

08

BEYOND
PANGÉA

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Stefano Marzano

All too often, the comforts of our technological society and the needs of the environment appear antagonistic to each other. People fear that sustainable design means giving up the handy inventions of the past century, taking a step backwards. But design can show us that such a pessimistic scenario is not inevitable. It should be possible to design ecologically minded, sustainable products that are attractive and charismatic enough for people to buy, while at the same time contributing to improving our quality of life. It is an ambitious goal, certainly; but it is one worth pursuing, on both ethical and economic grounds. If we accept the challenge, there are various paths to follow, potential strategies for realizing products compatible with sustainability and poetics.

One major factor burdening the environment is the relatively short life span of many products. We need to make products which last longer, and – more importantly – which people want to keep. To understand how to do that, we need to consider what it is about modern products that makes it easy for their owners to throw them away; and to recall what it was about objects in the past that made people keep them and pass them on to their children as treasures.

Relating to Products

Just as we are continually being bombarded by advertising and media messages so numerous that they cease to have any meaning, so the products we use often overwhelm us with their excessive number of features. The unused and irrelevant possibilities they offer us litter our minds like mental garbage. As a result, we no longer really relate to products or develop any affection for them. We never really make friends with them: they remain just casual acquaintances or incidental business contacts at the edge of our existence. And, because we do not feel bad about throwing away products we are not attached to, they end up polluting the environment.

While we have been creating this quantity-mad world, an essential human need has been neglected. Consider the sort of relationship our ancestors had with their objects – trusty tools, family heirlooms, totems or magical objects. Such objects not

only served a practical function but they were also carriers of memories, of personal or family history; they were magical or ritual objects that gave protection or expressed belonging. They remained in society. We have lost this affectionate relationship with most of our contemporary objects. We no longer form an emotional bond with them.

Envision the Future

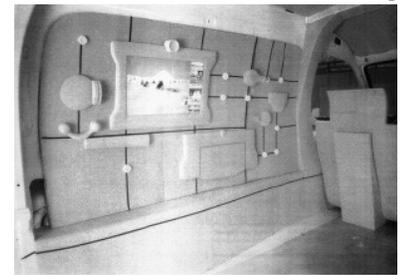
These concerns and views are found in the works of Satyendra Pakhalé. In the mid-1990s, Pakhalé was part of the New Business Creation Team at Philips Design, working on various projects. Under my design leadership, we initiated several collaborative projects with other corporations, joining forces to envision the future. These included Philips and Alessi, Philips and Levi's, Philips and Leolux, Philips and Lucent Technologies, and – last but not least – Philips and Renault.

During this period, we undertook several projects to investigate and create future scenarios in the hope of creating products and services that could potentially last and that people could bond with emotionally. In a multidisciplinary, collaborative spirit, designers worked in close cooperation with cultural anthropologists, social scientists and technologists. Together, we engaged with the design of lasting, sustainable possibilities for the future.

The Car as Companion

The Pangéa was one of the projects to look ahead and explore the world of objects and tools as life companions. Pangéa – Connected Wheels – was a visionary concept car project, created in collaboration with Renault, with Philips Design envisioning digital technology well ahead of its time. It is important to remember that the Pangéa was conceived long before Google was founded, well before GPS technology became accessible, and in advance of the all-pervasiveness of flat-panel displays, tele-media cameras, voice-activated input technology, digital graphic tablets and the internet.

In 1995, we asked: What if we take two companies working in ostensibly quite different fields but sharing the common goal of creating a better quality of life and then say the magic words – what if? – and just follow through. What if they joined forces in pursuit of that goal? In 1995, this was the starting point of a remarkable



A Stefano Marzano and Patrick Le Quément during the Pangéa concept car development, Turin, IT, 1996. Courtesy: Renault Design, FR.

B Pangéa concept car during a photo shoot in the south of France, simulating remote area exploration, 1997. Courtesy: Renault Design, FR.

C Full-scale study model of the Pangéa interior, envisioning the nomadic way of working with technologies, a decade ahead of its time, 1996. Courtesy: Philips Design, NL.

collaboration. Inspired by their respective design directors, Patrick Le Quément and myself, designers from Renault and Philips took up the challenge of working together on this joint, exploratory project.

Sustainable Society

As a part of the environmentalist call for a global view of the world, governments, organizations and individuals are becoming increasingly aware of the need to monitor the environment, not only for present generations, but also for future ones. The accelerating deterioration that has been observed in recent years has made it abundantly clear that our world is highly vulnerable. If it is to survive in a recognizable and agreeable form, we need to develop a sustainable society – sooner rather than later. Although improvements are already visible in some areas, it seems likely that this pursuit of sustainability will need to involve scientific research, advanced fieldwork, laboratory analysis and careful monitoring of the environment on a permanent basis.

The design departments of Philips and Renault decided to explore the possibility of developing a totally new kind of vehicle in concept form, one which would reflect this new situation. Making use of the latest environmentally friendly technologies, it would be a ‘mobile laboratory’: a multi-purpose professional vehicle which could contribute significantly to improving the quality of life.

Products that Last

After working on the Pangéa project, Pakhalé went on to orientate his independent practice towards researching the fulfilment of various human needs. By cultivating a sense of design aimed at rethinking our contemporary throw-away culture, Pakhalé acknowledges the improvements introduced by the modern lifestyle, while at the same time remaining deeply critical. Above all, modernity has opened the door to the age of discoveries, urbanization, the acceptance of technology, mass information and production, ending up, after two world wars, with the foundation of democratic values, which positively affected human, social and individual lives. A quick look at the contemporary world confirms that it is dominated by modernity in all its forms. With this in mind, Pakhalé recognizes and welcomes modernity’s great innovations, while simultaneously rejecting its conformism and dry approach to life based on a limited awareness of the world and a lack of cultural sensibility.



D Satyendra Pakhalé in discussion with Patrick Le Quément during the making of the Pangéa concept car, Turin, IT 1996. Courtesy: Philips Design, NL.

E Pangéa concept car before its unveiling at the Geneva Motor Show, Paris, FR, 1997. Courtesy: Renault Design, FR.

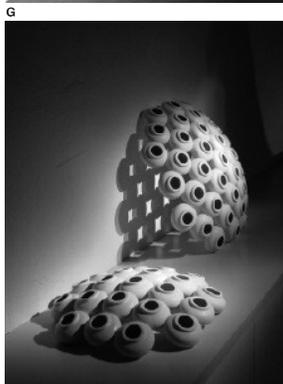
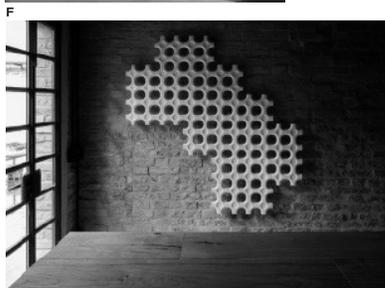
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In a fast-moving world with an unpredictable future and with social contacts being increasingly remote, people feel a need to establish a balance between living in the ‘now’ and being part of a tradition with an unchanging geographical base. Roots, traditions and rituals should be restored and cherished in order to give our lives depth. The throw-away society would – not solely for ecological and sustainable reasons – give way to a society which recycles short-term products and values others for a history that can be passed on to our children to continue the chain of the generations. Pakhalé has focused on creating objects and products that will hopefully last, eventually being handed over to the next generation.

Technology as a Tool

Technology never becomes something to be displayed to embrace the laws of the market or commercial consumerism in Pakhalé’s projects. Technology is a tool he keeps on cultivating, just as he did when I first met him, to allow his objects to speak to people and shape their lives, and hopefully the lives of the next generation. Every day in his studio he engages with this challenge, opting for the universal appreciation of human making, the richness of its values, and an all-embracing understanding of the significant role assumed by objects in human life.

With this intention, he continuously explores the functional, sensorial and technological qualities of his design projects in order to bring to light a universally graspable meeting point between various human needs and objects, which in turn mediate the encounter between humans and the surrounding environment. He works diligently to cultivate a design sensibility, a language that could last and create products that will hopefully become part of a collective human culture. In so doing, he proposes new design typologies, ingenious combinations of materials, forms and techniques. For instance, the Add-On Radiator¹, the Alinata Shelving System² and the Kalpa vase and bowl³, can all be truly said to introduce new functional typologies. The Kalpa can be used as a vase or a bowl by simply turning it upside down. It can hold fruits or flowers. Similarly, the Alinata Shelving System can be used as a wall, dividing spaces, and at the same time hold objects, but if a glass slab is placed on top of one of its modules it can also become a table.

F Alinata Shelving System at *Satyendra Pakhalé: Meeting of Minds*, solo exhibition at Hästens flagship store, Stockholm, SE, 2010. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

G Add-On Radiator at *Looking Ahead - the evolution of the art of making* at the Venice Biennale, IT 2015. Courtesy: Tubes Radiatori, IT.

H Kalpa Vase and Bowl at *Satyendra Pakhalé: OriginS*, solo exhibition at ammann // gallery, Cologne, DE, 2008. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

What if?

The future is not something that is created by the efforts of only a few individuals, companies or governments. It is the result of many contributions, of moments initiated in various places, of decisions whose impact may not be immediately apparent, but which ultimately can become highly significant. It all starts with asking: What if? What if we could do something, create unexpected collaborations, envision innovative future scenarios?

Therefore, at the risk of being charged with hubris, we, as producers of goods and services, and as designers, can – indeed, must – make our contribution in whatever way we can. Creating a new household appliance or domestic object may seem a minor venture in the grand scheme of the future, but that does not mean it will be without effect. Everyone must take a position and act with a clear goal in mind in those areas in which they have expertise and influence, joining with others who share the vision of a sustainable society to try to guide things in the right direction. This is, in essence, the ethic of our time. Pakhalé embodies this ethic through his diligent design practice.