Editorial

Exploring Participatory Design as a Strategy to Act within the City

In the last decade we have seen an increasing number of projects, research activities and discussions that focused on fostering a design practice that is able to promote sociocultural changes through the reconfigurations of social, economic, and political relationships, while working side by side with local actors. These initiatives emerged from the need for change in the widespread approaches and methodologies used to deal with contemporary societal challenges: monologic or unidirectional solutions appeared inadequate to face them. New configurations of actors, open solutions and a constant dialogue seem necessary to foster a more sustainable society in an ecosystemic perspective.

As Franzato and Campelo write in the call for papers for the special issue "Strategic Design Research Journal #10!", one of the main recent developments in the field of strategic design is the affirmation of the study and application of an ecosystemic perspective. Within this framework, strategic design affirms itself for its potential for developing strategies that articulate pervasive and farther-reaching relations among its several elements. This makes it possible to involve the whole ecosystem in a creative process that benefits research, development and innovation (Franzato *et al.*, 2015). Such strategies are articulated by and towards the several different processes that constitute and feed the creative ecosystem. At the same time, the design process unfolds and transforms itself through the relations provoked by the design action.

According to this, strategic design could have an astonishing relevance for designers' actions within the urban ecosystem, because it amplifies the possibilities to promote change and regeneration in the urban tissue. However, even if several attempts have already been made and some are presently going on (Manzini and Staszowski, 2013), they are also examples of the need for further methodological developments of how design could support the reconfiguration of the urban ecosystem and its relations. There is a need for outlining the conditions for a design practice that engages with the redefinition of urban relations, and thus of the systems and dynamics that inhabit and constitute the city.

A promising path seems to emerge from crossing strategic design and the ecosystemic perspective with Participatory Design (PD). Specifically, with the concept of infrastructuring (Ehn, 2008; Björgvinsson *et al.*, 2010; Karasti, 2014) and the reflections about promoting agonistic public spaces (DiSalvo, 2012) and non-agonistic ones (Latour, 2005) as a major design orientation. The concept of infrastructuring has recently been introduced and discussed in PD. However, it is currently at the center of a rich discussion, with several researchers reflecting and characterizing it from different perspectives. For instance, Karasti (2014) defined it as an ongoing and open process involving the anticipation of future scenarios and the alignment of heterogeneous socio-technical elements, which should support the emergence of such scenarios. Ehn (2008) described it as the design of future design possibilities. Despite these already existing reflections, infrastructuring still seems able to offer opportunities for further developments and research, specifically when observed from the perspective of a dialogue with strategic design.

The relevance of the processual dimension, the anticipation and elaboration of future scenarios, the constant alignment of different elements, as well as the development of relations among them are features of infrastructuring that point out the several promising connections with strategic design.

A potential future path for research and practice emerges from these reflections. This would help both the strategic design approach within the urban ecosystem and the concept of infrastructuring to be better unfolded. We thought this was the right moment to foster this discussion. Thus, considering that strategic design is the main topic addressed by the SDRJ, we organized this special issue wishing to achieve several objectives: to stimulate the research community to think about these possible connections, as well as to reflect on their processes and projects from this perspective, to discuss what the community has been doing about them and finally to present new research paths.

The contributions in this special issue propose several different interpretations of strategic design and infrastructuring. They highlight the enriching plurality of voices and expressions that characterize this debate among scholars and practitioners. At the same time, they establish new theoretical connections that prompt the pursuit of new research and design activities towards the integration of Strategic Design and PD. The seven articles included in this special issue touch upon a variety of topics ranging from participatory urbanism to environmental art; from placemaking to place-understanding, from social innovation policies to commoning. As a guidance for our readers, we provide here a brief overview of its content.

Kelkar and Spinelli propose a critical take on the topic of urban placemaking and underline the bottom-up perspective in this area. By reviewing the formal approaches and rationales behind placemaking the authors take distance from

the typical top-down 'planning and development' approach, which neglects the needs and opportunities emerging from situated communities, and propose an enriched frame: curiosity. Such a frame puts to the forefront community-led design, identity building, creativity and productivity. The authors also identify and suggest a set of designing guidelines that underlie the frame.

Similarly, also Napawan and Snyder address placemaking in critical terms and propose a shift towards the idea of place-understanding by reflecting on environmental art and activism as strategies for interventions in urban infrastructure. The two authors ground their work on a review of feminist approaches to artful participatory urbanism as cases for infrastructuring awareness and engagement around sensitive urban issues. They take stock of such experiences and present their collaboration with the city of San Jose (California) in engaging pilot communities with a greater understanding of the connections among household practices, wastewater management and urban sustainability.

Marttila and Botero explore infrastructuring, patchworking and commoning as strategic tools to support designers in enabling participatory processes in the urban context. Basically, these can give a sense of direction for exercising forms of continuous and open-ended design that are attentive to the collective construction of Things. Their arguments are grounded on a retrospective analysis of two cases of citizen-driven initiatives which took place in Helsinki (Finland) in urban gardening and public art. These experiences shed light on how particular concerns and caring practices can be mobilized and enacted collectively to let new forms of design and designing interventions emerge.

Hillgren, Seravalli, and Eriksen show how PD can provide a critical contribution to the current trends and policies in urban developments that rely on citizens' engagement to address societal issues. In particular, through the concepts of commoning and agonism they articulate a critical approach to local democracy and societal challenges. They adopt the two concepts for a retrospective analysis of a seven-year long infrastructuring process. Based on it, the authors suggest a first phase guided by an agonistic perspective for establishing and building relationships with marginalized actors, followed by a phase of strategic design aimed at creating alliances. However, they also raise warnings about the potential new hegemonies that may emerge and should not be neglected.

In their work Huybrechts, Dreessen, Schepers, and Salazar explore a typology for the different 'democratic dialogues' that characterize designers' performative practices. They articulate five types of dialogues – strategic, committing, questioning, agonistic and expressing – as a tool for supporting designers along infrastructuring processes in the urban context. The authors apply and exemplify such a typology through the retrospective analysis of the works done in Living Lab De Andere Markt to design alternative futures in Genk. Here, they show how the designers' agency and role in facilitating the infrastructuring process among the Lab, citizens, and public and private organisations are highly contingent and are best depicted by one of the different types of dialogues.

Van Reusel suggests the idea of wandering – losing control – as a strategy to enable collaborative and participatory design processes that focus on infrastructuring and design-after-design. She provides a series of thought-provoking statements that articulate the concept of wandering as suggestive of a non-linear process, with unplanned and uncontrolled moments that are guided by specific attitudes – losing control, diving into messiness, embracing uncertainty. Van Reusel develops her arguments based on the work done around Recup'Kitchen in Brussels.

In their work, Selloni and Manzini engage with social innovation in an ecosystemic perspective and focus on a policy level. The key contribution of this work is to advance the concept of policy constellation in support of sustainable infrastructuring processes for social innovation. By analysing three cases of social innovation policies in Italy – Bologna Regulation, Milan Smart City, Bollenti Spiriti in Apulia – they articulate the different components and actions that build such constellation and discuss design's role within them both in terms of professional skills and widespread capabilities distributed among the social actors involved.

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Chiara Del Gaudio and Giacomo Poderi
Guest Editors

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[1] In response to the call for papers published in September 2015, we received 26 submissions from very different geographical areas: Australia, Belgium, Brazil, England, Finland, India, Italy, Germany, Mexico, Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, and USA. The papers presented a wide variety of approaches to Strategic and Participatory Design and topics connected to our request. Through the double-blind review process we identified and selected seven articles for inclusion in this special issue.

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