

Back to the Future

The Future in the Past



ICDHS 10th+1
BARCELONA 2018

Conference Proceedings Book

Oriol Moret (ed.)

ICDHS 10th+1 Conference / Barcelona 2018

o Opening Pages



In memory of Anna Calvera (1954–2018)

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In memory of Anna Calvera
(1954–2018)

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Design as Mediator Between Local Resources and Global Visions. Experiences of Design for Territories

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Design for Territories / Strategic design / Social innovation / Territorial identity / Cultural heritage

Cultural, economic and social issues which arose by the end of Modernity and Post-modernity periods affected not only human beings but also places, which—as a consequence—have been dealing with identity, isolation and fear problems. As a reaction to the globalisation phenomenon, new localisms appeared. Design can have a role of mediator which is able to

valorize the positive aspects and capabilities of local resources, answering to global issues, and tuning them according to wider and foresighted visions. In our paper, we propose to use the approach of Design for Territories, which considers the territorial valorisation as a synergic, strategic and collaborative system of actions on various levels (productive, social, envi-

ronmental, cultural). To explain this approach, we are going to present several case studies, chosen in light of different issues, where the relationship between local and global, tradition and innovation is always delicate and controversial.

1. Framing the Concept of Design for Territories

Modernity and Post-modernity left a very important legacy on territories, such as the crisis of their identity, the precariousness of life of their citizens, the closure and fear for personal security of certain groups of people.

Therefore, territories needed (and still need) to re-think themselves with various and sometimes contrasting results.

Because of the fact that *grand* collective narratives (LYOTARD, 1984) were substituted by individualism and uncertainty (BAUMAN, 2000), the need for new certainties and for a renovated sense of community emerged, giving shape to a new local sense of belonging. However, these dynamics, if from one side were able to re-build the importance of communities and personal relationships, from the other side can generate that closure and fear previously mentioned.

How can design help to make this shift in a positive way?

In order to answer this question, we are going to look at the different approaches which design has had towards territories. In this field of research and action, capabilities of listening and mediating between local resources and wider issues of environmental, economic and social sustainability are particularly needed.

The relationship between design and territory has developed over time mainly in two main fields: the connection with artisan or industrial local productions; the development of communication and promotional activities, through place branding and strategic brand management. Today these two approaches are included in a wider process of Design for Territories, which considers the territorial valorisation as a synergic, strategic and collaborative system of actions on various levels (productive, social, environmental, cultural) (PARENTE et al., forthcoming).

This is a relatively recent field, which is very relevant in this historical period of transformation and shift towards new economies and social arrangements. Several territories are looking for new identities and a new equilibrium between the protection of elements of distinction—à la Bourdieu (1984)—and the openness towards more inclusive (and sometimes homogenized) visions.

In these contexts design still uses its original approach but it has been improving local craftsmanship thanks to innovation in terms of style, technique, products, and processes; for example, following the teaching of designers such as Giò Ponti, to whom we owe the birth of *Made in Italy* based on local craft know-how, or Ugo La Pietra, who from the late 1980s travelled through the Italian peninsula in order to preserve the local knowledge, innovating typical and traditional local productions in the sign of a new 'Territorial Design' (*Genius Loci* project, 1987/2000 in LA PIETRA, 2015).

Today, these initiatives are generally linked to wider strategic visions, aimed at building a virtuous local system, which acts positively both on the economic and productive levels, on meanings and relationships of a certain context, inside and outside the territory. In our opinion, these elements are able to define what we define as 'Design for Territories': a design thinking strategic approach focused on local empowerment, the creation of a solid local system, the identification of common values and goals, able also to be recognized from the outside, at a global (or at least national and international) level (PARENTE and SADINI, 2016).

In this paper we are going to deepen Design for Territories holistic approach in light of different case studies, in order to better explain what we mean with this concept; we are going to focus on the cross-fertilization between tradition and innovation, which often is oriented to the intersection between local and global. As Manzini and M'Rithaa state (2016), nowadays what we define as local is profoundly influenced by and connected with globalized trends and (also) favoured by networking possibilities, which new technologies have been giving us. The relationship between universalism and localism is interestingly explained by Manzini (2004a, 2004b, 2005, MANZINI and M'RITHAA, 2016) with the concept of 'Cosmopolitan Localism', referring to what Wolfgang Sachs proposed in 1992.

We can say that the problems which territories are facing are global and shared (with different levels of relevance and seriousness); Design for Territories tries to imagine solutions to these problems which can profit through local resources and capabilities.

These case studies are emblematic of some emerging territorial questions and of how the design approach can propose solutions, which go beyond a precise answer. Among these: how to renovate the traditional (and static) local production, finding a balance between local values and global markets? How to make recognizable a portion of territory, which is similar for cultural, productive and environmental vocations, but politically and governmentally fragmented? How to re-orient the identity of a place, which is in a period of recession of its historically well known local production? How to go beyond a solid local attitude of isolation and protection of its own territorial context, which could originate serious depopulation phenomena?

2. Local Knowledge and Cultural Heritage

The relationship between local productive traditions and culture, both in terms of historical heritage and contemporary production, can constitute an opportunity for a territory to enhance very specific resources closely linked to the context, but at the same time to look at wider, contemporary and universal futures.

Two examples clarify this concept.

The first concerns the small Ligurian town of Albissola, known for its historical ceramics manufacturing and the presence, even today, of qualified companies. The notoriety of Albissola is linked above all to the relationship between craftsmanship and the art world, developed by charismatic figures such as Tullio d'Albissola, ceramist, artist and writer, who managed to gather a large colony of Italian and foreign artists; starting from the 1950s, these artists transformed Albissola into a privileged place for meeting, discussion and artistic production. The presence and activity of experimentation of artists such as Lucio Fontana, the Danish Asger Jorn (whose dwelling on the hills of Albissola, today a house-museum, represents the most evident example of a fruitful osmosis between art and territory), the Group Co.Br.A., Wifredo Lam, Agenore Fabbri and many others, helped to influence a period of great cultural liveliness and international visibility for the entire territory.

Today Albissola, even if invested by a general decline in the ceramic sector, continues to cultivate knowledge and local skills not only educating new generations, but above all keeping alive the dialogue between tradition and innovation, in the wake of artistic experimentation and languages that have always characterized its identity.

In this context, there are many research collaborations with the University of Genoa and the Politecnico di Milano,¹ in the meantime also collaboration with some artists and designers, such as Giulio Iacchetti and Gum Design, continues.

With the research conducted in 2006 by the Department of Sciences for Architecture of the Faculty of Architecture of Genoa, as part of the III Biennial of Ceramics in Contemporary Art, the experimentation of the relationship between craftsmanship and the new 3D production technologies has been started; thanks to this experimentation, designers identified ways and phases in which it is possible to imagine mixed production techniques. Three-dimensional virtual models are used for the development of complex shapes; then, with rapid prototyping techniques, models for the handmade production of gypsum molds can be derived, as in the case of the “3 sfere” (three spheres) vase designed by Alessandro Mendini (Fig. 1): a possible and collaborative dialogue between different knowledge and processes that opens the way to new perspectives of development.²



Fig. 1 *Tre Sfere* vase prototype, designed by Alessandro Mendini.

The second example concerns the city of Pompei, whose archaeological site is a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1997, visited by about 3.5 million visitors in 2017. Here the relationship between local culture and global values is more complex, because the boundary between local and universal values becomes subtle. The remains and in particular the objects and works found in the excavations show a material and cultural history which displays both the specific place and a universal heritage. The interesting exhibition *Pompei@Madre*, at the homonymous Museum of Contemporary Art in Naples (November 2017 – September 2018), has well shown the capability to transcend space and time of these remains, through the display of the dialogue between archaeological finds and works of our contemporaneity.³

Similarly to Albissola, Pompei and the neighboring Vesuvian municipalities have a strong manufacturing tradition in the ceramic sector. The work “Pompei: New Merchandising” by the designer Marcello Panza, exhibited in the Museo Temporaneo di Impresa di Pompei (December 2017), explores the expressive skills and antiquities, reinterpreting them as contemporary icons, where the ceramic material, the relationship with earth, water and fire become the common thread between ancient and current knowledge, between local and universal cultures (Fig. 2). An example of strategic collaboration between territorial local production and cultural values that amplify the peculiarity, the sense of belonging and the meaning of a collection of products that well interprets the concepts of recognition and of ‘cosmopolitan localism’ previously mentioned.

[1] Among the collaborations carried out with the Politecnico di Milano and POLI.design, we highlight the research conducted with the Brand of Territorial Systems Course and the Master in Strategic Design in 2011 for the promotion of the identity of the territory and the feasibility study for an “Ecomuseo dei Molini da Colore”. See PARENTE, 2012: 58–65.

[2] See Casiddu Nicolò, “Innovazione tecnologica e artigianato ceramico”, in: http://www.attesedizioni.org/progetti_speciali/11/index.html (last accessed 15/06/18).

[3] See: <http://www.madrenapoli.it/en/pompeimadre-materia-archeologica-le-collezioni/> (last accessed 15/06/18).



Fig. 2 *Pompei: New Merchandising* exhibition by Marcello Panza, Pompei 2017.

3. Belonging and Diversity

Italy, probably more than other countries, is the homeland of diversity, of traditional recipes which vary in several ways, of accents and dialects which differ one from the other even a few kilometers apart. So much diversity is certainly a resource, of stories, values, artifacts, and skills. Therefore, the idea of “being Italian” is constituted by the sum of small and diverse elements, whose glue is a sense of cultural belonging. This speech could lead us to tackle very complex issues related to the construction of national identities; but in light of the touristic strategies for the enhancement of the territories, the extreme fragmentation in small areas competing with each other, in a global market, risks damaging the visibility of individual promotion and supply strategies.

We faced these issues during a didactic experience carried out in 2008 in a specific area of the Puglia region.⁴ This area, that hasn’t a specific name, is located between the most well-known and organized sites of Gargano and Salento. In addition to that, it is administratively divided into three different provinces and it is composed by 21 municipalities, some of which are very popular, such as Ostuni and Alberobello. Therefore, this is a unitary territory from the morphological and environmental point of view, yet divided into many entities, without a name that can recognize it as a homogeneous whole. The request of local administrations was very clear: how to be recognized as a whole, to have greater visibility in an international market, without renouncing its specific peculiarities.

Among the strategic communication hypotheses developed by the participants in the “BST – Brand dei Sistemi Territoriali” course, the “Quinte Mobili” project (Mobile Wings) (Fig. 3) proposes a platform for the offer and the choice of one’s personal visit experience. The user can choose through a thematic menu of services (entertainment, sport, food and wine, culture, etc.), graphically represented by and linked with a portion of landscape; in this way, the area isn’t associated to a name, but to an evocative image and its cultural and envi-

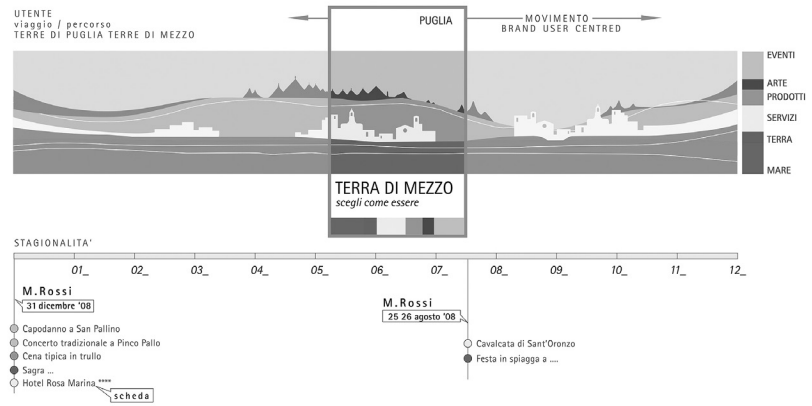


Fig. 3 *Quinte Mobili* project by Daniela D'Avanzo, Silvia Libera, Gisella Martinazzoli, 2008.

ronmental peculiarities, as if they were the wings of a theatre stage. Similarly to what happens in theatre with scenography, also the designed brand becomes dynamic and customizable, according to the experiences that you want to have, and that you select from the website. This project plays with the metaphor of richness and diversity of available offers, the sense of belonging and recognition within a broader and collaborative territorial system.

4. The Crisis as an Opportunity for Rebirth

The change of economic, development and social models are modifying the identity and the survival capabilities of some territories. We are witnessing phenomena of smaller center depopulation, of economic contraction, and as a consequence of functional emptying of large portions of the city. The industrial crisis has for some time imposed on the great European cities to initiate processes of urban regeneration and identity repositioning, as in the case of Barcelona and Turin, and today we carefully observe the transformations of Milan, after EXPO 2015, which is interesting in the field of application of new urban practices. We are going to analyze two case studies very different from one other: Biella, a rich and flourishing town in the Piedmont region known for wool manufacturing, and the tiny village of Topolò, on the border with Slovenia, almost uninhabited.

The crisis in the textile sector of Biella has led to the closure of many small and medium-sized enterprises and to a significant reduction in contracting, while the most important luxury companies remain. For the first time, the city was forced to emerge from its isolation, to rethink its model of development. For this reason, the city set up a strategic plan focused on: restoring the meaning of its historic center emptied of commercial activities, converting many abandoned buildings, and facing the escape of younger generations. These are the weak-

[4] First edition of “BST – Brand dei Sistemi Territoriali” Higher Education Course of POLI.design, a consortium company founded by the Politecnico di Milano, in collaboration with Puglia Region, the tourism body of Brindisi and some local companies. See: <https://www.polide-sign.net/bst/> (last accessed 15/06/2018).

nesses, but there still are many strengths, such as the excellence of its most important companies, the legacy of a productive past, the local know-how and the entrepreneurial spirit of its inhabitants; in addition to that, very important are the processes of reconversion towards the world of contemporary art, culture and the agri-food sector.

We were invited by local administrations to reflect on the future of Biella, both with an edition of the *BST* course in 2015 and with the subsequent research collaboration for the preparation of a feasibility study in 2016. Some possible scenarios of development were proposed, starting from the identification of potential resources that can be found in the territory. Among the various hypotheses, we mention here only the project “*CYCLE: Connecting Young Communities in a Local Experience*”, because it focuses on the theme of regeneration of spaces and places with the goal of enhancing people’s quality of life. This project, strongly oriented to the younger generation, restores and re-imagines values and places, being based on environmental and sustainability principles (Fig. 4). A physical regeneration of abandoned spaces, but also a rehabilitation of meanings that reconnect the past with the present through new ideas and ways of doing business in fashion, art, agribusiness and creative communities.



Fig. 4 *CYCLE* project by Dario Cavaglià, Marco Errica, Michela Galletti, Rosalba Porpora, 2015.

Topolò, a small hilly village in Friuli–Venezia Giulia on the border with Slovenia, represents the case of a 25-year hard challenge. The village was based on a rural economy and had undergone migratory phenomena since the late twentieth century; in the period of the Iron Curtain after the Second World War, it suffered massive depopulation, because it became an inhospitable land. Topolò has a symbolic and hopeful value. It represents a virtuous example of bottom-up design, carried out by some intellectuals who wanted to give back to Topolò, and to the whole valley, a place in the world. In 1994 Moreno Miorelli and Donatella Ruttar started the project “*Stazione di Topolò*” (Topolò Train Station), a cultural event and a laboratory of ideas that became a standing appointment every July, repopulating the small village with inhabitants of the world: an international community of

about 6,000 people which cyclically meet, transforming the suspicious attitude of the 24 inhabitants into a new form of hosting and sharing (Fig. 5). In these years, inhabitants who had left the village returned and they recovered the building stock and turned the town into a scattered hotel, a place of international meeting and experimentation. Art has played an important role in the interpretation of the local spirit, the mediation and the renewal of places and storytelling. This was possible thanks to participation and collaborative processes, which have been crucial for its success and its rebirth. Today Topolò, from being a place of abandonment and oblivion, has overcome the negative historical identity to become an example of successful renewal that has positive effects throughout the area (PARENTE and MEDEIROS, 2015).



Fig. 5 *Stazione di Topolò* project. Moreno Miorelli and Donatella Ruttar curatorship.

5. Conclusions

In this short contribution, the cases presented were to give an idea of the possible plans of action of Design for Territories, which deals with very different problems, scales, and objectives using always a strategic approach aimed at building relationships and synergies for the integrated valorization of territorial systems.

In the case studies, Design for Territories was aimed at:

- rethinking the relationship between local, productive and cultural heritage, and the demands of present times, in search of a dialogue between local specificities and global values;
- re-framing the identity of a territory and tuning it with contemporary challenges and possibilities, working for the creation of new meanings and relationships between existing and potential resources;
- putting at the core of strategic actions several positive values, such as openness, conviviality and sustainability;
- developing new, small and local narratives, to be shared with new and old citizens.

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