



# The Future of Design

The Third German Design Debate in Frankfurt am Main is examining nothing less than the future of the world to mark the 70th anniversary.

By Oliver Herwig

The location: historic. The participants: prominent. The occasion: highly topical. The Third German Design Debate in Frankfurt's Paulskirche focused on the future of design. At the heart of German democracy, it was all about de-colonization, participation, sustainability and the circular economy. Of course, the big question in the background was: What can design contribute to a better world?

The President of the World Design Organization (WDO), **David Kusuma**, was visibly surprised to be speaking about design in a church – he had never given a speech in such a place before. Kusuma who has a PhD in material sciences immediately emphasized the global importance of design as a “key pathway towards a better future in everything we do.” However, Kusuma went far beyond generalisations and identified a dilemma: although design has the power to improve the quality of life worldwide, it is not sufficiently recognized, let alone understood, by political decision-makers. Design policy will therefore play a decisive role in the future. Kusuma cited the UN's current sustainability goals as an example: these were created without the involvement of designers and can hardly be achieved in the period up to 2030. But that should change. The WDO wants to help formulate new, realistic sustainability goals in the future and assist with their implementation. In view of complex challenges such as climate change, constantly growing urbanization and technological convergence, design remains the key to confronting the challenges of the future: “Using the power of design as a fundamental tool to make communities and human settlements more inclusive, safe, more resilient and, of course, more sustainable.”

At a time when much of the world is becoming increasingly fragmented, the timing of the event entitled „Creating Community“ was ideal: they reminded us that design can unite and connect us.

## Using The Power of Design

No wonder all the speakers evoked the potential and responsibility of design. The Young Designers Circle – an international network of young designers from the WDO that bundles the creativity and ambitions of the next generation of designers – represented by **Kimia Amir-Moazami**, **Muhammed Khan** and **Pedro Sáez Martínez**, focused on the power of participation using concrete example projects such as „Not There Yet“.

The energetic Italian **Francesca Bria**, advisor to the EU, calls for more speed in the digital transformation in Germany. Referring to her successful transformation of Barcelona, she highlighted the connection between data democracy and political participation: “We need a radical shift, a new model of prosperity”, in which data no longer remains in the hands of a few companies but benefits local people – such as the city administration, which can use it to plan and make decisions in a more targeted manner. In her grassroots approach, art, ecology, and democracy go hand in hand, fueled by the raw material of the 21st century: data as the commons. In this way, Bria can even find something good in the „polycrisis“: Cities become drivers of change, data becomes a catalyst for circular transformation by creating public added value as part of the infrastructure.

**Sunny Dolat**, fashion curator and cultural producer, who co-founded the multidisciplinary Kenyan group „Nest Collective“ in 2012, also made this clear. Dolat introduced a new perspective: Design as a means of reclaiming stolen and suppressed (African) identities. With „Design Identities: Building and Reclaiming Black African Narratives“, he decidedly turned against colonial and Eurocentric perspectives, against the monolithic appropriation of colonial powers and in favour of authentic African history(ies). His conclusion: designing identities in Africa is cultural representation, sustainability and social activism: “Design (means) (...) reclaiming agency.”

### **Changing The Powerlessness of Design Education**

**Hartmut Esslinger** used his contribution to give a general reckoning with design education in Germany. As a „designer for industry“, design always has to do with politics, after all, he himself has contributed „to the loss of some key German industries“, Esslinger began flirtatiously, only to leave no good hair on the local automotive industry: „Design has degenerated into fashionable embellishment.“ Instead of ensuring sustainable innovations themselves, „they seek salvation in target group acrobatics“. However, it is not only companies but also politicians who stand in the way of real innovation. Esslinger combined his solution to the magic triangle of „design – technology – economy“ with a declaration of love to the young: „Germany’s de-industrialisation must be stopped with a better generation of young creative makers – which we do have.“ Of course, they need a new education, one that is taught at a creative sciences university, a combination of convergent design methods – „design thinking is ridiculous“, intensive workshops („contact with real problems“), science (user research and anthropology) and business administration. Esslinger’s prediction: only „a few will make it.“ His counter-model to an „amateurish, non-professional design education“ as a fashionable appendage at art colleges with no understanding of technology and an „economic policy hostile to creativity“ is aimed at multi-talented people who make design a top priority, at designers as mediators between disciplines. Because “No one can do anything with fools who merely sketch.” 50 per cent of success is based on the ability to visualise and present complex processes“ – these design talents deserve an elite university.

### **Directing The Mass of Data**

Finally, star designer **John Maeda** took on what is probably the biggest challenge in design today: AI. Is it a threat to human creativity or perhaps a useful tool? The master of information design made it clear that designers could not afford to do without such a development. However, all designers should retain one thing: their critical attitude: „Critical thinking is a core characteristic of design. And this technology needs more of it.“

**Kate Crawford**, senior scientist at Microsoft Research, agreed – with a twist: artificial intelligence is a fundamental upheaval in our culture, comparable only to the invention of photography or the discovery of perspective in Renaissance painting. And because we attribute almost magical aspects to the largely misunderstood AI, it is important to understand exactly what is happening now, for example with copyrights. If even Mickey Mouse, „probably the most aggressively defended piece of copyright“, is sucked into the maelstrom of data, we are in the midst of a crisis of copyright in the face of what is probably the greatest appropriation of the commons in history. Since machines could not own copyrights (at least in the USA), the following exchange would take place: we would now have access to the entire history of culture, but would relinquish any claim to copyright ourselves if we wrote works with the help of AI. The biggest experiment in global post-copyright would have three consequences: We would all train the AI with our images and posts on the internet, we would all give our skills to the system, and we would no longer own any rights. Crawford's consequence: in exchange for creative services, we lose copyrights. At least in Europe, the last word on this has not yet been spoken, and more and more artists and designers are reclaiming their works from the clutches of the data octopuses. As Prof **Mike Richter**, President of the German Design Council, said in his introduction when he and Donald Norman addressed the role of designers as part of the problem and part of the solution. Transforming this ambivalence completely into creative energy and real change will be the task of the future. This, in turn, was entirely in the spirit of **Lutz Dietzold**, CEO of the German Design Council, who emphasised the overall social role of design in general and this institution in particular in his opening statement. His call to politicians: create and shape the framework conditions. He added that it would be a joint endeavour to strengthen the position of design within the cultural and creative industries.

In a highly concentrated programme, the Third German Design Debate succeeded in bringing together different perspectives, approaches and generations: The speakers raised questions, formulated theses, generated contradictions and created new perspectives that provided decisive impulses for all players in the design and cultural scene.