

A sustainable future for tourism sector managing Covid-19 situation. Systemic Design approach to co-design the Place Branding for territorial and cultural cohesion

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A sustainable future for tourism sector managing Covid-19 situation.

Systemic Design approach to co-design the Place Branding for territorial and cultural cohesion.

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The tourism sector is by nature a complex one, characterised by a multitude of actors and supply chains that interact that interact in an implicit way during users' travel experiences. However, until the arrival of Covid-19 all its elements were considered as single and linear. The design has always been done without a holistic view of the context. The 2020 brings with it a strong need for reorganisation of the sector and its Next Rel(actions). This is one of the most polluting sectors, but it is evolving and needs a systemic vision within which design can make its complex and innovative strategic contribution. This research aims to investigate the needs of strategic stakeholders in the Piedmont region (Italy) in terms of promotion and identity to stimulate sustainable forms of territorial development, including tourism. The UNESCO denominations in Piedmont are set up as a District, which fosters dialogue and mutual exchange with regional administrations. Here they represent an applicative case study to promote a co-designed Place Branding intervention, a driver of sustainable initiatives. The paper presents the methodology adopted, which refers to Systemic Design, the activities carried out until now and the reflections for the next steps of the research.

Keywords *Systemic Design, Place Branding, Circular Economy, Sustainable Tourism.*

World Tourism Organization (2021), *International Tourism Highlights, 2020 Edition*, UNWTO, Madrid.

### Introduction

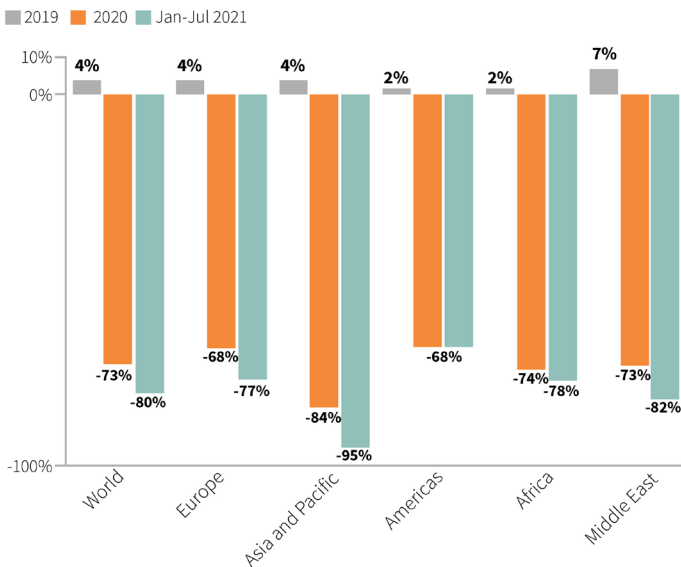
The outlook for the global tourism industry is currently characterised by a high degree of uncertainty and instability due to the Covid-19 pandemic. With travel restrictions between countries around the world, the pace of tourism has slowed dramatically, affecting all parts of the supply chain.

According to the declarations made by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) on its website, in April 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic, 96% of world-wide destinations had implemented travel restrictions. Around 40 destinations were experiencing a partial border closure, while 90 destinations have totally closed their borders.

The UNWTO World Tourism Barometer periodically shows the most relevant data to understand the entity of the sector and its trend. This publication would like to monitor short-term tourism trends on a regular basis to provide global tourism stakeholders with up-to-date analysis on international tourism. The impact of Covid-19 on the sector is clearly visible in this graph (Tab.1) showing the drop in arrivals in different regions of the world, comparing 2019 to 2020 and 2021. An unforeseen and, for the time being, unpredictable situation that urges survival measures for the sector.

Table 1. International tourist arrivals, World and Regions (UNWTO)

### INTERNATIONAL TOURIST ARRIVALS (% CHANGE)



Higgins-Desbiolles, F. (2020). *Socialising tourism for social and ecological justice after COVID-19*. *Tourism Geographies*, 22(3), 610–623. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1757748>

Maas, S., Bugeja, M. & Attard, M. (2021), "Sustainable Tourism Mobility in Malta: Encouraging a Shift in Tourist Travel Behavior Through an Innovative Smartphone App for Trip Planning", Zamparini, L. (Ed.) *Sustainable Transport and Tourism Destinations* (Transport and Sustainability, Vol. 13), Emerald Publishing Limited, Bingley, pp. 79-95. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S2044-994120210000013009>

Given this current scenario, many academia areas and business sectors are trying to focus on Sustainable Tourism highlighting that it may the current situation can be a great opportunity for its development (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020).

*The Crisis Of (Tourism) Values Calls For A Paradigm Shift*

It should be emphasised that the tourism sector, before Covid-19 pandemic, was already undergoing radical transformations. For example, mobility for tourism was experiencing a shift in the choice of ways to travel, especially by tourists who were more aware of their environmental impact. (Maas et al., 2021) Beyond the choices that each traveller can make as an individual, it is interesting to see how B-corp realities such as Goodwings have set up new sustainable services in recent years. They allow to their members to remove their CO2 emissions from travel or choose hotels with a low environmental impact that they have selected. But it is not such a widespread practice to make certain decisions during a trip or visit, because the factors that compromise such choices are many, from time availability to money saving or just for the sake of comfort when travelling.

In contrast to these actions related to sustainable mobility, which are still quite few and not widely considered, other transformations to which the tourism sector is subject are due to climate change, which characterise the impossibility of travelling to certain areas of the world, for example, or visiting

Figure 1. Goodwings B-corp website



and admiring animal or vegetation species because they are no longer present. Or not being able to admire ancient heritage infrastructures because they have been vandalised and cannot be restored due to lack of funds, or not being able to access certain sites because they have been damaged by civil conflicts and war. (Fyall et al., 2021)

Despite these facts, which have characterised some sites around the world for years, on the other side, for several years now, the figures for the tourism sector have been in substantial recovery.

The general economic recovery, up to 2019, has increased the spending capacity of families and therefore the possibility of more structured and elaborate trips characterised in some cases by long stays or short stays, but usually in holiday periods (UNWTO, 2020). 1.5 billion international tourist arrivals were recorded in 2019, globally, all regions saw a rise in arrivals. According to the first comprehensive report on global tourism numbers and trends of the new decade, the latest UNWTO World Tourism Barometer, this represents the tenth consecutive year of growth. (UNWTO, 2021)

If, however, these data are analysed from a qualitative and not just a quantitative point of view, it emerges that, until the start of the pandemic, the overtourism phenomena, associated with better known and more popular destinations, characterised most tourist destinations, which needed a breath. It is thus necessary to take a two-fold perspective on the historical period we are living through, which is decisively marking what the concept and experience of travel should be.

This period of great change, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, has brought greater attention to Sustainable Tourism, a concept that is increasingly widespread throughout the world. Many political actions and governmental programmes have been set up to create international frameworks for cooperation towards sustainable tourism development.

Zurab Pololikashvili (2020), Secretary-General of the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), stated in July 2020 that: "The massive decline in the number of tourists threatens jobs and economies.", stressing that: "It is therefore crucial that the re-boot of tourism is a priority and managed responsibly, protecting the most vulnerable and with health and safety as a major concern of the sector."

There is therefore a need for a new paradigm for tourism that can be regenerative for the natural, social, cultural, and economic capital of a territory.

Fyall, A., Garrod, B., & Wang, Y. (2012), "Destination collaboration: A critical review of theoretical approaches to a multi-dimensional phenomenon", *Journal of Destination Marketing*, pp. 10-26

World Tourism Organization, op. cit.

Einarsson S., & Sorin, F. "Circular Economy in travel and tourism: A conceptual framework for a sustainable, resilient and future proof industry transition". CE360 Alliance, 2020

### *From Recovery To Design a Sustainable Development For The Sector*

Starting from 2020, with the launch of the Green New Deal Plan and its Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies, Europe has set out a series of macro-objectives that can directly and indirectly concern the tourism sector, connected to the territory and the supply chains that characterise it. In the last year, following the pandemic, these initiatives have been joined at a more general level by multiannual recovery plans such as the NextGenerationEU (NGEU) at a European level and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) in Italy. In addition, there are national plans that have been known for some time, such as the Sustainable Development Strategy, which refers to the SDGs of the 2030 Agenda. At the same time the World Tourism Organisation, over the years, has been proposing several initiatives aimed at promoting and developing tourism that enhances local communities without damaging the landscape, society, or the local economy. Among the initiatives promoted are Best Tourism Village and the #Restart Tourism campaign after Covid-19. The latter is a key activity for the recovery of the sector. When we talk about tourism, we are not only referring to the action of visiting new places but also to the discovery of traditional tastes and flavours and knowledge of the host culture. The European Green Deal and the initiatives related to SDGs, in particular the 11 and 12 SDGs, aim to enhance both fields of action. Rediscovering the authenticity of a given product is a way of enriching the travel experience. Having the opportunity to taste organic food handled according to local traditions is a way to learn about the traditions of a new culture. These aspects need to be effectively narrated and local businesses that have made radical choices in terms of sustainability made known. To do this, however, relations with local administrators, the public sector and strategic stakeholders have a role to play in managing and revitalising the area. Furthermore, regarding the transition of the tourism industry, there are several long-term social and industrial trends that, according to Einarsson S. and Sorin F. (2020) will influence the actors in the travel and tourism industry in the years to come from the demand side. First and foremost is the tendency to undertake travel 'for change', with a desire to live like a local, seeking authenticity, participatory travel for transformative experiences. Then follows a post COVID-19 rethinking of the relationship of visitors with the cultures they visit, with travel becoming a tool "to showcase" excellence and distinctiveness. All of this with the search for a healthier (and more sustainable) lifestyle, e.g., slow travel, characterised by sports experiences



and wellness tourism, health tourism and food and wine tourism. Also, not to be underestimated is the increased interest in domestic travel, a rediscovery also given by COVID-19 of local attractions and cultures in less crowded destinations. The common denominator, however, is found in the growing awareness of sustainability, driven by global challenges on plastic waste, the climate crisis, etc., making sustainability a key purchasing factor also for Generation Z and the next consumer groups.

## Methodology

### *Design As A Facilitator Of Transdisciplinary Context*

The following research, starting from the work done on a specific case study, carried out by the Politecnico di Torino, which investigated the connections between the UNESCO sites of the Piedmont Region (Italy), proposes a co-design activity for the Place Branding of this Region. The guidelines of this research are part of the activities of a PhD project aimed at defining tangible actions by a Systemic Designer able to promote a new concept of tourism, directly connected to the valorisation of the territory and its supply chains by developing forms of experiential tourism through Circular Economy practices. The research question at the core of this work will investigate the possibility of designing integrated solutions to combine ecological, economic, and social benefits that could be directly linked to the process of sustainable innovation in the tourism sector by managing the consequences that the Covid-19 situation has caused. Specifically, this paper will highlight the study on the role of the communication of a territory to stimulate sustainable forms of tourism and territorial development by promoting activities in cooperation with the local stakeholders. It is in fact crucial to emphasise that the medium-and long-term strategies introduced in this year of transition at international government level to emerge from the pandemic crisis are strongly characterised by the concept of transdisciplinarity. This concept highlights a level of interconnection between disciplines that is becoming increasingly fluid and dynamic, capable of responding to the complex demands of the global market. In this perspective, Design aims to bring disciplines together in a constructive way and to make them dialogue in a fruitful and interconnected way. Over the last decade, the design discipline has focused more on sustainability as a system of resilient relationships instead of a characteristic of individual components in systems. (Ceschin, Gaziulusoy, 2016) Acting locally without losing sight of a wider, interconnected context is the basis of the methodological principles of Systemic Design (Bistagnino, 2011). Systemic Design has a crucial

Ceschin, F., & Gaziulusoy, I. (2016), *Evolution of Design for Sustainability: From Product Design to Design for System Innovations and Transitions*. Des. Stud., 47, 118-163

Bistagnino, L. (2011), *Systemic Design: Designing the Productive and Environmental Sustainability*. Bra (CN) Italy: Slow Food Editore

Jones, P., & Kijima, K. (2019). *Systemic Design: Theory, Methods, and Practice*. In *Translational Systems Sciences Ser.* (Vol. 8).

Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: the art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Double day/Currency.

Barbero, S., Compagnoni, F., & Pereno, A. (2019). *A systemic district for sustainable tourism co-designing interconnected networks for enhancing the natural and cultural heritage of local ecosystems*. In: *Relating Systems Thinking and Design (RSD8) 2019 Symposium*, October 13-15, 2019, Chicago, USA.

and valuable role in the context of sustainable development. Thanks to its ability to frame complex problems and foster co-design processes (Jones & Kijima, 2019), Systemic Design becomes the effective tool to be able to address the complex field of Circular Economy, thanks to the use of systemic thinking, in fact, as Senge (1990) states "this discipline helps us to see how to modify systems more efficiently and to act more in harmony with the natural processes of the natural and economic world".

A first research project was launched in 2018 to apply the Systemic Design approach to define a policy and governance process for the creation of an open and fluid system that is shaped according to the changing nature of the cultural territories originating from the Piedmont UNESCO sites. The research defined the path to be followed for the implementation of a pilot district involving different stakeholders and citizens, thus proposing an innovative bottom-up systemic approach to Sustainable Tourism (Barbero, Compagnoni & Pereno, 2019). Based on this, it was possible to work on the involvement of local stakeholders from 2020 onwards. This process involves co-design methodology aimed at defining a territorial identity, to adopt new approaches to tourism also at local level. Innovative tools are thus introduced to dialogue with local communities and involve all stakeholders in this transition. To do this, it is essential to widen our view to international contexts that suggest best practices in terms of sustainable tourism at UNESCO heritage sites and other sites. We will start from the European context to establish profitable relations with the Piedmont Region to then carry out our field research.

#### *Strategy And Tools For Co-Design With Policy Makers*

The launch of the co-design activities started with a research process mapping of the stakeholders in the area for whom a customised questionnaire was created to find out the state of the art of the area in which they live, administer, or operate through associations and local bodies. The team of Systemic Design researchers of Politecnico di Torino is working in close collaboration with the Piedmont Region and the UNESCO District which coordinates and promotes activities in the area through the involvement of UNESCO sites and recognitions to create a context for dialogue and exchange between them. At this stage it was necessary to rethink how to involve multiple and diversified stakeholders, mainly related to the area of government policies and administrations, in the co-design process. Exploring and experimenting with digital and hybrid methods of interaction is one of the challenges to be addressed in

this research. The digital tools integrated during the pandemic to organise conferences and focus groups, starting from the use of MIRO digital platform to web applications that allow engagement through scored quizzes, are key strategic elements to stimulate end-users (Fig.2). Together with the mapping and the administration of the questionnaires, a holistic analysis of the territories within the Piedmont Region, in which UNESCO sites are located, is being carried out. The Systemic Design is characterised by a preliminary overview research step known as the Holistic Diagnosis which “provides practical tools to approach complex scenarios with a holistic perspective, while supporting active cooperation among involved stakeholders” (Pereno, Barbero 2020). This step plays a key role in defining the cultural, landscape and economic elements that characterise the context. These ones become more relevant because of data that may emerge from stakeholder survey questionnaires. It will be crucial to communicate the peculiarities of the context that have emerged and those that will continue to emerge from the research, so that they are promoted and told in the best possible way. For this reason, the Place Branding project is also a key element to restore the confidence of end visitors and to enhance the innovative elements related to the new forms of tourism that will arise. The operation of "place branding", known as the "branding" of a place, involves a complex multidisciplinary approach which, going beyond the conception of the territory as a set of varied products or services to be promoted, focuses on the spatial fabric that characterises it, within which urban policies, the tourism sector, the sphere of enterprise and economic investment relate and overlap (Hankinson, 2004). Even though too often there are misunderstandings when talking about or explaining the meaning and purpose of Place Branding development. In the common mindset it is confused with a mere development of a logo and corporate image for a city for promotional purposes. At the expense of misunderstandings, the crux of Place Branding are the concepts of identity and image. As Boisen et al. (2011; p. 136) said: “the identity of a place is sought, identified, extracted and orchestrated to further load the place brand with positive associations. Ultimately, the goal of such practices is to improve the image of the place.” And it is for this reason that it is interesting to highlight how Boisen et al (Fig.2) visualised the relationship between the three concepts and the three dominant market segments of a context which are: businesses, residents, and visitors. All these subjects have to be taken into account when proposing a strategic co-design of a Place Branding.

Pereno, A., & Barbero, S. (2020). *Systemic design for territorial enhancement: An overview on design tools supporting socio-technical system innovation*. *Strategic Design Research Journal*, 13(02), 113-136. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4013/sdrj.2020.132.02>

Hankinson, G. (2004). *Relational network brands: Towards a conceptual model of place brands*. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 10 (2), pp. 109-121

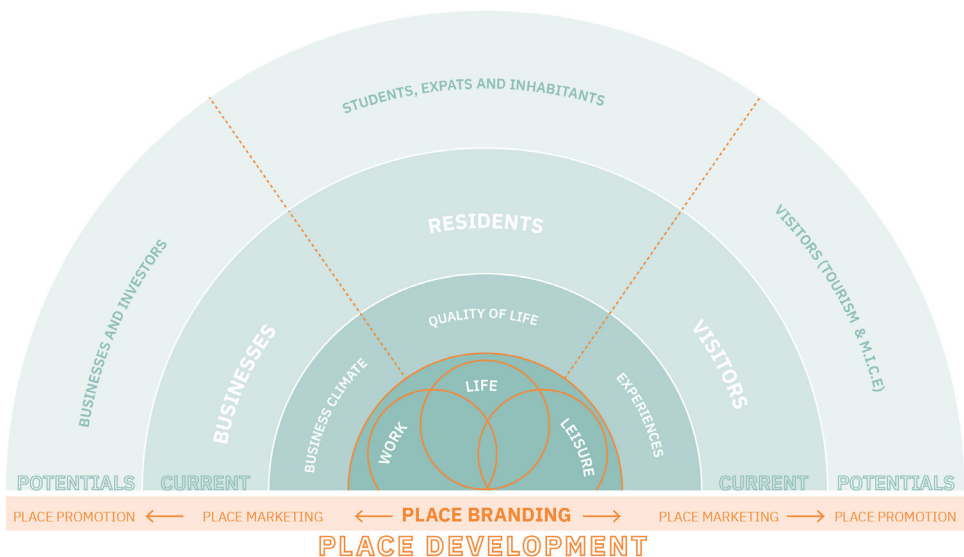
Boisen, M., Terlouw, K., Groote, P., & Couwenberg, O. (2018). *Reframing place promotion, place marketing, and place branding - moving beyond conceptual confusion*. *Cities*, 80, 4-11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2017.08.021>  
<https://doi.org/10.18111/9789284422456>

### Ongoing Activities and Expected Results

The research is ongoing and indeed the results elaborated so far from a selected area such as the Piedmont Region and UNESCO sites represent a strategic starting point. It is also worth noting that the process undertaken is a scalable and replicable design strategy at transnational level, but strongly based on the specific features of the local context. The global tourism industry is complex at the same time is crucial for the local and national economy. It combines many aspects that cannot be identified as separate and independent factors. The sector needs to be revitalised by increasingly developing a holistic vision that highlights and enhances the interconnected elements. Systemic Design offers a series of strategic methodological tools, capable of stimulating transdisciplinarity, for the development of projects on a territory by promoting co-design activities.

To find out the opinion of the various UNESCO designations present in Piedmont on the themes of Sustainability and Circular Economy, a survey was drawn up divided into macro sections useful for developing an initial individual analysis to be reported and shared later at District level. The main sections delved into the designations and the context in which they are found, the relationship between the designations and

Figure 2. Organisational aspects of place promotion, place marketing and place branding

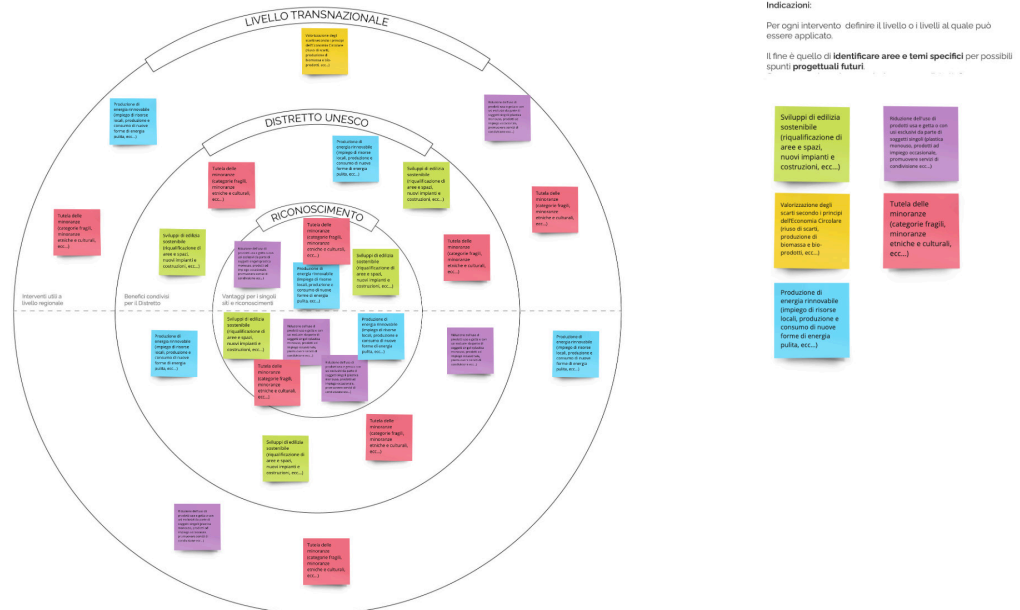


sustainability, and then concluded with a section on the communication of the site and the UNESCO District.

The survey represented a first phase of approaching the realities and at the same time an initial activity that allowed us to get to know the needs of our target audience. Later, the data collected were presented during the Table of Culture that is held periodically, coordinated by the Piedmont Region. Following the presentation, an interactive activity was carried out remotely to reflect on the strategic lines regarding multi-level Sustainability (UNESCO Recognition, UNESCO District, transnational) all the issues addressed were reported in a visualisation on MIRO (Fig.3) to facilitate sharing among the participants and will constitute a first element on which to continue with a thematic co-design meeting on the strategic elements that emerged.

All the reflections represent a first phase of the bottom-up process started to define the identity of the Piedmont UNESCO District and therefore to continue with the Place Branding proposal.

Figure 3. Visualisation of the interactive activity done with stakeholders on a MIRO board



## Discussion And Conclusions

The COVID-19 crisis has raised awareness of the importance of local supply chains and the need to rethink how goods and services are produced and consumed, both key elements of a circular economy. In most instances, when dealing with circular economy issues, we refer to the processing of material products and their supply chain. Now the time has come to explore the ways in which circular economy and sustainability principles can help make the travel and tourism industry more sustainable and resilient in the long run. The integration of circular, systemic vision and further advancing resource efficiency in the tourism value chain represent an opportunity for the tourism sector to embrace the sustainable growth pathway. A great level of rethinking and innovation will be required to adapt to a new reality, regulatory and customer demands. The co-creation of value, the optimisation of the system, are capable of developing interconnections aimed at rethinking the entire tourism sector. For too long this supply chain has been conceived with linear thinking. It is time to review the elements that characterise it from a systemic point of view, promoting concepts at the heart of the circular economy to develop a new way of travelling, discovering territories and cultural contexts. In this scenario, the role of Designers, and in this specific case of Systemic Design, becomes a facilitator in project contexts that intersect public and private sectors, administrative and productive fabric, local supply chains and consumers. Rethinking and redesigning with bottom-up operations facilitates inclusion and responds to the needs of the tourism and cultural sector which, more than others, will have to develop an increasingly glocal perspective.