



## **DESIGNERS' ROLE IN TIMES OF CHANGE**

**Address**

**by**

**the President of Iceland**

**Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson**

**at**

**DesignMarch 2011 Lecture Series**

**Reykjavík**

**24 March 2011**

*The speech was delivered without notes*

*This is a transcript of the recording*

It is both a pleasure and an honour for me to be with you here this morning, to be invited to participate in this sophisticated dialogue. Usually the President's role on days like these is to host a party, offer some wine and a little bit of food. So I welcome this opportunity to be able to contribute to the intellectual side.

DesignMarch has in a relatively short time established itself as a fascinating forum and enabled us to examine and understand an important dimension in our creative community, but also to invite you here from different parts of the world. Together we can examine how design has gradually become one of the fundamental engines of change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Of course design has always been with the human race in one way or another. Here in Iceland we see both in the National Museum and other places that despite the poverty of farmers and fishermen there were

extraordinary design capabilities both in women's handicrafts and also in what men built in these rather isolated circumstances.

Recently, especially in the last ten to fifteen years, we have enjoyed a wealth of international input. We were able to send many of our designers and artists to study and work in different parts of the world. All of this has created a melting pot in our country, helping us to ask: Where are we heading? What is our role in the world? How are we going to combine the heritage that we have been given and the extraordinary natural environment, the landscape in this unique country? How are we going to tie all of this together and make a contribution to the design revolution in the world?

It is a part of the Presidency, not just in this country but in most other countries, to be invited to participate in many conferences. During my time I have attended many. Usually these conferences add a little bit, but perhaps not very much.

I have to tell you that last January I was privileged to be invited to Munich and attend the DLD Conference. DLD stands for Digital – Life – Design. It is of rather recent origin. It takes place every year in January, initiated by the head of the Burda Publishing Company, but organised to bring together those who are at the cutting edge of the digital revolution, of new technological and scientific discoveries, dealing with the essence of life; it brings together those who can help us to determine how design is in a fundamental way changing the world.

For me it was one of the most remarkable conferences that I have attended, mainly because it brought home to me clearly, and dramatically the combination of these three elements: information technology, based on the digital way of interpreting the world and providing information; new scientific discoveries in the area of life sciences, especially

regarding human life; and the enormous transformation that creative design faculties are bringing forth all over the world. The combination of these three elements has become a force for change in the world, almost independently of what is happening in any other areas. They have made a profound impact already and will do so in the coming years, transforming every aspect of our life and our being and of the world.

I know it is a strong statement. It is for me quite a surprising conclusion because the other element in this conclusion is that the more traditional political dialogue in our societies, which takes place in presidencies, governments, parliaments and other more traditional institutions, has almost become a side-show compared to the enormous force of change that the combination of the digital information technology, life sciences and design are bringing to our society.

Where can it lead? I do not know. But I have become absolutely convinced that the creative forces that are behind these three elements which came together in the title of this remarkable gathering in Munich, DLD, the combined strength of these forces, is such that they have by themselves transformed our societies, the entire world and daily life in such a way that the impact of what the official authorities are doing is minimal compared to the effect of the creative communities.

I still, I have to tell you, struggle with going through these conclusions. On the political level we see what is happening in the Middle East. We can look at how social network technology, Facebook and the others, are not only changing our societies but political systems everywhere in the world. We also see how design elements in every aspect of our society are fundamentally transforming our vision of the world, ourselves and our daily lives.

Of course, as you know better than I do, the distinction between information technology and design has almost disappeared. So these three elements in the title of the conference in Munich have in fact come together in a single force.

Therefore I believe that the DesignMarch gathering here in Iceland, in addition to conveying what is happening in our design arena, is also a very interesting forum to talk about where this journey is taking us.

The second conclusion I brought from the discussion in Munich is that the pace of change is now so fast, and will continue to be so fast through its own force, that nothing will stop it. There is not a single authority in the world that will be able to stop it. This is of course in its essence very democratic. It is in accordance with the fundamental tradition of the free society, in both the classical and the modern sense.

So, in a way, I envy all of you to be at the cross-roads of this journey, being able to be creative participants in these forces of change.

Iceland is in many ways a good place to discuss all of this. It is a country that to some extent stands apart from the world but is also a part of how the world is changing, where the creative forces of nature bear witness to the great designer. The Almighty has here demonstrated the infinite possibilities of creating a landscape.

I sometimes tell my foreign friends that when we read the opening of the Old Testament, the Book of Genesis, which describes how God designed, although the official text is “created”, designed the world in six days and then decided to rest because the work was finished, that it is not completely accurate. When it came to the creation of Iceland, or the design of Iceland, the Almighty became so fascinated by the possibilities that the creation or the design process has continued in this country until

this very day, with new volcanoes and new lava fields, new islands and earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, the melting of the glaciers. Sometimes just for the enjoyment of us here in Iceland, but last year to the irritation of everybody else in Europe.

I believe strongly that if you grow up in a country like this, if you are brought up from early childhood with always something happening in your environment, that there is an unexpected element in your surroundings, it has an impact on how you view life and the arts. It is an interesting element, and causes us to speculate how, in Iceland, nature has influenced our design community.

I will give you two examples. A few months ago I opened an exhibition in the Design Museum which was dedicated to one of the pioneers in furniture design, Gunnar Magnússon. He is from a fjord in the northern part of Iceland, one of the most isolated communities, where, until the tunnel was created a few years ago, all roads were closed in October and didn't open again until June or July the next year. How was it that this young man from one of the most isolated fishing communities in the most northern part of Iceland became one of the most influential pioneers in the development of Icelandic design in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? The strength of his roots, the strength of the bonds to this isolated fishing community and to the landscape, the steep mountains and the ocean were such that he came back.

When the exhibition was opened two months ago in the Design Museum to celebrate his work, a formidable part of the exhibition was a huge photograph of one of the most predominant mountains in Ólafsfjörður, his fjord, his home community, showing how this steep extraordinary mountain comes straight down into the ocean. Why, more than fifty years after he left this fjord to become one of the most

influential pioneers in Icelandic design, did he find it necessary to have this photograph in the most prominent space in his exhibition?

Why is it that Steinunn, designing new clothes and pioneering new levels of fashion, whether for international fashion houses or her own company here in Iceland, when asked to interpret her new clothes and the way she designs, goes back to the Icelandic lava and her walks in the wilderness where nothing has been touched since the Almighty was at work a few centuries ago?

So in these two examples, both Steinunn and Gunnar Magnússon, we have two extraordinary individuals, both of whom have excelled in different journeys of design. When they are interpreting their work they go back to the Icelandic countryside. There must be something there.

All of us are now responsible for Mother Earth. We talk about climate change. We have all contributed to climate change. In this country, the home of the largest glaciers in Europe, we do not need to attend international conferences to know that climate change is happening. We can just watch our own glaciers. If we have doubts we talk to our neighbours in Greenland and they have sad stories.

So whereas nature has clearly influenced the creative design elements in our own country we must now realise that the environment is in danger of being destroyed so that future generations will in no way be able to enjoy it as we have.

I leave you with a thought which goes back to the conference in Munich, but also to what is happening to the glaciers in Iceland: We must acknowledge that we are all responsible for the future.

If, what I have concluded from the conference in Munich is right, that the combined strength of information technology and design

processes in our communities has become the most formidable force for change, more powerful than the official and political institutions which I called the side-show, then your responsibility to future generations is much greater than that of the people who until now have officially been charged with determining the future.

So while I hope you enjoy the dialogue and your stay here in Iceland I encourage you also to remember that with this power to initiate change you have a profound responsibility.