

7. The first supper of the School of Design. The theatricality of the set up between sound design and interactive dimension

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7.1 Setup, new technologies, and theatricality

While considering the project for the exhibition celebrating the 30th anniversary of the School of Design, with Paola Bertola and Giampiero Bosoni, it occurred to me to construct a sort of theatrical stage within the historical library to represent the genesis of the school and let the public into the heart of that flurry of ideas that was the basis of the new school: a scene with an imaginary dialogue between the founding masters, who are gathered around a table in a utopian *first supper*, situated in a timeless dimension. As such, I created portraits of Gio Ponti, Franco Albini, Carlo De Carli, Marco Zanuso, Achille Castiglioni, Vittoriano Viganò, Alberto Rosselli and Raffaella Crespi, conceptually placing them at a table laid with a Dantesque banquet, imagining them engaged in a discussion of a wide variety of themes related to the world of design. The identity of the schools – and that of Italian and Milanese design in particular – is made up of people, visions and ideas, so who better, then, than these great masters to celebrate their founding?

The central theme of the exhibition is therefore the idea of theatricality, involving the spectator in a show through choral storytelling. Although the idea of the exhibition initially came about as an educational tool aimed primarily at students – with the intention of evoking the genesis of the school through devices, documents, stories and visual presentations of images, collections and documents – it then transformed into an experience open to a wider audience of visitors, to present the protagonists of design history in an encounter that has a dreamlike quality but which is also extremely tangible. It is useful for transmitting the value of dialogue and exchange as an essential starting point in the conception and implementation of design projects.

In fact, I believe that, in design, it is the content of the vision that generates behaviours and forms, and that this is only possible within the horizon of a dialectical

concept made up of intersections and above all encounters. We therefore wanted to lead guests to sit conceptually at this dynamic table, which they themselves are called on to activate on a case by case basis, approaching the topic with empathy and participating in an idealised discussion in which the great protagonists discuss various central issues concerning the school. The result is a theatrical and participatory space designed to allow people to enter into a story, in which the exhibition experience opens up further paths of in-depth considerations.

Starting from the conviction that the exhibition space today is called on to respond not only to the need to exhibit, but also to give voice to memorable stories, there are two aspects of the *Design Convivio* set-up that deserve further exploration: the use of sound, in particular, and in a broader sense, the interactive quality of this installation intervention.

It is well known that in the design of exhibition spaces, audio and also video solutions are valid tools for making environments as en-

Sketch di Ico Migliore
dell'installazione *Design Convivio*.
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gaging and immersive as possible. With these systems, it is possible to transmit crucial information to accompany visitors during their visit in an extremely effective way. It is even more well-known, since each of us will have experienced it during our own interactions with museums and cultural spaces, that visitors remember more information by listening to an audio track rather than just reading the captions. For this reason, the theme of multimedia within museums is very topical and of fundamental importance. In other words, precisely because our way of learning has become multisensory, to all intents and purposes, places of culture should also be increasingly oriented in this direction, to allow music, words and sounds to be *heard*. In the field of museography, these changes can be implemented both in practices and in exhibition methods by actively involving the public, and in the organisation of spaces, which must necessarily be shaped to favour the entry of sound, the new protagonist of the scene. This is because the disruptive entry of technology into the construction of exhibition paths has led not only to new ways of content being used by visitors, but it has also brought about significant changes in the expertise required of the designer to manage the overall storytelling system. This does not mean designing entertainment in the most superficial sense of the term, but challenging ourselves with the idea of building knowledge and awareness, managing to enter into dialogue and interact with the most diverse audiences. In this scenario,

Illustrazione di Achille Castiglioni,
realizzata da Ico Migliore.
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new technologies play a fundamental role in expanding the museum experience. I like to imagine that the museum of the future will be a sort of *augmented museum*: a place dedicated not only to a passive encounter with the hieratic beauty of the artistic artefact, but a place almost devoid of perceptual boundaries where, by smelling scents and touching materials and objects with their hands, visitors will be able to have a much more concrete experience. There is, however, some evidence of just how much this theme affects the majority of younger visitors, even before physically approaching the museum. According to data reported in *Science and technology are the future of museums*, a study by IGT, a leading company for new gamification technologies, for 80% of visitors under 35 (the so-called Millennials and Gen Z) the priority is for the

museum to be interactive and to use integrated technologies. We also know that, for at least 42% of young people, the museum experience begins at home, by visiting its social media channels and website, this research being aimed at understanding how structures apply technology, from primary services to installations.

In these places, in fact, technology represents a bridge that can strengthen the connection between visitors, the space and the contents on display, which the museum project aims to create. The exhibition thus entrusts the audience with its interpretation, allowing them to reflect on it, in what could be called a mirroring effect, that is, a game of reflections and reversals of the viewpoint that makes the role of the viewer and those being watched ambiguous. Visitors are no longer *in front* of something, but *inside* the scene.

That is why, when we began the project for *Design Convivio*, we preferred to avoid telling a narrative of the genesis of the Politecnico di Milano's School of Design that would be a neutral and flat chronological sequence of choices and historical events, preferring instead a staging formula capable of expressing the sensory, even synesthetic, component to interact with an exhibition space capable of determining its form according to the narrative we wanted to construct. It is a place where we can meet and come together, made even more familiar by the voices of Gianni Biondillo, Paola Albini and other professional actors, as well as the background, where it is possible to distinguish the acoustic souvenir of the dishes on the set table in all the noises, suggesting a convivial and community-centric context.

Illuminated words, suspended at full height in the library, echo the protagonists' dialogues, recalling their fundamental role in shaping not only iconic projects and objects in the history of design, but the very language of design and its meanings. Key words on which the

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cultural and scientific vision behind the creation of the new course of study was based are announced by Raffaella Crespi, the youngest of the eight protagonists and the only woman. It was she, together with Tomás Maldonado, who transferred to the Politecnico in 1984, who started the work of the commission *Contributions to the formation of the degree course in Industrial Design and Furniture* that same year, embarking on the path of institutionalising design at the Politecnico di Milano.

At the centre of the installation are eight protagonists of the history of design, but that's not all: eight different themes wait to be selected by visitors, who activate an orchestra of questions and answers among the great protagonists of this first supper by touching the laid table with their hands. In other words, the acoustic aspect and the interactive dimension – opened up by the question and answer game activated by the viewer – were the two main driving forces for creating the right dramaturgy of the place.

7.2 Interactivity as a place of learning

Falk and Dierking are American researchers who have worked on informal learning modalities for years, with a focus on the museum field (in addition to being director of the Institute for Learning Innovation, Falk shares the title of Emeritus Professor of Free-Choice Learning at Oregon State University with Dierking. This latter is also Associate Dean for Research at Oregon College of Education). Regarding their research, although they were not the first to talk about *lifelong learning* (Falk & Dierking, 2000), it is important to recognise their crucial contribution to the reinvigoration of this concept, which states that learning is a continuous process that happens everywhere, at all times and throughout life. According to the pair of scholars, there are three contexts that affect the learning process at the museum: the personal one (which consists of motivation, expectations, existing knowledge, interests), the sociocultural one and finally the physical one.

Of course, from the designer's point of view, the physical context is important to the extent that it is able to condition and generate new behaviours: when the environment is welcoming, when the visitor seems

safe and well oriented, it raises their capacity for perception and, therefore, they learn better. In this sense, the role of the exhibition remains a central element of the experience and is very important. The visitor always has the possibility of reaching the same information using the computer, or reading at home or elsewhere, but coming into contact with real objects within an environment designed for a multisensory experience is something that can only be experienced in museums.

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Returning to the project for *Design Convivio*, the application of the principle of interactivity was essentially based on the conviction of the effectiveness of emotional contribution – that is, that aspect of a private and subjective nature that leverages memories, feelings and



past experiences – within the learning process. It is a central theme for us, since we found ourselves having to represent the genesis of a school institution, traditionally associated with the idea of teaching by means of imitation and repetition, and on the other hand we wanted to convey the idea of a new kind of teaching, based on the stimulation of curiosity and the interaction of the student/visitor in order to develop their own personal design capacity. In this intervention, therefore, the acoustic design component helped to give new life to this 30-year history, representing a moment of celebration of the goals achieved and a tribute to all those who have contributed to the establishment and development of design at the Politecnico di Milano.

The Castiglionis were certainly precursors in this area. Achille, together with his brothers Pier Giacomo and Livio, had already had the opportunity to experiment with design techniques for exhibition space that involved a considerable use of sound. Just think of the design of *The Waterways from Milan to the Sea*, the extraordinary exhibition on the Navigable Canals promoted by the Municipality of Milan in 1963, whose unique path in the halls of the Palazzo Reale in Milan consisted of narrow wooden walkways on which – according to anecdotes – vis-

itors often stumbled. The exhibition was intended to bring the serious problems of traffic circulation in Lombardy to the public's attention. The entire installation, from the walls to the floor, was made with wooden boards in order to recreate the atmosphere of the river world. The final part of the project was set up in the Sala delle Cariatidi, where there was a passage defined by sloping walls that scenographically evoked a sort of navigable canal. In the words of Achille Castiglioni, the design of an obligatory path was an indispensable element in a conceptual and didactic exhibition to involve the visitor not only intellectually but above all corporeally in a journey within the story.

Design Convivio
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Today, when we talk about audio in relation to museum spaces, we mean noises, sounds, music and voices. Therefore, we cannot exempt ourselves from referring to the first installations that revealed the great attractive power of multisensory and sound identification, that is, theme parks, which came about in America in

the early 1950s, and in their historical antecedents, that is, the Universal Exhibitions of the 19th century and in the current Expos. These types of set-ups «shared the idea of encapsulating the reconstruction of worlds, realities and *other* atmospheres in a limited space, to raise awareness of, or even just show, places, cultures and technologies of distant civilisations, associated with the idea of play and fun» (Perrotta, 2007). And when theme parks reached the peak of their development in the 1960s, above all through the



use of special effects, including sound effects, they became a threat to museums, which were experiencing a phase of decline in terms of attractiveness to the public. In the early 1950s «only a few museums

could compete with the appeal of theme parks, where the poor quality of content was amply compensated by the high technological standards of the exhibition systems» (Perrotta, 2007).

The digital agility of the tools available to designers today has undoubtedly given exhibition design a new possibility. This is an opportunity for renewal that also contains a risk: that the potential of spatial editing is transformed into an unbalanced superposition of devices that primarily address the visitor's emotional sphere, adopting a level of superficial empathy, ensuring the wow effect and with it also the success of the entertainment value of the set-up, but disregarding evolutionary and cultural aspects.

7.3 From funfair museums to narrative spaces

The phenomenon described is what we like to call a *funfair museum*. The answer to this type of *impasse* is, from our point of view, represented by the possibility of expanding empathic awareness with content on the part of the visitor, guided towards greater complexity by the museum path while always remaining usable.

From our perspective, between the two opposing poles – that of the traditional *nail-in-the-wall* museum and that of the spectacular *funfair museum* – it is necessary to introduce a third way, in which the resources put into play by new technologies are not ends in themselves but are functional to the message and narrative borne by each arrangement of interiors. That is why in recent years we have acted with the aim of designing museums and exhibition or cultural spaces that we describe as *narrative*, participatory, empathetic and memorable places people to want to enter and then return to, aspiring to give rise to new interests and insights.

A new conception of places of culture and aggregation has formed from these reflections, which revolves around the concept that we like to define as the *Museum Seed*, an effective formula for transmitting the idea of the place of culture that, like a seed, must be able to graft itself into the urban and social fabric of the surrounding territory to become an activator of new behaviours. Therefore, this kind of museum,

far from being a «dingy place with different kinds of bits» (Caton, 2003), becomes a dynamic system that is permeable and open to cross-fertilisation, while being capable of building awareness and community. It is place where all the elements of the project feature a common thread, a visit to which is as exciting as going to the theatre, so much so that – just as in the tradition of ancient Greek theatre – it is possible to experience that feeling of liberation, of the release of our own energies, emotions and moods that we call catharsis.

The new museum concept that we propose therefore aims to offer a vision of the future of the design of cultural spaces. To the extent that inhabiting cultural spaces today requires a new design approach capable of integrating architectural, design and graphic design in an encounter with the evolution of technologies, neuroscience and artificial intelligence, the museum of the future, like a seed, grows, transforms and extends into its *augmented* version, which is in constant evolution. Moving between conservation and narrative, it opens up to new forms of accessibility and inclusion.

That is why, together with Mara Servetto, in recent years we have acted with the aim of conceiving museums and exhibition or cultural spaces that we define as *narrative*, participatory, empathetic and memorable places in which people are hosted and to which they want to return, with the goal of giving rise to new interests and insights. Finally, in our manifesto *Museum Seed. The Futurability of Cultural Places* (Milgiore & Servetto, 2024), we brought together eight points that define the characteristics of this new museum as an institution that is multiple things at the same time: a place whose form is derived from its contents and the emotions it induces (*Form Follows Content and Emotions*); a content producer, that is, a dynamic, growing system capable of expanding the potential of content and curatorship (*Museum as Content Producer*); a bearer of innovation, new awareness and new behaviours (*Innovation Guarantor*); a place of experimentation through neurosciences and new technologies (*Expanded Frame*); an accessible space for care, innovation and social sustainability, capable of soliciting active participation (*Museum as Healing Place*); a place that, as a guest on the urban horizon, becomes its lifeblood, helping to design the city as a *collective home* (*Urban Nesting*); a promoter of business culture, a builder of brand identities and therefore a witness

of social and cultural evolution (From Hidden Archive to Dynamic Cultural Seed); a living organism that expands and contracts according to its needs (Museum as Living Organism).

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