FORESIGHT, DESIGN STUDIES, THE LONG TERM, AND ARCHAEOLOGY



Last Friday Bill Cockayne (Stanford Humanities Lab Assoc. Director) and I (also in my role as co-Director of Stanford Humanities Lab) were at the local office of DaimlerChrysler – RTNA (Research and Technology North America).

In response to their request, we were proposing a project to research the future of car culture, with a focus on a particular interest of RTNA in IT and interiors.

Our pitch was to look at the big picture of contemporary cultural innovation – to draw on ethnography, sociology, material culture studies, design studies, economic forecasting, whatever field necessary. But not to predict. Instead to sketch possible scenarios. Stories of what it might be like in five to ten to fifteen years time to use information technology in a car.

Sam (Schillace) is also part of this – with his expertise in Agile Development – a key to the success of the local software industry here. We were proposing to bring this design methodology to bear on such questions as – what will people want in their cars in ten years time?

Managing complexity.

We were arguing that it is not possible to establish user needs and desires, now and in ten years time, and use this knowledge to deliver a new piece of car interior that answers those needs and desires.

Many, probably most technology projects fail. Most which succeed are rated poorly by the end user. This is largely due to the complexity of technical products. Most companies and projects respond to this complexity by building large processes and teams. But this only makes the situation harder to manage. More people and more milestones means more communication, more complexity, and more distance between the user and the design, making it less likely to succeed.

Some companies approach this problem by having “talented” designers make guesses about what the user might want. In a complex environment, though, these guesses are more likely to be wrong than right. Further, this technique is only likely to refine existing solutions, not to discover new ones.

After-market customer survey is a very blunt tool for understanding what people need and want. People may well not be able to express what they like. Usability studies can focus on people’s interactions with things, and ethnography can help understand the crucial intangible and subjective factors of car culture and experience. But it remains very difficult to make predictions about complex systems.

So don’t try to predict.





Archaeological futures?

Instead Agile Development works on rapid prototypes, tries them out with people, modifies, then modifies again and again – because this is the best way to understand how people might get on with things. You can't predict. Work through conversation and collaboration.

The importance of iteration.

Instead, research not the local and particular, but the big picture – understand possible trends and use these to put the local more precisely in context. Our take on the very familiar "think global – act local".

But it also poses the question of just what is the long term and the bigger picture. And here I see a fundamental and unique role for what archaeology and anthropology could become – the only research environments that can deal with people's relationships with things over the long term. OK I am presuming a lot of both disciplines. Material Culture Studies – as a disciplinary field focused on stuff and goods – is in its infancy and hardly recognized by most of my colleagues in both archaeology and anthropology.

The importance of the long term.

But who else can deliver a big picture of the history of design? Of innovation and social change? Of anything? Only archaeologists. Everyone else is squinting at things through a pinhole.

(This has become my epic project – Origins, my latest book, is a study of more than 45 thousand years of design and innovation.)

Now we were up against frog design and IDEO – two of the 400 pound gorillas of the design world.

They are marvellous at designing lovely boxes. Black boxes of all kinds – whether they call them – services, interactions, emotions, brands, whatever.

Today we found out that DaimlerChrysler are going with frog.

Well, it was quite something to be up against them.

But we are coming across this need to understand the bigger picture more and more. I have commented upon it in my review of the archaeological year 2004 [Link]. And we have had conversations these last few months, coincidentally perhaps not, with both BMW and VW about the same question – what is going on in people's relationships with things like cars? How do we understand it all? Because these very sophisticated companies don't get it.

VW are even founding a university to change their company car culture. And more – to rethink our understanding of people and things.

I began my career over 20years ago with a highly controversial argument that it was the politics of the past that really mattered in archaeology, its intersection with contemporary interest. Here is the latest iteration of that idea –

Archaeology is actually one of the keys to getting a hold on the future.

Bill's great concept to encompass this need for the bigger picture is foresight.

So a spin off of our Humanities Lab is to be an Institute for Foresight.

Archaeology as part of research into the contemporary big picture.

And we already have courses, events and projects running – watch this space.