

Design in the Anthropocene: an opening to the *other*

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Abstract: Nowadays, more than ever, the acquired awareness of man's responsibility towards the compound planetary crisis we face is stressing the need of a change in perspective. Against the modernist anthropocentrism, some emerging theories are suggesting that coexistence is not only a human issue, but it rather concerns all the entities (animate or inanimate, material or immaterial) that compose the world. This is not seen anymore as a passive background, but rather as a system of relationships, made of different actors - human and non-human - all provided with a political voice and agency. The idea behind this assumption is that reclaiming ground that has been previously purified of too many missing voices and actors might spur the cultivation of a more responsible, ecologically sound politics. Such change of perspective is, clearly, shaking the foundations of all disciplinary fields and also affecting the very idea and practice of design.

What kind of approach to design are these perspectives contributing to shape?

Keywords: anti-anthropocentrism, ontological pluralism, (cosmo)politics, prototyping

Introduction

This contribution seeks to address the complex relationship between design and the increasing concern over planetary conditions. A growing number of scholars think we have entered a new geological era, the Anthropocene, ever since the atmospheric chemist and Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen popularized the term in 2000. The main argument behind this assumption is that humans - the major force in the current geological epoch - have irreversibly altered the planet, which is reacting with global climate upheavals. The acquired awareness of man's responsibility for similar phenomena is shaking the foundations and boundaries of all disciplinary fields and stressing the need of a change in perspective. Peter Sloterdijk's Spherology, Science Technology Studies, Latour's Actor Network Theory, together with New Materialism in philosophy - pioneered by political theorists such as Jane Bennett - are emerging trends in 21st century thought. By abolishing the traditional dualities of Modernity, such as the nature and culture divide, they are suggesting new ways to understand the world we live in and to address the compound crisis we face. Against the modernist anthropocentric perspective, the surrounding world is not seen anymore as a passive background, but rather as a system of relationships, made of actors or *actants* - «something that acts, or to which activity is granted by another» (Latour, 1996) - human and non-human, both provided with an agency which is also political.

This perspective implies going beyond the traditional, restrictive notion of politics as "the give and take in an exclusive human club", towards what Stengers and Latour defined *cosmopolitics*, i.e., politics seen from the viewpoint of an "ontological pluralism" as a continuous negotiation, a practice of coexistence



to which all the living and non-living entities participate (Stengers, 2005). The boundaries between nature and culture, *inside* and *outside*, entities and agencies traditionally seen as oppositional (human/animal, life/matter, organic/inorganic) are called into question, as well as those defining traditionally autonomous fields of knowledge, that begin to cross-fertilize each other.

Such change of perspective has, clearly, a profound impact also on the very idea and practice of design. Indeed, design practices can unveil and re-shape the co-existence of different entities, agencies and interweavings that constitute the political sphere.

1. Design and Politics

Martín Tironi, Chilean sociologist interested in interdisciplinary research on design, argues that «while politics must deal with the governing of human interests for the sake of common good, design, instead, would be focused on form, the aesthetic and functional arrangement of the things that populate the world. (...) on transforming, creatively and sensitively, the materialities into useful, usable or decorative products.» He suggests moving beyond these restrictive boundaries which see design as a tool or equipment *outside* the political (Tironi, 2017).

The sociologist Domínguez Rubio and the architect Foguè argue that until now the usual way to explore the relation between design and politics has been focused around what we can call design's capacity to *enfold* the political. That is its *prescriptive attitude*, its ability to inscribe political programs into materials, spaces or bodies, and to create silent forms of power and influence: design, thus conceived, turns out to be a form of doing politics through things. The rendering of power would work at a sub-political level by controlling the physical and technological elements that silently shape our actions and thoughts (Domínguez Rubio and Foguè, 2017). This means - using sociologist Akrich's words - that politics works through inscribing a certain «*vision* (prediction or scenario) of the world in the technical content of the new object» (Akrich, 1992). These *scripts* or scenarios constitute attempts to predetermine certain settings, defining a framework of action.

However, even if design's capability to create silent forms of power is and remain undisputed, it is equally important not to overestimate it. Predetermined inscriptions «tend to create a sort of performative illusion» (Domínguez Rubio and Foguè, 2017), according to which the effects of intentions and programs are some sort of inevitable result of the original design. Design objects, instead, are continually changing as people creatively transform them according to their need. Unpredictable and unexpected events come to disturb the *script*, letting the *otherness* in. To support this argument, Domínguez Rubio and Foguè mention the fate of those project that aimed to use architecture to enfold different visions of a new society, such as Le Corbusier's project to modernize Chandigarh, which has «turned into a flea-market and a place to hang clothes» (Domínguez Rubio and Foguè, 2017).

The unexpected and miserable fate of examples like this could be seen as an ironical commentary on the *enfolding* capacities of architectural design and leads us to realize the limits of the traditional way of considering its political capacities. It is therefore important to introduce a different way of thinking about how design can become a political matter.

2. The disappearance of the outside

In order to do so, we need to gain an insight into the complexity of the contemporary world. The process of *disappearance of the outside*, as Latour explains, «is certainly the defining trait of our epoch» (Latour, 2009), a phenomenon with great architectural and urban impacts whose relevance cannot be ignored. The compound crisis we face and the emerging of resilience issues are spurring a change in perspective.

Latour's Actor-Network Theory argues that rather than conceiving any subject or object as isolated, we should consider it as an entity enmeshed in a complex web of relationships, in which other human and non-human actors interact. A web that is always contingent, as it changes according to each specific condition. He radically questions traditional approaches to scientific issues, by referring to what he calls *collective experiments* (Latour, 2006). Science was once practiced *inside* laboratories, confined workplaces for experts only, leaving *outside* the pure *empirical experience*. Nowadays the laboratory has in most cases dramatically broadened its boundaries, and we are now all involved in the same

collective experiments mixing humans and non-humans together. Stressing the fact that the distinction between the inside and the outside of the laboratory has disappeared, Latour refers to what have been called *hybrid forums*. So far only two types of forums have existed: one that was in charge of representing *things of nature* and another one which was in charge of representing society. One simple way to characterise our times is to say that the two meanings of representation have now merged into one: to define the new politics, Latour introduces the expression *Parliament of Things*.

«The global warming controversy is just one of those many new hybrid forums: around the table, some of those spokespersons represents the high atmosphere, others the lobbies of oil and gas, still others non-governmental organisations, still others represents, in the classical sense, their electors (with President Bush able to represent simultaneously his electors and the energy lobbies who have bought him up!). The sharp difference that seemed so important between those who represented things and those who represented people has simply vanished. What counts is that all those spokesperson are in the same room, engaged in the same collective experiment, talking at once about imbroglios of people and things.» (Latour, 2001)

This shift implies a different attitude towards the traditional relationship between the *outside* and the *inside* and a philosophy of space aimed at making the *outside* disappear.

In order to better understand the meaning of this theoretical model and how it could be linked to design, it's necessary to draw attention to Peter Sloterdijk, one of Latour's main references, who first grasped the depth and extension of the concept of *design*.

«When we say that “Dasein is in the world” we usually pass very quickly on the little preposition “in”. Not Sloterdijk. In what? he asks, and in where? Are you in a room? In an air conditioned amphitheatre? And if so what sort of air pumps and energy sources keep it up? Are you outside? There is no outside: outside is another inside with another climate control, another thermostat, another air conditioning system.» (Latour, 2008)

Historically the personal sphere has always been formed at the expense of the *foreign*, the *not-belonging*. Nowadays, according to Sloterdijk, this short-sighted attitude has reached its constitutive limit.

«Because “global society” has reached its limit, however, and shown once for all that the earth, with its fragile atmospheric and biospheric systems is the limited shared site of human operations, the praxis of externalization comes up against an absolute boundary. From there on, a protectionism of the whole becomes the directive of immunitary reason. (...) Thus, the classical distinctions of friend and foe collapse. Whoever continues along the line of previous separations between the own and the foreign produces immune losses not only for others, but also for themselves.» (Sloterdijk, 2013)

In developing his theory, Sloterdijk signals the need to break down the partition wall between the *personal sphere* and the *foreign sphere*. He calls on us to think about the human subject, and the supra-individual subjects that we call *society* and *civilization*, together with objects, things, nature, animals, plants and the environment. These *things*, this *foreign sphere* so far has always been objectified, looted, taken for granted, exploited. (Sloterdijk 1998, 1999, 2004). By using the term *co-immunity*, Sloterdijk thinks of an unprecedented coupling between the personal and the foreign sphere: between human and non-human, as well as between human beings, to preserve themselves and the biosphere as an entity capable of guaranteeing their survival.

3. A political ecology of things

Within these reflections, Remo Bodei, in his analysis of the term *object* points out that the term object

«seems to derive theoretically from the Greek term *problema*, where “problem” is understood as an obstacle put forward as a form of defense, an impediment that blocks the way and causes something to stop. In Latin, more precisely, *obicere* means to throw against or place before. The idea of *objectum* (or, in German, *Gegenstand*, what is before or against me) implies a challenge, a contraposition that prevents the subject’s immediate affirmation precisely because it “objects” to the subject’s pretensions to dominance. It presupposes a confrontation that concludes with a definitive overpowering of the object, which, after the struggle between subject and object, is made available to be possessed and manipulated by the subject.

A thing, in contrast, is not an object, an indeterminate obstacle that I find before me and that I have to conquer or circumvent – rather, it is a cluster of relationships in which I feel and know that I am implicated and of which I do not want to have exclusive control.» (Bodei, 2009)

For his part, Latour, opposing to the modernist attitude towards the material world, argues that:

«To think of artifacts in terms of design means conceiving of them less and less as modernist objects, and (...) more and more as “things”. To use my language artifacts are becoming conceivable as complex assemblies of contradictory issues (...). When things are taken as having been well or badly designed then they no longer appear as matters of fact. So as their appearance as matters of fact weakens, their place among the many matters of concern that are at issue is strengthened.» (Latour, 2009)

By reimagining ostensibly settled *matters of fact* as contested and constructed *matters of concern*, he argues that we could reveal the configurations of interest and agency that connect human and non-human actors and which give particular social realities their weight. Thinking of the social in terms of complex assemblies, in fact, leads us to consider the political field from a completely different perspective. Jane Bennett, referring to Dewey’s idea of the *public*, claims that «there is no action that is *not* conjoint, that does not, in other words, immediately become enmeshed in a web of connections.» (Bennett, 2010)

Focusing on this assumption Bennett questions the positivist and antropocentric perspective - according to which the human understanding is the source of the general laws of nature - and argues that political theory needs to do a better job of recognizing the active participation of nonhuman forces in events. Nowadays, more than ever, climate change and its effects show that coexistence is not only a *human* issue, but it rather concerns all the entities (animate or inanimate, material or immaterial) that compose the world. Bennett suggests to abolish the traditional dualities of Modernity, such as human/animal, life/matter, organic/inorganic: oppositional pairs that establish separating lines and excluding boundaries. The surrounding world is not seen anymore as a passive background, but rather as a system of relationships, made of agents that condition each other, revealing their political role, their *agency*. Bennett - who refers to Deleuze’s assemblage as a term of choice for describing reality as a multiple object - aims to demonstrate that non-humans have an effective political *agency*. She suggests that recognizing that *agency* is distributed this way, and is not solely the province of humans, might spur the cultivation of a more responsible, ecologically sound politics and a new awareness of the new climatic, political and social urgencies. (Bennett 2010)

4. The (cosmo)political capacities of design

Laura Lieto and Robert Beauregard argue that «thinking of the social as a matter of associations and not as an entity pre-existing the process of assembling is a path-breaking ontological position that questions enduring social theories deeply embedded in design theory and practice. With similar subversive force, the idea of extending agency to entities other than humans – objects, material things, technologies, natural elements – poses new questions to all scholars and practitioners engaged with urban and architectural issues, not just to social scientists». (Lieto, Beauregard, 2015). The restrictive notion of politics therefore extends beyond its traditional boundaries, making design practices a particularly useful space to reflect on the multiplicity of entities, agencies and interweavings that constitute the political sphere.

Domínguez Rubio and Uriel Fogué, besides their analysis of design's prescriptive attitude, introduce a different way of thinking about how the project can become a political matter. Moving away from a technocratic approach, aimed at setting the rules, the *script*, and its boundaries, they use the verb *unfold*, to rather signal an *opening* (Domínguez Rubio and Fogué, 2017). This means the possibility of events occurring without having been previously predetermined by the designer, but as a result of the free interplay of multiple actors (not only human) involved in a contingent situation.

This *unfolding* ability, this letting the *otherness* in, can be defined as a *cosmopolitical* activity, i.e. a continuous negotiation, a practice of coexistence in which all the other living beings and non-living entities - to which we usually refer as *resources* - participate¹ (Stengers, 2005). It means to leave open the possibility of agency of the non-expected, surprising and unlikely *other*.

As Latour points out, speaking for Isabelle Stengers:

«For her, the strength of one element checks any dulling in the strength of the other. The presence of *cosmos* in *cosmopolitics* resists the tendency of politics to mean the give-and-take in an exclusive human club. The presence of *politics* in *cosmopolitics* resists the tendency of *cosmos* to mean a finite list of entities that must be taken into account. *Cosmos* protects against the premature closure of *politics*, and *politics* against the premature closure of *cosmos*.» (Latour, 2004)

Nature is no longer seen as unified, is not just *out there*, a simple backdrop for human activities: it has to be done, created, instigated, and *composed* (Yaneva, Zaera-Polo, 2015). The ethical role that design can take in the composition and perception of these heterogeneous assemblies is fundamental.

«cosmopolitics as a matter of design is an invitation to recognise the boundaries and extents of the design methods centred around humans, and to explore forms of de-centralisation through operations of co-designing that allow the inclusion of other, invisibilised entities.» (Tironi, 2017)

From the perspective of the Anthropocene «architecture has lost its fixity, along with its presumed modern purity». In fact it cannot be seen anymore as a self-contained, autonomous object set against the background of cities or landscapes. It is bound «to humans and non-humans, to material and immaterial entities, (...) to discursive and representational practices, to socio-economic and symbolic systems.» The shared awareness of its ontological instability and heterogeneity is «subverting concepts, unsettling binaries, questioning received notions of agency and authorship, as well as troubling the discipline's authority» (da Costa Meyer, 2016).

How can design be an effective tool in dealing with this acquired awareness?

Cosmopolitics, rather than working by means of a *totalizing prefiguration* - which adheres to the modernist determinism - proposes actions capable of producing results in terms of an *opening* of the present, by embracing the logics of openness and *prototyping*. As Martín Tironi argues, «prototyping does not impose or reconfigure, but its reason to be is to allow realities based on its successive failures and malfunctions to emerge, forcing to reconsider other paths and questions.» (Tironi, 2017) It doesn't refer to neither utopian nor heterotopic spaces, but requires an action to be performed in a contingent situation, installing «a notion of politics open to the potential, a relation with the present based on the speculative: it can make present, performatively, political worlds and possibilities that are still absent. (...) the political issues, problems and interests start to co-emerge in the process of testing.»

¹ However, a clear distinction needs to be made between *cosmopolitics* and *cosmopolitanism*. *Cosmopolitan* is a very old term which comes to us from Kant, referring to anyone who is a citizen of the cosmos. In this sense, it refers to the possible unification of all people - only humans, who have different perspectives on the world - through universal laws, while nature, the *cosmos*, is simply there, a fixed background. *Cosmopolitics* instead, refers to the politics of a *cosmos*, which includes all the many natural and material entities that make humans act. Whereas for cosmopolitans there is one unified nature, in cosmopolitics nature is multiplied, is a Multiverse. It is no longer seen as a simple backdrop for human activities: it has to be done, created, instigated, and composed. While cosmopolitanism stands for politics *in the cosmos*, cosmopolitics instead refers to the *politics of the cosmos*.

A cosmopolitical approach therefore opposes an idea of assemblage and *bricolage* to any totalizing vision.

«The ‘bricoleur’ is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with “whatever is at hand,” that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions.» (Lévi-Strauss 1962)

In contrast to a *problem solving* logic-based approach, a political understanding of design, adopting *prototyping*, also turns into a sort of *problem-making* practice, intended as way to introduce innovative ways of exploring and becoming sensitive to the contingency. By also questioning traditional disciplinary fields, it suggests a new way of looking at the social life, considering the multiple agents involved in it and unveiling *other* realities.

These perspectives clearly abandon the idea of prefiguring an *elsewhere* to *converge*, to rather promote open and situated activities of questioning and altering. According to them, future is not so much what has to be imagined or planned, but rather the *openness* emerging from an experimental and continuous alteration.

In this frame, it is worth mentioning a number of recent and not-so-recent attempts that try to activate and unfold different possibilities for political action and imagination.

Díaz Moreno and García Grinda, founders of AMID.cero9, in Madrid, let the interaction between different agents emerge in their work. In the 2002 project named *Magic Mountain* (Figure 1), in Ames (Iowa, U.S.) they transformed a massive urban power station into a piece of landscape inside the city. Challenging established instruments they proposed to deploy a local gardener’s ancestral techniques of genetic selection and covered its volumes with a membrane of roses, lights, and honeysuckle. Like a real mountain, the membrane provides a resting place for the largest species of North American butterflies on their migratory route. At the same time, an enormous variety of bird species can nest, since in recent years many of the area’s forests and wetlands have disappeared. The power station provides an alternative habitat and a living laboratory where the university can test new varieties of species adapted to this climate.



Figure 1

Lacaton & Vassal, in France, make intelligent reuse of the existing, and avoid recurring to demolition, regardless of how green the replacement building may be. Their desire is to find *what is essential in each situation* and to create a language of architecture based on an economy of means. Moving against

the anthropocentric tendency to reduce and define, they choose the option of altering and remodelling the dysfunctional buildings from the inside out, letting the needs of the users dictate the final form and look. They see their role as extending far beyond just building, creatively engaging with and also challenging traditional urban planning policy, which is too often destructive in its approach. In the social housing project in Mulhouse (Figure 2, Figure 3), in 2005, they provided any user with twice the normal area by reducing costs through a clever handling of the construction program and by using unusual and and low-cost construction methods.



Figure 2



Figure 3

La Borda Cooperative, in Barcelona, together with LaCol Arquitectura, promotes more accessible and fairer homes, with a non-speculative regime. The project (Figure 4, Figure 5), which began in 2012 and foresees the construction of 32 apartments (the “co-habiting units”) in the district of Sants is based on the following guidelines: tenant participation in the entire process, the creation of a flexible structure re-adaptable in future, the introduction of neighbourhood initiatives in order to favour community life.



Figure 4



Figure 5

In their work, the Rotterdam-based group 2012 Architecten (now Superuse studios), starting from questioning the notion of re-cycle - whose decomposition and recombination processes require enormous amounts of energy to be applied - propose the concept of *superuse*, which uses materials, components and objects in the form that they are found. In their project named *Wikado* (Figure 6), in 2007, they managed to renovate an existing playground by using discarded wind turbine parts.



Figure 6

In his *OS (OpenStructures)* project (Figure 7), the Belgian designer Thomas Lommée explores the possibility of a modular construction model where everyone designs for everyone on the basis of one shared geometrical grid. The intention is to initiate a kind of collaborative Meccano to which everybody can contribute, in order to stimulate re-use cycles of various parts and components and enable collaborative (and thus exponential) innovation within an hardware construction.

«When that product is discarded, enormous amounts of energy have to be applied to make the waste product break-down into smaller quantities. Often toxic by-products, energy and material-resource are used in the deconstruction process. The production of most products in our western, consumption-based society still run off this linear cradle to grave process.» (Lommée, 2009)

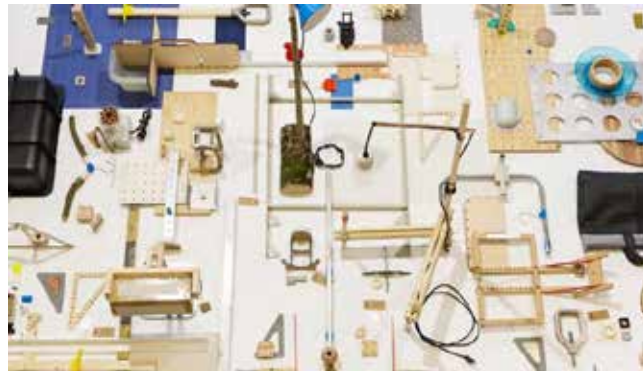


Figure 7

In 2013, Eindhoven-based designer Weilun Tseng has produced a system of open and modular electronic components, *Open E-Components* (Figure 8), that allows users to build their own electronic devices, lowering unnecessary consumption and blind buying action (i.e. planned obsolescence main effects). Each module can function independently, enabling the users to expand and adapt the electronic appliances to their personal needs.



Figure 8

5. A space for hesitation and care

The attempts listed - although differing in scale and context - share the same approach: they aim to question, interrupt, modify or subvert processes, practices and logics. They analyze certain realities in depth and highlight the agency of different material and immaterial entities. Against an unquestionable technocratic approach, they deploy and allow *slow reasoning*, *negotiation* and *re-interpretation*. Broadening the range of possibilities, they openly embrace change, and let the *otherness* in.

More than ever, the complexity and uncertainty we are dealing with at the present time compells us to slow down, deeply reflect, dig into the consensual way a situation is presented and create a *space for hesitation* (Stengers, 2005) where one can express concerns and disagreement. «We need to slow down, not to consider ourselves experts, authorized to believe we possess the meaning of what we know»

(Stengers, 2005). This requires adopting what Latour defines the *precautionary principle*, «a call for experimentation, invention, exploration, and of course risk taking» (Latour, 2006) and an attitude to *thinking with care*, (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), as a radically transformative political project that encourages intervention in what things *could be*.

«Words seen through care accentuate a sense of interdependency and involvement. What challenges are posed to critical thinking by increased acute awareness of its material consequences? What happens when thinking about and with others is understood as *living with them*? When the effects of caring, or not, are brought closer? Here, knowledge that fosters caring for neglected things enters in tension between a critical stance against neglect and the fostering of speculative commitment to think how things could be different.» (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017)

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