

I NTRODUCTION

The sixties produced a change in design and its culture; a change which embraced theoretical approaches, professional practices and ideological justifications.

Starting from this change, which we can consider to have been a genuine break, we entered what can be considered to be a new phase. The social and cultural panorama was different and so was design. Call it a post-modern phase or whatever we wish, what is certain is that professional attitudes, norms and routines together with social utopias were abandoned.

In the strict field of architecture and design there was a real revolt against the supposed rigidity of the international style of «good form» and in particular against those functional conditioners which remained as symbols of a past ethic, of a formal «Ancien Régime».

The moment the break occurred, the demand for liberty in style became an absolute desire. Designers denounced the lack of conditioners proper to the artist in the age of modern culture.

Now, some years later, when the most forceful moment of the break is in the past but when many positions that were taken up against the modern movement have been consolidated, this is the time to reflect on these themes with a certain serenity.

To this end we have asked a team of design theoreticians to consider four questions formed around the conditioners which loom over the determiners of form and thus over the degree of liberty accorded to professionals of design.

Here we have their replies, in their own original language, together with some reflections made by the Grup Ocata.

When we look at all these replies we see that design has always been considered as lying within certain conditioners that define its limits, limits which at the same time are its «raison d'être», since they respond to needs defined as physiological or even those of a cultural type. Throughout the whole of its history design has swung from one of these extremes to the other.

Furthermore, we cannot forget the technological and economic conditioners which have always been present in the design process; that is to say, all design has to fit in with a production system that has at its disposal certain technologies which are subordinate to a determined economic framework.

These limitations determine the languages within which design moves, and the fact that it tends more towards formal aspects or functional aspects will depend on the pressures of a cultural nature to which it is subject.

Within the range of cultural conditioners, it is necessary, according to Woodham, to take into consideration the weight which, in some specific period, can be imposed by predominantly ideological and political factors.

The emphasis the author places on cultural conditioners in design is tempered for Owen when he considers that the

limitations of technological factors are those which give an ideological justification to the forms derived from the method of production.

On the other hand, G. Bersano affirms that the more the object leans towards hyperconsumption—and here the author is referring to the consumption that is proper to a society of opulence—the fewer functional limitations it will have.

Rationalism proposes to utilize in the most logical fashion possible all the requirements and conditioners which surround a design process. To the same extent that the designer used rationalist procedures, so he found the design process facilitated—according to J. Capella. But, in fact, rationalism, in giving rational elements preference over emotional elements, gave rise to design solutions more proper to utilitarian than to cultural functions.

Moreover, functionalism introduces a formal explicitness derived directly from utilitarian functions to the extent that the functional solutions are converted into models for any design practice; functionalism has become like a style.

We agree with J. M. Montaner when he states that rationalism, in giving priority to rational questions, is not necessarily antitraditional, despite the fact that in a past age rationalism stood in contrast to the historical referent. What is really antitraditional is functionalism, since, by basing itself on functions to determine form, it finds itself obliged to change the form to the extent that the function itself changes historically.

Functionalism together with rationalism guided by the principles of modernity produce the international style—Owen accepts—while the forms of post-modernity produce the style of caprice.

Now, although the conditioners are stronger and more forceful—says Deforge—the conditioners should not determine the work of the designer and in this way design will remain an artistic activity. Nevertheless, we wonder if it is possible in design to create uncodified forms which can still be understood by the majority of the population.

Another position (Buchanan, Ricard and Satué) consists in channelling the expressive possibilities by starting out from conditioners which, as A. Pansera indicates, can be neutralized by individual poetics.

As we can see, expressive possibilities do not remain limited by rationalism or functionalism. The defenders of these positions (Buchanan, Ricard, Satué, Capella, Larrea) consider that functionalism and rationalism (as consolidated methodological spaces) permit confrontation with the dominant commercial applications of the period and with the contingent condition imposed by fashion and the ephemeral.

The defence of the conditioners as necessary elements for design is answered by A. Mendini, who considers that the conditioners have been catastrophic for design and that, once free of them, the imaginative project liberates unforeseen energy.

We have emphasized the market conditioner as something fundamental. On the contrary, G. Bersano attributes a critical dimension to the forms of today. From this viewpoint, the symbolical forms would represent a rebellion against tradition.

On the other hand, E. Satué considers that expressive liberty in the design process does not form a criticism of tradition but rather expresses the lack of a model. In these conditions, good design, lacking the support of models, remains

free for the talent of the designer. In opposition to the former attitudes, Quim Larrea and Juli Capella perceive present-day design and its conditioners in a highly critical manner and consider that in these moments in the field of determination of form there is a lack of ethical and philosophical criteria and it is consequently dominated by «hyperaesthetic superficiality».

In recent decades the socio-cultural situation has evidently changed but not in the whole range of design. There are products which are not subject to mass consumption (buses, surgical material, etc.) because they continue to be functional in their most important aspects. On the other hand, others which are directed towards a vast consumer public have their form determined by persuasive strategies.

Leaving aside that design which lies outside the more generalized consumer fields, we could say that form is dominated by the ephemeral, by fashion and by market demands. Thus, in this type of design the conditioners are apparently fewer, since any form can be used acritically, although in reality all objects are dominated by their condition of merchandise. There is no aesthetic style, strictly speaking, only marketing strategies.

According to Y. Deforge, and in some measure Enric Satué too, conditioners are inevitable but the designer must strive to be free and to make good use of that freedom.

For his part, A. Ricard argues that one cannot generalize. We must distinguish between a «ludic» design which has no conditioners and a «rigorous» design which has many conditioners and moreover competes with many objects that fulfil the same function so that the designer feels obliged to innovate in order to stand out from the mass and to contribute interesting solutions.

Present-day conditioners, according to Dovey, do not arise from function but from characteristics of seriousness: there are imperatives such as the accumulation of capital, of habitability, etc. As Woodham says too, they are conditioners which arise from the consumer society, proper to the stage of economic expansion of the eighties but now changing with the present situation of the nineties recession.

A. Mendini situates design on the fringe of the problem that binds conditioners to forms. He situates design, in a radical way, in the field of art and considers that the artist-designer enjoys absolute creative freedom. Would the aim of these radical affirmations be to provoke?

At the other extreme to the former expressions, Buchanan reaffirms the need for the designer to serve the public and to do so with the same care and rigour as an engineer would. In a similar vein to that of Buchanan we find the statements of J. Capella and Q. Larrea.

For Owen, postmodernism does not solve the problems facing design as it is centred almost exclusively on the formal aspects without taking into account the functional aspects.

Even supposing that style limits possibilities of expression and supposing that rationalist and functional styles represent a limitation of forms when it comes to designing spaces, objects and images (something which some of our correspondents deny), it must be admitted that the present situation offers a far wider range of expressive possibilities than before.

This is what Bersano and Montaner, among others, affirm. Some lay emphasis on the limitations which arise

from the present-day consumer economy (Buchanan, Dovey). Juli Capella and Q. Larrea draw a distinction, which they consider significant, between expressive possibilities and freedom of the designer. It is true that the designer, free from any one dominant style, can choose various formal proposals originating from different historical styles and in this sense he has great expressive possibilities. Never, however, has his task been so determined, as it is today, by the needs of marketing and sales. And this limits his liberty.

On the other hand, Mendini insists on his extreme position: the designer, he says, has to work independent of any discipline but, we ask ourselves, also independent of the discipline imposed by the market?

The very nature of design means that there cannot be design without conditioners. Some, like Dovey and Buchanan, add that, even supposing it were possible, it would still not be desirable. The conditioners are –as J. Capella and Q. Larrea affirm– fundamental, not only because they create norms in the design process which, used as starting point, make expression possible but also because they drive the designer to transgress them.