Making Things Happen: Social Innovation and Design

Ezio Manzini

The Design for Social Innovation for Sustainability (DESIS) is a network of design labs based in design schools (or in other design-oriented universities) promoting social innovation toward sustainability. These DESIS labs are teams of professors, researchers, and students who orient their didactic and research activities toward starting and/or facilitating social innovation processes. Each lab develops projects and research on the basis of its own resources and possibilities and at the same time acts as the node of a wider network of similar labs—the DESIS Network—which enables them to exchange experiences and collaboratively develop larger design and research programs.

Social Innovation and Design

Very succinctly, social innovation can be understood as "a new idea that works in meeting social goals."[1] A more detailed definition could be the following: Social innovation is a process of change emerging from the creative re-combination of existing assets (from social capital to historical heritage, from traditional craftsmanship to accessible advanced technology), the aim of which is to achieve socially recognized goals in a new way. Given these initial definitions, we can easily observe that social innovation has always been and will continue to be a normal component of every possible society. Although social innovation thus has always existed, I see two good reasons to focus on it today. The first is that social innovation initiatives are multiplying and will become even more common in the near future in answer to the multiple, growing challenges of the ongoing economic crisis and the much-needed transition toward sustainability. The second is that as contemporary societies change, the nature of social innovation itself is also changing, resulting in new and until now unthinkable possibilities.[2]

The definition of social innovation offered here is very broad and includes a wide range of events. We can draw up a first map of these events using two polarities:

- *Incremental vs. radical*. Here, the adjectives incremental and radical are used as in the field of technological innovation: They refer to changes that lie within the range of existing ways of thinking and doing (incremental innovation), or outside the range (radical innovation).
- *Top-down vs. bottom-up.* This polarity relates to where the change starts and, therefore, who its original drivers are. If they are experts, decision makers, or political activists, the innovation is largely top-down. If they are (mainly) the people and communities directly involved, then the innovation is (mainly) bottom-up.

1 Geoff Mulgan, *Social Innovation: What It Is, Why It Matters, How It Can Be Accelerated* (London: Basingstoke Press, 2012).

2 Michel Bauwens, *Peer to Peer and Human Evolution* (London: Foundation for P2P Alternatives, 2006), p2pfoundation.net (accessed July 6, 2013); Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams, *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* (New York: Portfolio Hardcover, 2009); Charles Leadbeater, *We-Think* (London: Profile Books, 2008); and Robin Murray, "Danger and Opportunity: Crisis and the Social Economy," www.youngfoundation.org/publications/reports/danger-and-opportunity-september-2009 (accessed June 30, 2012).

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In this paper, I consider examples of radical innovation emerging from both top-down and bottom-up processes, and from a combination of the two, known as hybrid processes. For each one I discuss what the designers' roles have been, seeking to offer a broad but structured vision of what design can do for social change. I refer to these design activities as design for social innovation, which includes whatever design can do to start, boost, support, strengthen, and replicate social innovation.[3] Within this framework, I also use the expression "design initiative," meaning a sequence of actions characterized by a clear design approach and by the use of specific design devices (e.g., prototypes, mock-ups, design games, models, and sketches).

Top-Down: When Social Innovation is Driven by Strategic Design

Let's start by describing the experiences of two great Italian innovators: Franco Basaglia and Carlo Petrini. These two men are extraordinary characters who worked with widely differing problems (mental illness on the one hand and the quality of food and food systems on the other), adopting a similar approach and radically changing the then-dominant ways of seeing and doing things. To avoid misunderstanding, I must stress immediately that neither Basaglia nor Petrini are in fact designers. In my opinion, however, both of them are, for all intents and purposes, great innovators and, *de facto,* designers. And their stories say a lot about what designers could and should do in this field.

Democratic Psychiatry

Franco Basaglia was an exceptional psychiatrist who, in the 1970s, founded the Democratic Psychiatry movement. In practical terms, what he did was to "open" the psychiatric hospital in Trieste (a city in the northeast of Italy), where he was director, and at the same time to start up cooperative production and service groups that brought ex-patients, nurses, and doctors together in enterprises that had to be effective in economic terms. (These groups were real enterprises—not entities whose very existence depended on financial backing from the state.) Why did he do it? The answer is both simple and revolutionary: *"Opening the institution [the psychiatric hospital, editor's note] does not signify opening a door; it means opening ourselves towards the 'patient.' I would say we are starting to have confidence in these people."*[4]

Let's try to explain this statement better. Basaglia's theme was mental illness, and his revolutionary (for the times) approach was that people with a mental disability are not only patients, but also individuals with capabilities. When seen only as patients, they retreat into their illness; but if we see them as people, we can

3 Ezio Manzini, "Design as a Catalyst of Social Resources: How Designers Can Trigger and Support Sustainable Changes," www.designresearchsociety.org/docs-procs/paris11/paris-procs11.pdf (accessed June 30, 2012).

4 Franco Basaglia, *L'Istituzione Negata* (Milano: Baldini Castoldi Dalai, 1968).

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support them in overcoming their problems and fulfilling themselves in some positive activity. The path laid out 40 years ago in Trieste by Basaglia has since become normal practice in Italy (or at least it should be). In 1978, as a result of his efforts, a national law was passed that opened up all psychiatric hospitals and set up new forms of assistance to the mentally ill. Since then restaurants, holiday villages, hotels, and carpentry workshops have started up, all run by "madmen." Many of these activities have worked well; some have become really successful commercial enterprises. For example, a cooperative of ex-patients currently runs a bar, restaurant, and bookshop in the ex-psychiatric hospital in Milan and every year organizes an important cultural festival.

Slow Food

In 1989, Carlo Petrini founded the international Slow Food movement. Its manifesto begins with the words: "We believe that everyone has a fundamental right to pleasure and consequently the responsibility to protect the heritage of food, tradition, and culture that makes this pleasure possible."[5] However, this notion of pleasure is not its only concern. Its vision goes on to say: "We consider ourselves co-producers, not consumers, because by being informed about how our food is produced and actively supporting those who produce it, we become a part of and a partner in the production."[6] In other words, Slow Food proposed a new way of looking at food "consumption"—but not only that. Driven by the same basic motivation, Slow Food looked at and supported the supply and valorization of food products that would gradually disappear if nothing were done because they were not economically viable in the economics of the dominant agro-industrial system. In practical terms, Slow Food has cultivated food awareness on the demand side through the actions of consumer-producer organizations: the *Condotte* (known outside Italy as *Convivia).* Consequently, it has spurred the growth of a market for these high-quality products. On the supply side, it has networked with farmers, breeders, fishermen, and the firms that process their products, and has established and promoted local organizations (the *Presidia)* to backing the suppliers and processors by connecting them to each other and to their market.

Basaglia and Petrini, and the teams they worked with to set up Democratic Psychiatry and Slow Food, have been the drivers of very meaningful and radical social changes. And the changes they made were carried out through their two extraordinary *strategic design* initiatives. In fact, both men managed to link the concrete local activities in which they were involved with far-reaching visions that ultimately brought people together, awakening the best in them by articulating a common meaning in the great and small things that each of them were able to do.

5 Carlo Petrini, *Slow Food Nation: Why Our Food Should Be Good, Clean and Fair* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2007).

6 Petrini, *Slow Food Nation: Why Our Food Should Be Good, Clean, and Fair* (Milano: Rizzoli Ex Libris, 2007).

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Basaglia, through Democratic Psychiatry, proposed a more general discourse on democracy and civilization. (The movement's name of Democratic Psychiatry is not by chance.) At the same time, beyond the discourse, the process of change had to be adequately supported—facilities (services, places, and tools) had to be available to enable people (in this case the mentally ill) to overcome their difficulties and fulfill their potential capabilities.

Petrini through Slow Food followed a similar course in articulating a radical new vision of what an advanced, sustainable food system could be like. Concurrently, adopting a strategic design approach, Petrini and the supporters of Slow Food created structures (the *Convivia* and the *Presidia)* to enable previously weak farmers to produce high-quality products and to find channels for the products' sale at a fair price. In doing so, Slow Food set up—what in design language we call an *enabling system—*a system of products and services aiming to empower the social actors involved.[7]

We can summarize what Democratic Psychiatry and Slow Food accomplished in their design strategy by describing three interdependent actions: (1) recognizing a real problem and, most importantly, the *social resources that might be able to solve it* (people, communities, and their capabilities); (2) proposing organizational and economic structures that *activate these resources,* helping them to organize themselves, to last over time, and to replicate themselves in different contexts; and (3) building (and communicating) an overall vision *to connect a myriad of local activities* and *to orient them* coherently.

Bottom-Up: When Social Innovation is Driven by Local Communities

To illustrate bottom-up innovation, I could refer to a variety of everyday life innovations, but to better explain them and their specificity, I begin by considering two beautiful and successful stories of radical change on the local scale.

NYC Community Gardens (USA)

Community Gardens are groups of volunteer gardeners that maintain public gardens in New York City with the support of GreenThumb, a program within the Department of Parks and Recreation that provides material, technical, and financial support to gardeners. The initiatives were developed in response to the city's financial crisis of the 1970s, which resulted in the abandonment of public and private land. The majority of GreenThumb gardens were derelict vacant lots.

In 1973, local residents and a group of gardening activists known as the Green Guerrillas started to plant "seed bombs" in the vacant lots and to cultivate tree pits in the area. One year later, the city's Office of Housing Preservation and Development

7 Francois Jegou and Ezio Manzini, *Collaborative Services: Social Innovation and Design for Sustainability* (Milano: Polidesign, 2008).

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approved the first site for rental—the "Bowery Houston Community Farm and Garden"—for $1 per month. Today, hundreds of community gardens in New York City are located in all five boroughs and host a wide range of different activities.

The volunteer gardeners, who are the backbone of this system, are very diverse in age and background. They plant and maintain trees, shrubs, and flowers; hold events and educational workshops; produce local urban food; and open the garden to the public every day during fixed time periods. Considering these activities as a whole, they engender community and citizens' engagement all over the city.[8]

Ainonghui, Farmers' Association (China)

In 2005 in Liuzhou, Guangxi (China), a group of citizens found that they could not access good, safe food in the city's ordinary markets. They went to villages, about a two-hour drive from the city, and found that traditional agriculture models—though struggling—still survived in the remote countryside. With the intention of helping the poor farmers while developing a stable channel of good, organic food, they founded a social enterprise: a farmers' association called Ainonghui.

Today, this farmers' association manages four organic restaurants and a community organic food store. By selling traditionally sourced food to citizens, the association also educates them on what traditional/organic agriculture is and introduces a sustainable lifestyle into the city. Thanks to Ainonghui and the direct links it has created between citizens and farmers, the incomes allow the farmers to sustain traditional farming and to lead a better and respected life. Several farmers have returned to the countryside to join in the organic food network.[9]

These two examples are representative of a growing number of initiatives worldwide—collaborative services where elderly people organize themselves to exchange mutual help and to promote a new idea of welfare; groups of families who decide to share some services to reduce the economic and environmental costs, but also to create new forms of neighbourhood; new forms of social interchange and mutual help (e.g., time banks); systems of mobility that present alternatives to the use of individual cars (from car sharing and carpooling to rediscovering the possibilities offered by bicycles). The list could continue, touching on every area of daily life.[10]

Looking at these examples, we can see that behind each of them is a group of people who have been able to imagine, develop, and manage something new, outside the standard ways of thinking and doing—to shatter mainstream ideas about how to solve problems. To do so, they had to: (1) (re)discover the power of cooperation; (2) recombine, in a creative way, already existing products, services, places, knowledge, skills, and traditions; and (3) count on

8 Giorgia Lupi, Cases of Service Co-Production—working document (New York: Parsons DESIS Lab, Parsons the New School for Design, 2011).

9 Fang Zhong, Community-Supported Agriculture in China—working document (Milano: DIS-Indaco, Politecnico di Milano, 2011).

10 To read more about them, see the DESIS website, www.desis-network.org (accessed June 30, 2012).

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their own resources, without waiting for a general change in the politics, in the economy, or in the institutional and infrastructural assets of the system. We refer to these groups as creative communities: *people who cooperate in inventing, enhancing, and managing viable solutions for new (and sustainable) ways of living.*[11]

A primary common feature of these creative communities is that they have grown out of problems posed by contemporary everyday life: How can we have more green spaces in our neighborhood? How can we organize the daily functions of the elderly if the family no longer provides the support it traditionally offered and the state no longer has the means to organize the requested services? How can we respond to the demand for natural food and healthy living conditions when living in a global metropolis? These questions are as day-to-day as they are *radical.* In spite of its overwhelming offer of products and services, the dominant production and consumption system is unable to give answers to these very basic questions. These groups of people have been able to answer them by applying their creativity to break with mainstream models of thinking and doing and by conceiving and enhancing new ways of doing, based on original combinations of existing products, services, and knowledge.[12]

These cases of bottom-up social innovation thus appear to be *design-led processes.* However, they are design-led processes with a particular characteristic: The "designers" are very diverse social actors who, consciously or not, apply both skills and ways of thinking that in all respects are to be considered design activities.[13] In this new context, professional designers can also play an important role by operating in two main ways: designing *with* and designing *for* communities:

- *Designing with communities.* This means participating as peers *with* other actors involved in creative community building and in collaborative service co-design. In this modality, designers have to facilitate the convergence of different partners toward shared ideas and potential solutions. This kind of activity requires a set of new design skills: promoting collaboration among diverse social actors (local communities and companies, institutions and research centers); participating in the construction of shared visions and scenarios; and combining existing products and services to support the creative community members with whom they collaborate.
- *Designing for communities.* This design means looking at specific typologies of collaborative service and, after observing their strengths and weaknesses, intervening in the context of the services to make them more favorable, and developing solutions to increase their accessibility and effectiveness and therefore their

11 Anna Meroni, *Creative Communities: People Inventing Sustainable Ways of Living* (Milano: Polidesign, 2007).

12 Jegou and Manzini, *Collaborative Services* (Milano, Polidesign, 2008).

13 Colin Bruns, Hilary Cottam, Chris Vanstone, and Jennie Winhall, *RED Paper 02: Transformation Design* (London: Design Council, 2006); Hilary Cottam and Charles Leadbeater, "Open Welfare: Designs on the Public Good," www.designcouncil.info/mt/red/archives/2004/07/open_welfare_de.html. (accessed June 30, 2012); and Ezio Manzini, "New Design Knowledge," *Design Studies* 30, no. 1 (2009): 4–12.

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replication. In this mode designers have to conceptualize and develop solutions for specific collaborative services and other enabling artifacts (e.g., digital platforms, orienting scenarios, and catalyzing events, including exhibitions, festivals, and other cultural events).

Hybrid: When Bottom-Up and Top-Down Meet

The social innovations we have been describing have been presented as top-down or bottom-up initiatives—either actions "from the top" that are capable of generating large social transformation or actions "from the bottom" that give rise to a multiplicity of local changes. However, a closer observation indicates that social innovation, both in its starting move and in its long-term existence, often depends on more complex interactions between very diverse initiatives, where the ones undertaken directly by the people concerned (bottom-up) are often supported by different kinds of intervention provided by institutions, civic organizations, or companies (top-down). We refer to these interactions as *hybrid processes.*

For instance, a micro-nursery exists because of the active participation of the mothers and fathers involved. However, it might have been started when the parents looked to the experiences of other groups (and eventually interacted with some of them), and it might be backed up by specific top-down initiatives and enabling tools, such as a guidebook indicating step-by-step procedures to be followed in starting up and managing such a nursery; support from local authorities in its assessment (to guarantee its conformity to established standards); and the support of a centralized service (in case of educational or medical problems that cannot be solved within the nursery itself).

The hybrid nature of these social innovation processes becomes increasingly evident as the scale of change to be achieved increases. One project that aims at social change on a regional scale makes the hybrid nature of social innovation much clearer.

Feeding Milano (Italy)

Feeding Milan is a strategic design project, promoted by Politecnico di Milano–Design Department, University of Gastronomic Sciences and Slow Food Italy. The project idea comes from the fact that in the Milanese urban area the demand for high-quality, fresh food hugely exceeds the actual, available production, despite the presence of a large "urban larder" known as Agricultural Park South Milan.

The strategic vision of the project focuses on the mutual advantage represented by the proximity of city and park, fostering the relationship between the city and the productive countryside through the de-mediatiation of the agri-food chain. The project seeks an answer to the city's demand for fresh and high-quality food and a means to help the park find new business models for its

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production. The final aim of the project is to create a sustainable and innovative metro-agricultural regional model. To achieve these results, the promoters of the project, led by a group of designers/researchers operating at Politecnico di Milano, started a series of design initiatives to implement a project framework by initiating collaboration between groups of citizens and farmers, and groups of designers and food experts.

The designers used scenario building to open the discussion with the stakeholders enrolled, and to align interested groups on a vision and some directions. Conversation with the interested communities about the scenario took place in a series of contextual workshops facilitated by design researchers with specifically designed tools (e.g., storyboard, mock-up, moodboard, videos, and sketches).

Using service prototypes, Feeding Milan has started a set of new design initiatives to make some of the envisioned solutions become real. These initiatives started with a series of events in the city, including the Earth Market of Milan, a farmers' market that brings farmers from the park to the city to sell their products; Veggies for the City, a project about the production and distribution of local vegetables; and the Local Bread Chain, which aims to restore a local bread chain, from crops to the final consumer. A digital platform supports and consolidates the connections among the Feeding Milano participants and the other potentially interested stakeholders.[14]

Feeding Milano is an emblematic example of a growing number of projects that, from the point of view of this paper, have similar characteristics. A European project, PERL/Sustainable Everyday Explorations, recently conducted a study of five such projects.[15] The research looked at Feeding Milan (Italy), which I already discussed; Designs of the Time: Dott07 (UK); Chongming Sustainable Community (China); Amplify (United States); and Malmo Living Lab (Sweden).[16] Considering these projects from the perspective of social innovation, three common characteristics can be observed: (1) They aim at sustainable changes on a regional scale; (2) they share the explicit goal of achieving set objectives by activating citizen participation; and (3) they have been started and are driven by some specific *design initiative*—that is, they have been explicitly or implicitly led by a design agency and/or by design schools or research groups.

From the point of view of the designers' role, the PERL study showed two things: (1) that all of the projects are large-scale innovation processes resulting from sequences of small-scale initiatives (i.e., that the *local projects* are coordinated, synergized, and amplified by larger ones, the *framework projects);* and (2) that all of them are mainly design-driven programs aiming to trigger, coordinate, and amplify local projects to generate sustainable changes on a larger scale.[17]

14 Daria Cantù and Giulia Simeone, "Feeding Milan, Energies for Change. A framework project for sustainable regional development based on food de-mediation and multifunctionality as design strategies," *in Proceedings of Cumulus Conference*, (Shanghai, DRS press, 2011), 289-98.

15 PERL European Lifelong Learning Programme, www.perl.org (accessed June 30, 2012).

16 Ezio Manzini and Francesca Rizzo, "Small Projects/Large Changes: Participatory Design as an Open Participated Process," *CoDesign* 7, nos. 3–4 (2011): 199–215.

17 Ezio Manzini and Francesca Rizzo, "The SEE Project: A Cases Based Study to Investigate the Role of Design in Social Innovation Initiatives for Smart Cities," in *Planning Support Tools: Policy Analysis, Implementation and Evaluation Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on Informatics and Urban and Regional Planning INPUT* (Cagliari, Franco Angeli, 2012), 1402-17.

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Finally, note that some of these design initiatives are top-down processes, others are bottom-up, and others are a combination of the two. In any case, given their aims and effects, all of them are to be considered elements of a larger participation process. They are all part of a larger social conversation about what to do and how to do it.

Conclusion: A Constellation of Design Activities

At the beginning of this paper I introduced the notion of design for social innovations using this initial broad and loose definition: Design for social innovation is whatever design can do to start, boost, support, strengthen, and replicate social innovation.

Now, following the discussion in the previous paragraphs, and looking in particular at the hybrid social innovation processes needed to support large-scale transformations, we must expand even further the notion of design for social innovation. In fact, in every social innovation process, and more clearly in large-scale ones, different actors participate at different moments and in different ways in a sequence of diverse and sometimes even contrasting events. The design process that emerges is quite a dynamic and unforeseeable process, in which different groups of citizens—supported or not by designers—might serve as leaders in the conception and implementation of new solutions. In this way everybody has the chance to see, experience, and evaluate new ways of being and doing—new viable solutions for given problems or hitherto unimaginable, new opportunities.

In light of these observations, we can modify our initial definition of design for social innovation, and say that it is a constellation of design initiatives geared toward making social innovation more probable, effective, long-lasting, and apt to spread. With this new definition, design for social innovation converges and largely overlaps with the notion of participatory design (at least in the way it is proposed by Pelle Ehn and his colleagues at Malmo University).[18] That is, both design for social innovation and participatory design can be described in the following ways:

- As highly dynamic processes. They include linear co-design processes and consensus-building methodologies (i.e., the most traditional view on participatory design), but they can go far beyond them, becoming complex, interconnected, and often contradictory processes.[19]
- As creative and proactive activities. Here, the designers' role includes the role of mediator (between different interests) and facilitator (of other participants' ideas and initiatives), but it involves more skills, as well. Most importantly, designers' role in both includes the designers' specificity in

18 Pelle Ehn, "Participation in Design Things," in *10th Biennial Participatory Design Conference Proceedings* (New York: ACM, 2010), 92-101; Erling Bjorgvinsson, Pelle Ehn, and Per Anders Hillgren, "Participatory Design and Democratizing Innovation," in *10th Biennial Participatory Design Conference Proceedings* (New York: ACM, 2010), 41-50.

19 Manzini and Rizzo, *Small Projects/Large Changes:* 192-215.

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terms of creativity and design knowledge (to conceive and realize design initiatives and their correspondent design devices).
- As complex, co-design activities that—to be promoted, sustained, and oriented—call for prototypes, mock-ups, design games, models, sketches, and other materials—a set of dedicated and designed artifacts.

The range of design activities (and therefore of requested capabilities and skills) is very wide: Designers can of course act as *facilitators,* supporting ongoing initiatives. But they can also be the *triggers* that start new social conversations. Similarly, they can be members of *co-design teams,* collaborating with groups of well-defined final users, but they can also behave as *design activists,* proactively launching socially meaningful design initiatives. At present, the role of designers as facilitators working in co-design teams is the most widely recognized. However, their roles as trigger and as design activist seem to be very promising, too.[20] In fact, operating in this way, designers can make the best use of their specific sets of capabilities and their special sensitivity. Therefore, they can be very effective in sparking off new initiatives and shaping dynamic social conversations about what to do and how. In other words, "making things happen" seems to be the most concise way to express what could be the most effective and specific role for designers.

20 Anna Meroni, "Design for Services and Place Development," in Proceedings of *Cumulus Conference* (Shanghai, DRS press 2010), 95-102; Eduardo Staszowski, "Amplifying Creative Communities in NYC: A Middle-Up-Down Approach to Social Innovation," *SEE Workshop Proceedings,* (Florence, Italy, May 13-15, 2010); and Giulia Simeone and Marta Corubolo, "Co-Design Tools in 'Place' Development Project," *Designing Pleasurable Products and Interfaces Conference Proceedings* (New York: ACM, 2011), 134-42.

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