

Obsession with future food. Reflections on the role of time in food design

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We are currently living in the past and the future at the same time. We are living in a moment of uncertainty that is seemingly suspended in an unstable present. This paper aims to reflect on the effect of time on the combination of food and design. The work of food designers intrinsically incorporates the idea of the future. We could say, to use a provocative expression, that food designers are obsessed with future food. While the term “sustainability” is not yet a global priority, Covid-19 has brought to light its oldest value, that is, one linked to the idea of time. Sustainability is in fact defined as the ability to maintain in the long term the ecological processes that happen within an ecosystem. For this motive, “sustainable development” means taking responsibility, in particular towards the next generations.

This paper briefly details how during the lockdown in 2020 in Italy, ElleDecor (a renowned architecture and design magazine) wanted to hold an event an exhibition on food and design. Because of Covid-19, the FabFood exhibition was completely developed online (<https://fabfood.ellededor.it/>). The event aimed to feed the international debate on the inequities and paradoxes that characterize the agri-food system and to raise doubts and generate ideas for the current research in food design. Autoctonario, a South American project is presented as part of the exhibition. Inspired by the exhibition concept, this article concludes by providing five contemporary ideas of time and responsibility for the future of food design.

Keywords:

food design, future, sustainability, online exhibition, time.

Introduction

We are currently living in the past and the future at the same time. We are living in a moment of uncertainty that is seemingly suspended in an unstable present. It's like we are eternally waiting for the future to begin to take form. Like never before, we are faced with a present that has already transformed itself into our future. Until the outbreak of the pandemic, our purpose was primarily centered around anticipating negative future events and investing our strength and resources to combat these. From this year, 2020, on, we will probably start to use terms like “before” and “after” with a much greater awareness. But certainly, both in terms of our “before” and our “after”, food is the most fundamental element in our lives, closely linked to all the resources which allow humans to live on this planet, like air and water.

The work of food designers intrinsically incorporates the idea of the future, or rather, it seeks to anticipate the future: not to chase it, but to anticipate it, predict it and plan it. We could say, to use a provocative expression, that food designers are obsessed with the future. Over the last 10 years, I have focused my career on identifying the most ideal tools for redirecting our future towards sustainable development. Firstly, this was achieved through my doctoral thesis which looked at the impact of digital technology on our ways of producing and eating food, and then later, during the many corporate workshops I have organized, at possible food scenarios in the year 2050.

I have always argued that food designers have a superpower: they are the heroes that are able to make and remake a system that is full of challenges to resolve, in order to build a model of development aimed at better food sustainability. As designers, our mission almost always turns out to be impossible, since, as we know, in 2020 we are producing enough food for all of humanity to live on, yet famine in the world is still a huge problem and affects more than 821 million people who do not have access to the nutrients they need. And the post-pandemic data are certainly not any better. By contrast, 2.1 billion people are either overweight or obese. We urgently need to feed a growing global population, yet 40% of the world's grain resources is used for livestock and fuel purposes. Lastly, each year we waste one third of the global production of food over all its stages, during the processes of conservation, transformation, distribution and consumption. But the amount of wasted food is four times as much as the amount of food we need to feed all the malnourished people in the world (Eating Planet 2018). This figure is sadly getting worse in the “after” stages of the pandemic.

After the pandemic I have felt a strong desire to give a real meaning to the combination of the two words food+design. Leaving behind the historical meaning of this binomial, we can finally enter into the broader dimension it refers to, as a “project over time”, which is relevant both to the individual and to the society that governs our world. While the term “sustainability” is not yet a global priority, Covid-19 has brought to light

its oldest value, that is, one linked to the idea of time. Sustainability is in fact defined as the ability to maintain in the long term the ecological processes that happen within an ecosystem. For this motive, “sustainable development” means taking responsibility, in particular towards the next generations.

This paper briefly details how during the lockdown in 2020 in Italy, ElleDecor (a renowned architecture and design magazine) very much wanted to hold an exhibition on food. Because of Covid-19, the FabFood exhibition was completely developed online (<https://fabfood.elledector.it/>). It aimed to feed the international debate on the inequities and paradoxes that characterize the world agri-food system and to raise doubts and generate ideas for the world of research and food design. I was personally involved in the planning of this exhibition, selecting and describing certain food design projects of our time that help us to understand their link to the past and give us a glimpse into the challenges of the future. Among these was Autoctonario, a South American project that aims to combat the cultural loss of the culinary traditions of Uruguay.

This article concludes by providing five contemporary ideas of time and responsibility for the future of food design. These suggestions remind us that it is necessary to aggregate and promote a culture of sustainability and conviviality, but also to move design towards trans-disciplinarity and digital technology, with a view to giving added value to all these things. There is no need for degrowth (often defined as “back to the past” attitude), just for a

change in the development model, in a harmonious way, capable of generating new widespread well-being. Without this, there can be no real progress; it would only grow the number of new and increasingly unacceptable inequalities.

Future food and “dormant resources”.

Food design has always been a combination of relationships and non-linear time, or in other words the coexistence of multiple time frames that dance simultaneously. It is believed that food design is always solely geared towards the future. However, food design does not come from nothing: design never starts from zero, but always begins by re-thinking and re-valuing everything that surrounds us, to be able to re-design and propose all of this in an innovative way.

On one hand, food design strives to acknowledge the tangible remains of the past, on the other, it influences us to overcome the limits of creativity, expressing what today appears to be unimaginable. Taking an abstract view of the human experience of food over time is fundamental in order to review our past interactions with ingredients, production, distribution and consumption and to therefore design future food systems.

Each time food designers are called on to develop a process of innovation in the agri-food sector, they must consider that the biggest mistake they could make would be to forget the past to design an imagined future.

If we were to use a design approach to plan any kind of intervention in the global food systems, it would be impossible to ignore what happened and methods that have had positive or negative effects up until now. And if we wanted to change the way we design, we would need to deal with the excessive productivity that we are now used to, and the growing expectations of consumers everywhere in the world. But we would also have to face numerous problems and resolve the serious damage that has already been done: environmental issues, climate change, and the consequences of the financialization of food, to name but a few.

Recently, I followed an inspiring presentation by Professor Lorenzoni, an expert in strategic management at the University of Bologna, wherein he explained the processes of innovation through a metaphor based on the ruins found on an archaeological site. He defined the ruins as “dormant resources”, silent resources that are visible to everyone but we often don’t even look at or consider. Some experts (historians and archaeologists, for example) have the necessary lenses to understand and interpret them, or else they would be lost. Although we are aware that those ruins are very important to us since they are what is left of our tangible past, our political and economic history, as well as our cultural heritage, we often do not consider them essential to our everyday life. And we consider them totally useless for our future.

A ruin can have a different meaning for a historian or a tourism manager,

for a landscape architect or a policy maker who deals with municipal funding. A designer is the expert who, using his or her transdisciplinary skills and competences, takes advantage of information and expertise to revive these dormant resources, and designs tools for them so that others can keep them alive. I like thinking about the work of a designer, about the creative process and innovation in this sense, most of all because it shows almost immediately what the biggest risk might be if these “dormant resources” are not cared for: the ruins would likely be lost and vanish forever, physically and culturally.

Every day, we are living alongside many “dormant” resources that are under all of our noses but are often forgotten. These resources are, for example, our landscape, soil, energy resources, and also, our food.

Fabfood, the first online exhibition on food and design powered by Elle Decor Italia.

A matter of weeks after the apocalyptic scenario of Covid-19 in Italy, Elle Decor Italia inaugurated the FabFood virtual exhibition dedicated to food in July 2020. The exhibition was created to investigate the relationship between the rituals relating to food, and their formal expression, from public spaces to domestic ones, in a world in which the theme of food is constantly evolving. Its focus on health and sustainability was inevitable, but it also did not avoid discussing present and future restaurant locations and the environmental themes linked to food production. The project saw the collaboration of a multidisciplinary group of professionals:

architects, scientists, graphic designers, creators, historians, landscape designers and food and construction materials producers.

A narrative was built that transversally connected tradition and the future, both in a state of constant tension. The transition from an analogue installation (initially, the exhibition was designed to be installed offline) to a digital one (due to the obvious impacts of Covid-19 on the artistic-cultural sector) Represented an important challenge for the Italian magazine, which on this occasion decided to experiment with a new and engaging formula, namely, creating an interior project, transformed into virtual 3D, that could be navigated on multiple levels of in-depth analysis, both of products and design, as well as of the scientific issues related to them. The final result is an immersive and experience-based journey, that virtually includes:

- **A Labyrinth**, a green urban space that contains seats and tables among blooming, edible plants;

- **A FutureMarket**, a futuristic supermarket where you can discover new frontiers of today’s food, to understand the trends of tomorrow and what food design is focusing on;

- **A Tribes section**, where three interior environments describe, using spaces and objects, different cultural approaches and lifestyles of urban communities with respect to food: Green-eaters, Future-foodies and Food-geeks;

- **A Cook&Share area** and a **Decor Restaurant**, where we can wonder

how restaurants will be “after” our current times, and we can experiment with new combinations with a specific ad hoc menu and an installation in collaboration with famous designers;

• **Finally, Home**, a virtual space that tells us about our domestic environment in the post-Covid era that is the reality of more and more people following the spread of smart working, where environments, food ones included, are increasingly fluid and liquid (Bauman, 1999, Bauman, 2002)

Futuremarket: food designers are obsessed with the future, but consumers are not.

When we came up with the Future Market part of the project, I deemed it necessary to structure it through questions rather than answers. My idea was that the audience should leave that space with more doubts than certainties. They showed that a univocal response does not exist, but there are different creative solutions that often overlap, towards which humanity (and designers) should be aiming.

Humanity has three colossal challenges ahead: food, energy and the environment. I thought that this exhibition should offer the viewer a “transdisciplinary perspective of uncertainty”. Nowadays, there are already countless solutions to resolve the aforementioned challenges, but it is also true that they could, individually and in the long term, exacerbate other problems. Shared and systemic solutions must be identified in order to reinforce the global commitment to planning a future for the next generations.



Figura 1 FabFood online exhibition by Elle Decor Italia

This is a crucial moment in which we are facing unprecedented challenges to food security and the conservation of our global environment, and when we think of sustainability, it is unlikely that tonight's dinner springs to mind. Confronting our global food challenges requires all of us to pay more attention to the food we put on our plates since the choices we make will help to re-frame our future. So, while we are pushing our shopping carts around the supermarkets, we should start to ask ourselves a lot of questions.

The most frequently debated global problems are those of poverty, famine and malnutrition, water, biodiversity in general and, in particular, agricultural biodiversity, as well as climate change. The exhibition tells us how in recent years researchers have studied a

lot to find alternative solutions, especially concerning the production of proteins that would be capable of replacing those of animal origin. But are today's consumers really willing to eat meatless protein and support sustainable agriculture that does not overwhelm the planet's resources? Do they believe that saving the planet and making it sustainable is a task for their generation or for those of the future? Unfortunately, according to an IPSOS research study conducted by the BCFN Foundation in 2019, the current scenario appears pessimistic. IPSOS survey for the Barilla Foundation which involved 800 young people between the ages 14 and 27, shows that Italian children/young people are well-disposed towards battles to reduce the impact of human behavior on climate change, but they are not sufficiently informed on

strategies to be put in place to this end. They know little about the Sustainable Development Goals promoted by the UN and - above all - they do not know the great impact that agricultural production and the food they consume that on the environment. And the most worrying aspect is that 60% believe that sustainability should be tackled by future generations.

Plastic pollution is one of the biggest environmental threats of our time. Consumers around the world understand how severe the effects of this are, and so food retailers have begun to sell and transport products in "Sustainable Packaging", or "Biodegradable Plastic" or "100% Recyclable Packaging". But what do these slogans really mean for the consumer? When consumers buy a plastic object, do they really understand its long-term impact on our planet? It is important to highlight the fact that just because a product is recyclable does not mean it will be recycled. Over 90% of all plastic ever produced has never been recycled. The examples mentioned during the exhibition attest that our goal is not to produce alternative plastics, but rather to find strategies and processes to produce less waste and rethink food as a precious material, not one to be wasted and contaminated.

Food photography reinforces our expectations of "Perfection" – it distances us more and more from the reality of food, that is often imperfect and ugly. Food that is considered ugly due to cosmetic and aesthetic imperfections only makes up a tiny percentage of overall food waste. However, it affects our food demand

and choices. Would consumers sacrifice the aesthetics of what they eat for a more equitable and fairer distribution of food? The examples from the exhibition show that ugly food that is thrown away because of cosmetic or aesthetic imperfections affects our food demand and choices. According to ISTAT, in Italy in 2009, over 7 million 500 thousand tons of fruit and vegetables were discarded during harvest and therefore never made it to our markets, shops and kitchens. This is an enormous figure, especially taking into account that the consumption of fruit and vegetables of all Italians added up to 8 million and 400 thousand tons.

By saving, exchanging and reusing seeds for thousands of years, farmers and gardeners have carefully selected crops, adapting them to growing conditions and climates, thus creating a rich genetic heritage of plants that has formed the basis of the global food supply for thousands of years. The FAO (FAO, 2015) confirms that approximately 75% of genetic plant diversity has been lost due to the rapid expansion of agricultural and monocultural (single crop) farms. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) reports that between 60 000 and 100 000 plant species are currently at risk of extinction. How many consumers know that re-valuing these endangered products and conserving their seeds will be essential to increase food self-sufficiency and encourage greater food security for future generations? Nowadays, however, we consume plant species that were domesticated thousands of years ago, and we have long since stopped creating new ones. Given the constantly changing climate, this could pose a

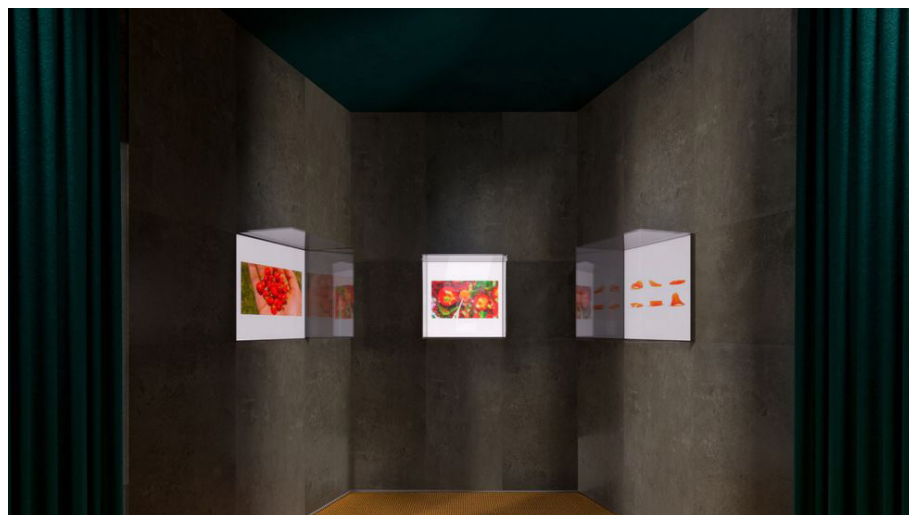


Figure 2 Future Supermarket section. 3D exploration. Screenshot (Sonia Massari, Food Advisor)



Figure 3 Autoctonario Frutos Nativos

serious problem. Many plant species must be restored, including those that are most suitable for becoming the food of the future and that are more resilient to climate change.

On one hand, it seems unthinkable to rely exclusively on our own home gardens to grow the food we eat, on the other hand, indoor solutions could be of crucial importance in the urban nutrition of our cities of the future. Soilless farming, the fourth agricultural revolution, is an interesting solution for food security and control in terms of the economic and productive advantages of its application (seasonal adjustment, no manpower and limited use of resources). As shown by the exhibition, small-scale forms of self-production are no less important, and have encouraged the recovery of domestic-sensorial and family dynamics rituals dating back to human civilization and the domestication of plants. However, several questions arise from this scenario:

- Will there be more and more time in the future to recreate conviviality, for example by increasingly focusing on preparing family meals, cooking and dedicating ourselves to small domestic crops? In urban houses, which are becoming increasingly smaller, will we have the space to do so?
- Indoor agriculture will be able to answer many of the questions asked by today's consumers about where their food comes from, its sustainability and its healthiness. How important will the flavor of the food we eat be in the future? Will taste be synonymous with quality?

- Self-production will contribute to

the redesign of the current agri-food processes. Products suitable for home use will be vital to the success of local food production. If in the supermarket of the future we will find more and more seeds to germinate and kits to grow our foods in a hyper-local way, will we only trust the products that we grow ourselves?

- If technical skills and green thumbs are not needed to grow food, since a computer will do all the work for us, what skills and knowledge will be needed for our experts to produce high-quality food?
- Pre-Covid-19 data showed that in 2050 two inhabitants out of three would go to live in the cities. Will this prediction change? Will in-home food farms help to reconcile humanity with nature, even in the cities?

If it is true that the future will bring us more creative types of food, it must also be true that it is time to rethink our future through the man-food relationship. We ought to ask ourselves why we need to design new food beyond what we already have, when perhaps instead we should simply redesign the way we produce and distribute it, creating food systems that are healthier for us and more sustainable for the planet. The key word for the future is food sustainability: a term that is still too complex and not all of us seem to be moving in its direction.

From South of America: the case of Autoctonario

There were many more varieties of fruit grown in the past than today, and

they were often named according to their place of origin. Industrial and demographic developments, which characterized the last century, have led to profound cultural changes: in the agricultural sector, for example, technologies used in mass production have grown, which meant that it was necessary to only select some varieties of fruit plants, those compliant with industrial treatments and methods, that gave an excellent yield and were resistant to atmospheric agents, and that were suitable for industrial manipulations and transformations, but also for storage (in the fridge, too) over long periods of time. At the same time, consumers' tastes have also changed, preferring the aesthetic and dimensional side of the fruit, as well as its usability in the kitchen, which is also constantly changing. Ancient varieties of locally grown fruit and agricultural biodiversity were soon abandoned or set aside, leading not only to the loss of the genetic heritage of these ancient varieties, but also to the greater loss of a cultural heritage.

Each day, dozens of plant species become extinct and no one bats an eyelid. It's incredible, our lives depend on them, and they are never spoken about (Mancuso, 2019)

Designers, too, along with researchers, producers and gastronomic experts, are now returning to work on fruits (that is, any plant product), on their multifunctional role that is not only productive, but also environmental, landscape-related, recreational and cultural. This is not only because these species can be integrated in an urban garden, in a home farm or in a vegetable garden, but also because they allow the

study of specimens of ancient varieties, aiming to always keep the values of the past alive while at the same time satisfying the modern aesthetic taste. This systemic design study then moves to the local and native levels, developing innovative solutions to gastronomy and food-related needs, to improve the relationship people have with nature, enhance these forgotten resources, spread them among the population and re-evaluate them in the collective imagination.

Innovation and tradition work together to rethink the identity of the fruits, starting from studies of the past, using elements from the present and giving new meanings to the future. We experiment with their dimensions, combinations, textures and colors. But morphology and material form are also studied as the principle of the authenticity of a place and a culture.

Revitalizing the practice of seed saving in individual people is vital to the collective food security of the world. The techniques of harvesting, conservation, as well as the creation of seed banks and seed exchanges between farmers, gardeners and even nations, will play an increasingly important role in our society, not only in order to preserve ancient varieties, but also to resolve any future emergencies related to pests, diseases and climate change. Not only this, but also the selection of seeds, as well as the collection, germination, reproduction and practical applications of seeds will help us to save the knowledge we will need to reinvent new local food scenarios and contexts in a global economy.

One of the projects presented in the exhibition is Autoctonario, from Cuchara, www.cuchara.uy. They are a duo comprising an anthropologist and an industrial designer. Autoctonario was created when they started getting to know and working with some producers and militants of native fruits. These fruits are very rich and diverse, from a culinary and nutritional viewpoint, and they have been in their country since prehistoric times. However, they are not known, produced or consumed by Uruguayans. Although in recent years with the slow food movement and the new gastronomic heritage economy, some chefs, producers and agronomists have started recovering some of these fruits and placing them, little by little, in the gastronomic sphere, still in the general population, for different economic causes and social and historical policies, these fruits are not widely known, and therefore not widely appreciated. They realized that this lack of knowledge not only involves native fruits, but many other autochthonous (indigenous) ingredients found on their land, and that are under-appreciated and under-used (seaweed, wild mushrooms and wild herbs, among others). The two food designers argue that one of the reasons behind this is that when Uruguay was born as a country it was denied its roots and the contributions of the original population and its resources, looking instead to Europe as a symbol of civilization, and therefore identity. Fortunately, in recent years a process of redefinition and repositioning of national cuisines has begun, with new demands for representation and gastronomic identity in Uruguay and throughout Latin America. In the same sense, authenticity is gaining increasing

social value and food heritage as a tourist resource and motor of socio-economic development is beginning to become widely recognized.

In this way, the Autoctonario project addresses these problems through the development of a series of products where indigenous ingredients are the protagonists. Their goal is to make products that allow more people to access them, as well as understand their importance and history. This visibility can encourage other enterprises or companies to use these fruits as ingredients and motivate the increase of their production. It also aims to boost the gastronomic value of national territories and expand their offerings of edible souvenirs for tourists, who are major consumers that are interested in the value of a product's origin.

They started with chocolate, since it is a food that can make anything edible and appetizing. They continued with other ingredients in other formats (tea, snacks and more). They designed the molds (printed in 3D), developed pairings with the different types of chocolate, and created recipes and packaging with the aim of making those original fruit products become the protagonists and therefore allowing them to tell their story. In addition to benefiting from the mix of disciplines, they work together with fruit producers, small businesses that already manufacture products using the fruits, and with chocolate makers who supported them in the development. This project was supported by a state agency: Agencia Nacional de Desarrollo.

Conclusions. Time and design methods for food sustainability transitions.

Food design is needed in order to provide methodological approaches that are useful for changing behavioral paradigms and for fostering new mentalities in the agri-food sector. Both the design of the food experience as well as the material qualities of food and the tools dedicated to it have evolved a lot in the last century and they have had significant impacts, both practical and emotional, on the way we supply our food and on our food acts too.

Now more than ever we have to study and work on Sustainable Futures: on our interactions, actions, services and systems that will make a difference. Consumers play an important role in this and to manage the connection between food and nature in a complex world like the one we live in today, they must first of all change their diets. Changing our diets is not the only way we can reduce our ecological footprint, although often it is the fastest way to lighten the burden we place on our planet. Transparency, and a sense of reassurance, simplification and portability, expansion of time and a rebirth of conviviality, which define the new paradigms of consumption and purchasing behavior, will symbolize our need as humans for our roots, territoriality and culture: simply put, our need for interaction.

I would like to conclude with five contemporary ideas about the role of time in food design. These suggestions will help us to stop our obsession with future food and begin to design our present in a more responsible way.

•**Collective times:** Seeing the future as an anticipatory network. You cannot do everything by yourself. Our perception of time varies from person to person. The past can be seen through different eyes and only by bringing these different viewpoints together in a transdisciplinary way can we arrive at a process of innovation. We must break out of our individual comfort zones and use empathetic mechanisms to reflect on ourselves, working with others and designing for the sake of the planet (Massari et al, 2020). In this so-called Anthropocene era, it is time to re-think the role that human activity has on the planet and on the man-food relationship. For years we have been hindered by gaps in our knowledge, but today we know the scenario very well. We only have to understand how to use our creativity to leave behind our current state of uncertainty and develop “joint” positive strategies. We must not forget, as well, that the main ingredient that is missing in many cases is the will of the individual.

•**Valuable time:** Modelling the critical cultures of anticipation, since time is a resource and must be used in the most effective way. In terms of the food of today and that of tomorrow: which drivers of value will be put in place by humanity to give a new meaning to our eating? Considering the imaginary science fiction future of food where humans feed themselves using pills and food is only considered in terms of its nutritional value, which is actually happening nowadays, we seem to be following a very different course of action. Our era constitutes the best moment to redesign, in a positive way, the cultural value of

the relationship between humanity and food, but also between food and nature. The social relevance and urgency of a vast operation of rethinking this relationship mean that we can no longer put this off, we must respond, at the root level, to the needs and abilities of people. The awareness of having a food culture in which people are able to identify and recognize their “food cultures of wellbeing and knowing how to live” is the most effective driver for redefining the value of food in concrete terms.

•**Present time:** Introducing performative anticipation as well. Focusing our attention on the moment we are living in, putting to one side our anxiety about the future. In a state of emergency, you must never plan. You must adapt and try to survive. However, you can study. You can study which rituals and behaviors are preferred, and which interactions are created. Moreover, you can study which solutions should be found. And by studying, we can start to identify the assets we can use to plan the next future. We should not become obsessed by the idea of food in the future, but we should instead constantly question ourselves and find a way to plan for the present that we want.

•**Tangible time:** Utilizing the methods and design techniques to create anticipatory practices. Transforming the perception of time into a multilayered experience. Sustainability for everyone, however, is unfortunately impossible. But it is possible to activate a sequence of layers of sustainability. The SDGs help us in this way to define in both tangibly and objectively the deadlines they must be achieved by.

•**Measurable time:** Exploring the dissonance between our image of the future and the available methods of designing, remembering the ancient link between time and the cosmos. We must face future challenges and give shape to possible alternative processes, emerging practices and effective sustainable pathways. Therefore, this means using planning methods based on design to facilitate the exploration of young people towards a transformative change in favor of sustainability. We are in the era of Agency-centered design (Massari, 2020). “Methods of the future” (futures) must be identified that can be used to help the emerging generations of sustainability planners and designers, and better prepare for the needs of a future that is constantly changing and transitioning.

According to Mayall (2003), social actors are individuals who have the power to act, and the agency is in the hands of the eater, the producer, the distributor, the educator, the policy maker and also the designer, who make a difference together with other individuals, helping to change situations, influence social processes and kick-start the production of healthier and more sustainable cultures.

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