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Designing Knowledge Otherwise: The Bembo Officina Editoriale as a Case for Alternative Academic Publishing

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Abstract: Bembo Officina Editoriale is an ongoing research and design project that addresses the epistemological, ethical, and technical challenges of contemporary scientific publishing. The project proposes an alternative editorial infrastructure in which automation serves pluralism, transparency, and free publications for researchers. The project has developed an automated, open-source workflow based on the Markdown-Python pipeline to generate fully editable InDesign output. This reduces production costs while enabling accessibility without compromising design quality, as demonstrated by the volumes already produced. Unlike most of the other experiences analyzed, the project is not limited to the technological infrastructure level of automation. The innovative challenge is to connect technologies with the management of the editorial process and the scientific and research policies of the doctoral program. The project is situated within a reflection on the historical continuity between typographical rationalization and algorithmic systems, suggesting that both shape epistemic authority in design research. BOE outlines the potential of collaborative peer review by integrating a double-blind review process that engages reviewers, editors, and authors in open dialogue through community-based public evaluation, promoting inclusiveness, accountability, and equity in disseminating design knowledge.

Keywords: open access; collaborative peer review; editorial automation; epistemic pluralism

1. Introduction

The academic publishing system, once a collective instrument for the advancement of knowledge, has evolved into an infrastructure dominated by commercial interests and profit-based models of dissemination. Academic evaluation and career advancement procedures require compliance with publication criteria linked to this system. This creates a feedback

loop that disadvantages young researchers and, in the long run, hinders the advancement of scientifically based research, the only one that produces tangible, socially useful results.

Fortunately, an international movement involving publishing houses, researchers, and academics aims to find innovative solutions to this situation. The initiatives mostly focus on the implementation (and adaptation) of technological platforms that encourage autonomy in editorial production.

The proposal we present, began as an experiment within the Bembo Officina Editoriale, here also goes in this direction. Bembo Officina Editoriale seeks to address specific issues and remedy some of the most serious problems, such as the distortions produced by the review system that does not guarantee fair and competent evaluations based on merit, the high costs researchers face to publish, and predatory systems. However, while refining the project from technological and organisational perspectives, we could not ignore a striking fact. Academic research is often structured around themes and methods determined by national and supranational agencies, thereby limiting freedom of research and predefining research fields. Consequently, there is a direct relationship between the academic publishing system and the research methods themselves, with the flaws of one being reflected in the other. Given the urgent need to rethink publication and dissemination systems, it is equally important to reconsider research itself, including its meaning, methods and purposes.

Therefore, our project not only aims to organise a democratic publishing system, but also seeks to initiate a reflection on knowledge and research in design through related educational and training activities. Being part of an academic environment enables us to closely link the project's functionalities to the training of doctoral students and researchers to do research. They are also trained to acquire editorial, layout and text management skills at all stages of the publication process. Therefore, our project seeks to challenge the notion that innovation in this field is solely determined by technological infrastructure. The innovative challenge lies in connecting the technology plan with a bespoke platform, the management plan for the entire editorial process and the plan linked to the scientific and research policies of the Doctoral School. Thus, the model of the independent publishing house is reconstructed and updated to reflect the characteristics of the contemporary world, but free from market pressures.

2. The Problem with Contemporary Academic Publishing

The hegemony of major publishing conglomerates has entrenched a paradox: while open access ostensibly increases the availability of research, it frequently imposes prohibitive Article Processing Charges (APCs) that transfer the economic burden from readers to authors, with average publication costs exceeding, as early as in 2012, 900 USD per article (Solomon & Björk, 2012). This financial model shifts the burden from publishers to researchers and disadvantages those with limited institutional or financial support. Early-career academics, independent scholars, and researchers in underfunded fields face systemic barriers that limit their ability to disseminate knowledge.

The approach marginalizes independent researchers, small-institution scholars, early-career academics, and those in poorly funded or less peer-review-oriented fields, including work

that challenges dominant paradigms or policy priorities and is therefore harder to fund and perceived as riskier (Bauwens, Reike, & Calisto-Friant, 2023).

The publish or perish paradigm (Van Dalen & Henkens, 2012; Bollini & Moretti, 2024) reinforces this inequity, prioritizing publication quantity over research quality and driving the emergence of predatory journals (Shen & Björk, 2015) that exploit publication pressure for profit while bypassing peer review.

This mechanism creates a self-perpetuating cycle of exclusion, where access to knowledge depends on institutional (or personal) wealth rather than intellectual contribution.

This condition is a structural alienation of academic labor. Researchers produce, edit, and review content, yet the infrastructure that distributes it is owned by external profit-seeking entities. In this sense, the publishing industry extracts surplus value from the academic community's unpaid intellectual work while imposing technical and legal restrictions on the reuse of knowledge.

The result is an epistemic and economic asymmetry. The authority of research becomes tied to the indexing systems (e.g., Scopus, Web of Science) and metrics controlled by the same corporations that gatekeep publication access.

Reclaiming publishing therefore entails not only a reorganization of workflows but also a repoliticization of knowledge production: academics must regain control over the means of publication, design, and dissemination.

3. The Bembo Officina Editoriale: A Design-Research Experiment

Within this context, Bembo Officina Editoriale was conceived as a non-profit, university-based platform aimed at rethinking the economic and procedural foundations of scientific publishing. Its primary objective is to eliminate APCs and drastically reduce production costs through automation, while maintaining rigorous scientific and editorial standards. The project builds upon the idea that accessibility and quality are not mutually exclusive but can be jointly achieved through technological innovation and methodological coherence. It focuses on three interrelated domains: typesetting, printing, and peer review.

The Bembo Officina Editoriale originated within Bembo Officina Editoriale university as an experimental platform for academic self-publishing. Bembo Officina Editoriale functions simultaneously as a technological prototype and a philosophical proposition. Its infrastructure—based on an open-source Markdown–Python pipeline—automates editorial production while preserving typographic quality and accessibility.

Unlike commercial platforms, Bembo Officina Editoriale's automation is not deployed to replace human editorial roles but to redistribute agency. Automation enables scholars to focus on content and peer engagement while minimizing administrative and production costs. This model embodies a form of technological minimalism, where efficiency is leveraged to sustain pluralism and inclusivity rather than profit maximization.

The market offers several automatic layout software that combine Indesign with XML markup, but these are proprietary and not open source. One example is Typefi, which allows even complex documents with formulas and tables, such as academic publications, to be laid

out. Another example is InXml, a similar software programme created by DiacriTech, which was designed to meet the needs of a university press. Both solutions are designed to meet the broader needs of various types of publications. A significant institutional precedent in Italy is represented by the Firenze University Press (FUP), particularly through its collaboration with the Dipartimento di Architettura (DIDA). FUP has implemented an integrated system for managing editorial processes that, much like our proposal, aims for low-cost production and high visibility through Open Access. Their platform utilizes XML technologies and XSLT style sheets, automating the extraction of metadata and the creation of various editorial formats (Bollini & al., 2006). Bembo Officina Editoriale, on the other hand, deals with publications in the fields of design, arts, architecture and urban planning, allowing greater attention to be paid to the layout of images, which is of fundamental importance in these sectors. Furthermore, the service is operated directly by Bembo Officina Editoriale, which therefore does not need to be outsourced: in such a manner, the specific requests of authors are handled jointly by the editorial team and the layout editors.

4. A Non-Profit and Sustainable Model

The project is developed according to criteria of sharing and optimisation, starting with the organisation of the workflow. The Bembo Officina Editoriale team, composed of seven people with different professional backgrounds, adopted the Agile Scrum project management method to coordinate their work.

Although these methods are widely documented and used in the IT field, not as much in non-software contexts (Gustavsson, 2016, p. 114), their adoption in a project not solely related to software development represents a highly innovative approach.

Agile methods (Fowler & Highsmith, 2001, p. 21) are a framework of values, practices and principles aimed at providing maximum value to the customer and managing risks. They are based on empirical principles and processes for managing the work of a team collaborating on the same product in short cycles.

Among Agile methods, Scrum is the most used (Diebold et al., 2015, p. 1; Hron & Obwegeser, 2022, p. 1). It consists of rules, roles and empirical practices that can be adapted to the context of application (Schwaber & Sutherland, 2020, p. 3).

The team implemented a customized version of Scrum. A virtual Scrum board was used to visualise progress and manage individual activities. The work cycles (Sprints) were set at two-week intervals. The daily coordination meeting (Daily Scrum) was converted into a weekly meeting to better fit the commitments of team members.

The success of Scrum adoption was primarily attributed to two factors: the effective use of the Scrum board and the consistent rhythm of fixed-length Sprints.

Scrum positively influences the perception of project success among participants, primarily impacting stakeholder satisfaction, rather than the achievement of commercial objectives (Serrador & Pinto, 2015, p. 1043).

The results achieved by the team have contributed to an innovative experimentation with the use of Scrum in communication design projects, suggesting potential for the positive

application of the method, while maintaining reservations about its impact on project quality and planning improvement (Author 6, 2024, p. 143).

A central aspect of the project is the automation of the typesetting process discussed in chapter 5. Through the work of Bembo Officina Editoriale, a system was developed to automatically generate Adobe™ InDesign™ layouts from plain text files. This process produces a formatted draft within minutes, ready for review and minor refinement. To further reduce costs, the project intentionally omits certain traditional layout refinements, such as ensuring identical line counts per page—an aesthetic convention unsupported by empirical evidence of improved readability (Perondi, 2024, p. 107). The decision to abandon such typographic traditions aligns with the project's methodological stance: in a scientific context, conventions not grounded in evidence should be reconsidered if they hinder efficiency and accessibility.

The printing process is outsourced and based on print-on-demand technology, allowing both digital distribution and low-cost physical production. Files are optimized for multiple purposes, including screen reading, home printing, and commercial on-demand printing. This hybrid model represents a pragmatic compromise, reflecting confidence in the rapid evolution of publishing technologies that will make such automated workflows increasingly sustainable.

The graphic and typographic choices reflect this same logic of reduction and optimisation. Rather than pursuing conventional layout refinements, the design prioritises clarity, consistency, and production efficiency, aligning visual form with the project's broader aim of minimising unnecessary labour while maintaining adequate functionality. The system relies on open-licensed fonts such as Spectral for the main text and Lekton for the notes apparatus, alongside Typo Mundi for titles, a typeface developed in 2012 at Università Iuav di Venezia. At the same time, the layout allows for design variations, such as bilingual parallel texts arranged horizontally rather than in the conventional vertical layout, or the use of circled numerals in the notes, introduced within the constraints of the system. These choices do not aim at formal experimentation per se, but remain consistent with the overall objective of facilitating automated production processes. In this sense, graphic design is not treated as a decorative layer, but as an integral component of the system's methodological and economic framework (figures 1 and 2).

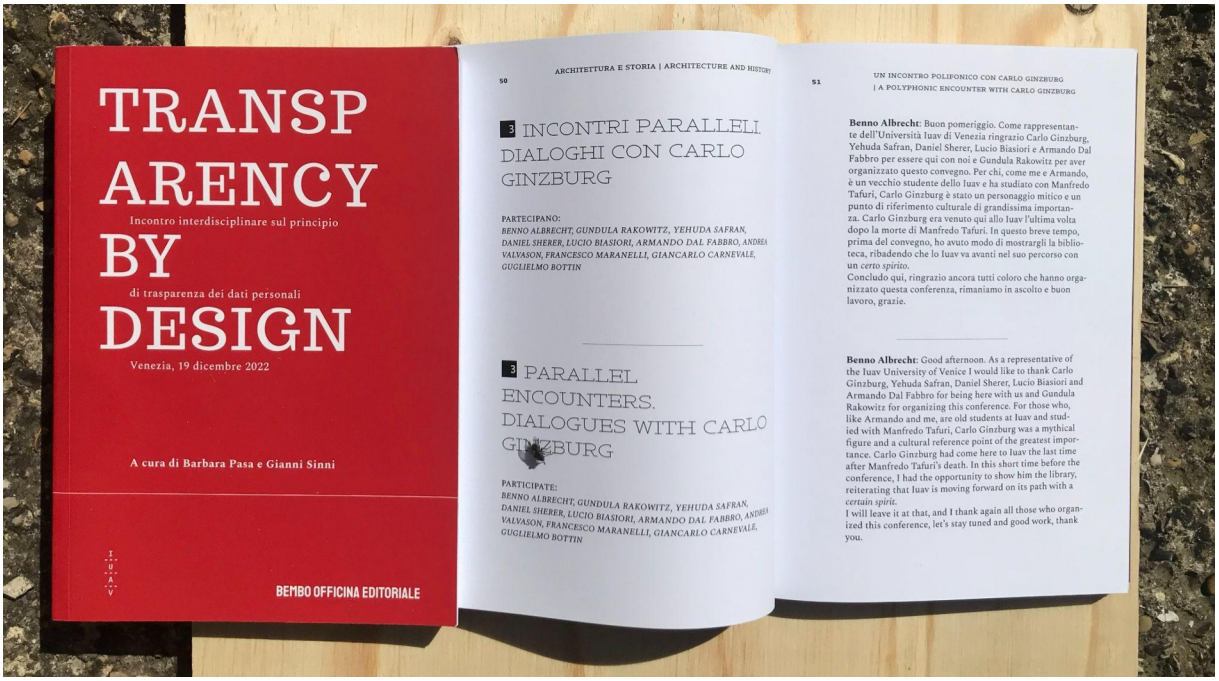

Figure 1 Printed volume produced through the Bembo Officina Editoriale workflow, showing the relationship between cover design and internal layout, with emphasis on typographic structure—bilingual parallel texts arranged horizontally—and image integration.

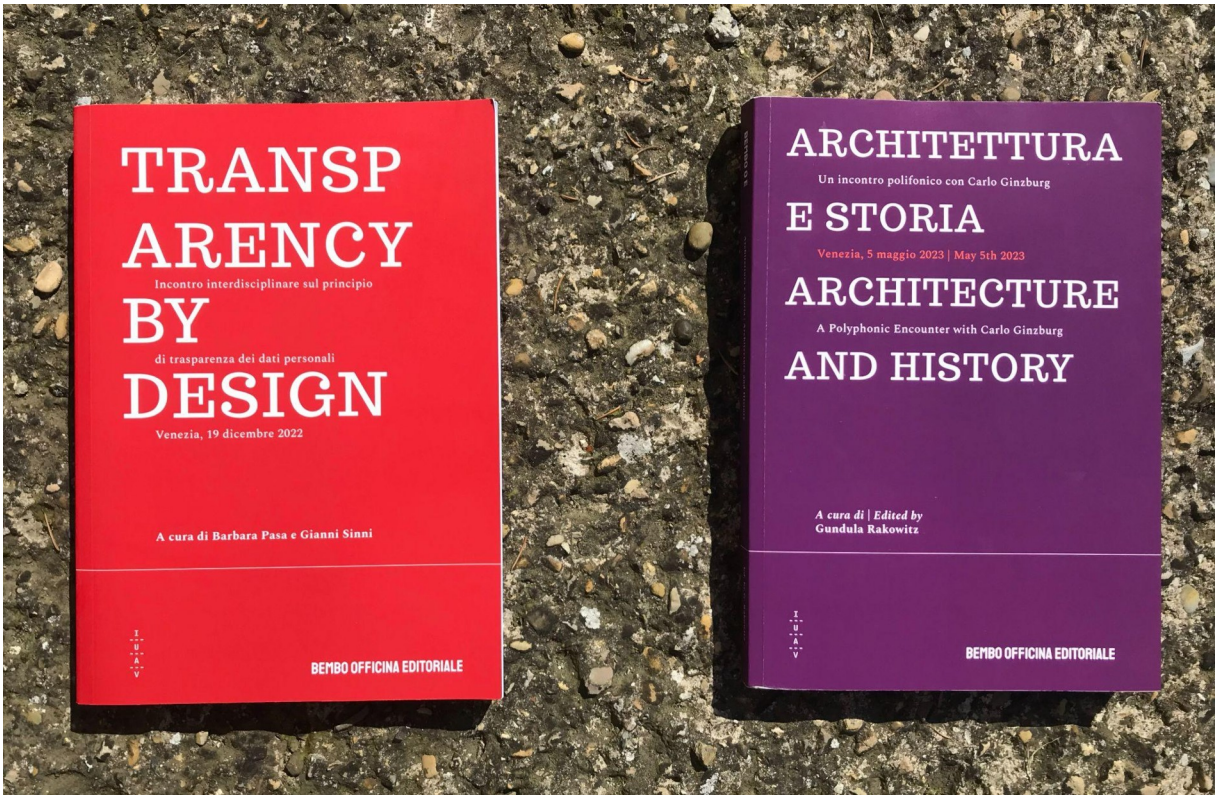

Figure 1 Examples of published volumes by Bembo Officina Editoriale, highlighting consistency in typographic system and variation in visual identity across different titles.

5. Typesetting automation: the Bembo Officina Editoriale system compared to LaTeX

At the heart of Bembo Officina Editoriale's editorial process is a custom typesetting system designed to produce semi-automated, APA 7th–compliant scientific publications that are free of charge for authors and editors and with minimal costs for the publisher.

Authors and editors prepare manuscripts in Markdown (Gruber, 2004) and bibliographies in BibTeX (Jacobsen, 1996). Python scripts developed for Bembo Officina Editoriale then compile these inputs into XML and JSON files.Those files are then imported into Adobe® InDesign® for final composition, but keeping the .xml manuscript and the layout independent of each other. The Bembo Officina Editoriale system expects authors to structure the manuscripts as tagged texts, generates a standard layout for the contents and allows for visual decisions in the desktop publishing stage, where Bembo Officina Editoriale's designers can refine layout using InDesign's features. This feature makes it possible to optimize the correction of errors virtually at any stage of the process: the author can modify the source files (.md, .bib and the other media files) and the editors čonvert the source files into .xml and update them in InDesign®, without having to manually tamper with the layout file, saving valuable time. saving valuable time. Unlike software that makes use of the LaTeX typesetting system, the combination of software created for Bembo Officina Editoriale offers the possibility of having a detailed and customisable layout through the manual modification if needed or desired. Other open source software, such as Paged.js, allows for greater freedom in layout than its LaTeX counterpart, but similarly to LaTeX it requires the developer to modify the layout directly through code, making layout customisation less intuitive.

Since this discussion concerns scientific publishing processes, we hereby propose a comparison with the LaTeX typesetting system, the current de facto standard for typesetting in academia (LaTeX project team, n.d.), to better elucidate the reasons—the most fundamental among many—that led Bembo Officina Editoriale to develop in-house custom software solutions and not adopt LaTeX, at least for its initial phase.

The most substantial difference between the two typesetting systems lies in the different degrees of editability of the typeset layout. The Bembo Officina Editoriale system decouples the manuscript contents and final design: authors supply constrained, semantically-tagged source-code (i.e., texts, figures, tables and bibliographies) while Python scripts and designers control visual output in the desktop publishing software. As such, it deliberately restricts what authors can write and tag in the Markdown manuscript, assigning the entire task of graphic layout to the publisher's typesetting system. Conversely, in LaTeX the manuscript (i.e., the source-code) and its typeset output are closely interdependent. The final PDF can be compiled and generated while the author writes, meaning that both the LaTeX template developer and the author must possess sufficient technical competence to achieve predictable results that meet the publisher's requirements.

This interdependence can be a critical factor, as freely available LaTeX templates vary greatly in structure and quality, ranging from very basic models with minimal libraries and code utilities, to highly complex frameworks. Customizing a template often demands substantial effort on the part of developers, given the legacy design of LaTeX syntax and the fragmented

state of its documentation, which rarely offers an integrated overview of how libraries interact. At the same time, authors face a considerable learning curve, as they must master a variety of interrelated (and sometimes conflicting) libraries to achieve the desired results. Despite this investment, complete control over the final PDF output is not always guaranteed. In daily practice, LaTeX writing (regardless of the user's level of experience) tends to heavily rely on a trial-and-error process, compiling repeatedly in the hope that the code will not break or produce visually incorrect results.

Although LaTeX and its editors can be installed and configured completely free of charge on an author's computer, the process of setting up the system is far from plug-and-play. On the other hand, online editing platforms such as Overleaf®, which have become the preferred choice for producing LaTeX-based publications, operate on subscription models that can be costly for individual authors or their institutions. While Overleaf® also provides a free plan that enables users to create and compile documents, this version comes with significant limitations in terms of storage space and other available features. By contrast, the Bembo Officina Editoriale system relies on open file formats such as Markdown and BibLaTeX, meaning that authors are not required to purchase any software or subscription to produce their manuscripts. The cost of commercial software licenses, such as those for Adobe® InDesign®, is borne solely by the publisher.

Still, the deliberate simplicity in manuscript production for the Bembo Officina Editoriale system has notable limitations when compared to certain features offered by LaTeX. In particular, LaTeX excels at typesetting mathematical formulas and generating plots (Brischoux & Legagneux, 2009), capabilities that Markdown cannot provide. Furthermore, platforms such as Overleaf® enable real-time collaborative writing, offering an integrated experience for authors. While it is possible to use collaborative online editors for Markdown and reference managers that produce .bib files, these solutions do not provide the same integrated workflow available in Overleaf®. Incorporating this capability into Bembo Officina Editoriale's production workflow would not only facilitate collaboration on multi-author projects but also streamline quality control within the platform and improve communication between authors and the editorial team, reducing the need for email exchanges.

This first iteration of the Bembo Officina Editoriale system is an applied and functioning example of an alternative scientific publishing process, free of charge for authors, sustainable for the publisher, and built with contemporary technologies dedicated to commercial and scientific publishing. In the future, depending on a review of the editorial process and budget availability, it cannot be ruled out that Bembo Officina Editoriale's typesetting could be implemented using LaTeX technologies.

6. Technical Infrastructures and the Design of Openness

It may not always be obvious, but the link between openness, technical infrastructure and information technology has always been, and still is, very strong. Initially, the Open Source movement aimed to promote the open and free sharing of tools. Then came the Open Data movement, which pushed for the return of all information resources produced by public bodies to communities as a collective good and an enabler for new, both tangible and intangible, goods and services. Currently, this paradigm also extends to the concept of Open

Government. This conceptual and operational relationship has now been so internalised and metabolised that we now naturally seek a specific web access platform for every new knowledge resource we need.

In recent years, numerous web systems for managing content and functions have been developed with the aim of reducing their generic nature and tailoring them to specific data types and procedures. Notable examples include the Italian institutional Open Data platform developed by the Agenzia per l'Italia Digitale (AGID, n.d.) and interoperable geospatial data infrastructures that adopt standard protocols for multi-platform integration, such as those defined by the Open Geospatial Consortium (OGC, n.d.).

In this context, one of the main threats probably lies behind the standardisation and uniformity of web-oriented services, which favours large technology companies. While these companies can easily invest huge sums of money in developing highly optimised and quite customisable applications, a critical issue arises from this: the centralisation of a kind of "technological power" in the hands of a few players that allows them to impose their methods and functions on loyal users. These users, who have become loyal after initially being attracted by the ease of use and the many possibilities for customising functions and content, find it difficult to switch to other solutions at a later stage. On the other hand, it is also well known that once a standard has become established, the vested interests involved in its development hinder the adoption of a new system, even if it is an improvement. (Norman, 1988, p. 275).

Furthermore, system efficiency must be evaluated by prioritizing human effort over machine optimization (Tognazzini, 1992, p. 79), since small inefficiencies repeated hundreds or thousands of times accumulate into significant long-term costs. Seen from this perspective, it is legitimate to question whether adapting an existing web application for a new open-access project is truly more effective than developing a dedicated one from the ground up.

Given these premises, we can only conclude that the technical infrastructure for openness needs to be properly designed. Tognazzini's open document First Principles of Interaction Design provided a primary framework for the design of the Bembo Officina Editoriale web application, alongside his broader scientific contributions. It informed all major interface decisions, including the choice to separate visual and interaction design into distinct work streams, as aesthetic design should be entrusted to trained graphic and visual designers (Tognazzini, 2014).

The design process of Bembo Officina Editoriale is impossible to describe in full, including all the relationships between the principles and their application. However, it is worth mentioning the most significant principles, starting with "ensure that users never lose their work", which has been interpreted more broadly; consider what would happen if the "big tech" company we rely on for our Content Management System were to stop providing its service: how could we prevent the loss of our data and procedures? How much would it cost to get back what is ours? This influenced the decision to create a custom CMS app instead of adapting an existing one and led to the choice of a lightweight IT architecture with a "DNS-less" database (without data server), including only the strictly necessary datasets to update both online and offline as required.

Another important point relates to the very meaning of "platform", which is understood as a system that enables multiple parts to work together in a synergistic way. Bembo Officina

Editoriale website plays a key role in integrating content, functions and tools, as Bembo Officina Editoriale's operations rely on various software applications and protocols, contributions from multiple users and operators, and the integration of different data sources, archives and information. The web-oriented architecture is imperative and enables the integration of the publications repository, back-end archive management and front-end access with customised search criteria, as well as some other ancillary functions.

Although technology can make our work easier, overly complex technology can increase difficulties and dissatisfaction (Norman, 1988, p. 49). Creating a dedicated platform meant that we could work based on requirements, adding only the strictly needed functions. This approach has significant advantages in terms of both system installation and maintenance. The customised search functions — the main tool for navigating the archive — have been grouped into a single multi-criteria bar, which remains accessible from the side menu in accordance with the specified “autonomy” criteria for final users.

Tognazzini’s open document organises many different design considerations into specific categories, such as those including suggestions relating to the consistency and accuracy of information provided to users when performing complex procedures, the use of colour coding, graphic styles and text, navigation structures, and the visibility, readability and hierarchy of interface elements. There are also suggestions relating to learnability that have had a particular impact on the design of the back-end interface, aimed at Bembo Officina Editoriale editors, who are to all intents and purposes, a specific type of application user. Responsive design is also a key principle in usability, and is essential for making content accessible on different devices. In fact, Bembo Officina Editoriale is optimised with three different layouts to adapt effectively to notebooks, computers, tablets and smartphones in vertical orientation.

7. Collaborative and Transdisciplinary Peer Review. Community, Autonomy, and Epistemic Equity

The question of peer review in Bembo Officina Editoriale, remains only partially addressed. As widely discussed in the literature (Ross-Hellauer, 2017; Heesen & Bright, 2021; Lupo, 2024; Guariento, Addone, & Perondi, 2024), current peer review models exhibit structural limitations. Bembo Officina Editoriale aims to serve as a platform for testing alternative models—particularly collaborative peer review (Jayasinghe, Marsh & Bond, 2007; Marsh, Jayasinghe & Bond, 2008)—which prioritise transparency and inclusivity over anonymity.

The project’s initial focus on publishing doctoral dissertations, texts that have already undergone rigorous evaluation through supervisory and examination processes, represents a first step toward ensuring quality control within this experimental framework. Nonetheless, the challenge of maintaining scientific validity persists, especially in disciplines with less defined epistemological structures, such as design and architecture.

One option is to complement the traditional double-blind peer review with a community-based evaluation process that broadens the plurality of perspectives while enhancing transparency and interaction among peers.

Building on the open peer review frameworks outlined by McCormack (2009) and Ross-Hellauer (2017), five main types of review can be identified: collaborative, post-publication, version control, authentication and certification, and moderation. Following Heesen and Bright (2021) and Marsh et al. (2007, 2008, 2011), the collaborative model appears most appropriate for design or architecture subjects, given its interdisciplinary and partly subjective nature. This approach may help overcome the limitations of traditional peer review, including lack of transparency, long turnaround times, conservative bias, and insufficient incentives for reviewers (Ross-Hellauer, 2017; Fitzpatrick, 2011; Van Noorden, 2013; Bohannon, 2013; Mirowski, 2018).

The proposed workflow includes a pre-review phase, a double-blind peer review, a collaborative peer review involving open dialogue between authors and community members, and a final verification by the editorial and scientific committees. In the collaborative phase, comments and integrations—whether textual or visual—are shared on a digital platform and may become part of the final publication, while reviewers in this phase are not anonymous and can be credited as secondary co-authors.

The main challenges include extended publication times, economic sustainability, and resistance to change. However, these can be mitigated through strategies such as process automation, the adoption of open-source tools, formal recognition of reviewers, and the inclusion of international and non-academic participants. The model is not intended to replace traditional peer review but to extend it, aligning with recent developments in open science and fostering a transdisciplinary community capable of enriching design research.

8. The Broader Implications: Rethinking Knowledge as a Commons

Bembo Officina Editoriale is part of a broader redefinition of scientific publishing as a collective infrastructure rather than a commercial service. The project demonstrates how design research can contribute to reclaiming knowledge as a commons—an open, shared, and collectively maintained resource. This aligns with the “repoliticization of knowledge production” mentioned in the introduction: returning agency to researchers and communities through design-driven infrastructures.

Bembo Officina Editoriale is not only a technological innovation (automation, open-source workflow, custom CMS) but also an epistemological experiment. It questions how the material organization of publishing—its formats, tools, and evaluation systems—shapes what counts as knowledge. The publishing system mirrors the “aberrations of research methods” and that reforming one necessarily entails reforming the other.

Design, Urbanism and Architecture, as disciplines situated between technology, humanities, and social sciences, offers a unique laboratory for testing new forms of open, collaborative evaluation. The collaborative peer review proposed in chapter 7 exemplifies this: it bridges epistemic cultures and redistributes authorship, enhancing both scientific rigor and inclusivity.

Bembo Officina Editoriale operates at a realistic experimental scale—doctoral dissertations, limited infrastructure—but with long-term transformative potential. It is a prototype for an equitable, sustainable publishing ecosystem that values accessibility, community participation, and methodological coherence over market logic.

9. Conclusion

Bembo Officina Editoriale is a publishing and cultural initiative focused on scientific research and the publishing tools needed to communicate it, based on open technologies and democratic organisational systems. The project has been successfully tested and implemented, and several volumes have been produced using the described process. Of course, the process is not yet complete. As previously mentioned, many issues remain unresolved, particularly with regard to aspects of the peer review system.

At this stage of the project, Bembo Officina Editoriale can address some of the most serious issues with the 'publish or perish' system. However, it remains within a system in which distortions in publishing and research are mutually reflective and interdependent. From this point of view, Bembo Officina Editoriale is only the first step in a strategy that aims to train researchers in research and critically rethink its objectives, reasons and meaning. Attempting to respond to the most pressing needs does not mean giving up on guiding a process that supports academic research attentive to the present and open to the world.

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