

# Designing ethically in a complex and changing world

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***Act in such a way that the consequences of your action are compatible with the permanence of authentic human life on earth (Hans Jonas, 1990).***

Design for public and social systems is a systemic design approach aimed at addressing complex societal challenges of communities, small or marginalized groups of citizens, and the public sector. Its ultimate goal is in improving the quality of life; facilitating social interactions and collaboration; and finding solutions that are environmentally, economically and socially sustainable, as well as inclusive and integrated with public policies and infrastructures. It has a transdisciplinary dimension characterized by a multiplicity of contributions from the disciplines of sociology, psychology, economics, political science, but also from design sub-disciplines (communication, service, interaction design, design for social innovation and sustainability...), and it is also closely connected to the digital evolution and the automation of processes generated by AI. Its material or immaterial outputs (systems of artefacts, spaces,

services, tools...) have a performative nature (in other words, they are active catalyzing agents) and are deliverers of a relational, intersubjective dimension, which is realized in different ways.

We find them in the forms of design collaboration, and in projects aimed at social inclusion; reducing inequalities; communication of public benefit, support, and care for the weakest groups; social innovation; co-design processes aimed at defining local and international policies with citizens; design for urban regeneration; design for the pluriverse; design that adopts a more-than-human approach; and post-colonial design.

This plural research dimension requires designers with the ability to connect and translate multiple knowledges in order to deal with complex realities or problems, which, as Morin argues (Morin, 2000, p. 7), are increasingly polydisciplinary, cross-cutting, multidimensional, transnational, global and planetary; but also needed are designers who are sensitive and aware of the uncertainty and changeability of the everyday circumstances in which we live.

To address this situation, according to Galimberti's thinking, it is necessary to overcome the mechanistic Cartesian paradigm, which sees humankind as the only subject in the face of an objectified nature, in order to adopt a systemic or complexity paradigm, which includes humans in the processes of nature, «because every phenomenon, including the human phenomenon, acts on the whole system, and the whole system acts on every phenomenon, including the human phenomenon» (Galimberti, 2023, p. 48). A testimony of this systemic phenomenology is the recent COVID-19 pandemic experience, which revealed a series of health, social, economic, and political emergencies on a global scale, as well as multiple ethical challenges at a general level (concerning the conduct of individuals) and at a specific level (in the exercise of everyday life within different spheres).

Therefore, introducing a reflection on the ethical dimension of design for public and social systems means addressing some questions concerning design action: What are we doing? How are we doing it? What is driving it? And for what purpose? And then, again, What must I do? Why do I do it? And why must I do it? What difference does my action make? These are, primarily, the questions of ethics (Fabris, 2014, p. 15).

Galimberti believes it is to take into consideration a threefold meaning of ethics because the models of the past no longer work. He introduced the concept of a *planetary ethics* because the existence of the entire world (animals, plants, biosphere) is at stake and it is crucial to consider those values and principles that are useful in addressing environmental problems from an ecosystem perspective; a *cosmopolitan ethics* based on the principle of kinship and in favour of cultural diversity and against all forms of discrimination; an *ethics of transcendence* which presupposes a radical cultural evolution and the overcoming the present situation to realize the possible (humans are incomplete and open to the possible) (2023, p. 56). As Galimberti asserts, quoting the thought of De Martino: the *ethos of transcendence* is the human experience par excellence as energy-transcending situations, i.e., as valorizing doing and, at the same time, operational valorization, (Galimberti, 2023, p. 436).

These reflections lead us back to the pragmatic dimension of design for public and social systems, as a field of possibilities in which the multiple dimensions of ethics constitute a challenge and an opportunity for real social, environmental, political and cultural change.

This volume tries to clarify what it means to design *ethically* in a complex world and how it can be done (according to which criteria) within a multifaceted reality where everything is interconnected and in continuous transformation.

### **Challenges and ethical principles**

An exercise of critical reflection that takes into consideration design actions and their consequences on our social, political, environmental, technological context is not new in design. There are many scholars and designers, from different design areas, who have made highly significant contributions that are directly or indirectly connected to ethics.

To mention just a few of them, we remember Thomas Maldonado's *La speranza progettuale. Ambiente e società* (1970); Victor Papanek's *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* (1974); Clive Dilnot's *Ethics in Design: 10 questions*, in *Design Studies: A Reader* (2009); Donald Norman's *Living with Complexity* (2010);

Tony Fry's *Design Futuring: Sustainability, Ethics, and New Practice* (2018); Elisabeth Resnick's *Developing Citizen Designers* (2021); Ezio Manzini's *Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation* (2015), and his more recent *Fare assieme. una nuova generazione di servizi pubblici collaborative* written with Michele D'Alena (2024); and equally relevant is the volume edited by Salvatore Zingale, *Design e alterità. Conoscere l'altro pensare il possibile* (2023).

All of these contributions attempt to identify shared criteria and principles for design and its applications, and to address a variety of complex and interrelated challenges that arise from diverse needs and interests of the socio-political, technological and cultural contexts.

A first element of complexity stems from the articulation of the different segments of society: citizens, government or non-profit institutions, public or private sectors, which can express multiple requirements or priorities. There is also a problem connected to their engagement and participation in the design process, without the exclusion or underrepresentation of marginalized people. From this perspective, it's essential to design inclusive and accessible artefact systems that guarantee an active participation of all involved stakeholders.

Another significant challenge is represented by a series of factors connected to power dynamics and control (political, economic, ideological...), that can influence decision-making and design outcomes.

In addition, the ability to anticipate future changes and design systems that are sustainable over the long term (both environmental-ly and socially), are tasks that require the ability to foresee the impact of design interventions on public and social systems, and managerial skills for monitoring and evaluating the use of resources and funds.

Further ethical challenges involve the capability to operate across diverse cultural contexts that are characterized by their own norms, values and reference systems. The designer needs to respect and integrate these cultural differences and sensibilities, facilitating the realization of design solutions that recognize the other than oneself, without imposing the cultural system of the majority. Here, interdisciplinary collaboration is fundamental to design holistic and effective solutions that need to be scalable and adaptable

to specific or changing environments and situations.

Not to be forgotten are the tasks connected to communication and multimedia and their ethical implications. The ethical dimension concerns the content and language of communication and the communication process (how communication is done). According to Baule, communication design has a significant role in the social construction of reality. The communication project is situated (strictly connected to territory) and through translation processes it contributes to the production of meanings; facilitates access to content; and encourages dialogue and the creation of common spaces for co-participation among different stakeholders (Baule, 2017, pp. 23-32).

Together with the communicative component of the project, as Bellino asserts, there are fundamental structural and systemic issues, involving technology distribution policies (who will be informed and who will not, who will be connected and who will be excluded: the digital *divide*) and those relating to media ownership and control (Bellino, 2010, p. 5). Finally, the ethical challenge also comprises the transformations brought about by the digital revolution and AI. Floridi affirms that AI is a new form of *artificial acting* which generates important ethical challenges, regarding autonomy, bias, explicability, fairness, privacy, accountability, transparency and trust, (Floridi, 2024, p. 93).

The self-regulation and autonomy of technological apparatuses risks subordinating human action and escaping human control. As Fabris asserts, the result for the human being is, on the one hand, a reduction in responsibility, and on the other, a growing sense of powerlessness (Fabris, 2020, p. 12).

In the face of this complex framework of varying challenges, ethical reflection on human action questions what the ethical principles are that can guide the transformations taking place. Philosophical reflection on human behaviour has identified a few shared values that we try to summarize here: the principles of *responsibility, respect and alterity, pluralism, dialogic confrontation*. We think these principles that are derived from *general ethics* can contribute to collective progress, and can orient design action in many concrete and contingent situations.

- The paradigm of *responsibility*, according to Jonas, constitutes the fundamental ethical principle that should guide our collective action (Jonas, 2009, p. 233). In the face of technological change, it is crucial to refer to a new kind of action that is inspired by a universal perspective: «act in such a way that the consequences of your action are compatible with the permanence of authentic human life on earth» (Jonas, 2009, p. 727). The attention to the scale of long-term consequences and to the irreversibility of our actions is the first duty of a *planetary ethics*.
- *Respect and alterity* principles are tightly connected to the concept of respect for identity (individual and collective) and to the capability to open ourselves to people or different cultures, who, as Simonotti asserts referring to Ricoeur, with their diversity, extraneousness, and in some cases incomprehensibility, in fact make possible the creation of new worlds, new meanings, and new unexplored spaces of sense (Simonotti, 2023, p. 9).
- *Thinking in the plural* means recognizing diversities and making them parts of oneself – it's an act of hospitality. To achieve this, it is indispensable that everyone makes an effort at self-criticism, sustaining a concrete multicultural dialogue and continuous processes of integration and mutual reinforcement. Respect, alterity and pluralism are the duties of a *cosmopolitan ethics*.
- *Dialogic confrontation* takes place through translation processes. To translate is not simply to transfer or mediate contents and significances, it also means to act on a dialogical level within a cultural pluralism. As Simonotti reminds us, in the act of translation there is a fusion of horizons; the effective participation in a common sense; the comparison and integration of different perspectives, beyond one's own particularity and that of others (Simonotti, 2023, pp. 126-127). Dialogic confrontation corresponds to a valorizing action and is an expression of the *ethos of transcendence*. It is what can help the whole of humanity make what is possible become real from a planetary ecosystem perspective.

## **Applied ethics for the design for public and social systems**

If theoretical reflections of general ethics are useful to frame the challenges and the reference principles for the design for public and social systems, referring to concrete cases and the so-called applied ethics tries to give an answer to the real questions that arise in the various fields of design action. The idea is to create a connection between general principles and applied ethics to bring out a virtuous circle between a series of reference values and their concrete experimentation within diversified contexts subjected to continuous transformations and urgent questions.

What challenges in designing ethically does design for public and social systems face? How do designers design ethically in the real world? Can designers become effective agents of transformation and social change? Who are the involved social actors? What kind of impact and effects within public and social system do they produce? How can we recognize ethical design practices that realize structural changes? How can digital environments and platforms contribute to the strengthening of an ethical approach to the design project?

If, as Silvia Pizzoccaro quotes, «A pluriversal design practice posits multiple worldviews and multiple lived experiences to inform the design field. Moreover, it advocates a relational view of situations in which the design responses to interdependent natural, social, economic, and technical systems, are specific and many forms of design practice may coexist» (Noel *et al.*, 2023, p. 183). This relational nature of design and the importance of lived experiences that inform design are clearly described in the two cases of the Off Campuses of Politecnico di Milano described by Davide Fassi and Francesco Vergani, and by Virginia Tassinari, Francesca Piredda and Elettra Panepinto; and in the Wish Mi project presented by Valeria Bucchetti.

Designers' reflection with respect to the theme of otherness, as Salvatore Zingale suggests, can focus on tools and actions «we are not interested here in finding an answer, but in highlighting how to engage design research on alterity means to urge the designer's mind to reflect on what tools and what actions need to be elaborated to cultivate relations with the alterities of the contemporary world

and to grasp in this alterity universes of meaning that would otherwise not be explored». This is represented by the research on the meaning of queer city presented by Laura Galluzzo, and in the chapter by Umberto Tolino on a reflection on methods and approaches in Public Sector Communication.

In the parallelism between translation and social design offered by Elena Caratti, «similarly to social design and design for social innovation, translation is a combination of different factors: a strong cultural component connected to Humanities, operational knowledge supported by technology, creativity, within a broader context that reflects on its processes from a pragmatic point of view», one can also frame the contribution of Daniela Calabi who sees design as an interesting tool for territories to work with and through, as well as Anna Anzani and Ada Piselli's description of the meaning of care and the role of design in the conversion of abandoned spaces in a way that is not so different from translation.

And finally, following James Postell's wish that «designers, educators, and institutions should never need reminding of the need to collaboratively contribute to the cultivation of shared social responsibility. The dynamic nature of the ethical dimension in IxD urges designers, students, and institutions to remain agile and responsive to an evolving societal, technological, and cultural context», Martina Motta and Rachele Didero question the intersection of new technologies, the fashion system, and ethics.

### **Towards a multi-voiced practical wisdom**

This book aspires to be a contribution that doesn't pretend to synthesize all aspects of the relationship between ethics and the design for public and social systems. It is a first thematic framing that helps to understand the correlation between the principles of general ethics and the complexity of applied ethics; its goal is in providing an opportunity for cultural exchange and collective dialogue.

The publication aims to submit a series of critical reflections and design projects, which translate the will to respond, from an ethical point of view, to the multidimensional aspects of our time.

The aim is not only to highlight the surface or material consistency of the devices, artefacts, and designed spaces (descriptive



hypothesis), but to offer a series of critical considerations on their substantive system-level effects, with the recognition of the importance of the Other as *Other* (Ricoeur, 2001) and the awareness of the interdependence between artefacts, individuals, societies, governments, institutions, and the planetary ecosystem (a reflexive hypothesis according to an ethics of plurality). In the current situation, the recourse to the ancient conception of *practical wisdom* (the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*), seems to be the right direction to take. It is a virtuous circle where the principles of general ethics (theoretical-explanatory knowledge) and the practical-situational knowledge of applied ethics converge, promoting a critical dialogue in the public sphere.

*Phronesis* and negotiation through dialogue can help us to identify common and shared orientations of meaning in an increasingly complex world; to define possible lines of conduct; and to identify specific actions in the different contexts of design for public and social systems.

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