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A Methodology for Intercultural Design. A Case Study for a New Cultural Centre in Turin

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A Methodology for Intercultural Design
A Case Study for a New Cultural Centre in Turin

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Abstract
Issues concerning integration and the relations between different ethnic groups within a changing contemporary society are becoming increasingly prominent in the social and scientific debate. Design skills can be employed as a tool to systematise this multiplicity, promoting innovation that respects diversity, comparison, and interaction between people and cultures.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a synthesis of a research experience, the development of a new Islamic Cultural Centre in the city of Turin (Italy), in which the intercultural design approach constitutes the founding theoretical and methodological basis for the development of the project.

Starting from the analysis of experiences developed in the field of national and international research, the authors developed a methodological approach to the theme of designing to promote intercultural dialogue, furthermore establishing collaboration agreements with local authorities for the development of the Cultural Centre.

Keywords
Design methodology
Cultural centre
Multicultural society
Intercultural design
Cultural identity

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Introduction

Due to its unique geographical location, stretching into the Mediterranean Sea and serving as a bridge between Europe and Africa, Italy has always been a land of migration. As a result, it is one of the highest-ranking countries in Europe and the world for the individual registration of new asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2022).

In light of the increasing multiculturality of society, issues concerning integration and relationships between ethnic groups and different communities are receiving great attention in the social and scientific debate. Cultural diversity provides a fertile ground for the emergence of novel insights and innovative approaches across a range of cultural domains, including education, politics and research agendas, museums, art, and the design discipline (Nemo, 2016).

From a design perspective, the rapidity and inevitability of these changes call for a re-evaluation of educational and design practices to effectively adapt accessibility policies aimed at the inclusion (social, cultural and economic) of people with a migratory background[1].

As a result, a proactive way of thinking is required to create communication channels that can give value to people's experiences in relation to the territories they inhabit and their personal cultural identity.

Indeed, intercultural factors become important issues for the design field in the global and local economy (Lin et al., 2007), especially for the development of new products and services and the definition of widespread graphic interfaces.

The design discipline, consistent with its sphere of action, can and *must* question the evolution of its own research and tools, actively engaging in these contemporary debates. This is in line with the fact that this discipline has always placed individuals at the centre of its action, focusing its analysis on the observation of the needs, culture, habits and lifestyles that characterise the context in which it operates, and seeking to "activate social processes to negotiate solutions, meanings, technologies, materials and forms" (Lupo et al., 2018, p. 67).

Moreover, as observed by Celaschi and Vai (2021), in 2007 the European Commission adopted the first European Agenda for Culture, which emphasised "that culture and creativity are important drivers for personal development, social cohesion, economic growth, job creation, innovation and competitiveness" (European Commission, 2007).

The relationship between design and a multicultural society can be analysed through different keys of interpretation, which extend across several design fields: product design, design for social innovation, communication design, interior design, systemic design, anthropodesign, design for food, design for cultural heritage, etc.

Is it then possible to identify a methodological approach — that goes beyond the individual fields of action — to support designers in the development of intercultural projects?

1
The term "person with a migratory background" is used in the literature to encompass a wide range of individuals and groups. It includes those who have crossed national borders involuntarily, such as asylum seekers, as well as those who have migrated voluntarily, such as economic migrants, but also the so-called *second generations* (Ambrosini, 2005).

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To date, in the scientific landscape of the design discipline – at the national and international level – it is possible to identify experimental reflections of particular value, which nevertheless maintain a discontinuity in application and research. Among these experiences, we can mention the reflections developed on intercultural design (Lotti, 2015; Radtke, 2021), cross-cultural design (Akpem, 2020; Choong et al., 2021), design for migration (Gasparotto & Ziliani, 2019; Moretti, 2019), design for "The Global South" (Brignoni, 2014; Fry, 2017), design for the Mediterranean (Balsamo, 2004).

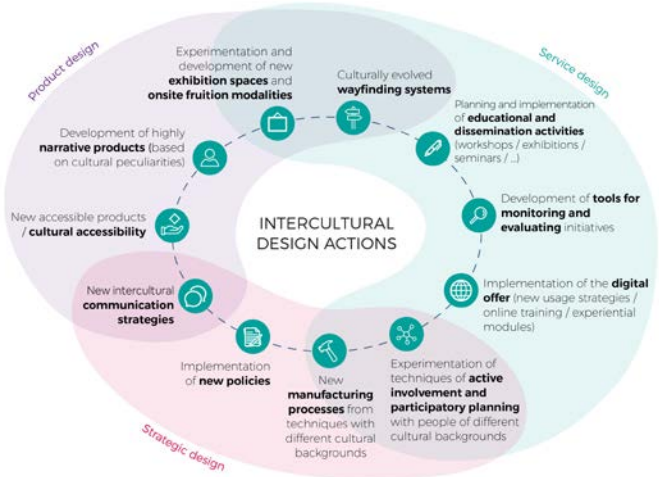


Fig. 1
Possible intercultural design actions. Credits: Authors.

With regard to the many levels of action at which design operates Fig.1, it is possible to consider a wide variety of implementations, including products, services, and strategies - not always strictly distinct - for which design takes the role of a multidimensional operational tool (Dal Palù et al., 2018), able to develop project actions aimed at building an intercultural dialogue[2].

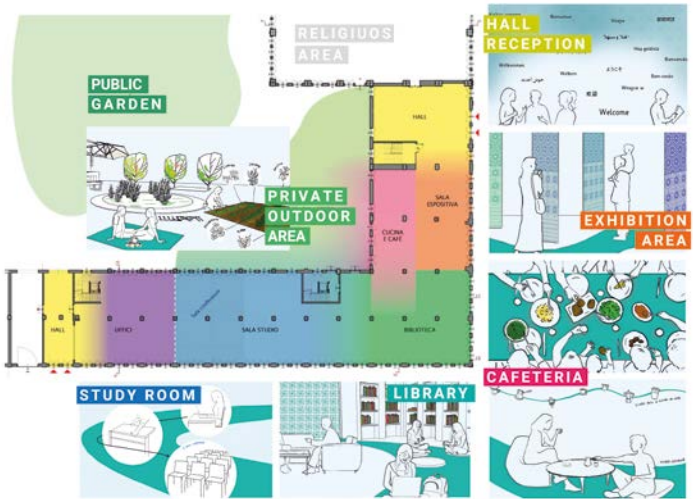
Awareness of cultural repercussions in design is certainly a key concern today, especially in the domain of Design for Cultural Heritage, which in this case converges toward Social Design, describing a common territory of study for these two strands of design research. In this perspective, therefore, we can continue to reflect on the need, in certain contexts characterised by considerable cultural complexity, to delineate a new figure of designer to support the definition of critical actions: an *intercultural-mediator designer*, who can collaborate with figures from the technical-scientific disciplines and the human and social sciences to navigate cultural complexities and create spaces of design interaction between one's own culture and foreign cultures, working on their mutual influence in the form of acquisition, fusion and overlapping (Nemo, 2016).

The purpose of this article is to summarise an experimental research experience in which the intercultural design approach contributes to the theoretical and methodological basis for the development of the project, but at the same time provides an in-the-field opportunity for critical reflection on the methodological approach itself.

2
From a semantic perspective, the intention in this essay is to consider an *intercultural approach* to be consistent, based on its dialogic and pluralist component (Nicola, 2004). It differs from the term *multicultural*, which is used to refer to a society in which several cultures "are co-present, but relatively separate in different ways and for different reasons" (Demorgon 1998, p. 29). Similarly, the term *cross-cultural* refers to the "communication process of a comparative nature" (Ting-Toomey, 1999). The latter approach, which has been more thoroughly investigated from a methodological point of view, emphasises the differences between cultures by adapting design choices to these different characteristics.

The work described here refers to the development of a new Islamic Cultural Centre in the city of Turin (Italy), a territory with a strong multicultural matrix characterised by policies aimed at fostering intercultural experiences[3]. The task of the Research Group was to accompany the Italian Islamic Confederation (the commissioner) in focusing the overall scientific project in order to guide actions in a philologically correct and effective direction, by developing the system of requirements and guidelines in particular for the implementation of the Centre's visual communication system.

Starting from the analysis of various experiences developed at the national and international levels (through case studies, literature reviews, field research), the authors reflect on a methodological approach to the topic of designing to promote intercultural dialogue, including establishing cooperation agreements with local authorities for the development of the Cultural Centre.



The purpose expressed by the Confederation was to build a new Cultural Centre in the former Nebiolo Foundry[4] in Turin — one of the most important Italian typeface and press manufacturers of the 20th century– in which, following its complete renovation, more than 80 per cent of the area would be allocated to public services open to citizens, identified on the basis of the needs expressed by the Confederation itself Fig.2: a library, an area for exhibitions and cultural initiatives, a student residence and study rooms — thus adding to the system of public and private services offered by the city. A space would also be dedicated to the religious needs of Muslim believers[5]. In addition, discussions between the commissioner and the research team led to the identification of the outdoor space (a public garden over which the building looks out) as a place of focus. This could be developed into a space accessible to citizens, where gardening and small-scale horticultural activities (e.g. aromatic plants) could be undertaken for the benefit of the guests of the Centre, the District and the City. This proposal was subsequently formalised through an agreement with the District, which permitted the use of the space for external events and activities in exchange for its maintenance.

3
Indeed in 2018 the "Linee guida per il Coordinamento alle Politiche per l'Interculturalità e alla Partecipazione della Città di Torino" (Guidelines for the Coordination of Interculturality and Participation Policies of the City of Turin) were approved. The document outlined three main goals: increasing participation in the management of public affairs, eliminating racial discrimination, and creating a stronger and more inclusive sense of community that leaves no one and no one behind.

4
The Ex Fonderia Caratteri Nebiolo (1880-1993) is remembered today mainly for its contributions to the field of type design. Furthermore, this foundry played a central role in the socio-economic development of the neighbourhoods in which it is located.

5
In 2020, the number of Muslims in Italy was estimated at 2.7 million, or 4.9% of the total resident population in Italy - both Italian citizens and residents with foreign citizenship. It is not a "monolithic block": the community is constituted by many sub-communities fragmented internally by national, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences. Source: https://www.openpolis.it/la-presenza-dei-musulmani-in-italia/ , consulted in September 2022.

Fig. 2
Main activities inside the Cultural Centre. Credits: Authors.

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This project will represent a novelty for the city and a point of reference not only on the level of the city but on the national scale as well, and would be part of a best practice scenario on the international level. A multicultural place open to the citizenry that could offer a shared space available to the community, providing services to citizens and contributing to the narration of the territory and its multiculturality.

Methodology and Practical Implementation

The reflections presented here do not seek to offer a work methodology *ex novo*. Instead, they aim to identify a design approach for the promotion of intercultural dialogue that enriches the plurality of cognitive models and enables professionals to perform different types of problem-solving in complex situations.

One of the main objectives is to identify a network of stakeholders and to encourage and create a project terrain capable of activating their direct participation in the development process of the initiative. It enables the assessment of territorial and community needs and resources, and the evaluation of the cultural coherence of the transformative solutions to be implemented (Bosso, 2021).

This section presents an analysis highlighting the results of the method and approach applied to the development of the project for the Cultural Centre.

The main challenge in converting this historic building (the former Nebiolo Foundry) into a place with a very different cultural matrix was to preserve its memory in a tangible way, while at the same time clearly attesting to its new identity.

The design work, developed in close cooperation with the Islamic Confederation and the group of researchers at the Politecnico di Torino aimed to translate these needs in a tangible key.

The collaboration between the Muslim community and the design team was structured through the establishment of a working table, which brought together representatives of the Islamic Confederation, their interlocutors (architectural studios, institutional and political figures, members of associations and cultural realities in the area), and the design team, of which the undersigned were members.

Furthermore, during the more desk-based research and design phase, the work could also rely on the collaboration (through a specially activated scholarship) of an Iranian research scholar, which allowed the research group to gather direct feedback and suggestions on the cultural coherence of the project.

The architectural intervention will return the image of a culturally coherent place, according to the principles of preservation and enhancement of its historical identity (typeface factory) and its future cultural role (cultural centre).

The project will be guided by a communication system that will act as the "narrative voice" of the new Centre in terms of identity and dialogue with the territory, capturing the formal and conceptual assonances between the art and technique of printing and Islamic decorative art, and conveying them through tangible and communicative actions to enhance them. This is in accordance with the above-mentioned methodological approach Fig.3, which consists, first, in extracting distinctive *intercultural markers*[6] from specific

cultural contexts, then translating these characteristics into highly representative products or services (Lin et al., 2007).

A procedural clarification — which concerns a crucial aspect for the success of these intercultural projects — is to establish a relationship based on in-depth knowledge of the cultural background of the entity promoting a specific action. In the case described here it was necessary, in order to prevent any obstacles to the dialogue, to acquire awareness of certain basic cultural variables relating to the management of interpersonal relationships and actions over time (Meyer, 2014): from the type of interpersonal communication adopted, to the perception and planning of time, the decision-making processes.

To ensure the most effective and appropriate approach, it is essential to consider adopting an open-minded, collaborative and receptive approach, which involves listening and dialogue. It is also important to recognise that the scientific and methodological process will necessarily have to be applied with some flexibility, given that contextual variables may lead to delays, the need for design revisions and the necessity of multi-level confrontations.

6
The *intercultural markers* are elements that are most prevalent within a particular cultural group and are considered surprising and remarkable by another cultural group (Bruns et al., 2012). They might include aspects related to appearance, modes of interaction, associated values and meanings, rituality, material culture, gestures, functional and behavioural factors.

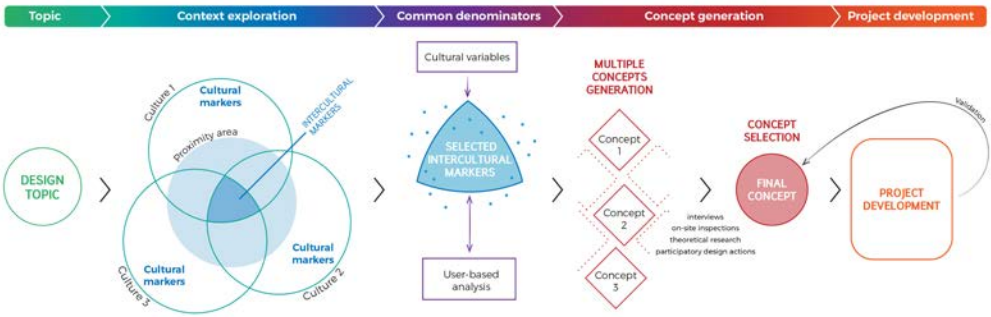


Fig. 3
Methodological approach. Credits: Authors.

Context exploration. A careful analysis of the contexts and collective histories related to the topic of investigation have been carried out, along with the mapping and analysis of international case studies. The creation of a basic framework is essential to understand subjective interpretations and the social role of possible cultural behaviours. It is also necessary to recognise the key principles shared by different cultures coexisting in a given area in order to avoid conceptual and interpretative errors.

Several Islamic Cultural Centres located in non-Muslim-dominated countries were thus mapped and analysed. About 30 cultural centres were examined at the international level, focusing on the settlement processes, the integration policies that were adopted, and the communication systems that were developed.

A preliminary analysis of this data was crucial for the formulation of a comprehensive design intervention strategy that aligns with the *urban regeneration* objectives of the City of Turin.

Subsequently, the socio-cultural context within which the Centre will be located was carefully analysed, as were the religious and cultural needs of the Confederation and the Muslim faithful. Regarding the overall scenario, it was essential to create a cross-disciplinary research approach (Muratowsky, 2016), involving

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experts in areas other than design, such as architects, sociologists, and historians. The different actors were gradually involved in the above-mentioned working table. The involvement of historical expertise — structured through participation in seminars and interviews and direct discussions with research groups and specialised parties, such as the Nebiolo History Project research team[7] and the Archivio Tipografico[8] — was one of the starting points for defining the project context. In-depth knowledge of the history and culture of the Nebiolo factory and the neighbourhood allowed a full understanding of the socio-cultural repercussions of the development of a new Islamic Centre. To reinforce this analysis, a sociologist was brought in to help the team better frame certain project perspectives, especially in relation to possible participatory actions by citizens in the centre's development activities.

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http://nebiolohistory.org/

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https://archiviotipografico.it/it-IT/

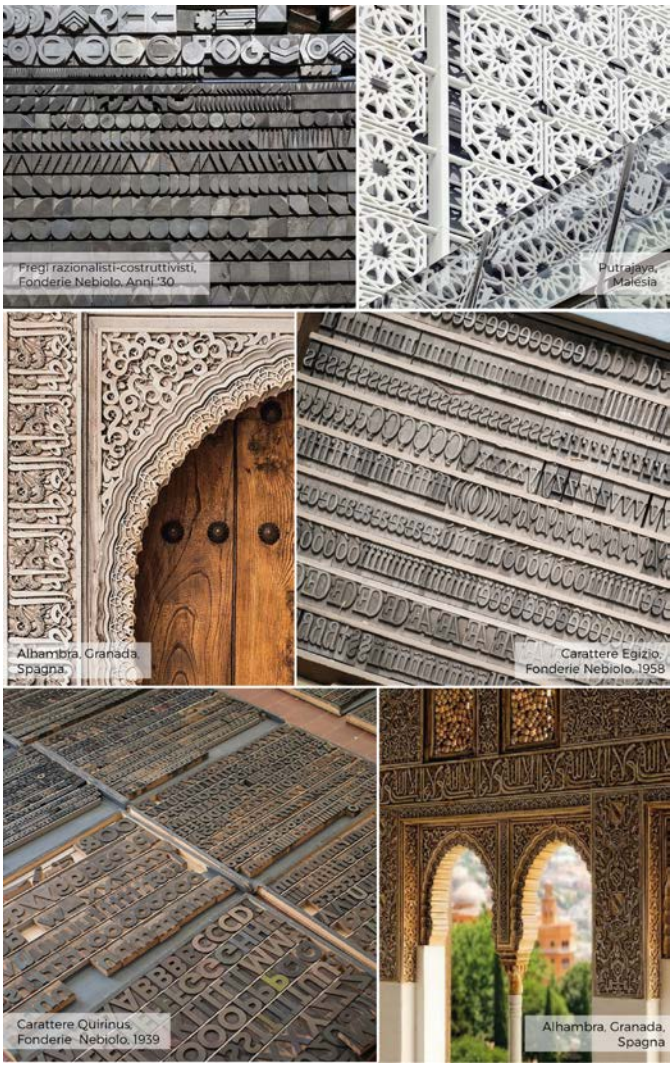


Fig. 4
The formal assonance with the geometric carved friezes of Islamic architectural buildings. Credits: Authors.

Common denominators. The next step consisted in identifying a common denominator system, that represented the cultural markers (tangible, intangible or behavioural) shared by the two cultures we analysed (the Islamic and industrial/typographical cultures) — the aforementioned *intercultural markers* — but also by all those elements that, although similar in certain respects, take on nuances of meaning depending on the culture of reference (elements that we could place within an "area of proximity").

The initial analysis focused on a comprehensive examination of the elements of material culture that defined the industrial history of the Nebiolo Foundry. This part of the investigation was developed through a combination of desk research (books, papers, digital archives) and structured dialogue and discussion with the experts on the Foundry's industrial history.

The industrial past of the architectural complex has offered interesting insights into typographic history and Islamic culture. By analysing the Nebiolo typefaces available in some Piedmontese and national archives, it is possible to observe their assonance with the geometric carved friezes on the facades of Islamic architecture Fig. 4, both from a decorative and conceptual point of view, which is linked to the profound sense and value of the written word.

Moreover, a further element reinforcing this comparison is the fact that both forms of writing are read from right to left. In fact, Arabic is among the Semitic languages that are read from right to left (*sinistroverse*), while typographic matrices are assembled with the characters mirrored, so that once printed, the print is read from left to right.

The different meanings that the identified *intercultural markers* assume in the context of different cultures and the related social implications were further investigated in interviews with members of the Confederation and discussions with other professionals (e.g. sociologists, to scientifically support the work through the application of analysis tools such as needs analysis, target identification and categorisation, risk factor assessment, etc.).

The next phase of the research involved a cross-analysis and conceptual overlapping of the elements of identity deemed useful to define guidelines for the future development of the concept.

Generating design guidelines. Various conceptual responses were then developed through the definition of possible solutions and approaches through theoretical research, interviews, on-site inspections, feedback, discussions.

On the basis of the defined scenario and the relevant element extracted from the intersection of different cultural features, the decision was made to work on typefaces as a decorative apparatus, thus creating decorative motifs reminiscent of arabesque patterns, but resulting from the structured juxtaposition of different typefaces Fig. 5.

Furthermore, this project was also an opportunity to start a didactic exploration with the aim of validating the methodology and implementing the practice of design thinking in the teaching of intercultural competences[9].

9
Specifically in a third-year design course titled "Design for Cultural Heritage" at the Politecnico di Torino (A.Y. 2021/22).

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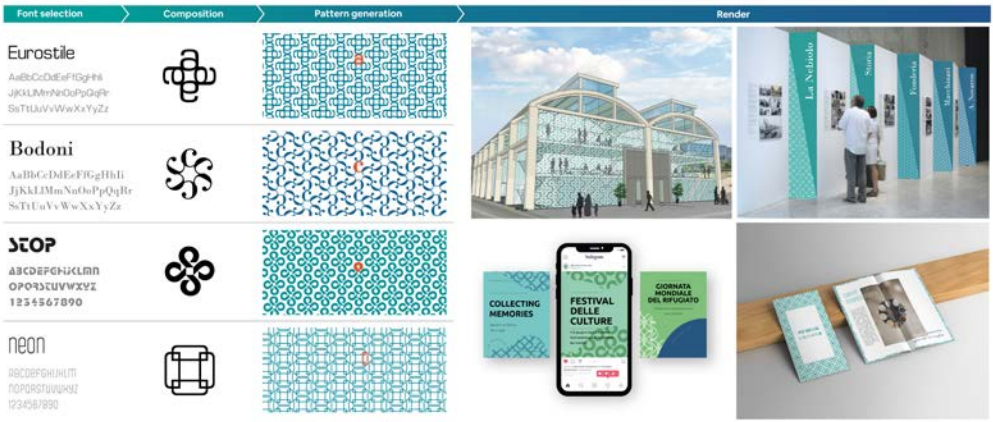


Fig. 5
Typographic pattern creation process and possible applications. Credits: Authors.

Project development. The identity of the Centre, as a complex and multifaceted concept, will have to be conveyed through communication actions on different scales of intervention and implemented through the involvement of different subjects (both stakeholders in the area and the citizenry itself). The different levels of action include the development of the visual identity framework; as well as the modalities of direct and indirect interaction with the public — such as the signage system, digital communication and so on Fig. 6.

COMMUNICATION ACTIONS

	Instruments	Cultural centre name	Cultural centre logo	Visual identity	Signage system	Social network	Website	Events	App
Goals	Path of reflection and co-design with the citizens and the realities active in the neighbourhood to develop a dialogue with the territory.	Defining the name of the Cultural Centre through internal discussion.	Definition of the Cultural Centre logo through internal discussion and confirmation through questionnaires / brainstorming with schools and citizens.	Development of the set of graphic-visual elements that will communicate the Centre to the public.	Information system that provides users with information on the external identification of the centre and also on possible routes within the space.	Choice of social channels through which the centre will communicate (or co-project) its activities and events.	Development of a website to convey the centre's objectives, initiatives and services.	Design of a series of events and exhibitions to be realised within a predefined time frame, also in collaboration with some local realities.	Development of an app to convey some specific information about the Centre (timetables, services available,...) and facilitate access to some services (bookings, guided tours,...).
Stakeholders	- Politecnico di Torino - Cultural Centre - Sociologist - Citizenship - Schools - Local associations	- Politecnico di Torino - Cultural Centre	- Politecnico di Torino - Cultural Centre - Graphic studio - Citizenship - Schools - 1/2 local associations	- Politecnico di Torino - Graphic studio - Tipography	- Politecnico di Torino - Graphic studio - Sign-making agency	- Politecnico di Torino - Cultural Centre - Communication agency - Social media manager	- Politecnico di Torino - Communication agency	- Politecnico di Torino - Cultural Centre - Schools - Local associations - Private institutions (museums, foundations,...)	- Web agency - Cultural Centre
Output	- Development of questionnaires and participatory planning - Definition of a series of opportunities for meeting	- Brainstorming - Name definition	- Brainstorming - Initiative with schools / associations - Logo design	- Logo definition, colours fonts, patterns, etc. - Development of other elements (business cards, letterheads brochures, flyers...)	- Development of an executive design of the internal signage system - External signage concept	- Choice of suitable social media - Developing the copy strategy for each social - Definition of an internal content curator	- Choice of information to be conveyed - Development of the website	- Choice of time frame - Definition of objectives - Structuring some initiatives - Identification of a collaboration format with external entities	- Defining the specific objectives of the app (added value to the user experience) - App development

Fig. 6
Overview of the communication actions for the Cultural Centre. Credits: Authors.

The communication approach is intended as a *fil rouge* to take up at different levels, from the graphic to the architectural level. At present, the project continues with the development of the architectural design in collaboration with a Turin-based architecture Studio, while the graphic and visual design will be entrusted to a communication studio specialising in heritage issues and in particular the Nebiolo reality. Furthermore, in collaboration with the Confederation itself and various realities active in the area, a calendar is being outlined of events and activities with a cross-cultural matrix that will be realised within the Centre Fig. 7.

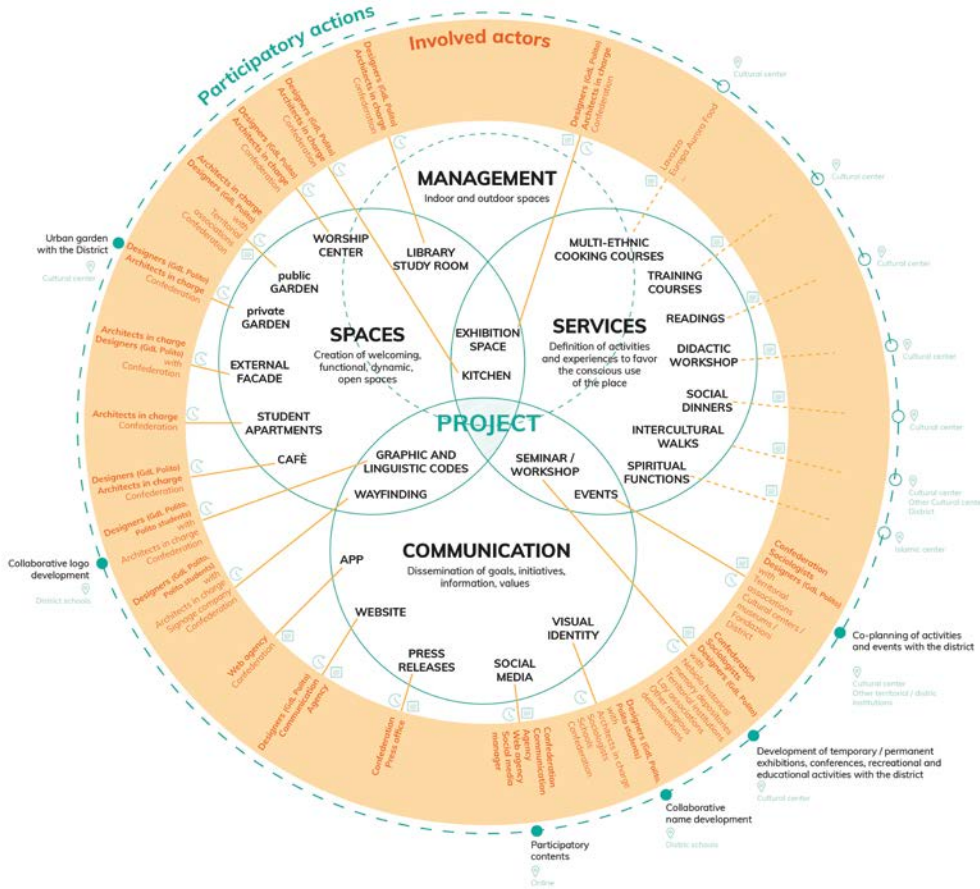


Fig. 7
Overview of the strategic goals of the Cultural Centre. Credits: Authors.

In order to guarantee the consistency and control of design choices, even as individual actors change during the evolution of the project, a *vademecum* was created for the correct use of the communication system for the new cultural centre, which will be managed by the Confederation.

Discussion and Conclusions

The feedback collected during the development of the Cultural Centre's scientific project allowed the authors to refine specific processual and design aspects, such as certain communication methods to be adopted, the definition and sharing of objectives with a predetermined timeline, the importance of including different skills and professional spheres within the entire design process, adequately selected and coming from different research sectors (for instance, social sciences, such as sociology and anthropology; historiography and historical-social skills; the design disciplines: primarily architects, graphic or product designers; engineering and restoration professionals; communication agencies; and so on).

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The value of this project consists, beyond the positive social impact expected at the neighbourhood and urban scale, of its aim to become a good practice in which the field of design plays a fundamental role precisely because it mediates between different cultural needs.

In a context of cultural and social openness linked to a concrete historical need, the design approach does not merely "take note" of social transformations, but makes them its own. It shapes and transforms them into a resource for preserving heritage values, designing new domains whose meanings can be expressed through innovative forms and content, seeking to seize opportunities for exchange, for the cross-fertilisation of cultures, knowledge and technical skills.

Today, alongside a necessary strengthening of the commitment to environmental issues, the main concept of sustainability is charged with new values of a social and cultural nature, orienting its action essentially toward inclusion and cultural accessibility.

The proposed methodological approach applied to this project offers some food for thought on the possible scalability of the adopted methodology applied to the reconversion of cultural heritage as a medium for dialogue and acceptance between different communities that coexist and shape territories.

The example of the Cultural Centre in Turin responds to a widespread territorial need across the entire neighbourhood (the need for a meeting and prayer point for Muslims) but at the same time renews the industrial history that has strongly shaped the area's cultural and social identity over time. In the same way, many Italian territories can lend themselves to similar actions of enhancement. Territorial mapping by municipal administrations of abandoned architectural cultural assets in strongly multicultural neighbourhoods could provide an excellent starting point for suggesting participatory projects in which the involvement of professionals could serve as a tool to synthesise the needs of the citizens and make them explicit, and for trying to build proposals together through intercultural design actions.

Intercultural dialogue, which is prodromal to open and non-conflictual multicultural societies, is also built by a dialogue through design about the contexts in which they can express themselves: this is a responsibility intrinsic to design in particular as a discipline epistemologically innervated by discussion, dialogue and collaboration. In these terms, the designer presents himself as a professional figure and researcher capable of placing his sensitivity as a receptor of demands, facilitator of relations and accelerator of virtuous and ethically evolved processes at the service of the project team and society.

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