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Reflections on the Design-Innovation Symposium, March 25-27, 2012, Horsted Place, East Sussex, UK.

Per Galle. March 29, 2012.

What stands out to me as the main theme of the symposium was, as indeed the name suggests, the relationship between design and innovation. By participating in the discussions, and reading the papers circulated prior to the meeting, I became aware of the fact that so far, design and innovation have been studied and practiced very much in isolation from one another. And this is so, it seems, despite the fact that both fields are concerned with, broadly speaking, changing a given state of affairs into a preferred one (to paraphrase Simon). The proposition (argued in the five papers by Boddington, Grantham and Hobday) that they might benefit from each other's knowledge and experience seems to me highly plausible, but it also seems obvious that to achieve such mutual benefits, there is a difference in culture to be overcome, as very clearly documented by Johansson in her critical survey paper. So my colleagues at the University of Brighton will no doubt have challenges to face in the remarkable project they have undertaken: to develop a new educational programme in 'Design-Innovation Studies', based on cross-disciplinary research and collaboration with specialists in both fields.

Among the various topics that sprang from the main theme, mention was made of 'design economy' as a new discipline. That idea, like much else I heard about, was new to me, and probably raised my brows considerably. But, without claiming any expertise in these matters, it seems to me a very interesting and relevant idea; no doubt such a discipline will be able to make a valuable contribution to the proposed educational programme; and I can begin to see, too, how the field of management, which was also represented at the symposium, might tie in with design, innovation and economy.

One might have feared that a confluence of these diverse disciplines in a context of education and research would engender a depressingly narrow-minded hostility to anything not directly and immediately contributing to economic growth in society. (Something, perhaps, similar in spirit to the research policy promulgated by the previous Danish Government, under the slogan "From research to invoice".) However, absolutely nothing I read or heard in connection with the Symposium, confirmed any such fears. On the contrary, much of the time was spent on intense discussions about the role and improvement of design education, not in hard-nosed terms of money and pay-off, but in such terms as 'the crafting of minds' (an expression dating back to John Stuart Mill, and applied with great insight in a contemporary context by Bruce Brown) and a need, in our post-industrial society, for the revival of other pre-industrial ideas of an integrative and formative kind of education. (Even my own high-flown ideas about the intricacies of the ontology and epistemology of design discourse and design thinking were taken seriously and welcomed to a degree that I would never have expected, given the main theme of the symposium.)

So, if these impressions of mine are representative of the spirit in which my colleagues at Brighton are going to pursue their goal of creating an educational and research milieu that unifies design, innovation, economy and management, I believe we should all follow their progress closely, learn from it, and encourage and support them in whatever small ways we can.