

# House and Studio Museums between Art and Design

RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN STRATEGIES

Edited by  
Anna Mazzanti

# Design International series

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# House and Studio Museums between Art and Design

RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN STRATEGIES

Edited by  
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PART 3

# Practices

# 7. The Genius Loci of the *Faber Place* and its *Exhibition*: Experimentation at the Bagatti Valsecchi Museum

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Politecnico di Milano

## 7.1 The Fabers' Work, House and Museum

The Bagatti Valsecchi House Museum is a peculiar place with a vibrant soul, worthy of being exalted. To better understand the context, though, it is fundamental to know its origins and protagonists.

The house is the result of the creative minds of Fausto and Giuseppe Bagatti Valsecchi, two brothers of Milan XIX century upper class who dedicated their lives to it. Despite their legal studies, they never practiced as lawyers. Instead, they were passionate about art and architecture and, even without proper education, they stood out as amateur architects (Bagatti Valsecchi, 1994) and became well-renowned in the Milanese society thanks to their house project.

Actually, the re-design process of the Bagatti Valsecchi's House had been initiated by their parents, Pietro and Carolina, who bought it in different fractions (Della Torre, 1994), merged by successive renovations, and finished according to the principles of Eclecticism, the prevailing fashion of the time. It was a commixture of styles with a predominance of baroque and rococo. Though, after their mother's

death, in 1880, Fausto and Giuseppe took over the reins of the project and an original choice distinguished themselves: they took the Renaissance as a reference, to make their residence representative of their recently gained social status. They wanted to appear ennobled just like the lords of the sixteenth century, the flourishing period of the idea of mansion.

As singular as it may look in the panorama of nineteenth-century Milan, the dream of bringing the Renaissance back to life was probably influenced by the events of the late 1870s and early 1880s, when the Savoy Court, to which the brothers owed their recent nobility, returned in the Milanese context. By the way, it was a period in which getting inspiration from the past was a constant and reassuring practice, as well as being synonymous with good taste (Pavoni, 1992). In addition, the Renaissance has been one of the greatest ideal models of any time.

In particular, the nineteenth century residence embodied the Romantic principles. It was transformed into a place of memory, not only familiar, but of a wider memory, which evokes truths found in the human imaginary. It was a theatre of everyday life, where the metaphor underlined the artificial and fictitious behaviour in the family environment, whose members acted as the protagonists of a play (Perrot, 1999). Indeed, people believed that their domestic environment had repercussions on their entire lifestyle, setting their *modus vivendi*. In fact, they thought they could assimilate the character of their own houses, especially in the eyes of others. The Bagatti Valsecchi's case was no exception.

To create a real sixteenth century mansion, the brothers dedicated themselves to a detailed study of the most important palaces of the Italian Renaissance, especially from Urbino, Mantua and Venice, not to reproduce a particular model of the past, but rather to take advantage of multiple sources of inspiration that they could elaborate in a completely personal key (Rolando, 1999), creating what was called the *Bagatti Valsecchi Renaissance* (Pavoni, 1994). As a matter of fact, many of the rooms reveal the personal signature of the brothers, who felt the necessity to create custom solutions to exalt their family and work, in complete harmony with the Renaissance style. Then, the house became a perfect mix of authentic and carefully selected piec-

es from the Renaissance period and details personally designed by Fausto and Giuseppe according to their modern yet sixteenth-century poetic. Indeed, they were men of their time and could not renounce to the comforts that their society recently achieved, like electricity and hot water, just because of the aesthetic language they chose. On the contrary, being among the first in Milan to have them was a source of pride and prestige.

The final result appears as a middle ground between the collection and the personal aspiration, but we must not forget that, primarily, it was a context of lived life. In fact, the house was inhabited by the Bagatti Valsecchi family until 1974. After that date, Fausto and Giuseppe's descendants decided to open the doors to the public, transforming it into a museum: they restored it to the original condition in which their creative ancestors left it, and today it remains unchanged by mandate.

## 7.2 How to Exhibit the Genius Loci: Approach and Method

This rich environment already provides detailed information about what is displayed. Instead, it is missing the exaltation of the most intangible heritage it can provide: Genius Loci, the spirit of the house, including the figure of the fabers and the actual results of their work. Consequently, Interior and Interaction Design were selected as suitable means to create an engaging and situated experience, oriented by a human-centred approach.

Moreover, the aim of the project was to take inspiration from the very specificity of the place, respecting and combining the will of all the parties involved: curators, visitors and designers, standing respectively for the place, the typology of experience and the means to meet all expectations. For this reason, for instance, nothing could be introduced or modified not to distort the frozen image of the time; while a temporary and replicable event format worked the best for a personal and engaging experience.

Necessarily, for a thorough knowledge of the location, preliminary on-field investigations had to be conducted to better understand the existing relationship between the place and its visitors, mixing tradition-

al and ad-hoc research tools, aimed at involving users unaware of being guiding the generative phase of the design process (Hanington, 2010).

Firstly, quantitative data about the visitors of the previous semester were collected through the statistic system of the museum. Secondly, to get a little closer to the users of the institution and to comprehend its dynamics, an ethnographical enquiry based on unobtrusive shadowing has been undertaken. That seemed to be the better solution to get impartial information about the visitors' experience inside the museum, as their direct involvement in this exploratory phase could have vitiated the results. A sample of one hundred people or groups have been followed through their entire permanence in the museum spaces to understand their behaviour and attitude towards the rooms and exhibited goods. In the meantime, a structured form was being filled in to take notes about the visitors and their experience in the museum. This system had the limit to be based just on the researcher's observation in a time span of about a month, that's why complementary qualitative research has been undertaken: taking advantage of their long experience at Bagatti Valsecchi's, the museum personnel has been directly involved in the research through semi-structured interviews. Fourteen volunteers answered questions about the visitors (in the first part of the interview) and their relation with the museum (in the second part), adding multiple and more expert points of view to the exploratory research.

In the end, this kind of collected information helped in getting familiar with the place and its users, assessing the great appeal of the house that amazed and engaged visitors with its sense of familiarity. Though, the observed behaviours and emotions prompted the modalities for a direct confrontation with the possible users – aimed at identifying the meaning for the intervention – and ultimately the design itself.

On-field research allowed plenty of unquantifiable factors to be acknowledged, enriching the quantitative research with impressions coming from a personal contact. Taking inspiration from co-design modalities and design exploratory games, simple physical games have been chosen as instruments of inquiry due to different reasons. First of all, they are participatory, they guarantee a common ground for conversation (Brandt, 2011) as game is instilled in human society since

its origins (Huizinga, 1938). Moreover, games respond to the necessity of acquiring spontaneous and unvitiated reactions since, when people enter the parallel dimension of a game, no matter how basic it is, they feel freed from social and cultural expectations (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Indeed, tangible items encourage users' engagement, especially in a museum context (Dudley, 2009), acting as boundary objects (Star & Griesemer, 1989; Spallazzo & Mariani, 2017).

The two games were proposed at the end of the visitors' tour of the museum, just before leaving. Visitors could choose whether to participate to the research by playing one or both games, or to decline. Ultimately one hundred samples per each activity were collected.

*Play Your Cards*, the first activity, was intended to investigate the visitors' reflections, preferences and emotional connections with the different rooms of the museum. It was composed by 18 cards, representing each room, and a dice with 6 different questions, initially undisclosed to the visitor (Figure 1). Firstly, players had to freely choose 3 cards, providing a reason for each choice, then they threw the dice and answered the corresponding question with one of the cards previously selected and a motivation. Though, some rules were a little flexible, as the real goal of the game was to originate a conversation to collect the greatest amount of information. Consequently, for instance, if the real answer to the dice question was not comprehended among the cards that the respondent had picked, (s)he was free to choose the actual room corresponding to her/his true opinion.

**Figure 1.**  
Cards and dice of  
the *Play Your Cards*  
game - Italian version  
(Sciannamè, 2017).



For *The Secret Inventory of the Bagatti Valsecchi Brothers*, the second game, instead, visitors had to feel free to explore their purest desires. The activity was, in fact, designed to understand what visitors would like to discover, experience and perform inside the museum, but such a request would have overwhelmed them. That is why, according to a design embedded approach (Kaufman & Flanagan, 2015), the game real aim was concealed by an alternative narrative.

The players were presented a fictional ancient-looking secret inventory of the Bagatti Valsecchi brothers (Figure 2), where ten mysterious magical artefacts were catalogued. Each of them had a particular power and represented a different kind of experience that could be achieved with the support of digital technologies. After reading the inventory, the players had to choose their favourite object and state how and where in the museum they would have used it. Here the choice was deliberately wide-ranged to offer the most complete overview with different kind of stimuli.



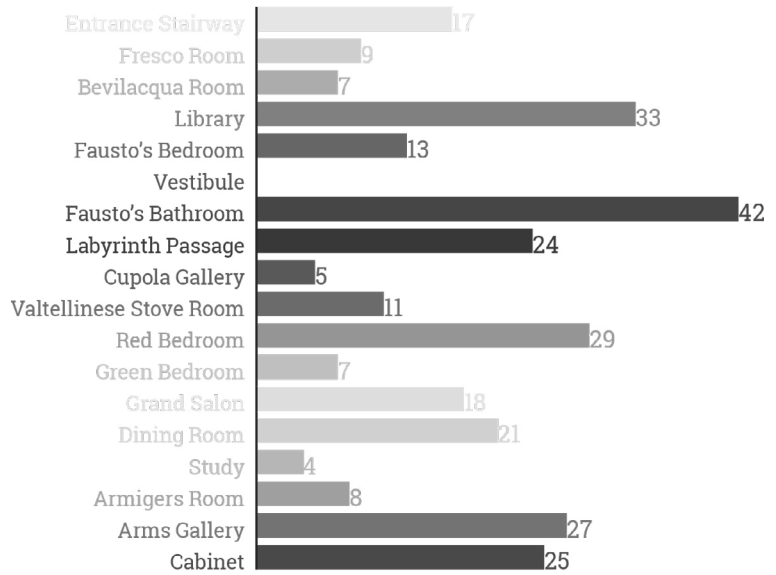
Figure 2. *Secret Inventory* in the three languages proposed - Italian, English, and French (they were selected based on visitors' data) (Sciannamè, 2017).

## 7.3 The Museum as a Living House

At the end of the research, all the parties involved highlighted the desire to have the homely dimension prevailing on the museum identity, so that the welcoming and familiar sensation could be emphasized.

In particular, the major outcomes of the research revealed that visitors actually enjoyed the house as a whole, in fact it was not easy for them to indicate a real preference among the rooms (Figure 3).

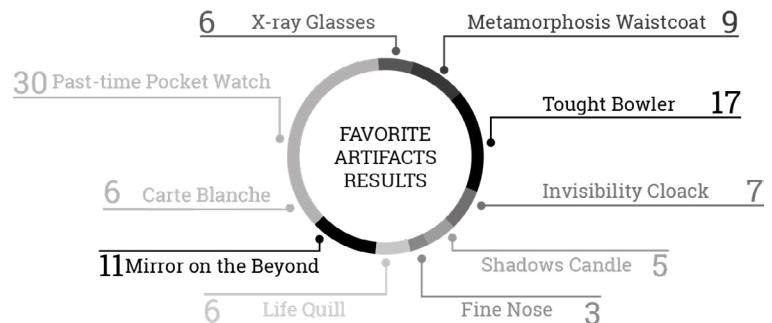
Figure 3.  
*Play Your Cards* results.  
 Favorite rooms of the  
 museum according to the  
 three-cards free picking  
 (Sciannamè, 2017).



Moreover, even if they were keen on participating in the playful activities, they would love being invisible observers in the middle of the action, in order to discover the most intimate secrets of the house and the familiar and social aspects of the domestic life, as it is patent from the results of the *Secret Inventory* game (Figure 4).

Then, the concealed thoughts of the visitors, which have mostly emerged from these indirect activities, helped to give orientation to the design generative phase and inspired the exaltation of the extraordinary everyday life of the people who dreamt, designed, realized and inhabited the Renaissance house of the XIX century. Indeed, the true essence of this place is represented by the simple pieces of ordinary life held in its history. In consequence to these findings, the aim

Figure 4.  
*Secret Inventory* results.  
 Favourite artefacts  
 selected (Sciannamè,  
 2017).



of the project is to bring these moments back to life by transporting the visitors in a distant dimension where they can actually and easily interact with the space.

In particular, in order to make the most intimate side of the house emerge, we returned to the original personification of the Genius Loci, whose symbols were painted on the walls. Even if this tradition acquired different meanings, it has never really disappeared, on the contrary, it has taken the form of noble families' coats of arms. That is why we translated the two main emblems of the Bagatti Valsecchi brothers in the materialization of Genius Familiaris (eagle) and Genius Rerum (lily). Each of them embodies a particular point of view of the Genius Loci and stands for a different visit path to discover the house's life on a symbolic reception day when the Bagatti Valsecchi brothers were still alive. The first one reflects the memories of the people who frequented the house, while the second gives voice to the objects' point of view.

Then, to make Genius Loci come alive, an integrated and flexible technological system has been designed so that the space could become responsive in a natural human-environment interaction with pervasive and concealed devices, not to alter the perception of space. In particular, audio and projection modules had to be deployed across the rooms to convey contents when triggered by the interaction module, a beacon-powered amulet worn by each visitor or group of visitors. The entire system also responds to the requirements of flexibility and scalability, as they can be easily moved and reprogrammed to be adapted to different settings and narratives.

Strolling around the house, a usual human behaviour in a museum, is at the core of the embodied interaction. In the different rooms, visitors may encounter three kinds of experience, according to the relevance of the place itself. Those where visitors just have to pass along are the *sound passage rooms*. Here, the immediate detection of the visitor wearing an amulet triggers environmental noises or distant voices. In the *vision rooms*, where evocative events could happen, the amulet activates a projection module, making shadows appear to visualize a significant scene. While, in the active *narration rooms*, visitors have to discover hidden details. This is why light events embedded in the audio

module draw the visitor's attention to a particular place where a special audio content will be disclosed only when the visitor gets close.

In short, the overall experience translates into an evening event, outside the museum opening hours, in which the visitor – alone or in group – can experience an intimate and magical relationship with the house, for a given time slot. The visit begins with the selection of the Genius that will guide the entire experience, and a brief tutorial for the interaction modalities. Then, across the rooms, different narrative strands are interwoven to show different aspects of everyday life and

Figure 5.  
Grand Salon final receipt  
(Sciannamè, 2017).



culminate in a banquet in the Grand Salon (Figure 5), the emblem of the social life of the period that mostly arouses contemporary curiosity. One of the strength points of the project is that visitors are encouraged to return so that they can discover ever new details depending on the Genius they choose at the beginning of the experience. Moreover, as the almost immaterial system can be easily and rapidly reprogrammed, a virtuous circle can be established, generating a sense of dependence and affection towards the museum.

In the end, designing to exhibit the Genius Loci is a delicate process. First, one needs to stay in the place, to live it, willing to understand and listen to it, in order to recognize its essence (Crespi, 2013). Then, when the spirit is revealed to the designer, the challenge is to make it patent without being intrusive, to let it pervade the environment as if it was the most natural outcome. In this way, the resulting experience of the visitors appear more authentic, they establish a deep bond with the free-of-barriers institution, they feel privileged of being part of an environment that is revealing its true and most hidden self in an almost human manner, and, finally, they develop an unparalleled sense of belonging in such a place.

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As a member of the research groups Desire – DEsign Strategies of Spatial Innovation and REgeneration and Place +, she investigates the role of spatial design, in particular with a view to energy and social sustainability. As a member of the inter-university research center Control Junk Laboratory and the NSBVN – Sustainable Exhibit Cluster, promoted by IUAV, she investigates the issues of circular economy and environmental sustainability in exhibition design. On these topics she is currently following the research De.Sign. The role of design in the energy transition process (ENEA), CAPitoli Urbani (CAP) and Greenway dei due parchi (Regione Lombardia).

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Her research has interspersed, in a parallel and often intertwined manner, between the field of interiors and exhibit design history and interior and spatial design. Author of several essays and articles about design history and interior and spatial design research, most notably the monograph *The Smart Home. An exploration of how Media Technologies have influenced Interior Design visions from the last century till today* (2020, FrancoAngeli, Milan).

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Director of the Specialising Master's *IDEA\_Exhibition Design*, and the Specialising Course *Design and Digital Technologies for the Intangible Cultural Asset*, she mainly deals with Design for Cultural Heritage in terms of museography and exhibition design, communication and enhancement of local areas, new models and narratives of cultural experiences, and the relationship between design, Humanities and arts. She is currently scientific lead on the project "Sound Design & Cultural Heritage".

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