

## DESIGN DIRECTORY: CREATING NETWORKS AMONG THE DESIGN COMMUNITY

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### ABSTRACT

Design Directory [Italia] is a research project promoted by Triennale di Milano and carried out by Dipartimento Indaco of Politecnico di Milano. It is also a tool to map the Italian design system (including companies, professionals, publishers, culture, schools and research), which, by visualizing information, allows to represent, interpret and share the system. It is a “mechanism”; a simple service design tool that wants to become a winning action and a cultural activity aimed to stimulate the creation of social networks, the participation of all the actors and the co-creation of contents. All this by using the web 2.0 approach.

The www was chosen as “the place” where data are built and shared: this choice is validated by the effectiveness of the web as a popular tool to share information. This solution develops belongingness and identity, which apparently are non marketable nor exchangeable goods. It also stimulates the need of the actors, involved in the system, to be acknowledged and it generates attention and communication. Within the Italian context, lacking both norms and institutions, there are no laws to control the Italian design system, nor a public institution such as a design center or a design council. Thus, Italy is an ideal context to practice research.

*Keywords: Design directory, Shared platform, Design community, Social network, Design system*

### 1 DESIGN AND SYSTEM: AN EVOLVING PROCESS

Design represents one of the main characters of the Italian territory. Recently the design profession has seen some changes. The “heroic” phase of Italian design has ended (the years of the best Italian designers such as Magistretti, Munari, Castiglioni, etc.), and a more spreading one has started, in which the number of actors involved in the design system. At this moment in time, when a lot of changes are taking place, design can, once again, represent for the territory a sort of guidance to support the dialogue and competition among regions and their production and cultural systems. (Bonomi 2006).

Furthermore, design represents strength for the Italian economy. It represents a production field comprising of design activities, education and publishing activities, cultural products, places, events, as well as a general orientation toward business. Italy, and especially Milan, represents in this sense a worldwide known and appreciated brand: for this very reason it needs to be acknowledged and leveraged. (Simonelli et al. 2002)

The design system is evolving and currently comprises, more than ever, new profiles which dialogue with the advanced design requirements, counting on a solid and significantly wider offer. This has led to an undeniable difficulty: it is currently difficult to have a clear picture of the design professions; for example, there isn't a professional list to refer to like engineers and architects have, and the relations and professions sees many activities and specializations.

The clear freedom that designers have led to a significant growth both in specialized professions and relations. The capability of building relations, “orchestrate” situation and “building systems” is a peculiarity of the Italian context, where for “system” it is meant an entity comprising of a plurality of elements.

Though, on the contrary of what happens in Europe, in the context of Italian design the term “system” doesn't have an institutional answer. The Italian design system has much strength such as the strength of structure's base, but also many weaknesses: the system is hardly mapped, non shared and thus uninformed. The international experiences are of different natures, public or private or both, and their approach is to privilege actors relations of different scale. However, the shared aim is to combine an institutional policy with a tendency to share data in order to establish relations and business.

A first example is represented by the Design Directory Wales (Dylunio Cymru, Design Wales), managed by a public institution, Design Wales, and funded by the Welsh Assembly Government. The main task of this institution is to manage an independent consultancy service focusing on specific design-oriented topics, and

mainly targeted to the Welsh industry.

There are also private examples raised by the needs emerged in professional fields. One of these is the CORE77 directory, created with the collaboration of the magazine Business Week (DESIGNDIRECTORY). It is a detailed database published on the magazine homepage where other contents regarding the discussion on the strategic value of design in business opportunities are published. With about four million users, the directory has a large potential of being seen by a global and differentiated public. This directory, created in 1995, is used by international designers, both students and well-known designers. Furthermore, CORE77 publishes articles, forums, and a calendar of events, conferences, parties and exhibitions.

In the United Kingdom there is another example of public institution, the Design Council, which uses applied research as a tool to publish annual reports on the actors of the English design system. (The business of design - Design industry research 2005) The English case, although without using a real directory, represents for its structure and experience one of the first institutions that answered the need to direct and manage such a complex system as that comprising the actors involved in a design project. (Arquilla 2004) Once the two possibilities are highlighted, the institutional and the private one, the Design Directory hereby presented represents a third possibility, original and experimental, which combines the models in one tool. The Directory is the result of a research project carried out by the Dipartimento Indaco of Politecnico di Milano and Triennale di Milano. The main characteristic of this tool is represented by the input that activates the system, where the single user, once registered, is the protagonist of a series of activities not only comprising the self-communication and promotion, but also the dynamic definition of a method to interact with the elements involved in the project.

This virtuous process is based upon the theories and dynamics of the social network and user generated content: highly popular activities. The Italian context, with its delay in intervening in this strategic and relevant field, needed a shared tool touching all the actors involved, in which the university (public institution) is the first activator of the initiative.

## 2 DESIGN DIRECTORY: METHODS AND TOOLS

Design Directory rises from the need to give an identity to a system, which is lately expanding and which still represents an important element for the economy and knowledge in Italy. Whoever looks at our Country with curiosity and interest, even at a distance, can see that design is definitely strength. In the current international competition, regions and cities aim to prove their identity and vocations in order to become productive, cultural and social leaders: in this context design is a value that should be preserved, spread and promoted as an element for cross-cultural and social dialogue and meeting. The Design Directory experience was chosen to represent Milan at the SDO – Seoul Design Olympiad 2008 (10/09/2008 – 11/13/2008). Other cities (Turin, Prague, Beijing, Paris, New York, Hong Kong, Eindhoven, Ningbo) will also take part in it, and will be analyzed and described through the “eyes of design”. (<http://sdo.seoul.go.kr>) The design system needs to be highlighted and represented, through the description of the activities and professions that revolve around the discipline. It isn't a straightforward and direct process, since many professions and activities, not clearly defined but alive and significantly growing, are linked to the word “design”.

Italy is extremely rich and fruitful as regards the design “production”. Thus, the research had to define a method and some criteria to identify and select the actors belonging to the design system. The criteria have to be valid, and to validate the system. As there were no specific researches and references to associations, the numbers of the system were defined at a twofold level: both the “emerged” (acknowledged sources, like design associations, guide) and “submerged” (acknowledgeable sources, like web portal, design awards) parts of the design system were identified. The emerged part is mainly and naturally investigated from above (who is or makes himself visible, who is or isn't subscribed to..., who is part of..., who has to complete certain paperwork...): it is a visible, represented and known world. The submerged part is investigated with a different modality, as it is not officially acknowledged; though, if well addresses and circulated even through policy actions, it represents the real novelty, where an incredible potential for system innovation lays.

The categories allowing to break down the “design” aggregate in consistent subsets have been defined, and 7 systems emerged: 1. Companies and trade associations; 2. Designers and design associations; 3. Schools; 4. Research centers; 5. Fairs and exhibitions; 6. Publishers; 7. The cultural system.

According to the research topic, these categories represent the design system. System meaning not only a group of actors with different skills, resources and specific competences, but also the totality of elements and relations among the actors. The relations are those which determine the “form of the system” and finally

make him recognizable as whole entity. (Manzini 2002)

Virtual (criteria selection) and physical (numerical) constraints have been defined for these research categories, based upon the number of actors of the system. The national directory comprises over 250 companies, 5500 professionals working in different design fields, 150 schools (universities, academia, schools and professional institutes), 350 research centers, 300 design fairs, 160 fair organizations, 200 among museums, archives, company museums and spaces for exhibitions, 200 magazines and 60 publishers. The research triggered the development of two tools to represent the system.

The first was at a local level: the Design Directory Lombardy was created for this, and presented at the “MilanoMadeInDesign” exhibition (organized by Design Focus – Observatory for design and promoted by Provincia di Milano and the Chamber of Commerce of Milano, in collaboration with Regione Lombardia). It represents the first step toward the creation of a wide information and service system aimed to enable the dialogue and the mutually advantageous exchange. The platform has two main values: from one side it gathers and visualizes the lists of all the professionals listed in Lombardy in the design systems, and from the other it visualizes the clustered data, emerged throughout the research, through maps and schemes which simplify concepts and current phenomena in the design system. The second step, still in process, is that of creating a platform shared at a national level, Design Directory [Italy], which follows the dynamic of the regional one, but represents a tool to share and represent the design system, which could be used and updated by all the actors involved. The web was chosen to build and collect these data as it is currently a valid tool to share this kind of information, and it was the main tool from which the communication actions were activated. The online tool allows getting over the cultural boundaries and makes the system accessible to everyone.

### 3 SHARED PLATFORM: HOW TO REPRESENT AND RECOGNIZE THE SYSTEM

To acknowledge design its value means to implicitly acknowledge the system around it. For this reason, the design system needs to be constantly monitored and analyzed, so that it is possible to see its endogenous and exogenous changes, and the elements which bring vitality versus those that lead to impoverishment. At Politecnico di Milano an intervention idea was tested: to acknowledge the system and its evolution through a representation model, a platform shared among the actors of the system.

The idea was to suggest from the bottom, sharing the concept, a self-representation method which involved since the very beginning (in the ideation and creation) all the actors of the system, trying to gather them together and giving them a shared identity, and most of all enabling the relation among them.

The strength of the system lies in this network of relations on the territory among the different actors involved: their competencies and skills are complementary for the development of design projects. The shared platform is called Design Directory, a “mechanism” that from a simple service design tool aims to become an intervention, a cultural action aimed to make the system explicit, a process of creation of a value that the actors share. The Design Directory becomes an action to found and represent the system, a list of the involved professions which is well represented by this claim: “count yourself to matter”.

The Design Directory is a “mechanism” that besides being a simple design tool, aims to become a winning cultural action using the “web 2.0” approach (Grivet Foaia 2007) to stimulate the creation of social network, the participation of all the actors and the co-creation of contents (O’Reilly 2006). This new working method should make explicit the process of value creation, which participants can eventually share. The Design Directory represents an example of *mass collaboration*, where new communication technologies are democratizing the creation of value. (Tapscott and Williams 2007).

The effectiveness of these tools allows the users of the *diffused community* to share a space for virtually getting together, to which they belong and can get organized. Suggestion actions are fundamental to be active within the system. This generates, for the user, self-esteem and proactively in new projects. It also generates, for the system, value and codified acknowledgment. The strength and effectiveness of the tool lies in the connections that the community creates in order to represent itself. The figure of this tool is given by the input of activation of the system where the single user, once registered, becomes entrepreneur of a many-sided activity. This activity involves communication, self-promotion and definition of a method for the elements involved in the project to interact. Once activated, the circle is extended to all the actors.

Finally, the Design Directory has the aim to become a behavior, going over the status of simple service design tool. A culturally shared action, or better a practice, aimed to fill relation and communication gaps within the Italian design system.

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