

Reflecting on

DESIGN CULTURE(S)

Cumulus Conference Proceedings Roma 2021

Volume #1

Reflecting on Design Culture(s).

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CUMULUS CONFERENCE

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DESIGN CULTURE(S) | CUMULUS ROMA 2021
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Design Cultures for Cumulus

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More than three years ago, once as co-chairs we started working on Roma Cumulus Conference before the pandemic, we discussed about a topic to address the global open plurality of Design in Cumulus, and at the same time the relevance of design to shape and to be embedded in society, together with the values that Sapienza University and the city of Rome may convey. “Design Cultures” seemed the best fitting at different levels.

The Topic

Design Cultures is first of all related to the concept of history. Every society is able to express a specific culture in its specific time: every season is speaking a different language and each society in history can be recognized accordingly. Such reflection seems valid for the past history, but also for the present and the future times. Celebrating design as an expression of society, through the history of art and culture in all its forms, finds in Rome, the Eternal City, the most suitable place to host such event, also considering it is the celebration of the 30th anniversary of Cumulus since birth.

At the same time, the reflection was also extended to the relationship of society with place and the plural expressions which may emerge globally by design. Since every local/global society may express a different culture, we felt the duty to respect each in its qualities and characters through tangible and intangible artifacts, objects, places and communication. While gathering the large Cumulus community, the conference came to be an incredible opportunity to look into the many different Design Cultures coming from any part of the world and to showcase and compare their principles and practices.

In conveying the close relationship between design and place, the concept of *Genius Loci* was derived from the Latin cults speaking about a spiritual deity capable of protecting the

sacred essence of places. Then it will be Christian Norberg-Schulz with the book entitled "Genius loci. Landscape environment architecture" to elaborate the same concept in order to express the permanent and unchanging identity characters that any place is able to express through a specific material culture (Norberg-Schulz, 1979). In his words, design action and the built environment should respect its intimate essence, interpreting and integrating shapes as well as materials. Equally, his phenomenological analysis also includes in the concept of Genius Loci the set of socio-cultural characters, habits, as well as languages that characterize a physical environment.

The close image between place and creative production can therefore also have an important suggestion for the design of the objects and the images which we use to communicate in our daily lives. The iconic representation of Made in Italy seems the result of the mythical intersection of territorial culture, places, history, know-how, people, food, shapes, and artifacts, which tell of a deep-rooted and permanent bond with local culture, a bond that Italian industrial history has been able to follow up for long.

Beyond the mythical narratives, the relationship between design and place, seems much more articulated and multifaceted in our modern globalized world. A product is the result of a complex processual interweaving of images, ideas and creativity, production and manufacturing, materials and technology, communication, distribution and sales, consumption, culture and social behavior. Each of these elements has a relationship with the physical place and culture, but equally such relationship has multiplied as the places that affect every moment of artificial creation have multiplied.

While discussing about the topic for the Cumulus conference in Rome, we started asking ourselves a number of questions: is the place where production takes place still the same place where the shape is designed? Are materials and technology proper to the place where the products are designed? Do distribution and communication speak the same language as the place of production? Do the cultures and behaviors of the society which are getting the products, coincide with the places of production? Are still design and products the outcome of the culture of a single local place, or the results of a network of cultures getting in touch each other?

While asking ourselves these questions, we wanted to investigate how Design Cultures have the ability to shape stories set in specific times and places, and to build relationships in everyday life, with significant consequences in society. In other words, how Design Cultures shape our reality producing the artificial nature in which we live every day and at the same time including a more intangible factor which is bound to communication and the more cognitive values which define our experiences, filling them with meanings.

Such design action should not be considered once for all. It is a process changing the shape and the meanings of our culture and environment, so connecting the past with the future of our society, the spaces of our cities, the interaction with the objects of our life, the way we communicate. In short, the environment where we live is the result of an ever changing process of artificialization and therefore a process of cultural stratification. Looking into the future, design is shaping the way the future society is expressing itself, so drawing pictures

of our future world. Reflecting on Design Cultures is about investigating about Design as a form of expression of our society through time and place in the history and in our local and global world, which is considering both the past and the future.

360 Degree Design

Design Cultures is speaking about how design has extended its territories of action and developed its methods to the point to draw complex and cross-border fields. The transition from the old twentieth century "industrial design" to the contemporary "360 degree Design" has led to the multiplication and expansion of its fields of expertise.

It is just the proliferation of contemporary artifacts, many of them including very complex technological or social characteristics, to imply the gathering of different scales together and the meeting of a large range of specialism. Design Cultures had to innovate constantly its tools and approaches in order to face every time a different scenario, in search of always producing new outputs on the line of innovation, while redefining its tasks and boundaries. These are new roles to discover, in-between material and immaterial factors, interaction and communication, service and product, experience and scenario vision, local and global, Design Cultures give sense and direction to production, communication, interface, service, image, while reaching new challenges and playing new roles.

In order to investigate the complexity of Design Cultures, we asked to the Cumulus design community to share their innovative, original, inspiring and disruptive ideas on nine different topics at the edge of the research debate, which we used to call the tracks of the conference: Design Culture (of) Making (Process, Manufacturing, Post-Industry); Design Culture (of) Multiplicity (Gender, Pluralism, Diversity); Design Culture (of) New Normal (Healthcare, Education, Work/Play); Design Culture (of) Proximity (Places, People, Economy); Design Culture (of) Resilience (Social Innovation, Circular Economy, Sustainability); Design Culture (of) Revolution (Critical Thinking, Disruption, Change); Design Culture (of) Thinking (Theory, History, Critics). Design Cultures aims to look and map the emerging fields of design to face the challenges of contemporary post-industrial society, and to understand the hybrid knowledge which is growing "in-between" from merging with other fields of enquiry, so increasingly multiplying the specializations which are more sophisticated and contextual. Understanding the different directions which Design Cultures are taking, means looking into the plurality of languages and methodologies, which interact and make the Design field even more pervasive and articulated. It is an exploration of a disseminated net of theoretical and methodological contaminations, which Design is experimenting, so implying the development of new professional characters.

While launching an international call to discuss about Design Cultures, we wanted to map the layers and the fields, so to tackle and explore all possible projects, approaches, methods, visions, research, so in the end to draw the scenario of the Cumulus community: what are the new scenarios of design and production along with the occurrence of the post-industrial

society of knowledge? What are its epistemological assumptions? What are the new fields to be developed? What approaches and methodologies?

Going Hybrid

At some point, the pandemic crisis blasted and we had to re-think dramatically our conference project as a hybrid event and we realized that the topic was not the only aim to address our work. Our first mission became to re-design the Conference as a process driven by design of the user-experience and the final outcome would not have been able to work without the support of technology.

After receiving a thousand proposals, a careful selection followed and about 350 papers and posters were selected and presented during the conference. In addition, Cumulus Roma hosted 14 working groups, the DESIS event, the new initiative called PhD Network, 10 exhibitions, and much more. All of this had to be accessible both physically and online. Therefore, the challenge was to develop two parallel conferences matching each other, giving the opportunity to also live a beautiful and engaging digital experience for those who would not be able to attend.

We also hosted the largest Members Fair ever in Cumulus: around 50 new members exhibiting and showing-off both physically and online, during the days of the conference. The interesting aspect is that usually, during conferences, this activity takes place around stands, on which flyers and advertising materials are arranged, and where the representatives of each school have a one-to-one contact with the visitors and the guests. Re-designing the conference experience as a hybrid experience through the support of technology, made possible to access in the different schools, allowing the Directors or the Deans to let each guest and visitor visit the physical spaces, the labs, the classrooms, the library, also carrying out interviews of the faculties and the students, while walking in the School.

That was still not enough and we wanted to open a special window on the main Italian schools. So, the conference hosted an Italian Members Fair with the participation of 18 Italian members from all over the country. Finally, we had 20 keynote track sessions, 4 plenary keynotes and about 80 panelists sessions, on 10 different tracks, during 4 days of conference, making this conference perhaps one of the longest in the history of Cumulus.

It should be emphasized that Cumulus Roma is not only the result of a process of translation of a physical event into the digital realm. Rather, it is the hybrid result of a re-design process for augmenting the user experience of actively attending a conference, which we hope will become a model to look into for the future. Above all, it became a real challenge: due to the pandemic, nearly two years had passed in which Cumulus went from hosting 2 conferences each year, to hosting none. Since we may consider Cumulus as a conference-centered association, because of the role that physical interactions are playing in our global design community, we felt a huge responsibility and we tried our best to keep the association together by building and maintaining connections with people who have placed their trust in

us, such as PhD students or professors who have had to wait so long to present their research and work.

An additional question was related to the size of the Cumulus community, while including more than 350 schools around the world, which is a number never reached before and which could be considered either a problem or an opportunity. We asked ourselves how to manage such a large number of participants, without dividing or locally clustering, but maintaining a sense of union and internationalization, which in fact is one of the main assets that characterize Cumulus and inspire schools from all over the world.

Technology, Sociability, Participation

While re-thinking the Cumulus conference as a process and while facing choices going after the management and the organization, the overall project turned to be an opportunity to see in a new light and to address some of the questions which can be strategic about the future of Cumulus Association. Looking back at the overall experience, we wish that our effort will be a valuable contribution for our community at large and for the challenges that any design global association will face in the future. In summary, three great challenges are emerging for the future of Cumulus international conferences: technology, sociability and networking, democracy and participation.

Technology come to be one of the main challenges for two reasons: on the one hand, since clearly it takes time and effort to learn how to use it, especially when it comes to emerging and sophisticated platforms. On the other hand, it becomes necessary to understand which technology is the most effective and the most suitable to re-design the activities of a conference with hybrid presence.

But technology also requires a great deal of economic effort, both for the repair and maintenance costs of software and platforms and sometimes even for dealing with unpleasant online occurrences such as hacker attacks. Additionally, online technology may change and develop very quickly, so in a short time we may find ourselves having to look into brand new platforms because those we just adopted may have become obsolete. There is a lot to take into consideration when it comes to technology and therefore it becomes a challenge which should not be underestimated.

The second challenge is about sociability and networking. Indeed, when it comes to Cumulus, it often happens to compare the conference experience to a “coffee break”. Therefore, the participation to a conference is not only about presenting or attending a paper session, but instead there’s an added value in that special relaxed time and space when colleagues meet together from other parts of the world, to network, discuss, share projects and perhaps to start the future research project. Then the reason for going to a Cumulus conference may become to “get a nice coffee”.

Once the conference becomes hybrid including both the online and the physical presence, the question is: how can we reproduce the same kind of sociability and networking

environment that is typical of the coffee break? Cumulus has always distinguished from other international conferences for being a warm community that is welcoming anyone, at any level. Cumulus is inclusive. So how do we keep this character that makes it unique? At the same time, we have to imagine ways to reproduce online the physical experience of travelling, attending the conference and enjoying the local culture, while following the heritage and the character that Cumulus has developed over the years. Such concept is very close to what we would call hospitality. Hospitality is welcoming people and opening the doors to those who come from afar. Hospitality is about sharing wine and food, introducing people to new places, conveying common values. The goal of Cumulus Roma was to extend the sense of hospitality through a digital experience.

The last challenge, which seems important to take into consideration, concerns democracy and participation. Having globally more than 350 schools as members of Cumulus means facing the chance that many people are in the condition of not being able to travel from one side to the other of the world and therefore to attend to a conference that is taking place in different continent. At this point the challenge is to envision new and different ways to mobilize all members, giving the chance to everyone to be part of the same community. Additionally, travelling is involving costs, which in the future may become even more unsustainable for young PhD students and scholars, who may want to attend to Cumulus events, and above all to have the opportunity to meet colleagues from different places and to fully live a 'Cumulusian' experience.

It is a question of participation to a cultural and scientific initiative, but it is also a question of democracy while including people from different countries and economic possibilities. Cumulus is and should keep to be a place of inclusion.

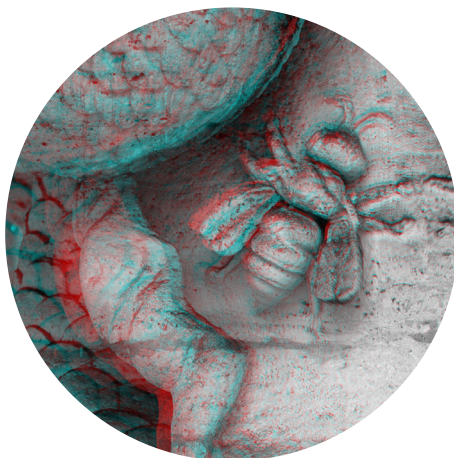
The notion of network is related with the idea of connection. A network, in Bruno Latour's view, involves a set of negotiations in which both human and non-human actors assume identities according to prevailing strategies of interaction. Since internet and the knowledge society raised, the concept of network stands for a different scheme of organization out of hierarchical structures towards more participative models which can support knowledge sharing and collaborative networking. Cumulus Association always included in its core mission to support any international student, scholar and researcher to acknowledge and at the same time get connected into the proliferating global network of design for developing new forms of collaboration while reaching the places in the world where design education, research and innovation move forward.

Cumulus Roma was a constant evolving project including people. But the whole project would not have held up without the help of technology, and moreover without social relations or without aiming to provide a service which was accessible to all in the same way and at the same time. I sincerely hope that our experience and the results we have achieved, some of which are collected in the proceedings of the conference, will inspire those who after us will generously take into their hands such spectacular project called Cumulus.

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EDITORIALS

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