

Creating a design department. The bond and influence of Italian culture.

(Medardo Chiapponi)

A tradition such as that of Italian design is certainly an important point of departure for creating a new design department. To borrow the effective image attributed to the medieval neo-Platonic philosopher Bernard de Chartres, one might say that it is somewhat like "dwarfs seated upon the shoulders of giants". The reason is that the culture of design is cumulative and interrelated. Even the most extreme innovations in material culture and design never completely and instantly replace what came before: they are added to it and trigger progressive processes of transformation, which can pick up ideas and solutions from the past which had seemed abandoned forever. In addition, the culture of design integrates and gives specific form to many other cultures that can count on significant inertia, from the formal/esthetic culture to the technological and manufacturing culture that underlie individual and collective lifestyles. It thus seems appropriate to look to the past so that we might be adequately prepared to deal with the present and future, because "changes in paradigm" are far less frequent and the processes they undergo are far more gradual than might be supposed from a superficial and inappropriate generalization of the theories of Thomas Kuhn.

To reclaim and advance the tradition of Italian design, it must necessarily be put in its appropriate historical context; it is important to look beyond the myth to avoid looking with prejudice to understand what really took place; how the protagonists of that extraordinary phase in the history of design were able to interpret their historical context, to make the best use of the cultural instruments at their disposal and find excellent responses to the problems they faced. And finally, it is important to decide how this may be translated into an educational and research system within a university.

The problem is not a new one: there are enlightening examples of how questions of this nature have been dealt with in experiences

that later became models or at least points of reference for the organization of all design schools. One of these examples is the historical analysis and debate which took place at the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm on the subject of the Bauhaus. The Ulm School, which was deeply rooted in the Bauhaus tradition since its very creation, was faced from the start with the problem of how to transfer this tradition into a nascent reality. Max Bill, the first director of the school, brought his personal experience as a former Bauhaus student to the task; but he also took it upon himself from the very beginning to correspond with Walter Gropius about the educational program; he constantly exchanged information and opinions with László Moholy-Nagy, the founder and director of the "New Bauhaus" founded in the United States in 1937, later known as the "School of Design" (1939-1944) and successively as the "Institute of Design" (after 1946). The dialogue continued with Serge Chermayeff when he succeeded Moholy-Nagy. Later, the historical analysis of the real Bauhaus and the cultural roots of its educational program, the end of the Bauhaus myth, the identification of its complex articulation of phases and protagonists, profoundly involved the teachers at the Ulm School, especially Tomás Maldonado, and these were among the factors that led Max Bill to step aside in 1962 in favor of the younger teachers.

It is interesting to note the coherence with which Maldonado continued to consider it necessary to place a school in its historical context and to refuse the idea of myth, even as he later conducted a retrospective analysis of the Ulm experience, in which he played a leading role.

In our case however, there is an additional step to consider, which is not devoid of consequences. In our case, we are not talking about a new design department that is just being founded and must contend with the tradition of an earlier design school. The department was founded within a context that did not have specific university programs dedicated to design; but it did develop, in the profession and in the relationship with manufacturers, the experience of Italian design whose significance is internationally recognized. It is therefore worthwhile to recall some of the essential characteristics of the Italian design experience to understand if and how it is possible and appropriate to transform them into the

foundations for a new university design department, which in turn might contribute to the development of a new Italian design.

Though it is difficult to separate and identify every single element of Italian design and of the idea of Italian design in the world, what is universally recognized as characteristic is its particular sensitivity towards the formal/esthetic aspects of design and a remarkable inclination towards "creativity". These characteristics are much easier to understand intuitively than to explain analytically. Take the most common clichés about how Italian design produces "beautiful" and "imaginative" things whereas, for example, German design produces "solid" objects that guarantee that they will work because the Germans are better at using technology. Like all clichés these too contain some elements of truth though they are by no means completely true.

To oversimplify a complex reality, we can identify two distinct phases in Italian design. In the first, the theories and practice of art, especially Futurism, chose to become contaminated by design and many other types of culture. The protagonists of that phase of Italian design could rely on a profound and widespread humanistic culture; the inspiration they derived from routine familiarity with an immense historical and cultural heritage concentrated in a very restricted space; an incisive ability to innovate the "*domestic landscape*"; the productive relationship with a superior-quality crafting industry and manufacturers who were sensitive to the role of design, and capable of interpreting their social role (an exemplary case is that of Adriano Olivetti); an advanced technological culture (micro-mechanical technology, the nascent information and communication technology and especially the technology of polymers which have had a remarkable surge in applications starting with the Nobel prize for chemistry awarded to Giulio Natta in 1963 for his works on polyethylene).

At that moment in history, several important manufacturers such as Pirelli, for example, asked designers to experiment freely with new materials and discover possible applications, so that these materials might become familiar to the public at large and be accepted culturally, in everyday life. This experimentation, free of technical or pressing economic constraints, helped to develop the "inventiveness" that is generally recognized as yet another

characteristic of Italian design. It is interesting to note the affinity with the present, when designers are being asked to build application scenarios and favor the diffusion of forthcoming technologies such as micro or nano-technologies.

At a later phase the prevailing currents in Italian design, in particular the current that went under the name of radical design, in their bitter criticism of Rationalist design and the objects of mass production, which they considered to be cold and anonymous, emphasized (and in my opinion, over-emphasized) the aspects closest to art and craftsmanship, limiting their fields of action, and in the end creating what were prevalently luxury objects for a restricted circle of users. In extreme synthesis one might say that if initially it was art that approached design, because previous artistic experience was applied to the field, or because many of its protagonists had personal contact with art, it was design that later moved closer to art to the point of becoming confused with it.

In addition to the university's tradition of debating design, just as important and perhaps even more so, are the general cultural tradition, a widespread manufacturing capability based on a superior quality of craftsmanship in many fields (from woodworking, to glass, ceramics, agricultural mechanics, and the production of motorcycles and automobiles) and the visual culture stimulated by a centuries-long familiarity with works of art (painting, sculpture, architecture as well as literature, music, theatre). All these contextual factors have contributed to making a mass phenomenon out of the attention to formal factors; they helped to foster the birth and development of Italian design, shaping it and contributing in a wider sense to the education of designers, which depended solely on universities in other contexts.

Therefore there are reasons behind the success of experiences such as Italian design that are not directly related to education and may not be reproduced in the program of a university design department. I refer to the relationship between designers and manufacturers, which is often personal and not filtered by professional or management structures; to the concentration, in the same place and at specific moments in history, of cultural institutions (La Triennale di Milano), commercial establishments (la Rinascente), magazines (Domus, Casabella, Stile Industria) and

other tools for communication and critical analysis, of enlightened entrepreneurs, designers, architects, artists, intellectuals.

Our task today is to understand how this peculiarity of Italian design can serve as a solid foundation for a practice of design that can deal with new issues, respond to new individual and social needs and delineate convincing scenarios for the application of new and emerging technologies. The next step is to organize a structure for education and research that gives young people the opportunity to accept the challenge of the transformations in progress, relying in the future on a cultural legacy accumulated over the centuries, and capable of dialoguing with other equally important cultures and traditions.

We mentioned previously that the historic experience of Italian design rose to success despite the lack of specific university programs dedicated to design. It is true that the principal figures who inspired Italian design were university graduates in architecture (among them, the Castiglioni brothers and Marco Zanuso) or artists who were more or less self-taught, in the elevated sense of the word, in the field of design (for example, Bruno Munari, Marcello Nizzoli and Enzo Mari). A rather peculiar situation existed in Italy, where a university education in architecture allowed access to professional practice in every field of design (from regional and urban planning to architecture, product design, and graphics). These fields were strongly interrelated thanks to the multifaceted activity of the designer/architects. This also explains the particular focus and the excellence of results achieved by Italian design in industries that are closely associated with architecture and in particular with domestic architecture (furniture, lamps, accessories and everyday objects). There is a historical explanation for a situation like the one in Italy where specific design programs were not introduced into the university system until fifteen years ago and architecture played such a unique role. In fact, it is here, in Renaissance Florence, that architecture originated as a cultural institution.

If we were to look at the Italian situation under a magnifying glass and concentrate on a few rather exceptional cases, assessing the excellent results they achieved, we could even believe people who sustain that a specific education in fields such as design is

useless. Their opinion holds that design involving compelling creative components may only be learned *by doing*, or better, by working side by side with a "master" in a professional studio: this reflects a situation that is quite similar to a Medieval atelier.

A less radical version of this idea envisions a clear distinction between professional training focused on the "here and now" and the "free" cultural and humanistic education that may be acquired at the university, but has little to do with the profession. To tell the truth, it is impossible to conceive of design education at the university level as a simple attempt to reproduce the experience of the great protagonists of design *in vitro*, like a laboratory experiment. The modern university has other roles and other objectives. It must find a convincing synthesis between professional skills and a cultural and "free" education. A specific characteristic of the university on the contrary is that it does not, even at the lower levels of the education, limit the scope to "restricted professional skills", meaning routine operative know-how, but strives for a "wider professional skill" that offers the tools to interpret and possibly guide the profound transformations that are taking place in our material culture.

Even the education of a designer may, with all due precaution, find significance in the theory sustained by Vitruvius in his famous treaty, written in the year 15 B.C., in which he wrote about the architect: "Let him be educated in literature, skillful with the pencil, instructed in geometry, know much history, have followed the philosophers with attention, understand music, have some knowledge of medicine, know the opinions of the jurists, and be acquainted with astronomy and the theory of the heavens".

In Italy today, building a new department specifically dedicated to design and an entire educational system (bachelor and master's degrees, thematic master programs, PhD) as we have done in recent years at the Iuav University in Venice, has meant dealing with a number of issues of primary importance. What relationship must there be between design with specific contents, and the tools, methodologies and rationales that are shared by every form of design? In other words, must education and research be based on a single comprehensive form of design, or on an articulated system of different forms of design? Which are today the issues able to favor

the gathering of the variety of kinds of design on new bases? What is the role of the project in education and research, and what on the contrary the role of technical and scientific, historical and critical, social and economic cultures? How can the role of professional designers be cultivated within an academic structure? What kind of relationship should exist between education and research in the field of design? How can design experimentation at a university contribute to building new scenarios for applying emerging technologies (information and communication technologies, sensor technology, micro and nanotechnologies, etc.)? How can design contribute to the cultural and social acceptance of these technologies? Does it still make sense (and how) to speak of local and national cultures in an intercultural era characterized by phenomena that tend to unify manufacturing processes and individual and social ways of using the products of our material culture at a global scale?

Design cannot seek nor even hope to find satisfactory answers in a self-referential way, limited to its own design discourse. It must on the contrary contend with the profound transformation that our material culture is undergoing to satisfy many and differentiated material and cultural needs, to advance scientific and cultural innovations, to use design tools to deal with broad-ranging issues of general interest. It is even more important, when speaking of university education in the field of design, to provide today's students with tools that will not only help them to deal with the transformations in progress, but to anticipate future transformations and help guide them.

To deal with such broad-ranging issues, it is important that the educational process cultivate and convey the experience that professionals have developed in the field; but it is no less vital that the university become a privileged venue for a historical and critical analysis that constantly verifies its present relevance. In an excerpt from *The Thousand and One Nights*, we find a tribute to the value of experience: "I am the only one able to do this thing: someone who has tried to do a certain thing is not like someone who has not." The importance of the contribution offered by professional designers to education is undeniable and depends specifically on the fact that the experience they can pass on does not concern just the design

project, but how it is managed interactively in the relationship with manufacturers etc. On the other hand, history reserves us many examples of professionals in the field of design, architecture, medicine, literature, painting, theatre, and engineering, who both practiced and passed on their knowledge at the university. In the field of design this allows students to come into contact with the latest issues and with a wide range of poetic approaches, points of view, methodologies and ways of dealing with problems. In short, it encourages pluralism and serves to prevent one of the drawbacks that often afflict academia: remaining closed within a self-referential context, losing touch with reality.

The knowledge and experience that professionals offer students at the university is very different however from what apprentices learn in the professional firm. The primary differences are as follows:

- A professional who teaches at the university does not pass on his expertise individually or in an isolated manner but within an institutional and organizational structure based on an educational model which he shares with other professionals, theoreticians, historians, teachers of scientific and technological disciplines, of humanities, etc. In other words, education within a university is a choral rather than an individual endeavor;
- A professional who teaches at the university does not pass on his expertise in relation to the specific requirements of the project he is working on, but organizes and rationalizes his experience with the purpose of passing it on to a large number of students. A fine example in this sense is constituted by the meticulous notebooks prepared by Paul Klee for his lectures at the Bauhaus;
- In his firm, the professional will impart knowledge acquired specifically in the fields he has worked in. At the university, a fundamental role is attributed to experimentation on new themes and to the relationship between research and education.

The design program at the Iuav University in Venice, involves a large number of professional designers in the fields of

product and communication design, in the bachelor of industrial design, master in medical design, master in product design and master in visual and multimedia design programs, as well as the PhD in Design sciences. Every year the university organizes workshops conducted for a shorter period of time by other independent designers. The first six years of this experience have involved, overall, over 80 designers.

At the same time, every effort has been made to develop the capacity for observation, the ability to interpret the world around us and to transform it into design ideas, to develop, starting at the undergraduate level and with increasing intensity, the relationship between education and research that characterizes modern universities. In the Italian context this means, and has meant for us, building a program in which students may find not only design experimentation but a wide range of scientific, technical, historical, critical, social and psychological disciplines, and more in general studies in the humanities, which they can select to build their individual educational path. In this way, we intend to build a system constituted by the specific skills required to deal exhaustively with the most relevant design issues of our time, while ensuring a broad education in disciplines associated with design, which in the recent past have contributed to the characterization of Italian design.

One last question remains to be discussed, whether it is legitimate and useful to think in terms of national or local cultures in the context of a much more generalized and intense intercultural exchange than ever before. It is a known fact that every culture grows and evolves through the contact and influence of other cultures. The most visible traces of this influence may be found in language, with the introduction of terms that derive from other contexts to express new concepts and behaviors, but also to design objects based on different material cultures. At this time we are facing a situation that presents powerful new elements in what we might call the "geography" of material culture and design.

First of all the manufacturing culture is undergoing profound changes. Until recently, specific manufacturing cultures, often

related to the use of specific materials, were and in some cases still are profoundly rooted in specific territories. This is the case of many fine handcrafting industries in Italy, such as glass in Murano or ceramics in Bassano, Capodimonte or Faenza, and others; but it is also true of production in the industrial districts which, as a group, have played a decisive role in creating the Made in Italy phenomenon. Here the entire process, from design, to the supply of components to production, were part of the same local culture. These days we often encounter the term "Designed in..." rather than "Made in...", and this change in language expresses the articulation of the design and manufacturing process and the global distribution of the manufacturing and assembly processes of the components.

This new condition primarily, though not exclusively, regards typologies of products that have recently and rapidly entered our material culture, whose roots can rarely be traced to a specific local culture and which have a profound influence on habits, behavior, individual and social lifestyles, on the customs and even the rituals of many local cultures. These are no longer products that express one specific culture and are introduced into another, such as the typical chopsticks from the culture of Chinese or Japanese food, which have now become household objects in the West thanks to the diffusion of this type of cuisine, or vice versa, the increasingly frequent use of forks and knives in cultures that had no use for them. What we are dealing with are new typologies of objects, for example the products that derive from the pervasiveness of digital technology, which entered the daily life of many different cultures more or less at the same time, modifying them not only from a formal and semantic point of view, but introducing new elements into the more general culture of using products.

These products represent a challenge for all local cultures, and that is why this challenge must be faced by everyone together, each with his own legacy of experience and the tools of his tradition. A significant difference with the past, however, is that no longer can we refer exclusively to different visual cultures because the form of objects that rely on digital technology is no longer, or perhaps not yet, able to determine

their identity. On the contrary, one of their specific traits is the fact that they are formally indistinguishable. A "black box" could be either a DVD player, a radio, an electro-medical device or a totally new product typology. The performance and user culture becomes much more significant in defining the identity of these objects. It is therefore necessary to develop new conceptual tools that can provide reliable answers even when the ones we rely on today are of little use.