

INTERNATIONAL DESIGN ALLIANCE CONGRESS 2011: THERE IS NO WAY THAT DESIGN CAN SUSTAIN ITS CURRENT TRAJECTORY

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The multidisciplinary design sector has evolved dynamically over the past decade and one of the most critical results has been the formal formation of the International Design Alliance (IDA) in 2005. The IDA is a strategic venture between international organisations representing design. The alliance was created by two founding partners – the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (Icsid) and the International Council of Graphic Design Associations (Icograda).¹ In 2008, the IDA added the International Federation of Interior Architects/Designers (IFI) to the alliance as the third partner. The alliance is based on the desire of its partners to ‘do together what they cannot do alone’, concentrating on opportunities arising from multidisciplinary collaboration (Icograda 2011a).

One such opportunity that materialised as a multidisciplinary collaboration was the inaugural IDA Congress, which took place in Taipei, Taiwan, from 24 to 26 October 2011. The event saw industry leaders and delegates from 21 countries come together for the three-day event. Almost all of the speakers and delegates participating

in the inaugural IDA Congress were in agreement that, despite rapid changes, the sector cannot sustain its current trajectory. They also agreed that the sector is not responding proactively enough when it comes to urgent issues such as climate change, fluxes in international and regional socio-economics, continued geopolitical conflicts, rapid and unpredictable technological development, and the constant ebb and flow of talent mobility, among many other factors. However, no other factor was highlighted more than the increased need for introducing more humanism into design thinking, processes and products.

Considering the union of the three professional bodies, the aim of the 2011 IDA Congress was to bring together the unified voice of designers from various disciplines and from around the world in a themed framework to advance the vision and mission of the IDA by engaging with government leaders (commerce, trade, culture), NGOs, businesses, science and technology, education and the social sciences. This intention was supported by Mark Breitenberg, President of the International

Council of Societies of Industrial Design (Icsid), who, during the Congress opening, stated that the goal of the congress was ‘to provide a forum that engages designers and leaders from other sectors, with a shared belief that design can offer new insights about our most pressing global issues, in order to create a world that is balanced, sustainable and inclusive.’ By means of the congress, the IDA also aimed to provide an engaging and educational experience for the memberships of the IDA partners and to promote interaction among the memberships, and to position the IDA as the global voice of design and an enabler of innovation.

As the event was held in Taipei, it was interesting to note how the Taiwan Design Center was supported by partners such as The Taiwan Design Alliance and the Ministry of Economic Affairs. Apart from the government’s recognition in promotional material for the congress, their support was clearly evident when President Ma Ying-jeou met with a group of prominent foreign designers on 25 October (Figure 1), and by the attendance of the country’s Vice President, Vincent Siew, during the opening ceremony of the Congress (Figure 2). According to Siew, the government has been trying to help local businesses to build a better international image as design industry leaders. Moreover, in light of Cape Town’s bid for the 2014 World Design Capital, it was promising to see some South African support by people such as the Executive Mayor of Cape Town, Patricia de Lille.

The theme of the congress, *Design at the Edges*, was aptly named in view of the following sub-themes:

- the edge between the design practices and other fields having a stake in design, including science, technology, government, business and non-governmental humanitarian organisations;
- communication and interior architecture/design



Figure 1: Taiwan’s President Ma Ying-jeou (right) meeting with the Presidents Elect of Icoграда and Icsid, Leimei Julia Chiu (left) and Soon-In Lee (Centre). Image courtesy of Taiwan Design Centre



Figure 2: Taiwan’s Vice President Vincent Siew (center), Taipei Mayor Hau Lung-bin (second left), Icsid President Mark Breitenberg (third from right), IFI President Shashi Caan (second from right), Icoграда President Russell Kennedy (right) and other VIP guests officiating at the opening ceremony of the inaugural IDA Congress. Image courtesy of Taiwan Design Centre

- what do they share and have in common, and what sets them apart;
- “cutting edge” work and ideas in design and in other fields: radically new, controversial, experimental, pushing the boundaries of the discipline (IDA Congress 2011).

In keeping with the overarching theme, five topics, namely Economic Development (business), the Internet (technology), Biotechnology (health and the environment), Urbanism (humanity and society) and International Migration (civil society) were covered in keynote addresses by an international panel of speakers. In addition to the five keynote presentations, delegates had the opportunity to sit in on breakaway sessions which included Design Salons, Design Practice sessions, Design Education forums and Design Explorations. The topics covered in the overwhelming number of sessions provided delegates with varied points of view and new opportunities. The five themes also had a global relevance, traversed all design disciplines and were essentially indicative of the widening domain of design and the resulting changes in contemporary design practice.

On day one of the Congress, the first keynote speech on economic development by Esko Aho – a former Prime Minister of Finland and current Executive Vice President, Corporate Relations and Responsibility at Nokia – was delivered via video conferencing and epitomised the theme of the Congress to some extent in that it illustrated design at the cutting edge of technology and communication (Figure 3). On the one hand, the medium of communication supported Aho’s message that despite technology being indispensable, designers are catalysts and key players who facilitate the communication. On the other hand, Aho shunned the paying delegates and loyal Nokia customers by not attending in person as he opted to rather participate in a Nokia meeting. Unfortunately, despite the aim to discuss national innovation systems and creative economies from a governmental and business perspective, Aho focused more on Nokia’s business tactics and its brand as a global power rather than addressing the core theme of economic development. Despite the poor choice of presentation for an opening keynote address, the engaging and informative panel discussion that followed proved to be worthwhile.

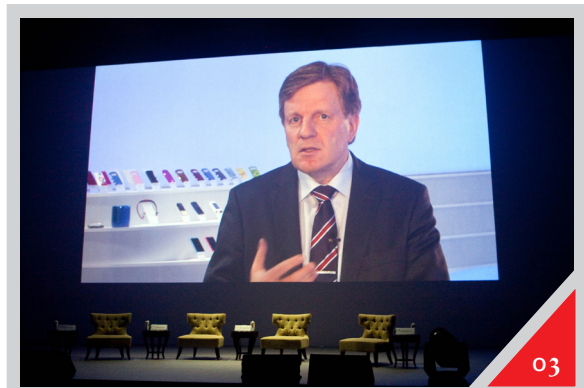


Figure 3: Keynote presentation on economic development by Esko Aho – a former Prime Minister of Finland and current Executive Vice President, Corporate Relations and Responsibility at Nokia. Image courtesy of Taiwan Design Centre



Figure 4: Panel discussion on Economic Development. From left to right are Emily Campbell (Director of Design, RSA), Valerie Jacobs (Vice President, LPK Trends), Nila Leiserowitz (MD, Gensler) and facilitator Kohei Nishiyama (Chairman, CUUSOO.com). Image courtesy of Taiwan Design Centre

The panel discussion was chaired by the eloquent Kohei Nishiyama from Japan and the panel members included Emily Campbell, Nila Leiserowitz and Valery Jacobs (Figure 4). Campbell, the Director of Design at the Royal Society of for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce (RSA), stood out as one of the most

intelligent commentators on this panel. Campbell reiterated the fact that we live in an ever more complex and diverse society and hence we need to consider the topic of *design as resourcefulness and self-reliance*² within an economic context. In particular, she urged the audience to think more critically about reduction and the endless possibilities of co-design in addressing social and public aspects of their lives. According to Campbell, people should be encouraged 'to go into the world not only as a consumer but as a designer, that is, as someone who has some sense of their ability to change what is around them.' Notwithstanding the fact that Campbell addressed these issues from a British context, her comments resonated with the multi-national audience.

Day two of the IDA Congress focused on the topics of the Internet and Biotechnology. Barry Lam, often described as a maverick among Taiwanese businessmen, lead the first keynote session. Born and raised in Hong Kong, Lam moved to Taiwan to attend university; subsequently, in 1998, he founded and is currently the chairman of Quanta Computer (*Design at the edges* 2011). Lam's keynote presentation focused on connectivity advancements, its impacts on Generation C and the thinking behind the 'era of disruption.' During the panel discussion, which was facilitated by Chin-Tay Shih, Lam was joined by Bill Seaman, Eric Schuldenfrei, and Ruth Soenius (Figure 5).

The most compelling theme and presentations at the IDA Congress dealt with Biotechnology. The enigmatic Indian environmental activist, Dr Vandana Shiva, presented this keynote address, which proved to be a popular favourite and more importantly, very thought-provoking. Overall, this topic addressed 'The Green Revolution and Genetic Engineering: A Design for Hunger and Ecological Disruption'. Shiva looked at how we grow our food is an issue of how we design agriculture including the landscape, plants and animals. She stated



Figure 5: Panel discussion on the Internet. From left to right are Bill Seaman (Professor, Art History and Visual Studies, Duke University), Eric Schuldenfrei (Co-founder, eskyiu Ltd.), Ruth Soenius (Director, User Experience, Siemens), Barry Lam (Charman and CEO, Quanta Computers Inc) and facilitator Chin-Tay Shih (Chairman, Institute for Information Industry).
Image courtesy of Taiwan Design Centre

that the Green Revolution and Genetic Engineering are based on designing agriculture on the principles of monoculture on toxic chemicals and re-engineering plants with toxic genes. These have consequences for food security and the environment. Among the consequences are the deepening of the hunger crisis and the impoverishment of ecosystems. Soil pollution, water pollution and genetic pollution are inevitable outcomes of a toxic design of farming (*Design at the edges* 2011). Shiva affirmed that 'We can design food and agriculture systems differently. This is what we do in Navdanya [an organisation that she established]. Our design is based on biodiversity. It is based on co-creation and co-production with nature. The ecological design increases food output while decreasing ecological costs' (Lange 2011). The main focus in this session was on how technology has brought a generic alteration of our food supply and hence, there was an urgent appeal for people, designers specifically, to consider the ways in which we use technology.



Figure 6: Panel discussion on Biotechnology. From left to right are Anthony Dunn (Partner, Dunn+Raby), Susan Szenasy (Chief Editor, *Metropolis* magazine), Cory Kid (CEO, Intuitive Automata) and Vandana Shiva (Founder, Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology). Image courtesy of Jacques Lange



Figure 7: Panel discussion on the Urbanism. From left to right are Feng-Tyan Lin (Dean, College of Planning and Design, National Cheng Kung University), Fred Gelli (Creative Director, Tatil), Marco Steinberg (Director of Strategic Design, Finnish Innovation Fund), Peter Bishop (Director, Allies & Morrison Urban Practitioners) and Michael Murphy (Co-Founder, Mass Design). Image courtesy of Taiwan Design Centre

contributed actively to one of the most thought-provoking discussions at the congress (Figure 6).

The third keynote address focused on Urbanism, which is topical at present, bearing in mind that 'by 2050 over 80% of the world's population will live in cities' (*Design at the edges* 2011). The challenge for designers then is to thoughtfully weave together strategies for transportation, climate change, housing and public space so that cities can be economically successful, beautiful and socially cohesive. Peter Bishop, director of Allies & Morrison Urban Practitioners, in his keynote presentation, explored examples where cities are beginning to tackle these issues creatively and define an approach to urbanism that could set the conditions for successful urban growth in the challenging 21st century. Owing to his background and work experience, Bishop referred to London's approach to hosting the Olympics in 2012. He also discussed the rebranding of the Royal Docks area as an example of urban strategy and planning. The discussion of Urbanism and the contemporary challenges of city design was discussed further when Bishop was joined by Marco Steinberg, Michael Murphy and Fred Gelli during the panel discussion (Figure 7).

The concluding session of the IDA focused on the topic of International Migration. The keynote presenter for this session was Bob Elton from Canada, who is a member of the World Economic Forum Global Agenda Council on the Skills Gap, which deals with issues around talent mobility and immigration. He presented a case study of migration specifically in Canada to contextualise the topic. The idea behind introducing this topic was highly relevant, but it was not presented in the context of the design ecology. The Canadian case study was vague and biased and led to anyone coming from a developing country feeling quite dispossessed because critical issues such as brain-drain and the complexities of migrating were not addressed. Elton's stance was purely based

During the panel discussion, Vandana Shiva was joined by Anthony Dunn, Susan Szenasy, Cory Kid, who all



Figure 8: Announcement of Cape Town's designation as the World Design Capital for 2014. Featured centre (in gold) is Patricia de Lille Executive Mayor of Cape Town. Image courtesy of Fatima Cassim

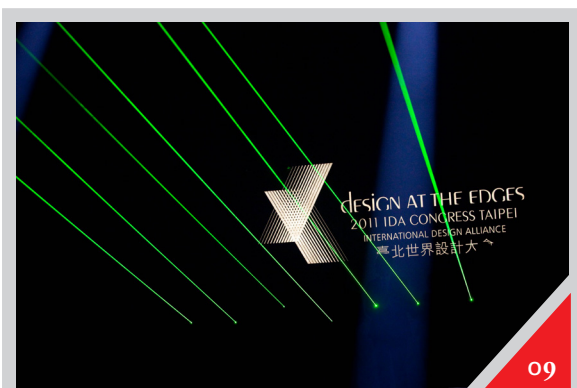


Figure 9: Opening ceremony of the inaugural IDA Congress. Image courtesy of Taiwan Design Centre

on the benefits gained by the recipient country and some minor observations related to Othering. The panel discussion on International Migration was facilitated by Mervyn Kurlansky (Principle, MKD) and consisted of Elton, David Fisher (Director, Seymorepowell Product Design), Juan Carlos Baumgartner (MD, Space) and Calro Ratti (Director, MIT SENSEable City).

For the South African delegates the third day of the congress proved to be very memorable for another

reason: the announcement that Cape Town was selected as the winner for the World Design Capital in 2014 (Figure 8).

Overall, the inaugural IDA Congress with its multi-disciplinary offering was an interesting experiment. It was definitely very different from any design event in recent years as it packaged topical issues under new themes and from new perspectives and despite the content not being completely new, important issues such as sustainability and the ethical responsibility of designers were highlighted once again in a meaningful way.³

Many die-hard design circuit conference delegates wondered how the new format for an Icoграда/Icsid/IFA joint congress would pan out. Ultimately, most of it worked surprisingly well. There were very few show-and-tell presentations, the introduction of speakers from disciplines that are traditionally considered to be 'outside of the design ecology' were well-received and the overall level of discussion definitely contributed to the development of design discourse. However, Communication Design metaphorically drew 'the short straw' amongst the overwhelming dominance of other disciplines, particularly Industrial Design and Architecture.

With regard to the host city, the evening activities that were planned as part of the Congress definitely made it more exciting and lent it a cultural flair. October also marked Taiwan's centennial and as a result the Congress, together with the Taipei World Design Expo, were considered as major events on the local calendar. Certainly, the organisers capitalised on the opportunity to promote Taiwan tourism. All in all, the congress was extremely well managed and organised and at the end of it most delegates probably felt that Taipei, as a

host, went to great heights and stood as tall as its famous Taipei 101 skyscraper.

Notes

1 At its 24th General Assembly that formed part of the extended *Design at the Edges* programme in Taipei, the International Council of Graphic Design Associations ratified a motion to change the organisation's official name to the "International Council of Communication Design". 'Past President Russell Kennedy described the new name as honouring the Council's history by retaining "Icograda" as its primary identifier, while embracing the emerging fields and expanded media practice of communication design (Icograda 2011b [O]) .

2 *Design as resourcefulness and self-reliance* is the guiding strategy that directs all of the activities of the Royal Society of for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce's (RSA). According to Campbell:

The RSA's central mission is to foster good citizenship by closing the gap between our everyday behaviour and the future to which we aspire. To close this gap, contemporary society needs to be more resourceful: its citizens more engaged, self-reliant and collective in their striving. Yet a combination of professionalisation, bureaucracy and consumerism threatens to reduce our resources of common competence and as citizens we often appear to be less resourceful than ever. At the same time our consumption has diminished the earth's resources and we now have fewer resources of energy and natural material at our disposal.

Design & Society [one of the RSA's key projects] argues that design will be fundamental to closing the gap between our behaviour and our aspirations because of the

particular resourcefulness that designers represent. Ready to improvise and prototype, brave in the face of disorder and complexity, holistic and people-centred in their approach to defining problems, designers have a vital role to play today in making society itself more resourceful (Campbell 2009).

3 A selection of video clips from the congress can be viewed at:

<http://designmagazine.co/wordpress/2011/11/26/ida-congress-2011-there-is-no-way-that-design-can-sustain-its-current-trajectory-1/#more-343>

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