



SID Società Italiana di Design  
*Italian Design Society*

# DesignIntorno

Atti della Conferenza annuale  
della Società Italiana di Design

A cura di  
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Alghero, 4 e 5 luglio 2022



# Speculations

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Design is the process by which we give shape to the future. By uncoupling this process from commercial interests, it can be used as a tool to reflect on, discuss and speculate about the world we live in. Speculative design explores possible future scenarios through the creation of tangible artefacts and immersive experiences (Bleecker, 2009). It is a kind of critical design that emphasizes imagination, storytelling, and craft as mediums for considering and communicating complex social, cultural, and technological issues. It translates critical thought into materiality (Dunne and Raby, 2013).

In July 2022, I delivered a two-day Speculative Design workshop as part of Design Intorno Assemblée Nazionale SID 2022 to collect stories of hopeful futures. In recent projects I have worked with different communities, inviting people to share their thoughts and feelings using designed artifacts to tell situated stories reflecting those communities' hopes for the future. This process reflects a kind of Design Investigation (Nova, 2021), in which observation and analysis is represented and discussed through the creation of artefacts. Design research methods were used in each case to create a structured approach to engage with people and collect information. However, the translation of that information into a designed artifact has largely been a solitary activity in which I, as the designer, imagine and give shape to things that seek to express the hopes and fears of others.

This Design Investigation could be considered as having five stages: framing the enquiry, engaging with people to gather information, analysis to identify insights, translating these into artifacts, and re-engaging with people to qualify the veracity of the artefacts. It bears some similarity to the Ethnographic Experiential Futures (EXF) model developed by Candy and Kornet Weber (2017) and like the EXF model, it can be considered as a cycle in which the process can be repeated multiple times, with the iterative development of artefacts achieving greater veracity over time.

This process is highly participatory, and veracity is ultimately qualified by those engaged in the process checking the designer's ego. Nevertheless, it positions the designer in an unequitable position of privilege, not just in terms of controlling the conceptual and aesthetic outcomes of the process but also in the extraction of information from participants. It is generally the designer who benefits from the process, be it in the authorship of the artefact, the publicity surrounding it, or the publishing of papers. Furthermore, this process of translation, conceptualisation and form giving, is subject to the inherent biases of the designer. In my own practice, it is inevitable that the work produced will, to some degree, reinforce a dominance of "Western Futures" (Mitrović et al, 2021) as well as reflecting my lived experiences and privilege.

Another concern was that Speculative Design is predominantly concerned with the creation of technological and industrial objects. In a previous project I challenged this approach by gathering information and translated it into stories before transforming it into

a scent. The scent provided an anchor for discussion, in the same way as an object might, but with a greater degree of abstraction, creating a rich space for discussion and interpretation by those engaged with the project. Creating a scent in a dynamic, participatory environment was not easy, and I was keen to explore alternative approaches that might create a similar platform for engagement but with fewer considerations and constraints.

A response to this was to create a workshop to consider whether designed artefacts are a necessary component of Speculative Design or whether simply using design methods could be enough to explore and materialise speculations. If so, this might provide a relatively low cost, low bar, platform for speculation. The workshop, called Femera Futura, aimed to explore the concept of everyday ephemera, the things we see, touch, hear, smell and taste that inform our identity and shape our culture. The idea of focussing on ephemera, rather than technology, excited me as much of my current practice is situated in the Graphic Arts and I wanted to explore if or how Graphic Arts could be used as a medium for speculation.

Ephemera can be considered as the utilitarian graphic design that we use, disregard, and ultimately dispose of, such as train tickets, newspapers, posters, and packaging. But if an artefact is defined as ephemera by its lifespan and disposability, then this classification might include a much greater range of things, such as clothing, food and drink or even audio-visual media, not to mention 'disposable' technologies such as mobile phones. Over two days, people were invited to donate a piece of ephemera. This act of donation could be considered a good test of whether an object is truly ephemeral.

The aim was to transform participants into curators of their own exhibition. This collection of ephemera, or Femera Futura, would become mediating objects for participants to think critically about the present and the decisions that would need to be taken to make these hopeful futures a reality.

When an artefact was donated to the collection, the donor was encouraged to describe the future it represented. Artefacts were catalogued and displayed alongside their stories. Participants were encouraged to react to other artefacts too, using them as jumping-off points to describe new futures, or embellishing and enriching existing stories. The use of recognisable, low cost and readily available ephemera created a series of cognitive anchors in the present whilst offering a framework to tell highly situated stories of hopeful futures yet to happen, what the futurist Stuart Candy (2010) refers to as "the futures of everyday life".

A series of probes were designed to provide participants with different degrees of interaction. Short interactions simply asked people to say where the future was or who was the focus of this future.

Another asked the participants to describe an emerging theme that interested them, creating a root from which another story might be told. Another encouraged participants to describe the kind of future they envisaged utilising the prompt of four different archetypal futures (Dator, 2017) (Candy & Watson, 2014). Another utilised an adapted version of the Experiential Futures Ladder (Candy and Dunagan, 2017) to create a framework for participants to tell rich stories.

These design probes provided a scaffold for participants to mentally time travel (Cuhls, 2017) into a multitude of situated futures, a process that was further supported by the location, design, and function of the workshop. Design Investigation has a "temporally and spatially situated nature" which is inherently sociable (Nova, 2021). In short, it's a reflection of the time, place in which the investigation takes place and the people with who

engage with it. Rather than creating designed artifacts as an output for this project, my role focused on the selection and design of the methods and in the design of the workshop space, using design to create a platform for engagement that would entice, amuse, and excite participants.

The audience for much, if not all, design is the general public (Nova, 2021) although it could be argued that a critique of speculative design is that it is often created as 'Design for Designers'. In this workshop my audience was not just designers, but design academics. I approached it as though engaging with a wider audience. This presented the challenge of how to engage people with the process and create an equitable value exchange between myself (data collector) and them (data provider). At its simplest this manifested as me attempting to translate investigation into experience. A process where participants felt that they had been treated well, cared for, considered and where they could recognise their contribution as both meaningful and valued.

Experience is a transaction in which the participant gains value through aesthetic, emotional and intellectual engagement, rooted in personal, social, physical, and often co-located contexts and sensory environments (Antchak and Ramsbottom, 2019). To design a generous experience, it is important to create a sense of immersion, a space in which participants are free to share their hopes and ideas without fear of ridicule. Immersion encourages participation and increases participant satisfaction (Antchak and Ramsbottom, 2019). An immersive environment should be thematic and bounded to create a distinct territory, a liminal safe space separate from the rest of reality (Caru and Cova, 2007).

Liminal space is the transitional space that exists between two distinct states, such as the threshold between inside and outside but also the mental space, between before and after. In the context of speculative design, liminal space allows scenarios that challenge existing assumptions and norms to flourish without the constraints of existing social or cultural frameworks. Liminality is a way to set participants free of the "dead weights [that] are fastened to the imagination" (Bleecker, 2012).

Femera Futura took place in a small room aside from the rest of the Design Intorno conference, adjacent to a social space in which people would take breaks, socialise and drink coffee. The workshop room was glazed with its own doorway. Liminality can be fostered through careful design. In this case creating a distinct and cohesive visual identity, costumes, and props to create an immersive environment: an act of generosity and a signifier of a transition to a new kind of space. In this context the bespoke signage on the window and doorway created a liminal threshold allowing participants to engage and immerse themselves in the workshop. Within the space I used costume and props to engineer an experience (Candy, 2016) and participants become curators, storytellers, and exhibitors in their own exhibition.

If liminality and experience create spaces in which ideas could flourish, a focus on everyday ephemera helps to bridge what Candy (2016) refers to as the "experimental gulf between inherently abstract notions of possible futures, and life as it is apprehended, felt, embedded and embodied in the present and on the ground". Participants engaged willingly with the process, with some making specific efforts to bring donations with them from their homes. The donations included: a 1€ coin, a sticking plaster, a lancet, a spoon, a Sicilian lemon tree leaf, a disposable cup, a stamp, a feather and perhaps predictably, a face mask. Ephemera, creates ambiguity and invites critique, encouraging participation. The combination of the ephemera and participant comments creates "a rudimentary sketch (of the future) rather than something too resolved or complete; an approach that allowed for

multiple 'next steps' instead of a 'The End'" (Clarke L, et al, 2021). Interestingly, the stories could be grouped into three broad overarching themes: communication, environment and health. Although the aim had been to uncover hopeful futures, the stores ranged from excitable utopias to despondent dystopias. What they shared in common was a broad focus on cultural values and social ethics an approach consistent with what the futurist Monica Bielskyte (2021) describes as protopian.

The approach to the project was conversational, social, non-judgemental, and open-ended. The result could be considered as "a series of connected ideas, or building blocks, that form an evolving narrative... [that] resonated with the people whose lives the stories were centred on" (Clarke L, et al, 2021). With more time and nuance, these futures could evolve from the false binaries of utopia or dystopia and be developed to be more protopian, "a continuous dialogue, more a verb than a noun, a process rather than a destination, never finite, always iterative, meant to be questioned, adjusted, and expanded" (Bielskyte, 2021).

The workshop was an experiment and there was no right or wrong in the process. It highlighted that there is potential in a more participatory and equitable speculative design processes that engages with people to collect information and insights in a more collaborative manner, where ephemera can serve as both a prop from futures yet to happen and a catalyst for stories about those futures to be shared. Femera Futura demonstrated that designed artefacts are not essential for exploring and materialising speculations. The process addressed some aspects of bias but did not remove it entirely and the traditional asymmetrical power relationship between 'designer' and 'user' must be recognised. While designed with generosity, it could still be considered inequitable. Protopian approaches that centre marginalised perspectives offers a framework that partially addresses this and this should be explored in future iterations. It is important to continue questioning and reflecting on the role of the designer in the process of speculative design and explore ways to make it more inclusive and equitable. Generosity is not equity, and the transaction between designer and participant in such exercises needs more consideration. However, low-cost and readily available ephemera can provide a framework for telling highly situated stories of hopeful futures. Through a more collaborative and iterative process, designers can work towards creating a more inclusive and diverse vision of the future and contribute to shaping a better world for all.

April 2023



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# DesignIntorno

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Il confronto con il nostro “intorno” e il dialogo non nostalgico con i saperi, i materiali e le lavorazioni tradizionali; il riconoscimento dell’intelligenza che sta già nelle cose, negli attrezzi da lavoro, negli oggetti d’uso; la riscoperta della ricchezza insita nelle dinamiche e nelle interazioni sociali. Questi tratti definiscono un insieme articolato, sullo sfondo dell’accresciuta accessibilità alla conoscenza e delle potenzialità dischiuse dalla rivoluzione digitale, verso nuove sintesi tra i saperi stratificati nei tempi e nei luoghi.

La comunità scientifica del Design è sollecitata a ripensare l’intorno come elemento unificante della cultura del progetto, soprattutto nel senso delle abilità che appartengono da sempre alla figura del progettista: come attore culturale e come interprete – un po’ anticipatore e un po’ visionario – del suo tempo.



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