# Protecting the Memory of Objects from Nostalgia (4D_Osaka019)

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**Abstract:** In *Das gewöhnliches*, Bazon Brock features vulgar objects, inexpensive things used in our everyday lives. Such as Pompey's artifacts were pivotal to understand life after a historical loss, so do normal objects, our tangible legacy, and our connection with them may very well be what defines our humanity. They not only represent but are also as much cause as they are the consequence of the way we live, contributing to the definition of that lifestyle and thus becoming essential in enhancing social values.

Every object has a meaning beyond its materiality, and the shape envisioned by its project promotes a reflection about the way we subsist, depends on our habits, suggests how we can live both individually and collectively, and encompasses a political vision or a rejection of the social organization. Design's participation in social construction becomes particularly acute in a time that so easily displays the erosion of ethical values, escalating the devaluation of truth, the institutionalization of hate speech, and the increasing assemblage of walls. Although history may not repeat itself exactly in the same manner, the warnings should not be ignored, and Design must not withdraw from action.

The role of Design in this crossroad becomes particularly emphasized in association with concepts such as memory. If Design's tolerance is not questioned when considering the respect for culture, the defense of collective knowledge by designers, the familiarity with products with which we have lived throughout generations, it may also become permeable because of that retrospective.

Memory seems to entail an inevitable sense of place. When our projects envision evolution but remain a reference to what we know, reminding us of our ancestors' homes through recognition and emotional value, those objects will inevitably distinguish themselves from others. It is necessary to protect that memory, but the homage to what is local and national is precisely what may become the source of the rhetorical foundation which helps to sustain nationalist discourses.

Therefore, the distinction between the notion of memory within Design and ideas such as nostalgia and selective memory becomes imperative, since those are the concepts which may truly feed intolerance. Nevertheless, it is also crucial to demonstrate Design's intercultural nature, its openness, as well as its contribution to the obliteration of borders and to the absence of possible conflicts between an international perspective and the (conscious or unconscious) resource to the past and to our shared inherited knowledge.

**Keywords:** product design, politics, tolerance, normal

## Nostalgia

3D Print technologies and their potential for creating a *Third Industrial Revolution* (The Economist, 2012) in which almost any product could be fully produced by one machine and adapted to individual wishes, coupled with the democratization of online sales, appear to have transformed market into markets (Bohm, 2005). Decentralization and the end of a *Fordist "one*

*fits all*" sense, poorly suited for today's desires, have given rise to production on a smaller scale, bringing the character of each product closer to the more exclusive handcrafted artifact and recalling Jasper Morrison's observation about the connection between the scale of production and the visibility of authorship (Morrison, 2006). This approach to craftsmanship seems to have installed a nostalgic moment within design, a moment in which the idyllic valorization of the past may not be exempt from consciously or unconsciously serving a nationalist and populist discourse. In fact, the redesign of objects and the recovery of shapes that refer to the past seems to inevitably evoke a specific type of *local memory*, intertwined with our ancestors' houses, and immersed in emotional value. Therefore, the consideration of memory's permeability to nostalgia sets the tone for our intended analysis, which questions its impact on people's perception of objects and, with it, the individual and collective experience(s) they convey.

For instance: when a collective of Swedish designers projected a set of pieces to be produced according to the national craft tradition, although there was never an intention to create an interior Scandinavian-looking, Kristina Rapacki questioned whether this was *A National Design?* (Rapacki, 2019). More than just preserving culture, they seem to risk carrying a nostalgic load, conveying a reductive image of former simplicity and contributing to a paranoid fantasy (O'Toole, 2018) about a golden past (Shafak, 2019), something that John Hersey (1946) describes as a selective memory which recalls the idyllic past but forgets Hiroshima.

## Concepts for memory against nostalgia

The shortest, obvious solution to eliminate nostalgia may seem to simply erase any reference to the past and create a new world. However, that would only repeat a conflict which is about a hundred years old, alluding to a time when design serves the ideas of Modernism, celebrating the pursuit of progress through technical innovation (Parsons, 2009). Within this context and frame of mind, faith in the machine emerged as a vehicle for social change and response to universal needs (Raizman, 2003), accentuating the separation between present and past, and breaking the connection to previous references and general memory. John Thackara (1988) thinks that this criticism is not directed at Modernism, but rather at its late practice, i.e., at the reaction to historicism contained in the functionalism of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius, generating a style as a unique path for rationality, and therefore criticized for treating all places and people in the same way and placing expert analysis over everyday experience. We, on the other hand, are in no way suggesting a cut with the past, since that would eliminate culture, the knowledge accumulated throughout generations (Fukasawa & Morrison, 2007), ignoring our own nature and evolution. Memory is a crucial concept to design. However, it has to be protected from appropriation by immobility and retrograde agendas. We need the past, but one that projects the future, allowing novelty and difference, and promoting internationality, integration and tolerance.

The idea of tolerance, of resorting to memory without serving nostalgia, can not just work as a slogan. There does not seem to exist any movement or theory today able to clearly reflect this approach, but a recent event can serve as a starting point. Takashi Okutani found it *Super Normal* (Fukasawa & Morrison, 2007) that, at the launch of Naoto Fukasawa's *Dejá Vù* stool (F.1), at Magis' booth in the 2005's *Salone*, the product was instantly adopted and used by visitors, rather than admired on a pedestal. The notion — *Super Normal* — served as a pretext

for an exhibition and a book in which Naoto Fukasawa and Jasper Morrison, who accompanied Okutani on his visit to the *Salone*, reflect on the urgency of modesty and normality of design by displaying products which, in their perspective, are able to convey these values. This case becomes relevant because Fukasawa and Morrison base the idea of Super Normal precisely on memory and, although it precedes the vulgarization of the term Populism, they seem to be able to refer to the concept without serving a discourse that may be associated with an acritical reconstruction of the past.

Jasper Morrison refers to evolutionary design, suggesting that we project by improving what we know, and supporting a connection to objects as part of an accumulated coexistence. He proposes "the evolutionary step instead of the creative leap" (Fukasawa & Morrison, 2007). This idea is supported by the notion according to which it would only make sense to produce something new if you improve what already exists, what you intend to replace. The most direct strategy is to keep the recognized form, to make small interventions and improvements, dealing with the culture in hand (Hara, 2007),  and rejecting the association of the term *design* with a culture of repeated change of typology. This refers us to the idea of familiarity, to the comfort we feel when we live with an object and how success in repeated interaction is fundamental to create the emotional attachment that will allow it to last. Morrison exemplifies how the stem in the Goblet wine glass carries the atmosphere of a table, even if it does not improve the implied functionality (Morrison, 1999). For him, the success in its continued use is the recognition of a product's beauty, a beauty that is not instantaneous, that grows and settles in our lives (Fukasawa & Morrison, 2007).

In Naoto Fukasawa's design, as in his speech, formal recognition is less direct. The shape, when repeatedly associated with an action, leads us to an unconscious gesture, *without thought* (Fukasawa, 2007). According to Masato Sasaki (Fukasawa, 2007), Fukasawa seems to explore the notion of *Affordance* as coined by James J. Gibson, who appropriates the verb *to afford* to describe how things can communicate possibilities of action, applying it to products with totally different functions. Fukasawa believes that this gesture often "exists deep under our consciousness and it is genetically inherited" (Fukasawa, 2010), also referring to Carl Gustav Jung's original notion of Archetype (Jung, 1972), which defines the collective unconscious as being transmitted from generation to generation, and therefore becomes shared by all, regardless of individual experiences. Through the adaptation of Jung's term to design, applying it to images such as the simplification of a camera or a telephone (installed in our unconscious by the repetition and success of a typology for only a few dozen years, clearly not long enough to have been transmitted to us genetically), the term archetype becomes utilitarian, translating the simplification of an idea. Whether in the immediate recognition of the shape of Morrison's *Socrates* corkscrew (F.2), in the invitation to a gesture evoked by the industrial fan and replicated in Fukasawa's *CD-Player* (F.3) or in any Archetype (F.4), memory is always presented as a key element for acceptance. Kenya Hara (2007) refers to dealing with shared values, stable and mature products. Enzo Mari (Fukasawa & Morrison, 2007) to the role of designer as guardian of collective knowledge.

There is an aspect that becomes central, allowing memory not to carry an heavy nostalgic load: the design promoted in *Super Normal* (even if the same does not apply to all the creations of its authors) is fundamentally based on contemporary objects. No matter how distant their formal origin is, it refers to objects that have always been evolving in gradual steps (Fukasawa &

Morrison, 2007), and do not belong to a distant past that someone wants to rebuild. Although the designer's intervention has different degrees of visibility, the product is always new, designed for our days and needs, no matter how much the understanding of contemporaneity may differ. The idea refers to both the existing and the new product. It refers to the coexistence of products from different periods. Since *Déjà Vu*, the object that generated the exhibition, the old coexists with the new, the material merges with a recognized shape validating the project today, allowing the image to no longer belong to, or be imprisoned by, the past.

This combination of cultures, ensured by memory, with the contemporary approach that protects the product from nostalgia, becomes fundamental for the construction of a design that respects the past without participating in an unhealthy nationalist (Bremmer, 2018) discourse. Merging rationality and freedom, ornament and utility, past and present, and connecting previously contradictory approaches (Kries, 2011), *Super Normal* created a unique concept defined by the fusion of functional and extraordinary in the creation of normal, useful things, combining parameters similar to Memphis with a formal approach closer to Modernism (Sudjic, 2009). The concept does not generally refer to a local or national culture, being almost always universally recognizable and promoting an international spirit. Its principles can be recognized in countless contemporary projects. In *Ovale* (F.5), Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec resort to a familiar material, slightly changing the shape of the plate's archetype, making it evolve, making it new. They seem to explore the idea of formal imperfection, playing with the ordered geometry, the relationship of similarity between the forms, and the disorder suggested in the asymmetry and manipulation of proportions and sizes. With this approach, by generating small differences that mimic the pre-industrial irregularity, they contribute to change the industry's image of rationality and cleanliness that had been kept since *Fordism*. In spite of referring to the past, it is still actual and universal. The language is soft, tension free, smooth, without abrupt accelerations or angular forms, alluding to the neo-primitive (Koivu & Bouroullec, 2012) between the artisan and the industrial, and approaching *liquid modernity* (Bauman, 2001; Bouroullec *et al.*, 2003), although perhaps not yet anticipating the entire scope of its interpretation. Mateo Kries, director of the Design Museum in Weil am Rhein, considered *Super Normal* to be the most important recent moment for design (Kries, 2011).

## Blur

However, this idea is also exposed to contradictions. One of the objects which illustrates the notion of familiarity, Jasper Morrison's *Sofa* (F.6), as universal as it may be or aspire to be, still aludes to the Chesterfield model, reminiscent of childhood (Morrison, 2006) and possibly more familiar in a local context. Resorting to local memory is not a problem *per se*, particularly if connected with the idea of sharing, trying to commercialize it around the world in spite of having been produced by a German brand. Nevertheless, a more limited approach to memory seems to invite the expansion of the idea, in our current context. *Milk NA1*'s lamp (F.7), a project made by Norm Architects studio to the english brand &Tradition, reminds us of the Scandinavian milking bench. Although the memory and reference to existing products, often imposed as a marketing resource, seem to have occupied a significant part of design's universe and discourse, becoming almost an obsession in certain cases, in this specific situation localness ends up being softened by the adjustment of shape to new functions, the base to a lamp, crossing it with the more universally recognizable shape of the lampshade. This crossing between cultures not only

generates new possibilities and combinations, but also reflects the way the world progressed and developed throughout several decades of relative prosperity, a more diverse society and a broader range of cultural references. To Hal Foster (2011), the mixing and non definition of boundaries are a staple of today's culture. Michael Graves (Graves *et al.*, 1994) predicted that, after Memphis, there would be black, white, all the grays and lots of color, already anticipating the diversity that followed the domain of late Modernism, defined by a clear separation between opposite black and white ideas. No one knows the exact reach of Michael Grave's reference, but his affirmations seems to convey more than the mere suggestion of that diversity's coexistence. Today, design's evolution is done through mixing, opening, universal evolution, and that is the source of its richness — more than searching for design's evolution through local culture (Bey & Bouroullec, 2010). In *Ori* (F.8), salt and pepper shakers idealized by the independent collective project Foodwork, and destined to be exhibited in Japan, are characterized by the attempt to create Norwegian products relevant to the Japanese way of life (FoodWork, 2012), since Japan was the country where they have gathered the Origami experiment which originated the objects' final shape (Voll, 2014). Even in Danish Sam Legald's *Ikono* (F.9), clearly inspired in *PH* models (F.10) (classics of Danish Poul Henningsen's approach to *design of author*), national culture is mitigated by the fact that it no longer is just a national ikon, having become internationally familiar.

## Objects that define life

If objects suggest the way we live, helping to define how we relate to each other, designers have a fundamental role in the construction of our world. Design's part may not be particularly evident or intentional, but it necessarily entails an assessment about the way society organizes itself. More or less aware, it is always political (Parsons, 2009), it is always part of the equation. Just as Pompeii's ordinary artifacts were crucial to understand its time (Fukasawa & Morrison, 2007), the products we use reflect how we live today. It seems impossible to analyze the nature of objects without questioning human nature, because without people they do not exist or make sense; on that same note, what makes us human is the fact that we create objects and have a relationship with them. In a way, "the world of man consists of things" (Schwartz-Clauss, M., & von Vegesack, 2010).

Louise Schouwenberg (Schouwenberg & Jongerius, 2018) proposes that choices were largely determined by class. When she remembers the buying of a cabinet for the house where she grew up in, as well as the importance of that process to her parents, she signals how they chose it considering not only their social life and their future needs, but also other people's possible judgement and considerations. Schouwenberg mentions how this experience was important to enable her to understand objects' political implications, the market's influence in people's lives, and how objects are pregnant with meanings and projections. Objects always reflect and define how we live. Smartphones determine contemporary relationships, *Braun*'s products prescribed a rational phase and luxury objects (may) comprehend exclusion. If we think about Museum der Dinge, in Berlin, particularly everyday objects from post-WW2 Germany, East and West, we can easily understand how objects reflect not only economic conditions, but also a life style. They will not be as explicit as Art promoted by the Nazi regime while suggesting a rustic life, but they can also convey a message of exclusion.

If design wishes to remain a constructive discipline, serving both evolution and civilization without invading individual freedom or imposing doctrines, schools have an obligation to include tolerance values in design's teaching and research, never interpreting this area as a sequence of tasks, nor the designer (who projects the world) as a technician held by purely commercial decisions. Thus, it is not evident that design's teaching and research have, for the moment, full awareness of their part in the promotion of tolerance. A careful reading of Portuguese governmental data base on Design PhD's (DGEEC, 2019), made within the programme *Design Obs.* — Design's National Observatory — by theme, keywords and abstract analysis, even if not yet definitive, allows us to conclude that, from a universe of 200 works, only a very low percentage is directly related with the connection between design and the way we live. Case studies and historical researches constitute the majority of the works, with 41,5% focused in specific authors and places. Operative works about working processes, design management, and industry, technique or technology, as well as about the promotion of design or details such as color, constitute 14,5% of the data base. Very specific works about areas such as illustration or interaction, represent 10%. The few research — 9% — devoted to the relationship between design and the world surrounding it seem to have been guided toward sustainability and inclusive design. These contributions are obviously legitimate and highly useful, but the reduced number of works devoted to everyday product's influence in our way of life seems to reveal an also limited notion of design's importance to the construction of society, which transcends its market presence. Social awareness, apart from occasional media attention, does not seem to be a dominant presence in design thought. On the contrary, design appears to lack a broad awareness of its responsibility, a notion that should begin by being correctly introduced and fully transmitted by design schools, instead of promoting it as a sequence of tasks and a participative addition to market society. Fortunately, it is much richer than that.

## Urgency

In today's context, characterized by the rapid advance of populism, protecting diversity has become paramount. The term, although typically presented without explanation, as if everyone could already define it (Baker, 2019), refers to the exploitation of everyman long term resentments, stirred by charismatic politicians with impossible promises (according to Barack Obama), an overused epithet for multiple manifestations of political anger (Steinmetz-Jenkins & Jäger, 2019), of emotional and oversimplified discourse. Present as much in the left as it is in the right, populism obscures more than it illuminates and, according to Cas Mudde (Baker, 2019), it is not a totally formed ideology such as socialism or liberalism. It is probably more akin to a method, antagonizing "the people", fundamentally good, and the corrupt "elite" (Baker, 2019). In the majority of the cases, it resorts to a religious discourse, reacting to secular government, even in countries without a particular religious tradition, forging an unholy alliance with religion as a promise to recover moral values (Steinmetz-Jenkins & Jäger, 2019), reminiscent of an idilic past. Although we may accept that history does not repeat itself exactly in the same way, there are aspects that can serve as a cautionary example and therefore should not be ignored (Wachsmann, 2017). This battle for design is, as stated about Brexit, also "a battle against intolerance, prejudice, xenophobia and the manufacture of distrust and disunity" (Brown, 2019).

The intimate connection assumed here between object and human awakens us, unavoidably, to the way they specularly reflect each other. The evolution of objects can be observed within a logic of continuity or disruption with the history and progression of its shape — both possibilities are a projection of the human, evoking its context and space-time horizon. Therefore, we must not alienate memory nor exclude it as an intrinsic component to the creation of objects, since it is also an intrinsic element to the creation of people. Its intervention may be the result of more or less awareness, but memory in nonetheless an unavoidable element in the definition of individual and collective production, subsequently becoming decisive to the definition of an individual and collective sense of identity. This is what makes it problematic, because that affinity with the way we are and see ourselves can not be alienated from who we were nor from who we want to be, pointing choices and paths. Nostalgia is one of those paths, emerging from a tendency which is also an option: the option to connote certain objects with a specific set of symbolic layers, creating an universe of meaning which contaminates not only them, but also the set of experiences they define and allow. We may question if people are the ones to search for that meaning in objects, projecting it after the emotional fabric that is consequence of the way we live and see the world, or if objects are the ones to install that way of seeing and feeling in individuals and societies. Both premises are equally valid. Therefore, we must remember that, under the attempt to *normalize the object*, lays the unavoidable *normalization of our relationship with the object* — as well as the understanding of what this can signify within the broader context of a value system which can pave the way and define possibilities to a much needed design culture.



F1. Dejá Vù, courtesy Magis / F2 Socrates, picture André Huber, courtesy Jasper Morrison Design / F3. CD-Player, courtesy Lara Jacinto / F4. Waterkettle, courtesy Lara Jacinto /  F5. Ovale, picture Paul Tahon & Studio Bouroullec, courtesy Alessi / F6. Sofa, courtesy of Jasper Morrison Design, picture Miro Zagnoli / F7. Milk NA1, courtesy Lara Jacinto / F8. Ori, courtesy Lara Jacinto / F9. Ikono, courtesy Normann Copenhagen / F10. PH 4/3, courtesy Louis Poulsen

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