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Heritage and cultural accessibility: the role of design in the creation of an intercultural dialogue

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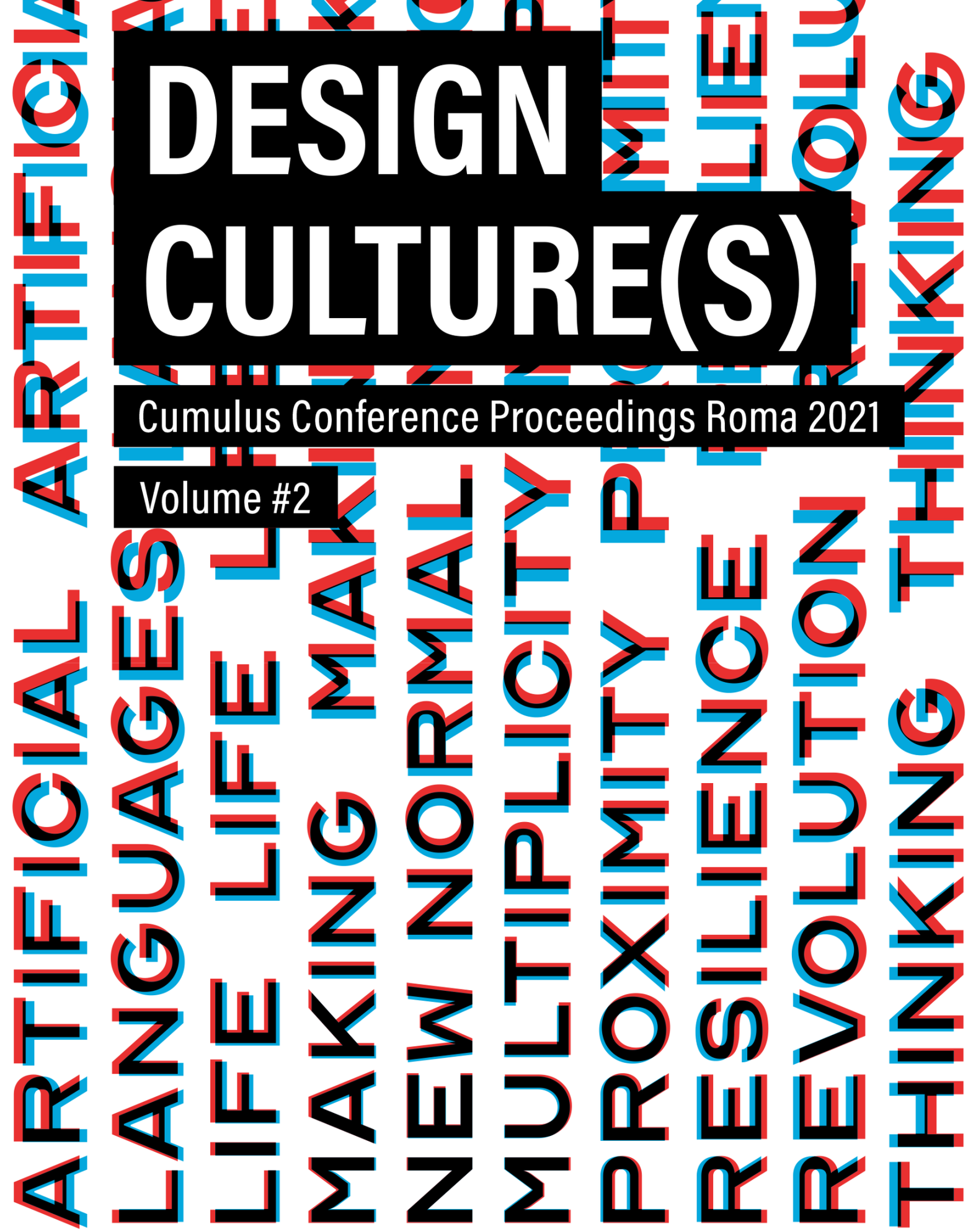
Volume #2



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Proceedings Roma 2021
Volume #2

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PLACES | PEOPLE | ECONOMY



Sam Bucolo,
Swinburne University of Technology, Australia
“Exploring the role of design through research which is focused on our economy through the lens of interaction (proximity) between people and places within our communities.”

Claudia De Giorgi,
Polytechnic University of Turin, Italy
“Design for territory is evolving beyond local connotations by considering an expanded world, to be reinvented through multidisciplinary reflections on the sustainable relationship with resources, the material cultures linked to them and the real dimension of our presence on the planet.”





Frédéric Degouzon,
L’École de design Nantes Atlantique, France
“In a time of globalisation going backwards and despite a clear recognition of design as a solution to complex issues, how close should be design practice to be efficient, detail driven and systemic?”

Giuseppe Lotti,
University of Firenze, Italy
“The design between opening and closure / globalisation and localisms / lands and borders: roles and responsabilities”



DESIGN CULTURE(S) | CUMULUS ROMA 2021
JUNE 08.09.10.11, SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROME

Heritage and cultural accessibility: the role of design in the creation of an intercultural dialogue.

Marco Bozzola[a], Irene Caputo*[a], Claudia De Giorgi[a]

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Abstract | This contribution intends to present a reflection in the field of design for the enhancement of cultural heritage in terms of cultural accessibility, and the implications related to the reception and integration of communities and social groups nowadays excluded. Within this context, design skills can be made available as tools to generate mediation processes between these cultural multiplicities, encouraging actions to enhance diversity and activating a dialogue between people and cultures. Design can devise strategies, services and integrated communication systems to facilitate meeting and exchange between the heritage and the multicultural community that lives in a territory.
By mapping certain virtuous design actions (at different scales, such as graphic, product and strategic design), we aim to highlight new possible approaches in the design for the fruition of cultural heritage, according to which the design act presents itself as a "translation" of values and identities for new and existing communities that cohabit in a territory.

KEYWORDS | DESIGN, HERITAGE, ENHANCEMENT, INTERCULTURE, ACCESSIBILITY

1. Introduction

The current process of globalization does not only bring radical changes in economic and political models, but also determines a huge “human movement”, linked to wide-ranging migrations and important social changes.

Faced with these great events, it is necessary to be able to re-establish a sense of confrontation, exchange and encounter both on the political level and in the cultural debate. We are part of an increasingly multicultural society characterized by the interweaving of lives and histories, usually distant from one another, but prone to the same dynamics that shape the territory and the value of its heritage. Therefore, it becomes necessary to create communication channels able to give value to people’s experiences in relation to the territories they inhabit.

Human migration, as a paradigm of a global and multicultural world, is not a new phenomenon, but while diversity is now a structural reality, inclusion is necessarily a mindful action which requires conscious foundations. This social complexity was rarely faced with a reflection and planning that also involved the cultural sector. But why could it be so important to focus also on the cultural sector? The power of culture is the ability to create new and surprising meeting places: spaces which are open; that promote knowledge; that allow people to get to know the “others” and their humanity; that help to create connections and to construct a different image from the common visions often presented by politicians and by the media. It is possible to consider culture as a virtual space that “make visible and give voice to what often remains invisible or silent” (Vlachou, 2017, pg.8). It is necessary for all people to have access to the knowledge and tools that will allow them to reflect upon and understand the situation we are currently facing in order to develop programmes and actions that can address the concerns and needs of the current society, including those of the newcomers. It is not an act of “handout”: some newly arrived groups represent specific cultures that require to be recognised and to be supported in their efforts to adjust and rebuild their lives in the new society and culture – be it through language provision, educational opportunities, skills development, or access to arts and culture.

2. Research context

The skills of design can be made available as a tool to systematise this multiplicity, promoting an innovation respectful of diversity, comparison and encounter between people and cultures.

Within this scenario, cultural heritage obviously plays a fundamental role as vehicle of identity and potential tool for dialogue between cultures.

Cultural heritage, as an expression of belonging, is an interpreter of the lifestyles developed by a community and passed on from generation to generation, including customs, practices,

places, objects, artistic expressions and values. Cultural heritage is often expressed as either intangible or tangible. As part of human activity, cultural heritage produces tangible representations of the value systems, beliefs, traditions and lifestyles. Therefore, cultural heritage is a wide concept, and – according to the definition given by the Italian Decree-Law n° 42/2004 "Codice dei beni culturali e del paesaggio" (Code of cultural heritage and landscape) – it includes artistic, historical, architectural, archaeological, and ethno-anthropological assets, but also book, archival, museum, natural or human-transformed, and environmental landscape assets. Tangible cultural heritage can be distinguished in three main categories: built environment (that includes buildings, townscapes, archaeological remains), natural environment (rural landscapes, coasts and shorelines, agricultural heritage), artefacts (books and documents, objects, pictures). As said, heritage is not only manifested through tangible forms such as artefacts, buildings or landscapes but also through intangible forms. That includes, for instance, cuisine, clothing, forms of shelter, traditional skills and technologies, religious ceremonies, performing arts, storytelling. Today, we consider the tangible heritage inextricably bound up with the intangible heritage.

In Italy, cultural heritage represents a significant asset both in terms of quantity and economic potential: taking as a reference the UNESCO World Heritage List, in Italy there are 55 sites of cultural and naturalistic interest, to which one must add the numerous intangible assets, also recognized and protected. In the report "Io Sono Cultura 2019" (I am culture 2019), published by Symbola and Fondazione Unioncamere, the direct economic value of the Cultural and Creative Production System in Italy was also carefully analysed. In 2018, it was close to 96 billion euros, or 6.1% of GDP, with the employment of 1.55 million workers (Symbola, 2019, pg.42). Moreover, "culture and creativity have a multiplier effect on the rest of the economy: the entire cultural chain produces 265.4 billion euros, 16.9% of the national added value, with tourism as the primary beneficiary of this flywheel effect" (Symbola, 2019, pg.10).

Reading these data, it is clear how a good planning strategy applied to this sector of analysis could have important repercussions also at an economic and social level.

This contribution intends to present a PhD research path in the start-up phase, which aims to identify certain methodologies and intervention tools, typical of the design discipline, for the enhancement of cultural heritage as a medium of identity and intercultural dialogue.

Within this context, design skills can be made available as tools to generate mediation processes between the said cultural multiplicities, encouraging actions to enhance diversity and activating a dialogue between people and cultures. Design can devise strategies, services and integrated communication systems to facilitate encounter and exchange between the cultural heritage and the multicultural community that lives in a territory.

This would allow the promotion of cultural accessibility and participation of all – including the categories at risk of social exclusion – and improve the interaction between indigenous and new citizens – creating synergistic relationships of openness and confrontation. This is

possible through exploration and construction of methods, tools, skills and innovative practices that make the cultural heritage (both existing and “imported”) accessible and available, also through the definition of languages and communication channels aimed at new audiences. Cultural accessibility is here understood as a dynamic and methodological process, not a design goal (Bodo, 2009).

An interesting repertoire of orientations and approaches developed by European museums in response to the multicultural society emerges from some studies carried out in recent years, some of which have been made available through online resources to draw upon for the identification of so-called “good practices”: such as for example the “Patrimonio e Intercultura” website, promoted by the ISMU Foundation - Initiatives and Studies on Multi-ethnicity; the Research Project MeLa* - European Museums in an age of migrations; the Compendium of cultural policies and trends in Europe, promoted by the Council of Europe in collaboration with ERICarts.

3. The role of design

The discipline of design has multiple and changing facets. One of its strengths is that of being a hybrid field whose design process needs to bring together and deal with many different disciplines.

Furthermore, within a structurally increasingly multicultural society, the pluralism of cultures and ethnic groups determines an increasing variety of audiences. A community that interfaces with different heritages and is made up of numerous actors who constantly shape socio-cultural contexts. In this reality in tumult and mutation, we therefore identify in the intercultural dialogue that process of open and respectful exchange between people and organizations with different cultural backgrounds and world views, designed to promote cultural diversity itself and the development of intercultural skills.

The role of design in facilitating the relationship between people (old and new citizens) and heritage can be structured in many ways. For example, through the creation of pro-active spaces: places that do not have a defined function, but rather remain open to several appropriation practices and uses; or through the development of communication strategies and exhibition practices based on strengthening the involvement of the visitors and their physical and emotional interaction with museum spaces; or also through the elaboration of new strategies for widening and strengthening the collection and museum content and communicating the plurality of stories which the related objects represent and embody; or even by creating new perceptions of heritage, for example by addressing the need to introduce temporary exhibitions in museum spaces or to bring “the museum out of the museum”, that is, to create design practices capable of bringing heritage out of places of pure conservation, where possible , thus making it a real shared asset.

4. Case Studies

Through a mapping activity of certain virtuous design actions (at different scale such as from graphic, product and strategic design), we wish to highlight new possible approaches in design for the fruition of cultural heritage, according to which the design act presents itself as a "translator" of values and identities for new and existing communities that cohabit a territory.

With the case studies that will be presented, we attempt to define a number of potential scenarios in order to design new forms of museums, exhibitions and design actions able to respond effectively to the challenges of the present age of cultural complexity and stratification.

Specifically, as said before, we will describe certain interesting examples taken from the world of communication, product, or even strategic design. Sometimes all these design fields can be interconnected and therefore the division will not be so drastic.

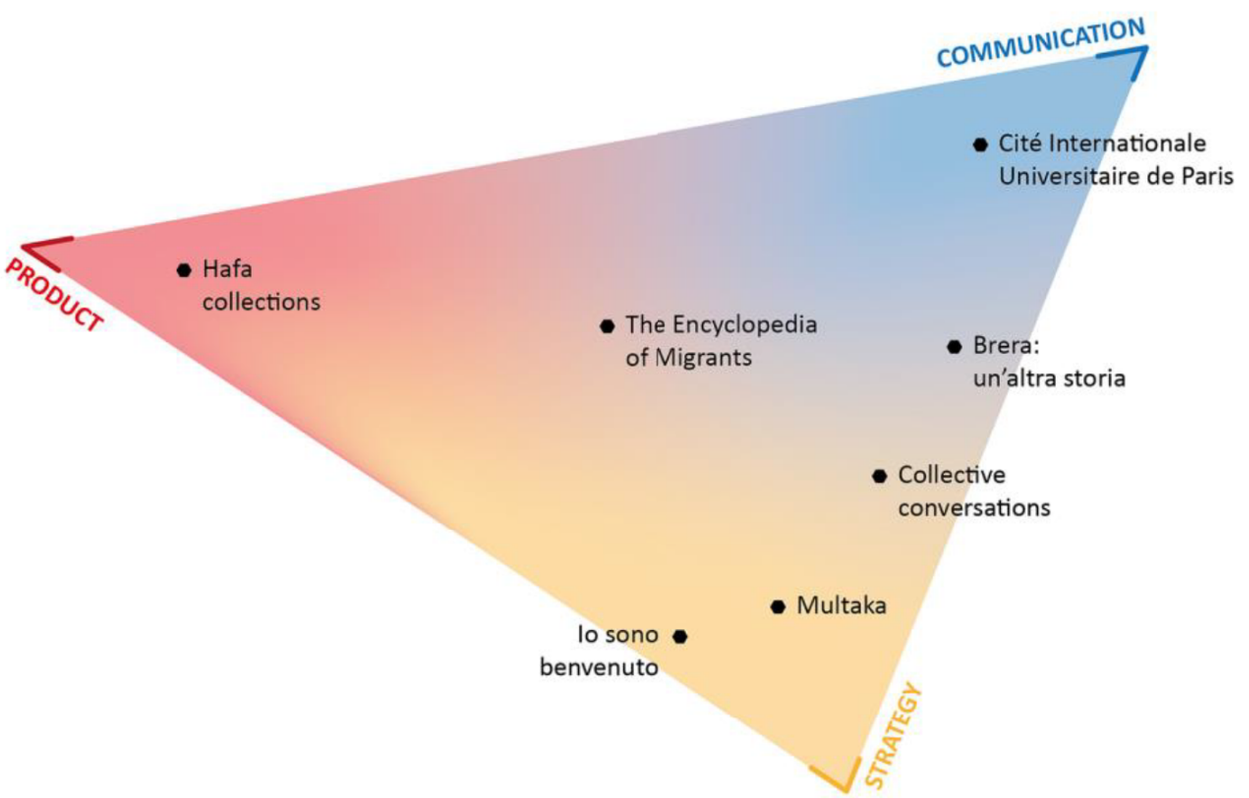

Figure 1. Case study analysis. How the different projects analysed are distributed in relation to the area of product, communication and strategic design (Credits: authors)

A first emblematic approach is represented by the wayfinding system designed by Ruedi Baur for the **Cité Internationale Universitaire** de Paris (2004); this is an example of how the interaction between visitor and signage system may be able to shape the perception of a space, also in terms of inclusion and cultural hospitality through the expressive languages

adopted by Baur with André Baldinger. In this case, in an intercultural scope, one of the main characteristics of the project is the font they designed: the Newut. As a matter of fact, the Newut font has the peculiarity that the height of the letter is the same for lowercase and capitals. This means that some letters can be replaced by non-Latin alphabet – such as Chinese, Greek, Arab, Hebrew, Cyrillic – characters whose shapes are similar to our own alphabet. A random variable percentage technique makes it possible to create texts that can be changed slightly by inserting foreign symbols, yet still be legible. By exploiting what is defined as the paradigm of the "orthographic priming" – according to which when a person reads, the position and shape of the letters are not strictly codified – it is possible to give the text a totally visual dimension that goes beyond its actual contents.

This project was bitterly criticised by those who believe it wrong to annex the symbols of other cultures "decontextualized" and deprived of their real meaning. But the fact remains that this solution creates a dynamic and chameleonic design in which the elements of visual identity, such as signage, seem ready to fit into a rapidly changing world. This wayfinding system not only fulfils its primary function – to indicate all the areas of the university campus – but leaves visual messages that are part of the university's complex, multiform and clearly multicultural identity.

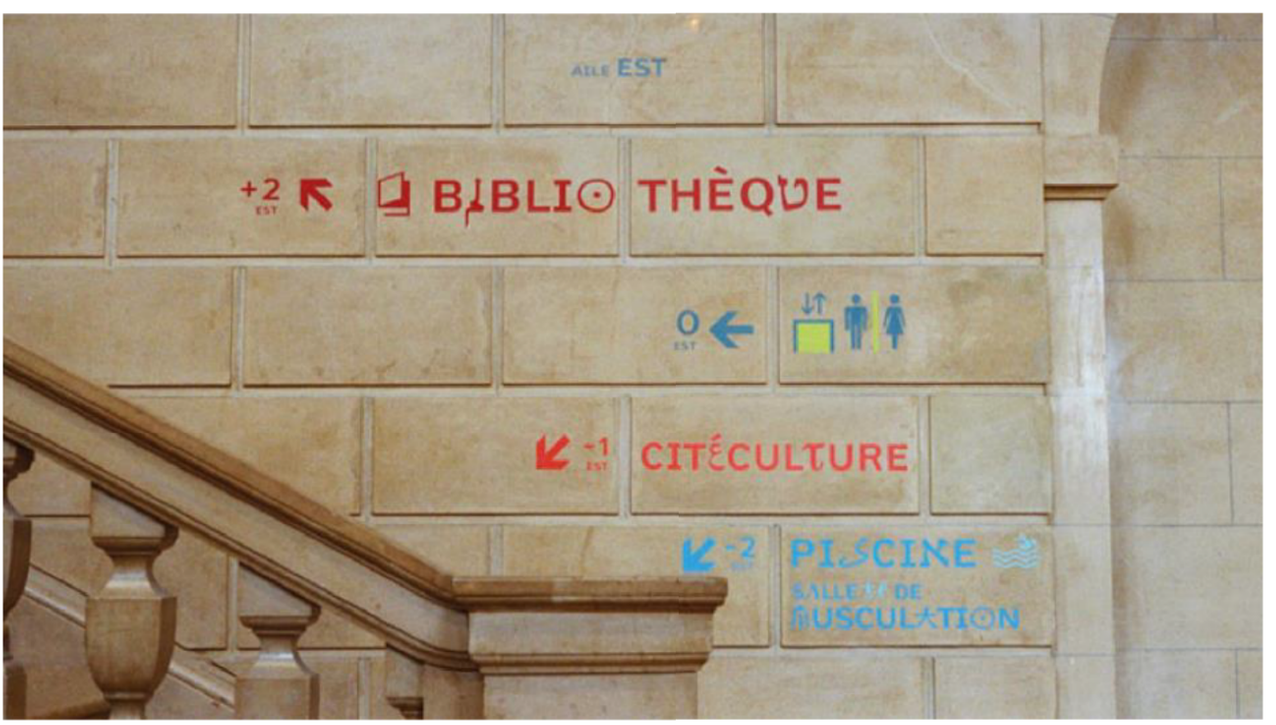

Figure 2. Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris, 2004. Details of the orientation system in which is visible the application of the Newut font (Courtesy: Ruedi Baur)



Figure 3. Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris, 2004. The Newut font and the variations of the single letters (Courtesy: Ruedi Baur)

Moving on to more case studies linked to the world of the product, the **Hafa Collections** project (1998-2001), coordinated by the architect and designer Milli Paglieri, sees the Piedmont craftsmanship, supported by Turin designers and Moroccan craftsmen, reinterpreting the forms of Arab living, recovering typical processing techniques of Marrakesh.

The collections were born in Italy, but changed over time, during their production. The interaction with the artisans, along with their processes and advice, modified and enriched the initial projects. All the collections aim to tell a story, and the different items become pieces of a story that is enriched over time with new elements. In 1998 the “Hafa Collection” was created: 12 Italian and Moroccan designers and artists have been urged to rethink furniture and furnishings in collaboration with skilled Moroccan craftsmen. By proposing apparently lost rituals, ancient materials and traditional processes, the creators have been able to find answers to many needs of contemporary living: the terrace environment, the space around the ceremonial of tea with low seats and tables, the numerous water outlets, and ambient light, typical of the Moroccan house, constituted in the designers' interpretation experiences of enrichment and contamination between the objects and western culture. In 2001 the project was enriched with the “Hafa Hammam Collection”: a collection by Milli Paglieri and Paola Navone, who tried to reproduce the atmosphere, the perfumes and the beauty rituals of the hammam (thermal complex similar to a Turkish bath) with a line of body and skin care products and a series of objects and accessories.

The meaning of Hafa is “end-point”: therefore, it describes a boundary to overcome thanks to a new approach to design and product. Evocative objects, full of references to the two cultures and immediately attractive. “Double” objects – simple and complex, spontaneous and cultivated because they are telling a population’s story and material culture, and another population’s design culture.



Figure 4. Hafa Collections project, 1998. Selected pieces of the Hafa Collection (Credits: Lorenzo Prando, Riccardo Rosso, Guido Drocco, Elie Mouyal)

Another interesting project, straddling the world of communication and product design, is the **Encyclopedia of Migrants**, that is an international project (2014-2017) supported by the Erasmus+ programme. It is based on a network of partners with different profiles (organizations, universities, museums, etc.) coming from France, Spain, Portugal and Gibraltar. The project was coordinated by the French organization “L’âge de la Tortue”, which works in the visual arts field. The initiative has had an artistic and experimental dimension designed with the aim to create an encyclopaedia both in printed and digital version, with approximately 400 testimonies directly made and written by migrants. The Encyclopaedia format was chosen in order to disseminate non-scientific knowledge, resulting from life experiences, with all the subjectivity that this involves. In this multi-volume, leather-bound book the care for layout and graphic design is visible and essential to the meaning of the project itself.

The main idea was to gather diverse accounts by migrants, which could be the source of a new knowledge, based upon the intimate and the individual. The most interesting aspect of this project is the idea that these life accounts are themselves interpreted as a heritage, to

be protected, remembered and spread, just as in the interpretation of Diderot and d'Alembert when they gave birth to the first Encyclopaedia.

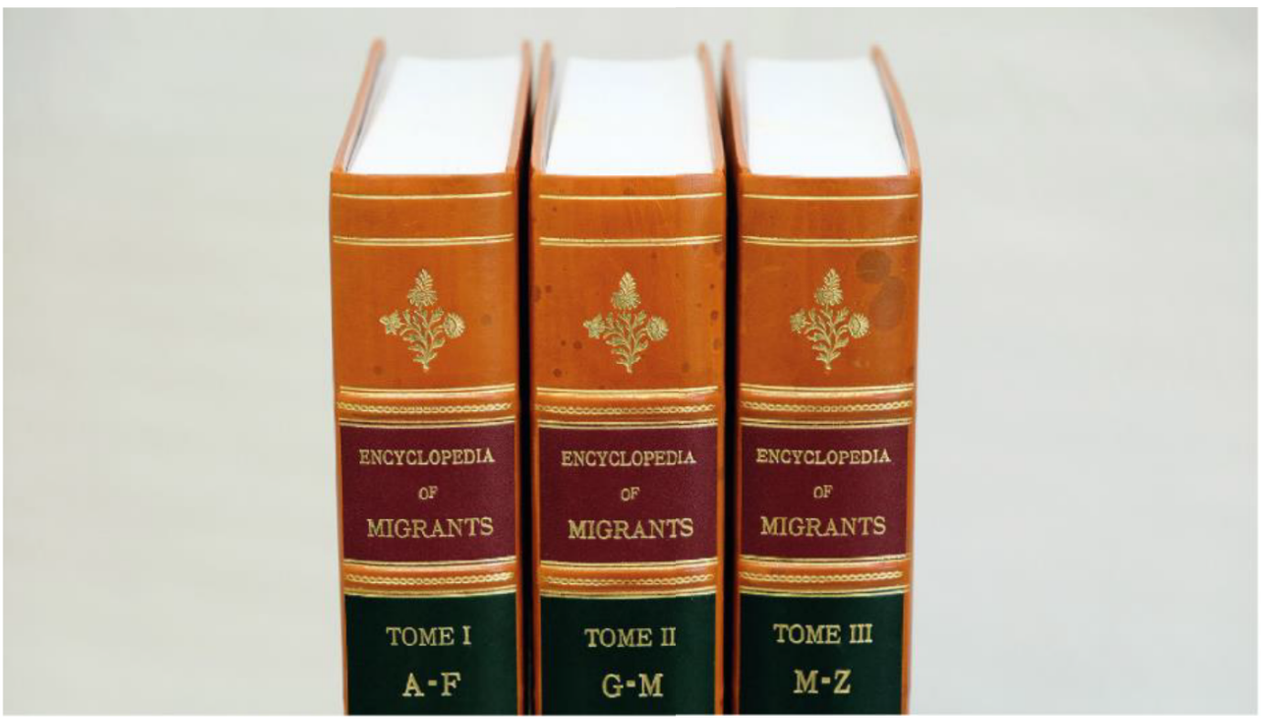

Figure 5. Encyclopedia of Migrants, 2014-2017. The three volumes that compose the encyclopaedia (Source: www.encyclopedie-des-migrants.eu – European cooperation project coordinated by L'âge de la tortue, at the initiative of the artist Paloma Fernández Sobrino)

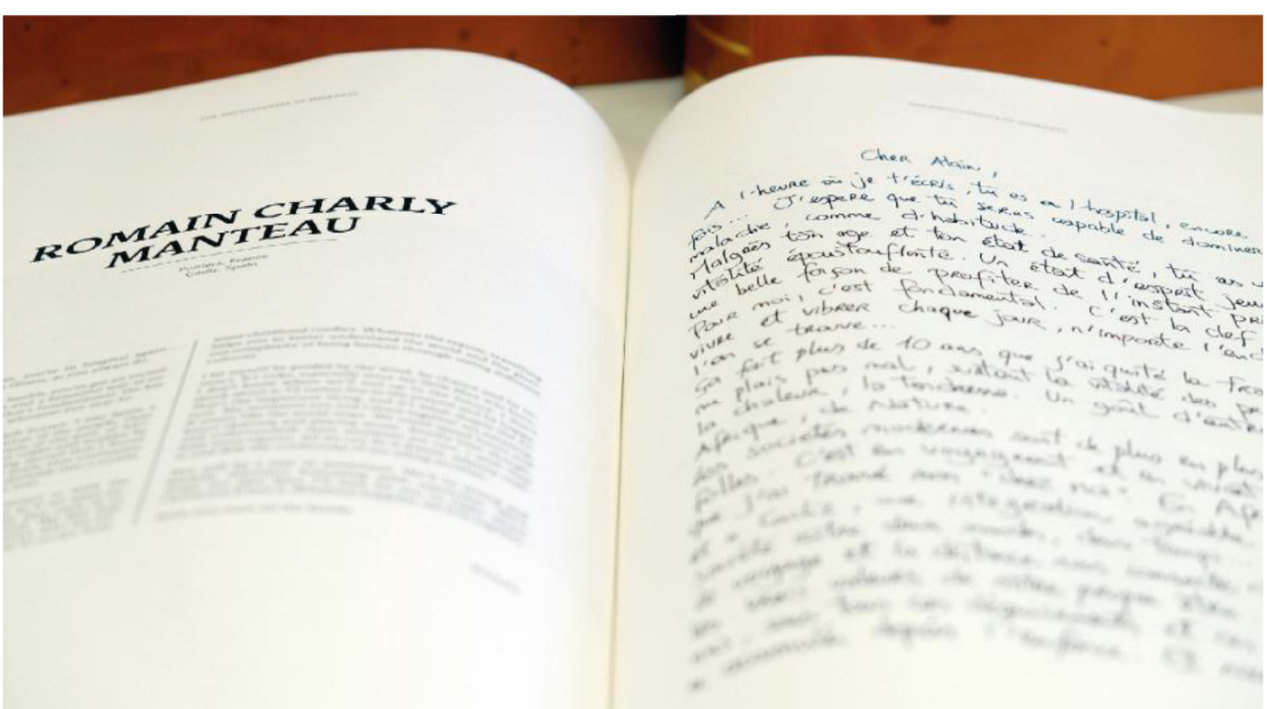

Figure 6. Encyclopedia of Migrants, 2014-2017. Internal detail of one of the volumes (Source: www.encyclopedie-des-migrants.eu – European cooperation project coordinated by L'âge de la tortue, at the initiative of the artist Paloma Fernández Sobrino)

The project **“Brera: un’altra storia. Percorsi interculturali nel museo”** (Brera: another history. Intercultural itineraries at the museum, 2014), held inside the exhibition spaces of the Pinacoteca di Brera (Milan), was an intercultural museum program cleverly narrated through video editing tools, in order to keep historical memory of this virtuous example.

This was an experimental project for the enhancement of the museum’s initiatives in an intercultural scope, and it was promoted by the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities, General Directorate for the Enhancement of Cultural Heritage, and the Pinacoteca di Brera.

With the awareness that the museum is a treasure chest that contains a multiplicity of stories, the idea was born to bring out what works of art can tell each of us in a different and shared perspective. Thanks to the gaze of eight museum mediators from Bosnia, Brazil, Egypt, the Philippines, Italy, Peru, Senegal and Hungary, visitors to the Pinacoteca were guided to interpret the complexity and richness of the museum's works by discovering new meanings and unprecedented interpretations, until finding signs of contamination and reciprocal figurative influence.

The cultural and social relevance of the project lied in the promotion of different levels of accessibility: the development of a new familiarity between the Museum and “new citizens”, the promotion of regular visitors to new points of view on collections and, more in general, the construction of policies for access and participation aimed at an intercultural audience, not “segmented” on the basis of origin and nationality. Another strong point of this project is its narration through a video: this aspect of “historical memory” is often underestimated in the design of this kind of experience, however it turns out to be a fundamental element to give value to the project itself and to be able to take it as an example for the development of future actions, also structured on other realities.



Figure 7. Brera: un'altra storia. Percorsi interculturali nel museo, 2014. Selected moments of the guided tours (Credits: Erminia Sciacchitano)

This project may be linked with **Collective Conversations**: an audience development project of the Manchester Museum, active since 2004, which consists in filming the interactions of people with objects belonging to the collections of the Museum. Indeed, groups of participants use the museum's objects as a starting point for reflections, stories and narrations, often autobiographical; the videos of the "conversations", made by specially trained museum staff, are currently visible on the Manchester Museum YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/user/ManchesterMuseum/about) and from the direct links published on the museum website. These Collective Conversations started in 2004, following an acknowledgement that the Manchester Museum's collections had been relatively under-used by the surrounding communities and lacked important information regarding their history and community context. The project has gradually developed into a new operational model for the Museum to deal with issues of interpretation, documentation and display and to carry out a more inclusive work with diverse communities, by increasing physical, intellectual, emotional and sensory access and engagement through: involving a wide range of peoples in intercultural dialogue in a unique process of identification, interpretation and documentation of collections; piloting innovative inreach and outreach, recording and communication techniques; integrating the narratives into collaboratively-developed community exhibitions. In the Museum's own words, "Collective Conversations" is a way to establish the museum as a contact zone, creating a new way of working.



Figure 8. Collective Conversations, 2004. Frames taken from the YouTube videos (Courtesy of Manchester Museum, The University of Manchester)

On a larger scale and with a long-term strategy, we find certain projects developed by the Egyptian Museum of Turin – a reality that makes material culture a field of dialogue and constant promotion – among which **"Io sono benvenuto"** (I am welcome, 2017 - in progress), created with the aim of bringing foreign citizens closer to the museum heritage displayed in the museum and create an environment of inclusion and hospitality. This event is organized annually on the occasion of the "World Refugee Day" and involves an extraordinary opening of the Museum dedicated to the performance of numerous musical activities within the exhibition spaces. Access is free for all visitors, in exchange for a small welcome message to be placed on the Welcome Wall. This is a way for the museum to belong to everyone, as the director Christian Greco pointed out:

> "the museum becomes the place where all citizens, even those who have joined our community for a relatively short time, feel welcomed, learn about the immense heritage kept inside of our walls, and in doing so, they understand themselves and others better. This is the purpose of culture, to build bridges and break down barriers." (Christian Greco, 2017)



Figure 9. Io sono benvenuto, 2018. One of the concerts performed inside the exhibition spaces of the museum during the event (Credits: Museo Egizio, Torino)



Figure 10. Io sono benvenuto, 2018. The Welcome Wall (Credits: Museo Egizio, Torino)

Another strategic project is the **"Multaka: Museum as Meeting Point – Refugees as Guides in Berlin Museums"** (2016 - in progress), in which Syrian and Iraqi refugees were trained as museum guides so that they could provide guided museum tours for Arabic-speaking refugees in their native language. "Multaka" (Arabic for "meeting point") also aims to

facilitate the interchange of diverse cultural and historical experiences. The guided tours involve investigations on historical objects relevant to contemporary debates, in order to establish a connection between the past and the present. In the process, the guides incorporate the visitors into the process of observing and interpreting the objects. In this way, through the mutual dialogue and the consideration of their own history, the visitors become active participants.

Through addressing visitors in clear and simple language aimed at all age groups and using peer-to-peer communication, the “Multaka - Museum as Meeting Point” project attempt to facilitate refugee access to museums, and to help them find social and cultural points of connection, as well as increase their participation in the public sphere.

5. Conclusions

The case studies presented demonstrate the possibility to activate an engaging dialogue between people and cultural heritage, in which everyone is treated equally and everyone has the same opportunity to access culture.

Specifically, these projects were born to pursue different goals, such as the creation of new languages and communication methodologies; the production of new narrative visions and re-readings of the heritage in an intercultural key; or to strengthen the bond between migrants and local heritage.

Design is therefore configured as an essential tool in structuring these strategic actions for integration. As it is evident in most of the case studies, the role of design is expressed in its most concrete form, such as graphic or product design. However, through a necessarily multidisciplinary approach (in which design skills are combined with skills specific to the field of analysis), design expertise may be expressed not only in its most executive form, but can also emerge as an important coordination and systemisation tool of the design process in its overall vision. In certain case studies presented, such as the “Io sono Benvenuto” or the “Multaka” projects, the figure of the designer is not explicitly recognizable within the project path: however, it can be interesting to observe how the inclusion of this professional figure could bring improvements in terms of exploration of communicative languages (different and more plentiful than those currently developed) and in the creation of more effective tools for participation and interaction with the public, capable of being put into use even without questioning the spirit of the project itself, but rather strengthening it through the union of more than one point of view. Designers are professional figures that, in participatory projects, must be aware – on the one hand – of the goals of the institutional collaborators – and on the other hand – of the needs, interests, and expectations of visitors.

By moving away from traditional guided tours to dialogue-based forms of outreach, this intercultural approach can become a pivotal part of the educational methods employed by museums and cultural institutions. Rather than focusing on communicating specific content,

the emphasis is on facilitating a dialogue between visitors with their individual expectations and what is being presented in the museum.

Cooperation projects play an essential role in cultural accessibility, enabling people to participate in the everyday cultural life of a city or community.

In order to concretely explore the possibility that cultural heritage can represent a powerful vehicle for intercultural dialogue, it is necessary to start an articulated process, based upon a "contextual and correlated development of theory and practice, which provides solutions in interinstitutional partnership and continuity over time in the field of heritage education, in an intercultural scope" (Bodo, Cantù, Mascheroni, 2009, pg.14).

A few specific reflections can be made concerning the modality of public involvement. To enable people to participate in the everyday cultural life of a city or community, cooperation projects need to be developed. It can be essential to work with associations and organisations of people with different backgrounds in terms of regional roots, religious beliefs, political orientation and national, cultural and social interests, in order to re-examine and re-explore the current narration of cultural heritage.

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