

THE DESIGN AFTER

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THE DESIGN AFTER

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SENSING THE CITY, SENSING THE RURAL

The track seeks to examine the role of technology in the urban-rural balance.

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RE-THINKING THE DESIGN ROLE: EXPERIMENTING NEW NARRATIVE & RHETORIC DESIGN METHODS

In thinking objects and spaces design produces symbols, cultural and aesthetic codes as a “cultural system”, which spreads innovation, embodied in new knowledge, products, values and lifestyles. It creates new meanings and, at the same time, it absorbs and modifies its rites and traditions; it renews the sense of things, it produces new mentalities. New visions of the world. Design is placed at the centre of a network of complex relations where the dominant features are “narrative” and “rhetoric”, which legitimize its products and modify design methods. In doing so, design elaborates and re-elaborates those design methods able to go beyond the dimension of technical gestures and of pure formal research, and access the unprecedented from within the routes traced by the ordinary. Many concepts developed within the design community have the strength to produce effects of meaning that transcend the boundaries of the discipline and spread to the wider socio-cultural system, bringing expert knowledge closer to the system of the collective imagination. The practice of planning is able to combine the richness of traditional techniques with new languages, redefining their characters and meaning. This article intends to focus on Design Storytelling as a true narrative expedient called upon to unify the objectual micronarrations in a single great story and, at the same time, to experiment with new cognitive, strategic and practical processes. Design guides the new processes of meaning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Krippendorff, 2006) and introduces new design methods of innovating not only the form-function, but above all, the form-meaning.

Keywords: Storytelling, Metanarrations, Design Rethoric, Sense Making, Design Identity

THE BRAND SCENARIO & NEW DESIGN NARRATIVE DEVICES

As a result of a continuous dematerialization of the market (Semprini, 1993) the brand represents the framework of meaning, capable of containing, amplifying and conveying the symbolic and cultural aspects of production. The sales space, up until recently the only place for economic exchange, is at this point part of a more complex *omnichannel* system, where the sales process is split into several different sales areas. In this context, the narrative aspect underlying the brand takes on even more value, precisely because it is capable of triggering those symbolic-relational practices that are able to act as an “adhesive” between the different formats and concepts in which the company today makes itself accessible. From the flagship store to the temporary store and through online stores, including new social media contexts, the element of cohesion is increasingly entrusted to the construction of narration that is capable of conveying, within the social context, an extended network of meanings, symbols and stories, that feed the everyday life of new atmospheres and rituals through articulated metaphors and new rhetoric. With the aim of enhancing their material and immaterial heritage, companies implement relational aspects and construction of meaning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Krippendorff, 1989, 1990, 2006) found within the retail space. Starting with the initial studies by Hirshmann and Holbrook on the hedonistic experience of consumption, the recognition of the experiential and emotional variable (Schmitt, 1999; Pine and Gilmore, 1999) launched the transformation of the retail space into a place where the brand finds full expression (Aaker, 2003; Aaker and Joachimstaler, 2003). If the store becomes the narrative context of the brand, design takes on the role of a system capable of bringing together production and consumption. Design translates strategies, expectations and discourses into as many scenarios of meaning which, in the contemporary panorama, become articulated scenarios of meaning. The use of metaphors, the invention of images and narrative hypotheses is the design response to what would be impossible to say otherwise. The more complex articulation attributed to the activities of brand enhancement requires the implementation of more experimental actions for the development of new narrative-design concepts as a guide for setting up new Retail spaces.

THE NARRATIVE DIMENSION AS A HERMENEUTIC DESIGN FRAMEWORK

If we consider narration - in the form of myth, legend, fable, story, of epic poetry but also painting, cinema, photography, in all its many forms - as one of the greatest categories of knowledge (Barthes, 1969) and as the first interpretative and cognitive device that man uses in his life experience (Bruner, 1988), the narration unfolds from within as a peculiar epistemological connotation (Striano, 2005). The act of narrating implies an activity of codification and definition of coordinates - in the sense of "putting in order" - useful for framing events, occurrences and situations in order to explain them, confer significance, according to a logic of meaning. If therefore, on the one hand, narration is a tool to "give form to the disorder of experiences" (Eco, 1994), on the other hand, contextually, it becomes a generator of knowledge by activating processes of elaboration, understanding and interpretation of the reality undertaken (Bruner, 1991). While the "narrative thought" acts at a subjective and interpersonal level, translating experiences, facts and events into a plurality of meanings, the "narrative discourse" organizes these meanings and makes them "communicable", transferable; it makes them "collective speech" and, as such, subject to multiple possible interpretations.

Within the context of this paper, the "art of storytelling", which accompanies the evolutionary history of mankind, starting from oral narration, then transiting from written narration to the contemporary ubiquity of visual narratives (Falcinelli, 2014), is intended as a tool for sharing a common sense of horizons, and takes on a collective and generative dimension. And this should not be confused with the increasingly popular practice - which began circulating around the nineties in the twentieth century - of management or marketing storytelling. If the narrative dimension contributes to the attribution of meanings and to the generation of meaning and relationships, marketing storytelling - in its most common current meaning - «glues artificial stories onto reality, blocks exchanges, saturates the symbolic space of adaptations and stories (...) designs behaviours, directs the flow of emotions, synchronizes their circulation» (Salmon, 2008) creating narrative mechanisms within which individuals/consumers are led to identify and conform themselves.

Design, as a process of signification (Krippendorff, 2006), «of introduction of new meanings within cultural micro-worlds» (Bertola, 2013), can in all respects be considered narration. Design, which generates sign artefacts - whether they be products, environments, systems, communicative artefacts... - acts on the co-present and complementary dimensions of form/function and form/meaning, of meaning and significance, activating actual *narrative discourses*. Working through *narrative discourses*

means, as mentioned above, dealing with the "transferability" of narration: the design process, and more specifically the metadesign, informs *narrative sequences* capable of returning complex, multi-dimensional, individual experiences yet inserted in a framework of shared and collective meaning. These narrative sequences, in turn composed of micro-narrative signs, enter into a system of relationships that implies activating dialogic comparisons: all the products/events/environments - intended as design objects - are potentially semiotic in so much as they are capable of activating processes of response and interpretation, perception and judgment (Bonfantini, 2000). The design sign does not live autonomously and autarchically, rather it enters into a continuous system of relations with its own context - social, economic and cultural - made up of production, sales, communication and consumption systems that find total confluence and completeness in the retail space. Within this context, the elements/signs that contribute to composing the brand's universe - of which the store represents the main narrative opportunity - behave as functional actants (Greimas, 1979): the single sign-object micro-narratives no longer have reason to be defined in an ontological manner - as bearers of a single and univocal message and/or function - but rather in a relational way, thus clarifying *what relationship they trigger*. «Thinking of the world as a set of objects seems to work less and less. An object exists as a bond of a set of interactions, of relations, and these can be described in terms of relative information of systems (or processes): information that a system has on another system» (Rovelli, 2014). As in physics, design shifts its focus from the object to the relationship between objects, from the design of the form-function-meaning to the direction of relationship systems. Object micro-narratives are replaced or integrated by the project of the narrative sequence where design intervenes primarily in the information process - in the sense of giving semantic, sensitive, material, experiential form - of the relationship.

NARRATIVE BOXES. NARRATIVE AND METAPHORIC ARTIFICES AS TRANSLATION PLATFORMS ORIENTED TOWARDS THE PROJECT

The strength of the project lies in the ability to give shape to what does not yet exist, other than in the mind of the designer, placing visual thoughts in front of our eyes. The strength of the project lies in the ability to give meaning to what is new, anchoring it towards a common feeling. Giving shape and giving meaning are inextricably combined in the acts of design configuration and pre-figuration. In fact, the innovation introduced by the design belongs, prior to the material dimension, to the symbolic and

cognitive dimension, and the objects that derive from it, even before being material, technological and instrumental objects, are cultural objects. Design works through continuous acts of decoding, coding and re-coding in a process of continuous translation of contextual disengagements of elements which recombined, transmuted and reinterpreted re-enter the context that generated them by carefully placing the elements of innovation on the linguistic, expressive and formal domains of tradition. In this sense, design implements processes very similar to the series of linguistic artifices - which in literature are considered estrangement - used by writers to present new aspects of a, more or less, known reality. Or, vice versa, it is the outflow from a context known to give ordinary elements an extraordinary character, in the etymological sense of out of the ordinary.

In order to be accepted, that which is new always needs to be tamed, made familiar, or rather inserted into the enclosure of what is already known. The sensorial boxes, which we present here, constitute "experiential cases", containers of elements wisely taken from a context that have the role of evoking, separate cultural elements, bringing them closer together and mending them, that are capable of reifying a complex context, through salient identity traits.

The box, being a container, takes on simultaneously the symbolic role of a fence and a frame. The enclosure also unites and makes daring combinations familiar. It normalizes them, it makes them obvious (Morin, 1966). The frame elevates the mere objectuality of what is contained in it and turns it into a metaphor; it allows to add, remove and modify the sense of things, it enables design thinking: the act of re-interpretation at the base of all creative processes.

The frame introduces "a vision, a reading, a look, a point of view" (Baule, 2011). A narration that here loses its mimetic connotation and instead looks toward linguistic devices capable of abstracting and opening up to meanings that transcend specific material, working on the symbolic terrain - as occurs when using metaphors - yet also capable of objectifying or transforming abstract meanings into shared images as in the use of types and stereotypes.

There is a rich linguistic apparatus in the design; a field of continuous experimentation, in particular in the area that we define as meta-design.

To this, we attribute all the "translation" operations of multidisciplinary knowledge that collaborate in the ideational process. As well as those regarding visualization which are necessary, for example, to transform the description of behaviours and needs into useful analysis tools for the design. Or the

abstraction operations that lead to the visualization of the design problem. Or the description of intangible facts such as lifestyles, formal and expressive languages or the visualization of pre-project artefacts which are the scenarios in which new values, behaviours and ways of use are proposed.

There are, as well, the narrative expedients needed to make visible not only the physical qualities of the object but also the qualitative elements - sensorial, communicative, value, emotional, relational, memory etc. - that are decisive in the construction of the product's identity.

The "narrative boxes" incorporate and stratify the possible acts of understanding, interpretation, construction, coding and translation that take place in the processes of finalizing the design's intention. They constitute an actual re-writing intervention of a system of detected signs. They shape them, but not as a closing act, rather as a platform for building new worlds.

METHAPHORICAL BOXES SPECULATION AS NEW EXPERIMENTAL NARRATIVE & RHETORIC DESIGN METHODS

The revaluation of the sensitive element, as a vehicle of mediation between scientific knowledge and collective imagination, leads to the pre-figuration of imagination and narratives. In this context, a number of artistic experiments, including the art series *The Future of Demonstration* (2017-2018), have critically investigated - through a transdisciplinary approach - the relationship between reality and its multiple narratives and representations. Through storytelling, the company seeks exclusive relationships with its audience; it investigates techniques, languages and designs specific narrative contents, defining the set of speeches that give rise to symbolic and cultural productions. This requires the designer to undergo a continuous search for innovation of the meta-linguistic criteria and connection fields. If, from the point of view of the user experience, the consolidated techniques of *Personas* and *Scenarios* represent an outstanding design expedient, as far as the relationship between brand-narrative-retail is concerned, the design of storytelling requires new tools of rhetorical innovation. The narrative effectiveness appears to be connected to the search for narrative-communicative artifices capable of creating new alliances between the material and immaterial value carriers.

In the work presented here, the narrative *expedient* is represented by the construction of the *Metaphorical Boxes speculation*, a limited place, yet not closed, capable of containing and conveying the meaning of the material and immaterial variables innate within

possible narrative contexts (if related to the company, then connected to the brand identity) and at the same time aimed at feeding new creative-design processes. The *metaphorical boxes* present themselves as boxes inside which objects, sound, olfactory, tactile materials are found; elements which, however, still need to be "discovered" and, only after their manipulation or transformation, do they reveal their meaning. The individual elements take on value, not so much in relation to their individual meaning, rather exclusively if interpreted in relation to the context of the entire box, as Morin (1983) reminds us, «the whole is greater than the sum of the parts», the relationship with the other elements of context activates a relationship of tension between *adaptation and the structure of internal identity*, such as to lead to an interpretative transformation.

Initially they appear almost like the aesthetic result of an advanced moodboard, yet in fact they are the result of a careful and systematic collection of material and immaterial elements aimed at activating a creative design vision and, therefore, like the pre-figuration not only of a possible design story, but also of the behaviours it encourages. These boxes are inserted, in a nuanced and fluid meta-design moment, at a "pre-scenario" level in which the single significant units are subjected to a process of semantic, sensorial and imaginative translation.

From the point of view of the metaphorical boxes' purpose, we observe at least two operational levels. The first refers to their construction, launched within the context of intransitive relations connected to the area of *design conversation* aimed at defining the "thing that does not exist". In this context, the activation of heuristic and metaphorical procedures enable to produce translations of meaning and hybridizations between universes of different meaning while, at the same time, they also restructure relationship (Penati, 2018). An activity that finds conceptual synthesis inside the box and that is necessary for the subsequent abduction processes. With regard to the second level, this refers to the use of the Methaphorical Box as a starting point for the interpretation of design hypotheses, capable of generating the novelty starting from the metaphorical stimulation contained in the box.

The *Methaphorical Boxes* are therefore the semantic and emotional link of a hypothetical narrative-set-up filter around a specific theme (on which works the person who defines the box, but does not reveal it to the person who eventually interprets it). The metaphors recreated seek to stimulate the ability to "see otherwise" with the aim of developing new and unpublished narrative-fitting experiences for the user. They are conceptual proposals which not only enable to show and synthesize a vision of aesthetic-functional meaning, but also enable to perceive them sensitively and perceptively.

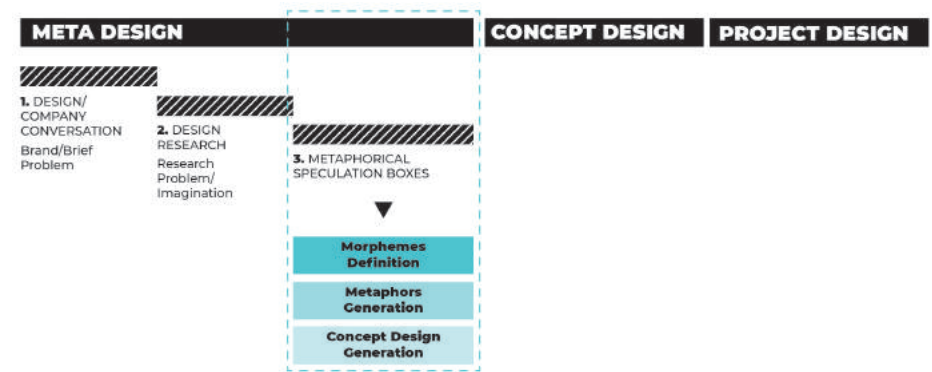


Figure 1. Design Process and Phases

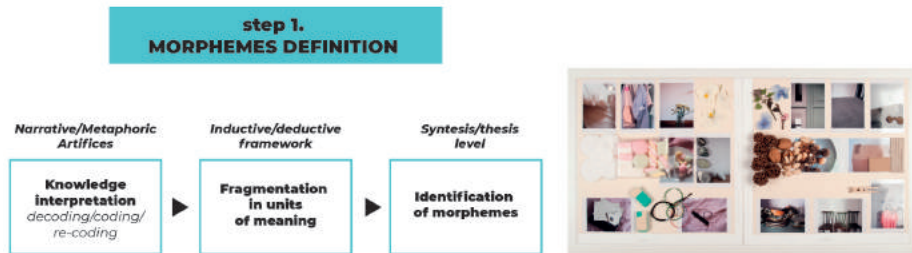
The Metaphorical Boxes develop along a path that we can explain as characterized by three main phases set in synergy between them (Fig.1). From an initial phase (Design/Company conversation) of activation of design thinking, where the research theme is identified and addressed from the point of view of the aims and the constraints placed, we pass, through a selection and filter activity, to a second phase (Design research) aimed at activating the "narrative thought". A phase where, through recognition, selection and connection, but also transposition, coding/decoding, the design generates particular, surprising, unexpected visions and translates them into thought through images. In this sense, the design absorbs and shapes, through a non-alphabetic vision typical of *simultaneous and visual-spatial intelligence* (Gardner, 1988; Penati, 2018) material, sensory, synaesthetic allusions without establishing a hierarchy between them, rather operating by synthesis. Here, thought does not follow the linearity of logic, rather it moves by similarities, by anchors. The images blend together in similarity, content, sensitivity and atmosphere. The relationship between observer and observed fact establishes a self-creating, autopoietic effect, where confusion (programmed, explicit, conscious) leads to the inexhaustible circularity of self-referential paradoxes. The objective is not the search for the "real", but for the "possible". Narrative thinking tends towards the construction of visions where things, people and contexts are linked together by the plot of cause-effect relations, space-time connections and the set of emotional and sensitive thoughts. This phase represents, for the designer, the starting point for the next phase in which the actual process of construction of narrative metaphors begins.

In the third phase (Metaphorical Speculation Boxes), the designer turns his attention to the translation of knowledge in the sense of constructing the "narrative discourse". Within this context and, through a process of semantic translation, the defined visions are transfigured into as many design metaphors capable of conveying their identity through the minimal elements of significance

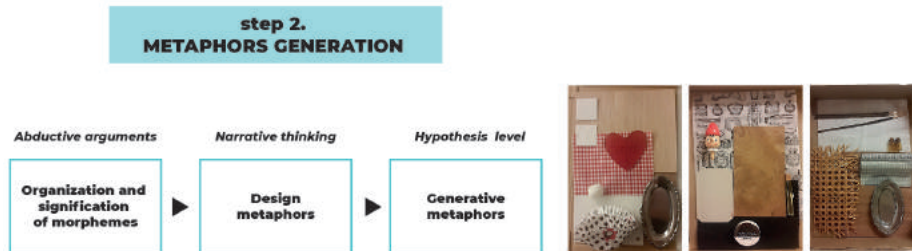
(morphemes) which, organized together, are able to restore their original essence. The vision becomes an "object" represented, organized, narrated, objectified and, as a sign, subordinated to the interpretation of the observer. The observer, who may not coincide with the person who processed the box, is entrusted with the last process of translation and interpretation towards a design concept. This third phase develops via three further moments. The first aims at defining morphemes (Fig.2), or rather the elementary units at the basis of narrative discourse, the second at defining metaphors (Fig.3), which construct specific units of meaning through the sign/symbolic, objective/visual and immaterial/sensorial organization based on sign and conceptual speculations. The third, instead, represents the relationship that is established between the Metaphorical Box and the subsequent phase of generation of the design concept (Fig.4).

Figure 2. Metaphorical Boxes
Speculation: Morphemes
Definition
Figure 3. Metaphorical Boxes
Speculation: Metaphors
Generation
Figure 4. Metaphorical Boxes
Speculation: Concept Design
Generation

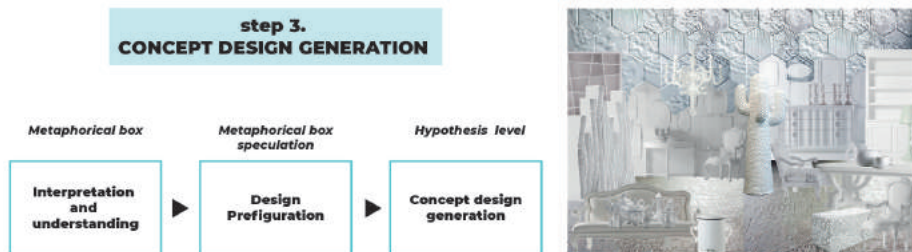
METAPHORICAL BOXES SPECULATION



METAPHORICAL BOXES SPECULATION



METAPHORICAL BOXES SPECULATION



CONCLUSIONS

The Metaphorical Boxes were used by the authors, within the didactic context, as input to projects related to Retail Design, at the academic and at an applied research level. The model experimented a change both in the transmission of new knowledge within the project and in the training of new skills for the project. The new narrative space becomes a relational place, a synthesis of a process in which imagination is organized, narrated and objectified and, as a vehicle of signs, subordinated to the spectator's interpretation. The transition from theoretical research to practical application has required continuous adjustments, especially with regard to sharing meanings at a level of different geographical cultures, where perceptual interpretation was not always homogeneous in the work group. The model has therefore placed increasing attention on the selection of morphemes and metaphors in relation to the specificity of the interlocutors, precisely because the meaning is never dependent on a single interpretation; rather it is determined in the relationship between observer and observed fact.

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