

Designing for territorial revitalization. A diffused art exhibition to foster northwest Italian inner areas

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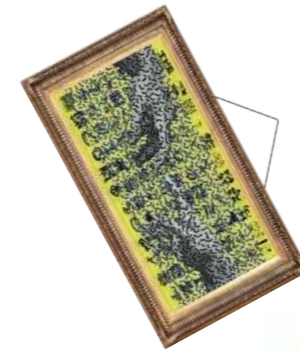
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# Designing for Territorial Revitalization.

A diffused art exhibition to foster Northwest Italian inner areas.

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Design for territories considers lands not only as a spatial context but also as a design object that has to be approached with definite strategies. The use of design methodologies for territorial purposes could lead to innovative products, services, policies and structures, with the aim to stimulate new activities and local relations. This contribution sheds light on the role of design discipline in building and implementing methods to support the development of a territory. The paper presents an actual case study carried out by a group of systemic design researchers from Politecnico di Torino, who worked on a multi-layered action plan for the Piedmont Region, in the north of Italy. For this plan, the designers were required to set up a series of guidelines to improve or activate well founded territorial policies. The research was carried out in the areas of culture, local economy and tourism promotion through the

project of a diffused art exhibition entitled *Il Rinascimento di Gaudenzio Ferrari*.<sup>1</sup> The exhibition also resulted in the development of participatory services, the enhancement of local economies, and the strengthening of the relations between districts. The paper analyses the supportive role of design, with investigations on emerging design, design for territories and systemic design. It describes the main phases of the project, underlining its outcomes, the positive impacts on local communities, its limits and possible future developments. It further suggests possible perspectives for an evolutionary process in the design sphere, with distinct guidelines for creating new diffused events.

**Key words:**

**Design For Territories, Systemic Design, Diffused Art Exhibition, Inner Areas, Local Development.**

## 1. Introduction.

The objective of the paper is to present the contributions of design in tackling territorial issues, working on new strategies addressed to develop and strengthen local economies and interconnecting governance policies. This is illustrated by the validation and assessment of theory through the implementation of a project. Currently, the design discipline is undergoing a transformation in its identity and competencies. The centre of the discussion is on how design can pursue its original purposes with regards to changes over time, societies and attitudes. The capacity to transform reality through better or new solutions may, in fact, assume different shapes and using various ways of acting, without changing the original scope. Designers have dealt with the concept of project (vb., from Latin "pro-iacere", to throw ahead) from widely differing perspectives. Researchers, academics and experts in several fields are realizing the increasing complexity of our reality. Therefore, design should no longer operate by distinct sectors, but become more inclusive and connect to new values and perspectives. Designers are required to develop a marked capacity of interpretation and comprehension, that includes complexity as a world-shaping force, and develop a sensitivity towards that dynamism (Fry, 2009). Design approaches are shifting their goals toward more comprehensive impacts and no longer deal with single or pre-defined needs. Design is starting to extensively explore the world in its broadest sense, tending towards topics such as economics, social sciences, territorial planning, artificial intelligence, big data and the environment, as a result of a global and irrepressible phenomenon of immense challenges. At the core of this contribution is the developing role of design to consider and include the multifaceted needs expressed in diverse territories. The design discipline is called upon to mature a strategic ability to act on more aspects, and on multifaceted complex scenarios at the same time. The reading of these signs, and of the linked future perspectives, is the source from which a systemic diffused project originates. The research conducted

by the Department of Architecture and Design at Politecnico di Torino<sup>2</sup> is based on the holistic territorial analysis of an inner north western area of Piedmont, in order to define and break down a set of occurring problems, and to identify interconnected multi-level strategies that can be adopted for reaching the desired change.

## 2. Design toward multidisciplinary: An emerging identity.

The design discipline boasts an established old and elaborate history from the early twentieth century when it developed as a specialized activity in Europe. At that time, it largely dealt with mass-manufactured products, but since then many things have changed and design has shifted away from "objects" toward "ways of thinking and doing" (Manzini, 2016). A decisive leap that boosted its evolutionary processes occurred as a result of the rising complexity in the dynamics of the world. It is in this cultural framework, that design has approached wider and manifold issues, trying to seek solutions to complex matters, whether social or environmental, economic or territorial, while broadening its disciplinary boundaries. The design of processes is no longer intended as the exclusive priority and competence of an individual professional: it is instead collaboratively conducted by a variety of expert stakeholders, which may even include the end-users. Design is, therefore, not assignable by nature to a unique area of study (Deserti, 2010), but it has always been at the intersection of multiple fields. As Victor Margolin (1992) observed, design does not refer to principles that specify its aim, but is defined each time the profession is put into practice. What characterizes an emerging design is a space of action that is fluid and that receives influences from miscellaneous kinds of knowledge. Design is becoming a multi-faceted science for the use and the implementation of other studies, a sort of toolbox that gains significance on the basis of its applications, and not a discipline that lives by itself.

As design widens to more fields of

application, it is necessarily undergoing a learning phase about methods and activities from other areas, especially the conceptually closer ones. Design contaminates – and is contaminated – every time a new context has to be investigated, or a project area defined. This occurs from the first steps up to the final outcomes, within a continuous process of understanding. As a matter of context-based knowledge, where all the involved disciplines are not ranked on a hierarchical scale but rather lie in a miscellany of intersections and mutual influences, design assumes a particular role. This role lies in the ability to see all these subjects from the top, not with any dominant role, but as the discipline which is able to grasp their connections and meanings. "Design is now becoming more about listening, asking, understanding, and drafting new possibilities and alternative realities" (Muratovski, 2016), and it is progressively turning into a cardinal way of thinking, where interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary practices can no longer be separated.

## 3. Design embraces systemic thinking.

Different areas of the design discipline have been affected by rapid changes in perspectives and mindsets. Meanwhile, other domains have carried out long-established activity with well-known and even more consolidated competencies. It is in these conditions that a new way to conceive design, with a diverse conceptual sense has developed. What is identified as systemic design is one of its under explored wings that deals with complex issues, systems of relations and intertwined functions, where the focus on solution-oriented approaches moved toward more integrative practices. Thus, systemic designers consider design as an advanced practice of rigorous research and form-giving methods, of critical reasoning and creative making, and of sub-disciplines and deep skill sets (Jones, 2014).

Systemic thinking has arisen from the urgency to recognize and deal with significant societal and global concerns. Design scholars and educators started

a fruitful reflection on the role of design for these kinds of issues, which has led to the delineation of systems theory and systems studies in the second half of the last century. Systemic design implies an orientation to advance design practices in complex problems. The orientation and the methodology through which this happens are also reflections of a changed identity based on collaborations and the interplay with diverse figures. The interaction and the co-design process that involves other figures is not only an internal priority but a necessity deriving from the discipline's current role of mediator (Celaschi, 2017). Thus, emerging design and systemic design rarely deploy vertically specialized abilities; they involve instead enabling capacities aimed at increasing the interoperability among several areas of study. In this way, new and additional research environments have been integrated with design. An interesting field is represented by territorial planning and regional studies. Territories are wide objects of investigation because of the variety of sub-elements and internal dynamics. Therefore, design can be used as a tool to inspect and operate on them, embracing territorial issues as some of the most multifaceted fields of design.

## 4. Design for territories: Goals and ambitions through experimental research.

Design for territories means designing for a territorial scope, with a focus both on small and larger scales. Interventions may imply the realization of products, the rethinking and configuration of production processes, the envisioning of new activities, or the outlining of strategies. Design has been dealing with territories in many ways, for example by studying and reinterpreting specific traditional products for selected geographical areas. However, designing for territories also means putting services into place. Even though the design discipline has often regarded territories and spatial contexts, a proper identifier label to define this relevance had not been clearly determined previously. Only recently, the

design community has come to feel the necessity to recognize and gather, under the same field of inquiry, the various studies that are working on territories. The literature on this topic is still limited and lacks a substantial theoretical reference framework. In spite of this, a relevant dialogue within the scientific community is emerging.

Practitioners are also seeking to contribute to this theme with new ideas and projects. The beginning of this interest can be traced back to the end of the '90s, along with the cultural debate about the transformation of big cities. At that time, multiple studies went into more depth on this matter by developing new fields of study such as territorial marketing, cultural marketing and economy of experience. Since then, a radical shift has occurred, and the territories once considered as the design context are now considered to be the design object (Parente and Sadini, 2017). The design approach to the territory is, in any case, a strategic one. For that reason, it is hard to detect a specific knowledge in which it can be identified. Design for territories includes a group of disciplines in relation to an objective and is not a discipline in itself (Lupo, Parente and Sadini, 2017).

Designing for territories definitively includes a set of heterogeneous actions with a common aim; that is the transformation of potential resources into effective implementation, within an overall perspective of sustainability and well-being for territories, people and socio-economic systems. In accord with these premises, this paper presents a design project that incorporates various types of intervention, with the accent on its outreach over time and triggering causes for activating further processes.

## 5. A diffused art exhibition in Piedmont.

*Il Rinascimento di Gaudenzio Ferrari* is the title of an art exhibition spread over the three towns of Varallo Sesia, Vercelli and Novara, from March to September 2018. Ferrari was an Italian painter and sculptor, and he is considered the leading representative of the Piedmontese Renaissance. His early pictorial style was

mainly influenced by the well-known artists Leonardo da Vinci and Bramantino (Agosti and Stoppa, 2018). However, his work was distinguished by strong animation, as shown beyond doubt in his most memorable religious works in the chapels in Sacro Monte and the fresco in Santa Maria delle Grazie in Varallo Sesia. The long-planned exhibition became an occasion to rediscover the magnificence of Ferrari's masterpieces, while promoting a wider initiative aimed at fostering cultural tourism and local economies. Most of the showcased paintings and sculptures were already present on the sites, while some of them were lent by other Italian and foreign museums, local churches and prestigious private collections. The event was made possible through the close cooperation between several public and private local and national stakeholders. It was promoted and sustained by the Piedmont Region, Compagnia di San Paolo, Fondazione CRT, and Intesa Sanpaolo. It was organized by Associazione Abbonamento Musei<sup>3</sup> (an association that manages the accessibility and the presentation of most of the cultural sites in Piedmont and Lombardy), the municipalities, and in collaboration with Politecnico di Torino, Department of Architecture and Design among others.<sup>4</sup> The actual exhibition took place at Palazzo dei Musei and Sacro Monte di Varallo, where the early stages of Ferrari's career were presented, while at Arca in Vercelli (former St Mark's Church) the artist's more mature masterpieces were showcased. Broletto in Novara accommodated the latest products of his artistic career (Agosti, Minonzio and Stoppa, 2018). Due to the multiple geographic locations across which the artist lived, the exhibition could not have happened in just one place. A diffused art exhibition was therefore the proper way to re-explore heritage while combining art, history, territory and people.

With the final aim of fostering the mentioned goals, the Politecnico di Torino was engaged at different stages, from the communication plan to the arrangement of the strategic development. The contribution of the Politecnico has been supportive of other measures driven by the Region, the municipalities, the tourism agency and Abbonamento Musei.

To handle the project, three conditions were outlined to provide and engage such bordering areas as: activities as incentives for territorial productivity (what); creation of a thick relational tissue between territories (how); and actions with impact on the long term (when). Subsequently, the territories were holistically scrutinized, and the project was approached following these steps: identification of places, holistic analysis, evaluation of critical issues and motivations for change, definition of guidelines, project execution, direct/indirect results from mapping, impact analysis, and definition of new guidelines.

The outcomes led to, and are still producing, answers regarding the levels of economic profitability, quality of life, perspectives of growth and governmental cohesion. Most of the gathered data has been elaborated to gain qualitative insights in support of the project development.

## 6. First design deliverables.

The research group led the aspect of visual identity and the communication of the exhibition, in collaboration with Abbonamento Musei, and the curators Giovanni Agosti and Jacopo Stoppa.



Fig.1. Design phases of the logotype.

Starting with a selection of the most representative paintings to advertise each venue, the design team came up with a range of graphic products, intended not only for the exhibition, but also for promoting the territory. The logotype Gaudenzio is designed to be reminiscent of a personal seal and can be inscribed in a square (Fig.1). The use of the sole personal name and the hyphenation of the syllables imparts a strong and unusual identification. By insisting on the facility of pronunciation and informal communication, the intent was to ideally shorten the distance between the artist and its audience. The dark background is in strong contrast with the white lettering, resulting from an analysis of the irregular serif typefaces, typical of the 16th century. The body copy, the advertisement (Fig.2), the banners and other visual artifacts were designed to attract people toward

new places and create interest in the less conventional aspects of little-known places. Banners were placed in the towns in which the exhibition took place but also in Turin, the regional capital.

With regard to digital media, more focused work has been made along these lines; firstly by defining the official website, and secondly in particular, by designing the digital platform - an open-access App to guide tourists to the exhibition sites, which provides them with accessible audio guides and augmented reality contents, share trip tips and engages them with the community of users (Fig.3). The development of the platform was made possible thanks to Ulixé Group, an innovative ICT company based in Turin, and is available to download for free both on AppStore and Google Play. The promotion of Gaudenzio has been surprisingly effective and the

logo has been used even beyond its original purposes, to identify local artisan products and gastronomical produce. The following paragraph provides a deeper insight into the project outcomes and its impacts on local communities, while illustrating some of the several artifacts that have been realized. Visual and graphic elements were, in fact, only the first design deliverables for the exhibition. Designing for a territory means dealing with many aspects including organization and communication, scenario building, participation and other kinds of interaction (Parente and Villari, 2010).

## 7. Project outcomes and impacts.

Over a period of around seven months, the exhibition involved more than 37,000 visitors, in three venues. Most of them came from Piedmont and Lombardy, with a lower percentage from Emilia-Romagna, Veneto and Liguria. The presence of foreigners was limited (less than 3%) (Associazione Abbonamento Musei, 2018). This indicates the local scale of the event and its territorial relevance. Despite the advanced average seniority of the tourists (55 years old), more than 6,000 of them downloaded the App, taking advantage of its easy-to-use features and listening to the ad-hoc recorded audio

guides. Fostering the connections among the main actors, including designers and governance agencies, opened promising perspectives of cooperation. As mentioned above, the event acted as a catalyst for the organization of related initiatives, connected to the local territories and the topics of the exhibition. The initiatives included thematic guided tours, conferences, trekking excursions and child-friendly activities, in order to include all citizens (Osservatorio Culturale del Piemonte, 2018). Together with these several activities, it is worth mentioning the busy schedule of events (concerts, conferences, tours) that took place in Varallo Sesia, and the realization of two murals in Varallo and Novara, by the street artist Andrea Ravo Mattoni (Fig.4). Several new territorial relations have also been created with public and private institutions, local activities and communities. The Gaudenzio logo has been particularly appreciated. Apart from the institutional advertising material, it has been spontaneously adopted by producers and business owners for the branding of some traditional products, or new ones created for the occasion. The logo has appeared on 10 different types of products on sale, with a greater emphasis in Varallo, where 11 businesses became involved. This has been possible due to Varallo's touristic vocation, a little town in which tradition and historical heritage

are still particularly relevant and part of people's identity. By using the logo, the community demonstrated the willingness to enrich the narrative of its own territory and the necessity to revive it continuously over time. The brand Gaudenzio has been diffused in other contexts to promote the location and different kinds of local products like toma (a typical ripened cheese, Fig.5), biscuits, bread (Fig.6), miasce (a traditional dough), beer, honey (Fig.7), jams, ice creams, agendas, soaps and shoes (Fig.8).

In most cases, producers and sellers decided to maintain the logo after the conclusion of the event, transforming it into a permanent mark of their identity. As evidence of its popularity and effectiveness, it has also been introduced for the sign posting of local hiking trails supervised by CAI (Italian Alpine Club), and for the religious itineraries at Sacro Monte di Varallo (Fig.9). The municipality also decided to give visibility to their new and refreshed identity with a large painting at the entrance of the town (Fig.10). With respect to the advertising banners made of PVC, the local NGO Di.A.Psi. based in Vercelli - that supports individuals with mental illnesses and their families - had the great initiative to give them a second life; rather than being trashed, the banners underwent an upcycling process, utilizing local craftsmanship



Fig.2. Visual advertisement of the diffused exhibition in Vercelli and in Torino, the regional capital.



Fig.3. The App Gaudenzio downloadable from AppStore and Google Play Store.



Fig.4. Andrea Ravo Mattoni, graffiti artist, proud of his artwork in Varallo. The painting reproduces a portion of the renowned Ferrari's work titled *Adoration of the Child with a bishop*.



Fig.5. The producer Cerini Farm showing the Gaudentian toma.



Fig.6. Traditional bread produced by the local bakery Il panificio di Varallo.



Fig.7. Honey from Apicoltura Sategna.



Fig.8. Scapin, a traditional local footwear, is realized in a special version as a tribute to Gaudenzio Ferrari.



Fig.9. One of the explanatory plaques situated in front of a chapel at Sacro Monte di Varallo.



Fig.10. The large-scale reproduction of the logo Gaudenzio painted on a wall at the entrance of Varallo.

skills and becoming unique colourful bags and pencil cases. The products can be currently bought in local thrift shops. These signs are clear evidence that the exhibition has been a driving force for the enhancement of local activities and related economies, even if with limitations and, in some cases, limited results. These effects are qualitatively important to accentuate the sense of belonging of the citizens to the entire process, the cooperative atmosphere between those who participated, and the perception of unity. The long-term goal revolves around the will of perpetuating these feelings and positive vibes, even after the temporal and spatial end of the exhibition.

## 8. Limitations and future steps.

In qualitative terms, the exhibition has been the pretext to revitalize a decentralized area of Piedmont, through a carefully planned cultural operation aimed at discovering more about an extraordinary artist of the past. Furthermore, it has been an occasion to foster the collaboration between contributors and beneficiaries and to create powerful work groups that could cooperate side by side toward common shared goals, even in the future. Undoubtedly, quantifying direct

and indirect impacts on territories and economies could be challenging. More detailed mapping of the reverberations of the event is still ongoing and will require the expertise of economists, sociologists, engineers and institutions to assess socio-economical macro results in the short, medium and long terms. The analysis will include a comprehensive report of the products sold, the revenues and the percentage of local GDP increase. The evaluation will be conducted together, but not exclusively, with local shops and producers, and will include face-to-face interviews and surveys, in order to define other possible influential KPIs. Further joint academic research on the role of design for territories would be desirable. However, it is of primary importance to continue creating and strengthening relationships between stakeholders, inculcate new processes and motivations for territories and municipalities to collaborate for the benefit of the region. A periodical update of the Gaudenzio App could transform it into the driving force for the promotion of local areas, aside from the specific event it was originally designed and published for.

## 9. Final comments.

The project of the diffused art exhibition introduced in this paper is

a valuable experiment for the design community. The event attempted to act on several levels by rethinking design as a multifaceted, multifold activity of thoughts and actions that are combined together. The observed impacts have certainly left positive traces in terms of a fertile terrain for the future growth of other initiatives.

Further verifications are however necessary to confirm and validate the suitability of this approach in different contexts.

A critical inspection of the suggested guidelines is opportune in order to reach a higher degree of applications. From a methodological point of view, enriching and extending the dialogue among the network of experts and researchers is a fundamental requirement.

The current case study and the research that has been simultaneously carried out, demonstrated an increasing and encouraging interest not only among the design community but also between public institutions and local speakers. Trialing this approach in other environments will enable design to define, with more clarity and awareness, the mix of different competencies needed. All these are incentives to take the discussion forward and to inspire the search for unresolved questions.

## Notes

- The title of the exhibition means *The Renaissance of Gaudenzio Ferrari*. Ferrari was a great Italian artist from the 16th century and the most important exponent of the Renaissance in Piedmont. His artistic works depicted some areas of Piedmont and Lombardy, where he lived between 1475 and 1546. He left important traces of a relevant artistic and cultural contribution that were worth to be told through a uniquely inclusive event. This was one of the assumptions that led to the design of a diffused event that could join territories which share common traits.
- The team that carried out the research project, titled *Design for Arts: Design of a coordinated visual identity system for The Renaissance of Gaudenzio Ferrari*, was composed of Pier Paolo Peruccio (Associate Professor of Design), Paola Menzardi and Maurizio Vrenna (Ph.D. candidates in Management, Production and Design), Riccardo degli Emili and Lorenzo Saracino, (former M.Sc. students in Systemic Design).
- The team of Abbonamento Musei that directly worked with Politecnico di Torino was composed of Dino Berardi (President), Simona Ricci (Executive Director), Eleonora Serra (Manager and Project Developer), Roberto Mautino (Organization and Communication Project Manager), and Lia Passadori (Responsible for the Sales Network and Tickets).
- A complete list of the partners involved can be found at <https://gaudenzioferrari.it/partner/>

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## Biography

**Pier Paolo Peruccio**. Ph.D. in History of Architecture and Urban Planning; Architect and Associate Professor of Design at Politecnico di Torino. Peruccio is WDO/ICSID Board Member, co-director of SYDERE (Systemic Design Research and Education) Center in Lyon and Turin, Coordinator of the II Level Specializing Master in Design for Arts. He is currently working on research projects concerning history of sustainable design, systems thinking and innovation in design education.

**Paola Menzardi**. Ph.D. candidate in Management, Production and Design at Politecnico di Torino. Her research explores how design is entangled in digital cartography aimed at developing augmented experiences of traveling and new collective forms of territorial narration. She studies new travel practices, ways of exploring and experiencing the backcountries to drive forward processes of revitalization and local development.

**Maurizio Vrenna**. Ph.D. candidate at Politecnico di Torino who operated in China for more than two years. During his professional and academic career in Europe and Asia, he became aware of the importance of a sustainable development, which cannot be realized without a profound change in the current politic/economic patterns. His career objective is to serve as an expert in the field of sustainable design through targeted research that aspire at concrete real-world applications.