

Unsitely! Colloquium
Leveraging Design to Improve Urban Construction Sites

Summary of Session 3

« Worksites and Innovation : Industrial design »

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Reinvent. Impact change barriers. Face resistance.

All five speakers, in their own way, have chosen a design-led innovation process to solve big, complex challenges in their cities. The words common to all presentations were "reinvent", "impact change barriers", "face resistance": these terms well characterize the scope and difficulty of the tasks ahead of our presenters at inception of their projects.

To summarize these journeys of change, I chose to regroup the stories told into four steps of a design-led innovation process and illustrate each one of them with quotes.

Step 1: See a problem or an annoyance, and turn it into an opportunity

Expressed under a "from... to..." formula or similar, all speakers presented issues related to particular construction sites and shared their desire to change the status quo and what their vision was.

Charles Ormsby, talked about a massive site south of Athens in Greece, and said "we had to turn the construction site from being an obstacle into an attraction center". Andrew Hollweck, on the construction industry carrying an image problem among all citizen in New York, talked about "positive changes, that had led to negative impacts: how to change that?". Susanna Sirefman said, in New York City, added value of design in the streets couldn't be easily measured, so she chose to organize "fresh thinking brought to a problem". Dror Benshetrit aspired to offer solutions "from voids or annoyances to catalysts of urban change" and Erik S. Churchill, recognizing that 50% of the world population is living in cities, figured out that "shipping is slow, expensive and emission generating, but information flies free".

Step 2: Propose solution sets in response to the problem and prototype them

Andrew, aspiring to raise awareness among stakeholders decided to write a report, a checklist of "quality construction sites practices" and found a way to distribute it to construction companies. Susanna organized a design competition aiming for design excellence. Dror imagined a smart geometry pattern that offers triangulation to build modular walls, thus moving from a typical barrier to a visually attractive "Quadror" wall. Eric used the "do more with less" mantra and applied it to prefab solutions, when Charles shared an unusual idea: organizing tours, including a biking event, at a controversial site during the key construction steps to bring higher notions of comfort to naysayers.

Now, in all design-led innovation processes, there is a "make or break" moment to overcome barriers and change mindsets: the essential moment to obtain one "big win". Then, it becomes the currency to convince others to follow. Which takes us to the next step...

Step 3: Find your first client or users group

Erick had the idea to organize "pop-up" assembly sites: light manufacturing applied to construction allows for spreading the view that designing near fabrication sites can reduce costs. Andrew is about to find a first construction company responding to the "doing good has a dollar value". Susanna pulled together an advisory group on design competition, involving stakeholders ranging from the obvious to the unusual, and confronted conversations on visually attractive urban sheds and printed canvas. Dror is currently installing a project in Turkey, most likely the first of many, and for Charles, the opening of the on-site Visitors Center in Athens, months before the Cultural Center would ever be finished, enabled hundreds of visitors to understand and feel more comfortable with the site character.

Finally the last step:

Step 4: Scale-up and speed the adoption rate to reach critical mass

With cyclists recently experiencing the new cycle paths in Athens, Charles is confident that the project is starting to meet the mission statement to "benefit the most". Susanna, after receiving more than one hundred designs from the international community is on her way to "make people change what they do and make those who don't care, actually do". Dror has a great product with the potential to shift the value from cost to new benefits. Erik is about to create a huge database and integrate the design side and construction side together. Andrew still needs to jump the hoops of government regulation and industry resistance but is on his way to show make an impact on future sites and surrounding communities.

In conclusion, to change the face of construction in the future will require a well-led process and three conditions from its actors:

- An envisioning design team;
- Contractors willing to cooperate;
- and last but not least, ambitious clients.



Fabienne Münch is the Chair of Université de Montréal Industrial Design School. The School places human values, critical thinking and research projects as foundational elements of its collaborative approach to educating the competent and responsible designers of tomorrow.

Prior to this position, Fabienne was Director of Ideation at Herman Miller Inc., a think tank that synthesizes user needs research, future trends and business factors into concept explorations, charting paths for potential innovations. Fabienne held various leadership positions in Research & Development, notably within Herman Miller incubator (Creative Office) and as Director of large-scale product development projects. She joined Herman Miller to facilitate the integration of B&B Italia into Herman Miller Europe and moved from Paris to Michigan in 1998 as International Development Director. Supported by a global multi-cultural team, she has been fueling Herman Miller's expansion into new markets by broadening the Asian and Latin American portfolios.

Fabienne started her career in Paris, championing wood furniture product development and M&A assessments for the European market leader Steelcase Strafor. Few years later, as Principal of a design studio providing services to the exhibition and retail industries, she developed a passion for leading creative teams. Fabienne holds a Master degree in International Business from Université de Nancy-ICN, France and a Master of Science in Coaching for Change from HEC School of Management, Paris and Templeton College Oxford, UK. She has two children and currently lives in Montréal, Canada.