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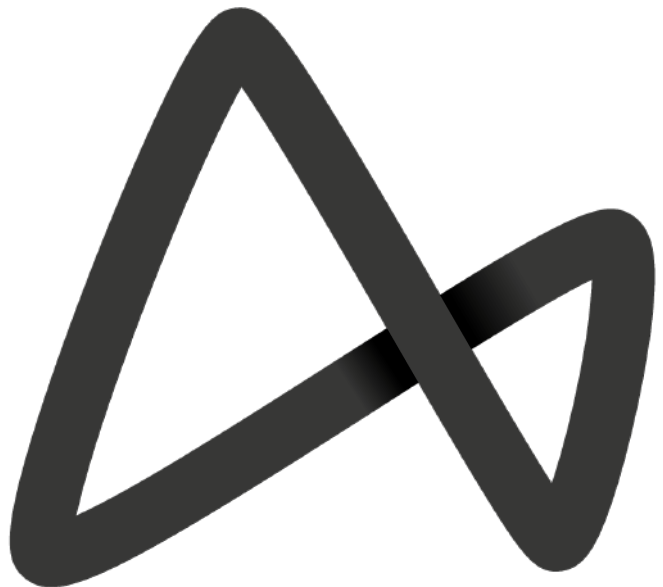
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Design and Innovation for Made in Italy

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(Eds)
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Abstract

Italy's inner areas are increasingly affected by depopulation and marginalization, calling for a renewed reflection on the role of design as a driver of territorial regeneration. Twenty-five years after the introduction of action-research in local contexts, the growing complexity of contemporary challenges – from demographic desertification to socio-economic and environmental transitions – requires an update of tools, approaches, and objectives.

At the same time, the spread of digital culture is reshaping the relationship between center and periphery, suggesting the possibility of overcoming traditional notions of marginality through new forms of connectivity and participation.

Within this evolving framework, design can play a crucial role through its ability to observe, interpret, and narrate local knowledge, resources, and critical issues. By activating collaborative and situated practices, it can support processes aimed at counteracting the depletion of human and cultural capital and fostering new opportunities for development. The paper reflects on the need to redefine design practices in light of the digital shift and the emergence of fluid, distributed communities – both physical and digital – capable of connecting people and skills across increasingly permeable territorial boundaries.

Keywords

Social Desertification
Design-driven Innovation
Inner Areas
New-action research
Process Visualization

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DESIGNING IN MARGINS: DEMOGRAPHIC FRAGILITY AND THE ROLE OF PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES

In order to frame the urgency and structural nature of the challenges affecting what are commonly referred to as Italy's "inner areas," it is more reliable to refer and focus on data, than to mere statements. Statistical evidence offers a clear, unambiguous picture of the major trends shaping these territories. Even more useful than national or regional data – often too broad to convey the specificity of local conditions – are small-scale, localized datasets. These micro-contexts, though seemingly marginal, are potentially representative of broader patterns.

In this spirit, we examine the case of Pietraroia, a small inland municipality in the province of Benevento, on the border with Molise. Located at the foot of Mount Mutria, 533 meters above sea level, Pietraroia lies far from major transportation and communication networks. Its economy is primarily agricultural, yet the area also hosts a significant geological site: a geosite where fossils emerging from the soil tell the complex story of the Apennine's geological evolution. The local paleontological museum houses emblematic specimens, including *Ciro*, a dinosaur hatchling that nowadays represents a well-known symbol of Italy's paleontological heritage.

To better understand the demographic situation of Pietraroia, we refer to Italy's national population censuses, carried out decennially since 1861 and, from 2018 onward, annually as part of the Permanent Census of the Population. According to this continuous dataset, Pietraroia had 2,131 inhabitants in the first census, reaching a peak of 2,245 in 1881. From there, the population began a steady decline – intensified after World War II – culminating in just 497 residents in 2023. This corresponds to a population decrease of 77.86% over 140 years, effectively a loss of more than three-quarters of its population.

Beyond the numbers, the age structure further worsen the situation. Most residents are over 55 years old, painting a future even more uncertain. What we are witnessing is not merely depopulation but what can be more accurately described as a progressive social exsanguination, leading toward the demographic desertification of entire territories.

This isolation is compounded by the physical and infrastructural distance from demographic centers. Major cities – despite facing their own crises – nonetheless offer community structures and economic dynamics that tend to attract younger generations, thereby further weakening the demographic resilience of these peripheral zones.

Such a scenario is implicitly acknowledged in the National Strategy for Inner Areas 2021–2027 (PSNAI)¹, released in April 2025. In one of its most unexpected statements, the document reads: "These areas cannot realistically pursue a reversal of demographic trends and must instead be supported along a path of chronic decline" Objective 4 of the plan even explicitly mentions an "accompaniment toward irreversible depopulation", acknowledging that many inner areas are already demographically compromised, with limited development prospects and weak attractiveness. While the report insists these regions must not be abandoned, it proposes a form of managed retreat: a social and infrastructural soft landing into long-term decline.

Given this discouraging perspective, which is the role design can play? It would be unrealistic to expect immediate or resolute solutions. Rather,

¹ See: https://politichecoesione.governo.it/media/jhld12qn/psnai_finale_30072025_clean_ministro.pdf

design may offer a lens through which to reinterpret the identity of places, and a way to bring attention to the systemic, contextual, and relational dimensions of marginal territories.

The geographic displacement of design practice – from industrial production centers to peripheral areas – stimulates both a critical rethinking of disciplinary objectives and greater sensitivity to local dynamics. Since the early 2000s, design research has begun to explore the potential of participatory, community-based approaches, capable of activating bottom-up processes and grounded in empirical knowledge. In this framework, design becomes both a tool for anticipation and an enabler of transformation, operating within and with the communities it addresses.

This approach emerges from the first national-scale research project known as Sistema Design Italia, coordinated by Ezio Manzini between 1998 and 2000 and funded by the Ministry of University and Scientific and Technological Research. Its goal was to assess the state of design across Italy and identify how the discipline expressed itself in different territorial contexts. One key outcome of that initiative was the recognition that design practices in Italy were not exclusively tied to industrial production, and that interesting examples could be found in territories traditionally considered peripheral to the discipline (Maffei & Simonelli, 2002, p.5).

Pivotal research on what it means to design in and with territories, in Italy. Its methodological core is action-research, a dynamic process in which the researcher plays the role of facilitator, mediator, and activator of local networks and at the same time contributes disciplinary expertise (Bertola & Maffei, 2009, p.22). Action-research involves a unique blend of theory and practice that, starting from a critical analysis of the observed phenomena, seeks to co-develop solutions with local actors – solutions that are not only shared but also culturally appropriate and context-sensitive.

In conclusion, in order to identify a single key concept guiding the role of design in such complex territorial contexts, the word would be “relation”, an irreplaceable ingredient embedded in the values defined by the awareness of the roles of “space” and time.

THE TERRITORIAL PLATFORM AS A NEW RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

In the 1970s, in a series of reports on the Social Situation of the Country, the Censis² highlighted the existence of two specificities, in a way convergent, of the Italian economic scenario: the presence of a widespread informal economy and the expansion of specific forms of economic localism. It concerned a largely pre-industrial informal economy, which in the following two decades served as a pathway for two other typical phenomena of the “Italian economic boom”, such as the molecular entrepreneurship and the mass industrialisation³.

Bonomi added further specifications to this framework by shifting the attention from the middle-sized cities (urban centres that can be located between large metropolises and small towns, which play a crucial role in territorial, economic and social balance) to more remote areas that can be

² Centro Studi Investimenti Sociali, is an Italian socio-economic research institute founded in 1964 whose activities mainly focus on carrying out studies on social, economic and territorial development.

³ See: https://www.censis.it/sites/default/files/downloads/Le_Considerazioni_generali.pdf

defined as “comuni polvere”⁴ (small municipalities, often characterised by social and territorial fragmentation).

Nowadays, Italian society is increasingly becoming a reality of local worlds where a predominance of the “micro” dwells: micro-companies, micro-behaviours, micro-social actors, micro-cohesion, which over the years has been defined as “molecular development” (Bonomi, 2024). In the 1970s, the authors of the mentioned report emphasised the strength of certain economic localisms and their consolidation into districts. Gradually, in the following decades when the Italian production system was changing, in the comparison with a globalised economic dimension, most of the districts showed an ability to adapt by absorbing somehow the innovation flows that “dripped” from above (Bonomi, 2024) and that could have compromised the local dimension. Districts and supply chains needed to find a more complex cultural configuration and denomination, which Bonomi identifies in the term “platform”, an over-used concept that, however, effectively captures the strong character of territory and localism, reflecting the value of the margins and the sphere in which to incorporate the dynamics of the city. The platform, in Bonomi’s definition, is the term that best conveys the transition from a fixed place to a system of relations focused more on the atopic dimension of the social rather than on the physical dimension of contiguity. Similarly, Branzi in his book *The New Italian Design* (2003) introduced the concept of the productive platform (Branzi, 2003), not referring to a bureaucratic organization of territories, as happened for industrial districts after the regulatory change⁵ that sanctioned their institutional recognition. By contrast, in the model of the productive platform, layered action systems coexist in variable geometric spatial configurations that cannot be enclosed within rigid perimeters. We are moving away from the conviction that growth concentrated in metropolises would also bring prosperity to marginal places and populations, with a linear and gerarchical vision of the “centre-periphery” metropolis-territory relationship. Today we live in a continuous metamorphosis in which the margin becomes the centre, where polycentrism is no longer based on the relationship between centres and peripheries but on three main geographical forms: diffuse urban-industrial territorial platforms, large or medium-sized central cities, and the vast territories of anthropic emptiness and environmental fullness that policies have classified as “internal areas” or lands of the margin (Bonomi, 2024).

This reveals a relational perspective that connects the dense meshes of the local, i.e. the weaving of relations between individuals, organizations and institutions at a circumscribed level, to the broader ones of the virtual and global dimension. From a linear, sequential and cumulative type of value production, we move to a production model in which wealth is produced through a collaborative process to create what Normann and Ramirez (1995) define as a value constellation in the corporate sphere, a series of territorial polarities or production platforms that go beyond traditional production localisms.

⁴ Literally translated “powdered municipalities” indicating a system of fragmented small villages. From the preface by Giuseppe De Rita, Italian sociologist and Censis advisor in A. Bonomi (2024).

⁵ Legal recognition of the districts first came with Law No. 317 of 5 October 1991. Until then, industrial districts had no effective institutional identity.

THE TERRITORY: FROM THE DESIGN CONTEXT TO THE DESIGN OBJECT

The old model based on rational production (Butera, 1990) falls into crisis when a rigid market with a predetermined demand is opposed, in the early 1970s, by a model based on a flexible market with a fragmented demand, with a barely gerarchical structure.

In fact, due to the industrial changes derived by the introduction of electronics and robots into factories, the industrial sector produces two different types of economy: a classic industrial economy (with wages and labour relations) that are increasingly restricted, and a new social economy, characterized by self-branding, mass entrepreneurship and widespread forms of work.

The transition, consequently, affects not only the economic dimension but is felt on multiple levels, involving the redefinition of social, economic, productive and relational models, therefore, the relationship with the territorial systems themselves must also be redefined (Villari, 2012). The space loses its dimension of physicality to assume a connotation extended to the immaterial: a fluid space (Bauman⁶, 2003) which takes shape from the network (Castells, 1996)⁷. It is precisely from this territorial production network that the national competitive advantage defined as Made in Italy has been built, understood as a productive and design capacity that cannot be identified exclusively in the production of material goods (automotive, furnishings, fashion), but which also lies in the socio-cultural systems linked to the historical-architectural, cultural and environmental heritage, as well as to the wine-gastronomic culture or agri-food production. An intangible heritage that has no reference in a single company but finds its basis in the territorial system as a whole (Maffei and Simonelli 2000).

In the same way, especially from the 1980s onwards, Italian design experiences a change in its molecular structure, adapting to the changes and the new competitive flows: the profession of the designer become democratized, less elitist, evolving in parallel with the changing context, and becoming what Branzi (2003) calls a “mass profession”. It manifests its pervasiveness in even unexpected sectors such as food, culture, communication, with the main purpose of “making visible” the peculiarities of specific contexts through products, services and strategies.

Towards the end of the 1990s, in fact, while the traditional design fields focus on the design of “products” (product design, communication design, furniture design, etc.), the emerging design disciplines focus on design for a purpose⁸ (design for emotion, design for sustainability, design for interacting, etc.). This represents a change in perspective perfectly linked to the changes in our societies and therefore in the priorities that design must consider (Parente, Sediti 2018).

In this transition there is, then, a change in the way of observing the relationship between design and territories: the perspective shifts from observing the territory as a design context to considering the territory as a design object.

⁶ According to Bauman, in the relationship between space and time, space represents the solid and stolid, and therefore heavy side of the coin, while time represents the fluid, dynamic and ever-changing side of that relationship.

⁷ Castells defines networks as sets of interconnected nodes that process financial, informational and other value flows with the help of new technologies.

⁸ At the end of the 2000s, the European Community promoted an idea of integrated development emphasising the urgency of responding to environmental issues, the enhancement of local and cultural identities, as well as the reduction of the socio-economic gap between regions.

It is precisely in the complexity of this system that design for territories establishes itself as a new field of theoretical study (Parente, Sedini, 2017). In its new shape, design becomes a strategic tool able to activate local design processes by connecting skills, know-how, resources and strengthening local networks between people, institutions, businesses for territorial development and enhancement.

EVOLUTION OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DESIGN AND TERRITORY

The first academic research that concentrated on the attempt to first focus on, and then define, the growing relationship between design and territories in its strategic and processual methods, were conducted in the late 1990s. The first of these was the SDI – Sistema Design Italia⁹ (SDI, 1998) research, under the scientific responsibility of Ezio Manzini¹⁰, which involved eight universities distributed throughout Italy (Milan, Florence, Rome, Chieti, Genoa, Palermo, Naples 1 and the Second University of Naples). The aim was to quantify and recognise the actual contribution of design to the success of Italian production in the world, analysing with methodological rigour all the contributing phenomena through the in-depth study of 90 case studies of significant product-systems in Italian territorial systems. The research aimed to identify new ways of application and interaction between the discipline of design and the territory by initiating a dialogue with places and developing a specific nomenclature to define certain emerging phenomena. This approach led to the germination of other national researches, applied to specific phenomenological circumstances of the relationship between territorial systems and design culture. More specifically we refer to Me.Design¹¹ (2002-2004) (Vignati, Castelli, Villari, 2005), D.Cult¹² (2004-2006) (Parente, 2009) and the “Wd-Workshop design, summer design seminar”¹³ (2001-2005) (Cristallo et al, 2002) that implemented the action-research method to experiment, through bottom-up and participatory processes¹⁴, the role of design in the planning, definition and implementation of development strategies of specific local contexts and the tools for interaction and empowerment of the community as an active player in the process.

⁹ Acronym for a national research project co-funded by Murst, carried out from 1998 to 2000, entitled: the role of industrial design in product innovation.

¹⁰ One of the leading academic scholars of design, founder of DESIS, an international network on design for social innovation and sustainability.

¹¹ With territorial specificity related to the Mediterranean area. Me.design. Strategies, tools and operation of industrial design to enhance and strengthen the resources of the Mediterranean between local and global”, co-financed by the Ministry of University in 2002-2004.

¹² With topic specificity related to the cultural heritage. D. Cult. Design for the Enhancement of Cultural Heritage. Design Strategies, Tools and Methodologies” (2004-2006).

¹³ Initiative curated by Vincenzo Cristallo, Ermanno Guida, Alfonso Morone and Marina Parente that took place in Morcone (BN) from 2001 to 2005 and was awarded the Compasso d’Oro prize for research in 2004.

¹⁴ The concept of participation is understood, according to the Scandinavian school (Ehn, 1993), as a mechanism for democratising the design process, whereby decisions are made not only by designers, but also by end users.

In 2008, through the DRM¹⁵ - Design Research Maps (Bertola & Maffei, 2009) promoted by the research network¹⁶ with other academic institutions¹⁷, the evolution of the research conducted in Italy until then was formalised through visualization tools, such as mapping and infographics, in order to democratise access for subsequent researchers to a repertoire of definitions, methodologies, and reflections useful for the concrete development of design approaches in this field.

Following this phase of field experimentation and theoretical formalisation, the national academic systems fostered a phenomenon of fragmentation of research with diffuse and collective micro-initiatives, not systematically enumerable in terms of numerousness and differentiation, which have contributed to the updating of the literature in this field and constituted an important moment of theoretical reflection.

Among the relevant initiatives we mention the research network D4T- design for territories, formalised in 2015 following the FARB call for proposals to support basic research, and the related scientific productions (three booklets covering three different thematic areas: theory and practice, tangible and intangible, competition and collaboration; the book D4T-Design For Territories. Approaches, Methods, Experiences that collects them, and a thematic issue of the scientific journal PAD Journal - PAD #13 "Design for Territories").

At the conclusion of this complex period of disciplinary gestation, in the 2020s, the need to rethink the structural definition of the phenomenon was felt, in order to resume the debate in a formalised, systematic way that qualifies and quantifies the impact of design research in relation to the various fields of action in which the discipline intervenes, in a context-world that changes rapidly and for this reason requires continuous updating.

Indeed, in order to develop sensors that, even before interpretation, clarify the current dimension of the relationship between design and territories, it seems crucial to adopt such a method of reading through exemplary cases, which had already guided the first academic research twenty years earlier. With this purpose, bottom-up work groups have been instituted within the SID Società Italiana di Design (Italian Design Society), made up of professors and researchers from 20 Italian universities who, in a collaborative process, discuss 11 different topics such as: fashion (Ecosystem Design for Fashion), materials (Design 4 Materials), sustainability (Design for Sustainability), communication (Communication Design), basic research (ERC: Positioning Design Keywords), technologies (Interactive Factory: enabling technologies, from IoT to XR), education (designXeducare), history (History of Design), dissemination (Pro-Des. Forms and processes of scientific design writing, production and dissemination), health and well-being (DHeS: Design for health, well-being and social inclusion), territory and cultural heritage (D:T:P: Design, Territory, Cultural Heritage) **Fig.1**.

¹⁵ Compasso d'Oro for the organic systematisation of design research in Italy from a global perspective (2011).

¹⁶ SDI Acronym for Sistema Design Italia - local action agencies twinned from the first university research of the same name.

¹⁷ CDD | Association of Design Ph.D. Schools in Italy; CPD | Association of Design Faculties and Degree programs in Italy; SDI | Sistema Design Italia Network of ten academic design research agencies and sponsored by the Design Faculty and INDACO Department of Politecnico di Milano.

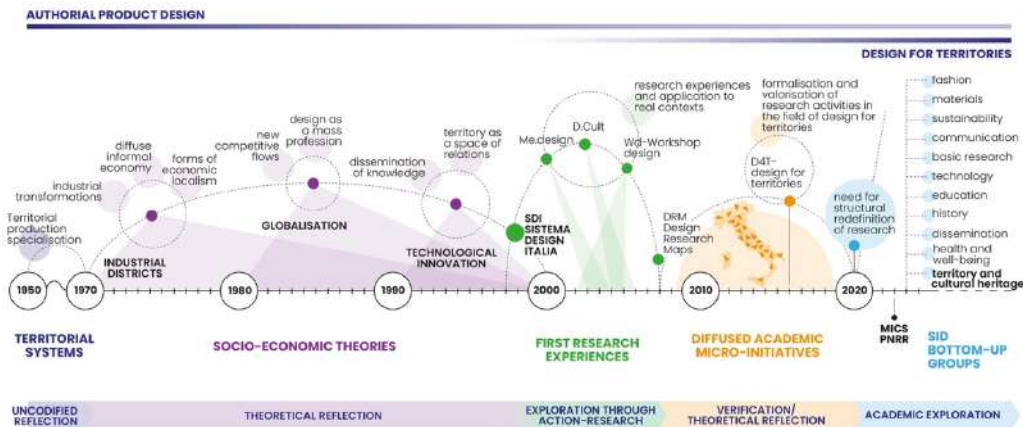


Fig. 1
 Visualisation of the evolution of the relationship between design and territories and academic research in the field of Made in Italy. Doctoral thesis. PhD Candidate Iole Sarno.

The latter, in particular, explores the relationship between design - territory - heritage:

The objective of the D:T:P: network is to initiate a critical re-examination of the relationship “Design, Territory, Cultural Heritage”, in order to update its reading models, theoretical contexts, operational practices. In other ways, it is a question of rereading the dependence that in new forms manifests itself between the meanings of local and global in a territorial context that, in renewing keywords such as “territorial capital” and “identity”, is growing in complexity. Furthermore, noting how crucial it is to promote basic and applied project research that fosters social innovation, the working group proposes to examine the role these play in making citizens, communities, businesses, public governance and private institutions proactive. For the same reasons, the D:T:P: network intends to investigate the relevance of digital technologies for a balanced development of territories and thus to preserve a tangible and intangible culture that, as established by the 2003 UNESCO General Conference, the 2005 Faro Convention and Goal 11 of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Cities and Communities, guarantees civil rights and democracy. (<https://shorturl.at/AuiDW>)

The modalities of interaction between the members of each group include work tools specifically tailored and restitution of overviews such as maps, infographics and texts, shared and developed collaboratively. This process allows to verify the current state of research in order to identify, among the various themes, differences and similarities that characterize and mark the design process in different areas, triggering comparison, reflection, learning and revision of multidisciplinary approaches in which design guides or accompanies the development of processes.

FORWARD: A PARTICIPATORY DESIGN EXPERIMENT IN INNER AREAS

The FoRWARD - *Furniture Waste for Circular Design* research project is funded by the PNRR in Mission 4 “Education and Research”. The organizational architecture of these funds is structured in Hub and Spoke, where the FoRWARD project belongs to the Hub “Made in Italy Circular and Sustainable” (PE11 MICS) conducted by an extended partnership composed

of 12 public entities (universities and research centers) and 13 private partners (companies in the industrial sector). Spokes, on the other hand, are thematic clusters that organize research according to specific disciplinary contributions and facilitate the exchange and advancement of knowledge on that topic by bringing together partners who conduct integrated projects by sharing resources tools and objectives **Fig. 2**.

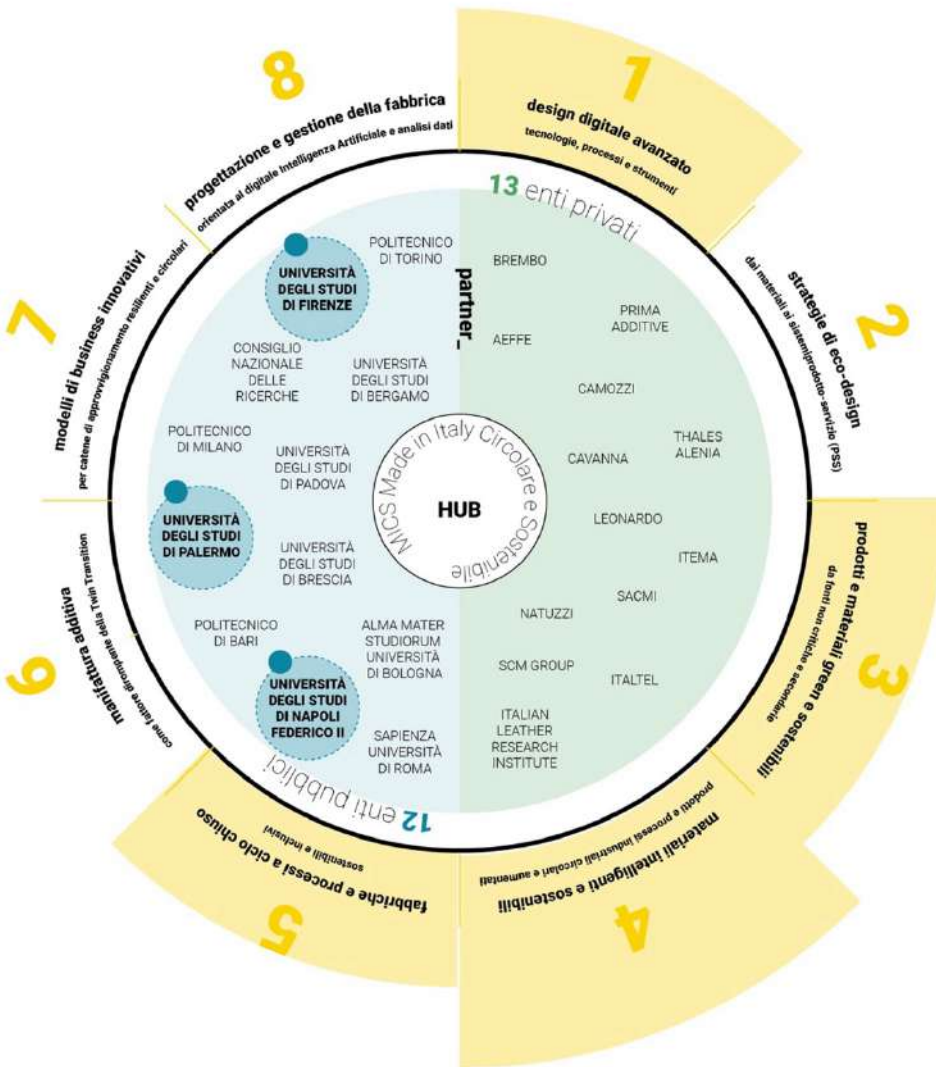


Fig. 2
Structure of the MICS research highlighting the universities involved in the ForWARD project and the Spokes within which the project is placed.

The ForWARD project acts across the Spoke 1 “Digital Advanced Design - Technologies, Processes and Tools” and Spoke 4 “Smart and Sustainable Materials for Circular and Augmented Industrial Products and Processes” which includes several projects geared toward the testing and transfer of innovative solutions in the field of sustainable materials and technologies, with a strong focus on the circular economy. The intervention that is described in this contribution concerns the work carried out by the research group of the University of Naples Federico II, in particular by the design group of the Department of Architecture (leader of the project) and the Department of Social Sciences, and refers to the objectives of Work Package 1.2 “Portfolio of Digitally Enhanced Solutions for Industrial Design,” specifically Task 1.2.6 “Design of Territories,” which aims to enhance material resources, local skills and production cultures through systemic and collaborative approaches. In continuity with the action-research experiences described in the previous paragraphs, the Forward research project, has been configured as an

experimental laboratory. Launched in 2023, the project involves 7 municipalities of Alta Irpinia: Aquilonia, Bisaccia, Cairano, Andretta, Monteverde, Calitri and Lacedonia. The area represents a context characterized by high settlement fragmentation, the pulverized presence of small businesses, a rich but underutilized tangible and intangible heritage, and structural phenomena of marginalization and demographic decline. According to updated data from the Alta Irpinia Consortium of Social Services (2024), the area has experienced a continuous population contraction, from 60,117 inhabitants in 2019 to 56,845 in 2024, with a loss of 3,272 residents, then more than 5 percent in just five years **Fig. 3**.

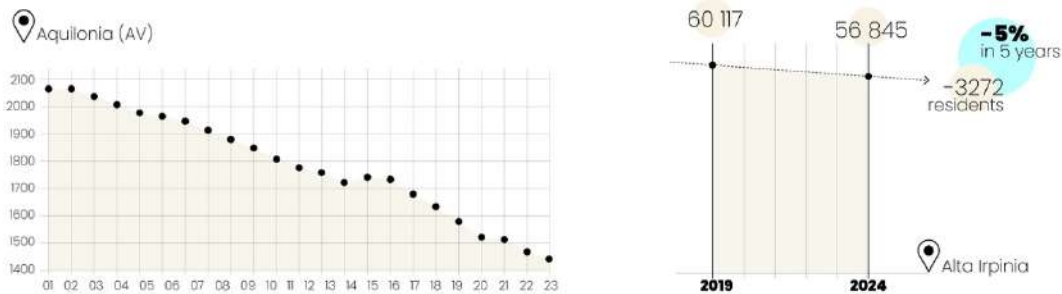


Fig. 3 Demographic trends in the municipality of Aquilonia (AV) ISTAT 2001-2023. On the right side: demographic trends in the Alta Irpinia area 2019-2024 (Alta Irpinia Social Services Consortium – 2024)

The problem of population decline particularly affects the production system in these areas where small family-run businesses persist, operating in the production of customized furniture, specialized carpentry, and maintenance/restoration of wooden artifacts.

The choice of this territory as a case study and place for experimentation was guided by the desire to intercept a context representative of the Italian production framework, characterized by greater criticalities in access to innovation and development. This decision made it necessary to adopt a systemic approach to the project, which was not limited to the single production unit of the wood supply chain or to a specific market, but was able to embrace the territorial complexity, promoting connections and relationships even among different supply chains.

Before describing the products of the specific Work Package, developed by the authors of this article, we mention the work of the extended research group composed of the sociology group that worked on the field analysis and field interviews, which allowed to substantiate the design choices (Marotta, Corbisiero, Zaccaria, 2024), and the work developed by the Architecture Technology component together with the Engineering team (Rigillo, et al., 2024) that produced a portfolio and experiments on materials and advanced technologies that allow to develop circular processes in the wood supply chain. These contributions were produced in parallel with the construction of a Living Lab that involved various stakeholders to identify a shared goal between the research team and local stakeholders.

The Living Lab's operational phases followed a structured progression: exploratory meetings for project involvement and outreach, in-depth surveys with the primary target audience, and co-design sessions with stakeholders.

- exploratory meetings
The first series of meetings involved representatives of the administrations of the seven municipalities. The meetings were aimed

to engage representatives to mediate and disseminate the project on the field and to initiate a dialogue. This first phase also allowed the research team to understand critical issues and real points of view and to start the process of emerging tacit knowledge. These moments represented the starting point to build up a network between research, institutions, and the territory.

- in-depth surveys

Interviews were conducted specifically directed at local manufacturing businesses in the wood-furniture sector that were the main target of the project. The survey explored aspects such as relationships with suppliers and customers, structure and size of companies, technologies they use, level of training of employees, supply chain of raw materials, and distribution of manufactured goods. The goal was to understand the positioning of companies with regards to the supply and reverse chain, but more importantly, the margin of awareness, knowledge, or openness to new forms of collaboration **Fig. 4**.



Fig. 4
Site visits and interviews to micro-enterprises in the wood and furniture sector, in collaboration with the Department of Social Sciences.

- co-design sessions

The next phase consisted of co-design sessions involving specific groups of actors and addressing the themes that emerged from previous readings and investigations. In these moments of interaction, strategies and concrete actions aimed at generating new forms of cooperation and responding to expressed needs were co-imagined, fostering the construction of a networked model of relationships **Fig. 5**.



Fig. 5
Co-Design session with representatives from local authorities (SAI - Welcoming and integration system) and local education and training institutions.

The Living Lab, through these phases, was configured as an active space of listening, inspiration, interpretation, design and experimentation, capable of activating dynamics of shared innovation and building, starting from the

territory, a plural and relational vision activated by the interaction of the design process with the context. The result was the definition of the project goal identified in the desire to define, not a unique and specific project but rather the construction of an educational platform that can give shape to repeatable processes that adapt and evolve over time.

The following paragraphs describe some designed devices that will become interaction tools of the educational platform.

MEETING DEVICES: FROM THE LIVING LAB TO THE TABLE AS A TOOL FOR INTERACTION

The chosen operational tool is therefore the Living Lab, understood as an action-research methodology based on the active involvement of users in real-life contexts and on the continuous iteration between prototypical development and stakeholder feedback. The territorial lab identified is located in Alta Irpinia – specifically in the municipalities of Aquilonia, Monteverde, Bisaccia, Calitri, Lacedonia, Andretta, and Cairano – a constellation of towns that, while sharing conditions of marginality, offer significant forest resources and ancient woodworking skills. The Living Lab makes it possible to overcome the logic of the top-down pilot project, replacing it with an open platform where solutions emerge from the interaction between universities, local authorities, businesses, the third sector, and citizens.

At the same time, the Living Lab adopted by FoRWARD refers to the guidelines of the European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL), which emphasize value co-creation through ongoing interaction between private actors, research institutions, public administration, and citizens. The actions proposed by the project are therefore defined as Tables: items of furniture that can be used to organize activities, but above all, spaces for encounter and exchange – horizontal surfaces around which to co-develop possible intervention strategies. The table, a privileged device through which FoRWARD activates the relationships in question, is understood in a dual sense: as both a symbol and a tool. More than just a piece of furniture, it becomes a material and discursive infrastructure where heterogeneous visions converge, knowledge is sedimented, and conflicts are negotiated **Fig. 6**.

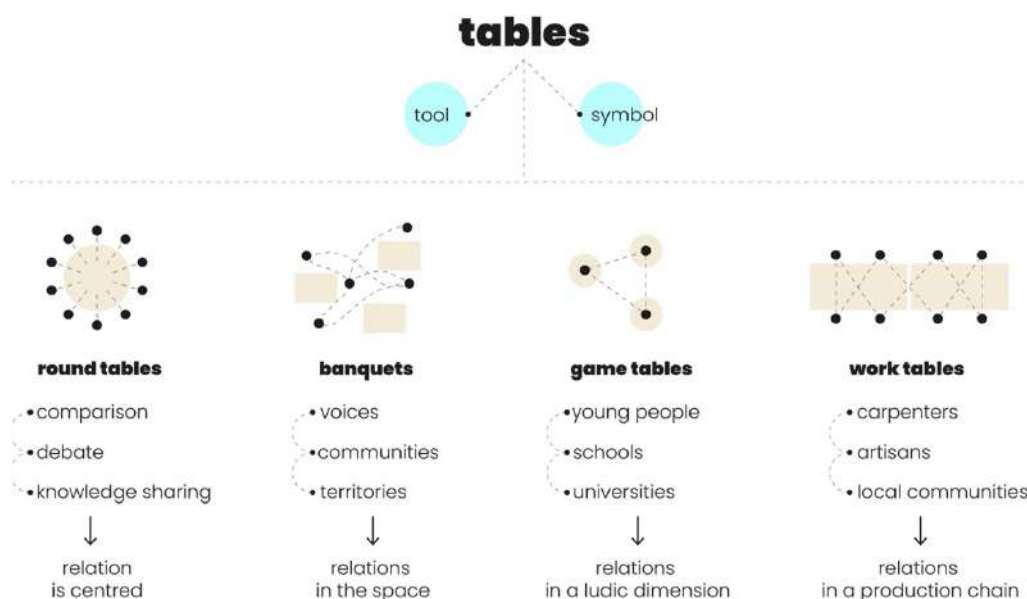


Fig. 6
Graphic conceptualisation of the “table” device as a tool and symbol of different interaction strategies.

The round table, in particular, embodies the horizontality of positions: all participants sit at the same level, recognizing one another as equals in the decision-making process. The project, therefore, does not aim to design a "functional" table, but rather to create enabling conditions for synergistic exchanges among stakeholders. It becomes a unit of analysis and intervention through which to overturn the traditional design–production–use sequence by placing relationships at the center. The object becomes a pretext for the shared construction of narratives, the structuring of alliances, and the systematization of skills that would otherwise remain fragmented. This approach stems from the play on words *round table / Around the table*, proposed by the collective Orizzontale during the 17th Venice Architecture Biennale. The young designers launched a call reflecting precisely on the physical and symbolic role of the table, its function in the development of relationships, and the multiple forms it may assume depending on the context. In this operation, the table is conceived as both a device and a territory of encounter: a space where experiences are shared and gathered, but also one where conflicts and contradictions can be faced and, at times, negotiated. The multiplicity of its possible configurations reflects the table's ability to adapt to different contexts, activating practices of open and inclusive dialogue and co-design (Orizzontale 2022).

As part of the FoWARD activities, this concept has been expanded: the table takes on different configurations depending on the phase and objectives of the process. The research identifies four main forms – *round tables*, *banquets*, *game tables*, and *work tables* – each corresponding to a different level of openness and type of interaction device. Starting from its most conventional form – the *round table* – it becomes possible to explore configurations that respond to increasingly diverse and experimental modes of engagement, depending also on the actors involved.

Round tables are broadly understood as mobile and flexible structures that initiate processes of discussion, debate, and shared knowledge construction. They do not always take on conventional forms in the research; more generally, they consist of temporary setups and practices aimed at involving different actors in direct dialogue and participatory experience. In this context, dialogue is not just a method but becomes a true design form capable of shaping spaces and relationships. This is exemplified by the collaborative project *Dialogue as a Form* by the Raumlaborberlin collective. Created for the inauguration of the Liebling Haus – The White City Center in Tel Aviv in 2019, the initiative transformed Bialik Square, a historic plaza in the heart of the city, into a space devoted entirely to dialogue and active listening. The event brought together experts from Israel and Germany, along with local residents and festival attendees, around an ideal round table – a white, lightweight canopy acting as a temporary urban lab in which the project fused with dialogue, transforming a physical location into a device for connection and exchange.

It is worth highlighting that the proposed devices represent design perspectives that the research intends to further develop in the next stages, with the aim of expanding the Living Lab experience by including new forms of social and design interaction. This is intended to strengthen the territorial network and promote the broader sustainability of the wood supply chain. For each identified category, a collection of case studies and best practices has been compiled – a summary of which follows, categorized by type.

A new variation the research intends to explore is the *banquet*: temporary installations capable of transforming public space into a place of conviviality

and exchange. The feast, conceived as a social practice, becomes a powerful tool for connecting voices, communities, and territories. At the same time, it serves as a pretext for initiating a shared design phase, generated and sustained by the event's organization itself. The suspension of norms, the exceptional nature of the moment, and its re-creative and plural character make *banquets* a rich ground for experimentation, opening space to new and creative behaviors and ideas.

Another example is the series of events organized by the collective Orizzontale for the evolving project *Prossima Apertura*. The themes of conviviality and food sharing guided a self-construction workshop, which gave rise to *Picnic Urbano*, a large circular wooden table conceived as a meeting place for residents of the Toscanini neighborhood in Aprilia. Inaugurated with a community-wide picnic, the 12-meter-diameter table later hosted a farmers' market, contributing to the promotion of short food supply chains and neighborhood services. Over time, it became a reference point for meetings, presentations, and moments of everyday social life, establishing itself as a shared public space actively used by the community.

To engage young people and schools, a third variation focuses on *game tables*: tools designed to weave together design and play, transforming the game into a device for participatory exploration. A key reference here is *La Casa Tappeto* (The Carpet House), created for the Italian Pavilion at the 2023 Architecture Biennale by Studio Ossidiana in collaboration with Adelita Husni-Bey. Conceived as a playful and immersive space, the project interprets the *game table* as a transformative device capable of merging space and activity into a single gesture. The large tent – at once a carpet, roof, shelter, and play area – is itself the result of collaboration with children and stands as both the outcome and the site of co-design. Here, the notion of the table reaches its highest degree of ambiguity: it is simultaneously a space and a tool, an object to be designed and a place in which to design, a game and a playground.

Completing the picture, the fourth configuration concerns *work tables*: tools designed to involve carpenters, artisans, and local communities in shared construction processes through which the designed supply chain can take tangible form. These tables serve as platforms for training workshops, learning centers, and participatory construction sites, where making is integrated with research and co-production of knowledge. A compelling example is the *Bricologis* project, promoted by the collective Pourquoi Pas!? in the Mas du Taureau neighborhood of Vaulx-en-Velin, France. This *work table* is a collaborative space providing resources for self-renovation and urban improvement projects, empowering residents through the sharing of skills and participatory design practices. The lab does not simply offer tools for construction but becomes a place where communities meet, learn, and experiment with new models of collective space management, sharing tools and materials.

OPERATIONAL TABLES FOR NEW PROJECT VISIONS

The first meetings of the Living Lab launched in Aquilonia have already tested *round tables*, while *banquets*, *game tables*, and *work tables* have not yet been fully explored.

The *round tables* brought together the mayors of neighboring municipalities, hospitality service providers, school representatives, and trade associations, resulting in a shared mapping of the challenges and opportunities related to

the forestry supply chain. In addition to generating strategic visions, these meetings triggered equipment exchanges – such as the joint use of CNC machining centers – and led to the definition of a schedule of micro-educational construction sites open to citizen participation. The *banquet* represents the second configuration: a temporary setup centered on conviviality, capable of transforming a square or churchyard into a space of vibrant social interaction and the sharing of informal knowledge. Projects such as *Piazze dell'Immaginario* by Studio Ecòl and *Picnic Urbano* by the collective Orizzontale demonstrate how food, placed at the center of a large circular table, can break down linguistic and cultural barriers, enabling forms of collaboration that would otherwise remain dormant. Building on these precedents, FoRWARD envisions the organization of itinerant *banquets* in the most remote hamlets, with the aim of bringing to light traditional recipes, oral narratives, and forest micro-stories – true living archives useful for defining a shared territorial brand. The choice to work with convivial devices is not driven by a secondary aesthetic concern, but is instead grounded in empirical evidence that conviviality frees up quality time and generates what sociologist Ray Oldenburg calls a “third place”: a hybrid space that fosters the informal exchange of ideas. Within such contexts, complex topics such as sustainable forest management or the adoption of FSC certification criteria can be addressed using accessible language, breaking away from the inevitable technicalities that often alienate citizens from decision-making processes. At the same time, collective celebration creates a shared sense of meaning that fosters continuous participation.

The third configuration, the *game table*, targets children, teenagers, and students from technical schools, reinterpreting the playful dimension as a tool for participatory exploration. It draws on serious game methodologies¹⁸. In the *game table*, emphasis on visual-material languages and manipulative gestures addresses the need to include individuals with varying levels of literacy and technical expertise. The educational materials are conceived as open narrative objects: small wooden blocks made from local tree species, laser-engraved with symbols from the forest cycle; scenario cards presenting real-world issues – such as the growing damage caused by the bark beetle or the shortage of skilled labor – and flexible rules that invite creative negotiation. In this way, play becomes a vehicle for technical and environmental literacy, stimulates creativity, and fosters a context conducive to youth entrepreneurship.

The *work table*, finally, reconnects design with making, organizing workshop cycles in which carpenters, digital artisans, designers, and researchers co-produce functional prototypes. Following the principle of *open design*, cutting plans and assembly instructions are released under Creative Commons licenses, facilitating the replication of the products in other contexts. This results in flexible training pathways that bridge the gap between schools and businesses, reducing the skills mismatch often reported by local SMEs. The practical dimension of the *work table* closes the loop between ideation and realization, laying the foundations for a regenerative local economy. The synergistic combination of these four forms results in an open ecosystem, in which each configuration is both a means and an end: a means, because it activates relationships; an end, because it is the tangible expression of a

¹⁸ On the occasion of the *MICSathlon. The Challenge of Future Talents*, the Trucioli Makers team — which included the authors of this article — won a special prize for social impact with the project *WoodUthink?* a serious game designed for FoRWARD.

collective learning journey. It may take a supply chain to make a table – but to build a sustainable supply chain, you need a table: FoRWARD adopts this provocation as a guiding principle, recognizing design’s ability to generate social infrastructures even before generating products.

The first empirical results and ongoing design initiatives confirm the solidity of this approach: *round tables* have led to the signing of a protocol for responsible forest management and the launch of a permanent *Wood Academy*; *banquets* will activate solidarity-based economic circuits and foster projects that connect multiethnic cultures; *game tables* will steer local high schools toward digital fabrication; and *work tables* will produce low-impact urban furniture to be installed in public spaces, generating a demonstrative effect capable of attracting new design partners.

The establishment of the *Wood Academy*, which emerged as a proposal during the early *round tables*, deserves special attention. The envisioned hybrid educational model aims to counter the outmigration of young talent by reconnecting human capital with local innovation opportunities and promoting a knowledge-based economy rooted in the territory Fig. 7

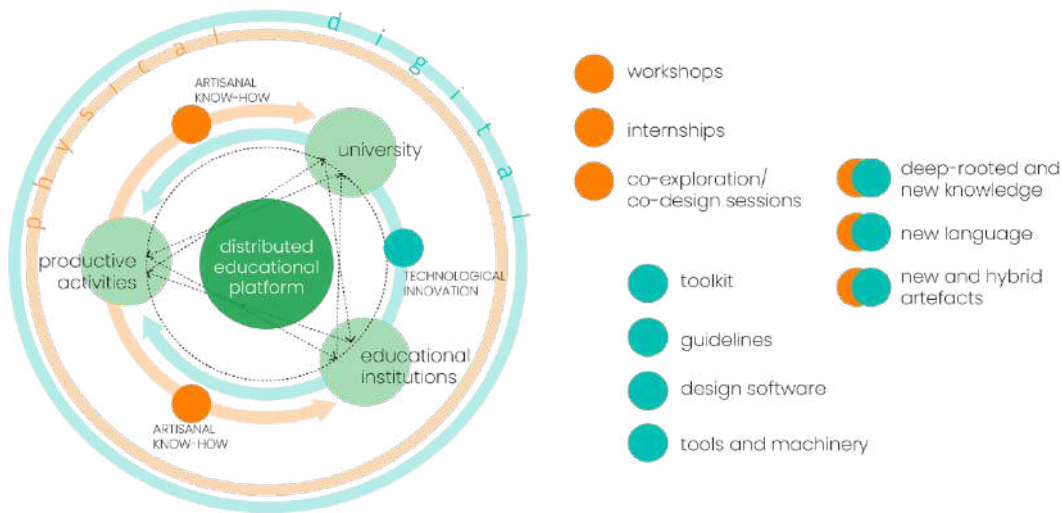


Fig. 7
Graphic conceptualisation of the inputs and outputs, physical and digital, of the distributed educational platform connecting universities, productive activities, and schools through a cyclical exchange of knowledge and competencies.

FoRWARD demonstrates that the regeneration of inner areas cannot be delegated to top-down infrastructure projects, but must instead be driven by the creation of relational spaces where communities can experiment, learn, and produce value cooperatively. In its various configurations, the table fulfills this role – as both a community catalyst and a platform for shared design – affirming that when oriented toward environmental sustainability and social cohesion, design can indeed trigger lasting transformative processes.

We cannot yet speak of verifiable and comparable results in this type of process, as Pelle Ehn claims: “In this field, there is a need for long-term infrastructuring where relationships continue... that is, that a social design project instigates a conversation and relationships that can be on-going beyond the “life” of the project itself. But that also makes the impact of social design very difficult to evaluate.” – Pelle Ehn Professor of Interaction Design, Medea, Malmö University Interview, 22 November 2013 (Armstrong L., Bailey J., Julier G., Kimbell L., 2014).

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