

# Design Activism and Social Change

*Barcelona September 2011*

Kjell Skylstad Editor in Chief

The University of Barcelona in September 2011 played host to art and design researchers from five continents gathered to reflect on the role that design can play in social change. According to Isabel Campi, the conference chair and president of the organizing Fundacio Historia del Diseny noted that design, although predominantly interested in responding to the economic interest of the marketplace, has proven itself to be an effective catalyst for social change. Throughout the conference three concepts dominated the discussion: Re-designing, Re-thinking, and Re-engaging. Nadia M. Anderson of Iowa State University discussed how contemporary design activism realizes Henri Lefebvre's "Right to the City" requiring an urban praxis that not only serves functional needs, but makes room for "places of simultaneity and encounters" meaning accommodating the fluid, shifting relationship of everyday life and social interaction. Design should be open-ended and flexible and make use of the informal systems already operating in their communities. Design projects should not only serve physical needs through spatial infrastructure, but also create opportunities for urban praxis by operating as social infrastructure.

In her paper "Design for All and Human Rights" Isabel Campi of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona commented on the Design for All movement of the 90's searching for new ethical referents and leading to the integration of the disadvantaged minorities into the environment.

The keynote speaker Professor Jeremy Myerson of The Royal College of Art in London in his address "Designing for the People, With the People, and By the People" sketched a panorama of Western design history. Design practice in Europe and

North America, he noted, has evolved over the past 60 years within the defining contexts of a production-led economy, consumerism, and more recently globalization. The relationship between professional designers and the people who use their designs has largely been a producer-consumer relationship, referring to the landmark publication of “Design for People” (Simon and Schuster 1955) by the US industrial design pioneer Henry Dreyfuss.

Since 2000 however, Myerson noted that global citizen concerns such as climate change, aging population, social exclusion, and economic equality have prompted a paradigm shift from designing for people to designing with people, and in some cases designing by people. In this new form of practice, the people are no longer passive consumers, but active participants in the design process. Designers are no longer “scaling up” to address globalization, but “scaling down” to address local and community needs. A new-found social activism in design, Myerson holds, requires more empathic, democratic, and bottom-up social models and methods of practice.

Through the examinations by a number of participants of the models for a social design practice connected to urban environments, this conference has created a basis for a critical dialogue that could pave the way for a new urbanism of the future.