

Local answers to global issues

Introduction: What the **** is Social Design ?

“Man is by nature a political animal”
Aristotle

Social : (Adjective) The mean of human interactions and dynamics in relation to a society

Oxford Dictionnary def nition:

- a. Of or relating to human society and its modes of organization.
- b. Of or relating to rank and status in society: social standing.
- c. Of, relating to, or occupied with matters affecting human welfare.

Design : from latin *Designare* , which means intention, goal, purpose.

Gave the words *sign, designate*, and in latin language such as French, *dessin (Drawing)* and *Dessein (Design in the meaning of intention)*

Oxford Dictionnary def nition:

Purpose or **planning** that exists behind an action, fact, or object

Social Design would hence mean the formulation of an intention upon human dynamics in a given society on various social levels. If *social* is the purpose of this intention, *design* is the tool. Although the terminology of Design often refers to things and materials, we can speculate that its definition has now transcended any kind of direct material consideration.

Can hence everything be considered as social ? As this question is closely related to human dynamics, is the definition of SD* a question of morality ? Values? Status? Where does the limit stands between SD, activism, politics and psychologic manipulation ? Is this border relative to every subject and individual (and in this case, is SD definition clueless anyway ?) or can we distinguish a certain frame in the gigantic ensemble of human dynamics and societal patterns ?

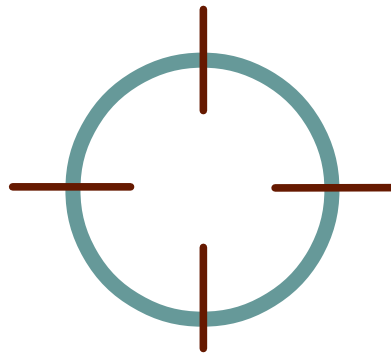
It seems impossible to address these questions with a definitive answer. Though examining these topics might results in the apparition of other questions, perhaps more relevant and pertinent, perhaps not.

In order to do so we will try to explore the following wonders through several chapters.

* I will now refer to Social Design as SD for redundant matters.

Cold objectivity vs Blazing subjectivity:

The complex yet essential in between of Social Design as a temper balance



Is there an inbuilt ethic in design? 'Social Design' is a normative statement. It implies designing for the social, but to what end? For whom? Why? Depending on how you frame it, almost anything could be 'social', both right wing and left wing politicians act in the name of 'society'.

“L'enfer c'est les autres.” (Hell is the other people.)

Huis-Clos, Jean-Paul Sartre

I've been told that everything could be considered as SD since everyone is actively taking part in a form of society, would it be a Wall Street trader or an indigene from Amazonia. They both play a specific role and fill a function on different social levels, in their own environment.

However, you could consider the trader's activity as anti-social, since he's speculating on virtual money and not participating into the real economy; as you could consider the indian as a social designer, since he's lifestyle is one of the most sustainable in the world. You could also have other arguments manifesting different values that define the opposite, or consider both individuals as social or anti-social designer.

We can only agree that social dynamics are relying on all the others : political, economical, technological, environmental. Hence a social designer could only be defined in contrast with his application context. A designer's position in a given situation should be considered as a statement to society in general, hence one should carefully consider thy positions before speaking out or taking actions.

One's position may also result in a particular perception of reality and, by consequences, opinions and beliefs creating the soil of this statement. In a general consideration, I don't believe there are such thing as bad intentions towards another, but only personal perceptions and interests to defend. In a sense, we are all fighting to impose our own vision of the world, although this perception of reality is also constructed by others influence .We are building our opinions and positions according to our experience of external events, and evolving in reactions to these events **

(Note : I truly make a difference between opinions/positions and values, morality. I believe certain opinions or behaviors can change even remaining faithful to values and consciousness. Since the world is evolving faster every day, we can be confronted to many critical situations when our values bring us to change our positions and opinions. We will come back to this later on.)

This refers among many things to the rising of protectionist economy in response to the world's globalization, or how in western countries, right wings party are recruiting more youngsters than during the past decades. What might appear as an Utopia for a distant elite clearly alarm the ones who won't stand from the same position when entering what many heads of states call the New World Order. In, and out; objective, and subjective; theorists, and technicians, globalists and conservatives : oppositions are many, but the majority still remains somewhere in the grey area.

How can a social designer incarnate a communication bridge? What distance shall we take when considering a problem we want to solve ?

Is taking part in a society and being an outsider at the same time possible?

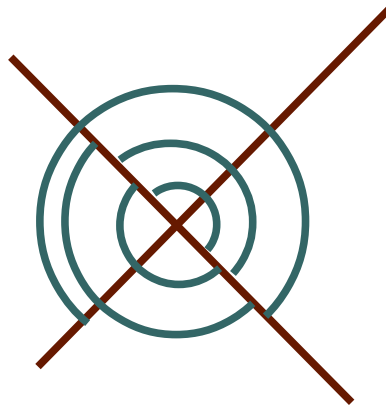
In the following chapters, we will quickly overview and discuss the formation of society patterns, what distance shall we take from it as Social designers, what kind of repercussions this position might have on thy society and what are the new tools owned by designers in order to improve social structures without repeating previous pitfalls.

** *“L'existentialisme est un humanisme” (Existentialism is a humanism) JP Sartre*

From natural state to social contract (two theories developed in Hobbes Leviathan)

From Historical patterns to society's structure

Or the originality of repetition



In the past, particularly the 1970s there was a flourish of socially minded designers and design collectives. Their social-engagement was political, embedded in a strong socio-Marxist ideology. Is the current design turn towards the 'social' an ideological weak version of previous eras? Is it a toothless gesture to the growing social, ecological and economic crises, a gesture that is too self-obsessed to tackle the underlying socio-political structural crisis (institutions of power)?

“Everything that needs to be said has already been said. But since no one was listening, everything must be said again.”
André Gide

I might be lacking distance and experience, but I feel we are not living easy times. However I do have the impression that we are also experiencing a kind of awareness raising. With the development of communication tools in instant time, information is travelling faster than ever, and hence, the global evolution of consciousness to.

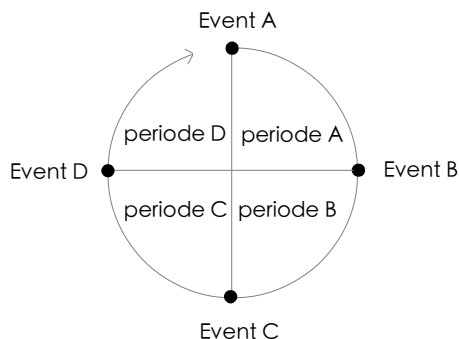
We're entering a time where more and more people are putting their beliefs in question, feel responsible of themselves and express the need to take action. Even if these actions remain smalls, they are happening, and on a global scale. These new ways of responding / reacting to the actual crisis are corresponding to our situation in space and time. They are indeed very different from the previous ones.

In general, historians and philosophers agree on the notion of society structuring itself in cycles. The same patterns are reproduced in very different conditions such as technological development, local lifestyle, daily habits, trends and fashions, communication tools, economical system and political situation. Recurrences take place due to ascertainable circumstances and chains of causality, but it appears natural to have different responses to different situations and localizations in time and space.

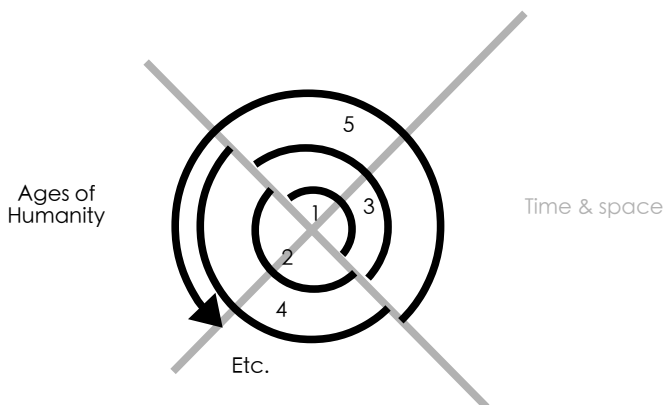
Classical way of looking at Historical time laps:



History as a cycle: Repetitive pattern in Human history
 (Often related to Empires or Ages)



History as a spiral pattern:
 repeated dynamics,
 different situations



*"a favorite theory of mine—to wit, that no occurrence is sole and solitary,
but is merely a repetition of a thing which has happened before,
and perhaps often."
Mark Twain*

It is very difficult to address fairly sensitive topics such as social gaps, ecological disasters and economical crisis on a global level with one simple solution (whatever it be an economical model, a political direction or a religious dogma). A lesson that we as humans and designers learnt from the past decades is that global patterns and miracle solutions are, at least a time waste, at worst a dangerous tool for institutions or companies empowerment (we will discuss this further.).

What may appear as a weak version of the past collectives and movement is, as far as I'm concerned, rather a slower, wiser, more flexible version of a bursting rebellion to the system that was Marxist ideology. The situation nowadays is much more complex and intricate that it used to be. Society isn't divided between workers and chiefs, neither is it easy to frame people into closed and specific categories.

With the improvement of technologies, we all became an active dot of the world's gigantic network web. If one decides to move one of these dots, the whole pattern will be changed somehow. For the same issues in different situations, we tried to come up with new tools for new solutions (a topic we will also address later on.)

It is not toothless or self-obsessed to be careful and aware. It is called consideration for the environment, and open-mindedness to a possible direction change.

We are entering a new age*, where I believe flexibility is key.

Although this multiplicity, ultra-connectivity represents in certain aspects a great advantage and progress, it may also disable the taking and owning of strong position in a world where everything is moving so fast.

The question of identity construction and the feeling of belonging to a society is being more and more questioned as everything that would define a social category is being opened and unframed.

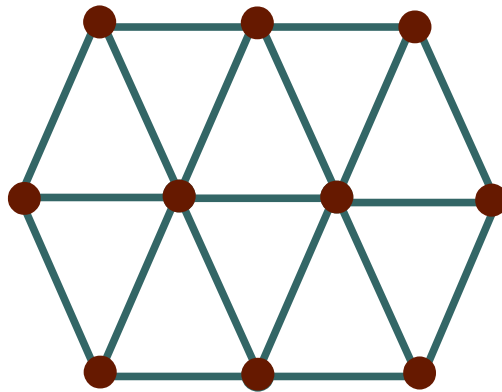
How do we know we belong to a social category ? If yes, which one? Is it a matter of feeling and personal decision ?

Is it important for a social designer to take part in a form of society ? Should we belong to one in order to pretend changing it ? What distance should we take to evaluate these issues ?

*(nothing to do with Aquarius)

Social Design and the power of habits

From shaping objects to structuring systems



Is social design questioning the very act of ‘making’? Is it asking an ethical question or dilemma, such as, “should we or shouldn’t we make this”? This is not necessarily only about over-consumption in an era of ecological collapse. It is also a question of design being deterministic in shaping our world. Is social design questioning the varied but real societal consequences of design?

Objects mediate power relations and in doing so either promote the status quo (reproducing power relations) or challenge the status quo (disrupting power relations). Designers play an essential part in the dynamics of social power, as for example, being institutionalised (and instrumentalised within dominant hegemonies or as a tool for activism. In other words, what does it mean to design responsibly when design is a conduit for power relations?

What goes around comes around.

It's becoming harder everyday to evaluate if I truly understand a situation or still belong to a circle I thought I knew. In these sorts of conditions, the consideration of the vast complexity of one situation can discourage me from taking initiatives. The impact of our daily actions in terms of external influence is not possibly quantified.

Although Design in general should be addressing these concerns, it is unfortunately often disregarded. As sustainability should ideally be included in any project initiative, social impact is barely/rarely considered in its main dimension. When answering a (problematic) situation on an individual scale, we tend to consider the narrow window of our perception : Is what you are concerned about really problematic for the collectivity? How can we make a differentiation between what we want and what we need ? Is this question easier to evaluate from an outsider view point? Or is our distance cutting us from necessary feelings? Differently formulated, should we position ourselves as sociologists or ethnologists ?***

Every impact owns its double side which should be considered as close to its wholeness as possible. These social consideration might results in (very) long term projects: hence, on the other hand, being obsessively careful about environmental awareness may disable creative process and spontaneous intuition. With that being said, one can hardly consider intuitive problem solving without living the situation from the inside.

Designing daily rituals should always be carefully questioned: what we think is what we create, what we create is what we do, what we do is what we are.

The new trends of social activism and the questioning of daily rituals illustrates the raising of consciousness in the impact of objects and physical things. As a matter of fact, objects and spaces are shaping our daily choreography and hence importantly influencing our behaviours. In consequence, we are observing another switch from tangible and material things to immaterial structures, such as Design networking, open source, and systems.

This shift in Design reflects a desire to change the type of impact we seek for: from influencing with objects to influencing with direct communication and networking. Does this change reflects a crave for transparency, for human contact ? For addressing the real problems to people concerned? For open-mindedness and flexibility?

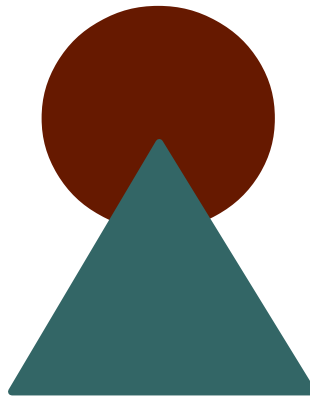
From my own viewpoint, treating globalisation issues with local answers by connecting specific dots could enable a progressive transition to a relative economical independence and stronger communities. I believe in encouraging and promoting slower lifestyles, sustainable productions, healthier habits, social communication and local resources.

Yet these concerns and design directions might cause certain issues in the context of hyper-connectivity and global communications. How can we remain away from moralistic behaviours and design colonialism? Are the new tools for identity's construction cutting the individual from its surroundings? Does it encourage people to focus one their own achievement as personal success stories?

*** Further: *Ethnologic structuralism*, Claude Lévi-Strauss

Super-Designers ?

Saving the world & the new forms of colonial tendencies



The social often implies limiting individual ambitions for the good of the group or collective (society). But the design processes, at least at DAE (provocation!!!) often emphasise the self and one's ego as the starting point. Should the design process shift from being self-centric to other-centric?

*“But great power carries with it great responsibility,
and great responsibility entails a large amount of anxiety.”
Sir Hercules G. R. Robinson*

Since the past decade, our so-called capitalistic and individualistic model is seriously being questioned. The ecological question apart, we are observing, at least in most western countries, a general burn out of workers, companies, countries and society in general. The new waves of thinking and planning our daily-lifestyle is increasingly encouraging us to slow down the rhythm, to focus rather on our personal well-being, mental and physiological health than being obsessed with other's needs and attention, or to what *society* expects from us. This desire to understand how we are dealing with life and to process daily information is also reflected in the design world.

On the other hand, I find the new obsession for absolute righteousness irritating and pointless. Whether is it diet behaviours, human-quantifying electronic devices, some alternative medias, new religious practices or food tracking, everything around us seems to dictate the rule of pure truth, pure transparency, pure healthiness to achieve ultimate perfection : these new kinds of phenomenon result frequently in moralistic behaviours from lesson givers.

There was of all times and everywhere in the world, a seek in human actions for ideas competition and imposing what one considers best. The fact is every individual/community/society/city/country remains different from the others, and hence should find its own solutions without seeing himself being educated by others. (As an example, trying to apply a German economical model to a mediterranean country (and Greece in particular) cannot possibly work without mistakes, since everything seems to divide these two cultures.)
Perfection as a rule to apply does not make sense in itself. Perfection is an unattainable balance that we can only come close to.

However this doesn't mean we should only be focused on our lives, well-being and matters. A social-designers is obviously addressing himself to the world's issues and questions.
Hence, is ego-centred design bad in itself, or can we use it as a tool for self-consciousness and self-awareness ?
Shouldn't you evaluate your own forces and weakness, understand your own patterns before taking important actions ?

Hell is paved with good intentions. Before pretending solving other's problems, one's should look once in the mirror and observe the world's issues in his own reflection. A problem you're questioning about yourself is always related (from close or far) to someone else's. By analysing and criticising your personal behaviour and habits, you are addressing hundreds or thousands. Displaying such an intimate and critical view of yourself (involved in a good design project) is (at least to my humble opinion) rather a proof of modesty and open-mindedness than narcissism or egocentricity.

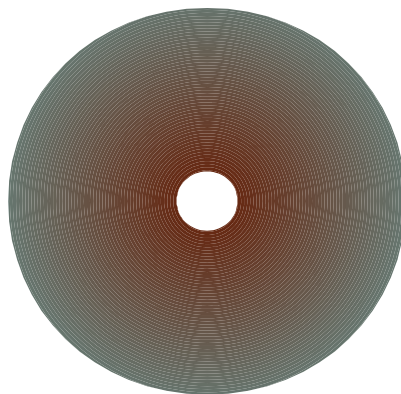
As a personal statement, I would describe a narcissistic person often running from its personal issues to focus on other's. As a contrasted comparison, an altruist person puts systematically himself in question, and makes himself available to help the other with the best tools he possesses. It is about interaction, dialogue, and understanding.

Once again, solving real problems requires wisdom, experience, and a deep comprehension of the situation. Starting a Design process by analysing our own functioning can only be salutary, at best for our environment, at least for ourselves (and this is already a starting point.)

But as we grow in this ever-changing world, how can our message be outspoken without being changed? How can we be heard without the support of the institutions in power? How can our intentions and ambitions remain modest when we want them to be effective? What are the new tools or solutions we can develop to directly impact people?

Incorruptible Social Design ?

The good of the many and profitable speculation



With a strong influence and tradition rooted in manufacturing, can design ever shake off this particular logic? In other words, is social design a whitewashing or re-branding of a practice that is imbued with the logic of making-for-profit, efficiency and functionality? Can it escape its pragmatic past and become something new? Or should it be true to its tradition?

*“Your face to face,
With the man who sold the world.”
D. Bowie*

Although SD can treat any kind of topic, SD is not any kind of Design. Social is precisely referred to the good of the majority. Or at least, the good of those who are concerned by thy Design and its impact. As social designer, Humans and environment's well-being should be our priority.

Yet, countless designs in history were progressively and insidiously derived from their prime intention and deviated to the main goal and reason of our economy: Pro fit. Sometimes intentionally, other times unconsciously during the production process.

As LeCorbusier housing assembles projects after Second World War, or Jean Prouvé's furnitures, we often see amazingly efficient social projects being disrupted/corrupted against (or not) the will of their designer . Trends & fashion are variable tools used in these consequences and speculators always come with new tricks & treats to achieve a certain form of commercial dimension, which almost always targets the project to a different social class.

But the financial viability of a project is a almost a non negotiable aspect of its materialisation. Making profit out of a Design initiative in order to achieve it should not deviate it from its faithfulness.

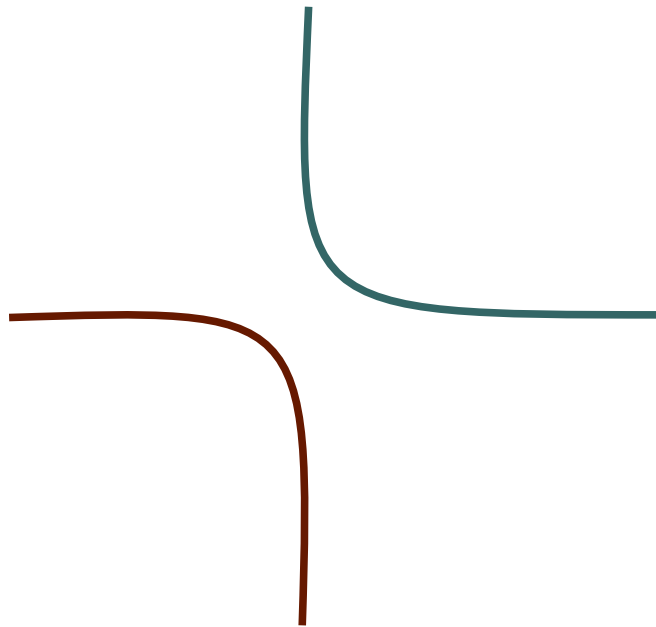
Even trying the best, the message is always changed somehow during its journey: It is also our duty as social designer to know where we can still stand and where we do not want to go. As quoted before, a changed situation might not follow our personal values anymore. We only get to choose where our personal survival and wage comes before. We are the only one to live with ourselves. Being aware of the choices we make is the only way to avoid regrets.

We live in a world of market and capitalistic laws, where profits and speculations rule upon everything else. It is made a religion to many. As a social designer also needs money to communicate and develop his project, it should ideally be fed and supported by the group it is aiming to help. Since the reality is often more complex and deceiving, one can turn to bigger institutions as a first support to build his experiences and independence. Working within the system's structure does not necessarily mean agreeing with it and even less supporting it. Understanding its functioning from close enables hacking it the best way and using its own rules to change it from the inside: what makes the difference is the step into action.

Aiming at local and modest scales enables a project to to take place in more realistic dimensions: economically, socially, sustainably, and politically. It certainly makes it easier to understand it, to communicate it, to help it and to evaluate its efficiency.

The society's transition to an improved democratic and social model can only be done in slow motion , one step after the other, as a spread and peaceful collaboration. In its radical and violent meaning, there is no such thing as a post-revolution democracy.

The perpetual research:
Social design as a matter of choices



*“You must be the change you wish to see in the world”
A quote commonly attributed to Ghandi*

Pretending to fill the role of a Social-designer can be a source of many questioning and anxiety, as these questions will never find their answers in another form than new ones.

It confronts the good of the many to what we personally envision. It reach the question of intellectual strength challenged with philosophical doubt. It is putting us in a ongoing self-evaluation, where our positions are always subject to reconsideration and redefinition. Hence our identity's construction might be shaken somehow, but also allowed to be shaped in a keener way.

The first person we serve with our design is ourself. This cultivation and care-taking of self-awareness consists in a first step to formulate an analysis and criticism process for the coming years.

Through the last pages, the question of the individual's development according to his environment appeared as closely related to his own capacity to question the reason of his own choices as well as their impact.

Its is a complex process to build our position whenever facing the world. The border and balance between personal perception and reality is never easy to address but is a key to the construction of one's social values. Hence the response I would answer as a method is to start where our interests reside and learn from what we observe.

As a Social-designer often stands both inside and outside the topic he is addressing, the fairest way to formulate a defined position is to systematically step in before taking distance.

SD is at the same time, a form of bridge enabling communication, as well as a sort of local surgery.

There is no such thing as a pre-established model working for everyone and everything, there is no one solution nor certitudes. Th exception might be that each situations comes with its own issues, and hence its own tools for its specific answers. And by giving these solutions, we also must experience the situation we perceive as a problem.

Social design is about awareness and anticipation, about observation and deductions. It is about questioning the effect of our actions and confront it to our first intention. Hence, in the actual context frame, where all our preconceived models are also being questioned, I would, for now, formulate my definition of SD as an intention to solve global issues with local answers. As our consideration for the world's sickness might looses us in unrealistic scenarios or totalitarian thoughts, I believe in the modest but effective involvement in a local community. Connecting individuals between each-other and promote a sharing of the means, resources and skills is a step towards a better social communication, a stronger identity feeling, and a gradient to sustainability as an independent economical model. It also encourage social trustfulness and civil peace.

Prima Materia

There shall be no such thing as a lost knowledge, as there is no such as a discovery. Mankind was given the means to survive, evolve, and discover the nature of his environment, before trying to master it. And through the Ages, proofs were also given to him, that he never succeeded to do so. Time, and language, were the wind and water fading his tracks away on the sand of his evolution; reinforcing his natural tendencies to reproduce the same mistakes. As man rushes in a time he does not possess, he's interfering with Nature and its slow process; deregulating and threatening its fragile balance, while getting in return strong consequences.

Soil, rocks, plants and animals were shaped thanks to the mould of necessity, and hence evolve in a perfect balance with their environment. But rules comes with exceptions, which among them man is found.

We are called the salt of the earth; and salt, as an essential element of life, is also chasing it.

Should we keep causing the disappearance of what allows us to live ?

All mankind needs is given to him, in this time, in this space. What allows us to feel alive allows us to survive: Tasting the salt of water while swimming in it, smelling the fertile soil while treading upon it, hearing the wind while being dried, admiring the sun while being warmed.

I am taking a step back to observe Nature's design and learn from her, experiment the fascinating patterns of living matter evolving under my fingers. Life process reaches a better design than we will ever. My research is starting from the beginning, that is to say living through conserving.

In order to feed yourself, and preserve your cells, you need to feed your goods while preserving its life. Transmutation may starts with the following words:

Take the clay from your soil, and build a tower from it. Not to reach the gods, but rather to eat. Leave it in the sun, it will make it strong for you.

Your have now a black tower, hence you need a white one. From the salt of the sea, raise a larger type, either with fire or either with time.

Once they are hard and dry, gather your fruits from the trees, the leaves from the plants and the roots from the ground. Do not clean them, for they were made to live longer in thy stage.

Place your goods in the black tower, and the black tower in the white one. You might shelter your food in a safe shadow, after covering it with a dark platter.

The black purification begins with water poured. Yet liquid cloud is precious, and the throat drying fast. Turn to the ocean to fill-in the gap, seeing you do not need to fear its salt.

Like paper drinking ink, black and white will start to speak, in the Ocean's language and with Sun moderation. You may leave the conversation, since White volatilisation is a long debating happening in silence.

When curiosity and hunger will urge you to come back, observe the wisdom not to judge too fast. Although white is melting, check mates is not yet coming : remember to provide enough Blue from the sea, for the Red of the sun is crystallising the game.

The white always starts, with the pawns placed from top. The time will pass and white reach the bottom; occurring from ten sunsets to twenty dawns. When transmutation will be done, the food shall be finished, and both white and black will somehow have perish.

But as no matter disappears and no sacrifice is wasted, your weaken white tower is now replaced: Look at the diamonds left on the black one. It saved you goods while your were running your life ; although by themselves, each element would ruin your harvest.

The interaction they had kept them busy in the game, when moving their pawns they were trading richness. Acknowledge the balancing of dryness to Sun's support, and the taste of your food to Ocean's salt. The fruits of your labor benefited from them, from the clay of the earth and crystals from the sea. Still the fifth element remains essential, you were the one who made transmutation possible. Thank your mind for giving you thy knowledge, and also your skilled hands serving its purpose.

Even in critical necessity, Time does not have to be made an enemy; in the way when sharing your bread, friends comes easily. Rather than a measure, time can be a tool.

From that transmutation, you may see the truth of matter's evolution: Every action gets a reaction. This experience was gave by the will of showing nature's process, expressing the bridge between life and death. While crystallising and preserving, it was also melting and decaying. All subjects are living, but objects also do. They evolve in the laws of matter, which is living from feeding, yet dying from it too. As death is unseen an slowly setting itself, you may not see it before it is too late.

Whenever interfering in natural process, consider carefully what you are about to make. Each decision own its impact, hence from each mistakes should come its deduction. Hermeticism in Alchemy made it a mystical practice. However, who can consider a saving of the knowledge, without teaching it ?

Salt Alchemy in a Globalised world

When it comes to sustainability in Design, we often picture the replacing of industrial materials by raw and natural ones, in products they are usually not associated with. Salt, in this context, symbolises a good example of these inexhaustible resources available all around the planet. It gives many possibilities in terms of ecological replacement and field of exploitation and research. Salt was used since the organisation of mankind in the most primitive forms of society. It is found in mountains, in lakes, in oceans and seas. Salt harvest only requires sun or heat, and its adaptability to its environment opens a door to endless research, whether you would collect it to preserve food in cold and wet northern countries, or build strong and hygienic architectures in hot and dry, southern regions.

Since the beginning of the green revolution and the questioning of capitalistic economy, Designers turned progressively their research towards alternative solutions found in Nature. In that sense, salt can be used in the best way to interact with environment and help Man's society without leaving any sorts of pollutions, as well as proposing an ephemeral and appealing look to objects, possibly recycled endlessly.

However, a question may be asked to many similar projects involved in alternative materials: The technology required to shape and form salt into daily basis objects might pose a problem when re-setting the aesthetics and the lifestyle we live in our globalised world. Salt is either forming through water evaporation into crystals; which process requires either a long time or a relatively advanced technology (in the context of small and local economies); or either found in blocks, extracted from mines (yet this solution cannot be properly designated as sustainable), or compressed with engineered machinery.

Although the purpose of pushing the relaunch of economy thanks to natural resources optimisation appears noble and from good intention, its practical starting and development often leads to questions and issues in terms of efficiency. If the aim of the designer is showing a path to self-sufficiency, one might ask what sorts of new perspectives does he offer us ?

It certainly brings a form of richness when, in need of answers, man turns himself to his land and nature's design. Though in a high-technical context, one can ask how the Designer, as an outsider, can hand his skills by giving a new perspective on ancient techniques. It is hardly conceivable for most man to go back in History to a form of primitive lifestyle. Learning from such methods can be smartly used to adapt it to nowadays context, with the help of harmless, democratically reachable and ecologically approved technology.

With a rotation of design outsiders ; who would first discover the landscape, experiment with natural resources and learn from traditional crafts & techniques; the development of a design project would not only limit itself to an object proposal but extend to a contribution to the local system and its seasonal characteristics. As salt adapts to humidity and temperature, find its roles in food, objects, architecture and energy resource, one can imagine the many possibilities of its uses on short-term productions. Objects or systems which would find their place and function according to each season and their local characteristics. A Salt ResearchLab meant as an open platform of interactions and networks would improve its actual exploitation in the present context and would allow it to be pushed through the perspective of incoming designers and helped via various kinds of experimental technologies. The importance of involving the public in thy project remains primordial, considering that living citizens represents the main target of these innovations benefits. Introduction, explanations, familiarisation and suggestions would both feed and frame the project towards its popular purpose.