

Enzo Mari

Design as a Language to Change the World!

For Enzo Mari, design acted as a language made up of shape and form. He believed that language addressed collective and social needs, requirements and requests. Mari's passion for design became his way of changing the world. He approached design and making as tools for questioning and critique. Mari also took more practical aspects into consideration, by reflecting on the cost of production in terms of both human labour and environmental impact. Integral to Mari's work, however, is that he did not differentiate between the prosaic, the symbolic, and the revolutionary.

Open-source design: alternative systems and provocations Potential focus for KS4-5



2002. Multiple with the components for chair P at 1:5 scale. Steel frame with photograph, technical sheet, nails and balsa wood panels. Corraini Edizioni, Mantuas. Archivio E. Mari, City of Milan, CASVA.

One of Mari's most celebrated projects is *Proposta per Un'Autoprogettazione*, first published as an instruction booklet in 1974. This consisted of construction drawings for simple furniture that could be executed using widely accessible lumber and nails. It was expressly intended to educate users in the design process. Mari would send a copy of the manual to anyone who wrote to his studio requesting it, asking only that builders of his furniture send him the price of postage. He was also keen to know if users tweaked his designs to make any of their own adaptations, and invited them to send him photographs of their finished pieces.

In the introduction to a 2002 publication revisiting *Autoprogettazione*, Mari asserts 'the quality-quantity ratio is central to the whole production: quality is determined when the shape of the product does not "seem" but simply "is"'. In other words, quality lies in the essence of form, rather than formalism. The editor of this publication explains how the word "autoprogettazione" is difficult to translate into English: auto means "self" and progettazione can translate to "design", "planning", or even "project (plan)".

Like language, aesthetics depends on people sharing an understanding of what certain words, shapes, or symbols mean and how they should be used. **Umberto Eco** was an Italian philosopher and cultural critic who called this system of tacitly pre-agreed associations a "code". In *The Open Work* (1962, translated to English in 1989) he states that any message one attempts to communicate must be "wrapped" in conventions that will increase the probability of it being understood. Using the structural conventions of language, one can convey information via ideas coded in pronouns, participles, verbs, or even tonal inflections. Through such transmissions, language takes on probability or intent.

In a 1995 interview with David Ryan, a former studio assistant, Mari spoke of the current condition of industrial design:

'(O)ur system of production is finalised to make sure that people don't think. So, in this respect, when it is close to the design being produced, it is not the object that is important, but that through the process, I have realised what some real needs for society are.'

Through *Autoprogettazione*, Mari asks users to "think" outside the typical channels of excessive and unthoughtful consumerism. He offers individuals the ability to generate an object with legible functions through transformative work, articulated in designs ordinarily stripped of it thanks to industrialised manufacturing. The engineering of each design is not hidden but expressed in its aesthetic form, and therein lies its power to communicate its function to the user.

Through this strategy of reciprocity, transparency, and empowerment, Mari stimulated critical thinking and debate through design.

Legacy

Between 1963 and 1969, only 36% of architecture graduates at Milan's major design school, Politecnico di Milano, actually went on to practice in the field. Design firms like **Superstudio** and **Archizoom** surfaced during this time, putting forth speculative 'agitprop' architectural illustrations and grandiose master plans to articulate often deliberately outlandish, socialist-inspired collective utopias, almost as a form of protest.

Mari's strategy was more covert. He wrote that with *Autoprogettazione*, he intended to 'smuggle in moments of research and ways of creating the stimulus to free oneself from ideological conditioning, standard norms, behaviour and taste.' Decades later, in the 2002 publication that revisited the project, he asserted in his introduction that given the rise of disposable design in the twenty-first century, the imperative for developing a critical awareness of how we consume is even more pressing than when the book was first issued and where he stated:

'When making the object, the user becomes aware of the structural reasoning behind the object itself; therefore, subsequently he improves his own ability to assess the objects on the market with a more critical eye.'

The enduring relevance of *Autoprogettazione*'s mission to instil critical thinking by elucidating the design process can be followed through to the modern-day "open-source" movement.

In 2015 Mari granted **CUCULA**, a Berlin-based non-profit, the rights to manufacture and sell his *Autoprogettazione* designs. CUCULA (which means "to do something together" and "to take care of each other" in the Central African Hausa language) seeks to develop a productive workshop for refugees in Europe looking to learn a trade. Working side by side to create furniture with fellow refugees and designers, proceeds from sales directly benefit these participants. In this way, the 'open-source' nature of *Autoprogettazione* has become a forum for people with different perspectives and cultural backgrounds to share a productive act and build a valuable skill set, regardless of whether they possess a common language or that of their host country.

In 2011 and 2012, Andrés Jaque and his **Office for Political Innovation** staged performances of '**IKEA Disobedients**' in Madrid and New York. They mixed together pieces of unassembled IKEA products to create their own Frankenstein furniture and a towering, multifunctional structure that accommodated individual and collective activities—such as hairdressing, cooking, aquaponics, and strumming stringed instruments—as well as spaces for lounging or working on computers. Visitors to the installation were invited to join and make suggestions on how to engineer the space.

Provocations

Use design to identify problems in relation to production and exclusivity.

Sharing knowledge and radical generosity.

How could this way of working impact the world?

Using design methods, consider your own space, places within your community, your country, and/or countries across the world to identify possible problems and alternatives.

Creating own worlds: next generation utopias

Potential focus for KS3-5

Illiteracy was common in Italy during Mari's upbringing. This social context provided a provocative and productive constraint for a designer and likely grounded many of his designs, including the self-build manual *Autoprogettazione* and his designs for children.



L'uovo e la gallina, 1969. Enzo Mari, Gabriela Ferrario. Polychrome print on coated paper. Published by Emme Edizione, first published by Bompiani in 1959. Archivio E. Mari, City of Milan, CASVA.

Along with his wife Iela, Mari illustrated and co-authored *L'uovo e la gallina*, 'The chicken and the egg' (1969), a book without words, through which the couple sought to impart less prescriptive and more reciprocal means of language development to early readers. The illustrations and ordering of pages communicate the process of a chicken laying an egg, the egg's gestation and eventual hatching, and the chick's growth into an adult. The uncaptioned graphics give young readers the agency to evaluate the narrative on their own terms, to form an empathetic connection to the story, and to develop an understanding of the device of illustration.



16 Animali ('16 Animals') interlocking game made of wood, 1959. Manufactured by Danese Milano. Danese Milano.

In 1957, Mari created *16 Animali* ('16 Animals'), a wooden toy puzzle comprising a set of stylised animal shapes that fit together seamlessly in a carrying tray. Users draw on the woodcuts' formal qualities to balance and integrate the animal shapes, while reconciling (or subverting) their place within a whole. They may interpret the puzzle purely as a formal 'whole' to be assembled in a particular way or more conceptually, for instance as part of a narrative, or a food chain, or a larger animal kingdom. Mari called it an "open story."

Even more anarchically, Mari called 'The fable game', first published in 1965, a "game without rules". It can be imagined as a compositional game; animals with animals, animals with plants, animals with stones, stones with animals. It is not a story to read or to leaf through but to make, unmake and build up: a never-ending adventure, played and invented anew each time by the endless possibilities at hand. The opportunities are countless and the limits unlimited in an enchanted world that can be brought to life, inhabited and populated with the child's own imagination and interpretation of their world.

Provocations

Reimagine the world around you. Identify key shapes and patterns. Turn them into a new language.

Can you 'read' the visual language of your environment? What repeating colours and pattern are there? What is the feeling of these repetitions and what stories could they represent?

Work collaboratively to interact with a starting shape, what else could it be? How do different iterations interact with each other?

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