

Designing ethically in a complex world

MULTIPLE CHALLENGES WITHIN DESIGN
FOR PUBLIC AND SOCIAL SYSTEMS

Edited by
Elena Caratti and Laura Galluzzo

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9. The accessible landscape. Sustainable narratives for empowerment

Daniela Anna Calabi

9.1 Communication design and landscape

It's not about expanding the menu of our communicative options: also because the ethical problem of which of these options to choose in the different situations in which we might find ourselves would arise again. Instead, we must identify a specific form of communication, a different general idea that underlies the standard theory [...]. To communicate means to open up a common space of relationship between interlocutors (Adriano Fabris, 2018).

Communication design for the territory is configured in a complex system of disciplinary convergences in design studies. Contributions from disciplines such as geography, ethnography, sociology, ecology, history, and anthropology outline viewpoints and interpretations of the meanings of the term *landscape*, emphasizing the need for a multi-level communicative system capable of considering interconnected layers of meaning.

The territory can thus be regarded as a special *palimpsest of plots*,

encompassing disciplinary, thematic, and narrative layers that are not always accessible. Even the semantic (and linguistic) codes of historical narratives are not always shared, with documents belonging to specific social and cultural structures either *locked* in archives or the preserve of a few.

When *translative* communicative systems (Baule, 2016) are lacking, it is often difficult to make accessible areas of meaning and references that constitute the heritage of collective knowledge, whether environmental, mnemonic, political, cultural, or social.

The design of communication, whose paradigm is relational and multidimensional, where identities gain value through their relationship with the other (Floch, 1997, p. 54), takes as its primary content the territorial relations that intertwine the physical, digital, and extra-physical dimensions of narratives, memories, information, and representation. The analysis of environmental and cultural characteristics, as well as the exploration and practice of places, and the study of perceptual values, allow for the selection of content, communicative formats, and expressive languages of value for communication.

In the reflections that follow, the communicative project of relationships between civilizations and places is considered, with the aim of fostering responsibility through verbal codes and forms of representation - traditional or hybrid - to share and enhance the sense of belonging to a community.

Changes in the territory always reflect social, cultural, technological, and environmental ones, which are often significant and rapid changes in the structure of communities. These changes have repercussions on the perception of quality and well-being associated with places, as well as on the ways in which relationships between community and nature are established and maintained.

In the concept of *territory* there are geographical, cultural, social, and spatial values, as well as historical, symbolic, and political ones, which configure it as a *complex* and adaptive system, characterized by dynamics that continually regenerate its properties (Bretagnolle *et al.*, 2003): «a *surprise* for the observer» (Batty and Torrens, 2001, p. 3), which may correspond to interpretative difficulties.

Therefore, the territory is naturally a space of relationships: it is

a point of access to cultural varieties and environmental concerns, where the contribution of design highlights the challenge of choosing a sustainable, inclusive, and shareable narrative framework. The aim of communication is to identify content that portrays the intricate characteristics of a complex landscape, encompassing explicit and implicit environmental and cultural features that are more or less visible and layered.

Communication design for the territory makes explicit the relationships between people and places. The causal link between landscape and communication becomes clear: the territory becomes a place of meeting and correspondence between thoughts (Liotta, 2005); design makes visible the connections between human beings, reality, and history (Maldonado, 1971). Considering the territory as a landscape of relationships means emphasizing the value of identities and differences to ensure cultural access to diversity.

Every territory is a container of aspirations and realities that, in order to be understood and shared, require conscious sensitivity and a certain culture of responsibility, which for communication design means embodying a clear ethical dimension.

The idea of ethical communication for landscapes and cultures defines a communicative action that creates common spaces. Acknowledging the ethical instance in communication generates the search for choices consistent with values such as inclusiveness, sustainability, cultural respect and, in general, determines the search for alternative ideas for content, formats, languages and devices, so that they return that consistency.

In communication design, the ethical perspective not only promotes and generates sustainable purposes, but also expressive values and innovation. The design gaze analytically values the depth and richness of details and information, preferring them to a stylistic and impactful narrative disconnected from territorial reality. Ethical communication (Fabris, 2006) defines an action that creates a responsible vision; all the more so when the territory is at the centre.

The definition of *ethical communication*, which implicitly addresses the social dimension, adds value to the act of sharing; it creates a bond, an objective commitment, a shared and accessible dimension; it deals with cultural landscapes and increases its transformative

impact through interconnection with other disciplinary fields.

While identifying the creative potential offered by the hybridization of design methodologies and design formats, ethical communicative action defines a field of experimentation that emphasizes specific inclusive strategies (Calabi *et al.* 2022), going beyond the transformative influence of new technologies and experimental representations.

It can be asserted that ethical communication promotes a paradigm shift: it focusses on accessibility to unorganized content, through unconventional and hybrid forms, breaking down barriers and stereotypes to assert community empowerment (Rappaport, 1987). Empowerment is understood as the process through which one acquires knowledge and resources on fundamental issues, moving from a position of disadvantage to access knowledge, skills, material or conceptual resources, thus participating in society.

Communication design that reflects on environmental and social issues highlights a genuine ethical vocation aimed at addressing territorial and environmental problems.

The relationship between design and ideologies characterizes a large part of the history of Italian design, with a dialectical and dialogical dimension that interprets individual and collective events.

Communication design has often directly related also to the political dimension, shaping images of institutions and contestations, stimulating civic consciousness.

It is recalled that the First International Biennale of Global Design Methodology *The Forms of the Human Environment* opened in 1970 at the Rimini Fair, with the Pio Manzù Centre for Environmental Structures Research presiding over the proceedings, coordinated by an international steering committee, which included Giulio Carlo Argan. The exhibition section documented the developments in environmental design, which was at the core of the work of three interdisciplinary groups; one of the themes of the interdisciplinary research delved into reflections on *Organizzazione e comunicazione dello spazio operativo* (Organization and Communication of the Operational Space, translation by the author) and showcased research on advertising language as a semiotic process. The research involved the participation and curation of the Art Directors Club of Milan, then directed by Giancarlo Iliprandi, who promoted the exhibition



Figure 1.
Giancarlo Iliprandi, 1970. Poster fotografici. By Associazione Giancarlo Iliprandi, Milano.

Aggressività e violenza dell'uomo nei confronti dell'ambiente (Aggressiveness and Violence of Man towards the Environment).

The exhibition highlighted the role of graphic design in the development of public service communication, addressing issues of broad social impact. It also denounced the critical aspects of the relationship with natural resources when they become a source of degradation and violence against cultural heritage, and a source of injustice (Mimmo Castellano) or incivility (Ilio Negri).

Posters anticipated the values and concepts expressed by Albe Steiner in his 1978 book *The Craft of the Graphic Designer* (Formia 2020, pp. 254, 256).

The subsequent communication campaigns consolidated the ethical function of communication: these are the public service advertisements launched in 1971, following the profound inequalities and social contradictions that, in Italy, came after the economic boom of the 1960s, giving an impressive form to crises and proposing an incisive political narrative.

Unfortunately, despite the meticulous organization and the shared importance of the environmentalist theme, the Rimini Biennale did not see further editions, transforming the event into International Study Days (Formia, 2020, p. 261). The value of interdisciplinary thinking intertwined with design cultures remains foundational; especially for visual cultures and communication, which since then have seen the construction of the future as a moral commitment (Ferraro, 1973).

On issues related to the identities of places, communication design for the territory makes it possible to reconnect content to spaces, communicating relationships and identities. On the one hand, the ethical content that structures communication obliges the designer to relate to values and needs, developing communicative formats capable of representing the complexity of territorial relationships, whether hybrid, visible, or invisible. On the other hand, the complexity of the network of relationships fosters multiple points of view and georeferenced connections.

9.2 Sustainable narratives

Territories are the result of the coexistence of nature and civilization (European Landscape Convention, Florence, 2000): it must be considered that the landscape is the sensitive and perceived manifestation, in an aesthetic sense, of the system of relationships that occur between the natural and inhabited environments. These relationships intertwine the connection of human societies and individuals with the places where they live and work. (Calzolari, 1999, p. 56).

Whenever land becomes a *place of exchange* it becomes territory (Magnaghi, 1998), that is, an instrument of work, cooperation, and communication; whereas landscapes define the aesthetic form of the relationships between the environment and the built space, where physical traces correspond to digital networks that support hybrid, physical, and extra-physical relationships (Cairncross, 1997).

The representation of a territory's relationships is as important as its geographical representation; it is a matter of making visible understandings, dialectics, and strategies of enhancement, which become aesthetic practices when the needs are functional to social *ethos*, public participation, and respect for place and environment.

The many breaks in the aesthetics of landscapes often correspond to points of rupture in the social fabric, where naturalistic ontology and a sense of interdependence and understanding of social facts are lacking. Many collective contexts are in crisis because of the speed with which spaces of relationships change, because there is a lack of communications that make changes comprehensible while maintaining memories, and identities, of past events.

Design can be an instrument of cultural encounter when it returns to the community the knowledge and information interconnected to places, when it interfaces isolated contexts with the aim of overcoming referential differences and incurrences and promoting the production of devices of orientation and exchange, for an ethical and aesthetic communicative relationship with places and the identities of landscapes. Ethical in that it is sustainable and oriented towards the development of methodologies essential to a broad horizon of social purpose (Marcolli 1968, p. 218); aesthetic because it makes perceptual and atmospheric the exchange

of knowledge and ethical immersion in contexts, while creating access to engaging and memorable content.

The correspondence between perceptually fragmented places and identities pulverized by sociocultural transference forces one to imagine communicative paradigms clearly aimed at ethical systems of relationship. It is not enough to communicate and share; the context of relationships must be communicated in order for engagement to occur, beyond the mere exchange of news: to communicate means to disclose a space of relationship between interlocutors (Fabris, 2006, p. 42).

To design a bridging element between realities - linguistic, cultural, social, environmental, etc. - and history (Maldonado, 1971), it is important to recognize the connective role. For the landscape, which is culturally concentrated and multidimensional (physical and extra-physical), the deployment of inclusive communicative devices, which aim to make quality content accessible, is a fundamental fact.

A number of experimental communication design projects for the territory make it possible to imagine access to the opportunities for dialogue and knowledge present in places and, at the same time, propose innovation in formats and languages. Reflections on the role of design in that sphere have clarified its centrality, which concerns not only that of translator between issuer and receiver, but above all that of expert capable of *simplifying* access to memory and identities.

Having defined the role of communication design of the territory as a facilitator of access and connector of relationships, we then consider landscape as an *implicit network* of knowledge and identities.

Communication design research addresses territorial complexity by considering the close relationship between cultural landscapes and networks, including when it comes to health and well-being.

The urgent need for an *explicit network* of health identifies the construction of essential, transparent and diffuse, accessible and recognizable relationships in the territory as an essential component of the collective system.

The *health networks project* is an experimental example of territorial communication design and *apomediation*, theorized on the city of Piacenza. Health, prevention, and community well-being are the key principles of the Polisocial Award 2020 initiative, which awarded

and supported the development of scientific research with a high social impact. Among the winning projects was *Coltivare_Salute.com. Cities and Health Centres for Resilient Communities. Health Centres as builders of urbanity and widespread sociality in the post-COVID-19 era: new peripheral centralities in healthy and integrated cities.*

The project aimed to create synergies between various University Departments (DASTU - Architecture and Urban Studies, proposer; DABC - Architecture, Built Environment and Construction Engineering; DIG - Department of Management, Economics and Industrial Engineering; DESIGN) and external partners interested in the outcomes of the project, operating in the Emilia-Romagna region and particularly in the districts of the city of Piacenza (Local Health Authority, Municipality, Associations, Emilia-Romagna Region, Territorial Committees).

The contribution of Communication Design for Territories (DCxT research group of the Design Department of the Politecnico di Milano) was to foster the development of widespread communication capable of influencing community lifestyles. The methodology was based on the assumption that in order to promote healthy lifestyles and prevention, a design approach involving the actors of the urban territorial network and the relationships already in place in the territory is essential. Having defined for design the role of *facilitator of access* to health and wellness opportunities, as well as connector of the network of relationships, territorial relationships between public, private and contracted healthcare actors were analyzed (Calabi *et al.*, 2023).

The representation of relationships structured a narrative on a cartographic basis, highlights physical, digital and hybrid connections (Quaggiotto, 2017). This made possible the procedure of reconstructing (and representing) the main relationships, which were then made accessible in the relationships of proximity, affinity, and medical and preventive procedures, so they could become supportive to the community of people and actors, proposing orientation and informational devices for citizen empowerment, with appropriate visual languages, photographic itineraries, and insights through dedicated social networks.

Finally, the maieutic aspects in communication design for the territory deserve a last look. The development of hybrid and innovative

communicative artefacts for complex territories that offer layered content involves a preliminary activity of in-depth analysis, to be developed with territorial practice (thus on the physical and perceptual level), but also through the study of the mnemonic, representation, and narrative and cultural dimensions.

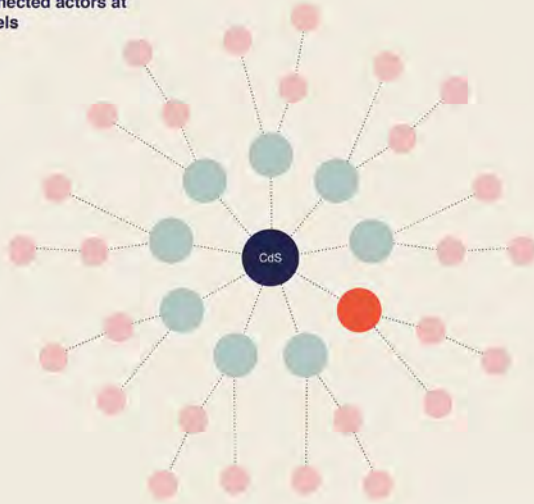
Considering places ethically and, in particular, formulating communicative proposals for tourist destinations (Corrado Del Bò, 2017) also promotes responsible narratives and sustainable behaviour. Here are examples of experimental projects that hybridize formats and languages, making use of metaphors and audiovisual representations that, from the point of view of sense-making, bring out themes such as those of the Anthropocene, cultural memories, abandoned sites, and overtourism. Beginning with the themes, it is possible to extend the concept of ethics of individual-community relations to the soil, water, plants and animals, for an ethical engagement that can understand and interact with the major transformations brought about by changes that cause human and natural conflicts. Determining a new landscape aesthetic means recognizing instances of new communicative and narrative needs.

Territorial network of Casa della Salute in Piacenza

3
Data visualization graph showing the dynamic network of interconnected links



Abstract diagram to describe the interconnected actors at different levels



Activities for people with motor disabilities



Children and gymnastic education

Interconnected graph system applied on the territorial network of Casa della Salute in Piacenza

The diagram shows the adaptability and dynamic scalability of the graph about the specific case study of Piacenza CdS, in collaboration with CSI. This visualization ensure accessible selected informations to the citizen, according to a specific topic.



CdS



1st level actor



2nd level actor



Sanitary network



Social network



CSI



Women's health



Activities for people with intellectual and social disabilities



Disability assistance

Figure 2A.

Calabi, Maturo (2023). Web interface by Dr. Giada Zoncada, Design Department, Politecnico di Milano.

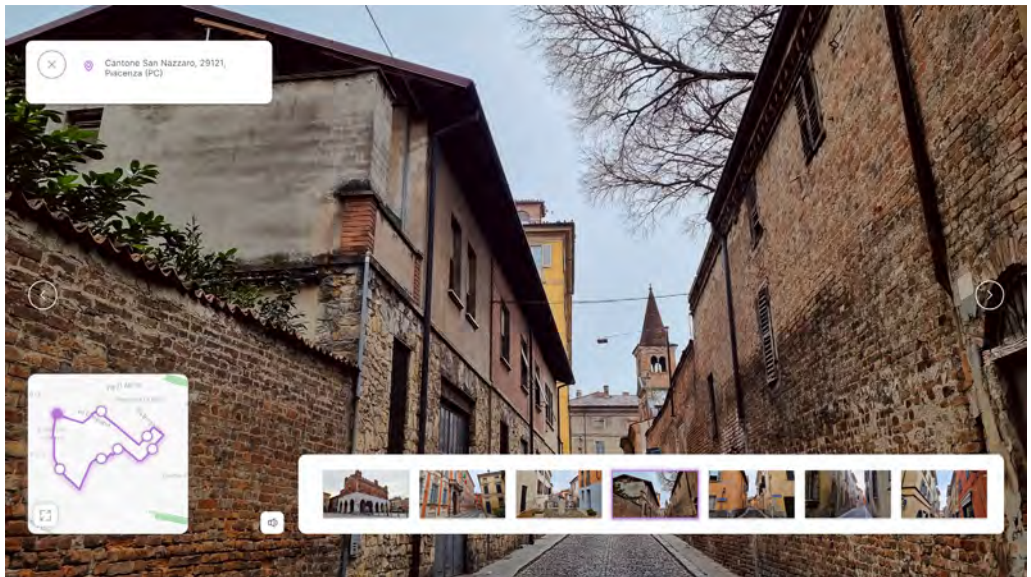
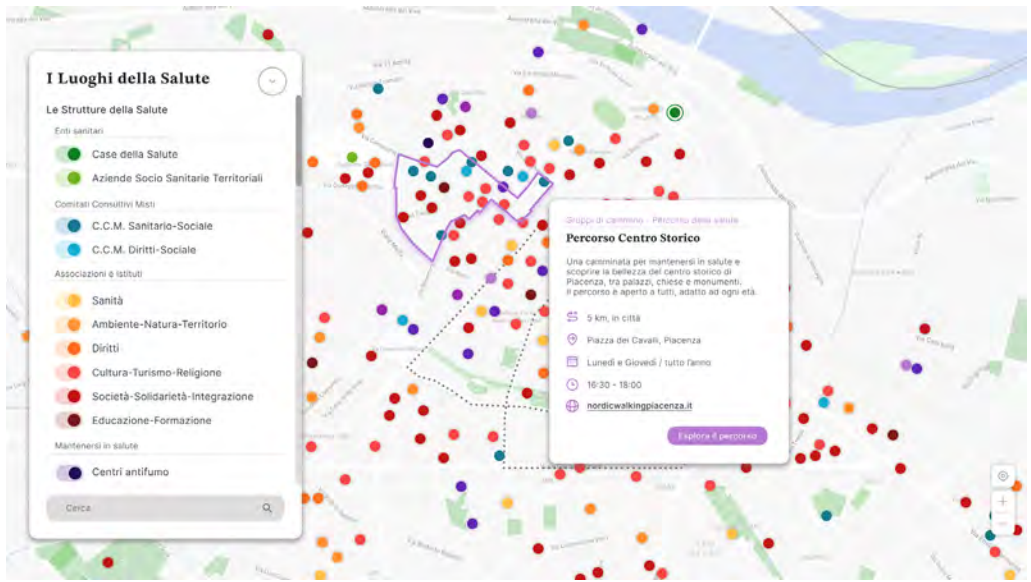


Figure 2B.
 Calabi, Maturo (2023). Web interface by Dr. Giada Zoncada, Design Department,
 Politecnico di Milano.

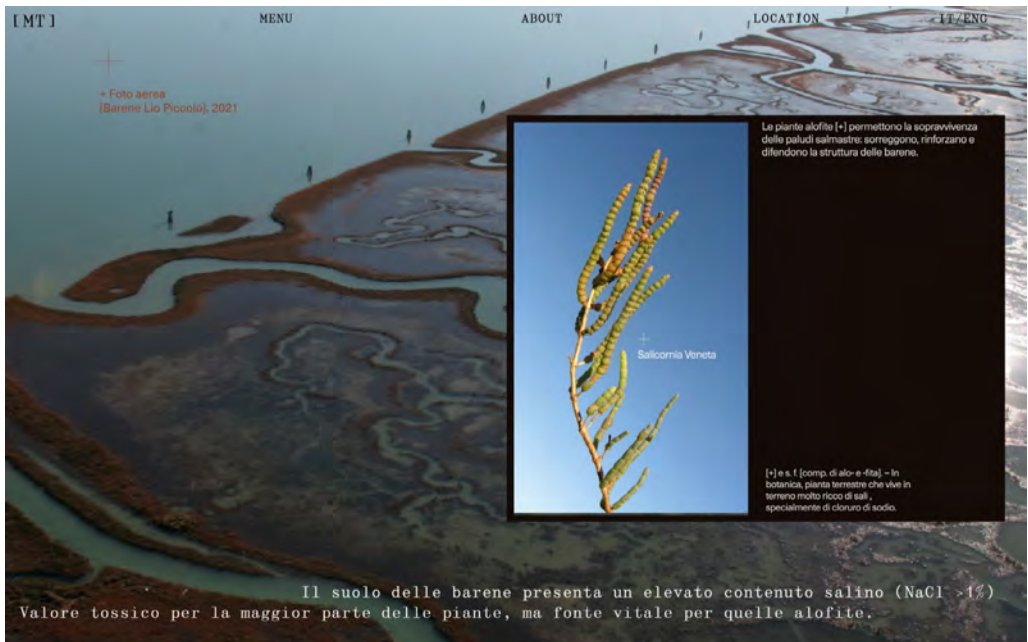


Figure 3.
Final Synthesis Workshop 2023/24, Master's Degree Programme in Communication Design, School of Design, Politecnico di Milano - Professors D. A. Calabi, M. Quaggiotto, C. Galasso, S. Scuri. Students: Asia Andreanelli, Greta Galligani, Annachiara Terrone, Margherita Villani. Experimental format: Territorial Metabolism. A post-anthropocentric digital metarecipe book. Communication design and territorial overtourism: Venice.



Figure 4.
Final Synthesis Workshop 2023/24, Master's Degree Programme in Communication Design, School of Design, Politecnico di Milano - Professors D. A. Calabi, M. Quaggiotto, C. Galasso, S. Scuri. Students: Gianmarco Ballestrieri, Benedetta Bellucci, Giacomo Bozzato, Claudia Pezzini, Beatrice Ulivi. Experimental format: Encyclopaedic virtual tour for territories of natural interest. The Cansiglio as a case study for the dissemination of complex ecosystems. Communication design and natural territories: Cansiglio Forest.

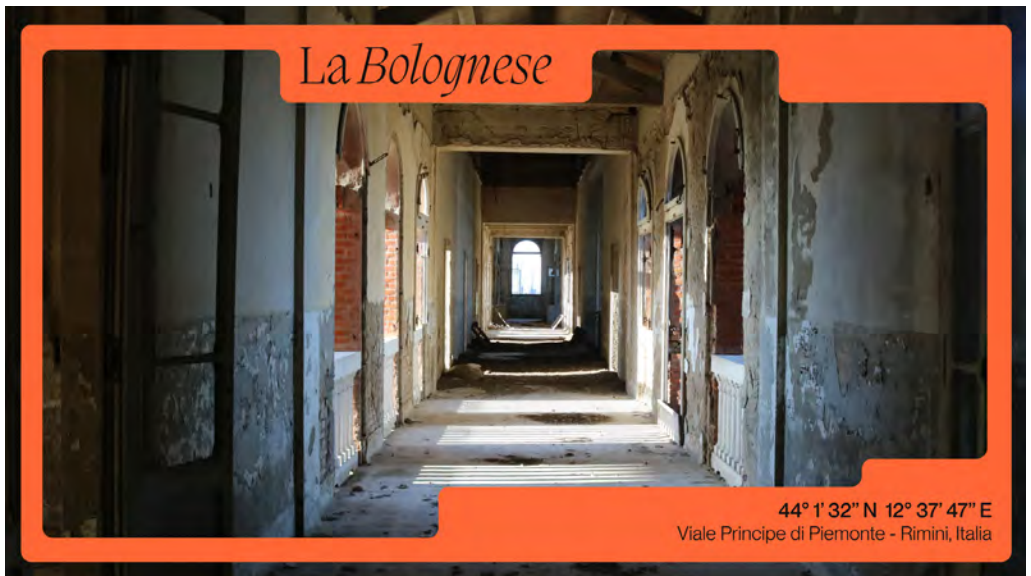


Figure 5.
 Final Synthesis Workshop 2023/24, Master's Degree Programme in Communication Design, School of Design, Politecnico di Milano - Professors D. A. Calabi, M. Quaggiotto, C. Galasso, S. Scuri. Students: Giovanna Bisconti, Giulia Scala, Lucrezia Trevisan, Maira Allievi. Experimental format: Hybrid immersive audio-journey for the communication of heterotopias. The memories of *colonia* (summer camps) in Romagna. Communication design and mnemotopes: colonia Miramare in Rimini.

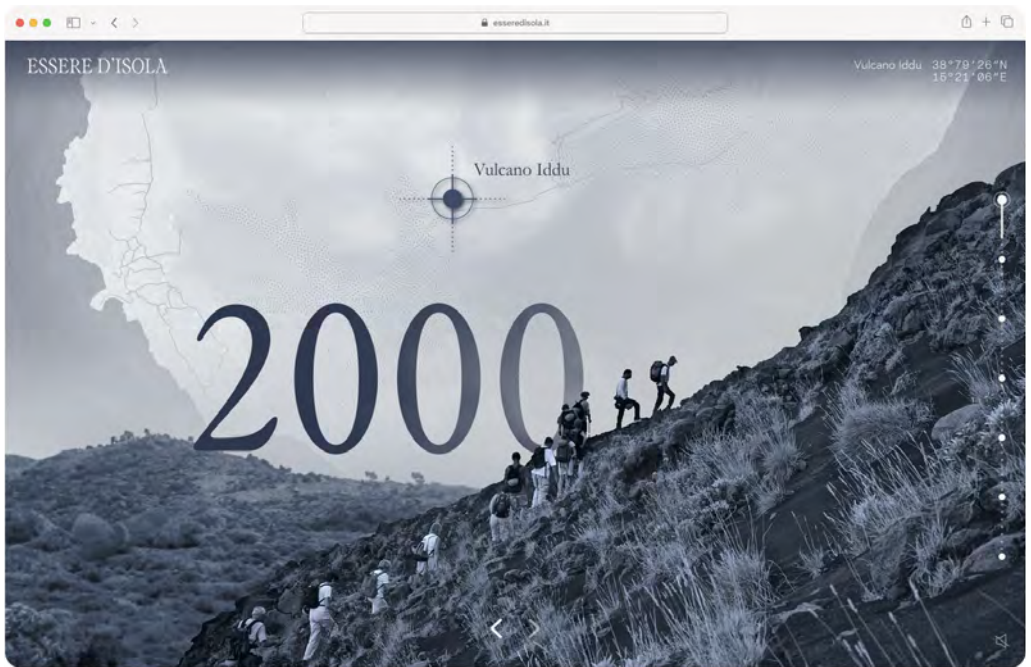
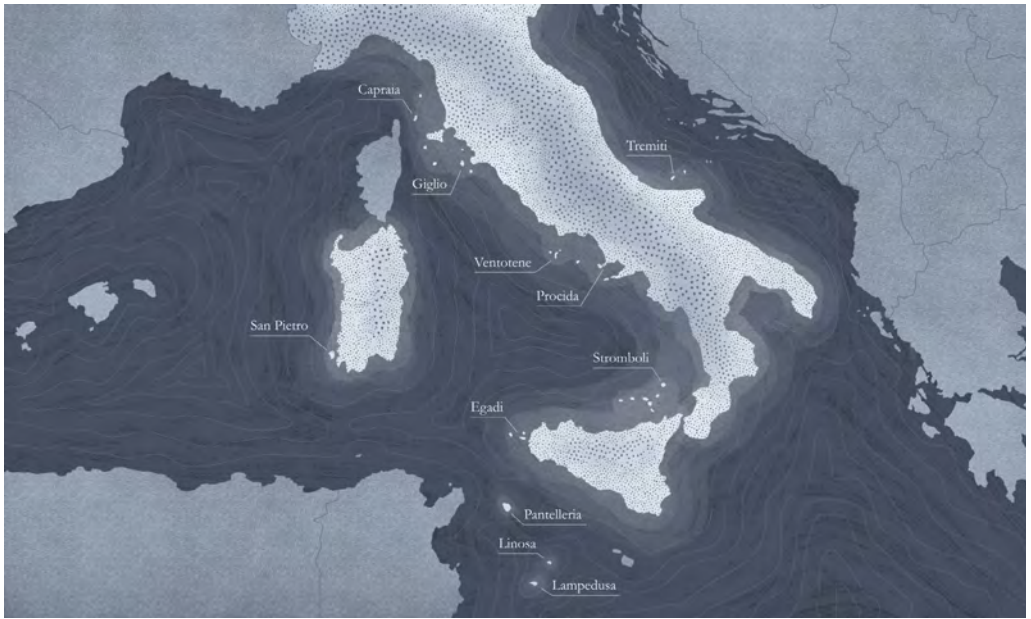


Figure 6.
 Final Synthesis Workshop 2023/24, Master's Degree Programme in Communication Design, School of Design,
 Politecnico di Milano - Professors D. A. Calabi, M. Quaggiotto, C. Galasso, S. Scuri. Students: Carola Gaulli, Miriam
 Macchi, Giorgia Nizzolini, Federica Russino. Experimental format: Audio-cartographic narrative: the smaller Italian
 islands in winter. Communication design and climatic challenges: tourist stereotypes.

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10. Care, community and reuse of places

Anna Anzani, Ada Piselli

10.1 A transition paradigm

It takes a whole village to educate a child. According to Manzini, the meaning of this African proverb can be expanded considering that it also takes a village – or a neighbourhood – to care for an elderly or particularly frail person. Ultimately, it takes a community to take care for each other. Therefore, the proverb refers to a strong connection between caring and the village, understood both as a relational and a physical place, where we are close to one another. Using a more recent term, closeness in the village that cares is defined as *proximity* (Manzini, 2021).

Although the village of last century cannot be recreated, there is a deep connection between the dimension of proximity, the presence of a community, and a physical place, which in different experiments is starting to be practised in present urban contexts. Our contemporaneity is profoundly influenced by abuse of nature; space obsolescence and abandonment (Dal Borgo *et al.*, 2016); mass migration; questioning how we can live together, sharing