

# THE VALUE OF DESIGN RESEARCH

11TH EUROPEAN ACADEMY OF  
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PARIS DESCARTES UNIVERSITY  
INSTITUTE OF PSYCHOLOGY

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CRAFTSMANSHIP MERCHANDISE FOR CULTURAL HERITAGE.  
BACK HOME WITH A PIECE OF HISTORY, TERRITORY AND  
DESIGN.

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## ABSTRACT

*Cultural heritage is a multidimensional value category that includes not only historic, artistic and architectural excellences but also material culture, the excellent skills of local craftsmanship. The aim of the work is to investigate how design and crafts, working together, can help to enhance the value of the territorial cultural heritage: not only by redefining/updating the expressive products languages, but also creating new channels of distribution.*

*The focus is a design research + didactic operation, dedicated to promote both the circuit of local Royal Residences and the material culture of the territory, through the creation of a museum merchandising collection. Research team has worked with the aim to promote historical excellences with new merchandising craft products developed by design students and local craftsmen. The operation involved cultural heritage and crafts experts invited in several seminars and lessons, 150 tutored university students and 30 crafts firms identified by a territorial Consortium.*

*The operation was developed with this dual vocation:*

- to establish a collaboration, at the same level, between university and craftsmen through students, to find new ways to innovate crafts with a “bottom-up” approach;
- to indicate directions to develop new products and new opportunities to promote and “taste” the Royal Residences through crafts materials and techniques.

*Keywords: design for cultural heritage, design and crafts for merchandising, territory cultural values, apprenticeship nearby craftsmen, research and didactics*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Crisis conditions and economic stagnation lay bare of weaknesses of a system – local, national, global – but they can also be the engine for change and transformation, able to reorganize the existing situation and give it a future. Especially today, innovative practices are based on culture, perceived as one of the most reliable resources for the economic promotion of cities and territories and for their expositive policy.

There was a turnaround at the beginning of the third millennium. We saw changing the role of the individual stakeholders in the process of the extensive transformations in society.

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Designers, having abandoned the "demiurgic" role of design that was typical of the time when architects were also industrial designers, work mainly and effectively on linking different types of knowledge: mainly in universities but also professionally, they feel that they are somehow the coordinators of this marketplace of knowledge. Industrial and craftsmen firms identify with the big problems affecting our changing society. They ask for help in scouting their potential and accept comparison, removed from the spirit of competition that distinguishes them, presenting virtues and faults. They also accept being judged and led in doing what is necessary today, not only to their economy, but also to society and for its future (Marzano 2013). Lastly, the institutions are perhaps those most subject to significant change. Political stakeholders and the commissioners of research projects for progress, now take part as co-protagonists of the same research project today, with a spirit of sharing the development process, as described in the aims of Horizon 2020. All of this falls within the aims and under the structure of *Materialmente* research / project, which we are about to present.

*Materialmente* is an initiative that is part of a larger research panorama that considers design as a strategic tool for the enhancement of cultural heritage and material culture. The research approach aims to focus strategies, project methods and new tools to enhance territory in terms of increase of the fruition, enjoyment of environmental resources and increase in value of the local craftsmanship and of the related productive system.

In this context it is possible to identify, on the one hand experiences aimed at creating new synergies between design and crafts (new products, processes upgrading, strategies for identifying new markets, etc.), on the other hand operations where design skills are put to use in development of local cultural heritage (products and systems for communication, promotion, fruition, of museums, exhibition areas, collections, local excellences, cultural events, etc.). In such a scenario *Materialmente* aims to go one step further by creating a meeting and exchange ground between these three components, Design - Crafts - Cultural Heritage, with the aim of a mutual enhancement.

*Materialmente*, in particular, as result of collaboration between Politecnico di Torino and Confartigianato Imprese Torino (a big local association of craftsmen coming from different material cultures), involves in the innovation challenge local craftsmen, also for a certain similarity of thought and action between craftsman and designer, that can lead to significant encounters between the two cultures: both the trades cultivate the value of material culture, integrate thought and production, idea and product, and all relatively quickly.

The designer, no longer a "demiurge", becomes a "knowledge broker". This new opening of design to collateral knowledge to the projects is essential for updating the nature and role of the designer: no longer just a "problem solver" but now an interpreter of needs, through the help of those who possess the tools (anthropologists and cognitive ergonomists, for example) to real consumers' behaviours and sense their alteration in relation to the development and change of cultural models.

By providing this new dimension, the designer is completed by the craftsman, giving motivation (sense and value) to the product, orienting it to contemporary models of consumption and increasing its quality in terms of both design and process.

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While craftsman is responsible for the manufacturing quality, the designer is responsible for the quality of the design and the process. Designer can assist craftsman where he proves deficient: on design, and on the process. Moreover, they play together a role on sustainable best practices.

Referring to design, the path of a new "craftsman-designer" role is a long and complex one that not everyone can manage.

Referring to the process, often the craftsman is incapable of communicating, promoting and selling what he makes. He needs someone who helps him, through design, optimising production processes, providing promotion strategies and supporting the marketing stage. In fact, the hope of craftsmanship resides not only in the well-made and local, but also in the "sellable", in a correct market positioning.

The *Materialmente* research promotes, renewed, the effective relationship between trade associations, regional institutions, the higher education in design and craft businesses. An alliance that is bringing about interesting results, combining the creativity and innovative skills of design with craftsmanship ability.

Moreover, *Materialmente* brings about, as an added value, the creation of products dedicated to enhancing and presenting, to visitors and tourists, the Piedmont circuit of Royal Residences, in the north-west of Italy: thus, one local excellence is associated with and promotes another one, tourist and cultural, with satisfactory results.



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Figure 1 –The “Corona di Delizie”: the Royal Residences system in Piedmont, Italy

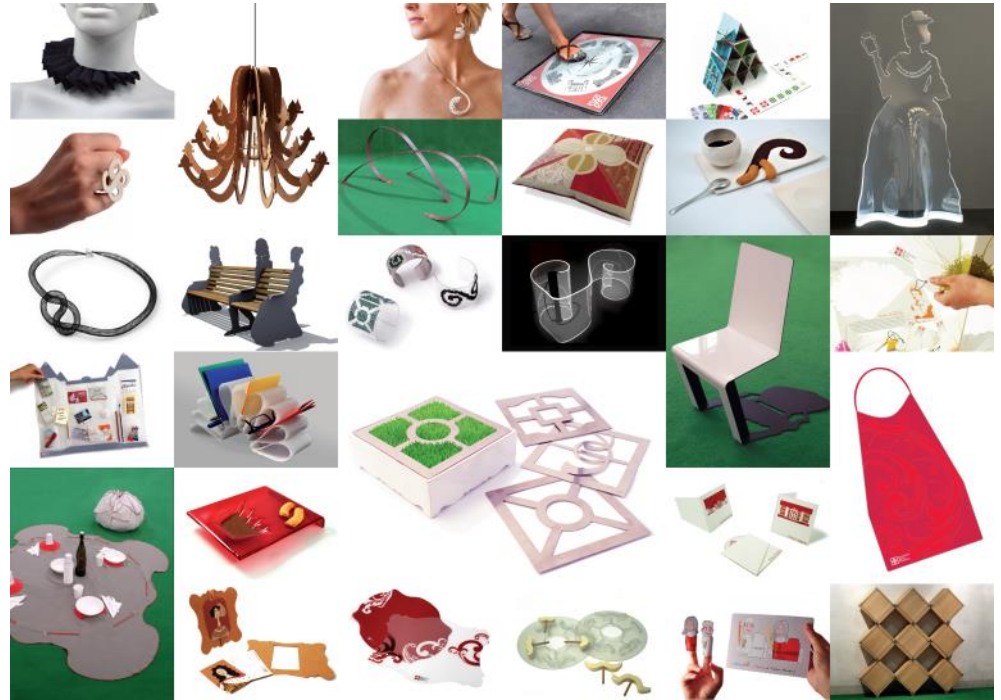


Figure 2 –The Materialmente merchandising products collection

## 2 OBJECTIVES

The rationale behind the *Materialmente* operation lies in:

- demonstrating that design and crafts can collaborate virtuously when roles are at the same level;
- bringing new designers generations near to the “design for craftsmanship” practice and culture, starting from university education;
- improving the effectiveness of the relationship between designers and craftsmen, testing it in apprenticeships and accompanying them to sign a contract for production and put-on-market;
- enhancing innovation and creating added value in merchandising for cultural heritage through the combination of two cultural heritages systems (historic residences and local material culture);
- strengthening Royal Residences brand identity through new merchandising products that confirm the historical legacy in a new “allusive” way.

## 3 METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

Starting from the objectives definition, shared with Confartigianato Imprese Torino (a trade association of craftsmen from different material cultures and

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production fields), the activity has developed through some progressive phases aimed to:

- the definition of specific needs and project requirements (considering both the strategic and the productive needs);
- the development of projects that have been conceived to be prototyped and produced;
- finally, but faced from the starting moment, the products promotion and distribution modalities.

In particular, we can distinguish the following phases:

### 3.1 FIELD RECOGNITION

Research team proceeded, according to the improved university design methodology by sketching, as first step, a *Metascenario* that students discussed and completed group by group.

Then, museum experts and craftsmen from Confartigianato Imprese Torino, interested in the research, intervened in several open seminars to enrich the frame and mark out possible paths to interpret the brief, providing students new elements to develop design concepts rich of value and sense.

In particular, this first phase has involved explorations and deepening on the themes of:

- craftsmanship, as cultural and technical heritage to preserve, recover and enhance;
- cultural assets system, as territorial and environmental identity capital;
- merchandising as communication and identity enhancing system.

### 3.2 DIDACTICS AND CONCEPTS DEVELOPMENT

Moreover, tutored students developed their proposals considering the received different stimuli and checking their projects with craftsmen.

This phase, developed during the "Design 3" course, a. y. 2009-10 (third year, part of the Disegno Industriale Degree Course at Politecnico di Torino), has involved 150 students and gave birth to more than 40 projects.

Students projects are aimed at to be useful products, with transmissible and recognisable cultural contents, representing and identifying the context from which they originate (Royal Residences), perhaps equipped with a playful dimension, and certainly a valid alternative to the generic "soulless" merchandising consisting of logos and little else, still strongly rooted, especially in promotional campaigns.

The research distinguished several alternative positions in interpreting the Royal residences system searching for project guidelines. In particular, some recurring design attitudes have been selected: the mention of distinctive signs or details of the piece (baroque architecture, geometric gardens, royal symbols, etc..) within the products; the allusion to the piece (there is no explicit trait of the piece, but the product recalls it).

Other kind of approaches have been excluded, such as the "philologically correct reproduction" (copy); the reproduction of the original according to an economic

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criterion (small-scale); the reproduction in small-scale and using a different material; the reproduction of a work on a different support.

Students developed Materialmente merchandising projects in different market areas and typological categories (home accessories, kitchen tools, wearable and textiles, kids toys and leisure, jewellery), with the aim to create products able to stand by visitors after they are back home.

Finally, students have been going in apprenticeship for two months nearby about 30 different craftsmen to develop together the executive and prototyping phase of each project. The projects have been developed employing, for every crafts enterprise involved, its specific materials and manufacturing know-how, which as a whole represent a diverse range of craftsmanship and business models: from the use of traditional materials and techniques (ceramics, glass, steel, paper, woodworking, upholstery, textiles, etc) to the most recent resins and plastic materials, digital printing techniques, CNC machining, digital modeling.

This apprenticeship phase evolved the research and provided 30 prototypes of different products, in different materials.



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Figure 3 – Some products from the Materialmente collection

### 3.3 PROJECTS PROTOTYPING

The selected projects for the prototyping activity have been studied and refined through the development of details solutions and direct experimentations in the craftsmen laboratories. Craftsmen and design students, during this activity, have had the chance to establish a direct dialogue and to share in depth projects and their achievements, crossing and enriching design and craftsmanship cultures.

The projects, developed by the students according to the technics and craft cultures involved, were then resumed and deepened during the apprenticeship period nearby craftsmen. Projects have been adapted with respect to the construction capabilities and optimized according to the feedbacks reaped from modelling and prototyping activities. The resultant artifacts are therefore the result of a constructive and virtuous exchange among the reasons of the project and the craft realization ones.

### 3.4 RESULTS DIFFUSION

*Materialmente* results in terms of achieved manufactured goods, strategic formulation and process development, have been spread to different levels (to specialists communities and to a larger public), and with different tools and means.

Some seminars have been organized, on the theme of merchandising for cultural heritage:

— “Materialmente. Education, research and craft together for the fruition of the circuit of the Royal Residences of Piedmont”, Castello del Valentino, Torino (18/06/2010).

— “Materialmente, merchandising and services for the Circuit of the Royal Residences in Piedmont”, held simultaneously to the first edition of the exhibition, Torino City hall (10/03/2011).

— “ ..back home with a piece of history, territory and design”, in the DNA Fair, dedicated to the guardianship, management and enhancement of the cultural and landscape Italian heritage, Lingotto Fiere, Torino (18/04/2013), where the *Materialmente* experience has been presented and compared with other Italian initiatives in front of a specialistic public.

At the same time, eight public exhibits of the operation results have been organized: in the Cappella degli Antichi Chiostri, Torino (March 2011); Artò Fiera dell’Artigianato, Lingotto Fiere, Torino (November 2011 and November 2012); Casa del Conte Verde, Rivoli (December 2011-January 2012); MACEF – International Home Show, Fieramilano, Rho (January 2013); ADI Design Index 2013 Selected Works, Triennale, Milano (October - November 2013); Design and Territory, ADI Design Index 2013 Selected Piedmontese Works, Archivio di Stato, Torino (October 2013); Design è - ADI Compasso d’Oro exhibition, ex Officine Ansaldo, Milano (April 2014).

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Figure 4 – Materialmente exhibition in Cappella degli Antichi Chiostrì, Turin.

The *Materialmente* telling has been moreover picked up in an international (Italian/English) publication: a book (Bozzola M., De Giorgi C., Germak C., *Design per i beni culturali territoriali. Merchandising museale e artigianato*, Celid, Torino, 2012) which illustrates the whole *Materialmente* operation but also goes more in depth, through some dedicated essays, on the specific themes of design, craftsmanship, merchandising and cultural heritage. *Materialmente* operation has won recently three prestigious prizes:

- Young & Design 2013 Special Mention, competition announced by Rima Editrice, Milano;
- ADI Design Index 2013 / Selection of the best evidences of Italian design, conducted every two years by ADI Associazione per il Disegno Industriale;
- Compasso d'Oro ADI 2013 Honour Mention, in the "Research for firms".

### 3.5 COMMERCIAL PHASE

The large interest of public and institutions gave birth to the opportunity to transform about 15 prototypes into products, exposed in the collection corner-shop of the most visited piedmontese royal sites (la Reggia di Venaria Reale) and sold to an international public, that goes "...back home with a piece of our history, territory and design". The sale phase has become possible thanks to a further screening activity of the achieved prototypes, aimed at evaluating and optimizing them for production for what concerns materials, processes and prices. At this moment an integrative communication activity has started, with the preparation of some specific communication tools:

- a printed, agile and updatable products catalogue, aimed at the diffusion and sale of the collection;
- a display system, expressly designed and produced to contain and show *Materialmente* products to the visitors of the Reggia di Venaria Reale, conceived to be updatable, transportable and identifiable in other future sale occasions;



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— a video, aimed to support the explication of the operation, integrated to the products display system in the Venaria Reale bookshop.



Figure 5 – Materialmente corner-shop in the Reggia di Venaria Reale.

As part of the commercialization of the products, an important issue has been the definition of an agreement between the parts (students, craftsmen), to protect the intellectual property of students who developed the projects on one hand, and to allow commercial exploitation of projects by craftsmen on the other hand. This agreement, signed by both parts and mediated by Politecnico di Torino in accordance with Confartigianato Imprese Torino, regulates the project transfer for the economic exploitation on payment of a lump sum to students. The sum does not imply the transfer of intellectual property, which remains a prerogative of the student-designer.

## 4 DISCUSSION

The potentialities of a model such as *Materialmente* have to be searched in the scale multipliers that synergies among different cultural systems (design, craftsmanship, and Royal Residences in this case) are able to activate in the direction of a reciprocal and jointed enhancement. This system is aimed at allow the production made by craftsmen to enrich itself of new sensitiveness and approaches to a new generation of products aware of cultural and technological changes, and to make possible, for these new merchandising family, the access to new markets where the “made by hand” product could find a coherent collocation and an effective distribution. At the same time, the historical and cultural heritage of Royal Residences gains in visibility, value communication and history telling, according to an auto-spreading principle nearby a wide and various public (for social and cultural origins). In that way, the *Materialmente* research contributes to the increase and diversification of the value of the offered cultural products, as well as the growth of the cultural awareness of the citizens.

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A limit of the operation could be found in the products prices, that for some demanding manufactured products are still high for some visitors categories (families, students visiting with school classes..). For this people it could be useful a further productive and strategy optimization, aimed at reduce the products costs due to the passages through the different subjects involved in the operation (craftsmen, bookshops managers, institutions), with the final objective to reach an agreement, also at a politic level, which could keep in consideration the need to create a new virtuous system in the mutual exchange, and not only the maximum profit.

## 5 CONCLUSION

*Strategy, Service, Product*: these are the different scale levels on which design works today. In the following parts, it will be explained what could be the development of *Materialmente* into the scale of strategy and service. These scales could then give more information on the characteristics of the future products. In fact, a good product often grows up from a good service design.

*Strategy*:

The training model (the students) and business model (the communities of craftsmen) proposed by *Materialmente* project is today ripe, therefore intended to be widespread. At which scale? At the national level at first, taking into account the partner Confartigianato Imprese (a trade association with offices in 21 Italian regions and which pick up about 17,000 members in Italy). Members interested in the development of new handicraft products, traditional or innovative, or those in support, (working materials, semi-finished products, components, etc.) could be at least a tenth, that is to say 1,500 members companies. Quite a great number of course, to which is good to offer, for the topic "design and cultural heritage", a new "network structure", to be created with the partnership of the institution MIBACT (Ministero dei beni e della attività culturali e del turismo). Considering that on this direction other initiatives are already active on the national territory (see DAB Design for Artshop and Bookshop), it means that it would be necessary to survey and to collect the opportunities for creating a new museum merchandising service at a national level. Italy has an immense wealth of museums and cultural opportunities, and the actions of an entire "network" communicating and promoting the message "craftsmanship works with design" could be a key.

*Service*:

We have to take in consideration both the following conditions:

- at first, every region in Italy has cultural goods with a specific identity and different opportunities for the visitors. The public that attends this cultural heritage is made of different target people, but also the same person could attend several times in a year the same cultural site/museum (such as happened for the Reggia di Venaria Reale in Piemonte)
- second, in Italy each museum has a different managing system: in fact there are national, regional, and local museums. The "network" could offer its expertise to identify the best way to activate a museum merchandising related to the context and to the different public.

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The “network” could also host the launch of initiatives (design competitions, school workshop, etc.) that each regional community of craftsmen could activate in cooperation with the cultural heritage of its own territory.

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