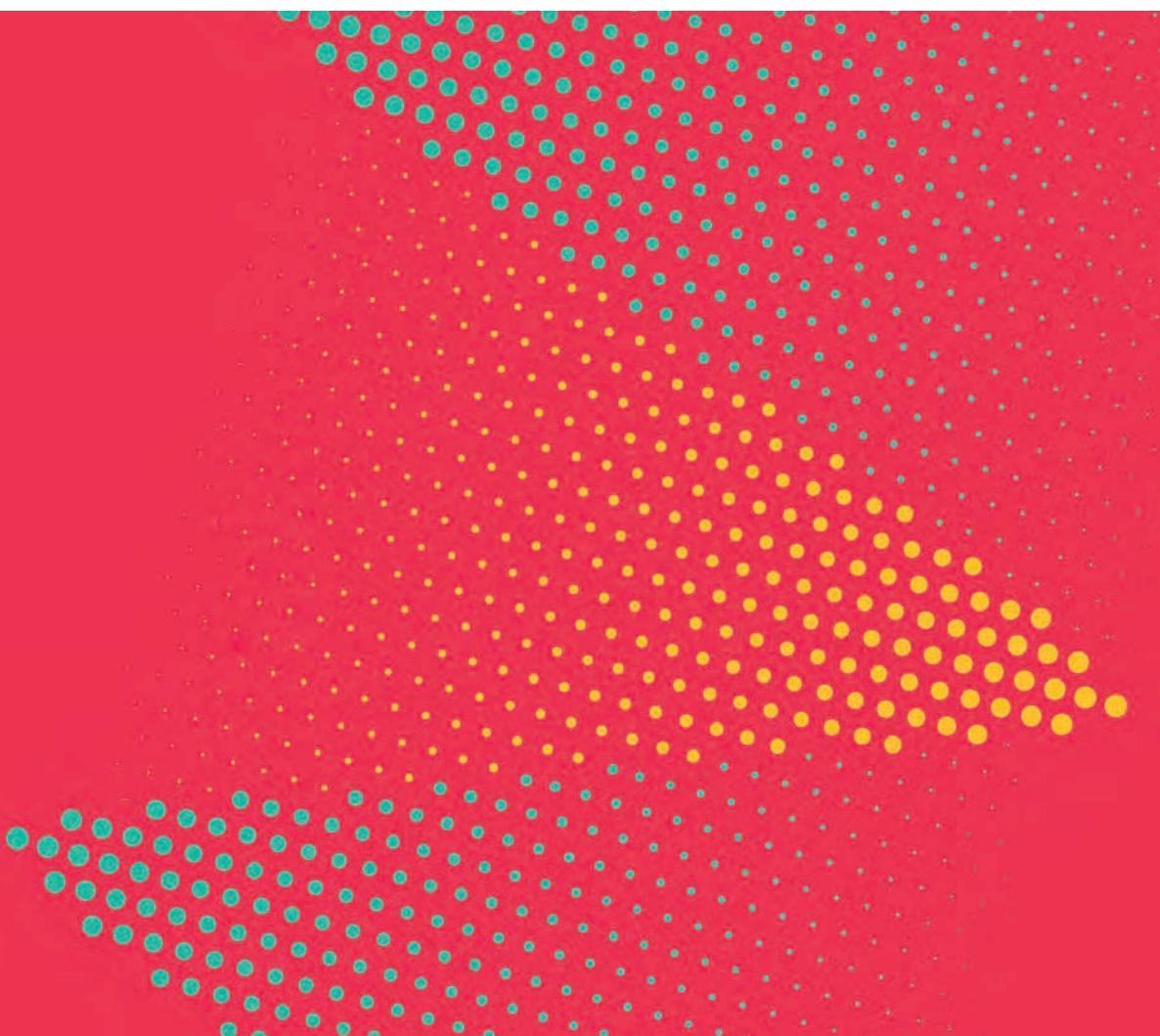


DIALOGUES ON DESIGN

Notes on Doctoral Research in Design 2018

edited by Luca Guerrini and Paolo Volonté



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edited by Luca Guerrini and Paolo Volonté



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Contents

Six dialogues on contemporary design,

by *Luca Guerrini, Paolo Volonté*

pag. 9

The beauty of things, by *Francesco Trabucco*

» 17

The role of users in the design process

1. Design serving people: Innovation through co-creation,

by <i>Elizabeth B.-N. Sanders</i>	» 27
1.1. Who does design serve?	» 27
1.2. Who does innovation serve?	» 27
1.3. Some thoughts on terminology	» 28
1.4. Changes in the design and development process	» 30
1.5. New roles for designers and the people that they serve	» 31
1.6. Awareness of various levels of value in co-designing	» 32
1.7. New tools for co-creation and co-designing	» 35
1.8. Conclusions	» 36

2. A multidisciplinary approach to user-centered de-

sign: Case studies in health care , by <i>Giuseppe Andreoni, Pelin Arslan, Fiammetta Costa, Marcello Fusca, Marco Mazzola, Sabrina Muschiato, Paolo Perego, Maximiliano Romero, Carlo Emilio Standoli, Giorgio Vignati</i>	» 39
2.1. Introduction	» 39
2.2. Disability workplace development	» 39
2.3. Children's environment design	» 41
2.4. Ageing monitoring and assistance system	» 44
2.5. Conclusions	» 45

The commitment to social innovation

3. Empathic design in new relationships, by <i>Tuuli Mattelmäki</i>	pag.	49
3.1. Designing platforms for action	»	51
3.2. Keeping up the curiosity	»	53
3.3. Sensitivities in empathic design	»	54
 4. Co-designing services in community-centered design: Conviviality and participatory prototyping, by <i>Anna Meroni, Daria Cantù, Daniela Selloni, Giulia Simeone</i>	»	57
4.1. Introduction	»	57
4.2. Framing the issue: Community-centered design, social innovation and design for services	»	58
4.3. Designing for food systems	»	60
4.4. A system under transformation	»	60
4.5. Designing for place development through participatory prototyping	»	67
4.6. Discussion: Community-centered design and service prototyping	»	68

The social meaning of clothing

5. In the hood – Clothing the criminal or the horror of the “hoodie”, by Joanne Turney	»	75
 6. When practices harden: The mystery of plus-size fashion, by Paolo Volonté	»	87
6.1. Research question: Why are plus sizes marginalized by the fashion industry?	»	87
6.2. Kinds of practice and design	»	89
6.3. The sizing system	»	91
6.4. The exclusion of fat bodies from the world of fashion	»	93
6.5. The practice of thinness	»	96
6.6. Conclusions	»	99

The significance of colours

7. Colour semiotics, by Stephen Westland	»	107
7.1. Introduction	»	107

7.2. Colour harmony	pag.	107
7.3. Colour preference	»	108
7.4. Colour forecasting	»	109
7.5. Colour semiotics	»	109
7.6. Colour and the design process	»	112

8. Colours: Notes on a multifaceted culture,

by <i>Mario Bisson</i>	»	117
8.1. The study of colour	»	118
8.2. Colour design	»	121

The potential of interaction design

9. Towards the information visualisation of connected objects, by *Massimo Botta, Giovanni Profeta*

9.1. Introduction	»	127
9.2. Capabilities of connected objects	»	128
9.3. Relationships between the object, the network, and the human being	»	131
9.4. Visualising connected objects	»	132

10. Game, hypertext, performance: New paradigms in museums and cities, by *Raffaella Trocchianesi*

10.1. Interferences, displacements and ubiquity in the new stratified city	»	137
10.2. Museum and city: Crossed paths by new technologies	»	139
10.3. Designing cultural experience: New paradigms	»	142
10.4. Conclusions	»	144

The role of design in transforming cityscapes

11. Senseable city, by *Carlo Ratti*

» 149

12. Heterotopic cities, by *Giovanna Piccinno*

» 153

12.1. Other spaces	»	153
12.2. New urban scenarios	»	157
12.3. Heterotopic, virtual and self-sufficient cities	»	160

The disciplinary core and borders of design in a changing world, by *Luca Guerrini*

» 163

Six dialogues on contemporary design

by Luca Guerrini, Paolo Volonté

Politecnico di Milano

In any doctoral community, the discussion or “defence” of the final thesis is a solemn ritual demanding concentration and courage on the candidate’s part. The term itself, “to defend”, evokes the battlefield, the legacy of a long-established tradition of “fighting” for the primacy of ideas (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Consequently, candidates discuss their thesis with a panel of scholars made up of members from their own community or extended to include foreign experts, and generally behind closed doors.

In 2012, the faculty of the Politecnico di Milano’s PhD programme in Design (established just three years previously, in 2009) set out to transform this ritual into a public celebration of knowledge. Discussants were selected internationally from expert scholars in the fields investigated by the candidates. Candidates presented and discussed their theses publicly. Guest scholars were invited to lecture on their most recent design studies and practices. Parties, music and art performances completed the programme of the event, which lasted one week. The event thus emphasised the collective effort of the design community, rather than candidates’ individual endeavours, as is usually the case in traditional defences of theses and official award ceremonies.

A lively debate ensued between two opposing “factions” within the steering committee about what to call the event, with one wishing to underscore its academic significance and the other its community spirit. Eventually it was the latter group who prevailed, and the choice fell upon “festival”.

Originally conceived to publish the results of the first Milan PhD Design Festival in 2012, this book has taken six years to make it into print. In the meantime, despite having already racked up eight editions, the festival formula remains a success. The panel of discussants is split equally between members who worked on the theses during the review stage and members

assessing them for the first time. The former group focuses on progress and improvement made during the thesis preparation process, while the second gives an external assessment. The balance between formal and informal sessions creates a relaxed, friendly atmosphere which not only encourages candidates in their thesis defence but also stimulates conversation among participants.

In order to promote participation and debate, the space given over to formal lectures was progressively reduced until in the most recent edition they became a series of very short talks bringing several scholars together. This new approach makes it possible to concentrate the festival into two and a half days, making it easier for both guest scholars and the Politecnico design community members to attend.

While the festival's main goals – such as sharing the new knowledge contained in the theses, promoting the Politecnico's PhD programme internationally and cultivating relationships among researchers – have been achieved, dissemination of results remains an open issue. Although a digest of the theses discussed in the festival has been published recently, the lectures have not yet been collected in print.

This book thus represents a new development. It focuses on the newest, most innovative developments in design through six dialogues between international scholars and members of the Politecnico di Milano design community. A dialogue is not just a conversation. As Richard Sennett points out (Sennett, 2012, pp. 18-20), conversations may be of two different types: he terms «dialectic» conversations that seek to find common ground in order to resolve oppositions into a new, synthetic position, while conversations that seek to form a relationship between the participants are «dialogic». According to Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), a dialogic discussion characteristically does not succeed by finding “common ground” regarding what is claimed, but rather by giving the participants an opportunity to understand one another. A dialogue is not about winning an argument or establishing the truth: a temporary, fragile, and often deceptive one. It is about looking at different opinions, letting them interact and cross-fertilise. Dialogues have the extraordinary capacity to draw energy from people's differences and channel it towards something new. «Though no shared agreements may be reached», states Sennett (2012, p. 19), «through the process of exchange people may become more aware of their own views».

Each dialogue focuses on a specific topic addressed by a 2012 PhD candidate. The list of contents thus provides an insight into the most commonly selected topics and an overview of the broad scope of the Politecnico's PhD programme in Design. It includes such topics as the increasing role of users

in design processes, the current commitment of design to social innovation, the social meaning of clothing and the practices of fashion design, the function of colours in design, recent developments in interaction design, and design of the urban environment in the digital era.

The first dialogue focuses on the role of users in design processes. Elizabeth Sanders' wide-ranging essay on the main changes produced by the participatory turn in design serves as a counterpoint to a report by a large research group from Milan's Politecnico (Giuseppe Andreoni, Pelin Arslan, Fiammetta Costa, Marcello Fusca, Marco Mazzola, Sabrina Muschiato, Paolo Perego, Maximiliano Romero, Carlo Emilio Standoli and Giorgio Vignati) on three case studies about projects in which the adoption of a multidisciplinary approach has made it possible to meet specific user needs in a user-centred design approach. Sanders argues that the turn towards co-design and co-creation is the apparent manifestation of a deeper transformation in the ultimate sense of the profession of designer. This profound transformation concerns the designer's primary interlocutor, who has gradually shifted from producers to users, from industry to social communities. The transition involves far-reaching changes in the forms and legitimacy of the design profession, especially in four areas: a) changes in the design process, related to the involvement of people at all stages in the process of developing a product or service; b) the progressive change in the role of designers, step by step, from professionals serving the industry to user-centred designers, to facilitators of the creativity of non-designer participants, and to catalysts of the process of collective creativity in co-creation settings; c) the extension of the value of co-design from being purely monetary (a tool for making products that sell better) to experiential (a methodological approach to improve the user experience), and social (a mindset for improving long-term quality of life); d) a thorough renewal of the methodological tools available to co-design. These profound transformations in the spirit and organisation of design as a profession are also the conditions for enabling people to practise their own creativity. In the following chapter, Andreoni *et al.* describe projects that combine qualitative and quantitative methods to improve the quality of life for users with special needs (such as children or the elderly). Three cases are presented: a) the design of a standardised, adjustable solution to enable workstations to be adapted to the various specific needs of disabled workers; b) a co-design process for evaluating and prototyping children's products according to design-for-all principles; c) a system to permanently connect the elderly with their relatives and care givers. In each case, a multidisciplinary approach integrated different research methods through the collaboration of various stakeholders, such as researchers, designers, engineers and staff from manufacturing companies and

healthcare institutions, enabling a better understanding of the needs to be addressed and improving the quality of the final results.

The second dialogue continues the discussion of recent transformations in design both as an activity and as a social function, with a special focus on the commitment of design to social innovation. Here, more specifically, the authors reflect on transformations in the designer's role when, with the emergence of co-design, social change has gradually become one of the central objectives of design itself, as already pointed out by Sanders. Furthermore, the co-design techniques have transformed the designer into a sort of community coach: someone with the skills and ability to teach a certain community tools and tactics to create, develop and prototype ideas. Tuuli Mattelmäki discusses how the transition from a user-centred design culture to a co-design approach specifically affects the role of empathic design. Empathic design developed to facilitate the designer's access to the world of users. Yet, today the same distinction between designer and user is weakened in co-design approaches. Designers need to become facilitators for co-creation settings and providers of co-creation tools. Experiments reported by Mattelmäki show that even in this new role of facilitators in creating collaboration platforms, designers can usefully draw on the well-established tools of empathic design. The Politecnico research group led by Anna Meroni (with Daria Cantù, Daniela Selloni and Giulia Simenone), on the other hand, introduces the concept of community-centred (as opposed to user-centred) design as a co-design strategy to support social innovation. Designers have become process activators whose role has to be understood partly in terms of indirect social value (Moulaert *et al.*, 2013), such as the value generated by the creation of relationships and competences within a community. Within this framework, the role of the designer is that of a connector, of a «community coach», as opposed to that of the traditional facilitator, since the coach performs the task of teaching the community to use design tools and methods to develop their design skills.

The third dialogue introduces a completely different field of research, that of fashion studies. In fashion, the designer's role is closely linked to the influence of consumer cultures. The authors focus on two contemporary fashion phenomena that are apparent indicators of deeper social aspects relating to marginality and exclusion. On the one hand, Joanne Turney addresses the use of hooded sweatshirts, which is very common among young males and in many contexts (particularly the UK) has become a symbol of transgression, social disobedience and crime. The hoodie is a universal garment with a specific feature: it removes the function of clothes as a means of expressing identity. Its form allows wearers to conceal their face and render their body

ambiguous. Thanks to its pervasiveness, it hides the individual in the crowd. At the same time, however, garments bear traces of their social use. So the hoodie carries with it traces of the centuries of imagery in which hooded figures have traditionally represented evil. Wearers of hooded sweatshirts are aware of this, be they rioters who want to express their social marginality to the affluent society, or high street consumers who want to project themselves as somehow rebellious. On the other hand, Paolo Volonté stresses the segregation of plus-size clothing and fat bodies from the fashion world as a consequence of the enduring tyranny of the ideal of thinness in Western cultures. In the second half of the twentieth century, slenderness became the standard of reference for women, which it continues to be today. Fashion has been a driving force in the emergence of the thin ideal since its industrialisation and the advent of the sizing system. However, adherence to the thin ideal is at odds with the significant share of the population in Western countries who are overweight. The reason is that the ideal of slenderness is currently incorporated in concrete elements of the fashion system, such as models' bodies, which makes it hard for protagonists of fashion, including designers, to change their attitudes and practices regarding the standards they aim to pursue.

Colour design is the topic of the fourth dialogue, between Stephen Westland and Mario Bisson. Both authors emphasise the importance of colour in design, discussing it from complementary points of view. Westland focuses on the semiotics of colour as a tool to investigate the meanings that colours bring to artefacts, while Bisson mainly treats the relational aspects of colour as a means of communication. The combination of both contributions clearly reveals what may still be a fundamental issue for understanding the function of colour in design, namely to what extent colours can have cross-cultural significance. Do colours have stable meanings? Are those meanings consistent across culture, age or gender? Can we rely on colour attributions? Research results are still inconclusive, which continues to pose a challenge to design practice today.

Interaction design is constantly evolving as a consequence of the tumultuous and apparently limitless development of digital technologies, meaning that our understanding of interaction is never complete. It thus seemed imperative to us to include a dialogue on the potential of interaction design. Massimo Botta and Giovanni Profeta's theoretical essay is complemented by Raffaella Trocchianesi's piece, which is based on a rich array of empirical cases. Botta and Profeta's chapter addresses the visualisation of interconnected objects, pointing out that in order to be effective it must be linked to

the multifaceted array of capabilities of interactive artefacts, such as perceiving the surrounding conditions, detecting positions, remembering, predicting, sensing object conditions, and so on. In fact, these new capabilities are the source of a huge amount of data available today, the appropriate visualisation of which would enhance our understanding of complex phenomena. The authors propose an analysis of object capabilities as a starting point for the articulation of information design elements for the visualisation of connected objects. Focusing on the increasing role of digital technologies in cultural and exhibition settings, a role that opens up space for a broader integration with the urban environment, Trocchianesi examines the consequences of the proliferating hybridisation of real and virtual places. This trend leads to new urban experiences of interference, displacement and ubiquity – consider for instance flash mobs, temporary stores, forms of temporary appropriation of public spaces such as Illegal Tango – which designers should be able to interpret through their work. In the field of cultural heritage, Trocchianesi proposes three paradigms aimed at transforming public spaces (such as museums, exhibitions and urban environments) into experiences mediated by new technologies: game, hypertext and performance.

This digital transformation of urban environments is also present in the final dialogue, with contributions from Carlo Ratti and Giovanna Piccinno about the role of design in transforming cityscapes. Here, however, the focus is on the physical city and how digital technologies could help in governing urban life. Carlo Ratti describes the activities of his SENSEable City Lab at the MIT, which focus on the analysis and development of services based on the exchange of data collected in the environment. Giovanna Piccinno argues that the age of urban deindustrialisation and smart cities offer a new opportunity to create spaces as common goods that reconfigure public places.

The final chapter, by Luca Guerrini, proposes an overarching interpretation of such recent developments in the field of design. Starting from Ezio Manzini's view that the focus of design has shifted from artefacts to processes (Manzini, 2016), and from the understanding of design as a kind of «dialogic conversation» (Sennett, 2012, p. 18) based on empathy, Guerrini suggests that today's designers, who are increasingly involved in co-design settings, are expected to take the lead in decision-making processes thanks to their empathic ability not only to listen to and understand users, but also to envision the design solutions implicit in their demands. This approach corresponds to a long-standing tradition in Italian design, whose protagonists have always focused on the intellectual as opposed to the technical dimension of their discipline, nurturing the human, critical and constructive aspects of their profession.

To complete the work, we asked Francesco Trabucco, who was coordinator of the Politecnico di Milano’s PhD programme in Design at the time when this book began to take shape, to express his vision of design today. His proposal is in some ways surprising and provocative. It is based on a thoughtful consideration of the hermeneutic interpretation of aesthetic judgment, that is to say, of the social nature of taste. In a manner reminiscent of Pierre Bourdieu’s analyses (Bourdieu, 1979), he describes taste, and therefore the perception of beauty that inhabits aesthetic judgment, as a social fact dependent on the individual’s social trajectory. Aesthetic judgments are qualitative judgments, therefore they are intrinsically relational: neither purely subjective (personal) nor purely objective (impersonal, unbiased), but an expression of the social history that has settled on the shoulders of the individual and which is grounded in a solid tradition. Particularly interesting is how Trabucco uses this hermeneutic approach to understand design. Compared to other fields in which aesthetic judgment is applied, design is characterised by the key role played by market success. Therefore, experts must always compare their appraisals with those of the mass of consumers who determine the actual success of a product. Market success should be appreciated as an expression of the aesthetic judgment of the multitude, because if taste and beauty are social facts, mass consumption is to be considered their authentic manifestation. Except – we would add – for the power that the educated classes still exert to clean up the world from what does not reflect their “civilised” taste (Elias, 1969) by managing heritage (through history, archaeology, museology, antique stores).

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The beauty of things¹

by Francesco Trabucco

Politecnico di Milano

The term “beauty” is subject to frequent abuse in everyday conversation. We wield it with both positive and negative connotations, indiscriminately quipping that something was “a beautiful sight” or “a beautiful mess” and noting that a friend has benefited from “beauty rest” or suffered “a beaut of a shiner”.

“Beauty” is something we see in the young of our own species but also in a bunny rabbit or a puppy dog. In such cases, however, we are not truly forming an aesthetic judgement but simply stretching the word’s meaning toward the cute or endearing. We apply beauty to natural phenomena, a thunderstorm or the reddish haze of a romantic sunset, wielding the term in the sense of “unusual” or “remarkable”.

Thus, *beautiful* is often merely an intensifier of the conceit or the reality we are discussing.

In the academic world, on the other hand, *beauty* is a term used warily, often cast aside in favor of less compromising euphemisms, such as “interesting”, “remarkable” or “unique”. In some respects, all this prudence is warranted, since it emphasizes the overwhelming significance of aesthetic judgement in design disciplines. In other respects, the wariness may be less beneficial, since it appears to betray an excessive fear that the term *beauty* may draw in philosophical or semantic issues or since, perhaps, it shows we would rather eschew questions it might be challenging to answer, such as: «Why is it beautiful?» or «Why is it ugly?».

On full reckoning, however, I believe our scientific community’s long-standing trouble facing aesthetic issues is the symptom of a problem: Design has, in recent years, grown into a pervasive discipline that cuts across multiple fields. With *design* we no longer refer merely to industrial products but

¹ Translated from Italian by Philip Grew.

stretch its meaning to digital artifacts, user experience, social innovation, interaction, and so forth. These are areas in which making an aesthetic judgement may be even harder, ones where it was long held that aesthetic value ought somehow to take a backseat to other values that were at times ideological, at times technological, and at times commercial.

Let me then return yet again to the definition – perhaps overly broad but useful as dialectic – provided by Vilém Flusser (1999): Design is the discipline that deals with giving shape to artifacts, including words and how they fit together. This definition implies that what makes design recognizable is the meaning of the particular shape something takes on. This statement holds true whether we are talking about a chair, how an algorithm is written or how a system organizes its ecological and economic resources.

Let me note here that in engineering disciplines, and technical pursuits generally, *form* is often bound in antinomy with *function*. The term *form* is attributed a sense echoing notions of “appearance” as opposed to substance, of “superficial” as opposed to essential, and of “vain” as opposed to useful. In the humanities, the sciences, and philosophy, *form*, its verb *formalize*, and especially its adjective *formal* take on the sense of organized “structure” made with rules. This applies from rules of courtesy up through rules of politics and on to rules of logic.

I believe Flusser means *form* precisely in the sense of imparting organized structure on things, making things emerge from chaos, and distinguishing them from “shapeless” material, by definition. The meaning of aesthetic judgement thus becomes a claim of being well-made, well-organized, and comprehensible. Therefore, aesthetic judgement represents no mere claim of visible, exterior gratification, but a deep judgement on things’ quality.

As a result, for this reason among others, although making such an aesthetic judgement often reflects a wholly subjective experience, it also implies great commitment. Consequently, when we use *beauty* in its proper sense to refer to perceivable values of an aesthetic nature, we acknowledge that those values are rooted in design. When we see a new object in a shop window or surf to a website or interact with a new application and exclaim: «What a beauty!», this more or less intentionally aesthetic judgement gives rise to a series of emotions ranging from curiosity, the wish to see more to understand what it is and how it works, to the urge to use, touch, try out, and perhaps own that artifact.

However, even in such a situation, it is not hard to imagine someone blurting out: «Beauty and ugliness are matters of taste», or «I just like it!» (or «I just don’t like it!»). As the saying went in days of yore, *de gustibus non disputandum*, which needs no translation. In its deeper anthropological aspect,

taste is the sense that enables us to recognize what is edible and what is not. Taste is thus not by any means subjective. Rather, it has huge social value essentially tied to the survival of the species.

When highly evolved societies make extensive use of taste to distinguish what we like from what we do not, in either aesthetic or gastronomical terms, it is again reasonable to suppose that such recognition plays out on the social level. Perception of taste may remain subjective but in actual fact “tastes” inhabit basic social space. They amount to “pre-judice” in the etymological sense that Gadamer (1986) gives the word, i.e. judgements made beforehand, from somewhere else or by someone else. These are judgements we assume as our own but that have actually been transmitted to us as information.

If it were not so, there would be no explaining the global success of certain products or even the mundane fact that the pizza parlor right downstairs is always empty whereas the one down at the corner is packed, all the time, every night, despite being more expensive. Nor would there be any explaining why the young people you see on city streets are dressed and coiffed in very similar ways, often displaying the same brands of shoes and hoodies. Such behavior among the young and not so young is evidently driven by a desire to imitate or conform. And this drive is especially strong among the young, stemming as it does from an aesthetic need that affects not only the choice of style to belong to but also the subjective perception of aesthetic self vis-à-vis the style being conformed to.

It is enough to look around to see that all the cars on the street are, with few exceptions, three or four colors. Automobiles have gotten larger and more powerful, while the old three-box sedans have all but disappeared in favor of two-box vehicles, essentially a single type run off in small economy car, large station-wagon, and SUV versions. Without going through the details, it is clear that television sets, cameras, and cellphones likewise tend to be very similar. With digital artifacts this phenomenon may be less pronounced, but here my expertise is limited. The fact remains that the striking conformity of industrial products, especially pronounced among those of medium or high complexity, i.e. those that represent the greatest financial investment and thus the highest enterprise risk, stems from strong market influence. In other words, what gets made is what has hopes of being sold.

It is hard to claim that tastes are truly subjective! It is hard to claim that the aesthetic judgement underlying the statement: «I like it» or «I don't like it», is free of the influence of financial, social intersubjective or overall cultural factors.

According to Robert Pirsig (1991), aesthetic judgement belongs to the category of quality judgements. It is thus among those judgements that are