

# Community-centred design: A design perspective on innovation *in and for* places

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*Abstract: In the design field, attention to local and territorial issues is relatively recent and is marked by the evolution of design as a discipline that deals not only with single products, but also with complex systems. Territories and communities became a design object to support innovation in the public sphere and society. Starting from a design for places perspective, the aim of this paper is clarifying and outlining the 'community-centred' approach to describing possible design contributions. Through literature review and case studies, four possible scenarios for community-centered design are defined, including bottom-up and top-down strategies. As result, the scenarios outlined are (i) design by communities, (ii) design with communities, (iii) design for communities, and (iv) design of communities. The first part of the paper focuses on places and communities as design object, the second part introduces a framework to interpret community-centred initiatives and describes the four scenarios. In conclusion, some implications for design interventions are outlined.*

*Keywords: Community-Centred Design, Design for Communities, Design with Communities, Design by Communities, Design of Communities*

## Introduction

In the design field, attention to local and territorial issues is relatively recent and is marked by the evolution of design as a discipline that deals not only with products, but also with experiences and services, systems, up to governments and societal transformations (Buchanan 2001). Therefore, territories became a design object, through an approach that is by nature holistic, strategic, and systemic and in which complexity is part of the context in which we live and operate (Liem 2012; Sevaldson 2010; Valtonen 2010). Therefore, this involves widening the design boundaries: from designing for a single company and for the final users, we move on to designing for and with local communities, for business systems up to relating to complex systems such as forms of governance and policy-making.

In the design field, the interest in social innovation and systemic transformations has grown to investigate new models of innovation that have a positive impact in businesses, as well as in the urban and public spaces. Areas such as Transition Design developed at Carnegie Mellon's School of Design reflect on how designers can play an important role within large-scale changes and strengthen the social capital and community cohesion. At the same time, there is a growing attention towards smaller scale spaces and initiatives, as well (Manzini 2010).

In this paper, reference is made to that area of design that is defined as 'design for the territory', when the design object moves to places and communities become the pivot of the design solutions. From this perspective, in this paper the community-centered approach refers to those initiatives that borrow from user-centered design and participatory design and focus on communities considered as the main users and as a collective design actor able to activate local resources to create value for places (Meroni 2008; Meroni and Sangiorgi 2011; Villari 2012). Through literature review and case studies, the aim of this paper is to clarify and outline the

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‘community-centered’ concept describing different levels of design interventions. To do this, four possible scenarios for community-centered design are described, including bottom-up and top-down paths, in which communities and designers interact with a more or less active role.

The paper is organized as follows. The first part focuses on the community as a design object and outlines a framework for interpreting the community-centered concept. The second part introduces four scenarios that describe communities as promoters or beneficiaries of design processes. Finally, the paper discusses the results and offers suggestions for future work.

## Places and Communities as Design Objects

Around the 2000s, there was the urgency from institutions and governments to respond to the ecological crisis and the sustainability of economic models as well as to the social cohesion issues, especially in the European context (Farrel and Thirion 2000; OECD 2001). At the turn of the 2000s, the European Commission promoted an idea of territorial innovation as integrated development (Farrel and Thirion 2000), highlighting the urgency of responding not only to the businesses’ issues, but also to the environmental problems, the enhancement of local and cultural identities as well as the reduction of the socio-economic gap between the Regions. The territorial capital is the concept behind this development model. The European Commission’s approach, then, defined guidance for policymakers, planners, and innovators: local development has considered as a collective process and approached in a long-term perspective (Farrel and Thirion 2000). This implies that (local) innovation is linked to a specific territory and derives from the capacity to organize public and private actors, civil society, and inhabitants as networks to form a common design culture whose purpose is economic, social, environmental, and cultural, and lined to the local communities’ well-being (*ibid.*).

The territorial capital model, as metaphor for local value creation, has also been adopted within the design discipline. Villari (2012) describes the territorial capital as a specific design object, defined as a system of resources available for designers to define development strategies, design new local services, and identify specific product-service systems at local level. In this perspective, a community-centred approach for territorial development is outlined identifying three potential areas of design intervention: a connective and relational dimension with the capacity to involve different stakeholders to create local value (systems and relationships level), a strategic dimension linked to organizational and methodological aspects (design strategies level); and an operational level where design solutions are described in terms of services, processes, and systems (artifacts level) (Villari 2012; Maffei and Villari 2006).

Territorial issues thus became connected to strategic design, service design, and design for social innovation (Manzini and Meroni 2014; Parente and Sadini 2017; Villari 2012). In particular, collaborative practices and participatory models have been explored to that support wellbeing and prosperity for people and places (Manzini 2015).

Reasoning from a human-centred approach and enhancing the territorial capital means taking into consideration contextual factors that favour the creation or the strengthening of local innovation. Therefore, the role of the communities (considered both as beneficiaries and promoters/designers of the interventions) is crucial and could be defined as “loci and drivers of social innovation” (Moulaert 2010, 7).

The human-centred approach applied to the large-scale design solutions has also become part of the European policy agenda (European Commission 2019). Similarly, the European Green Deal program (*Ibid.*) promotes the importance of putting citizens at the centre of the initiatives in an explicit matter. Within this program, the transition towards sustainability “must be just and inclusive. It must put people first and pay attention to the regions, industries, and workers who will face the greatest challenges” (*Ibid.*, 2). In this context, the practices of co-design and co-production take on an even-greater role (Meroni et al. 2018).

Based on these premises, the purpose of this article is to describe community-centred initiatives from a design perspective, in which design(er) and local communities play different roles and in which collaboration can be both design-driven or community-driven.

## **A Framework to Interpret the Community-centred Initiatives by Design**

Communities are groups of people who come together for several reasons. These reasons may include geographic areas, economic or social issues, political and administrative criteria, as well as technological aspects. For example, Sanoff (2000) defines the community as a group of people who live or work together in an area and have rooted a social attachment to it. Manzini and Thorpe (2018) describe the concept of 'place-related communities' concerning that of resilience and potential for design and collaboration to benefit community development and attachment. The level of community involvement or participation in decision-making processes often relates to the planning trends of the time. In the 1960s and 1970s community participation was characterized by its political nature, being adopted as a tool for conflict resolution or social struggle. In the 1980s and 1990s planners and theorists focused on creating suitable tools and methodologies to involve citizens in decision-making processes, and throughout the entire development process (de Roo 2018). This level of participation encourages community empowerment and builds capacity in community members who can begin to define the change they are seeking, or not (Paba 2002).

McLeroy et al. (2003) describe four types of initiatives that see communities as protagonists and which, even if referring to the health sector, can be generalized to other sectors. The categories proposed are: community as setting; community as target; community as agent; and community as resource. In the first, the activities refer to a specific geographical context which represents the place where the interventions are implemented on different scales. They are, therefore, interventions applied to cities, neighbourhoods, local organizations, individual contexts (such as schools or hospitals). In this case, community-based initiatives are aimed at changing individual practices and collective learning. When communities are considered as targets of change, they refer to systemic changes and interventions also connected to a political level. When communities are considered as resources, they refer to participatory models and to the processes of (re)organizing resources and/or competences within the communities. The model considering communities as agent emphasizes the environment and the context in which communities develop. In this case, interventions are characterized by the value given to mutual exchange and to the informal and social networks that support initiatives.

Architects and planners describe community design as a broader concept included within participation design. It is also labelled as 'social architecture', 'social design', and 'architecture for people' (Francis 1983). Many repertoires of participation methods have been developed together with a wide range of participation techniques that include more or less technological approaches and ranging from charrettes, workshops, gaming, scenario building, computer simulations that involve people through physical and digital interactions.

In the design field, when referring to community-centred initiatives, it mainly entails the practices through which communities are involved in co-design and co-creation processes, or in collaborative initiatives in which designers together with experts in extra-disciplinary fields, laypersons and end-users share design practices.

Through the lens of design for places, the community-centred approach is described to detail a collaborative design framework for action-research processes (Villari 2012; Villari 2014). The approach is described as an extension of the concept of human-centred design in which communities are both protagonists and beneficiaries of the design process in which value is generated both for the people involved and for the context in which they work and live (Meroni 2008; Villari 2012). So, when facing with large-scale and long-term interventions, the design process is centred on its systemic nature, considering the design activities as embedded in a large

and complex sociotechnical system. Prototyping, iteration, and experimentation are essential components of the process, both in the development of solutions and in their evaluation. In this paper, attention is paid to the design role within the territorial innovation processes and its relationship with the local community role. The communities, in this sense, are intended not only as beneficiaries of the process, but as design actors who - with different roles and skills - play as activators, promoters, and experimenters for territorial innovation.

Differently from the design solutions related to the industrial production, the design projects for places are subject to a condition of situatedness that requires a continuous adaptation to the local circumstances, a condition of path dependency that implies a relationship with the evolution of the territory itself in which we operate, a collective dimension since the solutions are always the result of the involvement of different actors and competences. Finally, the design activities include different levels of intervention that are not only related to the final solution but also to the contextual aspects (political, economic, social, environmental) that allow its realization (Maffei and Villari 2006).

## **Design By, With, For, and Of Communities**

As already mention, designing (strategies, products, services) for places entail operating in broad and complex sociotechnical systems in which the variables to be considered in design terms are political, economic, cultural, and social (Norman and Stappers 2016). Consequently, solutions are context-dependent, and, therefore, they are linked not only to technological or market issues but strictly connected to the local culture and milieu.

In the disciplinary field, social change, context-based solutions, and long-term scenarios are addressed in the context of Transition Design (Irwin, Gideon and Tonkinwise 2015) and Transformation Design (Jonas, Zerwas and Von Anshelm 2016) as well as design towards sustainable futures (Fry 2008) and in the more radical concept of pluriverse used by Escobar (2017). These are models in which new design theorizations are built around social change and emerging values concerning environmental and cultural challenges, the connection between local and global, and new relational models.

The local dimension and the possibility to have a real and measurable impact is, therefore, one of the contemporary challenges of design, in line with the socio-economic and environmental issues that affect the entire planet. As Escobar claims “the emphasis on place-making and collaborative practice, as well as the unambiguous grounding of transition design in an ecological vision, is an important element of the political ontology of design” (Escobar 2017, 138).

Designing at territorial scale requires system thinking and the capacity to play different roles to facilitate, enable, trigger processes, collaborate with different stakeholders, build collective capacity, and envision future scenarios and open forms of collaboration (Tan 2012; Malpass and Salinas 2020). Communities are involved in different ways in the design process. This section describes four different scenarios to articulate the concept of community-centred design and possible interventions when related to territorial issues (See Figure 1).

The *design by communities* activities are autonomously promoted by communities and refer to those initiatives in which the contribution of design is not explicit or formalized. In this case, the initiatives are activated, organized, and implemented by specific groups of people capable of producing value for the territorial capital through practices that are mainly self-promoted.

The *design with communities* initiatives include designers, laypersons, and end-users to co-design or co-create solutions aimed at generating value for a specific local context and/or a specific social group. These are initiatives in which specific design tools such as co-design workshops or collaborative prototyping are used, and the solutions and the processes involve the different skills, knowledge, and competences in formalized processes throughout the design journey.

The *design for communities* initiatives are described as those guided by a clear design strategy aimed at enhancing a specific community (for example, elderly, entrepreneurs, families, students, and so on). These communities are the direct beneficiaries of the design intervention (the design object); their growth and improvement generate value for the territory and the environment in which they operate, supporting economic, social, and environmental development adopting an explicit design-driven approach.

The *design of community*, in this framework, refers to those situations in which a community is not yet formally structured, but it is at the beginning of its formation. The community is still potential, with blurred boundaries and loose and informal relationships and structures. In this scenario, community initiatives are often at the beginning of their journey in which it is difficult to recognize an explicit role of design. Therefore, in this paper, the term *design of community* does not intend to describe the formal steps and tools by which to start and cultivate a community; instead, it describes the embryonic scenario from which various bottom-up or top-down initiatives can (or may not) arise.

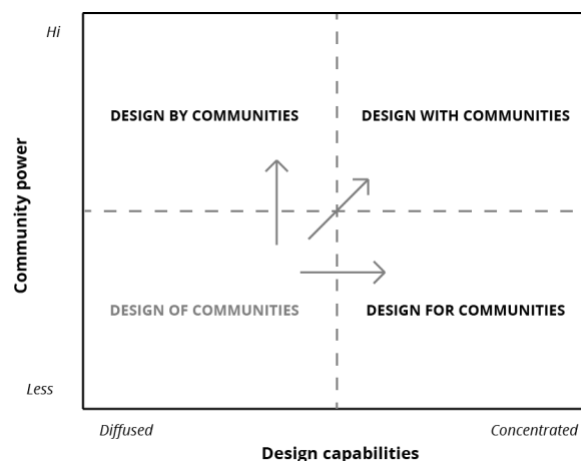


Figure 1: Community-centred scenarios

Source: Villari

### *Design by Community*

Manzini (2006) describes creative communities as ‘laboratories’ for producing new ideas and innovations aimed at improving our daily life (Jégou and Manzini 2008). The author refers to those groups of people who use collective creative capital to craft solutions that generate substantial social value. In the field of social innovation, Manzini and Meroni (2014) describe bottom-up initiatives as ‘community-based innovations’ concerning diffused capabilities to drive sustainable, collaborative change. In particular, the authors define ‘community-based innovation’ as “the result of a co-design process between a variety of actors (final users, grassroots technicians and entrepreneurs, local institutions, and civil society organizations) seeking to find a shared solution for a common issue” (Manzini and Meroni 2014, 367). Initiatives such as co-housing, local farmers’ markets, time banks, neighbourhood services, and the social streets, for example, belong to this category. In another way, the authors define these activities as collaborative services or social initiatives in which end-users are actively involved in both the design and production phases (Jégou and Manzini 2008). These types of initiatives do not often imply the involvement of designers explicitly, but their implementation is guided by the so-called local change makers.

The 'Neighborhood Concierge' (*La Portineria di Quartiere*) is an example. This initiative is an information hub aimed at delivering community services in an urban area in Milan. The services provided by the Concierge are, for instance, the possibility of receiving parcels, access to mutual help services, and to a shared stuff library in which people can borrow objects by other citizens. The aim of the initiative is to reinforce the local community and to increase a sense of belonging and reinforcing resilience and social capital. In such cases, the stakeholders adopt approaches or play roles that are, in some ways, attributable to design processes (in terms of strategies, services, or tools used), although these are not adopted explicitly. In the book 2 "Design, when everybody designs", Manzini (2015) also hypothesizes that there is a widespread design capacity that is not always attributable to the design discipline (referring to the field of social innovation) which generates innovation mechanisms capable of enhancing local resources in an integrated and sustainable way. Similarly, local initiatives such the 'Walking bus' or networks of farmers that deliver food are promoted and performed by specific communities to generate local value and to reinforce the material and immaterial resources of places, without adopting design strategies explicitly.

Such initiatives can be defined as mainly community-driven guided by a collective entity that uses specific resources to generate innovation at a local level. Changes remain primarily rooted in the civil society and the daily life, and the design role is not formally recognized or involved in an explicit way.

### ***Design with Communities***

The topic of participation and involvement of end-users can still be read from different perspectives, one more closely linked to business logic and the other to the democratization of design or decision-making processes. In recent years, co-design and co-creation processes have spread as an element of innovation within companies, public administration, up to policymaking. What the application areas have in common is the consideration of cooperative and collaborative practices as keys to encouraging the involvement of various stakeholders in the design process to respond more effectively and efficiently to complex problems, adopting new or different ways to address shared challenges between experts and non-experts.

The initiatives called *design with community* develop in this area. They refer to the processes and design approaches related to collaborative and participative initiatives for creating value for the territorial capital in which processes and solutions can be considered as co-designed or co-produced. Referring to design for social innovation, Manzini defines design with communities as initiatives in which designers participate

as peers with other actors involved in creative community building and in collaborative service co-design. In this modality, designers have to facilitate the convergence of different partners toward shared ideas and potential solutions. This kind of activity requires a set of new design skills: promoting collaboration among diverse social actors (local communities and companies, institutions and research centers); participating in the construction of shared visions and scenarios; and combining existing products and services to support the creative community members with whom they collaborate. (Manzini 2014, 62)

These activities aim to involve communities to promote and develop collective solutions, considering people's skills and knowledge as key resources in the design process. They are also initiatives aimed at enabling new skills for the community members and promoting the acquisition of design tools capable of triggering participatory processes for local innovation. An example is the *Social Food Club* aimed at supporting an entrepreneurial path involving

immigrants and foreigners' communities that inhabit Dergano, a peripheral neighbourhood in the north of Milan. This was a on-field research led by design researchers of Politecnico di Milano connected with a previous project called *ColtivAzioni Sociali Urbane (Urban and Social Cultivations)* promoted in the same territory with the aim to reinforce the social capital and create the opportunities to kick-start local business in the area actively involving universities, institutions, associations, individuals, and citizens. Through a service design process, communities were involved in sharing their abilities and envisioned a social food service in coherence with the local resources, competences, and businesses. These initiatives were structured through an explicit design process and led by design experts who strictly collaborated with local stakeholders. It entailed field research phases and the adoption of design ethnography tools, and co-design workshops working with community members, the Municipality, local associations, artisans, local businesses (Villari 2015). The proposed solution was simulated and tested through a collaborative event in which all the stakeholders were actively involved and able to share expectations and better define their roles. Still, on a neighbourhood scale, another example is that of the tactical urbanism interventions that the Municipality of Milan is promoting in various peripheral neighbourhoods. These are short-term and low-cost interventions that actively involve communities in designing and implementing small and incremental changes rather than sharing and discussing long-term visions. For example, it is about creating new squares in conjunction with schools, involving citizens to rethink specific areas of the city, designing new cycle routes, or redesigning the public space through experimental and temporary interventions that include collaborative actions that involve the local communities in transforming places with specific initiatives (i.e., performances, colouring paths or planting new trees). Expert designers and planners were involved by the Municipality to define the methodology, the collaborative process, and outline the expected outputs to be implemented with citizens. These typologies, in which communities are actively involved throughout the design process, as well as in the decision-making process, can be defined as community-centred initiatives (Manzini and Meroni 2014; Meroni 2008; Villari 2012) and called here as *design with community* initiatives to reinforce the collaborative approach at their basis. This is the closest condition to the co-design, and co-creation approaches adopted in the design discipline. In the design for the territorial development arena, the subject involved is always collective and always connected – in terms of knowledge, activities, or proximity - to a specific local area.

### ***Design for Communities***

As already stated, the design process is based on acquiring knowledge about the end-users, incorporating qualitative elements for the ideation and the design solutions. That said, this does not mean that the design process is always collaborative in all its parts, but some initiatives are mainly design(er)-driven and top-down processes in which users (and other stakeholders) are not involved in the decision making and/or ideation phases.

*Design for communities* describes practices that do not explicitly adopt collaborative processes in all the design phases. Although we can refer to user-centred practices, design for communities' initiatives are those ones in which design experts lead (and trigger) the process and define tools and strategies for the final solution. It is, therefore, a design strategy that involves design experts in order to provide ad hoc solutions and create value for the local context. Manzini (2014, 62-63) defines *design for communities* as initiative in which “*designers have to conceptualize and develop solutions for specific collaborative services and other enabling artifacts (e.g., digital platforms, orienting scenarios, and catalyzing events, including exhibitions, festivals, and other cultural events)*”.

An example is the SlowD platform. It is a design-driven initiative that creates value for systems of local artisans. It creates links between designers and small businesses to support process innovation and enable a knowledge sharing through a combination of digital and physical

networks. This platform reinforces the territorial capital, mostly due to the regional element and create context-based solutions that acknowledges the specific needs of the local communities involved by a clear design strategy.

Design for communities strengthens territorial capital through developing connections between designers, local communities, businesses, public and private organizations to rebuild social ties and strengthen the territorial value mainly using top-down strategies. These initiatives employ strategic activities, and the result is that communities are 'listened to' and analysed as a design object without necessarily having decision-making roles within the design process. These processes can be considered design-driven processes mainly led by experts, in which communities play a role of advisors and/or testers as in user-centred processes, but they are not directly involved in the design of the final solution. Manzini (2014) describe this kind of initiatives as guided by a strategic capability in which experts (designers) are able to recognize a problem and to find the social resources to solve it, to activate and organize such resources to put solutions in practice and, eventually, replicate them in other contexts, and, finally, to create a shared vision to connect diverse initiative under a wider umbrella in a coherent way.

### *Design of Communities*

Community design is not a new term. In architecture and planning, the term 'placemaking' is used to describe a community-driven approach to building places that act as community enablers and around which to build and strengthen the relationships between people (Laven et al. 2019).

The *design of community* scenario is undoubtedly the most difficult to be described because it can be referred as the initial stage of a community-building process. The roles within the community are not well defined yet and the same is true for the internal competences and skills of community members. In the community of practice model, Wenger (1998) defines this phase as a 'potential' community. More than a real community, a community of practice or a designed community is a loose network of people who occasionally interact around a situation or interest. For example, in the Covid-19 lockdown period, many new networks were born around principles of solidarity (groups of volunteers to support families), or to shared interests (events or lessons around cultural themes, sports, leisure, and entertainment). Communities can be cultivated (Wenger et al. 2002) and designed around specific needs and issues. Design of communities often provided on a voluntary basis, do not follow specific design schemes, nor do they share common tools. In other cases, design of communities are actions attributable to social and/or political activism. In terms of community power and design capabilities, it is difficult to identify a clear leadership, and the initiatives are often self-sustained following different processes with results that are not comparable. When aims, roles, tools and practices are clear and shared among participants, the community will be created and recognized by external actors as an entity. So, from the *design of community* scenario, other community-centred initiatives might (or not) evolve and transformed into design by, for or with community initiatives.

The four categories adopted to define the communities' involvement in the design processes outline some differences on how design can contribute to create value for places and clarify the community-centred design spectrum. Community-centred actions have in common the need to define a precise scale of intervention (e.g., a neighbourhood, a city, the regional or national scale), although the small scale is still the most significant one to start, manage and validate the change. Design in this context takes different roles that vary from advocacy, facilitation of processes and strategic conversations, to the co-creation of situated processes and solutions, as well as to the management of complex processes and networks. Unlike traditional design processes, the community-based initiatives still require a long time for planning, experimentation, and implementation, much closer to those of the architectural and urban planning scale rather than the products and services development.



In all the situations, community-centred actions depend on the specificities of the local context, on their capacity to create a strong connection with the territorial values and culture and produce collaborative and collective results in terms of processes and outcomes. Differently from the design solutions related to the industrial production, solutions are subjected to a condition of *situatedness* that requires a continuous adaptation to the local circumstances, a condition of *path dependency* that implies a relationship with the evolution of the territory itself in which we operate, a *collective dimension* since the solutions are always the result of the involvement of different actors and competences. Finally, the design activities include different levels of intervention that are not only related to the final solution but also to the contextual aspects (political, economic, social, environmental) that allow its realization (Villari 2012; Maffei and Villari 2006).

## Concluding Remarks

The paper describes four scenarios for community-centred initiatives outlining some differences on how design can contribute to create value for territories. The discussion develops around the 'design for territories' debate (Mazini 2010; Parente and Sadini 2017; Thackara 2005; Villari 2012; 2015), clarifying possible areas of intervention in which communities and designers play a crucial role.

With the growing interest of the design discipline on the issues of territorial enhancement there is a need to further explore approaches, tools, as well as specific design intervention. The scales of intervention, the design processes, and the specific tools that describe a community-centred design action (applied to local contexts) need to be further explored. The specific competences that designers and researchers need in practice can be further developed and discussed as well. In addition, the impact measurement of the initiatives in terms of design process and contribution is still underexplored as well as the community results' management and maintenance.

Designing for territories analyses the context and its resources, defined as territorial capital. This means that the design focus has a wider range of activities performed at varying scales. The territorial capital becomes the focus of the design activities, and the design outputs are a system of products and services aimed at enhancing the local resources and the wellbeing of local communities. Communities are then at the centre of the design process, and, at the same time, designers are part of a wider community involved in the process itself. This entails weaknesses: local knowledge about such complex situations is often incomplete, and solutions and approaches can be affected by this condition, on another level, solutions that are local based might not be scaled and replicated in other contexts and they often remain as pilots.

We are living in a world in which designer are more often faced with 'super wicked problems' (Rittel and Weber 1973), how the role of design is changing and what is the role of design to face large scale problems in the future? Nevertheless, the Covid-19 and the effects that the pandemic has had on territories and communities have called into question the current socio-economic models, leading to reflection on new connection models, new way of design, planning and brought to light unprecedented scenarios and new processes in which communities has generated virtuous paths to cope with the crisis (Rodgers et al. 2020; Villari 2021). With this renewed awareness, design(ers) can and must play an important role in triggering and make sustainable, inclusive, and fair solutions real creating value for the ecosystem in which communities live and act. Further, measuring the (positive) impact that design can bring to communities and social wellbeing is an important challenge that designers must include in their practices.

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