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virtuous
circle

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Design, Identity and Sensemaking: a Fertile Approach for Small Territories

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Recently, global competition among nations, big cities and major tourist destination has powered the specialization of disciplines such as territorial marketing, place and city branding, as well as numerous ranking systems for continuous monitoring of perception and reputation of places.

The design approach to these issues has always been sensitive to the enhancement of peripheral and marginal areas compared to the large economic flows, with research and experimental design activities.

Enabling small communities to recover their identity and to anticipate possible and sustainable futures is a goal that the strategic design for territorial enhancement pursues with great interest, as an appropriate alternative to growth systems based on large urban settlements.

The story of a successful case, the “Postaja Topolove” project in a small village on the border between Italy and Slovenia, offers an opportunity to reflect on a number of key issues in the design process: recognition and planning of the sense of place, storytelling and narrative methods, use of certain levers for development as art and culture, and the centrality of the participatory and collaborative dimension.

Keywords

Strategic design, Place identity, Sensemaking, Storytelling, Situated learning.

PLACE IDENTITY AND DESIRABILITY

Designing the identity of a territory, making it visible and recognizable is a very complex process, but increasingly necessary if there is a need to be attractive in a competitive market.

Big cities were the first places to experiment with and refine methods and strategies for attracting people, investment and business, now essential for the sustenance of the urban ecosystem. And they do it by planning medium or long-term strategies with large-scale interventions, as in the case of Barcelona and Bilbao, or through the soft levers of culture and events, as in the case of Turin. (Mailander, 2012; Guala, 2007; Evans, McDonald & Rudlin, 2011).

Global competition among nations, big cities and major tourist destination has thus powered the specialization of disciplines such as territorial marketing, place and city branding, (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009; Govers & Go, 2009; Dinnie, 2011;

Baker, 2012) as well as numerous ranking systems for continuous monitoring of perception and reputation of the place (Anholt, 2007, 2010).

Parallel to this main strand of studies and projects, led by a dimensional and/or economic scale, we may note the birth of a number of interesting initiatives of bottom-up territorial valorisation in minor and peripheral places, driven by motivations, values and objectives very different from territorial competition. These projects are about alternative models based on community rather than competitiveness.

This is a widespread need in Italy, littered as it is with small settlements which are invisible on the maps of economic geography, peripheral to the flows of knowledge and innovation, still anchored in a time that belongs to the past rather than the present, and therefore subject to processes of depopulation.

Now that the big cities are showing increasing signs of economic, social and environmental crisis, people once again appreciate lifestyles linked with slowness and well-being, made possible by new forms of work and knowledge at a distance enabled by digital technologies.

For these smaller places, with a change of perspective less geared to economic competitiveness, we can follow territorial development models based on qualitative aspects, related to the strengthening of communities, social innovation, environmental and socio-cultural value (Moulaert & Sekia, 2003).

In this perspective, small towns have at least as good a chance of becoming "desirable" (Buchanan, 2001) as the great urban attractors, if not more.

SMALL IS GOOD: THE RISE OF SMALL TOWNS

The advantage that small towns in marginal areas in Italy now possess lies in the fact that time appears to have stopped in these places, leaving the delicate balance between built forms and the shapes of nature intact.

Built mainly with local materials, in times when "0 km" (small carbon footprint) was primarily an economic need rather than an imperative of environmental sustainability, they are commonly called "widespread cultural heritage sites" because they represent a synthesis of tangible and intangible elements, preserving a socio-cultural heritage of traditions, knowledge, memories and rituals.

The process of protection and appreciation of these places was initially launched by a number of associations that have been promoting quality labels based on verification of specific requirements, with similar procedures to the labels used for typical traditional products. Among these are: "Bandiera Arancione" (Orange Flag) for the enhancement of small municipalities in Italy with a maximum of 15,000 inhabitants (<http://www.paesiarancioni.net>); "I borghi più belli d'Italia" (The most beautiful villages in Italy), which promotes small towns awarded the status of "great artistic and historical interest" (<http://www.borghitalia.it>); the national network of "Slow Cities" based on the concepts of well-being and quality of life introduced by Carlo Pedrini's Slow Food movement (<http://www.cittaslow.org>); and the "Res Tipica" portal (<http://www.restipica.net>) bringing together all the associations concerned with defining the identity

of Italian municipalities, based on certain specific local strengths, from local products to cultural traditions.

However, it may not be enough to have a quality label if this is not followed by effective action promoting the area. Especially if this labelling process becomes extensive, it will over time risk cancelling out the differences and the actual visibility of the places in question.

The capability of design to generate vision can be at the service of territories that need to better focus their identity and their objectives for growth, enhancement and - in some cases - survival. Reversing the process of abandonment of these places through observation of good practices designed with bottom-up processes, stopping the race for land consumption and reassessing the widespread heritage we already have, imagining a sustainable future for new economic and social models: these are fields of design action in the different stages of listening, observing and envisioning for the territories.

To do this, design is applied to these territories with a heuristic approach, proceeding to validate hypotheses through field testing, verifying the effects and modelling strategies and tools to suit specific contexts.

To explain this approach addressed to marginal and smaller sites, we took the emblematic case study of Topolò, a small Italian village on the border with Slovenia, which through a cultural event has been able to transform its identity as a non-place by restoring a new centrality to the village and its people.

Moreno Miorelli, one of the founders of the initiative, says: "There are places in the world that seem to be waiting for someone who can listen to them and only then they can reveal all their wealth."

A project for Topolò that represents a possible path for the social, cultural and economic rebirth of places that are disadvantaged for various different reasons, based on the paradox of transforming an inhospitable and suspicious territory into a place of acceptance and dialogue between cultures.

THE CASE STUDY OF TOPOLO: A PLACE THAT DIDN'T EXIST BEFORE

Topolò is a small town in the eastern part of the province of Udine. Its name derives from "topol", the Slovenian word for the poplar tree, widely present in the area. Topolò - or Topolove - is geographically a part of the valley of Cosizza, one of the four valleys formed by the river Natisone, and is located 580 m above sea level, on a steep slope.

With its 400 inhabitants, now reduced to 25, employed principally in rural work, Topolò was once the most important hamlet in the municipality of Grimacco. Emigration, which has always characterized this area, was the only alternative to starvation, and became massive in the 20th century, to the Americas (United States, Brazil and Argentina), then to the mines of France and Belgium and later to Germany and Switzerland.

The area suffered greatly during World War II and the subsequent "Iron Curtain" on the Italo-Yugoslav border. The Cold War transformed the border territory into

a place of absolute inhospitality: prohibitions, checkpoints and denunciations became everyday routine. The result was social disaster, disintegration of the community, rejection of its linguistic and cultural identity and a desire for escape. For those who still remained, there was trauma: the psychological block, mistrust, fear and suspicion as character traits.

The idea of the project is to turn this place into a laboratory for cultural integration and exchange, to show that life in places situated on the edge, in the broadest sense of the term, is not only possible, but can become an opportunity to activate new processes of organization and construction of lived-in space.

THE "POSTAJA TOPOLOVE" PROJECT

The revival of this small town took place thanks to "Postaja Topolove - Topolò Station", a cultural event and a laboratory for the arts and for thought created in 1994 on the basis of an idea by Moreno Miorelli and Donatella Ruttar, both still artistic directors.

After 22 years of ups and downs, and of international recognition, it now appears to be a small miracle. Like all similar projects, it would not be possible without the passion and dedication of those who created it and all those who believed in it. In the early years, the limited funds of a cultural association provided hospitality for artists in the village houses and covered the costs of some printed materials.

The project stood out right from the start for three ethical principles: gratuity, the gift, and hospitality. In short, exchange: precisely what had been prohibited in places like this for many years. The reference to the Station once again emphasizes the concept of cultural crossroads, arrival and departure.

The goal was therefore primarily ethical and political: on one hand to overcome the historical diffidence of the local people, who had over time become used to defending themselves and being wary of strangers, and on the other to restore to the village and its inhabitants a place in the world and a visibility denied by its status as a borderland not appearing on any map.

The project, now in its twenty-second edition in 2015, originated as a chance encounter between a lifeless town and contemporary experimental art.

In the first phase, a few selected artists are hosted in houses in the village, and are asked for the duration of their stay to become a part of the local community, with its rhythms and silences, collecting the various different stimuli that this little microcosm had to offer.

The invited artists are asked to "listen" to Topolò (Bruno, 2002), and then create an installation that translates this relationship.

Their presence almost has the value of a service. Local traditions and visual, audial, narrative and performative experiments, created by artists from around the world each year, collectively build the images of Topolò, which thinks for itself and renews itself.

It also consolidates a new sense of belonging and connection with distant people and places, which come to Topolò annually for about two weeks in July,

progressively adding threads to a network based on the values of empathy and collaboration.

Over time Topolò's growing reputation, spread by the artists themselves and by the press, has facilitated access to funding made available by local authorities: in 2004 the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region recognized "Topolò Station" as a project of regional interest, while a number of individuals were able to obtain European funding to renovate the houses and barns in the village for the construction of an "albergo diffuso". In a village without hotels, bars or shops, tending to physical spaces also began to improve reception conditions. Meanwhile, the non-profit "Association Topolò-Topolove" has ensured more effective management of the event and of reception services. Artistic experimentation is also aimed at creative workshops for children and for research in the field of sound. In 2004 the group "Tambours de Topolò" was formed with young musicians using petrol cans as percussion instruments, and in 2008 the "Topolovska Minimalna Orkestra" was founded, an orchestra with an open and variable structure made up of young amateurs and professionals from different musical genres. Both groups have earned a reputation for themselves performing beyond the confines of Topolò.

In parallel, a publishing project has been developed, now in its ninth edition, in which a number of authors are invited to live in Topolò for a certain time period to produce written and visual narratives.

Since 2010 there has also been a partnership with the "ToBe continued" project, a special 24-hour streaming concert held every year on March 24 (World Tuberculosis Day) with the participation of international musicians.

However, with the recent economic crisis, the event had been in danger of ending due to the drastic reduction in regional funding. In 2013, an international mobilization rushed to the rescue through crowdfunding, the appeal of Guido Scarabattolo, the auctioning off of a number of works from *l'Affiche* gallery in Milan, and the organization of "Topolò Day" in Graz by the association Rhizom (Sommariva, 2013). The funds raised have enabled the continuation of the event, which is now preparing for the next edition in July 2015.

RESULTS AND EFFECTS IN THE TERRITORY

This experience is a concrete example of how culture and art, in all its expressions, can contribute to the revitalization of places which seem not to have a future, highlighting the unexpressed potential of the area, the village and its inhabitants.

The strongest legacy generated from this experience is, in the words of Donatella Ruttar¹, the fact that "it changed the mood of the local people", rekindling lost hope and retrieving new forms of dialogue with the world.

Beyond the current 25 residents, today the "citizens" of Topolò are all 6000 people who have emotional ties with the village, embracing its philosophy and renewing this meeting of souls and places every year. The construction of a

¹ Interview with Donatella Ruttar of April 13, 2015.



FIGURES 1, 2, 3 - Postaja Topolove, XXI edition, July 2014 (Photo Maria Silvano)



FIGURES 4, 5 Postaja Topolove, XIX edition, July 2012 (Photo Maria Silvano)

community that has worked on the present and the past, but has also invested in the future over the past 22 years, allowing a generation of young people, now adults, to grow up in a sensitive environment which is multicultural and open to experimenting with a variety of artistic languages.

A third element is the symbolic dimension and the value of the microcosm of Topolò in relation to the larger area of Natisone valley and the eastern border.

This statement of identity led the way to implementation of other projects operating in the same direction to mend a wounded land and recover a cultural sense of belonging, such as the recent SMO-Slovensko Multimedialno Okno multimedia museum (the acronym SMO in Slovenian means "we are"), a museum of landscapes and narratives in San Pietro Natisone, designed by architect Donatella Ruttar (<http://www.smo-center.eu/index.php>).

The minor miracle of Topolò Station remains a unique experience because it is the outcome of a special chemistry between people and place, in a mix of the archaic and the innovative, a comparison between the local and the global. And also because its goal has never been economic, but spiritual nourishment of souls. Art becomes a facilitator, a universal language for bringing together apparently distant worlds.

LEARNING FROM TOPOLO

When we speak of non-places, there are two references that come to mind. The first is the point of view of the anthropologist Marc Augé on places standardized by globalization, such as airports or big shopping centres, which lose their connection with the local context (Augé, 2009). And the other is the lesson of Robert Venturi in his famous book "Learning from Las Vegas" (1972), in which he invited designers to constantly monitor the signals of worlds in transformation.

Topolò is a successful experiment in reconstruction of local identity, and it may take on a symbolic role, rather like, with some differences, the case of Las Vegas. While Las Vegas was an example of an identity that was invented by referring to fantasy and imagination, without any relationship to real context, similar to the invention of dreamlike Dubai, on the contrary Topolò represents a totally opposite perspective, a uniqueness of values based on the local place, without excluding a critical perspective on global phenomena. The thoughts and reflections that arise in Topolò have a global dimension and particularities that cannot arise anywhere else but in the specific context that makes it possible.

A project of reinvention of the identity of a place, where we recognize the ability of design to raise unconventional questions for problem solving, interpreting the local potential in an innovative way and verifying it with action/research.

This case allows us to reflect on the four dimensions involved in a process of recognition/invention of the identity of a place.

I. SENSEMAKING

The new identity of Topolò is based on precisely those elements that seemed to be its weaknesses: the memory of a past of suffering and exclusion as a borderland, and a concept of time that is stretched to the point of seeming to stand still. With a reversal of perspective, these two aspects have been turned into values: the border has become a permeable membrane for contamination with other cultures, and slow time has become a way of defending oneself from the chaos of the global markets and going back to the habit of listening to people and the environment.

The legacy of history is something territories must always relate to, but it should be reinterpreted, reactivated, sometimes rediscovered. We need to build a sense of place, finding a key point that can differentiate it from others while

at the same time identifying it around a clear concept, which here turns the border into an opportunity, the station as a place of departure and arrival of the world's citizens.

Taking another example, Campagna, a small town in South Italy, has begun to revive the lost tradition of "A Chiena" (the flood), a temporary diversion of the waters of the river Tenza along the main street of the old town, an ancient way of cleaning the city streets during the summer. Now this archaic practice has turned into an event that catalyses around the theme of water a series of ludic and cultural initiatives of rediscovery of territorial resources. Having recognized this surreal flooding of the village as an opportunity to renew the sense of place is a strategic choice of the project, requiring observation skills and sensibility in perceiving territorial potential.

2. STORYTELLING

Recognizing the values and distinctive features of a place are the first steps in arriving at a story of the territory, which is the heart of the experience. In the case of Topolò, which doesn't have a single story, the artists renew the story continually, and it becomes a story that stays up to date with the sense of the times. It seems paradoxical that artists could create a contemporary vision connected with the rest of the world in such an isolated place; but this is a result of the freedom of action in this place, the total absence of rules, requirements and time limits.

The story gives the place visibility, and makes Topolò appear on the map again, geographically and semantically.

The same has happened in Matera, a much more widely known city characterised by dwellings carved into the rocks, a UNESCO World Heritage Site which had however been forgotten for many years. Storytelling through film ("The Passion of the Christ" by Mel Gibson, shot in Matera, brought a flow of tourists from all over the world to the city) and the innovative promotional campaign of the Basilicata Region (which called on writers to write about the territory with novels available for free online) have reinforced the image of a city that has now been chosen as the winner among the many candidate cities for European Capital of Culture for 2019.

But, like Topolò, Matera still does not have a train station!

3. CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE AS TOOLS

We can frequently use art and culture as strategic tools in the process of re-evaluation of territories, but we cannot consider them a *panacea*, always able to make places more attractive. What we need is strategic thinking to coordinate the actions of enhancement of the territory and mutual purposes, making them highly specific and characterized.

Artistic expression appears in its purest form in Topolò, free from the conditioning of the market, as a way to help people to talk to each other again, to

dialogue and open up to the world. The aim is not the art itself (and this probably also makes the artists feel more independent), but to feel and communicate.

In Valcamonica, another mountainous area in Lombardy, a start-up called "Case Sparse" established by young designers is testing the formula of the artist in residence to build a local art park and connect this small place with the big international stages of the world of art. A three-year project in which a group of artists lives in an isolated farmhouse, while at the same time sending real-time traces of this creative process to a gallery located in a big city (in 2013 in Milan, in 2014 Berlin, in 2015 in London). Here the aim is not only to build a heritage of contemporary art and nature that can communicate with the archaeological rock park present in this area, increasing visitors' interest in the area; the goal is also to connect this peripheral place with the liveliest sites of artistic debate, making it known as a centre of cultural active.

4. PARTICIPATION AND THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

The "Topolò Station" project starts from the bottom, from an intuition of people linked to the place who believed in and placed their bets on its revival and on that of the surrounding areas. But permanent or temporary participation of all the inhabitants is a fundamental part of the project. Shared action creates a new sense of community and collective growth. For Topolò, this is essential.

We can certainly agree that enhancing the participation of the local inhabitants is crucial during the envisioning and the strategic development of a project. We know that top-down processes are frequently not successful and fail to take root in territories. The tasks of the designer include mediation, dialogue and facilitation, fostering active participation of all local players in all phases of the strategic process. Thus, it is the people themselves who are the real drivers behind the success of the actions of enhancement of local communities.

CONCLUSION

The Topolò case showed that the enhancement of small towns involved very different motivations and methods from those of the big territorial attractors. The target market appears absolutely secondary to the enhancement of social fabric and the strengthening of the sense of identity and community.

A series of noble values - gratuity, the gift, hospitality - form the foundations underlying the initiative and establishing the guidelines for these 22 years of collective experimentation on the site.

Topolò provides an example of best practice, useful for making the first methodological notes for a discipline that is currently being consolidated: strategic design applied to small communities.

Design is by nature a meta-discipline which draws on other knowledge to adapt application to ever wider fields; in the case of territorial development, this characteristic assumes even more evident characters, as the object to be

observed - the territory - is a complex and dynamic system made up of material evidence, intangible and human, which different and unique in each case.

If we want to extract some general considerations, the case of Topolò is of interest for its long life and for its dynamic "situated learning" (Lave & Wenger, 1990).

It is a project that:

- Results from deep listening to the territory (design audit);
- Identifies in a conceptual and human engagement from the outside - the guest bearing a universal artistic language - the key to introduction of phenomena disrupting established routines (trigger event);
- Advances by testing hypotheses and learns by observing the results (learning by doing);
- Builds collaborative relational networks through participatory planning and the absence of hierarchies (communities of practice);
- Immediately introduces a clear concept of value to guide the various initiatives: the concept of the gift, which also implies receiving (the ethical value of the project).

This process, summarized in phases, highlights the importance of preliminary listening to the territory and of interpretation, required so that each strategic project for development of the area will be specific, and not standardized, different from other territories.

In other words, the designer can be thought of as a farmer: before starting to cultivate a crop, he should be aware of the characteristics of the soil and the environmental conditions of the place (design audit); he then decides which seed is most suitable to plant (trigger event); he provides all the care and nutrients required (networks and participation); and he monitors and guides the effects of unexpected weather conditions (verification with local stakeholders and other feedback). If the whole process is done correctly, and each component accomplishes its role, the seed will sprout up to give a different shape to the uncultivated field. To do all of this, vision, forecasting, analysis, synthesis, direction and coordination are needed.

Many areas haven't had any care or attention over the years: the relationship between the natural and the artificial has evolved in an extreme way, leading to the paradox of two opposites: excessive concentration and depopulation.

As Michelangelo Pistoletto (2010) says, the challenge today is to imagine a "Third Paradise". If the first heaven is totally governed by the nature, and the second is artificially developed by human intelligence, the design of the third heaven is a fusion between the first and second, reinterpreting science, technology, art, culture and politics by giving places new meaning and form. Design today should be more and more responsible for predicting new scenarios of balance and sustainable development. And it is a field where the strategic design has a significant contribution to make, in collaboration with other disciplines.

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THE VIRTUOUS CIRCLE

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DESIGN CULTURE AND EXPERIMENTATION

Design comes out of the interaction between a practice, which seeks to change the state of things, and a culture, which makes sense of this change. The way this happens evolves with time: practices and cultures evolve and so do the ways they interact; and the attention that is paid at different moments to one or other of these interacting polarities also evolves. In the current period of turbulent transformation of society and the economy, it is important to go back and reflect on the cultural dimension of design, its capacity to produce not only solutions but also meanings, and its relations with pragmatic aspects. Good design does not limit itself to tackling functional and technological questions, but it also always adopts a specific cultural approach that emerges, takes shape and changes direction through a continuous circle of experimenting and reflecting. Because the dimension and complexity of the problems is growing, it is becoming evident that to overcome them it is, above all, necessary to bring new sense systems into play. This is ground on which design, by its very nature, can do much. Indeed, the ability to create a virtuous circle between culture and practical experimentation is, or should be, its main and distinctive characteristic. However, for this really to happen it is necessary to trigger new discussion and reflection about the nature and purpose of design practice and culture.