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# DESIGNING SUSTAINABILITY FOR ALL

Edited by Marcelo Ambrosio and Carlo Vezzoli

Proceedings of the

**3<sup>rd</sup> LeNS world distributed conference**  
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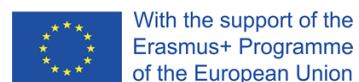
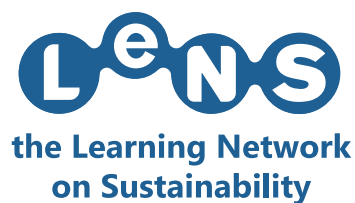
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# Designing sustainability for all

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Milano, Mexico City, Beijing, Bangalore, Curitiba, Cape Town,  
3-5 April 2019

Edited by **Marcelo Ambrosio** and **Carlo Vezzoli**

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# CONTENTS

## VOLUME 2 (*paper in this volume*)

### 4. SYSTEM AND CIRCULAR DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY

SYSTEM DESIGN FOR TERRITORIAL CYCLE TOURISM Alessio D'Onofrio	291
DESIGN TOOLKIT FOR SUSTAINABLE IDEATION Ameya Dabholkar, Shivangi Pande, Puneet Tandon	296
THE SUSTAINABILITY OF PACKAGING FOR E-COMMERCE: FROM SYSTEM TO PRODUCT. Amina Pereno, Silvia Barbero	301
SUSTAINABLE INTERACTION FOR MOBILITY SYSTEM Andrea Arcoraci	308
DESIGN AND AGRIFOOD FOR NEW SUSTAINABLE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT C. Anna Catania , Aurora Modica	313
ZERO KILOMETRE PLANTS PRODUCTION. AN INTEGRATED DESIGN APPLICATION Attilio Nebuloni, Giorgio Buratti, Matteo Meraviglia	319
DESIGN FOR CIRCULAR ECONOMY - A RE-THINKING PROGRESS IN THE WAY WE MAKE, BUY AND USE THINGS Barbara Wong	325
DESIGNING SUSTAINABLE AND HEALTHY FOOD SYSTEMS THROUGH CATERING: THE ROLE OF DESIGNERS Berill Takacs	333
SYSTEMIC DESIGN DELIVERING POLICY FOR FLOURISHING CIRCULAR REGIONS Carolina Giraldo Nohra	339
SUSTAINABLE CYCLE DESIGN AND EXPLORATION BASED ON TRADITIONAL GARBAGE COLLECTION MODEL Cheng Lin He	345
WHAT REALLY MATTERS? SYSTEMIC DESIGN, MOTIVATIONS AND VALUES OF THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY COMPANIES IN ITALY Chiara Battistoni, Silvia Barbero	351
IS DESIGN PLAYING A ROLE IN THE REALISATION OF CIRCULAR ECONOMY PROJECTS IN EUROPE? A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS.	356
“THE SEVEN TREES SIGNIFICANCE”. THE BENEDICTINE MONKS’ AGROSILVOPASTORAL PRODUCTIVE SYSTEM Prof. arch. Claudio Gambardella, Dott. Raoul Romano	362
ECOLOGICAL DESIGN THINKING FOR THE 21 <sup>ST</sup> CENTURY David Sánchez Ruano, PhD	366
DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY TRANSITIONS AND SUFFICIENT CONSUMPTION SCENARIOS:A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW Iana Uliana Perez, Mônica Moura, Suzana Barreto Martins, Jacob Mathew, Faiyqa Halim	371

DESIGN FOR A SUSTAINABLE INNOVATION OF THE ITALIAN COMPANIES: THE ECODESIGNLAB EXPERIENCE Jacopo Mascitti, Daniele Galloppo	384
DESIGN AND TRANSITION MANAGEMENT: VALUE OF SYNERGY FOR SUSTAINABILITY Jotte de Koning	390
DESIGN AND NATURE: NEW WAYS OF KNOWING FOR SUSTAINABILITY Kate Fletcher, Louise St Pierre, Mathilda Tham	396
CO-DESIGNING A COMMUNITY CENTRE IN USING MULTI-MODAL INTERVENTIONS Kim Berman (Visual Art), Boitumelo Kembo-Tolo (Multi-Media)	401
CRAFTING SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH SMALL, LOCAL, OPEN AND CONNECTED ENTERPRISES ON THE CANADIAN PRAIRIES: THE CASE OF MANITOBAN CRAFT BREWERIES Iain Davidson-Hunt, Kurtis Ulrich, Hannah Muhajarine	406
CASULO VERDE PROJECT: A SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO DESIGN MANAGEMENT. Larissa Fontoura Berlatto, Isabel Cristina Moreira Victoria, Luiz Fernando Gonçalves de Figueiredo,	412
MAPPING & CLASSIFYING BUSINESS MODELS TO REPLACE SINGLE-USE PACKAGING IN THE FOOD & BEVERAGE INDUSTRY: A STRATEGIC DESIGN TOOL Noha Mansour, Fabrizio Ceschin, David Harrison, Yuan Long	418
CLIMATE SWITCH: DESIGN LED SYSTEM RESPONSE TO CLIMATE CHANGE INDUCED BY CONSUMPTION Palash Ghawde, Bindiya Mutum, Praveen Nahar	424
FARM ONTOLOGY: A SYSTEM THINKING APPROACH FOR PLANNING AND MONITORING FARM ACTIVITIES Pasqualina Sacco, Raimondo Gallo, Fabrizio Mazzetto	429
INCLUSIVE CIRCULAR ECONOMY: AN APPROACH FOR EMERGING ECONOMIES Priscilla R. Lepre, Leonardo Castillo	435
PARTICIPATORY AND SUSTAINABLE STRATEGY-MAKING FOR COMMUNITY RENEWAL: THE CASE OF IAO HON IN MACAO Yan Xiaoyi, Zhou Long, Guoqiang Shen	441
<b>5. DESIGN FOR SOCIAL EQUITY, INCLUSION AND COHESION</b>	
TRANSDISCIPLINARY AND INTERCULTURAL FIELD STUDY AS A NEW APPROACH TO ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE DESIGNERLY Yue Zou, Zhiyuan Ou,	448
CERNE PROJECT AND REMEXE COLLECTION: ACTIONS IN SOCIAL DESIGN IN SEARCH OF SOCIAL INNOVATIONS OF SYSTEMIC CHARACTER Juliana Pontes Ribeiro, Adriana Tonani Mazzeiro, Gabriel Julian Wendling	454
TOWARDS INCLUSIVITY: EXPLORING THE IMPLICATIONS OF MULTI-SENSORY AND PARTICIPATORY DESIGN APPROACHES IN A SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT Alexis Wellman, Karolien Perold-Bull,	459
THE OPPORTUNITIES OF SUSTAINABLE HOUSING TO PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY Anahí Ramírez Ortíz	467
DESIGN FOR ALL TO SUSTAINABILITY FOR ALL SOCIETY Antonio Marano, Giuseppe Di Bucchianico	473

INTILANGA: THE HUMAN-CENTRED DESIGN OF AN OFF-GRID FOOD PROCESSING SYSTEM FOR MICRO-ENTERPRISES WITHIN JOHANNESBURG Antonio Marin, Martin Bolton	478
SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY AND VIRTUAL REALITY HEAD-MOUNTED DISPLAYS: A REVIEW OF THE USE OF IMMERSIVE SYSTEMS IN THE AID OF WELL-BEING Antônio Roberto Miranda de Oliveira, Amilton José Vieira de Arruda	484
RESEARCH ON DESIGN EMPOWERMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE ELDERLY IN COMMUNITY Binbin Zheng, Miaosen Gong, Zi Yang	490
FRAMEWORK OF ANALYTICAL DIMENSIONS AND DESIGN APPROACHES FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION Camila Ferrari Krassuski, Liliane Iten Chaves	496
COLLECTIVIZATION OF DESIGN AND DIGITAL MANUFACTURING: SOCIAL LABORATORIES Daniel Llermaly Larraín	502
FOSTERING SOCIAL INNOVATION THROUGH SOCIAL INCUBATORS AND CORPORATE SOCIAL INCUBATORS: EVIDENCE FROM ITALY Davide Vigliani, Paolo Landoni	507
UN-NUANCES OF CO-DESIGNING AND CO-CREATING: A DESIGN THINKING APPROACH WITHIN A ‘ZONGO’ COMMUNITY IN GHANA Patrick Gyamfi, Edward Appiah, Ralitsa Debrah	513
THE DESIGN OF BANYANKOLE TRADITIONAL HOUSE: POWER DIMENSIONS, HOSPITALITY AND BEDROOM DYNAMICS Emmanuel Mutungi	518
CHALLENGE BASED INNOVATION FOR HUMANITARIAN PURPOSES:DESIGNING A WEB-APP TO FIGHT OBESITY. RESULTS OF THEPORT_2018 PIER 32 Eveline Wandl-Vogt, Amelie Dorn, Enric Senabre Hidalgo, James Jennings, Giuseppe Reale,	
KAROLOS POTAMIANOS	524
USER EXPERIENCE IN DESIGN TARGETING POVERTY ALLEVIATION: A CASE STUDY OF “SHANJU RENOVATION” ACTIVITY IN MAGANG VILLAGE  FEI HU, JIXING SHI,	529
DESIGNING SUSTAINABLE MOBILITY FOR PEOPLE AT RISK OF SOCIAL ISOLATION – TWO CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES FROM SINGAPORE AND FRANCE Henriette Cornet, Penny Kong, Flore Vallet, Anna Lane, Yin Leng Theng	535
RESEARCH ON THE DESIGN OF SUSTAINABLE BATH EQUIPMENT IN POOR RURAL AREAS OF HEBEI HuHong, Li Heng	541
MAKING A COMIC ABOUT WESTBURY’S ANTI-APARTHEID ACTIVIST, FLORRIE DANIELS Florrie Daniels, Jean Bollweg	546
FROM ROBOTS TO HUMANS: PROSTHETICS FOR ALL Maria Rosanna Fossati, Manuel Giuseppe Catalano, Giorgio Grioli, Antonio Bicchi	552
DESIGNING SUSTAINABILITY FOR ALL OR CO-DESIGNING SUSTAINABILITY WITH ALL? Marie Davidová	558

DESIGN FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION WITHIN A VULNERABLE GROUP. LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE EXPERIMENTATION VIVICALUSCA IN ITALY Daniela Selloni, Martina Rossi	564
SUSTAINABLE DESIGN IDEA FOR ALL PEOPLE Dong Meihui	570
THE FUTURE IS FRUGAL Naga Nandini Dasgupta, Sudipto Dasgupta	574
#ECOTERACY, DESIGNING AN INFO INCLUSIVE AND UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE OF SUSTAINABILITY Nina Costa, Alexandra Duborjal Cabral, Cristóvão Gonçalves, Andreia Duborjal Cabral, Isabel Vasconcelos, Dânia Ascensão, Adriana Duarte	580
CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE FOR ALL: SUSTAINABLE FRUITION OF SITES BEYOND PHYSICAL ACCESSIBILITY Paola Barcarolo, Emilio Rossi	585
ADOPTION OF BIO-BASED ECONOMIES IN RURAL KENYA FOR IMPROVED LIVELIHOODS Pauline N. Mutura, WairimuMaina, Peter Kamau	591
DESIGN DISCRIMINATION–REFLECTION FOR CRITICAL THINKING Ravi Mani	597
ORGANIC FARMING AS A LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITY AND WELL BEING FOR SUNDARBAN FARMERS Sanjukta Ghosh	602
ERSILIALAB IN MILAN. A PARTICIPATORY EXPERIENCE TO DESIGN NEW WAYS FOR ROMA’S SOCIAL INCLUSION Silvia Nessi, Beatrice Galimberti	608
REVITALIZING MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT BY DESIGN Tao Huang, Eric Anderson	614
THE CONTRIBUTION OF COMMUNICATION DESIGN TO ENCOURAGE GENDER EQUALITY Valeria Bucchetti, Francesca Casnati	619
APPLYING HUMAN-CENTERED TECHNOLOGICAL APPROACH FOR SUSTAINABLE BUSINESSES IN INDIAN INFORMAL ECONOMIES Vivek Chondagar	624
STUDY ON SUSTAINABILITY OF WATER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM IN TRADITIONAL VILLAGES IN WESTERN ZHEJIANG PROVINCE - TAKING SHEN’AO VILLAGE IN ZHEJIANG PROVINCE AS AN EXAMPLE Zhang Yao, Zhou Haoming	629
SUSTAINABLE RURAL TOURISM SERVICE SYSTEM DESIGN THAT BALANCES LOCAL REVITALIZATION AND EXTERNAL INVOLVEMENT—TAKING THE AKEKE AS AN EXAMPLE Yiting Zhao, Jun Zhang	634

# VOLUME 1

FOREWORD	I
LENSIN PROJECT	II
THE LENS CONFERENCE	III
LENS MANIFESTO	IV
<b>1.KEY NOTE PAPERS</b>	
TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE DESIGN VALUES: EVOLUTIONARY CONCEPTS AND PRACTICES Xiaobo Lu	001
CIRCULAR ECONOMY, SYSTEMIC DESIGN AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT GUIDELINES FOR EMERGING ECONOMIES Leonardo Castillo	005
DESIGNING TO CREATE A SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF OUR COLLECTIVE CONCERNS Poonam Bir Kasturi	012
DESIGNERS FACING GLOBAL CHALLENGES Julio Frías Peña	015
SOUTH AFRICAN KEYNOTE SPEECH FOR LENS WORLD DISTRIBUTED CONFERENCE DESIGNING SUSTAINABILITY FOR ALL Angus Donald Campbell	019
THE CIRCULAR INDUSTRIAL ECONOMY IN A NUTSHELL Walter R. Stahel	024
<b>2. PRODUCT-SERVICE SYSTEM DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY</b>	
SUSTAINABLE PRODUCT-SERVICE SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS IN FASHION RETAIL Alana Emily Dorigon, Maria Auxiliadora Cannarozzo Tinoco, Jonatas Ost Scherer, Arthur Marcon	1
1TRASTOCAR. INTERACTIVE ART-DESIGN TO MAKE VISIBLE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT Ana Carolina Robles Salvador, Rodrigo Rosales González	6
PRODUCT-SERVICE SYSTEMS DEVELOPMENT PROCESS: SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW Barbara Tokarz, Bruno Tokarz, Délcio Pereira, Alexandre Borges Fagundes, Fernanda Hänsch Beuren	12
INTRODUCING SYSTEMIC SOLUTIONS FOR SUSTAINABILITY AT THE DESIGN COURSES IN UAM CUAJIMALPA. STUDY CASE: BOOK CLUB IN MEXICO CITY Leonel Sagahon, Brenda García	16
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LENS PROJECT AT THE UNIVERSIDADE DO ESTADO DO PARÁ (UEPA) Camilla Dandara Pereira Leite, Alayna de Cássia Moreira Navegantes, Antonio Erlindo Braga Jr	20
INITIAL PROPOSALS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PRODUCT-SERVICE SYSTEM AT THE UNIVERSIDADE DO ESTADO DO PARÁ (UEPA) Camilla Dandara Pereira Leite, Jamille Santos dos Santos, Alayna de Cássia Moreira Navegantes, Vinícius Lopes	

Braga, Agatha Cristina Nogueira de Oliveira da Silva, Antonio Erlindo Braga Jr.	24
ASPECTS OF THE PRODUCT-SERVICE SYSTEM IN BRAZILIAN LITERATURE Camilla Dandara Pereira Leite, Antonio Erlindo Braga Jr.	27
“LIBRARY OF STUFF”: A CASE OF PRODUCT SHARING SYSTEM PRACTICE IN TURKEY Can Uckan Yuksel, Cigdem Kaya Pazarbas	31
RESEARCH ON SERVICE SYSTEM DESIGN BASED ON VISUALIZATION OF SUSTAINABLE PRODUCT CARBON FOOTPRINT Chenyang Sun, Jun Zhang	37
INNOVATIVE SCHEME RESEARCH OF SHIMEN CITRUS’ LIFE CYCLE BASED ON PRODUCT-SERVICE DESIGN THINKING Chuyao Zhou, Jixing Shi, Jeff Lai, Amber Tan, Yuan Luo, Yongshi Liu, Shaohua Han	42
PRODUCT-SERVICE SYSTEMS (PSS): THE USE OF PRINCIPLES IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS OF PSS Emanuela Lima Silveira, Aguinaldo dos Santos	47
STUDY ON THE SERVICE DESIGN OF URBAN YOUNG DRIFTERS COMMUNITY Fei Hu, Yimeng Jin , Xing Xu	53
URBAN AGRICULTURE STARTUP CASE STUDY FOR SERVICE DESIGN IN BRAZIL Gabriela Garcez Duarte, Elenice Lopes, Lucas Lobato da Costa, Mariana Schmitz Gonçalves, Aguinaldo dos Santos	59
DEVELOPMENT MECHANISM ON CHINA’S INDUSTRIAL DESIGN PARKS THEMED DESIGN ENTREPRENEURSHIP Hongbin Jiang, Qiao Zhang	65
RESEARCH OF SUSTAINABLE PRODUCT SERVICE SYSTEMS ON CHINESE MINORITY BRAND CONTEXT Hong Hu, Feiran Bai, Daitao Hao, Jie Zhou	69
CHILDREN’S TOY SHARING SYSTEM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY CONCEPT Zhong Huixian, He Yi, Chen Chaojie	75
PRODUCT SERVICE SYSTEM APPLIED TO AIR-ENERGY PRODUCT BUSINESS MODEL INNOVATION Jiahuan Qiu, Jun Zhang	81
DESIGN AND RESEARCH OF RESOURCE RECYCLING SERVICE SYSTEM IN TOURIST ATTRACTIONS: TAKING INTERNATIONAL CRUISES AS AN EXAMPLE Jingrui Shen, Jun Zhang	85
RESEARCH AND PRACTICE ON INTELLIGENT AGRICULTURAL MACHINERY PRODUCTS AND SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS MODEL DESIGN Jun Zhang, Caizhi Zhou	90
THE CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CSR) AND STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT FOR THE MEXICAN SPECIALIZED PUBLISHING SMES Lupita Guillén Mandujano, Bertha Palomino Villavicencio, Gerardo Francisco Kloss Fernández del Castillo	96
SLOC MODEL BASED SERVICE DESIGN STRATEGIES AND PRACTICE ON ECOLOGICAL AGRICULTURE Lyu Ji, Miaosen Gong	101
APPLICATION OF THE CARD SORTING TECHNIQUE ASSOCIATED WITH THE STORYTELLING APPROACH IN A PSS FOR SUSTAINABILITY Manuela Gortz, Alison Alfred Klein, Evelyne Pretti Rodrigues, Félix Vieira Varejão Neto, Henrique Kozłowski Buzatto, Aguinaldo dos Santos	106

EMOTIONAL DESIGN IN FUNCTIONAL ECONOMY AND PSS TOWARDS BEHAVIOR CHANGE Manuela Gortz, Décio Estevão do Nascimento	111
SOUTH-TO-SOUTH SOLUTIONS: AN EXCHANGE OF AUSTRALIAN AND LATIN AMERICAN DESIGN APPROACHES TO THE UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS Mariano Ramirez	117
DESIGN AND SUSTAINABILITY: SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF LITERATURE IN BRAZILIAN PHD THESES Marina Arakaki, Conrado Renan da Silva, Tomas Queiroz Ferreira Barata, Olímpio José Pinheiro, Mariano Lopes de Andrade Neto	123
COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PRODUCT SERVICE SYSTEM BASED ON LIFE CYCLE ANALYSIS— INNOVATIVE LUNCH TAKEAWAY SERVICE SYSTEM DESIGN Nan Xia	129
SERVICE DESIGN FOR INNOVATION: THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF SERVICE DESIGN IN INNOVATION FOR MANUFACTURING COMPANIES Naotake Fukushima, Aguinaldo dos Santos	135
WICKED PROBLEMS AND DESIGN IN EMERGING ECONOMIES: REFLECTIONS ABOUT THE DESIGN OF SYSTEMIC APPROACHES FOCUSED ON FOOD AND TERRITORY Priscilla R. Lepre, Leonardo Castillo, Lia Krucken	141
HORTALIÇÁRIO: GARDEN FOR ANY SPACE Rita de Castro Engler, Thalita Vanessa Barbalho, Letícia Hilário Guimarães, Ana Carolina Lacerda	147
EMOTIONAL DESIGN IN FUNCTIONAL ECONOMY AND PSS TOWARDS BEHAVIOR CHANGE Manuela Gortz, Décio Estevão do Nascimento	154
DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY APPLIED TO WORKSPACES Susana Soto Bustamante, Elena Elgani, Francesco Scullica, Ricardo Marques Sastre, Marcia Elisa Echeveste, Maria Auxiliadora Cannarozzo Tinoco, Fabiane Tubino Garcia, Arthur Marcon	160
MECHANISM ANALYSIS AND APPLICATION STUDY OF SUSTAINABILITY EVALUATION TOOL FOR FURNITURE E-COMMERCE(ICSFE) Chuyao Zhou, Fang Liu, Suqin Tan, Tianwei Sun, Guixian Li, Shaohua Han	174
SUSTAINABLE PRODUCT SERVICE SYSTEMS: A NEW APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE FASHION Yaone Rapitsenyane, Sophia Njeru, Richie Moalosi	180
PRODUCT-SERVICE SYSTEM DESIGN OF HOUSEHOLD MEDICAL WASTE MANAGEMENT FOR DIABETICS Yiting Zhang, Miaosen Gong, Dongjuan Xiao, Yuan Hu	185
BUSINESS MODEL DESIGN BASED ON THE CONCEPT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT—A SERVICE DESIGN OF THE PHYSICAL IDLE MALL AS AN EXAMPLE Luo Yuqing	190
<b>3. DISTRIBUTED ECONOMIES DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY</b>	
DISTRIBUTED MANUFACTURING APPLIED TO PRODUCT-SERVICE SYSTEMS: A SET OF NEAR-FUTURE SCENARIOS Aine Petruilaityte, Fabrizio Ceschin, Eujin Pei, David Harrison	196
METHODS AND TOOLS FOR COMMUNITY BASED RESEARCH PROJECTS: DISTRIBUTED DESIGN AND DISTRIBUTED INFORMATION FOR VOLUNTEER ORGANISATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA Arnaud Nzawou, Ephias Ruhode	202

RECOVERY AND RECYCLING OF A BIOPOLYMER AS AN ALTERNATIVE OF SUSTAINABILITY FOR 3D PRINTING Camilla Dandara Pereira Leite, Leticia Faria Teixeira, Lauro Arthur Farias Paiva Cohen, Nubia Suely Silva Santos	207
EPLORING SCENARIOS TO FACILITATE THE ACCESS TO 3D PRINTING TECHNOLOGY IN EGYPT THROUGH SUSTAINABLE PSS APPLIED TO DISTRIBUTED MANUFACTURING Doaa Mohamed	211
INVESTIGATION OF THE IMPACT OF SUSTAINABILITY ON 3D PRINTING TECHNOLOGIES Emilio Rossi, Massimo Di Nicolantonio, Paola Barcarolo, Jessica Lagatta, Alessio D’Onofrio Design of abandoned vegetable and fruit transportation system based on sustainable distributed economy Haiwei Yan, Ruolin Gao, Yuanbo Sun, Ke Jiang	218
DESIGN OF ABANDONED VEGETABLE AND FRUIT TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM BASED ON SUSTAINABLE DISTRIBUTED ECONOMY Haiwei Yan	224
DISTRIBUTED PRODUCTION AND SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGIES FOR FASHION Alba Cappellieri, Livia Tenuta, Susanna Testa,	228
SUSTAINABLE PRODUCT SERVICE SYSTEMS: CASES FROM OCEANIA Mariano Ramirez	233
VISUALISING STAKEHOLDER CONFIGURATIONS IN DESIGNING SUSTAINABLE PRODUCT-SERVICE SYSTEMS APPLIED TO DISTRIBUTED ECONOMIES Meng Gao, Carlo Vezzoli	239
LAMPS - ‘DESIGNERLY WAYS’ FOR SUSTAINABLE DISTRIBUTED ECONOMY Prarthana Majumdar, Sharmistha Banerjee, Jan-Carel Diehl, J.M.L.van Engelen	245
THE THIRD SECTOR AS A VECTOR TO FOSTER DISTRIBUTED DESIGN AND DISTRIBUTED ECONOMY INITIATIVES: A CASE STUDY Priscilla Ramalho Lepre, Leonardo Castillo	251
‘SHKEN’ NATURALLY YOURS – SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF SUSTAINING RURAL DISTRIBUTED BAMBOO CRAFT ENTERPRISES OF NORTH EAST INDIA Punekar Ravi Mokashi, Avinash Shende, Mandar Rane	257
DISTRIBUTED SUSTAINABLE MARKET DESIGN BASED ON COMMUNITY Ruolin Gao, Haiwei Yan, Ke Jiang, Yuanbo Sun	261
PURA FRAMEWORK - A MODEL FOR DISTRIBUTED ECONOMY FOR INDIA Sharmistha Banerjee	265
CONTEXTUALIZING SUSTAINABLE PRODUCT-SERVICE SYSTEM DESIGN METHODS FOR DISTRIBUTED ECONOMIES OF INDIA Sharmistha Banerjee, Pankaj Upadhyay, Ravi Mokashi Punekar	270
DISTRIBUTED ELECTRIC VEHICLE CHARGING SERVICE SYSTEM DESIGN BASED ON BLOCKCHAIN TECHNOLOGY Wandong Cheng, Jun Zhang	276
MODEL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF OPEN SOURCE PRODUCTS MOD+RE+CO+DE Willmar Ricardo Rugeles Joya, Sandra Gomez Puertas, Nataly Guataquira Sarmiento	280
RESEARCH AND TEACHING PRACTICE OF PRODUCT SERVICE SYSTEM APPLIED TO DISTRIBUTED ECONOMY Yao Wang, Jun Zhang	285

## VOLUME 3

### 6. DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABLE CULTURAL AND BEHAVIORAL CHANGE

ARTISTIC CRAFTSMANSHIP VS DEGRADATION RISK OF HISTORICAL AREAS Adriano Magliocco, Maria Canepa	639
STRATEGIES FOR ECO-SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: COMPARING EFFICIENCY, SUFFICIENCY AND CONSISTENCY Andreas Metzner-Szigeth	644
SYNTHESIZING SOLUTIONS: EXPLORING SOCIALIST DESIGN AND ITS MODERN RELEVANCE THROUGH THE MEDIUM OF PLASTICS Aniruddha Gupte	650
MOTHERS FROM INOSEL: AN EXERCISE IN COLLABORATION TOWARDS A MORE SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY Bárbara de Oliveira e Cruz, Rita Maria de Souza Couto, Roberta Portas Gonçalves Rodrigues	655
THE ECOLOGICAL AESTHETIC CONNOTATIONS IN CHINESE TRADITIONAL ENVIRONMENT CONSTRUCTION SKILLS Changliang Tan	661
UPCYCLING IN COMMUNITIES: LOW CARBON DESIGN PROMOTES PUBLIC ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS AND OPTIMIZES SOCIAL Qiu Dengke, Peng Jinqi, David Bramston, Qiu Zhiyun, Chen Danrong	667
FASHION DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY: A FRAMEWORK FOR PARTICIPATORY PRACTICE Dilys Williams	672
A DIFFERENT DEFINITION OF GENERATIVE DESIGN Erika Marlene Cortés López	678
SUSTAINABILITY AND DEMOCRACY WIDESPREAD COLLABORATIVE DESIGN INTELLIGENCE Ezio Manzini	682
UTSTAL: HEADING HEARTS AND JOINING COMMUNITIES Fernando Rafael Calzadilla Sánchez, Francisco Emanuel Pérez Mejía	687
SUSTAINABLE DESIGN AND AESTHETICS IN THE SOFT SCIENCE AGE Francesca La Rocca, Chiara Scarpitti	690
THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS AND REFLECTIONS ON THE SUSTAINABILITY DEBATE Gabriela Sandoval Andrade	696
DESIGN FOR HUMAN FLOURISHING: PERCEPTUAL MAPPING OF DIFFERENT DESIGN APPROACHES TOWARDS HAPPINESS AND WELL-BEING Guilherme Toledo	700
USING EMOTIONAL DURABILITY FOR SUSTAINABLE PACKAGING DESIGN PRACTICE BASED ON USAGE SCENARIO Jifa Zhang	706
THE VALORIZATION OF INDIGENOUS CULTURE THROUGH UPCYCLING Jordana de Oliveira Bennemann, Eduarda Regina da Veiga, Ana Luisa Boavista Lustosa Cavalcante	711

CLOTHING LANDSCAPES: INTERDISCIPLINARY MAPMAKING METHODS FOR A RELATIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF FASHION BEHAVIOURS AND PLACE Katelyn Toth-Fejel	715
INTEGRATION OF ART OF HOSTING METHODOLOGIES AND PRINCIPLES INTO THE SOCIAL INNOVATION LAB PRACTICE: Lewis Muirhead, Rosamund Mosse	720
DESIGN AS DEMOCRACY: THE DEMOCRATIC POTENTIAL OF DESIGN Luiz Lagares Izidio, Dijon De Moraes	727
REGENERATIVE FOOD SERVING SYSTEM FOR A SUSTAINABLE UNIVERSITY CAMPUS LIFESTYLE: A SOCIAL AND BEHAVIOURAL STUDY Nariman G. Lotfi, Sara Khedre	732
DESIGNING FURNITURE BASED ON STUDENT’S LIFESTYLE AND MERGING WITH A SUSTAINABLE CAMPUS Neha Priolkar, Franklin Kristi	737
PERIOD. A CARD GAME ON SOCIAL TABOOS AROUND MENSTRUATION Devika Saraogi, Gayatri Chudekar, Nikita Pathak, Sreya Majumdar	742
ESTABLISHING A QUANTITATIVE EVALUATION MODEL FOR CULTURE-BASED PRODUCT DESIGN Pan Li, Baosheng Wang	748
SUSTAINING CULTURAL HERITAGE : DERIVING THE CONTEMPORARY FROM THE IDIOM OF TRADITIONAL CRAFTS Puja Anand, Alok Bhasin	753
EMPATHY SQUARE: AN AID FOR SERVICE DESIGN FOR BEHAVIOUR CHANGE TO SUPPORT SUSTAINABILITY Ravi Mahamuni, Anna Meroni, Pramod Khambete, Ravi Mokashi Puneekar	759
ECOMUSEUM AS A DESIGN TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL INNOVATION Rita de Castro Engler, Gabrielle Lana Linhares	764
MISLEADING IDENTITIES: DO PERCEPTUAL ATTRIBUTES OF MATERIALS DRIVE THE DISPOSAL OF SINGLE-USE PACKAGING IN THE CORRECT WASTE STREAM? Romina Santi, Agnese Piselli, Graziano Elegir, Barbara Del Curto	770
I TAKE CARE OF MY PLACES—PROJECT BY ALESSANDRO MANZONI HIGH SCHOOL, LECCO Rossana Papagni, Anna Niccolai, Eugenia Chiara, Laura Todde	776
THE ESPERANÇA COMMUNITY GARDEN AND THE CHALLENGES OF INTEGRAL SUSTAINABILITY Samantha de Oliveira Nery, Ediméia Maria Ribeiro de Mello, Rosângela Míriam Lemos Oliveira Mendonça	780
SPIRAL DYNAMICS: A VISIONARY SET OF VALUES FOR HUMANITY’S SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT Sergio Dávila Urrutia	785
CRAFT CHANGE: BEHAVIOUR PROGRESSION FRAMEWORK – EVALUATION IN QUASI PARTICIPATORY DESIGN SETTING Shivani Sharma, Ravi Mahamuni, Sylvan Lobo, Bhaskarjyoti Das, Ulemba Hirom, Radhika Verma, Malay Dhamelia	791
FOR AN AESTHETICS FOCUSED ON SUSTAINABILITY: STUDIES FOR THE CONFIGURATION OF ECOLOGICALLY ORIENTED PACKAGING Thamyres Oliveira Clementino, Amilton José Vieira de Arruda, Itamar Ferreira da Silva	796

CRITICAL ZONE: THE EARTH BELOW OUR FEET Vasanthi Mariadass	800
SERIOUS GAME AS A NEW WAY OF HANDICRAFT INHERITANCE—A CASE STUDY ON “HUAYAO CROSS-STITCH MASTER GROWTH RECORD” Xile Wang, Duoduo Zhang, Yuanyuan Yang	807
<b>7. PRODUCT DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY</b>	
PROPOSAL OF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DESIGN UNDER A SUSTAINABLE APPROACH: LCA CASE. Bonifaz Ramírez Adonis Wenceslao, González Leopoldo Adrián	812
CIRCULAR DESIGN AND HOUSEHOLD MEDICATION: A STUDY ON THE VOLUNTARY DRUG DISPOSAL PROGRAM OF THE CITY OF BETIM MUNICIPALITY Aline Rodrigues Fonseca, Rita de Castro Engler, Armindo de Souza Teodósio, Luiz Fernando de Freitas Júnior, Mariana Costa Laktim, Travis Higgins	817
DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABLE FASHION: A SUSTAINABILITY DESIGN-ORIENTING TOOL FOR FASHION Barbara Azzi, Carlo Vezzoli, Giovanni Maria Conti	823
DESIGN PRACTICE FOR SUSTAINABILITY: DEVELOPMENT OF A LOW-COST ORTHOSIS Caelen Teger, Isabella de Souza Sierra, Dominique Leite Adam, Maria Lúcia Leite Ribeiro Okimoto, José Aguiomar Foggiatto	831
MECHANISM ANALYSIS AND APPLICATION STUDY OF SUSTAINABILITY EVALUATION TOOL FOR FURNITURE E-COMMERCE(ICSFE) Chuyao Zhou, Fang Liu, Suqin Tan, Tianwei Sun, Guixian Li, Shaohua Han*	837
ANUVAD: CREATING SUSTAINABLE SMART TEXTILES THROUGH THE MEDIUM OF TRADITIONAL CRAFTS Chhail Khalsa	843
DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY FRAMEWORK APPLIED TO THE PROBLEM OF GARMENT WASTE: A BRAZILIAN STUDY Cláudio Pereira de Sampaio, Suzana Barreto Martins	848
LIFE CYCLE DESIGN (LCD) GUIDELINES FOR ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE CLOTHING CARE SYSTEMS: AN OPEN AND OPERATIVE TOOL FOR DESIGNERS Carlo Vezzoli, Giovanni Maria Conti	854
THE RESEARCH OF YI ETHNICITY FURNITURE DESIGN BASED ON ARCHITECTURAL SPACE Ding Yang	860
DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY AND ICT: A HOUSEHOLD PROTOTYPE FOR WASTE WATER RECYCLING Fiammetta Costa, Marco Aureggi, Luciana Migliore, Paolo Perego, Margherita Pillan, Carlo Emilio Standoli, Giorgio Vignati	864
OPEN-ENDED DESIGN. LOCAL RE-APPROPRIATIONS THROUGH IMPERFECTION Francesca Ostuzzi, Valentina Rognoli, Francesco Fittipaldi, Patrizia Ranzo, Rosanna Veneziano, Gustavo R. P. Nascimento, Victor J.D. S. Baldan, T. M. Ponciano, Janaina M. H. Costa, Eduvaldo P. Sichert, Javier M. Pablos	868
ANALYSIS OF THE POTENTIAL APPLICATION OF RECYCLED THERMOFIX INDUSTRIAL POLYURETHANE RESIDUE IN SCHOOL DESKS Gustavo Ribeiro Palma Nascimento, Victor José Dos Santos Baldan, Thales Martins Ponciano, Janaina M. H. Costa	

Eduvaldo Paulo Sichieri, Javier Mazariegos Pablos	880
RE-DESIGNING RECOVERED MATERIALS. CASE STUDY: FIBERGLASS IN THE NAUTICAL SECTOR Helga Aversa, Valentina Rognoli, Carla Langella	884
UNFINISHEDISM Huanhuan Peng	890
CRITICAL FUTURES TODAY: BACK-CASTING SPECULATIVE PRODUCT DESIGN TOWARDS LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY Jomy Joseph Jomy Joseph, Mariana Costa Laktim, Larissa Duarte Oliveira, Rita de Castro Engler, Aline Fonseca, Camilla Borelli, Julia Baruque-Ramos	899
HOME TEXTILE: AN ANALYSIS OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMICAL IMPACTS IN BRAZIL Mariana Costa Laktim, Larissa Duarte Oliveira, Rita de Castro Engler, Aline Fonseca, Camilla Borelli, Julia Baruque-Ramos	905
PRODUCT DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY – GUIDELINES FOR THE LIFE CYCLE DESIGN OF OFFICE FURNITURE Lena Plaschke, Carlo Vezzoli, Francesco Scullica	910
ON THE COLLABORATIVE MODELS FOR DESIGN SCHOOLS ENGAGING IN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF TRADITIONAL BAMBOO CRAFTS Li Zhang, Hai Fang	915
EXPERIMENTAL MATERIAL DEVELOPMENT LEADING TO SUSTAINABLE PRODUCT DESIGN Martin Bolton	921
AUTOMATIC COMPOSTER FOR HOME USE Maycon Manoel Sagaz, Paulo Cesar Machado Ferroli	926
SUSTAINABILITY IN THE PRODUCT LIFE CYCLE OF PAPER Qian Yang	932
BIOINSPIRED STRUCTURES IN LIGHTWEIGHT PRODUCT DESIGN WITH ADDITIVE MANUFACTURING Owen Gagnon, Brenton Whanger, Hao Zhang, Ji Xu	936
SMART HOME GRID: TOWARDS INTERCONNECTED AND INTEROPERABLE ELECTRICAL MODEL TO IMPROVE THE USAGE AWARENESS Paolo Perego, Gregorio Stano	941
ZERO WASTE: EXPLORING ALTERNATIVES THROUGH FOLDING Pragya Sharma	946
ENVIRONMENTAL PRODUCT OPTIMISATION: AN INTEGRAL APPROACH Reino Veenstra, Henri C. Moll	953
SUSTAINABLE DESIGN 4.0: METHODS AND TECHNIQUES OF THE CONTEMPORARY DESIGNER IN THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY Roberta Angari, Gabriele Pontillo	959
NEM, NEAPOLITAN EVOLUTION MEN’S WEAR: A BIO PROJECT OF MEN’S TAILORING Roberto Liberti	965
NEW SUSTAINABLE COSMETIC PRODUCTS FROM FOOD WASTE: A JOINED-UP APPROACH BETWEEN DESIGN AND FOOD CHEMISTRY Severina Pacifico, Simona Piccolella, Rosanna Veneziano	970

CHILDREN FURNITURE DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY Xiang Wang, Lulu Chai, Ren Fu	975
STUDY ON THE DESIGN OF TENON AND MORTISE JOINTS FOR NEW TYPE SUSTAINABLE EXPRESS PACKAGING BASED ON THE CONCEPT OF INTEGRATED CYCLING Xue-ying Wang, Jiao Yi	981
<b>8. DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABLE TECHNOLOGIES AND RESOURCES</b>	
INTERACTIVE DESIGN STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE BEHAVIOR CHANGE BASED ON OPEN SOURCE HARDWARE Yongshi Liu, Jing Ou, Yunshuang Zheng, Jun Zhang	988
DESIGN-DRIVEN STRATEGY FOR THE SUSTAINABLE TEXTILE HERITAGE COMMUNITY IN CHINA Yuxin Yang, Eleonora Lupo	994
EXPLORING THE DESIGN ETHICS OF THE FUTURE INFORMATION SOCIETY: A BRIEF DESIGN ETHICS STUDY OF “DIDI GLOBAL” AS A SOCIALITY INTERNET PRODUCT Zhilong Luan, Xiaobo Lu	1000
GLEBANITE® FOR MODELS AND MOULDS IN SHIPYARDS APPLICATIONS RATHER RESORTING TO MONOMATERIC SOLUTIONS Andrea Ratti, Mauro Ceconello, Cristian Ferretti, Carlo Proserpio, Giacomo Bonaiti, Enrico Benco	1006
PROJECT REMA: THE REGIONAL ECO-MATERIALS ARCHIVE Y.H. Brian Lee, Ding Benny Leong	1010
MATERIALS CLASSIFICATION IN FURNITURE DESIGN – FOCUS ON SUSTAINABILITY Paulo Cesar Machado Ferroli, Emanuele de Castro Nascimento, Lisiane Ilha Librelotto, Franchesca Medina, Luana Toralles Carbonari	1015
THE SUSTAINABILITY OF BIOMIMETIC SYSTEM DESIGN: FROM ORGANISM TO ECOLOGY Fan Wu, Jun Zhang	1021
SUSTAINABILITY DESIGNED WITH(OUT) PEOPLE? UNDERSTANDING FOR WHAT ENERGY IS (OVER-)USED BY TENANTS IN AN ENERGY EFFICIENT PUBLIC HOUSING IN MILAN Giuseppe Salvia, Federica Rotondo, Eugenio Morello, Andrea Sangalli, Lorenzo Pagliano, Francesco Causone	1027
RESEARCH ON BIOMASS ENERGY UTILIZATION IN RURAL AREAS BASED ON SUSTAINABLE DESIGN CONCEPT Haiwei Yan, Ruolin Gao, Ke Jiang, Yuanbo Sun	1032
LIFE THE TOUGH GET GOING PROJECT: IMPROVING THE EFFICIENCY OF THE PDO CHEESE PRODUCTION CHAINS BY A DEDICATED SOFTWARE Jacopo Famiglietti, Carlo Proserpio, Pieter Ravaglia, Mauro Ceconello	1035
RETHINKING AND RECONSTITUTED MATERIALS FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE — “RECONSTITUTING-PLAN” PROJECT AS AN EXAMPLE Jiajia Song	1040
BAMBOO SUPPLY CHAIN: OPPORTUNITY FOR CIRCULAR AND CREATIVE ECONOMY Lisiane Ilha Librelotto, Franchesca Medina, Paulo Cesar Ferroli, Emanuele de Castro Nascimento, Luana Toralles Carbonari	1046
ALTERNATIVE MATERIALS TO IMPROVE THE ASSEMBLY PROCESS OF FURNITURE FOCUSED ON SUSTAINABILITY DESIGN Paulo Cesar Machado Ferroli, Lisiane Ilha Librelotto, Natália Geraldo	1051

SUSTAINABLE DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR USING BAMBOO STEMS Ping Wu, Tao Huang	1056
SUSTAINABLE MATERIALS AND PROCESSES DESIGN: THE CASE STUDY OF POLY-PAPER Romina Santi, Silvia Farè, Barbara Del Curto, Alberto Cigada	1061
ENABLING USER KNOWLEDGE TO SUPPORT THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN ENERGY RETROFITTING OF PUBLIC HOUSING: A CASE STUDY IN MILAN Giuseppe Salvia, Federica Rotondo, Eugenio Morello	1067
EFFECTS OF COLOURED AMBIENT LIGHT ON PERCEIVED TEMPERATURE FOR ENERGY EFFICIENCY: A PRELIMINARY STUDY IN VIRTUAL REALITY Siyuan Huang, Giulia W. Scurati, Roberta Etzi, Francesco Ferrise, Serena Graziosi, Lavinia C. Tagliabue, Alberto Gallace, Monica Bordegoni	1073
BUILDING INTEGRATED PHOTOVOLTAICS (BIPV): SYSTEM APPLICATION GUIDELINES AND ALBEDO ASPECTS Sofia Hinckel Dias, Flávia Silveira, Aloísio Schmid	1079

## VOLUME 4

### 9. ARCHITECTURAL AND INTERIOR DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY

SUSTAINABLE-ORIENTED CHANGE MANAGEMENT FOR ALL BUILDING DESIGN PRACTICE Anna Dalla Valle, Monica Lavagna, Andrea Campioli,	1083
RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS AND SUSTAINABLE BEHAVIOUR: UNDERSTANDING IMPACT OF DESIGN ELEMENTS ON HUMAN BEHAVIOUR Ashish Saxena	1088
RESTRICTING FACTORS IN THE SELECTION AND SPECIFICATION OF SUSTAINABLE MATERIALS: AN INTERIOR DESIGN PERSPECTIVE. Emmerencia Petronella Marisca Deminey, Amanda Breytenbach	1094
OPTIMIZATION AND LCSA-BASED DESIGN METHOD FOR ENERGY RETROFITTING OF EXISTING BUILDINGS Hashem Amini Toosi, Monica Lavagna	1101
INDOOR ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY DESIGN OF HOTELS IN THE UNITED STATES AND EUROPE Ivan Alvarez Leon, Elena Elgani, Francesco Scullica	1106
SUSTAINABLE TECHNIQUES TO IMPROVE THE INDOOR AIR QUALITY (IAQ) AND THERMAL COMFORT IN HOT AND ARID CLIMATE. Laura Dominici, Sanam Ilkhanlar, Sara Etminan, Elena Comino	1112
DEVELOPMENT AND PROPOSITION OF A TOOL TO EVALUATE THE ECOLOGICAL IDENTITY OF PRODUCTS: FURNITURE CASE Onur Y. Demiröz, Meltem Özkaraman Sen	1117
INTERVENING ON 'BUILDING AS A PRODUCT' AND 'HABITATION AS A SERVICE' IN CONTEMPORARY URBAN SETTINGS FOR ADAPTIVE MICRO HABITATION DESIGN Shiva Ji, Ravi Mokashi Puneekar	1123
RESEARCH ON THE SUSTAINABLE DESIGN OF TRADITIONAL ARCHITECTURAL NARRATIVE CULTURE OF BEIJING HUTONG BLOCKS: A CASE STUDY OF NANLUOGUXIANG STREET Xin Wen, Fan Zhang	1129

SUSTAINABILITY INVOLVES EMOTION: AN INTERPRETATION ON THE EMOTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF SUSTAINABLE ARCHITECTURE Yun-Ting Gao	1134
 <b>10. LANDSCAPE AND URBAN DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY</b>	
TOWARD SUSTAINABLE CITIES THROUGH FUTURISTIC DESIGN MODEL: A CONSUMERISTIC SOCIETY PERSPECTIVE Azadeh Razzagh Shoar, Hassan Sadeghi Naeini	1141
STUDY ON SUSTAINABLE DESIGN OF RAINWATER LANDSCAPE IN EXISTING URBAN RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITY Di Gao, Xuerong Teng	1145
DESIGN FOR PUBLIC TOILETS: CHALLENGES AND CONTRIBUTION TO THE REESTABLISHMENT OF PUBLIC VALUE Fang Zhong, Xin Liu, Nan Xia	1151
DESIGNING COMMUNITY THROUGH URBAN GARDENING Gloria Elena Matiella Castro,	1157
EXPLORING FOG HARVESTING IN EUROPE: CHARACTERISTICS AND GUIDELINES FOR A SUSTAINABLE CITY MODEL Gloria Morichi, Dr. Gabriela Fernandez, Lucas B. Calixto	1161
CHARACTERIZATION OF TWO URBAN FARMS IN THE CUAUHEMOC BOROUGH OF MEXICO CITY Iskar Jasmani Waluyo Moreno	1166
THE CHALLENGES OF USING PUBLIC LAND SUSTAINABLY IN MEXICO FOR OUTDOORS RECREATION: CAN SERVICE DESIGN HELP BRIDGE THE GAP? Ivan Osorio Avila	1171
INTERCITY RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN URBAN AGGLOMERATION AND THEIR IMPACTS ON URBAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT Jianhua Zhang	1177
URBAN-RURAL NETWORK TOOL FOR DESIGNING SYSTEMS THAT SUCCESSFULLY INTEGRATE COMPANIES AND COMMUNITIES TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY AND RESILIENCE Juan Montalván, Akie Manrique, Santiago Velasquez, Lucia Rivera, Helen Jara, Luis Quispe	1183
SOCIAL INEQUITY IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT INFRASTRUCTURE & ITS IMPACT ON A CITY'S SUSTAINABILITY Lakshmi Srinivasan	1188
A TOOLKIT: FOSTERING A PARTICIPATORY STUDY OF SUSTAINABLE PAVEMENT DEVELOPMENT Lulu Yin, Eujin Pei	1194
THE LOGIC OF PLACE-MAKING TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE NEW URBAN AREAS IN HANOI: FROM ZERO TO HERO? Minh Tung Tran, Ngoc Huyen Chu, Pham Thuy Linh	1200
MATI- FINDING SELF AND COMMUNITY THROUGH LAND RECLAMATION Srishti Srivastava, Shivangi Pant, Sahil Raina	1206
THE PATTERN AND METHODS CONCERNING THE MICRO-RENEWAL OF THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT Tingting Liu	1211
RITICAL ZONE: THE EARTH BELOW OUR FEET Vasanthi Mariadass	1216

STUDY ON THE LANDSCAPE POLICY AND USAGE SITUATION : A CASE OF XIADU PARK IN YANQING COUNTY, BEIJING Yuanyuan Zhang	1223
AN ANALYSIS AND APPLICATION OF AFFORDANCE THEORY IN DESIGN OF URBAN RAIL TRANSIT Yu-Feng Zhang	1228
DISCUSSION ON THE SUSTAINABLE MODE OF NEW RURAL CONSTRUCTION IN CHINA FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTRUCTION Zhong Zhen	1234
<b>11. EDUCATION AND DIFFUSION OF DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY</b>	
DSXC: TOOLKIT TO SUPPORT DESIGN EDUCATION PROCESSES FOR SUSTAINABILITY Adolfo Vargas Espitia, Álvarez Quintero, Willmar Ricardo Rugeles Joya	1239
UPSCALING LOCAL AND NATIONAL EXPERIENCES ON EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL DESIGN AND SUSTAINABILITY FOR ALL TO A WIDER INTERNATIONAL ARENA: CONSIDERATIONS AND CHALLENGES Ana Margarida Ferreira, Nicos Souleles, Stefania Savva	1244
INTERDISCIPLINARY HIGH EDUCATION IN PLACE BASED SOCIAL-TECH: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE TAMBALI FII PROJECT IN DAKAR Andrea Ratti, Francesco Gerli, Arianna Bionda, Irene Bengo	1248
EDUCATION STRATEGIES AND BEHAVIORAL ACTIONS TO MITIGATE ENERGY POVERTY Anna Realini, Simone Maggiore, Marina Varvesi, Valentina Castello, Corrado Milito	1254
DESIGNING FOR CLIMATE CHANGE FOR ALL—A MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION DESIGN COURSE TO INCREASE PUBLIC AWARENESS Bo Gao, Glenda Drew, Jesse Drew,	1260
DESIGN PEDAGOGY FOR SUSTAINABILITY: DEVELOPING QUALITIES OF TRANSFORMATIVE AGENTIVE LEARNING. Bruce Snaddon, Andrea Grant Broom	1265
ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECTS IN THE UEL DESIGN COURSE: LEGAL CONCEPTIONS AND REALITY Camila Santos Doubek Lopes, Gabriela Namie Komatsu Yoshida	1270
EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT. CASE OF AN INDUSTRIAL ENGINEERING PROGRAM IN COLOMBIA. Carolina Montoya-Rodríguez	1275
USING DESIGN THINKING AND FACEBOOK TO HELP MOROCCAN WOMEN ADAPT TO CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS Diane Pruneau, Abdellatif Khattabi, Boutaina El Jai, Maroua Mahjoub	1281
DESIGN FOR SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY: DECOLONISING DESIGN EDUCATION Elmarie Costandius, Neeske Alexander	1286
A SUSTAINABLE DESIGN-ORIENTED PROCESS FOR CONVERTING AND SHARING KNOW-HOW Emilio Rossi	1292
FASHION DESIGN EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABILITY. A CHALLENGE ACCEPTED. Erminia D'Itria	1297
TRANSITION DESIGN – PRESENTATION AND EDUCATIONAL APPROACH Erwan Geffroy, Manuel Irlés, Xavier Moulin	1303
SOCIAL INNOVATION THROUGH DESIGN IN THE TRAINING OF YOUNG APPRENTICES: EXPERIENCING SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL PROJECTS Karina Pereira Weber, Isabel Cristina Moreira Victoria, Marco Antonio Weiss, Luiz Fernando Gonçalves De Figueiredo	1309

INSPIRING STUDENTS TO BE AGENTS OF CHANGE: A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE Laskarina Yiannakaris	1314
THE TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIATION OF SUSTAINABILITY: DESIGN AS A MODE OF INQUIRY Lisa Thomas, Stuart Walker, Lynne Blair	1320
DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY. STATE OF THE ART IN BRAZILIAN UNDERGRADUATE COURSES Marcelo Ambrósio, Maria Cecília Loschiavo dos Santos	1326
SUSTAINABLE DESIGN TRENDS WITHIN CREATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS Mireille Anja Oberholster, Francesco Scullica	1331
MODEL-MAKING COURSES AND APPROACHES IN TERMS OF SUSTAINABILITY: EXAMINATION OF INDUSTRIAL DESIGN SCHOOLS IN TURKEY Necla Ilknur Sevinc Gokmen	1336
SUSTAINABILITY IN UNDERGRADUATE ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY FROM KAZGASA, KAZAKHSTAN Nurgul Nsanbayeva	1342
ENCOURAGING DFE IN DESIGN EDUCATION TO PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE MEDICAL PRODUCT DESIGN Pranay Arun Kumar, Stephen Jia Wang	1348
INCORPORATING SUSTAINABILITY INTO RESEARCH PROJECTS Rosana Aparecida Vasques, Maria Cecilia Loschiavo dos Santos	1354
TEACHING DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABILITY BEYOND THE ENVIRONMENTAL DIMENSION: A TOOLKIT AND TEACHING STRATEGIES Rosana Aparecida Vasques	1359
ROLE OF DESIGN EDUCATION IN IMPARTING VALUES OF SUSTAINABILITY AS SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF DESIGNERS Sanjeev Bothra	1365
SPREADING GOOD SUSTAINABILITY PRACTICES THROUGH TEMPORARY RETAIL SHOPS Silvia Piardi	1370
FASHION DESIGN-RELATED DOCTORAL STUDIES IN SELECTED KENYAN UNIVERSITIES: ADVANCING APPLIED RESEARCH IN SUSTAINABILITY Sophia N. Njeru. Mugendi K. M'rithaa	1375
TRANSDISCIPLINARY FUTURES: WHERE DO EMBODIMENT, ETHICS AND EDUCATION MEET FOR SUSTAINABILITY LEADERSHIP? Srisrividhiya Kalyanasundaram, Sandhiya Kalyanasundaram,	1382
DESIGN: A REFLEXIVE, REFLECTIVE AND PEDAGOGICAL INQUIRY INTO SUSTAINABILITY Sudebi Thakurata	1388
URBAN MINE REDESIGN COURSE: RESEARCH AND TEACHING PRACTICE Xin Liu, Fang Zhong	1394
TRANSFORMING FOOD SYSTEMS IN CHINA: THE ROLES OF FOOD LITERACY EDUCATION IN ALTERNATIVE FOOD MOVEMENTS Yanxia Li, Hongyi Tao	1400
SUSTAINABILITY AND CREATIVE EDUCATION: DEVELOPING A SUSTAINABILITY CULTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN CHINA Dr Yan Yan Lam, Sheng Feng Duan,	1406



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## **WHAT REALLY MATTERS? SYSTEMIC DESIGN, MOTIVATIONS AND VALUES OF THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY COMPANIES IN ITALY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Since 2014, the Circular Economy (CE) concept is gaining an important role in the European context thanks to the specific direction given by the EU policy. This research wants to frame Italian companies who are working on CE context to understand mainly which is their approach and awareness to CE and if the design is playing a role in this transition. At the beginning of 2019, an online questionnaire was sent to the actors present in the app database 'Mercato Circolare' who, since March 2017, is mapping the Italian situation collecting the actors related to the CE selecting companies, events and experiences of circular citizenship. Despite the response rate was 14%, the results are interesting: 100% are SMEs; 21% are not aware to work on CE; >52% identified difficulties with value appreciation; design competencies are present in the 66% of realities and in 29% the designers by formation are founders.

Keywords: circular economy, Italian SMEs, design

### 1. CONTEXT

Since 2014, the Circular Economy (CE) concept is gaining an important role in the European context thanks to the push coming from the European Union with the document EU (2014a). Following the study conducted by Zamfir et al. (2017), the country is the most important factor which influences CE development. In this case, the country of reference where the research was conducted is limited to Italy due to the database chosen to investigate the topic. In the Italian context, the app 'Mercato Circolare'<sup>1</sup>(MC), of the homonym innovative start-up<sup>2</sup>, since March 2017 is mapping the Italian context collecting more than 250 actors related to the CE selecting companies, products, events and experiences of circular citizenship.

This research wants to frame the role of these actors in CE, understanding mainly which is their approach and awareness to CE and if the design is playing a role in this transition.

### 2. DESIGN, CIRCULAR ECONOMY AND SMES.

The main motivation behind this research is to understand how the design can contribute to the transition to a CE and to define and push an alternative and sustainable model of production and consumption to the linear one within the regenerative model Blue Economy (BE) by Pauli (2015). As Ellen Macarthur Foundation remind, the CE is "economy that is restorative and regenerative by design"<sup>3</sup>. This means that the entire system should be re-designed or designed by intention, considering many different factors, the complex system. However, in the scientific literature (scopus database), many contributions are narrowing the role of designer to product design, dealing with re-manufacturing or eco-design. However, in the review on CE by Lieder and Rashid (2016), design is mentioned "crucial to the development of the new economic model of CE" and "product design is identified as crucial in the design of sustainable circular systems, especially in connection with critical materials research". Bocken et al (2016) remember "integrating circular economy concerns at an early stage in the product design process is important" and shift the attention to the design of resources loops. They suggested two main design strategies: for slowing resource loops and for closing resource loops. For Andrews (2015) "Designers now have the opportunity to lead the paradigm shift and in addition to designing for the 'closed loop' they have the potential to influence business and consumer behaviour and consumption by extending actual product life and increasing perceived value of products." De los Rios and Charneley (2017) arguing on the skills and capabilities for a sustainable CE, they claim for a changing role of designers given that "the standard approach for creation, fabrication, and commerce of products is challenged". They reported the categorisation by Go et al. (2015) on the different design approaches for a sustainable industry: from the design for life cycle, to the design for environment (preventive) to the whole systems design. In fact, design in the lastly has seen an evolution: as stated by Ceschin and Gaziulusoy (2016) it has passed from product innovation to product-service system innovation to spatio-social innovation and to socio-technical system innovation.

About the designers skills, for Go et al. (2015) they pass from the understanding logistics, distribution processes and engineering functions, to services design and user experience, to perception of value. Andrews (2015) adds that to reach sustainability "some designers need to change their practice while others need to change their practice and thinking". As designer decisions can influence all the value chain (Braungart and McDonough, 2009), different training and skills for designers are required to meet the need of sustainability, especially in the manufacturing sectors which required it as stated by Garetti and Taisch (2012). Along Cradle 2 cradle design (C2C) (Braungart and McDonough, 2009) which now is also a product certification, Systemic Design (SD) (Bistagnino, 2011; Jones, 2018) and Design for product-system sustainability (Vezzoli, 2007) are recent approaches and education method for design for sustainability that are enlarging the focus from product to the system where it is embedded.

Previous studies have tried to frame the CE concept in European enterprises. Zamfir et al (2017) referring to Italian SMEs stated: "SMEs from Italy display a very heterogeneous behavior in adopting circular economy practices....SMES that activate in the manufacturing sector are the most active in the field of circular economy...the openness of Italian SMEs from services and industry to circular economy is also influenced by their total turnover...". The Flash Eurobarometer 441 (EU, 2016) in a questionnaire requested by the European Commission DG Environment on European SMEs and CE showed that almost three quarters of companies undertook some CE related activity (in Italy the 67%).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

After a literature review about the relationships between CE concept and the design role, we defined and sent, at the beginning of 2019, an online questionnaire to each entity in MC database (MCd) which are 276 in total. Specific and mainly closed questions were asked to raise the response rate. The open (OQ) and close (CQ) questions (listed in tab. 1) first want to frame the identity of these actors, after focus on their awareness on working on CE concept

<sup>1</sup> English translation: circular market.

<sup>2</sup> Othe author, Nadia Lambiase, is the founde

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/> . Last consultation 10/02/2019 .

and on the different scientific approaches related to CE, and at the end look for the presences of designers and their roles and main competencies.

[Table 1] Questionnaire questions

n°	Motivation: understanding ..	Typology of data	Collection method	References
<b>ENTERPRISE IDENTITY CARD</b>				
1	..the principal sectors in which the enterprises are working	Productive Sectors	OQ <sup>1</sup>	statistical classification of economic activities NACE <sup>2</sup>
2	..the principal area in Italy	location	MCd	
3	..the age of the phenomenon	Foundation year	OQ <sup>3</sup>	
4	..which are their clients	B2B or B2C	MCd	
5	.. the typology of enterprises working on CE	Enterprise size	CQ <sup>4</sup>	European statistics <sup>5</sup> - Pedone (2016)
		n° Innovative Enterprise and start-up	CQ <sup>6</sup>	Italian law on 'innovative enterprise and start-up' <sup>7</sup>
		n° start-up		
<b>APPROACH TO CE</b>				
6	..which approaches are known	Awareness on scientific approaches related to ce	CQ <sup>7</sup>	Approaches defined by authors
7	..their awareness on being into the CE concept	Ce awareness	OQ <sup>8</sup>	
8	...the most common CE principles	Ce principles	CQ <sup>9</sup>	Principles are base on an elaboration of Ellen MacArthur foundation principles
9	...the level of education about CE	Investment in training on ce	CQ <sup>10</sup>	closed answers mainly based by authors experience and EU (2016)
10	...the solutions and strategies adopted	Solutions to transition to ce	CQ <sup>11</sup>	closed answers mainly based on EU (2016)
11	..the most common problems faced to work on CE	2 main problems in ce implementation	CQ <sup>12</sup>	closed answers mainly based on EU (2016)
<b>IDEA CREATION, COMPETENCIES AND ROLE OF DESIGN</b>				
12	...how the idea behind the enterprise was born	Idea creation	CQ <sup>13</sup>	closed answers based by authors experience

13	..presence of Designers (by formation) in the company	Design presence in founders and company team	CQ <sup>14</sup> ; CQ <sup>15</sup>
14	...if designers (by formation) are entrepreneurs	Design presence in founders	CQ <sup>16</sup>
15	understanding principal competencies involved in CE	Competencies by team and founders	CQ <sup>17</sup> CQ <sup>18</sup>
		External consultants	CQ <sup>19</sup>
16	..if they are cooperating with other realities and are they public or private?	Partnership	CQ <sup>20</sup>

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The response rate to the questionnaire was of 14% (38 on 276) in 1 week of time availability. The data collected were processed and aggregate.

**IDENTITY CARD:** The answers came mainly by enterprises that are 87% (30 and 3 social cooperatives). The other 6% are represented by 3 sole practitioner designers or artisan, 2 association/non profit and 1 research centres. Between the enterprises, 19 are micro, 11 are small and 3 are medium. This means that 100% of the enterprises are SMEs which is perfect in line with the Italian average situation as demonstrated by Pedone (2016). This data confirm also as the micro and small enterprises are playing a role as the subject for the change (Barbero, 2016). Moreover, 21 entities state to be innovative (as the Italian law definition<sup>4</sup>) and precisely 8 are innovative start-ups and 13 are innovative enterprise (start-ups 5 years old). 55% works with clients (b2c), while 40% with other business (b2b) - no data about 5%.

The foundation year frames the phenomenon in time. 22 were founded from 2012 and 2018, 10 between 2000 and 2012, and 6 from 1960 to 2000. The increase from 2012, with a pick in 2015, reflects the period in which Europe Union starts to talk about the CE.

The ateco code provided in addition to the company description in MCD for the one who doesn't have a code, let define that the 42% are involved in manufacturing sectors. Precisely the main ones are: traditional manufacturing activities (8 cases); 'design and produce' (8 cases) - will be referred as manufacturing activities along the paper -; informatics (4 case) and energy (3 cases). 4/8 'design and produce' are sole practitioners.

55% of the total entities are located in the north of Italy (21 cases, especially in Piedmont, Lombardy and Trentino); 32% in the centre (12 cases especially in Emilia-Romagna, Lazio and Toscana); 5% in the south (2 cases). This reflects the situation about the total entities present in MCD.

**APPROACH TO CE:** Surprisingly, 8/38 state that they have never always been aware to work in this context. Many of these answers provided came from companies born before 2001. Regarding the 8 entities that 'design and produce', 2 don't know CE approach but 7/8 know the eco-design approach and 2 the C2C. Among all the 16 manufacturing activities only 3 know the SD approach and they are located in Piedmont region: this reflects the low diffusion of the approach in the manufacturing sectors outside the territory where it is a master degree (Torino, IT). Considering all the cases, after CE approach, the most known are: eco-design (16), BE (8), c2c (6) and SD (3). Only one reality know all the 4 approaches proposed. Approaches as Design Thinking, Sustainability, Green Economy, LCA and sustainable development were proposed voluntarily by 8%.

In the questionnaire 45% declare to have internal competencies about CE, while 30% have not yet invested in a training course on CE.

To frame which aspects of the CE they are implementing, we decided four main principles, which come from our interpretation of the Ellen MacArthur principles: 'generate value from waste'; 'use natural input or from second raw material'; 'design for the long-lasting duration'; 'prefer use to property.' In this specific research, many answers included more than one principles. The most cited was the 'generate value from waste' (33/38) and in 18 cases it was mentioned with the 'use natural input or from second raw material' which was cited in total 23 times. 9 state to work on 'design for the long-lasting duration' and 3 on 'prefer use to property'. Only 3/8 of 'design and produce' category are working for long-lasting duration of objects and 8/8 are generating value from waste.

About the actions taken as solutions or strategies in the last three years, 50% have done anything (9 are 'manufacturing activities'). Among them, 11 are micro enterprises. While about the other 50%, 10 have done an analysis of their fluxes and 6 a LCA, 4 have obtained environmental certification, 3 have re-design the product and 3 have environmentally improved their plant.

To understand the difficulties that they encounter frequently to work on CE, we have asked the main 2 problems. More than 52% identified difficulties in making the value added appreciated by the market, and about the 40% difficulties in accessing fundings. However, as the Flash Eurobarometer 441 state, one of the problems can be that in Europe "just over a third of companies are aware of government financial incentives for activities related to the circular economy" (EU, 2016).

**IDEA CREATION, COMPETENCIES AND ROLE OF DESIGN:** One of the most interesting aspect

4. Legge 17 dicembre 2012, n. 221 (DL Crescita 2.0- artt. 25-32). Retrieved online from <http://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:decreto.legge:2012-10-18;179!vig=>

emerged is that 11/38 (30%) answered that CE is their philosophy of life. This reflects that the CE is not only a business opportunities, but a high percentage of people consider it as a cultural paradigm.

About the creation of the idea, almost the 50% choose the reason 'to solve a society problem', 37% 'from a personal need', 30% 'from a previous working experience'. 7 were born between colleagues in another enterprise, 5 from scientific research, 2 to answer a call and 2 from a family enterprise. 11 of the total had an experience in Business Incubators. In 47% of cases they have external partnerships and in 47% of cases they haven't. 4 declare to have partnerships with research centres.

With the goal to investigate the role of design in the CE, was asked to define the competences of the founders and the employees. 21/38 has stated to have internal competences in design. To frame better this concept, it was asked if there are designers by formation in the team. In this case, only 1/3 of these 21 have answer positively. The reason behind this double question can be found in the lots of meanings of the term 'design'. Infact, lacking an official register, design is intended as a capacity possessed by many people and not a specific profession which corresponds to a particular bachelor degree. The designer by formation are working in 12 of the 38 identities analyzed and in 11 cases they are founders (in enterprise founded after 2001). This reflects the abilities of designer as entrepreneurs (Margolin, 2002). Designers are working in 7/8 in the 'design and produce' category which reflects the skills of 'designer as producer' as demonstrated by Margolin (2002).

Along the competencies in design (45% between founders and present in 25 entities), the main ones are: business and marketing (33), communication (27), financial (19), social science (16), engineer (15), ICT and development (14), natural science (10) and legal (9). It's important to underline that communication and legal services are mainly also delegated to external consultants, in addition to management one.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The results better define the Italian context on the CE, previously framed by other studies. Despite the response rate was of 13%, the main results are interesting: 79% are micro and small enterprises; 21% are not aware to work on CE; more than 52% identified difficulties in making the value-added appreciated by the market; 21% are 'design and produce' realities; design competencies are present in 66% of realities and in 29% the designers by formation are founders. Although, the results do not highlight the designer with a role in the design at the system level, as one of its emerging skills (see SD). This can let start a reflection on the need to spread this message out of the academia and research sectors, to change really the business practice over the sustainability aspect.

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