

# THE VALUE OF DESIGN RESEARCH

## DESIGN RESEARCH AND SENSE-MAKING IN CULTURE INTENSIVE INDUSTRIES: DRIVING INNOVATION THROUGH A DESIGN READING OF CULTURAL EVOLUTIONS

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### ABSTRACT

*Design, as discipline and practice, is referred to as the interpretation of contemporary culture, both in its tangible and intangible expressions. The design practice acts as an agent that can detect cultural evolutions, identify their drivers and patterns of change, and then design a possible new cultural environment which can embed the newly-found meanings and drive the innovation of products and services.*

*Through a literature review, the paper introduces the notions of "contemporary cultures" and "culture intensive goods", investigating the paradigmatic shift from technology- and market-driven innovation to design- and culture-driven innovation. Innovation can be defined as the attitude of a product or service to embody the symbolic and cultural contents of the system of reference, to be "authentic" (Gilmore & Pine, 2007) and evocative. Striving for authenticity, the design research aims to develop a storytelling of cultural meanings and to stimulate new sense-making processes within a given socio-cultural context.*

*Within this theoretical framework, the paper will focus on fashion, one of the most advanced culture intensive industries, as a peculiar case which has built methodologies and tools to draw innovation trajectories, starting from the reading of socio-cultural and economical contexts. In particular, the paper will discuss how cultural contents are embedded into fashion artifacts, how cultural exchange is becoming part of the relationship between contemporary users and producers and how fashion has become an eminent provider of cultural diversity and authenticity in contemporary markets.*

*Keywords: culture intensive industries, innovation, authenticity, fashion, museum, retail space.*

### 1 CULTURE INTENSIVE GOODS

The scientific debate about the nature of innovation has become increasingly important at a time of overall reorganization of the economic and political balances and of growing awareness of the impact of change processes on social, cultural and environmental contexts (Rosenberg, 1984). The positivist dream - which saw in science-driven technological progress the engine of innovation able to generate wellness - is gradually being overtaken by the idea that technological innovation is, in fact, a social construction (Penati, 1999; Pinch, 2005; Bucchi, 2010). The hypothesis of the abstraction of science from society must also be exceeded, assuming positions of greater responsibility with respect to the possible effects of science and technology operations. While the

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philosophy of science is developing this thorough review, organizations themselves are progressively led to acknowledge that research and development activities alone cannot guarantee innovative results (Weik, 1994; Flichy, 1996; Peters, 1999). These processes are indeed redundant and ineffective in the absence of a foreshadowing of how technological innovations, incorporated into new tangible and intangible artefacts, can really fit in a meaningful way in the universe of consumers. This is why it has become essential to understand contemporary cultures and their operating mechanisms, their possible projection into the future, and lastly, the "representation" of this projection. The scope of innovation widens from technology for its own sake to the individual/user, first with a more functionalist acceptance, typical of classic ergonomics, to include the individual's psychological experience. Finally, it is extended to the broader relationships between the individual, his (physical and social) environment and the values that guide his action with the aim of making sense and giving meaning to existence, defining his identity and belonging to a complex cultural system. In this new vision, innovation - materialized in complex aggregates of technologies, products, services, communication - is a process of signification or rather of introduction to new meanings within the cultural micro-worlds and "is", then, the narrative which articulates a "text" that can be encoded by individuals and can add meaning and knowledge to their experiences (Bertola, 2001; Bertola & Teixeira, 2003; Norman & Verganti, 2014).

This broad view of the innovation process becomes even more relevant when applied to certain categories of goods and services that can be said to have "high cultural content". The humanities and social sciences, with major emphasis on the second half of the last century, have helped to discredit the distinction between "culture", as a "high" product, outcome of the intellectual processing and textual encoding of knowledge, and "cultures", as a result of the evolution of a society and the institutionalization of shared values. Cultures can only be described by representing the network complexity of the relationships and practices established between the individuals belonging to them. The traces of these cultures are only partially codified in texts, they are often the result of collective-elaboration processes and can be found in material and immaterial artefacts (Foucault, 1966; Latour, 1995; Landowski & Marrone, 2002). Artefacts then become an active part in the definition of the collective and subjective identities of social communities and are in all respects cultural products (Volonté, 2009). This is particularly true when artefacts present three peculiar characteristics that identify them as products with a high cultural content. The first one is to be mature and historicized, recognized by individuals as bearers of a thick layering of meanings and narratives: the evolution of their forms and their use, the processes by which they are produced, the stories and the identities of the associated brands. The second is to be institutionalized in everyday life, to have a character of familiarity and to be partakers of the definition of people's lifestyles. The third is to become tools of mediation between the individual and his social environment, becoming "identity prostheses", that is definition tools of subjective and collective identities.

Precisely with respect to this particular category of products, design becomes primarily a means of re-signification, able to encode the deeper meanings and reconfigure them in new stories.

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## 2 AUTHENTICITY IN CULTURE INTENSIVE INDUSTRIES

As previously argued, what determines a "high cultural content" good is then the capacity of Culture Intensive Industries to incorporate those cultural, symbolic and evocative contents able to communicate and reinforce the essence and values of the company from the early stages of the design and production of goods and/or services. A process of sense making that begins with the reading and coding of the systems that determine the values of a company, a design process and a specific mode of production.

A journey in reverse that is legitimized through the heritage brand<sup>1</sup>, which builds relationships with the land and identifies the factors of differentiation and authenticity in specific operating procedures. This process of sense making employs narration as a tool to communicate with target audiences with respect to the product quality, the lifestyle that the very product incorporates and to transfer the company's history, its cultural roots and the future trajectories of the brand. Narration in Culture Intensive Industries therefore supports the dissemination of socio-cultural values that the brand embodies and wants to transmit and communicate to the world (Corbellini & Saviolo, 2009).

We can therefore say that "in a lot of ways, branding is simply telling a story" (Tungate, 2008: 27), although the told stories do not always have a matrix of authenticity. As claimed by Kapferer and Bastien (2009), it happens increasingly more often that the story may be partly invented, inspired or strongly emphasized. So when can a good or a narrative be considered "authentically" of a high cultural content?

The concept of authenticity immediately implies a reflection on the meaning of the word itself. A good can then be considered "authentic" if it incorporates the values of originality, defined as the traceability of the object in a specific territory (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009); diversity, understood as an expression of 'singularity' and therefore as a result of a specific process of de-commodification (Kopytoff, 2005) and uniqueness, expressed as a unique consumer experience, sincere and therefore authentic (Pine & Gilmore, 2007). "Authenticity" is a set of immaterial and intangible values that contribute to building the identity of the good and/or of narrative, in which the perception of "authentic" experiences can be traced back to the origin of these values, while each time renewing the languages and experiences with individual properties, consistent and evocative.

The paradigm of authenticity in high cultural content goods is then bound to a process of recognition of the good within a knowledge system and is supported by the ability to relate to the context and experiences socially identified as belonging to a specific set of values. In this light, the act of design is but a transformative action, able to read and interpret the immaterial elements in processes, artefacts and narratives that are inspired by the cultural heritage.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Urde et al. (2007), there exist two main types of brands: "brand with a heritage" and "heritage brand". Differently from the first type, "heritage brand is one with a positioning and a value proposition based on its heritage" (Urde, 2007:5). This means that brands are looking at heritage, understood as the set of identity values and a strategic resource capable of generating innovation and genuine value since "heritage brands are distinct in that they are about both history and history in the making" (Urde, 2007:7).

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These are innovative and replicable processes of value generation that prefigure different possible contexts of use and investigate the dynamics of persistence and transformation of authenticity. We can therefore say that the continuing process of production and signification of relational systems gives a new meaning to the Culture Intensive Industries. Narration as a process thus becomes one of the main tools through which design is able to characterize the project, reworking the stimuli and inspirations related to one's own experience and organizing them according to patterns and repertoires socio-culturally shared and therefore employable by the community.

Since authenticity is defined by the subject of narration rather than the process, research becomes essential to identify and preserve authenticity. Prompted by the need to present an authentic history (or culture), the prowess of designers therefore lies in their ability to employ research tools to identify the immaterial values and history of the brand and embed them in their designs.

### **3 CULTURAL EMBODIMENT: THE CASE OF FASHION**

Fashion is "the mold of the contemporary culture, in its ability to join the dynamics between individual and society. [...] Today Fashion, that has always been a multi-dimensional universe, is not just a change, a trend, the spirit of the times, the succession and combination of styles. [...] Fashion is the most complete expression of a post-modern industrial culture [...]" (Fiorani, 2006:7-8).

In the shift from a technology-driven and market driven innovation to a symbolical innovation (Verganti, 2009), Fashion defines its capability to innovate as the attitude of a fashion product to be close to the cultural contents developed and recognized as meaningful by the social context/group the product is designed for.

In its effort at searching, interpreting and designing a vision of the contemporary culture, Fashion has developed an original research methodology to detect evolutionary trajectories of values and meanings, known as trend research.

Trend research aims to orienting the design practice starting from the identification of relevant signals in various areas of search that inform the further design phases (concept development, collection planning, product development). It is a hybrid research activity, which moves from quantitative analysis and forecasting on product's aesthetic and perceptive characteristics – such as color and shape— and on markets figures—in regard of consumer's consumption habits, companies' market positioning and growth, and sale data—to a field qualitative analysis on socio-cultural contexts. Referring to this latter qualitative dimension, trend research borrows tools from humanistic disciplines to scanning and deep diving socio-political systems—that defines the evolution of values and behaviors of the collective imaginary— and core cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh, 2007)—such as art, literature, design, arts&crafts, movie industry, music industry— that express the evolution of symbolic, visual and experiential contents for a certain socio-cultural group. So, trend research is able to examine the Zeitgeist, 'the spirit of the time', and revealing predominant

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cultural trends in a certain age (Vinken, 2005). Those contents are then transferred into a visual dimension, through the use of evocative images. Evocative images make intangible contents tangible: using narrative techniques and symbolic representations —such as metaphors, allegories and synesthesia— they activate cognitive processes that allow to link conceptual contents to products' soft qualities (Colombi, 2010). Therefore, cultural concepts inform inspirational themes which suggest products' aesthetic and symbolical characteristics; colors, materials, finishing, shapes, meanings. In spite of being focused on the analysis of current phenomena, trend research aims to detect the potentialities for the development of new interpretations of cultural behaviors, attitudes and languages.

The product's newness is then related to its ability to be consistent and relevant with the context where the product's values are generated from and where the very product will be released to, yet being able to offer a new evolutionary perspective of that cultural context and its meanings.

Innovation in fashion lays into a cultural embodiment which promotes continuity with the past but, at the same, anticipates shifts that suggest a bigger change in the future. In fact, looking at cultural environments, products evolution, and markets, trend research conducts a micro and macro analysis, which highlights signs of change in the current time and near future but also the long-term future, introducing the urge for emerging cultures.

### **4 THE AGENCY OF FASHION BRANDS IN CONTEMPORARY CURATION**

Together with the incorporation of the values in the design process, brands require an institutional, external validation of the authenticity of their heritage. This is why, since the beginning of the new millennium, fashion companies have sought and increasingly nurtured collaborations with museums and galleries. The relationship between institutions has always been mutual: brands provide funding and objects, museums and archives provide a rich pool of inspirations. This collaboration is now witnessing a blurring of the boundaries, or rather an osmosis of the skills, with brands taking on the role of guardians to their own heritage and museums - due to digital competition and decrease of public funding - have mastered their marketing and goods-production skills.

The Giorgio Armani exhibition designed by Robert Wilson in 2000 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York signalled the start of this phenomenon. Although the display was highly criticized for overt commerciality and lack of curation (Rectanus, 2002; Mathur, 2005; Steele, 2008), it was followed by a stream of exhibitions dedicated to individual designers who have become increasingly more involved in the exhibition-making process. There are three types of exhibitions:

-The historical retrospective, a chronological and contextualized account of the designer's creation (e.g., Vivienne Westwood: 30 Years in Fashion, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK, 2004);

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-The immersive experience in the designer's imagery (e.g., Dries Van Noten – Inspirations, Les Arts Décoratifs, Paris, France, 2014);

-The installation (e.g., Dreamshop: Yohji Yamamoto, ModeMuseum, Antwerp, Belgium, 2006).

While the first type is the only display which can totally avoid the involvement of a designer (given that the institution has enough pieces to tell the story), the latter two require, to different extents, the contribution of designers. Moreover, these two also allow brands to transcend the collaboration with institutional curators to develop their own displays and simply renting spaces in cultural institutions. A step back in history is required to understand this evolution.

With her 1970s fashion exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Diana Vreeland changed the curatorial attitude for good. Vreeland was a magazine editor and she treated museum objects in the same way. Paraphrasing her, she stated that if an object is in a museum, one does not need to prove its historical or cultural value, so one can play with exhibits to communicate other, more style-led messages (Clark & Frisa, 2012). Prada and Hermes have reversed this philosophy: if we exhibit our products in containers traditionally linked to culture and history, then they will acquire the status of their containers. The style content needs no communication since the products are made by the brands.

Prada's application of this philosophy was the most literal. In 2014, the Italian brand commissioned Michael Rock, of the New York consultancy 2x4, to curate an exhibition to be held in the London department store Harrods. Instead of being divided in the usual typologies – womenswear, menswear, accessories – *Pradasphere* featured six themes: *Continentalism, Femascularity, Modernity, Figuration, Animality* and *Excessivity*. Although the display cabinets bore a strong resemblance to those in Prada's Milanese flagship store, they also looked similar to those employed in natural history museums, allowing the curator to describe the exhibition as a 'a taxonomy of Prada devices, a cabinet of curiosity in which everything has its place inspired by that Victorian urge to attempt to classify the world' (Graham, 2014).

Hermes, instead, developed a more refined intertwine of commercial and institutional. In 2012, London's Royal Academy of Arts hosted the exhibition *Leather Forever*, a celebration of the 175th anniversary of the French brand. It juxtaposed traditional museum display with installations and featured many historical pieces from the 19th century, as well as pieces commissioned by the Duke of Windsor and Wallis Simpson, fulfilling the expectations of historical relevancy connected to the hosting institution. There was also an artisan room where two skilled craftsmen worked on making some of Hermes' most iconic pieces. The idea that the process itself is something worth displaying was reprised the following year with the creation of the *Festival Des Metiers – Crafts Festival* – held at the Saatchi Gallery, a commercial contemporary art gallery with worldwide recognition and historical relevance (i.e. Charles Saatchi and his promotion of the Young British Artists). For a week, Hermes craftspeople demonstrated their skills live, in front of an audience, providing an insight into the complexity behind the brand.

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## **5 THE PROCESS OF MUSEALIZATION OF FASHION RETAIL AS STORYTELLING**

Within the process of enhancing their own cultural heritage, fashion brands have implemented the aspects of relation and meaning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Krippendorff, 1989, 1990, 2006; Verganti, 2002) incidental to the retail space. For some time, the retail space has undergone a profound evolution which, in the name of the discovering of the experiential and emotional variable, has become the place where the brand finds its full expression (Aaker, 2003; Aaker & Joachimstaler, 2003). Moreover, the retail space has been further modified by the establishment of new channels of product communication and distribution which have relieved major companies from sensible investments in the territory. The widespread distribution throughout a territory has been replaced by a more modest but complex communicative/distributive structure. The retail space, in its various acceptations as concept store and flagship store, has evolved so as to effectively represent a place of experience which - far from representing "memorable experiences", often leading to a phenomenology of forgery and counterfeiting as a cultural process (Collodi & Crisci, 2009) - has valued a deeper sense of authenticity (Gilmore & Pine 2007). From a space of "social window-displaying" (Codeluppi, 2007) to a place of cultural reframing, the retail space is contaminated with its own history through new display scenarios. The collected material, which constitutes the exhibitiv/narrative framework, represents part of the social and material history of a specific production area or territory; a twine of symbolic and material stories - from the systematic narration and critical assessment of events worthy of memory to stories, to testimonies and to the philological research on the forms of the objects, on the contexts in which they were created, on the events and economic/cultural and technological changes - that have influenced the production processes. The story of "things" is inserted in material culture and likewise occupies the closest space to the end user.

The new retail space are, therefore, an expression of the design process that emphasizes the value through an "intensification of sense," an "emotional force" and a sort of "magnificence", in the etymological sense of the term; there spaces go "beyond themselves".

In this area, the material dimension of the design process is retrieved: the artefact is envisioned as a "place of tangible realities," where the design logic is internal to a certain vision of the world. The display reflects the image of a story, which integrates the partial and/or functional aspects in a complex phenomenon, crossed at the same time by systems of physical, biological, social and cultural relations, which determine its nature and specificity.

In this context, consumer choices become shared values and stretch to the different proposed scenarios, not as a product offering, but as sign-products, so as to reduce the dependence of the products from technical and economic issues and, instead, to increase the need to integrate the technically possible with the socially desirable in a creative way.

## **6 AUTHORS' NOTES**

The paper is the result of common research and findings, nevertheless, section 1 was edited by Paola Bertola, section 2 was edited by Federica Vacca, section 3 was edited by Chiara Colombi, section 4 was edited by Matteo Augello and section 5 was edited by Valeria M.Iannilli.

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