

(IN)TANGIBLE HERITAGE(S)

A conference on design, culture and technology
- past, present and future

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(IN)TANGIBLE HERITAGE(S): Design,
culture and technology – past, present, and
future

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INTRODUCTION

(IN)TANGIBLE HERITAGE(S): Design, culture and technology – past, present, and future

The buildings, towns and cities we inhabit are physical entities created in the past, experienced in the present, and projected to inform the future. The same can be said of the artefacts we use daily: designed furniture in the home, the mobile devices in our hands, the vehicles we see on our streets. However, each of these places, buildings and products had, at their inception, social and cultural roles beyond their 'object' status. They continue to have them today. What we understand a designed object to be then, is a complex question of material and social import, and an intricate play of the tangible and intangible identities. Increasingly, it is also a question of hybrid experiences and overlaid histories. This conference addresses the range of issues connected to this scenario.

The complexity described above is even more pronounced in the case of digital artefacts and experiences such as computational design, VR simulations of ancient buildings, mobile apps, digital photography or virtual exhibitions. Intangible at the very moment of their inception, such designed artifacts not only blur the difference between the object and the experience, but, increasingly, the past and the present. Computer generated imagery creates 'life like' reconstructions of historic sites. Laser scanning gives archeologists glimpses of pasts erased long ago. Computational design gives designers instant recordings of their work in progress. Coupled with digital cataloguing, it gives us the instant asynchronous design archive.

Considered in this context it is not surprising that recently questions about the nature of heritage and design have opened up to redefinitions of the tangible and the intangible. In responding to this scenario the work of the authors collected in this publication present a diverse range of perspectives from various fields including art, architecture, design and cultural studies, to name but a few. They present reconsiderations of 'heritage' as both a tangible and an intangible concept and overlay our notions of the digital, on ideas of heritage and concepts of physicality and the present.

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PATRIM, ABOUT A RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

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INTRODUCTION¹

The paper presents a research and design experience – yet completed for what concerns the research activities - funded by Regione Liguria and developed since the beginning of the year 2021.² Two have been the requests and the research undertakings for which the Department Architecture and Design of the University of Genoa was called for: one - which will not be described and commented on in this essay - was to get a ‘governance model’, as it could be roughly named, operating through a “designerly” vision for the *Parco Naturale Regionale delle Alpi Liguri* whilst the other - object of this paper – was getting a complete and detailed proposal for physical landmarks, to be considered as the park “gates” or park entrances, for highlighting the access to the park from seven little different municipalities, on which territory the natural park insists.

It could be said that the request for conceiving and then realizing these material and tangible elements of intangible narratives has been - as for the ‘client’ – unquestionably open, indeed, as we did not have particular restraints nor binds, except for some limitations about the available budget. But, from the very beginning of the process of designing these landmarks, among us discussing how to handle the posed issue, we focused on two claims, in our perception both pivotal to be fulfilled: on one hand, our design should relate itself to the freshly new graphic signage structure and to the already existing graphics for the park as well as the informative panels (all of them already funded and mostly installed); on the other, we clearly had the perception that these landmarks would be if compared to the ‘average’ signages and informative panels, something else.

Our ‘doors’ should be easily recognizable in their appearance and meaning; should insert themselves properly in the environment; should – of course – communicate that the municipality belongs to the park territory even if the village itself is not residing ‘exactly within’ the park ambit; in addition, last but not least, our accesses should be ‘felt’ and remembered. Not an easy issue if looked at from this side of it.

Thus, we commenced operating through a conceptual structure, having in mind the focus of communicating, creating belonging and wish for reminiscing, and that all of this would come along and abide by the already existing visual artefacts, but somehow aiming to encompass a more “designerly” vision for our gates.

In Munari’s concept for the *sculture da viaggio*³ «if there would be [in a hotel room] an object, light and not bulky, to bring along with oneself, which had a purely aesthetic function, it could act as a link with our modern cultural aesthetic world». ⁴ Like Munari’s idea - even if much more prominent in terms of dimensions and much more ‘shared’ because of being public - our design expectation has always

been to offer a place where to focus on, without answering - that much – about the meaning and creating an aesthetic moment, a connection with a cultural moment instead.

THE PROJECT

One: a weird literature review

The research moment - literally intended – has been conceived not only as the usual journey through literature, but evidently, it was needed, the examination of examples that could be either an inspiration, roughly said, or a lesson learnt: what has worked in similar task's request and why? Where do the signages and the landmarks have been placed, in respect of what they wanted to highlight? How have they conveyed their messages?

Searching for an answer to all, and many more, questions what has in particular been considered as an exemplary case study was the new design of the doors for the *Parco del Delta del Po*, by Inandoutarchitettura (an Italian design firm, based in Ferrara), issued in 2018, awarded with the first prize within a design contest⁵ in 2019 and currently in action to be built⁶. Besides this, most of the park entrances have been considered – even if not finding them wholly appropriate for the request we have been called for – like the entrances of *Parco Nazionale del Gran Paradiso*, - *del Gran Sasso*, - *della Sila*. Somehow, we found interesting, as a good reference too, the south entrance of the *Riserva Naturale di Crava Morozzo*, but considered basically it was working that well – as being shaped in a very traditional door form – because of being placed in a flat territory.

Thus, made clear, as always, in the Design discipline, that we did not want to engross too much from the example we would examine, rather we could say we were searching for references: a kind of mighty weird physical literature of the existing – or shortly upcoming - park entrances, even considered that we already were aware that the program under which the research and its outcome were funded was evidently interesting other similar cases, either in terms of theoretical projects, either in terms of finalized ones to which our doors/gates could be compared and related.

We proceeded considering very far and distant examples - and well-known ones too – so far not only examining park entrances or visitors' centres but also city landmarks and landscape designs: in fact, as Gui Bonsiepe says in his essay about design research, «If it is true that designers can no longer design the way they did one or two generations ago, then it must also be acknowledged that researchers can no longer do research as they did one or two generation ago – i.e. orienting themselves primarily or exclusively by text».⁷

So, we 'travelled' from *Reddacliff Place Wayfinding* (Brisbane, Australia), to *Les Berges de Seine* (Paris, France), from *Fundy National Park* outdoor interpretive media (New Brunswick, Canada), to *Maen Llia* interpretation signage (Brecon Beacon, Great Britain), till the entrances to great American National Parks like Yellowstone. In all of these we found something that arouse a scholarly debate between us, getting some of the intangible values we wanted to express in a material form in our design; in fact, as stated by Donner et al. when commenting on territorial and local branding, “mere” details can be considered as valuable resources « [...] based on specific cultural and/or qualitative differentiation and exploiting unique territorial assets, as landscapes, local products, or people's traditions and know-how. Consequently, the brand identities are strongly rooted in the territories and their values, highlighting geographic origins and characteristics»⁸. Within the same work, part of the *Schwarzwald* system, in particular the “Echt Schwarzwald” is examined, which stimulated intensely our interest because of being like ‘our’ park diffused or better to say not gathered.

From the farthest to the nearest, for the biggest to the tiniest examples, rather than looking only for an aesthetical stimulus, the idea has always been understanding the methods generating the models, what these final simple landmarks were narrating and if – in the end - they were succeeding in their attempt.

Two: the reasons and the whys

Commonly design discipline is wrongly intended because what seems to be the threshold and the key point is the final outcome: the object, the artefact. We need, instead, to consider for this task - as well as for many others in the contemporary design discipline - all the processes and the natural possible changes, as even observed by Stefano Caprioli and Pietro Corraini.⁹ We have always been aware in all the research and design moments that the users, were the final point to be reached.

In this term, we had to care about two extremely different targets, and both would influence and determine the success or the failure of our research activity and effort. On one side we had the stakeholders, and together with them the mayors and the inhabitants of the villages, proud like only Ligurian people can be and harsh somehow. On the other - as for the specific task we were called for but, perhaps, even more for our inner desire - we had in mind travellers and visitors, equally in this case profoundly different one from the other: from the most active one, as a trekker of the *Alta Via dei Monti Liguri*¹⁰ to the visitor reaching the settlements by car only, maybe for a short time, interested in nature but somehow wishing to experience it from afar. It might seem weird, but we could observe all these different nuances within our team, so it was pretty easy to depict the scenario.

As expressed by Deyan Sudjic: «We need to move beyond designing for the way things are now and begin to design for how things could be, imaging alternative possibilities and different ways of being and giving tangible form to new values and priorities. In the field of design, users and consumers are usually characterized in narrow and stereotypical ways, resulting in a world of manufactured objects that reflect an impoverished view of what it means to be human. This project set out to develop a design approach that would lead to products that embodied an understanding of the consumer user as a complex existential being».¹¹

Thus, from the very early moments, we looked for identifying possible non-misleading, shared 'signs', presences of intangibles heritage and material culture, that could be read by visitors and felt as genuine by local inhabitants, among the seven villages. We contemplated food, craftsmanship, traditions, local lore. But, in the search for cultural common grounds, in the need to recognize - and then enhance - determined codification of visual recurring motifs, conveying either a sense of community and belonging for the residents together with a witness of the local traditions for visitors and travellers, we found the answer – literally - under our eyes. The park itself! Its unique non-gathered constitution - residing within the territory of the seven settlements of Cosio di Arroscia, Mendatica, Montegrosso Pian Latte, Pigna, Rezzo, Rocchetta Nervina, Triora, but not starting 'exactly' adjacent to the centre of the inhabited area; its distinctive articulation on three valleys – *Valle Arroscia*, *Valle Argentina* and *Val Nervia* – and the *Alta Via* connecting all the system. We decided then all these would be the elements encompassed in our design for the park 'doors' – now more properly thought of as landmarks. Through a material and visual codification, seven different landmarks will be narrating from a selected and specific viewpoint the belonging and the connections (ideal and territorial). Moreover, it is to acknowledge that 'working' with valleys has always been a practice among the Italian mountains, i.e. the Alps in the Trentino-Alto Adige region or in Valle d'Aosta, but operating with three valleys is kind of a new! A system, hence: three valleys, seven boroughs, one *Alta Via*. Now we lacked only of understanding where to place our concepts, for making them fit the environment and operating their aim.

Three: Where do (we) belong to?

Where to place our signages and landmarks has been probably the most challenging issue and thus even the one, we cared about with special sensitivity. According to our design – which is pictured in the following pages – we already left aside the distinct narrative about tangible heritage and material culture that the park management was correctly suggesting, sensing that this information about local lore,

natural and historical facts and presences were somehow better to be depicted within the illustrative panels.

Therefore, as previously described, instead of exploring for a differentiating value, we looked for a unifying one and – hence the territory, wildly appearing in its very particular constitution along with this particularity of the boroughs/municipalities being “part of” the park without “residing inside” the park itself was a stimulus instead of a constraint. But we were asked to design the door gates: how to determine the issue? Curiously, about non-coordinated image, Corraini and Caprioli say: «Delegating, sampling, misleading: by consciously acting on these elements, one places oneself between order and chaos. The freedom or rigidity of the instructions provided, the degree of subjectivity or automation chosen [...] can lead to formal results more or less similar to each other and more or less close to the expectations of the designer».¹²

Even if the park does not start exactly within the inhabited centres, nevertheless it ‘belongs’ to them, so we found it would not be misleading or unprincipled getting some freedom whilst positioning our ‘gates’. The boroughs declare themselves “as” belonging to the park and that is the enhancement, the enrichment we were looking for.

In the research work of Emilia Janeczko, Rafał Wojtan, Natalia Korcz, and Małgorzata Woźnicka we found a strong reference about the resonance of enhancing the outdoor experience through an appropriate visual and material communication, similarly to how it has been expanded and scholarly applied in museums and enclosed spaces like visitor’s centres. In particular, they express a key point when saying: «Graphic techniques make it possible to give a visual image to interpretative content in order to better illustrate the information».¹³

Again, Donner et al. clarify that «place branding is not considered in a narrow sense as merely the promotion or the marketing of a place, but [...] as the construction of territorial ideas, signs and practices and devising new ways for a local society to identify itself. This includes the valorisation of unique qualities of rural regions which can be tangible (natural, agro-climatic or cultural, patrimonial resources), intangible (skills, knowhow, traditional recipes, lifestyle) or temporal (historical, e.g. family tradition linked to generations) ».¹⁴

Every municipality thus could have its own landmark, to be associated with the already existing informative panels: several arrow-shaped signage, with the indication of natural and anthropic threshold would be hosted on a platform, depicting three green valleys connected/crossed by the red *Alta Via dei Monti Liguri*. As for its constitution, evidently, these landmarks need a view, but this somehow is not determinant. Somehow, once appreciated the first, the reasons, the inner and manifest significance of the project - even without a bond connection with the park sole or with the pointed view - works because being comparable to the others, as part of a system. As expressed by Davis when saying «Interpretive signs have been shown to be important tools in increasing visitor knowledge at natural areas»¹⁵ this was the aim we were aspiring to: non to mislead, therefore, but to create belonging, shaping value and territorial significance. “Something” to remember, for everyone.

CONCLUSION

In our research, overlooking a physical artefact to narrate and enrich a territory, roughly said we really experienced what Papanek says about the design process: «In actual practice, the design process can never follow a path quite as linear and sequential as is suggested».¹⁶ Due to the pandemic that intervened whilst the research was already assigned, but that made impossible our original scheme and method, and also due to a series of apparently unlucky circumstances we were forced to reschedule the design process in the order it is narrated within this paper. Because of forcibly being unable to visit the territory -which providentially we already knew because of having developed other researches in the same neighbourhood - exploring the ‘exact’ area of gates has been impossible for months as well as having

the chance to evaluate and verify our first attempts as research outcomes. After all, this unexpected pathway did not leave us discontent, indeed.

If Homer's grave can be indicated, on the Ios island, only by five simple thin steles, covered by inscriptions in five languages,¹⁷ thus our search for simplicity and effectiveness, bond and belonging, aesthetic value and freedom for a personal narrative is much more than understandable.

Through the discourses and the scholarly experience, the research team learnt that a landmark is not only made by its design – whenever proper and fascinating it could be – and, instead, that it lasts in people's minds only if felt, heartfelt. But, as said, this was almost already known since the early beginning. In our work, therefore, we sought the reasons that should allow each person, visitor or inhabitant, to build a personal relation with the 'object', whilst adherent to the original aim, meaning and narrative.

When looking back, after the intangible values of the *Parco Regionale delle Alpi Liguri* and its specific consistency, not thought of as a sum of its elements but as an entire whole, we observed at a certain point of the process we were already where we aimed to be. Through our project, inhabitants can look for their 'own' signage when being in another village for shopping or for visiting friend, and eventually visitors and travellers might have the feeling that all the valleys and the park is under their eyes. But more than everything else, the younger generation can develop attraction and affection to these territories through these landmarks, telling them that everything belongs to a very special area, with three valleys, seven settlements (easily overlooking each other but harder to be reached physically) and one ancient way, the *Alta Via dei Monti Liguri*. All of these elements embodied in a single 'object'!

Maybe we could point our interest on other territorial particularities and amenities, we could tell other stories and tales, but we decided the park and its very particular configuration, with these municipalities overlooking each other, always together but never connected, was the point and it was enough. «Cultural identity – John Heskett says - is not fixed, like a fly in amber, but is constantly evolving and mutating, and design is a primary element in stimulating the awareness of possibilities».¹⁸ accordingly, we tried our best to create a new value through tangible (and remarkable, we hope) 'objects' for the narrative of a very intangible heritage.

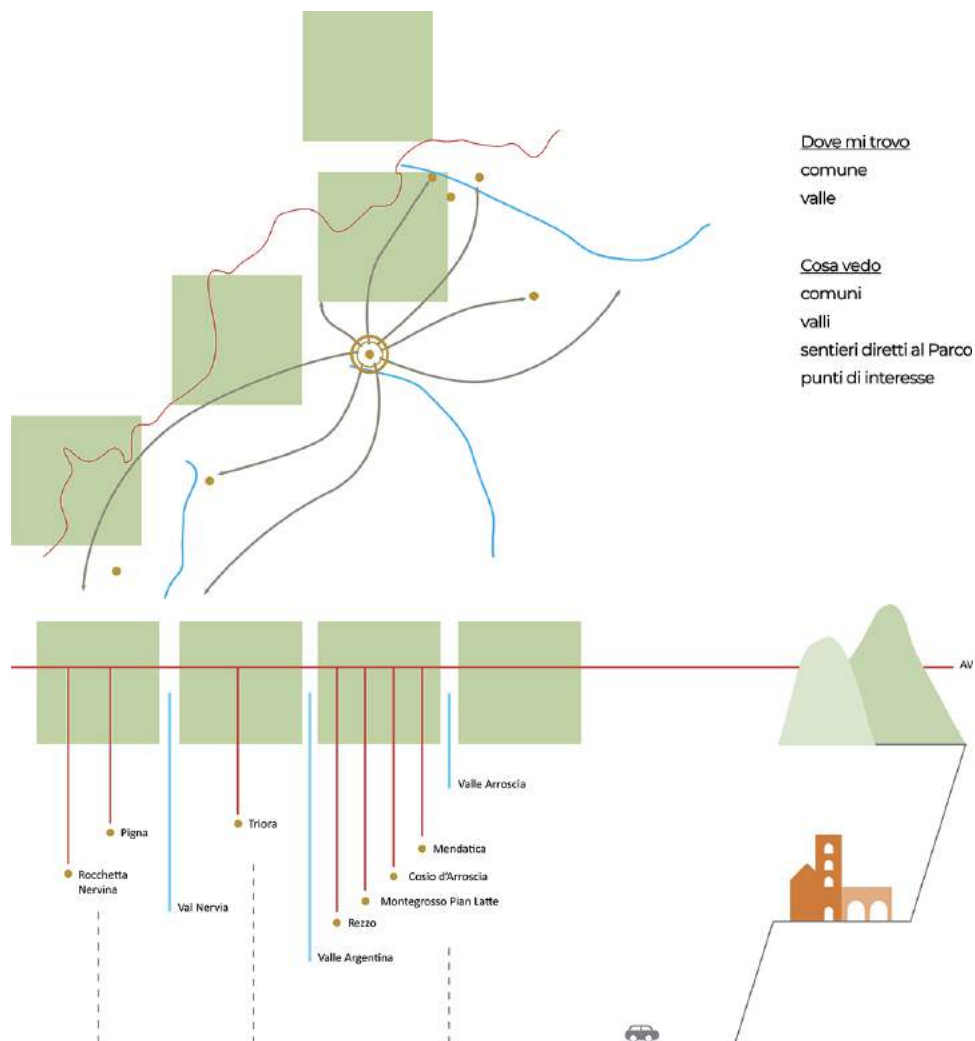


Figure 1-2. Scheme/abstraction for the concept



Figure 3. The panorama from one of the three valleys and the sight concept



Figure 4-5. Installation's drawing (sides and top view) and render imagined on site



Figure 6. Technical drawing of the installation, featured with material and constructions details, applied on the single element

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research group wishes to acknowledge and thank the *Parco Naturale Regionale delle Alpi Liguri* together with *Regione Liguria*, for funding the research activities.

NOTES

¹ All the research activities have been carried on by the whole team, here mentioned as authors; within the current paper - even if the whole experience has been reported - the "Introduction" has to be considered by M. Carola Morozzo della Rocca whilst the "Conclusion" has to be considered by M. Ivan Zignego; about "The Project" section/paragraph "One: a weird literature review" has to be attributed to Luisa Chimenz, section/paragraph "Two: the reasons and the whys" has to be attributed to Giulia Zappia and paragraph "Three: Where do (we) belong to" has to be attributed to Chiara Olivastrì.

² In particular, the team's research task was assigned by Regione Liguria, which joined the (PITER) ALPIMED in early 2018 and has thus started adopting all the necessary acts to finalize the project ALPIMED PATRIM in late 2018.

³ Literally translated as "journey sculptures"; Bruno Munari comments on and illustrates this project, which was truly realized in weathering steel and exhibited on the *Lungomare Caracciolo* in Naples. The ones presented for the hotel room, instead, should be contained pleated in an envelope, and opened once in the room «to maintain the bond with oneself cultural world». See Bruno Munari, *codice ovvio*, ed. Paolo Fossati (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 2008), 68-72.

⁴ Munari, 69.

⁵ The architectural contest was very close to the design we were asked for, unless for a profoundly different budget available and some constraints we did not have, like using wood for the landmarks. See "Progetto Realizzazione delle Porte del Delta - Land Mark", Parco Delta del Po Emilia-Romagna, accessed June 30, 2022. <http://www.parcodeltapo.it/it/pagina.php?id=57>

⁶ For further reference to the case study and the project please see. "Le Porte del Parco del Delta del Po", Inandoutarchitettura, accessed June 30, 2022. <https://www.inoutarchitettura.com/it/le-porte-del-parco/>

⁷ See Gui Bonsiepe, "The Uneasy Relationship between Design and Design Research", in *Design Research Now. Essays and Selected Projects*, ed. Ralf Michel (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2007) 37.

⁸ See Mechthild Donner et al., "Place branding, embeddedness and endogenous rural development: Four European cases." *Place branding and public diplomacy* 13.4 (2017): 284. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-016-0049-z>.

⁹ See Stefano Caprioli and Pietro Corraini, *Manuale di immagine non coordinate*, (Mantova: Corraini, 2005) 28-29.

¹⁰ The *Alta Via dei Monti Liguri* (AV, literally "High Route of the Ligurian Mountains") is a long-distance waymarked hiking trail in Liguria. The *Alta Via* ways are common through the Alps and the Italian mountains, i.e., the many ones present in the Dolomites; these hiking trails in some way originate and relate to the preservation and hiking activities of CAI, *Club Alpino Italiano* ("Italian Alp Club"). The Ligurian one connects the Ligurian Alp and the L. Apennines, almost running through the whole region, from west to east.

¹¹ See Deyan Sudjic, *B is for Bauhaus. An A-Z of the Modern World* (London: Penguin Books, 2014) 135.

¹² Freely translated from Caprioli and Corraini, *Manuale di immagine non coordinate*, 60.

¹³ Emilia Janeczko, Rafał Wojtan, Natalia Korcz, and Małgorzata Woźnicka, "Interpretative Signs as a Tool Supporting Informal Environmental Education on the Example of Warsaw's Urban Forests", *Forests* 12, no. 8: 1091 (2021): 2, <https://doi.org/10.3390/f12081091>.

¹⁴ Donner, "Place branding", 274.

¹⁵ Shawn K. Davis and Jessica L. Thompson, "Investigating the impact of interpretive signs at neighborhood natural areas.", *Journal of Interpretation Research* 16, no. 2 (November 2011): 56.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/109258721101600205>

¹⁶ Victor Papanek. *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 312.

¹⁷ See Christoph Ransmayr, *Atlante di un uomo irrequieto*, trans. Claudio Groff. (Milan: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli, 2022), 80-1.

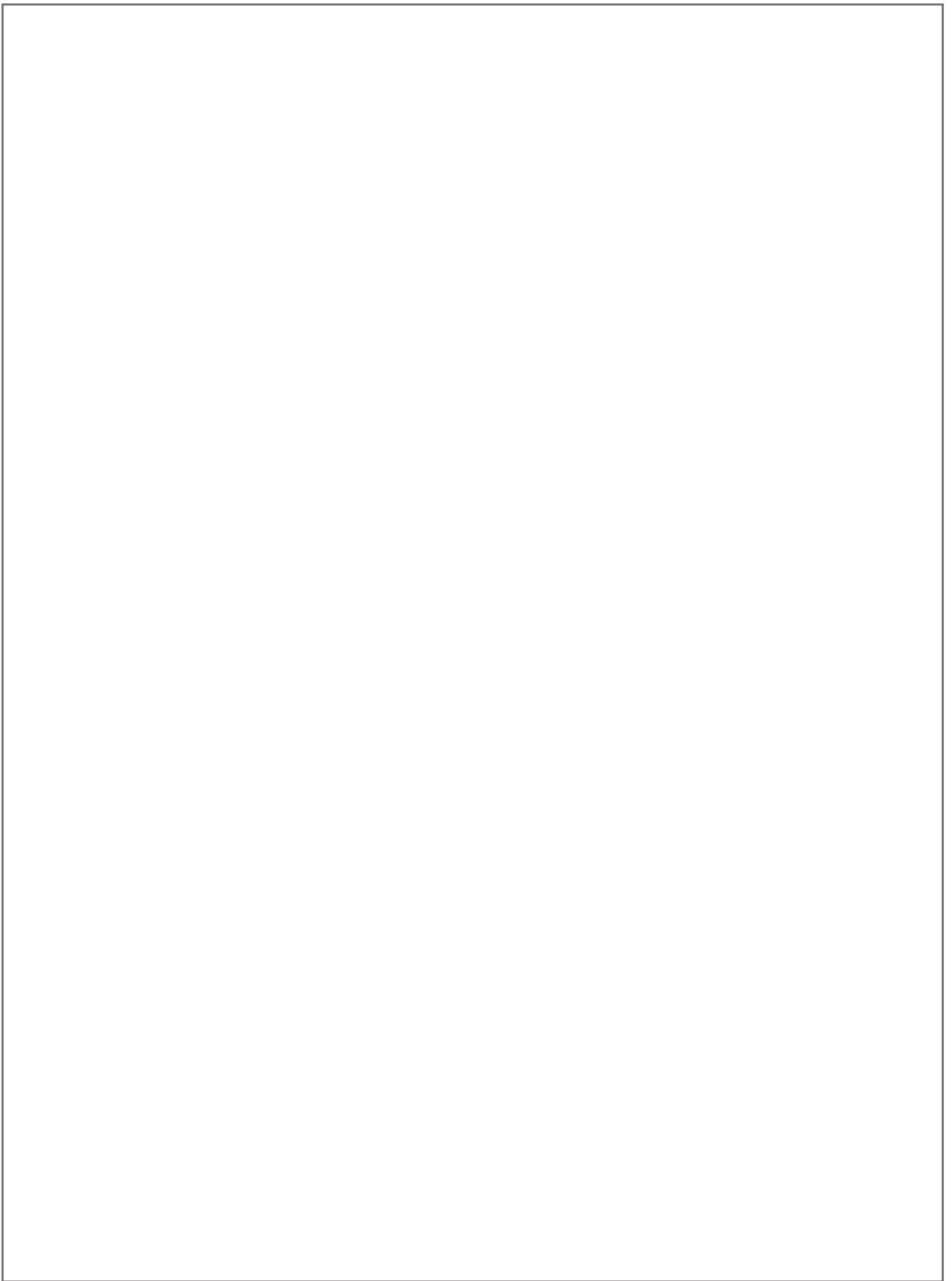
¹⁸ John Heskett, *Design. A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 90.

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