

10. Design in transition / Designing transitions. Insights from conversations with design experts

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The most innovative cultures have marked periods of redefining and comprehending the challenging circumstances of their time (Koestler, 1975; Hall, 1998). Simultaneously our globalized world has been characterized by the idea that the future is unpredictable and unmanageable (Reith, 2004); counterintuitively, this uncertainty created the willingness for people to still engage with the future even though it is difficult, or even impossible, to anticipate (Reith, 2004).

Because of its proactive nature, Design can act in the *space of possibility* shaped by dark times, as defined by Arendt. According to Cross (1982), design challenges are typically characterized as *wicked* due to their lack of clarity and organisation, which is common when it comes to societal challenges (Sedini, 2020). The commitment of designers is partially due to the recognition that Design has contributed to the creation of our contemporary unsustainable world (Monteiro, 2019; Papanek, 2022; Norman, 2023).

This chapter will explore how Design, as a discipline, adapts to and drives systemic change in the face of unprecedented uncertainty. In order to answer the broad question *How does Design deal with*

complexity?, this contribution synthesizes insights gathered from interviews with prominent Italian design experts.

10.1 Design and transition

The concept of Transition Design emerged from the 2008 crisis, in strict correlation with the multi-composed concept of sustainability, with the transition towards more desirable futures as the main goal (Kossoff, 2011; Irwin, 2015). Transition Design was developed as an evolution of Service and Social Innovation Design as a future-oriented practice; however, it can be seen as a serendipitous idea that was further developed and integrated into other theoretical and methodological design evolutions, such as Systemic Design (Jones, 2014). This idea of transition is central to the (co)evolutionary idea of Design, especially to the *matter* of Design (Tonkinwise, 2015). For this reason, in this contribution, it was decided to use the term without necessarily making reference to Transition Design tools and methods. Moreover, it is possible to state that human beings, whether aware of it or not, constantly live in co-transition with other species and contexts; therefore, it would be wrong to state that we are only now living in transition times.

The present moment we are all experiencing has not been the first period of uncertainty in history (Hall, 1998). Also, due to time-space compression, the future becomes an extension of the present (Nowotny, 1996), and in this sense, risks already exist and distributed all over our globalized world (Beck, 1992, 2009). The emergence of the concept of risk has been strictly connected with the notion of future and has had a central explanatory role in the indeterminate world of late modernity (Reith, 2004).

Risks can be more or less successfully overcome thanks to local economic, technological, and political benefits. Koestler (1964) uses the concept of *ripeness*, which involves maturity and the development of solutions at the right time in the right place. In general, periods of crisis, characterized by climate change, conflicts, and pandemics, have potentialities for being creative in responding to critical situations and events. These uncertain periods have been called *post-normal times* (Sardar, 2010; Montuori, 2011); in particular,

the concept of post-traumatic growth has been used to address periods of recovering from difficult times both at an individual and collective level (Tedeschi *et al.*, 1998; Fredrickson *et al.*, 2003; Fuentes, 2017; Staszowski and Tassinari, 2020).

Since Design involves creating something new or transforming a less desirable situation into a preferred one, and building a more humane world (Simon, 1998; Margolin, 2007), it is particularly important to make desirable representations of the world and find possible answers to face uncertain times and periods of crisis.

To conclude, as Manzini (2015), commented on Transition Design, another (design) discipline is not needed; however, scholars and practitioners should look at how Design changes in transitory times and how Design it can address our ever-changing societies, which is the goal of this contribution.

10.2 In conversation with Design experts

The concepts of transition and complexity are deeply intertwined, with each influencing and shaping the other in complex and dynamic ways. Understanding the relationship between transition and complexity is essential for designing effective strategies and solutions that account for the interconnected, non-linear, and emergent nature of the systems and phenomena we encounter in the world.

The following pages will be the first phase of a wider research carried out in collaboration with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Design Group Italia, involving three main countries: the US, Italy and Japan. The goal of this contribution is to provide a preliminary positioning to answer the research question *How does Design deal with complexity?*. To do that, the researchers decided to start from the essential pillars of Design, such as the definition of the discipline; the discussion on problem-framing and problem-solving design phases; and the identification of design impacts on society. The focus of this contribution will be exclusively on the Italian data collected through twelve semi-structured interviews with prominent Design experts. An expert interview is a type of qualitative interview that follows a thematic guide and focusses on the expert's knowl-

edge, which is often defined as particular expertise in a specific field or topic (Bogner *et al.*, 2009; Döringer, 2021). The interviewees' selection was guided by the intention to provide a comprehensive exploration of the diverse possible contributions of Design.

The interviewees came from both professional and academic domains, including different generations of product and service designers, as well as Design historians and journalists. The interview guide was developed in collaboration with the MIT and Design Group Italia teams, and it was composed of about twenty open questions.

All the interviews were conducted online by the author in 2021, lasted one hour on average, and were recorded and fully transcribed. The analysis was conducted using the manual labelling method with the support of Chat GPT.

Name/Code	Design Discipline	Gender
i.1	Design historian / Academic	M
i.2	Design professional	M
i.3	Design professional	F
i.4	Design historian	F
i.5	Design professional	M
i.6	Service designer / Academic	M
i.7	Metadesign manager	F
i.8	Design journalist	F
i.9	Design professional	M
i.10	Design professional	F
i.11	Strategic designer / Academic	M
i.12	Service designer	M

Table 1.
Interviewees list.

In the next section, the interviewees reflections and opinions will be collectively presented; it was decided not to use quotes since all participants are involved in writing and discussing these topics in academic and public contexts, and being anonymized could lead to a lack of recognition of their original thoughts. The discussion is organized according to four main topics: regarding the definition of Design: the Design approach to problem-framing and problem-solving; the focus on Design Culture; and Design's impact on society.

Design in transition

The first part of the interview was dedicated to providing a definition of Design, including the elusive notion of *good design*. Design is considered complex to define because of its multifaceted nature.

The evolution of the definition of Design towards greater complexity and incorporating the concept of transition reflects the dynamic nature of our societies. Design encompasses not only the creation of physical objects but also of services and systems. It involves understanding the transitions that individuals, communities, and organizations undergo and designing solutions that facilitate these transitions effectively. This evolution in the definition of Design empowers designers to create solutions that are not only innovative but also meaningful and transformative. A composed definition that emerged from the different experts involved is provided in the following pages.

Design is a form of creativity applied in various ways (i.6): to create and imagine things that make more sense (i.11), combining resources and constraints to achieve a satisfactory result with minimal energy (i.12).

Looking at the transitory nature of Design, it has evolved from simpler, spontaneous projects to be a more articulated, multifaceted process, also expanding its scopes (i.2) beyond product-centric views to include social roles (i.6) extending to relationships, behaviour, and rituals (i.7). It is consistently seen as a process involving creativity, problem-solving, and an intersection of form and function.

It is already very apparent in this first discussion how culture plays a critical role in providing a framework for Design, including different perspectives of understanding. Design has been depicted as a connective sea between different areas of knowledge (i.2, i.9). Moreover, the relationship and potential overlapping between *Cultura del Progetto* (Design Culture) and design, was highlighted already in the definition of the latter (i.4). At the same time, Design has been described as a globally creative discipline (i.7).

The so-called democratization of design has emerged since it has been presented as an attitude towards life (i.8) and even a collective act (i.6).

Most experts strongly challenge the notion of absolute criteria when asked about their interpretation of what *good design* is today. As far as the product design market is concerned, *good de-*

sign is defined as the combination of functional, sign¹, and poetic values (i.7). However, in the contemporary context, the *goodness* of Design results from the interactions of artefacts within a system (i.6); this means that *good design* needs relative assessment based on contextual factors, such as historical conditions, market responsiveness, and innovative impact (i.1).

As we are going to discuss later, the definition of *good design* is very much connected with the question of the impact of Design on society judged on criteria like sustainability, justice, and societal progress (i.6); moreover, *good design* is defined as educational and devoted to the improvement of the quality of life (i.2). In general, it seems that *good design* is possible as far as a *good designer* is involved in the process; indeed, even if the characteristics of a good design product might change, what stays the same is the importance of a cultural awareness, curiosity, capability to listen without preconceptions, and storytelling abilities of the designer (i.4, i.8).

Problem-framing and problem-solving

The interviewed design experts pointed out an intricate correlation between problem-framing and -solving, challenging traditional boundaries and blurring the lines between analysis and action. In particular, the problem-framing process empowers designers to redefine the current drive towards a change of perspective in Design by providing them with tools and methodologies to tackle complex challenges more effectively, empathetically, and innovatively. It enables designers to move beyond surface-level solutions and create transformative change that positively impacts individuals, communities, and society at large. Indeed, problem-framing involves defining a system, often leading to a radical change in the system itself (reframing). Framing, and especially reframing, are crucial for contributing to sustainability (i.6, i.11). However, in general, the majority consider problem-framing to be of the greatest importance, especially in the current Design landscape, which deals with complex problems (i.1, i.6, i.11, i.12).

The ability to frame issues correctly is highlighted as a key skill, with an emphasis on addressing latent needs or desires (i.9), and, according to some, analysis is already a crucial step for/of problem-solving (i.12); indeed, some interviewees rejected the idea of

Note 1.
According to Baudrillard (1968), the value of an object in a system of objects is known as its sign value.

problem-solving as a late-stage action, emphasizing the relevance of problem-posing (framing) moments (i.5). However, some interviewees stress the fact that Design has to provide a solution, which means that the design process cannot be considered as completed if the problem-solving phase is not carried out (i.3, i.10). Looking at the issue from a different perspective, questioning the applicability of Design to problem-framing and problem-solving processes, it was highlighted that Design is applicable to both phases, but its efficacy depends on the designer's strengths, such as openness, creativity, and an exploratory attitude (i.8). It is interesting how the designer's capabilities, values, and positioning are considered important in this specific case.

The question on the problem-framing and -solving design phases emphasised a relevant and common negative opinion, almost a resentment, toward marketing and the impact this discipline has on Design. In large part, the interviewees, more or less explicitly, stressed the limits of Design Thinking, especially in the subjugation of Design to market dynamics (i.4, i.5, i.11, i.12). In particular, the market culture was distinguished from the Design Culture, where the latter is idea-driven (i.5). When talking of Italian Design Culture (*Cultura del Progetto*) the idea-driven approach seems to be crucial since Italian (design) companies are considered to be more capable of transferring the knowledge, understanding that a valuable solution for a particular issue can be used to address a different one; and this is a specific characteristic of the Italian non-positivist approach (i.9), as will be discussed in the following section.

Design Culture

Cultural influences on Design are dissected, with specific attention paid to the Italian Design Culture (*Cultura del Progetto*), highlighting the centrality of cultural contexts in shaping design philosophies. As Zurlo (2019) stated, depicting the current Italian Design panorama, the Italian-born *Cultura del Progetto* identifies Design as a cultural act and research for meaning in a systemic vision, useful to engage the listening skills and critical anticipation, and able to interpret society's problematic issues and translate them into objects and services.

Similarly, the interviewed experts stressed how cultural background influences design perspectives, with distinctions made, for

example, between Mediterranean and Calvinist-Protestant Europe (i.9, i.12). The importance of history and tradition was raised (i.1, i.4), in some cases, even in a protectionist sense (i.3).

In Italy, the way of doing Design is different from other ways because it has been primarily influenced by art, uses an anthropological approach, and the signifier becomes signified (i.8). However, some of these primary elements have been lost over time, perhaps because Italy has looked increasingly at Anglo-Saxon cultures, and Design became a marketing/market tool, as discussed in the previous section. However, the strong relationship between Design and industry was identified as the uniqueness of Italian Design Culture because of the collaboration between small- and medium-sized enterprises and designers (i.1, i.2, i.3, i.8, i.10). This relationship, even if it happened for the market, was idea-driven (more than market-driven) (i.5) and positively influenced by the lack of internal marketing research which led to the development of culture through objects (i.1). The fact that Italian Design is rooted in objects influenced non-experts' general perception of Design as often associated with expensive, aesthetically driven objects (i.8); but in light of the changes in the discipline, as previously discussed, a new narrative of Italian Design should emerge. The distinction between experts and non-experts is also relevant when talking of Design Culture (i.10), identifying the importance of education and Design schools in accelerating experiences and transferring (implicit) knowledge (i.6), and providing new designers with interpretive skills (i.12). Going back to the humanistic culture, designers (especially those who studied and practised in Italy) are *technology humanizers* (i.10) because they are capable of integrating technical and technological aspects with philosophical considerations.

Design's impact on society

Design has a pivotal role in shaping both material culture and societal values, impacting primarily but not exclusively on consumer behaviours (Latour, 1992). That Design has an impact is already clearly manifested, and for this reason, the interviewees considered not only the positive impacts but, more especially, the negatives, showing the importance of foreseeing and designing the solution impacts and providing reflections on how to pay attention to them. In connection with

the topic of Design education, some experts stressed the qualitative and interdisciplinary nature of Design in distinction from contemporary societies, which measure themselves through quantitative data (i.1). If we look at Design from a market-driven point of view, impacts on societies have been negative; also, when dealing with immateriality, the effects have been tangible, such as in the case of Digital and Service Design in which companies like Airbnb had unintended (and undesigned) side effects (i.8). This is why all the interviewees stressed the need for reframing and contributing to a shift from traditional capitalism to a circular economy and sustainable societies (i,2, i.8). To do so, the challenge designers should take is to put aside the prevailing user-centric approach, changing therefore not only the design process, but *who* and *when* designers design for (i.11). The need for taking into consideration a more extensive system (not only the user), and a moment in time in the future, stresses again the importance of engaging with different stakeholders and experts from different fields to address complex problems (i.1, i.6, i.9). At the same time, it was a warning about participatory processes that are only carried out to be compliant with political processes, and thus compromising the critical perspective (i.10). Some others expressed scepticism about the current narrative that places Design at the centre of historical achievements (i.12). Design's strengths include its effectiveness for futile things, its ability to address soft values, and its enduring impact on consumer behaviour.

10.3 Conclusion

The initial research question, *How does Design deal with complexity?* cannot find a neat answer from such limited research. Being aware of the complexity of the question, researchers understood that an overview of Design and its practices was needed.

First of all, Design is complex itself because it involves a multitude of applications. Evolving alongside technological advancements, the Design landscape undergoes a continuous metamorphosis, shifting from products to relations, contributing to the building of sociotechnical organizations. Design's systemic and strategic role

has been revealed, extending beyond product resolution to encompass broader dimensions.

Dealing with complexity requires meticulous activity in acquiring knowledge, information, and data, as well as elaborating insights and defining goals. In light of this, even if problem-framing has been defined as the most crucial design phase, looking at reframing as a central moment for understanding the system and already looking for non-conventional solutions, the interviewees pointed to the original Design purpose of projecting solutions. Commenting on this, if we rely on System- and Complex-Thinking (Ackoff, 1994; Bijl-Brouwer and Malcolm, 2020) because of their reflective nature, they do not always lead towards the quick generation of creative solutions; however, they are capable of equipping designers with the tools needed to comprehend the multifaceted interplay of elements within an existing system.

Going back to solutions, these might also respond to futile needs since Design does not necessarily engage with urgent societal issues. Paraphrasing what Molotch said in the early 2000s, the issue is not stopping doing what we like but doing it in a more responsible, sustainable, and ethical way (Molotch, 2005; Monteiro, 2019; Papanek, 2022; Norman, 2023). Italian Design Culture, which is continually evolving, is recognised among Design experts, but the lack of knowledge about the discipline's complexity and potentiality among the general public and – especially – relevant stakeholders (such as policymakers) results in its simplification and a lack of recognition.

The designer's stance and positioning emerged strongly in the conversations with the experts. Designers have to take on a sense of authorial responsibility, considering the long-term impact of their work, moving away from a profit-oriented user-centric approach towards a more meaningful, circular, and future-oriented Design philosophy. For this reason, Design has to be intended as a political act (Monteiro, 2019) defining what and how needs to be designed, and for and with whom. This stance seems to redefine what is considered *good design* today. Its definition concurs with the inclusion of other relevant stakeholder, humans and non-humans, shifting therefore from human-centredness to community-driven design (Manzini and Meroni, 2017), humanity-centred design (Norman, 2023) and even planet-centred design (Talgorn and Ullerup, 2023).

The limited scope of the research presented here strongly influences the typology of results; indeed, a new conceptual framework is not provided in this contribution because the research mainly addressed the foundations of the discipline, reframing them in the light of contemporaneity. The focus on Italian Design experts potentially limits the findings, especially in regard to other cultural and political contexts or design communities. Moreover, in the future, it might be interesting to interview young designers who have recently started their careers to fully capture the latest developments or emerging trends in Design theory and practice.

Designing transitions means looking at Design as a timeless practice, forever changing yet anchored by enduring technical qualities with soft skills, reflecting on the dynamic interplay of creativity, cultural nuances, and societal transition. It refers to the process of intentionally and strategically shaping changes (reframing) within systems, organizations, or societies toward more desirable futures. In order to do that, collaboration within the system is crucial; designing with other stakeholders (policymakers, businesses, civil society, and other academics) has not to be a formal duty but must promote mindset shifts, behaviour change, and the adoption of new norms and practices. And to begin with, a fundamental question needs to be asked: what kind of future do we want?

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