On Displacement, Blind Immediacy, and the Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness: Review of Design (plus) Research Conference, Politecnico di Milano, May, 2000.
Keith Russell

Thoughtful men exchange greetings by posing questions to one another. [1]

Towards a Research Culture

Sometimes, beginnings *are* beginnings. In his opening lecture, Tomás Maldonado pointed to the current shift in direction of industrial design and the displacement of "what really happens today in the practice of design," brought about through the international increase in Ph.D. studies in design. Such studies, he declared: "Leave less and less room…for a design without research, without theory, immersed in the blind immediacy of the market and fashion." Ever present at the conference, current Ph.D. candidates made their difference obvious as they delivered papers, questioned from the floor, and established connections based on issues central to their work. Whatever the status of design plus research before Milano, it was successfully displaced by the engagement of these new members of the design research community.

Beyond such new difference, the old differences remain to be addressed. Theory and practice will have it out with each other at every opportunity. Acknowledging the ease with which such polarities maintain themselves, Maldonado reminded the conference of deeper philosophical concerns that often are disguised in the politics of battle. While recognizing the "concreteness of making and doing," according to Maldonado, design must reject "pseudo-concreteness, the rhetorical pretext of concreteness." As design researchers, we must guard against "what was once called 'the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.'" Redetermining the concrete, and redetermining the status of the concrete, requires that design be redetermined; questioning the nature of human and the human of nature must take its place in the discourse of design along with the already recognized concerns of making. Within this expanded rhetoric, no object will suffice as an answer and no action will equal conclusion.

Having raised such strong issues from the start, the opening lecture by Maldonado ensured that what followed was guided by a

1   M. Heidegger in John Salis, ed., *Radical Phenomenology: Essays in Honor of Martin Heidegger* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1978), 3.

Figure 1
Tomás Maldanado
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2   Silvia Pizzocaro, Amilton Arruda, and
     Dijon De Moraes, eds., *Design Plus
     Research: Proceedings of the Politecnico
     di Milano Conference, May 18–20, 2000*
     (Milano: Politecnico di Milano, 2000).

spirit of inquiry equal to Heidegger's challenge to ground our meetings, as thoughtful people, in the posing of questions. First, one Ph.D. candidate, and then yet another Ph.D. candidate, ensured there were no corners to hide from inquiry; the reverie of past triumphs was always about to be broken by a challenge to justify long-held views. On all sides, blind immediacy and the rhetorical pretext of preagreed concreteness stood as ugly figures admonishing those who would stay, uninspecting, in the fragrant garden that was the Milano conference.

While the concrete and immediate particularity of the conference has its place, the rapid decay of short-term memory implies that the conference papers will quickly assert themselves as the record of events. Reviewing the conference allows that, from this one person's perspective, elements of the sensorium may be transcribed and recorded, even if rearranged as a kind of map. Indeed, the concept of mapping arose in many presentations as a concept of what might properly be the current business of a conference reflecting on research and design. As pointed out by Silvia Pizzocaro[2] in her introduction to the conference proceedings, participants (more than 150) "from more than twenty countries met at the campus of the Politecnico di Milano to establish a ground for…debate, aspiring to offer not a series of status reports but the basis for a shared focus toward a culture of research in industrial design." The objective was a "*milieu* of expression."

Presentations and open question times, coffee and lunch, dinner and 1:00 AM gelato outside the Hotel Wagner: these moments, held in common with a group of design researchers, established a fundamental culture. Here we were, arguing over the day's events, even into the new morning.

Four Perspectives on Research

Beyond a common experience, grounding the Milan milieu, for this reviewer, was a sense of design knowledge inscribed in the architecture of Milan. Wandering the streets, half lost on purpose, required many escapes to the underground. Arising again to the Italian sunlight, from green line or red line or yellow line, four buildings, among the many, served as sign posts. These sign posts became crucial in my own cognitive mapping of the conference as that thing taking place in time and space in Milan in May.

First, the Castello Sforzesco, built in 1450 by Duke Francesco Sforza stands out in memory for its externalizing of power. The visual dominance, in the central courtyard, is an optical puzzle produced, as a piece of design, by holding the horizontal eye in tension with the vertical eye. The vertical finally overpowers; the tower takes visual control as something arising outside that will not be included. It exceeds the human through the human body and the dominant sense of sight. (Not surprisingly, inside is housed the ugly Pietà Rondanini, by Michelangelo, that says so much about the
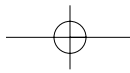
bodily slide to death in the arms of life.) The Castle is experienced as the donation of a power from outside and above. Its model of design talks to the epistemological concerns of designing: we are what we design and what we design gives us back our own sense of ourselves. Is this inscription of design knowledge about the "Theory-Centered Approach"? Is it theory that seeks to control through baffling horizontals and bewildering verticals? Is it theory that pretends to assert what is unavoidable in design? Is it theory that would establish a castle?

Second, the Duomo Cathedral, begun in 1386 under the Visconti Dukedom, stands as a forerunner for the World Wide Web as it seeks to out-display even its own story. Thumbnail after thumbnail begs to be clicked on with the promise of revealing another anecdote in the travail of man and his god. Here, power is invested in a concretion that appears to be that of a coral reef: more and more is added on each turn of the head. Indeed, this model of accretion is the very source of the building.

Hundreds of years in the making, the Cathedral and its continuous building have become the source of the vernacular expression "*la fabrica del dom.*" According to Aldo Rossi,[3] for the Milanese:

> …every major undertaking is likened to the "*fabrica del dom.*" There will be states of advancement and guarantees of continuity, however, the result always will be provision-al. Not provisional in a sadly ephemeral, but in an eternally provisional way, since the result is constantly in progress.

Beneath the altar, I can see something very simple if also pretending to be mysterious: men, bedizened, chanting as of old, in a chamber made for chanting, while outside their recess, the voluptuous colors of window after window open the eye to paradox rather than para-dise. Here, power is the secret of excess by addition. The body has been wrapped in a sensory bandage of its own knowledge; exceed-ing myself, I become lost and comforted in my loss. Here, design is experienced as the grand narrative of all mankind. Is this the "User-Centered Approach," where users are used up in their reexpression as servants of utility? Because we can do better, or add, we do? Here we become servants of our own myth of design? In practice and use, we drown?

Third, the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II or Salon of Milan, by architect Giuseppe Piermarini (1865), just seems to stand there offer-ing nothing more than itself and the occasional cheap thrill of an arch, a dome, and a glimpse of the possibilities of human space. What a nice place to shop, though this is not what I do. Here, power is sublimated and made into a companion of the self; it is reformed as something of my own making; as something I have already secretly desired. It is a numbing and a pacifying, a kind of Alessi prototype for a dumb toy to dumb away my time in transitions

3   Aldo Rosi, circa 1989, "Milanese construction" in Luca Basso Peressut and Ilaria Valente, eds., *Milano Architetture per la città* 1980–1990 (Rozzano, Milano: Editoriale Domus): 71–77.
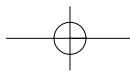
from arch to dome and back again. Here, power is my power over myself to overpower myself in my own pleasure. Here, I am experienced as space. Is this "the Education-Centered Approach," where we were taught how and where to have it, and then taught to forget that we are taught as we remember, as if for the first time, what it is to have it? "Educate" means "to draw out" as in "making a path for the drawn out to follow." This building seems to model my being drawn, towards being drawn as if that were a good and an end in itself. Just where am I going in all this learning? Along with Heracleitus,[4] we might agree that the "learning of many things teacheth not understanding, else would it have taught Hesoid and Pythagoras, and again Xenophanes and Hekataios" (frag. 16). Another arch, another dome, and we are wise?

Fourth, Stazione Centrale, by architect Ulisse Stacchini (1931), offers to translate time into a medium for my own transformation. It promises I will be taken on a train to a destination that must be the future, because all the signs are pointing away from here to there. At this station, design is experienced as the agent and goddess of time. By adding up histories, the interior skull offers an inverted bone cup of time. Is this the "Innovation-Centered Approach," where we find ourselves as novel participants in novel events speeding towards our own supplementation, augmentation, and realization as destroyers of the old world and creators of the new? Are we to get on board and rush to the horizon panting? Novated, renovated and innovated, we design, in denial of limit, our own ceremony of limitation denied. If only it were not so brash.

Community of Concern

Such is the poetry of buildings from this one vantage. Reading the conference papers (more than five-hundred pages), I am using these buildings to help organize the poles of thought, the tribal concerns, the design issues, and the designer concerns that were voiced and displayed during the conference. Here, the imaginary city of recollected-participants defeats my efforts to make a common sense. On day one, the conference buzz word was "intervention." On day two, it shifted to "provocation." By day three, we were into *ciao.*

In their final statement, the conference team; Ezio Manzini, Tomás Maldonado, Victor Margolin, and Silvia Pizzocaro; attempted to draw together the threads of the conference:

> Inside the larger network of designers, researchers, producers, and users, the design research community constitutes a network of individuals and institutions. This network connects individuals and creates a platform of interaction to encourage continuing dialogue among researchers who operate in different ways and in different domains. What this community has in common is a commitment to building a design research culture, which can contribute to a deeper understanding of design itself.

4   Heracleitus in John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 4th ed., 1930).
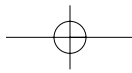
Prior to the conference, and recorded in his paper in the proceedings, Victor Margolin [5] outlined the intention of the conference:

> What is most important is to understand that a research culture cannot be designed from the top down by legislating aims and methods for everyone. It has to grow from the bottom up, through extensive discussion and debate. Until now, design researchers have lacked the forum for a broad engagement with multiple strands of research. If we can create such a forum, we can begin to mature as a research community. We will not only produce higher quality practitioners and educational programs, but we'll also introduce design research more effectively into the wider field of research on human culture, and the achievement of personal and collective well-being.

How do things grow from the bottom up? The Milan conference was very catholic in its offerings. It was very broad in its approaches. It was clearly formulated in an effort to involve as many distinct areas of design concern as possible. Special sessions aimed to draw attention to the large range of existing design communities including journals, previous, related design conferences and subsequent, related design conferences. The diversity of approaches underlined differences. For example, fully referred journals and journals based on personal discretion and cultural discernment would seem at odds unless we accept that both approaches offer needed and valid kinds of support for design research.

At the edges of these special sessions, one could perceive the ghosts of past contests. Were these ghosts put to rest? From the vantage point of the many new design researchers who found their way to Milan, the ghosts were very vague and the new connections very apparent. Enough time and enough new Ph.D. candidates would seem to have allowed the tribes to sit together from a common commitment: an Althing *was* formed.

How was this possible? How is it that research communities can be formed? Beyond the blatant features that make conferences wrong, what else was going on? There must be something beyond blind immersion in the accepted mode of yet another PowerPoint display; something beyond yet another diagram pointing arrows from box to box, as if concepts are interrelated magically through arrows rather than words; something beyond feature sets that parade as adequate descriptions of anything other than themselves; something beyond yet another demonstration of a design object as if such objects embody, like fine art objects, their own concreteness; something beyond yet another picture as a resolved thought.

By looking into the world of ancient Greek science, we can look into the origins of a community of concern that radically altered the world through its particular ability to originate and sustain a peculiarly diverse discourse. Such questions of origin now face design research.

5   Victor Margolin, "Building a Design Research Community" in Silvia Pizzocaro, Amilton Arruda, and Dijon De Moraes, eds., *Design Plus Research: Proceedings of the Politecnico di Milano Conference, May 18–20, 2000* (Milano: Politecnico di Milano).
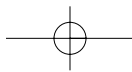
Thales established a basis for this structure [a particular structure that organizes theoretical knowledge] by making the transition from unprovable statements on issues that were impossible to observe, to responsible ones. This transition was made with the anticipation of critical discussion and in hope of attaining respect and glory, having once satisfied the demand for proof. Thus, we relate the event directly to the structure of human relations. Of course, the thesis that the new forms of knowledge had their roots in the character of Greek political and social life has been expressed many times. However, such assertions tend to postulate a leap from one form of human activity to another that differs greatly. Some underestimate the difference between the agora or court debates and scientific discussion, others regard the theories of the first philosophers as the direct projection of political changes. But when I say that proof comes from the demand for proof, this is already speaking in terms of behavior and interrelations. When I say that the method of consistent reasoning about the nature was discovered by Thales in anticipation of a critical discussion, we see that a particular form of interpersonal relations, a particular form of human interaction, is impressed into the very logic of theoretical inquiry.[6]

Consistent reasoning in "anticipation of a critical discussion" is what typified the Milan conference. After three days of intense debate, it became apparent that there was a shared understanding of, and engagement with, "a particular form of human interaction." Crucial to this understanding was an agreed absence of gurus, an agreed openness to the most innocent and fundamental of questions, and an agreed willingness to inform the discourse of missing and/or repressed perspectives.

6   Dimitri V. Panchenko, "Thales and the Origin of Theoretical Reasoning," (trans. by Anton Struchkov) in *Configurations* 1.3 (1993): 387–414; also available at URLhttp://muse.jhu.edu/journals/configurations/v001/1.3panchenko.html.