

- Augmented reality
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Soft approach

Eleonora Lupo

“Sensorial expressive artifacts can operate a sort of ‘time refraction’ by a single form”

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Slow Design: “cultivating” culture and sensoriality in the artifacts shape and use

This essay seeks to provide key assumptions and examples of applying a “slow approach” in the design of product functions and experiences. Some examples will provide evidence of embedding “soft qualities” and cultural/intangible elements in “culture intensive artifacts” for a real “slow” but dense and profound experience of relationships and appropriation between people and material production.

Introduction: the *slow philosophy* and its application to design and artifacts

The Slow philosophy and movement proceed from Slow Food movement. Known worldwide, Slow Food association was born in Italy in 1989, when, to instances of Carlo Petrini, delegates from 15 countries signed a document called the *Slow Food Manifesto*. In this manifesto, values are shared as a protest towards the impoverishment of life qualities caused by industrialization and its efficiency-driven production and consumerism, stigmatized as “fast life” and standardization. In opposition, the Slow Food movement proposed a way of “cultivating taste (...) by advocating historical food culture and by defending old-fashioned food traditions”. From that time, Slow Food has enlarged and diffused its activity, envisioning good, clean and fair food, defending biodiversity, protecting local and traditional production, supporting short production chains and co-production, but locating all of

these within a global system of virtuous connections, exchanges and networks. Following its development, a so-called slow philosophy was established, advocating a cultural shift towards slow qualities in other branches of human life: slow travel, slow media, slow cities, slow design. The current Slow movement is not a single association or organization, but a global community promoting a contemporary concept of slowness as a post-modern value.

The link between slow and design was originated through two different paths: on one side, slow has been considered as a paradigm towards sustainability¹ at a time in which design was questioning its role in material production, thus incorporating some of the Slow movement values; on the other side, in particular in Italy, design started to focus its attention on local production and collaborate with the food system, establishing a direct link between the Slow Food movement and the Food Design discipline².

¹ Fuad-Luke, A. “*Slow design*” – a paradigm shift in design philosophy? [online]. 2002. [Consultation: April 13, 2012]. Available at: <http://www.arts.ulst.ac.uk/artm/courses/jdmm/emotion/slow-des.pdf>

² Manzini, E.; Meroni, A. “The slow model: a strategic design approach”. *Gastronomic Sciences*, No. 1 (2007), p. 70-75.

According to Fuad-Luke, who was probably the first to use the term “slow design” in 2002, the rise of sustainability issues stimulates the design community to act as agents of change towards environmental and social responsibility in the challenge of design for sustainability. Indeed Fuad-Luke claims that mainstream design still needs to change its approach as it is too closely linked with the industry’s business model and its time constraints, while it should be more focused on well-being and human needs, beyond the acceleration of the manufacture of things for the marketplace. He proposes the slow design paradigm as a “balance between socio-cultural and individual needs and the well-being of the environment” (...) “celebrating the de-commodification of time”. Slow design is about well-being, is sustainable, durable, pluralistic and non technocentric. In this early work, Fuad-Luke provides examples of various products but, in fact, slow design can be applied to the design of services, experiences and processes too, as a step toward the dematerialisation required for long-term sustainability.

Later on, together with Carolyn Strauss, in slow-Lab 6, he posited guiding principles of slow design that, in fact, refer more to the immaterial dimensions of design, and move beyond the materialized object and focus on locality, community and local potential³:

1. **Reveal:** Slow design reveals experiences in everyday life that are often missed or forgotten, including the materials and processes that can be easily overlooked in an artifact’s existence or creation.
2. **Expand:** Slow design considers the real and potential “expressions” of artifacts and environments beyond their perceived functionalities, physical attributes and lifespans.

3. **Reflect:** Slow Design artifacts/environments/experiences induce contemplation and what slow-Lab has coined ‘reflective consumption.’
4. **Engage:** Slow Design processes are open-source and collaborative, relying on sharing, cooperation and transparency of information so that designs may continue to evolve into the future.
5. **Participate:** Slow Design encourages users to become active participants in the design process, embracing ideas of conviviality and exchange to foster social accountability and enhance communities.
6. **Evolve:** Slow Design recognizes that richer experiences can emerge from the dynamic maturation of artifacts, environments and systems over time. Looking beyond the needs and circumstances of the present day, slow designs are (behavioural) change agents.

“A strategic slow approach has to deal with the ‘intangibles’ or the ‘soft qualities’ of things”

For Ezio Manzini⁴, “the slow approach outlines a model of production and alternative consumption which is both subversive and feasible, a model which confronts head on the ideas and practices of today’s globalization. Nevertheless it can be immediately realized on a local level and, as Slow Food has proven, with success”. In a context where “the issues with which design is concerned are changing” and a “new design (often not recognized as a design activity and not practiced by designers) is emerging on well-being and way it can be attained”, the encounter with the Slow Food movement generated an attention on Food Design not focused on the spectacularization of experience but on facilitating distributed food economies based on creative communities’ tacit design. According to Manzini the qualities of a slow approach are an attention to localization (always more “connected” to the global

and a distinctive quality of human and sensory experience that involves cognition, emotion and motivation. This is a different shade of sustainability that is inclined towards culture, intertwining ethics with aesthetics⁵.

A proposed path from slow to soft qualities: cultivating cultural and sensorial density and intensity

From these premises, we would like to isolate three elements to propose our personal understanding of how slow design can be further developed and applied in the field of product-service-system design.

1. **holism**, represented by the systemic attitude of slowness, can be intended as the multiplicity of meanings and experiences that artifacts should convey through their sensorial qualities;
2. **durability**, encouraged by environmental sustainability of slowness, can be intended as attention to the “temporality” of artifacts and their use and experience, the way they should incorporate time into their shape and appreciation;
3. **distinctiveness**, related to local and territorial resources promoted by slowness, can be specified in the peculiarity of incorporating heritage elements into the design of artifacts.

These aspects lead to focusing on the design of the intangible qualities of artifacts, or “soft” qualities, in opposition to the “hard”, tangible qualities of objects and products, thus connotating the concept of slowness with an idea of intensity and depth of experience thanks to this new “density” of the artifacts. Within this vision, time is intended both

physically (experience and appreciation time) and conceptually (connections and nets of meaning) and the metaphor of “cultivation” results in an appropriate translation of slowness into this immaterial dimension of experience and connections.

This idea is not fully new: as Flusser pointed out in 2003⁶, the form is a kind of ideal non-consumable model; the shape of objects is the opposite of the matter. Flaviano Celaschi, in 2008, proposed a model focusing on the design phenomenon as a balanced system of form, function, value and meaning⁷. In other words, intangible aspects too (value, meaning) “inform” the shape of artifacts. Giulio Ceppi considers sensorial qualities to be the quality of the experience derived from the enjoyment and consumption of products and he bases this on the storytelling capacity of objects: from processes to brand values, from experience design to strategic design⁸.

Within this bigger frame, anyway, our point is definitively that a strategic slow approach has to deal with the “intangibles” or the “soft qualities” of things:

- incorporating cultural elements;
- embedding sensorial qualities.

Incorporating cultural elements responds to the need to value the recognizability and typicality of things, thus also rediscovering the value of tradition and the past. This implies design’s ability to add to the value of the cultural asset as an open-ended knowledge system⁹; it is possible, via an hermeneutic and interpretative design process, to identify and clearly isolate and define a system of recognizable and constant elements of a cultural patrimony, in terms of “authentic qualities” of forms and pro-

3 Strauss, C.F.; Fuad-Luke, A. “The slow design principles: a new interrogative and reflexive tool for design research and practice” [online]. In: *Changing the Change*, conference, Turin 2008. [Consultation: February 29, 2012]. Available at: http://www.slowlab.net/CtC_SlowDesignPrinciples.pdf

4 Manzini E., Meroni A. *Op. cit.*

5 Lupo, E.; Campagnaro, C. “Formare comunità, in-formare territori. Designing connected places: fare scuola di design per il territorio”. *Tafter journal: esperienze e strumenti per la cultura e per il territorio* [online]. Rome, No. 15, 2009. [Consultation: April 13, 2012]. Available at: <http://www.tafterjournal.it/2009/07/15/formare-comunita-in-formare-territori-designing-connected-places-fare-scuola-di-design-per-il-territorio/>

6 Flusser, V. *Filosofia del design*. Milan: Mondadori, 2003.

7 Celaschi, F. “Design mediatore di saperi”. In: C. Germak (ed.). *Uomo al centro del progetto: design per un nuovo umanesimo*. Turin: Umberto Allemandi & Co., 2008, p. 40-52.

8 Ceppi, G. *Design storytelling*. Milan: Lupetti, 2011.

9 Lupo, E.; Giunta E.; Trocchianesi R. “Design research and cultural heritage: activating the value of cultural assets as open-ended knowledge system”. *Design principles and practices journal*, vol. 5, No. 6 (2011), p. 431-450.

cesses, codified in cultural archetypes, that can be used as a repertory of creative sources to design innovative artifacts and practices, essentially through activation strategies for the cultural asset: re-contextualization, modernization, authentication. In this sense, the cultural elements are a source from which to gain inspiration for design purposes but, above all, experience and appreciation by users of “culturally intensive artifacts”. These minimal cultural units, which are usable as design features, are related both in forms and processes: formal, visual and material features, but also processual features, such as history, memories, knowledge, production techniques, etc., can be incorporated and actualized as extra meaning and pleasure in the function and use of contemporary objects. Two results are, therefore, obtained: innovating traditions and enriching products. Innovation can happen within the re-contextualization of the cultural asset (alternatively its formal or processual aspects) within a new productive sector or ambit (for instance, transforming folk products into contemporary tableware, see example 1, or tableware to fashion accessories, see example 2) or within a geo-cultural context¹⁰ (for instance delocalizing a site-specific heritage and communicating it through global products, see example 3).

Another possible outcome of this approach of culturally enhancing products is a high sensibility towards craft techniques and aesthetics (see example 4), that, sometimes, entails proposing and valuing the quality of imperfection in the product design, as a distinctive aesthetic feature, and the visibility of the creation process, as a technical trait, when products show traces of how they were made and by whom (personality, interests, background, individual memories). These connections help the

user’s experience and interaction with the object go beyond functionality and problem-solving, and extend the understanding and awareness of material culture production through a tacit and unconscious cultural learning of its stratification and depth. We could assume that these “culture intensive products” are a concentration of items in one single form, asking for a paced appreciation.

“These ‘culture intensive products’ are a concentration of items in one single form, asking for a paced appreciation”

On the otherhand, embedding sensorial qualities means opening up the relationship with things as a multifaceted physical and emotional experience. “A product is not simply a form with a single function but a collection of considered messages and stories” that engages the user’s attention or response. Through their sensorial qualities, products can start conversations with their users that transcend functionality. According to Kenia Hara¹¹, we are in front of “not products, but a mechanism to provide stimulus”, no matter whether they remain at the level of potentiality and possibility; they are an opportunity to grasp something that was previously unknown or unexplored. Therefore, these products can distance themselves from market and business rules and their timing and efficiency, in a drive towards innovative serendipity, often through the use of new materials, and user participation and interpretation of their potentialities.

In fact “sensorial expressive artifacts” embrace a relationship with people in the tactile and visual dimensions, but, above all, these expressive objects need an interaction to be performed in time to reveal and exteriorize their qualities. Here, too, this multilayered experience requires a different articulation and multiplication of time: sensorial expres-



▲ Formafantasma. *Baked*, 2009

sive artifacts can operate a sort of “time refraction” by a single form.

The two strategic lines can be used separately or combined together. Some examples are provided in the following paragraphs.

Incorporating cultural elements in the artifacts

In this paragraph we’ll briefly illustrate some possibilities for incorporating cultural elements into the design of new objects: they range from using and modernizing archetypal visual codes, patterns, materials and processes, to contemporary interpretation of craft practices, and were created by both famous and young designers.

1. *Baked* is a project by Formafantasma, an Italian designer duo based in Eindhoven, whose interest is the reevaluation of disappearing craft techniques. This project translates immaterial elements linked to a local and traditional ritual event into suggestions for new material artifacts in terms of both form and process. The designers took inspiration from a Sicilian folk event in Salemi, where a flour-

based material is used to create architectural decoration, maintaining the same traditional process for baking simple ingredients into the basic shapes of containers and vessels. The designers saved the process and technique of production, innovating the shape and function of objects from decoration to tableware, from folk events to daily life. Cultural references can be found in the linguistic and expressive codes of textures, colors and surfaces, in spite of a great formal discontinuity of the new product system (from devotional to functional) developed with a non-literal and yet sophisticated interpretation.

2. A kind of stone, “*pietra ollare*”, traditionally used in northern Italy to make multi-purpose vases called *lavec*, that have sedimented their essential shape into a sort of invisible and anonymous design, has been the object of a renewal and re-application process in a local craft workshop (first directed by Antonio Corrado and then by Goffredo Minocchi, then operated by Ginevra Mattioli and Floriana Palmieri). Here the designers wanted to maintain the material and its production process, innovating its area of application from tableware to fashion accessories.

10 Lupo, E. “Beyond craft culture: designing a new contemporary authentic”. In: *Design&Craft. Proceedings of the 7th Conference of the International Committee for Design History and Design Studies* [online]. Brussels, September 2010. [Consultation: October 10, 2012]. Available at: http://designview.files.wordpress.com/2010/06/paperdesigncraft_lupo.pdf

11 Hara, K. *Senseware*. Holon, Israel : Design Museum Holon, 2010.

3. *Opera gloves-extraordinary craft* is a concept by Giorgio Affinito, developed in a workshop within the context of the “Inspired by Beijing Opera” research project¹². The research project was aimed at raising funds for the Ada Ceschin Pilone Foundation (Zurich), a collection of costumes and props from the traditional Beijing Opera. The patrimony has been analyzed and reduced to minimal cultural units and archetypes, repurposed in inspirational visions to be redesigned within a design workshop. Affinito, moving away from a scenario defined as



▲ Floriana Palmieri. Tableware in “pietra ollare”, 2006
 ► Floriana Palmieri. High fashion accessories in “pietra ollare” for the fashion brand Acquistapace, 2006

“hyper-characterized” and derived from the fact that in the Beijing Opera each element is unambiguously meaningful, employing conventions (i.e. the characterization of the protagonists who personify extreme roles, values and universal sentiments with a precisely executed make-up and use of distinctive colors and accessories), decided to transfer this enabling capacity to contemporary accessories, like gloves, that in fact help users to play the four main characters of Chinese opera.



4. Hella Jongerius’s work is an example of valuing tradition and context traces in new design. Almost all her designs are characterized by a reinterpretation of existing forms and patterns to satisfy a desire for greater meaning and depth. Like other Dutch designers, she pays attention to detail and forgotten handicraft techniques, being free of the negative connotations of regression or nostalgia. In fact, craft techniques and motifs have been incorporated into new “discourses” (media, production processes,



▲ Giorgio Affinito. *Opera Gloves*, 2010

distribution channels and social contexts), not literally, but by reinterpreting more subtle elements that are not immediately recognizable, yet are genuine, original and distinctive. With her personal attitude and contribution she updates tradition in a typically contemporary Dutch conceptual way of thinking. Rebellious against the perfectionist culture of the industry, she deliberately introduced irregularities into a porcelain dinner set produced by Royal Tichelaar Makkum, giving an industrial product a handmade, crafts flavor. Using medieval shards donated by the Boijmans Van Beuningen museum she created vases and pots by gluing the shards with

epoxy. She designed vases for large-scale production by hand in China for Ikea PS, and developed a project to support Indian women to start their own sewing business by contributing their craftwork (the traces of which are visible in the final product together with their embroidered names) to the creation of embroidered wall hanging panels for the global market.

Many designers and companies are sensitive to this attempt to incorporate cultural (material or immaterial) features and reinterpret them: Patricia Urquiola, Marcel Wanders, Heloisa Crocco, Moroso, and Ekobo¹³, among others.



◀ JongeriusLab. Vases for IKEA, 2005
 ▼ JongeriusLab. *7 Pots / 3 Centuries / 2 Materials*, 1997
 ▼ JongeriusLab. *B-set*, 1997



¹² Project founded in 2010. Scientific coordination Eleonora Lupo. Research group: Elena Giunta, Raffaella Trocchianesi. Available at: <http://designview.wordpress.com/2011/01/26/inspired-by-beijing-opera-final-delivery/>

¹³ This cases study review has been conducted by Nariné Tchilinguirian, for her MA degree Thesis at Politecnico Milano in 2011. Thesis supervisor: Eleonora Lupo

Embedding sensorial qualities in the objects

This paragraph presents examples that focus on sensorial qualities, and, more precisely: visual dimension, tactile dimension, time dimension and user involvement. In this approach, too, we include projects completed by both famous and young designers.



these products stimulate senses and feelings, visual and tactile. Ross Lovegrove created an ultra-light-weight backpack made of a triaxial woven fabric, applying the potentialities of fiber in the creation of an unconventional three-dimensional shape, called *Seed of Love*. It is proposed in white to communicate the intimacy and seduction of a bride's wedding dress. Nendo, a product design studio, designed a



▲ Nendo. Blown-fabric for Tokio Fiber Senseware, 2009
◀ Ross Lovegrove. *Seed of Love* for Tokio Fiber Senseware 2009

5. Kenia Hara, Japanese designer and director of Muji since 2001, promoted the *Tokyo Fiber Senseware* project in 2009, to experiment with new applications for new materials, and, in particular, new artificial fibers. He used the term “senseware” to define “the matter that stirs the human creative instinct and awaken the desire to make things” citing the example of the qualities of a stone suggesting uses to humans. He selected seven Japanese fiber manufacturers and seven creative people from different backgrounds (design, architecture, media, art, fashion, etc.) making them collaborate to create new products or applications using artificial fibers. All

set of moldable, nonwoven lampshades blown-up like balloons in hot water. Due to the non-industrial production method, each product has a different form which takes inspiration from the traditional paper lantern. The wrinkles and folds in the neck tell the story of the manufacturing process.

6. “In Residence” is a design workshop promoted by Barbara Brondi and Marco Rainò to explore contemporary design within the framework of the World Design Capital event held in Torino in 2008. The topic of “nature through artifice” was assigned to 5 designers with the idea of codifying the relationship between the natural and artificial, whether inspirational or conflicting. The results led to challenging the “nature” of objects even in their sensorial and aesthetic appearance. The designers created

“natural unnaturalness” able to transfer new meanings, emotions and expressivity extrapolated from nature into the inanimate materiality of the object. Pieke Bergmans, a designer from the Netherlands, altered existing production processes to create new shapes and controlled imperfections: deformed lamps (“Light blubs”), bottles (“Crystal virus”) and vases (“Unlimited Edition”). Studio Glithero worked on time and transformation to capture the beauty of the moment that things are made and incorporate it expressively into the object; their blue-printing process, applied to vases and tiles, causes surfaces covered with light-reacting chemicals and exposed to UV lamps to undergo an intense color transformation from white to Prussian blue. They used botanical specimens to leave white floral-design silhouettes on the blue background.

7. Many designers¹⁴ consider user involvement over time as being important to unveil the sensorial and experiential nature of things. Kristine Bjaadal, a Norwegian designer, assigns the power to express hidden qualities to use and consumption: *Underfull* (a table cloth) has a hidden pattern that becomes visible only when wet or stained by wine, and *Underskog* (an upholstery fabric) has a hidden pattern which is slowly revealed as the fabric is worn. Both her projects work on changing product appearance over time, linking it with personal memories. Bethan Laura Wood's *Stain* tea cups change the assumption that use damages a product; the more the cup is used the more the pattern is revealed, thanks to a surface that is treated so as to retain the tea stain patina more in predetermined places, thus expressing personal tea drinking habits. Oscar Diaz's *Ink Calendar* is a surface calendar that enhances the perception of time pass-

▼ Studio Glithero. *Blueware*, 2010. Photo: Petr Krejci'



▼ Pieke Bergmans. *Crystal virus*, 2005



◀ Pieke Bergmans. *Light blubs*, 2009

¹⁴ This other cases study review has also been conducted by Nariné Tchilinguirian, for her MA degree Thesis at Politecnico Milano in 2011. Thesis supervisor: Eleonora Lupo



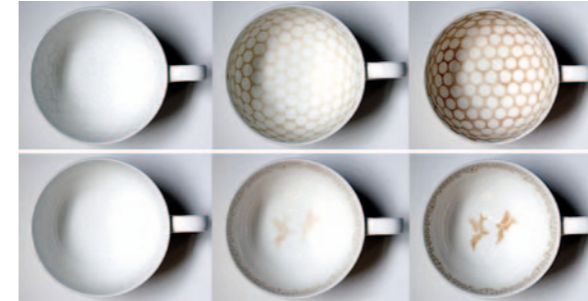
▲ Kristine Bjaadal. *Underfull*, 2009
 ► Kristine Bjaadal. *Underskog*, 2009

ing and rather than simply signaling it: it makes use of the ink spreading on the paper to indicate time. The ink is absorbed slowly, and the numbers in the calendar are “printed” daily. One per day, they are filled with ink until the end of the month.

This cultural and sensorial attitude can be stimulated and developed by designers thanks to the contributions of the humanities and social sciences to the understanding of the sense of things (and their re-design): cultural and stylistic elements need to be historically studied, contextual elements need to be geographically localized and anthropologically understood... to be innovatively used and transformed in something that is authentic but contemporary. All disciplines, such as history, sociology, anthropology, semiotics and their application in what we call “humanities centered design”¹⁵, are crucial for incorporating cultural elements and embedding sensorial qualities in the design of “intense” artifacts. Only a “soft approach” can transform the potentiality of the new manufacturing processes into an object poetry and spirituality that balance ethics with aesthetics.



▼ Óscar Diaz. *Ink Calendar*, 2007



▲ Bethan Laura Wood. *Stain*, 2006

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15 See: <http://www.humanitiesdesign.org/wordpress>