

12. Social innovation: from incubating to envisioning. Recovering the strategic dimension of design in supporting social innovation

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Cities and urban environments hold a central position in discussions surrounding ongoing transformations, actively involving themselves in the exploration of strategies to navigate the inherent uncertainties of the future. These uncertainties manifest not only in the generation of social, environmental, and economic tensions but also provide an avenue for experimentation with initiatives utilizing participatory methodologies and innovative democratic processes, and the promotion and support of widespread creativity in society (Landry, 2006; Meroni, 2007; Manzini, 2015). If we look at projects implemented by cities in the recent decades, we encounter activities such as participatory budgeting, community-driven development projects, participative and creative placemaking initiatives. These underscore the critical role of cities as laboratories for experimentation and adaptation, where participatory methodologies and democratic processes are contributing to address pressing concerns while aiming at fostering creativity and resilience to change.

Such examples can be considered cases of social innovations with impacts on a cultural and social transformation, where the transform-

ative potential emerges both in the outputs as well as in the collaborative process that generates them (Avelino *et al.*, 2019; Ravazzoli *et al.*, 2021). Indeed, while acknowledging the debate on a shared definition of what social innovation is (Murray *et al.*, 2010; Howaldt *et al.*, 2018), we are here referring more to the strategies and actions that contribute to the creation of a social innovation ecosystem (Howaldt *et al.*, 2018; Moulaert and Van den Broeck, 2018; Meroni, 2019) defined as a locally rooted combination of conditions, stakeholders, people, relationships, and resources working together to achieve a shared purpose and generate public value (Selloni, 2024).

This allows for a more systemic dimension and multifaceted debate around social innovation's rise, growth and potential impact, where actions of technical empowerment are coupled with cultural ones (Meroni *et al.*, 2017) and where the clear-cut distinction between top-down and bottom-up is overcome in favour of meeting trajectories and hybrid dimensions (Dees *et al.*, 2004; Westley and Antadze, 2010; de Bruin and Stangl, 2013; Westley and Antadze, 2013; Gabriel, 2014).

Indeed, while social innovation is commonly linked to bottom-up, grassroots projects and activist movements, there has been a significant increase in the involvement of institutions in promoting and supporting initiatives and policies. If we turn our look back to the urban context, we can see how cities and public administrations have promoted various incubation-like programmes for grassroots, citizen-led initiatives, with the shared objective to encourage citizens, informal networks and organizations to generate and develop ideas that explore innovative ways of living in uncertain times.

See, for example, the experiences of Bologna, Turin, Naples, Brindisi and Milan as the latest in the Italian context. Born as temporary programmes, all these initiatives have experimented with diverse ways and processes to attract, scout, support, and fund projects proposed by people and third-sector organizations.

These actions, on the one hand, make it possible to intervene promptly, intercepting the proactivity of individuals or small groups. On the other hand, they could benefit from a more strategic and structured action of constructing a vision of the future, not only linked to the modes of active and democratic participation of citizens (and thus to processes), but also with respect to new ways of living in a more

sustainable and inclusive way (and thus the contents). Individual agency alone is not sufficient; on the contrary, it is deeply connected with and dependent on existing artefacts, infrastructures, norms, regulations, laws, and institutions, but also on a shared sense of awareness, trust, and confidence to act in the social sphere and, more importantly, on the capacity to envision sustainable futures (Dorado, 2005; Shove *et al.*, 2014).

This chapter aims at presenting a critical reflection on a social innovation incubation process, named The School of the Neighbourhoods and promoted by the Municipality of Milan, and to discuss the role of design in guiding and nurturing a social innovation supporting policy at a city scale.

Design, and more specifically design for social innovation, has been widely recognised as a discipline and an approach that can support the emergence and scaling of socially innovative initiatives. These actions refer to mainly service and strategic design. The first is widely used by expert designers in supporting social innovators moving from the conception of an idea to the details of the experience, focussing on refining processes and interventions as well as prototyping solutions. Conversely, strategic design involves a broader perspective that encompasses sense-making as well as envisioning new possibilities and futures involving multiple stakeholders. This, together with codesign, acquires exponential importance when incubation-like programmes to support social innovation, as the one presented in this chapter, aim at exploring ways to leverage on a diffuse creativity in solving problems (thus fostering activism) and imagine alternative futures.

12.1 The School of the Neighbourhoods

The School of the Neighbourhoods (La Scuola dei Quartieri, 2018-23) is a programme initiated by the Municipality of Milan (co-funded by the European Union, as part of the Metropolitan Cities Operational Programme 2014-2020) and involving the Polimi Desis Lab in its design and delivery. The aim of the school is to stimulate and enable social innovation initially within fragile districts, and then on a city-wide

scale. The innovative element of the programme is the low entrance barrier (an innovative and useful intuition responding to local needs is enough) that encourages people to propose solutions aiming at prototyping new ways of living the neighbourhoods while generating public value: e.g., original models of aggregation; sustainable food-related services; alternative forms of care; and accessible and inclusive cultural initiatives. In the last 5 years, the School created a safe environment for education, experimentation, and incubation of ideas proposed by citizens that was able to attract more than 250 proposals, and to select, support and fund 56 of them with a grant up to 30,000 euros each.

The structure of the programme is organized into 4 main cycles of public calls, scouting and incubation, each lasting about one year and comprising 3 phases:

- the first phase consists of scouting activities: a free and open series of designed encounters to let needs and opportunities expressed by the neighbourhoods emerge, and to meet and guide prospective social innovators in the participation in the call;
- the second phase, named *advanced training* is about supporting selected ideas to tackle challenges and invent innovative responses and solutions while developing entrepreneurial skills;
- the third phase of prototyping and accelerating solutions provides personalized coaching, support to become a not-for-profit venture, and a project grant to co-finance the first year of activity;
- transversal actions worked to build a community of the participants and strengthen their relationships and networks with local communities and stakeholders.

What we propose here is to look back at the process of the School of the Neighbourhoods to reflect on the different applications of strategic design and the envisioning moments in the various project phases. Beyond the existing structure of the school being divided into 3 phases, it seems more meaningful to consider the process as taking place around the moments when ideas are selected.

This turning point is pivotal in distinguishing between an initial phase that is open and public, aimed at the entire city, and subsequent sec-

ond and third phases dedicated to the selected ideas, yet permeable to the context. In reconsidering the design actions in their strategic aims and how this goal can be interpreted and adapted to the various moments of the process, we will use *ex-ante* to refer to the activities prior to the selection of the ideas, i.e., actions for attracting and engaging citizens in proposing ideas, and *ex-post* to the activities that occur after the selection point, and therefore belonging mostly to the second phase and the transversal actions of networking and community building. However, it's important to note that the boundaries between *ex-ante* and *ex-post* tend to blur within iterative processes that unfold in cycles, as the one presented in the school.

This overlapping mechanism can be beneficial to the infrastructure of the ecosystem but also seems to be promising in terms of improving, refining, and reinforcing the emerging visions.

If we consider *ex-ante* actions, the range of designed forms of encounters can be grouped into:

- meetings and presentations to let the innovators be inspired by existing social innovators: e.g., *open lectures* from the neighbourhoods and a series of *Good Stories* from the communities, in the form of existing initiatives, projects and practices that can be ascribed as social innovations;
- tools to support participants in getting into contact with local communities (e.g., *Explore the Neighbourhood*, designed as an online pocket guide), and to explore existing assets and resources as well as criticalities and needs of the districts (e.g., a series of *On-site and Virtual Walks* of the neighbourhood);
- convivial events such as *The Ideas Festival* to celebrate creativity and proactivity of citizens as well as to scout prospective ideas and participants for the school (Figure 1);
- design tools to stimulate, improve and detail the idea of prospective participants, such as *The Fortune-Teller of Ideas*, a set of cards to generate ideas, a *What if...?* exercise to increase social sustainability, and *The Compass of the Ideas*, a tool to navigate the design of a service.

When we consider *ex-post* actions, we refer to a second group of activities dedicated mainly to the selected ideas and to the participants of the different cycles with the aim of building a supportive



and widespread community. Indeed, parallel to the actions related to training social innovators, the school organized:

- a series of encounters in the form of peer-to-peer events among participants and alumni of the school;
- a series of *neighbourhood meetings* with local organizations and actors with the aim of connecting and reinforcing the local network and rely on existing assets;
- a number of public presentations to present the ideas to the public, amplifying the innovative features and thematic areas proposed by the selected ideas.

This range of activities made it possible to modulate the training process on the basis of the participants, the skills they possessed, their degree of knowledge of the neighbourhood; the thematic areas; and the varying degree of maturity of the proposed idea.

Figure 1.
The Ideas Festival
celebrates the creativity
of citizens.

12.2 Envisioning as a strategic action

In the following paragraphs we propose a reflection on the strategic dimension of the activities listed here, and specifically on the envisioning dimension, related to feeding and nurturing social conversation around future visions, in order to imagine a necessary complementarity with activities more related to empowerment and training.

Ex-ante: envisioning as exploring, stimulating and inspiring.

The actions taken prior to the selection had two main objectives: first, to attract people and support them with their ideas in applying to the programme; and second, to achieve this goal by designing encounters that empower individuals to imagine solutions and become active, thereby nurturing their capacity to act. This approach undoubtedly represents the adoption of a strategic perspective, where the envisioning phase is crucial when connected to exploring existing resources and detecting needs, criticalities and desires.

Figure 2.
Peer-to-peer events,
neighbourhood meetings
and public presentations.



Additionally, it stimulates the ability to shape alternative models and inspires them through existing promising stories and cases.

What emerges is a tradeoff between the individual dimension – linked to personal needs, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations related to the programme, and creative capacity – and the collective dimension, which encompasses an imaginative vision of the future linked to the neighbourhood scale and has a longer transformative horizon.

While the actions undertaken were undeniably successful in engaging people and ideas, the envisioning process was only partially built from the exploratory and narrative phases. It did not produce a clear, structured, shared and coherent set of visions in the initial phase, even if still open and debatable. Conversely, it proceeded in driving and sustaining the creativity of the individual and informal groups, being prompted by their intuition.

Moreover, this preliminary work was partially facilitated at the beginning of the programme by limiting the territorial scale to a few neighbourhoods, while it became even more complex when envisioning futures at the city level. The design of a set of visions could have strengthened both the aspirational aspect and the connection to existing resources and actors while maintaining an innovative, even radical, character. We can assert that in the case of the school and its ex-ante actions, the individual agency dimension prevailed over the collective one, supporting through design tools the effort of the social innovator to synthesize needs, resources, and opportunities, and to project them into the design of a solution.

Ex-post: envisioning as connecting and reinforcing.

Reflecting on the actions conducted ex-post, while succeeding to engage local stakeholders and initiate a community of the school, they worked mainly on explicating possible connections among peers and with organizations, in reinforcing the technical skills and solving practical needs.

If we look at the 56 ideas in the 4 cycles of the school, we can observe how common and coherent interpretations of alternative ways of living emerge, both thematically and territorially. For instance, we can refer to the theme of food and its relationship to care and proximity (Corubolo and Meroni, 2023), or to projects that envision a precise

vocation of a neighbourhood in caring for the natural environment by relying on existing infrastructures. This initial action of connecting the seeds of *sense* expressed by the ideas of the school could formulate again an envisioning process able to reinforce and sustain change, as well as reducing the risk of the dispersal of efforts into isolated projects lacking thematic and spatial cohesion, and capacity to scale.

Indeed, the potentiality of adopting strategic design lies in the ability of expert designers to carry out a more robust interpretative work that connects, reformulates, reframes, and reinforces contents and thematic areas emerging from the selected ideas and transforms them, for example, into alternative scenarios that resonate with a broader audience.

Embedding a more consistent envisioning phase not only *ex-ante* (with a scouting objective) but also *ex-post*, could have benefited both the ideas and the social innovators, as well as the overall programme which involves neighbourhoods, organizations and policy makers. On the level of ideas, this could have nurtured the scouting phase of subsequent cycles, supporting the creativity of future social innovators to generate more refined and innovative proposals. Additionally, it could have strengthened potential synergies between existing and new ideas, thereby encouraging an incremental as well as exploratory approach to innovation. Here, *incremental* aligns with the concept of creating contexts for experimentation where peers, innovators and neighbourhoods benefit in a shared and reciprocal way, especially in cyclical processes. Adopting such an approach could have led to broadening the conversation at every cycle, engaging stakeholders in a wider codesign and coproduction action around the future of a neighbourhood. Moreover, it could have contributed in shaping policies that could support and sustain the transition proposed by the visions through this process.

This could bridge the short-term and present perspective of the ideas and their prototyping approach supported by the school to the long-term view of an ecosystem able to sustain a transformation and embed a systemic dimension.

We can say that the 56 ideas of the school potentially «exemplify systemic changes at the level of everyday experiences» (Meroni and Sangiorgi, 2011), where the values embodied by the social innovations

must be recomposed in a strategic perspective. The emerging promising practices, while certainly proposing changes at the neighbourhood scale, does not have the social and political strength to mobilise public policies capable of sustaining large-scale systemic changes. The role of the designer here is to contribute to set in place a structured and recognizable envisioning process able to link the niche level with the broader one.

Indeed, this creative leap between the two levels is a skill and sensitivity inherent to expert designers which refers to the sense-making capacity of connecting, interpreting, translating, and projecting, together with the ability of contributing in an infrastructuring process, as a continuous process of building relations with diverse actors to foster social innovation (Hillgren *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, when we refer to the cultural role of design, we must also include the need to nurture a critical view towards visions composed of values, new relationships, infrastructures (including cultural ones), and existing or prospective policies. Using the words of Manzini (2015), recovering the strategic dimension means to adopt a design culture «which is what is needed to feed both a critical sense (of the current status of things) and a constructive attitude (proposing values and vision in which to imagine the new)».

In this phase, especially in the Milanese context, we are witnessing a shift from temporary programmes to stable policies.

When supportive processes for the initiative of individuals and small groups become continuous and iterative, it is even more necessary to balance technical empowerment with strategic visions and contents; the fruition of incubation-like tools and programmes with a process of shared construction of meaning; a series of actions dedicated to a number of selected idea with a broader conversation within an ecosystem able to elicit opportunities and evolution, thus broadening the scope and duration over time, while consolidating emerging results.

12.3 Conclusions

As discussed in several arenas, social innovation is a key element in creating more resilient societies. In fact, from a design perspective in particular, social innovation is a process that, at the same time, implies and results from empowering people to overcome difficulties by using creative thinking and problem-solving, looking at problems as opportunities, and becoming open to change.

Moving beyond the more technical and incubation-like support provided by methods and tools of service design, this chapter proposes the recovering of the strategic role of design as a fundamental element in increasing the impact and the generation of public value and to support the transformative potential of social innovation. Such a process of 'thinking together about the future' is a way to support participants and society at large through the imaginative power of design, developing the *public imagination* (Selloni, 2017) and refocussing on the contents alongside the process.

A design-driven envisioning process not only attracts coherent solutions but also facilitates their mutual reinforcement, the sharing of resources, the establishment of local networks of stakeholders, and the growth of a vocation for the neighbourhood. Moreover, the initiatives emerging from a scouting phase, guided by a strategic vision, open up space for experimentation for innovative, often thematic and vertical, forms of policies, crucial to sustain the change over time and to scale up from a local neighbourhood dimension.

For design to maintain a central role, it must reclaim its capacity to shape future visions that not only captivate interest but also elicit proactive engagement from diverse stakeholders. Without this strategic dimension, design risks relegation to a more technical and less culturally impactful position, limiting its capacity for intervention to a less systemic and less influential role in fostering lasting and transformative change.

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