



# Cumulus Proceedings

# ShangHai

**Young Creators For Better City  
& Better Life  
2010**

Edited by  
Yongqi LOU  
Xiaocun ZHU

**Cumulus**  
*Cumulus 2010 Shanghai Conference*  
**CUMULUS**

Cumulus Proceedings

# SHANGHAI

Young Creators For Better City, Better Life  
2010

Edited by  
Yongqi LOU  
Xiaocun ZHU



**Aalto University**  
School of Art and Design



**College of Design and Innovation**  
Tongji University

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## Anna Meroni Paola Trapani Public spaces as common good

### The role of creative communities and collaborative networks

#### Abstract

The essay presents a social innovation led approach to the design of public space, following the reflection developed for the research Human Cities (2009-2010) within the EU action programme Culture. Assuming social innovation to be a set of promising new ways in which people and communities engage to strengthen themselves to achieve a result, often as a bottom-up initiative, it discusses what motivates these groups to take action over public space, and how design can support them.

This perspective implies the power of the social fabric to make an effect on the condition and development of a physical public space, instead of the other way round.

This action of (re)shaping public space underlines its value as a common good, meaning that all the members of a community can make use of it. It is defined as an inseparable unity of social and spatial elements. As a countercheck to this observation, we find that, when the sense of community and empowerment is lost, the frail essence of this kind of good is no longer recognized and it becomes continuously subject to acts of violence.

The analytical phase of the research presented in this essay is based on the observation of case studies, from where we synthesize a reflection on the role of creative communities and collaborative networks in generating and promoting new typologies of public space. Community can be built on: spaces and common services shared and opened to their neighbourhoods; local resources and skills connected to a wider network; initiatives aimed to promote the value of a place.

In conclusion, the paper proposes a possible pragmatic strategy to create design contexts and tools to support similar phenomena.

#### From Creative Communities and beyond

A recent EU funded research project - Human Cities, (2009-2010) within the action programme "Culture" – gave us the chance to further the reflection on social innovation and sustainable development within urban contexts, with a specific emphasis on public space (Coirier, Goličnik Marušić, & Nikšič, 2010). This paper takes the reflections started within that context even further (Meroni & Trapani, 2010).

The way we have been dealing with social innovation phenomena so far has led us to develop the concept of Creative Communities. Over the years we have matured a consolidated background to this field, collecting and analysing cases of social innovation from all over the world<sup>1</sup>. We define Creative Communities as groups of people who creatively organise themselves to obtain a result, exploring the transition towards sustainable ways of living and producing. Moreover social innovation can drive technological and production innovation in view of sustainability (Meroni, 2007).

Focussing on communities has led us to talk about a Community Centred Design, where the attention shifts from the individual "user" to the "community" as the new subject of interest for a design that is more aware of current social dynamics (Meroni, 2008).

This experience has taught us important lessons: the most interesting, meaningful and, to some extent, surprising is that there is a deep, lasting and identity-building sense of enjoyment and satisfaction in "taking care" of people/things/places and in "putting effort" into doing things. Both are ways of assuming responsibility towards the community and society in general and thus towards common goods, public space being one of them. This is where the importance of creating a social innovation-led approach for design has become crucial: designers can do a lot to start, support and spread its application. Within a society where pleasure and wellbeing are mainly conceived (and proposed) as "being served" and "consuming things" this lesson is a sort of Copernican revolution that can trigger a new way of conceiving and developing innovation in different social and business fields.

The process behind this behaviour, according to psychologists (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), lies at the root of self-fulfilment. Subjective well-being is related to a belief in interpersonal relationships: by helping each other, a community of support and strength has the capacity to bring people together around an idea, to get people moving, to get together to resolve a problem. Not only does the community find specific ways of building values, but also a sense of personal well-being is instilled. An attitude of this kind arises when we discover how to determine our own lives, instead of seeing ourselves as "consumers" of products; when we make creative use of objects

in the plenitude of society, according to what Inghilleri (2003) calls “sense endowed materialism”, using artefacts instead of being used by them.

Necessarily following on from this set of conditions, awareness towards common goods increases and all commons acquire a new importance in the personal and collective sense of wellbeing and belonging. This trend becomes manifest in what we can call the emerging economy<sup>2</sup>, which is founded on three pillars:

- a social character that is closely linked to the social innovation we have been studying;

- an environmental re-orientation that leads to a green-revolution, and a new territorial focus;

- technological innovation that comes from an unprecedented Such an economy calls for a new kind of product/service system, enabling people to address the lives they want to live. The accent shifts from products or services to “the support” they provide to people, in order to lead their own lives as they wish, and to navigate a complex world. Manzini talks about platforms for actions, enabling people to express themselves and bring their own capabilities into play in creating the solutions for their own lives, becoming part of the answer rather than part of the problem. Here, services acquire a unique importance: service provision rather than goods is becoming fundamental to economic exchange<sup>3</sup>. Value is co-created with and defined by the user, rather than embedded in outputs, and that’s why services become the paradigm of this emerging economy (Meroni & Sangiorgi, forthcoming 2011).

### **Public space as a special kind of common**

The social economy is an emerging phenomenon also characterised by the following elements: a strong role for values and missions in clustering groups active in certain fields; an emphasis on collaboration and on repeated interactions to accomplish bottom-up actions, aiming to achieve a common goal; a preference for care and maintenance rather than one-off consumption; the blur of boundaries between production and consumption; the intensive use of distributed networks to sustain and manage relationships, capable of being realized by broadband, mobile and other means of communication (Murray, 2009).

Public space seems to be one of the favourite hot spots of this economy and of social innovation, given its intrinsic nature of space “of and for” relationships.

We define public space as a special type of common good. Public space is traditionally a common, defined as a collectively owned resource. We believe that the novelty lies in considering it from a broader perspective which privileges the cultural and behavioural spheres over the spatial one, in a holistic vision of what a “common good” is. Thus it is what happens (or could happen) in the public space that reflects its true significance for the community. Public space is therefore both a social, political, and physical space “where things get done and where people have a sense of belonging and have an element of control over their lives”<sup>4</sup>.

Public space, in the times of social economy, promotes the values and the missions shared by the local community, fostering a sense of identity and belonging: we can see this very clearly, for instance, in the diffused system of community gardens in the Lower East Side in New York City; in the seafront promenades of many Italian towns, where people bring tables and chairs to eat and chat outdoors; or in the cultural and social mix to be found on the beaches of Rio de Janeiro. Public places are the accessible fields of opportunity and interaction, where people can meet to share experiences and visions, where they can try-out new paths to solve their own problems and improve the quality of life. Given its inherent character of accessibility, public space is the natural stage for social interaction and collaboration, promoting buzz, reciprocal influence and unexpected delight in the most dynamic neighbourhoods of our cities. As a countercheck to this statement, we can observe that the meaning of public space is continuously eroded when the sense of being a group of empowered people with a common interest, living together in a given place, is lost. Suddenly public space starts to lose its valuable status of common good, becoming either a no man’s land, a place of fear, crime and degradation or the domain of building speculation.

Over the decades, the ability to reshape urban space to new needs has always been an effective way to promote an attitude of care and maintenance rather than one-shot consumption. The topic of land waste is certainly crucial in the present environmental crisis, but the rising awareness of its limited availability can prevent disappointed citizens moving to the countryside only if the community is able to make cities desirable places to live in.

While other kinds of common goods, such as air and water, are “given”, public space is commonly “produced”. For this reason its meaning, allocation and use has to respect the needs of a vast audience, which has led to the birth of PARK(ing) DAY<sup>5</sup> in San Francisco, where 70% of public space is dedicated to vehicles, while only a fraction of that space is allocated to the public realm. The situation is even worse in many other metropolitan areas around the world. Anyone can participate in this strictly non-commercial project, which has been expanding worldwide, intended to promote creativity, civic engagement, critical thinking, unscripted social interactions, generosity and play. The creativity of those who live and run the cities will determine their future success and attractiveness. Creative groups are often the starters of renovation processes in contemporary cities, later involving a wider range of social groups. However, we often forget that creativity is not an exclusive domain of artists and innovation and is not exclusively technological. The emerging paradigm shifts attention toward social innovation, which mostly takes place in the commonly produced good of public space (Landry, 2000).

### **Cases and purposes**

To investigate the different shapes that public space could take as a common, we have made an extended observation of cases and then selected those with a clearer focus.

In this investigation, particular attention has been given to cases produced in Milan and discussed within the context of the research, Human Cities. Observation has been directed to situations where creative communities have taken action towards public space with different purposes. This has led us to the following categorization, which helped in understanding the rationale of the different actions, though not assumed to be exhaustive:

To produce goods and services for the household economy – the household sub-economy and the extension of family productive space into public space, as in an extended home: i.e. allotment gardens and community gardens;

- USA, New York City, Lower East Side Community Gardens.

A network of Community Gardens in public plots, created and maintained by the local residents, has been flourishing since the Seventies, greening the neighborhood and providing it with a rich social space;

- France, Paris, Jardin Nomade - Nomadic Garden.

Residents transform an abandoned plot into a shared neighbourhood garden.



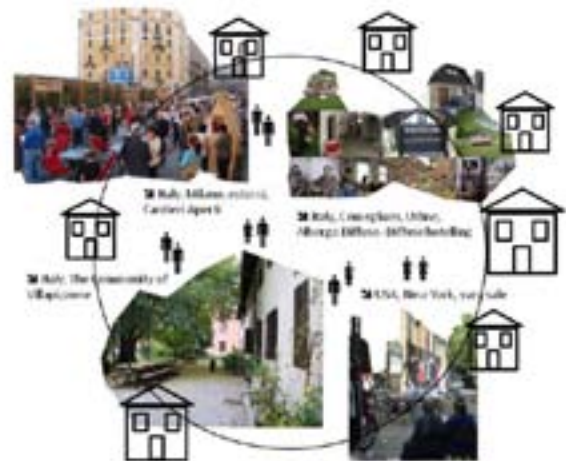
To host services and activities shared by community housing – the public space of a neighbourhood community formally or informally structured as a co-housing community: e.g. playgrounds for children, barter and yard markets, open access workplaces;

- Italy, Milano, Cantieri Aperti - Beyond the building site. A project of the group of activists esteri that aims to turn temporary building sites into physical and ideal spaces the neighbourhood can enjoy or use to host events;

•Italy, Milano, The Community of Villapizzone. A community to share everything with everybody, The Villapizzone community is a place in which people live sharing everything they have;

- Italy, Comeglians, Udine, Albergo Diffuso - Diffuse hotel.

A system to manage accommodation for tourists in the local territory, using private houses and existing resources;



To create contexts in which elective communities can express themselves, get organised and find synergies to help each other – the realm of public art and of amateur activities: e.g. flash mobs, arts performances, sport sessions, knitting happenings, music performances;

•Lithuania, Vilnius, Street Musician Day. Bycoordinating the performances of different local bands, this event gives everyone a possibility to express him/her self in music;

•The Netherlands, Eindhoven, Graffiti Galerie. A place in the city centre where graffiti artworks are allowed. Tolerating the spraying of graffiti in certain places, even promoting the artistic value of the works, is a way to prevent vandalism;



To reclaim the streets for different uses – the city re-appropriated for more human activities: e.g. proximity-vacation spots, spaces to rest and relax, public dining tables, public dancing floors, cycling and walking areas, open-air cinemas;

•Brazil, São Paulo, Elevado Costa e Silva (Minhoçao, Big Heartworm). A violent wound in the city that is now closed to traffic on Sundays, by the will of the municipality, when it opens to the public for bicycle recreation;

•Italy, Milan, Film Festivals. A series of initiatives of the group esteri, which bring the cinema to the streets and public spaces, creating unconventional open-air theaters and places of encounter;

- Italy, Milan, Tango Illegal. It is an amateur dance group

that organizes tango nights in the heart of Milan and in the surrounding area gathering a number of dancers in public spaces temporarily equipped with hi-fi music players;

- Italy, Milan, The Public Design Festival, Duepercinque. An initiative launched in 2009 by the group esterni, to collect and show ideas about how to temporarily use parking lots for purposes more oriented to public wellbeing and benefit.



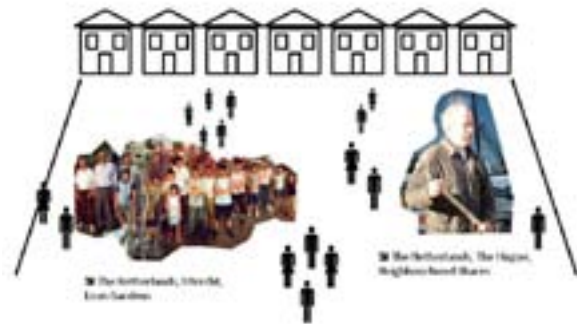
To express a political position, through activities and/or art performances – public space as a context of constructive protest, cultural and social engagement, where proposals are presented through “demonstrative prototypes” of possible improvements: e.g. guerrilla gardening, reforestation initiatives;

- Italy, Milan and Turin, Guerrilla Gardening. Free gardening attack (mainly in the night time) in different places of the cities, aiming to embellish neglected or forgotten areas with plants and flowers;
- Italy, Milan, Darsenapioniera. April 2010. A group of active citizens gathers to envision new possible uses of a very popular public place in the centre of the city, in order to subtract it from building speculation;
- Italy, Milan, Sorridi, ti stanno filmando! - Smile, you're on air! January 2009. An intervention by the group esterni to think about social control in public space through video-control. It is a guerrilla action placing new road signs at the bottom of CCTV cameras, similar in size and graphics to real ones but with the message: “Smile, you're on air”;
- Turkey, İzmir, Balçova Afforestation Society. Afforestation of drought areas and care of plants in the Balçova district by people living in the area.



To enhance living contexts – public space as an everyday panorama calling for quality, beyond the distinction between public and private: e.g. loan gardens cultivated by neighbours; cleaning days and public space maintenance by the inhabitants, open museums and galleries;

- The Netherlands, The Hague, Neighbourhood Shares. Inhabitants improve living conditions in their neighbourhood by taking over responsibility from local authorities for certain neighbourhood maintenance tasks;
- The Netherlands, Utrecht, Loan Gardens. Public green maintained by the residents makes a neighbourhood more beautiful and welcoming;



To improve security, safety and efficiency – public space as concierges and infrastructures maintained by the inhabitants: neighbourhood watch, collectively managed infrastructures and maintenance services;

- Finland, Helsinki, The Bearpark Sponsors. Elderly people, the police and the municipality networking for the benefit of public space, with the aim of promoting the participation of local people in taking care of their surroundings;
- Germany, Cologne Mülheim, MFG Mülheimer Fahrrad Gruppe – MFG Cycle Association. Paths and services for urban cyclists are better maintained thanks to the care and surveillance of the residents;
- Turkey, The Kerkenes Eco-Center and Environmental Studies. The Kerkenes Eco-Center is in a village called Sahmuratli, in Yozgat. By 2003 the eco-center established a concept of researching and promoting renewable energy and sustainable village life, where inhabitants actively contribute.



These cases present public space as an inseparable unity of meaning and spatial context, and of social and technical conditions, breaking the conventional boundary between private and public goods. Social innovation and public activism systematically transfer behaviours and purposes between the two realms of the household and the State.

It has been argued (Murray et al. 2008) that today social innovation stems from many sources: for instance, new forms of mutual action between individuals within the household economy – whether in the form of open source software, or web-based social networking around specific issues – are increasing in number and importance. Generally speaking, the household is becoming a fundamental cell of social innovation (Leadbeater, 2008). Moreover, the development of social enterprise operating within the market has been noticeable (Jégou & Manzini, 2008; Murray, 2009). Reaching beyond the limitations of the old categories, we discover that the Market can, to some extent, meet the goals of the social economy.

It is also true that the State is reshaping the concept of public property and the way to 'commensurate' social production, changing its own methods of allocation and control. In other cases, in addition to producing sociality, innovation by social enterprises has provoked responses from the private sector and the State. Finally, as mentioned, the weight of the household within the social economy is growing, both through labour in the household, and via the contribution to social production of informal networks, associations and social movements, and this is the realm of the social production of public space.

Studies in this field are flourishing in several parts of the world, many of them within the international network of DESIS<sup>6</sup> which aim at investigating social innovation from a broader perspective. A specific research on the value and the potential of social innovation for the benefit of the public space is now in progress in New York City, by Parsons The New School for Design. A group of researchers from the DESIS Lab is investigating the impact of creative communities in transforming urban space and lifestyles, with the aim of amplifying the scope and the benefits of these initiatives<sup>7</sup>.

### Networking and connecting

During our research path, we've registered the presence of groups of active citizens in different urban contexts, working to foster awareness of the local community around the topic of public space<sup>8</sup>. We acknowledge to these creative groups the role of hero in the stories, even though they simply perceive in advance what will later become a common opinion.

Given the blurred boundary between production and consumption of public space, we can borrow Alvin Toffler's term 'prosumer' (Toffler, 1980) to define the new kind of aware citizen who knows best what the right solutions are for his/her local situation. Without their action, the mere existence of physical public space is as useful as a piece of hardware without software. The community is the context to orchestrate this plurality of voices, through a democratic process that recognizes equal opportunities to all members, allowing their desires to guide the

creation and implementation of solutions.

The present stage of transformative innovation would not be possible without the spread of networks and global infrastructures for communication and social networking. We have already mentioned the circular relationship between physical space and people living in it, but public spaces are now being redefined and extended thanks to a third applied force: ICT technology. Flash mobs, street festivals, condo and street TVs, meet-up groups of all kinds are the new high-tech actors of the wired public space. Terms like peer-to-peer (distributed networks of equal entities mutually available), de-mediation (taking away the middlemen from retailing), wikis (websites open to easy and collaborative creation), collaborative platforms (on-line or off-line contexts which allow participation), open source (practices that allow contents created to be available to everybody) have moved from the lexicon of distributed systems to every-day life repertoire. It is interesting to observe the shift toward new habits, when people are given the enabling tools to do things together, without needing traditional top-down organizational structures.

According to Clay Shirky<sup>9</sup> a revolution doesn't happen when a society adopts new tools, but only when a society adopts new behaviours, exploiting these possibilities. This is what Jégou and Manzini define social innovation, meaning the various changes, mainly emerging from bottom-up, in the way individuals or communities act to solve a problem or to generate new opportunities (Jégou & Manzini, 2008). The rise of a distributed organisation model, where innovation and knowledge epicentres are widely dispersed and linked by networks, steps back from the imposition of standardised and simplified solutions from the centre. On the contrary, the network acknowledges local communities and neighbours living at the margins as those who have a sense of specificity of time, place, events and beliefs, a kind of insight that central politicians totally lack (Murray, 2009). Local innovative solutions to everyday life problems can be promoted and circulated in different epicentres of the net, fostering a process of social learning, where even the original promoters of the initiative can improve their solution thanks to the shared experiences.

### Strategies and approaches for doing and supporting

How can we, as designers, actively operate to foster such initiatives? How can we intervene in the pattern of society to support or make them flourish? These questions open the debate around the role of the designer in the present context.

It seems to be clear that it's time to adopt new perspectives. Several authors sustain that one possible role of a designer today is to create conditions for people to use creativity and innovate at the local scale, becoming able to recognise and understand the context in which innovations are born and develop tools and methodologies to support these situations (Sang & Manzini, 2009; IDEO 2009).

We believe it's time to support people in doing things and to do things with people. Both situations imply a co-designing capacity that must be put into practice with professional skills and tools, and raise more transversal reflections to be developed. Both

require stimulating a positive attitude in people, systematically building competency and encouraging pro-activity.

Questioning the role of the designer today means questioning also those of the client and user, which leads us to think about how and why we can support people in doing things and do things with people. That's to say that design should become the context of the actions and be better embedded in people's behaviour.

We believe that how to support people in doing things, is the key question. This first reflection is the result of the observation of a variety of initiatives around the world, going under the title of design for service toolkits to support bottom-up innovation<sup>10</sup>. All this material, currently available on the consultancy websites<sup>11</sup>, is aimed to familiarise non-designers with design thinking. Finally, these kits are, organised combinations of problem setting and solving design tools. They target local organisations or, more directly, communities aiming to implement new activities. In addition to this typology of kits, specific activity toolkits, getting-started and step-by-step instructables are commonly available through Internet for free use and open-source<sup>12</sup>.

In spite of the relative novelty of these toolkits, which makes them almost impossible to assess, they guide us to hypothesise the following conceptual structure for action-supporting kits:

- what to do: this is about the main purpose of the supporting activity. We have identified Observing, Communicating, Starting Up, Engaging, Synergising and Mobilising as the main general purposes of a supporting kit<sup>13</sup>. Each and every activity is a complex task in itself. A kit can address a specific activity or be multipurpose. Then again it could be generic, meaning that it doesn't address a specific field of activity, or thematic;

- how to do: this is about providing users with specific design tools or tips, organising them into a step-by-step sequence. When the kit is generic, tools are explained in a methodological perspective, when it is thematic they are more likely to be pragmatic tips, coming from the experience of previous users. Within the category of specific tools we can also embrace the different kinds of digital platforms with several aims (Baek & Manzini, 2009). These tools emphasize the importance of collaboration, co-creation and co-experience as key factors of successful initiatives;

- for whom: this is about the users of the kit, and the skills they are supposed to have or acquire. The more the kit is generic and the purpose extended, the more the user is likely to be someone like a professional design facilitator at the local level. The more the kit is thematic and specific, the more the user is an amateur.

These kits allow designers both to support people in doing things and do things with people. Nevertheless, they imply that a sort of "design demand" is diffused within the community, and thus expressed. They imply, eventually, that design was recognised as a context for the action.

We hold that one way to make this happen is through emulation: the power of visionary and radical ideas that so called "local change-makers" (Drayton, 2010) are proposing lies foremost in their ability to touch, attract and inspire other people, so that they wish copy them in some way. Acknowledging this

power, we propose that the observation, identification and diffusion in a highly communicative way of cases of social innovation is the first step towards effectively "amplifying" such ventures. And that's why initiatives such as the Human Cities Festival, SEP- sustainable everyday project and Amplifying Creative Communities<sup>14</sup> rely on widespread communication as a strategy for engaging people in diffuse design thinking.

Concluding, we believe in the importance of showing that firm commitment and hard work does bring a reasonable chance of success and also that design can help initiatives which bravely challenge the traditional way of acting in public space to flourish.

At present, collaboration and networking are the only feasible and effective ways for these initiatives to work: mutual stimulus, mutual support, resource sharing and affective empowerment of groups are the key ingredients of both their existence and their success.

Basically, designers conceive tools to interact with the environment: artefacts that possess utility, function, culture and emotional qualities. What kind of "tools", whether material or conceptual, can be designed to facilitate mutual support, enable resource sharing and create empathy within the community?

The answer depends on the specific field of intervention but, considering the relational nature of public space and the variety of cases observed so far, we can assume (Leadbeater, 2008) that these tools have to be a peculiar mixture of pre-industrial and post-industrial, with a marked value in "the values". As we have seen in the abovementioned toolkits, they mix and apply advanced technology support (i.e. digital platforms) and pragmatic, intuitive do-it-yourself instructions, emphasizing the importance of collaboration and co-creation. This strategy of support seems to have the potential to make people feel and be active and engaged in the contemporary world.



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## Notation

1. EMUDE emerging user demand for sustainable solutions, EU, VI framework programme, 2004-06; CCSL creative communities for sustainable lifestyles, a project promoted by the Task Force on Sustainable Lifestyles, within the United Nations 10 Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production, 2005-07; LOLA looking for likely alternatives Project within the framework of the EU CCN, Consumer Citizens Network 2005-09; several academic courses, workshops and national research projects.
2. According to different authors this is also defined as "Social Economy" (Murray, 2009; Murray, Mulgan, Caulier-Grice 2008), "Support Economy" (Shoshana, Maxmin 2002), "Co-production Economy" (Leadbeater, 2008; Von Hippel 2005; Ramirez 1999; Vargo & Lush, 2004), "Next Economy" (Manzini in Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011)
3. See Vargo & Lush, 2004, Vargo, Maglio, Archpru Akaka, 2008
4. The Ecologist magazine, Vol 26 No 4 - July/August 1996, "Who Competes?: Changing Landscapes of Corporate Control," by N. Hildyard, C. Hines and T. Lang
5. <http://www.parkingday.org>
6. DESIS: Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability, [www.desis-network.org](http://www.desis-network.org)
7. Amplifying Creative Communities, is the title of the research supported by the Rockefeller Cultural Innovation Grant 2009 for the DESIS Lab of the School of Design Strategies at Parsons the New School for Design. Years 2009-2011
8. Groups like Rebar in San Francisco, esterni in Milan, Prostorozh in Ljubljana, Future Canvas in Melbourne
9. <http://www.shirky.com/>
10. Just to provide a few examples, we can mention: IDEO, in 2009, has issued "HCD Human Centered Design: Toolkit"; Engine Service Design, in 2010, has issued the "Design for Service: for both service and manufacturing businesses"; the D-School of the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford, has issued the "D-School Bootcamp Bootleg".
11. <http://www.ideo.com>, [www.enginegroup.co.uk](http://www.enginegroup.co.uk), <http://dschool.typepad.com/news/boot-camp>
12. [www.instructables.com](http://www.instructables.com), <http://makingpolicypublic.net>, [http://www.wallacecenter.org/our-work/Resource-Library/wallace-publications/handbooks/Farmer11-1\\_Sc.pdf/view](http://www.wallacecenter.org/our-work/Resource-Library/wallace-publications/handbooks/Farmer11-1_Sc.pdf/view)
13. This part of knowledge comes from the collaboration with the research Amplifying Creative Community in NYC.
14. <http://festival.humancities.eu/en/introduction>, <http://www.sustainable-everyday.net>, <http://amplifyingcreativecommunities.net>

