

DESIGN CULTURE(S)

Cumulus Conference Proceedings Roma 2021

Volume #2

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

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

Volume #2

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Loredana Di Lucchio
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Angela Giambattista
Viktor Malakucz

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Viktor Malakucz
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Volume #2

Cumulus Conference
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Rome 2021

CONTENTS

-
- 2887 Heritage and cultural accessibility: the role of design in the creation of an intercultural dialogue
Marco Bozzola, Irene Caputo, Claudia De Giorgi
-
- 2903 Immigrant Cultural Acculturation - A study of Tibetan Clothing in India
Anahita Suri
-
- 2920 Making in Proximity: Design Policies for collaborative making cultures
Lina Monaco, Luca D'Elia, Viktor Malakuczi
-
- 2931 Making practice as narrator of changing social worlds-Textiles and the Scottish Borders, in the 21st century, but based firmly on the past?
Britta Kalkreuter
-
- 2942 **Multiple narratives for multiple visions: engaging citizens in building future scenarios for their city through participatory design and storytelling.**
Davide Fassi, Annalinda De Rosa, Francesco Vergani
-
- 2955 New Technological Space for Tourists. Design as a Trigger of Experience, Osmotic-Membrane Interface, Know-How Provider and Social Engager
Luisa Collina, Ilaria Bollati, Claudia Mastrantoni, Umberto Tolino
-
- 2968 Placemaking through Creative Practice: Enabling Change and Empowering Future Change-makers
Cheryl Giraudy, Saskia van Kampen
-
- 2984 Proximity as space of opportunity: connecting people, productions and territories
Valentina Gianfrate, Elena Formia, Flaviano Celaschi, Elena Vai
-
- 2998 Radius 100 model – Working multidisciplinary theories, methodologies and design practice: An approach to social design beyond academia
Dr. Yona Weitz, Arch. Sharon Koniak
-
- 3014 Rethinking User Experience of Parking Garage. Exploring Innovative Suicide Prevention Strategies Through Motivational Design
Sébastien Proulx, Adam Fromme, Leila Akberdin, Maria Basile, Olivia Forsyth, Maya Jenkins, Abby Nelson, Claire Spicer
-

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Multiple narratives for multiple visions: engaging citizens in building future scenarios for their city through participatory design and storytelling

Davide Fassi^a, Annalinda De Rosa^b,
 Francesco Vergani^{*c}

^a Politecnico di Milano

^b Politecnico di Milano

^c Politecnico di Milano

*francesco.vergani@polimi.it

Abstract | The paper presents a context-based and cross-disciplinary research, reflecting on how a participatory design (PD)-driven approach, embedded with narrative structures, could stimulate citizens' ability to envision plural understandings of their own city. The project is focused on the city of Ivrea, recently named for its industrial past in the UNESCO World Heritage List as "Ivrea, industrial city of the 20th century", influenced mainly by Olivetti's transformative action. The applied methodology demonstrates how the hybridization of PD processes with storytelling can trigger civic engagement and resilience within local communities, aimed at overcoming latent conflicts related to their past through PD-led activities. The co-creation of a common narrative dimension, shifting between real and fictional worlds and intended as an exploratory process, could engage citizens in envisioning future scenarios for their city, triggering their capability of analyzing and reframing past(s) and present(s) towards possible futures.

**KEYWORDS | PARTICIPATORY DESIGN, STORYTELLING, COUNTER-NARRATIVE,
PERFORMING ARTS**

1. Introduction

The approach and findings presented in this paper are based on the research project "Tango-Down Athena – Theatre and Design as hacking means of the contemporary urban myth" (TDA), run by the Polimi DESIS Lab of the Politecnico di Milano University, in collaboration with CRAFT - Centro Ricerca Arte e Formazione Teatro, a theatre research and training centre, and endorsed by Cité du design research centre (France), Tongji University (China), and supported by "Compagnia di San Paolo" foundation. TDA is a cross-disciplinary project that explores, by means of storytelling, the idea of "myth" in relation to urban spaces. Through design-led envisioning processes, the project aims to explore the influence a myth can have on the transformation of contemporary cities, its imaginary and its identities, through the development of a counter-narrative (Fuad-Luke, 2013) that is able to activate new meanings for the local communities and to offer a balanced articulation of their own past(s) towards future scenarios. The paper presents the first two phases¹ of the project, focusing on how the use of narrative methods triggered awareness and broadened envisioning capabilities within a wider and ongoing process of transformation.

1.1 Contextual condition

The TDA area of intervention is Ivrea, a city in north-west Italy. The context was selected in 2018 following the registration of Ivrea in the UNESCO World Heritage List as "Industrial city of the 20th century" for its industrial past, and influenced mainly by Olivetti's transformative action. Thanks to the economic, social and cultural policy of Camillo and Adriano Olivetti in the middle of the last century, the city underwent a successful development model. The industrial area of Ivrea, developed between 1930 and 1960 according to Adriano Olivetti's vision, proposed an alternative model to the 20th-century national and international experimentations of urban industrial areas, of the *company town* and industrial systems developed in large urban agglomerations. The area includes buildings for production, offices and study centres, but also for social purposes such as residential units, public services, and summer colonies, as well as centres for training and various cultural, sporting and recreational activities. Therefore, the company's development affected the whole urban pattern, becoming a laboratory for spatial, cultural and social projects and ideas. For more than thirty years, Adriano Olivetti tried to apply and redirect the urban conceptions that were being explored in the national and international debate and entrusted to the most significant Italian architects of that period. His death in 1960 marked a break in the city's

¹ The project is divided into four phases: 1) "Scientific assets" (from January to April 2019), a research phase on the definition of the relationship between urban myth and the urban model, analysed through scientific literature, some emblematic cases, and with a focus on the city of Ivrea; 2) "Co-design activities, community activation, urban installations" (from April to October 2019), a co-creation phase, involving local informal groups and associations; 3) "Theatre production" (from October 2019 to June 2020), the writing phase of a plot linked to the urban activation resources; involvement of design students for the spatial definition and realisation of the set; production and replicability, as well as in other contexts; 4) "Dissemination and communication" (from July 2019 to June 2020).

history, ending a period of commitment of the factory towards its own territory. The change in the factory's leadership led to a consequent change in its vision, which led in its turn to the slow but inevitable interruption of the former activities and the final fragmentation of its architectural heritage.

1.2 First mapping

The overall legacy of the city and its golden age was considered to be an foundation on which to build up a project concerning the notion of the urban myth and its potential for cities today. During the first phase of the project, the research team had to approach a relatively unknown context by getting in touch with places and communities and collecting data about Ivrea's past and present using desk and ethnographic research. While framing the context with representatives of local organisations and informal groups of citizens², a far more diversified background emerged than expected, one that was filled with conflicting opinions and visions.

This phase highlighted the early interpretation of the context as the sum of *overlapping geographies*, linked to the city's different souls and identities and connected to the city's heritage and memories. The concept of *overlapping geographies*, introduced by the authors, has been conceptually devised to mean elements of territorial diversity that have changed over time. These different portions of the city are mainly the results of a series of cultural and historical changes which occurred according to the city's development over the centuries. The configuration of the territory and the presence of the Dora Baltea river generated a geographical distinction between the northern part of the city - the old town - and the southern - the modern town. The first is characterised by a medieval urban pattern, which once a year becomes the scene of the nationally recognised carnival. The southern part developed during the twentieth century thanks to the presence of industries (primarily Olivetti and, later, Montefibre³). The main purpose of the UNESCO candidacy was to stimulate a relaunch of this area and, therefore, of the entire city, towards a functional regeneration that would boost Ivrea as an innovative technological and cultural pivotal point, as it used to be in the last century. However, the concept of *overlapping geographies* not only refers to the physical meaning of *geography*, but to a broader one, including social, cultural and human identities. In trying to allow local citizens to gain a deeper understanding of their identities and visions, a general sense of immobility and hopelessness emerged that connected the majority of people in the Ivrea community. This is mainly due to the myth of the Olivetti family as creator of a golden age that has now been lost, and has devided the citizens' perceptions of this heritage. If, on the one hand, this legacy is constantly re-proposed by communities as a unique and irreplaceable period in history, on the other hand,

² Relationships were established by first getting in touch with the experts who have been in charge of writing the candidacy report. This first step then led the authors to get in touch with people from cultural and administrative institutions in Ivrea.

³ Montedison Fibre, funded in 1972 and, for years, one of the largest Italian companies for the chemical sector.

it is somehow uncomfortable for those who are trying to move towards a future of possibilities that are disconnected from Olivetti's past. Throughout the years these different visions have generated latent conflicts and difficulties in mutual recognition, which is of course crucial for defining a common direction for the future of the city.

This extremely rich set of differences stimulated critical thinking about how historical, cultural and social changes, if not metabolised, can produce frictions within communities. How is it possible to boost communities' resilience towards proactive actions? How can PD approaches, tools and methods help to stimulate people's capacity to act?

2. Objectives

The cross-disciplinary process of the project required the understanding of participatory activities to be opened up in terms of key methodological approach, thus researching how a PD co-creative process can trigger awareness within local communities. For the design discipline, this means to be able to cross borders in order to design systems, strategies, and experiences rather than objects, visuals, or spaces (Muratovski, 2015).

The project investigated diverse levels of engagement to tackle the contextual complexity, made up of controversies and opposed perspectives, conducting within this given situated context a social conversation towards a non-solutionism(-based) (Manzini, 2016) process. This required an in-depth understanding of the role of PD-based activities, not for creating an alternative future but for envisioning one while shaping a better present. In fact, PD and Design for Social Innovation (DSI) practices are not only necessarily meant to empower communities towards efficient, durable, scalable and replicable solutions, but also towards questioning/re-framing the public realm, possibly triggering the participation of citizens and other local stakeholders such as associations, administrators and policy-makers in the democratic debate concerning the public realm. This could only be done by not pursuing all-encompassing and definite solutions but by diving into the contextual complexity, which allowed the difficulty to create a common voice to emerge, when there is no sense of a shared community or a mutual knowledge to be recognised and undertaken. This voice is needed in order to support the proliferation of "a more favorable environment for the birth and development of a multiplicity of other projects, even though they do not contribute directly and immediately to the solution of a specific problem"(Manzini, 2016, p. 57). In this sense, design activities, including visions, "can increase the probability that new solutions will emerge and can help them develop in greater synergy" (Manzini, 2016, p. 57).

The whole process aimed at nurturing the ability of citizens to envision and gain awareness of what is possible in terms of inner human resources. The essential matter of the design-led part of project was how to connect people's "active [and] agential role in changing the process of construction of social realities" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 573) towards a series of activities specifically designed for the reactivation of local communities.

3. Methodology

The Polimi DESIS Lab adopts a strategic and systemic approach to design and investigates the way design can support and trigger social innovation, combining creativity and visioning with the capability of engaging in co-design processes with a community-centred-design approach, particularly focused on the development of prototyping artefacts for the service and spatial design in urban contexts and towards the development of solutions for social innovation. Design artefacts, in the larger sense and beyond tangibility, are complex systems affected by – and affecting – a relational network of processes, interactions, bodies, things and ideas constantly in flux, where lives, societies and history unfold, in a world which is constantly becoming (Fox & Alldred, 2015).

TDA is a project that lays its foundations in direct contact with the communities of citizens and their context of belonging. By means of the practices borrowed from PD, an attempt was made to articulate a participatory path to highlight the potential citizens have as an active community able to act for their own well-being. Although the first phase of exploration of the territory brought to the surface the presence of a enthusiastic and diversified structure of identities, the inability to converge this pluralism into something truly proactive was also encountered. The research team aimed to trigger *agonism* (Arendt, 2013; Mouffe, 2000, 2007) within public spaces, that is the capacity of human plurality to establish a public sphere fuelled by a political and democratic dialogue to be then translated into concrete actions. In trying to articulate this proactive debate, it was decided to use storytelling and narratives as a tool with a transformative power to generate processes of change (Tassinari et al., 2017), and to funnel a shared vision of a hypothetical fictional world that overlaps the real one. This means reinterpreting what is familiar (real) through a process of abstraction (through the lenses of the fictional) to, then, return the uncovered meanings and understandings of their own resources into a new familiarity (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

To stimulate an active debate on extremely sensitive issues for the community of citizens is a process that nevertheless requires a significant level of abstraction from the context. Letting people discuss their unfamiliarity with divergent issues is an extremely delicate practice. Starting from the structuring of a process of increasing awareness – which is typical of PD approaches – the project explored a correlation between places and temporality within PD, hence the added component of narratology. According to Jung (2014), narrative, as one of the ancient forms of communication, has its own way of delivering concepts and information, using archetypes as developed elements of the collective unconscious. The effectiveness of the use of stories as a practice for understanding, by means of PD, dormant needs and future scenarios, is to be found in its being a mental framework for the cognitive organisation of human experience (Bruner, 1991; Plowman, 1996). Furthermore, using storytelling and narratives as a tool for exploring and encoding the context has the exceptional ability to trigger a process of abstraction: people > characters / actions > events / places > scenes. This process of abstraction emerged as a challenging area of reflection for

the PD field due to its ability to bring democracy, agonism and politics to an enhanced and fictionalised surface where communities can feel comfortable in discussing present issues and future visions, and avoiding the fact of feeling too attached to reality. Transferring physical places and personalities to a fictional level of action is a way to support, by means of stories, the participants' imaginative ability towards a broader design capacity, since "stories offer examples on how we can face and manage conflicts in everyday life and generate processes of change" (Tassinari et al., 2017: S3491). This transfer of elements between real and fictional worlds has also emerged as a useful strategy in other disciplinary fields. An example is what is defined as narrative embedding (Lane & Maxfield, 2005), largely employed in the marketing field, where the use of narrative and its peculiarities is applied in place of the collection of data and analysis in orienting individual actors towards the future.

The development of a parallel and fictional narrative world leads the researcher to perform the role of the narrator, carrying out a work of construction of the imaginary in which s/he tries to direct a process of awareness (through the production of knowledge) by a community of people. In order to trace all these elements, the research team provided participatory tools borrowed from game, service, and spatial design as well as narratology, philosophy and sociology disciplines. The whole activity was conceived mainly as a co-generated game and used devices such as cards and props to stimulate the envisioning capacity of the participants. All the elements were specifically designed to help the co-narration develop among the citizens, and provided a solid basis to trace all the insights and information useful for the research purposes.

4. Project

Starting with the objective and methodologies described above, the activity specifically designed for Phase 2 of the project focused mainly on:

- the creation of a community map of the city based on objective deductions and subjective memories/experiences related to local communities;
- the use of storytelling as a design discipline's co-generation tool to funnel visions (in terms of stories) set in a hypothetical fictional world that can be later brought back to the real one to enhance citizens' resilience;
- the definition of a toolbox made of characters, places, events and narrations as a basis from which to develop an immersive performative act (Phase 3 of the project).

The activity was conducted with four groups of citizens from Ivrea and the surrounding areas, as well as members of associations and informal groups, and experts in the cultural sector. The groups were also heterogeneous through the presence of participants of different ages, thus allowing for a more diversified interpretation of the territorial context. The activities were carried out in the spaces of the railway station managed by the Zac! Zone

Attive di Cittadinanza, a well-established cooperative that collaborates with citizens through social and economic approaches together with conviviality and solidarity.

The co-design (or better *co-narration*) activity was set in order to guide participants between real and fictional worlds, through the deconstruction of narrative in its fundamental elements: characters, actions, places. The co-creation session of narration with local citizens was divided into two distinct activities carried out in sequence:

- Activity 1 “Building a common narrative world”: creation of a shared – both physical and conceptual – vision of Ivrea starting from the narration of subjective and objective memories of the participants.
- Activity 2: “What if... - Living the fictional world”: development of a possible future scenario within a fictional context, where participants are abstracted into another level in terms of temporal and spatial dimensions through storytelling elements. The process of abstraction is triggered by the introduction of a disequilibrium element (hacking) that generates an imbalance. The story, created by the interviewees, uses the narrative world of Activity 1.

The two activities led to the creation of a story-making toolbox made up of characters, places, events and narrations. The toolbox, delivered to the partners of the TDA project, will be used as a starting element for writing the interactive performance (currently under development).

4.1 Activity 1 - “Building a common narrative world”

The first part of the activity was designed to stimulate a greater awareness of place through different interpretative levels that are able to give back a community (and objective) map of the city of Ivrea. Starting from some recognisable elements, the group was asked to define a map through a joint discussion on the physical and mental perception of the places in Ivrea. In addition to defining spaces (*thematic areas, borders and special places*), questions were asked to identify characters and events that were particularly related to the memories and stories of the participants.

The development of the first activity was requested by the research group which set itself up as a narrator by defining a series of steps:

1. **Introduction (blank map)** - Participants were provided with a print depicting the stylised map of Ivrea showing only the river (the Dora Baltea) and the railway axis.
2. **Thematic areas** - Subsequently, with the use of stickers, the group was asked to provide further specifications about the location of places and thematic areas they considered fundamental to the recognizability of the city.
3. **Borders** - The identification of areas and places allowed the circumscription of Ivrea within a confined space. The shape of the city changed throughout the

activities conducted with different groups of people, as a result of the conception of the individual participants.

4. **Special places** - Individual participants were asked to identify two places each that were related to particularly important past memories and experiences.
5. **Characters** - As the final step of Activity 1, participants were asked to identify some noteworthy characters related to local people (real and imaginary) who could be matched to a series of archetypes.

4.2 Activity 2 - “What if... - Living the fictional world”

The second part of the activity aimed at creating a story in a hypothetical fictional world in which the city of Ivrea has faced a significant event that has shaken its sense of balance. Starting from the map co-created in the previous phase, the participants were called to imagine an alternative world to be used as a setting for the definition of a self-contained narrative arc composed of a set of characters, tools, places, unexpected events and actions. The activity was aimed at stimulating group awareness as to how to recover from a destabilising situation through proactive actions that would enhance the communities' resilience.

If in Activity 1 the participants were asked to take an approach more linked to their personal experiences and behaviours, in Activity 2 they were encouraged more to imagine solutions within a process of teamwork. Furthermore, the personification of a fictional character limited the participants' possibilities of action to specific characteristics and skills, adding a further level of difficulty in creating the story. Activity 2 was conceived as a role-playing game; all the events and the progression of the story were recorded on cards to create a complete story, from the first chapter to the epilogue.

Activity 2 was completed over several steps:

1. **Traces from the fictional world** - Participants were provided with three different boxes containing different prompts (1 photograph, 1 object and 1 newspaper article) from the city of Ivrea set in a parallel world. They were then asked to trace the fictional world through the description of social, historical and environmental characteristics linked to previous hints. The different prompts are connected to hypothetical future changes in terms of climate, social, cultural evolution.
2. **Alteration event** - The participants were presented with a short narrative of a change (identified through a natural disaster caused by non-human agents) which led to a change in the city of Ivrea. Here resilience is required and is closely related to the ability to “bounce forward” and “move on” after a disaster (Manyena et al., 2011; Manyena, 2006), conceived as changes related to floods, the energy crisis, desertification due to global warming, or depopulation.
3. **Creation of the heroic community** - Subsequently, participants were asked to draw character cards (some new and others generated in the first part of the

activity) connected to specific archetypes. All the characters together defined a heroic community, i.e. a team that had to act together to overcome the situation. Participants, associated with a specific character, had to act consistently with the skills of their game avatar to proceed in the story.

4. **The game** - The game consists in building a Hero's Journey (Campbell & Moyers, 2011; Vogler, 2007) in which the community of characters is brought to face the change at places pointed out in the first part of the activity (special places). To move forward in the game, participants have to roll the dice and then draw a card from two different decks: the first contains *tools* to be used, the second contains *unexpected events* that change the course of the game.
5. **The narrative arc** - Even if the story was generated collectively each character was chosen to be the protagonist of a particular step of the game. In each step, the protagonist had to create a story chapter considering the characteristics of the fictional world created, the skills of the character card, and the tools found along the path. The group of participants had to outline a self-contained story structured in ten chapters, trying to combine characters, actions, tools and places.



Figure 1. Graphics of the tools used in the activity. The blank map served as the board on which to play the game.



Figure 2. The development of a story's chapter by participants and other prompts used to create the fictional world. The picture was taken at Zac!'s spaces in Ivrea, on the 25th of October 2019 during the co-design session with citizens.



Figure 3. "Special places" and "Chapter" cards are matched to define the progression of the story. Each card had a blank space where to sketch a quick visualization of spaces and actions. The picture was taken at Zac!'s spaces in Ivrea, on the 25th of October 2019 during the co-design session with citizens.

5. Results

Both the contextual conditions and the expected outcomes were somewhat challenging and therefore interesting to explore. First, the project location was atypical for the Polimi DESIS Lab: the research team had only a previous indirect knowledge of the context and its inner dynamics. This meant that the risk of a superficial commitment was high during the ethnographic exploration and in providing networks and activities, and also because of the short duration of the project. In this specific case, the character of the expected design outcome – a potential social change powered by the co-creation of alternative narratives – and the consequent lack of traditional tangible outcomes of the project's goal challenged the research group, raising questions both about the effective agency of the project's design innovation and the difficulties connected with such an open-ended, ephemeral outcome.

A central challenge for PD today is to embrace a cultural and humanistic re-balance, able to question not only viable solutions, collaborative knowledge construction and systemic change, but also the human action of inhabiting. This challenge means actively exploring alternative ways to tackle the context-based design process, where the interaction between people and the environment is a primary issue, intertwined with an attention towards temporality which is not only about reflecting in terms of short-/long-term effects and impacts, but rather moving from a linear and univocal interpretation of the temporal dimension, to a resilient and open-ended way of expressing different visions and voices, which are more related to the human (and non-human) dimensions.

Working with a community of citizens rooted firmly in the history of the city provided a double level of interpretation. On the one hand, it helped to cement our understandings of the territory, while on the other, it allowed us to test a series of approaches related to the theme of resilience. The idea of splitting the activity into two parts helped the participants experience a conceptual and emotional swing through the initial development of a sense of control, and the subsequent annihilation of the same with the consequent need for reconstruction. Activity 1 helped the formation of the teams take place in a relaxed atmosphere through personal emotional experiences, while the story making-focused Activity 2 unsettled this apparent sense of control, stimulating the same teams to act towards a possible solution. The participants were themselves associated with the experiences of their game avatars, even if on a purely fictional level. The activity allowed the research group to effectively test, even on a limited sample, the capacity for resilience of urban communities and their attitude in dealing with situations of potential uncertainty. At the end of the activity the participants were agreeably impressed by the challenge as they were initially unaware of the second part. Even if tested on a purely fictional level, most of them expressed a sense of satisfaction in understanding the number of actions individual citizens can undertake in a team. In their opinion, the activity also served to help them empathise more with their own territorial and social context, which was all-too often criticised. The objectives of the work have been effectively verified, triggering different

points of view in the community about the role they, as citizens, can play in improving their condition.

All the elements traced through the activities will now build the foundations of the interactive performance to be staged by CRAFT association. It will be interesting to observe how a PD co-creative process, its methodologies and approach, as well as the deconstruction of narrations, will then be reinterpreted by the peculiar language of the theatre, where the individual plot-spectator relationship owns, potentially, endless interpretations.

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About the Authors:

Davide Fassi Associate professor in design at the Politecnico di Milano. He published “Temporary Urban Solutions” (2012) and “In the neighbourhood” (2017). His research investigates the relationship between space and service with a community-centred approach. Awarded with XXV Compasso d’Oro in 2018 for “campUS – incubation and settings for social practices”.

Annalinda De Rosa PhD in Design. Research Fellow at the Design Department and Adjunct Professor at School of Design of Politecnico di Milano and at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano. She is part of the Polimi DESIS Lab within the international DESIS - Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability - Network.

Francesco Vergani PhD candidate in Design at the Politecnico di Milano. He collaborates in research activities dealing with space and service design projects related to the reactivation of local communities in urban contexts. He is part of the Polimi DESIS Lab.