Controfattuali, progetto come «mezzo per» e il (non)problema dell’artefatto assente

[Edoardo Fregonese]
1. Artefatto / Progetto

2. Scienza vs. Progetto

3. Epistemologia [filosofia] del progetto

Problema dell’artefatto assente
An artefact production process relies on designing when it includes the production of a *design representation*; indeed, I propose to *define* designing itself as the production of a design representation (Galle 1999: 58).
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The architect may truthfully tell his client that ‘the house’ he is designing complies with the fire safety regulations, even though there is not yet any house at hand to comply with anything. Obviously, he is not therefore talking nonsense. But conceivably he is using language in much the same way an author does when writing fiction. (Galle 1999: 66).
Dissolving the ‘problem of the absent artifact’: Design representations as means for counterfactual understanding and knowledge generalisation

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It has been argued by Per Galle that a viable account of designing should address the ‘problem of the absent artifact’. The problem concerns the nature of design representations. Specifically, the question how one can utter true statements, in terms of design representations, about artifacts when these artifacts are, in the design phase, still non-existent. This paper exposes the problem as a pseudo-problem. It is argued that design representations are not means for the production of truth-apt assertions. This dissolves the ‘absent artifact problem’. An alternative view is elaborated according to which design representations are means for counterfactual understanding, knowledge generalisation, and knowledge unification. Examples from the functional modelling literature are used to illustrate these roles.

Keywords: epistemology, philosophy of design, conceptual design, design representation

the ‘problem’ of the absent artifact, in fact, is not a pressing problem.

Accounts of designing that do take the problem seriously hence focus, at least partly, on solving the wrong kinds of challenges,

and are well-advised to re-focus their research agendas. (van Eck 2015: 2)
Design representations, and utterances based on them, can be subjected to evaluation in terms of a variety of norms such as

‘generality’,
‘precision’, and
‘completeness’ [...],

yet ‘truth’ is not among them.

This dissolves the ‘absent artifact problem’.
(van Eck 2015: 2)
Design models or representations are first and foremost ‘vehicles’ to procure (counterfactual) understanding of to-be-build artifacts in terms of offering answers to *what-if-things-had-been-different questions*, and means for knowledge generalisation and unification.

Two ways in which design models or representations support knowledge generalisation are elaborated: the generalisation of design knowledge by invoking *idealizations* or intentional *distortions*, and by using *abstraction*, understood here as the omission of design features from design representations or models

(van Eck 2015: 2)
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**communication (in general)**

the designer engages in communication with the client and the maker, who thereby come to know (something about) what the designer intends, and, apart from that, will probably use the representation in similar ways for focusing on various aspects one at a time.
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When used for *exploration*, the representation is used to answer a variety of hypothetical questions which may be posed by the client and the maker as well as the designer.
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‘How much would it cost to construct this thing?’

’How much time and labour would it take?’

‘What would it look like (when viewed from this point, when walked through along this path, etc) had it been constructed according to the current proposal?’
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The problem seems insoluble or intractable when one **insists on focussing on truth-conditions** with respect to assertions based on design representations and designing, unless – and this may come as a surprise – one recognises that **it is nonsensical to ask after the truth conditions of propositions based on design representations** in the first place, when the artifact in question has not yet been built (van Eck 2015: 7)

The question admits of no sensible answer; as long as an artifact has not been built, there seems no intelligible way to invoke a design representation to make a truth-apt/valued statement. *‘Truth’ is simply not something that one should ask of propositions based on design representations.*
(van Eck 2015: 7)

The exploration and communication of ‘truths’ about designs in particular concerns predictions about designs (Galle 2008).

**Do predictions have a definite truth value?** The question goes back to *Aristotle*, but for present purposes it suffices to observe that answers given to the question are by and large negative; *there does not seem to be a way to assign truth values to predictions concerning future states of affairs, i.e., predictions have indeterminate truth value* [...] *Certain states of affairs need come to pass before predictions turn out true or false.*

(van Eck 2015: 7)