



Media Information  
April 27, 2010

## **The Spirit of Optimism Reigns at the BMW Group Design Talk Villa d'Este 2010: "The Transition is Now!"**

**An international panel of experts joined to discuss the  
issues around "Sustainable Design: Fact or Fantasy?"**

**Munich/Cernobbio.** The BMW Group Design Talk has become over the years an important feature of the Concorso d'Eleganza Villa d'Este at Lake Como. The luxurious Italian setting showcasing some of the world's most beautiful and extraordinary classic cars as well as cutting-edge prototypes is under the patronage of the German carmaker, as committed to its automotive tradition as it is to designing cars for the future.

Given the array of aged beauties glistening and rumbling in the sun and still going strong after many decades on the road, this year's panel theme seemed especially topical: "Sustainable Design: Fact or Fantasy?" Hosted by Gert Scobel, a well-known German TV presenter, an illustrious panel had joined up for a lively discussion in front of an audience of international journalists and car collectors. Whether in the field of green building and energy management, technology, consumer design or creating the ultimate in luxury cars – a Rolls-Royce-sustainability, all were agreed, needs to be more than a buzz word or a convenient label in a newly eco-conscious market. The term, if taken seriously, should offer a key to help us shift our perception of the world, of our consumption and its impact on the environment. In terms of design, for example, it would encompass not just the sheer product, but also the whole process that made it. And, ideally, technology and a whole new generation of devices would be there to create transparency and a deeper understanding of the complex relationships governing this fundamental change.

Sustainability, like design, is many things to many people, and just as hard to define. If you check Google, Scobel pointed out in his opening remarks to the panel, the term sustainability hauls in a stunning 28 million search results. But though it seems to be a defining concept of these times, he continued, the notion itself is much older. Over four hundred years ago, forestry experts already understood that you must replenish what you cull in order to reap long-term investments: no wood, no income. Longevity, it turns out, is very much on the mind of the present-day panelists assembled by BMW when pondering viable forms of sustainability today. The Englishwoman Alice Rawsthorn is the design critic of the International Herald Tribune and the New York Times Magazine with a strong focus on the challenges of sustainable design. John Picard, American and founder of Picard & Associates and the influential Green Building Council, is one of the leading thinkers and builders of innovative living environments. Aaron Koblin is an artist using data visualization to create fascinating images of cultural trends and newly emerging paradigms. The young American is Tech Lead at Google's Creative Lab in San Francisco. Representing the automotive world, the Englishman Ian Cameron is Chief Designer at Rolls-Royce Motor Cars, creating

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a contemporary look for a venerable marque drawing a whole new group of clients to the epitome of luxury.

While the 2009 Villa d'Este Design Talk under the heading of "Is Luxury the New Modesty" was still dominated by the sea change of the financial and economic crisis, this year's discussion held the promise of opportunities unfolding as the markets recover and focus on change. "The transition is now", John Picard, a passionate proponent of melding business to the eco-movement, pointed out. "I could take you on a tour of Silicon Valley and show you how green construction and technology are coming together to create energy efficient buildings. If you follow the money, you will see venture capitalists heading in that direction." Managers of depressed real estate portfolios see a return on investments, he explained, once sustainable components have been put in, cutting costs. What was once considered the domain of eco-warriors – John Picard in his former life – and tree huggers has now advanced into the mainstream, drawing the attention of global companies like the insurance giant Allianz, and BMW itself, that are redefining their processes and opening up their structures to consultants like Picard & Associates. Topics like climate change, renewable energy, recycling and social responsibility are on the agenda of the World Economic Forum in Davos, where high finance, business and politics meet.

Alice Rawsthorn remembers hosting a panel there one year with distracted CEOs, only to find them well informed and very curious the next. "That phase of transition was immensely fast, indicating the change. I think from my experience that all aspects of sustainability are no longer seen as the fantasy of a few, but as hard facts."

The artist Aaron Koblin, who tries to find images that document this change in aesthetically arresting patterns believes in the power of transparency in making complex mechanisms visible. "Making people understand how much they consume, allowing them to monitor the carbon footprint, the energy output, each part of the whole that created that product they use, creates a downshift." He sees the emergence of an ever-larger open source community, sharing data. "You could call it a hive mind, effecting change through the many, many communicating parts." Design would thus not only encompass its classical application – ideally the creation of things functional and enjoyable – but would be a reflection of what today is being called cradle-to-cradle productivity, implementing eco-effective practices that reduce waste and keep products in a nature-like cycle. Already there is software being developed, allowing consumers to follow the history of what they have bought simply through the bar code. It is what John Picard calls "the technosphere heading toward the biosphere".

In her many discussions with young designers, Alice Rawsthorn notes that, to them, sustainability is no longer a tag, a marketable add-on for trendy urbanites, but an incremental part of their design process, blending creativity to responsibility. The question "what would green design look like" is as hard to



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answer as the query about the secret of "good design". "Obviously, we are already feeling guilty about the environmental impact of our lifestyle. Yet design should not be about donning a hair shirt, but finding ways to create sensible, innovative and – simply – pleasurable things."

A brighter future with less of the old mistakes may loom, but what of the people themselves? "Do we have the mindset that sustains design?", Ian Cameron asked, pivoting the Design Talk's topic to focus on a quality of life that seems to be swiftly being lost. "Design is about taking the time to reflect and the opposite of instant delivery." The counterbalance of mindless consumption would be the appreciation of value, of a quality grown over time, subject to changes yet, in a sense, equally sustainable because it is cherished." Very much like a well-built car. The Rolls-Royce plant in England, he pointed out, has itself experienced a green overhaul and has won awards not only for the eco-friendly building, but for the components and the way a Rolls-Royce is assembled. "For us it was about understanding our role as a forward-looking company."

This is also where John Picard sees a handle to spreading the applications of sustainability: a collective effort. "How do you make the Rolls-Royce Phantom greener? I would simply make the companies that manufacture components the drivers of change by downstreaming to them." Acknowledging the efforts of the automotive sector to become a cleaner industry focusing on reduction of waste and emissions, Picard pinpointed their advantage: "Cars are governed by life cycles – that is a built-in need to change, readjust and improve. In my area we build buildings to a code and simply look for the lowest bidder. That has been very bad for the quality of housing." His vision of a future based on sustainability would include life cycles. Buildings that are renewable without having to be torn down, clothes that can be given back to become something different. "We have no idea of the true cost of things in terms of how they impact the environment."

A sentiment shared by Alice Rawsthorn. "We tend to know a lot about our big purchases like property and cars, but what about the footprint of smaller things? That would be the next big step." Sharing and downscaling are to her examples of an emerging infrastructure based on aspects such as sustainability and offering feasible business models. She agreed with Cameron that we need to relearn appreciating a slower pace, inhabiting a former quieter space and enjoying the simple pleasures.

Obviously, radical measures are not always a sensible option. One way to avoiding waste and redundancy without having to forfeit our pleasure in beautiful and functional things would be, as the experts on the panel concurred, concentrating on intelligent, efficient design, incorporating technology and often influenced by biodiversity. Lighting systems that register whether they are really need to be on and inform the user, the research in bionics, a hot new area in the automotive field – applying the results of biological evolution in plants or animals to industrial products, or focusing on regionally developed forms of sustainability



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to avoid the inadequacy of global norms. As Aaron Koblin pointed out, sustainability in technological terms is already here to be experienced, for example in devices that can be regularly updated to become more user-friendly, thereby extending their lifecycles.

Each of the rare cars outside the palatial Villa Erba, where the Design Talk took place, was built to last. And already a treasured object even while new. Yet each car in its epoch also embodied an optimistic vision of the future, a creative concept each of the panelists shared wholeheartedly, despite the complexity of present challenges. Sustainable design is a work in progress, as the panel discussion showed, reflected in diverse approaches and experiential thinking. No longer the fantasy of visionaries, but hard-won fact.

Information regarding the Concorso d'Eleganza: <http://www.concorsodeleganzavilladeste.com>  
Information regarding the BMW Group's cultural involvement: [www.bmwgroup.com/culture](http://www.bmwgroup.com/culture)

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