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Design for social innovation within a vulnerable group. Lessons learnt from the experimentation ViviCalusca in Italy.

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ABSTRACT

This contribution outlines the project ViviCalusca as an experimentation of enhancing social innovation within a vulnerable group in Milan, living in a public housing located in Vicolo Calusca. The aim of the project was to overcome their situation of fragility by engaging them in various activities and applying a set of diverse approaches and techniques, coming from theatre, sociology and design.

As researchers in design for social innovation, we mainly used co-design and service design methods and tools: more precisely we planned a path of light co-design sessions to activate a sustainable micro-economy of exchange and gift among people in the neighbourhood.

This project led us to reflect upon our contribution as designers within a group with such a level of social vulnerability: we understood that the co-design process itself was more important than results, as it worked better as a form of community engagement rather than producing effective 'design' results.

Key Words: Design for social innovation, service design, collaborative services, vulnerable groups.

1. BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE: SOCIAL INNOVATION, VULNERABLE GROUPS AND POSSIBLE DESIGN CONTRIBUTION

In recent years, the concept of social innovation has become highly popular in different domains, raising the interest of policymakers, economic leaders, researchers and multiple types of organisations. Social innovation is widely recognized as a possible solution to tackle the most urgent challenges of our era and this popularity also generated a stress of the notion, stretching social innovation in so many directions that it is at breaking point (Grimm et al., 2013). In this paper we specifically consider one possible definition of social innovation, developed within the European project SIMPACT, and characterised by an explicit connection with the notion of vulnerable groups: “a novel combination of ideas and distinct forms of collaboration that transcend established institutional contexts with the effect of empowering and (re-)engaging vulnerable groups either in the process of social innovation or as a result of it” (Rehfeld et al., 2015 p.6). Hence, this conceptualisation places emphasis on vulnerable and marginalised groups who are not able to fully participate in the economic, social, political and cultural life of the society.

Italian sociologist Costanzo Ranci analysed the current characteristics of social vulnerability, distinguishing between ‘old social risks’ (mostly connected with middle or old age) and ‘new social risks’ which do not affect only personal incomes, but also more complex aspects such as housing deprivation, unstable employment, tensions between work and childcare and the living conditions of the elderly. This means to reflect on solitude and isolation, on the integrity of relations between generations and the reorganisation of families around caregiving activities (Ranci, 2010). More specifically, vulnerable groups are those people who are more exposed to instability and weak integration in society: “it is from the instability of the social position occupied that the notion of vulnerability draws its relevance” (Ranci, 2010 p. 17).

The ViviCalusca project, which is the main object of this paper, was developed precisely to produce and answer to the local conditions of exclusion and instability of a vulnerable group: the community of inhabitants of the public housing located in Vicolo Calusca in the Italian city of Milan. In this context, social innovation may be considered as a possible solution to support the empowerment of a vulnerable group. According to the SIMPACT research, “social innovators develop products, processes and services linked to the development of social competences (empowerment) within these vulnerable groups in order to reduce their vulnerability, that is, the degree of exposure to the risk of structural exclusion” (Castro Spila, Luna and Unceta, 2016 p. 6). As researchers in design for social innovation, our contribution to the ViviCalusca project was to use our competences to promote “a constellation of design initiatives geared to making social innovation more probable, effective, long-lasting and apt to spread” (Manzini, 2014 p.60). More explicitly, to use design approach, methods and tools to engage people in a process of activation and possible re-inclusion.

During the whole project we adopted an approach known as community-centred design (Meroni, 2008): this approach provides for the presence of designers in the community for long enough to activate particular initiatives, creating a common and shared aim, enabling the community itself to pursue a path of innovation.

In particular, we used our competences in service design and co-design as our aim was to activate a micro-economy of exchange and gift among people of Vicolo Calusca. In fact, according to Manzini (2015), when dealing with design for social innovation, service design and co-design seem to be crucial: the first one focuses on the quality of interactions and possible relations, the second one focuses on the enactment of pluralistic processes that may contribute to build a community (or to reinforce it). Hence, in this scenario, design for social innovation (meaning a combination of community centred-design, service and co-design) was experimentally adopted to improve the conditions of a vulnerable group, enabling them to follow a path of activation beneficial on one side to overcome isolation and on the other to set favourable conditions for making things happen, from simple collective activities to actual collaborative services.

2. CONTEXT: VICOLO CALUSCA AND THE PROJECT VIVICALUSCA

The public housing complex of Vicolo Calusca is located in Corso di Porta Ticinese, in the very centre of Milan, and it consists of 162 apartments inhabited by 234 residents. The majority of residents is composed by elderly people who were originally migrants from South Italy and have lived in the neighbourhood for several years, then there are newly arrived migrants and few families. Some inhabitants are disabled and others are former inmates.

Most of the residents of Vicolo Calusca experience some of the problems that Ranci (2010) identified as distinctive of social vulnerability: integrated poverty, housing deprivation and critical living conditions in the elderly age. In particular, this last problem is the most diffused, because of a reduction in the informal care provided by families, a high number of elderly living alone, the presence of dependent people who require long term care assistance. According to Ranci (2011), the condition of vulnerability is characterized by a state of weakness which exposes a person to suffer negative consequences if a problematic situation arises. The elderly are vulnerable because they are

highly exposed to damage: for example, dependent people may suffer severe impoverishment if they are alone or have no access to care services. A condition of vulnerability is experienced also by some migrants and families living in Vicolo Calusca, even if their degree of exposure is mainly due the instability of their situation, as they have insecure jobs and experience difficulties in the reconciliation of working and childcaring.

This diffused situation of social vulnerability in Vicolo Calusca is not ignored by local authorities who attempted to provide some services: within the complex there is the CAM office of the area (CAM stands for Multifunctional Aggregation Centre, it is a public service aimed at social participation and the development of recreational, cultural, educational and sporting activities accessible to all age groups). There is also a social housing service (from the Social Policies Department) which provides specific assistance to the elderly, responding promptly to requests for any kind of help and accompaniment.

In addition, in 2017, the Cariplo Foundation (a local philanthropic organisation funding projects that helps social and civil organizations to better serve their own community) issued a call for action specifically for the public housing complex of Vicolo Calusca, with the purpose to enhance the social cohesion of residents, create networks of solidarity between the inhabitants and overcome their condition of loneliness and fragility.

A consortium of partners composed of the local association 'Collaboriamo', the theatre company 'Le Compagnie Malviste', the research group of sociologists 'TraiLab' from Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore and our research group POLIMI DESIS Lab, expert in design for social innovation from Politecnico di Milano, won the competition presenting the project ViviCalusca.

ViviCalusca was a 15-months project aimed at engaging and empowering the community of inhabitants of Vicolo Calusca. The project built upon the existence of an important collective space within the complex Vicolo Calusca, named 'Cohub' and owned by the Municipality of Milan. Collaboriamo, who was the coordinator of the project, run this space, with the objective to transform it into an actual community hub, a place for collecting the needs of the condominium and where to put in place collaborative solutions, sharing resources, skills and time. The Cohub was a small space placed in the courtyard of the condominium and it worked essentially as a venue for events and workshops dedicated to sharing economy, but, actually, residents of Vicolo Calusca did not consider that space as an asset to improve their daily life. We may say that residents neither considered the courtyard as a collective space. The inhabitants of Vicolo Calusca did not know each other, did not frequent each other, did not live the life of the courtyard. Hence, in the first phase, the ViviCalusca project attempted to organise a set of events and engagement activities to make people meet and socialise. This phase was in charge of Le Compagnie Malviste who applied a set of theatrical approaches and techniques to facilitate meetings and share moments.

Our work as design researchers should have come later, once the community was 'established', or, at least, once a group of more active people emerged to start a path of co-design sessions and develop some collaborative services to facilitate the daily life of the condominium. Actually, the first engagement stage needed much more time than expected: we may say that the whole project ViviCalusca was dedicated to this phase. There was a total lack of social cohesion, that, combined with the condition of social vulnerability, made the work of Le Compagnie Malviste more arduous and longer than planned.

During this phase we understood that our contribution as designers needed a strong revision, also because we discovered that numerous people had problems with literacy and cognitive engagement. Our aim was originally to support residents in developing sustainable collaborative services, in which users become co-creators and co-producers of the service (Jégou and Manzini, 2008). But, given that situation, it was impossible to plan intensive co-design workshops and use traditional service design tools as we already did in previous projects with other communities.

In the next paragraph we will describe how we adapted our methods and tools to this peculiar situation and, in doing so, we learnt important lessons on our role and contribution as design researchers in social innovation.

3.PROCESS: A SET OF LIGHT CO-DESIGN ACTIVITIES TO ACTIVATE A LOCAL EXCHANGE AND GIFT ECONOMY

Given the complexity of the context and the limited inputs collected within the first phase, the entire set of activities organized by POLIMI DESIS Lab were conceived as 'reflective attempts', meaning that we used a deductive approach and we were learning-by-doing (Schon, 1984). From time to time we were continuously learning something from the community and reflecting back in order to improve our next interventions in terms of efficacy.

Our primary contribution in the project ViviCalusca came right after the phase of general mapping of the context (resources, actors and places). The first activities that we organized were devoted to identifying possible areas of opportunities to activate collaborative services, social events or different sort of exchanges. We called this activity 'Ideas Stand' because was conceived as a stand where passers-by could stop and share their preferences among a set of ideas that we suggested. The stand was set up in the patio in front of the Cohub space, so as to be in a visible and transit area where to attract the inhabitants without excessive insistence or intrusiveness. We also made it look

attractive, placing lights and small rewards for the contributors, in order to create a pleasurable experience, being aware that “attractive material and good food are crucial factors for the successful undertaking” (Meroni, Selloni and Rossi, 2018 p.160).

Building upon multiple case studies identified both within the context and outside, we elaborated a series of scenarios of activities that could be carried out in the neighbourhood. The scenarios depicted included: neighbourhood tours, neighbourhood living room (e.g. meeting space, reading groups, drawing), small domestic exchanges (e.g. help with shopping, small repairs), courses in handicrafts (e.g. embroidery, knitting, jewellery), dance groups, entertainment events (e.g. sporting events, cinema in the courtyard), cooking and eating together (e.g. cooking classes, neighbourhood dinners), second-hand market (e.g. flea market, clothes exchange), walking groups (e.g. mountain walks). We represented each scenario with a ‘card’ consisting of a representative image and an explanatory title so that the cards could work as ‘boundary objects’ (Star, 1988; Ehn, 2008) that, through evocative representations could stimulate the imagination of the participants.

The co-design activity basically consisted in involving the passers-by in expressing a preference among the scenarios and order the set of cards according to it on a board. The ‘Idea Stand’ represents an example of co-design activity that has been developed to facilitate a participation which was playful and not too demanding in cognitive terms and timing. It can be defined as ‘street co-design’ (or rather, ‘courtyard co-design’), in the sense that no specific appointment has been given to people, who were asked to carry out simple activities in an unconstrained and conversational manner.

The ‘Ideas Stand’ was repeated during the event ‘Light up Calusca!’ held in May 2018. The whole event was aimed at starting to connect the whole community through a collective performance led by Le Compagnie Malviste. Since the event attracted and engaged a lot of people of the community, it was a favourable occasion to replicate the stand.

With the ‘Ideas Stand’ we managed to collect contributions from 30 people overall, which is not significant considering the total amount of people living in the condominium, but, given the general situation of distrust and diffidence, it may be considered as a relevant number. In general, the qualitative insights gathered were more interesting than the quantitative ones: the most important result that the entire project team acknowledged, was the success of the party-event held in May. From that experience, we noticed that the most pressing need of the community was precisely ‘to be engaged in something’ and that the activities they received with greater enthusiasm were the entertainment activities organized by third parties, in which the active participation of the inhabitants is limited.

Starting from this first understanding, we downsized again our second intervention, aimed at mapping resources and actors. Since we realized that the engagement of the group could hardly be stretched to proactive initiatives, we designed a tool to collect those ‘talents’ owned by the community, useful to shape a first prototype of a micro-economy of exchange. We called this activity ‘Talent Board’. It took place in July 2018 during one of the weekly meetings coordinated by Le Compagnie Malviste and the social operators at the Oratory of the Church of Sant’Eustorgio, frequented by people who live in the neighbourhood. The activity consisted in the compilation of a card, the ‘Talent card’, on which each participant wrote his/ her own ‘talent’, understood as a competence that could be made available to others. The talents were intended as simple abilities such as cooking, sewing, teaching how to use a device and other sorts of domestic help. In the same way the ‘cards’ aimed at collecting what each one wanted to learn from the others. We collected all the filled card and hung them on the ‘Talent Board’ panel in order to start a discussion on possible exchanges, thus creating combinations. The exchanges included one to one and collective activities.

A total of 19 people took part to the ‘Talent Board’. Most of them were local residents over 65 years old and a group of girls, around 20s, from a host community not far from the project area.

One of the most interesting perspectives that emerged was that of a possible intergenerational exchange of skills between these two groups. According to this hypothesis, the older population of the neighbourhood could benefit from the support of the girls in improving digital skills and in the performance of daily tasks. The girls of the community, in return, could learn cooking tricks and practice conversation in Italian.

The value of the exchange, in this sense, has to be found in the interweaving of relationships rather than just in the skills and thus becomes a vehicle for social integration and light community activation.

If in the described activity the notice board have been used in a metaphorical sense to stimulate the emergence of people's talents, in the last phase, the notice board has become a physical object that can support and stimulate the interactions of the inhabitants. The notice board was organized according to precise categories, decided on the basis of previous experiments and also thanks to the creative conversation between the various partners of ViviCalusca and the social operators. The categories were:

- 'Search/Offer': it stimulated the search and the offer not only of objects, but also of activities and commissions.
- 'Since I'm going...': meant to become a 'collector of requests'. For example, when a person goes to a place which is not easily accessible, he/she can notify it in and carry out a task for someone else.
- 'See you in...': the inhabitants are reminded of the next appointments organized by the social operators or other organizing bodies.
- 'A thought for ...': a more emotional category, useful to remember various occasions such as birthdays, deceased, days of memory or even simply a thought of support for those who are in difficulty.

The delivery was organized as a conclusive and symbolic moment during the closing event 'Viva Calusca!' on December 12th, 2018. The notice board was then placed in the concierge of the complex of Vicolo Calusca, with the intention of making it a real support and accelerator of potential collaborative services: the categories proposed, in fact, are mostly functional principles of gift and exchange economy, which, when properly implemented, can be transformed into efficient, effective, durable collaborative services and especially facilitators of social relations (Star, 1988).



[Figure 1] Some images from the 'Ideas Stand' and 'Talent Board' co-design activities

4. CONCLUSIONS

The main lesson learnt from the ViviCalusca project is that methods and tools of co-design and service design may be applied not necessarily to reach specific design results, i.e. a set of effective and efficient services. This is the main evident scope, but there are other secondary aspects that, in this project, became instead central, and they are all related to an adoption of co-design as a form of people engagement. Hence, the stress is on the co-design process itself, rather than on results.

This reflection on the significance of the co-design process has been already developed by one of the authors in the final chapter of her book, 'CoDesign For Public Interest Services' (Selloni, 2017). She outlines a set of possible

extensions of the value of the co-design process, ranging from considering it as a form of citizen empowerment, to regarding it as an important pre-condition to co-production, as a way for exercising democracy, or as a potential (social) innovation process etc.

The co-design process carried out within the ViviCalusca project consisted of a set of very simple activities in which the most relevant aspect was the mere fact of having performed them, therefore on what happened. This was important for the inhabitants, who were involved in something easy but new for them, and, above all, it was crucial for the social operators who worked in the complex since long time. This last aspect became clear at the end of the project, during the conversations among the partners of the consortium and such operators (essentially municipal workers from CAM office and social housing services) in which we became aware that our design activities brought innovation and vivacity in their traditional way of doing community engagement.

From the other side, the development of the project led us to reflect on our role as designers in such contexts. In order to be impactful and enable the effectiveness of the exchanges proposed, a longer time dedicated to the creation and cohesion of the community should be foreseen. Moreover, we realized that the co-design activity can be performed effectively just if supported by the social operators that act as mediators. Alternatively, we must acknowledge that we become actual social operators and we should determine if we are interested or not in using co-design to engage people in a process of activation and possible re-inclusion. And, if so, we should investigate if we own the skills to do that or we need to acquire specific social mediation skills and, thus, to enrich our set of competences and be aware that the focus is on the (social) process and not only on the effective (design) results.

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