SERVICE MAKERS
City dwellers and designers creating a Local Distribution System

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Abstract

In this paper we are seeking to draw a parallel between the self-production of objects - making (Micelli, 2011) - and the self-production of services, as in collaborative services.

Both processes result from a renewed activism on the part of users, which we find in Creative Communities (Meroni, 2007). We will briefly describe the urban context in which this kind of "active" citizenship has matured, both in the design and in the development of goods and services, with reference to scenarios of Sharing Economy and Collaborative Consumption (Botsman and Rogers, 2011).

We particularly wish to highlight how the collaborative services brought into being by ordinary people constitute a form of service making, with a truly semi-entrepreneurial impact on the city and surrounding area. One significant example is the Local Distribution System created within the research project "Feeding Milan. Energy for change", a strategic design project for place development (Meroni, 2011) aiming at creating a network of services to connect farmers in the peri-urban area directly to consumers in the town.

The role of designers in this activity is still being defined, but it is increasingly moving towards that of facilitator and community coach (Cantù et al., forthcoming 2012), a figure participating in both the co-production and the development of the service. The exit strategy for designers from these processes and the possible future of services born in such contexts remains an open question. We particularly wonder whether it would be possible to foster a pre-incubation activity that could transform informal collaborative services into actual social enterprise start ups.

We are therefore seeking to prefigure potential evolutions of service making, among which the possibility of creating support structures for these activities. To continue our initial parallel, these

could take the form of Fablabs for city services, better defined as "Urban Collaborative Service Districts".

1. The context: the city as a place of services and Creative Communities

Cities are service places par excellence.

They constitute "the prevailing horizon of this period in human history, the landscape where 50% of the world's population lives…places miraculously alive with activity and capacity to welcome..." (La Cecla, 2009, p.XV).

Places where it is necessary to provide and benefit from services.

A city is also a narrative place par excellence.

It "contains millions of stories" and possesses "a symbolic dimension because it represents the collective imagination of millions of people. A city is the superimposition of material and imaginary landscapes" (La Cecla, 2009, p.XV). The protagonists of such a place are its citizens who, through their actions, determine the identity of the spaces they live in.

The contemporary city is undergoing a profound transformation, characterized by new needs and desires. To solve their problems cities need experts of various kinds who collaborate to find solutions, "yet ordinary citizens are also experts, they are expert in their own concerns and what they want..."(Landry, 2009, p.246).

This is why city dwellers are the protagonists of a new design age that is witnessing the birth of Creative Communities: "people who cooperatively invent, enhance and manage innovative solutions for new ways of living " (Meroni, 2007, p.30). Confronted with a problem inside a city, what is happening is that it is solved from the bottom up, starting to innovate what is already there without waiting for the arrival of a bigger, top-down change.

Creative communities are an original result of the cities because they are born and develop more quickly in contexts characterized by diffused knowledge, a high level of connectivity, a certain degree of tolerance towards non-conventional ways of living (Jégou & Manzini, 2008).

They try to improve the quality of urban life, making it more sustainable, pleasant and generative of sociality. To use an expression by Cibic (2010), they seek to transform the city into a "lovely place". Where by "lovely place" we mean *a lovely place because the life that goes on there is full of*

opportunities, where people can meet together and do things together, where children can play in a safe environment, where there is greenery and where the architecture, regardless of its style, provides the support for telling a story, creating a place whose beauty lies in the overall quality it generates (Cibic, 2010, p.21).

A place where the aesthetic quality is the harmony that comes from satisfying expectations.

Our intention therefore is to outline some of the characteristics of Creative Communities, in relation to what has been happening in contemporary society in recent years, in order to describe better the changes investing services provided in cities.

In a way Creative Communities are the symptom of a transformation, defined by Maffesoli (2007) as the decline of individualism and a return to tribal times. He maintains *that the autonomy of the middle classes is being succeeded by the heteronomy of tribalism, however you wish to call it – districts, neighborhoods, interest groups, networks – we are witnessing the return of affective and emotional investment* (Maffesoli, 2007, p.190).

The stress is now placed on us and on everyday life, which means refocusing on proximity. As Maffesoli (2007, p.194) says, "the contemporary age privileges the spatial and its various territorial modulations." We are trying to give meaning back to district, to neighbourhood practices and to the affective component they generate because this enables us to create a network of relationships.

This "sentiment of tribal belonging" can be comforted by technological development offering speed of contact and of the supply-demand cycle. Thus it is the ICT system that in a way has made possible this return to the tribe, to micro-groups. It is not by chance that the network paradigm can be seen as a re-enactment of the ancient concept of community: an existential and operative aggregation, a model that comes from archaic, pre-industrial cultures, based on trade/exchange and community conviviality.

Creative Communities are the heirs of such cultures and in bringing these up to date technologically they do not stop with the ordinary use of existing technologies, but they go on to use them in original, unprecedented ways "putting products and services normally available on the market into a new kind of system" (Jégou & Manzini, 2008, p.30). Furthermore, thanks to the web, they have acquired access to a capital of knowledge that would otherwise have remained the exclusive privilege of what Giddens (1994) calls the expert systems, which are currently at crisis point, at least in their traditional form. Indeed, the free circulation of information is forming new expert systems.

They are the people who animate Creative Communities, the highly innovative working agglomerates that contribute to the building of systems of sustainable development or, as Manzini and Jégou (2003) suggest, a body of products, services and knowledge that enable us to live better together, consuming less and regenerating the quality of the contexts in which they are used.

The experience of Creative Communities has taken a more definite and less pioneering shape in recent years as part of the Sharing Economy and/or Collaborative Consumption, which Botsman

and Rogers (2011) have defined as traditional sharing, bartering, lending, trading, renting, gifting and swapping redefined through technologies and peer communities. This definition comes from their book "What's Mine Is Yours" (2011), in which they explain how the Sharing Economy is no longer a niche economy but a veritable market which produces sizeable numbers and turnovers that are growing extremely rapidly.

2. Collaborative services as a kind of service making

The success of Collaborative Consumption can be partly explained by the economic crisis of recent years: many people have found less costly solutions to their needs through new forms of activism, self-production and sharing.

Self-production in particular is living a happy new season: craftsmen, designers and enthusiastic citizens are taking advantage of possibilities offered by the web, new software and 3D printers to produce objects and share stages of production, development and realization.

All these making activities for products have corresponding activities in making services that are evident in collaborative services. These are defined as "services where the end-users are actively involved and assume the role of service co-designers and co-producers" (Jégou & Manzini, 2008, p.32).

This paper is therefore proposing a sort of parallel between the familiar scenario of making in the self-production of products with that of collaborative services, associated with the activism of Creative Communities, made by ordinary people who literally produce the services they need themselves.

Such people are veritable "service makers" because they set up service activities that are often halfway between amateur and professional, profit and no-profit, based on sharing, bartering and renting goods, services, skills and knowhow.

Indeed we can even claim that they are "service thinkers and makers" because their contribution may cross all stages of the service, from the generation of ideas to actual realization.

3. One possible kind of service making: the creation of a Local Distribution System

In this paper we particularly wish to focus on one example of a service-making activity applied to a specific field: food systems. This is a field that offers many opportunities, both because it answers a basic need and because it is a problem area in contemporary cities, where it is not easy to procure high quality, local, fresh food. This is why there is currently a diffused sensitivity

towards the problem and many city dwellers have started to organize themselves, providing a variety of responses.

The example we wish to look into is part of the research project "Feeding Milan. Energy for change," launched by Slow Food Italy, Politecnico di Milano-INDACO Department and University of Gastronomic Sciences. This is a strategic design project for place development (Meroni, 2011) aiming at creating a network of services to connect farmers in the peri-urban area directly to consumers in the town.

"Within this project a service design team integrates a multidisciplinary group of agriculturalists and gastronomists to design a network of interconnected services based on the principles of short food chain, multifunctionality and collaboration between stakeholders, in order to develop a scenario of sustainable agriculture and food supply for Milan" (Cantù et al., forthcoming 2012).

Numerous service ideas have been elaborated within the project, some of which are already at an advanced stage of development, others still in the planning stage. Among these is a Local Distribution System, "an experimental system of food distribution based on new combinations of professional and citizen contributions, unusual collaborations between stakeholders and hyper local networks of people and entities such us shops, businesses, associations, supported by dedicated digital tools" (Cantù et al., forthcoming 2012).

The Local Distribution System (LDS) is a system of alternatives to large-scale retailing. It is based on disintermediation and short food chains and seeks to foster as direct as possible a meeting between demand and supply, between city and country. In this diffused local distribution system ordinary people play a strategic role because they become the mediators between end-users and the peri-urban farmers.

We are going to describe briefly some of the ways in which the Local Distribution System may be put into effect by citizen-users in service-making mode.

The city dweller may activate the service himself as he requires by using a series of public (neighbourhood shops and offices) or private (condominiums) points and connections already present in the urban system. These become delivery points for fresh local food, which people may access easily after ordering products online.

This service, the Farmer's Food Box, is already up and running with a weekly delivery. The other service ideas described, though not yet active, have been developed within a design studio entitled "Accidental Grocers" held in the Master of Product Service System Design at the School of Design of Politecnico di Milano.

Places in the city may be used not only as delivery points, but also as trading points. For example, a group of city dwellers may use private courtyards to organize peri-urban farmers' market, opening the doors of their own homes and creating a semi-public meeting place: a condominium market.

Or, a citizen may himself become a service promoter, not only by setting up delivery points but also, in a scenario-in-progress, acting as a link in the distribution chain between countryside and city by using, for example, the commuter routine of many city users.

The name of the design studio "Accidental Grocers" plays ironically on the possibility that all of us, if equipped with initiative, appropriate tools and a support system, may become "grocers", and thus part of the Local Distribution System, which lends itself to numerous configurations just because it brings creative connections between profit and not-for-profit, amateur and professional, market and society.

The citizen-user in this scenario is thus a creative producer, an active agent of change, a real service maker who uses the city creatively. The city becomes a platform of places to put to new uses, with functions to redistribute, roles to exchange and connections to set up.

Figure 1

An evocative image of a possible Local Distribution System in the city of Milan

4. The role of designers in service making

Service making directly involves designers and ordinary citizens in different roles, the borders of which, however, are often ambiguous. In actual fact professional service designers are ordinary citizens, in the sense that they operate within a context and within a given community. However, they do so with technical skills and specific tools that differentiate them. They are activists like

their fellow citizens and with them they start up and develop social initiatives, but unlike their fellows they constantly work on connecting, mediating and facilitating, but above all they bring visions.

Designers mainly intervene in service making at the beginning of the process, at the idea generating stage, developing ideas with the other participants. At this stage the Community Centred Design approach is fundamental. "The role played by and the skills required of a designer have evolved into those of a community coach: someone able to discuss and share ideas, using professional tools to make things happen. Service design competences and social intelligence skills are equally needed by the community as a whole to participate actively in societal development" (Meroni, forthcoming 2013).

No less important is the designer's role at the final stage, because here the problem of how to leave the process arises, what to do with the services generated, and of understanding whether the other participants have developed the skills and motivation needed to carry on alone. The designer's exit strategy comes up against the lack of business models and entrepreneurs who can transform the service making into a real business start-up, able to operate with the local community.

Sometimes the heritage left by the service thinking and making together with the urban community is lost with the impossibility of carrying out the tests needed by the services in order to develop into social enterprises. This is still an open question that crosses service design issues with those of economy, local policy and the lack of adequate legislation to accompany such activities into the market and into society in an official, codified way.

It is unlikely that designers will want to move from the role of facilitator and coach to become entrepreneurs, it is undoubtedly simpler for the active citizens to carry the process ahead. What is the best way of supporting them in the incubation process remains an open question: one way might be to create ad hoc structures where service makers can gather, a bit like the way Fablabs bring self-producers together.

5. Possible future evolutions: ad hoc structures for service making

Setting up support centres for collaborative services in the city would mean creating reference points for active citizens. We will attempt to describe briefly the possible functions of such a facility, though these cannot as yet be set down unequivocally since we are talking about emerging entities.

These places would hopefully become points of connection between ordinary citizens, designers, stakeholders and institutions, i.e. between all the actors involved in the service. They could be hybrid places, partly physical and partly digital, which gather together existing initiatives and

foster the birth of other processes, providing support at the designing, development and pre-incubation stages.

So such centres are "public bureaus", potentially linked to institutions and other urban hubs collecting activities, characterized by designer involvement at the service of citizens. In these "laboratories" in search of a definition, services could be born and developed on a common platform, integrating different functions that use the same resources and thus applying the principles of a scope economy. This would be a modular, peer to peer platform where everybody can use a piece or develop new parts.

The elements offered to people by the platform are of various kinds: on one hand tools to facilitate service design (and the designers themselves are in some way part of this), on the other "pieces" of services ready to be combined and fitted in various activities. These service "modules" could be distribution points, digital modules for purchasing transactions and a network of contacts and skills to enable the development of missing parts, according to the peer-to-peer relationships described by Bauwens (2010).

The Local Distribution System described previously in some way constitutes an example of how different kinds of services can be developed from the same diffused distribution platform in the city, by citizens themselves putting together and transforming creatively the already existing means that are made available to them.

Thus one possible horizon is to collect various service-making activities into a UDOCS - Urban District of Collaborative Services. The idea of Collaborative Districts can be explained through a parallel with the more familiar Industrial Districts. These have been defined as *a clustering of small and medium-sized enterprises located in a delimited and historically well-defined area, specializing in one or more stages of a production process and integrated into a complex network of economic and social interrelationships. Characteristics of an Industrial District are: highly human resource intensive work, low economy of scale, greater economy of scope and innovation through learning by doing.* (as for Wikipedia, 2012).

Many of these characteristics are matched in the idea of Collaborative District. Firstly, it is territorially rooted, in this case in a city and in the hybrid spaces of home and work, somewhere between public and private. Furthermore, in the Industrial District "relationships between enterprises are underpinned by cooperation between subjects operating at different levels of the production system" and the various production activities often contribute to the creation of a single product. The companies outsource to each other and this fosters "the elevated degree of co-ordination and integration in the system" (as for Wikipedia, 2012).

In the same way a Collaborative District is a place where different activities are linked and integrated. It is a multidisciplinary place, a new generation expert system producing services that take advantage of both physical vicinity and the possibilities offered by virtual contact. They are organized and interconnected "services in the cloud", geared to fulfilling those duties both great and small of everyday life.

In this sense we can claim that this kind of service thinking and making acts as a driver of social innovation that experiments possible futures for our cities in a protected environment (Ceschin, 2012).

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