

DRS2014: Design's Big Debates

Design Research Society's Seventh Biennial International Conference, Umeå, Sweden, June 16–19, 2014 (conference review)

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DRS2014: Design's Big Debates

Design Research Society's Seventh Biennial International Conference, Umeå, Sweden, June 16–19, 2014 (conference review)

Stella Boess

This article reviews the Design Research Society's (DRS's) 2014 conference and looks ahead to the upcoming DRS2016 conference. One theme characterizing DRS2014, the seventh biennial conference, was its openness: It was *open* by design. This character was expressed in two new formats that I review here. The second, related theme that became apparent is *articulation*. The conference raised questions of how design researchers and designers articulate their contribution and value in relation to societal issues. Because sessions in which academic papers are presented are at the core of DRS conferences, I offer some observations first about the sessions and then review the new, open formats introduced at DRS2014.

Academic Papers, Special Interest Groups, Posters

Academic paper peer reviews and presentations are at the core of the DRS conferences. DRS2014, as in previous DRS conferences, featured academic papers of high quality. To ensure this quality, review chairs Youn-kyung Lim and Kristina Niedderer conducted a one-stage full paper review rather than a review of abstracts. Themes at DRS conferences generally include culture and society, strategic issues, creative practice, engineering and technology, and the use context.¹ An emerging theme at DRS2014 was the role of design in design research. For example, Davoli, Redström, and van der Vleuten's paper examined how design probes can be used to explore and hack the inner workings of delivery systems.² The DRS Special Interest Groups each organized a paper session as a forum for current and relevant topics—a popular one being design education.³ DRS2014 created a friendly format for the poster sessions: As presentations in a centrally located and physically open auditorium space. The sessions were well-attended. DRS2014 also featured well-received pre-conference workshops and a doctoral student colloquium.

Debates and Conversations

DRS2014 general chairs Anna Valtonen, Johan Redström, and Erik Stolterman invited the delegates to participate, share, and enjoy. As Valtonen stated, "it's actually you making the conversations and the debates." Underscoring the significance of these conversations,

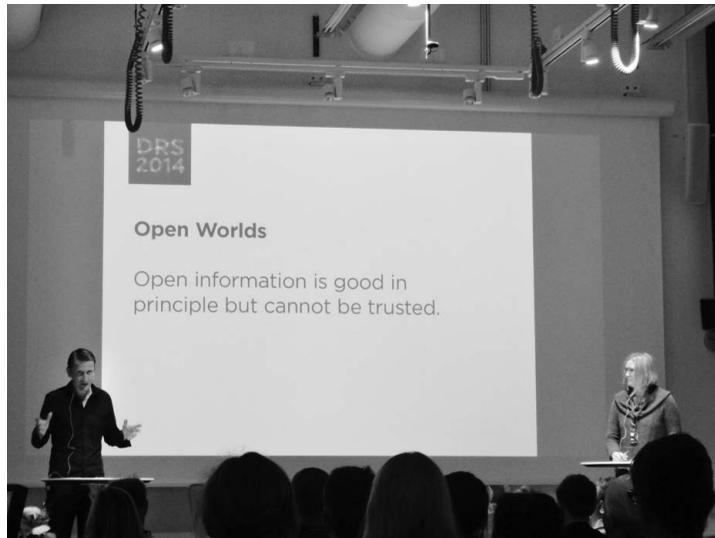
1 Seymour Roworth-Stokes, "The Design Research Society and Emerging Themes in Design Research," *Journal of Product Innovation Management* 28, no. 3 (2011): 419–24, 422.

2 Lorenzo Davoli, Johan Redström, and Ruben van der Vleuten, "Hacking Delivery Systems: Exploring Design Tools for User-Led Innovation in Urban Infrastructures," (presentation, DRS2014, Umeå, Sweden, June 16–19, 2014). www.drs2014.org/en/programme/proceedings (accessed September 21, 2015).

3 The Design Research Society Special Interest Groups can be found at www.designresearchsociety.org (accessed September 21, 2015).

Figure 1

Keynote debaters Marco Steinberg and Anne Burdick provide their opening statements on the proposition, "open information is good in principle but cannot be trusted."
Credit: Stella Boess.



Redström explained that, as design is growing and getting increasingly specialized and institutionalized, "there are also things we need to get together and talk about—big issues that may or may not form the future of design." Two new formats for DRS, *debates* and *conversations*, facilitated this sort of talk. Jamer Hunt and Carl DiSalvo, co-chairs of the debates and conversations, might have drawn inspiration from the approach of online debate and comment used for the recent Museum of Modern Art project, "Design and Violence," in which they were involved.⁴

Debates

Hunt introduced the main debates, which replaced keynotes: "The debates are a kind of... Oxford-style debate.... Because we feel that design is not separate from society but creates it, the debaters are pushed into polemical positions." Each debate started with ten-minute presentations from two speakers about a proposition and continued with a moderated discussion (see Figure 1). Meanwhile, Twitter conversations were carried on among audience members. For example, delegate Pierre Levy commented on Twitter, rightly in my view, that one proposition debated, "open information is good in principle but cannot be trusted," is a double statement and complex to debate. Such Twitter conversations then sometimes surfaced in the audience questions. Before and after each debate, the moderator asked for a show of hands: Who was for or against the proposition, undecided or confused? This poll revealed changes in audience opinion from before to after the debate, indicating that what we claim to know and believe is dynamic and benefits from articulation.

The delegates generally agreed that the debates were a successful, energizing format. Debates involve the audience and show the complexity of a topic by juxtaposing different perspectives. They also demand a high level of concentration from speakers and

4 Paola Antonelli, Jamer Hunt, Kate Carmody, Michelle Millar Fisher, and commentators, "Design and Violence," Museum of Modern Art. <http://designandviolence.moma.org/republic-of-salvation-michael-burton-and-michikonnita> (accessed September 21, 2015).

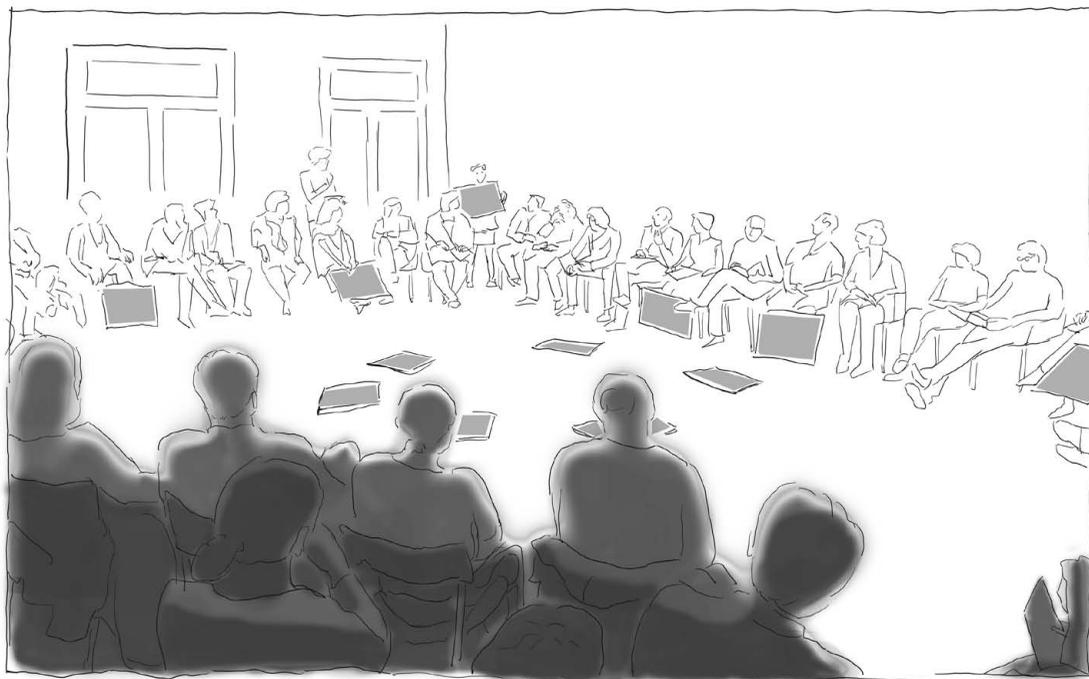


Figure 2
Attendees at a popular conversation session.
Credit: Stella Boess.

audience alike in quickly devising and processing contributions. Some delegates interpreted the openness of the format as insecurity or as a lack of conviction among the debaters. Some attendees thought the debates were artificial, while others wished that the exchanges had been sharper. Some commentators conceivably underestimated the challenge of debating on a podium.

Conversations

The other new format at this DRS conference was called, simply, *conversations*. Co-chair DiSalvo envisioned the hosts of a *conversation* (introduced as catalysts) as leading “lively and rigorous discussion of an hour and a half about the compelling issues.” The format resembled the panel discussions that are common at the CHI conference series, but they aimed at open consideration of issues rather than consensus forming.⁵ DRS2014 included 25 conversation sessions (versus 45 paper sessions). Because of the high number of conference attendees, the conversations averaged 40 participants instead of 20, as originally planned. At conversations with popular topics and speakers, delegates primarily watched the conversation among the panel of catalysts, rather than joining in with them (see Figure 2).⁶

One conversation I attended was set up as a workshop with active exploration and a reflective discussion among the 20 or so participants (see Figure 3).⁷ It brought surprises and insights for both organizers and participants. In fact, the experience of the various conversations raised bigger questions about the event: Why should a design research conference not include activities other than talking? Why not play, prototype, critique each other’s work

5 chi2015.acm.org (accessed September 21, 2015).

6 The catalysts of this conversation session, titled “Democratic Design Experiments: Between Laboratory and Parliament,” were Thomas Binder, Pelle Ehn, Eva Brandt, Joachim Halse, Yanki Lee, Ann Light, Jörn Messeter, Per-Anders Hillgren, Lone Malmborg, and Tuuli Mattelmäki. An abstract of the session can be found at www.drs2014.org/media/743566/drs-companion-v13.pdf (accessed September 21, 2015).

7 The catalysts of this conversation session, titled “Co-Embodied Theatre And Enactive Technologies,” were Jelle van Dijk, Jacob Buur, Preben Friis, Andrés Lucero, and Robb Mitchell. An abstract of the session can be found at www.drs2014.org/media/743566/drs-companion-v13.pdf (accessed September 21, 2015).

Figure 3

Workshop-style conversation session on co-embodied theatre. Credit: Sander Hermesen.



produced there and then? How might activism be incorporated? Researchers in other disciplines are already tying design-related skills like drawing into scientific argumentation skills.⁸ Why couldn't we do more of that? The conversation format opened up a new space, strengthening the point that articulation should be fostered, and led delegates to imagine even more active formats.

The Contribution of DRS2014

DRS2014 was the innovative design research event it set out to be. Why are debates and conversations relevant to design research? The new, open formats enabled peers at all levels of seniority and areas of experience to engage with societal issues and to have focused exchanges about them. Designers are increasingly carving out their place in the public discussion, using critical and speculative design as commentary, and using design thinking and service design to engage the boardroom and change organizations and municipalities. For these efforts to be fruitful, designers need to learn to articulate their arguments and connect with the languages of other contexts and disciplines. The conference concluded with a panel session in which DRS2016 chair Peter Lloyd noted that the focus of design is shifting from chairs and products to "the big things we hear in the news every day." DRS2016 chair Lin Lin Chen commented that the conference format had provided a new departure for design research. Bruce Nussbaum urged attendees, first, to play and second, to make. Finally, Tara Mullaney refreshingly provided a PhD student's perspective and noted how value had come into focus: Design can help create value, but it also can destroy it. Design research could engage with ethical values, not just in terms of avoiding unwanted side effects, but also as an actual focus of design. DRS2014 showcased the challenges of *openness* and *articulation* for the design research community.

In the run-up to DRS2016 in Brighton, UK, when the Design Research Society marks the fiftieth anniversary of its founding, can we build on the newfound openness?

8 See, e.g., Shaaron Ainsworth, Vaughan Prain, and Russell Tytler, "Drawing to Learn in Science," *Science* 26 (2011), 1096–97.