

# Designing Culture-intensive Artefacts. How the Design Process Interprets Craft Reiteration.

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## ABSTRACT

The paper approaches the subject of traditional craft and local know-how from the perspective of design practice. The specific focus is on those fields of design that produce the so-called culture-intensive goods (Hesmondhalgh, 2002; Bovone and Mora, 2003), such as fashion, home goods and food. They are the result of recombination by design of a specific cultural capital into new shapes and meanings. The paper will focus on the so-called "Made in Italy" and discuss, through best practices selected in those fields, how Design act as a cultural mediator shaping future artifacts rooted in the reinterpretation of the past. On one hand, accessing craft culture and its reiterative attitude of transmission of identity and tradition over times. On the other hand, recombining craft processes into reconfigured practices, encoding different meanings into new narratives.

*Keywords:* Design and Craft, Cultural Capital, Culture-Intensive Goods, Made in Italy

## INTRODUCTION

The polarization of approaches between tradition and innovation has always been present in the debate that has characterized the development of design as a field of theoretical and epistemological analysis and not only as a practice (Adamson, 2007; Flusser, 2003). A vision that sees design as a technical function subject to the leadership of technological innovation has long prevailed in the UK and US culture, both in terms of the economic-production paradigm and of theoretical considerations. The scientific and technological progress is indeed seen at this stage, as the sole engine of innovation. Only since the late 1970s – following the sometimes-dramatic outcomes of this vision in the social, political, and environmental spheres - a new debate was started about the nature of innovation. This fuelled a more detailed and complex conception of innovation phenomena, showing the interconnections between technical developments and the social communities that generated them (Rosenberg, 1982; Pinch, 1984). In fact, technological innovation is understood as part of the overall evolution of a company and as a real social construction (Penati, 1999; Pinch, 2005). In parallel, within companies and organizations, there is a growing awareness that research and technology-push development are not enough to ensure innovative skills (Weik, 1994; Peters, 1999). The innovation process even includes end users, no longer viewed as abstract market categories, but as individuals with an agency in the construction of the new, because they are capable and ready to understand and sometimes even to anticipate novelty. Therefore, the focus is broadened to the relationships between the individual, the physical and social context where they live and act, and the values that shape their behaviour defining their identity and belonging to a complex socio-cultural system, thanks to a process of sense-making and creation of meanings (Castells, 2004). With this premise, innovation assumes a new dimension: embodied in complex systems of interrelated technologies, products, services, and

communication, it is a process of signification or, even more, introduction to new meanings within the scope of a cultural context. Therefore, the very innovation is the narrative articulating a “text” that individuals can encode adding knowledge, and so new values, to their experiences (Bertola and Teixeira, 2003; Norman and Verganti, 2014; Bertola et al. 2015).

This broad understanding of innovation as a process of signification, becomes even more relevant when considering goods and services that have a “high cultural content” (Bertola et al., 2016). In fact, we refer the process that, especially in the second half of the Twenty-first Century, Humanities and social sciences supported to discredit the distinction between “culture” as a “high” product and result of the intellectual elaboration and textual encoding of knowledge and “cultures” as a result of the evolution of a society and the institutionalization of shared values. Cultures can only be described by the complexity of the relationships among individuals within specific communities, the values orienting them, and practices acted among them. Cultures are only partially written in texts. They are often the result of collective elaboration dynamics and are embodied in tangible and intangible artefacts (Foucault, 1966; Latour, 1995; Landowski and Marrone, 2002). Artefacts become an active element in the definition of the collective and subjective identities of social communities and, therefore, they are in all respects cultural products (Castells, 2004; Volonté, 2009).

In this perspective craft material culture, and the local and often tacit knowledge embodied in traditional production processes, can be considered a specific, richer and livelier culture repository (Pine and Gilmore, 2000). When design operates within this specific context of already-layered culture, it links the tradition of reiteration of practices, forms and meanings with new meanings and forms, making this evolution explicit to users into culture-intensive artefacts. They can be identified by three specific characteristics. Firstly, they are mature and historicized, as individuals recognize their ability to bear thick layers of meanings and narratives that declare the development of the production processes they are created by, the evolution of their forms and uses, the becoming of the identities of the brands they are linked to. Secondly, they are institutionalized in everyday life. In fact, they are familiar for the users and take active part to their life and to the definition of their lifestyle. Thirdly, and lastly, they are tools of mediation between an individual and his social context, therefore becoming “identity prostheses” that define both subjective and collective identities. (Bertola et al., 2013; 2015). This approach well describe much of the goods and services that are part of the so-called “Made in Italy” and that identify a particular vision, socially shared, of quality of life, ranging from the care of the house and of the person to the activities of transformation and fruition of the territory which correspond to precise formal and qualitative codes (Becattini, 1998; Rullani 2004). It is a universe of products and services that have evolved over time by stratifying meanings able to evoke a deeper value system, which is connected to the particular characteristics and the cultural capital of the place of origin (Bertola et al. 2002; Verganti, 2006). Design, as *agent of meaning* (Celaschi, 2008) is able to activate a re-signification process of this specific category of products, as it encodes their deeper meanings and reconfigure them in new stories in order to to enrich the value chain regarding craft. It accesses cultural capital (Throsby, 1999) represented by tangible and intangible reservoirs of local craft knowledge, building a narrative bridge between past and future. In the following section an operational model of design is presented, depicting the several ways in which it moves on the axis between reiteration and renege.

## 1. DESIGN+CRAFT. A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Although craft-based knowledge has often been scarcely taken into due consideration, it is a key component in contemporary productions. It has often substantially contributed to the conception, implementation and interpretation of every aspect of the contemporary Italian design practice, from the collaboration with the industry to simply perpetuating skills and knowledge (Rossi, 2005; Vacca, 2013). To discuss design and its relationship with the know-how of craftsmanship requires the introduction of a design approach, explicit and codified: *design-driven innovation* (Verganti, 2006) within an implicit way of working, often marked by an individual and subjective approach: *craft-based innovation* (Sennet, 2008) oriented towards uniqueness and distinctiveness. This relationship is made possible both by innovation paths linked to the product-aimed at the re-signification of the productions so that they are perceived singular (Kopytoff, 1986; Vacca, 2013) for appearance, features, performance, or meaning—and by a process innovation which aims to enhance and activate the know-how through the coding of re-configured and re-contextualized techniques and methodologies.

The aim of this paper is therefore to discuss how to promote continuous innovation within design and craft and how to enrich the value chain regarding craft through a design-driven approach. The proposed interpretative model (Figure 1) was developed to analyse, from a qualitative point of view, an anthology of case studies—carried out by Fashion in Process research collective ([www.fashioninprocess.com](http://www.fashioninprocess.com)) at the Design Dept. of Politecnico di Milano—collected in the fields of heritage, material culture and local knowledge enhancement, which represent excellence in the design+craft practices to which we refer as culture-intensive goods. From the operational point of view, the value of the main expression of territoriality-intangibility-uniqueness as value attributable to the classical concept of crafts (Sennett, 2008; Vacca, 2013; Vacca and Bertola, 2020) is positioned in the center of the model. Three interpretative variables are positioned as the axes of the model, with the aim to deepen the ways of activating and embedding content and craft-based knowledge with the consequent repercussions in the contemporary context: the articulation of language; the structuring of process and the finalization of the work. Finally, three circles represent a polarity of values according to the minimum v. maximum model with a median, indicating, in terms of quality, the positioning trend of the best practices analysed. Therefore, each variable/axis is assigned with a polarity of values, distinguished for each axis, which corresponds to:

- **Articulation of language:** *specific v. universal*. The “design+craft” approach embodies a new way of designing by becoming an integrated cultural system able to articulate a design language that acts as conservator or activator of craft-based knowledge (Sennet, 2008). As a conservator, it is substantiated by the artisanal culture emphasizing the specific dimension and identifying a recognizable and meaningful relationship between material culture and the territorial heritage. As activator, it acts through the reinterpretation of craft processes, encoding deeper meanings and reconfiguring them into new universal narratives.
- **Structuring of process:** *implicit v. explicit*. The design approach to cultural capital (Throsby, 1999) can take on different levels: an implicit one, in which the set of knowledge processes begins with the reading of a specific territorial heritage thus producing a result which is immediately employable in that precise local reality; or

an explicit level where actions progressively tend towards the global, incorporating new codes, transferring knowledge from one place to another, from one culture to another, through networks of relationships and, therefore, embedding design-driven innovation.

- **Finalization of the work:** *unique piece v. small collection*. Historically, an industrial product was distinguished from an artisan or artistic product through the quantitative dimension with which an object was offered on the market, since the creation of objects in series– identical to the prototype–annulled the value of the art work as unicum (Koenig, 1981). Nowadays, we get closer to a more contemporary vision of design in small series that explores the concept of ultra-luxury, exceptionality, uniqueness and flexibility as the enhancement of customization and definition of a private and intimate dimension of consumption (Colombi, 2009).

From the interpretative model (Figure 1) and the interplay between the three variables a complex and often contradictory relationship emerges between design and craft that can be interpreted through a vision that is plural, since it conveys more meanings on different levels of the design, understanding and communication, and hybrid because material culture is not merely an expression of experiences but also the bearer of different practices and methodologies. Based on these considerations, it was possible to identify behavioural trends that have allowed us to cluster four different approaches to craftsmanship mediated by design that are: *ArtArtisan*, *ArchetypalCraft*, and *MasterCraft*.

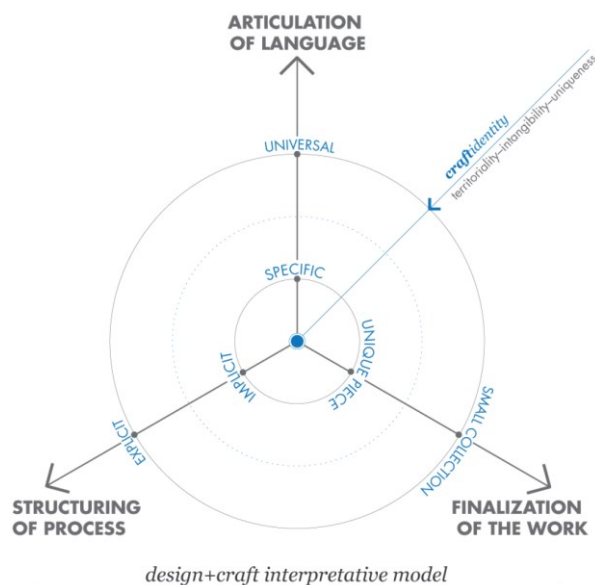


Figure 1. Design+Craft Interpretative Model. Source: Authors own elaboration. Fashion in Process Research Collective, Design Dept. Politecnico di Milano, Italy.

### 1.1. ArtArtisan

The *ArtArtisan* (Figure 2) works halfway between the worlds of art and craft. He has a high level of creativity which is reflected in the orientation of the design and production of manufactured goods towards the spectacle of gesture rather than sale. The *ArtArtisan*, through his way of operating, undermines and rejects the historical distinction between the arm – *faber* – understood as manual labour, and mind – *sapiens* – as conceptual activity, which had led to

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conventionally consider the figure of the artist as an intellectual and art as an autonomous and specific sector of intellectual work (Becker, 2004), towards a new synergy between a design approach and a manual action. The creative act is intimate and oriented towards the definition of artefacts of a high aesthetics value that reinterpret the shapes, patterns, decorations, styles and techniques typical of the historical and cultural heritage through an experimental and innovative approach. Craft techniques become the instrument through which to express ourselves and are rethought and reworked to communicate the introspective value of the project. The approach is radical with an operating mode that prefers the manual, immediacy and an orientation towards the work of art, the conceptual object and the unique piece.

An interesting case in this area is *FormaFantasma*, a designer duo based in Eindhoven who mix avant-garde, design and craftsmanship in eclectic productions of objects. The design trajectory they pursue investigates the role of design as a mediator in the relationship between tradition and contemporaneity, with a heavily critical approach to sustainability and the meaning objects take on in our lives. The focus on vernacular objects, ancient techniques and craft processes becomes the point from which to reinterpret tradition and find in it the very meaning of true authenticity, particularly favouring the matter over the object, the process over the attention to form. In this view, design as a ‘project of the process’ begins with a conceptual search that starts with the fascination for materials to slowly discover the process that the materials themselves require and finally reach a “forma fantasma [literally *ghost form*]” that is never predictable from the start of the process. This alchemical and conceptual approach focuses more on research and experimentation and less on the production of a finished object. Their attitude seeks to open new paradigms and to follow new design and production systems as can be seen in *Botanica*, a project where designers investigate on polymeric materials to develop particular mixtures of natural origin that may be considered as the ancestors of post-petroleum plastics. Each mixture is created from the resins of plants or from compounds derived from animal particles and wood waste: rosin, dammar, copal (the sub-fossil state of amber), natural rubber, shellac (a polymer extracted from the excrement of insects that colonize trees) and Bois Durci, (a material made from powder wood and animal blood). The project, sponsored by the *foundation Plart*, was conceived as a tribute to plastic: starting from the knowledge of tradition, it seeks to discover new linguistic and aesthetic expressions to present polymers in a perspective quite different from today through pre-bakelite aesthetics. This collection of objects was created and designed as unique pieces of experimentation and research that highlight an approach to the artistic-conceptual project rather than oriented towards serial or industrial production. Their way of *ArtArtisan* making is often exhibited at very important events like MiArt, in art galleries such as London Libby Sellers or in institutions such as the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Vitra Design Museum.

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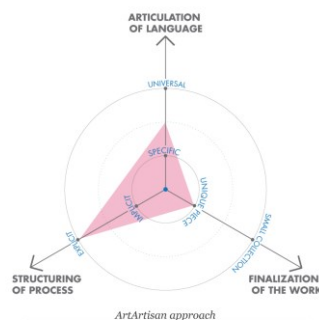


Figure 2. (a) ArtArtisan Approach. Source: Authors own elaboration. (b) FormaFantasma “Botanica”, 2011. In photo: “Botanica I”. Copal resin, natural shellac, wood fibers. Project by FormaFantasma, Curated by Marco Petroni and Photo by Luisa Zanzani. Courtesy of Formafantasma.



## 1.2. ArchetypalCraft.

The *ArchetypalCraft* (Figure 3) is the person who works within the tradition as he reproduces objects of the past without embedding innovation or following a project. Craft-based knowledge, in this form, becomes an expression of identity of a place because the craftsman works with the available resources to fulfil primarily and almost exclusively the needs of the local community. His production is oriented toward repetition and pass down memory of shapes and styles that are typical of a place. The productive dimension has quantitative limits and is mostly oriented towards the production of small series that fit within a niche market able to appreciate and understand the quality of these works. Since it is conceived in such a way, the product is likely to be far from the aesthetic, formal and functional needs of the global market and is thus a niche product, unknown to most. Indeed, the problem of the forgotten craft is often determined by the fact that - despite being productions of high value and strongly linked to the territory of which they are an expression - they are poorly communicated, thus becoming artefacts of *exception* in the double acceptance of the term, “unusual and difficult” vs “rare and precious”. While craft in its classical meaning is intended as glorification of technology and lack of interest in the search for new languages of expression, the *ArchetypalCraft* is a vision more open to the contamination of practices and methodologies (especially related with the communication and distribution of its products) while remaining strongly hinged to the tradition and the need to pass on unchanged fundamentals of technology and knowledge.

Italy has a great tradition and a broad artisan heritage which includes exclusive and invaluable techniques related to woodworking, interlacing, glass, ceramics, precious metals, spinning, weaving, which allow the creation of characteristic products that are developed in small regional productions. Some of these techniques have spread in an absolutely homogeneous way throughout the Italian territory; others instead, although they belong to the same type, have substantial differences in the processes and shapes that make them unique and characteristic of a precise territorial identity. In such a varied and knowledge-filled context, an interesting case study is Eligo, a company that works as editor of handmade artefacts. What makes it unique is having turned the propensity for ‘anonymous design’ - objects of the everyday, no-name, no-brand- and the passion for the craft tradition into an innovative brand idea (Biscalchin, 2014). The focus of the project is to identify the traditional archetypes of the most important artisan productions within the Italian manufacturing district system and bring them “uncontaminated” in the contemporaneity without the patina of time, typical of the old techniques. The main activity is therefore to create a network of small historically- and qualitatively-significant artisan companies, through a social and multimedia platform. In doing so, Eligo plays an important role in terms of quality through the painstaking research of small local realities, preserving their distinctive and technical peculiarities without altering the production system made up of niche collections and small numbers. One of the first experiences was with the *Chiavari straw chair*. An extremely ambitious project not only because it is the vernacular archetype of the Liguria district, but especially since it has become a cultural symbol and icon after the re-edition ‘Superleggera’ designed by the Milanese architect Gio Ponti in 1955 and still produced by Cassina since 1957. The project by Eligo of the Chiavari lightweight chair was an absolute success that managed to combine a construction technique unchanged over its two hundred year history, with the search for particularism that characterizes the contemporary consumer, but it was also able to generate positive feedback throughout the territory through the re-activation of the technique that

would have probably got lost over time. With this way of working, Eligo supports the artisan businesses that can continue to work in full respect of their rhythms and numbers, providing them with support and backing in the interpretation of the contemporary scene, choosing products to re-edit and contributing in the commercial communication through a selective distribution and a virtual showroom made of life-style magazines, trade shows and special projects with renowned designers and artists.

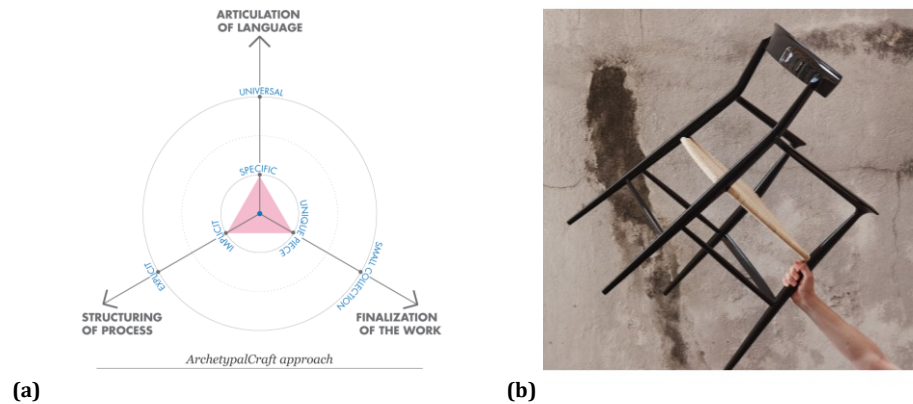


Figure 3. (a) ArchetypalCraft Approach. Source: Authors own elaboration. (b) Eligo. “The Chiavari Chair Project” 2011. In photo: “Tigullina” armchair. Handcrafted in maple, black glossy and reed weaving. Courtesy of Eligo.

### 1.3. CraftMaster

The *Craftmaster* (Figure 4) has a wider design vision, he makes his knowledge and expertise available to architects, designers and artists working each time on different projects, or collaborates with the industry, contributing in the prototyping and product development phases that will lead to a production of industrial artefacts in series. This craftsman figure is reflected in all the activities that require expertise, competence and skills of manual labour to produce goods and, despite operating within the tradition, the *CraftMaster* can develop his knowledge on products that belong to the contemporaneity. In this context, design too plays a key role because it is able to interact with crafts and to become promoter of continuous-innovation processes in favour of traditional and artisan activities without distorting their meanings or neglecting their identity and culture of which they are the representation. The productions are re-interpreted through a process of sense and value-making and can be defined with characteristics of *excellence*, such as the quality of the techniques employed for the product and the preservation of tradition which are combined with innovative processes; *singularity* and *uniqueness*, understood as an expression of the personality of the object and its cultural biography that differentiates it from other similar products. The production of the *Craftmaster* becomes a bearer of cultural and territorial information, mediated by the experience of the craftsman and the projectuality of the designer, making it a design object the added value of which is to also be an artisan product. Design, with its projectual/transformative activity, takes on a key role in the activation of processes of knowledge transferral with crafts, seeking a new design awareness in the mutual methodological limitations.

This is the case of Patricia Urquiola, a Spanish star-designer who has collaborated with the world’s most important brands in the furniture industry, renowned for her unique way to fuse industry with craft, high-tech with low-tech, the traditional with the contemporary. Each of her projects shows a constant attention to the world of crafts which has become the signature style of her distinctive designs. Each object is functional and decorative, the artisan roots are

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mixed with contemporary taste and shapes. One of the most interesting partnerships is with Moroso, a leader brand in furniture that has always favoured a design-oriented approach in synergy with Made-in-Italy craftsmanship. Urquiola aims at a new design concept of techniques and decoration and on processes of signification and enhancement of objects in their relationship with the consumer, thus coding a new procedural approach which merges the culture of making with the design culture. One for all, *Sardinian Rugs*, a collection of carpets presented in 2006 for the Milanese Design Week and conceived as unique pieces to re-read the Sardinian iconography of the traditional carpet. The collection is entirely hand made on horizontal looms with an ancient and distinctive technique called ‘*pibiones* [grain]’ by the craftswomen of the workshop Maria Antonia Urru in Samugheo (one the most important Sardinian craft-districts on the textile sector). In collaboration with Bentu Italy for Moroso, the CraftMasters of Maria Antonia Urru workshop have offered their knowledge and technical expertise in translating the designer vision in a *culture intensive artifact* that perfectly embodies work, collaboration and synergy in a craft-design attitude. The innovation introduced was to recover and give value to the Sardinian carpet craft reinventing its applications, adding inserts of unusual materials and working with the weavers on the macro scale of traditional iconography, breaking the patterns and varying their repetition. A process of sense and value-making implemented to renew and make unique these techniques on rugs. The production Sardinian Rugs is a small collection of artefacts produced upon the request of the consumer and distributed by Moroso as an exclusive collection where the added value is the privileged set of design, tradition, art and Italian style. Urquiola’s unique process creates products to touch, to see and to experience, and seeks solutions to create an intimate, informal yet exclusive, innovative and authentic environment. Her approach to the industry is filtered by the artisanal competence which gives it the character of exclusivity and uniqueness.

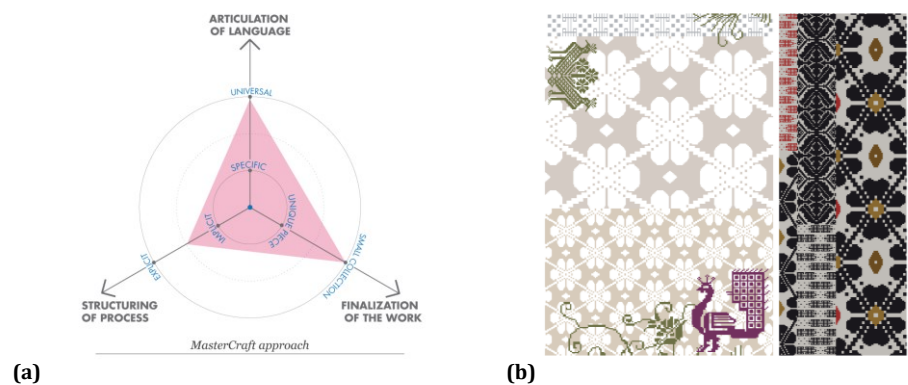


Figure 4. (a) MasterCraft Approach. Source: Authors own elaboration. (b) Patricia Urquiola + Moroso. “Sardinian Rugs” 2006. In photo: “Peacock” and “Flowers”. Collection of rugs handcrafted in the typical technique of Sardinia “pibiones”, a monolevel weaving. Design: Patricia Urquiola, Production: Bentu srl with Mariantonia Urru Samugheo for Moroso. Courtesy of Moroso.

#### 1.4. Discussion of the Interpretative Model

A territorial knowledge ontology and a privileged vision through a market lens determine the limitation of this study. The cases analyzed, which constitute the database for the model presented in the article, are predominantly Italian, therefore, subjected to distinct ontologies in how artisans deal with their respective material cultures. However, this study is not universal because the presented model does not apply to all craft realities. Not all artisans share the same propensity for collaboration and knowledge sharing or the need to face a broader and more globalized market. The cases analyzed are rooted in design+craft relationships and represent unique models of collaboration and cooperation that follow, as



Rossi (2015) argues, the central role of craftsmanship in the formation and development of Italian design. The collaboration and exchange of knowledge and skills between design and excellent craft realities become fruitful because it generates added value in quality and can arouse the attention of the post-modern market due to the cultural approach adopted. Furthermore, in outlining the relationship between design and craft, the study mainly focuses on enriching the craft value chain. Design acts as an agent of meaning to guarantee artisan development and entrepreneurship without loosening identity or impoverishing local skills.

## 2. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: OBJECTS AS VALUE AND PROCESS MAKERS

The analysis of those three design+craft approaches highlights the different ways in which design can become a promoter of processes of continuous innovation in favour of traditional and artisan activities that is ensured through the regeneration of original, authentic, recognizable, and highly differentiating cultural content that is reinvested along the design process of high cultural content artifacts. In the three best practices described above, one can then identify the productions of *excellence*, understood as quality recognized and certified by the techniques employed for the product and the preservation of tradition which are combined with innovative processes; of *singularity*, i.e the expression of the object's uniqueness and of the contamination between know-how and design; of *identity*, intended as a set of links that lead back to a technique, a knowledge or specific territory, making the product recognizable and differentiating it from similar others. This design and production approach embody material culture and heritage knowledge through processes that range from reiteration of the craft know-how (ArchetypalCraft), to re-performance of ancient practices and skills into a contemporary/radical vision (MasterCraft), to re-interpretation of meanings, process of transmission and transfer of culture through a design perspective (ArtArtisan).

These various design+craft fields are connected to divergent practices and conceptions of tradition which legitimate different interpretations and constructions of sense in repetitions and renege of skills and knowledge in the process of transmission and transfer of culture. Multidisciplinary thus becomes a design tool. The hybridization and the plurality of language are an expression of the contemporary society which looks for a potential space for new economic and productive development to impact on local systems in terms of innovation without affecting, or rather enhancing, the craft-intensive culture.

Design, as a process that connects and reconfigures traditional sources in new artefacts, is able to move along the craft value chain creating new meanings (Baudrillard, 1972). It enables craft production to avoid re-proposing passively the memory of shape and style, preserving the identity as a positive reminder to handicraft culture but at the same time reconfiguring creation and productive processes (Latouche, 2010; Sennet, 2008). Given this perspective, the design+craft approach has demonstrated to be able to establish a culture-intensive system, emphasizing the transience of local-provenance and identities (Appadurai, 1996; Kapferer and Bastien, 2009). The relation between design and craft is fruitful as when it is made explicit it enables end user to understand and value the excellence of a craft design production, appreciating its uniqueness, its authenticity, and its culture-intensive added value (Castells, 2004; Kapferer and Bastien, 2009; Pine and Gilmore, 2007).

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## ENDNOTES

The paper is the result of common research studies and findings, nevertheless, the paragraph: "Designing Culture-Intensive Artefacts" was edited by Paola Bertola, the paragraph: "Design+Craft. A Methodological Approach" was edited by Federica Vacca and the paragraph: "Final considerations: Objects as Value and Process Makers" was edited by Chiara Colombi.

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