AESTHETICS OF SUSTAINABILITY.

ESTÉTICA DE LA SOSTENIBILIDAD.

Prof. MFA Paolo Grazioli
pgraziol@msudenver.edu
ORCID: 0000-0003-1214-9059
Metropolitan State University of Denver
EE.UU.
Autor para la correspondencia

RESUMEN

La filosofía del diseño puede basarse en conocimientos de otros campos de la filosofía, como el griego antiguo y filosofía china. Las filosofías antiguas ofrecen una nueva perspectiva de una filosofía de diseño más general que se puede utilizar en la práctica del diseño contemporáneo, lo que lleva hacia métodos de diseño mejorados para la creación de una sociedad más ética. El concepto chino de "Acción sin esfuerzo", basado en encontrar las necesidades reales y evitar la lucha por producir lo que no es necesario, parece ser un ajuste sorprendente para la sociedad contemporánea en busca de respuestas a los problemas creados por la falta de sostenibilidad en los modelos de producción - consumo y los métodos.

ABSTRACT

Philosophy of design can draw on insights from other fields of philosophy, like ancient Greek and Chinese philosophy. Ancient philosophies offer a new insight to a more general philosophy of design that can be put to use in contemporary design practice, leading us toward improved design methods for the creation of a more ethical society.

The Chinese concept of "Effortless Action", based on finding the real needs and avoiding the struggle to produce what is not necessary, appears to be a surprising fit for our contemporary society in search for answers to the problems created by the lack of sustainability in our production and consumption models and methods.

What are the relations between philosophy of design and philosophy at large?

Philosophy of design can draw on insights from other fields of philosophy, like ancient Greek and Chinese philosophy.

Can these ancient philosophies also offer a new insight to a more general philosophy of design? Moreover, can results from the philosophy of design be put to use in contemporary design practice, by leading us toward better artifacts, better design methods and, especially, better ethics for the creation of a more ethical society?

If Greek philosophy is centered on the discourse surrounding the meanings of Forms and of the methods to transition them from an ideal state of "intentional objects" through Poiesis, so dear to the design discourse, Chinese philosophy instead is more focused on trying to create, as Sinologist Jean François Billeter describes it, a "*state of perfect knowledge of the reality of the situation, perfect efficaciousness and the realization of a perfect economy of energy*". The Chinese concept of *Wú Wé,* literally meaning "inexertion" or "inaction", seem to be a natural answer to the ontological questions posed by Plato first and then addressed by Aristotle. The Chinese concept of *"Effortless Action*", based on finding the real needs and avoiding the struggle to produce what is not necessary, appears to be a surprising fit for our contemporary society in search for answers to the problems created by the complete disregard for sustainability in our production and consumption model and methods.

These ancient philosophies offer a new insight to a more general philosophy of design and can result in a new role for industrial design, as an ethical guide leading us towards better artifacts, better design methods and, especially, the creation of a more ethical society.

Design is reflected in all the various artifacts that populate our existence: design forms and influences our lives just as much as science or technology. But what influences design? Design relies on technology and scientific knowledge, but it is, first and foremost, a cultural endeavor that enables lifestyles that people didn't know they could have.

The design process is related to the creation of objects (artifacts) and this process of creation of the "invisible" gives to the artifacts a duality of meanings. Designers, in fact, talk about what they design as if there were (already) tangible objects. Artifacts exist before they are physical objects in an imaginary world contained within the design discourse, in an ideal world where matter has not yet "contaminated" the ideal forms and ideas.

Plato's "Theory of Forms" defines the physical world as just a shadow, an image of the true reality of the Realm of Forms. According to him, Forms are abstract, perfect, unchanging concepts that transcend time and space and that exist in the Realm of Forms.

Aristotle famously rejected Plato's theory of forms, arguing that forms are intrinsic to the objects and cannot exist apart from them, and so must be studied in relation to them.

Similarly, artifacts too have a dual nature: they are physical objects on the one hand, and intentional objects on the other: design, in fact, exists without artifacts, since at the time a given artefact was designed, it had not yet been constructed. So what ontological assumptions should be made to explain the apparent fact that designers can know or predict the properties of an artefact, which is not there to have properties?

Although industrial design can be directly linked to the industrial revolution and apparently inextricably connected with the transition from small volume production of semi-artisanal artifacts to mass-produced, it arguably existed, as an activity, well before the 1900s and the advent of the Industrial Revolution.

The Industrial revolution has empowered the design process, which has become today the central activity that oversees the creation of all the products that populate the world.

It has become the activity that allows human beings to create products (*Poiesis)* through standardized manufacturing methods (*Techne*).

Aristotele defined *Poiesis* as the endeavor of creating something that did not exist before; *Techne* is the sum of processes that allows *Poiesis* to happen. The two concepts, as defined and discussed by Plato and Aristotle can be defined as the two main characteristics by which the industrial design process is composed: a creative process by which ideas become physical objects through a technical process (manufacturing) and an endeavor to create products that help to improve the lives of people existed well before the industrial revolution.

Therefore, it could be argued that, quoting the famous Italian designer Andrea Branzi, "...the history of design is but just a small part of a larger phenomenon that could be called history of objects."

As industrial designers are co-responsible for the process of populating the world with every product that is created, the need to define a general principle, an ultimate goal that defines the overall purpose of the discipline becomes not just important within the design discourse but indispensable for the future of society.

Aristotele used to define the ultimate goal, or purpose of every human activity as Telos.

Telos is considered synonymous to the term" Teleute" (end), particularly in Aristotle's discourse about the plot-structure in Poetics. The philosopher went as far as saying that *Telos* can encompass all forms of human activity: the *Telos* of warfare is victory; the *Telos* of business is the creation of wealth, and so on.

All the activities that form the product development process could, in the same way, be viewed as means to create artifacts that have as a final goal that of improving people's lives. The final *telos* of industrial design should encompass ethical principals in all its activities, to create a common goal that would represent its final ethical goal, the *telos of design* or "*design Weltanschauung"*.

So if we consider the Telos of design as an endeavor that creates new artifacts from the invisible Real of Forms through than ethical use of Techne, we could summarize the Telos of design as

the process of creating new products that improve people's lives with the useful and the beautiful.

Aristotle also said that the way to put the Telos into practice is called "Practical wisdom". The analysis of artifacts throughout history seem to offer support to this reasoning. Examples of artifacts manufactured by early "designers" to improve people's lives and make the owners proud of owning them can be found in many civilizations.

AXIOLOGY OF DESIGN

The creation of new artifacts through the process of "Poiesis" also includes in the design discourse the concept of aesthetics., as the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and appreciation of art, beauty and good taste. The word "aesthetics" derives from the Greek "Aisthetikos", meaning "of sense perception". Along with Ethics, aesthetics is part of axiology (the study of values and value judgments).

"The word "*ethics*" derives from the Greek "ethos" (meaning the guiding beliefs of a person, group, or organization) and it differs from morals and morality in that ethics denotes the theory of right action and the greater good, while morals indicate their practice.

Ethics is not limited to specific acts and defined moral codes, but includes the whole of moral ideals and behaviors, a person's philosophy of life (or Weltanschauung).

It asks questions like "How should people act?" (Normative Ethics), "What do people think is right?" (Descriptive Ethics), "How do we take moral knowledge and put it into practice?" (Applied Ethics), and "What does 'right' even mean?" (Meta-Ethics).

The concept of "Kalon" could be useful to create an ethical definition of what is "beautiful". Kalon is defined as "the ideal of physical and moral beauty especially as conceived by the philosophers of classical Greece" that considered "beautiful" and "useful" inseparable, to form the perfect, superior concept of absolute beauty, represented an ethical approach to the creation of new artifacts: without an inner spirit, a special Thymos, an artifact could not be considered beautiful and therefore not ethical.

Industrial design should also be concerned with the concept of Kalon, so to give every new artefact a deeper meaning that just a skin deep, superficial styling.

If we consider the definition of Thymos as per the Oxford Classical Dictionary, "Thymos" means "mind", "spirit," "inclination". It could be therefore interesting to draw another parallel between ancient philosophy and the philosophy of design. Products that were designed with the purpose of improving people's lives, for example by enabling a new lifestyle, have made them timeless, iconic, unique. Examples such as the "Cubo" radio designed by R. Sapper for Brionvega or the Valentine typewriter designed by Ettore Sottsass for Olivetti enabled for the first time in history an entire generation to be able to freely express their aesthetic preferences away from the control (and the disagreement) of

their parents. A new generation was finally able to practice the lifestyle of product portability that we enjoy today. These products had a sort of a secret "spirit" that made much more than just artifacts: they were lifestyle enablers, allowing people to live lifestyles that they did not know could exist. These products represented the incarnation of the idea of freedom for the younger generations of the late '60s and early '70s in Europe and the U.S.A.

It could be argued, therefore, that their success was created by a sort of inner spirit that made them lifestyle companions rather than just products: their Thymos.

Designing products to enable new lifestyles, that go even beyond the simple definition of useful, could be considered as the final goal of the design process: its ultimate Telos.

This is in strong contrast with the more materialistic approach to product development that often sees manufacturers introduce products that appeal to the need of our modern contemporary society of changing products as a natural practice that satisfies intangible, psychological needs and not practical, tangible ones.

An aesthetic tool that has been used to promote this consumeristic attitude is the accelerated aesthetic obsolescence.

"Accelerated aesthetic obsolescence", is a strategy based on creating very drastic aesthetic changes between adjacent generations of products with the intent of making the users feel uncomfortable with the "older" one, suddenly rendered socially unacceptable (uncool) by the appearance of the new, dramatically different one. The "revolutionary" design" strategy has been designed to instill the need to change often perfectly functional products just out of aesthetic concerns, contributing to the depletion of natural sources and pervading landfills with billions of tons of plastic and toxic materials. The strategy is in opposition to the more traditional one of "evolutionary design", where two adjacent generation of products are created to underline a sense of natural evolution represented by the similarity in appearance between generations.

The "revolutionary" design strategy is in strong contrast with the application of the philosophy of Kalon to product development. Products that do not present the combination of useful and beautiful should not be considered ethical.

Design can be responsible in perpetuating the idea that products should be changed often out of social concerns such as aesthetic acceptance of the new style and therefore a more ethical approach to product development is very central to the design discourse.

It has become evident, in fact, that overproduction, a consequence of consumerism, has made the system unstable and unsustainable. Climate change is one of the most visible manifestations of the overproduction method that creates an unsustainable number of products that, through the advent of consumerism, are quickly rendered obsolete and discarded. A short lifespan that stimulates a more hedonistic sense of enjoyment of the products has created an unsustainable system.

For Immanuel Kant (Critique of Judgment, 1790), "enjoyment" is the result of pleasure arising from sensation, but judging something to be "beautiful" has a third requirement: sensation must give rise to pleasure by engaging reflective contemplation.

In this sense, a new concept of ethical aesthetic enjoyment must be developed, to reverse the trend of fast consumption "consumeristic aesthetics". A very thin smartphone can no longer be considered aesthetically pleasing if the thinness of its design is a consequence of a manufacturing process that prevents single components like the back panel to be substituted in case of minor damages and require the substitution of the whole product.

A more ethical, less hedonistic sense of aesthetic enjoyment that includes the philosophical concept of "Kalon", beautiful if useful, is required to match the new economic model of "Circular Economy".

The concept of the circular economy can also be traced to a philosophical concept present in Confucianism, that talks about 生生 (Sheng Sheng). The ideogram, through the combination of the vertical pictographic character che representing vertical growth, and the horizontal radical tu, representing the earth, depicts the image of a plant breaking through the soil. The character is associated, in ancient Chinese philosophy, to the life of humans being and it conveys the message that humans are co-living with nature, expressing an ethical need to make life on earth sustainable. Also, the concept of Sheng Sheng describes the optimistic attitude of Confucianism: "both survival and death are life, and life, like water, flows endlessly". this is the concept of constant "production and reproduction", as expressed in the Circular Economy that prescribes those products are no longer used and discarded in a linear way that clearly separates life from their demise (death) but that they are, instead, recycled and upcycled, reintroduced into the cycle of life endlessly.

This circular concept also requires a different aesthetic approach that values the recycled or upcycled materials. In modern contemporary society, the concepts of "new" and "good" have become intrinsically connected: owning a new product is a manifestation of a certain economic status and its appearance obtained through the use of virgin materials has, so far, being its practical incarnation. The function of products is no longer that of executing its functions in the best possible way but also that of being status symbols. This function can not be just linked to the advent of consumerism, as it can be argued that a Greek general or a Roman aristocrat would be proud of showing their shiny helmet or their decorated vases, it has reached unsustainable levels in contemporary society: the use of virgin materials (plastic and metals especially) to represent the projection of the owner's status has brought society to brink of collapse, as shown in this research published by the United States Environmental Agency.

Although consumeristic "culture" still represents the mainstream culture in modern contemporary society, there are some alternative philosophical movements that theorize a departure

from it. Serge Latouche's "Décroissance" (degrowth) movement started in 2008 as a "Décroissance: A Project for a Radical Transformation of Society" advocates the need to reduce global consumption and production and aims at creating a socially just and ecologically sustainable society with well-being replacing G.D.P. as the indicator of prosperity.

In philosophical terms, designer can also refer to aesthetic cultures that value imperfection over perfection, as in the Japanese aesthetics philosophy of "Kintsugi".

Kintsugi (golden joinery) is the centuries-old Japanese tradition of mending broken ceramics with lacquer dusted or mixed with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. As a philosophy, it treats breakage and repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to disguise.

"Not only is there no attempt to hide the damage, but the repair is literally illuminated a kind of physical expression of the spirit of mushin…. Mushin is often literally translated as "no mind," but carries connotations of fully existing within the moment, of non-attachment, of equanimity amid changing conditions. …The vicissitudes of existence over time, to which all humans are susceptible, could not be clearer than in the breaks, the knocks, and the shattering to which ceramic ware too is subject. This poignancy or aesthetic of existence has been known in Japan as mono no aware, a compassionate sensitivity, or perhaps identification with, [things] outside oneself."

Kintsugi originates from the philosophical concept of "Wushin" a concept (or "Mushin" 無心 "no mind") in Japanese)

The aesthetic philosophy of making the "life" of the products through imperfections, of making visible its "vicissitudes of existence over time, to which all humans are susceptible" is also a way to create a stronger emotional attachment between the user and the product. Swiss bags manufacturer Freitag, whose products are considered status symbols among the progressive consumers in Europe, bases its own aesthetic and manufacturing philosophy on the concepts of "circularity"[2]. Their products are made of recycled tarp truck covers, with the aim of making their products "endlessly recyclable".

Through a combination of ancient philosophy and modern manufacturing techniques, it should be possible to create products that finally break away from the equation "new=good". The implementation of this aesthetic philosophy would require a deep cultural change through an education of the consumers to the concept of celebrating imperfection, reusability and upcycling. Products like private vehicles, personal computers or smartphones could be designed in a way to embrace the aesthetic of "Sheng Sheng", accepting the unorthodox appearance obtained through the use of non-shiny, non-virgin materials for mainstream products.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

The two virtues of thought that deal with what can be otherwise, i.e., what is contingent, are *technê* and *phronêsis*, craft and practical wisdom. Aristotle emphasizes the former, a disposition (*hexis*) with respect to making (*poiêsis*), is distinct from the latter, a disposition with respect to doing (*praxis*). https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/episteme-techne/

Sinologist Jean François Billeter born 1939 in Basel, Switzerland; is a Swiss sinologist and honorary professor of the University of Geneva, where he created the sinology department in 1987.

Author: Jean François Billeter. Year of publication: 1990. Title: Chinese Art of Writing. Publisher: Rizzoli.

WuWei, (Chinese: "non-action"; literally, "no action") Wade-Giles romanization wu-wei, in Chinese philosophy, and particularly among the 4th- and 3rd-century-BCE philosophers of early Daoism (daojia), the practice of taking no action that is not in accord with the natural course of the universe. https://www.britannica.com/topic/wuwei-Chinese-philosophy

Author: R. M. Dancy. Year of publication: 2004. Title: Plato's Introduction of Forms. Publisher: Cambridge University Press.

"Aristotle conceived of Poiesis as ranging over what might be in order to create a high-level product of the human intellect for reflection and the development of character. " (Thomas Martin, Department of English, Wheaton College. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1080 Published online: 31 March 2020.

"Episteme and Techne", Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. First published Fri Apr 11, 2003; substantive revision Fri Mar 27, 2020.

Andrea Branzi. Year of publication: 2018. Title: "Il Design, Storia e Controstoria". Publisher: Giunti Editore.

Telos: "an ultimate end". Merriam-Webster vocabulary. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/telos

Werner Jaeger. "Telos or Teleute'". Year of publication: 1986. Title: "Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture". Publisher: Oxford University Press. Pag.69.

Kamran, Qeis, Topp, Saskia, Henseler, Jörg. Year of publication: 2021. Title: Towards the Co-evolution of Food Experience Search Spaces Based on the Design Weltanschauung Model in Food Marketing". Publisher: Cogent Business & Management.

The word comes from the Greek `aisthetikos', meaning `of sense perception.'University of Sussex, Generative Creativity - lecture 14.

https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethos

"Plato's *thymos* represents a pared-down model of human agency typified by one central desire or aim in life but also exhibiting whatever further capacities of persons are necessary to enable it to pursue that aim in interaction with the other elements of the personality." https://oxfordre.com/classics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-8180?rskey=sInAOt&result=1

Thymos, by Douglas Cairns https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.8180

The Brionvega "Cube" is a global icon of industrial design and as such is on display in the most important contemporary art museums of the world. It can be found, for example, at New York's MoMA. https://www.brionvega.it/es/radio-cubo.html

"Valentine" Portable Typewriter. Artist: Ettore Sottsass (Italian (born Austria), Innsbruck 1917–2007 Milan). Manufacturer: Ing. C. Olivetti & C. S.p.A., Ivrea, Italy. Date: 1968. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/739409

The Critique of Judgment (Kritik der Urteilskraft), also translated as the Critique of the Power of Judgment, is a 1790 book by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant.

Huang Yushun, Li Xuening, Prof. Yushun Huang, Meirong Yan, Prof. Xuening Li.Year of publication: 2021. Title: "Life Confucianism as A New Philosophy: Love and Thought. Publisher: Bridge21 Publications.

https://www.epa.gov/climateleadership/sector-spotlight-electronics

Serge Latouche. Year of publication: 2019. Title: "La décroissance: Que sais-je ? n° 4134". Publisher: Presses Universitaires de France.

Journal Article. Title: "Décroissance: A Project for a Radical Transformation of Society". Author: Barbara Muraca. Environmental Values. Vol. 22, No. 2, special issue: Degrowth (April 2013), pp. 147-169. Publisher: White Horse Press

Kintsugi https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-centuries-old-japanese-tradition-mending-broken-ceramics-gold

Author: Christy Bartlett, Dr. Charly Iten, Prof. James-Henry Holland. Title: "Flickwerk: The Aesthetics of Mended Japanese Ceramics". Publisher: Cornell University, H. Johnson Museum of Art.

https://www.freitag.ch/en/circulartarp