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Participating

«New technologies are constantly appearing and disappearing, offering us unfiltered glimpses of life in parts of the world we will probably never visit, much less understand», argues Lesley Lokko in introducing “The laboratory of the future” for the 18th Venice Biennale’s 2023 International Architecture Exhibition, adding that seeing simultaneously near and far is also a form of “double consciousness”. The introductory reflection narrates an unresolved tension, which must push us to grasp with greater depth the complexity of the contemporary global and local, human, and non-human, especially in the context of a systemic cultural project such as Participation in an international exhibition.

We are under the illusion that we can always know more and better about the other – beings, places, or lives that are distant – thanks to glances and views provided by relational digital tools which, although certainly innovative, interactive, widespread, and available, are effectively too fast and ephemeral to fully understand.

Even the staging of the classic temporary national exhibition Pavilion under the banner of self-referentiality, uprooted from both the context of origin and the context of placement, encourages the visitor to ephemeral knowledge and passive fruition, often demonstrating that it cannot or does not know how to bridge distances, rather that it sometimes seeks to amplify them, from a dualist, colonialist, often arrogant, socially unsustainable perspective.

“How will we live together?” Hashim Sarkis, curator of the previous edition of 2020, proposed a discussion on complexity by inviting participants to actively rework the soul, meaning, and value of the five individual words of the title and the concepts, which these, at once, underline and make explicit.

The contribution illustrates experiences, methods, and approaches of design in situated research-action activities, in which the academic community operates in direct contact with the territories and notably explores the research project entitled “Laboratorio Nomade di Comunità”. Here Community Design applies approaches and methodologies that consider 5 main elements of the project, namely place, nature, people, values and time (Fig. 1), placing itself as a founding and propulsive part of “Ospite, Ospitante”, the National Participation of the Republic of San Marino in the 2023 International Architecture Exhibition at the Venice Biennale.

Pavilion, autopoietic listening organism

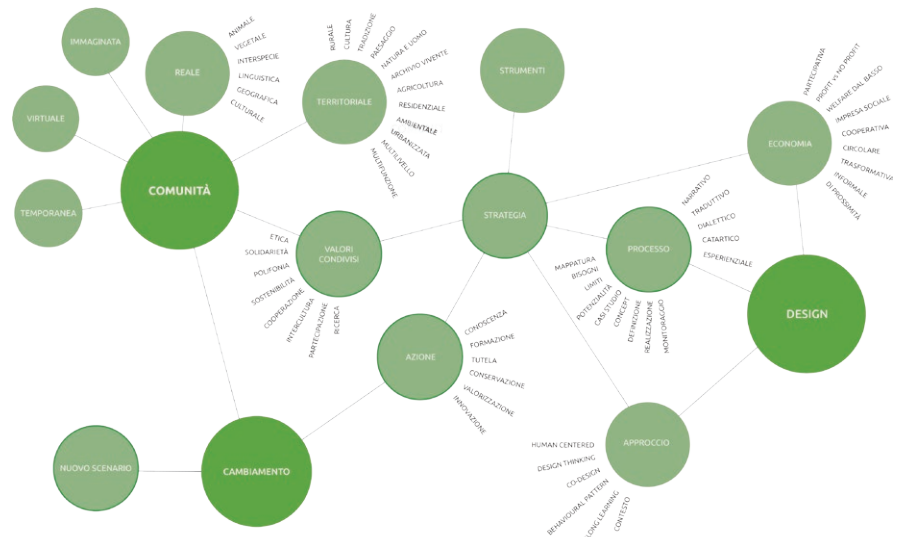
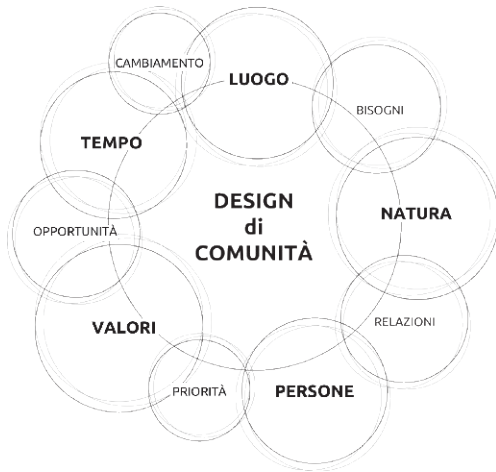
design becomes a tool for social innovation and sustainable development, fostering the self-determination of local communi-

ties. Even through the vital architecture of a Pavilion, we can offer alternative ways of living generously together. We must, however, be honest and acknowledge that to gain a deeper understanding of other regions of the world (Aime, 2015), it is necessary to concretely test diversity, enriching exhibition experiences with real experiences in our own places of life or elsewhere, not just by looking, but by interacting, by listening humbly and closely.

To the concept of a Pavilion understood as a given, closed, and concluded object, alien to the context, catapulted and indifferent to the place to which it emigrates, it is necessary to counterpose the idea of a Pavilion as an open and evolving organism, a cell that intertwines with others (Ingold, 2019), that roots itself and intentionally assimilates from the place, in order to reinterpret itself and evolve, in an inclusive process of the other, in search of a kind of autopoiesis, that is, «the property that all living systems have of self-organizing and continually redefining themselves according to the relationships that exist between the elements that compose them. A system is autopoietic if it generates resources, contents, and meanings from itself and develops autonomously» (Maturana and Varela, 2001).

The project analysed is developed over three years and uses Venice as its experimental location, namely a section of the Castello sestiere – “Sestiere” identifies a name of Venetian neighbourhoods –, that is delineated by Campo San Lorenzo. The San Marino Pavilion, set up in the “Fucina del Futuro”, stands as an antithesis to the traditional exhibition approach, in which the user is often a passive actor, transforming the exhibition spaces into an organic and dynamic machine of cultural and social activation. The aim is to constantly, consciously, and curiously involve citizens, children and the elderly, designers and researchers in participatory activities, meetings, confrontations, and workshops. The methodological approach integrates into a single and articulated ecosystem of intervention the study, confrontation, and design with the resident and transit population, the analysis related to value creation, the critique of project impacts on multiple levels, and the degree of involvement of the implicated communities. Not just a classic exhibition then, of solo architecture, but an experiential space of doubt, in which a slow and articulated process of studies, projects, and collective and participatory actions aims to intercept and enhance the encounter between beings from local and visiting communities. A micro threshold space between hosted institutions and host citizens, of not belonging to one or the other, a permeable place of listening in which contradictions can manifest and shape interspecies, multispecies, posthuman pollinations.

The paper highlights the role of design as a mediating agent between individuals and territory, strengthening the link between resident, temporary, and academic communities.



Fluid communities and indigenous projects

where the anthropocentric vision has reduced land to a mere resource to be exploited, leading us toward an eco-catastrophic condition (Magnaghi, 2010).

For several decades now, critiques of this model have been consolidated, proposing alternative, transformative, social, and solidarity-based, localised and self-sufficient economies. Territorial planning has also begun to move in this direction, considering the anthropic context from an evolutionary perspective in which city and natural landscape are considered an integrated and systemic organism that rests on local ecological, cultural, and social resources to foster processes of self-determination of communities in the management and development of their living space (Magnaghi, 2010). Around this dialogue, design becomes a tool for identifying, recognising, strengthening local identity, and promoting sustainable social innovation processes, activating, and facilitating networks of collaborations between local actors, and generating cultural, environmental, economic, and social value (Villari, 2012).

We find it useful in this context to take the small local community as the focus of design reasoning.

«The health of a territory, its resilience in the face of catastrophic events, its maintenance, and its very aesthetic quality require that there be a community that cares for it». Beginning in *Design When Everybody Designs*, and more recently in *Politiche del quotidiano*, Ezio Manzini clearly expounds the link between Community and place. He defines a series of factors, methodologies, registers, and guidelines. He also reminds us that there

is a silver lining in today's much disquieting existential condition, which Zygmunt Bauman has called liquid modernity, hyper-accelerated, fragmented, uncertain, and progressively more complex, in which values are more fluid, volatile and seemingly elusive.

Indeed, at the local level, we can consider ourselves much freer than in the past from barriers, stereotypes, and atavistic prejudices. Hence, we can take advantage of the opportunity to feel welcomed as part of a community with which to design our present and develop indigenous participatory projects of Inclusive Design and for social innovation, taking on the concept of community as a space of opportunity.

By incorporating local resources and specificities, the community-centred approach actively engages communities in project creation, fostering a system of cooperation and participation (Villari, 2012; Varini *et al.*, 2019). Organic communities can assist in addressing the ambiguity and individualism of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2014). They are always evolving due to historical, economic, and cultural dynamics.

Villari (2018) identifies three levels of “community engagement”, namely design “for, with, and driven” by the community. The first refers to structured design processes, intending to create value for a specific community by acting at a systemic level. In the second, co-design and co-creation processes involve the community in the path of territorial enhancement. In the third, design is not explicit but traceable to practices of social and political activism in which it is the community itself that adds value to the territory it inhabits. The expert designer assumes the role of facilitator, accompanying citizens in building resilient ecosystems and caring for local commons through participatory methodologies

and co-creation processes (Rizzo, 2009; Manzini, 2015). Design becomes an agent of environmental transformation while assuming an educational and formative role (Dalisi, 1978).

Activating and de-colonising

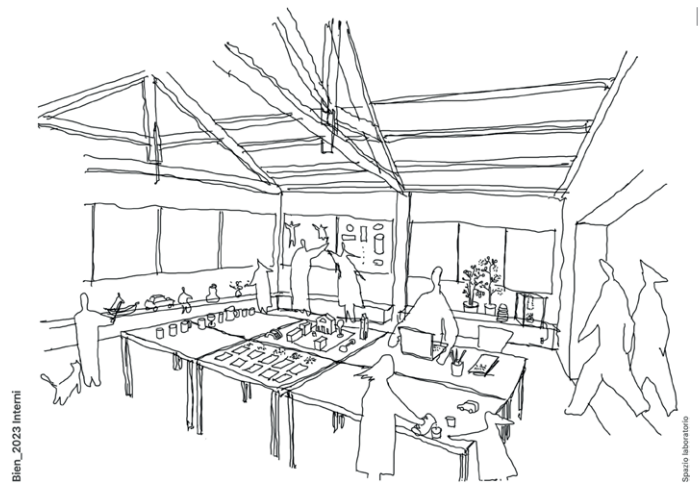
The participation of San Marino has enhanced the capacity of educating communities to interact with learning communities, promoting the renewal of the place's material and immaterial culture, and creating new opportunities for confrontation and the development of physical and virtual networks between different actors (Varini, 2023). This area is resisting the processes of gentrification and depopulation of the inhabiting local community, still preserving many authentic forms of local Venetian life. These include small neighbourhood businesses such as tailors, hardware stores, newsstands, stores, and neighbourhood bars, as well as neighbourhood services, including nursing homes, libraries, a convent, and some schools. In addition, the Campo is used as a venue for public demonstrations and collective events. Given the peculiarities of the Sestiere, the project intentionally proposed an unusual approach of listening, integration, discussion, participation, and imagination, in which the space was transformed into a space-connector thanks to the participatory actions of the resident hosting communities, passing communities, and academic host communities (Varini, 2023).

The theoretical and applied research project revitalised spaces and common areas for seven months through a very rich series of co-design activities (Fig. 2) such as meetings, seminars, workshops, roundtables, and exhibitions, led by national and international actors – with the inaugural participation of the New European Bauhuas. The approach was embedded in four themes defined by the Pavilion curatorship, namely Community, Religion, Food, and Multi-species. Given their theoretical-practical nature, the project activities, also classifiable as academic Third Mission activities, became instrumental to the role of the University as an activator of other territories. Therefore, an initial phase of analysing evaluation models related to the same was useful, subsequently opting for an interpretation of the project through a methodological approach related to theoretical domains of social design, co-design, systemic design, and community design in which the community component plays a decisive role. With respect to these considerations, for a qualitative monitoring evaluation of individual project activities, it was decided to use the Circular Value Flower (CVF) model applied in numerous action-research activities by scholars Leclercq & Smit (2023).

Circular Value Flower

The CVF model enables the definition of how, when, and to what extent communities can be considered virtuous ecosys-

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tems, playing a key role in the transition towards more sustainable frameworks typical of the circular economy, while promoting greater energy, social, and economic resilience. Specifically, it analyses the collaborative closure of resource cycles at the local level, highlighting value creation on multiple levels.

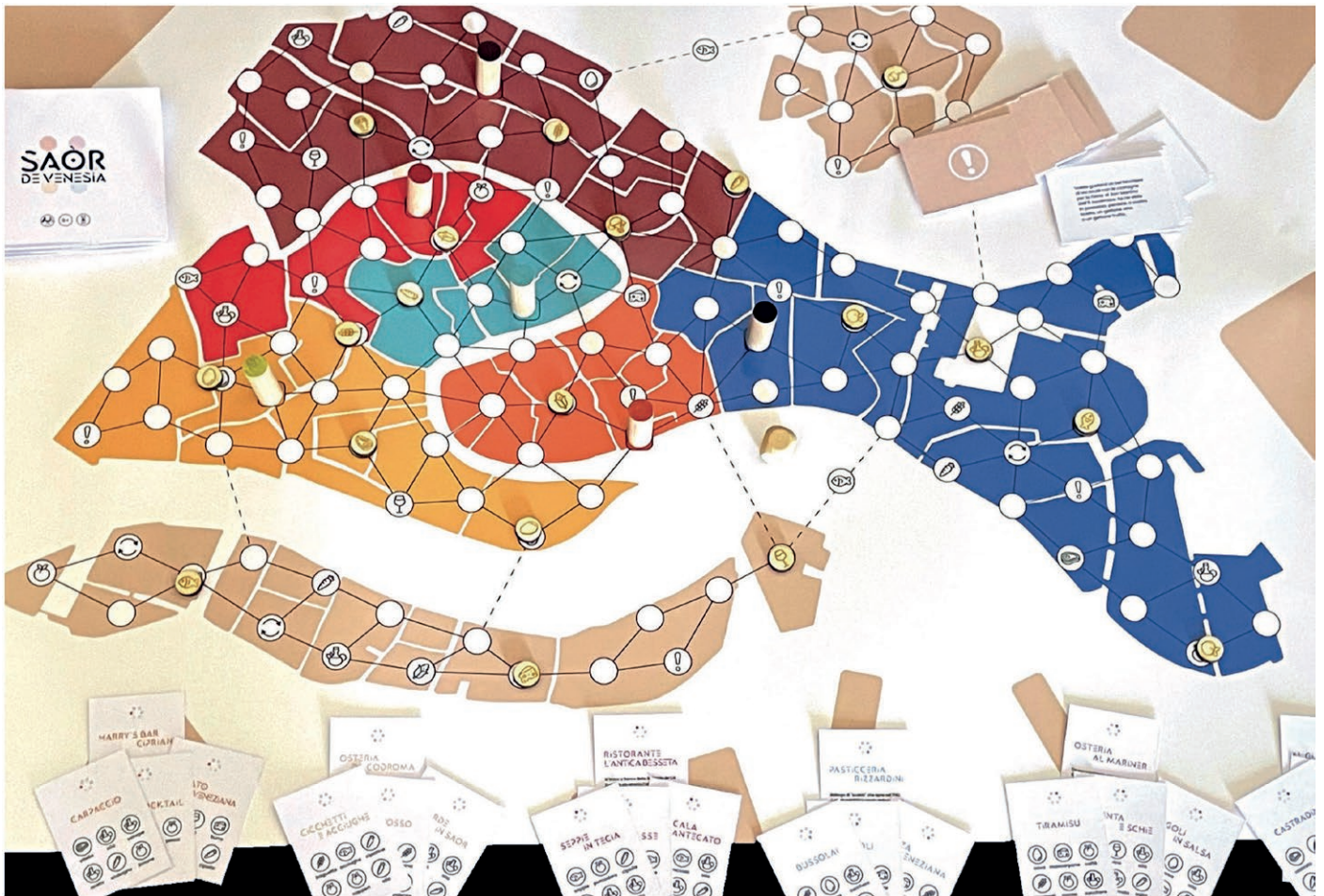
It is structured into five levels, with project initiators and their ambitions at the centre of the flower. The first level analyses the capital that can be activated within the community; the second examines resource cycles such as water, energy, and materials; the third identifies potential partners, including institutions, businesses, NGOs, and designers, while the fourth focuses on spatial interventions on buildings, infrastructure, and public spaces. The final level represents the values generated – social, economic, ecological, aesthetic, and cultural – offering a framework for analysing circular initiatives in neighbourhoods. The model is implemented through two diagrams. The first is a visual representation of the flower's five levels, while the second uses concentric circles to show the qualitative value of each level and the relationships between different elements. The case studies analysed through the CVF provide a visual representation of the impact that projects have on specific territories.

The impact analysis of the “Laboratorio Nomade” project was carried out in progress, initially through data collection of internal activities within the pavilion, later evaluating community engagement levels (Villari, 2018) and, finally, assessing the impact using the CVF.

The monitoring phase gathered textual, photographic, and video material, producing a database (Amatori, Guerra, & Varini, 2025) that highlighted an extraordinary sample of 36 different activities carried out over 7 months, classified using a multi-digit system that includes:

- a sequential number indicating the chronological order of activities;
- one or more uppercase letters such as C (Community), R (Religion), F (Food), M (Multispecies) to indicate the macro-themes identified in the Pavilion's curatorial process;
- one or more lowercase letters such as r (research), e (event), m (meeting), s (seminar), w (workshop), and x (exhibition) define the type of activity.

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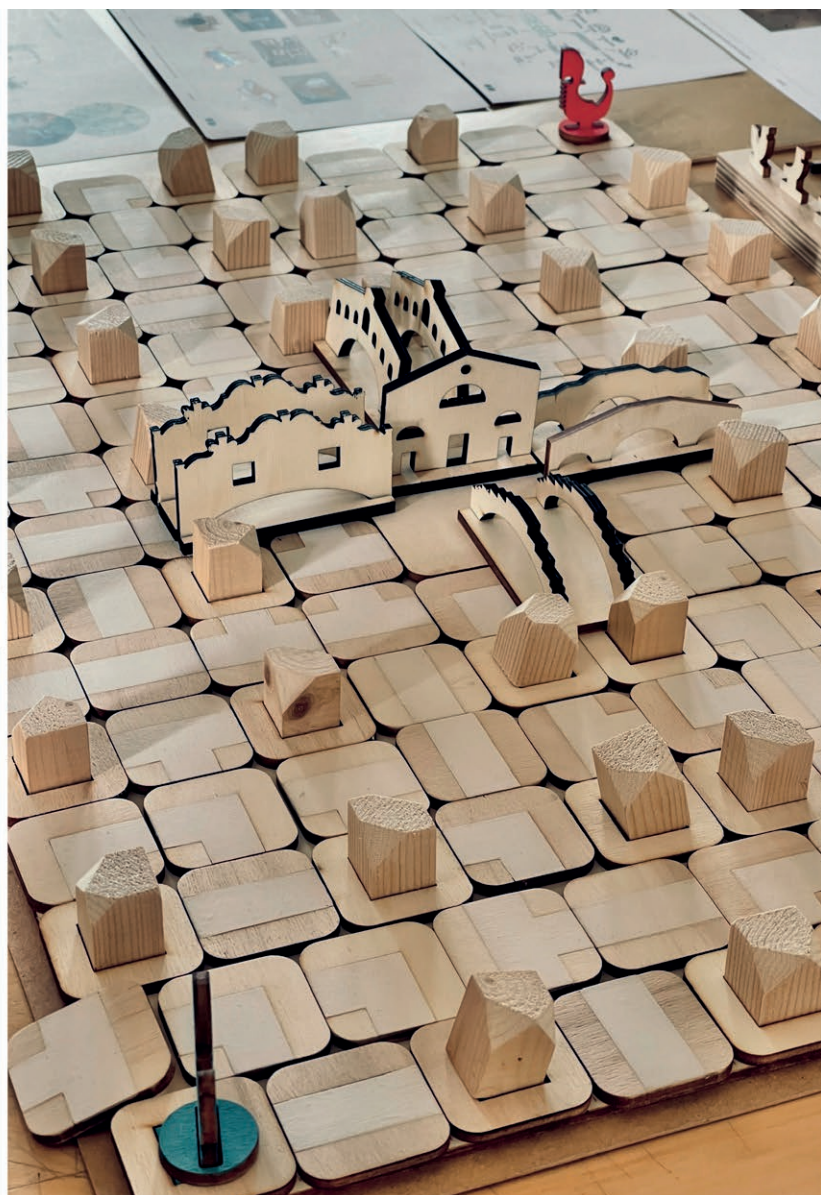
From the database, two activities were selected as samples for evaluation based on their typological, thematic, and temporal diversity:

1. Food, ritual, conviviality, experience (10.1-CFw). This workshop explored conviviality, nourishment, and hospitality rituals through an analysis of the Venetian context and local food practices. Participants experimented with new ways of interacting with public space through food. The collective culinary design, presented to the community, stimulated reflections on the use of public space.
2. Fuori Tutto! (24-Ce). The final event transformed the dismantling of the pavilion into a neighbourhood market, where furniture was put up for sale to encourage its reuse within the community. Through an auction or controlled-price offers, the project promoted circularity, reduced transportation costs, and strengthened the connection with the territory, turning the end into a moment of sharing and sustainability.

The CVF model was adapted to the San Marino community hosted in San Lorenzo and, thanks to the researchers Chiara Amatori and Anna Guerra, it was integrated with the categorisation proposed by Villari (2018), which effectively assessed local community engagement. The analysed case studies reveal that the community was actively involved in the activities, reaching a medium-high level of engagement, assuming the role of promoter and activator of initiatives, as seen in the case of “Fuori Tutto!”. Public space proved to be a key element in both activities, whose social value was highly representative.

Inhabiting threshold spaces

The application of the Circular Value Flower analysis model has enabled a qualitative and systematic measurement of the engagement level of both local and transient communities, showcasing how design can activate networks, enhance territorial resources, and generate significant social and cultural impacts.



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A crucial aspect that emerges is the need to develop tools for monitoring impacts over different time frames, to understand whether and how the effects of activities take root within communities and the territory. The issue of generated value and its measurement remains an open field of research, requiring a multidisciplinary dialogue between eco-design, sociology, economics, and urban studies.

The Biennale experience has also sparked critical reflection on the system of international exhibition events, which operate within a hierarchical rationale often detached from local

contexts, while also providing alternative opportunities for co-generation, creating spaces for integration and transformation. Thus, anthropological, and sociological contributions are becoming increasingly relevant to design knowledge, fostering horizontal approaches to the biographical, collective, and institutional dimensions of the relationship between the self, the other – whether a person or an object – and action, in a continuous and negotiated dialogue.

From this perhaps unconventional approach to design, we like to imagine that a new, authentic, and deeper sense of care

for people may emerge, acknowledging their specificity and uniqueness. This also includes special attention to those transitional spaces between cultures and different contexts, which communities ultimately represent – threshold spaces between public and private, nature and artificiality, city and architecture, centre, and periphery, urban and rural, South and North. As Burckhardt suggests, it is possible to reactivate both the client and the user– not in the sense that we now expect them to produce deterministic and fixed programmes, but rather that they too may contribute to defining only what is necessary, leaving space for those who will participate in the process in the future to express their views.

The context of Insula of San Lorenzo, within the vibrant Sestiere of Castello, appeared to be the ideal setting for hosting the San Marino National Participation at the 2024 Biennale, thanks to its distinct characteristics as an urban threshold space, a historical crossroads between the institutional core of Piazza San Marco and the artisan area of the Arsenale, between the distracted tourist and the proud, deeply rooted local community.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Chiara Amatori and Anna Guerra for their research and analysis.

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