
Eros and Ecology. The New Alchemy of Sustainable Design

Dario Russo

Università degli Studi di Palermo, Italy

ABSTRACT

This article explores the multifaceted nature of Eros, the incarnation of desire, as a central theme in contemporary design, where objects become symbols of desire that blur the lines between absence and presence, necessity and satisfaction. Drawing on Plato's Symposium, which describes Eros as born from both poverty and resource, we investigate the dynamic interaction between lack and desire in the form of creativity and human achievement. We analyze how iconic objects, from Ettore Sottsass's "Shiva" to the "Bocca" sofa and the "Valentine" typewriter, seduce us, possess us, and eventually lead to abandonment, reflecting a perpetual cycle of desire and detachment in our interaction with the material world. The discussion extends to the concept of "erotically sustainable design", exploring the shift towards sustainability in design that adds a level of desirability to objects not only through aesthetic and functional appeal but also through narratives of ethical commitment and environmental stewardship. The article aims to illuminate the deep connections between aesthetics, affection, and consumerism in contemporary culture, proposing that the challenge for modern designers lies not only in creating visually and functionally seductive objects but also in incorporating sustainable values that resonate with the urgent ecological and social needs of our time.

Keywords: Eros and design, Environmental sustainability, Cycle of desire, Design icons, Conscious consumption

INTRODUCTION

In a world where Eros, the very essence of human desire, is inextricably woven into everyday life, design takes on a new dimension, rising from mere functionality to a vehicle of deep erotic implications. Objects, once considered simple tools for human use, now transform into powerful symbols of desire, revealing a complex interaction between need, fulfillment, and seduction. One of the most penetrating reflections on this theme dates back to Plato, who, in the Symposium, presents Eros as the offspring of Penia, poverty or lack, and Poros, abundance or ingenuity (Plato, 206b). This genealogy is not merely a mythological narrative but unveils the profound nature of human desire: an entity that arises from lack but is capable of orienting towards creativity and achievement.

This article aims to explore how design becomes an arena where Eros plays a central role, analyzing the dynamic interaction between form, function, and communication in the context of our desires. Through a critical lens, it will

investigate how objects not only influence but are influenced by consumer culture, outlining their evolution from simple utilities to catalysts of broader meanings. At the heart of this reflection lies the transformation of objects into icons of contemporary desire, embodying not only personal aspirations but also collective ones, marking a turning point in the narrative of design. Specifically, it highlights how the aesthetic value of objects is increasingly intertwined with an ethos of environmental sustainability. This evolution reflects not only a change in the perception of design but also a growing commitment to responsible consumption practices. In this light, objects take on a new ethical significance, becoming symbols of a more conscious human desire committed to environmental preservation.

Through this journey, the aim is to emphasize how, in the contemporary era, design and the resulting objects represent a fusion between aesthetics and ethics, between individual desire and collective responsibility. By exploring the role of design in shaping our emotional and material landscapes, this article seeks to reflect on the seductive power of objects and the responsibility that stems from our relentless pursuit of beauty, pleasure, and meaning in the world around us.

THE BALLET OF SEDUCTION: DESIRE AND OBSOLESCENCE IN DESIGN

Design objects, especially iconic ones, exert an irresistible attraction, triggering a dynamic of desire deeply rooted in our perception. The consumer is trapped in a cycle of desires where they are both actor and victim: they stimulate a production of goods that transcends mere use value, but at the same time are subjected to an urgent compulsion to enjoy through consumption (Carmagnola, 2009), highlighting how the seduction exerted by products is part of a broader mechanism that affects our interaction with them. This process of seduction is immediately tangible, as Donald Norman emphasizes in “Emotional Design”, where the first sensual impression of a product can trigger a spontaneous desire reaction: an instant visceral reaction: “Wow, yes, I like it, I want it”. It’s the so-called “Wow Effect” (Dorman, 2004). This dynamic sheds light on the power of visceral design to directly influence our desire towards objects.

The ability of objects to “seduce” and enchant observers, also illustrated by Mario Perniola in “The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic” (1994), suggests that consumer objects, despite their materiality and belonging to the domain of the market, can assume almost “spiritual” meanings, elevating their value well beyond practicality. This aspect of design highlights how it can mask desires and impulses, transforming simple utilitarian objects into catalysts of intense emotions, comparable to the effect provoked by seducers or figures of irresistible charm, through an aura of seduction that surpasses their functionality.

This game of seduction unfolds in three key moments: attention, possession, and finally, abandonment. Attention is captured by the visual qualities of the object, its shape, color, material, and function, triggering an instinctive reaction. Possession materializes with the purchase, marking the moment

of utmost enjoyment in making the object our own to admire and use it. However, the cycle completes with abandonment, when the object, having exhausted its charm, is subtly distanced from us. This sequence is designed to exhaust itself quickly, pushing us towards new purchases in an endless cycle. As Günther Anders observes, the destruction of a product – sentimental before functional – represents not an accidental epilogue but its ultimate fate (Anders, 1980-2014). Thus, design objects fascinate us, bind us to them, and then leave us, in an eternal cycle of seduction, possession, and abandonment, reflecting our constant search for novelty and pleasure.

SEDUCTION AND SYMBOLISM: THE EROTIC POWER OF DESIGN

Design objects, with their innate power of seduction, are often likened to gallant seducers or femme fatales, embodying a charm that transcends mere functionality to touch the deep chords of human desire.

A prime example of this seductive power is the “Shiva” vase, designed by Ettore Sottsass in 1973. The phallic shape of this vase not only serves the function of holding flowers but becomes a symbol of erotic desire, evoking the silent essence of sensuality and sexuality. Its insolent presence becomes a surface upon which desires are projected, turning it into an object of fascination that many wish to possess and display.

Following is the “Bocca” sofa (lips), created by Studio 65 in 1970, inspired by Salvador Dalí’s installation depicting the face of Mae West. This piece combines physical comfort with a “super comfort” that is psycho-visual, becoming a quintessential symbol of eroticism: the Italian upholstered furniture industry was the first to “represent” comfort as a more complex value (Annichiarico and Branzi, 2008, p. 280), offering an experience that transcends mere sitting.

“Valentine”, a portable typewriter designed by Ettore Sottsass for Olivetti in 1968, known as «la rossa portatile» (the red portable one) (Dardi and Pasca, 2019, p. 151), is another object of seduction that rises above the ordinary. Its fiery red color and innovative design make it a captivating and seductive symbol, drawing attention and igniting passion.

“Firebird” by Guido Venturini for Alessi (1993), a gas lighter with a provocative shape, shows how even everyday objects can exert a seductive charm, inviting purchase with their bold irony and their ability to evoke a smile.

“Him & Her”, the chairs designed by Fabio Novembre for Casamania in 2008, offer a bold and blatantly erotic reinterpretation of the “Panton Chair”, exploring the harmony of the sexes through forms that evoke toned and sensual bodies.

Finally, Olga, a luxury sex toy designed for Lelo (2003-2005) by Eric Kalen, often mistakenly attributed to Philippe Starck, represents the pinnacle of seduction in design, promising an intense pleasure experience thanks to its shape, material, and the strategy of intentional waiting that enhances desire: “The best things in life are worth the wait. The second best things are crafted to perfection. Our luxury items are designed for those who seek every day magic and understand that good things take time. Once you commit to your

new favorite indulgence, please expect 30 days before this treat makes its way into your lap as it will be manufactured specifically for your order”, reads on Lelo’s website, highlighting the value of waiting and desire in the consumer experience.

These objects are not just examples; they are manifestations of how design can evoke and manipulate desire, transforming everyday items into icons of charm and seduction. They unveil the power of desire and its anticipation as a driver of human experiences. And, in a playful and seductive context, even an object like the *ólibos*, the leather artificial phallus mentioned in Aristophanes’ “*Lysistrata*” (vv. 108–110), shows how design and desire are intertwined in our culture and history, exploring the depths of our drives and desires.

GREEN THAT SEDUCES: THE NEW EROTICA OF SUSTAINABLE DESIGN

In the contemporary era, the relevance of design icons seems to fade, as observed by Chiara Alessi in an essay from 2018, marking the end of the era of great design icons. This is not due to a lack of talent or vision but rather reflects a historical and cultural context that has evolved, shifting the focus of design from questions of “who” and “what” to “how” and, most importantly, “why.” In this changed scenario, contemporary challenges such as climate change and the urgency of environmental, social, and economic sustainability become the stage on which the relevance and meaning of projects are played out. Today, ethics and sustainability are at the heart of design, making every object a message, a language that tells stories of sustainability. Thus, sustainability itself becomes a new tool of seduction, exploited through captivating communications that associate products with a sustainable ethos, transforming sustainability into a vehicle for enhancing desirability.

A striking example is the transition from Charles Eames’ “Shell Chair” of 1948 to the modern “Eames Plastic Chair Re”, now made from recycled plastic. Although the chair retains its iconic shape, the sustainable makeover increases its allure, using the name and communication to make it an object of desire in the era of sustainability. Reflecting on design, Maurizio Ferraris highlights that in our era, it is not so much the aestheticization of objects or the names of designers that characterize it, but rather the knowledge of the designers themselves and the fact that they give their names to objects (Ferraris, 2008, pp. 70–71). Evocative names like Eames Plastic Chair Re. Therefore, in a world facing climate change, “sustainable green” becomes the new color of seduction, surpassing the “fiery red” of past epochs, making “recycled plastic” more enticing and sellable than the “ergonomic shell” (“Shell Chair”).

In this era of “erotically sustainable design”, Eros intertwines with the imperative of sustainability, creating a seduction that goes beyond aesthetics to embrace a deep ethical commitment. Design thus becomes a field where the challenge is to balance seduction and information, desire and sustainability, navigating between visceral attraction and the promotion of responsible consumption. Studies such as those by Rather and Milfeld (2024) and Yokessa

and Marette (2019) highlight the importance of environmental communication, while Sheehan and Atkinson (2012) examine the delicate balance between stimulating desire and promoting sustainable practices, emphasizing the complexity of greenwashing dynamics in contemporary design.

CONCLUSION

In the current design landscape, the shift towards sustainable practices marks a paradigm change in the approach to the creation and consumption of everyday objects. The design icons of the past, with their ability to capture attention and stimulate desire through sheer aesthetics and functionality, give way to new expressions that incorporate environmental awareness. This transformation does not denote a decline in creativity or design appeal but rather reflects a significant shift in societal priorities and consumer expectations.

Today, designers are faced with global challenges, such as climate change and the need for more sustainable behaviours. In this context, sustainability emerges as a new criterion of beauty and desirability, capable of generating allure equal to, if not greater than, that of traditional forms and functions. The reinterpretation of design classics, such as the transformation of iconic chairs into versions made with recycled materials, symbolizes this transition, demonstrating how commitment to the environment can enrich an object with a new level of meaning and appeal.

This evolution of design carries with it a sustainable narrative that becomes central to product communication, turning the concept of sustainability into a vehicle of seduction. The choice of recycled materials, emphasis on low-environmental-impact production practices, and focus on durability and reparability of objects are no longer just ethical requirements but become distinctive elements that enhance the aesthetic value and seductive power of objects.

In this new scenario, the role of the designer extends far beyond creating aesthetically pleasing and functionally effective objects. Designers become agents of change, tasked with navigating between the need to seduce and the need to promote greater environmental responsibility. The current challenge lies in balancing these two aspects, managing to stimulate desire for objects that not only meet practical and aesthetic needs but also embody values of sustainability and ethics.

In conclusion, the emergence of sustainable design as a new frontier of seduction marks a significant turning point in the relationship between humans and objects. Design offers a lens through which to explore how beauty, pleasure, and meaning can converge towards more environmentally respectful practices. The convergence of aesthetics and ethics opens new pathways for understanding and appreciating design, not just as an expression of individual desire but as a manifestation of a collective commitment to a more sustainable future.

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