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### **Using product and design tools to improve services.**

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## CAN YOU TRANSFORM A COUNTRY BY DESIGN?

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### **ABSTRACT**

At the beginning of 1993 an enthusiastic designer from London considered that the impossible might be possible, to help reverse the downward spiral of the economy of Romania through product design.

Groups of British and Romanian designers are collaborating on various design projects that can improve the living standards of the average Romanian by providing work, education and affordable products. Although it is too early to say if the scheme has been a success, already it has progressed further than many could have hoped. This paper describes the stages towards fulfilling this dream.

### **INHALTSANGABE**

Am Anfang 1993 hat ein begeisterter Konstrukteur aus London überlegt, dass das Unmögliche möglich ist, um die Verbesserung des rumanischen Wirtschaft durch die Produktkonstruktion zu helfen.

Konstrukteurs aus Grossbritannien und Rumanien arbeiten zusammen mit Konstruktionprojects, die das Leben des durchschnittlichen Rumanien verbessern können, durch die Bereitstellung der Arbeit, die Ausbildung, und erschwinglichen Produkten. Obwohl es viel früh ist, um zu sagen ob das Programm erfolgreich ist, im Kontrast zu was viele Leute geglaubt haben, hat sich das Programm doch weiter entwickelt. Dieses Paper beschreibt die Stufen um der Traum zu erfüllen.

### **INTRODUCTION**

A lot has been written on how effective design and its management can improve the profitability of organisations [1] [2] [3]. Effective organisations compete in world markets and that this can improve the entire economy of a nation. "Design for Transformation" approached this problem from the opposite direction by taking a national prospective as the starting point.

The democratisation of Romania and the introduction of a market economy has resulted, for many, in a serious decline in the indigenous industries, high

unemployment and fall in the standard of living. Factories were uncompetitive by World standards but were protected under Communism. Now this protection has been swept away. Uncompetitive products have been replaced by imports and uncompetitive factories have closed. There are still many Romanian companies operating but some are still providing poor quality, overpriced products that do not even suit their local markets. For many Romanians democratisation has caused difficult problems with shortages in fundamental products such as soap, paper, shampoo, basic foods, milk, toys and inexpensive clothes.

Against this background Design for Transformation was started in an attempt to try and reverse part of this decline through designing engineering products suitable for the home market and for export.

Groups of British and Romanian designers are collaborating on various engineering design projects that can improve the standard of living of the average Rumanian by providing work, education and affordable products.

### **THE THEORY**

It may be considered that people who live in competitive technological societies buy products that give them benefits within an acceptable price range. These benefits can be expressed as design features, so customers purchase products for reason of their design. A society is recognised by the articles that it produces. Therefore, engineering design is important to a nation and hence, we would expect that the engineering designer would be one of the most important shapers of our society.

Until recently, generally in Eastern Europe people did not have this same access to technological products. There was limited choice and product design has not been formed as a result of market pressures, but as a result of government dictate. With the end of the Communist regimes this is changing. In Romania at least, People are now able to choose what they purchase from a wider variety of products that are now available. There preferences are for products from the west, usually Europe. This does little for the economy, status and ultimately, the well-being of the Romanian people.

Therefore, it ought to be possible for the transformation of the country to take place through the indigenous design of products, primarily engineering and engineering based products suited to the needs and desires of people within that country.

Design For Transformation is the coherent application and experimental verification of the importance of design and designers. Of course, Design For Transformation can only be the catalyst for a much wider application of this design theory.

An enthusiastic designer (Chris Spencer) believed that a group of British designers could work with their Romanian counterparts to develop products to suit the Romanian market. He brought together a group of designers who were specialists that covered the whole spectrum of the subject. In Romania a similar group was assembled.

There are three broad aims. The first is to identify and design products and services that:-

- 1 respond to real needs, and are appropriate, affordable, and environmentally friendly.

- 2 would use existing skills and existing resources
- 3 would create employment and, perhaps, exports.

The second aim is to set up a new professional organisation for Romania which is progressive, multidisciplinary and acts as a catalyst for industrial initiatives.

The third aim is to demonstrate to industry how design works as an integral part of the product cycle and is an essential strategic tool.

### **DESIGN AND THE DESIGNERS**

It was found that in Romania designers tended to have a much narrower understanding of 'design', tending to have more of an art background and dealing more with aesthetics and styling. More of an all-embracing multidisciplinary market led approach was needed as characterised by the Total Design [4] [5]. By this definition, design is effectively everything that is needed to identify, develop, and market products, and consideration must be given up to and including the product's eventual disposal.

This understanding of the overall importance of Total Design, in the engineering sense, is what is required to revitalise the industrial companies within the country. This needs to be coupled with education, training, and enthusiasm, with almost an evangelical zeal. Thus, as engineering design was accepted as being the central activity, other people were brought in from Romanian industry and these people added a more business and engineering balance.

### **THE PRACTICE AND PROBLEMS**

Design for Transformation's approach has been to initiate collaboration between British and Romanian designers, starting in a relatively small way, and then spreading through osmosis, education and training; continuing as a long term involvement.

Twenty one designers went from Britain to Romania in October 1993 and met a similar number of their Romanian counterparts. The British team stayed with their Romanian counterparts, allowing the opportunity for greater friendship and understanding of the country's situation. The British contingent included a good cross section of designer types including architecture, packaging design, corporate communications, advertising, textiles, fine art, crafts, ceramics, graphics, marketing strategy, publishing, interior, furniture and product design, as well as engineering design, design management and design education.

A two day conference was staged aimed primarily at Businesses in Romania in which each British and Romanian designer made a presentation. The specific aim was to introduce the designers to each other and to identify specific projects. Following the formal presentations, on the last half day of the conference people were grouped together in order to link together British and Romanian designers with industrialists that had identified potential projects in which they required help. Their specific problems were noted for the next phase of the programme.

As an example, an employee of the recently formed Patents and Design Protection and Copyright office wished to know more of the workings of the British equivalent. This

was an easy problem to solve and was dealt with shortly after returning to the U.K. As another example, a doctoral student studying metal spraying was having difficulty in obtaining up-to-date information on the topic. Suppliers in the U.K. have been very supportive in her requests for specific information.

Most of the British contingent also visited and lectured at universities and colleges in Bucharest. At the Politehnica University, for instance, the authors gave a joint presentation to about eighty students and industrialists. We were then shown their computer department where they teach CAD using Autocad. Shortages exist here also. They have about 12 terminals (10 monochrome 2 colour used by postgraduates) which are used 5 days each week from 8.00 to 10 pm and each computer has 2 students operating all this time. They have a throughput of 1,000 students trained in there each year. Diskettes are very expensive (in their terms) and we saw none in the machines being used.

The Design For Transformation visit received a remarkably high profile. A press conference was held and this was reported in both the press and on radio. Meetings have also been held with the Ministry of Industry. Imagine a group of foreigners appeared in your country and said they could transform your country by design, how much credence, publicity and Ministerial backing would they get? The British delegates were surprised that the Romanians appreciated this need so clearly and that they welcomed the help that was offered. These meetings were very successful and the Minister was enthusiastic about the visit. At the request of the British party he has appointed a person to be responsible for Design (appointed that day) and there will be a space in the government office set aside for design matters. The Minister also suggested (before he could be asked) that the Romanian government should provide 50% of the finance for selected design projects. In other words the government have verbally agreed to all the things the British party had previously agreed to request. There has also been support from the Romanian Development Agency and the National Chamber of Commerce and the British Council in Bucharest.

Starting in Spring 1994 British and Romanian designers started working in teams on projects, many are in collaboration with forward looking Romanian companies. Appropriate products are being created, which will be manufactured, distributed and sold - a feat of design, engineering and innovation. Training, consultancy and networking initiatives are being run in parallel to the main programme. Design for Transformation is establishing what can be done and has already started doing it.

Many subsequent visits have been made by some of the British designers to all parts of Romania. They have found that it is only by 'face to face' discussions can they achieve any real 'action'. The Romanians, it would appear, are not good at communicating by fax, phone, or letter.

Not unexpectedly, some projects are already floundering as the anticipated need does not stand up to a more thorough market investigation. But the others are continuing and additional projects are being added to the original list.

## **PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE**

At the time of writing the following have, so far, been achieved:-

1. About one hundred British designers and a similar number of Romanian designers are now involved.
2. The response from the Romanian Government has been excellent. Projects will be funded to 50% by the Government.
3. The profile of 'Design' has been raised in the country. The government has named a person responsible for design matters and opened an office within the Ministry of Industry.
4. Projects have been identified and many of the British Design for Transformation teams have been back to Romania in order to progress individual projects.
5. The first product designed by the group - apparatus for a children's playground - was fitted in May 1994.
6. A group of British students have been involved in a furniture design and manufacture project in collaboration with the Institute of Architecture with funding from the Worshipful Company of Furniture Makers. Collaboration with the furniture manufacturing industry has continued.
7. One assistant professor from the Politehnica University of Bucharest has successfully completed his MSc in Engineering Product Design at South Bank University.
8. A number of student and teacher exchanges have taken place funded either by the British Council or by the European Community through their Tempus programme
9. Perhaps the most significant achievement has been in assisting the Romanians to set up their own Design Centre in Bucharest. It opened in January 1996 as a Non-Profit Association and there will be a British full time Director during the setting up period. The centre will also offer training and it is anticipated that it will be self financing after three years. This should act as a focus for the development of design as a catalytic presence and not as a provider of specific design consultancy.
10. Other projects in publishing, training and education, public space design, fashion, textiles, craft and engineering design are making headway.

## **FINANCE**

Although the project has had the support of many organisations both in Britain and Romania mainly in the form of the provision of time, encouragement, use of premises and contacts, and airfares for employees to become involved in the project but the entire project is desperately short of money.

Attempts have been made to obtain finance from various European organisations but with little success. Perhaps, not surprisingly, their attitude is "what's in it for us?" As the point of the project is to make Romania better able to stand on it's own feet and not become dependent on imports, it would appear that perhaps there is little to encourage companies to become involved. A short sighted view as there would be no objection to joint projects and these companies would, no doubt, be favourably viewed by the Romanian Government.

It is not possible to register "Design For Transformation" as a charity. We have spoken to the Charity Commissioners and they have advised "the purpose of the organisation would not be exclusively charitable in law. In particular, whilst there is a clearly worthwhile purpose of seeking to assist the reconstruction of the commercial base in Romania, this is not a purpose which is regarded as charitable, whether in this country or overseas".

Design For Transformation has been registered as a Company Limited By Guarantee and it will have the legal status of a charitable trust. This can take on business and covenants as long as all profits are put into the projects. The Romanian authorities have taken the view that we are charity or aid workers and have waived the requirement for DFT members to need visas.

A significant application to the European Community for Tempus funding was made in January 1994 to put together a Design Teaching Centre. This was unsuccessful but no reason was given.

In January 1995 a proposal was submitted to the Know How Fund in respect of assistance towards the setting up of the Design Centre in Bucharest. This would make the initial setting up process much smoother and support a number of personnel including a British manager.

The whole project could flounder due to lack of finance. Even donations of office supplies and equipment would go some way to keeping this worthwhile project going.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This is an on-going project. It would be premature to say if it is a success, as many of the projects will take years to complete, but already it has progressed further than many could have hoped. It has been extremely encouraging to see the way in which Romanians have warmed to the British Design for Transformation group.

Can you transform a country by design? The first indications are that, although it is not easy, perhaps you can and, in this case, 'Design For Transformation' is the catalyst. If the enthusiasm is matched by the finance there can be little to stop us.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

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On our return a list of projects was drawn up that met the criteria, they were also the type of projects with which the British group were familiar. Most had been requested by the Romanian Industry Ministry. These included:-

1. The refurbishment of a public place. This will include street furniture, a playground, signage, project management etc., linked to the main market redevelopment project organised by the Mayor's office in Bucharest.

2. Setting up a Rumanian Design Council to establish contact with industry and transform awareness of design, coordinate projects, offer consultancy and information and generally raise the profile of design throughout Rumania.

3. Improving the transportation infrastructure. A feasibility with input from relevant ministries and organisations; practical ways of transforming public transportation.

4. A cheap hydraulic press which project which later became part of a wider scheme for converting rice husks into building products.

5. Modular furniture. A basic practical range of seating, storage etc. that can be added to over time and which is affordable for Rumanians setting up home.

6. Some small scale design projects to cover the growing small enterprises such as cooperatives and 'cottage industries'. Help through design of products, distribution and marketing. Additional help through training, seminars, export and networking initiatives. This will be undertaken in conjunction with the Rumanian Development Agency.

7. And also a journal and several educational projects to help create a comprehensive and practical design education that will equip students with everything they need to play their crucial part in the regeneration of Rumanian industry .