Episode 6: Movement with Giulio Iacchetti

Transcript of the sixth episode of the podcast "With Ferré, projects and principles in dialogue" titled "Movement", featuring Giulio Iacchetti. 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.

In his design practice, Gianfranco Ferré saw movement as the key value that allows fashion to meet people – in other words, that brings objects and bodies together. It is not only about physical motion, but also about flexibility of thought, elasticity of vision, and the ability to push an idea forward and move beyond the obvious.
To explore this theme we invited Giulio Iacchetti, a Milan-based designer known worldwide for his fearless ability to reinvent the archetypes of design. With him we talk about the role of movement in the world of objects, in materials, and in design practice itself, in order to move past stereotypes and head decisively towards innovation.

Paolo Ferrarini: Giulio, welcome to the podcast of the Gianfranco Ferré Research Center, Digital Innovation for the Creative and Cultural Industries at the Politecnico di Milano. Today we will talk with you about one of the core values in Gianfranco Ferré's creative process, namely movement. Let's start with a very simple question: if you had to choose one design object that best represents movement, which one would you pick?

Giulio Iacchetti: Maybe it sounds like a predictable answer, but to me the Vespa has represented – and still represents – the purest metaphor for movement. It literally put an entire country into motion in the postwar years. Its lines are projected towards the future, yet they still carry mechanical know-how and traditional craft, that inventive spirit of doing everything with almost nothing. Its form even comes from ideas linked to the helicopter. Corradino D'Ascanio was an engineer who always looked beyond. So yes, I would say the Vespa.

PF: And if it had to be a domestic object, something that is still, stationary?

GI: In fact, objects are never really still. There is this funny paradox that is often mentioned as an exception, as something that doesn't quite work. We call them "furniture", and designers mostly design furniture that is, in reality, "immobile" – they don't move. It is a curious oxymoron. Instead, small and medium-sized objects are constantly in motion because we carry them around. They rely on someone else's kinetic energy, but they are always moving. If we think about household

objects – which I love – cutlery, glasses, jugs, all the equipment for the kitchen and the table, these are things that are always in motion. They live in symbiosis with our hands and our gestures, and so, deep down, they contain this vocation for movement.

PF: When it comes to design, how do you design movement? Which elements do you activate when you feel the desire, the need, or when you receive the brief to create a specific kind of movement?

GI: As I said, the objects I have imagined and designed over the years are in close relationship with the human body – most of all with the hands and the body as a whole. If I think of the bags I design for Moleskine, for instance, I devote a lot of time to the way they sit against the body but also to how they move together with the body. It is an ongoing study that, for smaller objects, is focused above all on hand movements, because any tool-like object has a very strong relationship with the hand. And the hand, as we know, is the queen of movement. The fingers, the grip, the way you hold the material, the way the material reacts, whether the grip is secure – the object must not slip or fall; it needs to lend itself to a real relationship with the hands.
This is a beautiful rule, and also quite a simple one to experience and test, because I myself verify the quality and validity of an idea by gripping it in my hands, feeling how it reacts, trying to understand it, and also observing previous examples to see how other hand-related objects function. In my studio there is a large archive of objects that I look for, buy, and collect because I want my team to enjoy this aspect too – to be able to test objects directly, in first person.

PF: Speaking of materials, is there a material that, in your view, best embodies the idea of movement?

GI: I could say fabric, because fabric clearly lends itself to this idea. It lives in the wind, it moves in the air. But, as often happens in design, we shouldn't be lazy and stop at the first thought. It is more interesting to think about movement in heavy materials. Once again, we can turn to the rule of the oxymoron, of the unexpected. So yes, it is simple to imagine the movement of fabric – and I too have designed with that in mind. For example, I once designed a ground cloth for stopping and resting, for picnics in the park and the like. There was an idea of wind and flags there too, and when it was not used in that way it could become something else.
But I equally like to think about the movement of objects and materials that are extremely heavy. This very morning I was looking at a selection of stool projects. I adore stools because, in design terms, they are the minimum. A chair, if anything, is already more complex: it has four supports and a backrest. A stool instead reduces everything to three supports and no backrest. It is the minimal tool for sitting. I realised that over the past thirty years I have designed many stools, including some made of stone. I tried to understand how to give them movement. So the project also involved shaping an area where the hand could hold it correctly, because sometimes, or actually very often, we need to move stools around.

PF: If I think of one specific object that you designed and that represents movement, my mind goes straight to the Tropico lamp you created for Foscarini – an object that in theory should be still and immutable. Instead, you added elements that allow people to change it, to play with it and transform it: you can move some parts, replace them with others. Can you tell us how this "moving" lamp was born?

GI: That's a good example because, once again, we are talking about objects which by nature should be static, but in reality are not. Tropico was actually a family of lamps. As so often happens in my work, the concept grew out of a module that we studied in a refined and quite complex way. We know that simplicity is complexity resolved. To arrive at the simplicity of that module, we tried many options and explored different paths, also because in the end it was injection-moulded in plastic. Before building the mould, we needed to be absolutely sure. The module was a sort of small clip that snapped onto metal rings of different diameters.
In this way, you could combine and build volumes around a central axis of rotation. The overall design was quite symmetrical, but it retained the memory of movement. The end user was meant to build the lamp. That was the point: the person who bought it received a set of metal rings and a large number of small joints or modules, and then had to assemble the lamp. There was a whole dynamic dimension, linked precisely to the construction process, which for me was part of the project.
Now, if I told you that the lamp was a huge commercial success, I'd be lying, because eventually we all realised – and sometimes you have to go all the way down a path to learn this – that people don't really enjoy assembling things. Or rather, they instinctively associate these repetitive gestures with low-end, do-it-yourself products. So that aspect weakened the project. Nonetheless, I believe certain avenues must be explored to the end, both for the designer and for the company, because they need to be tested and experienced. At the very least we had a great time building those lamps.

PF: Speaking of modules, you mentioned them earlier. Many of your projects work through the multiplication of small elements that can change colour, shape, or size but are still repeated. Is this a way for you to talk about motion, or is there another intention behind this idea of infinite multiplication?

GI: I've thought about this a lot. I am very attracted to modules and to textures that are completed by modules capable of repeating themselves infinitely. That word – infinite – is important. We all have a certain longing for infinity inside us, sometimes hidden, sometimes more clearly felt.

The idea that a module can expand in every direction without a boundary – or rather, with the only limit being the material or the edges of the table you are working on – carries within it this notion of endless propagation. I think that, through design, it makes tangible a yearning that each of us has and that I personally feel very strongly.

PF: Another kind of movement that I see in your projects is your passion for very fluid forms. It connects to what you said about the hand and movement: it is almost as if the objects you create wanted to be caressed. That kind of fluid movement reminds me of water – again something infinite and always flowing. Does this idea also connect to that sense of the infinite, of continuous motion?

GI: If you take a pencil and start moving it over a sheet of paper, it is very natural to draw organic, soft lines. It comes from the movement of the arm, which is like a compass. If I keep my elbow still and move my hand, I immediately draw a circle – my own circle – whose size is set by the distance from the pencil to the elbow. That curve expresses something about us; it's incredible.
My first realised project was a door handle, and a handle is pure movement. The company called it Ibis – not my choice – because they had a whole range of handles designed by different designers,

each one inspired by flight. The bird names were the common thread. My handle really fit that logic: there was a curved line that "stretched" the material, brass, which is fairly heavy. It started with a certain thickness and then tapered towards the end, becoming very thin. It embodied the idea of flight, of fluid, dynamic movement. That curve, the backbone of the handle's design, was my curve. Years later I drew another curve and placed it next to the handle, which I still keep in the studio. They were identical. That discovery amazed me and, I must admit, gave me a quiet sense of satisfaction.

PF: It is a kind of handwriting, a signature – a form of identity.

GI: Exactly. As we know, identity is never collective; it is always individual. I love the fact that certain things express who we are and cannot really be replicated. People might try to imitate them, but it never truly works. That curve is just like that. I invite everyone to try this: it will be your curve, and it is, in its own way, a fun exercise.

PF: It reminds me of how, as teenagers, we fill entire sheets of paper trying out different versions of our signature. You can spend days drawing curves to define the way you will sign your name for the rest of your life. In a sense, there is a similar kind of research there.

GI: Absolutely. There is a search, but also a sense of recognising yourself in that gesture. At a certain point the signature stabilises and becomes an archetype for you, and you don't really know why you've reached that final point. I too spent a lot of time looking for my graphic identity. It's fascinating.
And, just to stay on a rather "elevated" note, right now I am designing an ironing board. I am studying the movement of the iron, of the hand that guides the iron, and once again it's a curved, dynamic movement. Of course the iron could follow a straight, geometric trajectory, but that would be a forced motion. If you mimic the action, it is almost impossible to move the iron in a perfectly straight line. The natural motion of the hand traces a curve. That is why organic, soft lines are so common in design, not only in mine. They aren't just pleasant to look at or references to the archetype of the mother – who is soft by nature and whose forms we are all drawn to as children. We are less instinctively attracted to dry, geometric shapes.
Then again, sometimes, by contrast – and here we are touching on movement in trends and fashion – when everything is soft, a more geometric, sharp force appears. Later, soft forms come back once again. I often illustrate this by showing friends and colleagues the evolution of the iPhone: some models have sharp, straight edges; others have rounded ones. It is as if, when we are in one condition, we feel the desire for the opposite. This back-and-forth motion is like a pendulum. We constantly seek stability, but we never really find it.

PF: I am convinced that the pair of the ironing board and iron is the perfect combination for understanding fashion. I often encourage my students to iron in order to understand clothing. When you have a shirt lying between the iron and the board, you truly grasp how fashion construction works. There are different kinds of shirts, different techniques for ironing them, different boards that bond better with different irons. We are here at the Ferré Research Center, where we know that the geometry of garments – shirts in particular – is fundamental. After seeing what happens here, does it make you want to change anything about your ironing-board project?

GI: It certainly raises some questions. When you are working with an ironing board and an iron – which I don't use all that often, but I have used and do occasionally use – you begin to notice how functional some garments are and how others are not. It would be wonderful to think of a world where these things also talk to each other at this level, so that you don't condemn whoever has to iron your designs to a kind of hell.
Of course, as in any art, people can develop real skills. I truly admire those who can iron quickly because they know how to do it well. I don't see those gestures as humble or unrewarding at all. On the contrary, they are poetic. When someone truly masters an art – and ironing is an art – watching them is a spectacle.
We are often just enthusiastic amateurs, whereas professionals can resolve any problem. So, thinking about an ironing board that can be a good partner for someone who wants or needs to iron and doesn't necessarily want to delegate that task to others – that is exactly what I am working on. It's a tool that can change not only the look but also the spirit of a garment.

PF: Earlier you mentioned balance. In design we know that one way to create movement is by controlling balance and imbalance: certain angles, edges, and proportions make things feel as if they are moving. As a designer, do you feel more at ease in conditions of stability or instability – with a sense of stable equilibrium, or when that balance is being challenged?

GI: I would say that a good product must convey balance and harmony and be balanced in itself. However, the best condition for designing is instability. Instability, lack of balance, dissatisfaction – all those words that start with "un-" have followed me all my life. My mother used to tell me: "You've always been dissatisfied, somehow unhappy." But that is the perfect condition for designing. Instability pushes you to move, to head somewhere – towards what we simply call the future.
Walking itself is an unstable way of moving forward. The moment you raise one foot, you are already trying to find the next point of support. In that precise moment you are off balance, in a state of total instability. I honestly do not understand how anyone can design without being in such a condition. I have turned my instability and dissatisfaction, which as a child made me feel unlucky, into my main source of energy. So yes, long live instability.

PF: I'll ask you a similar question, but this time let's talk about symmetry. Does asymmetry have anything to do with instability?

GI: When we talk about symmetry we inevitably need to deal with production processes and materials. I am strongly attracted to symmetry around a central axis of rotation, because it is a way of working that simplifies life. Everything made on a lathe is generated by a rotational movement around a central axis. That movement naturally leads us to think of symmetrical forms, because that is what the lathe is able to produce.
I am currently very engaged with a project that ties me closely to Alberto Lessi and our collaboration "Il tornitore matto" – "The crazy turner" – which revolves around objects produced primarily by metal spinning and traditional turning. These objects almost necessarily come out symmetric. My first project for Il tornitore matto, made with metal spinning, is extremely stable: it is a copper amphora-like base called Conca, a reinterpretation of a traditional vessel from Ciociaria, a region of Lazio. These containers were made for carrying water on women's heads, often with a cloth or cushion to support them. I reinterpreted that form, but it is slightly unstable. It rocks a bit. Think-

ing about it now together with you, I realise that I once again introduced a light degree of instability. Every time you place it down, it wobbles slightly and then finds its position in the world.

PF: So it is an object designed to be stable, but with a permanent trace of movement.

GI: Exactly. That's right, and I had actually never thought about it in those terms before.

PF: Staying with your projects related to movement, you have designed several clocks in your career – for Danese, for Alessi. One of them sits on a corner: it can be placed over a corner or tucked into it, which again is a kind of instability. You also designed a truly memorable clock for Nutella. How do you conceive the movement of time? Do you prefer a more mechanical, analogue kind of movement, or something faster, slower?

GI: The movement of the hands is probably one of the first kinds of motion that fascinates us as children. I have always loved clocks, and my father before me did too. I think he passed this passion on to me – not for precious or ostentatious watches, but for "normal" ones. My First Communion gift was a pocket watch. No child asks for a pocket watch, but I had become attached to the idea. I asked my parents for a watch with clean lines. I must have been about eight; I don't remember exactly. I wanted it without decorations, very pure. They found one for me – I still have it. It was a Swiss mechanical watch with very clean design. That, I think, was my first encounter with a certain idea of design, long before I knew that designing would become my profession. And the watch has always been with me.
The movement of the hands, the mechanics of winding it, taking care of it – all that has always fascinated me. So inevitably I was going to design clocks one day. In Alessi's case there was also a little strategy involved, because to make Alberto Alessi fall in love with your idea you need to unsettle him a bit. If I had simply proposed "yet another" wall clock, I would have ended up in a long queue of designers who had already done so. It would have been hard to convince him to add a new wall clock when the catalogue was already full of them. Instead I proposed a corner clock, to be placed in corners – either on the inside angle or on the outside edge. I argued that, depending on where you are in a room, you might be able to read the time better if the clock is positioned in a corner. That narrative helped a lot in getting the project selected.
The Nutella clock, also produced by Alessi but for Nutella, came from the idea of using the iconic Nutella jar – which no one will ever change – as part of the design. The jar, called Pelikan, even has its own name. I loved the idea of treating this jar as something precious, not because of its material but because of its distinctive form. It reminded me of those mantel clocks protected by glass domes. Thinking about a Nutella clock, I pictured one of those domed clocks. We played with that image, perhaps buried deep in my subconscious. In concrete terms it was simply a clock housed in a jar, but the reference was there.

PF: Do you ever explore other disciplines where movement is crucial? For example dance, cinema, performance art?

GI: Honestly, no. I think rather of a kind of kinetic quality within objects themselves. I imagine the movement of things, not so much of bodies. For everyday communication I sometimes create little domestic videos for Instagram to show how objects work. For those I may rely on the advice and help of friends.

You have reminded me of something that became a kind of tiny performance for me. Our friend, the photographer Max Rommel, made a video for the coat hanger I designed for Toscanini. It is a hanger that moves in its own way because it is magnetic. There is a fixed part, locked onto the hanging rail, and a removable part with the actual shoulders to support the garment. You detach it and then reattach it with a crisp, automatic click. The hangers can then swing slightly around the rod that holds them. Max filmed a video – very effective and quite powerful – set to the can-can, where you see a wardrobe door open and these hangers suddenly start dancing. We said earlier that objects cannot initiate movement on their own. When they seem to, the effect is magical, like in fairy tales – in Beauty and the Beast, for example, where at night the objects move and talk. In the case of that hanger, the video creates a similar sense of poetry and enchantment.

PF: Giulio, leave us with an image, a thought, some way of imagining movement in the future of design.

GI: It's hard for me to answer that. But I remember that before I encountered the world of design and before my vocation in that direction became clear, I was firmly convinced that I would become a sculptor. I loved Gothic sculpture: I remember Cangrande della Scala, which I saw at Castelvecchio, and Ilaria del Carretto in the cathedral of Lucca. Then I saw Umberto Boccioni's Unique Forms of Continuity in Space – a sculpture that was later cast in bronze. It is incredibly powerful and incredibly heavy, yet it conveys this idea of dynamism, of a body running towards some unknown trajectory that you want to follow. You want to become its follower. It is a form of pure movement.
That figure inspired me. I think that idea of movement informs everything in my life – this constant instability in my thoughts and ideas and this habit of always putting myself in precarious situations. It is the basis not only of my work but also of my whole life.

PF: I have just realised that you are a Futurist.

GI: I think a spark of Futurism still informs Italian design today. It was the only truly Italian art movement, and it continues to inspire us enormously because it was completely oriented towards what has yet to happen. Every time we design, we inhabit that same dimension – what does not yet exist. What could be more powerful and inspiring than that? I don't know.

PF: Thank you, Giulio.

GI: Thank you.

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