DESIGN AS TRANSLATION.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE A HEALTHY LIFE?

        In modern societies, this question tends to be answered by maintaining the body young and fit, usually thru a low-fat diet and physical activities like run or going to the gym. This way, behaviors related to training have become a materialisation of being healthy, giving body to the concept of "healthy living". But should we consider this materialization as a definitive translation of the concept of being healthy? Ideas need to be materialized so they can be assimilated in life. Assuming this point of view, Design can be defined as a materialization process which translates concepts into objects and behaviors. Therefore, to design something should be understood as a process of embodying meaning in the language of objects. Complex concepts such as "healthy living" can be broken into several moments and are the result of subjective perception. Objects can serve as catalysts of the experiences that define this perception, creating interactions that can make people feel healthy and transforming the abstract idea of "healthy life" into a concrete perception. This presentation intends to discuss how the perception of having a healthy life should be designed in the future, trying to make clear that to design is not a neutral translation but an encoding process which can profoundly change the meaning of a concept according to the way it materializes it.

IMAGE 1: Project developed in 2011 by Cátia Santos, under the guidance of Renato Bispo, in the Industrial Design Project II course of the Industrial Design degree.
IMAGE 4: Project developed in 2010 by Carolina Sousa, under the guidance of Renato Bispo, in the Industrial Design Project II course of the Industrial Design degree.

IMAGE 2: Projects developed in 2004 by Filipa Pires, under the guidance of Fernando Brízio, in the Final Project course of the Industrial Design degree.
IMAGE 5: Project developed in 2014 by Andrea Francisco, under the guidance of Renato Bispo, as her final work for the Master's Degree in Design and Product.
IMAGE 7: Project developed in 2018 by Eduardo Vanzeler, under the guidance of Renato Bispo, as his final work for the Master's Degree in Design and Product.

IMAGE 3: Project developed in 2008 by Diana Antunes, under the guidance of Fernando Brízio, in the Final Project course of the Industrial Design degree.
IMAGE 6: Project developed in 2015 by Sofia Silva, under the guidance of Renato Bispo, as the final work for her Master's degree in Design and Product.

I would like to begin by thanking the organization for this conference and by saying that it has been a great opportunity to be at a truly interdisciplinary meeting, with the challenges that this entails, mainly due to our different backgrounds and vocabulary, the same reason that makes this meeting particularly interesting.

I want to share with you the idea of design as a process of translation. This approach results from my pedagogical practice, seeking to organize the way of teaching design that I use with my students, and eventually to lunch a broader discussion about design.

In this presentation I will try to present and discuss with you the most relevant points that the notion of translation can offer to product design, using projects developed by students at ESAD.CR to support my points of view.

ESAD.CR is a Polytechnic, a practical school with close to one thousand six hundred students, in which about one hundred and seventy are studying product design. Each one of them develops and prototypes about two projects per semester, which leads to the actual production of more than five hundred prototypes every year.

In some extent, the production of student work, mirrors contemporary society, which is completely full of objects. This production creates a tension inside the school, like the one that can be found in society. How to guarantee that objects we design are good, and that make sense at sustainable level or at a social and emotional level, instead of being just more stuff?

Krippendorf (2006) in his book Semantic Turn draws attention to a central issue in contemporary design. For this author the main purpose of designing is to produce meaning, therefore a good design should lead to meaningful products.

In my teaching practice, I arrived at the same conclusion, and I could say that the main purpose of teaching design seems to be rising the student awareness about the conceptual and material process that allows him to design products that make sense.

The projects still must be new, well-built and with good functionality, but if they lack meaning they remain empty of their purpose, just one more object in the consumption continuum in which contemporary society has become.

One of the main goals of design seems to be encode meaning in products, but products are not words, they convey meaning in a different way, in a material way, which relates to our senses, our body, our memory, our emotions, and upon all with our ability to act and to live.

Usually, when we hear the word "reality" in the academic language, it means the relation with companies, trying to connect a speculative academic environment, oriented to knowledge in itself, with the world of business, that keeps the economy running, and for this reason tends to be seen as more real, but I believe that the idea of "translation" has more to give to design than just the connection with the economic reality or even with a greater efficiency of design solutions in a social context.

We can start by defining design as a kind of translation from sociocultural values and concepts to the language of things. A process of materializing meaning, of expressing it in the language of our physical reality, of translating ideas into embodied meaning.

As Berman (1988) says the semantic field of the word "translation" is quite rich and it can means different things, such as the process of literal or non-literal translation of words from a language into another; the conversion of something from a medium to another;
or even the process of moving something from one place to another.

In Portuguese language the word "translation" is translated to "tradução" which means essentially literal translation. There is also the word "translação" often used in mathematics and medical research, less used in common language which maintains a greater polysemy of meaning that comes from the original latin word, in which translation implies a physical or symbolic transference and can be used both for ideas or things.

To understand how this process of translation can be achieved it is crucial to begin by analyzing how meaning is produced in objects. If we base ourselves in semiotic theory, which dismantle the symbolic process, as a strategy to overcome what is called the obstacle of the evidence that makes us feel that meaning is an automatic process, we can unterstand the meaning of an object as a layered process, where in a first moment we recognize what we are seeing and only then interpret its meaning.

The second layer is the meaning of an object. A personal interpretation of the person that is confronted with the object, based on connotations, associations that this person make based on their personal experience, cultural background, emotions, and embodied knowledge.

IMAGE 1

In image 1 we can see how design is using cultural codes to convey meaning. We can see an object that seems to be half glass and half bottle. We recognize the forms because they are very stable in our cultural code, but it is not so easy to understand the object as a whole, because sum of its parts is unconventional. So, we ask ourselves what does this object means?

And when we try to find an answer, we start making connotations, trying to interpret is meaning, associating it with ideas that we already have. Probably we will remember a table, or a dinner, maybe we will associate the bottle neck with drinking a beer or a soft drink. And this relatively stable elements can lead us to thought about formality and informality around a table and the social interactions that happens in this context.

This second layer of interpretation, that can be called meaning, depends on the first layer, when we recognized the half glass and the half bottle. But, if the first layer is relatively stable the second is for sure more open and will rely more on personal interpretation.

IMAGE 2

The examples presented in image 2 works the same way. First, we recognize the elements in these unconventional objects, only then we start interpreting.

On the left we can see the interior of an old tram, and a dress swinging from the hand support. What does it mean? We start doing connotations, using our memories, our perception of the experience which to object invites.

On the right we probably recognize a pair of pants, with some big exterior pockets with holes on the bottom, the context is there to give us a clue. A garden, pigeons, and a movement of dance. What does these pants mean? What happens when we rotate or dance?

Perhaps we will connote this dress and pants with childhood, or with poetic contact with the environment around us, some could feel a sense of happiness or wellbeing, others will have completely different connotations.

In some way it seems easier to understand the meaning, than trying to describe it in words. This is a crucial point of the process of design translation, maybe it is easier to understand deeper complex meanings through objects than trough words, even if it is not possible to describe explicitly and precisely what we are understanding.

But objects are still not words, and its language despite being powerful enough to create in us the sense of evidence is somehow limited in our control over what we try to communicate. Barths (2001) argues that the syntax of objects consists fundamentally in the gathering of elements. These gatherings create forms, that become intelligible compositions of elements upon which we build meaning. Complex messages, as the ones presented before, frequently still rely on simple gatherings of easy recognizable shapes.

Simplicity, or less is more as the designers often say, make the first step of meaning easier. Facilitates the first step in interpreting the meaning of an object. The absence of unnecessary elements accentuates the presence of those that remain. The game of creating meaning, which involves recognizing and combining elements, thus becomes more controlled. The non-essential elements can be understood as noise that could lead the interpreter to make unwanted connotations.

IMAGE 3

In the project presented in image 3 we can see a gathering of two simple elements, two pairs of slippers of different sizes. One for adult and one for child. When in top of each other, this gathering invites us to use them in a certain way. What does it mean? You probably will remember the moment of dancing with a child to, but why make this moment permanent? Why to record this moment on an object? The connotations process starts, hopefully leading to a reflection about how parents should relate with their infants, and how often attention, emotional contact and play should exist in a parent/child relationship.

IMAGE 4

In the next image we can see a bird cage, the perch is a flute. Again, we recognize but what does it mean? The simplicity of the elements used makes the first layer of recognition, clear, but the meaning remains deep and complex. Why people have animals? What is the hidden need? The ability to communicate without using words, the feeling of connection. But in the other side the emprisonment of animals, the role of man over nature.

The ambiguity and complexity of the deeper meaning of this project relies on the fact that cages and flutes are objects with different semantic fields, so when we find a way of connecting these two fields together, we create a need for reflection, and when we reflect upon things, its sense stops being automatic, we become more aware of our values, believes and prejudices.

We live in a complex world surrounded by complex ideas. Ideas like healthy life or wellbeing, that can make us feel that we are unable to decide what to do, because the world is so complex that we can`t understand it. But maybe, and this is a big maybe, it's easier to unterstandd the deeper meaning of complex concepts trough objects than trough words, because objects translate these concepts into reality, allowing us to experience them.

This is why is so important that designers are connected with other specialists, because they need to be bilingual, they need to understand the language of concepts in order of being able to translate them into objects, but this is also why, a designer should remain a designer, someone that is specialized in designing forms, not concepts but forms.

So, what is the role of design in defining the world where we live? Designers are not politicians, and usually don't have much power to decide important things in society. Designers have a completely different power, the power to propose, to show alternatives, in a way that non specialists can understand. Designers have the power of syntheses, the power of materializing complex concepts, and material syntheses has the power of evidence, of changing reality, because when we start believing in them, they become real in its consequences.

IMAGE 5

In Portugal the public pools are not as in Budapest, the water temperature is colder, around 27 degrees, the project in image 5 is a two pieces swimming suit, in which the bottom part is made of very thin neoprene, a thinner version of the same material used in surf suits.

This swimming suit allows older people to dress an undress easily, and it was developed with a municipal swimming pool in Caldas da Rainha, in contact whit the older users that go to this pool. Its affordance or somatic qualities allows people to stay longer in the water and use the pool in a more pleasurable way. What is the deeper meaning?

Depression and loneliness are the biggest problems with older population in Portugal. Being able to use a municipal pool in more comfortable way is an invitation for an older person to remain active, to go out of home and be with others, to stay autonomous and self-confident.

IMAGE 6

The project in the image 6 was made in connection with a traditional pastry shop in Lisbon, it is a "guardanapo" (a napkin) a traditional cake usually eaten by chidden. The new version adds some red fruits to the batter and reduces sugar. The shape remains familiar for a Portuguese person, but the flavor and the visual appearance has been changed. It`s not the old unhealthy "guardanapo" anymore, it's a new one, more concerned with children health problems due to excessive consumption of sugar. But it is still a cake! and is

changing the meaning of what is a cake, and therefore the meaning of what is a pastry shop, updating them to new concepts of health. If we start changing products, we change institutions and therefore society.

IMAGE 7

The project in image 7 changes the way children learn music. The child can create a specific set of musical notes and organize them according to his or her body and to the exploration of harmonic relations. It can start with only one box allowing the child to explore rhythm, or with as few as three boxes to create a harmonic sequence and evolve to 32 boxes, the same three octaves as classical piano.

It is a musical instrument which adapts to the player, allowing the person to explore and achieve results faster, or to explore new ways of relating notes with each other. Even if a person never has played music before, he or she can start exploring and doing simple melodies after the first session of learning. It promotes exploration and self-learning. What does this mean in the context of a learning environment? What if leaning was driven by enthusiasm and curations instead of fear and exams?

The deeper meaning, as usual is open to interpretation, but the object poses the question.

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