



## Era 05 World Design Congress

*The changing role and challenges of design, 22–28 September, 2005 Copenhagen, Denmark*

*“In the new era, design will influence the evolution of society, where the focus will be on quality of life for all, unrestricted by geographic, ethnic or economic boundaries.”*

### Lofty ideals and great expectations

Certainly the goals were lofty. As explained by the event’s president Jan R. Stavik, Era 05 was “a daring experiment... and, the beginning of something new.” Conceived with the ideal that design, as a creative force, can help us face the challenges of a rapidly changing and increasingly complex world, the multidisciplinary event’s goal, as defined by project manager Marc Lefkowitz, was to “create together, by means of a cross-functional approach to social and commercial issues...to help define the future role of design and designers, and to provide a new perspective for today and tomorrow.”

“Design is a key link in the value chain.”

—Mads Lebech,  
chairman of Greater  
Copenhagen Authority

### A unique Nordic experience

Era 05 grew out of a collaboration between sixteen Nordic design institutions in association with the “three sister” global design organizations: the International Council of Graphic Design Associations (ICOGRADA), the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (ICSID) and the International Federation of Interior Architects/Designers (IFI). Years in the planning, geographically far-flung and undoubtedly ambitious, this Scandinavian super-event commenced with three separate topical conferences in Helsinki, Gothenburg and Oslo from 22–24 September, followed by the joint “World Design Congress” convened in Copenhagen from 25–28 September 2005. In northerly Helsinki (Finland), 200 delegates met in the Media Centre LUME at the University of Art and Design under the theme of *Joining Forces* to explore the relationship between design research and its practical application as a catalyst for industrial competitiveness. At the same time, 500 attendees gathered 800km (500 miles) to the southeast in Gothenburg (Sweden) at the reclaimed wharf setting of Eriksberg Hall under the theme *Design for Everyday Life*—

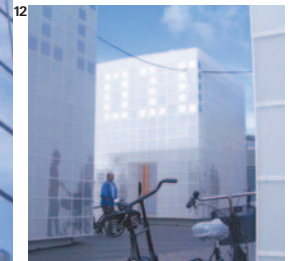
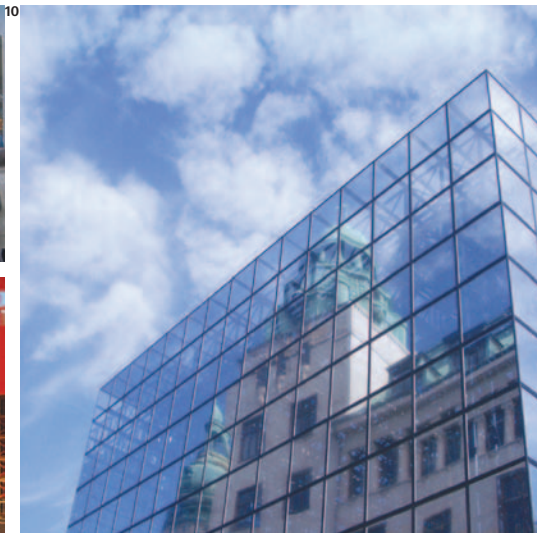
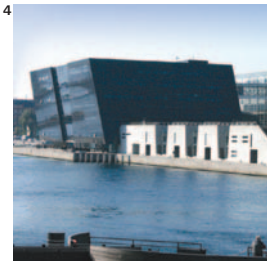
a discovery process focused on design, safety and security. Also concurrently, 260km (160 miles) north in Oslo (Norway), a third group of 250 delegates from 22 countries focused on design and social responsibility under the theme of *Design without Borders*. Many of these participants then boarded the Pearl of Scandinavia ferry for a panoramic fiord and sea experience en route to Copenhagen, Denmark’s capital city, 485km (300 miles) to the south.

### Driving change—by design

Unofficial proceedings started at 18:00 on Sunday, 25 September with a networking/cocktail reception at the impressive Danish Design Centre (DDC) on H.C. Andersens Boulevard across from the historic, world-famous Tivoli (the birthplace of leisure parks with fun-rides). Following an informal address by DDC chairman Steffen Gulmann, delegates mingled over endless drinks, took in the two DDC exhibits (*DANISH: framing the future of design* and *FLOWmarket*), or headed to Tivoli for a season-closing open-air concert/performance.

Official proceedings commenced the next day at Bella Center, Scandinavia’s largest exhibition and congress venue. Lise Vejse Klint, president of Danish Designers, moderated the plenary opening and outlined the congress themes. Official welcome

Right: 1, 2. Signs of a monarchy: the old “winged wheel” of the Danish State Railway, and updated “coach horn” and crown of Post Denmark. 3. “Enough H.C. Andersen already!” poster decrying the famed author’s ubiquitous 200th anniversary omnipresence. 4, 5. New and old mix along Copenhagen’s waterways: the neo-monolithic public library, and the charm of Nyhavn’s twelfth-century quays. 6. The era 05 World Design Congress dovetailed perfectly with the city’s “Design Year 2005” initiative. 7, 8. Pedestrian-scale and easily navigable, Copenhagen attracts millions of tourists annually—many photographed with the iconic Little Mermaid. 9. Era 05 plenary session at the Bella Center. 10, 11, 12. INDEX: AWARDS: the bold new “Nobel Prize” of design, with winning works displayed in pavilions in Copenhagen’s public squares. 13, 15, 16. Bold art and scenic vistas at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art: Halim Choueiry takes in the Matisse exhibit. 14. Era 05’s branding and key message: re-act, re-search, re-think, re-form, re-solve in a new era. 17. A wide range of concurrent exhibits and design-related initiatives reinforced the city’s claim as the “world center of design.” 18, 19. The 2003–2005 ICOGRADA board in Hornbaek, and South Africa’s Jacques Lange receiving the presidential gavel from Denmark’s Mervyn Kurlansky at the 21st ICOGRADA General Assembly. Thanks to Hanspeter Schneider (Switzerland) and Russell Kennedy (Australia) for providing photographs.



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speeches by Jan. R. Stavic (Norway), ICOGRADA president Mervyn Kurlansky (Denmark), IFI president Young Baek Min (South Korea), and ICSID president Luigi Ferrara (Canada), were followed by the Danish Minister of Culture, Brian Mikkelsen, on *Innovation and Design as Political Instruments*, by mayor Mads Lebech on *Designing a Modern Urban Region—Copenhagen The Human Capital* (Greater Copenhagen's twelve-year strategic urban plan), and by industrialist Krister Ahlström, chairman of the Finnish-Swedish Design Council, on Finland's three-decade transformation into one of the world's most

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needs the  
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—Mark Breitenberg, USA

competitive and innovative economies (through use of design as a strategic pivot for development and rejuvenation). Although HRH Crown Prince Frederik of Denmark “presided” over the opening by dint of his presence, many delegates were disappointed that he said not a word (though that did spare him the embarrassing audio/visual complications others experienced, and that continued to plague presenters over the following days).

### **Tomorrow's products, environments and communications**

For the balance of Monday, delegates split into three parallel streams of discipline-specific presentations. The industrial design track, entitled *ICSID: Stories from Around the World*, was moderated by Mark Breitenberg of Art Center College of Design in Pasadena (USA). Presentations included Gcina Mhlophe (South Africa) on storytelling and design's role in the interplay of culture, business, politics and science; Tobias Lau of Bruce Mau Design (Canada) with a presentation titled: *From Marketing Nation to Change Maker Nation: How Denmark can spearhead Massive Change*; Leimei Julia Chiu of the International Design Center Nagoya (Japan) on *The Impact of Asia's Economic Growth: New Challenges for Design*; Pradyumna Yvas of the National Institute of Design (India) on the relationships between tradition and culture as well as the current challenges for design; and writer Bruce Sterling, ‘Visionary in Residence’ at Art Center College of Design (USA), on future scenarios.

The architecture and interior design track, *IFI: The future is an Open Space*, was moderated by Ellen Klingenberg (Norway) with sessions addressing future trends and professional challenges: Swedish architect Torsten Hild on *Who Cares—Social Aspects of Interior Architecture*; architect/designer Kees Spanjers (The Netherlands) on *The Architecture of Change*; Shashi Caan of Parsons School of Design (USA) on *Interior Design: The*

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*Next Hundred Years*; and interior architect Miguel Aragones (México) on *The Color of Light*.

The graphic design track, *Icograda: Communicating in a Four-Dimensional Environment*, was moderated by Lise Vejse Klint—it explored the pending fourth dimension (emotional, cultural, political) transcending the traditional 2-D approach of the

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— Luigi Ferrara, Canada

past and 3-D approach of today’s communication designers. David Berman (Canada) spoke provocatively on *Weapons of Mass Deception: Design & Social Responsibility*; Jakob Fenger of Superflex (Denmark) presented *Branding with Focus on Different Ethnic Backgrounds* and showed creative design projects such as GUARANÁ POWER, an alternative caffeine soft-drink developed in collaboration with Brazilian farmers; Iranian expatriate Masoud Alavi presented *Silk Road* and addressed multicultural brand influences; American designer Terry Irwin (now at Schumacher College, U.K.) explored design for relationships, holistic design principles, and systems thinking with *The*

*Web of Life: A New Way to View Graphic Design*; and Gero Grundmann of Studio Bec (U.K.) ended the sessions with *When I’m Sixty-Four—Designing for Demographic Change* and a call for “an inclusive ethos” of design, cautioning, “We are tomorrow’s older people—we need to design (now) for our future selves.”

### More is less

Tuesday, day two, began with three parallel streams exploring specific societal issues “in the New Era”: *Masses in Motion: Design and the Migration of People*; *Shifts in Society: Design and Demographic Trends*; and *People Coming Together: Design and Multicultural Societies*. The day’s closing plenary *For a Better World, Press One*, featured keynotes by architects Benedetta Tagliabue (Spain) and Per Feldthaus (Denmark); journalist Jennifer Leonard (Canada) on *Transformation: Design Beyond Form*; an empowering presentation by futurist/author David Zach (USA); Slovenian philosophy professor Slavoj Žižek on *Design as Ideological State Apparatus*, an examination of “design’s knowns and unknowns” replete with a hilarious deconstruction of Donald Rumsfeld’s rhetoric (for many, the insightful highlight of the congress); a session on intellectual property by Etienne Sanz de Acedo (Spain), and presentations by the three sisters 2007 congress host cities.

Wednesday, day three, offered seven streams in separate venues(!)—a staggering number of program combinations that left many feeling bedeviled by choice (a redeeming feature was the multi-transport travel card issued to all delegates, allowing free travel by bus, Metro, train and Water Bus). Sessions included *Intellectual Property* at the Danish Architectural Center; *World Report* (from six continents) in The Pyramid at Danish Industry; *FutureScope: Seeds of Tomorrow* at the IT University; *SWERA05 Students’ Workshop* at the Royal Academy School of Architecture; the *Design Management Symposium* at Dansk Handel & Service; the *Presentation of Papers* at the castle Charlottenborg (since 1754, The Royal Academy of Fine Arts); and *Exploring Change in Design Education* at the Ingvar Kamrad Design Center in nearby Lund, Sweden.

The congress ended with the plenary *Tomorrow is Another Day* at A-Huset (a derelict sixties-era industrial building offering splendid vistas of Copenhagen’s skyline) with summaries of the day’s parallel sessions; an address by Bendt Bendtsen, Danish Minister of Economic and Social Affairs; a keynote on “livable cities” by Danish architect Jan Gehl; and closing formalities. A spirited closing party featured rooftop BBQ, edgy fashion, performance, music and dance that raved well into the next day. (The surprise closing drew strongly mixed reactions from attendees—some applauded its “slumming as inverted poverty” while others simply decried it as “unpleasant, unfriendly and inhospitable.”)

### Scenic and social scenarios

As one would expect, the 600-plus delegates from 46 countries were also treated to an assortment of tours, exhibitions, receptions and open-house studio visits—and for many (myself included), the week's most meaningful moments arose from extracurricular exchanges, impromptu debates and spirited interaction with design colleagues of all ages, nationalities, backgrounds and disciplines—events like this inevitably rekindle old friendships and provide serendipitous opportunities for new relationships.

**The most important aspect of design is the ethical, which has to do with creating quality of life."**

—Olafur Eliason,  
Danish Icelandic artist  
(quoted in *Designmatters*)

Other highlights for me included a quiet afternoon visit with board colleagues to the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art on the Øresund shore north of Copenhagen, and a cobble-stoned trek with a dozen or so designer colleagues (from as many countries) to Christiania, Copenhagen's enigmatic and alternative "free town." (Formed in 1971 when hippie squatters stormed and occupied a 34-hectare [84-acre] former army base, this "losers' paradise of idyllic peace" has retained its status as an enclave of social diversity and an independent state, becoming a symbol of the Danes' progressive self-image in the process, and attracting over a million tourists annually.)

### Design capital

Copenhagen is a remarkably civilized place—a peculiar mix of old and new, metropolis and village, both provincial and cosmopolitan—and a perfect destination for this significant design event. Founded in 1167, home to the world's oldest surviving monarchy, and replete with fairytale traditions and the fables of Hans Christian Andersen (whose 200th birthday was celebrated this year), the city has leapt into the 21st century with modern waterfront settings and futuristic infrastructure while at the same time protecting its abundant public squares, pedestrian walkways, parks and gardens. Charming features that make the harbor city of 600,000 navigable include the Citybike (free bicycles available to tourists and locals for a small deposit), the Water Bus (public harbor boats) and the automatic, driverless Metro trains.

Denmark has long been known for design that combines humanism and social awareness with functional and aesthetic values, traits that have enriched its international culture and commercial life. The government's declaration of 2005 as national "Year of Design" (in recognition of design's contribution to both cultural development and wealth creation) brought additional focus and import to the Era 05 events.

### INDEX:2005—Design to Improve Life

Billed as "the world arena for future design and innovation... under the patronage of HRH Crown Prince Frederik of Denmark," and described by some as the "Nobel Prize" of the design world, the city also saw the launch of INDEX as "an international network that presents the following events in Copenhagen every four years: the world's biggest design awards (5 × 100,000 euros); two international design exhibitions about design that improves life; and, an international summit meeting on creative problem-solving featuring five design labs." Following the INDEX: Award on 23 September (for the design categories Body, Home, Work, Play and Community), the top 100 nominated designs (of 535 considered) went on 24-hour display in cubed pavilions located in 5 of Copenhagen's public squares—an innovative and interactive way to engage a broader public.

### XXI ICOGRADA General Assembly

Following the congress, international association representatives from each of the three design disciplines met for their respective general assemblies. Highlights of the ICOGRADA general assembly included the ratification of 11 new members (including AIGA) which broaden the Council to 92 member associations in 48 countries; the report on the new secretariat (shared with sister ICSID) in the host city of Montréal; and a review of the strategic plan for the newly-formed International Design Alliance (IDA), a multidisciplinary partnership that will serve as the "collective voice for design" on the world stage.

At the end of an intense week (both strenuous and energizing), Era 05 delegates said their goodbyes and headed back to their far corners of the globe. While participants' experiences and resulting opinions varied widely (based on post-event comments), this unique, multidisciplinary congress had indeed delivered a fair measure of what it had promised—certainly it was visionary, ambitious, original and (yes, overly) complex. Had the intimate Nordic pre-congresses and main event in Copenhagen "helped define the future role of design and designers," and "provided a new perspective" for the design professions? Will the planned exchanges, cross-pollination and opportune interactions of Era 05 lead to new multidisciplinary alliances and collaboration? Time, and only time, will tell. **CA**

*Author's note: A CD-ROM journal of the full Era 05 Congress proceedings will be available early in 2006. For more information, contact the ICOGRADA Secretariat in Montréal: secretariat@icograda.org.*

**[accompanying quotations]:**

“Status quo is not part of the solution.”

- Era 05 (promotional brochure)

“In the universe of culture, the center is everywhere.”

- Ruth Klotzel, Brazil

“In its very soul, Denmark is a design nation.”

- Danish Design Centre (promotional brochure)

“Design is a key link in the value chain.”

- Mads Lebech, chairman of Greater Copenhagen Authority

“Culture and Business are mutual conditions of design-  
the two legs of design policy.” - Brian Mikkelsen, Danish  
Minister of Cultural Affairs

“The message needs the medium to make an impact.”

- Mark Breitenberg, USA

“94.5% of all statistics are made up.”

- Stephen Hitchens, U.K. (quoting Woody Allen)

“The thrill of the designer is to shape.”

- Benedetta Taglibue, Spain

“When science discovers the center of the universe, a lot of  
people will be disappointed to find they are not it.”

- Futurist David Zach, USA (quoting Bernard Bailey)

“All professions are a conspiracy against the laity.”

- Futurist David Zach, USA

“Only God and little children can stand monotony.”

- Futurist David Zach, USA (quoting G.K. Chesterton)

“Children are the message we send to the future.”

- Futurist David Zach, USA

“Fifteen years ago, companies competed on price. Now  
it’s quality. Tomorrow it’s design.” - Dr. Krister Ahlström,  
Finland (quoting Robert Hayes)

“Creativity is in the air.”

- Steffen Gulmann, Danish Design Centre (quoting Plato)

“We are always working towards greater complexity, in order  
to create greater simplicity.” - Luigi Ferrara, Canada

“One has to scan the entire horizon in order to learn  
something new.”

- Marianne Frandsen, Denmark

“It isn’t pollution that’s harming our environment, it’s the  
impurities in our air and water.” - George W. Bush, quoted  
by David Berman, Canada

“Possible ≠ Desirable.”

- Terry Irwin (USA), Schumacher College, U.K.

“The questions we don’t ask stay with us the longest.”

- Gero Grundmann, Studio Bec, U.K.

“The most important aspect of design is the ethical, which  
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Danish/Icelandic artist (quoted in Designmatters)