

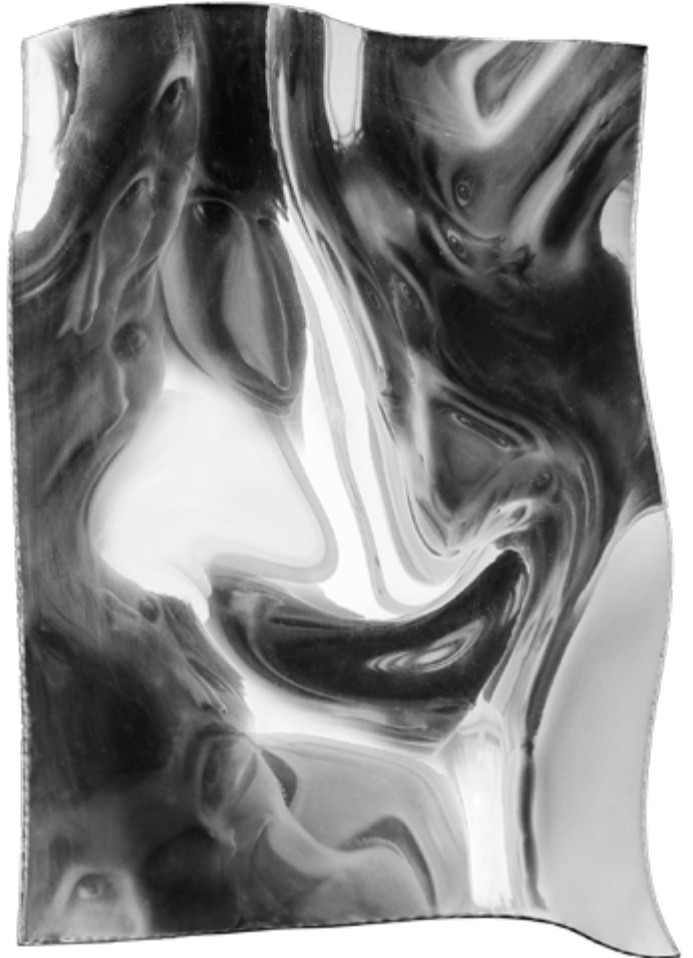
Temes de Disseny #40

The Role of Designers in Society: Ethical, Theoretical and Practical Perspectives.

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Temes de Disseny #40
El Rol dels Dissenyadors
a la Societat: Perspectives Ètiques,
Teòriques i Pràctiques

Temes de Disseny #40
El Rol de los Diseñadores
en la Sociedad: Perspectivas Éticas,
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Carbon footprint
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PC = 47,5 kg CO₂ eq.

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Distorted identities, by Bernat Rucabado. Elisava Undergraduate Degree in Design final degree project, 2024. In a context where social landscapes are defined by constant interaction with algorithms, personal identities become affected by platforms' corporate interests, which promote their users' digital consumption to generate profits through data extraction. This project proposes a distorted mirror, shaped by a tridimensional representation of data extracted during my personal interaction with Instagram. It translates into physical space the algorithmic perception of users' identities, thereby illustrating the algorithmic-driven influential process that distorts users' self-perception of identity.

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Co-designing with and for Small and Remote Communities: Reflections on Transformative Innovation, Servitisation, and Agonism

Within the conceptual framework of design for social innovation and democracy, this paper reports on implementing participatory processes in regenerating public spaces in semi-rural contexts, questioning the meaning of transformative innovation, servitisation, and agonism in non-urban contexts. This inquiry argues for exploring a reassessment of how we enact participatory public space regeneration strategies through their application in a remote context. The latter has been untouched by all the bottom-up initiatives and movements that have swept through European urban centres over the last fifteen years; returning to the urban space with these reflections could provide an opportunity to explore new perspectives, even in a saturated context, questioning the models of metropolitan practices. By challenging the paradigm of innovation as the only direction associated with a valid process of improvement and change, this paper delves into the urgency of looking at co-design processes through the lenses of decoloniality, relationality and agonism, creating moments of reflexivity inside the research team and with the local community. Our reflections and learnings stem from “Human Cities / SMOTIES, Creative Works with Small and Remote Places”, a participatory design project that examines community engagement methods for co-designing public spaces and transformations in European rural areas, specifically Albugnano, a small town in northern Italy. Setting the Albugnano community as an experimental ground, the case study addresses the lack of valorisation of tangible and intangible heritage, depopulation and social fragmentation by unpacking narratives, nurturing social imagination, and collectively envisioning and designing potential regenerative transformations.

1 INTRODUCTION AND CASE PRESENTATION

As acknowledged, design for social innovation (DSI) has found extensive ground in broadening design for social needs and societal good (DiSalvo et al., 2011; Jégou and Manzini 2008; Koskinen 2016; Margolin and Margolin 2002). The traditional design objective of producing tangible problem-solving artefacts hooks into much broader ecological and environmental psychology perspectives, questioning which idea of political agency and design responsibility we are helping to shape. In the larger framework of socially responsible design, we focus on DSI for urban and rural needs, social development, and creative communities. DSI explores the ways in which transformative processes can be supported by enabling groups of actors (citizens, policy-

makers, third-sector organisations, business partners, etc.) to address social issues that may concern services, places, systems, and even strategies (Fassi et al. 2013; Manzini 2015; Manzini and Meroni 2014). This approach, dealing with the quality of relationships and synergies between involved and impacted parties, requires a necessarily relational and situated way of thinking that goes “against various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims” (Haraway 1988, 583), and against the modern de-localisation and “marginalisation of place (the here and now of social action) in the definition of social life” (Escobar in Mignolo and Escobar 2013, 36).

Within this framework, the authors present a case in which they experiment with a community-centred design process (Manzini and Meroni 2014) in a semi-rural context starting from research that has so far mainly been developed in urban areas, elaborating on the differences, limitations, and opportunities that emerge.

KEYWORDS

Co-Design, Remote Places, Agonism, Servitisation, Innovation, Decolonising.

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To reconsider our design practices, the article draws its reflections from the above-mentioned basis towards the relationship between participatory design (PD) (Björgvinsson et al. 2012; Björgvinsson et al. 2010; DiSalvo and DiSalvo 2014; Hillgren 2013; Holmlid 2012; KEMMIS and Mctaggart 2005) and relationality issues related to aesthetics, democratic agonism (DiSalvo 2010; DiSalvo et al. 2011; Hillgren et al. 2016; Koskinen 2016; Mouffe 2000, 2007) and the ontology of co-designing (Akama et al. 2019; Bishop 2005, 2006; Bourriaud 1998; Rooke 2013). To rethink the meaning of radical innovation, power structures and coloniality (Ansari 2021; Quijano 2000; Schultz et al. 2018; Tlostanova 2017) within PD in defence of the question of place (Escobar 2001), we raise concerns about the role of locally grounded processes of place regeneration through community-centred design, wondering whether we should challenge current design practices by experimenting in non-mainstream standpoints. This was achieved through the study outlined herein, which the authors conducted as members of the Polimi DESIS Lab (Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano), part of the worldwide DESIS Network connecting more than 60 design universities. The Lab adopts a strategic and systemic approach to DSI, mainly focused on design for service and spatial design, alongside contributions from strategic design, user-centred design, design for territory, and sociology. After 15 years of research and practice in urban ecosystems, the Lab moved from growth, solution-oriented and exploitative views towards resilient systems applied to the regeneration of commons and recently started tackling the rural context as part of the SMOTIES project, whose reflection work is illustrated here.

1.1. The research project framework and context

SMOTIES is a four-year project (2020-2024), co-funded by the Creative Europe program of the European Union and coordinated by the Politecnico di Milano. It is an initiative of the Human Cities network, which, since 2006, has brought together European design and architecture universities and consultancies to enhance the quality of indoor and outdoor public spaces and foster novel methods for social cohesion by actively engaging with local ecosystems through participatory design. With SMOTIES, the Human Cities network is redirecting its attention towards 10 small, remote areas in Europe that are experiencing depopulation and relational remoteness while possessing valuable cultural



Fig. 1. View of Albugnano and Vezzolano Abbey. Polimi DESIS Lab.

assets that are at risk of being undervalued and not transmitted to future generations. All the partners selected a location in their respective country and acted as intermediaries, catalysts, and advocates for the regeneration of community spaces through scenario-building and foresight (Auricchio et al. 2023, 2024), as well as participatory and co-design approaches, aiming to re-activate citizens to envision futures for their living environment. The methodology experimented with using relational and participatory practices in an effort to understand social dynamics, leverage local narratives, and ensure the regeneration of spaces. At the Polimi DESIS Lab, we chose Albugnano – a small village with about 500 residents – as a remote Italian setting for the SMOTIES project.

Albugnano is in the Basso Monferrato area. It thrives in the wine and gastronomic sectors – crucial for commercial and tourism growth – has a rich Romanic cultural heritage exemplified by churches like the Vezzolano Abbey, and attracts over 30,000 visitors annually (Fig. 1). Despite these strengths, challenges arise due to insufficient tourism infrastructure and the town's struggle to communicate its other attractions. Hidden gems are hard to access and require improved services. Depopulation weakened social bonds, and the lack of transport and services reinforced migration to larger population centres. Despite this, the town still attracts residents due to its healthcare facilities, natural beauty, and affordable housing.

A peculiarity of small towns is the blurring between individuals and institutions. Given the small population, institutional roles are influenced by and inextricable from personal lives and attitudes. Interactions between institutions are less formal and more colloquial, with the positive effect of making them more reachable and aware of inhabitants' needs but also more susceptible to personalism, with private conflicts sometimes limiting public agency. This fosters a diversity of visions among Albugnano's residents when it comes to the area's revitalisation, boosting the local economy through its main sectors or nurturing new artistic endeavours. As a result, differing perspectives emerge around which potential narratives to prioritise for the region when projecting it to the outside world. Since 2020, we have been embracing the local will to revitalise places and services and starting to engage with the community to shape a transformative process, examining the existing underlying local debates to regenerate public spaces collaboratively. We aimed to address social fragmentation and territorial remoteness to empower various types of narratives as prospective future narrations (De Rosa et al. 2021; Tassinari et al. 2017) that may function as counter-narratives (Hillgren et al. 2016, 2020), bring those opposing voices into the debate, and possibly strengthen their social links.

In 2020, the Albugnano citizenship had just elected a new mayor, dispelling the risk of an election with no candidates and a specific commissioner. Different social groups supported the elected mayor in a successful democratic effort of cooperation between new citizens, people who live in the town but work elsewhere, old local families and local wine producers. After COVID hit, the consensus started to erode, leading to heated arguments and finally causing the government to fall in 2022. At this stage, SMOTIES had ended the in-field research, the knowledge base development, and the

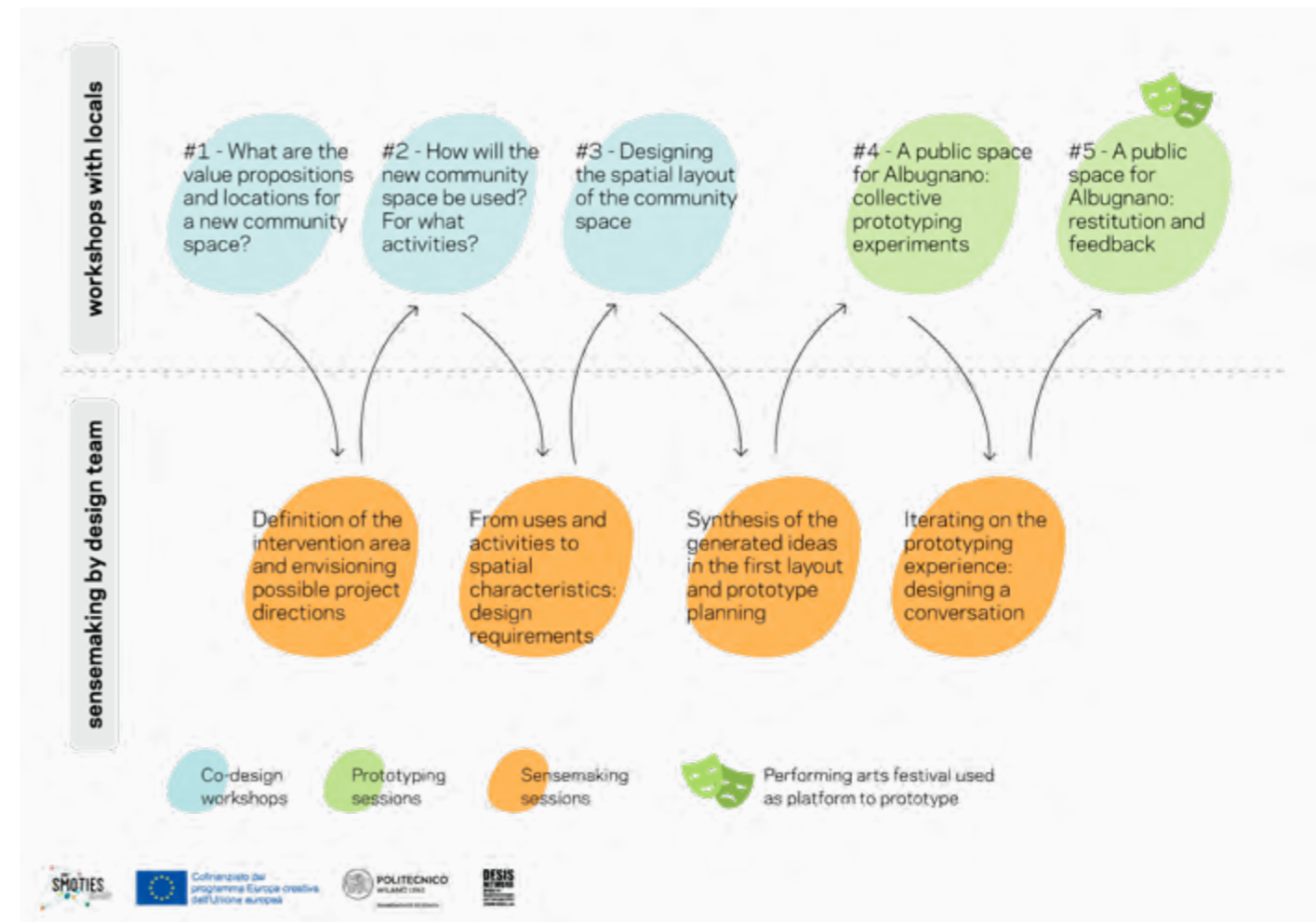


Fig. 2. Diagram detailing the May-July 2023 co-design phase, showing how the reflexive and participatory steps mutually fuel one another. Polimi DESIS Lab.

scenario-building and had already started to engage locals in participatory activities, building on the co-designed project direction. Due to the ongoing local political crisis, we faced mounting challenges, and unfortunately, our endeavours during the electoral campaign were misconstrued as favouritism towards specific political factions. For instance, during a co-design session following a rehearsal of the local choir, stakeholders expressed apprehensions about SMOTIES' perceived alignment with a particular political party, advocated by select members of the musical organisation. Subsequently, when we had to select a specific location for the spatial intervention, each option carried significant political implications owing to the networks of conflicting individuals, stakeholders, and local associations. Since the project needed a place to happen, SMOTIES stalled, and we decided to postpone the co-design actions until after the next elections, waiting for the open conflicts to find a political resolution. After the re-election of the previous mayor, there was finally an adequate situation for the participatory activities to restart.

Our goal was to create a conversation between unidirectional voices through PD methods. Thus, the conflicting narratives linked to different places were put into agonistic conversation, leading to the final design concept: a system of service and spatial interventions distributed throughout the historical centre. The overall project unpacks, reinterprets, and expands these voices to pursue project ideas in line with

the regeneration scenario that the citizenship co-created, also considering feasibility and objectives concerning the funding body.

1.2. Methodology

Through a combination of primary and secondary research, the methodology (Auricchio et al. 2023, 2024) was implemented through parallel and interlinked activities, promoting a structured, iterative process and enabling informed decision-making to maximise project outcomes:

In-field research and knowledge base development of the local relational landscape (Oct.2020 - Oct.2021):

Analysis of the assets and challenges to guarantee that initiatives conform to the contextual needs and dynamics, allowing local stakeholders to express their expectations:

- › Place development and functions development maps

Analysis of the physical morphology to explore the historical, contemporary, and functional facets of the region's natural and built environment and their interconnections:

- › In-depth interviews
- › Local actors map
- › Baseline data wall

Reflexive research for data extraction, interpretation and scenario-building (Oct.2021 - Oct.2022):

Identification of future directions to pinpoint possibilities for intervention through the creation of scenarios that serve as evolving perspectives and narrative lenses, offering insights into a future where community and stakeholder participation in remote areas is on the rise:

- › Definition of future scenarios
- › Case study collection
- › Exploration of project directions
- › Shaping intuitions

Impact Assessment:

- › Impacts and Indicators canvas
- › Dissemination strategy canvas

Participatory activities (Apr.2022 - Jul.2023):

Collection of stories related to Albugnano places:

- › Storytelling the future
- › Itinerant story playing

Co-design workshops (Fig. 2)

Implementation of interventions (Apr.2023 - Jul.2024):

The approach is rooted in a transdisciplinary framework that combines urban design, history, and environmental psychology:

- › Public space analysis map and development board
- › People-place interaction chart
- › Executive design

1.3. The research goal: research questions

While such processes, practices, and foresight methodologies are widely recognised and validated in urban areas, the project sparked (3) reflections on their application in small and remote places (Fig. 3).

(Q1) Can a transformative intervention catalyse democratic agonism in the local community?

The described political conflicts in Albugnano were probably ignited by underlying disagreements. Nonetheless, we can speculate that the project's presence and the European echo might have awakened the interest of the public arena. Although the agonistic lens allows for a favourable interpretation, reflection on the unexpected impacts beyond the co-design process in small communities is needed to plan transformation projects better.

(Q2) How can radical innovation be considered in remote places?

Assuming a participatory process, we debate on paths of innovation that may not necessarily be guided by urban knowledge: remote contexts yet to be involved in innovative networks and experimentations can lead us toward substantial shifts in direction for regeneration processes that are place-centred, relational, and pluriversal (Escobar 2018). Is it more viable to generate radically innovative solutions from a service-system design perspective, or is it preferable to opt for more straightforward, locally grounded solutions implemented by citizens? The first speculation implies a definition of 'radical' based on the researchers' experiences in urban advanced environments, while the second could be

considered 'radical' from a place-centred perspective. Balancing these approaches reduces the risk of perpetuating an oppressive dynamic that could be interpreted as exploitative, enforcing coloniality.

(Q3) Does the servitisation of experiences reduce meaningful human interactions in the territory?

While interviewing citizens, we found that disorganised information limited tourism but fostered meaningful visitor-local encounters. Improving the information structure from a servitisation perspective could enhance experiences but may reduce valuable interactions. From a services decommodification perspective, we call for a value-driven, contextual, and networked service design, prioritising an approach based on local values to preserve the unique character of small and remote places.

These three ongoing reflections highlight the importance of looking at co-design processes through the lenses of coloniality, relationality and agonism, creating moments of reflexivity inside the research team and with the local community. They also pose broader questions, challenging the vision of which society the design practice is contributing to shape. Returning to the urban space with these reflections could provide an opportunity to explore new perspectives, even in a saturated context, questioning the models of urban and metropolitan practices.

2 DISCUSSION

After the first year of online preparatory activities, the second year of testing the methodology in the field, and the third year of co-design activities, the project shaped eight interventions in Albugnano to support the needs of locals and visitors, orchestrating a system of interconnected places (Fig. 4). There were six minor interventions and two primary ones: the square – now mainly a car park – soon to become one of the few Italian examples of tactical urbanism in a remote context, and a small disused garden – soon to become an agora for performances and gatherings. All the places are linked through a system of panels that provide usage information (timetables, contacts), historical information (images and data) and subjective stories from citizens, accessible online on the municipal website.

The strategy is based on the Spatial+Service Design approach (S+S) (De Rosa 2022), a transdisciplinary perspective that seeks to design spaces and provide services as a single entity: the spatial interventions become platforms for local community activation in the long term. It takes a systemic reading of Albugnano, building on pre-existing usages of the local places while connecting them, valorising them, and enabling the imagination of new possibilities. It also ties into existing networks of touristic, logistic and leisure activities, and valorises the local culture through place-based community-shared stories. The aim is to enhance existing activities and support the emergence of new ones: leisure spaces for spontaneous activations, spaces for performances and cultural events, and elements for signposting and narrating the area through the words of citizens.

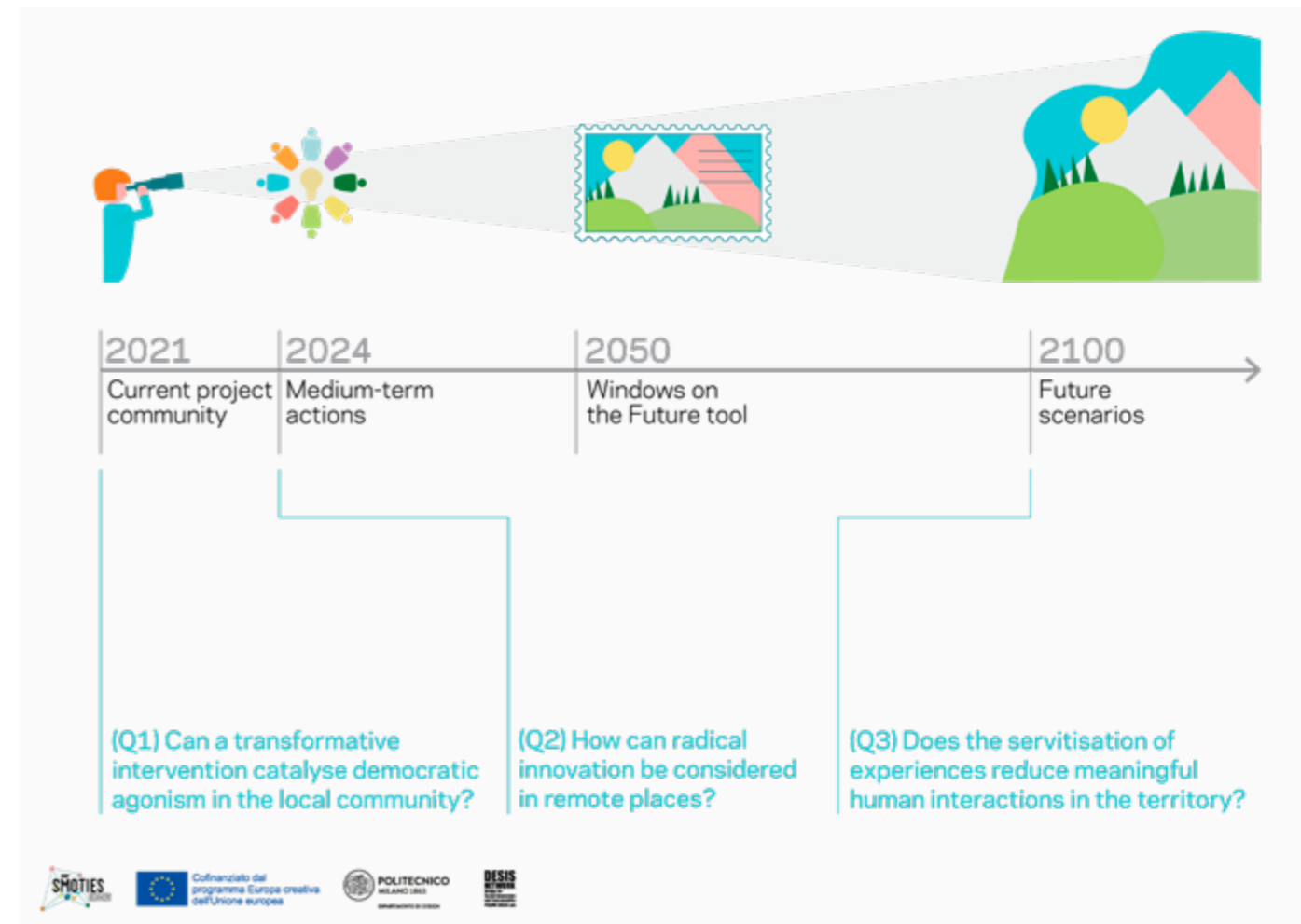


Fig. 3. Situating the research questions in the SMOTIES project strategy in the context of future perspectives of change for Albugnano. Polimi DESIS Lab.



Fig. 4. Diagram detailing the intervention system in significant places. Polimi DESIS Lab.

2.1 - transformative interventions as agonistic catalysts (q1)

The political debates helped us understand how different places were perceived as representative of different social groups and stances on prospective future narrations.

Spreading our intervention in a system of places to better re-articulate the discourse among contextual voices.

The (political) responsibility in the context of designing for participation also lies in finding synergies with locally-triggered initiatives.

2.2. - reflection on the perception of innovation to decolonise co-design practice (q2)

Radical interventions are closely intertwined with coloniality and Western-centric frameworks, reiterating power structures.

Switching from one extensive and disruptive design intervention to valorising the already-existing initiatives and integrating the novel, occasional and diffused interventions in the local system.

Gradually challenging the consolidated co-design tools and language to achieve a less formal tone and taking part in local life and community gatherings.

2.3. - servitisation of experiences through the lens of relationality and commoditisation (q3)

The servitisation of tourism services without a connection to the territory could hinder the unique, collaborative social interactions of the rural reality.

Developing the design intervention to ensure the information and contacts of local stakeholders are easy to find, accessible to visitors and distributed in multiple places, to enhance interactions with the actors already present in the area.



Fig. 5. Synthetic overview of the key reflections and their impact on the design intervention. Polimi DESIS Lab.

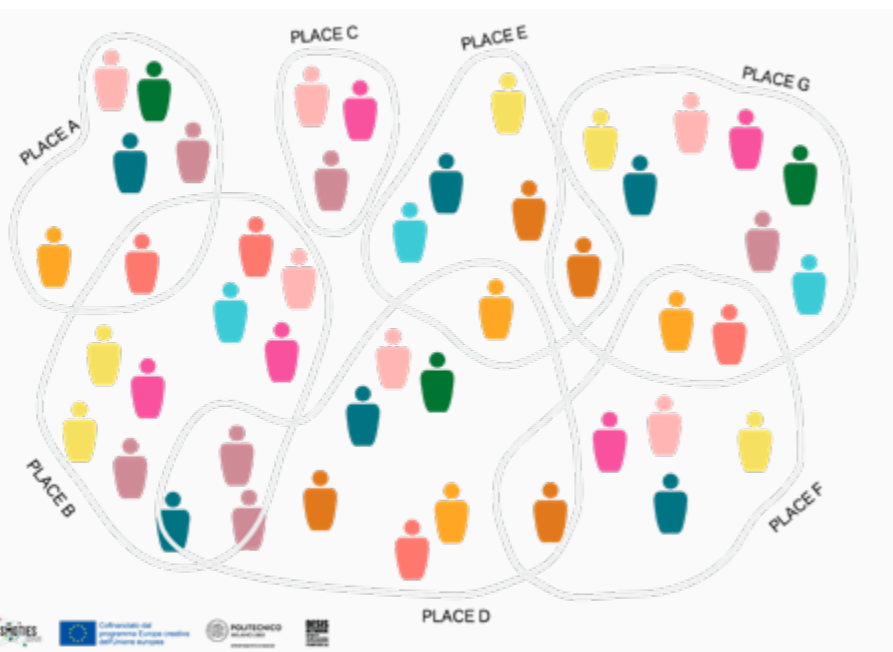


Fig. 6. Places as activators of networks of relationships and meanings. Polimi DESIS Lab.

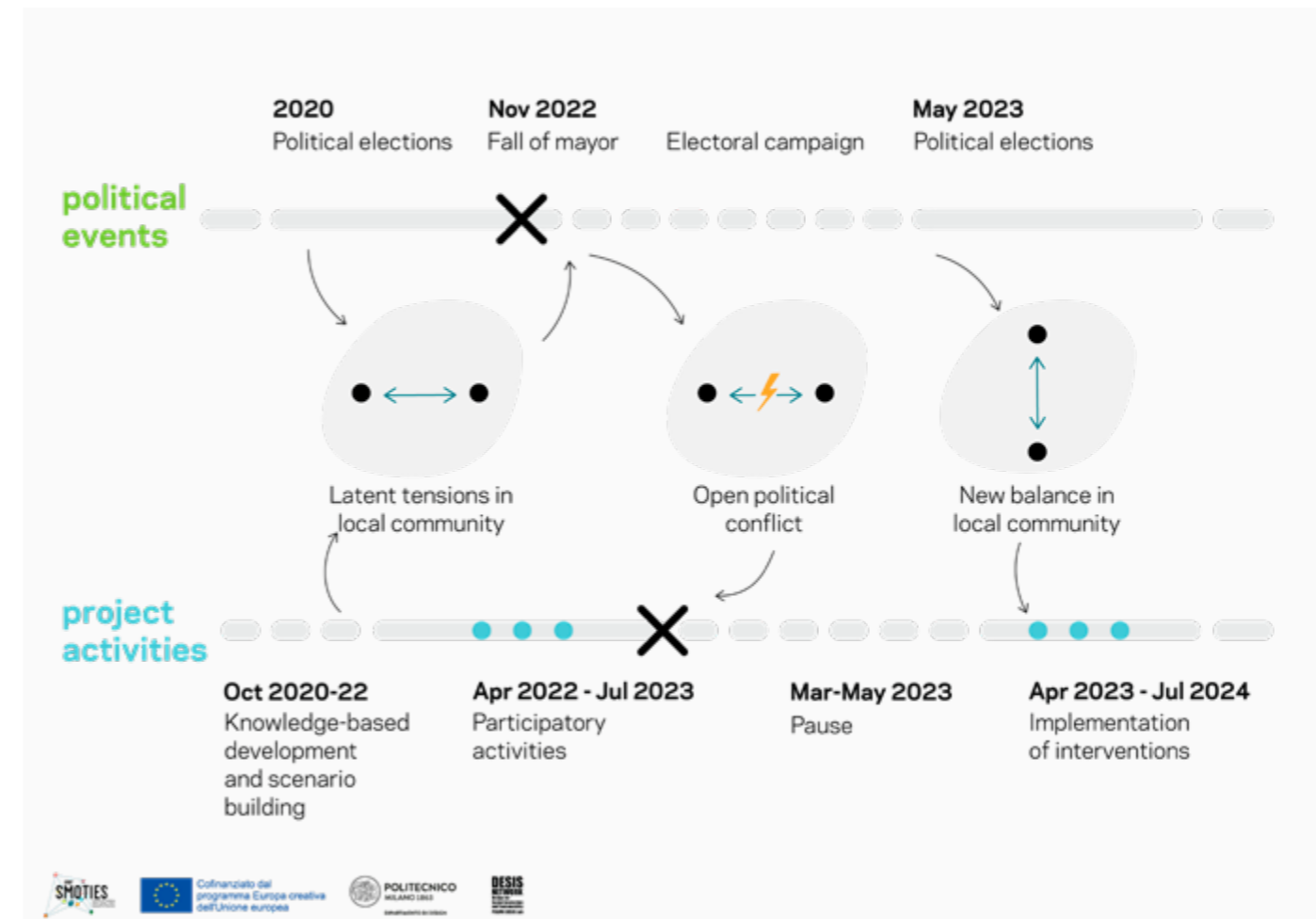


Fig. 7. Timeline illustrating the correlations between the co-design activities, local political events and latent social tensions in the community. ©Polimi DESIS Lab.

In the following paragraphs and illustrated in Fig. 5, we provide ongoing reflections in response to the three research questions and illustrate how the project prompted us to challenge common co-design approaches in the theoretical direction outlined above.

2.1. Transformative interventions as an agonistic catalyst: the mutual construction of places and identities to re-articulate discourse among contextual voices

The political events in Albugnano and the possible influence of the SMOTIES project on them led to crucial reflections that informed the design of the final S+S intervention, adopting a transformative lens (Dorst and Watson 2020; Hummels et al. 2018; Patrício et al. 2018; Sangiorgi 2011). We discerned in the local debates that paused many initiatives – not just our project – a manifestation of democratic agonism in political life. Framing our activities as a design experiment in civics (DiSalvo 2022) supported our reflection on those that had apparently ‘failed’, which still enhanced our understanding of the conditions needed to enable a long-term change and contribute to creating “connections to enable future actions” (DiSalvo 2022, 121), i.e. infrastructuring (Hillgren et al. 2011; Le Dantec and DiSalvo 2013; Star and Ruhleder 1996; Van Reusel 2016), and knowledge to navigate a structured institutional landscape,

i.e. institutioning (Huybrechts et al. 2017, 158). In practice, we realised that we needed to slow down our project goals and schedule to spark a further re-articulation of contextual voices, making sticking to our pre-determined plan secondary to developing a deeper connection with the local community through meetings and conversations.

Additionally, the aforementioned experience evidences the multi-dimensionality of places that exist as “complex relational entities, enablers of interactions and owned by people through forms of identification” (De Rosa 2022, 145) beyond their spatial and functional features. Extending into the social and political dimensions, places are part of local agonistic debates: they allow intangible power dynamics and political discussions to manifest themselves in the public sphere. Given the overlapping at the micro-level of institutional, associational, and non-institutional roles among the inhabitants of Albugnano, the distinction that Rancière (1999) makes between ‘politics’ – the political debate as held in parliaments and converted into policy – and ‘political’ – what can be seen and said within a community that speaks to people’s immediate concerns and desires – is blurred. Therefore, designers need to gain an in-depth understanding of the relational networks of people (Rainie and Wellman 2012) and the symbolic meanings associated with each place (De Rosa et al. 2023) to initiate a dialogue with a local community.

Reading through the agonistic lens of the political conflicts and their ties to ‘place’ led the research team to embrace multiplicity in the final intervention design: the focus shifted from choosing the best place to situate the design intervention to creating a network of distributed interventions in multiple places, each reflecting the functional and symbolic needs of the social groups activating them (Fig. 6). By doing this, the economic and political power of the resources that SMOTIES is bringing to the area is distributed among the community, preserving the existing dynamics.

2.1.1. Unforeseen impacts and designers as temporary community members

The possibility that the co-design process could spark debates was accounted for, but the extent of its effects beyond the participatory activities was unexpected. It is difficult to verify if and how much our activities influenced the political situation, but the research team shared the perception that opening a discussion about public spaces and economic resources contributed to reviving latent tensions and the citizens’ proactivity (Fig. 7).

In this situation, the relationship created between the research team and the local community was crucial: initially, distance was perceived as a barrier to the development of trust and ownership by the locals, but when the conflicts exploded, being external to the context helped by providing an extraneous in-



Fig. 8. A generative session to ideate novel activities for the system of interventions. Polimi DESIS Lab.



Fig. 9. A generative session using the Desktop Walkthrough tool to outline the spatial layout for one of the primary interventions. Polimi DESIS Lab.

put to the community while preventing individual stakeholders from bending the project to favour their economic and political interests. We would argue, however, that this also prevented the local community from delegating responsibility for the impetus for regeneration, relying solely and passively on this project. By contrast, the distance of the project promoters generated a positive impact in that it strengthened a widespread sense of active citizenship that allowed the communities to design themselves, going beyond participation and becoming the ‘creative government’ of remote places.

2.2. Reflection on the perception of innovation to decolonise co-design practice

2.2.1. Towards place-based innovations

The participatory and co-design practice for the regeneration of Albugnano’s social and spatial landscape entails the involvement of both a design research team and ‘users’, which, in this case, are the residents and visitors to the town. PD is based on developing changes rooted in people’s needs and co-designing with the actual experts in the project context. Going through our co-design process, once we had conducted the research and identified issues and opportunity areas, we sought to articulate solution concepts through co-creative and generative workshops (Figs. 8-9).

In performing these workshops, we realised that we were stimulating the imaginative and design capacity of the inhabitants based on experience gained in recent years in urban contexts. In the latter, not only have citizens assumed a pro-active role through the development of bottom-up activities for several years, but over time, policies have also experimented with new forms of civic and political participation. This is not to say that we have forgotten the foundational assumption of SMOTIES, namely that of operating in contexts that have great potential but have not yet been invested in by regeneration processes; instead, we had not fully realised that these contexts are often familiar with but have not yet directly experienced participatory, radical, and horizontal forms of change to imagine significantly different futures.

In this sense, adopting a decolonial approach, the intention was not to find ways to replicate urban models of innovation but to take a step back in reviewing these so-called *innovations* in the light of a radically different context. We questioned the potentially different perceptions of what to consider innovative: what if the path of innovation does not align objectively with the direction indicated by cities? What if remote and rural contexts can lead us toward substantial shifts in direction for regeneration processes that are place-centred (Casey 1997; Escobar 2001), relational (Akama et al. 2019; Bishop 2005, 2006; Bourriaud 1998; Rooke 2013), and pluriversal (Escobar 2018)? What if the radical novelty lies in non-mainstream standpoints?

An initial preliminary answer could lie in an eco-systemic approach to innovation. These reflections focused the final design solution on weaving a network between the existing community resources and a series of punctual interventions, with the aim of strengthening what was already present and fostering the long-term community ownership of the outputs of the SMOTIES project.

2.2.2. Towards a pluriversal mindset in co-design

The vision of a “techno-centric rationale for ‘innovation’ and ‘progress’” (Forlano 2017, 19) has been traditionally dominant in Western framings of design, to the extent that they are also a widely expected outcome for stakeholder communities involved in participatory social innovation processes and for participatory designers. The designers’ perception of radical innovation fails to consider the real-life environment (the social, architectural and historical context) as the paradigm that the solution would radically innovate. This failure risks putting the designer in a position of power, imposing a solution with limited regard to the local stance. A top-down, design-savvy yet context-agnostic solution would decrease the chances of weaving in the local socio-spatial fabric of Albugnano to account for its values and needs. Acknowledging the need to disrupt this vision of innovation, which is closely intertwined with coloniality and power structures (Ansari 2021; de la Bellacasa 2017; Quijano 2000; Tlostanova 2017) and the potential oppression implicit in design tools, especially in DSI (Akama et al. 2019; Barcham 2023; Pierri 2017; Tlostanova 2017), we believe there is a risk of enforcing epistemic injustice (Bhargava 2013; Fricker 2017) through the co-design process.

As Barcham (2023) pointed out, it is crucial to understand that the design process and tools we use are culturally loaded by the contexts in which they were crafted, and that they need to be modified to ensure consistency with the situated epistemologies, respectfully engaging the local communities. Doing so represents an opportunity to “de-couple design from its modern, industrialised roots so that it can be re-situated and re-conceptualised”, as set out by Akama et al. (2019).

As an outcome of this discussion, the team geared itself towards adopting a pluriversal mindset (Escobar 2018), even if creating a meaningful dialogue between these forms of knowledge was challenging. In other words, we attempted to “rethink how to conceptualise the co-design process to support people, and not the other way around” (Akama et al. 2019, 17). We did this by challenging our process and tools, changing our choice of language to avoid the technical terms common in our practice and welcoming informal exchanges, such as community gatherings for festivities and spontaneous conversations, as part of the co-design process.

Ultimately, we are aiming to put our expertise into serving the community and developing solutions that will enable Albugnano’s ecosystem to thrive collaboratively. The very nature of this ambition requires mutual listening and sharing in a synergic exchange of each party’s expertise, with responsibility and care (de la Bellacasa 2017) on the part of the design team to keep an eye out for the risk of reverting to power structures and coloniality.

We pursued this intention in the final concept. Instead of transforming the participants’ proposals into a radically innovative solution, we clustered the concepts and matched them with the most appropriate place in town, supporting the emergence of a unique profile for each place the intervention touches. The *innovativeness* lies in the systemic and network-based nature of the intervention, making room for daily transformative acts of appropriation. By adopting an S+S approach, the ecosystem of places becomes an open platform for re-articulating interactions tied to the regeneration of commons, welcoming its definition by locals.

2.3. Servitisation of experiences through a relationality and commoditisation lens: from easy solutionism to value-driven and relational design

Our third reflection stems from observing the peculiar serendipity of local social interactions: we noticed how the difficulty of finding tourist information and overcoming mobility challenges generated meaningful social interactions, creating casual encounters between visitors and locals and triggering cooperative mechanisms within the community itself. The research team experienced this first-hand and reported it to community members during the interview phase (De Rosa et al. 2023; Finardi 2023).

“What cheers me up is seeing people arrive [in Albugnano]. Whenever there’s a cycling or motor-cycling event, or when people come here for the first time, they often end up lost or disoriented in the car park in the little square. And I always go out onto the balcony and ask, “Do you need anything? Are you lost? Do you want a hand?” Always welcoming, always welcoming!” (English translation by the authors).

“My son attends school in [nearby city], and luckily, a neighbour gives him a lift in his car. Without this option, I’d have to drive him to the bus stop in Albugnano as there’s no other transport available, which means leaving at 6:30 in the morning.” (English translation by the authors).

When analysing these experiences from a service design point of view, it is easy to classify the lack of services and information as weak points to be fixed to enhance the accessibility of the territory. Potentially, the impact on the ‘user experience’ of tourists would be positive, but we argue that a relational cost would be paid: the unique social interactions, appreciated by the local community and typical of a rural context, would be lost. Problematising the potential servitisation (Baines et al. 2017; Kowalkowski et al. 2017; Sundbo et al. 2022) and commodification (Chen and Kong

2021; Morgan 2014) in Albugnano, we would outline both risks and opportunities (Lew 2019; Vidickienė et al. 2020) unique to the rural context.

Adopting a value-driven perspective to DSI, the impact of the abovementioned perspective would damage the community. The Manzini and Cipolla (2009) definition of relational services provides a practical framework: the risk identified is the potential to commodify meaningful interactions – defined as I-Thou, a relationship engaging two complex beings – and transform them into functional exchanges – defined as I-It, an experience that occurs between two objectified presences who view one another solely as performers of a specific task.

The local system’s potential servitisation could have both positive and negative effects. Excluding easy solutionism, it is possible to envision a critical approach to tourism that can become transformative, relational and pluriversal (Pernecky 2023).

This reflection sparked a question that supported our team in conceiving the S+S intervention: How do we safeguard the local relationality but make the area more accessible for locals and visitors?

2.3.1 Fostering local relationality through a strategic intervention

Albugnano has a local system of places, activities, and services known mainly by the locals, which is a precious resource for temporary citizens. The challenge is making this system emerge and become visible while leveraging the information provided to foster the described meaningful interactions. Conceiving places as assemblages of multiple accessible features, ranging from the spatial to the social and symbolic, implies organising information and crafting storytelling that could convey those intangible qualities and meanings. In addition, centralising information in a digital or physical artefact would imply providing easy access to Albugnano, but that would enforce an exploitative touristic dynamic and lead the project away from enhancing local relationality.

In our intervention, we are articulating Albugnano narratives: the information about services and tourist attractions, the area’s historical development, and the town’s storytelling from the locals’ point of view. These different forms of narration are distributed in a system of unique but connected places.

The final goal is to systematically intervene in the public space to support both locals and visitors. Locals will experience their places with a spatial layout shaped around their requirements, supporting additional activations when needed. At the same time, visitors will find information about the area throughout their visit to the town and get a glimpse of the symbolic meanings narrated by the lived experience of locals. This strategy aims to foster meaningful interactions between the mentioned targets and their social networks.

Describing our reflections on the SMOTIES project, we tried to outline some key arguments that stemmed from our embodied perceptions and experiences throughout the project.

(Q1) Can a transformative intervention catalyse democratic agonism in the local community?

The answer is affirmative: the design intervention catalysed the agonistic debate, even if it was hard to measure or quantify. The designing of public places revealed how embedded they are in the local social, cultural, and political life, providing occasions for latent tensions to manifest into something more concrete. To better operate within the agonistic environment, three elements are needed:

- › In-depth understanding of the networks of people, places, meanings, and the implicit tensions between them.
- › Thorough evaluation of potential unforeseen impacts on the community beyond the co-design process.
- › Reflection on the research team’s closeness to the locals, setting the appropriate role as a temporary community member according to the project’s goals.

(Q2) To what extent is radical innovation socially sustainable in remote places?

To safeguard the community’s long-term sense of ownership of the generated concepts, we needed to challenge our perception of radical innovation based on our expertise as practitioners and researchers with a design background. Specifically, we articulated four points:

- › The context challenges how we conceptualise radical innovation, calling for a redefinition based on a place-centred, relational and pluriversal perspective.
- › There is a need to reflect on power dynamics and potential oppression, such as epistemic injustice, in DSI projects.
- › As designers, there is a need to continuously pursue a balance between giving inputs to the territory and acknowledging and receiving its traits.
- › The innovative aspect of the proposed intervention is that it is situated and context specific.

(Q3) Does the servitisation of experiences reduce meaningful human interactions in the territory?

Based on the project activities, the preliminary answer is affirmative: there is a risk of hindering local relationality. Extensive field research would be needed to validate this reflection and answer the initial question. We can summarise two points:

- › Local values and future scenarios can provide a solid foundation for defining design principles that guide the design intervention towards the intended transformation.
- › Territorial storytelling that strategically combines narrative aspects and informative elements can be leveraged to enhance local social interactions instead of damaging local sociality.

Finally, these critical reflections call for the integration of multiple approaches in the current practice of DSI, expanding the framework that SMOTIES used as a theoretical starting point to co-design the S+S intervention. As

a research team, we feel that adopting a reflexive approach that looks through the lenses of coloniality, relationality and agonism is of the utmost importance if we are to go one step further in making our practices more caring and pluriversal. Exploring rural contexts challenged our methodologies and practices and fundamentally questioned the vision of which society we are helping to build. Further reflection on the dominant values and development trajectories of urban, academic and modern knowledge is required.

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The article illustrates the theoretical reflections and insights from the project’s fieldwork and final implementation.

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