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## MEMORY AND DISCOVERY

### THE CONTRIBUTION OF HUMANITIES TO THE ENHANCEMENT OF BUILT HISTORICAL HERITAGE

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#### ABSTRACT

*The contribution of humanities and its mutual exchange with the design tools is going to be illustrated with particular reference to the enhancement of little-known built heritage. Broad issues related to the concept of territorial identity, collective memory and perception of sites cannot be solved only assuming a technical-scientific point of view. The contribution of social sciences allows to describe the new ways the users get in touch with Cultural Heritage, first of all through the new technologies. The use of new technologies can stimulate a more active participation of the users, also enhancing the knowledge of minor built heritage, which is the ultimate goal of the project. To this respect, the contribution of storytelling turns out to be a mean through which the owners can tell their assets and the visitors can tell their experience<sup>1</sup>.*

*Keywords: little-known cultural heritage, user participation, storytelling*

#### 1 INTRODUCTION

Cultural rights are worldwide considered as human rights. Cultural Heritage, values, institutions and language are crucial for the collective memories and sociability and for their key role in providing a sense of social belonging and citizenship (European Commission 2014).

The concept of Cultural Heritage is progressively widening, shifting from a predominantly physical significance of its dimension to an "intangible" one, and continues to expand, changing "... from closed to open system... in the Anglo-Saxon meaning" (Irace 2013). The change of meaning of the "heritage" concept is related to the profound societal changes and to the collective behaviour, in the ways the community as a whole and the individual citizens relate to new cultural values, i.e. existing assets temporally distant from us, and new goods. At the same time, the contemporary landscape of design research for Cultural Heritage offers food for thought to a complex framework where even the meaning of the elements involved is constantly being redefined: the involvement of the design process in the Cultural Heritage field contributes to capture the value of an asset even before its official recognition. The design processes are aimed to bring out the potential of built assets, not only physically preserving or archiving them, but also considering them as living resources, capable of generating new values and new opportunities.

Taking as an area of study and research the historical architectural heritage, implies the need to assume a multidisciplinary approach. Next to a knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> Although the paper is the result of a collective reflection and practical research, Claudia Caramel edited paragraphs 3, 5 and 6, Anna Anzani edited paragraphs 1 and 4, Angela Baila edited paragraph 2, and Margherita Guarisco edited paragraph 7.

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derived from fields closely related to the subject such as history, history of art and architecture and to strictly specialized technical matters, the theme need to be addressed in the light of wider issues such as the concept of collective identity, territorial and historical memory, all involving the human experience in psychological and sociological terms.

In addition, the use of technology in relation to Cultural Heritage is an interesting cause for reflection. The possibilities offered by the rapid spread of digital devices and applications are in fact already recognized both in the process of heritage knowledge and in that of its enjoyment and appreciation. In particular, the use of computer tools and the development of more and more efficient applications results into new ways of communicating the Cultural Heritage and to make it accessible in the sense both to facilitate its understanding by different categories of users, and to make it open, if not physically, virtually.

This aspect of the design research closely involves other topical issues such as the definition of design strategies to broaden the audience of cultural users and the changing role of the user learning experience. In fact, the use of technology makes it possible for the public to switch from a passive dimension to an active participation in the process of learning, interacting and personalizing their learning experience. The so called "User Generated Contents" are progressively increasing also in the cultural sphere: at present, encouraging the active participation of the public is one of the strongest possibilities for raising its awareness of the Cultural Heritage.

A large part of the design research is currently involved in designing effective strategies to this end and interesting solutions may then also result from areas other than the ones considered here.

Making the user learning experience enjoyable, encouraging the inclusion of new categories of users helps to promote the cultural development of the community and its sense of identity, favouring an increase of social cohesion and an improved quality of life.

## **2 LITTLE-KNOWN CULTURAL HERITAGE**

The little-known Cultural Heritage, consisting of those objects, contexts and situations whose cultural value is not dictated by a legal recognition, but rather by the human experience of individuals and the community, as well as less established or popular examples of Cultural Heritage in the area of the living arts - in other words both tangible and intangible Cultural Heritage - are recognized at a European level as valuable aspects to be enhanced (European Commission 2014).

Paying attention to "minor" Cultural Heritage, whose relevance on the historical, artistic and anthropological level is not well-established, means looking deeper into contemporary society and enhancing aspects which, for undeniable economic and managerial reasons, are often neglected and lack of suitable projects that can make them an opportunity of development for the community and the territory.

The intrinsic potential of known and little-known Cultural Heritage lays in its capacity to stimulate a civic sense of local identity and to foster the development of a more liveable model of society, making the right to citizenship real and improving social cohesion and the quality of life. Reciprocally, knowledge can also become the most effective way to respect and at the same time preserve the heritage.

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To widen significantly the number of users of Cultural Heritage and the Cultural Heritage itself - by including little-known assets - may give the people the opportunity to access a knowledge they are already endowed of, but of which they are unconscious, encouraging them to claim and enjoy it not letting it be exclusive property of a few. Making the Cultural Heritage "affordable" and "accessible", means overcoming mental barriers even before the physical ones and offering everyone the opportunity to know.

The authors of this paper are involved in a project to enhance a little-known heritage through a strong involvement of citizens; once set-up, the model will be applied to the case of Art Nouveau architectures in the territory of Varese Province (Figs. 1 and 2). In particular, it is oriented to devise strategies and tools to shorten the distance between people and cultural heritage with a special regard to the young generations. Among the European cultural phenomena, Art Nouveau is a particularly significant manifestation that, at the same time, presents a unitary character of the European culture and manifold expressions of local identities of member states. Started and declined in a short time range between the eighties of the nineteenth century and the First World War, Art Nouveau developed around some common themes, differently interpreted in local territories and involved a large number of cities. In addition to the well-known buildings and masterpieces, there is an immense heritage consisting in private villas, leisure facilities, objects and furnishings which is important both for the local history and for the whole artistic expression of Varese territory. Due to a lack of appropriate protection tools and policies, this heritage is continually exposed to the risk of significant losses. This is true especially for all those assets that can be considered "minor" examples of the movement and that are little-known to the general public. The involvement of people, before that of institutions, is a fundamental issue in this process. The ongoing project here presented aims to design ways and tools that can foster the involvement of private citizens in order to sensitize the public opinion and to encourage gathering and sharing little-known documents. Crucial to this aim is the use of digital technologies whose versatility allows reaching different users by age and background. At the same time, the digitalization of documents and contents is also a way to allow their circulation and to ensure their transmission to the future generations.



Figure 1—(Emma Lonati tells the roaring years of the Palace). Video-interview to Mrs E. Lonati, the daughter of the first director of the Palace Hotel in Varese in the occasion of the Hotel centenary anniversary November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U\\_d1wa3sqio](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_d1wa3sqio)).

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Figure 2 –Postcard of 1913 showing the Palace Hotel in Varese. Designed by Giuseppe Sommaruga, it is one of the most important Liberty architectures in Varese.

### 3 THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

The "problem setting" can suitably be dealt with through a multidisciplinary approach which allows to pair technical-scientific evaluations with considerations derived from the social sciences and humanities. The contribution of the social sciences turns out to be particularly valuable not only in terms of contents but also from a methodological point of view. In particular, when designing a model for the enhancement of the existing assets their role could be very useful to trace the users' profile.

Besides the identification and study of "best practices" involved in similar projects, the analytical phase requires to define the investigation context and thus implies the ability to observe and describe it. To this respect, the strategy of sociological sciences seems to be suitable and can give a substantial contribution to the meta-project. Here, the specific social phenomenon to be observed and described is the relationship between society and its historical and Cultural Heritage both in terms of significance and of operating modes. In today's society, that is more and more complex and is involved in a process of globalization, it needs to be understood what value is attributed to the development of local identity, what is the meaning of preserving the historical memory of a territory and the knowledge of its heritage in the eyes of young people and of future generations. In addition to the condition of those living in a

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particular place, that of those who use it only occasionally must then be considered. In fact, the same object may represent an element of identity in which somebody recognize and acknowledge his past, while for others it can become an opportunity of discovery or study. Sociology, and in particular, the most recent sociology of Environment and Tourism (Gilli 2009), outline precisely the modern man behaviour toward the discovery and enjoyment of the territory and capture and understand the changes that have occurred in recent years.

The role of the users turns out to be more and more dynamic and participatory so that the users' figure and the range of their demands can no longer be taken for granted.

Sociology also allows to closely observe the fundamental role played by information technology in the learning process of the Cultural Heritage.

To this respect, applying in the design process the approach used by anthropologists for the study of human phenomena seems to be an interesting "contamination" between the humanities and design. Through a "participant observation", the researcher comes into close contact with the people and their cultures and this can result into a scenario where all the subjects of the project are actively engaged in the decision in order to establish a complete picture of possible actors and their needs.

Computing devices and their dedicated software are of great importance in the user's learning process, being in many cases the only real opportunity to use and know the assets. A project of enhancement aiming to involve different types of users, each with their own characteristics and needs, draws from the potential of information technology tools the opportunity to simultaneously offer different answers. Therefore, even the design of a purely scientific-technical item, can well benefit from a humanistic approach. If, on the one hand, the social sciences and humanities can provide very important information for the designer to approach the object of study in a more conscious way, the designer is responsible for foreshadow possible use scenarios of the historical heritage. If design is "fed" by the contribution of social sciences, on the other hand the design tools can facilitate the interpretation and visualization of data derived from other disciplines, and contribute to make the information usable. Therefore, the design process and the contribution of the humanities prove instrumental to each other and may lead to a cross-fertilization through the entire project phase.

#### 4 THE CONTRIBUTION OF STORYTELLING

If the fruition of the Cultural Heritage follows relatively well-established procedures, the less-known heritage requires a strong "bottom up" contribution to be understood and explained. In fact, in order for the minor assets to be described, their authors must be involved, if possible, or those who, for their own personal experience, know directly the objects. In this regard, storytelling will be a particularly useful tool. In fact, telling the story of a building means at the same time recognizing its value and contributing to the spread of knowledge.

As observed by Giaccardi (2011) in his academic research, heritage is not only what belongs to the dimension of memory, but is a concept constantly being developed. From her point of view, a good way to understand what we now attribute value to, is to "listen" to the stories that we build about ourselves. The opportunity now offered to anyone, to tell and share their experiences through a number of social networks like *Facebook*, *Twitter* and of photo-sharing platforms such as *Flickr* or *Pinterest*, are in fact a very interesting opportunity to observe

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what, in the cultural and knowledge experience of an ordinary citizen, acquires value.

The power of stories comes from deep in our past and from deep in our consciousness: humans are *homo fabulans*, the species that tells stories. Telling and listening are the natural instruments of relations between people. The stories belong to the culture and to the mind: their power lies in their ability to overcome the reality, rewrite it and give it coherence. Narrations are interactive, experiential, and have the same structure of the memory. By telling other people the world that is within us, we can understand and it and make it cultural. In our current transition from product-centered design to the design of human experiences, the narrative aspect of our practice is more important—and carries more responsibility—than ever before (Breitenberg 2006).

In this framework, the contribution offered by the community, if properly supported in terms of technology and content, may prove to be of primary importance for the knowledge and the enhancement of the less known heritage. The direct participation of the users can in fact result into a cost effective and efficient option, especially considering the scarcity of public funds invested in the cultural sphere, to collect and archive unpublished testimonies.

## 5 SOCIAL MEMORY AND SOCIAL NETWORK

Memory is a strong element of bond between psyche and cultural-historical environment. Its social dimension is the product of an interaction between individuals and society. A selection of what happened in the past can be rebuilt in the present because we share with other memories or coordinates that allow us to position them (Giuliani 2013). In the sharing of memories, objects and places often play a significant role, by provoking thoughts and emotions that constitute part of our identity, acting as cues in the process of remembering and as intermediaries between future and past (Barthel et al. 2013).

Traumatic experiences, or other significant events in the history of a social group, raise the question of the duty of memory, which is functional not only to avoid oblivion but also to legitimize and attributing value to certain ways to tell and preserve the past. It is the duty to make the past be present and ensure that the narrated memory also be a "memory that tells". The participation in a polyphonic narration can safeguard the continuity of a belonging and an autobiography (the individual self) and keep alive a collective history. As if an individual self and a collective self were in continuity, in a relationship where they feed each other (Giuliani 2013).

Some experiences carried out in particularly sensitive contexts, such as the areas affected by the L'Aquila earthquake in 2009 have shown that the contributions of local population in terms of historical memory and documentation, by means of information technology, have allowed to rebuild the image of the city before the earthquake, contributing to the reconstruction of destroyed places or at least to preserve their in memory. Significant in this respect is also the story of the earthquake offered by the voices of the citizens of L'Aquila through blogs and Facebook collected in an essay by Giuliani (2012) (Fig. 3).

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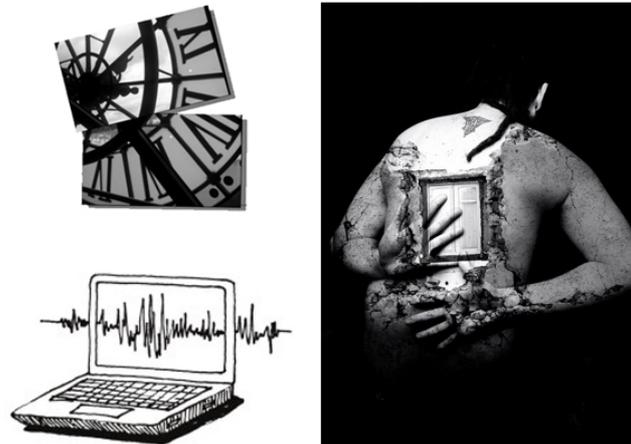


Figure 3 –Images from the slides presented by M. Giuliani at the Conference CGBG "Tecnologia e Leggerezza" Pavia, January 29-31, 2014. On the left, illustration by Duccio Battistrada, on the right photographic work by Sara De Vita, <<http://www.slideshare.net/massimoslide/atemporalit-e-assenza-di-radicamento-in-un-luogo-sotto-il-tetto-di-una-storia-dal-convegno-ckbg-tecnologia-e-leggerezza-pavia-2931-gennaio-2014>>.

Also in the case of the Great East Japan Earthquake and associated tsunami and nuclear catastrophe of March 11, 2011, the so called "3.11" that shook Japan and the rest of the world with its human toll and devastating scale, not only massive amounts of information, but also increasingly diverse and intensive social interactions, blogs, tweets, audio recordings, non-governmental and relief organization communications, photographs, videos, news articles, disaster-related government websites, and other digital documentation are located in the virtual world of websites and social media. In order to keep a record and a memory of them for survivors and citizens as well as for scholars and policy-makers, the *Japan Disasters Archive* strives to lend permanence to records of the response to 3.11 that would otherwise be transitory and scattered fragments. Its resources are also made available to the global online public for curation and commentary. The digital archive is in this way more decentralized and "crowd-sourced".

On a similar spirit is based the initiative co-funded by the European Union *Europeana 1914-1918 – untold stories & official histories of WW1*, an interactive

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website that explores stories, films and historical material about the First World War and allows people to contribute their own family history (Europeana 1914-1918 2014). *Europeana 1914-1918* mixes resources from libraries and archives across the globe with memories and memorabilia from families throughout Europe.

Social memory plays a key role not only in the case of post traumatic conditions but also in the process of human meaning-making and in the structuring of life experiences as a part of our everyday lives. While the importance of integrating opportunities for storytelling into digital memory technologies is widely acknowledged, there are fewer examples that discuss the value of different media for augmented memory systems. The interdisciplinary TOTeM (*Tales of Things and electronic Memory*) project investigates new contexts for augmenting things with stories in the emerging culture of the Internet of Things (IoT). Tales of Things (Fig. 4) is a tagging system which, based on two-dimensional barcodes (also called Quick Response or QR codes) and Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology, enables the capturing and sharing of object stories and the physical linking to objects via read and writable tags (Barthel et al. 2013).



Figure 4 –TOTeM (*Tales of Things and Electronic Memory*) attaches stories to the things that people leave behind, and allow new owners to access them.

(<<http://www.digitalurban.org/2010/05/rememberme-future-everything-and.html>.>)

Among other examples of interactive and participatory culture, *City of Memory* can be mentioned, which is an online community map of personal stories and memories organized on a physical geographical map of New York City (Fig. 5).

*StoryCorps* is again an American experience, whose mission is to provide people of all backgrounds and beliefs with the opportunity to record, share and preserve the stories of their lives. Its purpose is "to remind one another of our shared humanity, to strengthen and build the connections between people, to teach the value of listening, and to weave into the fabric of our culture the understanding that everyone's story matters" (StoryCorps 2014). At the same time, it is creating an invaluable archive for future generations. *StoryCorps* is one of the largest oral history projects of its kind, since 2003 it has collected and archived more than 50,000 interviews with over 90,000 participants.

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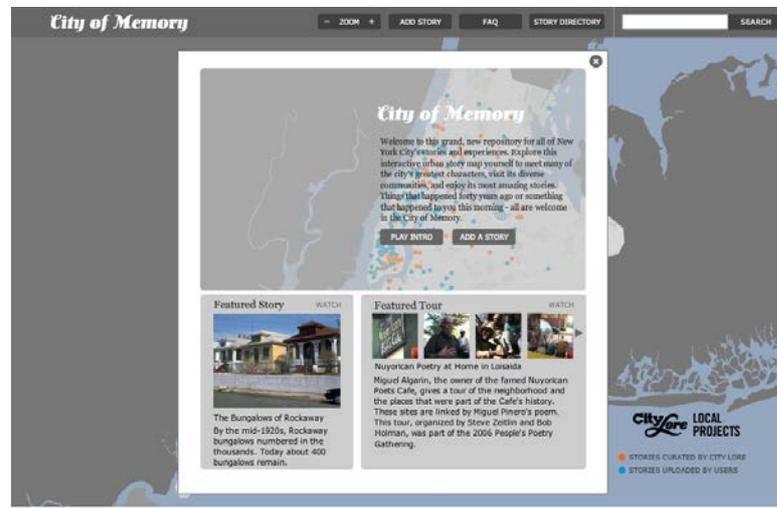


Figure 5 –Homepage of the website: City of Memory (<http://www.cityofmemory.org/map/index.php>).

## 6 THE ROLE OF THE DESIGNER

In the project of enhancement of less known Cultural Heritage, the role of the designer can be assumed as that of a mediator, whose mission is to facilitate understanding. He should be aware of the positions of different actors (the institutions, the owners, the users) and his task should be to exercise his function as intermediary between different needs and the responses offered public services, in order to create solutions able to go beyond the differences. In particular, his role can be the organization of meetings between public institutions and private citizens, designed to gather the individual expectations towards possible solutions to the problem and to facilitate the stakeholders understanding the project and expressing their opinions.

Ongoing evaluations and feedbacks will form design elements of major importance through which any required correction to the project can be identified and the validity of the elements introduced can be verified. Design and Humanities are in this sense complementary to each other, both in terms of instruments and in terms of new design solutions, so as the reciprocal contributions cannot be clearly distinguished. Interviews and thematic discussion groups supported by social networks turn out to be very useful to collect quantitative and qualitative data aimed at the design project. The digital humanities allow to organize and display the data making them understandable and usable. The organization of information by means of design tools such as concept and thematic maps, graphs and diagrams, is particularly useful.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

In the complexity underlying the design process, which involves the continuous exchange between technical and humanistic knowledge along with the ability to forecast something that does not yet exist, the complexity inherent in the

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human being itself and its expectations can be identified. Given the changing nature of the human being in the course of a single life, and along the entire evolutionary process of humanity, design as a discipline addressed to innovation, and its cross-fertilization with social sciences and humanities, could give a fundamental contribution to understand the ongoing change and to fit in it. Opportunities can be found to designing systems aimed to support the explication of networks of meaning, intergenerational communication that can be useful and valuable for reminiscing, the creation of social histories of families and communities, and for social interaction. If sometimes Internet is seen as part of a process of dissolution of the proximity, many experiences make us looking at it as the place where people are increasingly seeking new forms of closeness; not as an alternative to the physical world but as an opportunity to reconstruct as closely as possible, in the virtual dimension, a space of thought and relationship when the physical one is cancelled. In the experience of many users, the social network, as well as being a connection factor and a possibility of self-narration, is experienced as a "place": virtual, but where the status of "virtual" is quite another way to be "real" (Giuliani 2013). On the other hand, experience the world through the construction of metaphors is a common activity that supports our thinking and has to do with our ability to conceptualize abstract reality. Therefore the network, while telling a story, also speaks of something greater, of narrative as construction and re-construction of self; and of how our communication is changing in these years.

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