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Advanced design as reframing practice: Ethical challenges and anticipation in design issues



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ABSTRACT

Advanced Design (ADD) is a branch of industrial design that directs and uses the tools, practices and knowledge of conventional industrial design in long-term projects, or in projects that are addressed to a distant future. Recently, ADD has focused its attention on projects that are not governed by a client in order to search for innovation stimuli that come from extreme situations or far from the aim of the project. It also focuses on continuous innovation processes in which the designer is not the only creative actor of the process and often only helps draw the route of innovation, instead of drawing it alone. Although the ethical debate has always been alive in conventional industrial design, considering this renewed horizon of ADD, a particular reflection on the concepts of ethics, time and the designer's responsibility, is necessary. This paper describes the transformation of the traditional designer considered to be the demiurge of fashion and industrial products into a manufacturer of possible futures and co-author of futurist reframing.

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1. Design, advanced design (ADD) and reframing: from shaping goods to materialising the future

There is consensus that conventional industrial design represents the integration of artistic skills and technical knowledge into product design in order to create the kind of desire that we see in shopping centre windows and advertising. This profile originated from industrial tradition, which today we call design. For almost a century, researchers have examined behavioural change related to consumption; for an equal amount of time, designers have drawn both desired and necessary objects. The evolving of human needs, saturation of commodities in western markets and changes to the processes of production and reproduction have called for a continuous updating of conventional industrial design. From this evolution emerged so-called ADD, which works in a design domain characterised by the need to think about products, systems and services suitable for a distant future. Therefore, ADD focuses on long-term projects.

In the postwar period, highly complex manufacturing sectors such as the automotive industry began to design and build “dream cars” or products not expected to be immediately placed on the market. These commodities have been labelled “concept products” to mean their leading function with respect to consumer tastes and their progressive alignment towards the morphological and structural codes used in the contemporary world.

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ADD is an articulated set of design processes oriented to shape products and services for the distant future as well as to produce commodities for highly complex contexts, created through the involvement of broad groups of designers – and even with the contribution of the consumer. These kinds of projects are often unsolicited from specific clients. They frequently face situations that are unconnected to the present and not linked with their own productive sectors because they are disruptive, extremely innovative and unusual compared with the spectrum of goods produced for immediate consumption. ADD projects rarely have a target market, an industry reference or a client. Indeed, they typically do not have a single creative author and they are often intended for other designers rather than end users. In this regard, ADD is at the “front end” of “design-driven innovation” (Celaschi, 2000) and therefore requires continuous theoretical reflection rooted in practice for the construction of their own instruments and paths that can be followed to give the future an original shape.

ADD aims to transform every discovery, every new piece of knowledge and every invention into a continuous innovation, not only adapting them to the expectations and needs of the production system and end users, but also helping build new producers, new production processes, new users and new markets for innovation diffusion. For example, at the University of Bologna we are pursuing a research around “future foods” based on an extreme scenario characterised by the gradual but systematic shutdown of all refrigerators. This seemingly simple action would cause a global food crisis, because no citizens in mature industrialised countries are aware of the food preservative systems that have brought about human development for over 40,000 years.

ADD, in this case, offers a simple scenario as well as a wide scale reframing that is not satisfied to succumb to the litany of energy savings as the only salvation. It redesigns the system of furniture, accessories, goods and packaging in order to think about new dishes and the training that people need in order to regain the knowledge previously delegated entirely to the supermarket cold chain. Salt, vacuum-packing, oil, alcohol and dehydration once again serve as natural preservatives that we must relearn to use.

This case is paradigmatic of how long-term design intervention can be meaningfully reframed by changing values and consumer behaviour. The paradigm shift imposed by the advent of ADD practices, while offering innovative tools and methods and proposing unexpected responses, requires us to reflect on the ethical issues related to design change.

2. A brief history of ethical issues in conventional industrial design

The history of design as a discipline is relatively recent; however, if we examine this path through the lens of reflection on ethical issues, we can recognise that we have progressively taken note of the consequences of design action macroscopically through few larger topics, namely environmental issues, social issues and cultural issues. These three key issues represent the corridors within which conventional industrial design has revealed its deep connection with the question of ethics and the designer’s responsibility for a large part of the second half of the 1900s. Along this brief history emerge seeds of ethical design practice that can later be interpreted as weak signals of ADD’s birth.

2.1. *Environmental issues: from acknowledgement to prevention*

The acceleration and spread of industrialisation in the 1960s produced the first environmental disasters and gave rise to the awareness of an environmental issue. In the early 1970s, this took the form of a scientific awareness of environmental limits and problems. The forward-looking Club of Rome published the report “The Limits to Growth” that, thanks to its continuous updates, remains a point of reference about the future resources available on the planet (Meadows, Meadows, Randers, Illiam, & Behrens, 1972). At the same time, within the international design community, the first ethical issues around the theme of environmental sustainability were raising. In the 1970, Tomas Maldonado, influenced by his previous experience at the school of Ulm and aware of the important social role of the designer and the responsibilities of the project towards the community, described the designer as an intellectual technician. In his opinion, design responsibilities required a strong ethics founded on a solid cultural base of the designer. In his book, translated into English under the title *Design, Nature and Revolution: Toward a Critical Ecology*, but originally published in Italian under the significant title *La speranza progettuale (The Design Hope)* (Maldonado, 1971), Maldonado criticises the degradation of our physical environment. The originality of his approach lies in the fact that the environmental problem is contextualised in a critical and transdisciplinary discourse that relates to the political and cultural nihilism of the youth dissent of those days, the utopian and conformist escapes of environmental design, the autonomy degree of intellectuals in late-capitalist society and the relationship between design and revolution (Margolin, 2007).

In the 1980s, thanks to the intensification of the international debate and activism of NGOs (nongovernmental organisations), this awareness reached institutions. Environmental policies and regulations, essentially based on the “Polluters Pay Principle” began to be outlined, and in 1987 the UN report *Our Common Future* provided the first definition of sustainable environmental development (Vezzoli, 2003). The notion of the environment in the design literature has since changed: it has become a system of relations between anthropogenic (technosphere and sociosphere) and non-anthropogenic components (geosphere and biosphere), including the presence and action of humans with their needs, individual and collective behaviours, different forms of social organisation and technology production (Chiapponi, 1989).

After the spread of industrial production, the growth of markets and the advent of the consumer society, design tension became focused more and more on the product. However, if the main need in the postwar period was to rebuild society based on values where each item was associated with a function, superfluous buying had already begun by the boom of the

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