

## The strategic role of design: The Italian case

### O papel estratégico do design: o caso italiano

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#### Abstract

Almost all the histories of Italian design tell us that design culture was born in a close relation between professionals and SMEs. Looking at this relation, we can read the story of the relation between design and strategy from a pretty peculiar perspective. Starting from those sectors today we would normally call “design-oriented”, Italian SMEs historically develop a symbiotic relationship with design, which becomes the engine of innovation: a driver which gives the opportunity to build their identity, and emerge in the domestic and in the international markets. This relation is almost always characterized by a direct link between entrepreneur and designer, in which the designer is not only asked to give shape to ideas, but rather to understand and interpret the needs, to anticipate desires, to build a “frame of meaning” around the market offer. The Italian entrepreneur is used to discuss with the designer the development of new products, defining market opportunities, and the possible solutions. In an under-structured context, where marketing (and for sure strategic marketing) is still missing, design plays a role of mediation in the relation between company and market, developing what we are used to call a strategic approach. In other words, in Italy design developed a strategic attitude from the very beginning, and did not become strategic after the meeting with marketing. The framework in which this happens is very particular: the entrepreneur usually operates within a confined space (the industrial cluster) in which his motivation to emerge is mainly linked to social legitimacy. This framework – to quote Weber backwards – builds a tension towards the creation of “beautiful and well made products” rather than a tension towards profit, which explains why design comes before marketing. This entire story happened in Italy in the absence of a structured presence of design within the university, which initially is not a “visible” player within the system. Only the profound transformations of the competitive scenario generated, in relatively recent times, a need for a specifically targeted research and education system, leading to the fast development of the design-system inside the university. If we look at it today, looks like it has been there from the very beginning, while its pretty recent birth is a sign of a profound change, carrying the need of more conscious approaches to design.

**Key words:** strategic design, design practice, SMEs, industrial clusters.

#### Resumo

Quase todas as histórias de design italiano nos dizem que a cultura do design nasceu em uma estreita relação entre os profissionais e as SMEs. Olhando para essa relação, podemos ler a história da relação entre a concepção e a estratégia a partir de uma perspectiva bastante peculiar. A partir de hoje, os setores que normalmente chamamos de “design-oriented”, o italiano SMEs historicamente desenvolve uma relação simbiótica com a concepção, que passa a ser o motor da inovação: guiando o design para construir sua identidade, e emerge no mercado interno e nos mercados internacionais. Esta relação é quase sempre caracterizada por uma relação direta entre empresário e designer, em que o criador não é só solicitado para dar forma às ideias, mas sim para compreender e interpretar as necessidades, a fim de antecipar desejos, para construir um “quadro de significado” sobre a oferta do mercado. O empresário italiano é usado para discutir com o criador do desenvolvimento de novos produtos, definindo oportunidades de mercado, e as possíveis soluções. Em um sub-contexto estruturado, onde marketing (marketing estratégico, com certeza) ainda está faltando, o design desempenha um papel de mediação na relação entre empresa e mercado, desenvolvendo aquilo que é utilizado para ligar com uma abordagem estratégica. Em outras palavras, na Itália a concepção estratégica é desenvolvida como uma atitude desde o início, e não se torna estratégica após a reunião com o marketing. O quadro em que isso acontece é muito especial: o empresário normalmente opera dentro de um espaço confinado (o *cluster* industrial) em que a sua motivação para emergir é principalmente ligada à legitimidade social, que – para citar Weber trás – conduz a uma tensão no sentido da criação de “bonito e produtos bem feitos”, em vez de tensão para o lucro, o que explica por que vem antes da concepção à comercialização. Toda esta história aconteceu na Itália, na ausência de uma presença estruturada de concepção no seio da universidade, que inicialmente não é um jogador “visível” dentro do sistema. Apenas as profundas transformações do cenário competitivo gerado, em tempos relativamente recentes, exigem a necessidade de uma investigação especificamente orientada e sistema de ensino, levando ao rápido desenvolvimento da concepção do sistema a partir da universidade. Se olharmos hoje, parece que foi ali desde o início, enquanto o seu bonito recente nascimento é um sinal de uma mudança profunda, que transportam mais consciência da necessidade de abordagens de concepção.

**Palavras-chave:** design estratégico, prática de design, SMEs, *clusters* industriais.

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Almost all the stories of Italian design tell us that Italian design culture was born in a close relation between professionals and SMEs. This relation has been described by many authors, using all the possible categories and points of view of historical studies. In fact, we can read about this relation even in the lines of the typical stories based on the description of single characters, and we find it fully represented in the stories describing industrial production as based on the relation with society, technology, economy, such as De Fusco's history of design, where Italian design is described in terms of differences with other national contexts not just from a stylistic point of view, but linking it with the social and industrial context (De Fusco, 1985).

De Fusco's point of view is particularly interesting: it is not simply focalized on the history of objects and characters, but also on the simultaneous history of ideas, processes and organizational patterns. Reading his history of design, we discover, for example, that the very idea of "mass customization", which seems to be born in the North American economic context at the beginning of the nineties, according to the famous definition by Stan Davis and the studies of Joseph Pine (1992), was already applied by Italian furniture companies during the late seventies:

"Wanting to have a wide range of models in their portfolio, companies use a limited number of flexible machines, in contrast with many rigid machines normally used in other kinds of industries. Concerning the management of stockings, they normally stock components rather than end-products, which generates in the customer the impression that the furniture industry is working on commission"<sup>1</sup> (De Fusco, 1985, p. 275).

This description was published years before Pine's book, and refers to an even previous situation. The history of "Latin design" is full of these little lapses, mainly linked with the difficulty in building an international stature of its theoretical background. The case of Italy is somehow paradigmatic: there is no correspondence between the strength of the national design system and the reputation of the Italian design thinking. For sure a negative role is played by the language: while design is international by itself, design thinking has to be expressed in a national idiom. We would like to fill this gap, not in contrast with a dominant culture, but with the idea of giving a contribution to a general growth.

One of the biggest misunderstandings coming from the lack of diffusion of the theoretical background of Italian design, is the unavoidable description of its history as a parade of icons, which played an important role in its popularization, but at the same time represented a distraction from a deeper interpretation.

What we strongly want to point out is that Italian design developed processes as well as products. Obviously,

products are always much more appealing and easier to be communicated than the processes they come from, but if we really want to give a contribution to design studies, we have to be able to link them looking at design practice.

Going back to our central issue, the relation between Italian design and local industrial clusters in terms of practice and processes has been explored in a founding research conducted by a group of 17 Italian universities coordinated by Politecnico di Milano, where the basic idea was to define the role of design in the innovation process connecting many different points of view, like those coming from the economic studies on local development and clusters; those coming from the market strategies; those coming from the product development processes; and of course those coming from design theories and methods.<sup>2</sup>

The results of this research tell us about a tough relation between design and SMEs, about the primary role played by design in the development of the so called "Made in Italy"; and about the perspectives of further integration between design and local production systems in a period of fast change of the competitive environment (Maffei and Simonelli, 2002).

The evolution of design in a context so strongly linked with industrial clusters is obviously connected with the evolution of clusters themselves, so that we can use the relation with SMEs inside local clusters as a key for the interpretation of the development of Italian design.

The first phenomenon that we observe looking at the Italian clusters evolution and their relation with design, is represented by the shift from the challenge of serving the domestic market to the challenge of expanding to international markets, occurred in different periods in the different sectors of "Made in Italy", but with a general development starting from the '80s.

If we look at it from a design perspective, we have to notice that the most relevant issue is the progressive introduction of foreign designers inside the "Made in Italy" system, a phenomenon that can be interpreted in different ways:

- enforcing the idea that for the Italian companies, and particularly SMEs, designers traditionally work as interpreters of social needs and innovation agents, so that facing foreign markets they prefer to rely on designers familiar with the specific social and economic contexts, or with international markets in a more general sense;
- linking it with the communication role that designers start to play inside the value proposition of the companies. In fact, part of the Italian design mythology is built on the fact that Italian companies start communicating the designers as characters, trying to make them famous or at least familiar to

<sup>1</sup> Translation by the author of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> We refer to the research "Sistema Design Italia" (Italian Design System), whose results have been published in different books and essays. "Sistema Design Italia" was the first research awarded with the 'Compasso d'Oro' prize by the Italian Design Association (ADI) in 2001 "for the quality and the innovative character of the results".

their audience. This makes pretty natural the idea that foreign designers can be used as testimonials of the newly acquired international status of the companies; • as a signal of a provincial attitude, which companies try to escape from by trying to build fragments of internationality, while in fact they even try hard to find someone speaking foreign languages inside their organization.

The second phenomenon is the progressive shift from the idea of “Made in Italy” to the idea of “Italian Style”. Looking at it from a design point of view, we are tempted to have a completely positive attitude: it seems pretty difficult to be prophets of the Italian Style without the Italian designers. But we have to observe that this is a slippery ground.

One of the bases of the idea of Italian Style is that production lost its central role, leaving space to much more strategic functions. This story has been told many times, linking it to the new central role of brand, or to new forms of companies territorial organization and production. Sometimes it has led to a sharp criticism of new economic and social paradigms<sup>3</sup>. In some other cases it has led to the idea of a sort of natural balance in the fluxes of people and goods from the different parts of the world (Legrain, 2002). What we can say for sure in the Italian case is that - even though in some sectors we have seen a deep delocalization - the idea that large part of the production has moved to emerging countries is completely false. Italy keeps on being a big producer in many sectors, and it seems there is no real signal of an inversion of trend.

We also have to observe that the very idea that design could possibly survive the absence of an industrial background is pretty difficult to believe. The cases of the Italian computer and consumer electronics industry prove this pretty well. Olivetti used to be one of the best stories of success in the integration between design and entrepreneurship in a local cluster<sup>4</sup>. But if we look at more recent times, we discover that Italian design completely lost its space in the computer and electronics sector: the lack of the industrial background turned into the disappearance of Italian designers operating in the sector, and in a gap in competences which will be difficult to fill in the future.

We are somehow tempted to go back to the idea of the “Made in Italy”. But again we have to observe that this is another slippery ground: today it would be difficult - probably impossible - to certificate something as “Made in Italy”. What would we have to control: that the idea was developed in Italy? By a completely Italian team? With Italian designers? Realized by an Italian company? With

Italian production machineries? Using Italian components? Or just branding a supposedly Italian end-product? And how would we consider the Chinese community in Prato?<sup>5</sup> As a delocalization of manpower? Or as a simple change in the production base where we can still use the category of “Made in Italy”.

In fact, nor the old idea of “Made in Italy”, nor the new idea of “Italian Style” would perfectly match our need to explain the change in Italian design practice, but we cannot get rid of the interest in style in such a simple way: The idea of style carries with itself some important consequences: It is the signal of a deep change which is worth a deeper investigation. From a design perspective, this brings to some relevant issues: on one side it seems that the materiality of the production is somehow losing its central position; on the other hand, it seems that the centre of the attention moves to what we could call an “atmosphere”, which is a pretty complicated thing to define, and an even more complicated thing to be designed and managed. In this change, we have to underline the importance of the role played by the brand: while at the beginning of our story it used to be a secondary issue, mainly a problem of identity, now it has become a strategic issue for most of the companies.

The third phenomenon is the progressive shift from the typical district models, described in the studies on local economies by authors like Becattini, Brusco, Rullani,<sup>6</sup> to what we could call an “extended production system”. If production is not at all disappearing, as figures tell us, industrial clusters keep on being alive: they survive and change. In this sense the extended production systems could be defined as a transformation of the industrial clusters much more than their substitution. This phenomenon can be described with the idea that the borders of local districts become too narrow to contain the complexity of production, which tend to expand to wider areas, until the very idea of local district cannot describe anymore what is happening, and in fact new definitions, such as that of meta-district, or that of “extended system” replace the old one. What we normally observe today is that the traditional districts lose their borders, and that companies tend to build a system of relations which is still locally based, but with many possible links to a wider territory, up to a global scale.

The opening of local borders, combined with the fragmentation of the knowledge base of production, represents a new challenge, leading to new roles of design inside companies, which cannot be described as a peculiar Italian condition, since some evolutionary patterns are definitely similar in all the advanced economies, with reference to all the possible dimensional scales of companies.

<sup>3</sup> This happened with a particular media exposure with the so called no-global thought, well expressed by the famous book by Naomi Klein (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Many stories of design describe the Olivetti case, and a few monographies have been published on Olivetti (De Giorgi and Morteo, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Prato is the centre one of the traditional Italian textile districts, where a wide community of workers coming from China has now almost completely substituted the Italian manpower.

<sup>6</sup> These authors, and in particular Giacomo Becattini, develop their theories on the economic mechanisms of industrial clusters starting from the actualization of some intuitions of the economist Alfred Marshall, but they are part of an Italian school on local economies, which expressed advanced theories on the forms of industrial organization of SMEs long before some most celebrated international authors.

At a first level, we notice that design professionals progressively shift from the complete control over the development of the idea to a much more fragmented attitude, which is in fact the mirror situation of the fragmentation of production, and above all of the fragmentation of knowledge.

This leads industrial production (inside clusters, but also inside big enterprises) to a complex combination of extreme vertical specialization and horizontal process organization competencies.

This process can be seen as a part of the progressive fragmentation of the vertical company, which is matching the progressive growth of complexity of the industrial clusters. And in fact we find a parallel situation in the development of design competencies: on one side the "vertical specialists"; on the other the generalists who look at the overall innovation process.

In this pretty complex situation, the portrait of the "traditional" designer, as someone who takes care of all the aspects of the development process in his professional office, does not correspond to any real practice. Today the fragmentation has become so wide that we can even recognize curious forms of specialization in the "generalists": and in fact dealing with a complete overview of innovation processes tend to become a vertical competence applied to an horizontal task, with designers specialized in introducing innovation pathways inside companies, in managing strategic issues, in building portfolios, and so forth.

If we turn back to look at how design built its solid links with the Italian economic and production model, starting from those sectors that today we would normally call "design-oriented", we observe that Italian SMEs historically used design as a sort of "engine of innovation". In fact, design was used both as a driver to build their identity, and as a tool to catch new needs and transform them into a productive response, in order to emerge first in the domestic and later in the international markets.

This relation is almost always characterized by a direct relationship between entrepreneur and designer, in which the designer is not only asked to give shape to ideas, but rather to understand and interpret needs, to anticipate desires, to build a "frame of meaning" around the market offer. The Italian entrepreneur operating in design oriented sectors is used to discuss with the designer the development of new products, defining market opportunities, and the possible solutions. In an under-structured context, where marketing (and for sure strategic marketing) is still missing, design plays a role of mediation in the relation between company and market, developing what we are used to call a strategic approach. In other words, in Italy design developed a strategic attitude from the very beginning, and did not become strategic after the meeting with marketing.

Strategic design is often described as a recent idea, linked with new scenarios, while it is in fact a pretty old

attitude, which evolves in the changing scenario we have described, since the system of design competencies tends to become more and more complex, expanding to new fields and defining new roles and forms of practice. This transformation can be described by introducing the idea of a progressive shift of the interest of design from the control of material issues, mainly linked with the product; to a wider control of immaterial issues, and their relation with the material substrate. Here comes the idea of "product-system", as a complex combination of material and immaterial factors and qualities, that have to be faced with a new "strategic" attitude (Mauri, 1996; Eminente, 1991).

Since we are saying that Italian design was already born strategic, we cannot describe this scenario as an overnight transformation: it is the result of a long term change occurred in design theory and practice. If we look at the position of design in relation with other disciplines<sup>7</sup>, its territorial development can be described in terms of progressive expansion from a "solid centre" – which we could describe as linked with the traditional interest in the "material side" of product design – to much softer peripheral areas, where we observe a wide overlapping with other disciplines. These overlapping areas represent at the same time an opportunity, a challenge, and a danger. On one side, we might say that the exploration of the borders brings knowledge and opportunities of cooperation; on the other hand, we might say that introducing design culture in new areas is an important challenge; but we also have to acknowledge that the borders are areas of potential conflict, where identities become much more shaded and we can lose our way or become preys.

If we keep on using the metaphorical description of design as a territory, we could say that travelling to explore the borders or foreign territories is a much more interesting activity than staying still in the centre. But we also have to observe that in any exploration we must be conscious of where we start from in order to understand where we are going, and we have to manage some positioning tools if we do not want to lose our way. This leads to the problem of defining the identity of design, which is a growing interest related to the expansion of the design territories. Probably, since the general mindset of design is being a "non-discipline", or else an open system, we cannot imagine that it will ever be possible to define a clear delimitation, but we should also recognize the need for some shared view and for a better understanding of the borders of design territories.

### **An economy of beauty: The undiscovered motifs of "Made in Italy"**

The framework in which all these transformations occur is very particular: the traditional Italian SME entrepreneur usually operates within a confined space (the industrial cluster) in which his motivation to emerge is mainly linked to social legitimacy, which – to quote Weber

<sup>7</sup> This way of describing design is pretty typical: it applies the categories of positioning by difference and by similarity to a cultural and theoretical issue. The famous definition of industrial design by Tomás Maldonado, as an activity of coordination of many different factors linked to different spheres of knowledge surrounding industrial design, can be placed inside this line of thought (Maldonado, 1976).

backwards – leads to a tension towards the creation of “beautiful and well made products” rather than to the tension towards profit, which explains why in the Italian model design comes before marketing.

This tension towards a sort of “economy of beauty” can be linked to an ancient cultural heritage, in which the borders between craftsmanship and art were not so well traced: The competitive attitude of the best craftsmen in Italian princedoms is pretty similar to the one displayed today by small companies in local areas. Probably, this attitude can be somehow linked with the craftsman mindset of many Italian SMEs, as perfectly described by Osborne. In his description of the nature of craftsmanship, he rejects the normal criteria used to distinguish it from art, introducing some general characteristics of craftsmanship that perfectly match a possible description of the best entrepreneurs of Italian SMEs during the development of their relation with design, like the idea of “genuine pride in the process of production”, and the portrait of craftsmanship as an “ethical life-style aesthetically based” (Osborne, 1978).

In fact, as soon as the borders of the district become loose, and as soon as the attention of the entrepreneur to the local social context becomes lower, the idea of beauty as a first goal tends to disappear and to be replaced by much more managerial points of view, normally carrying with them a vary attitude towards design, and the need for a much more formalized approach towards innovation.

### Design and University in Italy: A recent story

The relation of design with SMEs inside Italian industrial clusters can be used as a key to understand the evolution of design inside the universities, and the relation between university and industry in Italy in a wider sense.

All the story we have told about the evolution of the relation between design and companies in Italy happened in the absence of a structured presence of design within the university, which initially is not a “visible” player within the system.

In fact, the profound transformation of the competitive scenario we have described, can be looked at as the main reason which generated, in relatively recent times, a need for a specifically targeted research and education system.

This need was so urgent and strong, and the context was so clearly receptive, that the development of the design system inside the university has been realized at an incredible speed rate.

If we look at it today, looks like it has been there from the very beginning, while its pretty recent birth is a sign of a profound change, carrying the need of new approaches to design inside companies, and the need of design inside new unexplored territories.

The new challenges of the design education and research are pretty clear if we just look back at the portrait of the evolution of clusters we have tried to make.

If we look at the education, the shift to a “knowledge based” system drives to the general need to increase the

competencies in people inside companies. At the same time, the fragmentation of production and knowledge drives to need to build vertical specialists in sectors, phases or activities. But also, in kind of a contradictory way, there is a need for design as a mediator (Celaschi and Deserti, 2007) of different forms of knowledge and functions, with a much more horizontal attitude. In the end, the progressive shift from the control of a completely material base to a wider control on all the elements of the value chain or the value constellation, including all the dynamics of the brand, leads to the need of new approaches, roles and tools in the design activity.

If we look at research, we discover the need to build stronger relations from both parts. An economic necessity for the universities, in a context of decrease of the public investment in support of research. But also a knowledge necessity, since design cannot be approached in a completely theoretical way: Applied research is the base of a well directed and effective teaching. And, above all, the change of the economic scenario from a factor driven to an innovation driven system, in which the role of design appears different and somehow stronger than in the past, which leads us to an optimist view of the future even in a troublesome period like this.

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