

DESIGN CULTURE(S)

Cumulus Conference Proceedings Roma 2021

Volume #2

ARTIFICIAL ARTIFICIAL
LANGUAGES
LIFE LIFE
MAKING MAKING
NEW NORMAL
MULTIPLICITY
PROXIMITY
RESILIENCE
REVOLUTION
THINKING THINKING

**Design Culture(s)
Cumulus Conference
Proceedings Roma 2021**

Volume #2

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Loredana Di Lucchio
Lorenzo Imbesi
Angela Giambattista
Viktor Malakucz

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Viktor Malakucz
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Volume #2

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of Art and Design Education and Research

Rome 2021

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The engagement of visitors in faber's houses and studios. Empirical design research and experimental actions in Lombardy

Raffaella Trocchianesi^{*a}, Anna Mazzanti^a,
Alessandra Spagnoli^a, Davide Spallazzo^a

^aDesign Dept., Politecnico di Milano
^{*}raffaella.trocchianesi@polimi.it

Abstract | Lombardy is characterised by industriousness and creativity, a crucial aspect of the region's identity that drifts from eminent artists, designers, and architects from the late XIX century to the beginning of the XXI century. This context is the action field of D.E.SY. (Designing Enhancement Strategies and Exhibit SYstems for the Italian House Museums and Studios), a research project carried out by the authors that aimed to improve and investigate theories, methodologies and design solutions in order to foster enhancement strategies for house-museums and studios of artists (*faber*): eminent creative personalities connoted by a tangible output and whose studios and houses are influenced by their "creative action". The three meaningful examples of experimental actions developed within the research are: *Genius Loci*; *Atelier as living nature*; and *The art and its inhabitants: artistic imaginaries between houses and exhibitions*. In conclusion, the paper argues the interdisciplinarity between design and art through an empirical approach and three experimental actions focused on the enhancement of both tangible and intangible values of artists (*faber*) and their workplaces.

KEYWORDS | ART&DESIGN, HOUSE MUSEUMS, CREATIVE'S ATELIER, DESIGN FOR CULTURAL HERITAGE, CULTURAL NETWORK

1. Introduction

Lombardy is characterised by industriousness and creativity, a crucial aspect of the region's identity from the late 19th century to the early 21st century, including internationally renowned artists, designers and architects.

This context is the field of action of D.E.SY. (Designing Enhancement Strategies and Exhibit SYstems for the Italian House Museums and Studios), a research project carried out by the authors that aims to improve and deepen theories, methodologies and design solutions to foster strategies for the enhancement of house museums and the studios of artists and designers (*faber*): eminent creative personalities marked by tangible production and whose studios and houses are influenced by their "creative action".

The places involved include both real institutionalised house museums and spaces that represent just neglected potential future museums, but still reflect the narrative of their original function. Moreover, they can be spaces owned by public or private institutions. The focus of the research also includes houses and/or studios that have been partially modified over the years. The narrative of the original place is hidden but still traceable and could be virtually reconstructed thanks to the remaining visual documentation and other sources.

This essay aims to present some results of the research developed in the analysis of existing cases and addressed to some design-driven proposals in order to enhance the experience of visiting such places.

The subject of this study is a group of representative house museums and studios from the late 19th and early 21st centuries. They are all significant examples of eclectic culture, the expression of artistic personalities, at the same time designers and compulsive collectors, a *mise en scene* of their taste and creative spirit. These "special" environments, paradigmatic "magician's laboratories", are therefore considered to be a well-recognised heritage even by museum protection and conservation institutions such as ICOM. Indeed, in addition to an immersive portrait of creative and unique personalities, they also include many aspects of everyday life and thus important historical traits that are recognisable as an outstanding part of territorial identity. Moreover, *faber* spaces, often animated by passionate heirs and curators, represent a countertrend to a diffuse and less sustainable hypermuseum. In this way, taking into account the projects developed by D.E.SY., these spaces generate educational processes for communities (Bosoni, Lecce 2019; Mazzanti 2019).

On the other hand, the analysis of the criticalities related to these places highlights the connection between different narrative levels: the historical background of the house-owners/creators' lives, their specific personalities, the lives lived in these houses, the relationship with their own creative expressions in their lives, the relationship between their collections and their creations, the relationship between the space of creation and the space created.

Three significant examples of experimental actions developed by the authors within the D.E.SY research are: *Genius Loci*, a cultural experience based on an interaction design approach; *Atelier as living nature*, a series of exhibitions located in ateliers; and *The art and its inhabitants: artistic imaginaries between houses and exhibitions*, an experimental action focused on the exhibition and meta-design approach.

Genius Loci was developed in collaboration with Museo Bagatti Valsecchi and proposes an innovative approach to enhancing heritage through non-invasive digital technologies.

Three photographic exhibitions entitled *The Atelier as Living Nature* were hosted at the Fondazione Albini, the Fondazione Castiglioni and the Studio Negri; they showed views of studios at the time when their creators were active, creating an intriguing dialogue with the current studio environments and the voices of the *faber's* heirs and museum curators. The exhibitions also fostered an eloquent new narrative, reawakening the connotation of these spaces as a true 'Living Nature'.

The art and its inhabitants: artistic imaginaries between houses and exhibitions is based on the interpretation of the "portrait" of the artist's home and studio and aims to answer two research questions: how does the physical workspace influence the artist's creation process? How do the creation processes and techniques combine to "shape" the creative space? Herein, the aim is to collect different design-driven interpretations within the same methodological context: from a field analysis to an interior design output.

In conclusion, the article supports the interdisciplinarity between design and art through an empirical approach and three experimental actions focused on enhancing the material and immaterial values of artists (*faber*) and their workplaces. Museum scholars define these as "talking spaces", places that with their furnishings become the "body of an intention" (Orsini, 2012). The D.E.SY. methodology has focused on them with non-invasive good practices and micro-interventions to decode them as environmental diaries (Mazzanti 2019).

2. Experimental actions

2.1 *Genius Loci*

The Bagatti Valsecchi House Museum is a special place, with a vibrant soul, worthy of exaltation. The house is the result of the creative minds of Fausto and Giuseppe Bagatti Valsecchi, two brothers of the Milanese upper middle class of the 19th century who dedicated their lives to it.

To create a real sixteenth century mansion, the brothers dedicated themselves to a detailed study of the most important palaces of the Italian Renaissance, not to reproduce a specific model of the past, but rather to take advantage of multiple sources of inspiration that they could elaborate in a completely personal key (Rolando, 1999), creating what was called the

Bagatti Valsecchi Renaissance (Pavoni, 1994). In so doing, the house became a mix of authentic and carefully selected pieces from the Renaissance period and details personally designed by Fausto and Giuseppe. The final result appears as a middle ground between the collection and the personal aspiration, but we must not forget that, primarily, it was a context of lived life. In fact, the house was inhabited by the Bagatti Valsecchi family until 1974. After that date, Fausto and Giuseppe's descendants opened the doors to the public, transforming it into a museum: they restored it to the original condition in which their creative ancestors left it.

This rich environment already provides detailed information about what is displayed but it is missing the valorisation of the most intangible heritage it can provide: the *Genius Loci*¹, the spirit of the house, including the figure of the *fabers* and the actual results of their work. Consequently, Interior and Interaction Design were selected as suitable means to create an engaging and situated experience, oriented by a human-centred approach. Moreover, the aim of the project was to take inspiration from the very specificity of the place, respecting and combining the will of all the parties involved: curators, visitors and designers, standing respectively for the place, the typology of experience and the means to meet all expectations. For this reason, for instance, nothing could be introduced or modified not to distort the frozen image of the time; while a temporary and replicable event format worked the best for a personal and engaging experience.

For a thorough knowledge of the location, preliminary on-field investigations had to be conducted to better understand the existing relationship between the place and its visitors, mixing traditional and bespoke research tools, aimed at involving users unaware of being guiding the generative phase of the design process (Hanington, 2010). Firstly, quantitative data about the visitors of the previous semester were collected through the statistic system of the museum. Secondly, to get a closer to the users of the institution and to comprehend its dynamics, an ethnographical enquiry based on unobtrusive shadowing has been undertaken. That seemed to be the better solution to get impartial information about the visitors' experience inside the museum, as their direct involvement in this exploratory phase could have vitiated the results.

This information helped in getting familiar with the place and its users, assessing the great appeal of the house that amazed and engaged visitors with its sense of familiarity. Though, the observed behaviors and emotions prompted the modalities for a direct confrontation with the possible users – aimed at identifying the meaning for the intervention – and ultimately the design itself.

At the end of the research, all the parties involved highlighted the desire to have the homely dimension prevailing on the museum identity, so that the welcoming and familiar sensation could be emphasized.

¹ A project by Martina Sciannamé (2017), supervisor: Davide Spallazzo.

In order to make the most intimate side of the house emerge, we returned to the original personification of the *Genius Loci*, whose symbols were painted on the walls. Even if this tradition acquired different meanings, it has never really disappeared, on the contrary, it has taken the form of noble families' coats of arms. That is why we translated the two main emblems of the Bagatti Valsecchi brothers in the materialization of *Genius Familiaris* (eagle) and *Genius Rerum* (lily). Each of them embodies a particular point of view of the *Genius Loci* and stands for a different visit path to discover the house's life on a symbolic reception day when the Bagatti Valsecchi brothers were still alive. The first one reflects the memories of the people who frequented the house, while the second gives voice to the objects' point of view.

To make *Genius Loci* come alive, an integrated and flexible technological system has been designed so that the space could become responsive in a natural human-environment interaction with pervasive and concealed devices, not to alter the perception of space. In particular, audio and projection modules had to be deployed across the rooms to convey contents when triggered by the interaction module, a beacon-powered amulet worn by each visitor or group of visitors. The entire system also responds to the requirements of flexibility and scalability, as the modules can be easily moved and reprogrammed to be adapted to different settings and narratives.

Strolling around the house is at the core of the interaction and in the different rooms, visitors may encounter three kinds of experience, according to the relevance of the place itself. Those where visitors just have to pass along are the sound passage rooms. Here, the immediate detection of the visitor wearing an amulet triggers environmental noises or distant voices. In the vision rooms, where evocative events could happen, the amulet activates a projection module, making shadows appear to visualize a significant scene. While, in the active narration rooms, visitors have to discover hidden details. The overall experience translates into an evening event, outside the museum opening hours, in which the visitor can experience an intimate and magical relationship with the house. The visit begins with the selection of the *Genius* that will guide the entire experience, and a brief tutorial for the interaction modalities. Then, across the rooms, different narrative strands are interwoven to show different aspects of everyday life and culminate in a banquet in the Grand Salon, the symbol of the social life of the period.

Designing solutions to exhibit the *Genius Loci* is a delicate process. First, one needs to stay in the place, to live it, willing to understand and listen to it, in order to recognize its essence (Crespi, 2013). Then, when the spirit is revealed to the designer, the challenge is to make it patent without being intrusive, to let it pervade the environment as if it was the most natural outcome. In this way, the resulting experience of the visitors appear more authentic, they establish a deep bond with the free-of-barriers institution, they feel privileged of being part of an environment that is revealing its true and most hidden self in an almost human manner, and, finally, they develop an unparalleled sense of belonging in such a place.

2.2 *The Atelier as Living Nature*: reflecting (on) Studio's heritage

Within the research framework - that supports both multidisciplinary systemic insights and field experimentation in museological and culturally oriented design areas – the D.E.SY. Research group promoted three photographic exhibitions entitled 'The Atelier as Living Nature'². The exhibitions are part of the Milano MuseoCity 2019 event - promoted by the namesake Association and the Municipality of Milan, and by a network of private and public cultural institutions working to promote and enhance the dissemination of Milan's museum heritage. The three small exhibitions at Fondazione Franco Albini, Fondazione Achille Castiglioni, and Studio Mario Negri were dedicated to the image of the studio through the eye of the photographer who captured the panorama at the time of their creators. The archival images presented in the actual exhibits have become a stimulus to start a deeper reflection on the spaces and to show their original auras, as they are an eloquent narration of the present time, which can be enriched by reawakening the connotations of these spaces as true examples of 'Living Nature'³.

In the context of the research, the 'Living Nature' theme was thus dialectically reflected in the particular environments of the studios and ateliers of creative people, designers, architects or artists. These are places full of hints and interpretative clues. It is an environmental and immersive 'nature' created from eloquent objects: works, tools, and inspirational subjects, more or less evident signs which outline the memory of the protagonists. "Whether it is the artist's atelier, an almost always solitary space, or the architect's or designer's studio, which is usually collective, we find ourselves faced with places that are always full of memory (where the archive area is the pulsating testimony of the creative heart), environments that preserve an atmosphere and are the mirror in which we can still see the reflections of those who have practiced and lived in them, when they are no longer active but are 'kept alive'" (Bosoni, Lecce 2019). These spaces, while constituting 'still lives' with respect to the time in which they were established, are, in fact, still vital and often dedicated to renewed and new activities (as in the case of the Fondazione Achille Castiglioni and Fondazione Franco Albini). In this sense, the 'Living Nature' theme has been recognized as an interpretative and meta-design metaphor useful both for observation and for the design of actions to enhance these spaces.

The three small exhibitions were therefore an opportunity to experiment with different curatorial and exhibition approaches to the same interpretative metaphor. The studios of an architect (Albini), a designer (Castiglioni) and a sculptor (Negri) lent themselves to being reinterpreted through archival photographic images, often authored, that testify to the passage of time, the evolution of spaces and of private and professional life, the endurance of a particular 'creative aura' that, reread with the eyes of the present, acquires even more charm and strength. This precious archival resource (the photos), which can almost always

² Exhibit project promoted and curated by Anna Mazzanti, Giampiero Bosoni, Rita Capurro, Chiara Lecce, and Alessandra Spagnoli.

³ Nature, in all its forms, from the natural or anthropized landscape to the relationship between man and the environment, was the guiding theme chosen for Milano MuseoCity 2019.

be found in the *faber's* spaces, is therefore a primary resource for activating storytelling design strategies and represents the "hub for the enhancement of the *faber's* home and studios". (Bosoni, Mazzanti 2019). The three studios, which differ in the morphology of their spaces, their character and their distinctive features, still reflect the soul of their *forgers* and, at the same time, their heritage filtered through the eyes of their direct heirs. Therefore, since the three exhibitions were presented as parallel and coordinated through a single fil-rouge, the different curatorial and exhibition strategies adopted made it possible to highlight the peculiarities of these studios. The curatorial and design choices - such as the selection of the images, the design of framing system and spaces' layout - made it possible to translate the metaphor into three different design interpretations: the frame as a focusing tool for Fondazione Franco Albini, the unexpected glimpse for Fondazione Achille Castiglioni, and the intimate retrospective for Studio Mario Negri.

As for the exhibition at the Fondazione Franco Albini, the selection of shots aimed to show the three temporal and physical movements of the studio: from via Panizza 4 to via XX Settembre 21 and, finally, to via Telesio 13. Among the selected images, the iconic portrait of Franco Albini taken by the American photographer Irvin Penn in 1948 is the only evidence of the studio in Via Panizza. Franco Albini and Franca Helg are portrayed side by side in the Via XX Settembre studio in the 1960s. The shots from the 1970s, set in the current studio in Via Telesio, bear witness to the transition to the "Studio Architettico of Franco Albini, Franca Helg, Antonio Piva and Marco Albini". Strict light wood frames soberly highlighted the pictures. The photographs were integrated into the spaces according to a principle of cleanliness and spatial rigour: the images of the various Albini studios have been superimposed on the layout of the current Foundation's headquarter and have been arranged on parallel levels - almost never overlapping - unravelling a clear, almost linear narrative of the evolution of the studio over time.

A different approach was adopted in the exhibition presented at Fondazione Achille Castiglioni: from the photos' selection to the display setting, the aim was to give a "concentric" interpretation of the Castiglioni brothers' professional history. A limited selection of archival shots recounted the first studio of the brothers Livio, Pier Giacomo, and Achille Castiglioni in Corso di Porta Nuova preparing the viewer for a reinterpretation - through images - of the current studio in Piazza Castello. The shots by Luciano Ferri and Ugo Mulas, among others, cover a period from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s. Through the images, integrated in simple white passe-partouts (a legacy of the last great monograph dedicated to Achille and promoted by the Triennale di Milano in 2018/2019) it was possible to recognize objects that have become iconic, the three brothers involved in the various design phases, and illustrious visitors who testify to the cultural dynamism that characterized the studio's life. The glimpses, details and moments captured by the shots were directly compared with the current layout of the studio, preferring, whenever possible, oblique and unexpected set-ups: a direct homage to Achille's amusing and shrewd personality.

Finally, at Studio Mario Negri, it was decided to set up images which, as in previous cases, would retrace the evolution of the sculptor's studios (from Via Pisacane, to Via Stoppani 6 and, finally, to Via Stoppani 7), emphasizing the intimate and introverted aspect of his creative activity. Through the shots it is possible to recognize the artist as he gives form to his works, the objects and tools that characterize his private corners, the sculptures he made and those in progress: testimonies that reveal years of hard work and creation, from the 1950s to 1987. Frames of different shapes, sizes and finishes, which were previously an integral part of the studio, have amplified the aura of an already intimate and private place. Views, perspectives and instances of intense creative fervor have brought the space back to life, allowing the viewer to perceive the sculptor's strong presence, and "act as memory consolidators" (Trocchianesi, 2014). In all of these studios, the photographic archives show themselves to be 'active folders' capable of underlining the constant presence of *fabers* as "spatialized biographies" (Bosoni, Mazzanti 2020).

2.3 The art and its inhabitants: artistic imaginaries between houses and exhibitions

The art and its inhabitants: artistic imaginaries between houses and exhibitions is the title of an experimental action aimed at involving young designers and researchers in the exhibition design field⁴.

This research is based on the interpretation of the "portrait" of the artist's home and studio and aims to answer three research questions: how does the physical workspace influence the artist's creation process? How do the creation process and techniques work together to "shape" the creative space? How can this content be synthesised in an exhibition?

The aim of this action is to collect different design-driven interpretations expressed through exhibit solutions within the same methodological framework and spatial context: from a field analysis to an interior design output.

In this way we can have a collection of several interpretations developed according to a process that starts from the field analysis towards an interior design output embracing the following methodology divided into three stages:

Immersing&Reading

- Studying the artist's personality, his works of art and his productive process.
- Visiting the actual space (the artist's house and studio).

Method and tools: desk research, on-field research, interviews, camera, sketches pads.

⁴ Project curated by Raffaella Trocchianesi and Anna Mazzanti, 2018-2019.

Output: map of topics and suggestions, sketches and notes.

Interpreting&Abstracting

- Graphically synthesizing the “essence” of the artist and his workplace (spatial and mental) through a critical approach.
- Focusing on a specific topic starting from the artist’s production.

Method and tools: metaphor, abacus of chromatic, material and iconographical codes.

Output: moodboards, diagrams and collages.

Translating&Representing

- Translating the artist’s studio identity into a design exhibition that hosts both the artist’s works of art and a spatial (archetypal) interpretation of their own house and studio.

Method and tools: exhibit score/partitura allestitiva, narrative model, exhibit model, design attitude.

Output: diagrams, sketches, technical drawings, render.

This approach allows to “extract” some crucial elements that represent the pillars of the relationship between the artists and their workspace through metaphorical communication registers.

This research action produced twenty-four design exhibitions, hypothetically placed in PAC – Padiglione di Arte Contemporanea in Milan, as “indirect portraits” of artists and their house-studios. For each of them, *narrative models* and *exhibit models* have been defined. The *narrative model* is the way in which the narration of the exhibition is organized, while the *exhibit model* is the design attitude with which the space is treated in order to stage the contents of the exhibition.

The *metaphor* is also an important tool able to synthesize the core of the idea using evocative images belonging to other contexts. But the essence of this process is the spatial interpretation and translation of the house studio into an exhibit model: how do interior designers locate and interpret the studio’s synthesis of the identity in a place out of the studio itself? What metaphors, spatial models and design attitudes do they choose in order to express the relationship between the artists and their creative space?

If we read and compare all the design results of this research action, we can find some recurrences. Following some design attitudes which interpret the identity of the studios:

- *Scenography:* in the exhibition the studio is represented by a scenographic setting through different ways and systems: i. e. *layered wings* able to stratify multiple images and perspectives of the workplace; *stage setting* as a reproduction of a

meaningful part of the workplace in a style which is not realistic but totally white and out of scale.

- *Synecdoche*: in this case the identity of the studio is present in the form of a synecdoche (the part for the whole) using a specific piece of furniture present in the workplace: i. e. the *wardrobe of memories* (Leonilde Carabba) is reinterpreted in different ways within the exhibitions, as a big video wall where visitors can discover her stratified memories and art suggestions or multiplied as an actual furniture system with which visitor can physically interact (opening doors and drawers) and find objects and information; the *freestanding tripartite screen* (present in the Fornasetti's house/studio and collection) becomes the main display system here; in the exhibition the *red room* – which in the Fornasetti's house/studio is a "secret" and totally red one, where all pieces of furniture and textile, objects, and books are red (even in the titles of the books there is the word "red") – becomes an immersive room where visitors can discover thoughts, private objects and special pieces of information; the *colours and materials* as architectonic references to the actual place (Mario Negri).
- *Domestic paradigm*: the exhibition is interpreted as a cross section of the house/studio. In this way visitors are immersed in the private space of the artist: i. e. the *wall as a linear unrolled space* in which rooms and corridors are photographically reproduced in the same vertical surface, the bi-dimensionality is interrupted by niches with actual objects or interactive screens (Fornasetti); the diverse rooms of the house/studio are "spread" in the whole exhibition in a sort of multi articulated and "diffused home".
- *Abstract spaces*: the exhibition "undresses" the space all figurative references to the actual artist house/studio: i. e. in a "neutral" context parts of *walls and surfaces are malleable* in terms of materials and settings in order to make the place performative and dynamic (Pomodoro's creative process); some parts of the house/studio is reinterpreted by *archetypal spaces* like tunnels and caves in order to underline some crucial meanings of artworks and their symbolic context; the *white box* as a "neutral" place where pictures of the actual workplace are shown as a documentation.

This research project demonstrates the interdisciplinarity between design and art through an empirical approach and an experimental action able to extrapolate the interpretative logics of both the tangible and intangible values of the artists and their workplaces. The latter influence the creation process and, symmetrically, the creation process shapes the workplace: indeed in Fornasetti's case – for instance – part of the space is a repository of sources of inspiration (see the room with the archive of iconographical units) and part of it is a show of countless objects. Pomodoro's studio includes an archive of works, documents and – at the same time – a workshop "shaped" by materials. All of these artists and places tell something about the creation process, the inspiration path, the physical and/or mental approach to the art. All of

these spaces can be expressed by metaphors like: the introspective journey, the retreat, the labyrinth, the wonderland, the Wunderkammer, the silent island, the grammar of signs and so on, in a continuous dance of evocative images and physical installations (fig. 1).



Figure 1. The chart illustrates the correspondences between the artists involved in the research and the design attitudes and metaphors assumed in the exhibition systems related to them and their studios (Troccianesi 2019).

3. Conclusions

The three actions previously described, demonstrate three different ways of enhancing the topic and object of the research:

- In *Genius Loci* the object of the research – Casa Bagatti Valsecchi and its tangible and intangible heritage – is the actual context in which visitors explore the narrative related to the house itself.
- In *Atelier as living nature* the object of the research – the ateliers and their tools and works – is the actual context of the exhibition and, at the same time, the subject shown through the mediation of pictures.
- In *The art and its inhabitants: artistic imaginaries between houses and exhibitions* the object of the research – the essence of the studios, the artist's personality and their works – is not shown in the studios themselves but in another place (PAC-Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea).

Sharing attitudes and skills, the researchers involved in D.E.SY., therefore, have set up experimental laboratories where the different narrative processes adopted underline the immersive portrait of the *faber* and his work, his poetics and his interpretative ideas of spaces. In doing so, they found ways to make submerged and hidden meanings eloquent and evident. In conclusion, therefore, it is a matter of display techniques, or immersive narratives through digital technologies or exhibit re-constructions and interpretations. The common intent has been to bring back to life what Valery (2008) called the "poetic state" of the *faber*.

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About the Authors:

Raffaella Trocchianesi. Architect and Associate Professor at Politecnico di Milano, Department of Design. Director of the specialisation Master IDEA_Exhibition Design, she deals with Design for Cultural Heritage in terms of museography and exhibition design, communication and enhancement of local areas, new models and narratives of cultural experiences, relationships among design, humanities and arts.

Anna Mazzanti. Assistant Professor in History of Contemporary Art, at Politecnico di Milano, Department of Design. She is responsible for the FARB DESY project (2017-2019), deals with museology, environmental art, history and art criticism of the 20th century.

Alessandra Spagnoli. Assistant Professor at Politecnico di Milano, Department of Design. Her research interests mainly concern processes of cultural enhancement guided by design in terms of strategy, actions and communication and new practices and narratives in the fields of exhibit and retail design.

Davide Spallazzo. Assistant professor at Politecnico di Milano, Department of Design. Active in the field of Interaction Design and Human-Computer Interaction, he mostly studies the role of digital technologies in the enhancement of Cultural Heritage towards meaning-making and social engagement.

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