

FROM HUMAN-CENTERED TO MORE-THAN-HUMAN DESIGN

Exploring the transition

edited by Barbara Camocini and Francesco Vergani



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1. The Political and Social need for a New Design Culture

*Alessandro Biamonti**

Abstract

The pandemic that we are facing worldwide has highlighted some fragilities of a system of values that we took for granted and, at the same time, has brought out new paradigms and new energies, both unknown and known yet unattempted beforehand. Still, we did not dare to put them into practice. For both those strategies involving large organizations and companies and the private daily life of individuals, it has become of pivotal importance to deal with the new meanings that the pandemic has made us attribute to our actions and relationships.

The city's spaces have been changing and so have the times, with their own social interactions. The economic leverage (as it previously happened with the myth of the function) has proven ineffective in guiding urban transformations. *Inclusion, sustainability, respect, sharing* – without forgetting *beauty* and *meaning* – are key concepts for the development of contemporary projects.

Within the tradition of Design in our own Country, it might be worth mentioning the peculiarity of what we call Design Culture (Cultura del Progetto), an approach which has always preferred the generation of meaning over the search for solutions.

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In this framework, the world of Design faces the great opportunity to redefine the foundations of a new Design Culture for the third Millennium, which reaffirms the political and social contribution of this discipline. Indeed, a political and social design culture, rather than relying on an ideological paradigm to defend, connects better with the events of public life as well as to those strategic choices to be made for the future of a community.

1.1 Premise

In the early 2020s, an unprecedented period that could only have been thought of by visionary either screenwriters or novelists began: the world came to a stop because of a “flu”. A virus (from the Latin “virus”, meaning a poisonous secretion), a microscopic biological entity – a parasite – started to proliferate among humans, causing such terrible damages that unprecedented precautionary measures such as social isolation and lockdown were necessary. All forms of interaction between human beings, whether related to physical contact or merely proximal, were reduced to an absolute minimum.

In spite of the many reflections published in record time, there is still room for better elaborating how much this pandemic condition has affected our dimension as human beings, our relationships, the construction of a system of values, both social and individual. What has already emerged quite clearly is that this new condition of deprivation of certain possibilities previously taken for granted has also opened up new chances.

At first, the winning strategy was undergoing over-protection. Individuals closed themselves inside their small private sphere, shielded from the outside world. Be that as it may, whilst technically effective against contagion, isolation unfortunately raised a sense of diffidence towards any “other”. However, in the long run this enclosed scenario, isolated from a potentially dangerous outside world, brings out how the condition of “other” is represented by everyone, therefore at the same time by no one. Because, as they say, “we are all in the same boat”. It is therefore desirable to adopt an approach that aims to break down the diffidence that has been generated, through

an adequate quantity (and quality) of information, practices and useful methods to develop a sense of belonging between the members of the same community.

Indeed, the ultimate scope is to create a community that can be trusted and that trusts itself. For the Design Ecosystem (professionals, companies, schools, etc.) we are clearly facing the most important challenge and opportunity since the first industrial revolution: the need to collaborate in the formulation of paradigms for a new balance in society. This new balance entails, first of all, that we attribute the due value to those issues that had previously been neglected within the strict economic and political program of the “running locomotive”. This leads us to the question of environmental sustainability, which stems from a desire to reconsider as vital those solutions to problems that are currently jeopardizing the future of the planet. Accordingly, a new conceptualization of balance, in which growth and economic well-being become the driving force behind the search for solutions instead of the cause or consequence of the planet’s inequalities. Indeed, this virus, which has made us all feel more fragile, imperfect and human, may also have taught us to understand how it is precisely in that fragility, that imperfection and humanity are the foundations for a new energy, a new strength. This period has also reminded us that the ultimate goal of designers – and indeed of companies – is not just to make money on furniture, objects and services, but rather to help build a better world in which we can spend our own lives and those of future generations in the happiest way possible.

The Italian tradition of the “Design Culture” (Cultura del Progetto) finds its roots in this approach and represents a double possibility of interpretation. On the one hand, that of the designer’s individual point of view, in which a project is approached not only with the scope of providing a functional answer to a specific need, but also in terms of elaborating the issue within a wider socio-cultural dimension. On the other hand, from a broader point of view inherent to society, it represents the result of an eco-systemic phenomenon, which does not only concern the “design community”, but is also inserted within a specific local context. In this way, each project not consti-

tute an isolated phenomenon but is part of the contemporary dynamics of its day and age.

The current pandemic situation, which, as previously outlined, can be perceived a starting point towards a new condition, also represents an important standpoint. This is indeed because the approach of the “Design Culture” does not refer to distant possible futures, but rather to an evolution of the present. The real objective of the designers and the ecosystem of which they are part becomes the production of scenarios. These scenarios, often clearly different from everyday life, sometimes even utopian and disruptive, all arise on the basis of solutions, dynamics and technologies that can be applied and used today. Thus, they work as scenarios and visions of an alternative present. Therefore, as we have experienced in recent years, the future can reserve us the surprise of technological, political and social events that may cause sudden changes of direction, opening (or unfortunately closing, in some cases) possibilities for our lives.

It is therefore desirable to keep on producing visionary scenarios, while also avoiding holding tight to the *alibi* for which any element or condition required for their actuation may depend on a future we cannot control. Finally, we should always remind ourselves of the importance of focusing on certain precise objectives, themes and conditions, arising from both the opportunities and the challenges of the present.

1.2 Topics

1.2.1 Inclusion

There is a general misunderstanding between the concepts of inclusion and integration. Integration, which has been at the centre of many social and political battles in recent decades, is a concept akin to the idea of normalization (i.e., smoothing out differences in order to achieve a condition of normality). In this view, differences are seen as something to be removed, in such a way that are invited, helped (or sometimes pushed) to change themselves and adapt to

normal conditions. Inclusion, as cited by Gaspari (2020), who himself draws from the sociologist Habermas:

Does not mean assimilatory grabbing, nor it does not mean closing oneself off from the different. Rather, inclusion of the other means that the boundaries of the community are open to all: also, and especially, to those who are mutual strangers or who want to remain strangers.

As far as its philosophical framework, while integration represents an added value to the results of a service, inclusion is a fundamental right of every human being. Therefore, if integration can be understood as a linear process, with rules aimed at a goal to be verified, social inclusion is presented as a dynamic process, unstable and in continuous definition, because it constantly brings into play the rules and balances between the individualities of a community (Trabucchi, 2020). From a design perspective, the concept of integration can be brought back to the practice whereby differences must be eliminated in order to make all the elements cohere with the parameters of a pre-established “normality”. On the other hand, within the concept of inclusion, the context must possess those characteristics that will allow any differences to be assimilated. In this way, inclusion also emerges as a concept capable of overcoming the era of the “standard”.

1.2.2 Sustainability

The issue of sustainability has been a topic in the field of design for decades, thanks to scholars of the likes of Thomas Maldonado or Ezio Manzini, who have strongly contributed to raising awareness among generations of designers, researchers and even organizations and companies. In the face of the most recent forms of commitment to protecting the planet, it is necessary to remember that this sensitivity in the world of design can flaunt a long-established tradition. Such a tradition has changed over time, taking on a more complex form, in an attempt to include issues that, whilst not strictly related to environmental debate, have emerged over time as important for a global condition of sustainability.

The definition of sustainability has, in fact, expanded over time to include, on the one hand, economic-social issues in which there is a relationship of reciprocal influence, and on the other, some more vertical, in-depth studies of supply chain issues relating to materials, processes, etc. Today, a reflection on sustainability is to be considered essential in any projects, and for each project it requires a specific declension.

1.2.3 Respect

Respect, in its most classic definition, is the act of “admiring (someone or something) deeply, as a result of their abilities, qualities, or achievements” or a “due regard for the feelings, wishes, or rights of others”, thus, a feeling embracing both esteem and regard. In fact, the term “respect” derives from the Latin *respēctus* (esteem), which in turn comes from *respicere* “to look back”, in other words, to look a second time. You look at something a second time when you have either not understood it, or when you want to appreciate it again. In any case, one does so when something is worthy of interest. When it therefore deserves respect.

In the context of Design discipline, the term is important on two somewhat related levels. Firstly, there must be adequate “respect” for the users of projects, their needs, their expectations. Secondly, it is important to note that projects which arise within the framework of “respect for people” deserve respect themselves. The work of the designer, or rather the action of designing, fits into that territory that lies between Technique and Culture (Maldonado, 1991). This is an important position which underlines that what concerns either only Culture or only Technique is not Design but it is something else. Yet this condition of being “between” two poles does not indicate a fixed position in a third dimension, but rather the temporary and ever-changing condition of a balance that includes both technical and cultural elements. A delicate balance between these two sides that should also take into account their characteristics, needs, and expectations with great respect.

1.2.4 Designing With/For

Arguably, the times we recently experienced has forced us to reflect on how unavoidable *sharing* is. As a community of human beings, whether we want it or not, whether we seek it or not, it should be clear today that we share the same fate.

History has shown over time the fragility of borders, walls and barriers: both those physically constructed and defended in the past, as well as the more contemporary ones, often less tangible but erected with the same inner logic of “keeping something out”. That “something” which, when conditions become critical, when entropy collapses, can never be contained. The reason beneath this change lays in the belief that humanity has more to do with communicating vessels than with clusters. It has become once again evident that we would take advantage from visualizing ourselves as a single complex community. Within the cultural debate of Design discipline, scholars have started to veer towards this direction. In fact, today we are witnessing a growing number of experiences based on sharing and collaborative inclusion, so much so as to make them one of the defining factors of our times. In addition, a significant sign of change is also coming from international competitions (one such example is the Italian Compasso d’Oro), which reflect the emergence of a growing sensitivity towards projects with a strong social impact, oriented towards a system-wide exploration rather than the definition of a circumscribed object. Such projects often developed in the framework of a broad multidisciplinary participation, involving also end users. This new scenario can help the development of new models of reference, new narratives for our dynamic, vital and cosmopolitan society, on which the various experiences based on sharing are inserted and find fertile ground.

In recent years, many authors have explored the role played by design in the “big picture” of our complex society, highlighting how in recent decades we have increasingly moved from designing objects to designing systems and services supporting society, and how this has necessarily led to working *with* society (Manzini, 2018; Thackara, 2005; Norman, 2011).

Moreover, a further change is represented by the passage from times in which designers, albeit with good will, were finding new so-

lutions from the top of their profession, to a more effective condition in which such solutions are developed in collaboration with other people from outside the design community and yet provided with complimentary skills and a direct involvement in the issues to be tackled (Mulgan, 2013). Indeed, if on the one hand good design has always brought unexpected results, on the other the most attentive and sensitive people (non-designers) have always welcomed these new results in a very natural and intuitive way, as something they have been waiting for in their daily lives.

So, in the words of Don Norman (2011):

When you go out into the society, and you try to do things for the society, you've to work with the society.

1.2.5 Beauty

Although the question is a decidedly uncertain one, it is not possible to conceive a design action that does not include an aesthetic intention, or that does not produce beauty. The history of humanity shows us that beauty is an unavoidable question. Indeed, beyond the parameters by which it is measured, beauty is a psychophysical sensation that human beings have always strived for, ever since they first sketched the world around them. Without considering phenomena related to the purely artistic dimension, the history of human material culture – with the first graffiti, drawings, decorations, shapes and materials – is a sequence of demonstrations of how the creation of “useful” objects has always been accompanied by the search for beauty.

Beauty can also be interpreted as a social construction as well as a cultural phenomenon. Indeed, the aesthetic experience may consist of universal evidences, often linked to natural phenomena, which come to be perceived, almost physiologically, by the senses without the need for cultural interpretations. Instead, it can be found in the result of different socio-cultural declensions, whose understanding requires a sharing of information, history and values, as typically occurs within a given society.

Design has an important role in the construction of beauty, above all by acting in the combination of the two aforementioned dimensions, the natural-instinctive and the socio-cultural, through the construction of meaning. Since beauty is a complex issue, and in order to avoid the trivialisation produced by the search for a simplified dimension, it is necessary to train ourselves in understanding and perceiving the complexity of beauty. We need to learn how to recognise its nuances, its limits, which lead us to find beauty in tragedy. As an example, we may think about the works of extraordinary beauty that, like Michelangelo's *Pietà*, depict scenes of heartrending tragedy, flowing into the sublime. The desire for beauty has no gender, no race, no age. Beauty is in fact an anthropological tension, an energy that runs through the history of human beings, both in the dimension of individual existence and in the shared values of a social context. For a designer, beauty is an essential, intrinsic component of his or her work of building a new world that, if uglier, can never be better.

1.2.6 Meaning

Contemporary Design appears to be a territory whose perimeter does not seem to be defined by a clear line, but rather by a blurred zone, which is in fact typical of those disciplines characterised by a wide margin of hybridisation and unpredictability.

Design is certainly not a science, and consequently its results are not certain and unambiguous. Such a condition leaves a wide margin of action and interpretation for the human element, and therefore also room for the emotional component, which, whilst being difficult to manage and assess, is becoming increasingly important over time. This is inevitable if we consider the impact that Design can have on people's daily lives. We are therefore referring to a discipline characterised by contrasting elements, which can be held together by what represents the true focus, the true goal towards which every design activity should tend: the creation of meaning. The production of meaning represents the overcoming of the typically early-20th-century limit, that pertains to the centrality attributed to the concept of "function". Often seen in opposition to

the presumed superficiality of a purely aesthetic dimension, the *functionalist* approach has deep roots in the history, and in the relative system of social and religious values of European society. To put it bluntly, nobody wants to surround themselves with objects and services that do not work. But just as today we no longer ask Art to reassure us with beautiful landscapes, but rather to provide us with a reading, a meaning, a vision of contemporaneity on which to meditate, in the very same way with regard to Design, today we do not ask a product/service simply to *work*, but rather to help us interpret the spirit of the times through a new meaning. This can be achieved, for example, through the introduction of new gestures, new habits, new aesthetics that can contribute to improving our experience of the world.

1.2.7 Dynamic Balance

Balance in theoretical physics is defined as a condition in which the actions of different forces cancel each other out, generating a situation of harmony. But in moving from theoretical physics to life experience, it is often necessary to introduce altering variables such as time, friction, etc. So, to begin with, we can think of the various forces involved as changing over time and precisely because of this harmony of balance, as the result of these forces, will change over time. Therefore, there is a dynamic dimension to balance.

The closest personal experience to the dimension of balance is probably riding a bicycle, an activity in which opposing forces, allowing you to go forward, are at work. In fact, it is precisely by moving forward that one avoids falling. Some more skilled or more fortunate people may have the same experience surfing over a wave or fighting the wind in a sailing boat. In any case, these are experiences where conflicting forces are managed and organised to generate a favorable condition for the person involved in the activity, even though such a condition changes every moment and therefore requires constant attention and an immediate ability to react.

From the design point of view, within a society-world that is becoming more and more complex, it is important to consider the di-

mension of harmony as a dynamic, ever-changing condition requiring constant tests (in virtue of its constant, unexpected developments).

1.3 Conclusions

Our country, and specifically the city of Milan, is a particularly fertile and dynamic context for Design. In fact, the city is easily associated with events of the Design Week, thanks also to the presence of various professional and cultural realities, as well as a strong tradition linked to what is defined as Design Culture (*Cultura del Progetto*). According to Ettore Sottsass (2002):

In Italy design is not a profession, it is a way of life.

I think this statement reiterates the importance of Design when viewed beyond the strictly professional dimension and in connection with the society in which we live. Sottsass's verdict also came to my mind when I came into contact with the Japanese term *Ikigai*. More than a term, *Ikigai* is a concept, as it represents a situation of existential balance in which four conditions occur simultaneously. The first one is "you do what you love". According to it, your work and your actions correspond to your desire or passion, and that putting it into practice is a kind of existential mission. The second one is "what you do is what you're good at". The idea here is that your job allows you to put your professional and personal skills into practice. The third condition, then, is that "you do what you can be paid for". So that the results of one's work can be professionally verified, which is usually also based on an economic dimension.

These first three conditions have mainly to do with the subject, apart from the last one where an external value dimension also comes into play. The fourth one instead reverses the point of view, because it requires doing *what the world needs*. Therefore, by widening the horizon of reference, one's work must be useful to the world, to others, to society.

It must be said that this interpretation of the term, whereby *Ikigai* expresses the complex situation of balance in which the four

conditions occur, has been proposed by an American researcher, Dan Buettner, who has “translated” the term into an almost diagrammatic form, in order to make it easier for Westerners to understand, while for the Japanese the meaning probably appears less complex and more intuitive.

It was very natural for me to superimpose the aforementioned Sottsass’s statement on this diagram (Fig 1.1) and certain characteristics, such as *responsibility*, *meaning*, *character* and *beauty*, which I believe should be part of the set, professional and personal, of a designer, particularly nowadays. Such characteristics can hardly be expected from a traditional training course, but rely on personal qualities that can be developed, supported, helped by an experiential training that must, in some way, involve life, passions, interests, to reach a relationship between the designer and society (Biamonti, 2020).

The outlined connection and involvement therefore imply the existence of a social role for Design. Such a social role that cannot be separated from taking a position towards the choices and the visions that concern the society in the context of a political dimension. Today, the idea of doing politics through projects is no longer a slogan, but can actually boast a tradition of projects and practices that in recent decades have gradually become the tools of a form of innovation capable of generating *added values*, both in economic terms and in terms of social integration. A still blurred idea of projects and practices, sometimes at the “prototype” stage, which help to visualize the scenario of future community structures.

Therefore, we are not talking about a purely ideological individual political identification. But rather the assumption, supported by the growing need to produce meaning, of a role within politics. A Design involved within the government of the *polis*, and therefore Design as a key-element in the development of visions, choices and, indeed, policies of society.

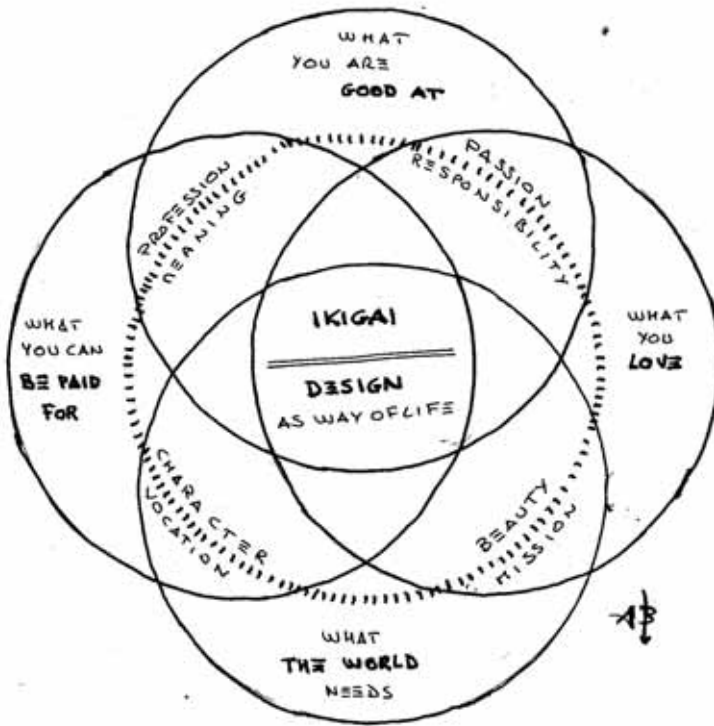


Fig. 1.1 – Ikigai diagrammatic representation

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The environmental emergency of the last century, highlighted by the pandemic, has led to an urgent need to reformulate the predominant role of human beings on the planet by undertaking a less anthropocentric design approach. This urgency has been especially outlined by a re-evaluation of the concept of the Anthropocene, which can be defined as a geological era characterized by the significant human impact on the geology and ecosystems of the Earth. Within this theoretical framework, the book explores the role of Design as a multifaceted discipline capable of exploring the complexity of a changing world, and reconsiders the human being's position in a pervasive relationship with the contemporary environments (physical and abstract) through a More-than-Human approach.

This volume illustrates reflections, analyses, and interventions guided by or intersected with the concept of the post-Anthropocene, and traces two different scales of observation. The first, explored in the two starting chapters, highlights how the complexity of the topic requires a large-scale analysis perspective in order to be fully understood. The concept of the post-Anthropocene does not exclude the human being as a fundamental component but takes the latter as a departing point to frame wider contemporary needs and issues and to support a call for action to envision and shape the future. The second part of the book instead explores the possibility to include, within this broad discussion, the theme of More-than-Human applied to specific disciplines – linked to the culture of Design – analyzing different aspects that move from taxonomy, application, and creativity.

