The Italian Design Research and Practice in Cultural Heritage Exploitation

By Luigi Brenna, Eleonora Lupo, Alberto Seassaro, Raffaella Trochianesi,
Politecnico di Milano

Abstract

This paper will present, starting from some of the results of Milano Politecnico Industrial design Dept. Research Group in “Cultural Heritage Enhancement”, some theoretical considerations about how to develop design research in the groundbreaking field of enhancing Cultural Heritage. In fact, this is an emerging area of knowledge and professional field for design research processes and practice.

The investigations and projects realised provide a wide range of cases which give evidence to the innovative and often tacit role played by design in enhancing the value of Cultural Heritage. Design can in fact enable sustainable cultural awareness and permit people to experience culture in a more involved way.

This paper will illustrate some academic design experiences and exemplary research activities on cultural heritage evaluation, analyzing different contexts and pointing out their implications with design theory and educational approach.

Keywords

Cultural design
Heritage fruition
Enhancing by design
Design tools and processes for Cultural Heritage
Design concepts
1 | PREMISES AND DICIPLINARY FIELD

1.1 | Why Design for Cultural Heritage?

_Luigi Brenna_

Italy is famous as the country which has the largest concentration of cultural heritage sites in the world. The country counts several monuments: churches, castles, museums and other buildings which represent a very unique inheritance which no other country can rely on. Furthermore, Italian territory can be considered a masterpiece of art itself because it is the witness of centuries of history and craftsmanship aimed to preserve and use the land from an agricultural point of view.

For this reason there are many different disciplines which study cultural heritage from different points of view: history, building restoration, literature, architecture and archaeology. Nevertheless, the ability to enhance this richness is not often satisfied by a singular specific scientific discipline. Each one of the fields mentioned above is a scientific contribution which serves well in its role to preserve the cultural heritage, but most of the time it lacks a broader vision which considers the final users’ point of view (Brenna, 2003). Furthermore, the technicalities of each disciplinary field might not express all of the symbolic and communicative aspects which are so important in giving sense to a community and its land. That means that a monument represents only a cost to be preserved instead of a richness to be used in a profitable way. Besides, one should not forget that the concept of cultural heritage is very large and includes an amount of tangible and intangible goods which traditional disciplines hardly consider.

Design then, can bring its approach to the cultural heritage field. The specific field of design is about people and their relation with the product – system (Mauri, 1996). Design studies reality, interprets it in order to produce something, tangible (products) or intangible (services) which

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1 The system product concept was introduced by Francesco Mauri in his book (Mauri, 1996). It refers to the fact that an object can be considered product only when it is part of a system composed by distribution, service and communication
permits society to grow and live better (let’s think about the Fiat 500’s role in after war period in Italy). For this reason, design must consider the complexity and the variety of the contemporary world and act like a link among different aspects which gravitate around a point of interest.

The case of cultural heritage is considered one of those points of interest in which a wider vision must be brought to light in order to connect and synergize all different aspects involved (building, territory, history, communication, service, fruition and preservation). Design approach permits people to use the immense heritage left by history, and to consider it as a chance to get pleasantly involved, while learning about the territory itself and having unique experiences inside it (De Biase, 2008).

1.2 | Design and Cultural Heritage

Alberto Seassaro

Design began to deal with the cultural heritage system when it started reflecting on itself, and realized that its original area of application, (in terms of furniture, product, graphic design...) result of the industrial culture, had entered into crisis and evolved into a more complex dimension. At this point design came out of the area of industry to tackle new territories (Seassaro, 2004).

A multiform platform has been built around design for cultural heritage. In this platform there are elements that together allow a mediated reflection and several design opportunities translatable into real or simulated activities that enrich the knowledge about this field. In some areas of intervention it is still not commonly understood that design is the appropriate tool to valorise the heritage and generate several cultural phenomena (Seassaro, 2006).

In design processes for the enhancement of cultural heritage there are three components:

- design as a discipline multiverse (Bertola, Manzini, 2004);
- cultural heritage which, until recently, was considered to include only artistic or historical and aesthetic values;

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2 see also the concept of esperienza culturale “capacitante” (enabling cultural experience) Sacco, Segre, 2008.
- between these two elements there is the user of these processes. While up to some time ago this user was considered a “contemplative user”, today it is necessary to identify him as a subject with a more participative role.

There is therefore an interesting triangulation:

1. *multiverso* design with its dynamically evolving phenomena,
2. cultural heritage as category which tends to become all-encompassing
3. the user, whose ways of fruition are constantly changing.

These elements are compounded by the designer-“metadesigner” as mediator-interpreter of this process.

The “metadesign” action is also expressed by historical-critical scientific profile that accompanies cultural heritage in a new dimension; cultural heritage changes because contextual factors change: as a consequence, there is a new identity, a new cultural product.

If the project aims to answer a specific question, the “metadesign” deals with the question and in doing so, uses innovative scenarios.

1.3 | Design “Calls” Cultural Heritage

*Raffaella Trochianesi*

The contribution of design in the cultural heritage context is to identify and shape design strategies, tools and methodologies to enhance the cultural heritage at different scales (from the landscape to the city, from the building to the product, and up to the intangible heritage such as traditions, crafts, etc.). Cultural heritage design is an interdisciplinary matter involving the skills of interior, product, communication and strategy design (Trocchianesi, 2005).

The evolving concept of cultural heritage, which has been extended from specific individual artistic products to a more expanded and complex dimension (often intangible) including cultural identities and material traditions of entire territories and landscapes, needs new approaches (Trocchianesi, 2006).
Such a broad and complex definition of cultural heritage leads design reviewing its cultural paradigms in order to make them applicable in the interpretation and intervention on territorial cultural resources (Trocchianesi, 2008a).

Currently the issue of cultural heritage is a strategic asset in national and international systems that support and facilitate the use of innovative approaches for the exploitation of cultural resources. Companies, governments, local and regional clusters can become partners and important clients in search of scientific expertise in this field.

Culture in its material and immaterial manifestation is becoming an ideal (political and scientific) platform for the testing of a new "Made in Italy" concept, based on the enhancement of cultural heritage through design oriented practices.

2 | CASE STUDIES

2.1 | Olbia: Stopping the Flow3

Luigi Brenna

The project Olbia: Stopping the Flow is the result of an eight day workshop4 held in Olbia by Raffella Trocchianesi and Luigi Brenna (Politecnico di Milano) during the summer school SEI (International Summer School) Environment and Design5. In this case the cultural heritage to be considered and enhanced was the city of Olbia and its surroundings.

Olbia is known for its very busy port which permits tourists to come and visit Sardinia. Not many attractions justify remaining in town, in fact people prefer to leave as soon as they can, to enjoy other Sardinian places better known for environment, services and vibrancy.

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3 In Italian the title is: “Olbia – Sostare i passaggi”.
4 The workshop was organized by the collaboration between Politecnico of Milano and Sassari’s University of Studies.
5 In Italian: SEI (Scuole Estive internazionali) Design e ambiente
From Research to Vision

The first step was to explore the city in order to capture its identity. Students were urged to express in a graphic way (by picture, video, sketches, photomontages and written thoughts) the impressions they could get by walking into town and by analyzing the communication that Olbia produced in terms of web sites, magazines, articles on news papers, brochures, and pamphlets.

Then students were invited to show the “city portrait” to better understand which kind of Olbia came out from their observations. The character of a “passing through” city emerged overbearingly, becoming the basis on which the design concept has been built upon.

Brainstorming followed the first phase of research and a vision appeared about the idea that the “grab - and - go” character of the town could represent a real opportunity. Olbia has been interpreted as a creative and subjective gate to the town itself and all of Sardinia. It has been thought as a sort of speaking, artistic and interactive window, able to welcome and emotionally introduce the huge crowd of tourists to the experience they will have. At the same time Olbia has been seen as a place able to preserve and enhance the memories and the artistic expressions experienced by the tourists during their holiday in Sardinia.

Back to Reality. Giving Shape to the Vision

How to respond in a feasible way to the arisen idea? How to convert the vision into a possible shape of reality? Naming the project was the first step we took. “Olbia Pass-Port” seemed to be a perfect name for the concept. It recalls the personal document necessary to travel, but also the importance of the port which brings so many people to pass through Olbia.
Olbia pass-port: the series of travel notebooks

The idea is about a product system based on a tool which finds itself half way from a tourist guide and a sketchbook. A sort of Moleskine produced in Olbia, thought to invite users to express themselves in a very personal and artistic way. Tourists were invited to use this particular book; signing, designing, sketching, painting, gluing and writing everything concerning the emotions Sardinian land left inside their souls. The user/composer at the end of the vacation is invited to leave a copy of his best pages which will be part of a continuously changing exhibition about Sardinia. In fact, the most communicative pages can be reproduced in order to be shown in different ways inside Olbia. They can be placed in an outdoor exhibition to display in the main course of the town; the “tourist masterpieces” could also be displayed in corners placed inside bookstores or public buildings; and they can be published by the Olbia Tourist Office either in annual books or on a section of the local websites.
By “Olbia Pass - Port” the Sardinian town becomes the emotional window of Sardinia. It prepares newcomers to an emotional adventure; it provides a pleasant exhibition for people waiting for the ship back; it contributes to give a cultural dress to Olbia which can become the “art keeper” of Sardinian beauty and can improve its image in people’s eyes by showing that Olbia cares about the people who come and visit Sardinia.
It’s important to underline the role of the product system inside the project. In fact, design in this case, is not only concerned about making a communication product aimed to promote Olbia, but with the “Olbia Pass - Port” the design is about thinking of a system which can fit only the city of Olbia: build on Olbia’s identity.” ad hoc” for Olbia. The sketchbook is only one part of the entire system and it works only if all the parts of the system function: communication, distribution, services and players involved.

Conclusion
This case wants to show that no other existing discipline is concerned about enhancing a cultural heritage site (in this case a territory) in such a way. The field of the disciplines which studies cultural heritage are so specific that one can hardly elaborate a wide vision concept such as the one we have just discussed. Furthermore, it can be said that the interpretation ability of design is often
closer to the final user than other disciplines are (Brenna, L.; Seassaro, A.; Trocchianesi, R.; under publication).  

2.2 | Gonzaga’s Chronicle. Errant Narratives with 8 Tarot Cards

Raffaella Trocchianesi

Gonzaga’s Chronicle. Errant Narratives with 8 Tarot Cards is a project developed within an applied research entitled Mantua: Culture & Commerce City, which investigates and proposes dynamics to upgrade and valorise a network of shops (principally historic ones) in the old town of Mantua, which is an important landmark of Italian cultural tourism. This research aims to relate, through design-oriented actions, the system of cultural heritage in the old town of the city within the trade system. The research is divided into two phases: an initial phase of "multidimensional" analysis of the territory aiming at building innovative scenarios leading to specific actions of enhancement, and a second phase in which six project groups receive this material previously “processed”, proposing a city visual identity with potential contents, in order to develop innovative concepts.

Gonzaga’s Chronicle. Errant Narratives with 8 Tarot Cards is one of these six developed concepts. It is a design action for urban enhancement, a system-product with the aim of upgrading the network of boutiques and shops of the old town of Mantua and some artistic and architectural outstanding works, thanks to a system of items (organized in a kit) given to visitors (citizens and tourists). The kit includes: eight playing cards, the game rules, and a city map, including eight tours

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7 Gonzaga’s Chronicle. Errant Narratives with 8 Tarot Cards project by Raffaella Trocchianesi, Elena Enrica Giunta in the research Mantua: Culture & Commerce City (scientific manager Fabrizio Schiaffonati; scientific coordination Giorgio Casoni, Daniele Fanzini, Elena Mussinelli; design processes Flaviano Celaschi, project coordination Angela De Marco. Purchaser: Camera di Commercio of Mantua, shopkeepers association of Mantua).
matched to the cards themselves; and sound-tracks with eight sound trails (corresponding to the cards and the routes; and finally, public displays near the involved shops and cultural buildings. The game is designed to promote an immersive and specific buying experience allowing a commercial and cultural city’s enhancement. The eight cards, which correspond to eight urban routes (realised and narrated by sound-tracks recorded for this purpose) represent characters, rituals, and values which are part of the history and of the urban culture of Mantua.

Gonzaga’s Chronicle. Errant Narratives with 8 Tarot Cards: 8 Tarot Cards

It is assumed that the project is going to be launched during one of the many festivals of Mantua: *Ludicamente*, (the festival of no-technology games), just to accentuate the city’s “game” vocation. Some information points, located near the six historic gateways of the old town city, will offer the kit.

This project draws on the historical practice and the iconic fascination of the tarot cards, reinterpreting them in a contemporary key and multiplying their communicative potential. Each user, having received the kit, has to choose a tarot card for his buying experience in the city (the choice is done by following game’s actions or by following one’s preferences).
The eight playing cards correspond to characters or values of the city combined within specific buying sectors (Rigoletto-fashion man, The Admirable Critonio-sport/free time man, Isabella d'Este-fashion woman, The Ghost of Agnes-sports/free time women, The Underground-food, The Company-self-care/welfare/home fashion, Sacred & Profane-culture, The Black-luxury). The graphic language is deliberately not didactic but "visionary", in fact there are figurative elements that allow an immediate recognition, dialoguing with visual suggestions and other decorative motifs. The meaning of each card in its dual version - image upright or inverted, like in traditional tarot cards - is explained by the rules of the game. The map linked to the cards highlights the buying paths into the old town. Each card’s itinerary is linked together with a sound-track designed to guide the visitor in a space disseminated experience of the city.

The audio-stories are original scripts (written by emerging writers from Mantua) based on the distinctive characteristics (in terms of content and language) of each tarot card, and provide breaks every time the visitor approaches one of the shops or buildings presented in the specific itinerary chosen. The itinerary provides moments of connection, and the sound-tracks go along with these plots, providing with the sound setting different narrative relations between characters and roads. The visual displays, positioned close to the involved shops, help the user to recognize the various stops, thanks to a silhouette image drawn on a particular tarot card.
During this experiential tour through the culture and the trade system of Mantua, the visitor comes in contact with different interfaces and languages of communication: the tarot cards evoke, the narrator’s voice says, the map indicates, and the signs verify (Trocchianesi, 2008b). The legendary and imaginative contextualisation provided for the experience creates new events for a city that proves to be the stage for countless stories (Trocchianesi, 2008c).

2.3 | “Paper Offerings” Active-Action by Design

Eleonora Lupo

“The system of relations explains and therefore increases the value and sense of Cultural Heritage” (Montella 2009), so the project “Paper Offerings Active-Action”, developed within the Asian Life Style Design Lab at Hong Kong Polytechnic University School of Design, focused on the meaningful Chinese tradition of paper offerings. It was aimed at exploring, documenting, representing and enhancing this Chinese tangible and intangible heritage as a valuable and experienceable cultural system in the contemporary Hong Kong lifestyle, in order to allow people (local community and tourists) understanding and appropriation. This objective is pursued by designing some communication devices and tools called visual display (Goldshmidt, 1994) and cultural maps.

Paper offerings are objects made out of paper, which are burnt, and offered to gods, ghosts and ancestors, basically in search of protection or good luck, but they can also be used to solve physical diseases or other problems, or to make an offer to relatives who have passed away (Le Scott, 2007). Paper is shaped in many different forms, decorated in various colors and sized in many dimensions, according to different purposes and uses. Basically traditional papers are two-dimensional (among which is the famous “paper money”) and three-dimensional copies of real objects, made up from a

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8 Visual display can be defined as systems and tools for visual reasoning and thinking, to make explicit knowledge and to support creativity.

9 This work has been based on field observation and on the anthropological research of prof. Janet Lee Scott in Hong Kong, which is the most complete and systematic documentation of paper offerings and the definitive reference for further details. Our project is meant to be complementary to this comprehensive ethnographic study, providing a way to interpret and visually represent, by design tools and maps, the paper offerings as a system. To see further detail about the project please refer to Lupo, 2009a.
frame of bamboo strips (usually every day appliances, food or servants to the more common luxury and leisure products, like portable computers, mobile phones and every kind of fashion item).

Examples of Paper Object for Worship

Everyday items are used for daily sacrifices, while special items should be used for specific events, like festival and funerals. It’s also common practice to buy and burn paper shaped as items of everyday life to provide them to the ancestors as gifts for their new life.

Usually, customers go to a paper shop and buy standard sets already packed or sets for particular deities and then go to perform the worship in the temples. Otherwise, customers can ask to the shopkeeper to prepare a personal set of paper offering.

So, even if paper offering has been disregarded and ignored as Cultural Heritage, and has never been communicated in a systemic perspective, it has various valuable elements like people knowledge, artefacts, places and practices, each one with a tangible and an intangible component:

- material paper items;
- offering rituals and worship (and values associated);
- worship locations;
- paper production sites and processes;
- paper shops and retail processes.

All these elements together form an intangible cultural system (Kirshenblatt Gimblett, 2004).

Two hypotheses were basically in the background of this project: one is that a cultural system is a connected system that functions as a whole and could not be understood and implemented without designing all the relations among the elements; the second one, is that in each cultural/material system there are elements that have been deliberately designed and elements that are not designed, or, we could say, that have been collectively shaped and therefore are not easily perceivable and appreciable, because they are habits shared in a tacit way.

So, the design actions have been directed to the identification and documentation of the Heritage in order to enhance, and revitalize the various, less evident aspects in an experienceable way. For
instance, strengthening the weaker or more fragile connections and incorporating the heritage value in the contemporary lifestyle, in order to keep the whole system alive.

The final result has been a prototype of a design based system of knowledge and experience about paper offerings objects and processes, depicting in a systemic perspective, all of its aspects, through the design of *cultural maps*, useful both for local people (making them aware of its value as common heritage) and tourists (making it possible for them to discover it).

Those cultural artifacts are qualitative maps of Hong Kong, representing connections, correlations, causal relations and meanings among the valuable tangible and intangible elements of this diffused heritage in an enjoyable itinerary.

The cultural maps have been used to localize objects, places and processes of production and uses of paper offerings. Two types of relations among the elements have been identified and structured in itineraries suitable for tourists: the first relation implies artefacts exchange, the second one implies knowledge exchange. Both of them are deeply connected with the context and the local community.
Using the map, the tourist can enjoy an articulated and complete experience of paper offerings heritage, starting from the shops and the paper items themselves, to meeting, craftsmen and learning about production processes and techniques in some workshops or to increase, knowledge about rituals and worship, and moving to the temples and to the burning places.

The map serves also as brief catalogue about paper offerings typologies and as a portable memory of the experience.

3.3 | Conclusion: Designing Cultural Heritage

Eleonora Lupo

Design for cultural heritage includes that set of theories, methodologies, tools and techniques whose ambit of application is the system of cultural heritage in its broadest sense, as the cognitive dimension, social and symbolic of a territory and a community (Lupo 2007; Lupo 2008b).

More than a disciplinary field, it is therefore a context of application. Within this context, the design approach integrates different technical and operational processes in order to reach results and actions possibly located, recognizable and replicable. The typologies of design interventions are
addressed both on shapes configuration and on procedures and methodology, according to the complexity of the cultural heritage (Lupo, 2006; Lupo 2009b).

Some basic branches of design can be identified, in terms of operational practices and methods of the traditional concept design for cultural heritage, such as exhibition design, communication design, lighting design, and services design applied to the cultural field.

However, we detached a more articulated “system” of design skills, such as the ability to think strategically about aggregate skills (Seassaro, 2005). Those capabilities translate strategic choices, (such as heritage protection, management and exploitation), into practical activities for knowledge, organization and experience of the cultural heritage, throughout the synergic application of the communicative, specialist and strategic competences of design. (Celaschi, 2004).

The objective pursued by design is to create, activate and increase the value of a cultural asset in its civil, social and developmental role (from “value per se” to “use value”, as system and experience). The concept of enhancement evolves from the “representation of culture” (Greenblatt 1995, Karp, 1995) to a system of collective use and development for an area and its community of reference: the heritage enhancement contributes to the construction of identity, integration and social cohesion, development, creativity and innovation (Greffe, 2005), overlapping short term and long term strategies.

Moving from competence to design processes, it is consequently possible to individuate metadesign\textsuperscript{10} actions aimed, with a descriptive approach, at recognizing the value of a cultural object and at providing it as a context more than a content of project for forthcoming interventions,\

\textsuperscript{10} Within the innovation processes the design activity can be synthetically presented as metadesign and design. The metadesign (Giaccardi, 2005) has often been defined as “design of a design process”, and is focused on research and finalized in understanding a problem (analyzing user, context, market, competitors, technology) in order to generate possible solutions (called visions and scenarios) «already inscribed in the reality» (Dematteis, 1995), while the design phase is focused on concept generation, modeling and prototyping, testing and evaluation, development and production. Both of them are creative processes that require design thinking and skills, but use different methods and tools: usually the metadesign is considered supporting the design action, but is itself a reflection on the creative process too.
and design actions aimed at the active-action (Lupo 2008a) of cultural heritage, improving by design its protection, knowledge (i.e. relief, representation, archive design), fruition, promotion and production (i.e. management, exhibition design, communication and corporate identity design, design of educational services and information design, production of multimedia and video, events design).

Design serves as a mediation between a context, a cultural object (or a system of goods) and the user or the community of reference, and has a relational approach among different layers and scales of action, becoming the form of organization of cultural heritage, allowing the legitimacy of its value (i.e Paper offerings “active-action”), promoting occasions and times of different access, use and appropriation, (i.e. Gonzaga’s Chronicle), and developing strategies for innovative re-contextualization of the same value (i.e. Olbia Pass-port), investigating the issues of authenticity (MacCannel, 2005), typicality and production locality (Lai, 2007).

As seen from the case studies, design for cultural heritage helps to facilitate the adoption of an innovative, systemic vision of cultural heritage in all its forms and to make, through a participative process, its active-action and fruition socially sustainable and economically viable for the community, as recommended by the institutional bodies for development (European Commission, 2007).

Bibliography


