

A PHILOSOPHICAL OUTING TO DUTCH DESIGN WEEK

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From 21 to 29 October 2022, the Dutch Design Week was held in Eindhoven, one of northern Europe's most significant events (regarding visitors and exhibition material). Scattered through three main locations, the event showcased a plethora of exhibitions revolving around several themes and initiatives. Thousands of designers and artists gathered to share their work and ideas, welcomed by a stimulating and buzzing atmosphere.

The overall experience was extremely inspiring. Indeed, the occasion was also enriched because, especially in the Dutch context, this type of event and all design-related activities are increasingly considered with a broader and not merely technical perspective. We visited the exhibition spaces and attended some of the events held there. Not least, a crucial event within Design United's Design Research Programme was a workshop named 'Discussion on Politics of Design', which focused on the relationship between design and the political dimension and thus also involved the politics of design itself and its social role in our lives.

First of all, from a philosophical perspective, it is clear that the activity of (industrial) design of objects, which are conceived first and foremost in virtue of certain desired ends, is not something that is exclusively concerned with the difficulties of the technical design itself, i.e. how to do something, what materials and technique should be used, etc., in view of a hoped-for or expected result. Design as a complex activity (or maybe better, 'a set of activities') also necessarily involves wondering about the reasons behind that particular desired purpose and the unseen forces/determinants (theoretical, ideological but also social, economic and political) that may contribute to influencing it or making it perceived as relevant or worthy of being developed.

After all, design today is deeply connected and adapted to our societies' digital and informational dimensions. Technology, in this sense, is perceived and pursued as a legitimate way of extending the possibilities of human functionality. And not only those we might call (simplifying a little) 'natural', which are traditionally imagined as more intimately linked to our organismic being. But also the social ones, which are, in fact, a second nature and which, perhaps by their weight and relevance, become the first. The Dutch Design Week showed the aspects and consequences of this integrated life with technology, in which we received the Promethean fire not only as a tool to free ourselves from our natural condition but as a foundational and indispensable element of our contemporary existence, thus determining (whether we like it or it causes us discomfort) our natural condition.

The exhibition and workshops, therefore, placed a great deal of emphasis on particular contemporary themes, such as issues of sex and gender (from social interaction apps to human reproduction, notably the concept of motherhood), the living dimension of the future (the objects and spaces of the world to come) and of course environmental sustainability and the ecological crisis.

And so we have seen cork bricks, where design is also the science of materials, allowing you to continually modify and redesign the space of your home (without the use of glues, mortars, etc.) to adapt it to a dynamic and ever-changing life. Or a cooking setting entirely based on the

activities of different combinations of Fungi, from the creation of new foods (through fermentation) to the non-generation of waste, to show the possibility of fully circular consumption. Almost an unintentional, unconscious and certainly reductive homage to specific themes of Donna Haraway's *Chthulucene* in the analysis of the need for a new dimension of interconnected life, in which symbiosis (or better sympoiesis) reveals our relational and compostable nature. Or again, still on the subject of reuse and circularity, the projects aimed at redefining plastic (and the objects made of it, therefore) not as something temporary and replaceable but rather as a versatile and protean and, therefore, durable material. Persistent yet changeable, plastic can be seen as capable for this reason of better accommodating our emotions or perhaps even instantiating them.

Designing something, like any creative act, involves ideas that are hidden, assumed, or inherited and that philosophy can help bring to the surface. Indeed, the Netherlands has long recognised the importance of philosophical reflection over technology in any design activity and its relevance as a shared cultural background between different disciplines, especially technical ones (which is also evident from the strong presence, precisely in technical universities, of philosophy courses designed specifically for design, engineering and tech students). Thus, many of the designers exhibiting at the Dutch Design Week tried to show how their work could not simply be reduced to the technical realisation of a product (the difficulties of which only boiled down to questions of practical feasibility). On the contrary, in presenting their ideas and solutions, they tried to show (albeit not always successfully) how open questions and perspectives shaped by genuine philosophical reflection had contributed to the realisation of their products.

Let us take the case of birth. Of course, it is a biological process we share with many other life forms on Earth. Yet it has, throughout the history of our species, entailed the genesis of cultural but also social, ideological, political, etc. meanings, which have in turn promoted the creation of devices (from rites such as baptism to the medicalisation of childbirth to name but two extremes) to make these aspects concrete. Are we going to live in a world like the one envisaged by the genius of Aldous Huxley in his *'Brave New World'*, in which reproduction (in its social value and propagation of the species) is a simple procedure completely disengaged from relationships (both sentimental and sexual) or, as specific anarcho-primitivist movements predict, are we going to experience a sudden descent to a fabled 'state of nature' such as the one contemplated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *The Social Contract*, and not the brutal and violent one of the Hobbesian dimension, which is also the result of political and technological choices and contingencies? The meaning of technology here is, therefore, not only material. Designing something is no longer just about objects but also about processes, institutions, norms, and even phenomena. Thus, designing is also about making choices. And choices that are not only individual but often necessarily collective. So how to make them? Who to involve? And in what way? Designing all this, the future, in short, is also a constant challenge to the structure of our society and our idea of liberal democracy.

And yet technology as such is not neutral, nor is designing solutions for the issues that affect us, something that, as philosophers and hopefully as human beings, we can overlook.

In short, we need to ask ourselves not only whether and which technologies might make sense in ways that we deem just, sustainable, or inclusive of the changes that we bring about or that we undergo. But also whether and why a technological answer is really a solution per se.

Just think of a fundamental dimension of the current ecological crisis. The non-stop production of new objects by this society of ours hungry for continuous and endless creation, which eventually becomes waste. One might ask why not teach that designing something is not just about building an object but also about solving a problem. For example, at the intersection of design and nudging, develop a device that stimulates individuals to behave virtuously, such as

picking up waste. But herein lies the point. This aspect becomes crucial when thinking about how to teach the cultivation of these perspectives in future designers and beyond. As Nolen Gertz also suggested during the workshop and in a piece written in relation to this very event, this way of framing the question “taught students to view products as solutions to social problems and to view social problems as resolvable by products. Consequently, issues like pollution came to be viewed as caused, not by complex psychological, political, and economic factors but by the absence of a product that could make cleaning up garbage fun. And of course, some of the complex psychological, political, and economic factors that cause pollution to revolve around our not taking the environment seriously” (Gertz 2022).

Indeed, when dealing with design, philosophy can certainly aid in unveiling the implicit assumptions behind specific ideas or solutions, or it can keep design activity open against the centripetal thrusts due to the specialisation of knowledge. However, it cannot and should not be just that. Philosophy, in the end, is also the Socratic gadfly ‘stinging’ society, its dreams, desires and demands.

Contributor Statement

Federico Boem wrote the first draft and worked on the conceptualisation. Elisa Paiusco revised the first draft, worked on the final draft and worked on the conceptualisation.

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