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Design in the transition phase: a new design culture for the emerging design

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ABSTRACT

In the present debate, the term ‘design’ is used with three different meanings: *diffuse design*, *expert design*, and *co-design*. This paper mainly refers to expert design. That is, the members of the design community who, by definition, should be endowed with specific design skills and culture. Given that, assuming that we are *already* living in transition phase, it proposes to see the contemporary society as a huge future-building laboratory in which a broad and complex learning process is taking place. In this conceptual framework, it discusses the expert design role in general and, in particular, what its specific skills and culture should be.

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Premise 1: the use of the term ‘design’

In the present debate the term ‘design’ can be found to have three different meanings:

- Design/1, or *diffuse design*, i.e. the natural human ability to adopt a design approach, which results from the combination of critical sense, creativity, and practical sense.
- Design/2, or *expert design*, i.e. the expert members of the design community who, by definition, should be endowed with specific design skills and culture.
- Design/3, or *co-design*, i.e. the overall design process resulting from the interaction of a variety of disciplines and stakeholders, including final users and design experts.

Therefore, when discussing design, it is important to clarify which one of these ‘designs’ we are talking about. For example, when the discussion is on problem-based and solution-oriented design processes and their transdisciplinary nature, we are obviously referring to Design/3. On the contrary, Design/1 is the one referred to when discussing the importance of spreading design capabilities among different stakeholders (as happens with the whole discussion on design thinking). Finally, when we discuss developing specific design skills and culture, by definition we are talking about Design/2.

In this paper, I will mainly refer to Design/2, i.e. the expert design, focusing on what it is and what its specific skills and culture should be in order to play a role in the transition toward a resilient and sustainable society.¹

Premise 2: the transition phase

We are *already* living in transition phase: the twenty-first century has seen all of us catapulted into a risky, turbulent, and complex reality that we can perceive as a mesh of long-lasting crises and/or as a broad social learning process.

In this framework, contemporary society can be seen as a huge future-building laboratory where everything that belonged to the mainstream way of thinking and doing in the twentieth century is changing and will change: from everyday life and the very idea of well-being, to the large socio-technical eco-systems in which they exist; a learning process of which design is part and in which it could, and should, play a major role.

In this laboratory, different mutually reinforcing factors, i.e. different 'regimes'², coexist:

- *Regime1*: This is the one that was mainstream in the twentieth century. Now it is declining, but it is still powerful, with its past century large and hierarchical companies and institutions, its economy of scale and its promises of a product-oriented well-being.
- *Regime2*: It is the most powerful emerging regime. It presents two interrelated sides: the one driven by the big powers of the twenty-first century, with their 'the winner-takes-all economy'³ and their proposal of hyper-individualized and delocalized service-oriented well-being. As a kind of reaction, on its other side, we observe the spread of fear (of the future and of the 'others'), the rise of a new tribalism, and of a desperate search for roots and identity.
- *Regime3*: This is another twenty-first century emerging regime, an alternative to both Regimes1 and 2, in which limits of the planet and connectivity combine themselves in promising social and productive networks: small, open, connected, and localized organizations that conceive and realize new ideas and practices. In doing so, this anticipates resilient and sustainable ways of living.

It is clear that the forces of Regime1 are the ones trying to keep us in the ecological 'trap'⁴ that we have been dragged into during the past century, and which we are largely still in.

On the contrary, the forces of the emerging Regime2 are driving us toward another catastrophic perspective: bailing us out of the previous trap, they bring us in another, one that is even worse, characterized by hyper-individualism and social, cultural, and environmental desertification.

Luckily, we are also witnessing the advance of Regime3: new ideas and new practices that impact on the concepts of time, place, work, well-being and, more generally, the quality of relationships. Ideas and practices that are starting to weave the fabric of a resilient and sustainable well-being, and hence, if we are able to recognize it, also of a new design culture (Manzini and Tassinari 2013; Manzini 2014; Meroni 2007).

Premise 3: the strategy of change

Theoretical reflection on complex systems and practical experience of social innovation lead us to the recognition that a large, complex problem should not be tackled by looking for a single, large, complex, unitary solution but by spreading the complexity over the various nodes in the system. As Josephine Green (2013) writes: 'Rather than trying to control complexity through top down command and control hierarchies, social innovation shows us

how to embrace complexity'. It does so by developing local initiatives in which those directly affected, i.e. those who know the problem best and from close up, are directly involved.

It appears that the main design strategy to change complex systems, including the very large ones, does not consist of conceiving equally large and complex solutions, but in 'making things happen' and then learning from experience, and in creating more favorable eco-systems for them where they can flourish, spread, and connect vertically (up-scaling) and horizontally (out-scaling) .

The previous paragraph may need further explanations: making things happen and learning from experiences are not the only terrain for action. Other kinds of design initiatives are needed: the ones to integrate a multiplicity of local projects (for example, 'planning by projects' and 'acupunctural planning' which, by linking up different local projects and different scales of intervention, tend to influence and transform large institutions and entire territorial systems), and the ones that contribute to producing a more favorable environment for the birth and development of a multiplicity of other projects, even though they do not contribute directly and immediately to the solution of a specific problem. For example, this group includes design initiatives that produce infrastructure, standards, and regulations, knowledge, visions, and shared values that together are able to increase the probability of new solutions emerging and help them develop in greater synergy)

I argue for a theory of change in which broad and long-term views are needed to feed and orient the social conversation on what to do and how. In addition, therefore, to trigger and enhance small, local, and connected actions; a multiplicity of projects in a social learning process in which available resources can be catalyzed and used best.

Question 1(1): Is there a need for another kind of designing that is connected to long horizons of time and visions of a sustainable future?

- YES, design must evolve, developing a culture and a posture capable of connecting what design experts do to long horizons of time and visions of a sustainable future. Yes, this is a new design because mainstream design is still in the trap of Regime1 and because strong drivers are pulling innovation, and several design experts, in the new trap of Regime2.
- NO, we do not need a special kind of design (Transition Design) among other kinds of design. Long horizons of time and visions of a sustainable future should become the 'normal' cultural background of future mainstream design. That is, of the whole community of design experts willing to do what design, by definition, should do. That is, to work for a better, more livable world.

Question 1(2): How does Transition Design differ from other attempts to reorient design?

For me, 'transition design' should be intended as 'design in the transition phase.' Therefore, this question becomes: in the transition phase how does design change?

Design in the transition phase is not a discipline. The transition phase is a context in which design is embedded, being influenced by it and having the capability to influence

it. In this context, design is applicable in different ways, with different postures and using different skills.

It appears that in the transition very different kinds of design initiatives can be performed. In short, they can be grouped into three main typologies:

- *Design activism*, when design experts actively promote new local initiatives.
- *Design with communities*, when design experts collaborate with active groups of people in making a given solution more accessible and more capable of lasting well into the future.
- *Design for favorable eco-systems*, when design experts conceive and develop material and immaterial artifacts that are capable of making a whole eco-system more favorable for new initiatives to emerge, flourish, spread, and connect.

What these different ways of working have in common is what makes them effective agents of a positive change. It is a design culture that drives and directs them. That is, for what our discussion here is concerned with, it is the design culture of design in the transition toward a resilient and sustainable society.

Question 1(3): What skill set would be unique to Transition Design?

For me, this question should be changed and become: what skill set should design experts have to play the role of change makers in the transition toward resilient and sustainable society?

To answer this question, two steps must be completed:

- To recognize the *emerging design* features.⁵ That is, to recognize the on-going changes in design culture and practice and the emerging skills that, in the crisis of Regime1, characterize it.
- To outline the *specific competences* permitting emerging design to become an agent of change toward Regime3. That is, toward a resilient and sustainable society.

Today, the basic features of emerging design are already clear, and they are very different from those dominant in the twentieth century. The main feature is that its focus has shifted from 'objects' (meaning products, services and systems) toward 'ways of thinking and doing' (meaning methods, tools, approaches and, as we will see, design cultures). In so doing, design becomes an agent capable of tackling widely differing issues adopting a human-centered approach: from traditional product-oriented design processes to complex and often intractable social, environmental and even political problems⁶. A second main change, linked to the first one, is that all design processes are, de facto, to be considered co-design activities involving a variety of actors: professional designers, other kinds of experts and final users (Ehn 2008; Ehn and Nilsson 2014; Manzini and Rizzo 2011).

Given that, as anticipated, a second step has to be completed. In fact, the emerging design basic features and the consequent design experts' capabilities, per se, do not say for which kind of change they will be used. In short, emerging design could be, and de facto already is, a driver of change for both Regime2 and Regime3.

The question therefore becomes: what is the skill set needed to make emerging design a potential driver for Regime3?

To answer this new question, two different issues must be considered: the quality of the *design process* and of the *design culture*.

- *Design process*. Emerging design (in transition to Regime3) is an activity promoting and supporting contradictory, open-ended processes in which different stakeholders bring their specific skills and their culture. The complex and dynamic nature of these co-design processes is what gives emerging design the possibility to operate as a real agent of change toward resilient and sustainable ways of living and producing.⁷
- *Design culture*. Emerging design in transition (to Regime3) participates in the co-design processes, feeding them with ideas, visions, and proposals. That is, using the same words of the Transition Design definition: it is the capability to support design actions with 'long horizons of time and visions of a sustainable future.' In my interpretation, this design feature is not one of a specific kind of design, but it is the main pillar of what twenty-first century design culture should be. That is, the culture of all the design experts willing to contribute to the transition toward a resilient and sustainable society.

Where should this new design culture come from? A full, well-reasoned answer to this question is beyond the scope of this paper. However, here I can summarize some points that seem to me to be particularly relevant.

This new design culture is not being invented from zero, but it can be built up by interacting with the growing wave of bottom-up social innovation (that is also the main driver of Regime3), and with the new set of interlinked scenarios it is generating and partially enhancing: the scenario of *distributed systems* (intended as the infrastructure of a resilient society); the scenario of *social economy* (intended as an ecology of different economies); the scenario of *relational qualities* (intended as the quality to be searched for to enjoy a sustainable prosperity); and the scenario of *cosmopolitan localism* (intended as the condition in which locality and connectedness, identity, and diversity come together giving richness to the experience and resilience to the overall socio-technical system).

In conclusion, emerging design must be fed by interactions with other cultural worlds (thanks to transdisciplinary interactions) and, most importantly, with discussions among peers in specific design arenas; exactly as the one we are doing with this Transition Design Symposium.

Notes

1. The contents of these notes refer to the first three chapters of my book, Manzini (2015)
2. Regime: a mutually reinforcing set of factors – value systems, institutions, infrastructures, and technologies – that shape and are shaped by ecological interdependence.
3. The winner-takes-all economy can be seen as an economy of the global scale, based on a mixture of liberalism+global networks.
4. Trap: a persistent maladaptive state; a dominant regime that undermines resilience and human well-being.
5. A very clear statement on the nature of emerging design, and in my view of its present limits, was proposed in 2014 in a manifesto named DesignX, collaboratively authored by: Ken Friedman (Tongji University, College of Design and Innovation and Swinburne University Centre for Design Innovation), Yongqi Lou (Tongji), Don Norman (University of California, San Diego, Design Lab), Pieter Jan Stappers (Delft University of Technology, Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering), Ena Voûte (Delft), and Patrick Whitney (Illinois Institute of Technology, Institute of Design). http://www.jnd.org/dn.mss/designx_a_future_pa.html (accessed December 2014).

6. The list of authors who contributed to start this re-definition of design could be very long. My main references are: Brown (2008); Buchanan (1992); Cross (2011).
7. This co-design process can be seen as a social conversation in which everybody is allowed to bring ideas and take action, even though these ideas and actions could, at times, generate problems and tensions. In short, this means that these involved actors are willing and able to establish a *dialogic cooperation*. That is, a conversation in which listening is as important as speaking Sennet (2012). See also: Björgvinsson, Ehn and Hillgren (2012, 127–144); DiSalvo (2012).

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