

# *A brief history of the Design Thinking Research Symposium series*

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The eleventh Design Thinking Research Symposium, held in Denmark in 2016, marked the 25th anniversary of the start of the symposium series. The series has been an amazing development over those 25 years, starting rather by accident, and also proceeding by a rather accidental process of enthusiasm for ‘what next?’ and the creativity and goodwill of volunteers intent on making it happen. But overlaying its accidental nature there has been serious academic purpose and a concern for ensuring good research that helps knowledge to grow and disseminate. Together, the DTRS organisers and participants have created an international ‘invisible college’ to promote and sustain research in one of the wonderful aspects of human cognition—design thinking.

The symposium series originated from a proposal that Norbert Roozenburg and I made within the Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering at Delft University of Technology in 1990. The proposal was to hold a small international workshop meeting on ‘Research in Design Thinking’ that would bring together some of the early work in progress at that time, in both design cognition and computational modelling of design processes - i.e., studies of the natural and the artificial intelligence of design. We were interested in how this research in design thinking might inform both education and practice in design. The Faculty provided the funding, Kees Dorst joined us in the planning, and we invited about a dozen researchers from The Netherlands, Germany, the UK and the USA to the meeting, which was held in Delft in May 1991.

Even though it was a very interesting meeting, and it produced a good set of proceedings, *Research in Design Thinking*, we did not have any intention of creating a series of such meetings. However, Kees Dorst and Henri Christiaans, who were both working on protocol studies of design activity for their PhDs at Delft, returned from presenting a joint paper at the ASME Design Methodology conference in the USA in 1992 with a proposal for another workshop. The proposal had originated at the ASME meeting in discussions with Scott Minneman, from the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center, USA. The idea was to use facilities at Xerox PARC to video-record experiments with both individual designers and small teams tackling the same design problem, and then to invite researchers around the world to conduct analyses of these recordings and present their studies at another workshop to be held in Delft. Again, the Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering gave financial

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[www.elsevier.com/locate/destud](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/destud)  
0142-694X *Design Studies* ■■ (2018) ■■–■■■  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2018.03.007>  
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support, and Xerox PARC provided the facilities; Larry Leifer and his engineering design group at nearby Stanford University also provided contacts with local designers who volunteered to be participants in our experiment. Kees and Henri worked up the design of the experiment, including the design brief and background information for ‘a device for carrying a backpack on a mountain bike’. Kees, Henri and I spent a week at Xerox PARC in January 1994 conducting and recording the experiments with Scott and his colleague Steve Harrison. We selected two of the recordings, one individual designer (‘Dan’: engineer Victor Scheinman from Stanford) and one team (‘Kerry’, ‘Ivan’ and ‘John’: from the IDEO design consultancy), as the common data sets. We invited researchers around the world to participate, and sent them copies of the recordings and transcripts. The symposium that we held in Delft later that year became known as the ‘Delft Protocols Workshop’ (the name was first coined by Scott Minneman), with some 20 papers being presented, and later published in the book *Analysing Design Activity*.

For the first time in design research, a common data set was provided to researchers around the world, for their own analyses, presented at the workshop. The content and format of that meeting were felt by the participants to be so good as to warrant more of the same. Specifically, during the closing discussions, it was Ömer Akin who proposed to organise another meeting. And so a third meeting on ‘Research in Design Thinking’ was held at the Istanbul Technical University, Turkey, in 1996, on the topic of descriptive models of design.

Following the same informal process, a fourth, considerably larger, meeting was held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, USA, in 1999, focused on the role of representations in design thinking. It was there that the organisers, Gabriela Goldschmidt and William Porter, introduced the term ‘Design Thinking Research Symposium’ as the generic title for the series.

The fifth meeting, organised by Peter Lloyd and Henri Christiaans, was again in Delft, in 2001, approaching the study of designing set within its broad social context. It helped to develop a multi-disciplinary approach to studying not just the activity inside a design process, but also the ramifications and implications that occur outside of it.

Ernest Edmonds and I organised the sixth symposium, at the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia, in 2003. This one returned to somewhere near the focus of the original meeting in Delft in 1991, on design expertise and the nature and the nurture of expert performance in design. This workshop meeting again brought together a relatively small, international group of active researchers. Throughout this series of symposia, this workshop format has been found to be a successful way of synthesising the contributions

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