

The ISI Story & A Warm Welcome To All Who Share Our Vision

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ISI was born out of the recognition that academic, scientific and professional conferences seem to offer scant opportunities for colleagues to confer, to converse. Typically, a minority of participants deliver prepared presentations to a relatively passive majority. Except for brief Q & A opportunities, interchange among participants is rarely found on the official schedule. That which does occur is self-organized, informal and wedged into the interstices of the “real” program. Presenting is almost always more prestigious than listening, and some presentations carry greater prestige than others. Traditionally, the prestigious experts disseminate pre-packaged new ideas to the others, who are encouraged to take home and use whatever they find valid or promising.

Such hierarchical knowledge distribution systems greatly constrain us in addressing humanity’s most pressing and complex issues, issues about which we are not merely concerned, but also outraged. Of course, at traditional conferences it is understood that scholars should approach issues objectively—without emotional involvement.

Bela H. Banathy had a different vision for scholarly gatherings, one which could more fully harness the collective potential of groups. What if all participants were designated presenters and given the opportunity to send prepared papers to the others in advance? And what if extended, in-depth, nonhierarchical conversation among them became the program? And what if systems scholars from all over the world focused their conversation together in order to put their expertise actively into the service of humanity world-wide? Dr. Banathy established the ISI and inaugurated its first scholarly gathering at Fuschl Am See, Austria in 1982 to find out. Since then we have called our gatherings “conversations” to distinguish them from traditional conference formats. Participants come to ISI Conversations more to cooperate in making serviceable knowledge than to disperse or gather it, though they are welcome to do both.

As Dr. Banathy puts it, “We aspire to reap the ‘reflecting and creating power’ of groups that emerges in the course of disciplined and focused conversations on issues that are important to us and to our society.”

A Warm Welcome to All Who Share Our Vision

We warmly welcome all systems and design scholars and practitioners who share our aspirations. Newcomers of our five-day conversations will find a relaxed, casual and friendly atmosphere. Experienced participants offer the following suggestions:

Be open-minded, stay “loose”, and be patient. Try to establish a relationship with someone who has been here before, and have short, but regular, debriefings (one-on-one) about the day’s experiences.

With our combined efforts, we believe we can make a difference in our world for the better. We will help you grow professionally and we invite you to help us become what is the best of humanity.

Think of the conversation as a total -immersion environment in which you eat breathe, and live the ideas of systems design as they pertain to the human condition. As with any such environment, it is both luxurious to wallow in the inspirations that bubble up though you and those around you, and at the same time overwhelming as you try to catch the various currents of thought that often spin you around and leave you wondering where you really stand on a given issue. The best idea is to “go with the flow” and trust that meanings will emerge-- if not during the conversation then after.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember is also the most challenging: don't forget to take the design culture home with you. Keep the conversation alive, both with your group and with others in your daily environment, so that you never really “leave” the conversation. That is the goal toward which every participant strives.