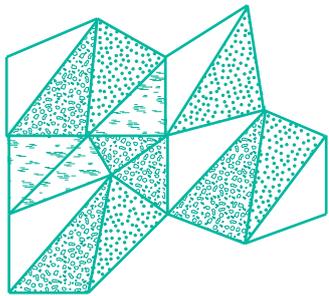
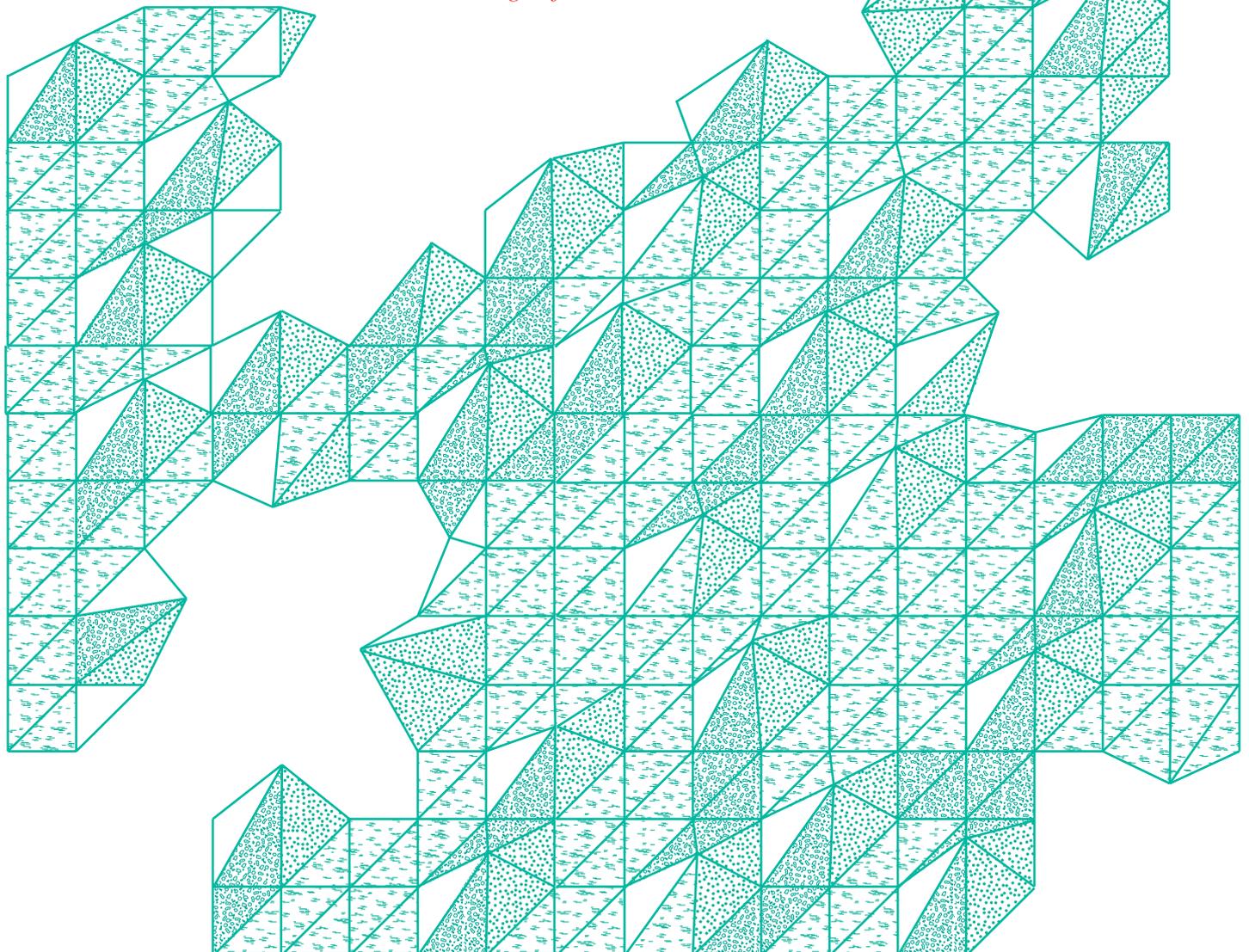


**Design for social innovation
as a form of designing activism.
An action format.**



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Design for Social Innovation as a form of Design Activism: An action format.

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Abstract

This paper presents and discusses an action format developed through design experiments aiming to make things happen. It brings to the already rich debate on social innovation a designer's perspective mainly focused on action research and field actions.

This action format of design for social innovation, the 'Social Innovation Journey', is structured on a non-linear sequence of steps and actions that progressively engage a community and help it to set up and prototype a social innovation through an event-like pilot initiative: a 'farewell' initiative that, while prototyping the innovation, releases its full ownership to the community. The action format is illustrated through research projects and training activities which have brought designers to design 'with' or 'for' social innovators, .

The 'Social Innovation Journey' is an open, in progress, framework for intervention set up by the Polimi DESIS Lab, the Politecnico di Milano based laboratory of the international network DESIS – Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability. It comprises a network of researchers adopting a strategic and systemic approach to design, with a specific focus on designing for services and *design activism. It explores how design can enable people, communities, enterprises and organisations to kick off and manage innovation processes by co-designing and setting in place experiments of new services and solutions.*

1 Empowering Creative Communities

Since the early 2000s, the international group of researchers and scholars in service and strategic design that, later, would found the DESIS network, started to investigate the phenomenon of 'creative communities': groups of people doing together small, creative, extraordinary things to change the way of living, so as to bring value to society, the environment and business. EMUDE – Emerging User Demand for Sustainable Solution, a research funded in 2004-06 under the 6th FP of the European Commission was one the initial projects of the group (Manzini & Meroni 2007). From that moment on, the research to understand and then empower, through design, social innovators has never stopped. By integrating, more and more, researching and teaching, several applied research projects have been developed. With particular regard to the Polimi DESIS Lab, a few examples of activities are worth mentioning, in order to clarify the typologies of the interventions. This has resulted in growing experience in education and action research projects of design for social innovation: building on this experience, the Lab is today framing an action format that can guide further initiatives, be replicated and evolved.

Roughly, the typologies of action can be classified as follows:

- educational activities developed in service design studios at the Masters level of design programmes: it is a kind of action research that, finding inspiration and commitment in existing or potential research projects, activates the students' creativity and capacity to explore new possible areas of work. This is the case of 'Yes Weekend!', a service design studio in 2012 with the students of the Master of Product Service System Design of Politecnico di Milano, to explore tourism in the periurban areas of the Parco Agricolo Sud of Milano, a huge agricultural piece of land bordering the city. Students were asked to co-design with farmers and citizens simple, workable and ready to use services to enable citizens to enjoy their weekend in the local farms. The activity was connected to the existing project 'Nutrire Milano – Feeding Milan' (www.nutrire milano.it), that will be presented later on, and resulted in 10 ideas that raised the consciousness of farmers and citizens about the potentiality of the area. Besides the educational purpose, these activities aim at opening up a conversation with selected stakeholders about potential research projects.
- research activities developed through educational ones: it is a kind of action research that engages students in parts of the projects, asking them to generate ideas that contribute to the general work. This is the case of 'Human Cities, Reclaiming public space', a project supported by the Culture programme of the European Commission (in 2011-12) aimed at activating people and local stakeholders with regard to the public space. Students of the Master of Product Service System Design were involved in the task of designing initiatives and toolkits to enjoy the space of the Campus of the Politecnico di Milano in the neighbourhood of Bovisa, as it is, indeed, a public space (www.humancities.eu). The project resulted in a very good response from the people, which led to the activation of the project 'Coltivando – the convivial garden at the Politecnico di Milano' that will be described later in this paper. This kind of activity, of which Human Cities is a paradigmatic example, is aimed at opening up opportunities for a more creative and exploratory research, thanks to the involvement of students. As for the previous kind of research, it might evolve into unexpected initiatives.
- research activities developed by professional researchers in response to projects: it is a kind of action research that is mainly managed by teams of experts with the occasional involvement of students. The knowledge produced, then, feeds both research and training. This is the case for "SPREAD-Sustainable Lifestyles 2050" a multi-disciplinary European social platform project that developed a vision for sustainable lifestyles in 2050 (www.sustainable-lifestyles.eu). The design contribution focused on co-designing scenarios with experts and stakeholders, combining social and technological innovation, bottom-up and top-down approaches. This is a 'design driven' approach, which aims at activating social conversations about future perspectives for individuals, communities, enterprises or any kind of private or public organisation.

The previously mentioned cases illustrate the effort of design researchers to create and diffuse into society a culture of sustainable innovation by activating reactions that might reach beyond the purpose of the specific projects. In other words, by creating contexts for sharing of experience and practice (Ceschin 2012; Ehn 2008) that enable people to act in a more effective and ‘professional’ way, a culture of social innovation might emerge.

2 Designer as an Activist

Despite the academic context in which these research projects have originated the approach adopted was, from the beginning, orientated to make things happen as soon as possible by putting in place different forms of prototyping and starting to learn from potential mistakes and failures (Brown, 2009). Processes have been conducted by applying service and strategic design tools in a trial and error manner. The lessons learnt, nevertheless, are not specifically, or not only, about the way service and strategic design methods and tools are used, but instead are about the way designers approach the stakeholders and the community (Sanders & Stappers 2008; Margolin 2012). One of the first lessons is that loyal dedication and deep diving into the social system are conditions of work for the designer dealing with social innovators. In doing this, the designer becomes part of the team or community attempting to undertake the challenge. Conventional professional advice is here replaced by a situation where the designer is ‘embedded’ in the community. This allows speaking about design and community coaching: using professional tools to make things happen and enable people to do it (Fuad-Luke, 2009; Fry 2011).

In fact, another lesson from the action research experiences is the importance of understanding in which phase of development the social innovations need to get support from designers and for how long it is required so as to make initiatives become self-sufficient and the community ‘competent’ (Meroni & Sangiorgi 2011). This is a ‘designerly’ way of intervening into people’s lives, motivating actions, mobilising stakeholders, creating “spaces of contest”, which reveal and challenge existing configurations and conditions of society (Markussen 2011). This is also a shift from designing ‘for’ the community, to designing ‘with’ the community and finally to allow communities to design ‘by themselves’ (Brown 2009) and it opens up the issue of planning an ‘exit strategy’ by creating the condition for the innovators to be autonomous and committed enough to take the initiatives further. Looking back at the research projects is an opportunity to reflect about the process, the outcomes and the interaction with the stakeholders, in order to frame an action format that can be further evolved and replicated for a more effective intervention.

In the next section of this paper a draft of the ‘Social Innovation Journey’ is presented, built upon the experience of Polimi DESIS Lab: it systematises activities recurring in the research projects and tries to help designers understand the stage of the social innovations they are dealing with and the potential of following ones. The method leads to the stage of incubation of a social enterprise. As such, it also helps to evaluate and plan the possible intervention according to the various steps. It is worth mentioning that, not being a linear process, it might have various iterations and requires the interaction of a variety of competences. With regard to the design action, in particular, the experiences developed so far have reached the stage of producing a prototype of a ‘special’ kind. After that phase, on one hand the innovation is somehow released to the owner (either an individual, a group, a community, an enterprise) who might decide to evolve it as a kind of enterprise or replicable model, and on the other hand it needs the support of an incubator with specific skills. The ‘special’ kind of prototype mentioned above is something that contributes to qualify and distinguish the method: it is, in fact, not a simple functional test of potential innovation, but is an engaging event (or sequence of events) which aims to activate the social innovators to move the initiative ahead and become independent of the designers. It is, in other words, a farewell action that must be carefully planned as a part of the exit strategy of the project.

In the following sections the method will be discussed and exemplified through a couple of applied research projects, ‘Coltivando’ and ‘Nutrire Milano - Feeding Milan’. As the method has been built on the experience of these projects (and others), there are occasional inconsistencies and divergences that represent the progress of the approach. Still, being a design method, it will remain open to evolutions and adaptations according to the different circumstances. It has to be considered, therefore, as a path for action.

3 Fostering and Supporting Social Innovation: the 'Social Innovation Journey'

The 'Social Innovation Journey' can be schematised as in figure 1: it visualises the different steps and the main possible interactions of the process.

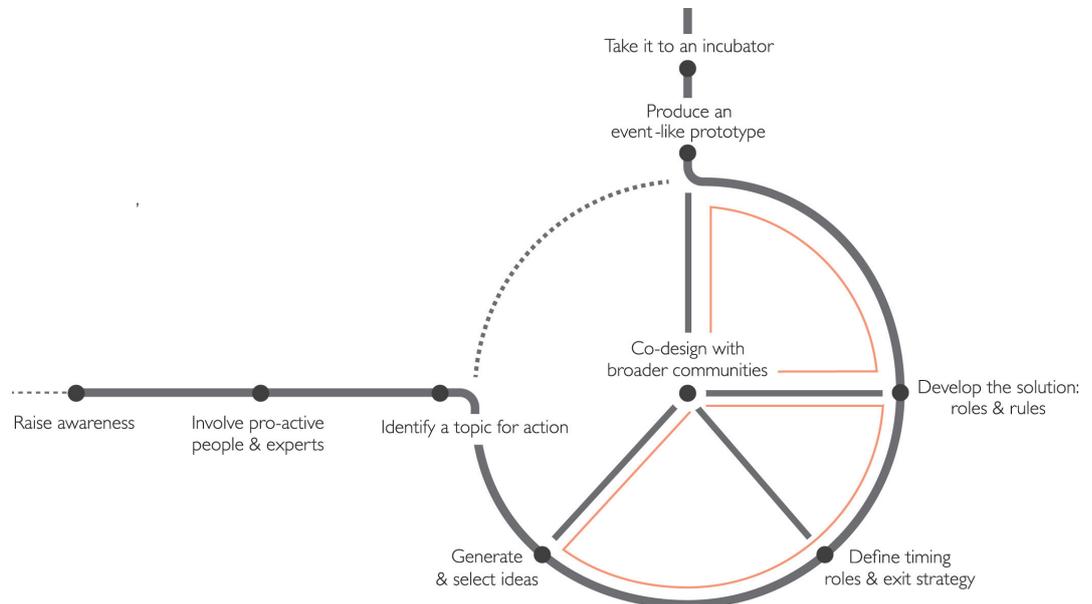


Fig. 1: The 'Social Innovation Journey' (Politecnico di Milano)

Steps are phases of the development of social innovation (i.e. the degree of development and implementation of the idea) that allow the designer to understand the kind of action to take.

Raise awareness

Find and activate potential social innovators. This is an in-depth phase to be centred on the explicit or implicit awareness of the social innovators of their role and actions. It allows, in parallel, for light to be shed on hot topics. Awareness could be raised through direct contact with local initiatives and promoters, so as to present them with the possibility of supporting them through the design process/tools/output.

Identify a topic for action

Obtain the interest of an existing/potential community of social innovators and stakeholders. This step is about establishing direct contact with the community and developing a first phase of desk research that could support potential areas of interest. Interests could be then highlighted through a proposal by the designers and/or by the informal (or formal) communities themselves who have already framed the action. This step, often, follows the next one.

Involve pro-active people & experts

Define a vision and scenario. In this step, the most pro-active agents of the community (i.e. the social innovators) who might become the main stakeholders of the project or its driving force, have to be identified and involved to work side by side. This is a crucial step of designing for social innovation, as it implies not to start from scratch, as in a 'vacuum', but from the capacity and interest of people and groups already active in the specific field. This phase is aimed at framing a vision and a scenario for possible solutions, setting context-specific initiatives, and defining why and how to attract other potential stakeholders. This phase, finally, result in obtaining consensus by the community.

Generate & select ideas

Develop a first set of draft concepts. In this step, ideas are not yet defined into details but they present possibilities and opportunities to be further developed with a broader community of stakeholders. The generation process is a co-design one that involves (or takes into account the input of) the experts and the pro-active stakeholders, and uses the scenarios as a starting point for the conversation.

Define timing, roles & exit strategy

Create an action plan for the project. Despite the fact that this plan will be validated only after the next co-design activities and a clearer idea of the solutions, it is of great importance to draft it as soon as possible in the process, so as to carefully plan the use of the resources, the timespan of the project, the expertise, the activation of the stakeholders. As an outcome, the role of the designer has to be clear, as well as the exit strategy that might or might not coincide with the prototyping phase. This step might often anticipate the generation and selection of ideas.

Co-design with broader communities

Attract additional stakeholders and start a process of engagement with the project. The co-design sessions organised within this step need to involve as many people as possible so as to kick-off a 'social conversation' about the ideas and get inputs back. Some of the people engaged in this phase, would probably become 'ambassadors' of the ideas within broader communities. By doing so, the ideas could continue to spread in the society and, hopefully, generate a social innovation movement that enables people to take action.

Develop the solution: roles & rules

Define the relationships between the stakeholders. After the co-design sessions, the action plan of the project could be then validated and set in place. In this step the components of the system are designed, including the hardware (i.e. spaces, objects, communication etc.) and the software (i.e. tools, platforms, rules to be followed etc.). At this end of this phase, the 'value proposition' of the solution, its overall sustainability and the benefits for the different stakeholders must be clear.

Produce an event-like prototype

Involve the community in testing the solution in a way that creates the functional and emotional involvement and attract a broader audience. It might take, in reality, several actions and progressive experiments. It is intended to prove the practicability of the idea while creating an emotional engagement that enables and motivates the community to take full ownership of it, and pursue it over time. Meanwhile, the hardware of the system is tested so as to refine the solutions if needed.

Take it to an incubator

After the prototype phase the solution might be taken to an incubator in order to evolve it as a structured venture or as a start-up. The incubator brings the skills that are likely to be missed, until that phase, into the process: namely business planning, system engineering, market analysis and so forth. The incubator also helps the innovator to make a full assessment of the solution, so as to define its key performance indicators and the conditions for its overall sustainability. This is not a mandatory phase, but it is needed when the solution presents business possibilities and the innovator is keen to move in this direction. The venture might then take the shape of a social enterprise. The incubation provides inputs to re-shape the solution, to model the business, to start up the enterprise and replicate the initiative. When the solution upgrades to a real enterprise, it could be replicated in other contexts.

4 The ‘Social Innovation Journey’ through Projects

Two project developed by the Polimi DESIS Lab are then described in the section to present the implementation of the method.

4.1 Coltivando - The convivial garden at the Politecnico di Milano

‘Coltivando’ is the community garden set up at the Politecnico di Milano - Bovisa Campus, a collaborative project where the competences of both spatial and product service system designers converged. It has been developed by a team of postgraduate students, supervised by researchers and teachers and co-designed with the local neighbourhood.

www.coltivando.polimi.it



Fig. 2 ‘Coltivando’ (Politecnico di Milano)

Raise awareness

Within the framework of the European Research 'Human Cities', the Polimi DESIS Lab investigated how to open the public space (with considerable green areas) of the Politecnico di Milano - Bovisa Campus to the neighbourhood and the city. This was meeting the needs of the neighbourhood of reclaiming a public space that was part of their culture, since the campus is located in the site of a former manufacture where most of the people living there were working.

Identify a topic for action

In October 2011, after a weeklong workshop held by the Polimi DESIS Lab at the School of Design of Politecnico di Milano, 9 different actions were presented by the students to reconnect the neighbourhood and the campus. They were tested and prototyped during a one-day event: 'C'è spazio per tutti - There's room for everyone'.

One of these actions was about the creation of a community vegetable garden. It was the most successful one, and many people working at the university and living near the campus showed interest in being a member of the future community garden.

Involve pro-active people & experts

The results of the previous phases were then taken in consideration by the Polimi DESIS Lab in February 2012. This brought together a team of multi-disciplinary students, staff with expertise in spatial design and service design, a local association involved in community garden (Il Giardino degli Aromi) and the Milanese network of them (Libere Rape Metropolitane) plus a community garden and development practitioner from an Australian social enterprise (Urban Reforestation), so to create a group of experts and pro-active people to develop the project of the garden.

Generate and select ideas

Since there was room and interest to engage the Politecnico di Milano's students, staff and surrounding community with the public space in the campus, a 'convivial model' was defined as possible answer to the need of having a garden: the garden's vegetables would have grown and then distributed in a shared, communal, way. Spatial and service designers generated ideas to be discussed with the community in co-design activities, so as to better understand how the hardware (beds, shelters, etc.) and the software parts (rules, management, etc.) of the garden could be developed.

Define timing, roles & exit strategy

These first ideas including a plan of development of the project (to be confirmed after the co-design workshop) and the different roles of the stakeholders involved (researchers, students, associations, citizens) were put in place. In the specific case, due to the location and nature of the project, the 'exit-strategy' of the designers (that's to say the way of releasing of the solution in the hands of the community) was not planned, but the idea was to support the project until it's self sufficiency in terms of organization.

Co-design with broader communities

The team of designers organised workshops to co-design the community garden with its potential users. This has been an important phase of the project because the users of the garden will be giving feedback to the designers on how they think it should look like.

Three community consultation sessions were run:

1. May, 2012. An internal meeting with the students and staff of the university to engage them in the project. The aim of this workshop was twofold: from one side, it aimed at informing the academic community about the garden and to collect their feedbacks according to the peculiar expertise; on the other side, the hope was to involve more design disciplines in the project, such as communication, fashion and product.

2. May, 2012. A first external meeting with the local community to spread the word about the project as well as to co-design different elements of the garden with them. The co-design activities focused on the creation of groups of expert and beginner gardeners; they were asked to design the map of the garden, according to some given elements (such as: plants, benches, bushes, tools, convivial spaces...); then they were asked to discuss a draft of the membership basic rules.
3. June, 2012 As well as the first co-design workshop, after one month designers replicate it to engage more people from the neighbourhood.
4. At the end of the two co-design session, more than 80 people from the neighbourhood were involved and some of them actively took part to the next steps of the process.

Develop the solution: roles & rules

Designers collected from the workshops feedbacks to give a final shape to the garden space, as well as to the service model and the garden governance. They put the basis for the first community and for the garden construction in October 2012.

As a demonstration to the people of the co-design session, spatial designers build the prototype of the 'Box Zero', the container for the plants specifically designed for 'Coltivando' and put some tomatoes and basil in it. It was aimed at testing the effectiveness of the box project, as well as to prove the actual interest of the local people in volunteering to take care of the box in the summertime.

Produce an event-like prototype

On October 13th 2012, the second edition of 'C'è spazio per tutti- There's room for everyone' event was held. At this time, students and designers were still working on the event that will last for one week and will end on October, 13th, with the collective construction of the first garden bed, as well as the first community of 25 people.

'Colivando' was not taking into an incubator and it didn't follow the 'Social Innovation Journey' in its complete cycle. The event-like prototype was the starting point for a weekly appointment engaging people on building both the site and the group. This process of affection is still going on and makes emerge some adjustments compared to projects that came out from the previous phase. 'Coltivando' is now a place where people are enjoying their free time, producing their own vegetables and fruits and enriching their social experiences through collateral activities i.e. seminars, schools visits etc.



Fig. 3: the Social Innovation Journey for 'Coltivando' (Politecnico di Milano)

4.2 Nutrire Milano – Feeding Milan: Energy for Change

‘Feeding Milan: Energy for Change’ is an action research project funded by Fondazione Cariplo, a bank foundation, and developed by a partnership between Slow Food Italia, the Polimi DESIS Lab and the Università di Scienze Gastronomiche. Started in 2010 and now, in 2013, near to the conclusion, it investigates how design for social innovation can contribute to create a local ‘foodshed’ that serves to connect local food production in periurban areas (and in particular in the huge agricultural park bordering the south of the town, the Agricultural Park South) with its consumers in town, through a network of services (Manzini & Meroni 2013; Cantù & Simeone 2011). Given that it actually encompasses a number of different services, the following description will focus only on some specific ones and on the framework project. As consequence of its complexity, the project implied several iterations and parallel activities.

www.nutriremilano.it



Fig. 4: ‘Feeding Milan’ (Politecnico di Milano)

Raise awareness

In 2007, a small fund from the Italian Ministry of the University and the Research allowed the Polimi DESIS Lab to start a theoretical research about the role of agricultural parks for the sustainable development of regions and towns. It was the opportunity to investigate the reality of the Agricultural Park South of Milano. Partially involving the students of the School of Design of Politecnico, the research resulted in the creation of a scenario for a regional ‘foodshed’, combining production and leisure in a network of new short-chain services. It was also the opportunity to get in touch with local stakeholders (authorities, farmers, organisations) already active in the region and operating with this purpose.

Identify a topic for action

In 2009, when the city of Milan won the competition to host the Expo2015 proposing a food related topic (“Feeding the Planet. Energy for Life” is the title), the DESIS Lab and the Slow Food association (already collaborating in other activities) decided to conceive a project that, despite any possible initiative of the board of the Expo, would have elaborated and put in place a vision of food sustainability and sovereignty for the city of Milano.

Involve pro-active people & experts

The partnership of the DESIS Lab with Slow Food and with the University of Gastronomic Sciences was informally set: in a few weeks, a first vision, an articulated scenario and a detailed project plan were prepared, with the aim of looking for funding. After a few months the financial support was found: an initial grant from Cariplo Foundation was defined, and the partnership officially started to work. The common purpose was making things happen as soon as possible.

As the project begun in its general frame and the ideas for specific services were generated, the same activity of involving experts and pro-active stakeholders was repeated for each service in different phases.

Generate and select ideas

Beginning fall 2010, a co-design workshop was organised between the Polimi DESIS Lab, the Slow Food and the University of Gastronomic Sciences teams in order to move from the scenario to specific services in the field, using existing assets, resources and people. Specific design tools (ideas cards, case studies, etc.) were produced for the purpose of stimulating the brainstorming. A first set of ideas were generated and agreed to be further developed. Among those, the farmers' market. Meanwhile, some pivotal editions of the farmers' market were set in place, adopting the format of the Earth Markets, the Slow Food concept for it.

Define timing, roles & exit strategy

A more detailed plan of actions was then defined, targeting 2015 as first scenario for having a number of initiatives in place. Specific roles were set for the research partners, and other specific partners, experts or collaborators were involved. Since the funding scheme was yearly approved by the Cariplo Foundation according to the results of the previous work, it was not possible to plan all the activities with accuracy. Moreover, being at that time the design process still in development and the experience not yet mature, a clear exit strategy wasn't set and this made the use of the resources not as effective as it could be.

Co-design with broader communities

In December 2010, after around one year from the beginning of the project, the full scenario of 'Feeding Milan' and the outcomes already in place were presented during an open, bold, event organised by the research partnership and the Foundation and open to everybody.

For the purpose of that event, a catching storytelling of the scenario and the main service ideas were produced, designing a series of short movies named 'video-scenarios'.

It was the beginning of diverse co-design sessions organised in several circumstances to start a technical and social conversation about the project and its specific outcomes. According to the timetable of the design of the various services, open co-design sessions were organised in events, conferences, places and whatever useful circumstance the project partners were involved in. Most of all, the Farmers' Market itself was an 'ice-breaking' device to make the whole project become 'tangible' and reliable in the eyes of a broader community.

It is worth mentioning, in particular, the 'Ideas Sharing Stall' at the Farmers' Market: a stall, among the others, conceived as an interaction point between the designers and the citizens/farmers/producers potentially interested in the development of the services. At the stall, every time, a different topic for interaction and co-design was proposed.

Develop the solution: roles & rules

The specific services creating the network of Nutrire Milano had different timetables and plans of development. For each one, specific stakeholders were involved, different target identified and co-design sessions accordingly organised. Each one went through diverse generation and development phases, very often involving the students of the Master of Product Service System Design as active participants. Main services designed are the Farmers' Market, the Farmer Food Box, the Local Bread Chain, the Local Tourism, the Local Distribution System.

Produce an event-like prototype

Considering the complex articulation of the project, the already mentioned lack of a detailed planning and a related exit strategy, the timespan of prototyping was different from one service to another. The Farmer Food Box, for example, went through 2 main cycles of prototyping, each one involving many people. It can be criticised that none of them was planned enough to effectively engage the main stakeholders and let them take the full ownership of it. Therefore, the solution still needs to fix several issues.

The Farmers' Market, instead, was successful to the extent that, when it was moved from one neighbourhood into another, a huge group of citizens started an action toward the public administration to have it back. Even if this action was not successful, it was the beginning of another story that the Polimi DESIS Lab begun in the neighbourhood in order not to 'waste' the positive energy of the inhabitants. As an outcome, thus, the activism of the project team mobilised the people and really empowered the existing of prospective social innovators.



Fig. 5: the Social Innovation Journey for 'Feeding Milan'. (Politecnico di Milano)

5 Next Steps: Thinking About the Future

The 'Social Innovation Journey' is not a foolproof method to be replicated here and there to make things happen. It is, instead, a first attempt to guide the designer in understanding the different phases and statuses of a social innovation. In fact, by attempting to formalise the various, typical and recurring, phases of development of a social innovation, it helps also in defining the expected outcomes of each one and how the designer can act to help achieving them. Over the next months, the Polimi DESIS Lab will test, elaborate and evolve the method in research and training projects, in order to assess its usefulness.

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Sitography

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