

Culture and Creativity as Assets for Inclusive Growth in Small and Remote Places: A Design-Led Process

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Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the design-led process in the research and the range of its application in contexts beyond the mainstream: the decentralized areas, defined as “small and remote places”. This is based on an ongoing action-research project called *SMOTIES - Creative works with small and remote places*, a four-year co-funded project by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union. The ten partners involved in the project come from the cultural realm, including universities, design/art collectives, NGOs, and design associations. They aim at knowledge transfer, capacity building, and audience development in 10 small and remote areas in their own country. This paper refers to the first two years' activities focusing on the shared methodology and overall program.

Keywords

Cultural and creative sector
Design for social innovation
Design for sustainability
Community-centered design
Design futures

Introduction and approach

Started in 2020, the SMOTIES project Fig. 1 belongs to the *Human Cities* network involving, since 2006, design, art, and architecture universities, creative centres, and consultancies. Spanning all of Europe, *Human Cities* network acts as a platform of interdisciplinary exchange, examining and acting to improve the liveability of public spaces by using participatory design as an approach to supply systems of process and innovation.

Human Cities network has been funded throughout the years by the Creative Europe (Culture sub-programme) of the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), consolidating its approach and creating opportunities in several European contexts to implement innovative experimentations, nurturing networks, building capacity with local stakeholders, and diffusing cultural values. Through SMOTIES, the *Human Cities* network shifts its focus from the urban context to small and remote European villages, districts, and sub-regions which are depopulated, relationally remote, and depositories of material and immaterial culture that risk being undervalued, not consolidated, not handed down, and hence lost (EY, 2021; OECD, 2018).

Based on the European quantitative criteria for Remote and Rural places (European Union Regional Policy, 2008; OECD, 2020b, 2020a), remote and rural places are those with a population density below 150 inhabitants per square kilometre, where 50% of the residents cannot reach the centre of a city of at least 50,000 inhabitants within 45 minutes. It means that in these areas there are geographical barriers and/or no good transportation links; therefore, the infrastructure system is underdeveloped in terms of sustainable mobility models able to support a better everyday life for all generations. Further, the access to essential services and amenities within walking distance is not inclusive regarding equality for all and affordability. These areas are often characterised by social divisions, or specific social groups struggling against economic issues due to local and global crises, such as the current financial one, the austerity measures, and the increase of the already present rural marginalization after the Covid-19 pandemic. These last factors have a significant role in making these areas isolated indeed. Nowadays, the leading causes of rural marginalization have not only to be ascribed to geography but to the "lack of access to resources [...] resulting from a lack of socioeconomic and political connections ('connectivity') and, hence, of relational 'remoteness' "(Bock, 2016, p. 556). As Castells (1996) and Sassen (2011) state, network society has enabled people to become part of global networks (Leadbeater, 2009), regardless of their physical proximity to dense infrastructures. Functional and relational factors play a fundamental role in active collaborative community systems and favour the growth of exchanges and connections (De Lange & De Waal, 2019; Manzini, 2021).

Accordingly, the Smoties project focuses on areas where proximity and social economy (i.e., proximity to a rewarding job market, proximity to research-intensive environments, the presence of community bonds) are weak or not valorised, generating spatial segregation.



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of the European Union

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<https://eit-culture-creativity.eu/about-us/>

Fig. 1
Human Cities *SMOTIES* –
*Creative work with small
and remote places* logo.
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Regarding scale and spatial features, SMOTIES small and remote places are territorial units composed of a network of places (both indoor and outdoor) located outside of major cities and hardly connected. They could refer to:

- villages/areas that may also be not far from major cities but difficult to reach (in terms of physical or relational connections)
- villages/areas with no relationships and interconnections with *Nodes of Creativity* (NoC), such as universities, research centres, outreach projects, innovative communities/networks
- villages/areas that still have not been involved in networks, creative bottom-up processes, and project-based experimentations.

Furthermore, they own an attractive material and immaterial culture that needs support from a NoC to be fostered through tangible experiences at the local level, to make relations possible among the community(ies), and to improve daily life. SMOTIES aims at identifying and activating possible trajectories for a local evolutionary pathway, leveraging existing minority excellence niches. This process is supported by participatory design and social innovation practices and is based upon the belief that culture-led regeneration and development strategies can transform places. The cultural and creative sectors not only offer social benefits (such as improved wellbeing and community cohesion) and economic benefits (through local taxation, job creation, innovation, and supply chains), but they also contribute to *place-making* by making cities and regions more desirable places to live and work, thereby promoting inward investment, inward labour flows, higher productivity, and increased tourism. A city or region's economic and social growth is the primary emphasis of culture-led regeneration and development programs, which encourage and facilitate cultural and creative activities. This approach is in line with the New European Bauhaus vision that “brings a cultural and creative dimension to the European Green Deal to enhance sustainable innovation, technology and economy” (European Commission, 2021, p. 3). This is also demonstrated by the recently started EIT (European Institute of Innovation & Technology) initiative EIT Culture and Creativity: “a Knowledge and Innovation Community designed to strengthen and transform Europe's Cultural and Creative Sectors and Industries (CCSI) by connecting creatives and organisations to Europe's largest innovation network”¹.

In this framework, SMOTIES focuses attention on networked, participated, and local creativity as a resource for a territorial profile (communication, life quality, image, reputation, innovation, clusters, etc.) for regional and destination development (Innerhofer et al., 2018, pp. 2–4). The capacity to act and regenerate the SMOTIES

small and remote place communities is supported by the collaboration among local stakeholders and the ten main partners², which include public institutions, design centres, creative agencies, national associations, and research centres. Within the project, the ten partners act, in fact, as *Nodes of Creativity*: they are in 10 European cities and have been chosen for the particularity of position, cultural uniqueness, development potential, and consolidated role in their creative sector.

Nodes of Creativity works with small and remote places as interlocutors, activators, and supporters of creative works to be anchored in public spaces through a shared methodology summed up in 5 work packages, including WP1 Project Management, WP2 Methodological Framework, WP3 Impact Analysis, WP4 Engaging the Locals (Co-Design), Learning (Masterclass and Training), Producing (Prototyping Studios), WP5 Dissemination and Exploitation of Results.

Methodology

SMOTIES takes a step further in the landscape of bottom-up and grassroots processes; the active involvement of people in the transformation of their existence, acting in their environment to achieve social change, has already been assimilated in the European context and has already grown into place in the urban structure, integrating creative people (designers/artists), local authorities, administrations, innovative companies, territorial actors, the third sector and representatives of active citizenship towards infrastructural changes (Montalto et al., 2019). These processes reveal a diffused awareness of specific problems, how to tackle them and bring to light common values and beliefs, increasing social networks in local contexts.

The geography of local contexts has activated multiple micro-spaces of best practices and evolved into systemic networks that demonstrate that even marginal locations have become part of global networks and spread their influence (Sassen, 2004). It is the case of ENoLL - European Network of Living Labs, ECBN - European Creative Business Network, FabLabs and Makerspace cooperation, Smart Cities joint actions, social housing foundations, etc. Therefore, we are in a dense network of connections linking local efforts and creating a flurry of initiatives and social change processes that have demonstrated a not yet fully exploited capability to reach the defined typologies of small and remote places and to turn their full range of participatory models (living labs, mobility systems, makerspaces, housing innovations) to fit into diverse contexts. These last have an additional component: they possess a generational multiplicity that could reinforce and highlight the quality of the knowledge transfer of the material and immaterial culture.

The design process that is leading to the establishment of creative works with/in the public spaces in 10 small and remote places with the help of 10 partners based in 10 European cities is having a short and mid-term impact in terms of reinforcing the identity of small places, showcasing their unique creativity, preserving their material and immaterial culture, and using design to build long-term development strategies.

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Department of Design - Politecnico di Milano (Milan, Italy), Cité du Design (Saint-Etienne, France), Clear Village (London, UK), FH Joanneum, University of Applied Sciences (Graz, Austria), Urban Planning Institute of the Republic of Slovenia (Ljubljana, Slovenia), Estonian Association of Designers (Tallinn, Estonia), University of the Aegean (Ermoupoli, Syros, Greece), Zamek Cieszyn (Cieszyn, Poland), University of Madeira (Funchal, Madeira, Portugal), Alernance SLF (Reykjavik, Iceland).

To ensure the achievement of these impacts, the *Nodes* work with small and remote places as interlocutors, activators, and supporters of creative works anchored in public spaces through:

- A shared methodological framework that guarantees a baseline process for all partners of engaging local communities for audience development
- Transnational mobility of creative professionals to create a network of actors from small and remote places and to avoid the risk for the last of becoming culturally and socially isolated; this is also stimulating the creation of opportunities for long-term economic development
- Masterclasses and training for capacity-building purposes to improve the professional skills of the locals and create new job opportunities
- An evaluation of the impact to generate a long-term legacy in the involved contexts.

The shared methodological framework design converges into the *Smoties Toolbox* that all partners have tested in small and remote places. The methodology of the SMOTIES Toolbox revolves around a systematic and interconnected approach to concept development and impact assessment. It consists of six collections of tools/toolkits. These toolkits are designed to complement and synergize with each other, providing a comprehensive framework for project leaders. The methodology involves gathering and analyzing contextual information, envisioning desired future outcomes, and defining and assessing the project's impact. By leveraging the tools within each toolkit and integrating them across the system, project leaders can gain insights, set clear objectives, and evaluate their initiatives' social, cultural, economic, and environmental impacts. The methodology promotes a structured, iterative process, enabling informed decision-making and maximizing positive project outcomes. Through a combination of primary and secondary research, observation, and discussion, the SMOTIES Toolbox aims to uncover the community's key issues, organising them in guiding perspectives towards the future. These perspectives have been called *Windows on the Future* and are thematic lenses through which looking at small and remote places as seeds of the future and consisting of a set of possible scenarios based on the analysis of future trends. They have been designed to support a foresight process: project leaders can identify stakeholders and map the territory, gaining a comprehensive understanding of the local context. The SMOTIES Toolbox sets the foundation for effective project planning and ensures that initiatives are aligned with the specific needs and dynamics of the small and remote place, enabling laypersons and local stakeholders to articulate their expectations of prospective innovations (Heidingsfelder et al., 2015). This approach has been based on design futures studies (Amara, 1981; Candy & Dunagan, 2017; Candy & Potter, 2019; Dunne & Raby, 2013; Fry, 2020; Henchey, 1978; Hillgren et al., 2020; Voros, 2001, 2003).

Windows on the Future are set into five streams: "Project-based Communities" dealing with active citizen participation and new kinds of governance (Fassi & Manzini, 2021) *Fig. 2*, "Co-created ecologies" regarding creative solutions for sustainable living, "Beyond Tourism" exploring new paradigms of tourism as living an

authentic life, “Proud to be silver” focused on healthcare and wellbeing of the elderly people and intergenerational dialogue, “Distributed education” exploring the future of local cultural and creative knowledge. Each *Window* is structured as a positioning map identifying two future trends (axes) and four scenarios: the vertical axis is related to the engagement of the population – a focal point of our approach – and the horizontal one declined to each topic.³

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The illustration of the *Windows on the future* methodology is illustrated in the forthcoming paper: Auricchio, V., De Rosa, A., & Monna, V. (2023). *SMOTIES: scenario building for creative solutions in remote places.*

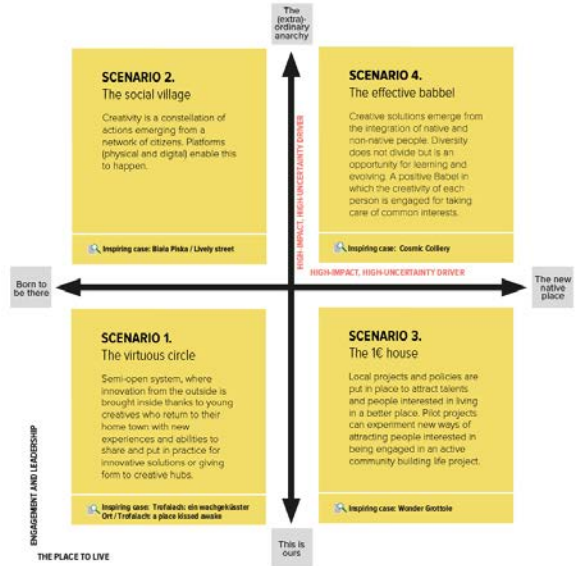
Window on the Future 1 “PROJECT” COMMUNITIES

Active citizen participation and new kinds of governance

KEYWORDS:

FUTURE GOVERNANCE, CITIZEN PARTICIPATION, CREATIVE CAPACITY BUILDING, DEMOGRAPHICS AND POPULATION DENSITY, INCLUSION

The scenarios in this *Window* have to do with the future of citizen participation and their ability to give form to shared future projects. Their common aim is to build resilient creative ecosystems for future development allowing the creation of an inclusive governance structure that can secure full commitment of the local rural community to their long-term goals. These scenarios build on the emerging trend of civic participation in governing local development, stretching this concept from sporadic projects and civic listening to a new form of governance led by creative citizens.



The exploration of scenarios is followed by the analysis methodology on people’s use of public space to familiarise themselves with how space, people, and actions are intertwined. It is based on a transdisciplinary approach between urban design, history, and environmental psychology. The analysis comprises a set of boards to report in-field analysis and observations of the interactions among people and places, a historical overview of the area’s development, and a geographical/morphological survey. Combining this analysis with the design opportunities coming out of the exploration of the scenarios, partners are founding the idea-generation process together with local stakeholders. This phase is helped by several activities provided by the program, such as masterclasses and training to link academia and the professional realm to in-field actions and the prototyping of solutions to test results on-site.

Fig. 2
Example of positioning map for the “Project-based communities” *Window on the future.*
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By answering the call for projects of the Creative Europe program, the proponents had a strong focus on the impact and legacy of the outputs and outcomes to be achieved; for this reason, the Toolbox also aims at supporting the impact assessment of each project, by identifying the possible impacts of a project in a small and remote place and evaluating them. Defining impacts in the meta-design phase of a project allows a better clarification of the project’s objectives. Through a co-design approach including all ten partners, SMOTIES defines result indicators to measure the meeting objec-

tives and the effects obtained by looking at its direct addressees and impact indicators about the successful influence on the economy and society beyond the direct interventions. This is an ongoing process expected to have a final set of instructions by the end of the 5th semester of the program.

The partners with the local communities and stakeholders have tested the SMOTIES Toolbox system to collect feedback and refine the tools: the final version will be published at the beginning of 2024.

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The small and remote places are Basso Monferrato (Italy), Oberzering (Austria), Penmachno (UK), La Vallée du Dorlay (France), Joaveski (Estonia), Bobrek (Poland), Estreito da Calheta (Portugal), Apano Meria (Greece) and Polhograjski Dolomiti (Slovenia).

Expected and Ongoing Results

The project SMOTIES:

- has created a network of design-led *Nodes*, developing creative works with(in) small and remote public spaces using a scenario-building design methodology
- has engaged villages, settlements, provinces, and regions, also through the involvement of policymakers and representatives, to develop creative works in public spaces, including training and educational activities to improve the professional skills of the locals and create new job opportunities
- is supporting the creation of a network of small and remote places thanks to the transnational mobility of experts who are communicating and disseminating results
- is assessing the long-term impacts of the outputs and outcomes, starting from a participatory approach linked to design thinking and design futures approaches, engaging with local creative communities
- is turning experiences developed in creative works with public spaces into systemic models to influence the habits and socialisation of the beneficiaries and the spaces in which they happen.

These results are possible thanks to that methodological approach and deep diving into the context done by each partner. The strengthening of local networks of stakeholders and the dense program of activities has helped the *Nodes* not only to gradually step into the small and remote context but also to build relationships with the social context and ease processes to boost local creativity. Each partner has covered various environmental locations (from top of mountains to sea coastal), dimensions (from 30 to 1,500 inhabitants), and distances from the cities⁴.

The first results of the research are happening right now and show the peculiarities of dealing with small and remote contexts both from the research partners' point of view and the locals' one.

As regards the partners, the choice of small remote places to work with is often based on professional networks or direct knowledge of the places and people. Sometimes, these relationships are based on previous small projects, didactic activities, or first intuitions about places and people's potentialities not yet explored. The shared methodology helped the partners to have a coherent approach with local people and to explore scenarios and design opportunities with a list of tools that will make comparing the results easier and evaluating the impact more feasible. The *Windows on the future* framework

based on trends, European documents, and desk research adds consistency to the value proposition of the partners towards the local communities: having solid literature and best practices background and showing what is happening in the rest of Europe helped the partners to engage the locals with a strong trust and expertise.

Conclusions

At this point, three main insights emerged by meeting and engaging with local communities in the SMOTIES small and remote places **Fig. 3**. As regards the locals, the number of citizens in these places is so small that, often, some citizens hold different offices and roles (i.e., mayor, head of associations, local artisans, farmers, etc.). On one side, this phenomenon eases the decision process; sometimes, it may be an obstacle to moving forward. Secondly, the dimensions of the possible interventions are diverse and heterogeneous since local needs vary from context to context. There is such low quality or even absence of public spaces that minor interventions, such as basic urban furniture, renewal of street pavements, or small public art installations, could make a difference. This aspect makes evident the importance given to intangible yet impactful processes of social engagement, skills exchange, and support to policies that support the *creative milieu* of cities and neighbourhoods, leveraging the role of culture in addressing broader social and economic challenges. This perfectly matches the short and medium-term impact of outputs towards a long-term effect on the areas: acupunctural outputs (Jégou, 2011) could feed a more significant transformation of places due to a renovated interest and reactivation of social dynamics. Finally, the number of local meetings reinforces and enriches the local network of stakeholders and citizens, reaching out to people with little or no involvement. These interactions boost conversations and debates for exploring ideas and solutions with the SMOTIES partners.



Fig. 3
Co-design activities in
Albugnano (Asti, Italy).
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SMOTIES aims to contribute to reinforcing small places' identity and transform sustainable opportunities into long-term development strategies. They are significantly improving the capacities of remote places to become part of a transnational network thanks to newly created synergies while being firmly embedded in the local context and establishing an innovative view of the local creative industry and endemic design strategies. The potential of transferability still needs

to be understood throughout the development of the SMOTIES task about impact assessment (through the definition of results and impact indicators) of such actions in remote places. Several activities have already been completed, including 41 meetings with the locals, 15 masterclasses and training sessions to engage students and professionals in defining solutions using the Toolbox, 16 travelling talks about communicating the project and disseminating the first results, 12 prototyping sessions to test the solutions and one publication with the collection of the European best practices located in the ten countries involved in the program.

This process helps the partners to explore the local context, to support the communities renew of their sense of belonging to their territory, to investigate design opportunities and future pathways of change, reinforce local networks, prototype first solutions, and assess short/medium/long-term impacts. The network is constantly meeting to keep track of the ongoing activities, aiming at fulfilling the complete set of goals of SMOTIES research project.

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https://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/news-events/news/new-publication-creative-europe-2014-2020-gender-equality-sustainability-and-digitalisation-cultural-2022-02-21_en

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