Forward to the Primitive. New Sustainable Design Processes Characterized by Primitive Aesthetic

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Abstract
What will Design become if the object disappears, sublimating itself into the most sustain-able expression of form, that is its absence?

As part of a wider theoretical research on new models of effective product design, we want to emphasize how the growing integration of ethical and environmental sensibilities leads to an often-primitive approach to design that is capable of catalyzing concrete actions and triggering a new accessible aesthetic for the public.

What emerges is a process of progressive disappearance of the object in user practices, replaced by more intangible qualities and value components (ethical, cultural, ideological dimensions of the project), which are also investigated and enjoyed through new unexpected media supports such as videos, films, ambient happenings. This process sees the center of content production shift toward the market or the public and its "peripheries," where a more natural instinctive and direct approach is often expressed in an essential, primitive language.

Keywords
Design process
Primitive aesthetics
Action design
New craftmanship
Sustainability

Introduction

What will Design become if the object disappears, sublimating itself into the most sustain-able expression of form, that is its absence?

Within the framework of this speculative question is substantiated one of the most pronounced and evident transformations of design practice in the contemporary: we are now witnessing a progressive utilitarian devaluation of the object, accompanied by a new participatory interest in designing the future through actions (such as happenings), rather than through the use and consumption of the objects themselves. Indeed, on the one hand, this process is characterized by the progressive dematerialization of the product, which increasingly looks more and more like a service or a "fluid assemblage" (Redström, Heather, 2019, p. 30), on the other this is driven (almost induced) by the overexposure of design pathways leading to design, which are themselves transformed into products for eminently media-driven consumption about "how it is thought". As part of the research, we want to emphasize how the growing integration of ethical and environmental sensibilities leads to an often-primitive approach to design that is capable of catalyzing concrete actions and triggering a new accessible aesthetic for the public. Through some case studies, workshops, and design experiences, we want to investigate and verify here which emerging models prove to be most effective and replicable.

Evolutionary Framework

In some ways, the call's urge to draw more sustainable scenarios pushes us beyond the Anthropocene and underscores the crisis of the majority of ecological thinking, from which almost all customary patterns of productive and market development derive. So far, humans and their needs have always been placed at the center of a modifiable relational ecosystem composed of living beings and exploitable inert resources. Firmly anchored in this existential conviction, homo-sapiens has evolved, protected, for long periods of the most recent history, from the specter of an ideological conviction based on an optimistic vision of development (linked to continue innovation) and the idea of the inexhaustibility of resources. At the same time, knowledge has grown, and a latent culture of the project has spread, within a relationship of mutual contaminal inference, capable of generating moments of reformism and rearrangement of development models.

Industrial production and a certain definition of design, although in transformation today, do not escape this pattern and indeed have sometimes proved responsible for hyper-production of objects, without corresponding either quantitatively or qualitatively to people's real needs and market demand. Industrial Design bears the responsibility of having characterized its disciplinary identity for almost a century (at least until after World War II) through its strong reflexive relationship with forms, materials, techniques and production technologies, almost without strategically weighing those intangible lateral qualities (such as the quality of demand, interactions with local cultures, synergies and trans-disciplinary contaminations),

which place and sustain the product within a complex and articulated con-text, solicited from many sides, in delicate balance.

Using a lateral philosophical approach, Tony Fry, in his recent book *Defuturing, a new design philosophy* (Fry, 2020), describes the topic of sustainability in relative terms as the *sustain-ability* of a system or a community, with reference to a product, a process or a development model. This version translates sustainability into a non-intrinsic quality of the object and rather refers it to an articulated contextual framework, in which social, cultural, ethical factors are as important as the metarial, technological and economic ones, which are more traditionally traced back to design. "While we are more then even aware of both the promise and the threat of technological progress, we still lack the intellectual means and political tools for managing progress" (Feenberg, 2002).

The trajectory of morpho-linguistic evolution from *Industrial Design* to *Design*, reflects at least the most recent part of this change, which originates in the transition from *Modern* to *Post-modern* and continues even further to the present, leaving space for a possible redemption of design. If we assume the late birth of Industrial Design as coinciding with the appearance and subsequent affirmation of Modernism in Europe, accepting its already evolved complex definition of "reason of the whole" formulated by Tomàs Maldonado in 1961, we realize that its qualifying adjective (industrial) at some point slowly began to change, until it disappeared in the determination of "total-Design" (Dorfles, 1972) or in the more generic one of design. This process drew an inclusive parabola that progressively integrated soft qualities (ethics, communication, experience, etc.) and definitively dematerialized the object into a myriad of micro-projects, as Andrea Branzi states: "from product-design to buzz-design" (Branzi, 2007).

The reasons for design have remained largely unchanged over time, but its manifestations have changed as a result of technological (infrastructural) innovation and increasingly sophisticated marketing activities, which can shift the axis of the functional perception of a product and building scenarios at least as strongly as design. Andrew Targowski, a Polish American computer scientist and pioneer of applied information systems, in outlining his tripolar model (Mitrovic, Auger, Hanna, Helgason, 2021, p. 14), once again emphasizes the difference between culture and infrastructure, where culture is based on relatively stable values, whereas infrastructure changes over time in a largely additive manner, thanks to local graft and contributions, which thus cause its development to evolve in an almost unidirectional sense.

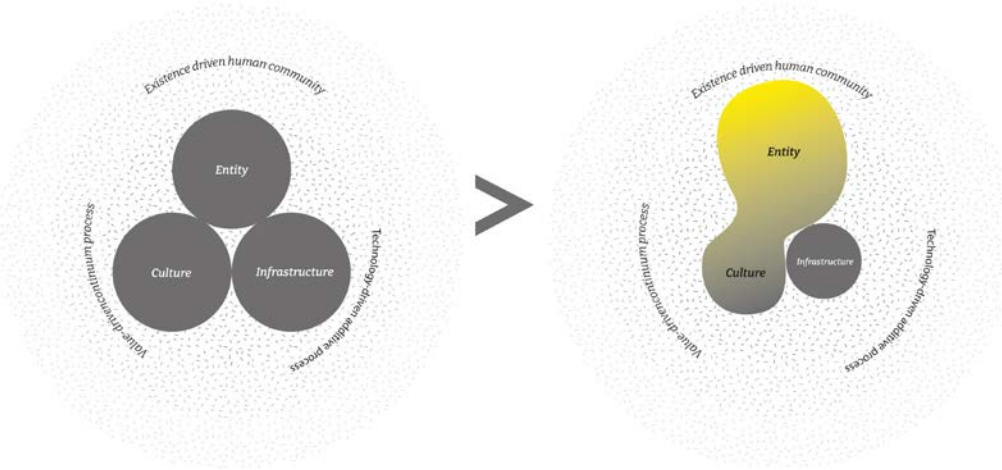

Fig. 1
Andrew Targowski's tripolar model identifies three driving factors behind innovation processes, each with different characteristics: culture, infrastructure, experience.

The historical, cultural, economic, social context variably influences each innovation vector and determines conditions of different inferential relationship, where today the experiential component prevails (in a certain sense with a participatory vocation), this places the project more and more inside the market, in close proximity with the user.

If we apply Targowski's model to the world of production and to what precedes it, i.e. design, we perceive the risk of a slow, technocratic, unidirectional and contaminated transformation, with respect to which, as mentioned, history punctually delivers episodes of revenge and success, mostly generated by an effort of at least cultural imagination, before being technological. Even more definitively, we can say that it is precisely the action exerted within the perimeter of culture that has always represented the sine-qua-non condition to produce visible and permanent development effects in each of the most important innovation junctures, whether or not accompanied by technological factors.

From Product to Process

According to some observers, the weakening of the materialist notion of design is an inevitable end in the face of the crisis in production and industrial systems, where the empty spaces of design have been rapidly recaptured by local communities of makers (which have sprung up spontaneously in the form of democratic actions of anarchic inspiration) and by a new craftsmanship of Anglo-Saxon origin (perhaps a residual expression of an Arts and Crafts vocation that is still alive). Faced with the crisis of capitalism and the object overpopulation on earth, the system is now driven by many small local editors, and it seems to react with idealistic signals, partly rejecting products, and turning its gaze into new contents and new forms of production.

While in the traditional production practice the object is the result of a synthesis process directed by a designer who works as a cultural mediator, now the object (sometimes self-produced)

grows-up directly in the market and so it is increasingly involved in the direct and democratic self-definition of the local fringes in the audience. In this new horizontal production pattern, the ethical, political and idealistic dimension prevails above anything else, to the point of blocking out or rather metabolizing the form without conditioning.

At the same time, another transformation has taken place: after the digital revolution, which slowly redefined the paradigms of production, distribution, consumption and perception of goods, there is now a mature interpenetration between the physical, digital and biological world, summarized in the concept of the fourth industrial revolution. The advent of *Digital Manufacturing* has shortened the distance that once separated the figure of the designer from the production environment. The designer now gets his hands dirty and becomes a direct-maker, creating an ever-closer link between the conceptual and the real, thanks to increasingly accessible and efficient tools. The design process itself (such as *Design Thinking*) changes in the face of the opportunities offered by Digital Manufacturing.

This transition, far from being a mere qualifying factor only for what precedes the appearance of the object on the market, finds definitive expression in the *phygital* model, in which the advanced level of development of digital technologies and the pervasive distribution of access points or protocols defines areas of proximity between the physical and digital worlds practically everywhere. In this sense, one can go so far as to define phygital virtually any experience, including those through which empathic involvement with the product is generated, on which choice and satisfaction, for example, depend.

Just as, according to the Nobel Prize winner Josif Brodskij, the eminently weak connotation of communism at the end of the twentieth century sanctioned the collapse of the Soviet countries, today the collapse of formal/materialistic hedonism in production and the simultaneous pervasive appearance of bottom-up design actions put the process (rather than the product) as a focus for Design.

The lack of interest in the product and, on the other hand, the growing interest in the act of realization (testified by the huge number of video-tutorials available on YouTube and the other social-networks) pushes the center of production towards the boundaries of the production system. In some way this often determines a more instinctive and direct design approach, at least when it is not mediated by the conscious action of a design-expert who draws on his own experience. Consumers today could not be seen as merely users but "they must become active imaginers. This is something people usually do when they visit museums to view historical articrafts on display, [...] more and more interested in using props to transport viewers' imagination into a thought experiment" (Dunne, Raby, 2013, p. 93).

This aspect of change partly derives from extra-ordinary extra-social changes (or to put it in the words of the sociologist Bruno Latour *"from uncontrolled and uncontrollable events and actions"* - Latour, 2005, p. 59), like those that more than ten years ago Ezio Manzini identified in cultures and social groups crossed by contamination, which distort the meaning of Design and from which spring other knowledge, other needs, other project applications (Manzini, 2015, p. 48).

Hypebeast is one of the leading online destinations for men's contemporary fashion and streetwear. In 2012 HBTV (the business television channel of the brand) decides to produce a series of videos searching, selecting and presenting the practice of a few Anglo-Saxon artisans and designers. Behind the choice and the production operation there is first and foremost an anthropological and behavioral intuition: that of a growing public interest in the backstage of the product, an almost morbid curiosity, expressed in latent form by the public, who, from the kitchen to the factory, from tailoring to the private of a home, increasingly seek confirmation or explanation of the origins of everything. An attitude so intense that it turns into an object of interest itself and eventually diverts attention away from the commodity, the form, the product.

In the series entitled *Modern Day Artisans* five young British designers (like the *Young British Artists - YBA* - who started exhibiting their work in 1988), Max Lamb, furniture designer, Sebastian Tarek, custom shoe maker, Ricky Feather, bicycle maker and designer, Jake Ferrato, custom shoe maker and Duffy Jewellery, jewellery designer, bring out a new dimension of craftsmanship and *DIY* (Do It Yourself) production, in which the aesthetic and value quotient of the handmade product is finally elevated to a high level of seduction, thanks to the contamination of contemporaneity and tradition. In addition to a systematic access to the heritage of traditional knowledge, each time linked to the transformation of one or more materials for the realization of a product, each author demonstrates, just as methodologically, a natural ability to contaminate codified production processes with new product management tools.

Fig. 2
Max Lamb stands in his London studio behind a maquette for one of the 6x8 Chair, made from a single piece of western red cedar. The 6x8 Chair explored the tension between individual quirk and mass-produced form, the way that a singular maker can mimic industrial methods yet push against them.

diid DSI No.1 — 2023
Doi: 10.30682/diiddsi23t1h

Fig. 3
Max Lamb, one of the 6x8 Chairs (left) next to a Douglas Fir Chair originally designed for Acne Studios' Stockholm headquarters. The 6x8 Chair explored the tension between individual quirk and mass-produced form, the way that a singular maker can mimic industrial methods yet push against them.

Everything (from technology to communication, from packaging design to product customization) happens under the watchful eye of a video-camera and through a *rough* and casual projection of the processes and steps that accompany the birth of the product.

Again, Max Lamb emphasizes the search for extreme essentiality (a reduction of the product to its minimum terms) behind his project to reinterpret the campaign-chair, an example of *flat-pack furniture*, produced and well-known all over the world in a very basic version (the *Roorkee chair*, for example, was produced in India and it was used by the British Army since 1898). The version designed by Lamb for Dunhill seeks to reduce the product to its bare minimum, with obvious formal and typological consequences: more contemporary production declinations such as seams and joints disappear, in favor of a bare materiality made of wood and natural leather.

Fig. 4
Max Lamb, making of the campaign-chair designed and realized in 2011 in collaboration with Dunhill labs. The project originates from the designer's search for extreme reduction in form and workmanship around a Roorkee chair (an emblematic example of flat-pack furniture, produced and distributed since the late 1800s in India). The result will be a seat with a wooden frame assembled by dry-fit joints, seat and back in natural leather attached by a few metal rivets.

From the observation of the practices analyzed and many others, scattered all over the world emerge some constant factors, which we believe can take on a strategic value for the development of new forms of production of items with a low level of complexity and for the effective enhancement of traditional knowledge.

This escapological tendency of design, or rather of emerging contemporary design, from the system of deferred industrial production, in favor of processes of self-production, in which the continuous synthesis of thought and action takes place, proves to be more sustain-able today and generates typological and morphological innovation in the direction of primitive simplicity.

The unprecedented interest in the processes of production and design, redefines the arrangement of the system-product (understood as "the set of contact elements between producer and customer, i.e., the organic and coherent whole of product, service and communication" - Zurlo, 2012, p. 33), which is increasingly complemented by the direct (or video-mediated) experience of making. This is a new offering intended to correspond to the growing voyeuristic curiosity of the public, partly replacing the fetishism of possession, and above all opening up an interesting prospect of development in the direction of an increasing aestheticization of processes instead of things.

Conclusions

After having freed the field of the project from formalisms and style exercises that are ineffective for the user or the modern public, another vocation for design remains, capable of creating value beyond form and function. As in a primordial landscape in which man (designer or user) is alone, the process and a necessary behavioral reflection become central, free from aesthetic and its materiality. This is the starting point

from which a new sustainable (or sustain-able) aesthetic arises, in which the physical manifestation of the product is systematized most of the time only in a second moment, while what immediately appears is the programmatic action (rigorously filmed) with which the designer (alone or in a group) fills the time and space of the present.

In an empirical way, the present research aims to highlight, in the work of some designers and in the in-Covid design experience, carried out within the course of Product Design of the University of Florence and University of Tuscia, constant traces and common denominators of a new methodological essentialism, experimented effectively in the production of new types of products. Within an almost neo-primitivist condition, we intended to isolate levers of design, performative, experiential action, capable of indicating new design topics and disciplinary scenarios beyond the Anthropocene.

Thus teachers, designers and researchers have chosen to operate consistently with the critical review just outlined, to isolate a minimum methodological apparatus through which to provide design tools adherent to a less formalist demand. In this sense, an experimental scientific approach was adopted, through which, starting from contextual conditions of limitation, a few but stringent instrumental constraints were added (Covid-1, comparable to those found in the case studies. The self-productive prerogative or the idea of limiting the number of materials or means at the designer's disposal has thus standardised the design process, facilitating access even for non-experts.

In this phase, the programmatic reduction of the designer's "traditional" operating field was compensated (but it would be better to say accompanied) by the parallel integration of new multimedia tools, which contributed to the preliminary and contextual planning of the design processes themselves and to the construction of a sensible component of the perceived value of the product.

From the video documentary, to the design of a digital product/service integration platform, to the planning of mass-custmization actions in the production processes: what emerges from the case studies and from the experimentation conducted are "dried" outputs in the formal component, which are however deeply updated in the meaning perceived by the public: a consumer, ethical and experiential value, increasingly expressed by rapidly evolving markets.

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Fig. 5
Gabriele Matteoli, Elisa Giliberto, Leonardo Cai, Scrub, series of bollards and street furniture made of precast concrete, a project developed as part of Prof. Jurji Filieri's Product Design 2 Laboratory course at the University of Florence Industrial Design degree program. The Project, developed during social distancing phase due to the first Covid-19 pandemic emergency, originates from a speculative conditioning of the brief, which traces the design act back to primitive actions of composition and transformation of matter. Courtesy the authors, the University of Florence.

"Therefore, it is not the ancient crafts to be pursued, but the profile and characteristics of the artisan" (Micelli, 2011, p. 64), today necessarily enriched by the ability to enhance the product also through the story of the processes from which it originates. In this framework design contaminates craftsmanship, repositioning his brand and almost creating a new form of participatory end-user militancy for the creation of an object.

Author Roles Acknowledgement

Both authors participated in the writing of the entire paper with personal disciplinary and research contributions. Paragraphs 1, 2 and 3 are mainly to be attributed to Jurji Filieri (corresponding author). Paragraphs 4 and 5 are mainly to be attributed to Elisabetta Benelli.

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