

A navel too big

By Andrés Gustavo Muglia

Isn't it too much to ask design to “make the world better”? Isn't there in such request an exacerbation of its goals (and of designers) above its possibilities and concerns?

Reading the articles [Sign consumption](#) and [Design: accomplice or ally to consumption?](#), published in FOROALFA, I've become a victim of a certain perplexity that perhaps is not that surprising, let alone the first related to articles posted by designers and qualified people here and in other places. First of all, my feeling is based on the fact that both articles and specially, the first of them, by Mr. Álvarez Comesaña, doesn't talk about design. It speaks about economy, market, politics, but not design. Second of all, my perplexity is based on the fact of the difficulty to understand these articles; because of the words, the twists and ways to express a message that could've been said in a simple, less intricate manner. This might be secondary for some, a matter of forms or style, but that's not my case; for I read in this fragorous and grandiloquent expression way a will (consciously or not) of inflating a speech far beyond what it (or what it transmits finally) deserves.

Perhaps the results concluded in these two articles proceed from a not so happy question. This question or trigger, which isn't a new thing and it has been repeating itself in many ways for a long time, has seemed to me, from the first time I read it or heard about it, completely absurd. “Design makes the world better?” I think the main problem is the question, not the answers. Because thinking that design may or not influence in making the world (with all of its infinite vastness) in a better or worse place, its an unfathomable pedantry. Isn't that giving design a responsibility that's too big? Isn't assigning it a power larger that what it can wield? Isn't that way too vain?

I never heard a carpenter saying that he worked hard to make a furniture correctly because it would make the world a better place. My butcher, when slicing thinner breaded meat, doesn't imagine, in an exaggerated, feverish holistic dream, that such moderate skill can actually change anyone's fate. Not even a professional or a scientist, if we step out the field of mere crafts, can come to think that his work might make the world better, for surely he would be wrecked in his own megalomania. It's a different thing that such work effectively makes the world better. Not even Alexander Fleming thought about that when he coincidentally discovered some mushrooms that would begin the era of antibiotics. Did Einstein think in making the world better when he announced the theory of relativity? Doubtful. What I truly believe is that all of them (the carpenter, my butcher, Fleming and Einstein, each one in his context), were thinking about doing their job right. Now, that such jobs indirectly make the world better or worse is a mere effect that do not concern them.

I believe that this is a question meant to inflate design, to give it a thickness it doesn't have, to

stimulate an image that elevates it as a discipline. Let's think an absurd example: if all designers band together and decide not to work for companies that sell things that people don't need, stimulating their eventual costumers through a joint-venture operation of publicity and design, what would happen? Would people stop consuming? Would companies disappear as victims in spite of such formidable plot? I think they'd simply find another way of communicating with people, dumping the contest of designers and giving a lesson to their inflamed egos that, in this manner, would notice the expendability of their services.

So? Must designers be mere mercenaries that play along with the market, helping, with their image bombardment, to stimulate even more the over-stimulated senses of the people? Is that right or wrong? Who should determine that? Would a designer need to find another type of client? Which one, in that case?

Beyond these discussions, where a blanket of suspicion is cast upon a certain type of design and another one is elevated, bound with the so called "design for the people", I'd like to seed another concern in this penultimate paragraph, a more concrete, earthly, contingent perhaps, but for me, more worrying. This is: to verify that many examples of design, whether they're made for state-of-the-art multinational companies or for neighborhood small stores, a lack and complete emptiness in the type of design that "they make us" consume. The same signs that lack of meaning, imposed by trends, repeating over and over again in any designable material. They're simply adapted, without thinking about the underlying signifier that every image comprises. That is bad design! If we could focus on doing what we do in the best possible way, we could vanquish this type of repetitive, characterless design. We could make design better, regardless of the client. Later, each will decide who to work for, to who obey or to what interests follow.

If everyone makes an effort from their place to make its craft in the best possible way, the world will effectively improve, without anyone thinking about it or projecting it. Alas, that won't happen, forget it.

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