

origin, thus potentially becoming meaningful and generative to the research community after the conference.

« 12 » As a closing reflection on the “Closing reflections” (§72), I have all sympathy for the aim to establish a commonly understood language, but it may be necessary to start by asking who is doing the understanding. In my simplified dichotomy above, is it the emerging research-through-design community (scenario 1) or is it the context in which the emerging community is situated (scenario 2)? I believe that the way forward and the decisions to be taken ahead are strongly contingent on the answer to that question.

« 13 » And personally, I think that it is much more important to build connections across research communities than to erect yet another silo, even if it means dealing with difficult tradeoffs.

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## The Making of a Conference

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**> Upshot** • The practice of thoughtful conference design helps to preserve the research conference as a vital arena for knowledge construction and exchange.

« 1 » First things first, full disclosure: I am a serial conference organiser and am currently organising a large design research conference so am wrestling with the issues that the authors deal very effectively with in Abigail Durrant et al.’s target article. It centres around research that is conducted through design and how best to present and talk about it, but more generally in an age of high bandwidth and seamless connectivity we might ask: Why have an academic con-

ference at all? What knowledge and legacy does physically being together in a place generate, and how is that accessible to others? Arguably, the physicality of practice-based work makes being situated in the same place more important but still, why not figure out a way of putting the whole thing online?

« 2 » The case against is clear. Twenty years ago, without our mobile phones, iPads and laptops, a conference offered a place to listen and focus, to present unknown work, and discuss ideas free from day-to-day life, cosseted in a conference bubble. But the bubble popped a while ago. Look around you at a conference now and you see people that are barely present at all: sending quotations and opinion to their Twitter feeds, solving staffing problems back home, or emailing that important review for a deadline just missed. They are there but not there, participating but not contributing.

« 3 » The conference has become more of a flow than a thing. TED,<sup>1</sup> with a simple formatting move and nice take on design, has kick-started the attention-grabbing, inspirational, presentation that now plays out in commercial contexts at ever lower levels. Delegates leave inspired by a captivating story, but not necessarily any the wiser. And that brings us back to the point of an academic research conference: openness about method, subject, object, and process should (in theory) leave delegates with a head full of new ideas, a bunch of new connections, and the research community enriched until the next time. The conference, traditionally the start of new dialogue, now finds itself in the midst of continuing dialogue. The most it can do is to channel and record the flow of discourse.

« 4 » Against this context, I found the article a considered and informative account of a process to develop new formats for conference participation in the area of practice-

1| According to the TED Website, <https://www.ted.com/about/our-organization>: “TED is a nonprofit devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short, powerful talks (18 minutes or less). TED began in 1984 as a conference where Technology, Entertainment and Design converged, and today covers almost all topics – from science to business to global issues – in more than 100 languages.”

based design work. This is an area where the traditional paper-presentation format, in its “backward” reporting of results, limits what can be discussed about the “forward” potential of a design artefact. The “Rooms of Interest” (§47) central to RTD 2015, and the most fundamental attempt to get away from the traditional “lecture” format, represent a way to open up discussion around physical artefacts, and includes researchers operating in organisational contexts. The Rooms of Interest are positively assessed by the authors, though the participants are seemingly more ambivalent. That could be said of the other attempts at format-changing too (§33), and I think the reporting of audience response slightly diminishes the contribution of the article, the achievement of the conference, and the careful thought behind its many components.

« 5 » The target article does show how difficult it is to take the conventions and terminology of the academic conference (§60) and confound the expectations that these bring in a way that is both understandable and coherent to a broad range of researchers, who may only be partially engaged in the lead up to a conference. The ingredients that arguably make for an effective conference – good organisation, good chairing and facilitation, a few unexpected items, formal mixed with informal – evidently remain as important as they ever were (§47).

« 6 » I am of course biased by the conference I am attempting to design, and I use the word “design” very deliberately. What I think this article best presents is the *practice* of conference design, the process of working out what kind of things to specify for submission (§31), what kind of discussions and dialogues will fit the geography of place (§27), what the available technology can do to enhance understanding (§38), and how best to attract and corral participants. That requires thinking at a number of levels, but as the article shows, those levels need to be integrated and understandable, from the paper format, to the checkboxes at submission, to the communication of intentions throughout. The organisation of RTD 2015 is clearly shown to have developed from the prototype of RTD 2013 and I am sure RTD 2017 will develop further still in that ongoing flow of dialogue within the research through design and wider community.

« 7 » There is a nice quote in Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, a novel about King Henry VIII of England, where the protagonist Thomas Cromwell is asked by one of his advisors what the King of France will get out of a proposed treaty with the Pope. Cromwell responds that:

“the making of a treaty is the treaty [...] it is the processions that matter, the exchange of gifts, the royal game of bowls, the tilts, the jousts and masques: these are not preliminaries to the process, they are the process itself.” (Mantel 2009: 391)

That sentiment is reflected in the way that conferences sit in the academic landscape now: the making of the conference – in the relationships that are formed between organisers and presenters, the dialogues that take place around formats, the ability to put more, and more complex, material online prior to the conference, and amend and update following the conference – is progressively becoming what the conference is. There is, as the target article demonstrates, the need for a “conference object” to sit in the flow of academic discourse around practice-based design research (as well as design research more generally), to create eddies and to pull the flow one way or another. The need for that “object” to be well-considered is pressing and I think is demonstrated in the article.

« 8 » I do, however, take issue with the distinction between practice-based research and research more generally that the overview of §§6–13 presents. The distinction has been around for some time, as the authors correctly reference, but is becoming less useful as doctoral training for design researchers increases in quality, and researchers considered “practice-based” are equally able to articulate, in text and argument, what they are doing, how they are doing it, and the knowledge they are creating. All types of design researchers are increasingly seeing their research as a form of creative practice, so research through design should keep the idea of what an artefact is as open as possible; theses and papers are also objects too. What I have tried to show, by highlighting the practice of conference design, is that practices of research and organisation everywhere can

be considered as creative, reflective, and critique-able activities.

« 9 » In conclusion, I think this article opens (or perhaps contributes to – I have to confess ignorance here) an important reflective dialogue about the practice of conference design, and effectively illustrates what the purpose of a (design) research conference is, and can be, in the world today.

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## Platform and Habit of Inquiry

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> **Upshot** • My comments should contribute to making the next RTD conference even more “successful.” If we are to advance design research, changing the format of conferencing is secondary to changing the culture of inquiry, although they surely intertwine.

« 1 » I must start with an apology and a declaration: I am not writing necessarily from a constructivist point of view, and there are more opinions than arguments in my short commentary. I have co-organised a 100-person conference, a 70-person one, and two small symposia in design research, and have followed the debates on research through design for the past 15 years. My commentary, based on my experiences, is meant to encourage and support not only the authors but also anyone who is

genuinely interested in advancing design research by organizing a conference or a similar event.

« 2 » In terms of design research (conferences) generally, if there is one thing to improve, then I will suggest it is the culture of inquiry. What I refer to is not epistemological positions or methodological rigour, but rather the practice of *collective* inquiry. The habit of knowing, correcting, and building on existing research/knowledge is at its weakest in the cultural practice of design research. (For instance: at the EAD'06 conference “Design System Evolution” in 2005, as a co-organiser, I noticed that there were different ideas on design presented; these ideas overlapped with or repeated other previous ones and yet the authors seldom examined these other similar ideas; see Chow 2005). Unless this is changed, the contribution made by changing the format of conferencing alone is very limited. I will use Abigail Durrant et al.'s target article as an example to clarify what I have in mind.

« 3 » The article is a very detailed, well written, careful description and reflection on experimenting with some new formats for a new conference series. The discussion covers pre-conference review and selection, on-site process and set up, and goes all the way to post-conference documentation and dissemination. One feels that one can take this article, follow it, and run a conference. Valuable as it is, changing or adding one thing would greatly enhance the article and the design of future conferences.

« 4 » The authors are aware of different understanding or meanings of “research through design”; however, I hope it is fair to say that they seem to focus mainly on “tacit knowledge” gained from practice, and physical or material artefacts as embodied knowledge. These are the main issues for and around which their alternative conference formats are designed. However, these issues are not new, nor is the discussion on alternative conference formats.

« 5 » I wish that, instead of writing a general account of the evolution of research through design, they had had gone into a much deeper critical review of other conference series focusing on “tacit knowledge” and “embodied knowledge.” Two come to my mind: the older “Research into Practice”