

making and unmaking the environment

Making and Unmaking the Environment
Design History Society Annual Conference 2017
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Convenor: Kjetil Fallan
Co-convenors: Gabriele Oropallo, Ingrid Halland, Ida Kamilla Lie,
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Design and designers hold an ambiguous place in contemporary environmental discourse. They are alternatively being blamed for causing environmental problems, and hailed as possessing some of the competences that could help solving those problems. Despite this long-standing centrality of design to environmental discourse, and vice versa, these interrelations remain underexplored in design historical scholarship.

Half a century ago, Leo Marx coined the phrase 'the machine in the garden' to describe a trope he identified as a prominent feature of 19th and early 20th century American literature, in which the pastoral ideal is seen as disturbed by the invasion of modern technology. Marx subsequently shifted perspective from this fascination with 'the technological sublime' to a deep concern for the environmental ramifications of technological progress. The question of how we as society deal with the allegorical machine in the proverbial garden is more relevant than ever. Design is both making

and unmaking the environment. Conversely, it might be argued that the environment is both making and unmaking design. This conference seeks to explore how these processes unfold, across timescapes and landscapes, thus opening a new agenda for the field of design history.

In the anthropocene, we can no longer talk about design (and) culture without also talking about design (and) nature. The conference theme is intended to stimulate new directions in design historical discourses that take seriously design's complex interrelations with nature and the environment. Not only does design feature prominently in the making and unmaking of the environment; studying the history of these processes will also help reveal how the idea of the environment itself has been articulated over time. Engaging with issues of environmental controversies and sustainable development can move design history beyond its conventional societal significance, and may thus enable more resilient futures.

Italy: Toward an Ecological Sensitiveness (1950s-1970s)

Chair:
Grace Lees-Maffei

Venue:
Seminar room 3

The origins of the ecological sensitiveness in Italy go back to the 1950s merging different cultural, ideological, technical and artistic approaches. The panel explores the relationships between sustainability, art and design in a historical perspective aiming to answer to multiple questions: is there an “Italian way” to environmental sustainability? Which is the role of Italian cultural heritage in defining a whole idea of environment? Which were the weight of the different approaches (technical, political, philosophical, artistic) in shaping the contemporary challenges?

Modelling the Future: Aurelio Peccei and the Club of Rome

Pier Paolo Peruccio,
Politecnico di Torino

The paper clarifies the role played, mainly in the sixties, by some Italian “futurists” (i.e. Aurelio Peccei and Pietro Ferraro) in describing future scenarios by the use of humanistic approaches and mathematical models. The “need for rationality” (Christopher Alexander, 1964) of the design process seems to have many philosophical elements in common with operational research and other scientific approaches for predicting the future. Most of them are directed by groups considered by the sociologist Robert Boguslaw (and quoted by Tomas Maldonado in “La speranza Progettuale”, 1970), as the new utopians, in other words neopositivist “social engineers” who believe the key to design lies in mathematical models and numbers (Robert Boguslaw, 1965). Nevertheless the Italian approach to future studies was culturally close to the French one represented by Gaston Berger, the father of the school of foresight, and Bertrand de Jouvenal, author of the landmark book *L'art de la conjecture* (De Jouvenal, 1964). In 1968 the Italian industrialist Peccei founded the Club of Rome, an informal and non-political association created by a group of international scientists, business leaders, intellectuals, and politicians with an ambitious goal: to launch an urgent debate on “the predicament of mankind”. Their contribution was to further a better understanding of the problems of modern society as a whole. The main outcome of their work was the publication, in 1972, of the “Limits to Growth” report considered still today a milestone study in the history of environmentalism.

The Image of Sustainability: Associations and Visual Communication

Elena Dellapiana, Politecnico di Torino

Since the beginning of the Fifties, intellectuals and politicians started a debate on sustainability as members of associations, whose goals were contaminated and improved by some overseas spurs. In that period, the world of ecological associations grew up to protect the natural and anthropic environment facing the increasing sensitiveness of the general public and the political authorities. The result was the elaboration of some theories coming out from specialized and technical fields for the communication of the ecological message to a larger number of people using the most innovative graphic design and visual communication systems, in relationship with commercial and politic movements as the worldwide anti-nuclear groups. In 1970 another association, “Pubblicità Progresso” (“Progress Advertising”), was born to create a network between the professionals with the challenge to communicate these fights. Advertising campaigns communicated by all media and directed to specific publics (i.e. primary schools, neighbourhood communities) were promoted and financed by trade associations and government agencies. It gave a strong boost to social communication and triggered a debate on the use of ethical graphic.

Landscape as Labor Force: Agriculture between Myth and Counterculture in Italian Artistic Practices

Francesca Comisso,
a.titolo Curatorial Collective

The paper investigates some artistic experiences in Italy in order to highlight the peculiarity of a relationship with the natural environment that draws from material and agricultural culture. It anticipates some contemporary environmental issues and new post-industrial economies. To give an example, in 1957 the artist Pinot Gallizio develops the “industrial painting” in the Experimental Laboratory of the Situationist International in Alba (Piedmont). It is a painting produced on rolls of up to seventy meters, intended as a détournement of painting that, in the situationist perspective, is able to inflate the economic value through the quantity. In the same year Gallizio designs “an experimental station for medicinal and aromatic plants”: an agriculture aesthetization project through cultures rich and stimulating to the senses, seen as an alternative to a massive industrialization.

Between 1973 and 1981 the conceptual artist Gianfranco Baruchello creates, on the outskirts of Rome, the Agricola Cornelia S.p.A., a project which investigates the relationship among art, agriculture, animal husbandry and the market valuation processes and culture. A “way to respond to the Land Art” (Baruchello 1983), the artist says, to tell an artistic experience and life that is among “Spiral Jetty” by Robert Smithson and “Splitting”, by Gordon Matta-Clark with whom he shares Baruchello’s similar strategies to subtract territory from speculation. Furthermore the research of some Arte Povera artists helps to foster the collective gestures and signs of the rural world as part of a new alphabet for redesigning man and society.