Envisioning the city.
A design-oriented communication process for a sustainable urban transformation

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of an initial exploratory phase of "Imagine Milan", an educational and research project with a great experimental character for experiencing communication formats capable of promoting social dialogue and innovation, focusing on the theme of sustainable mobility and the city of Milan, which involved teachers and students of the Faculty of Design (Politecnico di Milano) in collaboration with Milan City Council. The videos are instruments for the common and internal dialogue among decision makers involved in the design of infrastructure and, above all, promoters of a new idea of Milan as a sustainable city. Project objectives were promoting a sustainable mobility culture, building and promoting a new image of Milan, facilitating dialogue between Milan City Council and stakeholders. In synthesis, we developed a communication system according to three main actions: listening, envisioning and promoting. First of all, the paper will present an overview of the videos and the results. Following will be faced the theme of communication to the citizens through the use of storytelling. Or how tales and the "dramatization" of everyday life can lead audience from emotion to awareness, and thus promote the spread of social behaviour and encourage best practices towards sustainable mobility. Finally, we will focus on the relationship between imaginary and scenario, highlighting potentiality and tools of design for envisioning transformation, translating cultural repertoires and producing new visions that are both brand new and shared.

Keywords: communication system, listening, envisioning, promoting, social innovation.

INTRODUCTION

"Imagine Milan" is an educational and research project with a great experimental character for experiencing communication formats capable of promoting social dialogue and innovation, focusing on the theme of sustainable mobility and the city of Milan.
We present the results of an initial exploratory phase, which involved teachers and students of the Faculty of Design (Politecnico di Milano) in the draft strategy and artifacts of audiovisual communication, in collaboration with Comune di Milano (Milan Municipality). The videos are instruments for the common and internal dialogue among decision makers involved in the design of infrastructure and, above all, promoters of a new idea of Milan as a sustainable city. In fact, our city is facing many challenging changes towards the Expo 2015. It is therefore useful and urgent listening to the territory, shaping the expectations and collective aspirations and building shared visions of the future for a sustainable city.

Project objectives:
• Promoting a sustainable mobility culture;
• Building and promoting a new image of Milan;
• Facilitating dialogue between Comune di Milano and stakeholders.

What we did, in synthesis:

Actions		Audiovisual Communication Formats	Themes (sustainable city mobility)		Target
Listening	→	10 *miniDOC* (5 min.)	Walking in Milan	→	Stakeholders and citizens
Envisionining	→	10 *scenarios* (3 min.)	Walking in Milan	→	Stakeholders and citizens
Promoting	→	16 *shorts* (30 sec.)	Walking in Milan	→	Citizens and stakeholders
	→	11 *shorts* (30 sec.)	Cycling in Milan	→	Citizens and stakeholders

What we did, in details:

- Defining communication strategies and actions for the promotion of a culture of sustainable mobility in Milan and a new image of the city.
- Listening to the territory through the documentation of the transformations in progress and the good practices already active; video interviews with citizens, workers and commuters, associations, craftsmen and companies; the search of footage and iconographic repertoires to reconstruct the memory and consolidate the imagery of places, through the consultation of libraries, archives and the collaboration with Storie Digitali (www.storiedigitali.net).
- Visualization of scenarios for sustainable mobility for activating the negotiating-tables and conversations between Comune di Milano, internal stakeholders and actors (technicians and politicians) and the external ones (district councils, associations, merchants and other stakeholders).
- Promotion of sustainable mobility values, cycling and walking culture as a mean of socialization and re-appropriation of urban spaces.
- Activation of a permanent observatory of the transformation of some areas of the city of Milan: every project team worked on a specific area, focused on it both the phases of documentation and scenarios visualization. This will make possible obtaining a map of the city of Milan in continuous evolution, which could record and make available the different stages of change.

The videos produced are intended for the distribution on urban screens (outdoor; metro and bus), social networks on line, podcasting and broadcasting on local television channels.

The "Imagine Milan" project proposes a collaborative approach between Comune di Milano and the research team, testing activities and practices of co-design for social innovation.
The research process integrates the communication project with the experimentation of innovative tools for collaboration: semifinished artifacts, such as mood-boards communicating the imagery of the area, storyboards and basic visual tools woul be useful during workshops and round-tables. It is based on the critique of a possible future, allowing needs to emerge and stakeholders to share a common path of growth. The adoption of such an approach allows the construction of a new imaginary of reference towards sustainable mobility and a series of concrete actions that accompany Milan to the important appointment with the Expo 2015.

Figure 1: the map of Milan and the 10 areas of interest

Audiovisual formats

miniDOC

scenario

short

AN OVERVIEW

The research and analysis phases became the basis to build the audiovisual projects, from the narrative and aesthetic point of view: listening to and exploring the territory were a source of inspiration and suggested patterns to develop the videos.

The first audio-visual format that we focused on was the miniDOC (fig. 2). The video's purpose was to tell in a short length of time (5 minutes maximum) the most important aspects emerged from the previous work of exploration, research and analysis in the area of reference, as well as the critical issues related to sustainable mobility and public spaces.
The direction followed by the most part of designers' teams was making interviews: just edited together, or combined with shots from the area and archive material such as photos and historical films. During the research, in fact, all groups found not only contemporary iconographic

repertoires, but also historical archival matherials. Some groups used these materials, often worked out again, to enrich the miniDOC. In one case (*Lazzaretto*) antique prints have been scanned, cropped, placed on different layers and animated as puppets. In others (*Navigli by day*) archival photos were divided into several layers through a post-production process, in order to introduce a sense of depth and movement.

Figure 2: miniDOC

Almost all the works reflect and record multiple points of view, communicated by split screen (*Navigli by night*), by a quick editing (*Navigli by day*, *Lazzaretto*) or by sound editing, superimposing several voices. The miniDOC about *Brera*, for instance, begins and ends without pictures, but only with the voices from many people, communicating the heated debate about the social and urban transformation of such an ancient quarter of the city, famous for its special artistic and cultural identity.

Only one group proposes a different solution, creating a video which is closer to the aesthetics of art than documentary. The miniDOC about *S. Ambrogio* area offers a second level of processing.

Interviews, data, photos, became elements to build a script: S. Ambrogio himself, with his "ancient" voice, in a monologue, tells his story, followed by noctural blurred images from the area.

The second format was the scenario (fig. 3), a three minutes video dedicated to the same area, previously viewed, analyzed, documented through miniDOC. Its difficulty was due to the fact that there were no urban or architectural projects to communicate, but the values linked to the sustainable mobility. The aim was not to tell data or real projects, but abstract concepts, and to find ways to visualize them. Here the solutions change radically compared to miniDOC. In fact, if in miniDOC the most important part was given to words and testimony, in almost all scenarios it is given to images and visions. Almost all works don't use dialogues, but just music and sounds. *Brera* becomes

a neighborhood without barriers, where children can play in the streets and students of Fine Arts Academy can use the streets to draw and show their work. We can find the same logic in the scenarios dedicated to *S. Ambrogio*, *Lazzaretto*, and *Quadrilatero della Moda*.

Figure 3: Scenario

How the quality of life can raise, by the introduction of sustainable mobility, is often communicated using a countered relation between subjects and background: actors shooted in green back are shown in drawn landscapes (*Brera*), silhouettes are moving into photos (*Quadrilatero della Moda*), or actors are shooted in green back and worked out again in posproduction to become almost black silhouettes able to act into photographed and redesigned landscapes (*Navigli by night*). In many cases, we notice the use of the silhouettes: a reference to the maquettes of architectural projects, but also to a long tradition in illustration and film animation.

Other scenarios use different logics: *Bovisa*'s scenario, for example, in continuity with its miniDOC, uses the mockumentary style, with fake interviews to residents, in a hypothetical 2020, in wich the area is free from cars. Another scenario (*Navigli by day*) underlines the values related to the sustainable mobility. In this case, words become the film structure: actors are walking and moving in the area, interacting with typographic elements that reinforce the script. In another scenario (*Sempione*), an old man's voice from the future, tells us about an episode happened in his youth when mysterious balloons tied to the cars freed Sempione's area from traffic. Visually, the photos from Sempione's area are shown together with hand-made drawings. Insead, the *Isola* scenario, uses a traditional animation technique (stop motion), animating a pop-up book. Each page is a place, which is transformed into what it would be if there were no more cars, but green and public spaces.

Finally, each team worked on a very short advertising format (30 seconds) (fig. 4). In this case, the project was not related to a specific area of Milan. The goal was to promote sustainable city mobility and its values and benefits. In this case, the styles and the solutions were very different: from playing with the clichés of cars advertising to micro-tales about love stories born walking. From highly complex digital animation to simple video where small cardboards are used as props and narrative objects. In any case, the action of walking or biking, feet, legs, body, are the thread that runs through all the commercials.

Figure 4: Short

STORYTELLING FOR SOCIAL CONVERSATION

For over a century the image-movement has established with the city a relationship of special interest. Although both (the image on one hand and the movement on the other) evolved in parallel and indipendent ways, there is no doubt that theiy triggered a bond of mutuality: on one hand, the urban space found in the filmic image another instrument of analysis and representation of its own shape. On the other, cinema immediatly gazed on the nature of western metropolis, so that we can say that the filmic imagery itself, since its first appeerence, was predominantly urban. In fact, it clearly appears in the work of Lumière brothers: their production, between 1895 and 1905, offers a wide range of *vues cinèmatographiques* dedicated to the major european cities. In these brief and rudimetary metropolitan scenes (wich have a basically descriptive purpose, devoid of narrative or fictional intent) are already clear those traits that underlie the relationship between the city and its film representation and somehow it remains still unchanged.

The first consideration relates to the kinetic nature of filmic image. Cinematographic representation introduces a dynamic reading of the city that can "phisically" go inside and outside space (indoor

and outdoor), revealing the nature of architectural form both from the point of view of spatial organization and in terms of its symbolic meanings. This dynamism is not merely a visual exploration of buildings or the simple performance of their monumentality. The image-movement breaks, in fact, the tradition of pre-cinematographic representation, always aiming to an abstract ideal and harmonious image of the urban dimension, to propose a fragmentation and a "dramatization" of the city and its in progress trasformations. It is not a coincidence that the *vues* produced by Lumière turn their attention not towards the architectural building itself, but towards the street life, to the incessant flow of people, vehicles and goods that has always characterized the urban experience. In this perspective, the city represented in films is configured not as *urbs*, the city of stone, but as *civitas*: the city of men (Bertozzi, 2003).

A second key aspect is given by image's complex nature that overlaps its own symbolic and ideological meanings to the architecture's ones, offering a different and autonomous interpretation. The urban representation proposed by cinema (documentary or fictional) is not rooted in the design intention of architects or planners, but it investigates retrospectively the results through an "external analysis". It is a vision that interprets, transforms and sometimes entirely reinvents the urban space, but also produces an image of the urban space which is never completely false (Casavola et alii, 2001).

Just like any other form of narrative expression, cinematographic storytelling does not record data of reality, but necessarily tells stories through a *mise en scène*. To the objectivity of scientific description audiovisual language opposes narrative subjectivity, which blends elements of real and imaginary ones in order to return a representation of reality that is not exact, but authentic - and therefore likely and plausible - as we perceive it. The two extremes are not in collision, but are integrated as Bruner (1985) theorized about human cognitive processes.

Narrative thinking filters reality through the consciousness of its characters in order to play and conceptualize human experience. Similarly, audiovisual storytelling is configured as a system for the organization of thoughts and knowledge, then it performs a number of key functions at both individual and community level. We can summarize these key functions, such as the following ones:

- *Frame*: all stories provide a "frame of reference" that includes the narrated events and in which the spectator can place its own life experiences making comparison. This function is even more strengthened in cinema and audiovisual tales, in which the concept of "frame" (related to the idea of "a window on reality") takes a real "phisical" identity that isolates and highlights the value of images (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2007).
- *Memory and identity*: audiovisual tales represent storages of collective, individual and autobiographical memories through voices, words, images, gestures, languages. Those shared memories are going to become a collective identity.
- *Conversation*: storytelling as a tool for sharing and dialogue between individuals and organizations, that facilitates and guides social behaviours in terms of responsibility, integration, best practices, sharing of knowledge and values towards change.
- *Imagery*: audiovisual storytelling practice makes society able to review its past, codify and frame the present and represent its future espectations.

Audiovisual storytelling enables all these functions from an essential element: dramatization. Each story is actually a representation of a conflict. Characters are individuals in a perpetual struggle with their fate and the environment around them, suffering and struggling to achieve a specific goal. Drama is the real drive of any narrative, the element of the discourse that creates the bond with the audience allowing him to portray himself and his own experience in the history that is listening to. The mechanism of the drama not only applies to the narrative genres of fiction or entertainment (film, tv series, reality show), but it's also functional in the context of social communication and management referring to citizens and stakeholders. Representing the transformations taking place, promoting innovative services or spreading new behaviours means first of all clashing with the resistance, fears and prejudices that the public opinion shows against any process of change.

Nowadays communication cannot simply reassure the audience or enhance the performance of objects and services. Storytelling, in fact, has to tell this emotional conflict and then solve it, triggering a process of identification that turn the viewer into an active subject (storylistener) whithin the communication process.

The Imagine Milan project tried to test and verify the potentialities of audiovisual narrative within social communication. In particular miniDOC and scenarios clearly show that the identity of an area is built right from the representation of personal and collective histories of its inhabitants, a set of polyphonic images, faces, voices, gestures and characters in a continuous comparison (sometimes, indeed, stressful and conflictual) between the historical memory, the complexity of the present and the future expectations.

IMAGERY AND SCENARIO

The experience so far conducted represents an experiment of the contribution that communication design can give to the dialogue about possible worlds and sustainable innovation. In particular, audiovisual formats are proving to be complex artifacts both as expressive languages and from the production processes poin of view, as far as they can trigger networks of expertises and knowledge towards representation and mediation. Quoting Manzini (2003 and 2008), "Transition towards sustainability is a social learning process that will teach us, progressively, through mistakes and contradictions – like every other learning process – how to live better, consuming (a lot) less and how to recreate the physical and social ambient we live in". Design culture and practice then is intended as a social process that enables the potential strenght of consumers, critical consumption and co-production by creative communities, collaborative networks and new forms of partnership and assumes the role of mediator and facilitator for this social process. Hence, design has to equip itself with forms of visualization, simulation and storytelling such as mise-en-scène and framing to facilitate the design conversation, support the learning process and negotiate controversies between the stakeholders. Tales and visualizations are therefore conceived for idea generation on one hand and for prototyping on the other, bringing tangibility to ideas in order to catalyze the process even further and also informing and shaping the project itself. Such images have to be designed: ideas as mind images and images as concrete ideas to be discussed. We can call it design audiovisual conversation: a process between imagery and scenarios where videos represent tools for activating relations and memory processes, but also the imagination process for the configuration of possible worlds.

Johansson et al. (2007) proposed a model of documentation in design practice, distinguishing between discourses about the past (retrospective) and discourses about the future (progressive), that may be more related to the product or the process; to the form or the content. Generally speaking, this kind of model let us mapping our work as practice-oriented or theoretically directed; towards documentation or solution; as realistic, photographic, abstract, geometric or diagrammatic according to the expression axis.

Similarly, the communicative effectiveness of the videos designed and produced for Imagine Milan work on the synergy between different formats and genres, each of them is consistent with specific strategic goals. In fact, assuming audiovisual storytelling as design practice, the three main actions Listening, Envisioning and Promoting correspond to the brief communication formats called miniDOC, video scenario and short, respectively producing Imagery, Imagination and Image.

Table 1: Imagery, Imagination, Image.
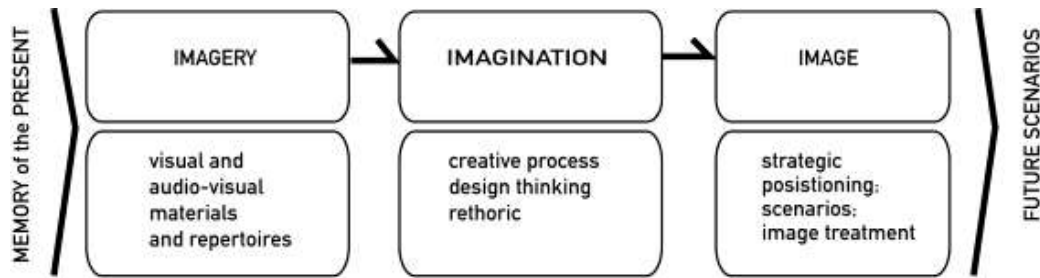
Design contributes to the definition of expectations and needs, acquiring, looting and re-creating a catalogue of images, promises and life styles capable of orienting the individual choices. Looking at the imagery as a cultural and trans-cultural archive of themes, figures and common habits is a fundamental approach to the configuration of possible scenarios for the transformation of everyday life into a sustainable one. It's like looking for and collecting "minimal everyday mythologies" and defining both basic tools and systems for design for observing (just think about visual ethnography or ethnographic cinema), envisioning and telling stories. The realistic and fantastic registers of representation refer to the "archaic universe of doubles" (Morin, 1982) and are based on audiovisual genres that contribute to the registration or the fictional construction of the world, according to an epistemological model of sense making, which has its own technical, aesthetic and linguistic tools for translating and making knowledge explicit.

Imagery and scenario are thus strictly related and are intended to regenerate each other (Piredda, 2008) according to a dynamic co-evolution path.

Figure 5: imagery and scenario
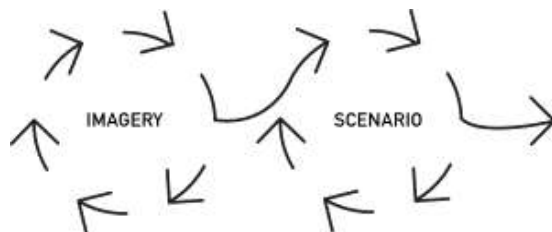
In particular, during the Imagine Milan project we experimented a specific format for video scenarios, based on a three minutes duration and a three-acts narrative structure: the first part introduces or defines the problem or the state of the art; the second part or, better say, the turning point asks "what if…?", the typical design question for future scenarios; the third and last part proposes, explains or "metaphorizes" possible solutions.

Figure 6: video **scenario's narrative structure**

The synergy between the three formats produced a communication system capable of

shaping the relationship between memory and imagination for a multiple and manyfold identity of the city and for driving its transformation towards sustainable innovation.

The experience so far conducted has started a process of exploring tools and audiovisual expressive forms to integrate the cultural humus and the personal experiences into the interpretation processes, thus leaving behind the willingness to universalism typical of modern communication and rather addressing to restricted and close communities of users: "Even the most robust visual language is useless without the ability to engage it in a living context" (Lupton, 2008). Communication design can hence provide an epistemological and aesthetic contribution to envisioning our future. We are seeking semifinished artifacts and systemic formats for translating complex visions and tales, towards an "audiovisual design thinking".

Actually, as many areas of social sciences (management and marketing, in particular) are looking at or adopting design-oriented processes, visual thinking and design culture are widespreading due to the cross-disciplinar and cross-fertilizing approach of our times. The further aspected resuts advocate a multidispiciplinary approach and further collaboration between sociology culture and communication design culture, leading to the activation of a permanent observatory of the transformation of the city and its identity.

MOVIE DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABLE MOBILITY: FROM PROMOTION TO A MAP OF THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE CITY

Since the Faculty of Design of Politecnico di Milano introduced multimedia and visual communication into its teaching programmes, new responsibilities and also the application of different skills have been introduced to increase the already widespread world of communication. Visual design has increased its perspective: multimedia, interface design, web design, virtual project, photography, video. It has also been fed by the economy of communication: marketing, strategies of communication, market analysis and all that is related to the meaning of communication and company. The company communication is therefore broadening out its horizons. Today companies (publics and privates) possess complex and organised systems for communication. All the aspects of communication - advertising, direct marketing, public relations, commercial television, web, multimedia, events, media planning - aim to create the corporate image, to strengthen its notoriety and its credibility towards its target of consumer. They also aim to create new margins of profit, giving to the companies the chance to become more and more competitive on the global market. This process, which requires many skills, large investments, development strategies with many economical variables, is the first step for the creation of the brand. This process applies the mass market but also the more complex fields that concern the city marketing and new strategies in the green economy.

In the brand there are many plus related to each other: reliability, originality, credibility, elements connected both to the product/service and the company. Those elements produce a positive perception in the user. At the same time people appreciate the emotional involvement that a brand can stimulate, looking for new experiences. In the complex architecture of communication, then, image-movement represents the meeting point of the advertising and the research of new languages of representation and visual design. The situation is the same either if it is an advertising short, an institutional video, a set design for big events or a flash animation for the web. Significant examples are the fair's booths, the big promotional events, the fashion catwalks, the theatre but also the point of sale, the setting in particular occasions, exhibition's opening, shops and other, all placed where the techno-communicative dimension has an important role as attraction and sign of innovation.

We are aware that, today, communication design has to use new forms of experimentation in order to bring new lifeblood to the converation between stakeholders in the market field, which is sometimes flattened by the standardisation of the communication products, towards social innovation. The so-called movie design area holds multilevel requests and uses transverse

instruments. The concept of Movie Design implies the union of technologies and strategies for the development of their contents. In this perspective the concept of multimedia, closer to a techno-centric vision, combines with a multimodal concept. This is a word that defines a more cultural approach to the digital world, in which all the channels and communication's instruments are used in a renewed relationship man-machine, generating different and more complex communicative modalities.

In order to face the project of dynamic communication artefacts we have to get complex skills structured in 4 levels, which are connected each other:

- technical skills: the "tools bag", a metaphor, but also a real instrument to face an audiovisual and multimedia communication project;
- linguistic skills: the grammar elements that make sense and allow the interpretation of image-movement and the objective of the communication project;
- aesthetic skills: knowledge and sensitiveness coming from the art and the fields of linguistic and technical experimentation;
- strategic and creative skills: we can find those skills in the field of design of course, but also whithin the economic world, in particular management, marketing and corporate communication which are strongly and historically related to the promotional activities, providing additional tools for design practices.

In the field of company communication the strategic skills and the one related to the multimedia production are usually developed in different places, by different teams: in some cases they are applied directly by the companies, in other cases the advertising agency project the entire communication campaign, from strategy to creativity. Newly, a different approach to the project has been developed, due to the improvement of digital technologies, which make production more flexible. In this case, just one team has the responsibility to coordinate all the four areas: the technical, the linguistic, the aesthetic and the strategic and creative one. This idea of unity is the fundament of the Movie Design practices, in particular whithin the educational experiences.

The Imagine Milan project, we propose here, is part of the Movie Design field. In fact, the communication system proposed and implemented in collaboration with the Municipality of Milan (documentary, scenarios, adv shorts), used all the elements that characterize this new area. In particular:

- the company was represented by the Municipality of Milan;
- the market analysis was focused on finding international best practices;
- the goal was to build communication tools for dialogue and social conversation and raise awareness about the need for virtuous behavior in relation to sustainable mobility;
- the communication products were oriented to a conversation between stakeholders and to a wider audience (a community of interests) through the web channel.

The result of this action-research - a map that can be updated and can therefore represent a vision of the changing city - has shown that communication is a powerful tool for building dialogue and envisioning scenarios. The images illustrate and inspire storytelling and behaviors that may change the relationship that users have towards the city, towards a more sustainable urban living.

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