

# Activating new strategies for the Lombardy Region and the Italian-Swiss border area: A cultural design approach<sup>1</sup>

## Ativando novas estratégias para a região da Lombardia e fronteira entre a Itália e Suíça: uma abordagem de design cultural

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### Abstract

The focus on the explorative and uncoded phase of the design process, the innovation potential, the role of the design practice as a mediator among external factors, the research framework and the new cultural “products” are strong elements of the Advanced Design approach that can be recognised in two experiences of applied research: R.E.I.L. (Register of Intangible Heritage of Lombardy) and E.CH.I. (Ethnographies Italo-Swiss for the valorisation of the intangible heritage of the Italian-Swiss border). The cultural politics of the public authorities involved have been an opportunity to test the process of “territorial design” as a creative process aimed at producing a series of actions oriented to increasing the local development. Particular attention has been paid to the intangible cultural heritage as an expression of knowledge and values (symbolic-ritual) of the local communities that over time has implemented creative strategies for the enhancement of its identity. This paper faces the topic of the valorisation of the territorial identity and explains the two research projects mentioned before. It enters into the merits of the several levels and scales of intervention.

**Keywords:** design for cultural heritage, intangible heritage, cultural identity.

### Resumo

O foco na fase de exploração ainda não codificada do processo guiado pelo design, o gradiente de inovação, o papel do designer como intermediário entre os fatores externos, a estrutura da pesquisa e os novos “produtos” culturais que dela derivam são elementos importantes do Advanced Design approach identificados em duas experiências de pesquisa aplicada: R.E.I.L. (Registro do patrimônio intangível da região Lombardia) e E.CH.I. (Etnografias ítalo-suíças para a valorização do patrimônio cultural intangível da área transfronteiriça). As políticas culturais das administrações públicas envolvidas foram à ocasião para testar o processo de “design territorial” como processo criativo destinado para a produção de uma série de ações orientadas à implementação do desenvolvimento local. Uma atenção especial foi dedicada ao patrimônio cultural intangível como expressão de conhecimento e dos valores (simbólico-rituais) das comunidades locais que, no curso do tempo, aperfeiçoaram estratégias criativas para a valorização da própria identidade. O *paper* aqui presente discutirá o tema da valorização da identidade territorial ilustrando os projetos de pesquisa mencionados, entrando na especificidade de suas múltiplas articulações e declinações nas diversas escalas de intervenção.

**Palavras-chave:** projeto para o patrimônio cultural, patrimônio imaterial, identidade cultural.

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## Advanced Design for Cultural Heritage

For several years the discipline of design has advanced a significant experience in terms of both research and applied research in the valorisation of the cultural heritage field. The research group DeCH-Design for Cultural Heritage (Department of Design, Politecnico di Milano) works specifically on these topics linking critical-theoretical research and applied research. It specialises in design and innovation of strategies, methods, processes, places, and products to valorise cultural heritage in terms of artistic, architectural and archaeological assets, landscapes and cities, tangible and intangible heritage. Some of these projects have been developed starting from the involvement of the community. In the cultural heritage field the main goal is often not the commercialisation of goods or services, but the creation of new processes and models of cultural value and cultural experience in order to suggest new “uses” of the cultural asset. There are not specific companies or clients that commission the project; often there is not a specific demand but there is a real need. Therefore, this aspect represents an interesting challenge for the discipline.

The mission of “territorial design” is to valorise the territorial capital, which is “the set of elements (tangible and intangible) in a specific geographic area” (Farrel *et al.*, 1999, p. 19) and again:

*it is the articulated and complex set of different parts, tangible and intangible, that we can visualise according to several layers related on territorial resources [...], human activities [...], know how [...], skills [...], culture [...], traditions [...], forms and features of the governance [...], the relationship with other territories [...]* (Parente, 2012, p. 104).

We can define “territorial design” as a creative process aimed at producing a series of actions oriented at increasing local development. The relationship between local development and territorial capital is seen to be based on the concepts of sustainability and competitiveness (Franzato, 2009).

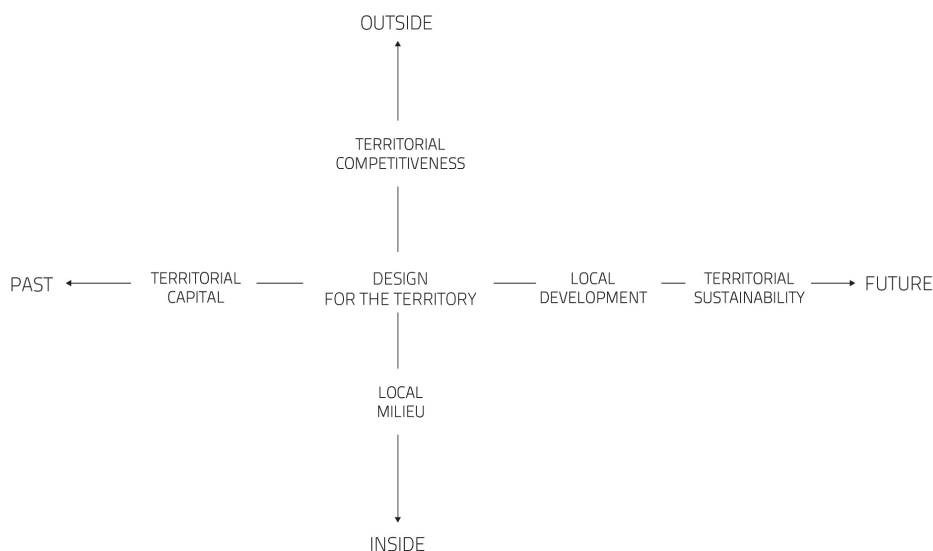
In the chart below, the territorial design is located on the axis of time because it acts in the present (exploiting resources available to the territorial capital) but it is oriented to the future because it focuses on local development and its positive effects should be evaluated in the short, medium and long term. The territorial design is also located on the axis of space both for the geographic contextualisation of the cultural goods involved and for the relationship with other local areas (territorial competitiveness) (Figure 1).

The analysis of the identity of places is fundamental to the process of the valorisation of the territory, and it is important also for “scenario building” and “image communication” phases.

Identity is a complex issue because it involves a layering of data, themes and elements that are an important set of tangible and intangible values. The study of identity of places becomes the starting point to understand this stratification through a reading that includes “memory” (past), “awareness” (present) and “potential” (future).

This leaning to the future is fundamental because the identity of places (and also its valorisation) is focused on the designer’s ability to explain the vocation of the territory as a basis to identify new opportunities and potentialities (Trocchianesi, 2012). Bauman argues that the “desire” for identity arises from a need for security (Bauman, 2008), which highlights the social disposition of places and safety achieved by the sharing of goods and values. In this way, the valorisation of a common heritage becomes an important cultural and social platform through which to put into action processes of improvement and development. The action to strive for innovation and to the possibility of finding new scenarios of development and valorisation means modifying the way of looking at problems. This means both analysing the organisational and productive social system, and finding new styles to create imagination, stories and narratives with a potential for realisation.

The scenario is the overall view of a complex situation undergoing transformation: the vision of a hypothetical state of things that someone knows, imagines and describes in a communicable and understandable way.



**Figure 1.** Contextualisation of the territorial design action in space and time coordinates (chart by Franzato, 2009).

The scenario is made up of three elements: the vision, the motivation and the proposal; it has to be plausible (although aimed at the future) and arguable because it is a tool of mediation among the stakeholders; they have to understand the path of the research and be able to see the potential (Manzini and Jégou, 2004). The involvement of stakeholders and the finalisation of their possible real contributions is a fundamental step; this action happens if it can communicate a common vision both in relation to the present and to possible future development. So, resources of the territory, potentials, the project incentive and its impact on the context have to be present and visible in the scenario. The “form” and the visualisation of the scenarios are the result of a design activity that brings elaborate visions and proposals. This means that scenario building is a design activity.

In this paper, some cultural practices focused on the involvement of communities of the specific local areas will be described and will be critically analysed as possible models of intervention in order to valorise the cultural heritage starting from the intangible values. Intangible Cultural Heritage is a “living heritage” that expresses itself through oral traditions, languages, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, and technical knowledge. All these aspects have to be transmitted across generations in order to contribute to the creation of the identity of people<sup>2</sup>.

The design for Intangible Heritage (documentation, valorisation, re-activation) represents a challenge to multiculturalism and it can stimulate Advanced Design scenarios focusing on social innovation and sustainability. The Intangible Heritage System is favoured by the intrinsic sustainability of the intangible processes because it is highly linked to local resources (Guglielmetti, 2009). Therefore, the narrative and performative dimension of the intangible heritage requires the constant participation of a system of actors who often express creative forces (like the R.E.I.L. case described below). The designer can be considered as a facilitator and mediator of participatory planning processes. The reformulation of the tradition comes through a varied system of factors.

Some specific questions emerge:

- In which stage of the design process is there high potential of innovation? In identification, documentation or cultural experience of the heritage?
- In which fields is there a re-formulation of models of experience? In spaces, in relationships, in artifacts, in skills?

Following some bottom up trends in the context of Social Information Technology:

- the use of social networks to spontaneous organisation of a community (e.g. “Tammuriate” of “Sette Madonne Campana”), the use of blogs and video-web formats for the transmission of repertoires (e.g. the community of “zampogna” musicians);
- the use of cross media to create new narratives through performing media and social tagging (e.g. “TarantaVlog” that combines Blog, Moblog, Vlog, flash animation and streaming video).

In the cultural heritage field, the design challenge is to establish a shared design process with communities and their identity values.

## Real context and multidisciplinary team

Since 1972, the Lombardy Region has been working on research and development of the traditional heritage culture after creating the Archive of Ethnography and Social History (Regional Manager AESS, R. Meazza, [www.aess.regione.lombardia.it](http://www.aess.regione.lombardia.it)). In the last ten years, this public and institutional stakeholder has worked on the creation of design scenarios in order to document and express local and ethnographical identities (especially regarding risk of extinction) in terms of audio-visual narratives and mixed registers of communication. Its actions are co-located within the cultural politics of the territory and its opportunities and constraints legislation.

Specifically, the two projects that will be presented here refer to the regional law LR 27/2008 that interprets the essence of the UNESCO Convention of 2003 for the “Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage” (Bortolotto, 2008). This protection is one of the important points of contemporary cultural and political activities. It is important to defend creativity and also the sense of belonging and identity in the community, particularly in border areas historically subject to exchange processes. The AESS work intercepts a social solicitation, a need expressed by a community that lives a knowledge heritage frequently fragile and scattered untranslatable into a specific demand. Such “diffuse creativity” is frequently evidence of a “distributed intelligence” among people.

The focus is on those expressions that are situated in a directional approach based on the organisation of resources, people, and materials in order to make visible an epiphenomenon collective ritual. Examples include the carnivals of Schignano and Bagolino, the celebration of Santa Cruz of Cervo, the Funsciù of Gianico or the Music of the 4 Provinces. This could also include the chain of knowledge of traditional violin craftsmanship in Cremona, in 2012, declared World Heritage by UNESCO. Participation, as a key theme of the governance, is reaffirmed in the report of the Intergovernmental Committee (dated 2013), where the big machines for popular and celebrative rituals are included in the Representative List (for example the celebration of Gigli of Nola; the Varia of Palmi; the Faradda of candle holders of Sassari; the transport of the Saint Rose machine). There is a sort of “protagonism” expressed by people, the ability to interpret cultural heritage as an element useful to create new narratives, often in dialogue with transversal skills.

The AESS created a specific multidisciplinary team for the R.E.I.L. and E.C.H.I. projects. These projects consider the contribution of design in addition to other humanistic disciplines. This allows an interdisciplinary approach in order to create a system of constant comparison between the inputs and outputs of each stage. The Working Group created a “stream of semi-finished” diverse and flexible outputs periodically releasing “intermediate prototypes”

<sup>2</sup> The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, adopted by UNESCO on October 17, 2003, and signed by Italy with the norm of ratification n. 167 of 27 September 2007.

(involving video makers, photographers, ethno-musicologists and so on). This process engages the communities involving them in scenario building, in discussion of the vision and in adoption of choices. In this way, the design discipline is considered as a sort of “shaper” and “mediator” of the project process in the territorial field; indeed, it mediates the economy, marketing, human sciences, art and technological competences. The design approach is able to bestow on objects and processes form, function, value and meaning through a creative dialogue.

The project for the territorial valorisation is collaborative because the contemporary processes of creation and innovation are often more collective (Celaschi, 2007). This aspect is especially seen in this highly complex field where local institutions, public administration, researchers and citizens usually intervene. The project for the territorial valorisation is also interactive both for the participative experience that it offers to users, and because it activates a relationship among environment, places and people. It is also multiscale, multidimensional and multidisciplinary because the project touches the scale of the landscape and architecture and also the tangible and intangible culture. The territory presents a multiplicity of dimensions (environmental, economic, social, cultural) and for its valorisation it needs several disciplines and skills (Celaschi, 2007). The goal of territorial design is, thus, the valorisation of the local areas using the resources of the territorial capital that summarise the identity of the territory.

Below is a focus on the two projects mentioned above (R.E.I.L. and E.CH.I.) with a particular interpretative filter design applied.

### R.E.I.L. and E.CH.I: experiences in the territory

R.E.I.L. Register of Intangible Heritage of Lombardy ([www.aess.regione.lombardia.it/reil](http://www.aess.regione.lombardia.it/reil)) is a project coordinated exclusively by the Archive of Ethnography and Social History AEES. The request was to create a public registry in 2010-2011 for local authorities, non-profit organisations, cultural institutions, but also to holders of public or private

funds. Projects were requested that would propose new forms of communication, with particular attention to the involvement and participation of the population. The call was only dedicated to the Lombardy region, and the goal was to strengthen the link between intangible cultural heritage and places by encouraging the direct participation of young people in finding new organisational forms and scenarios in order to engage them in the process. The awareness stimulates protagonism and production of multi-device scenarios included in a self-story and communication collection called Register.

The objectives were: impact on the local economy; involvement of a network of social actors; enhancement of synergies; on-line collection of exemplary projects to stimulate the emergence of a dialogue and exchange community. A multidisciplinary committee – with a designer included – coordinated the work of the community through talks and workshops. During the reading of the results, the designer expresses the ability to interpret the scenarios as a “facilitator of processes” and specifically “to facilitate the continuity of cultural practices”, proposing criteria and guidelines. He has created a collection of multi-scenarios where all the elements of social innovation and sustainability are obvious, furthermore, he has facilitated the creation of a community of creative practices that express and seek real solutions to continue the practice of a deep-rooted cultural knowledge. Overall, the Registry, through a process of listening and results orientation, is a device-impetus to renewal of knowledge.

### Results<sup>3</sup>

The 29 funded projects involved 73 subjects. The five themes identified (Figure 2), as well as defining areas of investigation, have shown methodological approaches mostly from the field of ethno-anthropological research (Figure 3). In the “ethnography” projects with a strong component of documentation in the field of ethno-anthropological, disclosed essays, reports and research journals were included. The three themes – “corporate memory”/“memory and

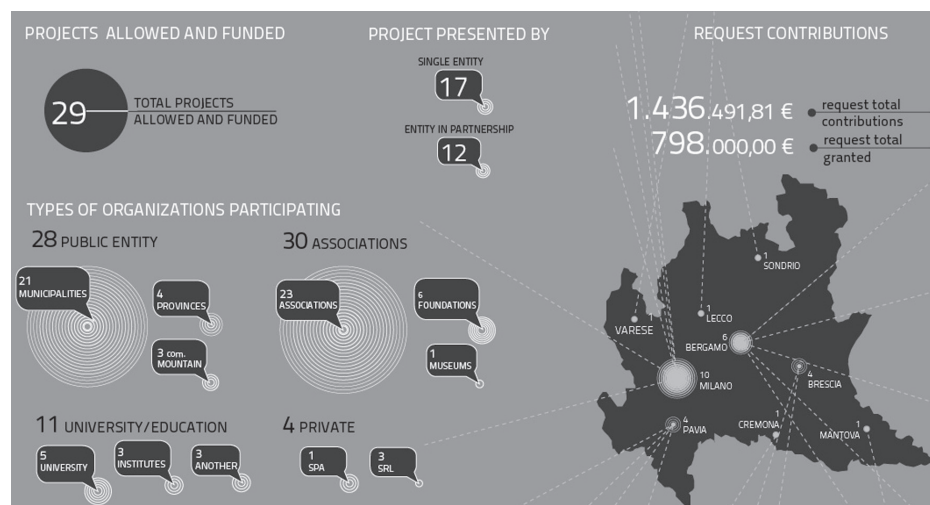


Figure 2. Excerpt from the info graphic poster R.E.I.L.: actors and geographies (chart by Guglielmetti).

<sup>3</sup> The multiplicity of the results of this project is visible in the “Workshops and Conferences dossier R.E.I.L.” ([www.aess.regione.lombardia.it/reil/?page\\_id=5](http://www.aess.regione.lombardia.it/reil/?page_id=5)).

rural areas"/"memory and urban spaces" – collect all those projects that contain video interviews and micro-stories accessible on the web. These projects, together, have created a real network of Lombardy memory. They also included a communication action completely dedicated to photo-storytelling. The types of project outputs are related to actions: cataloguing, editing video, social web editing, territorial animation, training and re-use of repositories.

The project "E.C.H.I. Ethnographies Italo-Swiss for the valorisation of the intangible heritage of the Italian-Swiss border" is an Interreg project aimed at the cross-border region of the central Alps. Different places in this area are similar in terms of traditions, rituals, and celebrations in the intangible heritage field. The group of partners working on the project consists of: Aosta Valley, Canton of Vallese, Piedmont, Canton of Ticino, Lombardy (National Leader of the project through AESS), Graubünden and South Tyrol. Launched in September 2009 and completed in May 2013, the project was refinanced until July 2014. The project included a research contract called: "The design of cultural heritage for the project E.C.H.I."<sup>4</sup>.

The project is dedicated to cross-border areas. The rediscovery of the specificity of these places hints at future scenarios in which the cross-border areas will be back at the center of Europe. Principles of culture and renewed collective creative resources give strength to the traditional substrata. This action was brokered among different tools and objectives expressed by individual institutional partners insisting on a complex network of expertise and research-action devices in the cantonal and regional contexts. The general objective was to create a shared strategy to support the community of the Italian-Swiss border areas to respond to the risk of dispersion, regression and isolation of specific cultural and linguistic diversity and plurality, and also on the re-activation of some traditional activities potentially adoptable in the contemporary context. The various public cultural institutions involved have dedicated observation of the needs and desires of the community; in this way they became promoters of the network actions, increasing the

quality of the whole intangible cultural system. The project allowed the creation of a "common sense" approach through strategies aimed at organising a space for relations, trade, creation and recreation; this is based on the enhancement of a specific form of identity: belonging to the alpine territories border.

The role of design is mainly expressed in two main forms:

- quality relations design: design and process control through techniques of visualisation, facilitating communication among partners in order to identify and share objectives and outcomes;
- techniques for participatory design: building consensus with the communities involved from time to time; declaring the system of constraints and opportunities for the dissemination of the project (active learning, teaching modules, workshops, open lectures, study days, seminars, public presentations, conferences).

## Results

There are three areas of design oriented results ([www.echi-interreg.eu](http://www.echi-interreg.eu)):

(1) the implementation of a visual and narrative documentation. Some outputs:

(a) workshop documentation of five activities resulting from the involvement of a community of young creatives (photographers and videographers), young anthropologists and a network of local actors for the knowledge of the cultural asset and the application of ongoing survey methods shared by a community, creating short films and a photogallery.

(b) Intangible Research Web Inventory ([www.intangiblesearch.eu](http://www.intangiblesearch.eu)). The online inventory provides accessible tabs and research papers about the intangible topic. It is constantly upgraded and implemented by communities, individuals and stakeholders of the heritage (Brutti, 2008).

Interface design includes aspects of "user generated content" to stimulate community participation. After the



**Figure 3.** Excerpt from the infographic poster R.E.I.L.: themes and results (chart by Guglielmetti).

<sup>4</sup> Research Fellowship conferred by public announcement April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2010, the Politecnico di Milano, dept. of Design, Scientific coordinator: Raffaella Trocchianesi. Date of start of the collaboration: June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010.



investigation on user profiles that will attend the website, you have stimulated two forms of participation: proposing a new intangible cultural heritage included in the Inventory; collecting narratives of an asset already filed. The intent is to collect stories from the community: intangible heritage lives on the territory, it is part of all us.

(2) strategic and communication framework to promote and make contents accessible for the community. Some outputs:

(a) Argonauts in the Alps (<http://argonautinellealpi.org>): it is a journey of observation and a story of meetings of some intangible heritage witnesses as part of a group of famous writers. This experience has been translated into a blog, a book and a traveling event in five steps.

(b) Intangible Mag: on-line Magazine added to the project web portal E.C.H.I. ([www.echi-interreg.eu](http://www.echi-interreg.eu)), which collects reviews, voices, and stories on the theme of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

(c) Network map E.C.H.I.: three maps devoted to the ritual, the “savoir faire” and the characters of “rituals and legends alpine” (map children’s play) with a goal to guide the public and stimulate tourism. These maps are made from Tyvec material and are distributed on the web as cultural merchandising (Figure 4).

(d) Cartoon: graphic novel titled “The puppeteer of the Alps” by P. Cossi that expresses an intercultural and intergenerational story through a visual narrative.

(3) A design driven innovation model facilitating the reproduction and incorporation of this kind of knowledge in new forms and processes of valorisation. Some outputs:

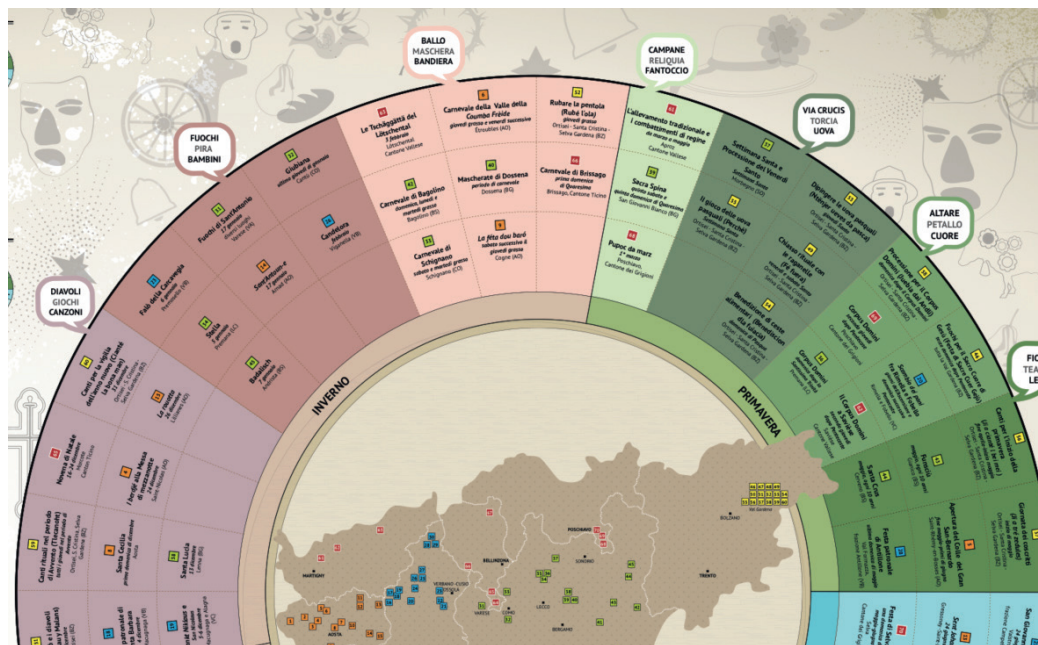
(a) Design in Bobbin Lace ([www.facebook.com/designaltombolo](http://www.facebook.com/designaltombolo)): the aim of this project was to develop “canturino” lace<sup>5</sup> through new aesthetics and traditional practices. A team of researcher-designers and a group of lacemakers worked to produce six prototypes of cross-border bags that represent the territory. The bags introduce new forms of use, new decorations, new materials and colors of yarn.

## Conclusion

### Advanced Design between diffused creativity and cultural policies

As a result of the stimulus legislation of UNESCO, there has been mobilisation of local communities and scientific communities around the world in developing new principles regarding recognition, inventory and valuation of intangible assets, which provide for the direct involvement of communities<sup>6</sup> and their territories.

Some preliminary conclusions can be made as a result of the two projects discussed above. The projects R.E.I.L. and E.C.H.I., though both an expression of the cultural policies of the Lombardy Region, were two different responses to very similar socio-cultural issues. The R.E.I.L. project identified an “aggregating force” from the different communities of the territory in which they created scenarios, autonomous and multi-outputs. Promoting a Registry, the Lombardy Region has provided a tool for the development of projects, but also a device for observing,



**Figure 4.** Detail of the map of the local rituals divided in the four seasons and according to key practices or objects (fire, dance, scarecrows and so on) (designed by Guglielmetti).

<sup>5</sup> “Canturino” bobbin lace is an ancient and specific tradition of Cantù (North Italy). In this country and in the local area there is a very important community of lacemakers.

<sup>6</sup> Framework Convention of the Council of Europe in 2005, better known as the Faro Convention, signed by Italy 27<sup>th</sup> February 2013, and that in fact promotes the participation as an essential factor for the management of heritage.

listening and providing results. The project demonstrated the presence of a “diffused creativity” test, often of a “distributed intelligence” among people involved in renewing the symbolic value but also the socio-economic potential of local know-how (in its various manifestations).

Some critical points emerged: the lack of recognition of the multi-disciplinary value of designing the testing methodologies of meta-design based on culture. The design skill was often involved only in the final stages (production output) of R.E.I.L. projects. The communities that operated autonomously – without a real synergy of disciplinary work – often missed/rejected objectives expressed in the brief.

With the E.C.H.I. project, the intervention consisted in the observation of needs from the territories and transformation of them into strategies and cross-cultural policies, through a multi-service platform that attempts to answer common needs and is easily aggregated in consistent activities. An example that comes close to models of people-centred action involves community empowerment platforms with a system of devices and products for use by the community. The spearhead of this program was the “Inventory/Repertoires” with a narrative quality which provides, in the obvious limitations of grid cataloguing, the cultural geography of an area. The focus on the explorative and uncoded phase of the design process, the capability of innovation, the role of a mediator among external factors, research and new “products” are strong elements of the Advanced Design approach that is recognised in these applied experiences. This explorative attitude of Advanced Design presents actions that involve three different levels: object, process and sharing (Celi, 2010). In this case, the object is the cultural asset of this specific territory, the process is the whole methodology as a framework of the actions, and the sharing is the process of the involvement of the communities.

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