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YVES BEHAR'S HARD-WORKING TALENT



ph: Andrea Basile

In this open-hearted conversation, world-known designer Yves Behar tells DM about the role of design as a catalyst for change and forward movement in a world often too comfortable with the known and safe, and too scared of the unexpected and new. He believes that, while technology, and AI in particular, can be useful as a tool, only humans can understand, and connect with human needs. In that, humans will always be better designers.

A strong supporter of hard work, he reveals how, as a young designer, he earned his place at the decision-makers' table by showing executives their ideas sketched on paper. Read on to find out how he also believes that engaging creatively with traditional, local crafts and materials, can influence design at a global level.

The soft power of human-driven design in making the world move forward.

In today's multipolar world, how does design function as a form of soft power, and where is the line between design and activism?

What I've told myself, and always have practised, is this idea that as a designer, I'm able to move things forward when I create. And when I create, I'm also an example.

Design is for me a catalyst, the soft power of creativity in the sense that as designers we have to continue to create, to build, to show the future that we believe in. In the world we live in, a lot of the principles of what really makes design successful are interconnected: diversity, universality of ideas, generosity. In a way, activism is what design does, in a world that feels somewhat retrograde.

Are there cultural or geographical contexts where design can drive the most radical change? How do you design without imposing a "global style"?

Design is a mixture of global style and regional, local craft and making. Right now I'm speaking to you from Lisbon, which I fell in love with five years ago. Here in Portugal there's still so much making, so much craft. I can easily access so many materials and craftsmen to partner with. That allows me to give a new direction to my practice.

For me, global and local, or "glocal", is a natural state. The creative flow can come from local participation and involvement with craft. Here I'm working with cork and

“Activism is what design does, in a world that feels somewhat retrograde.”



TELO Trucks: the MT1 is the world's most efficient EV pickup, built for urban living and weekend adventures.



TELO Trucks:
Fuseproject's MT1 reimagines the pickup for city life: a compact, five-passenger EV that fits within the footprint of a two-door Mini yet packs a 60-inch bed and full-size utility – on par with a Toyota Tacoma while being about 40% more compact. The architecture maximizes interior and cargo space without the bulk, offering an agile, lower-impact alternative to traditional light-duty trucks.



Kind Humanoid — MONA

Billed as “the first friendly robot designed to navigate and assist in unstructured environments.” Fuseproject gives it an approachable character: a soft, diamond-shaped head with a mood-expressive display, a kimono-inspired torso, and a warm bronze palette—balancing technical capability with human-centered design.

sustainable textiles, local resources influencing global practice. I've brought them into the TELO project, the truck we're building. We are now in the final stretch, focusing on details and homologation, and we have already produced two working prototypes.

I see an important role for the designer to motivate and engage creatively with traditional crafts that tend to die off unless renewed. The richness of craftsmanship, whether here, in Indonesia, or anywhere in the world, benefits from design, re-energised with new ideas. I like that role of the designer as a connection between the very local and the global.

How do you personally reinterpret the role of the designer with new technologies like artificial intelligence?

Technology is everywhere and AI is just another technology. Some are more disruptive than others, but I do not build projects or companies around a technology, but around human needs. The entrepreneurs, scientists, and technologists that I work with are all humanists.

The hype around AI and the almost monolithic thinking we see today is overblown. I have used AI since the late 2000s and it has been extremely useful. These projects are about education with the Moxie robot, about ageing with the companion ElliQ, and about supporting parents and babies with Happiest Baby SNOO. These embodied AI projects have made a difference by solving one-to-one needs that are personal and real.

AI becomes problematic when it removes the need to learn lifelong skills or abates the need for conscientiousness. Being a designer or a writer requires conscientiousness that AI makes you think you don't need.

In terms of design, AI is just a tool, and it's terrible at designing. Design is not about stamping a predictable aesthetic everywhere. Design is about connecting to unique human needs.

There was a study where people were shown copies of artworks and then the originals. The emotional impact of the copies was ten times less. Machine-made is not authentic. Human-made is authentic. Without authenticity, we do not connect. Humans will always be better designers.

“I see an important role for the designer to motivate and engage creatively with traditional crafts that tend to die off unless renewed.”

Do you think multidisciplinary is a success factor when it comes to design?

When I created Fuseproject, the name was about fusing different disciplines at the service of an idea. With a multidisciplinary approach, we are not saying one practice will be the solution. We are saying we don't know where the big idea will come from.

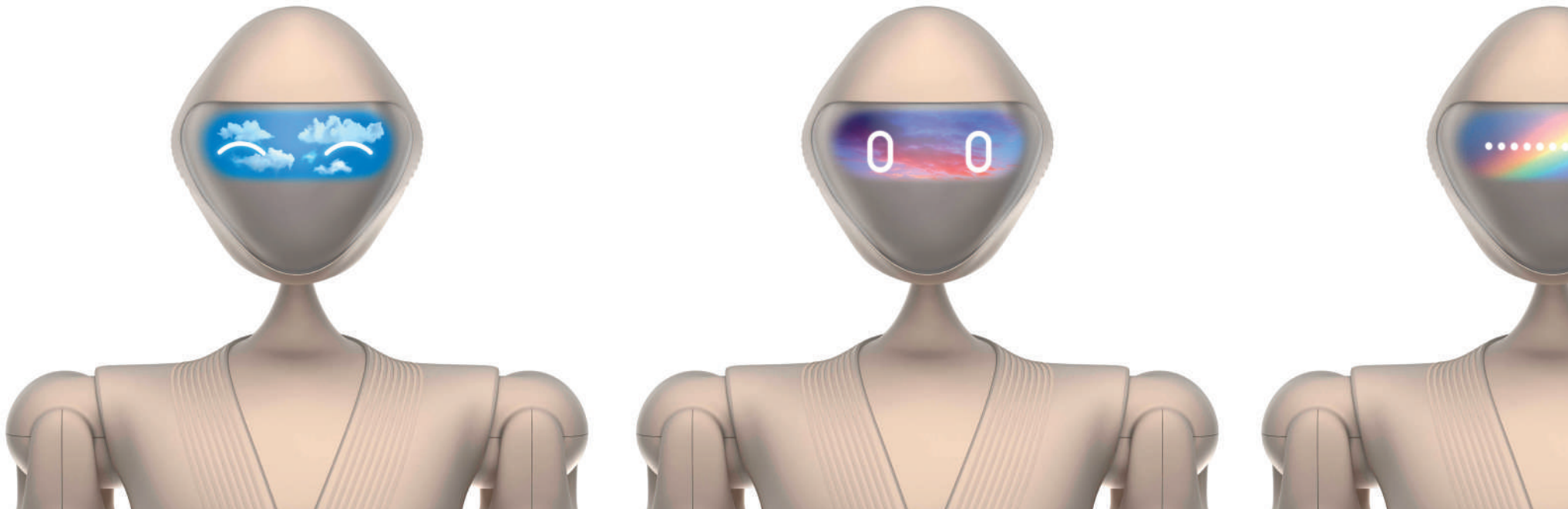
Once the big idea is discovered, all the other disciplines are there to enhance it, to make it real. That is very different from specialised groups pulling in separate directions. A multidisciplinary approach creates greater opportunity for discovery and cohesiveness.

I have worked this way for 25 years since I founded Fuseproject, and I feel it is the ultimate way to design and collaborate.

How important is it to integrate design and brand strategy from the start of any project?

Since 2005 we have partnered with over 100 start-ups. Two out of three times we designed the brand and often even the naming of the company. Being part of the strategy, in collaboration with the founders, is a way to define the long-term presence of a company, how it is perceived and communicated.

I have found it very fulfilling, but also impactful in the long term, to create the core notions of the brand. Whether naming products or companies and creating the branding and presence of how they exist in the world, it has become fundamental to our work.



Emotion seems to play an important role in all this. In fact, you once said emotion prevails over aesthetics. What does this mean to you?

To me, beauty is important, but trend and style are not. What's important is how an object connects emotionally with its user. It is not about throwing colours and shapes at the world. It is about creating the magic that happens through interaction with a product or an interface.

Objects around us can distract us negatively, but we can also design them to interact discreetly in the background, without interrupting. People find that magical, intelligent and emotionally satisfying.

That emotional intelligence is something we need to imbue in the work all the time. For us as designers, contributing to the world means putting things in front of people that fit in rather than interrupt.

“Style has been a trap in design. Why should an aesthetic that is beautiful in one object be transferred to another?”



SNOO Smart Bassinet

Snoo is the first robotic bassinet that soothes fussiness and extends sleep for babies—and parents, offering an additional one to two hours of sleep per night. Clinical studies show it can reduce symptoms of postpartum depression more effectively than antidepressants, and it's the first and only FDA-approved bassinet... keeping babies safely on their backs during sleep.



Get in the Game — SFMOMA
 An exhibition that explored how art and design shape the role of sports in culture. Fuseproject organized 200+ works across 15,000 sq ft into themed zones—fandom, winning & losing, breaking records—within a cohesive, open flow, and a stadium-like entrance of stretched netting sets a high-energy tone for artworks, interactive installations, and athletic gear





Fuseproject and Rossinavi's Solsea is the first hybrid-electric catamaran superyacht, designed for silent nature exploration. An eco-displacement yacht enabling 100% electric operation for day trips and up to 80% electric cruising during transatlantic crossings, and significantly reduced consumption and operating costs by 80% while cruising, and 100% during wintering. Features include large surfaces for solar panels, including a dual-purpose pool cover that serves as a shading and solar surface and a full-width hydraulic rear door transforms into a beach club platform. For this project, Behar used cork as an expression of sustainable luxury, and also designed all the furniture.

How do you reconcile that with visual brand language and brand identity?

When you are creating a brand, for example the TELO Truck we're working on, you build a design language that will apply to the next vehicle in the family. That does not mean the language should force a product into being something it does not want to be. Context still remains important.

Style has been a trap in design. The idea of a signature style always feels contrived. Why should an aesthetic that is beautiful in one object be transferred to another? Designers should adapt a design language to fit different forms.

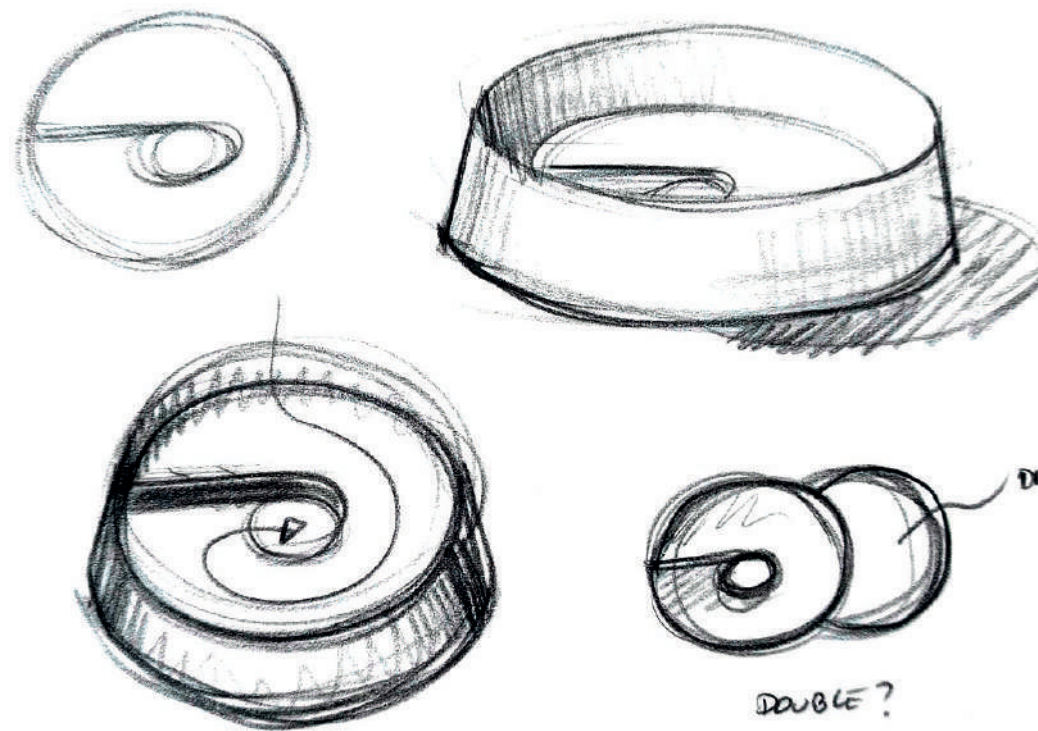
What advice would you give to young people wanting to start a career in design?

Really focus on the skills of design. There is so much temptation today to learn everything, to be the accountant, the patent lawyer, the manufacturer, the business owner. Those skills will be learned in due time. The most important skill, the one that differentiates you, is the ability to take ideas and turn them into a reality: a drawing, a mock-up, a manufactured object.

When I was a young designer, I arrived in California from Switzerland, where seniority was very much a thing. But in my late twenties, I would be sitting in rooms with scientists, entrepreneurs and PhDs. They would all talk about an idea, and at some point they would turn to me and ask, "What do you think?" I would make a quick drawing, and suddenly they would see their idea in a new way. That was when I earned my place at the table, regardless of age, accent or background.

So my advice to young designers is to focus on this tremendous value you can bring as a creative, and learn all the other things in due time. If you do not build that capacity to be the best designer you can be, skilled at something so unique and so needed, you are missing out.

“AI is just a tool, and it’s terrible at designing. Design is not about stamping a predictable aesthetic everywhere.”



LAUFEN — VOLTA
The first zero-emissions ceramic collection, fired in LAUFEN's 100-meter electric kiln powered entirely by solar energy. The basin's interior engineers a circular flow that mimics a river's motion, enriching daily rituals while aiding conservation; the exterior echoes that movement and integrates LAUFEN's large outlet system for uncluttered storage.





OLPC - One Laptop per Child - XO LAPTOP

Conceived as a durable learning tool for children in developing countries, it features a sunlight-readable display, a robust rubberized case, and dual Wi-Fi “rabbit-ear” antennas.



CIONIC - Neural Sleeve

The first bionic clothing designed to improve mobility for people with neurological conditions: a wearable leg sleeve that analyses gait and delivers functional electrical stimulation timed to the gait cycle to activate the necessary muscles.



Are you a believer in hard work, like talent is not sufficient on its own?

This is actually a pet peeve of mine. I have had that discussion many times. When people do not understand what it takes to be excellent at anything, they say, “You have so much talent.” It always drives me crazy, because talent without hard work is wasted.

The idea that ability comes from the sky rather than from the ten thousand hours spent developing through trial and error, sweat and tears, is a terrible shortcut.

For me, talent is simply recognising the love of what I do. If I love design, I apply myself completely to it. That is the core of talent: recognising potential, then investing work to build it into something extraordinary.

I often quote Pablo Picasso: “Inspiration exists, but it has to find you working.” If you apply your brain to solving a problem, that problem will get solved because you are working on it.

“Inspiration exists, but it has to find you working.”

(Pablo Picasso)



Yves Behar

BIO

Yves Behar (b.1967 in Lausanne, Switzerland) is a Swiss-born industrial designer and founder of the San Francisco-based design and branding firm Fuseproject. Educated in Europe and at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, he worked with Frog Design and Lunar Design before establishing his own studio in 1999. Fuseproject has developed a wide range of projects for companies such as Apple, Herman Miller, Microsoft, Coca-Cola, Puma, Samsung and UNESCO, combining multidisciplinary design with social innovation. Behar is particularly known for his humanitarian work with One Laptop per Child and for projects such as the Snoo smart bassinet and the August smart lock. His creations are held in the permanent collections of major museums including the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Musée de Design et d'Arts Appliqués Contemporains in Lausanne, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum in New York. More recently he has launched a new venture in Lisbon, expanding his practice to include local craft and sustainable materials.

fuseproject.com



SHADES OF MEANING

How the colours around us shape perception, emotion, and design

Colour comes from the way light, objects, and our brain interact. It is the first thing we notice, shaping our senses and giving meaning to what we see. Each colour is an experience created by this interaction, and designers know how to use it effectively.

Before shape and movement, there is colour

Before we perceive form or movement, it is colour that catches our eye, giving the first and most immediate information about what we encounter. This rapid response is the result of millennia of human evolution: we register colour first, then movement, and finally the position of objects, animals or people.

What we call “colour” is simply the result of an invisible dialogue between light, the object and our brain. Light travels in waves, some long and others short. When it strikes an object, part of the waves are absorbed while the rest are reflected and reach our eyes. The receptors in the retina then convert this light into electrical signals, and the brain completes the process by interpreting, recognising and assigning meaning. Colour is not an intrinsic property of an object but a constructed perception that changes with the light, the context and our perceptual system. Each colour is therefore a sensation born of interaction.

This perception is one of the most influential factors in decision-making, as numerous scientific studies confirm. People form a mental image of a product in about 90 seconds, and more than half of that impression is based on colour. Colours also stimulate the brain through neurological connections, activating areas linked to the limbic system and the hypothalamus, which regulate mood, energy, appetite and even stress.

Although cultural context plays a decisive role, there is also a universal convergence around certain colours. Our reaction to a hue is partly subjective, but it is helpful to recognise which colours make us feel better, so that we can bring them into our spaces and communities.

In the psychology of living, nothing is neutral

According to the Munsell Colour System, an internationally recognised classification, colours are defined by three main attributes: hue (such as red, yellow, green, blue, and violet), value (brightness), and chroma (saturation or intensity). This framework is essential for understanding how colour shapes perception and emotion.

The value we unconsciously assign to different colours comes from instinctive reactions. Warm, light colours increase muscle tension, raise heartbeat and breathing, and encourage movement. Dark, cool colours have the opposite effect, promoting calm and a sense of self-sufficiency.

Research also shows that colours such as orange, light blue, pink, or green, especially at certain levels of brightness or saturation, can evoke memories of carefree childhood or joyful, light-hearted moments. This effect is particularly strong for colours we encounter in nature. Our minds also interpret tonal variation spatially: we know that distant objects appear paler and less defined. This is why cool colours seem further away and can visually expand a space,

Dopamine decor

Colour as an activator of wellbeing in the home: this is the guiding principle of Dopamine Decor, which uses carefully chosen palettes to convey positivity, vitality, and balance.

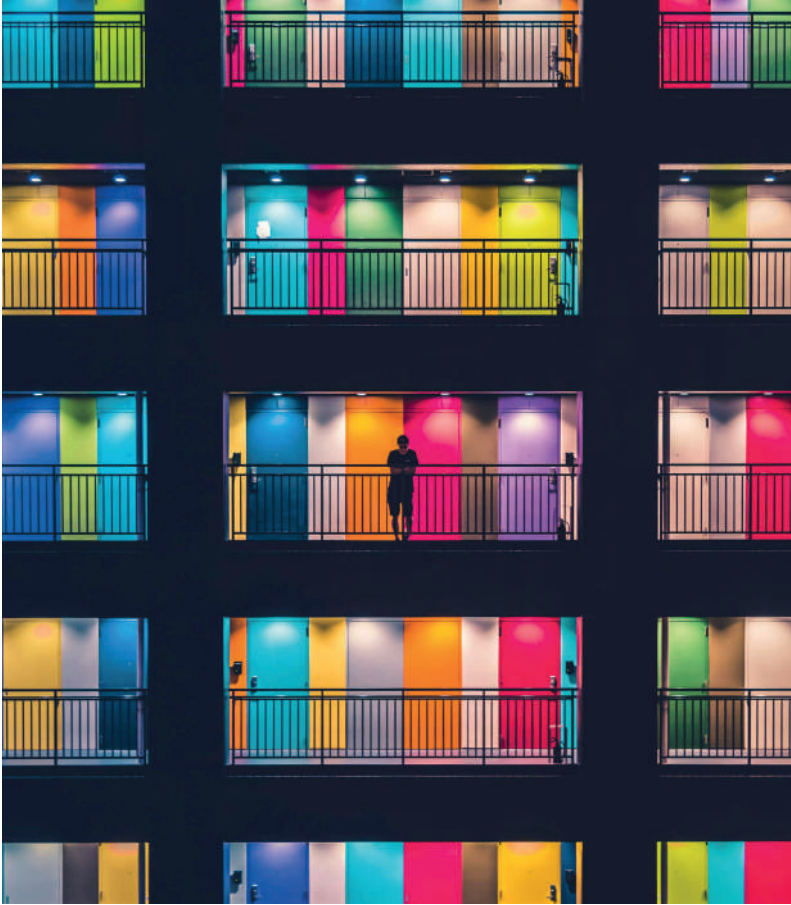
The name comes from dopamine, the neurotransmitter that generates feelings of wellbeing in the brain. When light waves reach the retina, they are converted into electrical impulses sent to the hypothalamus, the area that regulates the endocrine system and influences our emotions.

Dopamine Decor precisely calibrates each colour choice to create home environments that lift mood through visual perception. The approach is holistic: every shade must be in dialogue with the other elements of the space.

particularly when they are lighter, while warm colours appear closer and can make a space feel smaller, especially when darker. We also know that bright colours tend to trigger positive emotions, while black evokes both positive and negative responses and is often favoured by young people. Its popularity in fashion and marketing likely comes from its associations with power, mystery, seduction, and rebellion, all of which can be highly appealing to consumers. Red can enhance competitive performance; blue and green support reasoning and problem-solving; yellow energises and captures attention; brown conveys seriousness



and reliability. Yet blue, in some contexts, is associated with sadness, just as white can symbolise purity in Western bridal traditions but emptiness or death in parts of Eastern culture. Colours also affect how we perceive depth. Fixed colour groups are often associated with artificial elements, while varied or changing colours remind us of nature and the passing of time. Similarly, muted or darker shades tend to recede into the background, while bright and vivid tones stand out in the foreground. This contrast can dramatically change how we experience a space. For example, painting walls in darker, muted colours can make a room feel more spacious than it actually is. What can affect our psyche, however, is monochromy in interiors, which causes visual strain and a sense of psychological oppression.

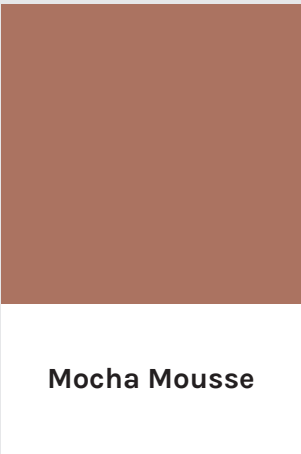


Why 2025 Needs These Colours

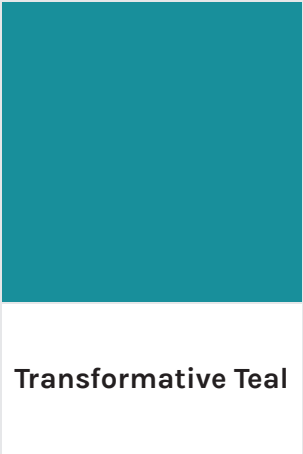
This year’s colour palette speaks not only to aesthetic sensibilities but to the emotional and cultural undercurrents of our time. Mocha Mousse, with its warm, enveloping tone, evokes a sense of comfort, intimacy, and quiet nostalgia—an anchor in uncertain times. In contrast, Transformative Teal points to a world in motion: forward-looking, fluid, and grounded in sustainability. Together, they form a chromatic dialogue between stillness and change, expressing the dual need for both emotional refuge and conscious transformation in 2025.

Mocha Mousse (Pantone 2025): The colour of balance

The Pantone Colour Institute has announced Pantone’s Colour of the Year 2025: Mocha Mousse, a warm brown that blends easily into any setting. Soft and reassuring, it suggests connection and harmony, evoking milk chocolate and coffee foam. In colour psychology, brown is linked to security and stability, drawing on its association with the earth and tree trunks as symbols of balance. Mocha Mousse was selected to reflect the search for calm in an increasingly fast-paced world. It encourages us to slow down, reconnect with nature, and find inner peace. Ideal for wall colours, furniture bases, or textiles.



Mocha Mousse



Transformative Teal

Transformative Teal: The colour of 2026 for a changing world

In 2026, colour will be more than an aesthetic choice: it will serve as a powerful signal of change. WGSN and Coloro, two of the world’s leading trend forecasting agencies, have named Transformative Teal as the Colour of the Year (Teal is a deep greenish-blue shade, named after the small duck with a distinctive stripe of this colour around its eye).

Born from the fusion of dependable Deep Blue and Aquatic Green, this shade is intended to reflect an era of transition and reorientation. According to WGSN, 2026 will be defined by a growing collective need for urgent transformation in social models, production systems, and our relationship with the environment. Transformative Teal enters this landscape as a symbolic colour, evoking resilience, regeneration, and connection with nature. It is no coincidence that greens and blues are gaining prominence: Google Trends shows that searches for “teal” have risen by 9% year on year, reflecting a widespread desire for balance, stability, and an ecological outlook.

It speaks of fluidity, bridging nature and technology, emotion and rationality, aesthetic desire and environmental urgency. It conveys both sustainable futures and inner wellbeing, carrying a promise of renewal. For brands, it is also a strategic lever: a recent WGSN study shows that 98% of consumers say colour influences their purchasing decisions.

Making Sense of the Colour Maze

From Pantone to HEX: why do so many systems coexist, and how do designers navigate them? There is no single universal language of colour; instead, multiple systems have developed over time, each designed to meet different professional needs:

Pantone was launched in the 1960s for the graphic arts, ensuring that a logo, a fashion fabric, or a printed brochure would look the same everywhere.

RAL, born in Germany in 1927, was designed for paints and coatings in industry, construction, and signage. Today it includes several collections (Classic, Design, Effect) used across Europe.

NCS (Natural Colour System) was developed in Sweden from the 1960s and officially published as a standard in 1979. It is based on six elementary colour perceptions (white, black, red, yellow, green, blue) and is widely applied in architecture, interiors, and product design.

Munsell (1905) was one of the first scientific attempts to classify colours using three dimensions: hue, value (lightness), and chroma (intensity). Still today it is used in education, art, restoration, and even in soil and earth science.

CIE colour spaces (since 1931) are the international scientific standards based on human vision. CIE XYZ and CIELAB provide the foundation for colour measurement, calibration, and digital imaging worldwide

These systems coexist because each serves different needs, from graphic design to architectures, but they are not interchangeable, and that often causes confusion.

Why does the same colour look different on screen, paper and materials?

We expect a colour to be absolute, yet in reality its perception changes depending on device, medium, and environment.

On screens

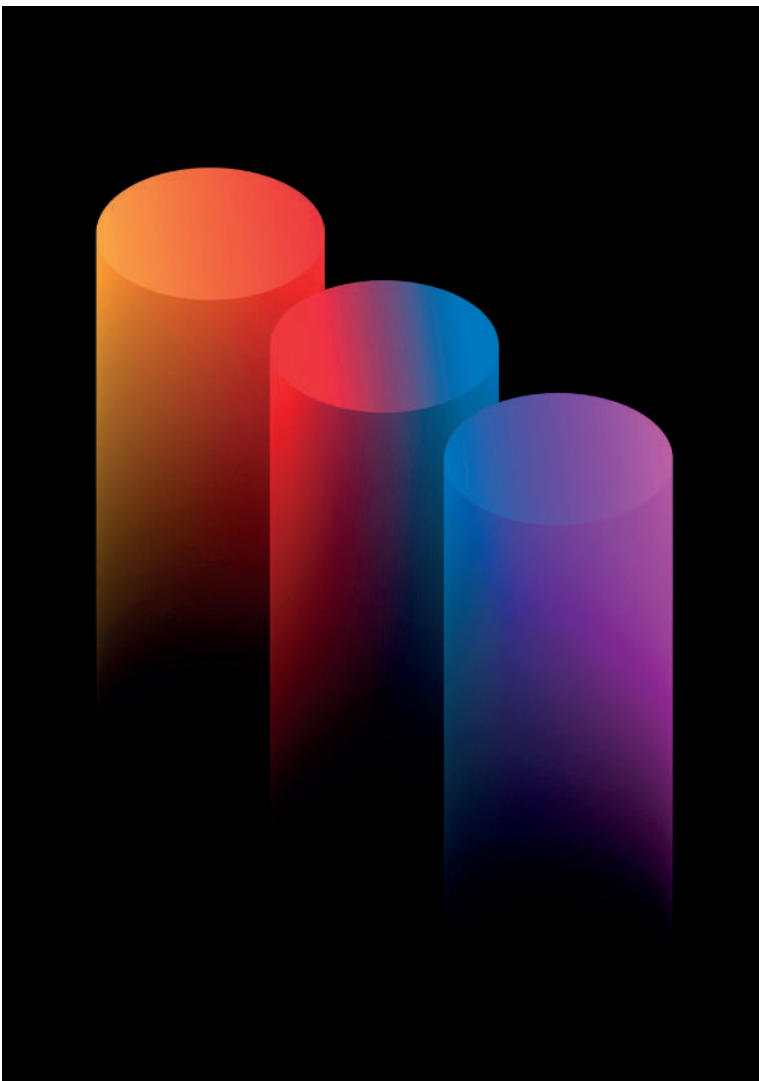
Colours shift because each display has its own calibration and technology. A smartphone with an OLED panel could render the same RGB values slightly differently from an old LCD monitor. Ambient light, screen coatings (matte or glossy), and brightness settings also affect perception.

In print and on materials

The same ink looks different on glossy or matte paper, and even more so on plastic, fabric, or metal. Finishes such as satin, matte, or gloss, can alter vibrancy. There are no official conversions between systems like Pantone and RAL: at best, one can find the closest match. Custom inks or paints can reproduce a precise hue, but this often involves higher costs and complex processes.

Human perception

Colours also change with lighting. A sample may match perfectly under daylight but appear different under LED light, a phenomenon known as metamerism. Surrounding colours and contrast can trick our eyes, and individual perception varies with age or vision differences.



Digital colour models: Speaking the language of screens and print

In the digital world, colour is described with mathematical models that allow it to be displayed consistently across devices and media:

RGB (Red, Green, Blue): the additive model of light, used by screens, cameras, and digital devices.

CMYK (Cyan, Magenta, Yellow, Black): the subtractive model of inks, used in printing.

LAB (or CIE L*a*b*, where CIE stands for Commission Internationale de l'Éclairage): a device-independent model based on human vision, used for calibration and as the universal reference in colour management.

HSB (Hue, Saturation, Brightness): an intuitive way to describe colours by type, vividness, and lightness; common in design software.

HEX: a six-digit alphanumeric code that represents RGB values, the standard for web and digital graphics.

These models don't replace Pantone, RAL, or NCS, but they ensure that colours look as consistent as possible when moving from a smartphone screen to a printed catalogue.

MORE THAN FORM, MORE THAN FUNCTION

How empathic design blends identity, regeneration, and wellbeing to put people at the heart of projects



© JUNI GBR - Julia Schmidt & Nikolas Hagele

A guide to human-centred design, looking towards and beyond 2026, in which designers and companies are called to place individuals at the heart of every project, for their wellbeing and for that of society. A well-designed space can bring on emotions, support mental health, and contribute to cultural transformation.

Beyond function, working through emotions, which comes before aesthetics

This is the path an increasing number of designers and companies are following: seeing use as an organic dimension that benefits both the individual and the community. How is this achieved? Through empathy, understood as a genuine design competence. It is about a design approach that can listen, interpret, and even heal. And it follows one essential rule: put the individual at the centre of the creative process. This is what we call empathic, or emotional, design. As the designers and creative professionals we spoke to for this issue testify, it has become a true instrument for aesthetic, cultural, and environmental transformation. In an increasingly complex, interconnected, and sensitive world, the designer is expected to create experiences that are meaningful, aligned with users' values, and capable of generating genuine emotional impact.

When we enter a home, a room, an office, or any public or private space, the first thing we perceive is its emotional impact. It is inevitable. So let us recognise it, embrace it, and make the most of it. Light, sound, colours, scents, furnishings, textures, materials, the arrangement of space, fullness and emptiness: all shape our emotional state, influencing our wellbeing or discomfort and, in turn, our decisions and actions.

What is empathic or emotional design?

Empathy in design is the ability of the designers to understand and share the emotions, needs and perspectives of the people they are designing for. It means immersing oneself in the user's world to create solutions that truly respond to their needs, moving beyond surface-level understanding to uncover the motivations behind the project. This is possible only with the awareness that the environment we inhabit influences not just our gestures and movements, but also our inner life, our balance, energy and sense of fulfilment. Once we leave our "fingerprints", objects retain a trace of our experience, becoming imbued with meaning in an emotional exchange that turns into a narrative code of lasting eloquence.

The first essential step in this creative journey is active listening: gathering continuous feedback, observing behaviours, and understanding the user's context. But this is not marketing; it is a genuine relationship. Choosing the empathic approach means recognising that design is, above all, an emotional matter, even before being an aesthetic one. Its aim is to generate a seamless interaction between people and the objects or spaces they inhabit. This requires understanding that emotions shape our thinking and profoundly influence our lives, forming the basis of how we make decisions.

The empathic approach treats design as a process, a continuous interaction with its users



© Simone Barberis

Z24 Books Bookcase by Muller Van Severen - Zanotta
Placed against the wall or positioned in the middle of the room as a divider, the Z24 Books is a new self-standing bookcase with remarkable versatility. The glossy lacquered metal sides reprise the iconic zig-zag motif, creating a sculptural visual impact, while the fixed shelves in natural oak provide a material contrast between the solidity of wood and the visual lightness of metal. The interplay of light and shadow enhances the perception of depth and dynamism. This bookcase adapts easily to different settings, from the living area to the bedroom.

Identity, environment and mental wellbeing

The empathic approach views design as a continuous process, in constant interaction with its users, to create solutions that are not only functional but also rich in value and meaning for individuals and communities. Within this framework, the designer works across three further paths: geo-cultural design, regenerative design and neurodesign, each focused on identity, environmental responsibility and mental wellbeing.

By its nature, empathic design can connect these three aesthetic, creative and functional dimensions, enabling experiences that are emotionally, cognitively and socially meaningful. It is a way of designing not just for the users, but with the users, recognising them as an active participant in the process.

In practice, empathic design releases its transformative potential by integrating the perspectives of geo-cultural design, regenerative design and neurodesign. Geo-cultural design translates local aesthetics into global languages. Regenerative design goes beyond simply reducing consumption or using recycled materials, embracing systemic regeneration that turns design itself into an ecological infrastructure. Neurodesign focuses on emotional and cognitive wellbeing, creating spaces and objects that support a better quality of life.

Empathic, or emotional design places the human being at the centre, creating solutions that are not only functional but also able to generate value and meaning in people's lives.



La Boule Miami – Villeroy & Boch's

Villeroy & Boch's La Boule is a reinterpretation of the tableware collection created in 1971 by designer Helen von Boch, which was awarded the Red Dot Award. Conceived as a table set for two, it consists of seven stackable pieces which, once combined, form a compact sphere: two flat plates (24 cm), two deep plates (approx. 500 ml), two bowls (approx. 620 ml) and a serving plate, all made of premium porcelain in Germany. With a total of eight carefully crafted designs for La Boule and five for La Petite Boule, the collection offers a broad palette of colours and a variety of decorations ranging from classic and elegant to modern and bold.



© JUNI GBR - Julia Schmidt & Nikolas Hagele



Orwell – Goula/Figuera Studio
Orwell is a piece of furniture halfway between a sofa, a bed and a “cabin.” Named after the author of the famous dystopian novel 1984, the design concept is to recreate a sense of intimacy that can sometimes be lost, even within our own homes. Orwell invites you inside to relive childhood memories, as if entering a “den.” Its heavy quilted curtains block out noise, while its bed-like dimensions allow it to be used either sitting or lying down.

This human-centred approach calls for interdisciplinary training that reaches beyond traditional design skills, drawing on ergonomics, environmental psychology and the social sciences to fully understand how people interact with their surroundings. In doing so, empathic design can bring about projects that are ethical, sustainable and effective, generating experiences that enrich our relationships with ourselves, with others and with the world.

Geo-cultural design: where empathy is not the projection of one’s own world

Empathy is not a universal emotion expressed in the same way everywhere. It is a localised practice, shaped by the symbolic codes, values, and emotional languages of each culture. How, then, does the empathic experience change according to cultural background? Geo-cultural design offers an answer. It is an approach that considers local cultural and geographic specificities. While not a formal technical definition, it is a perspective that stresses the need to localise design within its environment, taking into account traditions, local resources, climate, and the needs of the community. The aim is to create solutions that are appropriate, sustainable, and meaningful in their specific context.

If empathy is a relational practice, what happens when the “other” belongs to a cultural world different from our own? How can we listen, interpret, and design empathically without imposing our worldview or mistaking empathy for projection?

*Empathic Design
in a nutshell*

- Born from a full understanding of human emotions
- Not the identification with, or projection of, one’s own values onto the user
- Ensures social survival
- Places emotion before aesthetics
- Cannot exist without the human being
- Before it becomes a technique, it is a relationship
- By nature, it is interactive and interdisciplinary
- Participatory, thus facilitating social transformation
- Always integrated into context
- Creates a continuum between exterior and inner life
- Meets and fulfils real, not induced, needs
- Not a phase of design, but its complete expression
- For a project to exist, there must be a process
- Generates physical and mental wellbeing
- Transforms the object into a subject



Riga-riga by Pierre Charpin – Zanotta
The Riga-riga collection is defined by a handcrafted inlay pattern, where the choice of materials is intended to translate shapes and colours into sensations. The contrast between ash wood and polished coloured glass elements creates rhythm and three-dimensionality.



Low Bol by Zaven – Zanotta
The new Low Bol coffee tables are characterised by the same concave form, which allows them to be placed side by side and combined in different ways. Available in two heights, they make it possible to create dynamic and personal configurations within the home.



Circula by Studio Rygalik
Circula is a seating system designed to provide a symbolic and functional space for dialogue and to encourage direct social interaction. Made of three interlocking modules and with a seat supported by three legs, it was originally commissioned to stimulate social interaction among school-children. It represents a synthesis of style and concept in the circularity of design. Produced in three versions, spruce or pine wood, recycled plastic, and phosphated steel, all from recycled materials. Circula is currently available in three sizes, with diameters of 2600 mm, 3000 mm and 5800 mm, accommodating from 2 to 20 people.



For the designer, the first step is to pay attention to local traditions, weaving cultural and artisanal elements into the process in order to strengthen heritage. This involves using local resources, testing materials, techniques, and skills available on site, while reducing environmental impact and supporting the local economy. It also requires a readiness to collaborate with cultural mediators, to co-design with local communities, and to draw on indigenous materials, symbols, and rituals without exoticising them.

Sometimes it even calls for dismantling one's own model of empathy. What we see as "warm" or "welcoming" may elsewhere be considered intrusive or cold. The aim is to learn the emotional grammar of others by observing their codes, silences, and gestures.

Empathy across cultures

In many Asian cultures, empathy is often implicit, discreet and indirect, with social harmony and respect for roles taking precedence over overt emotional expression. Sensitivity is communicated through shared silences, ritual gestures and subtle non-verbal signs of care. In this context, empathic design must remain understated and respectful, attuned to the unspoken. It should create environments that welcome without imposing, suggest rather than assert, and honour spiritual and communal dimensions.

In Northern European and Anglo-Saxon cultures, empathy is generally sober, contained and rational. Listening is respectful, eye contact is direct but not intrusive, physical proximity is moderate and gestures are minimal, with words serving as the main vehicle. Showing excessive emotion may be seen as inappropriate or intrusive. In this context, empathic design values privacy, discretion, autonomy and quiet comfort, favouring neutral, warm materials and spaces that safeguard emotional boundaries.

In Latin American, Arab and Mediterranean cultures, empathy is often expressed through physical engagement, open emotional sharing and close proximity, which serve as direct vehicles of solidarity and recognition. In these contexts, empathic design builds on this relational energy with warm materials, embracing forms and spaces that encourage social interaction, such as large tables, intimate seating clusters, warm lighting and tactile textures.

Understanding these differences is not an optional intercultural exercise but the foundation of a truly responsible empathic design. Good intentions alone are not enough; it is essential to read emotions as they are culturally encoded and socially shared, while avoiding projections, stereotypes and oversimplifications.



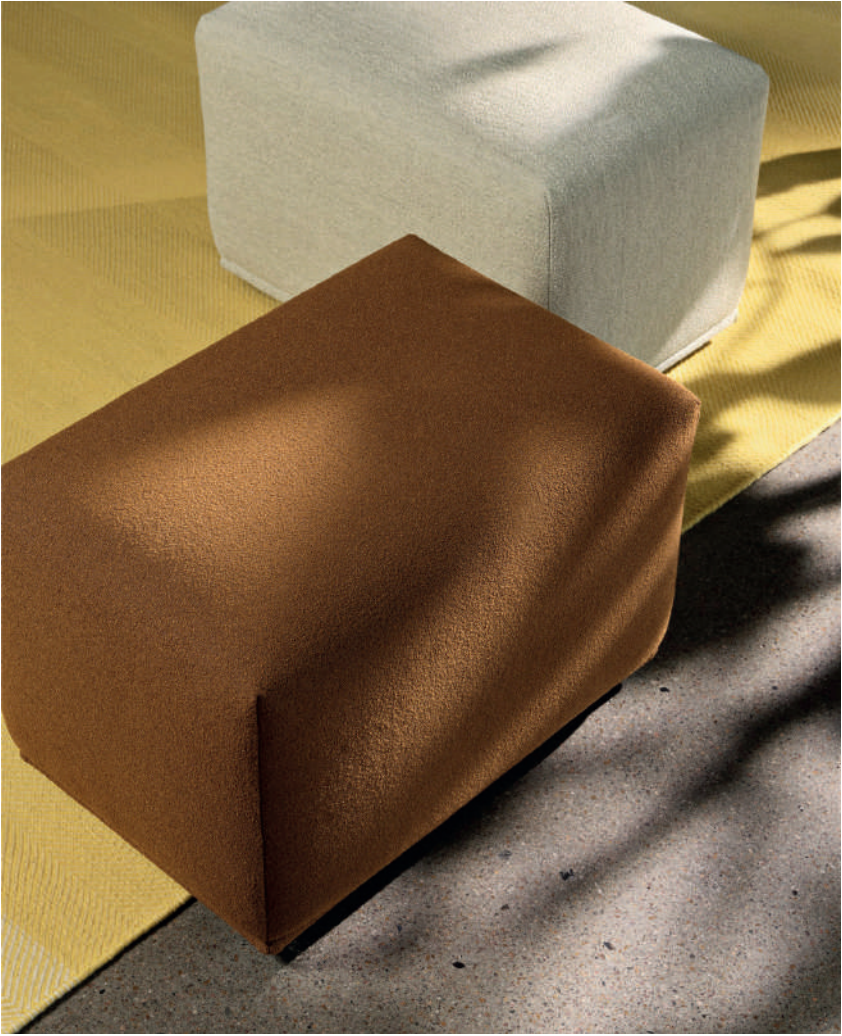
The Chair by Neri & Hu - De La Espada

The walnut frame conveys solidity and a sense of permanence, while the soft leather upholstery, malleable and responsive, invites the body to leave the trace of its transient presence. This chair, seemingly simple, has been designed to be more than just a piece of furniture: it is an invitation to embrace transformation and to engage with change.

From waste to wonder: the emotional side of regeneration

Regenerative design is about much more than recycled materials. It is about creating production cycles that restore value to the ecosystem, respecting and “feeling” the environment. Biofabrication, integrated supply chains, advanced biomaterials, and industrial upcycling are all valid tools, but they must be part of processes that are genuinely circular.

The question is: how can empathy shape and transform regenerative design? How can we see ecological regeneration not only as a technical solution but as an act of care for the environment and for future generations? Regenerative design goes further than sustainability understood simply as “damage reduction”. Its aim is to restore, nourish, and reactivate life cycles, creating systems that grow stronger over time, both ecologically and socially. When regeneration meets empathy, the environment is no longer an object to be fixed but a subject to relate to. Empathy extends to soil, trees, water, animals, and living infrastructures. It becomes an ecocentric, interspecies empathy that listens to natural rhythms and treats the Earth as a living organism.



Eco Pouf – Muuto
Versatile and comfortable, it is made with soft padding and a durable fabric cover, resting on elegant legs that give the impression of light floating. It combines Scandinavian simplicity, immediate comfort and a touch of visual lightness, making it perfect as an extra seat, a footrest or even a decorative element in understated and welcoming interiors.



Piton Portable Lamp – Muuto
The Piton lamp is a rechargeable torch that combines outdoor aesthetics with urban functionality. Made of anodised extruded aluminium and plastic, it offers three lighting orientations: from above, from below or sideways. It can be hung or carried thanks to its handle. The battery lasts for around six hours at maximum brightness (210 lm) or 13.5 hours at 50 percent intensity.

In this sense, environmental empathy is the key to a regenerative design that is respectful, sensitive, and intuitive. It facilitates not only functionality but also emotional and even spiritual bonds with places. A green roof, for instance, is not only a surface that reduces urban heat; it is a meeting point between architecture and ecosystem, between people and biodiversity. This approach also redefines the role of the designer, who is no longer just the director of circular solutions but a mediator between human and non-human, between present needs and future visions. The questions change from “How much energy does this object consume?” to “What relationship does it create? What emotions does it generate? Does it encourage respect, coexistence, and harmony?”

A truly empathic regenerative design gives voice to the unborn, to future communities, and to landscapes yet to come. It recognises that every material and formal choice leaves both an ecological and an emotional imprint. It listens to environmental trauma and responds not only with technical fixes, but with emotional regeneration that restores the land and our sense of belonging to it.

Designing for the feeling brain

The third strand of empathic design is neurodesign, based on a simple but powerful idea: the human brain is not just a rational processor but an emotional, sensory, adaptive system. It reads every space, form, light, colour, sound, and texture in terms of safety, stress, attraction, calm, or stimulation.

When empathic design meets neuroscience, its scope deepens. It moves beyond observation and listening to address the perceptual and emotional workings of the human mind. Neurodesign provides tools to understand how the brain responds to environmental stimuli, enabling spaces that connect directly with the nervous system through senses as well as reason.

In an age of stress, distraction, and anxiety, designing for cognitive and emotional wellbeing is a cultural act with real impact, reaching the biological level even before the symbolic dimension. Natural light through a window, the curve of a corridor, the texture of a wall, background noise: the brain reads these signals in milliseconds as either threats or comforts.



Neri&Hu for NIO Life - Tea Set and Portable Light

This collection is designed to help users adapt naturally to the fast-paced rhythm of modern life, maintaining balance and flexibility within the intensity of the urban lifestyle. It does so through natural materials, fluid forms and direct, intuitive usability.

Empathic design listens to the body before it speaks. It creates environments that lower stress, improve focus, and encourage mental and physical recovery. It also touches the affective dimension: how a space or object can trigger memories, evoke bonds, and build emotional connections.

Neurodesign also embraces neurodiversity. Designing for everyone means recognising different cognitive sensitivities and creating spaces that are legible, accessible, and supportive rather than overwhelming. There is also a deeper form of empathy at play, reaching the nervous system before conscious awareness: spaces designed in tune with biological rhythms, heartbeat, and breath.

Empathy becomes an invisible form of care: design that does not impose but supports; that may go unnoticed, yet is deeply felt. Empathic neurodesign is, ultimately, design that heals the mind through space, a true design of care.

Neurodesign offers tools to understand how the brain reacts to environmental stimuli, enabling design that tunes directly into the nervous system, not only through rationality, but through senses and emotion. It is the first true “design of care”.



How science explains empathy in design

Empathy is a complex neurological mechanism that has helped us survive as a species. It was studied in depth after the discovery of mirror neurones in the 1990s, which activate both when we perform an action and when we see someone else perform it.

At its core, empathy is about human connection. It is not just “putting yourself in someone else’s shoes” but entering into a genuine and profound relationship with others, and even with objects, as part of everyday life. In this sense, empathy is a vital tool for social survival.

What does this mean for design? It means the chance to create objects or spaces that people do not only use but also care about. Don Norman, one of the pioneers of UX design, explains in *Emotional Design* that every interaction with a product happens at three levels of empathic processing:

Visceral level, triggering an immediate, instinctive response

Behavioural level, relating to the practical use and functionality

Reflective level, tied to a deeper meaning

It is not enough to understand what users do (behavioural level); we must understand what moves them emotionally (visceral level) and what gives meaning to their experience (reflective level).

Norman writes:

“Today, we cognitive science scholars understand that emotion is a necessary component of life, as it influences the way we feel, behave, and think. In fact, emotion makes us more intelligent [...] Without emotion, our ability to make decisions would be compromised [...] One way emotions work is through chemical mediators that affect specific centres of the brain, altering perception, decision-making ability, and behaviour [...] When we are relaxed and happy, thinking processes expand, gaining creativity and imagination [...] Products can be more than the sum of their functions, their true value lies in satisfaction, because one of the most important human needs is to establish our self-image and our place in the world.”

Another key reference is the paper “A framework for empathy in design: stepping into and out of the user’s life” (*Journal of Engineering Design*, 2009). It redefines empathy from being an innate personal trait to an active, structured process that any designer can develop and apply systematically. The authors outline three stages, research, communication, and ideation, to show how designers can engage with users’ experiences. Their work demonstrates that empathy in design is neither a gift nor a simple skill. It is a competence that must be cultivated, enabling designers to look beyond the obvious and create solutions that genuinely improve people’s lives and benefit society as a whole.



The home that speaks to the senses

Home feels truly welcoming when, the moment we step inside, we sense its beauty and comfort. And how does this feeling reach us? Through our senses. Increasingly, research in perceptual psychology confirms just how deeply they shape our experience. Beyond sight, sound and scent, touch plays a greater role than we often realise. This is why designers pay close attention to textures and materials. Multisensory design helps us absorb information, explore our surroundings, and meet our most basic needs.

Natural wood, felt and suede, soft, warm and tactile, create comfort and a sense of safety. In contrast, cool and smooth materials like steel or glass can suggest distance, discipline and rationality, making them well suited to spaces where focus or professionalism is required. Certain materials also stir personal or shared memories, evoking stories, landscapes or traditions: porcelain, bamboo, jade, terracotta, linen. Natural, irregular textures offer visual richness and stimulate the limbic system. Overly artificial or flawless surfaces may feel neutral or even cold. By contrast, imperfections speak of care and authenticity, striking deep emotional chords.

Lines shape the emotional tone of a space too:

- Horizontal lines suggest calm, stability and rest
- Vertical lines evoke authority, aspiration and growth
- Diagonals and obliques convey dynamism, tension and movement
- Broken or zigzag lines express nervous energy and fragmentation
- Curves are the most comforting, signalling softness, approachability and warmth. Even infants prefer curves, hinting at a primal link between curvature, safety and comfort.

Geometry adds another layer. Balanced tensions arise when dynamism meets complexity. Circular or rounded forms suggest harmony, completeness, protection, relaxation and trust. Sharp, angular forms suggest precision, power and logic, but may also feel cold or demanding.

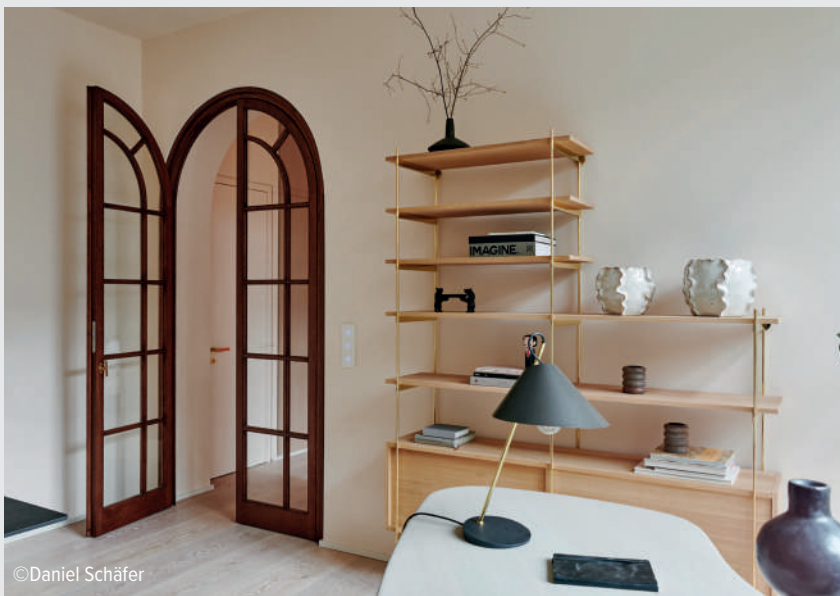


Sarah Barnard
Designing for the Human Experience: A Compassionate Approach
The kitchen is often the heart of the home, which is why the design here is conceived as a spatial flow that encourages intuitive movement. Natural materials such as stone and wood from sustainably managed forests have been selected. Embracing the paradigm of neurodiversity, the furnishings incorporate solutions such as soft-closing drawers and acoustically designed walls that reduce sound intensity. Ergonomic storage solutions promote order, the lighting system is layered and adjustable, while biophilic design elements help regulate mood and energy. Finally, the spaces for both adults and children are as personalised as possible, with views to the outdoors.



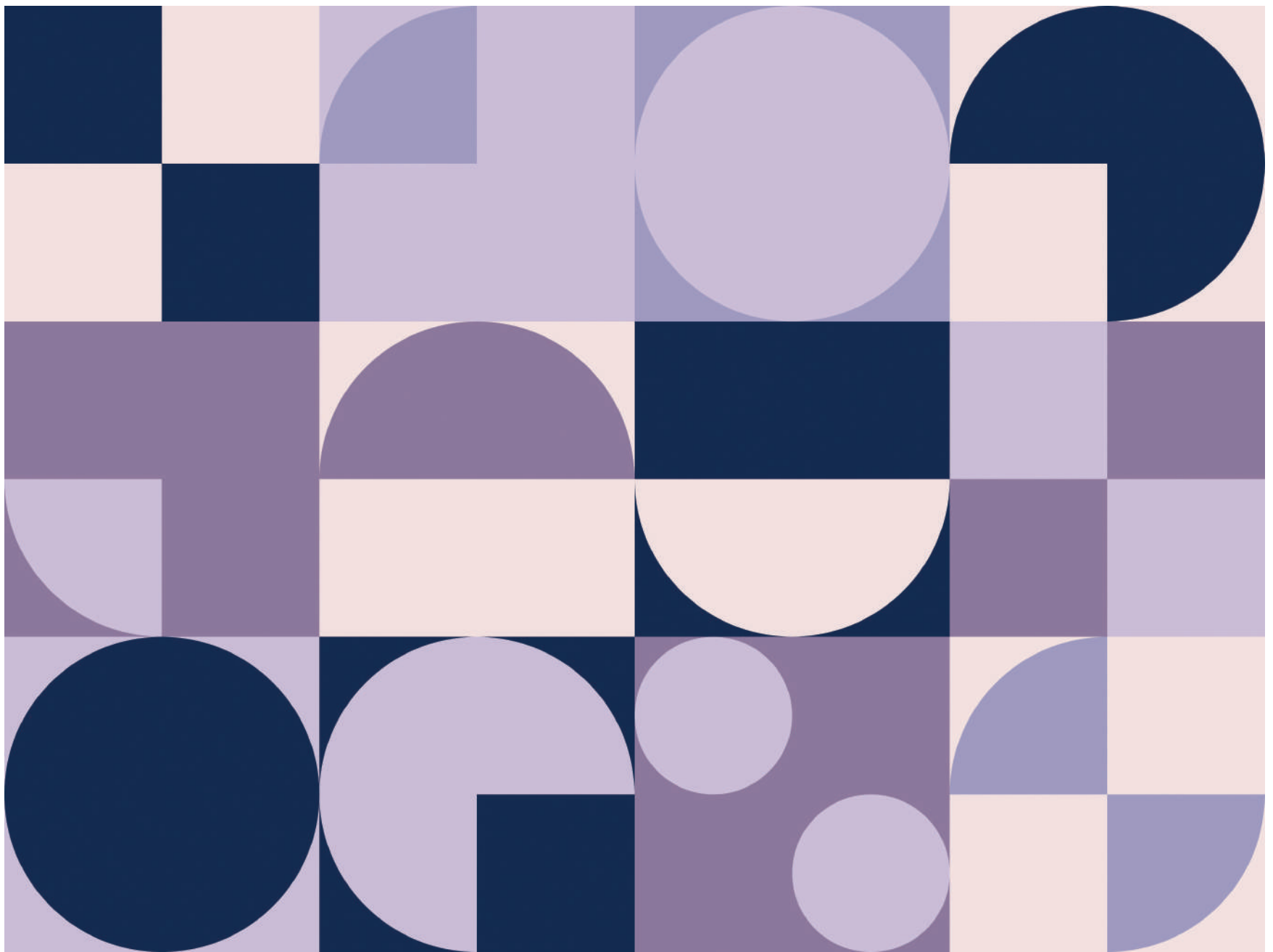


Carlo Berlin – A Guest Lodge
The Guest Lodge was conceived to bring back, through space, the unique emotions of holidays. It is inspired by the family's most cherished childhood memories: the Swiss Alps and the waves of the Spanish Atlantic coast. Two large murals by artist Anna Talens welcome guests with symbolic landscapes of mountain and sea, while curves and natural materials such as wicker in the kitchen, Moroccan Tadelakt in the bathrooms and a cave-shaped shower continue the narrative with tactile qualities and scents borrowed from nature. Every space is designed to relax and surprise, from hand-upholstered furnishings in Parisian fabrics to monolithic natural stone basins by Salvatori, and sophisticated lighting.



Some materials awaken personal or shared memories, evoking gestures, stories, landscapes and cycles of nature, from porcelain and bamboo to jade, terracotta and linen.





THE LANGUAGE OF THINGS

How semiotics helps design speak through symbols, meanings, and narratives

Objects are not merely goods; they have a life of their own. It is the designer's task to communicate their voice, meaning, and value, making design both a creative and strategic asset, as it serves as a privileged channel for empathy.

If we recognise that objects have a presence, a value, a meaning, and therefore a kind of life, semiotics amplifies the relationship between creativity and functionality, positioning itself as a privileged channel for empathy.

Every design object is not just functional but also a signifier, something that communicates and carries meaning. This is where semiotics comes in, the branch of philosophy that helps us understand what an object says and how it says it, as well as why its meaning can be perceived differently by each of us. In design, semiotics is the study of signs, meanings, and communication within objects and spaces. In other words, it examines how design “speaks,” what messages it conveys through shapes, materials, colours, and visual languages, and how these messages are interpreted across different cultural contexts.

Understanding semiotics enables designers to create objects that are readable and understandable, to design experiences consistent with the intended meaning, to avoid cultural or interpretative ambiguities, and to control the visual communication of a project. It also helps answer questions such as: What additional meaning does a designer’s intervention give to an object? How do design objects shape the organisation of public and private spaces?

If we recognise that objects possess presence, value, and meaning, and in this sense a kind of life, semiotics strengthens the link between creativity and functionality, establishing itself as a privileged channel for empathy. According to the classical theory of Charles Sanders Peirce and Roland Barthes, semiotics operates on three levels. The first is form, understood as the relationship between proportions, symmetries, rhythm, and geometries.



Charles Sanders Peirce and Roland Barthes — pioneers of semiotics, from the triadic model of signs to the analysis of denotation, connotation and myth.

A round table, for instance, symbolises unity, harmony, and family. A minimalist chair may communicate order, control, and restraint in the West, while in the East it can also be read as a sign of humility, harmony, or a return to the essential.

The second level concerns the link between a sign and what it signifies. For instance, bright red may suggest passion, danger, or warmth depending on the context, but it can also symbolise happiness and good fortune. A red velvet sofa with brass details might evoke status and prosperity.

The third level is interpretation, which is shaped by culture, experience, and context. For example, a recycling symbol is seen as an ecological gesture in Europe and the United States but may not carry the same meaning elsewhere. Similarly, a natural bamboo modular storage unit with clean, light lines may feel perfectly at home in an Asian setting.

Semiotics shows us that objects are not just things, commodities, or tools for use; they carry cultural and symbolic value. As Barthes wrote in *Mythologies*, the Citroën DS was more than a car: its wind-defying curves embodied the myth of technology set against Nature.

And consider his prescient insight into plastic: its potential for endless reuse and its capacity to make objects easy to produce and accessible to all, ushering in a form of democratisation that encouraged products to be created for the sheer pleasure of use. This is the same path Apple later followed, moving beyond grey computers to suggest a break from the uniformity of the average consumer.

Semiotics is an essential tool in every designer’s “toolbox,” because each product also requires the design of its narrative and its social impact. If an

object carries meaning, then design becomes a relationship, effective only when it stems from a correct reading of signs.

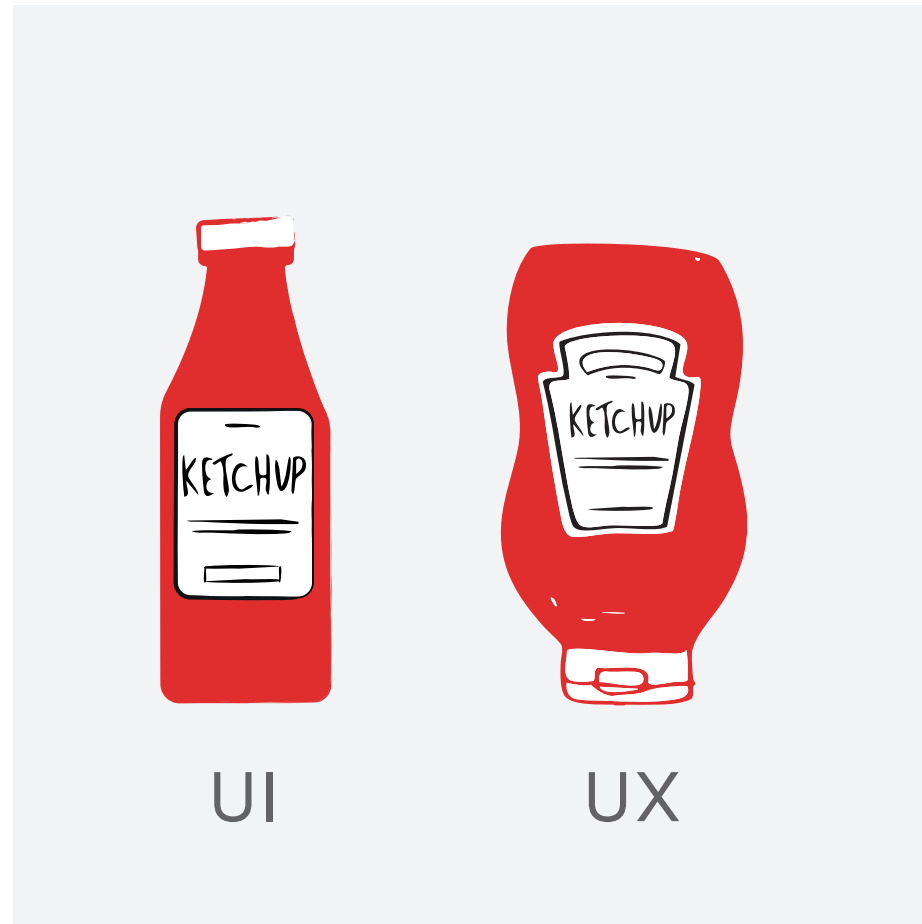
In this sense, semiotics is a strategic resource, exploring how an object takes on not only a structural or functional role but also a symbolic one. This perspective fits closely with the empathic approach, where the focus is not just on the finished product but on the process of its creation.

How design speaks today

Today, the application of semiotics to design takes a cross-disciplinary approach, intersecting with fields such as UX design, visual anthropology, ethnography and intercultural marketing. By uncovering the deeply human foundation of these disciplines, semiotics helps designers understand how visual signs, shapes, materials and colours are read, interpreted and experienced across different cultures.

A key example is the design of digital interfaces (UI/UX). In Western contexts such as Europe and the United States, the ideal of visual clarity is expressed through minimalist layouts, white space, intuitive icons and sequential navigation. In many East Asian countries, by contrast, interfaces tend to be denser and more information-rich, with abundant text, layered symbols, bright colours and animations. This reflects a different perceptual grammar rooted in the centrality of writing and a culture of semantic abundance.

Knowing semiotics enables the designer to control a project's visual communication, create objects that are easy to read and understand, design experiences that align with the intended meaning, and avoid cultural or interpretative ambiguities.



Looks nice, but does it work? Without user experience, design speaks only of aesthetics and function. With it, objects and interfaces gain meaning, empathy, and resonance.

The same design gesture therefore carries different meanings depending on the cultural context in which it is interpreted: what appears “empty” and legible in the West may seem “bare” or disorienting in Asia, and vice versa. These are not “aesthetic preferences” but actual grammars of meaning.

Another example is the Samsung Galaxy Z Flip, whose foldable form recalls the clamshell phones of the 1990s. In Asia, it is seen as a futuristic revival of a familiar design, while in the West it is more often regarded as a novelty. In Chinese and many other East Asian cultures, the semiotics of design is layered and narrative. Decorative motifs, materials, colours and spatial arrangements carry deep, shared symbolic value: they are not just aesthetic choices but representations of the world, the family and cosmic harmony.

The use of red, gold, circles, calligraphic characters, dragons or plum blossoms is never neutral. Each element carries memory and symbolic meaning, which must be respected and understood, even in contemporary design. The concept of “emptiness” is also seen as positive and dynamic, representing a potential space for welcome and transformation.

In the West, particularly in European and North American design, semiotics tends to emphasise the universality of signs, clarity of message, and simplified communication. Dominant codes include official visual systems, standardised iconography, clean lines, and functional

symmetries. Forms are often created to be self-explanatory and to work independently, an approach rooted in modernist, rational, and systemic visions of design, influenced by structuralist thinking and the avant-garde movements of the 20th century. In countries such as India, and across African and Latin American contexts, the semiotics of design is often fluid, composite, and hybrid. Traditional codes – religious, ethnic, or ritual – coexist with globalised languages of technology, branding, and digital media. The result is a syncretic and visually intense aesthetic, where design becomes both a marker of identity and a tool for political storytelling.

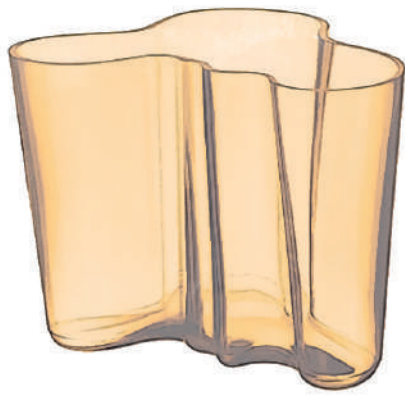
“For the science that studies processes of signification, what matters are the relationships [...] it conceives of design as the act of shaping a network of relationships that goes beyond the product itself, even if influenced by it [...] To understand contemporary society, to reconstruct its practical functioning, and above all the social and relational system that makes it work, we cannot overlook objects. Or rather, as we would say, artefacts, and thus design itself. This is because the social fabric is made up not only of individuals, human beings who interact on the basis of their presumed nature, but also of artefacts, which create networks no less complex and intricate than the first. Alongside intersubjectivity, in other words, we must also consider interobjectivity, conceiving of societies as societies of objects as well as subjects. Above all, we must look at how humans and non-humans interact, and at the consequences these relationships have on both.”

—Dario Mangano, *Stories of Semiotics and Design*, in *Ais/Design Journal*

When objects speak



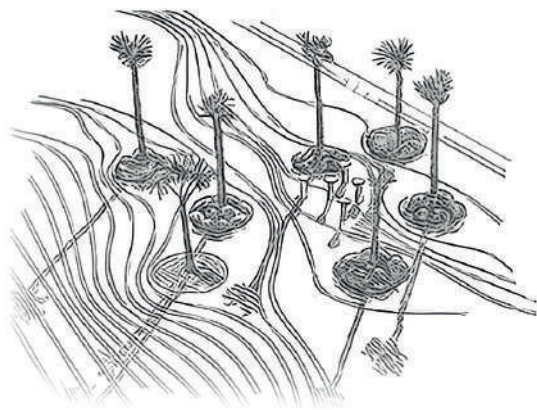
Vitra Panton Chair (1960):
An icon of modernist design that embodies freedom, experimentation, and the optimism of the 1960s. It has become a cultural symbol, firmly embedded in the Western design lexicon.



Aalto Vase by Iittala (1936):
Its form was inspired by Finnish lakes, making it a cultural symbol rooted in the landscape. It evokes nature, organic forms, and Nordic identity, and has come to function as a national myth abroad.



Rompitratta switch (1968):
Castiglioni brothers changed the way switches were conceived. An example of “overcoding” in Eco’s terms: a simple, familiar object re-designed with new technical and semiotic functions.



Superkilen Park, Copenhagen: Every item of urban furniture, from benches to signs and fountains, is imported from a country represented within the local community. The park becomes a multicultural visual atlas.



Nani Marquina rugs:
Patterns inspired by Berber, Mapuche, and nomadic Asian iconography. Each rug is a layered semiotic surface, preserving and updating ancestral symbolic codes.



Jaipur Rugs:
Each rug tells a story; the patterns are not abstract decorations but symbolic signs, rooted in Indian traditions and cultural narratives.

RAINBOW WITHOUT A STORM



A conversation with Italian designer Lorenzo Damiani on the design of surprise, poetry of form, folding marble and other wonders.

What happens when marble bends, chipboard gains dignity, and rainbows appear without a storm? In the eyes, and hands, of Lorenzo Damiani, design stops being about noise and novelty and becomes a quiet act of intelligence. With the mind of an inventor and the ethics of a craftsman, Damiani reshapes familiar materials into unexpected forms, always guided by a deeper sense of purpose. His work, at once poetic and precise, reminds us that true innovation often lies in restraint, and that good design is not only what lasts, but what speaks. Lorenzo Damiani shares his perspectives on design, its functions and responsibilities.

What guides your work today, and what legacy would you like to leave for young designers?

I believe that the most important goal, in life as in design, is to seek the meaning of things and of our actions. As I always say, before designing anything, one must understand the reason for doing it, carefully considering all possible variables. Everything we create today will outlive us tomorrow, often for a very long time, and may become a burdensome legacy for future generations.

I would like to pass on to younger designers a strong understanding of the value of research in design: in-depth study, perseverance, and the necessary effort to reach a goal, the ability and strength to overcome the disappointments that will perhaps be numerous. Above all, I hope to convey that it is possible to work with great passion without needing to take shortcuts; social media is not real life.

What do you think needs to be designed into the current international design landscape with an eye to the future?

The real world needs practical design responses that overcome issues like early obsolescence, where adjusting a component is always possible, where purchasing a regenerated object is normal, where the idea of ‘fast design’ diminishes, and where we limit the idea of possession and ownership, replacing it with sharing and usage. Not to have but to use when needed: this approach, already taking hold in certain areas, deserves to be spread like wildfire.



© Andrea Basile

Truciolari Collection
A new, nobler life for poplar chipboard — hand-shaped or CNC-milled, left raw and finished with a water-based coating that preserves its natural essence. Fully recyclable.

“We already have more than we need. Maybe the most responsible act is to create less.”



152 collection
Glass waste is placed in a special container that has a tube and then sealed permanently. The collection is produced by Luigi Fornasier on the Venetian island of Murano



What is, what represents, and how important is regenerative design?

Considering the impact of our design actions, as I said before, I think it is fundamental. We live in a system in constant evolution that also feeds on what we do to regenerate itself and, therefore, we must always think about the consequences of our 'doing'. Personally, I prefer the label 'common sense design' to 'regenerative design'. In a world in which we now have more than enough of the superfluous, perhaps the fairest action would be to minimise new productions or, in any case, try to act with extreme responsibility. The world is ours, but it will also be of those to come.

What results, what perspectives has your research on the extreme performance of materials, on their "breaking point", brought?

I want to answer this question by giving the example of my experience with marble. In 2007 I started to use thin sawn marble but, only from 2012, I was fortunate enough to understand that this semi-finished stone could be used in an alternative way. In fact, before that moment, the thin slabs have always been used flat: I have simply transformed a technical limit into a design opportunity, coming to understand how to exploit the defect of flexibility - due to their being so thin - to create marble objects that before this research could only be obtained by milling a block. So, my solution has allowed to save a lot of material: this has always been the real goal. Then, from the experience gained through projects in "bent marble" we got to the extreme of the "foldable marble" with the Foglio bench, in which the thin slab of marble flexes under the weight of the person itself. Obviously, to get to this result, we had to do a lot of research to know what the exact breaking point of marble was... even if the project does not exclude that this may occur after a certain number of interactions.

How does your statement "the communication of a message can be considered the main purpose of an object" materialise?

Many of my projects carry a more or less explicit message. For example, if I think about the Truciolari collection... the idea underlying the entire collection is that any material, if well crafted, can become precious. So, in order to convey this idea, I tried to tie chipboard, a widely known and used semi-finished material, to equally established techniques like manual turning and CNC milling. This process gave rise to "other" kinds of objects, conferring a new dignity on chipboard itself. The idea is precisely to show how interesting and original results can be achieved even with materials perceived as poor or less noble.

Or take the Earth Overshoot Day collection, where the message becomes even more evident: I tried to visualise the consumption of our planet's non-renewable resources through the erosion of a world map. To tell the story of this alarming depletion, I created CNC-milled vases, finished by hand using scraps of cedar veneer. It seems clear to me that the real function of these vases is their message.

What do you think about the current trends of geo-cultural design and neurodesign?

I definitely feel close to a design approach that takes into account the relationship with the places where the object itself originates, but I don't feel the need to attach a "label" to this attitude. I believe that the measure by which a project should be judged is its quality; everything else seems secondary to me.



“The real function of some objects is the message they carry.”



Marmo Piegato - Stool - Pusterla Marmi
Crafted from a thin marble sheet delicately bent, it reveals how stone can take on light, sinuous forms through innovative techniques, reducing material waste while challenging marble’s traditional rigidity.



Earth Overshoot Day Collection
Mobility
This project traces key dates of World Overshoot Day, revealing humanity’s escalating overuse of Earth’s resources from 1986 to projections for 2045. A stark reminder of what lies ahead, unless our relationship with the planet changes.

What is your definition of "empathetic design", is it a response to a certain cultural evolution or a necessity that has always existed but is now explicit?

Personally I don't feel very comfortable with this definition. I consider it redundant, unnecessary, and I wouldn't want my projects to be defined as such. To me it is totally obvious that users' needs, be they direct or indirect, should always be at the centre of the project.

If the concept of "surprise" is your signature style - new unexpected powers to things, like the table/fan, the armchair/suitcase and many others - do you consider yourself more an inventor than a designer?

In 2009, for the solo exhibition "Lorenzo Damiani: Where Have All the Inventors Gone?" at the Triennale di Milano, curator Marco Romanelli highlighted my inclination to work on the fusion of functions, a kind of typological contraction, viewing form as the result of a more complex thought process. Later on, Silvana Annicchiarico described my design approach as a "design of surprise," specifically to underline the sense of wonder and disorientation that some of my projects may evoke when seen for the first time. That said, I consider myself a designer.

What role can technology and in particular artificial intelligence have for a design that wants to remain "human"?

Artificial intelligence, if used properly by individuals with a certain level of experience, could certainly become a valuable aid. The problem arises when this tool is used by designers who exploit the opportunity in a superficial way, risking the homogenisation of ideas.

“Surprise and disorientation can be part of a project's language.”

Your work "Rainbow Without a Storm" is an example of visual poetry: what role does the poetic dimension have in your design?

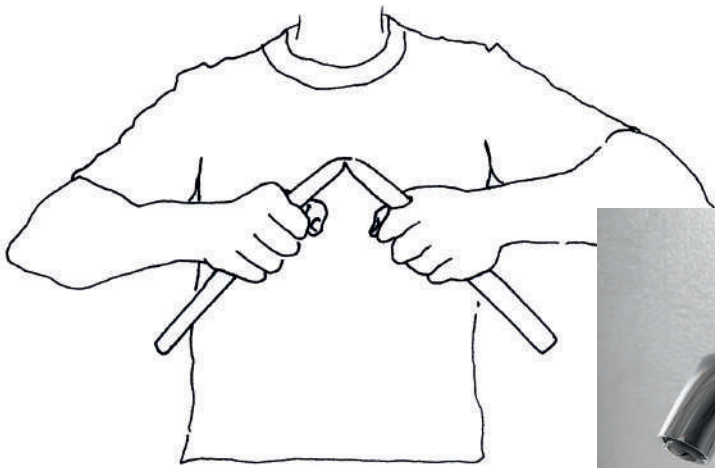
To be honest, I find it a bit difficult to answer this question. For me, every project must respond to a set of questions. The way those answers are given can vary depending on the context, although there are likely to be some recurring elements that might be interpreted as a form of design poetry. I would rather share with you the secret of how to create rainbows: this project aimed to reproduce the colours of the solar spectrum in a natural way and in a carefully selected location, seeking to trigger the formation of an authentic, non-artificial rainbow. The aim was to preserve the poetic quality of light refraction, subjected to the laws of Nature which alter the chromatic effects according to the changing brightness of the day. All of this is Rainbow Without a Storm.



© Andrea Basile

Boboli - Pusterla Marmi
Marble pebbles, typically used in landscaping, are bonded and CNC-milled to create sculptural forms. Between each stone: only air and a hidden glass tube to hold water.

Ikea - Fuorisalone 2018 - 'Alla Scoperta Dell'infinito'
Disassembled furnishings suggest endless possibilities,
reflecting a flexible, ever-evolving way of living.



Fold - Ceramica Flaminia
external folds become internal
barriers, slowing water flow
and reducing pressure.



Lorenzo Damiani

BIO

Lorenzo Damiani (b. 1972, Lissone /near Milan) is an Italian furniture and product designer with a degree in Architecture from Politecnico di Milano. His work is rooted in a sustainable, material-driven approach. He has notably been experimenting with marble and metal to minimise waste and maximise structural efficiency. Significant projects include the Aerea and Benna benches (Da A), the Monolithos, Marmo Leggero, and Boboli marble collections.

www.lorenzodamiani.net



Marmo Pieghevole - Panca Foglio

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Back to the drawing board

THE REVIVAL OF CRAFTSMANSHIP IN GLOBAL DESIGN

Artisans become co-authors of the design projects, not only for their ability to shape, but also for their capacity to give meaning to products made directly by people for people. Today, craftsmanship is increasingly seen as the geo-cultural grammar that celebrates living materials, the human gesture and controlled imperfection, capable of creating authentic relationships.



Raw Material

A sculptural series made in India, created using a subtractive method as a reflection of a landscape shaped by erosion and remodelled by human activity. Made from marble slabs salvaged from architectural sites, the pieces are composed to form sculptural screens, seats, benches and tables.



It has been described as the great experimental laboratory of design. At the heart of contemporary transformations, craftsmanship now holds a prominent place in high-end design, which is rediscovering a dimension long considered secondary. This is not a nostalgic approach or a purely decorative aesthetic. Today, craftsmanship re-emerges as a design code that restores meaning, proximity and cultural connection to the experience of living.

A revival perfectly aligned with the emerging paradigm of empathy. In a time marked by environmental crises, social instability, and perceptual disorientation, empathetic design presents itself as a cultural, ethical, and sensorial response. It does not merely shape functional forms; it builds relationships, listens to people's deeper needs, and honours the memories of places and materials.

In this dimension, craftsmanship thrives, expressing the very best of itself. It becomes far more than a production technique, it stands as a form of listening, a geo-cultural grammar, a relational medium between designer, maker, and user. Craftsmanship reveals the essence of a product made directly by people for people. It speaks of encounters and physicality. It also speaks of resilience, because such unmediated process is no longer just a technical act, but a gesture of humanity charged with tactile, temporal, and cultural values.

Craftsmanship in design demonstrates the contemporary global urgency to create relationships, experiences, and meanings through a local lens. It redefines the concept of glocal because, by nature, it can absorb cultural changes while remaining faithful to its original core in tradition. In this way, it speaks to both the senses and identities both functional and emotional, allowing the concept of 'use' to unfold in all its dimensions.

As Richard Sennett wrote in *The Craftsman*, the hand is not the extension of the mind, it IS the mind, for it can think. Moreover, artisans work in long timeframes, engaging with the material in all its physicality, embracing and elevating imperfection. They can therefore become co-

authors of the project, far removed from the logic of standardised, ephemeral consumption, offering a perspective that closes the gap between designer and user.

For all these reasons, when craftsmanship meets empathetic design, it generates not only objects but also visions, relationships and cultural exchanges. It can: resist industrial standardisation; restore dignity to material micro-cultures; and revive sustainable, inclusive local economies.

As Isabel Valdés wrote in Cuadernos de Diseño 4, This approach “calls for, more than a technological revolution, a cultural revolution. What truly changes is not so much the object we consume, but the way we consume it. (...) If the last revolution was the mass production of millions of perfect, identical products with rigorous quality control and standardisation, This new revolution produces fewer objects, each marked by individuality and originality. It is the birth of the workshop, not the factory, sustained and developed through social networks. (...) This new form of creation decentralises the means of production themselves. Designers can continue creating for their traditional consumers but, rather than selling the rights to major manufacturers or relying on them for production, they can now work independently and autonomously. The democratisation of design and production tools makes it possible to reconsider existing projects and to offer new, unique products capable of quickly adapting to individual contemporary needs. (...) Today, design and production stem from a culture of participation. By looking at how creative people design and make objects, we see that the new revolution is emerging through interaction between communities.”

Neither nostalgic nor merely decorative, craftsmanship today re-emerges as a design code that restores meaning, closeness and cultural connection to the experience of living.



NLÉ- Zaria Chair

This chair draws inspiration from the traditional African birthing chair as well as the regal thrones of northern Nigeria. The archetypal form is reinterpreted with four intersecting planks. No screws, no nails, no fasteners: only the weight of gravity and the precision of the cut.

Geo-cultural perspectives from Asia

In the Asian context, the craftsman often absorbs and reflects geo-cultural specificities. Here, the relationship between craftsmanship and design is rooted not in breaking away from industry but in continuity with ritual gestures, the centrality of tradition, and an empathy that seeks collective harmony and coherence with the cosmos rather than individual expression.

This is why empathetic design in Asia does not shout but whispers, revealing itself in meticulous detail, attentiveness to material, the disciplined repetition of a gesture, and the idea that every object holds a fragment of a shared world.

At the 2025 Salone del Mobile in Shanghai, a new generation of Chinese designers emerged, blending traditional local knowledge with contemporary languages to create objects that narrate tradition, bringing it into the present. The PINWU studio in Hangzhou, for example, collaborates with rural artisans to create collections that reinterpret natural materials. In South Korea, the Shift Craft project is an



intergenerational laboratory that encourages dialogue between renowned master artisans and contemporary designers. Each object becomes a witness to an invisible continuity, born from empathy for another's skill and for the material itself. Korean visual culture is deeply shaped by a tactile and ritual sensitivity, where aesthetics are built not on spectacle but on slow gesture, measured rhythm and the tension between emptiness and fullness.

In Japan, craftsmanship has always carried a philosophical dimension. Techniques such as kintsugi or urushi (lacquerwork) are not simply technical acts but practices that invite introspection. Handmade objects such as tea bowls, paper lanterns and tatami furnishings have been described as cultural interfaces, expressing silence, balance, sobriety and endurance.

In India, craft traditions are linked to many local communities and castes. Studios like Studio Raw Material, based in the western desert plains, use discarded materials to explore social and economic issues, creating objects that are also artworks and sculptures in their own right.

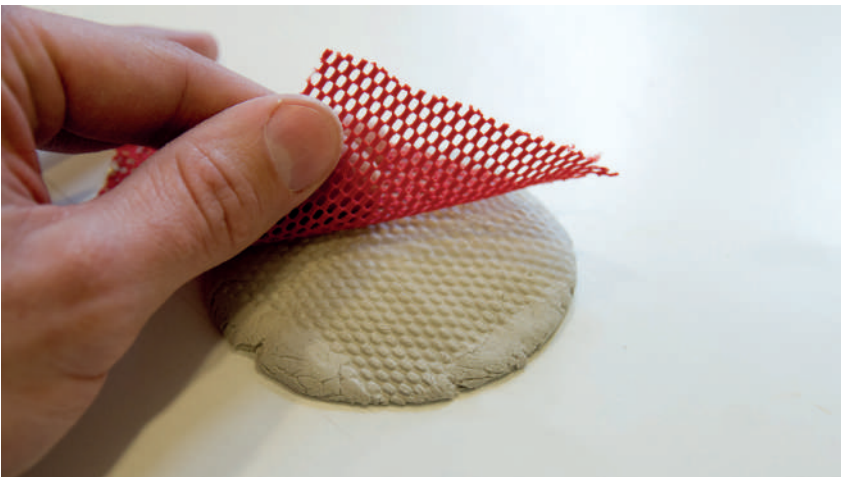
In all these contexts, craftsmanship is more than making; it is a form of cultural belonging and shared storytelling. Empathetic Asian design builds on these legacies with respect, staying true to local traditions while creating objects that carry memory, highlight the value of materials and accompany daily life with quiet presence.

A design passage to Africa

“Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.” This Nigerian saying reflects the position African design has held for too long, consigned to the darkest corner of the room. Today, however, Africa is a continent reshaping global geopolitical scenarios. In this shifting context, the artisan shows that design is not a souvenir but part of the continent's centuries-old visual culture, rich in symbolism and deeply connected to the natural environment. Many contemporary designers build on these roots, reinterpreting traditional elements within a modern aesthetic.

This has been described as “informal design”, characterised by flexibility, spontaneous creativity, and the use of local and recycled materials, reflecting daily life, traditions, and available resources. It should not be confused with mere simplicity, but rather associated with hospitality and authenticity. Intertwined with this informality is hackability, the recovery, transformation, and repurposing of objects. Grounded in its artisanal dimension, African design is centred on humanity, sustained by a strong sense of community. Though its origins may lie in necessity, production often becomes an opportunity to redefine use, for example through innovative materials or purpose-built techniques.

Although design is only partly recognised as a profession in many African countries, craftsmanship reveals Africa not as a monolith but as a diverse creative force, nourishing cultural identities and driving sustainable innovation. In this context, craftsmanship plays a vital role, materialising stories, symbols and spirituality, and shaping the identity and meaning of communities.



Raw Edges: Mutina Tex, Mutina Tape and Mutina Folded Raw Edges, now part of the Mutina team, brings its craft sensibility to the Tex tile collection inspired by textiles. It was conceived by collecting every kind of texture through impressions in plasticine. The diamond-shaped tiles are an enlarged version of a basic knit pattern. The Tape collection for Mutina features colourful graphics applied to two base surfaces, one white and one black, creating different atmospheres within the same space. The Folded collection for Mutina, also by Raw Edges, turns paper into ceramic, taking inspiration from the tiles commonly found in apartments of the 1950s and 1960s.

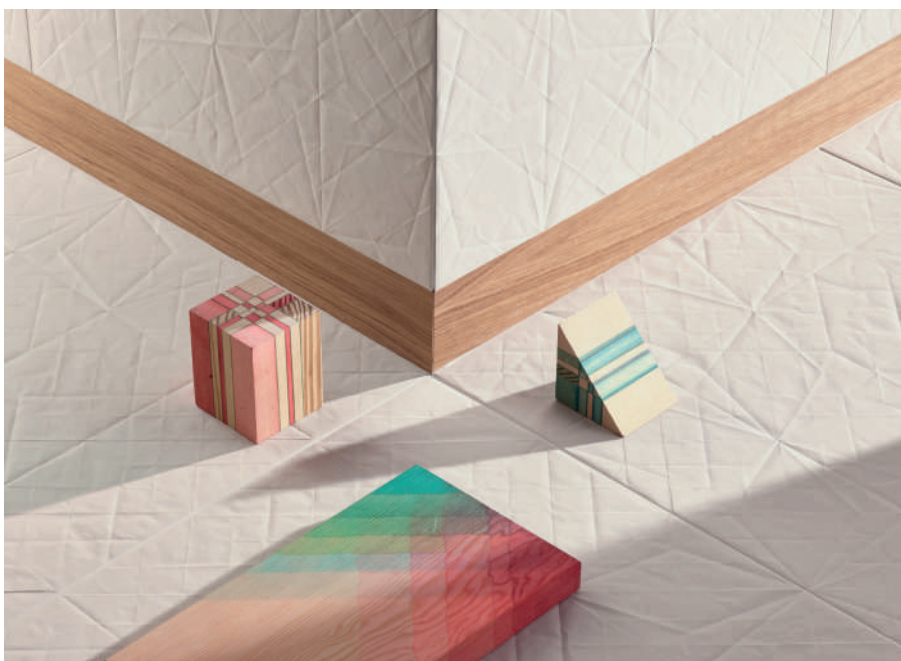




Urban Native

Produced using local craft methods, the designs by The Urban Native tell African stories through functional objects, exploring materials and technologies with a primary focus on sustainability. Every piece is designed and made in South Africa.

In all these contexts, craftsmanship is more than making; it is a form of cultural belonging and shared storytelling.



The Western take

In the Western view, empathetic artisanal design is often a reaction against mass production and the anonymity of global design. It is driven by a desire for uniqueness, slowness and lasting quality, as well as a search for meaning through local identity, cultural context and material sustainability.

Many design studios are rediscovering craftsmanship as a critical and narrative act, a way to highlight the relational and territorial dimensions of a project. In a time marked by radical environmental, technological and perceptual change, design can no longer respond solely with elegant forms or functional solutions. It is called to do more: to care. Care for those who inhabit spaces. Care for those who make objects. Care for the territories that host us. Care for the senses, cultures and gestures that risk being forgotten.

In this scenario, the rediscovery of craftsmanship is not a return to the past but a path of design evolution, one that reconnects design to real life, to bodies, communities and narratives. It is a form of sensitive and generative design that respects differences without abandoning international ambition. This can be seen in independent productions, new galleries dedicated to contemporary design, and companies working closely with artisans while honouring traditional techniques and craftsmanship.



THE AESTHETICS OF IMPERFECTION

A conversation with Ziyuan ‘Zoey’ Zhu on designing across disciplines, balancing empathy and tech, and embracing the beauty of the incomplete.

Zoey Zhu is not interested in perfection. Trained across design disciplines and cultures, she operates in the fluid space where empathy meets technology, and where local rituals confront global systems. In this interview, Zhu reflects on working with AI micro-taskers in South Africa, the pressures of serving global e-commerce clients in Asia, and why young designers should balance novelty with responsibility. She believes design is a continuous conversation, not just with clients, but with the world itself. What emerges is an approach that prizes incompleteness as a strength and uses design to ask the right questions, rather than provide easy answers.

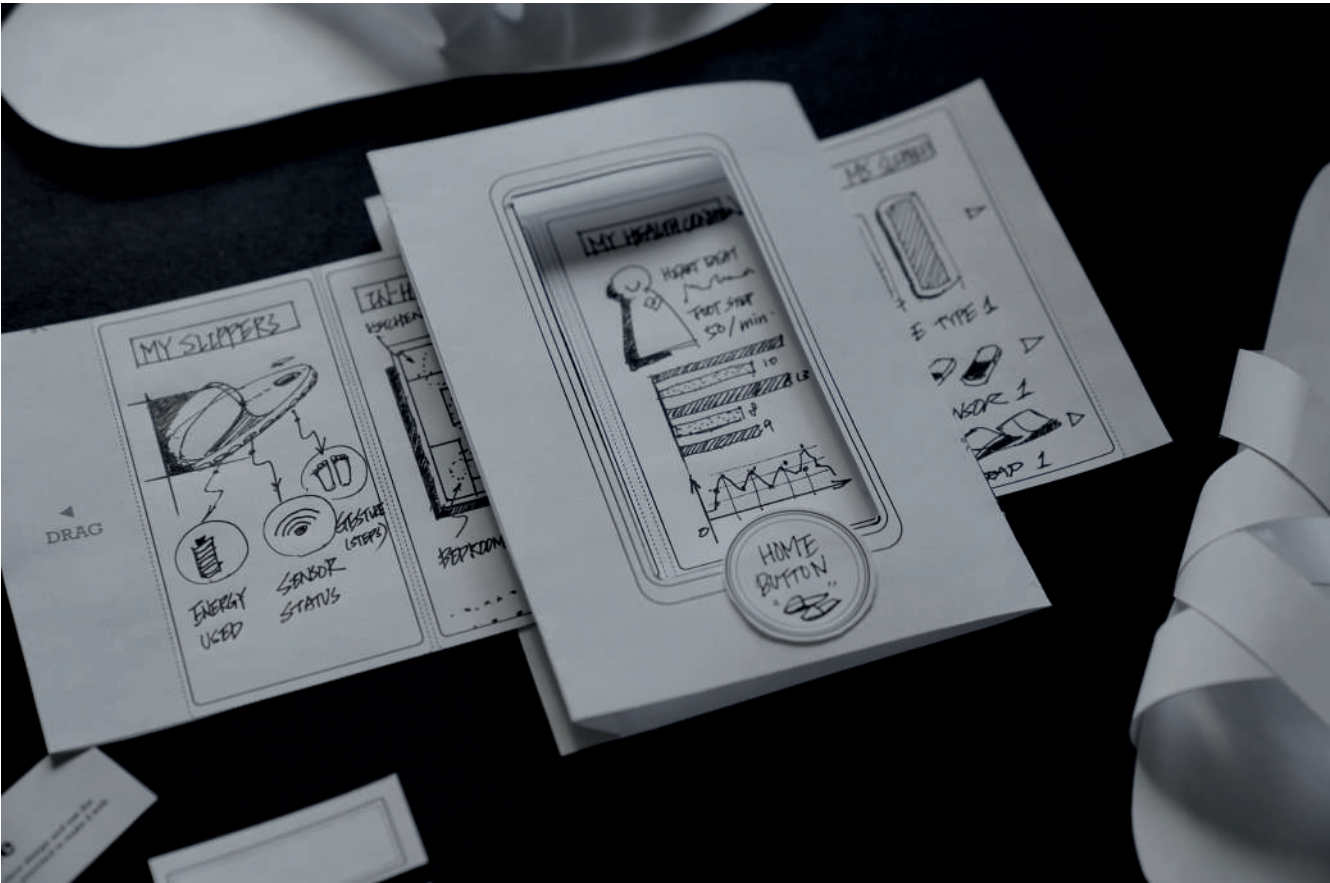
How does technology move beyond a mere tool to enhance design, especially in interactive spaces and urban environments?

The projects I love the most are about people, the people I interview, the people I design for. There's one project I'd like to share. It was a small project, but it really left a deep impact on me. We were designing for micro-workers in the Global South. A micro-worker is someone who does AI annotation in the backend. When you see powerful AI tools, the data behind them is manually labelled by people. For example, if there's a picture, they'll circle the car or the person. That's basically what they do every day. From my perspective, I thought: this is insane. They get paid really badly. But some of them actually enjoy doing it.

Also, this kind of micro-work gives them a way to live more freely, because they can do freelance jobs on the platform.

This project really challenged my personal beliefs. But in the end, it was clearly good for the people. We were using technology, specifically blockchain. In that case, a more stable digital payment system helped. We paid them in cryptocurrency at the time. The platform could support them better than if they were paid in the local currency, which was very unstable because of inflation.

It became one of my favourite projects. It was short, only two weeks. So for me, that's an example of how technology is more than a tool. It interacts with social systems. It has consequences.



Make To:Gather is an award-winning initiative focusing on digital & physical co-creation



“Technology is more than a tool. It interacts with social systems. It has consequences.”

Do you see today's designer as a mediator between technology and human experiences, bridging physical and digital dimensions?

Yes, absolutely. I think designers now more than ever are this kind of translator. It's no longer just: we design a product, and that's it. We have to understand the logic of the system. We are not only working with engineers but also with the people who are interacting with the results. So we are always in between.

You need to make sense of how a technology works, and at the same time think: how will this feel for people? What will this change in their life or their habits? You always move between different logics. And you try to bring some kind of harmony to that.

How is AI transforming the relationship between objects, people, spaces, and services? Specifically, how does it enrich your design workflow without replacing the designer?

I think AI is not a thing to be scared of but a tool to be leveraged. It's not like: here is AI. It's more hidden. It's embedded in the process. Sometimes I use it to analyse patterns, like user behaviour, or how people interact in space. It helps to make some predictions.

But I don't think it should replace the designer. I think the important thing is that it supports your



“Empathy is not about being nice. It’s about really listening and accepting that your idea might be wrong.”

From 2022–2024, Zoey collaborated with MIT Environmental Initiative and Anjunabeats, the music label from London, on immersive climate installation



iF Design Trend Conference 2024: “Humanizing AI in Design”

work. It gives you information, but it doesn't tell you what to do. The choice is still human. So, in my workflow, AI is like a support system, it helps reduce repetition, explore different scenarios, but the values, the judgement, are still ours.

For project recipients, what does an empathetic, human-centred design approach concretely mean in practice?

Empathy is not about being nice, It's about really listening and accepting that your idea might be wrong. I've had this experience a few times. Like in the project in South Africa, I thought the work was horrible, that they were being exploited. But after I talked to them, I realised that for them, it was a real opportunity.

So in practice, empathetic design means letting go. Letting go of what you think is right. Being flexible. Adapting. You try not to impose. You co-create. Even if it's a small project or a short time, you try to include people in the thinking process. You don't make assumptions.

As physical and digital spaces converge, what role do rituals and habits play in shaping meaningful interactive experiences? Can design help reframe them?

I think rituals are what make experience human. They are not just actions, they have rhythm, memory, expectation. So when we design hybrid experiences, we have to consider these layers. For example, when I work on interactive installations, I try to think: what is the first gesture someone makes? Do they hesitate? Do they touch?

*“Designers can't wait
for someone else
to define the rules.
Because by the time the
rules come, the damage
may already be done.”*



These small moments are part of a bigger ritual. Sometimes design can shift these rituals, reframe them, but it has to be done gently. People resist too much change. So I think the power is in subtlety. You don't erase rituals, you build with them.

In your view, how can designers actively shape ethical frameworks around emerging technologies, rather than merely adapting to them?

Designers can't wait for someone else to define the rules. Because by the time the rules come, the damage may already be done. We are at the beginning of the process. We have to be critical. We have to ask: what is this for? Who does this benefit? What are the consequences?

Sometimes it means saying: no, I don't want to work on that. Or: I want to ask more questions before I agree. That's hard, especially when there is pressure. But I think design has a role to slow things down. To reflect. To ask difficult questions. Not just make things look nice.

Your working method integrates technology, ecology, and creativity. How do you integrate these three aspects in your process?

To me, they are not separated. Technology is not neutral. Ecology is not just nature. Creativity is not just aesthetics. They all mix.

For example, in one project we used waste materials, scraps from production. We upcycled them. But we also used digital tools to visualise how the material would age or be reused. So there's this dialogue between ecology and simulation. Creativity is how you make that connection visible. It's the way you tell the story. I always ask: what is the footprint of this thing? Not only the environmental one, but the cultural one. Why are we making this? That's the centre of my process.

“If everyone thinks the same way, you get predictable results. Bringing together different disciplines, you get friction, but also new forms of value.”

How important is interdisciplinary work in your design practice?

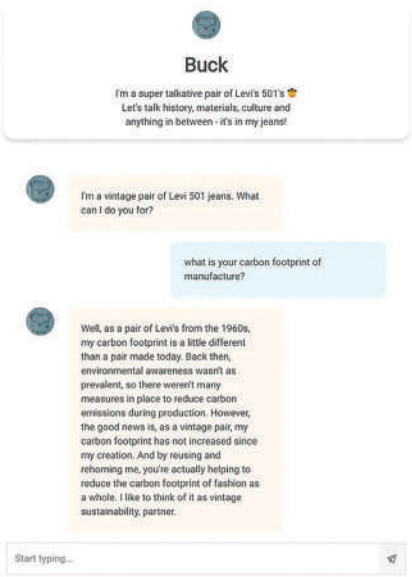
It's vital. I don't believe in working alone. I work with artists, coders, researchers, sometimes even farmers or activists. Everyone has something they know deeply. When you bring them together, it becomes complex, but also powerful.

It's not always easy. People have different languages, different ways of thinking. But that's where surprises come from. If everyone thinks the same way, you get predictable results. Bringing together different disciplines, you get friction, but also new forms of value.

You've noted how different cultures approach design. From your diverse experiences, what cultural influences shape your work, and how do you choose your focus amidst so many global inspirations?

I think culture shapes things. When I worked with clients, and sometimes there is this feeling of rush, like everything has to be new, fast, surprising. In branding especially, there's this drive to always change. It can be exciting, but it also makes it hard to build something that lasts.

Talking Pants is a speculative design project exploring human-AI interaction in daily objects



In contrast, in some other cultures, there is more space to slow down. People talk more about coherence, about history, about long-term meaning. I try to learn from both. I don't think one is better, but they are different ecosystems. So when I choose my focus, I think about the values I want to bring to the table. Not just the aesthetics, but the way of working.

What advice would you offer to young designers starting their careers?

Don't chase perfection. The aesthetics of imperfection is something I really believe in. Things don't need to be perfect to be meaningful. Actually, sometimes the cracks, the flaws, they are where the beauty is.

Also, don't try to do everything. It's OK to go slow. To be confused. To ask questions. And don't believe everything you see on social media. That's not the whole story. Design is not just images. It's context. It's ethics. It's relationships.

Work with others. Listen. Be curious. Be critical. And take care of yourself. It's a long journey. You don't need to have it all figured out.

Zhiyuan Zhu

BIO

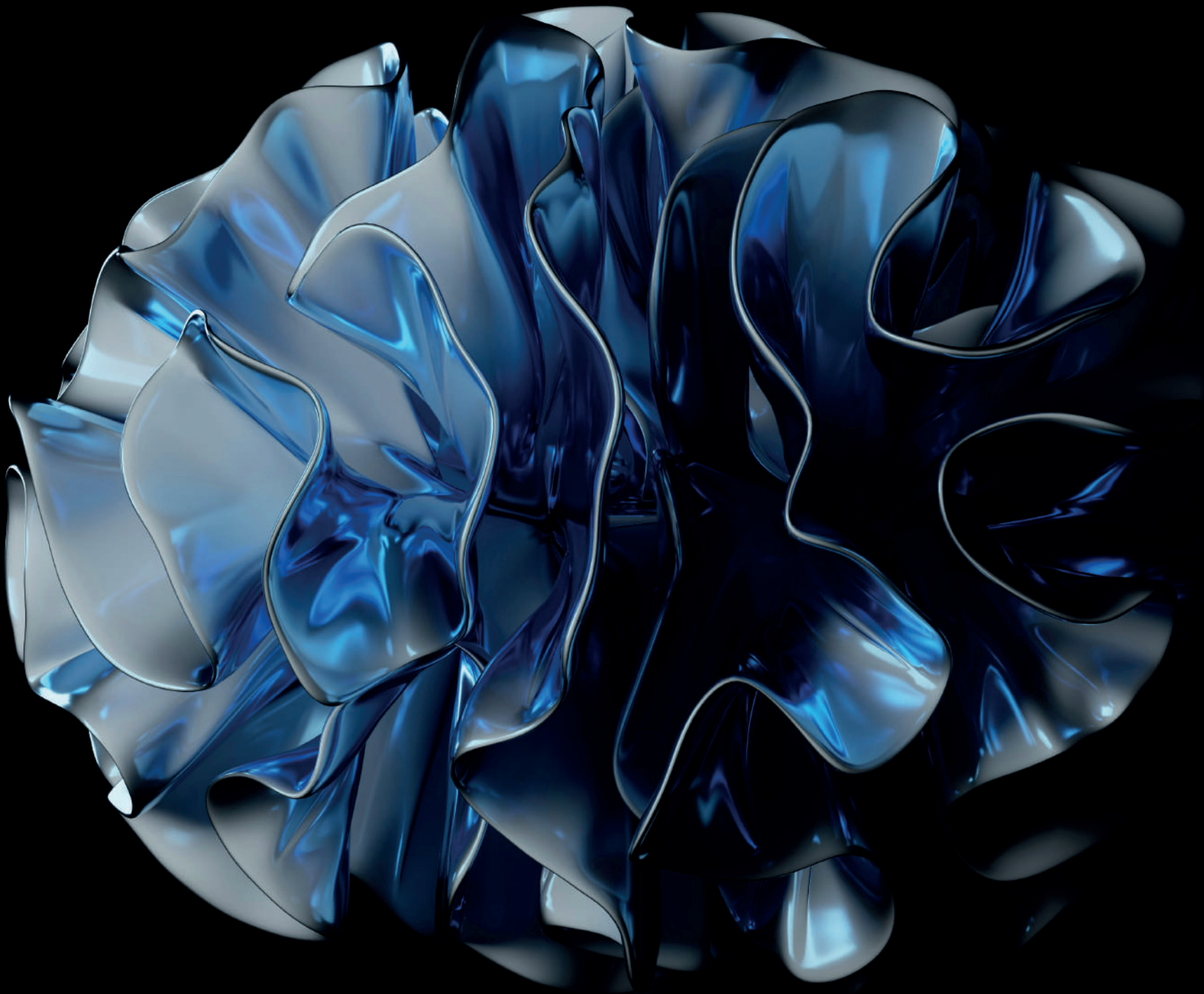
Zhiyuan 'Zoey' Zhu is a senior creative technologist at IDEO, based in San Francisco. IDEO is a global design and innovation company recognised for pioneering human-centred design. Her work lies at the intersection of design, emerging technology, education and sustainability, creating both physical and digital objects to explore and communicate the relationship between people and their built environment. She holds a Master of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science (EECS) and a Master of Science in Architecture Studies from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, completed in 2022. She also studied Environmental Studies and Architecture at the University of Stuttgart in 2018, and earned a Bachelor of Engineering in Architecture from Dalian University of Technology in 2019. Zhu is the recipient of several awards, including the IDA, Spark Design and SOM China Prize. She has received international art and research fellowships from institutions such as Ars Electronica, Technion, the University of Stuttgart and the MIT Council of the Arts. She has also been invited to speak at numerous international events, including SXSW, the iF Design Trend Report Conference, PODIM, Design Museum Week, the International Design Conference (IDC), IDSA, Pratt, IIT, Telkom University and the Bandung Biennale.

iam-zy.com



Beauty in the brain

AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR ANJAN CHATTERJEE



In this fascinating conversation with DM, Professor Anjan Chatterjee explores the emerging field of neuroaesthetics, the study of how our brains perceive and respond to beauty in its many forms. From art and design to natural landscapes and everyday objects, he explains how aesthetic experiences arise from the interplay between sensory input, emotional response, and the personal and cultural meanings we attach to what we perceive. Drawing on his concept of the “aesthetic triad” and his research into the psychological components of design perception, Chatterjee discusses the common principles that underpin our responses to beauty and the variations shaped by culture, background, and individual differences. Read on and discover an inspiring discussion ranging from evolutionary perspectives and mental health implications to ethical questions around predictive design and the practical meaning of empathetic design.

You have described neuroaesthetics and neuroart in your work. Can you give us a short definition and how it can relate to design?

We think of neuroaesthetics as a sub-discipline of cognitive neuroscience. Broadly speaking, cognitive neuroscience is trying to understand the nature of the human mind as implemented through the brain. Within that, one component is the fact that we value aesthetic encounters of different kinds. The scientific discipline asks: what is the nature of those encounters? How is it implemented in the brain? How malleable is it? And ultimately, why does it matter?

We think about how the brain carves out the world, into people, places, and things. We have aesthetic experiences of people: what they look like, why we find some beautiful and others less so, and how that influences interactions and behaviour. We have aesthetic experiences of places, both nature and the built environment, and of things, which might be consumer products. We are also interested in art, and the fundamental question of why we care so deeply about paint on a canvas when we cannot eat it or have sex with it, and yet it matters to us.

Within this, design, especially our relationship to the built environment and its relation to nature, becomes particularly prominent.

Aesthetic experiences extend beyond art to objects that are not art. Most people, if you ask them about profound aesthetic experiences, will recall moments that can be deeply moving, even transforming: sometimes in nature, sometimes in architectural spaces, sometimes with music, art, or dance.

These experiences are not utilitarian. They are intrinsic, giving us well-being and a spectrum of emotions, including pleasure, joy, wonder, and awe, that give life texture and meaning. They are not moments we pursue in order to make more money or impress others, but because of the intrinsic value of the experience itself.

Is there a primary driver behind why we find something beautiful?

I wish the answer were yes, it would make our work easier. We frame the domain as the “aesthetic triad”:

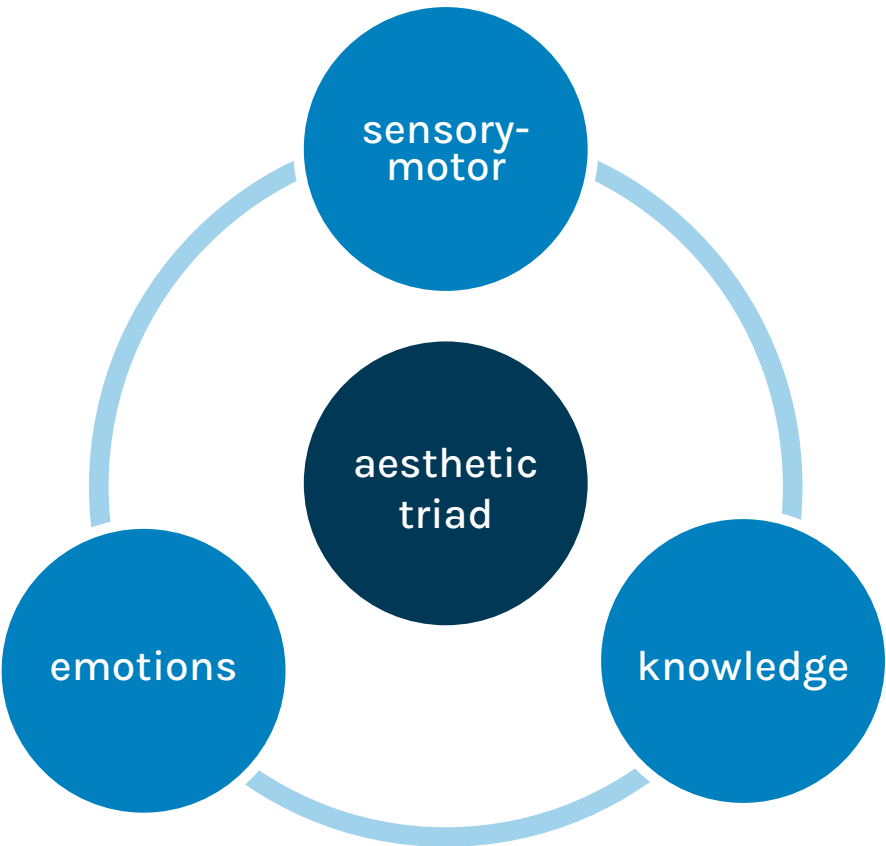
The *first* component is sensory-motor: sensations and their properties, light, shadow, form, smell, texture, sound, the underpinnings that can trigger an aesthetic experience.

The *second* is emotions. Beauty often involves pleasure, but also mixtures: the sublime or awe may include a slight sense of anxiety, feeling small before something vast.

The *third* is knowledge and meaning: education, background, culture, historical context, all shape how sensations map onto emotions.

Beauty varies by category. People are more consistent about natural kinds, such as faces, bodies and landscapes, and more variable about human artefacts like art, architecture or interior design. This variability challenges scientists, but we believe beauty is in the brain of the beholder, and brains are more similar than different. What triggers wonder may differ between individuals, but once in that state, brain activity is remarkably similar. We see this in studies where participants view paintings that move them deeply. The specific works that provoke

“The brain carves out the world, into people, places, and things.”





Antonio Canova, Amore e Psiche (Psyche revived by Cupid's kiss)

the response vary from person to person, but when in that state, the same brain networks, such as the default mode network, are activated consistently.

Would you consider beauty universal, or culturally modulated, and beyond that, shaped by individual experience?

We ask: beauty of what? Focusing on design as a human artefact, there is variability. Our lab has found three psychological components to our response to design. One is coherence, meaning how legible and comprehensible a space is. The second is fascination, referring to its informational complexity and the way it evokes exploration and curiosity. The third is homeiness, which is the feeling of being comfortable and belonging in a space.

These occur for everyone, but triggers vary. Coherence and fascination show more agreement, while homeiness is highly cultural and idiosyncratic. For example, people on the autism spectrum may react differently to fascination, since complexity can overwhelm, leading to avoidance rather than attraction.

This points to the importance of recognising both universal psychological states and the variability of what triggers them.

Does beauty play an important role in human evolution?

I believe so. In *The Aesthetic Brain* (2014) and in my current work, I consider evolutionary factors. Individuals who preferred environments with certain features, such as prospect, meaning a view to detect danger, refuge, meaning safety and nourishment, and mystery, inviting exploration, may have been more likely to survive. These features still shape how we respond to and create our surroundings. Mystery in particular connects to fascination, reminding us that once our basic needs are met, we look for stimulation and novelty.

“We believe beauty is in the brain of the beholder, and brains are more similar than different.”

Is there a link between the built environment and mental health?

Absolutely. Our collective lockdown experience is telling: people became acutely aware of their surroundings. For children, differences in home environments, space, quiet, internet access, had clear impacts on learning.

In our work, the brain responds to coherence, fascination, and homeiness even unconsciously. All three can contribute to overall well-being, though the optimal mix depends on the setting, whether a study, bedroom, office, museum, airport or stadium. Biophilic design, incorporating nature, may reduce stress or enhance creativity. We are testing this in a clinical “refresh room” for people recovering from substance use disorders, to help them self-regulate emotions.

If brain-based data could predict emotional responses, what are the ethical implications of "predictive design" ?

I would be delighted if we had enough data to make such predictions. Designers already predict future responses intuitively, but rarely check after the fact if those predictions hold true. Neuroscience emphasises prediction error, adjusting our expectations when new information differs from our hypotheses. Without collecting post-design data, we miss opportunities to improve. One could even ask: is it ethical not to collect such information?

What about empathetic design? Does it make sense to you?

We do not use that term in our work, as its meaning is unclear. If it means designing inclusively for specific populations, for example, people on the autism spectrum, then yes. I have seen low-stimulation rooms in some European museums, offering restoration for those overwhelmed by high-fascination spaces. Accessibility for older people, those with low vision, or mental health conditions could also fall under this. If “empathetic design” simply means

design that helps people flourish according to their abilities and constraints, then it makes sense to me.

It seems that background and context, personal, cultural, historical, are central to all of this.

Yes, context shapes everything. I would add that we are at the very early stages of this research. We have a “table of contents” but need to write the chapters. Neuroscience claims are provisional, context-dependent, and incremental. We are just scratching the surface.



BIO

Anjan Chatterjee, born on 22 October 1958 in Bhopal, India, is Professor of Neurology, Psychology, and Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania and founding Director of the Penn Center for Neuroaesthetics. He obtained his BA in Philosophy from Haverford College in 1980 and his MD from the University of Pennsylvania in 1985, followed by training in neurology at the University of Chicago and research fellowships at Case Western Reserve University and the University of Florida. His research spans spatial cognition, neuroaesthetics, and neuroethics, and he is the author of *The Aesthetic Brain* as well as co-editor of several volumes on neuroethics and cognitive neuroscience. He has served as president of both the International Association of Empirical Aesthetics and the Society for Behavioral and Cognitive Neurology, is a founding board member of the International Neuroethics Society, and has received awards including the Norman Geschwind Prize in Behavioral and Cognitive Neurology and the Rudolph Arnheim Prize for contributions to Psychology and the Arts.

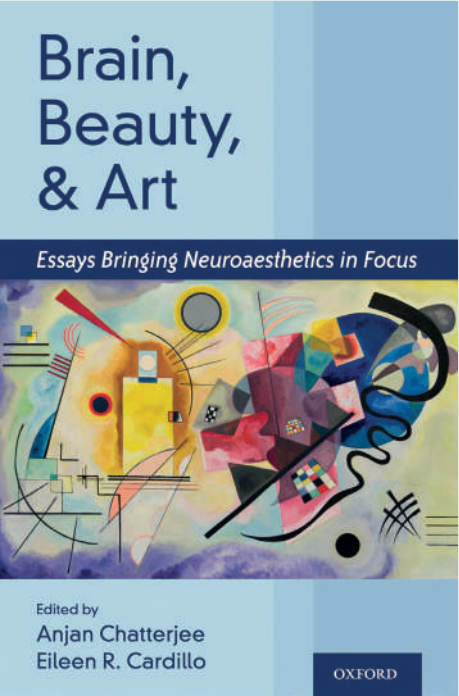
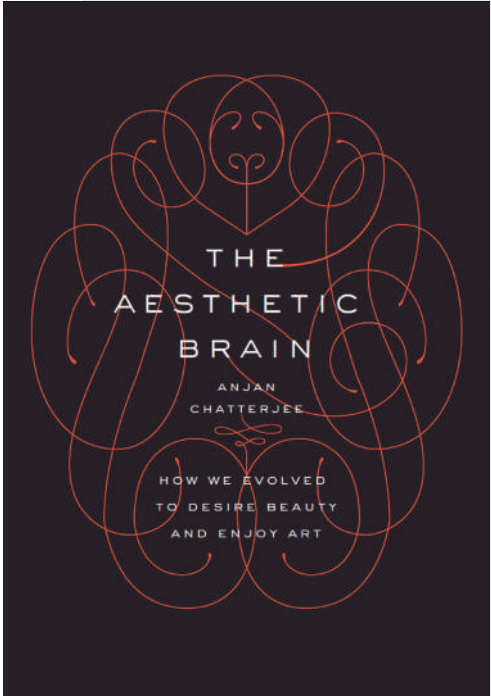
neuroaesthetics.med.upenn.edu

psychologytoday.com/us/blog/brain-behavior-and-beauty

Prof. Chatterjee’s selected books

The Aesthetic Brain:
A neuroscientific journey into how beauty, pleasure, and art are rooted in the human mind, exploring why aesthetic experiences are central to our lives.

Brain, Beauty, and Art:
A collection of essays from leading scholars that trace the origins and future of neuroaesthetics, investigating how we perceive and respond to beauty and art across disciplines.



MIND THE INTERACTION

Simona Maschi on designing tomorrow's connections, from Copenhagen to a 12th-century monastery in Italy's rolling countryside.



From the pioneering years at Ivrea in Northern Italy, where Olivetti helped launch Europe's first school for the field, to nearly two decades leading the Copenhagen Institute of Interaction Design (CIID) which she co-founded, Simona Maschi has seen interaction design grow from a niche concept to a driving influence shaping systems, services, and environments worldwide.

Her vision reaches far beyond conventional thinking, enabling meaningful experiences between people, technology, and their surroundings. Now she is bringing CIID's approach to Italy, establishing a new hub in a 12th-century monastery in Bergamo, Italy. In this fascinating conversation with DM, she reflects on the discipline's journey and why its future may depend on learning from nature.



As a co-founder of the Copenhagen Institute of Interaction Design (CIID), what is your core vision for the role of design in shaping the future?

The interaction design practice emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, and matured in the 1990s and into the present century. It concerns the design of products, services, and environments, enabled by digital technologies. I say “enabled” intentionally because sometimes the technology is not visible. But the type of experience that a person or a group of people can have with a device, or in an environment like a hospital, an airport, a car, is enabled by digital technologies. Often you do not see the technology, which is interesting.

In general, “design” has traditionally been associated with aesthetics and functionality, with beautification, especially in Italy. People think about jewellery, fashion, furniture, lamps, and tables. In reality, it’s about laying the foundations for something that does not yet exist. It is an act, a practice, linked more to creativity and thinking of new things than to aesthetics. Design is thinking about future things that do not yet exist, supported by tools and approaches such as prototyping, because when you imagine something new, you have to communicate it. Interaction design carries all of this, along with the “interaction” aspect, which focuses on designing the interaction itself.



“Traditionally, design has been associated with beautification”



CIID embraces a world-class research & consulting lab, education programme, and soon a venture building platform: can you provide some insights on how you can make them interact for the best possible outcome?

I see the years in Ivrea as the birth of the interaction design practice. Ivrea is a small city in northern Italy, best known as the historic headquarters of Olivetti, the pioneering maker of typewriters, calculators and early computers. In the late 1990s, as the digital technology boom began, Olivetti, with Barbara Ghella and Franco Debenedetti, launched a school entirely dedicated to interaction design. The idea followed a visit to Silicon Valley, where this new discipline was already in use but had no dedicated school in Europe.

Small yet ambitious, the Ivrea school offered two-year programmes for just 25 students annually, backed by a €36 million investment. From this unlikely setting emerged groundbreaking projects such as Arduino, based on C++ and led by Massimo Banzi, and Processing, a programming language for designers.

The CIID years from 2005 to 2019, when we had the full-time course, are like the adolescence of the practice. We created the profile, the identity, the values, the ethics and established key processes for it.

Now in Italy, I see this chapter as the impact phase, the more mature stage after adolescence. Our great dream is to take the CIID blueprint and duplicate it in other continents and countries where

we have significant alumni hubs, from India to Japan to America, and go to places where there is a need for impact.

Our new Italian base is in Bergamo, in a beautiful 12th-century monastery with a wonderful history. We invite everyone to visit. While our home remains in Europe and we will continue courses and projects there, we feel the responsibility to go where this kind of practice can have positive impact. We are always looking for talents from all over the world to join our one-year interaction design course.

Why did you choose a monastery for CIID's new Italian base?

It is not by chance. The monastery was once home to Ambrosian monks, who were among the first to explore the relationship and balance between humans and nature. Being in such a place is a constant reminder that we are part of an ecosystem, and it inspires us to design in ways that respect and work within that system.

You're passionate about creating design solutions with a positive impact. Could you share a specific example of a project at CIID where design interventions led to significant social or environmental benefits?

One example from the early days of this work is Arduino, which came out of the Ivrea school. Founded by Massimo Banzi, a close friend who teaches with us regularly, Arduino is an open-source electronics platform that allows people to create



interactive projects. It has enabled designers, students, and makers worldwide to experiment, learn, and build solutions that can have real social and environmental impact.

We are now in a phase of moving from human-centred innovation to life-centred innovation, a biocentric approach to innovation. We learn from biomimicry, adopting dynamics intrinsic to nature to inspire the design of artefacts. From death to birth to nourishment, nature teaches us that everything that dies nourishes the rest, so circularity is profoundly inherent to nature.

How can design thinking methodologies be used to foster stronger collaboration between academia and industry, and what are the key ingredients for a successful partnership?

The Ivrea and Copenhagen experiences show that the right environment, shared values, and a willingness to experiment and prototype are crucial. Strong collaborations emerge when design is understood as more than form or aesthetics. It is about creating the conditions for new things to exist, informed by ethics, impact, and a readiness to evolve.

How can we ensure that technology is developed and implemented in a way that truly enhances human well-being and promotes social equity? What do you make of AI?

I am fascinated by this new phase of AI. It is a great opportunity, but one that must be understood and managed carefully, like all big innovations and paradigm shifts such as the internet. Leonardo da Vinci said inventions should reduce human fatigue, not effort. Effort can be regenerating. Fatigue is the draining, unproductive kind. That principle could guide how we design with AI, focusing on removing what is unproductive and exhausting, while keeping what is regenerating and transformative. In today's design landscape, one important challenge is integrating biocentric thinking into business strategies, understanding that the purpose of nature is not growth but evolu-

“We are now in a phase of moving from human-centred innovation to life-centred innovation, a biocentric approach to innovation”





tion. Companies able to evolve based on the positive impact they can create on people & planet can create more value than those that only focus on expanding markets. For businesses across sectors there are strategic and commercial opportunities in shifting from a focus on profit to a focus on impact.

What are the key skills and mindsets you believe the next generation of designers needs to cultivate? And a word on empathetic design?

We want our students to become leaders who understand the ecosystem concept and the role we have in it. Learning from biomimicry is central, observing and applying nature's principles, not as plug-and-play solutions but as inspiration. The ability to evolve, to become the best version of oneself, can guide decisions in design and beyond.

Empathetic design aligns with this, as it requires seeing beyond human needs to the needs of the larger system. For the next generation, this means cultivating creativity, prototyping skills, ethical awareness, adaptability, and the capacity to work with complex, interconnected challenges.

We use this approach with our partners including Lego, Rockefeller Foundation, Translated, Roche, and Volvo.



BIO

Simona Maschi is the co-founder and director of the Copenhagen Institute of Interaction Design (CIID), where she leads the overall organisation, heading a team that combines a world-class consultancy, an education programme, and venture-building platform. Born and raised in Italy, she earned an MA in Architecture (1996) and a PhD in Industrial Design and Multimedia Communication (2002) from the Polytechnic University of Milan. An expert in service design, scenario design, and design methods, she is passionate about solutions that create a positive impact through a design culture that works in collaboration with academia and industry. Her projects have addressed private and public transportation, health and wellbeing, sustainable housing, and smart cities, and she is a frequent speaker at international conferences. Maschi serves on the jury for the Don Norman Design Awards and is part of a board of experts developing new design strategies at the University of Macau in China. She has more than 30 years of teaching experience at institutions including Denmark's Design School, the IT University in Copenhagen, and the Politecnico University in Milan, and was a visiting scholar at the Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago. Before founding CIID in 2006, she was an associate professor and researcher at the Interaction Design Institute in Ivrea, Italy

ciid.dk

“The purpose of
nature is not growth,
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CIID in Bergamo: A New Home for Interaction Design

Amidst the monastic calm of Astino, the Cascina Convento has been reborn. This 12th-century treasure, part of the historic Monastero di Astino, has undergone a meticulous restoration thanks to the MIA Foundation and the Municipality of Bergamo, emerging as the new headquarters of the Copenhagen Institute of Interaction Design (CIID).

Fully equipped with contemporary furnishings and state-of-the-art technologies, the Cascina Convento hosts the Interaction Design Programme. Here, history and innovation meet: the ancient architecture provides a backdrop where students from across the world will shape the future of design, in a space that is both contemplative and experimental.

This place represents more than the conclusion of a renovation project. It represents a symbolic chapter in CIID's journey—where centuries of cultural heritage embrace the urgency of contemporary design education, and where the past becomes a fertile ground for imagining the future.



Neurotesting packaging — In 2024, Neuralisys measured how different on-pack messages for a functional beverage shaped consumers' neurological and behavioral responses.

FEEL FIRST, THINK LATER

A CONVERSATION WITH MARCO BALDOCCHI ON NEURODESIGN, EMOTIONAL RESONANCE AND HOW EMPATHY AND EMOTION SHAPE THE CHOICES WE THINK WE MAKE.

What makes a product not just beautiful, but meaningful? For Marco Baldocchi, design thinker and specialist in neuromarketing, the answer lies in resonance: the subtle emotional vibration a product triggers in the mind of the beholder. In this wide-ranging conversation, he breaks down the science and emotion behind empathetic design, shares real-world insights from cross-cultural research, and argues for a shift in design thinking from aesthetics to significance. From symmetrical pasta to misunderstood packaging, Baldocchi reveals how deep listening, neuroscience, and cultural awareness are reshaping the relationship between people and products.

What makes a product truly empathetic? How does it go beyond mere aesthetic appeal?

Well, design starts with something that pleases the eye. It stimulates the visual sense, which is one of our most dominant senses. In fact, around 55 percent of our neurons are dedicated to processing visual information. So of course, design first connects through vision and activates our brain. But from there, it goes deeper.

When a product manages to stimulate the limbic system, the part of the brain connected to emotions, it can establish a genuine connection. Empathy happens when the consumer recognises the product as something that speaks to them, or even for them. That moment of unconscious recognition between the user and the object creates a meaningful relationship.

This recognition might come from evoking a memory, a sensation, or shared values. For example, if someone strongly values sustainability, even the tactile sensation of a material that feels eco-friendly can create a connection, even if, paradoxically, the material is not sustainable. It's the perception that counts.

You talk a lot about emotional resonance in design. Could you elaborate on what that means?

I believe that the key word in empathetic design is resonance. When an object, product, sound or taste resonates with someone's emotional memory, it creates a bond. Through the senses, it triggers an emotion, and that emotion fixes a memory. That's how an authentic relationship is formed. It's not about targeting people's senses, it's about vibrating with something they already carry inside.

That's why I prefer to speak of an interior echo rather than just aesthetics. Empathetic design should not just be about what looks good, but what leaves an imprint.

What are the key factors that create this resonance?

Over time, I've identified five main factors: familiarity, trust, desirability, consistency, and meaning. These form a kind of emotional archetype that can be found across cultures. Of course, socio-cultural factors influence everything. But within certain clusters of people, there are patterns that are surprisingly consistent.

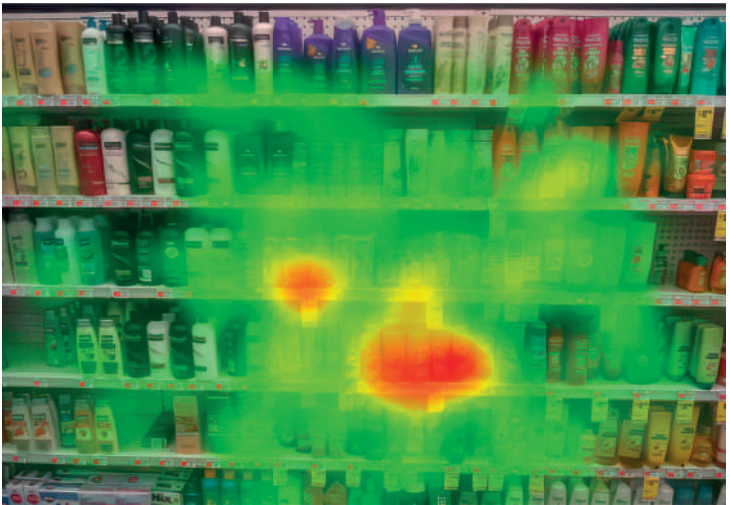
Neuroscience gives us qualitative tools to observe this. You don't need huge numbers. Around 30 well-clustered participants can yield scientifically valid insights. With the right sample, we can detect common emotional reactions, facial expressions, subconscious responses.

And we must remember: the unconscious mind reacts 200,000 times faster than the conscious mind. That's why it's so crucial to pay attention to unconscious perception. The first impression happens before you are even aware of it.

We are animals that are emotional, lazy and selfish. It sounds bad when describing the human being like that, but it's true. Without emotion you don't create attention, and if there's no attention, there's no choice. Then, ultimately, the rational part of our brain is engaged. That's why often the simplest designs are the most successful, since they involve less cognitive load.

This is exactly why designers must shift their attention from form to meaning. You are not decorating an object, you are embedding a story. And that story must resonate emotionally first.

“When an object resonates with someone's emotional memory, it creates a bond”



Visual maps show where consumers' attention lingers on a shelf, uncovering unconscious patterns that influence choice.



Neuroscience meets architecture — Using platforms like iMotions, researchers can track eye movements, facial expressions, and biometric signals to reveal how office design unconsciously shapes focus, comfort, and emotional engagement



Eye-tracking technology helps researchers understand how users navigate digital interfaces, revealing where focus falls and how design choices guide behaviour

Psychologist Paul Ekman, a pioneer in the science of emotions, developed the Facial Action Coding System (FACS) to decode the micro-expressions that flash across our faces in fractions of a second. These subtle, involuntary movements reveal emotions we may not even be aware of—shaping trust, empathy, and decision-making long before rational thought comes into play.



So, how does this play out across different markets?

This is where it gets really interesting. I often work with brands that want to enter the American market. They bring products that perform strongly in their home country but then face a completely different perception abroad. I recently did the reverse, helping a US company enter Europe. Their managers struggled to understand why things that were essential for them made no sense here.

Take colours. In China, red symbolises prosperity. In Italy, it means passion. Or consider minimalism. A minimalist, natural product with soft pastel packaging might work beautifully in some European countries, but flop in the US. There, it might need bolder, more vibrant colours. On the other hand, try selling a fluorescent product in Europe, no chance.

We have biological constants like symmetry, which universally pleases the brain. The association between beautiful and good is another strong stereotype, neurologically ingrained. But many other responses are built culturally.

And these differences go deep. Even gestures, even facial expressions can carry different meanings. In some cultures, smiling is a signal of trust. In others, it might mean submission. So empathy in design has to include cultural empathy too.

Can you share a practical example of this cultural mismatch?

Absolutely. We ran a research project for an Italian food brand targeting the US. We tested in Los Angeles, Dallas, and New York. The results were eye-opening. In Dallas, for example, many people didn't even know what an artichoke was, even among high-spending, well-travelled consumers. So, forget selling artichokes there.

Even more striking: grissini with pizza flavour. You'd think that combining two American favourites, breadsticks and pizza, would be a win. But they didn't sell. There's no mental association between those flavours in the US market.

Then there was the tomato sauce. A runnier sauce triggered disgust reactions in facial coding. The gesture of turning over the bottle and seeing it so liquid made people recoil. The same product, but with visible tomato pulp, was perceived as fantastic.

Did you notice any patterns in terms of perceived value?

Oh yes. One example blew me away. A packet of coloured farfalle pasta, all naturally dyed, with a transparent designed package. The company wanted to sell it at 3 dollars. But in unconscious price perception tests, consumers in all three cities placed its value at 9 dollars. That's three times more.

And these were consistent results across very different regions. That shows the power of design. If you create something visually compelling, with the right emotional cues, it significantly boosts perceived value.

How do you bridge the gap between academic research and real-world business?

That's something I care about a lot. Universities are amazing labs, but they can take six months to deliver research results. Businesses don't have that kind of time. In my work, we deliver insights in a month, concrete, actionable, without the heavy theory. For example, we might tell a brand: change the packaging like this, focus your marketing on that message.

My goal is to make science practical. If it stays abstract, it's beautiful, but inaccessible.

When you speak to companies, what do you often find is missing in their understanding of design?

Many brands start by saying: "My customer doesn't understand me." But over time, they realise they need to communicate differently. They talk about "hitting the target" or "impacting the senses." I always stop them. You don't need to hit anyone. You need to make something resonate.

That's the big shift. Don't ask what your product means to you. Ask what it means to your audience. The same product means different things in different countries. So adapt the story. Make sure it aligns with local perceptions and emotional expectations.

What would you say to designers focused only on the rational or functional aspects of a product?

If you want to influence choice, you must first create attention. And to do that, you need to work on emotion. Without that, even the most functional, brilliant product

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We have this illusion that people decide rationally, but it’s emotion that triggers interest. Rationality comes later, to justify the choice. The product that evokes a feeling first will always win the battle for attention.

And I want to say something more: if you design only with logic, you may create something correct, but not something that lives. Products, like people, need a soul. That soul is emotion.

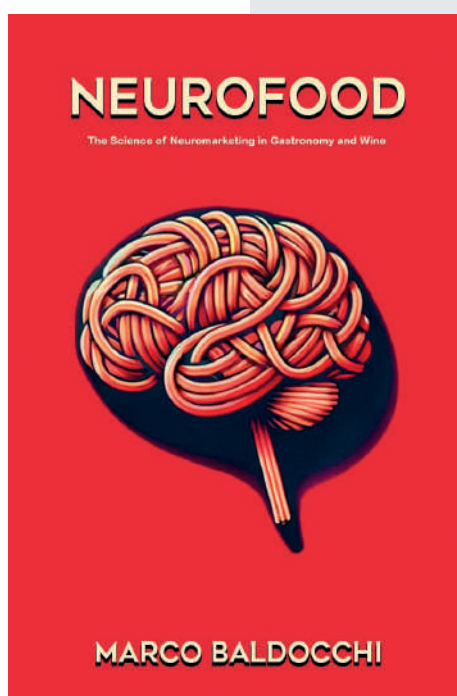
Any final thoughts on where empathetic design is heading?

I believe we need to move from a focus on form and function to a focus on meaning. Empathy in design is not about making something attractive. It’s about creating a shared emotional vibration. That’s where real value lies.

Ultimately, it’s about resonance. If you can trigger the right emotional memory, if your product can echo something deep inside the user, then you’ve done your job as a designer.

Empathetic design does not mean making something nice. It means being able to put yourself in the shoes of your audience, in their daily lives, with their cultural and emotional baggage. It means creating something that speaks their language, without words.

Neurofood (Hoepli, 2022)
Baldocchi’s book explores
how our brain reacts to food,
from everyday choices to
immersive dining experiences,
revealing the hidden power of
multisensory perception.



BIO

Marco Baldocchi is an entrepreneur and an expert in neuromarketing. Born in Lucca in 1978, he completed a degree in Communication Sciences in Switzerland and founded the communication agency On Web in 2005. In 2018, he established Marco Baldocchi Group Inc., a neuromarketing agency based in Miami, Florida. He has served as President of the Young Entrepreneurs of Confcommercio Lucca and is currently the National Head of Technological Innovation for Conflavoro, an Italian employers’ association. In the United States, he serves as Communications Director for MAIE (Movimento Associativo Italiani all’Estero), representing Italians abroad. He lectures at institutions including 24Ore Business School and Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan, and since 2021, he has been a board member of the Digital Marketing Certificate Programme at the University of South Florida, MUMA College of Business. Baldocchi is the author of *Neurofood: il neuromarketing applicato al mondo dell’enogastronomia* (Hoepli, 2022), *Neuromarketing per il food* (Flaccovio Editore, 2020), and co-author of *Money Matters Tips vol. 2* (USA). A member of the NMSBA (Neuromarketing Science & Business Association), he was voted “6th Top World Speaker - Neuromarketing Series 2021” and contributes to the NMSBA YearBook. He is also active in the International Advertising Association (IAA), where he teaches neuromarketing applied to the food industry. Since 2020, he has served as Neuromarketing Research Director for the Associazione Nazionale Neuroscienze Applicate.

neuralisys.com



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BELONG HERE

Designing a workplace that carries corporate values, driving well-being, performance and sense of unity

A new collaborative and sensitive design approach now carries the responsibility of translating corporate values and psychosocial needs into participatory spaces. International research shows how design can strengthen the bond between employees and companies, improving well-being, engagement, and productivity.

What is the link between design and the workplace? Where we work is also where we spend a large part of our day. It should be a place with empathic qualities rather than just a functional space. So what role does design play in the lives of workers?

To answer this, we can turn to studies such as *Creating Places to Belong: 2024 Workplace Report*, conducted by Kimball International in collaboration with Ipsos and Arigami using U.S. data. The research explores the connection between workplace design, the sense of belonging and workers' psychosocial well-being. It shows how the design of spaces, through furniture, layout and sensory qualities, can enhance engagement, productivity and well-being, while reducing turnover and absenteeism.

Neuroscience shows that belonging is a fundamental human need. It goes beyond inclusion: it means feeling valued, recognised and part of a 'we.' The *Creating Places to Belong* report found that where belonging is present, job performance rises by 56 per cent, sick days fall by 75 per cent and turnover risk is reduced by 50 per cent.

Workplace design is therefore called on to facilitate connection, enabling spontaneous and meaningful relationships that create that community feel, while also ensuring physical and mental comfort. Thoughtful acoustic planning, adjustable lighting, tactile materials and soft forms all contribute to a sense of welcome, including for neurodivergent people.

It is important to distinguish between high-sensory-stimulation environments, such as dynamic open-plan spaces, and low-stimulation ones, where silence and soft lighting prevail.



Universal Studio

The 12,700 m² facility was conceived with custom elements designed to be reconfigured or dismantled and repurposed. The focus was on simple, thoughtful solutions, such as natural linoleum flooring and the removal of secondary wall finishes. Visitors are greeted by the calming scent of lavender, which lines the walls. On the second floor there is a meditation room clad in wood, using natural, sustainable materials that improve air quality, provide a rich sensory experience and ensure excellent acoustic performance. Thick carpeting and comfortable seating create a cocoon-like atmosphere.



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The research identifies five organisational cultures: Classic, Harmoniser, Collective, Trailblazer and Adaptor, and shows how spaces can be tailored accordingly.

- Classic values structure, authority, and clear roles, favouring a hierarchical approach focused on performance and individual responsibility. Design: formal layouts, individual offices, or organised clusters that support top-down communication, typical of traditional large companies or public institutions (legal, banking, public administration).
- Harmoniser values balance, well-being, and interpersonal support, favouring a collaborative, empathic work approach. Design: warm, relaxing spaces, welcoming common areas, informal settings that encourage dialogue (people-focused companies, NGOs, education, healthcare).
- Collective values community, belonging, and shared mission, favouring participatory work with a strong shared identity. Design: open-plan spaces with brainstorming areas, strong symbolic elements, co-design environments (social enterprises, mission-driven startups, cooperatives).
- Trailblazer values innovation, challenge, and growth—thriving in change with ambition and flexibility. Design: dynamic, flexible, tech-driven spaces with creative zones and adaptable layouts (tech companies, creative agencies).
- Adaptor values agility, flexibility, and resilience, favouring reactive, problem-solving approaches suited to evolving contexts. Design: modular, reconfigurable spaces, neutral and hybrid zones (companies undergoing transformation, some multinationals).



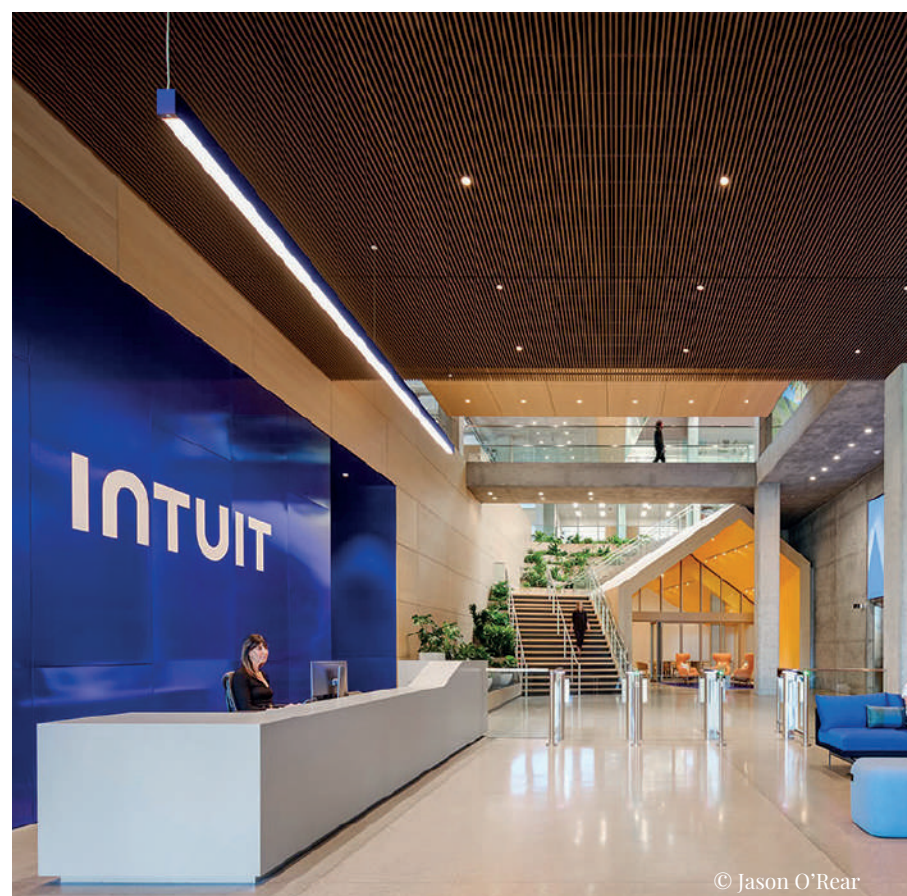
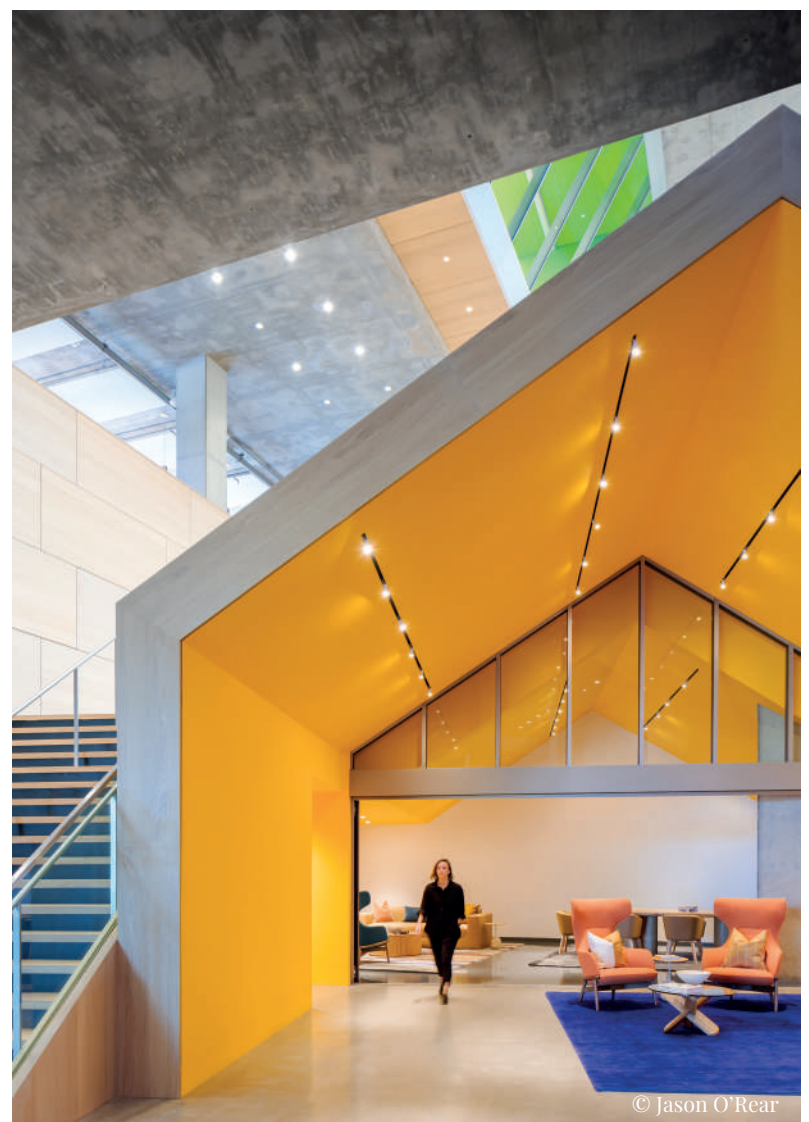
Psychological safety, individual expression and inclusive design, together with role clarity and value coherence, are the keys to building community across geocultural perspectives in workplace design

These categories help connect culture to space. If an organisation's culture is Harmoniser, an overly competitive or impersonal environment can cause misalignment and frustration. By contrast, coherent design strengthens identity, engagement and belonging.

The research also identifies six space types that enhance belonging:

1. The Hub - informal social space
2. Culture Café - eat and share ideas
3. Work Your Way - customisable areas
4. The Meet-Up - collaboration spaces
5. Room on the Move - mobile spaces for training and mentoring
6. Well + Good - wellness, meditation, rest areas

Developed with neuroscientists and designers, the report introduces an innovative multisensory framework that uses interdisciplinary methods and immersive 3D platforms for experiential testing.



Clive Wilkinson
Spread over four floors and 16,600 m², and certified LEED Platinum, the building accommodates around 1,000 people in a hybrid working model. At the entrance, visitors are welcomed by a luminous blue metal wall and a reception desk that appears to rise from the polished concrete floor. Beyond this lies the “Little House” hospitality space and a grand timber-clad staircase wrapped in greenery, leading to the upper atrium. At the heart of the building is a lofty three-storey atrium, flooded with natural light. A blue metal staircase winds upwards through the space, flanked by suspended balconies, encouraging movement and social interaction. The open-plan work areas are defined by bold, playful architectural and interior finishes, enriched with hospitality-inspired features.

Hierarchical Belonging and Gen Z Perspective

In the U.S., hybrid and customisable spaces that reflect corporate values address belonging through psychological safety, individual expression and inclusive design. In China, by contrast, belonging is perceived as collective and hierarchical, requiring design that enhances role clarity and expresses corporate value coherence to build community.

This emerges from the 2024 study “The Implications Social Belongingness in the Workplace Have on Chinese Employees’ Working Behaviour”, published in Lecture Notes in Education, Psychology and Public Media, based on medium-to-large Chinese companies. The study shows that belonging strongly correlates with higher motivation, better communication with superiors and positive perceptions of career prospects. Women report higher stress and slightly lower belonging than men. In traditional sectors such as manufacturing and logistics, belonging is more collective, while in creative and communication fields personal recognition matters more.

Role clarity, value coherence, and interpersonal respect are the main levers. Design here should prioritise organised spaces and collaborative rituals with well-defined roles.



Henning Larsen

The new headquarters of KAB, Copenhagen’s largest housing association (7,400 m² in a pentagonal plan), blends the character of the office with that of the home. It has no front or back, but opens out on all sides. The living room, garden and kitchen have all been reinterpreted as working environments. Staircases recall the shared stairwells of residential buildings, traditionally places where neighbours meet. On the west side of the atrium, a glazed wall encloses meeting rooms and private offices designed like rooms in a house. On the roof, a garden terrace allows employees and visitors to take a break while enjoying views of the city.



A Compass Group India report with Mintel shows that workplace socialisation is equally important elsewhere in Asia. Events with food and drink increase employee happiness by 50 per cent, and 75 per cent believe that lunch conversations strengthen relationships. Yet 49 per cent of Indian employees report feeling lonely, with negative effects on productivity. Socially active employees are more aligned with corporate strategy (42 per cent versus 100 per cent). Nearly half (44 per cent) of those who interact regularly with colleagues have at least one good friend at work, and 38 per cent of these socially connected employees report a strong sense of workplace belonging. By contrast, lonely employees take twice as many sick days, directly increasing costs and reducing productivity.

In Singapore, three in five workers would quit if they lacked a sense of workplace belonging, especially among Gen Z, according to a Randstad study. For some, workplace relationships even outweigh financial incentives, with 43 per cent willing to accept lower pay for ‘good friends at work.’ Yet only 37 per cent of Gen Z trust their employer to create a culture where all colleagues can thrive, compared with 51 per cent of Baby Boomers. This generational gap also shapes how people want to experience workspaces.

Globally, this highlights the need for design that promotes psychological inclusion and embraces diversity, whether ethnic, cultural, generational or neurodivergent.

This involves creating accessible environments with neutral zones for decompression or personal expression, such as customisable corners or collective storytelling walls, along with informal hubs, coffee spaces and small lounges for spontaneous encounters.

Ritual spaces, such as areas for events, celebrations and onboarding, are also valued. Embedding corporate values into shared spaces through murals, art or colour schemes strengthens identity, especially when employees’ faces and stories are included. Co-designing with users through surveys, focus groups or pilot tests ensures alignment, particularly for Gen Z, who expect involvement rather than top-down decisions.

Comfort, whether thermal, acoustic or visual, should be planned holistically, perhaps through biophilic design that emphasises natural light and warm, tactile, stimulating materials.



THE FUTURE OF SPACE ARCHITECTURE FOR A NEW INTERPLANETARY RENAISSANCE

In conversation with Annalisa Dominoni & Benedetto Quaquaro, pioneers in architecture and design for space and extreme environments, Space Design becomes a vision of interplanetary living where technology, beauty, and empathy converge. From sensory-driven habitats to robots that convey the sensation of a hug, their Use & Gesture Design methodology turns microgravity into an opportunity—shaping environments that nurture body, mind, and emotion, bringing a touch of home to the cosmos.

What does designing for space mean and what does it imply?

Space architecture is undergoing a period of great transformation and development thanks to the private sector, which is fuelling a vision of the future of an interplanetary humanity that will inhabit space. Designing for space does not just mean creating habitats to protect against hostile external conditions, but also going beyond functional aspects to consider physiological, sensory and emotional aspects, which are altered in confined environments due to the lack of natural stimuli. The goal is to evolve towards an advanced concept of “biosphere” to improve the quality of life and relationships between humans and nature, even beyond Earth.

If today, on our planet, architecture looks to the future by imagining smart, inclusive and sustainable cities – continuous cities, of immense dimensions that will be connected and accessible through networks similar to neural networks, capable of communicating with the population immediately and creating fluid services defined by collective needs – in space, architecture is inspired by the same idea of the future, facing greater complexity, some of which is still unknown, seeking new languages that can combine technological innovation and aesthetics, science and beauty. In this scenario, the role of the architect and spatial designer that we promote is to design “sensory space environments” that represent a new way of experiencing space beyond Earth in harmony with the cosmos without sacrificing a symbiotic relationship with nature.

Can you give us an example of a project you have carried out for space that could also be applied on Earth

The new Sensory Space Station project we have developed for Thales Alenia Space introduces, for the first time, an entire module dedicated to astronaut entertainment. Not only experiments and facilities, but an environment that promotes leisure and relaxation, for which we have proposed a series of innovations to compensate for the lack of natural stimuli in confined environments, but also to meet the need for privacy that comes from living in a group in small spaces. This is no easy challenge, considering that we are dealing with an extreme environment that involves conditions different from those we experience in everyday life, such as confinement and microgravity.

The latter is particularly fascinating because it affects many design parameters, for example, by cancelling out weight or altering the shape and perception of things.

The first innovation was “light quality”, which can change colour and intensity to reproduce the natural day and night cycle and thus rebalance circadian rhythms altered by the lack of natural light. But there is also what we might call “light architecture”, which defines different areas and atmospheres in the same open environment, depending on the activities carried out by the crew, by adjusting the light temperature and shape using light screens to divide spaces or light bubbles that define work or relaxation areas. Another innovation was “acoustic quality”, because noise is amplified in confined spaces. To reduce the constant background noise produced by the space station’s on-board instruments, we covered the interior of the modules and part of the furnishings with sound-absorbing textiles. Working with materials and textures allowed us to enhance the “visual and tactile qualities” of the surfaces with the aim of creating a warmer, more homely overall feel than the cold aluminium that covers the interior of the ISS.

Can you explain the methodology behind the Use & Gesture Design you have created?

The Use & Gesture Design (UGD) methodology was created by Annalisa Dominoni with the first Portable Caddy project, a tool container that Alenia Space commissioned Annalisa to develop in 1998 for routine maintenance of the European Columbus module of the International Space Station.

What attracts us most about spatial design is the “predictive capacity” that comes into play when imagining how new habitats will be experienced, how our products will be used in space, how they will interact with astronauts and the environment, how they will react to external stresses and how they will support activities. Throughout this process of analysis and projection, it is very useful to apply the UGD methodology that is created specifically for the space environment, and which helps us to define the characteristics of habitats, equipment and even clothing, which are very different from those we use on Earth, as confinement and microgravity. We believe that designing for space means being “visionary”, overturning conventional thinking, such as turning reduced gravity into an advantage instead of considering it a limitation, and proposing solutions that would not be possible on Earth.

The cutting edge of space architecture and space design is the “Sensory Space Station”.



Designed by Annalisa Dominoni and Benedetto for Thales Alenia Space in 2019, the Sensory Space Station represents the avant-garde of space architecture. It stimulates all the senses to counteract the lack of natural stimuli in a confined environment.

“Space Design acts as a bridge between science, technology and beauty.”

In terms of the more empathetic aspects of design, what contribution does the "Space Design" approach, or rather UGD, make?

Space Design - thanks to the UGD methodology and multidisciplinary approach that allows different disciplines such as mechatronics and robotics engineering to be integrated to generate disruptive innovations - can have a decisive impact on the form and performance of new products, creating new gestures and behaviours, but also drawing inspiration from sensory aspects of our everyday lives that aim to make us feel at home in space. One example is the Send Sense project. The sense of loneliness felt by crew members when they are away from home and their families for many months is one of the biggest problems of living in space in a confined environment. Although this is currently reduced thanks to the possibility of making video calls, physical absence cannot be overcome. Send Sense provides the sensation of a hug thanks to two soft twin robots that allow two people, one on Earth and one in space, to communicate by remotely sending the sensation of movement and touch provided by the movement of internal fluids controlled by a CPU. They consist of a rigid core, for charging and transmission, and a soft part, and can be worn on the hand or around the arm.

What are the implications of UGD in the context of neurodesign?

As space designers, designing for the future, we have always been involved in neuroscience, making a contribution that goes beyond the functional and survival aspects, which are fundamental in space, and also embracing aesthetic values. Space Design goes beyond functional aspects to consider physiological and emotional factors that have a major influence on our behaviour. Living in space in a confined environment means a total lack of natural elements - such as air, water, light, temperature, humidity, and the sounds of nature - which are fundamental to our biorhythms. Another example is Star Fruit, an orange-shaped "comfort food" made with edible packaging containing fruit powder. When water is added, it expands to take on the defined shape of the fruit without producing waste. The act of eating the segments of a fruit compensates for the lack of natural food in space with a tactile and visual experience that evokes memories of taste and smell.

In your space projects, what is the relationship with aesthetics?

Space Design has the power to add beauty to technology and to transform the lack of gravity, considered a limitation, into an opportunity, by creating environmental and tool-based solutions that could not exist on Earth and that offer new ways of inhabiting and using objects, understood as body extensions to amplify comfort and performance in Space. Our recent projects of prosthetic objects combine the languages of beauty and technology to improve the performance of astronauts and parastronauts. Organic Sculpture is a prosthetic object that replaces a leg. Applying the Use & Gesture Design (UGD) methodology to analyse the behaviour and movements of the body underwater, which are very similar to those assumed in microgravity, this project is inspired by the way octopuses use their tentacles, taking advantage of the environmental laws of space. We love to conclude the interview with this example, which shows how design for space is a bridge between science, technology and beauty.



The exhibition of space objects and prototypes, "Cities of the Universe", held at Le Scuderie of the Prague Embassy in December 2024 as part of the travelling multimedia "Design Spaziale Italiano" project curated by Annalisa Dominoni and Benedetto Quaquaro.



© Silvia Guerini

Is it possible to experience a long-distance hug with our loved ones, between Earth and Space, wearing sensations thanks to soft robots?



Gravity is the “great designer” that changes the shape and the meaning of life in space.

Organic Sculpture is a prosthetic device designed to replace the legs of parastronauts in space. Taking inspiration from the way octopuses use their tentacles to their advantage in space, it applies the Use & Gesture Design (UGD) methodology to analyse body behaviour and movement in microgravity.

The “Use & Gesture Design” methodology allows to “predict” the new behaviours of people and objects in space.



Star Fruit is an orange-shaped “comfort food” with edible packaging containing fruit powder. It provides a tactile and visual experience that compensates for the lack of natural food in space, evoking memories of terrestrial tastes, smells and gestures.



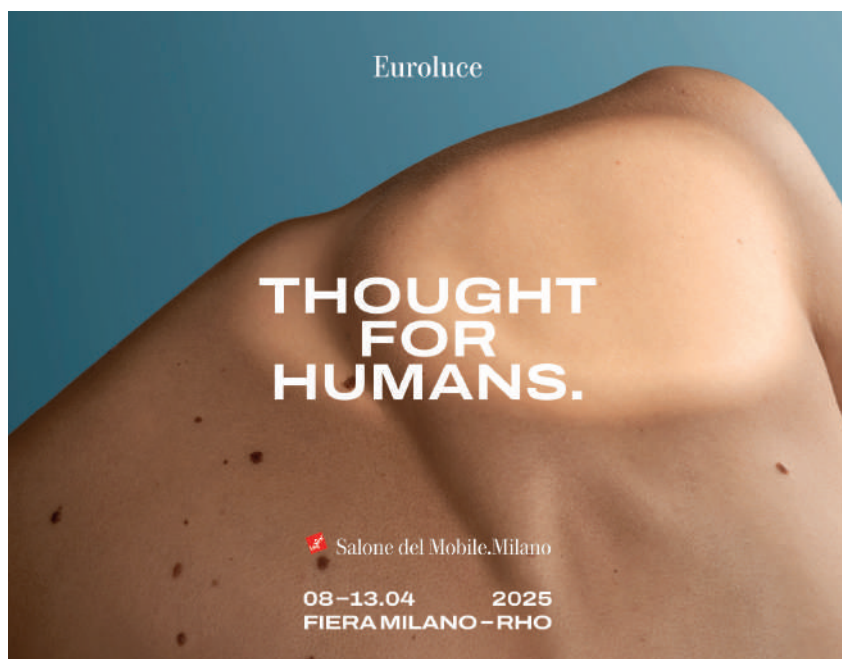
Both PhDs, architects and designers, **Annalisa Dominoni and Benedetto Quaquaro** are the founders of the (a+b) studio and leading experts in architecture and design for space and extreme environments. They teach at the School of Design at the Politecnico di Milano, where in 2017 they created the world’s first and only space design course, Space4InspirACTION, supported by the European Space Agency. They are responsible for ESA_LAB@ PoliMi_Design, the space design research laboratory at the Department of Design at the Politecnico di Milano. They collaborate on an ongoing basis with leading international space agencies and industries and with major design and Made in Italy companies. Their projects have been shown in several prestigious exhibitions, including the 23rd International Triennale Milano Unknown Unknowns. An Introduction to Mysteries in 2023. They are Design Ambassadors and curators of international exhibitions, including Design Spaziale Italiano, a multimedia exhibition touring the world in 2024 and 2025. They are the authors of more than 200 publications and essays on design culture, which have contributed to establishing the strategic role of design in space.

dipartimentodesign.polimi.it/en
designspazialeitaliano.it

THOUGHT FOR HUMANS

The human-centric vision at the heart of Salone del Mobile.Milano 2025

Empathy arises in the dialogue between design and its recipient, because every object is conceived to enhance human interaction. Natural materials, a soothing colour palette, seamlessly integrated digital technology, artisanal quality, and modular furnishings for flexible living spaces all contribute to this vision.

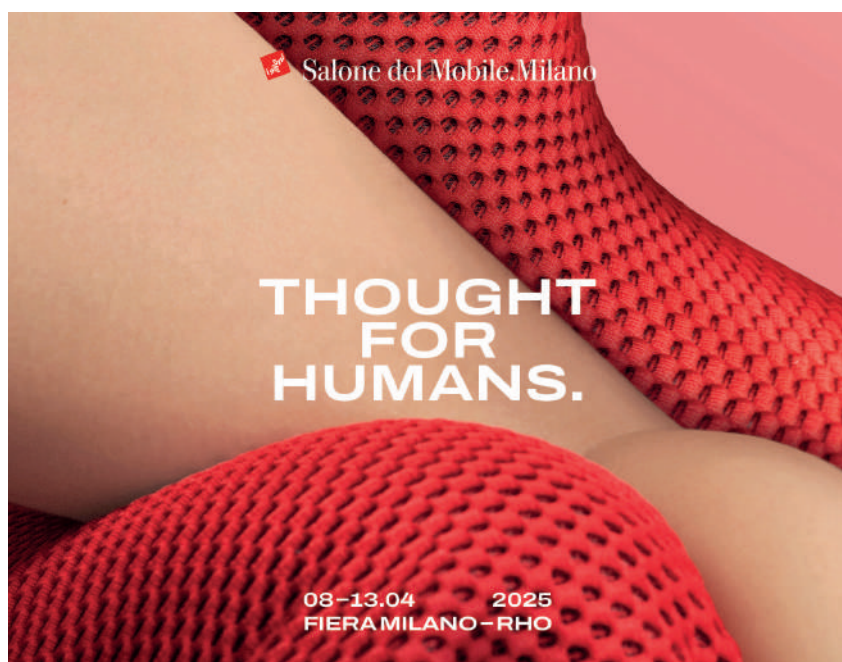


Design, reimagined around the human being

“Thought for Humans” was far more than a statement of theme, it was the defining narrative of the 2025 edition of Salone del Mobile.Milano. A bold conceptual frame that placed empathy at the core of the design discourse, this edition invited the international design community to reconsider the relationship between objects and their users, not only in functional but also in emotional terms. With 302,548 attendees and 2,103 exhibitors from 37 countries, 68% of them international and a strong presence from China, the event traced the contours of a global design landscape in motion. It also pointed towards the emerging business geographies, opening the way for new cultural and commercial exchanges. The next edition of the Salone is scheduled to return to Milan from 21 to 26 April 2026.

Bill Durgin: Design rooted in human anatomy

At the intersection of material, body, and light was the visual campaign curated by artist Bill Durgin, an ode to tactility and to the visceral relationship between the human form and the objects that surround it. “As human beings, we engage with design every single day. Everything around us is made by someone, for someone,” Durgin reflects. “Great design is not only visually appealing, it brings joy to the everyday: moving through space, preparing breakfast, working, or gathering around a table with our family. In designing furniture, I’ve learnt how deeply designers study the human body, our movements, capabilities, postures, all with the intent of making life easier. Design is anchored in human anatomy and thrives on continuous interaction with it.” Design, Durgin suggests, is so intrinsically entwined with the body and psyche that its highest purpose is to foster environments of emotional wellbeing.



Communication campaign 2025 by Bill Durgin

Natural materials and colours that convey calm

One of the most noticeable trends at Salone 2025 was the resurgence of natural materials. Raw wood, stone, cork, hemp, and terracotta reclaimed the spotlight, not only for their aesthetic purity but also for their tactile and emotional resonance. This return to nature signals a gentle yet decisive departure from artificiality, embracing organic textures and irregular finishes, and celebrating imperfections. A renewed attention to sustainability was ever-present, with widespread use of recycled and low-impact materials such as reclaimed wood, natural fibres, travertine, and composite materials from industrial waste. Cork, terracotta, and stone sourced from low-emission production chains played a key role.

The Salone itself promoted green guidelines for exhibitors, encouraging long product life cycles and mindful material selection for the booths' structures, in line with principles of circular economy and social, as well as environmental, responsibility.

Across the fairgrounds, biophilic design, evoking natural elements and peaceful atmospheres, emerged as a transversal trend. Earthy tones (beige, brown, terracotta), metallic accents (brass, bronze), and soothing hues (sky blue, sage green) defined a sensorial, welcoming aesthetic. Matte finishes, etched glass, and soft-touch marbles completed the visual narrative.

The chromatic evolution of 2025 embraced a quiet elegance: sand, grège, cream, and ivory punctuated by earthen accents of rust, ochre, and sage. These hues served not only an aesthetic purpose, they functioned as emotional conduits, suggesting calm, balance, and inner peace.

The central theme of Salone del Mobile 2025 highlighted the importance of the relationship between design and the user, with the aim of enhancing the quality, and emotional resonance, of everyday life.



© Ruggiero Scardigno

Arena Drafting Futures – Formafantasma

Integrated technology, modularity and craftsmanship

The home, and by extension the workplace, is evolving into a smart, responsive ecosystem. Yet here, technology blends in discreetly, almost invisibly. Built-in appliances, ambient lighting, connected furniture, all uphold a minimalist aesthetic without compromising on performance.

Innovation emerged from both sides of the spectrum: the recontextualisation of craftsmanship and the adoption of advanced technologies such as 3D printing and home automation systems. The result? Personalised furniture and modular systems tailored to the needs of multi-functional spaces.

The increasing demand for adaptable interiors found concrete answers at Salone 2025: modular sofas, mobile partitions, adjustable tables, and furnishings designed for remote work, leisure, and socialising, even in compact environments. The home thus becomes a fluid, dynamic space, aligned with the rhythms of daily life.

Another defining trend was the synergy between digital technology and artisanal heritage. Numerous projects showcased 3D-printed elements, numeric detailing, and AI-assisted processes, without forgoing an aesthetic anchored in tradition. This digital craftsmanship yields bespoke, emotionally vibrant pieces, a new luxury defined by sustainability, individuality, and sensorial resonance.



© Tommaso Sartori

Dorothea Hotel Budapest – Piero Lissoni

THE ACCIDENTAL VANGUARD

Rodolfo Guzmán
on Chile's culinary
revolution, from
foraged roots to global
recognition. How
Boragó's pursuit of
endemic excellence
redefined Chilean
gastronomy



Chef Rodolfo Guzmán, at the helm of Boragó in Santiago, has captivated the culinary world with an approach to food that is as deeply rooted in Chile's ancient landscape as it is forward-thinking. His method, which can be described as anthropological, focuses intently on endemic ingredients and traditional cuisine. In this interview, Guzmán shares the remarkable journey of Boragó, from its challenging beginnings to its current status as one of Latin America's most acclaimed restaurants. He tells DM about how the unique geographical and cultural tapestry of Chile, the profound influence of its native foraging communities, and the relentless pursuit of culinary surprise, rather than a focus on technique, unexpectedly led to global recognition and a revolution in Chilean gastronomy.

What was the context in Chile when you started?

We started almost 19 years ago. At that time, Chile was very different. To be honest, gastronomy was never a thing to us Chileans. Chile used to be the poorest country in Latin America, 50 years ago. Then, it suddenly exploded economically, becoming the healthiest economy in Latin America.

Chile is a very long and narrow country, it works like an island without being an island. We do not share a single ingredient with our neighbouring countries, which for me, as a cook, was a pain in the beginning, because I really wanted tropical ingredients. Also, the climate here is quite different. Our ocean is very, very cold, and you have lots of snow in the mountains. Down South, it is like being in Sweden, with snow in the ocean. This year, for the first time ever, the ocean got frozen in the South, you could see the waves frozen.

During the Ice Age, some areas in Chile were not frozen. These were our ancient forests, our ecosystems. Also, what you find in our waters, you won't see anywhere else in the world. That's why it feels like an island, because the Andes are so high, reaching almost 7,000 metres. Talking about Argentina and Chile is like talking about black and white. Not better or worse, just completely different. The Atlantic Ocean is one thing; the Pacific Ocean is something else entirely.

What role did native cultures play in your approach?

Chilean natives, who have been around for the last 12,000 years, never mixed with the rest of the Latin American Inca population. They never got mixed. They were foragers; they didn't know agriculture and they were nomads. They were sharing everything, the mountains, the coasts, the forests, the land itself. They were gathering and sharing. That is our culture, nomadism. Also, they were warriors. That was mainly why, when the Spanish came to conquer, they could never conquer the Mapuche people.

Everything at Boragó is organic. These ingredients have been around for such a long time, amazing ingredients you have never seen before, from the ocean and from the mountains.

How did Boragó begin to work with these ingredients?

The trouble was convincing people to send these ingredients from Patagonia, from the coast, from around our country. But they've been very nice. I ended up learning and meeting lots of people: not only producers or foragers or other Mapuche people, but also agronomists, biologists, anthropologists, botanists. People would tell me, "Hey, Rodolfo, do you know this guy that is grabbing these ingredients from the mountain?" And I'd go for it. I felt so blessed and lucky to be able to work with these ingredients.

At that time, in every good restaurant, the best things were coming from outside the country. A famous restaurant would be importing fish from Japan, prosciutto from Italy, mozzarella from Naples, just to be considered a good restaurant.

“Amazing ingredients you have never seen before, from the ocean and from the mountains.”



Onion and pink tomato tarte tatin
Almond cold cream on a Summer salad



Patagonian lamb A la Inverse, fig leaf and Maule pink tomato

Lots of French cuisine. The best chefs were European chefs at hotels. But at a Chilean restaurant, Chilean ingredients, nobody cared. “These are too ordinary, they do not even have a price in the market,” they would say.

What made Boragó different?

I said to my Chef de Cuisine, who is one of my best friends and still works with me, “Hernán, Boragó has not to be about technique, our culture does not belong to technique.” Yet we both trained in Europe, in the best restaurants, and we loved European cuisine. What was happening in Spain at the time, that was massively amazing. But this did not belong to what we believe in, the ingredients from deep into the forest, from high up on the mountain. We looked back in time in order to move forward. That was all very simple.

Was it Chilean cuisine you were creating?

We did not want to create anything, we wanted to learn about how to use Chilean endemic ingredients. Not endemic cuisine, just Chilean cuisine, with lots of imagination and originality.

We started using many endemic ingredients. I would say 85% of the ingredients we use, come from the wild. Initially, people would send us these ingredients as a favour because it was not a business, there was no market for them. We used to be four people in the kitchen. That is how Boragó started. At that time, one ingredient meant one possibility. Now, one ingredient means at least 300 possibilities. And in my mind, this was Boragó’s true revolution.



Poppy, tomato pebre and the last cherries of the Summer



Boragó Restaurante

So you mainly use seasonal produce?

Yes, though our seasons are very short. They are like small windows of opportunity to make the most of a fascinating array of produce. We have more than 300 different kinds of berries and wild plants, even growing under the snow in the South. But they last for two or three months, maybe even less for some of them, yet we wanted to have them all. We started making notes, not to forget for the next season, so we could move forward.

We ended up classifying and categorising the entire land according to the different types of food. I know this is very trendy in a way, documenting and exploring. But we didn’t mean it to be cool. We knew nothing. We needed... we wanted to learn. In Boragó, we now have a Dictionary of the entire land. We are going to have to publish it at some point so kids can learn it at school.

How do you define innovation?

Innovation might be something that people used to do 5,000 years ago. It could be the most innovative thing that you ever tasted or seen in your life. I like to think that humans move back and forth in time, and that is phenomenal to me.

Is there a single flavour that defines this journey?

It is the flavour of umami in general. It does not matter if it comes from the ocean, if it comes from a wild fruit, or from a tree. It does not matter if it comes from our mothers when they fed us as children. It does not matter if it comes from a cut of meat. Umami, in a way, has always guided us throughout human history, pointing at what was needed in order to survive. And then, over time, we began to find pleasure in it, too.



Boragó Restaurante

That journey with umami has guided us at Boragó over the years, because nothing truly great happens overnight. Like any meaningful pursuit in life, it takes time.

How do guests chose what to eat and drink at Boragò, since it's all virtually unknown to most?

At the beginning, and until 2013, we had à la carte, of course. Then everyone wanted to try the tasting menu. We had two tasting menus, one shorter and one longer, and suddenly ninety five percent of guests chose the long menu. So we removed the other one.

Also, we didn't have a wine list. We started searching for the most interesting Chilean projects around the country, not the most expensive wines but those that had value for us. We slowly started discovering some extraordinary producers, meeting people we never thought we'd meet. And now we have those bottles nobody else has in Chile. We created something that made sense with our food, even with the non-alcoholic pairings. We also use rainwater from Patagonia.

What is Boragó like today?

Now it's totally different. We're in a neighbourhood close to the mountains, near the Andes, next to Cerro Manquehue. The restaurant has a first floor, a second floor, researchers, and a food research centre. I still have no idea what we're going to do with all this information, because Chile had never really considered these ingredients. We have more than 200 people behind the restaurant, our extended family, sending us these ingredients. They're very well known nowadays, because every Chilean restaurant now wants to use at least some of this produce.

Bio

Rodolfo Guzmán was born in Santiago, Chile, in 1978. After an early interest in other careers, he decided to pursue cooking and studied at a culinary institute in Santiago. He later trained in Spain at Mugaritz under Andoni Luis Aduriz, where he developed a creative and technical approach to gastronomy. In 2006, he returned to Chile to open Boragó and began cataloguing the country's endemic pantry. His cuisine, entirely based on native ingredients and ancestral techniques, initially struggled with local audiences but gradually gained global acclaim.

Boragó has since earned international recognition, including top positions in Latin America's 50 Best Restaurants and the Sustainable Restaurant Award in 2018 and 2021. Today, located at the foot of Manquehue Hill, Boragó is supported by a network of over 200 people and houses a Chilean food research centre dedicated to preserving and celebrating the country's unique biodiversity.

borago.cl



Glossary

A quick reference guide to some of the key concepts inspiring this issue of Homa’s Design Magazine. They define some of the current and most interesting trends in the way we conceive our lifestyle today

Emotions

/ɪˈməʊʃənz/

The true currency of design. More than logic, they drive our choices, turning a functional object into something that triggers memories, affection, or surprise.

Empathetic vs Empathic

/ˌempəˈθetɪk/ /ɪmˈpæθɪk/

Two sibling adjectives: both mean “able to feel empathy”, and describe sensitivity to others’ feelings. We consistently chose the latter in these pages, finding empathetic burdened by a certain unfortunate echo.

Endemic ingredients

/enˈdemɪk ɪnˈɡriːdiənts/

Ingredients that grow only in a specific place. They carry the geography, culture, and identity of a territory, making a recipe (or a project) unrepeatable elsewhere.

Foraging

/ˈfɒrɪdʒɪŋ/

Gathering what nature offers spontaneously. In design, it also means exploring hidden materials and resources, with curiosity and responsibility.

Human-driven design

/ˈhjuːmən ˈdrɪvən dɪˈzaɪn/

A design approach where technology follows people, not the other way round. It means creating objects that listen to human needs before setting new rules.

Interaction

/ˌɪntərˈækʃən/

Not just “to interact,” but the spark that happens when you touch, use, or observe an object. It is the moment when design stops being inert matter and becomes an experience.

Neurodesign

/ˌnjʊərəʊdɪˈzaɪn/

Where neuroscience meets design. It studies how the brain and senses respond to shapes, colours, light, and materials, reminding us that spaces affect our mood more than we think.

Regeneration

/rɪˌdʒen.ərˈeɪ.ʃən/

The art of giving life back. In design, it goes beyond sustainability, focusing on renewal and growth: restoring ecosystems, reviving traditions, and turning resources into something richer than before.

Semiotics

/ˌsiːmiˈɒtɪks/

The science of signs and meanings. In design, it is how objects speak: a chair invites you to sit, a flashing icon demands attention.

Space architecture

/speɪs ˈɑːkɪˌtɛktʃə/

Designing for life beyond Earth. It is not only about spacecraft and colonies, but about shaping habitats that balance function, comfort, and psychology when humans venture into the most extreme environment of all: space.

Umami

/uːˈmɑːmi/

The “fifth taste,” savoury and enveloping. Figuratively, it is that elusive something that makes an experience full, memorable, irresistible.

Well-being

/ˈwelˌbiːɪŋ/

Physical and mental balance: the ultimate goal of any meaningful project. Beyond aesthetics, it is about spaces and objects that help people live better.

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