

**Commentary on the Main Article “Future Center – An  
Unconventional Approach to Promote Intellectual Capital  
Potential”**

**Facilitating the Future**

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**1 On the Happiness of Futures: We Get what We  
Are Unprepared for**

Happy Futures? Szogs cites Future Center pioneer Leif Edvinsson’s iconic salutation, while recognizing that things don’t always turn out that way. Futures are not necessarily *happy*, certainly not for everyone, even when we work hard at trying to make them so. We don’t always get what we prepare for, but we *do* have to put in the work, otherwise we must make do with what we are unprepared for.

Does facilitating the future enhance innovative and competitive advantage? If so, how can we leverage the innovative capacity of our organizations for the benefit of society? If we accept William Gibson’s famous pronouncement that “the future is already here, just not evenly distributed,” we should make effective use of the signs and signals around us to place the world in a sharper perspective. But consider how society thinks about the future. Marshall McLuhan’s contention that “We drive into the future using only our rear-view mirror” is as apt now as it was in the 1960’s, when he observed that most people do not foresee change until it has occurred, and then consistently misinterpret its consequences.

Other ways of thinking are needed to create stepping-stones towards *happy futures*. Although we are living in a knowledge society, not everyone accepts it, or acts accordingly. Adapting Gibson’s dictum about the future, we can say that the

importance of intellectual capital is already clear, just not acted upon equally. At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, collaboration, continuing knowledge development and innovation should be much sought-after in business, social and societal contexts. Unfortunately, the recognition of knowledge, intellectual capital, innovation and sustainability thinking as cardinal points for our corporate values compass will not happen by itself. The road is long, and the journey must be facilitated.

Future Centers in different parts of the world, as Szogs indicates in his article, have demonstrated how to facilitate this journey. The journey is as much about discovering the past as the future, as they both relate to how we think and act in the present. It is also about taking steps in the present, after considering and understanding their possible consequences. In this sense, Future Centers help us to facilitate the future.

## **2 Insights on the Edge: What Future Centers Are Learning Now**

As Günther Szogs points out, Future Centers have proven their value as intellectual capital accelerators and facilitators of the future for organizations in diverse places in Europe and Asia. Working in such centers takes people out of their present day concerns, their habitual thinking patterns, assumptions and routines, and in turn requires them to examine their dominant logics, ask difficult and sometimes disturbing questions, and look at issues through multiple perspectives. Central to understanding why Future Centers work is seeing how they stimulate innovation capacity.

Space in Future Centers is important, but the concept is broader than buildings. A Future Center works through the synergy of physical and virtual space, operating philosophy, active facilitation, working methods, and the diversity of people working together. People are central; and their mental and emotional spaces are essential elements in the mix. As Szogs indicates, the neutral safe-fail space and playfulness are important elements in why Future Centers work. Accepting *failure* is another critical factor. Being able to learn from failing is an essential compe-

tence. Rapid prototyping, a key working method in innovation environments, is an iterative process of doing and learning, in which good = good enough. It is fast-track continuous improvement that is often characterized as *failing your way forward*.

This entrepreneurial spirit is needed to deal with the many challenges facing modern knowledge organizations and knowledge societies. These include the rapid pace of change and the changing nature of work; the increased need for collaboration across borders, cultures, disciplines, and generations; institutionalized territorialism and compartmentalized work regimes where responsibilities are arranged in silos; and the ineffective future-orientation in government and business.

In the Netherlands, we see a variety of promising approaches for addressing challenges like these. LEF future center's approach is to consciously pursue breakthroughs in the issues its clients bring, based on what neuroscience and cognitive psychology teach us about how the brain works. Courage is the essence of working in LEF; it is the name of the center and the personality trait required for project managers and program directors to work towards breakthroughs there. In addition, LEF is committed to discovering *why* their different working environments work, and how they can be made more effective, supporting research at several Dutch universities aimed at measuring how space influences behavior and creativity.

Working from a different vision, ABN-AMRO's Dialogues House creates a physical and intellectual space for *making more possible together*, creating what founder and Director Paul Iske calls a *collaboratorium* where bank personnel and people from the outside world can meet in dialogue about enhancing innovation, entrepreneurship, sustainability and collaboration, and pursue diverse objectives relating to these goals. Dialogues House also houses the bank's Incubator, an Arena for introducing powerful ideas, and its Institute of Brilliant Failures, a facility aimed at building new perspectives on failure and entrepreneurial spirit into the mindset of its parent organization.

The Shipyard, Future Center of the Dutch Tax and Customs Administration, is a place steeped in organizational tradition, while at the same time definitely *not* the

normal workplace. This is an environment where civil servants come to unlock their innovative potential and apply it to making the organization more innovative and effective in the work it does. The Shipyard actively exercises its *license to disturb* in order to move the organization in new and useful directions.

In Asia, there is increasing interest in Future Center concepts. Hong Kong has a Future Center, a number of other Chinese cities are looking into creating new facilities at science and technology parks; Taiwan and Malaysia are exploring what such centers can mean for them. The most exciting developments, however, are in Japan. KDI, the Knowledge Dynamics Initiative of Fuji-Xerox, opened its Future Center in 2009. They see Future Center concepts as one way to help Japan transform the way it organizes work. Through their center, they coordinate a Japanese Future Center Community with more than 40 organizational members. Although initially influenced by European Future Center thinking, their intention is to prototype new models tailor-made to fit Japanese culture and capable of dealing with the challenges Japanese society faces.

What are Future Centers doing with their lessons learned? They are prototyping new work environments, based on concepts like these:

- *Playful spaces.* Playfulness in Future Center practice has various functions: disarming and relaxing people working on difficult problems and complicated issues, de-stressing people who usually work in brain-unfriendly work environments, demarcating the procedure-zone from the creative zone. *Having fun while working on serious business* is seen as a critical factor defining Future Center effectiveness. And this provokes the question: Why shouldn't playfulness and creativity be part of our daily workplaces?
- *Realization spaces.* Throughout the Future Center process, the emphasis is always on *achieving concrete results*. Centers continually prototype processes to turn ideas into actionable plans, policies, products and services. A good idea, however widely held, is not enough for innovation; ultimately, organizations and regions benefit most from realization spaces where ideas

are turned into practice. Rapid implementation in the real world is the bottom line.

- *Collaboration Counts.* Successful innovators are excellent collaborators. They work together in *laboratories*, science and technology parks and extended networks, leveraging insights from the past and present, taking relevant work from diverse sources and combining it into something new. This is true for innovations in technology but also in social science and societal processes. Paul Iske of Dialogues House calls this “combinatoric innovation”, and he describes why it is essential to “create the conditions under which parties with diverse backgrounds can combine their knowledge to find new ways for value creation”.
- *A Future Center Alliance.* In 2010 a group of Future Center practitioners from eight countries, meeting at the Future Center Summit in Tokyo, initiated an international alliance. This Future Center Alliance brings people and organizations with diverse interests and backgrounds together through a shared passion to support collaborative innovation and ‘futures thinking,’ and a desire to leverage core expertise, complementary skills, and their extensive networks to deal with complex multi-disciplinary challenges to organizations and society.

## **2.1 Finland Creates Value in Practice**

As Guenther Szogs points out at the end of his article, there are many ways to enable innovation and facilitate the future. Finland’s Aalto Camp for Societal Innovation (ACSI) is an initiative for enhancing our understanding of how societal innovation happens, while at the same time creating actual value in practice. ACSI is such a promising initiative because it facilitates a mind shift for societal change at different levels: in the problem-owners who bring real issues to work on, in their stakeholder communities of users and end-users, and in camp participants. It is all about how people reframe their problems and how organizations and regions think about the future.

Yet another perspective on innovation systems in Finland is the *regional innovation ecosystem*, a concept central to initiatives organized through Aalto University and ACSI. It describes a systemic approach to how cooperation and extensive co-creation integrates government, business, universities, NGO's and citizens working in a region. Diverse projects strive to discover how healthy innovation ecosystems function, and which conditions enhance self-organization and self-renewing innovation processes.

Why do initiatives like ACSI and practical working concepts like the regional innovation ecosystem find fertile ground in Finland? Although the Finnish innovation system has consistently been rated among the top national innovation systems in the world, people recognize that it will not be adequate to meet the challenges that lie ahead. There is no national complacency about being one of the best, rather a drive to keep improving in order to better face the road ahead.

### **3 The Relevance of Future Centers for Germany**

The successful organizations and innovation ecosystems of today have been created through the technology and insights that *were*, not the technology and insights that *will be*. It is necessary to think in more future-oriented ways about our organizations and what they can offer, our regions and what they can become, and our society and where it is going.

Germany already has many relevant sources of inspiration, ranging from the work of Jungk and his colleagues with Future Workshops to the fascinating thought experiments of Dr. Helmut Volkmann at Siemens in the 1980's. There have always been many cutting-edge experiential knowledge initiatives in Germany; today more of them than ever. Consider Berlin's Betahaus, Deutsche Telekom's T-City, or the dynamic, temporary future center at Zeche Zollverein during the Ruhr's 2010 stint as European Cultural Capital.

Looking at these examples through the lens of Szogs' apt distinction between *perfect imperfection* and *imperfect perfectionism*, we see their limitations, but also their possibilities. At Freudenberg we can extend our experience of the world – but where is the focused application to real-world issues? In the House of Finance

we see how bricks and bits can be attractively integrated to address contemporary objectives – but where is the broader societal context in which key stakeholders *get their hands dirty*, wrestling with real issues of the future? Doesn't a house of the future need participative process space, where diverse and divergent parties can act and interact; and realization space where they can create the future together?

With its diverse building blocks, its enormous store of intellectual capital and its powerful knowledge economy, Germany seems ideally positioned to develop a new generation of Future Centers. What is standing in the way? We can speculate on a number of factors that hamper innovation in knowledge societies; as evidenced by Szogs' article, they are also present in Germany and as a result may be limiting the will to create new Future Center concepts there:

- *We are not impressed.* While Germany has an impressive collection of ingredients, as Szogs says, there are not enough recipes. And beyond the recipe, it is the cook, the kitchen, and the actual cooking that make the difference.
- *We do that already.* Complacency and self-satisfaction are often part of the problem: *That's nothing new*, is a classic innovation-cruncher. If the ingredients look familiar, *combinatoric creativity* is called for is to create new recipes and cooking techniques.
- *Wanting to be perfect.* Prototyping is not waiting for the *right answer* but going with the best guess, even if it means *failing your way forward*. Experimental and experiential learning are key.
- *Paralysis by analysis.* Innovation requires hard work and dedication, Thomas Edison's famous 99% perspiration. Analysis alone, no matter how good it is, will not achieve innovation.

### **3.1 The Houses of Frankfurt-Rhine-Main**

Szogs argues that the Frankfurt Rhine-Main region can make stronger use of its *House of* concept. Using the FRM *House of* model, it is interesting to speculate on how to tweak the design of each individual house with *future centre thinking* to

make it a more powerful instrument for using intellectual capital to renew the region. Even stronger is to conceive a *House of Houses* that integrates and actualizes the work of all the Houses within the broader context of Germany, Europe and a globalized world. Such a *House of Houses* would be a House of Connections and a House of Impacts: a safe-fail environment for challenging assumptions about regional goals, roles, resources, relationships, driving forces and realization roadmaps, and a Realization Center to guide plans into practice. It would be a next-generation Future Center.

The House of Impact would discover how to create impact from the Houses approach within and beyond the individual sectors. It would organize context-oriented dialogue to co-develop promising solutions, best options for good investments and venture ideas for next-generation science, priming the pump for paybacks in 40 years and concrete societal impact by 2020. A House of Houses would integrate and facilitate collaboration, providing a neutral space amidst highly competitive cities. It would not be Frankfurt's House or Darmstadt's, but a regional center for innovation and realization: here, the regional players would not relive old patterns, but use them in the context of breakthrough thinking and appropriate actions, leveraging the interlocking capacity of powerful sectors – mobility, logistics, pharmacy, medicine, financial services and ICT – to create an attractive place for people to live, work and flourish in a connected world.

### **3.2 Lessons Learned for Germany**

Healthy knowledge economies of the future will thrive on innovative capacity, active networks, and collaborative spirit. Entrepreneurial spirit is important and governance is required in order to create conditions for active participation and overcoming fear. These economies need spaces to work in: innovation environments. This entails, as Szogs points out, they key is an integrated approach in which space, appropriate methodologies, diversity of participants and the systemic anchoring of results in organizations. These innovation spaces are places in which we can reframe the *what* and work actively with the *how*. The central question is always: *Does the organization really want innovation?*



Are there lessons for Germany in this story? Perhaps in the lessons of the Dutch Future Centers, using courage to translate questions about issues in government, business and society into prototypes and possible breakthroughs, making use of their license to disturb. Perhaps in the lessons of Japan, collaborating internationally through Future Centers while actively prototyping of new Future Center models of their own, uniquely suited to Japanese society. Perhaps in the lesson of Finland, which saw itself in the mirror of international evaluation as being *one of the best*, and decided to take action now in order to ensure that its innovation ability is capable of keeping it there.

Being smart is less important on this road than getting your hands dirty, wrestling with real people and their issues, enriching your perspectives on where you are going and how to get there. This leaves you better prepared in some small but important ways, even when the future comes and you get what you haven't prepared for.

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