

Review Paper

DOI: 10.53681/c1514225187514391s.37.339

ABOUT “LESS” IN DESIGN: MULTIFACED INTERPRETATIONS

Sobre «menos» y diseño: interpretaciones multifaces

FRANCESCA LA ROCCA
ORCID 0000-0002-4133-2744

Department of Architecture and Industrial Design, Università degli Studi della Campania “Luigi Vanvitelli”, Aversa, Italia.

Correspondent Author:
Francesca La Rocca, francesca.larocca@unicampania.it

ABSTRACT

Building on the Mies van Der Rohe slogan “less is more”, the present research aims to identify phenomena and lines of thought that relate in different ways to a conceptual link between the idea of “less” and design. Going beyond reductionism, this contribution explores different interpretations that have emerged in the postindustrial age, which can represent new lifeblood for the design culture of the near future. On this basis, emblematic projects are selected, specifically from 2000 to the present days; particular attention is paid to Italian visions, historically associated with a non-standardizable concept of design and with an humanistic idea of simplicity. The multiple “paths of less” that arose in this research show some desirable qualities for the future of design; these directions can be further explored, also in the hope of reducing our footprint on the planet.

KEYWORDS

Simplicity; Less-is-more; Ecological minimization; Sustainable design; Minimalist aesthetics.

RESUMEN

Partiendo del lema de Mies van Der Rohe «menos es más», la presente investigación pretende identificar fenómenos y líneas de pensamiento que se relacionan de distintas maneras con el vínculo entre las ideas de «menos» y el diseño. Más allá del reduccionismo, la contribución explora diferentes interpretaciones surgidas en nuestra era postindustrial, que pueden representar una nueva inspiración para la cultura del diseño del futuro próximo. Sobre esta base, se seleccionan proyectos emblemáticos, específicamente desde el año 2000 hasta la actualidad; se presta especial atención a las visiones italianas, históricamente asociadas a un concepto no estandarizable del diseño y a una idea humanística de la simplicidad. Los múltiples «caminos del menos» que surgieron en la investigación muestran algunas cualidades deseables para el futuro del diseño; creemos que estas vías pueden seguir explorándose, también para reducir nuestra impronta en el planeta.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Simplicidad; Menos es más; Minimización ecológica; Diseño sostenible; Estética minimalista

Date submission:
22/04/2025
Date Acceptation:
03/11/2025

1. INTRODUCTION: FROM ONE TO MORE “LESS”

The idea of minimization is typical of Modernism, implying a strict adherence of the project to well-expressed needs, as an ideal coincidence among scientific, economic and aesthetic requirements; in its best known expression it is summed up in Mies van Der Rohe's slogan “less is more”, and Dieter Rams clarification, “less but better”.

As is well known, Functionalism has its roots in Darwinian theories, from which it draws scientific legitimacy. This aspect is already visible in the mid-19th century in the work of Horatio Greenough, which assimilates natural organisms, machines, and human artifacts (Greenough, 1853). The principle “form follows function”, represents the adoption of a basic principle of Darwinian evolutionism (Steadman, 1988). Despite its origin in biological theories, Rationalism veers toward an interpretation of the efficiency of systems that implies a stringent reductionism of the design equation; a paradigm fascinated by Machinism thus ends up prevailing. The cultural complexity inherent in the slogan less-is-more, – also evident in its purely aesthetic matrix – therefore gives way to a rigid economic-productive version; the result is the idea of an optimization of the production process, along the lines of Tayloristic theory.

As of the 1960s, reductionism and hyper-rationalism have been subjected to scrutiny of an increasingly critical design culture. Among the most refined critical voices were those of Radical groups who, provocatively, present in their most extreme consequences the myth of a concept of efficiency that strips the object to the bone. In 1971, the Italian groups Archizoom and Superstudio curate a double issue of the magazine *IN* (edited by Pierpaolo Saporito) on the theme of the “destruction of the object.” Along similar lines was the contribution of Jean Baudrillard, for whom an absolute focus on function leads to the “zero degree of objects” (Baudrillard, 1968). If the less-is-more principle is exasperated the object is destined to implode on itself: emblematic in this sense is Alessandro Mendini's 1974 performance *Lassù* (“Up There”), wherein he sets fire to a geometric chair on an unreachable pyre.

A conception of “less”, marred by such reductionist drifts, runs the risk of tarnishing or, worse, rendering invisible other multifaceted interpretations, that have existed historically, and that are now re-emerging with significant peaks.

The aim of this article is to investigate the meaning that the idea of simplicity in objects has taken on in different cultural contexts, ultimately arriving at hypotheses for new future interpretations consistent with the pressing needs of sustainable development.

Taking a leap into the contemporary, we can see in the exhibition “The Essence of Things. Design and the Art of Reduction” (Vitra Design Museum, 2010) an excursus of the expression of simplicity in the evolution of industrial design artefacts. The exhibition aspires to trace the history of the “principle of simplicity”, showing both the most singular solutions and common objects. The tendency towards “less” includes a focus on functionality, the idea of lightness and transparency, the need for compactness, based on the requirements of production and logistics, and the pursuit of geometric abstraction and synthetic expression.

2. NOTES ON METHODOLOGICAL CRITERIA

The present research does not have the ambition nor can it have the space to give an exhaustive history of “less” in contemporary design; however, unlike the aforementioned exhibition, we are especially interested in highlighting *divergent visions*, irreducible to a single model of thought and embodied in some design examples. The visions of “less” are interpreted in relation to philosophies, traditions of the past, and artistic currents, which appear to have a strong influence on the project.

We have explored phenomena with specific reference to the field of design, selecting some emerging lines of thinking at different times with an in-depth look at Italian design.

Although the survey is mostly concerned with industrial design, conceptual paradigms that emerge are obviously pertinent to all scales of living.

The method adopted includes a critical selection of projects, which are considered emblematic with respect to identified lines of thinking. Due to the scope and space of the article, we could select only a small number of images, which consequently hold exemplary value. Given these limitations, the main criterion that has guided the selection of projects in this research was to reflect the variety of cases to the fullest extent—in relation to the function and nature of the objects (whether more practical or more artistic), their aesthetics, and the production processes involved, ranging from advanced technologies to low-tech and handmade approaches.

The research was developed by drawing mainly on projects from 2000 to the present days, but with free references to previous significant episodes and to the Modern roots of the less-is-more idea. We have specifically identified: the essential feature of simplicity in its religious root and in pre-industrial societies; Japanese minimalism; the Italian version of “less”; the ideas of reduction in its connection with the ecological crisis. In these cultural contexts the idea of essentiality does not imply a model of mere technical optimization, but rather an original expression of humanistic values. It encompasses visions of simplicity that are full of anthropological meanings and a refined ability to condense complex thoughts into an object. The Japanese and Italian points of view were chosen as particularly interesting because of their ability to combine Modernity and technological innovation with their deep cultural roots.

From a methodological point of view, it was particularly interesting to analyze the “sense of less” by choosing cultural contexts that have very different starting points or are even polar opposites. The Western tradition that we can identify in “less is more” is based on economic imperatives, with the desire to resolve them by following a precise line of rationality. The Japanese tradition, on the other hand, is determined by a mystical and symbolic imperative, which has endowed that society with a perfect, ancient, and abstract balance; a balance that nevertheless contemplates the acceptance of incompleteness and impermanence (*wabi-sabi*), in which the refinement of technologies contributes to a mystical reduction and rarefaction of the object.

The Italian vision, differently from orthodox rationalism, sees simplicity as a very concrete code, which has its roots in an idea of the Mediterranean that is at once rural, religious, and metaphysical. This will generate a version of Italian simplicity, still alive in design culture, in which the coldness of the reductionist object is tempered by an imagination that freely interprets the artifacts of the past.

A small focus on contemporary eco-sustainable design has been deliberately placed at the end of the paper, which can draw new inspiration from the survey of interpretations of simplicity: eco-design culture can in fact gain strength by referring to an explicitly pluralistic paradigm.

3. SIMPLE OR POOR: PREINDUSTRIAL LIFE AND RELIGIOUS ROOTS

It may be interesting to mention how the idea of “less” can, in different ways, go beyond its modern positivist origin. On the one hand, the idea of “less” can be linked to a state of poverty, intended as a lack of resources; on the other hand, it can take on a shade of meaning that tends towards spirituality. These are two movements of meaning which can appear to be opposites – one looking down towards reality, the other looking up towards transcendence – though both share an attitude of sublimation.

An influential form of simplicity for the project is linked to the life conditions in pre-industrial society, with reference to the peasant world. Material and intangible rural culture is a “transnational universe”, as Pierpaolo Pasolini defined it in the 1970s. He sought the values of pre-industrial civilization that he considered lost in the Italy of his time, in the context of ‘Third World countries’, where consumerism and cultural homologation

had not yet taken root (Pasolini, 1975). In this type of sociocultural context the availability of resources, which are frequently scarce, is strictly related to construction technologies, control of the landscape, working tools, and objects of everyday life. The more scarcity prevails, the more the relationship between artifice and nature is conceived on the basis of effectiveness and simplicity, although this in no manner excludes the presence of the symbolic and imaginative dimension. This idea appears clearly in the research that Bernard Rudofsky carried out in the 1960s and brought to the stage in the exhibition “Architecture without architects”, which became so famous that its title became a slogan. With the eye of the ethnographer, he presents building traditions that are the result of local knowledge handed down, continuously refined within a community of experience (Rudofsky, 1964). This form of simplicity does not imply for Rudofsky a general standardization but, on the contrary, a variety of evolving models. Simplicity can be also combined more directly with religiosity, affirming the idea of a life that is as rich inwardly as it is naked and essential in its material environment.

For the Amish, for example, simplicity signifies a rejection of any technical solution that is not immediately comprehensible. They adopted a theorem of maintenance and reparability, ante-litteram, well before it became a paradigm of thought to counter the planned obsolescence inherent in the capitalist system. (Latouche, 2013)

Popular culture influenced by Catholicism elaborates simple prototypes for objects: this is a living matrix in the Italian interpretation of rationalism. Just think of the ‘poor’ representation of a room in Giovanni Michelucci’s 1920 drawing, entitled “I fioretti di San Francesco”. As Branzi wrote:

“Unlike other European or international design cultures, Italian design has preserved its roots in popular and peasant culture, developing single prototypes that interpret modernity as the emergence of a new basic alphabet that allows us to rediscover spiritual and ideal values” (Branzi, 2008 p. 314).

If following a timeline we sequence the works “Quadro da pranzo” by Michelangelo Pistoletto (1965) (fig. 01), “Sedia di paglia” by Alessandro Mendini (1974), “Trono” by Francesco Facchin (2000), “Architettura da centro stanza” by Lapo Lani (2011), we understand the vitality of this origin. Unexpectedly, this origin was also explored by the Radical Avant-garde. “The exhibition “Extra-urban Material Culture”, curated by Adolfo Natalini, displayed his interest for the tools of marginalized cultures of farmers, fishermen, artisans, shepherds and coalmen; objects such as a straw chair, a wooden stick, a wicker basket come onto the scene: things of “simple use”, for a new journey “towards the region of the memory” (Natalini, 1978).



Fig. 1 - Michelangelo Pistoletto, “Quadro da pranzo”, 1965.

Accessing the interior of “Una casa tutto di un pezzo” (fig. 2), we have the impression of entering an archaic rural stone structure; in reality we are in an artefact made, layer upon layer, with a stercolithographic technique.

The collection “Cruciale” by Giulio Iacchetti (2010) (fig. 3) starts from the essentiality of the religious symbol, to interpret it in various ways, with a sensitivity that is never desecrating. All the practices that we have highlighted are not the result of an ingenious process, quite the contrary: they are often the outcome of a sophisticated procedure which selects forms, technologies, processes, to meet complex requirements and maximum expression.



Fig. 2 - Marco Ferreri, “Casa tutta d’un pezzo”, 2010.



Fig. 3 - Giulio Iacchetti, “Cruciale”, 2010.

4. JAPANESE MINIMALISM

The peculiar sense of simplicity of the contemporary Japanese culture of project, can be interpreted as emptiness (*ku*), space or silence (*ma*); lightness and beauty of impermanence, of the phenomena of usury that reveal the passage of time (*wabi-sabi*); and asymmetry, non-definition and imperfection. These ideas are rooted in diverse philosophical schools, ranging from Zen Buddhism to Shinto animist thought (Menegazzo e Piotti, 2015), and are clearly evident in the recent exhibition “Origin of simplicity. 20 Visions of Japanese Design” (Adi Design Museum, 2024).

The traditional Japanese garden of rocks and sand exemplifies for Tessen Soki, a 15th-century Zen monk, «the art of reducing thirty thousand miles to the length of thirty centimetres». The poetics of the compression of the universe into a space-hologram includes all the scales of design: research on the essentiality of inhabiting a space has a particular history in Japanese architecture, full of contradictions, in the polarity between technological innovation and tradition.

In the 1990s, a new version of the poetics of ‘less’, far from orthodox rationalism, emerge in Japan. The minimal living unit of the “Nagagin Capsule Tower”, devised by Kisho Kurokawa, had represented in the 1970s the emblem of machinist reduction, without pointing out any concrete ways forward. With the essay “Rediscovering Japanese space”, Kurokawa turns to a poetics of “symbiosis”, promoting a future, beyond the Modern, that hybridizes marked innovation with traditional values (Kurokawa, 1985). A generation of architects in the 1990s has to deal with the further altered character of the urban landscape in metropolises such as Tokyo: real estate parcels are often so reduced in size that they appear almost like leftover spaces from the built environment. The challenge is met by adopting Kurokawa’s lesson: the designers know how to rework their historical propensity for space reduction into highly unconventional solutions. The extraordinary results are documented in the exhibition “The Japanese house. Architettura e vita dal 1945 ad oggi” (musco MAXXI, Roma - Barbican Center, Londra, 2016-2017)

At the industrial design scale, the works of Tokuji Yoshioka, Shiro Kuramata, Toyo Ito, Chachy Murata (fig. 04), Nendo, Mugi Yamamoto, are among the most significant examples of the Japanese minimalism tendency. Issey Miyake starts with the simple act of folding, combining origami and hi-tech. Recent and emblematic examples are the works “Chaise médaillon” (2021) and “Drift” (2024) by Nendo (fig. 05), a collection of glass shelves.

Sometimes impalpable, other times completely transparent, the objects are often on the verge of becoming metaphysical. A distinctive feature of Japanese design results in the ability to combine pre-industrial simplicity, with the use of natural materials and manual technologies, and sophisticated technological innovation. In an obsessive attention to detail, technology is sometimes forced to disappear, contributing to an enigmatic character of the object and creating a final product that can appear almost “cruel” in its perfection.

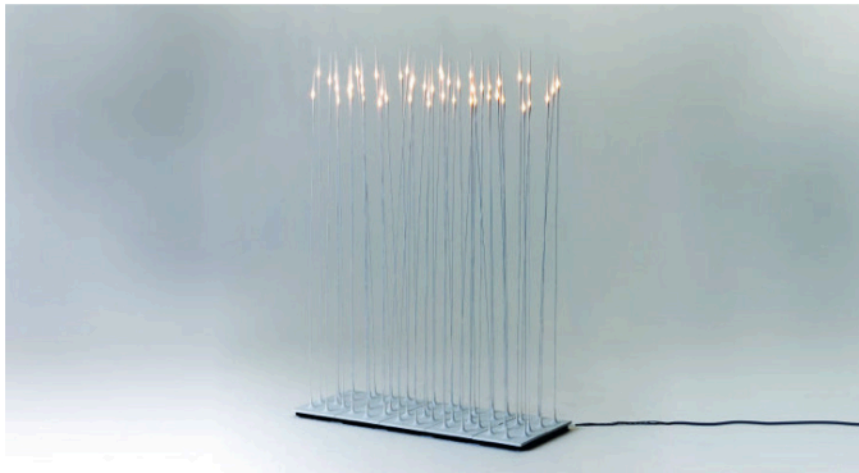


Fig. 4 - Chachy Murata, Sisuki lighting, 2008.



Fig. 5 - Nendo, Drift, 2024

5. VERSIONS OF ITALIAN SIMPLICITY

The Italian project is characterized by a simplicity far removed from the less-is-more of orthodox rationalism, even when this seemed like an absolute ethical-aesthetic imperative. It is rather a metaphysical simplicity, an anthropological study of everyday gestures: but what emerges above all is the ability to condense a sophisticated thought.

The simplicity of Italian rationalist architects of the 1930s-1940s was influenced by the atmospheres of the Metaphysical movement – notably the paintings of Giorgio De Chirico. They also sought to escape the monumentalism of the fascist regime: think of the works of Figini and Pollini, or Franco Albini (Branzi, 1999, p. 87).

For Giò Ponti, simplicity is a universal value. It is a hidden thread in the history of mankind, progressing from heavy to light, thick to thin, dark to light, fragmentary to unity, and from complicated to linear. If «fantasy is a hallucination», it is «as lucid and precise as dreams». It is incorrect to call an imprecise person a dreamer. «True dreamers “dream precisely” (Ponti, 1957, p. 74). For Albini, a piece of furniture must simply be a piece of furniture, «without the artificial quest for the extraordinary at any cost». His poetics is averse to the exceptional, to technical acrobatics, to one-off pieces; innovation is pursued in schemes but through «common and poor materials, pure technical solutions, serial objects» (Albini, 1936).

Bruno Munari's simplicity is sometimes so sophisticated to the point of having been patented. Indeed, the “Occhialini a 5 lire”, made of folded and cut cardboard – inspired by the immediate gesture of shielding the eyes from the light with the hand, and by Eskimo glasses – were in fact patented in 1954.

In the 1960s-1970s, the Radicals' point of view provocatively exaggerates the reductive and multiplicative logic of industrial society. In Archizoom's “Mies” chair (1969) (fig 06), essentiality reaches «the limit of functional irony», as Charles Jencks observed (Jencks, 1972, pp. 18-19). Imagining a sort of reduction to the “zero-degree” for objects Archizooms propose a useful to raise the issue of creative stagnation resulting from the homogenization of the International Style.



Fig. 6 - Archizoom, poltrona “Mies”, 1969.

On a different front, the artistic movement “Arte Povera” demonstrates a poetics linked to basic elements of nature. The artists drew on minimal objects such as a leaf, a twig, a stone, to point out its marvelous and enigmatic appearance; their inspiration from an alchemic tradition leads to a rediscovery of the anthropological value of things (Celant, 1969). The movement influenced, in a partly subliminal way, Italian and international design.

Bruno Munari collects small scraps on the coast to make compositions of them, presenting them in the book “The Sea as Craftsman”.

“You throw something into the sea, and the sea (after an unspecified and unspecified amount of time) returns it to you processed, finished, polished, shiny or matt depending on the material, and even wet because the colours are more vivid this way” (Munari, 1995).

Going back to the works of artists such as Pino Pascali, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Giovanni Anselmo and some contemporary design research, we recognize the long trail of Arte Povera. It is evident, for example, in the project “Affinità Naturali” by Giorgia Zanellato (2013) (fig. 07), who composes small stones with plant elements; or in the work “De natura fossilium” by Formafantasma (2014) (fig. 08), which is an investigation into the culture of lava, from the Sicilian volcano Mount Etna.



Fig. 7 - Giorgia Zanellato, “Affinità naturali”, 2013.

All the versions of “less” that we have highlighted, share a common feature: a critical and original point of view towards industrial society and the attention for a world of objects that contemplates materiality, morality and sustainability. This ethical and aesthetic value of simplicity is expressed well in the exhibition “Il design italiano oltre le crisi. Autarchia, Austerità, Autoproduzione” (Triennale Design museum, Milan 2014) curated by Beppe Finessi: showing different historical moments of the 20th century, the exhibition explores the original attitude of Italian design in dealing with the scarcity of resources.



Fig. 8 - Formafantasma, “De natura fossilium”, 2014.

6. REDUCTION PRINCIPLES AND ECO-DESIGN

The sustainable project culture has coined a new international slogan, destined to surpass that of Mies: the 3 R’s, of “reduce, recycle, reuse”. To focus on environmental requirements means to consider, at every scale of the project, the “Life Cycle Assessment”. The aim of the project is to help reduce the input of material and energy, as well as the impact of emissions and waste, in every phase from pre-production to the disposal (Vezzoli, 2016).

Sustainable products appear today to express a crucial quality, investigating a micro-sociology of the everyday: an attention to small gestures and detail, far from obsessive ergonomics, however. An emblematic product of refined modesty, encapsulating the 3Rs, like a hologram, is “Moscardino” (Giulio Iacchetti e Matteo Ragni 2000) (fig. 09); it is a disposable fork in compostable plastic, combining both the function of fork and spoon, winner of the XIX edition “Compasso d’Oro” Award, and part of the Moma permanent design exhibition.

In the post-industrial age, the emergences of the two “soft sciences” – life sciences and information and telecommunication sciences – influences our conception of objects and encourages us to also re-think our idea of simplicity in relation to sustainability (Serres, 2016). It is no coincidence that Gillo Dorfles in his essay “Horror pleni” extends the need to reduce both material and immaterial invasion: he observes an «unstoppable multiplication of objects, information, sensory stimulations», that afflicts our society (Dorfles, 2008). The dematerialization allowed by contemporary electronics and telematics also brings the promise of a *lighter world*; technologies and materials can gradually become more impalpable and thin; furthermore, we are now in an era where our technology is becoming increasingly biology-based.

In this context, the focus on the conceptual richness of less appears to be an antidote to a double misunderstanding: on the one hand, the obsolete idea of sustainable design as an impoverishment of matter, sense, lifestyle; on the other hand, the conception of ecological quality as incessant optimization, in adherence to the models of Total Quality.

The culture of sustainability is actually leading us to a *methodological pluralism*. The strategies of eco-design are plural, as are the technological levels, the strategies and the aesthetic visions, that coexist and inform experimentations. But this happens, mind indeed, without the 3 R’s paradigm being altered or affected.

The project “Transparent Tools”, developed by Jesse Howard in 2016 (fig. 10), far from the standards of the dominant technology, consists of a series of small household

appliances, predisposed to simple reparability and, if desired, self-manufacturing; the objects are made, as detailed in axonometric exploded views, through components of three types: reusable, purchasable in a common hardware store, or designed ad hoc to be reproduced with a 3D printer. This form of “transparency” also embodies a new aspect of simplicity, that moves away from the purity of form as a typical aesthetic category of Rationalism, tolerating instead imperfection in the name of sustainability.



Fig. 9 - Iacchetti & Ragni, “Moscardino”, 2000.

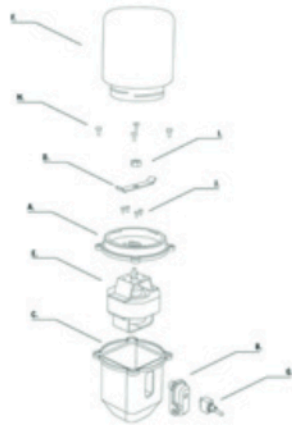


Fig. 10 - Jesse Howard, “Transparent tools”, 2016.



But the Do-It-Yourself practices nowadays even involve biodesign: the particular mix between the worlds of design and biology has spread in recent years; prompting designers to personally undertake experiments in the fields of synthetic biology, which can become a future new form of simplicity (Bailey, 2010). This emergent and decisive form of “complex simplicity” has been advancing in the last decade. It concerns the integration of the biological and the digital, allowing on-demand and customized robotic bio-fabrication; as in Officina Corpuscoli’s “Bio Ex-machine” (fig. 11), a research project still in progress, interweaving digital and biological computation and exploring the potential expressed through additive fabrication techniques. The XXII Triennale International Exhibition (Milan 2019) “Broken Nature. /Design Takes on Human Survival” focuses on the state of the relationship between design and the natural environment on the international scene, promoting both low-tech and hi-tech solutions and showing the works of a generation that investigates plural escape routes from a muscular artificiality of technology.

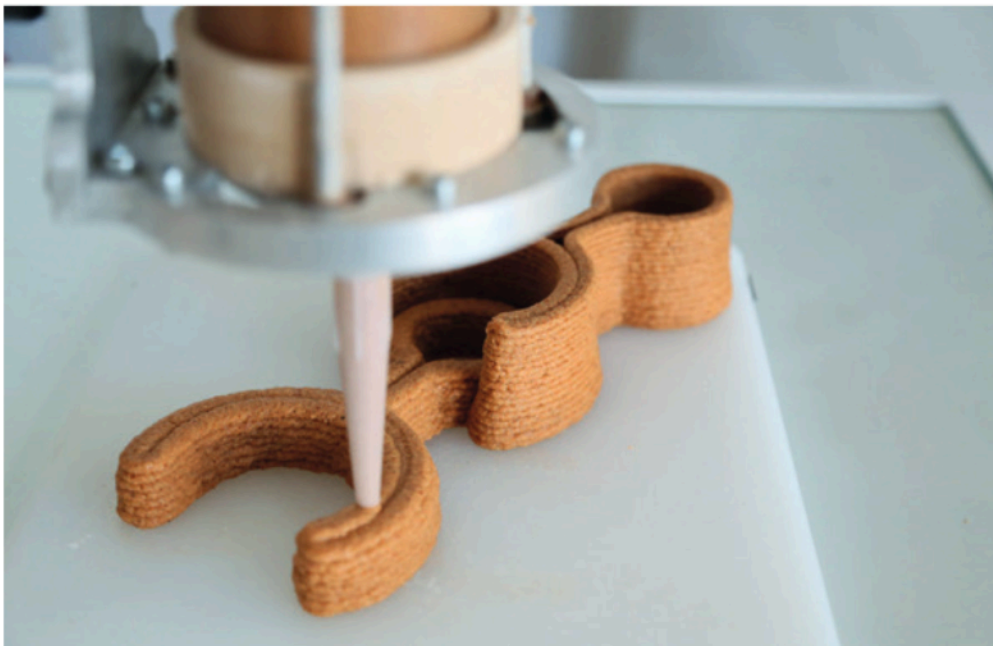


Fig. 11 - Oficina Corpuscoli, "Bio ex machine", 2022 - in progress

7. CONCLUSIONS: LITTLE REMARKS ON THE FUTURES OF LESS

The survey we have attempted to carry out in this article aims to contribute to the discussion, highlighting some possible connections between cultures and design experiences that may express, if not a common inspiration, the answer to shared questions that reality itself imposes. Aspects of this reality have long emerged in some traits of the contemporary world. In the 1960s Jean Baudrillard expressed his critique of what he calls *the grade zero of the object*, as the extreme consequence of Rationalism; it coincides with concentrating on object's function, cut off and out of any scenario (Baudrillard, 2004, pp. 22-23). In the same period, the school of Ulm is challenged – especially by the radical Avant-Garde – for its excessive focus on the method and identified as an advanced point of orthodox Rationalism. Ulm appears to be the quintessential emblem of a reviewed scientific industrial version of the less-is-more. However, in spite of this interpretation, an almost *metaphysical nature* of the object emerges in Ulm's products, beyond the intentions themselves: probably in adherence to the Latin roots of its director, Tomàs Maldonado (La Rocca, 2017, pp. 30-32).

When we analyze through the framework of real cultural scenes of Modernity, the less-is-more principle often ends up going beyond its own rigidity. As an approach to problems that, somehow, pervades the whole history of human artefacts, simplicity has been cultivated in very different fertile soils.

We have attempted to make some cultural lines of design more visible, sometimes resolving a conflict between tradition and technology, finding new ways for an unconventional form of simplicity. The most significant visions of "less", highlighted here, show some desirable qualities for the future of design; they will steer us away from risks – which have never been entirely dispelled – such as technicist drift, absolutization of green thinking, homogenization to corporate-style "Total Quality" models.

Ettore Sottsass, in "Di chi sono le case vuote", discusses a utopian dwelling and its inhabitant: a person free from the compulsive need of accumulating objects; identified, in the end, with a man who is nomadic and, therefore, constitutively without a home (Sottsass, 2002, pp. 307-310). He uses this paradox to explain how we are inextricably bound to a double tension: of making our habitat complex and figuratively rich, through objects and symbols that give it anthropological density; or, on the contrary, of living

in a simple, bare, reduced space; an environment in this sense capable of hosting a creativity free from the pre-existence of the past.

Aware of this existential tension inherent in dwelling, it is still difficult to imagine a neutral, cold simplicity, that does not embody divergent anthropological values.

As we have seen, the idea of the object's essentiality takes on particular meanings in different historical moments and in the material cultures of each country. But if we were to similarly investigate the phenomenon of luxury throughout history and its various conceptions, we would find an equally remarkable richness of interpretations (Byzantine luxury and its sacredness, the sense of rarity in Chinese luxury, the sobriety of Italian luxury, and so on). We know how the theme of sustainability influences industrial production today at every level. The most prestigious luxury companies now invest in minimizing waste, reusing materials, and reducing environmental impact—and they make a point of communicating this. Are these contradictory phenomena, or do they represent a new paradigm of thought still to be explored and validated? What, then, will the *less is more* of the future look like? Will the dematerialized technologies of digital innovation and AI play a decisive role?

The multiple “paths of less” that we have analyzed can be further explored, to reduce our footprint on the planet; in an ecological perspective the reduction is primarily to stop the exponential deluge of objects, which are produced to the detriment of any logic of quality; on the opposite front, to the new myths of “excellence” at any cost, we might prefer the idea of “supernormal”, following the Naoto Fukasawa and Jasper Morrison cultural hybridization: a paradigm of simplicity, that brings together Japanese and Western cultures (Fukasawa & Morrison, 2007).

As Emanuele Quinz suggests, rather than mere utilitarianism, simplicity, seen from the point of view of sustainability, must be synonymous with “frugality” (Quinz, 2020). Facing the urgent challenges of the planet, our post-industrial age needs both the technical and humanistic contribution of design culture. Only a view that encompasses both dimensions is able to transform the most ordinary product into a distillation of thought.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- Albini, F. (1936). “La Gommapiuma Pirelli alla VI Triennale Milano”. XIV Editoriale Domus, Milano.
- Bailey, J. (2010). *Biophilia + Technophilia*. The University of Michigan, Taubman School of Architecture.
- Baudrillard, J. (2004). *Il sistema degli oggetti* (1968). Bompiani.
- Branzi, A. (1999). *Introduzione al design italiano. Una modernità incompleta*. Baldini&Castoldi.
- Branzi, A. (2008). The Great and the Simple. Annichiarico, S., & Branzi, A. (Eds.). In *What is Italian Design? The seven obsessions*. Catalogue of the exhibition. Triennale Design Museum-Electa.
- Celant, G. (1969). *Arte povera*. Mazzotta.
- Dorfles, G. (2008). *Horror pleni. La (in)civiltà del rumore*. Castelvecchi.
- Fukasawa, N. & Morrison, J. (2007). *Super Normal. Sensations of the Ordinary*. Lars Müller Publishers. Zurigo.
- Greenough, H., (1957). *Form and function: remarks on art, design and architecture* (1853). H.A. Small. University of California Press.
- Jencks, C. (1972). “The Supersensualists. Part II”, *Architectural Design*, XLIII, 1, January, pp. 18-19.
- Kurokawa, K. (1988). *Rediscovering Japanese Space*. Weatherhill.
- La Rocca, F. (2017). *Design on trial. Critique and metamorphosis of the contemporary object*. FrancoAngeli.
- Latouche, S. (2013). *Usa e getta. Le follie dell'obsolescenza programmata*. Bollati Boringhieri.
- Menegazzo, R., & Piotti, S. (2015). *Wa. L'essenza del design giapponese*. L'Ippocampo.
- Munari, B. (1995). *Il mare come artigiano*. Corraini.
- Natalini, A. (1978). *La memoria invece*. Catalogue of three exhibitions at Studio Franca Pisani, Tipolitografia G. Capponi in Firenze.
- Pasolini, P.P. (1975). *Scritti corsari*, Garzanti.
- Ponti, G. (1957). *Amate l'architettura*, Vitali e Ghianda.
- Quinz, E. (2020). Da “less is more” a “less, but better”: la semplicità nella storia del design. *Domusweb*, 10 luglio 2020. [https:// www.domusweb.it](https://www.domusweb.it). (Accessed on 29/11/24).
- Serres, M. (2016). *Il mancino zoppo. Dal metodo non nasce niente*, Bollati Boringhieri.
- Rudofsky, B. (1964). *Architecture without architects*. Moma NY.

Sottsass, E. (2002). Di chi sono le case vuote?. In *Scritti*. Neri Pozza.

Steadman, P. (1988). *L'evoluzione del design. L'analisi biologica in architettura e nelle arti applicate*. Liguori.

Vezzoli, C. (2016). *Design per la sostenibilità ambientale*. Zanichelli.

NOTES ABOUT AUTHOR

Francesca La Rocca

Francesca La Rocca, architect, Ph.D., is professor at the University of Campania “Luigi Vanvitelli”, where she is teaching “Methods and critique of contemporary design” and “Culture of the image”. Her main research interests concern the design culture, in its relations with science, technological innovation and aesthetics; the perspectives of the eco-oriented project applied to architecture and industrial design.

Her work includes: “Il tempo opaco degli oggetti. Forme evolutive del design contemporaneo” (selection ADI Index 2007 for 22th Compasso d’Oro Award); “Design e delitto. Critica e metamorfosi dell’oggetto contemporaneo” – english version “Design on trial” (FrancoAngeli 2017).

Reference According to APA Style, 7th edition:

La Rocca, F. (2026). About “less” in design: Multifaced interpretations. *Convergências - Revista de Investigação e Ensino das Artes*, VOL XIX (37), 19-32. <https://doi.org/10.53681/c1514225187514391s.37.339>