The role of Design in building and maintaining the modern lifestyle: disconnection as a foundation

With the spread of digital technologies in recent decades, humans have become disconnected not only from Earth but from themselves. This process, however, is not recent. For centuries, Western civilization has established and reinforced a model of thinking and relating to the world that supports disconnection, separating human beings from what common sense calls "nature". Design has a role in this, as it is responsible for the conception of many of the artifacts and interfaces that mediate our interactions in various ways, whether with the environment, between humans, or with other beings. In the current context, marked by problems related to physical and mental health, climate, political, and social instability, there is a movement to seek different ways of being in the world. Reconnection seems to be essential for this change in orientation.

"Human versus nature", an idea that has become solid

In 2020, the year that marked the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, which claimed millions of lives around the world and drastically affected the daily lives of many citizens, another unprecedented event occurred: the mass of objects built by humanity surpassed the Earth's biomass. The study "Global human-made mass exceeds all living biomass", published in issue 588 of the journal Nature that same year, found that anthropogenic mass has doubled every 20 years throughout the 20th century. Every week, the equivalent of the weight of all living humans is produced; the mass of plastics is equivalent to twice that of all terrestrial animals, while the mass of buildings and infrastructure has surpassed that of trees and shrubs.

For some scholars, the human impact on the planet has reached sufficient intensity to define the beginning of a new geological era: the Anthropocene. Although there is no consensus regarding the chronological determination of this period, it is marked by changes in the climate, atmospheric composition, soil, water, and biosphere. In addition to the name Anthropocene, other competing terms are accepted, such as Capitalocene (which considers the capitalist system as responsible for the environmental crisis) and Plantationocene (which highlights colonization and coloniality as central processes in the degradation of the environment). Regardless of nomenclature and dating, it is impossible to deny that "human dominion over nature" has relentlessly affected the Earth's ecosystem. Furthermore, it has subjected people to a cruel and disenchanted way of being in the world.

Such destruction can only be justified by a high dose of insensitivity – which is intrinsic to political and economic systems that practice extractivism, monoculture, and colonization. This state of torpor, in turn, is linked to a profound disconnection. In a world that prides itself on classifying itself as connected, it is important to ask: What does this supposed connection refer to? While the term is used broadly – if not excessively – by the marketing departments of large corporations, the layers that separate human beings from the Earth become even more numerous and increasingly extensive, thick, and rigid, both in their material and immaterial forms.

At some point in its history, humans seem to have detached themselves from Earth. It is most likely that this was a long process, which began slowly and gained exponential speed until it took off at the speed of the most agile rockets, fighter jets, and missiles. Historically, the division between humans and nature became evident in the Modern Age, with the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, which placed humans at the center of everything, with their rationalism, scientism, and individualism. These movements have a place and date: Europe, mid-14th century and early 17th century, respectively. However, they were not limited to this space and time. The European idea of human superiority was forcibly imposed on all continents through colonization, characterized by the domination, conquest, exploitation, extraction, extermination, and acculturation of other peoples. This destructive force would later be intensified by industrialization, liberalism, and globalization. Philippe Descola, a French anthropologist, states in the book "Diversité des Natures, Diversité des Cultures [Diversity of Natures, Diversity of Cultures]" (Bayard Éditions, 2010):

> In order to speak of nature, man must distance himself from the environment in which he is immersed, he must feel external and superior to the world around him. By withdrawing from the world through a movement of retreat, he will be able to perceive this world as a whole.
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> [...] from the moment we become accustomed to representing nature as a whole, it becomes, so to speak, a great clock, whose mechanism we can dismantle and whose parts and gears we can perfect.

Thus, the perception that there is a humanity and a nature, and that the former is superior to the latter, was used as a fundamental argument for the continued destruction of nature in favor of human progress. In his book "Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description" (Routledge, 2011), anthropologist Tim Ingold discusses the importance of the bipedal posture for humans, establishing a link between biology and

the separation between man and nature:

> Whereas the feet, impelled by biomechanical necessity, undergird and propel the body within the natural world, the hands are free to deliver the intelligent designs or conceptions of the mind upon it: for the former, nature is the medium through which the body moves; to the latter it presents itself as a surface to be transformed.

Clearly, there are important differences between humans and other beings, but these should not legitimize a rupture. Likewise, different forms of life – animals, plants, fungi, and bacteria – have very distinct and unique ways of intelligence and agency. It is the relationships between them, and between them and the environment, that establish the balance in the Earth's biosphere. Human beings are no exception to this reality. The process of collaborative creation and evolution between living beings and the environment is studied by the American philosopher Donna Haraway, who coined the term "sympoiesis," which means making-with. In "When Species Meet" (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), she says:

> I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such, some of which play in a symphony necessary to my being alive at all, and some of which are hitching a ride and doing the rest of me, of us, no harm. I am vastly outnumbered by my tiny companions; better put, I become an adult human being in company with these tiny messmates. To be one is always to become with many.

The fact is that, beyond the division between humans and non-humans, we have also created divisions among ourselves. These countless dichotomous, binary oppositions — good versus bad, civilized versus savage, self versus other — not only determine a reductionist and limited perspective but also inherently place one side as superior to the other.

Ultimately, the "human versus nature" division is an invention solidified and exported by modern humans. Certainly, the "humanity" group is an exclusive club, as Ailton Krenak points out. In "Ideias para Adiar o Fim do Mundo [Ideas to Postpone the End of the World]" (Companhia das Letras, 2019), the indigenous philosopher and environmentalist asks: "Why do we insist so much and for so long on participating in this club, which most of the time only limits our capacity for invention, creation, existence, and freedom?"

Design and modernity

Design as a profession emerged within an industrial context and was founded on the separation between the design and production phases. With its roots in craftsmanship, the role of the designer became focused exclusively on planning and conception. This shift occurred as industries recognized the value of design: secrecy and exclusivity became tools for commercial advantage.

Thus, transformations in industrial organization and, consequently, in work, such as mass production through molds, the mechanization of processes, and the extreme division of tasks were essential for the emergence of design as we know it today. On a broader scale, Rafael Cardoso points out in "Uma Introdução à História do Design [An Introduction to the History of Design]" (Blucher, 2008):

> Design is the result of three major historical processes that occurred in an interconnected and simultaneous manner, on a global scale, between the 19th and 20th centuries. The first of these is industrialization: the reorganization of manufacturing and distribution of goods to cover an increasingly larger and more diverse range of products and consumers. The second is modern urbanization: the expansion and adaptation of population concentrations into large metropolitan areas, with over one million inhabitants. The third can be called globalization: the integration of trade, transportation, and communication networks, as well as the financial and legal systems that regulate their functioning. All three processes share the challenge of organizing a large number of disparate elements — people, vehicles, machines, housing, shops, factories, road networks, states, legislations, codes, and treaties — into harmonious and dynamic relationships. Together, this process can be understood as a movement to integrate everything with everything else. In the broader conception of the term 'design,' the various branches of the field emerged to fill the gaps and separations between parts, bridging voids with design and interstices with interfaces.

In fact, since its inception, design has expanded, encompassing several "points of contact" between human beings and the world. It has accompanied and contributed to enabling the changes that have occurred since then, such as the development of metropolises, large corporations, new technologies and materials, and, more recently, the digital boom. Through increasingly precise processes and tools with objective purposes, designers develop projects that address problems or commercial opportunities that are not necessarily real or genuine, quite the opposite.

In 1971, designer, educator, and social activist Victor Papanek, in the book "Design for the Real World: Human Ecology for Social Change" (Thames & Hudson, 1985), emphasized the need for designers to take responsibility for the social and environmental impacts of their work.

> Never before in history have grown men sat down and seriously designed electric hairbrushes, rhinestone-covered shoe horns, and mink carpeting for bathrooms, and then drawn up elaborate plans to make and sell the gadgets to millions of people

In this excerpt from the book's foreword, Papanek points out the absurdity of using human effort and natural resources to create and sell objects that should not even exist. However, despite his criticisms and suggestions, the practice of design remains the same to this day. Almost 50 years later, Colombian anthropologist and environmental activist Arturo Escobar wrote the following in "Designs for the Pluriverse" (Duke University Press, 2018):

> [...] much of what goes on under the guise of design at present involves intensive resource use and vast material destruction; design is central to the structures of unsustainability that hold in place the contemporary, so-called modern world.

In addition to having a direct role in the environmental destruction of the planet, design actively participates in maintaining a model of thinking and relating to the world that encourages increasing consumption. Design is urban, but not only that, it composes a system of signs that goes beyond material reality and is capable of shaping human behavior. Jean Baudrillard had a lot to say about this when he wrote the book "Le Système des objets" [The System of Objects]"(Éditions Gallimard, 1981) in the 1980s.

> Each of our practical objects is related with one or more structural elements, but at the same time they are all in perpetual flight from technical structure towards their secondary meanings, from the technological system towards a cultural system. The everyday environment remains, to a very great extent, an "abstract" system. For all their multiplicity, objects are generally isolated as to their function, and is the user who is responsible, as his needs dictate, for their coexistence in a functional context [...]

Regarding functionality, Baudrillard states:

> [...] "functional" does not qualify what is adapted to a goal, merely what is adapted to an order or system: functionality is the ability to become integrated into an overall scheme. An object's functionality is the very thing that enables it to transcend its main "function" in the direction of a secondary one, to play a part, to become a combining element, an adjustable item, within a universal system of signs.

These signs, refined and reinforced continuously and collectively, acquire coherence and a character of naturalness, of reality or, to use Baudrillard's term, of hyperreality: "generation by models of a real without origin or reality". This is the order of consumption, which develops at the expense of all forms of life, even human ones. In "Antropofagia Zumbi [Zombie Anthropophagy]" (N-1 Edições, 2021), Suely Rolnik states that, in today's society, individuals' self-esteem depends on an imagined hierarchy in which they are judged and measured against each other, constituting a system of comparison that becomes increasingly powerful, as if it were inevitable.

There is a codependent relationship between design and the capitalist way of life. Isolation, in this economic and social context, is not a consequence, but rather a fundamental aspect: separated from "nature" and among their own species, human beings are faced with an irremediable void.

Designing a desirable world

"What world would you like to live in? What would it be like?" These questions are not asked as often as they should be. We are born into a predetermined social, political, and economic model, indifferent to our instincts, feelings, thoughts, and desires; hegemonic, hostile to autonomy; and devastating to charm, imagination, and hope. But like all models, it is not eternal. We are left to try to define what will come next.

At a time when apocalyptic visions dominate the individual and collective imagination about the future, desirable worlds become increasingly distant and unlikely. That is precisely why the question "What world do you want to live in?" is so important. It is urgent that we question the current configuration and allow ourselves to conceive of a new reality, so that we can design based on our true needs and aspirations – as people who are part of an ecosystem, and not as users and consumers.

In the field of design, a little-known approach that goes against the capitalist logic of production and the market seems to be emerging. Speculative design, described by

Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby in the book "Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming" (MIT Press, 2013), paves the way for the use of design as a tool for investigating possible futures. The field has great potential to initiate debates and provides encouragement by expanding horizons. However, the creations that derive from this new field have, up until now, had limited scope and, in most cases, have not managed to escape pessimism. In a way, we are still stuck in ways of doing things motivated by consumption, which makes it difficult to develop proposals that can be more than resentful critiques of capitalism. In other words, our projects, no matter how much they try to point to the future, are still anchored in the hegemony of the present. But other perspectives need to be considered.

The indigenous peoples, who have resisted colonialism for centuries, show us that there are other ways of relating to the E/earth. For example, without the notion of ownership (for them, the E/earth is not ours, we are the ones who belong to the E/earth) and without human exclusivity (for them, non-human beings and natural entities also have agency). Converging with these people can be a starting point for changing our orientation towards sustainable ways of inhabiting the planet.

The turning point is to recover the vital awareness that we are part of a cosmic dance. As long as the exclusivist dualistic thinking invented by modern humans prevails, they will be doomed to consume E/earth in a desperate attempt to fill the void left by having separated from it. The times in which we live beg for a radical change: duality needs to collapse, creating space for plurality. As for my desires for the new world, they have to do with simplicity, affection, care, community, and art. What about yours?