Sustainable qualities: powerful drivers of social change

How social innovation is changing the world (and how design can help)

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Abstract

Looking attentively at the complexity of contemporary society we can detect a variety of creative communities involved in sustainable social innovation. Behind each of these initiatives, stands a group of people who have been able to imagine, develop and manage something new, beyond the standard ways of thinking and doing. They succeeded in challenging the apparent hegemony of mainstream ideas about how problems need to be solved by providing valuable alternatives.

A primary common feature of such creative communities is that most of them have sprung from the joint confrontation with problems from everyday life. Facing up to them, they conceived and practically enhanced new models of thought & action *where everybody wins - the individuals, society and the environment.* A second common feature is that they produce and are, in turn, driven by new notions of qualities: new qualities of their physical and social environments. We can refer to them as *sustainable qualities: qualities that ask for more sustainable behaviours in order to enjoy their benefits.*

The paper introduces and discusses these qualities, in particular the *deeper underlying frameworks* that define them, such as: the *recognition of complexity as a value*, the *search for dense, deep and long-lasting relationships*, the *redefinition of work and collaboration as inherently human expressions* and the *human scale of the socio-technical systems* and its positive role in the definition of a democratic, human-centered, sustainable society.

The qualities that these frameworks generate are radically more diverse than the ones that the mainstream models have spread and emphasised across the globe in the last century. The paper concludes by asserting that these sustainable qualities clash with many if not most of the mainstream ways of thinking and doing and by indicating that, in this battle between cultural (and behavioural) models, several different social actors play a role. Designers - who are or should b, influential players when the topic at stake is the quality of "daily life experience" - are as such a very relevant group of social actors in a process that is shifting contemporary society from a paradigm characterised by individualism, consumerism and unsustainable behaviours to an alternative one, of which the contours are gradually emerging.

Quality as a driver of change

In 1989, Carlo Petrini founded the international Slow Food movement. Its manifesto begins with the words:

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[1]   DESIS-*Design for Social Innovation for Sustainability* is a network of *design labs* based in design schools (or in other design-oriented universities) promoting social innovation towards sustainability. These *DESIS Labs* are teams of professors, researchers and students who orient their didactic and research activities towards starting and/or facilitating social innovation processes. Each lab develops projects and research on the basis of its own resources and possibilities and, at the same time, acts as the node of a wider network of similar labs, the *DESIS Network*, which enables them to exchange experiences and collaboratively develop larger design and research programs (www.desis-network.org).

[2]   *Idem.*

[3]   International Association of Universities of Art, Design and Media (www.cumulusassociation.org)

"We believe that everyone has a fundamental right to pleasure and consequently the responsibility to protect the heritage of food, tradition and culture that makes this pleasure possible"[4]

However, this is not the movement's only concern. The manifesto continues: *"We consider ourselves co-producers, not consumers, because by being informed about how our food is produced and actively supporting those who produce it, we become a part of and a partner in the production"*[5]

In other words, Slow Food proposed a new way of looking at food consumption. But it also went beyond this intention and - driven by the same basic motivation - it operated equally on the supply and valorisation of food products that would have otherwise gradually disappeared, because they were not considered economically viable in terms of the economics of the dominant agro-industrial system. In other words, it has cultivated food awareness on the demand side. It did so through the actions of consumer-producer organisations: the *Condotte*, known outside of Italy as *Convivia*. Consequently, it created a market for high quality products. On the supply side, it also addressed farmers, breeders, fishermen and the firms that process their products. With them it has promoted local organisations (the *Presidia*) to support them by connecting them to one another and to their respective markets.

Petrini and his teams who have set up Slow Food, have been drivers of a meaningful, radical social change. This operation was made possible by carrying out an extraordinary *strategic design* initiative. It managed to link its concrete *local activities* with *far reaching visions* able to bring people together, to awaken the best in them and to give render meaningful everyone's actions, whether big or small.

Petrini and Slow Food, generated a radically new vision on what an advanced, sustainable food system could look like. In coherence with that, adopting a strategic design approach, he created structures (the *Convivia* and the *Presidia*) to enable previously weak farmers to produce high quality products and find suited channels to sell their products at a fair price. In doing so, Slow Food set up what we, in design terminology, would call an *enabling system:* a system of products and services aimed at empowering the social actors involved[6].

We can summarise what Petrini and Slow Food did in a design strategy based on three interdependent types of action: (1) Recognition of a real problem and, most importantly, of the *social resources that might be able to solve it* (people, communities and their capabilities). (2) Proposal of (organisational and economic) structures that could *activate these resources*, helping them to self-organise, endure over time and replicate in different contexts. (3) The building (and communication) of an overall vision able *to encompass a myriad of local activities* and *orient them* coherently. It is this vision of new sustainable qualities that we aim to discuss here.

The starting observation is the following: the Slow Food venture did not start by criticizing the state of things but rather by recognizing the "right to pleasure", meaning the right of access to "good, clean, fair" products. It went on to make both concrete and viable an idea of quality that contrasts the currently ruling one. The idea of quality that Slow Food talks about is a profound kind of quality that requires time in order to be produced, recognised, understood and enjoyed. As a matter of fact, the adjective "slow" in Slow Food refers to food that is of high quality (also) because it is produced and consumed taking the time that it naturally takes. This is a crucial point: the slowness to which Slow Food refers is not a quality in itself – nothing is good just because it is slow. But slowness reveals itself to be a necessary requirement for the production and appreciation of the profound quality Petrini focuses on, the quality of being "good, clean and fair" at the same time[7].

This relationship between quality and time is both recognisable and extendible beyond the realms of food. The quality of all things basically cannot rise above, by producing them in a hurry. They cannot be appreciated without dedicating them some time. Profound quality is the result of a slow social process in which the ability to act and create goes hand in hand with the ability to recognise. In conclusion, the "right to pleasure", which conveys a connotation of something pleasurable, desirable, brings along new notions

[4]   Petrini, C. (2007) *Slow Food Nation. Why our food should be good, clean and fair*, Rizzoli, Milano
[5]   Petrini, C. (2007) *Slow Food Nation. Why our food should be good, clean and fair*, Rizzoli, Milano
[6]   Jegou, F., Manzini, E. (2008), *Collaborative services Social Innovation and design for sustainability*, Polidesign Milano
[7]   Petrini, C. (2007) *Slow Food Nation. Why our food should be good, clean and fair*, Rizzoli, Milano

of time, relationships and work, which stand in contrast to mainstream expressions of those notions in the last century. In the opinion of the authors, it is most important in contemporary society to promote this "right to pleasure" and the new sets of values it introduces.

Slow Food's ideas on quality prove insightful for the topic at hand because of several reasons. We will consider two of them:

- as one of the world's most successful cases of social innovation, Slow Food emphasises the relevance of the qualitative dimension. It shows how this qualitative dimension must be supported by a pragmatic one, hence rendering evident the double link between cultural and organisational issues.

- In the Slow Food venture, neither Petrini, nor his main partners have been trained as designers (the Slow Food collaboration with designers is relatively recent) as such. Nevertheless, all of them can, to every extent, be considered great designers. The stories they can tell say a lot about what designers can and should do in order to trigger and support sustainable social innovation.

Let us now enlarge our scope from the well known case of Slow Food, to a myriad of other cases of social innovation that are telling similar stories.

Social innovation

Social innovation is "*a new idea that works in meeting social goals*"[8]. Given this definition and looking attentively at the complexity of contemporary society, we can indicate a variety of initiatives that can be considered good examples of social innovation. They range from groups of families sharing services to reduce economic and environmental costs, while also improving their neighbourhoods; new forms of social interchange and mutual help (such as time banks); systems of mobility that present alternatives to the use of individual cars (from car-sharing and carpooling to the rediscovery of bicycles); the development of productive activities based on local resources and skills that are linked into wider global networks (e.g. certain products typical to a specific place, or the fair and direct trade networks between producers and consumers established around the globe) and so on. These are but a few examples. We could easily extend our list to include initiatives that touch upon every aspect of people's daily lives around the globe[9].

Zooming in on such initiatives, we can observe that they challenge traditional ways of doing things and introduce new, alternative and often more sustainable behaviours. Of course, each case ought to be analysed in detail in order to assess its true environmental and social sustainability more accurately. However, we can recognise at a glance their congruence with some of the fundamental guidelines for sustainability.
First of all, for instance, many of these initiatives have an unprecedented ability to align individual interests with social and environmental ones — reinforcing the social fabric while doing so. They generate new and more sustainable notions of well-being, a well-being where greater value is placed on the quality of the social and physical context, on a caring attitude, on a slower pace in life, on collaborative action, on new forms of community and locality.

Furthermore, attaining this well-being appears to converge with major guidelines for environmental sustainability, including positive attitudes towards sharing spaces and goods, a preference for biological, regional and seasonal food, a regeneration of local networks etc. Most importantly, it corresponds to an economic model that could become significantly less transport-intensive and better capable of integrating renewable energies and eco-efficient systems.

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[8]   Mulgan, J. (2006) *Social innovation. What it is, why it matters, how it can be accelerated*, Basingsotke Press, London
[9]   Meroni, A. (2007) *Creative communities. People inventing sustainable ways of living*, Polidesign, Milano; DESIS, www.desis-network.org

Because these examples of social innovation suggest solutions that merge personal interests with social and environmental ones, they can be considered promising initiatives. Within the context such initiatives, in different ways and for different reasons, people have been able to steer their expectations and their individual behaviours towards more sustainable ways of living and producing.

Common features

Although these promising initiatives of social innovation still represent a minority, their number is increasing and their influence is spreading. In the past ten years, the ways in which social innovation is taking place and the strategies to trigger, support and direct it, have received increasing attention, which has led to in-depth discussion and discovery of various relevant features that have been observed. To give a preliminary overview of such features, we shall resort to three representative examples to introduce and briefly discuss them as well as their major implications for social and economic models.

Example 1: NYC Community Gardens (USA)

Community Gardens are groups of volunteer gardeners that maintain public gardens in New York City with the support of GreenThumb, a program within the Department of Parks and Recreation that provides material, technical and financial support to gardeners. The gardens were initiated in response to the city's financial crisis in the 1970's, which resulted in the abandonment of public and private land. The majority of GreenThumb gardens were hosted in derelict vacant lots.

In 1973 local residents and a group of gardening activists known as the Green Guerrillas started to plant and cultivate vacant lots with "seed bombs" and tree pits in the area. On April 23, 1974, the City's office of Housing Preservation and Development approved the first site for rental as the "Bowery Houston Community Farm and Garden" for $1 a month. Today, there are hundreds of community gardens in New York City, located in all five boroughs, hosting a wide variety of activities.

The volunteer gardeners, who are the backbone of this system, vary in age and background. They conduct multiple activities: from planting and maintaining trees, shrubs and flowers to holding events and educational workshops, producing local urban food and opening the garden to the public on special occasions throughout the year. Considering these activities as a whole, they engender community and citizens' engagement[10].

Example 2. Southwark Circle of Care (UK)

Southwark Circle is a membership organisation that provides on-demand help for elderly people with daily practical tasks through reliable, local neighbourhood helpers. In particular, the Circle supports these people in taking care of their households. It also proposes different kinds of social and health-related activities, improving the practical daily life of the elderly and, at the same time, promoting a sense of community and participation. The neighbourhood helpers are rewarded within the framework of a time-bank scheme and are technically supported by professional social workers.

The Southwark Circle idea was co-designed and tested with over 250 elderly people and their families and developed by Participle Ltd, a London-based design company. Their first real-scale pilot was launched in May 2009.
Participle's prototypes are now being developed in several rural and urban areas. Four Circles were launched in 2010, nine others are now in the business planning stage (with Participle supporting them in developing the economic model and cost-saving calculations). A Circle becomes economically self-sustaining, requiring no further funds from the local authority, in its third year.

Example 3. Ainonghui, Farmers' Association (China)

In 2005 in the city of Liuzhou, Guangxi (China), a group of citizens found that they could not access good, safe food through ordinary city markets. They went to villages about a two-hour drive from the city and found that

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10   Lupi, G. (2011) 'Cases of service co-production', working document, Parsons DESIS Lab, Parsons The new School for design at New York, USA.

traditional agriculture models, although struggling, still survived in the remote countryside. They eventually set up a social enterprise, a farmers' association called Ainonghui, in order to help struggling farmers to survive and to establish a stable channel of good, organic food for themselves and each other.

Today this farmers' association manages four organic restaurants and a community-run organic food store. By selling traditionally sourced food to citizens, they also educate them on what traditional/organic agriculture is and (re)introduce a sustainable lifestyle into the city. Thanks to Ainonghui and the direct links it has created between citizens and farmers, the incomes of farmers are now better able to sustain traditional farming practices while allowing them to lead a better and more respected life. Moreover, several farmers have returned to the countryside to join the organic food network.[11]

Looking at these examples, our first observation is that, behind each of them, there is a group of people which has been able to imagine, develop and manage something new, beyond the standard ways of thinking and doing, i.e., to shatter the existing mainstream idea of how problems need to be solved.

In order to do that, they had : (1) *to (re)discover the power of cooperation;* (2) *to recombine, in a creative way, already existing products, services, places, knowledge, skills and traditions* and (3) *to rely on their own resources*, without waiting for a general change in politics, the economy, or any institutional or infrastructural assets of the system. For this reason, we can refer to these groups of people as **creative communities**: *people who cooperate in inventing, enhancing and managing viable solutions for new (and sustainable) ways of living*.

A primary common feature of creative communities and of the promising initiatives they are able to generate is that most of them have grown out of the need and will to come up with solutions for problems posed by contemporary everyday life; examples include: how can we have more green spaces in our neighbourhood? How can we organise the daily functions of the elderly when their relatives no longer provide the support they traditionally offered and the state no longer has the means required to organise the requested services? How can we respond to the increasing demand for natural food and healthy living conditions when living in a global metropolis?

These questions are as day-to-day as they are radical. In spite of its overwhelming offer of products and services, the dominant production and consumption system is not only unable to provide answers to these questions but, above all, it is unable to providing *satisfying* answers from the point of view of sustainability. The aforementioned creative communities have been able to answer these questions and others by applying their own creativity to them, in order to part with mainstream models of thought and action, by conceiving and fine-tuning new *win-win-win* models *for individuals, society and the environment.*

Community gardens in the New York case, for instance, provide green space for the neighbourhood, improve air quality and protect biodiversity as well as support the well-being of residents. They also improve and enhance social interaction, public safety and the economic effectiveness of the public investment (better services for less money). Similar evaluations can be made for the other two examples: the circle of care produces better services for the elderly at a lower cost to the community, while community-supported agriculture creates a kind of symbiosis between citizens and famers where everybody wins.

At the core of this positive outcome lies a radical change — a paradigmatic shift in people's roles in service systems, in their motivations and ultimately in the economic models they conceive and realise.

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[11]   Zhong, F. (2011) 'Community supported agriculture in China', working document, DIS-Indaco, Politecnico di Milano at Milano, Italy

Roles and models

In promising initiatives like the aforementioned three, the "end user" essentially no longer exists: no one involved in the initiatives is merely a user or a consumer. All people involved are, in different ways, agents of the solution. It is exactly this dramatical change of role that makes these solutions viable. In the case of the Southwark Circle, for instance, the central issue is to assess the role and presence of the elderly in society. The ageing of the population is a well-known example amongst the many complex challenges in contemporary society. Given the new demographic structure, there are simply not enough resources to deliver everybody the services they need in an acceptable way - if services are to be designed and delivered in the traditional way. This purely economic problem often conceals another, equally large one: the sense of loneliness, abandonment and uselessness or obsoleteness experienced by many of these elderly people. In this respect, the Southwark Circle, by giving an active role to elderly members and their social network (i.e., the network of neighbourhoods that can support them in their daily lives), succeeds in breaking the old paradigm of social services that mainly target passive individuals. Southwark Circle's strategy shows what is possible in economic and qualitative terms when *end users are considered active participants* in defining and realising a solution and when their *social networks are valorised* as integral and fundamental components of the solution delivery system.

The *Ainonghui (farmers' association)* - as in most cases of community-supported agriculture - is based on a social and economic model implying new *relationships* between people (in this case, farmers and citizens) and places (in this case, city and countryside). Its model breaks with the traditional boundaries, blurring roles and (re)connecting places, creating synergies on the basis of different motivations and leading to a valuable coexistence of different perceived values. The community-supported agriculture model may be seen as the seeding bed of a new economy, a *social economy* which manifests itself as an ecology of different economies: those of the market, the state, foundations, but also, as in the proposed initiatives, of the gift economy and the "old" economy of families and neighbourhoods blended in with the newest economy of sharing via emerging social networks.

These observations also lead to a discussion of the relationships between traditions and new proposals. Creative communities, as shown by the three different examples presented here, build their own solutions (i.e., answers to the questions posed by contemporary life) using whatever they can find in the vicinity of their system as *building materials*. This means making use of existing ideas, accessible technologies and living traditions. These often show similarities with ways of doing and thinking that characterise pre-industrial cultures (i.e., the old market, the grandparents' vegetable gardens, the caring neighbours of "the good old days," the sharing of tools and equipment that used to be the norm before the advent of our present consumption-oriented society and so on). The existence of these evident links to traditional ways of living could lead some observers to say that, after all, these initiatives present nothing new and simply reflect nostalgia for a village life that cannot return.

Looking more carefully at those initiatives and their motivations, however, shows that this conclusion could not be further from the truth. The so-called "past" emerging in these initiatives is actually a very much up-to-date social and cultural resource. It is the value of neighbourhood conviviality that enables us to breathe new life and a sense of security into a neighbourhood or a village. It is the sense of seasonality and local food production that can set today's unsustainable food network straight again. It is the value of sharing that enables us to lighten the burden of the apparatus and makes available the specially equipped spaces we require. In the end, we can say that traditions provide a heritage of knowledge, behavioural patterns and organisational forms. As such, seen in light of current conditions and problems of existence, these traditions may constitute valuable building materials for the future.

Design for social innovation

Social innovations are *design-driven processes* with a particular characteristic: those who "design" constitute a very diverse group of social actors who, consciously or not, adopt ways of thinking and

competences that are in all respects forms of "design thinking" and "design knowledge"[12]. It must be noted that the notion of *design for social innovation* we employ to here is rather broad and thus inclusive. In practice, it is an "umbrella concept" under which one can find "*whatever design can do to trigger and support social innovation*"[13]. Similarly, we can say that a designer for social innovation is anyone who is actively involved in conceiving and developing social innovations. There are the *design experts*, who have been trained as designers, but there are also all those who, consciously or not, adopt a design approach and use design competences in different ways, playing different roles: from feeding the social conversations with *scenarios* and *proposals*, to empowering creative communities with *specifically conceived sets of products, services* and *communication artefacts*.

Given its spontaneous nature, social innovation defies a strictly planned approach. Nevertheless, something can be done in order to make the social invention of new ways of living and producing more likely to succeed, in order to make sure that once a new idea becomes a promising case, it can be supported and become more durable, effective, accessible and eventually, replicable.

Generating a new idea, creatively adapting and managing an existing one or even simply actively participating in an ongoing venture often calls for a significant commitment in terms of time and personal dedication. Although this almost "heroic" aspect is one of the most fascinating characteristics of many of these initiatives, objectively speaking it is also a limit to their long-term existence and to the possibility of being replicated and adopted by many. This appears to be a major limit to the diffusion of collaborative endeavours in general: the limited number of people that both have the possibility and the will to cross the threshold of commitment required to become active participants, or even promotors of such initiatives.
In order to overcome these problems, collaborative organisations need to become more *accessible* (reducing the aforementioned threshold), more *effective* (increasing the ratio between results and required individual and social efforts) and more *attractive* (enhancing people's motivation to be active).
Of course, each collaborative organisation will require its own specific implementation strategies. Nevertheless, some general design guidelines can be drawn. Regardless of the specific case, it will be necessary for instance to promote communication strategies that provide the required knowledge, to support individual capabilities in order to make the organisation accessible to a larger group of people, to develop service and business models that match the economic and/or cultural context of potential participants, to reduce the amount of time and space required and increase flexibility, to facilitate community building and so on. In turn, these strategies generate an articulated product-service system that, as a whole, can be defined *an enabling system*: "*a system that provides cognitive, technical and organisational instruments so as to enable individuals and/or communities to achieve a result, using their skills and abilities to the best advantage and, at the same time, regenerating the quality of living contexts, in which they happen to live*"[14].

In practical terms, what enabling systems should do is to bring into play a specific kind of intelligence, i.e. the intelligence that is needed to stimulate, develop and regenerate the ability and competence of those who promote and use them. Obviously, the greater the expertise and motivation of the user, the simpler the solutions may become. And vice versa: the less expertise they embody, the larger the extent to which the system must be able to make up for the individual's lack of skill by supplying what he/she does not know or cannot do. Finally, the less the user is motivated by economic and functional reasons, the more the system must be not merely friendly, but also culturally attractive.

The latter, brings us a step forward from the first line of action, i.e. to conceive enabling systems, to the second one, i.e. to promote sustainable qualities that attract and stimulate sustainable behaviour.

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[12] Bruns, C. et al. (2006) 'Transformation Design', *RED Paper 02*, Design Council, London; Manzini, E. (2009), 'New Design Knowledge', *Design Studies,* no 301

[13] DESIS, (2012), DESIS Presentation, www.desis-network.org

[14] Jegou, F., Manzini, E. (2008), *Collaborative services Social Innovation and design for sustainability*, Polidesign Milano

Sustainable qualities

Citizens, associations, enterprises and local governments that conceive and set up new solutions and those that actively and collaboratively participate in them, do it by choice. In other words, in the solutions they create and produce, *creative communities* and their supporting partners, recognise some features that are better than the ones proposed by the mainstream unsustainable production and consumption system: they choose solutions permitting them to live a higher quality of life (i.e., a way of life that they perceive to be of a higher quality, to be better than the mainstream alternative) and consume less (i.e., fewer products and less occupancy of space). That is, they compensate for the reduction in consumption with an increase in something else that they consider more valuable.

This "something else" is generally represented by qualities of their physical and social environments. We can refer to them as *sustainable qualities: qualities that ask for more sustainable behaviours in order to enjoy them,* qualities that, as Slow Food anticipated and as grassroots social innovation empirically demonstrates, can substitute for the unsustainable ones that have been predominant in the past century[15]. These qualities are attractors of sustainable behaviour. Let us move beyond observations of such promising initiatives as instances of evident trends to seek for *frameworks that could help us define them*. The ones that we consider here include *relationships, time, work, collaboration, scale*, *places and complexity.* These *frameworks* and the new qualities ensuing from them, are diverse yet also interdependent. They are like different views of a broader picture, the different facets of a complex *pluriverse* which could eventually be considered a pattern of signals indicating an emerging culture, or even an emerging civilisation.

·   *Relationships*

Promising initiatives are social organisations. Their structure is a system of interactions between people and between people, places and products. These interactions are what ultimately characterise them. *Creative communities seem to be particularly sensitive to these interactions and to complex, deep human relationships.* In fact, in several cases, it is exactly this interest in stronger relationships that tends to lead behavioural choices. This shift from products to interactions is not new. The present mainstream system of production and consumption has already made this shift, yet often by reducing interactions to shallow experiences (e.g. proposing life as reality-tv shows, living environments as theme parks). Creative communities on the contrary, are generating solutions that ask for denser, deeper, longer lasting systems of relationships. These "*deep relationships"* are exactly what they value.

·   *Time*

Both complexity and deep interactions ask for new valuations, interpretations and experiences of time. The time needed to build enriching complexity and deep relationships, i.e. *qualitative time*, is characterised by a slower pace. As anticipated introducing Slow Food and its background theories, this slower time is needed in order to link together a multiplicity of actors, places and products and build several layers of meanings on them. *Creative communities recognise this link and - unlike in contemporary accelerated time - they recognise slowness as a precondition for producing more profound qualities.* The discovery of the "slow," of course, doesn't intend to substitute "fast time," dominant in the past century up until now, with its opposite, "slow time." The time of complexity is an "*ecology of times"* where different types, with different characteristics and different paces, coexist.

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[15]   Manzini, E. (2010), "Small, Local, Open and Connected: Design Research Topics in the Age of Networks and Sustainability," in *Journal of Design Strategies*, vol 4, no 1, Spring

· *Work*

Enriching complexity, deep relationships and an ecology of time form the backdrop against which human activities can and must be reshaped. At the centre of this new scene stands the (re)evaluation of work as a primary means of human expression. *Creative communities seem to move in this direction. In fact, they re-evaluate work and see human beings as individuals carrying out meaningful activities* - people active in "making something happen," in trying to shape the context of their lives and create viable futures. As such, they are in radical opposition of the mainstream system that considers human beings mostly as mere consumers, users and spectators of shows that somebody else produced. But creative communities are also challenging the traditional idea of work because they greatly re-value manual work and because they extend the idea of work to a broader range of activities. These include tasks that normally are not considered work, such as activities of care, of neighbourhood management and community building - activities that ultimately enable people to face problems of everyday life and constitute the basic fabric of the daily quality of life. This framework leads to the emergence of the quality of "*meaningful work*".

· *Collaboration*

In this same process of re-evaluation/re-definition of the notion of work, the value and the power of *collaboration* re-appears. It is a necessary precondition for "making something happen" and for allowing people to play an active role in the construction of their desirable future. *Creative communities are, by nature, based on collaboration. They are groups of individuals that decide to connect in order "to make something happen."* Participants freely decide to relinquish part of their individuality to create a system of links with other interested individuals. Ways of collaboration vary as do their motivations to do so. In the initiatives we have studied, there is a blend of discovery of the practical effectiveness of doing things together and the cultural value of sharing ideas and projects. In contrast to what used to happen in traditional communities, this form of collaboration is not mandatory: it is a "*collaboration by choice*", where people can freely enter and opt out. This intentional collaboration situates itself at the crossroads of two trajectories: one moving from hyper-individualistic people of most industrialised societies, who (re)discover the power of doing things together and the other moving from traditional communities in less industrialised societies, that move towards more flexible forms of intentional collaboration.

· *Scale*

Small-scale organisations are, generally speaking, more transparent and comprehensible and, therefore, nearer to the local community. At the same time, many of these small-scale initiatives are connected to other similar or complementary ones. By jointly weaving a large distributed system, they hint at a new concept of globalisation - a distributed globalisation where, for each process of production, distribution and consumption, much of the decision-making, know-how and economic value remains in the hands, minds and pockets of the local community. *Creative communities seem to orient themselves in this direction for two different sets of reasons.* On the one hand, they permit members to understand and manage (in an open and democratic way) complex social-technical systems. On the other hand, the "*human scale*" of the communities gives individuals the opportunity to carry out their activities to fulfil their needs and build their desirable futures from within the framework of organisations where human relationships continue to be lively and personal.

· *Places*

The small scale and interconnectedness of social organisations allow them to be deeply rooted in a place. Simultaneously, by being highly interconnected they can also be very open - to global flows of ideas, information, people, goods and money. *Creative communities tend to search for*

this balance between the local and the open: a "cosmopolitan localism" capable of generating a new sense of place. As such, places are no longer isolated entities, but rather nodes in short and long distance networks where the short networks generate and regenerate the local socio-economic fabric and the long ones connect a particular community to the rest of the world. Within this framework, a variety of new local, open and highly contemporary activities are taking place, such as the rediscovery of neighbourhoods, the resurgence of local food and local crafts, the search for products developed in close proximity in order to have more direct experience with their origins and the strategy of self-sufficiency to promote community resilience to external threats and problems.

· *Complexity*

All the cases of social innovation and the solutions they generate, are intrinsically complex. As such, they cannot be reduced to singular motivations and singular results: both motivations and results are multiple and their quality depends upon their variety and configuration. *Creative communities recognise this kind of complexity as a core value in their existence, i.e. as richness in the experiences they offer*. With this kind of complexity, the traditional boundaries between who designs, who delivers and who is a user of a solution become increasingly blurred. No stereotypical profile of participants can be employed. Therefore, the emergence of this "*enriching complexity*" can be considered a value reflecting the very nature of human beings (the complexity of which cannot be expressed in mono-dimensional terms).

Deep relationships, ecology of time, meaningful work, collaboration by choice, human scale, cosmopolitan localism and enriching complexity, are qualities we have been able to discern so far as sustainable qualities emerging from qualitative frameworks. In our opinion, these sustainable qualities urge for a reflection on their value in contemporary society and the consequences they might lead to if considered in a bigger picture.

New qualities, social change and design

The quality frameworks we have outlined are situated at the deepest level of the social fabric, the one that Fernand Braudel referred to when he introduced the concept of *longue durée*[16] ,i.e. the history of the ways in which people's everyday lives are collocated in time and space. These cultural and social structures, following Braudel, are so deep and change so slowly, that, usually they pass by unnoticed to the actors involved. Nevertheless, there are periods in which things move faster and in which existing long-lasting structures clash with newer, emerging ones. It appears that we are living one of these periods right now, a period in which the "tectonic plate" of modernity clashes with a newly emerging one, shaped by the converging powers of the limits of the Planet and the power of connectivity.

Thus the question becomes: are qualitative frameworks described in the previous paragraphs expressions of the emerging tectonic plate of a new sustainable civilisation? Our intuitive answer is affirmative in this respect: what we are witnessing is a confrontation that will touch and has already touched people at the deepest levels of their daily lives. We could label it *the war of times and places*: a confrontation in which different structures of our everyday lives collide and compete. It is in this dynamic context that the aforementioned qualitative frameworks, considered as a complex whole, give rise to *a new set of qualities: sustainable qualities.* As they stand in stark contrast to the past century's mostly unsustainable ones, these qualities may further develop from mere signals into powerful drivers of change.

A further assessment of the dynamics of these frameworks and their ensuing qualities would benefit strongly from the contribution of insights and understandings from different disciplines. Amidst these, considering their skill-base, designers can be considered core figures in the equation of people that are and should now play a central role in this transition. The frameworks from which the sustainable qualities

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16   Braudel, F. (1958) 'Histoire et sciences sociales: La longue durée', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales,* vol 13 no 4

arise have been objects of study in the past. Although the ensuing qualities have an innovative character, we can make use of several cultural, historical, philosophical and sociological references to help us better understand and define them. If for example philosophers can help to study the emergent qualities and define their critical character in more detail, designers should take up their role in picturing this new paradigm. Because of the nature of their discipline, because of the culture of projects they inherited throughout the history of design, willingly or not, they are influential players when the topic at stake is the quality of the daily life experience. Moreover, looking at the past, it is easy to recognise that, considered as a whole, designers did a lot to promote the past century's solutions and qualities (in many cases oblivious however to their un-sustainability). Today, the image is more complex and contradictory: on the one hand many designers are still working from the same business-as-usual attitude. But on the other hand, various others are searching in alternative directions of how to become positive agents of change, frontrunners in moving beyond the kaleidoscopic surface of the present to recognise (and amplify) the signals of this emerging (sustainable) civilisation.

To raise awareness of these emerging sustainable qualities and values is probably the first necessary step for any designer in order to empower social-innovation oriented initiatives and to help shape and support this newly emerging paradigm.

A lot has been achieved already, but much more still remains to be done. The war of times and places, even if it started decades ago, is still in its infancy. Most still needs to happen. It will be a dramatic, fascinating confrontation.

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