

AN ACADEMIC GIFT ECONOMY: WHAT STANFORD H-STAR AND MEDIAX GOT RIGHT



A reflection after the Danish H-STAR fellowship reunion, University Southern Denmark, Odense, May 22-23 2026

Last weekend I joined a reunion of the Danish researchers – twenty-five or so of us – who had passed through Stanford’s H-STAR fellowship between about 2010 and 2015. It was organized by Connie Svabo, whom I hosted at Stanford years ago and who has been a close collaborator ever since, and by Keith Devlin, the founding executive director of both mediaX and H-STAR and now an adjunct professor at Connie’s STEM Education Research Center – FNUG, at the University of Southern Denmark [Link].

In another post [Link] I have uploaded my keynote which offers some thoughts on the future of collaborative research networks – AI enhanced. Here I reflect more generally on what we can learn from both H-Star and its associated program mediaX

at Stanford.

Here is what struck me most. H-STAR and mediaX both closed in 2022. And yet here was their community, convening itself across a continent, years later, still generating new conversation and new work. The institutes are gone; the network is unmistakably alive. This is worth thinking about.

Experiences, memories, legacies

Across two sessions the group reflected on the H-Star experiences, memories, legacies, take-aways.

The features named were almost entirely human ones. **Hospitality** – a culture of hosting that one of us called commensality, the sharing of a table. **Flat hierarchies**, where hosts and guests were assumed equals in expertise. The institute as an **intellectual crossroads**, convening people’s interests and aspirations so new connections could form. The **personal growth** and changed self-understanding that came from belonging to something with real **vision**. A genuine **internationalism**. **Entrepreneurship** made actionable. A **growth mindset** that put the tough questions first and sat with uncertainty. **“Next bench” crossover**, where an idea travels from one field into another. Following the **“way of design”** in managing research projects – And, most honestly, a **pragmatic modus operandi**, can-do knack for working around the institutional politics of the academy.

What strikes me is that for a program ostensibly about information technology, almost nothing on this list is about technology. It is about people and presence, trust and time.

Why “gift economy” is the right description

I summarized all this as **an academic gift economy**.

A gift economy is one where value moves through giving rather than exchange – where a gift creates a bond and an open obligation to give back, and where standing goes to the generous. Scholarship has always aspired to this: we publish freely, we cite to acknowledge a debt, we host the visiting stranger.

The clever thing about H-STAR and mediaX is that they sustained this *at the*

interface with industry, where the logic of markets and intellectual property pulls hardest the other way. mediaX was the affiliate programme – Stanford’s membrane to the corporate world – and somehow it kept the gift economy intact across that boundary.

In a long conversation a few years back, when I was working on the concept of a digital commons with the Japanese software company Biproggy, Martha Russell, who ran mediaX, talked of mediaX as an **intellectual commons** – the digital and the analog now being inseparable anyway. Her word for the method was lovely: “**engineered serendipity**.” You cannot command good collaboration, but you can stage the conditions that make it likely – attentive listening, curated encounter, a culture of respect. The obstacles, she insisted, are never really technical; they are about trust, incentive, and the quiet politics of getting people to share.

This is exactly what we have been calling **creative pragmatics** [Link]– the way of working that can be traced across five decades of project-based, studio-based, problem-led learning, from the d.school at Stanford to that wonderful Danish tradition of participant-centred learning at Roskilde and Aalborg. Staging over procedure. Context over universal rule. The genuine problem and matter of concern first. The creative, abductive leap. Seen this way, the academic gift economy isn’t a happy accident of one institute – it’s creative pragmatics built into an institution.

Living it out

If that’s the principle, the work has been the proof, and we heard many examples at the reunion. Here are a few personal examples, all of them collaborations.

The **Revs Program** [Link] treated the car as material culture – the *archaeological automobile* – treating it not just as a technology we use but as a thing entangled with us, full of memory, encountered like an archaeological site. Set beside Cliff Nass’s psychology of the car, it held the past and future of the same object in one frame. (It ran, fittingly for a gift economy, on a literal gift from visionary Miles Collier).

Foresight at Stanford [Link] turns the same instinct toward the future – not predicting trends but knowing what to build and why, mobilizing design foresight and what can be called applied archaeology, business archaeology. Its playbook,

like mediaX's, is given away free. And it now sits, of all places, in the Stanford Archaeology Center – the futures wing of the old H-STAR ecology come home to roost in archaeology itself.

And in my **studio-lab** now the thread continues: with Connie Svabo, whose blending of art and design into research is creative pragmatics in its own right; with Sabine Remdisch (Professor at Leuphana), herself an H-Star alumna, whose Leadership Garage has carried the convening model from Stanford to Germany. We now have a national funding program – Trans Nation Co-Creation, funded by the German Federal Ministry of Research, Technology, and Space.

The most extraordinary cross-over for me is methodological. An archaeological sensibility underlies my continuing consultancy work with Japanese industry (including Aisin corporation), while strategic design foresight has come to inform my socio-cultural modeling of prehistory and antiquity. I mentioned a project with the software company Biprogry to build, deliberately, a “digital commons” – this is the very thing H-STAR and mediaX managed to achieve by culture alone.

That last point is the open question I came home with. H-STAR solved the gift-economy problem by *culture*. Can we now solve it by *design* – can the thing be rebuilt from a blueprint, or does it always depend on particular people in a particular place? The reunion proves the gift economy, once made, endures. Whether we can engineer it afresh is the work ahead.

My collaboration with Connie began when I hosted her as an H-STAR fellow. Fifteen years on it is still producing new things – which is, when I think about it, the whole argument in one example. A gift that became a partnership. The task now is to understand it well enough to give it away again.



Keith Devlin (Executive Director Emeritus, Stanford H-Star) with Søren Nedergaard (CPO Novo-Nordisk Foundation) and Lars Beer Nielsen (Division Chief, Danish Ministry of Climate, Energy & Utilities). Odeon Hotel, Odense, Denmark.

Here are some items that offer more detailed insight into Stanford H-Star, and especially mediaX.

An interview with Martha Russell (Executive Director Stanford mediaX) on intellectual commons and key features of mediaX's industrial affiliates program.

mediaX at Stanford – the summary retrospective 2022

mediaX – the Playbook (2022)



Business archaeology and foresight in Brazil, with Tamara (Carleton) – mediaX 2017