

# Social Design as a Multiscale Planning Tool

Maurizio Galluzzo Author<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ISIA Firenze, Via Pisana, 79, 50143 Firenze, Italy  
maurizio.galluzzo@isiadesign.fi.it  
**ORCID CODE: 0000-0002-9786-7254**

For years, for decades, designers have been grappling with the question of the right balance between ethical design, profitable commercial design, market needs, and market forecasting. The figure of the designer has never been more fundamental than now, precisely when synthetic and powerful players, such as artificial intelligence, enter the scene, seemingly disrupting situations that had been somewhat defined and matured. If we are living in the years when new tools are presented that facilitate the use of knowledge for design, we have seen many in the past, but none as strong as creative artificial intelligence. The figure of the designer, the artist, the person whose identity transfers their culture, their personality into the product, bringing their uniqueness, emerges as fundamental.

While systems supporting the design and creation of artifacts, both physical and digital, constitute a great advantage in terms of performance and, in the future, even product safety, current systems, whether they support code development (the so-called "vibe coding") or three-dimensional design, are characterized by an algorithm that fundamentally considers an average among several solutions it has already "seen". It knows the commercial success of these solutions, sometimes down to the single metropolis. Of course, all this is very exciting, challenging, and engaging, but those who have been involved in these issues for decades know well that the product—not the mass-market product, which nonetheless has well-defined design, production, and distribution phases—is determined by the so-called "signature," meaning the identity of the professional designer.

Never before have products needed that unique characteristic which, together with other basic disciplines essential for creating a feasible product—namely, knowledge of materials, new materials, complex models, and subjects that seem distant like the sociology of consumption or behavior—is associated with the esteem for the designer already known to the consumer. The product sells because it is made by that person-brand, whom people not only trust but also grow fond of, following their development daily through social media or dedicated platforms, and here the human factor becomes decisive.

Starting from the first decade of the 2000s, we began to talk about "Smart Design" as that set of tools that allows us to read, understand, model, and dominate the complexity of a project that necessarily must be multidisciplinary, articulated in its phases of ideation, design, validation, engineering, production, packaging, logistics, and delivery. The phases do not end there; for many years now, thanks also to particularly sig-

nificant regulations, we follow the product until its "death" and beyond, up to its reconstruction and reuse, when not directly its repurposing. Knowledge and processes that were once the cultural heritage of only a few professionals have now become necessities for businesses to act effectively, commercially profitably, and socially acceptably.

While on the one hand we are witnessing a further massification of merchandise production that reaches our hands at a low cost, without considering the unsustainable characteristics that generated them (pollution, energy consumption, labor exploitation, environmental and social risk, etc.), on the other hand, there is a greater sensitivity towards reuse, just think of the success of apps that allow the sale of used clothing. There is a world that has rediscovered the used, reused, and reusable product.

If we understand that Smart Design addressed, and is still valid today, the theme of analyzing the complexity of the project as a whole and trying to tackle the same complexity not by dividing the problem into many small, increasingly fragmented parts, but on the contrary by increasing the level of complexity, we have already achieved a first goal. The most intuitive example is that of our planet; if we see it as a single entity, we can only understand some of its geometric and spatial dynamic characteristics. We cannot understand its deep meaning without increasing the level of complexity, that is, by moving away, seeing many other planets, understanding how these planets orbit within a solar system. Seeing many solar systems, seeing many galaxies allows us to discover that a universe exists whose rules are dictated precisely by the knowledge of complexity. For years we taught students that problems must be stripped down, simplified; it was the worst lesson we could give them. The results are often encountered in the merchandise we find on the market: products that are ends in themselves, that mimic existing products, that do not use any of the characteristics we discussed before, and that merely copy or imitate something already existing.

For years we talked about the difference between radical innovation and incremental innovation. The former changes the way of seeing the product in its relations with the world and with the user-consumer. The latter is only a system for making modifications that are not very significant from a geometric and functional point of view but make us feel more secure. In this way, we can risk little, but it will not take us very far. Incremental innovation can work but, in mature markets, it creates products that risk being quickly overtaken if one does not dominate the market.

Social design is a completely different cultural approach: it centers on complex social problems and the idea of improving the community. It acts through a systemic transformation of both design and realization processes. If social design could be defined a few years ago as a frontier, we are now able to understand that even social humanities disciplines, such as anthropology, the study of cultural behaviors, community dynamics, local narratives, what are called micro-experiences or micro-knowledge, can help the user and the designer create products and communication models more suitable for a particular area and population groups.

If the sociology of consumption enjoyed enormous success in the post-war period because it somehow created easy solutions, perhaps using the same initial letters for rules to build a subset of "commandments" that were easy to remember but within which the project could be expressed, it now has an even more complex and complete role. The sociology of consumption confronts contemporaneity, having, more than ever before, numerical, reliable, and highly precise tools to understand the conditions that lead people to make not only commercial but also ethical and social choices. And it is precisely on this that we must rely to understand how behavioral sciences can interact with design, and escape the temptation to use manipulative tools to fully induce the potential customer to become one. The theme of manipulation in commercial communication, advertising, and identity, or the company's mission, has never escaped these rules, but we now have reading capabilities, at least for a part of the population, that are able to completely bypass this condition and put us in the position to use ethics consciously and genuinely.

If we use tools that put the human person at the center, think of Industry 5.0, for example, but also the product, we are perhaps building something important.

Social design plays an increasingly important role also in communication: it is a design approach that uses communication tools and strategies to address social problems, promote inclusion, and facilitate collective change. Social design distinguishes itself from traditional design by its orientation towards social impact. It is not limited to the creation of objects or aesthetics but aims to generate value for communities by activating participatory processes and meaningful relationships. In communication, this means designing content, languages, media, and interactions that foster dialogue, awareness, and empowerment.

Speaking of communication at a local (micro) and general (macro) level, we can recall an experience that has involved me along with Creactivity for years: the experimentation of civil protection communication in collaboration with Emergenza24, a non-profit organization that I have the honor of managing for years, and also the largest emergency communication community in Europe.

Emergenza24 is a concrete example of social design in communication, thanks to its ability to activate a network of citizens and professionals to manage and disseminate information during emergencies. One of the most emblematic projects is the "Emergency Communication Workshop" promoted by Emergenza24 on the occasion of the Creactivity initiative. This workshop involved university students, experts, and volunteers in designing effective communication strategies for crisis situations such as earthquakes, floods, or industrial accidents. The characteristics of the project led us to define a single but important objective: to rethink emergency communication to make it more accessible, timely, and participatory, focusing on the citizen.

**Micro-Macro Approach:** At the micro level, the focus is on understanding individual reactions and informational needs during an emergency; at the macro level, the dynamics of coordination among institutions, media, and civic networks are analyzed.

**Tools Used:** Social media (Twitter, Telegram, Facebook), interactive maps, visual and textual content designed for rapid and understandable dissemination were used.

**Active Participation:** The entire project starts with active participation: it is based on a community of over 80,000 digital volunteers who report events in real-time, contributing to the construction of a distributed and reliable information system.

We evaluated the different social impacts, which were many, but one in particular was significant: during the Ischia earthquake (2017), Emergenza24 demonstrated the effectiveness of its model. The network of citizens provided immediate reports, while the technical committee validated and disseminated the information, supporting Civil Protection and the media in crisis management. The design of the communication allowed for overcoming barriers between institutions and citizens, fostering a more coordinated and conscious collective response. This example shows how social design in communication can transform an information system into a tool for social resilience, capable of connecting individual experiences and collective strategies.

Link: [www.smartcampus.it/social-design](http://www.smartcampus.it/social-design)