

INTERACTIVE BY DESIGN

ANYONE WHO HAS SPENT MUCH TIME IN BRUSSELS OVER THE PAST 15 YEARS HAS SEEN AN ASTONISHING TRANSFORMATION OF THE CITY: WHOLE SWATHES OF BUILDINGS HAVE EITHER BEEN REPLACED OR STRIPPED TO THEIR SKELETONS AND REBUILT. THIS REPRESENTS A FAILURE OF THE POST-WAR ERA OF DESIGN, WHEN A NARROW FOCUS ON FUNCTION CREATED A GENERATION OF BUILDINGS THAT DEMOTIVATED PEOPLE OR EVEN RENDERED THEM SICK.

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Good design is not a luxury, but a necessity. Design is now understood to enhance (or hinder) human learning and social interactions, and technical changes have certainly been a factor in our greater appreciation of this role:

- + As content generation became digital, good graphic design has become much more accessible and affordable;
- + New building materials and techniques have made it possible to reintegrate aesthetics into buildings in cost-effective ways;
- + As the number of digital objects around us has multiplied, user interfaces have needed to evolve in order to guide people and create effective, intuitive and even enjoyable interactions.

The expanded purpose of design first included accessibility and usability and now is acknowledged to have a social vocation.

The traditional trade show space illustrates the point. Intended to be blank canvases, cavernous exhibition halls are easily transformed into confusing mazes where it is easy to get lost and to feel hemmed in by a series of ironically disjointed and claustrophobic spaces. Just as city planners and

architects are starting to reintegrate the concept of the forum - a place for informal gathering and interaction - into their work, we need to think about how to use meeting spaces to encourage spontaneous exchange.

Inside the formal meeting rooms, there has been a trend in recent years for panel discussions to migrate from head tables to easy chairs. The change is not just cosmetic. The first set-up creates a dynamic of one-way communication from authorities on-high to a passive audience. In the second scenario, the speakers are brought down to the audience's level, and they now face each other in a semi-circle, a much more conducive setting for informal exchange. While I think this trend is good, it does pose challenges: many speakers still cling desperately to the security of prepared speeches and talking points.

Design can also foster virtual communities. Based on a successful pilot (its yearly conference in Asia and the Pacific), IFA is in the process of creating a distinct visual identity for every series of conferences it organizes. We did something similar when our association adopted a new visual identity: each

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committee has its own colour variation of the corporate logo. These employ graphic design to help community members within the larger group to find each other and the content that interests them most.

Now that the tools are widely available and accessible, it is up to us to use our imaginations to foster the greatest interaction and exchange through design. Indeed, the challenge is broader than just improving our conferences and publications. Associations themselves are social spaces. How does our association architecture encourage interactions, connectivity and interdependence? Or does it hinder them?

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