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CUMULUS  
Conference  
June 3-7, Milan

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# Service Design for Social Innovation: a Community-Based Initiative for Enabling Local Enterprise

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In recent years the international debate about the role of design in innovation is focused on the concept that design is not only related to technological or market issues, but it is mainly connected to human behaviours. New forms of innovation are growing that are strictly connected to societal changes. The role of individuals, associations, companies and institutions is becoming crucial to support and promote changes in business and society, acting under the big umbrella of social innovation. In this framework, this paper is based on one local co-funded project aimed at promoting social innovation and creating a social enterprise through an action-research approach. In the first part, a background on social innovation and community-based initiatives is discussed to underline the links between social and local innovation issues. The second part explains the action-research as the methodological approach adopted for the project. Finally, a reflection on the enabling role of design in the early stage of the process is described.

## Keyword

Social innovation, Community-based initiative, Action-research, Service design.

This paper aims to stimulate a discussion about assessment challenges, evidencing some “in progress” experiences, open questions and possible future directions.

## INTRODUCTION

Over recent years the international debate about the role of design in innovation is focussed on the concept that design is not only related to technological or market issues, but it is mainly connected to human behaviours. The European Leadership Board, in Design for Growth and Prosperity report, defines design as a mean of “people-centred innovation” (Thomson & Koskinen, 2012), strengthening the idea that it has the capability to promote growth and prosperity across

Europe. A broader concept of innovation is proposed, considering design interventions also connected to societal changes and non-technological issues. This enlarged vision requires individuals, associations, companies and institutions to act on a wider spectrum of activities (i.e. new services, new business, new tools) that can be considered under the big umbrella of social innovation.

The paper explores how design can play an important role in social innovation initiatives. In particular it describes a work-in-progress research aimed at creating a new social business through community-based activities and services at neighbourhood scale. The business consists in creating a *didactic kitchen* where people can learn, experiment, and share their knowledge acquiring specific competences to be spent in future employments.

In the first part of this paper, a background on social innovation and community-based initiatives is discussed to underline the links between social and local innovation issues. The second part describes the action-research as the methodological approach adopted for the initiative. We conclude with a reflection on the relevance of a community-centred approach where design is applied to neighbourhood scale interventions. According to the social innovation framework and the service design approach, the activities described agrees with Manzini's conception (2007) about how to conduct design research for sustainable social innovation, which basically implies:

- focusing on promising cases to support future actions;
- building services scenarios to visualize and consolidate design directions;
- structuring enabling systems to allow people in developing design solutions;
- promoting creative contexts where people collaborate to promote ideas able to provoke changes at socio-economical and policy level.

## SOCIAL INNOVATION AND COMMUNITY-BASED INITIATIVES

When referring to local changes, innovation can be considered as a broad concept of transformation including economical, sociological, political and market aspects. Innovation at local level is affected by different factors: decision-making and planning processes, local policies, strategies of the local agenda, the capacity of actively involving people, the participation in policy-making processes; and different actors: entrepreneurs, academics and organizations (Villari, 2013; Manzini, 2014). The main purpose is to enable local economies by strengthening the public sector, cultural activities, small productions, the citizens' well-being, as well as non-economical aspects and natural environments.

Local empowerment is one of the main issues addressed by the European Commission that considers local innovation at the heart of European policy planning. From the formulation of Lisbon Agenda in 2000 to the current Horizon 2020 strategy, EU encourages territorial innovation through the empowerment of local communities and local network and the circulation of knowledge. In this framework collaborative and bottom-up approaches - such as the social innovation paradigm - are evidently becoming fundamental. Europe is investing

a lot in social innovation as a driver for the growth of a new economy based on social issues and participation in local governance (BEPA, 2011).

Social innovation enables individuals and the civil society to play an active role as agents of change (Mulgan, 2012; Manzini, 2015) and it is considered as a possible solution to the worldwide financial crisis (Dervojeda et al., 2014; Leadbeater, 2007). Social innovation applies to different scales, from large areas to very small contexts, such as small neighbourhoods or condominiums (Moulaert, 2009; Villari, 2015). Accordingly, the BEPA report (2011) describes three scopes of social innovation: social, societal, and systemic. *Social* mainly refers to the social demands that are not addressed by the market; *societal* refers to areas where social and economic boundaries are blurring; *systemic* entails activities and initiatives aimed at 'reshaping the society' (BEPA, 2011).

Social innovation - as well as other activities affected by human behaviours - is a path-dependent contextual process (Moulaert, 2009; Mulgan 2012). Therefore results are susceptible to different interpretations and are difficult to measure, both on a small and a large scale.

Considering the main goals of social innovation described above, an action-research approach is illustrated in the following paragraph, as a process that merges design research and practice to enable the creation of a new service that becomes a vehicle for value creation for local areas.

## FOCUS ON COMMUNITY-BASED INITIATIVES

The transition from an economy based on industrial production to a knowledge and service-based society has fostered the emerging of new forms of innovation not only based on technological, marketing or R&D issues. The concepts of non-technological innovation, people-centred innovation and social innovation put a large emphasis on the human scale. Initiatives are thus characterized by processes that actively involve individuals and/or communities in co-designing, co-creating and co-producing products and services.

When referring to local contexts, local communities become the main actor of these processes, supporting a community-based perspective on innovation (Moulaert & Sekia, 2003; Villari, 2013, Manzini & Meroni, 2014).

The limit is that because of the contextual nature of activities undertaken, results are context-based and often not replicable in other similar situations. The outputs derive from iterative processes that synergically merge research and practice in line with specific contextual issues.

Their plus is that they imply the involvement of different stakeholders (designers, practitioners, public and private actors and citizens), taking part to participative processes, where they can play different roles such as decision makers, strategists, planners, facilitators, coaches, mentors.

The role of designers can be wider than usual as well. Tan (2009) has identified seven roles for the designer in social innovation initiatives (Co-creator, Researcher, Entrepreneur, Capability Builder, Facilitator, Provocateur and

Strategist) highlighting his capability to 'communicate', 'catalyse' and 'enable' the design practice and contribution in the public and social sector.

Action-research is considered a research approach based on collaboration and participatory activities that connect theory and practice. Interesting features of action-research are related to its experimental nature, and the attention it puts on knowledge sharing and community learning processes. Several scholars (Argyris, 1985; Friedman 2001; Reason & Bradbury 2006) consider actors involved in the action-research process in terms of *community of practice* or *community of inquiry*. Action-research is described as a cyclical and iterative process consisting in a succession of hypotheses, experimentation and verification (Kolb, 1984) where observation, interpretation, and action (Stringer, 1999) are reiterated over time in order to add new knowledge step by step.

When applied to local interventions, action-research allows acquiring knowledge about the context, local resources and the value of territorial capital (Villari, 2013) and to propose solutions that are coherent to the real needs of the community analysed. From a design perspective, action-research can support designers and researchers to better understand the contextual needs of local communities and to co-create and co-design tailored solutions. From a local perspective, communities are enabled to acquire new competences, and to envision solutions according to their specific needs playing an active role throughout the action-research process.

## SOCIAL FOOD CLUB: A SOCIAL KITCHEN TO SUPPORT LOCAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Social Food Club is a 18 months project aimed at supporting social innovation in Dergano and Bovisa, two adjacent neighbourhoods in Milan. They are characterized by the high presence of multi-ethnic communities that represent about the 40% of the local population. The main objective of the research is to develop the pilot project of a social enterprise based on collaborative food services. The pilot aims at involving foreign communities living in the neighbourhoods and people in search for a job or who need to re-enter into the job market. To support the development of new local services and social innovation processes, some statements guided the overall process:

- Discovering what local areas offer in terms of resources and competences;
- Adopting a participative approach in every phase of the process;
- Connecting and enabling the dialogue among different stakeholders to support their active participation and engagement;
- Enabling people to improve their skills in terms of design activities;
- Supporting solutions that have a good opportunity to be implemented in the future according to their feasibility and repeatability in other contexts.

In the following paragraphs the first stages of the Social Food Club action-research process are presented. The approach and tools adopted are described and ongoing results and future opportunities are discussed.

## THE RESEARCH PROCESS

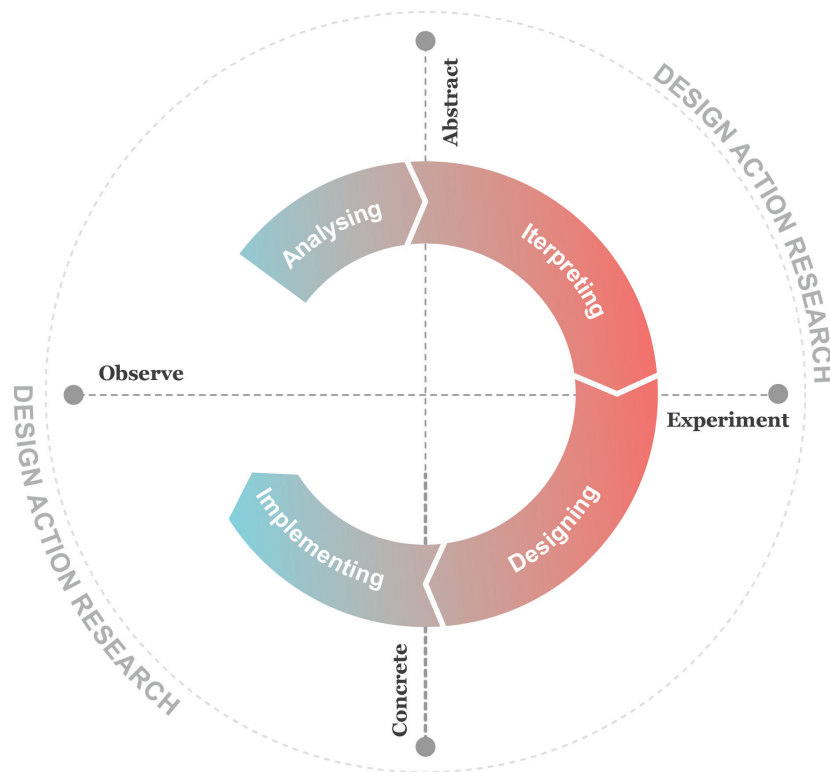


FIGURE 1 - Action research cycle (source: Villari, 2014)

The overall action-research process is structured in four main phases, including analysing and interpreting phases (research and understand) and designing and implementing phases (action and knowledge sharing) (Villari, 2014).

The method used for data collection consists in structured and non-structured interviews mainly addressed to local communities, associations, and local enterprises. Interviews were conducted on the field through questionnaires tailored to the different users involved (citizens, ethnic communities, ethnic groups working with local associations). Each interview was documented with pictures and transcribed. Tools like workshops were then used to actively involve local associations and policy-makers. Workshop activities were documented with pictures and reports. Moreover cultural probes were adopted to gather data from a more detailed user perspective. They were collected and analyzed to identify design opportunities not emerging from interviews.

Referring to researchers/designers, adopting an action-research approach for local projects means:

- structuring a process dealing with the analysis of local opportunities and weaknesses;
- interpreting and synthesising gathered data;
- envisioning solutions able to solve specific problems for the target area;
- developing emerging ideas.

In this paragraph the ongoing process of the Social Food Club action-research is described through different stages: research (field and desk), scenario building, service idea generation and service description.

Starting from the premises presented above, the research process has focused on issues regarding social innovation, social entrepreneurship and food services and experiences.

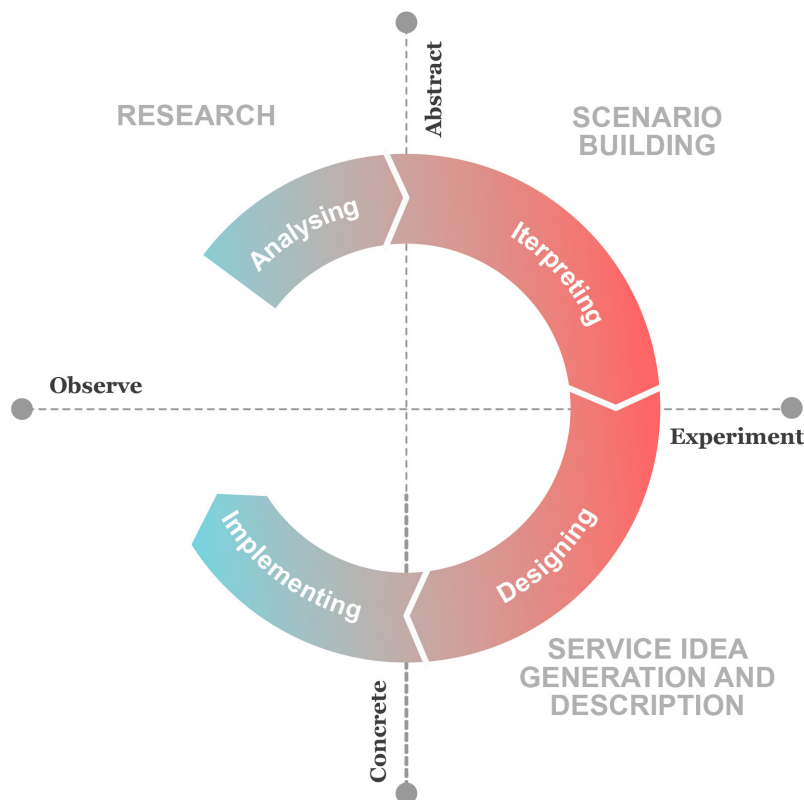


FIGURE 2 - Stages of the ongoing research process

#### Field and desk research.

The core of the research has focused on collecting promising cases related to food, social innovation and social entrepreneurship in urban areas. The result is a collection of sixty-five examples including food-chain services located in urban contexts. In general, examples are characterized by:

- the social aim of the business (i.e. business addresses to fragile communities or involves these communities in providing services);
- the involvement of multicultural aspects in the service;
- social innovation initiatives related to food in urban context especially focused on Milan area.

Cases in the last category have been deepened through direct interviews with main actors involved in order to understand their business models, design issues behind the service, the development process and the network involved to kick-start the initiatives. All cases have been visualized through cards containing the main information on the initiatives and highlighting crucial issues useful to support decisions in future steps of the research.

Another activity that supported the desk research was the deep analysis of business opportunities in the neighbourhoods. A map of the food business in Dergano and Bovisa has been created together with a repository of empty spaces that could host the future enterprise. What emerged from this activity is the understanding of the internal neighbourhoods' resources and external drivers/opportunities useful to structure design strategies for future implementation.

**Cosa c'è nel tuo cestino?**  
 Ci hai vedere che cosa hai comprato? In che quantità?  
 Ci dici perché sei venuto/a a fare la spesa qui?

**Cosa hai comprato e in quale quantità?**

generici		panettina	bevande
_____	_____	1. Pane	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
frutta e verdura	carne e pesce	cibo etnico	altro
_____	1. Vitello	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

**Perchè fatto questa spesa?**

- Consumo giornaliero
- Per un pasto specifico
- Consumo settimanale
- Per una festa
- Consumo veloce
- Cena/pranzo per ospiti
- Prodotti mancanti
- 

**Quanto hai speso?**

4€

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**Social Food Club**  
 Dergano-Bovisa

**Guerrilla Ethnography - 5 min.**

Data 21/01    Luogo  Gr. distribuzione     Neg. Etnico  
 Ora 18:07    VIA IMBONATI     Mercato Rionale   

**Chi sei?**  
 Dici qualcosa che riguarda te e la tua famiglia.

Nome KADIRI  
 Cognome ISMAIL  
 Età 38  
 Sesso M  
 Cittadinanza MAROCCHINA  
 Occupazione PIASTRELLISTA  
 Quartiere di residenza DERGANO  
 Da quando? 6 ANNI  
 Nucleo familiare 4 (AMICI)  
 E-mail  
 Cellulare 3386147383  
 Dove possiamo trovarci nel quartiere?

FIGURE 3 - Questionnaire dedicated to obtain information about the food consumption in the neighbourhoods

Simultaneously to the mapping interviews were conducted to investigate the multicultural communities living in Dergano and Bovisa, and community behaviours related to food activities (buying, preparing, cultivating, learning). Contextual interviews - mainly conducted in local markets and multi-ethnic shops - and cultural probes (involving people living in the neighbourhoods) were structured to gather different levels of information: some dedicated to

briefly understanding the food consumption in the neighbourhoods and others dedicated to explore the food lifestyle of different communities.



FIGURE 4 - Cultural Probes designed to investigating the people behaviours related to the food consumption in the neighbourhoods

These activities required a big effort in terms of planning, design, and organization. Some local organizations working within multicultural communities were involved through dedicated interviews and questionnaires adapted to be used during Italian language courses for foreign women. The overall result was a citizen-based picture about how people live in local areas and how they are linked or interested in food activities and entrepreneurship.

#### Scenario building: analysing and interpreting data.

As mentioned before, quantitative data gathered were mainly related to socio-demographic issues in Dergano and Bovisa and related business activities concerning the food sector. Moreover, a list of empty spaces in the two areas was created to map opportunities for the creation of a new business starting through existing resources. Data collected were summarized in graphics and maps and shared with local policy-makers and associations. The picture emerged describes a very multi-ethnic place where more than the half of new-borns have foreign parents. In the two neighbourhoods, there are many activities already working on similar topics, and this represents a good starting point to involve competences that can support the food service development. Finally, there is availability of some public empty spaces that could be adapted for creating new businesses, and also some local associations own unused spaces that could be shared to integrate other initiatives.

From the qualitative research, results highlight barriers for Italian and foreign communities in sharing their food cultures, mostly because of a lack of knowledge about products, the lack of a common place where different culture can mix, share knowledge and promote practical activities and the mistrust towards 'unknown' food.

#### Service ideas generation and description

According to results emerging from the research phases, a creative phase started. This phase involved designers and researchers, some key representatives



of local communities and some external experts working on food issues. Results were used by designers and researchers to create business scenarios, namely describing some directions guiding the service idea development phase.

Four scenarios have emerged (described in Table 1):

- i. Social Food Club as a didactic kitchen that involves local ethnic communities and local ethnic food shops;
- ii. Social Food Club as a hub for reinforcing local food networks;
- iii. Social Food Club Academy as a place where food trainings are delivered by chef to help disadvantaged people in finding a new job;
- iv. Social Food Truck as a delivery system that connects the local restaurant to a food truck that delivers food in the two areas.

Scenarios have been described and shared among stakeholders through a workshop involving local associations, citizens and policy-makers. Different ideas about new services for the neighbourhood were discussed with the purpose of highlighting challenges and solving specific issues for the local. According to feedback obtained, one of the four scenarios has been selected as the most promising for a potential scaling-up. The criteria for the selection were:

- availability of resources (spaces, people, time);
- level of interest by the local community;
- balance between long and short term activities;
- link with some topics of current policies.

Considering opportunities and constraints, the final concept proposed consists in the creation of a social enterprise to be located in a local association headquarter. In this place people can attend courses and programs about food issues thanks to the set-up a didactic kitchen connected to a small restaurant. The idea is also to connect training to other initiatives aimed at helping local associations in delivering the already existing offering in order to reinforce relationships among local actors.

The transition from research to practice involved also architects, food providers and business experts to support the research team in the definition of the project's social and business sustainability. The service concept was revised according to technical reviews, in order to plan future steps. These will be related to the business feasibility and a more detailed benchmarking, to seek possible investors and to involve associations, local actors and third parties that could act as the service provider of Social Food Club.

## FINAL REMARKS: DESIGN AS AN ENABLER FOR COMMUNITY-BASED INITIATIVES.

The Social Food Club project is part of a growing generation of community-based services, small networks and local empowerment that aim at fostering social innovation. In this paper an example of design contribution for the development of social innovation initiatives at local level has been presented. The initial stages

Table 1. Business scenarios identified during the concept generation phase.

<b>Social Food Club SCENARIOS</b>	<b>ACTORS INVOLVED</b>	<b>SERVICE IDEA (how it works)</b>	<b>OFFERING (what it delivers)</b>
<i>1. Social Food Club: sharing restaurant and social market</i>	SFC staff Citizens Local shops	Food is prepared in the Social Food Club Kitchen involving the local communities that also participate in the delivery phase. While they are engaged in the service, they receive food vouchers. The local multi-ethnic shops can also sell some products in the space.	It offers multi-ethnic food for people that live, study and work in the neighbourhoods. Moreover people can buy a selection of products from different areas and receive information about them and how to prepare them.
<i>2. Social Food Club: The Food Hub</i>	SFC Local ethnic restaurants	Food is mainly prepared by local ethnic restaurants. SFC role is to manage and coordinate the service processes such as booking, delivery, pick up. SCF acts like a hub to reinforce the local activities and create a stronger local network of ethnic restaurants and shops. Restaurants will pay a fee to join the network and SFC will guarantee a certain number of orders per day/week	Ethnic food delivery during the lunch time tailored for students and people working in the neighbourhoods.
<i>3. Social Food Club Academy</i>	SFC Chef teams Local associations	Food is prepared in the SFC kitchen by a team of chef who are also trainers for unemployed people who want to learn about food processes. The idea is to create a link between the SFC Kitchen and the job market related to the food system.	Delivery of hi-quality food with budget costs. Moreover, some food is donated to disadvantaged families or young people.
<i>4. Social Food Truck.</i>	SFC Food truck	Food is prepared in the didactic kitchen and delivered in the SFC restaurant. Moreover, through a food truck - able to reach a wider audience in the neighbourhood – food is provided in key places of the two areas involved (i.e. close to university, big companies and organizations)	Ethnic food delivered in the restaurant and by the food truck.

of a practice-based research are described with the purpose of a social enterprise and its related services. The action-research was developed to tailor and develop the design process of community-based services focused on existing communities' resources.

Service design is a multidisciplinary activity that can support the introduction of social innovation at different scales, from policy level to small actions, to advocate social changes and the birth of new enterprises (Leadbeater, 2007; Mulgan et al., 2007). When social innovation is related to small contexts, results are strictly connected to the local *milieu* and the capacity of citizens to support and manage the change. Adopting a community-centred approach in terms of service design (Villari, 2012; 2013) means re-defining services focus, the role of designers and the way to generate the solutions.

Designing services for local areas entails a deep analysis and knowledge acquisition about the territorial context and its resources in terms of tangible and intangible elements. At this level, services are related to a wider community of stakeholders with different interests and roles. For designers means being part of a wider learning process in which tools, languages, knowledge are shared among participants. In this perspective, people-centred design can be described as a process that enables citizens to play a crucial role in every phase of the service development.

For these reasons, providing feedback throughout the research and design process is crucial, in order to allow stakeholders and designers promoting social innovation initiatives that are negotiated and co-created by a wider community. This is not only related to economical aspects, but it also concerns cultural, social, environmental, and cognitive issues. As a consequence, it must be considered that outputs of the design process cannot be measured only in terms of physical and tangible artefacts, but also in terms of awareness and newly-created knowledge created. Moreover, the adoption of a service design perspective, allows people perceiving the design process as a synergic system of products, interactions, strategies, plans, tools.

At this stage, the action-research can be considered as part of a 'scaling out' process, namely social innovation is associated to a novel idea that address social problem on a small scale (Westley & Antadze, 2013). Differently, the 'scaling up' process needs to be designed and envisioned also considering the intrinsic uncertainty of the journey and 'the fact that scaling up social innovation is not a predictable and straightforward process' (Westley & Antadze, 2013, p. 10).

The main reflections derived from the lesson learned during this early stage of the Social Food Club process can be summarized in few points. They refer to the role of design(er) as enabler of community-based activities, that create the conditions to kick-start, develop and support local initiatives. Main points are:

1. adopting design tools to collect qualitative and quantitative data, through the involvement of local communities, represents a way to create awareness about the design approach and business opportunities in local areas. The engagement process and research tools need to be customized to support on

one side citizens' participation, and on the other side sharing data gathered to the widest audience.

2. Supporting collaboration among different stakeholders from public and private sectors since the early stage of the project. The research, the service scenario and the service idea are created through a *collaborative platform* in which people can participate and share their experiences and competences. In Social Food Club, the role of university has been crucial, as a 'local' and 'diffuse' design research centre able to create local networks and to share design tools that people (experts and non-experts) can reuse in other situations. The purpose is to advocate the role of design as a lever for innovation at local scale and increase the awareness about creating new services that brings value to local contexts in a long term perspective.

3. Enabling mutual learning processes in which on one side researchers acquire knowledge about the local context and its challenges, people's needs, opportunities and difficulties; on the other side policy-makers and local actors learn about design. In this framework local associations and citizens are involved in imagining possible and concrete solutions to create new jobs. They are part of a virtuous cycle where communities play the main role in the development of local initiatives.

Future expected outcomes concerns the service setup, the business strategy, the design of the space and activities delivered, as well as the link with multicultural stakeholders. The local service will thus need to engage different stakeholders and merge economical and social aspects, considering citizens' needs and local activities already in place. The main challenge for the project will be to move from a 'scaling out' to a 'scaling up' process.

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# THE VIRTUOUS CIRCLE

CUMULUS CONFERENCE 2015

## DESIGN CULTURE AND EXPERIMENTATION

Design comes out of the interaction between a practice, which seeks to change the state of things, and a culture, which makes sense of this change. The way this happens evolves with time: practices and cultures evolve and so do the ways they interact; and the attention that is paid at different moments to one or other of these interacting polarities also evolves. In the current period of turbulent transformation of society and the economy, it is important to go back and reflect on the cultural dimension of design, its capacity to produce not only solutions but also meanings, and its relations with pragmatic aspects. Good design does not limit itself to tackling functional and technological questions, but it also always adopts a specific cultural approach that emerges, takes shape and changes direction through a continuous circle of experimenting and reflecting. Because the dimension and complexity of the problems is growing, it is becoming evident that to overcome them it is, above all, necessary to bring new sense systems into play. This is ground on which design, by its very nature, can do much. Indeed, the ability to create a virtuous circle between culture and practical experimentation is, or should be, its main and distinctive characteristic. However, for this really to happen it is necessary to trigger new discussion and reflection about the nature and purpose of design practice and culture.