ME.Design. Design strategies, tools and procedures aimed at increasing the value and promote the resources of the Mediterranean area between local and global. An italian example of action-research about design for locality.

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Introduction
Design for local development is the main focus of the ME.design research, carried out in Italy throughout the years 2002-2003 by the Sistema Design Italia network. Its main objective was that of identifying and studying in depth the strategic action modalities of design for the territory’s development especially in Italy, and in those contexts having an ideal relation with the Mediterranean basin, from the historical and cultural point of view, or from that of the production system and local resources.

This paper describes the main results of the research, its methodological approach, the carried out activities and the main results regarding design as a discipline.

1. Context
A group of over 90 researchers from 7 Italian Universities (Politecnico di Milano, Università di Genova, Università di Pescara, Università di Palermo, Università Federico II di Napoli, Seconda Università di Aversa, Università di Reggio Calabria) belonging to the SDI Agency | Sistema Design Italia1 since the year 2000, carried out the research “ME.Design. Design strategies, tools and procedures aimed at increasing the value and promote the resources of the Mediterranean area between local and global.” The research started in 2001 and ended in 2003 and was co-funded by the Ministry of the University and the Scientific and Technological Research. The ME.Design research focused on the local contexts having a historical and cultural relation with the Mediterranean and on the investigation of the design approach potentials (expertise, tools, design activities) for the local development. The design research model that investigates the enterprise and its system of offer (product, services and communication) was supported by a new approach leading to test the design capability to be of service to the local resources empowerment, being them tangible or intangible.

The starting point for this new and little investigated design research approach was the rising of entrepreneurial initiatives, especially on the South and women’s entrepreneurship, that has lately allowed to register a growth within the field of the local production exploitation, of the tourism, of the agroindustrial etc…

Starting from this evidence, the research aimed at understanding how design could intervene on projects for the local resources development, being them tourism, wine-gastronomic, environmental, typical handicrafts resources representing the local richness and the development potentials. The focus was the territory, in terms of territorial capital. Starting from the LEADER2 program experience, the ME.Design research described the territorial capital as the whole of 5 integrated key resources:
- know-how and expertise, that is the technology knowledge and the research and development capabilities, the culture and the identity, the shared values etc.;
- human resources, the people living on the territories, the immigrants, the activities and the enterprises (companies’ dimension, production chains etc...);
- physical resources and the way they are managed, especially the environmental resources (relieves, soil and subsoil, flora e fauna, cost and inland, rivers, lakes, etc.), the facilities and the infrastructures, the historical and architectural heritage;
- governance, the policies, the collective operators and the local public affairs management;
- markets and external relations, the export of local products on several markets, the participation of the companies to promotion or exchange networks, the network creation etc..

Fig. 1: visualisation of the territorial capital

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1 SDI | Sistema Design Italia is a network of research agencies for innovation and promotion in the design field and is a spin off of a two year research co-financed by MIUR (Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca – Italian Ministry for research and education). SDI is made of 8 centres inside universities spread out on all the Italian territory (Milano, Firenze, Roma, Chieti, Genova, Palermo, Napoli 1 and the Seconda Università di Napoli) in which small groups of researchers are fully active in promoting innovative research and education in the design field.

2 The EU program LEADER (Liaisons Entre Actions de Développement de l’Economie Rurale) was taken as reference. The focus is the organisation of the rural development, the acquisition of new qualifications, the promotion of the rural tourism, the support to the small innovative enterprises and the promotion of high value agricultural products.
The territorial capital resources were visualised through the metaphor of a series of overlapping layers (Fig.1), this allowed to set up the theoretical basis for starting up the on field experimentation: the theoretical assumption states that there can’t be local development unless the resources are integrated, and the layers are getting closer. Starting from a key local resource, access port, a strategic project can trigger an integration process of the available resources. The more the layer get closer, the more there is integration and development; at the opposite, the initiatives enlarging that gap, generate a loss in the boost towards innovation. The object of the project becomes then the territorial capital. This implies the need to define design action modalities (disciplines, approaches etc.) and tools (research/analysis tools, observation/monitoring tools and local action tools) at the designer’s disposal to face this project dimension.

In order to do so, an innovative research modality was chosen (scheme 1): first of all a theoretical framework of reference was set up, to allow the researchers to get on the same wavelength about the object of the investigation, using real tools (thematic glossary, observation kit, visualisation tools etc), secondly a research on the field (through an action-research methodology applied to design).

On the basis of the set up methodology 7 design workshops were carried out throughout the national territory; they involved the research community and the designers as well as the local actors system (public administrations, bureaux, associations, enterprises and citizens). The actions on the field were made real in workshops starting from real situations: Valdambra [AR], SanRemo [IM], Mantova, Morcone [BN], Ustica [PA], Reggio Calabria, Naples. The workshops were carried out with the aim of suggesting possible projects for a sustainable development (environmental, cultural, social etc) of the whole local system.

2. The research method

the ME.Design research is an action research, meaning the iteration process of action-reflection-verification through which it is possible to verify and validate the theoretical premises with an experimentation on the field.

In the initial phase of the research the action-research issue were investigated, thank to cues from extra-disciplinary fields1–63 as well. The in-depth study aimed at identifying the characteristics of the action-research process and the characteristics of the phases47–8 to then adapt them to the design discipline.

An original research approach was then articulated, that generated an "action-research kit" belonging to the SDI | Sistema Design Italia network and used within ME.Design.

The kit, shared amongst the researchers, describes the action strategy of the research and includes some guidelines linking the abstract theoretical level to the experimental and design dimension to be activated on the field.

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2 Kemmis, S & McTaggart, R., The Action Research Planner, Geelong, Victoria, Deakin University, 1982
6 Argyris, Chris (2000) Flawed advice and the management trap: how managers can know when they're getting good advice and when they're not. Oxford University Press. A reworking of the concepts of Argyris' previous work, applied to provide a challenging critique of most current management theory and advice
The kit describes the action-research process splitting it into four phases and identify their activities, tools and design results.

**The research process and the ME.Design design method**

The ME.Design research process is a continuous cycle characterised by four macro-phases: research, analysis, concept, project. The process, cyclical and recursive, is represented by a spiral articulated in four macro-activities: learning, elaborating, acting, realising (Fig. 3).

![Fig 3. ME.Design: interpretative matrix of the research process](image)

**Phase 1. Research**

It refers to the activities related to the cognitive, explorative, investigative dimension. This phase regards the knowledge of the territorial capital of a territory. The investigation aims at deepen the knowledge with the objective of identifying the main characteristics and the weaknesses. It aims at setting up a reference framework for the following design actions, identifying the “access port” of the project. The research, in this case, can have a desk connotation, carried out then through several documentation materials (bibliographic material, photography, investigations etc…) but it can also be seen as a research on the field through the direct contact with the local actors. The result in design terms is to describe the gained results through artefacts characterised by a strong visual component.

**Phase 2. Analysis**

The analysis phase starts from the knowledge basis generated in the previous phase. The activities regard the elaboration of a plan of action, the definition of the main activities to be carried out, the individuation of the tools and the competencies to be involved for the plan to be implemented. The objective is that of deepening and re-defining the design guidelines. Even in this case, the design ability is to visualise the information in a synthetic way, useful for carrying on the activities.

A research glossary (S.T.A.R)\(^5\) was set up in this phase, in order to build a shared language with reference to the local issues read through the (strategic) design lens. 23 case studies were developed at a national level focusing on design for the local contexts development, regarding several issues: production chain development, tourist services, territorial network creation etc…

**Phase 3. Concept**

The shift from the abstract level to the acting dimension is made evident by the identification of the design concept, and therefore by the definition of the design idea to be then tested on the field. The objective is that of setting up the basis for the project, to describe its potentials and characteristics, and to identify the subjects and the referents to be involved. The concept comes from the previously gained knowledge, together with the design capability to re-interpret the problems, turning them into opportunities.

The design concept rises from the cooperation amongst different figures and expertise (researchers, designers, experts, local administrations etc…) that syntonically suggest the design visions. The concept, referred to a particular territorial situation, involves different stakeholders.

The design tools are different and in relation to the specific objectives. It is tools tied to the brainstorming activity, communication tools, or supporting the project, or preparatory for the action on the field.

In this phase ME.Design suggested to activate the experimentation on the field through the design workshops. The workshops represent the tools to test on the field the assumption of the previous phases.

**Phase 4. Project**

The specific project activity is generated by the acting. The ideas are then made real and take shape in artefacts systems of different nature.

In ME.Design, the design phase coincides with the realisation of workshops in the examined local contexts. The actions tied to the workshop have different objectives: from creating relation networks, to defining design strategies, to ideating products and services for the territory etc..

The workshop implies the realisation of several supporting artefacts (organisational, communication etc…), designed according to the product-system idea, that is the integrated whole of product, communication and service representing the focus of the strategic design activity.

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\(^5\) Sistema Topologico Argomentativo della Ricerca
The design activities on the territory outline from one side the end of a research cycle, to the other they represent the starting point for the following phases of research and action. A new action-research cycle then begins, starting from the thoughts on the carried out activities and from the verification of the gained results, through a continuous learning process.

3. The ME.Design workshop

Starting from the setting up of the action-research kit seven workshops have been activated throughout the national territory. The workshops were carried out in several contexts, differing for their environmental characteristics, territorial dimension, involved actors and nature of the objectives. They represent a significant sample of actions as to which a design role was defined, as activator and enabler of innovation processes locally activated. The experiences are presented as follows, through a description of the context, a synthetic map of the process and the main results.

3.1. Case RIFLETTERE MANTOVA [SDI|MILANO]

The Mantua project regards the creation of the city’s identity through a participatory process involving the citizens with the aim of increasing the value of the city, through a sharp direction, able to enhance its social, material and historical resources.

The project involved the SDI agency of the Politecnico di Milano, a group of Milanese directors, the Commune of Mantua and some local associations. Three activities were realised:
- a research that highlighted the traces of the Mantuan identity appearing from the publications about the city itself (guides, magazines, articles etc…);
- an experimentation on the Mantuan territory to point out, through some video-recordings, the city through an internal look, of who’s living the city day by day, and through an external look, of who’s getting closer to Mantua from the outside.
- the staging of an exhibition/performance in the city to show the community the outputs of this analysis (desk research and shootings).

The results are different:
- Mobilization of the local private and public subjects, actively involving the people and a reflection of the community on the issue regarding the city identity creation;
- Experimentation of a design approach from an inter-disciplinary and participatory point of view;
- Use of new “scenographical” tools for communicating Mantua (the videos). The innovative tool used for visualising the identity is the shooting, that allowed to interact with the people and to show the results in a simple but impressive way. The exhibition/performance will then allow to gather the inputs for the action-research process to start again. The carried out work allowed to elaborate the tools for the designers willing to deal with the project for the city’s corporate identity.

3.2. IL MERCATO DEI FIORI DI SANREMO [SDI|GENOVA]
The workshop carried out in Genoa focused on the exploitation of the nursery gardening local productions through the identification of design strategies for the product system. The flower production of the Ligurian west represents a relevant peculiarity of the territorial capital of this part of Liguria strongly characterised in terms of natural and human resources competencies, identity and market. It represents an environmental, productive, cultural resource that was developed throughout the time, so much that Sanremo is known as the “city of flowers” and the Ligurian cost as the “Flowers Riviera”. This system of actors and resources, dynamic and competitive, has recently gained an acknowledgement as a flower district. From the design point of view, the intervention area regards the possibility to strengthen the communication and promotion of the image, weak from the point of view of the communication and product-system artefacts.

3.2.1. NETWORK AND FUNDING FINDINGS
1st intervention: hypothesis, feasibility study, the “Flowers Image Project” aimed at defining a new corporate image for advertising the floral products.
2nd Critical cognitive analysis of the production area and of the flowers identity in the west Liguria and of the communication used by that sector
Network and funding findings

3.2.2. IL MERCATO DEI FIORI DI SANREMO [SDI|GENOVA]
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3.2.3. WORKSHOP VALDAMBRA [SDI|MILANO]
Starting from a workshop carried out in Bucine, Valdambra, the action-research activities promoted the activation of territorial services aimed at improving the local realities from the point of view of the environmental and social sustainability. Valdambra is a small valley in the Arezzo Province, close to important transports infrastructures, to the main arts cities (Arezzo, Siena, Florence), and to the Chianti, but it is still left on one side by the industrial and tourist...
development. The perspectives triggering the actions on the territory were: higher qualification of the tourist activity, exploitation of the cultural and natural resources, exploitation of the typical products and increase of the appeal for people carrying out “at a distance” jobs.

The local actors, administrations, bureaux and citizens awareness of the local richness and of the possible strategies to be used has been increased. After the workshop, the concepts of services realised during the first phase were tested. Design was the enabler of the relations amongst the subjects and brought design expertise of the territorial services, using the network’s potentials and suggesting new forms of hospitality in the valley.

3.4. WD3° MORCONE [SDI|NAPOLI]

In Morcone (BN) the workshop focused on setting up collaborative strategies amongst the territories, to exploit the environmental and cultural resources.

The Workshop design aimed at being a lasting laboratory where there could be exchanges between design and local productive systems, acting within “peripheral” realities, but characterised by a strong identity. The Wd acted at different levels: the promotion (involving local actors), the verification of operational models and training at several levels; the direct action on the territory allowed design to be connected to the local system for the environmental and cultural resources development.
The Wd Morcone initiative reached its third edition. While in the first couple of years the aim was that of creating a stable network of actors and to involve them in order to improve the local resources, now that the network is consolidated, the intervention is then punctual and regards different issues. The Wd3 results shows most of all an increased mobilization of the local subjects, and a higher awareness of all the resources of the territory (being them agroindustrial, landscape, environmental). Design was the enabler of the initiative and brought both methodological expertise to set up the initiative (action-research, strategic design and service design) and design expertise, using product and strategic design tools.

3.5. PROGETTO WORKSHOP: TO COMMUNICATE [AMONGST] THE INDUSTRIAL DISTRICTS IN CAMPANIA
New visibility and relation tools for the S. Agata dei Goti-Casapulla district [SDI|NAPOLIAvessa]
The project belongs to a cooperation and exchange program amongst the industrial districts in Campania and with the Faculty of Architecture of the Seconda Università di Napoli, aiming at spreading to the industrial field the design and communication tools.

The objective of the research was to define the identity of the S.Agata dei Goti district system through a design activity aimed at defining a possible corporate image for the district.

The project's focus was "To communicate the district" and it was articulated into two main issues:
- identification of the corporate identity
- definition of the structure for a dedicated portal
In this case design helped strengthening the relations amongst the local actors, University and the enterprises and it enabled the creation of a network of actors now sharing the projects. Furthermore, it used the typical communication design tools, suggesting innovative projects for the corporate image of the district’s collectivity (corporate identity, portal, web site, etc.).

### 3.6. CALABRIA DESIGN [SDI|MILANO, SDI|REGGIO CALABRIA]

The workshop carried out in Reggio Calabria focused on the exploitation of the local production within the textile handicrafts. The project, developed with ARTES, aimed at activating an experimentation in Calabria, to develop local innovation connecting design to the system of enterprises dealing with the artistic textile handicrafts. A “Creativity workshop” (Laboratorio di Creatività) was realised through a workshop focused on the product system: product, communication/distribution of products textile handicrafts.
The local actors communities, starting from a first activity on the territory, perceived the value of the design contribution, activating then new projects for the exploitation of the typical resources. Design used its expertise within the exploitation of the textile products using product, communication and service design tools. The products catalogue was analysed and a strategy for reorganising it was suggested; a project for the products distribution was defined, and an alternative of the artefacts designed by Atena was suggested.

### 3.7. WORKSHOPUSTICA [SDI|PALERMO]

In Ustica the issue of the sustainable tourism development was treated. The issue was to differentiate the tourist crowd on the island. Ustica presents a complex but small ecosystem, therefore it is easy to monitor its energetic flows variables, its production activities (agriculture, fishing, tourism), the disposal, the environmental resources management. Starting from the island’s territorial capital, integrating the actions and the projects the Municipal Administration already partially realised, some design concepts were elaborated for initiatives and strategies aimed at creating and communicating opportunities for the deseasonalisation of the island’s tourist offer.
In this case design was the enabler of the initiative together with the local actors and brought its project development method. The main results regarded the island’s corporate image and the design of service for a wide tourist offer also during the winter.

4. Conclusions

From one side the research lead to theoretical results on the role design plays or could play in local development projects (design uses strategic, organisational, communication capabilities etc..), to the other side real results were reached. The nature of these results isn’t strictly tied to the projects realised during the workshops, but they refer to the growth of the local actors’ awareness of the contexts’ potentials, and of the ways these potentials could be expressed through real projects developed with the design action. An important result was then to have developed some tools and especially a methodology for the design action-research peculiar of the SDI | Sistema Design Italia research network that has developed it. This methodology, thank to the characteristics of flexibility and malleability with reference to the local context (available resources, actors, actions etc..) in which it is experimentally used, represents an innovative tool that it is possible to spread and use also internationally. Those territories where the development potentials based on the production resources availability are melted with those tied to the typical handicrafts production, the agorindustrial resources, etc.. being then able to open up areas for an economic, social, environmental, cultural etc.. strengthening and development will then be considered privileged places to spread this methodology.

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