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FASHIONPLUS: HOW TO ESTABLISH PRODUCTIVE CONNECTIONS AMONG DESIGN | ENTERPRISE | TERRITORY

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ABSTRACT

Fashionplus aims at showing how *creativity* can become a triggering factor to establish *social and economic connections* inside a productive territory, that is to say by intervening on the actors of the project (i.e. designers) and on small/medium local enterprises. The project has developed a knowledge production network among the actors of the local productive system in the area of Carpi, thanks to innovation processes based on actual relationships between designers and enterprises.

This has allowed the development of a model of technological transfer repeatable also in other productive territories: it does put in touch the actors of a territory - that is to say enterprises, local authorities and institutions - and the design system of skills, that is to say their *creativity* understood as strategic lever for competitiveness. The project has shown that *design* can actually enable a *systemic* dimension of innovation involving both enterprises and their whole offer system; this has been realized through specific experimental projects, which help and trigger the growth of global skills among the actors of the territory itself. The influence of design can actually support connection processes inside a local productive system: in this sense, Fashionplus has allowed to experiment with a model of knowledge-transfer based on the actual presence of designers inside enterprises and to trigger a dynamic of synergic growth of skills and expertise inside them.

Keywords

creativity, design-driven innovation, productive connections, designer/SME/territory, knowledge transfer, project works

CREATIVITY/ DESIGN-DRIVEN INNOVATION /TERRITORY

The founding idea of Fashionplus (project issued by *European Social Fund, Department for Work and Pensions* and by the region *Emilia Romagna*; realized by *Carpi Formazione, INDACO Department of the Politecnico di Milano* and *Citer* - it aims at drawing-up the design world to the SMEs of the fashion productive system in Emilia Romagna) and of this paper is that creativity and design skills do represent a winning combination for the innovative growth inside a territory. This is at the same time a social and economic-productive territory but also a real territory with real actors (enterprises) and a system of expertise and abilities, which the recent industrial crisis has weakened. By territory, we mean thus the totality of actors belonging to a system, from the micro to the macro level, from the local productive system of enterprises, institutions and local organizations, to the system of skills and expertise and the relations connecting them all. [Quadrio Curzio A., Fortis M., 2002]

Social, cultural and economic connections of a territory defined like this are at the same time an enzyme that helps enterprises but they are also a potential brake to the adoption of alternative strategies and models in critical situations; to bring innovation into a territory is not an easy attempt. A strategic lever, which allows introducing innovation in a productive territory, is *creativity* in connection with design. When this manifests itself in a territory, it does not generally express itself in terms of a punctual specific invention that enriches only the single actor; instead, it does become a recognizable element, a sort of *special ingredient* that annotates the processes of creation, production and distribution of actors and enterprises.

When this happens, the activity of designers emerges in a progressive way; their ability to create products and processes gets stronger and more and more solid. It becomes, in the words of the *discipline of design*, ability to build an explicit strategy, a vision, and to pursue it through the definition of a brand, the creation of

offers of products-services, the tangibility of the relationships with the real market. These are in other terms the signs that creativity, meant and understood as *process*, is actually producing the new; or else creativity enables, feeds and reinforces the innovation process. That's why we can say that creativity (in this case the presence of designers inside the enterprises selected by Fashionplus), generates a triggering factor which creates *geo-communities* [Bonomi, 2006] and produces a newly born combination of connections among actors, so that the innovation brought to the territory becomes solid, interesting, legitimate, communicable and repeatable. The model of knowledge-transfer proposed by Fashionplus is the evolution of the relationship between the model of organizational development of *local productive systems* (in their distinctive form, the one of the *industrial district*) and the complementary system of innovation, which characterizes it.

Creativity as triggering factor of innovation processes is already a known focus in our economic-productive system - just think to the role of the *entrepreneur/designer*, main character of Italian companies from the after-war period to the present day. Thanks to his innate entrepreneurial skills, he has generated the contemporary model of economic development based on specialisation and originated the phenomenon of the *Made in Italy*. The role played by designers in the industrial system has been then a key role for its evolution, even if through different paths depending on the specific characteristics of the various territories and of their enterprises [Bertola, 2007].

In particular, inside the system of SMEs - sometimes without any brand and strongly rooted into a territorial supply chain - the contribution of the project has been less explicit. These enterprises still suffer nowadays from a lack of identity, which is typical of their offer, from a feeble aptitude towards the development of innovative products-services and from a lack of comprehension and opening to emerging markets. The action of Fashionplus has tried then to renew the market challenge of the SMEs of the fashion system of Emilia Romagna, trying to trigger *relational* and *know-how processes* inside the productive territory, using as *gluing element* and main factor creativity and design. In a scenery in which everything runs so fast, consumption cultures, countercultures, new social forms and life-styles continuously emerge, it is necessary to imagine a change in the way to conceive, produce and distribute, to become again competitive by using design to generate new strategies and communication and relational processes in the territory. Other similar projects have been realised both at a national and international level, such as DAC | Design for Arts&Crafts in the Lombard area (project aiming at developing the artisan field by creating stable relationships between enterprises and designers, initiated and promoted by Confartigianato Brescia, Consorzio Poli.design, Upa Services within the framework of the Convenzione Artigianato 2003-2005 by the Lombard Region and Unioncamere. See also Arquilla, Simonelli, 2006: <http://www.polidesign.net/dactool/>). Another example is Prime Cup (a three-year programme of sponsored researches addressed to young designer about innovation-oriented SMEs in Lombardy; it aims at drawing near the production world and the expertise one: <http://www.triennale.it>).

2 FASHIONPLUS: FIELD ACTION

Fashionplus originates from the actual demands of a well-defined territory, the one of Emilia Romagna, which is trying to cope with the maturity of the textile field by means of new forces, new needs and a more and more interactive interdisciplinary cooperation among textile industry, research and other productive fields open to new common challenges. [Allegretti, 2007]. This region is the third main apparel manufacturer in Italy and is characterised by a very high concentration of enterprises and employees for the *Fashion System* in Italy, with a prevalence of enterprises with a smaller dimension than the average considered on a national scale. Inside the economic-productive system of Emilia Romagna stands out the *textile district of Carpi*, one of the most important textile industrial districts in Italy and main productive site for fashion in this region. The widespread presence of small and medium enterprises in this territory, the importance of a network of inter-company transport, the presence of enterprises specialized in all the phases of the productive chain and with consolidated skills; these are the main characteristics of this district model. To cope with the progressive decline due to the globalisation of the markets and the consequent de-localisation of the production, the productive system of the area of Carpi has been in need of new motivating forces to deal with both national and international markets. For this reason a group of local actors, service-centres in connection with the textile field (Carpiformazione, Citer) together with a university department (INDACO,

Design Faculty, Politecnico di Milano) supported by a system of design and fashion skills have initiated the project Fashionplus. They have thus actually realized what exposed in the proclamation of Emilia Romagna in terms of carrying out interventions/tools to support innovation, competitiveness, internationalisation and development for enterprises. The multi-disciplinary characteristic of the project team (the university with its know how and design and fashion and services-centres with their ability to establish direct relationships with local enterprises) has allowed to define a mix of skills and roles. This has made an innovative strategy possible, which is strongly connected to the quality of the relations between designers and enterprises in order to realize innovative projects for both enterprises and territory. The role of university has been then both the one of connector and the one of knowledge-bringer. Local actors have been a sort of connection to the local network of people and resources, organising, thanks to their expertise, the research and the exchange of experience, and making thus possible to enable and activate the skills brought by university. The aim of the project has been then to bring into this territory a series of new motivating forces that would work in the direction of the creation of a new *spider web of values*:

“...the value chain cannot be traced anymore inside enterprises. instead we have to analyse and break up into factors that spider web of values, which includes local sub-suppliers, small ones and artisans, until the final customer. This must be reached through the strength of the brand, of the sales and assistance net - a spider web of values in which enterprises weave their web keeping together territorial rooting and economy of services. In the spider web of values, which goes from the territory to the world, enterprises perceive as strategic the phases of planning, production and sales of intermediate goods and components, of machineries, services and technological solutions. Starting from the territory itself, the very concept of the Made in Italy changes, as it does not only mean only ability to produce but, more and more, also ability to include and incorporate into planning, production and brand the wishes of the customers/final users ...”
[Bonomi, 2006]

To do this Fashionplus based itself on a *strategy of creativity*, that is to say the introduction of one of those three Ts exposed by the model of Richard Florida: *T for talent*. The project has followed exactly this work process: to introduce the theme of creativity into the territory of Carpi through the introduction of talent - that's to say of people, of those young *professionals* of the project, which belong to that category of the *knowledge workers* to which both Florida and Butera refer to [Florida, 2003; Butera, 2006]. Fashionplus has actually imagined producing an innovation experience, which would be in connection with the contribution of the people inside enterprises and to their relationship with the market. The founding idea has been the one to propose an *action research* [Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., 1982], i.e. a concrete action on local innovation models thanks to the presence of young researchers-designers as *enablers* of innovation processes inside SMEs of Emilia Romagna. This strengthening action aimed at testing a project of cultural mediation between SMEs on one side - often lacking not of a productive specific culture, but of more global motivating forces - and the more advanced culture of design on the other. This last one bases on strategic visions, in which not only the product in itself represents the offer but, instead, a whole product-system- the material artefact integrated with services and communication.

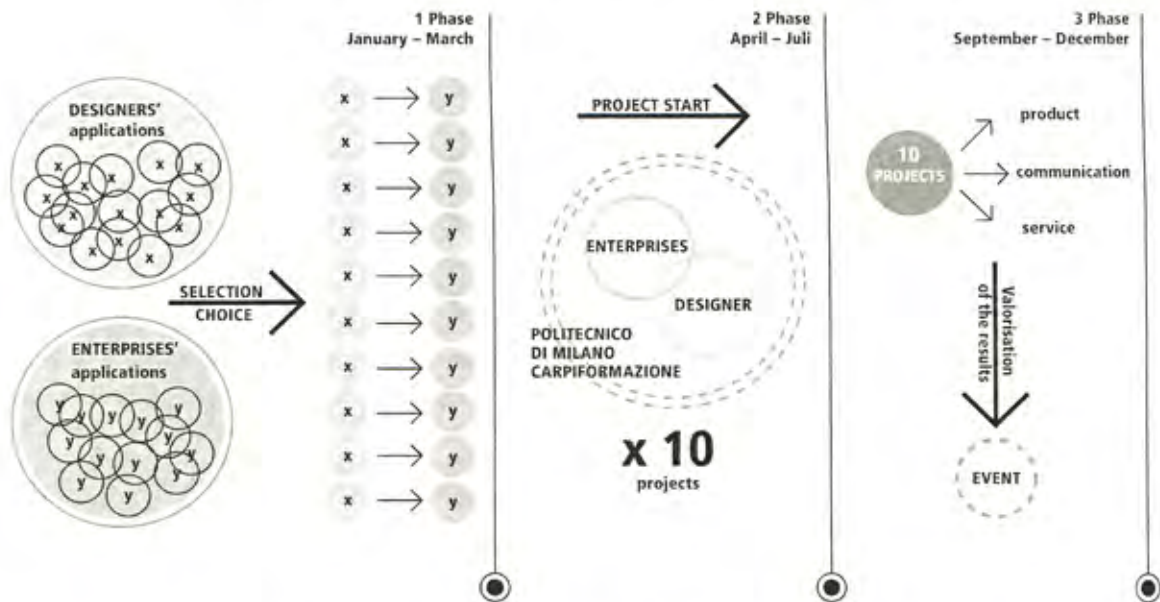


Figure 1 Scheme of the phases of the project Fashionplus

Concretely the project has selected ten textile enterprises on the territory and ten fashion designers from an international basis through national public notification. Enterprises have been selected based on their profile and above all based on a project in which the *contribution of design* could be the decisive factor to develop an innovative approach to the product-system. Ten designers have been chosen in a similar way based on their skills/experience. Creativity and design skills of the young professionals of the project have been then an enzyme to feed an innovation seed for the offer of the enterprises. After matching enterprises with designers, the singles projects have started and both the university research team and local experts have monitored them. The revisions of the projects took place collectively so that the value of the connection would enrich everybody through confrontation with all the others. The result has been a series of ideas to combine the expertise of enterprises with the peculiar vision of design. The final combined result, in our opinion even more important, has been the opening of enterprises and territory to the theme of innovation. In some of them, the contribution of design has triggered important feedbacks on themes like strategy, governance, skills and research, organisation. The experience then has not come to an end with the closing of the projects themselves; instead, the entire territory has been involved and informed about the outcome and goals reached through an event, an exhibition and a catalogue. In addition, local government institutions such as municipality and province have been involved to realize the exhibition and to partake of the outcomes. The project has made possible the building of relationships among different actors, and this is an important goal for the project as it has generated innovation in a territorial system that was in decline. Fashionplus has shown that design can favour a *systemic dimension of innovation* through the realisation of specific projects. This experience has actually helped the birth of relationships, comparisons and project plans to reach a common goal, that is to say bring innovation into a system.

3 GOALS REACHED AND POSSIBLE FUTURE PROJECTIONS

The project has shown that *design* can trigger a systemic dimension of innovation through the realisation of specific projects, which impact on and trigger chain reactions among the actors of a territory. A double goal has actually been reached: on one side the implementation of ten transversal projects in six months, from the conceiving of new collections (*product design*), to the planning of services (*service design*) and communication (*communication design*) to support the activities of enterprises. On the other side, the development of a system which has consolidated the relations among actors, and the experimentation with a model of knowledge-transfer which will be possible to repeat and apply to other contexts. The chain effects of the project have been:

1. *for enterprises*: in the first place, a series of projects and advanced concepts, in some cases entered into production, in others still in at test; in the second place, the opportunity to experiment with new working systems with fashion designers and be part of an extended network of projects which can be implemented in the future;

2. *for fashion designers*: the possibility of an enriching experience inside enterprises and the opportunity to build relationships with them and with their territory for the development of future projects and cooperations;

3. *for the local productive system*: the design driven valorisation of the territory and the experimentation with a repeatable innovative model for the diffusion of innovation, to help the growth of competitiveness of the whole system and the dialogue and connection process among the many actors.

3.1 Outcome for the system

Fashionplus has allowed to experiment with a model of knowledge-transfer letting the importance of connections among actors stand out. The combination has been a profitable one as partners with different skills composed the team and it is exactly the connection among different disciplines that has allowed the *enrichment* of the system and the good outcome of the project. The multi-disciplinary characteristic has allowed to the system to create and consolidate its own relationships, to undertake then the following steps. The element that triggers connections is *design*: creativity has promoted actions for the valorisation of the territory and has allowed to experiment with a new model of diffusion of innovation, to help growth of the competitiveness for the whole system and the dialogue and connection among the many different actors.

3.2 Outcome for enterprises

Enterprises have developed together with fashion designers ten projects: four of product design, two of communication strategies and brand identity and four strategic projects concerning services and distribution. The single projects have been developed through consulting activities, each designer has agreed with the enterprise a timing of autonomous work with periodical project reviews. After a phase of analysis to gain knowledge of the enterprises themselves, the second step has been a definition of the briefs proposed by them and for the development of the projects. The project briefs have been agreed with all the partners, the expertise of all of them has allowed to re-orientate, if necessary, the project itself to lead the enterprises to define design-driven innovations. The projects show a degree of innovation that is correct for both the reference context and the local productive system. Enterprises have subsequently made investments to prototype the emerging ideas, as far as both collections and communication tools. In all projects, it is possible to see innovation factors in all the steps of the creative process: from the research method to the definition of concepts, to the final general planning. The duration of the projects has been of six months. In most cases, the relationship between designers and enterprises continues in the form of professional consultancies concerning both the project started with Fashionplus and other new projects in progress. For them, Fashionplus has been the occasion to experiment with a new work method based on consultancy, to re-think strategic projects that otherwise they would have *never* realize. The results show that design can be an important strategic lever for enterprises not only in the long run, but above all in the short-term, as it gives immediately concrete benefits to enterprises and to those production contests which may be static or facing a period of crisis.

Entering into the details of the projects, in six months ten projects have been developed with an innovative and original contribution. To understand the efforts done and risks run by the enterprises to challenge emerging markets, it is important to keep in mind the characteristics of the context of the projects, that is to say the small dimensions of enterprises and the static dynamics of their local productive system. Talking about product design, some projects have led enterprises to propose collections with their own brand, from mere suppliers for others they have started to propose their own collections. There is instead who has decided to join in a consortium and try to launch new collections with innovative materials, such as biologic or allergenic textiles. Talking about communication strategic projects instead, enterprises have decided to focus on the strengthening of their image through different elements, for example the labelling of the item with the *traceability* of the productive process, or else through the study of products, merchandising items or elements of coordinated image (brand & communication manual).

Fashionplus represents an example of real possible innovation and shows how design can contribute to the development of competitiveness of SMEs in Emilia Romagna; it shows how design, by creating a new *spider web of values* (in the words of Bonomi), can become an important tool to trigger, develop and communicate it.

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