The monographic issue of **diid** with the title *Design After Modernity*, is offering a reflection around the idea of modernity and its relevance in relation to the issues of Design, while opening the discussion on the reconstruction and the rearrangement of our time, beyond the nostalgia for a past that could become a shelter to escape from a future that presents itself as uncertain, if not as a threat.
After the great collective projects, the idea of progress seems privatized into an omnivorous present and opens to a number of questions: what is the destiny of the project in a time that renounces to the progressive development of its history? If the design project is the representation of our material culture, what are the forms that can still explain a collective project?

*Design After Modernity* is investigating the relevance of modern Design and its contemporary expressions in the design project. Rephrasing Hamlet, who claims "Time is Out of joint" after meeting the ghost of his father: if our time is unhinged: "that I was born to put it back on track?"
Is Design able to restore a collective idea of future?

Loredana Di Lucchio, Lorenzo Imbesi, Sabrina Lucibello

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# Think

It is this *resistance of the real* to which the design culture is accustomed and from which it must leave again. In resisting *things* we are given the necessary support for action and today therefore, to direct the development of the discipline of design within open yet sufficiently clear boundaries. To understand what genre of *interplay* among the sciences is the most favorable today, and therefore making the less impenetrable the intricate rhizome of design; recognizing what is most precious, shining through its branches. Brilliant and precarious.

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## Think

# The distinctive features of modernity in design culture


In the field of semantics, the concept of modernity has been interpreted differently by a range of visions linked to methods and processes of change that have involved various sociological, economic, political, psychological and cultural aspects of society. Literally speaking, the concept of modernity refers to that which is associated with the spirit, taste and characteristics of one's own time or recent times and usually includes aspects and characteristics such as the idea of the progress, emancipation, evolution and innovation of society away from what the near or distant past represented in traditional and conventional terms. (La Piccola Treccani encyclopaedia, 1995)
Modernity *de facto* represents the stance taken by individuals, societies and eras as regards their past, and the consciousness of modernity springs from just such an awareness of rejection and the collective desire to adopt it. The analysis of a particular moment in history has always generated the concept of modernity, distinguishing it from, and praising it in comparison to, a bygone time associated with a previous era that, though admirable, is obsolete, and has distanced itself to a greater or lesser degree from the past.
This article is inspired by the need to interpret the characteristics of modernity in design, and instead of taking its cue from the categorisation of events in terms of their historical order, focuses on the meaning that the concepts of critique and crisis, which underpin modernity, have had in the 19th and 20th centuries when it comes to the various different ways of understanding design. Though the circumstances of crisis that affected post-industrial society, which emerged after the presumed end of modernity, produced critical schools of thought boasting different content and perspectives, these did not mark the dawn of a new era at all, but proved to be merely brief, though incisive, intervals within modernity.


[ modernity, postmodernity, neomodernity, new design forms ]


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### *Critique and Crisis*

The German historiographer and philosopher Reinhart Koselleck developed a conceptual historical stance that prioritised the link between historical processes and the social evolution of *guiding concepts in the modern movement* from ancient times, when these concepts were first formulated, to the modern era.

Koselleck identifies the historical period from 1750 to 1850 as the *Sattelzeit*, or *saddle-period*, that marks the advent of modernity. He sees in that *historic threshold* the deep-seated crisis of thought when the meaning of political and social concepts changed and they acquired a definitive form, taking on value and meaning not only when interpreting the past but when interpreting the future as well (Koselleck, 1959).

While the *space of experience* was hegemonic in the pre-modern world as a *magistra vitae*, what dominates the modern world is the *horizon of expectation*, *i.e.* the form of the future. For modernity, the truth resides in *tomorrow* rather than in *today* (Fusaro, 2012).

The value of historical change and of the new, based on a positive stance towards the future and not the conservation of the past, asserts itself as the paradigm of modernity, where the *space of experience* in everyday life fades into the background, while the *horizon of expectation*, *i.e.* that desire for a different, better future that becomes the foundation of the modern world, becomes hegemonic (Koselleck, 1979).

When interpreted from the point of view of crisis as a constant and unwavering element, modernity is understood to be the "structural condition of the contemporary world" (Imbriano, 2016). In such historical circumstances, *critique* and *crisis* are the origin and destiny of modernity, the mere consciousness of reality. Interplanetary space – which opened up at the end of the Second World War, though marked by lacerations and conflict – was unified by *technical communications that weave together and bind the entire surface of the globe*, a network of relationships that definitively swept away the separation and isolation between the various parts of the planet. Technical progress created a total reciprocal dependence that *subordinates everything to everything else*. In the latter half of the 20th century, the technical revolution definitively *opened up interplanetary space*. European history expanded to become world history, thus unifying the Earth in a single perspective, which is the ideal continuation of the *first conquest of the entire terrestrial globe by bourgeois society*. This unification has *thrown the entire world into a state of permanent crisis*, *i.e.* into *today's worldwide crisis*, which is characterised not only by the competition between, and supremacy of, superpowers such as Russia and the U.S.A., but also by emerging countries such as China, Brazil, India, South Africa, South-East Asian countries, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong and by the irreversible demographic migratory flow from Africa.

Globalisation, which began in the early modern era with geographic discoveries, has only now become a reality because only now do we really have a world that is entirely inter-connected in real time.

As far as this aspect is concerned, Koselleck was the first, long before anyone else, to see modernity as a space of conflict and, from that time on, modernity developed from a concept of representing a particular era to a time that is structurally understood to be transitory, *i.e.* destined to become obsolete (Imbriano, 2016).

### *Neologisms of modernity*

Attempts to establish a chronology of modernity, understood as an era, are therefore complicated compared to the awareness of the concept of modernity as an ever-changing present that marks our awareness of a rejection of tradition and the past.

When conflict increases, change happens at a faster rate and at a more global level, making it harder to control; all this should be tackled, as Koselleck suggests, from the point of view of how its meaning and conceptual content changes rather than avoiding it, as postmodern thinkers suggested, who believed conflict is unresolvable and therefore we should either accept it or avoid it with an ironic, disillusioned, passive, decidedly individualistic manner as a contingency.

We find ourselves within a new modernity that forces us to face problems without avoiding them; to consider conflict as a potentially tragic event that, however, still allows us to take a more reasonable, more solid stance; to accept the challenge of finding new forms of expression that resonate with public opinion and not just art experts; to assess which borders should be enforced, expanded, removed or redesigned (Mordacci, 2017).

The modern world still belongs to the era that began with the French Revolution and whose historic, planetary repercussions have not yet ceased. The postmodern (Lyotard, 1979), supermodern (Augé, 1992), liquid (Bauman, 2000), neomodern (Mordacci 2017) and retrotopic (Bauman, 2018), though clearly possessing different content and perspectives, did not prove the dawn of a new era but merely brief, though incisive, intervals within modernity. These movements are probably no more than the intensification of the experience of fragmentation that has been typical of aesthetic modernity since the late-19th century, which contrasts with the classic idea that optimistically considered modernity to be the certainty of progress, which was shaken to its foundations by the tragedies of the 20th century.

### *Design after modernity*

When we interpret history and the role of *Design after modernity*, we cannot help but refer to that strong conceptual focus that design, as it evolved, has always had towards a *horizon of expectation* of the future, as an improvement in quality of life, which would be different and better.

The processes of change unleashed by the industrial revolution and the new needs that emerged with the advent of greater economic mobility led to a radical transformation of rules of behaviour and communication in all walks of life and allowed the creative activity underpinning design to tackle new circumstances (Meurer, 1991).

The world of new products that resulted, stimulated by the search for a *modern style* was immediately divided into two, with one branch oriented towards aesthetic form and the other towards practicality and function. Attempts to bridge the gap between

aesthetic form and function, fostered by industrialisation, developed by originally trying to combine craftsmanship and industrial processes and force them to coexist. These two sides of *Gestaltung*, the aesthetic and functional, were influenced and determined by economic and social factors, though with obvious differences.
The most interesting and valuable ideas that emerged in the 1920s were developed in Germany by the *Bauhaus* movement in 1919 and the newly created Soviet Union of the *Vchutemas* in 1920.
In a departure from the classic rules set down by the Academy, the two schools developed new concepts, new means and new didactic methods that aimed to stimulate individual creativity with the knowledge and use of manual artistic techniques and the introduction of theoretical teachings concerning the principles of design, artistic composition, visual perception, industrial design, the science of technique, economy and sociology. The concept, which was later taken up by the Ulm School of Design, was to teach that the creation and development of forms was not merely a creative act, but rather a problem that was part of the socio-cultural and technical/scientific changes underway and subject to that same process of modernisation.
However, the industrial product that resulted followed two different alternative routes with the application of technical innovation: the route of *performance innovation* with radically new solutions, and the route of *imitative reproduction* with existing product solutions produced at low cost and in large quantities (Manzini, 1991). In any case, this dualism was based on the belief that scientific, functionalist rationality was a progressive factor thanks to developments in technique when seeking the minimal, essential forms of objects in order to reduce production costs and make such objects accessible for the working class. This opinion remained widespread for most of the early 20th century, both in Socialist bloc countries and in western European countries where they formed the basis of modern design culture and the aesthetic and functional value of industrial mass production. This period, which featured the domination of mechanical processes in all aspects of human activity and a subsequent phase during which that process faced crisis, led to the mechanisation of products using a Tayloristic organisation of labour and the type-based standardisation of manufacturing. During that period, the reductionist-deterministic mechanical model was the main cultural benchmark in technical and organisational thought.
This led to the introduction of design as *styling*, to the introduction of languages of form that looked to the new values of modernity, speed and movement, more so in the United States than in Europe. Objects lost the original transparency of their mechanical parts and were covered in body panels that made them safer and more consistent with the cultural values of the time. The aesthetic improvement of products not only aimed to increase their appeal on the market, but also to encourage "the desire to own something a little newer, a little better, a little sooner than is necessary" (Stevens, 1954). Design no longer attempted to find definitive solutions and products that would last over time, but rather to create continuous processes of technological, aesthetic, functional, commercial and commodity-related innovation for a restless, turbulent market that followed a selective and often unpredictable rationale (Branzi, 2006).
Industrial development did not create an orderly, rational world, quite the contrary: it produced a commodity-related, formal system that was increasingly varied, brimming with exceptions, trends and innovations. Complexity, not rationality and order, was the real future that was in store for industrialised societies (Branzi, 2006).
Things shifted from an industrial strategy based on a technical product to a strategy imposed by the market. The growing integration of social aspects and cultural values within products and production activities and consumption involved less interest in technical/economic issues and more of a *focus* on the need to integrate the "technically possible" and the "socially useful" in a creative way (Manzini, 1991). The widespread effects produced and the emergence of environmental concerns highlighted the limitations of a simple linear progression of development while, on the contrary, it imposed a review of simplistic models of reality in favour of a vision that was imbued with more complex and diverse cultural and symbolic values that were definitively destabilising.
The first time the positivistic model of unlimited development faced a crisis was in the 1970s in response to the first worldwide energy crisis, when awareness grew of the socio-environmental imbalance among emerging environmental movements. For the first time, the *focus* in industry shifted to the manufacturing process and how and to what extent it affected ecology, the environment and society: 'design has become the most powerful tool with which man shapes his tools and environments (and, by extension, society and himself" (Papenek, 1971).
The *focus* shifted towards responsible design that concentrated more on the needs of the real world and of ordinary people rather than on the interests of industry and capitalism. Acritical consumption, the culture of obsolescence, the waste of resources and the use of subliminal persuasion on consumers supported by an advertising apparatus were the basic criticisms that led to the crisis in design as a profession, as well as a radical review of the concept of design, which was now defined as 'the planning and patterning of any act towards a desired, foreseeable end' (Papenek, 1971).

New forms of design
During that time, the head-on criticism of bourgeois consumer ethics and of the technical vision that is subject to market forces found its highest symbolic and cultural expression in the *Italy: the New Domestic Landscape* exhibition, held at New York's MoMA in 1972 and curated by an Italian Radical Design group. Its powerful ironic and controversial stance, which was clearly visionary, when calling into question established and dominant socio-cultural stereotypes subjected the present to a critical, radical review. Products became a cultural tool of protest, reform or even conformism against the violent effects of the capitalist production system's technical expansion and rationalisation.
A new analysis of industrial reality began to form, describing an entirely different vision of the future from what had been put forward by rationalist modernity. Never-

theless, Radical Design was reduced to a *status symbol* by the market's ability to absorb any attempt at protest or subversion.
By the early 1980s, the momentum of previous counter-cultural, environmental and socio-political protest movements came up short when faced with a wave of economic neoliberalism that extended over and affected the entire world during the final phase of the Cold War.
The utopian, progressionist vision of the modern movement, supported by movements such as the Enlightenment, idealism and Marxism, which interpreted reality by applying unifying principles, made way for a de-ideologised vision that focused on the loss of any certain, stable benchmark and instead identified with a reality that constantly changes, that is staunchly multiple and indefinitely transitory (Lyotard, 1975). The globalisation and liberalisation of the trade in people, markets and goods led to the development of a society that was increasingly complex, where "the excess of time, excess of space and excess of ego" (Augé, 1992) *liquefied* personal and social ties that therefore tended to dissipate, detach and become increasingly weak. This liquefied condition led to individuals afflicted by loneliness, egoism and egocentricity, who live in a world that is also liquid, and not solid like pre-modern societies were. Man in this liquid modernity is disoriented and lost when faced with the myriad messages that *hit* him every day. Man becomes an *unstable point* in a *universe of moving objects* where consumption becomes an individual act (Bauman, 2000). Hence the unease typical of the post-industrial condition and the reassuring escape to social networks, creating a phenomenon that is nothing short of addiction.
Design, which until then had been considered a single discipline, began a long process of internal division, linked to the increase in professional skills. In just a short time, thanks to this new autonomy, new professional sectors appeared: product design, interior design, service design, strategic design, environmental design, communication design, all of which boast particular design instruments as well as rationales that do not always concur.
It was only with the dawn of the new millennium that cultural and socio-political movements critical of the effects of the market economy and its worldwide distribution revived. Involving visions focusing on intellectual responsibility and ethical and environmental demands, issues regarding environmental sustainability, energy saving and access for most users were adopted, in *inclusive design*, as decisive factors for improving the performance of products on the market. Its products and services are user-centred, and considered worthwhile only if they are for everyone, regardless of their age and psychological and physical condition (Lebbon, 2003).
The calling into question of the stereotyped functional vision, subject to market and consumer forces instead of the consumer, has resulted in the introduction of critical instruments into the creative process that, when seeking design solutions, take into account all the ethical, environmental and socio-political implications that lie at the heart of a design idea. *Design thinking* is a human-centred process based on people's needs and the solutions that are developed. Following a designer's observations and research, it is the user who decides if a product should exist or not. In this type of creative process, even failed solutions are part of a learning curve, "there's no judgement" (Simon, 1973). *Design Thinking* is an "attempt to bring about a conceptual revolution, to avoid the temptation to make beautiful, useful, lucrative objects; it is something much bigger: it means building a meaning and a narrative around each object we create" (Brown, 2009). We adopt a critical, speculative type of approach that contrasts with the neoliberalist system, even if one of its aims is to provide companies with a new way to provide a response to, out of all the possible future scenarios, the one that is most desirable and thus improve one's own profitability.
In his latest book – *Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation* – Ezio Manzini completes his observations, which began back in 2008 with the *Changing the Change, Design Visions, Proposals and Tools* conference, regarding design as an open, practical and collective practice. A founder of DESIS, the international Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability network, he believes that the sustainability of any socio-technical system is the result of a slow process of socio-cultural change fostered by a new, responsible, individual awareness and new models of behaviour and social organisation. Design as it developed in the 20th century, linked to industry and the products that it mass-produced, has proved itself no longer able to control the changes that have overwhelmed not just products but systems, services, organisations and a growing number of daily activities as well (Murray *et al.* 2010). As a result, all these entities can no longer be reproduced in a conventional way; they need to be designed by experts: *i.e.* designers who have the cultural and practical skills that allow them to integrate and promote the design skills of others, *i.e.* non-experts. In contrast, design experts boast a collection of skills, sensibilities and cultural instruments – design culture – that can be applied to all types of problems: from traditional product conception to the co-creation of a social service, to the proposal of new forms of democratic representation. They are solutions to specific problems that, in developing them, produce new forms of social interaction, contribute to the reconstruction of the social fabric and participate in producing new value systems.
Another interpretation of the role and responsibility of design is that of speculative design or critical design. The term was originally coined by Anthony Dunne in the 1990s who, together with Fiona Raby, formulated it during the Royal College of Art's *Designing Interactions* programme. "Let's call it critical design, that questions the cultural, social and ethical implications of emerging technologies. A form of design that can help us to define the most desirable futures, avoid the least desirable" (Dunne & Raby, 2013). The aim is to call into question the strictly utilitarian and anthropocentric vision of design understood in its traditional modernist meaning, to critically reflect on the impact of technology in everyday life and envisage the target audience of new technologies using imagination and the pretence of "visions of the future" and to launch a dialogue between experts, scientists, engineers, designers and users (Auger, 2013).

While participatory design questioned the passive role of the user-consumer in the 1970s during the product planning and design phase, *Open design* has taken up that challenge in more recent years and, thanks to the advent of open source free software, has made way for transdisciplinary cooperation and holistic, integrated approaches. The act of creation has become an act of co-creation in an open and collaborative process where we do not design a 'pure' object, we design its relationship with the environment and the user experience as well (Imbesi, 2015). In 2010, Ronen Kadushin published his *Open Designs* manifesto for the first time: a range of online projects with *Creative Commons* licences that can be downloaded, copied, altered and produced straight from files with CNC machines without using special instruments. This means that all *Open Designs* that are technically approved are available for production, in whatever quantity, without investing in equipment anywhere and by anyone. The aim is to shift industrial design and make it relevant to a society based on information that is globally connected via the Internet. This approach, accompanied by the rapid, widespread adoption of *Rapid Manufacturing* technologies, allows us to build objects by adding either powder or polymerised materials starting from a mathematical model created in three-dimensional CAD. The process of defining a product and its consumption is no longer a serial, industrial process protected by traditional copyright: it is within that "free" (Lessig, 2014), on-demand culture, of copyleft and *Creative Commons*, of the public domain (Di Lucchio, 2014). A single individual's *property* disappears from the development of a new product in favour of the development of new open proposals, not only in manufacturing, but also in consumption and product and process innovation. Designers have become *makers*, from *authors* they have become *producers*, in line with Walter Benjamin's prophecy, whereby modern artists, though part of the production system, know that if they want to gain recognition "their products must not appear in the form of goods" in order to "react against their capitalistic use" (Benjamin, 1934). Design takes responsibility for interpreting and controlling the processes of change underway, with a positive attitude that possesses ethical as well as technical, anthropological and aesthetic sensibility, so as to influence behaviour, create new lifestyles and change the systems of relationships between individuals. Once again, a criticism of consumer society becomes a crisis in the manufacturing system and develops continuous experimentation in an attempt to change the paradigms produced by modernist culture.



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*Living Nature. La natura dell'abitare*, CRA - Carlo Ratti Associati, Milano Design Week, 2018.



# Utopian traces

The following image gallery tries to tell the contemporary design that has not betrayed the design features of modern thought, keeping the utopian vision of the future as an essential theme.
Man has always tried to imagine the future, projecting his life into an alternative time and space.
At the center of modern thought there was the utopia of a man who lives fully in an industrial society, then still far away. The break with the past was necessary and the designers stimulated it starting from the technological and aesthetic premises of their time and projecting them forward, trying to interpret the feeling of a society eager to project their existence in an alternative time and space.
This search for a utopian dimension, both individual and collective, can be considered in part connected to an instinctive search for happiness and to the desire to improve the quality of one's life, factors that have always fueled the progress of society. To put it in the words of Tomás Maldonado "Ultimately, it is about replacing a state of affairs deemed unsatisfactory with another more desirable one. [...] The question, therefore, is not progress or antiprogress, but rather the kind of otherness that one wants to prospect: the kind of other-reality to be opposed and replaced by the current one.
[...] It is obvious that, in one way or another, the problem of the quality of life appears to be closely linked to the ideas each one has of satisfying one's own needs.
But when the question of needs emerges we are sure that, sooner or later, we will be forced to measure ourselves with the idea of happiness [...]".
The gallery of images collects the prediction and the planning of the future in which imagining modern man is not an escape from reality but the construction of a *futur future*.
The gallery wants to tell the projects that imagine man confront himself with the utopian dimension of reality through the project of yesterday and today.

Zoe Balmas

[ critical vision of the past, utopias in futuristic objects, complexity management, a positive vision of technology, a response to real needs ]

01

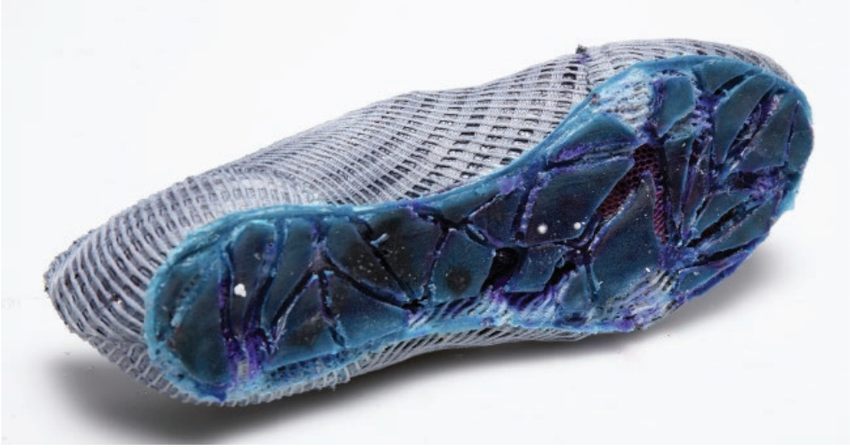
02

**Critical vision of the past**
>
Objects that arise from a speculative attitude towards the past and that are projected into the future to the limits of the abstract, imagining possibilities and solutions that contribute to making tomorrow more and more defined and projected.

03

**01** *Silk pavilion*, Neri Oxman, Mediated Matter Group of MIT Media Lab, 2013. A robotic arm capable of reproducing the process with which the worm deposits the silk.
**02** *Madeleine*, Amy Radcliffe, 2013. A machine capable of recording the molecular information of perfumes.
**03** *CaCo3*, Laura Lynn Jansen and Thomas Vailly, 2014. A collection of objects in petrified limestone, which arise from the replication of the processes of formation of calcareous deposits.
**04** *Foragers*, Antony Dunne and Fiona Raby, St Etienne Design Biennale, 2010. Devices capable of maximizing the nutritional value of organic materials in the event of food scarcity.

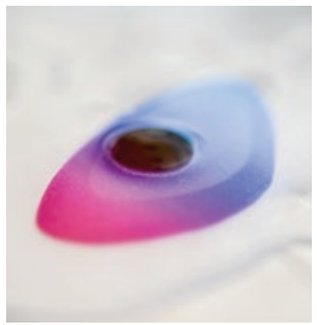




01

02

**Utopias in futuristic objects**
>
Experimentation goes beyond the limits and boundaries with other disciplines investigating at the molecular and biological level, merging technology and the human body, employing microorganisms, fungi and bacteria as agents for the production of objects.
The result are products that bring us into an almost magical dimension, suspended between science and poetry, even though they are real, defined and tangible products.



03

**01** *Bioplastic footwear sole sample*, Alice Potts, 2018.
**02** *Eye Heal* (cure diseases and traumas of sight), *Eye Enhance* (enhances the sight of man up to 15/10), *Eye Advance* (record and share the visual experience), Mhox, 2012.
**03** *Carbon Eaters*, *Puma Biodesign*, Puma in collaboration with the MIT Design Lab, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2018.
**04** *Adaptive Packaging*, Puma Biodesign, Puma in collaboration with the MIT Design Lab, Massachusetts institute of technology, 2018.

04

01

02

**Complexity management**
>
In such a rich information and interconnected society, the designer is increasingly confronted with complex systems, in which his role is no longer just a rereading of traditional typologies, but the delineation of a new language based on experience, which succeeds to guide the transformation from tangible to immaterial.

03

**01** *Google Gkass, 2013. Glasses* with different functions: reading websites, checking social networks, viewing maps and driving directions using Google Maps, also allow you to capture photos and videos to share online.
**02** *Supermarket of the Future,* CRA - Carlo Ratti Associati, in collaboration with Coop Italia for the Coop Italia's Future Food District pavilion, Milano World Expo, 2015.
**03** *Demain est un Autre Jour,* Mathieu Lehanneur, 2011. A device that collects information on weather forecasts in real time from the web and transforms them into images.
**04** Eataly World, *Man and the Future - Hortus,* CRA - Carlo Ratti Associati, in collaboration with FICO, Bologna, 2017. A hydroponic greenhouse in which visitors can plant a seed and control its sprouting on their smartphone through an app.

04

01

02

**A positive vision of technology**
>

The technology seen as a support to the production of design useful to man, which satisfies him in its complexity and in its holistic vision of reality and therefore of the fruition of products; products that make technology more attractive, intuitive, desirable, in a user centered perspective that uses and governs technology.

03

04

**01** *Andrea Air Purifier*, Mathieu Lehanneur, 2009.
**02** *Carapace Project*, Mhox, 2015. It allows to transform the body thanks to 3D printing.
**03** *Smart Mirror*, IoT Project - NEC Personal Computer, Yota Kakuda Design, 2016.
**04** *Jins Meme Clip*, Yota Kakuda Design, 2016.

01

**A response to real needs**
>
Some designs of the Contemporary have declared the modernist approach of designing for man keeping the user as a central actor: the project improves the life of man, taking part of his daily life, made of real needs and sometimes of replies to emergency situations.

02

03

**01** *Together Canes, Assunta* e *MonoLight*, Lanzavecchia + Wai, 2012. Objects designed to facilitate older people and to assist their daily needs.
**02** Therapeutic Felt-Tip Pen, Mathieu Lehanneur, 2001.
**03** GravityLight, GravityLight Foundation, 2018.
**04** Better Shelter, modular post-emergency shelter. UNHCR + IKEA Foundation, 2015.

04

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