



Luigi
Bandini
Buti

Ask the Right Question

A Rational Approach to Design
for All in Italy



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ISBN 978-3-319-96345-7 ISBN 978-3-319-96346-4 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-96346-4>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018948830

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Foreword I

According to Eurostat, some 70 million European (circa 21% of the population) was aged 60 or more in 1997. As we live longer lives and the birth rate continues to fall, more than 35% of Europe's population will be aged 60 or more by 2020, net of immigration.

Years ago, I happened to be talking to a member of the D2 unit at the European Commission's Directorate-General for Enterprise, who was responsible for drawing up a discussion paper on user-driven innovation.

We discussed how we could learn about future consumers' needs and aspirations, including the ones they may perceive but about which they are not yet fully aware. We concluded that the answer was to put together groups of consumers and ask them the right questions.

And now I have in my hands the proofs of a book written by Luigi Bandini Buti about this very concept of asking the right question: an exhaustive manual, written in that inimitable style of yours that disseminates with a smile, yet is no less rigorous for that. Drawing on the principles of Design for All, it makes another contribution to spreading knowledge about the many and varied applications of this meritorious tool for social integration.

Thank you, Gino.

Rodrigo Rodriquez
www.rodrigorodriquez.com

Foreword II

In times of great technological transformations and digital ubiquity, many of us find ourselves wondering how much longer it will be before we interact with robots or cyborgs at every moment in our everyday lives, the kind of thing we see in the movies.

Today's increasing levels of automation will oblige us to refashion the meaning of our existence, both personal and with regard to our work, so as to be able to live in a world with increasingly innovative, customised products and services designed so that any individual can use them with comfort.

In other words, although technology has great opportunities to give us, it is always the human being who should direct the necessary developments and dominate the environment that surrounds him, by making a careful analysis of his needs.

Although at first sight it may not appear to be directly pertinent to the technological context of our age, the repeated reference to a humanistic approach that comes across in this book by Luigi Bandini Buti actually furnishes us with the magnifying glass wielded by the alert observer, the expert who studies civil society and can help us understand how human existence has to interface increasingly with changes that are not restricted to technology alone, but also encompass the individual and the social context in which he expresses himself and relates to others.

“Ask the Right Question” captures the essence of how to interpret the events of our times correctly and provides us with the right approach for disseminating wellness in such a way that it will be increasingly equitably distributed among human beings: the level of technology that we have achieved will enable us to live longer and better-quality lives, adapt our homes as well as our factories and offices and interconnect with the objects we own, all with increasing ease.

I believe that the path mapped out here by Luigi Bandini Buti is the right one, also for adapting technology to suit the needs of micro-firms and craft businesses. The implementation of a humanistic approach with the potential to generate an increasing flow of advantages for the individual, in fact, also paves the way for a greater convergence between such firms and large-scale industry in terms of technology.

On the other hand, contexts of innovation are destined to open up increasingly as a consequence of the input of experts specialised in a variety of disciplines. And Design for All will enable micro-firms operating in many fields (construction, wood and furnishings, complements, accessories, etc.) to express their voices more effectively in polyvalent functional groups partnering with external experts from the professions, the universities and technological backgrounds.

In short, if the collaborative approach is combined with the humanistic approach to design, it can enable the specific skills necessary for creating a new product or service to be recognised, facilitated and strengthened, also in terms of a network approach to firms, which can have a far greater impact than the one that used to treat innovation as something that happened within the confines of individual businesses.

It is a question of establishing a method of design and of corporate development inspired by a logic that in some respects makes a clean break with the past, but this path is one that we shall have to tread if Italy's micro-firms, so inextricably related to our country's history, are to be able to take advantage of many promising market niches in the near future.

Co-working, fablabs and social agriculture are just three examples of how social and participatory innovation are evolving into one of the driving forces of new economic initiatives. This is not a question of promoting top-down forms of inclusion, but of developing bottom-up initiatives that create a level playing field for everyone. Design for All enables this to be achieved, since it throws light on how to go about designing, from the very start, products and services for a broad spectrum of individuals, using what technology has to offer to cater for people's real needs.

Rovigo, Italy

Andrea Scalia
Innovation and Networking,
Confartigianato Firms

Preface

This book is the result of experience of working with Confartigianato in Vicenza, whose aim was to train technicians at all levels to be capable of catering for the needs of the elderly. To achieve this, a course was organised that attracted the participation of many firms, designers, plant installers and social and health professionals, who for various reasons all took an interest in accessible housing. Avril Accolla and I, as lecturers, realised that it was far from easy to convey the notions in question appropriately to people with such widely different backgrounds, curricula and interests, so we devised a multicultural system that we decided to call “Ask the Right Question”.¹

Milan, Italy

Luigi Bandini Buti

¹ Translator’s note: What the Italian title recommends is in fact that you, the designer, should actually “ask *yourself* the right question” (my italics). In Italian, the phrase trips off the tongue very easily, more easily, indeed, than the phrase “ask the right question”, but it is altogether more of a mouthful in English. Since the author has used the title repeatedly throughout his book, quoting it as the name that he gives to a model of investigation, I chose to leave the reflexive part of the verb out of the title, on the understanding with the author that I would explain this choice at the earliest opportunity.

Translator's Note

Every translator who sets out to tackle a new text has to make a fundamental decision about the approach to be adopted in his work, because there are more ways than one of going about the task.

The accuracy and consistency of technical language and terminology are unquestionably of paramount importance in scientific and academic texts, since scholars from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds will descend on the new contribution and pick it to pieces, take exception to it, quote it and derive further reasoning from the positions it adopts and the motives it cites for adopting them. In such cases, it is understandable that accuracy of linguistic rendering from one medium to another is of such all-pervading significance as to relegate such issues as readability and the ability to hold the reader's interest to a secondary level, if indeed they are even taken into consideration at all. Such is the price society sometimes pays for the continuous flow of academic discussion.

Yet for all its decades of practical impact in the real world, design is still a relative newcomer to the world of academia: while it has certainly laboured to establish a viable lexicon of its own that lexicon, together with the grammar used in its expression, has to reflect the idiosyncratic development of the discipline, which does not owe the development of its writings to the solitary strivings of academics slaving away in the rarefied atmospheres of hermetically-sealed faculties, but to the jottings and reflections of professionals who spend most of their days working as creatives in the market, ever in search of innovative solutions for tackling the issues that a rapidly-changing society turns up in sometimes quite unexpected places and at quite unexpected times.

Design theory and its writings are one of those hybrid creatures that are born when real-world experience (in this case, of design practice) comes face-to-face with the need to record it in a manner that academia may (at times begrudgingly) acknowledge. Clearly, these writings are unlikely to be couched in a strictly academic language, and it is the responsibility of the translator to take due note and act accordingly.

In addition to all this, it has been my great privilege to count the author of this book, Luigi Bandini Buti (Gino his friends), among my close personal friends for

some fifteen years. Fifteen years in which we have worked together closely in furthering the cause of the theory and practice of Design for All, both in Italy, where we both live, and internationally: fifteen years of intense and always fruitful discussions, that enable me to say, not without a note of pride, that I understand how his mind works.

Gino is a native of the northern Italian region of Emilia Romagna, where storytelling has long developed as a fine art. Like many a creative, but in practice better than most, Gino is himself a past master at storytelling, highly skilled at framing complex issues in parables that render their complexity instantly comprehensible, also for the layman with no particularly highly developed background in the lexicon of design theory.

My aim in translating this book into English has been twofold: (1) to ensure that the meaning, and not just the strict wording, of the message conveyed by Gino is communicated faithfully to his readers in another idiom, while at the same time ensuring academic substance and consistency of terminology and (2) to capture and reproduce, in a different language, the always serious—yet sometimes also playful—tone of the original and above all of its author. My hope is that the result does not read like an academic tome, but like the tales of a lifetime of experience being told by a friendly older mentor, for that is what it should be.

Pete Kercher

Acknowledgements

This book was written as a result of a close working relationship with Avril Accolla.

For their help in writing the definitive version of the book, my thanks go to Pete Kercher for his perspicacious translation, to Gregorio Strano for his assistance, to my children Cristina and Simone for their relations and to everyone else who gave me advice.

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Part I

Background

Chapter 1

Design for All



Products, places and systems should be developed to cater for all individuals.

A little while ago, a young colleague asked me: “Since you take an interest in these things, can you tell me what kitchen is best suited to a person who has to use a wheelchair?” He had been commissioned to adapt a flat to the new requirements of a client who had come out of hospital, but in a wheelchair.

I gave him some information about what the market had to offer for people with disabilities.

He was back on the telephone a few days later, apologising for having to disturb me again, but this time he wanted to know my opinion: what would it be better to use in that project, gas burners or an induction hob? I was happy to answer him with all my professional experience: gas burners make it really evident to the user when they are on or off and also how intensely they are being used, but they are not easy to clean. They are also intrinsically dangerous because they rely on using gas, even though today’s protection systems are very effective. An induction hob is very easy to clean, but the message it sends about whether it is on or off is not natural (like the gas flame), but codified (you have to read signs and symbols). And it is not suitable for all pans. You cannot use a wok, with its rounded base, for example. “Is your client a good cook, someone who cares about his kitchen?” I asked.

I immediately realised that my question had embarrassed him: “Actually... I don’t know”, he answered.

“What do you mean ‘you don’t know’? Who are you designing this kitchen for?”

“I know he is in a wheelchair, so I have to make him a kitchen for a disabled user.”

He had already told me that his client lived with his family, so there was no guarantee that he himself would be doing the cooking. “You know, before you make any decisions, you have to ask yourself some questions”, I advised him, then went on to tell him that he needed to know how his client related to the kitchen before the event that had disabled him: was he a skilled chef, someone who often cooked himself, or was there someone else in the family who prepared the food? And if he was not the one who did the cooking, did he have to prepare his own food under certain circumstances, such as during his or his relatives’ holidays? Or did he need no more than a coffee and a fried egg? If we were in the USA, his culinary

needs would most probably go little further than owning a can opener and a microwave! But that would never be enough here in Italy... luckily!

Once you know about the past, I continued, the next thing is to find out what has changed. Maybe nothing will alter about the way he lived his life beforehand, or will there be changes?

You have to ask questions; but what's more, you have to ask the right questions.

Only after you have asked those questions can you start thinking about the solutions, which might be the creation of a kitchen suitable for a person in wheelchair, following the principle that he has few or no opportunities to adapt, while the other members of his family have far more. But it might also be a 'normal' kitchen where it is also possible for a wheelchair user to make himself a coffee without any difficulty; or it might be a kitchen that pays no particular attention to the wheelchair user, because he will never be able to use it or even want to, because he cannot or because he is assisted at all times.

By now it should be clear to everyone that the statement "...he is in a wheelchair, so I have to make him a kitchen for a disabled user" risks being dangerous nonsense.

A good design, a design for everyone, relies on us asking the right questions before we make any decisions. That is what we are taught by Design for All, which also stipulates that the questions are not just a pleasant opportunity to have some contact with reality, but must be structured to be effective, efficient and satisfactory.

Mankind's artefacts have to provide responses to the needs, aspirations and dreams of those who use them.

But how do we go about getting to know what they are?

We have to ask the people who know!

Good design theory and practice teach us that anyone who sets out to develop a design certainly asks questions and looks for answers: questions and answers concerned with people, what they need, the tools they have and how they use them, what they know and what they dream about, the context, the environment and the market.

Products, places and systems also have to cater for people with sensory, perceptive and cognitive limitations. Not just the ones that are obvious, whether permanent or temporary, but also the ones we have because of a moment of distraction, inexperience, tiredness or anything else.

It is no easy challenge.

It takes more than a good designer's common sense or the use of common knowledge to tackle this task appropriately. The designer will need to get access to specific and often specialised information, such as in the area of physical and biological impairments. A superficial smattering of various disciplines will almost never be sufficient: you will need to learn the skill of involving other disciplines and other people, some of them with a high degree of specialisation.