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01

THEORIES AND PRACTICES

Design for Territories as reflective practice

by Marina Parente

METADESCRIPTION
Design for Territories is a relatively recent field of study and project, based on situated learning methods and reflective practice.

KEYWORDS
Design for Territories, reflective practice, learning by doing.

ABSTRACT
Design for Territories is a relatively recent field of study and project, based on situated learning methods and reflective practice. As meta-discipline, in order to be applied to fields other than products, it has to confront and dialogue with other discipline. The paper begins with a quick overview of the evolution of Design for Territories, compares it with other disciplines, and then describes the current framework of European planning and defines the methodological approach. Finally, it introduces the new “D4T - Design for the Territories” Research Network of the Design Department, Politecnico di Milano.

1. Introduction

Design for Territories is a field of study and project that was born in the late ‘90s, at a time of fervent cultural debate, prompted by the economic, productive and social transformation of big cities, that had begun to manifest itself in the previous decade. For the first time urban progress manifested itself as a decrease, with the abandonment of industrial spaces and activities and with the loss of identity and economies.

The concept of development, the role of urban spaces, and the relationship between town and country, between center and periphery were changing. It was a time when a paradigm shift was needed with testing of new methods and creative solutions, in which all disciplines engaged in the development of the territories began to question their levels of involvement, their methods and potential solutions.

But even before the consolidation of new inter and intra-disciplinary approaches, action and field-testing sought reflection on new practices to be applied in the meantime. The case of the urban renewal of Barcelona during the Winter Olympics in 1992 is still considered as a best practice. The big event becomes an opportunity to rethink the city, here transforming Barcelona from an industrial city of the nineteenth century to a modern metropolis.

The goal was well defined in the urban planning document: “Consolidating Barcelona as an entrepreneurial European metropolis, affecting the macro-region where it is located, with a quality of socially balanced modern life and highly situated in the Mediterranean culture.” At the foundation of the strategic objectives there was a reflection on the idea of the city as a large, shared vision, which also considered the intangible factors. This vision can be summed up well

- as JM Serra, the municipal administration consultant for Barcelona ‘92 and Barcelona Regional, described at a seminar in Milan in 2011 – in the poster designed by Javier Mariscal in 1979, which already glimpsed the potential of the city through effective hyphenation of its name:

BAR: the space of sociability, openness to young people and creative classes.

CEL: the reclamation of the sky, in terms of public property and open space, which had been progressively obstructed by the increasing density of construction in the Plan Cerdà for private rental purposes.

ONA: the recovery of the waterfront and the visual link of the city with the sea, through new spaces and new forms of public use.

Javier Mariscal, Barcelona poster, 1979

The success of the Barcelona case lies in the long-term strategic vision, in the synergies between the various public and private actors, in integrating interventions at the "hard" scale (the architectural, urban planning and infrastructure) and the "soft" scale (communication, lifestyle, the new image, attractiveness for new users). Barcelona managed to become a place of reference for new creative generations before the success of the famous book by Richard Florida (2002). Still considered today as one of the finest examples of city marketing, Barcelona has become a paradigmatic case for ex-post disciplinary reflections: it is considered by city planning as an example of a "reticular strategic plan", an integrated form between the top-down models and bottom-up planning, where a wide network of actors is now involved in the decision-making, and policy and management processes to enable a prior agreement with respect to the city's "operational" project (Perulli, 2004, p.75), anticipating the current indications of European planning.

This large parenthesis is to reiterate that large and complex territorial changes during this time resulted in ''acting" being the first priority, and then, as a consequence, theorizing and consolidation of new disciplinary approaches.

It is no coincidence that around the year 2000 there was considerable consolidation among disciplinary studies including: territorial marketing (Caroli, 1999, 2006; Valdani, Ancarani, 2000); cultural marketing (Colbert, 1994; Micozzi, 2006; Croci, 2010); and the economy of experiences and big events (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Cercola & others, 2010; Gallucci & Poponessi, 2010).

Within the urban planning and the social sciences fields, there also emerged an integrated and multidisciplinary approach of the Territorialist School (Magnaghi, 2000) and a

new concept of local development that was not only related to economic factors but also social (Bonomi & De Rita, 1998), cultural and creative ones (Rullani, 2004; Landry, 2006).

2. Territory and design

Design also approaches these issues through direct experimentation - the so-called “action research” derived from the social sciences (Swann, 2002) - and comparison with other disciplines.

The interest in the relationship between design and territory has always been there, as for all the planning disciplines in which the contextual situation plays an important role, but at that time, the perspective of observation began to change: it moved from observing the territory as the *design context* to considering the territory as a *design object*.

Two main factors influenced this shift in focus.

On the one hand, there was the evolution of design as a discipline, gradually expanding the concept of product to a systemic dimension and interfacing directly with the cultural transformation phenomena of society. This emphasized its claim of being “multiverse” (Bertola & Manzini, 2004) and able to deal with emerging issues and areas. Strategic design, design services and subsequently design for territories are just some of the disciplinary forms, where the observation focus is expanded towards increasingly complex and relational product-systems.

On the other hand, the change of economic scenarios and the appearance of the territories on the competitive scene, also evidenced by the growing interest in marketing, led to the placement of “goods” within a perspective of sustainable

development no longer centered only on production, but oriented towards service sector processes.

However, in contrast to marketing, design's interest is not only economic but is strongly oriented to the relationship with end-users and therefore to the dimensions of social, environmental and cultural sustainability.

In terms of academic design research, the path toward the territorial issues began in 1998 with the Sistema Design Italia[1] research (Italian Design System) coordinated by prof. Ezio Manzini. The research highlighted not only the territorial dimension of Italian design, based on a successful combination of local conditions (productive, organizational, cultural) and creative intuition and sensitivity, but also its territorial variations, revealing strengths, specificities and the most innovative signals for each area of the country. It could be defined as "design **in** the territory", in line with the theme of the Italian industrial and then cultural districts, highlighted in studies by Becattini (1998, 2000), Santagata (2000) and Valentino (2001).

That research was also successful in finding (especially in less well-known areas of "design-oriented" production systems) new ways of applying design aimed at enhancing local cultural products, or resources related to environmental, historical and cultural heritage or to the collective imagination linked to the idea of place[2]. These design forms were often spontaneous rather than generated by a structured sys-

1. National research "Italian Design System. The role of industrial design for product innovation. Development of project resources of the Italy-System between local resources and global markets", co-financed by the Ministry of University in 1998-2000 and coordinated by prof. Ezio Manzini of the Politecnico di Milano, with the participation of 17 universities, rebuilding a very detailed picture of the state of Italian design, of the specific nature and trends.

2. For more detailed information on the mentioned examples, see: Cristallo V., Guida E., Morone A., Parente M., *Design e sistema territoriale. Cinque casi studio di successo in Campania,*

tem and created by actors actually recognized as designers. The forms then initiated a dialogue with the places of origin, by renewing and inventing a different reading of them and indirectly re-planning the same territory: a kind of "design **of** the territory", in other words products, communication systems and services related not only to businesses but to all types of local organizations.

These considerations have led the way in subsequent research, highlighting the interest in the discipline of design to consider territory as the object of the design action. In the national research project, Me.design[3] (2002-2004), attention was paid specifically to the exploitation of resources through design in the Mediterranean area.

The research is aligned to what is established at the community level in terms of territorial development, i.e. an *integrated, ascending* and *territorial* methodological approach: *integrated*, as it evaluates territorial resources as a whole and not in a sectoral manner; *ascending*, as it incorporates bottom-up and participatory activation processes; and *territorial*, by reiterating the concept of the local system and the value generated between natural resources, social structure and culture of the place (Villari, 2012).

The Me.design project integrated also the interpretation of Magnaghi, who defined the concept of self-sustainability of the territories: "A rebirth through new fertilizing acts, which produce new territory or new fertile relations between the urban settlement and environment, is needed. In these terri-

Libria, Melfi, 2002.

3. The research *"Me.design. Strategies, tools and operation of industrial design to enhance and strengthen the resources of the Mediterranean between local and global"*, co-financed by the Ministry of University in 2002-2004, coordinated by prof. Giuliano Simonelli of the Politecnico di Milano, was conducted with the universities of Milan, Genoa, Naples Federico II, Naples SUN, Chieti, Reggio Calabria and Palermo.

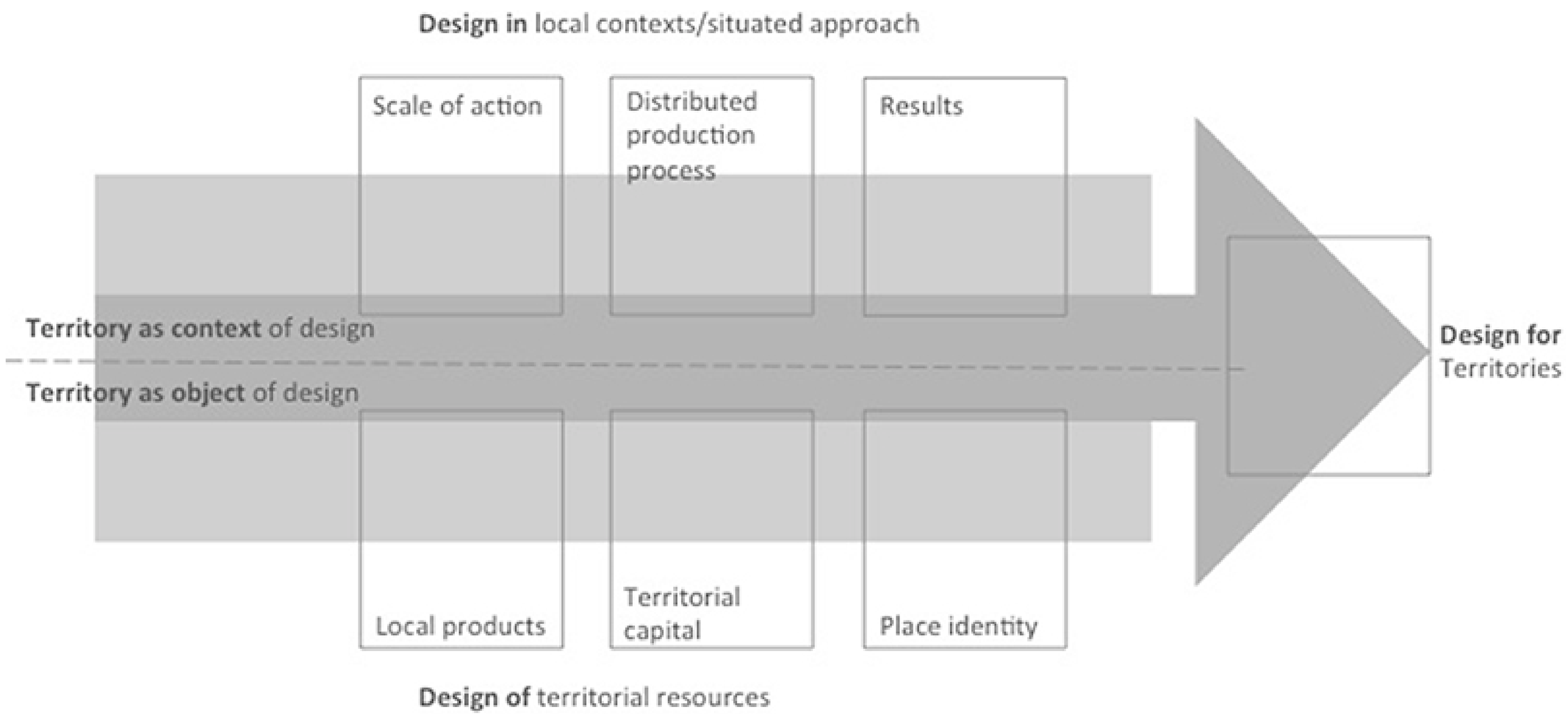
torializing acts there is the germ of a genuine and lasting sustainability of development (which we call 'self-sustainable development') as a new search of virtuous relationships, new alliances between nature and culture, between culture and history" (Translation from Magnaghi, 2000, p.18).

The Me.design research also takes as a paradigm the concept of "territorial capital", an articulated and complex set of tangible and intangible resources, which are the system of values, constraints and opportunities of a territory, derived from LEADER programming European projects for the development of rural areas, thus placing it at the basis of the process of "design for territories". The methodological foundations for a design-oriented approach dedicated to the enhancement of the territories were established through design experiments conducted in specific contexts with the Me.design research. This is characterized by the centrality of the local community as an active player in the decision making and implementation processes and by the visionary ability of the design director in envisaging multi-sectoral and multi-actor strategic scenarios.

In this discussion of "design in / of / for the territory" there are three approaches that gradually expand the observation from the territory as a *context of design,* to an *object of intervention* and then to a *relational system*.

Taking up the concept of re-production of places connected to the theme of self-sustainability of the territories, it can be analysed, in a design driven view, according to two metaphors (Parente, Lupo, Sedini, 2016).

The *biological metaphor* refers to an idea of territorial *regeneration,* which goes from its development to its growth and up to its *renovation,* as happens in the biological processes of living beings.



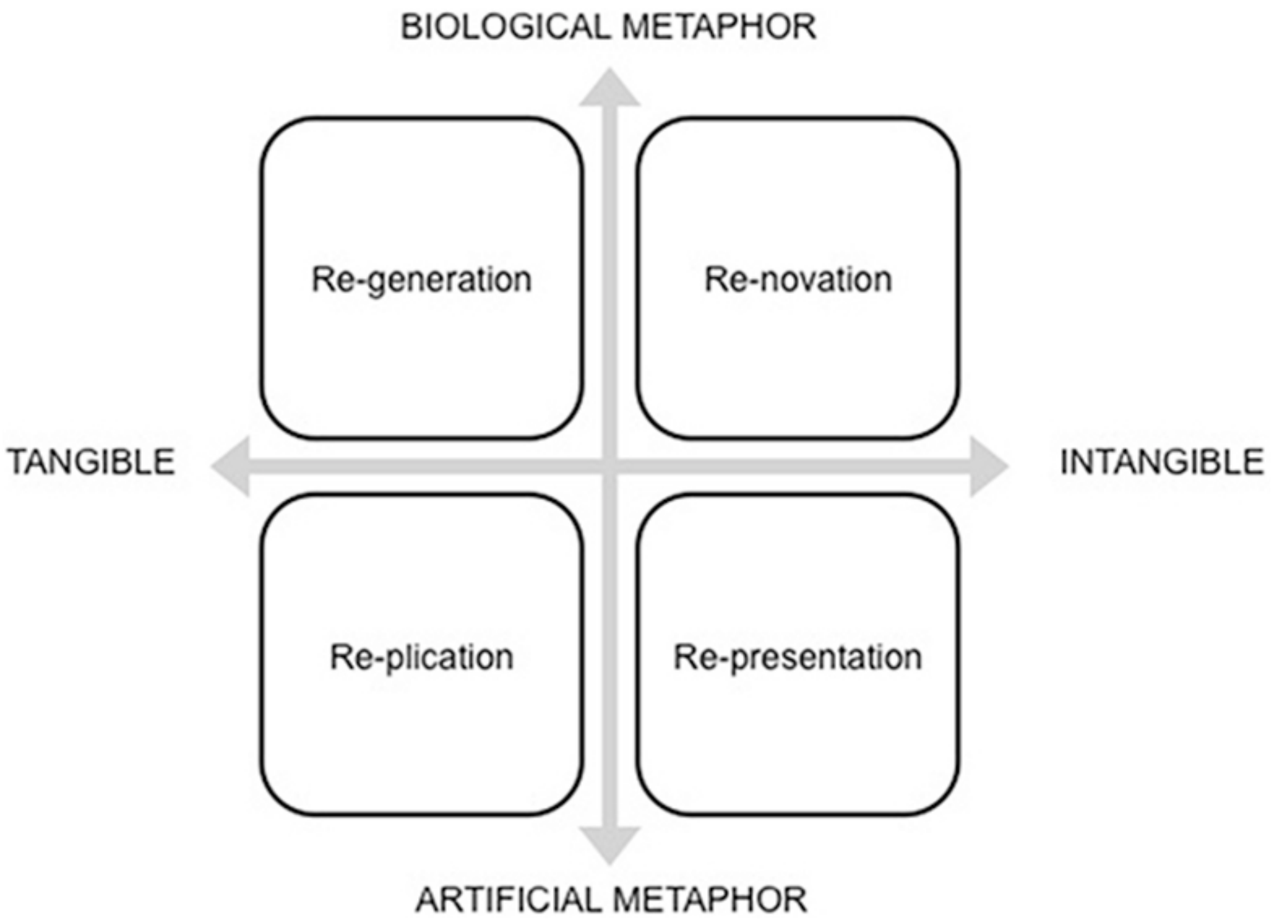
Design in /of / for the Territories (Parente, Lupo, Sedini, 2016)

The *artificial metaphor* refers to the production and multiplication concepts, which are characteristic of industrial and creative processes and goes from *representation* (*mise en scene* or narration) to *replication*.

Both metaphors can be interconnected with the tangible and intangible elements of the territory, resulting in four approaches: *re-generation*, *re-novation*, *re-plication* and *re-presentation*.

More specifically, within the biological metaphor the biological concepts of growth, development and diversification apply to the design of the territory through the re-generation of its tangible elements (resources, products, etc.) and the re-novation of the intangible ones (traditions, identity etc.). The power of this metaphor lies in the close attention paid to the intrinsic qualities of the territory as an organism capable of self-regeneration, repair, imitation, and virtuous specialization.

Instead, in the artificial metaphor, the dimension of the "production of the new", starting from exogenous factors, is the most valuable among the dynamics of development and di-



Different strategies for the Re-Production of Places (Parente, Lupo, Sedini, 2016)

versification of territories. The power of this metaphor should be read in the ability to switch from the exploitation of existing capital (enabled by design) to the exploration of new possibilities (March, 1991) through a deliberate design action that introduces and negotiates disruptive "artificial" elements.

The metaphor of the artificial applies to the processes of re-production of the territory through the *re-plication* of tangible elements (shapes and materials) and *re-presentation* of the intangible ones (images and imaginary), able to create new ways of fruition of the territories.

However, we know that in the territorial contexts the boundaries between tangible and intangible resources can be blurred and therefore the different strategies can be, in some cases, overlapping and integrated.

3. The current European framework

In recent years, the European program for territorial development has taken into consideration and implemented specific actions of financing and support, suggested by academic research in a variety of disciplines; this is apparent from the European Commission's (2010, pp. 74-76):

"This literature – especially the evaluation reports and CEC communications – provides evidence that local development approaches bring significant added value in the following five fields:

- *Understanding new patterns of development,* for example the diversity of local factors that determine competitiveness and development potential of an area or the key role of factors such as the business environment providing 'local collective competition goods' or human capital stock available in local labour markets. (…) These have inspired approaches followed by EU initiatives such as LEADER and URBAN.
- *Addressing sub regional development problems*
(…) Local development strategies have helped areas to optimize their productive potential, and less-developed regions to diversify their production, promote tourism and specialise in niche products with higher added value (LDEI Local Development and Employment Initiatives).
- *Improving governance*
Involvement of local actors and partnerships in development projects and strategies is a more visible outcome of this approach and it can be seen as a concrete and active form of subsidiarity, Local development has strongly promoted the establishment of area-based public private partnership (…).
- *Contributing to EU cohesion policy, territorial integration and improving financial mechanisms.*

This literature – and most recently the Barca report on place-based policy - suggests that local development should increase the efficiency of EU finance by promoting greater concentration of structural finance at the local level and through better management of local projects (…).

- *Promoting inter-territorial cooperation*.

Networking of projects of local dimension such as the Community Initiatives did and INTERREG and LEADER Programmes currently do, made a contribution to territorial cohesion and, at least symbolically, contributed to the removal of borders inherited for centuries.
This achievement shows that European integration and Europeanisation has more to do with the way in which actors are interconnected than in the definitive preponderance of a level of government".

The document also contains guidelines for EU support to local development for 2020, to increase territorial cohesion. Local development represents one of the major operational tools in the hands of the EU cohesion policy to offer new opportunities for the most remote areas and communities. The economic and financial crisis, along with the recovery plan and 'Europe 2020', create strong pressure to reinvest in the local development approach, and to offer new opportunities for those most remote areas and groups (p. 29).

In addition to territorial cohesion, the EU also aims to invest in knowledge and creativity, one of the objectives of Europe 2020, the European Union's ten-year strategy for growth and jobs, launched in 2010 to create conditions conducive to smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

The EU agreed on five quantitative targets to be achieved by the end of 2020: employment; research and development; climate and energy; education; social integration and pov-

erty reduction. It identifies design-driven innovation as a response to the urgent need for growth and jobs in Europe, embedding design in Europe's innovation system for the benefit of society, enterprise and the public sector[4].

In addition to territorial balance and support for the weak areas of the European community, social innovation and people-centred design approaches are also recognized as strategic goals and methods for territorial growth. As Ezio Manzini (2010) says, "a SLOC scenario, where SLOC stands for *small, local, open* and *connected* (…) and the global is a *network of locals*".

These lines have been added to the action for culture and creativity of the Creative Europe 2020 program, in which we also find support for the European Capitals of Culture and the European Heritage Label.

4. Design methodology for the territories: situativity, learning by doing, reflective practice

As mentioned previously, design, by its very nature, is rooted in doing, focusing on the practical consolidation of theoretical and methodological thought (Friedman and Stolterman, 2015) and, in order to be applied to fields other than products, as a meta-discipline, design has to confront and dialogue with other disciplines.

In the case of territorial development, this feature becomes even more evident, since the object to be observed - the territory - is complex, dynamic, multi-actored and intersectoral,

4. Challenge 2 in *Design for Growth & Prosperity*, Report and Recommendations of the European Design Leadership Board (2012) p.24

made of material intangible and human evidence, and each time, different and unique. To quote Magnaghi, "The territory is an artwork: perhaps the highest, the choir that humanity has expressed. (...) the territory is produced through a dialogue, a relationship between living things, man himself and nature, in time throughout history. It is a choral work, co-evolutionary, that grows over time. (...) The territory comes from fertilization of nature by culture (...) has character, personality, identity, perceptible in the signs of the landscape." (2000, p.17).

One of the most important actions of design for the territories is the precise understanding of the context, the ability to "see" and recognize the resources and values of a territory, revealing even those that are dormant or potential. In order to transform the resources of a territory from "potential" to "effective", a special level of attention is required to recognize them, through a reading of the territory that allows an interpretation of the intimate sense of place, an observation that, as Giuliana Bruno affirms in his "Atlas of emotion" (2002), involves a theoretical shift from *optic* to *haptic*, from *sightseeing* to *siteseeing*, from *motion* to *e-motion*.

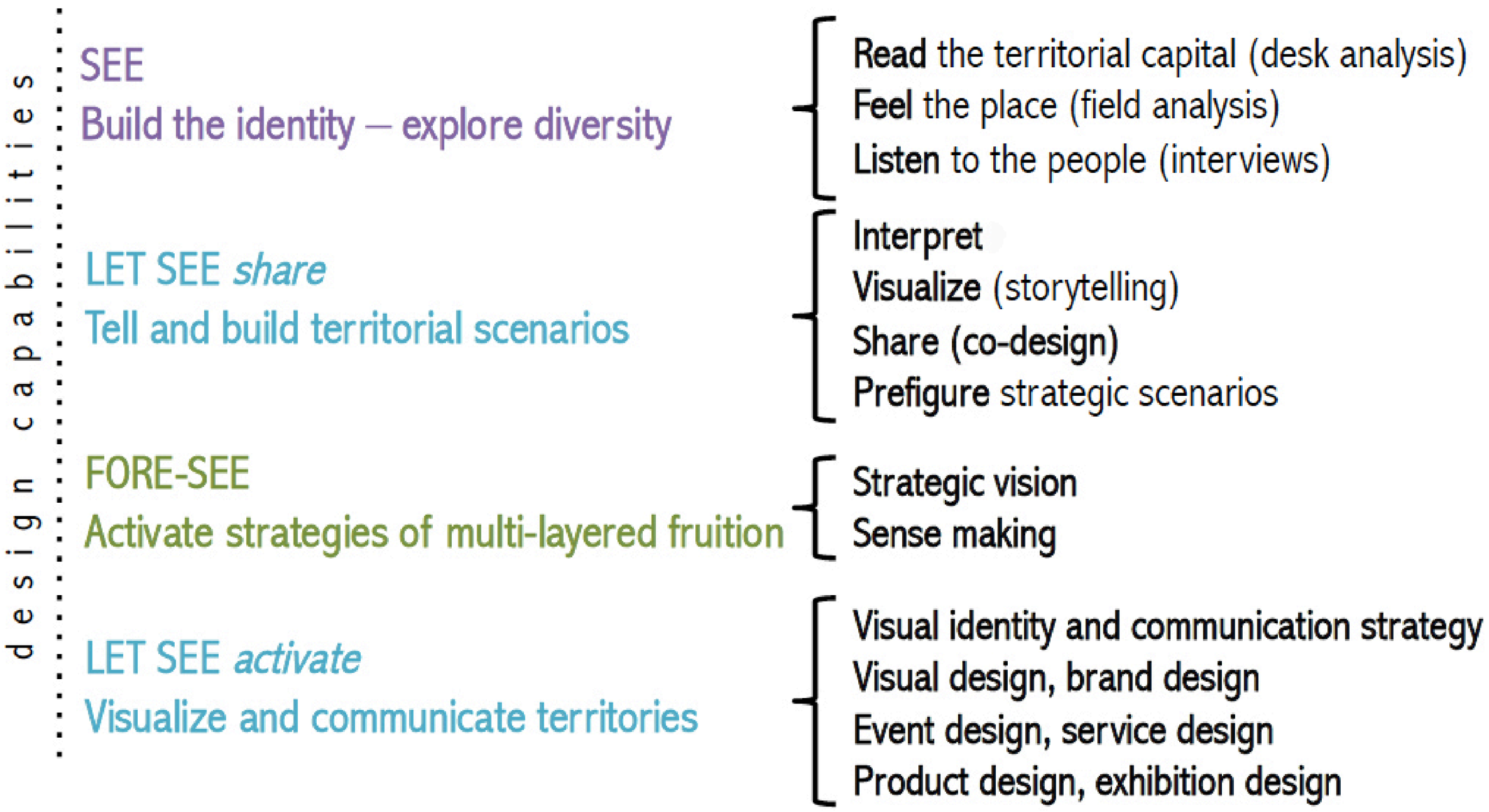
The centrality of the theme of "seeing", in this enhanced form, has been effectively articulated by Francesco Zurlo (2012) to describe the process of strategic design. Applied to the design for the territories, as can be seen in the attached diagram, it identifies the project phases which correspond to specific competencies and application fields of design: *see*, *let see* and *fore-see* become the method and purpose of design actions for the territories.

The main activities that characterize a design-led approach to the territory are: read the territory, interpret it, display it; build meaningful areas and shared visions; promote forms

of participatory planning and empowerment of communities; transform visions into actions and practical initiatives; design systems-product and service interfaces derived from them; promote and implement an effective communication of the entire process.

Another aspect that characterizes the approach of design for the territory is found in its "situated learning" (Lave & Wenger, 1990) and "reflective practice" (Schön, 1993).

As a tailor-made approach compared to a specific contextual situation, it: comes from a concentrated listening to the ter-



Phases, purposes and capabilities of Design for Territories

ritory (design audit); identifies possible keys to the introduction of disruptive phenomena of established routines (trigger event); advances theory and learning by observing the results (learning by doing); builds collaborative relational networks through participatory planning (communities of practice); introduces concepts of value that serve as focal point to guide the various initiatives (ethical value of the project).

We could also call it a problem-solving informed by the problem-finding and problem-setting, an approach more "problematic" to reality, which considers each situation in its complexity and in its uniqueness: in the words of Schön (1993), a "knowledge in action" and a "reflection in action". These considerations gradually feed a strengthening and an integration of the method through a set of tools that can be customized for different contextual situations.

5. Conclusions

In recent years through action research in the territories the discipline of Design has developed approaches and expertise via educational experiments and applied research projects oriented to the themes of: territorial identity; local development; enhancement of cultural heritage; the design of services and for social innovation; the narrative of the territory (from mapping to storytelling); strategic communication and brand design of the territories; and game design and other forms of experiential design.

This wealth of approaches, now present in the Design Department of Politecnico di Milano, is at the centre of the "D4T - *Design for Territories*" research network (www.d4t.polimi.it), funded by departmental Farb funds, with the aim of stimulating continuous updating of reflection in this disciplinary field, and to renew comparisons with other disciplines and with the international scene.

So today, we cannot draw conclusions except to pay attention to the ongoing debate and consider constantly evolving scenarios. This paper, therefore, is seen as an initial contribution to a systematization of what reflective practice has produced to date in terms of methodologies and interdisciplinary exchange.

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