

Design as a Dialogic Practice for Fragile Heritages. A Community Micro-Museum in the Heart of Sicily

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Abstract

The present paper — which also brings together a reflection on the complex and identity-based context of the Mediterranean area with all its critical aspects, but also with its specific values — is articulated within a theoretical framework that investigates the complex relationships between design, cultural heritages, territories and communities, characterised by conditions of systemic fragility. This part is followed by the presentation of a design experience from a small eco-museum carried out in a rural village in the Sicilian interior. A community-based micro-museum, generated through dialogic and co-design practices, which combined the historical-anthropological and scientific-educational dimensions linked to knowledge on wheat and bread. A project designed to reuse the cultural heritage as an engine of sustainable and shared development, of a small and fragile, yet cohesive, rural community, which has intercepted some emerging research address from the contemporary debate on the topic.

Keywords

Design for cultural heritage
Connected heritages
Dialogic design
Design for education
Information design

"I stood breathless before an immense, yellowish basin [...] I descended, bearing in my soul the storm of a most Sicilian conflict, between neglect and beauty [...]." (Rumiz, 2011)¹.

This paper, including a brief reflection regarding the complex context of the Mediterranean area, is set out within a theoretical framework that synthetically reconstructs several considerations by the scientific community of design around the complex relationships that link design, cultural heritage, the territory and the community (Parente et al., 2018; Lupo, 2009). This is followed by the presentation of the design experience of a small eco-museum in the rural village of Santa Rita (Caltanissetta), which has absorbed several lines of research and design practices that today feed the on-going debate and thinking of many academics.

The above-mentioned experience was selected and presented as a case study at the *International Symposium Stretch the Edge* (overseen by the researchers of the Università degli Studi della Repubblica di San Marino); this represented a moment for the dissemination and collaborative discussion of more extensive and structured research, the objective being to explore the centrality of the contribution of design to the rebirth and enhancement of historical villages and small walled towns. This elaborate and interesting work has mapped out, in an international context, a series of case studies regarding the regeneration of rural, marginal and peripheral areas with natural or artificial boundaries, which today are seen as innovative and challenging areas of disciplinary experimentation.

The Deep Roots of the Sicilian Way to Design for Development in the Southern and Mediterranean Context

The design experience in the village of Santa Rita certainly has deep roots, connected to the cultural heritage, knowledge, research, experimentation, critical reflection and sensitivity of the "Sicilian school of design" in Palermo, founded in the 1970s by Anna Maria Fundarò and her collaborators. This important legacy² added to the on-going debate at that time, via an original point of view aimed at investigating the specific relationship between design and the southern and Mediterranean territorial context, whose strategic objective was to revitalise a historically problematic and fragile local social, economic and productive context (Ferrara, 2017).

A "much-needed design" (Trapani, 2018), a "design for development" (this was the motto) serving the university system and the virtuous, concrete and lasting development of the Sicilian society and economy, started from its own specificities linked to a complex and difficult region, but with a wealth of values, knowledge and craft skills, cultural and environmental resources.

A Sicilian way to design, pursued over the years by Fundarò's students and by a small community of young academics, who with Michele Argentino at their head (her most direct collaborator), and subsequently also with Vanni Pasca, were able to propose a more

1

Le case degli spiriti is a tale of travel/exploration, in search of a lost land, amidst ruins, landscapes and abandoned places, now fallen prey to wind and nature.

2

The reference is to the experiments carried out by researchers at the Institute of Industrial Design in Palermo in the context of SDI research, collected, under the scientific responsibility of Fundarò and Argentino, in the series: POLI.Design's *Territori Del Design*.

ethical and less aesthetic idea of design based on the cultural and productive specificity of Mediterranean areas as a strategic lever for sustainable and lasting local development.

In short, this would be a Sicilian school of design in whose DNA there was already a certain sensitivity and a long-term view of the themes and issues that would later become central to the disciplinary debate on design for the cultural heritage.

This specific feature was also accompanied by a significant patrimony of new experiences, interwoven with the most important national research projects (SDI, Me.Design, D.Cult, D4T, PRIN 2010-2012, etc.), in which the Sicilian school has actively participated with theoretical contributions and design experimentation. Fundamental research, starting with the *SDI - Sistema Design Italia* experience, coordinated by Manzini in 1998, provided the theoretical-methodological basis for investigating the relationship between design and territorial development starting from the centrality of a renewed and interactive dialogue with local areas and their specific features (especially in rural and outlying areas) where design had begun to take on new, different and original forms.

This keen interest continued with the *Me.Design* research project (2002–2004), the aim of which was to enhance the local capital of the Mediterranean regions that began to be observed through a new Mediterranean lens and a cosmopolitan outlook (Guarrasi, 2014), that made it possible to better appreciate and value the enormous and extraordinary wealth of a shared Mediterranean cultural heritage, generated by frequent fluid inter-connections (Braudel, 2010), based on open identities and in a continuous pursuit of dialogue with the *other*.

This singular treasure was generated from a milieu of great profundity (Guarrasi, 2014, p. 44), and should have witnessed Europe launching a sort of Marshall Plan based precisely on territorial capital and cultural heritage, in the words of Daverio (2013), who in Palermo had coordinated the PRIN 2010-2012, *The design of cultural heritage between history, memory and knowledge. The immaterial, the virtual, the interactive, as material for a project at a time of crisis* (tda - translation by author).

It was precisely on the basis of the debate around the themes of the PRIN 2012 and the previous assumptions relating to the specific cultural, southern and Mediterranean characteristics of the Sicilian school of design, that the idea of recovering and enhancing a problematic, isolated, local, rural Sicilian area, which over the years had sunk into a situation of low productivity and a serious identity crisis.

Design as Dialogic Practice for Fragile Heritages. A New Methodological Approach for a Rural and Community Micro-Museum (In Sicily)

In the previous section, we saw how Mediterranean regions have, in their DNA, an extraordinary propensity for listening, dialogue and conversation. *Ethnoscapes* (Appadurai, 1996) are conceived as “interfaces of connection of otherness” — here expressed in the dual meaning of dialogical node and design dimension of possibility (Zingales, 2022) — and of diversity, capable of generating an extraor-

dinary interweaving of dialogue. As Manzini (2018, p. 37) reminds us, these create communities and projects starting from the solid and bi-univocal correlation between places (understood as spaces endowed with meaning) and communities (to which meaning is given by human conversations) that continuously re-generate them (Manzini, 2018, p. 45).

Conversations create connections between heritages, for which design becomes the binding element for complex relationships between knowledge, communities, ideas and the territory; it becomes a tool for understanding and decoding, an original and innovative resolver of critical issues; a generator of new meaning, new value (including economic value), new processes of rewriting the cultures and identities of communities and the territory. We might define them as “connected heritages” (Monterosso, 2022) that generate and re-generate (through the project) new “Mediterranean” patterns, material and immaterial, that stratify and interweave both the solid connective tissue — landscapes, cities, objects, artefacts — and liquid — of societies and communities with their histories, dialects, rites, celebrations, traditions, knowledge, etc.

It is also from this Mediterranean propensity for connection, relationship and dialogue with and within communities, that the adventure-project in the Santa Rita village emerged, when the *Santa Rita Cultural Association* was established in 2013, made up of women united by the common goal of redeveloping the ancient village, preserving its historical, religious, productive, cultural and gastronomic identity, to reinforce its micro-economies and make it a destination for experiential, relational, slow-paced and quality tourism (Slow Tourism).

The multiplicity of skills and interests that had generated the project idea led to the development of a social imagination workshop characterised by intensive interaction with the local community, the focus of which was placed on the reconstruction and communication of memory, the conservation/transmission of knowledge typical of indigenous agricultural traditions (relating to wheat and bread), and education on biodiversity. It was a dynamic and open dialogue that endeavoured to re-contextualise local resources in a broader framework of cosmopolitan regionalism (Manzini, 2005) capable of connecting the local to the global. Within this approach, design played a central role, as it was able to guide and bring the community together, working towards a common vision. This made it possible to experiment with that Bohemian idea of a “dialogue of reflection and research”, as suggested by Zingale (2019), which, by going beyond individualized thought, had opened up to the collective idea of rewriting its own history.

In short, this then implied open-source dialogical and social innovation practice, which Manzini (2016) has called dialogical design, an expression of an emerging design culture (Manzini, 2015), resulting from open and interactive exchanges with other worlds of culture (philosophy, sociology, anthropology, future studies, etc.). This “dialogic design” is configured as a fundamental meta-discipline to operate successfully in the field of *Design for the Territory* (Parente, 2017), where it is necessary to intervene, with regard to the context, with great precision, via an approach more problematic to reality, which considers each situation in its complexity and in uniqueness.

According to certain academics, this type of methodological approach is even more necessary, particularly when working in micro-places and with local and fragile micro-communities such as that of the tiny rural village of Santa Rita, whose identity has always been linked to the work and rhythms of the boundless wheat-fields surrounding it. This isolated agricultural community has risked extinction due to the migratory movement towards the cities; this remote village, suspended in space and time, mirrors perfectly the image of a dusty, dry, almost desert-like South. It captures the geographical and human landscape of rural Italy until the 1960s and 1970s, as magnificently documented in *Parabola d'oro*³, where yellowing fields, undulating and boundless, provide a setting for the thousand-year-old toil of women, men and animals: a sort of island within an island, which has preserved the millenary cultural identity of a Mediterranean south built upon wheat and bread (that is always bitter⁴).

This special place is marginal, different, on the border, the frontier; a threshold space as Riccardo Varini (2019) would define it, which necessitates operations of “design acupuncture” (Varini & Brignoni, 2022), within a new field of investigation that is increasingly focussed on design. A “community design”⁵ (Sicklinger et al., 2019), which is shaped as an innovative and experimental, disciplinary and methodological area, specifically geared towards design in marginal micro-territories, where it is easier to experiment and implement projects that move in the direction of favoured, sustainable, community and ecosystem futures, in a symbiotic scenario of coexistence with other natural elements (Varini et al., 2021).

Thanks to this particular awareness and new approach, the afore-mentioned micro-territories (and the communities that care for them), “become key to transcending consumer gigantism, urban monoculture and the commoditisation of industrial agriculture” (Varini et al., 2021, p.187).

This is exactly what happened in the village of Santa Rita, where two young visionaries, sons of the village, Maurizio Spinello and Salvatore Pitrola, became the protagonists of a systemic change, starting from their radical and dissenting position with regard to an aggressive market firmly in the hands of the “clergy of the professionals of need, which generates dependence on castrating abundance and modernised cultural poverty” (Illich, 2013).

Maurizio was an educated, anarchic farmer and hacker (Himanen, 2003), who returned to secretly grow prized, ancient Sicilian corn. For years the only permanent inhabitant of a ghost town, he opened a bakery that produced organic bread and pasta, attracting tourists, academics, journalists and chefs from all over the world. Salvatore was a lawyer, an expert in local development policy, who, guided by a group of young Sicilian researchers and designers, reclaimed the palazzetto of the La Lomia barons, owners of the estate, to turn it into an astonishing and innovative museum that, in 2018, was nominated for the *Compasso D'Oro*.

3

It is a documentary on the wheat cycle by the master Vittorio De Seta (1955), which belongs among a series of films (*Surfarara, Contadini del mare, Lu tempu di li pisci spada, etc.*) on the material culture of post-war Sicily.

4

Here the reference is to the bitter fruit (bread) of the millennial toil of agricultural work and the exceptional severity and endless, wearisome cyclicity (Nicosia, 2014).

5

The term also identifies the DDC Research Unit established between Venice, San Marino and Bologna that has been working for several years on marginal local communities in national and international contexts.

These two original, personal stories have become collective stories, capable of propelling and re-launching processes of re-identification and re-connection to the cultural heritage, including those local communities close to the village, starting from an intricate system that connected the material components of the village itself (church, baronial palace, houses, warehouses) with the non-material, linked to the stories-testimonies from the micro-histories of the farming families, in which the facts of the great social and economic history of the island are reflected.



Fig. 1
Immaterial Micro-Museum of Wheat and Bread (IMMWB). Santa Rita. Geographical and human landscape of a small farming village by Francesco Monterosso.

This action of territorial development was driven from below, guided by a dialogic and community-based design, which found its tangible and visible expression in the creation of a micro-museum. This museum of identity and territory has blended material- and immaterial heritage in a synthesis of history, personal and collective memory, science, technique and technology, assuming the characteristics of an “eco-museum” (De Varine, 2005) or a “relational museum” (Bodo, 2003), a complex and living reality, a place for learning experiences, social gatherings and civil growth.



Fig. 2
IMMWB. Conversations with the community by Francesco Monterosso.

Exhibit, Narrative Project and Educational Artifacts in *Micromuseo Immateriale del Grano e del Pane*

Thanks to funding obtained from the LAG Terre del Nisseno, under the PSR Sicily 2007/2013, the 19th-century baronial palace was transformed into the *Immaterial Micro-museum of Wheat and Bread*, in which the words “Memory, Knowledge, Interaction”, epitomize a narrative path that has combined the historical-anthropological dimension of memory, with the scientific-didactic-laboratory dimension linked to knowledge regarding wheat and bread. The whole was carried out through the mediation of low-cost and open-source technology (such as Arduino) allied to contemporary representational languages (static and animated infographics).

The micro-museum was specifically geared towards the world of museum education and conceived as a resource and educational service for the community; it does not display objects, but rather, information, with the aim of preserving and handing over to new generations the collective memory of the place and suggesting, through specific knowledge (of wheat and bread), a system of values that cannot be disregarded in a contemporary and future key. Inside, there is a multi-dimensional and multiverse exhibition that, along an intricate, narrative itinerary, describes the microcosm of the village in a holistic, emotional and sensorial manner, starting from a series of informational artefacts (documentaries, interactive installations, static and animated infographics), the result of (self) productions by a team of young Sicilian designers⁶.



6
F. Monterosso, concept, art direction, scientific coordination, exhibit design; D. Emanuele and M. Di Piazza, anthropological documentaries direction; G. Dioretico and S. Farruggia, educational documentaries direction and motion graphic design; L. Di Martino, coordination, graphics and communication; M. Schifano and Maria Pia Erice, interaction design; U. Di Piazza, sound design; A. Friscia, web and new media design.

Fig. 3
IMMWB. Immersive room with interactive narratives about memory, work and rites by Francesco Monterosso.

The ground floor layout is introduced by a kind of hologram of Baroness Rita La Lomia (to whom the village was dedicated in 1895) that tells the story and life in the village; next there are a series of interactive analog installations that allow knowledge through multi-sensory experiences. An immersive room hosts an interactive panel that activates narratives on memory, work and worship through the narration of community members.

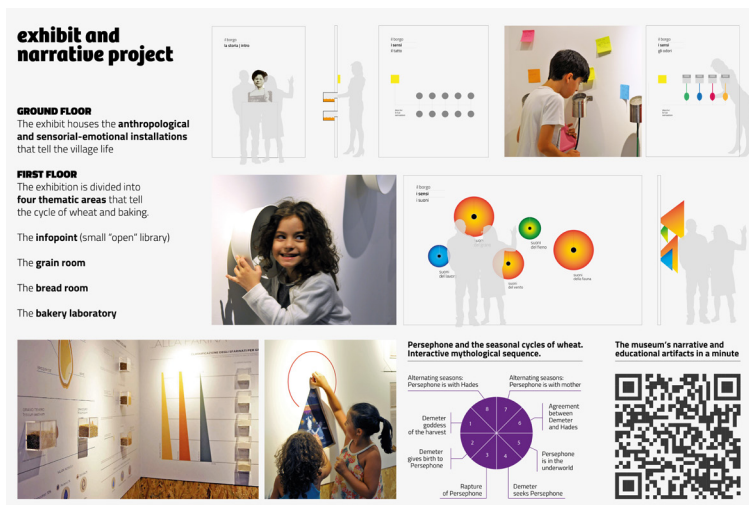


Fig. 4
IMMWB. Interactive sensory journey by Francesco Monterosso.

The first floor layout is divided into four areas:

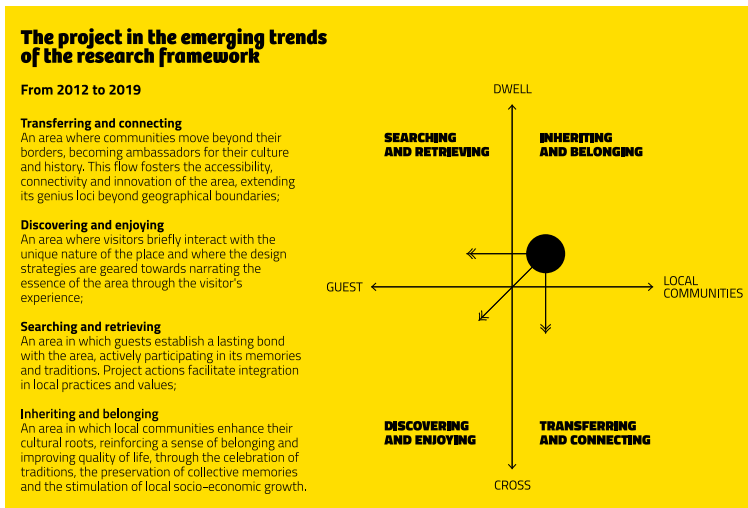
- The infopoint/meeting room is a multi-purpose space which houses a small monographic library on wheat and bread.
- The *Wheat Room* offers - through interactive audiovisual on the grain cycle and infographics on cereal classification, biodiversity and ethical consumption - an overview of its botanical, historical, cultural and environmental aspects.
- The *Bread Room* tells the technical processes of grain processing through a sample of grains and flour, interactive audio-visuals on rising/baking and infographics on milling/production processes.
- The course ends with a *Bread Lab Room* dedicated to activities on bread making.



Fig. 5
IMMWB. Interactive educational documentaries by Francesco Monterosso.

Conclusions

Participation in the *Stretch the Edge* Symposium represented an important opportunity for dialogue and exchange, which, within a wide-ranging context of international experimentation, made it possible to set the project regarding Santa Rita within an extremely original and well-structured framework of theoretical-methodological and design practices. The research connected with the Symposium certainly falls within the framework of the studies on Community Design conducted by San Marino researchers on marginal local communities, and moved within a well-structured framework, which, via a number of key indicators, made it possible to classify the experiences in four categories, dwell/cross and guest/local communities, and four areas of intervention: transferring and connecting, discovering and enjoying, searching and retrieving, inheriting and belonging (as shown in Fig. 6).



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Fig. 6
IMMWB. The project in the research framework. The graph also shows the trend that, in subsequent years, led to a slight shift in the direction of the other areas. Illustration based on Research Scopes doc of *Stretch the Edge* Symposium. By Francesco Monterosso.

In the light of the research objectives and in relation to the framework illustrated, the case study is perfectly in line with the description of the *inheriting and belonging* area, since it has been able to activate a regenerative and circular process of writing and re-writing the personal and collective identity of a small and cohesive, local community, which, with considerable willpower and determination, has harnessed its heritage and its social and territorial capital in the shape of a new engine for sustainable and shared development.

This condition has made it possible to identify the innovative and most interesting component of the experience undertaken in the Santa Rita village, that of a community micro-museum, brought about through dialogic and co-design practices; in the wake of a Mediterranean cultural specificity of research, design and didactics replete with ethical and social momentum, this has tapped into certain lines of research that today are seen as innovative and challenging.

These emerging lines of research encounter cultures and fresh awareness, closely linked to theoretical and project experiments of a “dialogic and community design”, which, through systemic and complex (bottom-up and open) actions of territorial development, is capable of generating “interconnected heritage”, instrumental in starting and triggering lasting processes of social regeneration in an eco-systemic and relational approach, based on a re-connection with nature, and, as much as anything, through a more contemporary awareness open to dialogue with more-than-human otherness.

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