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TalkLight

On teaching Design Innovation: Interview with Ashley Hall

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Innovation is one of those buzzwords that we keep hearing constantly nowadays, and its use and (much more often) abuse can lead to misunderstandings, blurry meanings and non-effective use of its true value. In the spirit of contributing to the development and establishment of design innovation, within Philips and to the outside world, I've looked to the academic world to find insights on how we can understand and apply the full potential of this discipline. And what better place that one of the world's leading universities in design, the RCA?

The Royal College of Art, based in London, comprises 23 postgraduate programs in creative disciplines, ranging from fine arts to vehicle design. Its ethos is based on excellency, collaboration and crosspollination, which produces excellent professionals in their fields: John Galliano, Ridley Scott or Tracey Emin are a sample of all the great talents born at that school. Their annual graduate show becomes every year a reference point within the art & design world and a pilgrimage for those seeking inspiration and the latest trends from upcoming and brilliant young talents. Sounds interesting, right? You can have a peek into this creativity runway this year's show is at Dezeen, which has made a remarkable compilation of all their Show RCA 2012 stories here. Or you can check my Twitter @cristinaferraz for some highlights of the exhibition.

And within the RCA, we find Innovation Design Engineering, or IDE. A leading-edge, creative product development course that involves experimentation, design, engineering and enterprise activities. The course offers all ingredients for innovation: collaboration, multidisciplinarity, resources, talented people, passion and drive. As a graduate of that program myself, and having just finished a collaborative project with them together with Philips Consumer Luminaires – with some really impressive results! -, I thought I could pick the brains of some of their excellent tutors to get a grip on how Design innovation is understood and taught. Indeed, I realize that my belief on the fact that for striving in professional practice you should learn from the two sides of the coin; the business reality and the academic push, comes across quite clear - you can see my other story on Design Innovation and collaboration with academia   here.

So I sat with Ashley Hall, a designer and deputy head of the Innovation Design Engineering program at the Royal College of Art / Imperial College London where he is head of Experimental Design, GoGlobal project and research. He has lectured and run interdisciplinary cross-cultural projects in many countries across the world, and developed consultancy projects with many global companies such as Unilever, Ford, Nasa or Philips. On top of its involvement with the RCA, Ashley runs a design studio, Diplomat, focused on furniture designs for mass production and experimental ranges, and he is actively researching and writing in the areas of non-linear systems in design, experimental design, industrial design pedagogy, cultural transfer and design & geographically liberated difference. An impressive portfolio that reflects the collaborative and expansive nature of the Design Innovation discipline.

Hope the interview triggers you, and remember that Design Innovation is all about dialogue and idea sharing, so don't be shy and comment – I'd love to hear your views!

How do you see Design Innovation as different from other design disciplines like product design that are more known to companies and the general public?
I think the main difference is that it's not coming from a form generation or traditional industrial design background. The focus is more on game-changing and disruptive innovations on a wider scale, whereas traditional product design is still heavily focused around appliances. Instead of being driven by designing a physical product we work on combinations of hardware, software and user experience all working seamlessly together. In operation it's much more about collaborative working and creative leadership based around using cutting edge technologies and bringing together experts from multiple

disciplines.

What's the key factor in understanding design innovation?

Innovation can be driven from several approaches, social, technology, digital etc. Design innovation aims for new to the world ideas achieved through design thinking including a deep technology input at the early creative level rather than as a later bolt-on solution. The most important factor to understand is that it combines human-social, technological and entrepreneurial elements in concept generation.

Why Design Innovation now? How can it help companies in this specific context of crisis?

Design Innovation is delivering into a world where companies are being fundamentally challenged with disruptive technologies, online brands like Google's Android, Facebook, Amazon and Ebay emerging into the physical world, designing ecologies of physical-digital user experiences and the long tail economic effect of selling less of more. As a design course we need to educate for a commercial world that is rapidly changing with converging and diverging trends that have few accepted creative methods that we can rely on in the future. Designers themselves are quickly being drawn into central strategic business roles from positions a few decades ago where they were largely concerned with styling basic features on physical products. Design Innovation can provide a big shift in creative focus that generates ideas for all the stakeholders rather than coming from a particular discipline perspective. It's not enough anymore to plough on regardless with a production model based on churning out physical products when digital experiences are ever more enticing and ubiquitous in our lives. Companies that learn how to understand their market through new digital opportunities and integrate them into their innovation pipeline will reap the benefits.
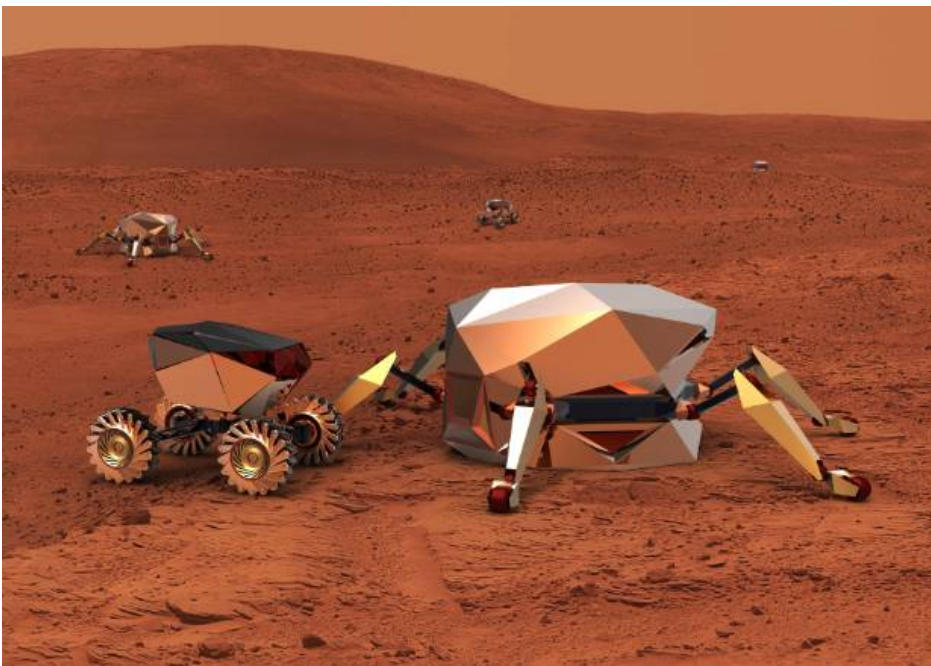
Above: Mars Rover Project done by IDE with support from NASA, Thales Alenia, ESA and Pramac.

Can you explain how to educate designers on Design Innovation? How does it differ from traditional design education?
Design innovation is beginning to emerge as a new strand of design education with increasingly distinct ideas and approaches. Traditional design education stems from historical practical and creative skills sets that were seen to be industrially valuable and developed from physical industries. The new challenges described above have made this uncertain so we need to develop new approaches in how we educate. We are developing a flexible and adaptive educational model that is essentially non-linear in the sense that we don't tell a story about how to design. Instead we expose our students to very diverse creative situations that allow them to build powerful, flexible and most importantly personally tailored creative models that will be more useful in the future. The greatest skill they graduate with is the ability to be producers of innovative projects drawing on multiple disciplines and cultures. They understand how to create with technology and understand the languages of the multiple disciplines to produce innovative results.

What's the role of Open Innovation, collaborations and partnerships within your discipline? How do you approach it from an educational role?
Collaboration and partnerships are crucial to open innovation and we train our designers to develop these skills as their core activity. This is particularly important as we have students from over 15 different disciplines ranging from engineering to architecture, business, fine art and most of the design disciplines from over 25 countries. Two thirds of our work is in groups so there is excellent cross-cultural and peer learning to reflect working in a global design economy. We all now work in close physical and digitally dispersed groups and its important to have a personal creative model that is tuned for this to be really effective. At the moment we are collaborating with the Philips domestic lighting business group looking at the new lighting paradigms driven by LED and how we can link lighting to domestic digital lives and develop new consumer engagement models. As an example of interdisciplinary team-working, one of our project groups has a Russian space engineer, MIT mathematics prodigy and a Japanese Industrial Designer.

Can you think of best cases and best practices for collaborations between universities/companies (your own experience)?
In the last few years we have worked with Airbus, Ford, Vodafone, Hutchison Whampoa, Rio Tinto on Paralympic sports and NASA /European space agency on a Mars Rover. With these kinds of projects we work with commercial partners on fuzzy front end and strategic design innovation concepts to explore near future strategic design opportunities. The great thing about students is they give this complete spectrum of opinion about the brand. They may not all be fans and this can be useful in telling you things that you may not want to know, but need to know. Not many consultancies can throw 36 people from around 20 countries and 15 disciplines at a project so this big diversity and spread is our USP. It works both ways; we use it as a format to freely exchange wider ideas on changes in design and society so it has a big picture benefit to the client and the department. It's interesting that many companies are increasingly seeing an academic creative relationship as a key element in their future strategy.

Above: Rio Tinto Sports Innovation Challenge.

26 Views
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