by
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Do you see the link between voting for a racist party and retail in our cities?

An unexpected link maybe but for me it's an obvious one and I'm tracing it in this essay, the first in a series of reflections on my job that I will share here with you.

In 2020, during the early weeks of covid, I put to paper my thoughts on retail, faux-authenticity, what is sacrificed in the name of efficiency, and the dreadful homogenization of urban centers in the age of social media.

My position has evolved to a much more radical one since I wrote it, but if you follow my work, this might be interesting— and hopefully helpful—to you.

TOWARDS AN ESTHETIC DEGLOBALIZATION

Resisting the Internet

In today's world it may well appear that stores are opened mainly for mercantile reasons, to satisfy a commercial desire. What's more, people generally tend to view the neighborhood store as futile, if not obsolete, in this age of e-commerce, rather than consider the services and social interactions that they provide. And yet, opening a store in the 21st century remains essential. Slowly but surely, we will come to see opening a store as an act of resistance: to the Internet, to the disappearance of our social ties, and to the desertification of our city centers. During this unprecedented healthcare crisis, and in the wake of lockdowns and restrictions on moving about in public, we all saw the highly social role that our neighborhood shops played. How many of us used the excuse of buying a baguette as a way to escape from the house for a few minutes, our permissions to leave the house in hand? How many of us rediscovered the pleasure of chatting with our fruit and vegetable seller? But even aside from this crisis, we must remember that many people live alone and that on any given day, their local baker or pharmacist may be the only people they talk to. Our neighborhood shops are, thus, vital. It is frightening to imagine a world where people's only social interaction is receiving a package or take-out delivery, or perhaps taking an Uber ride. Opening a store fulfills our need to preserve, to the greatest extent possible, those places where we can socialize. For those of us who belong to the pre-millennial generation, we could never have imagined that love would become such a business, in the form of dating apps where people seldom appear to meet anymore. People used to go to bars and restaurants, or even just try to pick someone up in public. This kind of direct, human interaction is disappearing in Western countries, and this is why I believe that opening a physical store is key to a country's mental health and well-being. Hence, the following thoughts on the need to revamp retail commerce, to reinvent how we think about it, and to consider the impact that this might have on our lives.

I. WHY ARE OUR CITIES IN DECLINE?

1. The style of cities

I believe that each city has its own esthetic specificity, its own identity, where the styles that characterize the various phases of its development manifest themselves like different visual strata to form the urban landscape. This identity is a veritable trademark, instantly recognizable among others, so much so that when you arrive in certain cities, you know immediately where in the world you are: in Paris for its Haussmann, Restoration, and Empire façades, in New York for its cast-iron buildings, and Art Deco and International Style skyscrapers, or in Berlin for its mixture of Bauhaus, Prussian palaces, and Soviet-era architecture. The visual appearance of objects, interior designs, and buildings shapes the local character of any given place at any given time. And this uniqueness contributes to the gradual, cultural development of societies. The esthetic specificity of places and the populations who inhabit them is intangible and it is constantly in the process of unfolding. It is what often inspires us to travel: to go see styles of production that are unfamiliar. It concretizes our relationship to the Other through a visual language that a community shapes and breathes life into, ultimately transmitting it to future generations. For that matter, when we visit a city, our sole contact with other people is often with salespeople in stores or waiters in restaurants; obvious as it now seems to us, tourism and consumption go hand in hand.

The forms that surround us participate in the fabrication of our culture; they represent the underlying, physical framework for all our activities. The formal appearance of our world is an integral part of our daily life and influences how we act, individually and collectively; this models our being in the world. Hence, the importance of design, of the forms we create, fabricate, and integrate into the world, and of their specificity and singularity, the non-resemblance of these various forms.

Before the globalization of our contemporary era, each place, whether understood as a city, a region, or even a country, had its own specific esthetic trajectory. Its architectural style was always tied to the access to local materials and specific modes of production. Subsequent periods each adopted their own style, with their canons that everyone acknowledges. "That doesn't exist anymore. It's the major characteristic of our new modernity: there no longer is a shared doctrine.[1]" In Europe, for example, a continent that boasts centuries-old traditions of craft, things are now mostly made "American-style," because the United States now dictates most fashion and visual trends. We must revitalize this local culture, this esthetic specificity in time and space, even at the risk of evoking certain unwanted nativist specters. Because the French style of the past, for example, is a visual trace, a living memory of our heritage, a bulwark against the amnesia that the era of cultural uniformity brings with it.

1. Christian de Portzamparc, *Toute architecture engage une vision de la ville*, Le Monde, February 3, 2006

2. Globalization: the source of an esthetic cancer

No matter in which city center I find myself these days, I generally come to the same conclusion: everything looks the same. One single style appears to have colonized any number of culturally diverse spaces. Cafés from New York to Seoul, from Beijing to Berlin all have the same minimalist décor, readily identifiable at first glance: terrazzo, brass, marble, decorative metal frames, imitation Scandinavian or industrial furniture, vintage Edison bulbs… All of these materials and furnishing styles, which no longer represent any specific, local identity, have now been exported the world over. A uniform hipster style for every occasion that exploits a sense of history and nostalgia for the industrial workshops that used to inhabit the neighborhoods that hipsters have come to colonize. Except that the authenticity here has been entirely fabricated. Through globalization, this style has become reproducible ad infinitum and, as a result, cheap to

produce. And it isn't just limited to the cafés of the world; it has taken over other kinds of venues as well, from bars and restaurants to shared office spaces and fashion boutiques. Even short-term housing rentals participate in this sense of total homogeneity. Esthetic uniformization has become all the rage, another consequence of globalization.

Hipsterization doesn't come out of nowhere. It can be understood as a consequence of a process of globalization, namely our exponentially increasing mobility. Never before has it been so easy to travel to so many places, whether for work or as a tourist. Greater and greater numbers of travelers pass through the same metropolises of Paris, London, Seoul, Los Angeles, and others. On the one hand, they take some of the esthetic specificity of these cities back to where they live. On the other hand, hipsterization, almost like a product, fulfills a demand: the demand of these travelers, who are in search of local authenticity, but who also want to feel "at home" wherever they go. As Kyle Chayka already wrote in The Guardian[2] in 2016, the hipster style provides a familiar, comfortable environment to this well-off, mobile class. There is a global circulation of styles, each one specific to a certain place, that have mixed and invaded the major cities of the world to form a large, incoherent amalgam of trends that are reproduced ubiquitously, almost to the letter. In the long run, we risk living in an extremely insipid world, destroying the specific heritage of any given place in the process. Why should anyone travel if the world's cities all lose their esthetic specificity? Why should we continue to shop in neighborhood stores if they all start to look alike?

2. Kyle Chayka, *Same old, same old. How the hipster aesthetic is taking over the world,* The Guardian, August 6, 2016

We should also remember that esthetic uniformization is merely one facet of a larger trend of cultural uniformization. It does not merely affect the design of objects, interior design, and architecture; it also conditions other forms of esthetic production, from film to music, clothing, and art. It ultimately impacts all forms of cultural production: language, cuisine, lifestyles, values, and norms. As the French economist Serge Latouche[3] described, cultural uniformization has descended on the world with a far-reaching fury. It is the result of the dissemination of dominant cultural models and a form of imperialism that often comes from English-speaking countries who have imposed their cultural forms on the rest of the world.

3. Serge Latouche, *L'occidentalisation du monde,* La Découverte, 2005

3. …and the experience of retail.

Today, tourism and consumption go hand in hand. In this sense, the experience of a city seems deeply intertwined with the experience of consumption and shopping in the stores that populate it. When visiting a place, it's only natural to form a particular relationship with shopkeepers, with servers in restaurants—sometimes they are even the only people we've interacted with by the time we return home. Just like architectural styles, these service professions are part of a city's image. The better my experience as a customer, the more likely I am to return to a particular shop—or even to a city—where I've had meaningful interactions with people in the service industry.

Yet, I feel that in neoliberal capitalist societies, these roles being at the very end of the consumer chain are often considered less important. Some businesses even seem to see them as entirely dispensable, replacing them with machines like self-checkout kiosks. If we consider these jobs to be of lesser value, we will naturally be inclined to pay them less. And yet I'm convinced that if a salesperson mistreats a customer, they can undo the work of the designer, the marketer, the manufacturer—from the beginning to the end of a product's creation and launch. If a single interaction between a seller and a buyer can ruin everything and can determine whether or not the product will be purchased, then isn't the salesperson's role actually the most crucial? In my view, we need to realize that this part of a product's story (the sale) is completely overlooked, even though it can make or break everything. Without necessarily upending the hierarchy entirely, I believe it's time to recognize the importance of these service jobs and to stop perpetuating the precarious conditions of salespeople: their underqualification, low wages, and so on.

4. Pinterest, Instagram et al.: the creative dudes

Esthetic uniformization is not due solely to the circulation of styles as they physically manifest themselves. It is also the result of an intangible flow of dominant esthetic trends that began to emerge among the billions of social media users in the early 2000s. Scattered across the globe, users of these platforms engage in a massive exchange of esthetically inspired images that constitute this globalized style. Social media use algorithms to influence how we as users consume images by ranking posts to show the content that appears the most likely to interest us: the same visual modes, the same signs, the same codes that have already been liked and shared, and which will be further distributed. Without our even realizing it, the internal logic of social media goes so far as to shape our tastes, and as a result, we find ourselves drowning in this globally uniform style.

This is not far removed from what the founders of the Frankfurt School, the philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, argued in their work The Culture Industry: Essays in Mass Culture, published in 1947. In their opinion, the functioning of the culture industry (the system composed of cultural products such as cinema, radio, and magazines, among others) tends towards the standardization and homogenization of all cultural works and products. "Civilization today gives everything an air of resemblance[4]," they wrote. The culture industry standardizes, schematizes, and simplifies for consumers, relieving them of the need to think. "The culture industry's style is the very negation of style." This is exactly what we are witnessing in the nightmare of hipsterism, esthetic uniformization and its simplification through globalization. Our cities are now running a veritable esthetic race to the bottom. I am also under the impression that more than just suffering from uniformization, style is slowing down tremendously.

4. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, Allia, 2012

One merely need study the photographs taken in city centers in the 1960s, 70s and 80s to notice the differences immediately, whether one compares the design of people's clothing or of their cars. But when we compare a photograph from 2002 with one from 2012, we see that the differences in style are much less pronounced, as if our creativity had slowed down immensely. This can be explained as a fear of risk. We see how this obsession with reducing risks permeates all sectors of our society, from education to healthcare to commerce. Just think of the extent to which we now fight illnesses! Risks must be minimized, according to the financialization of creativity, which has given us benchmarks: the analysis of the desire for consumption and the monitoring of products from competitors to optimize the creation of an equivalent product to be launched on the market. We watch what competitors do and especially what people want, and we make it for them. We no longer create because we follow our impulses and because we feel a kind of internal need that we think will also resonate with an audience. We create merchandise because we analyze and we believe we are responding to a demand. The main purveyors of creative "ideas" are social media, which have become permanent benchmarks. For example, a few years ago Pantone began to present their "color of the year," which they define as follows on their website:

> *"The Pantone Color of the Year influences trends in product development and purchasing decisions in a number of sectors, from fashion to industrial and interior design, as well as graphic design and product conditioning. The process of selecting the Color of the Year requires a thorough reflection and analysis of current trends.[5]"*

5. Présentation de la Pantone Color of the Year, pantone.com, 2020

What's so incredible is that the following year, a number of large companies who place consumer products on the market will actually use this color! Ultimately, it is this kind of initiative that gives the impression that the stylistic evolution of objects, cars, clothing, interiors, and buildings, a process that changes constantly in relation to the place where it unfolds, is stagnating, and is almost at a standstill. We could call this an "esthetic routine": everything around us looks the same, is reproduced from year to year, and gives us a sensation of Déjà vu.

I find that seeing the same forms over and over again generates a kind of ambient esthetic boredom and is leading to the dulling of our visual and physical sensations. I even think that this lack of surprise underlies the annihilation of our sense of agency and individual will; our sensibilities have fallen asleep, and we have become zombies. Perhaps only a fundamental revolution could change this situation, politically, socially, and economically and, in a way that is more relevant than one might think, esthetically as well.

5. Gentrification, the pseudo-local, and amateur artisanship

Unless it falters, the hipster style has a good bit of life left in it. It doesn't just fabricate a boring, insipid esthetic; it is fundamentally exclusive. All one has to do is walk the streets of the Marais, named for the marshes on which it was built, to realize this. In the 1940s, this was considered "one of Paris' warts![6]" Only in the 1960s, impelled by André Malraux, were major rehabilitation projects undertaken. This entailed the expulsion of many artisan and working-class families who lived in the insalubrious buildings that were slated for demolition. Exit the poor laborers, the immigrants, and the dark-skinned folks: the clear sign that the first phase of the neighborhood's gentrification had begun.

6. Élodie Falco, *Le Marais d'antan, d'insalubre à branché*, Le Figaro, May 2, 2019

It was precisely on the basis of this heritage that today's esthetic uniformization has prospered. The exponential rise in rents disfigured this old, working-class neighborhood, including the Marché des Enfants Rouges, Paris' oldest covered market, and its local stores. The Marais has become a kind of Las Vegas, a trendy storefront neighborhood populated by a meager slice of its former inhabitants, and by wealthy tourists in their second homes or in short-term rentals. The life of this neighborhood has been greatly impoverished; the only activity that remains along its streets is shopping in high-end boutiques. Heaven forbid one should claim esthetic uniformization, though. These stores do everything possible to play with the image of neighborhood and authenticity. Witness their indiscriminate exploitation of the term maison, or "house." People shop for clothing at Maison Kitsuné after eating at Maison Plisson, and then they sleep in the hotel Maison Bréguet. This is a far cry from the mire of the original Marais, which has since become a shrine to consumption and luxury. There is a certain kind of storytelling or excessive marketing at work underneath the false appearance of local, transparent production, which tells shoppers that they can rediscover a number of terroirs, local distribution channels, and more ethical modes of production. Myths and stories are woven around products to make people forget that they are in fact products. This kind of storytelling is one of the aspects of a hyper-marketing of everything possible for the sake of feeding social media.

For that matter, it is worth asking, who is opening these new stores? In the last several years, we have witnessed an explosion of new brasseries, cafés, cheese shops, coffee roasters, stores selling ceramics, vintage bicycles, and whatever else. At first glance, it seems as if artisanship has not gone through any sort of crisis. But when we dig a little, we realize that many of these people are recent business school or political science graduates searching for meaning, retooling for a new profession, often a manual trade or craft. The fear that this younger generation has led the American anthropologist David Graeber to coin the expression "bullshit jobs," referring mainly to office workers whose days are organized around useless, superficial, and meaningless tasks that generate alienation, because such activity is of no real interest to society.

This is why we see upper-level managers morphing into amateur neo-artisans. The younger generations have reversed what it means to be cool: "an Instagram photograph of cakes instead of working on a Powerpoint at a consulting firm.[7]" These manual trades or food-related professions, which are rooted in a local space and in a direct interaction with their clients, appear to fulfill better these businesspeople's aspirations. We are in fact witnessing the birth of a new profile: the neo-artisan, who possesses all the tools of the neoliberal world and the

7. Jean-Laurent Cassely quoted by Marine Miller in *Le hipster pâtissier est aujourd'hui plus valorisé que le cadre sup' de la Défense*, Le Monde, July 17, 2017

techniques and codes acquired at their business schools. In claiming to carry on a tradition, these entrepreneurs don't set up the cheese shops as we thought of them even twenty years ago. They instead create a Las Vegas of cheese shops in which everything has changed: under the pretense of authenticity we find the fabrication of brand images, the importance of social media, exponential margins on outrageous prices, and a diminished customer experience that remains limited, despite the strong commercial potential.

6. The impoverishment of creativity

The weak link in all of this is that these entrepreneurs often lack any sense of creativity; they are simply former workers from the world of finance! They are happy to follow a trend, which contributes to the uniformization of esthetics and modes of production. And here we can put our finger directly on the problem: the power to create has shifted.

Truly creative people have unfortunately lent many ideas to everyone with the appearance of social media and the massive sharing of images that has ensued. And these new entrepreneurs accessed this; they were under the impression that they could themselves be so creative, to reinvent themselves as artistic directors. For a long time, in an era before social media we believed that creativity was a sphere that was kept somewhat separately from the rest of society. Until the finance people came along and said, "Actually, it's simple; I see this every day, the sources, the references, the formal vocabulary, so I can do it too!" They have appropriated competencies without actually possessing them; hence, the nightmare that has yielded a veritable esthetic simplification, in which there is one sole source of inspiration: Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, and the first few pages of a Google Images search. People don't seem to realize that this pathetic sense of accessibility, which came out of nowhere, leads to poorer quality, because creating something is not merely a question of assembling a collage of references or cooking up a visual stew. Creativity has been decomplexified and made accessible to everyone; as a result, these young entrepreneurs call themselves designers and create brands that follow the latest visual trends.

Today, marketing dictates the design, with the help of esthetic benchmarks and moodboards commissioned from hip consulting firms. We must actually re-complexify the style of what we make. And to do that, anyone who wants to set up a project has to once more use artistic directors and designers for their competencies, their expertise, and the specificity of their own style. All of this has led, for example, to the proliferation in the last few year of property redevelopment projects that tend to erase the distinctive characteristics of a given place. These developers are forgoing the architectural heritage of the places where they work for a common, globalized esthetic. And fashion has gradually replaced esthetic specificity.

7. The great functionalist misunderstanding, or how to misread a book

However, the general impoverishment of creativity is not simply due to the emergence of social media and how they have codified and simplified esthetics. If everything tends to look alike, it's also because designers have misconstrued the seminal works written in this field, specifically the writings of certain modernist architects.

When Adolf Loos published Ornament and Crime in 1908, he took great issue with the various modes of ornamentation that characterized the production of the Second Empire and the 3rd Republic in Vienna. The Viennese Secession and Art Nouveau, the two main currents of applied arts at that time, were marked by a historical eclecticism that borrowed from just about everywhere. Above all, Loos objects to the "ornamental instinct," which he sees as the failure of the modern

era to create its own formal language. Even if it is important to remember the racist nature of such a text, which viciously objects to Papuans as an example of an "inferior" civilization, I nevertheless feel that, aside from the polemics and the paradoxes, there are several crucial lessons to be learned about the challenges that design faced at that time. To provide you with an image, the bourgeois interiors of 19th century Europe were decorated with thick drapes that barely allowed any light to enter, the furniture was heavily stuffed and padded, only to become huge repositories of microbes and dust, and an infinite quantity of knick-knacks in the styles of various eras piled up and encumbered the living areas.

The fight against ornament was a collective one, as other pioneers of modernism joined in, including the Austrian architect Otto Wagner, who inscribed his motto in the fronton of his Villa Hütteldorf: "Necessity is art's only mistress." Or, on the other side of the Atlantic, the American architect Louis Sullivan, who had written a few years earlier that "that the life is recognizable in its expression, that form ever follows function. This is the law." In France, Le Corbusier, who for that matter would publish Ornament and Crime in 1920 in his magazine L'Esprit Nouveau, also weighed in on this struggle in his major work The Decorative Arts of Today: "[We have to] rise up against the arabesque, the spot, the loud noise of colors and ornamentation."

It is essential that we understand these texts in the context of their era. For the fathers of modernity, the issue of ornament cannot simply be resumed as an esthetic problem; it was instead a question of civilization. Architects at that time saw ornament as a moral flaw and an economic drain. They asserted that a building or an object had to be useful, that it could not merely consist of an unjustified decorative expense, that priority had to be given to the material, whose intrinsic beauty had to be preserved, and to the function. This esthetic ideal mirrored a democratic one: if ornament was the province of rich clients and thus an expression of social inequality, its abolition would help envision a more just world. It also addressed a public health issue: the unhealthiness of housing in Western metropolises in full expansion was incubating unprecedented illnesses. Hygienism promoted a new understanding of our built environment, whose forms, this movement claimed, should sustain everyone's moral and physical health.

In terms of design, architects borrowed industry's materials and means of assembly line production, as a result of which an object had to be stripped down as much as possible, to reduce the number of its constituent elements and, thus, the number of production steps. "The principle of beauty in their eyes arose from a principle of economy, and the principle of economy, from a principle of utility.[8]" When we now look back at the characteristic production style of the modern movement, we see that its geometry, smooth surfaces, distilled sense of line, and the attention to new materials (such as concrete, metal, and glass) all contributed to the formation of a new esthetic paradigm. And this new style was not free of decoration either; it affirms a decorative system in its own way. Far from escaping from ornament, which merely changed form, it renewed our perception of the objects and buildings that surround us. When we look at Loos' interiors, we quickly realize that his precepts fell into the wrong hands and have largely been watered down. Consider the American Bar in Vienna, where he used brass, wood, glass, and onyx, all noble, luxurious materials, to conjure an ambience specific to modernity; it's anything but an aseptic white cube stripped of all ornamentation! It is instead a highly decorated interior, in the best sense of the term, which encourages the sense of ease and relaxation that a bar intends to offer its customers. Far from rejecting ornament, Loos instead radically renewed it.

I believe that this groundbreaking texts have been misunderstood. Some of their ideas have been removed from their particular European historical context and have become doctrine for certain architects and designers, who have used them to justify an extreme sense of functionalism. These creators instead meant to say: "We have to value material for what it is, and if you keep things simple, you will lower your costs." People instead understood that they were supposed to construct buildings and objects whose appearance was dictated by their use. This fundamental misunderstanding of Ornament and Crime gave rise to a kind

8. Sabine Cornille et Philippe Ivernel, *Presentation of Ornament and Crime by Adolf Loos*, Rivages, Paris, 2015

of carte blanche to big capital, and instead of simply abandoning superfluous ornamentation, we simplified everything and began to use cheap materials. Such misinterpretations are in large part the reason why our contemporary world has become so ugly!

8. The designer: a popular profession… that is not accessible to the people

Social media, the uniformization of styles, the hyper-marketing of design, misinterpretations are some of the main factors that have led to the impoverishment and simplification of what we create. Lastly, there is a much more direct cause that I think is key to understanding these phenomena: the education and profession of the designer, which have changed radically.

Over time there has been a significant watering down of the education available to designers. Design used to be an almost artisan profession, with a constant exchange over the development of the form, from its design to its fabrication. The workshop heads were among the best artisans in France, and they only trained a dozen pupils; the time of their apprenticeship was relatively brief. Just as there was a significant hierarchical distinction between the fine and the applied arts, the apprentices who wanted to become artisans were commoners, often from the working classes. The change in paradigm has also been one of quantity. When the École Boulle was founded in 1886, it was the only institution offering professional training in craft, furniture and applied arts in France. In the present day, there has been an explosion in the supply and demand for art and design education. In the public system alone, there are 44 institutions of higher education in the field of art and design for more than 12,000 students (numbers that quickly double when we also take into account the private ones). Obviously most of these schools do not have top-notch studios and tools; teacher recruiting has been institutionalized and is far removed from the artisanal nature of the profession. IT has come to occupy a primary place in this area of education through the emphasis on digital design and visual inspiration on social networks, what we call "trends." We are witnessing an enormous simplification at the very source of these creative professions, namely, in the schools.

Little by little, we also realize that designer has become a profession for the upper-middle class. Private schools cost between 5,000 and 10,000 euros per year. The website of one of the best ones, Strate School of Design, even advertises their partner banks, proposing preferential lending rates to help students finance their studies. Setting up an art school has become a real business, and a profitable one at that! Studies have been dragged out as well. As a result, even in the public institutions, the most selective of which are in Paris, the simple fact of having to pay for housing in the city immediately culls out many potential candidates; only young people from the privileged classes can afford to apply. There is a catastrophic lack of diversity in the access to art and design education in France, which helps explain why the profession of designer has become so exclusive; the financialization of teaching and education attracts future creative professionals who are essentially disconnected from most people's real needs. The advent of social media has also helped usher in the ambient narcissism of our time and the starification of the profession, a desire to become a well-known, highly sought-after "auteur" designer. The prices of their objects shoots through the roof, resembling more the untenable cost of contemporary artworks than, for example, a fair price for an accessible, democratic, high-quality table.

The training of designers has changed extensively in the last few years, but across a larger arc of time, we also see that industrialization has turned the techniques and processes for forming and producing objects on their heads. Until the Industrial Revolution, the artisan was often the person who both designed and built an object. This was someone with considerable skill and experience, someone who knew both how to manually shape things and how to create them. They didn't live with the same, huge distance between the work of designing and that

of fabricating that characterizes the modern age. Nowadays, the genealogy of an object, an interior design, or a building stretches from the designers who model it to the workers who bring this model about. In the era of digital design, the simple drawing of an object is often limited to the 3D modeling tools provided by software such as Rhinoceros, SolidWorks, or AutoCAD, all of which are used extensively in industrial design, interior design, and architecture. These platforms use Bézier curves to draw, which, it is worth noting, were invented by an engineer to standardize and rationalize drawing. If for no other reason, all the possibilities for creating new forms are restricted and reduced, which ultimately leads to a form of esthetic standardization. The only manual movement currently required in design is operating a mouse, a rapid, effective click that conforms to a logic of mass production. And the only movement needed for fabrication is often repeated incessantly along a vast assembly line.

The changes in how we train designers and shape objects are the major contributors to the impoverishment of what we create. They isolate designers from the society of their time and render them deaf to its actual needs. These changes have led them, like for all artisans, not to have a comprehensive overview of a project's progress, and instead to feel that they are instead mere links in a long production chain. People are in effect dispossessed of the fruits of their labor. It's no surprise that they are unable to feel pride or satisfaction over producing an object from start to finish, that they feel interchangeable.

9. The influence of Japan

Obviously a style of interior design or of a culture's objects does not exist in a vacuum; it is also shaped through the importing of exogenous elements. Especially in this era of globalized interactions, it is absolutely normal and even beneficial for different esthetic cultures to coexist, to interact, and to be porous to one another. In the realms of architecture and design, with a few decades separating them, consider Frank Lloyd Wright or Charlotte Perriand, and their particular relationship to Japan.

From the moment Wright opened his firm in Chicago in 1893, he had already developed a vision of organic architecture that was very close to Japanese philosophy, traditional Japanese housing styles, and the art of Japanese gardens. He was also a great collector of Japanese prints and engravings. This influence permeates all of his work, especially the design of the Prairie Houses, in terms of the architecture's integration with nature, the predilection for natural materials, and the relative simplicity of their construction. In the early 1910s, he devoted himself wholeheartedly to the construction of the new Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, where he surrounded himself with several Japanese assistants who went on to become famous architects in their own right, and who transmitted Frank Lloyd Wright's ideas through their own architecture firms in Japan. In the field of design, in 1940, Charlotte Perriand became an advisor in decorative art and design to the Japanese Ministry of Commerce! In this case, it was the state itself that used her recommendations in its guidelines for the country's industrial production. But Perriand, like Wright before her, did not come to Japan with the belief that Western styles were superior. They were both great admirers of Japanese culture and they remained humble enough in their desire to learn more about Japanese philosophy, esthetics, and know-how. They spent their years in Japan meeting artisans, visiting workshops and factories, and observing how people lived. They immersed themselves fully in the culture and took their inspiration from it to design objects, furniture, and buildings. We can see the fruits of this amazing encounter in Perriand's work, which lies between Western modernism and a traditional Japanese esthetic, specifically its use of materials and techniques, such as bamboo, weaving, lacquer, and even the rendering of space through the division of light and shadow in traditional Japanese houses.

There are many such examples. In a different way, with less cultural exchange but at a greater scale, consider the China Chair by Danish designer Hans

Wegner, which was produced by Fritz Hansen. Wegner designed this chair inspired loosely by a style of Chinese armchair traditionally called a "horseshoe chair" that he admired at the Danish Museum of Industrial Art. When we compare the two productions, we see that this was actually a redesign more than a fundamental reinterpretation but that notwithstanding, this "Chinese" chair is well made and has become an icon of modernist Scandinavian design. This recognition might be explained by the synthesis of the best of Danish expertise in woodworking at the tie and the traditional shaping of Chinese armchairs.

The notion of a reciprocal circulation of ideas and forms is fundamentally different from a unilateral pillaging. There is a difference between the mixing of cultures and their appropriation.

10. The tempura, ceviche, and caffè latte syndrome

The minute we stop talking about an equal sharing of culture and instead find ourselves facing the use of cultural elements by dominant powers for reasons of profit, we are well within the sphere of cultural appropriation. There are dozens of examples of cultural uniformization that have sprung forth in the world of large restaurant chains, which have increasingly resorted to a sense of exoticism to attract customers. Language itself has acquired a mercantile value that is accounted for in commercial strategies and the launching of new products. This is why, the world over, anything in the least bit fried is now called tempura, any dish made with raw fish is ceviche, and all coffees made with milk have become a latte. Under the pretext of originality, these names are assigned to dishes that are far removed from the actual specialty they designate, to the point of becoming utterly meaningless and absurd outside their original cultural context. These appropriations are made in the same spirit of the globalized interior design imported directly from the United States, which borrows elements from various cultures, from Japanese minimalism to Scandinavian design, only to regurgitate them in a "Western" vein. These exchanges have merely served to create an inchoate, global magma that has become the esthetic norm, even when it is re-imported to where it was first assembled, like a snake biting its own tail.

Globalization tends to erase all the distinctive characteristics of a given culture to render it more "consumable." This leads to a palpable loss of the cultural heritage specific to that place.

11. The decline of our city centers

To open a store the right way, we have to analyze the uniformization of styles that arises from this phenomenon that I have called esthetic globalization, but we also have to understand why, in sociological, historical, and political terms, consumers have forsaken physical stores.

"For Lease"… "Going Out of Business: Everything Must Go!"… the windows of despairingly empty shops plastered with such announcements and lowered metal blinds now pervade our cities, shadows of their former selves. In small to medium-sized cities in France, the percentage of empty storefronts is increasing with each year; in one of every three cities, the vacancy rate (i.e., the ratio of commercial spaces available for lease to those that are occupied) now exceeds 15%. As Olivier Razemon[9] has analyzed this, commercial desertification should be read as a symptom of a broader phenomenon affecting the downtowns of cities with less than 100,000 inhabitants, one that comprises a decline in the population (which also results in empty housing units), rising unemployment, a reduction of the quality of life, and the pauperization of the population that still lives there. Shops have left city centers because commercial leases have become too expensive, because people have harder time accessing city centers with their cars, and because e-commerce is competing heavily with well-established stores.

9. Olivier Razemon, *Comment la France a tué ses villes*, Rue de l'échiquier, 2017

This is the result of political, ideological and urban planning decisions that France made in the 1950s and 60s, as it began to confront various problems, including access to homeownership, the development of a car-based society, the rise of large-scale retail, and rural flight. At the time, people thought that cities should stretch out as far as possible to limit the promiscuity of city centers, to avoid people living on top of one another. The easiest way to foster economic growth and create jobs was to create industrial and commercial areas at the edge of cities. Between a supermarket that creates 300 jobs and pays education taxes and the neighborhood butcher, the choice was clear for politicians awarding construction projects. Land was given as quickly as possible to the property developer who would build the supermarket. This sort of short-term political thinking has truly destroyed the entrances to cities. We don't see this in England or in Italy. Some parts of Europe have remained protected, and this decision appears to be eminently French.

In the 1960s, we gave priority to commerce and to consumption, ultimately to the sale of mid-range products that were made accessible to everyone. This is when large-scale retail empires such as Leclerc or Auchan arose, they too setting up shop where there was more space, closer to the middle and upper classes who had opted to settle in the largely single-family home suburbs. City centers were no longer able to welcome so many cars. At that moment, consumption moved from the neighborhood shop in the city center to the suburban supermarket. The playing field ceased to be level. For the average consumer at the time, it was a dream, as there no longer was any need to go from the fishmonger to the butcher by way of the fruit and vegetable seller. Everything was under the same roof, which signified a non-negligible savings in time. The prices were also much cheaper, and the choice, enormous. At the same time, the entire urban layout underwent a major paradigm shift. All the surrounding properties, which belonged generally to farmers, were sold off. This came with a wave of first-time homeownership for the middle class, who bought houses designed according to the same model—which were thus cheaper—in areas surrounding cities that were characterized predominantly by single-family homes. And with this came the enormous amount of space afforded to cars. It is the world we see in Jacques Tati's films, where everything becomes standardized and automated to an absurd degree. And finally, inhabitants over time lost interest in their city centers, with the exception of very large cities like Paris or Lyon, where a cultivated, well-to-do class has persisted, for whom a car is not necessarily an obsession.

I believe that there is a direct relationship between the decline of city centers and individual political attitudes. In smaller cities, the middle and upper classes moved en masse to the suburbs. They were replaced by poorer populations, often immigrants. So, what visitors to the city center now first see are halal butchers and kebab shops. Even if the immigrant population remains a minority, they become a visual majority. People still go into city centers because public institutions like post offices or the city hall and private ones like banks are still located there. They see a majority immigrant population that looks unemployed, like they're not doing anything other than sitting on city benches all day, talking to one another. The impression is incorrect, but it's a strong one nonetheless, because it leads people to feel as if they have been "replaced"; hence, the far-right's theory of the Great Replacement. It's a vicious circle: when the middle classes abandon city centers for the suburbs, neighborhood stores disappear, and when the housing is small and cramped, the poorest populations who are economically forced to live there spend half their day outside. This visual impression of immigrants "loitering" on the streets of their city centers leads people to become xenophobic and to feel that they are being "invaded." If we allow this process to continue, city centers will one day be deserted, and everyone will turn fascist! This is what's happening in many cities in the south of France; I don't think it's by accident that in Béziers, a town where more than a quarter of all storefronts are shuttered, the RN party has made such huge gains and Robert Ménard was elected mayor in the last election with almost 70% of the vote. This is all very troubling.

12. Avoiding the Retail Apocalypse

In the United States, this has been termed the "Retail Apocalypse."[10] This term first gained traction in the American media in 2017, following a number of bankruptcies and closings of retail stores, perhaps most notably of the toy giant Toys "R" Us, which posted 5 billion dollars in liabilities in its 2017 balance sheet, and closed all its US stores in 2018, firing all of its 33,000 employees. The Retail Apocalypse refers to how consumers have abandoned physical points of sale, and how this has led to the gradual decline of established stores and the rise of digital retail giants such as Amazon. It is also in large part due to a change in consumer habits among a new generation that makes mostly online purchases using a mobile phone. A number of social media, such as Instagram, have become major e-commerce platforms. The first sectors to be affected by this shift were of course the markets for fashion, objects, books, movies, and music, in other words, the entire culture industry. But it is not just because of the growth of e-commerce.

10. Derek Thompson, *What in the World Is Causing the Retail Meltdown of 2017?*, The Atlantic, April 10, 2017

I draw a direct connection between the Retail Apocalypse, esthetic uniformization, and the culture of productivity. At the edge of cities, supermarkets all offer the same items to all their customers, while in city centers, food-related businesses, which had specialized offerings, were replaced by fashion stores, chains and franchises. Like supermarkets, they all resemble one another, offering the same products from one city to the other. For the few stores that remain, consumers have stopped coming because the interior architecture has been ignored in favor of a homogenous, "hip" style lacking in any esthetic specificity. It is also a question of the quality of service and the mediocre offerings, but we will address this later.

13. Exchanging time

Stores have developed a veritable culture of productivity and profit. Just as we are expected to design and manufacture more quickly, we are supposed to sell more quickly as well. This leads to a diminished experience for the customer, one that can readily be replaced with online information. The last attraction for stores was the possibility of buying "in person," entering a store and leaving with one's purchase. But Amazon Prime, with its promise to deliver in just two hours, has obliterated this advantage of immediacy. It is very hard to compete with this, because we suffer from addiction to velocity in our capitalist societies.

German sociologist and philosopher Hartmut Rosa[11] described this phenomenon in great detail. Consumers today are in a hurry, with a deep "need for speed." We want everything now, and before everyone else. And this constant acceleration goes against the quality of experience that the act of buying something in a store should provide. This also affects real estate, as property owners share this vision of catastrophic immediacy, charging incredibly high rents because cities like Paris draw the whole world to it. The situation is of course very different in smaller cities who can't play this game, because the whole world isn't flocking to Limoges or Toulouse, simply put. These astronomical prices result in part from gentrification and in part from the inability of lessees, be they individuals or store managers, to formulate a long-term plan. Leases pass from one lessee to the next, and unless we conceive of stores as existing for the long haul, we will abandon them for the sake of immediacy. We create flash-in-the-pan brands that will only last for a few months, opening nothing more than pop-up stores. These temporary stores resemble a classic point of sale, but their fundamental attribute is that they appear and disappear in just a few days, weeks, or months. This concept arose in the 2000s, inspired by the marketing strategies adopted by the founder of the watch brand Swatch. Limited editions were offered for just one season to test products before risking offering them more on the long-term. Pop-up stores are usually easy to set up and are barely furnished; it is their sense of immediacy that piques the curiosity of consumers.

11. Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity,* New Directions, 2015

In fact, the entire structure of our daily lives has succumbed to this paradigm of urgency that drives our economy. The illusion of a production that never stops is linked to the illusion of a modern individual who is also able to produce, consume, and work all the time. It is already happening: online, we can buy things 24 hours a day, read our emails in bed, talk on the phone when we're on the toilet, and eat while we're reading. However, this quest for speed is the very opposite of our physiological rhythms, which are instead tied to the pace and cadence of our gait, for example. This issue was already raised by the anthropologist Leroi-Gourhan[12], who discussed the divergence between the rapid evolution of technological objects and the slowness inherent to the human body, which has remained unchanged since prehistory. It is this very collision of two contradictory rhythms that has created our pathological modernity, our constant sense of urgency.

12. André Leroi-Gourhan, *Le Geste et la Parole II, La Mémoire et les rythmes*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1964

Nor must we forget that our profession mainly involves selling time. I have always thought of business as an exchange of time. For example, if I buy a bicycle, which may be relatively expensive, I have the impression that someone took a lot of time to design and to build it. In purchasing it, what I give in exchange is a certain number of hours of my life (assuming that I am being paid on an hourly basis). So, if I pay 1,000 euros for this bicycle and I am paid 50 euros an hour, I can calculate that this bicycle is worth 20 hours of my working time. In other words, the money I earn is time I exchange for fabrication. This concept has a name in Japan: honmono, the true product, the authentic object.

This was Marx's revolutionary contribution to economic philosophy: his novel concept of commodity fetishism, which describes how the capitalist system conceals the working time spent by a commodity's producers behind its trivial appearance, thereby reifying the fundamental nature of social relationships between people. This ambiguity is what makes luxury goods so clever: sold at a very high price, they give the impression of a very slow time of production. They invoke a certain notion of craft by promoting an image of hard-working artisans who tirelessly labor over the same, small piece of tissue to create their embroidery… even if this fabrication process does not at all take the time one thinks. Soe luxury brands have gone so far as to develop sewing machines that introduce manual irregularities! But this issue of time can be applied to all areas of our lives. Love and friendship are also a question of time, the time we want to spend with someone, and the time we spend thinking about them. Life itself is a question of time, since we are here only for a finite amount of it.

14. Visual obesity, or no future

Our relationship to time has become extremely complex. Paradoxically, this seems unthinkable when we have to tackle contemporary social and economic problems. In addition to the culture of productivity, the addiction to speed, and the exchange of time, there is one final relationship to time that we must address: the "eternal present."

We are constantly being assaulted by images and information that we cannot digest. As soon as we receive a sign, we are already onto the next one, whether on Instagram or websites that feed us steady streams of information. It has become such a pathology that we have coined a word to describe the constant surfing of new information on social media: doomscrolling. With the healthcare crisis, the general state of paranoia, being locked down at home, this symptom has grown extensively. We search frenetically for information and images to fill a void, our eyes riveted to the screen as we scroll through data, sometimes for hours at a stretch. This overconsumption engenders a vicious circle: the more we scroll, the less we are able to absorb and digest, and the more our sense of powerlessness and anxiety feed themselves and our addiction. We have become visually obese, victims of an overfull present, a permanent present that does not allow us to readily envision the future or digest the past. And this has an impact on what we see and want to do; we only look at a small scale, at tomorrow, without imagining what even next year might be like.

In the philosophy of time, the attitude of considering only the present to exist, and not the past or the future, has a name: presentism. We have truly become ill in our relationship to time, as asserted by the medieval historian Jérome Baschet, who wrote in his 2018 work Undoing the Tyranny of the Present:

> *"The perpetual present, or presentism, is a form of imprisonment in a hypertrophic present that both weakens our historical relationship to the past by reducing it to a few, scant remembered images and impedes any vision of the future that is not an extension of the present… The thus eternalized present appears to be the only possible world. This relationship to historical time… is typical of the neoliberal capitalism that arose in the mid-1970s and asserted itself increasingly in the following decade.*[13]

13. Guillaume Ledit, "Nous sommes malades de notre rapport au temps," interview with Jérôme Baschet, Usbek et Rica, 2018

We can explain it in particular through our relationship to the future, which has totally changed since the emergence of neoliberalism in the 1970s and 80s. Since the Enlightenment, the future was synonymous with progress, and society tended to place a good deal of faith and optimism in the future. We now feel so powerless about the seemingly endless political, environmental, economic, social, and health crises. An entire generation has lost this faith in the future, which has become more synonymous with a sense of threat than hope. But we have to believe that it is possible to change this relationship to time, to open up our ability to project ourselves into the future, not with the certainty of progress inherent to capitalism, perhaps instead by using alternative systems.

This is a very general observation, but it does apply to designing of stores. Nowadays, we exploit the notion of the ephemeral to observe trends. A boutique may open and close in just a few months' time, and this inability to envision a longer-term perspective is making people unstable and fatalistic. We have to break this construct of the eternal present! In designing a store, this can involve very simple commitments that nevertheless defy the logic of commercial haste inherent to the neoliberal system. For example, we can decide to produce in a fairer way, prioritizing quality over profit. This demands a logic that is slower and sometimes costlier. As consumers, we can decide to buy less but better, investing in a higher quality product at the moment of purchase with the intention of keeping it for longer. To take the time to choose a comb, one we could use for years, rather than picking up a plastic one at the supermarket, only to break it or throw it away a few months later, because the object has no value in our eyes, neither symbolically, emotionally, nor qualitatively…

I am convinced that the fundamental issue is, what life does a product have today? Today, why for the price of a hamburger that we will swallow in just a few minutes can we buy a pair of pants that we should be able to keep our whole lives? This is neither normal nor healthy, and it this problem of usage that generates different timeframes for producing, thinking, choosing, and consuming.

15. Esthetic and social racism

The hipster style: some can afford it, and others can't. In 1905, the German philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel analyzed the process of division inherent to fashion in a brief essay titled Philosophy of Fashion. As an imitation, it presents itself as belonging to society, but as a means of differentiation, it embodies an act of social distinction. According to Simmel, fashion should be viewed as inextricably linked to social hierarchies, as it constitutes "a product of the division into classes.[14]" The hipster style acts like a trend and social form: by bringing together individuals from the same group, it excludes people from "lower" groups. A coffee in the Marais often costs five euros in places decorated in a "minimalist" style (which is actually just a code word for "cheap"), where this same coffee used to

14. Georg Simmel, Philosophie der Mode, Broché, 2014

cost just one euro not even twenty years ago. All people want is a good coffee, and for less money! Thus, esthetic uniformization generates an economic fracturing and, in turn, the death of cultural diversity.

This economic fracturing also entails a social fracturing through the expulsion of an entire segment of the population from the neighborhoods afflicted by gentrification, which is in part also tied to this esthetic uniformization. In Paris, where property prices now average more than 10,000 euros per square meter, the working class and a good chunk of the middle class have lost the economic ability to live here. Even working class neighborhoods like the Goutte d'Or in the 18th arrondissement have fallen prey to wealthy home buyers who even just a few years ago would never have deigned to set foot in such areas of town. And with this new population come new entrepreneurs with local, neo-artisanal initiatives, lugging their globalized esthetic along with them. The same ones who showed up some ten or more years ago in the Marais. "Paris is becoming a lair of the super-rich," said Emmanuel Trouillard, a geographer responsible for conducting housing research at the IAU, Paris' Institute of Urban Planning and Development[15].

15. Quoted by Soazig Le Nevé in À Paris, *des classes moyennes en voie de disparition*, Le Monde, June 11, 2019

The lower classes are condemned to move away to the banlieue, suburban cities with significant amounts of public housing. To make a very simple example, let's consider the Cité des 4000 housing project in La Courneuve in the Seine-Saint-Denis department, which emblematizes the grands ensembles projects built in the 1960s throughout the greater Paris area. Four large blocks of housing were built at that time to house thousands of people who could not find a place to live in Paris, many of them repatriated from Algeria. In no time at all, this ghetto of poverty concentrated many social and financial difficulties, mass unemployment, and with that, the emergence of a delinquency that was often drug-related. But we have to understand the violence in these housing projects also in esthetic terms.

The ugliness, exclusion and violence are all connected. Godard expressed this very well in Two or Three Things I Know about Her, a portrait of a young single mother who becomes a prostitute, and who lives in the very housing project that Nicolas Sarkozy wanted to wash down with high-pressure water hoses. The Cité des 4000 is first and foremost a series of long walls of gray-blue concrete towering more than fifteen stories in the air, a kind of prison that Godard filmed in a panoramic format to accentuate this space that lacked any perspective to provide a sense of escape or any horizon to offer a view of the future. Today, everyone is struggling to implement a coherent urban renewal policy that involves tearing down these old block houses and building something better in their place. If we had built these suburbs better from the start, investing them with significant esthetic capital, their inhabitants and the projects they inhabit would not have both fallen into such a sad state. Historically, the beauty of Paris' heritage, preserved through the architectural rehabilitation of various neighborhoods within the city limits, has been reserved for the rich, while ugliness and insalubrity has been foisted on the poor.

We can see the same thing at the different scale of automotive design. When Dacia launched its first low-cost vehicles, they were made in the shape of a rectangle! Finance people in fact think that poor people just doesn't understand design. They tell themselves that they just need a car, and so, no effort goes into designing the body. The only reason it works is because it's not expensive. It's a shame, because producing a good-looking, well-designed car and an ugly car with no formal identity costs the same, because it is merely a question of shaping a mold! But in the minds of the people running these companies, poor people have bad taste or simply don't care about the formal appearance of their objects. This is the exact opposite of the culture of elevation that existed in the 1970s, when even the most democratic objects had to be well-designed. And once more, the social fracturing goes hand in hand with an esthetic one: the beautiful goes to the rich, and the ugly, to the poor.

II. TOWARDS AN ESTHETIC DEGLOBALIZATION

I. Local specificity

The wealth of any society resides in the uniqueness of what it produces, what we might call its esthetic specificity. So, how can we make sure that we do not lose this cultural diversity at an international scale? I believe it is essential that we uphold the idea of an esthetic heritage as a guiding stylistic thread, one that we nevertheless continue to revisit and renew.

France's Urban Development Code contains an "esthetic article" to protect the specificity of rural and urban landscapes in the context of local urban planning. Materials, colors, and all other esthetic criteria used for new constructions are studied to ensure that the structure does not impair the character of the space where it will be built, and, to the contrary, that it fits into this environment harmoniously. Cities also have what is called a coloration master plan, which uses precise color charts for its various neighborhoods. Thus, anyone wanting to build is subject to a range of colors and tones for façades, doors, balconies, and shutters, and sometimes even the design of the wood and ironwork, and of the furnishings visible from the street. The city of Angers also recommends the ongoing use of traditional materials that form the base of the city, which include schist, limestone, and wood. In Oléron, to protect woodwork from weathering, people have customarily used whatever leftover paint they had for their boats. As a result, doors and shutters were always green or blue, and today, the island's charter has preserved this traditional color chart. All places have resources particular to them that produce an equally specific know-how.

As everything is starting to look alike through this process of esthetic globalization, we have to rely on our spatial and temporal context to design new projects to live alongside the things that form our past. This also applies to the creation of a new store; we should examine its coherence with the plan for the city where it will open, in accordance with this notion of esthetic heritage. A boutique should be unique and yet, appropriate for its surrounding architectural styles, unlike chain stores, which all reproduce a single construction model. When you visit a Louis Vuitton, Hermès, or Christian Dior boutique, whether you are in Taiwan or Toulouse, you will find the same products displayed in the same windows at the same time. But people should instead be confronted with the local character of any given place. To do this, long before any development project is undertaken, people have to think long and hard about the locally available materials, the history of that city, and its local know-how to design a project that is intelligent and well-adapted. We must ultimately value the local natural and human resources that any given place has to offer.

Things also have to change in terms of esthetic responsibility. Currently, esthetic decisions in cities are often made by politicians who have no design or art education, whether they are former attorneys, social workers, businesspeople, or political scientists. They draw no distinctions between the beautiful and the less beautiful. We shouldn't hold this against them, because they have not been trained to see this. But people should recognize that one cannot improvise a creative perspective and sensibility. Moreover, they are surrounded by people who are interested in other things besides quality and esthetic specificity, namely producing cheaply and profitably, according to a neoliberal, capitalist logic. There no longer is any long-term follow-up on projects, whereas the esthetic components should be designed and overseen for the long-term. We have to be able to look back to analyze past successes and failures, to acknowledge them, and to learn from them.

Decisions must rise above the political, and the terms of office in our political system are generally too short for making decisions! Moreover, even among creative professionals, the best people are not making the decisions. Among architects and urban planners, we witness a kind of ego delirium in their desire

to make their historical mark on cities, a narcissistic delusion that is cut off from all local realities and the needs of inhabitants. It is so pathetic to see the architecture firms of stars such as Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry, and Reem Koolhas disfiguring the cities where they work, without perceiving the local nature of the place, the esthetic specificity of the landscape and its future users. Like a McDonalds or a Starbucks franchise, large architecture firms authoritatively impose their narcissistic esthetic, thereby asserting further the immense power they already wield.

2. Do we really have to innovate constantly?

We must again seek out the truly creative minds: designers, creative professionals, artisans, who all have certain competencies, a committed approach, and their own style that exists in relation to the space where they work. In late 19th century Victorian England, William Morris championed this power of applied arts against the mechanization brought by the Industrial Revolution. Today he would be defending the power of designers against the globalization of the digital era. Morris was a painter, architect, decorator, poet, illustrator, and intellectual who helped found the Arts and Crafts movement. When we reread some of his lectures, such as The Arts and Crafts of Today and How We Live and How We Might Live, we see just how relevant his thought and practice have remained to how we design, now more than ever. He was not against machines and mechanization per se, instead the ugliness of manufactured products and the dehumanization of workers that this process entailed. He was inspired by the spirit of the Middle Ages in particular, its sense of human solidarity at the service of beauty and quality, especially in the erection of cathedrals, which were never built by a single person, and instead by an interdependent group of trades. The talent of each one was essential to the construction. Morris enacted this principle when he established his own company to create domestic objects, furniture, wallpaper, and stained glass, among many other things. In his speeches, he denounced the abuses of industrial society and its unbridled pursuit of profit, which was aggravating the divide between classes and transforming the lives of workers into a desert of ignorance and misery.

> *"To see a man of those inches… has given me a feeling of shame for my civilized middle-class fellow-man, who is regardless of the quality of the wares which he sells, but intensely anxious about the profits to be derived from them… The decorative painter, the mosaicist, the window-artist, the cabinet-maker, the paper-hanging-maker, the potter, the weaver, all these have to fight with the traditional tendency of the epoch in their attempt to produce beauty rather than marketable finery, to put artistic finish on their work rather than trade finish.[16]"*

16. William Morris, *The Arts and Crafts of Today, in Art and Its Producers, and The Arts and Crafts of Today: Two Addresses Delivered Before the National Association for the Advancement of Art*, Longmans & Co., London, 1901

Morris begins by noting that, regardless how one describes the ornament of a certain epoch, its artisans have never stopped themselves from decorating the objects of their work. His notion of Arts and Crafts is simple: if man's fate condemns him to work, art can be a source of consolation for this fastidious labor. Far from being futile, the fabrication of objects of daily life under respectful conditions allows a worker to feel that he/she is creating something beautiful, useful, and personal. For Morris, appropriating a task through an individual artistic gesture allows artisans to accept their work and find a certain pleasure in it. Thus, "as eating would be dull work without appetite, or the pleasure of eating, so is the production of utilities dull work without art, or the pleasure of production." We can view Morris' struggle as lying at the origin of a massive esthetic revolution: the appearance of the applied arts in the lives of societies. He is the father of what we now somewhat generically call design.

I sense that it's a short walk from the Victorian bourgeoisie to the neoliberal, hipster entrepreneurs of today. Couldn't we push for the transmission of artistic know-how and advocate for the pleasure of seeing local artisans create things that are beautiful, and which are such because they exist within a historical and geographical context? In the spirit of William Morris, it is time that we help workers re-appropriate their productions, and shun those industrial modes of fabrication that disempower and disenfranchise workers.

To begin with, if we want to regain quality, we need to rediscover a sense of time and slowness. When designing a store, we can choose to involve local artisans in the project, who will help us acquire an awareness of the traditions that characterize the place where the store will open. These artisans can provide visual, esthetic, and technical assistance to help us create a space suited to its usages, and a particular sales experience. Those who do hire designers and artisans bear the responsibility of not pushing for mass production, of rediscovering a connection to the handmade and to durability, where the priority for the product is quality, and not quantity. If we truly consider all of this, we must also reflect on what this could entail for designing a store, namely that it involves more than a simple act of decoration. Creating a space in an enlightened manner means working with designers and local artisans in a way that is not merely a passing fashion statement. It means ensuring that these experts remain connected to the project over the long term and not just as the works are carried out, consulting them when there is a problem, asking for their advice, establishing a bond of trust. By cultivating deeper, more durable, and more local relationships, we realize that creating a store is more than simply a question of generating a profit, and that it instead entails the creation of a social bond.

Avoiding using the standard whatever, subcontracting from far off, not shifting and exporting productions to developing countries, surrounding oneself with a team: this creates a healthy economic environment where even money circulates on a more local basis. Creating a store is like creating a work of art. It takes time. Consider someone who do not invest properly in setting up and decorating their home, even though this is where they will live for years, if not the rest of their lives. I believe the same principle applies to a store. While one certainly has to take the limits of one's resources into account, one should take all the time possible to arrive at something beautiful. We have to remember that a store is a kind of religion. That may seem bizarre to say, but it's true. It's your temple, your salespeople are its priests, you are its apostle, and your product catalogue is your Bible. When people find a beautiful church, they may well return there to pray, but if your temple isn't beautiful, no one will come back!

3. Taking one's time

One of the most crucial aspects of setting up a store today is hiring the most qualified people possible, or at least people that can be trained over the long term, so that we revive the actual profession of selling. It's a shame to reduce this to being a cashier. Being a salesperson has become a temporary job, but it used to be a veritable career that allowed people to develop highly specific skills. Salespeople have become the last step, like an anus in a digestive system; they are often the worst paid in the company where they work, and the least respected. The people who run the company have to take responsibility so that they can once again be proud of the complexity and diversity of knowledge and expertise that their profession demands. For example, at Buly, we pay our salespeople 30-40% above market rate, because we know that these are ultimately our most important employees. We have taken the time to train them in various languages, calligraphy, and in origata, the Japanese art of paper folding and packaging. We are simply trying to reconsider the multitude of practices that this professional actually involves.

A true salesperson knows all the products intimately, takes the time to listen, to advise, to explain, and to suggest. This person has acquired skills and expertise in

this domain, and can also transmit them. Just as during the phases of designing and fabricating a store, we should not treat the moment of sale as something to be completed as quickly as possible; it should instead be something that is done as best as possible, by taking one's time. As I said before, buying something can be summed up as an exchange of time. And as a salesperson, I am giving you my time to sell you a durable product, which took time to design and make.

This relationship is now highly imbalanced; we buy something quickly and very expensively that was made in just a few seconds. We have to do everything we can to rediscover the exceptional nature of this exchange between the salesperson and the customer around the product. And this applies to any domain! Just as when the vegetable seller explains a recipe, tells us a story, or gives us advice on storage, we realize that we are dealing with someone who knows the entire history of various kinds of tomatoes; these kinds of interactions can be fascinating each and every time. Or imagine your local fishmonger who has your phone number and knows what you like, and who calls you to tell you "I just got some phenomenal sea bass from Brittany for you!" This elevates a simple commercial gesture to the level of social interaction, the sharing of experiences, which is precisely what is missing from supermarkets and large retail stores.

If we want to ward off the Retail Apocalypse, we have to reintroduce a notion of surprise and selection, to be better than the Internet. The Internet represents an utter lack of human interaction, where everything is automated, and which offers a selection one could make oneself and find elsewhere. Of course it's nigh impossible to be cheaper, but we can provide better service. We can explain where the product comes from, who made it, and why it costs what it does. We can look for things that people don't necessarily know about and which they can discover in the store. We have to rely on our customers' intelligence and natural curiosity; they want to learn and understand, not just buy. We also have to change our windows every week, consider our displays and interior layout, create new pathways, train our sales staff, and pay them well. Ultimately, we have to create a community of trust around our store.

This concerns all kinds of businesses, and not just high-end ones. You can be extremely creative with a kebab shop and give your customers looking for this kind of product an exceptional experience, one that doesn't just copy the kebab joint down the street! Unlike most everywhere else, by injecting our creativity into places where it matters, we can raise intellectual and esthetic standards. Let's take the French style kebab at the restaurant Grillé, which is made with high-quality veal, incredible fries, a spectacular sauce, and a special bread. Yes, it's slightly more expensive than a regular kebab, but they have raised the bar considerably. Instead of a kebab, they call it a grillé, which is actually the translation into French of the Turkish word kebab. Outsmarting the Internet also means no longer competing on the basis of price alone, and not necessarily viewing everything as immediately accessible. Making these efforts is the price we have to pay to save our neighborhood stores.

4. Esthetic deglobalization

Opening a store has become a political statement. It's a way of keeping our city centers from dying, of preserving human interactions and social bonds, of protecting the beauty of our cities and reclaiming our power from the Internet giants. Unlike the same, old chain stores that have invaded all the world's cities to offer the same, old products, opening a store supports a local, balanced economy and slows down social, economic, and even esthetic globalization. To return to the example of the tomatoes, if you want to sell tomatoes, things have changed. You have to find out everything about a tomato, and then go see your local grower and ask him/her to grow more so you can expand the selection of tomatoes on offer to include new varieties to meet demand. Analogously, the esthetic arrangement of a store, which relies on the spatial and temporal context in which one lives, serves as a counterweight to fight esthetic globalization, and helps cities rediscover the

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diversity and specificity of their styles. A store has a much more important role to play in this than society leads us to believe. It is today the only thing that can influence everything; if consumers are encouraged to buy organic, and if the shopkeeper can influence a small grower, the entire line of consumption can be transformed. This holds true for all kinds of businesses, from fashion to furniture, and it is of primary importance to our future.

We are living through an unprecedented global crisis that comprises health, environmental, political, economic, and of course social issues. One merely need recall the recent international movements for feminism, against racism, and against police violence. But this crisis is also esthetic, and we must acknowledge that the creation of forms cannot be separated from the other challenges we face, even if they appear more important. It's urgent that we do. Henri Lefebvre, a Marxist sociologist in the 1960s, developed a critique of daily life. For him, time marked by habit would only lead to the reproduction and perpetuation of relationships of dominance between classes. To break this pattern and ennui, which I would compare to what I called an esthetic routine, he argues that the inventiveness inherent to creation and the esthetic experience serve to undo the normative conventions of daily life. In The Right to the City, he goes so far as to uphold a new right alongside the right to individual freedom and the right to equal treatment before the law: the right to the city. A fundamental, inalienable right to a fair urban life, to a quality of urban life. Let us imagine this resulting in cities becoming centers for esthetic insurrection against daily life. For Lefebvre, our fundamental, anthropological needs are not take into account in urban planning: the need for an imaginary in particular, which is the great failing of the cultural and commercial structures erected in cities. Let us draw all the lessons from this that we can, even the most paradoxical ones, never mind that they might make Lefebvre spin in his grave. By designing alternative stores that form part of a production circuit that respects the esthetic specificity of local areas, creating new ways of consuming, developing long-term collaborations with local artisans, taking the time to choose the proposed items carefully, and on an individual level, buying less but better.

This could lead to a transformation that has become crucial, one that would sketch out a possible process to oppose esthetic uniformization: esthetic deglobalization.

With research and references by Grégoire Schaller.