

Changing the change

Design Visions, Proposals and Tools

An international conference on the role and potential of design research in the transition towards sustainability

Torino, 10th - 11th - 12th July 2008

Organised by Co-ordination of Italian Design Research Doctorates with
Conference of Italian Design Faculty Deans and Programme Heads.

In the framework of WORLD DESIGN CAPITAL TORINO 2008 | © ICSID
An ICSID initiative of the IDA.

Lorenzo Imbesi [lorenzo.imbesi@uniroma1.it]

ITACA Dept., Sect. Arts, Design and New Technologies - "Sapienza" University of Rome, Italy

ETHICS BECOME SEXY!

A critical approach to Design for the right to access to aesthetics and technology in the knowledge society

Abstract

If environmental issues have had a prevalence to delineate what sustainable design is, while ecodesign approach has been developing products with low environmental impact; nowadays we are facing the rising of further social topics somehow dealing with ethics matters. Above all, the ethics dimension, which belongs philosophically to the sphere of behaviours, while setting together design and production, makes a contradiction to be solved while expecting a form of responsibility after economic profit.

At the same time, the critical thinking on the role of design, as well of production and consumption in contemporaneity, cannot ignore the historical epistemological turn from the fordist-taylorist paradigm of mass and serial production into the post-industrial development which draws a new economic and productive geography. In a world where the industry of the chain assembly leaves space to new and more flexible forms of labour, allowing production to untie and decentralise itself from territory, the binary paradigm of centre-periphery or north-south, which have painted the maps of marginality and colonialism, cannot tell anymore the complexity of contemporaneity. Then, a net of connected hubs designs a fluid horizontal structure without centre, delocalizing and autonomizing the activities. The new geography of global cities including, after London, New York and Tokyo, also places as São Paulo, New Delhi, Hong Kong, Cape Town, before considered as peripheral, is the scenario where centrality and marginality are now concentrating while increasing inequalities.

At this point, the paper aims at focusing a recurring topic of contemporary design research, reflecting on new models of development connected to the knowledge society, aiming at developing that immaterial capital as intelligences and scientific and technical knowledge taken into account as an important factor for competition. As Jeremy Rifkin stressed, poverty cannot anymore measured just by the satisfaction of primary needs, but on access and inclusion to technologies and communication which can give a chance to societies to develop autonomously. The power of access can build the differences and inequalities while opening holes in the net: being disconnected means being excluded to the educative, cultural, informative chances which communication technologies mean, while broadening the economic and social disparity.

The paper faces the conceptual relationship between ethics and design through different aspects (organization, production, distribution, consumption, ...), while touching the issue of new technologies which can therefore suggest a new form of development, beyond the fordist industry, capable to break down the classic dichotomy between north and south, developed and underdeveloped. Besides, if global has become the way to be local, is it still relevant to make any difference between the north and the

Changing the change

Design Visions, Proposals and Tools

An international conference on the role and potential of design research in the transition towards sustainability

south of the world? Rather, isn't it that we can now locate as many south in the north and north in the south?

Moreover, the paper will cross over the issue of the aesthetics of ethics, while simply asking: is it possible for design for/of sustainability to exceed somehow the "pauperistic" aesthetics which has been historically connected with?

Hans Jonas' culture of the "limit" and principle of responsibility have marked the ecological culture for a long time, giving at the same time an extraordinary metaphor for the design imaginary, while pointing to technology to be in charge tout court to the environmental calamity and at the same time dreaming a sort of romantic restoration to a natural condition. Its related aesthetic answer is a sort of Calvinist programmatic minimalism combined with a prudence for project, the refuse of technology in favour of local handicrafts and a minimal aesthetics for reuse of thrash, both physical and moral.

But, if we cannot ignore the centrality of consumption of goods and services phenomena, beyond the utilitarian theories of need, consumption itself cannot be anymore identified as a secondary activity from production and market, moreover able to produce meanings and knowledge. But the question is: what is the shape of ethics?

Quoting Bob Willard, design should be "sexy, smart and profitable" while connecting ethics with the intelligence of new technologies, competitiveness of production and being sexy for consumption.

Therefore, productive consumption and the critical awareness of the values of goods ask for a right to aesthetics which can assume at the same time ethics and solidarity values in order to give a shape to the desires of those excluded and indigent men and women. Thus, aesthetics become politic. Very sexy!

Through an interdisciplinary theory-based and design-based approach, linking design, productive consumption, cultural studies, anthropology, the contribution will be based on the experiences of two exhibitions and a conference which I have curated on the topic, while it will provide images related to product design projects which will illustrate the subject matter.

References

Bataille Georges, "La part maudite", 1949;

Jonas Hans, "The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age", 1985;

Rifkin Jeremy, "The Age of Access", 2001.