

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN PRODUCTS AND CONTEXTS – KEY DRIVERS FOR THE DESIGN OF A PRODUCT

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ABSTRACT: According to the recent economic situation, the actual business model will not be sustainable for a long time. In this paper we want propose a design methodology, which leads the possibility to influence people behaviours through the products. The aim of this paper is to underline the role of the designer, as director of the process, in order to coordinate involved actors and actions. This approach suggests a result, namely a product, which uses the local resources preserving material and cultural tradition and furthermore understanding the relationships between the customer and his territory. The link between the product and its context defines a “surplus value” which characterizes the design process as “sustainable”. According to that, the final aim should be a “customised product” defined through a multidisciplinary approach, where the role of the designer is creating a dialogue among all the different actors involved in the definition of the product.

KEYWORDS: sustainability, territory, relationships, multidisciplinary, industrial product

BACKGROUND

Since the second half of the last century the scientific community was able to document, with an increasing deepening, the dramatic effects which human beings' activities wield on natural systems to solve their needs [1].

According to that, the Living Planet Report 2010 [2] pointed out that the ecological footprints of countries are causing an increasingly impressive environmental deficit.

Every day the International scientific community describes the effects of the human impact on the earth's natural system that still remains the only source we have and that is the base of the entire world economy and our wellness [3].

The actual economic and financial crisis is a huge and serious problem, but our ecological deficit is much more worrying than any other crisis we went through, also because environmental problems are probably one of the biggest reasons of the increasing of the economic crisis.

The world economy has grown with a massive rate in the last sixty years. The gross world product (GWP), has reached 69,000 billion of dollars in 2008, and already in that year there was a soft deflection in the annual growing percentage, due to the current economic crisis [4].

In the 1950 the gross world product was approximately of 6,600 billion of dollars and, since then, in sixty years we have almost tenfold.

By comparing these figures, it seems not plausible believe in a continuous and endless growth of the GWP.

As pointed out by the economist Jean Paul Fitoussi in his speech at the East-Forum 2010 in Rome, the sustainability is a complex concept formed by economical, social and environmental dimensions.

These three aspects have to be considered in a complementary manner, they cannot be in

competition, and so it is not possible take into account only the economical part [5].

According to that, the economical and environmental crisis can be seen as two aspects of the same phenomenon.

Thinking about the nature, it's interesting underline as, contrary to our economic model, all the earth's natural systems can renew themselves, generating life.

According to that, the ecologist Eugene Odum called the natural systems: life-support systems. He also described the whole earth as an ecological unit, formed by living and non-living parts, which together interact to form a stable entity [6, 7].

Our dominant culture leads us to neglect, and often to ignore, processes and functions performed by the nature. Each time we use it for our welfare, we probably weak or damage its resistance and resilience, and we difficulty understand that, in this way, we are reducing our chances of development for the future.

As ecologists have affirmed, humanity is closely dependent to processes, features and services provided by natural systems.

The humanity-health is therefore linked to the health of ecosystems and biodiversity, which are the basic constituents of natural systems.

As human beings, we are also a component of natural systems: without them we would not be able to evolve, and survive.

Despite this, people are heavily altering functioning and diversity of ecosystems: this is reflected in significant impacts on wellbeing, economy, wealth, and happiness of society. Because of that, urgent and concrete actions to reverse the negative trend are required.

The challenge we face today has very significant proportions and the only hope we have to win is to involve everybody.

It is humanity's duty figure out how the current 7 billion of population (the number is increasing and will

be approximately close to 10.6 billion in 2050) can live in this planet with an appropriate lifestyle, without causing the devastation of natural systems [8] (United Nations, 2010).

The aim of this paper is showing a possible way for facing the crisis by starting from a co-operative approach in the product's design process.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on the application of the Systemic Design methodology, namely with the acronym SD further in this paper. This approach underlines the importance of making better use of material and energy flows, in order to model our production and energy systems looking at the nature's rules [9].

This concept is also asserted in principles of Industrial Ecology theory: effluents of one process serve as the raw material for another process; the industrial ecosystem would function as an analogue of biological ecosystems [10].

Furthermore, according to the SD methodology, material and energy flows should be opened, in order to decrease environmental impact and resources depletion.

In particular, according to its principles (Figure 1), the SD:

- considers the waste of a system, namely output, as resources, namely input, for another system
- argues that each system starts from relationships among its constituent parts
- underlines that each system should be self-sufficient as much as possible, in order to naturally led to balance, and furthermore to preserve, itself alone
- assumes the relevance of the local context as resource base
- takes into account, during the design process, the environmental, social, cultural and ethic context as well as the subject of the project.

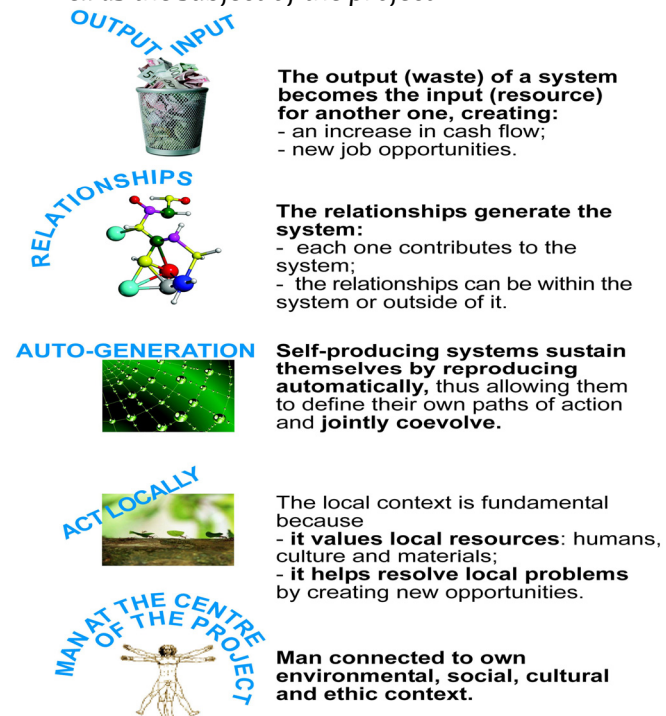


Figure 1: Systemic Design principles

In this paper the applied methodology stresses the relevance of connections and relationships among the elements of a system, which consequently underline the importance of a multidisciplinary approach in the design process.

According to that, the inter-connections among system's components are important as well as the dialogue among the participants in the process.

Therefore, a model based on systemic principles takes into account exchanges of material and energy among the involved elements; this is why it is possible to say that it is strictly influenced by the rules of the natural system.

It is a matter of fact that every natural system can be described with flows. In Nature nothing evolves in a static way: everything is linked and interacts with its own surrounding. Indeed, the design challenge for our century is finding the way to link as much as possible the elements of a system, trying to find a solution according to them [1].

RESEARCH AIM

The aim of the research is think about the consequences of the human's daily activities on the territory.

By starting from that concept and focusing the study on the design process, it is really important take into account strong relationships among human beings and their surroundings.

During a historical evolution, a territory is defined in time and space by behaviour of its inhabitants and its local peculiarities.

Hence, each specific geographical area is defined by different resources, which during centuries have been used from human beings in order to reach their needs. So that, the inhabitants of different contexts have developed a specific "know-how", strictly connected with defined territories.

Besides, during years the human abilities in doing things have lead a "material culture" characterized by social and cultural aspects dependent on territorial qualities.

Summarizing, a design process based on the local characterizations, has to take into account different aspects of a territory, which can be summarized in: available resources, "know-how" and "material culture" [9](Figure 2).

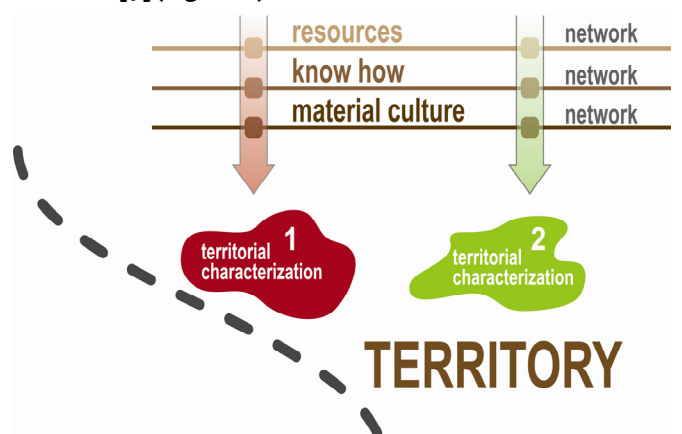


Figure 2: Local resources, know-how and material culture define the characterization of a territory

Because of the suggested approach promotes the interdependency between the product and its context, it is possible to forecast some relevant effects which influence the territory in different fields (Figure 3).

- Economy: the use of territory's resources leads the growth of the local economy.
- Culture: thanks to this approach, each territory will be defined by different expertise, strictly related to the "material culture" of its inhabitants.
- Market: the preference for of a small-scale economy will avoid problems caused by a large-sale logistic.
- Environment: a production method based on the local available resources will produce fewer products with high quality, without affect the environmental balance.
- Quality: the quality-level of a product will be guaranteed by its local-identity.

Moreover the application of this method will consequently enhance the wellbeing level of a place and its inhabitants.

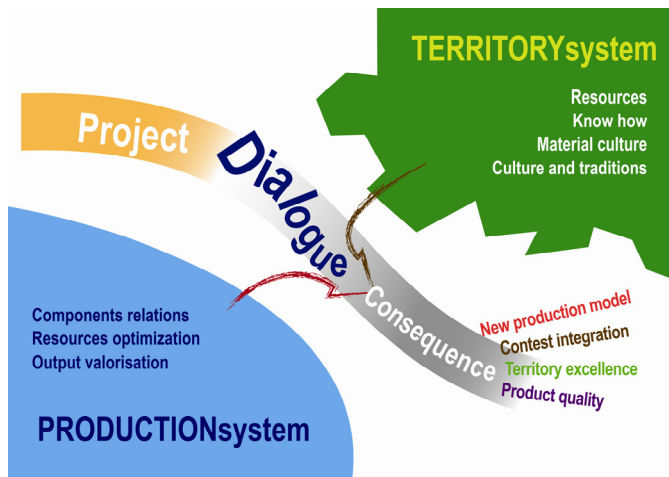


Figure 3: Several consequences are defined by relationships between the product and its territory

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper the authors have described a design process based on the strictly relationships between the product and its surroundings, and furthermore the possibility of guiding customers toward a sustainable approach, in term of economical, social and environmental values.

By starting from the natural systems' concept of the interaction among the elements of a system, it becomes clear that a product has to be related to its territory, in order to use the available resources and to preserve its "know-how" and culture.

The customer, who hopefully will understand the relevance of connections between the product and its territory, will be also able to appreciate these characteristics as a "surplus value" of the product itself.

The inter-dependency between the product and its surroundings, defined by multiple social, cultural, economical and environmental factors, point out that every earth's zone define as many products.

Consequently, by applying a systemic approach that considers the product as a "system" connected with several other related elements, a "customized product" would be preferable instead of a "standard one".

A systemic and holistic approach like the SD methodology, is based on the co-operation among the actors of the process. Because of that, the designer should take the role of expertise's coordinator, in order to show common points among the elements of the system; to point out possible hidden connections among the product and the other related systems and furthermore to explain interconnections among the participants' expertise.

Thanks to a systemic approach, the designer is able to show interactions among components and also wide the boundaries of a product that will be influenced by several factors, from social to environmental areas (Figure 3).

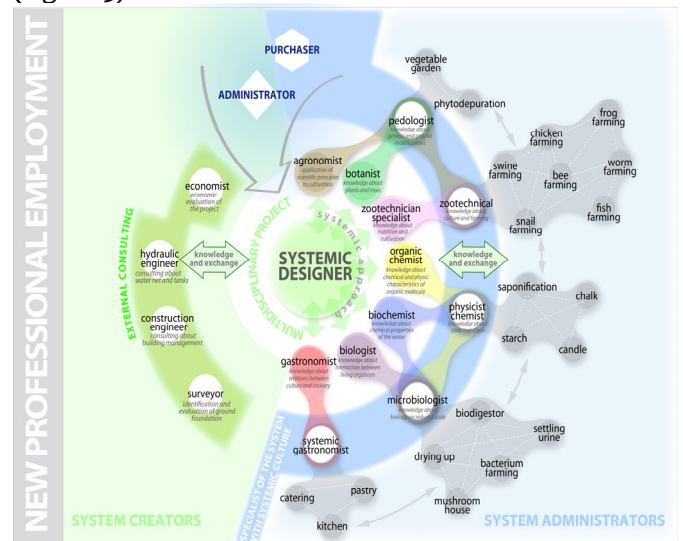


Figure 3: The role of the systemic designer, case study of a jail in Turin, Italy. Project of some students of the Master course "Systemic Design", Politecnico di Torino, 2011-2012

The straightness of the social, cultural and environmental factors shift the industrial approach from a "linear model", characterized by the competition among parts, to a "systemic model", defined by the co-operation among stakeholders. In this process multiple disciplines and seemingly unrelated aspects of design are integrated in a manner that permits synergistic benefits to be realized [11].

FUTURE RESEARCH

We introduced a method for the development of products that are highly connected with the local characteristics.

However the practical-aspects have not been analyzed in this paper. Because of this reason, possible future developments can be:

- The analysis of the role of the consumer, which should be educated in order to appreciate the "surplus value" of a product connected to the territory.
- The development of a "consumption model", based on the valorization of local values and territorial aspects.

- The application of this methodology in a case study, in order to study the real consequences that this approach causes to the products' design process.

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