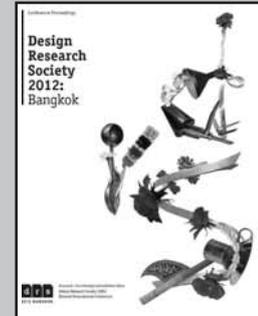


Review

Design Research Society 2012 Bangkok: Reforming traditions, reshaping boundaries

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Arriving in Bangkok from Dublin, I did not know quite what to expect from a city whose name in Thai language, Krung Thep, translates directly as 'City of Angels'. Thailand's renown for warmth, charm and hospitality is well known, however in its period of transition, political reorganisation, and recent natural disaster, the nation is being forced to reconcile tradition and progress, East and West, classicism and modernism. Events at the Design Research Society conference 2012, staged at Chulalongkorn University Bangkok, fortified the city's reputation and exposed the country's exciting state of flux. Over the four days from 1st to 4th July, DRS delegates encountered a multidimensional culture – a nation which is at once free-flowing and open to change, yet which remains grounded in tradition and pride for its rich history.

The conference program reflected these ideas of flux, and blended the expected and unexpected. On one side, the academic program contained a superb range of papers which reflected the DRS's mission to form a cohesive yet diverse international design community. In addition, indigenous scholars presented papers on pertinent local themes. On the other side, the organising committee at Chulalongkorn delivered a four-day social and cultural schedule which celebrated Thailand's evolution, focusing on current shifts in Thai culture and society. Together, this mix ensured that the DRS's first visit to South East Asia was one of its most successful and thought provoking conferences to date.

The background to DRS 2012's host university is significant, having undoubtedly influenced the thematic fabric of the conference. Located close to the commercial hub of Siam in the heart of downtown Bangkok, Chulalongkorn is Thailand's longest established university, and ranks amongst the most prestigious in Asia. It is a huge institution of more than 36,000 students, its faculties spanning the arts, social sciences, medicine, law, and engineering. Its buildings are a mix of old and new, designed in traditional Thai and more modern architecture styles. Named after King Rama V, the university still retains strong linkages with the Thai royal family. Indeed, to this day members of the royal family present diplomas at graduation ceremonies.

It was graduation day at Chulalongkorn on the tropical Sunday evening on which the conference opened. DRS delegates arrived on campus grounds during palpable excitement, as students and proud families milled around taking photographs, and enjoying the occasion. In Thailand, it is mandatory for students to wear uniforms to attend classes and meetings at university – Chulalongkorn's students wear a white blouse or shirt, with navy blue shorts or knee length skirts. Its graduation gown is particularly striking: transparent white net gowns are trimmed in golden flashes. Yet while draped in the symbols of ceremony and tradition, the university is also an Asian hotbed for academic research excellence across its faculties. Scratching beneath the surface of classicism

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and tradition, one finds a progressive institute dedicated to furthering, on an international scale, its departments and scholarly communities.

The opening keynote address by Pichet Klunchun set the scene for a conference entitled *'Re:Search: uncertainty, contradiction and value'*. A graduate from Chulalongkorn in khon style Thai classical dance, Pichet later studied Western dance in the USA. Returning to Thailand, he formed the Pichet Klunchun Dance Company, and embarked on a mission to fuse khon with contemporary Western dance. While his work has achieved critical acclaim internationally, his company performing extensively in Europe and the US, at home Pichet has encountered criticism and resistance to his modern interpretation of khon. In Thailand, as elsewhere, the rigidity of tradition and flexibility of reform often co-exist uneasily. However, demonstrations by six of his company's dance pupils illustrated Pichet's vision for a beautiful, moving and often insightful fusion of classical and modern.

Transformation, unity and inclusivity were to become key themes of the conference. Over the course of the coming days, proceedings at DRS 2012 strengthened the Design Research Society's central mission. Both the DRS's membership, and its six-decade old aim to promote "the study of, and research into, the process of designing in all its many fields" are becoming increasingly inclusive and expansive. At DRS 2012, there were dedicated tracks across a multitude of fields of interest, from design organisation and process, design thinking, and sustainability; to design inquiry, design culture, and design theory; along with SIGs on pedagogy; experiential knowledge; objects, practices, experiences, networks; wellbeing and happiness; and inclusive design. Adding to this blend, the scholarly design community is now truly global. In attendance were delegates from more than 30 countries, ensuring that discussion was lively, multidimensional and far-reaching. Diversity was absolutely embedded in DRS 2012.

What is especially significant about the assorted congregation, and the arrangement of tracks, is that design discourse is no longer bounded by the confines of discipline. Rather, discussion becomes grouped around specialisation of subjects which criss-cross a multitude of domains. Delegates came from design schools, engineering and business faculties, as well as from industry, and specialise in digital design, graphic design, management studies, architecture and urban planning,

cultural studies, product and industrial design, and service and interaction design, to name but a few. Hence the DRS's mission to embrace, include and expand is supported by its openness in crossing the heretofore rigid boundaries of discipline.

I identified four pervasive themes arising from the ensuing debates over the course of the conference, which interestingly all touch on the theme 'uncertainty, contradiction and value': (1) re-shaping design education, (2) addressing and resolving methodological discord, (3) the evolving nature of the relationship between production and consumption, and (4) design's heightening responsibilities in sustainability and inclusivity.

Design futures is always a broad and contentious topic at such conferences however at DRS 2012, there was much interesting debate around emerging ideas in design pedagogy. Particularly noteworthy is the infiltration of design approaches in education – both in general, and in design education specifically. First, as we look towards Umea Institute of Design in Sweden as the host for DRS 2014, it is first interesting to see the breaking down of traditional compartmentalisation in design education. Umea is revolutionary in its own development of exploratory approaches to developing its curriculum. Anna Valtonen, rector of the Institute, spoke about Umea's use of cross-disciplinary workshops for students, industry employers, and university decision makers to evolve more meaningful course contents. Second, at a broader level, Randy Swearer of Philadelphia University, USA, presented research on using design thinking to reshape universities – from curricula, structure, organisation, and even buildings. These emerging pedagogical approaches look set to gain recognition as important breakthroughs as the design discipline, in its new era of value, steps outside of traditional confines to redefine boundaries in education.

Thankfully, however, there remains plenty of incongruity in the community, particularly between the so-called 'researchers' and 'designers'. This is, of course, the purpose of such a convention, as it provokes discussion from which we can generate new ideas and knowledge. Discord is especially evident when it comes to the governance of methodological choice, and this was a second recurrent theme. In the presentations at DRS 2012, there was a clear divide between those studies using conventional qualitative and quantitative approaches, versus those using a 'design' methodology (i.e. research conducted *through* design). The presentation made by Seymour Roworth-Stokes of University of the Creative Arts,

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UK, and chair of the DRS, was particularly insightful on this theme. Seymour highlighted the prominent usage of case study methodology in design research. It is no surprise that there exists a lack of agreed understanding of what constitutes a case study. Therefore, using case study as an example to highlight the issue, Seymour calls for stronger underpinnings in design research with the aim of heightening its reach and impact, rigour and validity, both in design journals and further afield.

While breaking boundaries and finding harmony in research and education was one chief component of the proceedings, the outcomes of, and changes in, design practice and process were equally well represented. The changing nature of the relationship between production and consumption was a third key theme, and especially captivated me for its relevance to my own research in the business of design. Anthony Crabbe, from Nottingham Trent University, UK, took us on a fascinating tour of the phenomenon of 'upcycling'. Upcycling denotes both designers' and consumers' reuse of old and discarded products and materials to offer new functions and greater value. Inevitably, a result of the practice is that new product meanings are formed, reversing Louis Sullivan's "form ever follows function" ideology. Nodding once again to transition, the notion of upcycling is also significant for its proactive and responsible, but often inadvertent, response to overproduction and wastage. A keynote address by Saran Yen Panya put a local spin on the subject. A graduate of Chulalongkorn, Saran is a practicing designer whose work seeks to understand social division, which is extremely polar in his native Thailand. Saran described a sense of discomfort in resolving a perceived incongruity between design as his chosen profession and his working class background. So, his projects explore this disparity by melding 'high' symbols of luxe and classicism, with 'low' found and crafted objects. Saran's constructed juxtaposition is a provoking comment on modes of consumption, and he interprets this divide through a combination of design, societal and cultural signification.

Closely related to the paradox of consumption is the issue of sustainability and inclusivity, and many presenters, especially the DRS+Holcim keynote speakers, addressed this fourth pertinent theme. Eco-designer Singh Intrachotoo looked at the idea of social innovation and environmental sustainability. He described precisely why urban planning and sustainability are inextricably linked in Bangkok, where there are approximately only 3 square metres per head, making it one of the world's most densely populated cities. As an architect and urban

planner, Singh sees it as his responsibility to create environmentally responsible living solutions by (re)using local materials. His Urban Farm Urban Barn project sought to band together urban communities and enhance residents' life quality by developing a means for neighbourhoods to cultivate food and become partly self-sufficient. Likewise, architect Dirk Hebel examined the pursuit for "more" as rapidly rising populations create the need for even greater consumption. Dirk described a sense of responsibility in encouraging sustainable behaviour, chiefly 'using less for more', and 'using more what's [already] there'. Dirk's projects in Africa centre on the idea that design can prevent the problems of the West being replicated in the developing world, and he promotes the consideration of construction, materials, culture and context, amongst others, as crucial in better supporting growing urban populations.

A final note must be made of the exceptional social and cultural program. DRS 2012 was a conference of many firsts, including the first floating conference dinner. It was a memorable evening cruising in darkness past Bangkok's golden-lit monuments on the Chao Phraya River. Another highlight was the range of one-day field trips exploring Thailand's rich arts and crafts legacies. These were scheduled to take in, amongst others, the indigenous wickerwork communities in Angthong province, designer studios in and around Bangkok, and Thailand's Royal Arts School. This choice made selection extremely difficult. I elected to learn more about the production (and consumption) processes of Thailand's famous ceramic industry. Our small group visited three incredible locations. First, was the floating market at Damnoen Saduak, 100km to the west of Bangkok. The floating markets provide a colourful insight on the traditional markets of Thailand's waterways, not to mention the industriousness of the Thai people. As potential customers float by on narrow gondola-like boats, stall owners use long poles capped with hooks to yank in trade. Next up was the Pinsuwan Benjarong ceramic factory. This beautiful and serene location, surrounded by an orchid garden, is a quiet and peaceful workplace. Teams of experts paint delicate patterns with incredible precision and intricacy, and their brushes looked to contain no more than 10 bristles. In stark contrast to this calm was the noise, chaos and activity at our last stop, the Office of the Traditional Arts. This is a working school, where apprentices learn from master craftsmen and women. All ornamentation related to the Thai royal dynasty – such as official pageantry, public statues and palace decoration – is produced here. We were granted access to an endless series of workshops,

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each with a different focus, for instance: crochet, woodwork, resin painting, sculpting, mirror making, gold leafing and carpentry. We met and talked with many members of the enormous army of workers, whose speed and precision of skill was quite unbelievable. Reflecting the Thai national psyche, each worker had the utmost care for his or her station, and an unmistakable pride in their work.

Bangkok was, in reflection, a fitting and timely host for DRS 2012. It is a city of change, speed, and vision, yet it remains inextricably grounded in history and tradition. This mirrors the current transition in the design discipline. The global and pluralistic design community is opening up and searching for solid ground in its educational foundations, methodological approaches, wider responsibilities, as well as its future direction. This is an exciting period as we face the challenge to regenerate the past and shape a future filled with potential. The papers presented in Bangkok have raised the bar for forthcoming conferences, as has the precedent set by the local organising committee. I'm sure all delegates will join me in offering my expression of gratitude to the DRS's organising committees for ensuring an enjoyable, memorable and worthwhile visit to Bangkok.

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