

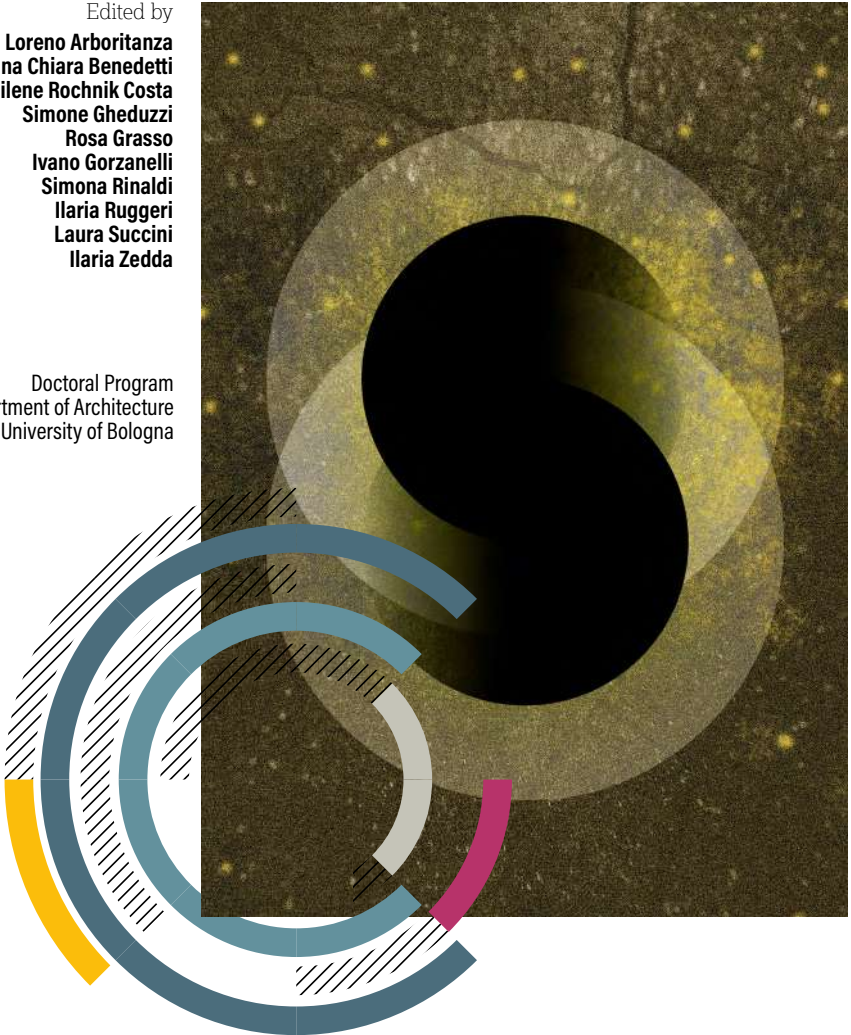
# The Ecological Turn

Design, Architecture and Aesthetics  
beyond "Anthropocene"

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Doctoral Program  
Department of Architecture  
University of Bologna





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# The Ecological Turn

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## Design for Social Innovation in Italian Inner Peripheries\*

Inner Peripheries; Design For Social Innovation; Design For Territories; Relational Design; Sharing Practices.

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Italy is scattered with small peripheral settlements, often characterised by difficult environmental morphologies, a lack of public services and a tendency toward depopulation. These places are mostly located in inland mountainous or island areas, far away from big cities. Yet despite a significant drop in population, they are still home to a quarter of the Italian population, distributed over more than two thirds of the entire country.

Today, a few of these towns are being reorganised and repopulated, re-establishing a sustainable community approach thanks

\* Since the work was shared between the four authors, the editing of chapter 2 is attributable to D. Scodeller; chapter 3 to D. Turrini; chapter 4 to M. Manfra; chapter to 5 E. Trivellin, and chapters 1 & 6 to all the authors.

to innovative forms of organisation and entrepreneurship, capable of bringing together cultural, natural and social capital and production chains. In these contexts, unexpected models of innovation and design are born, to outline peculiarities of extreme interest for a contemporaneity that comes to include the dramatic instances of the current pandemic circumstances.

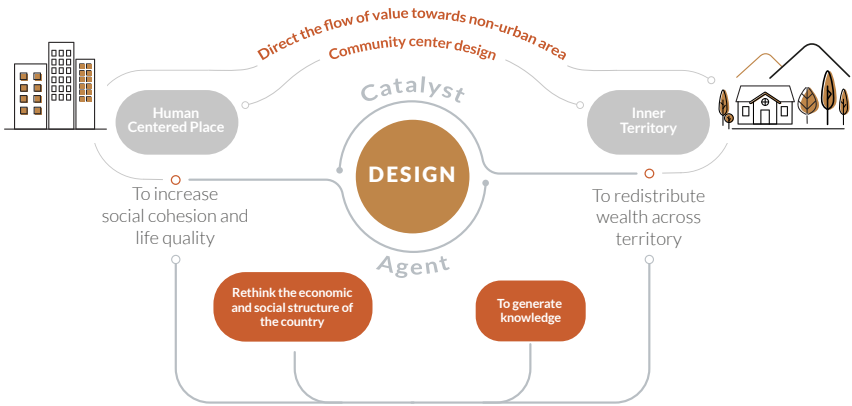
The aim of this paper is to draw attention to strategic scenarios, theoretical guidelines and examples of good design practices, already created or in progress, including those by the authors, related to the promotion of eco-literacy, community and on-demand health and social services, the promotion of local agri-food systems, the preservation of know-how and craftsmanship, highlighting the contribution that articulated and multiscale design can provide in transforming territorial fragility into social and economic opportunities.

The Italian territory is scattered with small, marginalised settlements often characterised by the lack of public services, by a physical morphology impeding connections and mobility, and suffering from depopulation. These places are mostly found in hilly and mountainous inland areas along the Apennine ridge, in the mountainous areas of the Alpine foothills and the Alps, or on islands, far from large urban centres with their infrastructural arteries, and yet, despite a significant demographic decrease, they still host a quarter of the Italian population, spread over more than two thirds of the country's territory.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to being characterised by the distance from the major centres and the scarcity of civic services, the internal areas generally hold significant environmental and artistic cultural resources. However, these characteristics aren't sufficient to curb the abandonment of peripheral territories. With

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1 Barca, Casavola and Lucatelli, "Strategia nazionale per le Aree interne: Definizione, obiettivi e strumenti di governance", 19. These areas occupy 60% of the surface of the national territory. They manifest phenomena such as a decline in population, an increase in demographic aging, and a weakening of the economic and productive fabric. The rise in unemployment causes the underutilisation of entire territorial areas such as - for example - unused agricultural land.



the establishment of the *Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale* (Territorial Cohesion Agency), the *Strategia Nazionale delle Aree Interne* (National Strategy for Inner Areas), and, more recently with the *Piano Sud 2030* (2030 Plan for Southern Italy), the issue has begun to receive attention, materialising in the allocation of funds to integrate these territories, or in any case bring them closer to the dynamic centres.<sup>2</sup>

Although there is an urgent need to resolve the opposition between centres and peripheries, we must also remember that Italy has a complex structure that cannot be shortly described with the simple dualisms of large–small, far–near, city–countryside, or centre–periphery. In fact, there is a nuanced gradation that we do not find, with the same characteristics, in any other European nation. The historical reasons that have defined this system form the basis of peculiar strengths and criticalities which are worth exploring, not only from a social point of view, but also from an economic and productive one as well as from a design culture perspective [Fig.1].

Fig. 1

Main topics, formula and research approach

<sup>2</sup> Italian government, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, *Piano Sud 2030, sviluppo e coesione per l'Italia*.

## Rethinking inner peripheries beyond the Anthropocene

To try to define what the role of design is for these contexts, in view of the new kinds of relationships between humanity and territory explored by the conference, it is useful to refer to the in-depth analyses articulated by the *Forum disuguaglianze diversità* (Forum on Inequality and Diversity).<sup>3</sup> Among the fifteen points proposed to reduce inequalities, points 6, 8 and 10 are of particular interest since they address the development strategies for research and businesses aimed at places, as well as guidelines for the tools for environmental sustainability. The sixth in particular, “Collaboration between universities, centres of expertise and small and medium-sized enterprises to generate knowledge”, addresses the issue of the country’s economic structure and how it has a profound relationship with the peculiarities of the Italian environment.

The studies of these situations, starting with Becattini’s,<sup>4</sup> highlight not only moderate company size and consequent agility, but also the importance of a network that connects companies with research and training centres. This collaboration has the aim of increasing knowledge and increasing social cohesion through improved job opportunities, raising the quality of goods and services produced, and promoting a clear vision of the concept of territory where the introduction of new technologies favours sustainable and responsible development and has the objective of redistributing wealth and generating social value while preserving the environment and improving the quality of life. In general, the need for a design for the territories and the environment that starts from these assumptions is thus highlighted:

- the environment is not only the setting for human life, but it is a system in which man is an integral part and which he should responsibly protect even if only for the sole purpose

3 Forum disuguaglianze diversità, *15 proposte per la giustizia sociale. Ispirate dal programma di Azione di Anthony Atkinson*, 81–104.

4 Becattini, *La coscienza dei luoghi, il territorio come soggetto corale*, 25–37.

of safeguarding himself; therefore, every planning act must be not only human-centred, but also environment-centred. This approach is clearly expressed by the British anthropologist Tim Ingold, according to whom “user-centred design casts practitioners as the mere consumers of objects designed *for* them, and not *by* them, in order to satisfy predetermined ‘needs’.”<sup>5</sup> For Ingold, design cannot be anything other than a participatory path in which something not known in advance is sought.

- the design that favours the interests of high-density human settlements, motivating these choices with a distorted idea of democracy (which does not start by responding to people’s needs, but with economic and political power concentrated and strengthened in urban centres), has yielded solutions which have often only had negative effects on the so-called marginal areas.

Referring to established practices of participatory planning, which from De Carlo to Dalisi and Manzini have for decades characterised the Italian culture of design,<sup>6</sup> as well as to the anticipatory actions of Danilo Dolci – who at the Palma di Montechiaro conference in 1960 proposed the definition of “depressed areas” for those territories where socio-economic conditions (poverty and education level) alienated communities from the rest of the country<sup>7</sup> – design, in these contexts, could act, on the one hand by enlarging the recipient (from individual to the community and the environment), and on the other hand by developing an attitude of active listening aimed at a more extensive collaboration in planning actions, as the interpretation and synthesis of the stakeholders is more complex.

5 Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, 70.

6 De Carlo, “L’architettura della partecipazione”, 87–142; Dalisi, *L’architettura della imprevedibilità: Glossario delle varianti*, 13–14; Manzini, *Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation*, 77–90.

7 Costantino and Zanca, *Una Sicilia “senza”: Atti del convegno di Palma di Montechiaro del 27–29 aprile 1960 sulle condizioni di vita e salute in zone arretrate della Sicilia occidentale*, 118–127.

The theme is also proposed as a nexus for theoretical reflection on the capacity for action, the limits of the tools of the different disciplines of the project as a whole (design in its various meanings, including urban planning and architecture) in defining directions of intervention. Faced with the danger that the “global nature system” is not governed as a common asset, but by organisations or administrations with competing interests, leaving room for the domination of “geopowers,”<sup>8</sup> a useful theoretical reference appears to be the re-evaluation of thought and action by Patrick Geddes – member of the Town Planning Movement – who asserted the relationship between urban design and social justice in his work at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He argued for a close relationship between *integrated communities* and active management of the territory, proposing concepts such as “think global, act local”<sup>9</sup> and the development of territorial analysis tools such as the “valley section” to highlight the interactions between anthropic systems and the morphology of the territory, and not least by underlining the role entrusted to education to support the understanding of places and biodiversity.

It thus appears increasingly urgent and important that design focuses its attention on those marginal areas where, as there are no major external interests, collective and widespread requests can constitute a source of attraction for actors and activities that usually focus and develop in more populous centres. The initiatives and projects that this paper aims to analyse and highlight, ranging from experiences of active citizenship, to new cooperative forms, to community health and social services, to the protection of know-how and craftsmanship, fit into this general framework, highlighting the contribution that well-structured and multi-scale design can provide in transforming territorial fragility into social and economic opportunity.

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8 Bonneuil and Fressoz, *L'événement Anthropocène: La terre, l'histoire et nous*, 113–114.

9 Geddes, *Città in evoluzione*, 103–146.

## **New economic chains between participation and sharing practices**

The collective action of people intending to re-inhabit marginal areas, helped by a widespread propensity for participatory design, is seen today as a laboratory of socio-economic practices for mutual survival in apparently inhospitable places. Faced with the current crises and unsustainable consumption patterns, humanity has found the territory and its communities to be indispensable places, once again full of meaning, and cooperation as a privileged way to experience and rethink them. Through the reassessment of ethics as a collective phenomenon of solidarity and social utility, and thanks to a new practice of relationship design aimed mainly at the design of groups of operators, activities and services, the inner areas can thus “recreate projects and circular economies where the concept of capital is also a social and cultural matter”<sup>10</sup>. In this regard, the new community cooperatives are emblematic: not satisfied with promoting a political and ideological stance but which propose a responsive common action that gives rise to diversified local activities, totally collaborative and never competitive.<sup>11</sup> These associative forms relate principles of trust, responsibility, subsidiarity, mutuality and shared investment through an initial group of co-planners and volunteers who are responsible for developing process and service planning for the whole territory. The objectives of these participatory visions are to produce value through economic initiatives capable of guaranteeing income regardless of favoured welfare programmes; promote territorial enhancement by recovering the identity of the place; and offer job opportunities especially for the younger generations.

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10 Manfra and Turrini, “Towards a new resilience culture: Relational design and workshops of social innovation for fragile areas in central-southern Italy”, 337.

11 Teneggi, “Cooperazione”, 103–107.

Particularly fitting cases of collaborative practice in this context are those of the Emilian Apennine villages of Succiso and Cerreto Alpi, which constitute “cooperative towns” with the aim of restoring sites and activities for socialisation and services, but also developing agricultural and food chain co-production capable of reinvigorating opportunities and local working conditions, interrupting the exodus of young people towards the valley and even allowing them to return.<sup>12</sup> What emerges is therefore a “supportive ecosystem that brings out, catalyses and sets up the potentially available resources”<sup>13</sup> allowing citizens to be proactive and creative in defining common initiatives.

In this scenario, the role of the designer is therefore not to design finished solutions but to mediate, facilitate and encourage the spread of the project, through the strengthening of ties, relationships and cooperative exchanges between individuals. Thanks to their proactiveness, the design culture can provide (and even more so in the future) optimal conditions for an idea to take shape and, ultimately, will be able to confer over time guidelines and tools for executive co-design practices, laid out in the sectors of product design, services and communication, which are all strategic for the success of the new supply chains.

In this sense, the designer is no longer concerned only with configuring decisive solutions in the first person but rather defines himself as a mediator, or *actant* capable of conceiving, experimenting and adapting multiple alternatives in expanded collaborations, both in the material and immaterial world<sup>14</sup>; in short, he becomes the architect of possible choices which, thanks to co-planning optics, place the real needs of the territory, the community or the individual at the centre of every design.

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12 Teneggi, “Cooperative di comunità: fare economia nelle aree interne”, 297–306.

13 Manzini, *Politiche del quotidiano: progetti di vita che cambiano il mondo*, 95.

14 Fagnoni, “Da Ex a Next: Design e territorio, una relazione circolare basata sulle tracce”, 16–27.



Hence, design can abandon a purely authorial dimension and can become a common tool, practiced by people with different disciplinary backgrounds, or by individuals who have not followed specific education paths. After all, Victor Papanek, a pioneer of social and sustainable design, even in the 1970s described how creativity and the capacity for design planning are inherent in every person regardless of their training courses and experiences.<sup>15</sup>

The various stakeholders who have worked to support the agri-food chain of the Frattura white bean are an emblematic case study for the analysis conducted here, where the citizens of the village of Frattura di Scanno in the Marsicani Mountains have met on participatory paths in partnership with the Matrix96 Cooperative, the University of Bologna, the Archaeological, Fine Arts and Landscape Superintendence of Abruzzo, the Municipality of Scanno and, recently, the University of Ferrara.<sup>16</sup> Within this project, motivated by a socio-anthropological documentation mission, the desire of the community to regain possession of its identities emerged—identities lost due to a long process of abandonment. This was achieved through co-planning practices conducted by the residents, anthropologists and by designers of different backgrounds who have worked on the regeneration of disused public spaces and on the recovery of the ancient line of indigenous legumes (now a Slow Food presidium), which has transformed into an economic opportunity that is expanding with the involvement of young inhabitants of

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15 Papanek, *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change*, 15.

16 The latest advancement of the Frattura project took place in 2019 with a workshop on participatory paths for the food supply chain, as part of the community festival “Non solo un fagiolo”, which was also attended by representatives of the Department of Architecture of the University of Ferrara.

Frattura and which involved process design and communication activities.<sup>17</sup>

### **Education, care and community services**

Education sites have always contributed to forming relationships between territories and learning but peripheral locations often affect the equity of the school supply due to differences in the conditions of access, both in terms of space and infrastructure, and of economic and social opportunities; thus heightening existing problems of territorial fragility. Nevertheless, places on the edge continue to show themselves as places of change, where inequalities are more marked, but where the best innovations are born.

This can be seen from many examples of regeneration underway for some time in the field of non-traditional education. These concern development practices and sustainable teaching actions able to produce participatory dynamics and stimulate investment in territorial resources and in the often neglected intersection between knowledge and local development.<sup>18</sup>

This is the case, for example, of the primary school of Ronchi Valsugana (TN), where a project has been created based entirely on outdoor education and eco-literacy. This has increased the number of students, encouraged turnover among teachers and the settlement of new young families. The model of the school network of the Madonie in Sicily is also particularly impressive. There, through research-action practices, participatory paths were tested in the construction of a three-year plan for educational offerings in a territorial key: green community, innovation,

17 Del Fattore, Rizzo and Felici, "From people to landscapes: The Fluturnum Project: Archaeology and anthropology in the Tasso-Upper Sagittarius valley", 15; Rizzo, *Una comunità competente*, 1; Manfra and Turrini, "Towards a new resilience culture: Relational design and workshops of social innovation for fragile areas in central-southern Italy", 340–342.

18 Luisi and Tantillo, "Scuola e innovazione culturale nelle aree interne", 10–14.

energy, agri-food, health, environment, culture and tourism. This pedagogical chain will support the experimentation of innovative smart schools through laboratories for integrated digital teaching and territorial fab labs<sup>19</sup> with particular reference to the theme of renewable energy.

It is not difficult to imagine how these education sites can attract further and ever more incisive design projects that can respond to the demand for improved quality of life: services and training offers, accessibility and new devices, mobility infrastructure, institutional networks of shared research and planning, active civic participation and associative social fabric, and the redefinition of spaces aimed at recovering a cooperative vision of educating.<sup>20</sup> And if it is true that, in addition to education, the care and health of those who live in peripheral areas are essential aspects for their recovery, then free and creative multidisciplinary design planning, increasingly understood as a strategic process, political, place-based, problem-solving or reframing of themselves, can certainly be placed in the planning bed of experiences related to care systems. Pharmacies that become multifunctional centres, community nurses and midwives who are part of the territorial assistance network, participatory first aid that activates community networks for emergencies (also guaranteeing specific services to residents such as, for example, shovelling snow or bringing medicines and firewood to the elderly), are just some of the ideas born from proactive and intersectional approaches capable of mobilising and enhancing the energies of the territory and the community.<sup>21</sup>

The municipality of Riccia (province of Campobasso), for example, combines housing with assistance to the infirm and recuperation of the historic centre, meant to improve its potential

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19 Anderson, *Makers: The New Industrial Revolution*, 21–39.

20 Lo Presti, Luisi and Napoli, “Scuola, comunità, innovazione sociale”, 417–434.

21 Costa, “Cura”, 109–114.

with infrastructure interventions and remote assistance/tele-medicine. Indeed, a service centre is planned for the Casa della Salute in Riccia: “This is intended for social and psychological assistance, as well providing for continuous health monitoring; it aims to provide daily help and concrete support to the non-self-sufficient elderly and to those who live alone or in disadvantaged conditions. A sort of ongoing assistance – an experimental, local reinterpretation of what is called long-term care – ensuring innovative forms of health care with treatments oriented to support individuals to achieve greater functionality according to their health conditions”.<sup>22</sup>

### **Training and job opportunities for peripheral productions**

The necessity of training professionals for the needs of small and medium-sized Italian businesses has led to the development, since 2015, of some actions that have constituted a pragmatic, but not formalised, proposal of what in Europe is called dual training.

Between Florence and Siena, an integrated training plan has been structured around an “Interior and Design” technological district which starts from the analysis of the territories’ needs and then gives guidance capable of encompassing regional policies up to those on a European scale. The project is set up to cover a network of non-homogeneous subjects who are able to provide answers regarding competitive applications for training plans. The university centres of Florence, Siena and Pisa, some research centres, secondary schools with technical and artistic training orientation, companies that belong to the regional technological districts (in particular those in the interior design, nautical and fashion sectors) and training agencies are the fundamental sites (nodes) for development of the activities. The entire design system mainly refers to two documents: one from the

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22 Golino and Colavita, “La sanità di prossimità: un progetto di welfare per le Aree Interne”; 9.

Regional Economic Planning Institute of Tuscany (IRPET),<sup>23</sup> the other from the Experimental Furniture Centre of Poggibonsi.<sup>24</sup>

The network described establishes a non-hierarchical relationship between urban centres and peripheral areas and attributes to each node the role of protagonist with specific professional skills strongly linked to the territories to which they belong. While the research centres are traditionally located in the capitals, the secondary schools, productive sectors and training agencies are located in territories that need to strengthen their skills that have been lost due to their marginalisation.

The objectives have been developed on several levels: to raise the qualification levels of the personnel of manufacturing companies to facilitate the push towards innovation by providing an alternative response to incremental innovation; to set up training strongly oriented towards sustainability so that its principles become a company legacy; to optimise training times by organising training so as to match demand with supply; and finally to create a distribution of opportunities that allow the territory and urban centres to be conceived as a single and complex entity. The immediate aims were to find professional solutions for students who have just graduated, reintegrate those into the company who have left the working world, and raise the applied knowledge of university students who in many cases have combined academic with professional paths.<sup>25</sup>

Among the projects that have received funding from the European Social Fund through the Tuscany region, two of them have among their objectives the updating of traditional craftsmanship skills in the digital age. We refer in particular to a training course for managers and a training course for

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23 Faraoni, *Anticipare i fabbisogni: i risultati delle indagini sulle imprese dinamiche toscane*, 5.

24 CSM – Centro Sperimentale del Mobile e dell'arredamento Soc. cons. a r.l., Poggibonsi, Siena, internal paper (2017).

25 Trivellin, "La formazione professionale: Uno strumento di crescita per il territorio", 234.

technicians.<sup>26</sup> With different degrees of in-depth study, the two training courses have set themselves the objective of developing mechanisms capable of facilitating creative processes, where digital technologies can facilitate responsible production, both from an environmental and social point of view.

In some respects, the *enabling technologies*,<sup>27</sup> and all the discoveries of the research project Paradigms 4.0, have meant that innovative processes are no longer proportional to the size of the companies: the most innovative production companies today belong increasingly to peripheral territories and they can be small in size.<sup>28</sup> What has been written so far confirms that industrial design, in its methods and dimensions, faces completely different problems compared with its beginnings, while remaining consistent with the goal of improving the living conditions of people and the environment.

Perhaps design should function with the bricoleur's approach, seeking to find value in what is available.<sup>29</sup> The words of Claude Levi-Strauss, transposed here from a different context, can express this very effectively: the rational concatenation of elements of the network can be seen only in hindsight; the bricoleur takes things apart in order to connect them in new ways to make them work differently. Equally effective as an analogy is the kaleidoscope: "an instrument that contains scraps and fragments through which structural combinations are created" where "certain marks acquire the quality of meaningful things"<sup>30</sup>.

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26 The courses we refer to are Digi.craft IFTS, funded in 2019, and *Craft and Maker* for the strategic training of technical professions, funded in 2019.

27 Celaschi, Montanari and Padula, "Approcci all'innovazione trainata dal design", 75.

28 It is emblematic in this regard that the Nuova CEV glass factory in Empoli was awarded as an innovative company, among 128 competitors, in the Tuscan regional award "Primavera d'Impresa." Nuova CEV is a company from the lower valley of the river Arno belonging to a sector in severe crisis with just 33 operators counting owners and employees.

29 Flaviano Celaschi, "Il design come mediatore tra saperi: L'integrazione delle conoscenze nella formazione del designer contemporaneo", 19–31.

30 Levi-Strauss, *Il pensiero selvaggio*, 48–50.

Overcoming the model of industrial production and intensive exploitation of the environment in which design was born and developed, which from many points of view is considered no longer applicable, has allowed us to recover some elements that are characteristic of craftsmanship; all this is also due to technologies that allow us to re-establish a relationship with the local community and a means of production without having to give up an extraterritorial dimension.

## Conclusions

As seen here, the culture of planning and in particular the discipline of design can contribute to the protection and social and economic reactivation of fragile territories in many ways: from the definition of strategies and guidelines, to the configuration or reconfiguration of work groups, processes and activities, and the creation of services and products. These intervention scenarios are certainly part of the design for the territories, defined with a particular approach that fine-tunes local development strategies and of which the territory is co-author,<sup>31</sup> but evolve at the same time towards new frontiers still partly to be delineated, embracing different possible scales of intervention and interest, from the promotion of traditional local supply chains up to the political dimension of national or supranational planning.

What constantly characterises the local enhancement processes, independently of the observation scale, is the need to consider the territory as a system of interrelated and interdependent resources for which design can assume a strategic role<sup>32</sup>; the approaches and case studies illustrated in this contribution then highlight how design can assume this function even more in the processes of enhancing or relaunching an area

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31 Franzato, "Design nel progetto territoriale", 1-6.

32 Villari, *Design, comunità, territori. Un approccio community-centred per progettare relazioni*, 7-9; Scodeller, "Design per il territorio", 25-30; Peruccio, Menzardi and Vrenna, "Designing for Territorial Revitalization. A diffused art exhibition to foster Northwest Italian Inner Areas", 190-197.

considered marginalised, aiming at participatory and collaborative actions (a bottom-up approach) that put a new value on the so-called territorial heritage<sup>33</sup> of a cultural, social, productive and environmental nature.

Within the limits imposed by some local administrations that are often anchored to a concept of closed local communitarianism, effectively opposing the initiatives of innovation that have been highlighted here, the designer must increasingly reflect on the ability to connect people, places, institutions and companies, and, in designing the tools to make different actors dialogue, on the possibility of giving communities the ability to become, themselves, autonomous carriers of innovation. Thanks to his transversal skills, the designer can create relationships with associations, communities and individual citizens, playing the role of community-manager, to help direct inner peripheries towards responsible choices.

Therefore, new planning areas are opening up which are completely or partially unexplored, which represent crucial challenges for the designers of the future, offering interesting opportunities for research and experimentation. In conclusion, in these contexts, the designer who is and will be increasingly part of collective planning among peers, has a greater responsibility for training and experience, and will have to direct communities towards responsible choices using the tools of empathy, participation and storytelling.<sup>34</sup>

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33 Magnaghi, *Il progetto locale. Verso la coscienza del luogo*, 300.

34 Perullo, *Estetica ecologica: Percepire saggio, vivere corrispondente*, 178.



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