

# Communication design for accessing cultural landscape

## Design de Comunicação para o acesso à paisagem cultural

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#### Abstract

Nowadays the relationship between people, culture and territories is changing. On the one hand, great emphasis is placed on the value of cultural heritage and local identity as means for social cohesion and economic growth. On the other hand, experience-based tourism is growing and, consequently, it increases the need of an experience-based communication strategy. This paper explores the contribution of communication design to tourism promotion and the enhancement of cultural identity. It will deal with the topic of communicative access, which is meant as the result of a visual translation of several tourist information. Therefore, it focuses on the design process of digital communication formats aimed at providing “experiential” representations of the territory and its identity. To explain the process, a research project carried out by the authors will be presented as a case study.

**Keywords:** communication design, local identity, cultural landscape, experience-based tourism.

#### Resumo

Atualmente, a relação entre pessoas, cultura e territórios está se alterando. Por um lado, grande ênfase tem sido dada ao patrimônio cultural e à identidade local como meios para coesão social e de desenvolvimento econômico. Por outro lado, o Turismo de Experiência está crescendo e, conseqüentemente, a necessidade de desenvolvimento de estratégias de comunicação para esse modelo de turismo. Este artigo explora a contribuição do Design da Comunicação para a promoção do turismo e para a valorização da identidade cultural. Tratará do tema acesso comunicativo entendido como resultado da tradução visual de diversas informações turísticas. Portanto, concentra-se no processo de design de plataformas digitais de comunicação que buscam proporcionar representações “experenciais” tanto do território quanto da sua respectiva identidade. Para explicar tal processo de design, um projeto de pesquisa realizado pelos autores será apresentado como estudo de caso.

**Palavras-chave:** design da comunicação, identidade local, paisagem cultural, turismo de experiência.

#### Introduction

Nowadays, the relationship between people, culture and territory is changing. On the one hand, several public and private institutions are fostering the establishment and implementation of policies aimed at the safeguarding and the enhancement of cultural heritage and local identity. This is a crucial issue in our society, especially because cultural heritage and identity can contribute to social cohesion and economic growth. These topics are also included in Horizon 2020. The introduction to the *Work Programme 2014 – 2015 Europe in a changing world – inclusive, innovative and reflective Societies* claims:

*In challenging times for its internal coherence, Europe should improve the understanding of its cultural heritage*

*and of its identities in order to strengthen cohesion and solidarity and to encourage modern visions and uses of its past. [...] In these efforts, new technologies and digital cultural heritage should play an important innovative role as they enable new and richer interpretations of our common European culture while contributing to sustainable economic growth (European Commission, 2013, p. 5).*

Here, the European Commission make an explicit reference to tourism industry. Understanding cultural heritage has always been a travel motivation but, as suggested by Richards (2014), recently the concept of “culture” has been reframed. He observes a shift from tangible to intangible culture and a consequent decline of the traditional cultural consumption model. Today’s tourists seek experi-

ences in their travels, and the growth of experience-based tourism involves, in turn, the need of an experience-based communication strategy. Therefore, the tourism supply must go beyond the boundaries of product to become experience. This is a challenge that affects especially those who deal with communication, since their task consists in shaping the first contact with the tourist destination.

From this context, the paper deals with the contribution of communication design to tourism promotion industry, suggesting possible directions for developing new models of interpretation of cultural heritage and local identity.

### Identity and Cultural Landscape

Many disciplines deal with the concept of identity and, as a consequence, it does not seem to exist a unique definition of the term. As stated by Ypma, identity “appeals to collective meaning (*memoria*) that in its turn facilitates the identification processes of groups and individuals” (Ypma, 2011). Nevertheless, according to the Italian sociologist Remotti, identity “is made also by otherness” (Remotti, 2001, p. 63; authors’ translation); it is the result of a process that involves simultaneously assimilation and separation, and therefore cannot be determined a priori. This process, reinforces Remotti, is a “matter of choices” because it entails selecting elements and connections from a limitless range of possibilities. Indeed, the identity of a territory results from the overlapping, into space and time, of several tangible and intangible characters. The selection of these characters, made more or less consciously by inhabitants or tourists, creates the place image (or rather one of the many possible).

From this perspective, place identity can be promoted by representing *cultural landscape*<sup>1</sup>; a notion that express the human interaction with the environment and the presence of tangible and intangible cultural values in the landscape (Mitchell *et al.*, 2009). Indeed, as pointed out in the European Landscape Convention (Council of Europe, 2000), landscape is an essential component of people’s surroundings and a foundation of their identity.

Taking into account the scenario previously described, the notion of landscape is particularly significant because it suggests a different interpretation of cultural heritage and local identity. Indeed, as pointed out by D’Angelo, landscape expresses not only the culture of a place but also its aesthetic identity. It is a perceptual phenomenon that belongs to the domain of the aesthetic experience (D’Angelo, 2001).

### Tourism and experience: a matter of design

The literature review on experience-based tourism suggests we look at the issue from the perspective of experience economy. An interesting contribution towards this direction is given by Forlani (2004). The author interprets tourist experience through the Pine and Gilmore’s four

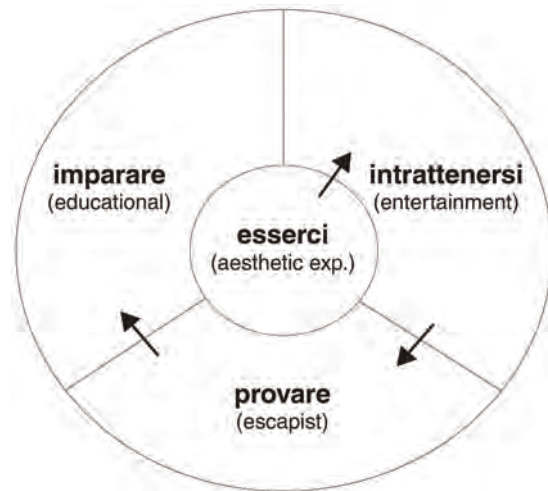


Figure 1. The Forlani’s realms of tourist experience.

realms of experience (Pine and Gilmore, 2011). As shown in Figure 1, Forlani considers the aesthetic dimension as the necessary condition for a richer tourist experience. He asserts that the aesthetic experience of a place elicits the desire of “being there” and defines an “atmosphere”.

According to this perspective, it should place a great emphasis on the aesthetic dimension in tourism promotion. Therefore, a communication project able to meet tourists interest should be an “aesthetic work” aimed at providing tourist information by means of aesthetically meaningful experiences. It should be pointed out that this “aesthetic work” is not an “artistic work”; it requires the definition of replicable processes and, therefore, is a matter of design.

### Communication design and territory: tasks and goals

Communicating a territory means to satisfy simultaneously three main functions: (a) *predicting*, that consists in anticipating the on-site experience (Giannitrapani, 2010) and is strictly related to the notion of *destination image* – the sum of beliefs, ideas, impressions, and expectations about a tourist destination area (Crompton 1979). Basically it provides a projective experience aimed at suggesting a first impression (Griffero, 2009) of the cultural landscape; (b) *informing* consists in managing different kinds of content (documents, pictures, oral memories, etc.) in order to provide all the information and knowledge needed for the understanding of a cultural landscape; (c) *orienting* has mainly an instrumental aim. It is intended to increase the awareness about the image of a territory – its shape and meaningful components: paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks (Lynch, 1960) – by means of a synoptic representation which should be able to organize hierarchically a complex body of information.

<sup>1</sup> “Cultural landscape” is here understood according to UNESCO’s definition: “Cultural landscapes are cultural properties and represent the ‘combined works of nature and of man’ designated in Article 1 of the Convention. They are illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlement over time, under the influence of the physical constraints and/or opportunities presented by their natural environment and of successive social, economic and cultural forces, both external and internal” (UNESCO, 2013, p. 14).

*[...] le forme [...] del design sono generatori, debbono cioè irradiare qualcosa e contribuire alla produzione di atmosfere (Böhme, 2010, p. 254).*

The main task of communication design consists in translating, transcribing and transferring information. It can be defined as an “aesthetic work” (Böhme, 2010), since it combines “design” in terms of project and “design” (*disegno*) in terms of visual representation (Baule, 2012). This doubleness is the starting point of our research activity, which is concerned with the topic of communicative access. From our perspective, the “communicative access” results from the visual translation of information, documents and atmospheres that represent the main characters of a cultural landscape. It is the result of a design process that aims to allow the access to several kinds of contents that otherwise would remain hidden.

Our investigation focuses on the design of digital communication formats: powerful synthesis tools whose effectiveness consists in giving a unitary appearance to textual, visual and auditory information. In other words, we are interested in identifying those forms of representation that are able to translate and synthesize different kind of content in order to provide meta-tourist information with an experiential approach. We are not necessarily interested in “inventing” new formats, but rather we focus on the process that drives the choice of the most appropriate one to meet a specific communication goal. Indeed, each communication format is a mediator intended to satisfy one or more of the functions described above. Moreover, it has its own aesthetic rules – it frames the scene, selects a point of view and establishes distances; in other words, it defines proxemics and *regime degli sguardi*<sup>2</sup> (Giannitrapani, 2010) – and, therefore, it affects the cognitive and pathemic dimension in a specific way. Hence, making the right choice is far from being irrelevant, especially in the current scenario, which is characterized by the progressive development of digital media and technologies. This process of transformation is so quick that we often have to deal with some “hybrid artefacts” in which innovation and tradition converge. For this reason, the metamorphosis of devices must be supported by a renewed emphasis on representation languages and communication formats. That is exactly the focus of our research activity, since, as suggested by Baule (2012), one of the priority of communication design is to find the right language for shaping content.

This theoretical framework drives our research activity and has been the basis for the development of a funded research project we are working on: the [InLomellina] project.

The design outcome consists in a responsive website for the promotion of Lomellina, a little-known rural area near Milan (Italy). The analysis of the promotional material available (mainly guidebooks) reveals that the area is communicated in a very traditional way. Furthermore, despite a rich historic, artistic and natural heritage – largely unknown also to locals – currently Lomellina is not perceived as a tourist destination.

Therefore the main aim of [InLomellina] project is to allow the “communicative access” to Lomellina’s heritage and provide the “aesthetic experience” of its cultural landscape.

It should be pointed out that the [InLomellina] website is rich in textual contents that give a detailed description of the territory. Therefore, our efforts focus on the communication formats to illustrate and support the text.

In the next sections we will present the project, focusing on methodology and design process.

## Research methods

In order to better understand the potential of digital media and technologies, as well as to identify the main existing communication formats and their features, at the very beginning we conducted a deep analysis of the state-of-the-art starting from a collection of various kinds of digital communication projects (web documentaries, web magazines, virtual tours, etc.). The phenomenological approach employed to the case studies analysis has provided us several insights for developing the project.

Simultaneously, we analyzed sixty-three communication products – guidebooks, brochures, websites and publications – for the promotion of tourism in Lomellina. The content analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, was aimed to identify: (a) the main Points Of Interest (POIs) of the area; (b) the amount of information provided for each POI; (c) the main tourist promotion themes.

The results of these two analyses drove the project development, as it will be better explained in the next section that describes the design process.

## Design process

The first step has been to relate POIs to communicative functions. The qualitative content analysis of guidebooks revealed, indeed, that some places are particularly suitable for predicting the on-site experience while others have an “informative” power. The second step has been to divide the resulting two groups of POIs into subcategories according to their features. Taking into account the results of the phenomenological analysis about the state-of-the-art, we then selected the communication format more suitable for each subcategory. A similar design approach has been adopted for the orienting function. That means we identified the communication format by considering firstly the characteristics of the area.

Design process and results are presented subsequently, divided by communicative function.

## Predicting: continuous gaze and aesthetic identity

As suggested by Giannitrapani (2010), every tourist guidebook identifies some places considered particularly significant for their aesthetic value. Often these places are panoramic viewpoints that well represent the “sense of place” (Tuan, 1977) and its “aesthetic identity” (D’Angelo,

<sup>2</sup> Gaze regime (authors’ translation).

2001). More of others, these “unique places” – or “must see” – are able to affect our perception of the tourist destination. That means they have a “predictive” power.

The must-see sites of Lomellina, identified by the analysis of guidebooks and other promotional materials, can be divided into three subcategories: (a) *open spaces*, both urban (e.g. city squares) and natural (e.g. parks); (b) *interiors* (e.g. baptisteries and castles); (c) *paths* (e.g. water-courses and ancient lanes).

The term “must-see” implies the on-site observation; therefore, these places should be represented through communication formats able to foster spatial understanding. In order to elicit the sense of “presence” (Slater, 2003) and to trigger off a proprioceptive response – “sightseeing has become site-seeing” (Bruno, 2002, p. 16) –, the user should be able to “access” to the place and look around. Thus, the space will be represented through a continuous gaze (more human-like). The analysis carried out allowed us to identify some communication formats that possess the features required for the purpose. Taking into account

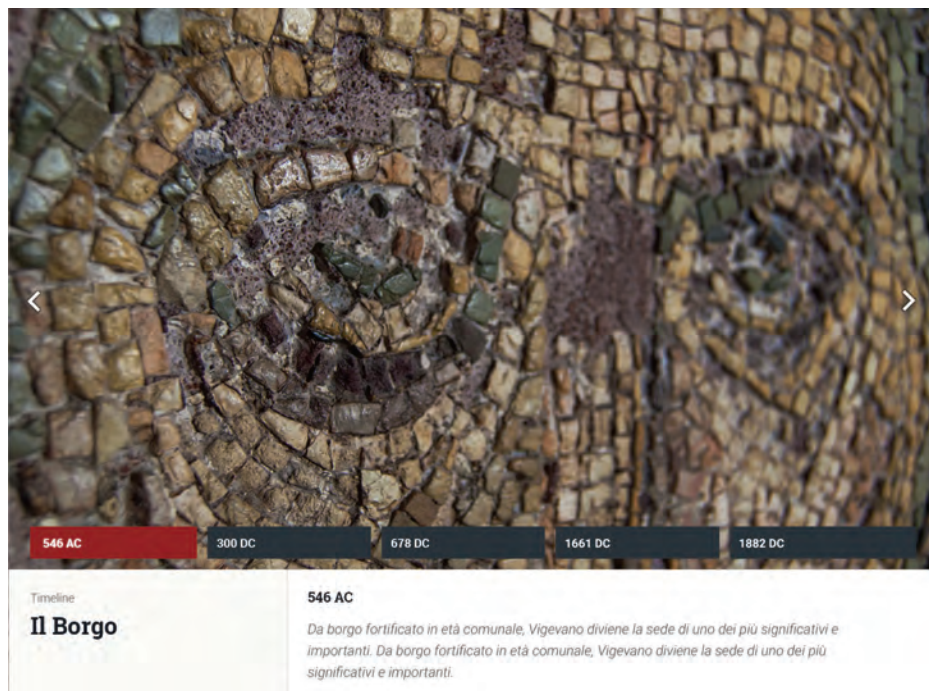
some usage patterns related to the type of space they usually represent, we selected three of them, one for each subcategory of “must see” listed above: (a) *panoramic photos* for open spaces (Figure 2); (b) *360 virtual tours* for interiors; (c) *walk-lapse* for paths.

**Informing: Multiple gaze to seek knowledge**

As a consequence of its wide dimension, Lomellina is rich in points of interest. Nevertheless, only some of them can be found in almost all the publications analyzed. Commonly, these places are described in detail, focusing on their social, historic, artistic and natural values. A great variety of content is available to describe them; therefore, they are particularly suitable for informing users about the Lomellina cultural landscape. Taking into account the results of the content analysis, the selected POIs can be grouped into three major subcategories: (a) *POIs representative of the historic and cultural intangible heritage*: these are places that have played an important role in the past



**Figure 2.** A panoramic photo that represents a field of rice.

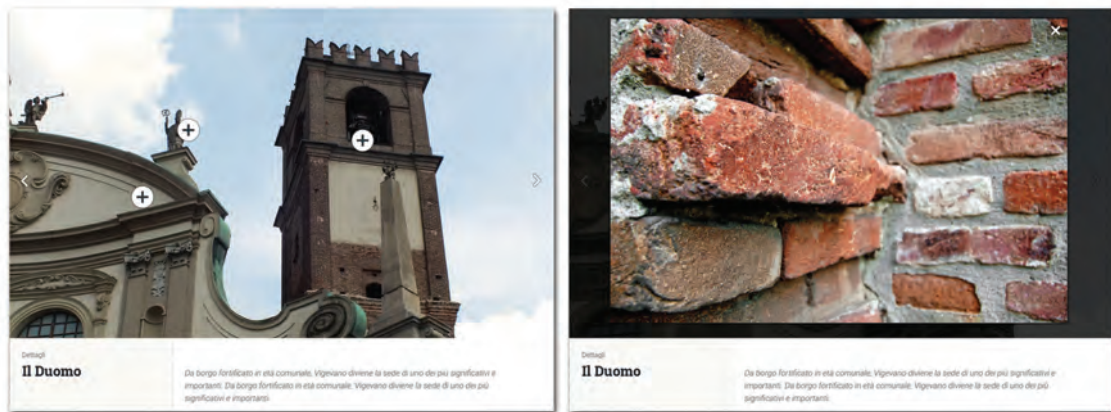


**Figure 3.** An example of photographic timeline.

(e.g. the site of an historic event). Their description is often coupled with historic documents, and if there is any physical trace of their past (e.g. a coat of arms on the façade of a building), it will be highlighted; (b) *POIs representative of the historic and artistic tangible heritage*: normally architectures or pieces of art, whose description focuses on the most significant details (e.g. decorations of a façade that reveal the architectural style or historic period); (c) *POIs representative of the natural heritage*: in this subcategory fall those places – commonly areas more or less wide – that present some emblematic features of the natural environment of Lomellina (e.g. the *garzaia*).

Choosing the right format is fundamental to represent the variety of content related to the POIs selected. Generally speaking, this richness of information requires a fragmented gaze that continuously varies the focus and triggers a cognitive response moving the attention from a detail to another.

Taking into account some of the theoretical works previously mentioned (Bruno, 2002; Giannitrapani, 2010) and exploiting the insights from our analysis, we have been able to identify a format for each subcategory of POIs: (a) a *photographic timeline* for the first subcategory: as shown in Figure 3, it consists in a gallery of pictures that represent the main historic milestones through close-up photos, historic documents or archive images; (b) an *interactive image* for the second subcategory: it consists of a photo in which the whole subject is visible (an architecture or a piece of art). In the same position of the most significant elements are placed some hotspots that allow the user to open the relating close-up image (Figure 4); (c) a *photo gallery* for the third subcategory: the format presents the natural environment from different perspectives and viewpoints in order to enhance each distinctive attribute as well as to provide a more vivid image of the whole area. For instance, an extreme close-up of some dew drops, combined with a



**Figure 4.** An example of interactive image. On the left, the main photo. On the right, the close-up image displayed by clicking a hotspot.



**Figure 5.** The homepage.

long shot that displays a rice field, enveloped by the winter fog, are able to suggest a mood and the atmosphere of the place.

### Orienting: the map as interface

Lomellina is an area quite vast and little-known, therefore, its *perceptual form* (Lynch, 1960) could easily appear vague and rich in empty spaces. A limited awareness of the physical space implies a consequent difficulty to (geo)locate – and to fully understand – the cultural memories of a place. From this perspective, “orienting” takes a wider meaning that entails the need of a format able to represent not only the geographical reality but also the socio-cultural space. To this aim, the most suitable representation is the cartographic one, since, as suggested by Quaggiotto (2012), the map has a double nature: it is a tool for orienting and guiding, on the one hand, and a narration, on the other. It lies between the representation of spaces and the creation of new ones (Scuri and Calabi, 2014). Hence, the cartographic representation is the communication format we selected to satisfy the orienting function. As shown in Figure 5, the [InLomellina] project is, indeed, a map-based web site.

The case study analysis allowed us to collect several examples of map-based websites. We have observed that in most of them the cartographic representation is also used as a menu that allows the user to navigate the pages. In our project the map has the same feature and so becomes an interface for accessing content. Simply by selecting one of the POIs displayed on the map, the user can access the relating content. Furthermore, in order to maintain the connection between content and place, the map will be always present on the screen.

Another key feature of this kind of representation consists in its ability to simplify and organize hierarchically a rich body of information. But this capability must be managed. To this aim, website and contents are structured on three levels, which, in turn, correspond with three different states of the map.

The first one is the homepage. Here, map has the task of representing and framing the area highlighting simultaneously hierarchy and position of the POIs. In order to avoid the risk of information overload, the amount of places displayed depends on the zoom level. The bigger the area framed, the lower the number of places shown (only the most significant ones).

After choosing a POI, the user accesses to a second kind of map. On the one hand, it frames the place, on the other, it locates contents and provides information about the typologies of communication formats available.

The last map will be accessible selecting a communication format and it gives detailed information about it. In the case of a panoramic photo, for instance, the map locates the picture and shows the direction of the eye gaze (Figure 6).

### Final remarks

The research presented in this paper is focused on the contribution of communication design to tourism promotion. It does not aim to provide disruptive innovation, but rather it focuses on the value of design approach for facing challenges related to the changed relationship among people, culture and territory. The research project [InLomellina] is a first example of practical application of the suggested approach. It has been presented in order to show how design could suggest possible directions for developing new models of interpretation of cultural heritage and local identity.

Also, this experimentation has been an opportunity to better understand the potential of digital media and technologies, and to explore possible directions for further development of the present research.

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**Figure 6.** An example of map associated with a panoramic photo.

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