A text, further developing thoughts on:

About Emotional Design
– Why we love (or hate) everyday things –
by Donald. A Norman

All the quotes of the following text are extracts from the book:

Norman, Donald A. : Emotional Design.
Why we love (or hate) everyday things.
USA : basic books, a member of the
perseus book group, 2004

"If you want a golden rule that will fit everybody, this is it: …"

„Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful."

One of the founders of the Arts & Crafts movement is quoted in the beginning and as conclusion of Donald A. Norman's book, Emotional Design. The quote is ascribed to William Morris, who as a craftsman in so many fields of work, put far-reaching thoughts on the evolution of mass production and it's seemingly equivalent, individuality.

Finishing such a book with a "golden rule that will fit everybody" seems quite interesting to me as the opposite is postulated during the whole book. Emotion is something that can't be felt the same way by a great amount of people. It is something very personal and individual that has to be added by every person itself.

We are all Designers

"Things do not become personal because we have selected some alternatives from a catalogue of choices. To make something personal means expressing some sense of ownership, of pride." People want personalization. It is something we all do and furthermore have to do. Everything we touch or even everything we give a thought on is a process of personalization.

Never in time as little as now, we are not able to even produce a small part of the things we use in everyday life by ourselves. We just personalize our homes by selecting things that are preproduced by big companies. Customization is the answer mass production gives to this urge of personalization. However, it is impossible to build mass produced products that fit every individual need.

Choose one of the following techniques to customize your book on the next page.

Try to signal it belongs to you and design it the way you want it to.
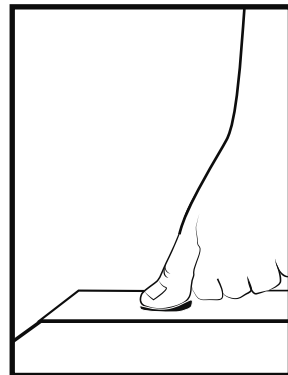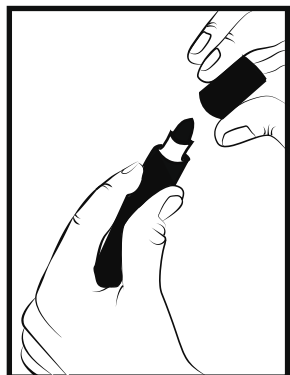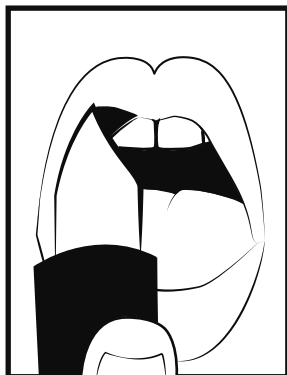
Have you got the feeling that this book represents your way of thinking and designing now? Does it feel personalized now?

I assume the answer is „NO." Maybe even : „NO, NOT AT ALL!"
By talking about customization of products and services, we actually talk about the choice between a variety of options. Those options hardly ever fulfil our real needs and wishes, we more often just benefit from the lower cost and less effort. So instead of having to think about what one could do with a blank page there is a simple instruction provided. Also there is only a minimum of choice between two actions. This exempts from the time and energy consuming task of creative thinking, but is accompanied by a great loss of satisfaction in use.
There is no need to do complex and long-lasting thinking any more. Hence we become able to make use of more things and services.

Together with the ability of possessing and utilizing more comes the wish for simplicity as well. Many products with many customization opportunities could make it a time-consuming and exhausting task to even learn how to use these customization tools. Everything becomes more complex because one must always choose among numerous alternatives. "Proper customization does not come by further complicating an already complex system." The task for designers hence is to not only produce slightly adapted products and services for different target groups, but also add some simple and natural tools, similar to our existing behaviour, so people can personalize the products easily by themselves. This act gives great emotional advantage for the people using it as well as big advantage to the brand that stands behind the product.

The difference to the thoughts of Arts and Crafts here might be that the designer should not go back to the roots and create everything by hand but let people create selected parts by themselves, with the knowledge and tools they are capable of. In a society like ours, a tenet to produce everything with as much handcraft as possible might be a nice idealistic notion, but not possible to implement without suffering a significant loss compared to some advantages of mass production.

The Arts and Crafts way to create emotional value might be to design and influence the style of this book right from the beginning. One could print all the letters by hand, cut all the pages by hand, and even bind the book by hand. This way of creating a relationship between the owner of this book and the book itself is extensive and longsome. Having a ready-made book and enough space and options to act freely, one can easily create some relationship by just adding a simple tool, just like a pen.

A pen for example is a tool we all know how to use. It is one of those tools that impact our personal way of expressing thought very little. There is no special style it imposes or no special medium we need to know about to use it.

For proper personalisation, you might want to use this pen now and adapt any part of the book exactly as you would like to. Or also you could do not.

Just use it the way you are and represent the way you want things to be.

To make an advantage for the people using something, Designers need to make it possible for the customers to keep up with time and innovation, but provide the surrounding conditions making people wanting to use their own designing and creativity tools. Basically you can say that this is something everybody does the whole day while making decisions. So why shouldn't a designer offer freedom to design and facilitate creativity and positive emotional value when it's something good for both sides? One example given in the book is, that it is even an act of design when arranging items on our desk, furniture in our homes, and things we keep in our cars. "Through these personal acts of design, we transform the otherwise anonymous, commonplace things and spaces of everyday life into our own things and places. "The clothes and shoes we wear, personal web sites like facebook or twitter are prime examples of personal, non-professional design statements. All those special personal value we add to mass-produced services and products are giving pleasure and make them part of our lives. Design is part of the equation we need to have between something simple and understandable for everybody, but also personal and individually inflicted with certain feelings and associations.

Filled up with emotion, a product or service will be perceived as kitsch, whereas fully untinged, it will be perceived boring and not appealing at all.

What differs indeed is the level where people start to afflict something with emotions. Cultural differences, education, personal experiences and many more factors influence these varieties of perception-levels we all distinguish in from another. The discipline of Design can facilitate the chance to trust in people so they can adapt their property properly. It can offer the interaction that is key to our emotions. " Love comes by being earned, when an object's special characteristics makes it a daily part of our lives, when it deepens our satisfaction, whether because of its beauty, it's behaviour, or its reflective component."

Emotional value in processing information and making decisions

Our brain mainly is aware of two different and colluding information-processing systems. Affect, which consists of quick unconscious judgements and cognition, the interpretation and making sense of our environment. Together they create emotions by creating conscious Affects.

In decision-making, sometimes affect is stronger than cognition and sometimes it's the other way round. But every decision making process includes both levels. "Bottom-Up" activation are those processes, driven by perception   "Top-Down" activation are called those driven by thought. Everything we do has a cognitive component to assign meaning and an affective component to assign value.

creates MEANING

COGNITION

Top-Down   Bottom-Up

AFFECT

creates VALUE
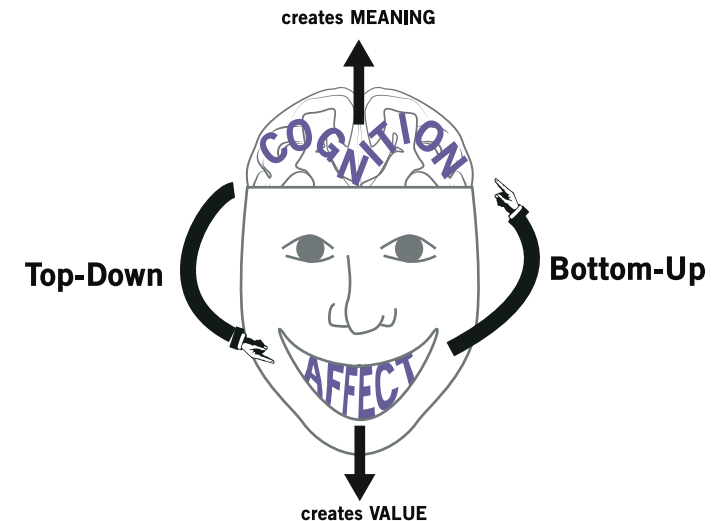
Furthermore, the affective component changes the way we are able to reflect about things.

When one is in the state of a negative affect there is a tendency to focus on details. People hence are inclined to narrow their thought process and concentrate upon aspects directly associated with the problem or circumstance that makes them feel anxious.

In contrary, positive affects arise curiosity and creativity and also make effective learning processes possible. The psychologist Alice Isen once discovered, that when you make people feel good, they are better at brainstorming and examining multiple alternatives, the kind of qualities we need to enable unusual out of the box thinking.

So "...attractive things make people feel good, which in turn makes them think more creatively." The question arises in what way this makes people feel love or hate for products and services. In what way does this way of processing make it more or less easy and pleasant to use them?
"Simple, by making it easier for people to find solutions to the problems they encounter."
When overcoming a problem, humans learned to apply approved knowledge and actions. I myself remember elder people sometimes telling me that when learning from others, you don't have to do all the mistakes by yourself. So when failing, the most natural result is to try again, because underlying this way of doing something is a proven self- or foreign-generated treasure trove of experience. This way of solving a problem has already worked before so it must work again, we think. The problem is, that sometimes we are not able to see every aspect of a problem first and hence can't make the right off-the-cuff decision. Negative feelings are the result of first setbacks.
"The tendency to repeat the same operation over again is especially likely for those who are anxious or tense." When trying and failing again and again, we get even angrier and more anxious. Anything about theproblem changes but our thought process narrows and narrows. The vicious circle starts. When people in positive state are encountering the same problem, they are more likely to look at alternative solutions and hence are more likely to come to a positive and satisfying result. "In other words, happy people are more effective in finding alternative solutions and, as a result, are tolerant of minor difficulties."

Try to find the shortest way from one end of the labyrinth to the other!
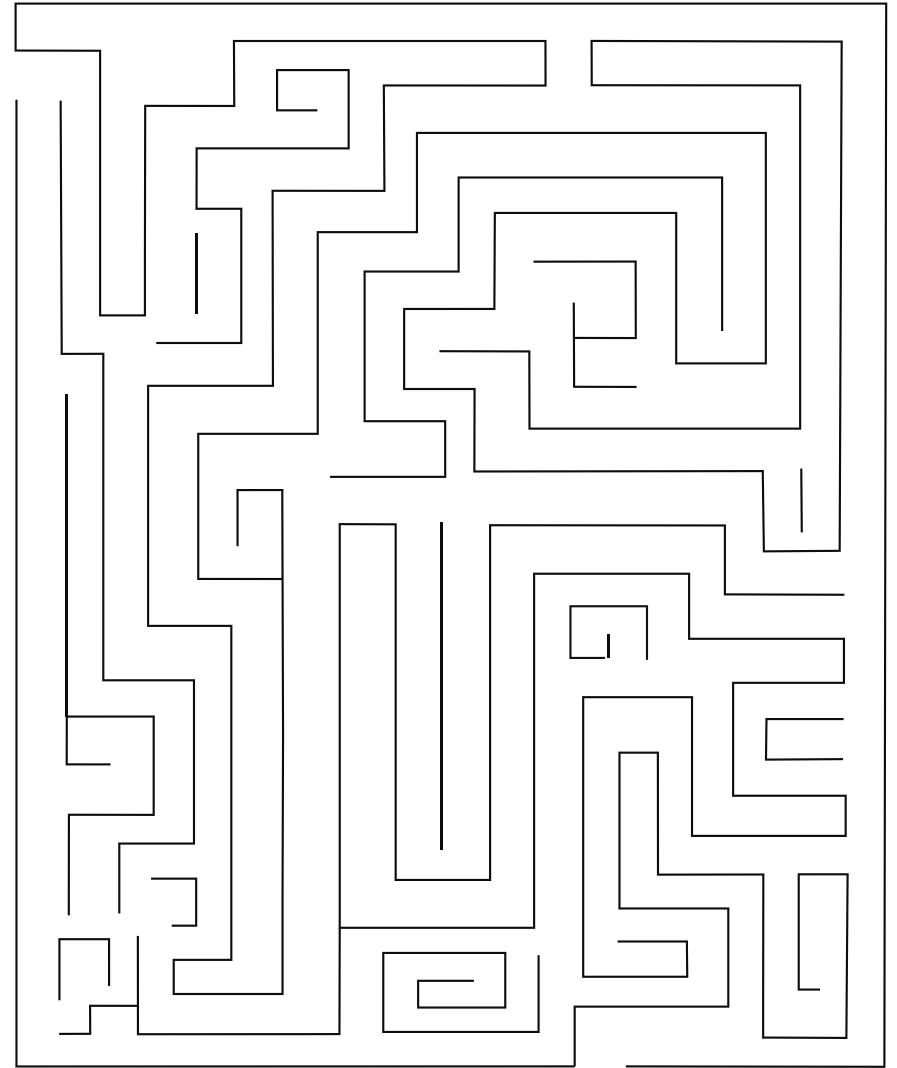
Going around,
a very effective way...

There is one big problem in modern society that especially arises with the increased use of technological gadgets. Although we know that things that make us feel good are easier to deal with and also produce better results, it has become a common phenomenon that sometimes we hate the things we interact with but still have the need to use them. This ignorance of emotions is caused by many reasons. It may be the pressure to perform well, the wish to keep up with the newest trend, the fear to miss experiences, or maybe all together. There is no proof why people and society changed that much. Anyway, fact is, that surveys and rising number of psychological diseases caused by stress, show how modern people suffer from a lot of pressure and frustration in daily life. "The problem is, that we still let logic make decisions for us, even though our emotions are telling us otherwise." But without emotions, we wouldn't be able to make smart decisions; we wouldn't be able to react quickly to immediate information about the world surrounding us. Many of the judgements we make are already determined by first impressions; they are made even before they reach our level of consciousness. This processing system has been very important in evolution. Conscious rationalization comes after the affective system producing certain chemicals and reacting to the world around us unconsciously.
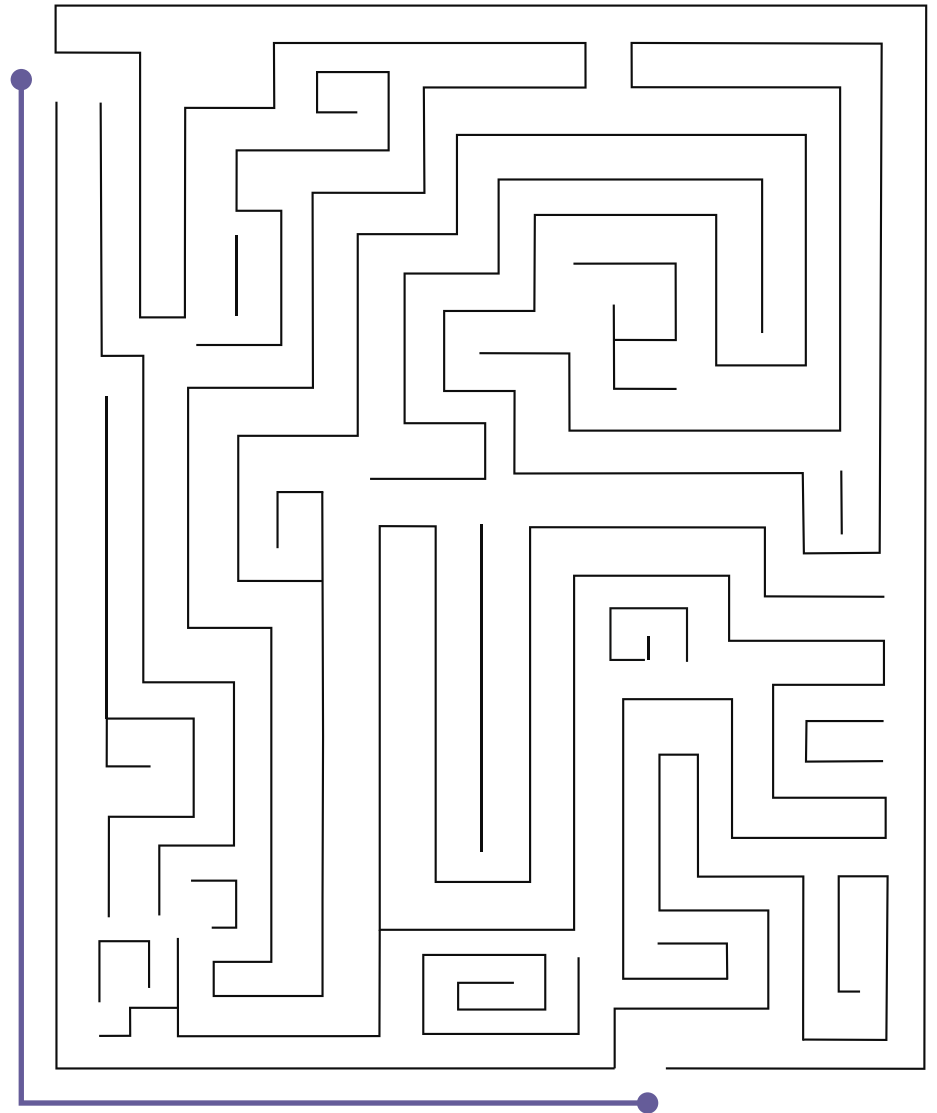
Usability, more effective than going around...

Today we work with loads of things we don't even have a clue about how they work. When those things are not working the way we want them to, we can only try but mostly fail in solving the problem. Though, we know that many other people manage to work with those gadgets well, we start becoming not only angry at the products that fail to fulfil our needs appropriately, but also at ourselves. Even though we need to work and need to make use of those gadgets. It is this kind of unconscious unhappiness we need to avoid to make people feel happy and comfy using a product or service. Instead of just looking at this rise of negative feelings in daily life, I think it should become a special task for designers to strengthen the awareness of service providers and product manufacturers to concentrate on proper usability for the people so they become happy and satisfied with the purchased product or service.
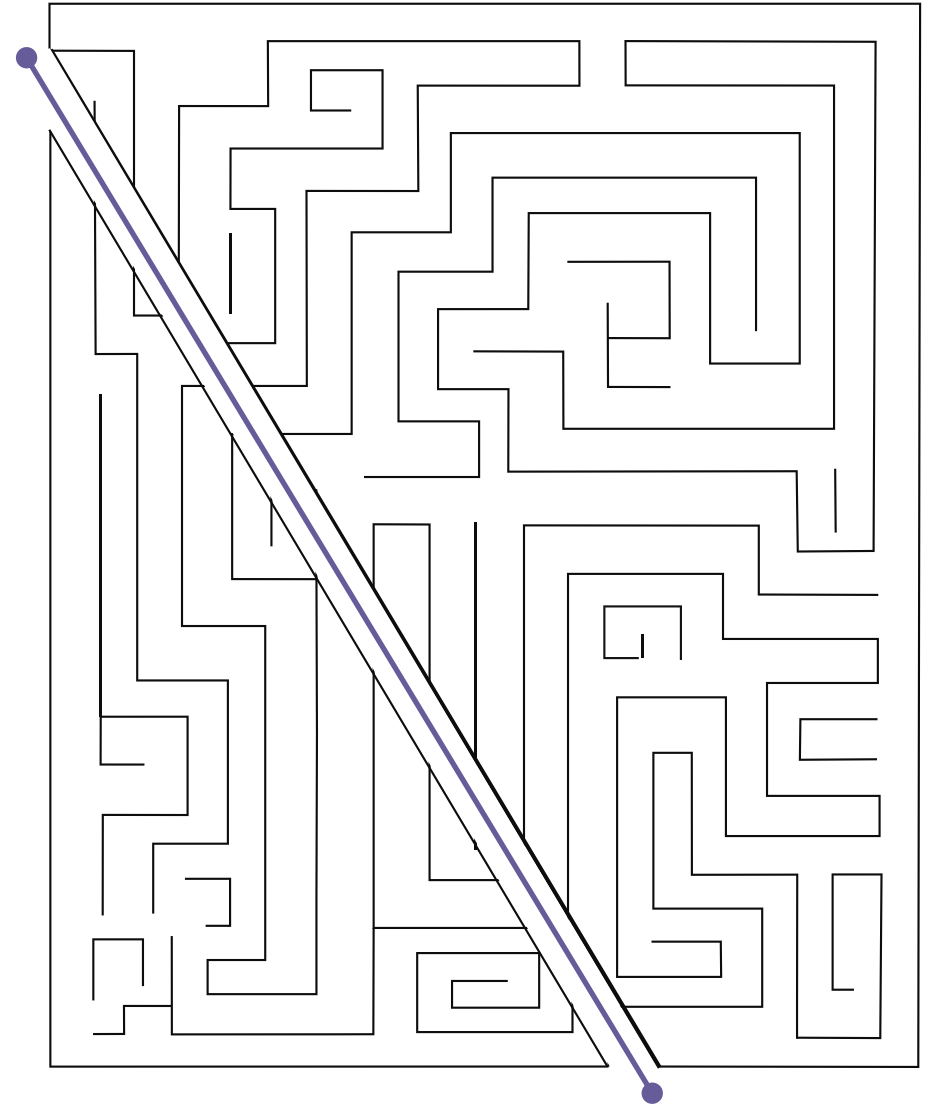
Three Dimensions of Design

Making a useful connection between beauty and function, we basically need to consider the disciplines of biology, neuroscience and psychology. Those sciences combine and analyse our perception and reaction. Every Level is important for making decisions. They evolved over millions of years to function effectively in a very complex world. "Cognition and affect, understanding and evaluation – together they form a powerful team." From these three levels of processing, Norman concludes three corresponding forms of Design. Visceral, Behavioural, Reflecting. "Each plays a critical role in human behaviour, each an equally critical role in the design, marketing and use of products."

The Visceral Level

of Design represents the automatic system our brain uses to interpret powerful emotional signals without having to think about it. It is all about the emotional impact. Our senses are very important for this level as they are giving us the information the visceral level directly processes. "The visceral level is fast: it makes rapid judgements of what is good or bad, safe or dangerous, and sends appropriate signals to the muscles (the motor system) and alerts the rest of the brain. This is the start of affective processing." When looked upon the view of the different scientific disciplines this level is biologically determined.

Fun is a very important exemplification for this level of processing. Some things may just feel comfortable and pleasant, subtle fun making and we like to use them but never notice why. When activating the visceral level and having fun as an example, not only we are able to solve problems better, but also we tend to forget about mistakes. One example in Norman's book, considering this fast level of processing information, is that when walking on a plank that lies on the floor, that's no problem for us. Instead, when we are supposed to walk on the same plank, put up 100 meters high in the air, we wouldn't be able to do it as well as we could walk on it on the ground. Our anxiety and the corresponding signals sent to our brain, influence even our ability to walk, something that actually should work automatically and without having to concentrate on it. Seen from the context of design, the most important thing addressing this level is appearance. It gives us the first impression the visceral level needs to make rapid judgements.

When this visceral level is being revised and changed, then it comes to the next level.

The Behavioural Level

represents the brain process that controls everyday behaviour. It is the unconscious source of most human behaviour. It serves as a kind of link between the visceral and the reflective level. Trained activities make use of the facility that the behavioural level does trained actions just fine while we can make use of our reflective level. It makes it possible to drive your car subconsciously while consciously thinking about something else at the reflective level. Control is an important factor at this level. When feeling safe in the world, our visceral level passes on to the behavioural level and people can make use of this automatically acting system. One example for this level is the already mentioned process of driving a car, walking, chewing our food and many more. These are all trained actions we are able to do while using the reflective level to make important decisions and thoughts. There are some actions, again brought up by the use of electronic devices, which we ought to be able to do when using them. If we don't learn to control the impact of these devices on our daily lives, we are forced to make conversation, per telephone or sms, listening to the instructions of a navigation device and further more things of the behavioural level, although they would actually need our full concentration and the power of the reflective level. It is a necessary part to learn how to allow electronic devices to disrupt routine and concentration demanding actions. Norman says that, "The real problems of modern communication come from the limitations of human attention." We can't listen and talk at the same time and we can't write and talk at the same time as well, if we want to provide our full attention. But to make things easier, so we don't have to focus on the technical problems with the devices or also in product design in general, we as designers need to offer people a comfy and understandable environment so they can focus on the things that matter, like conversation or listening. For design, representing this behavioural aspect might be the discipline of usability. In other words: "The pleasure and effectiveness of use". It is what makes us feel safe and comfy and it enables us to make use of things. Not think about them, but use them automatically whether semi-skilled or intuitively.

The Reflective Level

represents the thoughtful part of the brain. It can enhance or inhibit the behavioural level. It watches over, reflects upon and tries to improve the behavioural level. When we buy things that don't really fulfil our original needs but after some thinking we dispose a good explanation to ourselv for buying it, then we make use of this level. Cultural differences, the role in society and representation are important components of this level. As an example, some people, as well as I myself, tend to hang up photos of their friends and family or of important events in their homes. When guests are coming, mostly they don't really say, "wow this is a beautiful picture", but they tend to ask you about where and under what circumstances the photo was made. Hence you get to tell stories about those things in life you want your visitors to be informed about and have those events represented in a very small but effective way. Another field where this level plays a great role is advertising. It is true, people are attracted first by the visceral level, but this attraction is short-lived. The level of reflection that, when addressed subtle and elaborated, generates the wish to posses the thing and think about where to use, show or place it. This level makes it appealing to us in our future vision and makes well advertised products become parts of our actions in daily life. This level has a lot to do with humanity, with the ability to rethink what we do and how we do it. Furthermore it has to do with storytelling and our role in society. It is about how we want to see ourselves and how we want to be seen by others. Self-image, personal satisfaction & memories represent this level in design.

No design can reach to completely fulfil every level.

Each level requires a different style of design and when satisfaction for one level has to be reached, the others will have to recede. One cannot design a product for everybody or every need. "One person's acceptance is another one's rejection. Worse, what is appealing at one moment may not be at another."

The visceral level and the behavioural level are the more active ones and the reflective level takes the task to passively reflect upon those two. The behavioural and the reflective level are the ones more sensitive to education and experiences. Cultural points of view have huge impact on those levels. "What one culture finds appealing, another may not." When designing for the masses, it may occur more obvious to rely on these two levels, as they are being more predictable and iterative. "If you want a successful product, test and revise. If you want a great product, one that can change the world, let it be driven by someone with a clear vision." The difference is, that when you test, revise and change all the time, the outcome will very likely become a compromise, acceptable for the majority but not exciting for the individual. This kind of excitement is evoked when appealing the visceral level. It may be the most personal one. It is the emotional value added to the things and makes us feel love or hate for them.

Seducing, usability, relationship

an incantation for long lasting design

When one wants to do something pleasurable for the many and also with personal emotional value for the individual, this is a goal that cannot be achieved fully. To be able to come even near the approach, it is important to be able to appeal each level at the right point. What is considered delightful has a lot to do with the context it is perceived in. So what are the circumstances that produce excitement, evoke enjoyment, and later transform this impression of shallow joy into one of deep and long lasting pleasure?

A Combination of three steps, taken at the right time and in the right way.

In the book, Khaslavsky and Shedroff are mentioned by suggesting the three basic steps enticement, relationship, and fulfilment. It is said that first there has to be made an emotional promise, then the promise has to continually be fulfilled and later the experience should end in a memorable way so the user wants to do it again.

The first one, enticement, can be easily achieved by making it look different than other things from the same category. Another way to do this, suggested in the book, is to use the excitement of an unexpected transformation. Maybe the product or service looks the same like something we are used to, but differs in function. It is all about making something special and outstanding from the mass and arise curiosity and interest.

The second one is to create a certain relationship between the user and the product or service. You can do this by adding emotions. People tend to read emotions into everything. We read emotional responses even into machines, furniture or simple objects, if there is the slightest chance that they remind you of something we've already made emotional experiences with. "Scientists have shown that the biggest responses always come with the least expected event." Confusion, fear, anger or slight joy are just some feelings you can evoke in people to create some kind of relationship with the product or service they are using. But only reaching this is not enough for something to be in use for more than just a short moment.

It is the fulfilment, which makes people use something again and again and really feel love or hate about it.
"Great design—like great literature, music, or art—can be appreciated even after continual use, continued presence." Adding this value to design may be the master discipline as it is something very important to create for the masses. One way to reach it is by making the product or service tell a story. Another way to reach this is good usability and little signs of abrasion. The best case could be if the user recognises that every time of usage it is a little bit of a different experience but basically creates the same benefit.

To finish this text, I would like to quote a review on the book my work is about.
It kind of summarizes what I think about this book in a very pleasant way.

"Donald Norman's relentless and exacting axploration of the universe of
everyday objects has brought him to the final frontier of design: emotions.
His exquisite psychological analysis provides a solid and reliable reference
and a most valuable tool."
(Paola Antonelli)