

The quality challenge

Today the theme of quality is at the centre of the industrial debate. It is, in my opinion, an interesting but limited debate, in that quality, understood as “total quality”, is seen as a fact solely internal to the industrial organisations’ basic themes: how to reduce wastes, how to increase the reliability of the products, how to render a more efficient service for the client, etc. The theme of quality must instead go beyond this distressful horizon. It is necessary to see it as a great design challenge, oriented towards the quality of the environment and mindful of the complexity of the problems in terms of ecological, sensorial, and cultural qualities. What does “ecological product” mean? How can we enrich our sensorial landscape? How can we give cultural value to new technologies? In short: how can we make the world habitable?

It is in this picture of ample and complex problems that the activity of the designer fits in: an operator whose role is (or should be) to creatively interact with production and marketing to better the habitability of the world.

This definition (which is at the basis of the didactics and design research at the Domus Academy), questions the traditional relationship between designer and industrial management. The designer is not to be seen only as a specialist at the service of the firm, called to resolve already fully defined problems, but is to be seen also as a subject endowed with his/ her own cultural autonomy and peculiar vision of the world, which intervenes in the “strategic” definition of the products (that is to say, in the moment in which one plans the program of the project).

It is in this phase, in fact, that the confrontation between different cultures (that of production and marketing on one hand, and that of the designer on the other hand), allows the emergence of new qualities: those “deep qualities” which, integrated in a product, can constitute a competitive advantage for the firm and, at the same time, can contribute towards making the world habitable.

Quality in the post-industrial metropolis

The world to make inhabitable is that of the post-industrial metropolis: the “global village” on a planetary scale, whose character has been deeply marked by the diffuse and profound impact of new technologies.

To say that this is the world in which to intervene does not mean to accept it as it is. It means to understand the way in which it reproduces itself and the problems that it is faced with, because anything one wants to do, this is the material one has to operate with.

A first observation concerns its physical consistency - the metamorphosis of the materials with which it is made, and the time scales and the processes of its transformations.

In the contemporary world, matter, which has always been solid and stable – the inert counterpart of ideas, seems to have become ductile and malleable in every possible way. The integration between science and technology, penetrating with its own impacts in the everyday environment, has made many of the traditional technical ties fall away, enlarging enormously the field of possibilities: forms and functions until yesterday unthinkable, are today possible.

On the other hand, market competition has pushed producers toward the most rapid use of these possibilities, integrating the multiplication of images and performances offered, and the acceleration of the introduction of the “new”.

Out of this has derived a sense of general ephemerality, an impoverishment of the sensorial experience, a superficialisation and dematerialisation in the relationship with

objects: the world tends to be perceived as a disposable world. A world of objects without depth, which do not leave any traces in our memory, but which leave instead a growing mountain of waste.

The discovery of physical and semiotic limits

While technical innovation broadens our possibilities, our culture begins to understand the existence of other limits we were previously unaware of: the limits of our environment and the resulting implications. This discovery is certainly another aspect which characterises our current historical phase and will require a profound rethinking of the meaning we have attributed up until now to the terms “design” and “production”.

The realisation of environmental limits involves the discovery that it is no longer possible to conceive of a single design or production solution in isolation from the whole, broader relation which the product will become part in its complete life cycle (production, use, discharge). Considering these relations, we come to an extraordinary increase in the complexity of the system with which the designer and the producer have to interact.

The discovery of environmental limits does not only refer to the physical limits of the biosphere. What we are also discovering is another type of limit: the limit in our capacity to confront ourselves with a growing mass of information.

We discover, in short, that our “semiotic environment” (that is to say our semiosphere) is limited. We find that it is impossible to introduce an uncontrolled quantity of signals into it, because it creates its own type of pollution. This “semiotic pollution” is characterised by confusion, loss, and distortion of meaning, leading to the general production of semiotic waste.

In this way we discover that the result of the “liberation of the forms and performances” allowed by technology, can also be a great production of “noise”. That is to say that what happens is precisely the opposite of what we had hoped to achieve by the increase of information.

We must therefore connect products to their environment, not only on the level of their physical relations with the biosphere – of which we already talked - but also on that of their relations with the semiosphere. It means the necessity to produce not only new images, but to design some stable and lasting identities, able to insert themselves recognisably in the cultural space in which they are placed.

The problem is that to go in this direction it is necessary to develop a new product culture. A culture that questions how it is placed in our environment and how it is related to the user.

This problem poses interesting and novel challenges to research orientation. Here I would like to propose an orientation which I believe to be particularly suggestive: to think of objects, not as instruments at our service, but as entities for us to affectionately care for - to think of objects as plants in a garden.

The garden of objects

Today we live in a world of objects of rapid consumption. Objects which perform their service requiring minimum effort and minimum attention, but also, as I already mentioned, objects which pass us by without leaving any lasting impression in our memory. A disposable world made to require no effort, but which, at the same time, produces no quality.

Imagine now a garden with some flowers and some fruit trees. Think of the attention, time and energy that are required and think of its products. Those flowers and those fruits, and the person who made them grow, do not have a measurable value in banally economic terms. Certainly the garden must produce flowers and fruits, but the person dedicated to this, does it

for a more general reason: he/she does it because he/she loves plants. Try now to imagine an analogous relationship with objects. Think of some objects that are as beautiful and useful as a tree in a garden: objects that would last and would have a life of their own. Objects that, as a tree, would be loved for how they are and what they do. Objects that would render a service and would require tending.

If the more general role of design is to make the world more habitable, a way of doing it is, in my opinion, that of proposing a new criteria of quality, which would have the garden, and the care which it requires, as a metaphor of reference. A new criteria of quality which would bring to a system of objects variety, complexity, life, garden, and that, at the same time, would be a product of the current world: a world so extensively and intensively artificialised.

It seems simple. In reality, following this proposal implies an overturning of the way design has traditionally oriented itself towards its products. It implies an inversion of tendencies in the relationship between subjects and objects. It implies a new ecological sensibility: taking care of objects can be a way of taking care of that much larger "object" which is our planet.