The designer as formalizer and communicator of values

Jordi Pericot

Graduate in Philosophy, doctor in Art History from the Universitat de Barcelona. Professor of Audiovisual Communication at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra. Director of the journal Temes de Disseny. He has worked intensively in pedagogy and research in the theory of image and the theory and pedagogy of design.

The constant demand for new products on the part of consumers has led to innovation becoming the driving force behind changes in market share among rival firms. With this objective, the process of innovation and design occupies a central place within companies in order to interrelate and coordinate all agents involved in production.

Designers, aware of social and cultural values but also of the firm's technical possibilities, are involved in each of the phases of the innovation process and, through the product, are responsible for formalising and communicating the cultural values that activate the innovation process.

The appearance of the industrial production society gave rise to design. In this initial phase, design objectives focused on the conception and mass supply of products that globally met the needs of the consumer and which the latter had to accept. The dream of any entrepreneur at the time, as Pierre Musso says, was a single product, a single colour... and to manufacture as many copies as possible.

As from the 1980's, a profound modification came about in the consumer and production was no longer the only force present in the market. Consumers demanded differentiated products and industry, hoping to provide solutions to valid functions for everyone, opted for a design of products for each one where people had the freedom to choose depending on their own inclinations. These new products were not aimed at a single target but rather at a wide range of individual types, which designers had to connect with and provide with satisfactory individual formal responses. This diversity of users and functions, as well as its influence on the new types of production and marketing, has forced us to redefine design within the framework of social communication.

Obviously, these changes are not unrelated to the phenomenon of globalisation in production and markets. Nowadays, everything is interconnected, each agent is independent from the others and what happens in one place affects the other places for better or for worse. We are faced with globalisation as a deterministic fact that is difficult to escape from, but it also forces us to find solutions to the problems presented.

One of the consequences, not precisely positive, of the phenomenon of globalisation is the loss of competitiveness of our products. There are increasingly more products made in places where labour costs are lower and that, logically, compete at low cost with those from our own country. Evidently, in a free market the response to this situation is not by stopping these products from entering the market. To date, the protectionist measures adopted by some countries do not seem to be a good solution, not even in the short term.

The response to this inevitable international low-cost competition lies, without doubt, in innovation and in making original, individual products of their kind. Innovating to satisfy the needs of a superior economic segment, increasingly more demanding in terms of quality, novelty and differentiation. In order to achieve these objectives, companies must implement strategies that improve their productivity and reduce costs. In other words, they must adopt, within the context of the company's overall culture, an economy of innovation that favours new ideas and activates new programmes and new markets.

Innovation has become a key factor in companies being able to recoup their competitive advantages and in ensuring survival. It is possible that the innovation system may not be the only solution but it is one of the most effective for guaranteeing and consolidating competitive advantages.

1. Innovation and risk

Although it is vital for the continuity of the firm and to improve the environment, innovation always acts as a destabilising element. Cultural factors or the technological requirements involved mean that any innovating proposal is liable to enter into conflict. Innovating means provoking a unique situation that necessarily imposes a displacement of the product in terms of type and semantics and, consequently, its presence is always questioned until, over time, it becomes part of a new cultural reorganisation and is accepted. In many cases innovating also means that production and marketing techniques has to re-adapt, i.e. it always involves what we might, in business terms, call risk.

At its industrial beginning, innovation had a positive image and was often associated with an improvement in quality. Consumers attributed changes to a desire to improve the product's functions, its durability or simply its appearance. Products varied in shape and function without a prior analysis of demand. In other words, a designer strategy and logic were applied that were the opposite of current marketing. For companies, innovation was relevant if it adapted to the interests the target were supposed to have.

This acceptance by consumers has varied significantly and innovation is no longer always accepted as something positive. Innovation and quality are no longer inseparable binomial... or should we perhaps say they are antinomies? Innovation often leads to an attitude of mistrust and deceit that can even engender a certain rejection.

In spite of the risk involved, when innovation is applied the aim is always to achieve a business advantage. Hence the need to evaluate innovation according to the risk and expected benefits[1]. A risk that, in general terms, is directly proportional to the intensity of the innovation proposed.

The intensity of an innovation can vary greatly, ranging from a radical to a moderate innovation. Between these two poles we can place a series of degrees of commitment, two of which we highlight here: fed-back innovation and incremental innovation.

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[1] See the need for prior analysis and its usefulness a proposal for innovation, by P. DEHAN-JEAN GINSBERG and L. BABBOULET.

1.1 Radical innovation: (fig.1)

Radical innovation gives rise to completely new products or services. Given the transgressive nature of these revolutionary changes, this involves a high risk of lack of adaptation and rejection of the unknown. But, at the same time, they may also be accepted as highly positive in markets where their technological advances and practical advantages are prioritised[2].

Highly appreciated in the sector of fashion or prestige and status products, radical innovation is perceived as advanced and therefore enjoys a natural advantage in the market. The advantages it is attributed are within the area of social perception and the risk of dysfunctionality that might be involved in prioritising unusual side effects is
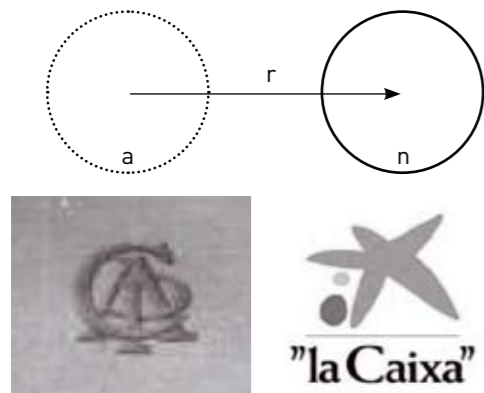
perceived as a plus in quality terms, albeit always within a small sector of the elite.

From the point of view of the market, radical absolute innovation is rare or non-existent, as the environment, due to a lack of culture references, finds it difficult to accept total novelty. Radical innovation, in order to be more easily understood and accepted, requires the added feedback of some redundant elements.

1.2 Fed-back innovation: (fig.2)

To make a radical innovation more acceptable and to reduce its risk of being rejected, fed-back innovation includes design forms that belong to the object being replaced by technology or by market demands.
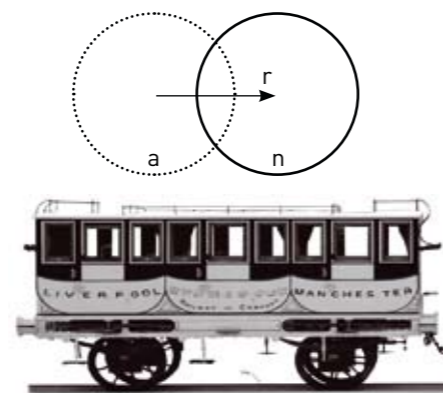

Fig.1: Radical innovation. The distance between the new product (n) and the previous product (a) is important. The risk (r) of rupture and incomprehension is high, although the novelty factor may result in great appeal.
Image: La Caixa opted for a radical change in its image that was not only accepted by the public but created a new style of corporate image in many other banking institutions.

Fig.2: Fed-back innovation. Reduces the risk of rupture and facilitates understanding of the novelty.
Image: The transport function between a stagecoach and steam train led to the design of train carriages in the form of a stagecoach (Liverpool-Manchester, 1930).

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[2] Innovation as an unknown fact is not, according to H. CHRISTOFOL, positive nor negative. It may induce fear or fascination, generate difficult problems or provide much satisfaction.

The relationship between the reference object and the new one is normally functional in nature. The new object, totally different from a technical point of view, replaces and improves the functions previously covered in a similar way by another object, from which some formal aspects have been taken that are already culturally assimilated. This incorporation means the object becomes more familiar and the degree of possible conflict is reduced, as well as the risk involved in a radical innovation.

The incorporation of known forms assimilated by users, represented by the intersection of the two circles and associated with the object's functions, acts as a vehicle for the proposed change and makes it more understandable. It is therefore a total innovation in technological terms but partial in terms of form and symbolism.

1.3 Moderate innovation: (fig.3)

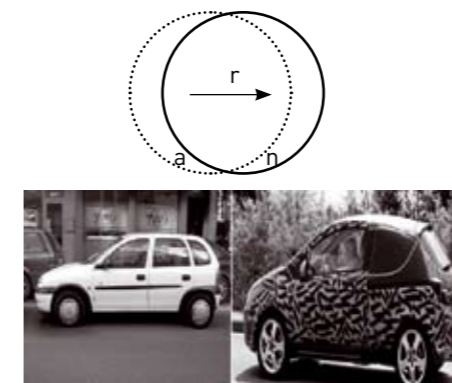A design of moderate innovation involves technological, formal or cultural changes of a lesser degree. Although it

represents an improvement in the product, the changes made do not break with the traditional conception of the product, nor do they contradict users' expectations nor interpretation.

This kind of innovation is limited to developing or improving the product's effectiveness in its technical, functional or symbolic aspects but without substantially modifying its configuration, nor imposing new production modes. What we usually understand by re-design is no more than moderate innovation, modifying the product's perceptive forms.

Moderate innovation is closely related to programmes for maintaining and updating a product. This kind of innovation means that the product can be adapted to the cultural and technological changes inevitably arising in society and can lengthen the product's life cycle. It's easy to understand and assimilate as, instead of being based on an original new idea or structure, it introduces and reinterprets an earlier solution.

The commercial risk involved in this kind of innovation is minimal, but the possibilities of awakening interest in the target are also limited. At worst, moderate innovation is ignored or simply seen in terms of a non-conflictive aesthetic issue.

1.4 Incremental innovation: (fig.4)

Incremental innovation means that the functions of a product can be gradually improved or even, as recognised by Fabien Goux-Baudimnet, the product can be provided with new complementary functions and thereby evolve.

Located between the two extremes, radical and moderate, incremental innovation lies along a series of degrees representing realities that have been tried and tested by industries and that allow radical changes to be

Fig.3: Moderate innovation: Risk is reduced to a minimum but the appeal provided by novelty is also reduced.
Image: The moderate innovation introduced to the Opel-Corsa 2006 is basically motivated by the need to adapt the product to market demands and its cultural changes.

carried out over time but with moderate, successive innovative presentations.

In adapting itself to the social and cultural changes in the environment, incremental innovation proposes successive interpretations that, in relative terms, users perceive as similar to or better than the earlier ones. At worst, the product is perceived as the same, without significant variations.
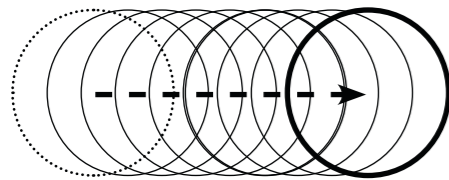

Fig.4: Incremental innovation: Reduces the risk of radical change to a minimum, while maintaining interest over time.
Image: Incremental innovation carried out over time in the Coca-Cola bottle.

This is the most popular kind of innovation when reducing the risk factor involved in a radical change. The successive introduction of the innovation means that a change is gradually accepted that, if carried out suddenly, might be rejected.

2. Why innovate?

However, if there is risk involved in any kind of innovation, the question is... why innovate?

There are various reasons to defend innovation, in spite of the risk it may involve. Among these reasons we highlight the following:

2.1 Innovation is necessary in order to keep up-to-date

Innovation means that the product can be kept on the market. Habits of social behaviour vary continuously and, if the corresponding innovation is not introduced, products would soon become obsolete. In these cases, innovative actions within a programme to keep the product up-to-date are limited to introducing some moderate variations in the product that respond to the cultural changes occurring in the target at that time.

The intensity of the moderate changes to which a product is necessarily subjected vary depending on the commercial life cycle. In most innovative products, the sales pattern follows a curve of growth, maturity and then decline that requires different treatments. In the initial and growth phase, the successive moderate changes applied to the product respond to the uncertainty of the market and technological advances. As it develops, competition becomes more intense and, in order to differentiate the product and integrate it within the market, technological and formal innovation becomes more evident. In the phase of maturity and strength, the product becomes standardised and innovation no longer applies additional changes but rather is limited to reducing costs while still maintaining the same standards of service and quality.

Over time, the temporal monopoly of the innovation becomes diluted. Due to the dynamics of competition, non-innovative companies adopt the innovation and the extraordinary benefits disappear that had been provided by initially introducing the innovation. Obviously, overcoming this loss requires the introduction of new innovative proposals into the market.

2.2 Innovation is necessary in order to satisfy the need for change

Product life cycles are increasingly shorter, particularly with high technology products or those with a strong symbolic value. In order to satisfy this tendency towards accelerated change, companies must adopt well defined strategies and incremental innovation policies. Exhaustive market research will determine the product required at that time and will then design and produce it.

Investment is required in the marketing, promotion and distribution techniques required in order to stay in the market, as well as a dynamic, creative design. Companies that make fashion products, objects for personal use or status symbols depend largely on good solutions for ongoing renewal provided by design.

2.3 Innovation is necessary in order to anticipate social changes

The aim of an innovating process must be permanent excellence. In this respect, an innovative policy aimed at maintaining and updating products is not enough, but rather predictable market conditions must be anticipated and new selling opportunities created. Design must be able to specify the desires for an ideal object, without, however, taking immediate technical and cultural barriers into account to any great extent. In other words, a realistic design is required but also an imaginative design, able to anticipate the technical, formal and functional solutions that are currently being implemented.

Innovation of a radical nature involves a relatively high risk. The effort to adapt that is required from consumers in order to place themselves in a possible future world arouses fascination but also mistrust or rejection.

In order to reduce the risk factor and to be more competitive, incremental innovation is adopted. Each innovation phase is presented as an improvement in functional quality, although without explaining the original idea behind this approach, as users could feel as if they were being used, like guinea pigs, and mistrust results that have not been tried and tested. In this case, prospective studies become very useful in order to view overall trends and technologies in the market and to define the paradigms that will arise or continue.

2.4 Innovation is necessary in order to evolve

Within a progressive approach, innovation is vital in order to evolve. In adopting an innovation programme, companies commit themselves to accepting structural and organisational changes that will help them face the future. Consequently, they develop technologies, create new infrastructures and reinforce their research capacity.

With the help of design, an innovative company transforms scientific / technological advances into new products, effectively relating science, technology and production to social needs and market requirements. Technological research is activated, production is enriched with new techniques and the product, with new symbolic and functional values, acquires hitherto unknown conceptions of use.

3. Productive spaces within the process of innovation and design

The perpetual demand for renewal on the part of consumers means that companies place innovation at the heart of social changes, technological events and economic flows, and it is the most important resource for changing market share among rival firms.

The innovation and design project, as a central aspect in companies, must be placed within a strategy that ensures that all its productive spaces are constantly interrelated and coordinated, right from the pre-commercial stage. This interrelation is fundamental in order to create new market opportunities based on excellence, anticipation and the ongoing improvement of products.
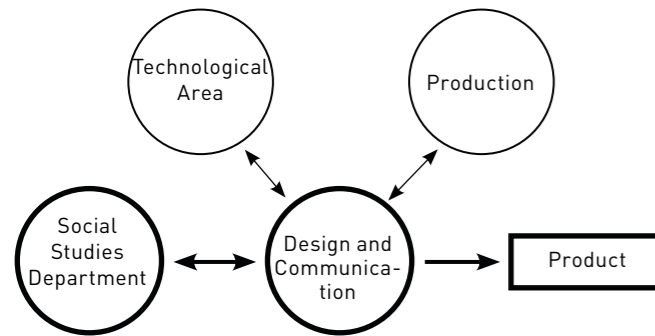
Fig.5: Innovation and the design process

Ignoring any of these dimensions could compromise the potentially good results offered by the innovation project. We should not forget that no-one has exclusivity in a process of innovation and design and none of the productive agents is marginal or privileged compared with the others.

3.1 Design as mediator

One of the elements that most favours dialogue between the agents in a design process is undoubtedly the use of the internet. In the world of digitalisation, the product appears as the final stage of a conception process in which all the productive agents take an interactive part. This situation opens up a wide window of ongoing dialogue and experimentation that helps designers to advance towards a new logic of contrasting ideas and innovative proposals. The facility to carry out tests in the laboratory, to construct virtual mock-ups or prototypes... are very useful strategies for specifying a new product's concepts, functions and forms.

Through this article, we are trying to analyse the interdependent reactions that, in a process of innovation and design, arise between the different areas in question, particularly between the departments of Social Studies, Technology, Design-Communication and Production (fig.5). However, we will attempt to analyse more deeply how the department of Design and Communication and the

department of Social Studies mutually interchange and contribute to this process. We will also define the current role of the designer within the innovation process.

Aware of the social and cultural values and also of the technical possibilities in order to carry out a product, designers are involved in each of its production phases, including, thanks to the advantages of virtual reality, the direct and ongoing confrontation of their work with the market and investigating its reactions in order to ensure authoritative results.

As a bridge between all the productive agents, it is evident that designers must also have the capacity to question and redefine objects within an industrial logic that enables their manufacture. As material translators of the general agreements of the market and coordinators of the various areas of production, designers provide initiatives and reaffirm their desire to intervene in the overall architecture of the product. Only through extensive knowledge of production can they choose or modify the tools that are best suited to the innovative proposals.

Design is not an exclusively technological nor scientific domain but needs to be complemented with a specific know-how, directly linked to the pragmatics of use and social sciences. With design, logical-technological reasoning, scientific and quantifiable, is complemented harmoniously with the non-scientific ambiguity of values related to sensibility and subjectivity. Both converge in a synthesis that includes the sequential and scientific process of technology with the inductive, globalising approach of designers. With an overriding qualitative and subjective conception of the work, designers express their desire to personalise the project and to make it suitable and satisfactory for users. Hence the act of designing takes on varying, different forms when exploring new paths and producing new, useful ideas.

3.2 The Social Studies Department

Insofar as it is fed by cultures, the process of innovation and design must be based on real examples of social contemporary man. In this respect, an innovation project must gather as much information as possible on the social context, its needs, values, preferences and general agreements.

The Social Studies Department, or the corresponding external services that have been hired, is the interdisciplinary research and analysis team whose aim is to identify and quantify the needs, values and symbols that hold sway in a particular social group. As a basic source of information, the department first uses data provided by the company itself, the general and specific statistics on different sectors of the population. The department has numerous tools of observation and analysis to measure and quantify the project's viability. Market surveys allow a critical, constructive view of the innovation project to be drawn up, using the know-how of the company, as well as the true motivations behind consumer decisions.

From all these data, the Design and Communication Department extracts the conceptual premises that allow it to specify the product's content, which will subsequently be shaped and materialised by the Design and Communication Department.

3.3 The Design Department: formalising symbols

It is evident that one of design's great responsibilities is to concretise and give shape to a product depending on the interests and values holding sway in a specific social group. However, the rapid and complex technological, economic and cultural transformations in today's society make it very difficult to perceive and evaluate these.

At the beginnings of industrial production, designers used to define projects based on the social needs and functional, material and technical requirements considered appropriate. With these data, they constructed the project's premises which led them, deductively, to formalise the end product.

Nowadays, a process of this kind, lineal and personal, is practically unthinkable. Society no longer sees itself within a traditional world of repeated offers but expresses itself via the personality of differentiated products in constant change. Industrial production is no longer a slave to repetition, nor is standardisation incompatible with having differentiating symbolic and communicative values[3]. Design no longer works for a specific product nor is it aimed at a pre-defined end client. Now, the same product, by means of communicative strategies, can be aimed at different users in very different ways.

Insofar as it is a sign that conveys values, a design project must be coherent with the spirit and universe of values previously defined by the Social Studies Department. Design has entered the era that Musso calls emotional design, where our relationship with an object as a user is more motivated by its semantic content than by its functioning. As we are reminded by Jean Baudrillard, things pretend to serve, although they have a different meaning. A meaning that comes more from the object's intangible messages than from its manufacturing or utilitarian production.

Designers today must bear in mind the new interpretation of object as a sign and locate it within the sphere of semantic values attributed to it. Designing is, basically, giving shape to a variable system of values of use, of exchange or symbols, which are restructured depending on the social changes occurring.

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[3] With regard to digital technologies and the recovery of handcrafted values, see PERICOT, JORDI, in Temes de Disseny, no. 2, where the origins of these changes are analysed.

3.4 Design and communicating values

Although the basis of design lies in the materialisation of intangible uses or previously defined signs, the new role given to designers also leads them to be responsible for communicating these signs and to ensure they are duly interpreted.

Designers are the ones who transcribe, in physical terms, the commercial, industrial and symbolic requirements of a product, but they are also the ones who, making use of their capacity for analysis and synthesis, construct a bridge of communication between the object designed and its social or market context. As a constructor of a discourse, the design process must place particular emphasis on the relationship between the information transmitted and its interpretation. The object must be conceived in such a way as to ensure its interpretation is in line with the previously defined interests. In other words, designers must be competent in the phenomenon of communication and social persuasion.

With this new responsibility, designers leave their traditional domains, founded on the product, and fully enter the area of communication. Efforts to make an innovation culturally understandable will be effective if the designer has the necessary knowledge of the social sphere to be able to create an exclusive view of the world and to project it onto the collective imagined world.

A designer must know about communicative strategies and, if possible, conceive new ones. As a builder of symbols and new values, designers must complement the marketing work and grasp everything involved in the object that may be indeterminate. This understanding allows new values to be provided, replacing old codes and opening up new ways to create new objects, new uses and new utopias.

3.5 The creative position of designers

One of the most relevant contributions by designers compared with the rest of the innovation team is their creative attitude.

With regard to design, creativity is perceived as vague, ephemeral, imperceptible... but always appreciated and valued as part of a strategic plan for innovation. When work is carried out transversally and interactively, the normal development of the process should be questioned[4], improbable cross-references should be made in order to enter into a world where creative accident and intuition are not only allowed but desirable.

Designers formalise ideas before they are verified, they infer the viability of a product before it is verified or they imagine ideal situations to stimulate new innovation strategies and to be able to introduce new elements, never before grasped or considered by the team.

This creative position leads them to reconsider the whole process and, if necessary, to modify aspects of it that have become weakened by current conjecture. Evidently here, the term "creation" is used in a figurative sense, therefore far removed from the concept of creation ex nihilo. When we talk about the process of design, we use the term "creation" as the ability to establish or introduce, for the first time, a new thing based on a pre-existing reality, but done in such a way that it is not necessarily to be found in the current reality.

Designing is therefore the same as synthesising elements that, without altering their nature, modifies their qualities and functions with regard to the knowledge users have of them. From this point of view, creativity, both in producing ideas or new, useful practices for a

[4]With regard to design methodology based on disorientation, see PERICOT, JORDI in Temes de Disseny n. 6.

group of individuals, would originate more in society than in the creating subject.

A novel scientific or technological contribution only becomes innovation if it is accepted by the social group in which it appears. Otherwise it is ignored and rejected. John Bernal stated that this already used to happen in ancient Greece, describing the difficulties for scientific advances to be introduced in a social culture that was hostile towards them: The scientific possibilities of classical culture - states Bernal - could not become fully effective within the context of the civilisations where they were born. They were constantly blocked by the social and economic limits inherent in a plutocracy based on slave ownership.

Valuing the creativity of designers does not mean, therefore, that this quality is sufficient per se; also required is the means of expression to communicate this and to convince. To introduce emotions, aesthetic pleasure, the artistic dimension into companies... these are undoubtedly the basic traits of designers' responsibility within the design and innovation process. To communicate these values and to satisfy the needs and desires expressed by the target is their social responsibility.

4. Activating the design process

The potential for creation and change offered by the innovation and design team is activated, in its fundamental qualities, through a dual but opposing logic that we may define as: (1) activation via its origins in social demand and the needs of its individuals or, on the other hand, (2) activation based on the company's interest in offering a product. We may also consider the existence of a third logic that would be expressed by a (3) permanent dialogue between the company and the social context or market.

Naturally these three kinds of logic do not occur in isolation nor absolutely, although here we will describe them

individually as models that allow us to analyse the design strategies applicable to each of them according to their predominant logic.

4.1 Activation via social demand: subject-based design

In this case, the design process is activated when the company realises there is a social demand that might be devised and produced. Aware of the expectations and desires shown by the market, the company starts a process of innovation that will lead to the formalisation and materialisation of the corresponding product. (fig: 6)

The company enters a logic of response and commitment where users' needs are the basis of innovation and must be answered by design as a project-based, technological and creative discipline. In this situation, the design project is more determined by market demands than by technological changes or production possibilities.
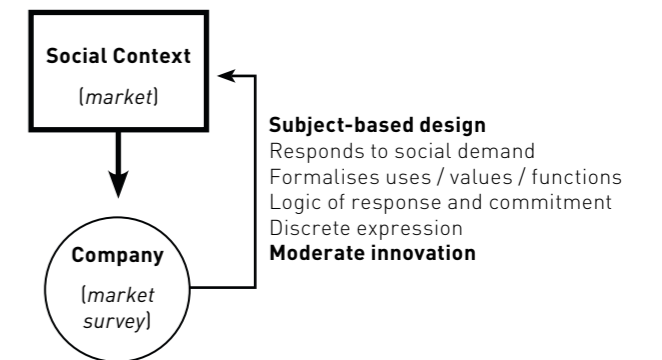

Fig.6: Activating the innovation process via social demand

As this design process is based on the subject, the needs, preferences and general tastes of the social group in question must be determined. In this respect, the Social Studies Department carries out the corresponding market surveys and specifies the economic and developmental strategies applicable to the product.

Opinion surveys, questionnaires, interviews... are the most direct way of identifying the needs and ensuring good knowledge of these. It is also essential to determine the requirements that, given their content, are related to marketing, distributing and the potential demand for the product. Subsequently, the department will draw up general responses and will define the framework within which the product will be located.

It is vital to evaluate these data to begin formalising the product or, more accurately, the design project, while also optimising the company's resources and choosing the tools that best adapt to the situation and the product. Oriented towards the real problems expressed by society, the design project must opt for moderate innovation. However, research into solutions must be accompanied by a critical and open spirit that allows new perspectives and new paths to be considered. Very often, this attitude gives rise to unexpected products and projects.

4.2 The imposition of product: object-based design

A company's supply system does not always follow the logic of response and commitment. Very often an innovation process is activated by means of a logic of creation and change, regarding totally new applications. The product or service offered is normally focused on an something that comes from technological research or from the simple but original combination of known technologies. (fig.7)

In this case, the factor of technological knowledge is one of the intangibles that is most identified with the speed of the change and the reduction in product life cycle. Its critical role is a decisive factor in improving a company's competitiveness.

However, it would not be accurate to present technology as an infallible tool for improving a company's flexibility and competitiveness. In spite of its undeniable importance as a decisive factor in innovation, technology must also be accompanied by social recognition.

It's true that innovation, particularly that of a radical nature, is due largely to technological advances, normally expressed in patents and registrations but almost never as an object. In order to be transformed into a valuable product, technology needs design that, in line with market laws, can turn it into a consumer object.

On the other hand, a product of advanced or radical innovation rarely responds to a social demand. Hence it is highly complex to manage and its results are difficult to diagnose. The risk involved is high. In these cases, in order to reduce the risk of a lack of understanding or rejection involved in this innovation, it is necessary to construct a product as a social fact, presupposing the existence of a market and, from this future view, carrying out the corresponding prospective surveys to anticipate the motivations and mechanisms of decision-making of the new consumers.

Subsequently design, as directly responsible for symbolic expression, will have to provide the object with the necessary content in order to persuade, seduce and convince the market that must be created. From a communication point of view, the design project must be very aware of the place that will be occupied by the product in society's mind and the status it will be granted by consumers

In radical innovation, design, using intuition and creativity, enjoys greater freedom of initiative and can play a decisive role in proposing tangible imaginables. Its creative spirit, says Patrick Hetzel, can be developed more freely and
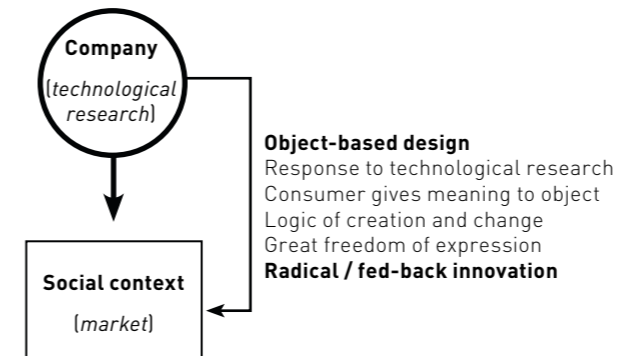

Company (*technological research*)

Social context (*market*)

Object-based design
Response to technological research
Consumer gives meaning to object
Logic of creation and change
Great freedom of expression
Radical / fed-back innovation

Fig.7: Activating the innovation process via product imposition

can take a more active part in restructuring social values. Design, according to Richard Eisermann, is a process that establishes scenarios for the future, that makes things be fair, that provides a certain view of the world and allows it to take on difficulties.

From a design point of view, radical innovation is exceptional or even impossible due to the fact that, as we have already stated, it would not be accepted due to a lack of understanding. Hence, when the problems implicit in radical innovation, such as changes in usability, values or habits, exceed the interpretative or acquisitive possibilities of users, the design process, so as to create a market, must carry out a programme of fed-back innovation with redundant elements, coming from objects that previously carried out similar functions to those of the new product. If the distance between the current object and the previous one is excessive and difficult to accept, design may resort to incremental innovation in order to achieve complete change.

4.3 The permanent market / company dialogue: subject / object design

As we have seen, ideas can be generated via the market and its subjects or also via the supply of a product on the

part of a company itself. A third way, and possibly the most usual, is the interaction between these two basic trends that involves an ongoing analysis of the technical and cultural changes occurring in society and identifying successive market trends within these. (fig. 8)

The constant competition a company is subject to forces it to anticipate market trends and to be ready to advance solutions so as to resolve the problems and proposals that occur. Here, innovation follows a logic of maintenance and permanence, where neither the point of view of the consumer nor the company can take priority but rather the focus must be on the interaction between both.

As priority factors for innovation and differentiation in the market, the company applies the practical knowledge it has concerning social behaviour and its aesthetic and symbolic values. With this objective, the Social Studies Department analyses how potential consumers are structured so as to concretise the features of an area that might be served by a new company product or service.

In order to increase the constant desire for innovation in a market conditioned by product variety, the company, although not explicitly, applies design strategies based on programmed product obsolescence and a parallel proposal of incremental or progressive innovation. This is the case, for example, of consumer products that undergo intense formal change in order to be able to remain in the market, such as fashion, status symbols or technologically appealing objects.

This logic, based on subject/object interaction, requires that designers have good knowledge of public opinion and their minds, as well as a capacity to anticipate and respond to continuous social changes, to their values, norms and preferences. Always with the right amount of rhetorical originality: surpri-

sing and interesting consumers and persuading them become fundamental objectives in the design project.

In this case, acceptance of the innovation does not come so much from its innovative and original nature but rather from the persuasive and appealing qualities of the object, insofar as it improves the image of the person using it, his or her status, exclusivity or vanity.
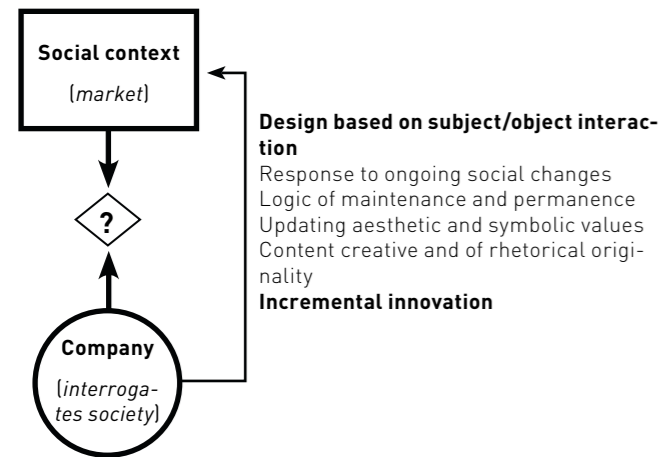

Design based on subject/object interaction
Response to ongoing social changes
Logic of maintenance and permanence
Updating aesthetic and symbolic values
Content creative and of rhetorical originality
Incremental innovation

Fig.8: Activating the innovation process via a continual company/market dialogue

5. By way of conclusion, designers' new space

Today's culture of innovation has revealed the existence of a space that, although not new, has rarely interested designers. We are referring to the decisive role of consumers when ascribing meaning and value to a product. Insofar as they are responsible for formalising the product, designers must realise that the value given to a product comes basically from the client.

Offering a product is always oriented towards producing effects in the client. Clients, as receivers, perceive it and update it as they get to know it and desire it: they make it theirs and, as part of their experience, it takes on meaning and value for them. Consequently, a valuation of a product

does not rely so much on its formal and material structures but rather on the interpretative situation generated in the user according to his or her interests, needs, knowledge and the advantages he or she believes it can provide.

From a pragmatic point of view, offering a product is no more than an attempt at provoking specific attitudes, ideas and effects in consumers and, in this respect, the design project cannot be reduced to formalising the product but must also place special emphasis on the act of valuation provoked in the receiver or client.

The process of innovation and design therefore appears as a social fact, where what is offered by the company is not an isolated, unidirectional event but occurs within a broader context of a system of references, determined by the commercial, aesthetic and cultural experience of the people involved. It is therefore logical to carry this out within the dynamics of an interrelated relationship, one of dialogue between the producer, product and consumer.

As they work, designers therefore need to prioritise the relations existing between production and reception, between the product and its ultimate valuation. This new task involves an attitude towards design that is more oriented towards social communication and a good knowledge of what we might call the grammar of dialogue and its communicative strategies. But, above all, designers must be competent in how to go on, i.e. in understanding the practical knowledge possessed by consumers in order to accomplish the routines of social life.

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