

# WHAT DESIGN CAN DO!

**A REPORT ON THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
WHAT DESIGN CAN DO! ABOUT THE IMPACT OF DESIGN  
ON SOCIETY, 26 & 27 MAY 2011 IN AMSTERDAM.  
WHERE 23 SPEAKERS FROM DIFFERENT PROFESSIONS  
DISCUSSED THE POWER OF DESIGN AS A CATALYST FOR  
SOCIAL CHANGE WITH AN AUDIENCE OF 1000!**

All too often design is associated with just aesthetics, trends and luxury, but it can mean so much more. At its best, design can change, improve, renew, inspire, involve, shock, move, disrupt, help or solve. **What Design Can Do!** was conceived to demonstrate the value of design thinking in responding

to the challenges of today's world. The theme of the first conference was 'Access', since having or not having access is a pressing global issue at play on many levels in society. This report reflects on two inspiring days in which designers and a host of other professionals shared ideas.

# INITIATED BY DUTCH DESIGNERS



## MEET THE TEAM THAT INITIATED, CURATED, DESIGNED AND PRODUCED WHAT DESIGN CAN DO!:

From left to right (standing) Sara Landeira, Bob Aardewerk, Femke van Gemert, Eric Wie, David Snellenberg, Hilmer Thijs, Liesbeth in 't Hout, Chris van Bokhorst, Lotte van Gelder, Billy Nolan, Tim Vermeulen, (sitting) Bas van Lier, Arnoud van Dommelen, Laurens van Wieringen, Pepijn Zurburg, Richard van der Laken, Tirso Francés, Job van der Pijl, Lisette Schmetz, Janneke Kreike. Not on the photo: Remco Wagemakers, Karen Smit, Maria Koomen, Gerard van der Werf, Robert Jan Marringa, Jacob van Rijs, Fanny Smelik, Roel Stavorinus, Bob Witman / Photo: Leo Veger

### INITIATORS

**Richard van der Laken**, graphic designer, founder of De Designpolitie  
**Tirso Francés**, graphic designer, founder of Dietwee Ontwerpers  
**Femke van Gemert**, textile designer and trend forecaster  
**David Snellenberg**, copywriter, founder of Dawn  
**Gerard van der Werf**, founder of WK Amsterdam  
**Laurens van Wieringen**, product and furniture designer, founder of Studio Laurens van Wieringen  
**Pepijn Zurburg**, graphic designer, founder of De Designpolitie

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**Richard van der Laken**

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**Lisette Schmetz**, SCHMETZ Projectmanagement & Consultancy in Design, founder of Arnhem Mode Biennale

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**De Designpolitie**

### COMMUNICATION AND PUBLICITY

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**Roel Stavorinus**, design strategy and design management

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# 'STORIES THAT MADE ME FEEL HUMBLE'



**What Design Can Do! (WDCD)** was developed as part of the Dutch Design Fashion Architecture Programme (Dutch DFA) to strengthen the international position of the Dutch creative industries. **Richard van der Laken**, initiator and creative director of WDCD, and **Christine de Baan**, director of Dutch DFA, look back at the conference.

## RICHARD VAN DER LAKEN

### Why did you want to organize this conference?

'First of all because I think that if the Netherlands is one of the leading design nations in the world, as we all like to believe here, it should have an international multidisciplinary design conference like for instance Design Indaba in South Africa. And secondly because I realized that in order to keep our position, we need to be in contact with fellow designers from other parts of the world and enrich ourselves with their stories.'

### What did the conference bring you?

'My personal observation was that there is rather a large gap between our kind of work here and what designers in countries like India, China or Brazil are doing. They deal with different kinds of problems. Their stories were less about ego and much more about context. On the other side of the world there is a different kind of engagement that probably goes deeper than ours over here. It made me feel quite humble. We can learn a lot from such stories in defining our own position.'

### What improvements would you want to make next year?

'I would want the breakouts to yield more concrete ideas. We want the conference to demonstrate the solving capabilities of design. I would like to be able to initiate some projects prior to the 2012 edition of WDCD so that we can present the results at the conference. I also want to have even more speakers from other parts of the world, because they have made me curious.'



OVER TWO DAYS WHAT DESIGN CAN DO! DREW AN AUDIENCE OF MORE THAN 1000 PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT COUNTRIES

## CHRISTINE DE BAAN

### Why did Dutch DFA decide to support WDCD?

'There were several reasons. We agreed very much with the idea that the Netherlands should have a large content-driven event that draws public from abroad, like Doors of Perception did previously. Another reason was the platform this conference offered us to present some of the key figures from our international network to the Dutch public. And thirdly we support the message that design can help to make the world a more sustainable, better and more pleasant place, which is one of things that unites the partners in Dutch DFA.'

### How do you look back on the conference?

'I'm very positive. The range of speakers provided a nice mix of disciplines, countries of origin, generations, visions and lightness and seriousness. I was really impressed by the way the conference was organized: the logistics, the design, the communication, the way speakers were welcomed and guided, it was all very well done. And the public was good as well. I had the feeling everyone from the Dutch design scene was there and that they used the opportunity to make new contacts.'

### If anything, what could be done better next year?

'It would be nice if next time during the conference we could build on a new argument based on the information presented and together set a new agenda. The activist character of the conference could be stronger.'



NINE BREAKOUT SESSIONS ON DIFFERENT TOPICS NEXT TO THE MAIN PROGRAM WERE ALL BOOKED OUT

# CONTACT HELPS DESIGNERS COME UP WITH BETTER SOLUTIONS

BY ELS VAN DER PLAS,  
DIRECTOR OF PREMSELA,  
THE DUTCH PLATFORM  
FOR DESIGN AND FASHION

Design can offer solutions to all sorts of problems and contribute to a better society. *What Design Can Do!* offered proof of that assertion in many ways. In a personal account of the conference Premsula director Els van der Plas concludes that many contributions focused on reinstating values that seem to have vanished and that 'contact' is a dimension that unites many of the visions presented.

1. WIM CROUWEL SAID THIS DURING A CONVERSATION THAT TOOK PLACE IN THE SERIES 'PIONEERS OF INDUSTRIAL CULTURE', ORGANISED BY PREMSELA, THE NETHERLANDS INSTITUTE FOR DESIGN AND FASHION, WHICH TOOK PLACE DURING THE RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION OF HIS WORK AT THE DESIGN MUSEUM IN LONDON ON 23 JUNE 2011.

2. PREMSELA LECTURE 'OUT OF TOUCH', BY RICHARD SENNETT, 26 JUNE 2011, MUZIEKGEBOUW AAN 'T IJ.



FROM THE STAGE DANIEL EATOCK CLEARLY CONNECTED TO THE AUDIENCE

'Design offers solutions.' That was the answer from graphic designer Wim Crouwel when asked by Deyan Sudjic, director of the Design Museum in London, about the power of design.<sup>1</sup> Sudjic tried to extract an aesthetically tinted answer from the celebrated 83-year-old Crouwel, who made his name with his consistent, strictly ordered and aesthetically motivated designs. But Crouwel insisted he had always put his design talent at the disposal of clients, and they wanted him to organize and communicate information. After his long years of distinguished service he had no other answer. 'Design offers solutions', he repeated.

Similar answers surfaced often during *What Design Can Do!* The conference focused on the power of design, fashion and architecture, and the potential role of these professions in today's world. Design can offer solutions to all sorts of problems, such as the production and transport of food, and the increasing distance between the source of products and their consumption. In that way it can contribute to a better society.

## FOOD

Food, one of our basic needs, was a recurring subject at the conference. First there was a breakout session organized by Philips Design and Design Cooperation Brainport Eindhoven with Jon Rodriguez, Senior Consultant People Research at Philips. Among his ideas on the future of eating was the possibility of cultivating and printing food inside the home.

This scenario proved too much for one member of the audience. He shouted out that what Philips was doing was disgraceful and stormed out of the room. His outburst, as he explained to me later during the break, stemmed from his opinion that Philips was focusing too much on the development of new technology and prod-

ucts and too little on real problems and questions. As a chef with a focus on sustainability, he saw more relevance in addressing the subject of increasing urbanization and the production of food in cities. He cited a project by Martijn de Potter, who had turned vacant housing complexes in Amsterdam into vertical agricultural sites with LED lighting.

This very experiment was the subject of both praise and criticism in the breakout session on agriculture organized by Premsula. The audience approved of bringing food cultivation closer to city dwellers, but disapproved of growing tomatoes without sunlight. Food production in the city brings both food and production methods closer to people.

## GREEN SOLUTIONS

Brent Richards, director of the Design Embassy in London, contended that city design should adapt to consumer needs and bring food production closer to the home. Vegetable gardens and vegetable growers are already common on the roofs of New York, and green farmland dots the outskirts of the city. Gina and Scott Keatley of Nourishing New York farm the roof of their apartment complex in East Harlem, as does star chef Patrick Connolly of Bobo Restaurant in Greenwich Village. Richards called for new green solutions in the city, not only on roofs and balconies, but also on the city fringes, in living rooms, and on vacant urban sites. While Richards expressed his excitement about the potential of these developments, audience members voiced concern that the food requirements of the world's population could not be met in this way. We still need thousands of acres of farmland and large-scale, efficient and animal-unfriendly cages and pig houses. Participants in the various breakout sessions were of the view that communicating about food and its production is an important

## DESIGN REALLY DOES MATTER IN PROCESSES OF CHANGE AND IN THE SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS

task for designers. Awareness about where our meat comes from makes consumers both responsible and loyal. The animal-unfriendly pig house may produce cheap meat but not a clean conscience. Communication is therefore hugely important.

## CREATIVITY RULES

According to Oliviero Toscani, keynote speaker and photographer, everything is communication. He contended that creativity is about communication, and that the highest form of communication is art. For him, creativity must be subversive. Such views made him the most activist speaker, whose Benetton campaigns, *Colors* magazine and Fabrica research centre established his reputation as a super-communicator. Toscani made the difference at the conference because he made designers aware of their responsibility and had a message for them. Don't compromise - creativity rules! Designer Julia Lohmann testifies to that. She makes lamps from sheep stomachs, which are usually discarded as waste. The lamps hang like luminous white balloons from the ceiling. She argued that we should relate in a more honest way to nature and to animals. We should ask ourselves why we don't want to know that a piece of steak wrapped in cellophane comes from a small calf. Lohmann showed her cow-shaped sofas in cow leather in which the life of the animal is still visible. She also gives them names like Antonia and photographs them in a field: stone-dead, but with a new function. Her products may shock, but respect is the key word for her. Respect was also the key word in the presentation from the Brazilian Adélia Borges. Her appeal to involve artisans in the design process was impressive. She was critical of Western designers who travel with high expectations and the wrong attitude to 'faraway countries' to have fun working with talented craftspeople. After all, Western designers are visitors, and they have to study the context in which they find themselves. Many artisans not only possess exceptional skills but also design their own products. We need to show respect to these individuals to make collaboration a success. The craftsmen must benefit it too.

## CONTACT IS KEY

Many contributions during *What Design Can Do!* focused on reinstating values that seem to have vanished. Dealing responsibly with nature, with animals, with one another — those were the recurring points of interest. Another idea that cropped up often was the conviction that design really does matter in processes of change and in searching for solutions for big and small problems. What is lacking is courage, said Toscani. The courage to make a difference, to be a good client, to express and accept your creativity. It's not about marketing but positive change.

The American cellist and sociologist Richard Sennett, who delivered the Premsula Lecture this year<sup>2</sup>, added an important dimension that unites Toscani, Borges, Van Rijs, Lohmann and also Potter: contact. Through contact the designer can build up a relation with a problem, an object or a person. As a result, the designer can produce better work and come up with better solutions. During his conversation in London Crouwel stressed the fine relationship with his client. Without that relationship he would never have been able to produce his work. For a sense of connection or feeling with others now seems to be the key to creating a better world.

# WHAT DESIGN CAN DO!

## DAY 2 REPORT

SUMMARIES OF THE 23 PRESENTATIONS

### 'DESIGN IS ABOUT HUMAN INTENTIONS'

M P RANJAN (INDIA)



'When I speak here, it will be heard clearer and louder in India, where design is very much needed,' Indian design thinker M P Ranjan said at the beginning of **What Design Can Do!** 'By discussing design here we can do something for the other side of the world.' Design is first of all about human intentions. Professor Ranjan told the audience. 'The best way to show these intentions is through action,' he said, giving the examples of the Katlamara bamboo crafting project, the composting project The Daily Dump, and the Furaat rainwater harvesting system. These projects show that good design above all needs good governance, something that according to Ranjan still needs to be fully understood by Indian policymakers.

### 'CONSIDER THE CONSEQUENCES OF WHAT YOU USE'

JULIA LOHMANN (GERMANY)



'If design is used to question things and to deliberately move them into a more sustainable and future-proof direction, it has an immense power,' Julia Lohmann said. 'My personal way to do that is to connect the objects around us with their origin.' In her designs, often considered to be provocative, Lohmann tries to eliminate the gap in our understanding of the consequences of what we use. A ceiling of illuminated sheep stomachs, a cow-shaped couch made from one cowhide, and a stool that mirrors the inside of a dead calf, all reflect the same message. Lohmann: 'There is no logic in using one part of an animal while discarding the other part in disgust and not seeing its value.'

### 'ARCHITECTS NEED TO REFLECT'

JACOB VAN RIJS (THE NETHERLANDS)

Countering the 'endless mass of shit' that is currently being built, Dutch architecture firm MVRDV tries to design more interesting buildings that meet future demands. Architects need to reflect on the challenges that face society, MVRDV's co-founder Jacob van Rijts said. The office's concepts, however, are sometimes misunderstood, like Pig City, a series of high-rise farms in the harbour of Rotterdam. Van Rijts: 'It was never meant to be actually built, but we received lots of negative reactions.' But the studies

do translate into real projects like the design for the future South Korean city Gwanggyo, near Seoul. MVRDV's plan for a series of overgrown hill-shaped buildings, housing 100,000 people per km<sup>2</sup>, is currently being studied for further development.

### 'TYPOGRAPHY IS VERY POWERFUL'

HUDA SMITSHUIJZEN ABIFARÈS (LEBANON)

Lebanese-born designer Huda Abifarès was surprised to hear from ArtEz academy chairman Dingeman Kuilman that her Khatt Foundation was listed by *Rolling Stones* magazine as one of the main influences on design in the next decade. The foundation, started in 2005, brings together typography designers from the Middle East and Europe in order to make Middle Eastern designers aware of the possibilities of type design and, by this, to bridge cultures. 'Typography can be very meaningful,' Abifarès said, explaining that type design can be a tool for self-expression. 'My students in the Middle East always asked permission to do things. I taught them to decide for themselves, and that is the goal of the Khatt Foundation too. The Arabic uprising means that they finally get the point.'

### 'VENICE IS A THEME PARK'

GIORGIO CAMUFFO (ITALY)

A native of Venice, graphic designer Giorgio Camuffo has devoted much of his professional energy to highlighting the problems that afflict his home town. A place he knows like the back of his hand — he was once a gondolier — Venice epitomizes the problems of the contemporary city. Jokingly referred to as 'the first urban theme park, as artificial as Disneyland', it is now, he says 'a brand that hosts biennales but is home to a dwindling population'. Despite the decline, Camuffo told his audience he wanted to provoke people. Even though the city is drowning beneath the floods of visitors, he produces a magazine entitled *Venice is not sinking*, which encourages participation and exposes the absurdity of a city that is nothing but a tourist destination. People can even make proposals in a section entitled 'If I were the mayor...'. For everybody, he told us, 'has a duty to do something for their home town'.

### 'DESIGNERS STAND BETWEEN ENGINEERS AND SOCIETY'

FRANK TJEPKEMA (THE NETHERLANDS)

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### 'ARCHITECTS MUST LEARN TO UNDERSTAND THE INFORMAL'

ROHAN SHIVKUMAR (INDIA)



In his sharp and entertaining contribution Indian architect Rohan Shivkumar exposed the ignorance and egocentrism of architects and designers who fill Indian cities with glass walled palaces and other pompous buildings. Shivkumar convincingly demonstrated how traditionally trained architects are completely incapable of understanding the needs of people living in the slums, who make up 60 percent of Mumbai's 20 million inhabitants. And he explained how his students developed alternative plans for the reconstruction of Mumbai's densely populated Dharavi slum. As the real estate market collapsed, the opportunity arose to actually build two of the plans, showing, in Shivkumar's words, what design can do for the informal.

## 'QUESTION THE AMOUNT OF STUFF YOU COLLECT'

MONIQUE VAN HEIST (THE NETHERLANDS)

'I never considered fashion to be a real career option when growing up,' confessed designer Monique van Heist. 'I was thinking of becoming a flight attendant, but I always made clothes.' She elaborated on her complex relationship with the fashion industry and explained how her questions led her to chart her own path within the system. Why is there a fixed way of presenting during shows? Why create clothing that needs to be discarded after a season? 'Hello Fashion' is Van Heist's solution to working within fashion while remaining true to her persona. She goes against the grain and places repetition and continuity above a production system that is out of control. Van Heist's clear message to all avid shoppers: 'Fill your closet with garments instead of fashionable objects. Be critical of the amount of stuff you collect.'



## 'WHERE PEOPLE ARE, THINGS HAPPEN'

DANIEL EATOCK (UNITED KINGDOM)



Look and you will be rewarded. English artist Daniel Eatock certainly looks. He is an observer who captures the randomness and chance occurrences in our everyday world that seem mundane yet are also beautiful. Everyone can submit visual observations, or 'temporary moments of alignment' as he called them, to his website. The city can do a lot for design by rewarding us with special moments that, he added 'are even better than design'. Eatock summed up his ideas with a series of maxims: going places is gone; the work is the idea; design nothing (or as little as possible); look for existing solutions (be original); find solutions to problems that do not exist. To him, engaging with the city means looking and showing, but ultimately it is not the city that interests him but the people that occupy them. 'When there are people around, things just happen,' he explained. 'My work is about noticing what happens.'

## 'STOP TALKING, START TO ACT'

DEYAN SUDJIC (UNITED KINGDOM)

'There is no longer a single definition of design. It has become a matter of telling stories, offering criticism, asking questions, a way to understand the world around us, and that world is increasingly urban,' said Deyan Sudjic. The writer, currently director of the design Museum in London, told us we need to think about the city in a different way and look at how planners, politicians, sociologists and others see it. Despite people's negative perception of the city, it is the place we identify most with. The best cities allow the maximum number of people to get the most out of them. Designers need to say 'let's stop talking and act'. Sudjic finished on a cautionary note. 'Belief in utopias is not easy, since they have always turned sour. That explains our reluctance to become activists today.'

## 'DESIGNERS NEED COURAGE'

OLIVIERO TOSCANI (ITALY)

Turn to page 12 and 13 for the edited version of Toscani's plea for fearless creativity. It's a manifesto for true and unrestrained creativity!

## 'REDUCE EVERYTHING TO HUMAN SCALE'

MICHAEL WOLFF (UNITED KINGDOM)



While interviewed by Nikki Gonnissen and Thomas Widdershoven, Michael Wolff asked for the lights to be turned up a notch. It showed how sensitivity to detail creates a big difference, as this minimal intervention at once reduced his distance towards the audience. With a branding record that ranges from Apple to Audi, Wolff explained how his work has always been about creating value instead of making money for companies. 'How do you manage all these impressive multinationals and brands?,' Thonik asked admiringly. Wolff: 'No matter how big and intimidating a client might seem, in the end you are dealing with individual people.' In a world where most products and facilities are still created on the basis of a certain defined 'average', Wolff stressed the importance of design's inclusive quality.

## 'THE FUTURE IS STILL OPEN'

OLE BOUMAN (THE NETHERLANDS)



Everybody can be an architect in the re-opened Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi), because interactivity will play an essential role in all exhibition spaces. 'People will be able to construct their own vision of a city,' NAi director Ole Bouman explained. The current refurbishment of the building includes a highly symbolic gesture that drastically changes the experience of visiting the institute. Previously one had to cross a narrow bridge over the water to enter the majestic yet somewhat aloof venue, but now a square welcomes visitors. The NAi is a place 'where anything can happen and the future is still open'. Bouman stressed how important it is for architects to become more aware of their social role in society, presenting several cases from his Architecture of Consequence programme, among them the Eichbaum Open, that demonstrate how simple measures can have major social consequences.

## 'PAINT FOR ALL'

PER NIMER (SWEDEN)

'Colour provides inspiration and joy, and through our paint we make it accessible to as many people as possible,' Akzo Nobel's Per Nimer stated. The design manager of the company behind the 'Let's Colour' campaign that colours entire neighbourhoods across the world spoke about the advantages of colour for life.

## 'DESIGN CAN'T SOLVE EVERYTHING'

JURGEN BEY (THE NETHERLANDS)

Jurgen Bey, who currently heads the Sandberg Institute, expressed his amazement at the absolute imbalance in the fundamentals of today's world: the huge amount of time spent working to provide for leisure, the way relaxation time is then spent in overcrowded locations, and the contradictory effects of the economic crisis.

For a teacher these are not the worst of times. While all systems eventually crash, education simply keeps going. According to Bey, present-day designers should question less and start doing more in the way artists and elementary scientists do. 'I can't imagine anything worse than sending a group of designers out in a boat with a mission. They would probably end up just asking questions.'

## 'REBALANCE HAND AND BRAIN'

ADÉLIA BORGES (BRAZIL)



'I wish I had the same access to information on crafts from Brazil as I currently have to products by Apple or Italian furniture design, since I value these categories equally,' design critic and curator Adélia Borges commented, summarizing the inequality of information and power distribution across the world. Within our cultures we need a better balance between brains - academia - and hands - crafts, Borges said. Of course an interest in local and regional production from foreigners is welcome but, she warned, we need to remain wary of a neo-imperialist attitude. Borges: 'Access to cultures means the right of all the inhabitants of the world to have their cultures recognized and to have equal access to all the world's cultures. To achieve this, however, boundaries and prejudice must disappear.'

## 'DESIGN FOR PEOPLE'

SCOTT STOWELL (USA)

You would hope that design is always about the people who use it, but clients sometimes forget that detail. 'This is why,' graphic designer Scott Stowell explained, 'at Open we have an explicit motto to remind us: Design for people.' The sub-theme of Stowell's talk was 'Pay Attention'. In the practice of Open this means always looking for ways to insert more layers of meaning, whether it be jokes or serious detail. The end user who pays an equal amount of attention will pick up on these layers and enjoy them.

## 'WE ALL SEE FROM A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE'

PAULA DIB (BRAZIL)

'I am curious about how each individual sees and interacts with this world. The focus of my practice revolves around that. From there I investigate how to bring solutions to the world,' Brazilian designer Paula Dib stated. One of the first things she discovered during her ten-year career was that good research requires real involvement. Dib initially worked on rural projects in small communities in Brazil, but then embarked on an international adventure and an educational project with secondary school pupils from different backgrounds in the UK. In Brazil Dib noted two different forces of development: the urban and the regional. She considers it a challenge to make the different identities that stem from these movements equally visible in the future. This new way of shaping culture will place the designer somewhere between the artisan and anthropologist.

## 'DESIGN NEEDS WELLBEING'

DROR BENSHETRIT (ISRAEL)

'You can take a tiny idea a long way.' That was the conference message from New York-based product designer Dror Benshetrit, who crosses disciplinary boundaries effortlessly. His presentation mixed product design, architecture and even art direction. How far can an idea go? As far as you want was his answer. Case in point: the triangulation structure discovered while making a chandelier becomes the basic unit of a motorway sound barrier, a truss for prefab homes, a pop-up pavilion, and a kit for providing emergency accommodation in disaster regions. Benshetrit took the idea of sweeping things under a carpet and turned it into a master plan for luxury villas beneath an undulating green roof in Abu Dhabi. 'Wellbeing is the most important word to use in relation to design,' he summed up. 'We need to feel, then imagine, then translate imagination into action, and finally share the results. Design starts by acting upon what we feel.'



DROR BENSHETRIT INVITED MODERATOR LUCAS VERWEIJ TO TEST THE STRENGTH OF THE QUADROR STRUCTURE

Check out some insightful interviews with Oliviero Toscani, Julia Lohmann, Huda Abifarès, Liu Xiaodu, Paula Dib, Rohan Shivkumar and MP Ranjan at [whatdesigncando.nl/news](http://whatdesigncando.nl/news)

## 'A NEW APPROACH TO CREATIVITY'

DAGAN COHEN (THE NETHERLANDS)

Clad in elegant tails, Dagan Cohen added a touch of Hollywood flair to WDCD with his presentation on his project Upload Cinema. Cohen believes we need to change our approach to creativity. 'Our means of communication have become accessible to everyone. This democratization has resulted in an explosion of creative material on open source canals.' With Upload Cinema Cohen harvests the best of YouTube footage and brings it back to the screen, creating the perfect hybrid circle. Snippets of homemade films accompanied his conference presentations and gave the audience something to laugh and think about, with messages like 'Meditation is a waste of your shopping time'.

## 'YELLOW IS NEW PINK'

LIDEWIJ EDELKOOT (THE NETHERLANDS)

Provided we avoid a Third World War, there will actually be a smooth, harmonious and lemon-coloured future ahead of us, Lidewij Edelkoort predicted. 'Because yellow is the new pink!' It was a message warmly welcomed by canary-coloured WDCD. During WDCD's concluding presentation Edelkoort painted a setting of drastically shifting social structures and a wider consciousness in terms of our need to possess and experience products. 'We must embrace new ways of producing objects because exploitative labour is no longer an accepted reality.' On the other hand, Edelkoort stressed that given our changing relation to the screen, where boundaries between virtual and reality are becoming increasingly vague, the simple projection of a desired object in the future might satisfy our needs. If this route is followed, the real physical possession of products might become irrelevant.



## 'MODERNISM STILL IS THE BEST WAY FOR CHINESE PEOPLE'

LIU XIAODU (CHINA)



The growth of the urban landscape in China is rapid and provides the biggest challenge for Urbanus, the Beijing and Shenzhen based architecture firm co-founded by Liu Xiaodu. 'We aim to find living solutions for low-income people, and besides building new objects we want to embed new structures into existing vernacular contexts.' Xiaodu, however, is clearly aware of the limitations of the Chinese situation. 'We have to be more realistic than idealistic. In the end a modernist and collective solution, which to Western eyes might seem almost utopian, still remains the main route for the Chinese.' 'An increasingly complicated topic we are facing,' Liu stated, 'is how to balance the demands that come with the emerging capitalist society in China with the actual capacities of this planet.'

# WE MUST HAVE THE COURAGE TO RISK BEING DIFFERENT

BY OLIVIERO TOSCANI

Creativity in communication today conditioned by an obsessive search for consensus, leading to the most banal mediocrity, Oliviero Toscani says. At *What Design Can Do!* the Italian photographer, famed for his provocative advertising campaigns, condemned commercially driven fear and pleaded for creative freedom. 'We have the creativity to change the messages, rearrange the entire image.'



OLIVIERO TOSCANI TELLING THE AUDIENCE HIS TRUTH.

## A MANIFESTO FOR TRUE AND UNRESTRAINED CREATIVITY

Creativity is a surplus of intelligence and sensitivity. It is the opportunity that potentially lies between our heart and our brain. The human race is divided into two classes, people who are creative and people who are not. Truly creative people are rare. They are a tiny minority, oppressed by false proponents of creativity and by everyone else. Only truly creative people have no fear of creativity. Everyone else is afraid of it. They, the non-creative people, oppose it and try to curb it because they know that creativity gives rise to new ideas that sooner or later they will have to come to terms with. The army of non-creative people is huge. It includes a mass of bureaucrats who claim that their positions of power give them the right to block creative processes. They exist to cut down to a level of mediocrity every idea that is not stupid enough to gain consensus. That's why all newspapers are alike, all automobiles look like one another, television programs are interchangeable, different brands of clothing propose an identical style. The economy is a pretext. Power's lack of culture and lack of courage to invest in ideas is a clear and undeniable sign of the agony of creativity. Paradoxically and ironically, creative people must constantly defend themselves from the bureaucrats of power, those who never need to defend their own lack of creativity and courage, but seem to identify solely with their role as accusers and censors.

### FEAR CREATES MEDIOCRITY

Art is the highest expression of human communication. And by Art I don't mean only painting or sculpture or the ancient and traditional arts, but above all the modern, mass arts, like: photography, design, fashion, architecture, cinematography and so on. Communication, like art, has always been at the service of one power or another – religion, politics, industry and production, or as a counter power, but still a power. But today the creativity of communication is conditioned by an obsessive search for consensus, in the false belief that consensus is success. Fear of failure always produces mediocrity, because the chosen solution will always be the least risky and the most banal. Modern creativity has been stripped of ideas and individual passions. It has been relegated to the role of a company servant. It has to be a vehicle for strategies that focus solely on raising the market price of the company's stock.

### CONDEMNED TO COMMERCE

The raw material of art are the artists, the communicators, the photographers, the designers, the writers, authors, musicians, actors, the image-creators; good sense would tell us they should be protected, handled with the same care with which bakers handle flour. But this is something that is becoming more and more rare. The artist who clings to his intents, his sensitivities, and his inspirations, to his visions rooted in his own insecurity – the essential requisite for producing creativity – risks seeming narcissistic, hysterical, or even presumptuous. Creative people now are condemned to serve and work in terms of finance success and the stock exchange, while communication concepts, ideas and scenarios are conceived and decided on by specialists in communication and in marketing, by market researchers, and by levels upon levels of managers who make sure the result is banal and stupid enough to satisfy the public that they call the Target. Commercial success, not creativity, is what counts. Doing so most of the images on medias are stupid, flat, costly, repetitious and useless. Communication is a means of delivering messages produced by an institutional and corporate power that is polluting our lives with this miserable level of culture and creativity. In the world of communication – and not only in that world – the people who manage creativity, limiting and restraining it instead



IMAGE FROM OLIVIERO TOSCANI'S 'RAZZA UMANA' PROJECT

of encouraging it, are paradoxically responsible for working against the very same economic interests they say they defend.

### BURNING LOGO ON OUR BRAIN

So most of the communication, like most of products, looks alike. It is branded and conditioned by marketing that makes us feel part of the herd, the vast global flock of livestock, where to be different means to be alienated. Branding means exactly that, a burning logo of ownership stamped forever on our brain. No one wants to be a black or a lost sheep, so we are all lambs in the slaughterhouses of communication, and especially that of the multinational brands. Brands do not nourish society; brands are nourished by society. We think that the future is a place where scientific and technological evolution, combined with branding and marketing, will give rise to a guilt-free, trouble-free, pain-free, shiny, sterilized virtual world – a world in which everything that is potentially ugly about human reality is excluded for fear of turning codes upside-down. While we try to reduce all of life to a set of patented codes, the worst risk is that of natural evolution. Difference becomes the enemy of the state of things.

### ARTISTS SHOULD BE FREE

Today communication feeds on the people that it should feed, instead. Originally, it was thought to be a public service, the voice of production and consumption the voice of culture. But now it has degenerated, becoming an instrument of economic manipulation. Intellectuals, creative people and artists who produce communication are in the front line of this army of collaborationists. Artists should have the power finally to free themselves of their fears. The future needs to allow the artist real power and responsibility in the world of communication. Creative people should break these bonds and destroy these codes, and help encourage free thought. It has never been in marketing's interest that we artists and consumers should be able to think, because anyone who thinks can be creative, and creativity is always subversive. It's about time to revolutionize this situation. We need creativity in communication. There have been and there still are instances when expression has had the courage to risk being different: communication that takes risks and dares to go beyond profit and the requirements of the clients. Creativity is a surplus of intelligence and sensitivity. It is the opportunity that potentially lies between our heart and our brain. Creativity has to be always subversive. Unless it encounters an intelligent patron or institution, it is destined to remain outside pre-established plans and bureaucratic authorizations. To be creative means to have no securities, it means doing the

## IT HAS NEVER BEEN IN MARKETING'S INTEREST THAT WE ARTISTS AND CONSUMERS SHOULD BE ABLE TO THINK.

contrary of what every pre-established system wants you to do. To be creative means to try to do something that has never been done before, to build out of nothing something that can have an enormous value. Creativity requires a state of non-control, of limitless courage. And that is why conformism is creativity's worst enemy. Anyone who doesn't have the courage to be able to take risks cannot be creative.

### WE CAN CHANGE THE MESSAGE

Communication in all its forms could really be at the service of humanity. It could be a creative means of research into the new language that we are searching for to symbolize and identify the human condition and the exertions of society, to understand and explain the new world that is racing towards us with the speed of a meteorite. It could be utilized to help enrich humanity in the laborious task of expressing itself better in this world, to connect with the rest of society and permit a better future. This kind of media and communication could challenge and provoke debate about ideas, it could break the rules, destroy the preconceptions and the conformism that rule and condition us. This could give rise to true beauty, and give us the opportunity to create in a condition of free expression, communicating true and profound beliefs to the world around us without being conditioned by profit. We have the creativity to change the messages, rearrange the entire image. We must have the courage to risk being different. No one should be culturally, physically or spiritually starved. Channels of distribution do exist. Creative people, and providers and creators of content, may have the keys to unlock real communication, communication of real meanings that could change our lives and the lives of others with creativity and respect. We need to create a dialogue, not a monobrand, a monothought, a monologue, a monoculture. We should not only be survivors as a species, but we should prosper creatively and evolve dynamically, we must recognise the whole human race as a brand, with all of its diversity, ethnics and colours, its differences and sometimes its limits and vetoes. A human brand based on respect, not on power; possibility, not uniformity. Love, not fear.

Creativity is a surplus of intelligence and sensitivity. It is the opportunity that potentially lies between our heart and our brain. Our spirit needs that kind of creativity in modern communication.

This is a shortened version of Oliviero Toscani's speech at *What Design Can Do!* The entire text can be found at [www.whatdesigncando.nl](http://www.whatdesigncando.nl)

# WHAT DESIGN CAN DO!

## BREAKOUT SESSIONS

### TAPPING THE CREATIVE MINDS

Nine breakout sessions that ran next to the main programme demonstrated What Design Can Do for a host of social issues.

Turn flower boxes into vegetable boxes, rooftops into vegetable gardens and unsightly wall surfaces into fertile walls-capes. Turn bike wrecks into bike racks and solve two problems at once.

These are just two of the ideas that came out of the nine breakout sessions held parallel to the main programme of What Design Can Do! The sessions, hosted by different organizations, took advantage of the number of creative minds present to generate new ideas.

Philips Design, together with Design Cooperation Brainport, presented a vision on the future of kitchen appliances. Dutch design platform Premisela hosted two breakouts, on sustainable textiles and the future of agriculture. Social design laboratory No Academy took their participants outside to find solutions for several urban problems. Young Designers & Industry, a group that addresses current issues with the help of designers, also went out on the streets to collect opinions on 'loneliness. Can we do with less?' was the central question in the session hosted by the Doen Foundation, the fund set up by the Dutch charity lotteries. Butterfly Works, an organization that uses design to generate social change in developing countries, asked for ways to stimulate the cooperation between Dutch and Afghan designers. Students from the digital media platform CrossLab of Rotterdam's art academy surveyed the social commitment of conference attendees and presented the outcome in their breakout on data visualization. Finally, the Netherlands Architecture Institute discussed the accessibility of cultural institutions.



ATTENDEES EAGERLY REGISTERED FOR ONE OF THE NINE BREAKOUT SESSIONS...



THAT WERE HELD PARALLEL TO THE CONTINUING MAIN PROGRAM...



TO PROFIT FROM THE ASSEMBLED CREATIVITY IN A MORE INTIMATE SETTING

# WHAT DESIGN CAN DO!

## A GROWING EXHIBITION AND A BOOK

### A THEATRE OF DESIGN ACTIVISM

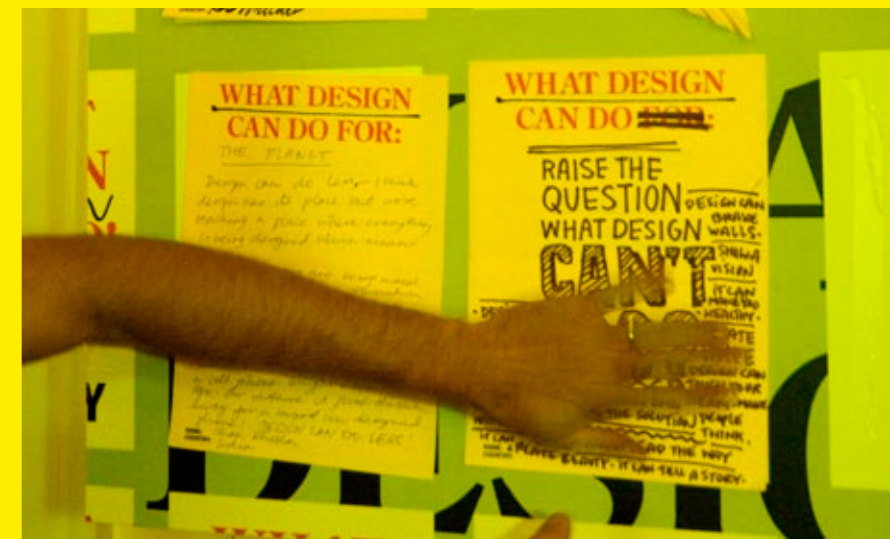
A growing exhibition of ideas and a conference book compiled on the spot added to the activist character of What Design Can Do!

Throughout the two-day conference the Stadsschouwburg theatre turned more yellow by the hour due to the yellow pages that people pinned to the exhibition panels around the building. Attendees were invited to post their ideas and comments. This resulted in a wealth of clever ideas, funny thoughts, serious suggestions and cries from the heart. Here's a small selection.

'Make Amsterdam a better version of Venice with free public transport, no cars, boats instead of trucks, and terraces along the canals.' 'Less decoration design. What's wrong with functional?' 'What Design Can do for: the many. A lot more than for a few!' 'Children 1st. Make design skills a major in primary schools instead of colouring within the lines. Only then can we promote knowledge and imagination, the two key factors for sustainable life.'

Elsewhere inside the theatre the finishing touches were put to the conference book, which included reports from the breakouts, reactions from the public, images of the growing exhibition, a review of the event, and pictures taken on both days. Compiled and printed on site, the book miraculously features a photograph of the presentation, on stage, of the first copy to Lidewij Edelkoort, the final conference speaker. A few hours later copies were distributed to conference attendees who had gathered at the brilliant closing party.

Download the WDCD 2011 publication via [whatdesigncando.nl/news](http://whatdesigncando.nl/news)



ACTIVISM IN THE THEATRE: IDEAS OF THE PUBLIC WERE PUT ON DISPLAY...



WHILE THE CONFERENCE BOOK WAS COMPILED ON SITE...



AND DISTRIBUTED AT THE CLOSING PARTY TO HAPPY PARTICIPANTS INCLUDING LIU XIAODU, M P RANJAN AND SCOTT STOWELL



WHAT DESIGN CAN DO!  
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FOR BRAZIL

‘What Design Can Do! should definitely pour themselves a good Dutch beer and cheers to a job well done! They’ve taken a simple and straightforward concept and crafted something that will hopefully grow over time into Holland’s nucleus of inspiration for designers around the world.’  
Design Indaba blog (South Africa)

‘What remains at the end of this global summit on the impact of design in the social scope are a lot of words, images, inspirations and above all an indelible track network, at the disposal of all while the theatre curtain closed.’  
At Casa / Corriere della Sera (Italy)

‘What Design Can Do! is an inspiring platform for ideas, visions, solutions and statements from all those architects, graphic designers, product designers, fashion designers and photographers who make it their responsibility to seek design solutions for energy problems, differences in prosperity, the environment, the crisis.’  
Adformatie (Netherlands)

‘It is almost impossible that this successful event won’t turn into an annual tradition.’  
Trendslator (Netherlands)

‘WDCD gives evidence of passion, conviction, talent, entrepreneurship and the dream to share and inspire. That’s what design can do!’  
Isworks (Netherlands)

‘What Design Can Do! was a great success - informal enough to be accessible and extensive enough to answer and raise plenty of questions about what design can do.’  
Grafik magazine (UK)

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Photography: Leo Veger and Mirjam Boekholt  
This report was made as an appendix to Items magazine.  
Special thanks to Premsela Foundation and Spinhex & Industrie for their support.