

Design Emergencies and the Power of Design

Interview with Paola Antonelli

Paola Antonelli

Senior Curator at the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and Director of Research and Development

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Abstract

The interview with Paola Antonelli mostly focuses on the *Design Emergency* project she is curating together with Alice Rawsthorn as an experimental cultural initiative created in March-April 2020, during the first Covid-19 lockdown. By presenting the origin of the project and its main goals, she highlights the role of design in the pandemic and post-pandemic, and, more generally, in every crisis, when people need to adapt and deal with change. The presentation of some of the designers she met in this project concretely demonstrates the assumptions and approach: to make people understand the power and the importance of design.

Keywords

Design Emergency
Crisis
Design power
Transformative challenges
Awareness

Senior Curator at the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York and Director of Research and Development. She has a vast experience as curator of exhibitions and cultural projects in the field of design. Just to quote two examples that are located at the beginning and in a more recent phase of her career: in 2005 she organized the exhibition *Safe. Design Takes on Risk* (MoMA), which presented products and prototypes designed to protect body and mind from dangerous and stressful circumstances. More recently, in 2019 she curated the exhibition *Broken Nature: Design Takes on Human Survival*, organized at the Triennale di Milano, which made us reflect on the relationship and responsibility between “restorative design”, the environment and other species that populate the Planet.

EF Your experience as Curator of exhibitions and cultural projects in the field of design is recognized worldwide. These projects have always been characterized by refined content, critical and often provocative approaches, and innovative tools. Most of all, they have been highly future-focused and have envisioned possible new directions for the design discourse, involving a general public. Could you tell us something about your career, especially how your experience as design Curator has nurtured the debate on the future frontiers of design research and practice?

PA I have a background in Milan, the capital of design, in Italy. I grew up with design, in a place where people talk about design like they talk about football or politics. Design was normal in my life when I was growing up, and when I moved to New York City, I realized that there was no such normalcy there for design. People had a familiarity with contemporary art, but not with design. In a way, that lack of stereotypes about design — or at least, the stereotype there was, of design as *decoration and embellishment* — gave me the chance to really start from *tabula rasa* and talk about design in much broader terms. From the very beginning, I wanted to make sure that people realize design is more than just furniture, cars and posters. The first exhibition I curated at the MOMA was about materials and design, a theme that came from Italy where I had previously worked with Achille Castiglioni. I wanted to present various ways to understand what design is and the role that it plays in our everyday life, because that is ultimately my goal. Whether I talk about design as furniture, as videogames, as symbols, as infrastructure, as anything that can come to mind, my goal is always one: to make people understand that design is a force that can help not only designers, but citizens, policymakers and scientists approach the building of the present and the future in a different way. So, design by itself is not the solution to the ills of the world, but it is a necessary enzyme, together with policy making, science and technology, to build a more copasetic future that takes into account the interests not only of other human beings, but of other species and of the Planet too.

I see design as central to culture, central to political and individual life, and I want to communicate that to as wide an audience as possible.

EF We know, we see, and we perceive that the design discipline is evolving rapidly, involving new paradigms, disciplinary relations, approaches, fields of innovation. At the same time, we cannot forget what has happened over the past two years. Could you give us a possible interpretation of the impact of the pandemic and post-pandemic periods in this changing scenario? How transformative challenges may change the role of the design discipline/profession itself?

PA There are a lot of romantic clichés about pandemics or crises, that crises are always a jumpstart for a renaissance, and, you know, as is always the case with clichés, they have a lot of truth in them. This pandemic, even this crisis, have taught us a lot, and design has been fundamental as it always is to help people adapt and deal with change. You are asking me a gigantic question, but I am going to give you an answer that provides examples, as you requested. At the beginning of the pandemic, during the lockdown in March-April 2020, my husband and I were stuck in our apartment, and like everybody else, we were trying to understand how to cope. We had more time to listen and to read. Even though the world was crumbling and there were many people that were seriously in trouble, we had this strange, idyllic bubble of quiet that we had not had in a long time. Larry was listening to Fat Joe, a hip-hop artist. Every night he was doing these Instagram Lives with various other friends, musicians or artists, and I remember Larry telling me that I could do this, too. It seemed like a great idea, so I called my friend Alice Rawsthorn, who is the foremost design critic in the world. We share the same goal in life, to make people understand the power and the importance of design. We thought this was a great opportunity just to show people how design intervenes in the pandemic. We also called another friend, Frith Kerr, who is a graphic designer. She put together an identity for us in four days and we started the *Design Emergency* project.

EF Could you describe some of the preliminary phases? We know the project provoked a significant reflection on some of the main topics of our contemporary age: you spoke about violence after the pandemic, vaccine hope, collaboration, symbolism, information, hacking.

PA To give you an example of how we went about it, we started with an architect, Michael Murphy of MASS Design Studio in Boston and in Rwanda, who has been working with governments all over the world in health emergencies. He worked with the Rwandan government for the Ebola crisis, with Haiti for the cholera crisis and, right then, he was being called by big New York hospitals to help them deal with the pandemic. Shortly thereafter, we had Alissa Eckert, who is one of the two illustrators at the Center for Disease Control that designed the COVID image we are all familiar with. The coronavirus is a big blob, so it was a choice to make it round like a deep-sea mine, with the menacing red S protein. We spoke with her.

Then, just to give you other examples, we interviewed Professor Marco Ranieri in Bologna, at the Ospedale Universitario Sant'Orsola, one of the doctors in the world who devised a way to split ventilators. He told us the story of how he brought together other experts and a plastic manufacturing company near Bologna to produce this valve.

We also had Mark Dalton from New Zealand because the New Zealand campaign for COVID awareness was the best. We took this emergency as an opportunity to show people how many facets of design were involved in helping during the pandemic. But we have been continuing because there is also an after-pandemic. We are not there yet, but how do we continue? How do we take the lessons from the pandemic and build on them? How do we take other crises into account, such as the environmental crisis, the social justice crisis?

We also had specials, after the Beirut blast, the wildfires in the West, or the Black Lives Matter movement. All these different crises come into play and are part of how we will live life in the future, so it is really important for us to show how powerful design is. These are just examples, but I think that you can just turn your head and right around the corner in Bologna see the dozens of different interventions that design is already involved in to make the city and your quality of life better. Then you can expand to the rest of the territory. It is very important for us to show people in their own life, on their own skin, what design is doing, so that they will finally understand it.

EF You have introduced the concept of the after-pandemic and the evolution of the *Design Emergency* project. Could you mention some emblematic interviews that can highlight this concept?

PA There are many, but there is one in particular that I think might have a long future. It is Kunlé Adeyemi, an architect based in the Netherlands who has worked in many cities around the world, but whose first forming experience was in Lagos (Nigeria). He has been talking about the fact that cities need to have a different relationship with water because, in the future, there is going to be either too much water or too little. Water is so central. His first experiment was a floating school in Makoko, an area of Lagos that is built in large part on the water, where homes are on stilts and people move around by boat. He made a floating school together with the community. The reason why I like this experiment by Kunlé is because it deals not only with the reality of the environmental crisis and the future of cities, but it also deals with the community. This leads me to another great interview, the one with Xu Tiantian, a woman architect based in Beijing. She has been working with communities, especially in the Songjiang Valley, which is a valley of four hundred small villages. She experimented with the idea of architectural acupuncture: it is the idea of going into a community, listening to the community, understanding not only what the community needs, but also what the community can do and

produce. Then very humbly, without the bombastics that architecture used to propose in the past, just working on small interventions. It might be a bamboo theater, it might be transforming an old bridge, covering it and making it something of a “piazza”. It might be building a tofu factory, because in a village tofu is an important product, and making it become a community center as well. I like the fact that the future deals not only with the horrible crisis that is the environment, but also with an attempt to involve communities in the making of their cities and their future.

EF Could you give us a possible vision of the future of the design discipline?

PA My motto is that there is always a design emergency. We are dealing with everything that comes our way and designers, I think, will be much more embedded in the world. Hopefully, people will also start learning that design is not only furniture. When I say people, I also mean politicians that keep on pushing Italian design as furniture and fashion. They will also be supportive of other forms of design that are so fundamental to the future. We will see more and more designers getting involved in the Metaverse, for instance: interfaces, video games, symbols and infrastructures. I believe that more and more people will start to understand how design needs to be part of corporate decisions, political decisions, and of pretty much every facet of the world.

EF What about the impact of this idea in design schools? Is education to creativity a possible answer to our responsibility towards the Planet?

PA Education is so important and so complicated. One of the biggest issues with design education is the fact that design is a strange hybrid between science, technology, art, engineering, material science, sociology and anthropology. It is a very complex discipline, but very often it falls under either the purview of the polytechnic, like an engineering school; or, worse, when it falls in an art school. I say worse because I think it is more constructive for a designer to start with a sense of rigour that is given by science and technology and then, you know, become free into the world of art. But that is not really the big problem. The big problem is the cost. Many design schools cost a lot of money. There are not enough scholarships, and they don't guarantee a paying job like medicine, or academia, or business, or better yet engineering do. Many students go to design school and come out with huge debt, so they take whatever job they can, which is often akin to a consultancy. Boston Design Group, Boston Consulting Group and many other big groups have started design divisions, that are not the kind of design that we hope to push for the future. It really is important to try and reform design education at the infrastructural level, not only in the curriculum, but in the way it is founded, in

the way it is supported financially. Design students should be able to experiment for a while before they find a paying job. A few years ago the Dutch government used to do that: through a foundation, it would support students not only during school, but after they graduated, giving them a rent-free apartment for two years, and buying what the students would make. It's about jumpstarting a career, rather than dropping students with a lot of debt into the job market: I would love to see policymakers think about the future of design education and the future of designers.