**Design for Social Responsibility and Market Oriented Design: Convergences and Divergences**

Dr Nicola Morelli

**Abstract**

The question of sustainability calls for a new design approach, which is clearly distinguishable from the present market-based approach. Papanek offered one of the most relevant contributions to the foundation of this approach; however his perspective has not been adequately developed in the last decades.

This paper gathers several contributions to the debate about this new perspective, gathering suggestions from recent contributions from Victor Margolin, from recent design projects promoted in market-based contexts and from social studies. This paper explores the perspective of a new socially-responsible design paradigm, with the aim of contributing to the debate for the definition of a new profile for the design profession.

**The context for a paradigm shift**

In 1972 Victor Papanek proposed a new design agenda focusing on designers’ responsibilities towards environmental and social needs (Papanek 1985). The needs Papanek referred to are the needs for a more responsible use of environmental resources and for a better balance between developed and underdeveloped regions of the world or, even in the most developed countries, between different social groups in the modern society. Papanek call for responsible design was based on a clear opposition of this design approach to the more common and traditional market-oriented design, in which designers’ competences, technical knowledge, cultures, values and methodologies are finalized to produce a profit for companies operating on the market. Such design practice, according to Papanek, is disregarding the above mentioned needs and increasing environmental problems and social unbalances.

After 30 years a rich literature has been developed, which proposes cultural, professional and methodological insights into design for the market, which cuts across different disciplinary areas, from social sciences to management, from engineering to semiotic. On the contrary, the area of responsible design, advocated by Papanek did not generate the same amount of studies, applications and methodological insight on how a more responsible design approach could be articulated and how designers could work in a non-market based context. (Margolin and Margolin 2002)

Yet, after many years, the need for a new design agenda, proposed by Papanek, come forward again, as a consequence of conflicts and crisis caused by the increasing disparity between geographical and social areas of the world. Peter Butenshon highlighted the gap between common design practice and the urgent problems of disadvantaged areas of the world. He emphasized the inability to provide solutions for the basic needs of those populations, while, on the other hand, design and technology are now able to respond to almost any kind of need emerging in the industrialized world. At the “Common Ground” conference, in 2002 Butenshon stressed the need for a design agenda that addresses those problems. (Butenshon 2002)
In a recent paper, presented at the same conference, Victor and S. Margolin re-proposed Papanek's work, focusing on social implications of his approach (Margolin and Margolin 2002). V. and S. Margolin proposed that a revision of Papanek's work in new directions can lead to the generation of a new design paradigm in which a socially responsible design approach can have a central and distinct role with respect to market-based design. He argued that the two approaches, design for the market and design for social responsibility should not be considered as alternatives, as market-oriented design may well respond to ethical, social or environmental needs. Market-based design, though, cannot match the whole complexity of human and social needs of socially disadvantaged groups and economically and ecologically depressed regions of the world.

V. and S. Margolin proposed that socially responsible design and market design are two complementary approaches, that define two poles of a continuum, the main difference between them being the priorities of the commission rather than a method of production or distribution.

Victor Margolin expands this argument in his recent book, *The Politics of Artificial* (Margolin 2002), in which he examines design proposals, experiments and thoughts, from Fuller's revolutionary proposals to the innovative thinking of Kenji Ekuan and Alexander Manu and the innovative design approach of Jaime Lerner, in Curitiba (Brazil) and Nancy and John Todd in USA. The cases illustrated by Margolin suggest that there are signals of a revision of design profession in the direction indicated by Papanek.

The most recent design proposals analyzed by Margolin are coming as a reaction to the increasing concern about the concrete implication of the question of sustainability for the production and consumption systems. Several scientific studies have emphasized the need for a radical change of the dominating model of development in the most industrialized countries. The present development model is based on a large use of resources, and a high disproportion between consumption patterns in developed and developing countries (Von Weizäcker, Lovins et al. 1997). According to some studies sustainability in a long term future is only possible if resource consumption on the planet is reduced by ca 10 times (that means that the production and consumption system needs to become ten times more efficient in the use of resources). (Weterings 1992; Jansen 1994). Technological development does not seem to be sufficient to produce such a dramatic efficiency improvement. Such a change calls for new development models, involving substantial social and cultural changes (Jansen 1994). The design strategies framed in this perspective should refer to new scenarios, outlining new ways of living and new cultural and social models. For this reason the debate on design for sustainability should be based on a higher awareness of social and cultural processes, rather than on a pure technology driven logic.

The challenge of sustainability has been considered by several institutions, including state governments,1 as a call for a substantial change in the production and consumption patterns. The initiative of such governments has, in turn, reduced the gap between the radical solutions proposed by some design thinkers and the actual behavior of companies and institutions. Although the corporate world is still opposing its inertia to radical changes, some organizations2 have introduced the perspective of a sustainable future into their corporate horizon.

At the same time, though, the maturation of the debate on sustainability is adding complexity to the problem: the focus of the debate about sustainability in its earliest phases was on resource consumption, but the solutions proposed in this area should pay special attention to the need to preserve acceptable social and economic conditions. While scientists and technologist focus on the physical aspects of social metabolisms, with the aim of avoiding environmental catastrophes, other social actors, including designers, should focus on supporting a transition towards a more sustainable system, avoiding major social (and therefore cultural, political and economical) catastrophes (Manzini 2000). A mature analysis of the question of sustainability requires a holistic view of the present conditions, which must include social and cultural needs of disadvantaged populations and social groups.

The call for a new design agenda should be situated in this context. The design profession, Margolin says, has not adequately clarified the potential of its contribution to the question of sustainability. “While the world's
design needs are evident, reinventing the design profession is not.” ((Margolin 2002):102). The new design paradigm advocated by Margolin should emerge from the solutions to this contradiction.

Paradigms and disciplinary distinctions

V. and S. Margolin argues that the revision of the design profession towards social and environmental sustainability should be seen as a new paradigm. Focusing on the social aspects related to the question of sustainability Margolin proposes that the new paradigm should clarify:

- public and agency perceptions of designers,
- the economics of social interventions,
- the value of design in improving the lives of underserved populations,
- a taxonomy of new product typologies,
- the economics of manufacturing socially responsible products, and
- the way that such products and services are received by populations in need. (Margolin and Margolin 2002)

This agenda may be extended to include the possibility for designers to be involved in political and institutional activities which would focus on long-term systemic solutions, rather than on simple problems.

Margolin’s proposal of a new paradigm of socially oriented design, however involves some risks.

A first risk is that the research for a paradigm brings about a higher level of complexity in the debate about operational strategies to implement sustainable design. A paradigmatic change implies a broad analysis of the social cultural and economic context in which the design profession exists. This change depends on a change in external factors, (new social values, new funding sources, new cultural conditions) co-evolving with design profession.iii Such a context could be changed by (rare) paradigmatical innovations or, more likely, by a series of punctual design intervention. None of the new punctual solutions would change, by itself, the present model of development, but each of those will influence the development towards new models. Each solution may appear to be very weak when compared for a need for a paradigm shift. The idea of a new paradigm, however, may help emphasizing the weak signals generated by each solution.

A second risk of talking about a new paradigm, which is different from the existing market-driven design paradigm consist in the risk of loosing sight over possible convergences between socially oriented design and market-driven research and design initiatives. While it may be useful to separate and emphasize socially responsible design as a clearly defined disciplinary area, it is also very important that the distance from the existing market-based design practice does not preclude any possibility for cross-fertilization between the two areas.

It is worth noticing that social studied have been dealing with this problem for quite a long time. In the sector of social services the distinction between market based and non market based interventions on social processes has been vanishing with the crisis of the Welfare state. De Leonardis (De Leonardis 1998) notices that market-driven initiatives are progressively taking over the space made available by the shrinking of public intervention on social problems. However the same author observes that the quality criteria on which market-driven initiatives are based do not always match the criteria related to social quality. The question arising in this area is to what extent market driven criteria and methodologies can be sufficient to generate high quality social services. The question can be further articulated, in order to understand to what extent the concept of quality differs in market-driven and socially-oriented services and what conditions must be satisfied in order to provide social quality.

When translated to design activities the question can be proposed in similar terms: market-driven design strategies may provide designers with new tools to manage short and long term strategies for sustainability. Corporate culture has developed powerful techniques, for instance, to generate solutions based on a wider social
consensus. Such techniques could also be used in socially-responsible design initiatives. Furthermore it should be
stressed that market-driven initiatives in some geographic regions may have particularly positive effects on the
social conditions of the same area. On the other hand it is important to understand to what extent a new socially-
responsible agenda can borrow methodological tools from market-driven design practice and what are the criteria
that define socially-responsible design as a new, specific approach to the question of sustainability.

The following section will focus on convergences and differences between market-driven and socially-responsible
design. The analysis of the possible convergences (in section 3) emphasizes methodological insights that can re-
direct design profession, whereas the definition of socially responsible design with respect of the parameter of
social quality (section 4) defines the different perspective in which socially-responsible design is situated, and
therefore provides new insights towards the reinvention of the design profession.

**Market-Driven Versus Socially Responsible Design: Possible Convergences**

For several years now, industrial companies, research teams and institutions have been working on a new design
approach, aimed at producing solutions that are sustainable from both the business and the environmental perspectives.

Sustainability implies a double challenge for designers: a technical challenge in the short term, that derives from
the need to reduce the environmental impact of modern society by improving existing products, and a long term
challenge, that implies a thorough analysis of many possible futures, in search of sustainable and desirable
directions to follow, starting from the present. While the short term challenge looks at the existing production
and consumption system, focusing on the improvement of the environmental performances of existing products,
the long term challenge calls for a collective revision of future perspectives paying major attention to solutions
based on substantial changes in the consumption and production system. Such solutions usually rely on different
social behaviors and cultural frameworks and propose different mixes of products and services, i.e. a different
combination of material (e.g. products, technological infrastructure) and immaterial (e.g. services, cultural and
social values) components. This implies the participation of designers and companies to a social process that
individuates shared visions, on the ground of different social, cultural and economic values.

The projection of desirable future scenarios onto the present is a common approach used in several research
projects, some of which promoted by research and academic institutions (e.g. SusHouse), others promoted by
industrial companies (e.g. **Vision of the Future**). This circumstance indicates that the possible cross fertilization
between the market-driven approach and sustainable-oriented strategies may prove to be a key point to generate
feasible, effective and profitable initiatives. But what is more important for the purpose of this paper is to
understand that the strategic objective proposed by a long term perspective was pursued by using
methodological tools based on the involvement of people from different disciplinary contexts and various cultural
backgrounds. Although the aim of the above mentioned projects was directly or indirectly referred to the
proposition of “appropriate business solutions”, it is possible to think that some of the methodologies used in
such projects could be applied also in socially-responsible design initiatives.

**Some methodological insights**

Scenario building is one of the methodologies that a socially-responsible design approach can borrow from strategic
design. Scenario building has been widely used in strategic management, often with a specific design focus, as in the **Vision of the Future** project, initiated by Philips Design in 1996, with the aim of exploring what people will perceive as useful, desirable and beneficial in the future and to create a technological roadmap to realize this goal.

The research involved multidisciplinary teams consisting of cultural anthropologists, ergonomists, sociologists,
engineers, product designers, interaction designers, exhibition designers, graphic designers, and video and film
experts. The project was based on a series of creative workshops, which produced more than 300 scenarios (short stories describing a product concept and its use) based on the socio-cultural and technological research.

The scenarios were developed using five basic parameters: people, time, space, objects and circumstances. The question of sustainability was not explicitly addressed, but rather considered as one of the criteria to identify a desir able future. Eventually the scenarios were distilled down into 60 concept descriptions, grouped in four domains: personal, domestic, public and work, mobile. The concepts were discussed again with experts and eventuated in a series of prototype products.

It should be stressed that the project aim was to generate prototype products for the market. From the perspective of this paper however, the process of concept generation is possibly more interesting than the final results, because such a process was based on multidisciplinary dialogue and cooperation for the construction and selection of scenarios, which were eventually translated in design concepts.

More recently the scenario building approach has been used for studies focused on Environmental sustainability. The SusHouse project, for instance uses Design Orienting Scenarios (DOS) to generate visions of the future that are subsequently orienting operative design decisions. Manzini and Jegou (Manzini and Jegou 2000) emphasize the difference between DOS and the more commonly used “policy orienting scenarios” (POS). Such a difference clarifies the utility of DOS both in the SusHouse project and in broader design initiatives.

According to the authors, “POS” tends to characterize the effects of various political decisions on a plurality of individual choices, by using one or more global visions of society. “DOS”, on the other hand, tends to show the effects of single decisions of a group of actors on the focused system through one or more visions of this particular focused system. “POS” tends to be used by the public or private sector to assess and show to the public possible effect of different policy alternatives. “DOS” are used by single social actors or a small group of actors to orient their own future and build appropriate business solutions.” (Manzini and Jegou 2000).

The general characteristic of the DOS approach are:

- To generate a plurality of hypotheses,
- To involve all the stakeholders in a design initiative, including those who will be the final beneficiary of the initiative
- To use a narrative structure, which allows for a better communication between stakeholders with a different background

The scenario building process for DOS is based on several brainstorming sessions involving groups of actors representing the community involved in the development of the solution (including those who are supposed to develop and provide the solution and the supposed users of the solution). Those sessions produce a set of possible scenarios, which describe the possible future changes in a specific cultural and social context. The fundamental elements of each scenario are:

- A title: which synthesizes the scenario
- A vision, i.e. a dense abstract, written in a literature style that broadly summarizes the scenario
- Some essential characteristics, i.e. a set of criteria against which the scenario will be evaluated. Such criteria can include environmental issues, economic implications and users acceptance
- A series of proposals suggested by the scenario

The output of the scenario approach is not necessarily a product or a set of products or services, but a range of solutions, on the basis of which the various actors can orient their choices for sets of products or services according to their personal needs.
The use of DOS in socially responsible design initiatives would not only suggest a set of possible solutions, but also empower the design ability of local communities, that would be able to identify common values and shared visions and use the outcome of the scenario exercise to generate their own design solutions.

DOS can complement the structure V. and S. Margolin proposed in his contribution for the Common Ground conference and possibly be used as a tool to manage some of the phases proposed by Margolin (Margolin and Margolin 2002). Margolin’s proposal is borrowed by social sciences and consists of a six steps problem-solving process, including the phases of: engagement, assessment, planning, implementation, evaluation, and termination. The DOS approach can help managing the first phases of the process, using the scenarios to involve the stakeholders in the phases of engagement, assessment and planning.

Another operational tool that could complement the above mentioned methodologies are use cases. The use case methodology can be used to integrate DOS in the phase of the development of specific solutions. Use case methodology has been used in service design to project realistic cases of service use, in order to generate lists of requirements for the service (Morelli 2002 a and b). Use cases consist in simple statements, in plain language, describing the various phases of use of a product or service. The development of use cases should include the participation of different actors, including designers, service providers, infrastructure providers and, possibly, users. The use of plain language for the description of use cases is the key to generate mutual understanding between actors with different cultural backgrounds. For that reason the use case methodology can support the participation of the actors directly involved in the social-design intervention by overcoming the barrier due to cultural differences between designers (and other social operators) and the target of the design intervention.

**Socially-Responsible Design and Social Quality**

Advocating design strategies that are not market-based usually attracts the skeptical comments of those who interpret design exclusively as a competitive tool for companies aimed at increasing their monetary profit. Even some designers that would be open to the possibility that design be a tool for solving social or environmental problems are worried about the apparently unbreakable logic of economic rationalism, which leave no space for socially responsible actions, unless they have a clear economic justification.

The basis for a different approach to design, in the perspective of a socially-responsible design action should be searched in an idea of well-being that focuses on the capability of products and services to provide better environmental and social quality (Manzini 2000)

The notion of social quality is commonly used in the agenda of international institutions and organizations and could become a key to revise design profession. The notion is used in the social and economic debate as a necessary complement to economic growth and it is becoming itself a criterion to evaluate development. A design activity aimed at increasing social quality is therefore profitable under a perspective of socio-economic development both in developed and developing countries.

The definition of the notion of social quality is important to clarify the characteristics of a socially-responsible design approach. De Leonardis (De Leonardis 1998) defines social quality as the **measure of citizens’ capability to participate to the social and economic life of their community in conditions that improve both their individual wealth and the conditions of their community.** This definition emphasizes two aspects of social quality:

The first aspect concern citizens’ capability to be an active part of the community: social quality increases when more citizens are in the condition to participate and contribute to the development of their own community. Social quality implies therefore the inclusion of those parts of the society (especially in developed countries) which
are otherwise excluded by social life and those communities (mainly in developing countries) whose consistency is undermined by poor socioeconomic conditions, which limits individuals action to a mere fight for subsistence. The second aspect concerns the definition of social quality in relation both to the individual and to the community’s needs, two instances that are often in conflict. Social quality refers to the possibility to fulfill both individual and common needs, while empowering both individual and social capability to generate new quality.

In the design perspective, a socially-responsible design solution is a solution that not only fulfils a specific individual need but also enhances social and collective capability of a community to develop its own solution. Socially-responsible design should therefore aim at generating solutions based on a mix of products and services with high cultural and social significance. Such solutions should be the result of collective capabilities, rather than a service provided by an actor (an institution, a company or a designer) to his customers. What determines the efficiency of a solution is not the material essence of a product but the potential of products or services to make the users capable of generating their own conditions of well-being.

Being the result of a social process such solution should empower the target users, in order to produce further solutions. This point is particularly critical in socio-economic or geographic contexts in which the lack of support from market mechanisms would give very short life to solutions based on mere products. Using a product as a medium between producers of the solution and their customers would signify reducing the life of the solution to the useful life of the product. Once the product breaks or wears out the original problem is re-proposed to the community, which will need further help. This situation will require re-establishing a link with the producer, as the existing link will probably be broken.

A product-based solution can suffice in a market logic, in which designers and producers work on a gap, or a deficiency (a real gap or a potential one, emphasized by market research) in the social group they are working for, but a sustainable logic must work on customers’ capabilities (regardless their limitation) in order to emphasize them as a resource. This means that an adequate design solution must eventuate in a product-service system whose value is co-produced by customers. The result of a socially responsible initiative is empowering people, rather than satisfying customers.

A final consideration, implicitly related to the previous considerations of social quality, is about the local focus of socially-responsible design. Unlike the traditional market-driven approach, aimed at producing solutions for a global market, a socially-responsible approach is targeted to local contexts. The need of a direct involvement of the community of users in the development of a design solution implies that each design solution is local, though methodologies and approach may be common to several other solutions. A local action also reduces material movements of goods and materials (this in turn reduces the environmental impact of the production and consumption system) and reinforces the links between individuals in the social community, thus increasing social cohesion at the local level.

Manzini (Manzini 2000) observes that the contemporary myth of individuals, which, empowered by their own material world of products and tools, are able to solve their own individual problems, is incompatible with a sustainable environmental and social development. Local solutions, with their capability of reinforcing social communities, would revert this trend, generated by a market-driven ideology.

### Socially-responsible design in a self-serving society

The criteria and logics of the market-driven approach are based on a vision of a served society, in which products are the only medium between producers (the servers) and users (the clients). In such context the profile of designers’ profession is strictly linked to the development of material products.

The previous consideration, instead, suggest that a socially-responsible approach is rather based on a self-serving society, in which producers of knowledge, know-how and tools work together with those who will use such
knowledge to generate their own solutions. In such perspective the traditional designers' profile, is not longer adequate to describe the role of design in innovation processes.

What would be designers’ role in a perspective in which users, empowered by a socially-responsible action, would be able to provide their own solutions (materialized in products and services)? Who would be the designer in this perspective?

The new profile of socially-responsible designers should start from this question to break the strong link between designers and material products and start considering how the particular characteristics of the design profession may be critical in the new perspective. It is worth noticing that the critical revision of the link between designers and material products is not a new element in the design debate. A critical discussion about redefining designers’ competences has already been started in market-driven contexts (Manzini 2000; Maffei 2002; Morelli a and b). The perspective of social responsibility, however, may introduce some new elements or emphasize new aspects. The new sustainable solutions must be based on the generation of new visions and new values. Designers’ attitude to envision possible futures, generate scenarios and translate such scenarios in usable solutions may be critical in the development of sustainable innovation. Designers capability, beyond their technical competences, consists in integrating and catalyzing different competences in a design products that makes new sense, i.e. opens new perspectives and generates new values for the social context the designers works for.

By focusing on designers’ capability, rather than on his relations with the production of material products, it is possible to open an interesting perspective for the redefinition of the design profession advocated by Margolin.

Conclusions

This paper gathers several treads and contributions on design for environmental and social sustainability, providing further material for a more structured debate on the revision of the design profession in the next future. The paper is not meant to complete the large picture of socially-responsible initiative for sustainability, but rather to emphasize some relevant elements on which a new design perspective can be opened.

The paper explore the implication of Victor Margolin’s call for a new design paradigm, taking into account the complexity of the task of a revision of design profession within a new paradigmatical frame.

The treads of the debate on a new design paradigm can be articulated in theoretical contributions (many of which are synthesized by Margolin) and methodological contributions, some of which, mainly developed within the corporate and institutional context, are illustrated in this paper.

Many paradigmatical configurations borrow elements from existing paradigms. On the basis of this consideration this paper explores the possibility to borrow operational and methodological indications from market-driven design practice. The framework for the new paradigm could be traced on the basis of the new criteria and parameters that define social quality.

Finally, the paper outlines a logical territory, in which socially-responsible design should be located. In such territory the link between designers and products is weaker, but this does not imply the end of the design profession, but rather a revision of designers’ role, looking at the intrinsic characteristics of design practice. Designers are in fact very familiar with such a new territory, located between technical possibilities and latent socio-cultural potentials. This paper opens a window on this territory, with the aim of stimulating further explorations.
Aknowledgements
The author wish to thank Kaare Eriksen and Kristin Støren Wigum for the indications and feedback provided for this paper.

Bibliographic References


Notes
i The earliest initiatives from state governments came from the Dutch Ministry of Environment, which in 1992 promoted a study reported by Wetering a Opshoor (Weterings 1992). Other countries, such as Sweden, have manifested the intention to introduce innovative regulatory structures, with the aim of grounding the taxation system on the consumption of resources, rather than on individual and company earning. This would imply a significant change in the economic systems of those countries.
Some companies, such as Interface, Shindler, and Xerox and many others are also revising their mission, in order to include environmental responsibility as a critical factor in their business strategy. Interface, for instance, changed its mission from selling carpet to providing a floor covering service, Shindler’s mission is to provide ‘vertical transportation’ in buildings, Xerox re-named itself as the ‘document company’, emphasizing its focus on a result (the document) rather than on the product (the photocopier).

The change in some of those factors depends on the shift from the present economical model, based on high resource consumption, linear production and consumption processes and the predominance of market rules to a new model in which the use of resource is based on natural cycles, the production and consumption system follow circular, rather than linear processes and social and cultural values become as important as market values. A radical change like this would be a critical condition for a new design paradigm, however its discussion is beyond the purpose of this paper.

Further information on the project are available at the URL:
http://www.design.philips.com/vof/vofsite0/voflev1/intro1/intro1.htm

The SusHouse project was a EU funded project developed among institutions in different countries. The project analyzed three major function related to the household. For each function the working groups in the different countries generated a set of scenarios. The scenarios where eventually evaluated and selected, in order to generate sets of possible solutions.

The concept of value co-production has been introduced by Norman and Ramirez (Normann and Ramirez 1994 Ramirez 1999). The authors introduce this concept as opposed to the concept of value chain. While in a value chain perspective the production of value stops at the sale point, after which the customer destroys the value, in a value co-production perspective the customers take part to the production of value. Norman and Ramirez refer the concept of co-production especially to services.

A good example of a design initiative developed in this logic is the Grønne Møbel project, a Danish initiative based on the cooperation between craftsmen, designers, small workshop owners, and consumers. The initiative started in 1994, when a big quantity of trees affected by the Dutch-elm-disease needed to be logged in Danish cities. A network of mobile sawmills was organized in order to help private citizens and small forestry-owners to have their trees logged and possibly transformed into locally produced furniture. The designers’ contribution not only consisted in the development of a range of furniture-models in contemporary and classic design, but also in the definition of a set of rules aimed at making sure that the new furniture used at least 80% of local resources and to guarantee a high environmental and design quality (Eriksen N.D.).
Author's Biographical

Dr Nicola Morelli
School of Architecture and Design, Aalborg University
nmor@aod.auc.dk

Dr Nicola Morelli is an associate professor at the School of Architecture and Design at Aalborg University. He has previously worked at Politecnico di Milano and at the Centre for Design at RMIT University, in Melbourne (Australia). Dr Morelli has worked on research projects focusing on service design and design for sustainability. His present interests focus social, cultural, economical and environmental implication of design activities in innovation systems.