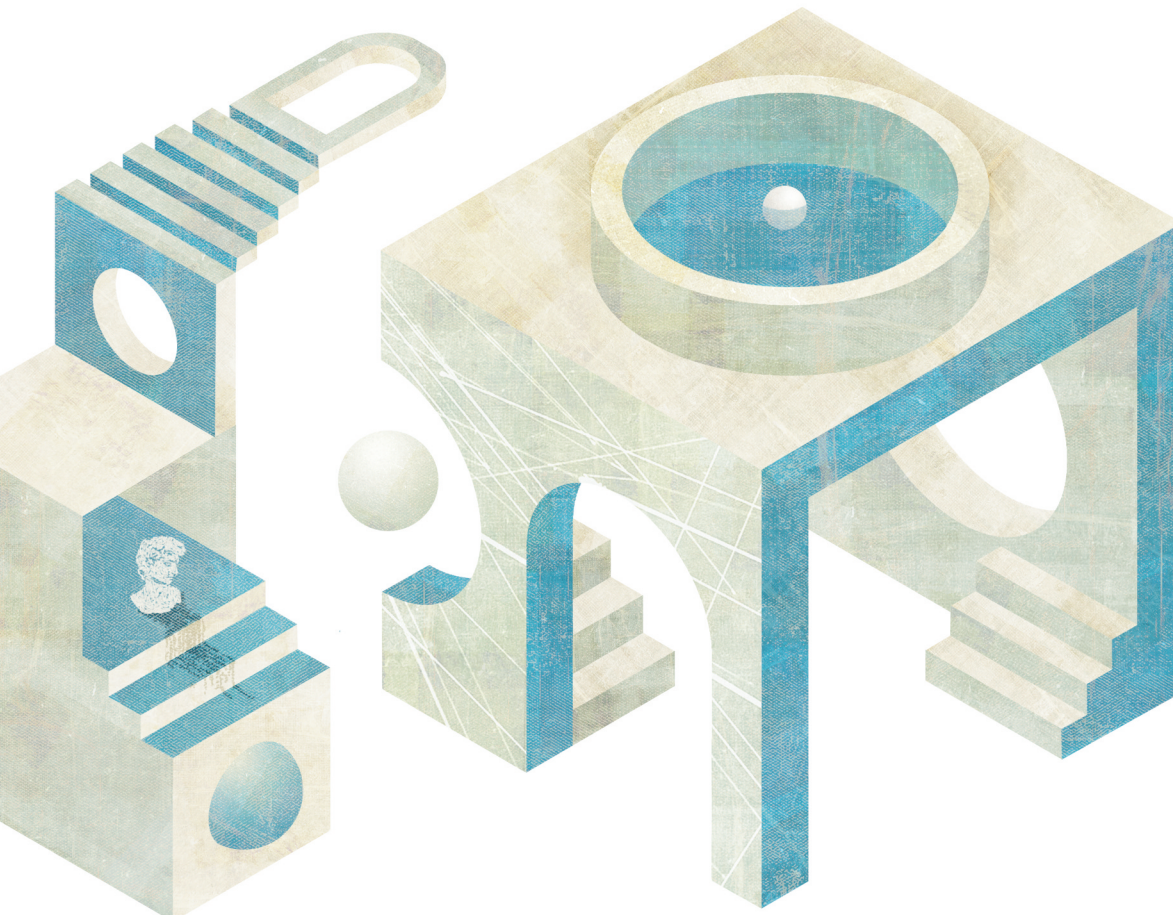
DESIGN CULTURE MATTERS

Embracing cultures and cross-cultures
through design perspective and matters

edited by Giampiero Bosoni, Marta Elisa Cecchi



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5. How to Discover a Design Culture?

James Christopher Postell, Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano

Abstract

In this chapter, what characterizes a design culture is examined and a method is presented to discover new insights in the operations and procedures of disciplinary practices within the cultural domain of Italian Design.

Examination of how students gained cultural insight in the seminar *How to Discover the Italian Design* will be two-fold, using concepts applied from the discourse on cultural studies, and utilizing a *list of actors* to guide the inquiry. The seminar was an opportunity for students from countries outside of Italy to discover facets of Italian Design. Students were introduced to the discourse in cultural studies and utilized multiple sources to examine five design disciplines: fashion, furniture, graphics, interior, and product design. Within each of the professional and disciplinary domains, students focused their research on *designers, companies, product output, history and theory*, and *social media influencers*, as well as the *technologies, materials, tools*, and *methods* used within the disciplinary domains.

Relying on data visualization, students learned by *seeing* their research visualized into infographics, which helped them *discover* facets of Italian Design. *Discovery* is defined and presented as an important concept in the process of learning.

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Introduction

Learning about a design culture can be challenging, specifically when trying to understand intangible operations, processes, and tools within a new cultural domain. Intangible aspects shape cultural identity but are difficult to *see* and design disciplines rarely have clear indicators. At a basic level, culture has been defined as shared symbols, norms, and values in a social organization (Walsham, 2002). However, consideration should be given to the question: *which symbols, what norms, and whose values are the most useful to understand the culture of a design discipline, or of a larger domain such as Italian Design*?

Learning is influenced by the questions asked, the resources utilized, the contextual boundary of the inquiry and of the inquirer. How research data are gathered, organized, and synthesized also matters.

In this chapter, questions guide the reader to consider concepts related to learning a new design culture. A personal journey of discovering Italian Design is presented to connect the learned concepts with a process of discovery. Finally, there is a case study which demonstrates an effective method for researching and discovering a design culture using data visualization techniques. The conclusion reflects upon a methodology used for discovery. We begin with the first question.

What Constitutes a Design Culture?

According to Guy Julier, a shared set of values comprised of human behavior, material culture, and societal norms or conditions constitute a design culture (Julier, 2014). He has also previously described design culture as "*collectively-held norms of practice shared within or across contexts*" (Julier, 2006). Both descriptions articulate thoughtful definitions of design culture. His contributions of *context-informed practice* influenced others, including Ezio Manzini's *emerging design cultures* (Manzini, 2014).

I hold the point of view that context-informed practice does not necessarily need to be geographic, ethnographic, nor time dependent and I view professional practice using processes and operations and disciplines in a more general, theoretic realm. Therefore, a focus will

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include both context-informed practices and design domains and seek to understand their contributions to the discourse.

The formation of a design culture by its very nature establishes *context-informed boundaries* created by tangible output and intangible operations. A *domain* can be formed by any organized structure, organization, or society such as a discussion, a firm, a discipline, or a country. Domains can be large or small, their output tangible, or intangible and are shaped by the contextual limits in a field of inquiry.

A *frame of reference* is a unique type of boundary that offers a comparative reference between two or more domains. *Paradigms* that a group holds in a specific contextual domain influence how the group thinks and behaves outside of its contextual domain.

Thomas Kuhn wrote about paradigms in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). He presents the idea that paradigms are understandings about how people in a shared societal group think about and do things, sometimes without being conscious of how specialized their behavior or norms may be (Kuhn, 1962). It is helpful to consider an important concept that Kuhn has discussed: before introducing a new paradigm shift related to a particular society, one should first identify the society values of the person or group introducing the paradigm shift. No matter how empathetic one may strive to be in placing ourselves in the societal domain of others, we are bound by the limits of our own context.

Within frames of reference, there are useful and creative methods available to identify typologies of design culture. One can use conventional constraints of ethnographic locality, for example, Milano, Brianza, Friuli / Udine, Torino, or Rome, and time, such as 1930-1950, 2020-2022 (Sparke, 1996). Design movements often reference regional-cultural geographies and time boundaries. French Art Nouveau from Nancy and Paris 1750-1914, German Design Bauhaus, Dessau 1925-40, Danish Design from Copenhagen and the Royal Academy 1950-1970, Design from the US Midwest (Cranbrook and Grand Rapids 1940-60s), and China, Beijing, 2000-2015 (Manzini, 2014).

Regarding Italian furniture design, the region of Brianza has long been marked as a specific, historical, and cultural region in northern Italy. Brianza has had a history rooted in crafted making, specifically making wooden furniture in thousands of small shops (*botteghe*) operated by skilled *artigiani* or crafts people.

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During the time of my visits to Milan and Brianza in the 1980s, the number of Italian furniture companies and their capacity for production was a formidable reality. According to Promosedia, in 1989 half of the total number of chairs produced in Europe were made in Italy. Of those produced in Italy, approximately 65% were made in Friuli, 25% made in Brianza, and the remaining 10% scattered throughout the Boot. The size of the Italian furniture industry was achieved, in part, by the increases in production during the 1970s which saw production skyrocket, mainly due to increased exports. Furniture exports grew from 74 billion lire in 1970 to 1,856 billion lire in 1980 and reached a staggering 6,000 billion lire in 1990.

Today, Brianza contains large, clustered industrial manufacturing facilities that utilize innovative technologies and new materials in the making of products extending well beyond furniture. Brianza's material culture has evolved from hand tooling processes utilizing wood-working skills to CAD/CAM manufacturing technologies using new materials that include wood composites, hybrid ceramics, and biopolymers.

Material culture is primarily identified through the technologies and new materials used in the output of products such as in modernism, arts and crafts, parametric design, and human computer interaction design. Cultural identities can range in scale from firm-based to city-based, from regional to global. The bi-polar scales of local and global events are referred to as *glocalization,* a term coined by sociologist Roland Robertson. In the Harvard Business Review article, he described *glocalization* to mean "*the simultaneity, the co-presence, of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies*" (Robertson, 1980).

International exhibits and publications have contributed to the global discourse of Italian Design as a specific design culture. In 1972 at the MOMA in New York City, Italian Design was branded through an exhibit titled *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* curated by Emiliano Ambasz (Bosoni, 2008). Many have considered this exhibit the zenith of Italian Design because it helped shape cultural identity of the Italian domestic landscape resulting from new ways of living, embracing furniture, graphic, product, interior, architectural, and urban design disciplines all contributing and advancing the cultural discourse. The timing of the exhibit aligned with the beginning of an economic, societal, and political resurgence fueled by a genuine interest in the concept that Italian Design was embracing new technologies and new materials. The

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exhibition grew the exportation of Italian products and values which originated from the 1950s branded campaign *Made in Italy.*

Why is it important to reexamine *Italian Design* now, 50 years after the exhibit *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*? The answer lies in the fact that the societal values held by Italians have changed significantly, and innovative technologies, new materials, and new products and services have achieved new levels of quality, responding to new and evolving societal and environmental challenges facing the 21st century. This leads us to a second question related to discovering a design culture.

How might the processes and operations of *making* shape a design culture?

Consider the Latin origin of the word manufacturing, *manu factura,* to mean *made by hand* (Etymonline, 2021). Production is a process of making, using one's hands and hand tools. Also consider the accelerated technological innovations of CAM technologies, digitally programmable robots, and AI that are shaping new products and innovative manufacturing processes. It seems reasonable to speculate that innovation in technology, production processes, and new materials have brought significant change to the output of designed products and to the discourse of *material culture.* Focusing purely on manufacturing processes and outputs fails to fully explain a design culture and its interconnection with societal values. There are processes and outputs in design that exist beyond the machination of making. Nonetheless, innovations in how things are made have changed how people live.

In striving to understand a holistic and contemporary view of Italian design culture, it is helpful to seek an understanding which encapsulates the nature of the working relationships that lies within both the technological context (realms of making) and societal context (realms of use and users). One place to start are paradigmatic producers and actors of design.

Combining producers and actors in the *realm of making* with those in the *realm of designing* and *use/user* categories results in a broad network of individuals, companies and interconnected sub-domains. Consider the following list of *actors*:

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DESIGNERS and their ideas, ideations, trials, creations, methodologies, and output.

COMPANIES and manufacturers are closely intertwined with evolving innovative technologies and new materials.

DESIGNED OUTPUT is traditionally used to identify a design movement. A design discipline is primarily known through its designed (conceived) and produced (realized) output.

TECHNOLOGIES AND MATERIALS are the engines of Material Culture. How things are made includes the operations and material processes which are used to produce the products and designed output.

HISTORY AND THEORY are the discourse of a cultural domain, documented in public and scholarly forums which include journals, books, articles, blogs, interviews, videos, and exhibitions.

INSTITUTIONS include academic programs and professional organizations. A curriculum is an important tool giving value and order to the knowledge and skills required to enter a design discipline. Academic programs contribute to the formation of a Design Culture through research and the quality of skilled graduates. Organizations become hubs for professional discourse and development, often driven by societal needs and desires.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND INFLUENCERS serve as a megaphone to market-trending issues in a Design Culture. Social media influencers link trends, values, and branded messages of a company or product with the public and potential consumers. Popular formats include Facebook, Instagram, podcasts, Twitter, and Meta spaces yet to be developed.

The actors, processes of making, and institutions listed above do not constitute an all-encompassing group. They serve however as a framework of co-dependent components developed from a personal journey to discover Italian furniture design in the mid-1980s and updated to reflect societal changes. We will now explore how the visualization of data can serve as intermediaries to discover facets of *Italian Design.*

How can a Design Culture be *discovered* and what role does discovery have in the learning process?

Before tackling this question, consider how one learns. Learning can be achieved through several distinct methodologies such as immer-

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sion, direct experience, empirical study, by doing, and through second-source research.

Discovery is an important concept, whose definition and conceptual meaning can inspire insightful methods and processes of learning. *Discovery* is the act of learning something (*seeing something*) unexpected or new, but it requires a method.

How to discover a design culture remotely is a new reality due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and a challenge for many reasons. Some challenges arise because cultural learning through immersion or direct experience is directly related to travel; access to the Internet is not guaranteed; and time zone differences translate to some people attending meetings in the middle of the night. Remote learning indirectly limits discovery by placing emphasis on the design and cultural discourse through online sources due to the absence of physically seeing and touching products and the inability to experience physical exhibition spaces. Therefore, an alternative methodology to experiential learning is required to create discovery. The method of choice proposed for our class was visualizing research data and creating infographics. The value of mining data from online sources, although limited and potentially misleading, became a tool for researching. Creating information maps to visualize research data would enable new discoveries and describe the online discourse.

How to Discover the Italian Design was an elective seminar offered in the School of Design at the Politecnico di Milano in 2020. Thirty-three international Erasmus students from thirty global design schools, along with three native Italian students were enrolled. Collectively, students in the seminar were organized to study five design disciplines because the majority came from programs of fashion, furniture, graphic, interior, and product design, though some students were studying architecture, textile design, and transportation design.

Objectives of the course were two-fold. One was to develop a broad understanding of five design disciplines driven in part, by research and personal inquiry into the culture and history of Italian Design. In this context, students explored tangible and intangible contributions to the larger global culture of design. The second objective was to synthesize the research data in a collective manner and develop an exhibit to promote the infographics for others to explore the discovered cultural domain of Italian Design.

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The course was taught by me, an American professor and architect who had recently joined the faculty at the Politecnico di Milano in the School of Design. The seminar course was developed to offer a flexible roadmap to help students research the histories, networks, and operations of Italian/Italic Design, and to encourage discovery through the visualization of their research data.

Days before class began in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the city. Expectations for the course were revised when the university transitioned from in-presence learning to online instruction. Most of the students continued with the course despite limitations caused by the pandemic. *How do you transfer knowledge about a particular design culture to those outside of its cultural geography, learning remotely, and limited to online methods?* In response to this question, the seminar was organized into three phases: 1) Preparation and study, 2) Research guided by individual inquiry, and 3) Group synthesis and teamwork.

Phase 1: Preparation and Study

The first phase in the seminar introduced concepts and characterizations of cultural identity, directing students to selected readings to understand *Italic-Italian* distinctions and research methods. Students were assigned two initial readings, each requiring written responses helping students reflect on concepts. In the beginning of the course, the phrase *Italian Design* was substituted by *Italic Design*, inspired by the article ITALICITY: Global and Local (Bassetti, 2002). Bassetti distinguishes the concept of "Italic peoples" from that of Italians and his ideas resonated with the goals and learning outcomes of the seminar. The term "*Italicity*" delineates *Italian* in the broadest cultural sense; not limited by ethnic or linguistic belonging as with those of Italian origin or even with those who speak the Italian language (Bassetti, 2002). It served as an entry portal with the task of introducing concepts and typologies of cultural identity.

The second reading was an unpublished paper entitled, "*Furniture Design in the Midst of Architecture*" (Postell, 1990) which presented a personal journey into learning about Italian Design in the mid-1980s.

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Phase 2: Research Guided by Individual Inquiry

During this second phase, the backgrounds of the students enabled them to decide which design discipline they would research with the aim to balance the class into five equal disciplinary domains. While online lectures continued weekly, students refined their personal inquiry and developed their research studies. Examples of personal inquiry included:

- where and how designers received their design education;
- gender-social relations stemming from cultural history;
- materials and technologies in the making of projects.

The following figures present the visualization of personal inquiry and their unique approaches.

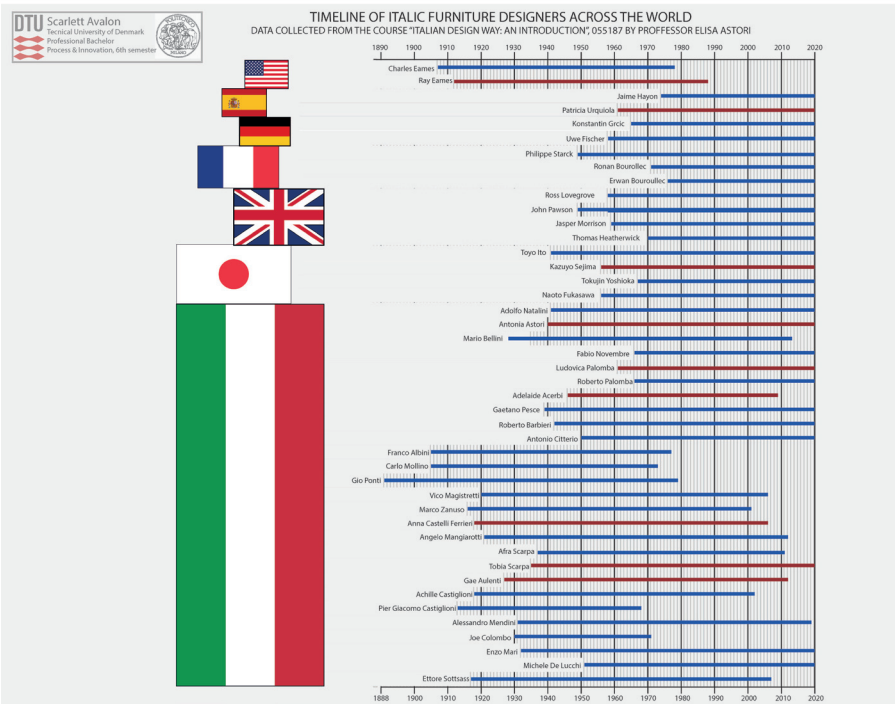

Fig. 1 – Timeline of Italic furniture designers from across the world. Scarlett Avalon

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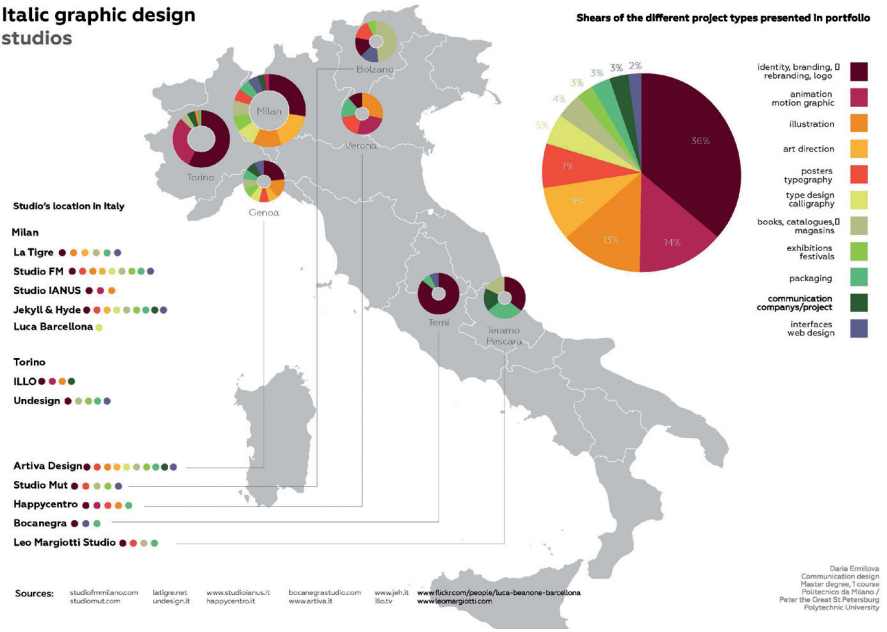

Fig. 2 – Geographic mapping of Italic graphic design studios. Daria Ermilova

Through a process of creating infographics following the data visualization methodologies of Edward Tufte (2001), students presented their work, and in turn, the professor provided real-time, online critique to each student, in addition to the weekly emailed and personalized comments. Not only did students learn from the online class exchange, but they also improved their understanding about Italic Design by *seeing* work by other students. Students soon began to perceive the information/visualization exercises as tools for "*seeing*" an inherently complex and dynamic Design Culture. Decisions such as selecting variables challenged students to examine specific data and discover why it was *Italic* and what was being told about a design discipline.

Output from the second phase generated six actor-oriented digital pdfs by each student, complete with some level of visualization of data and documented sources. It took significant time to gather and synthesize the data by each student due to the diaspora of time zones caused by the pandemic.

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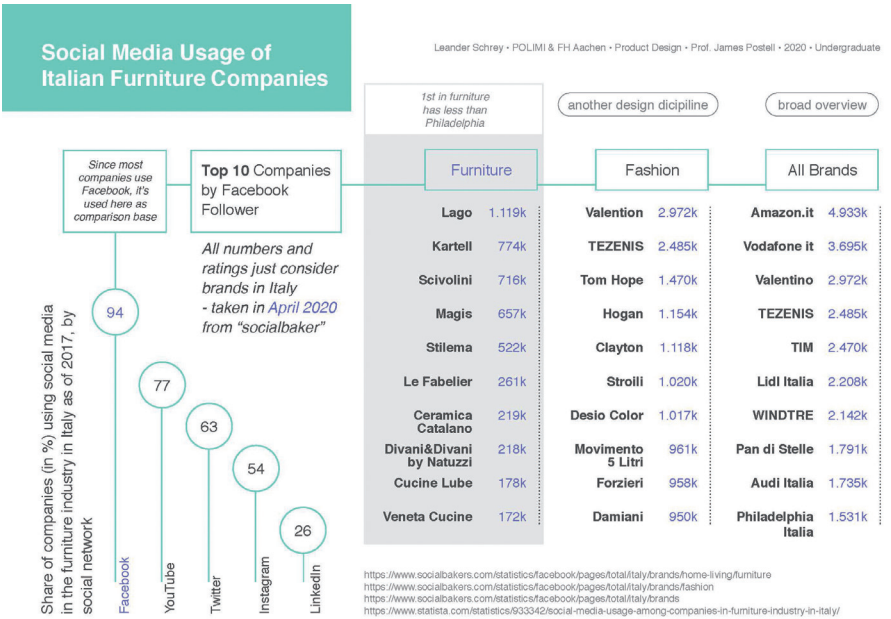

Fig. 3 – Social Media used by Furniture Companies. Leander Schrey

The goal was for the data to speak clearly through visualization and give voice to the research. *Figures 1-5* are examples of visualizing research data with personal inquiry. This exercise was both challenging and liberating. If students needed further time to sharpen their inquiry and explore more research, they were granted more time so that they could visualize their info graphics with enough data. The opportunity and encouragement to revise each research work based upon critique of data gathering and interpreting helped refine the work and focus the learning.

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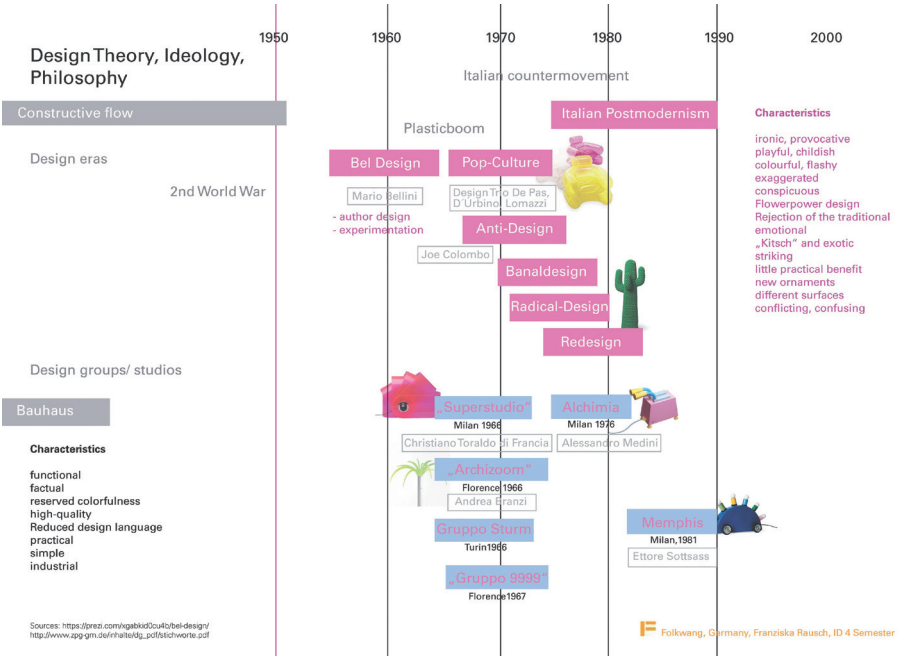

Fig. 4 – Design Theory, Ideology, and Philosophy. Franziska Rausch

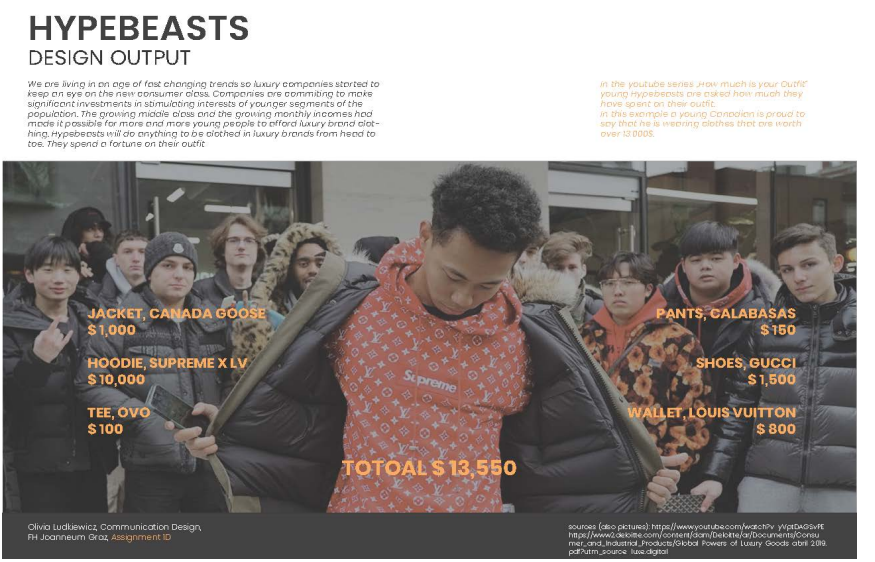

Fig. 5 – Visualization of data, fashion HYPEBEASTS. Olivia Ludkiewicz

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Phase 3 & 4: Group Synthesis and Teamwork

The third and fourth phases of the seminar required students to work in small interdisciplinary groups, to edit the disciplinary research and prepare the content for an exhibition. These steps enabled third-person edits to the work, and through the exchange, the work evolved once again to a more poignant level of understanding of Italic Design adherent to a specific design discipline like Fashion Design or Product Design. Components were disassembled, reassembled, and uploaded into a built interactive site, whose graphic organization served as a framework for the collection. On the last day of class, everyone took part in an online walk-through of the website exhibition.

Each team wrestled with critique about effective storytelling, data-sets, visualization, and organization. They were aware their work held bias and was on some levels incomplete. The personal inquiries, how they were visualized, and the quality and citation of sources used for the data were important and resolved. Students were able to synthesize their design discipline research, while at the same time generate learning lessons about the power of visualizing data. Collectively organized, the answer to the question *What is Italic Design?* became visualized.

In response to the pandemic lockdown, exhibiting the work was decided through a student-led effort to create a website domain (https://10757209.wixsite.com/italicdesignpolimi). While teams were working on organizing each design discipline, one team was tasked with the platform design and thematic template for displaying the work. This team envisioned the interactive website, required each team to follow formats, and ensured the functionality of the website.

During the final class, when the website was presented in its final form, students saw all the disciplines and links between actors together. It provided a learning opportunity to see their discourse into the *Italic Design* Culture presented by design discipline, as interpreted through the eyes and work of the students. The website aptly substituted the physical classroom as a productive and inspiring space for critique and learning.

Students discovered how to use a pedagogical tool within the research assignments through the poetics of making data visual. It is anticipated that those who visit the website will discover Italic Design through the *corporeal imagination* enhanced by the visualization and interaction of the digital platform.

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Fig. 6 – How to Discover Italic Design, website-homepage created by students in the seminar course. School of Design, Politecnico di Milano. June 2020. *(https://10757209.wixsite.com/italicdesignpolimi) courtesy Scarlott Avalon*

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Concluding remarks

Learning about a design culture is a daunting and challenging exercise that requires curiosity, empathy, patience, and a process to discover tangible and intangible operations and procedures from various domains. It goes deeper than simply studying the actors or the output from a discipline or domain. Introducing interconnected domains within the design disciplines of Italian Design was useful to research and visually *see* through the infographics. The shared roadmap and stringent use of multiple sources for gathering research was important for the group work to recreate a whole (the website) out of the parts (individual research).

The seminar resulted in students seeing the design disciplines and the discourse on Italian Design culture afresh and holistically, despite the uncertainties, weakness, and criticism that stem from utilizing such a method. Instead of being consumers of data they were interpreters of data. Reflecting, thinking, learning, and discovering a design culture (remotely) can build understanding of a cultural domain and gain deeper knowledge about a design discipline.

This chapter sought to demonstrate that learning is enhanced when students are actively engaged in creative, generative activities (Hall, Bailey, and Tillman, 1997; Chi, 2009). Generative activities have been shown to benefit comprehension of domains involving invisible components. Wittrock's generative theory (1990) stresses the importance of learners actively constructing and developing relationships between pieces of information, knowledge, and experience.

This teaching methodology has proven it can be done within the time span of a semester. The results of this didactic experiment illustrate that this method of teaching and learning is justifiable for future educational models. Further exploration using this methodology will develop more evidence to expand learning and discovery tethered to visualizing data.

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Authors

Giampiero Bosoni (editor), Full Professor of Interior Architecture at the Faculty of Design, Milan Polytechnic. Since 1991 he has been responsible for the courses of History of Design and of Architecture. Architect, he has collaborated with Figini and Pollini, Vittorio Gregotti and Enzo Mari, with whom he developed an interest in the theory and history of design in the field of architecture. He has written and edited several books and around 300 articles for numerous magazines in the sector ("Domus", "Lotus", "Abitare", "Casabella", "Interni", "Ottagono", "Print" (USA), "Brutus Casa" (J) and others. Editor (1982-94) of the magazine "Rassegna" magazine directed by Vittorio Gregotti, and director (1989-94) of the magazine "Progex, Design & Exhibition Architecture". Since 1980 he has been a consultant for the magazines "Casabella", "Ottagono", "Interni", "Domus" and the Milan Triennale. In 1997 he designed and curated the first nucleus of the of the Historical Collection of Italian Design at the Collection of Italian Design at the Milan Triennale. In 2009 he was commissioned by MoMA in New York to edit a book on the history of Italian history of Italian Design, illustrating it with a selection of the museum's collection. He is a member of the Scientific Committee of the Franco Albini Foundation Albini Foundation and president of AIS/Design, the Italian Association of Italian Design Historians. He has held numerous conferences at universities and other cultural cultural and educational institutions in Italy and abroad.

Marta Elisa Cecchi (editor), Interior Designer (MSc) and Phd in Design at Politecnico di Milano. Her PhD research investigates the design of atmospheres in temporary exhibition spaces, through the study of historical case studies of the environmental qualities of the exhibition space. She has carried out research activities at the Triennale Design Museum and the Compasso d'Oro Museum in Milan. She is a teaching assistant in various

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courses on the history of design and planning. She collaborates with the magazine "Inventario", analysing design and its relations with contemporary art.

Beatrice Bianco, is graduated in Archaeology and Ancient History at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris, she always explored the material culture both in the past and in the present days. Since 2011 she works for important realities in the Collectible Design field, in Italy and abroad. In 2015 she founds and directs Camp Design Gallery in Milan until 2021, supporting new perspectives of contemporary design. She collaborates as independent researcher, teaching fellow, lecturer and didactic coordinator with professors and PhD students of Politecnico di Milano and POLI.design.

Mauro Ceconello, Architect and Associate Professor, Product Design, School of Design, Politecnico di Milan. He focuses his research activity on tools and apps to enhance cultural heritage and tourism using mobile technology, serious games, and interactive systems. He held courses about augmented reality and mobile experience. He is a scientific coordinator of many research projects concerning valorisation of culture through digital technologies and interaction tools.

Peter Arthur Di Sabatino, is an Associate Professor in the School of Design at Politecnico di Milano. Previous positions include: Dean of the College of Architecture, Art and Design at the American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates Visiting Professor at PoliMi and the National Institute of Design, India; Chair of the Department of Environmental Design at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California; Professor of Architecture and Urbanism at Woodbury University in Los Angeles. Director of the Community Design and Urban Research Center in Hollywood; Licensed Architect in California in private practice in architecture, urbanism and design.

Marinella Ferrara, PhD, Associate Professor of Industrial Design at Politecnico di Milano, Head of MADEC, the Material Design Culture Research Centre (www.madec.polimi.it). Her research aims to clarify the relationship between design and materials, and to contribute to design theories and teaching methodologies. She developed the theory of the Material Paradigms (2004), founded MAD (University of Palermo, 2006), one of the first Materials Library of the Italian Universities. Following, she published the first Italian design-led study on Smart, Sensible and Interactive Materials (Lupetti, 2008), defined the Italian Way to Material Design (2015) and developed the Design-driven Material Innovation Methodology (2015-2017).

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Owain Pedgley, is full Professor of Industrial Design at Middle East Technical University, where he has been a faculty member between 2007-14 and since 2017. He received his B.Sc. and PhD degrees in Industrial Design from Loughborough University. His subject expertise centres on user experience, interfaces, and interaction, notably in the context of materials and design, and musical instrument innovation. His methodological expertise is in research through design. Owain is co-editor of the book series "Materials Experience" (Elsevier, 2021; 2014), and Editorial Board member of "Design Studies".

James Postell, Architect and Associate Professor, Product Design, School of Design, Politecnico di Milan. Professor Emeritus, College of DAAP at the University of Cincinnati. He has taught architecture, interior design and product design at: Texas Tech University, University of Cincinnati, DIS in Copenhagen, and the Politecnico di Milano. He focuses his research activity on links between design, technology, and methods of production, with focus on furniture design. As a practicing architect (www.designstudio161.com) he has designed and written about interiors, furniture, craft, and materiality.

Valentina Rognoli, is Associate Professor in the Design Department, Polimi. Here, she began her academic career focused on Materials for Design. She has been a pioneer in this field, starting almost twenty years ago and establishing an internationally recogßnised expertise on the topic both in research and education. For her PhD, she undertook a unique and innovative study on a key but a little treated topic that is the expressive-sensorial dimension of materials of Design and their experiential aspects. At present, her research and teaching activities are focusing on pioneering and challenging topics as DIY-Materials for social innovation and sustainability; Bio-based and circular Materials; Urban Materials and Materials from Waste and food Waste; ICS Materials; Speculative Materials; Tinkering with materials, MDD method, CMF design, emerging materials experiences, and material education.

Federica Rubino, is a PhD candidate with a scholarship on the design-driven approach and performance management for digital innovation in museums, between Design and Management Engineering Departments at the Politecnico di Milano. She has a background in Economics and Management for Arts, Culture, Media, and Entertainment from Bocconi University, and a Double Degree from Copenhagen Business School. She collaborated with other research centers active in the Italian cultural management field, such as Fondazione Santagata for the Economics of Culture and ASK Bocconi Research Center. Her academic and professional interests cover the management of museums and cultural institutions, the digital transformation of museums, and participatory practices in heritage management.

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Davide Spallazzo, holds a PhD in Design and is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Design of Politecnico di Milano. Active in Interaction Design and Human-Computer Interaction, his main research interest is the human-centered approach to digital innovation and meaning-making, applied to diverse fields of inquiry. Over the years, he coordinated and took part in several national and international research projects concerning digital technologies in the Cultural Heritage field, serious gaming, and AI. He is now coordinating the Meet-AI research project, aimed at creating a new UX assessment method for AI-infused products.

Ziyu Zhou, is a PhD candidate in Politecnico di Milano, Department of Design. Through analysing the teaching and learning process on materials in design, she is devoting her research on exploring what materials and material education can bring to design students, and, most importantly, how do they work. She is committed to clarifying the explanation on relationships mainly between materials experience and the design teaching and learning activities.
Prior to this, in 2015, Ziyu obtained her Bachelor degree in Industrial design in Jiangnan University, Wuxi, China. In the same year, she starts her Master study in Product Service System Design in Politecnico di Milano, Department of Design, Italy.

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We live in an uncertain, changing, hard-to-focus era in which traditional design approaches and methods can no longer respond to today's challenges that surface in varying degrees and intensity. Moreover, we are developing a different perception of 'materiality' and the mediums employed. Hence in this 'liquid' and blurry landscape, the question emerges: What is the importance of understanding the value of design culture, more precisely, the "matters" through which this culture is manifested and expressed today? Moreover, how design culture aligns with the changed reality by responding "creatively" to today's emergencies?

The volume investigates a wide sphere of issues referring to an extended concept of "matter" – the word matter intended not only as materials as such but also of content and relationships – through design actions, approaches, processes, tools and methodologies employed in different areas and with different objectives, yet united by the desire to intercept the current shift, sometimes reinventing and sometimes evolving programmatically over time to embrace the changed framework.

The matter is thus interpreted in its range of potential declinations, bouncing from concept to object, material to immaterial, process to solution, and traditionally defined medium to a dynamic virtual tool.

This collection of essays is dedicated to all those who wish to explore the value and "matter" of design culture between past inheritance, present time and foreseeable future mutations through the deepening and inspiration of new and alternative tools, approaches and design methods.

FrancoAngeli
La passione per le conoscenze