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ART VS
DESIGN**



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PAD #17 | LANDSCAPE – ART VS DESIGN**O. EDITORIAL #17**

Towards a possible “liquid mapping” by Anna Mazzanti & Matilde Marzotto, *guest editors* **005**

I. MAPPING THE MEDITERRANEAN. THE DESIGN THIRD SPACE

Visual Territories and Communicative Landscapes. Mapping and Configuration of Complex Phenomena by Vincenzo Cristallo & Miriam Mariani **018**

The *Seascape* beyond the Physical Dimension. How Data Design could Display Complex Marine Environments by Matteo Aimini & Lucilla Calogero **036**

Design in Digital Cartography. Evolving Landscape Narrative Tools for Territorial Exploration and Enhancement of Local Heritage by Paola Menzardi & Pier Paolo Peruccio **060**

Places in Lieu. Mediterranean Sedentary and Nomadic Living Spaces by Alberto Bassi, Giuliana Califano & Tommaso Listo **077**

II. DESIGN VS ART IN MEDITERRANEA AREA

Ulysses Does Not Come back Home. From Maps of Migration, Small Constellations of Artistic Influences in the Mediterranean Landscape by Marco Borsotti & Sonia Pistidda **104**

Visual Grammar of the Mediterranean Landscape: Chromatic, Iconic and Object Identities by Raffaella Trocchianesi **133**

Drawing the Place’s Soul. Designing the Representation Experience in the Schist Villages by Graça Magalhães **160**

III. DOCUMENTS. ARTISTIC PROJECTS FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN AREA

Landscape is a Space of Action and Thought by Costanza Meli **183**

Becoming Garden. Notes on the Creation of a Planetary Garden by Miguel Georgieff, Michele Loiacono & Sergio Sanna **206**

Adrian Pac’s Art House in Shkodër: a Common and Shared Space between Cultures and Art by Martina Marolda **231**

V. BIOGRAPHIES

About the authors **257**

MAPPING THE MEDITERRANEAN THE DESIGN THIRD SPACE

Visual Territories and Communicative Landscapes. Mapping and Configuration of Complex Phenomena

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Keywords

Visual Territory, Communicative Landscape, Transfiguration, Mapping, Complexity.

Abstract

Joel de Rosnay (1977) defines a “complex system” as an organism composed of a large variety of components that have specialized functions (Bettini, 2014). Starting from its metaphorical value, the territorial system is complex by definition, or rather a multiform organism that, besides representing a symbolic archive of shared memory, is a real and rhetorical place whose resources and assets are the result of the historical combination of environmental, human and cultural factors that have marked life and development over time (Cristallo, 2004).

The reading of a territory is therefore a multiple action since it simultaneously envisages the interpretation of its characters and the construction of “meaning areas”. Understanding the territory is therefore equivalent to codifying the signs, alphabets and visual grammars that make up a stylistic and narrative figure capable of reproducing a “communicative landscape”. Landscape in the sense of “perspective and visual reconstruction”, made up of natural and anthropic characters and also those offered by a sort of long, empirical, and sometimes “poetic”

look, to compose a relational vision. Resuming what was claimed by Capra, namely that “relations must be mapped” (Capra, 2015), since it is not possible to measure or weigh them, therefore quantify them (qualitative and relational approach) the paper aims to illustrate reading models and visual restitution of the “concept of territory” in physical and metaphysical terms. An exercise that starts from a didactic and research experience developed within a representative process that identifies the passage from a “communication geography” (objective surface phenomena) to a “communication mapping” (phenomena’s conceptualization and relation).

1. From *Visual Territory* to *Communicative Landscape*

Considering the territory as a “complex system”, in accordance with what was previously defined by De Rosnay, means first identifying the multiple parts that contribute to composing the complexity of the whole. These parts, as they are also complex subsystems, need to be read hierarchically and according to a configuration of relationships (Cipro, 2015). Starting from a definition of the concept of “territory”, literally “geographical area, portion of land or land of a certain extension” (Treccani, 2019), the physical, geographical and, in a certain sense, materiality of the system emerges. Direct knowledge of the territory derives from the experience within it, just as its perception by an observer depends on the tools that he possesses to interact with it. The reading of the territory, therefore, is somehow filtered by the observer’s perceptive and cognitive structures. As Gregory Bateson argues, “the relationship between mind and world is such that it is the observer who gives contours to things. There is implication and, so to speak, co-emergency between observation and boundary” (Mori, 2014). However, considering the territorial system as a complex system, it is necessary to ask whether it is therefore enough to experience the territory in order to become really and deeply aware of it, or is it necessary to identify further instruments that provide for the interpretation and mapping of the relations that exist within the system.

Tightening the objective on the territory, in order to identify its parts, means defining *landscapes*, or focusing on “circumscribed areas, bounded and observed from a certain point of view” (Treccani, 2019), each of which can be found in a context

of stratifications and pre-existing with which they dialogue and relate. In a certain sense, the definition of landscapes constitutes the passage of scale from the territory to its parts, from the generic to the punctual, in order to identify delimited fields of action within which to construct meaning areas?

The passage of scale from territory to landscape constitutes the evolution from the *perception* of the territory to its *interpretation*, the transformation of a *visual territory* into a *communicative landscape* (Cristallo, Mariani, 2019), the *ri-semanticizzazione* (as attribution of new meanings) of a place through a complex observational, cognitive and planning action (Spirito, 2015).

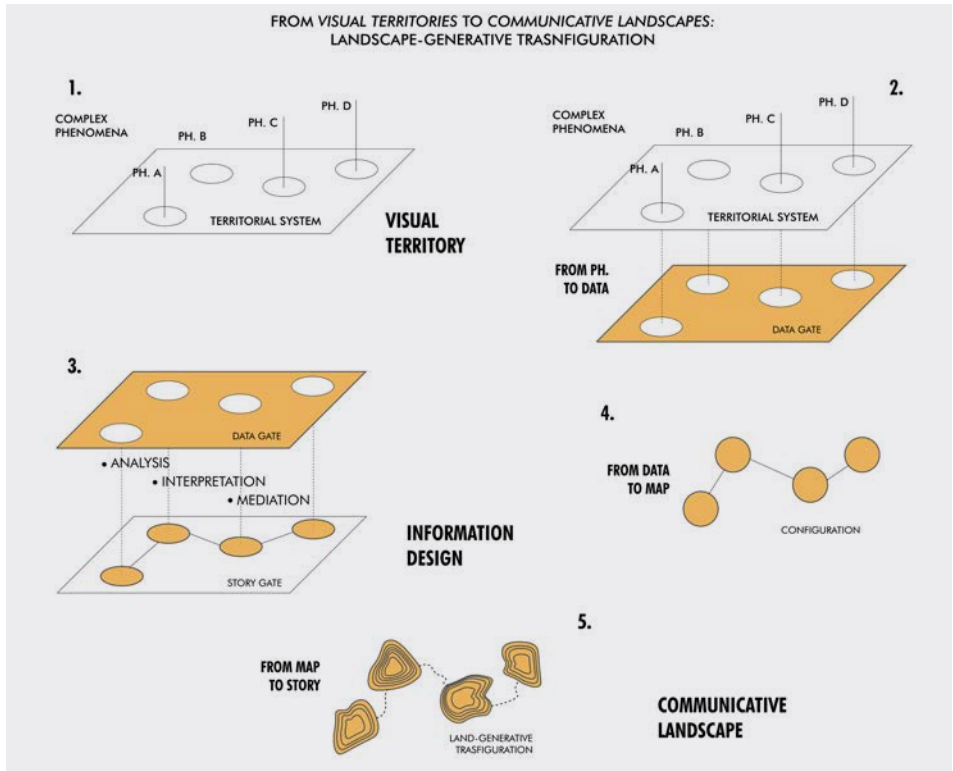


Figure 1. Design Vincenzo Cristallo, Miriam Mariani, *Landscape-Generative Transfiguration's Steps*, 2019.

In more general terms we can speak about “communication mapping”, taking up what was claimed by Capra: “Relationships must be mapped” (Capra, 2015), which makes explicit the need for a new scientific approach to relationships (as well as individual objects), since it is not possible to measure or weigh them, therefore quantify them, passing to a qualitative and relational approach, based on the analysis of processes.

The production of maps as a “searching act for the sense of place”, as “a set of identities with boundaries” (Amoruso, 2012), constitutes a project operation whose phases involve the identification of images, first mental and subsequently translated in a form, through a communicative code. However, it is necessary to consider what was stated by Alfred Korzybski about the relationship between language, map and territory: “A map is not the territory it represents but, if correct, it has a structure similar to the territory that gives an account of its usefulness” (Mori, 2014, p. 19) and adds Luca Mori: “(...) we do not really know the territory, but maps, and maps of maps. [...] Besides, we do not access the territory except through a selection of differences, remaining confined to the mapping mode” (Mori, 2014, p.30). Thus, it emerges how the mapping instrument can be considered an “intermediate world” between the observer and the territory, halfway between phenomena and their representation (Iacono, 2005).

Mapping places based on a cognitive process, taking up what was stated by Kevin Lynch in “The image of the city”, makes explicit the relational nature of the so-called “environmental images” starting from the imageability of the place, or its

figureability (Lynch, 1969). This reflection brings with it the figurative or, better to say, representative problem of perceived environmental images: the need to elaborate a “system of visual language that uses colour, shape, line, hierarchy and composition to communicate clearly and appropriately” (Woolman, in Lima, 2011, p.11).

Within the reflection on complex systems, Ross Harrison identifies as one of the key features of such systems, in addition to the “relationship”, the configurative nature of the same, understood as a hierarchy of internal system levels (Cipro, 2015). Considering literally the term “configuration” as “representation of something according to a certain disposition and a certain form similar to another object” (Treccani, 2019), the communication issue emerges strongly, both in the physical and in the metaphysical elements. It is in fact necessary to remember both the components, the tangible and the intangible, which constitute the territory system, in particular the relationships that constitute its structure. What visual restitution is, therefore, the most appropriate, together with the mapping of phenomena, in order to make the territory system communicable?

2. Mapping and *transfiguration*

The discipline of Information Design, as a process of reading and interpretation of phenomena and their restoration through visual syntheses, makes it possible to simplify very complex information to make it accessible through a communicative project. The elaboration of information is, today, a key research field about the project on the territory: contem-

porary society must be considered as the society of the immaterial, of the so-called “fifth dimension” (Cosenza, 2012), contextually to the exponential evolution of the information dimension and communication through the use of Big Data. Bertin states: “graphic representation is one of the basic sign systems conceived in the human mind in order to memorize, understand and communicate essential information” (Bertin, in Lima, 2011, p.2). The management of huge amounts of data has led to the need to investigate suitable representation tools to reduce their complexity and facilitate their understanding, the primary interest of the Data Visualization field.

For the visualization of territory’s phenomena, visual communication is based on the codification of narrative languages that allow the systematization of collected data. The coding of these languages represents the configuration phase of phenomena, having as objective the correct and easy communication of the same, through the shared understanding of the signs through which they express themselves. For this reason, the choice of visual signs cannot ignore their recognizability, however it is clear that they represent the metaphorization of reality, the filter through which science on the one hand and culture on the other, see and interpret phenomena. These signs become the mouthpiece of contemporary landscapes and their complexity, an expression not only of semantic information, but also of aesthetics (Eco, 1962), through the original and different organization of elements of already known visual grammars. More than a narrative configuration, the phenomena mapping through the tool of Data Visualization, constitutes a transfiguration, understood as

“metamorphic device par excellence (...), hypertext with various possibilities of navigation and scrolling” (Valeriani, 2004, p.33). The concept of “transfiguration” brings with it the reference to the heuristic value of the graphic composition. In an interview with D. Sheff we read: “When two distinct elements are subtracted from their element and merged together, (...) the thing born of this combination is an entirely different fact, a third intelligence with its own life” (Valeriani, 2004, p.47).

In order to clarify the concept of “transfiguration” in the field of Information Design, let’s talk about the information mapping project for the bestseller “The Game” by Alessandro Baricco, realized by the group 100 km Studio by Andrea Novali and Luigi Farrauto, graphic designers specialized in maps and *wayfinding* projects. In “The Game”, the map design is an aid in visualizing ideas and concepts, therefore in their communication to the reader. The transfiguration operation, in this case, consists in representing concepts that are completely different and far from the geographical reality, attributing to them a navigable, visible nature, tangible, from immaterial to material, from metaphysics to physics. They transfigure them in the form of geographical maps composed of portions of land, mountain ranges, rivers and islands. Even the temporal element is translated into space: on an imaginary time line, or rather a route, various concepts and their evolutions are positioned, like organisms, constructing a non-linear visual narration, but based on the construction of different maps, each summarizing a specific aspect of contemporaneity that we try to describe, on which different paths are drawn from time to time. In recent decades, what Baricco

himself has defined as a true “paradigm shift”, “a shrewd mutation” of society, which has led individuals to conform to a “mass individualism” marked by digitization and by the evolution of increasingly advanced and “dematerializing” technological systems and tools (Baricco, 2018). This dematerialization of reality brings with it, therefore, the representative problem of it, of its concepts, of its evolutions. From here, the need to transfigure these concepts, to concretize them, and therefore, net of its interpretative nature, the cartographic representation does not correspond to a simple objective transposition of the territory, but to its conceptual synthesis (Baricco, 2018). “The Game” maps are, therefore, the contemporary world’s maps, useful for a better understanding of the so-called “digital fortresses that now mark our landscape (...) as geological information” (Novali, 2019), results of a land-generative transfiguration.



Figure 2. Design 100km Studio, *The Game*, 2018.

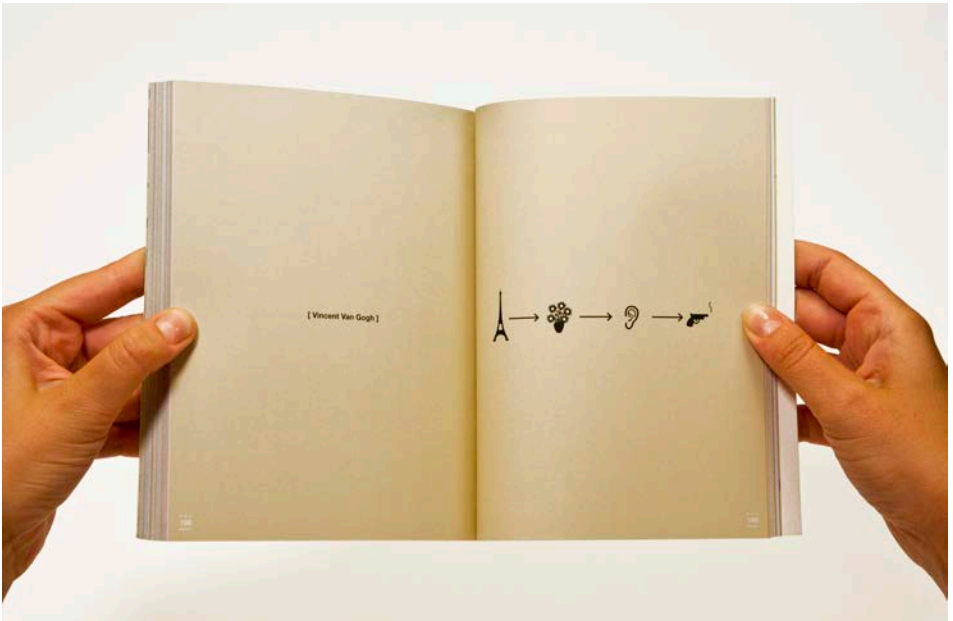


Figure 3. Design H-57 Studio, *Vincent Van Gogh - Shortology*, Shortology.it, 2012.

Taking up the concept of “transfiguration” as a “device” proposed by Valeriani, we can associate the attribute of “open work” (Eco, 1962) the Data Visualization tool, in particular through the infographic poster. Or better, as Valeriani’s “passing” work, made to be “for everyone”, based on simplicity and iconographic universality. An iconic example of so-called “passing works” is Keith Haring’s metropolitan graffiti series, to which we can add the Shortology case, from the H-57 Studio group. Both examples see the use of a system of pictograms, organized in a narration, result of the study of contemporary phenomena, reworked in a visual synthesis. The objectives of these narratives are simplification (never obvious), immediacy and comprehensibility, deriving from a wise use of the pictogram, as well as the values of composi-

tion, colour and narration. Each “scene” of the narrative, both in Haring’s graffiti and in Shortology productions, constitutes a cross-section of the contemporary, placing it in the foreground, extrapolating it from its context (reality) into an abstract and conceptual dimension.

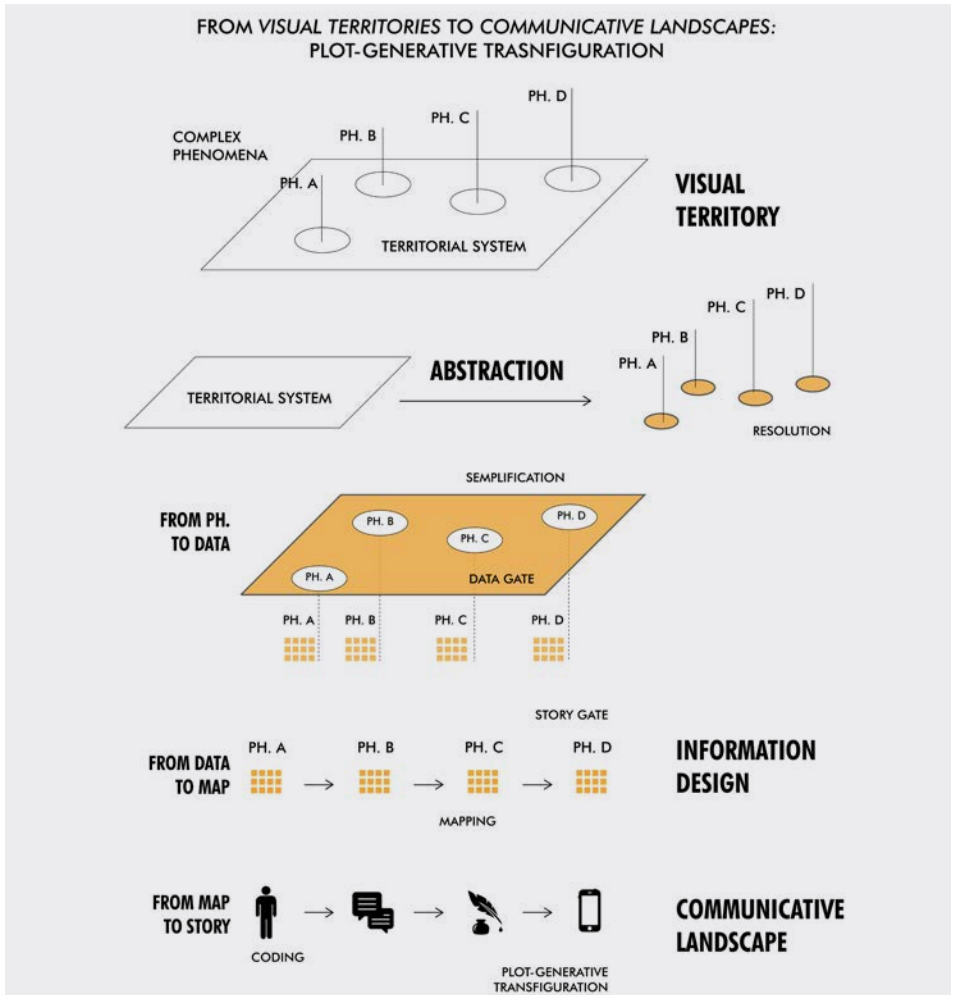


Figure 4. Design Vincenzo Cristallo, Miriam Mariani, *Plot-Generative Transfiguration's Steps*, 2019.

However, despite the abstraction, we can see (between a pictogram and the other) the background where this narrative takes shape, the scenario of the contemporary that is reflected clearly and unmistakably, among the visual symbols (plot-generative transfiguration). In fact, in this case, abstraction is understood as a process that allows the introduction of new symbols that broaden the previous field of investigation (Treccani, 2019) allowing to share a message, and which is configured as a creative act based on simplification and interpretation. The elaboration of an infographic language constitutes, as suggested by Paul Cox, the result of a process based on resolution, simplification, mapping and coding (Corraini, 2016), or a process that starts from the observation of reality (from qualitative and quantitative data) to its representation, through an operation of abstraction. This process sees graphics as a vehicle for coding information, therefore with the function of cognitive support (Cairo, 2016).

3. From *Data Visualization* to *Storytelling*

Baricco's text and the graphic and visual interpretations conducted by 100 km Studio were the starting point for a critical reflection, and subsequently a didactic-design experimentation - on the theme of the graphic representation of complex phenomena in the framework of Information Design - all of the Final Synthesis Course in Design of the Master's Degree in Design, Visual and Multimedia Communication, 2018-2019, at Sapienza University of Rome. In particular, the aim of the course was to understand the possibility that Information Design can operate transversely in several areas of communication through methods, tools, fixed and interactive visual

manifestations, of different genres and origins. That is acting through graphic and visual “representations”; data and information transpositions; processing of narrative sequences that require a communicative project that begins in the development of specific alphabets, grammars and visual syntaxes consistent with the object/subject to be communicated.

That is to say to intuit that the massive diffusion of complex, repeated, unpublished and dissimilar information – about causes and meanings – today requires an operational dimension that simultaneously combines the development of “data” and the corresponding language to be adopted to communicate them considering that there is an operation to make the transition from data visualization to storytelling possible). This ongoing process has been a critical key implemented by the “use” of a series of seminars (Inside Design - Lecture Series) that has seen professionals, researchers and scholars of Information Design telling the multiplicity of infographic communication as a “symptomatic manifestation” for mediate the dynamism and reversibility of the contemporary visual and multimedia project in the presence of data to be represented and disseminated. This was followed by a series of laboratory exercises which saw students discussing various political, social and cultural topics (Data Book, Data Film, Data Event, Data Map, Data Future and Data Service) on which to carry out documentation, comprehension and graphic-visual transfiguration operations. Peculiar is the theme of the fourth exercise entitled “Data Map”, for the possibility of connecting the mapping theme in different descriptive keys, expanding the definition of “knowledge territory” (iconic

events of world history) marked by physical and metaphysical values. In other words, to establish that mapping is equivalent to increasing the level of knowledge in the sense of democracy and the information sociality. It is not a coincidence that the work, supported by a large and substantial documentary apparatus, then ended in the possibility of returning a synthetic visual narration typical of the *manifesto* (infographic *manifesto*) which, by its nature, intends to communicate data and emotions without betraying the sense of chronicle and history. An itinerary halfway between teaching and research that has brought Information Design to the attention of students as a tool of “knowledge and conscience” to understand causes and consequences - as well as forecasts, opportunities and development of visual communication strategies - around an equitable and lay dissemination of knowledge.

4. Conclusions

Taking up the words of Reif Larsen, from “The Selected Works of T.S. Spivet” (2010): “A map is not limited to mapping, but it makes freedom and formulates meaning; it creates bridges between here and there, between different ideas that we did not know to be connected previously” (Larsen, in Cairo, 2016, p. 263). The heuristic value of the map as a visual representation that gives new meanings (*ri-semantizzazione*), in fact, is found in the possibility of exposing data and “allowing them to be analysed, explored and made discoveries” (Cairo, 2016, p. 31), attributing to the object map not only the value of a tool for designers, but much more as a tool for the public. The territories’ representation (physical and metaphysical) and, as illustrated above, their *figureability*, can be

summarized with a journey in stages, a sort of crossing of progressive gates, real “access doors” for communication. In particular, it is a matter of identifying Data Gates (from the territory to the data), proceeding by configuring Story Gate models (from the data to the information), to then stage examples of Storytelling (from information to narration) such as to make the complexity of spatial data intelligible¹ (Cristallo, Mariani, 2019). Thus, a purely perceived territory becomes a communicative and communicable landscape, transfigured in its appearance but not in its content. This is how the complexity of a system is interpreted and summarized, simplified in its form, but not reduced in its meaning: “It is not the landscape that really exists, but exists only in an aesthetic interpretation of the world we call landscape (...). Interpretation is a form of complex knowledge” (Saggio, in Zagari, 2013, p. 74). Design, including Information Design, presupposes hermeneutics as the structure of the project (De Fusco, 1990): on the basis of what “appears”, what “means” is interpreted and consequently represented in the form of languages that have a cognitive and perceptive value such as to constantly contribute to the formation and transmission of a culture of visual communication.

1. The themes related to Data Gate, Story Gate and Story Telling, have been the subject of research and study within the cycle of interdisciplinary seminars entitled *Communication and representation. From Data Visualization to Infographic* conducted within the Final Synthesis Laboratory in Design of the master's degree in *Design, Visual and Multimedia Communication*, La Sapienza University of Rome, 2018/2019, teachers Vincenzo Cristallo, Ida Cortoni, Maria Grazia Berlangieri, tutor Miriam Mariani.



Figure 5. Design Students, La Sapienza University of Rome, *Synthesis Manifesto for Data Map Exercise*, 2019.

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Scuola del Terzo Luogo was born and developed during several editions of Incontri del Terzo Luogo, moments of research on the "undecided" spaces of the city, spaces in which not everything is totally chaotic and wild, but where not everything is already planned. Starting in the fall of 2012, an informal group of people started a journey within these spaces that has facilitated comparison, actions on public space, experimentation, relations with the context and various forms of life with special regard to the topic of the garden. The reference place that gave life to this path, supporting it with its own resources, is Manifatture Knos, an undecided space in the city of Lecce, that has been recovered after a long period of abandonment and returned to the city as an independent cultural center. Scuola del Terzo Luogo wants to deal with new forms of pedagogy by challenging conventional teaching models, where giving political dignity to indecision becomes the modality of intervention on the common good, or the practice through which we take care of places.

www.manifattureknos.org

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She is currently working on the correspondence and on the publication of the sculptor Vico Consorti (1902-1979) at the University of Siena, following the assignment for the research project *Siena anni Trenta: ipotesi per una mostra* (2017). In 2016 she joined the national project *Diffondere la cultura visiva: l'arte contemporanea tra riviste, archivi e illustrazioni* (Progetto Nazionale FIRB 2012). In March 2016 she received her PhD at the University of Florence with a thesis titled *Le immagini al potere, le immagini del potere. La rappresentazione fotografica dell'architettura contemporanea nelle riviste italiane di settore (1928-1943)*. Graduated in Contemporary Art History at the University of Siena in 2011 with the thesis *Adrian Paci. Da Albanian Stories (1997) a The Encounter (2011)*, she is also specialized in video art. She is interested in the architecture of the Sixties in Italy and Europe, a theme that she has treated in her research *L'architettura pneumatica. Ricerche negli anni Sessanta tra avanguardia e utopia* (2007). Her recent research interests include new media in relation to visual arts, with special reference to architectural communication in Italian, French and German magazines in the Twenties and Thirties and in relation to power and totalitarianism.

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She is an art historian. In 2007 she published "Arte Open Air. A Guide to Contemporary Art Parks in Italy". She curated lectures and workshops focusing on the relationship between aesthetics, art and landscape, in collaboration with FAI Fondo Ambiente Italiano, Fondazione La Raia and Orticola di Lombardia. In 2014 she founded 'lookaroundart', an entrepreneurial initiative aimed at bringing a wider audience closer to contemporary art. Currently, together with the management of the 'lookaroundart' project, she continues her teaching activity in public and private institutions such as IED-Istituto Europeo del Design and Politecnico di Milan.

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Member of Ground Action, a collective of experts in the field of architecture, landscape and art, which is inspired by all those collective, active and participatory practices of space making such as, for example, the international experiences of the operational workshops. Its activity is configured as an on-site and open air research atelier, aimed at triggering or accelerating the re-evaluation processes for peculiar places, claiming the performative value of the action in the public space and in the landscape. It promotes sustainable design by using recycled materials and the direct and concrete realization of the installations using impromptu ways and forms. According to its method, Ground Action helps to create the opportunity for a dialogue with administrations, other local institutions and all those subjects active in the area capable of providing specific support and knowledge.

<https://www.groundaction.eu/>

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