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PARTICIPATORY DESIGN FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE AND URBAN PUBLIC SPACES.

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ABSTRACT | The article addresses the value of participatory design as a methodology to be applied in the enhancement of a territory's cultural heritage and its urban public spaces. The goal is to preserve and promote territorial identity, transforming public spaces into inclusive and vibrant community places that stimulate social interaction.

Urban public space has a significant impact on people's quality of life, contributing to the formation of a community and the dissemination of culture and civic identity. Therefore, through participatory design, the community can closely collaborate with the design team to develop site-specific solutions that respect the characteristics and needs of the local community.

Co-design processes foster mutual learning: the community shares its knowledge and experience, allowing the designers to fully immerse themselves in the territory and its peculiarities. Concurrently, designers contribute to increasing the community's awareness of the value of its cultural heritage and community places. The community does not always recognize these values, which often remain undervalued and underused. For this reason, participatory design aims to overcome this challenge by involving the community in the design process.

The article examines two case studies - Restanza Workshop and RAISE innovation ecosystem - to further explore the role of participatory design between the past and the future and demonstrate how important it is today to generate new processes of territorial and cultural rediscovery and valorization.

1. Introduction

Participatory design is configured as a key methodology to implement during the regeneration and enhancement processes of a territory, its cultural heritage, and its urban public spaces (Gehl, 2010). It is presented as an activity that transcends the mere rational resolution of urban needs; rather, it is a reflexive practice that facilitates both the construction of relationships between stakeholders as well as the creation of new opportunities that positively impact society (Meroni, 2019; Meroni, Selloni, 2022). This methodology, if applied during the various stages of the design process, can foster the creation of more democratic, proactive, and inclusive societies, where the result is not only the realisation and implementation of new products or services but also and, above all, the value of the collaborative process that takes place during their design (Bannon, Ehn, 2012).

Urban public space, as a place of community and a stage for interaction, plays a crucial role in people's quality of life, contributing to the rediscovery or construction of a sense of community, culture, and civic identity (UN-Habitat, 2016). Therefore, its enhancement not only increases its physical and social attractiveness but also contributes to the psycho-physical well-being of the community.

In this scenario, participatory design becomes a precious resource to the community, which, actively involved in the design process and supported by the design team, designs specific solutions that reflect the local context. During participatory urban design processes, mutual learning and enrichment take place: the community, by sharing its experience with the designers, enables them to acquire new knowledge, while the latter, through deep observation and immersion in the context, contributes to increasing the community's awareness of its own cultural heritage and collective spaces.

In fact, despite the wealth of stories, culture, memories, and traditions of a specific place, the community does not always fully grasp the intrinsic and intangible value of its heritage and social spaces, thus not realising that preserving these values is crucial to passing them on to future generations. In co-design processes, therefore, designers assume the role of facilitators, directing and enabling the conditions whereby collaboration between multiple heterogeneous actors can take place (Chambers, 2002).

Notably, since an in-depth knowledge of the local context becomes fundamental for site-specific projects (Tamborrini, Strabellini, 2018), they support the community in highlighting not only the issues but also the potential of its territory, which is an essential value from which to start to intervene on urban public spaces.

The importance of participatory design in territorial valorisation processes emerges in the analysis of two case studies of urban co-design, chosen as exemplary experiences among those in which the author personally took part during her PhD research: *Restanza* workshop, focused on the rediscovery of traces of the past; and *RAISE* innovation ecosystem, aimed at the creation of Smart Cities, on which the author works with the Design research team of the University of Genoa.

2. Restanza Workshop

Restanza represents a paradigmatic experience of participatory design aimed at exploring and enhancing the rich cultural and territorial heritage of the small medieval village of Terzorio, located in the hinterland of the province of Imperia in the region of Liguria. The entire project was curated by a group of PhD students and researchers in design and landscape architecture from the University of Genoa as part of the "*Alfabeto d'Entroterra*" project promoted by the Associazione Radice Comune and winner of the Compagnia di San Paolo Foundation's call for proposals "Guidelines for collaborative practices of active civic participation," obtaining funds for the territorial regeneration of the village.

The title of the workshop emphasises the feeling of being both anchored in a place and disorientated and acting consequently in such a way as to protect it and, at the same time, radically regenerate it (Teti, 2022), working in a direction that counteracts the depopulation of villages.

Indeed, the workshop took place in this village as it was an ideal place to launch a participatory process of territorial regeneration. It is a town with approximately 230 inhabitants, rich in traditions to be perpetuated, stories, and natural beauty, whose peculiarity lies in its immense quietness due to the total lack of services, which had to close during the Covid19 pandemic, leaving residents and tourists without indoor places to socialise and spend their leisure time.

The only public space potentially accessible to the community as a new meeting point was the lower floor of the Medieval Tower, a place where, until a few days before the workshop, there was the village's historical documentation archive, which was in a decidedly dilapidated and irretrievable state due to neglect and infiltration of the Tower.

For the aforementioned reasons, the workshop aimed to promote the territorial regeneration of the village, starting from the enhancement of the cultural heritage, the natural landscape, and the Medieval Tower, the identity symbol of Terzorio, which currently houses the council chamber on the upper floor and a space to be reused and made available to citizenship after the removal of damaged documentation, on the lower floor.

The four-day workshop was held in December 2023 and involved twenty participants from all over Italy, including designers, students, PhD students, and professionals, who stayed in the small village for the entire territorial regeneration process to connect as much as possible with the territory and the local community. A few days before the workshop, the organizing team, supported by the municipal administration, publicized the initiative that would be held shortly thereafter to recruit as many citizens as possible to participate in the project. Thanks to the great ferment in the village, the recruitment phase was easier than expected. From the beginning, some members of the citizenship enthusiastically joined the already large group of participants, thus creating an interdisciplinary co-design team (McKercher, 2020) of about thirty people.

On the first day, through a series of inspections and interviews with citizens (the ones already in the team and others who met in the village streets), the process of documenting, reconstructing, and preserving information on Terzorio's tangible and intangible heritage began. After collecting the data, the hybrid team conducted a focus group during which, using brainstorming and a large canvas to be filled in with post-it notes, four themes of interest were identified: the emblematic stories of the village, places of sociability, rites, and rituals, and culinary traditions, inserting as much information as possible for each category.
As a result of this process, the hybrid team was able to retrieve and map the historical memories and local traditions of Terzorio, which were the foundation of the work that was to follow.

Over the next three days, the co-design team, according to the inclinations of each participant, divided into three sub-groups:

- Graphic Communication: directed by the graphic designer Mauro Bubbico, the participants explored and elaborated the information related to the four topics of interest, creating for each of them a small booklet to be donated to the community as a sign of a rediscovery of cultural heritage and strong territorial identity;
- Land Art Performance: led by landscape architect Fabio Manfredi, the team conceived, realized, and filmed with a drone a symbolic performance among the water cisterns on the Terzorio hillside. It involved all workshop participants and citizens who had not yet taken part in the experience, leaving them an aerial film to rediscover the local tradition of water rationing as well as the beauty of the natural landscape;

- Community furniture creation: supervised by designer Francesco Fusillo, the group applied their know-how to design and construct furniture for the Medieval Tower, starting from simple wooden boards. Benches, bookcases, tables, stairs, and coat racks gave new life to the disused ground floor of the Medieval Tower. Moreover, technical drawings were made for each piece of furniture and were donated to the community to enable them to make new furniture equal to that designed together.

Ultimately, the co-design activity encouraged the creation of a custodian community capable of rediscovering, documenting, and handing down its cultural heritage while at the same time enhancing the space of the Medieval Tower with artefacts that make a place that has long been inaccessibly usable, thus leading to the revitalisation of a village that seemed hibernated in time.

Figure 1. A citizen of Terzorio collaborates in the reconstruction of the historical memory. Photo by Rachele Tonioni.

Figure 2. The realisation of the performance among the cisterns, filmed by a drone. Photo by Rachele Tonioni.

Figure 3. Some citizens work on the creation of wooden furniture for the Medieval Tower. Photo by Rachele Tonioni.

Figure 4. Wooden furniture for the Medieval Tower. Photo by Rachele Tonioni.

3. RAISE Ecosystem

RAISE innovation ecosystem, an acronym of 'Robotics and AI for socio-economic empowerment,' conceived by the National Research Council, the Italian Institute of Technology, and the University of Genoa, financed with MUR funds through the PNRR for the three years 2023-2025 and coordinated by the Liguria Region, aims at promoting regional and national cooperation between the research system, the production system and institutions through the design and commercialization of technological solutions based on robotic systems and artificial intelligence.

In this perspective, RAISE, by actively involving its local resources and expertise, enhances the strengths of the Ligurian territory, responding to the real production and social needs of the Liguria region.

In this project, the research group of the Department of Architecture and Design of the University of Genoa - of which the author is a member - composed of professors, researchers, and PhD students in urban planning, sociology, architecture, and design, participates in Spoke 1 "Accessible and Inclusive Urban Environments and Services," which intends to design and implement intelligent and responsive technologies, devices and services for the urban context, to empower the usability of urban services and increase the perceived sense of wellbeing in city life; in detail, the interdisciplinary team is working on work package 5 "From inclusive technologies to inclusive smart cities," focusing on the identification of design solutions to implement urban regeneration strategies through the active involvement of citizenship in the design processes and a fruitful interaction with public administrations.

During the first year of the project, further to the desk analysis preparatory to the in-depth study of the reference framework concerning urban furniture, installations, smart and responsive products and services for a more inclusive, active, and attractive urban space, both from a physical and social point of view, the UniGE-dAD team started a field analysis focused on the detection of the needs and requirements of residents in the urban environment, by carrying out the *ResponsiveSpaces* workshop. To conduct this analysis, the district of San Salvatore in the municipality of Cogorno, in the province of Genoa, was identified as ideal as zero case study thanks to its heterogeneous characteristics.

San Salvatore is a small-sized urban context, which can be assimilated to the urbanistic concept of the 15-minute city, according to which all the main daily needs of residents can be met by walking or cycling within 15 minutes (Moreno et al., 2021; Manzini, 2021). Moreover, the entire area is particularly interesting as it has numerous services, commercial activities, sports facilities, cycling and nature trails, and historical and ecclesiastical buildings, which make it versatile for analysis in various contexts. Due to its diversified urban structure, the area is well suited to become an incubator for urban prototype solutions that use robotics and artificial intelligence, which can also be subsequently replicated and declined in other contexts of the Ligurian territory. In addition, in the San Salvatore area, there is also the diocesan campus 'Villaggio del Ragazzo,' a large organisation that manages educational, social-health, labour, and vocational training services, which has offered its spaces for possible prototype experimentation. Initially, the interdisciplinary team made on-site visits to observe and extrapolate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) of the area examined. Subsequently, the *ResponsiveSpaces* workshop was held to identify the major criticalities and needs and possible solutions or wishes of citizens. Around forty stakeholders from the area, citizens, users, or workers in the 'Villaggio del Ragazzo,' members of the local administration, and members of the PAs of the surrounding towns actively participated in this workshop.

Initially, the participants were interviewed one by one by the researchers through semi-structured interviews aimed at extrapolating the major needs in the urban environment; subsequently, several focus groups on specific topics were carried out to reason together on which needs to intervene and to think about solutions and design scenarios to be launched with the community in the next months. Ultimately, the active involvement of citizens in this preliminary phase was essential to understand what needs should be met by intelligent and responsive urban devices and furniture and to define a common vision on the next steps to implement.

Figure 5. A focus group with San Salvatore citizens, students, and frequenters of the 'Villaggio del Ragazzo' during the *ResponsiveSpaces* workshop.

4. Conclusions

The successful implementation of participatory design in both case studies generated significant civic engagement for the community, progressively triggering fruitful community reactivation and empowerment (Selloni, 2017), regardless of the outcome obtained.

Within the *Restanza* case study, community involvement was indispensable for the creation of a 'caretaker community' committed to the reconstruction and preservation of the community's historical memory. This approach was an effective tool to mobilize citizens to preserve the past and their cultural heritage while promoting a sense of territorial identity and revitalising community life. In addition, the handing back of the Medieval Tower to the community and its furnishing had a positive impact on the entire village, since today it has become the main meeting point for citizens and local associations.

This workshop has proven to be a successful intervention in the discovery and re-appropriation of territorial peculiarities, so much so that it could become an exportable and scalable model for those villages presenting analogous conditions.

In the RAISE project, on the other hand, the involvement of local stakeholders in the empathisation phase with the territory and the users' needs by carrying out focus groups favored the sharing of future visions for the use of the collective spaces of the Villaggio del Ragazzo and its surroundings. In the next phases of the project, participatory practices will intensify as smart site-specific furniture will be co-designed, prototyped, and tested. This process will lead to the realisation of an urban project that will see intense civic engagement and the building of a more cohesive community aimed at fulfilling the same goal.

Ultimately, the active participation, enthusiasm, and, at times, emotion on behalf of the community members during both participatory processes testify to the effectiveness of this methodology aimed not only at enhancing the cultural heritage and urban public spaces but also at increasing a sense of community, new opportunities, and greater community well-being.

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About the Author

Federica Maria Lorusso is a Ph.D. student of the doctorate of national interest in Design for Made in Italy. Her research focuses on enhancing urban public spaces through participatory design approaches, aiming to create public spaces and urban furniture that positively impact the well-being of the community.

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