Tim Seitz

Design Thinking und der neue Geist des Kapitalismus. Soziologische Betrachtungen einer Innovationskultur [Design Thinking and the new spirit of capitalism. Sociological consideration on an innovation culture], Bielefeld, Transcript, 2017, pp. 142

Paolo Volonté *Politecnico di Milano*

Design thinking is one of the most renowned aspects of the current expansive trend of design, a shift from the design of mere artefacts to the design of product systems, to the design of services and practices, to the idea that innovation process as a whole can and should be design-driven. The specificity of design thinking is to recognize (and exploit) the tacit capabilities of design possessed by human beings, in particular by the users of possible innovations. It implements a kit of design tools to enable innovators to make decisions based on "what future customers really want" – according to the movement's rhetoric – instead of relying purely on historical data or making risky bets based on the designer's instinct. Design thinking is originally based on a deep interest in developing an understanding of the people for whom products or services are to be designed. It aims at helping innovators both in the task of observing and developing empathy with the target user, and in the process of questioning the problem, the assumptions, and the implications it involves. Within such framework, the professional designer is the one who, thanks to the mastery of the designer's toolkit, is considered able to identify, organize and make productive the vision skills of those who will actually use the new product or the new service.

More tangibly, design thinking is a method to foster creativity in the process of industrial innovation involving envisaged potential users in the process. Although the designerly way of thinking has been discussed by a number of scholars in the second half of the last century (Bruce Archer, Nigel Cross), the name "design thinking" is now linked with the method developed by the IDEO design company and theorized by Tim Brown. This is an iterative process, in which designers seek to understand better the user of an envisaged innovation and to redefine problems. Ideas are stressed in brainstorming sessions and the adoption of a hands-on approach in sketching, prototyping and testing. The method aims at identifying alternative strategies and solutions that might not be instantly apparent with the initial level of understanding of the problem. It is not only used by IDEO offices and other design agencies, but also taught in some schools and high schools, and translated into toolkits that can be bought.

This particular feature of design thinking, which is both a method for designing in the contemporary complex world and the symbolic mark of an organization and a community of experts, makes the case particularly

interesting to be inquired into through the tools of Science and Technology Studies (STS). With this in mind, Tim Seitz undertook an ethnographic research on the world of design thinking seen through the Berlin viewpoint represented by a school in Potsdam and a design agency in the German capital. Attending the agency for two months (actually a rather short time for an ethnographic work), the author has not only been able to observe the life of the organization and collect dominant discourses, but above all he could observe a number of workshops for the implementation of design thinking by attending them. His goal was to study design thinking as a practice, namely, as a set of interconnected actions performed by a community of people who recognize themselves in that practice and share ideas on how it should be performed optimally. In his view, considering design thinking as a practice allows us to avoid being trapped in the network of discourses about it.

The ambition of the book he published after the research, *Design Thinking und der neue Geist des Kapitalismus* ("Design thinking and the new spirit of capitalism"), is to "follow the design thinkers" (p. 15, English in the original, thus winking at the famous motto by Bruno Latour), treat design thinking as a practice (p. 18), and take the materiality of design thinking processes seriously (p. 57). The expectation that it creates is, therefore, to interpret design thinking through practice theory and actor-network theory, and consequently to emphasize the collective aspects (translations, assemblages, inertias) underlying the choices of actors and the idealizations of official rhetoric. Consistently, Seitz claims to base his research on the theory of practice that "directs its attention to aspects that previously could hardly be perceived by culture theories that overlooked practices: the temporality, corporeality and materiality of social practices" (p. 18).

Accordingly, chapter 1 is devoted to the temporality and chapter 2 to the materiality of design-thinking workshops. The temporality is surprisingly characterized by a strong subjection of the envisaged workshop actions to a pre-established pace that is functional to the quick and foreseeable unfolding of the workshop rather than to a full exploitation of the creative resources deployed by participants. In this way, the theoretical model of the process ends up prevailing over the situated practice and binding it to needs that seem to be extrinsic to the expected outcomes. Materiality acts through the objects envisaged by the design-thinking method, which in Seitz's analysis end up incorporating and thus stabilizing the lively individuality of participants. In his book *Change by Design*, Tim Brown wrote: "The mission of design thinking is to translate observations into insights and insights into products and services" (2009, 49). Tim Seitz sees in Callon's sociology of translation a conceptual tool to deconstruct those translations into what they really are. Although the ambition of design thinking is to come closer to the real needs of users, the materiality of the method that it uses separates the results from real people and relates them to the

personas arising from the workshops' job: "The persona should refer to the interviewees *out there* in the real world. [However,] from now on it will be designed for the persona and not for the interviewees. It no longer needs to be thought of as the diffuse and unpredictable amount of different people [out there]" (p. 68).

Yet, the most interesting part of the book is the third chapter, bearing the same title of the book (pp. 102-122). Here the author renounces to the use of concepts that are common in STS, and turns to the sociological theory of Boltanski and Chiapello (*The New Spirit of Capitalism,* 2005) to argue that design thinking is a typical form of criticism of capitalism "becoming endogenous" (*Endogenisierung*). According to the French sociologists, the "new spirit" of capitalism consists precisely in internalizing the classic critiques of capitalism (for example that of promoting useless, wasteful and inauthentic consumerism) by using them as sources for more acceptable – even if capitalistic in nature – forms of production that impose themselves for their apparent "diversity" compared to traditional capitalism. Design thinking appears to embody such kind of strategy. Seitz highlights two ways in which it does so: through a "promise of authenticity", and through a promise of work emancipation. Here the distinction between discourse and practice of design thinking, discussed in the previous chapters, emerges as particularly useful.

Consider first the promise of authenticity. While design-thinking discourses share positions very close to the critical theory ("The torrent of cheap goods that began to flow from their factories and workshops has fed into a culture of excess consumption and prodigious waste" states Tim Brown, 2009: 2), in design-thinking practice those discussions are resolved into the design of more "authentic" products, which respond to the "real" needs of users. "Design thinking is thus the result of criticism becoming endogenous, which makes the addressing of *true* needs its task, but also offers the prospect of gaining a competitive advantage over conventional products. […] Products and services are created whose *diversity* is considered a selling point" (p. 109).

Regarding the promise of work emancipation, a similar contradiction occurs between discourses that present design thinking as an instrument for the liberation of individual creativity and emancipation from the constraints of hierarchical work, and a practice structured by timing that is functional to the efficiency of the process rather than to the expression of participants' creativity, as described in chapter 2. "Instead of the demand for limitless release of creativity, design thinking seems more likely to have established a domestication of creativity within creativity reserves" (p. 114).

To sum up, the interpretation proposed by Boltanski and Chiapello of the new spirit of capitalism makes it possible to find a convincing explanation of the apparent divergence between design-thinking discourse and the operative modalities in which it is expressed, in the form of both applied methods and goals pursued. The critical discourse has become little more

than a particularly effective tool in the competition for gaining markets.

However, although Seitz's thesis is convincing, a sense of incompleteness lingers at the end of the story. A sense of flaw that will particularly affect STS scholars. Many of the ingredients of this story are familiar to them: ethnography, the emphasis on the materiality of non-humans, the use of practice theory, the sociology of translation. However, as you enter the text, the feeling grows that a conceptual toolkit has been borrowed from the STS without having read the user manual. Flaws start cropping up when concepts should be aptly used to give accuracy to the interpretation of field data. It then becomes clear that the author is acquainted with practice theory exclusively in Robert Schmidt's account (*Soziologie der Praktiken,* 2012). The contributions of Schatzki, Shove, Turner, Warde are overlooked. The whole debate about the agency of objects is missing, although it would markedly enrich the book's understanding of materiality in design-thinking activities. As a matter of fact, Latour is often referenced, but the lack of a general understanding of the actor-network theory produces a series of blatant misunderstandings of his thinking, e.g. regarding the concept of script or the relationship between researcher and social actors. Taking into account *Reassembling the Social* would have helped avoiding part of those misunderstandings. Finally, the sociology of translation is summed up in isolation from the discussion that derived from its elaboration.

Some books produce dis-pleasure. I mean that you do not just dislike them, e.g. because they are obscure, incomplete or badly argued. They appear to be lost opportunities. They miss the opportunity (and the urgency) to fill an empty space in shared knowledge that they have been able to recognize. When a book fails to grasp this opportunity, when it does not keep a promise that seemed exciting, it is not just disappointing, it actively produces a destruction of potential pleasure, it severs an anticipated fulfillment. In fact, it produces dis-pleasure. It is with this feeling that I finished reading *Design Thinking und der neue Geist des Kapitalismus.*

<div align="center">✳ ✳ ✳</div>

Sarah Pink, Kerstin Leder Mackley, Roxana Morosanu, Val Mitchell and Tracy Bhamra
Making Homes. Ethnography and Design, London, Bloomsbury, 2017, pp. 176

Alvise Mattozzi *Free University of Bozen-Bolzano*