

New Terms to Define the Field of Design

Critical Analysis, and a Qualitative and Quantitative Survey in the Veneto Region

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a research project undertaken by a team of researchers at the Università Iuav di Venezia, which began in January 2021 and ended in January 2023. The project investigated the present-day reality of design studios in the Veneto region, to understand the transformations that have occurred in the ways of thinking and acting tied to the modification of the areas of intervention and the design skills that are expected from the designers.

The profession and relationships with companies and clients on the one hand have changed from familiar and historically-practiced approaches, reflecting transformations in the position and role of the designer, and on the other have undergone a significant expansion in the possibilities of intervention.

The final goal of this study is to offer a reflection on the directions in which the profession is moving, with the aim of informing professionals and design businesses, as well as the educational institutions which are forming the next generations of designers.

Keywords

Designer
New value
Profession

Within the study of the ongoing transformations in the culture and practice of the profession of designer, a theoretical research study has been conducted, both literary and in the field, by examining the evolution of the areas of intervention in which designers work in order to bring forth new knowledge, attitudes and tools necessary for a proper practice. In the current context, relevant skills have expanded considerably to include the ability to conduct research, work together in multidisciplinary teams, and understand the socio-cultural context in which the project is set.

Design professions encompass so many different fields that one sometimes wonders whether the traditional product-communication-interior classification is sufficient and still valid to frame the proficiency of a designer, or rather if “the physiognomy of design as a result of the encounter and complex interaction of various guiding principles” (Findeli, 1995, p. 62) is not pushing towards a redefinition of more transversal fields of intervention. Or whether, on the other hand — here only provocatively — an increasingly specific, vertical and punctual (re)definition of terms and practices is required.

This paper presents the results of a research project undertaken by a team of researchers at the Università Iuav di Venezia, which began in January 2021 and ended in January 2023¹. The project investigated the present-day reality of design studios in the Veneto region, to understand the transformations that have occurred in the ways of thinking and acting tied to the modification of the areas of intervention and the design skills that are expected from the designers.

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Design Professions in the Italian Design System

Since the beginning of the 20th century in Italy, with significant differences among different territorial and regional contexts, we have witnessed the development of an overall design model and overall system with unique and peculiar features, which will be addressed only briefly in this paper, mindful of a partial historical-critical and operational investigation and aware of local features and identities, beginning with those of the Veneto region (Calabrese, 1998, 2001; Paris, 2005; Morteo & Sette, 2011; De Fusco, 2014).

Arising clearly during the interwar period, the design system established itself with the economic boom and was quantitatively consolidated in the following decades up to the historic transition of internationalisation in the 1980s, weathering controversial confrontations with financial capitalism, Neoliberalism, the ideology of techno-sciences, and the recurring and then permanent crisis of

The research project was financed by the Venice Foundation and conducted by Lucilla Calogero and Alberto Bassi from the Università Iuav di Venezia and involved PhD students, university teaching assistants (Michele De Chirico, Francesca Spolverini) and students from the Master's degree course in Design. The students contributed to the work by interviewing and dialoguing with design studios, which also provided an experience of direct contact with the working world. The full research report is to be published soon.

the Third Millennium. In Italy, the design system is the outcome of a unique dialogue between design culture and business culture, of production paradigms that are predominantly socially-based, as are fundamentally the districts and post-districts, the historical matrix of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), still largely peculiar to the Italian model (Becattini, 2000; Colli, 2002).

These enterprises are fuelled by the complex and articulated system of skills and know-how generated by the either explicit or tacit transmission of knowledge, the vocation of product-oriented companies based on incremental innovation and flexible specialisation, which makes a small batch production feasible, with a large amount of specialised labour and a strong orientation towards the client through tailored projects and production.

An approach linked to the management tools typical of the so called 'lean production', congenial to districts and SMEs: considerable decision-making autonomy at the lower levels, ties between companies in the construction of the global value chain, flexibility in design, intense relationships between research, production, and commercial aspects in the development and prototyping phases, effective integration between organisation and logistics, which has remained unchanged despite the advent of robotics and numerical control in manufacturing.

Italy has been highly relevant with regard to the relationship between design, business, society and culture. Contextual, collective, and cultural factors — both material and immaterial, of coded and uncoded language, tangible and intangible assets — are constitutive of design Made in Italy, and account for the implicit (less frequently, explicit and self-reflexive) ways in which the synthesis of design is expressed, the correlation between forms of time and intellectual elaboration (Bassi, 2022a).

In the hybrid age marked by the technological-digital revolution and its ever-closer intermingling with human thinking-acting (Khanna & Khanna, 2013), within an economy of the symbolic based on the need to construct values beyond form-function-performance, and based on the potential of a knowledge-based economy, designers (and companies) find themselves facing the need for new skills, knowledge and know-how (and of an Italian 'making' in the unavoidable international context) in order to search for updated meanings and forms of design (sense-making), a cultural, theoretical, and operational relocation of the sense-value that may be ascribed to design, offering the opportunity to free it from the ideological burdens of authorship or commercial arrogance, from a self-referentiality that leads to irrelevance (Napoleoni, 2008; Magatti, 2009; Cooper Ramo, 2009; Byung-Chul, 2015; Fisher, 2018; Bassi, 2022b).

Within these contexts and conditions — in which, as we said, an accurate analysis of local specificities, in particular those of the Veneto region, has not yet been fully developed — investigating the current and future transformations of the profession of designer becomes fundamental.

Design has always historically assumed the role of an agent of change capable of interpreting major social, political, economic, scientific, technological, cultural, and ecological shifts to guarantee that they have beneficial effects on people's well-being.

As stated by Huppatz, “designers plan actions and generate outcomes that aim to improve the human experience” (2019, p. 2). There is an urgent need today for the “agent of change” power that is channeled by design, and indeed the discussion with about one hundred Italian design studios initially resulted in an image that sees “design everywhere and in every direction” (Bassi, 2017): “design has gone viral. The word design is everywhere. It pops up in every situation. It knows no limits” (Colomina & Wigley, 2016).

At the same time, since the end of the 20th century, as access to employment has increased, the culture of the profession has moved towards a hyper-specialisation that has verticalised and fragmented design directions (Press & Cooper, 2016). In contrast to, and as a result of this spread of ‘meta’ and ‘supra’ professions, the profession of designer has been experiencing a shift towards the development of transversal skills. In this sense, the traditional categories that identify product, communication and interior designers — and on which most of the available degree programmes in higher learning institutions are still based (Meyer & Norman, 2020) — seem to show limitations in terms of framing the effective operation in the field and the specific skills that designers are expected to possess. Over time, several scholars have contributed to a broad, inclusive and interdisciplinary definition of design. For example, Norman Potter defined the profession in his book *What is a Designer* (1989), through three fields of action: “Messages, Things and Places” (Potter, 1989). In 2001, Richard Buchanan systematised his reflections around identifying four orders of design: “graphic, industrial, interaction, environment” (Buchanan, 2001), thus broadening the traditional scheme by recognising the autonomy of the interaction sphere. A further contribution was made by Krippendorff (2006), who argues that design has the task of giving meaning to objects and social practices, supporting a changing society. With respect to the profession, and in the process leading design towards the realisation of increasingly intangible products — “the trajectory of artificiality” — such as services, interfaces, systems, the fields of intervention are identified as “products, goods, services & identities, interfaces, discourses” (Krippendorff, 2006, p. 6).

With his *Design in Tech Report*, John Maeda annually produces a critical analysis of the design field by assessing its trends, professional changes, and areas of intervention, in particular the relationship with developments in technology. In 2016, he started to sharply juxtapose the classical design disciplines, such as product design, communication design and interior design, and those in which design is called upon to relate with technology in a narrow sense, which he calls “design in tech disciplines” (Maeda, 2016). Finally, in 2020 the *Design Economy Report* produced by the Symbola Foundation started classifying design into six different areas of specialisation: product, space, communication, fashion, digital, service and strategic. “Among these areas, Product and Space can be

defined as the historical fields of design. Communication has been developing relatively recently, and is rapidly expanding, whereas Service & Strategic are new" (Fondazione Symbola, 2020).

Design: The Key Concepts

The research and working hypothesis was the observation of the field of investigation through an alternative classification to the traditional categorisation of product-communication-interior, and would allow for a certain degree of transversality of skills. With his book *Design: the Key Concepts*, Huppatz (2019) takes his place within the debate, aiming to identify and define design, breaking it down into six fields of action: Information: in which, relying on the world's strong integration with data and complex information systems, the designers work on their creation of meaning, forms and different ways of communicating and transforming them into knowledge; Things: this concerns the field of product design, from the initial drawing to prototyping, to the optimisation of production processes, and is a field of intervention that interacts with several sectors; Interaction: an area, relating to the ways in which people interact with each other and with their surroundings, including through technology, which has also changed over time in relation to the spread of the digital; Strategies: concerning the design feasibility of value strategies for integrated systems, composed of the interaction of actors involved in the production, delivery and use of services and products; Systems & Services: related to the organisation and structuring of resources, communication and material artefacts tied to a service, to improve its experience in terms of quality and interaction; Experiences: on the user experience of products and spaces which make up everyday life. Huppatz's interpretation was the key that directed the reflection and research conducted in the field with professional design studios in the Veneto area.

Design and New Professions in the Veneto Region

The research has developed a field survey, by means of a qualitative-quantitative investigation, of the contemporary operating conditions of professional firms, particularly in the Veneto region. The choice of this geographical location in particular not only relates to objective operational conditions tied to the location of the Università Iuav di Venezia, but it also makes it possible to read the articulation of the broad scope of operations. Indeed, this is an economic-entrepreneurial and socio-cultural context that on the one hand presents primordial situations in which the need to bring in dedicated figures, whether internal or external, first comes into consideration in relation to the company's small size and limited number of employees, or when the company's position within the supply chain first begins to change from producer of components-semi finished products-services, to maker of finished products, which must also be placed within the processes of distribution and communication. On the other hand, there are identifiable historically and broadly structured realities, which must address the transformations brought on by the

new technological, digital and environmental conditions, as well as the changes in markets and patterns of behaviour and consumption, in relation to new value systems. The research was based on three main questions: What does it mean today to work in the field of design? What are the areas of intervention? What skills are required?

The Research Method

There were two main phases in the research: theoretical exploration, which defined a lens of observation tied to the literature regarding the areas in which designers currently work; and the field survey conducted starting with the elaboration of a questionnaire, the mapping and involvement of a research sample made up of design studios active in the Veneto region, followed by the collection of data, its cleanup, analysis, systematisation and interpretation, and finally the publication of the results in the form of a report shared with the studios that took part in the research.

With regard to the field survey, two different methodologies were adopted. The first was a quantitative analysis, used to collect data from the interviewed studios in a homogenous and comparable way, while the second was a qualitative analysis, the aim of which was to explore the best practices and levels of awareness of proficiencies, as well as of the roles that designers are required to possess and know how to recognise.

(Calogero & Bassi, 2022)

Preliminary Mapping

The preliminary mapping for selecting the design studios to interview required the definition of some parameters of analysis and the creation of a system of references to provide the tools necessary to read the information and direct the research.

Initially, it was decided to use the mapping of the creative industries on the territory, produced within the scope of the DIVA (Development of Innovation Eco-Systems and Value Chains: Supporting Cross-Border Innovation through Creative Industries) research project, which immediately highlighted the “difficulty in defining and delimiting the boundaries of the ‘cultural and creative sector’, given the complexity, fluidity and heterogeneity of cultural production and consumption processes” (Faraone, 2022). In this sense, the categorisation provided by the ATECO classification, which does not univocally define and isolate design studios, but includes architecture studios and other only partially related activities, represents an insurmountable limit for the identification, among creative industries, of design studios alone.

It was therefore decided to proceed with a mapping of the studios based on a network of relations and interlocutors in various capacities, already involved in teaching and research activities with the Design area of the Università Iuav di Venezia.

Field Survey

This was followed by a qualitative assessment of the collected sample, based on the degree of field experience, expertise, and up-to-date design orientation, as inferred from the critical knowledge developed in the university environment as well as from the studios' websites, and the subsequent survey. The importance of the dialogue with the different studios active in the area proved to be a useful tool both for understanding the orientation of those working in contact with the market, and in orienting and increasing the awareness of the role that students are training to play.

The sample involved a total of 53 studios covering the provinces of Vicenza, Verona, Padua, Treviso, Rovigo and Venice.

The analysis of the literature and the definition of the state of the art led to the formulation of a questionnaire with nine questions, divided into three sections: 1. Organisation of the studio: aimed at investigating the organisation of the studios, the skills offered on the market and the types of fields of intervention; 2. Designer profiles: aimed at acquiring data on education and skills; 3. New skills: aimed at testing how aware and up-to-date the studios are regarding new fields of intervention.

First Analysis

The first section (Organisation of the studio) showed how the studios did not univocally recognise their vocation, adhering to the traditional product-communication-interior classification, but stated that they operate in one or more of the traditional categories: 40% indicated several areas, while 60% stated that they only operate in one single area. When observed through the lens proposed by Huppertz (Information, Things, Interaction, Systems&Services, Experiences, Strategies), the studios respond with diverse and varied images, even where there is a clear adherence to a traditional category (product, communication, internal).

Furthermore, they all equally address all six of Huppertz's fields. Such evidence points towards a horizontal idea of studio, not necessarily specialised and focused on a single field, but open across several.

The second section (Designer profiles) collected the profiles of 81 designers working in the studios. The overall picture of the skills they possess showed that, although they hold positions and roles that adhere to traditional categories, what they actually do in practice leads them to develop other skills that are useful to embody the role for which they were involved. The 81 profiles include: 11 architects, 3 art directors, 5 loosely defined designers, 28 product designers, 19 communication designers, 9 interior designers, 1 strategic designer, 2 3D modellers, 1 project manager.

Those surveyed were asked to assign a score from 1 to 5 to the degree to which they possessed specific individual skills. In terms of methodological competencies, among those suggested (literature review, case study analysis, interviews, design thinking, storytelling, co-design, LCA, use of workshops and Fab labs), the most widely known and utilised were case study analysis and the

application of design thinking, followed by co-design. Regarding the values designers strive for, an average score of 4.7 was given to 'passion', which is realised among other things through self-learning, alongside formal education.

The predisposition to 'growth' constitutes another value with an average score of 4.6, followed by, lastly, the tendency towards 'curiosity' (with a score of 4.5), whereby the designer embraces multi-disciplinarity in order to develop the attention and flexibility needed to deal with contemporary conditions. With regard to the possession of soft and hard skills, an average of 4.3 stated that they had "an aptitude for research and critical thinking skills", 4.2 "communication and project presentation skills"; 4.1 "problem solving skills".

The third section (New skills) showed more frequent collaborations between different specialisations, to guarantee the project an interdisciplinary dimension. The results highlight that the external professionals with which studios work most frequently are: photographers, engineers, and developers. Data also shows relations with social media managers, while only in one instance was activity with press offices reported. In a few units, collaborations emerge with philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists, demonstrating an openness not only towards technical relations but also to profiles with backgrounds in the humanities.

New Identities of the Profession at the Time of Expanded Design

The work returned an overall picture of the skills possessed by the designers working for the studios participating in the survey. Three general considerations strongly emerge from the research. There is a fragmentation in the definition of the roles and competencies, by reason of the extension of the intervention of design in very broad fields.

A second consideration concerns the organisational model of the studios: rather than fitting into a single field of intervention between product-communication-interior, there is a tendency towards transversality, with each of Huppertz's suggested fields being equally considered. This implies a preference for a horizontal type of organisational model for the different fields it operates in.

Another peculiarity regards the configuration of skills that the firms are able to deploy, due in part to their frequent external collaborations. This conveys the idea of a networked studio structure in which both technical and humanistic knowledge and skills come together.

With respect to what has emerged overall, it is possible to draw some initial considerations of interest to the field of education. First of all, the need appears relevant for a broad, humanistic and interdisciplinary education capable of directing, managing and shaping the artifactual synthesis of the shared aggregate processes advanced by design. Secondly, the transformations currently underway — which are certainly technological-digital, but above all value-driven, e.g. between circularity and inclusiveness — imply a relocation of the designers' thinking and working patterns, that identifies a human design-driven innovation approach as a priority and an identity.

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