# 6. Different voices of identity. The role of communication design for the 0-18 community

Valeria Bucchetti

## 6.1 Communication design for society

The relationship between communication design and society is profoundly deep-rooted and touches on what pertains to the ontological dimension of communication design, implicitly inviting us to maintain the reflection on the objectives, priorities and responsibilities of our design actions. This is a particularly complex area in which the communication designer is the subject who acts in the community for the community and who feels responsible for the signs and traces he/she leaves in the semiosphere, as well as for the quality of the communicative act itself from which the access to content derives.

It is an area that recognizes its founding ethical core in the dimension of what traditionally belongs to public utility or social-graphic design (Anceschi, 1984; Pignotti, 1984). This is an area of the project that has deep roots and well-charted paths (Steiner, 1973) and which, although within different lines of work, has periodically reaffirmed the idea of communication designer as a profession open to dialogue and to the tensions of society. Such an idea is capable of supporting

an alternative to the ideology of professionalization, a field exerting its influence on the designer to summon up *ethical* courage and reconsider objectives and contents into which to pour their *talent*.

It is around this axis that reflections and experiences have developed, allowing the emergence of accents and facets that design disciplines have favoured by intersecting the fields of communication design for social responsibility, access design (Baule, 2012); social design; design for social communication (Galbiati and Piredda, 2012); communication design for welfare (Bucchetti, 2017), and their values.

What is at stake here is the performative role of the communication project when it supports the transformations which social policies in particular are carrying out (Rosina and Sorgi, 2016), when it must accompany change and provide tools to support relations between the public administration and the citizens. And also when we find at the centre communicative actions concerning socially relevant services (Mancini 2002, p. 7), those having to do with the well-being and living conditions of the people and with the resources and the opportunities available to them in the various phases of their existence, i.e., project areas crucial to the improvement of the quality of life.

Communication design therefore becomes an instrument. It becomes the interpreter of a will, a process for the implementation of policies by the public administration and its bodies. It designs artefacts to speak to citizens; it gives visibility to innovation processes; it becomes a facilitator, but also an ally – and sometimes an accomplice – of the process of change. And it is in this role that it is called to redesign its priorities on the scale of design values in balance between humanistic values and technical knowledge in a careful and conscious critical process aiming at the improvement of social and environmental living conditions (Branzaglia and Bollini, 2003; Baule, 2015; Piscitelli, 2019).

## 6.2 A project aimed at young citizens and the role of communication design

The Milan 0-18 project is part of this framework, developed within the policy plan of the Metropolitan City of Milan, which represents

an opportunity to develop a disciplinary reflection in the field of communication design called upon to make its own contribution and play its own role on multiple levels. Milan 0-18 is the main output of the *WISH MI: Well-being Integrated System of Milan* project, one of the 20 projects selected by Urban Innovative Actions (UIA), a call for bids from the European Union which provides resources to European urban areas in order to test innovative solutions to face the challenges confronting our cities today.

The project stems from the assumption summarized very well in the saying: *it takes a village to raise a child but, more importantly, it takes children to create a village*. Milan 0-18, which originates from the acknowledgement of the growing plurality of phenomena reshaping the Milanese social fabric and its needs, sets itself a daunting challenge: to promote the multidimensional and integrated well-being of all minors (0-18) living in the city of Milan, guaranteeing them full access to quality educational, cultural and social services. The City is called to face this challenge through a holistic and integrated approach which, as such, involves not only the public sector, but also the private social sector and the entire city community in the co-design of an integrated system of policies, programmes, services and opportunities promoting the well-being of all the children and all the young boys and girls in the City.

The basic idea that inspired the project consists in the belief that together we can improve our ability to read the needs of the territory, design responses and new policies, services, and opportunities promoting well-being. The aim, therefore, is to build a city with a strong and cohesive social fabric in which young citizens and their families are at the heart of the construction of the Milan of tomorrow; that is, a City in which their needs, desires and resources are adequately acknowledged and no one is left behind. It is therefore a project with an innovative scope and of an interdisciplinary nature, whose objectives and purposes are based on a concept of welfare that is no longer exclusively devoted to the resolution of primary needs, but capable of spreading the culture of personal well-being.

Having set these objectives, communication design makes its contribution on multiple levels with a duty to accompany young citizens, but also the various actors belonging to the system, on this

course of transformation: change of viewpoint of ways to contact the services, request them, conceive them and share them; transformation of mental models relating to the citizen-institutions relationship.

The figure of the communication designer is called upon to support this entire process, thus including his/her disciplinary point of view during the development of the action, fuelling the comparison and enriching the dialogue with the other subjects involved in the decision-making process.

Thanks to this role, communicative actions are not conceived downstream, as frequently happens, but matured in progress, translating the different requests communicatively, accompanying the decision-making processes along a path that facilitates and makes the implications entailed by scenarios and gradually outlined hypotheses (providing notational tools, forms of schematization of data and knowledge), more comprehensible (visible) on a communicative level. Hence, the designer's ability to frame and guide their own research and orient it towards the desired events by bringing it into the future perfect is put into practice (Celaschi, 2016). The tools they designed are at the service of the entire group to give a visual form to a system in progress and to facilitate decisions and processes of anticipation or strategic forecasting.

The communication designer therefore extends her/his role as a translator between the sender and the receiver (Anceschi, 1981; Baule and Caratti, 2016) to play simultaneously that of actor within a system of subjects and of facilitator of relationships within the working group.

A second level concerns the design of communicative products responding to the communicative needs of the system itself, and which include: the identification function (the design of visual identity elements, identity of spaces in the urban context); the informational-promotional function (the design of communication and exhibition tools capable of conveying information about the system in order to spread its peculiarities); the phatic function (the design of a set of tools capable of activating and renewing relationships and of keeping channels of exchange with citizens alive by implementing direct and indirect methods of listening).

A final level involves the systemic sphere and not only the definition of rules and grammars, but also of tools to facilitate

and guarantee the directorial management and the control
of the products so that over time their creation and articulation
are kept in line with the subject and traceable to it.

## 6.3 A participatory and generative open system

Singularity-plurality, listening, inclusion, accessibility are some
of the key words that outline the Milan 0-18 system, and which have
been pivotal in directing the design choices for the construction
of the communication system.

Due to its nature, it is a system that is thought of as variable;
open; able to modify itself because it is constantly listening; capable
of welcoming different voices and signs in relation to the plurality
of profiles characterized by specific interests and vocations;
and which finds its reference model in dynamic and kinetic identities.
Such dynamic or post-logo identities, as we know, (Ferrara, 2007;
Felsing, 2009; Chiappini and Sfligiotti, 2010; Van Nes, 2013; Sinni,
Ruggeri and Varini, 2018), are «often defined as *fluid* (Lapentino,
2011), in which the adoption of more fluid and expressive languages
is characterized by variability, reference to the context and proces-
suality is preferred to the sedimented and conventional repetitive
application of a recognizable visual element such as brand, perform-
ability, non-linearity, coherence and variety» (Guida, 2014, pp. 114-115,
author's translation).

Communication design thus responds to the need to enhance
the multiplicity of the subjects, their distinctive traits and the poten-
tial of the relationship between them in order to foster relationship
of interdependence with the subjects of the community.
It does so through a system capable of meeting the requirements
of flexibility, upgradeability, customization and with tools, which,
thanks to computational visual design, can generate variety according
to the demands of dynamism.

The identity system is thought of as an open container which can
accommodate and coherently interpret the idea of multidimensionality.
From the point of view of the conceptual model it is important to un-

derline the definition of the variations through a directorial approach
for which the centrality taken on by the process and the design
of the process itself are determined according to its role as orches-
trator. It is through systemic design that we can predict the virtuous
effects that the individual pieces will have on the system, to prefigure
how the system is able to generate them, welcome them, interpret
them and re-introduce them into its communication circuit.
For example, I plan a certain process because I know that I want to
obtain some particular functional results both for the activation
of certain 'communicative behaviours' and for the representation
of an overall idea drawn up *ex-ante* (Ciuccarelli, 2007).

In the case of Milan 0-18 it is not just an adaptive and flexible iden-
tity system, made easily applicable by the logo-generator (*generative
tool* on the website dcxw-milano018.org), but also a participatory
one (Bartoli, 2013; Bucchetti, 2017) with the task of giving voice to
the subjects it addresses, a task it performs by acting on two distinct
levels: the first in which the sound register is the protagonist, the
second anchored to iconic-figurative testimonies instead.

**Drawing with the voice**

The voice of the young represents, not only metaphorically but also
strictly speaking, the direct means of making their thoughts explicit.
Because Milano 0.18 intends to promote a plural community in which
each subject is an expression of their own individuality and,
at the same time, plays an active and generative part, the promise
of giving voice to identities was chosen as the focus of the project.
To this purpose, the correlation between phonation and visual
configuration was enhanced. It is a communicative move aimed
at promoting the relationship between subject and system based on
a playful component that leverages the friendly dimension and which,
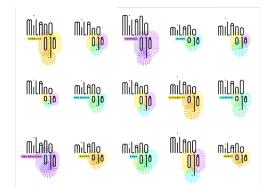through it, opens up to the dimension of trust.

The resulting dynamic logotype can react to sound inputs entered
through a digital application (generative tool) which converts
the audio parameters into graphic parameters, thus giving life to
unique and personal variations which express the visual translation
of the individual subject's vocal print. It is the audio parameters
that influence the conformation of the logo by acting on specific

**Figure 1.**
Generative tool interface that allows voice interaction with the logo. It enables the generation of potentially unlimited versions of the identity sign that can be recognized as expressions of the same system.

behavioural qualities of the basic lettering: elasticity, expansion, radiation, chroma. When interfacing vocally with the tool and the phonation corresponds a transformation of the logo that reacts to the given impulse.

## Testify through images

The second level on which the open system is based focusses in particular on the role of the sign-logotype, an integral part of the Milano 0-18 logo, and develops around the idea of knowing how to accommodate other iconic elements resulting from a participatory process.

Some methods have been designed which allow us to achieve a recognizable visual configuration and *behaviour*, but it is no longer something rigid and *pre-fixed* (Shaughnessy, 2008; Guida, 2014). At the centre there is no longer just the sign, but the formal behaviour dictated by the compositional rules: the stratification, multi-layer, and chromatic palette organize the heterogeneity of the figures, i.e., the traces left by the different subjects making up the community unified by a common graphic language which harmonizes, integrates, and intersects them.

With this in view, translation paths were designed from communication design practices for the different age groups of children and young people through creative workshop activities with the sign-logotype at their centre. Each workshop, characterized by a specific graphic technique (collage, three-dimensional papercut, linocut print), activated a process of self-reflection in the participants in relation to the city, their desires and rights, and represented

an opportunity for each of them to talk about themselves and build a first level of knowledge and relationship with the system.
The results of these activities and the exploratory course adopted have generated an alphabet of signs consistent with the compositional rules of the identity system and with the formal behaviour dictated by them, thus giving life to brand configurations which introduce new semantic levels ascribable to the values of the Milan 0.18 system.

The one described is a dynamic and open identity system which has also been extended to the design of spaces, both in terms of participatory model and communicative grammars.
That is, the generative principle is the foundation of the design of the community hubs present in different neighbourhoods of the city, seen as spaces constituting the physical counterparts of the digital artefacts – the digital platform designed to allow dissemination and interaction with dedicated services – and whose task is to guarantee physical access to the system, promote the recomposition of the different opportunities at local level, and experiment with innovative services for minors and their families.

Figure 3.
The artistic techniques explored during the workshops. Over 3000 new logo configurations can be created by combining the individual contributions from each experience.

# 6.4 An ethical commitment to the community

The challenge posed by the identity project described is formidable; it is connected to the growth and development phase of the system, which will have to deal with the consumption of images (and its acceleration) and which, every time it welcomes a new subject, will have to test its ability to remodulate itself with gradually distinct expressive forms  and with heterogeneous qualities of detail, welcoming contamination and hybrid form as integral parts of its being (Bucchetti, 2017; Consalez, 2017). The stability of the identity system will therefore be verified every time the system entrusts itself to those who live it, put it into action, and make it their own, accepting that everyone – since it belongs to everyone – can enrich it with their own *intonation* and that any *imperfections*, any discrepancies, can be reabsorbed by its own cohesive force and be perceived as values.
In this way, the directorial function shifts its focus within the design process, to one of anticipation. That is, new directorial perspectives are tested, which have the task of increasing their prefigurative abilities: foreseeing, welcoming and orchestrating the results of a process characterized by open phases without betraying the objectives of control over the overall identity in the process.

The work being carried out in the area of communication design for welfare (the communication design research group of the Department of Design – Politecnico di Milano – has been focussing on the topics of social responsibility for many years, bringing these issues into development and devoting educational experiments to welfare themes) has therefore offered a field of experimentation and an opportunity to question itself on the merits.

The analyzed project allows us, in fact, to reflect on its performative functions, on its qualities as facilitator and aggregator of multiple identities, and at the same time it allows us to bring out the role of the project as a producer of theory; to consider design «both as a planning ability and as a predisposition to think design-wise», i.e., as a theory and at the same time practice of an *inventive habit* (Zingale, 2020, p. 55) and which, as Giovanni Anceschi recalled during his lessons, refers to the model virtuous

praxis-theory-praxis which considers the project, to all intents and purposes, as an agent that allows the production of theory which, in turn, will impact on new design actions.

In particular, the Milan 0-18 project allowed us to directly reflect on the identity system and on the role of the sign-brand as an active image capable of building consensus and participation, while broadening the gaze. This is a process started by the Municipality of Milan with the Wemi system (wemi.comune.milano.it) which constituted a first pilot project to provide services to citizens (Bucchetti, 2017).

The assumption of a design paradigm based on a form of open-design at the service of the community, in which the participants are active actors bringing their improving contributions, does not, in fact, only concern the tasks of design but, more broadly, the way of understanding every aspect of our social life, including and reinterpreting, in the design perspective, the axis of relational design (Lorenz, 2017). It is therefore a question of not giving up on getting closer to that condensation of *high quality of public affairs* which in the 1980s, in the field of public utility graphics, was believed to be a prerequisite of graphic artefacts, a quality which not only must involve the formal or compositional solution, the aesthetics of the figure, but which also must put the content of the representation at the centre, and which requires communication designers and public institutions (in an ideal perspective) to meet on the level of common political and cultural responsibilities .

Through the design process the communication designer becomes, as we said, the translator of a will and also an ally of those who express it. And it is precisely because of this role that it assumes a co-responsibility on an ethical level, every time – remaining within the Milan 0-18 project and moving from the metaphorical to the factual – that the brand which listens to the voice of young citizens and reacts to it as the dynamic identity system prescribes, will represent a public administration, an entity or a subject which in fact ignores or disregards the demands of citizens and thus proves to be a communication system aimed at mere appearance.

# References

Aime M. (2019), *Comunità*, Il Mulino, Bologna.

Anceschi G. (1981), *Progettazione visiva: convenzioni e procedimenti di rappresentazioni,* Edizioni Officina Immagine, Budrio.

Anceschi G. (1984), *Circostanze e istituzioni della grafica di pubblica utilità*, in Anceschi G., ed., *Prima Biennale della Grafica*, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milan.

Bartoli M. (2013), *è Bologna*, Available at http://www.matteobartoli.com/portfolio/e-bologna/. Accessed February 2023.

Baule G. (2012), "Interfacce di riconfigurazione. L'accesso comunicativo ai luoghi del sapere", in Quaggiotto M., *Cartografie del sapere*, FrancoAngeli, Milan.

Baule G. (2015), "C'è design e design. A proposito di design critico", in Bucchetti V., ed., *Design e dimensione di genere. Un campo ricerca e riflessione tra culture del progetto e culture di genere*, FrancoAngeli, Milan.

Baule G. and Caratti E., eds., (2016), *Design è traduzione. Il paradigma traduttivo per la cultura del progetto. 'Design e Traduzione': un manifesto,* FrancoAngeli, Milan.

Bollini L. and Branzaglia C., eds. (2003), *Etica e comunicazione*, AIAP Edizioni, Milan.

Brovelli S., Farrauto L. and Sfligiotti S., eds., (2012)*, "*Spazio comune"*, Progetto Grafico*, 22 (fall), Aiap Edizioni, Milan. Available at https://aiap.it/prodotto/progetto-grafico-22-edizione-digitale/. Accessed January 2024.

Bucchetti V., ed., (2017), *Un'interfaccia per il welfare. Le funzioni sociali del design della comunicazione*, FrancoAngeli, Milan.

Bucchetti V., Rossi M., Tolino U., Verrotti di Pianella B. and Visconti P., (2023), "Communication Design for Welfare, the Challenge of Preserving Human Interactions in Remote Participation. Rethinking and Redefining Collaborative Activities for a Virtual Environment"*,* in Zanella F., Bosoni G. *et al.,* eds., *Multidisciplinary Aspects of Design Objects, Processes, Experiences and Narratives*, Springer, 475-484.

Celaschi F. (2016), *Non industrial design. Contributi al discorso progettuale*, Luca Sossella, Vignate.

Chiappini C. and Cioffi A. (2006), "Identità cinetiche", *Progetto Grafico*, 9: 96-109.

Chiappini C. and Sfligiotti S. (2010), *Open projects: Des Identités Non Standard*, Pyramyd, Paris.

Ciuccarelli P. (2007), "La marca come sistema complesso e le ragioni del mataprogetto", *Sistema Design Italia Magazine*, 5. Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320083299_La_marca_come_sistema_complesso_e_le_ragioni_del_metaprogetto_-_Brand_as_a_complex_system_calls_for_a_metadesign_approach. Accessed December 2023.

Consalez L. (2017), "La costruzione di uno spazio ibrido: RAB-WeMi San Gottardo", *Territorio*, 83: 88-98. DOI:10.3280/TR2017-083013.

Felsing U. (2010), *Dynamic identities in cultural and public contexts*, Lars Müller Publishers, Baden.

Ferrara C. (2007), *La comunicazione dei beni culturali. Il progetto dell'identità visiva di musei, siti archeologici, luoghi della cultura*, Fausto Lupetti Editore, Bologna.

Galbiati M. and Piredda F. (2012), *Visioni urbane. Narrazioni per il design della città sostenibile*, FrancoAngeli, Milan.

Gouldner A. W. (1960), "The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement", *American Sociological Review* 25, 161-178. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/2092623.

Guida F. E. (2014), "Identità generative. Programmare la corporate identity", in Coletta C., Colombo S. *et al*., eds., *A matter of Design. Making Society through Science and Technology*, Proceedings of the 5th STS Italia Conference 2014, Milan, Italy. Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273440076_Identita_visive_generative_Programmare_la_corporate_identity. Accessed January 2024.

Lapetino T. (2011), *The Future is Fluid: Inside Dynamic Logos*. Available at http://www.hexanine.com/zeroside/the-future-is-fluid-inside-dynamic-logos/. Accessed March 2024.

Lorenz M. (2017), "Des identités visuelles statiques aux identités visuelles flexibles", *Graphisme en France 2017. Logos & identités visuelles*, Centre national des arts plastiques, Paris, 1: 27-55. Available at https://www.culture.gouv.fr/Espace-documentation/Documentation-scientifique-et-technique/Graphisme-en-France-2017-logos-identites-visuelles. Accessed February 2024.

Mancini P. (2002), "Perché comunicazione pubblica? Le ragioni sociali di uno sviluppo impetuoso", *Quaderni di sociologia*, 30: 5-15, Rosenberg & Sellier, Torino. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/qds.1232.

van Nes I. (2012), *Dynamic Identities. How to create a living brand*, BIS Publishers, Amsterdam.

Pignotti L. (1984), "Appunti per una grammatica e una identificazione della grafica di pubblica utilità", in Anceschi G. ed., *Prima Biennale della Grafica*, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milan.

Piscitelli D. (2019), *First Things First.Comunicare le emergenze. Il design per una contemporaneità fragile*, LIStLab, Trento.

Rosina A. and Sorgi S. (2016), *Il futuro che (non) c'è*, Università Bocconi Editore, Milan.

Resnick E., edited by (2019), *The Social Design Reader*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London.

Sagmeister S. (2007), *Casa da Musica Identity*. Available at http://www.sagmeisterwalsh.com/work/project/casa-da-musica-identity/. Accessed March 2024.

Shaughnessy A. (2008), *Wolff Olins' intuitive branding. Business Week*. Available at http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2008-02-06/wolff-olins-intuitive-brandingbusinessweek-business-news-stock-market-and-financial-advice. Accessed March 2024.

Sinni G. ed. (2019). *Design Civic Consciousness / ABC per la ricostruzione della coscienza civile,* Quodlibet, Macerata.

Sinni G., Ruggeri I. and Varini R. (2018). "L'identità autorevole. Il progetto d'identità visiva degli Istituti culturali di San Marino", *Md Journal*, 5, 152-163. Available at https://issuu.com/materialdesign/docs/mdj_10_pagine_singole_issu. Accessed January 2024.

Steiner A. (1973), "La grafica degli Enti Pubblici", *Linea grafica*, 1, 2, 3.

Zingale S. (2020), "Design o progettualità? Osservazioni critiche", *Ocula*, vol. 21: 51-72, ottobre. DOI: 10.12977/ocula2020-41.