

P / REFERENCES OF DESIGN

EPI-CENTRES OF THE WORLD WIDE WEB: 30 YEARS OF ITALIAN WEB INTERFACE DESIGN HISTORY, A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION.

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ABSTRACT | When we think of the third industrial revolution, namely the digital one, we have Silicon Valley in mind. The southern area of the San Francisco Bay is where, back in 1969, Stanford University launched the ARPANET, the first seed of the Internet revolution, and many of the pioneering and contemporary companies driving the digital turn, as well as most of the innovation in the field comes from California. Nevertheless, the WWW backbone and the globalisation brought up by the Internet have declined in the different regions according to a glocal perspective, creating a relationship between the centre and the peripheries that should be critically investigated.

Although in a borderline position, Italy was among the “early adopters” thanks to a technological infrastructure that created favourable conditions to establish a context for the flourishing of website design communities of practitioners and experimentation in the field. Besides, some of the Italian protagonists of the 90s and early 2000s gained visibility on the international scene and established original trends in the Italian community.

The paper proposes, drafts, and discusses a possible Italian historiography of the last 30 years, treating web interface design as a contemporary digital artefact at the crossroads of transdisciplinary approaches: graphic design, computer science, and Human-Computer Interaction. In doing that, it also faces aspects of research in the fields of contemporary design history able to propose different perspectives and trace down different stories compared to the “official” mythology of the Information Age. The historical approach, in fact, questions the relationship between global and local actors, decolonising the “vulgate” in order to include decentralised experiences enriching with points of view a complex, articulated, interconnected, but not monolithic evolutionary process as narrated so far.

1. Centre and Peripheries: Different Perspectives

It has been thirty years since the web protocol created by Berners-Lee was made available royalty-free and led to the birth of the World Wide Web as a (future) mass medium that we are all familiar with today. Although in a peripheral position, Italy was among the “early adopters” of the digital revolution thanks to a strong infrastructure innovation creating favourable conditions to establish a technological context for the flourishing of websites as communication artefacts and an intriguing experimental field of design. Besides, some of the Italian protagonists in the 90s and early 2000s gained visibility on the international scene. It is helpful to name some of them, such as Mirko Pasqualini, an Italian ‘enfant-prodige’ of web design based in New York and co-founder of WXO, who tragically passed away in 2020; Luigi De Aloisio, currently working on the ‘nostatic’ explorations; Simone Legno, mentioned in *New Masters of Flash* (Baumann et al., 2003); SuperTotto.com aka Totto Renna. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, several local community events and awards also created leadership in terms of languages and approaches intimately connected with the rest of the Italian design scene.

More recently, others have set specific trends in the Italian digital design community, such as Claudia Molinari, internationally awarded narrative-game designer of the duo WeAreMüesli.

By opening the perspective to experimentation beyond the bi-dimensionality of a display, Studio Azzurro and its intellectual offspring represented a turning point towards a more transversal way of conceiving and conceptualising communication and experience projects mediated, enabled or augmented by digital technologies. If, in the latter case, the architectural and exhibition scale, as well as the intellectual presence of the late Paolo Rosa (Balzola & Rosa, 2019), have made it possible to trace these design experiences in a structured manner, vice versa in the case of what has populated the web and the digital world over the past 30 years, it hardly leaves footprints and traceable paths. Therefore, reconstructing and telling a coherent, documented and articulated story of ephemeral, emerging and complex phenomena seems to be the real challenge in terms of methods rather than content.

The historiographical issue becomes all the more necessary and urgent for those phenomena that belong to the contemporaneity and to contexts that are eccentric with respect to the disciplinary centre of innovation and experimentation in terms of geographical and cultural spaces.

It is indeed paradoxical that a global phenomenon such as the advent of the World Wide Web, in terms of its revolutionary scope and planetary pervasiveness, should be perceived in terms of approaches, models, aesthetics and stylistic features as a single, unifying and unified corpus. The role played by the big players in the digital information market, the “four horsemen of the [digital] apocalypse” (Galloway, 2015) is undeniably homologating, as in the case, for example, of the aesthetics of Apple’s products and interfaces or the design system (material design) of Google/Android, which impose patterns and guidelines that are universally received and adopted, just to name two of the leaders in the hardware/software/cloud/service sector.

Even within equally international phenomena, in fact, as in the case of rationalism and modernist architecture, it was possible to identify local schools, currents, interpretations, as in the case of the Bauhaus or Scandinavian interpretation or individual personalities active between and after the two world wars. This was also the case in the field of visual communication and graphic design, where the variations of the Swiss style or of the so-called ‘Milanese School’ or, within the same tradition, the more recent Dutch “wave”, have been contrasted with a modern language, it seems more difficult to define as many variations, paths and personalities in the field of digital design.

The relationship between the epicentre of emerging phenomena and the successive waves that spread from it to more distant territories often defines a leadership role and a subordinate terrain. If this progression is particularly visible in certain historical processes, the time lag becomes the space for mediation with local material culture, taste and aesthetics or for original elaboration.

In their emergence and evolution, innovations often transcend the context and purpose for which they were conceived to spill over into other domains and respond to other needs implicit in the social fabric. However, this dynamic relationship moves asynchronously. Technology dictates the rules by making itself accepted, indeed often becoming indispensable (Bucchi, 2020).

However, recent and contemporary phenomena, such as the electronic and then digital revolution, show a rapidity in which these different planes collapse. The web has become a worldwide mass communication platform in less than a decade. Although it is a polycentric phenomenon that sees the American way (first the military and then the Silicon Valley) and the European communities (from the academic-scientific spheres to the open source model) converge, the Bay Area soon takes over thanks to the concentration of entrepreneurial realities that manage to ride the “momentum” in commercial terms gaining the leadership. The United States, specifically California, formulates the rules governing innovation and design processes in political, financial and commercial terms. These are rules to which the rest of the world has inevitably adhered because of the monopolies that have been created, i.e., the dominant role of platforms such as Amazon or Meta or software such as Adobe or Microsoft. As Gui Bonsiepe (1993) already pointed out,

“the imbalance in international trade relations [...] may represent a type of power that should supersede traditional forms of ‘making history’. [...] without lapsing into the idea that the industrial design of the periphery is merely a belated and shoddy repetition of the process through which the industrialised countries have gone through in the last ninety years when the d.i. was transformed into a social reality.” (Bonsiepe, 1993, pp.78-79)

In particular, in some of the essays dating from 1987, Bonsiepe analyses and discusses the ambiguity of this relationship in industrial design in the broadest sense, but especially in the transition to the electronic and then digital world in which design itself becomes an interface and interpretative model of asymmetrical social, economic and political relations. Among the themes that emerge as characterising this relationship between centre and periphery, Bonsiepe identifies the question of autonomy and a partially hetero-directed development of the processes of adoption and acquisition of innovation and its languages with respect to internal capacities, i.e. the production of a “material” culture with its own identity with respect to the external culture and the world trade scene.

At the basis of these processes, design didactics, not only professional practice or critical-academic reflection, play a significant role, especially in a tradition of teaching design culture still deeply rooted in the unifying lesson of the Bauhaus first and the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm later. In the former case, the reference is to the model of basic design, the Grundkurs and the philosophical, conceptual and language-based founding elements of rationalism and modernity, and in the latter to the interdisciplinary approach of the post-World War II period, which is on the way to the crisis of this ‘fideistic’ vision of the rational and progressive and to the post-whatever. The shift from industrial design to a society of image (Sinclair, 1988) and communication (McLuhan, 1989) and web 2.0 and social platforms (DiNucci, 1999) that dematerialises production and fruition processes and practices in favour of a continuous flux – infinite, like the scroll of social media walls – further collapses and flattens identities, aesthetics and languages on the epi-centres.

2. Mapping the Italian Scenario: for a Research Methodology

The research project presented is in its preliminary phase. It deals with the research of recent history in the field of web design, i.e. that part of digital design predominantly oriented towards interface design of interactive artefacts and websites between 1993 and 2023.

The project has been divided into several concentric waves covering different sources to map and create a puzzle of fragments able to recreate a bigger picture of the phenomenon investigated, the last 30 years of (Italian) web design history.

1) The first of the five planned waves aims to explore and scan printed documentation – i.e. a) theory and statement books; b) edited books and curated projects' catalogues; c) journals and professional magazines; d) indexes and annuals; and e) publishers, which we could call the “cold” sources (for a more in-depth discussion on “cold” and “hot” sources compare Gunetti, 2017). Documents that can reflect crystallised knowledge or image of a specific period often limited and partial but stable and fixed. Even if working with analog materials, it seems counter-intuitive when it comes to the history of digital design. However, these primary sources show us a precise picture of a given period. Their potential is also their limit: much of the information presented is not valid anymore (URLs of websites, emails and other references), making it very difficult to trace back presences, styles, and phenomena though presented and secured in time.

The first recognition, partially presented but discussed in this paper, maps the aforementioned categories of direct sources.

2) The second wave, on the other hand, explores digital references as primary documentation, e.g. a) websites; b) the Internet Archive; and c) directories, databases and repositories. We can label those “hot” sources because they are still evolving and producing entropic energy and dissipation. Accessing URLs, in fact, often implies finding new versions of a website, updated information and news, partially or completely shadowing and erasing previous releases (Bollini & Guida, 2022; Bollini & Guida, 2023)

3) Moving from the more stable to the living sources, the scope of the third wave is to explore oral documentation and first-hand memories, for instance, thanks to oral stories, interviews, personal archives and so on. This wave embraces the micro-historical approach (Ginzburg, 2023; Parikka, 2011) in order to gather documents, traces, and glimpses from the protagonists, fixing the memories in possible further sources documenting the past in the future, scraping and digging archive primary and secondary sources, preserving existing and otherwise perishable testimonies and legacies. It is also the context in which historical research tools, methods and practices face the need to rethink the idea of documentation, access and sources.

4) The fourth one investigates live documentation, i.e. a) awards such as the Bardi Web Award, Italian Web Award, DonnaèWeb, AWDA (the AIAP Women in Design Award) and/or awards with a digital section like Media Key Awards, already partially mapped, presented and discussed in this essay; b) associations' activities, community meetings as in the case of Architecta, Web Master Italia, International Web Association (IWA) Italy, the Italian Association of Visual Communication Design (AIAP), AccentiRosa, the Ux Book Club, Ux/UI Designer Italia; c) professional conferences and events, for instance: the Kerning Conference, ePublisign Rimini, Webbit, Ux Book Clubs, Italian Information Architecture Summit, WUD (World Usability Days), WIAD (World Information Architecture Days), Pane, Web & Salame, Accessibility Days, that is periodical as well as ‘una tantum’ events; and d) more ephemeral experiences often taking place thanks to people gathering together. In this case, we can include several categories and sub-events.

5) Finally, the last wave is mainly focused on digital design education, i.e. mapping the a) Universities, private schools and academies, and courses teaching web/UX/UI design; b) the profile of professors and lecturers, their academic background and scientific sectors; c) the disciplinary areas of Bachelor and Major Degrees and of the courses.

The research approaches the investigation by adopting complementary and convergent strategies. The common ground of the first wave has been to map through “cold” sources the existing printed documentation about the last 30 years of web design, namely digital, interface, experience design and information architecture.

In order to do that, the publishers specialised in the digital technologies, design and user research disciplines have been listed, and the catalogues analysed.

Reilly, New Riders, Peachpit Press, A Book Apart, Rosenfeld Media, and Friends Of have been catalogued on

the international scene. The following have been considered significant at a national level: Hops Libri, Tecniche Nuove, Hoepli, Pearsons, and Apogeo, together with Happy Books and Logos. Other players such as A Book Apart, Peachpit Press, O'Reilly, Rosenfeld Media, Taschen, Rockport, AVA, and Pepin Press, for instance, have been included as significant references, although not expressly specialists in the field but covering the project's culture macro-area (architecture, product/industrial design, graphic design, illustration and so on).

If the publisher and consequently the monographs or edited books, catalogues, annuals and indexes have been considered at the international level because of the presence of Italian protagonists in the World Wide Web scene, in the case of journals and magazines, the spectrum has been restricted to the national one. In particular, LineaGrafica e Progetto Grafico, i.e. two communication/visual/graphic design periodicals linked to the academic scenario and professional magazines such as Internet News, Neural, Wired Italia, and Jump.

Looking at the Italian scenario, it is possible to trace down a local historiography of the last 30 years when treating web (interface) design as a contemporary digital artefact at the crossroads of transdisciplinary approaches between communication and graphic design, computer science and Human-Computer Interaction. Doing that also means facing aspects of research in the fields of contemporary design history. It questions from a methodological perspective the difficulties in researching digital sources in an ongoing environment and proposes a systematisation and critical mapping derived from the analysis of publications, curated books, international indexes and annuals published between the mid-90s and the 2010s, scientific journals and digital archives and repositories. Furthermore, it aims to discuss the consequences of switching from the canonical approach to historical research – based on archives, primary sources and documentation mainly in the form of written, printed, and sketched materials – to digitised, digitalised or digital-native sources. For their very nature, the latest ones appear to be subject to obsolescence, manipulation and disappearance, forcing researchers to interpret and write design history based on non-traditional sources and approaches.

Another issue to discuss is the supposed peripheral role of Italy in the evolution of digital visual languages and its participation in the international scene. In communication design, the presence of Italian designers in the global discussion and discipline advancements is underestimated. The research project aims to establish the dignity of some protagonists to be mentioned in the still-to-be-written histories of digital design.

3. Italian Historiography: A Tentative Summary

“By the end of 1993, there were still fewer than 650 websites online” (Ford & Wiedemann, 2019, p. 22). One of the first was Italian: the CRS4, a research centre based in Cagliari (Sardinia) and effectively an extension of CERN. Its website was published in August 1993. The opportunity came from a late 1992 meeting that Maurizio Davini, from the University of Pisa, had with Berners-Lee, who shared a copy of the source code of the web (UniPiNews, 2023). The CRS4 Research Centre was directed in a couple of periods by Nobel Physician Carlo Rubbia: first in 1990-1999 and then in 2003-2006.

In its history, CRS4 has distinguished itself for some milestones related to the development and dissemination of the Internet, not only in Italy: as already mentioned, it created the first Italian website in 1993 (www.crs4.it), contributed to the creation of the first European web-based newspaper in March 1994 (L'Unione Sarda) (Bettini, 2006), and to one of the first Internet Service Providers (Video On Line, December 1994). These milestones also suggest that in the early 1990s, there was a growing need for technicians and designers not only of protocols but also of the first interfaces.



Figure 1. a) “Il progetto delle interfacce” book cover, 1993; b) “Web Design in Italy 01” book cover, 2004; c) LineaGrafica, n. 299, 1995.

3.1 Theory and Manuals

In 1993, Giovanni Anceschi, the most important Italian theorist in the fields of graphic and communication design at the time, published “Il Progetto delle interfacce” (Interfaces Design) (Figure 1a). At that time, he was the scientific coordinator of the Special Course in “Interface Design: Interactive Communication Design” at Domus Academy in Milan. In his seminal volume, Anceschi defines the roles and competencies of the interface designer, consciously not confined to the fields of the then-emerging web design.

In particular, in the essay “The Domain of Interaction. Protheses and Anaphora for Interface Design”, Anceschi (1993, pp. 9-41) discusses the disciplinary approaches to interface design, dividing them into theoretical, analytical and descriptive, on the one hand, and pragmatic operational disciplines on the other. He opened the perspective of a transdisciplinary approach to digital design, including ergonomics and cognitive psychology, information theory, and theories of notation and graphic notation, to name but a few. The book itself represents the variety of disciplinary contributions thanks to the participation of authors – scholars, practitioners and researchers – such as Daniele Marini (professor in the Information Science department at the University of Milan and founder of the Eidomatic Laboratory), Sebastiano Bagnara (full professor in ergonomics and psychology at the University of Siena), Marco Susani (an architect who has been collaborating with Olivetti and Sottsass Associati), Roberto Polillo (founder of the company Etnoteam, specialised in software engineering, author of several publications in the field of usability and design and then professor of Computer Science), Gui Bonsiepe, previously mentioned, and Stefana Broadbent (research fellow at the Centre de Recherche en Epistémologie Appliquée de l’Ecole Polytechnique in Paris). The list demonstrates the variety of contributions converging in interface design and interaction.

In 2006, Anceschi will also edit, with Massimo Botta and Maria Amata Garito, the book “L’ambiente dell’apprendimento. Web Design e processi cognitivi” (The Learning Environment. Web Design and Cognitive Processes). The collective volume provides an insight into the experience of one of the first Master’s courses delivered online in Web Design, which proposed a cross-disciplinary approach based on the expertise and experience of academics and professionals. Some of the authors were the above-mentioned Roberto Polillo and Daniele Marini. With them, Anceschi involved Giovanni Lussu (one of the most relevant theorists in graphic design), Carlo Branzaglia (theorist and teacher), Dina Riccò who wrote: “Sinestesie per il design” (1999) (associate professor at Politecnico di Milano), Letizia Bollini (2004), Maurizio Gnot (at that time at Politecnico di Milano), and others.

Among the various contributions, Anceschi specifies in his introductory essay that the book was conceived mainly by designers. Asserting a fundamental role for designers, in terms of skills and sensitivity, in the project of web interfaces. He proposed a map organising the knowledge of web design and then the figure of the web designer (Anceschi, 2006, pp. 29–39). He organised the knowledge map into two main layers: Methodologies and Artefacts. The design methodologies are articulated in ‘instances’ (indispensable operations: data collection, analysis, solution research and development, executive design, ...), ‘notation systems’ (all those methods useful for representing the new objects of the web, which are kinetic and temporal objects), and ‘semi-finished products’ (i.e., the elements that will constitute the website: typographic text, images, icons, ...).

The second layer, the one of the Artefacts, is divided into two main categories: Tool Sites (those websites that allow for concrete activities) and Database Sites (websites that allow access to a variety of sources of information). This synthesis is useful to support one of the hypotheses of the present research. Namely, the contributions of Italian design culture fully deserve reappraisal at a level that is not solely local. Indeed, some of these references have contributed to the institutionalisation of Communication Design disciplines and the training of digital design professionals.

3.2 Magazines: LineaGrafica

In the early 90s in Italy, only a few magazines were dedicated to graphic design. Alongside them, the Italian publishing market offered various opportunities such as publications, some of which were more oriented towards the technical and design aspects of the web, e.g. Internet News, Wired Italia, and others towards artistic developments and the search for new aesthetics and language, like Neural.

LineaGrafica, founded in 1946, was the main one specifically dedicated to graphic and communication design in all its aspects, reserving its pages to theory and technical aspects and showing case studies. Giovanni Baule (already a full professor at Politecnico di Milano) directed it from 1980 until it ended in 2007. The magazine published during the 80s some articles on digital arts, movie design, and computer arts, and it was an obvious consequence of giving exposure to the first interesting cases of web interface design in the early 90s. It is of some interest that one of the first editorials dedicated to the Digital Revolution was published in 1993, and it was a sort of warning about the changes that it was bringing in the professional world:

“The computer revolution has already changed the manner in which printed graphic artefacts are produced and is beginning to create its own where electronic graphics are inside the writing and reading mechanism itself. The extension of the graphic design project from desktop publishing to all forms of electronic media brings into question the already debatable confines of an area that had precise limits within the typographical sector but one that was able to extend its vision beyond the world.

The fact that a profound transformation is already taking place is evident. An unequivocal disorientation has hit the culture of graphic design [...]. It is necessary to renew, as soon as possible, the awareness of historical background, capable, as always, of articulate direction, new forms, intelligent products and balanced formal solutions.” (Baule, 1993a)

In essence, with his words, Baule emphasises the need for a culture of design and its centrality. It should be noted that just a few years earlier, in 1989, Baule, Anceschi and Torri drafted the “Carta del Progetto Grafico” (Charter of Graphic Design). This was a sort of manifesto in which the centrality of communication design in contemporary systems was advocated (Baule, 2015).

In one of the subsequent issues of the magazine, he identifies an initial response regarding the role of the visual communication designer and its needs:

“Faced with these new technologies, graphic design finds itself less “armed” with a design theory and guide-less. [...] However, if graphic design is also able to propose itself as a construction of the new media, where each writing and compositional operation of the “new page-settings” can be relocated, where the graphical form of the interaction is invented, it will then discover a precise task. One that will also involve the design of new systems, typologies and formats. One that will encourage, as a first act, a move towards the verification of traditional methods.” (Baule, 1993b)

It is of particular interest to revisit some of these editorials that, on one hand, accompany the developments of the web and, more broadly, the digital domains and, on the other hand, those of the profession. Especially how, particularly in Italy, professionals were adapting to them. The editorial titled “Routes”, from 1995 (Figure 1c), is probably more optimistic in tone as it begins to clarify the tasks of the graphic designer:

“The communication visual project has always been designed as a way to accompany and take in hand the message receiver. If we consider graphic design [...] [as] a general project of information system, indicating different routes, even the most complicated. This continuous project of route tracing, map drawing and verifications is applied in various fields. [...]

In the net of the hypertexts or, more generally, in the digital systems of writings, graphic design is not any different: controls – cursors and buttons – although metaphorically illustrated as electromechanical, are actually symbols, writings, operative signs: all graphic systems for active directions.

In a virtual library, the system connecting the texts, which can be immediately consulted, is organised on a communicative level. Today, interconnected computer systems are metaphorically called the information superhighway because they are true international communication routes, the faster they advance and broaden through new links and nodes, the more they need adequate sign systems, maps and faster ways to identify directions.” (Baule, 1995)

In essence, within the Italian disciplinary literature, there was a need to emphasise the role of the graphic designer on one hand and to build a more solid and updated theoretical foundation on the other. Baule’s reflections and considerations indeed find a perfect counterpart in the publication of the first reference texts from a theoretical perspective, as mentioned in the previous paragraph. Also, the first repertories with collections of case studies emerged, which were useful for mapping and monitoring production.

3.3 Repertories: The First Collections of Case Studies

“NewMedia Italian Design” (Bergamini, 1997) was the first book that aimed to give an overview of the production of websites and multimedia products in Italy, as affirmed by Anceschi (in Bergamini, 1997, pp. 8-9). The first impression was that online and offline digital production in Italy was at the international level. Referring to the evolution of web design and to the role of the visual designer, Anceschi states:

“Perhaps the most pioneering phase is coming to an end when there is already a lot to do. Now begins the phase of focusing on how to do it. [...] we are perhaps moving from a phase of technical naivety to a phase of rhetorical awareness or rather [...] direction. So it once again claims for the designer the ability to govern the limits and potential of hardware and software and to know how to exploit them in the function of an effective and efficient visual translation. [...] the designer, the web-designer, must know how to be a designer of the invisible, or rather of hypostructures, i.e. info-designer and service-designer, but must also be a designer of the visible, i.e. of the graphosphere, and of the video-sphere [...], i.e. graphic- and visual-designer. He must be a logistical planner, a director and choreographer of interaction, but also a tactician and strategist of communication.”

Commenting on the collected case studies in the book, Anceschi defines Italy's pioneering web production as free-range in its adaptation to the hard constraints of technology and what Daniele Marini called eidomatic friction, i.e. the excessive number of clicks needed to reach a destination. He also notes how the phenomenon of website production has already taken on a sociological dimension by involving all spheres of life on the web. The book thus provides an important overview of the sectors and realities active at the time.

It is also to note that in the same year, in September 1997, the first website of the Presidency of the Council was presented to the public for the first time. It was the first online presence of the Italian government. It was configured as the typical showcase site, with the images mounted on the classic grey background of the early days of HTML. It is a bit poor, considering that in 1998, Macromedia Flash went mainstream, but it certainly testifies to how the presence of institutions on the web would have constituted another area of application (Ruggeri & Sinni, 2022).

In 2004, another collection of case studies was published: "Web Design in Italy 01" (Galli & Nannini, 2004) (Figure 1b). The intention was to introduce the first book series specifically dedicated to web design in Italy. The initiative was launched through a call on the web magazine yo-yoll.net, which was dedicated to graphic design initiatives and news.

Although the project did not continue, it also represents an interesting case for some of the considerations that the curators report in the introductory text. One initial issue emerged, linked to the transience of the web and the need to document its transformations:

It might apparently seem a contradiction to presenting websites in print, therefore, losing those multimedia and non-linear characteristics offered in websites. When this book is published, several of the websites will have already undergone modifications or will be restyling. This is why paper allows for the permanency of the projects involved, which would, on the other hand, become lost.

In offering a useful instrument of consultation and inspiration for those who worked in this field, it collected websites created on assignment:

"[...] which affront problems related to communications and positioning, usability and accessibility, supported by an overall project of great dimensions.

From the beginning, the idea was not only to present several frames taken from the web but to, above all, highlight the planning elements that define each specific website.

The creators of the website selected were asked for information regarding the project and the material used, which led to their final creation. Reading through this volume, one can find work drafts, logos, flow charts, photos, and illustrations so that it seems more similar to a book on graphics than a simple home page catalogue.

The presentation structure of the websites, along with the URL and the frames copied from the web, provide several notes relating to the project, information on the author and on the structure that followed the planning and programming stages, and, if available, iconographic project material. At the end of each page, a summary was added that lists the technology and software used, excluding the obvious." (Galli & Nannini, 2004, p.5)

So, there was a clear intention to present at least some case studies in a documented manner, complete with the process or information that could account for the 'instances' and 'notation systems' adopted. The selection of case studies was based on four evaluative parameters: 1) graphic design; 2) Contents and communication capability; 3) Usability and navigability; 4) Accessibility (this parameter was only applied to Public Administration websites or to those with public interest).

The two editors conclude their introduction, affirming that, a few years after the publication of the first repertoire (Bergamini, 1997), “the web has definitely left behind the pioneering phase ever more to become an instrument of daily use for those who work or require information, using the world wide web” (Galli & Nannini, 2004, p. 5).

3.4 Awards

Awards are possibly another source, although most of them disappeared over time, and nowadays, it is difficult to reconstruct the rankings, being most of them promoted online starting from the early 2000s. The only exceptions are the Compasso d'Oro and the ED Awards (the European Design Awards).

Established in 1954 and promoted by ADI, the Italian Industrial Design Association, the Compasso d'Oro is renowned as Italy's oldest and most prestigious design award. Over sixty years, the award has recognised more than 350 projects, with nearly two thousand receiving Honorable Mention archived in the Historical Collection, established in 2001. The award selection process involves a pre-selection conducted by ADI's Permanent Design Observatory and then published in the ADI Design Index yearbooks. Starting from the 2007 edition, all selected projects have been collected online and are free to access. As in the ED Awards case, all awarded projects among the various categories are published online.

Among the awards specifically dedicated to web design and related activities, it is necessary to briefly mention the Premio Web Italia (PWI), which ran from 2002 until 2012 and expanded to encompass all digital products, including apps, games, and social media channels. In addition to the Best Project of the Year category, awards were also given for Professional of the Year and Web Agency of the Year. Another referenced award was the Bardi Web Award, run from 2000 until 2008.

Of the main mentioned Italian awards, none have an active website, and there are no circulating yearbooks. This makes it difficult to reconstruct the Hall of Fame and identify any individuals or organisations that have particularly distinguished themselves.

Although awards have played a significant role in the construction of a culture and community within the Italian scene, they seem to go into a crisis from a certain point onwards. Some well-established and prestigious experiences seem to fade away and then close down for good gradually, others continue if they are more grafted into the broader sphere of communication and marketing by updating, adding or renewing specific categories in the digital sphere. A number of hypotheses can be advanced in this regard. In some cases, this is a physiological conclusion due to the waning energy, commitment and presence of the original organisers and the subsequent lack of new protagonists capable of taking up this legacy and renewing it as the digital project context rapidly changes. On the other hand, the renewal of the professional world made up of new generations of digital natives for whom certain areas, practices and processes were much more taken for granted and metabolised than for previous generations who had experienced the emergence of the internet and the web.

Lastly, it can be assumed that the visibility given by collective platforms - as in the case of Behance - and by social media, the possibility of direct contact, exposure and self-promotion, has partly diminished the 'showcase' role originally offered by awards in the face of new dynamics and interaction between people and peers enabled by Web 2.0 onwards.

The limited presence of web design in the various award categories, particularly in the area of communication design, represents a significant change in the sector. It is partly a sign of a structural transformation of design in the digital sphere: static pages, corporate sites and customised solutions are being replaced by platforms that have standardised various processes. New blogging frameworks - e.g. WordPress or Drupal - complemented by add-ons and plug-ins offer a solution for most communication strategies and, in a serialisation context, interface design is sacrificed in favour of commercial or slightly customisable visual templates.

A second critical aspect is represented by the relationship between the traditional world of graphic design and the emerging sector of interface and digital artefact projects. The first seems to be less keen to recognise the latter as part of the same design culture mainly for the strong interdisciplinarity of the digital world and for the hybrid profiles – (user) researchers and experience designers, cognitive psychologists or computer scientists and developers – involved in the design practices.

4. Conclusions

As partially illustrated by this initial phase of research, here presented and discussed, the world of Italian web design has been extremely vibrant and diverse since its inception, at least in terms of quantitative production. The local project culture and research environment have expressed theoretical reflections and contributions, unfortunately, marginalised compared to the main trends at the international level, often due to the language gap. In fact, many of them have been published in Italian or have been translated only recently, losing the sense of originality brought by their first edition and within the then-contemporary debate. In this sense, the relationship between centre and periphery, between languages and mainstream modes of dissemination, seems to penalise original local productions in a (post)colonialist perspective, effectively weakening the broader debate or making it a solo rather than a choral one. As prosecutions of the research plan and as a possible further development of the whole project, the qualitative production needs to be reassessed in light of a more comprehensive mapping and compared with contemporary productions from other geographic areas. The critical issues and difficulties already highlighted in the preceding paragraphs are just the main ones that have emerged in the initial stages of this research. Others may arise.

Further reflection on the relationship between the centre and periphery should be made on the Italian territory and experience precisely because of the specificity that the research is bringing out. Referring above all to events, communities and awards, a specific and original distribution is, in fact, noted. The Italian panorama, in fact, as emerges from this initial mapping, is studded with polycentric and eccentric presences with respect to the large urban reference poles where most of the international web agencies or the big players in the sector are (have been) concentrated. Provincial towns, peripheral with respect to poles such as Milan or Rome, but central in their turn with respect to territories with specific productive, entrepreneurial, and cultural vocations that should be further investigated. In addition, some of the communities of practice and cultural reference have, in turn, fostered a great territorial connection between these different centres by organising events, conferences or meetings in different cities precisely to meet and contaminate local realities and contexts.

In this perspective the research highlights alternative point of view to the American West-Coast centric narrative proposed as the only possible interpretative approach to the digitalish storytelling. Besides, the exploration to be further expanded, faces the role and the contribution of women protagonists according to a decolonising (Lupton, 2021) and feminist discourse (Bollini, 2020).

In its future developments, the research intends to investigate and deepen precisely these peculiar and original aspects of the Italian experience, of an epi-centre, peripheral, but not marginal to the broader international debate.

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