

Design and Industry: Lessons from the Italian Design System¹

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ABSTRACT

The paper describes the relation between design and Local Productive Systems (LPS) as one of the key elements of competitiveness of the Italian SMEs in the sectors of the so-called “made in Italy”. The paper is based on a comprehensive study, resulting from the combination of different research programs carried on by the authors during the last 10 years, including a wide collection of cases, and direct experiences in applied research with Italian companies.

In the paper, authors discuss the role of design research assuming a mainly practical perspective, focusing on the kind of research that is carried on by designers and design research institutions in relation with companies operating in the Italian LPS. According to this perspective, the peculiarities of the Italian design system are the distributed nature of the research process; the non-structured and unaware observation of local and global contexts of use; the visionary approach led by design.

Authors point out that designers, in their close and almost “familiar” relation with companies, do not look at them as stakeholders, but as subjects of an interactive process driving to innovation, where designers are at the same time able to bring in companies visions and trajectories for innovation, and to deal with the technical issues related to the development of new products.

General Terms

Design.

Keywords

Design Process, Design Research, Local Productive Systems.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is the result of a decade of researches we developed on design and innovation in SMEs, supported by literature review on the relationship between Innovation and Local Productive Systems. The argumentation we propose is based on qualitative factors, emerging from many case studies developed for the above-mentioned researches. Among them: the foundational research “Sistema Design Italia” funded by the Ministry of University and Research, and the European research E.Va.N. (European Value Network).

Many scholars have faced the problem of design research in its multiple forms and manifestations. In the framework of this paper we are not interested in a synthesis of the vast literature on this topic, but just to notice, along with others (Zimmerman, Forlizzi and Evenson, 2007), that literature shows two main ways of intending design research: on one side a “utilitarian” interpretation, where research is seen as part of the design process, serving the development of commercial products or services; on the other side a “scientific” interpretation, where research is seen as a mean to develop new knowledge, mainly dealing with approaches, methods, processes. Normally, the first interpretation prevails in the design practice communities, and the second in the scientific communities. Schön tried a synthesis, by explaining how a reflection on practice can be seen as a way of producing new knowledge (Schön, 1983).

Looking at the connection between the design research and the artefacts resulting from the design process, we find a convergence on the idea that a product can be seen as a possible result of research when it changes the existing paradigm, leading to radical innovation (Cross, 2001).

We have to notice that this point of view assumes a mainly individual perspective, which means that it tends to describe single products that can be specifically linked with single companies, involving a clearly defined designer (or design team), who can be described as the “inventor” of the new solution. But while we will display a strong interest on radical innovation, we should not forget that innovation could be the result of a long collective process rather than a short individual one. As George Nelson used to put it: “*No design can exist in isolation. It is always related, sometimes in a very complex way, to an entire constellation of influencing situations and attitudes. (...) Earlier*

¹ Though the present contribute is the result of common reflections between the two authors, Alessandro Deserti edited paragraphs 1, 5, 6, 7, 8; Francesco Zurlo edited paragraphs 2, 3, 4.

generations solved this problem by using many hands and minds over periods of centuries (...). The 'designer' then was not an individual, but an entire social process of trial, selection and rejection. Today he is still that, though in a somewhat different sense, and we tend to overestimate his significance as an individual." (Nelson, 1957)

Adopting the "utilitarian" point of view, the following notes are focalized on the kind of research that has a mainly practical function and impact in relation with a Local Productive System (LPS). Applying to research the same perspective that Nelson applies to products, we would like to notice that this kind of research can be seen as a collective process rather than as an individual one, and that the single cases that we will tell represent a widespread situation, diffused in a whole system.

In the description of the LPS, we are using the term "industries" even if we know that it is often insufficient to describe the contemporary complexity of production, since we want to point out the strict relation between design and a productive background. In the Italian case, this background is made by systems of micro, small and medium enterprises that are often connected to give shape to production clusters with a strong rootedness in a specific local context. From this point of view, the Italian case - that was object of interest in the past (Sabel, Piore, 1984) - is emblematic: the productive system is composed almost entirely of SMEs contributing to the 40% of the national GDP, especially in the "lifeware" sectors (the so-called 3F: fashion, furniture, food).

As we will see, the design research that helps this productive system has a specific objective: supporting the innovation of the processes and of the product-systems (not only the product, but the mix of product, service and communication) by improving the competitive performance of the companies. In these companies the investment in the research is very limited because of the small size and of the scarce financial resources, and the strategies to overcome this weakness are singular: on one hand a sort of "outsourcing" that distributes outside the research process; on the other hand initiatives - now supported by local and central governmental policies - of co-opetition, that is the convergence of many local industries (also connected to big companies) on projects of research that is pre-competitive but also functional to the growth of knowledge capital in the cluster.

This phenomenon is particularly interesting because it gives us some idea about the type of research that is functional to the growth of the above-described productive system, but also because it is in some way different and complementary to the User Centered Design approach. The peculiarity of this (small and confined) productive system, the distributed size of the research process, the entrepreneurial spirit of the companies are the ingredients of a research process that - although starting from the observation of local and global contexts of use (non-structured and unaware) - tends to overcome them by a visioning approach led by design.

This phenomenon is what opens to radical innovations versus the incremental innovations that Verganti describes as an Italian characteristic (Verganti, 2009). In other words, the UCD research that observes the users and tries to get from their habits the inspiration for innovation leads inevitably to a leveling in the company offer, even if it is upwards. The attempt to differentiate pursued by this type of research results substantially in a flattening (Moon, 2010; Dell'Era, Verganti, 2010).

Another important aspect of the type of research that will be described is that it tends to emphasize the reasons-why of the new products, highlighting in particular the storytelling aspects.

2. DESIGN AND LOCAL PRODUCTIVE SYSTEMS

Almost all the stories of Italian design tell us that it was born by the close relation between professionals and SMEs. This relation was described by many authors, using all the possible categories and points of view of historical studies, and is in fact fully represented in the histories describing the evolution of design in relation with external changes, such as De Fusco's history of design, where Italian design is presented in terms of differences with other national contexts not just from a stylistic point of view, but linking it with the social, economic and industrial context (De Fusco, 1985).

In the European context and in the Italian one in particular, the LPS are particularly common. The LPS have different configurations: they can be clusters of companies connected to a manufacturing hub of international importance, or systems of companies that share the same region, or real interconnected clusters of firms specialized in a specific production process (Maffei, Simonelli, 2002).

These systems often constitute a real milieu because some economic, social and cultural aspects (especially these last) tend to overlap and become difficult to disentangle. Becattini (1998) speaks of community of companies, highlighting the cultural and community dimension, which often feeds the relation between each one of these entities.

In the Italian case, these companies, especially in the so-called "design-oriented" sectors have a remarkable "dynamic capability" (Teece, Pisano and Shuen, 1997): a strong reactivity and flexibility that gives the capability to adapt to the context and meet the new requests quickly. As a matter of fact, they materialized the concept of flexible specialization that Sabel (1989) interpreted as an effective answer to the dramatic instability and uncertainty of international markets. In this frame we find the design editing companies: companies having only a part of the production inside, but taking extreme care of the processes of product conceptualization, prototyping, marketing and communication, and looking on the territory for other companies with production specializations, that can be configured in an ad hoc network for a specific project (Zurlo et alii, 2002). In these contexts that are particularly active and full of business, it is often a project that guides the configuration of the network.

If we turn back to look at how design built its solid links with the Italian economic and production model, starting from the design-oriented sectors, we observe that Italian SMEs historically used design as a sort of "engine of innovation". In fact, design was used both as a driver to build their identity, and as a tool to catch new needs and transform them into a productive response, in order to emerge first in the domestic and later in the international markets. This relation was almost always characterized by a direct relationship between entrepreneur and designer, in which the designer was not only asked to give shape to ideas, but rather to understand and interpret needs, to anticipate desires, to build a "frame of meaning" around the market offer. The Italian entrepreneur operating in design-oriented sectors was used to discuss with the designer the development of new products, defining market opportunities, and the possible solutions. In an under-structured context, where marketing was still missing,

design used to play a role of mediation in the relation between company and market, developing what we are now calling a strategic approach. In other words, in Italy design developed a strategic attitude from the very beginning, and did not become strategic after the meeting with management.

We have to acknowledge that this native attitude of being strategic is evolving in a changing scenario: the system of design competencies tends to become more and more complex, expanding to new fields and defining new roles and forms of practice. This transformation is deeply characterized by a progressive shift of the interest of design from the control of material issues, mainly linked with the product; to a wider control of immaterial issues, and their relation with the material substrate. Here comes the idea of “product-system”, as a complex combination of material and immaterial factors and qualities, that have to be faced with a new strategic attitude (Eminente, 1991; Mauri, 1996; Zurlo, 2010).

Many family firms managed directly by the founder or his/her descendants are present in LPS. The category of family firms also includes large firms (such as Barilla and Ferrero) but small and medium companies tend to dominate. Family firms represent around 92% of all companies operating in Italy. The family dimension has in itself some strong but also some weak aspects. Among the second ones there is often the lack of delegation to skilled managers because of the continuous presence and interference of the owners in the management. On the other hand this aspect can be sometimes a strength, since in the decision making the approach of the owner/manager is quick and reactive. The entrepreneur chooses quickly, often taking risks but with the clear objective to strengthen the innovation capacity and competitiveness of his business.

In these contexts there is also a strong fluidization between the interpersonal relationships and the employment relationships. There is a clear barrier between working time and spare time but a continuum that goes far beyond the company thresholds within the ganglia of the social territory. It is not an exaggeration that the innovation (linked to the product as much as to the process) in the district of tiles (Sassuolo), takes shape at bars during the chat between technical managers and entrepreneurs. It is a social capital that is made of strong ties (Granovetter, 1973) among the various stakeholders in the area that often elect or give rise to new meeting places where the possibilities for an exchange in knowledge and experiences multiply and trigger (Bettiol, Micelli, 2005).

The integration of the entrepreneur in the local culture and society favors a greater focus on the needs emerging in the local context. These needs are connected to the daily routine: food, housing, clothing. They are needs that can be easily experienced by small companies and even more by craftsmen because this condition is often the starting point of many of them and it keeps on being the mental status of many of them. The craftsman is in his nature an operator aiming at understanding and interpreting the specific needs of a user. Some crafts, such as the family tailor have always had a user-centered approach (Margolin, 1997).

The company with the craftsman mentality is the one that picks from the context needs and desires that can become, somehow, universal (De Michelis, 2001). They are expressions of a lifestyle that even if deriving from a specific place, becomes potentially adoptable in different contexts. This user-centered dimension is the concrete expression of a glocal trait, leading to specific application fields, but also building some important competitive advantages. It is not by chance that Technogym, the family

company who built an empire in the sector of fitness and wellness, was born in Romagna, one of the most important leisure districts in Europe (Bonomi, 1999); in the same way Dainese, a company that is well known for the production of clothing and equipment for motorcycle enthusiasts, took life and inspiration from a context characterized by a concentration of motorcyclists and companies operating in that sector.

The framework in which all these companies work is very particular: the traditional Italian entrepreneur usually operates within a confined space (the industrial cluster) in which his motivation to emerge is mainly linked to social legitimacy, which leads to a tension towards the creation of “beautiful and well made products” rather than towards profit, which explains why in many Italian companies design comes before management.

This tension towards a sort of “economy of beauty” can be linked to an ancient cultural heritage, in which the borders between craftsmanship and art were not so well traced: the competitive attitude of the best craftsmen in Italian princedoms is pretty similar to the one displayed today by small companies in local areas. Probably, this attitude can be somehow linked with the craftsman’s mindset of many Italian companies, as perfectly described by Osborne. In his description of the nature of craftsmanship, he rejects the normal criteria used to distinguish it from art, introducing some general characteristics of craftsmanship that perfectly match a possible description of the best entrepreneurs of Italian SMEs during the development of their relation with design, like the idea of “genuine pride in the process of production”, and the portrait of craftsmanship as an “ethical life-style aesthetically based” (Osborne, 1978).

3. A (FAMILIAR) WAY TO INTERACT BETWEEN INDUSTRY AND DESIGN

The family dimension of these companies, or better the family-like mental framework that characterizes them even when they are equipped with a managerial apparatus external to the family (normally keeping the control of the company) is part of the craftsman’s mindset, and deeply influences the relation with designers. In fact, there is a sort of continuity with the designer, who usually has an external position, and assumes the role of artistic director or design manager. The external position allows designers to free themselves from the routine of the company, and capture design knowledge from the context. As a result, they can mix internal competences, considerations about products and processes in the company, and trends emerging outside. The relation with the designer is often prerogative of the entrepreneur, and is in most cases sustained by a relation of friendship. The choice of the designer, beyond the closeness to the “style” of the company, is often connected to elective affinities. In the sixties, the years that have characterized the birth of Italian design, such elective affinity was sometimes associated with the cultural emancipation of the company and its family. In Brianza (the region in the north of Milan where the most famous Italian furniture companies were born) companies come from a past characterized by craftsmanship and rural culture, far from the super-structural dimension of the “high culture”, and mainly connected to a manufacturing dimension. For the entrepreneur, establishing a relation with the designer meant getting in some way free from a past considered demeaning and degrading. In these industries designers were considered carriers of technical competences but also, and mainly, of a cultural perspective, thanks to their relations with art vanguards and with the world of architecture. Italian design was born in the post-war years in close

connection with the culture and practice of architecture that, contrarily to what happens in other international contexts, often represents an intellectual and political more than a technical-operative dimension.

Nowadays, the family dimension holds on even if enterprises, in particular those connected to second/third generations, have progressively developed their philosophy and their style, with a less penetrating influence of the “family designer” on the product development. That represents an ambidextrous behaviour (Cautela, Zurlo, 2011), mixing the exploitation of tradition and typological aspects, and the exploration of new pathways.

On the other hand, the awareness of the strategic role of design is increasing, generating new professional profiles and new educational pathways (e.g. the specialization courses in Strategic Design at Politecnico di Milano and in Business Design at Domus Academy). The designer approaches the company by focusing on its competitive aspects, by learning how to read balance sheets, by considering its positioning, catalogue and product portfolio. Designers find a new way, in particular during the first contact, to transfer design knowledge by adopting an empathic attitude with the entrepreneur and the organization. They give prominence to the approaching phase and to the audit of the company, a sort of “design due diligence” imitating the strategic consulting approach that has a specific objective: creating a relation of confidence with the entrepreneur based on trust. The supply of design services and design research to the enterprise becomes, in other words, a trust good, or else a service that finds its reference in the mechanisms and devices of trust activation.

4. A DISTRIBUTED SYSTEM OF RESEARCH

In the LPS there is a tacit system of relations that represent a sort of architecture of the value offering, mainly built on a local base. Trust assumes a central role also in these relations: it is one of the ingredients of a real process of enactment (Weick, 1995) of the various actors operating on the territory. Not only: other cultural aspects back such networking processes. For example a sort of competition among individuals that reflects a highly individualistic condition, often turning into actions of calibrated cooperation that are in reality forms of cooperation.

In such system design often plays the role of activator of connection between enterprises and craftsmen. Attempts to explain such phenomena resulted in some useful interpretative concepts: some of them are represented by theories connected to processes of practice communities building (Brown, Duguid, 1991; Lave, 1988; Lave, Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and some by reflections coming from the knowledge sciences (Nonaka, Takeuchi, 1997). On one hand the conditions that allow such processes; on the other hand the ways with which such processes may emerge. In our hypothesis, design research as a support to companies is the kind of research that backs processes of radical innovation aimed at the “concretization of a technical object” (Simondon, 1958). For technical object we do not only mean the material aspect of an artefact, but the value system of a company including a bundle of product, service, communication etc.

Different case studies realized by Politecnico di Milano highlighted that in some cases the project idea, driven by design, is what activates the value chain, promoting a sort of network of scope (as we found in the European research E.Va.N.). The aim is the development of a new idea of product, characterized by a vision, that activates sense making (Weick, 1995) in an existing or

emerging organization, where everyone works in a sort of interactive dance (Maffei, Zurlo, 2000): a process of interactive construction that tries to reach the precise scope of shaping a new artefact. The fact that these actors operate in the same place indicates proximity as a factor of activation of the network of scope; even if we have to recognize that today, thanks to ICT, the networks are expanding and partly losing their traditional local base.

According to Verganti (2009) enterprises enact a system of interpreters able to identify weak signs and emerging trends in the different contexts of use. The project and the control of such net of interpreters allow enterprises to identify innovation paths and to consolidate their competitive advantage. The word interpreter explains the attempt to transform non-structured knowledge, drawn from the context, in something understandable and usable in the organization of the company. The problem, if there is any, is at first identifying, and later controlling, such net of interpreters. In any case, the enactment dimension is not only a collection of weak signs from society and culture, but also the ability to build the organization and the net on a new idea of project.

Research proposed by Italian design is mainly conceptual, and requires storytelling capabilities before the technical ones. “*I had an intuition while I was visiting a lighting fair in the United States, and told that to my collaborators on the phone. We called the lamp we developed and produced “Idiots”: it was impossible they couldn’t understand what I was talking about. When I went back I could see the prototype realized*” (Ernesto Gismondi, President of Artemide Group, account of the author). This passage is well explained in the reflections of Vico Magistretti, another important Italian designer: his “design on the telephone” has often been mentioned in his lessons, writings, and interviews. The concept, so clear that it can be described on the phone, does not represent a type of explicit knowledge (codified and replicable), nor a form of implicit knowledge (assumed by absorbing the practices used in a context): it is instead a type of intermediate knowledge between the tacit and the explicit. The concept is the spark of a process of enactment of internal and external actors of an organization: it shows the way to entrepreneur, technicians, supply chain.

The designer is the director of this type of distributed research, thanks to particular capabilities. Apart the generative dimension that the concept/inspiration can enact, designers carry out a role of connection and facilitation of the relation among the internal parts of the organization and the territorial contexts. This is also due to the multilingualism that characterizes their professional skills, or else the ability to communicate with technicians, entrepreneur, marketing men, technology suppliers. Moreover, designers can control real communication processes: for example drawings and prototypes of a first idea but also, for more complicated projects, the visualization of future through scenarios.

In a certain way, this type of research appears as a sort of action research, where an initial point of view (the inspiration concept) becomes the element of comparison with various actors involved in the network of scope: even though the starting point is represented by a specific issue, the objective is focused as the process goes towards the realization of the final result. Alberto Alessi, quoting Frank Gehry, writes: “*it is like jotting down some ideas and then following them, instead of establishing the destination one wants to reach at the beginning of the process*” (Alessi, 2011).

5. UCD (ALSO) TO READ THE NEED OF THE COMPANY

Within the described system the role played by the company in enhancing design knowledge is very important. Enterprises and entrepreneurs that adopt a wait-and-see policy do not allow the activation of a virtuous network. Vice versa, a dynamic attitude is at the base of the activation of the process of “distributed research” producing innovation.

It is also opportune to reconsider the strategies of relation between design and enterprise. An interesting intuition (Verganti, 2006) regarding the approach of Lombard companies to innovation, proposes to adopt a sort of user centered approach to the company. In other words, considering the company as a user and “researching” its specific needs can be form of strategic approach to design. Here becomes central the issue of the company audit, which cannot be connected to specific tools or surveys, but has to be realized by means of a direct interaction with the key actors of research and innovation in the organization, as well as with the decision makers (Best, 2006). In other words, there is an empathic level of relation that turns into extra-work dynamics, or in a formal negotiation between entrepreneur and designer.

In the LPS, the identification of the needs of the enterprise takes place firstly thanks to the condition of familiarity that characterizes the relation between designer and organization: familiarity with the productive processes, the competences, the characteristics of the product portfolio, the commercial needs, but also with the aspirations and vision of the managers. Alberto Alessi, in his recent selection for Triennale design museum (Dream Factories, 2011), proposes the metaphor of the good gardener that makes his plants grow (ideas and designer) caring for them day after day: a good image suggesting this confidential form of relation.

6. PROCESSES OF VISIONING AND STORYTELLING

The inspiration that drives the process of distributed action research among more actors of a specific organizational or territorial context, originates very often from a process of unaware observation of a context of life. We call it unaware because it is not supported by any methodology, structured process or tool. It is instead a process that may hardly be codified and transferred, and that can be developed only by means of practice, also thanks to specific capabilities (Zurlo et alii, 2002).

“If you are not curious, give up” was the saying of Achille Castiglioni (Cavaglia, 2008) expressing the aforesaid unaware form of observation. In his work it is possible to identify ideas emerging from the context through a careful and curious activity of observation. The spoon made of PMMA created for Kraft and reproduced by Alessi in 1996 is the answer to a behavioural need: the shape of that spoon follows exactly the jar neck. Castiglioni catches this suggestion by observing the gourmands while retrieving the rest of mayonnaise under the neck of the jar, inaccessible to spoons: in fact they commonly use their fingers. Or, always in his works, the use of new technologies, as the pneumatic one, to build great exhibition structures, where the observation of a specific technology offers new occasions of experimentation. And again, the design of a long seller such as the Brera lamp for Flos. The lamp looks like an egg and draws inspiration from a famous Piero della Francesca painting, now in the Brera Art Gallery, Milan. In the painting, the Virgin with Child and prostrating Duke Federico da Montefeltro are

represented in an extraordinary Renaissance architecture, where a mysterious, suspended egg over the Madonna’s head catches the eye. Even though the egg is still, it communicates the idea of a pendular and constant motion. In the Renaissance iconography, it represents the idea of purity and virginity, and gives a formal inspiration for Castiglioni’s project. It is, instead, a memorable object for people of the 21st century because, being suspended over our Lady’s head, the egg provokes interrogatives and also some embarrass (what if it fell down?). The ones who buy the Brera lamp know that painting and have assimilated that mysterious sign: it is the reference to a collective imaginary that makes the object meaningful and recognizable.

But the case of Castiglioni is not an isolated one: Italian design is characterized by a visionary tension, which becomes stronger during seventies in the cultural humus of the schools of architecture. Here the idea that the future can be positively imagined and designed, rather than predicted, takes shape. Visions, intended as pictures of possible or desirable futures, become the fertile ground over which a whole generation of designers develop advanced projects, exploring the world of tomorrow through its embodiment in artefacts. What makes the Italian experience unique is that LPS, made by the system of family owned small enterprises that we described, which would seem the most far from radical ideas and from being interested in unconventional ways of exploring the future, become the place where these ideas take shape, and the exploration turns into exploitation. Inside this framework, Italian designers can be described as intellectuals combining the capability of being cultural operators and technicians: they act as a link between society, where new needs and desires take shape, and factories, where they are turned into artefacts.

The interest of Italian design in lifeware is connected with its visionary background: the application sectors of Italian designers reflect their visions, dealing with the evolution of society and the life of people. The sectors themselves display a sort of hedonic attitude, which can be seen as a reflex of the national character, but also as a natural way of Italian designers of being close to people: looking at the pleasurable side of life, and considering the pleasurable side of everyday objects is a normal attitude of Italian design. This can sound heretic in the academic context, but the idea that we need a scientific investigation in users to start designing would have sound strange to the whole generation of designers involved in the construction of the “Made in Italy” phenomenon. We have to acknowledge that today things have changed: for sure user studies built a though knowledge useful to designers, but at the same time we have to notice that the design process cannot be fed just with the observation of the user, even if this observation is deep, and moves from the investigation of the rational side to the investigation of the irrational side of our behavior.

In fact, we cannot say that the Italian approach is not interested in studying the user, but we have to notice that Italian designers operating in LPS traditionally perform a sort of unconscious observation process that can be experienced in contexts that are easily accessible: daily life and elements that connote daily life, or else what we called lifeware products.

The process of unconscious observation cannot be separated by an activity of visioning meant as a process of critical anticipation. The visioning is both a filter for the selection of signs (a direction based on certain behaviors, certain technologies, certain imaginaries), and the projection useful to the development of the idea. It is a filter for research and its direction: the vision is the

epiphany of what we have called inspiration, and is the element that builds the net of researchers in the organization and in the territory.

Stefano Marzano, CEO and Chief Creative Director at Philips Design, introduced the visionary approach of Italian design in Philips, where he found a fertile ground, and the possibility to enrich it introducing knowledge and competences coming from different disciplines. What we mainly want to notice in this case is that a different context, such as that represented by a big multinational enterprise like Philips, brought the necessity of formalization. While in the Italian LPS rules are loose and the design process is far from being formalized, so that we properly talk about an approach rather than about a methodology, when we shift to the context of a big enterprise the need to define processes emerges, turning the approach into a formalized method.

The visionary background of Philips Design method has its roots in the strong belief that future can be shaped. This belief is cleaned by the strong ideological background it used to have in the Italian school of architecture, merged with the strong user centric view of the Dutch school, and put at the base of the radical transformation of Philips from a technology-centred to a people-centred company, started in 1990 by Jan Timmer after a tough crisis. In the very words of Marzano *“The future, then, is made by those who take responsibility for it today. That means that we, too, can participate in the shaping of this future. By virtue of the enormous number of products they put onto the market, large companies play a major role in determining the quality of our lives. Such corporations should therefore shoulder their responsibility and become conscious of their power. Those of us who work for them must play our part in this.”* (Marzano, 1992)

The importance given to the quality of life is another heritage of the Italian approach, but exploring it outside the context in which the designer and the user are familiar requires new competences. *“The other big challenge for me was to give meaning to this idea of quality. (...) This was important for me in the reorganization of the Philips Design Centre, where a great change in the skills occurred from the '90s to today. From the skills and competences related to the historical design and the graphic and package design, we shifted also to interface design, multimedia design, and we formed a great team of human scientists: sociologists, culturologists, anthropologists, cognitive psychologists. A team able to build an interface between society, the cultural changes, and design cultures, representing another interface with the technological culture.”* (Marzano, 2001)

The formalization of the approach becomes necessary to relate with a managerial infrastructure, but we have to notice that Philips Design is conceived as an independent structure, with great levels of autonomy, also to give freedom of exploration, far from the constraints of the factory. *“This change has meant a great change also in the processes of development, which have typically become multidisciplinary, and processes giving the possibility of repetition. This is part of the cultures of management and quality, trying not just to understand how we obtain a successful process of development, but also to document it, so that success can become repeatable.”* (Marzano, 2001)

Another interesting characteristic of the visionary-based design is the way in which products are used as a mean of communication: products shift from needing a story to becoming the story themselves. Philips Design normally uses prototypes built within a research framework as means of communication of a peculiar vision of the future: these products are sometimes fully functioning, but they are not built to be marketed.

The vision is able to qualify the process of distributed research also thanks to its narrative dimension. Storytelling is the cognitive and communicative tool supporting processes of research: symbolic references, the search of the reason why behind design choices, the reference to meanings unfastened by the simple functional aspect are all base ingredients of this process.

Moreover, this direction does not only explain the concept but also accompanies the launch and life of the product, sustaining the aspects of service associated to the product, as well as the communicative, display, packaging and promotion aspects.

Also these aspects are part of a process of distributed research where other actors often intervene with different tools and processes.

7. THE (PLEASURABLE) LIFESTYLE AS A BASE OF INTERNATIONAL IDENTITY

The international appeal of Italian design is rooted in the capability to conceive products based on an identifiable systems of values, through the construction of a “frame of meaning” that can be shared internationally. We cannot find an explanation of the international success of Italian design in planned policies of internationalization of companies and clusters, since for a long time the Italian economic policies were based on the idea of following the lead of Countries whose economies were characterized by big enterprises operating in structured sectors.

The same country brand is not the result of a planned identity building operation, but the effect of the capability to give shape and meaning to products through a system of values positively matching the international sensibility, based on a strong cultural heritage interpreted in a day-by-day work by designers and companies, so that we can describe the Made in Italy as largely unplanned (Fortis, 1988).

Nor there has been, and there is today, any design policy: design emerged as a character of Italian companies in a spontaneous way. The phenomenon of Italian design was studied from many different perspectives, but never supported at any institutional level, at least until when Politecnico di Milano, followed by other public universities, struggled to build a dedicated education and research system, which came in fact much later than in other countries. (Bertola, Maffei, 2010)

The spontaneous growth of Italian design enforces the theory of a collective phenomenon, where design can be placed among the typical forms of “tacit knowledge” characterizing the LPS (Wood, Rust, Horne, 2009), which is in fact matching with its not structured way of operating.

The international appeal of Italian design is the result of a “social construction”, forging its capability to represent a lifestyle, based on a peculiar way of living and looking at things. We could describe the phenomenon by telling that the local context represents a cultural base naturally holding an international appeal. In fact, recent studies suggest a more formalized and organized way of interpreting the Italian lifestyle as a mean to enforce competitive capability of Italian companies and districts in the international markets (Ambrosetti, 2008).

This means that single products and designers can be seen as part of a collective phenomenon, which is strongly characterized (even if we might find exceptions) by some common characteristics: the keen attention to details which becomes manic in some companies, coming from a craftsman’s culture; the extreme care for the appearance of things and people, and the natural interest in the pleasurable aspects of life, coming from an hedonic culture.

The idea of pleasurable products is somehow a “built-in” character of Italian design: the same territory of lifeware products where it tends to operate is proof of this.

We also have to recognize that, even if in these notes we are continuously referring to the idea of a national character, we are describing an open system rather than a closed one. The profound transformation of industrial districts into wider networks, occurring during the last years (Corò and Micelli, 2007) is based on an already open system. The more the system tends to openness, the more design becomes a strategic resource: recent studies comparing open networks with traditional companies show that in 51,3 % of the first there are specific resources dedicated to design, while in the second only 37,4% (Corò, Micelli, 2007). In fact, the internationalization of the design resources comes much earlier than the geographical expansion of the productive system itself. Italian design driven companies integrate design resources from all over the world, and design is one of the few areas of intellectual work where Italy seems to be attractive at an international level.

For the Italian companies, foreign designers become sort of “external interpreters” of the Italian lifestyle. At the same time, they play an important role in the internationalization of Italian design, enriching the local perspective, and making it global while keeping its cultural roots.

In fact, the studies we have made (Sistema Design Italia research), and years of experience in applied research in LPS, make us say that Italian companies work with two different kind of designers: those who have a continuous relation and are integrated at a strategic level within the company, and those who have occasional relations. Managing a portfolio of international designers can be seen as a design strategy, requiring design management competences, but most of the times the relation with the single designers cannot be seen as strategic in itself: the wider the portfolio of designers becomes, the less the relation with a single designer can be seen as a strategic asset. At the same time, we notice that most of the companies develop a preferential relation with some designers, who play a strategic role in managing the design policy of the company. These designers are involved in what is normally called “art-direction” or “design direction”, which is a strategic activity where they are asked to define the general guidelines of the design, to assure the overall coherence of the work of different designers, to scout new talents, and sometimes even to become sort of “coaches” of the team of designers, giving them advices and making them grow. When the task of the designer becomes more strategic, shifting from giving shape to single products to giving shape to the whole design orientation, it turns out that Italian companies almost always involve “local” designers. Probably behind this choice there is a strictly functional reason, since it would be very difficult to lead a design direction activity without being physically close to the company: even with nowadays communication systems, this task requires a constant contact between company and designer. But we would like to remark that there is also a cultural disposition of Italian designers, born within the framework of the close relation with the decisional levels of the companies, to operate at the strategic level. This also means that in some cases companies make an instrumental use of foreign designers, based on the provincial idea that they will assure an international status, but this seems a pretty common situation, affecting many countries and areas of work.

8. CONCLUSION

The collective, distributed and interactive dimensions characterize design research in Italian LPS. Inside these contexts the processes of design research seem to be strongly influenced by the nature and quality of the relation between designers and companies. The closeness between the two gives the designer the opportunity to become a good interpreter of the company’s needs, and to act as a mediator between these needs and the end-user’s. This means that some of the principles of UCD are somehow extended to the relation with the company, which becomes a subject of interaction that can be studied through the filter of design knowledge.

The local dimension of the systems where these processes occur is in a strong tension with the international dimension of the markets that the companies are normally serving: the development of products is based on a local culture, which gives a collective identity to the products of different designers and companies. International success does not come as a result of the study of preferences, but from the capability to build solutions upon an internationally sharable system of values and lifestyle. The progressive territorial expansion of the traditional districts, now transforming into much wider open networks, does not seem to affect the capability of Italian LPS of using design knowledge and resources as strategic tools to support innovation and competitiveness. If we look at design knowledge and resources, they were already configured as open systems long before the opening of the production system.

Their strong point seems to be the capability of being deeply rooted in the local dimension, investigating needs and interpreting desires through a cultural lens, giving at the same time an international perspective. Their limit seems to be the link with a specific system of products, which we called lifeware, where the pleasurable, and sometimes hedonic, dimension plays an important role in building the collective identity, and the recognized quality of the artefacts. It is not sure, and probably this could be the topic for further investigation, if the same attitude could be transferred to other sectors or categories of products.

Design research gives an important contribution to this system: it acts in a “context based” way through informal relations, which normally turn into non-formalized processes, and it is at the same time characterized by a visionary approach, which builds a high disposition towards innovation through the exploration of desirable futures. The complex mix between the capability to assume information from the context, looking both at the end-user and at the company as subjects whose needs must be interpreted; and to build innovation pathways through envisioning capabilities, seems the most important lesson that can be learnt from the Italian design system.

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