

From Design Methods to Future-Focused Thinking: 50 years of design research

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The 50th anniversary of the founding of the Design Research Society fell in 2016, and the biennial DRS conference for 2016 became a special 50th anniversary conference, which took place in Brighton, UK, last June.

The Design Research Society was founded in 1966 following the *Conference on Design Methods* held at Imperial College London in 1962 (Jones & Thornley, 1963). In the lead up to the 50th anniversary DRS2016 conference we contacted the secretary to the 1962 conference, Peter Slann, who now lives in Scotland, and who sent us the original reel-to-reel audio tape recordings of the 1962 conference. Listening to those tapes it is striking not only how similar to today are some of the discussions about design and design research, but also how much has changed – in 1962 every voice is a clipped, male, British voice. One comment at the end of the conference stands out as significant. Thanking people for coming to the conference and looking towards the future at the end of the closing session, John Page, then Professor of Building Science at Sheffield University, asks the audience three questions (the quote is verbatim):

‘if one agrees that there are bodies of knowledge that have been raised here, which need further exploration – particularly a case in point would be the terminology of design – is there any point in trying to get some kind of inter-disciplinary working party going on these problems? In this question of disciplines,

is there any machinery or any way of arranging for an interchange of information between specialists and people working at Universities? Lastly, is there any point in making the whole thing more of a formal entity, a society, or something of that kind?’

Fifty years later it is clear that there was a point. The DRS as it exists today, and of course the journal *Design Studies*, can trace their origins to the affirmation of that last question in 1962, and the ‘some kind of interdisciplinary working party’ that design research has become owes its identity to that 1960’s future-focused thinking. It was fitting that John Chris Jones, one of the key organisers of the 1962 conference – and a major contributor to the field of design methods ever since – was able to come to the 50th Anniversary conference and speak.¹

On the occasion of the 40th Anniversary of the DRS, Nigel Cross wrote a *Design Studies* editorial reflecting on the development of design research as a discipline which is well worth reading for those who aren’t familiar with the historical development of the field (Cross, 2007).² His conclusion that ‘design research is alive and well, and living in an increasing number of places’ still holds today and, if anything, since 2006 has increased considerably in reach and depth. In the ten years that have passed we have seen significant new journals launched, such as *The International Journal of Design, Design and Culture*, and latterly *She-Ji*:

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Design, Economics and Innovation, with publication in the field now a subject of study in itself (Gemser & de Bont, 2016; Gemser, de Bont, Hekkert, & Friedman, 2012) a sure sign of good health. Design methods continue to be a staple of design research as new practices such as co-creation and design thinking have emerged and spread far beyond the traditional disciplines of designing. The increasing sophistication and speed of the internet has served to widen accessibility, and popularise design and design research, for example through initiatives such as the TED (Technology, Entertainment, and Design) conference series. The number of academic conferences related to design research continues to grow, with audiences increasingly diverse and often bridging research and practice in interesting ways (see for example the *Research Through Design* conference series (Durrant, Vines, Wallace, & Yee, 2015)). Perhaps fueling this growth are increasing numbers of PhD researchers who are often major contributors to conferences. Organisations like PhD by Design³ are driving up research quality and ensuring that today's PhD Researchers will become tomorrow's design research leaders.

Conferences have been central both to the DRS and to the development of the design research field and since the 1962 conference many design research conferences have been held, with the DRS often as a key organiser (see the list in the [Appendix](#)). In common with other academic disciplines, defined sub-fields of research have originated from these conferences. *Design Participation* in 1971 (Cross, 1972) started the participative design movement that has grown into present day co-design. *Design for Need*, held in 1976 (Bicknell & Mcquiston, 1977), taking a global view of the population, started both sustainable and inclusive design, and *Design Policy* held in 1980 (Langdon & Cross, 1984) introduced a much needed social, political and international dimension to the design research field as design itself lurched into the consumerist 80s. From

almost every conference comes a thread that leads to the present day, so the 50th anniversary conference represented a point to gather those threads together and consider what kind of textile they might weave in the coming years.

The second aspect of design research conferences is less familiar in other research disciplines where the paper presentation dominates. This is the development of the conference form itself, in terms of the formats available to attendees for presentation, dialogue, and engagement. Design Participation in 1971 experimented with video:

'The proceedings in the main hall were videotaped, and also relayed by CCTV to the lounge. These facilities made it possible for participants to choose their own level of participation. The video recordings were made available to participants if they wanted to see a presentation again, or to catch up on one they had missed. Extra discussion rooms were also in use during each evening. One group took the opportunity to introduce a new participatory design-educational game called GRIPS (Gaming, Random Interfacing and Problem Structuring).' (Talbot, 1972)

While the 1973 Design Activities conference aimed at:

'the provision of an extension of media forms beyond the normal "verbalised" media of the average conference with the idea that such extensions were significant contributions to dialectical form, and not just "entertainments".'

The 2014 DRS conference, in Sweden (Lim, Niedderer, Redström, Stolterman, & Valtonen, 2014)⁴, continued this tradition by introducing new formats for 'Conversations' and 'Keynote Debates' alongside the more traditional academic paper presentation, which allowed greater participation from people not able to submit papers but experienced in the design research field (Boess, 2016). It is entirely appropriate that the

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