Hippocrates or Hypocrisy?

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Introduction
The difficulty to conciliate social welfare, as understood today, and environmental protection, converges more and more towards a consensus on the absolute need to implement policies based upon sustainable development.

The project to reach this aim, however, is far from simple [1] and obvious. It implies changes in the models built up along the technical history of the post-modern man.

This paper intends to review possible design strategies in order to achieve a reformulation of the contribution of design to the implementation of sustainable development.

Three facts point out and open a path to the future:

- the changeover from the mass production economy to the emerging knowledge economy is creating an ‘era of access’, in which desire models are more based on enjoyment than on possession;

- The need to rationalize exploitation of natural resources leads to the creation of products with a life-cycle thought in terms of longevity and durability, therefore emphasizing functionality and quality, in a more user-oriented attitude;

- The strengthened cultural capacity of the designer to understand (and foresee) what is new, to recognize the signals emitted by emerging ideas and behaviours and by the innovative application of promising technologies, make him a particularly well positioned ally to help society create a new way of living and relationship with material culture, with some probability of a sustainable development model for economy, environment and, for design itself.

Business models

Today’s business models result from a consumption paradigm based on the possession of goods and their accumulation, as a way of transmitting wealth and heritage from generation to generation.

The democratisation of objects, and consequent freedom of acquisition, plus the harsh competitiveness faced by companies in order to survive in this model, made the market a huge repository of offers multiplied day by day, in a suicidal spiral.

To survive in this context, companies must exceed their competitors, but also themselves. The speed of the offer renewal was induced by an economy based on planned obsolescence and the development of disposable products, as a way of maximizing profits.

This economy, as refers Lester Brown, caused a ‘bombardment’ of objects requested by the associated system – ‘fashion’. Consequently, it paved the way to a steady proliferation of artefacts that do not intend to satisfy a need, but a desire prompted by publicity and by marketing. This proliferation leads to and actually is a consequence of a market full of variety, where differentiation becomes more important than certified quality.
New communication technologies reduce distances, making easier access to offers, information and knowledge. The possibility to access the same products in different places changed lifestyles and standardise the consumption models.

**Production policies**

The production policies enabling today’s business models helped this strategy based on short lifecycles, in which ephemeral products satisfied the needs imposed by the fashion system.

This productive principle carried with it a series of consequences, in which environmental deterioration unfortunately has an important place. The disposable (‘use and throw away’) products, that fulfil an ephemeral need, are real money (and waste) generators. This satisfaction of a desire (more than a need), with no (ethical) added value, leads the users to an evanescent ‘pleasure’, distorted by the futilities and excesses, forced on them by the industry.

For every ton of goods that reach the consumers 30 tons of waste are produced, and 98% of those goods are thrown away after 6 months [2].

In a new economy, the transition will have to take place in the basic services that satisfy needs, as well as in relation to the longevity of the products, leading to more quality and less quantity, and this should be the motto for a path to follow. Because

> ‘what users look for are not the products or the services, but the “results” those products or services allow them to achieve. The same demand for results can change with time, when new results substitute the old ones.’ [3]

How then to reconcile these new attitudes with the necessary macro-economic directives, if these take into account social and environmental factors? Will environmental issues alone force to rethink the industry? to restructure the existing and to create a new one?

Some companies, with a long-term vision, had been optimising their resources – in particular energy, water, materials – through more efficient productive processes, development of renewable and recyclable products, and other changes that pay for themselves and help the environment.

It is now clear that an increasing group of consumers in the developed world had reached already a level of consciousness that allow an advantage for the companies and products socially and environmentally responsible, suggesting that this is an interesting business opportunity [4].

When we try to find some new business models based on the environmental issue, we tend to seek the production of ‘environment friendly’ goods, recyclable and recycled.

For a long time this approach has been widely developed in the field of eco-design, mainly aiming to minimise the environmental impact by merely redesigning existing products. However, trying to solve existing problems based on that same method would hardly lead to the implementation of an alternative successful strategy. A rupture is required, in order to assure a truly new beginning, and not only a strategy complemented by a new constraint.

According to Jeremy Rifkin [5], market and property are two synonyms imposed by modernity. Buying and selling mark our day-to-day, and we cannot imagine any other way to organize exchange.
When we feel the need to own something, we attribute a value to that product or service. But that underlying value involves a series of factors, as social, financial, or emotional value. The exchange value of objects is, today, purely associated with money, and that system leads directly to the vicious cycle of production-discard. If those objects were exchangeable for other objects, the system would be a cycle of produce-use-recycle-reuse-recycle-reuse… ad infinitum.

Objects could be created in a perspective of longevity and durability, and not in a transitory perspective of consumption. While the global economy keeps the exchange process solely based on money, this model is going to be discarded from any discussion. However, as defended by Manzini [6], ‘it is possible to do business while reducing consumption’ if we change the model premises.

It would allow a reduction in production, since the companies could survive and be competitive, with products being progressively more expensive due to the improvement of their quality, and the remaining profit coming from services and maintenance.

The possibility of turning those design principles into a business strategy clearly requires new economic attitudes. The closed product cycles allows a reduction in raw material consumption, which - if associated with a reduction in fossil energies, and an increase of renewable energies, will establish a new perspective of durability for the productive system.

Figure 1 represents the traditional lifecycle of production/discard. After longer or shorter use, products are thrown away.

Figure 2 represents a new approach to the production policies – production/recycling/discard. The recycling of plastic bottles serves to produce textiles; the aluminium cans are used to produce other metals. In short, products serve to produce other products.

Figure 3 represents a closed production cycle. After a first use period, hopefully longer since products are conceived with an increase in quality to assure durability, we engage a maintenance cycle, re-using the product after renovation (maintenance and/or upgrade), and finally, after partly or completely recycled into raw material it will allow the production of the same or another product. The system can repeat itself almost forever.
This TV set, produced by Philips, is an example of a long-term product, assuming in the future all manufacturers will collect their electronic products when these are no longer useful. Its structure is made of one single type of material, making recycling easier, and the paints used are water-based, reducing environmental impact.

This model implies a new project and business attitude in communication with the market. On one side the designer has to assure, when conceiving the product, a high level of quality for the materials, construction and working aspects. The ‘look’ becomes less important than performance and durability. The duality between essential (functional system and quality) and superfluous (fashion and seduction on the shop shelf) will not be an important issue anymore. On the other side, the company will have to ensure maintenance and justify the price increase by the improved achieved quality.

The figure shows a chair made of aluminium, 85% of which comes from recycled sources. Emeco produces aluminium chairs, since 1930, supplying, among others, the United States Navy. When the ships were dismantled, chairs were in good condition and were sold to a restaurant; when that restaurant closed up, the chairs remained in good condition and were sold to a hospital. This durability reveals a high level of efficiency, since the functionality results from the selection of materials [7].

For Augusto Morello [8] the consumer’ awareness of their role as users implies a reaction from the companies with attempts to implement quality, and this quality will become a communication argument, mainly when real innovation in products and services is not implemented.

‘The market itself could evolve, from an arena of product transactions, to an enormous arena of ‘performance’ transactions, a colossal contracting/rental system. At that point, design will really change, re-encountering again its original global potential. This is the “project for design” that designers and business people will have to investigate’ [9].

Values of Design

In these contexts, design had and still has a crucial role. For now, it ensures diversity and differentiation in a market that, as we can all see, is absolutely saturated with offers.

Therefore, and because the market is ever requesting more products in shorter times, it does not allow for the development of truly innovative proposals. The game has been mainly focused on exercises of style and aspect. Many times, and paradoxically, the reduced space for true innovation become even more obvious when technology participates in this phenomenon.

The introduction rhythm of new technological solutions that allow new formal developments has been a constant in the market, conveying the image of innovative products when actually these are no more than a formal variant of those already existing.
In the material culture, ‘look’ or appearance rules over efficiency, causing design to use technology to exploit this way more than to seek for the construction of alternatives.

‘No wonder if so many producers and distributors are interested in design as a tool to differentiate product variants; this practice is certainly related to the real lack of product innovation’ [10].

Interdependent and increasingly changing realities that contribute to the emergence of new behaviour patterns, new business models and new ways of interaction with the environment result in new values that impact all spheres of human activity, and, necessarily, design. However, the answers given by some designers are far from satisfactory, because they are restricted to that game of reduction innovation to an aesthetic question, which is a narrow view of the activity.

If design really wishes to change behaviours and has a visionary attitude towards social trends, economic structures and emerging environmental changes, then it must be able to define future action strategies. As defined by Buchanan [11],

‘design is the art of inventing and implementing shapes in two, three and four dimensions, which satisfy needs, wishes and desires, thus affecting changes in attitude, beliefs and actions on others’.

Therefore, the designer will have to mould, in a pedagogic way, the behaviours behind the products / services he designs, to anticipate the events, to form and inform society, thus implementing a prospective design.

Victor Papanek [12] raises the issue of whether designers, architects and engineers should, or should not, be taken as personally responsible and legally liable for creating artefacts, objects, accessories and buildings that cause environmental damage.

For Rifkin [13], the real value of the new economy does not lie in physical property, but in concepts, ideas and images. The most coveted asset will be intellectual capital. Hence, richness production will no longer be based on products. As mentioned by Morello,

‘the need of design in services is more and more a reality; but which designer could, until today, design services? The professional figure of the designer has to be renewed to face the job; and this renewal will impose a deep revisitation of design’s conceptions’. [14]

If design fails to follow these changes, and continues to build up on product conception serving a declining economy, it will be hopelessly unable to perform its tasks.

Design is a process of thought, and it’s that process that changes behaviours. This raises the question of ethics, and its task in the design process. With the industrial revolution and consequent mass production, design begun to interfere in those behaviours through the objects he conceived. When we watch the decline of that revolution, we also watch the decline of the ideas able to guarantee quality of life and innovation.

There is a pressing need to break up with conventionalisms, to propose new solutions and to think about the design culture we have been producing, that might lead to various modus operandi.

This diversity and pluralism of actions could justify the creation of an ethical code dealing, among other topics, with the protection of the profession. A code that, besides ruling the professionals’ moral conduct, should primarily protect the ‘receptors’ of the actions taken by those professionals, ie, a code that should rule the purposes and the essence of the existence of an activity, possibly similar to the Hippocratic oath.
It is essential to create an ethical basis in the education of designers. The changing attitudes in society as well as the renovation of the production and consumption systems depends on it. Because design is a social information channel, the acceptance or rejection of new principles also depends on it, because as a modelling agent of society it has a part of responsibility from which he cannot escape.

**Hippocrates or Hypocrisy**

Like all revolutions in history, the present one implies also a change and causes resistance. Behavioural evolutions forced upon us by contemporary civilization led to two conflict blocks, one trying to create a new model for action and the other trying to maintain indefinitely the one used up to the present.

According to Toffler [15] ‘there are people who fight against the minorities’ power, who despise direct democracy, who resist decentralization, regionalism and diversity, who fight for the preservation of a retrograde energy system, who praise the traditional family, who minimize ecological concerns and who oppose a new economic order. On the other side are those who are in favour of a democracy where power is shared with minorities, who ask for the end of giant bureaucracies, who demand a renewable and less centralized energy system, who want to legitimate alternative options to the traditional family, who give top priority to environmental problems and who recognize the need for restructuring world economy.’

These two fighting blocks are to be found in all areas and fields of activity: in politics, economy, family, environment and also decisively in education, which is upstream of, and influences, all other attitudes.

With design the same seems to be happening. On one side designers clung to the current economic models, even when integrated in vanguard current aesthetics, which question the object and reinvent it with a more intense cultural appeal. They fight ferociously for their own survival and visibility, in an attempt to still take further benefits from a declining and inevitable condemned model. On the other hand a few designers ‘of prophetic spirit’, as Papanek [16] put it, want to believe, and do believe, that it is possible to restructure the profession answering new emerging needs in society.

Notwithstanding, curiously, the first ones continue to state that the environment and the people are very important, in a political and professionally correct litany, while, effectively, they continue to pact with the industry so as to withdraw all the dividends that derive from there, perpetuating this spiral of consumption system, with an hypocrisy that they don’t even seem to be conscious of. Design journals and magazines, support centres, business associations and the media in general are flooded with such examples that, because they are so obvious, aren’t worthy of mention …

In education, where, after all, all this begins, the situation is quite the same.

**Curricula** seem to devote a special attention to cultural, social and environmental issues, but deep down they are structured according to past values without questioning the reasoning for the process – progress – production, appeasing the consciences undermined by that same comfortable hypocrisy.

On one side they show they have a feeling for the preservation of values. On the other side they do not implement those same values when the refer to a primary (and sole, it seems) purpose of media ‘success’ for the proposals, even if blessed only by the small groups of opinion leaders who, as marketing knows well, praise and stimulate people’s behaviour.
And the masses, now promoted to ‘cultural’ consumers will perpetuate the system and will bring the largest possible profit to designers as well as to companies – ‘It’s economics, stupid!’

Hippocrates or hypocrisy? To finally embrace the core values of the foundation of the discipline or to read them superficially and conveniently in a careless and autistic comfort characteristic of those who belong to the small percentage of mankind with “High living standards” ... and consumption? And for the remainder of the world, what model to advocate?

Do we settle for a highly worthy, just in the paper, letter of guiding values, or do we try to build a new and questioning attitude, disturbing and uncomfortable to some, and comfortable to others, but re-founding the design activity? It is in our hands and in the practice, of each and every one of us, the answer to this dilemma.
Footnotes:
[1] Contradictory and deliberately controversial views like those of Borg Lomborg are closer to intellectual terrorism than to credible alternatives for society, and, strangely, justify astonishingly well all mystifications supported by large economic interests.

[6] (MANZINI, 1999 : 100)
[7] (DATSCHEFSKI, 2001)
[8] (MORELLO, 1995 : 75)
[10] (MORELLO, 1995 : 71)
[12] (PAPANEK, 1995 : 100)
[16] (PAPANEK, 1995)

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