

Oscar Farinetti and Eataly: the design of an agro-food excellences network

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INNOVATION IN DESIGN EDUCATION

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of Design as a Process*

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INNOVATION IN DESIGN EDUCATION

Theory, research and processes to and from a Latin perspective

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OSCAR FARINETTI AND EATALY - THE DESIGN OF AN AGRO-FOOD EXCELLENCES NETWORK

Pier Paolo Peruccio¹

The Design Processes Award was presented to Oscar Farinetti, the entrepreneur from Alba in northern Italy, who invented the Eataly format.

What is Eataly? It is the first supermarket in the world devoted entirely to high-quality food where customers can purchase excellent food and drink and also stop and taste, look around, take cookery lessons and learn about seasonal products and the Presidia. It is a model that integrates the market, food, drink and learning.

Why this award? The idea was to give an award to those who - in recent years - have successfully embarked on unprecedented entrepreneurial adventures in our region, by creating projects in which the role played by design as a process is quite clearly an engine for the cultural and economic development of the region.

This territory, in particular, has given rise historically to extraordinary entrepreneurial events that have not focused exclusively on the creation of goods.

All too obvious, perhaps, is the case of Adriano Olivetti and his typewriter company founded in Ivrea in 1908.

Olivetti believed industry to be the linchpin of any modernization process in terms of economics but also in a social and civil sense: his industrial project closely related to social and cultural issues as well as including architectural and urban planning elements. We are also considering the idea of community; seen as an entity with undetermined geographical boundaries and economically self-sufficient, in which conflicts between society and industry can find an ideal re-composition.

Therefore, not only are they beautiful typewriters but they exert an influence at a number of levels in relation to territory, factory and civil society.

If the Design Processes Award had existed even 10 years ago, perhaps then we would have awarded the prize to the entrepreneur Marco Boglione, chairman of the clothing brands Kappa, Robe di Kappa, Jesus Jeans (and today also K-way and Superga), all brought together in the international company BASICNET (also listed on the Milan stock exchange). Boglione actually succeeded, at the end of the 1990s, in giving shape to a design process around a dot.com scenario, constituted by a network of licensees, a sales network and

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companies producing items of clothing, all located in different countries but linked via the Internet. The ethical aspect in this case is lacking; here the innovative and strategic element of design is paramount.

Today the prize is instead awarded to Oscar Farinetti.

We are in a completely different period to the end of the 1990s and the international crisis is a daily reminder of that. We believe that Oscar Farinetti today represents as much “planning ability” as “know-how”. He has embarked in the last 30 years on extraordinary entrepreneurial adventures (from Unieuro - a chain of household appliance stores - to Eataly), capable of anticipating economic and lifestyle trends and revolutionizing some business processes which were considered to be rigid, not modifiable, such as those of the food sector, and creating cutting-edge communication formats.

The areas in which he has operated range from home appliances to the agri-food sector; the latter being a pillar of our economy today, the real wealth of the country. All this entrenched a historical era in which a new generation of young farmers, breeders and fishermen is taking shape, and the sense of respect for the land seems to be in constant growth.

OSCAR FARINETTI

He is ahead of his time, a visionary and an enlightened entrepreneur. He is above all a talent in terms of the large retail sector. He is not a designer. He was born in Alba (Cuneo) in 1954; the son of a partisan commander who, after the war, opened a pasta factory. From 1972 to 1976 he attended the Faculty of Economy and Trade in Turin, then to join the family business.

From 1978 to 2003 he was first a director, then chief executive officer and president of the Unieuro group (a store chain selling household appliances and - initially - also foodstuffs) which he sold in 2003 after opening more than 100 stores across the whole of Italy.

His life has been punctuated by significant corporate transactions: acquisitions of new brands, re-launches, diversification, sales. When technology and computers were bursting into daily life, he was trading in home appliances.

He invented some cutting-edge commercial formulas such as the so-called “everything must go”, the first ever sales in the history of consumer electronics, but also the first sales by instalments, using the daily discount technique and loss leader products (sold at a low price). He had the intuition to implement interest-free financing, the idea of using goldfish to attract children and the 3 for 2 on mobile phones, based upon the type of offers which already existed in the food industry. In the meantime, the computer became indispensable and the mobile phone a necessity. What he sold was optimism; optimism became his commodity. To communicate this, he invented almost metaphysical advertising with Tonino Guerra, Fellini’s great screenwriter but also a poet, writer and sculptor. He needed to find a different way of speaking about home appliances and technology; after all, even D’Annunzio had collaborated with the “La Rinascente” chain of stores.

Eataly opened in Turin in January 2007 after a long gestation period while every stage of the project was being implemented. After nine months it opened a sales outlet in Milan. Other locations in our region followed (Monticello, Asti, Pinerolo); the following year, a branch opened in Tokyo, then in Bologna. In 2010 it reached New York, close to the Flatiron Building, becoming an almost legendary location for Made in Italy food, and finally in 2011 in the old port in Genoa. In September 2008 Farinetti left the role of CEO to remain President.

ABOUT EATALY

Eataly was created by merging the words “to eat” and Italy.

Aim: to bring high-quality products to everyone, not just the select few. Business activities, being an entrepreneur, are at the heart of everything: the aim is to increase the percentage of people who think about what they put into their bodies, choosing top quality products. Eataly is aimed at a section of consumers. But it is precisely those consumers who are being asked to choose, to make eating an “agricultural act”. It is a new concept: to offer the oldest merchandise in the world, food, in the form of a quality product, one which respects the environment, agricultural and manufacturing traditions of the territory. Oscar Farinetti’s is not an intervention solely aimed at innovating the product (food, though of high quality); it is a strategic, wide-ranging action which completely changes the process (manufacturing, distribution and, more generally, the culture of food, bringing quality food to increasing sectors of the population) with significant positive impacts on the territory.

He designed a new, shorter product value chain by introducing new players, changing the relationship between who does what, reducing the flow of goods and the number of middlemen in the process.

In particular, he strove mainly to shorten the food chain: to give shape to a network of excellences, eliminating intermediaries, where possible, and buying directly from breeders and farmers.

The initial idea was to attract the world of small craft businesses capable of offering high level products, often unavailable or inaccessible due to price.

The second objective (almost reformist) was to convince the greatest number of small and medium manufacturers, farmers and breeders, to become ethical producers.

The aim was thereby to create a platform of agro-food excellence in order to obtain sustainable prices by containing the costs of the food chain and margins, offset by large quantities.

The brand now brings together a group of small companies which operate in the various food and wine sectors: from Gragnano durum wheat pasta to the mineral water of the Maritime Alps, from wine to Piedmont beef to the oil of western Liguria.

Also, and perhaps above all, the bread is of extremely high quality: prepared with natural yeast and organic flour and baked in a wood stove.

The finest raw materials are sourced in the territory; the next step is to communicate the

respect for tradition; finally, the aim is to educate about a way of eating that is as “healthy, clean and fair” as possible.

“Eating is an agricultural act” says the farmer and philosopher Wendel Berry. This message is displayed at the entrance to Eataly. Translated into economic language: demand leads the market. If everyone demands high-quality foods, manufacturers are obliged to produce high-quality foods. High-quality foods have never been offered using techniques of mass consumption by the hypermarkets that are known so well to Farinetti. He took the large size of the space, the freedom of choice and ability to change one’s mind. On the other hand, he took, from the local markets, the informality and opportunity to chat between merchant and customer.

Why the first Eataly in Turin? Turin, the closest capital to Slow Food, the city where the Salone del Gusto (International Food Fair) is held and the sensitivity for a certain food and wine culture is at its strongest.

Eataly is generally presented as a format with some common features:

- wide open spaces, typical of large retail areas;
- presentation of food as a “living cultural asset”: a challenge that every “Made in Italy” comes across when it faces globalization;
- informality of the environments (calling into discussion the concept, the perception of luxury);
- reasonable prices (in relation to quality goods);
- special offers;
- design of single-themed restaurants, i.e. specialist eating areas adjacent to the relevant department with service direct to the counter (a pillar of the Eataly format). Everything is established from a careful pre-design analysis: our way of eating in the last 20 years has changed, not the eating locations. The number of single people is increasing: social and informal eating areas are now favoured);
- process transparency: all stages of the process must be visible, with no secrets;
- the concept of honesty, the perception that no lies are told in that location;
- role of communication: never trivial or annoying. Very descriptive and informative. Simple and direct language: transmitted with irony and lightness; you chat, you talk about what you do.

Therefore:

1. on the one hand is the offer of the products (in the form of distribution and an opportunity to eat and drink);
2. on the other hand, learning, available in the form of cookery lessons, tasting sessions, courses on correct food preservation, lessons for children. This latter aspect is the most original component of Eataly and is fundamental in allowing the consumer to grasp the correct perception of quality.

Another important theme is the creation of contrasts; Eataly itself must become a place of contrasts.

Starting with the brand: the half moon, the way of embracing food, not closed: a fragment of the Turkish flag and the bazaars of Istanbul, the location which, more than any other, inspired him to construct Eataly. Even the opening of a museum on Carpano vermouth is an apparent contrasting element. Farinetti was able to secularize the Slow Food philosophy, bringing it closer to food produce. Slow Food acts toward Eataly as strategic advisor to guarantee an offer that always stands up to its promises. Last but not least: the relationship with the city: it also performs a public service, for example, food education lessons for children. A cultural and entrepreneurially significant operation. It remains a unique case study (much explored and liable to be replicated, sometimes badly): an exportable format but, above all, anti-cyclical, since the current crisis seems to have affected it only to a minimal extent.

“Innovation in Design Education” is the title of the Third International Forum of Design as a Process, the annual meeting of the Latin Network for the Development of Design Processes, held in November 2011 at the Politecnico di Torino, Italy. The book presents the results of the conference, which focused on three specific topics of the debate concerning design education: the relationship between schools and companies, innovative instruments for design teaching, and research for education. Particular attention was finally addressed to the host school, which was invited to present its experiences and research relating to the chosen theme.

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