ATLAS OF SOCIAL INNOVATION

NEW PRACTICES FOR A BETTER FUTURE

SI drive

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FROM SOCIAL DESIGN TO DESIGN FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

Social innovation has many challenges in practice due to the complexity of stakeholders and ecological systems involved in the framework of value co-creation. Service design is emerging as a more effective approach in order to enhance SI co-design and long-term stakeholder involvement for achieving the purpose of adoption and diffusion.

Alessandro Deserti / Francesca Rizzo / Onur Cobanli

THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL DESIGN

Design has a long tradition of relation with the social. A recent British report classified social design into social entrepreneurship, socially responsible design, and design activism [1]. Social design has gained momentum in design research during the last ten years, a development which can be seen as having several roots. Some of these roots go back a few decades, to the writings of Papanek [2] in 1984, while others are of newer origin, as for instance in the area of service design that intersects with public sector innovation and the emergence of new societal challenges.

Even though it is impossible to state all of the reasons behind this phenomenon, some of them can be clearly identified as being external to the discipline's development and being much more reliant on complex socio-economic trends.

Many countries still do not show clear and strong signs of recovery from the global economic downturn that has started in 2008 and caused a structural lack of resources, particularly affecting the public sector. The economic, demographic, social and environmental long-term challenges call for deep changes, questioning many of the assumptions that have underpinned public services, posing new challenges for institutions, policy makers, civil servants and communities. While austerity measures were adopted all over the world, societal challenges are intensifying: youth unemployment, elderly healthcare, immigration, social inclusion and other wicked problems press public institutions with the contradictory request of delivering new services or restructuring the existing ones, achieving a higher effectiveness with less resources. Contemporarily, we are also observing the rise of a "social design" movement that is characterized by a socially-oriented objective instead of predominantly commercial or consumer-oriented ends. In fact, there is already a widespread acknowledgement of the role of design and its potential in facing societal challenges and helping social innovations (SI) to flourish.

In particular, there is an increasing awareness of the impact design has on understanding and framing problems and finding solutions in collaboration with communities, influencing societies and the wider environment. According to a recent report from the Arts and Humanities Research Council [1], we can also consider social design as a design-based practice aimed at collective and social ends, rather than predominantly commercial or consumer-oriented objectives, which operates across many fields of application, including the local and central government, as well as policy areas such as healthcare and international development.

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Despite the wide acknowledgement of design as a strategic tool for developing SI initiatives, especially Design Thinking, and the urgency in which social issues are rising, the 26 business case studies of the SIMPACT project revealed that design is still underestimated or not considered as a resource in SI praxis. We introduce here the notion "of design culture as a specific system of knowledge, competences and skills that operates within a specific context to develop new products, that mediates between the world of production and consumption and that coordinates multiple factors related to technology, market and society" [3].

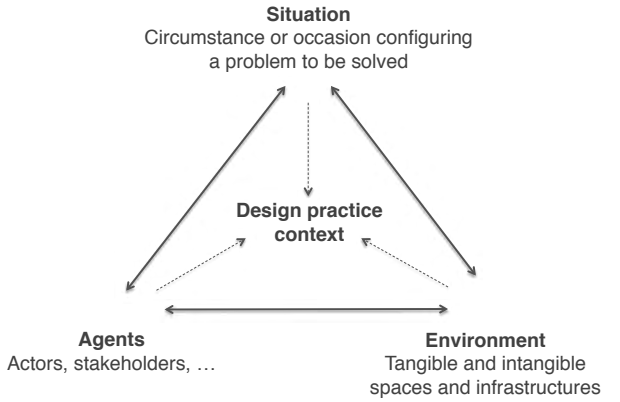
Against this background, the introduction of a design culture and practices within the context of social innovation does not solely rely on the collaborative dimension between end users or the beneficiaries and the initiator of a SI. Design Culture brings with it both the design capability to strategically meet the needs of the users and the design competences to deal with constraints related to all of the factors that affect the process of innovation development (technological, organisational, infrastructural, commercial, etc.).

COMPLEX PARTICIPATORY DESIGN PROCESSES

In the tradition of co-design many researchers [4] have focused on the potentiality of end-users' collaborations and prototyping to engage stakeholders in the exploration of innovation. In this tradition it is possible to consider two basic modes. The first one is the dialogue mode, which deals with the processes of collaborative design and tools for engaging users and other stakeholders in collective creative envisioning together and eventually in rethinking the current state. This mode grows from practices that have their roots in close connection with participatory design tradition, but also 'beyond usability' research, dealing with experience design and empathy. The second one is the prototyping mode that addresses in particular the ways in which designers tend to reflect and make sense of complicated and often yet non-existing things by giving shape, sketching, visualizing and prototyping in various ways. These two conceptual modes are most of the time overlapping in practice and they are today converging to the foundations of those design labs (living labs, urban living labs, ecosystem of innovations) that are blooming in a variety of initiatives. These labs are similar to new R&D contexts in cities, in scientific parks, in territories, and in private companies. They are shaped by envisioning innovation through the establishment of strong connections with the network of stakeholders that belongs to a place; through fostering long-term engagement with local communities which leads to the emergence of new everyday practices that point to new opportunities for design.

> Design Culture brings with it both the design capability to strategically meet the needs of the users and the design competences to deal with constraints.

Contrary to those living labs that emphasize technology evaluation or adaptation, these co-creation spaces make use of a situated and human-centred approach for local communities to develop innovation. Design, in these contexts, works directly from the particular conditions and resources of the local communities engaged in each of the project pilots in order to employ relevant service systems



The situatedness of design culture

that may facilitate social innovation. Scalability in this approach comes about not through the similarity between communities but through the robustness and generic qualities of the service design concepts.

HOW SOCIAL DESIGN OPERATES TODAY: AN EXAMPLE OF A DESIGN DRIVEN SOCIAL INNOVATION PROJECT

Within the context of the European project "My Neighbourhood", a long-term experiment of SI design has been conducted by a team of design researchers. The Milano pilot experiment has taken place in the Quarto Oggiaro neighbourhood, located in the northwest area of Milano, not far from where the 2015 Expo took place. Here, the entire SI design process was conducted thanks to a strong collaboration between the Politecnico di Milano (holding a long tradition in design and in urban planning research), the Municipality of Milano, the associations and volunteers that operate in this area, and the people who live there. This mixed design team performed all the activities and managed the interactions with the local communities and stakeholders in order to engage them in the co-design process and in the SI experimentation. The pilot run over a course of one year and a half, with the first months being dedicated to exploring and approaching the neighbourhood.

The design team started understanding physical aspects of the neighbourhood, the characteristics of its population, its socio-economic dimensions, the main actors operating in the context, the relation between the neighbourhood and the rest of the city and the characteristics of the urban services already offered in the neighbourhood.

Following this, a period of intensive co-design meetings started. In this phase, the design team established four different design tables, involving designers, urban planners, people from the Municipality of Milano, representatives of

Interviews with Quarto Oggiaro Neighbours
(photo: Francesca Rizzo)

the local associations, and people from the neighbourhood. Each table started from a complex discussion on the relevant neighbourhood issues, ending with a list of main challenges:

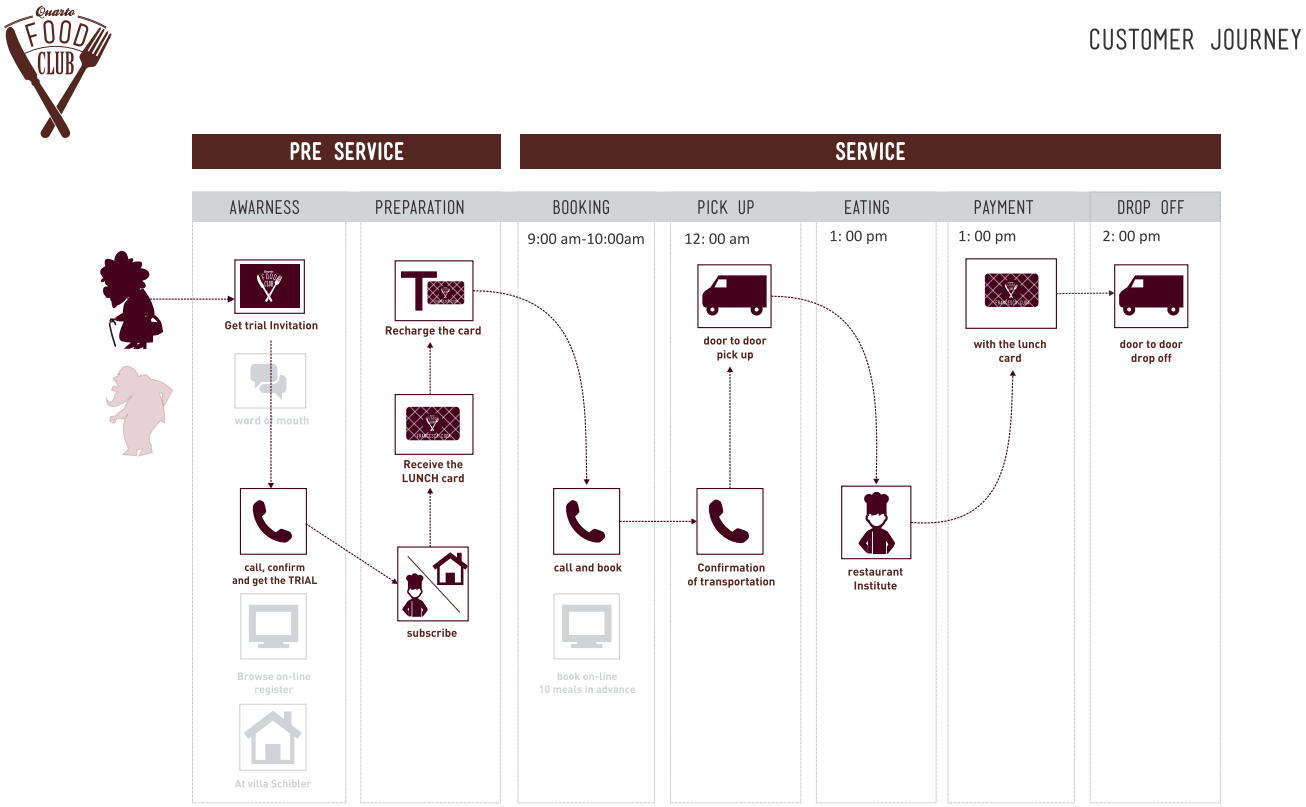
- regenerating disused and derelict public areas;
- improving social life and inclusion of elderly people;
- preventing school drop-outs and creating job opportunities for young people;
- exploring and testing new potential entrepreneurial opportunities and businessmodels for start-up companies.

Starting from these challenges, the design tables then worked to elaborate four possible service ideas as smart solutions for the framed problems. Out of four, two ideas were selected for the whole development and testing process. In the following we will shortly introduce one of them.

The Quarto Food service

Quarto Food Club addresses the relevant needs of the quite large community of elderly people living in Quarto Oggiaro.

It is a service that combines the need to deliver food to vulnerable single elderly citizens with that of improving their social life, enjoying a meal prepared with special care and dining in a sociable environment to relieve their sense of loneliness. At the same time, the service aims at responding to another issue in the neighbourhood, namely unemployment rates among young people, by involving students from local hoteling schools, who can receive credits for the practical training, and who are given the opportunity to enter in a real food preparation and catering experience. Specifically, the service involves two high schools in Quarto Oggiaro where students prepare every week some meals as part of their training for catering and food preparation. Starting from this resource, the service idea is to deliver these meals to a group of elders living in the neighbourhood,



The Quarto Food customer journey

preparing for the occasion a kind of social space in the schools, where elderly can enjoy the meal together, getting in touch with each other and with the students. The students will also have benefits from this interaction, as they will receive academic credits while their work will be recognised by real end-users.

The implementation of the service required the development of a formal partnership: it will be realised thanks to the agreement between the professional hoteling schools (providing the food preparation and the venue) and some local associations (providing the contact with elderly people and a van for the transportation from the private places to the school and vice versa).

Through ordinary activities of food processing, students will prepare – one to three days per week – meals for the target group. An IT platform will support the process of the meal and trip booking, and a personal rechargeable lunch card will be provided to the users to partially cover the costs of the meal and the service.

CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the diffusion of design and especially of Design Thinking as the most suitable methodological approach to develop successful Social Innovation (SI), the debate here is still superficial and lacks a serious elaboration in the field of design practices and how they can be applied to SI processes. In particular, Design Thinking is advocated, today, as the most suitable method for designing SI solutions without, however, distinguishing the strategic level of policy from the operative level of the solutions.

If, at the general level, we observe a contradiction between the idea of SI as a kind of bottom-up process and that of design as a process of innovation led through the application of specific design competences (design-driven innovation), we also want to underline one bias that is occurring in the field of SI: Design Thinking has been applied until now to analyse ex-post processes of SI. In this regard, we have seen a proliferation of studies that has tried to demonstrate how SI development can be described with user-centred design principles, which call for the involvement of end-users and beneficiaries in the development process of the solutions.

While there is much buzz surrounding design for SI, real practices seem to be quite distant from the application of basic principles of design. Moreover, it is also true that design shows a high potential for SI mainly for two fundamental reasons: i) SIs address problems that present high levels of complexity due to their intrinsic correlation with societal challenges; ii) SIs require the involvement of different actors in order to solve these challenges.

Regarding the first dimension, these kinds of problems are often chronic and unmet, even if the forms in which they appear are completely new. For instance, advanced countries in different historical periods have faced migration, yet if we think of it as it is emerging in Europe these days; we can perceive, for example, the new difficulty that arises from the impossibility to control the flows. As a result, we need the collaboration of new and old expertise to face them.

Regarding the second dimension, the needs SIs address show a high degree of complexity due to the high number of actors involved in their solutions. This factor imposes a process of mediation capable of aligning and forming agreements between the involved stakeholders.

This complexity, however, has been largely misunderstood, with the idea that the mere involvement of users in setting ideas and understanding their needs would correspond to the introduction of design and its practices in SI development.

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