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Editors
Luisa Collina, Laura Galluzzo, Anna Meroni
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Nurturing Culture
Nurturing Design

Eleonora Lupo, Associate Professor - eleonora.lupo@polimi.it
Design Department
Politecnico di Milano, Italy

Sarah Teasley, Head of Programme – sarah.teasley@rca.ac.uk
Royal College of Art, United Kingdom

Paolo Volonté, Associate Professor – paolo.volonte@polimi.it
Design Department
Politecnico di Milano, Italy

Within the "virtuous circle" of design's relationship to culture, design's ability to explore the surrounding world and to learn from traditions, other cultures and other disciplines reveals opportunities for the future. Voracious, curious and critical design engagement with context, environment and parallel worlds generates new cultural production in what can be, when done thoughtfully and carefully, a virtuous and transformative circle from reflection to experimentation. Such a process enriches both new designs and, ideally, the overlapping and parallel cultures and environments engaged. This track focuses on the continuous process of nurturing that, our authors argue, is integral to ethical and effective design practice and pedagogy.

We might begin by articulating some of the key generative relationships between culture, broadly defined, and design. Culture nurtures design practices to form, develop and transmute in particular ways. Design practices and the products of design – physical and immaterial – shape and shade interactions of various sorts between people, things and the environment, further shaping culture. The impact of these relationships only splinters with each "rotation" of the circle, creating new design practices and products and new cultures, which then begin their own rotations. At worst, design engagement with culture produces superficial styling referring to clichéd or hackneyed ideas of tradition. At best, design that openly, open-endedly and open-mindedly engages with cultures on an equal footing explores lifestyle and common values and habits – what Bourdieu (1984) would call habitus. It seeks to embed these within process of designing, as well as in the design, from a user experience perspective, and is prepared to have routes detourned by culture's agency in the process. Despite the complexity - and the deliciously 'wicked problem' aspects - of this continual and continually diversifying process, the generative relationship between design and culture is often treated reductively within design research, practice and education. The recent embrace of research methods such as design ethnography and democratic design methods such as co-design and participatory design implicitly and explicitly require designers to embrace culture's presence and

potential. More practically, design university curricula continue to expect that students will produce contextual work as part of the degree requirements.

And yet all too often culture is filed under 'context': an early stage in the design process to be ticked off the list and shelved once prototyping and iteration is underway, rather than an integral consideration throughout the design process that can be continually generative in its own right. Designers, design researchers and design educators too numerous to name here not only argue but demonstrate through their own work that engagement with culture is inseparable from creative design: that the latter without the former is an empty shell. Regardless, the fundamental messiness of culture – and the sheer danger of encountering contradictions, resistance or impossibilities from one's interlocutors, or of realizing that cultural specificities can limit and even negate a designer's power - presents a challenge that many would rather ignore. Addressing design practice's embeddedness in culture – let alone what design might learn from culture – may be admirable, but it also requires more effort. It can mean unpredictable outcomes, and it requires relinquishing power and control, for many designers an unnerving decision (despite the fact that complete control over any project is already an illusion, as actor-network theorists argue so convincingly, cfr. Latour 2005).

Papers in the 'Nurturing' strand present a plethora of resounding arguments for why design practice must address culture consistently from beginning to end in the design process, and for why engaging with cultures, context and environment produces richer, more resilient design. More to the point, perhaps, they articulate strategies and tactics for doing so, and discuss the challenges and fragility encountered in attempting to do so.

TOOLS AND APPROACHES FOR NURTURING THE DESIGN PROCESS

Design is not an "exact discipline". It does not rely on the standardised research methods of the hard sciences but on aesthetic experience. Therefore, developing innovative knowledge for design requires a different methodology from those typically used in scientific inquiry. Scientific research looks for explanatory models of "how things are". They are based on the observation of phenomena and the testing of hypotheses in order to produce scientific theories that aim to be objective, verifiable, repeatable and universal. Design research into "how things could be", on the other hand, is an act of creation that demands a more experimental and heuristic model.

At the same time, design practice is a form of reflection (Donald Schön in 1983 defined 'Reflection-in-Action', a technique for learning from practice experience) or an integrated process in which design theory and practice are indistinguishable. It leads often to practice-based theory "*not about explanations and justification (knowing why), but rather about establishing facts (knowing what) and instructions for actions (knowing how)*" (Grand, 2008).

Many papers in this track focus on the virtuous circle through which design culture experiments and reflects in an instrumental approach, developing a critical practice that nurtures the design process with tools and methods often borrowed from other fields, contexts and disciplines.

Tools can be focusing on the metadesign phase (analyzing, understanding and visualizing problems and situation) or can support the design phase of conceptualising solutions: innovative culturally intensive products that learn from traditions and historical references, for instance, as shown in Tina Moor, Alexis Schwarzenbach, Andrea Weber Marin and Brigitt Egloff's paper. "Silk Memory"'s research is supported by a digital database of samples for inspiration. This archive of silk textile swatches, documenting a best-of selection of Zurich silks from 1800 to 2000, has been tested in the explicitly trans-cultural context of two workshops for collaborations between Swiss and Indian design students. Swatches from the Silk Memory Archive have been combined with Indian themes of cultural persistence and the free and transformative interpretation of symbols and meaning.

Different methodological approaches can both nurture the design process and serve as the final objective of design practice. In Maresa Bertolo, Ilaria Mariani and Giulia Ruffino's paper "Earthsploitation", the ludic paradigm is both method of knowledge and learning in the design process. The paper considers game design as a "result of technological transformation and significant cross-fertilization with other branches of knowledge", in order to nurture social innovation and specifically to reflect on the food production system (consumption resources and ecological consequences) and invite more reflexive, conscious behaviours.

Similarly, Francesca Piredda and Davide Fassi's paper "In a Garden" demonstrates that an interdisciplinary approach mixing spatial design with trans-media storytelling can be effective in engaging co-creation activities and conversations with neighbourhood residents for building identity and innovating the use of public spaces.

COLLABORATIVE AND COMMUNITY-CENTRED DESIGN PROCESSES

Collaboration has become a key word for design practice. According to Richard Sennett (2012), the techniques and politics of collaboration rely on "dialogic abilities": the social ability to manage differences among individuals and groups. The dialogic principle does not necessarily imply that a common position is achieved, but rather that participants engage in an exchange of reciprocal understanding in order to widen each side's previous area of vision.

Such improvements can be based on indirect exchanges, including those in the design process that take into account and observe context and cultures to address the specific needs of a community or place. They can also emerge from direct exchange, which in the design context could mean designers directly engaging a community in a co-design process (or participatory action) as a resource for assessing, contributing and improving the design outputs. Design

exchanges might go further still, and devolve power and responsibility from the designer to the community itself, in an experimental process of design democratisation.

In these ways, collaboration is often intended and intertwined with community-centred design processes, especially in social design and social innovation. In Renata Leitao, Anne Marchand and Cedric Sportes' paper "Constructing a Collaborative Project Among Designers and Native Actors", designers work with a First Nations community in Canada. The two projects described in the paper aimed to innovate visual heritage through a learning process defined as "long-term collective articulation of issues" and by doing so to address local development.

We should also discuss the balance/unbalance or symmetry of collaborative processes between designers and communities, or between design and local qualities. Solen Roth's paper "Northwest Coast Artware", critically assesses the simplification and standardisation of indigenous design in the context of mass-reproduction. In Xue Pei and Lucie Decker's paper "Rethinking about Fashion Design toward Cultural Sustainability", an ethical relationship is assumed to be established between local communities and fashion industries in order to build cultural sustainability and participative approaches.

Such issues around power, agency and ethics require a humanistic vision of design practice, nurtured by anthropology, sociology, ethnography, history, pedagogy, linguistics, cognitive sciences and human sciences in general. The Humanistic design approach described by Colombi and Lupo in "Culture-Driven Meta-Products" uses "applied humanities" to provide humanistic analytical methods and tools (defined meta-products) to examine or describe a context or a problem, serving as a starting point for design activity. The approach's focus on "design for humanities" also provides creative methods and generative tools to offer new possible points of view for in-depth humanistic research.

NURTURING (IN) THE DESIGN COMMUNITY

The design community deserves a special focus. Design as a discipline, industry and community has developed and changed tremendously during the last decades, sharing common developments across communities while also maintaining the heterogeneity of national and other localised design cultures. At the same time, globalization's pressures have broadened the reach of historically western design practices – conventional as well as experimental – to new geographies, and allows local concerns, conventions and practices hitherto not represented in global 'design' discourse to shape international conversations. An updated consideration of the community of design is needed. Social sciences like anthropology and sociology have a long tradition in the study of professional communities and worlds (for instance the "art world", cfr. Becker 1982), but have yet to produce a substantial and meaningful body of knowledge on the design world.

This gap makes designers' self-reflexive research on the topic even more useful. Bianca Elzenbaumer's Marxist view of the precarious working conditions of designers, presented in the paper "*Precarious Designers and the Transformative (Im-)Possibilities of Biopolitical Production*", offers one useful view. Elzenbaumer considers the precariousness experienced by many designers today as an expression of the capitalist economic system. She supports the idea that designers should repossess their lives by shifting their focus from working for the profit of others to questioning how wealth is produced and distributed in society. In other words, she argues, designers should perform a collective "refusal of work" which calls for a movement of invention that goes beyond capital.

The fact that design cultures and communities are heterogeneous is key to many papers in this strand. Loredana Di Lucchio, Lorenzo Imbesi and Mariana Amatullo's paper "Design Vectors in Design and Arts*" introduces ReVeDA (Research Vectors for Design and Art), a new Cumulus working group focused on research in design that replaces the older group, CURE. Since design research, as the authors remark, is now booming, the working group's principal objective has been to promote a collective discussion about the leading trends in design research in design schools. ReVeDA is based on the idea that design research is not a fixed activity and/or a stable community, but a field driven by moving 'vectors' that push change and innovation in new directions.

Similarly, Elena Elgani and Francesco Scullica's paper "Hotels interior spaces" focuses on the importance of cross-fertilization in design, a profession that requires constant contamination with other disciplines. Yet design itself is already divided into several heterogeneous fields, from interior to product, from service to interaction, from communication to fashion and so on. Thus, the cross-fertilization needed to carry out complex design processes concerns not only similar and complementary disciplines, but also contamination across multiple sub-communities of designers.

Johnson Witehira and Paola Trapani's paper ("The Whakarare Typeface Project") clearly articulates the specificity of working between global and local cultures of design practice. The paper deals with the process of designing a proper Maori font. In such a process, two apparently opposite forces conflate, namely the universalistic one of western design culture and the local one of Maori culture. As the authors articulate them, the first is driven by the principles of Gestalt theory, the second by a cosmo-genealogical narrative about the origins of the world. As postcolonial studies show (Bhabha 1994), the meeting of western rational explanations with non-western local narratives produces a critical situation. Western universalism is at the base of the definition of design still dominant today. In this definition, design arose with industrialization and has become a leading force of modernization. As such, design could easily become a hidden force of western cultural imperialism. Local communities of designers in sites and cultures outside the generating centre of this discourse reside in the border between this risk and the chance to creatively innovate their own culture.

SOCIAL CHANGE

The practice of design is embedded in contextual developments that drive it at any given time towards new directions. The social context generates general concepts, attitudes, narratives and normative settings that frame the nurturing of design ideas, activities, processes and methods. Many novelties in the history of design are actually consequences of external changes rather than internal. Major turning points in design, for example, have been stimulated by cultural changes that boosted our interest in sustainability, by technological changes that nourish the open innovation approach and by an institutional change – namely the academisation of design – that launched the emergence of design research.

Three papers in this track deal with such contextual developments. In two cases it is about the fragmentation and hybridization of cultures in today's globalized world. Han Han and Francesco Zurlo in "New Approach to Look into Strategic Design for Luxury Brands" focus on the fashion system but draw upon the pedagogy of multiliteracies to suggest how strategic design could foster the working of branding strategies within the context of a globalized society. The authors tackle the issue of matching the luxury companies' brand strategies with the consumers' capability to decode variously the brand's value (meaning). They claim that enabling the consumers to master the multiplicity of communication channels and decode the mass of messages that overcrowd a multicultural society is a strategy to ease an expert understanding of the global brands' values (or meanings).

Similarly, design literacy in a multicultural environment is at the core of Francesca Valsecchi's paper, "Cultural Translations as Design Capability, on Communication Design Teaching". Valsecchi uses the concept of transculturality, rather than multiculturality, to underline the continuous and connected transformation of cultures when they unfold in a common space. Whereas multiculturality implies the idea of different static cultures that meet and must come to an agreement, the prefix 'trans' underlines how the differences melt, producing new identities at each encounter. She claims that embedding a transcultural awareness in research practice can facilitate the spread of a sustainability ethos in design.

We must also attend to non-human actors, whether our physical environment or the world of things. In "In the Cycle of Nourishment" Ajanta Sen and Ravi Poovaiah depict how embracing cultures that work their lives outside the "framework of the machine" typical of modernity can enrich the design process by introducing divergence. An analysis of the different worldviews that drive cultural decisions about nourishment lead Sen and Poovajah to argue that design should facilitate a reversal of our common idea of nourishment itself, which is distorted by industrialisation.

CONCLUSION

The papers within this strand explore the relationship between design and culture, within the context of design research, practice and pedagogy and from cognate or overlapping areas such as craft history. Humanities and social science research offers language, concepts and analytical frames for articulating culture's relationship to practice and practice's relationship to culture. Within design research and practice, ideas and approaches stem from very real concerns indigenous to design. They define and generate – then iterate through use – frameworks for design practice that are reflexive of culture, that incorporate cultural specificity or sitedness into process and product and, in some cases, grapple with thorny questions of power, authority and ethics.

Ultimately, through this strand we hope to help engagement with culture to move beyond "contextual" to "integral", and to advance its unconscious incorporation into design and research process. In other words, we hope to nurture change within the cultures of design itself.

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DESIGN CULTURE AND EXPERIMENTATION

Design comes out of the interaction between a practice, which seeks to change the state of things, and a culture, which makes sense of this change. The way this happens evolves with time: practices and cultures evolve and so do the ways they interact; and the attention that is paid at different moments to one or other of these interacting polarities also evolves. In the current period of turbulent transformation of society and the economy, it is important to go back and reflect on the cultural dimension of design, its capacity to produce not only solutions but also meanings, and its relations with pragmatic aspects. Good design does not limit itself to tackling functional and technological questions, but it also always adopts a specific cultural approach that emerges, takes shape and changes direction through a continuous circle of experimenting and reflecting. Because the dimension and complexity of the problems is growing, it is becoming evident that to overcome them it is, above all, necessary to bring new sense systems into play. This is ground on which design, by its very nature, can do much. Indeed, the ability to create a virtuous circle between culture and practical experimentation is, or should be, its main and distinctive characteristic. However, for this really to happen it is necessary to trigger new discussion and reflection about the nature and purpose of design practice and culture.