

Designing with the neighborhood: an experience of participatory design and social communication

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THE VALUE  
OF DESIGN  
RESEARCH

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# THE VALUE OF DESIGN RESEARCH

## FOREWORD

The 11<sup>th</sup> conference of the European Academy of Design (EAD) took place on April 21-24<sup>th</sup>, 2015, at Paris Descartes University Institute of Psychology in Boulogne Billancourt, near Paris (France).

The conference focused on furthering an understanding of the value of design research and how design research draws value from fellow disciplines – psychologists, engineers, ergonomists, sociologists, management scientists, and others - while generating value of its own. To structure a debate on this concept of value, four distinctive facets of the value of design research were chosen: **excellence** and the usefulness of methods to improve the quality of design methodology; **interdisciplinarity** as a major source of value in design practice; the value design generates for **organizations**, specifically in the context of innovation and for society in terms of how it helps develop value for people. Finally, how design research has sought to respond and measure **value** within itself.

As research in design and psychology tells us, ‘the whole is more than the sum of its parts’: we chose to gather in the scientific committee researchers coming from these various contexts and to systematically integrate French researchers into the international EAD community that had never been in France. We received 362 abstracts from 38 countries, with 220 accepted papers addressing these four questions of the value of the research in design. These four facets of value were managed across the 31 Tracks which are featured in these proceedings.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Conveners and Track Chairs would like to extend their sincere thanks to the teams of people who helped create a culturally rich and engaging experience at EAD11. In particular, Gilles Rougon for the pre-workshop Business Design Lab, held at Chambre de Commerce et d’Industrie de Paris; Muséum Espace Landowski for hosting a welcome of Cocktails and Canapés on behalf of the town of Boulogne Billancourt and its mayor, Jean Christophe Baguet and, Professor Bernard Darras for arranging sessions and the gala dinner at the Université Paris I Sorbonne.

# CONTENTS

Track 01: Methodology for Design Research  
Track 02a: Epistemology of Design  
Track 02b: Epistemology of Design

Track 3a: Design Research & Creativity  
Track 03b: Design Research & Creativity  
Track 03c: Design Research & Creativity

Track 04: The Future of Design Research  
& Publishing in Peer-reviewed Journals

Track 05a: Design Research & Design Education  
Track 05b: Design Research & Design Education  
Track 05c: Design Research & Design Education

Track 06a: The Partnership between Designer and Researcher  
Track 06b: The Partnership between Designer and Researcher

Track 07: Design Research for Luxury Industries

Track 08a: Design Research & Crafts  
Track 08b: Design Research & Crafts  
Track 08c: Design Research & Crafts

Track 09a: Design Research for Innovation Management  
Track 09b: Design Research for Innovation Management

Track 10: Innovation & Knowledge Management

Track 11a: Human Factors as a Source of Value for Innovative Design  
Track 11b: Human Factors as a Source of Value for Innovative Design

Track 12a: Post Industrial Design Scenarios for Innovative Strategies  
Track 12b: Post Industrial Design Scenarios for Innovative Strategies

Track 13a: Design Research, NPD, Innovation Management & Marketing  
Track 13b: Design Research, NPD, Innovation Management & Marketing

Track 14: Design Research, Entrepreneurship & Cultural Innovation

Track 15a: Semiotics & Design  
Track 15b: Semiotics & Design  
Track 15c: Semiotics & Design

Track 16: Sciences, Design Research & Society  
Track 17a: Design in Government: the value of design  
to policy-making and policy implementation

Track 17b: Design in Government: the value of design  
to policy-making and policy implementation  
Track 17c: Design in Government: the value  
of design to policy-making and policy implementation

Track 18a: The Value of Design Research for  
Societal Change and Behavioural Change  
Track 18b: The Value of Design Research

for Societal Change and Behavioural Change  
Track 18c: The Value of Design Research for  
Societal Change and Behavioural Change

Track 19: The Design Approach versus Research Approach

Track 20a: Design Research in Industry R&D Departments  
versus Design Research in Academia

Track 20b: Design Research in Industry R&D Departments  
versus Design Research in Academia

Track 21a: Research-through-Design: creating  
insight and enabling dialogue through making

Track 21b: Research-through-Design: creating  
insight and enabling dialogue through making

Track 22a: Humanities & Social Sciences

Track 22b: Humanities & Social Sciences

Track 22c: Humanities & Social Sciences

Track 23a: Can Design Research Help Measuring Design Value?

Track 23b: Can Design Research Help Measuring Design Value?

Track 24a: Design Research, Strategy & Foresight

Track 24b: Design Research, Strategy & Foresight

Track 24c: Design Research, Strategy & Foresight

Track 25a: Design Research for Change Towards  
Sustainable Development & SRE

Track 25b: Design Research for Change Towards  
Sustainable Development & SRE

Track 25c: Design Research for Change Towards  
Sustainable Development & SRE

Track 26a: Enterprise Design

Track 26b: Enterprise Design

Track 27a: Design Research & Semiotics

Corporate Communications, Branding

Track 27b: Design Research & Semiotics

Corporate Communications, Branding

Track 27c: Design Research & Semiotics

Corporate Communications, Branding

Track 28: Creating the Whole in Design Research

Track 29a: Design Research on Design

Competencies Track 29b: Open track

Track 30: Design Research & Healthcare

Track 31: Future Directions for Design research

11TH EUROPEAN ACADEMY OF  
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APRIL 22-24 2015

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## ABSTRACT

*In urban regeneration processes, the inclusive and active participation dynamics of the inhabitants become fundamental to design a real transformation process both on an architectural and social level. The citizens and their involvement become both essential elements for achieving shared solutions, especially in those areas where the social and economic issues are added to urban degradation. "I numeri di Via Ghedini e Via Gallina" is an example of interdisciplinary project, aiming to an architectural upgrading of some of the public housing located in the city of Torino (Turin). Among the project activities planned, the working group ended up developing the graphic identity of the street numbers, currently missing or not so readable focusing on giving a concrete form to the design of the information system deeply representing the identity of the neighbourhood. An action which sets up the process of returning of the common areas to the inhabitants and emphasizes the gradual return to everyday life in the neighbourhood. The interaction between the numerous institutional and not institutional actors involved in the project, has transformed this part of town in a true interdisciplinary laboratory capable of promoting new social and territorial balance.*

*Keywords: social innovation, participation dynamics, local identity*

## 1 INTRODUCTION: WHY STREET NUMBERS?

The aim of this paper is to relate an experience of participatory design and social communication through the case study of an interdisciplinary project taking place in Torino (Turin). The interdisciplinary project "*I numeri di Via Ghedini e Via Gallina*", is part of a complex process of urban regeneration in the suburban neighbourhood of Via Ghedini, which among other measures, provides for the performance adjustment of two public housing complexes.

*Via Ghedini and via Gallina* are enclosed within a small neighbourhood delineated on one side by an interesting architectural heritage of public housing complex and on the other by a complex social mix, which has historically characterized the resident population. Still, it is a suburb of Turin with a social fragile and degraded urban spread.

In particular, the public housing complex in Via Ghedini 19 and Via Gallina 3 has been for a long time a construction yard (Figure 1). Five years after the works, not completed yet, several redevelopment projects were completed such as the modernization of the technological housing equipment but also the habits and the lifestyle of the common areas, so long unused.

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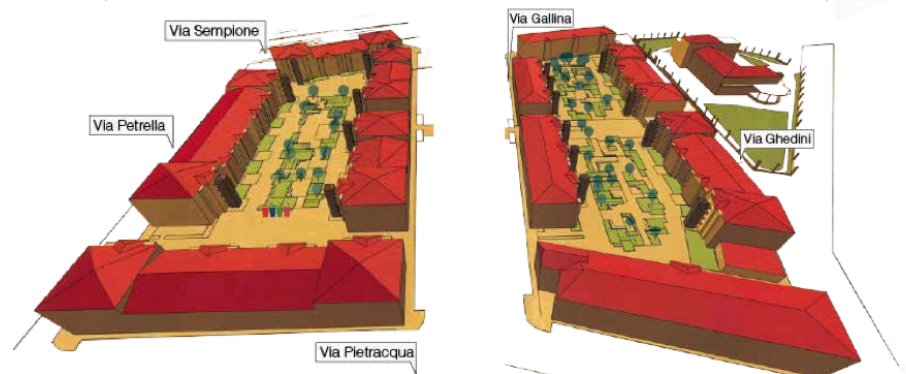
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## ***Designing with the Neighborhood: An Experience of Participatory Design and Social Communication***

*Cristian Campagnaro, Veronica Saula Gallio*



*Figure 1 –schematic view of the two public house complexes in Via Ghedini and via Gallina.*

The renovations made at the time concerning the external front of the houses, with the reconstruction of the plaster and painting, as well as the recovery of the decorative elements, the construction of the external elevators, and bioclimatic greenhouses. However, the upgrading processes of the common areas are still being finalized. (*Figure 2*)



*Figure 2 –the context: inconvenience and degradation due to the construction yard*

This last step will give the courtyard back to its inhabitants, turning it into a social gathering point. The workshop for re-designing the information system and civic numbers of this area is part of this "return": the workshop and its outcome represent a symbolic act, a gift to leave to the local people as a sign of re-appropriation of public spaces. So, this initiative represents the revival of the idea of community, that develops from the concrete experiences of cooperative re-appropriation of spaces for living and for producing. (Magnaghi, 2000)

In addition to sanction a gradual return to everyday life of the inhabitants, the civic numbers are a real necessity for the neighbourhood. In the complex of Via Ghedini and Via Gallina the presence of the construction yard has altered as well as the perception of the place even the use of the already degraded signals, making them more often invisible and ineffective. In many houses, the official numbering is no longer present; in its place there are handwritten tickets, precariously glued to the front door. In the rare cases where there is the civic number, the alterations made by the construction yard make it difficult to be read. To try providing for these deficiencies, local authority established provisionally parallel signage access to the courts, in order to facilitate orientation. This operation had little success.

So postmen, friends, carriers, ambulances complain about the difficulties in identifying the civic numbers of scale within the courtyards and the inhabitants

complain of undelivered mail and lost packages, remembering with nostalgia "when" in that courtyard "there was the goalkeeper".

## 2 **METHODOLOGY**

### 2.1 CREATING THE NETWORK

The workshop "I numeri di Via Ghedini e Via Gallina", comes from a first meeting between the Cooperativa Animazione Valdocco, representing the mediator between the construction yard work and the inhabitants, and the Department of Architecture and Design of the Politecnico di Torino. The meeting was part of a round table, Tavolo Ghedini, about the management of the common areas within the district. In particular, the intervention scale of the working group, called "Focus spazio Ghedini", has been extended to the whole district, in order to design inclusion projects open to local economic realities and associations whose activities involve vulnerable users. The basic idea is: it is possible to promote a more effective strategy to support activities aimed at combating poverty and other phenomena of social and economic vulnerability, by insisting on the territory and on some key-locations in the neighbourhood. Associations, cooperatives, voluntary groups, academic research and other training agencies cooperate to produce contrast tools to marginalization factors such as poverty, homelessness, access to food, to housing, work and education, just sharing their experiences, actions and tools. In this way, the designer's role consists in facilitating learning processes and in supporting diffuse design. (Manzini, Jegou, 2003).

The need to answer to the orientation problems through an information design project was the lever to plan a system aiming at the local community development; in this case the focus was to strengthen the cohesion of the inhabitants, weakened by the crisis, and, specifically, by the long construction yard presence. In fact, *"the designer who works on a regional scale, participating in the design community, is considered as complementary competence that can enable exchanges and sharing of knowledge, creating conditions for facilitate processes of organizational learning, cognitive and cultural activities through design"* (Maffei, Villari, 2005, 2)

The design process took place in several stages and with different tools: first the network construction and the interaction processes between the actors; following by workshops, study meetings, social events and local parties in order to involve the most problematic areas of the neighbourhood in the project.

The operators of the Cooperativa Animazione Valdocco, who work directly on the neighbourhood, transferred constantly the inhabitants' need to the working group, grating the activation of participation and sharing processes. Similarly the designers and the researchers involved to the project shared their project skills to respond to the community needs.

The one-week workshop was used to go in depth on the context features, and to involve design students on the processes. The workshop was part of the DesignWorkshopWeek of the Politecnico di Torino, which each year offers to the students of Design and Visual Communication the opportunities for project experiences. Experts, adhering to their cultural background but atypical and related to the world of art, photography, theater and social, coordinate all workshops. Taking part in DesignWorkshopWeek guaranteed to have



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experienced staff in the process and a group of 20 students as well. By means of their participation in the workshop would enable them to support the project with a critical mass and would allow them to emphasize the social value of the experience that was used for an experience of teaching and situated away from the classrooms, in contact with territories and real events.

To answer the last step of this process, the production, we had the opportunity to collaborate with the social artisans of the laboratory MaiUguali Cooperativa Animazione Valdocco, which organizes and leads the handling experiences and ceramics processing dedicated to people with disabilities. In this way, keeping the ceramic as a medium for communication, including the familiarity with this material, the process obtains an additional social value, in the direction of inclusion and communities practice capacitation.

A lot of other actors have been part of the project network, as the area of Rigenerazione Urbana (Urban regeneration), the Città di Torino, and ATC, Agenzia Territoriale per la Casa della provincia di Torino (Territorial Agency for the House of the Province of Turin) and Servizio Adulti in Difficoltà (the Adults Service in Trouble). In particular, Servizio Adulti in Difficoltà hosted the workshop at the night shelter of Via Ghedini 6, allowing the effective presence on the territory of the students. In addition, the early stage, the project was supported by a group of graduating students of the Degree in Design e Visual Communication, which gather into experience step by step. They created an experience logbook, following the whole process and the civic numbers' production, contributing ultimately to the assessment and evaluation of the experience. Furthermore, the graduating students were an important hub and channel to keep in touch the various actors involved to the project from the inhabitants to the authorities.

The sum of all these opportunities and interaction between all the involved parties made possible the construction of this complex and interdisciplinary system, which gave rise to the process of participatory project "I numeri di via Ghedini e Via Gallina".

## **2.2 DESIGNING WITH THE NEIGHBOURHOOD: THE WORKSHOP STEP BY STEP**

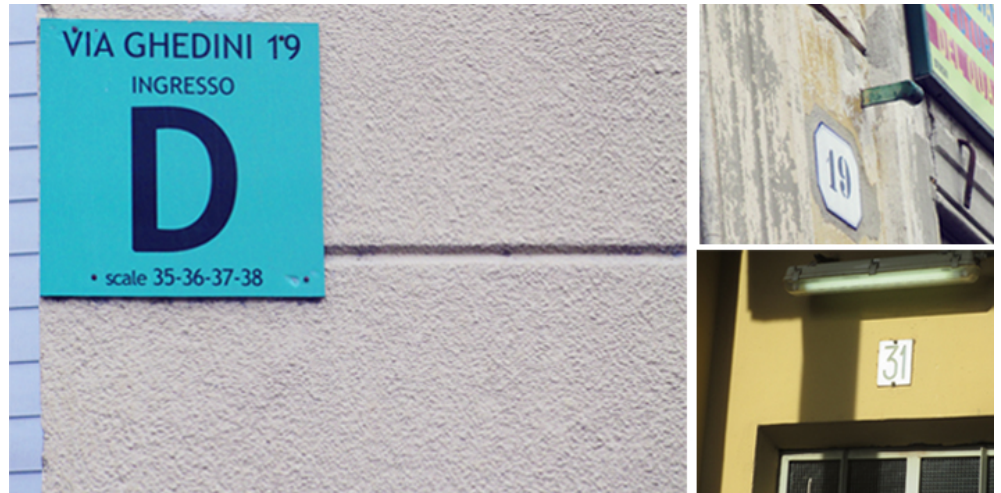
The challenge was accepted by 21 students of the Degree of Design and Visual Communication at the Politecnico di Torino, who decided spontaneously to join the project, which began in the first week of March 2014. The students then ventured for a week in a multidisciplinary, stimulating and participatory context, providing for the graphic identity design of the civic numbers and interiors of the two public housing complexes. In the early days of the workshop, participants discovered the context in which they were going to work, meeting some local residents, and listening to stories and testimonies of their life and therefore acquiring interesting and valuable design ideas.

The experts, who accompany the students in the communication and visual project, were the young architectural studio Officine VisualArch. The analysis of several case studies and experiences related to urban communication, architecture and graphics about interaction between signs systems and ceramics, provided students with the knowledge and content required to begin the workshop design step. After collecting ideas and information, students, divided into groups of five, began to develop scenarios and concepts useful for the definition of a different graphical identity numbers. There were site visits, interviews and reportage photography to enrich the knowledge and document their works. In addition to the meeting with the residents and operators, the

## ***Designing with the Neighborhood: An Experience of Participatory Design and Social Communication***

*Cristian Campagnaro, Veronica Saula Gallio*

students knew the social artisans to carry out the project: the guys of the MaiUguali laboratory, Cooperativa Animazione Valdocco. In fact, the handiworks designed by the students are making by the guys of the ceramic course for people with mental and physical disabilities.



*Figure 3 -context analysis*

The first step of the civic numbers design process was the analysis of the context and the macro-fields definition. The area in question, as previously described, has two residential complexes: the well-known via Ghedini and Via Gallina. The two complexes contain 40 stairs about 350 units. Each group therefore had to work on three different elements: the entrances (the main pedestrian and service), the scales numbers and the civic numbers (Figure 3).

The comparison between the different groups showed the problems associated with current signs system, namely:

- the lack of a proper fit;
- the lack of uniformity;
- the lack of clarity in the given message.

Once the areas of intervention were well identified, each of the five students groups identified their own guidelines, following different directions. Some have chosen to play with the material overlapping layers of ceramic or taking advantage of the three-dimensionality in a way that brings the poetry of the lantern; who preferred to enhance the connection with the context, some historical memory of the buildings and finally those who like to experiment with the geometry abstracting maps in primary forms. The one-week workshop was concluded with a presentation of the final projects in Cittadella Politecnica del Design e della Mobilità in front of teachers, tutors and to the other participants of the DesignWorkshop week 2014. (Figure 4).

Experience, however, did not end with this rich and intense week of workshop, waiting for the proclamation of the winning project, the various stakeholders met several times to verify the projects feasibility. Following the workshop, issues related to the installation of new elements on the external front of the buildings emerged. Such installation process would have to meet regulations and rules dictated by both the master plan and the plane color of the city of Turin. Therefore it was decided to set aside the project component related to the entrance area and street numbers instead focus on the numbers of the stairs, however, taking the name of "civic numbers". In these meetings, following

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APRIL 22-24 2015

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lengthy negotiations between possibilities and limitations, three projects were selected. The three selected projects, which better respond to the feasibility, speed and cost needs. In the following months the inhabitants themselves through a process of door-to-door poll had the opportunity to be involved again in the decisional process, just voting their favourite projects.

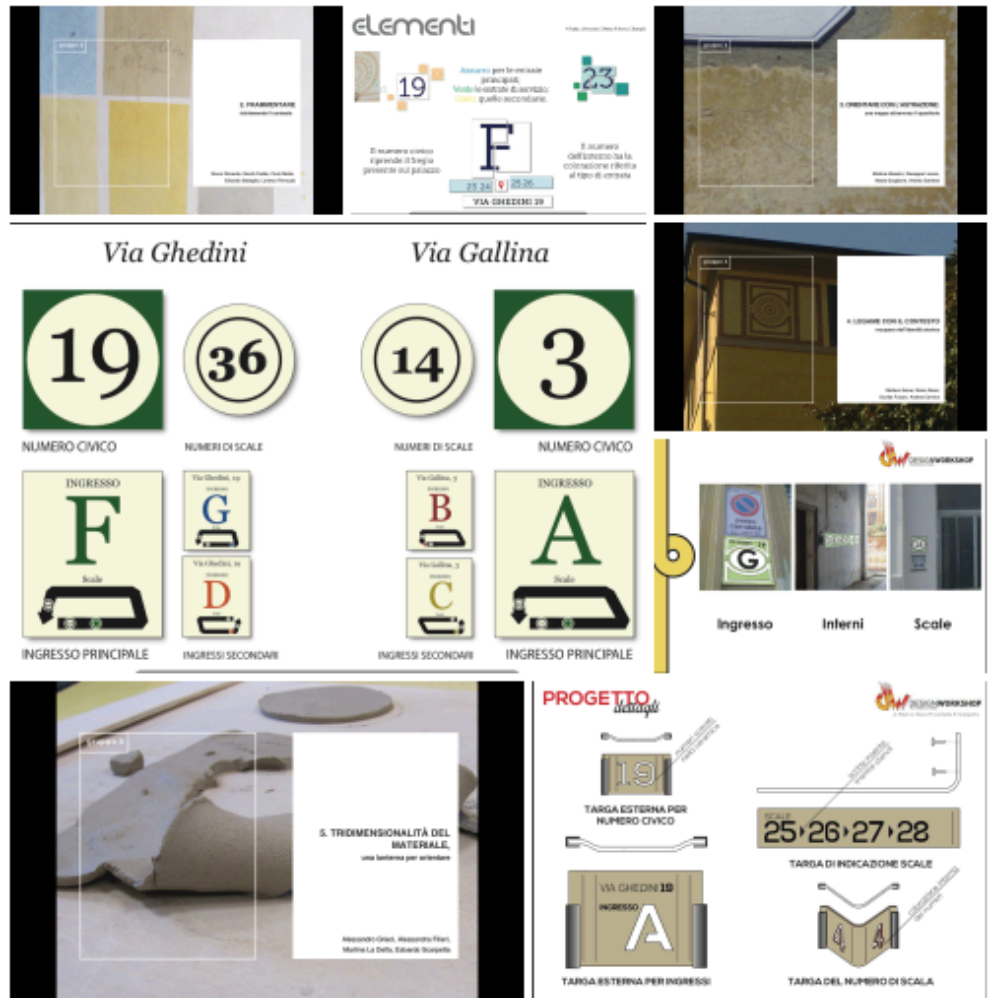


Figure 4 –some civic numbers' graphic design projects

### 2.3 THE NEIGHBOURS' DAY

The Neighbours' day, is an European event in which each inhabitants is invited to make a simple gesture at the same time throughout Europe: inviting neighbours to share a nice time around a buffet or a lunch, enhancing social cohesion and creating new solidarities. The local operators of the Cooperativa Animazione Valdocco organized the Neighbours' day in Ghedini's district. During this event, the public counting of the votes of the three finalists projects for the new civic numbers took place. In the weeks leading up to the Neighbours'day event, the operators had set up the "mobile polling station", going from house to house, distributing the newsletter with the description of the three competing projects and the voting process. The involved families, once chosen their favorite project, had the opportunity to vote for it. At the end of the Neighbours'day, the counting of votes was held in front of all the participants after moments of fun, music and laughter. At the election review, there was at

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APRIL 22-24 2015

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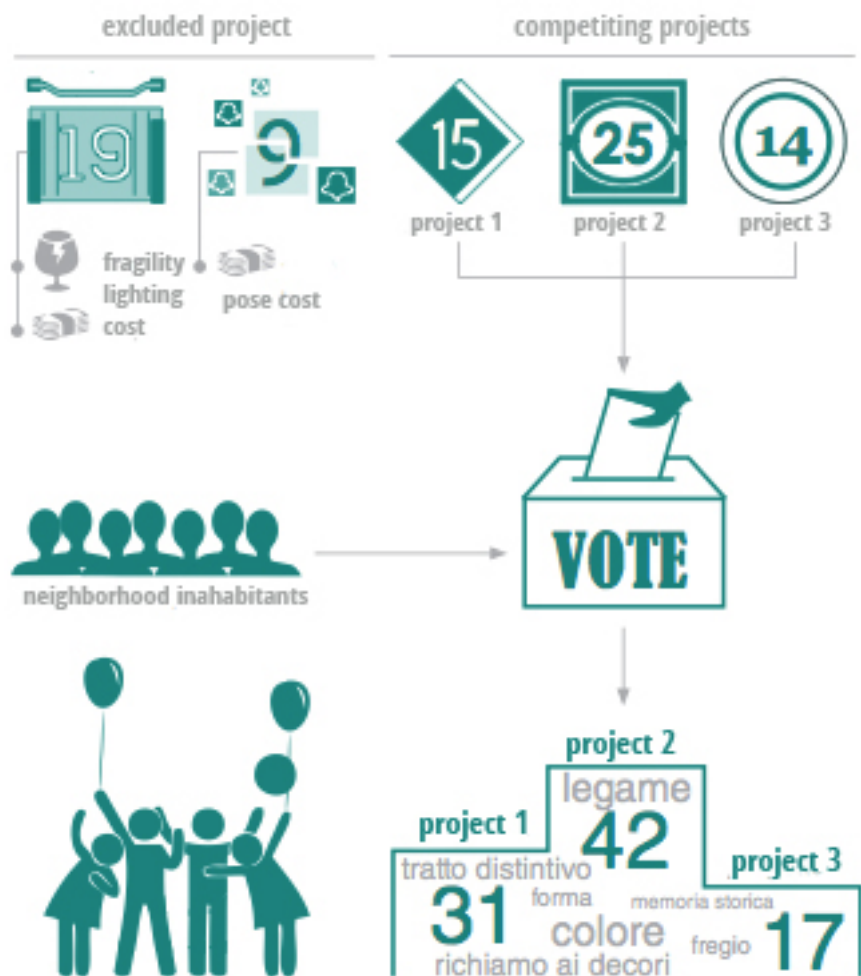
## Designing with the Neighborhood: An Experience of Participatory Design and Social Communication

Cristian Campagnaro, Veronica Saula Gallio

least one representative from each of the three competing projects. (Figures 5-6)

The final result of the voting process was uncertain until the end. The suspense of the audience broke up just when the winner was the project "Relation to the context". Despite the diversity of the three competing projects, the winner one emphasizes the strong connection that the inhabitants feel with the local context. The project incorporates the decorative friezes on the front of the buildings, turning them into frames within which to place the civic numbers.

The intention is to integrate the civic numbers identity with the peculiarity of this neighbourhood, reinforcing a distinctive feature of the public housing complex. In addition, the involvement of the community in the design process leads to a production of durable goods founded by a shared design process based on trust and relationship (Ranzo, Sbordone, Veneziano, 2010).



Figures 5 -Neighborhood Votation . Schema realized by F. Gucciardi ,A. Mantovani, M. Truffa Giachet, 2014



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Figures 6 –Neighborhood Day, Votation process in Via Ghedini, Torino 2014

### 2.4 FROM PROJECT TO HANDIWORK

The creation of the handiworks, currently underway, is the result of a close collaboration between designers, researchers and social craftsmen. The engineering of the civic number to its actual production has been an important part of the process. In fact, It was inevitably the modification of the original winning project to meet production requirements. In particular, the modifications were made to meet the capabilities and difficulties of the guys who have been making the civic numbers. This step of the winning project adaptation to the production requirements has been followed and carried out by the three graduating students of Design and Visual Communication, Federica Gucciardi, Agnese Mantovani e Marco Truffa Giachet, who designed and built, supported by the FabLab Settimo, any media (frame, stencils, templates, and blocks) required to facilitate the production process to the guys of the MaiUguali laboratory (Figure 7).

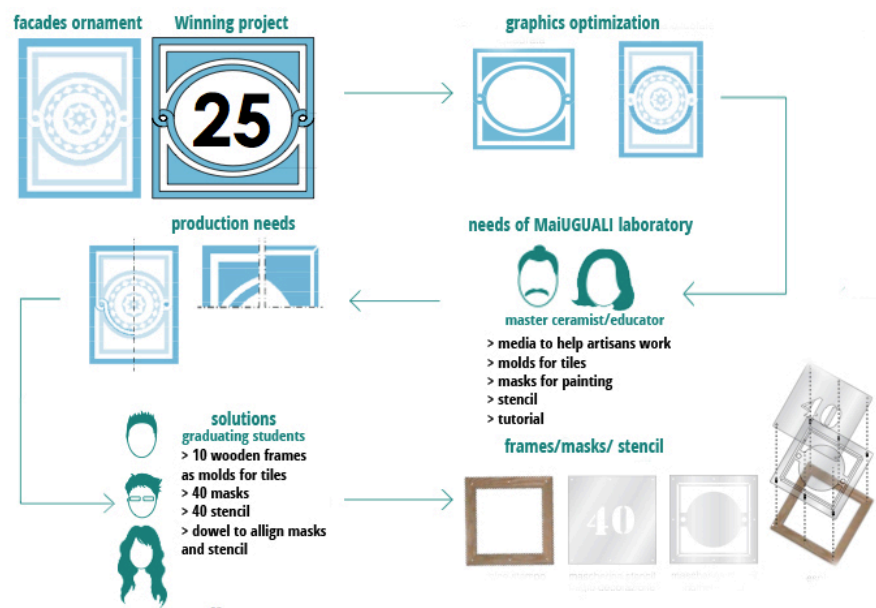


Figure 7 –from the project to the handiworks. Schema realized by F. Gucciardi ,A. Mantovani, M. Truffa Giachet, 2014

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### 3 PROJECT OUTCOME

#### 3.1 DESIGNING CONNECTIONS

Currently, the laboratory MaiUguali is developing, with the help of media designed specifically, ceramic tile used for the civic numbers. The production should be completed by the end of December. The choice of relying on artisanal manufacture, on the one hand expands and makes uncertain the timing of realization, on the other guarantees the uniqueness of the intervention, giving greater identity to the finished product, in addition to enhance the social dimension and inclusivity that become central also in the production of the handiworks.(Figure 8)



Figure 8 –MaiUguali Laboratory, civic numbers production processes.

The difference of the individual elements, the imperfection of the handmade gesture will become an expression of the values that the entire process encloses and delivers: diversity as richness, social inclusion, sharing and participation.

*"a double link needs to be established between the place, the community and the product: the quality of the place and of the community is a decisive element for a product's success; vice versa, the success of a product, to be long-term, needs to favour the qualitative regeneration of the place and the community of origin"* (Manzini, 2005, p.2). For this reason these tiles are not so interesting for the design result, but as already said, for the collaboration process and comparison that generated them. At first glance the house numbers may actually seem minimal intervention and unremarkable compared to the critical issues in the area analyzed.

By moving, however, the focus from the final objects to the process that created them, it is to understand why they are not trivial at all. The same residents, after a moment of poor attendance mainly due to the disappointments of late that the yard is accumulating, responded in a positive way. This represents a social knowledge declination that leads to the production of objects that combine to demonstrate human relations and modes of aggregation that follow: relational values that exceed the use, process and formal values. (Lupo, 2013)

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They participated in the workshop, shared impressions, discussed, and even set up a little "electoral campaign". They participated as scrutinizers at the examination and are waiting now to see the tiles realized.

The MaiUguali laboratory is thrilled to be working in the area, to have the chance to show their reality outside of the community, in a less stigmatized environment. For who participated in the laboratory is in fact a huge satisfaction to see their handiworks used in a context outside the laboratory: an act of recognition.

The answer to a simple requirement, such as the return of a graphic identity to the neighbourhood, generated exchanges of expertise and collaborations that allowed each party involved to get a positive feedback. In this way the concept of the creativity is not about new technologies, but it is about community and territorial realities; It is something that should be cultivate, fed, made to grow and spread in a shared manner. So it can have lasting effects, going beyond the lability of a culture stereotyped. (Ricci, 2011)

### 3.2 THE DESIGNER'S ROLE

This experience was characterized by two different roles: the student, or the young designer, and the expert. The expert is the one who, in some way, is called to ensure the qualitative dimension of the project. The street numbers could have been made in any way, including a designer in this process facilitated the objective of a certain quality on the final product. Especially during the workshop there was a wider desire of supervision, the storytelling and the livability of the complex space. The design students, who acted as facilitators in the process that might be difficult to reduce to professional experience, gave rise to that form of sharing instances of the base, the debate that enriched the experience. Upstream there is the figure of the designer who has the role in designing this complex process that did not exist, which arises due to the fact that the designers at various levels (as part of the process, in 'the social sphere) meet to produce something together.

So, in this experience the creativity process could be considered the result of the interaction of a system composed of different parts: domain, an project answer and a field; where the culture (domain) is characterized by symbols, the project answer is the person who brings innovation within the symbolic domain, and the field is a group of people that recognizes the validity and confirmation innovation. (Csikszentmihalyi, Rochberg-Halton, 1981)

The action of the project is not identified only by the physical object, but rather by the system of relationships and shared activities that it can generate: " *The action of the project is therefore a collective action that requires a process of shared goals, practices, tools, languages, etc.. It takes place in a given territory and is aimed at the exploitation of resources (tangible and intangible) that feature that particular context. According to this view the action on a regional scale design needs to be enabled actors, skills and interactions right to create therefore the design community...*" (Maffei, S., Villari, B., 2005 p.2).

A fundamental part of this experience is, in fact, the processuality component or the idea of responding to a complex way, to a need apparently simple and secondary. The project does not give only a functional response to a need, but around it, builds a virtuous system composed by different actors: a network of relations and exchanges, capable of triggering "positive changes" and lead to social improvement. (Papanek, 1970)

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4 **CONCLUSION**

Designing scenarios in which bring into play social dynamics, it is not obvious, because it is first of all based on people. It is clear, however, how a participatory design and an active involvement of the community are essential to determine the acceptance and success of the planning proposals, promoting bottom-up actions. The interaction between the actors involved in various capacities in the project has therefore had the intent to foster the potential resources of the district, involving citizens in retraining and promoting the participation of residents to the construction yard. The result was a process that can strengthen the concepts of local identity through the redesign of the relationships between the various stakeholders in the area, enhancing the network of knowledge and know-how with local peculiarities of the context.

The interaction between the numerous institutional and not institutional actors involved in the project, has transformed this part of town in a true interdisciplinary laboratory capable of promoting new social and territorial balance.

Associations, cooperatives, workshops, and academic research collaborated on the one hand to encourage the involvement of residents in decision-making, promoting the development of a culture of respect for public property; on the other hand to implement the fostering dynamics of potential resources of the neighbourhood triggering processes of social inclusion.

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# THE VALUE OF DESIGN RESEARCH

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