Article

From Designed Object to Designed Context: Changes in Environmental Discourse in the First Twenty Years of the International Design Conference in Aspen

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Abstract: Through an in-depth discussion of the International Design Conference in Aspen from 1951 to 1970, this paper explores how environmental discourse underwent a shift in its connotations in the field of design during the conference. Of particular importance in this process of discursive transformation was the 1970 conference. This year's conference erupted into a conflict over the connotations of environmental discourse as environmental discourse outside of design impacted on and transformed the environmental discourse within design. This article examines the different concepts of the term 'environment', as presented by speakers and participants at the International Design Conferences in Aspen from 1951 to 1970, and especially focuses on the debates surrounding 'environment' at the 1970 conference. The article concludes by exploring the implications of this event and summarises the role of the 1970 International Design Conference in Aspen at this crucial turning point in environmental discourse. The aim is to explain and strengthen the significance of discourse a design conferences in the history of design, and to explore a new direction of design history research.

Keywords: Environmental Discourse; Design Conferences; the International Design Conference in Aspen

1. Introduction

The publication of Silent Spring in the mid-20th century had the effect of widely spreading environmentalist ideology through society. As the most influential design conference at the time, the International Design Conference in Aspen (IDCA) [1] responded positively to this trend with environmentally themed conferences in 1962 and 1970, respectively themed 'Environment' and 'Environment by design'. During the first twenty years of the conference, from 1951 to 1970, 'environment' was an important discourse in the field of design that was brought up and discussed many times, along with the discourses of 'graphic design' and 'integrated design'.

The conference was organised by the Aspen Institute, an international organization formerly known as the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies. It was founded in 1949 by Walter Paepcke, president of the Chicago Container Corporation, in the town of Aspen, Colorado, USA. The Institute is dedicated to organising seminars, policies, conferences and leadership development programmes to build a 'free, just and equitable society'. In 1951, Herbert Bayer, a consultant to Paepcke, and design director Egbert Jacobson together came up with the idea of a conference to discuss 'good design and good business' [1]. Since Paepcke also believed that modern design could be more profitable for business, he supported the idea and organised the International Design Conference in Aspen, which aimed to increase communication and collaboration between artists, manufacturers

and business people. The idea behind the International Design Conference in Aspen is a direct continuation of the essential Bauhaus philosophy. The Bauhaus was committed to improving the relationship between the art world and the business world through the design of household objects such as lamps and teapots, which could be industrially mass-produced [2]. In the mid-to-late 20th century, the International Design Conference in Aspen held an important position in the world of international design due to its dissemination of conference papers from key speakers. Furthermore, design magazines devoted extensive press coverage, at times dedicating an entire issue to the conference.

Table 1. airs, and core presentation topics and speakers or contributors at the International Design Conference in Aspen, 1951-1970.

Year	Theme	Chairs	Core presentation topics	Speakers or contributors
1951	Design as a Function of Management I	Walter Paepcke	(to be found)	(to be found)
1952	Design as a Function of Management II	R.Buckminster Fuller	(to be found)	(to be found)
1953	Design as a Function of Management III	Leo Lionni	At Aspen in Colorado	Nikolaus Pevsner
1954	Planning: The Basis of Design	Will Burtin, Carl Maas, Gyorgy Kepes	(to be found)	(to be found)
1955	Crossroads: What Are the Directions of the Arts?	Will Burtin	Opening Remarks	Will Burtin
1956	Ideas on the Future of Man and Design	Will Burtin	Why Don't We Have the Cities We Need?	Max Frisch
1957	Design and Human Values	Saul Bass	Communication of Values Through Design	Richard Latham
1958	Design and Human Problems	Garrett Eckbo	How Do We See the World Today?	Hin Bredendieck
1959	Communications: The Image Speaks	Morton Goldsholl	From Primitive Disorder to Twentieth-Century	Lancelot Law Whyte
1960	The Corporation and the Designer	George D. Culler	(to be found)	(to be found)
1961	Man/Problem Solver	Herbert Pinzke	So Who Needs a Sarsen?	Richard T. Morris
1962	Environment	Ralph Eckerstrom	Perfecting the Earth	Arthur Drexler
1963	Design and the American Image Abroad	Peter Blake	Don't Just Stand There Trembling	Reyner Banham
1964	Directions and Dilemmas	Eliot Noyes	Quick and Cheesy, Cheap and Dirty	Dexter Masters
1965	The New World	George Nelson	(to be found)	(to be found)
1966	Sources and Resources of 20th Century Design	Allen Hurlburt, Mildred Constantine	All That Glitters Is Not Stainless	Reyner Banham
1967	Order and Disorder	Craig Ellwood, Jack Roberts	We Are Not Clockwork	Paul A.Weiss
1968	Dialogues: Europe/America	Reyner Banham	The Alienated Professional	Jivan Tabibian
1969	The Rest of Our Lives	Ivan Chermayeff , Henry Wolf	The Spirit of Design-Period	René Dubos
1970	Environment by Design	William Houseman	The Environmental Witch-Hunt	Jean Baudrillard

Conference themes, conference ch

At the 1970 conference, representatives of design insiders and outsiders held completely different views on the term 'environment'. As a result, a heated environmental discourse erupted at this meeting between participants with different perspectives. The term was originally derived from the old French 'environner' and the old English 'avirounement' through a process of splitting and reorganisation. Its original meaning was

'the area or physical environment surrounding a place or thing', and the term was used to describe the natural environment. Over time, the meaning of the term became richer, and by 1948 it was defined as 'space affected by human activity' [3]. At this conference, the students, environmentalists and social science academics argued that the conference board's understanding of the environment was too one-sided and politically detached [4]. The conference board was jolted by these critiques from outside the field of design. And in the aftermath of the conference, environmental perspectives from people outside the design field had reshaped the design field's perception of the 'environment'.

This paper seeks to delineate the changes of environmental discourse in design throughout this era, analyzing the Aspen Conferences between 1951 and 1970 in three stages: before, during, and after the transformation. This research aims to investigate how discourse and design conference have influenced the design history. When we review design history research, we find that academics have focused primarily on tangible design artefacts. Therefore, this paper helps to expand the scope of design history research by focusing on discourse and meetings, two non-physical objects that are often overlooked by design history research.

In terms of the theoretical perspective of the study, this study provides insight into the design of internal and external conflicts in environmental discourse at the 1970 conference from the perspective of semantically closed theory. Semantically closed is an expression of a linguistic property that encompasses expressions in a language specifically predicated by 'is true' and 'is false'. Brulle Robert, a professor of sociology, used the term in the study of social organisations and further explained that negotiations about discourse and membership boundaries need to be at least partially closed in order to form a social organisation. This closure occurs either through a process of consensus or conflict. With consensus, the role of rational argumentation is emphasized in building mutual understanding; while for conflict, a symbolic closure is the end result after a contest for power [5]. According to Brewer, the International Design Conference in Aspen can be seen as an event where linguistic closure is achieved in the design community. For at those conferences, the boundaries for the various discourses within design were repeatedly discussed, and discourses were deconstructed in conflict and reconstructed in consensus.

2. The Literature review

2.1. Research on environmental discourse in design

At the beginning of the 21st century, there was an intense academic debate on environmental discourse. Mühlhäusler and others defined environmental discourse as a linguistic device for expressing the relationship between human beings and the natural environment. The ambiguity of the terms environment and nature is central to the understanding of environmental discourse, and the different connotations of that discourse is mainly reflected in whether the specific connotation is centred on human beings or on nature [6]. The term environment itself is a human-centred concept: 'the term increasingly implies a nature that is significant only for human health and life' [7]. In addition to this, Mühlhäusler et al. suggested that there is an urgent need for interdisciplinary study, given the linguistic complexity of environmental discourse.

This paper examines environmental discourse in the design discipline, an aspect that has been previously explored by researchers based on studies of discourses of the built environment. For example, Gülser ÇELEBİ concluded in Environmental Discourse and Conceptual Framework for Sustainable Architecture that environmental discourse is concerned with an ecological or sustainable architecture and that this kind of architecture is becoming a discipline [8]. Inci Basa analysed linguistic signifiers such as context, interpretation and definition and suggested in his article Environmental discourse of architecture that environmental discourse is initially shaped by architectural discoveries of 'the environment', and that driven by the 'environmentalisation' of architectural

intentions, environmental discourse achieves its full materiality through linguistic figures [9]. Donal Carbaugh and others in Cultural Discourses of Dwelling: Investigating Environmental Communication as a Place-based Practice discussed the importance of context and place in architecture, in relation to environmental discourse [10].

2.2. Research on International Design Conference in Aspen

The research conducted on the International Design Conference in Aspen reveals that the discourse of the conference has been partially explored by some scholars. Joanne George's doctoral dissertation, the functions of graphic design: sociologies, history, and the International Design Conference in Aspen studied the precariousness of graphic design and explored the attempts of the International Design Conference in Aspen to define and develop the field of graphic design. George argued that the conference did not address the status of design, but rather the intractability of graphic design's controversial character [11]. The Aspen Complex, a book detailing the International Design Conference in Aspen from 1960 to 1980 [12], includes the article I can't talk to you if you say that: an ideological collision at the International Design Conference at Aspen, 1970. That article provided an exhaustive account of the heated protests by environmental activists and students at the 1970 conference. The author, Alice Twemlow argued that the 1970 conference offers an interesting case study where established design practices and discourses were subverted and transformed. Twemlow further noted that various design conferences, represented by Aspen, have reacted to the disruption that arose in 1970 and have adapted by making space for self-criticism of design as well as allowing for different perspectives and understandings.4 The collection of essays International Design Organisations: Histories, Legacies and Values includes Robert Gordon Fogelson's article Becoming the International Design Conference in Aspen [13]. That article focused on the internationalisation of the International Design Conference in Aspen by viewing the conference through the constructed lens of a discourse on international design. The author notes that 'in light of recent shifts in global design history, the birth of the International Design Conference in Aspen helps to document many of the challenges in the construction of international design discourse in the post-war period' [14].

Scholars only began to study the International Design Conference in Aspen at the beginning of the 21st century and the research on the subject has flourished over the past two decades. The majority of papers fully acknowledge the significant impact of the Aspen conference on the design community as a whole, but scholars have only scrutinised the conference from a discursive point of view. Twemlow and George's papers both provide a narrative account of the environment-related conflicts at the 1970 conference, while this paper takes a holistic view on environmental discourse from 1951 to 1970, including an in-depth analysis on discourse and design conferences from the perspective of the semantically closed theory.

3. Environmental discourse before 1970: environment as design object

3.1. Man-made Environment

I am inclined to summarise the discourse on the internal environment in the field of design in the 1950s and 1960s as 'environment as design object'. Although the term has never been coined, many people have expressed similar views when referring to the environment in design contexts. The term 'object [15]' refers to 'something that can be seen or touched', and this meaning carries the passive status of being scrutinised by a subject. Hence, 'as design object' implies that something is being shaped by a person through design. The connotations of 'environment as design object' and 'Man-made Environment' are almost identical, both emphasising the control of the environment by humans through design. They differ only in that the latter is broader in scope and refers to all

environmental objects, whereas the former is limited in scope and usually specifically refers to the environment in and around cities.

The core discourse of the International Design Conference in Aspen in the early 1950s was focused around 'design' and 'management' before the word 'environment' was included in its discussions. The theme of the first three conferences, from 1951 to 1953, was 'Design: A Function of Management', which was chosen to convince entrepreneurs of the value of 'integrated design' for business.11 By 1954, the conference theme was changed to 'Planning: The Basis of Design'. George described this theme as emphasising 'the importance of design to human civilisation' as the conference explored in detail how design serves the needs of mankind. I agree with George that the Aspen design conferences of the 1950s did extensively explore the role of design in all aspects of society. However, from 1954 onwards, designers attending the conference started to be increasingly critical of the uncontrolled expansion of commerce, which is contrary to the original intent of the conference. In my opinion, it was against this background of criticising business and emphasising the role of design that more 'objects of design' came to be included in the discussion in order to highlight the significance of design for human beings. Therefore, 'environment' was widely discussed as an object of design during this period.

On the one hand, there was a consensus on the discourse of 'Man-made Environment' at the early Aspen design conferences. The Aspen Papers, curated by Reyner Banham as the Aspen International Design Conference's chair, compiles vital discussions from the conference's initial twenty years. This book is a collection of classic speeches on the environment given at the International Design Conference in Aspen in the 1950s. In his lecture Landscape and Cityscape at the 1955 International Design Conference in Aspen, architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock noted that 'Both landscape and cityscape are unwieldy entities not readily shaped by the conscious hand of man' [15]. Obviously, in his speech, the word 'environment' was directly replaced by 'landscape [3]', and when we trace the meaning of 'landscape', we find that it means designed nature. The following year at the conference, the architect Paul Rudolph put the environmental at the forefront of his lecture The Six Determinants of Architectural Form, in which he argued that 'Every building, no matter how large or small, is a part of a greater whole, and the architect perforce participates in planning' [16]. From his description, we can clearly sense that the 'environment' he refers to and the 'landscape' in Hitchcock's words both refer to the Man-made Environment, and both of them tacitly agree that the environment is the object of design.

On the other hand, in conjunction with the critique that designers of that period had for commercial sprawl, the Man-made Environment was often contrasted with the sprawling city. For example, Rudolph emphasised in his lecture: '... buildings for commerce, housing, finance, and administration should not dominate our environment' [16]. Similarly, at the 1958 Design and Human Problems conference, landscape architect Christopher Tunnard criticised the 'random, haphazard, and poorly planned way' of urban development.11

From these criticisms we can see the position of designers in the late 1950s who questioned Paepcke's intention to combine design and commerce for profit. George concluded that designers of the time associated the alienation of man from nature with a disregard for the spiritual values of mankind.11 Reflecting further on George's point, I realised that the designers' focus on human values in environmental issues was also key to the development of the consensus that 'the environment is an object of design'. In the eyes of the designer, the commercially controlled city is incompatible with human values, and the environment must be designed appropriately in order to solve this problem. As Hitchcock pointed out in his speech, 'Man's intervention is, therefore, neither rare nor necessarily deleterious.' The designers proposed their solution to this problem, which is to control mankind through design. As for the exploitation of the natural environment,

this is also the view summarised by Hitchcock: 'In theory, planners are to create our cityscapes of the present and the future, and also to exercise such control as can be exercised consciously over landscape in the macrocosmic sense' [15].

3.2. Ecocentrism

In the 1960s, when design remained steeped in the discursive consensus of the Man-made Environment, Rachel Carson published Silent Spring, where she criticised the degradation of farmland ecosystems caused by the pesticide DDT [17]. This critique catalysed the environmentalist movement in Europe and the United States. The release of Silent Spring marked the end of a long period of stagnation for Ecocentrism [4]. By recombining concerns about natural ecosystems with long-ignored public health issues, the book redefined the form of human-nature interaction [18]. Ecocentrism denotes a nature-centred, rather than human-centred, value system.

Ecocentrism has had a profound impact on the field of design. After the 1980s, it spurred the emergence of a new environmental discourse from 'green design' to 'ecological design' and ultimately to 'sustainable design' [19]. Before the emergence of these discourses, in the 1960s, the field of design vacillated between the discourses of man-made nature and eco-centrism, and therefore, I will describe the two different perspectives and approaches of design scholars in relation to environmental discourse during this period.

One perspective centred on the International Design Conference in Aspen consensus of 'Man-made Environment'. Unlike the 1950s, designers in the 1960s expanded the Man-made Environment from the city and its surroundings to the planetary level, arguing that the Earth's environment could be subject to design. By this time, a broader environmental consensus was established that 'the environment is an object of design'. Arthur Drexler's Perfecting the Earth speech at the 1962 International Design Conference in Aspen was a profound illustration of this view. Significantly, this conference marked the first adoption of 'environment' as its theme, a positive response by its board of directors to the burgeoning environmentalist movement, having been sparked by Silent Spring, in the post-war period. However, Drexler re-emphasised the important role of design in addressing environmental issues, declaring: 'We don't have to think of technology as we do think of it. world as a scrap heap... design can perfect the planet' [20]. In addition, I think there are some clues to the conflict that erupted at the 1970 International Design Conference in Aspen that can be mined from this speech. Drexler, who was a professor of architecture at Yale, Harvard, and MIT, considered natural phenomena such as contour maps and models of the earth's surface to be 'architecture' — objects that could be shaped by design. Thus, at the end of his lecture, he lamented: 'Instead, the students think of architecture as the making of things in opposition to the earth'.20 As mentioned earlier, one of the contributing factors to the setback of the 1970 International Design Conference in Aspen was the protests of the student body during the event. This suggests that as early as the early 1960s, students had embraced the ideas preached by the environmentalist movement, developing a different conception of the environment compared to their professors.

Figure 1. A panel discussion at the International Design Conference at Aspen, 1962. Image sourced from website: https://colorado.aiga.org/2015/04/living-history/.

Figure 2. Ralph Caplan, British architectural historian and critic Reyner Banham, and conference chair Elliot Noyes, 1964. Image sourced from website: https://colorado.aiga.org/2015/04/living-history/.

On the other hand, certain design professionals hold a contrasting perspective on the environment compared to the consensus of the International Design Conference in Aspen. A select few, represented by Ian McHarg, actively embrace environmental discourses such as eco-centrism. McHarg, the founder of the University of Pennsylvania's Department of Landscape Architecture, advocates the reintegration of humans into the natural environment. In my opinion, McHarg's design philosophy represents the value that the environment enjoys the same importance as human beings, which is different from the prevalent emphasis on human-centric concerns among most designers.

McHarg rose to prominence during the first wave of the environmental movement across college campuses in the early 1960s, and his lectures and courses were widely admired in schools throughout the U.S. His book, Design with Nature [5], published in

1960, focuses on his important contributions: pioneering the design direction of ecological planning and promoting a way of analysing site hierarchy of sites [6], in order to design with a complete understanding of the local soil, climate, hydrology and other attributes. The aim is to create designs that are both protective and responsive to the natural environment of the locality.

It is clear that McHarg is a prophetic figure among design scholars, and his contribution symbolizes a top-down action by the design elite to reshape the environmental discourse in the design community. Unfortunately, McHarg's actions were embraced by only a few design scholars and did not reflect the design community as a whole. It was not until the 1970 International Design Conference in Aspen that an important opportunity arose to shake up the consensus on environmental discourse in the design community.

4. The 1970 International Design Conference in Aspen: Intersecting environmental discourses inside and outside design

As can be seen from the previous discussion, the 1950s and 1960s marked the first period of a shift in the discourse on the internal environment of design from 'environment as design object' to 'environment as a design context', with the former concept being well-established. The 1970 conference discussed in this chapter, on the other hand, can be regarded as the middle of the transition, where the notion of the 'environment as design object' was questioned and rejected by external voices in the design community. The 1970s saw the rapid growth of the global environmentalist movement, driven by the enduring influence of Silent Spring, with a milestone in this period being the creation of the first Earth Day [7] in 1970. In June of the same year, the International Design Conference in Aspen convened under the theme of the theme of 'Environment by Design,' chaired by William Houseman [8]. While the conference theme clearly responded to another wave of environmentalism in 1970, it also emphasised the split between environmental discourse within and outside the design community and drew attention to the distinct connotations of environmental discourse within and outside of design, as argued by Twallow [4]. The conference ended in conflict. I summarise the contrasting perspectives as the internal and external camps of design.

4.1. Environmental discourse camps within design

The design internal discourse camp included figures such as Herbert Bayer, a consultant for the Container Corporation of America; Saul Bass, a graphic designer; and Eliot Noyes, IBM's director of design, who had made successful careers in the post-war phase of economic growth and defined the emerging design discipline. In their view, the environment was the object of design, and all environmental problems could be solved through design and planning. Some scholars have pointed out that for most of these successful designers, although they were educated as artists or planners and realised that design had its roots in the arts, they preferred to think of design as an activity that served business and industry and solved problems [4].

4.2. Designing external environmental discourse camps

I refer to the group opposing the design community's consensus that 'the environment is the object of design' as the camp of environmental discourse outside of design. This camp consists of young students, environmentalists and social science scholars. While young students and environmentalists constituted the largest and most vocal opponents at the 1970 Aspen International Design Conference, social science scholars, though fewer in number, brought deep knowledge in critical scholarship. Despite their different identities, these three shared a common stance on environmental issues. For them, 'the environment' was seen as the epitome of a political issue that

underscored the urgency of protecting the Earth's natural resources from further damage by major political and economic interests.

4.3. Environmental discourse conflicts

From the standpoint of semantic closure, the conference witnessed the deconstruction of the discourse 'environment,' as elaborated upon by both sides and it evolved beyond a closed discourse.

Speakers from the Inside Design camp focused on the process of environmental design. In his opening remarks, conference chair Hausmann emphasised that 'when you walk down any street in any town, you will find endless objects that are objects of design... the man hole covers... mailboxes, screen doors... they have all got design'. In the conference brochure, the title used to reiterate the theme of the conference was 'a palette for design activity,' which conveyed the consensus within design that 'the environment is an object of design.' This title served to highlight the Board of Directors's emphasis on the role of design in solving environmental issues. Twemlow summarises the board's intention: 'The 1970 International Design Conference in Aspen will seek to comprehend the man-made environment; not so much as a technological challenge to ensure the environment, but much as a technological challenge to ensure survival, and as an intricate fabric of physical, social and esthetic threads to be rewoven' [4].

However, members of the design externals camp dominated the proceedings during the free lunchtime discussion, reiterating the meaning of 'environment' in their critique. They argued that treating the environment only as an object of design reflects a narrow and elitist perspective. Environmentalist Cora Walker delivered a talk entitled *Pioneering in Co-Op Programs*, in which she accused designers of having selfish motives in their purported interest in the Harlem ghettos. Walker argued that designers were not concerned with the well-being of the city's communities, but rather used the inner city as an opportunity to secure government grants for their 'beautiful creative drawing board plans'. She accused the designers, stating: 'You have the arrogance to feel that you can solve vast national problems, involving the life and lifestyle of masses simply by remaining in your own little comfortable world of design'[11]. Similarly, Baudrillard used an ironic metaphor to describe how conference boards perceived environmental problems in his article *Environmental Witch Hunts*, describing the environmental crisis from the perspective of the elite as an 'apocalypse in a magic ambience' [21].

Figure 3. Cora Walker's speech at the 1970 conference. This image is from a documentary film about the 1970 International Design Conference in Aspen by Eli Noyes, son of Temple Eliot Noyes and his friend Claudia Weill. URL: https://vimeo.com/59495003

Ultimately, the conference ended with the students forcing attendees to vote [9]. This act symbolised the subjugation of the external design discourse to the internal design discourse, as the final point of the voting document touched on the core of the design profession represented by the Aspen conference: designers attending the conference were discouraged from involvement in architecture, advertising and products solely for profit, an attitude that the students saw as a destructive force in society [4]. This document highlights the conflict surrounding environmental issues at that time, and indeed, this Aspen conference on environmentally themed design was initiated by those with environmentally destructing daily behaviour. In his article, Baudrillard openly dismissed the theme of the conference, 'Environment by Design', arguing that the focus on environmental issues diverted attention from real social problems: 'But the real problem is far beyond Aspen — it is the entire theory of the environment, which constitutes a generalised Utopia, a Utopia produced by a capitalist system that assumes the appearance of second nature in order to survive and perpetuate itself under the pretext of nature' [21].

As a result of this subjugation, it became clear that members of the design community were abandoning the consensus that viewed the environment solely as the object of design. Instead, they began reevaluating their understanding of the relationship between design and the environment. Architect Peter Brian Hal reflected on this in his lecture *The Liberal Conspiracy*: 'We are more conscious now that society has many different possible objectives, that they may come into conflict... Many designers with successful careers ignored this. Their design solutions took all too little cognizanse that such clashes existed.' I feel that this reflection can be seen as a key statement in the semantic movement from deconstruction to closure of environmental discourse, as it represents a realisation by members of the design community that it is no longer feasible to focus only on the 'designed' properties of the environment, and that the environment is a factor that needs to be considered prior to design. He suggested: 'It's argued that, before we know we need more new towns, before we know where and how big they ought to be, we want a closer examination of these objectives and of the alternative ways of achieving them' [22].

At this point, the semantic closure of the environmental discourse within design has come to fruition. I am inclined to summarise the new consensus on the connotations of environmental discourse as 'environment as a design context'. The expression 'context'

refers to the background, premise, or situation that constitutes an event, statement, or idea [3], which makes clear the dominance of the environment over design. This implies that before designing, it is necessary to consider the specific temporal and spatial 'situation' in which the design will operate, as well as the associated contextual factors. This connotation, contrasting with 'environment as design object', also reflects the imperative for design to be responsive to the environment, i.e. design as an action that operates within and for the benefit of the environment and its inhabitants, rather than the self-realisation of the designer outside the environment.

5. Impact of the turn in environmental discourse and post-1970 environmental discourse

After the 1970 conference, this turn of discourse had far-reaching effects on the International Design Conference in Aspen and on the design field as a whole. I discuss these influences at both the level of thought and practical action.

5.1. Changes in the perception of the design community

Firstly, the 1970 conflict challenged the Aspen International Design Conference's status as a research institution and the modernist values it represented; it also caused the members of the Aspen International Design Conference's board of directors to reevaluate their own values. These board members, who held sway over the discourse of the design community at the time, found their views on the relationship between environment and design shaken and changed, which allowed for the rapid spread and development of a new consensus on environmental discourse. Speaker Fasson, recalling the 1970 conference, reiterated the idea he had absorbed from it: 'People have the opportunity to shape the environment in which they live' [4]. The following year's conference, chaired by Fasson, witnessed restructuring.

Secondly, the design community's changing perceptions of the 'environment' were manifested in an iterative discourse. The proposal of 'environment as a design context' serves as a broad generalisation of the environmental consensus, representing the shared connotations of various environmental discourses after the discursive shift. After 1970, new and more specific environmental discourses were introduced in the design field. For example, in the 1980s, the concept of 'eco-design' became popular, which advocates the design of earth-friendly materials, products, projects and communities; in the 1990s, the concept of 'sustainable design' emerged, which emphasises not only ethical and environmental responsibility in the design process but also environmental sustainability. This extended to considerations of longevity, with the idea of 'designing long-lasting, durable products' [19].

5.2. Changes in the design community's actions

On the one hand, the Aspen International Design Conference has undergone changes in its theme and organisation over the years. At the 1971 conference, Fasson introduced a new theme, 'Paradox', and sought to highlight the ideological engagement of the conference by addressing major political issues. He also envisioned new methods for organising the conference and advocated small group discussions with young people involved in the planning process. The Board of Directors worked to develop a format conducive to meaningful interaction between presenters and sessions. By the mid-1970s, the conferences had gained a reputation as 'summer camps'.11 On the other hand, discourses such as 'eco-design' and 'sustainable design' mentioned earlier have led to new design initiatives in the design community. For example, in 1994, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) identified 50 eco-design projects, which signalled the beginning of the integration of eco-design into national policies [19].

6. Conclusions: The International Design Conference in Aspen as a key arena for discourse change in the design history

The International Design Conference in Aspen, which has lasted for half a century, has been a witness to the most significant trends, insightful ideas, and heated debates in the design industry and academia from the 1950s to the present day. In the 1950s and 1960s, the conference underwent its first major shift in focus from the application of design for profit-driven businesses to the use of design to solve the social issues caused by business expansion. It was at this moment that designers began to focus on the environmental discourse, which sought to define the social role of design. At that time, designers saw their mission as opposing unlimited commercial expansion and repairing an over-industrialised society; as architect Peter Brian Hal put it, 'With us, in particular, there was a belief that land was being with us, in particular, there was a belief that land was being squandered and that it must be saved' [22]. Thus, the consensus of the environment as an object of design was widely recognised by the design community during this period.

However, a contentious debate emerged regarding whether design could protect the environment by shaping it. While some participants in the 1960s continued to see 'design' as a commercial tool, others who saw design as a form of artistic expression grappled with feelings of complicity in promoting commercial activity at the expense of social welfare. They argued that the ethical dilemma lay not in the form of design, but in its principles: designers did not have the right to use their work to legislate for public values [11]. At this time, the rising environmentalist movement prompted designers to adopt a new perspective on the environment, thanks to the International Design Conference in Aspen's active response to social hotspots and its invitation to experts outside the design field. Despite the semantic closure as a result of conflict regarding the environmental discourse in 1970, this profound encounter ushered in a new perspective on the environment in the design field. Designers realised that the environment was not just a mere object in the design process but should be seen as an important context for design from its emergence.

Ultimately, the International Design Conference in Aspens from 1951 to 1970 witnessed a shift in the environmental discourse within design from 'as a design object' to 'as a design context'. This change also triggered a related change in approach to design practice. Obviously, the International Design Conference in Aspen can be regarded as a key arena for discursive discourse change and semantic closure within the design field, as well as both a catalyst for change and a platform for design to move from discursive turnaround to practical innovation. The design history value of discourse and design conferences is therefore self-evident. The results of this research will hopefully provide a new research perspective for the study of design history that synthesises discourses and design conferences.

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