Impact of design on social inclusion of homeless people: the case study of Costruire Bellezza

Working Paper

Author 1: Cristian Campagnaro
   Associate Professor
   Department of Architecture and Design of Polytechnic of Turin

Author 2: Lyudmila Petrova
   Research Associate in Cultural Economics
   Erasmus School for History, Culture and Communication
   Co-founder CREARE Foundation

Introduction

This research paper first reveals the practice of design for a social change in the case study of “Costruire Bellezza” (Crafting Beauty, CB), a permanent and interdisciplinary laboratory aimed at social cohesion. The case exemplifies the realisation of innovation through knowledge spillovers, i.e. transfer of benefits from the design sector to the social service sector.

Second, the paper argues that in order that design contribute to systematic and structural changes in other sectors, it takes building a new context by establishing linkages with diverse actors in the process (multi stakeholder approach). In this respect the paper reveals how those different stakeholders, i.e. professional designers/creatives, design students, anthropologists (researchers and students) and social workers by engaging in participatory activities begin to share common values which in return realise as multi facet benefits. To capture their effects, the analysis builds on the application of action research and the Value –based Approach to assess any changes in cultural and social values that the design generates elsewhere.
Costruire Bellezza: framework of a design participatory practice for social inclusion

Costruire Bellezza (CB) is a Design Anthropology led project and it was set up in 2014 in Turin, a city which has a long tradition of social innovation. CB started as an experiment focused on both the empowerment of homeless people and the development of skills in university students through participatory and interdisciplinary approaches.

The multidimensionality that characterizes homeless people deals with different forms of personal and human discomfort. Next to the services that meet the primary needs of the homeless people, the Italian Federation of the bodies for the Homeless people (Fio.PSD) recommends services that facilitate the homeless transition to an effective integration in the society. Multidisciplinary teams, collaborative networks and synergic interventions are pointed out as the only way to face the phenomenon.

Fig.1. Multidimensional aspects of homelessness

The research is curated and managed by the architect and designer, Cristian Campagnaro (Department of Architecture and Design of Polytechnic of Turin) and the anthropologist Valentina Porcellana (Department of Philosophy and Educational Science of Turin University).
The project takes place in one of the six night shelters of the city of Turin. It brings together homeless people, design students from the Polytechnic University of Turin, anthropology and education students from the University of Turin, social workers from the Service for Adults in Difficulty (funding service against homelessness) of the City of Turin, educators from social cooperatives, which manage services for homeless, designers, craftsmen, creatives and citizens.

CB is a project for social inclusion via a design-led creativity and participatory process. It engages students and homeless people in systematic and collective experiences through workshops of furniture design (chairs, curtains, benches, bags), interior design and food workshops, art workshops (contemporary art, writing) and gardening. In twice-weekly meetings, all these participants take part in co-creation experiences and share tacit and explicit knowledge and competencies for a reciprocal enrichment. Homeless people can enrol in the project for nine months in the form of a paid internship, while the duration of students’ participation varies. About 25 workshops have been held in CB since the beginning in July 2014. The workshops produce useful products and services for the participants of the project, or useful to neighborhood communities or another group of citizens. Usually, a designer, a creative talent or a master artisan leads the workshops in the role of tutor. The tutors act as incitement for the group and monitor the quality of the design processes through careful guidance of the crafting towards beauty.

CB’s method of work builds on the Design Anthropology approach and aims to engage diverse stakeholders (social workers, designers, researchers) and beneficiaries (homeless, design and anthropology students) to responsibly participate in designing innovative processes, co-producing and managing them. By fostering participatory actions and co-creation, the CB is promoting the interpersonal relationships among all participants. As such the creation of design product, services or process can be seen as “relational goods” (Bruni, 2008) which also have the purpose of improve the well-being of the people in need.

From the practical point of view, the working tools of CB are the workshops where participants co-design and self-build, the paid internship for all trainees, monitoring through participants observation, focus group and semi-structured interviews.
Design and realisation of social values to support the social inclusion of homeless people

Design sector as part of the cultural and creative industries (CCIs) produces cultural goods (products and services) for which both cultural and economic values are important (Throsby, 2001). Cultural value of CCIs is defined as aesthetic, spiritual, social, historical, symbolic and authenticity value (Throsby, 2001). These values can realise not only within the value chain of the cultural and creative industries (through production, dissemination and consumption of cultural goods), but also when artists and designers are working for the other less creativity intensive sectors and contribute to the innovation of new products and processes. Stoneman (2010) calls this “soft innovation” which aims not to alter the technical characteristics of the products, but where the realisation of cultural value is important. Following this argument, some scholars suggest that CCIs can transfer multiple benefits to the other sectors and foster the innovation in those sectors (Potts, 2011; Throsby, 2001).

The project of CB exemplifies those processes where social services for homeless people benefit from the application of design and participatory led activities. The mechanisms by which the design intervention leads to innovation in the social sector is facilitated by the processes such as learning, sharing, creating and experimenting among professional designers/creatives, design students, scholars (in both anthropology and in designer) and social workers (Campagnaro & Porcellana, 2016). The way CB is working is based on collaborative environment where different stakeholders are involved in experiments which are coordinated and directed by the application of Design Anthropological approach. This approach allows to combine theoretical dimension of the research and the practical outcomes of the project by mediating between bottom-up approach and project goals and by fostering quality of outputs and outcomes from the whole processes.

---

1 Here we consider CCIs model by Throsby (2008) which includes both core sectors (literature, music, performing arts, visual arts, heritage and museums, film industry) and related industry sectors (advertising, broadcasting, video gaming, publishing, music recording, architecture and design).
To capture and assess the dynamics and complexity of the impact that the Costruire Bellezza achieves for all stakeholders involved, research team of the project implemented an integrated method of evaluation which combines action research methods with Value-based Approach (VBA). Action research is a method of Design Anthropology approach and VBA is theoretically rooted in cultural economics. Unlike the conventional impact measurements which tend to focus on outputs (number of visitors, activities, hours, etc.), the Value-based Approach concentrates on social and cultural impacts in terms of qualitative changes. It focuses on the goal values or on the range of qualities that the project aims at. Thus, the values and their valorization constitute the core of the analysis. Often, articulating these values (qualities) is quite a challenge. Yet, this method assists the participants in the evaluation to agree on a clear articulation of the most important values.

First, on the basis of semi-structured interviews with the project team, the research determined the value goals, i.e. personal (relating to individual’s experience), social (relating to an experience of a group), societal (relating to the experience of communities at large), and transcendental (relating to whatever transcends the personal, the social, the societal) that the project aims to achieve. Second, the way in which the project will realise these values is clarify by determining the strategies (activities, tools, working methods, communication) and the external stakeholders (beneficiaries, partners, policy makers, funding bodies, media) involved. Only when both stages are completed, the evaluation of possible changes in values is performed. At this stage, the stakeholders are asked (through a survey or a focus group) to weight the importance of different proxies (attributions to values) defined in stage 1 based on their experience of the project. It is the gap between what is valued and what is experienced that provides the proxy of the impact.

**Discussion on shared values of Costruire Bellezza**

The combination of design anthropology research methods and the VBA evaluation method proves that CB through its unique methodology of experiencing and practicing design activity enable different stakeholders of the project to build shared values. The most important shared values are innovation, belonging, sharing, flourishing, optimism and equity, as innovation and belonging are far more significant than sharing and optimism (fig.2). The analysis also proves that these values are of different importance for the
different stakeholder groups. For example, the value of innovation is of greater relevance to design students, social workers and tutors, and flourishing – for the homeless and design students.

Fig. 2. Value map of Costruire Bellezza.

Changes in relations to personal values

The analysis of the results shows that the project reached a strong immediate impact on the homeless people behaviour (fig.3). More specifically, the new practices through the design workshops strengthen homeless self-awareness and subjective well-being. Their self-esteem, feeling good and personal creativity were enhanced. The level of self-awareness is connected to the level of trust in the others. Thus, the collaboration experienced in CB appears essential for (re)activating the trainees’ self-awareness. The homeless individuals involved feel positively accepted by people that do not focus on their previous life story. The results of the interviews with the social workers, tutors and students also confirm that through the engagement of the homeless people in the creative workshops, their cognitive, social and communication capacities improved.

Fig.3. CB change radar chart of homeless: proxies
Changes in relation to social values

By analysing the changes in social values, it can be concluded that the project has very strong social dimensions by means of sharing, helping, collaboration and co-creation. The most obvious benefits of the project pertain to increased collaboration and co-creation, experienced by the homeless people, the social workers and the tutors; increased willingness to help the others or paying attention to the needs of others, experienced by the social workers and the students; increased social interactions (more general), experienced by the homeless people, the design/anthropology students and the social workers.

Changes in relation to societal values

The most remarkable societal change in the project which begins to shape is that the participants in the projects, especially those with the most vulnerable position in the society, i.e. homeless people are starting to gain a sense of belonging to a group. The project’s working method allows close interaction, creates a process of cooperation among different social groups and stimulates the creation of relationships among those groups within the community, for example, between the homeless people and the social workers, between the homeless people and the design/anthropology students. During their participation in the project, citizens from different social groups start to respect more each
other and gain a better understanding of each other’s challenges.

The multidisciplinary observation process within the Design Anthropology approach and the evaluation of shared values through the Value-Based Approach, help to involve all project actors and to investigate other significant aspects apart from changes of homeless behaviour toward well-being.

References


