sa el punto de venta tiene que transmitir una continuidad y homogeneidad, a pesar de estar situada al final del proceso. Pasa a ser la plataforma de interacción entre la identidad construida por la empresa y su público objetivo; su rol es convertirse en el dispositivo unificador que proporciona coherencia al mensaje, articulando las diferentes fases en una puesta en escena del producto.

El punto de venta ha pasado de ser un simple elemento más en la suma de un proceso, a ser su síntesis —su elemento constituyente— en tanto que plataforma de contacto físico real entre productor y consumidor. Desde el punto de venta se entra en contacto con el imaginario producido por la industria.

En segundo lugar, se ha modificado su centro de atención; el proyecto no sólo ha pasado a describir las características físicas del espacio sino también a definir valores inmateriales, más cercanos a la lógica emotiva. Su función no queda relegada a definir las características y los detalles espaciales, los cuales son una consecuencia, sino que se concentra mucho más en la función de crear alrededor del producto una aura que lo haga deseable y creíble, dotándolo de una personalidad expresada tridimensionalmente. El problema, no obstante, se encuentra en su sistematización. Por último, y en tercer lugar, todos los cambios apuntados presuponen una transformación fundamental: la modificación de los conceptos de eficacia, de uso y de percepción del punto de venta, y que lógicamente comportan su transformación formal y tipológica. Forma y fondo adquieren nuevo protagonismo. Es en este sentido que podemos señalar cierta paradoja: si tradicionalmente el producto era el mensaje que se dirigía al consumidor, mientras que el punto de venta actuaba como medio para hacerlo llegar al cliente, ahora es el propio medio —el punto de venta— el que se convierte en el verdadero mensaje para diseñar.

Product decentralisation: from product to system (sales point)

The evolution of industrial society has brought about a series of changes and mutations which have substantially modified the classical concept of the product. From the idea of industrially manufactured product, we have gone to that of culturally elaborated product. The difference in merchandise is progressively placed in the cultural system; it is from a personal interpretation, through our own background, that we give individuality and meaning to products. We contrast the «industrial» product characterised by intrinsic and palpable differences, industrially produced, with the cultural product characterised by complementary and interpretable differences, personally produced: we establish a relationship according to individual background. If the product was traditionally chosen for its features, now the buyers' decision has shifted to contextualisation: company image, personality, and identity.

We can affirm that the product loses its centrality. The customer increasingly buys other things, besides the simple product. Paradoxically, then, if it was once publicity which illustrated the product, it is now the product which illustrates publicity. This evolution, from industrial society to consumer society, has brought about great changes in the perception of products and companies. Design has not remained aloof from these changes.

1. Valuing products: the place of design

The discipline of design has achieved and developed a specific category as a result of the historical evolution of society, its industrialisation and progress. Industrialisation meant modifying the logic of the production process for previously existing products, in which the artisan was the element of cohesion giving unity to the whole process and making the product perceived and felt as an adequate response to our own needs. Industrial society brought about specialisation of the process and its isolation in four new realities —market, project, production, and consumption— to which the

development of different disciplines in knowledge and professionalisation corresponded: from marketing, design, and engineering to marketing techniques, publicity, and consumption sociology. Thus, along with a new direction in society, we must add the beginning of the evolution of a new process of «production» of products which underwent modifications and variations, according to social dynamics and different paradigms presented: from the mechanisation and logic of fashion to the value of image or culture, as we have said before.

Within these evolutions there was a major difficulty when directing design towards finding its place in this scheme. This brought about the birth of diverse positions, methodologies, and ideological directions, by means of which it is possible to have an overview of our own discipline, according to the centrality and importance given to certain elements and requirements. The design project was conceived in different ways, but always linked to aspects belonging to its moment in history and the current cultural values most prominently present: from the strongly mechanicist of early production, due to a certain mechanical excitement offered by the new industrial possibilities, we arrived at the current paradox of friendly products, highly technological inside, but purposefully simple and close in their outside appearance.

If we review the evolution and development of our discipline, we can appreciate, however, the same dynamics constantly addressed to reconstructing the unitary process of product production —existing in pre-industrial society— to achieve a vertebration of the four environments which configure it (market, project, production, and consumption) in a unique coherent unit, and give it a new centrality. At a functional level, this trend was very close to the logic which allowed the artisan to control, give meaning and coherence to the whole process: the incorporation of experience, technique, and memory; the knowledge of specific demand by means of direct relationship between customer and producer; a made-to-measure product carried out according to personalised needs; the guarantee of permanent (post-sale) service by care of the product.

1.1. Covering needs

From the beginning of mechanised production, all along the second half of the 19th century and the first

years of the 20th, the whole of industry was set up along productive lines: it was machinery, with its new possibilities for transformation, which directed the formal character of all manufacture. Along with the different kinds of housing, the proliferation of new places for work and leisure, the growing specialisation of domestic space and everyday life, there arose a whole series of needs —completely non-existent till then— which ideally placed themselves as the legitimate reason for different experiments and research into the application of modern productive techniques. The response to the requirements of modern society was an enormous proliferation of products and artifacts which were to become part of people's everyday environments.

Together with strong technological development and the incipient growth of modern economies, there was the precarious existence of an undefined market with no unity, potentially a virgin market with few demands. On the other hand, the imperialist trends of modern states —at the beginning of the 20th century— and the military demands of governments, made the existence of a market even more feasible; a much wider market where products could be placed with no kind of previous concern. Thus, different products arose which did not specifically respond to the requirements of demand but rather to the possibilities of the productive aparatus. There was no structured market to be interpreted and from which to direct and address production. The response to the void in the material environment was a great number of functional products and artifacts, full of innovations and features. In this environment, marked by productive requirements, the beginning and development of design was inserted; it was not to emerge until demand was incorporated into its perspective, put together within the concept of the market.

Continuing progress and the generalisation of consumer goods led to its progressive disuse (a consequence of constant innovation), market unity, and the growing importance of commercialisation. The design project was no longer structured in the very heart of production and was only conditioned by the language of industry. The shape of the product was no longer the intent to translate the mechanicist paradigm and was made up beyond productive requirements. The contrast with the language of the machine was the language of the market under pressure from new demands. The breaking point may have been represented

by the '29 crash and the later need to promote the market by consumer motivation, by means of the «unsatisfied consumer», creating new needs and directing company strategies toward the market.

The logic of standardisation as the projector's main aim to achieve made no sense from the moment certain kinds of products became generalised. Strong, progressive technological innovations, together with a more defined and advanced market structure, gave evidence of the decline of the process and the generalised model which did not take the individual into account unless it was as the generalisation of requirements beyond personal preference and subjective logic which, later, were incorporated as a basic mechanism of motivation for demand. If at the beginning design was concerned with the intrinsic characteristics of the product —its functionalism, efficiency, durability, and normality (a consequence of the wish to cover basic needs)— the requirements of diversification became evident when related to a market which had achieved a certain maturity.

1.2. Responding to the customer

The strong emphasis placed on production was displaced towards a market orientation; new demands opened in design discipline were placed on the need to understand it and the ability to give it a specific answer. Market evolution brought about a growing interest in stimulating it by means of the creation of a modern and imaginative reference with which to identify. In this sense, design was placed in promotion and projection of derived product characteristics, that is, what makes them different. The formal value of the product took on a great importance, as it allowed the expression of a specific moment and communicated temporality. Through its formal qualities, there arose a difference from everything previously existing and, at the same time, the possibility arose of personalising a certain sensitivity adequate to the requirements of current taste and fashion. Thus, there came about a very dynamic series of changes, substantial in consumers' life-styles and habits, with a view to stimulating sales. This produced a very strong interest in marketing, publicity, and design as basic disciplines for orienting production towards the market and its diversification.

Product differentiation placed design as an extremely important value for its appreciation, as it added a value strongly linked to each individual in a different way and, at the same time, allowed a visual translation of market requirements. In this sense, under the generalisation of the temporal paradigm, there was a continuous incorporation of the idea of expiry dates and obsolescence in products as the basic stimulus for demand. Design was forced to give shape to temporality by means of the proposal of certain lines and formal references, from which to interpret and achieve the spirit of the times. Translating the up-to-date and fashionable was to have its best allies in designers' proposals. They were asked to adapt products' personalities to market demands, already known to marketing, and later promoted by publicity techniques. A further step in the process of distinguishing products was the incorporation of product brands so as to create a different identity around certain values which design had to take into account when giving shape to any product. The product image was strongly subordinate to market requirements, to certain ruling criteria. Production redirected its strategies, forcing design to take a stand on product aesthetics and relate to market requirements. The market would be increasingly directed by the ever-present logic of fashion and the strong development of the culture of image, clearly effective answers to the need for diversification and the structure of supply.

Design, in this perspective, was placed in the imperative need to respond to customers by projecting the product's differential characteristics, previously defined by a market analysis. There was to be a progressive generalisation of the criteria of difference. As a consequence of using the same implements and sources of analysis —emphasising the ruling market criteria— there came about a new saturation which implied changing an initial minority distinction into a growing unity of supply. If in the initial phase of the design there was no specific concern for product difference, the growing proliferation of production on the market made even the careful shaping of this attribute insufficient for valuing differences.

1.3. Reaching the consumer

The strong development of the market —its consolidation, democratisation, and hegemony— brought about the need to establish differences beyond the product itself and the brand identifying it. The idea of the mar-

ket as homogenous was displaced towards segmentation and targets, moving from the great majority to great minorities. A strong preponderance of the context of product consumption took over from the evolutionary logic of diversifying and sophisticating brands. The previous promotion of product communication aspects by means of upscaling differences in range displaced consumer attention to the product's surroundings; a new condition materialised in its consumption spaces, incorporated into the imaginary projection made by individuals through the products they consume. The space in which the product is placed was to become more relevant and led to a strong qualitative development of distribution and its value in the future customers' mind. The consequent response was the predominant role given to new merchandising and mixed marketing disciplines which were to have their translation in the increasing design of agreed commercial formula systems, among which franchises were the best exponents.

Paying attention to the complementary characteristics of the product was a proven need in this new period for the production world. That is to say, everything which could complement it and bring it closer to the customer. An important approach was begun towards the buyer and the physical space where shopping took place, by means of different promotions, discounts, gifts, and merchandising strategies in which design was no stranger. The value of the product was placed in a higher area than its mere presence and extended to the corporate image of the company itself with the logical consequent application to the sales point as a clear environment for relating producer and customer. Catching the customers' needs and guaranteeing the product beyond its purchase were concerns which implied a strategic redirection for companies and, therefore, design's own position.

The project was placed in the set of aspects configured around the product. The new concern was defined by the elements interceding between customer and product, by unity. To the concern for aesthetic qualities, formal aspects, and communicating a precise identity totally faithful to the personality defined by the brand, there were added aspects having to do with the dimension of consumption: completely synthesised and represented at the sales point and the surroundings proposed for product exhibition. The challenge for the projector became defined as the ability to transfer different attributes constructed about a product to a tangible and coherent proposal, by means of contextualising it. From its own packaging to the arrival at the sales point, it was necessary to transmit a unified personality which could be rapidly identified by the customer under any of the different aspects which made up the product's presentation in its surroundings, whether altogether or in an isolated or partial manner.

1.4. From customer to friend

Expanding the attributes to be projected around a product brought about its displacement as the central vector in the whole process. Company values, expressed by company personality, became the most important elements. The company became a part of the social and cultural domain.

Productive activity became communicative activity. Through all means of expression, the company had to be able to produce a corporate product, a certain specificity or personal style, a true information emitting system, constant and coherent. Strategic requirements were placed in the capacity to build up and transmit a very precise identity: brand, product, or service.

Importance is placed on trying to build up a series of cultural characteristics. Beyond the simple functional features of the product, there was evidence of a need to emphasise the development of a true company culture, presupposing a social implication by means of a direct presence in the surroundings. No doubt it is at this point that the potential of the sales point is shown to be an extremely important element for general consumers' final evaluation of the company. Whether or not they are customers, the sales point can become a place for relating and interacting within which different consumer profiles can feel identified through their own cultural compatibility with the proposed offer.

We have gone from the singular response traditionally demanded from the designer —represented by the unique and isolated product— to the plural response or megaproduct. Design requirements are transferred to the whole of the identifying system where the product is a significant vehicle inserted into a logic bearing a certain cultural specificity. In most cases it is physically materialised in product contextualisation: the sales point acts as a true stage for determining the interaction between company, product, and customer or, better yet, the social ensemble.

2. Decentralising the product: the system

Until a few years ago, the different elements which allowed us to visualise and «consume» a company (product, packaging, publicity, merchandising, service, sponsoring, sales point, etc.) were produced and conceived as singular answers to experiences previously defined in the briefing. The whole effort of design was centred on the improvement of each of these elements —often quite independently— which company activity later related, starting out from the position of privilege granted to the product. In spite of the existence of corporate identity, quite often the synthesis and reading of all these «expressions» was relegated to the consumer, who became their relation link, the unifying factor establishing the link and the sum between each of the parts and the whole. The relationship, however, could be shattered at any moment.

Thus, the definitive step was not the sum but rather the synthesis of the whole in any of the parts (packaging, publicity, product...) which made up the whole. That is to say, each part or element had to relate to all the others, refer to itself and to the whole. We went from the idea of the product to that of the system or megaproduct.

The problem of design was in the need to project a unifying device. A coherent group capable of instilling homogeneity to the company's ensemble of products, while establishing a constant unifying link —customer faithfulness— with the public; all this presupposes a permanent presence on the market, by means of constant identification and memorisation.

It became necessary to establish a style of one's own, on which to build and develop company activity. In this way, an important independence was achieved in regard to the life-cycle of the product and service, which meant an important step forward in quality. Product decentralisation brought about a role change: the product became an identity support, while the sales point became the synthesis expressing the whole process. The perception of a style of one's own, of a company personality, was centred on the commercial space. Paradoxically, in a time strongly tending towards dematerialisation —promoted by the new media and computer technology—, the space for sales took on a new strategic centrality, in all its physicalism. It became a permanent publicity billboard. The anonymity of distribution seemed to have been overcome. Thinking out a project no longer supposed just

designing the product. The project became an over-all project: merchandise design began to incorporate the whole of its promoting and communicating platform from packaging to commercial services but integrally. The product's reliability was placed in its significance related to a context —the sales point— which gives it truth and identity. While it evoked varying responses and interpretations, it acted as a bridge to join the product's physical existence and the mental images we can make of it. The conscious and the unconscious, linked by the sales point, relate and take shape by means of consumer practices. The legitimacy of these spaces was now subscribed by the «message» they proposed; in the end, it is what people take home and what is established as a defining trait that a consumer act has taken place.

2.1. The product as cultural system

The strong development of the productive system has filled the market with products beyond consumers' possibilities and real needs. Products are increasingly more alike both in features and in characteristics. The differences among them is no longer in production only, nor in sales, but rather in the proposition of a different consumption related to new social habits. It is not a question of communicating product attributes, as features have become generalised. The aim now is to inform and promote the different characteristics beyond their materialisation.

The valuation of products has displaced the material aspect, turning it into a cultural construction. Current perception and valuation place merchandise differences in relation to image, personality, and cultural values built around it. Differentiation is specified in the imagination represented by the product, in the identifying persuasive atmosphere. Thus, we can speak of the megaproduct: a projected system which integrates a set of cultural values, attributes, rules, and aesthetic characteristics imbuing all expressions which the company produces under basic homogeneous criteria.

The meeting point between values attributed to the product and the customers' sensitivity has its space in the commercial space; it represents the stage for consumption where the product takes on shape and meaning. Consumers increasingly behold the world from the consumption view-point and adapt to it by their cultural background. Today's importance of consumption

and the social sanction make it possible to share a series of socially recognisable values. Reading and assimilation of products and their messages from one's own background has turned into a means of differentiated positioning and adherence. Starting from the different discourses proposed, all consumers can feel identification, reaffirm their own personalities, and undergo a double differentiated feeling: individual, insofar as they interpret the message from their own culture, and collective, at the same time, as their interpretations are shared with other individuals bearing the same sensibility which makes them different from the rest of their social group. Faced with a homogeneous offer of products, consumers tend to choose what better adapts and represents their socio-cultural values. This is very obvious in the success achieved lately by products based on ecological values (The Body Shop, Natura, Essencial...). It is from this different situation that we can today speak of the cultural dimension in productive activity and its logical extension to the world of the consumer. Consumption cannot be reduced to a simply economic activity from the moment choice preference, valuation, and possession of merchandise is pre-eminently placed in the cultural dimension.

The extent of these new values makes recognition surroundings —cultural images— increasingly present around products. These can act either as identity platform for consumers or as distinction element in regard to the rest of existing products. Their stage —the sales point— responds to certain values to achieve consumer preference and meshing. It is with this new logic that the overall image of the establishment becomes relevant.

2.2. The sales point as megaproduct

The new way of conceiving the sales point is not only motivated by the increasing quantity of supply, but also by its quality. As we have repeated before, product differentiation, range increase, variations and diversifications, have led to a saturation of supply. Achieving merchandise distinction implies building up a solid, specialised personality which can adapt to the specified target. This implies analysing its components: values, attitudes, and codes which define and identify, to be able to construct a referential imagination allowing identification. Here is where focussed importance emerges in commercial spaces.

The strong presence of new and original distribution formulas is explained by the given communication and persuasion capacity. Their function, beyond distribution, centres on giving the product a personality and prestige which imbue it with a certain aura. These dynamics are integrated in emerging new individual practice and more creative social relations, set up through consumption. Mass consumption, as an instrument of social progress, allows important segments of the population to «represent» their interests and express them. All cities in the last few years have considerably increased spaces devoted to and related to consumption, as an inequivocal specific response to leisure and free time culture characteristic of current society.

All these changes imply a great social transformation: social segments are no longer pyramid-shaped; the great mass of consumers becomes fragmented; the idea of the market is transformed; society becomes more complex; subjects are differentiated by roles and life-styles relating to certain values, habits, and specific products consumed; the consumption space allows adscription of consumers, outlines their identity, and determines a certain personality. This means different directions in production strategies and will logically bring about a different way of understanding design so as to respond to new social practice. The aim of the project centres on trying to translate a specific discourse, making the company's communication strategy tangible and extensive to all its production, guaranteeing their homogeneous quality.

Under this new reference framework, the design of commercial establishments is substantially transformed, as new requirements are imposed:

– Possibility of serialisation and repetition.
– Capacity for adapting to different configurations and situations.
– Translation of the company image into palpable images.
– Guarantee of homogeneity and coherence in all applications.
– Creating attractive and participative situations for consumers.

As a result of these new requirements, among others, we can assert that the sales point was categorised as «an industrial product». This assertion is based on a whole series of basic aspects: in the first place, there

is a modification of one's own logic in the conception of the project, as it is no longer a singular response, isolated from the company's strategy; on the other hand, the function employed in the sales point has to transmit continuity and hegemoneity, even though it is placed at the end of the process. It becomes the platform for an interaction between the identity built up by a company and its target public; its role is to become a unifying device which gives coherence to the message, connecting different phases in the product's staging.

The sales point has gone from a simple element in the sum of a process to its synthesis —its constituent element— to the extent that it is a platform for real physical contact between producer and consumer. At the sales point, there is contact with the imagination produced by the industry.

In the second place, its attention centre has been modified; the project not only describes the space's physical characteristics but also defines its non-material values closer to emotional logic. Its function is not relegated to defining the spatial characteristics and details which are its consequence, but rather concentrates much more on the function of creating an aura around the product, which will make it desirable and credible, giving it a personality in three dimensions. The problem, however, is in systematisation. Lastly, and in third place, all these changes described presuppose a basic transformation: the modification of concepts of efficiency, usability, and perception of the sales point which logically bring about its formal and typological transformation. Form and background acquire a new leading role. In this sense, we can note a certain paradox: if the product was traditionally the message addressed to the consumer, while the sales point acted as a means to make it reach the customer, now it is the medium itself —the sales point— which has become the real message to be designed.