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Relational design practices in design for social innovation: a place-centred approach

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This paper reflects on how relational art can contribute to participatory approaches in design for social innovation research and practices applied in community engagement processes towards the regeneration of commons in rural contexts. Inland areas, small towns far from large urban centres, today face urgent challenges to counter the process of abandonment and devaluation. The loss of primary services such as schools and the exodus to the cities increase their fragility. In the wake of the pandemic, many reflections on the role of public space have emerged: the recovery of a renewed human scale dimension and the need to manage the converging effects of the climate emergency, health pandemics, and economic collapse through collective and systemic action require carefully designed systems' transitions. This perspective calls for the emergence of horizontal and participatory strategies, which aim to valorise resources by counteracting abandonment and weakening of social relations. Following these reflections, the paper illustrates an ongoing participatory process involving the community of Albugnano, a town of approximately 500 inhabitants in the Basso Monferrato area (Italy), as part of the activities of the "Human Cities / SMOTIES, Creative works with small and remote places" research project.

Keywords: design for social innovation; community-led local development; relational art; participatory design; remote places

1 Introduction

The design purpose of "shaping behaviour rather than form, [and of] exposing the principles and skills of design to enable us to design with people rather than for them" (Design Council, 2006) is not a disciplinary branch but a disciplinary core feature. This contribution is positioned in this broad framework to illustrate an ongoing situated experimentation, to discuss the impact achieved so far and the renewed challenges to explore a possible common ground for participated, dialogical, and inclusive social transformations in rural territories through design-led participatory practices and

relational design. This experimentation is a community-centred research project (Cantù et al., 2012; Mazzarella et al., 2017; Kuure & Miettinen, 2017; Manzini & Meroni, 2012) aimed at transforming the public realm in a remote context through a series of interrelated activities such as co-creation sessions, co-designed and prototyped scenarios, networking actions for community engagement about urgent issues of public interest, and support to democratic participation. The physical space transformation process through place-centred activities is developed together with the design of services (De Rosa, 2022), focusing on the issue of relationality between people, communities, and their territories, involving a multi-actor ecosystem. The scale of the actions focuses on a place-centred dimension of the ecosystem influenced by a trans-territorial extent of communities and identities. The proposed reflection describes a tested methodology and the criticalities that emerged to understand – as the primary research focus – how these need to evolve by exploring other forms of relationality in participatory approaches applied to design for social innovation.

1.1 The research context

"Human Cities / SMOTIES, Creative works with small and remote places" (afterwards referred to as SM) is a four-year project co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme of The European Union and coordinated by the Polimi DESIS Lab of the Department of Design of Politecnico di Milano. Starting in 2020, SM belongs to the Human Cities network (afterwards referred to as HC), involving, since 2006, design, art and architecture universities, centres, and consultancies. Spanning Europe, it acts as a platform of interdisciplinary exchange, examining the liveability of public spaces by using participatory design as an approach to supply systems of process and innovation. With SM, the HC platform applies its approach to 10 small European places which are depopulated, relationally remote, and depositories of a material and immaterial culture that risks being undervalued, not consolidated, not handed down, and hence lost. These small and remote places benefit from the design of cultural and creative innovations within public spaces and in collaboration with local stakeholders thanks to the ten project partners, which we defined as "nodes of creativity": this definition includes public institutions, design centres, creative agencies, national associations, research centres, located in 10 European cities. They work with small and remote places as interlocutors, activators, and supporters of creative works to be anchored in public spaces through a shared methodology that will guarantee a process of engaging local communities for audience development, transnational mobility of creative professionals, masterclasses and training for capacity building purposes and an evaluation of the impact to generate a long-term legacy in the involved contexts. SM aims at activating possible trajectories for a local evolutionary pathway, leveraging existing excellence niches. Participatory and social innovation practices support this process. It is based upon the belief that culture-led regeneration strategies can transform spaces into desirable places to live and work through democratic participation. By combining design, visual arts and performing arts skills, we give life to alternative ways of community engagement by co-designing a specific public space. The final aim is to stimulate local communities to take responsibility and authority for collectively giving form to the future of their living environment and actively participate in its care and governance.

The reference territory that led to the development of this regenerative action in Italy is the area of Albugnano, a town of approximately 500 inhabitants in Basso (ed. lower) Monferrato area, a remote area in North-Western Italy, rich in hills, forests, and vineyards. Its driving forces are the wine and gastronomic sectors, an influential resource for commercial and tourism development, and its significant cultural heritage of the Romanic period, with a high concentration of churches and chapels,

such as the Vezzolano Abbey. The Abbey, for instance, attracts more than 30.000 visitors yearly. Still, the local system cannot offer much for prolonged periods: the touristic wayfinding is lacking, and the town cannot strategically communicate and valorise other interest points or entertainment activities. The Albugnano area has many hidden places and buildings worth visiting. Still, most are closed or difficult to find: the tourism asset needs to be supported by adequate services, and there is the need to stimulate local communities by co-designing renewed places and services for local inhabitants and boosting attractiveness and awareness through its varied heritage. Since 2020, POLIMI DESIS lab has started a process of engagement and co-creation with the local community: inhabitants, both working in the area and nearby; entrepreneurs active in valorising local production excellence; representatives of local institutions and creative associations. The main vulnerability of the reference territory relates to depopulation and the decrease of social bonds, especially for younger generations, linked to the progressive underutilisation and closure of gathering places in the last years. The area is facing a slow depopulation which caused the town school to close and many young people to move towards more significant centres for study or work reasons. In contrast to this scenario, different reasons still lead people to move to Albugnano: an increasing tendency according to the locals and confirmed by national data, showing a positive trend in the resident population from 1990 onwards (ISTAT, 2022). First, the area has different sanitary structures for the care of older people and people in need of psychiatric support: the job opportunities combined with some personal connections brought families from Peru and Romania to Albugnano. Second, the natural beauty and tranquillity make more wealthy visitors consider buying a summer house there. Third, the price of homes is lower, and the availability of green areas brings people who want a comfortable living solution while remaining able to reach Turin in 45 minutes. Generally, these elements make the area welcoming and contrast the non-existing public transport, the distance from urban centres, and the lack of service in town. Manifold initiatives flourish from networked citizens and multilevel collaboration of local experts (i.e., sociologists, biologists, artisans, and cultural workers), taking collective responsibility for the future of their living environment, its care and governance in synergy with the municipality strategy. E.g., Local companies have recently joined forces launching a Regional Enoteca (albugnano549.it) for social and cultural activities and selling and promoting products in a former primary school abandoned due to population decline. However, social interactions are limited by small groups, creating a highly segregated social environment. This social distance keeps the newer and older residents to a different level of knowledge of the territory, creating loneliness and limiting the sense of belonging to Albugnano.

1.2 The research approach

SM takes a step further in the landscape of bottom-up and grassroots processes: regional disparities require different approaches in remote contexts, in need of integrated policies that match the needs and circumstances of other rural economies, able to understand the growth dynamics of low-density economies (distance to markets, role of the trade sector, and absolute advantages) and to deploy a range of policy instruments (investments, addressing market failures, and supporting social innovation) (OECD, 2020). In this project, the design-driven methodology (desk research on future trends for European small and remote places, remote wellbeing, and rural region conditions, i.e., European Regional Policy, OECD, EY), combined with participatory co-design methods, are guiding us to look at medium-term outcomes for 2024 but also looking further into the future to 2100 impacts. After the development of a shared methodological framework that guaranteed a baseline process for

all partners to engage with local communities for audience development (Auricchio et al., 2023; De Rosa & Fassi, 2023), the phase for testing place-based and community-led transformations of public spaces through a co-creation process is now leading to creative ideas for spatial design. Through six community-engagement workshops with ~30 people, we are co-designing community spaces in public areas in Albugnano (Figure 1). The aim is to reactivate these spaces' synergetic through co-designed creative initiatives that fulfil the abovementioned objectives. We wish to intervene in these places not as separate entities but as complementary public spaces that foster an overall experience of the area. According to mapped needs, these places are meant to be arenas for events by associations and gathering places for the inhabitants, co-managed through a shared manifesto. The co-design process would foster the proactive attitude of the community: in the first phase (February-September 2023), we put in place the identity setting and co-design of project spaces, testing the use of spatial prototypes; then in the second phase (October 2023-October 2024), we will gather the results of the prototyping, towards wide-ranging planning for the creation of an effective synergy between the project spaces, the implementation of the executive phase of tourist and cultural services aimed at the activation, valorisation and long-term sustainability of the initiatives. As envisaged social and economic impact, the valorisation of public spaces will give greater attention and value to it in the short term. By giving it the role to host future events, it will act as a centre for community-building activities in the long term.
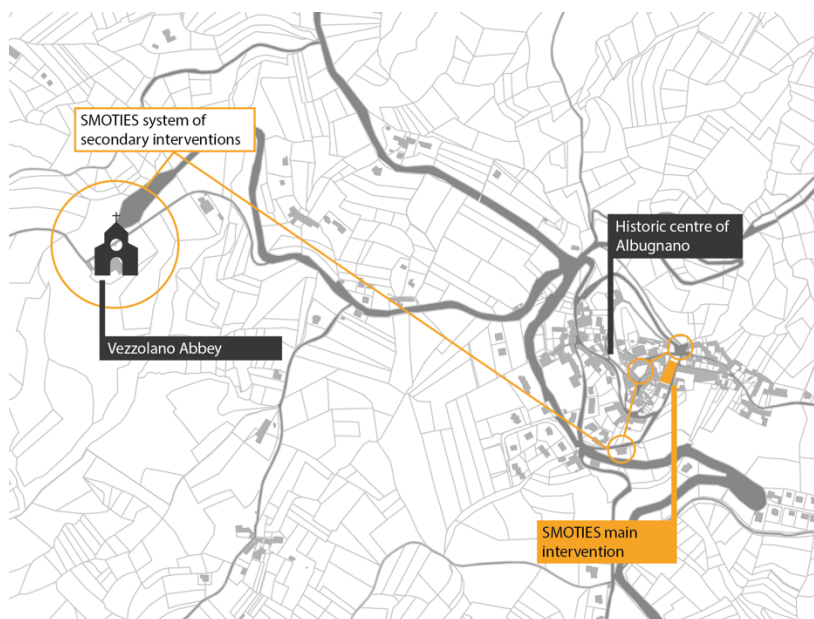
Figure 1. The system of interventions of SMOTIES project in Albugnano. © Marco Finardi.

2   The contribution of relational art to design for social innovation

Within complex relationalities of a given context, such as the one described above, this research aims at challenging how participatory design may actively contribute to materialising agency; political activation requires the engagement of diverse publics and the extension of participation and collaboration through design as a form of democratic enquiry (DiSalvo, 2022), in which the aesthetic dimension enables cultural and civic political action (Keshavarz & Maze, 2013; Rancière, 2013; Tassinari, 2018) through physical and digital encounters. These last can enable new collaborations to regenerate the public realm through place-centred and trans-territorial communities and identities

(Sassen, 2004). These design interventions and performances often require experimental practices to enable participation and engagement with different kinds of publics while simultaneously potentialising new relations, materialities, and preferable futures. Design for Social Innovation explores ways to advance social changes that lead to social and environmental sustainability. This approach often involves a significant reduction in the material aspects of the design object, emphasising a relational and dialogical perspective instead, increasing emphasis on the value derived from the experiences of artefacts and places (De Rosa & Galluzzo, 2023). Art and design-led interventions play a crucial role by generating *a new aesthetics* (Tassinari in Vermaas & Vial, 2018) that make change by *situated relationality*, meaning to make interactions with and through the tangible environment, to engage a plurality of voices in conversation and create a common ground for a more participated, dialogical, and inclusive social transformation (De Rosa et al., 2021).

By analysing participatory practices in the fields of relational art and design for social innovation, we have noticed that there are many similarities in the process whereby they are conducted: from the activation of groups of citizens, the creation of empathy and trust, the demand to perform a task, to the creation of a final output usually involving the creativity of the group. Furthermore, storytelling, narratives, and visual and artistic languages are not new to the design and co-design practice, being embedded in many methods: from the research stage to the concept development and prototyping, crafting scenarios through copywriting, collages, short videos, or sculpting and enacting situations, are all well-established practices. Such methods also allow designers to collect thick data, enable creativity, and empathically connect with users but are mainly used as tools or steps of a broader non-artistic process. The design discipline has adopted artistic languages for specific objectives needed for ideation. Focusing on the *research through design* approach and asides from the similarities, research in design for social innovation and relational art are inherently phenomenological and based on encounters that can be analysed from a performative perspective. Relational artworks' outputs represent only the surface of a profound change that happened in the intimate self of participants, generating a temporary situation, aiming at provoking change and challenging identities through an emotional and aesthetic process, making people resonate with experiences, visions, and concerns embedded in the artworks. A participatory design process generates concepts and envisioning/prototyping scenarios that rely on the experience of participation through value co-creation towards developing ideas, concepts, and those concrete interventions that shape reality. Participatory processes can play an essential role in reframing issues and reconfiguring behaviours in the common realm: while pursuing transformative innovation, there is the need to go beyond the concrete outputs and focus on a deeper layer such as culture, power dynamics, and social structures (Sangiorgi, 2011; Vink et al., 2021), calling for a more philosophical and sociological reflection on co-created narrative processes (De Rosa et al., 2021).

2.1 Building the hypothesis of the project work

Design for social innovation literature describes frameworks and factors contributing to the success of social innovation projects (Aksoy et al., 2019; Chalmers, 2013; The Young Foundation, 2012; Manzini, 2015; Murray et al., 2010; Neumeier, 2017; Unceta et al., 2016; Voorberg et al., 2014; Voorberg et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2022). The social network of relationships activated during such processes is the fundamental factor for their successful impact. It can create trust, shape long-term connections, allow an effective knowledge exchange, and generate emotional and empathetic connections. These relationships enable participants to develop a sense of ownership of the process

(Björgvinsson et al., 2010; Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Del Gaudio et al., 2016). What potential risks might be envisaged? The risks of not effectively managing this relationship creation are reaching only superficially the local community: engaging only the most active community members in good socio-economic conditions and without any vulnerability. Another risk is gaining limited knowledge about the local community and its culture, making the project perceived as externally led, not owned by participants, not aligned to local needs, or not inserted in the specific community narratives. Starting a design intervention with these issues would lead to a problematic output, limiting diversity and developing a project with a short life and narrow impact.

Literature from the artistic field, especially of relational art, agrees that participatory artwork enhances connections between people, positively impacting group and community dynamics, creating individual and collective identity and new meanings for common (Akimenko, 2018; Akimenko et al., 2022; Daykin et al., 2021; Di Croce et al., 2020; Gingrich et al., 2020; Huss & Bos, 2018; Klein & Tremblay, 2016; Lindström et al., 2022; Merli, 2002; Sarantou et al., 2018; Tricarico et al., 2022). Even with some critical voices calling for more rigorous studies, the cited sources analyse how participatory artistic activities build trust even with marginalised and vulnerable populations. Also, creating deep bonds allows for a better understanding of the intervention contexts and mapping community assets, including social interactions and power relationships.

Our reflection builds on these premises and questions how these can positively impact both i) the relationships between the design team and community (H1) and ii) the inclusiveness of co-design actions within the transformative process (H2). Through the first hypothesis (H1), we argue that a relational art approach could contribute to design for social innovation to create new and more robust social bonds - inside the local community and between the participants and the design team - supporting the creative process. This hypothesis positions artistic practice not only as a language or medium to be applied to a design process but, more importantly, as an approach to work with the local communities facing the complexity of creating new deep bonds. Few projects and publications treat the topic with a similar perspective (Akimenko, 2018; Akimenko & Kuure, 2017; Cristea et al., 2023; Muller & Loke, 2010; Niculae et al., 2021; Tassinari et al., 2017), leaving a gap for research directions and new practices. Hence, this research aims to test also the second hypothesis (H2) regarding the potentialities of involving participatory art projects and methodologies as a step for a co-design process that aims to be inclusive, diverse, and plural and allow for a democratic engagement of people in design interventions of public spaces.

If social innovation is vastly debated in design, the threads linking it with the participatory art sector are less visible and more implicit. Multiple tools and methods applied in co-design workshops use artistic languages. Still, the design and artistic literature are mainly separate, missing a theoretical reflection on their relationship and potential applications. Although participation in the artistic sector is a well-known practice, with countless examples since the 1920s (Muller & Loke, 2010; Riout, 2002), a common definition of participatory art is still lacking. The critics' debate is not settled on a precise keyword even, generating overlapping meanings and confusion. "This expanded field of relational practices currently goes by a variety of names: socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, participatory, interventionist, research-based, or collaborative art." (Bishop, 2005). An influent definition, referred to by many, is the one given by Bourriaud of relational art as "an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions

and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space" (Bourriaud, 1998, p. 5). Going further into the definition, relational art is defined as a *state of encounter*, and the artwork role is "no longer to form imaginary and Utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist." (1998, p. 5). "The artwork is presented as a social interstice within which these experiments and these new *life possibilities* appear to be possible." (1998, p. 20). The vision of relational art needs to be highlighted as a space to experiment with possibilities, to practice new ways of living and new relationships between people, something that resonates with design as the practice of making futures in everyday practices (Tonkinwise, 2015). This space to experiment with possibilities is what enables the generation of social impact. Contributing to the already cited corpus of studies that outline how participatory and relational projects impact communities, Dewinter (2021, p. 11) notices how "The 'outbreak' attempt of participatory art may not lie in restoring social coherence by removing differences through processes of integration and inclusion, but in creating a space where plurality and difference are at stake". Supporting this dialogical conception of participatory art, Rooke (2013, p. 5) states that "The most ethical projects are those that genuinely offer opportunities for communities to work with artists, finding questions they wish to explore together", implying an early engagement of the public – the community, enabling them to frame the process and choose a direction together with artists.

Building on the two hypotheses described above, the contribution of this paper is an attempt to analyse a relational design approach and practice. The following paragraphs outline the key aspects of relational design, interpreting the principles of relational art through the lens of design for social innovation, and expanding civic democracy through the confluence of critical, speculative, social and participatory design (DiSalvo, 2022).

2.2 Narratives, encounters, and politics of participation as relational design practices

Our reflection on relational design practices is developed by exploring three key concepts on which we decided to focus because of their presence in the literature of both the fields of design for social innovation and relational art: narratives, encounters, and politics of participation.

2.2.1 Narratives

In many design methods, there is a narrative component: e.g. presenting primary research results about users; creating scenarios and personas; storytelling a concept to make its value evident; mapping the experience and developing a coherent communication or determining a narrative dimension of the physical evidence of a place (De Rosa, 2023, pp.131-139); and many more examples from the tools used every day by design teams (Bertolotti et al., 2016; Niculae et al., 2021). It is probably even more evident that narratives are key in relational art: e.g., artworks relying on local traditions; inviting the public to share personal anecdotes; creating fictional stories from real experiences; placing participants in scenarios that make an emotional reaction, sometimes even physical or in the form of a game. Narratives have been used in both design and art to connect the interior perception and the exterior manifestation of personal and collective identity. The research of Daria Akimenko (2018) thoroughly explores the issue: "[...] All of us come to be who we are (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives rarely of our own making" (Somers, 1994, p. 606). According to Akimenko, narrative identities have three aspects, common to narratives and identities separately. They are:

- Contextual, or located in time, space and their complex systems of interactions.
- Intersectional, or composed of multiple identities that can simultaneously be complementary or conflicting.
- Enabling authorship, or the agency each person can have to articulate their identity and describe themselves.

Using narrative identities in projects, Akimenko proves how this approach challenges power structures by changing the role of people involved – from passive participant to active agent – and facilitating a sensemaking process – understanding their own life and the communities they are part of. Experimenting with narrative identities in multiple communities, Akimenko developed a framework for reflexive art-based research – clearly situated on the border between art and design – following five stages in which empathy between researchers and different elements is created:

1. Planning, when the project is conceived, and empathy is built between researchers.
2. Discovery, when researchers explore and create empathy with the specific context.
3. Connection, when empathy is built between the team and participants.
4. Immersion, when empathy creates a shared space enabling the narrative artistic process.
5. Detachment, when reflection on the created empathy takes place, preparing for the ending of the project.

Therefore, narrative identities constitute a powerful approach to preparing the ground for design interventions and creating a meaningful connection, enabling the project team to reach, engage, and empower marginalised or peripheral communities (Akimenko et al., 2022; Sarantou et al., 2018). Her research draws from two previously developed approaches: psychogeography (Debord, 1958; Perkins et al., 2002) and art-based research (Leavy, 2020).

2.2.2 Encounters
Another critical recurring theme in the literature is encounters between a person and another person or a person and an object. As previously presented, "[Relational] Art is a state of encounter", as Bourriaud (1998, p. 7) synthetically summarised in his theories. He described the production of a work of art as a proposal of a shared world made by a set of relationships that are not only the context in which the artwork operates but the actual object constituting the artwork itself. If the form is the sum of tangible elements that enable us to experience an artwork, "producing a form is to invent possible encounters; receiving a form is to create the conditions for an exchange, the way you return a service in a game of tennis." (1998, p. 9). In this conceptualisation, the invention of encounters is up to the artist. At the same time, whoever receives the form – assisting or participating as a public – must be in the conditions to create this exchange. Encounters are a familiar construct even in the design of services: *service encounters* are usually defined as the moments when the user interacts with the service, being through a physical object, an interface, or a person. Cipolla and Manzini (2009) further elaborate on this concept, distinguishing between standard and relational services. The distinction draws from Martin Buber's theories about the in-between space created when an 'I' interacts with a 'Thou' or 'It'. In the first case, the 'I-Thou' interaction generates a relationship: two people perceiving themselves as complex beings, exploring the space between them, open to meet the unexpected reaction and quality of the other. In the second case, the 'I-It' interaction generates an experience: a person deals with an object or something perceived as such, driven by the expectations and roles created by the context. Manzini builds on this classification to describe a type of collaborative

exchange in which both sides receive a benefit; in other words, they create a shared value through an encounter: "the collaborative encounter in which two or more people meet and interact to do something they all recognise as a value" (2015, p. 95).

Practical applications of this construct involve recognising an individual's limited emotional, intellectual, material, economic, and time resources. Consequently, individuals can decide how and where to invest these resources in various interactions and engagements. Embracing this diversity is essential to accommodate different levels of engagement intensity based on different needs or intentionally opting for a single level. Uncertainty is inherent in collaborative encounters and relational services since they rely on rich human-to-human interactions, necessitating openness to meeting others. While designers can establish conducive conditions and contexts for these interactions, they cannot control the encounters completely.

2.2.3 Politics of participation

The previous paragraphs presented how narratives and encounters can transform a community's relational and social fabric of a community. Our reflection builds on the said constructs as tools to shape social structures, making them design materials that a process of reflexivity can influence (Vink et al., 2021; Vink & Koskela-Huotari, 2022), which, we argue, can spark from the relational design approach theorised. Moving further, any social innovation process that impacts social structures deals with the idea of democracy: participation relates to power, agency, dissensus and conflict. Here the hypothesis of using the relational art contribution to foster diversity and plurality during the co-design process becomes key: strengthening a community that perceives itself as such and can deal with internal differences and conflicts raises the political aspect of participation.

If participation is a clear fundamental of democracy, its importance in the design and artistic field is not given for granted. For this reason, the political reflection on the participatory dynamic is not obvious and sometimes overlooked incredibly since the topic became trending and participatory practices increasingly multiplied. In participatory art, an essential contribution comes from Claire Bishop, who, even one of the most critical voices, is also a supporter of participatory practices and problematises some fundamental issues (Barok, 2009; Bishop, 2006a, 2012). First, she criticises that everything that is participatory is perceived as positive and good just because opposed to a dominant societal model, while engaging citizens per se is not necessarily helping to contrast the dominant narrative nor to create anti-capitalistic spaces (2006b). Furthermore, she observes how many artworks structure a participatory mechanism to reach some sort of agreement and consensus between participants to end the performance with new relationships based on shared commonalities. Bishop highlights how this can alleviate dissensus or shape it into a polite form, conforming it to fit into the dominant narrative and rendering it void. She defends disturbing performances and relies on the multiple levels of interpretation that elicit differences and power roles. She takes those as an example of relational artworks where diversity is used to spark a lively debate and push boundaries. Participation is defined and evaluated then on how to manage dissensus, more than reaching a common shared position: a relational antagonism that encompasses how different subjectivities work on their identity also through negation and discomfort when confronted with the otherness (Bishop, 2004, p. 30). Second, she argues how the social intent of participatory art forces artworks to be evaluated only from an ethical and social point of view, evading aesthetic and poetic debates. This argument is relevant for this reflection not because it is necessary to explore how an artwork is

assessed but because the conclusion Bishop draws could constitute a good strategy even in the design field: participatory art should be evaluated both with aesthetic and social metrics, even if they are often difficult to combine and have opposite tensions because the most poignant artworks in this current are relevant from both points of view. Translating this principle into the designer's practice, design for social innovation projects needs to be evaluated from a design perspective (being the output a product, a service, or a system) and from a social one.

Discussing the political implications of participation in art and design leads the discourse to assess how this conception is combined with the democratic configuration of our society. Acknowledging that the interventions are positioned in a broader democratic framework is fundamental to clarify the aim of participation in social innovation projects and how the issues raised can find an institutional interlocutor. As seen in the arguments of Bishop, dissensus is vital to democracy to the point that the deliberative democratic assumption to reach a collective rational consensus is discussed as unrealistic. Chantal Mouffe explains in detail how and why this conception of democracy needs to be overcome by an agonistic pluralism (1999, p. 9). Namely, Mouffe argues that politics is concerned with finding unity in a context of diversity and conflict, about distinguishing "us" and "them". In her vision, democracy is not about abolishing this difference but evolving how we deal with that: turning from the conception of "them" as enemies to be destroyed to adversaries that will challenge your position in the debate. Therefore, democracy becomes a way to deal with differences relying on shared democratic values; working to balance dissensus and consensus, combining the agonistic view of adversaries that somehow share a part of our collective identity while at the same time having different political positions, is the difficult task to operate a democracy.

What if these processes could help communities recognise and build their collective identity, creating that common ground needed to create a context of agonistic pluralism? What if the openness and ambiguity of artistic languages could create a channel to maintain dissensus into a collective process, being able to host contradictions in a unique artwork? "In participatory work, agonism almost inevitably exists. Working with the agonistic aspect of socially engaged and participatory processes, art is not a case of merely solving conflict to get on with producing a satisfactory output or outcome. It is more of finding value in naming conflict and tension and making it apparent through the collective creative process." (Rooke, 2013, p. 5). These questions remain to be explored and tested empirically in future research.

The described literature supports the hypothesis that a relational approach could be mediated from relational art to the design process, especially in design for social innovation (Table 1).

	NARRATIVES	ENCOUNTERS	POLITICS OF PARTICIPATION
RELATIONAL ART	**Performed narratives:** to connect the interior perception and the exterior manifestation of personal and collective identity.	**Alternative forms of constructed conviviality**: artworks as proposals for a shared world made by a set of relationships.	**Artworks for dialogical dissensus:** disturbing artworks that rely on multiple levels of interpretation and that elicit differences and power roles, where diversity is used to spark a lively debate and push the

	E.g. artworks relying on local traditions; inviting the public to share personal anecdotes; creating fictional stories from real experiences; placing participants in scenarios that make an emotional reaction, sometimes even physical or in the form of a game; etc.		boundaries of everyday interactions.
DESIGN FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION	**Situated narratives:** the unfolding of actions and relationships over time *E.g. presenting primary research results about users; creating scenarios and personas; storytelling a concept to make its value evident; mapping the experience and determining a narrative dimension of the physical evidence of a place; etc.*	**Relational devices:** creating shared value through collaborative encounters that rely on relational capabilities as key elements.	**Agonistic pluralism**: participatory narratives to reframe issues and reconfigure behaviours in the common realm, express conflicts and differences while stimulating reflexivity on power dynamics, social imagination and social structures.

Table 1. Confronting the three concepts in relational art and design for social innovation within a product-service system perspective.

3 Situated experimentation in Albugnano

The project's objective was to test the application of the developed relational approach in a design for social innovation practice while creating tools based on the three key concepts outlined above. Another objective was finding concrete patterns for the described theoretical approach, allowing for a first evaluation of results. Analysing the local territory, Albugnano presents a highly fragmented community. Multiple social groups are present – including newcomers moving from the nearby cities and immigrants from other countries – and while this new population is welcomed, it remains segregated in their social interactions. The local tourist attraction drives visitors to the area, but the town lacks activities and places to see for extended visits besides a few points of interest. The knowledge of the territory is therefore distributed unevenly between older residents, newcomers, and tourists. The field research was structured to collect personal and collective narratives and use them as design material to create a conceptual output (i.e., the Albugnano Community Map) for a product-service strategy integrated into place transformation.

3.1 Collecting narratives: methodology and sampling

The research design draws from Narrative Inquiry (Clandinin, 2006; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002), Art-Based Research (Leavy, 2020; Knowles & Cole, 2008) and Psychogeographic Mapping (Biesta &

Cowell, 2012; Debord, 1958; Sidaway, 2022), relying mainly on semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observation.

To build empathy with the interviewees and gain knowledge about their biography, the first step was dedicated to their presentation, asking about their primary occupation, age, residency, and general demographic data. Then, two dimensions were considered to collect narratives and measure encounters: time and space. The first was integrated with the interviews asking each participant to recall their usual daily routine, sharing with the researcher their hourly schedule. Afterwards, the same question was repeated, addressing a past period of their life before a significant lifestyle change was identified during the presentation of the subject. Space was integrated into the interview structure by asking participants about places in the town associated with personal memories from their past and present daily life. Additionally, they were questioned about three prominent locations to which they felt a strong connection. To support the interviewing process and data collection, each participant was given a printed map of the Albugnano area to draw with markers their daily paths and places crossed. This structure was functional in gathering the local narratives about the relationship between the participants and the territory. It was a combination of local spots and encounters between social groups inside the community. The two constructs of social structures and dissensus were addressed mainly during the analysis of the collected data: the social structures could emerge from the daily routines and how dissensus is managed from the narratives about governance dynamics inside the community, also related to the transformation of the common realm. Multiple observations were carried out, aiming to support the research process by gaining basic knowledge of the geography of Albugnano, building trust with the local community, and collecting insights about existing meeting places. Through observation, the understanding of the context was deepened, providing a solid ground to reflect on the transferability of the outlined approach.

In addition to the methods used to collect data, a reflexive approach was adopted to question possible biases generated by the change of context and increase the research validity (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023; Vink & Koskela-Huotari, 2022). The researcher kept a journal to annotate personal impressions and actively challenge the interpretation of the observed local context, explicitly aiming at de-constructing meanings based on their personal life experience in metropolitan and urban contexts. Regarding the sampling, a hybrid strategy was adopted: the interview process started through convenience sampling, activating the relationship that the SM project already had developed locally; then a snowball sampling was adopted, aiming to reach multiple social groups of the local community, not necessarily already contacted during the SM activities; finally, the interviewees were selected according to their relationship with the local territory combined with biographical data, to maximise the variation between their experiences.

To analyse the collected data, different methodologies and tools have been adopted. A first revision of the interviews' transcripts extracted the relational data - encounters and relational network - and the spatial data - places visited. Comparing and clustering the web of relationships surrounding each participant to the research, we recognised different patterns originating from the typologies illustrated later. Considering the spatial data, each place was analysed by counting the frequency of people visiting it regularly and then by identifying the past and present usage of each, including its symbolic and functional meanings. Subsequently, the open coding of the transcripts was performed, creating code categories for a second selective coding. This process generated narratives and insights

about the community, interweaving the relational and spatial data into subjective perspectives and common narratives.

Over six months, from September 2022 until March 2023, this method allowed us to collect data and realise three ethnographic observations, 15 semi-structured interviews, and one researcher's journal with multiple entries. Participants were engaged at first through snowball sampling, then changed to purposive sampling to ensure the reach of a balanced distribution of age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic conditions. Three kinds of results were extracted from the analysis of the collected data:

- The relational networks of participants were visually represented and clustered into four recurring typologies.
- A list of mentioned locations was created, summarising the usage and perception of each.
- The narratives collected were triangulated with the previous results, creating complex insights about the local community.

3.2 Building the relational network

Building on the representation by Rainie and Wellman (2012), the Relational Matrix has been developed for each interviewee: a diagram describing the network of relationships and encompassing the more intimate and looser connections. Relationships were divided into two categories: the ones connecting the subjects to the community of Albugnano and the other ones linking the participants to different social circles. We identified four main patterns corresponding to different ways of living and experiencing the places in the Albugnano area. In addition to visual pattern recognition, the Matrix develops various versions, exploring the values that could best fit the two axes and more accurately describe the observed differences. The final version of the said matrix (Figure 2) describes the categories according to two parameters: the intensity and type of usage of the places in the Albugnano area and the perceived belonging to the local community.
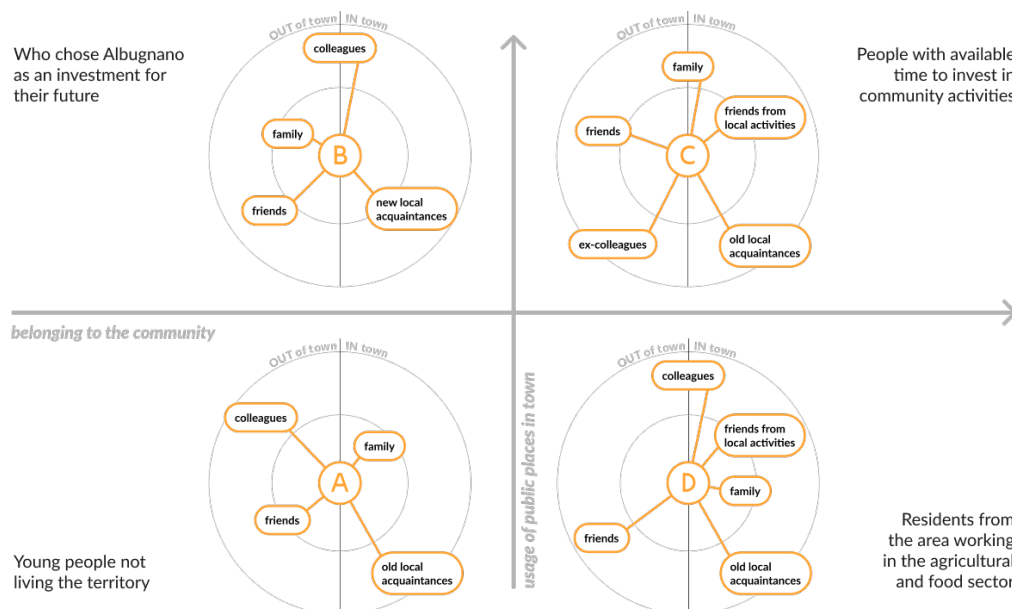

Figure 2. Relational Matrix mapping the local relational networks. © Marco Finardi.

The first parameter indicated a deep connection between the interviewee and their relationships with numerous locations in the area, resulting in a high score. Conversely, the low quadrants encompassed individuals who spent most of their time outside Albugnano or in private spaces. The second parameter assessed the interviewee's participation in community dynamics, with positive quadrants indicating a strong sense of belonging to the community. The negative quadrant indicated a feeling of distance from the ongoing community life. The rest of the analyzed data supported the coherence of the four clusters, which were mainly substantiated by corresponding narratives describing the perception of the geographical area: young people not living in the territory, those who chose Albugnano as an investment for their future, people with available time to invest in community activities, and residents original from the area working in the agricultural and food sector.

3.3 Understanding the meaning of places, their use and perception

The data analysis yielded two main results for the relationships with places in Albugnano. Firstly, we extracted each location from the transcripts. Then, we combined this list with the associated meanings provided by each interviewee to describe the past and present usage of the places (Figure 3). Next, we collected and synthesised the local narratives related to each place. This synthesis enabled us to create an internal tool for sharing the acquired knowledge of the territory: a digital map (cf. paragraph 3.5) with markers on each identified place. The map was then linked to a database summarising the present and past usages of the site, capturing the local narratives in the form of audio excerpts from interviews and their respective transcripts. We shared this tool with the entire SM team, exemplifying a potential application of the described approach to support the design process internally. Additionally, we analysed each place based on the number of interviewees who mentioned it, particularly differentiating between those who said its present usage and those recalling memories. This analysis visualised how each place was positioned regarding its use and perceptions between the present and the past.
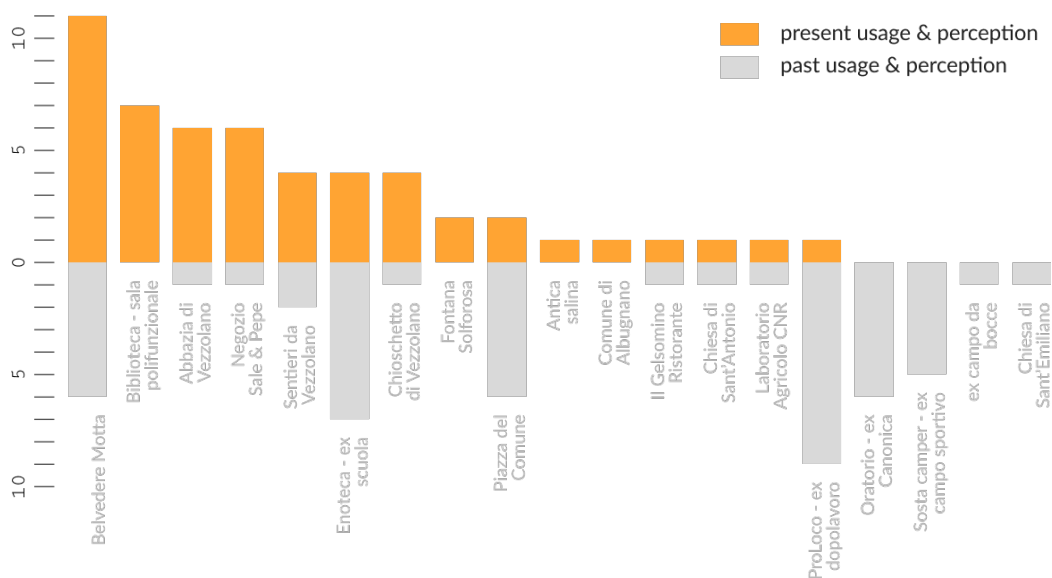

Figure 3. Graph of places and their present and past usage & perception / n. of participants mentioning each place. © Marco Finardi.

3.4 Insights about local narratives

Once the places were identified and described their usage, the collected local narratives were analysed and used as support for the research. Five main insights emerged:

1. The community spaces of Albugnano are a memory of the past.
2. Living a slow lifestyle based on spontaneity, relationships, and nature.
3. Those who choose to live in town find places to develop personal projects and passions.
4. The cultural clash between community sociality.
5. Political community conflicts
6. Young people are living far from the community.

Once the collected data about places, relationships and local narratives were analysed, the ideation phase started, developing a conceptual output that could leverage the highlighted insights to trigger a change in the community of Albugnano. To complete the previously known needs and the insights that emerged from the fieldwork, some key users of the output were identified:

1. Long-standing residents – Inhabitants of Albugnano who spent most of their lives and have deep knowledge of the local territory, with many stories to share but no one to listen to.
2. Newcomers – Residents that recently moved to Albugnano because they enjoy the area but still have limited knowledge of the local community and traditions and would love to know more about it.
3. "Slow" tourists – Visitors interested in exploring Albugnano, and connecting to the local community and habits, would love to spend more days in the area but wonder whether there are enough attractions and activities.
4. Local touristic operators – Employees and volunteers that cooperate to promote the area, and would love to guide more tourists but struggle to find a common platform to be reachable and accessible.

Additionally, the conceptual output could include local organisations and institutions that could find common ground to interact and take care of the needed interventions in the area to maintain and improve tourist places.

3.5 Prototyping relational design practices

The Albugnano Community Map is the initial result of this process: a system of diffused narratives and encounters that creates engagement in the local community and supports the touristic system (Figures 4 to 8). It includes a digital platform and a set of physical touchpoints designed to make the tacit knowledge about the area accessible and to create occasions to develop new relationships in Albugnano. The expected long-term impact of the system includes increased social cohesion within the different social groups in town and the support for creating a touristic network welcoming visitors for more extended periods. The conceptual output aims to be the missing connection between many resources present in the local context, working to link the historical centre with the Abbey, connecting different relational networks already active locally, and finally creating a digital presence for local places while creating a physical dimension to immaterial narratives. On a relational side, the Map could develop occasions to build meaningful encounters between social groups that are currently far. Long-standing residents and volunteers of local associations can get in touch with newcomers and visitors, creating new social bonds and increasingly intertwining the relational network. Local

narratives can be shared through the designed places and encounters, and the local social structures could be positively affected by the long term design intervention and political debates.

The Map is constituted by a product-service system that includes physical and digital touchpoints to effectively target users who already know about the initiative and those who still need to find out. The hybrid touchpoints allow crossing both the immaterial dimension – typical of narratives and encounters – and the material dimension – of the local context. The double physical and digital dimensions can intercept different kinds of users and guide them in a seamless experience. Through the physical touchpoints, it is possible to follow a path and reach the chosen locations; then, some "sneak peaks" about the narratives and stories are embedded in the panels to attract the attention of the reader/viewer and start the interaction.

Figure 4. Network of local places connected to the SM project's intervention areas. © Marco Finardi.

Storyboard tourist

1. wishing for a trip to the countryside

2. finding out that Albugnano offers more than expected

3. mobility and knowledge of the area remain problematic

4. discovering the community platform to ask for help

5. getting the ride and guided visit

6. finishing the trip satisfied and thinking of coming back

Figure 5. Storyboard of the experience of a tourist visiting the area and meeting locals. © Marco Finardi.

Storyboard resident

1. getting to know about the Albugnano Community Map

2. sharing knowledge and narratives about the territory

3. becoming a keeper of specific places in the area

4. receiving a request for a guided visit

5. guiding visitors in local places and telling local narratives

6. resting satisfied about making the cared places known

Figure 6. Storyboard of the experience of a resident welcoming a visitor. © Marco Finardi.

Figure 7. The Albugnano Community Map: simulation of the tour sections on the digital platform. © Marco Finardi.
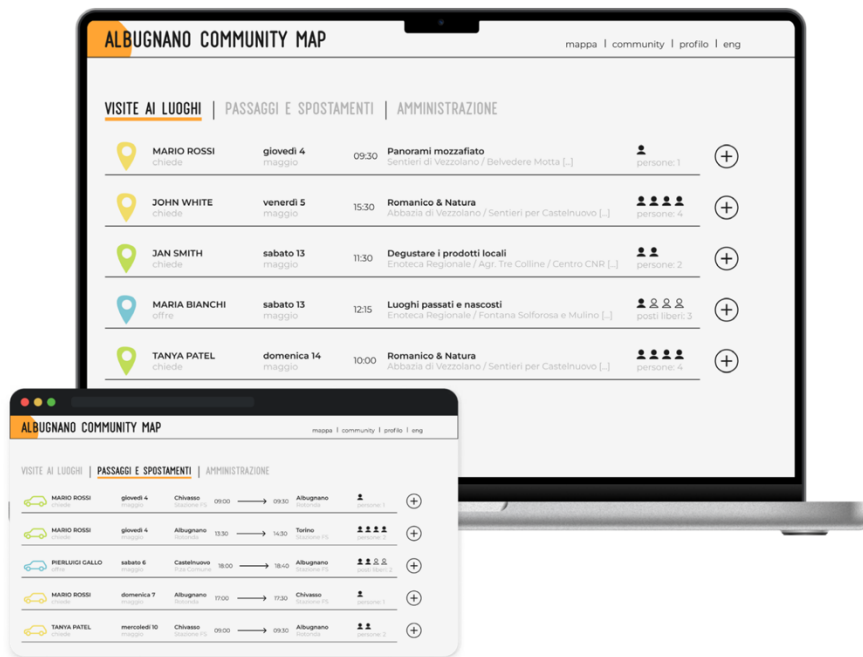

Figure 8. The Albugnano Community Map: simulation of the community section on the digital platform. © Marco Finardi.

4 Conclusions

On a theoretical level, the analysis of the literature confirmed that common ground between relational art and design for social innovation already exists, even if not acknowledged explicitly. Narratives, encounters, and politics of participation are concepts found in the literature of both fields. They can be seen as potential building blocks for outlining a theoretical framework in this paper for the regeneration of commons in rural contexts.

Based on the constructs described in the literature review, the tested relational design practice can be evaluated at a three-fold level (Table 2).

From a *narrative perspective*, the developed relational approach to interviews demonstrates an effective way to describe a community through an assemblage of cultures, identities, and communities of people embedded in specific places of the reference territory. At a research stage and with relatively limited resource investment, it can provide insights into the relational networks, tracing the human actions, memories, rituals, and symbolic relationships in the local public spaces, and the narratives deeply felt by residents. This allows the research team to value transfer them through words-images-forms and effectively engage locals (H1) that would not come to traditional co-design activities (H2). The collected stories are also envisioned in the prototype as enablers for the community to recognise itself and to allow slow tourism to interact with the local culture.

From the *perspective of encounters*, the relational approach revealed how the experience of participation is intrinsic within places: ideating possible encounters and creating the conditions for meaningful exchanges between participants is fundamental for building empathy between the researcher and the locals through the connection with their territory, opening doors to be felt less as a stranger and more as a welcomed guest (H1). Additionally, the narrative interviews allowed the creation of encounters with new people and places in the local area of Albugnano, positively contributing to diversifying the engaged group of participants to SM activities and revealing the local habits (H2). The prototype demonstrates how meaningful encounters can be generated between local inhabitants and visitors from a relational perspective.

On the *politics of participation* level, the interviews exposed the local social structures and ongoing conflicts in the community, demonstrating how places could enact interactions through agonism. The prototype calls for an active engagement of community members of different social groups, enhancing their dialogue and creating the premises for the long-term and ongoing process of space co-ownership within the SM project (H2). The foreseen impact is to develop an agonistic debate that can channel the ongoing conflicts into positive effects for the territory. The Albugnano Community Map prototype draws a project direction, giving concrete application to the theoretical concepts and envisioning the positive impact that a relational approach can have on the system of local stakeholders.

	NARRATIVES	ENCOUNTERS	POLITICS OF PARTICIPATION
A PLACE-CENTRED APPROACH	**The assemblage of cultures, identities, and communities of people embedded in territories:** collecting, crafting and telling the stories of personal or collective identities to create an insightful connection with a specific community.	**The intrinsic experience of participation within places:** ideating possible encounters and creating the conditions for meaningful exchanges between participants, engaging their emotional and relational qualities.	**Places as enactive of interactions through agonism:** strengthening a community dealing with internal conflicts, acknowledging dissensus as a key political aspect of democracy towards a space co-ownership.

Table 2. The relational approach in a place-centred design for social innovation project.

After the conception of this prototype, the activities with the local community continued with a programme of workshops and experimental relational practices. While the description and evaluation of these fall beyond the scope of this paper, it is relevant to report some of the emerged reflections. While working in a remote place, the research team noticed how the distance was geographical and cultural: Europe is a constellation of diversity within and beyond its national and regional borders. Therefore, we realised the need for a slow and caring process of integration through a set of micro-actions to gain an inclusive perspective of the local community and to create a relationship with it, continuously questioning the structured tools designed for the co-creation process, as well as the pace of the workshops and the methods adopted. Initially, we conceived our role as external from the local community. At the same time, we noticed how adopting a more informal approach led to an increased engagement, making the researchers closer to the inhabitants. Finally, our presence and process enabled the local agency to be expressed concretely, which represents a positive impact from an agonistic perspective but can heighten latent local conflicts (i.e., struggles related to risks of touristification, rural gentrification, etc.), even hindering the co-design process, as noticed. The effects of the relational design practices on the whole design process and the long-term impact on the community will need further evaluation and testing of the approach in the implementation phase. A deeper reflection on the designer's role, the enabled agency and the cultural distance of remote places remains to be explored in future research.

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