

Design and Crisis

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Although the word crisis began to appear on the media headlines only in 2008 (as a consequence of the financial cataclysm), the symptoms of a wider and deeper crisis were evident years before. Seen from the Center, these crises have been called “The four riders of the Apocalypse”. Slavoj Žižek names them: the environmental crisis, the consequences of the biogenetic revolution, the unbalance within the system (above all the exploitation of natural resources) and the explosive growth of exclusion (Žižek 2010, page 520). Seen from the Periphery, a fifth rider should be added: the hegemonic interests that crush the local needs of the people who dare protest against the scouring of the basis of their biological as well as economic survival (among others, open pit mining, exploitation of water resources to extract minerals or monocultures with extensive use of agro toxic substances).

Inevitably, these crises also reflect on design, on its professional practice, its teaching and discourse. I am not given to formulating apocalyptic previsions that might foster desperation, discouragement and fatalism, which would be the expression of an attitude that designers cannot allow themselves, except if they have abandoned all faith in being able to intervene with project activities in real life, however limited the possibilities of concrete intervention might seem.

I am even less given to accept the reassuring aspect of a discourse that intends relativizing the seriousness of this generalized crisis, calling it a simple cyclic phenomenon, after which better times will come, a new global and digital belle époque; likewise, I reject the threatening side of this same discourse, which wants to install a climate of fear finally ending in unbalancing actions against those who rebel against the hegemonic discourse.

A crisis offers the opportunity, and imposes an obligation, to review the dominant reference frameworks in which one has moved up to this moment. It demands verifying its validity or the loss of it.

If we observe the last two decades of history, we can see, in the first place, a gradual erosion of public domain; second, an increase of the asymmetry between community and private interests, and, third, the emptying of the concept of democracy.

This process has motivated the emergence of voices that claim for a reinvention of the public domain as a democratic space and the recovery of effective democracy, and not only in a nominal sense, as it happens when terms like “exclusion” and “inclusion” are used to avoid the uncomfortable and even

conflictive question of redistribution (Mouffe 2008, page 119).

It might be tempting to follow the poetic-surrealistic inventions of the neo-language, whose promoters reveal an overflowing creativity to construct a harmonizing image of a reality which is not harmonic at all, for example, when the uncomfortable concept of “recession” is replaced by the delightful term of “negative rate of economic growth” (Escolar 2011), a term which is part of the cannon of the hegemonic thinking of financial-monetary type that has settled in the last three decades in the Centre as well as in the Periphery. It is said, without hesitation, that there is a need to adapt democracy to the market, instead of asking whether it might not be more related to the concept of democracy to adapt the market to it.

There is an increase in the number of justified doubts about market capacities as a socio-historical invention; is it the most suitable tool to face the pressing problems humanity is facing today and in the future? I quote a warning from Jürgen Habermas:

“Facing the problems of the 21st Century, again comes up the old question whether a civilization can allow itself to be captured as a whole by the whirlwind

of the driving forces of only one of its subsystems, even though this one has become the dominant model of evolution” (Habermas 2009, page 97)

This sentence shows the European context in which it has been formulated. But it is criticized by the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano, who coined the concept “coloniality” to show the dark side of modernity and emancipation (Quintero 2010).

The concept “epistemic disobedience” belongs to the same framework of reference, an invitation radically to doubt the reference schemes of the prevailing thought (Mignolo 2010, page 126), a concept that, compared to the dominant design practice, has not been reflected upon. One of the results of the current crisis might be a re-configured project practice, characterized by epistemic disobedience, something that until now appears like an undetermined eventuality; but not because of that, impossible.

Massive unemployment and exclusion/inclusion have entered the circle of design problems. Directly confronted by social problems, mainstream design reacts in a vehement way and, for understandable reasons, prefers to remain fixed to the idea of a socially neutral, aseptic, design.

The so publicized sustainable development will have limited opportunities of success in front of a way of thinking that considers nature and human resources a capital. This judgment must not be interpreted as a declaration of resignation, that is, as

if nothing could be done to face a way of industrialization that can hardly escape from being characterized as an implacable process of plundering, as it is particularly clear in the countries of the Periphery.

Another significant corollary of the growth of the symbolic dimension of economy and the predominance of the economist-monetarist discourse is the emergence of branding, with the subordination to the one dimensional criteria of the market. With branding culminates a process characterized by a blindness in front of everything that cannot be expressed in monetary values. Nobody will deny the omnipresent and even crushing force of the market, but one thing is to accept it as a reality and a different one, to impose it as the only reality.

Increasingly, design has been instrumentalized by marketing, which tends to treat design services as second class auxiliaries. In the field of design, this process promotes self-referentialism of unknown dimensions in previous times, like architecture that culminates in “starchitecture”. The designer as a person has acquired more importance than design itself. Between the concept of design as a service and the doubling of design back on itself, there is a deep gap. Varying one Andy Warhol’s sentences it can be said that today many people think that design is the name of the designer.

The concept of “utopia” does not have a good press today. For some, it is an anachronistic concept. It has been subject to criticism and even complaints, from the current of thought labelled

“postmodern”. This current calls naïve the hope of being able to influence the network of social relationships by means of design. It discards, as outdated, a position that allows cultivating the desire to infringe current social relationships. The place where one wants to be positioned remains at one’s personal judgment, but it would be blind to ignore the social effects of project activities on everyday practice. Excluding social conditioning programmatically from the project activity would lead to putting socially relevant projects into quarantine.

This political dimension of design may be explained by a comparison of the contexts in the Periphery and in the Center. The history of Latin America may be useful for this. In the last decade, most of the Latin American countries celebrated the bicentenary of their Independence. A Second Independence was mentioned, which reveals that the process of Independence has not finished. There are several explanations for this. I will limit myself to the international division of work according to which peripheral countries are assigned the role of exporters of commodities in the form of minerals, oil, wood, soy, meat or cereals which serve as input for industrially differentiated countries. Products without a project component, products without design. Acting against this international division of work, the following question emerges for designers: how can design contribute to increasing autonomy or reducing heteronomy? In this lies the difference of project action between the Periphery and the Center. It must be clear that this declaration does not imply a value judgment. It is about distinction, not about judgment.

A series of new design specializations and programs emerged in the process of design diversification in the past decades. The initial enthusiasm for experience design was motivated by the illusion of opening new spaces for design. In the debate about this concept, two conflicting groups became clear: facing the supporters of this type of design, critics thought that it was absurd to try to design this type of experience. Experience designers felt uncomfortable because, apparently, the material substrate is essential in order to have experiences. And this is the designer's realm of intervention.

A few years ago, another concept began to be spread: "design Thinking", a new mantra among company managers. The existence of a particular type of cognitive competency was vindicated by it. It did not take long for it to be demolished by an eminent scientist who wrote: "Design thinking is a public relations term for the old-fashioned so called creative thinking" (Norman 2010).

I share this criticism; design thinking is a vague term, unless it refers to design's holistic or comprehensive approach which has always been used to characterize design work. If multidimensional approach is accepted in other fields of activity, we are facing an encouraging case of design radiating into other areas. This may be one of the contributions design can make to overcome the present crisis.

I should like to mention another phenomenon of the design crisis, operating in the attempts to transform design objects into art. Art historian Andrea Giunta wrote the following: "[...]

art vanguard was thought about in a programmatic way, the relationships between art and social space" (Giunta 2011, page 58). A model expression of this vanguard art, of this "great modernist adventure" (as it has been called) were the constructivists of the first years of the soviet revolution, who sought to transform art forms into forms of a new everyday life (Rancière 2009, page 14).


An inverse process can be observed today as design is interpreted as an artistic activity; consequently, art galleries and museums open their spaces to exhibit "design". Nowadays, industrial products previously not considered worthy of attention, gain the condition of cultural objects and lend themselves as investment goods. Previously, when an industrial product was presented as an object of art, it was a scandal like the one produced by Marcel Duchamp in 1917 with an anonymous product, and even worse, a urinal, whose current value (as a replica of the lost original) is estimated to be three million Euros. Certainly, Duchamp was not interested in design, and even less in erasing the boundaries between design and art as it is the case today with "transitional design"; on the contrary, he wanted, with his action, to elude the bourgeois concept of art and show its arbitrariness. Compared to this action, the current attempts to revitalize design by means of art seem rather innocuous.

The new (and not so new) type of design claims for itself a special condition as art-design product. It is characterized by an explicit indifference, even hostility and disdain, towards the criterion of

utility and it limits itself mainly to a variety of traditional products such as chairs, tables, lamps and products for the personal habitat. That has nothing to do with Duchamp's revolutionary élan, and may possibly be the expression of a neo-conformism that, with radical gestures, leaves everything as it is. "Art -design" finds affinity with the interests of curators who look for new exhibition themes which go beyond the established form typology of pictures, installations and digital arts.

Another critical point of design is the academization of teaching. On the one hand, there is an increased offer of master and doctorate courses, mainly due to the institutional pressure to adapt to criteria of academic excellence (also because the academic field is a source of income). Design research has achieved consolidation. On the other hand, this offer is noted for subordination to criteria and traditions of the established fields of knowledge which are foreign to the project field. Instead of the traditional degrees of PhD or Doctor in Sciences, another degree corresponding to the field of design (Ph Project or Doctor in Design) will have to be invented. Thus, it would be possible to counteract the danger of a traditional policy of naming Professorships or Chairs, based on academic excellence (which is not necessarily similar to Project excellence), making project courses at university, step by step, atrophied and more and more distant from professional practice and from the pillar of design training: the project.

What can be done from the perspective of design to face the current crisis? In the formulation of a reply of a generic character, I want to avoid the risk of repeating committee formulas, well known and full of good intentions, but inefficient. We need to take into consideration the radical innovations offered nowadays by the field of informatics, which make visual modeling possible, digital simulations, imaging technologies, access to information on the web and wide digital communication; likewise, we need to consider the development of new materials and manufacturing processes, the progress of biotechnology and cognitive sciences.

With due precaution, I am formulating six questions as a previous condition to emerge from a crisis like the current one: firstly, question the sacrosanct concept of "market"; secondly, question the predominance of private interests to the detriment of common interests; thirdly, question the imperialism of economist thinking; in the fifth place, question a development model based on the plundering of resources and, finally, question a lifestyle that depends on a huge consumption of energy. It is true, one cannot be satisfied with simple questioning, but can certainly take it as a starting point to act against crisis, which implies appealing to every citizen, as the solution to crisis cannot be delegated. Crisis cannot be outsourced. 

NOTES

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