

Systemic design and social marginalization – Mapping and assessment of projects for the empowerment of people experiencing social exclusion

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# Systemic design and social marginalization: mapping and assessment of projects for the empowerment of people experiencing social exclusion

## Working Paper

Marco D'Urzo

MSc in Systemic Design

Department of Architecture and Design, Politecnico di Torino

Giada Pezzi

MSc in Systemic Design

Department of Architecture and Design, Politecnico di Torino,

Cristian Campagnaro

Associate professor

Department of Architecture and Design, Politecnico di Torino

## Introduction

The aim of the work here presented is to provide a tool to map and assess projects addressing the issues of social marginalization, while considering them in their inner and exterior complexity. This means analysing both the whole project and the main users (marginalised people), as well as: the project's impact on the community; the full spectrum of motivations behind its development; the long-term possibilities it generates for users; its capability to gather resources needed on the local territory while creating value on the same territory.

Recognizing the complexity of a social issue is the basis of any design process and of this work too: giving simple answers to complex problems, while apparently being effective on the short term, could only increase the complexity and wickedness of the problem itself on the long term.

## Social marginalization as-is a wicked problem

Our initial reference on social marginalization has been this definition from C. Ranci (1996):

*"The notion of social marginalization reflects the idea upon which society's organization is based, not only on inequality regarding access to social rewards or on the hierarchization of social positions, but also on the existence of different degrees of social integration. A person is marginalized when lies far away from the centre of the social system he/she belongs to and close to the borders that separates that system from the external world."*

The marginalized person's experience is process of continuous adjustment to different social contexts in which the person will eventually never been integrated. The impossibility to settle inside

a defined social context leads to the impossibility to build strong social ties. Among the different conceptions behind the origin of the condition of marginality, we can briefly delineate a set of domains of causes which, with different combinations, lies at the root of this condition.

The first set concerns social and context dependant factors (Germani, 1976):

- Economic factors;
- Political factors;
- Psycho-social factors;
- Demographical factors.

The second set concerns the individual-dependant factors (Ranci, 1996):

- Breaking up of social bonds;
- Voluntary segregation;
- Opposition to the dominant order.

Their existence is enough to state that social marginalization is a complex, or better a *wicked problem* (Rittel & Weber, 1973) resulting from the overlapping of these causes, both at individual and social level. Considering social marginalization as a wicked problem is essential to avoid the creation of simplistic stereotypes and wrong narratives that could lead the public opinion and the politics to promote and develop policies that not only would not solve the problem, but could, in fact, make it more complex.

That considered, before approaching the problem is essential to highlight its complex nature, referring to points n.8 and n.9 in Rittel's and Webber's formulation: "*Each can be considered to be a symptom of another problem*" and "*The discrepancies (and causes themselves) can be explained in numerous ways.*" (Rittel & Weber, 1973).

### **Today's society and social marginalization**

Nowadays social marginalization is often seen as a condition distant from the life of most of those people enjoying an average quality of living. A clear metaphor of this simplistic view of the problem can be highlighted in Z. Bauman book "Wasted lives" (2004), in which the philosopher makes a parallel between marginalized subjects and material wastes. According to him, material and "human" wastes, are nowadays considered by governments, institutions and public opinion as something that must be managed and dismissed: hopeless elements without any possibility of being useful for themselves or for the community, for which the society must find a proper landfill that would allow and easy discharge.

Opposed to that vision, the Capabilities Approach developed by A. Sen and M. Nussbaum describes how, for a person to be able to deeply express his/her existence, he/she must be recognized in their full complexity, with respect to both needs and potential. In this sense, anyone who is able to completely live one's life and exercise their agency, is a resource not only for oneself but for society as a whole. This shows that people who are socially excluded may become key for the activation of virtuous processes both at an individual and a collective level.

This approach is based on the person instead of being based on preferences or rights; in fact, the essential question behind the capabilities approach (CA) is "what a person could do or be?". Starting

from this question, the CA can consider the person in his/her whole complexity, understanding the differences that exist between every subject in the inputs he/she needs to reach a condition of wellbeing and in the possible outputs he/she can express.

In this sense, there are two main reasons why the systemic approach could be useful for contextualizing the problem of social marginalization:

1. the focus on complexity and on the intersection between different scales allows to consider the individual complexity of the marginal subject and their interactions with and within the complexity of the context;
2. as the natural systems that inspired it, this approach sees no “wastes”, but only different kinds of resources, each one with its features and potential. Considered that, every element of the system can activate virtuous processes if properly enhanced and placed. In fact, the systemic approach in an approach aimed towards sustainability, being that environmental, social or economic.

## TOOL DEVELOPMENT

### Theoretical framework: Systemic Design

According the previous theoretical references, we carried out the development of a mapping tool based on the systemic approach as a set of values and principles.

Systemic design differentiates from other design thinking areas of interest both in terms of scale and social complexity of projects. In fact, it focuses on wider and higher-level systems containing multiple sub-systems. The aim of systemic design is to map, propose and reconfigure such complex systems through a human-centred design approach. It is also important to notice that systemic design is not a discipline, as opposed to industrial or graphic design, but a design orientation that considers the use of different disciplines as needed.

### Theoretical reference

The development of the tool was also based on three following theoretical design references:

- 5 principles of systemic design (Bistagnino, 2009)
- 4 domains of design (Jones & Van Patter, 2009)
- Designer knowledge characterisation (Manzini, 2015)

The combination of these references into the tool allowed us to have summarized, clear but still exhaustive view of projects from different perspectives: project stakeholders', users' and reference community's, as well as an external expert view from a design perspective, regarding role and methodologies of the designers involved.

We will now illustrate the main schemes we developed. The tool is divided in three parts:

#### 1. Project framing

This part includes some schemes developed to contextualize the project, describing:

- The work-related issue(s) addressed by the project, referring to our specific interest area (see paragraph *Research field - actual situation*)

- The geographical localization of the project and the local reference community
- The kind of users involved, their issues and the role and skills they would gain by being involved in the project
- A description of the expected period in which the project will develop and the user will be involved

For the sake of time effectiveness, these schemes will not be illustrated.

## 2. Qualitative mapping

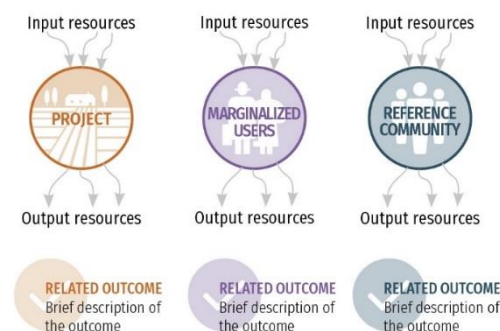
The second part is based on the 5 principles of systemic design (Bistagnino, 2009), through which we carried out a qualitative mapping of the project.

### 1. Input/Output/Outcome

This first mapping parameter allowed us to have a clear view on the tangible and intangible resources involved in the processes, how they are transformed and which the outcomes of these transformations are.

The mapping was carried out for the three fundamental components of each project: project's organization itself; project's marginalized users; reference community the project develops within.

Example:

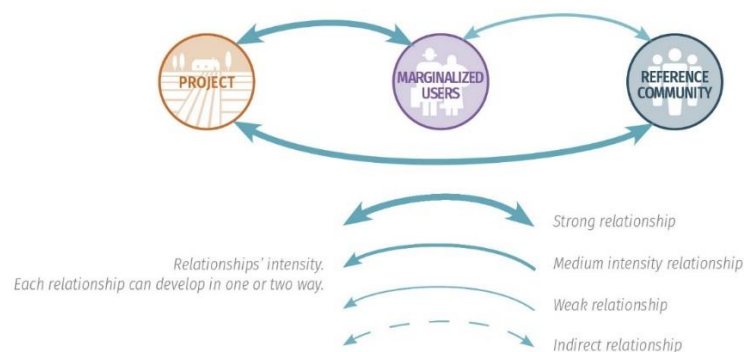


### 2. Relationships

Here we highlighted the kind and quality of relationships occurring between the three components of each project.

Each arrow can have one or two ways, and their thickness indicates the intensity of the relationship at a perceptive level: strong, medium, weak or indirect.

Example:

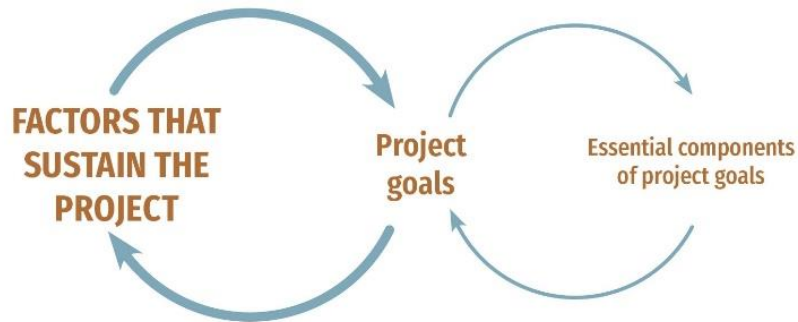


### 3. Autopoiesis

Two parameters are based on this principle:

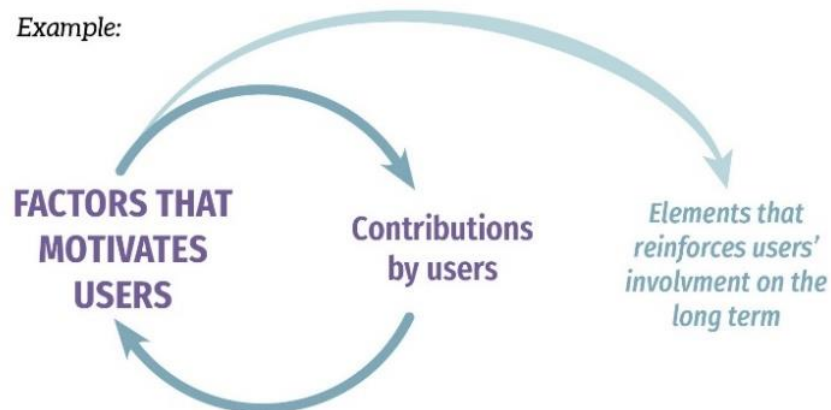
- First, we mapped the project's goals, the essentials components of them and the factors that allow the project to sustain itself in fulfilling these goals;

*Example:*



- second, we repeated the process with regards to users, by mapping factors that motivate them in being involved in the project, contribution they must give the project to guarantee the sustainability of the entire process and, finally, the long-term outcomes of their involvement in the project.

*Example:*



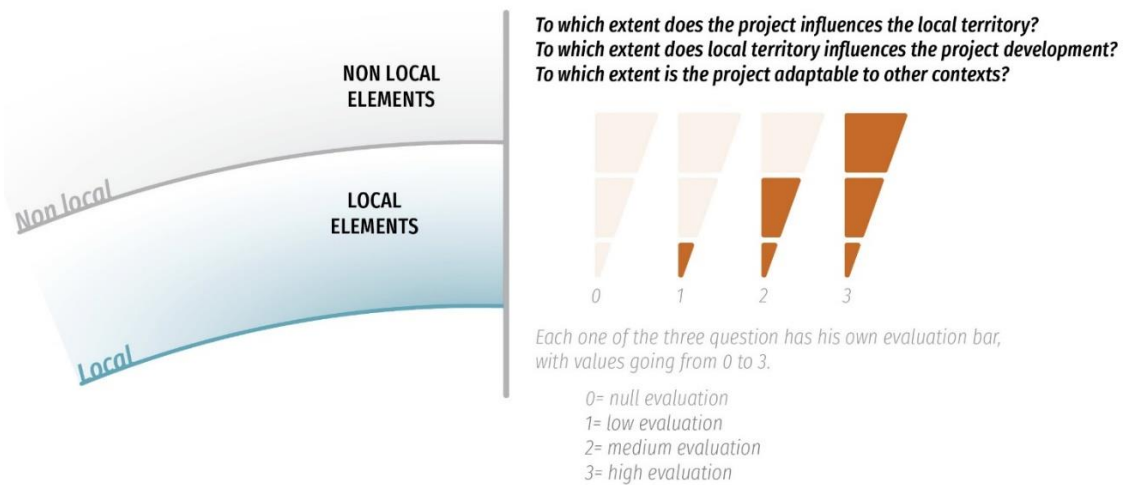
**4. Act locally**

Following this principle, we mapped the physical origin of the resources, to visualize the role of the local territory in the development of the project and how the project give value to them.

We used a simple scheme showing the local or external origin of resources and trough a to-the-point evaluation (with values ranking from 0 to 3) based on the consideration emerging from these 3 questions:

- To which extent does the project influence the local territory?
- To which extent does the local territory influence the project development?
- To which extent is the project adaptable to other contexts?

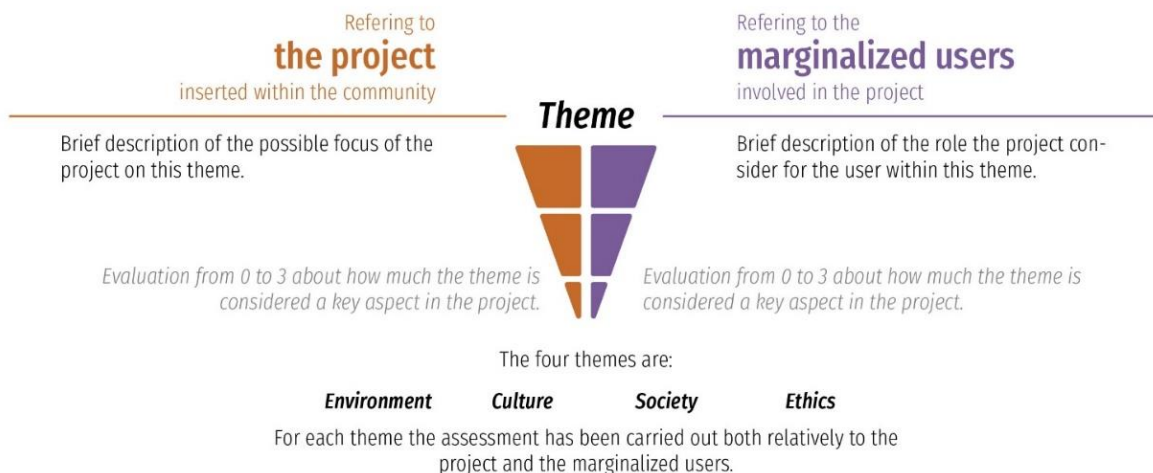
Example:



**5. Human at the centre of the project**

Starting from this principle, we prepared a summarised assessment on both how the project relates to the community and how the project involves the users. The assessment has been carried out relatively to the four themes integrated into the principle: environment, culture, society, ethics.

Example:



### Design component analysis

The last part is based on Jones' and Van Patter's 4 domains of design (2009) and on Manzini's work on design knowledge characterisation (2015). By intersecting these two references we could create a scheme showing:

- At what level of change the project outcome is placed within the 4 domains;
- In which domains and in which phases of project's development the designers act;
- What kind of knowledge these designers have, differentiating between:
  - "Diffuse" design knowledge, referring to the one "put into play by "nonexperts" with their natural designing capacity." (Manzini, 2015);
  - "Expert" design knowledge, referring to the one put into play by "people trained to operate professionally as designers." (Manzini, 2015).

Example:

## PROJECT'S OUTCOME CHARACTERISATION

Aside from this example, for each project we highlighted only the involved domains, describing the project's action in each domain.

### Artifacts and communications

Design as making, or traditional design practice

### Products and services

Design for value creation (including service design, product innovation, multichannel, and user experience), design as integrating.

### Organizational transformation (complex, bounded by business or strategy)

Change-oriented, design of work practices, strategies, and organizational structures.

### Social transformation (complex, unbounded)

Design for complex societal situations, social systems, policy-making, and community design.

## DESIGNER'S ROLE

# expert

## 1.0

Brief description of the designer's role towards the project goal

Possible phases of action:

**conception**  
**organisation**  
**actualization**

# 1.0

# 2.0

# 3.0

# 4.0

# diffuse

## 4.0

Brief description of the designer's role towards the project goal

Possible phases of action:

**conception**  
**organisation**  
**actualization**

## RESEARCH FIELD

The tool we developed is intended to be used for the analysis of projects addressing social issues: among different issues, we decided to focus on today's increasingly solid relationship between precarious and atypical working conditions and the creation of marginality. This relationship had led us to identify, as the field of analysis, the issue of poverty resulting from chronic unemployment or job precariousness within the European context.

### Context

We decided to limit our research field to Europe (referring to EU-28) to have a sufficiently coherent context for the definition of the issue. In fact, even considering the differences, we can say that European countries share some fundamental principles and historical origins across their welfare and job-related systems.

### Theme

We decided to focus on poverty resulting from chronic unemployment or job precariousness for both personal interest and objective reasons. In fact, in a capitalistic system, the possibility to sell one's workforce is the essential element behind the possibility to survive. Since this possibility is becoming rarer, given the employment dynamics of the post-fordist job's market, we can witness an increasing group of people struggling to obtain sufficient resources to live. We investigated the evolution of both the welfare system and job's market in the defined geographical context; aside from the research on these two very wide topics, our main references on this specific issue were two:

- "Di condizione precaria" (*of precarious condition*) (Salmieri & Verrocchio, 2015), a publication gathering different essays on job precariousness, job's market evolution and dismantlement of welfare system;
- "Poveri noi" (*poor us*) (Openpolis & Act!onaid, 2016), a report on poverty that compares the Italian situation to the one of the other European countries.

Data and insight extracted from these two references have been integrated with EuroStat data from different reports.

### Actual situation

As of now, Eurostat data highlights some prominent issues linking unemployment or job-related problems to poverty:

- Starting from unemployment, the 47,5% of EU-28 unemployed individuals are at risk of poverty, even after the intervention of dedicated welfare measures (Eurostat, 2015);
- However, the problem goes beyond unemployment: in fact, while we have 20,8 mln unemployed individuals in the EU-28, 40,3 mln of people live in a condition of severe material deprivation (Eurostat, 2016). This means that the condition of severe material deprivation goes beyond jobless people, and possibly include people employed but still under the poverty threshold: the so-called "working poors" (Treccani, 2013);
- In fact, we count that 9,5 workers out of 100 risks to find themselves under the poverty threshold (Eurostat, 2015);
- This risk is often linked to the precariousness of jobs: today, 19% of workers between 20 and 64 years have a part-time contract; the 11% a fixed-term contract (Eurostat, 2016);

- Also, the education level of individuals is directly linked to their possibility of being employed: in fact, we saw that only 52,6% of people with a primary or inferior secondary level of education are employed, against 70,7% and 82,7% of people with upper-secondary or upper-tertiary level of education (Eurostat, 2016).

Out of these data, we highlighted four key issues the actual job's market present in generating poverty:

- Unavailability of work, referring to unemployed and inactive persons;
- Unapproachableness of work, referring to people with low levels of instruction and education;
- Low-intensity work, referring to precarious workers;
- Low wage work, referring to working poors.

## Research

We searched our reference context for projects addressing at least one of the four issues listed before. We looked for experiences that, beyond their specific purpose, could represent a starting point for the development of new community policies addressing social marginalization.

We analysed 12 projects, four for each domain of design starting from domain 2.0, since we thought that 1.0 domain would not have been relevant for our work being too narrow. Analysed projects are distributed across seven EU nations.

Research has been conducted in desk mode due to technical, economical and temporal limitations.

## CASE STUDIES

Here we present a list of the 12 case studies analysed:

### Domain 2.0:

- REFUGEE ScART (Rome, Italy / 2011 – ongoing), *refugeescart.org*
- Progetto QUID (Verona, Italy / 2012 – ongoing), *progettoquid.it*
- Cucula (Berlin, Germany / 2013 – ongoing), *cucula.org*
- Costruiamo Saperi, *Building knowledges* (Ragusa, Italy / 2015 – ongoing), *diocesiragusa.it*

### Domain 3.0:

- Compagnons Bâisseurs, *Comrades builders* (France / 1957 – ongoing), *compagnonsbatisseurs.org*
- The Big Issue (London, UK / 1991 – ongoing), *bigissue.com*
- Grow Enterprise Wales GrEW (Galle, UK / 2010 – ongoing), *grewcorporate.org.uk*
- Voidstarter (Dublin, Ireland / 2013 – ongoing), *voidstarter.com*

### Domain 4.0

- El Humoso cooperative (Marinaleda, Spain / 1991 – ongoing), *cooperativamarinaleda.es*
- R-Urban Colombes (Colombes, France / 2008 – ongoing), *r-urban.net*
- Malmö Living Labs/Herrgård's Women's Association (Malmö, Sweden / 2010 – ongoing), *medea.mah.se/malmo-living-labs , herrgardskvinno.wordpress.com*

- Camera Popolare del Lavoro, *Workers' circle* (Naples, Italy / 2015 – ongoing), [clashcityworkers.org](http://clashcityworkers.org)

We will now present a selection of four cases (one for each domain, two for the domain 4.0), briefly explaining their goals and the features highlighted by our analysis.

### ***Costruiamo Saperi*** (Italian for “Building Knowledges”) - 2.0, products and services

*Costruiamo Saperi* is a project born in 2015 in Ragusa, a city in the Southern Italy. Activated by the local diocese, in collaboration with an association of architects, the project aims at renewing an abandoned farm and its surrounding agricultural lands by engaging immigrants and homeless people. The final goal is to create an agricultural and a building cooperative to make the engaged users fully autonomous.

The analysis highlighted how this project gives great attention to local environmental and cultural features, aiming not only at renewing the surroundings but also at doing it by using traditional farming and building techniques.

The project creates strong relationships at different levels:

- First, between the local community and the beneficiaries of the project, leading them to know each other by organizing events (workshops, local markets...) aiming at involving the whole community.
- Then, at a territorial level, *Costruiamo Saperi* interacts with different partners and stakeholders (local institutions, schools, associations...) to promote, diffuse and safeguard the traditional local knowledges.
- Finally, the whole design process is based on knowledge exchange between the involved users and the designers behind the project, or the artisans involved to recover the traditional techniques. Since the involved users are immigrants, they bring their own nation-specific knowledge to the discussion.

In sum, *Costruiamo Saperi* shows a great emphasis on the principles of systemic design, even if not explicitly. In fact, the project goes deep both at individual and territorial/community level, by developing capabilities in the beneficiary and by involving the whole community, recovering the traditional culture and the environment.

### ***The Big Issue*** – 3.0, Organizational transformation

This is one of the first and most widespread social innovation projects in the world. Started in London in the '90s and now spreaded in lots of different countries, *The Big Issue* aims at involving homeless people in selling a street newspaper. Homeless buy the newspaper for 1.50 £ and sell it for 2.50 £: they keep what they earn, to have a starting point for being economically autonomous. Despite being so famous and widespread, this project shown some important weaknesses from a systemic point of view.

First, being a simple newspaper selling activity, the projects does not consider local territory's features at all. While this feature allows *The Big Issue* to be easily exportable in different contexts, it also prevent a deep rooting into the context.

In addition to that, the project activates a self-entrepreneurship process that mimics the same competitive dynamics that quite likely led the homeless individual to his/her marginalised condition, without working on the development of his/her capabilities. This approach will not contrast the beneficiary's weaknesses, leaving his/her condition again strongly linked to the economic market dynamics.

The possible relationship between beneficiaries and the community risk to be very weak, being based only on the buy-and-sell activity of a newspaper.

Regards the design process, the core areas of the projects lack expert designers, whose action is limited only to the graphic realization of the newspaper.

In sum, *The Big Issue* acts on a very limited supportive level, involving only the marginalized person without really helping him/ her in the development of his/her capabilities, identity and social life.

#### ***R-Urban Colombes – 4.0, Social transformation***

Born from a collective of french architects, R-Urban aims at co-producing resilience and community services inside a degraded suburb of Paris. The process is activated through the involvement of locals in the creation of a network of thematic hubs spreaded across the suburb.

The first factor emerging from our analysis is how this project focuses on developing the environmental aspects of the context, without highlighting its cultural features. However, this is probably due to the difficulty to trace cultural references in a complex and depersonalised urban context like the one *R-Urban* develops within.

A strong feature of the project is its multi-level action, that goes from the development of individual's capabilities through training and workshops to the urban renewal processes involving the whole neighbourhood.

Another strong feature lies in the organization of *R-Urban*: in fact, the entire project is self-managed by the community together with the designers (which act mainly as mediators with the local institutions). This ties the project's development to the community's needs.

In sum, *R-Urban* shows a strong cohesion within a systemic approach, acting and involving the community on different levels, even decision-making ones.

#### ***Malmö Living Lab/HWA – 4.0, Social transformation***

The Malmö Living Lab is a university lab carrying out research on social inclusion practices; for our research, we investigated its relationship with Herrgårds Women Association (HWA), an association

of immigrant women working towards empowerment and emancipation in a neighbourhood in the outskirts of Malmö.

Between the two entities there is an exchange process which turns out to be mutually positive: in fact, while helping HWA with its activities, the Living Lab can count on the connections of the association in the neighbourhood for carrying out field research on social inclusion.

The Lab always tries to keep a low-profile action in this collaboration, so as to promote HWA women's acquisition of identity and independence and avoiding making them rely too much on the Lab's action.

The role of the Lab is very important in promoting the action of HWA among city institutions. In fact, while associations like HWA are very often key in creating social cohesion in poorer neighbourhoods, institutions tend to overlook their action. The Living Lab works to raise awareness about this issue, so as to possibly find more resources for their action.

With regards to the designers' role, thanks to the different range of activities in which the Living Lab is involved (with HWA and with other entities) the Lab can always experiment new social inclusion processes and new roles the designer could cover in activating them.

In sum, the action of the Living Lab is very adherent to a systemic perspective, acting both for the capacitation of the project's beneficiary as well as for the development of new policies and awareness raising at institutional level.

## CLOSING REMARKS

We were finally able to identify two sets of closing remarks:

- The first regards some practical highlights emerging from the analysis of the projects;
- The second includes highlights from a methodological perspective

### *Analysis Highlights*

Three main points emerged from the analysis of the 12 projects:

1. Projects that explicitly aims at creating a strong bond between the community and the users have a positive impact on the latter, whose involvement is motivated not only by a personal interest but also by the will to generate diffuse wellbeing among the community.  
An example of that could be seen in *R-Urban*, in which users are a fundamental part of every aspect of the activated processes, including decision making.  
This feature is strongly linked to a systemic perspective: in fact, we can state that strong relationships between components strengthen the entire system; conversely, a robust system will more easily guarantee wellbeing to its components.
2. We noticed that projects acting in the 4.0 domain (social transformation) include, among the elements necessary for the sustenance of the project, also not economy-related factors.  
This can be seen in the Living Lab, in which, more important than the generation of profit, is the motivation linked to research and data gathering.  
This highlights how a project that truly aims towards a deep social change shows interest not only in the generation of profit but also in the generation of culture, wellbeing etc.

3. Last point concerns the attention to the local dimension.

In cases such as *R-Urban*, the project does not start from features of the context, being those features weak. However, the project considers people, with their potentialities and needs, as a starting point for promoting new values and behaviours. In that way, even models with strong reproducibility such as this one can generate processes that roots deeply in the contexts they act within.

On the other hand, cases such as *Costruiamo Saperi* develops within a context with strong territorial features: in such cases, thanks to their consistency, these features could represent the starting point for activating new positive processes at a social level.

Both cases show the importance of deeply understanding the features, potentialities and needs of the local context to design processes that allow the best use and expression of local resources.

### *Methodological highlights*

At last we identified two considerations about the analytical use of systemic design principles from a methodological perspective, since we used them to analyse existing projects instead of actually design further projects:

- While focusing on the theme of social marginalization linked to job-related issues, the use of systemic design principles and knowledge allowed us to analyse the issue in its whole complexity. In fact, systemic design's multi-level view supported us in framing projects from a wide point of view including impact on the local community and the individual dimension of project's beneficiaries.  
Ultimately, we could understand the depth of the project's intervention, by differentiating between those that limited their action to a superficial and supportive level and to the others instead that tried to work on the root causes of the condition of marginality.
- From a general point of view, the use of systemic design principles for analytical purposes allows to link all the different elements that intervene in the development of a project. This capability highlights strengths and weaknesses, together with contradictions that could emerge between a project mission or theoretical reference and its practical action.

### *Final considerations*

As expressed by Margulin (2012) one field design thinking can contribute in building democratic processes is the visualization of complexity, to make it more accessible and understandable. Our work, even if mainly targeting expert designers' use, tries to break down complexity to make projects more understandable, unfolding and highlighting their dynamics. This capability makes our work a tool for ongoing projects analysis: an instrument to rapidly check and assess the project's development, to eventually correct unwanted directions. Equally, used for the analysis of existing projects, it can extrapolate new insights from a different perspective.

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