Episode 4: The Detail with Giorgia Lupi

Transcript of the fourth episode of the podcast "With Ferré, projects and principles in dialogue" titled "The Detail", with guest Giorgia Lupi. MOOC "Unfolding Gianfranco Ferré", Polimi Open Knowledge, Politecnico di Milano.

"With Ferré, projects and principles in dialogue" is a podcast curated by the Gianfranco Ferré Research Centre with Paolo Ferrarini. In this series of conversations, we meet designers and practitioners from every field. With them, we talk about their projects, their challenges and their working methods, always starting from Gianfranco Ferré's design principles – namely body, matter, colour, detail, volume and movement. We will discover viewpoints, disciplines and applications that help us to understand more clearly Gianfranco Ferré's vision, his cultural legacy and the relevance of his thinking in all the different fields of contemporary design.

When we admire Gianfranco Ferré's creations, it quickly becomes clear that creative freedom and design rigour meet in the detail. Whether it is a particular workmanship, a technique, a decorative element or a structural one, the symphony of minutiae that make up a garment contributes to the substance of its message. The theme of detail is also at the heart of the work of Giorgia Lupi, an internationally renowned information designer and leading voice of data humanism. We meet her in New York, at the offices of Pentagram – one of the world's most important design studios – where Giorgia is a partner. With her help, we explore those aspects of design that are tied to the small elements that make a big difference, moving towards a kind of design that overcomes obstacles and gives concrete form to ideas.

Paolo Ferrarini: Giorgia, welcome to the podcast of the Gianfranco Ferré Research Centre, Digital Innovation for the Creative and Cultural Industries at the Politecnico di Milano. Today, with you, we will talk about one of the founding values of Gianfranco Ferré's creative process – detail. I know that ever since you were a child you have loved putting things in order, and that this already showed an almost – allow me the word – obsessive passion for detail.

Giorgia Lupi: Definitely. One of the anecdotes my mother still loves to tell is what my favourite pastime was when I was little. Both of my grandmothers were seamstresses – as many grandmothers were in the Eighties. All my friends' grandmothers were seamstresses, it seems. I loved spending my afternoons after school in one particular grandmother's workroom. She had countless buttons, threads, ribbons and, of course, all the tools she used for her work. My favourite pastime was taking everything out of all the drawers, spreading it across the big table she sometimes used to cut large patterns on, and putting it all back in order every day according to different categories and, we might say, different taxonomies.
So, one day, obviously, all the buttons would be sorted by colour – but even more obsessively, on another day they would be sorted according to whether they had one hole, two holes or four holes. At other times I would look at their length, their size. I created these visual taxonomies that gave me incredible satisfaction, even though they were completely useless and had no purpose whatsoever. I think that is where my general passion for visual organisation and classification began. That is what later led me to work with data. But it all started there.

Another thing I remember is that, as soon as I learnt to write – in my first or second year of primary school, whenever it was – my hobby was "upgraded", taken to the next level. I started writing little legends explaining how to interpret the different groups of materials I had created. So, my passion carried on and evolved from there.

PF: Of course. What you are describing is fascinating because it shows that the beginning of your passion for detail and for design, in a way, has to do with fashion – or at least with clothing – which is not something everyone knows.

GL: Yes, absolutely. If I think about… I am not a huge fan of the word "creativity", but I do not really have a better one. When I am asked what my creative influences have been, I would definitely say that one of them was my grandmother – creative in the way she would cut and reuse scraps of fabric. She had that post-war mindset of never throwing anything away, but she created compositions that, to me, were beautiful. She did tailoring work for Max Mara – we were in Emilia Romagna in the Eighties – so even if I did not go on to become a fashion designer and I do a very different job today, it was all incredibly fascinating to me. It was undoubtedly one of the creative influences I encountered in the very first years of my life. So yes, in some way, it does all connect.

PF: Let's build on that and broaden the discussion to design in general. How important is detail in the development of any project? We can then talk specifically about your own projects, but if we stay on a more general level for the moment – given that you studied at the Politecnico and you have a polytechnic mindset – how important is detail, in the broadest sense, in design?

GL: I honestly believe that detail makes up the whole project. We can unpack that, of course. Right from the beginning of the design process – which, for me, is a phase of discovery – the details each of us notices in what we observe in reality, in what we see in a design brief, in what we are able to pick up when we speak with a potential client or with our audiences… I think there is a lot of detail there already.
Let's imagine we are ten different designers – or three different designers – with the same brief about the same object, with the same material and the same visual inspiration, speaking to the same people at the start of a project. I believe that the details – the really specific, non-macro aspects of what we see, what we hear, what we process – are already the starting point of how we begin to design.
So even before we pick up a pencil or sit at a computer or take a pair of scissors in our hands – whatever tool is appropriate for the type of project we are working on – detail is what makes the way we think unique and different from the person who might be competing with us or, in any case, from anyone else. I see this much more clearly now that I lead a team of designers – paradoxically more than when I was designing more on my own at the beginning of my career. Once you start actually designing, detail is everything.
Perhaps we should also clarify what we mean by "detail". It is the care you take to find a solution that is not rough, that is not perhaps banal or obvious. If you think of a successful project from start to finish, and if you think of its realisation, what makes the difference is always the detail – not only in the quality of a fashion garment, but also in the quality of the typography chosen, the typeface selected for something apparently very simple like a poster.
When we talk about data, there is an even greater focus – at least in my profession – on small data and on specific stories that may seem like details within a much larger dataset. If we think about

product design, detail is everything – we might ask why so many of us love Apple more than other brands. So yes, I really do believe that, in the end, detail is everything.

PF: As you already hinted, you often find yourself dealing with huge data sets, which are basically piles of details. All that data is an accumulation of details that you have to sort out and make speak, right? I wonder: do you start from the detail or from the whole when you are developing a project? Or does it depend from case to case?

GL: That is a very interesting question. If we start from the premise that I still believe detail makes the difference, I would say that design – and this does not only apply to data – is always a matter of zooming in and zooming out. You need to keep the big picture in mind, the broader idea of where you are headed, while at the same time constantly zooming in on the details. On the one hand this is to verify whether your broader hypotheses actually work; on the other, especially in the world of data, it is to avoid losing touch with what is human.
Let me explain. In the world of data, there is a lot of talk about big data, about artificial intelligence. We live in an age where the phrase "big data" and data in general are associated with computers and machines that work with data on our behalf. But I believe that human beings – who are ultimately the ones receiving any kind of communication based on data – do not think in terms of large-scale aggregates. We think in terms of stories. We are able to connect emotionally with something that we can relate to our everyday lives, to our most basic human questions.
Far too often, if we do not pay attention to this kind of detail – if we move only across the macro landscape of big data without trying to reconnect certain points in the data and anchor them in how we live today, in the human situations and questions that data can help us consider (I do not think they can simply answer them) – then we lose everything. So, for this reason, there has to be a back-and-forth between a larger and a smaller scale, and our attention has to move constantly between them. I am repeating myself, but for me what makes the difference is still the detail.

PF: Of course. Could you tell us about a recent example in which a detail you did not notice at first emerged later and changed the course of a large project – when a detail became the crucial click?

GL: I have an example which, for me, is perfect – even if I will perhaps go slightly off on a tangent. It is a project concerning my personal life which then took the form of an article I wrote for the New York Times and, more recently, a TED Talk.
For the past four years, ever since I first caught Covid, I have been dealing with what I believe is now also called "long Covid" in Italy. For those who are not familiar with it, long Covid refers to the various health consequences that some of us unfortunately experience after an acute infection or reinfection. It can be moderate and still allow a relatively normal daily life, or it can be completely debilitating. I have had highs and lows. There have been times when I had to stop working and was very debilitated, and even today I do not consider myself cured. It is something that has profoundly affected my life.
At the beginning, when I started developing symptoms that doctors were unable to diagnose, I began collecting data. I created a spreadsheet which I kept for years. Day after day, I recorded the various symptoms, what I had done in my day in order to see if there were correlations – how far I had walked, what I had eaten, my stress level – and, since I wore a smartwatch, all the biometric data it captured. Over time, this system expanded to include the treatments and medications I was taking, always in the hope of spotting correlations.

In the first phase, this data collection gave me a huge sense of control – the idea that I could manage something so uncertain. My attention was focused on the symptoms and on what I thought might be their triggers. It was also useful in conversations with doctors. At a certain point, though, I had a realisation – and I think that is where we can talk about a detail that made a big difference. In that first period of illness, given the way I am, focusing on symptoms was crucial. I then wrote an article in the New York Times in which I visually represented these four years of symptoms, to raise awareness and help people understand what it means to live daily with this kind of condition. It is very different from that reductive idea of long Covid as just a list of five or six symptoms, comparable to being a bit tired after work.
Sadly, it is nothing like that. It is a constant presence. Probably after publishing the article and receiving thousands of messages, when I went back and looked at my spreadsheet I realised there was another way of seeing everything. There was another spreadsheet I could have started. It may be a bit of a stretch to call it a "detail", but I do think it is one.
From the beginning of 2024, I started a completely different kind of data collection – much smaller in scope than the big symptom spreadsheet I was filling in every day. The new collection focused on the things I had managed to do that day or on the things I was grateful for. The first entries in this new spreadsheet are things like: "Today I managed to enjoy five minutes of sun on my face by the window." There were times when I was bedridden and could not do anything else. Gradually – also thanks to medical treatments – I began to feel better. I started to see progress: "I managed to walk for two minutes; I managed to take the subway; I managed to go back to work."
It became a collection of data with a broader breath – a way of looking back at life again. These details that I started gathering in 2024 had been there all along, but when a personal story is so full of suffering, you often do not see them.
In relation to our conversation, I think it is important to remember that the details that make the difference – in a personal story or in a project – are always right in front of us. It is a matter of asking the right questions, choosing the right lens, the right focus, and also of going against what comes most naturally. For me, it was much easier to concentrate on pain, on symptoms, on the things I could not do, because they dominated my days. But focusing on these new details, which gradually became more pervasive, was an important part of my recovery.

PF: Sometimes, however, detail can be distracting. I imagine you sometimes have clients who turn up with data sets or requests that are extremely specific – microscopic, even – and your job is the opposite: saying, "No, don't look there, look here instead." Do you have a concrete example – a project you can talk about – where the client's focus on a detail risked taking things in the wrong direction?

GL: To begin with, I think that very often designers' and developers' work involves guiding the client from detail to the big picture or vice versa. Even though I still believe that detail makes the difference, the ability to move fluidly between these two scales is what allows a designer to speak to different audiences and to guide a client through the different project phases.
I do not have a single specific example, but it has happened more than once that, paradoxically, my most difficult clients have been those with a design background. You might think that was because they had a different opinion from mine, but that was not the issue. It was because there was less trust and a greater fixation on an idea, a concept or even a form, a sketch. Clients who were confident opening Photoshop and using the tools to throw down some ideas would end up focusing on design details that should really be the designer's responsibility. This often prevents the client

from concentrating on what the project's goals are, who its audience is, what the company or foundation's objectives are.
As designers, we offer many different options and, at the beginning of the process, we need to understand what works for a particular client – what their tastes are, what style is appropriate, both for the client and for their audience.

PF: If we look at the aesthetic side of your work, taking all its components together – design, data design, graphic design – would you say that is a detail, or is it substance?

GL: In general, I would say it is substance. The characteristics that make up style and the aesthetic appearance – and the way these are developed in the final output, whether it be a poster, an object or a fashion piece – have to be defined in detail. I think the aesthetic dimension is a substantial part of design in general. You often hear that design is functional. That is true – design has to be functional – but it also has to be emotional.
Unless we are talking about a podcast or an audio recording, we react viscerally to aesthetics. So, I do think aesthetics are a substantial aspect. Aesthetics and style, however, are two different words and refer to slightly different concepts. Aesthetics define the formal quality of an output – composition, the way shapes, colours and type interact, and the shapes themselves. Style, on the other hand, has more to do with cultural and temporal constructs, with a particular historical moment. So, I see them as distinct.

PF: Many of the things you are describing – in relation to your projects – come through very clearly in one of your fashion projects which, if I am not mistaken, is the only one you have worked on. And I know you enjoyed it very much.

GL: Very much indeed. It is my only real fashion project, even though I have done other things with textiles – a rug based on data, for example, and a scarf with data about progress in reducing mortality from malaria, which I later donated to a foundation that works on research into infectious diseases.
The one real fashion collection I have developed was for the brand & Other Stories, which is part of the H&M Group, and it was a project I really loved working on. I keep saying it is probably the project I have enjoyed the most in my seventeen years of work.

PF: Of course. Could you tell us about it – but I will set you a challenge: tell us about it in terms of the role of detail.

GL: Absolutely. The fashion collection comprises fifteen items – it is a limited collection of fifteen pieces that tell the stories of the discoveries and innovations of three women: Ada Lovelace, the first computer programmer; Rachel Carson, one of the earliest environmental activists; and Mae Jemison, who is still alive and was the first African-American astronaut. The garments tell the story of what they did to advance their scientific disciplines, through the patterns on the textiles.
The role of detail here lies, in my opinion, in the way I responded to the brief. & Other Stories gave me a very broad brief. They wanted to tell stories of women who could be inspirational. I could have decided, again, to tell an aggregated story of many women – creating a chart with a thousand, two thousand, one hundred thousand women who had made discoveries or been inspirational. Instead, I chose to zoom in on three personal stories.

For those three stories, I also manually dissected the algorithm underlying Ada Lovelace's computer programming. She started to design the first calculator in the nineteenth century, and I manually analysed "Silent Spring", Rachel Carson's seminal book, building datasets that were really full of detail and then representing them. Again, I think detail made a big difference. Rachel Carson's book was entirely embroidered onto the garments. Mae Jemison is depicted on some of the pieces, where the design team became very inventive with applications that are so detailed you are almost afraid to touch them. That is perhaps one of the weak points of some of the items.
I think that from the very beginning I approached the project by zooming in on detail – the detail of the brief, the detail of the stories and the detail of how the pieces could look in terms of aesthetics and style. If you could look at them up close, you would see that they are incredibly detailed. The patterns are intentionally full of tiny lines, colours and dots. For me, it is a project that involved a great deal of attention to detail.

PF: I have to say, I find it particularly successful because it offers so many layers of reading at the level of detail. You can look at a jumper, a skirt, a jacket – the entire collection – and fall in love with the aesthetics. You might simply say, "How beautiful, a black jumper with a colourful embroidery – fantastic, I want it". If the buyer wants to go deeper, though, you also designed the shoppers, the bags that came with the purchase, which included a legend. So, you could stop at the level of constructive detail – which also becomes a detail of meaning – and that could then act as a trigger to go and discover the life of an astronaut, an ecologist or a scientist.

GL: Absolutely, one hundred percent. I would like to take this opportunity to say something I have started to mention now and then. If we talk just about data visualisation – and perhaps, at times, also about graphic design in general – I believe that any project should ideally be able to satisfy both a Bart Simpson and a Lisa Simpson of this world.
Using the same garment as a simple example, a Bart Simpson might just say, "Ah, nice pattern, I'll wear it", and that is it. Faced with the same garment – or, say, an editorial data visualisation – a Lisa Simpson would say, "Wow", and start to dig into the detail, to explore, to read. As you mentioned, this is about levels of reading. What I enjoy in my work – or at least what I hope I manage to do – is precisely this: including many different levels of reading.
This probably also comes from my training as an architect. Twenty years ago, when I studied architecture, spending hours and hours drawing by hand for five years, the idea of multiple layers of reading was something I learnt through practice, and it is something I have carried with me into the world of visualisation.

PF: For data to speak clearly, do details need to work more through harmony or through contrast?

GL: That is an interesting question. Both, I would say. In the architecture of a data visualisation – what our eyes notice first, according to the visual principles of Gestalt theory – I think there has to be harmony. Imagine that we have two axes, X and Y, and our data is positioned according to the values on those axes. In that case, we could talk about the "harmony" of data that moves together to form a trend or to highlight outliers.
But if we move on to more qualitative data – categories, for example – then to make those categories speak, you need to use contrast. That means different colours, so that you can distinguish A from B, from C, from D. I think harmony and contrast have to work in harmony with each other, if that makes sense.

PF: Of course – they also need to be in dialogue. Have you ever found yourself working on a project with too many detailed elements, which you then ended up simplifying as much as possible to bring out the deeper meaning?

GL: Yes, many times. I think that in most data projects, at the start, you collect or look at far more data than you eventually digest and represent.
A simple example is a project that became quite viral in past years, called "Dear Data". For one year, through weekly collections of personal data on a specific theme, I got to know someone I had never met before, who lived in London while I was living in New York. We would track, for instance, how many times and how we said "thank you", how much we complained, what our negative thoughts were, the activities we were doing – for an entire year. So, fifty-two weeks, each focused on a different data collection, which we then represented in the form of a fairly large postcard. On the front of the postcard we drew a visualisation of all the data we had collected. On the back, we wrote the other person's address and a legend explaining how to read our data. These fifty-two topics were pretexts to get to know each other.
At the beginning of each week, we both collected far more data, because when you start collecting data you do not yet know what will be interesting. So in a week when the theme was "Let's collect all the times we complain", I remember starting my data collection by tracking everything: where I was, of course; what the complaint was; who it was directed at; what had caused it; whether it was necessary or not; whether it was in Italian or in English; whether it was said in person or written in a message. At first I also recorded other things, to see whether there were any influences: the weather, to see whether grey days… and lots of other variables.
In the end, I represented fewer data points – even though the attention we paid to qualitative detail was what helped us become friends and made the project interesting. If I had just made tally marks for every time I complained, that would not have been particularly meaningful.
At the same time, there was always a bit of a funnel, every week, to filter things. By Tuesday or Wednesday, we would usually both have reached the point of understanding, "All right, this looks like an interesting dataset to collect". Maybe the initial categories on the Monday had been ten; then they became six or five. This is a very specific example, but I think it is what happens in most data projects, simply because the data you collect has to answer the questions you have. If, at the beginning, you only have a big general theme, you need to collect data in order to arrive at interesting questions.

PF: Exactly. One last question, Giorgia. Is there a detail you have noticed recently that you would like to turn into a project?

GL: Let's say that, especially since I started dealing with long Covid, I have become very fascinated by stories of healing – not only in the sense of physical healing, but more broadly as a personal transformation that takes you from being one version of yourself to another. The tension – or perhaps we could say the process – that runs through these transformative moments, possibly in a collective or aggregated way, but always respecting personal stories, is something I would like to explore further.
Having met many people who have learned to manage or completely overcome chronic illnesses – people who have been a great source of inspiration, especially when I was very unwell – I started to reflect on all the human qualities involved in a healing process. These are not just about medicine, doctors, treatments and the biological dimension. I do not know whether this counts as a "detail",

but perhaps it does – it is an aspect I would like to investigate further and, as often happens, possibly turn into a project.

PF: I am fairly sure that before long we will see it as a project. Thank you, Giorgia.

GL: Thank you, Paolo.

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