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Design for sustainability: focusing the real world

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Design now lives a very exciting time. There are aspects that show this salutary phase: the number of publications, research products and conferences is growing, strengthening Design's area scientific production, finally minds are in intensive communication in the world of design research. The V!RUS journal is also involved in this effort of reflection on design.

The research on Design is not a new subject, but compared to the seventies, when I began my postgraduate studies in this area, it appears today that the research is in a more advanced stage, covering a wide range of subjects, fields and sub-thematic fields, and the area seeks to disseminate the importance of combining thematic relevance with scientific rigor. One thing is certain, the value of design has shifted from the world of lust for the real world of the times we live in!

There is an active and restless community of professionals scattered in major departments of various universities, producing a geography of the design research around the world. We could draw up a list from A to Z including the main research topics in contemporary design, from accessibility to sustainability, including social responsibility, health, issues of education in design, etc. Long list, where each of us would feel well represented.

Throughout this development, there is a concept of design in motion. Significant aspect to note is that currently there is great emphasis on research on topics related to sustainability. This focus of design on sustainability requires a discussion that moves away from conventional thinking that has prevailed in this area, bringing new epistemological and methodological challenges.

The imperatives of the contemporary world bring us to face these issues, demanding a creative confrontation to the new phenomena. One point is certain: the issue of sustainability bounds together issues of life and death, the primary drives, as described by Freud's Eros - the energy of life, and Thanatos - the energy of destruction.

It is precisely the dialectic between Eros and Thanatos that is at the heart of the concept of sustainable development formulated by the WCED - World Commission on Environment and Development, in 1987: "Sustainable development is development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs."

Given this fact, and considering that the concept of sustainable development deals with the balance of systems of needs, it is worthy to re-think the concept of necessity. An important reference for this task is the work of Tony Fry, who in 1994 said:

"Necessity is something that we have, which is part of our being in the world. The necessity comes to us from outside, it is given as a demand of the cultural milieu where we are born and grew up (culture is evoked here in an organic and anthropological sense). Design shapes the very world that we shape, and which, in turn, shapes us."

For a long time, meeting the needs of privileged minorities was the predominant aspect of the design universe: you can even talk on a design for greed. However, the challenges of the contemporary world have brought to our area of knowledge the question: How design can meet the needs of those who lack economic means or status?

The answer to this question requires a rethinking of the relationships between design concepts and our values, as well as the inclusion of intention and intentionality within the design field. In this sense, the epistemological understanding is essential in order to identify what values are structuring the production of knowledge in design.

Speaking on the socio-political movements of the sixties and seventies, Herbert Marcuse left us an inspiring text, delivered in a lecture to students related to ecological movements in California, in 1977. In it he sees the power of Eros over Thanatos and states that: "A successful environmentalism will subordinate, within individuals, the destructive power to the erotic energy."

After all, what are the possibilities for the design to overcome our present condition of unsustainability and bring out the erotic energy, putting the focus on the real world? We need to work on the perspective of systems and their interconnections, especially in the inextricable interweaving of the cycles of life.