

transformative
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DESIS Network TSI Narrative



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1 DESIS Network

DESIS is as an acronym for “Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability”. The DESIS Network (one of the transnational networks under study in TRANSIT) is a network of design schools or design-oriented schools in universities, and defines its main aim as using design to trigger, enable and scale-up social innovation through design thinking and design knowledge. It works with local, regional and global partners, to co-create socially relevant scenarios, solutions and communication programs related to social innovation to face the great challenges of contemporary society.

Since its inception in 2014, Desis Network operates as a cultural association at *Politecnico di Milano*. It is chaired by Ezio Manzini, a former full professor at *Politecnico di Milano*, who works as visiting professor in many universities around the world, and mainly with active DESIS Labs. Polimi DESIS Lab is one of the local groups under study. The other DESIS Lab is NAS Design (*Núcleo de Abordagem Sistêmica do Design*) at the Federal University of Santa Catarina, Brazil.

This TSI narrative presents the case of DESIS Network as a whole and the local examples in Brazil and Italy as shown in Figure 1:

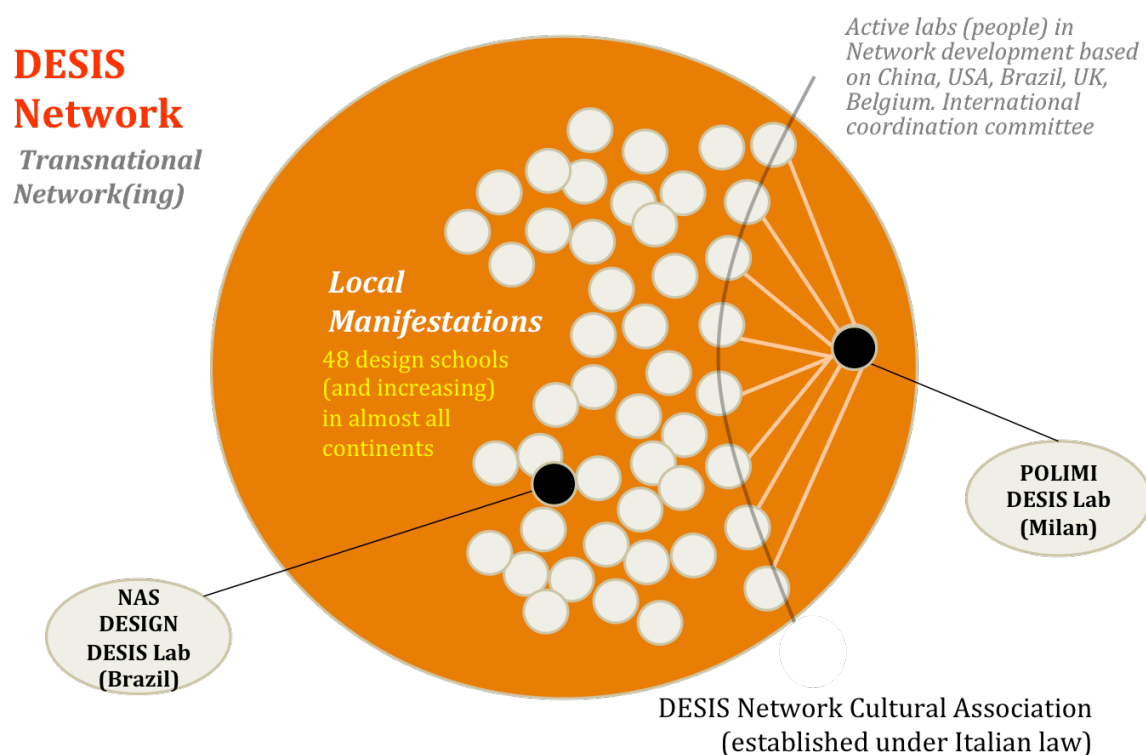


Figure 1: overview of levels of DESIS Network

There is no direct relationship between POLIMI DESIS Lab in Italy and NAS DESIGN in Brazil. However, there is a common identity; they are working in the same direction but with specific strategies and considering their respective local contexts.

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DESIS Network offers the possibility to promote joint initiatives between Labs and the participation in the Network development is stated as a formal duty for members of DESIS Association. Polimi DESIS Lab performs an active role in supporting and building the transnational network. NAS DESIGN's participation in the transnational network is not active **even** if, together with Polimi DESIS Lab, it actively develops projects aligned with DESIS Network aims. Language is a key barrier for the Brazilian Lab: NAS DESIGN members, in general, are not fluent in spoken and written English and expensive translations are required.

Alongside Polimi DESIS Lab, there is a small group of Labs in DESIS Network that are very active, composed of members in the US, Brazil (not only NAS DESIGN), China, Belgium and the UK. The interpersonal relations between these members and Ezio Manzini - in his role as the key actor promoting knowledge exchange between nodes - was crucial for the initial development of the DESIS Network and its consolidation. The establishment of DESIS Association, which gave DESIS legal status, and the intensification of joint initiatives between DESIS Labs, represents a new phase in the Network's development, in which it starts to rely progressively less on the key role performed by its founder. Today, the impressive number of Labs on several continents attests to the reputation of the overall network and of each DESIS Lab.

1.1 Development of DESIS Network

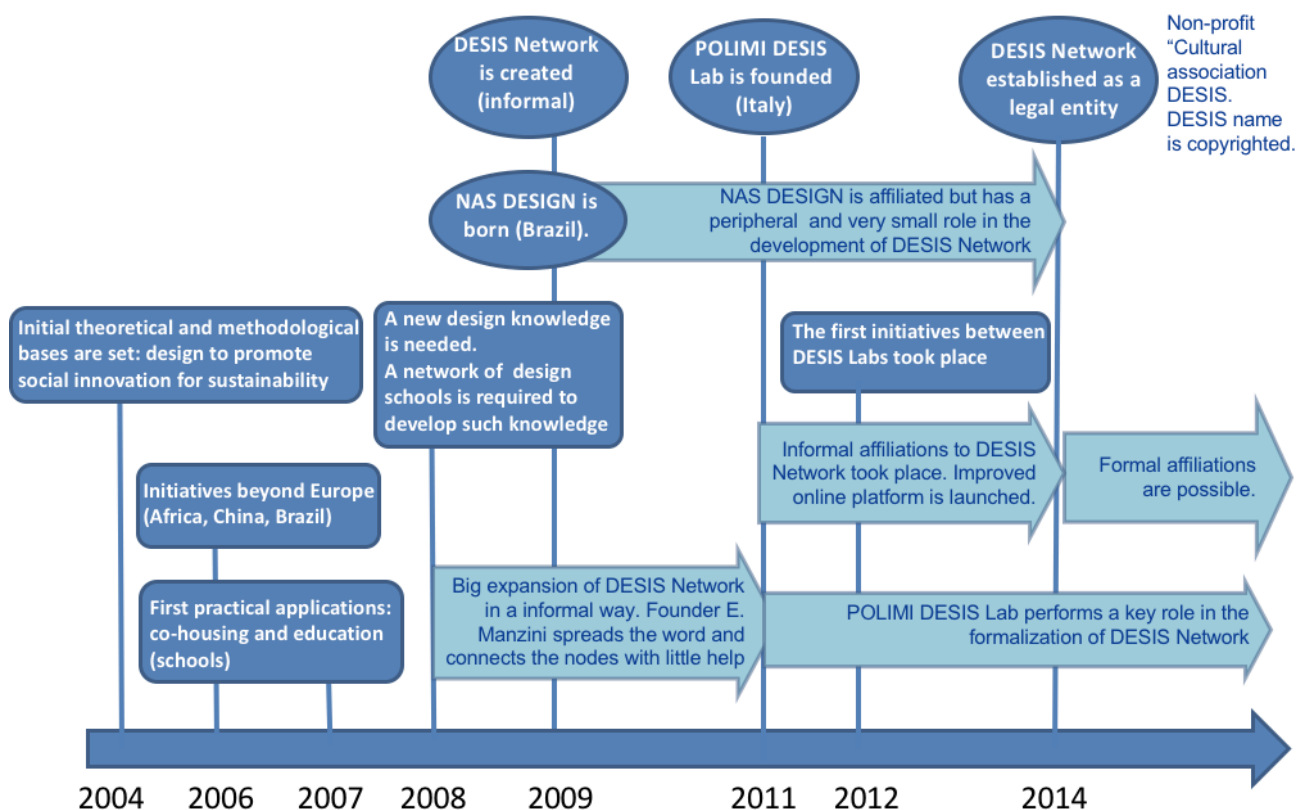


Figure 2: development of DESIS Network

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POLIMI DESIS Lab directly inherited the knowledge developed in the first research projects on design for social innovation, under the coordination of Ezio Manzini (DESID Network founder) at Politecnico di Milano. Today, POLIMI DESIS Lab, coordinated by Anna Meroni, plays a leading role in the development of DESIS Network.

The idea of DESIS Network has its beginnings in 2008. POLIMI DESIS Lab was founded in 2011. Between 2008 and 2011 the network followed a very informal development, based mainly on the work of Ezio Manzini in spreading the word and connecting the nodes, with a small amount of informal help. Former PhD students from Politecnico di Milano, dispersed all over the world and founded the first Labs (China, Brazil, China etc.), under the formal name “DESID”. In addition, previously established Labs increasingly joined the network.

The foundation of POLIMI DESIS Lab in 2011 and the significant number of Labs that joined the network between 2008 and 2011 were key in fostering the process of formalization and institutionalization of DESIS Network. This started in 2012, with the initial informal affiliations and self-organized initiatives developed by DESIS Labs, and finished in 2014, with the establishment of DESIS Network as a non-profit “cultural association” under Italian law. The DESIS Logo has been copyrighted, but is free to use for network members. All the knowledge generated in the network is openly available to internal and external members.

2 Aspects of change and innovation

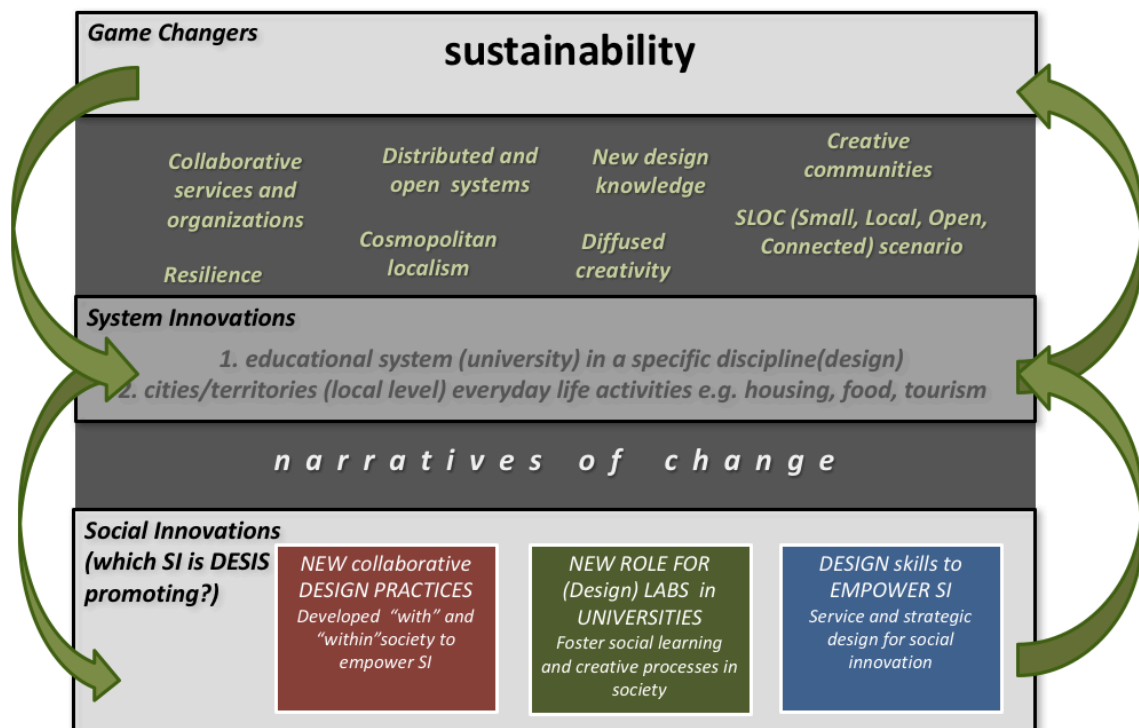


Figure 3: DESIS Network – game changers, system innovations and social innovations

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DESIS Network is working largely to define what the design discipline and design schools will be (or should be) in the future to be able to bring about transformations in the current unsustainable ways of living and doing.

DESIS Network.

What.

Changes required for the transition towards sustainability are to be designed through bottom-up processes. **DESIS intends to identify and empower creativity in society.** This societal creativity is expressed in the grassroots innovations from below (social innovations), which anticipate possible and alternative futures, but it also includes other experiments and solutions developed collaboratively. Here, the design schools (DESIS Labs) have a role to play, by being open to society, participating and empowering this creativity and performing an actual role (developing projects that effectively promote change at the local level). These projects simultaneously promote change and reveal and consolidate new design knowledge and practices. Society is a vast laboratory for creativity and change, which requires centres (labs and potential solutions) that enable this creativity to flourish and develop. Design schools (DESIS Labs) aim to participate in and empower these processes, by being one of these centres or being connected with other existing centres. In this way, DESIS Labs, being based in universities, have the flexibility to explore and consolidate new frontiers, but at the same time to stimulate the universities to be open to society.

How

The DESIS network promotes this process is based on four pillars:

- **Students** - educate them to promote change in collaboration with society, effecting the shift towards a more sustainable future;
- **Paradigmatic projects** – projects developed in collaboration with society and which indicate that it is possible to operate the shift towards new ways of living and doing (and to create the desire to do so) based on societal creativity. It also increases the demand for these new professional designers;
- **A new design knowledge** – to be produced to support both the students and new professional practices but not only this: it also constitutes a design knowledge that is able to help individuals, communities, institutions and companies to design feasible solutions and take part in a complex social learning and creative process towards sustainable changes;
- **International networking** – to intensify the above-mentioned processes, to improve the reputation at local level (DESIS Labs) and to enable joint initiatives between DESIS Labs.

Local manifestations and their projects

Specifically regarding local Labs in Brazil and Italy, and their respective local projects, NAS DESIGN works with groups of people focusing on their *social needs* (income, job and development needs) and sometimes opportunities (when thinking about their local culture as an opportunity). In contrast, POLIMI DESIS Lab is focused on *societal challenges* towards creating new *structures to society* (BEPA, 2011). In this, Polimi is more connected with and more directed to the *future*, while NAS Design is more local, strongly connected to the region and oriented towards the *present*.

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DESIS Network members

The idea of change motivates many Network members. Indeed, it was mentioned that DESIS Network wants to 'make the **revolution**'. Some members state that DESIS network is a kind of '**movement**', a disciplinary movement in which people regard themselves as a 'different kind of designer'. It is guided by a 'technical and professional' vision fostered (in students) and oriented (in professionals) to promote change. One of the interviews highlighted that this is the difference between DESIS and other SI networks (like Transition Towns): DESIS Network has the point-of-view of a specific discipline and task. '**Passion**' was a key word in one of the interviews used to describe the motivation behind the DESIS Network Labs. Passion to follow 'visionary' projects that are able to express a culture of change, of transformation.

2.1 Social Innovation

Design and creativity are considered abilities possessed by everyone (particularly in groups or communities) that can be supported and empowered by expert designers. Socially innovative solutions are built by non-professional designers and expert designers through collaboration, from the bottom-up: a teaching-learning-researching-designing process, that starts in the broader society and arrive to universities through DESIS labs, generating a new design knowledge. This is signifying a new role for designers and design labs in universities.

Design, as an organizational function that has been a tool of marketing and management activities, shifts to a new practice and a new role, acting at a strategic level. It is *strategic design for social innovation*. This strategic approach to design is extended to the whole of society, including governments, NGOs and communities. For example: based on grassroots innovations, *design oriented scenarios* provide *visions* of possible futures to feed a social learning process towards a more sustainable future.

DESIS Network, in dealing with social innovations and setting up strategies and solutions - particularly with regard to services - to make them grow and spread - keeps in focus that social outcomes *are not 'products' that can be easily made to formula and packaged*¹. In fact, one of the key narratives of DESIS Network is how to grow and spread, but to retain the original qualities that social innovations bring to light.

2.2 System Innovation

Level 1: DESIS seeks to foster changes in design education, with developments in the **formal education system and the universities** in which DESIS Labs/design schools are based. It updates university practices and aligns them with societal capabilities, creativity and demands. It aims to boost and support the teachers' and students' action (from *ideas* to effective *action*) to design "within" and "with" the society, and to promote effective change.

Level 2 (DESIS Lab projects at the local level): Through their local universities, DESIS Labs can change a number of systems, which includes areas of knowledge, and the practices of

¹ http://youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Davies-Simon_Growing-social-innovation_ISIRC-2013.pdf

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companies and governments. It is possible to observe examples of influence at these levels. The **co-housing project** in Italy, developed by Polimi (before the formal establishment of Polimi DESIS Lab) and other partners, in approximately seven years, moved from being the first project of its kind in Italy, to become a widely reproduced and recognized practice for housing. This fostered changes in the housing sector, impacting from small companies and social organizations to major brands, local governments, and education.

Local manifestations (DESI Labs) act at the level of cities, mainly in urban settings, where they seek to promote system innovation. At this level, the relationship with the public sector is a key issue.

2.3 Game-changers

These are: the demand for sustainability, and the network seeking to enable sustainable futures. It is possible to identify other game changers, such as the 'sharing economy' and the 'spread of networks' based on the 'ICT revolution' (and the distributed, open, peer-to-peer organisations it generates). This is particularly evident when considering the theory and practice of the "collaborative services" that have been extensively developed over the years in DESIS Network. These last game-changers have enabled the existence of DESIS Network itself.

2.4 Narratives of change

DESI Network has a conceptual and theoretical base, continuously under development by DESIS local Labs with other actors, and presented through different narratives. Ezio Manzini had (and still has) a key position in developing the *metanarratives* for DESIS Network, by assembling labs that identified similarities with their own narratives and joined the network (e.g. NAS DESIGN in Brazil). DESIS Labs are developing initiatives that favour a knowledge exchange process with other Labs, and therefore, are increasingly able to build new joint narratives.

The initial *metanarratives* that guided the transformative processes DESIS Network aims to foster in collaboration with society are listed below:

The **SLOC scenario (small, local, open and connected)**, *a distributed production and consumption system where the global is a "network of locals". It a mesh of connected local systems, the small scale of which makes them comprehensible and controllable by individuals and communities.* It is related to the narratives of the **distributed and open systems** and **cosmopolitan localism** (*enabled by ICTs, referring to the possibility of acting locally, but being globally connected*). Focus is given to solutions able to foster interpersonal relations and collaborations between people. This is highlighted in the narrative of the **collaborative and relational services and organizations**, which are those that rely on participants' own skills and capabilities to achieve commonly recognized results. It means a shift from passive users or consumers to participative members in a new generation of services and organizations. **Resilience** is another narrative of change that is being progressively developed in the network. All these practices are fostering a new design culture. A diffused design ability is required by the transition towards sustainability and forms a **new design knowledge**, to be developed through a vast research program, that involves not only expert designers but also

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other actors in society. *All this can be imagined as a great co-creation phenomenon, where different individuals and communities interact in a more widespread process of social learning and innovation: one which generates, and is itself regenerated by, a new design knowledge.*

2.5 Societal transformations

The transition towards sustainability requires the **germination and consolidation of new ideas of well-being**. This places a huge challenge to the design discipline and is one of the main drivers of DESIS Network development. There is also the will to create a shift in design theories and practices, from being part of the problem (by contributing to unsustainable consumption and production patterns) to being part of the solution (changing these patterns).

The recognition of **creative abilities, diffused among members of society** as a key resource to promote sustainable change (expressed in social innovations) was another driver that signalled the beginnings of DESIS Network (2007).

These two drivers have guided DESIS Network until now in terms of the social transformations it aims to promote through design schools (DESIS Labs).

3 Aspects of (dis)empowerment

GOVERNANCE

Affiliation to an international network affords a reputation for DESIS Labs, which enables them to innovate at a local level. This reputation allows a DESIS Lab to operate in a university (as is the case in Brazil) and helps to promote a favourable perception in society, by being part of a worldwide initiative.

The key role of the founder has gathered DESIS labs around common objectives and narratives. DESIS has relied heavily on the leadership of its founder, however, this is changing with the **establishment of the DESIS Association (DESIS Network legal form is an association under the Italian law)** and intersecting initiatives taking place between DESIS Labs.

The Network itself is kept as light as possible and its main goal is to empower DESIS Labs. Practically, the “centre” (international coordinator) alone manages the website, organizes the annual general assembly and defines a specific program for his/her mandate. All specific initiatives are self-organized between DESIS Labs themselves, following the conditions defined in the DESIS association statute.

DESIS Labs are based in universities, and their initiatives keep universities’ practices up to date and bring them in line with societal demands and new trends. While DESIS Labs are empowered by being based in well-recognized institutions, **this institutional framework could also restrict DESIS Labs initiatives**. There could be a lack of recognition of a new design theory and practice (as practiced by DESIS Labs) among local colleagues, which would result in disempowerment. Academic demands could also restrict the way DESIS Labs operate.

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SOCIAL LEARNING

DESIS boosts SI issues in a European and international context and it is considered to be the first network on design for social innovation and one of the first focused on SI issues worldwide. On other hand, there is a lack of recognition of these new design practices among society as a whole, which do not fit with the expectations of the social, government, business and management sectors. *Paradigmatic* projects are , therefore, also developed to demonstrate otherwise.

DESIS empowers students, professors and professionals as transformation agents to participate in the social learning processes required for the transition towards sustainability.

DESIS supports non-designers to design by supporting citizens in expressing their ideas and in collaborating to solve their own problems. Some professional designers and professors can be opposed to this view of design practice, which, according to them, can diminish the power and recognition of expert designers.

RESOURCING

Affiliation to an international network empowers some DESIS Labs to find partners for submitting proposals for funding. There is a huge potential for worldwide projects (forty-eight labs in several continents, and increasing). However, the network is monodisciplinary (only designers) and this may be a problem to get funding for social innovation projects.

The DESIS Association statute does not allow the association to manage financial resources (it makes it easier for the association to be managed and does not create a concentration of power and resources) but this does not allow the Network to be funded as a whole, only as individual Labs. Thus, all financial resources are managed by the Labs, which can, however, gather with other labs for joint initiatives. **A member of a DESIS Lab** (elected as international coordinator to accomplish a two-year mandate) **manages DESIS Network using its own resources.**

Universities' operations and resources empower DESIS Labs and DESIS Network, which are realised in the professors' duties, student' activities and universities' infrastructures. Specific financial resources for projects are raised by DESIS Labs themselves. On the other hand, if there is a lack of local resources and infrastructure in universities, this restricts the possibility for DESIS Labs to connect and collaborate with the overall network.

MONITORING

The monitoring process in DESIS Network enables knowledge generation. It intensifies the production of (a common) knowledge between the DESIS Labs by analysing the impacts of the local projects in a number of fields (governance, job creation, etc.). However, there is a **lack of network monitoring process** to verify the consequences of DESIS processes in students (now and in their future professional practices) and in teachers. **Existing monitoring processes in universities disempower DESIS Labs** whose activities may not fit within the existing evaluation metrics.