

December 2005
Event Material Publication



**Event Synthesis:
EdLab Seminar with Edward Bakst**

S. Saba Hughes
Teachers College, Columbia University

EdLab, The Gottesman Libraries
Teachers College, Columbia University
525 W. 120th Street
New York, NY 10027

© EdLab, Teachers College, Columbia University 2006

LIMITED DISTRIBUTION NOTICE: This report has been issued as a Technical Report for early dissemination of its contents and its distribution outside of EdLab prior to publication should be limited to peer communications and specific requests. For information on republication rights, please contact: edlab@tc.columbia.edu

Overview

Professor Bakst is coming from SADM - School of Art Design & Media, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore

General topics

Professor Bakst emphasized interdisciplinary communication and the importance of breaking down barriers in creativity and education. According to Bakst, innovation and creativity should be drawn from different sources, experiences and cultures. His design of the School of Art, Design & Media in Singapore, and his various projects revolving around storytelling and blending disciplines, strongly reflect these ideas.

The School of Art, Design & Media is a place for undergraduates, graduates and post-graduates to experience a fusion of ideas across areas. Students have the opportunity to work with organic as well as digital forms of design. The very structure of the school is meant to fuse with the landscape and foster creative imagination: The roof is covered with grass to blend with the landscape, and the sides of the building are made of glass that alternate between reflective and transparent. Bakst describes it as “a creative asylum,” a place to find your passion and your self.

Bakst is also working on the design of a space that will foster creativity among multiple disciplines. He calls this space the incubator. The incubator will allow creative minds from around the world to socialize, brainstorm, and transform each other’s works. It will be an open space of innovation in all forms.

Areas of conflict

EdLab participants questioned Bakst’s belief in corporate sponsorship for his creative projects. Does corporate sponsorship restrict creativity and innovation? Or is it the only option for designers since academia often does not have the funds to carry out such projects? Bakst believes that drawing support from several sources is often necessary. Although academia can foster innovative projects, it often does not have the financial means to develop those projects to their fullest potential.

There is also conflict in the very notion of promoting creativity. If everyone is promoting creativity and “thinking outside the box,” is there a new status quo that is created? Does innovation then become the norm?

Thoughts for further discussion

EdLab is an open space where creativity and innovation is fostered among various disciplines, but will be interesting to see how the lab can further develop, physically and intellectually, as an incubator.

Presentation

Gary Natriello: Professor Edward Bakst will discuss the notion of how to create an incubation space within an institution and will speak about the school he founded in Singapore.

Edward Bakst: I've been passing around quite a bit. I left Poland as a political refugee when anti-Semitism exploded during the war and came to study at Columbia. I then went to Colorado and started an animation department there. I like working with people who know more than I do, and I realized the people who work in Colorado would not challenge me. They never had such a creative opportunity to be challenged or to challenge people. Instead of leaving, however, I decided to take advantage of my contacts around the world. Over the 2 years I was there, I had people join me from over 20 countries to work together as faculty. Historians of animation worked together and created friction. Students hated it because they didn't know what to think – it wasn't stable. But, creativity is not supposed to be stable.

Conflict was created from all the varied ideas and it was exciting because we were not only teaching students, but also challenging them and breaking the molds for each of those students. Then I went to Michigan to a redesigning program, and after that I went to Singapore to start a new design school. There was one sentence in the letter from Singapore which convinced me to go: "We feel we are not comfortable with creativity and we are looking for someone to show us how."

Chinese culture is uncomfortable with risk-taking and making mistakes or losing face. This is the natural upbringing of the culture which is against the creative spirit.

For a year I designed the building and the thinking of the school. This was the first time I was facing such a challenge, an exciting project to design a building. I felt the school needed to express on the outside what would be going on in the inside.

What I was after was probably too much to handle in Singapore at the time, but things have happened there since I first arrived. After leaving the school I started my own company, IDEAFORIA, which is about applying storytelling to architectural design. Everything is about telling a story and instilling the essence of a space and understanding what it is trying to say. This is a new way of looking at spatial design. I like it because I've never done it before. I came to New York and met with Arthur Levine, and we started talking about the incubator.

The future of education is about abolishing all the walls. Everything is fusing. I think the fusion concept and the process, as opposed to the results, is what education should be about.

Key Points about SADM:

- Designed to advance Singapore onto a global creative arena
- Asian culture, arts and heritage utilized to set it apart
- Exposing extremes – teaching digital as well as organic

Promoting advancement in creative, scholarly, literary, technological research, and innovative amalgamation.

“Creative asylum” – where to find your passion and self

I felt the school needed to be driven by its own culture. America is a baby in comparison to the 5,000 year old Chinese culture. But I also felt that half of the people should be from Asia and the other half should come from around the world.

The school was designed for undergraduates, graduates, and postgraduates and there is a fusion of areas in the school. For example, animation deals with script writing, as well as traditional and digital cinema.

Looking at game and interactive media from the point of view of storytelling, and these stories will offer several opportunities for alternative endings.

-motion capture- looking at it as a way of creative art in the space

-looking at robotics and performance art.

-installation art.- museum exhibits will become interactive and allow us to move into the space in relation to the space itself.

-everything is communicating together.

- it allows students to explore a variety of areas instead of focusing on just one thing.

Ethics and media – it’s very important to understand

-the lighting and the mood will adapt to us, but at the same time, we need to be aware of *how* it adapts.

-we have a lot to learn from mythology.

The relationship between undergraduates, graduates and post-graduates, is that the graduates will be the beacon and create the explosiveness. The IP incubator would be between the post-graduates and graduates.

The idea of cross-pollination emerged in the architecture. Three different platforms which come out of the ground, meet and cross over. In order to blend it with the landscapes, the roof would be covered with grass. It’s a magical feeling. The sides of the buildings should be covered with glass that changes from reflective to not reflective to transparent. Everything is constantly changing, resulting in a form of creativity and imagination.

This building will be completed in 4 to 5 months.

The Incubator

I’m trying to create a space within which creative brainstorming occurs across several disciplines. For example, if a ballerina works with a technician, new things will happen.

This is an exciting way to bring international talent around the world, and for the West to fuse with East. Everything begins with socializing and brainstorming.

As ideas come to life, you turn around and see this interactive space, and you can draw or create in any form. As those ideas clarify, you go into pre-production in whatever form. There is an open production environment, so people can walk around and see what everyone is doing.

You can do lots of different things in the space. Everything is transparent to everyone. If someone would like to see a “theatre in reverse,” he goes into a production area rather than just viewing the show. The deeper he goes into the space, the deeper the understanding of the production. The work should be interdisciplinary and open. It should not be done in isolation.

BH: Is this design (the incubator) being incorporated into the design of the SADM school?

Bakst: No. I do not think academia is a good place to build in this design because academia is somewhat disconnected from reality. I would prefer to see corporations sponsor work such as this.

Another idea is MUSEorbium, which creates an experience around stories. You see the development of a story (based on Guggenheim in NYC), and with each movement, you “travel through time.” I like the idea of circular motion and spirals.

HSC: It doesn't seem like corporate support would help break the creative mold.

Bakst: When corporations pay for things, you do have problems. But you have to sell your soul to several people at the same time. Academia is known for backstabbing and political twisting too. There is no perfect world. What corporations can provide is the financial backing and energy that is difficult to get in academia. Deadlines can often be the most inspiring thing for an artist.

BH: I've been thinking about storytelling on different levels. It struck me in your conceptualization of the space that you went back to the creation story, “the” story. Is it conscious? Is that where we're all trying to get back to? Or can you start wherever you want?

Bakst: Life narrows us. It's a few of us who manage to not be narrowed. Picasso, for example, thought broadly throughout his life. Einstein is another example. I think the global way of looking at anything is critical. I look at the smallest problem from the global point of view. So that way you see things globally. Mythology is the most wonderful thing ever, because it is so imaginative, but it also has logic. If you look at *Lord of the Rings* or *Star Wars*, they all start from mythological stories.

BH: We happen to be a similar kind of incubatory group here, so it seems like it is important to make a mythological story about us.

PB: I used to make stories for Nickelodeon, and I realized that everything can be a new, fresh way of looking at things. Every mundane, old thing is capable of a different viewpoint. I'm an atheist obviously – I think that's how gods were created.

Nickelodeon asked me to create a holiday special without any religious symbols. I did a segment on the inside of a snow globe, starting with the smallest detail. The beauty of it is that when the kids play with a snow globe now, they will think about how they can be inside it. Teaching is basically screwing up students' minds. It's wonderful to get your students to a point when they decide to disregard everything they've learned and just jump and experience, to open their wings and start flying.

I think there is room for interdisciplinary incubation, but academia will never come up with the kind of money to make it successful. There are benefits in drawing from corporate sources. It's a question of keeping the balance.

GN: can you say something about what you see as barriers to innovation and how you've worked against them to overcome them?

Bakst: The government and ministers in Singapore. I said to them, "you cannot manufacture creativity." For example, you can't rush wine because it will turn into vinegar. In 40 yrs Singapore transformed themselves from the 3rd world to the 1st world. They planned everything. They're great at manufacturing. But now they realize they have to be creative. But they're approaching creativity with the right side of the brain, and it's exciting to watch. It is our pre-existing conditions that are our greatest enemies. I say don't settle, be a wanderer. Stability and settling is dangerous. Comfort is dangerous. It is an individual and institutional prescription. Columbia is also finding it hard to take risks now. My life is pretty confusing, but it makes me feel young and energetic and it lets me look at new opportunities. It is costly and hard.

Lin: What do you think you learned from traveling to different countries?

Bakst: Before I left here, I started to feel very strong anti-Arab sentiments. I felt this way partly because of 9-11, and partly because I am a Jew. I think 9-11, however devastating, was a wonderful opportunity for this country to wake up, but it didn't. I think it's very dangerous what is happening with the world.

In Singapore, they are using the fear of the people to take care of them. I'm sorry to be so negative, but if we let someone control our lives, they will. When I left this country I saw how wonderful Arabs behave with each other. In a sense, our ignorance is our greatest enemy. I think traveling around the world is the best education. We are destroying cultures around the world. For example, MacDonald's is everywhere.

HSC: The quest for creativity can also create a new status-quo. What happens when all the nations become creative?

GN: I think Hui Soo is trying to ask, is it a good thing that people in power have decided that creativity is the goal? Or is it better to be marginalized?

Bakst: I think it is a good thing, because people will try it.

HO: If you're a creative person, you don't want to be like the others.

Bakst: Taking away different cultures is dangerous. Competition creates innovation, but preserving of cultures is the number one objective.

BH: You're saying that the most important thing in creativity is preserving culture, but how can you be creative when you're trying to preserve the culture?

Bakst: I think it's important to understand your heritage and yourself. The stories you come up with are an understanding of your experiences.

HSC: When you listen to youth around the world, I don't think they consider diffusion of culture being bad thing,

Bakst: what makes New York wonderful is that we've learned to live together. You go to the Midwest, however, and it's terrible. It's a different attitude.