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MADDALENA DALLA MURA *In the early 2000s you had the opportunity to be involved in a venture which many design educators would aspire to but also fear: the founding of a new design school, the Faculty of Design and Art at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano. Before discussing this experience, however, we would like to know what your personal path towards design and design education has been.*

KUNO PREY To tell the truth, as a boy I wanted to fly, I wanted to pilot F-104 fighter jets. That is why initially I chose to attend a high school that would give me access to the Air Force Academy. Then, for various reasons I transferred to an art school in the Gardena valley, and finally to the State Art Institute in Cortina d'Ampezzo where students were taught to design and build furniture. After completing my studies at that school, I enrolled in the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia. At that point I was no longer interested in being a pilot, I felt I needed to keep my feet on the ground. In the meantime, Beppe Olivieri, my design teacher in Cortina, asked me to work with him for a company in Calalzo, Lozza, that produced eyeglasses, to establish a Research and Development Centre. Here I found myself not only designing, but also serving as a link between various figures, such as the engineer and the company stylist, but I also took advantage of the possibility I was offered to observe every aspect of the company reality, from the definition of a new collection, through the development of the products, to marketing and the contacts with the distribution network. In the 1980s, I began to go to Milan quite often, and met many designers such as Heinz Waibl, Roberto Sambonet, Italo Lupi, Achille Castiglioni, Ettore Sottsass, as well as Gianfranco Ferrè, Mario Bellini and Alessandro Mendini. Whom I met after 1983 when, though I had not graduated from university, I enrolled at the Domus Academy which had just been founded by Andrea Branzi. Here I was surrounded by students from all over the world, and was able to observe the difference in the level of qualification of the college graduates – in architecture and design – and the few like me who had no degree on paper but design and work experience. This episode made it clear to me that something was awry in design schools. How could you have a degree in design, without the slightest, or almost, experience of design? That is when I began to wonder what was the role of design in the teaching of design. I found a clear answer to this question ten years later, when in 1993 I became a professor of product design at the Fakultät für Gestaltung of the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar. The faculty was then being organized under the direction of urban sociologist Lucius Burckhardt. The approach at Weimar was to place a central focus on design from the very first day of the student's career. The student would be thrown into the pool without knowing how to swim, he would be given design assignments from day one.

LEARNING TO DESIGN (AND TO TEACH) BY DESIGN

INTERVIEW WITH

Kuno Prey

BY

Giorgio Camuffo,
Maddalena Dalla Mura
and Alvisè Mattozzi
Bolzano, 10 July 2013

MDM *What did you find to be unique in this model of transferring design knowledge?*
KP This was an apparently new model compared to a certain tradition of frontal

instruction, but in fact it is very old, because it can be assimilated to the practice of an atelier. The heart of this model is practically an aphorism: learn to design by designing. In short, the students are led through the design process from the very start, even though they have not yet learned the fundamentals for this work. We are all familiar with the curriculum taught at the Bauhaus in 1919, which contemplated that the students not begin to design until they had acquired a series of techniques and skills. Today this type of organization of the curriculum, given the rapid and continuous developments in technique and the introduction of new and more advanced technologies, is no longer sustainable. It is unthinkable to expect a student to become an expert in materials before beginning to design. On the contrary it is crucial that s/he learn to approach a design project from the very start, to understand its complexity, to get used to teamwork and to consulting experts with specific competencies. In short, the model adopted at Weimar is an evident process of “learning by doing”.

GIORGIO CAMUFFO *Was this approach to design education your main point of reference as you faced the challenge of building a design school in Bolzano?*

KP Yes, but with some distinctions. First of all, Bolzano offers an education in both product design and visual communication, so that a student must put equal effort into various disciplines, whereas in Weimar he had to choose whether to major in visual communication or product design. I believe that the union of the two disciplines and the diverse dimensions of design offers many advantages and opportunities for the students. Another fundamental difference is the teaching of theory within the atelier, the space in which the students design three days a week. I would like to specify that the offices of all three professors involved in the project are physically located inside the atelier. The integration of the theoretical course into the project ensures that the student can count not only on the guidance of the designers and technical consultants, but also on an introduction to the theory relative to the theme he or she is working on; that he be stimulated by this theory to reflect on the project, and think before actually beginning to design. It is important for students to understand that technology and computers are just tools, which cannot per se guarantee any result. Furthermore, the presence of theoreticians within the project, in the physical space of the atelier, provides the opportunity for them to keep in touch with the design process and understand the designers.

MDM *Given the central role of design, and the project-based education, does the distinction between product design and visual communication make any sense?*

KP The two disciplines are drawing closer every day, but in my opinion at the undergraduate level they should still be taught separately, providing the possibility in some instances to step across the boundary lines.

ALVISE MATTOZZI *Could you elaborate on the question of the difference you noticed between the skills of college-educated designers and other designers during your years of training?*

KP I should start by saying that I learned a great deal from the college-educated designers I have met throughout my career. At the time of the experience I re-

ferred to earlier, however, I noticed that the college graduates engaged in endless conversations and discussions, without ever really getting to the core of the issue. To me it seemed like they went around in circles rather than directly addressing the problem – even though one of the assets of our Italian schools, particularly architecture schools, was that they developed a great body of theoretical, almost philosophical, thought. For someone who has never designed but only studied, or someone who has never studied how to design, not even in theory, the practice of design may feel strange at first. A strong theoretical component may therefore prove to be something of a hindrance in the education of people who complete their studies but still don't know how to design; they are prone to improvise and must learn to design. On the contrary in German technical schools, for example, graduating designers display a remarkable degree of precision and are capable of developing any project, and working out any detail: they are perfectly familiar with systems, modes, manufacturing processes, building processes, but they have limited expressive qualities, and are in fact paralysed by technique.

AM *Are you suggesting that the educational model adopted in Bolzano, which includes theory in the project, is a sort of mediation between these two extremes?*

KP It certainly is, and was planned in this spirit. As I said, design remains the priority, but it is supported by theory. The theory that stimulates students in the project and leads them to read a book, takes them into a museum, prompts them to see a film, makes them write, is important. It leads them to explore what they are doing or will be doing in greater depth. Too often, the students plunge right in, without thinking: they start to work without having reflected on what they are doing, without really having “designed”. “Learning by doing” does not mean going into the workshops, grabbing a few pieces of wood and starting to build. Obviously there are many steps that do require experimentation with materials and various techniques, but always in the wake of a certain thinking process.

AM *In your opinion then, what is the most important aspect of the project-based model adopted in Bolzano, for learning design?*

KP From my point of view it is the possibility of addressing wide-open themes, of exploring the potential of a given theme, even of taking a position on the matter, or even taking your distance. The atelier does not impose the same constraints as might a client's brief. There is no premise such as “we are designing a chair: the chair must have a bent plywood seat and backrest because the company we are working with is specialized in this material, etc.” If this sort of brief were the basis for a school project, it would limit the field of action from the start, reducing the possible solutions to a purely formal approach. Complexity and an open field are often problematic for the students. The younger generations – and I believe this problem is widespread – need to feel closely guided, perhaps too closely. In my opinion the reason is that throughout their educational careers they have been accustomed to respond to precise, well-defined assignments. Presenting them with a wide-open design theme is asking the opposite. It is a way to stimulate the students to take a stance. In our society,

no one is being asked to take a direct stance any more, because everything has apparently been established already, young people have no idea what they can influence any more. They still don't realize that they can change things. This is why it is important to introduce the students to the design theme from different points of view; it is important to include history, to explain the past of a certain theme, but also to understand how a certain product is used and communicated today... In the end, there is a possibility that the student might react, that s/he might depart from the design theme or reinterpret it, and I believe that this is a great success. It has happened to me before: for example, when I introduced the theme of wine, one student chose not to deal with wine, but with water; another student worked on a performance, with particular attention to political, social and gender issues. So I think that if within an atelier, a student does not obediently follow the indicated path, but takes a detour and yet is still able to complete his or her project, it is almost always a success. When experimenting, mistakes are possible and the end result may even be a failure. But we learn from our mistakes – on condition that they are pointed out, explained, clarified. The entire design process must be analysed so that the student may be told: "Look, this path, this material, and even this shape might have led to a different result".

GC *You mentioned frontal instruction as opposed to project-based teaching. Though I am convinced of the potential of the latter, I do not feel that the difference between the two approaches is really that strong. The project-based model still involves one person who knows and others who learn, the structure is still very vertical.*

KP It depends on how the designer in the atelier communicates and conveys his or her knowledge: the teacher must be able to guide the student, without saying "do it this way, do it my way"... When the design teacher lacks this ability, it is obvious in the students' work: you can see that the student projects in a certain atelier all use the same language that unfortunately is expressed in terms of form and aesthetics alone. The task of a design teacher is to help students build their own identity, their own *Formsprache*, their own "language" – in a wider sense. This can only happen if you let the students experiment. They must be given the possibility to develop their own creativity and to give it form, some sort of order. This is a delicate process and challenge. They must be helped to begin a process – which is not necessarily limited to product design or art – that like a mountain spring turns into a river and leads out into the open sea. When the student reaches the sea, he will have to choose the most congenial way for him to swim – butterfly, backstroke, freestyle, breaststroke...

GC *So in and of itself, the project-based educational model is not enough to guarantee the central role of design?*

KP For it to work, this model requires generosity and an open mind on the part of the project leader, and the teachers of the integrated subject matters, and on the part of everyone else teaching practical and theoretical courses. Everyone involved must embrace and stand by project-based design and someone must be responsible for monitoring the situation, talking to the professors, and watching out for any problems along the way, suggesting or working out

possible solutions. This educational model and a three-person project management team, is not really natural. It might be harder for someone raised in a traditional academic environment, which works by isolated compartments.

AM *As a "theoretician" I must say that I noticed a certain tension in your words between the idea of "a three-person project team", which in some way gives the three professors equal standing – with obvious differences – and the allusion you sometimes make to more specifically defined roles, in which there is a designer on one side and a theoretician who helps the thinking process on the other: this is not the same thing as a three-person project team...*

KP But the point is not the three-person project team. Let me explain myself more clearly. Each project is led jointly by three figures but of course I do not expect the theoretician to design. The theoretician gives his contribution from a different perspective than the designer. The same is true of the project assistant's field of expertise: he is not a teaching assistant, but someone who guides the students as a teacher of technical subjects. In this sense there are three people responsible for the project. With regard to the students' work, you offer your critique from a theoretical point of view, I offer mine from a designer's point of view which is quite different from yours. But the theoretician plays an important role. In other schools, including Weimar, a relationship this close does not exist, and it is rather difficult to bring together theory and practice. In general I do not believe it is useful to have too many subjects outside the context of the project. Vice versa, being able to count on theoretical and technical guidance for the project, throughout the project, on the field, allows the students to understand much more. What is important for the students is to learn a method they can use to solve problems. This method can be learned through the example of the projects they develop in the ateliers – and can be applied to other themes.

GC *As a designer, I am very keen on the idea of project-based studies. But then I would prefer the concept of "designing together". I like the idea that even a theoretician can somehow design and that, on his part, a designer can theorize or make a "theoretical move", "mossa teorica", as Giovanni Anceschi would say. In fact this is something that actually happens in the world of design, in some interesting cases. However it is obvious that in an educational model, trying to hold theoretical and practical subjects together is even riskier than keeping them separate, independent. It can only work if the three teachers have a proper understanding, if they work harmoniously: then you get that horizontal, liquid dimension that makes it possible to call it "designing together".*

KP I agree. On condition that each person recognizes his/her own limits and the competencies of the others, because that is the only way a project can be approached as a group.

MDM *I think that an important theme is emerging from your words, Kuno. One that we should pay attention to: the challenge of learning to teach, and specifically of learning an educational model or approach.*

KP Certainly, that is a question that needs to be raised and thematised – "freedom of teaching" is simply not enough. There are good designers who are not

good teachers, or are incapable of working in the context of certain educational models. I experienced this problem personally, when I was the Dean of the Faculty in Bolzano. With each professor that I met, I took it upon myself personally to explain the type of school I had established, the goals, the working methods. Let's say I even put on a few pounds in the process, because I often took my colleagues to dinner to discuss these issues. You need to manage a group of people in some way, within a specific context. But it is also important for the professor to understand what kind of school he will be teaching in.

AM *Teaching certainly has something to do with the professors' willingness to keep learning. As you said yourself, you came to teaching from your professional experience. In conclusion, how did you learn to teach?*

KP When I got to Weimar, the only background I had was my experience as a designer, the experience of working with professionals, with the specialists within manufacturing companies, with craftsmen and producers. I suddenly found myself dealing with totally different people, in a different context: students who wanted to learn to design, who were there to learn what I already knew how to do. I learned to teach by tiptoeing softly into the atelier, trying to understand how the group worked and how I could motivate the students by proposing design themes. At that moment I really asked myself what I could do to learn to teach, but I learned as I went along, by doing. I tried to imagine myself in their shoes, wondering: "When I was a student, how would I have wanted the design culture to be communicated and conveyed to me?" And I used that approach to work with the students. In general, I would say that an academic environment is always an opportunity for everyone to learn. When I walk into the atelier I must be the one who wants to learn with the students, to believe I can experiment with them, thanks to them.

GIORGIO CAMUFFO *In 2006 and 2008 you edited two books, which developed from a reflection on the Faculty of Design and Art in Bolzano, and bore two important titles: "Design Education" and "Design Research".¹ What is your idea of education and learning in the field of design?*

HANS LEO HÖGER Of course, design education can be interpreted in a variety of ways, depending on how you define design itself. Those who understand design in terms of problem solving usually teach the future designer to solve problems. This understanding of design, focused on the conceptual binary of problem and solution, is based on Scientism and Positivism. It is a part of the legacy of the Ulm School and, at least to a certain extent, a German invention. However, from my point of view, design is first and foremost a discipline of interpretation, transformation and sharing. The art of asking questions is an essential element. A designer whom I greatly admire, Richard Sapper, once said: "A designer serves to transform an idea or an opinion into a form".² What he means is not only making an idea visible, but also making it tangible, present, real. From this point of view, design means focusing on opening new horizons, without of course excluding a response to problems. In terms of education, considering design as a propositional activity implies taking a position within a wider framework. It means educating designers who can offer new qualities to the people who come into contact with their projects: quality of life, of experience, of perception, of thought, of emotion. In this sense, design becomes not only a service, but an act of sharing. Design education should be understood primarily as the sharing of experiences, knowledge, curiosity, concerns, projects.

THEORY WITHOUT PRACTICE IS USELESS, PRACTICE WITHOUT THEORY IS DANGEROUS

INTERVIEW WITH

Hans Leo Höger

BY

Giorgio Camuffo

Bolzano - Venice, 10 July 2013

via Skype

GC *Is this idea of education as the sharing of experiences and knowledge limited to schools?*

HLH Definitely not. A young person who does not enrol in a design school, but has the opportunity to work closely with a good designer for a few years, and has some talent, can be successful as a designer. History teaches us, however, that self-taught designers who achieve noteworthy results are the exceptions to the rule. I don't believe that self-education is a valid alternative to a formal education.

GC *What is, or what should be, at the heart of a school? What can a structured education offer a young person, that he/she would be unlikely to learn elsewhere?*

HLH I am convinced that a good education is one that gives students the tools to continue learning throughout their lifetimes. This idea is quite popular today since we developed the notion of "lifelong learning", but it is actually

¹ Hans Höger (ed.), *Design Education: Studying Design through Project-Based Learning* (Milan: Abitare Segesta, 2006), and *Design Research: Strategy Setting to Face the Future* (Milan: Abitare Segesta, 2008).

² "Einen Designer braucht man, um eine Idee oder eine Meinung in eine Form zu verwandeln." Richard Sapper during the inaugural speech for an exhibition on the work of Ingo Maurer in Munich; excerpted from *Richard Sapper - Design* (Cologne: Museum für Angewandte Kunst, 1993), 94.