

Interview from Susanne Schuricht and Mirjam Struppek, held with John Thackara, 2005

John Thackara is the Director of *Doors of Perception*, an international conference and design futures network, as well as a non-profit foundation and consulting company in Amsterdam and Bangalore. Former editor of *Design Magazine* (1980 - 1985), in 1985 he founded Design Analysis International (DAI). From 1993-1999 he was the first Director of the Netherlands Design Institute. He is author of the book *In the Bubble: Designing in a complex world*, published last May by MIT Press. He lives and works in Amsterdam and Ganges.

When and how did you first get involved with computers?

Someone gave me a word processor when I first started work as a journalist in the 1980s. But if you mean, when did I start to think about them, I would say 1993, when we did the first Doors of Perception conference. That's when I began to ask: "Ok, these things are interesting but what are they for? And what do they mean?"

You call yourself a "symposiarch." Wikipedia describes symposium "as a Greek social institution," a gathering for men to debate, plot and party, overseen by the symposiarch. How did this "profession" change in our modern networked society?

Well for one thing it's not just for men! My main work is to pose interesting questions to people, and then persuade them to come together to discuss them. I'm not sure this task is fundamentally different now than in the time of the ancient Greeks. We have communication systems to get in touch with each other, but live encounters between people for whom a question has meaning remains the most important part of what I do. Also, the party is just as important now as it was 2000 years ago!

What is most challenging as symposiarch?

The challenge is to persuade people that a question is worth their time and attention. We are all so flooded with "noise" that it's never easy to get a person's attention.

Who is participating at Doors of Perception? And what's their background?

The delegates at a Doors conference come from around 50 countries. The same goes for the 900,000 people who visit our website each year. They come from a wide variety of disciplines: no professional group makes up more than 20% of our crowd.

What is the main activity of Doors?

Our main activity is helping people look at things in new ways. Doors helps imagine sustainable and engaging futures, and then takes design steps to realize them. But what people really value is that we bring together different disciplines and communities that would not otherwise meet. These connections lead to all manner of new relationships and projects. We do projects together that explore scenarios for new services - enabled by information technology - that support new ways of living.

In Doors of Perception 8 in Delhi, what were the new, special insights you gained?

A personal "Aha!" moment in Delhi was the realization that remix is not just about new music and VJ-ing. Remix also signals a broader cultural shift away from the obsession with individual authorship that has rendered everything from art to management so tiresome in recent times.

Another takeaway from Doors 8 was an understanding that enabling platforms for social innovation need to meet three criteria: they should creatively engage the people they are intended for; they should help people to evaluate the new against the old; and they should help local people retain control over their own resources. Big corporations may have a role to play here as providers of enabling platforms, but not as the proprietors of finished products or services. The challenge is to design system architectures that promote local leadership, and that keep power, knowledge, and the value generated at the local level.

What exactly do you mean by enabling platforms?

An enabling platform is a set of tools (such as the telephone) that helps people do things for, and with, each other in a different and maybe better way. This is in contrast to tools and services that disable human agency, and make it harder for people to do things themselves. So-called “self service” technologies are a prime example of this second kind.

John Thackara

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What do you think is the future significance of virtual networks and their online platforms as a tool for enabling people that share interests and knowledge, but sometimes not the same location?

They will be as important as, say, the telephone network or the railway network, but not a substitute for situated, embodied encounters.

Susanne Schuricht

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Mirjam Struppek

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Your web column “in the bubble” has now become a book. Why did you call it “in the bubble”?

Mainly to challenge the idea that design is something you do from the outside in, or top down. “In the bubble” is a phrase used by air traffic controllers to describe their state of mind, among their glowing screens and flow of information, when they are in the flow and in control. Lucky them! Most of us feel far from in control.

We're filling up the world with amazing devices and systems-on top of the natural and human ones that were already here-only to discover that these complex systems seem to be out of control: too complex to understand.

My book has a simple and positive idea: Things may seem out of control, but they are not out of our hands. By the way, I made a website all about the book! I say in the book that the best condition for a designer -mentally and physically- is to be both in the bubble and outside it: immersed in reality, but also aware of the bigger picture.

What does home mean for you?

Difficult question. I'm like a Frigate Bird - and where does it live?

I travel a lot of the time. And, since I was 18, I've lived outside the country where I was born (the UK) for more years, than I've lived inside it.

And now our last personal question: - how do you manage the complexity of your amazingly multifarious life?

Who said I managed it! I have an interesting life but I have the suspicion that it manages me more than me, it.

Mr. Thackara, thank you