

The king's wall

Nature is the ensemble of the story of its forms.

(Anonymous)

One day, a king decided to be the richest man on Earth. But his interest was not in material things. He was attracted by signs and words. He wanted to be the most intense man and to penetrate into regions of being where no-one before or after him had ever adventured.

He began to learn every word written or spoken in his realm. He sent messengers to explore far-away lands, to learn new expressions and vowels. He spent his days reading, and no other occupation seemed to please him or distract him.

Very soon, words began to insinuate themselves into him. They filled his dreams, woke him at midnight, prevented him from looking at others without being transported to far-away imaginary places. As his knowledge grew, so did his solitude. Memories, troubles, emotions, all were buried under a thick cover of words; they entered the living and deep strata of a savage nature which was no longer capable of awaking or remembering.

The king found himself more and more alone and blind. He had built around himself a wall as thick as the history of the world.

The evolution of civilization is, for many reasons, like the adventure of this king. For a long time we have believed that advances in material well-being were enough for an automatic development of anthropologic progress and the growth of human happiness. Production of goods and production of happiness seemed to be in direct proportion. Doubt or question about the validity of such a model seemed the effect of ideological nostalgia, the result of an inability to surrender to the birth of the new.

When the First Universal Exposition took place in Paris, it was evident that some disquiet had troubled the sensibility of artists. There were those who (like Mallarmé, who set down his worry in a series of articles written under the effects of the shock of his visit) saw in the epiphany of goods the possibility of the production in the esthetic line of the menace of alienation that Marx had spoken of in the economic field; the risk of a subverting of values, of the opening of an era in

which the golden calf would be worshipped instead of the true God, and in which the production of goods would prevail over humanity's needs for development.

The most wide-spread belief was, however, that as long as technical progress advanced, somehow or other things would settle down by themselves. It seemed as if within the market systems themselves there were inherent principles of self-adjustment that would allow for an improvement and perfection of society without the need for pre-established ends or types of external planning.

A large part of the epistemology that has sustained the modern culture of design has settled into a similar imagery, analogous for several reasons to the myths that inspired the old «conquistadors». Thus, the future was seen as a territory to be conquered, an Eldorado which would never cease to offer its gifts. In the search for the new and for improvement, goals could be disposed with. All esthetic, cultural, technologic, exploration was a «wandering» in search of protection from the risk of gratuity and dispersion which still spoiled the happiness of Homeric journeys. Everything seemed to presage that the isles of meaning that, in its search, humanity had touched on, sooner or later would come together into a unified cartography, giving birth to a homogenous territory, rich in resources and possibilities.

The fact that, in their explorations, the pioneers of science and of design quite casually found themselves in fields of bio-ethics or of virtuality, or that the new dimensions of artificiality progressively fled from an anthropologic domain, was not enough to cause great worries. Natural evolution itself seemed to confirm the validity of a project without *telos*, the fitness of a method made up of impulse and internal urges, more than by a goal to achieve.

On the other hand, no reaffirmations in the historical field were missing. The fall of the Berlin Wall seemed to definitively reinforce the impossibility of creating a planifiable society, to the point that all activity planning external goals, from which to orient immanent choices, is an illusion.

Within this culture of progressive homeostasis, a kind of conceptual tautology has affirmed itself, according to which the world being created is the only one possible, and also the best of all possible worlds.

Today, this confidence has been shattered. Dreams have disappeared from images, design has turned into a divided activity, people have lost the artistic capacity

for expressing themselves. An excess of esthetic perfection tries to fill the growing impotence of products which ought to communicate and penetrate under the surface of images to the flesh of emotions and the every-day life of people.

Objective growth has turned out to be abstract growth, a grey sizzling that leaves no space for any significant difference. The signs we produce with great effort and consume with the hope of living our existential condition more intensely are constantly reabsorbed in a cannibalistic spectacle that grinds and dissolves it all. The world of estheticized merchandise which at first had surprised us with its beauty and its results, now no longer seems capable of offering us new emotions.

We have not realized it, but having developed the dimensions of consumption from a simple mode of enjoyment toward a more and more complex instrument of projection and adherence to life-styles and values elaborated by others, has made productive reality slide toward a state of product pornography which, like that of man, demands progressively more exaggerated spectacles, a greater identification of the actors in direct proportion to people's inability to live their own Eros unashamedly. A kind of reflex participation has been developed that requires a continued state of alteration of objects, a communicative over-excitement directly proportional to the apathy of the subjects to which products are destined.

Like the King of the story, in our case it also seems that the results of the efforts we have expended up to now have given us a growth of solitude, stress for security, superficiality, and emotional anaesthesia. In spite of the obstination to create «free time», to develop new opportunities, or to build more meaningful spaces, there is no longer time or place for authentic pain or joy.

A deep feeling of exhaustion has insinuated itself into our society. New, more vital energy is needed to reinvigorate the projective alchemy linked to an esthetics of consumption which is no longer sufficient. Besides ways of production linked to the market, there remain to be discovered those of an ecology of the artificial, an ecology of the natural world, and, finally, (possibly) an ecology of the soul.

Utopia

The impulse of these phenomena makes us believe less and less in the possibility that endogenous dynamics of development can autonomously give themselves forms of correction. Once again, external regulation, or rather a level of design not exclusively directed to partial solutions is called for, one which can elaborate growth-oriented strategies: where to converge, why, with what scale of values and price selection.

The need for great scenarios of reference is characteristic not only of this era. In all periods of time, scientific avant-gardes have not limited themselves to passively attend on the changes that technical progress tends to produce, but rather, empathically anticipating much wider collective tendencies, have focused on projects and visions toward which they must orientate the evolution of society.

With the development of the consumer culture it seemed, however, that models could be renounced, or rather, that at least there could be as many models as there were individual consumers. Model and individual coincided. The exercise of Utopia has been so dispossessed of its projective legitimacy that it has become a fiction that marks the limits to contemporary society (*Metropolis*, *Blade Runner*, *New York 2080*) rather than a tool for prefiguring external goals from which immanent selections may be reconsidered or a project form where design and quality, and the images of a willed reality, could be designed.

What is characteristic of the current phase is that this need for fabricating utopic scenarios is not only a creative mode typical of some avant-gardes, but also a condition of development set forth by the very form that many problems of an industrial nature are taking on. They are needed because of the emotional saturation which the consumer model seems to have attained, the general conviction that the ecologic matter cannot be solved by partial adjustments, and the evident zeal of the current productive system for giving answers to the needs of an exponentially growing humanity.

The task of design is that of contributing to individuate new Utopias, to design isles of meaning towards which we must steer to build a new world.

The new ethics demands a new esthetics

To question not only the how, but also the what, the why, and for whom the artificial is produced means colouring the reflection on the destiny and direction of our development with a strong ethic tint. It is no longer by means of a simple estheticization of merchandise that design can expect to make a contribution to the solution of all the problems that arise.

The features of the development of modern civilization have been characterized till now by three elements:

- The priority of consumption as a mode of acquiring and developing social and individual happiness.
- The centralization of the company as a social institution which provokes evolutions in society by its transformations.
- The city as a homogenous place of consumption from which industrial activity is expelled.

Merchandise has been the base of all this process. From its production and consumption logic, relationships between persons, between persons and things, and between persons and spaces have arisen. In the culture of goods, it is precisely only the dimension of consumption that has been experienced as a part of the creative project. The production mode has been reduced to the category of an instrument which does not participate in the elaboration of scenarios of happiness. The effects of this opposition have been the radicalization of the three processes:

- The way of consuming has more and more often extricated itself from the anthropologic network of work, home, and life relationships.
- The manner of production has become the object of union and organization matters, without becoming an esthetics of the every-day.
- The urban form has taken on a substantially monologic dimension, albeit disguised under a superfluous kaleidoscopic image.

All this is currently changing. The classic manner of consumption of the product and the status of merchandise is becoming marginal; the company is no longer central, as new economic and productive systems are reaffirming themselves in society; time and space linked to work and consumption are less sepa-

rate every day, and less differentiated among themselves.

A new esthetics becomes necessary, but it must sink its roots in a profound ethic reflection. Its possibilities of success are actually proportional to the capacity of design to assume, once again, a mission and a political responsibility. With the multiplication of consumption, it seemed as if there were no longer any sense in taking a stance where all contrapositions were only simple questions of «style» which sooner or later would regroup to form a new variety of modernity. In this cultural climate, the practice of design has progressively regrouped into an exercise of individual expression, searching for esthetic places in the market spaces.

In this way we have lost what Agnes Heller called the development of «indetermination», that capacity of contributing to an evolutionary leap in anthropologic and spiritual growth of the human species which has always characterized great artistic movements.

Today, new directions must be sought for the themes of differentiation, personalization, and eclectic experimentation which dominated esthetic development in the eighties. The new evolutionary horizon consists of a widening of the dimensions of universality, ethics, and semantic density. This is the moment for those sensitive spirits who wish to recover the complexity of existential values that the dynamics of consumption have led to under-develop to feel the weight of hunger and poverty with the same intensity as they were captivated by the seduction of an elitist esthetics.

Cahier de doleance

We have tried to individualize new territories where we would like the productive system and design to walk hand in hand. It is still only a list of hopes and reproaches, a *cahier de doleance* where we would like to see the culture of design involved.

It is an open list, and we invite everyone to write it.

Production for all inhabitants of Earth

It is necessary to think more of Earth than of the market. New ecumenic products are not required to carry out a hypothetical brotherhood of merchandising and consumption. This, in any case, has been an ideal of the first, heroic, era of industry and design. What is

now required of them is the possibility of their DNA having an in-written capacity for giving feasible answers (in technical, economic, and environmental terms) to the material and spiritual requirements of the different markets on Earth, be they of the First or the Fourth World.

For this reason, productive and design logic is experimented with, alternatives to what is current, capable of giving rise to products only proposable in limited contexts, inaccessible to the greater part of humanity.

New spaces in a dense world

The condition of metropolis is as unsatisfactory in the First as in the Fourth World. The evolutionary model of the city continues to pursue internally the narrative myth of the domestic «enclave» produced in the 19th century, a monologic cellular multiplication of multi-functional containers. Today, this system is coming apart because of its incapacity to eliminate friction between cultures, fragmentation of individual experience, and saturation of work and consumption time.

New visions are needed, in which the current clonic organization of urban modules may be substituted by other forms of cellular growth. New concepts of space and coexistence made possible thanks to technical evolution (of communication, transport, and electronic handling), ideal for the growing variety of economic and cultural networks.

A new formal dignity

Design has become a *lettering* of products, a production of *lettre ornée*. There is no longer a mystic writing of acts, the sacred feeling that derives from the consciousness of having put into motion forces and processes whose effects cannot be calculated. A consoling feeling of gratuity has taken the place of disquiet which always accompanies a project when it is an authentic risk and a confrontation to the challenges of reality.

Faced with the typographical pollution produced, design now has the obligation of introducing harmonious forms, of creating a graphic order of artificiality which will resituate products in a cosmologic dimension of beauty.

The formal alchemy for obtaining new configura-

tions or an ultimate «look» for a product should be replaced by research into languages which trace lines and secret relations between things. Identifying universal codes capable of giving an infrastructure to esthetic productions is surely the most important task that design must face, if we are to trust in a renaissance of the object.

From an industry of consumption to one of the spirit

It is high time too, for industry to take an evolutionary leap and take up a role more in keeping with its possibilities. Even though lately we have often attended processes that go in the opposite direction (with the transformation of the traits of «producers» into those of «manufacturers»), there is no reason to believe that they will have a more deeply cultural use.

Till now, activities for spiritual growth (education, communication, research, publicity) have been auxiliary in regard to goods. Perhaps future conditions of development (economic, too) lie in an inversion of this relationship. Merchandise and instruments will serve the development of the industry of culture and entertainment. Prevailing services will be the pleasure of learning, of ordering one's own memories, of relating to and communicating with others. In this context, the production of artifacts could also turn again towards the material of dreams. The company would be a kind of artist, whose need for research and innovation would not be dominated only by the requirements of material development, but rather by an internal rhythm and an editorial role for spiritual messages.