

The Design Research Society in the 1980s and 1990s: a memoir

Conall Ó Catháin

Past Chairman DRS
conall@ocathain.org

DOI: 10.21606/drs.2016.332

Abstract: This paper records some experiences of the author as a Council member and Officer of the Design Research Society during the 1980s and 1990s. This included a precarious period when the Society's very existence was in question and it was in danger of being wound up. During this time we managed to get the Society back on to a firm footing and broke new ground, firstly embracing the internet which massively improved communications between members, and secondly we began to co-operate with the Design Societies of East Asia. We re-established DRS as a learned society with a truly international reach.

Keywords: Bath conference; DRS internal problems; revitalisation of DRS; start of IASDR

1. Introduction: early involvement

My involvement with the Design Research Society included a precarious period when the Society's very existence was in question and the Society was in danger of being wound up. During this time we managed to get the Society back on to a firm footing and broke new ground, firstly embracing the internet which massively improved communications between members, and secondly we began to co-operate with the Design Societies of East Asia. We re-established DRS as a learned society with a truly international reach.

It seemed useful to record these experiences for future reference by members. The basis of the following account was first committed to paper in 2006.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

The Design Research Society (DRS) was founded in 1966, following the Conference on Design Methods held in London in 1962 (Jones and Thornley). This had brought together many different people who had recognised that there were methodological similarities across many fields of design. An international Design Methods movement was spawned that generated considerable interest. However, this waned quickly when design methods and computer-based design did not live up to their early promise. The DRS organised meetings in various locations around the UK and an important series of UK-based international conferences some of which were very large. I have no direct experience of this early period. Beginning in 1968, the society issued a quarterly Newsletter. I have a couple of early examples among DRS material in my possession.

Fionán de Barra, a lecturer who taught me in my undergraduate course in Architecture first told me about the society in 1968 or 1969. A nephew of the late E. F. O'Doherty – a founder of DRS, I believe – Fionán was a graduate of the Design Technology MSc course run by J. Christopher Jones at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology and recommended it to me.

I joined the Society about 1977. The late Professor Ted Happold of Bath University, another founder of DRS, told me that the Society had become inactive at one stage, but remained comfortably solvent because he had determined that membership subscriptions had to be paid by Standing Order. These continued to increase the society's bank balance while it was inactive! Ironically, years later these early Standing Orders would become an administrative headache.

At that time members used to receive copies of Design Methods and Theories from the United States. This was just before DRS established its own learned journal, Design Studies, first published in 1979. The first Editor was Sydney Gregory. Having by then become a Council member, I recall reports of the discussions with Butterworths who published it.

2. DRS Bath Conference, 1984, 'The Role of the Designer'

In 1982, Nigel Cross, then Chairman, invited me to organize the society's next Conference in 1984. I was then a lecturer at Bath University.

By this time the society had started to lose some of its "fizz," although I did not realize this at the time and became aware of the fact only gradually. There had been a conference organising committee, but I had not either the experience or the wisdom to make use of it other than consulting individuals on an ad hoc basis. I did it all on my own with some advice from the Treasurer. This really was being thrown in at the deep end. Looking back on it I am amazed at the amount of responsibility given to me: I was given *carte blanche*, able to decide everything from the conference theme to room bookings and how much to charge participants. DRS Council received progress reports, of course.

I got whatever help I could from Bath University colleagues, notably Dick Reynolds and Ken Smithies, now both deceased. John Green of the University Accommodation Office, who was very experienced with conferences, was a great support, offering crucial advice on the

financial planning side. He even arranged for the rooms we would be using during the conference to be painted just before the event. John Woodwark of Bath University suggested that the conference theme should be broad enough to attract the widest possible range of participants. The theme became “The Role of the Designer.” Robin Jacques suggested a slogan, “Design Rules OK.” I made a pun on this: “Design Roles UK?” I had help from my six-year-old daughter, Elinor, who turned this slogan into a graffiti which we used as the logo. My late colleague, Ralph Emmanuel of Bath University provided the aerial photo of the Royal Crescent and Circus, Bath, which served as the question mark, but I don't think too many people got the visual joke.

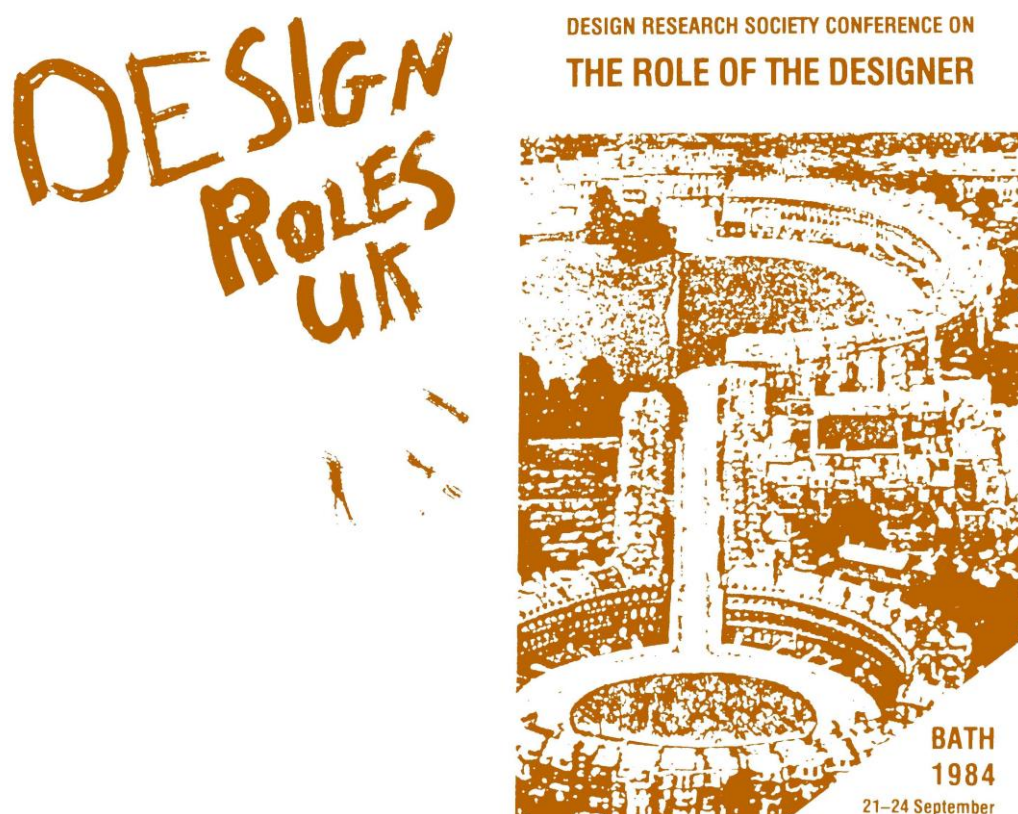


Figure 1 Artwork from the conference publicity brochur

I designed the Call for Papers brochure and had it typeset and printed by the University printer on a strange machine that we would now call a piece of ‘intermediate technology.’ This was fabulously expensive. I then set about distributing copies of this brochure as widely as possible world-wide. Some colleagues from Bath University and any DRS Council members going abroad to other conferences took bundles with them. The Society also had its own international mailing list from previous conferences, while a kind and helpful person got me a copy of the mailing list of the Royal College of Art. We soon needed a reprint of the brochure, which again was ridiculously expensive. I wrote a stimulus paper for Design Studies at the instigation of the editor, Sydney Gregory (Ó Catháin 1984).

When the abstracts came in we held a meeting to scrutinise them and decided we had a viable conference. It was necessary to devise a format for the page layout of the papers to mail out to the authors. I used a very good example from another conference. However, when the typed papers eventually came in, a good many people had ignored these very clear directions. This caused me a lot of grief later when editing the proceedings and, even though I spent an enormous amount of time on this task using OCR and Ventura Publisher, they were never published due to competing pressures on my time.

During the conference there was a keynote speaker each day followed by three parallel sessions. I was fully stretched for the three days of the conference. I don't believe I attended a single presentation, apart from my own! People would keep coming to me for information, even though I had posted directions all over the place, and updated timetables daily. There was one major hiccup: the General Manager for Product Development and Chief Executive of GKN Technology had agreed to be a keynote speaker for the last day and he cancelled at very short notice, leaving me with little or no time to find a substitute. This was a terrible blow. Fortunately, Professor Ted Happold whom I had already teed up to chair that session stepped in and saved the day by giving a presentation about his own work. Apart from the academic paper presentations we had new book displays from Butterworths and Van Nostrand Reinhold. The late Edward Matchett kindly ran a concurrent live creativity workshop which in retrospect was perhaps the highlight of the conference.

By all accounts 'The Role of the Designer' was quite a successful conference. People attended from all over the world. It even made a profit. Ken Wallace, who went on to become Professor of Engineering at Cambridge, wrote afterwards, "It was one of the best conferences I have attended – such an interesting mix of participants. In particular, I benefited enormously from the Matchett Workshop." This was pure DRS!

I was completely exhausted afterwards, and the Society did not have the human resources to publish the proceedings. This was an indication that the society was on a downward slide, though we didn't realize the significance of it at the time. Indeed the fact that a completely inexperienced young academic had been tasked with organizing an international conference was another sign. There would not be another international DRS conference for a number of years, though we remained active in the UK.

3. 1984 – 1994

Soon after this conference I was invited to become (Honorary) Secretary by the incoming Chairman, Robin Jacques. A very thoughtful person, Robin taught me a lot. Later after starting to read management books it became clear to me that he had been acting as a mentor! Robin would offer principles for action for example:

- We should always be moving into new areas.
- It is better to ask people to do tasks that further their own self-interest.
- The Chairman drives everything (!)

In retrospect it is clear that by this time many of the earlier protagonists of the Society had moved on and were no longer active participants. In some cases they had moved up into more senior positions. In many cases they had become involved with specific research areas of design research as their subject areas evolved and matured. Others had devoted themselves to design practice.

Council members felt a strong obligation and commitment to the membership to put on a regular programme of events. At the time our goal – normally achieved – was four local meetings per year around the UK at which people would present their research. I should mention our debt to Myfanwy Truman who was very effective in organising meetings during this period.

As time went by it appeared that there had been a shift away from the excitement of the early days, when people from different areas had discovered common methodologies and shared results with each other, to perhaps a more formal phase which saw people joining to find out about design research and learn how to do it. Often, they would then move on, without making much contribution to the work of the Society. While we were happy to facilitate this learning process, it did mean that the discussions at meetings could sometimes become repetitive as new participants asked the same questions year after year. We would recruit a trickle of new members, but the total number – insofar as it could be determined – remained fairly static. There did not seem to be anything to be done except facilitate this mainly educational process.

A more serious problem in a voluntary organisation was the fact that occasionally someone would accept an Honorary Officer role and then do the job badly, or in one case, do absolutely nothing. I remember the Chairman writing to and exhorting a particular individual, to no avail. This could be quite debilitating for the Society.

DRS members were typically early adopters of computers. But computerisation brought its own problems. Maintenance of the membership list was a severe and persistent difficulty. Sebastian Lera Macmillan, former Treasurer and Chairman once told me that the database had been re-keyed four times, as it migrated from one academic's computer to another that, naturally, had incompatible software. Incidentally, when a member first joined, the membership number allocated would start with two digits recording the year of joining. Unfortunately, this tacit knowledge was not passed on and at some stage the original Membership Numbers got "lost in translation". The total number of members – so far as we could count them – continued to remain stubbornly static around 300-350. There was always an ambition to increase the number of members, but this was never achieved in those days. An enduring difficulty was the fact that many of the early Standing Orders were untraceable, so that when we wanted to increase the annual subscription we did not know whom to contact. This left a rather imprecise membership list, where in a significant number of cases we could not be sure who was still paying a subscription and whose name should be removed from the list.

Sometimes it felt that we were running just to stay where we were, but I persevered in my secretarial task of “facilitating communication between the members of Council,” as one Chairman put it. In fact I was often called upon for advice by members organising events in those days. In spite of my feeling of frustration at times at this apparent lack of progress, there was a very strong sense that the founders of the Society had given us something very valuable, that had in fact become an institution, and it was important to continue the work they had started.

By this time there was a track record of twenty years' worth of really interesting and original research which had been facilitated by the uniquely interdisciplinary nature of the Society. There was the body of conference proceedings, the run of the Design Studies journal since 1979, and the quarterly DRS Newsletter, more or less unbroken since the 1970s. There was a definite, if apparently limited, demand for what we were providing. Steve Little once remarked to me that many of the IT breakthroughs, supposedly made in the nineteen-nineties, had already been discovered by DRS people in the nineteen-seventies. The same applied to Computer Aided Design. Some of the pioneers of CAD were members of DRS, for example Chuck Eastman of Carnegie-Mellon and Tom Maver of Strathclyde. The attraction of the DRS was always its interdisciplinary nature: one would regularly meet people from all sorts of disciplines, doing all sorts of interesting work.

We learned some other lessons along the way. After the 1984 conference we had been unable to muster the manpower to organise another. We on the Council felt this break keenly. At one stage it was proposed that we employ a professional conference organiser for the next DRS Conference. We made an agreement that the organiser would share the profits and he in turn guaranteed no loss to the Society. It seemed like a reasonable deal. Although a postal strike occurred during the planning period things seemed to be going well. Then one day we discovered that the professional organiser had cancelled the conference. When I wrote to enquire why, he simply replied there was not enough interest from DRS members! From that I learnt that we need to keep control over our own events.

Structural problems made themselves felt during this time. The Society was too small to afford permanent staff and lacked a 'home' other than the departmental address of the current Secretary. This contributed to a visibility problem in the pre-internet world: people complained that you couldn't join the DRS because you couldn't find it! Someone once asked me at a meeting in London, “Is this the real, original DRS?” I was able to confirm this. We were punching well above our weight, but at considerable personal cost to a small number of dedicated people. The difficulties were stated with admirable clarity by Professor Bruce Archer.

“My own ambition on becoming Chairman of the Design Research Society in 1988 was to try to secure its future. I had several concerns. First, the membership was too small to provide a large enough income to mount substantial membership services, or to fund any serious lobbying. Second, the recruitment of new members was so slow that it was not keeping up with the natural erosion of the existing membership. Third, the Society had no constantly attended telephone address at which it could be contacted by enquirers and official bodies.

“To all these ends, over the past two years, I put a lot of work into trying to develop affiliations with at least one larger organisation having interests in common with our own. The two which came to fruition were our loose association with the Chartered Society of Designers and our more formal affiliation with the British Computer Society.

“ ...

“The DRS's associations with both of these bodies have been used to good advantage in the past year, but could, and should be exploited much more fully in the future. So far we have not made any serious attempts to adapt these connections for the purposes which I originally had in mind: that is, for mailing, recruitment and public relations.” (Archer 1990).

Towards the end of my time as Secretary the then Chairman tabled a paper on the future of the Society, laying out several options:

- remain as we were (with the attendant difficulties)
- merge with or affiliate to another body such as the Chartered Society of Designers or British Computer Society (both professional bodies with tens of thousands of members)
- campaign actively in order to recruit more members

He pointed out that the number of members was very small in comparison to the number of people who might be doing design research and very small indeed in comparison with the total number of designers. We wondered if there was a natural constituency of a certain size: after all not every designer could be expected to be interested in an interdisciplinary society for design research.

I and others were against a merger, arguing that it was better to soldier on, retaining the Society's identity and unique role. In the event we formed some affiliations without losing our identity. Looking back, these alliances do not appear to me to have delivered any great benefits to the DRS, but at least we survived as an independent organisation.

4. 1994 – 1998

I became Chairman in 1994. Shortly before I took up the position, the outgoing Chairman had proposed at a Council meeting that the Society be wound up and its assets be used to fund an annual lecture. He was frustrated – as we all were – by our lack of progress despite his considerable efforts. The suggestion of winding up the Society was unthinkable to me. I was determined to put the society back on track if I could. I made Officers' reports top Agenda items for every Council meeting. If I may be immodest in reporting it, a few years later Bruce Archer said to me, “You did it. For a while it seemed as if the DRS might stagger a couple more AGMs but you turned it round.” They were kind words, but did not reflect the reality: I had learnt that it was crucial to have effective officers and it was their efforts of course that turned things round. I was blessed by having mostly very competent and dedicated officers and was always at some pains to give them individual credit at the Annual General Meetings. In a voluntary society there is not much you can do to reward people's

efforts so I used every opportunity to praise the Officers publicly. Although I cannot name them all here, we all remain in their debt for the continued existence of the Society.

During my time as Chairman significant changes took place in the UK university system and these were both opportunities and threats for DRS. Firstly, the polytechnics had been redesignated as universities in 1992. Secondly, the first of a series of system-wide “Research Assessment Exercises” was introduced in the same year in order to concentrate research funding on those departments identified as giving the best value for money. It was very unfair to the newly-designated universities, the vast bulk of whose staff had not been employed as researchers, though it must be said that a good many DRS members were employed by polytechnics and were doing excellent research.

It was obvious that the new universities were not going to be funded on the same comparatively generous basis as the old. This ill-conceived scheme continues to plague the UK university sector. It has had the effect of concentrating funding in a small number of departments to the detriment of the sector as a whole. Incidentally, it was apparent that the DRS had a public persona that was at odds with its sometimes ramshackle reality when we were invited to nominate people for appropriate subject panels.

Over time the effect this had on DRS was that there was a gradual shift in the make-up of the Council from the ‘harder’ design areas, in the direction of Art and Design. Lecturers in these areas had not traditionally done research: they tended to be practitioners. However, henceforth they needed to be doing it, since their institutions had now been designated as universities and in future their funding would depend on research performance. This shift was reflected in the subject matter of the DRS meetings. This opened up the new area of research by design and gave some new impetus to the Society. The hoped-for big increase in membership did not happen however. One bonus was that since there were more women academics in Art and Design, the number of women on Council increased, something I had been trying to achieve.

Another issue we addressed was the lack of a stable address for the Society that we could put on our publicity and other literature. This was solved when Bob Jerrard approached Birmingham Institute of Art and Design (BIAD) in 1995. BIAD then became our address. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of a stable postal address in the age before universal access to the World Wide Web and search engines.

My great goal was to make the Society more international again. In the early days it had had some very big and successful international conferences. I wanted to see if we could restore that golden age. Email was essentially free and international as well. When it started to become more widespread, it seemed to me that it would be highly beneficial to the Society to make use of it for our communications, particularly since DRS members had always been among those at the forefront of such developments. We began to use email routinely for announcements to those members who had the facility. We started to save money on postage, and a great deal of envelope stuffing on the part of event organisers.

Meanwhile, the DRS quarterly newsletter Design Research was an important part of the society's output, and was well thought of by members and outsiders. Some libraries subscribed to it. The Newsletter would go for long periods without serious problems until the departure of the Editor precipitated a crisis. The society owes a great debt to those unsung editors, especially Necdet Teymur who edited it for years.

In 1995 I inaugurated the interactive 'Design Research' email discussion list on MAILBASE (later JISCMail). David Durling later converted this into the non-interactive monthly 'DRS News' which eventually reached thousands of people worldwide. We were able to send paper copies of this document out to people who were not on line when we could not find a replacement Newsletter Editor. Remembering the notable "wheelchair of my aunt" on-line discussion on MAILBASE in particular and feeling that it fulfilled a definite need I later reintroduced an interactive discussion list called 'DRS' which is still in existence. These developments were truly revolutionary in how they allowed members to communicate instantly. Our later use of the world-wide web did not seem nearly so much of a breakthrough. I still regret the unfortunate loss of the URL "drs.org.uk" which we had been using, due to failure to keep up the payment.

As already mentioned, we had been plagued over many years by an inability to keep reliable membership records. Over the years we had accreted many extra names. Newsletters and other mailings were going to people who were not interested in them. This was costing volunteers' time and a lot of money in postage. It seemed clear that we could not make progress if we could not set ourselves goals and be able to see where we were. The Treasurer John Langrish and, especially, the then Membership Secretary, Bob Jerrard made great progress in bringing this problem under control. A separate problem we faced was the day-to-day maintenance of the membership database. The Membership Secretary, Bob Jerrard proposed that we provide a modest sum annually to pay for a secretary's time at BIAD. Council was very happy to try this out and it worked very well. Mindful of the data disasters of the past we also made an arrangement whereby the Bob would occasionally post me a floppy disc containing a backup copy of the member database for safe keeping on the neighbouring island. Those backups were never needed.

We always had to be very careful about money and Council agreed we would always aim to make a small profit or break even with every event, while meeting the speakers' expenses. As a result of careful husbanding all round and judicious use of facilities offered by the various Universities, such as free rooms for meetings, the Society was in a much stronger state financially at the end of my time as Chairman. It is fair to say that we solved most of the tasks we set ourselves and DRS was once again in good heart and ready for a new adventure.

5. The East Asian Conferences

In 1998 at the DRS 'Quantum Leap' conference in Birmingham, a society member, John Shackleton, introduced himself to me and told me that he was working at a Japanese

university. Ever on the lookout for opportunities I rather optimistically asked him if he would organise a DRS conference in Japan, definitely casting my bread upon the waters! He replied, “I don’t know about organising one, but there is a conference coming up.” He introduced me to his boss, Professor Kazuo Sugiyama, of Chiba University, Tokyo, who turned out to be the Chairman of the Japanese Society for the Science of Design, and also Chairman of the organising committee for the upcoming conference. I proposed to him that we collaborate on organising an international conference. The encounter was a classic case of win-win. I wanted to extend our DRS reach internationally; Sugiyama was equally interested in making his conference more international, i.e. to reach outside of South-East Asia. He seemed delighted to link up with the Design Research Society! He emailed me soon after, in October 1998, with a firm proposal for collaboration between our societies. Since it marks a historic moment for DRS it is appended here. (Appendix).

To make a long story short, we in DRS agreed to sponsor the ‘4th Asian Design Conference 1999’ along with the Design Societies of Japan, Taiwan and Korea. DRS was asked to provide academic referees from Europe. I organised these, providing about a dozen people. By then my time as Chairman had come to an end.

A good number of DRS members, including myself, presented papers. I was invited to address the conference on behalf of DRS, and also had the honour of representing DRS on a panel that included the designer of the Japanese Bullet Train (Shinkansen) and other luminaries. This collaboration was such a success that we repeated the formula two years later for the ‘5th adc’ at Seoul, Korea. Again DRS members including myself presented papers and I was again invited to address the conference on behalf of DRS.

The series has continued every second year, with DRS organising its own conference in the intervening years. In 2003, at the ‘6th adc’ in Tsukuba, Japan, we agreed to form an international umbrella organisation to be called the "International Association of Societies of Design Research (IASDR)". The next conference was to be held two years later in Taiwan. That conference’s website stated, “The IASDR's first conference will thus be titled 'International Design Congress—IASDR 2005' to truly reflect the scope and current state of development.” This IASDR series has continued to the present day. I continue to be involved as a referee.

At that conference in October 2005, in Douliou, Taiwan, I was reminiscing with Professor Sugiyama about our first meeting in England in 1998 and he remarked that our meeting was really the start of the IASDR. He said it should all be written down. So I have done so!

6. Postscript

The above is mostly a view from the inside. Looking outwards, one may speculate that Operations Research developed during the Second World War was an impetus for the Design Methods movement in Europe and in the United States. Equally, Japan and East Asia had their great period of expansion in its aftermath. The period covered here saw the massive increase of exports to the West from Asian countries of consumer products and

automobiles, accompanied by the concurrent reduction of manufacturing in the US and Europe as jobs were “exported”. There is a significant difference in design practice between Japan and the UK: Japanese companies used in-house designers, while British companies tended to use consultants. This explains the much shorter time-to-market of Japanese products. There was not so much interest in design in UK industry as there was in Japan. It was certainly not considered a science in the UK. This attitude may have had a negative affect on recruitment of members. The Society may have been out of phase with British industry during the bad times alluded to above. However, one may conclude that the DRS approach turned out to be a fruitful one.

7. Appendix: Email from Kazuo Sugiyama

Date: Wed, 7 Oct 1998 14:23:08 +0900 (JST)

To: cs.ocathain

From: sugiyama@design.ti.chiba-u.ac.jp (Kazuo Sugiyama)

Subject: collaboration with the DRS

Dear Professor

I am writing to you following our introduction at the recent 'Quantum Leap' conference, and your suggestion regarding some collaboration with the DRS on a future conference in Japan. As I think was mentioned in discussion with John Shackleton, the Japanese Society for the Science of Design has been involved in organising a number of joint conferences in Asia, the last in Korea last year and the next is about to be held in Taiwan at the end of this month. The JSSD is now beginning to plan next year's international conference, which is scheduled to be held around this time next year in Japan. This may present an excellent opportunity for collaboration on the lines you suggest.

I understand that the DRS has, in the past, organised a 'DRS day' in the context of other conferences, however I am unsure whether this would be the best approach in this case. At this stage, what I had in mind was that the JSSD would essentially take responsibility for the general organisation (simply from the practical point that the venue is to be Japan), and that all the societies involved would be represented on the technical committee responsible for refereeing and selection of papers, (which will be required to be in English). It is expected that the Korean and Taiwanese societies will be involved as before, and we would welcome the participation of the DRS.

I look forward to your response on this matter, and would welcome any suggestions you may feel are appropriate.

Yours sincerely,

Conall Ó Catháin

Professor Kazuo Sugiyama
Chairman of the Program Committee
4th Asian International Design on Design Science
Department of Design and Architecture
Faculty of Engineering
Chiba University
1-33 Yayoi-cho
Inage-ku
Chiba-shi 263-8522
Japan
Chiba University
sugiyama@design.ti.chiba-u.ac.jp
TEL +81-43-290-3102
FAX +81-43-290-3121

8. References

- Ó Catháin, C., (1984) ROLE OF THE DESIGNER Conference announcement: stimulus statement and call for papers DRS Conference, Bath, UK, 21-24 September 1984, *Design Studies*, Vol 5 No 1, January.
- Archer, B., (1990) Chairman's Report, *DRS Newsletter* No. 40, December.

About the Author:

Conall Ó Catháin is an independent scholar. He lives in Ireland.