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- Le sezioni 1 e 2 (da pag. 432 a pag. 433) sono state redatte da Emanuela Bonini Lessing.
- Le sezioni 3 e 4 (da pag. 433 a pag. 435): sono state redatte da Valentina Bonifacio.
- La conclusione (sezione 5): é stata redatta in comune.

Valentina Bonifacio

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Identity across boundaries: a study conducted by communication designers and social anthropologists

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In 2011 a multidisciplinary workshop was carried on in the Po river delta region in Italy. The following paper analyses the interaction between urban design, communication design and social anthropology in the workshop with a particular focus on the two latter disciplines. More specifically, it will show how the outcomes of the anthropological survey were successfully incorporated into the work of the designers.

1. Context: the 2008-2009-2010 and 2011 Iuav "Summer School on the Po river delta"

The objective of this paper is part of a field research conducted during the "Summer School on the Po river delta", that took place in Taglio di Po (Northeast Italy, Veneto region, Rovigo province) in September 2011. The Summer School- lead by Iuav University of Venice, Italy- is an intensive study program (IP Erasmus) financed by the European Commission's DG Education and Culture. Since 2008, the workshop consists of a two weeks residential field research, whose participants are students and scholars coming from selected European universities. The purpose of the workshop is to create 'scenarios' for the regional development of the Po river delta.

Defined as a weak territory, the delta is today facing problems like the shrinking of its population, the uncertainty of its economy and the effects of environmental phenomena/disturbances intensified by climate change. Despite this vulnerability, the area offers promising conditions for the development of a series of activities. In this context, the manifold strategies are usually common answers to specific questions that sometimes lead to the development of conflicts amongst the inhabitants. Conversely, constructing scenarios that reveal small and large transformations, and exploring their material consequences, is a way of reducing the uncertainty about the future. Moreover, it helps local society to take informed decisions around potential opportunities (Tosi 2012).

The program's cross-disciplinary approach consists in multifaceted observations carried on by working groups composed of landscape architects, urban designers, communication designers, anthropologists and geographers.

2. The collaboration between designers and other disciplines and its development

When the first workshop started, in 2008, the graphic designers team began by selecting the tools (this term is used in a wide sense: theory and critics, methodology, case studies) at their disposal in order to enhance a multidisciplinary work whose main goal was that of building 'scenarios'. Service design and design for scenarios were two of the three disciplinary branches involved in the methodological framework, because of the ability of design methodology and tools in interpreting needs and data in order to formulate and visualize solutions that are not yet available (Carroll 1995, Manzini & Jégou 2006). The third selected disciplinary branch was information design, especially when considering that "information can empowers people to attain goals" if the shaping of the contents "satisfies the information needs of the intended recipients" (IIDD in references). In particular, information design was understood as an accurate instrument of research action more than as a pure formal output. Rather than as a vertical procedure, the design process has been conceptualized as a circular communication action of listening to, showing analysis, encouraging public discussions.

To enhance the multidisciplinary approach, the designers have collaborated with a different discipline in each of the realized workshops: in 2008 with visual artists; in 2009 with urban planners; in 2010 with other designers and in 2011 with anthropologists. This one-to-one work with other disciplines led to the necessity of defining a variety of "site-specific" tools in order to face a multiplicity of specific tasks. In particular, one of the main results of the work conducted by the designers+designers group was the realization that the Po delta territory seems to be configured like a system of closed socio-economic groups that do not interact one another. Given these premises the new questions became: "Can this area effectively be represented by a single visual identity, how should it be, and what should it communicate? Do local residents prefer to increase tourism, grow their industrial sector, or something else entirely different?" (Bonini Lessing & Mevis 2011: 71).

The uncertainty that was detected in the 2010 workshop led to the necessity of exploring more intensively some local dynamics. In particular, the way power was distributed amongst the different socio-economic groups - or at least its perception among the resi-

dent people - was not that clear yet. The still partially ambiguous relationships amongst local stakeholders could have had negative effects in what concerned the outcomes elaborated by the whole team. For this reason, it was decided that anthropology should be involved within the last workshop edition in 2011.

3. Collaboration between communication design and social anthropology

Despite their seldom collaboration, the disciplines of communication design and social anthropology seem to have an immediately evident point in common: they are both concerned with 'identity' in the sense of how people describe themselves and their being in the world. From a methodological point of view, they both start by entering in relationship with local people and talking to them in order to reconstruct their perception of themselves and of the place they inhabit. In fact, they are both part of a bottom-up approach that represents a valuable instrument in many interdisciplinary studies. Nevertheless, while in the case of communication design this is usually the first phase of a much longer process, the anthropological discipline puts the majority of the emphasis precisely in this first phase of the study. Much of the anthropological training consists in fact in learning how to interact with the other without imposing one's own categories of interpretation.

Both disciplines consider that people are often unconscious about the reasons for their behaviour and about their deepest interpretative categories. And this is why the anthropologists consider that a long period of participant observation is generally preferred to making direct interviews. This methodological stance, for instance, is one of the main difficulties when conducting any kind of multidisciplinary study. The difficulty is represented by the extended period of time that the anthropologist should spend in the fieldwork, and that is linked to the necessity of gaining insight into the 'native' point of view through a deep involvement with the subjects of the study. On the other hand, if the researchers can spend on site only a limited period of time, they have to adapt to the study conditions without losing the 'spirit' of the discipline. In some cases it means to bypass the purely observational phase and to carry on interviews with a varied range of local actors trying not to impose the researcher's own way of 'reading' the area and its own interpretative categories. For example, in order to understand if the local power plant was perceived as a problem by the interviewed, the team avoided to ask directly "what do you think about the power plant?" In fact, this would have implicitly forced the interviewed to think about it as an issue. For this reason, it was decided to engage in a dialogue with people through an open approach, such as asking them to tell us about their life stories and daily activities. This modality of interaction is quite frequent in urban anthropology (Signorelli 2003). Because of this extreme openness in the structure of the dialogue, it is only while conducting the interviews that specific categories – such as the variety of social groups that are present on the territory – emerge.

In a similar way, one of the aims of the designers' investigating phase is that of pointing out those elements that play a significant role and a symbolic function in the local community. As emerged from the fieldwork, for example, bars appear to be one of the only places where the different social groups possibly interact one another. Highlighting what values and items unite or separate people has been the starting point. The following step consisted in the elaboration of visual tools – diagrams and concepts - that could facilitate the urban designers teams in completing their scenarios.

From a theoretical point of view, another difference between the disciplines of communication design and social anthropology concerns the research phase when the perceptions of the inhabitants are analyzed and re-elaborated. While the anthropologist places a special attention on keeping the contents of the interviews (the emic data) well separated from other types of data (i.e. the etic ones), the communication designer can incorporate other 'objective' sources of information - historical archives, economic data, etc.- in the analytical process without keeping them separated from the formers. The communication designer aims at collecting information and data originating from different sources because this should allow the stakeholders to weight up the most suitable actions following the analytical process. While anthropologists aim at giving a correct portrait of the situation, communication designers are pursuing a project, which is to say: they elaborate tools that could be useful for modifying current assets. This is why designers should be guided by an ethical approach. The role of the designer should be that of saving information and making a visual synthesis accessible and comprehensible to the stakeholders.

In an interdisciplinary effort, the anthropologists decided to translate the content of the interviews in a visual form in order to emphasize certain issues and facilitate transmission. This effort responded to a specific need of building a "bridge" between the different disciplines. Talking about his own experience as anthropologist collaborating with a team of designers, Van Veggel states that "One could say that we just needed to develop a common language – a language in which I wrote my findings, and which the interaction designers could read in terms of functionality" (Van Veggel: 9). And it was precisely because of this need to find/create a common language between the different disciplines involved in the research that the contents of the interviews were immediately translated into diagrams in collaboration with a graphic designer. In fact, although the use of visual tools in anthropology has increased over the last decade (Banks 2001; Pink 2006), it has sporadically been done in specific relation to urban design.

On the other hand, this process of graphic translation is a fundamental step towards the elaboration of a common language between anthropology and communication design, and especially towards the elaboration of a language that should be functional to the needs of the designers. The question immediately posed

by the anthropologist has been: “what – out of all these data – could be useful for a communication and urban designer?”. As the following diagrams illustrate, the complexity that naturally arose from the interviews has been drastically reduced and ‘distilled’. Despite this concern with efficacy and utility, though, special attention has been placed on ‘distilling’ the content of the interviews without losing the point of view of our respondents. In this sense, it is important to underline that we tried to represent ‘perceptions’ and not ‘facts’, even when we decided to represent collective perceptions instead of personal ones. The only allowed generalization has been the condensation of singular perceptions into a collective one. This was a necessary step towards the incorporation of the results of the anthropological study into communication design and - in a further step - into urban design scenarios. The scenarios themselves have been designed for the whole collectivity that inhabits the territory, rather than for only a limited number of them or from the perspective of one peculiar social group.

4. 4. Case-study analysis

The “communication design” team and the “social anthropology” one have started working in parallel since the first day of the workshop. The “social anthropology” team was composed by a group of four students, three of which were urban designers and one was an interactive designer. Guided by an anthropologist/supervisor, who also trained them on how to realize the interviews, the students conducted a number of interviews amongst local inhabitants and they synthesized the results in a number of diagrams (two of them are presented in the next page). In particular, the interviews were realized with the following people: two fishermen, an old farmer, a municipal councillor for cultural issues (‘assessore alla cultura’), the president of the fishing consortium, a librarian, and two students. The outcomes of this preliminary anthropological research were exposed to the “graphic design” team, and the interactive design student who participated in the research began collaborating with the team immediately after, acting as a kind of “bridge” between the two groups.

As previously anticipated, the first step has been to identify - from an emic perspective - institutions and groups that are present in the territory, and to understand how local people perceive them in terms of access to decisional power on local issues (Diagram A). Instead of focusing on the perspective of a single institution or actor, we decided to condense the content of the different interviews into a ‘shared perception’. This generalization was facilitated by the fact that all the interviewed subjects have shown a similar perception on these issues. On the other hand, this strictly emic perspective has generated some anomalies. Indeed, an important local institution, the ‘consorzio di bonifica’ (reclamation consortium) is strangely absent from the scheme. The reason for this omission is that the institution was never mentioned during the interviews. This anomaly could be attributed to the relatively small number of interviews.

The second diagram [Diagram B] that we present in his paper aims at highlighting the main ‘idioms’ – we could call them ‘emic concepts’ – that emerged from the interviews. These idioms were chosen both because they were frequently mentioned in the interviews – they were central categories used by the people in order to make sense of their world - and because they conveyed a particularly thick and unusual [to a non-local point of view] network of connotations.

These two diagrams are shown in interaction with two of the graphics produced by the communication designers team (Diagram A1 and Diagram B1).

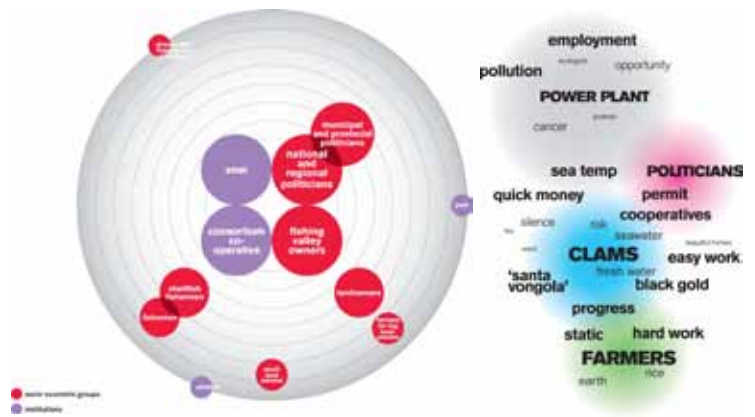


Figure 1. Diagram A: Perception of power distribution. Diagram B: Idioms.

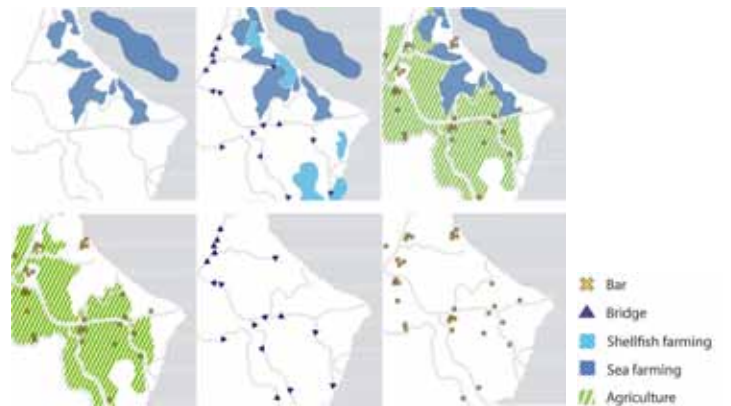


Figure 3. Diagram A1: A day in the Delta

The A1 diagram represents a further “translation” of the anthropological survey aimed at ‘spatializing’ and ‘temporalizing’ the information expressed in diagram A. Each section of the diagram represents the ongoing activities that are taking place in the whole Po Delta area in different moments of the day. One of the outcomes of this diagram is to show how two of the main socio-economic groups – the farmers and the fishermen – do not interact neither physically nor temporally.

The Figure 4: “Diagram” B1 is a symbolic translation of some of the idioms expressed in Diagram B. It represents an ideal ‘kit’ of



Figure 4. "Diagram" B1. Basic elements of the territory

material and affective elements of the territory (fresh water, sea-water, earth, rice pant, rice and air) that local people should be able to bring with them in case they had to move to other parts of the Po Delta region. This kit was thought in relationship to some of the urban planners' scenarios that implied an internal displacement on the part of the farmers' socio-economic group.

It might be useful to remark that the anthropology team did not further intervene in this last phase of programming.

5. Conclusions

From a methodological point of view, we consider that a full engagement of communication and urban designers in the preliminary anthropological phase has proved to be very fruitful because the researchers have literally embodied a peculiar attitude – one which is particularly attentive to the stakeholders' point of view – in their further analysis. This is a strength of this method if we think that this process should allow local stakeholders to take decisions about their future by comparing different figures in a simpler way.

As a result of the 2011 workshop it was easy to appreciate how anthropology and visual design complement each other: if the first one can offer a precious contribution in the preliminary phase of the study, the second one possesses the necessary tools in order to actively intervene in the place. They can both benefit one from the other also by finding out and experimenting the most convenient forms of visual representation, in order to return the collected data in a comprehensible but scrupulous way.

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