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Rethinking Ethics in Design

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Rethinking Ethics in Design

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Abstract: After the so-called “end of the great narrations,” together with the crisis of the paradigms of modernity, the lack of tools to decode a reality in permanent change and the call for values taken as reference for making choices, which can be political and practical at the same time, reopens the debate on the concept of ethics and the multiplicity of challenges emerging from life and society, after any “act of faith” or “ideological prescription.” The article aims at focusing the contemporary reborn of the reflection around ethics on every aspect of society, in particular for those who are committed to understanding the sense of developing projects in our postindustrial era, which is crossed by crisis and emergencies in every part. As the postindustrial era is investing in immaterial assets of knowledge, the creative labour of the mind is now considered to be the primary workforce capable of generating value. According to this, the designer assumes a critical role and responsibility, while developing visions and scenarios for the artificial organization of our future societies to come. Starting from a renewed interest around the reasons of ethics, after a deep crisis of its philosophy, the article is a contribution to understanding the theoretical shift from the cause of sustainability to the reasons of ethics and moreover to developing the critical reflection on the multiplicity of issues that design action has to face.

Keywords: Ethics, Sustainability, Social Innovation

Introduction

One evening Mr. G., my client, took me out on the balcony of his apartment overlooking Central Park. He asked me if I realized the responsibility I had in designing a radio for him.

With the glib ease of the chronically insecure, I launched into a spirited discussion of “beauty” at the market level and “consumer satisfaction.” I was interrupted. “Yes, of course, there is all that,” he conceded, “but your responsibility goes far deeper than that.” With this he began a lengthy and cliché-ridden discussion of his own (and by extension his designer’s) responsibility to his stockholders and especially his workers.

“Just think what making your radio entails in terms of our workers. In order to get it produced, we’re building a plant in Long Island City. We’re hiring about 600 new men. Workers from many states, Georgia, Kentucky, Alabama, Indiana, are going to be uprooted. They’ll form a whole new community of their own. Their kids will be jerked out of school and go to different schools. In their new subdivision, supermarkets, drugstores, and service stations will open up, just to fill their needs. And now, just suppose the radio doesn’t sell. In a year we’ll have to lay them all off. They’ll be stuck with their monthly payments on homes and cars. Stores and service stations will go bankrupt when the money stops rolling in; homes will go into sacrifice sales. Their kids, unless daddy finds a new job, will have to change schools. There will be a lot of heartaches all around, and that’s not even thinking of my stakeholders. And all this because you have made a design mistake. That’s where your responsibility really lies, and I bet that they never taught you this at school!”

I was young and, frankly, impressed. Within the closed system of Mr. G.’s narrow market dialectics, it all made sense. Looking back at the scene from a vantage point of a good number of years, I must agree that the designer bears a responsibility for the way the products he designs are received at the marketplace. But this view is still too narrow and parochial. The designer’s responsibility must go far beyond these considerations. His social and moral judgment must be brought into play long before he begins to design, since he has to make a judgment, an a priori

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judgment at that, as to whether the products he is asked to design or redesign merit his attention at all. In other words, will his design be on the side of the social good or not (Papanek 1969).

A Social Call

The story told by Victor Papanek (1925–1999) in the excerpt from his book *Design for the Real World*, published for the first time in 1969, comes to be a useful introduction to some of the most important issues that still animate the current debate on ethics and design, while recalling the social and the moral responsibilities of the designer. In this respect, Papanek is considered the vanguard of human-scale, socially and environmentally responsible design, while working for the disabled, the poor, and underdeveloped areas, besides being considered a thorn in the flank of more commercial design, and he is certainly the subject of a renewed interest today.

In particular, Victor Papanek advised about the social and moral responsibilities of design toward a “real world” made of people of flesh that live, work, travel, play, go to school, get old, get sick. From the historical pages of someone who is considered the vanguard of design for human-scale emerges the ethical consideration that the project is not a luxury for a narrow technological elite but an interface with the urgent needs of a humanity in excess to the limit of survival: crowded in the slums and ghettos of our cities, filling refugee camps of the old and new wars, inhabiting migration detention centres, and fleeing victims from natural disasters. Namely, the awareness of the needs and desires of a multitude of men and women who crowd the planet, that is the other 90 percent that is finally celebrated in the official circuits of design with exhibitions and projects, involves the designer in a form of ethical responsibility beyond the common professional ethics (see: *Design for the Other 90%*, exhibition held at Cooper Hewitt, National Design Museum in New York in 2008 for the first time and will be at United Nations soon).

If the environmental factor has been for a long time a cornerstone of sustainable design and ecodesign somehow established its instrumental principles, then more recently the reconsideration of the ethical dimension after the economical profit opens to a range of social topics which make the analysis, but also the tools and opportunities, more complex. According to this, Victor Margolin argues that the designer should answer to a new social call to match up the real needs of men and women, when the market model and the social model should not be construed as opposite principles, rather as polarities of a continuous fabric, in which the designer rewrites the priorities for a new social debate for design. If in political economics the term “capital” refers to wealth that can produce more wealth, then the same term may be used to include all those resources to realize a project, and, then, after the financial capital this should also include social and human resources, physical tools, and organizational and political capabilities. In a scenario of major and inedited complexity, design has the power to play a role in processes of collaborative design which responsibly put the focus on society and the people to create innovation (Margolin 2002). In trying to reach people who normally do not benefit from any form of design, social design has as its goal to redefine the tools, the role, and the knowledge of the project for innovation; the improvement of society and the quality of life; to revise the relations with production, so far focused on the quantitative dimension of the market; to find new social industries careful of behaviours and lifestyles; to increase the power and participation of society in the industrial choices, just like changing the social perception of the role of the designer. Therefore, social design cannot avoid the question of innovation that emerges from society through new ideas, products, and services after the more commercial dynamics connected with production (Green and Manzini 2008).

Holistic Responsibilities

Going back to the historical excerpt of Victor Papanek, the action of design displays its holistic and extensive power to influence and manipulate a number of questions yet to come. Close

between the reasons of the client and the economic value of his work, the designer has to manage choices which will have an influence on the future of society in many directions, and, furthermore, he finds himself picking out such options in a short period. Time is always the benchmark that design has to face, unlike other fields, and this prerequisite affects and qualifies at the same time his work of research: it is the short time to make choices that characterize any resolution not the best by any standards, but the most suitable in a specific time and place.

Any good designer sustains that a likewise good project, any good project, cannot be called that without assuming a number of features that attains to its ethical measure connected with the society and the environment in which it is being placed. But in addition to professional deontology, which individually binds every good professional as an active actor of a society to right practices and values of a general etiquette, design has a responsibility in creating the material landscape where we live, which is to say the raw material of the world, and, as a consequence, the social scenarios that come to be shaped from this activity while drawing the network of relationships mediating our behaviours. Then, design has to do with our material culture, meaning as a mix of men and objects, matter and behaviours, living and inert, visible and invisible.

Closely connected with technology, design is the way we try to solve problems, fill needs, satisfy desires, shape our world and change the future, as well as create new problems. Design is primarily an iterative and complex process in which important decisions are being made related to society. As a result, design can build many important consequences on the cultural and ethical issues related to the hypothetical future scenarios that somehow arise and involve actors and heterogeneous contexts. The project does not stop with the design of a shape, but rather continues in the choice of materials, as in production, distribution, consumption, even dismissal, while implying an endless network of subjects, often with contradictory interests.

If environmental questions have had a prevalence to delineate what sustainable design is, while the ecodesign approach has been developing products with low environmental impact, then nowadays we are facing the rising of further social topics somehow dealing with ethics matters. Above all, the ethics dimension, which belongs philosophically to the sphere of behaviours, while setting together design and production, makes a contradiction to be solved while expecting a form of responsibility after economic profit. Specifically, the ethics of production does not necessarily relate itself with the social and the environmental one, while assessing only the economic factor as the only engine and principle of profitability in calculating the cost-benefit of enterprises. But the growing critical conscience in consumption and its impacts on environment as on the exploitation of labour, or developing countries, on planet pollution, or the mistreatment of animals, has given new opportunities the chance to emerge for companies to work beyond the logic of instrumental rationality and economic profit, while discovering a competitive advantage in a form of ethics and social responsibility.

Filling the Box

Sustainability in Design somehow often inherited the character and the matters of the ecological movement, often transmuting in ecodesign: as a result, environmental issues have had a prevalence to mark out the field of sustainable design. The growing awareness of the end of the resources at our disposal and the irreversibility of any human activity within our environment, led to strengthen a movement in design, considering the ecological features of environment as the main cause for project. Man is not anymore at the centre, but the ecosystem of a complex systemic environment (Von Bertalanffy 1968). At the same time, more recently, we are experiencing the rising of further topics more connected with society and then somehow dealing with ethics matters, while rehabilitating to design the vast majority of the people who come to be excluded from the profits of production.

If the culture of the “limit” as principle of responsibility (Jonas 1984) has marked the ecological culture for a long time, giving an aesthetics for project and at the same time rejecting

technology as the primary cause for environmental failure, our analysis should consider the paradigmatic shift toward knowledge society and the social role of consumption beyond need as a form of knowledge and production of culture.

The consideration of the social responsibilities of design suggests the relationship with its ethical value and impact on the daily lives of people, both reconsidering with a critical eye some of the categories related to sustainability which have based for a long time the ecological thinking while developing a sort of morality for the project.

The consideration of the shift brought by the third industrial revolution, knowledge and information technology in the forms of organization of contemporary societies, and the spaces we live and dwell should be the context in which to introduce any analysis on the scenario that design has to face. The change is modifying at the same time the global geography of development which was once cut between North and South. The rise of the global cities in every part of the world is a brand new phenomenon for bigness and density while displaying at the same time new and original critical situations which should be examined with innovative tools.

At the same time, the diffusion of new technologies spreading in the world opens again a reflection for analysing what can be considered a sustainable technology toward development. If helping the once-called “third world” toward a sustainable growth meant just downgrading or giving away innovation in technology or industry, then the rise of new technologies, mostly connected with communication and knowledge, releases chances for development and for playing new leading roles in a sustainable way, which should be investigated.

Also, one of the products of globalization is a form of culture of responsibility which generates the awareness of the local and global effects of consumption. Therefore, consumption cannot anymore be considered just as a passive act, but moreover an action which can be aware of its active role in producing skills, knowledge, as well as redirecting production itself toward more sustainable strategies for environment and society. The progressive market politicization may open to new schemes and experiences of enterprise to be explored.

Sustainability has been shaped through time as a form of strict castigatory project instructed by the morality of need where desire is banned. As already mentioned, the concept of the “culture of the limit” developed by Hans Jonas (1984) and which has produced a form of aesthetics to sustainability through time, should be reconsidered according to the penetration of media around the world and the diffusion of global lifestyles producing a form of aesthetic awareness and education among social strata and places. Therefore, the strict limit between need and desire should be reviewed in order to claim “the right to aesthetics” together with the basic needs for every men and women. This is one of the challenges for contemporary design: shaping an aesthetic for ethics in order to have good choices be recognized and accepted but also be beautiful choices.

The awareness of living in a smaller world, the diffusivity and the permeability of the new technologies of information and knowledge, the development of new lifestyles together with the problematic awareness of the role of consumption, move in the direction toward a critical review of some of the categories related to sustainability, on which the ecological thought has based his thinking for a long time, along with some colonialist typos. Namely, the relationship between the North and the South of the world, the question of technology, the culture of limits, the cultural value of aesthetics and consumption, and the new forms of social participation.

Ethical Thinking

The need for a form of ethics happens to occur to respond critically to the complexity and the mutation in which the human condition is nowadays living in the acceleration of globalization and the flows of images: through the reconsideration and updating of the concept of ethics applied to project we may find the reasons for the responsibility of those who draw the shapes of the world toward society and the environment, beyond any simple moral witness.

The contemporary resurgence of ethical thinking comes after a deep crisis which affected its irrational and subjective character that got it far from the scientific conception of the world, declaring the impossibility of building a universal moral able to give comprehensive answers to be shared beyond any “act of faith.” The so-called end of grand narratives and the totalizing visions of history (Lyotard 1979) and a new awareness of the complex and nonlinear character of any phenomena and scientific, economic, and cultural systems that knowledge has to interface with (Morin 2002) are the source of a new demand of ethics outside of any absolute model.

The crisis affecting every field of knowledge becomes the chance for a renewal and the discovery of a new social role for ethical thinking, considering that it is not possible to meet every occurrence out of a multidimensional logic including every element in a mutually complex relationship between each part and the whole, the local with the global dimension, the micro with the macro. Then, the dialogue opens for the analysis and understanding of any occurrence and the multiplicity and inherent uncertainty of its characters fall within the workspace of a new ethics recovered to overcome the traditional dichotomy between theory and practice. The need for interpretative models to guide action facing the complexity that the new scientific paradigms and environmental challenges place to humans let rise again the need of an ethics able to overcome the problem of neutrality and objectivity of moral judgments to indicate a framework of values that can guide the practical life of people (*Praktische Philosophie*).

Overcoming any claim to define a comprehensive design of ethics, or to formulate a universal morality, ethical philosophy incorporates the social mandate to regulate the interplay between economics, politics, interpersonal relations, the questions open by scientific research and innovation, the rights of the new moral subjects, the responsibility toward the “others” non-humans, the animals, the environment, the questions of the body and life facing biotechnology, the new processes of production and reproduction. Then, we can speak about animal ethics (Passmore 1974; Midgley 1984; Regan 1990), environmental ethics (Jonas 1984), ethics of networks, bio-ethics (Singer 1999), ethics of sexual difference (Irigaray 1985; Haraway 1991; On Eaubonne 1974; Warren 2000; Shiva 1995), business ethics (Sacconi 1991). This is just to mention a few of the research topics developing specific and precise visions from a partial perspective, thus widening the debate on how to manage the complexity of life beyond any final regulatory foundation. From a practical need, the proliferation of so many applied ethics related to specific issues witnesses a window for a social dialogue on the new condition of life to which we are called to respond, and, at the same time, the search for a new notion of responsibility toward the “other” in order to meet the challenges of contemporary times. There is a real need for a dialogue to rethink the role of ethics, which on one side should define non-prescriptive principles of behaviour and at the same time would not just end up being a mere moral witness.

Dealing with a State of Crisis

Crisis seems to be the keyword interlacing any analysis of contemporary society and the world yet to come. According to a number of dictionaries, the concept of crisis is related to a sudden and distinct change, in a positive (or negative) direction, which occurs in a disease. In fact, the word reflects an unsure meaning, while opening to a change connected with a decisive stage, which coincides with a sudden fall of temperature. Therefore, yet in the first possible definition of the word—which, as it is fairly well known, comes through the mediation of Latin, from the Greek “krisis,” derived from the verb “krino” separate—we are dealing with an illness and at the same time a double chance, to destroy or heal. As per its etymology, the crisis is a time for parting between two conditions, a sudden change for good or evil in the course of a disease, from which you judge and decide the healing or death.

Still in the field of health, the crisis is a sudden escalation, a violent phenomenon, mostly short. Out of the strictly medical domain, other crisis are, however, always in some way metaphorically connected to a sick body, perhaps in relation to the spirit, as a profound disruption in the existence of a person. Then, of course, there is also the economic crisis that is

characterized as a sudden transition from a situation of economic prosperity to a state of economic depression. Extending to society, the concept of crisis becomes a vast and deep disturbance in the life of a community, a group of people, a State. Then, it can be considered as an extension of the first part of the definition: a difficult and ultimate time, which settles and predicts important changes.

In the analysis of the changes in society we are facing, together with the category of second modernity, Ulrich Beck (1992) testifies we are entering the risk society, where we are leaving the state of upward growth and wealth, which characterized the first modernity. A growing sense of fear and anxiety, then, would accompany the growing awareness of the risks connected with environment and pollution, the uninterrupted local and global wars, unemployment and social inequalities, the crisis of the financial markets.

But, furthermore, it is the understanding of living in a state of scarcity, where the resources are limited and inadequate to guarantee the dream of a wealthy existence for humanity, as was envisioned by the first modernity (Beck 1992). Then, the society becomes reflexive because it learned to reflect on the consequences of its modernity and the tight relationship between the production of new risks and the growth of society (Beck 1994). As said before, the crisis displays its double meaning of destruction through the pauperization of the resources or healing through a new awareness and empowerment of people along with the knowledge society.

According to the analysis of many critics, it is often the negative trait that is prevailing after the positive visions of the future and the production of the risks are taking place in the optimistic projects for tomorrow. Then, the question would be: is there still any space for the development of the “positive” project? Giving an answer to a crisis seems often not to leave much room to planning a new every day, or it could be an original chance for envisioning the future?

In addition, the awareness to live nowadays in a state of “finite market,” namely to cohabit with a slow or even no growth, pushes to radically rethink the production strategies in the direction of the needs of the market, which should be considered such as a fluctuating and unstable variable and then subject to sudden changes and irrational environmental factors (Coriat 1979).

On the contrary, the Fordist model of production used to move along an opposite philosophy of growth, as it was measured quantitatively unlimited as per extension of the volumes of production and its presence on the territory. Its pattern of expansion was substantially locally territorialized and made reference to a locally settled audience to absorb an ever-increasing share of durable commodities. Namely, it was for a long time an economy of scale related to the exponential expansion of the volumes of products. The consequent search of lower prices was then achieved by mass production and the rationalization of the processes of manufacturing.

Conclusion: Being Plural!

Man acquires a new consciousness of being no longer unique and the centre of the universe, rather, he lives in a condition of plurality (Arendt 1958) where the individual has a limited sovereignty and resigns total control of the future (Beck 1986). The anthropocentric view collapses in front of the acquired awareness that internally every life is never pure in itself, rather, it is the incomplete result of endless changes and contaminations with the otherness that houses and is housed in it. Equally, outside every life inhabits a complex environment, an “umwelt” that weaves countless chains of interactions between biotic and abiotic factors, whether living or not, where should waive to any claim of biological and ontological domain.

The designer always works within the ethical domain, while combining the theoretical idea with the punctual practice and including in his work the need for a transformation, the prediction/modeling of his work in a product, and the adoption of suitable tools. Equally, through the individual choice, the design action always encourages a collective idea of good and happiness that will be more or less widespread, depending on the success it will meet. The

freedom of the individual action and the imperative for the collective choice come together in the personal responsibility of the designer.

In this regard, it is possible to get closer together the reflection on human and design action, because of the plurality of the condition from which both move and at the same time the complexity and stratification of the variables with which they operate every day. The transformation of the world and the formalization of an idea must necessarily face the complexity of the environment and, thus, increase the variables and relationships between each single element. Therefore, the design action always acts in the public domain because, in addition to the specific clients to which it is committed for deontological reasons, it must deal with an often contradictory local and global organized network of emergencies. Aspects such as the complexity and multiplicity of the actors involved, the uncertainty and the nonlinearity of the overall results of each action in time, the reciprocity between a whole and its parts, force every designer to a new responsibility to the “other,” be it a person, an animal, vegetable, or artifact.

Then, the design action is always a problematic and multidimensional act that is in need of new answers, which are often related to technological acceleration and social development: nature and the environment, justice and social equity, globalization and local cultures, new technologies and scientific research, new forms of biological and artificial life and the responsibility toward future generations. In other words, design has to do with the lives and behaviours of men and women who often are in remote places, and therefore involves different cultures. At the same time, design elaborates material shapes, but also handles immaterial facts and delivers communication; it matches the world economy and then relates with production, trade, and consumption.

According to this, the so-called Deep Ecology claims the existence of a biosphere whole in which it is not possible to make a final ontological separation between the human and the non-human realm and that the organic as the inorganic components are not isolated, rather, they take part together weaving a fabric of interrelated relationships.

The principle of responsibility (Jonas 1984) unveils a new sensibility toward the “other” and becomes critical in the debate on ethics in addressing in some way the characters of uncertainty and contradictions of contemporary life. Likewise, the concept of responsibility helps to reintroduce the strength of the action in living, and therefore the freedom and the imperative of choice, borrowed from the prevision of the possible effects of conduct. Ethics finally gain access into the design field.

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