

Doha debate links it all up

ANDREW TORRES reports on the recent Tasmeeem design conference held in Doha



Jeremijenko: Innovative designs

For a region that has experienced such startling development and construction in the past two decades, there is a remarkable lack of serious discourse on design in the Middle East. The Tasmeeem Doha design conference seems to be a notable and self-conscious exception to that. Organised and hosted by Virginia Commonwealth University – Qatar (VCUQ) with generous support from the Qatar Foundation, Tasmeeem has established itself as serious venue for internationally-recognised designers to discuss their work.

The theme of this year's conference 'Synapse: Designer as Link' conceptualised the role of the designer as a connector between often unrelated fields, implicitly positing that the practice of design

is, or should be, inherently interdisciplinary.

As a design conference, Tasmeeem construed its subject broadly, incorporating architecture, interior design, graphic design, fashion design, industrial design, interaction design, identity design and branding and business and organisational design. It was an ambitious agenda to set but resulted in a rich, vibrant week of workshops, talks, and discussions.

VCUQ's facility at Education City, amidst monumental architecture and massive construction sites, provided an impressive setting for the week's activities. The main atrium of the building served as the primary venue for speakers and panels as gorgeous





Insight: Kelley noted creativity as an important leadership quality

‘moving postcards’, short films of typical scenes in the life of the city shown in fast forward by Simone Muscolino and his students, filled the visual space between speakers and provided a subtle link back to the urban environment that inspired much of the conference.

From the start, it was clear that much work had gone into the crafting of the conference both programmatically and physically. Faculty and students at VCUQ, along with guest designers, had spent the previous few semesters conducting preparatory work in the form of research and studios.

A large part of that preparation went into the so-called ‘Synapse Projects’, activity-based workshops that formed the core of the conference. The themes of the projects, ‘Stratified Societies’, ‘Health & Well-being’ and ‘Managing Life in a Construction Zone’, drew directly from the challenges faced by Qatar in particular and Gulf countries in general. Led by Line Christiansen, director of design foundation at VCUQ, Anab Janin, founder of the interdisciplinary design studio Superflux, based in London and India, and Ibrahim Jaidah, managing director of Arab Engineering Bureau based in Doha, the projects engaged participants in discussion and design charrettes aimed at generating potential design solutions to complex urban, social and cultural problems. The results of these workshops, presented on the last day of the conference, ranged from the practical to the fantastical.

Tasmeeem bills itself as an international design

conference and the speakers, presenters and designers certainly lived up to this hailing from across Europe, North America, Asia, and the Middle East. Likewise, an impressive range of countries were represented among the attendees including Oman, Kuwait, Lebanon, Croatia, Greece, Canada and the US, along with many others. A large contingent from the US campus of VCU was also in attendance. And though a fair number of the attendees were students and professors, it was far from a strictly academic conference. Professional designers, business people and community members were plentiful and brought diverse perspectives to the various workshops.

‘Design thinking’ was perhaps the biggest buzzword of the conference. An amorphous term to be sure, design thinking could be reasonably defined as the process by which designers identify and analyse problems, creatively theorise multiple potential solutions and integratively experiment and refine options to reach the best solution. In this sense, design is something you do, not something you make. And this process of design is increasingly being taught in business schools and applied to other fields and industries completely outside traditional design disciplines. This was very evident in the types of presentations and the nature of discussions at Tasmeeem.

An early session, ‘Design Thinking through Business Model Innovation’, linked design thinking to business with a focus on entrepreneurship. The workshop was led by Alexander Osterwalder, author of *Business Model Generation*, and Anders Sundelin, vice president of business operations for CIP Professional Services. They outlined a common vocabulary and framework for designing and analysing business models, something few designers have much experience dealing with. Working in small groups, workshop participants used this framework to analyse one another’s existing business models and then design a business model for a new sustainable sanitation company.

The keynote speech given by Tom Kelley, the general manager of IDEO, was undoubtedly an early highlight of the week. A leading global design consultancy based in Palo Alto, California, IDEO has gained a reputation as a relentless innovator in designing products, processes and experiences for its clients. Part motivational speaker and



part design guru, Kelley focused not so much on IDEO's own work as on the approaches that have allowed it to be so successful. He noted that as the world escalates in complexity, creativity has become the most important leadership competency. The ability to observe, synthesise information and create innovative new solutions to problems is the value of designers.

And, as Kelley explained, it is only through this kind of innovation that businesses can succeed in increasingly competitive markets, thereby underscoring the ascendant role for designers. He described successful design as occurring at the intersection of three spheres: people (what is desirable), business (what is viable) and technical (what is feasible). And it is design thinking that brings those spheres into contact.

He devoted much of his energetic talk to three so-called 'Faces of Innovation', a theme explored more fully in his 2005 book, presenting 'The Anthropologist', 'The Cross-Pollinator' and 'The Storyteller'. The anthropologist connects with human insight to identify problems to solve, as in the recognition that children use toothbrushes differently to adults, which led to IDEO's creation of a groundbreaking line of kids' toothbrushes for Oral-B. The cross-pollinator connects with diverse sources of ideas and applies them to problems that might not obviously be related, as in the transformation of generic store-brand products into the wildly successful Muji retail concept. And the storyteller connects with key audiences to sell the solutions, a type usually more associated with business than design. With these types, Kelley put forward a thoroughly multivalent concept of design, one that came to be echoed throughout the rest of the week.

Tasmeem served as an opportunity for the second meeting of the Middle East Design Educators Association (MEDEA), a group founded at the previous Tasmeem to support and promote design education within the region. Though still loosely structured, the organisation generated considerable interest among not only among design educators but also design students and practising designers, a testament to the need for advocacy and public education about the role of designers in a region where it is still a relatively young profession. Drawing on the experience of Jimmy Ghazal, head of digital

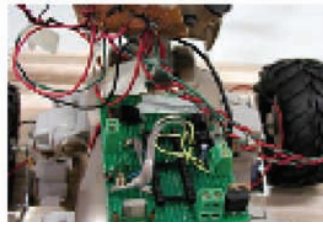
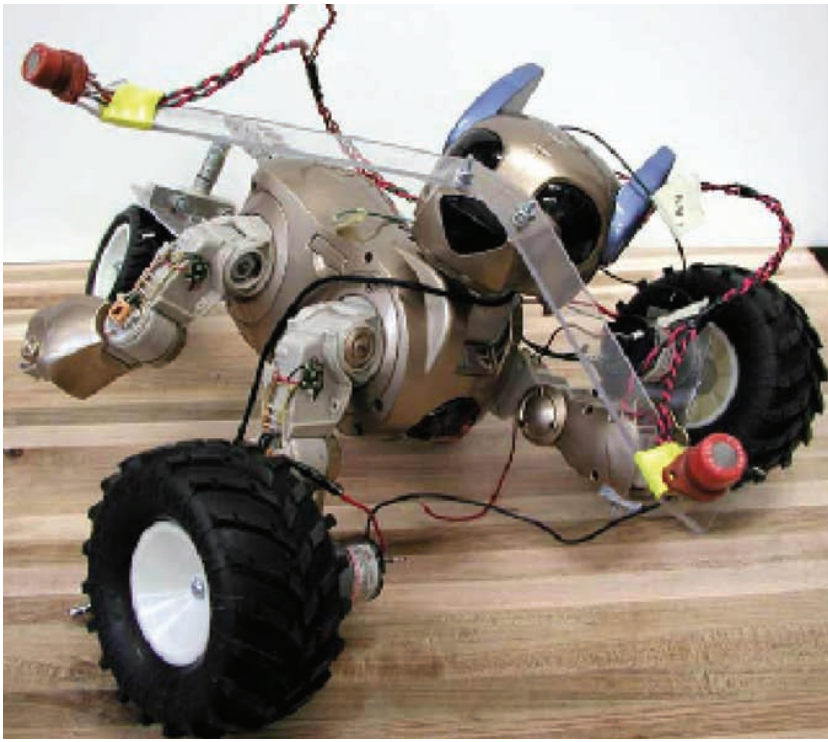
at M&C Saatchi Mena in Beirut, as a practising designer in the region, and that of Richard Grefé, executive director of AIGA based in New York, the workshop helped frame the goals and strategies of MEDEA in a way that is responsive to the professional environment in the Middle East while drawing on the depth of experience of similar organisations working elsewhere.

Of the many remarkable speakers at Tasmeem, perhaps the most intriguing and illustrative of the conference theme was Natalie Jeremijenko. An artist whose background includes studies in biochemistry, physics, neuroscience and precision engineering, Jeremijenko exemplifies the notion of designer as synapse. Jeremijenko's design work broadly engages issues of environmental health but defies easy categorisation. Rather than typical design projects, it would be more accurate to describe her work as experiments or demonstrations aimed at articulating the relationships between humans, non-humans and their environment.

In her fascinating talk, Jeremijenko presented projects that ranged from modifying swarms of robotic dog toys to search for volatile organic compounds on former industrial sites, to installing small-scale photovoltaic solar awnings that project messages about energy as the sun filters through them over the course of the day, to capturing airborne black carbon with filtering solar chimneys and making pencils from the captured carbon to demonstrate the local carbon content of the air and installing verdant micro-parks in front of fire hydrants on urban streets to filter runoff before it enters storm drains.

All Jeremijenko's projects displayed a subversive inventiveness and an acute awareness of the impact of media and public interest on the furthering of her agenda. Her presentation, filled with knowing asides and half-finished thoughts, gave a portrait of a sincere, committed designer with an incredible depth of knowledge operating in a far-reaching conceptual space quite unlike anyone else.

In something of a counterpoint to the experimental, idiosyncratic nature of Jeremijenko's work, Hunter Tura presented the work of Bruce Mau Design, one of the heavyweights of global design firms, whose projects tend to be commercial and large-scale. Based in Toronto, Bruce Mau Design (BMD) is known for its innovative approaches to



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Future form: Jeremijenko introduced innovative projects including the use of robot dogs to sniff out VOCs

design problems. As its president and CEO, Tura explained the need to design the process, not just the product, of design work. Drawing on examples ranging from the identity design for OCAD University in Toronto to the branding and graphics for the new Oprah Winfrey Network, he used BMD as a case study in designing the contemporary design practice.

Design, especially as practiced by firms like BMD, is typically about solving current problems. But it is often the speculation on future problems that provides the most fertile ground for creative thinking. Fiona Raby discussed her work as a designer and professor dealing largely with meditations on the possible. As partner in the design firm Dunne & Raby and a professor at the Royal College of Art in London, Raby's work imagines the possibilities and implications of emerging technologies projected into the hazy future. One future Raby outlined in her talk was one of scarcity in which humans on an overburdened planet might resort to foraging for food using ominous technological prostheses. The designs of the prosthetics and the accompanying narratives and images serve to provoke dialogue on social and environmental issues.

Raby also presented a student project, a collaboration between design students and research scientists, that explored the possibilities of genetic modifications of plants, asking whether it might be possible to grow mechanical pieces and parts rather than manufacture them just as one might grow and harvest fruit.

With Tasmeeem focused on engagement and

interaction as a central element of design work, the conference included a unique live design element dubbed TasmeeemLab. Produced by Pink Tank, a boutique consultancy based in the UAE, TasmeeemLab invited four young Arab designers to set up shop in a large studio space and create in collaboration with students and attendees. Their completed projects were presented with commentary and discussion at the end of the week. The designers were: Manar Al Muftah, a graphic designer from Qatar and alumna of VCUQ; Younes Duret, a product designer from Morocco; Richard Kahwagi, a graphic designer and DJ from Lebanon and Khalid Shafar, a furniture and object designer from the UAE. Their open collaborative design processes put into immediate practice many of the concepts being discussed elsewhere at the conference. They were clearly a hit with the students and they gave the conference a fun, fresh vibe.

Serving as something of a critic-at-large for the entirety of the conference, Alice Twemlow, chair of the design criticism MFA programme at the School of Visual Arts in New York, delivered a running analysis of the various talks and workshops. She was also given the daunting task of synthesising the week's events into a neat summary in the closing keynote speech and succeeded marvellously in organising the week's rambling proceedings into common themes of identifying issues, approaches, making and display and discuss.

Andrew Torres is assistant professor of architecture and design at NYIT Babrain