

# Making things happen

## Social innovation and design

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### ABSTRACT

The paper introduces the notion of *social innovation* and discusses how design can stimulate and support it. In order to do that, it considers several examples of radical social innovation, proposing three main typologies of innovation processes: *top-down*, when strong actors take the lead to promote and enhance a social change; *bottom-up*, when social changes emerge from grassroots activities; and *hybrid*, when a variety of bottom-up and top-down innovations take place within the framework of a coherent program. The paper indicates how each one of these three typologies implies some *design initiatives*, (meaning sequences of actions characterized by a clear design approach). Considered as a whole, these design initiatives and capabilities define the area of competence of a new field of design: *design for social innovation*. This can be defined as *a constellation of design initiatives geared to making social innovation more probable, effective, long-lasting and apt to spread*.

### Social innovation and design

A very succinct definition of social innovation is: “a new idea that works in meeting social goals” (Mulgan, 2006). A more detailed one could be the following: social innovation is a process of change emerging from the creative re-combination of existing assets (from social capital to historical heritage, from traditional craftsmanship to accessible advanced technology), which aims to achieve socially recognized goals in a new way. Given these initial definitions, we can easily observe that social innovation has always been and will continue to be a normal component of every possible society. Nevertheless, though social innovation has always existed, there are two good reasons to focus on it today. The first one is that social innovation initiatives are multiplying and will become even more common in the near future in answer to the multiple, growing challenges of the on-going crisis and the much-needed transition towards sustainability. The second one is that as contemporary societies change the nature of social innovation itself is also changing, opening new and until now unthinkable possibilities (Bauwens, 2006; Tapscott, Williams, 2007; Leadbeater, 2008, Murray, 2009).

This definition of social innovation is very broad and includes a wide range of events. We can draw up a first map of them using two polarities:

- *Incremental v. radical*. Here the adjectives incremental and radical are used as in the field of technological innovation: they refer to changes that lie within the range of existing ways of thinking and doing (incremental innovation), or outside them (radical innovation).
- *Top-down v. bottom-up*. This relates to where the change starts and, therefore, who its original drivers are. If they are experts, decision makers or political activists, the innovation will be largely top-down. If they are (mainly) the people and communities directly involved, then it will be (mainly) bottom-up.

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<sup>1</sup> DESIS-*Design for Social Innovation for Sustainability* is a network of *design labs* based in design schools (or in other design-oriented universities) promoting social innovation towards sustainability. These *DESIS Labs* are teams of professors, researchers and students who orient their didactic and research activities towards starting and/or facilitating social innovation processes. Each lab develops projects and research on the basis of its own resources and possibilities and at the same time acts as the node of a wider network of similar labs, the *DESIS Network*, which enables them to exchange experiences and collaboratively develop larger design and research programs.

In this paper I will consider examples of radical innovation emerging from both top-down and bottom-up processes, and from a combination of the two, known as *hybrid* processes. For each one of them I will discuss what the designers' role has been, seeking to offer a broad but structured vision of what design can do for social change.

I will refer to these design activities as *design for social innovation*, which includes whatever design can do to start, boost, support, strengthen and replicate social innovation (Manzini, 2011b; DESIS, 2012). In this framework, I will also use the expression *design initiative*, meaning a sequence of actions characterized by a clear design approach and by the use of specific *design devices* (such as prototypes, mock-ups, design games, models, sketches).

## Top-down: when social innovation is driven by strategic design

Let's start by describing the experiences of two great Italian innovators: Franco Basaglia and Carlo Petrini. These are two extraordinary characters who worked with widely differing problems, adopting a similar approach and radically changing the then dominant ways of seeing and doing things (mental illness on the one hand and the quality of food and food systems on the other). To avoid misunderstanding, I must stress immediately that neither Basaglia nor Petrini are in fact designers. In my opinion however, both of them are, to all intents and purposes, great innovators and, *de facto*, designers. And their stories say a lot about what designers could and should do in this field.

**Democratic Psychiatry.** Franco Basaglia was an exceptional psychiatrist who, in the seventies, founded the Democratic Psychiatry movement. In practical terms what he did was to "open" the psychiatric hospital in Trieste (a city in the North-East of Italy), where he was director, and at the same time start up co-operative production and service groups which brought ex-patients, nurses and doctors together in enterprises that had to be effective in economic terms (real enterprises, not entities whose very existence depends on financial backing from the state). Why did he do it? The answer is both simple and revolutionary: "*Opening the institution (the psychiatric hospital, editor's note) does not signify opening a door, it means opening ourselves towards the "patient". I would say we are starting to have confidence in these people*" (Basaglia, 1968). Let's try to explain this statement better. Basaglia's theme was mental illness, and his revolutionary (for the times) approach was that a person with a mental disability is not only a patient, but also an individual with capabilities. When seen only as a patient he/she retreats into his illness, but if we see him as a person we can support him/her to overcome his/her problems and fulfil him/herself in some positive activity. Nowadays the path laid out 40 years ago in Trieste by Basaglia has become normal practice in Italy (or at least it should be). In 1978, thanks to him, a national law was passed that opened up all psychiatric hospitals and set up new forms of assistance to the mentally ill. Since then restaurants, holiday villages, hotels and carpentry workshops have started up, all run by "madmen". Many of these activities have worked well. Some have become really successful, commercial enterprises (e.g. a co-operative of ex-patients is presently running a bar, restaurant and bookshop in the ex-psychiatric hospital in Milan, and every year organises an important cultural festival).

**Slow Food.** In 1989, Carlo Petrini founded the international Slow Food movement. Its manifesto begins with the words: "*We believe that everyone has a fundamental right to pleasure and consequently the responsibility to protect the heritage of food, tradition and culture that makes this pleasure possible*" (Petrini, 2007). However, this is not its only concern. Its presentation goes on to say: "*We consider ourselves co-producers, not consumers, because by being informed about how our food is produced and actively supporting those who produce it, we become a part of and a partner in the production*" (Petrini, 2007). In other words, Slow Food proposed a new way of looking at food consumption. But not only. Driven by the same basic motivation, Slow Food operated on the supply and valorisation of food products that would gradually disappear, if nothing were done, because they were not economically viable in the economics of the dominant agro-industrial system. In practical terms, it has cultivated food awareness on the demand side (through the actions of consumer-producer organisations: the *Condotte* –known outside Italy as *Convivia*) and consequently a market for these high quality products. On the supply side, it has addressed farmers, breeders, fishermen, and the firms that process their products, and with them it has promoted local organisations (the *Presidia*) to back them by connecting them to each other and to their market.

Basaglia and Petrini, and obviously the teams they worked with to set up Democratic Psychiatry and Slow Food, have been the drivers of very meaningful radical social changes. And they did so by carrying out two extraordinary *strategic design* initiatives. In fact, both of them managed to link the concrete *local activities* they were involved in with *far reaching visions* able to bring people together, to awaken the best in them and to give a common meaning to so many things, great and small, that each of them were able to do.

Basaglia, and Democratic Psychiatry, proposed a more general discourse on democracy and civilisation (it is not by chance that the movement is called Democratic Psychiatry) and, at the same time, they clearly indicated that this process had to be adequately supported: that there had to be facilities (services, places and tools) to enable people (in this case the mentally ill) to overcome their difficulties and fulfil their potential capabilities.

Petrini, and Slow Food, followed a similar course generating a radical new vision on what an advanced, sustainable food system could be like. Coherently with that, adopting a strategic design approach, they created structures (the *Convivia* and the *Presidia*) to enable previously weak farmers to produce high quality products and find channels for their sale at a fair price. In so doing, Slow Food set up what we, in the design language, call an *enabling system*: a system of products and services aiming to empower the social actors involved (Jegou, Manzini, 2008).

We can summarise what Democratic Psychiatry and Slow Food did in a design strategy based on three interdependent actions: (1) Recognition of a real problem and, most importantly, of the *social resources that might be able to solve it* (people, communities and their capabilities). (2) Proposal of (organisational and economic) structures that *activate these resources*, helping them to organise themselves, to last over time and to replicate themselves in different contexts. (3) The building (and communication) of an overall vision able to *connect a myriad of local activities and orient them* coherently.

## Bottom-up: when social innovation is driven by local communities

To introduce bottom-up innovation I will refer to a variety of everyday life innovations. However, to better understand them and their specificity, let's start by considering two of them in particular: two beautiful and successful stories of radical change at the local scale.

**NYC Community Gardens (USA).** Community Gardens are groups of volunteer gardeners that maintain public gardens in New York City with the support of GreenThumb, a program within the Department of Parks and Recreation that provides material, technical and financial support to gardeners. They were initiated in response to the city's financial crisis of the 1970s, which resulted in the abandonment of public and private land. The majority of GreenThumb gardens were derelict vacant lots.

In 1973 local residents and a group of gardening activists known as the Green Guerrillas started to plant vacant lots with "seed bombs" and cultivate tree pits in the area. One year later the City's office of Housing Preservation and Development approved the first site for rental as the "Bowery Houston Community Farm and Garden for \$1 a month. Today there are hundreds of community gardens in New York City located in all five boroughs, hosting a lot of different activities.

The volunteer gardeners, who are the backbone of this system, are very diverse in age and background. They conduct multiple activities: they plant and maintain trees, shrubs, and flowers; hold events and educational workshops; produce local urban food; open the garden to the public every day in fixed time periods. And, considering these activities as a whole, they engender community and citizens' engagement (Lupi, 2011).

**Ainonghui, Farmers' Association (China).** In 2005 in Liuzhou, Guangxi (China), a group of citizens found that they could not access good, safe food in ordinary markets. They went to villages, about a two-hour drive from the city, and found that traditional agriculture models, though struggling, still survived in the remote countryside. With the intention of helping the poor farmers and developing a stable channel of good, organic food, they founded a social enterprise: a farmers' association called Ainonghui.

Today this farmers' association manages four organic restaurants and a community organic food store. By selling traditionally sourced food to citizens, they also educate them on what traditional/organic agriculture is and introduce a sustainable lifestyle into the city. Thanks to Ainonghui and the direct links it has created between citizens and farmers, the incomes of farmers are now better able to sustain traditional farming while allowing them to lead a better and respected life. What's more, several farmers have returned to the countryside to join in the organic food network (Zhong, 2011).

These two examples are representative of a growing number of initiatives world-wide: collaborative services where elderly people organize themselves to exchange mutual help and, at the same time, promote a new idea of welfare; groups of families who decide to share some services to reduce the economic and environmental costs, but also to create new forms of neighbourhood; new forms of social interchange and mutual help (such as time banks); systems of mobility that present alternatives to the use of individual cars (from car sharing and car pooling to the rediscovery of the possibilities

offered by bicycles) ... The list could continue, touching on every area of daily life (to read more about them, see: DESIS Network, 2012).

Looking at these examples we can observe that, behind each of them, there is a group of people who have been able to imagine, develop, and manage something new, outside the standard ways of thinking and doing, i.e. to shatter mainstream ideas about how problems had to be solved. In order to do that, they had to: (1) *(re)discover the power of cooperation*; (2) *recombine, in a creative way, already existing products, services, places, knowledge, skills and traditions*; and (3) *count on their own resources*, without waiting for a general change in the politics, in the economy, or in the institutional and infrastructural assets of the system.

We will refer to them as **creative communities**: *people who cooperate in inventing, enhancing and managing viable solutions for new (and sustainable) ways of living* (Meroni, 2007)

A primary common feature of these creative communities is that they have grown out of problems posed by contemporary everyday life, such as: how can we have more green spaces in my neighbourhood? How can we organise the daily functions of the elderly if the family no longer provides the support it traditionally offered and the state no longer has the means to organise the requested services? How can we respond to the demand for natural food and healthy living conditions when living in a global metropolis? These questions are as day-to-day as they *are radical*. In spite of its overwhelming offer of products and services, the dominant production and consumption system is unable to give answers to these very basic questions. These groups of people have been able to answer them by applying their creativity to break with mainstream models of thinking and doing and by conceiving and enhancing new ways of doing, based on original combinations of existing products, services and knowledge (Jegou, Manzini, 2008).

Thus it appears that these cases of bottom-up social innovation are *design-led processes*. But they are design-led processes with a particular characteristic: those who “design” are very diverse social actors who, consciously or not, apply ways of thinking and skills that are in all respects to be considered design activities (Bruno, Cottam, Vanstone, Winhall, 2006, Manzini, 2009). In this new context, professional designers can also play an important role by operating in two main ways: designing *with* and designing *for* communities.

*Designing with communities*: This means participating *peer-to-peer* with other actors involved in creative community building and in collaborative service co-design. In this modality designers have to facilitate the convergence of different partners towards shared ideas and potential solutions. This kind of activity requires a series of new design skills: promoting collaboration among diverse social actors (local communities and companies, institutions and research centres); participating in the construction of shared visions and scenarios; combining existing products and services to support the creative community they are collaborating with.

*Designing for creative communities*. This means looking at specific typologies of collaborative service and, after observing their strengths and weakness, intervening on their contexts to make them more favourable, and to develop solutions to increase their accessibility and effectiveness and therefore their replicability. In this mode designers have to conceive and develop *solutions* for specific collaborative services and/or other enabling artefacts (such as *digital platforms, orienting scenarios* and *catalysing events* such as exhibitions, festivals and other cultural events).

## Hybrid: when bottom-up and top-down meet

The social innovations we have been describing until now have been presented as *top-down* or *bottom-up* initiatives: actions “from the top” that are capable of generating large social transformation. Or, vice versa, actions “from the bottom” that give rise to a multiplicity of local changes. However, a closer observation indicates that social innovation, both in its starting move and in its long-term existence, often depends on more complex interactions between very diverse initiatives, where the ones undertaken directly by the people concerned (bottom-up) are often supported by different kinds

of intervention by institutions, civic organizations or companies (top-down). We will refer to them with the expression: *hybrid processes*.

For instance, a micro-nursery exists thanks to the active participation of the mothers and fathers involved. However, it may have been started looking to the experiences of other groups (and eventually interacting with some of them) and it may be backed up by specific top-down initiatives and enabling tools, e.g. a guide-book indicating, step by step, the procedure to be followed in starting up and managing such a nursery; local authority support in assessment (to guarantee its conformity to established standards); the support of a centralized service (in case of educational or medical problems that cannot be solved within the nursery itself).

The hybrid nature of these social innovation processes becomes more and more evident when the scale of change to be achieved increases. One example of a project that aims at social change on a regional scale can make this statement clearer.

**Feeding Milano (Italy).** Feeding Milan is a strategic design project, promoted by Politecnico di Milano-INDACO Department, University of Gastronomic Sciences and Slow Food Italy. The project idea comes from the consideration that in the Milanese urban area the demand for high quality, fresh food hugely exceeds the actual, available production, despite the presence of a large, potential "urban larder" known as Agricultural Park South Milan.

The strategic vision of the project is to focus on the mutual advantage represented by the proximity of city and park, by fostering the relationship between the city and the productive countryside through de-mediation of the agri-food chain (answering to the city demand for fresh and high quality food and helping the park to find new business models for its production). The final aim of the project is to create a sustainable and innovative metro-agricultural regional model. To achieve this result the promoters of the project, led by a group of designers/researchers operating at Politecnico di Milano, started a series of *design initiatives* towards the implementation of a project framework, by activating collaboration between groups of citizens and farmers, and groups of designers and food experts.

Scenario building was the basic tool that helped designers to open the discussion with the stakeholders enrolled, and align interested groups on a vision and some directions. Conversation with the interested communities about the scenario took place in the project, within a series of contextual workshops facilitated by design researchers with specifically designed tools (storyboard, mock-up, moodboard, videos, sketches).

Currently, Feeding Milan has started a set of new design initiatives that aims at making some of the envisioned solutions become real, in the form of *service prototypes*. These initiatives started with a series of events that are currently happening in the city: the Earth Market of Milan, a farmer market that brings farmers from the park to the city to sell their products; Veggies for the City, a project about the production and the distribution of local vegetables; The Local Bread Chain that aims at restoring a local bread chain, from crops to the final consumer. A digital platform that supports and consolidates the connections among the Feeding Milano participants and the other potentially interested stakeholders (Cantù, Simeone, 2010).

Feeding Milano is an emblematic example of a growing number of projects that, from the point of view of this paper, have similar characteristics. Here, I refer to the results of a recent research conducted within a European project (PERL / Sustainable Everyday Explorations). In this research 5 cases were selected and studied. They were: Feeding Milan (Italy), which I have already presented; Designs Of The Time: Dott07 (UK); Chongming Sustainable Community (China); Amplify (USA); Malmo Living Lab (Sweden) (Manzini, Rizzo, 2011 ).

Considering them from the perspective of social innovation, three main common characteristics can be observed: (1) they aim at sustainable changes on a regional scale; (2) they share the explicit goal of achieving set objectives by activating citizen participation; (3) they have been started and are driven by some specific *design initiatives* (that is, they have been - explicitly or implicitly - led by design, i.e. by design agency and/or by design schools or research groups).

From the point of view of the designers' role, it emerged that: (1) all of them are large-scale innovation processes resulting from sequences of small-scale initiatives, i.e. the *local projects* are coordinated, synergised and amplified by larger ones, the *framework projects*. (2) All of them are mainly design-driven programs aiming to trigger, coordinate and amplify local projects in order to generate sustainable changes at a larger scale.

Finally, it is noteworthy that some of these design initiatives are top-down processes, others bottom-up, and others a combination of the two. In any case, given their aims and effects, all of them are to be

considered elements of a larger participation process. They are all part of a larger social conversation on what to do and how to do it.

## Conclusions: A constellation of design activities

At the beginning of this paper I introduced the notion of design for social innovations using this initial broad but loose definition: *design for social innovation* is whatever design can do to start, boost, support, strengthen and replicate social innovation.

Now, after the discussion in the previous paragraphs, and looking in particular at the hybrid social innovation processes needed to support large-scale transformations, the notion of design for social innovation must be extended. In fact, in every social innovation process, and more clearly in large-scale ones, different actors participate at different moments and in different ways in a sequence of diverse, and sometimes even contrasting, events. The design process that emerges is quite a dynamic and unforeseeable process in which different groups of citizens, supported or not by designers, may lead the conception and implementation of new solutions. In this way everybody has the chance to see, experience and evaluate new ways of being and doing: new viable solutions for given problems or hitherto unimaginable, new opportunities.

In the light of all this, we can modify our initial definition of design for social innovation, and say that *design for social innovation is a constellation of design initiatives geared to making social innovation more probable, effective, long-lasting and apt to spread.*

With this new definition, design for social innovation converges and largely overlaps with the notion of participatory design (at least in the way it is proposed by Pelle Ehn and his colleagues of the Malmo University (Ehn, 2008; Bjorgvinsson, Ehn, Hillgren, 2009). That is, both design for social innovation and participatory design can be described as (Manzini, Rizzo, 2011):

- Highly dynamic processes: they include linear co-design processes and consensus building methodologies (i.e. the most traditional view on participatory design), but they can go far beyond them, becoming complex, interconnected but often contradictory processes.
- Creative and proactive activities, where the designers' role includes the role of mediator (between different interests) and facilitator (of other participants' ideas and initiatives), but involves more skills and, most importantly, it includes the designers' specificity in terms of creativity and design knowledge (to conceive and realize design initiatives and their correspondent design devices).
- Complex co-design activities that, to be promoted, sustained and oriented, call for prototypes, mock-ups, design games, models, sketches and other materials: a set of dedicated and designed artifacts.

It follows that the range of design activities (and therefore of requested capabilities and skills) is very wide: designers can of course act as *facilitators*, supporting on-going initiatives. But they can also be the *triggers* that start new social conversations. Similarly, they can operate as members of *co-design teams*, collaborating with groups of well-defined final users, but they can also behave as *design activists*, proactively launching socially meaningful design initiatives. At present, the role of designers as facilitators working in co-design teams is the most widely recognized. However, that of trigger and design activist seems to be very promising too (Meroni, 2010; Staszowski, 2010, Simeone, Corubolo, 2011). In fact, operating in this way designers can make best use of their specific set of capabilities and their special sensitivity. Therefore, they can be very effective in sparking off new initiatives and making dynamic social conversations about what to do and how. In other words, "making things happen" seems to be the most concise way to express what could be the most effective and specific role for designers'.

(4024 words)

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