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REAGENTE. A label for social innovation

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Abstract: The paper presents Reagente, an initiative aimed to investigate the possibility of involving people in co-design processes to create a blueprint for a quality label. It is conceived as a system that recognizes values to bottom-up actions giving new meanings to vacant spaces. Reagente is a strategy to simplify policies, to embed reactivation in our cities and to enhance social innovation. Reagente aims to propose a tool conceived as a brand to test an inclusive and participatory process to define guidelines and labeling requirements for activists in order to communicate their actions and to spread shared values. The city is perceived as an experimental laboratory, where people cooperate to produce social, economic and environmental benefits taking care of urban voids. In this direction, the label certifies the initiatives of active citizens, regulates the activities carried out and becomes a tool risen from below rather than imposed from the top.

Keywords: quality label, vacant spaces, co-design, temporary uses, design for policy.

1. Framework

1.1 Background

Thinking about 'the next' means to see the actual changes in order to anticipate future ones.

Contemporary society is characterized by a new type of activism, not seen as a protest or political stance, but as an emergency reaction: citizens spontaneously organize themselves to give an immediate answer to their problems, starting from existing reality without waiting for top-down support and resources.

The reason for this attitude is not only the economical crisis. The background of this renewed citizens' activism is a broader concept of social innovation (Mulgan, 2006), that outlines a relational system of new forms of economy as a sharing economy, collaborative consumption (Botsman and Rogers, 2010) and new forms of welfare, known as second welfare, relational welfare, etc. (Cottam and Leadbeater, 2004; Ferrera and Maino, 2013; Boyle and Harris, 2004)

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This new social, economic, institutional and legal paradigm is going to characterize the 21st century as the “CO-century, the century of COmmons, COllaboration, COoperation, COmmunity, COmmunication, CO-design, CO-production, CO-management, COexistence, CO-living. For all these reasons it is urgent to design the rules and institutions of this new century.” (Iaione, 2015)

Referring to design field the questions are: how can design improve these tendencies finding new tools to build a new kind of governance? How can design not disperse the activists' creative energies? How can we improve bottom-up initiatives? What kind of strategies can support this transformation? What is the role of design in the development of these strategies?

In this way, design operates for social innovation, activating, sustaining, and orienting processes of social change toward sustainability. It is a blend of different components: original ideas and visions, practical design tools within a framework of a design approach (Manzini, 2015). Working on social innovation is not only solving problems, but setting the basis of a new civilization that simultaneously meets social needs and creates new social relationships or collaborations.

Nowadays we observe an exponential growth of empty spaces in our cities, triggered by the economic crisis and by the growth of relationships and activities transferred from physical spaces to digital ones. Current scenarios propose the city as an experimental laboratory where informal actions and temporary reuse practices become innovative instruments.

Thus *Next* means to focus on proximity, local context and the activation of people who live in the spaces of cities. It means designing not only with users, but engaging people as co-producers of services and goods, changing the focus from user centered design to citizen centered design (Selloni, 2015).

In doing so, the designer becomes part of the team or community attempting to undertake the challenge. Conventional professional advice is here replaced by a situation where the designer is ‘embedded’ in the community. This allows speaking about design and community coaching: using professional tools to make things happen and enable people to do it (Fuad-Luke, 2009; Fry 2011).

1.2 Introduction

There are situations where universities assume the role of active members of the community and facilitate the creation of new forms of partnerships in the general interest between government, industry and businesses, the non-profit sector, social innovators and citizens, and other institutions such as schools, academies, research and cultural centres.

In the sharing, peer to peer and collaborative age, there might be space for a new design of public institutions, capable of responding to the actual needs of citizens and of adapting better and more quickly to the social changes.

The analysis of emerging design practices based on sharing assets and bottom-up processes gives rise to social innovation attitudes experimenting forms of dialogue between citizens and policymakers. There is a need to elaborate a general governance strategy to substitute the current system of top-down regulation with one focused on urban horizontal planning, collaboration, and consultation with stakeholders.

The first step that recognizes and changes the relation between public administrations and active citizens in Italy is the Regulation for the Care and Regeneration of Urban Commons of the City of Bologna, conceived as a part of the *The City as a Commons* project that LabGov started in 2012. It consists of two years of field work and three urban commons governance labs. The Bologna regulation is a sort of handbook for civic and public collaboration, and also a new vision for

government. It reflects the strong belief that we need a cultural shift moving away from government, toward collaborative or polycentric governance. This calls for more public collaboration, nudge regulations, and citytelling. (LabGov, 2014)

This regulation, that deals with issues such as the increase of empty spaces in cities, is the occasion for activists to give a new meaning and value to the urban voids, experimenting different ephemeral practices to rethink their uses and identities. Unfortunately, the urban spaces and services of general interest undergo a deep crisis. This crisis is determined by two factors. The first one is the deficit and decline of the public or collective spaces, in the suburbs as well as in the central areas, in the moment of transformation in facilities as well as during the maintenance ones. To the contrary the second factor of crisis occurs when citizens gradually lose their interest and attention for the urban public spaces, perceiving them as nobody's or local public authority's places, rather than common areas.

The emergent and more collaborative aspects of design suggest that policy options could be increasingly co-designed through an interplay between policymakers at different levels of the governance system, interest and lobby groups, external experts and, not least, end-users such as citizens or business representatives.

What is then the role of public authorities within this model? Christian Iaione explains: "First to scout and enable active citizens and social innovators, and then to oversee the process and give technical support to citizens, the proper techniques to collaborate – and ensure they are collaborative, not competitive, processes. Secondly, they need to be working on finding solutions that re-define asymmetries" (2015). It is their role to treasure the civic imagination and liberate energies. Then public authorities oversee the process and resolve any conflict.

Design reverses the political vision in a smarter and more engaging way of tackling problems close at hand for citizens and can help to shape policy in practice.

The generation of new, innovative and transformative policies depends on the ability of policy makers to inquire into situations before they turn into problems. The way we frame problems influences the kind of solutions we are seeking to address them. Rather than accepting the problem-solving mode of policymaking, Martin Rein and Donald Schön (1977) propose to reflect on the problem as it appears, to state and re-state an issue. Through designing we can effect change: change in the way we think about a problem. Design can improve these tendencies working for policy as a resource for public services organizations. Institutions are increasingly engaging with design as a tool to reform the public sector.

2. Concept / quality label



Figure 1. First studies for a logo

The dissemination of re-cycle practices and temporary re-use, besides being an expression of social innovation and rediscovery of DIY, it demonstrates a perspective shift of design disciplines. Through bottom-up actions related to use artefacts or abandoned spaces for everyday life collective

purposes, rather than consumption, the interest focuses more on people than on things. In Italy this scenario is the background for a strong past influence and it is affecting the way we think about the future.

Temporary uses propose activation of vacant or underused land or buildings with no immediate development demand. It involves directly design disciplines, tools and methods, from service design to product design and communication design.

The main difficulty, emerging from our analysis and activities with the municipality, is the regularisation of spontaneous processes and DIY practices. Another weakness relates to the impact of the projects developed without public regulations. Municipalities have often no specific rules and instruments to legalise this kind of activities, so they tend to force spontaneous processes into official methods and procedures. At the same time creative activists and citizens' associations lack in management skills.

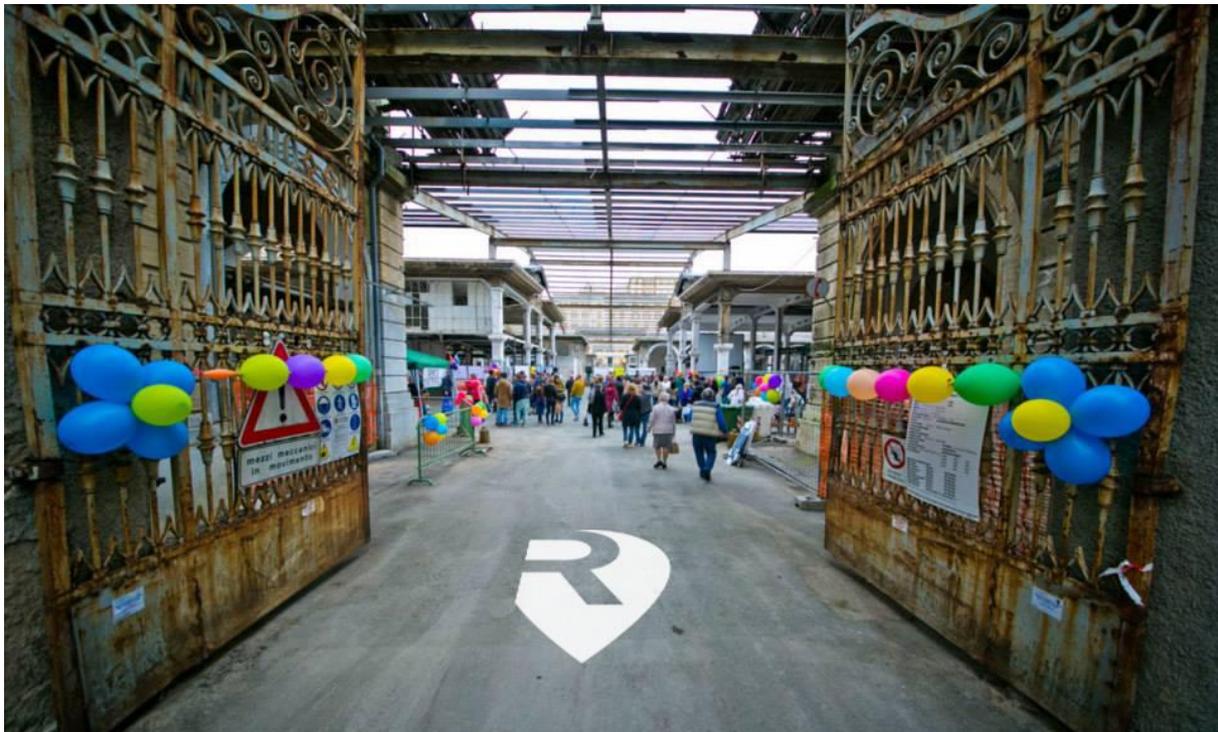


Figure 2. The quality label is used in recycled spaces as a mark of reliability, transparency, acknowledgement.

A general gap appears between needs and time frames: the standardized procedures and the bureaucracy of government clash with the urgency of the specific aims of the citizens.

A new kind of approach is necessary, therefore, in order to consider these actions not as specific practices but in their global context. We should not merely interpret such phenomenon as a new way of doing things, but we should adopt a broadened perspective to evaluate the benefits of what it is done, in order to maximize its effect on the public sphere.

The relationship between groups of activists and municipalities, as it emerges, follows four different attitudes:

- *the oppositional one.* It is a relationship devoid of confrontation and support in carrying out the activity, with precarious structures, nevertheless the challenge to create opportunities for socializing in abandoned places makes interest stronger.

- *the supplemental one*. It is a relationship offering a supplementary service to a deficient situation.
- *the contractual one*. It is a relationship based on standard procedures and institutional, as calls, existent rules, committees.
- *the equal one*. It is a relationship developed only in particular conditions, i.e. through the availability of a space for which solutions are designed with their respective requirements.

The initial idea is to focus on proximity and the everyday life of a creative community and support their activities through a set of methods and tools acquired from design research. In this way, the research and the Reagente project move from the university to the city, directly connecting it and its inhabitants, as a proposal to address these needs. A label can be a tool to disseminate good practices and a certification system at the same time, a way to manage the process. A label built as a brand may be a viral message. A Label is an acknowledgment and accordingly it may be an award, a plaque, a quality certification. It transmits in this way a meaning of reliability, confidence, openness, assuming a role of device for spreading a different approach for reuses of vacant spaces. At the same time it must take charge of aesthetics values.

The stories, the tales of experiences carried out, tell us of a possible world, they have emotional content, and they are able to arouse empathy and solidarity. The stories originate from words, from images and signs that become signifiers and produce meanings, through slogans, phrases, symbols. A major route of contamination is spreading the memetic virus.

2.1 Designing a label, a brand, a service.

“A reagent is a substance or compound added to a system to cause a chemical reaction, or added to see if a reaction occurs.” (IUPAC,1997)

The concept takes a look at how service design, activities and branding/labelling are connected to each other, and how a better relationship could improve people experiences. The project is conceived as a service, with material and intangible components. It needs to be represented through the passing of time, using service representation tools as a timeline or a storyboard. Furthermore, it works as a brand, acting as a meme, spreading from mind to mind, and able to catalyse collective changes (Fagnoni, R. 2014) The creation of a quality label can be a way for spreading values related to interventions, and for testing urban, environmental and process quality. The brand tells us a story on how we can face the present-future of our cities.

WHAT. The project proposes a trademark that can be assigned at those interventions regenerating, reusing abandoned or disused places. It is conceived for recognize a role to those citizens involved in, to facilitate processes and to simplify assignment procedures.

HOW. Starting from the sharing of common values the project proposes a simplified assignment procedure, evaluating the fulfilment of requirements and criteria, to obtain the label.

WHO. A network involving activists, associations, together with institutions, municipalities. It aims at taking care of public spaces, services, social activities, as catalyst for new opportunities.

“Cities are not just made out of buildings and streets, they are mainly built of actions, events and practices, sharing knowledge” (Fagnoni, R. Ricci, M. 2016) The social significance of events meets with representative and promotional needs. Festive occasions, outdoor performances, exhibitions, mass demonstrations, taking place in the city, provide an opportunity to establish collective relations, to sensationalize, to stage contrasts.

Events, temporary happenings, become expression of a community that is rebuilt in the same place simultaneously. They are collective expressions of a will and an intention.

Designing events in abandoned places or underutilized, it gives life to provisional spaces, temporary. However, they enter fully into the urban identity creation processes, aimed to innovate the product-system cities. They are a way to stage and test possible uses, to put back into circulation spaces and environments by using installations, products, signals, messages.

Design contributes in creating a brand/quality label to strengthen these different bottom-up initiatives, transforming them in public-interest services from an environmental and social point of view.



Figure 3. Having and sharing awareness of activists is one of the main objectives of Reagente.

The process for creating a brand implies many activities. It shall trigger with the definition of a system of values and criteria according to quality standards with the supervision of experts, studying its visual identity, organizing its communication and promotion. It is a complex process, that could though start a new cycle of activities and give birth to a new development logic, founded on collective and results-based rather than punishing-regulatory systems. This means also to design new forms of citizen participation within our cities. Design is assuming unprecedented roles, connecting design approaches with policy and politics.

3. Actions and procedures

“Process is more important than outcome. When the outcome drives the process we will only ever go to where we’ve already been. If process drives outcome we may not know where we’re going, but we will know we want to be there.” (Mau, 2012)

Reagente, as a quality label, needs to evolve as a tool and engage with all the stakeholders involved in the process. It is conceived as a design thinking process in participatory and systemic perspectives to transform a constellation of autonomous subjects in a community, where activists, associations and common citizens and their light reuse actions of abandoned areas can share common criteria.

Design thinking method has recently been adopted to tackle complex problems related to social innovation. This methodology, initially market oriented, has evolved beyond making objects and it is at the core of effective strategy development. "By working closely with the clients and consumers, design thinking allows high-impact solutions to bubble up from below rather than being imposed from the top." (Brown and Wyatt, 2010).

Starting from active citizens Reagente has become a process carried out through three events in summer 2016 with the collaboration of the Local Administration. It is addressed to active citizens, association and individuals with the aim of creating a label to be joined through a collective process, to develop connections, share specific values and, at the end, give visibility and spread reuse actions beyond the project.



Figure 4. Meetings of Reagente in different locations of the city.

As a tool to enhance recycling actions on territory, Reagente's process can be considered as a way to explore the identity and its resident communities: in this case the active citizens who are leading actions on abandoned heritage in the city. This identity can also be considered as a choice of project (Zurlo, 2003) and needs to be put in value through design actions. In this respect the three events involving citizens were organized in abandoned buildings of the city in different areas, as paradigm cases of on-going spontaneous bottom-up recycle actions. Reagente's process can be seen also as a

tool of enhancement of territories, transferring meaning towards a human dimension, an element able to connect and relate in the same system places, communities and practices addressing the same values.

To achieve this goal it was necessary to reach as many activists as possible and the events were placed in different places, a sort of travelling workshop and a stepwise strategy aiming to develop a co-design process to define initially the problem and then to implement solutions. Local media were involved in spreading information about the venues and the purposes of the action.

3.1 Reagente 16.06.2016

Empathize. The first step of the process is based upon the shared recognition of an identity within a community and towards the system it is referred to.

All the participants were asked to define their actions in two different ways: throughout a mapping related to actions and places and by presenting directly themselves following a defined framework.

In the first mapping they were asked to indicate where the actions were led and what kind of actions – whether legal or illegal, temporary or permanent. Filling out a form prepared on purpose for the meeting, participants could describe more precisely the type and the target of their actions and later on they were asked to describe opportunities, difficulties, tools and values related to the experiences they had. In this phase the aim was to combine information given by the participants in real time through an immediate visualisation of data collected. In the following definition phase, the data gathered in the empathize phase were implemented with direct presentation to glean insights and common points across many different users.

3.2 Reagente 08.07.2016

Ideate. Reagente as a quality label is a tool that needs to be developed from below and not imposed with the purpose of addressing to community needs and shared values.

The scope of the second Reagente is to share values with all the subjects involved in the project, in order to identify a common goal which is indispensable for the project success. The participants were asked to define criteria of the label as it was already an existing tool adopted by the local administration. The method adopted to discuss the label criteria was loosely based on the Open Space Technology, (Owen, 1993), extensively used for working effectively with large groups with different approaches. The criteria thus created are supposed to become the label guidelines, to be used for evaluating projects, initiatives and active groups who apply for quality certification.

3.3 Reagente 16.09.2016

Define. The values of Reagente towards a shared document.

The aim of the third meeting was to share achievements of the on-going activities and to co-create a sort of charter of values as a result of the process. Values such as social inclusion and participation, transparency, legality, public interest, urban commons, care for aesthetic elements, use of sustainable materials, respect for historical memory were discussed. The amount of the topics together with the lack of time available in each meeting have meant that the process is not yet completed and must be modified in line with existing resources.

Design's approach implies that the format of the events was specifically meant to deliver the result, but circumstances evolved the learning and forthcoming process and in this direction a closed group was settled with spontaneous applications to go on with the research to prototype and test the quality label.

An innovatory horizon encompasses everything from concept to launch, and Reagente has now to be developed as a label putting together available resources. From here onwards the process needs to find a dialogue with different experts in the field of regulations and technical arguments to really become a useful tool (quality label, award or open application to a platform), as well as to find resources to be developed and tested in a real context. In this respect design can give multiple answers in different ways. Design can enable people, communities, enterprises and organisations to kick off and manage innovation processes by co-designing and setting in place experiments of new services and solutions.

4. Results and objectives

The approach proposed in this paper focuses on the creation of a design framework for developing public and collaborative services. It is based on bottom-up process, involving local players and generating local solutions that could be shifted and scaled up. It includes co-design activities conducted in collaboration with non-professionals from the community and from the municipality. One of the results achieved during the development of the project described in this paper is the mapping of active citizens in the local context. The groups of participants have been mapped in relation to the actions they carried out with the idea to create a system where the single actions lose their specific meaning towards a more general rationale oriented to urban commons with points of strength and weakness.

The process came out as a powerful tool for gathering people from a constellation of autonomous subjects to a real community, where all subjects involved can identify themselves, participate and share the creation of common criteria. In this experience, borrowing once more terms from the chemical industry, university becomes a sort of catalyst, a substance that, without being consumed, is involved in a chemical reaction, accelerating it. The acceleration occurs when the connections are more fluid, and in these relationships the academic research group has been acting as a mediator in order to facilitate the communication of activists with institutions, aggregate them, interpret their needs and to put the whole system in a process that can give birth to a new kind of city, to produce active innovation.

The output of the first phase of the process was the sharing of common values, and to achieve it some of the participants have been involved in the Reagente's activities creating a closed working group to continue the project.

For the co-design activities the research team developed a set of detailed design elements, as tools for the user experience, design and visual identity. The project team has defined, furthermore, the criteria and the step of the process. The timeline of the process includes these following steps, that are not necessarily consequential, but each of them must be fulfilled:

- Procedures. Definition of the phases to gain the label for actions promoted by the associations
- Benefits. Faster process for the allocation of spaces, public recognition, funding possibilities, etc.
- Platform. Interactive web space, capable of mapping, to connect, to relate and to take a picture of the constant evolution of Reagente's network.
- Partners. Creation of an operative group with whom develop the process that has been carried out till now.
- Financing. Participation in European or national calls to fund the project.

- Identity. Definition of visual identity as a sign capable of identifying Reagente and communicate it.
- Criteria. Definition of principles in accordance with the charter of values shared in the process and other paths already undertaken by the administrations.
- Tool. Defining solutions to promote the project: quality label, award, network, platform, creative commons, crowd founding, etc.
- Advices. Legal and administrative advices to screen the compatibility of Reagente's system with the Regulation on Urban Commons, and quality brands strategies and expertise in similar processes.

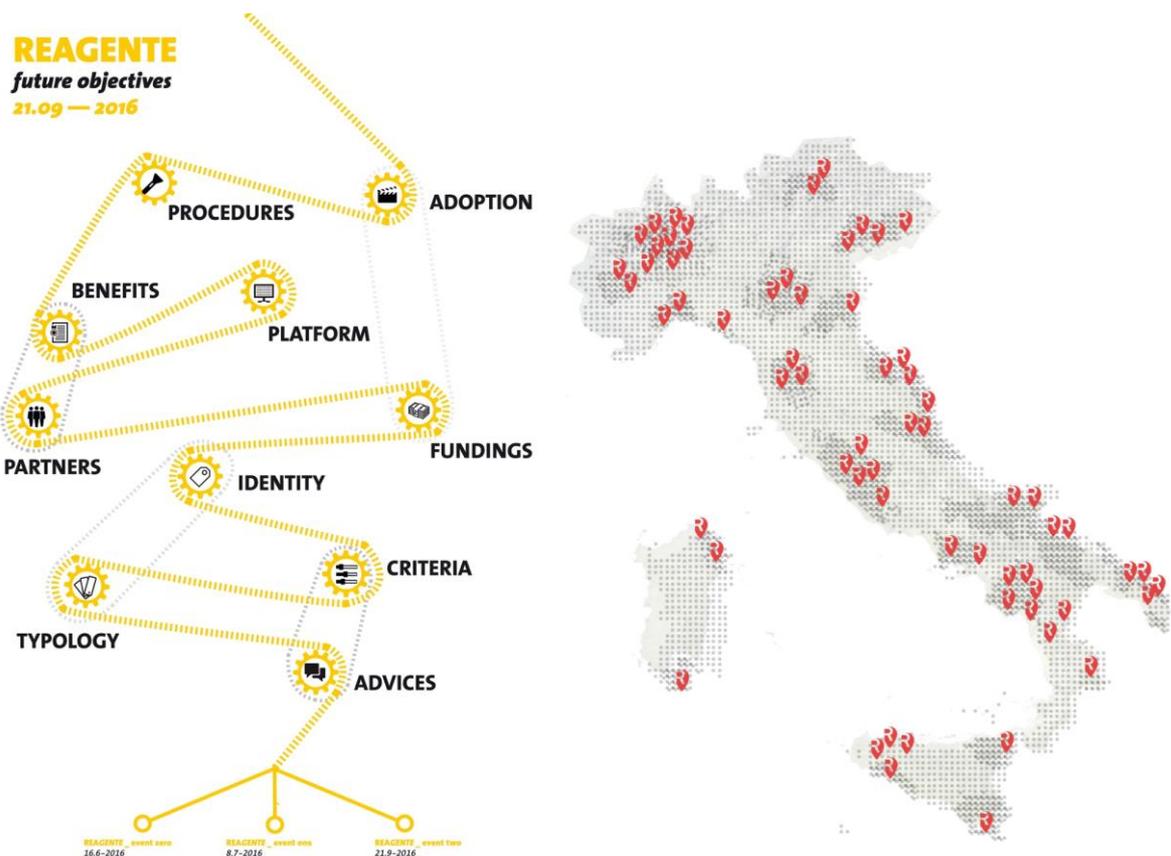


Figure 5. 6. Next steps, objectives and the possible spread in the national context

The challenge is to maintain the energy of bottom up phenomenon as a resource, but it has to be reinforced with a legitimization, a regulation to lift it up towards a social change and a good design quality improving urban environment.

To facilitate this process, the design community, in general, and design schools, in particular, can play a pivotal role. Design and new forms of social organization are activating new mechanisms of sharing knowledge and experiences. Social innovation is recombining existing resources and capabilities to create new functions and new meanings, often changing the way of looking at problems.

Coming back to design for next, the main issue is to realign activities, spaces, projects, regulations, policies at a human scale and upon real necessities, in order to rethink the city and calibrate tools to anticipate future scenarios.

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