FUTUREDESIGN
Reflections at the limit of impossible

Dario Russo

ABSTRACT

Can today design help to improve the world? During the 20th century, it did it. Actually, it has been establishing itself historically in this sense: to improve the everyday life of common people. In the last decades, however, design has become a sort of magic patina helpful to make goods attractive: a dimension of project linked to more the look of goods than to the challenges of our time. By the way, Maurizio Carta talks about 'futuredesign' and 'alternative present' – a reflection on present helpful to determinate a better (next) future. The present crisis, that is now rooted, calls for a rethink. We must grasp it in order to determinate the change that we need. The Paleo-Anthropocene in which we live, predatory and really unsustainable, has to become a Neo-Anthropocene, sustainable both socially and ecologically. Design, Urbanism and all the disciplines of Project should converge towards this change. The Future City, that it will be born from this mature and balanced cultural spur, will be an Augmented City – open, smart, sensitive, creative and fluid. And the key of the project will be the empathy: the capability to design for and with the people – for a better world.

KEYWORDS

design, crisis, sustainability, urbanism, city, empathy

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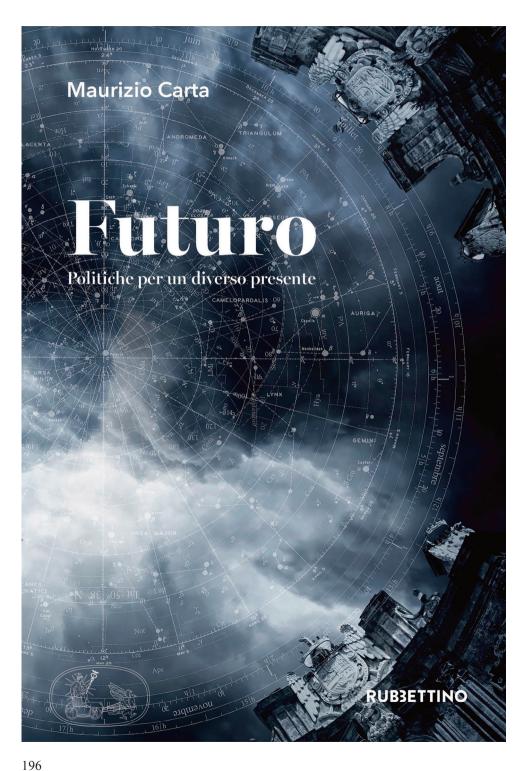
The history of design is often related to that of architecture and art. Compared to these two disciplines, obviously, design is a new entry. And yet, although it really didn't cross the history of Western culture, in the last century it has changed its statute many times, by assuming different forms and social roles. Born to create Beauty with industry at the beginning of the last century, it became, during the first half of the 20th century, a mean to improve everyday life through industrial products able to elevate the social conditions of people. On the contrary, many people think that design simply serves to renewal the look of objects in order to make them more saleable – a sort of polite version of programmed obsolescence. In April 2020, but, everything changes, because we have to face a worldwide pandemic. In this scenario, clearly emerges the idea that our current development system is at a breaking point; especially the resulting global pollution. We must change, we must evolve in order to maintain minimum standards of (life) quality. And perhaps our very survival is on the line. Therefore, those issues addressed by Carta become ever more significance, because they are not simply speculations around project but operative guide-lines towards the Future. Or better the 'alternative present', as he loves to remark; by reading the book we have to remember that there is present and alternative present: the first one is that we suffer, whilst the second is that we design by thinking of the future (Carta, 2019, p. 18).[1]

A very effective quotation of Gille Deleuze introduces the first chapter: great thinkers are a bit seismic, they do not seem to be subjected to evolution, but they proceed for crisis, for shocks (Deleuze, cit. in Carta, 2019, p. 9). In this perspective, the term 'crisis' does not mean final point of a dramatic destiny but start point in order to redesign everything, be better. In fact, the crisis we are living is a great opportunity – which is to redesign the world. As Einstein (2005) states in 1934, 'insanity is doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results'. That is why a crisis can be a blessing both for people and Nations – because it leads to progress. Creativity comes from distress, as the day from the dark night. Here is a simple as vital concept, formulated by Heraclitus before and better than Einstein – change, when times ask for it, will not be only licit but also necessary.

Be the change that you wish to see in the world | The change we are talking about, obviously, is both macro and micro. If it is true that great changes are created by a plurality of actions addressed towards a common goal, it is important that everybody acts in his small way, regardless of how big his small way can be and from the enormous effects the only one person can contribute to determinate. Gandhi encourages to be the change that we wish to see in the world. Therefore, like good university professor, with roles of academic and politic management, Carta aims to update his own academic discipline in relation to the times of the alternative present: as far as the academic field that he knows very well, he invites all to give more thought to goals, education, internship, by promoting in all the matters of the courses of degree in Architecture – but also in those in Design, Agricultural Sciences and I would add

Maurizio Carta

Futuro

Politiche per un diverso presente

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Communication and Social Sciences – the themes of liveability of the city, quality of landscape, of cohesion of the inland areas, of environmental sustainability and of energy efficiency (Carta, 2019, p. 347). According to Carta (2019, pp. 348, 349), we need to remodel of the paradigms we teach at the Universities, to move away from obsolete metaphors, to adopt new models and narratives. In brief, we need to rethink deeply the disciplinary contents of Urbanistic and of all the disciplines of project. Undoubtedly, Design is one of them and more of all, it is aimed at experiment and modify its line-guides, because it is closely linked to two fundamental things that are constantly evolving – technology and society. Therefore, we agree with Carta when he states the need for updating the academic programs. Also, why this is the only way to maintain contact with our disciplines, which evolve on the field, and to plan research on the real world.

In the first pages, Carta (2019, p. 12) relaunches the figure of the intellectual as an activist, aimed to contribute really to society: it is no longer the time of abstract and neutral intellectuals, inmates in their studies and intent on purely speculative researches. In the words of Gramsci in 1919, we are called to 'participate actively in practical life as constructor, organiser and permanent persuader'[2]. Moreover, at the vision of Gramsci of the intellectual as an activist, Carta intertwines the vision of Jean-Paul Sartre (1972), that is the intellectual as technical of practical knowledge that inserts himself in what that does not concern him, or better that it would not concern who is intent only on pure intellectual speculation. So, between Gramsci and Sartre, Carta reminds the illuminating definition that Tomás Maldonado gives to designer – 'technical intellectual', that knows and can do. For Maldonado, in fact, the theory has to be impregnated with practice and practice with theory (Riccini, 2009, p. 167). The designer, in short, as the urbanist to which Carta (2019, p. 203) refers, is a thinker able to move from thought to action in order to impact on territory and society.[3]

Thus, the design of the future will be more and more institutional design – a very wide and responsible project aimed to orchestrate many partial activities inside an overall logic. Carta remarks that the human city cannot be reduced to its urbanistic components, not even to those 'augmented' by emotions, or to the social ones, or much less the economic ones, but it requires a political synthesis of all these and especially a renewed politic humanism, a 'walk together' towards greater civil participation to the political responsibility (Carta, 2019, p. 169). This capability of orchestration, of coordination is – or it should be – also that of design, that assumes here a strategic, political and institutional dimension. In this elevated meaning, obviously, design is not about products look, as people commonly think, and not even it can be reduced to 'styling' of product, as Gillo Dorfles states (1972)[4]. It is this also the conviction of Maldonado in 1976 that, far from referring to the form (of the product) end

Fig. 1 | Cover of the book 'Futuro – Politiche per un diverso presente'; the image is 'Cosmogonia Barocca' by F. Ferla.

in itself, highlights on the wide range of implications of design. In brief, design is a 'fully-fledged social phenomenon' (Maldonado, 2008, p. 15).

Neo-Anthropocene | The institutional question is obviously linked to the ecological one, that is highly developed in the Carta's essay. The now all-pervasive turbo-consumerism, with its dissipate and predatory way, is primarily responsible for the ecological footprint on the Planet. It is also a serial heatsink of social and civil values – a process now degenerated into a global looting, a brutal neo-colonialism that has deformed cultures, flatted differences, anaesthetized democracies (Carta, 2019, p. 40). Moreover, we have to consider the devastating changes that, as we know, imply exponential damages – breaking of food chains, reducing of quality of life, increase of wars, rampant migration (IPCC, 2019). Whether we like or not, our era has been defined Anthropocene, because the history of man is connected to the natural one and the whole of human activities implies a decisive impact on the Planet. Thus, we should need a paradigmatic turn – from erosive, extractive, pervasive, unfair and conflictual Paleo-Anthropocene in which we live to Neo-Anthropocene, in which humanity, far from be the problem, design and implement the transition towards sustainable development (Carta, 2019, pp. 57, 59). That is an inspiration for urbanists, architects and designer – there is again time for designing future, a better world where the human nature and the not human one thrive together for millennia (Ellis, 2018).

In this perspective, in the future the cities will be more and more characterized by growing number of new makers (designers of the latest generation) that carry on reuse and recycling actions on the entrepreneurial model of a start-up inside the circular economy: the economic model on which the cities of the circular society of the 'alternative present' will arise will be able to generate local value instead of the extractive economy that creates dependence from the exogenous strategies of corporations (Carta, 2019, p. 67). For example, an interesting case is that of the urban gardens, thanks to the collective work of inhabitants-farmers that create a 'green, urban and human archipelago' similar to the Arabic luscious scenarios that made of Palermo Aziz, a wonderful city. As Carta preconizes, in the city of future, nature will not be anymore antagonist of architecture, but it will return to be vegetal material of the urban project before Anthropocene could casted out it (Carta, 2019, p. 313). Thus, nature will not be any more Broken Nature, as the title of the exhibition by Paola Antonelli and Ala Tannir (2019) at XII Milan Triennale, aimed at clarifying the connections between we (humans) and the environment – connections that have been now compromised, if not completely broken, in the last centuries. On the contrary, design will have to be in charge of the human salvation (Design Takes on Human Survival is the subtitle of the exhibition) – it will have to offer critical means in order to look to the future with a different awareness.

Augmented Cities | The model of the city in the circular society of the 'alternative present', however, will not be limited to separate collection. It will point rather to the

recycling of wastes inside an industrial system that is ecologically sustainable through the reduction of land consumption and the promotion of principles and practices of urban regeneration, reuse and recycling (Carta, 2019, p. 220). Waste will have to assume a positive value thanks to a net of infrastructures helpful to recycle everything in an almost total way. This is the real goal to reach through the tool of separate collection on various layers and treatments. This is the circular economy – pure Beauty! (Carta, 2019, p. 109). According to the principles of circular economy nothing is a waste and everything comes out from a production process is raw material helpful to another production process. The same product design is based on the possibility to disassemble the parts for reusing them in the production cycles founded on the production chain and on new production nets. That is a more creative designed recycle – a planned generative post-obsolescence instead of the rapid programmed obsolescence (Carta, 2019, pp. 68, 69). What appears is thus a new systemic project, because is about the relations between people, enterprises and resources of a territory, in order to promote the local culture and identity as well as a collective well-being (systemicdesign.org). In short, today more than ever 'there is a need of system actions' (Carta, 2019, p. 244).

This net of people, activities and resources naturally adds something: it creates Augmented Cities (Carta, 2017). The city of future is certainly innovative, dynamic and transformable, able to evolve according to external and internal inputs – a city that innovates its hardware by putting in the field a sustainable, open and participated model, but also and first of all its software, which is the way of living, producing, moving. Without doubt, the augments cities are more sensitive towards people and environmental as well as able to evolve in a resilient and flexible way, by assuming incremental and adaptive processes such as to generate community from our increasing 'augmented humanity' (Carta, 2019, p. 125). Therefore, the Augmented Cities imply A Paradigm Shift, that can be considered as a constant as necessary shift, because our cities have to change from time to time, both outside and inside, in order to adapt themselves to new lifestyles. That is a 'visceral revolution', in the words of Andrea Branzi (2006) – a process of re-functionalization of the building (or whole urban areas) of which the designed use is changed in part or completely. One thinks for example of the former industry warehouses that once were peripheral but are now central and so functional to all a part of city that has grown with time and participate now inside and organic system. Thus, the design adapts itself like a chameleon in order to elaborate temporary, not definitive and subject to change solutions. Of course, we are not talking about operations of lifting, cosmetic surgery, we are not talking about nose makeover or correction of lips or breast, but about the actual replacement of internal organs of improving functionality (Zardini, 2004, p. 574).

The heart of the augmented cities is obviously the communities that too are open, smart, sensitive, creative and fluid (Carta, 2019, p. 183). And of course, the term 'community' can only remind, an urbanist as well as a designer, of the great Adriano

Olivetti, enlightened businessman, that is always mentioned in the histories of design (and not only), to which Carta refers, often and however, by talking about Future. The sharing economy implies a co-policy, that is an augmented, dynamic and innovative policy, because it is founded on cooperation. That is a return to 'economy of communion' that in Italy was successful and set a model of cooperative system (Carta, 2019, pp. 154, 155). The augmented city, thus, is also a city on a human scale or better the 'city of man', as Olivetti states (1960), thanks to a very elevated idea of industry, that is the heart of a process of modernization in an economical sense but also from a social and cultural point of view.[5]

Empathy | Besides, the concept of community is the basis of so-called emerging design – Design. When Everybody Designs – thanks to collaborative nets, made for and with people. One alludes here to a methodology based on an interdisciplinary approach and driven by a heterogeneous team in which the designer works as a facilitator-coordinator of different skills in order to solve problems of a social type with the greatest possible participation (Manzini, 2015). In the same way, the urbanist which Cart talks about is a sort of cultural coordinator, an urban designer aimed to create harmony, balance, sonority: an orchestra director of city where there are many and different orchestra musicians, each with his instrument with peculiar timbre, all able to read music but not just as eager to perform according to one rhythm, one time, one scan that are designed by the careful baton of the urbanist-orchestra director. And one does not always have the lucky of conducting a close-knit and well-composed orchestra, but often one has to find harmony where there is dissonance, balance where there is unbalance, sonority where someone else would hear noise (Carta, 2019, pp. 545, 546).

In order to design the 'alternative present', thus, more space and importance should be given to the emotional aspects as well as functional ones. Most of all we need to put people in the foreground, through a constant process of listening, of dialogue and of interaction in which who is involved express a fruitful alternation of reason and emotion, of facts and sensations, of rationality and instinct, in order to recompose the specificity of places (Carta, 2019, p. 177). This vision, people-centred, reminds Design Thinking, an innovative method based on the new (digital) technologies, the interdisciplinary confrontation and most of all on the experience of the user (person even before than consumer). Pragmatically, passing thought some iterative phases, the design thinker aims to leverage on the experience of many people (prospective users) that participate in this process thanks to an interaction which serves to create empathy[6]. The communities involved in this process have everything to gain. They are augmented communities, as has been said – a precious formula of collective intelligence that finds favourable conditions in augmented cites.

To understand the dynamic of the collective activity of those who participate to this process of developing with and for the people, it is possible to refer to the concept of Opera Aperta (openwork), formulated by Umberto Eco in 1962. Based on

happenings, the openwork of Eco opens up to different integrations, parts that add concretely something, and it channels them into the process of a structural vitality that the work owns even if it is not concluded, and that it works also in the way of several and different outcomes[7]. In the same way, Carta observes that the contemporary culture consists often in the participation of its users, by accumulation and stratification of points of view, becoming in real open-source culture, where one cannot recognize anymore a principal author but a collectivity of authors/readers, where audience and work merge into an incremental product, that evolves through next writings (Carta, 2019, p. 289). We add – next writings that give 'openness' and 'dynamicity' not only to urbanism but also design.

An interesting example of it is the work of Droog Design, a group of artistes-designers founded by Renny Ramakers (design historian and critic) and Gijs Bakker (designer), international point of reference since the first years of Third Millennium. The multiple Droog objects, midway between industrial production and artistic installation, «[…] are as basic and as minimal as can be: that they consist only of what is needed to materialize the concept. But usually, the concept dictates 'more': less and more literally coming together in one product» (Lupton, 2006, p. 79). In this sense, thus, Droog Design is a concept design, or better 'open design', where «[…] open = undefined» (van't Spijker, 2006, p. 52)[8], that is 'opera aperta' (work in progress), as the work of Eco – virtually endless and open to interpretation-completion by the viewer-user, that becomes part of the work itself. In the second half of the book, Carta presents new challenges – Between metropolis and archipelagos; Heterotopies of median Italy; Antifragile communities; Heritage and creativity; Sicily, land of innovation; Cities of culture; Palermo, Aziz; Polipheries; Vision and courage; Epilogue, but not too much. These are concrete challenges for measuring our courage, because Future-design calls us to action and not only to diagnosis; now we know how to be protagonists of change, what to do day after day to lift ourselves from the torpor that clouds our action e to defeat the individualism that mutilates action.

Notes

1) As the author explains at the end of the book, the 'alternative present' can generate an alternative future, coherent with mine/our vision of the world more interesting, happier, that hovers on the edge of the present state of things. That's why the future comes from the interaction between reality and what that is possible, but it feeds on the courage and the capacity of putting them together (Carta, 2019, p. 369).

2) L'Ordine Nuovo was a publication with variable periodicity founded in Turin on May 1, 1919 by Antonio Gramsci and other socialist intellectuals from Turin (Palmiro Togliatti, Angelo Tasca and Umberto Terracini). The Ordine Nuovo declared its program of social and proletarian renewal in the Battute di Deludio written by Tasca himself.

3) As Carta (2019, pp. 203, 207) states, we cannot escape from repair the fracture between research and project experimentation, recomposing the alliance between research and project, between

theory and practice; because those that fallow in love with practice without science are like helms-men that enter in ship without rudder or compass, that have never certainty where they go. The prac-tice must always be based on a good theory, Leonard da Vinci wrote in Trattato della Pittura. Howev-er, there is no solid theory that is not based on solid fundaments of practice, if one does not want to be virginal helmsmen that have never heard the howling of the stormy sea.

4) According to Dorfles (1972, p. 124) Styling is the mere formal change of product, without any technical or scientific reason, in order to increase its 'appeal' and make him more saleable; it is a sort of 'cosmetics' and employed in USA as well as in the nations in which consumerism is more pronounced.

5) In the Second post-War period, Adriano Olivetti founded Edizioni di Comunità (Editions of Community), then the magazine Comunità (Community), cultural point of reference of the homony-mous politic movement, started in 1947. In 1959 Editions of Community published a collection of essays significantly titled Città dell'Uomo (City on Man).

6) For more information on Design Thinking, see: Lewrick, Link and Leifer, 2018, 2020.

7) According to Eco (1962, pp. 56, 61): 1) because the 'open' works are in motion, they are char-acterized by the invite to make the work with the author; 2) there are those works that are materially concluded but open to continuous germination of internal relations that user has to discover and choose while he perceives the totality of stimulations; 3) every work of art is substantially open to a virtually endless series of possible readings, of which each leads the work to relive in according to a personal perspective, a personal taste and a personal implementation.

8) An emblematic project is Do + Create (2000), in which the user is invited to do something in according to an operative indication. For example, the chair Do Add Short Leg, by Jurgen Bey, has a leg shorter than the others that makes it impracticable; but the solution is enclosed in its name – Add a Short Leg, in order to complete the chair making possible its use. Another example is the tape Do Frame, by Martí Guixé, characterized by a décor that alludes to a setting of days gone by (5 cm x 50 m). In the same way, Do Scratch, another project by Guixé, is a lamp that is hidden in a black box waiting for seeing light. In fact, it is can be 'turned on' by scratching part of its surface – Fiat Lux! Or even, Do Break, by Frank Tjepkema and Peter van der Jagt, seems a very common porcelain vase; but it is panelled from inside with a layer of silicone. Thus, if one breaks it, ever part stays in place, and who took the satisfaction of breaking something has again a perfectly working object. But the most sensational object is the 'virtual' armchair Do Hit, by Marijn van der Poll, that appears like a metallic cube. It works like it – one buys the steel cube, that is empty, and hits it with a hammer un-til one obtains the desired shape. It is not the best of comfort perhaps, but who will use this arm-chair? Or better: who will use it as an armchair?

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