

Designing coalitions: Design for social forms in a fluid world

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Abstract

The fluidity of the world produced by the diffusion of connectivity drives us to adopt a similarly fluid interpretation. Doing so, the products of human activity are to be seen as fluid forms: *social forms* in a turbulent world, the existence of which continuously requires us to exercise a considerable diffused designing capacity. The article applies this interpretation to a concrete case: a line of social innovation known as *collaborative living* and a programme of initiatives on this theme promoted and implemented in Milan over the last 10 years. What this case shows us, and is assumed to be generalisable, is the creation of new social forms, new communities of residents, and the existence within them of proactive groups that operate as design teams, which the article refers to as *designing coalitions*. The article discusses the nature and dynamics of these communities and the designing coalitions that act in and with them, and concludes by stressing the importance of a strategic, design approach capable of bringing them into being, orienting them and keeping them alive, ultimately making them independent of external support.

Keywords: social forms, community, designing coalitions, design for social innovation, collaborative living.

Contemporary society seems to be losing its solidity: its organizations are becoming ductile and the forms of life within it are becoming fluid, every project tends to be flexible and every choice reversible. Or at least that's what we like to think.

It follows that the best metaphors to describe it come from the physics of fluids rather than of solids, more from living systems than from mineral ones. This is nothing really new in philosophical terms, we are just going back to Democrito and Lucrezio's fluid world, to the world of Venus rather than Mars, as Michel Serres wrote long ago (Serres, 1980)¹.

However, though nothing is so new in philosophical terms, everything changes in practical terms. The "normal" vision of the world, at least as far as western culture is concerned, has been built on a model of thought in which "reality" is seen as a collection of forms and functions immersed and frozen in solid material. This is a way of seeing things that started in the Neolithic Age, with the Neolithic Revolution, was inherited by industrial society and has been used until now, undergoing some tension but with no real challenge.

It is in this context that design has emerged and developed, building its own culture and its own traditional conceptual and operational tools. Today, a century later, that world which seemed so solid, simple and limitless no longer exists. The solidity of things has dissolved in the fluidity of information. Apparently, simple systems have proved to be irreducibly complex and the planet has made us re-discover its limits (limits that have always been there for all to see, but nobody was able/wanted to see them).

The depth and speed of this change cannot but shake the culture and praxis of design at its very foundations. This is quite clear today. However, it may not be so clear that at this stage, as in all critical moments, it is the crisis itself that, while destabilizing what exists, also opens up new, unforeseen possibilities².

A fluid world

The agricultural and industrial societies of the past were highly viscous systems, so they were, in practice, solids. The social and production organizations were solid, as were personal ties and visions of wellbeing (which were in turn mainly based on the solidity of things: land, houses, goods possessed and goods consumed). This solidity was to a large extent the consequence of three complementary phenomena: the lasting stability of social conventions and cultural traditions (and thus the resistance of organizations to transformation), the near impenetrability of space (thus resistance to mobility for both people and things) and the limits to transmitting information (leading to a limited diffusion of ideas and the limited spatial spread of organizations).

In recent times, this solidity has been declining: social conventions have loosened their grip and tend to release individuals from all traditional community ties (Giddens, 1991). The development in means of communication has made space more permeable and has led to an increase in physical mobility for both people and things. Lastly, more

¹ Throughout the history of western philosophy there have been two parallel ways of describing the world: one which saw it as a solid world, made of things stable over time, and the other that interpreted it as a fluid world, made of moving particles.

² The breadth and complexity of this situation will not be explored in full in these notes. A wider treatise can be found in Manzini (2015).

recently still, increased connectivity³ is completing the job of dissolving traditional social organizations (Castells, 1996).

These phenomena together lead to the emergence of an almost fluid world in which everything becomes transient, modifiable and experimental; a world where individuals, ideas, images, products and money are “set in motion” as has never been possible until now (Appadurai, 1999; Castells, 1996).

Before moving on along this line of discussion I would like to add one basic observation: the transformation underway produces effects that many, including this writer, consider to be negative, full of unknown factors and therefore worrying. This is the world masterfully referred to by Zigmund Bauman as “liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2000). However, although I share Bauman’s concern, I believe that the current situation also has potentialities, as has always happened in history. So, in adopting a design approach, I’m seeking to acknowledge them, put them into focus and attempt to interpret them in practice.

I shall try to take a step in this direction in this article: the fluidity of the world produced by the spread of online networks and connectivity compels us to adopt a fluid interpretation. As we said, the possibility of looking at the world in this way is not in itself new. However, today there are various pressing reasons for doing so: the possibility of considering the world as a fluid reality does not only help us to orient ourselves better in the face of the current diffusion of networks and connectivity, it also enables us to offer a more effective description of the complex, dynamic systems before us⁴.

Social forms and enabling ecosystems

In the solid world the production system produced, or thought it was producing, material products: solid, lasting, (relatively) stable artefacts that appeared to be more or less timeless. Obviously, it was not quite like that, or at least it was not only like that. However, as we have said, this way of seeing things was for a long time the way production was interpreted. It was what enabled us to be sufficiently accurate in our interpretation.

As we have seen, in recent times this model has been under attack from many sides. Now, in the framework of a fluid world, we can recognise that these products are the tangible components of more or less complex social forms, which have determined their existence by designing, producing and using them.

By looking at things in this way, we can see that human activities mainly produce “social forms” (Simmel, 1971). By this we mean the interwoven relationships between people (and between people and places) which, when they last long enough, acquire recognizable characteristics.

So the term “social form” has a very wide meaning. It includes all the institutionalised social forms (from the family to businesses, to the apparatus of state administration), but it also includes various kinds of community: those non-institutionalised social forms that make up the

connective tissue of every society and thus play the fundamental role of making it cohesive, ductile and, ultimately, resilient (they may be neighbourhood communities with close ties to a place, or communities of interest brought together by a theme or issue). Finally, these social forms also include those non-institutionalised, often transitory, but cohesive, motivated and action-orientated groups that tend to drive social change: those design and production *coalitions* that bring communities and institutionalised social forms into being and lead them to evolve over time).

Obviously, these social forms vary enormously. However, they also have some important aspects in common. One of them, the one of most interest to us here, is that their very existence is based on *interactions* between people: *meaningful encounters* (Buber, 1996; Cipolla, 2009; Manzini, 2015) and *conversations* (meaning sequences of meaningful encounters – Winograd and Flores, 1987; Flores and Flores Letelier, 2012). Thus, these encounters and conversations are the “relational material” of which the social forms are made. It follows that no discourse on their designing and production can ignore this relational dimension: social forms are built from their molecular dimension, which we now see to be an interweave of relationships. On the other hand, since human relationships cannot be designed, neither can we design social forms.

Nonetheless, something can be done: their existence can be made more probable and their life easier by influencing the characteristics of their environment, meaning the *socio-physical ecosystem* in which they are collocated. Let’s take a closer look. For any social form to exist it requires a suitable natural and socio-technical environment: an enabling ecosystem that, like all ecosystems, is in turn made up of many subsystems – economic, cultural, legislative, technological and, underlying them all, physico-natural.

Designing and producing social forms

Social forms are made possible, durable and, where appropriate, enabled to replicate by acting on this ecosystem to make it more favourable. This can be done in various ways which for the sake of simplicity can be grouped into two main courses of action: (i) create dedicated *enabling systems* that foster the existence of a specific family of social forms; (ii) modify the characteristics of the environment as a whole, so as to make it more favourable for a multiplicity of social forms.

Obviously, the two lines of action are complementary: the first, creating enabling systems, consists of conceiving and creating a set of products, services and communicative artefacts that bridge the gap between what a social form needs and what its environment, as it stands, already offers. The second, making the environment as a whole more favourable, involves actions that we can define as *infrastructuring activities* (Star and Ruhleder, 1995; Bjorgvinsson *et al.*, 2010), with reference to both the physical environment (transport, energy and IT networks etc.) and the socio-cultural environment (legislation, norms

³ Connectivity, as an indicator of the quantity and quality of manageable interactions of manageable relations by an individual, has the same effect on organizations as temperature has on materials: an increase in temperature loosens the ties between atoms and molecules making materials flexible and then fluid. Increased connectivity reduces ties in the configuration of organisations, making them flexible and then fluid.

⁴ We should remember that natural ecosystems can be described with ecological models and they too are undoubtedly fluid models (Bateson, 1972).

and regulations, economic incentives, cultural activities and all pre-existent social forms). Having said this, how does all this change when the social forms we are talking about are those in a fluid world?

In the solid world, for the vast majority, the prevalent way of doing things could be lived and described as a series of routine activities: activities that required people to act in accordance with cultural and behavioural conventions that appeared to those who conformed to them to be essentially unquestionable absolutes. In the fluid world this is no longer so: the forms that appear in it are unstable by definition. Their existence and duration are the result of a series of phenomena combined in ways that require considerable designing capacity on the part of all the actors involved. When operating in a world in rapid and profound transformation, every subject has constantly to redefine their objectives and invent new ways of doing things. In other words, in a fluid world, individual freedom appears to individuals as the need to constantly design their own lives day by day, from the great existential decisions down to the micro-planning of everyday life (Beck, 1997; Giddens, 1991, 2000; Manzini, 2015).

In this sense individuals must certainly be design-orientated and strategically-minded, but so must companies, public administration, cultural organisations, volunteer groups, cities and local areas. Indeed, in a fluid world every social form appears and operates as a subject, and like every contemporary subject each day it has to define what it is and how it wants/can/knows how to move in order to exist. It has to design and manage not only the solution to problems as they come up, but also its own identity. An identity by which to make itself recognisable and appreciable in the arena of social discussions and negotiations.

In a fluid world, therefore, all subjects have to adopt an approach that is (prevalently) one of design. In this context the term *design* indicates the application of a complex capability, one resulting from the integration of four properly human capabilities: *critical sense*, which enables us to recognise and judge what is unacceptable for us in the situation we are dealing with; *creativity*, which enables us to imagine how things could be; *ability to analyse*, by which we can recognise and judge the limits of the system and the resources available; *practical sense*, which enables us to activate a workable action strategy, meaning a series of moves that, taking account of the limits and making best use of the available resources, manage to approximate the results that were originally imagined.

What characterises this fluid world is that this design capability is not applied only to give form to something new (and when traditional forms cannot be reproduced), but also when it is necessary to give lasting continuity to the form created. In other words, what would have been an activity of pure management in the solid world, in a fluid world, in which everything tends to change quickly and

continuously, maintaining a form is in itself a design activity: the creation of events that enable that form to adapt and regenerate with continuity.

Collaborative living as a social form

After introducing this way of interpreting reality, let's try to apply it to a real case and see whether, and in what way, it can help us to understand. I shall use as an example the activities inherent in a line of social innovations known as *collaborative living* and a programme of activities on this theme promoted and implemented in Milan over the last 10 years. As we shall see, in spite of its specific nature, many of the observations it allows us to make can be generalised.

The theme of collaborative living refers to a way of living the home, neighbourhood and city that includes the sharing of spaces and services in a framework of self-organisation, mutual-help, friendship and good-neighbourliness (Manzini and Jegou, 2003; Meroni, 2007; Ferri, 2016).

On the surface of it, the idea of people joining forces to help each other – the essence of a collaborative lifestyle – strikes you as obvious: in all living cultures and throughout history, human beings have created societies in order to live together and co-operate.

On the contrary, a collaborative way of living today is a goal that we have to strive towards; something has happened that has deprived contemporary society of the obviousness of co-operation. The result is a solitary-techie-addict way of living: a “castaway life” sustained by on-line services and social networks. However, a lifestyle such as this, kept afloat by technological gadgets, can never satisfy the masses of practical, psychological and cultural issues which people have. And that is not all. It does not create the cohesion needed to make society resilient and, when confronted with the unknown and the disasters that may befall us, prevent people finding themselves isolated and overwhelmed by events (and, even before that, as we too often see happening today, by the fear of what they imagine could happen).

Luckily, in our complex contemporary society, these solitary lives have, to a certain extent, been outlawed by other behaviours and ways of thinking that see the value of a joint effort and how to put it into practice. Even though still a minority view albeit gaining ground, a rationale such as this provides the terrain for the growth of innovative ideas which we refer to as collaborative living.

The collaborative living talked about today is neither the village of the pre-modern past, where collaboration was based on traditions and conventions seen as immutable, nor the ideological communities of the last century (from the Israeli Kibbutz to American hippies of the sixties), where collaboration was seen as a total ethical and political obligation (Manzini, 2016)⁵.

⁵ The history of collaborative living began with the ideas and practices that arose in Europe and the USA at the end of last century. The time collocation of this starting point helps to explain the difference between the various forms of co-operation over the centuries in pre-modern society (in which co-operation was defined in terms of its nature and its form by tradition and convention). The collaborative living we are referring to, however, emanates from a clear choice, does not follow convention and to be truthful, in a way breaks the new moulds which steer us towards solitary lifestyles. However, collaborative living has a history which cannot be compared to other ways of communal living and co-operation, such as the American hippy communities of the Sixties and the kibbutz in Israel. In fact, although they seem similar to a certain degree, the hippy communities and kibbutz, for all their obvious differences, were both forms of living together built on sound principles. Their basis was the ethical or political stance which upheld the just value of living together and co-operating. Given the foundations of their choice, the organization of everyday life was seen as a necessary consequence.

Collaborative living is based on a practical agreement within the open framework of an idea (deliberately left undefined) of good-neighbourliness and co-operation: a group of individuals and families discuss the best way to live together by sharing some services and establishing a solid feeling of care for one another. If they do so, it is because the idea of doing so and living close to one another and sharing something appeals to them. Nonetheless, it is precisely the choice of what to do together and how to do it that tips the scales in its favour; it is the choice that forms the backbone of the entire proposal from which the sense of society and culture of what is being achieved arises.

In other words, these people gather around an idea⁶ (that of collaborative living) and operate in design mode to put it into practice, setting themselves basic rules and proposing a series of activities for which the residents can choose whether, in which ones and how, to take part (Latour, 2005; Ehn, 2014). It follows that, while kibbutz and hippy communes are, in different contexts, emblematic examples of twentieth century interest communities (in this case, communities based on the sharing of strong ideological convictions), the idea of collaborative living appeared right from the start as an expression of the essentially post-ideological communities of the twenty-first century.

The social forms that emerge are very diverse: the combination of different basic rules and different collaborative activities leads to a wide variety of social forms corresponding to as many ways of conceiving collaborative living – from those in which there is more sharing and the commitment is greater (which, in many ways, tend to resemble the communities of the last century), to those in which ties and commitments are lighter (which tend to resemble the apartments with numerous shared services already being offered on the housing markets in many cities). Solutions between these two extremes come forward as a space of possibilities in which various types of encounters, conversations, and activities, which are more or less relational, strong and lasting, may take place. These spaces of possibility, together with the interweave of conversations and activities that take place within them, are therefore the new forms of community: communities of collaborative living.

Communities in a fluid world

To look at them more closely and at the conditions that make collaborative living possible, I shall refer to a programme developed by the DESIS Lab at the Politecnico di Milano in collaboration with several partners, started more than 10 years ago and still going on in different forms (Roegel, 2013; Manzini, 2015; Ferri, 2016).

The first stage of the programme, initiated in 2006, concentrated on cohousing: a specific form of collaborative living in which, adopting a bottom-up approach, a group of families decides to live nearby, sharing some spaces and services. Given that by 2006, the cohousing idea had been around in Europe, and indeed worldwide, for many years, the programme started with research aim-

ing to better understand the nature of existing cohousing projects and their ways of functioning. This study produced an overview of how they worked in terms of shared spaces, collaborative activities and the related design and management processes.

What emerged was that within all the resident communities there was a particularly committed and pro-active group. In some cases this was the same group as had initially started the project; in others it was an evolution of that original one. In all cases the protagonists of this group were residents. In many cases, however, especially in the initial stages, the group also included external experts.

Generalising from these observations we can immediately say something about contemporary communities. In a fluid world communities are open social forms: spaces of possibility for a variety of encounters between people, and between people and the things, places and other living beings in the context they find themselves in. These are spaces where different interweaving conversations offer opportunities for expression, propose solutions to problems, and open up new prospects.

Looking at them together it is easy to recognise that contemporary communities are very different from those of the past (those to which we still often refer when talking about communities in common parlance). Two of their characteristics are particularly distinctive. The first and most evident is that unlike the pre-modern traditional communities, which were not chosen by their own members, the contemporary ones exist by choice. At the same time, unlike the twentieth century intentional communities, which were based on strong ideologies calling for exclusive affiliation and promising a strong identity, the contemporary ones are multiple, non-exclusive and demand no special level of commitment. The second characteristic, depending on the first one, is that those who participate in this kind of communities are not looking for a ready-made solution or identity. On the contrary, they are looking to build their own solution and identity by making their own personal choices among the various options proposed. Finally, a further distinguishing aspect can be found that has to do with the way these open, flexible communities of low relational intensity exist and evolve over time. As the case of collaborative living shows so clearly, their existence requires that the conversations on which they are based be produced and continuously regenerated, and orientated towards the action by a particularly motivated group of actors endowed with the necessary expertise.

Enabling collaborative living

Let's go back to the programme of activities concerning collaborative living promoted and developed by the DESIS Lab at the Politecnico di Milano. The research on cohousing considered previously also highlighted the fact that, although this idea had been in circulation for some time, the number of completed cohousing complexes was still very low everywhere, and particularly so in Italy. In the Milan area, for example, dedicated in-depth research showed that, although a large number of people had

⁶ This way of acting corresponds to what Bruno Latour (Latour, 2005; Latour and Weibel, 2005) defines as *matter of concern*.

expressed interest, various difficulties seemed to prevent them from implementing a viable project.

Moving from this observation, the DESIS Lab, together with a socially oriented enterprise, developed a programme aimed at fostering cohousing projects for larger numbers of people. In practice, work started with an analysis of the potential demand and the reasons why it was so difficult to turn the projects into actions. From here, assuming the viewpoint of those directly concerned (the future co-housers), it went on to focus on three main difficulties: (i) getting in contact with other people interested in the project who were in a position to start at the same time; (ii) finding a suitable area of building land, or a suitable building for renovation, and getting through the bureaucratic and funding difficulties for their purchase; (iii) co-designing, with all the future residents, the shared spaces and the service activities to be carried out collaboratively.

To deal with these difficulties the programme set up a series of initiatives aiming to overcome them. The first was the creation of a broad interest community around cohousing: a light community, supported by a digital platform and a team of experts in the real estate market. The platform enabled those interested in cohousing to contact each other and the real-estate experts to draw their attention to a number of potentially usable areas of land and/or buildings.

Various smaller communities then grew out of the initial broad interest community (which reached a membership of several thousands). Each of the smaller communities focused on a particular building or area of building land and was supported by a group of experts. Among these were experts in community-building, thanks to whom the group was able to consolidate, create a formal association and decide together its status and its neighbourhood rules. At this point, moving onto the third stage, each community together designed the shared spaces in detail, along with the activities to be carried out collaboratively: a process of co-designing spaces and services that called for the support of experts in co-designing methods working side-by-side with the resident community. Finally, the community changed once again, moving on into the fourth and fundamental stage: where there was no longer any need for the support of external experts and everything still to be done was taken over by design and management teams consisting only, or mainly, of residents.

Thus we can observe that over time the initial interest community has evolved into three other forms, corresponding to as many stages in the co-designing process, which have included a variable number of experts in different disciplines and, in particular, designers (experts in communication, new media, interior and service architecture, all of them with a cross-discipline experience in co-designing practices). During these different activities this team also produced specific communicative artefacts dedicated to the purpose: story board, toolkits and

other tools to facilitate the discussion at various stages of the product. Finally, as we have seen, the creation of different digital platforms, on which individual communities were based and with which the individual design and management teams were able to operate, was fundamental to the project.

This way of operating and these co-designing tools have since been replicated in other, similar co-housing projects and in other initiatives dealing with collaborative housing. In particular, when the initial activity had come to an end and it was no longer necessary for the DESIS Lab researchers to take part in the team, a company was created dedicated to this kind of activity (Cohousing.it, 2017). It has continued to operate professionally, gathering experiences and systemising the network of relationships built.

The first part of this programme was followed by a second part centring on the Fondazione Housing Sociale (FHS, 2017): an important Milanese institution dedicated to the promotion of social housing⁷ which has decided to integrate the principles of collaborative housing into its proposals and has adopted many of the ideas and tools developed in the previous experiences of cohousing and adapted them to its new needs (Manzini, 2016).

Looking at the way FHS has been operating, various similarities with the processes described for cohousing can be seen. However, the starting point is very different and it is worth examining this diversity more closely: a cohousing community consists of people who already have a clear enough idea of what they want to do and they choose together what they want to set in place. So everything happens in the framework of a bottom-up initiative (even though, as in the example given, it may be supported by a team of experts). On the contrary, in the case of social housing, the list of possible future residents is drawn up by FHS (on the basis of income and social diversification) and so the community is built among people who have not chosen each other and who know nothing about the project before it starts. This implies that building the community will bring rather different problems from those met with in cohousing community building. In this case the problem is not to bring people together in relation to a possible action, but to bring them to recognise the value (practical value for each of them and social for the community as a whole) of the collaborative activities proposed.

After this initial stage of forming and motivating the group, the following stages of community building, co-designing shared spaces and collaborative services and becoming independent of the team of experts are much the same for the FHS project as those described for cohousing. We should also add that at the last stage, when FHS leaves the field, the residents organise themselves with the support of a new professional figure: the *gestore sociale* or "social manager". This is a professional who promotes and co-ordinates the various activities that the community finds itself wanting and having to do day by day (Ferri, 2010, 2016).

⁷ The Fondazione Housing Sociale (FHS) began experimenting in 2004 with an innovative model based on sustainability and ethical investment. For FHS, "social housing" means the set of dwellings, services, actions, and instruments addressed to those who are unable to meet their housing needs on the open market for economic reasons but who have not reached the point where they are eligible for public housing allowances. For more information: <http://www.fhs.it>, and Del Gatto et al. (2012).

Designing coalitions

An observation of how things work in practice in these different examples of collaborative living clearly raises an issue that is crucial for us: the relationship between an open, light community of residents and groups that operate within it as design teams, which we shall call *designing coalitions*.

In all the cases considered we can see that the different communities that characterise them emerge and live thanks to particularly active social forms within them and which effectively operate as designers, managers and often the producers of those initiatives that have, over time, enabled them to build and then manage and regenerate the communities of which they are part.

Generalising, we can thus say that if, as said, a contemporary community is a space of possibility for various interweaving conversations lightly and fluidly linked to common issues and problems, in order to exist and last over time it must contain other more closely-knit social forms endowed with greater mutual understanding: *coalitions* in which members have converging ideas, and the skills and abilities, power and motivation necessary to put them into practice. These *designing coalitions* may be horizontal, i.e. peer-to-peer, or vertical-horizontal hybrids. Horizontal coalitions are those in which the competence, in terms of skills and abilities, and power necessary to achieve the desired goals are to be found within the group of those directly concerned. By contrast, hybrid coalitions are those that are formed when abilities and powers are required to achieve the objective that cannot be found within the group of those directly concerned.

We can also observe that designing coalitions evolve over time, modifying the architecture, the competence required and the intensity of their interactions. In doing so, they tend to produce several coordinated activities that, together, constitute a program or, in other words, a coherent succession of stages in a co-design process.

On the other end, given that operating in a turbulent environment, the formal coherence of the succession of stages is often upset by reality, designing coalitions must be able to navigate this rough sea, moving in the intended direction but taking into account the feedback from, and changes imposed by, the context. In other words, the co-design processes they contribute to enhance are dialogical programs (Sennet, 2012; Manzini, 2015) in which a wider vision frames a flexible series of small-scale moves. And in which there has to be space for trial and error, for readjusting the direction considering emerging critical points and potential resources.

Strategic design for designing coalitions

Designing coalitions do not exist by chance. They are themselves the result of design initiatives that are, by all means, strategic design ones and that become more and more important according to the increased turbulence of the contexts.

To design designing coalitions means to identify, case by case, suitable groups of partners and build with them a set of shared values and converging interests. To do all that requires a visionary capacity combined with the dialogic

ability to listen and keep in account several people's ideas. Of course, these strategic design activities are not necessarily done by design experts: they can be performed by everybody endowed with the necessary intellectual gift and practical experience. Nevertheless, I think that design experts should play an important role, with the possibility of bringing to the process previous experiences, specific knowledge and sensitivity. Finally, if and when experts of this kind have a role in creating designing coalitions, they should demonstrate a very special ability to empower the non-expert community members: to create with them the conditions for their self-sufficiency, or in other words they should enable the project to continue, evolve, regenerate without the support of external experts.

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