House and Studio Museums between Art and Design

RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN STRATEGIES

Edited by
Anna Mazzanti

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3. Metadesign Approach and Exhibit Models for Staging *Faber*'s Atelier: An Experimental Action

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3.1 From the Atelier as Private Space to a Cultural Asset

The space where the *faber* works – house, atelier, place of transformation – hosts the manifestation of a creative process that is embodied in the matter.

The topic of this essay is a critical and design reflection on the exhibit modalities of a place intended to have a private and intimate function which ends up opening itself to a public cultural experience: from a place able to generate cultural assets to a cultural asset itself.

> **The valorisation of the atelier allows for studying the social statute of those who lived in it, their work methods, and ways of projecting themselves into the world, as individuals and inventors. That means thinking of these personal spaces, often humble, not only as mere private places, like memory shrines, but as special museum buildings and, consequently, integrated into a wide apparatus of the contemporary art and cultural system. (De Marco, 2014, p. 760).**

This place is suitable for a process of metaphorical reconfiguration, not in terms of *atelier as a static memory* (as a reconstruction or preservation in the *how it was-where it was style*) but rather as a plurality of potential narratives aimed at staging the *genius loci*.

> **By definition, the creative person's workroom is independent and self-referential – sometimes austere and dry to breathe and concentrate, other times saturated with the objects needed for the layering process of thinking and elaborating. The artist's atelier is almost always solitary; the architect's and designer's atelier are usually collective, but above all their places are full of memories, whereas the archives represent the beating of a creative heart. These surroundings are permeated with a special atmosphere. When they are no longer used, but 'kept alive', they become mirrors in which we can still see the reflection of those who practiced their craft there. (Bosoni & Lecce, 2019, p. 8)**

Herein the atelier is intended as a space where tracing clues, recognizing marks, and unveiling secrets able to bring to light at the same time the human dimension – made of *infra-ordinary* anecdotes and daily manias – as well as the artistic one which is crucial for recognizing materials, tools and creative techniques.

3.2 Interdisciplinary Perspectives and the Design–Humanities Convergence

Among several expressions and activities of cultural enhancement, diverse models of the *faber*'s atelier representation and fruition are outlined. In this experimental action, the humanistic disciplines were represented by the competencies of art historians and critics, meanwhile, the design discipline brought its tools and methods aimed at making complex contents visible through concept generation processes and exhibition design practices.

Through this collaboration, some topics emerged:

- elaborating new paradigms of relationships fosters the synergy among these competences;

- translating collection and artistic contents into exhibit practices helps address the complexity of the relationships among artists' personalities, their atelier/house's core identity, and their works of art in new models of cultural experiences;
- extracting the design attitudes with which the involved designers interpret this topic in the developed exhibitions.

The conceptual allegiance between design and the humanities then seems conducive to experimenting with new forms of collaboration that lead to the re-codification of process and content.

Bourdieu (1993) affirms that the field of cultural production is linked to a larger social context that he calls the *field of power*. The value of this power then lies in the symbolic realm (including the aesthetic). The field of culture has relative autonomy, but its boundaries are permeable, and it is this permeability that creates its compelling role within contemporary society. The challenge of the design approach is to intervene in these boundaries to rethink existing structures and develop new forms of knowledge.

This approach is confirmed by humanistic studies in which aesthetics is defined as an intercultural category (of knowledge). In this sense, art, anthropology, and design are places of discussion, understanding, and evaluation of cultural activity (Caoci, 2008).

The model of this action verifies a mutual relationship between design and works of art, and this leads to a constructive disciplinary exchange: design is impacted by the humanities and the humanities are pushed towards more experimental approaches via the design practice. In particular, in this field, the design approach creates the narrative infrastructure (that influences the model of the cultural experience), and it deals with suggesting new forms of relationships between visitors and content, whereas the artistic approach creates the structure of content and the relationships amongst the said content.

Both disciplines offer important elements useful to understanding works of art and a multiplicity of meanings derived from them. In the design discipline, these elements are tools that facilitate knowledge and the exchange of content, whereas in the humanities, an interpretative key allows for the understanding of new knowledge, new experiences, and new exchanges. From this follows the idea of

translation by design: the translation action includes interpretation and use of new communication registers to shape new exhibit paths and new ways to show the core identity of the artist's atelier/house. At the same time, the humanities offer *interpretation*: the interpretation action allows a critical analysis to problematize topics and stimulate new curatorial paths.

3.3 A Design-Driven Reading of the Atelier

The art and its inhabitants: artistic imaginaries between houses and exhibitions is the title of an experimental action aimed at involving young designers and researchers in the exhibition design field.[1]

This research is based on the interpretation of the *portrait* of the artist's home and studio and aims to answer three research questions: how does the physical workspace influence the artist's creation process? How do the creation process and techniques work together to *shape* the creative space? How can this content be synthesized in an exhibition?

This action aims to collect several design-driven interpretations expressed through exhibit solutions within the same methodological framework and spatial context: from a field analysis to an interior design output.

The analysis and development of content and themes are the beginning of all considerations relating to conceptualization and design.

In this way we can have a collection of several interpretations developed according to a process that starts from the analysis on the field towards an interior design output embracing the following methodology divided into three stages:

Immersing & Reading

- Studying the artist's personality, their works of art and their productive process.
- Visiting the actual space (the artist's house and studio). *Method and tools*: desk research, on-field research, interviews, camera, sketch pads.
- *Output*: map of topics and suggestions, sketches, and notes.

Interpreting & Abstracting

- Synthesizing graphically the *essence* of the artists and their workplace (spatial and mental) through a critical approach.
- Focusing on a specific topic starting from the artist's production. *Method and tools*: metaphor, abacus of chromatic, material, and iconographical codes.
- *Output*: mood boards, diagrams, and collages.

Translating & Representing

- Translating the artist's studio identity into a design exhibition that hosts both the artist's works of art and a spatial (archetypal) interpretation of their own house and studio.
- *Method and tools*: exhibit score, narrative model, exhibit model, design attitude.
- *Output*: diagrams, sketches, technical drawings, render.

This approach allows us to extract some crucial elements that represent the pillars of the relationship between the artists and their workspace through metaphorical communication registers.

In this design process, we used a specific tool: the *exhibit score* (Trocchianesi, 2014). The concept of the *exhibit score* fosters the breakdown of the exhibit structure into different parts thanks to a graphic representation organized in parallel layers. This tool has been thought for the designer who has to manage the whole simultaneity of parts that contribute to the *mise-en-scène* of an exhibition. Graphically, the *exhibit plot* presents a horizontal structure made of different variables (each line corresponds to a specific variable):

- The contents organization is the logic and order of the collection management (the sections and the *file rouge* designed by curators).
- The spatial organization determines the paths and the design paradigm of the whole exhibit system.
- The exhibit artefacts and displays establish a specific relationship between visitors and the content shown.
- The actions and mechanics of interaction between visitors and the collection as well as among visitors themselves, determine the dynamics of the whole visit as far as the quality of the cultural experience is concerned.

- The communication register and the narrative style are expressed by the applied graphic communication system, materials, colours, and technologies, as well as the interface of displays.
- The length of the visit (total and partial) according to the articulation in rooms or *episodes*. This aspect is related to the rhythm, pauses, and accelerations that punctuate the visit.

All parts of these horizontal lines correspond to the part placed above and below to have a matrix reading.

No other creative disciplines possess such a multi-faceted range of instruments for the design of space as scenography and exhibition design. They instrumentalize the means of architecture, theatre, film, and the visual arts to design distinctive and effective spatial dramatizations.

Space is the central medium in which, with which, and for which designers think and create. Space – whether in the form of a scenically designed exhibition or a piece of architecture – is itself used as an instrument and can orchestrate all other instruments in the integrated sense of a total work of art. Four spatial parameters, on which all staged spaces are based, constitute the potential of space: the physical, atmosphere, narration, and dramaturgy (Atelier Brückner, 2011).

Each of these spatial parameters refers to a specific quality of the space and, in consonance with the other parameters, makes it possible to access content, get to the bottom of things, ferret out the soul of a theme, or get closer to a topic. The interplay of the spatial parameters in a dramaturgically ingenious and stimulating setting in exhibitions and architecture seduces the recipients into accepting the story and its message.

Indeed, we assume this approach stresses the relationship between the organization of contents (in this case, works of art and materials about the house-atelier) and the exhibit narrative.

This research action produced twenty-four design exhibitions, hypothetically placed in PAC – Padiglione di Arte Contemporanea in Milan, as indirect portraits of artists and their house studios. For each of them, *narrative models* and *exhibit models* have been defined. The *narrative model* is the way in which you arrange the narrative of the

exhibit path, while the *exhibit model* is the design attitude with which you treat the space to stage the contents of the exhibition.

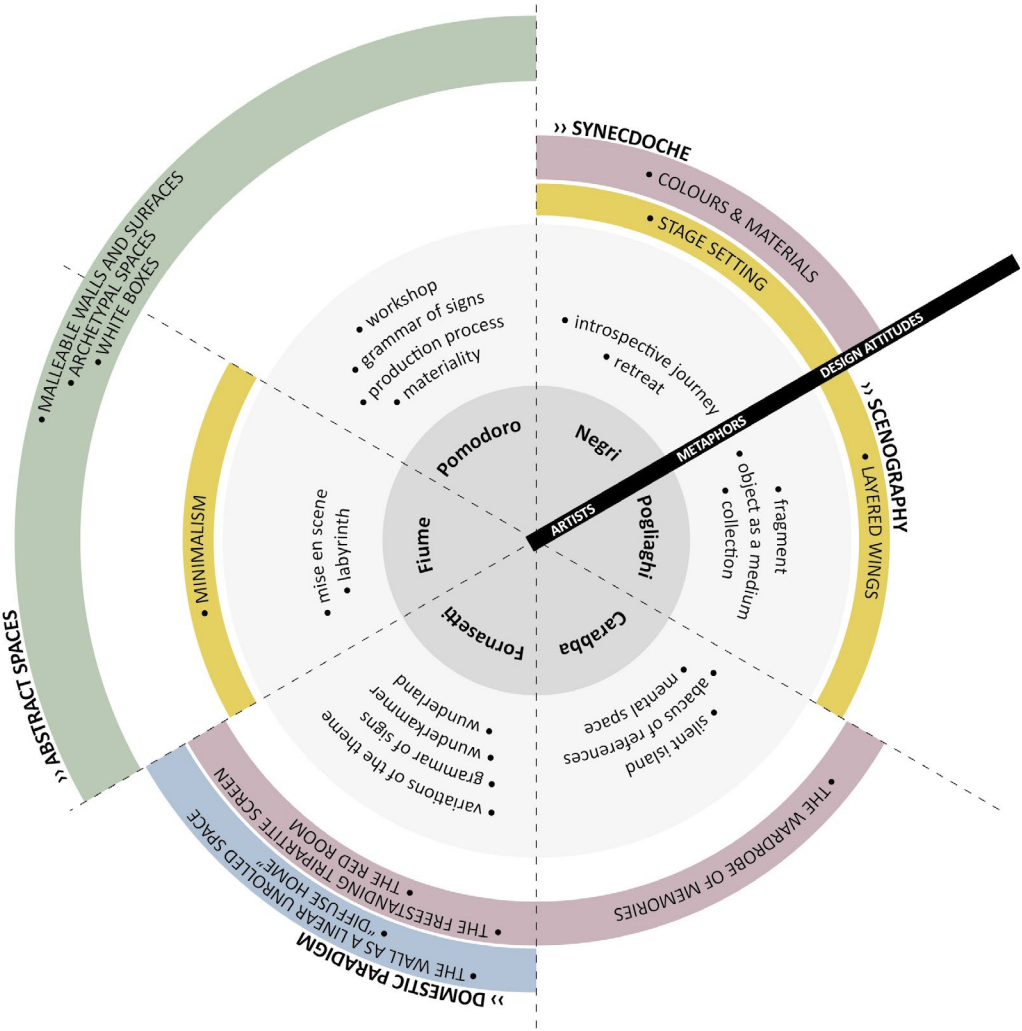
The *metaphor* is also an important tool able to synthesize the core of the idea using evocative images belonging to other contexts. But the essence of this process is the spatial interpretation and translation of the house studio into an exhibit model: how do interior designers locate and interpret the studio's synthesis of the identity in a place out of the studio itself? What metaphors, spatial models, and design attitudes do they choose to express the relationship between the artists and their creative space?

If we read and compare all the design results of this research action, we can find some recurrences. Following are some design attitudes that interpret the identity of the studios:

Scenography: in the exhibition, the studio is represented by a scenography setting through different ways and systems, i.e. *layered wings* able to stratify multiple images and perspectives of the workplace, *stage setting* as a reproduction of a meaningful part of the workplace in a style which is not realistic but white and out of scale.

Synecdoche: in this case the identity of the studio is present in the form of a synecdoche (the part for the whole) using a specific piece of furniture present in the workplace: i.e. the *wardrobe of memories* (Leonilde Carabba) is reinterpreted in different ways within the exhibitions, as a big video wall where visitors can discover her stratified memories and art suggestions or multiplied as an actual furniture system with which visitor can physically interact (opening doors and drawers) and find objects and information; the *freestanding tripartite screen* (present in the Fornasetti's house/studio and collection) becomes the main display system here; in the exhibition the *red room* – which in the Fornasetti's house/studio is a secret and totally red one, where all pieces of furniture and textile, objects, and books are red (even in the titles of the books there is the word *red*) – becomes an immersive room where visitors can discover thoughts, private objects and special pieces of information; the *colours and materials* as architectonic references to the actual place (Mario Negri).

Domestic paradigm: the exhibition is interpreted as a cross-section of the house/studio. In this way visitors are immersed in the private space of the artist: i.e. the *wall as a linear unrolled space* in



which rooms and corridors are photographically reproduced in the same vertical surface, the bi-dimensionality is interrupted by niches with actual objects or interactive screens (Fornasetti); the diverse rooms of the house/studio are *spread* in the whole exhibition in a sort of multi-articulated and *diffused home*.

Abstract spaces: the exhibition *undresses* the space with all figurative references to the actual artist's house/studio, i.e., in a neutral context, parts of *walls and surfaces are malleable* in terms of materials and settings to make the place performative and dynamic (Pomodoro's creative process); some parts of the house/studio is re-

Figure 1.
The diagram shows the correspondences among six fabers engaged in the experimental action, the metaphors and the design attitudes applied in the temporary exhibitions aimed at valorising their ateliers (author's elaboration).

interpreted by *archetypal spaces* like tunnels and caves to underline some crucial meanings of artworks and their symbolic context; the *white box* as a neutral place where pictures of the actual workplace are shown as documentation.

This research project demonstrates the interdisciplinarity between design and art through an empirical approach and an experimental action able to extrapolate the interpretative logic of both the tangible and intangible values of the artists and their workplaces. The latter influence the creation process and, symmetrically, the creation process shapes the workplace: indeed, in Fornasetti's case – for instance – part of the space is a repository of sources of inspiration (see the room with the archive of iconographical units) and part of it is a show of countless objects. Pomodoro's studio includes an archive of works, documents, and – at the same time – a workshop *shaped* by materials. All of these artists and places tell something about the creation process, the inspiration path, and the physical and/or mental approach to the art. All of these spaces can be expressed by metaphors like the introspective journey, the retreat, the labyrinth, the wonderland, the Wunderkammer, the silent island, the grammar of signs, and so on, in a continuous dance of evocative images and physical installations (Figure 1).

The several narrative processes pinpointed in this essay highlight diverse exhibit models focused on *fabers*' figures as well as the space where their creation happens. These models are mediators in making explicit some aspects that – otherwise – could be hidden or not adequately readable. They embrace the aim to revive what Valery (2008) called the *faber's poetic state*.

Notes

Note 1.
Project curated by Raffaella Trocchianesi and Anna Mazzanti, 2018-2019.

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She coordinates and participates in research projects on the relationship between contemporary art, design and cultural heritage, including the D.E.SY research project on house and studio museums, and she teaches courses on contemporary art and spaces, art and landscape, and the relationships between art, design and museology within bachelor's, master's and PhD programmes.

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House and studio museums of artists, architects, and designers – the spaces of the faber – constitute the core subject of this volume, which examines how these dwellings and workspaces, already configured as museums or envisaged as such after the disappearance of their owners, may be systematically studied, classified, and enhanced through the disciplinary lenses of art history, museology, and design. Originating in the D.E.SY research project (Designing Enhancement Strategies and Exhibit Systems for Italian House and Studio Museums), the book advances a typological framework for the spaces of the faber in Lombardy, with particular attention to Milan, and investigates their narrative, experiential, and curatorial potential in relation to contemporary design and curatorial strategies. The contributions address house museums, house ateliers, studios, and studio-archives, engaging with issues such as the aura and genius loci of these places, processes of musealisation and reconstruction, and analog and digital storytelling devices for their valorisation. By integrating historical, museological, and design-based approaches, the volume proposes a polysemous reading of the faber's spaces as vital microcosms and three-dimensional self-portraits, offering a shared methodological ground and operative tools for researchers, curators, designers, and cultural institutions.

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