

Design Culture and Dialogic Design

Ezio Manzini

The question of culture is virtually absent from the debate on contemporary design and especially from what in this paper I refer to as *emerging design*: a problem-based, solution-oriented design, the defining characteristic of which is not the products, services, and communicative artifacts it produces, but the tools and methods it uses.¹ The discussion on it dutifully covers environmental, economic, and social issues, together with those of participation and the environmental, economic, and social effects of its results. Certainly all these aspects are very important, but the absence of a debate on emerging design's cultural dimension is a serious limitation that prevents it from becoming the agent of (cultural and therefore also social and environmental) change that it could and indeed should be. Meanwhile, although rarely discussed, emerging design *also* has its own culture—a culture that is rather limited and limiting precisely because of this lack of debate. In this paper I call this culture *solution-ism* and *participation-ism*.

To go beyond this somewhat reductive culture, we need to return to the discussion on issues that are or should be typical of design: from the criteria by which to orient and assess the quality of local solutions, to the broadest visions of the world toward which we work. This discussion must be undertaken through a *dialogic approach*, in which the various interlocutors, design experts included, interact as they bring their own ideas and define and accept their own responsibilities.

Design in the (Long) Transition

Emerging design is a way of interpreting design and designing that is not yet mainstream, but that is expanding and, for all intents and purposes, will be the design of the twenty-first century.² It is a theory and practice that started to take shape at the turn of the century—a period marked both by growing evidence of the planet's limits and by a rapid growth in connectivity. It is therefore a design that, more or less consciously, is gearing up to operate in the phase of transition in which we are immersed (and will continue to be for some time to come). This transition phase presents itself as a mesh of long and lasting crises and, at the same

1 A very clear statement on the nature of emerging design, and of its present limits, was proposed in 2014 in a manifesto titled "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). See http://www.jnd.org/dn.mss/designx_a_future_pa.html (accessed December 2014).

2 The contents of this paragraph summarize Chapter 2 of my book: *Design When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

time, as a broad, complex social learning process by which everything that belonged to the mainstream way of thinking and doing in the twentieth century will have to be reinvented: from everyday life and the very idea of well-being, to the large, socio-technical eco-systems in which we exist. Design is part of this learning process, and it could and should play a major role in it.

Today, at the beginning of this transition, the features of emerging design already appear, and they are very different from the ones that were dominant in the twentieth century. Traditional design theory and practice were constructed in the Europe of the early twentieth century, with reference to the industrial production of the time. It gave rise to the idea of design as an expert activity, aimed at conceiving and developing products for serial production using the industrial technology of the period. Much has changed since then. As mentioned, the main character of this change is that, in more recent interpretations, the focus of design has shifted away from “objects” (meaning products, services, and systems) and toward “ways of thinking and doing” (meaning methods, tools, approaches, and, as we will see, design cultures). In undergoing this shift, design becomes a means to tackle widely differing issues, adopting a human-centered approach: It shifts from traditional, product-oriented design processes to a process for designing solutions to complex and often intractable social, environmental, and even political problems.³

A second main change, linked to the first one, is that all design processes are, de facto, co-design activities that involve a variety of actors: professional designers, other kinds of experts, and final users.⁴

A third change, following from the first two, is that the term “design” can now be found with three different meanings: *diffuse design*, by which we refer to the natural human ability to adopt a design approach, which results from the combination of critical sense, creativity, and practical sense; *expert design*, by which we refer to professional designers who should, by definition, be endowed with specific design skills and culture; and *co-design*, by which we refer to the overall design process resulting from the interaction of a variety of disciplines and stakeholders—final users and design experts included.

When discussing design in general and emerging design in particular, making it clear which one of these “designs” we are talking about is important. For instance, when the discussion is on problem-based and solution-oriented design processes and their transdisciplinary nature, we are obviously referring to co-design. In contrast, diffuse design is the one at stake when discussing the importance of spreading design capabilities among

3 The list of authors who contributed to start this re-definition of design could be very long. My main references are: Richard Buchanan, “Wicked Problems in Design Thinking,” *Design Issues* 8, no. 2 (Spring 1992); Nigel Cross, *Design Thinking: Understanding How Designers Think and Work* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2011); and Tim Brown, “Design Thinking,” *Harvard Business Review* (June 2008): 30–35.

4 Pelle Ehn, “Participation in Design Things,” *Proceedings of the Tenth Anniversary Conference on Participatory Design 2008* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 2008), 92–101; Ezio Manzini and Francesca Rizzo, “Small Projects/Large Changes: Participatory Design as an Open Participated Process,” *CoDesign* 7, no. 3-4 (2011): 199–215; and Pelle Ehn and Elisabeth M. Nilsson, eds., *Making Futures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

different stakeholders (as happens with the whole discussion on design thinking). Finally, when we discuss specific design skills and culture, we are by definition talking about expert design.

In this paper I mainly refer to expert design, focusing on what it is and what skills and culture are specific to *design experts*.

Design Culture(s)

Recall that what characterizes emerging design are the methods and tools used. In it the role of design experts is to cultivate these methods and tools, apply them effectively, and make their usefulness visible. However, design is not only the sum of its methodologies and tools. Neither is the role of design experts reducible merely to this equation. Before being a technique, design is a capacity for critical analysis and reflection, with which design experts produce knowledge, visions, and quality criteria that can be made concrete in feasible proposals. And this understanding holds true at all levels: from the single local solution to the evolution of the entire socio-technical system. Therefore, whoever steps forward as a design expert must also be—and be acknowledged as—a carrier of this specific culture: the *design culture*. Design culture encompasses the knowledge, values, visions, and quality criteria that emerge from the tangle of conversations occurring during design activities (the ones that are open to interaction with a variety of actors and cultures) and the conversations that take place in various *design arenas*. Such arenas include the multiplicity of physical and virtual places—from conferences to informal encounters, books, universities, specialist journals, blogs, and Facebook groups—in which design, its meaning, and the quality of its results are discussed.

This definition is close to the one given by Guy Julier: When talking about design culture as a context-informed practice, he describes it as “collectively-held norms of practice shared within or across contexts.... [D]esign culture thus becomes a forum... by which globally diasporic actors connect, communicate, and legitimate their activities.”⁵ However, while for Julier design culture is principally a specific study discipline that produces its specific experts, for me it is mainly the culture of the designers themselves and of the communities in which they operate: the culture on which design itself is based and thanks to which innovative meanings can also be proposed. Precisely this design culture is the source of the most original contributions design experts can offer as innovation because, in presenting ideas, proposals, and visions, they can trigger meaningful changes in the very idea of well-being and in the qualities that characterize it. The search for those qualities is what motivates people’s choices at all levels: from single solutions to the reorientation of individual and collective ways of living.⁶

-
- 5 Guy Julier, “From Visual Culture to Design Culture,” *Design Issues* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2006), 70–71. See also Guy Julier, *The Culture of Design* (London: Sage, 2000); Victor Margolin, “The Product Milieu and Social Action,” in *Discovery Design: Exploration in Design Studies*, Richard Buchanan and Victor Margolin, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955); Ezio Manzini, “New Design Knowledge,” *Design Studies* 30, no. 1 (January 2009): 4–9.
- 6 Roberto Verganti, *Design-Driven Innovation* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2009); Ezio Manzini and Virginia Tassinari, “Sustainable Qualities: Powerful Drivers of Social Change,” in *Motivating Change: Sustainable Design and Behaviour in the Built Environment*, Robert Crocker and Steffen Lehmann (ed.) (London: Earthscan, 2013), 217–32.

From this point of view, which has its roots in the idea of “cultura del progetto” [design culture] from the Italian design tradition,⁷ design culture can be defined as the “meaningful context” in which a new project is conceived and developed and in which new meanings are produced—meanings that, in some cases, can influence the very culture from which they grew. In reference to this meaningful context, when Julier talks about design culture as agency, he says that “... it takes context as circumstance but not as a given: the world can be changed through a new kind of design culture.”⁸

An Emerging Design Culture?

Given its origins and nature, design culture is not a single unit; in fact, we should speak of it as a plural entity that includes as many different cultures as there are arenas in which the question of design is investigated and discussed. Nevertheless, in certain places and moments converging factors create the conditions for particularly clear and recognizable meaningful contexts to emerge. This convergence enables us to talk about the European design culture at the beginning of the past century, or American design culture in the 1930s, Scandinavian design culture in the 1950s, or Italian design culture in the 1980s. Conversely, but for the same reason, talking about the culture of emerging design is difficult. In the following paragraphs we examine why.

Every design project (just like any human activity or product) exists both in a physical-biological world—where human beings live and artifacts are produced and function—and a socio-cultural world—where human beings interact through language and things assume meaning.⁹ Thus, describing a project by talking about its way of tackling and resolving a problem (i.e., describing it as a solution) means observing it in the first world. Conversely, describing the culture it emerged from, the quality criteria it adopts, and the meanings it carries means considering it in the second world. Therefore, every human activity and everything we produce always lives in both these worlds, even when one of these lives may not be evident.

Up to now, the life of artifacts in the socio-cultural world appears clear, and can easily become an object of discussion when we refer to material artifacts, whether armchair or washing machine, house or city: We have a language to talk about these artifacts’ meanings (because over time they have been socially constructed); we have quality criteria by which to judge them; and we have cultural references with which to compare them.

We cannot say the same of emerging design and its results. This is so for two reasons: First, the urgency and extent of the problems to be tackled drive us to a pragmatism that in the name of efficacy leaves no time for critical and cultural

-
- 7 “Cultura del progetto” is translated in English as “design culture,” but it must be considered that, in Italian, the term “progetto” has a deeper and more complex meaning than the one normally given to the English term “design.” See also: Andrea Branzi, *Weak and Diffuse Modernity: The World of Projects at the Beginning of the 21st Century* (Milano: Skira, 2008); and Andrea Branzi, *Introduzione al design italiano* [Introduction to Italian Design] (Milano: Baldini & Castoldi, 1999).
- 8 Julier, “From Visual Culture to Design Culture,” 71.
- 9 Humbert R. Maturana, Francisco J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (Dordrecht, ND: Reidel Publishing, 1980); Herbert R. Maturana, *The Biological Foundations of Self-Consciousness and the Physical Domain of Existence* (Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 1993).

reflection. Second, in emerging design, project results are complex, hybrid, dynamic entities, and we do not yet have language for talking about them, history to compare them with, or until now, arenas in which to discuss them. Consequently, recognizing the design culture from which they are emerging and which they are expressing is no easy matter. Therefore, the conversation tends to deflate into narrowly solution-oriented discourse—a mere narration of the techniques used and the effectiveness of its results, suggesting that this field is the only one on which discussion is possible.

It must be added that, in this same solution-oriented discourse, some cultural issues do appear too: The more human-centered is the problem, the more participative is the process of resolving it and the more socially innovative is the solution the more the cultural dimension of the problems tackled and the solutions found must be investigated in depth to understand people's needs, their capabilities and motivations, and the social dynamics in which they are living. However, while this solution-oriented culture is indispensable in getting a clear focus on the problems and on stakeholder capabilities and motivations, it does not lead us to propose new qualities. It does not enable us to say how we can create a world that is richer in opportunities, more interesting, and, ultimately, more attractive.

Solution-ism and Participation-ism

If the discussion on emerging design focuses mainly in its functioning, it goes without saying that the technological, economic and managerial dimensions must play a central role in it, and that the necessary cultural contributions are also orientated in this direction. On the other hand, since as we said no human action can be free of the sense system it exists in, these solution-orientated technical and cultural actions also have a meaning, they emerge from and propose a design culture. In our case, the culture of today's emerging design comes over as a tangle of *solution-ism* and *participation-ism*.

Solution-ism. By this expression, which I have taken from Eugeny Morozov, though without necessarily sharing all that this author attributes to it, I mean a culture that starts from an approach that is in my view totally correct, reducing it to a reductive ideology that leads us, as Morozov writes, to recast “*all complex social situations either as neatly defined problems with definite, computable solutions or as transparent and self-evident processes that can be easily optimized.*”¹⁰

In my view, the correct initial approach is the one stating that the complexity of the world, and therefore of the problems it poses, should be tackled by identifying a multiplicity of less

¹⁰ Ibid., 5.

complex, smaller scale sub-issues. This approach, which comes from theoretical reflection on complex systems and from the practical experience of social innovation, leads to the recognition that a big, complex problem should be tackled not by looking for a single, big, complex, unitary solution but by spreading the complexity over the various nodes in the system: “Rather than trying to control complexity through top down command-and-control hierarchies,” writes Josephine Green, “social innovation shows us how to embrace complexity.”¹¹ It does so by developing local initiatives in which those directly affected—that is, those who know the problem best and from close up—are directly involved.

Given that, it must be observed that these solutions do not constitute the *only* terrain for action. Other kinds of design projects exist that are capable of integrating a multiplicity of local projects. For example, “planning by projects” and “acupunctural planning,”¹² link up different local projects and different scales of intervention, and in doing so, have the power to influence and transform large institutions and entire territorial systems.

In addition, other design activities 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 can increase the probability that new solutions will emerge and can help them develop in greater synergy.

Therefore, if the first limit of solution-ism is in not taking account of all these possibilities, its second limit is in proposing to find solutions concentrating only on the way they function, on their economies, and on their practical results, while leaving in the shadows the critical discussion of their meaning and the qualities sought and produced. This lack of a deep cultural discourse can be found at all scales: from motivating the participation of the various stakeholders in local solutions, to feeding the broadest of social conversations about the future.¹³

Participation-ism. Participation-ism is a sort of cultural aphonia that induces design experts to refrain from expressing themselves. In this case, too, the departure point is an extremely important idea: the recognition that every design process is co-design, and that it therefore must provide space for the point of views and active participation of many different actors. However, this original good idea has developed into an ideology that also is limited and limiting. In its adoption in co-design processes, the design expert’s role is reduced to a narrow, administrative activity, where creative ideas and design culture tend to disappear. Design experts take a

11 Josephine Green, *Beyond20:21st Century Stories*, <http://www.growthintransition.eu/wp-content/uploads/Green-A-new-narrative.pdf> (accessed December 2014).

12 Ezio Manzini and Francesca Rizzo, “Small Projects/Large Changes: Participatory Design as an Open Participated Process,” *CoDesign* 7, 3-4 (2011): 199–215; Lou Yongqi, Francesca Valsecchi, and Clarisa Diaz, *Design Harvest: An Acupunctural Design Approach Towards Sustainability* (Gothenburg, Sweden: Mistra Urban Futures Publication, 2013), 202; Che Tam Biggs, Chris Ryan, and John Wisman, “Distributed Systems: A Design Model for Sustainable and Resilient Infrastructure,” *VEIL Distributed Systems Briefing Paper N3* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 2010).

13 In this sense, solution-ism can be seen as an updated vision of functionalism—functionalism in a world where what is designed consists not only of products but also of product networks, services, and communication.

step backward and consider their role simply as that of “process facilitators,” asking other actors for their opinions and wishes, writing them on small pieces of paper, and sticking them on the wall and then synthesizing them, following a more or less formalized process. We can call the results of this way of thinking and doing “post-it design.”

The problem is that, in moving from the intention of giving voice and an active role to different stakeholders, participation-ism and post-it design end up transforming design experts into administrative actors with no specific contributions to bring—other than aiding the process with their post-its (and, maybe at the end, with some pleasing visualizations). In other words, in the participation-ism perspective, the design process is reduced to a polite conversation around the tables, as stakeholders undertake some participatory design exercises. On the contrary, in my view, the social conversation on which the co-design process is based is much more complex than a participatory design exercise, and it requires design experts to be much more than administrative facilitators and visualizers.

Design Culture and Dialogic Design

Co-design is a complex, contradictory, sometimes antagonistic process,¹⁴ in which different stakeholders (design experts included) bring their specific skills and their culture. It is 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. As a result, what makes a dialogic conversation in a design process is that the involved actors are willing and able to listen to each other, to change their minds, and to converge toward a common view; in this way, some practical outcomes can be collaboratively obtained. In short, these involved actors are willing and able to establish a *dialogic cooperation*—a conversation in which listening is as important as speaking.¹⁵

It comes that, in the dialogic design framework, the design experts’ capability to listen is a crucial one (and, of course, it is a particularly difficult one for those who are still bound to the past century’s tradition of “big-ego design”¹⁶). Nevertheless, it is also clear that, at the end of the day, the quality of the results largely depends on the quality of the ideas that come up in discussion. Therefore, to adopt a dialogic approach, design experts must learn to listen, but they must also learn to propose their own ideas and visions. And to do it in the most appropriate way.

The obvious precondition for being able to do so is that these ideas, values, and visions exist. That is, that a design culture capable to generate and cultivate them exists. And here we have reached a crucial point: If, as we said, the emerging design culture is still weak and reductive, how can it be strengthened and

14 See the works cited in note 3, as well as Carl DiSalvo, *Adversarial Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); and Erling Björgvinsson, Pelle Ehn, and Per-Anders Hillgren, “Agonistic Participatory Design: Working with Marginalised Social Movements,” *CoDesign: International Journal of CoCreation in Design and the Arts* 8, no. 2-3 (2012): 127–44.

15 Richard Sennet, *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

16 The big-ego design is left over from the last century’s demiurgic vision, in which design is the act of particularly gifted individuals capable of imprinting their personal stamp on artifacts and environments. Even though this perspective may still mean something in some very specific design fields, this way of thinking and doing becomes highly dangerous when applied to complex social problems.

enriched? Where might we find an initial nucleus of ideas, values, and visions with which we might start? Although a complete answer to these questions is beyond the scope of this article, I conclude with two very brief observations:

To answer the first question, the culture for emerging design will result from discussion in various design arenas and from stimuli encountered in interaction with other cultural worlds. Therefore, these discussions among peers must be started and occasions for generative interactions with actors endowed with different cultures and experiences must be created.

The answer to the second question stems from both the transition and the social learning process in which we find ourselves. In this framework, society can be seen as a huge future-building laboratory—a laboratory that, amidst numerous contradictions, is already emitting signs of a new culture:¹⁷ emerging ideas and practices that are affecting the mainstream conceptions of time, place, work, well-being, and, more generally, the quality of human relationships: ideas and practices that, in my view, are starting to weave the fabric of a new civilization and, hence, if we are able to recognize it, also of a new design culture.

17 Anna Meroni, ed., *Creative Communities. People Inventing Sustainable Ways of Living* (Milan: Polidesign, 2007); Manzini and Tassinari, "Sustainable Qualities," 217–32; and Ezio Manzini, "Making Things Happen: Social Innovation and Design," in *Design Issues* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 57–66.