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Original
Designing for territorial revitalization. A diffused art exhibition to foster northwest Italian inner areas / Peruccio, Pier Paolo; Menzardi, Paola; Vrenna, Maurizio. - STAMPA. - (2020), pp. 190-197.

Availability:
This version is available at: 11583/2846296 since: 2020-09-21T17:44:00Z

Published
Universidad de Alicante. Escuela Politécnica Superior

Published
DOI:10.14198/eurau-ALICANTE

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Designing for Territorial Revitalization.

A diffused art exhibition to foster Northwest Italian inner areas.

Design for territories considers lands not only as a spatial context but also as a design object that has to be approached with definite strategies. The use of design methodologies for territorial purposes could lead to innovative products, services, policies and structures, with the aim to stimulate new activities and local relations. This contribution sheds light on the role of design discipline in building and implementing methods to support the development of a territory. The paper presents an actual case study carried out by a group of systemic design researchers from Politecnico di Torino, who worked on a multi-layered action plan for the Piedmont Region, in the north of Italy. For this plan, the designers were required to set up a series of guidelines to improve or activate well founded territorial policies. The research was carried out in the areas of culture, local economy and tourism promotion through the project of a diffused art exhibition entitled Il Rinascimento di Gaudenzio Ferrari. The exhibition also resulted in the development of participatory services, the enhancement of local economies, and the strengthening of the relations between districts. The paper analyses the supportive role of design, with investigations on emerging design, design for territories and systemic design. It describes the main phases of the project, underlining its outcomes, the positive impacts on local communities, its limits and possible future developments. It further suggests possible perspectives for an evolutionary process in the design sphere, with distinct guidelines for creating new diffused events.

Peruccio, Pier Paolo¹ + Menzardi, Paola² + Vrenna, Maurizio³

¹. Politecnico di Torino, DAD, Turin, Italy. pierpaolo.peruccio@polito.it
². Politecnico di Torino, DAD, Turin, Italy. paola.menzardi@polito.it
³. Politecnico di Torino, DAD, Turin, Italy. maurizio.vrenna@polito.it

Key words: Design For Territories, Systemic Design, Diffused Art Exhibition, Inner Areas, Local Development.
1. Introduction.

The objective of the paper is to present the contributions of design in tackling territorial issues, to highlight new strategies addressed to develop and strengthen local economies and interconnecting governance policies. This is illustrated by the validation and assessment of the theory through the implementation of a project. Currently, the design discipline is undergoing a transformation in its identity and competencies. The centre of the discussion is on how design can pursue its original purposes with regards to changes over time, societies and attitudes.

The capacity to transform reality through better or new solutions may, in fact, assume different shapes and using various ways of acting, without changing the original scope. Designers have dealt with the concept of project (v. from Latin “pro-iacere”, to throw ahead) from widely differing perspectives. Researchers, academics and experts in several fields are realizing the increasing complexity of our reality. Therefore, design should no longer operate by distinct sectors, but become more open and multidisciplinary and adopt new values and perspectives. Designers are required to develop a marked capacity of interpretation and comprehension, that includes complexity as a world-shaping force. The design discipline is no longer applied to the exclusive or competence of an individual professional; it is instead collaboratively conducted by a variety of expert stakeholders, which may even include the end-users. Design is therefore, not assignable by nature to a unique area of study (Desert, 2010), but it has always been at the intersection of multiple fields. As Victor Margolin (1992) observed, design does not refer to principles that specify its aim, but is defined each time the profession is put into practice. What characterizes an emerging design is a space of action that is fluid and that receives influences from various kinds of knowledge. Design is becoming a multi-faceted science for the use and the implementation of other studies, a sort of toolbox that gains significance on the basis of its applications, and not a discipline that lives by itself.

As design widens to more fields of application, it is necessarily undergoing a learning phase about methods and active disciplines that are conceptually closer ones. Design contaminates – and is contaminated – every time a new context has to be investigated, or a project area defined. This ongoing and the methodological approach through which this happens are also reflections of a changed identity based on collaborations and the interplay with diverse figures. The interaction and the co-design process that involves other figures is not only an internal priority but a necessity deriving from the discipline’s current role of mediator (Celaschi, 2017). Thus, emerging design and systemic design rarely deploy vertically specialized abilities; they involve instead enabling capacities aimed at increasing the inter-operability among several areas of study. In this way, new and additional research environments have been integrated with design. An interesting field is represented by territorial planning and regional studies. Territories are wide objects of investigation because of the variety of scales and perspectives. Therefore, design can be conceived as a tool to inspect and operate on them, embracing territorial issues as some of the most multifaceted fields of design.

2. Design toward multidisciplinarity: An emerging identity.

The design discipline boasts an established old and elaborate history from the early twentieth century when it developed as a specialised activity in Europe. At that time, it largely dealt with mass-manufactured products, but since then many things have changed and design has shifted away from objects “toward” of ways of thinking and doing (Manzini, 2016). A decisive leap that boosted its evolutionary processes occurred as a result of the rising complexity in the dynamics of the world. It is in this cultural framework, that design has approached wider and manifold issues, trying to seek solutions to complex matters, whether social or environmental, economic or territorial, while broadening its disciplinary boundaries. The design discipline has increased its capacity to grasp their connections and meanings. “Design is now becoming more about listening, asking, understanding, and drafting new possibilities and alternative realities” (Murata, 2016), and it is progressively turning into a cardinal way of thinking, where interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary practices can no longer be separated.

3. Design embraces systemic thinking.

Different areas of the design discipline have been affected by rapid changes in perspectives and minds. Meanwhile, other domains have carried out long-established activity with well-known and even more consolidated capacities. Systemic thinking has arisen from the discipline’s current orientation to advance design practices along with the cultural debate about the transformation of big sites. At that time, multiple studies went into method on this matter by developing new fields of study such as territorial marketing, cultural marketing and economy of experience. Since then, a radical shift has occurred, and the territories once considered as the design context are now considered to be the design object (Parente and Sedini, 2017). The design approach to the territory is, in any case, a strategic one. For that reason, it is hard to detect a specific knowledge in which it can be identified. Design for territories includes a group of disciplines in relation to an objective and is not a discipline in itself (Lupo, Parente and Sedini, 2017).

Designing for territories definitively includes a set of heterogeneous actions with a common aim: that is the transformation of potential resources into effective implementation, within an overall perspective of sustainability and well-being for territories, people and socio-economic contexts in Piedmont and Lombardy, the municipalities, and in collaboration with Politecnico di Torino, Department of Architecture and Design among others.

The actual exhibition took place at Palazzo dei Musei and Sacro Monte di Varallo, where the early stages of Ferrari’s career were presented, while at Arca in Vercelli (former St Mark’s Church) the artist’s more mature masterpieces were showcased. Broletto in Novara accommodated the latest products of his artistic career (Agosti, Minnanzio and Stoppa, 2018). Due to the multiple geographic locations across which the artist lived, the exhibition could not have happened in just one place. A diffused art exhibition was therefore the proper way to re-explore heritage while combining art history, tourism, territory and people.

The final aim of fostering the mentioned goals, the Politecnico di Torino was essential at different stages, from the communication plan to the arrangement of the strategic development. The contribution of the Politecnico has been supportive of other measures driven by the Region, the municipalities, the tourism agency and Abbonamento Musei.

4. Design for territories: Goals and ambitions through experimental research.

Design for territories means designing for the specific socio-cultural issues, both on small and larger scales. Interventions may imply the realization of products, the rethinking and configuration of production processes, the envisioning of new activities or the outline of strategies. Design has been dealing with territories in many ways, for example by studying and reinterpretating specific traditional products for selected geographical areas. However, designing for territories also means putting services into place. Even though the design discipline has often regarded territories and spatial contexts, a proper identifier label to define this relevance had not been clearly determined previously. Only recently, the design community has come to feel the necessity to recognize and gather, under the same family of interests, the various studies that are working on territories. The literature on this topic is still limited and lacks a substantial theoretical reference framework. In spite of this, a relevant dialogue within the scientific community is emerging.

Practitioners are also seeking to contribute to this theme with new ideas and projects. The beginning of this interest can be traced back to the end of the 90s, along with the cultural debate about the transformation of big sites. At that time, multiple studies went into method on this matter by developing new fields of study such as territorial marketing, cultural marketing and economy of experience. Since then, a radical shift has occurred, and the territories once considered as the design context are now considered to be the design object (Parente and Sedini, 2017). The design approach to the territory is, in any case, a strategic one. For that reason, it is hard to detect a specific knowledge in which it can be identified. Design for territories includes a group of disciplines in relation to an objective and is not a discipline in itself (Lupo, Parente and Sedini, 2017).

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5. A diffused art exhibition in Piedmont.

Il Rinascimento di Gaudenzio Ferrari is the title of an art exhibition spread over the three towns of Varallo Sesia, Vercelli and Novara, from March to September 2018. Ferrari was an Italian painter and sculptor, and he is considered the leading representative of the Piedmontese Renaissance. His early pictorial style was mainly influenced by the well-known artists Leonardo da Vinci and Bramantino (Alessandro Spannocchi). His work was distinguished by strong animation, as shown beyond doubt in his most memorable religious works in the chapels in Sacro Monte and the fresco in San Michele in Grinzane in Varallo Sesia. The long-planned exhibition became an occasion to rediscover the magnificence of Ferrari’s masterpieces, while promoting a wider initiative aimed at fostering cultural tourism and local economies.
To handle the project, three conditions were outlined to provide and engage such bordering areas as: activities as incentives for territorial productivity (what); creation of a thick relational tissue between territories (how); and actions with impact on the long term (when). Subsequently, the territories were holistically scrutinized, and the project was approached following these steps: identification of places, holistic analysis, evaluation of critical issues and motivations for change, definition of guidelines, project execution, direct/indirect results from mapping, impact analysis, and definition of new guidelines.

The outcomes led to, and are still producing, answers regarding the levels of economic profitability, quality of life, perspectives of growth and governmental cohesion. Most of the gathered data has been elaborated to gain qualitative insights in support of the project development.

6. First design deliverables.

The research group led the aspect of visual identity and the communication of the exhibition, in collaboration with Abbonamento Musei, and the curators Giovanni Agosti and Jacopo Stoppa.

**Starting with a selection of the most representative paintings to advertise each venue, the design team came up with a range of graphic products, intended not only for the exhibition, but also for promoting the territory.** The logotype Gaudenzio is designed to be reminiscent of a personal seal and can be inscribed in a square (Fig.1). The use of the sole personal name and the hyphenation of the syllables imparts a strong and unusual identification. By insisting on the facility of pronunciation and informal communication, the intent was to ideally shorten the distance between the artist and its audience. The dark background is in strong contrast with the white lettering, resulting from an analysis of the irregular serif typefaces, typical of the 16th century. The body copy, the advertisement (Fig.2), the banners and other visual artifacts were designed to attract people toward new places and create interest in the less conventional aspects of little-known places. Banners were placed in the towns in which the exhibition took place but also in Turin, the regional capital.

With regard to digital media, more focused work has been made along these lines: firstly by defining the official website, and secondly in particular, by designing the digital platform - an open-access App to guide tourists to the exhibition sites, which provides them with accessible audio guides and augmented reality contents, share trip tips and engages them with the community of users (Fig.3). The development of the platform was made possible thanks to Ulke Group, an innovative ICT company based in Turin, and is available to download for free both on AppleStore and Google Play. The promotion of Gaudenzio has been surprisingly effective and the logo has been used even beyond its original purposes, to identify local artisan products and gastronomical produce. The following paragraph provides a deeper insight into the project outcomes and its impacts on local communities, while illustrating some of the several artifacts that have been realized. Visual and graphic elements were, in fact, only the first design deliverables for the exhibition. Designing for a territory means dealing with many aspects including organization and communication, scenario building, participation and other kinds of interaction (Parente and Villari, 2010).

7. Project outcomes and impacts.

Over a period of around seven months, the exhibition involved more than 37,000 visitors, in three venues. Most of them came from Piedmont and Lombardy, with a lower percentage from Emilia-Romagna, Veneto and Liguria. The presence of foreigners was limited (less than 3%) (Associazione Abbonamento Musei, 2018). This indicates the local scale of the event and its territorial relevance. Despite the advanced average seniority of the tourists (55 years old), more than 6,000 of them downloaded the App, taking advantage of its easy-to-use features and listening to the ad-hoc recorded audio guides. Fostering the connections among the main actors, including designers and governance agencies, opened promising perspectives of cooperation. As mentioned above, the event acted as a catalyst for the organization of related initiatives, connected to the local territories and the topics of the exhibition. The initiatives included themed guided tours, conferences, trekking excursions and child-friendly activities, in order to include all citizens (Osservatorio Culturale del Piemonte, 2018). Together with these several activities, it is worth mentioning the busy schedule of events (concerts, conferences, tours) that took place in Varallo Sesia, and the realization of two murals in Varallo and Novara, by the street artist Andrea Ravo Mattori (Fig.4). Several new territorial relations have also been created with public and private institutions, local activities and communities. The Gaudenzio logo has been particularly appreciated. Apart from the institutional advertising material, it has been spontaneously adopted by producers and business owners for the branding of some traditional products, or new ones created for the occasion. The logo has appeared on 10 different types of products on sale, with a greater emphasis in Varallo, where 11 businesses became involved. This has been possible due to Varallo’s touristic vocation, a little town in which tradition and historical heritage are still particularly relevant and part of people’s identity. By using the logo, the community demonstrated the willingness to enrich the narrative of its own territory and the necessity to revive it continuously over time. The brand Gaudenzio has been diffused in other contexts to promote the location and different kinds of local products like toma (a traditional ripened cheese), Fig.5), biscuits, bread (Fig.6), miace (a traditional dough), beer, honey (Fig.7), jams, ice creams, agendas, soaps and shoes (Fig.8).

In most cases, producers and sellers decided to maintain the logo after the conclusion of the event, transforming it into a permanent mark of their identity. As evidence of its popularity and effectiveness, it has also been introduced for the sign posting of local hiking trails supervised by CAI (Italian Alpine Club), and for the religious itineraries at Sacro Monte di Varallo (Fig.9). The municipality also decided to give visibility to their new and refreshed identity with a large painting at the entrance of the town (Fig.10). With respect to the advertising banners made of PVC, the local NGO Di.A.Psi. based in Vercelli – that supports individuals with mental illnesses and their families - had the great initiative to give them a second life; rather than being trashed, the banners underwent an upcycling process, utilizing local craftsmanship.

**Fig.1. Design phases of the logotype.**

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and indirect impacts on territories and economies could be challenging. More detailed mapping of the reverberations of the event is still ongoing and will require the expertise of economists, sociologists, engineers and institutions to assess socio-economical macro results in the short, medium and long terms. The analysis will include a comprehensive report of the products sold, the revenues and the percentage of local GDP increase. The evaluation will be conducted together, but not exclusively, with local shops and producers, and will include face-to-face interviews and surveys, in order to define other possible influential KPIs. Further joint academic research on the role of design for territories would be desirable. However, it is of primary importance to continue creating and strengthening relationships between stakeholders, incubate new processes and motivations for territories and municipalities to collaborate for the benefit of the region. A peridical update of the Gaudenzio App could transform it into the driving force for the promotion of local areas, aside from the specific event it was originally designed and published for.

9. Final comments.

The project of the diffused art exhibition introduced in this paper is a valuable experiment for the design community. The events attempted to act on several levels by rethinking design as a multifacetted, multifield activity of thoughts and actions that are combined together. The observed impacts have certainly left positive traces in terms of a fertile terrain for the future growth of other initiatives. Further verifications are however necessary to confirm and validate the suitability of this approach in different contexts.

A critical inspection of the suggested guidelines is opportune in order to reach a higher degree of applications. From a methodological point of view, enriching and extending the dialogue among the network of experts and researchers is a fundamental requirement.

The current case study and the research that has been simultaneously carried out, demonstrated an increasing and encouraging interest not only among the design community but also between public institutions and local speakers. Trailing this approach in other environments will enable design to define, with more clarity and awareness, the mix of different competencies needed. All these are incentives to take the discussion forward and to inspire the search for unresolved questions.

Notes

1. The title of the exhibition means The Renaissance of Gaudenzio Ferrari. Ferrari was a great Italian artist from the 16th century and the most important exponent of the Renaissance in Piedmont. His artistic works depicted some areas of Piedmont and Lombardy, where he lived between 1475 and 1546. He left important traces of a relevant artistic and cultural contribution that were worth to be told through a uniquely inclusive event. This was one of the assumptions that led to the design of a diffused event that could join territories which share common traits.

2. The team that carried out the research project, titled Design for Arts: Design of a coordinated visual identity system for The Renaissance of Gaudenzio Ferrari, was composed of Pier Paolo Peruccio (Associate Professor of Design Research), Paola Menzardi and Maurizio Vrenna (Ph.D. candidate in Management, Production and Design at Politecnico di Turin). The research has been simultaneously targeted at discovering more about the relationships between localities and processes that are combined together. The observed impacts have certainly left positive traces in terms of a fertile terrain for the future growth of other initiatives. Further verifications are however necessary to confirm and validate the suitability of this approach in different contexts.

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8. Limitations and future steps.

In qualitative terms, the exhibition has been the pretext to revitalize a decentralized area of Piedmont, through a carefully planned cultural operation situated in front of a chapel at Sacro Monte di Varallo.

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Biography

Pier Paolo Peruccio. Ph.D. in History of Architecture and Urban Planning. Architect and Associate Professor of Design at Politecnico di Torino. Peruccio is WDO/ICSID Board Member, co-director of SYDERE (Systemic Design Research and Education) Center in Lyon and Turin, Coordinator of the II Level Specializing Master in Design for Arts. He is currently working on research projects concerning history of sustainable design, systems thinking and innovation in design education.

Paola Menzardi. Ph.D. candidate in Management, Production and Design at Politecnico di Torino. Her research explores how design is entangled in digital cartography aimed at developing augmented experiences of traveling and new collective forms of territorial narration. She studies new travel practices, ways of exploring and experiencing the backcountry to drive forward processes of revitalization and local development.

Maurizio Vrenna. Ph.D. candidate at Politecnico di Torino who operated in China for more than two years. During his professional and academic career in Europe and Asia, he became aware of the importance of a sustainable development, which cannot be realized without a profound change in the current political/economic patterns. His career objective is to serve as an expert in the field of sustainable design through targeted research that aspire at concrete real-world applications.