

20. Every Student Is, in Their Own Way, a Master

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One of the things that always stimulated me and, consequently, bound me to Alberto Seassaro for nearly thirty years was his way of transmitting knowledge, in teaching, to students.

Over more than forty years, Alberto succeeded in bequeathing the deep sense of design as a project discipline that *enlists* countless other, ever-evolving disciplines.

His courses, first at the Faculty of Architecture and later at the Faculty of Design, were focused on the education and growth of each person, of each individual student, capturing and developing their personal essence, using methods rooted in theoretical tradition and, at the same time, experience-based methods, with frameworks and principles as a background score and, in the foreground, examples, wide-ranging culture, citations, and metaphors.

In his courses, literature, philosophy, anthropology, history, geography, the arts, and languages fostered the development of creative thought marked by the wisdom and quality of sound designing.

Nor was this aim pursued by relying solely on bibliographic references and exercises as ends in themselves. He asked of students a

critical maturity, and the book was a tool that, together with many others, was meant to raise the quality of the knowledge embedded in projects, whose unfolding had to excel in *concept* as much as in technical and executive quality.

His thinking on pedagogy evolved over the years yet retained certain lines that allow me, with complete ease, to call it the *Seassaro method for teaching design*. A way of teaching that, above all when I was a student, struck me deeply, finding it different from all the other courses I was taking in the Faculty of Architecture in the mid-1980s.

I cannot forget the seminar *Cultura e progetto della luce* [Culture and the Design of Light] within his course *Tecnica ed economia della produzione edilizia* [Technology and Economics of Building Production], which immediately revealed itself as a concentrate of multidisciplinary knowledge deemed the minimum necessary foundation for designing, and for realizing what had been designed, using that method of *learning by doing* that would become the central feature of the teaching in the Faculty of Design, where *learning by doing* consisted precisely of theoretical instruction and direct practical experience.

In the 1980s the *Industrial Design* courses within the Faculty of Architecture were very few, and those I had encountered were set up in a wholly different way. Some were conducted through simple didactic exercises of small-scale design, like those taught by Raffaella Crespi, who placed enormous emphasis on her own bibliography. By contrast, Marco Zanuso's were important, complex, and sophisticated. One became an excellent designer, skillfully prepared through non-trivial exercises in both architecture and design, but, as in certain courses in *Architectural Design and Composition*, you had to follow the *verb* and become a disciple of the instructor. Achille Castiglioni, with his non-authoritarian presence, absolutely simple and direct, was the professor of a *thousand secrets* of good designing, a figure of great experience with whom it was a pleasure to engage without any fear. Courses by important masters, yet which to me seemed aimed at training more or less expert *artisans of design*.

Before Alberto Seassaro's seminar I had not encountered a course endowed with the emotional sensitivity needed to make one perceive design as a discipline possessed of the *cultural depth* required to form designers with authentic character and personality, resilient and able

to face challenges with their own integrity and, above all, with the capacity to look beyond what exists, in search of new ideas and solutions, moving beyond the drawing and modelling of artefacts and products.

Alberto Seassaro's course addressed a fundamental element for both architecture and design, namely *lighting*, and, looking beyond the merely technical aspects, it brought to the fore the high symbolic and metaphorical contents it bears in the arts, in philosophy, and in theology, so as to construct a course of study on a theme only apparently *abstract*.

The course offered direct, cross-cutting experiences, using light to *speak about product* with Piero Castiglioni, and about his lamp Scintilla, released in 1972 by Fontana Arte and now an icon of minimalist design. It was presented at the seminar as a «lamp not to be looked at, blinding like sunlight», and here I leave one to infer the debate, the exchange, and the metaphors about light not to be looked at.

But light was also a way to discuss cutting-edge technology, thanks to contributions from the *Centro Elettrotecnico Sperimentale Italiano* (C.E.S.I.) in Milan on Via Rubattino, where the new technologies of fiber optics, then still experimental, could carry light from a distant source through tubes, *as if it were water*. And here too I leave it to the reader to imagine the debate generated by the encounter between the most technological questions and the metaphorical visions surrounding light. Light was also proposed as *environment*, as a *shaper of places*, through the experience of Gabriele Amadori, a committed scenographer who, together with Alberto Seassaro, introduced the term *synesthesia* as the capacity, more or less voluntary, to involve different senses in the perception of an event. A term new to us, on which Alberto Seassaro had already worked in the 1960s in his degree thesis, and one that proved absolutely disruptive for those embarking on design.

On this concept of synesthesia, Alberto Seassaro proposed designing and building a kaleidoscope as a machine for manipulating and shaping light. An extraordinary object for *design* pedagogy, capable of catalyzing visions and ideas and, if properly understood, of testing students through projects of broad cultural scope and thus drawing out the soul and personality of the person designing.

The second exercise was equally sophisticated. The student was asked to create a *luminous event* in time and space. If the time variable

could be freely defined, the space, by contrast, was given and had to take the form of a cube with a base module of one meter. Monumental works were presented, cubes over two meters on a side whose events bore learned metaphors and allusions, ranging from a UV-light interpretation of Bruno Munari's *drop* to the design and colors of the then-new Memphis, all the way to replicas of nature with reproductions of lightning and the aurora borealis.

A splendid and *luminous* beginning for what became one of the most iconic courses in the *Industrial Design* track within the Degree Course in *Architecture* and, for a few years, within the Faculty of Design at Politecnico di Milano. It was an extraordinary success and a profound satisfaction that Alberto Seassaro, with the deepest values typical of a generation raised in debate and contestation, including political, savored fully.

A strongly multidisciplinary pedagogy, then, grown over time and aimed at equipping the student with the knowledge needed to provide a solid and autonomous cultural foundation and, above all, a critical mind of their own, not divorced from a design capacity that did not shy away from managing the technical dimension.

Learning by doing found in Alberto Seassaro's teaching a way to form designers with an identity of their own, yet also with the competencies suited to working in teams within a climate of continual exchange; a value that left students with the sense of having attained a maturity that went beyond the mere experience needed to pass an exam.

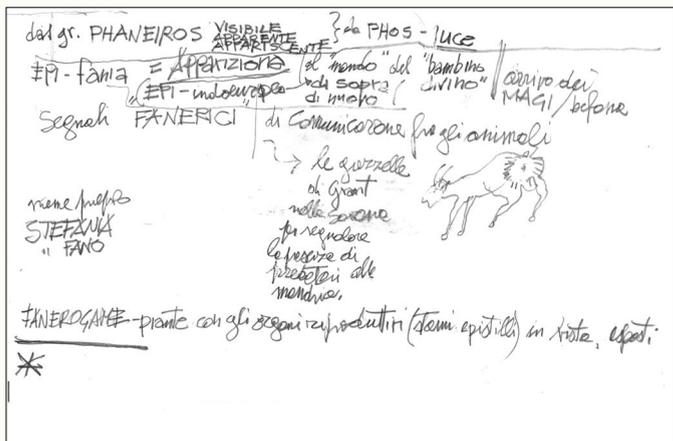
This pedagogical approach, which I experienced in 1987 as a student and subsequently saw evolve while for many years working alongside Alberto Seassaro as a teaching assistant, never changed its substance; it was instead the object of continual adjustment and integration, enriched by his research on light. One of the linchpins of this research was an etymological itinerary that probed ever more deeply the truest and most profound meaning of the word *light* and the constellation of terms that denote luminous phenomena, touching the scientific, cultural, and anthropological aspects of different human civilizations. Studies that Alberto Seassaro summarized and gathered into two beautiful tools which, together with Claudio Conio (my colleague through many long years of assisting), we iconically called *la piramide* [the pyramid] and *i papiri* [the papyri].

Figure 1. Notes for the *Lighting design* course.

La piramide is an extraordinary, geometric synthesis of all the knowledge that revolves around light, which Alberto Seassaro

distilled into a beautiful graphic work reproduced below. A small, synoptic chart, compact yet dense with marks and annotations, arranged in a logical circuit wholly descriptive of this energy that enables living beings to see.

The *papiri* [1](#) [2](#), study diagrams drawn on long strips of sheets glued together, on



which Alberto Seassaro, in a vast domino, lists meanings and the historical and anthropological considerations of various civilizations concerning light. Eight sheets of differing lengths that probably generated the *Piramide*.

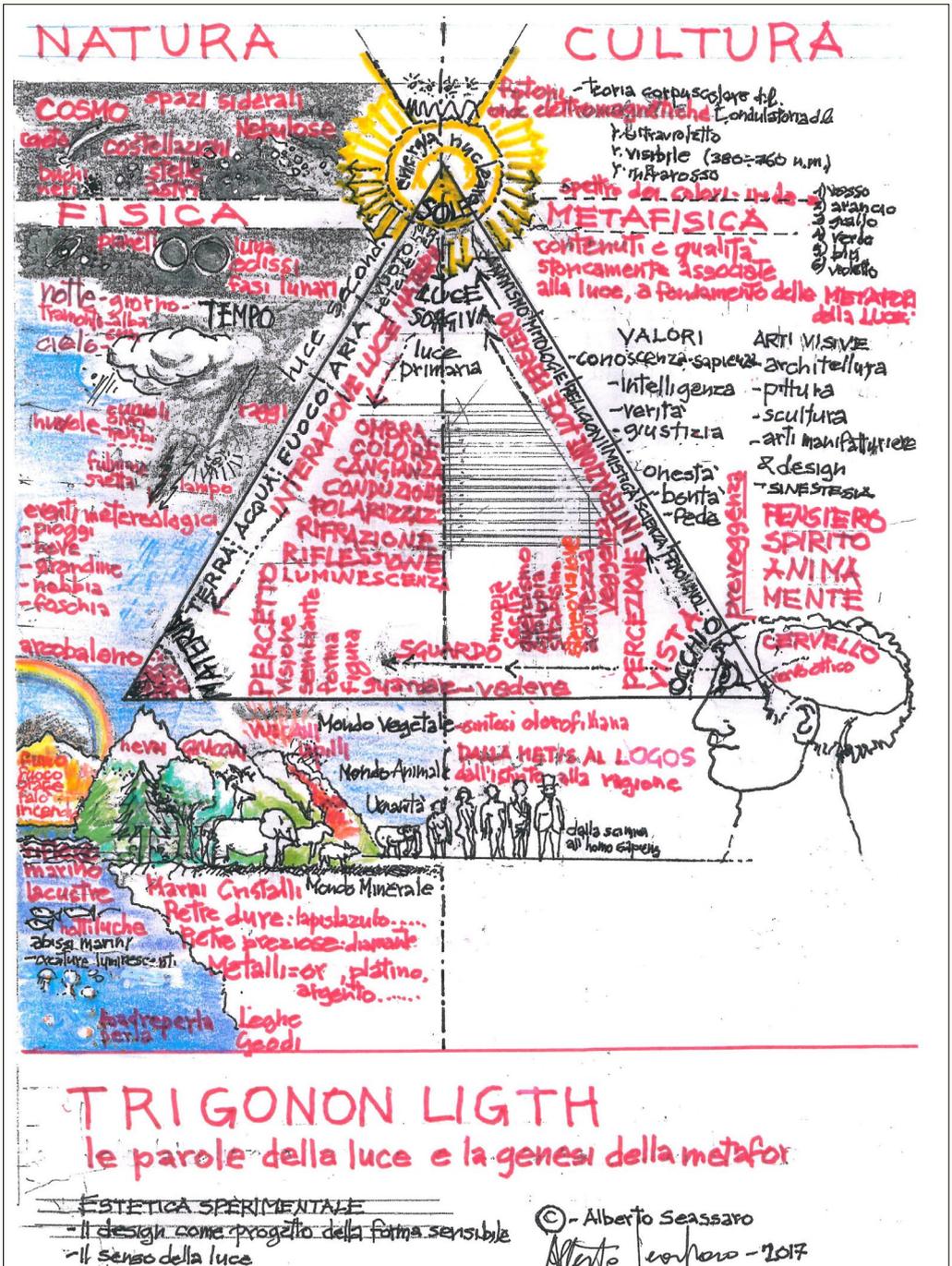


- 1. Radici etimologiche vocaboli della luce. [Document](#) →



- 2. Radici etimologiche vocaboli della luce. [Document](#) →

A final thought on Alberto Seassaro, as instructor and as Dean. By steadfastly supporting the moral and educational growth of students, he also conveyed to them an understanding of the political dimensions that accompany the evolution of the university. Unforgettable was the class in which he explained the 3+2 university reform – introducing the first level of *Laurea triennale* [three-year first-cycle degree] and the second level of *Laurea specialistica o magistrale* [second-cycle master's degree], established by DM 509/99 and later amended by DM 270/04. Breaking off the lecture, he delivered an extended address that began from *Articolo 33* [Article 33] of the Constitution and carefully laid out the details of that reform for the students, showing deep respect and consideration for them, so that they might be aware, also on the political plane, of the transformations under way in the place where they were being formed and might become protagonists of those changes, to become, each in their own way, young Masters of design [3](#).



3. Progetto non finito del Manifesto per il Corso di Culture della luce.

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