New design in a complex world

An Interview from Susanne Schuricht and Mirjam Struppek, held with
John Thackara, 2005

John Thackara is a design producer and a "symposiarch", designing
collaborative events, projects and organisations. Under the focus on new
services, improving the quality of life, he is reconceiving new technology
and the issue of sustainability. He is the Director of Doors of Perception
(Doors), an international conference and design futures network, a non-
profit foundation and consulting company in Amsterdam and Bangalore. His
background is Philosophy and Journalism Studies. He started his career,
editing various art and architecture books as well as the Design Magazine
from 1980 – 1985 and wrote for various publications. As founder of Design
Analysis International (DAI) he started in 1985 lecturing architecture and
design management and consulting clients form the educational, governmental
and private sector as well as organizing exhibitions and conferences
worldwide. From 1993-1999 he was the first Director of the Netherlands
Design Institute. John Thackara is author of the book "In the Bubble:
Designing in a complex world", published in April 2005 by MIT Press.

– "A friendly gesture is, if a story is read to you".
Mr. Thackara: What do you think of, reading that remark?

It's always a friendly thing when someone gives you his time and undivided
attention. Handing over the text would be so much easier.

– When and how did you first get involved with computers?

Someone gave me a word processor when I first started work as a journalist
in the 1980s. But if you mean, when did I start to think about them:
I would say 1993, when we did the first Doors of Perception conference.
That's when I began to ask: "Ok these things are interesting but what are
they for? And what do they mean?"

– Something what New Media is often associated with, or what is said to be
the "New" Thing about New Media is the possibility of interaction ...

Exactly. Interaction is another word for what living things do to stay
alive and evolve – they interact with their environment and with each
other.

— What is for you the idea behind the word "interaction"?

The main and for me only important meaning is interaction between people.
Interaction between machines is of modest technical interest, but no
cultural interest. Interaction between a person and a machine is a little
but more important, but only if that, too, leads back to interaction
between people.

– So a main focus in computer development should be put on connecting
people and thereby creating valuable interaction between them?

For me, yes, that should be the main emphasis.

– What does it mean for you, being connected?

It means being connected to other people socially and personally. I spent most of my two weeks in India last month with no Internet but I felt tremendously alive and connected to people.

– You call yourself a "symposiarch". Wikipedia describes symposium "as Greek social institution", a gathering for men to debate, plot and party, overseen by the symposiarch.[1] How did this "profession" change in our modern networked society?

Well for one thing it's not just for men! My main work is to pose interesting questions to people, and then persuade them to come together to discuss them. I'm not sure this task is fundamentally different now than in the time of the ancient Greeks. We have communication systems to get in touch with each other, but life encounters between people for whom a question has meaning remains the most important part of what I do. Also, the party is just as important now is 2000 years ago!

– What is most challenging as symposiarch? Please tell us one of your best experiences.

The challenge is to persuade people that a question is worth their time and attention. We are all so flooded with 'noise' that it's never easy to get peoples attention.

One of my best experiences was last week, in India. The mix of people that came (to Doors 8); the atmosphere they created; the generosity of spirit; and the high quality of honesty and discussion. All these were special.

– How would you describe the goal of Doors of Perception in a single sentence?

I've spent ten years using a variety of single sentences and the only thing I know works, is for people to participate in a Doors event. But my 2005 single sentence is: "Doors is a worldwide design and innovation network whose aim is to learn how to design services, some of them enabled by information technology, that meet basic needs in new ways".

– Who are the participants of Doors? And in which fields do they work?
Doors is a conference, website, and knowledge network. We bring together innovators, entrepreneurs, educators, and designers who want to imagine alternative futures – sustainable ones – and take design steps to realize them. The delegates at a Doors conference come from around 50 countries. The same goes for the 500,000 people who visit our website each year.

Doors is a worldwide design and innovation network whose aim is to learn how to design services, some of them enabled by information technology, that meet basic needs in new ways. Every two years or so,

the network meets to share the results of its work with citizens, education, industry and professionals.

What is the aim and how do the participants utilize this approach in their respective activities? Please give us an example.

We bring together innovative people and organizations around an agenda for design transformation. We do projects, together, that explore scenarios for new services, enabled by information technology, that support for new ways of living.
Our main activity is helping people look at things in new ways. People get involved in Doors because they need to look at things from a fresh perspective. These are new times. Doors helps imagine sustainable and engaging futures - and take design steps to realize them.

But what people really value, is that we bring together different disciplines and communities that would not otherwise meet. These connections lead to all manner of new relationships and projects.

- Do you think it is a balancing act in your business, building design for social capital, trying "to make the place a better world" and dealing at the same time with the economic world and a state with drawing more and more from social responsibilities?

It's always hard balancing different kinds of work. There is never enough money - and these days are harder than a few years ago.

My reasons for dealing with people and social issues is, that I find them to be more interesting - not because I want to make the world a better place.

- You just came back from doors 8 in Delhi. What were the new, special insights you gained?

A personal "Aha!" moment in Delhi was the realisation, that re-mix is not just about new music and vj-ing. Re:mix also signals a broader cultural shift away from the obsession with individual authorship that has rendered everything from art to management so tiresome in recent times.
Another takeaway from Doors 8 was an understanding that enabling platforms for social innovation need to meet three criteria: they should creatively engage the people they are intended for; they should help people to evaluate the new against the old; and they should help local people retain control over their own resources. Big corporations may have a role to play here as providers of enabling platforms - but not as the proprietors of finished products or services. The challenge is to design system architectures that promote local leaderships, and that keep power, knowledge, and the value generated, at local level.

- What exactly do you mean with enabling platforms?

An enabling platform is a set of tools (such as the telephone) that helps people do things for and with each other in a different and maybe better

way. This is in contrast to tools and services, which disable human
agency, and make it harder for people do things themselves. So-called "self
service" technologies are a prime example of this second kind.

**- What do you think is the future significance of virtual networks and
their online platforms as tool for enabling people that share interests and
knowledge, but sometimes not the same location?**

They will be as important as, say, the telephone network or the railway
network - which is to say: very important, but not a substitute for
situated, embodied encounters.

**- Doors of Perception (Doors), has a second office in Bangalore. I remember
at Doors 6 "lightness" in 2000, SUGATA MITRA told about an experience -
they fixed a touch screen at a wall in a poor Indian quarter and children
came and played around, learning very fast how to use the Internet, neither
knowing any programs before nor understanding any English...
How did the Idea of Doors East start? What is the fascination especially
with India?**

Doors East was an extension of relationships we developed with India and
South Asia from the start of Doors, in 1993. At Doors East 1 (in
Ahmedabad, in 2000) we looked at the design of services enabled by the
Internet in a South Asia context, and discussed the relationships between
information technology, development, and environmental sustainability.[2]
At Doors East 2 (Bangalore, 2003) our theme was design and local knowledge,
with an emphasis on mapping local knowledge, location-based information
services, and new business models to pay for them.[3]

**- Do you think the society or rather the people change in India by
acquiring the "western" new media tools?**

We all change, continuously, in response to changes in our environment.
Those changes include the advent of new media. As we learned from McLuhan,
technology changes us - and we change technology. As for India: I suspect
people there change technology and are changed by it, in more than a
billion different ways. Just like the rest of us. "Our" technology is just
one among an uncountable variety of influences.

**- Your approach is not simply from a design perspective. Tell us more about
your social and political ambitions.**
If, as we strongly believe, tech-push is over as a driver of
innovation, then a new model of innovation is needed if we are to
find ways to exploit the broadband communications, smart materials,
wearable computing, pervasive computing, and connected appliances,
that we're unleashing upon the world.
India is a world-class incubator of new business models. The "Public
Call Office" concept enabled hundreds of millions of people to gain
telephone access, within a few years. What's coming next?

Above all, people in South Asia are still respected as a value - not
only as a cost, as they tend to be in the north. Tomorrow's services
need to involve people more, not less, than they do today and India,
with one fifth of the world's population, is an ideal place to

explore what it might mean to design services that use people more, not less.

The take-away

Doors 8 is about next-generation service and product concepts. You will leave with ideas for new services, and many of the connections and capabilities you will need to implement them.

What do you see as the driving force for innovation?

"When people talk about innovation in this decade, they really mean design".(Bruce Nussbaum in Business Week, January 2005)

Our aim is to shift the policy and business agenda away from top-down, technology-push innovation. We want to find out what platforms are needed to enable bottom-up social innovation - and how to design them

- Your web column "in the bubble" has now become a book. Why did you call it "in the bubble"?

Mainly to provoke people to stop thinking of design as something you do from the outside in, or top down.

"In the bubble" is a phrase used by air traffic controllers to describe their state of mind, among their glowing screens and flows of information, when they are in the flow and in control. Lucky them. Most of us feel far from in control. We're filling up the world with amazing devices and systems-on top of the natural and human ones that were already here-only to discover that these complex systems seem to be out of control: too complex to understand, let alone to shape, or redirect.

My book has s simple and positive idea: Things may seem out of control-but they are not out of our hands. By the way I made a website all about the book![4]

I say in the book that the best condition for a designer - mentally and physically - is to be both in the bubble and outside it: immersed in reality, but also aware of the bigger picture.

- In the book you declare, "We're filling up the world with technology and devices, but we've lost sight of an important question: What is this stuff for? What value does it add to our lives?" How much technology do we need?

Unfortunately "need" and "have to live with" are irretrievably mixed up. The world is so full of technology and inter-mingled systems that we can't just throw them away. But I'm confident we are moving away from the idea that tech is a good thing by itself.

- You once claimed: "Innovation driven by social fiction instead of science fiction." Can you give us an example of how new social services for daily life could look like?

The simplest example I know is "Walking Bus". Parents all over the world
dislike the fact that their children are driven to school - so small
groups, in many countries, are self-organising to accompany children to
school on foot. It's a low-tech thing - they only use telephones - but the
results are terrific.

- What is the difference between art and design for you?

Art is about framing things in such a way that we see or experience them
differently. Design is about reorganising the world in more concrete ways.
I'm optimistic that the two activities will intermingle in the future!

**- In your Bubble-text "The post-spectacular city" you wonder whether
"Art has become most attractive to the interests it once ridiculed"...
- What in your opinion is/should be the aim and intention of new media art?**

As I said, new media art can be a kind of frame, or medium, in and through
which we see things differently. Seeing things differently is the
precondition for acting (and being) differently in the world. This is where
art is extremely important - especially if we are moving away from a
mediated world to one in which everything is live once again.

- What would you suggest someone who is now 20 years old?

a) Distrust the feeling of satisfaction.
b) Be extraordinarily nice to people who are older than you and whose name
is John.

- What does home mean for you?

Difficult question. I'm like a Frigate Bird - and where does she live?
I travel a lot of the time. And, since I was 18, I've lived outside the
country where I was born (the UK) for more years, than I've lived inside
it.

- Do you enjoy living in Amsterdam?

I do. But I also live in France now!

**- And now our last personal question: - how do you manage the complexity of
your amazingly multifarious life?**

Who said I managed it! I have an interesting life but I have the suspicion
that it manages me more than me, it.

Mr. Thackara, thank you

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[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symposium

[2] www.doorseast.com/2000doorseast/india_in_bubble.html

[3] www.doorseast.com

[4] www.thackara.com/inthebubble/