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Which way to go? Some complicated crossroads facing design culture in Aspen

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Abstract | Born in 1951 thanks to the efforts of the businessman and philanthropist Walter Paepcke, the annual International Design Conference in Aspen (IDCA) proved to be a highly influential experience for the development of design culture during the second half of the 20th century. A closer look at its history allows for a better understanding of the ever-shifting directions of the design debate throughout the years, as well as of its connections with other fields of practice and knowledge production such as architecture, visual arts, sociology, and philosophy. This contribution will try to dig into the main issues at stake in the first two decades of the conference, and into the uses and implications of keywords such as technology, business, responsibility, environment. More broadly, the aim is to shed light upon some of the crossroads design culture was faced with in an epoch that proved to be crucial for its own development[1].

KEYWORDS | IDCA, DESIGN DEBATE, BUSINESS, RESPONSIBILITY, ENVIRONMENTALISM

[1] The present paper is the result of a close collaboration between the two authors. However, paragraphs 1 and 2 can be ascribed to Elena Dellapiana, and paragraphs 3 and 4 to Ramon Rispoli.

1. Introduction

In 1949, the Chicago-based industrialist Walter Paepcke (1896-1960) – who had already been involved in supporting and financing the New Bauhaus with the *émigré* László Moholy-Nagy (Malherek, 2018) – launched the proposal of a series of meetings involving architects, designers, artists, economists, industrialists and businessmen, gathered for a week in the montane environment of Aspen (Colorado) where he and his wife had properties: this is how the idea of the International Design Conference at Aspen (IDCA) came into being. Resembling – albeit in a distinctively non-urban fashion – the European examples of the Deutscher Werkbund conferences, the Darmstadt Artists' Colony or the CIAM, the initiative also contemplated the presence of the participants' family members: the intention was to establish an community-like venue where designers and intellectuals from various fields could get together and debate, in an idyllic place surrounded by nature.

2. The IDCA in the Fifties: the business first

Despite its charming and peaceful natural setting, however, the project of the IDCA proved to be rather turbulent from its very beginning. In the preparatory meetings – held in New York two years later, in 1951 – a first controversy emerged, one that would influence the conference at least for its first two decades. Answering to his own company's art director – Egbert Jacobson, who had proposed to invite as speakers prominent intellectuals and designers (such as Shahn, Burtin, Kepes, Charmayeff, Sert, Eames, Saarinen, Kaufmann) – Paepcke stated that "without the attendance of important businessmen there would be no point to the conference" (Allen, 1983, p. 277). The main purpose of the IDCA for Paepcke was, in fact, to address "once and for all the relation of design to business" in every field "from the graphic arts to industrial design, furniture, interiors, and architecture". His suggestion was, then, to have two conference chairs: one designer and one businessman; on this premise, the art historian Charles H. Sawyer suggested that the title of the first conference would be *Design as a function of management* (IDCA Records, 1951a).

After several invitation proposals, the definitive speakers' panel was mostly made up of businessmen – entrepreneurs and companies' art directors – along with several independent designers from either Europe (Bayer, Albers, Lionni) or the U.S. (Eames, Nelson, Kahn). Significantly, the list did not feature any member of the Industrial Design Society's management team (Dreyfuss, Bel Geddes, Teague, Loewy, to name just a few), who had discussed the new functions and directions of design only a few years before, at the MoMA 1946 conference *Industrial Design as a new Profession* (Poulos, 1988, p. 177).

The market-oriented approach was immediately clear in the introductory speech by Paepcke, the mastermind of the conference. Announcing the speakers' panel, he stated:

> "American business faces a new era and a new phase of competition. Because of the leveling or equalizing processes now generally practiced throughout industry (...) the opportunities for effective competition based on traditional factors of price and quality of product have been greatly diminished" (IDCA Records, 1951b).

The four days also included an exhibit on *integrated design* able – in the intentions of the organizers – "to illustrate the value of design in manufacture, sales distribution and public relation (…)". Along with several leading American companies, the show also included Olivetti: the graphic art, product design and architecture developed over the years for the Italian manufacturer of typewriters and business machines was already considered "an object lesson in management-designer collaboration for commercially sound and artistic expression" (IDCA Records, 1951c).

Just while the legendary exhibition *Olivetti: Art in Industry* – held at MoMA and financed by the company itself – was in preparation (Allen, 1983, pp. 279-280), the Italian firm was presented once again as a paradigm for the way it employed art, the work of excellent designers and the dialogue with tradition in order to improve both its products and its marketing tools: an enthusiastic judgement that was already becoming an axiom. It comes as no surprise, then, that during the following IDCA (which kept the same title of the first year) Walter Dorwin Teague – who was already familiar with the Italian design scene, having been involved in the organizing committee of the exhibition *Italy at Work: her Renaissance in Design today* (Dellapiana, 2018) – made a strong case for why Olivetti should have been a model for American companies too: "Olivetti in Italy has accomplished this identification superbly without any stereotype or repetitiousness whatever, with only an inexhaustible freshness that has become instantly recognizable. We are seeing this happen in a distinguished way with IBM. It is happening to Alcoa and to US Steel" (Teague, 1960).

Teague's pragmatic position was somehow counterbalanced by the only other designer invited as a speaker at the second IDCA, the already idolized Buckminster Fuller, whose paper *Design Today* (Banham Papers, 1952) had a completely different focus: the future. Providing that "American production genius was brought about, the ingredients of which were technique and financing", he made an optimistic forecast concerning technology and the possibility of extending its benefits to all mankind: 26% of the world's population was already enjoying them in 1952, a percentage that would rise, according to him, to 50% in 1970 and to 100% in 2000.

Apart from Fuller, however, those who made themselves most heard in the conference were the businessmen: Richard Gump, a luxury tycoon, who entrusted designers with the responsibility of making entrepreneurs aware of the need of "good design", or the printing company owner Alfred A. Knopf, whose argument went along those same lines. Such positions, implying the primacy of companies over designers, pushed the graphic designer and member of the organizing committee Leo Lionni – speaking on behalf of the latter – to

suggest that the presence of industrialists was not that essential for the real objectives of the IDCA.

Figure 1. Magazine page designed by Fernand Léger for Walter Paepcke's Container Corporation of America (source: Fortune, vol. 6, 1945). For Paepcke, visual arts and graphic design were crucial tools for improving business well before the inception of the IDCA.

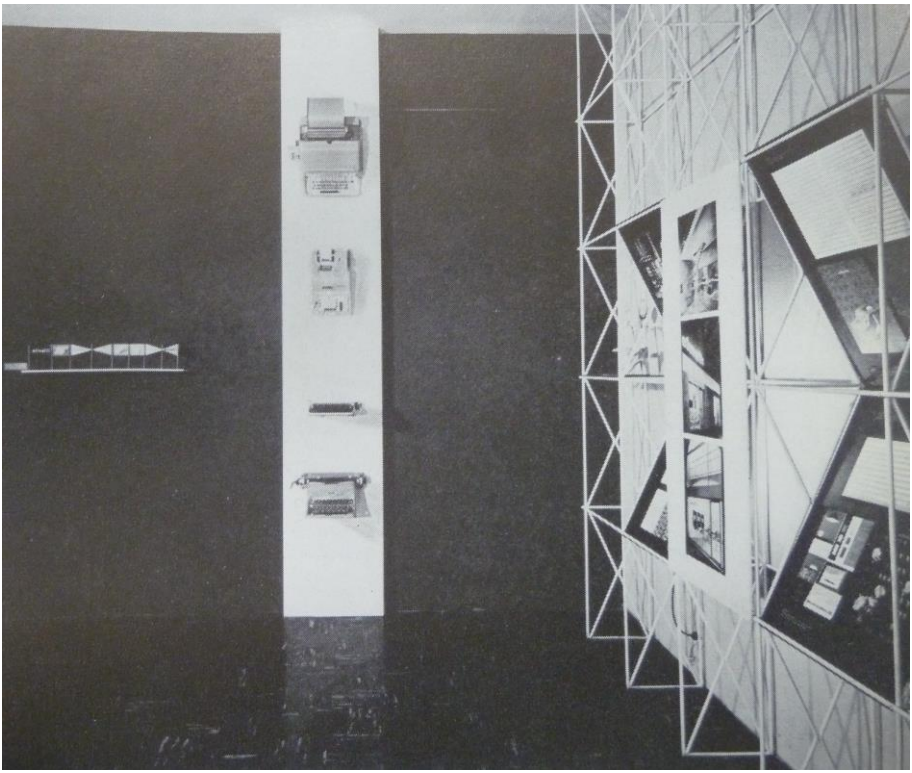

Figure 2. "Olivetti, Design in Industry" exhibition at MoMA, New York, 1952. Designed by Leo Lionni (source: Deborah Allen, "Olivetti of Ivrea", Interiors vol. CXII, n. 5, Dec. 1952, p. 111).

And in fact, the following conference – the last with the same title, chaired by Lionni himself – was entirely run by designers. This time, the European presence was strong: the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner was the main speaker; Max Bill, dean of the School of Ulm, and Enrico Peressutti – who was already in New York to supervise the construction of the Olivetti showroom – were the main international hosts; but also Xanty Schawinsky (Black Mountain College) and Gyorgy Kepes (Chicago Design Institute, former New Bauhaus) were also European-born, and perfectly in line with Moholy-Nagy's views. The only "authentic" American was in fact Dave Chapman, president of the U.S. Society of Industrial Design. The registered audience – which also included the panelists – was composed of 65 free-lance designers, 95 companies (represented by executives or art directors, e.g. Pei for Webb&Knapp, Nelson for Magic Chef), 10 journals or magazines, 9 museums, 37 educators, 34 students. New frictions soon emerged during the talks: Pevsner demolished each of the golden rules of American good design, which he saw as "fallacies". In his contribution – published years later by Banham (1974, pp. 15-18) – he made some ironic remarks about the

other guests, defining Fuller and his geodesic dome (built in a two-hour performance by two of his students) interesting but featuring an "obscure literary style"; Charlie Eames was for him a "youngish designer with a delightful boyish face" and the chairlift the most fashionable thing in Aspen. More seriously, he highlighted the fact that "on the whole the conference was happily free of politics". Pevsner concluded by shedding light upon what was for him a clear gap between the old and the new world, stating that those who worked in the US:

> "take their risks, defend their positions and at the end offer us, the public, a far higher volume of products for the house that are not the least bit hidebound in design. Our best design may be more refined than theirs, but we have less, and certainly too few designs that pronounce frankly what century they belong to" (ibid., p. 18).

Pevsner's diffidence towards the invited speakers was not isolated: evidently, the drafter of the minutes had not heard of the Ulm School before, nor could he understand the intellectualism of the BBPR monument in the Milan cemetery or Schawinsky's *Spectrodrama* performance, even though he was clearly "a good person" for him (Banham Papers, 1953). The 1954 edition limited itself to exclusively American speakers but focused on a wider spectrum of disciplines. *Planning: The Basis of Design* involved less designers (strictly speaking) but a larger number of architects, landscape planners, engineers, economists, art historians, biologists, psychologists, writers, specialists in public opinion, TV producers. The point, in brief, was to discuss the value of customers' needs and how to interpret and answer them through design. This was a recurrent topic in those years: something similar was promoted a few months after for the Ann Arbor Conference in Boston (*Design and the American Consumer*) and it was a replica, in turn, with a more "scientific" approach, of the call launched in Darmstadt during the 1951 *Darmstädter Gespräche*, devoted to *Mensch und Raum* (Man and Space) where the philosophers – among whom Martin Heidegger – tried to envision a solution to the crisis of design. While in Europe the disciplinary issues were tackled with the support of humanities, in the U.S. the same attempt was made with the help of science. 1954 was also the year of the First International Conference of Industrial Design held at the Milan Triennale (Molinari, 2001)[2], in which international designers such as Bill, Pevsner, Kepes, Wachsmann also took part; unlike in Aspen, though, the perspective in Milan was strictly disciplinary. The dialogue with the Milan Triennale went on. The following IDCA, chaired by the graphic designer Will Burtin, was titled *Crossroads. What are the directions of the arts?* The title evoked one of the X Triennale's main topics, *L'unità delle arti* (the Unity of Arts) (Bassi & Riccini, 2004, pp. 103-119); however, while the Milanese event insisted upon the *mixité* between architecture, design, and art – with the contribution of artists such as Lucio Fontana – the Americans focused mostly upon the crossroad between man and mechanization:

[2] Yet another factor contributing to the *annus mirabilis* of Italian design.

art was just the icing on the cake. On these premises, the board planned to invite Walter Gropius – whose seminal book *The Scope of Total Architecture* had just been published (Gropius, 1955) – who was unable to accept in the end (like Herman Wejl, Einstein's assistant, due to his master's death). In his introductory speech, Burtin – after paying tribute, once again, to those companies that had been capable of improving their business entrusting artists, such as the Italian Olivetti and Montecatini – presented a conference framed in various operational fields (Landscape and City, Education, Leisure, Communication) which would be addressed in a multidisciplinary way. Besides this new framework, one of the novelties of the edition was the presence of computer and cybernetic technicians (Bernard S. Benson, Arnold F. Arnold) who, following Fuller, insisted in their optimistic vision concerning the possibilities given by automation, despite being aware of their potential dystopian effects:

> "With the advent of automation it is not hard to imagine a system evolving as follows. The work of ten is done by one and the one works to support the other nine in questionable leisure. These other nine are attached to nine sensation-producing television sets and are allowed to 'wear out' by a natural process of living, at the end they are junked. (…) automation and the arts are natural marriage partners which can produce happy children, but the marriage will not happen by accident" (IDCA Records, 1955).

In general, the 1955 edition confirmed an increasing shift towards issues that were under the spotlight in the cultural debate in those years, leaving aside the industry and the market. It is worth remembering that some of the most famous dystopian novels – the ones by Burroughs, Asimov, Dick, to name just a few – were published between 1953 and 1956: this cultural mood influenced the following IDCA conferences and contributed to further stimulating the debate about the designer's moral responsibility. The following three editions, *Ideas on the future of man and design* (1856), *Design and Human values* (1957) and *Design and Human problem*s (1958), were consequences – as well as further triggers – of the debate concerning the so-called "human-centered design" (Scodeller, 2019). The designer's relationship with his own cultural roots was addressed both by European – Alberto Rosselli in 1956 and Ernesto N. Rogers in 1957 – and American speakers – John A. Kouwenhoven in 1957 and Harvey Wheeler in 1958 –, while the impact of design upon the society as a whole was the main issue at stake for the sociologist Charles Wright Mills (Trevino, 2014). In his famous 1958 talk *The man in the* middle, Wright Mills criticised designers for being submissive to the will of the market, one consequence of this being that they often lied to the public: the same accusation launched in those years by the social critic Vance Packard (1957, 1960), and the same that would later recur in Victor Papanek's seminal book *Design for the Real World* (1971). Wright Mills' radical attack to the capitalist market economy – something recurrent nowadays, but not at that time – recalled Gramsci's vision of the relationship between intellectuals and power (D'Orsi, 2001); from this perspective he urged

designers to take responsibility, that is, to be members of mankind and to fully understand what their "membership" meant: (...) what has been lost is the fact and the ethos of man as

craftsman" (IDCA Records, 1958). Man and ethics were the new issues at the top of the design agenda; a similar mindset was spreading also on the other side of the ocean, where the debate started focusing more and more upon design's moral and political values, including in teaching (Stile Industria, 1959).

Figure 3. Poster of the IDCA 1959 (source: private archive).

3. The Sixties: from man to the environment

In the 1960s, in accordance with a cultural climate extending well beyond the specific field of design, the IDCA saw the sudden emergence of environmentally and socially conscious stances.

In 1961, the year following Paepcke's death, the title of the IDCA – perfectly consistent with its initial optimistic spirit – was *Man/Problem Solver*: the markedly positive stance emerged from the very first words of the chairman, the design educator Herbert Pinzke, who kept looking at design as an effective way to cope with human problems. But there was also room for divergent visions. In his speech *First things First* – which would be, quite interestingly, the title of the famous manifesto signed 3 years later by Ken Garland and other graphic designers (Garland et al., 1961) – Bernard Rudofsky provocatively stated that he had never seen man as a "problem-solving animal" inasmuch as humanity's most fundamental problems were still unsolved, in spite of any philanthropic aspiration:

> "Has man achieved the status of problem solver? asks the program committee. Are we able to recognize a problem when we meet one? I should like to ask. (...) Hypnotized as we are with extraneous problems, with conquering even less hospitable properties such as the moon and the stars, we are progressively losing track of our most pressing terrestrian problems" (IDCA Records, 1961a).

A similar disenchantment could be found in the first contribution to the IDCA by Tomás Maldonado, *The Problem of All Problems*, in which he claimed that the industrial designer might be in fact a problem-solver,

> "but seldom a problem-solver who is free to decide which problems should be set and how they should be solved. It is certain that the problems are frequently set for him from outside, and no less frequently the solutions as well. In most cases the designer wants to set and solve problems for human use, but in most cases he feels obliged to set and solve problems for human abuse. This is, without doubt, the problem of all problems" (IDCA Records, 1961a).

Critical stances of this kind gained further momentum in the following editions. In 1962 the IDCA focused upon the environment (particularly man-made) and upon the role played by design in altering and re-shaping it, either positively or negatively. Under attack was, most of all, modern city planning, whose negative social consequences had just come under fierce criticism (Jacobs, 1961): Herbert Bayer voted against the possible invitation of Le Corbusier and Niemeyer to the conference, as their cities were for him "monuments which start with designers rather than with people" (IDCA Records, 1961b). The current state of design was not exempt from criticism either. Arthur Drexler – who had just been appointed as director of the Department of architecture and design at MoMA – said that the world was not merely "a dump heap to be ruined by factories making things", and the only way to see architecture and design as tools for "perfecting the earth" was to consider the process by which a thing was made "at least as important as the thing itself" (IDCA Records, 1962a). Analogous was the stance of the industrial designer Neal Hathaway, according to whom designers were to

be held responsible for the shoddy artifacts which soon were “broken down, burned out, cracked, faded, rattled, bent, warped, slowed down or stopped” (ibid.).

Within this context, the IDCA 1963 – titled *Design and the American Image Abroad* – constituted a clear exception. At the height of the cold war – less than a year after the Cuban missile crisis – a conference whose explicit aim was to find new *designerly* ways of building international consensus for America was “too strong an invitation for political power plays” (Banham, 1974): any sort of critical stance was, therefore, out of the frame.
Already in 1964, however, critique made its way back into the IDCA. The premise of the conference - titled *Directions and Dilemmas* by the chairman Eliot Noyes – was once again the need for an “enlightened materialism”, able to improve the conditions in which human beings live. Particularly interesting, in that context, was the case made by the New York-based writer Ralph Caplan for the development of a more rigorous form of design criticism: “if the nation is to have public awareness of design, we need popular design critics and reviewers. (…)”, people whose voice would help to stop “the flood of superfluous appliances” (IDCA Records, 1964).

Figure 4. IDCA 1965 attendees gathered in front of the new tent designed by Herbert Bayer, replacing the former by Eero Saarinen (source: cover of the Visual Arts Bulletin vol. 6, n. 8, 1965).

By the mid-1960s the positions within the IDCA started polarizing and the tones escalating, also reflecting the state of a nation (and of an entire world) in turmoil for the Vietnam war and the emergence of the counterculture. The title of the 1965 conference, *The New World*, was chosen by the chairman George Nelson as an acknowledgement of the "tremendous pileup of changes" (IDCA Records, 1965) occurred on the planet in the preceding two decades, considered in all their socio-political and environmental dimensions (anticipating, somehow, what would be the premise for the foundation of the Club of Rome three years after): it was, therefore, the perfect stage for those arguments that put into question any form of 'technophilia'. The frightful repercussions of not tempering technology with human considerations – in other words, what Horkheimer referred to as "instrumental reason" – were the main focus of the keynote lecture by the British socio-economist Robert Theobold, whose words resonated with the ones pronounced a few years earlier by Rudofsky: "today we define the problem of going to the moon worth solving, but we do not define the problem of solving poverty as worthy of our attention" (ibid.).

A similarly critical vision of technology was the common ground also in 1966 (*Sources and Resources of Twentieth Century Design*) as well as in 1967, one of the most influential editions in the early history of the IDCA. Within the frame of the thought-provoking title *Order and Disorder*, nearly every participant - except for the artist Ben Shahn and his passionate defense of chaos - stood up for the need of a new form of order, to be re-established in the world also by means of design (IDCA Records, 1967a). The contribution that sparked the greatest interest – as it can be easily deduced from the extensive press coverage (IDCA Records, 1967b) – was the one by the architect Alfred Caldwell: his severe criticism of the lifestyle of modern man, who "through his disorder is poisoning the planet and making it unfit for all life – including his own" (IDCA 1967a), might well have had a significant impact upon Victor Papanek, who was in Aspen for the first time as one of the attendees (IDCA 1967c)[3]. Among the paladins of order also stood Max Bill, whose contribution was filled with philanthropic scientism and old-fashioned optimism: "as designers, we can produce examples showing how a problem could be solved" in order to "realize harmonious relations between the needs of the individual and the possibilities of society", something that "must be done honestly, with responsibility", the two bases of responsibility being "wisdom and morality" (IDCA Records, 1967).

In 1968 – within the framework of a dialogue between European and American architectural and design culture prompted by the chairman Reyner Banham – what came from the American side was something like a declaration of guilt. In contrast to Europe, where a designed object was conceived as an investment and should therefore be durable, in the U.S. design was seen – as the art historian David Gebhard pointed out – as "an experience, a well-placed maraschino cherry on a dessert to be consumed" (IDCA Records, 1968). Along

[3] He would return to Aspen as one of the invited speakers four years later, in 1971.

those same lines, the industrial designer Richard Latham admitted that American culture "concentrated too heavily on producing and marketing things" and if there was a way out of that, it should no longer be found in isolated things but in systems (ibid.).

The 1969 edition The *Rest of our Lives* was probably the one with the gloomiest mood in the whole decade, reflecting "the despair the participants felt at the crumbling of American ideals" (Michaels, 1980, p. 36). Henry Wolf, one of the two chairmen, claimed that the real problem at the end of the century was not "technology, organization, coping with obsolescence and other things", but "a problem of the fading of belief in something". From a similar point of view, George Nelson spoke of the necessity to escape from "the perverted offspring of the American dream" brought about – among other things – by the blind faith in technology: an escape that could be found by providing design and humankind in general with "new tasks, difficult tasks". From this perspective, he also borrowed the famous 1968 French students' slogan "let's be realistic, let's ask for the impossible" (IDCA Papers, 1969).

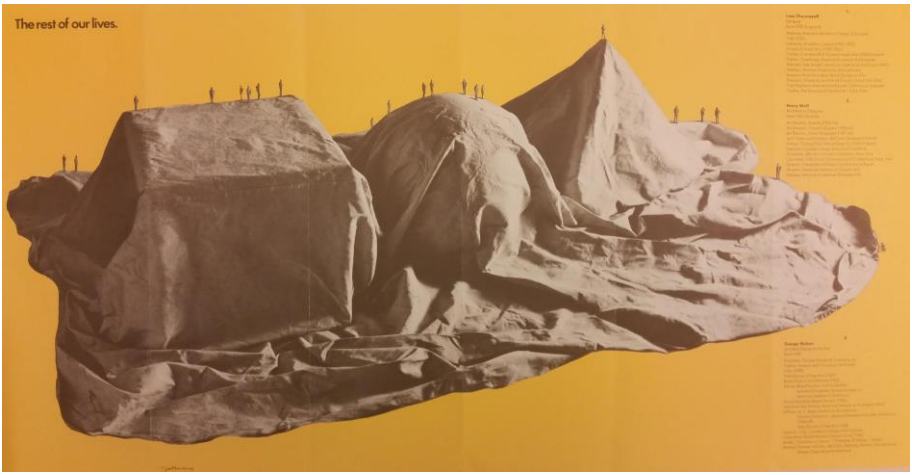

Figure 5. Poster of the IDCA 1969 (source: private archive).

4. The storm and its consequences

Quite ironically, the most powerful attack to the IDCA came, one year later, from the very people Nelson had taken inspiration from. In 1970 – as it has already been acknowledged (Scott, 2007; Twemlow, 2009, 2012) – an open protest against the *élite* of the organizers was launched by students, environmental activists and the so-called "French group" (a delegation of radical left-wing French intellectuals including Jean Baudrillard): which human being was really at the centre of design's concerns? The IDCA's already well-established

narrative of responsibility came under fierce criticism for being “too white, male, middle-class”; even the conference format was questioned for being too conservative, as the pre-established sequence of interventions left little room for open and collective discussions. Confronted with such an all-out attack, the philanthropic foundations upon which the conference had stood for two decades proved to be more fragile than expected: what fell under the notion of “designer’s responsibility” was not a common ground, but an outright political battlefield.

As Banham stated, “as a chairman of that stormy last session of the ’70 conference I could suddenly feel all these changes running together in a spasm of bad vibrations that shook the conference. We got ourselves together again, but an epoch had ended” (Banham, 1974, pp. 222). The IDCA took a different path from that moment on: no proceedings were published ever since - so as to do away with anything that could resemble the framework of an elitist academic venue; as for the topics of discussion, the socio-political and environmental agitation gradually faded away, paving the way for the re-emergence of issues and themes more specific to the design field. A crucial edition in this sense was *Shop Talk*, in 1977, the moment in which “design professionalism began to overpower politics: (...) a watershed year”, according to Jack Roberts, “because we were finally talking about design again” (Michaels, 1980, p. 38).

That said, the tensions and concerns of those first two decades were anything but solved: market-led, technicist, philanthropic, socio-politically engaged and environmentally conscious visions of design kept colliding head on in the IDCA up until its final editions, some 30 years after. In this respect, the main battleground was always roughly the same. Which issues and concerns fall within (or beyond) the scope of design? In a world increasingly flooded with an overwhelming amount of - often useless, sometimes even harmful - objects, how and to what extent are ecological and critical thinking allowed to have their say also in the field of design? The problematic crossroads of those early years at Aspen were yet another expression - a highly significant one indeed - of the most pressing dilemmas and challenges facing design culture during the second half of the 20th century; dilemmas and challenges that resemble, often quite vividly, those of our present time.

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