

Design for Digital Publishing: The *Domus* Experience

In recent years one of the most relevant fields of development in online publications is the search for new supports and devices that will enable reading experiences to be as smooth and free-flowing as possible. In spite of the swift proliferation of iPad editions of many magazines and newspapers, the prevailing trend seems not to favour the idea of specific layouts for each support, but rather to find a code that may be adapted to the physical dimensions of the different devices. The story of the birth of the digital edition of the review *Domus* offers an interesting perspective of this specific period of evolution and change.

Disclaimer: This is not a critical essay, but the bare report of a recent design experience, accompanied by a few designer’s perspectives of design-related stuff.

The day my collaboration with *Domus* magazine came to an end—after nearly three years acting as creative director and as a consequence of a natural turnover inscribed in the magazine’s tradition—a press release announced the decision to reduce the fifty-three journalists working in the company owned by Mrs Mazzocchi to thirty-three. The idea was to drastically shrink the resources allocated to editorial work, besides being a side effect of the shutdown of three of the ten monthly magazines published by the company.¹

Editoriale *Domus* (founded in 1929 by Mr Gianni Mazzocchi, one of the masterminds behind many memorable Italian journalistic ventures, like

Stile Industria, Casabella, Panorama, L’Europeo, etc.) is an important Italian publishing firm. For decades, *Quattroruote*, its celebrated automotive magazine, has had the highest market share in its field, acting as the most widely recognised point of reference for reviewing the performance of new cars and the price of used cars. The reasons brought to support the decision were mostly connected to the effects of the huge financial crisis, which caused a drop in the number of sold copies, a dwindling of subscriptions and an exponential decrease of advertising revenues. In *Domus*, paid advertisements used to come from design and furniture companies, which have suffered the effects of the crisis quite heavily and have therefore sensibly reduced their marketing efforts in recent years.

While this episode has still to reach a final settlement, it is just the last in a series of news reports revealing how larger companies in the same industry are also trying to reduce fixed costs in order to adapt their operating margins to a horizon of scarcer resources. A few months before the communiqué

¹ Besides *Domus* (the magazine that gives the company its name), Editoriale *Domus* prints several other specialised publications that cover different interests, ranging from the automotive industry, to aeroplane enthusiasts, to tourism and mountaineering.

by Editoriale Domus, RCS MediaGroup—one of the main Italian multimedia publishing groups—publicly stated the planned cut of 800 job positions, the sale of the headquarters of *Corriere della Sera* on via Solferino in the historical centre of Milan, and the closure of ten of its monthly magazines.²

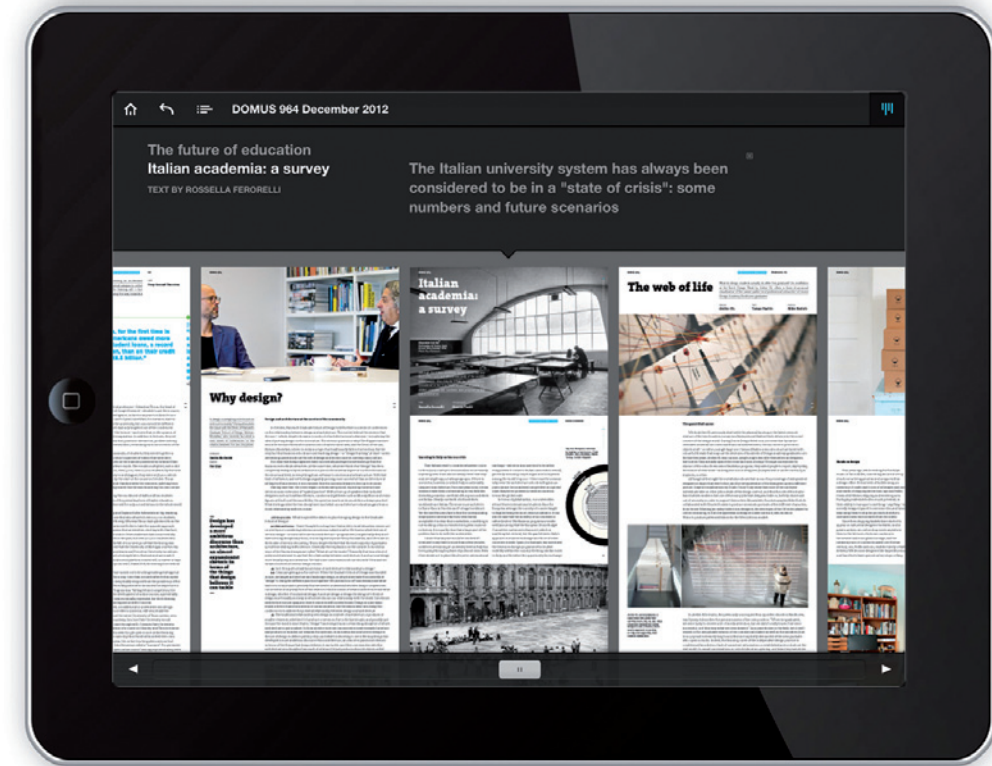
The phenomenon isn't a crisis of the actual media: people still want to read, and potentially a lot more than in the pre-2008 era. It's rather the edge of a huge shift that began years ago when the Internet became the main infrastructure for information, and was recently reaffirmed when hyper-connected mobile devices emerged as privileged and ubiquitous tools to access that same infrastructure. For a long time the publishing industry has been unable to adjust to new modes of news delivery, and has struggled to avoid any widespread shift from paper to digital (an attempt was also made in other areas of cultural production, like music and film). Current economic difficulties are slowing down investments in new technology, but this epochal change will take place anyway. Innovation in this field implies a disruption of the current business model in a way that is still either largely unknown or is unpredictable: the Net and the market are filled with fine examples of viable solutions, but how (and if) large old companies will make them profitable is yet to be seen.

Leaving this troubled (though for many reasons exciting) situation aside for the moment, let's go back a few months, to the end of August 2012. This was an interesting time at *Domus*: at the heyday of Joseph Grima's editorial course, the magazine was at the centre of a debate that was repositioning design within a twenty-first century framework. A series of articles published in 2011 and 2012 about issues such as copyright, authorship, open design paradigms, 3D printing and distributed technology

brought up many of the concerns which would later fill up vast portions of the general press, both in print and online.³ It became a real arena, hosting an early and passionate discussion about open source practices and their implications, and coverage of technology products and services from a design criticism point of view, which was unprecedented for a 'traditional' design review.⁴

On 28 August, after an intense developing phase that lasted three months, the *Domus* iPad edition was finally launched during the vernissage of the 13th edition of the Venice Architecture Biennale. It was the result of a long process, both from a strategic point of view, for it involved finding the right balance between the paper magazine (a behemoth with an authoritative reputation that went back eighty years), the website (launched the year before and a completely new medium), and from the point of view of design (iPad publishing was still much of a wild territory, lacking defined standards and developing on a very fast track).

The decision to create an iPad edition was inextricable from Joseph Grima's vision to bring *Domus* into the twenty-first century, transforming it from a respected magazine into a networked platform of design journalism. The year before he became the magazine's editor in chief, Grima spent several months sketching out this strategy, focusing at first on the new website, developed together with Dan Hill, strategic design advisor and the actual designer. This was followed by the complete overhaul of the magazine, which we accomplished between November 2010 and April 2011, and the third phase was meant to be the iPad edition, which had different expectations. First of all, *Domus* is a design magazine and, as such, it should be able to innovate as an actual product, make a statement through its actual practice and pursue a role within the avant-garde.



▲ The Platform

What was once the legacy of prominent figures in the design scene (Munari, Sottsass, Fletcher and Esterson, to name but a few of the designers responsible for the visual appearance of the magazine) could now only be the result of teamwork. The aim was not just to tackle a new design output but also to deploy a new strategy, potentially able to become a reference in its field (back in 2011, there were not many other renowned architectural journals on iPad). Last but not least, the operation was also meant to put to rights the long-standing issue of overseas distribution, which was tardy and expensive. Breaking the ground with a thorough iPad edition was something that seemed a must-do.

We weren't after something necessarily radical; we just wanted to get it right, and so be able to iterate our first conscientiously designed issue with

the same dedication we had put into the physical magazine.⁵ We began to sketch different layouts, trying to convey the compactness and flow of contents that filled a sample issue of the magazine on the relatively small iPad screen. So, together with Manuel Ehrenfeld, who joined us to work on DPS implementation and help develop some UI elements, we began to design a pilot issue in May, which then became the September 2012 issue, the first to be delivered through App Store's Newsstand.

We shall now describe some of the design challenges we faced, that focused on those specific parts of the design that best represent our main areas of interest.

The Platform. Integration within the existing workflow and the need to rely on the expertise of in-house staff, both of which were based on the knowledge and use of Adobe InDesign, made Adobe DPS almost a natural choice. We considered Mag+ as an alternative, but at that point it didn't yet seem to be

2 *RCS annuncia 800 esuberi* [online], *Corriere della Sera. Economia*, Milan. [Accessed: 18 October 2013]. Available at: http://www.corriere.it/economia/13_febbraio_11/rcs-tagli_7737116c-745d-11e2-b945-c75ed2830f7b.shtml

3 See especially P. Markillie, 'A Third Industrial Revolution,' *The Economist*, 21 April 2013, cover story.

4 See *SuperNormal*, a series of contributions edited by Dan Hill, covering the intersections between technology and design. <http://www.domusweb.it/en/news/2011/12/15/supernormal-technology-and-design.html>

5 For a deeper insight into the early stages of the design process of both the Domus website and the iPad edition, see D. Hill, 'Sketchbook: Domus magazine on iPad' [online], *cityofsound*, 2012. [Accessed: 30 September 2013]. Available at: <http://www.cityofsound.com/blog/2012/10/domus-magazine-ipad.html>



▲ Index of Contents

a well-tested platform.⁶ We had to build our experience practically from scratch within the actual project, and we opted for the solution that would potentially ensure the largest support community and the most extensive feedback on the issues we could have to tackle. Moreover, although it had no possibility of developing a completely new, customised app, DPS allows html integration and this seemed sufficient for tweaking the output a little, when needed. We wanted to keep the app simple, and therefore paid special attention to layout and readability.

Index of Contents. Besides the standard indexing tools that Adobe DPS already has on board, we created a special index page in order to provide the reader with a customised preview of the contents that included photos and longer summaries than those of 120 words hosted by the platform's navigation menu. The table of contents became the touch-down page immediately after the cover, offering a

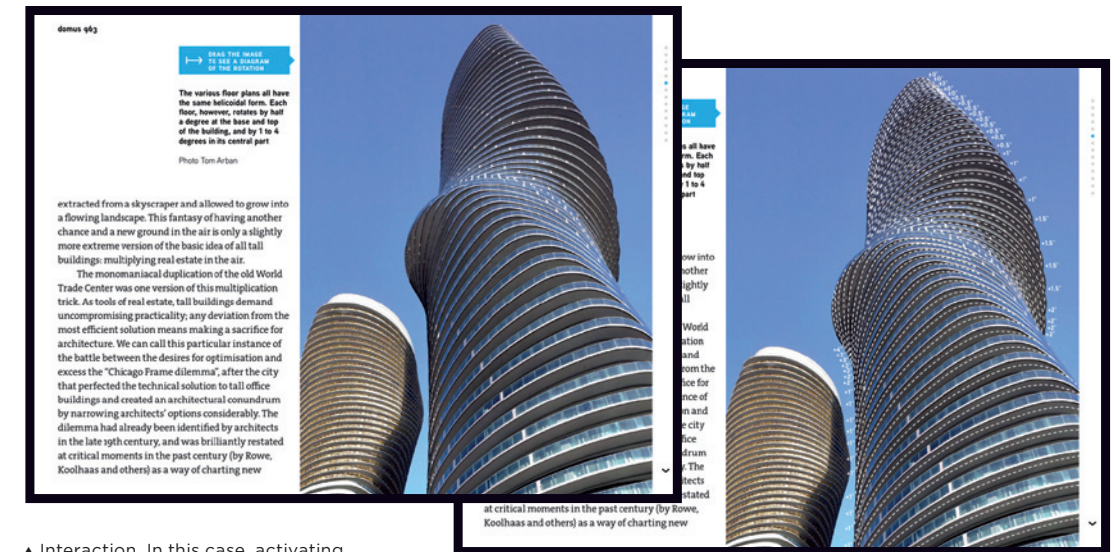
complete overview over the whole issue with a minimum amount of interaction.

Titles and Text. The typefaces used in the iPad version are the same as those in the printed magazine, with an adjustment in weights and the choice of the display version for TheSerif, which is used for titles and body text. This adjustment wouldn't have been necessary for the new iPad's display (which almost replicates the perceived resolution of analogue media), but it did entail a slight improvement for the pre-Retina screens on older devices, so we chose it.

▼ Titles and Text



⁶ An outstanding example of the capabilities of this platform arrived in April 2013 with the app of *New York* magazine, that included a live feed from the website in the weekly content of the paper edition.



▲ Interaction. In this case, activating additional layers of information.

The cover featured a static background with a photo, or a simple looping video. Text (title, summary and credits) is superimposed and still, with only a small exception: the title in the cover story automatically fades in over the picture, while the summary follows on the next page.

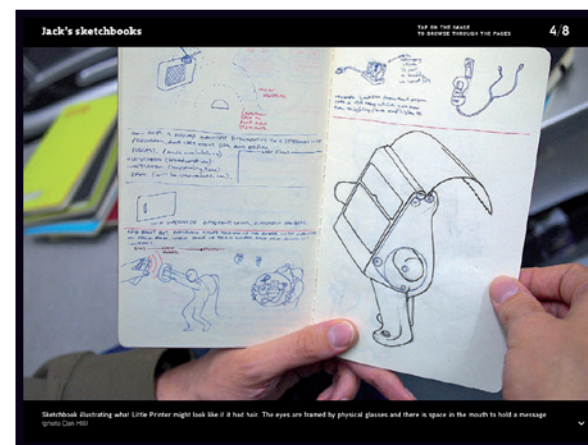
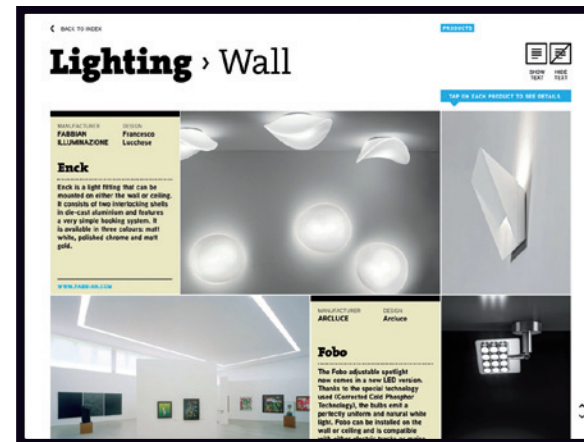
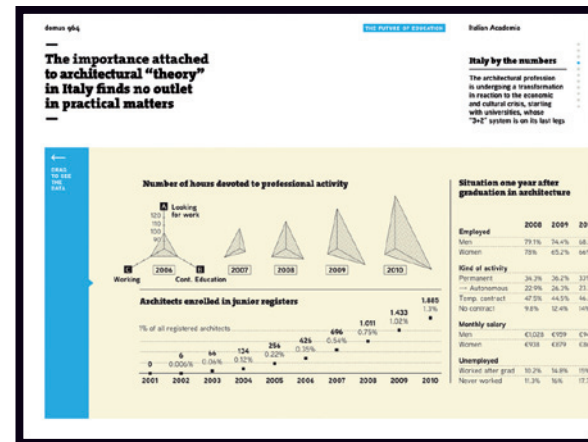
Pagination vs. Continuous Flow. The single-page format of *Domus* is uncommon in contemporary magazines: it's a huge canvas measuring 245 x 325 mm; a full-text layout can contain 1800 words. The surface of an iPad screen is a different matter: even two pictures displayed at the same time would appear strained inside a tiny space. So, the architecture of the page is much simpler, with a maximum of a dozen different layouts in each issue. We also decided to maintain a flip navigation in most cases, for *Domus* articles are usually quite long (comprising an average of 1200 words per article), and include a number of photos, so as often as we could we chose a full page layout, with no interaction. Thanks to flip navigation, we ended up with a very simple

sequence of text pages and full bleed photographs, although we didn't rule out scroll navigation, which was the best solution for shorter articles and for the initial op-ed (without images).⁷

Finally, we decided to have a double layout, vertical and horizontal, to respect the iPad feature that enables users to read the same content in landscape and portrait orientation. We accordingly set the rule of not using change of orientation to display additional content (apart from a single column where this resource allows users to move from a past to a present picture of the same subject).

Interaction. We didn't intend to delve into the interactive abilities of the device. The iPad is already a highly distractive environment in which we are continuously being tempted to switch between apps, follow teleporting links to various digital shores, or sneak at the last updates on our Twitter feed. We therefore reduced self-activating animations to a minimum and made a simple list of possible ways of interacting with the page: showing or hiding captions, switching between two different stages of a process, activating additional layers of information, revealing something hidden, zooming.

⁷ For a good comparison of both navigation methods, see O. Reichenstein, 'iPad: Scroll or Card?' [online], iA blog, 2010. [Accessed: 30 September 2013]. Available at: <http://ia.net/blog/ipad-scroll-or-card/>



▲ Galleries + Captions

Galleries + Captions

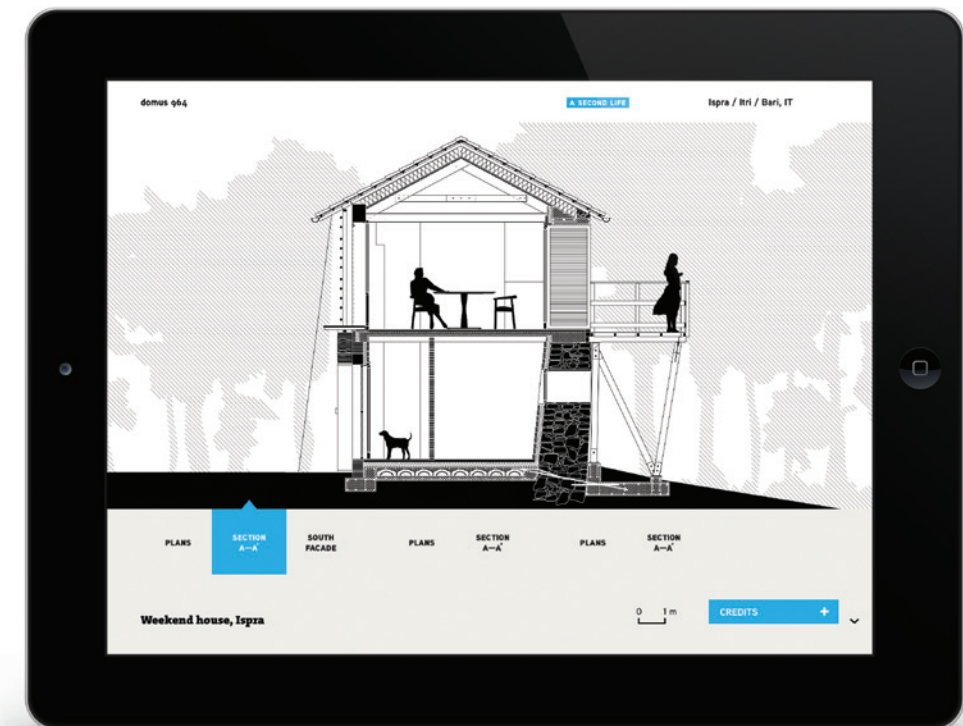
While few objections are raised to the beauty of a photograph visualised on the bright, crisp and saturated screen of current tablets, understanding how to manage information for the growing number of visual media you are encouraged to add to them is quite a problem. Being able to organise visual content well, without it distracting from the reading, has proven to be a difficult task. We carefully considered how to balance different modes of visualisa-

tion, deciding to get rid of small clickable images, which were displayed full page instead. We created two different sets of galleries: sliding galleries for sequences of images that needed no individual captions, and tappable galleries for series that required step-by-step explanations.

Drawings

The huge computing power of a device like the iPad allows us to use large, detailed vector drawings that are not, however, zoomable (to ensure we control the scale of the visualisation), without having them clumsily inserted in the navigation bar. All the drawings were redesigned for a second time after being prepared for the printed issue of the magazine, in order to be better accommodated to the size of the tablet. This enabled greater precision and produced improved results as regards the clarity of representations. They were organised within series (plans, sections, details) so that they could be compared much more effectively than on paper; a sequence of buttons allowed us to switch from one to another and they could also be directly superimposed.

I agree with Craig Mod when he says that "The future of books is built upon networked platforms, not islands."⁸ Designing a magazine for a tablet has



▲ Drawings

turned out to be an exciting experience, mainly because there are still only a few good examples out there, and as we don't yet have a solid set of references there's room for a lot of experimentation. Moreover, after two years of daily design for print, iterative design enabled us to hone and change many things that had proven to be wrong in the first instance.

We never really shed the uncanny feeling of working on an unstable base, dependent on the continuous change of standards, format and technology—at the end of the day, the iPad didn't even exist until three years ago, which means it will certainly evolve into something very different at a pace that will not encourage the consolidation of shared design values. We also felt that the tools and the workflow were still unrefined as, after having designed a print layout, many operations still had to be reiterated manually, applying the same software and the same logic to a different layout.

Magazines on tablets are still closed environments, continuously subjected to the attraction of a huge magnetic field—the Web—that tends to draw them out. We like sharing, through a variety of media ranging from social networks to old-fashioned e-mail, and letting people know what we read and care about. But magazine apps are still a fenced-in ecosystem, where one never knows what the content they're sending out on the Net will look like.

One of the main reasons for this sense of clutter is that we still have no clear idea of how to make people pay for contents in an environment of perceived freedom such as the Internet, nor of how to connect this to a platform that is supposed to obtain revenues.

This brings to the need for a completely new model: how do we sell digital journalism? *Works that Work*,⁹ a design magazine founded and run by Slovakian type-designer Peter Bil'ak, is an interesting example; besides offering the printed edition and the possibility to download the entire PDF for a fraction of the price, it also sells single articles at \$1

⁸ C. Mod, 'Platforming Books. Making *Art Space Tokyo* Digital' [online]. *Craig Mod Journal*, 2012. [Accessed: 30 September 2013]. Available at: http://craigmod.com/journal/platforming_books/

⁹ *Works that Work* [online]. [Accessed: 30 September 2013] <https://worksthatwork.com/>

each. The model resembles that of the iTunes store: fragment the contents and make them cheap, offer them at an iconic price. There's no trace of any competition between paper and digital, just the availability of different platforms. And the website designed by Atelier Carvalho Bernau, also responsible for the printed magazine, is beautiful.

Another interesting example with a similar approach is *Matter*,¹⁰ a website for longreads that offers subscriptions for a small monthly fee, and the possibility of purchasing a single story, which grants access to a responsive, carefully designed and distraction-free layout.

The importance of design is crucial in these examples: what can really improve a reading experience on the web is a good user interface, a clear layout of contents and a proven legibility.

'The main currency of news sites is attention':¹¹ you can't paywall the contents or the actual access to information, only the access to a better experience. We are keen to pay in order not to see the ads: design, again, is the valuable item on the table. Investing in platforms and building consistent systems for the delivery of articles and media can be the most effective ways to get people pay in order to gain access. Paywalling a content without changing the experience will always move audiences towards alternative sources of intellectual entertainment available for free somewhere else on the Net.

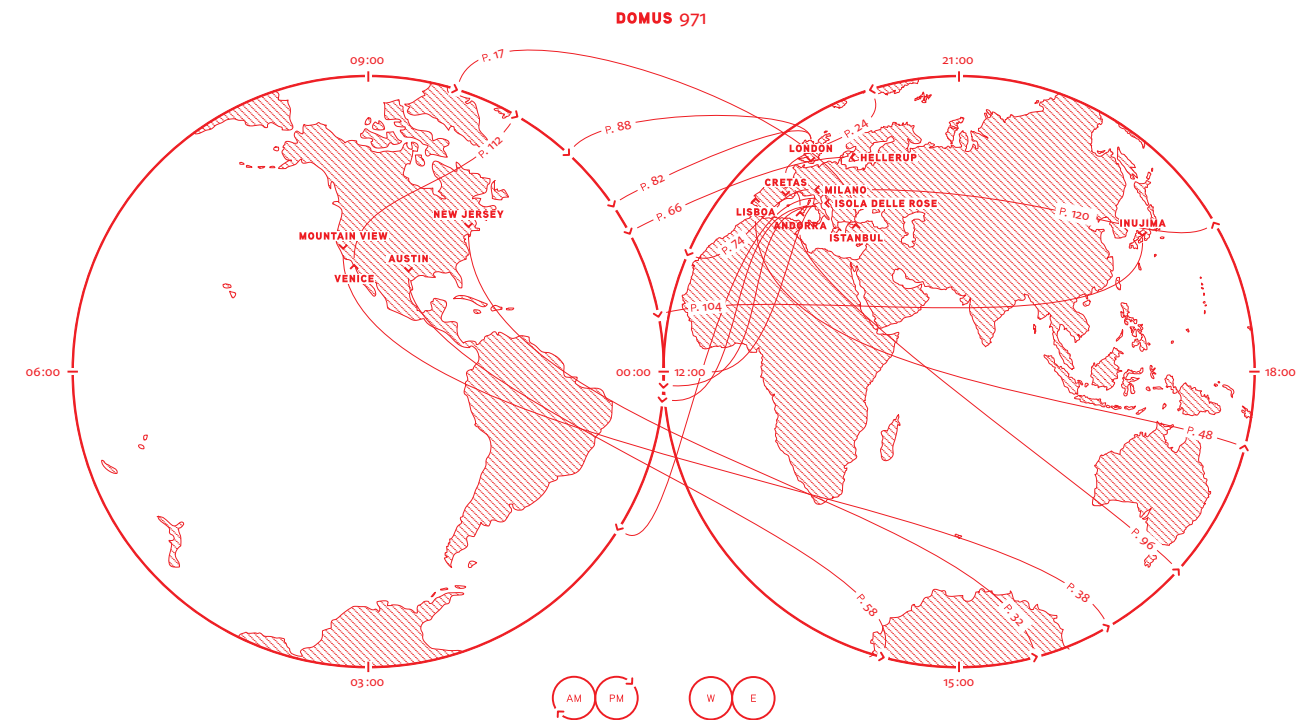
So, if the same content's feed is supposed to flow into different devices, it's pretty clear how what was once the sole domain of graphic and editorial design is now gradually flanked by the rise of coding, even if we are speaking about a different discipline (product design), as Justin McGuirk has sharply pointed out, 'The real innovation is happening at the level of code.'¹² Code is managing to make the distinction between different media disappear. In an increasingly digital world in which even manufacturing is

developing through open-source distributed structures, the separation between physical products and digital information is ceasing to be visible. If editorial design thrived on the urgency of modulating and resolving complexity in newspaper pages, in today's world an app's UI has a much greater impact on our daily lives. The way in which we design frameworks and interfaces is a matter inherently related to the discipline of design.

“What was once the sole domain of graphic and editorial design is now gradually flanked by the rise of coding”

Once Joseph Grima and I had completed our work at *Domus* (with issue 971, July/August 2013), a new editor in chief took the reins of the magazine and new design directions have been proposed. Instead of seeking a transition towards an integrated platform of contents and shifting its hub from analogue to digital, the choice seems to lie in privileging a more 'traditional' readership, one that is willing to pay a higher price for a more expensive product. The main focus appears to be drifting from content towards the manufacturing of an exclusive commodity, establishing a hierarchy between different media.

We are keen to read things on screens because by doing so we are just one step away from effortlessly sharing them and thus converting them into parts of our own legacy—a germinal development of a personal editorial activity. Suffice it to look at *Flipboard*, the whole concept of which was the intention to collect and curate stories, to the point that the main interactive element consists in 'flipping' through contents, in the same way as we flip



▲ Visual (chronological and geographical) index of the projects, in-depth articles and opinions featured in 971 *Domus* issue.

through the pages of a physical magazine. Digital tools on the web enable us to appropriate what we read more thoroughly—if we share the contents we enjoy as readers, these can also help shape our personality on a more direct level. It's seamless, effective, and doesn't even require the ability of remembering or even fully understanding what we consume as readers.

Besides a certain compulsion to seek self-confidence in connection with the use of social networks, these tools also grant us strong political power. The logic and the resilience of the networks lie in their open protocol and inherent difficulty in preventing the circulation of information, which is something hard to inscribe within our legal framework. In the first words of his article printed at the back of the last

issue of *Domus* to be published by Grima, Fabrizio Gallanti stated that 'architecture and design magazines published in Italy represent an enclave of democracy'.¹³ What we strove to do at *Domus*—chiefly through Joseph Grima's courageous and innovative editorial approach, designed to transform the magazine into a twenty-first-century editorial venture (capable of delivering contents on multiple platforms, and being constantly connected to a network of international contributors)—pursued this idea.

10 *Matter* [online] [Accessed: 30 September 2013]. Available at: <https://www.readmatter.com/>

11 O. Reichenstein, 'Business Class: Freemium for News?' [online]. iA blog, 2011. [Accessed: 30 September 2013]. Available at: <http://ia.net/blog/business-class-news/>

12 J. McGuirk, 'Design critics make an exception for certain technology products' [online]. *Dezeen*, 2013. [Accessed: 30 September 2013]. Available at: <http://www.dezeen.com/2013/09/27/opinion-justin-mcguirk-design-criticism-technology/>

13 F. Gallanti, 'On Architecture Magazines,' *Domus*, No. 971 (2013), pp. 120–123.