

Observation and hypotheses for interpretation

I would like to start by stressing an inconvenience. This is represented by the presence of some paradoxes related to the way in which the artificial environment appears and is discussed:

How is it possible to talk increasingly about “superficialisation” of experience, loss of the objects’ physical and cultural character, and matter reduction in favour of information while, on the other hand, the world is more and more saturated with things, loaded with trash of all kinds?

How is it possible that the most widespread perception in this society, defining itself as the society of information, should induce the feeling of being sunk in noise?

And finally, how is it possible for technical and scientific innovation to bring man’s capacity to manipulate matter and information to never-attained levels, and for the overall evolution of the environmental system in which we live to move towards relentless degradation?

The interpretative scheme I would like to put forward in order to understand this contradictory situation is based on two fundamental factors:

- The change of scale in the technical and productive activity involves a sort of matter “fluidification” and an acceleration of environmental transformation times.
- The limited character of the physical and semiotic environment in which we live and operate stands out and appears in the form of product saturation and the accumulation of trash of all kinds (both physical and semiotic).

Reduction of technical limits, matter “fluidification” and time acceleration

In the last few decades technique has considerably improved its capacity to manipulate extremely small things quickly. As a consequence its work escapes our sensitive sphere and the consequences it produces seem to emerge from material supports whose functioning may not be understood, and to be lacking in a physical identity our senses can recognise. Moreover, the “matter” designers cope with (that is the indissoluble whole of materials and transformation techniques) seems to have lost the solid, static and long-lasting character it always had, acquiring instead a sort of “fluidity”. Indeed today no precise and relatively stable survey of possible technical solutions exists any more, as technique enables a “continuum of possibilities”, a “hyperchoice” of alternatives, a wide variability of possible results.

In this new technological and productive situation, with the disappearance of the “inertia” traditionally opposed by “matter” to the dynamics of ideas and to change, the artificial environment has been invaded by a growing proliferation of forms, and is characterised by an extraordinary acceleration of the time in which transformation processes can take place.

This gives origin to the experience of “dematerialization”, and the “superficialisation” of our relationships with objects. The reduction of technical limits and the “freedom” technique allows in the design and production of the everyday environment means the continuous variability of products and also the impossibility to entrust them with experience and memory.

While technical limits fade away, new ones appear: the limited character of the system in which we operate is deeply felt.

Appearance of environmental limits, product saturation, trash accumulation

Environmental problems are so strongly emphasised that I do not think it necessary to discuss them here. I would like to highlight a few aspects though:

- What in the past was a theme only discussed by a few minorities, today has become a widely felt phenomenon as well as a fundamental and strategic industrial problem.
- The increase of “evidence of the limit” does not necessarily involve the emergence of a “culture of the limit”. It does not mean that the social and productive system in its complexity has outlined the supporting elements of a culture and practice suitable for the new situation.

Indeed, design, production and consumption in industrial societies have grown within a cultural picture based on the idea of the environment as an unlimited system. In order to overcome this model deep changes are needed, involving all of the system’s actors.

Such environmental limits are related to the physical environment (with the subsequent classical ecological problems), as well as to the semiotic one: information flows through an environment that is also limited and involves ecological problems (which we may define as “semiotic ecology”).

Messages, images, languages may not proliferate uncontrolled without resulting in an accumulation of semiotic trash and huge noise. This is obviously true for information provided by the media, as well as for other forms of “media” such as products.

The uncontrolled increase of performances and forms made possible by technique takes place beyond an adequate cultural control, thus producing noise and trash.

So it happens that objects, acquired and used, increasingly turn into signs, mere communication supports, contributing to semiotic pollution. And on the other hand, once their “useful life” is concluded, once they have lost their possible communicative significance, they go back to mere materialness (the materialness of the support providing information), thus contributing to the planet’s physical pollution. In my opinion this mechanism accounts for the contradictory phenomenon mentioned at the beginning of this speech, we experience as the “dematerialization” and “superficialisation” of our relationship with things. When things arouse our interest and we perceive their physical presence and “materialness” they stop involving us and become trash.

The limits of the culture of design

The above, in my opinion, stresses the insufficiency of the contemporary culture of design. On one hand we have the most classical positions, justly referring to principles and values, but in the light of a world that no longer exists. They refer to a productive, social and cultural reality dating back to the beginning of the century, when the modern culture of design started. However the transformations that took place have deeply changed our specific and general references:

- The materials we talk about are no longer the same. What “genuine” image of materials should be made the most of if their true (and therefore “genuine”) nature includes their ability to support any type of image?
- The objects we talk about are no longer the same. What relationships may be established between form and function by operating with miniature and “hyper-performative” systems lacking in a form our dimensional scale may perceive?
- The production we talk about is no longer the same. How many different forms of “industrial production” coexist today and, consequently, how many different perceptions of “designer” are there?

- Our concept of Progress, which should refer to a project's ethics, is no longer the same. Where are we going since we have discovered we are living in a limited world?

We have a recent theory which defeats the principles of an ossified modernism, but which does not seem to answer the present ethical and practical questions:

- How to prevent the "liberation of forms and languages" from turning into a pollution growth factor in the semiotic, if not physical environment?
- How to cope with the theme of the environment's "deep quality", not only constituted by formal languages, but also by a more complex range of sensorial experiences and cultural references?
- What is, in more general terms, the designer's responsibility once the demiurgic myth has been played out and the complexity of the world with its subjective choices has been discovered?

Towards a new ecology of the artificial environment

It appears at first glance that the recent history of the culture of design and products, from the critics of the Modern Movement, through a series of phases, now finds itself at a sort of impasse: in a trend towards an unimportant formalism, the multiplication of forms and functions without reason and the loss of the project's ethical references. Looking more carefully, however, it appears that alternative lines of research have been developed in the same years and other questions have been asked. For instance at the Domus Academy, which has been working for a few years as a centre for projectual research on the development of a culture of design adequate to the present situation, the lines of research included:

- The question of the term "quality" and the search for deep qualities, related to more deeply rooted requirements and cultural structures.
- The "domestication" of new technologies, as a reflection of the nature of the penetration of technical innovation into the everyday.
- The sensorial experience of the environment and the cultural references and operative instruments enabling the design of its immaterial qualities.
- The question of the term "inhabiting", when the world to inhabit is the present metropolis.

These lines of reflection and research do not exhaust the present problems, but emphasise the possibility to face them in a critical and constructive way by integrating them with the widespread demand (often latent but perceivable) for ethical references in a project. This means a demand for a way to overcome the paralysing effect of the crisis in ancient certainties and of the discovery of the unshakeable complexity of the reality in which we operate, as well as for a way to take all this into account while constructing "islands of senses" as the basis for projectual and productive choices.

The suggested research may be defined (and this is how we define it at the Domus Academy) with the expression "towards a new ecology of the artificial environment". In addressing a problem like the ecological one, that the theme of quality poses serious questions relating to quantity (quantity of products, of trash, of energy, etc.) should not be surprising. The change in the designing, manufacturing and consuming habits, enforced by the onset of limits to the system, may only take place in two ways:

- "enforced" by catastrophic requirements
- "attracted" by new possible qualities

There are good and clear reasons to strive so that the transformation, which will take place anyway, may take place in the second way. If we are convinced of this, the only acceptable way to lay out a strategy for change within the present complex society is clearly to look at the possible qualities of a well-balanced world.

To adopt this perspective means that designers have to be aware of ecological problems of a general kind, to understand their reflections on the most diverse and small projectual choices, as well as, and this may be their specific task, to propose possible and attractive ecological settings.

Indeed, these settings for the “new qualities” may attribute a common component to the action of different social actors, may support the accomplishment of the mentioned phenomenon of “cultural attraction”, which could lead different subjective drives to converge into the production of an artificial environment endowed with deeper and more stable qualities.

It is therefore necessary:

- To propose new valuable criteria primarily constituted by “environmental quality”
- To present new settings suggesting the possible existence of a world in which a new ecology of the artificial environment may be accomplished: a world in which the discovery of limits no longer appears as a reduction of possibilities, but as the source for new ones.

I would like to conclude with a quotation by Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Steingbert: “The concept of bond...does not simply limit possibilities, but also constitutes an opportunity; it not only dominates from outside a reality existing above all, but also participates in the construction of an integrated structure and determines on occasion a spectrum of intelligible and new consequences”. The designer’s task towards the 21st century is to discover and highlight these new possibilities.

Conclusions

The present artificial environment and the technical system producing it are a great challenge to the culture of design: on one hand they put its most steady background in a critical position, while on the other hand they arouse a widespread and continuous demand for highly cultural projectual solutions. They enlarge to new fields and levels the need;

- To associate the knowledge of technical performance with the intervention of cultural references
- To extract from the latter the legitimisation of our choices
- To “culturalise” the new products by defining their position within the social imaginary.

All this appears as a widespread and strong demand for design, and for a type of design able to answer the new questions.

There is no room in this speech to suggest new guidelines for this badly needed culture of design. I will only say that, by carefully observing what happened in these last few years in the culture and practice of design, it is possible to detect interesting research lines. “Towards a new ecology of the artificial” is the expression that could group together these fields of research and make them converge, thus providing a common background on which to build a culture of design and an industrial culture suitable for the present technical, social and cultural situation.