Design for Next Challenges

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Design for next Challenges.

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Abstract: As we know, several contemporary shifts in society, technology, production are reframing Design processes, approaches and tools. And while professionals, educators, researchers are questioning about Design methods, tools, experiences, moving from to study the near past to define the next stage of innovation, Design as knowledge is evolving as a wide-open field with many applications and meanings. According to this awareness, when for the Twelfth edition of the International Conference of the European Academy of Design (www.designfornext.org), it has been launched the topic ‘Design for Next ...’, the aim was to tackle the social, technological and industrial shifts of the future. But in ‘Design for Next ...’, ‘next’ is not only a question of future, it implies the concept of proximity as well as of destination, related to time and to physical space. Asking to the international Design community ‘What is Design for the next? And what is the next’ focus of Design?’, we would like to discover future fields of investigation and practices in Design.

Keywords: Design Research, Future Studies, Design Challenges, New Visions

1. Premise: Design, Present, Future and possibilities

The studies about ‘the anticipation’ (also renowned as ‘future studies’) as a scientifically accredited process started from the 70s of last century (de Jouvenel, 1967, Cournand & Levy, 1973, Masini, 2006). But, it is just on recent years, that the impact of the ‘future studies’ are having a new awareness in the various knowledge and, in particular, on Design. An awareness about, in particular, on the processual dimension of Design that generates various form of innovation, from the social and cultural ones to the technological and productive. (Http://www.projectanticipation.org). The reasons for this new interest on the future studies are manifold and especially related to the various changes that are currently investing the traditional design processes. These changes leave a designer ‘on the field’ with less and less sophisticated conceptual tools and methodologies. On one hand, we are assisting in the de-materialization of our world (places, objects and process), in favour of a society of services. This has obvious implications for the role of the designer: its competences are replaced by other skills - from ICT to Humanities - in determining the so-called 'touch points' and in the possibility of co-designing the experiences of those who can no longer be considered simply consumers but 'people', in its the complex meaning. The need to take in account the process of sharing – involving a large number of people, too often not expert in Design – has definitively cancelled the classical Design condition as 'demiurge' or as 'sole author' of the project.
On the other hand, the evident importance that the processes (as ‘way to do’) are gaining in relation to the products (as ‘results of what we do’) is causing a paradigmatic shift for Design from the concept of ‘form as substance’ to the concept of ‘process as a form’. The traditional role of client (public or private) with an economic capacity to express a design ‘request’, defined and articulated, is disappearing in the new economic system. That means the ‘problem finding’ (rather than ‘problem solving’) becomes the core of the design action, with a different opportunity for Design to play a driving role in the companies as well as in the society.

Moreover, the ‘time’ is becoming a crucial factor both in design and innovation processes. And while social demands seem to be satisfied in a short-term consumption, the technological innovations and the economic turbulent contexts require long-term organized processes where to build, step by step, conditions for more radical and useful transformations, rather than chasing the emergencies. In this context, the inability of designers to be real ‘engines’ of the transformation processes – of the territory, goods, services – and to be a ‘mediators between knowledge and needs’ (Celaschi, 2008) is evident; therefore, to continue to plan and deal with transformation processes requires an attention to the future based on the idea of ‘futures possible’ described few decades ago by Bertrand de Jouvenel. Whith the concept of ‘Futurible’, he argued that, during the times of crisis and fear (not many different from what we are living today), the future has to be built not only exploiting discoveries and technical scientific innovations but using reflection, fantasy and utopia. (De Jouvenel, 1967)

To anticipate the future, according to Jouvenel, is not question of numerical prevision, but it is cultural expression, moral fact, ability to recognize the consequences on life, happiness, society, and possible choices. It is in this different capacity invoked by de Jouvenel that the Design is totally involved. But the overlapping terms between design words and the future are more complex.

The visionary connotation of the project, besides being intrinsically linked to its very meaning is closely linked to the development of modernity – the etymological meaning of the term ‘project’ derives from the Latin word proiectare, which means ‘throwing forward’. And this resumes a concept proposed by Victor Margolin (2007) which, in delineating possible relationships between Design, the future and the human being, distinguishes between predictive, prescriptive, pragmatic or idealistic scenarios.

“A predictive scenario is based on what could happen. Its methodologies involve gathering data and organizing it into patterns that make reflection on future possibilities more plausible. Creators of predictive scenarios recognize that the events or activities they study are too complex to control by fiat. In contrast, prescriptive scenarios embody strongly articulated visions of what should happen. Data plays a subordinate role in the argument for a specific course of action. Predictive scenarios tend to be pragmatic, while prescriptive ones are idealistic.”

According to Margolin, designing (in the present) requires a vision of what the future could and should be. For him, ‘could’ puts in place the conditional, while ‘should’ is prescriptive, it becomes an action, a hint and it is not inevitable. Therefore, Viktor Margolin claims that Design, planning the future, should not only work on the contingency of human choices but it has to guide them, offering them new and different chances.

That means Design works with the idea of possibility, use the ‘possibilities’ as a tool of craft. The reference to the ‘possible’ and to the ‘prescriptive’ puts attention from what is (and it is often presented as inescapable/inevitable) to what it might be, thus bringing the discourse to a ‘political dimension’, with the meaning of to be active part at the society.
The term of opportunity, apparently vague and blurred but not at all weak, can mean of what is (still) indefinite and uncertain but also of what might be, putting the 'political' status of interpretations and visions in the foreground.

For Design, thinking about the future doesn't mean imagining great solutions with futuristic techniques, it means getting rid from the mental constraints of the present and imagine the possible. (Ferraro, 1998).

And when the future is possible, the question moves into another temporal dimension: an indistinct space that is 'almost, not enough, but very close, so much to seem possible'.

And it is no longer a matter of future, but of 'next'.

To imagine the 'next' is a question of borders (in between the present and the future, in between what is and what should be) in order to articulate ideas, concepts and notions out of the conventional approach of 'inside-the-box'.

It is to look for topics or concepts related to social practices that, in somehow, are not evident but lie beneath the surface.

By paraphrasing what American writer William Gibson said, "The future is already here - it's just not very evenly distributed." (Http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1067220), it is possible describe with effective synthesis the relationship between Design and 'next', where Design looks for predictive signals of the near future.

But these signals are never obvious, powerful, and well-defined: these are behaviours, attitudes, products and services of nowadays that announce in a 'weak' shape the future. In this case the concept of 'weak' doesn't have a minus meaning, it evokes the notion of early warning of phenomena that could become important in the future.

Therefore, the task of Design is to work with these 'weak signals' that must be recognized, focused and expanded.

2. Design challenges: in between signals, ideas and actions.

Three interesting experiences are reported below in order to evaluate if and how Design is reading and interpreting these signals and what is their importance to build the 'next future'.

2.1 Near Future Laboratory

The first one is about a design team, called 'Near Future' Laboratory which declares to have as goal the understanding how imaginations and hypothesis become materialized to swerve the present into new, more habitable, near future worlds: exploring people’s needs, motivations and contexts, they map new design opportunities and chart potential futures. (http://nearfuturelaboratory.com)

Near Future Laboratory is a team of 'design' researchers who try to get out of conventional schemes in order to create new opportunities for an interaction in between society and new technologies.

With the pragmatism that often appeals scholars of applied sciences, their way of working can be defined as "thinking in action": their process moves from the idea to the prototype, to come back to the idea enriched with new facets. A continuous movement between thought and action to build devices that help us to imagine a more liveable, more sustainable and even more enjoyable world.

According to their founders, Julian Bleeker and Nicolas Nova, the 'adventure' started with the belief that there was an empty space between those who are committed to designing and producing objects (in particular, it refers to the world of profession) and who focuses on what should be constructed, basing on trend analysis and other forecasting practices (and here we refer to the world of scientific research).
The idea has been to develop a research and design practice that works in between long-term academic studies and the short-term development of the commercial product. In this 'time gap' - in between the short and the long term - they are convinced there is and can to be build what they call 'near future'.

Their goals are: a) to encourage design innovation by freeing it from market constraints; B) work fast without those large economic investments of the classic innovation processes; C) eliminate any censorship about ideas and projects due by the market factors, exploring unexpected possibilities; D) circulate knowledge and intuition quickly over the years - using the system of creative-commons and not the classical one of pay-to-know. And to pursue these goals, they chose to use the 'time' as a 'polyvalent expression'. Because their projects work on the interaction within humans and time, as well as their focus is on the near future. As they themselves admit, they feel in some way close to the imaginary worlds of Bruce Sterling: but they may well be considered constructors (rather than writers) of the imaginary. Each of their projects is an exploration of a piece of current reality, starting from unconventional premises, they investigate and designing a hypothesis of the future.

As in the 'Ikea Catalogue from The Near Future' project realized in collaboration with the Mobile Life Center and Boris Design Studio in Stockholm. In this project, they tried to imagine a real 'future' in which the Internet of Things is really present in everyday life. And what we can think, today, more 'normal' and of everyday of the Ikea's products? And so, without neglecting any details, considering all possible aspects (from shape to price), this new Ikea Catalogue, full of new kind of products, becomes the result of their Design Fiction.

For them, technologies (those of the Internet of Things) are not just opportunities for innovation, but stimuli to imagine new social practices, new ideas of the future. The most interesting approach of Near Future Laboratory is that isn't enough for them to have ideas, to describe and to design them. Their main concern is to test these ideas transforming in real experiences to get information and feedback. Hence the need to prototype these pieces of future physically and socially through objects and practices that can be experienced.
2.2 Officina Corpuscoli

Therefore, this Design for ‘next’ is not just about analysis ‘from a far’, but real actions. Such as what is doing the second case-history that we are going to explore. This is not about a design team, but about a young designer, Maurizio Montalti, which after to be graduate he decided to open not a classical design office, but a research Lab, called Officina Corpuscoli, (http://www.corpuscoli.com) that seeks to reveal unorthodox relationships among existing paradigms. By distilling research and analysis and tangibly materializing relevant facts, his main goal is to create projects and conditions that allow for a resonant critical experience, by the synthesis of ideas through design.

The work of Officina Corpuscoli is toward the exploration of the Design approaches, aiming to investigate and reflect upon contemporary (material) culture, thereby creating new opportunities and visions both for the (creative) industry and for the society as whole. Officina Corpuscoli doesn’t trying to explore many future – as the previous Design group – but is focusing on a specific scenario, with the aim of making it possible: his work revolves around the recent scientific 'discovery' on the potential of fungus and mycelium to have unexpected properties in interaction with inorganic materials such as plastics.

As in the Bio Ex-Machina, a multidisciplinary research project, where Montalti explored the possibilities of digital and biological interconnection through the creation of products capable of cultivating living cells in specific fungi or mycelium, gaining new functions and properties aesthetic. The main purpose of this design research has been the development of hybrid artefacts with nano-metric structures, imagined as an ecosystem able of combining strategies of algorithmic design, materials' behaviour and living organisms, also exploring production processes that use ‘robot arms’. In this case, Montalti’s bio-manufacturing can be understood as a real and experiential demonstration of a possible future where different signals, which in our present are niches of innovation, are combined to become widespread practice: a) the use of bioplastics as a sustainable alternative to the use of non-biodegradable materials; b) the use of robotics as an iterative production strategy and non-repetitive operations; c) a widespread access to all the disciplines.
involved (computational design, biology, robotics, additive manufacturing) through open-source tools.
In this work, Montalti is convinced that designers must take on ethical responsibilities and pursue their ideas even if these are close to be utopic, albeit analytically and ethically correct. For him, the Design task seems to be to highlight the limits of industry and its current production methods. The effort is to bridge the existing gap between the experimental design — that is too often relegated to a niche — and an effective fruition by people; using specific projects he tries to demonstrate that it is possible to achieve a valid and cost-effective model for the economy as well as for the environment.

2.3 Full Grown

This approach is essentially to persuade about 'next' future, using facts more than with simple projects, albeit these can be well-developed and packaged.

And this is exactly what Gavin Munro is trying to do with his Full Grown. In fact, the third experience here reported is about not only a design experience but a production one. (http://fullgrown.co.uk)

And if in the Near Future Laboratory, the focus is on the search for 'weak signals' and in Officine Corpuscoli all the efforts are to turn some of these signals into a new possible operational reality, Gavin Munro’s experience has the value to be a piece of a 'next future' became reality and already in some way available.

This experience also starts from one of those 'weak signals' that, this time, Gavin Munro intercepted using a personal sensitivity.

Reflecting on the actual furniture production, Gavin asked what sense it would have. Before, we grow the trees just to cut them down; then, we work the wood into smaller pieces in order to re-assembling again in an object, durable like the original material, but with a new shape suitable for its function. This 'antithesis process' - growth, destruction, and new re-construction – seemed so illogical to Gavin that he felt the need to regenerate the whole process starting from the tree growth.

This has been the incipit for the development of a new way of designing and producing furniture, reducing at the minimum the use of technology. In the 'Full Grown' factory, Gavin Munro obtains its products by designing and driving the growth of trees through structures that accompany the growth of the young branches to assume the shape of chairs, shelves and tables.

The process of iterativity and non-repetition is entrusted entirely to 'mother nature', while the designer's task is of predicting, planning and treating the harvest, that, within a few years, will sprout and grow as chairs that do not need joints or connections, eliminating the assembly process.

This process, of which Munro is a pioneer, opens up a completely unexpected, but absolutely possible, way of sustainable, efficient and ecologically aware production method able to substantially change the industry’s structure.

And in the next future, where today there are polluting factories, there will be cultivated fields of trees in the form of objects. A future where the self-production is the main component of the process, and the self-generation is conceptually entrusted to nature. And each Designer, and potentially each of us, can became a 'farmer of objects'.
3. Conclusion: next ‘minimal’ utopias

What emerges from these three experiences of ‘Design for Next’ is a sort of ‘aporia’ in between the wide dimension of the challenges to build the future and the small dimension of the concrete actions.

Design, in this construction of the future, seems to be able to touch relatively ‘reduced’ territories (intending here, with territory, the space of influence of the proposed solutions), and therefore weigh as ‘single’ and somewhat ‘spontaneous’ step towards the possible next future.

From these experiences, it seems evident that from those ‘weak’ signals can inevitably grow just punctual, but not less effective, visions. And this ‘punctual’ dimension of Design for Next points directly to another issue that is characterizing our contemporary and its future consequences: the loss of grand, universal narratives in favour of small, local narratives (Lyotard, 1979).

In fact, it is not difficult to argue that this beginning of the new century, unlike the previous one, is a century without great visions or great utopias.

Or better, it is an evidence that our contemporary culture (considering here contemporaneity as present) seems to be conditioned by the 'legacy' of a near past, such as that of the twentieth century, marked by the emergence of some grandiose ideologies and their unfolding.

This condition is felt by society, culture, politics both positively – as awareness of the failure and the exhaustion of the twentieth century utopias as in the warming of the Berthold Brecht's Galileo: "Unhappy is the land that needs a hero" (Brecht, Life of Galileo, Scene 12, p. 115, 1939) – and with a feeling of frustration – due to the latent fear that the total and absolute renunciation of any utopia leads to the cultural ‘aporia’.

The dual meaning of the contemporary concept of utopia is also evident in the lexical use of this word sometimes taken with a very restrictive value (unrealistic, abstract model), sometimes to emphasize the denunciation of the existing situations and the positive capacity to orientate forms of social renewal (almost as opposed to ideology).
Design, more than other knowledge, is heavily invested by the absence of great visions. The three experiences, before described, demonstrate in their aims, but also in their actions, to not contemplate large-scale utopias. Today, in the construction of the 'next', Design expresses a discomfort towards any utopian thinking or towards the way of utopically thinking. (Moneti, 2011).

Design assumes an attitude of disillusion towards those unrealistic models closer to the concept of 'outopia', as a chimeric, unattainable 'place that is not there'. Design shows a different form of utopia, or rather, a different purpose and meaning of 'utopian thinking', which is no longer in search of worlds too perfect and too remote to be able to aspire to become real, or even just to serve as guide for the ethical-political actions. With this different approach of utopia, Design recalls the positive concept of 'eutopia': a 'right place', a horizon of 'not yet', towards which to aim the critical, planning and transformative efforts. But this is not just an operational choice of Design. It seems to express the specific character of contemporary society, which so strongly characterized by endemic uncertainties and insecurities (Prigogine, 1997) and liquefaction of social and cultural ties (Bauman, 2005).

Society doesn't ask any more so big and maximizing actions to be far from being realized, but rather many small possible actions resulting from so many small visions that then draw a collective vision. In other words, we pass from the logic of maximizing utopia to the one of 'minimalist utopias' (Zoja, 2013) where, as Yona Friedman argues that believing in utopia and simultaneously to be realistic is no longer a contradiction. (Friedman, 2000).

It is on this logic of 'minimalist utopia' that the Conference Design for Next has opened and gave voice to the many possible future where urgent questions - social, technological, economic and environmental questions - find possible answers in minimal utopias who invest 'democratically' any field of design and can be replicated with different weights and measures not to describe perfect worlds but to act in many different real worlds.

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