# Geographies of experience. Communities, places, interactions.

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## ABSTRACT

The economic globalization and the worldwide connections enabled by the net have had a huge impact on the relationship between communities related to a territory. These phenomena are also the context in which other forms of aggregation – fluid and fast have been born, brought together by interests and cooperative scopes. The overlap between the global and local levels can, however, generate friction. The three actors of this relationship: people, as individuals and as communities, the physical spaces they experience, and the global digital dimension, therefore need a mediation interface that guarantees a balance. The three actors of this relationship: people, as individuals and as communities, the physical spaces they experience, and the global digital dimension, therefore need a mediation interface that guarantees a balance. So, what can be the role of design and technology in creating, maintaining and guaranteeing the connection between these entities? The paper discusses the role of design as an enabler of spatial and community relations, proposes a critical mapping of the approaches adopted through the critical analysis of three recent paradigmatic case studies.

*Keywords:* Spatial interaction design, social design, emotional design, space-based interaction

## INTERSECTIONS

The notion of boundaries and space in itself has deeply changed in the last decades. The trade and economic globalization, the mass media spread have become a more impacting reality thanks to the worldwide connections, both physical as well as digital that transformed the earth in a *global village* (McLuhan & Powers, 1992). These changes have profoundly modified the relationship between people and space, but also the social dynamics of those who live in this space (Bollini, 2011a). On the one hand, this has allowed the creation of transversal communities of interest distant in space, but virtually linked by the digital network. On the other hand, it has sanctioned the crisis of traditional local communities, their stability, their implicit knowledge (Manzini, 2018) and above all their relationship with physical space. Also, UNESO (2003) in its definition of cultural heritage has included *immaterial heritage*, pointing out that they directly involve these three actors: people, space and relationships. In fact, it states that ICH are *living traditions* "contemporary rural and

urban practices in which diverse cultural groups take part", *inclusive* "they [...] have evolved in response to their environments and they contribute to giving us a sense of identity and continuity" and *community -based.* Besides, the digital utopia of the *universal access* (Berners-Lee, 1997; Rifkin, 2000), the positive and optimistic side of globalization, has been defeated by the phenomena of web 2.0 and by the drift generated by social media (Lanier, 2014). The Verdnasky's Noosphere (Yanshin & Yanshina, 1997), the highest "sphere of reason" of the human knowledge and evolution constituted by the interaction of human minds – that many as identified with the *collective intelligence* (De Kerckhove, 1997) — seems to be much more conflictual than it had been thought. Instead of helping to build a peaceful world, based on collaboration and consensus, it risks overturning the balance of democracies instead, and further marginalize fragile parts of society that already suffer for the *digital divide.* "The capitalist journey, which began with the commodification of space and material, is ending with the commodification of human time and duration." stated Rifkin, underlining the dramatic shift from the original expectation to the current reality. Nevertheless, the digital revolution has created a permanent intersection between the two *dimensions*, the global and the local one, and changed permanently the paradigm based on which we interact: "Collaborative organizations are social groups emerging in highly connected environment. Their members choose to collaborate with the aim of achieving specific results. [...] Characterized by freedom of choice and openness." (Manzini, 2015)

Which is, then, the role of design and designers inside this contemporary scenario? Which is the role of social design in helping people building new form of communities living in the hybrid world – both global as well as local – enhanced by technologies?

## 1. SPACES OF EXPERIENCE

As twitted by Andy Budd – one of the most prominent figures in the field of user experience design – "People don't actually design experiences, but environments in which experiences happen." (2019). A first answer is that designers are *mediator* who design a *meta-space* – no matter the scale or if physical, digital or blended – in which people will live, meet, interact creating their own *world*.

The study, which embraces the broader spectrum of the relationship between community, territory, representation and social identity (see Bollini, 2018, 2014, 2011b; Bollini & Cerletti, 2009) mediated by the use of digital technologies, focused in particular on the mapping and interpretation of some recurrent approaches to the project. A first research phase mapped a wide range of case studies that were analysed on the basis of common and

comparative criteria (taken from previous methodological research: see Polillo, 2003, Nielsen 1993; DeLeon, 2018; and the ICOM 2018 research) to give rise to the clustering of recurrent phenomena. The latter have been identified with a keyword that connoted the conceptualization and the model of interaction underlying the project.

## 2. A POSSIBLE TAXONOMY

The aim is to return a possible multidimensional taxonomy (see table 1) of the design approaches. The first criterion adopted is the one that tries to identify the role of design and interaction. The keyword word tries to conceptually enclose the pivotal role of design in a process that goes from a more concrete and contextual level of connection between the three actors - a community, a territory and co-creation process - to a more abstract level. Here the interaction can be deferred in space and time, i.e. the bond is weak, but the intensity of the emotional activation is *dramatic*. The second issue is how designers can collaborate with people eliciting involvement, participation and sharing. In the latter case, the role perspective is overturned by the design on the people. That is, the designer has a maieutic and enabling role within the communities (see Maffei, Villari, 2015; Manzini, 2015) and the dynamics of social innovation generated bottom-up and from a participatory and co-creative process. The third parameter considers the scale of the effect that the project intervention can have within a range that goes from a local and circumscribed situation, to the globalized one. In this case, however, the two concepts are not simply the extremes of an intervention scale, as if it were a quantitative and dimensional criterion. On the contrary, they represent the complexity of design action and its consequences. Glocal, in fact, is not the middle ground in terms of *extension* of the interventions, but rather represents the binary nature of the relapses that act simultaneously on several interconnected levels. Metaphorically referring to Lorenz's theory (1972) we are faced with a sort of *butterfly effect* – that is "the sensitive dependence on initial conditions in which a small change in one state of a deterministic nonlinear system can result in large differences in a later state" (Boeing, 2016) – applied to the spatial and social dimension.

**Table 1. For a possible taxonomy of the relationship intercurrent between the three main actors: interaction, community, space.**

| Interaction Design Key Concepts | Community/People role and involvement | Effect scale on people and places |
|---|---|---|
| #belonging | co-design/participation | Local |
| #rememberance | witnessing memory | Glocal |
| #emotion | story-sharing | Local/Global |
| #impact | direct/deferred actions | Glocal |
| #perception | re/discovery | Local |
| #empathy | shared storytelling | Global |

## 3. THREE CASE STUDIES

According to this scheme, from the original research, three keywords have been selected that best represent the spectrum of this conceptualization: belonging, impact, and empathy.

### 3.1. #Belonging: Candy Chang I Wish This Was, New Orleans, 2010

In the first case, the project is aimed at the participation of suburban inhabitants who have suffered from processes of marginalization, gentrification and abandonment. The role played is to activate the community in a process of awareness and reappraisal of urban space. Developed in 2010 by the designer, activist and urban planner Candy Chang *I wish this was* is a participatory experience that explores the emotional involvement and the social engagement of a local community. "Infusing street art, urban planning, and ethnographic research, the project reveals the hopes, dreams and colorful imaginations across different neighborhoods, challenges barriers to participation, and provokes new insights for what New Orleans might yet become. Responses ranged from the functional to the poetic" (Chang, 2010). The project has become both an open *method* to be freely used and replicated, as well an exhibition part of the *Ethnographic Terminalia* exhibition featured in the 2012 Venice Architecture Biennale.

**Fig. 1. Materials and outcomes of the project: "I wish this was". (Source: http://candychang.com/work/i-wish-this-was/ No copyright declared)**

### 3.2. #impact: ArtScience Museum + WWF, Brian Gothong Tan: *Into the wild*, Singapore, 2017

*Into the Wild* is an immersive experience capable of soliciting and creating an emotional connection between art, science and environmental sustainability issues. Realized thanks to the partnership with WWF and with the support of Google, the installation creates a concrete link between the actions made within the virtual space and the Indonesian rainforest. The aim is not to increase the relatability, through technology, but to improve it. In fact, for each virtual tree planted during the visit to the museum, the project provides for the planting of a real tree, thus creating a possible intersection between the two worlds, between reality and a *possible* world.
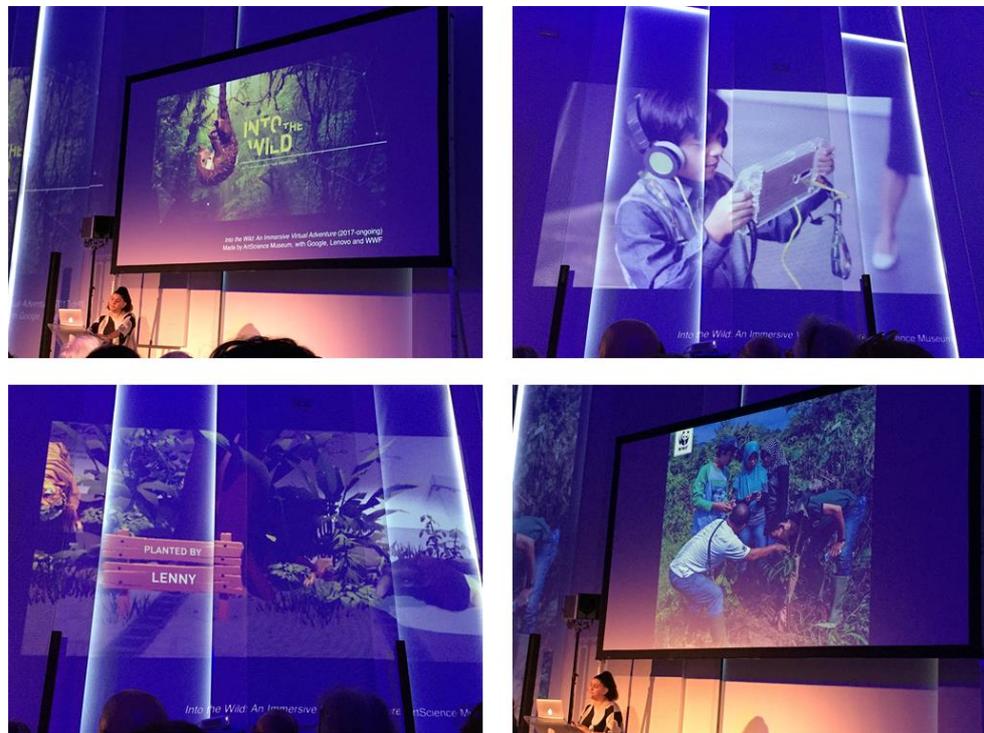
**Fig. 2. Exhibit, virtual world and WWF activities connected to the project: "Into the wild" (Source: pictures taken during a public event)**

### 3.3. #empathy: Gabo Arora and Chris Milk with the UN & Samsung *Clouds Over Sidra*, 2015

At the basis the projects there is the research that Gabo Arora has carried out with virtual reality, but beyond technology: how do we represent pain and suffering? If we show the horror and brutality of war, do we stop waging it? Doesn't seem to be the case. On the contrary, we become insensitive and addicted to suffering and its representation. The relationship with violence seems almost to become voyeuristic. When we identify with the other, the enemy even becomes a pleasant spectacle. Each war seems to have been narrated through a specific media: photography for the First World War; television, in the case of Vietnam; Syria thanks to Youtube and Black Lives Matter directly on Facebook Live. However, the shocking images seem to paralyze our imagination and with it, our ability to identify with others, to feel empathy. Designing putting people back at the center, telling their stories, putting them in their context: this allows us to understand and get involved.

The technology of virtual reality, immersive and multisensory, requires the creation of a new grammar and a new vocabulary. The experience of embodiment allows a deep physical and emotional involvement in which the impression of presence generates the need to interact, to create a relationship. The feeling of being looked at allows us to recognize ourselves and

to enter into a dialogic experiential dimension. It is the gaze of Sidra, the twelve-year-old girl who leads us into the Syrian refugee camp (Zaatari Refugee Camp), her narrative that takes us into the context, allows us to touch it, to experience it and, finally, to feel empathy.

"Virtual reality in the past was previously used almost exclusively in the gaming industry, and most recently in music. This is the first time it is being used for a pressing global issue, and the feeling of presence is immensely powerful. We hope it will create empathy, inspiring decision makers to make commitments towards helping to address the refugee crisis. [...] I want to influence decision makers, first and foremost. I don't think all of them truly know what [Sidra's life] is like and, in giving them this experience, I'm hopeful they will be moved to weigh greater the consequences of their decisions" is the statement of Arora (2015) reported in the UN Action aid campaign website about the use of VR to tell the stories of vulnerable communities.

These are the words of UNSG Ban Ki-moon during Kuwait opening speech in 2015: "Last night I saw a deeply moving video entitled "Clouds over Sidra". It is an amazing virtual reality production of the starkness of life in the Za'atari Refugee Camp through the eyes of a beautiful young girl by the name of Sidra. She says: 'I have been here a year and a half and that is long enough... but no one knows when it will be safe to go home, nor what will be left for them when they return.'"



**Fig. 3. Bi-dimensional views of the VR experience: "Clouds over Sidra" (Source: picture taken during a public event)**

**Fig. 4. UN Secretary-General Mr. Ban Ki-moon watches Clouds over Sidra VR film. Photo: David Gough (Source: www.facebook.com/pg/SDGaction/photos/?tab=album&album_id=10152801735602496)**

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

The transformation of the very nature of social communities, from stable local groups over time to temporary liquid forms of aggregation with an interest or purpose, opens up new questions and challenges. On the one hand, the processes that are hitting the anthropomorphic territories and the urban areas are prophesizing modifying economic, structural and social historicized structures, giving rise to a sort of fracture with the previous continuity and spatial contiguity. Phenomena with the *airification* and challenge of pos-gentrification require a profound rethinking of the use of space and its re-design. On the other hand, digital technologies - the web, IoT, ubiquitous computing - create a sort of overlap between the physical world and the virtual one made of connections and data, creating a *blended* and hybrid experience or, better yet, *phygital*. It is within these new scenarios that design must find its conceptual, factual and ethical role and its relationship with society as a whole and with individuals in order to play a role of enabler and facilitator.

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