo!, the work by Elizabeth Tunstall, and the SEEdesign network. The organisers of the Turin conference also assured me that all the materials of the Turin conference will eventually be posted online, in audio or text form, and we will let you know when this is the case.

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