

## Design as contamination between arts and knowledge: The case of Euromedsys<sup>1</sup>

### Design como contaminação entre arte e saber: a experiência Euromedsys

**Silvia Pelosi**

silviapelosi75@gmail.com

Seconda Università degli Studi di Napoli. Dipartimento IDEAS\_Industrial Design Ambiente e Storia. Abazia di San Lorenzo ad Septimum - Borgo San Lorenzo, 81031 Aversa, Italy.

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#### Abstract

Because the contamination and overlap between design, craft and art generate innovative results in terms of new products, processes, and modes of behaviour, it is necessary that each of these disciplines restrict itself to its own field. The transfer between knowledge and creative skills must take place in a respectful process of reciprocal confrontation, in which expertise and behaviour are exchanged between equals. The skills of each one should not cross over into a field occupied by the other, but should instead be transferred within this process of confrontation in which only the discipline of industrial design, thanks to its inherent nature as process, can interpret and redirect them towards new modes of behaviour, products, and scenarios. In that sense, and in terms of processes and products, the Euromedsys project discussed here, born out of an intersection-interaction between different cultures united by a common Mediterranean matrix, can boast of having attained original outcomes thanks to the ability of the actors taking part - designers, artist-craftsmen, firms - to achieve fruitful exchanges of expertise and skills.

**Key words:** Euro-Mediterranean, knowledge, community of practice, contamination.

#### Resumo

Porque a contaminação e sobreposição entre design, artesanato e arte geram resultados inovadores em termos de produtos, processos e comportamento, é necessário que a dimensão de cada uma destas disciplinas permaneça ligada ao seu próprio campo. A transferência de saber e de arte deve ocorrer em um recíproco processo de confronto respeitoso, em cuja troca de conhecimento e comportamento se concretizam em um mesmo plano. As competências de cada um não podem atravessar as áreas de intervenção, mas podem, ao contrário, ser transferidos para dentro do processo, de forma que só o design por sua natureza projetual, pode interpretar e transmitir em comportamentos, produtos e cenários. Nesse sentido, o projeto Euromedsys discutido aqui, nascido de um cruzamento entre diferentes culturas unidas por uma matriz comum do Mediterrâneo, apresenta resultados originais em termos de processos e produtos por causa da habilidade dos atores envolvidos - designers, artistas-artesãos e empresas - para conseguir intercâmbios frutuosos de conhecimentos e habilidades.

**Palavras-chave:** euro-mediterrâneo, conhecimento, comunidade de prática, contaminação.

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#### The EuroMedSys I and II Projects – Structure and objectives<sup>2</sup>

EuroMedSys is a transnational cooperation project developed as part of the Community initiative Interreg III B Medocc, structured as a partnership composed of the

Regions of the European Union overlooking the Western Mediterranean – Northern Shore – and Regions pertaining to Mediterranean Third Countries – Southern Shore<sup>3</sup>.

The project's general objective is to reinforce and valorise a Euro-Mediterranean identity, promoting the economic integration of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

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<sup>1</sup> The drawings are by Giuseppe Vaccaro.

<sup>2</sup> The Scientific Director of the EuroMedSys I and EuroMedSys II projects for the IDEAS Department – formerly DISPAMA – is Mario Buono; the director for the Campania Region is Mariano Marchettiello. For detailed information about the first EuroMedSys project, see the catalogue: Buono and Lotti (2005). The EuroMedSys II experience was described in the catalogue: Buono and Lotti (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Project partners are Italy, France and Spain for Europe – Northern Shore – and Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia – Southern Shore – as Mediterranean Third Countries.

pertaining to the three production chains of HabitatMed, Agribusiness and Advanced Services to SMEs, through the creation of a common cooperation platform that will stimulate and facilitate dialogue among institutions.

Two different editions of the programme were conducted, EuroMedSys I and EuroMedSys II, and the Campania Region and the design research group of the IDEAS Department – formerly DISPAMA – of the Second University of Naples participated in both projects in the HabitatMed area, coordinating the action of designer-business exchange.

During EuroMedSys I the action involved designers and businesses from the Campania Region and the PACA Region – France. The exchange activities involved the Consorzio Ceramisti Cavesi of Cava de' Tirreni; the Giuseppe de Negri company, one of the oldest silk mills in San Leucio; Giovanni Apa, a company that crafts coral; and the Consortium Terre de Salernes in Marseille. The designers Fabrice Faber and Riccardo Dalisi probed the topic of "Mediterranean Conviviality," working remotely with the French and Campanian companies and testing new solutions for Mediterranean living according to the guidelines of the HabitatMed manifesto.

Likewise, EuroMedSys II, structured around the HabitatMed chain, saw the participation of universities, public organisations and businesses from the Regions of the Northern and Southern Shores. The project was divided into two actions, an international workshop held at the Institut Supérieur des Beaux Arts in Sousse, Tunisia, coordinated by the University of Florence<sup>4</sup> and the IDEAS Department, in which the participants were students from the degree courses in Industrial Design at the University of Florence, ISIA – Istituto Superiore Industrie Artistiche – in Florence, the École des Beaux Arts in Marseille, the L. Vanvitelli Faculty of Architecture of the Second University of Naples and the Institut Supérieur des Beaux Arts in Sousse, and a designer-business exchange that involved not only the Campania Region and the PACA Region, but also businesses and designers from the Gouvernatoriat de Sousse, Tunisia. Another EuroMedSys II objective was to verify the possibility of making products with the HabitatMed brand.

The results of the two experiences – the exchange and the international workshop – were displayed on several occasions<sup>5</sup> and published in two catalogues.

### The integration of knowledge

The integration of knowledge, even of different nature, is the prerequisite to achieve innovation, "the knowledge for the production of innovation is not the result of singular creative process [...] the nature of innovation suggests that the scenario of the production is often larger than the organization" (Foray, 2006, p. 65).

Methodologically have been tested and adopted process for knowledge transfer processes with

the aim to develop individual skills and not lose his knowledge, particularly that produced in an unconscious manner.

As new knowledge can occur, it is necessary to identify mechanisms and systems for the sharing of tacit knowledge. The spiral model proposed by Nonaka and Takeuchi (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1997) showed that the creation of knowledge in organizations depends on the ability to convert tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. The model is targeted at corporate organization, but it can be extended to more complex structure such as territorial system. Operationally, it is possible to identify different mechanisms for the transfer of knowledge. Among these, the most frequent mechanism coincides with the observation and imitation of innovative products, in which case the learning process of stakeholders will be able to transfer only part of the knowledge embedded in the product, especially if it is a product with a high level of innovation, the more complex the product the greater the difficulty to imitate and that stands as a synthesis of tacit knowledge also. Regarding the latter category, there is an objective difficulty in codifying and transferring all the innate knowledge and local practices that represent the cultural frames and value of an enterprise, "the exchange, the dissemination of knowledge and tacit learning assume mobility of people who have [...] storage and retention of tacit knowledge are influenced by their transfer from generation to generation and a suitable replacement process of the people who have [...] the tacit knowledge that can not be classified or indexed systematically" (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1997, p. 91). In this case the only way to implement the exchange is the physical mobility of people, so that we can observe and repeat the same gestures, this requires an investment in terms of time and cost, thus this kind of process is implemented, usually, from companies located in the same territory, either exchanges with other companies or with research centers and universities. To this end, the workshop is a highly effective model to facilitate shared planning processes, where they can collaborate on a single target people with different cultural backgrounds. The open and flexible structure of the workshop also allows one to experience in a continuous exchange, which is also creative in terms that can generate new knowledge and new projects. In the case of the EuroMedSys project is operated through a dual level of exchange and comparison, cognitive and practical. The initial objective difficulty was to achieve tangible results that they broadcast all the tacit knowledge of the places involved in the project. The international workshop and the action of exchange, which has been providing opportunities to meet in the three regions involved. It has been a valuable tool not only to operate for the exchange of information and knowledge assets, but in particular to learn gestures and practices. Thus the body of knowledge takes place between the local culture and values for the realization of products.

<sup>4</sup> The Scientific Directors of the EuroMedSys II project are Mario Buono for the IDEAS Department.

<sup>5</sup> The results of the EuroMedSys experience have been displayed on several occasions: *Habitat Med I – Florence Villa Il Ventaglio – Università Internazionale dell'Arte* 1–7 July 2004. *Medesign – forme del Mediterraneo – Genoa, Palazzo della Nuova Borsa*, 5/11 – 12/12 2004. *Habitat Med II – Spedale degli Innocenti – Florence – July 2007. Tra Mediterranei, l'esperienza Euromedsys – Latin American Pavilion – Mostra d'Oltremare – Naples – June 2009.*

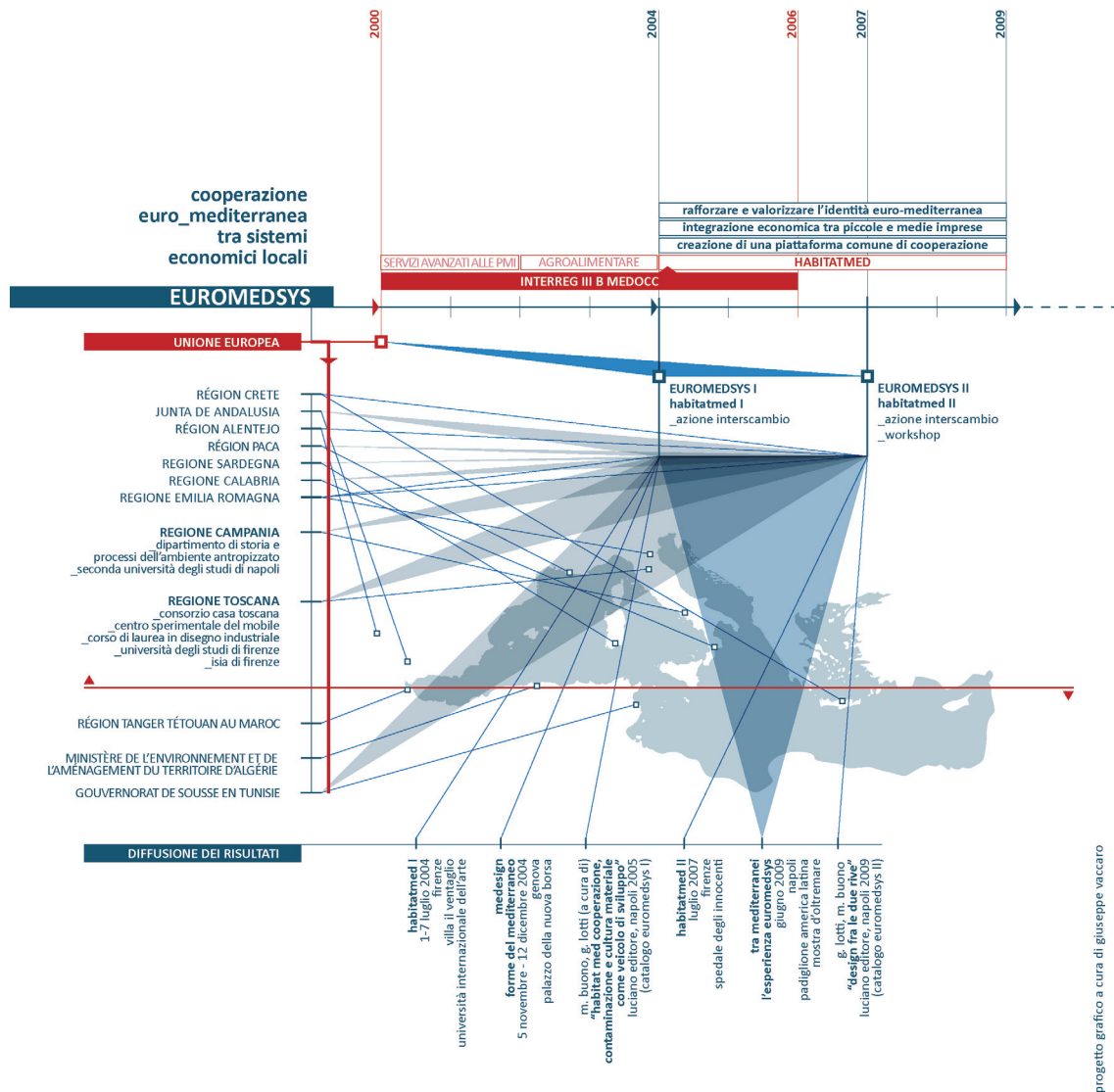


Figure 1. Euromedsys general structure.

### The EuroMedSys experience as cultural cross-fertilisation. The exchange

The reference scenario of the EuroMedSys is the Mediterranean, a maritime space that defines a unique and complex identity for different people and countries, "a 'mental' geography that has allowed different cultures to develop without merging, giving rise to exchanges and artistic and material productions that can express the quality and absolute value of the sensible world" (Ranzo, 2005, p. 29). The powerful artisanal component found in the "factories of the Mediterranean" has represented a field of experimentation for a comparison between different approaches to the project and the adoption of a shared method, structured around the "practices" that characterise the involved territories.

As part of EuroMedSys I, with the aim of defining a Mediterranean habitat (Furlanis *et al.*, 2004) there were extensive discussions on identity as a blend and interweaving of cultures, and the term "cross" was often cited as a key to interpreting this concept and was later adopted to define a model that was replicated in the second experience.

The international cooperation activity for the HabitatMed chain thus took shape through the matching-exchange of designers and businesses as well as the international workshop, both structured on the principle of the encounter/crossing of cultures and knowledge.

During the project, work was done on a dual level of exchange and engagement in terms of both knowledge and practice. The model that was adopted represented a valid instrument not only to support the exchange of information, but in particular to learn local actions and practices to transfer to the end solutions.

The network sketched out by the EuroMedSys programme, characterised by a close-knit system of relations in which knowledge transfer took place by learning "know-how" in a setting as complex as fragmented as the Mediterranean, also represented an effective model for implementing knowledge and skills, as well as shared creativity.

Contact with places and local work practices, socio-cultural cross-fertilization, the direct observation of methods and processes tied to a strong tradition of craftsmanship – particularly in the case of companies on the North-

ern Shore – and the comparison of different approaches to the project, during exchange actions such as the workshop, inspired the inventive activity of the designers and students, suggesting alternative scenarios albeit in the continuity of local tradition. All of this is evident in the products, which innovatively illustrate the social and cultural heritage of the Mediterranean populations.

Particularly in EuroMedSys II, the brief on which the designers compared notes – “innovation as invention for the development of the Mediterranean” – was inspired by the common need to break away from production tied to outdated models and processes and excessively repeated stereotypes, and by the goal of identifying new forms and functions for classic traditional objects, testing solutions that have never been adopted in the HabitatMed sectors. The sense was thus that of orchestrating and staging the experience of Mediterranean hospitality, employing the instrument of invention as a vehicle to preserve a value that travellers of all eras have always acknowledged and helped disseminate, thus building a complex offer that is difficult to imitate on the global market.

Symbols, gestures and rituals established in the culture of the populations of the Southern and Northern Shores become visible in solutions that invent other ways of innovating, an aspect that is not tied to technology or production processes but that, thanks to the

instruments of design, arises from talent and creativity. Thus, although the results of the second exchange action are far removed from the evocative “artefacts” of Fabrice Faber and Riccardo Dalisi, they recount established gestures reinterpreted through new and original forms and functions.

The innovative dimension arises from the knowledge of the businesses involved and the territorial setting in which they work. The close rapport with hand-craftsmanship and raw materials typical of Tunisian *savoir-faire*, which has vanished almost entirely from the entrepreneurial culture of the Northern Shore, fascinated the designers so much that it inspired experimentation that spread through traditional production processes. The narrative dimension springs from direct observation of the lifestyles of the individual populations, which come to pertain “to everyone” in the re-invention process. Thus, the representation of laundry hanging out to dry in the alleys that can be seen on a ceramic composition by the French designer Geraldine Petit becomes the postcard of a ritual rooted in the folk tradition, which – intact for over a century – reveals itself to the traveller. Likewise, a photograph of the antennas dotting the rooftops of Naples is observed and reinterpreted in vases and birds’ nests, which take an element disturbing the city skyline – one that, in reality,

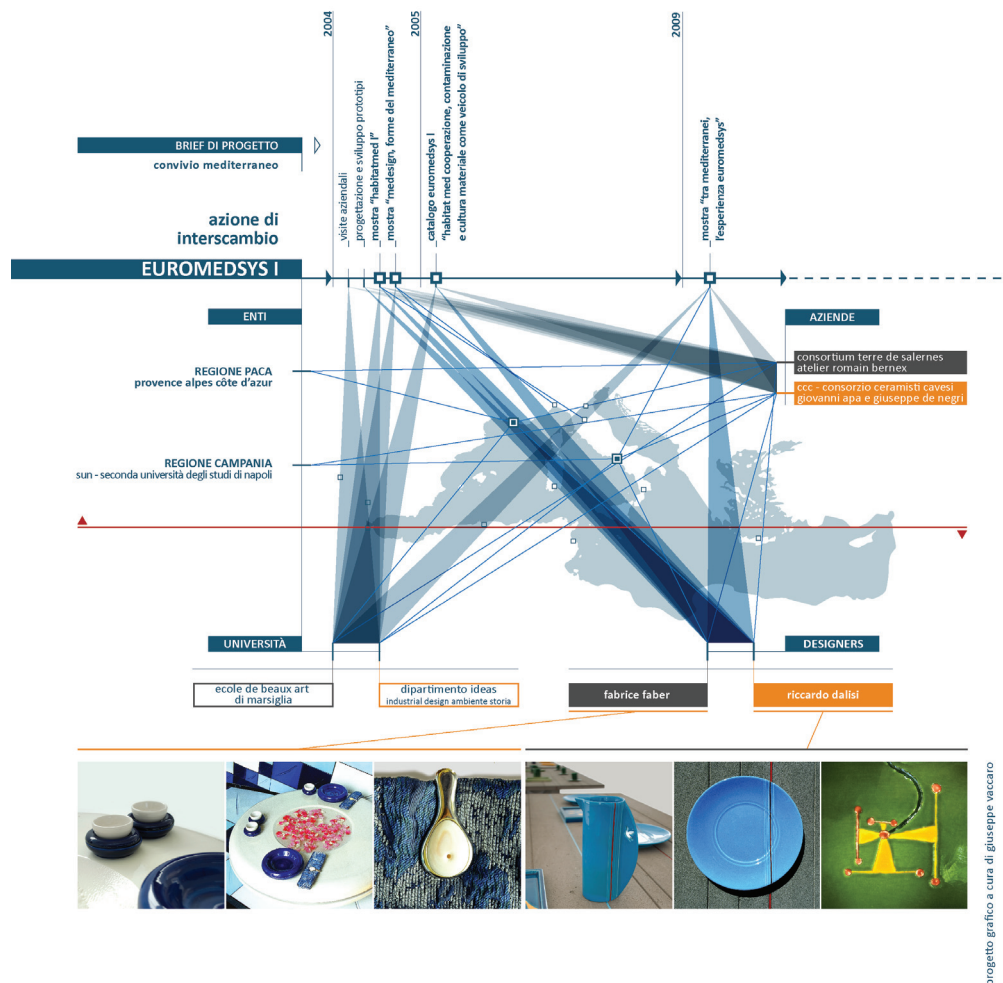


Figure 2. Habitatmed I.

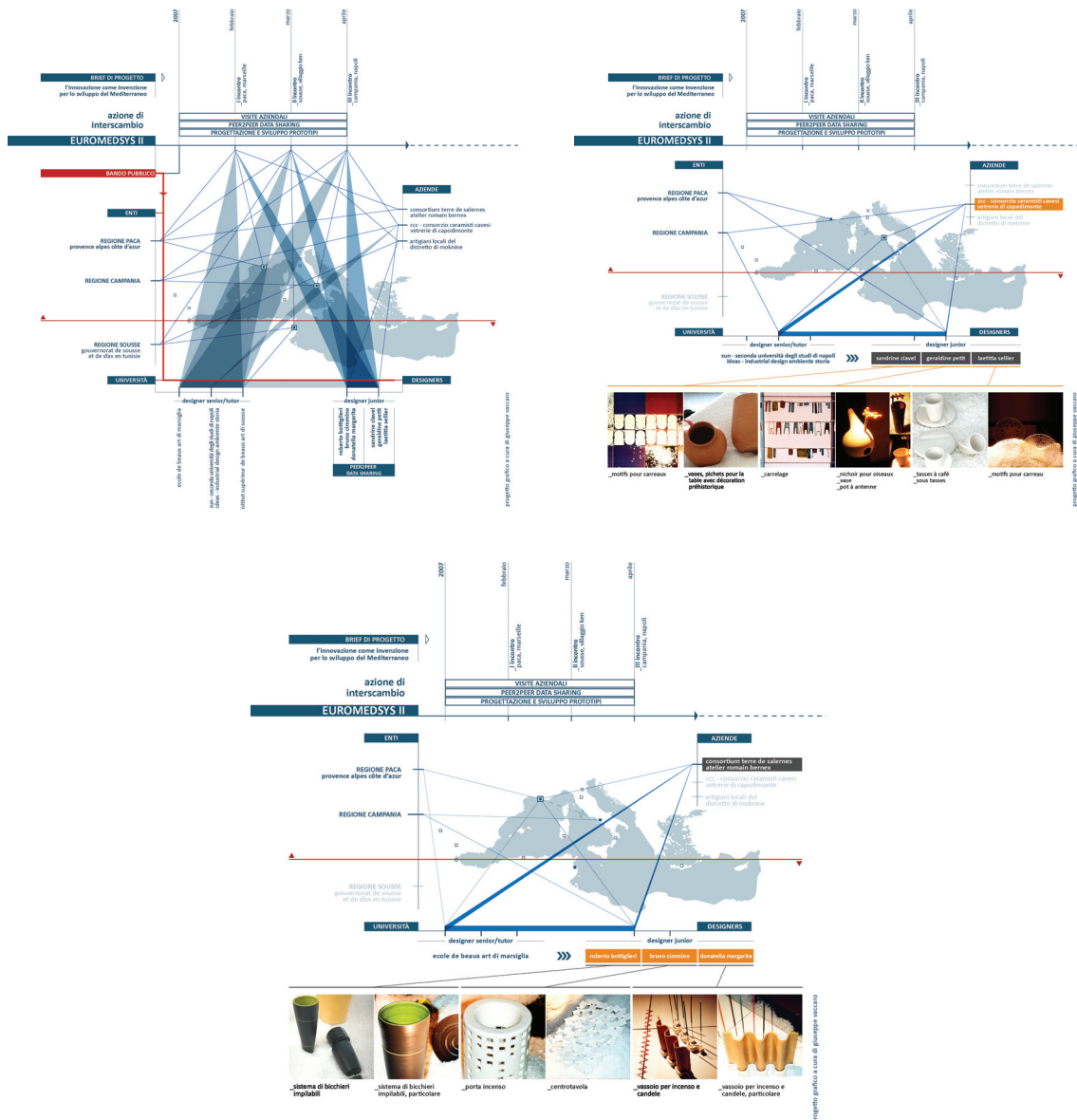


Figure 3. Habitatmed II.

pertains to any city, Mediterranean or otherwise – and assimilate it into a specific function.

As was the case for the designers from the PACA Region through their contact with the culture of Campania, so too the products of Campanian designers for French companies show the influence of the culture of the Northern Shore.

The juxtaposition of fragmentariness and visual unity of the intarsia of the carpets and mosaics adorning Tunisian dwellings inspired the Campanian designer Bruno Cimmino and was embodied through the overlap of ceramic tesserae in the Pixel centrepiece, a modern interpretation of a “universal” object that, at the same time, fully expresses the mosaic of cultures that characterises the Mediterranean and, for this very reason, is familiar to travellers.

The desire to transfer a common identity to individual objects is evident in Roberto Bottiglieri's Totem project. In the case of this Campanian designer, the selfsame fragmentariness is harmonised in a composition of different forms and functions moulding a single object that symbolises the encounter of several cultures.

The prototypes of the exchange actions were displayed in Florence at the Spedale degli Innocenti during the Habitat Med II exhibition, along with prototypes made by the students during the international workshop.

Aside from the results and the tested model, it is important to reflect on the opportunity provided by the project for a first international convergence around the subjects of creativity and Mediterranean design<sup>6</sup> and, in particular, the possible construction of a “community of practice” in order to valorise and identify innovative scenarios promoting tra-

<sup>6</sup> The EuroMedSys experience was channelled into the broader inter-university research on Mediterranean design entitled “Medesign”. For more detailed information, see *Medesign. Forme del Mediterraneo* (Fagnoni et al., 2004).



ditional local production sectors. "Communities of practice" represent forms of aggregation between businesses pertaining to the same industry or from different production sectors that share the same goals and, in a fully spontaneous way, establish relationships in order to achieve them. Spontaneous aggregation starts from the ground up and is formed not only to exchange information and knowledge, but also to implement practical activities for the construction of new knowledge in the territory, "the model shares values and strategic objectives, centres this vision on trust and incorporates know-how, which ceases to be a transition object to become an exchange of information. It does not deny the network structure but underpins it" (Nicolais, 2007, p. 124).

The general objective of the EuroMedSys programme was to reinforce cooperation and dialogue among the Regions of the Northern and Southern Shores of the Mediterranean, also with a view to enacting the Barcelona Declaration for a free trade area in the Mediterranean.

The project thus originates with a path that has been sketched out on a political level, distinguishing from above an identity that each component has helped build. In this sense the sharing of the same objectives and the experiences of exchange and engagement have reduced the differences among the Regions and laid the foundations for the construction of a platform to valorise the production excellence of the Mediterranean, involving professionals, institutions and businesses.

In the specific case of the Campania Region, the project was an opportunity to implement the same dynamics characterising the communities of practice among the involved businesses and the IDEAS Department, so that "the set objective of configuring a community of creative minds, researchers, trainers and entrepreneurs, albeit in the limited milieu of ceramics, was established autonomously and voluntarily to conduct practical activities, create new know-how, build new identities and lastly, without improvising, form an experience of the community of practice" (Buono, 2009, p. 31).

Indeed, the collaboration between the Department and the ceramic companies in Campania was consolidated through new research and training projects on the transversal subjects of innovation and creativity. In an entirely spon-

taneous way, they involved other production entities in the territory – such as the energy industry – and became tangible in the further objective of using design instruments to implement internationalisation programmes in collaboration with the research bodies of other European countries, sketching out a common path for the creation of a "Mediterranean community of practice" based on creativity, design, and the exchange of local know-how and practices.

Following the drawing that showed the structure of interchange action.

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