

# P / REFERENCES OF DESIGN



## MAPPING INTERACTION BETWEEN DESIGN AND THE THIRD SECTOR IN ITALY. PERSPECTIVES TO PROMOTE SOCIAL INNOVATION.

**Maria Manfroni<sup>\*a</sup>**

a Università Iuav di Venezia, Italy

\* [mmanfroni@iuav.it](mailto:mmanfroni@iuav.it)

**DOI: 10.63442/FDEW6503**

**KEYWORDS | SOCIAL ENTERPRISES, THIRD SECTOR, DESIGN FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION, DESIGN FOR  
SOCIAL ENTERPRISES, SOCIAL IMPACT**

**ABSTRACT** | The current socio-economic complexity and the wide challenges that contemporary times present to design open up new opportunities for research in the field of design for social innovation.

In a perspective in which the dimension of environmental and social sustainability of design now appears inescapable, and in a national panorama characterized by the recent affirmation of the Third Sector and the social enterprises, designers operate strategically within complex design networks, generating not only new social forms but also new organizational models. However, the different activities involved in the social economy seem to face some challenges in the development and scalability of their initiatives. This productive sector finds itself responding to a rapid digital transition and reviewing its offer concerning its services as well as their organizational models. Based on these premises, the design could play a strategic role in promoting a cultural and mindset change in the Third Sector, which would enable the development of services, strategies, tools, and organizational models capable of fostering innovation and providing sustainability in the medium to long term.

The research, launched in October 2022 in the 38th cycle of the PhD in Design Sciences at the Iuav University of Venice, aims to investigate the relationship between design for social innovation and the Third Sector in Italy and, through the mapping of social impact enterprises and initiatives active on the territory, to identify the contribution and possibilities of design within these processes. In particular, from the analysis of the selected realities, it is proposed to investigate how and through which approaches methods, and tools designers operate in this field.

The research methodology conducted an initial phase of defining the scope of intervention, analyzing and reviewing the reference scientific literature relating to the social dimension of the design discipline and the current socio-economic context. The investigation continued through the selection of significant case studies through the use of qualitative methods (Desk Research Analysis) aimed at providing an initial overview. This phase aims to obtain significant data regarding which areas of design are most involved by companies, how designers operate within teams, and how much design-driven innovation is internalized in entrepreneurial processes.

Compared to the reference scientific literature, the research intends to offer an advancement in the knowledge of design methods in the field of design for social enterprises in Italy to describe their characteristics, approaches, and supporting tools. Therefore, to deepen how the design approach can be applied to the model of social enterprises, bridging the many organizational gaps and supporting their social mission.

Therefore, the research aims to elaborate a multi-level mapping of the relationship between design for social innovation and the Third Sector in Italy, which can contribute to determining the relevance of the topic in the contemporary panorama, provide new research perspectives, and support the different actors involved in these processes.

## 1. Introduction: the Social Economy Paradigm and the Relevance of the Italian Third Sector

The emergence of the Social Economy paradigm (Murray, Caulier-Grice, Mulgan, 2010) is assuming great relevance at national and international level.

The European Commission estimates that every day, around 2.8 million social economy activities in Europe offer concrete and innovative solutions to the major challenges facing our times. This potential can be fully exploited through the implementation of appropriate measures and policies (European Commission, 2021). In this sense, a relevant contribution on the topic was recently provided by the United Nations General Assembly through the adoption of the Resolution "Promoting the Social and Solidarity Economy for Sustainable Development" (United Nations, 2023).

This evolution manifests itself in the development of a broad hybrid zone within the socio-economic context, characterised by the proliferation of organisations capable of producing economic value while maintaining a predominant orientation towards the creation of social value and the pursuit of the general interest (Calderini & Gerli, 2020).

However, the different activities involved in the social economy seem to face some difficulties in the development and scalability of their activities and need more support from institutions to increase the production of their economic and social impact. This productive segment needs a rapid transition to digital and green and to review the offer of its services and organisational models without forgetting the need to value and give non-self-referential metrics to its impact (Giunta, 2023).

According to the survey conducted by Fondazione Italia Sociale, Deloitte Private, and TechSoup Italia (AA.VV., 2021)–regarding the need for innovation by Third Sector organizations–96% of the non-profit organisations surveyed perceive a strong need to innovate, with over 70% stating that they invest in innovation both to improve their product and service offerings and to optimize internal processes. In both cases, the predominant approach is incremental, focusing on improving or adapting existing offerings rather than introducing new services, products, or processes.

In particular, according to the survey, only 20% of the Third Sector organizations involved claim to adopt service design approaches in the design and organization of their services.

Therefore, if Third Sector organizations want to carry out this task effectively, it is necessary to change, both from a cultural and a mindset point of view, to develop strategies, tools, and organizational models capable of promoting innovation.

## 2. Approaches and Challenges for Design in the Social Field: Design for Social Enterprises

The analysis of contemporary reality highlights the urgent need for the discipline of design to direct its attention towards current social challenges, actively contributing to the promotion of positive change. In dealing with the current profound crisis, which brings about major changes in the prospects for socio-economic development, the relevance of design for social innovation (Amatullo et al., 2021) and the social sustainability of design represent indispensable issues for contemporary and future designers (Manzini, 2014). The world today has changed; the complexity of current global and social transformations has grown exponentially, and with it, the responsibilities of designers have increased. To make a positive impact on society, the contemporary designer adopts participatory strategies and practices of collective creativity to cooperatively find solutions with communities and generate new ways of acting (Meroni & Selloni, 2022). Design for social innovation is a field that relates profoundly to the idea of a transition, as it deals with new

ideas (products, services, and models) that, by meeting society's needs, are capable of creating new relationships and collaborations, in other words, innovations that improve society's capacity to act (Caulier-Grice et al. 2012). Although the question of the social value of design is not a recent issue but a deeply rooted urgency within the design world (Sinni, 2020), the discipline's interest in cooperation with activities oriented towards promoting social innovation, such as Third Sector organizations and Social Enterprises, is more recent. Based on these reflections, the distinctive capacity of design for social innovation to create new relationships between different actors, redefining roles and enhancing competences (Tjahja & Yee, 2022), clearly emerges. In the virtuous dynamic of relationships, social enterprises emerge as key actors, participating both as natural agents of social innovation (TEPSIE, 2014) and as direct results of this dynamic process (Figure 1.).

By interweaving design and challenges of common interest, it becomes clear that it is precisely social enterprises that can effectively address these issues in a 'neutral field' (Figure 2.).

Interest in the field of social design focuses on the development of a recent approach known as 'design for social enterprises,' which aims to integrate user communities as catalysts for change (Selloni & Corubolo, 2017). Design for social enterprises incorporates a wide range of cross-cutting approaches, sensibilities, and tools, spanning product, service, communication, interior, interaction, and strategic design. Among these, service design and strategic design emerge as particularly crucial, focusing on the quality of interactions and the creation of innovative partnerships (Rosini & Barbero, 2023).

However, successful implementation of design for social enterprises requires a systemic approach. Through the combination of design methods and tools, it could support innovation within social enterprises, overcome barriers within incubation programmes, activate local entrepreneurial ecosystems, and enable entrepreneurship that is sustainable over time (Kwon, Choi & Lam, 2021). Although there is evidence of the positive impact of design on social issues, it is necessary to fully understand how the design approach can be applied to the social enterprise model, bridging organizational gaps and supporting their social mission.

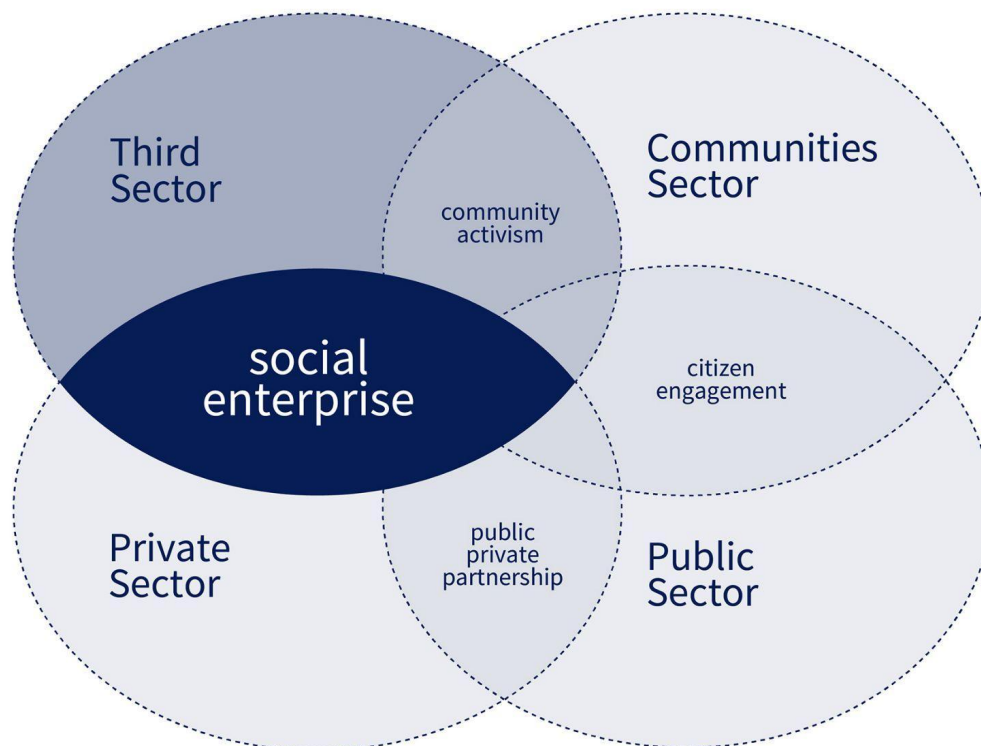


Figure 1. Graphic elaboration from: 'Social Innovator Sectors' (TESPIE, 2014).

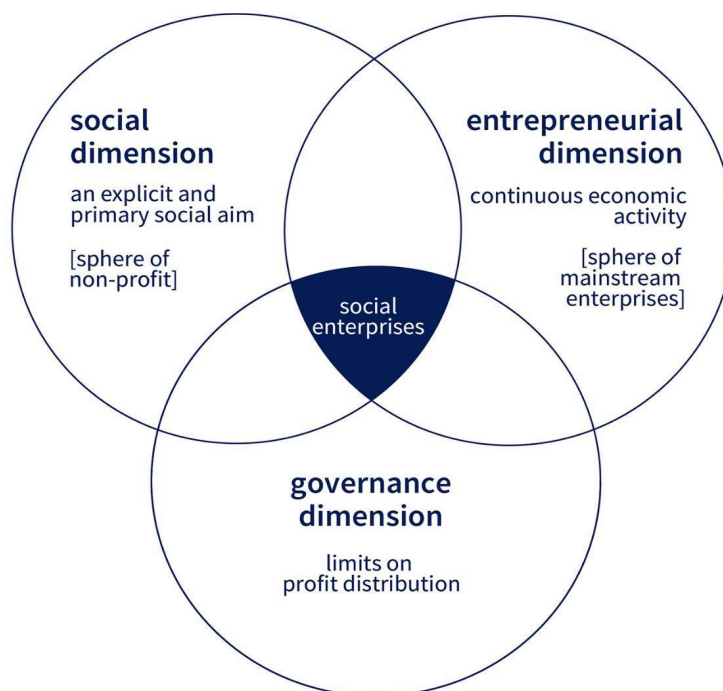


Figure 2. Graphic elaboration from: “The three dimensions of a social enterprise” (European Commission, 2015).

### 3. Research Methodology: Methodological Approach and Research Questions

The research aims to investigate the relationship between design for social innovation and social entrepreneurship in Italy. In particular, considering the criticalities that the sector encounters in developing longer-term strategies-the intention is to understand how the combination of approaches, methods, and tools related to design can support the development of these enterprises.

The research, therefore, poses the following questions:

1. How does design for social innovation interface with Italian social enterprises and the Third Sector, and what opportunities can be generated?
2. What is the relevance of social entrepreneurship on the national scene, and if or how much design is involved within these processes?
3. What design tools and approaches can be adopted to support and foster the competitiveness, diffusion, and sustainability of social enterprises over time?

To answer the research questions, the research involves advancing according to qualitative and quantitative methods and is structured through the following phases (Table 1.):

Table 1. Research Methodology and Phases.

<b>preliminary analysis</b>	context analysis and definition - scope of intervention	question processing and research method
<b>background</b>	framework and analysis of the scientific field literature	Social Design, Design for Social Innovation, Design for Social Enterprise; Social Economy, Social Innovation, Third Sector, Social Enterprise
<b>state of art</b>	identification and selection of nationally significant (Italian) case studies	social enterprises operating in the field of design for social innovation active in Italy; (desk research) overview
<b>hypothesis</b>	formulation of research hypotheses	definition of analysis tool mapping
<b>testing and observation</b>	field observation in selected realities	focus groups, semi-structured interviews and evaluation workshops; data collection and verification of research hypotheses
<b>conclusions</b>	processing conclusions and output delivery	discussion of results and main findings

Steps 1 and 2 –*preliminary analysis and background*– helped define the scope of intervention and the research topic. A qualitative method was used to examine the relationships between social entrepreneurship and design in both theory and practice.

For this phase of the research, the adoption of an exploratory approach was useful to gather data and information regarding established research and knowledge in this area through the analysis of scientific literature. This phase was useful for defining the state of the art, identifying possible gaps, and understanding possible research opportunities. Phase 3 –*state of the art*– focuses on the identification of significant case studies at a national level through Desk Research, useful to provide an overview of the existing realities in Italy, to which an initial survey questionnaire. It will then be submitted for the collection of primary data, then organised in a dataset. During this phase, ethnographic research will be conducted to understand the real situation in the Italian context. The objectives of this exploratory research are to obtain answers to the research questions and to determine the potential contributions to the study area. Subsequently, based on the established criteria, the most significant realities will be selected in which field research will then be conducted.

Starting with the data obtained from the previous phases, the *research hypothesis* will then be formulated in phase 4. To validate the hypothesis formulated, phase 5 –*verification and observation*– will proceed, during which workshops and tests will be organised, directly involving the previously selected realities. Finally, in phase 6 –*conclusions*– based on the results obtained, the hypothesis will be verified, and research conclusions will be elaborated.

## 4. Design and the Third Sector in Italy: an Initial Overview of Case Studies

In recent years in Italy, the phenomenon of social impact entrepreneurship has seen a great increase. The outcome of this process is generating a space in which profit and non-profit logics converge, generating a multiplicity of hybrid combinations (Symbola Foundation, 2021). This mapping of design in the Third Sector focuses on the Italian panorama and, through a qualitative-quantitative analysis of design in social impact entrepreneurship processes, aims to understand the relevance of design in this sphere and whether and how the combination of approaches, methods, and tools about design can support the development of such enterprises. In particular, it aims to collect information regarding:



- what is the legal status of the entity (non-profit, mutual, for-profit), and how does this influence the adoption of the design;
- in which areas of design innovation is mainly played out (product, communication, service, and strategic, space, digital, fashion);
- how designers are involved by companies (non-design; design as a driver; design as a process; design as strategy) (Danish Design Centre, 2015);
- how much design-driven innovation is internalized in business processes (in-house, outsourcing, quasi-in-house).

From the analyzed overview, the research identifies four typical modes of interaction between design and the Third Sector (Table 2.): (1) design of, (2) design for, (3) design with e (4) design and:

1. the organization is a social enterprise or a Third Sector entity that is involved in the design and production of products, communication artefacts, and clothing, and it involves designers in its team (*design of*);
2. the reality is a social impact enterprise (for profit) that is based on design and provides design support to the Third Sector through the tools and approaches typical of service design and strategic design (*design for*);
3. the initiative promotes programmes facilitating the matching between the Third Sector and designers, helping to increase the recognizability of the figure of the social designer and the valorizations of their skills (*design with*);
4. the reality develops multidisciplinary incubation processes aimed to finance and grow the social enterprise and enable its development through the adoption of design tools and/or the involvement of designers (*design and*).

As for the *design of* category, the study is investigating realities such as *Terra di Tutti*, a social enterprise specialising in the creation of products from recycled materials, which involves people from migratory backgrounds, social workers, and designers in craft workshops of creative reuse (Figure 3.); *Laboratorio Zanzara*, a social cooperative that encourages integration between designers and people with cognitive and motor disabilities. The designers develop products and communicative artefacts from the ideas of the people involved, which are then marketed in their shop (Figure 4.); *Quid* is a social enterprise that designs and produces clothes from discarded fabrics (95% from fashion surpluses), including people from pathways of labour fragility (60 % of employees). The *design for* category includes companies such as *Studio Shift*, a benefit company that provides research, eco-social business, and design-driven consultancy services for social enterprises and third-sector organizations; *Lama Impresa Sociale*, collaborates with enterprises, institutions, and the third sector to design sustainable processes and services, using design thinking and co-design in complex contexts; *Social Seed*, a company that, through the combination of different skills and approaches to design, supports and experiments with innovative solutions with social enterprises and Third Sector organizations. The *design with* category includes initiatives such as the *Bando Wonder*, aimed at designers and third sector organizations to foster the hybridization of skills, strengthening the connections between the two worlds to generate social innovation; *Design Sprint for ETS*, a project that has planned three co-design events on social innovation topics in 2023, to bring together young designers with expertise in Strategic and Service Design with three Third Sector organizations.

In the *design and* research category, the research is mapping realities such as *SocialFare*, a social enterprise that offers expert consultancy programmes for Third Sector organizations wishing to develop social impact projects in their territories, combining design approaches; *Avanzi-Sostenibilità per azioni*, operating as an ecosystem dedicated to social innovation, is committed to promoting the development of Italian companies facilitating initiatives and actively involving stakeholders.

Table 2. Modalities of interaction between design and the Third Sector: illustrative case studies.

<b>Design of</b>		
Terra di Tutti	Lucca (LU)	<a href="https://www.terraditutti.it/">https://www.terraditutti.it/</a>
Laboratorio Zanzara	Torino (TO)	<a href="https://laboratoriozanzara.it/">https://laboratoriozanzara.it/</a>
Quid	Verona (VN)	<a href="https://www.quidorg.it/">https://www.quidorg.it/</a>
<b>Design for</b>		
StudioShift	Morbegno (SO)	<a href="https://www.studioshift.it/">https://www.studioshift.it/</a>
Lama Impresa Sociale	Firenze (FI)	<a href="https://agenziaalama.eu/#">https://agenziaalama.eu/#</a>
SocialSeed	Bologna (BO)	<a href="https://socialseed.eu/">https://socialseed.eu/</a>
<b>Design with</b>		
Bando Wonder	Torino (TO)	<a href="https://www.circolodeldesign.it/progetti-di-impatto/wonder">https://www.circolodeldesign.it/progetti-di-impatto/wonder</a>
Design Sprint for ETS	Bergamo (BG) Seregno (MB) Romano di Lombardia (BG)	<a href="https://www.designforsocial.it/">https://www.designforsocial.it/</a>
<b>Design and</b>		
SocialFare	Torino (TO)	<a href="https://socialfare.org/">https://socialfare.org/</a>
Avanzi Sostenibilità per azioni	Milano (MI)	<a href="https://avanzi.org/">https://avanzi.org/</a>



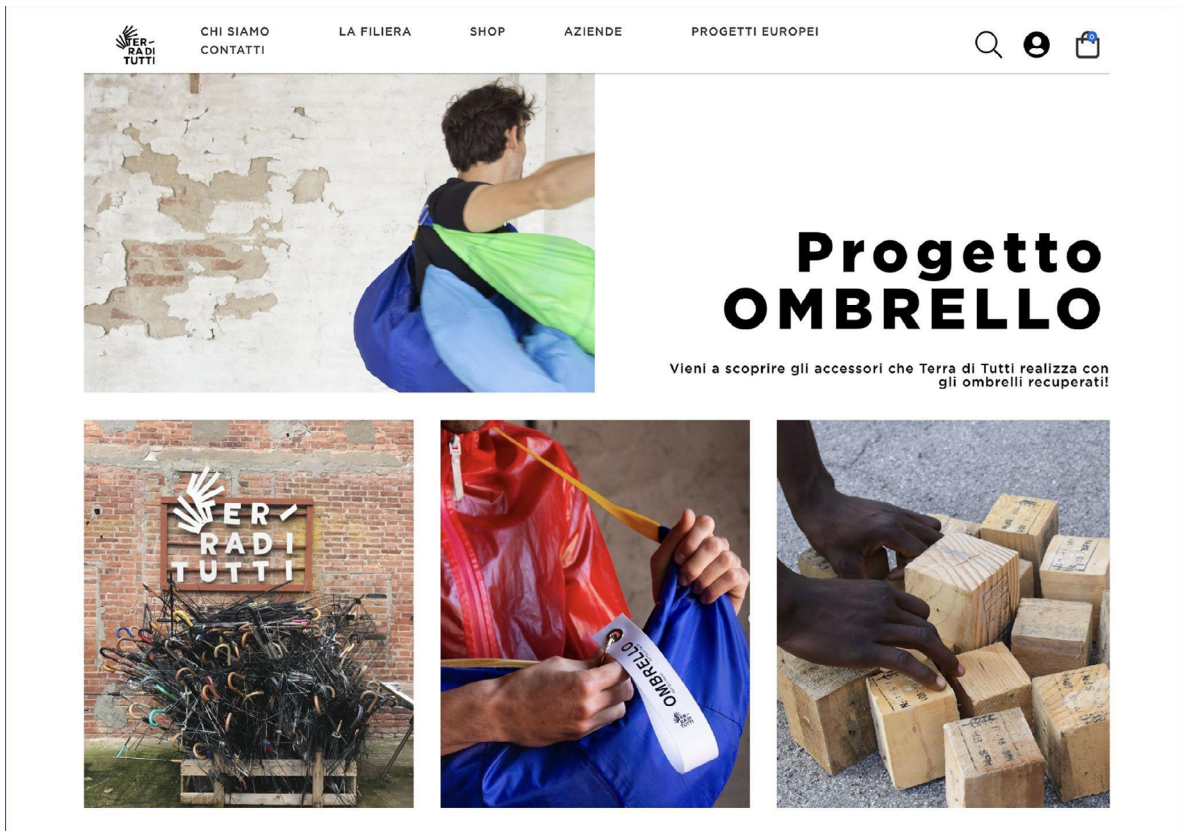


Figure 3. Terra di Tutti, a social enterprise in Lucca, designs and produces products with recycled materials, including people from migratory backgrounds.

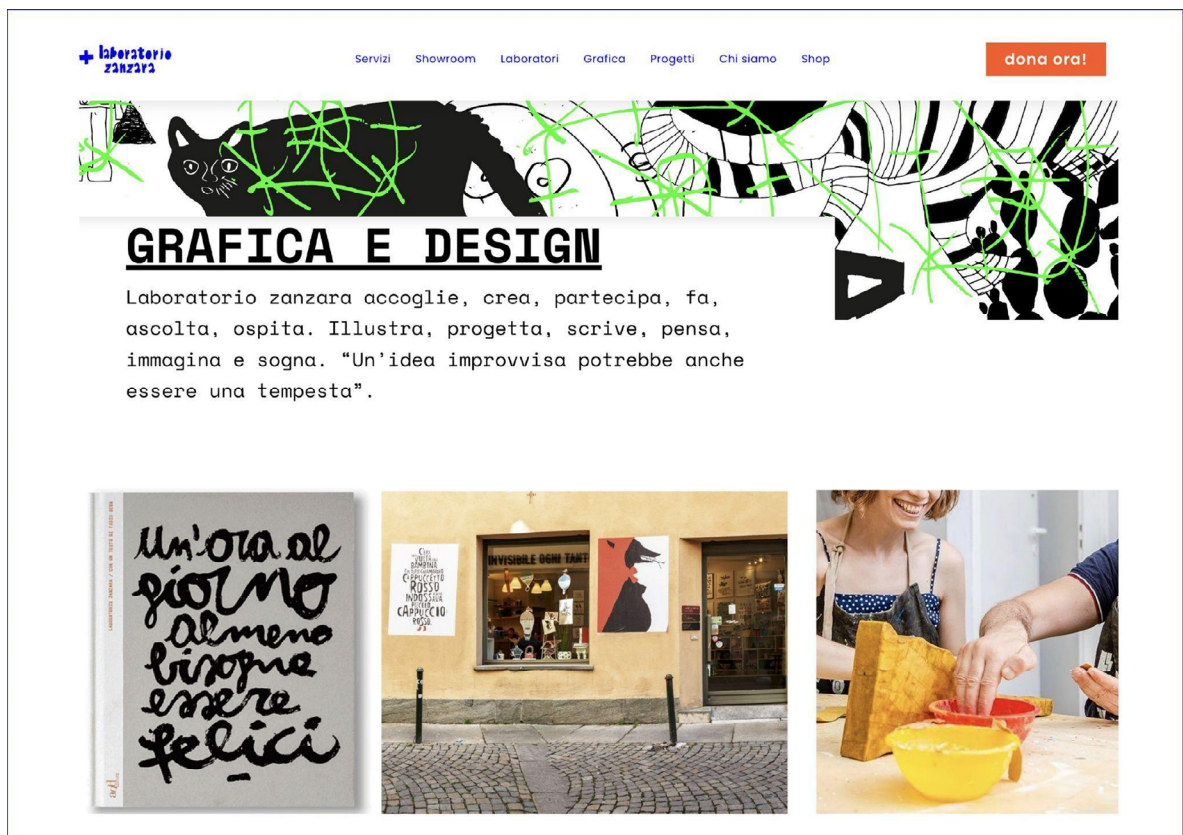


Figure 4. Laboratorio Zanzara, Social Cooperative in Turin, design of communication artefacts including people with cognitive disabilities.

## 5. Current Results, Expected Outputs, and Future Perspectives

The panorama outlined here is a partial outline of the realities mapped to date, and its dimensions go beyond what has been presented. The research, launched in October 2022, has completed the first phase of analyzing the relevant scientific literature and the state of art through the identification of 60 significant case studies, which were useful in focusing on and understanding the relevance of the topic.

In the future phases, the research will focus on an in-depth analysis of the cases identified in line with the objectives set through the elaboration of a survey questionnaire to be administered to the selected realities to collect the necessary data. In addition, exploratory interviews will be conducted with experts on the topic to identify their role in the development of social enterprises, explore their awareness of the relevance of design, and understand their relationships with other organizations to further develop the mapping and launch further investigations.

The expected research outputs, therefore, aim to provide an advancement of knowledge on the topic of design for social enterprises in Italy and to understand whether and how a design-driven approach could enable organizations to design solutions in a radically different way. However, in assessing the opportunity to connect the non-profit world with the discipline of Design, it is appropriate to identify new directions of development for social enterprises and to expand the recognition of the professional figure of designers working in this field. It is also essential to orient organizations to recognize the relevance of design practice so that it is no longer understood as an occasional activity but as an integrated practice in business activities. In this sense, the aim is to highlight the need to promote widespread awareness of the crucial role of design in the field of social enterprises and the centrality of this issue in the Italian landscape today. Design emerges in this sphere as an essential vehicle for rendering tangible visions of plural futures and bringing such futures to life, creating new ways of exploring and experimenting.

## References

AA.VV. (2021). Fondazione Italia Sociale (FIS), Deloitte, TechSoup Italia. (2021, February). *La domanda di innovazione del terzo settore*. Salvatori, G., Scarpat, F., Schiavone, A., Lanzillo, E., Palumbo, M., Fortunato, M., Filice, M., Morra, C., Fraticelli, F., & Togni, E. (Eds.).

Amatullo, M., Boyer, B., May, J., & Shea, A. (Eds.). (2022). *Design for social innovation: Case studies from around the world*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003021360>

Calderini, M., & Gerli, F. (2020). Innovazione, sfide sociali e protagonismo dell'imprenditoria ad impatto: Un ripensamento degli ecosistemi d'innovazione per una nuova generazione di politiche. *Impresa Sociale*, 3, 10–19.

Caulier-Grice, J., Davies, A., Patrick, R., & Norman, W. (2012). *Social innovation overview: A deliverable of the project: The theoretical, empirical and policy foundations for building social innovation in Europe*. The Young Foundation.

Danish Design Center. (2015). The design ladder: Four steps of design use. Retrieved from <https://danskdesigncenter.dk/en/design-ladder-four-steps-design-use>

European Commission. (2021). *Building an economy that works for people: An action plan for the social economy*. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11948-002-0037-y>

Fondazione Symbola. (2021). *Coesione è competizione: Nuove geografie della produzione del valore in Italia*. Fondazione Symbola-Intesa San Paolo-Unioncamere. Retrieved from <https://www.symbola.net/ricerca/coesione-e-competizione-2021/>  
<https://doi.org/10.3280/qua2015-104003>

Fondazione Symbola. (2022). *Design economy*. Fondazione Symbola, Deloitte Private, & Poli.design. Retrieved from <https://symbola.net/ricerca/design-economy-2022/>

Giunta, E. (2023). *Design for social: Accelerare l'innovazione nell'impresa sociale*. Studio SHIFT.

Kwon, H., Choi, Y., & Lamb, B. (2018). The design and social enterprise ecosystem: How can design be applied to a developing social enterprise ecosystem? *Design Research Society 2018 Catalyst, University of Limerick, June 25–28*. <https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2018.283>

Manzini, E. (2014). Making things happen: Social innovation and design. *Design Issues*, 30(1), 57–66. [https://doi.org/10.1162/desi\\_a\\_00248](https://doi.org/10.1162/desi_a_00248)

Meroni, A., & Selloni, D. (2022). *Service design for urban commons*. Springer International Publishing.

Murray, R., Caulier-Grice, J., & Mulgan, G. (2010). *The open book of social innovation*. The Young Foundation and Nesta.

Rosini, C., & Barbero, C. (2023). Complex organizations, an exploration between design practices and management: New perspectives to systemic design application in social enterprise. *Strategic Design Research Journal*, 15(2), 107–120. <https://doi.org/10.4013/sdrj.2022.152.03>

Selloni, D., & Corubolo, M. (2017). Design for social enterprises: Co-designing an organizational and cultural change. *The Design Journal*, 20(sup1), S3005–S3019. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2017.1352809>

Tjahja, C., & Yee, J. (2022). Being a sociable designer: Reimagining the role of designers in social innovation. *CoDesign*, 18(1), 135–150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2021.2021244>

United Nations. (2023). *Promoting the social and solidarity economy for sustainable development*. Retrieved from <https://unsse.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/A-77-L60.pdf57-66>

### About the Authors:

**Maria Manfroni** is a PhD student in Design Sciences at the Department of Project Cultures, Luav University of Venice, Cycle XXXVIII. Her research topics mainly concern design in the social sphere, specifically exploring the relationship between design for social innovation and the Third Sector in Italy.

# P/REFERENCES OF DESIGN

**This contribution was presented at Cumulus Budapest 2024: P/References of Design conference, hosted by the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest, Hungary between May 15-17, 2024.**

## **Conference Website**

[cumulusbudapest2024.mome.hu](https://cumulusbudapest2024.mome.hu)

## **Conference Tracks**

Centres and Peripheries  
Converging Bodies of Knowledge  
Redefining Data Boundaries  
Bridging Design and Economics  
Speculative Perspectives  
The Power of Immersion  
The Future of Well-being  
Taming Entropy: Systems Design for Climate and Change  
Ways of Living Together  
Cumulus PhD Network

## **Full Conference Proceedings**

<https://cumulusbudapest2024.mome.hu/proceedings>

ISBN Volume 1: 978-952-7549-02-5 (PDF)

ISBN Volume 2: 978-952-7549-03-2 (PDF)

DOI Volume 1: <https://doi.org/10.63442/IZUP8898>

DOI Volume 2: <https://doi.org/10.63442/TADX4016>

## **Conference Organisers**

Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design Budapest (MOME)

[mome.hu](https://mome.hu)

Cumulus Association

[cumulusassociation.org](https://cumulusassociation.org)