



Reasons  
to Research  
in the  
Mediterranean  
Area



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### **Reasons to Research in the Mediterranean Area**

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# CONTEMPORARY PANORAMA

030

# Design Approaches and Methodologies for the Valorization of Places. Experiences from the Western Mediterranean Area

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## Keywords

Design for Territories, Mediterranean Places, Place Identity, Territorial Valorization

## Abstract

Design approaches, competences, and methodologies have a significant impact and reputation on the process of analysis, construction and enhancement of places. Indeed, design is particularly able in driving interventions, focused on the valorization of tangible and intangible local peculiarities, which give shape to, highlight and connect specific territorial identities.

In this paper, we are going to propose a model we want to use in order to synthesize the possible approaches design can activate for the valorization of places and in particular of the Mediterranean area. We are going to use the biological and artificial metaphors and express them according to tangible and intangible dimensions. As we are going to explain, this approach is particularly useful for the Mediterranean scenarios but can be extended to other territories with similar characteristics.

## 1. Introduction

The definition of what we intend for the Mediterranean is very challenging, especially nowadays. We definitely cannot define this area according to institutional borders or political boundaries. Instead, we can refer to the intangible elements which connect (and sometimes divide) the populations which enrich this “fluid” area (Matvejevic, 1987; Braudel, 1998). Fluxes of people have always characterized the so-called Mediterranean area and these fluxes have always carried with them culture, heritage, lifestyles, in one word: identity. The *ethnoscapes* theorized by Appadurai (1996) have always characterized the Mediterranean, however, nowadays these fluxes are wider in terms of frequency, distance and numbers than before.

The identity and the complexity of the Mediterranean area can be defined also by its peculiarities, such as its productive and economic structure which is strictly connected with lifestyles. This structure supports a new idea of quality, strongly characterized by local features, but able to compete in international scenarios. A territorial development of this kind is able to keep together socio-economic relationships with tradition and innovation; it starts, for example, from the specificities of certain handmade local productive systems, of the cultural heritage system and of the culinary and agricultural resources.

According to the call, we intended both tangible and intangible peculiarities and common features of the Mediterranean area as an opportunity to deepen and reframe some topics, which already are part of the Research Network D4T – Design for Territories agenda of the Politecnico di Milano,

Design Department<sup>1</sup>. In this paper, we are going to present an approach which considers the biological and the artificial metaphors applied to the 'valorization' goal of territories (or places). The concepts presented here have a strong relationship with co-creation processes, technologies, development of sense-making and the resolution of specific problems, as we are going to discuss hereunder. Before introducing these concepts, we are going to trace the theoretical and research path that led to the foundation of a line of research specifically focused on design for territories.

## 2. Design and territories: from object of study to context of action

It may be pretty unusual for the design discipline to talk about territorial projects: we are used to think about design as the project of "things" for "people"; actually, this concept was soon enlarged into a more holistic vision of "environments" and then of "experiences" for people. In the evolution of the discipline, design dealt at first with the topic of territories as local systems of physical and cultural resources that influenced the definition of products. These artifacts, objects, items incorporate material and semantic values linked to the contexts where they were designed or realized. The 1998 research headed *SDI Sistema Design Italia*<sup>2</sup> represents a first systemic scouting of

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1. D4T - Design for Territories is a Research Network financed by the Design Department of the Politecnico di Milano in 2015, coordinator prof. Marina Parente (<http://www.d4t.polimi.it>).

2. The research *SDI Sistema Design Italia* (Italian Design System) was financed by MIUR (Italian Research Ministry) and coordinated by prof. Ezio Manzini from 1998 to 2000. It involved 17 Italian universities and in 2001 gained *Compasso d'Oro* price instituted by ADI (Italian Design Association).

the Italian design peculiarities in a relationship with the diverse geographical areas of origins, their cultures, traditions and specific productive specializations. From this scouting phase an opposite relationship emerged: beyond products “shaped” by the contextual situation, some of them started a dialogue with the places of origin, renovating and reinterpreting a different reading, vision and, indirectly, definition of the territory itself. This consideration opened the floor to subsequent research, highlighting the interest of the design discipline in considering the territory as an object of design actions through a series of wider activities ranging from product design to strategic services and experience design (Parente, 2010). The national research project, *Me.design. Strategies, tools and operation of industrial design to enhance and strengthen the resources of the Mediterranean between local and global* (2002-04)<sup>3</sup>, paid a specific attention to the strategic use of resources in the Mediterranean area, according to a design approach, which in this specific case was defined as (Parente, 2016):

- *integrated*, because territorial resources were considered as a whole
- *ascending*, because it incorporated bottom-up and participatory processes
- *territorial*, because reiterated the concept of the local system and the value generated between natural resources, social structure, and culture of the place (Villari, 2012).

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3. Co-financed by the Ministry of University and coordinated by prof. Giuliano Simonelli of the Politecnico di Milano, it was conducted with the universities of Milan, Genoa, Naples Federico II, Naples SUN, Chieti, Reggio Calabria and Palermo.



The Me.design research considered the territory not only as a context but also as a specific object of intervention. Indeed, it took the concept of territorial capital as a crucial paradigm.

Summing up, as a design project object, a territory has to be intended as a set of resources, territorial and environmental capital, the identity of which has to be preserved, valorized and renovated; as design project context, the spatial (or scale) dimension where the project is located, its process and its results, have to be taken into account.

The spatial dimension of design practices was analyzed and identified in terms of *situatedness*. The standardization and the de-placement of products and processes were substituted with a profound interpretation of the territorial peculiarities of the product-systems and the way in which places “enter” inside objects. We went from an initial independence from territory to a vision of territory as a context where to localize the project or to use it as stimulus and element of value (design in the place) leading to a perspective of a territory as the object of the project (design of the place). In this last case, design is mainly focused on the valorization of the territorial capital, that is tangible and intangible resources of a place (Zurlo, 2003; Villari, 2005).

However, the concept of “design of the place”, to simplify things, is usually associated with projects close to the traditional productions (in terms of memory and authenticity of the cultural tradition) or authorial top-down actions for designing the identity of a place (the image – similar to a brand – of a territory in terms of visibility and attractiveness); instead, design

is more focused on wider and strategic topics and is concerned with the valorization of the identity of places as an incentive for local development, the valorization of resources, and the promotion and empowerment of local communities.

The need for a wider definition was born. We need to use the concept of “design *for* the place” as a synthesis of the two aforementioned approaches and as an emphasis on the proactive and systemic capacities of design.

This evolution arose out of the confrontation with other disciplines, such as urban planning, that has deepened the concept of sustainability of places. Alberto Magnaghi (2000) efficiently synthesized this evolutionary approach in three phases:

- *functionalist*: territory is not generally seen as a cultural interlocutor but as a support for other goals;
- *environmentalist*: territory is intended as a natural system. Environmental sustainability becomes the structural condition for economic development.
- *anthropo(bio)centric*: territory is seen as a highly complex living organism. Sustainability takes into consideration both environmental and political, social, and economic dimensions.

When we talk about “design *for* the place”, we are in line with this third vision, putting emphasis on the capabilities of design in facilitating interpretative actions, negotiation and qualification of behaviors able to connect places and people, to make needs evolve and to change models and social settlements in a specific context or shared space – even an intangible one.

Within this framework, the territorial dimension is not only a bond and a requisite of design, but also an opportunity of growth from a social point of view (Lupo, 2008).

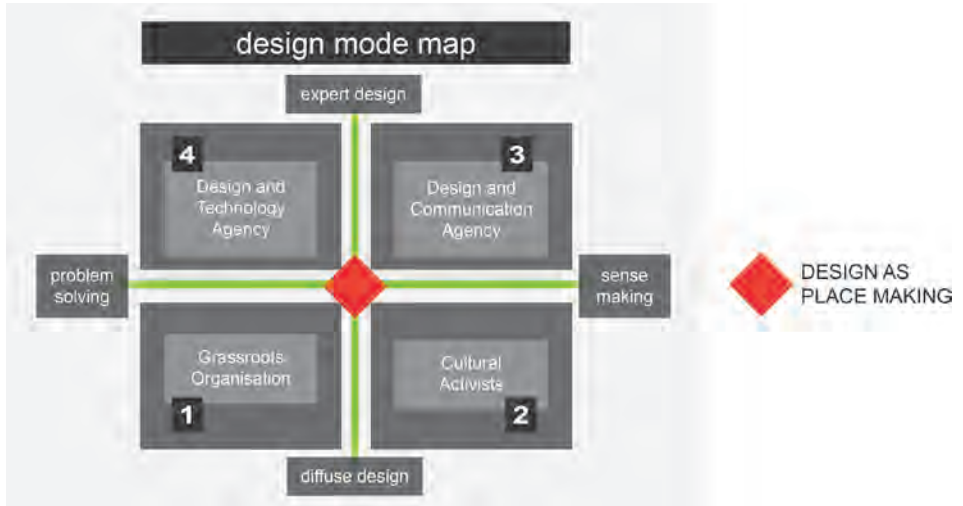
### 3. Design and Valorization of Places

Design has always put people at the heart of its actions. Design process and strategies are focused on re-interpreting reality from the privileged point of view of people, looking at their needs, their culture, their habits, and lifestyles. In addition to that, the role of designers is increasingly not that of implementing top-down projects but to favor the spread of knowledge and the growth of diffused design capacities (Manzini, 2004; 2015).

This approach may be particularly useful when we are faced with strategic planning for the enhancement of Mediterranean places. Indeed, designers may be detectors of those similarities and common purposes which can be the foundation for the valorization processes of Mediterranean places. Designers can provide of stories, enable virtual, physical and conceptual platforms where it is possible to activate social processes to negotiate solutions, meanings, technologies, materials, and shapes. In a similar way, design put in place several kinds of “materialization” of a territory through the development of products and artefacts strictly connected with its tangible and intangible elements.

Ezio Manzini (2014; 2015) proposes a model to classify different and more recent design approaches, using a map where on the x-axis there are “motivations and expectations” explicated in two polarities “problem-solving” and “sense-making”, and on the y-axis, which explains “actors and competences”, there

are “diffuse design” and “design expert”. Each quadrant generated by the crossing represents a specific design mode and its evolutions (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1.** Design mode map, adapted from Manzini E. (2015), “Design when Everybody Designs”, p.40.

However, if we refer to design contents, it is clear that the borders between problem-solving and sense-making tend to be blurred. We are particularly interested in the *Design as place maker* design culture. This specific culture of design happens at the boundaries and is able to clarify their permeability. *Design as place maker* is characterized by the fact that “various design experts, from both the problem-solving and the sense-making perspectives, are converging into a central area of the map to develop projects at a local or regional scale” (Manzini, 2014: 98). Manzini makes reference to the relationship between a local and a global approach, which is able to create a new ecology of places. The typologies of projects having their origins in these collaborations are different and

have mainly to do with service design, social innovation, and experience design.

All of them (service design, social innovation, and experience design) can represent the possible design fields for the valorization of places since it has to do with the people's needs in connection with local resources capable of being activated and communicated both for their emotional, functional and cultural impacts (Ceppi, 2004).

For these reasons, the valorization of places can be both a physical intervention for improvement and a creation of sense and meanings.

#### **4. Regeneration, Renovation, Replication and Representation: different strategies for the Valorization of Places**

We decided to work with the two biological and artificial strategies on both tangible and intangible elements of the territory:

- a biological process typical of living beings, with an idea of regeneration of the territory that goes from its development to its growth and renovation and onwards until its multiplication;
- typical dynamics of the artificial and its fruition, which, starting from the reproduction (audio, video, etc.), arrive at its representation (*mise-en-scene* or narration).

In the following paragraphs we are going to present the four strategies concepts resulting from the intersection between tangible/intangible dimensions and the biological/artificial metaphor. It is important to stress the fact that these bound-

aries are blurred and therefore the different strategies are in some cases overlapping (Fig. 2).

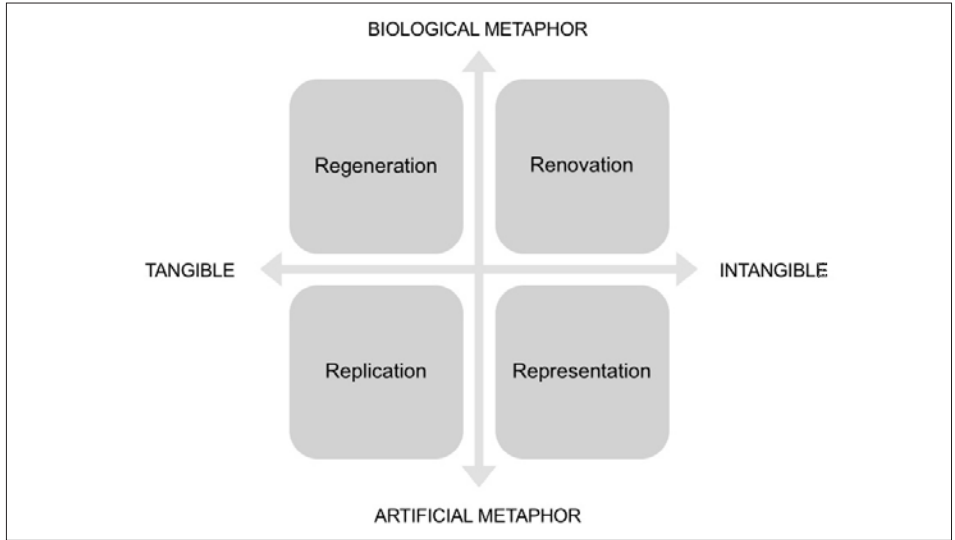


Figure 2. Strategies for the Valorization of Places.

More specifically, within the biological metaphor the biological concepts of growth, development, and diversification apply to the design of the territory through the *regeneration* of its tangible elements (resources, products, etc.) and the *renovation* of the intangible ones (traditions, identity etc.). The power of this metaphor lies in the careful attention to the intrinsic qualities of the territory as an organism capable of self-regeneration, repair, imitation, and virtuous specialization.

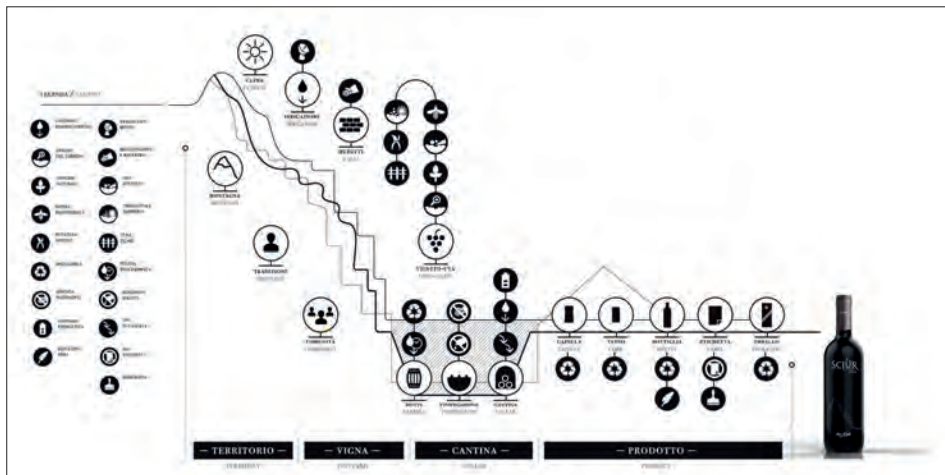
It is possible to talk about *regeneration* when territorial valorization actions are designed, both in terms of physical and material development (infrastructure expansion, redevelopment artifacts, production of new artifacts). These actions

can leverage the existing territorial capital and are inserted in continuity with desired virtuous evolutionary processes, which, however, are at a disadvantage from exogenous obstacles. Therefore, a rebalance or a facilitation (speed up) of these processes is needed.

In this field, the scale of design is that of service design, but also strategic design and policy design. This design approaches, starting from the enhancement and the diversification of local resources, regenerates places, tracing the whole supply chain, thanks to experience design or the involvement and empowerment of local communities.

It is primarily an expert design oriented towards problem solution; people's degrees of involvement, bottom-up participation and self-promoting, can be, depending on the scale of intervention and complexity, marked out as diffuse design. Taking into consideration *regeneration* case, we can mention projects for the valorization of traditional products of the wine and food tradition, which are able to generate new cooperative networks and cultural offers, as for example the design project developed for Nino Negri wine Sciúr (Fig. 3). Nino Negri company, based in Valtellina, asked the collaboration of the Strategic Design Master (POLI.design - Politecnico di Milano), to develop a strategy for a new wine able to recover the knowledge of traditional vineyards of Valtellina and of local know-how in a local contemporary product. Sciúr is intended to be a prototype that encourages a trend, a repeatable example, capable of having a positive effect on reality, showing how knowledge may actually translate into a product, bottle or production system.





**Figure 3.** Nino Negri, Sciur design system. Project by Strategic Design Master' students, POLI.design - Politecnico di Milano.



**Figure 4.** Moulding Tradition project by Studio Formafantasma, retrieved by <http://www.formafantasma.com/moulding-tradition>.



Another example of *regeneration* can be the Moulding Tradition project developed by Studio Formafantasma in 2009 (Fig. 4). The project takes inspiration from the Sicilian ceramic tradition (Teste di Moro), introduced by the invasion of Moorish people of Caltagirone in 17th-century. Recently fluxes of migrants are moving to Sicily from the same lands as immigrants. The project Moulding Tradition focuses on the relationship between past and present, fear and tolerance, innovating and evolving the local traditional ceramic in light of contemporary issues. The project results in a collection of ceramic vessels decorated with portraits of migrants and with information, as for example the percentage of refugees who immigrate per year.

We talk about *renovation* when the dynamics of continuity of the virtuous evolutionary processes of a territory activated and facilitated by design are placed in an immaterial dimension and therefore in the intangible elements of the territory, such as its values, its identity, its image, its reputation, its traditions, its capital of knowledge. In this case, too, design activates development processes that leverage existing but weak or even potential capitals, going to redefine, through the renewal of values, customs and traditions, or the diversification of processes and know-how, the overall identity of a territory and simultaneously its reputation and competitiveness. The scale of design is most often that of strategic and communication design (corporate image, brand design, design of events) that may be oriented to develop the attractiveness for both tourist and residential purposes as well as investment and entrepreneurship.

Examples that fall into *renovation* case are the strategic and visual projects of local identity, and the actions of territorial promotion and enhancement and re-contextualization of typical know-how or cultural traditions, customs and practices, that indirectly regenerate the identity and the cultural positioning of a place in the tourist or productive imaginary. Here, expert and diffuse design co-exist: alongside institutional and top-down policies, bottom-up semi-structured or temporary proposals and actions (*activism*) are generated, and both are oriented toward sense-making.

As a case study, we can mention the new image branding for Porto, developed by White Studio in 2014 (Fig. 5). The Portuguese city needed a visual system, a visual identity that could organize and simplify communication with citizens, and the relationship with local authorities. The objective was to represent Porto as a global city and at the same time as a city for everyone.

In a similar way, Spring Agency worked from the Morocco place-branding campaign for the English-speaking tourists, called Much Morocco (Fig. 6). The visual image is based on the typical Moorish tale through which it is possible to see photos depicting various landscapes and touristic attractions.

Talking about the artificial metaphor (located in the lower section of our scheme), the dimension of the “production of the new”, starting from exogenous factors and its understanding and experience, is the most valuable among dynamics of development and diversification of territories. The power of this metaphor should be read in the ability to switch from the exploitation of existing capital (enabled by design) to the explo-



**Figure 5.** Porto image branding by White Studio, retrieved by <https://www.behance.net/gallery/20315389/New-identity-for-the-city-of-Porto>.



**Figure 6.** Much Morocco branding project by Spring Agency, retrieved by <http://www.springagency.co.uk/case-studies/morocco/>.

ration of new possibilities (March, 1991) through a deliberate design action that introduces and negotiates disruptive “artificial” elements: artificial which, in this context, does not take the negative connotations of fake or unnatural, but the multi-faceted one of non-natural, then artifact (Manzini, 1990). Concerning the tangible dimensions of a territory, it is possible, for example, to extend the modalities of experience and enjoyment of its material assets through an enlarged dissemination and distribution of its products (being them simply local products or holders of specific identity values) but replicated in forms re-designed for other users and different markets (*replication*), in order to enable geographical relocation or thematic reframing (cross-fertilization of product sectors). The metaphor of the artificial applies to the processes of valorization of the territory through the *replication* of tangible elements (shapes and materials) and *representation* of the intangible ones (images and imaginary), able to create new ways of fruition of territories.

The design scales of action are various: from strategic to product and communication design, able to generate models of knowledge and fruition of a place even in an indirect and mediated manner. Examples in this area are the design of iconic products, or the diffuse practice of creolization of local products and the incorporation of new products and processes where the original references are even too blurred and frayed. The role of expert design is therefore relevant in this area since it uses a culturally advanced and sensitive approach opposed to (but also capable of leading and improving) the spontaneous and widespread phenomena of production.

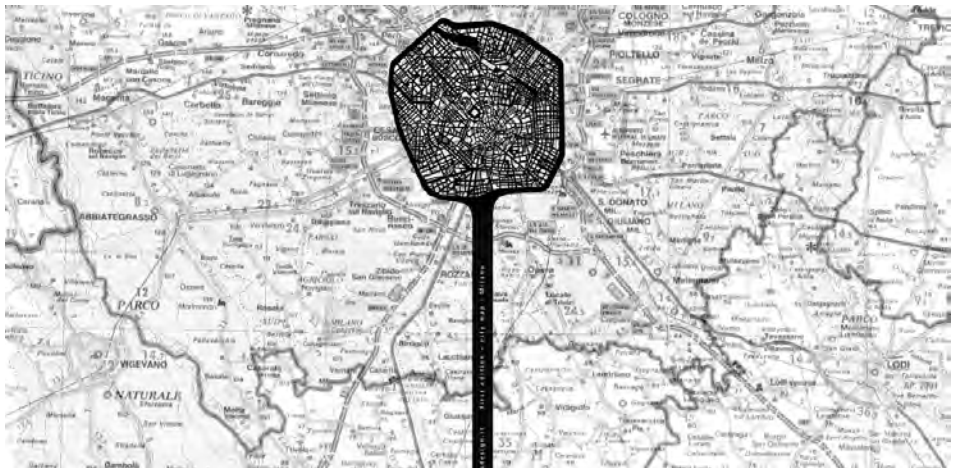
The case study we propose for the *replication* process is Bye Bye Fly souvenir, designed by Giulio Iacchetti for Pandora Design (2007) (Fig. 7). The idea at the base of the fly swatter is realizing a non-conventional souvenir for Milan. The designer was inspired by the mosquitoes problem which affects the Milanese summer evenings. He thus thought of a fly swatter having the map of Milan instead of the classical net to catch flies (Parente, 2012).

Another interesting example of *replication* is the Ex-voto project by Studio Nucleo (2017), which was part of a larger project called PARA20SACRI (Fig. 8). The designers reinterpreted the *ex-voto* objects (immersed in resin) and, collaborating with Italian artisans and crafts workshops, they created 1.000 pieces in limited edition.

We talk of *representation* when, in activating new dynamics of production and re-use of a territory, design operates on its intangible and identity elements building up consciously (regardless of a deliberate design of new explicit identities), new values and images that return into new meanings. These representations can have a narrative vocation and a theatrical and performed characterization (*mise-en-scene* of the territory) or even a fictional one. In all the vocations, the experiential dimension is the main objective of the application of design skills (ranging from communication design to experience design and interaction design) which are put in place both by an expert and a diffuse design.

MappiNa platform, born by an idea of the urban planner Ilaria Vitellio, is the case study that in our opinion is able to explain the representation process (Fig. 9).





**Figure 7.** Bye Bye Fly, Giulio Iacchetti for Pandora Design, retrieved by <http://www.giulioiacchetti.com/?p=509&lang=it>.



**Figure 8.** Ex-voto project by Studio Nucleo. Pictures by studio pepe fotografia, retrieved by <http://nucleo.to/site/ex-voto/>.

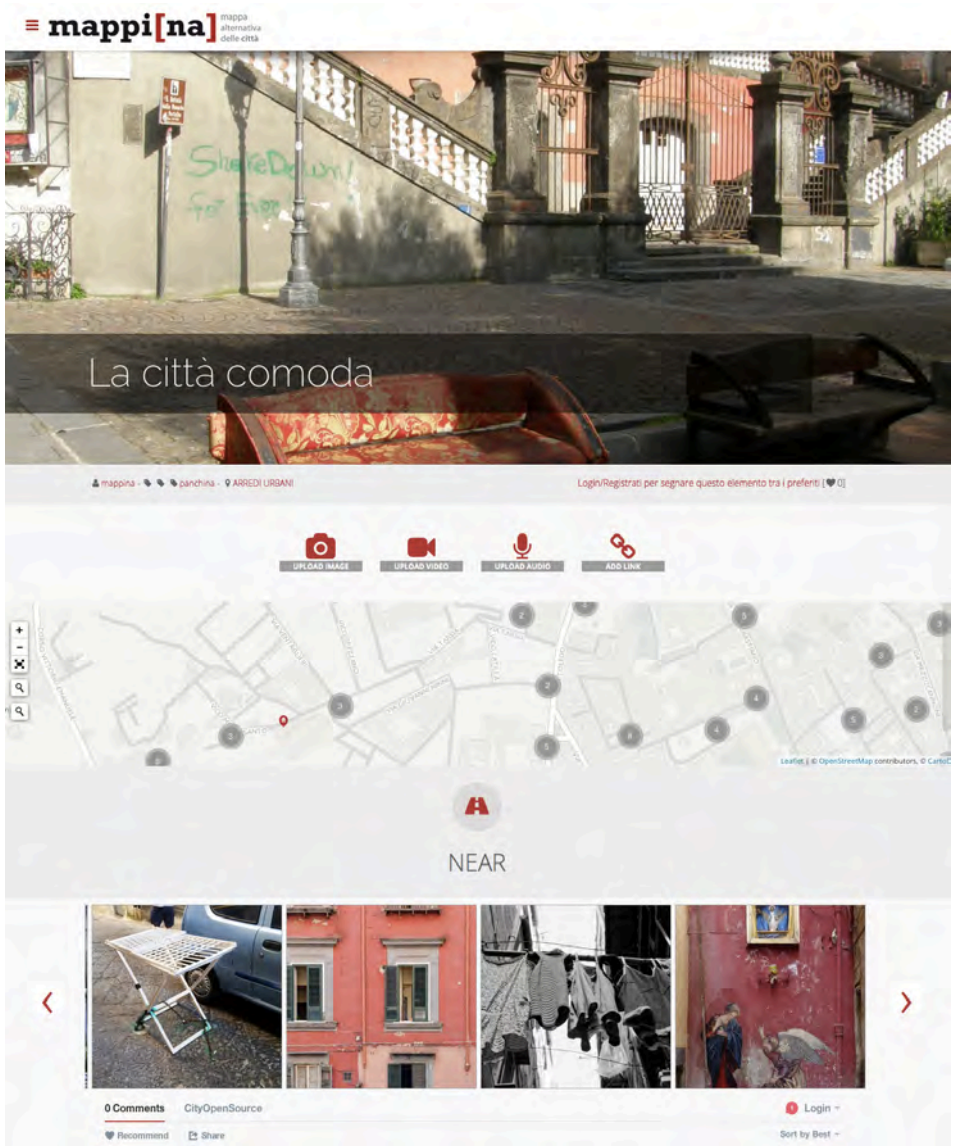


Figure 9. MappiNa platform, retrieved by <http://www.mappi-na.it/>.

On this platform, people can contribute to the creation of a contemporary map of Naples by sharing photos, audio files and videos about unusual aspects of the city (Parente, 2015). To conclude, we can mention the Digital Diaries developed by the agency Can't Forget It{aly} (Fig. 10). Videomakers (in most cases foreigners by choice) depict Italian cities and landscapes in a new way: showing people and their (real) life.



**Figure 10.** Screenshot from Digital Diary Basilicata (2013) by Can't Forget It{aly} agency, retrieved by [http://cantforget.it/portfolio\\_type/basilicata-lonely-planet-italia-radio-capital/](http://cantforget.it/portfolio_type/basilicata-lonely-planet-italia-radio-capital/).



We can sum-up the four approaches here presented as follow.

Valorization	Tangible	Intangible
<b>Biological metaphor (development)</b>	Regeneration of products, resources, places	Renovation of values, identities, images, reputation, uses and traditions, know-how, knowledge capital (attractiveness and competitiveness)
	Design: expert (mainly) Design mode: problem solving (mainly)	Design: expert and diffuse Design mode: sense-making (mainly)
<b>Artificial metaphor (fruition and experience)</b>	Replication (copy) of forms, materials	Representation (mise en scene or fiction) of values, imaginary, identities
	Design: expert (mainly) Design mode: problem solving (mainly)	Design: expert and diffuse Design mode: sense-making (mainly)

**Table 1.** Strategies for the Valorization of Mediterranean Places.

## 5. Conclusions

Starting from the reasoning developed within the Research Network D4T - Design for Territories, such as the discussion about the change of the design role in projects dealing with places, which use an integrated approach in light of the specific visions of the “design in/of the place”, we extended these concepts and strategies to the design of Mediterranean territories. We systematized the theoretical and methodological foundations for the valorization of territories, which we connected to the actors, the contents, the strategies, and the objectives of design projects focused on places. Therefore, we analyzed this topic looking at the artificial and the biological metaphors in connection with tangible and intangible dimensions. Thanks to this approach we are able, from one side to identify and show a framework of already developed experiences, from the other

side to give a referring tool for the development of new design projects focused on Mediterranean places. It is clear from this framework how the design enables all the strategic assets of a territory through activation processes that build the physical dimension and the identity of places in a non-pre-determined way, but flexible and open to multiple options and variations. This openness to multiplicity corresponds to the understanding of contemporary social dynamics of globalization, mobility and migration of information, objects and people that make a growing number of variables the needs of appropriation and representation of communities and places, and challenge the monolithic nature and completeness of certain representations in favor of solutions more differentiated, multi-layered and open-ended.

In this context, the scale of territory reproducibility and reproduction, too, changes, contemplating the vision and action of a single individual as equally significant and constitutive of that one of a group, in a general process of enablement of authorship. Design, therefore, is also concerned with achieving conversational, consultative and negotiation processes of such options. The systematization here proposed is obviously a simplification of the possible approaches, useful for visualizing some conceptual categories. However, design projects may not be identified by looking at them from strict conceptual borders, since they live out of coexisting realities and overlaps. Embracing the complexity of Mediterranean places and the need to reinterpret their identities and functionalities, design can play a very important role in creating spaces, networks, and engagement for a collaborative understanding and a redefinition of the territories where we live.

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