

Design and Emotion: some thoughts on users, things and feelings

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Abstract

Emotion is one of the most overused words of the moment in contemporary world and has become part of design vocabulary, associated with products which seek to provide pleasurable experiences and to establish emotional relationships with their users [8, 9]. The study of emotion in the field of Design is, thus, new and has been conducted through various methodological approaches and through discussion with authors from an equally wide range of disciplines. The aim of this paper is to offer a theoretical reflection on the emotional relationship of users with the designed environment from an anthropological point of view. It will examine three special situations: (1) using a product designed in partnership; (2) using something for the first time; (3) and brands that bring back good memories.

Key words: Emotional Design, Participatory Design, First Time Experiences, Affective Memory

1. Introduction

Products play an active role in everyday life. They shape social practices, they influence behaviors, they incorporate goals, and become inseparable from what we are. Much more than form or function, the designed environment is the setting where our experiences take place and is impregnated with emotions. And emotions play a central role in cognitive and social processes and all aspects of human life [1, 4, 6]. Therefore, understanding how and why things evoke emotions is crucial to understanding our own society and imperative to designing our environment.

This paper presents some findings from a study on the emotional relationship of users with the designed environment, carried out through anthropological research methods, including participative observation and interviews with users. It focuses the feelings surrounding three special situations: (1) using a product designed in

partnership, or by the process also known as participatory design; (2) using something for the first time; (3) and brands that bring back good memories.

In this light, feelings such as co-authorship, self-dependence and “memorability” emerge as crucial categories for understanding how products are endowed with new meanings and for the shaping of products inextricably linked to positive feelings and a more plural and sensitive society.

2. On Design in Partnership

Vera has a peculiarity: she is an outstanding swimmer, but she cannot use her legs to get about. Vera had a desire: an object that would help her to get from the beach to the sea without being carried. Something simple, light and which would have a discreet impact on the surrounding environment. Vera sought out the Laboratory of Investigation in Living Design (LILD) of PUC-Rio and its unique approach to design in partnership. After numerous meetings, conversations, exchanges, tests and prototypes, her desire acquired the shape of a “sliding” object of minimum friction coefficient with the sand. Vera talks about the process in which she participated actively:

We conducted numerous tests and went to the beach several times. The first objects were not good and we continued to modify them until we achieved a successful result. I used it a lot and I still have it. (...) I helped to build this object, there's no doubt about that.

Like Vera, many other people have contacted LILD and benefited from the practice of Design in Partnership. As José Luiz Mendes Ripper - coordinator of LILD - rightly observes, basing a design on requests made by people can lead to unexpected situations and reveal singular needs. This is what his report indicates:

I remember a project we developed with a girl who couldn't move her hands and wanted to be able to hold a lollypop and use a lipstick without any help. (...) This question of basic needs is extremely relative. It changes from person to person.

Practically all our everyday activities are mediated by objects. There are all around us every day and at every moment, facilitating or obstructing our actions. Given this, it is clear that “good design” is that which allows our everyday activities to be carried out spontaneously, as if they weren't being mediated through objects [7].

For the Argentinean designer, Jorge Frascara, the activity of Design is not in the manufacture and distribution of his products but in their *effect* on people. Regarding the field of visual information, Frascara suggests that the activity of Design shall be concerned with the construction of things “with the aim of affecting the knowledge, the activities and the behavior of people.” Among the practical strategies presented through which designers may effectively change peoples' lives, Frascara highlights associations between professionals and their target public. For the author:

It's very important to have the public as a partner in the whole process which affects it. (...) If there is no association between producers and interpreters in relation to the desired objects, attitudes do not change [7].

Stressing the importance of working in partnership and highlighting the benefits of this practice, Frascara continues:

It is in association situations where the relationships are ethical, where the finest talents bear fruits, where it is possible to undertake complex and ambitious projects and where designers can play a catalyzing and collaborative role in the creation of a cultural and conceptual environment in constant development [7].

“To have the public as a partner” is in “the name”, in the practice and in the *raison d’être* of Design in Partnership. And it concerns an action present not only in the development of the project, but also and principally, in the formulation of the problem, as Vera’s report shows:

The idea of the sliding mechanism arose because I wanted an object that slid until it reached the seashore. As far as I knew, this object did not exist. So I wanted it to exist. It was a team effort, in which we studied the possible solutions together.

The process of Design in Partnership is characterized by the fact of doing “with” as opposed to “for” people and, also, by collaboration between designers and future users and a dynamic in which each participant influences and is influenced by the experience and point of view of the others. It is distinguished, furthermore, by the development of unique and singular objects which address needs which are equally unique and singular, but no less necessary for this reason. As Ripper [in 2] explains, “this is a way of working which prioritizes the logic of the user and not the logic of the industry.” The result of this process is the fruit which we might call “shared authorship”. In summary, Design in Partnership does not simply have the public as a partner, but as a co-author. And what is the relationship like between people and something which comes into existence through direct collaboration? What do people feel when they are co-authors of a Design process?

2.1. On the feeling of co-authorship

In an article entitled Design and Order in Everyday Life, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi comments on the results of a study into the meaning of domestic objects. The researcher describes how, in principle, he sought to understand the meaning of works of art for people and how they brought order to their lives. However, in his initial interviews, he noted that the works of art did not appear to have great importance in the lives of spectators.

According to Csikszentmihalyi, even on the rare occasions when the interviewees appeared to respond to the aesthetic qualities of the works of art, these did not appear remarkable for their aesthetic quality, but for the capacity of the interviewee to recognize this quality. The author explains that to appreciate an object is a way of participating in its creation. What emerges as a sense of “co-authorship” prompted by this appreciation is what allows the work of art to have importance in someone’s life.

Csikszentmihalyi also noted that people show a strong attachment to domestic objects of no aesthetic value and went on to investigate the reasons for this. From the situations observed, the researcher singled out the

involvement of people with object that they themselves had constructed. This sense of co-authorship is illustrated in exemplary fashion by Vera's observation about the sliding mechanism which she helped to construct:

I really liked to swim and felt very content with the slider, I felt satisfied. Because it was something that I couldn't have bought due to the fact that it didn't exist. So the only way of having it was to work on it. I feel that the work we did was a success.

Vera's words demonstrate, furthermore, that Design is an activity which, in fact, can transform existing realities into other more desirable ones [7]. We can conclude, therefore, from the results obtained up to the present, that Design in Partnership – and its unrivalled capacity to address the “singular”- is an important means of constructing a more inclusive and pluralistic physical environment.

3. “First-time” experiences

When Romeu became a resident doctor, all his colleagues had a car. He spoke to his father about buying a car, but at the time he couldn't help him. So, with his own funds, Romeu bought the car he wanted. As he explains:

The first car I had was a used car, but for me it was new. (...) It was the car I has always wanted to have, it had everything I needed. (...) And best of all, I bought it with my own money... It was a very special car for me. It makes me feel free! It makes me feel grown-up!

Romeu's feeling for his first car is also evident in the comments of a woman about a dress in Stallybrass' book:

(...) the first dress I got from my own hard work! What a sense of joy! Of self-sufficiency, of self-confidence was generated by this work [11].

As Peter Stallybrass [11] helps us to understand, “the effort” exerted in the acquisition of an object is one of the aspects responsible for the feeling of independence that can be generated by the relationship of people with their objects. And the sense of independence seems to have enormous importance in everyday life and in our relationship with the designed environment. As the neuroscientist Antonio Damásio [6] explains, from the moment we become independent we start to decide what we want to have around us. For the author, the act of choosing and taking decisions is intrinsically related to emotions. In an illuminating passage on the relationship between emotion, decision and the objects which surround us, Damásio affirms “(...) we can decide what objects or situations may or may not form part of our environment, which objects and which situations are those in which we want to invest time and attention”.

Throughout our lives, we are always taking decisions in relation to objects and having new experiences through them. Everybody goes through the experience of using something for the first time. As Damásio perceptively observes:

(...) one of the signs that we have reached adulthood is that few objects in this world, or even none, retain any emotional innocence. It is very difficult to image emotionally neutral objects .

Objects often “inaugurate” new phases: knives and forks, bicycles without training wheels, make-up boxes, shavers, high-heeled shoes, cars, ovens, walking-sticks. Objects are important agents in “rites of passage” as the following passages of two young undergraduate students show:

I was in the 3rd grade. I remember when my class graduated from using pencils to using pens. I remember the announcement that this was going to happen. It was unforgettable. It was like a ... a rite of passage: you have grown up and now you're going to use a pen instead of a pencil! (Gabriela)

With me it was different. I was in the 3rd grade too, but the change from pencil to pen was a kind of painful, because my turn never came... The teacher decided that anyone who had nice handwriting could use a pen and my handwriting was beautiful, lovely, totally rounded. Even so, various classmates got there before me. (...) One day the teacher said: as from tomorrow, you can bring a pen to use. I felt relief... it was as a rite of passage, and I also felt: Wow, I'm no longer a kid. (Elaine)

The change from pencil to pen, in both accounts, was perceived as a rite of passage, evoking a feeling directly related to the desire to “no longer be a child” or to grow up, to mature. It's worth emphasizing here the importance of objects which participate in our first experiences of use. After all, our decisions seem to be directly influenced by the feelings evoked by using something for the first time.

Manuela describes how she didn't know which profession she was going to take up until the first time she used a computer she got from her mother:

The first time I switched on the iMAC my mother gave me and saw that interface, I thought: this is what I want to do with my life! I want to do something related to this computer! (...) I felt really excited, really motivated ... (...) it was very exciting. Since then I've been completely in love, totally in love with the company.

Manuela decided to become a designer. And her statement can be taken as example that “good design” is that which provides a pleasurable experience to the user. So pleasurable, those users don't want to be apart of them.

4. Affective trademarks

When she was a child, Julia was fascinated by the Royal baking powder tin. She has fond memories of her mother baking cakes and she looking at the tin close-up, delighted by the label with the design of another tin on it in a circle, and another inside this and so on, and so on ... She imagined that one day she would be able to see the last tin! Today, when she wants to make a cake, she uses the same baking powder. And with every cake that whole scene repeats itself; her mother in the kitchen, her looking at the tin close up, the smell of cake in the air, her childhood.

Many people have a story to tell about an “affective trademark”: the favorite refrigerator, the first bicycle, the porridge grandma used to prepare. Many marks become part of our lives; we wake up in the morning and there they are “looking” at us.

In the toothpaste, in the milk carton, in the clothes we wear, in the billboards in the street, we are surrounded by marks. They are “spectators” of scenes from our everyday lives, and sometimes supporting actors or even the protagonists of important moments in our particular history. But how do we choose the marks we spend our days with, at home, at work, with our families, with our friends? Why do some of them end up being so loved? The studies of Damásio [5] on the role of emotions in the process of taking decisions could have a lot to contribute in the search for answers to these and other questions raised by the field of Design and Emotion.

In his book, *Descartes’ Error*, Damásio [5] defends the idea that the great philosopher committed an error in stating that reason and emotion were two completely different things. The author explains that he started writing this book with the aim of proposing that:

(...) reason may not be as pure as most of us think it is or wish it were, that emotions and feelings may not all be intruders in the bastion of reason at all: they may be enmeshed in its networks, for better or for worse [5].

Based on his discoveries, Damásio [5] adds that feelings also play a role in the choices we make, influencing our decisions for good or for bad, according to the past experiences with which they are associated. As Damásio [5] explains: “feelings end up becoming ‘qualifiers’ of this thing that is perceived and remembered”.

Developing the idea that it is impossible to take decisions simply on the basis of reason, Damásio explains that when we need to make choices, we tend to imagine future scenarios, to evaluate the consequences of possible options and to examine their pros and cons. When an option provokes a disagreeable sensation, it functions as a warning of the danger of that choice and we tend to eliminate it. When the option provokes an agreeable sensation, it works as an incentive and we tend to consider it. Damásio calls these good or bad feelings “somatic markers”. As he explains:

Because the feeling is about the body, I gave the phenomenon the technical term somatic state (in Greek, ‘soma’ means body); and, because it “marks” an image, I call it a “marker” [5].

Damásio adds that somatic-markers improve the predictive capacity and efficiency of the decision-making process, since they reduce the number of options and, furthermore, protect us from future harm. To summarize:

Somatic-markers do not make decisions for us. They assist the process of decision-making by highlighting some options, either dangerous or favorable, and eliminating them rapidly from subsequent consideration. You can think of them as a system of automatic qualification of predictions, which acts, like it or not, to evaluate extremely diverse scenarios of the future that lie ahead of you [5].

When we associate given situations or objects with agreeable or disagreeable sensations, these sensations are registered, and accessed by the mind every time we find ourselves in a situation of choice. Our choices are, thus, influenced by prior experiences and emotions already felt.

Taking the debate into the field of marks, we can state that our choices are influenced by feelings which we associate with marks. The washing-powder that our mother used and the feeling of devotion; the lolly-pop our father bought before lunch and the sense of complicity; the tomato paste that our grandmother used in her delicious pasta sauce and the love with which she cooked for the family; the first car and the feeling of independence.

It's easy to locate in our memories examples of this nature and to agree that many of our choices are influenced by somatic-markers. However, Damásio [5] warns that:

By associating positive emotions with people, objects or places, indiscriminately and habitually, we end up feeling calmer than we should in relation to many situations [5].

The affective associations that we establish with certain marks can be very dangerous, and block our critical sense. It is as if these marks made us feel more secure, interfering with our capacity to evaluate their negative aspects, in the same way we can't see faults and weaknesses in those we love. Doctor Dráuzio Varella [12], in his article *Mercurocromo, Merthiolate and other beliefs*, repeats Dráuzio's warning:

When the Minister of Health decided to ban products which contain mercury in their formulation, a reader complained in the newspaper: "What can be wrong with them if my grandmother used them?"

Even when we know that a product can be damaging to our health, the feelings we associate with its mark carry more weight. It is easy to believe that there is a direct relationship between our more meaningful experiences and the choice of marks that will become part of our everyday lives. The marks with which we decide to live are also marks of these experiences and the feelings they evoke. It is easy, furthermore, to believe that marks, which are genuinely concerned with our well-being, have a far higher chance of favorably stimulating our somatic-markers. It is easy to conclude, finally, that a "good mark" is that which promotes memorable experiences and the well-being of its public, of society and the planet.

5. Final thoughts

The partial results of our investigations suggest that the study of the emotional relationship between people and the material environment has a valuable methodological and theoretical tool in the thought of authors of varied fields of knowledge and, above all, in the observations of users. They further reveal that artefacts do not exist outside of social relationships. They are mediators of everyday actions, links between people, witnesses of our experiences and, as such, they evoke feelings of every kind. They bring crucial notions to increase Design capacity to give existence not only to objects and messages, but to positive feelings and, above all, to a more responsible society.

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