



The Extraordinary Everyday. The Post-Crafts in the Historical City

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Abstract. In the 1980s, Anna Maria Fundarò, founder of the Sicilian design school, carried out a study on the craft activities still active in Palermo's historic centre, for reactivating a new and specialised material culture through design. Fundarò's vision anticipated the concept of "design for the territory", which is now widely applied in the design community, especially in relation to local contexts rich in traditional knowledge, non-formalised design. At the same time, since it is connected to new technical opportunities and sustainable strategies, artisanal and neo-artisanal production (newly supported by the digital manufacturing) is currently part of an innovative and evolutionary scenario regarding this discipline. Starting from a consideration about the renewed relationship between traditional productions and design, the paper focuses on the cultural and narrative processes of artefacts whose masters are craftsmen, still operating in certain urban historical environments; the paper emphasises the capacity for design to activate new and *extraordinary* meanings, through processes of deconstruction and re-contextualisation. In order to verify the relevance of Fundarò's methodologies and lines of research, many work spaces, materials, techniques and products have been detected and surveyed; during this documentation process in the historic centre, today mainly devoted to tourism, many artisans have been interviewed, involving them and their artisan skills and know-how in the project itself. The experience was greatly affected by the outbreak of the pandemic and the heavy restrictions it entailed. Several of the on-going projects acquired a strong relational and storytelling connotation when exploring new domestic and autobiographical aspects.

Keywords: Design · Post-craft · Everyday life · Palermo · Narrative

1 Where is the Craftsman?

Up until the industrial revolution, craftsmanship was the prevailing mode of production, generally characterized by small-scale, mass-production, through a combination of conception and production in the hands of the same individual, who brought together mastery of the tools, the knowledge and skills necessary for the conception and production of the objects and artefacts; furthermore, the figure of the craftsman was at the centre of the processing of know-how that was often non-formalized, widespread and shared in local communities and contexts.

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Italian design has developed its own specific, cultural and local character, based around relational, collaborative, experimental design, which has often been able to enhance and transfer artisanal know-how to the industrial dimension and contemporary idiom.

In fact, Italian design is recognized as having an “artisanal root” that has nurtured its particular quality:

“[...] an economic and industrial system has developed through a particular and original process of modernization of artisanal culture, transferred to small and medium-sized industries, and from the design and artistic culture of the humanist tradition, reworked by that cultural phenomenon known to all as Italian Design.” [1, 21].

In the 1980s, a recognized master of design like Enzo Mari also tried to visualize in a unified framework the constant presence of an “artisanal gradient”, also in the industrial world, extending the dimension of craftsmanship to the contemporary world and illuminating its connections (also ethical and political) with design planning. In setting up the 1981 exhibition *Dov'è l'artigiano?*¹, Mari re-pieced together the two extremes within which artisanal practices and knowledge emerge in the variety of contemporary production: from the possession of the means of production and the convergence in a single figure responsible for design and execution, to the other extreme, in which there is a complete dissociation of individuals and skills that implement the various phases of the production process [2]. Alongside the many theoretical reflections and design approaches regarding the permanence of an artisanal dimension in Italian design culture, it is today worth comparing an authoritative point of view from outside the discipline, which has broadened the debate on craftsmanship with its relevant social, philosophical and cognitive implications. The pragmatic sociologist Richard Sennett proposes to “[...] save the *animal laborans* from the devaluation that Hanna Arendt had made of it” [3,272]. Pupil of Hannah Arendt (author of this definition), Sennett demonstrates, through a rich repertoire of examples drawn from history, a thesis that he has placed at the centre of his volume *L'uomo artigiano*².

“[...] making physical objects also provides insights into techniques that can shape relationships with others. Both the difficulties and the possibilities of making things well also apply to the building of human relationships” [Ibid., 275].

From the practice of the *artfully made*, from the adaptive and contextual intelligence of the craftsman, according to Sennett, there emerge forms of sensitive knowledge and active adherence to social life, which can be effective responses to today's multiple ongoing crises. The complex and refined material culture, which the westerworld has managed to develop, once again becomes a model of personal identity and collective intelligence for the renewed centrality of the *artifex man* in the building of the individual's quality of life. Sennett offers us intense theoretical food for thought that has contributed to arousing in design culture an interest in, and adherence to, new models of craftsmanship, also in the light of the themes of digital and social innovation, fostering of the individual and social ties and the building of virtuous relationships for the environment in urban and territorial contexts.

¹ Where is the Artisan? (Author's translation).

² Man as Craftsman (Author's translation).

In design culture, the historic and recurring *querelle* between the proponents of industrial and/or craft production today certainly appears to be definitively outdated; on the other hand, systemic and strategic approaches are emerging, implemented through design processes that combine conception, production and fruition of goods, both material and immaterial; these approaches are geared towards the protection of the environment and the community, which require individuals endowed with cultural awareness, creativity, traditional and advanced technical skills. Moreover, the identity and emotional value of the product is being increasingly emphasized, while today's complex production, communication and consumption systems fuel an adaptive and inclusive, expressively and technologically hybrid design, which has marked the transition from "Industrial Design" to "Design", in its broader and more structured meaning of human-centred and environment-centred design.

2 Ordinary vs. Extraordinary

Starting from these concise considerations on the contemporary interpretations of the relationship between craftsmanship and design, we would like to propose a reflection on the traditional craft productions of our object landscape, not only for its character of *permanent archetypes*, which still support many of the activities and rituals of everyday life, but also as triggers of a complex configuration of meaningful relationships, both material and immaterial, between people, things and living spaces.

The aim is to verify the possibility for designers not only to create innovative objects and functions, but also to reconfigure - through design - the meaning of what is part of the ordinary scenario of the predominantly 'anonymous' things that surround us, by trying to associate the designer's skills with an ethno-anthropological, analytical capacity and a 'story-telling' expressiveness, capable of producing that "[...] functional knowledge for living in a socio-cultural context" that is today increasingly central to the mission of design [4]. Interaction with contexts, practices, subjects possessing traditional knowledge, is one of the ways in which design offers itself as a process of essentially cultural reworking and innovation, in the development of new functional and symbolic qualities of objects; this process can lead to the emergence of the extraordinary even in an object of ordinary, everyday use, something seemingly linked to the past.

Because, as pointed out by the anthropologist Pietro Meloni, "Ordinary is something apparently banal but at the same time highly complex. The definition of ordinary is in itself ambiguous; it means something that cannot be understood without an advanced level of deconstruction and re-contextualisation within the social space" [5,84].

Meloni's words are an invitation for the designer to retrace all the cultural processes and narratives, the bearers of which are the artefacts and craftspeople still operating in the everyday and in the proximity of, for example, certain particular urban environments; they offer up an invitation to trigger new and 'extraordinary' meanings through the processes of invention, transformation, deconstruction and re-contextualisation that are inherent to design. (Fig. 1)

These reflections on the connections between design and traditional production have stimulated and guided a series of didactic experiments that, albeit at different times, and different conditions and outcomes, have aimed to propose "[...] a renewal of the tones,



Fig. 1 .Notebooks, Edizioni Precarie

narrative, emotional levels and relationships that design can finally adopt with regard to those anthropological themes that have always remained outside the narrow confines of modernity” [6,43].

3 Anna Maria Fundarò: Design as Material Culture

In analysing the state of the art of craft production in the historic centre of Palermo - the subject of this paper - it is essential to start from the teaching and scientific experience of Anna Maria Fundarò, founder of the School of Design in Palermo. In fact, Fundarò, in the 1980s, abetted by the extensive involvement of students and collaborators, produced a comprehensive map of handicrafts still alive in the historic centre³; in its original vision, the study of the artisanal skills and practices still present in the historical quarters constituted the necessary premise for reactivating, through innovative design, a new Sicilian material culture, characterized by its relationship with the history of a city and a territory, geared towards forms of sustainable development for a community aware of its own cultural identity(Fig. 2).

It should be noted that, while today the characterising link between Italian design and craftsmanship in its multiple local forms is a scientifically established fact, in the 1970s

³ The research, which was selected in 1981 for the 12th Compasso d’Oro exhibition at the Milan Triennale, was published in the same year in the volume ‘Il lavoro artigiano nel centro storico di Palermo’ (Craftwork in the historic centre of Palermo); an extraordinary encyclopaedic atlas of craftsmen’s trades, which includes drawings, historical documentation, and testimonies from craftsmen, and which covers the city, working spaces, objects, tools, and people.



Fig. 2. Small Sacred Space of A. Di Bernardi. Realization in the workshop of master silversmith A. Amato

and 1980s only a few avant-garde designers tried to combine design with craftsmanship as an expression of a widespread folk culture, starting from positions that were highly critical of industrial mass-production and its disruptive social and cultural implications⁴.

It was only much later, through an intense process of reworking the subject, that the scientific community of design focused (in local contexts, steeped in traditional knowledge and non-formalised design practices) on that particular innovative dimension rich in cultural connotations that is typical of Italian design, proposing the concept of “design for the territory and for traditional production”⁵.

Today’s design culture is reintroducing artisanal and neo-artisanal production⁶ (and post-artisanal) in a rapidly evolving scenario, linked to a new centrality of innovation in social and digital manufacturing⁷, which nurtures the widespread creativity of *fablabs* and *makers*, with the additional prospect of greater self-determination on the part of the individual as regards market supply.

Exemplary in its breadth and methodological quality, themes of renewed relevance emerge:

- The relationship of continuity and/or discontinuity between pre-industrial modes of production and design;
- Craftsmanship providing a way and a place of experimentation for the design of the industrial product;
- The cultural and anthropological dimension that emerges from traditional formal and figurative material; and which enriches artefacts with fascinating non-material content (individual and social histories, practices, values and ideas shared by the community);
- The research and scientific classification methodologies “in the field” of traditional knowledge in historical contexts, developed as support for design planning.

⁴ A distinctly anti-academic approach was that of Riccardo Dalisi, who at Napoli experimented with forms of collective creativity, such as “less polluted samples possible by culture” [7,84]; or like *Alchymia* by A. Guerriero, we proposed the design-crafts for a predominantly expressive purpose.

⁵ In 2008, in the in-depth quantitative and qualitative mapping of Italian design research, set out in the book “Design Research Maps / Prospects for university research in Italy” [9], the scientific activities attributable to “Identity, territory, and local production” are significantly placed in the sphere of “Beyond Made in Italy: new frontiers of design research”, as if to confirm Fundarò’s intuition that the future must be planned starting from its own cultural identity.

⁶ *The New Craft* exhibition set up at the Fabbrica del Vapore on the occasion of the 21st Milan Triennale Exhibition, illustrates the relationship between craft and advanced technology in different fields of design with particular reference to digital production technology and 3D printing [8].

⁷ Digital manufacturing is based on the introduction of the most advanced digital technology, such as numerical control and laser cutting machines, 3D printing systems, which make it easy to produce small series and customised products, profoundly changing not only the production processes but also the organisation and management of the factory. But craft workshops have also profoundly changed their set-up, contaminating themselves with the world of *fablabs* and *makers*. For institutions, too, the transition to “Manifattura 4.0” has become a strategic objective of economic planning lines.

4 New Craft in the Historic Centre

Recently⁸, the spirit and scientific approach of A. M. Fundarò [10] was re-proposed through a comparable, extensive survey and documentation of urban spaces, craft ateliers, materials, techniques, products, in the old centre of Palermo; the research and didactic experience were tackled by students and teachers with a particular willingness to listen to the individuals possessing artisanal know-how, something which is at increasing risk of extinction, yet is still relevant in relation to a strongly changing urban identity.

Whereas the new tourist vocation of the old centre has led to the flourishing of small and very small craft workshops (often dealing purely in *bricolage*) geared mainly towards reworking a cultural tradition that has been deconstructed into stereotypes for tourism, some craftsmen (e.g. sheet metal working for everyday tools, precious-metal working, the production of *coppola*, the typical Sicilian hat, and other traditional head-gear) continue to express their know-how, techniques and figurative range, alongside innovative experiments by young neo-artisanal designers (Fig. 3).

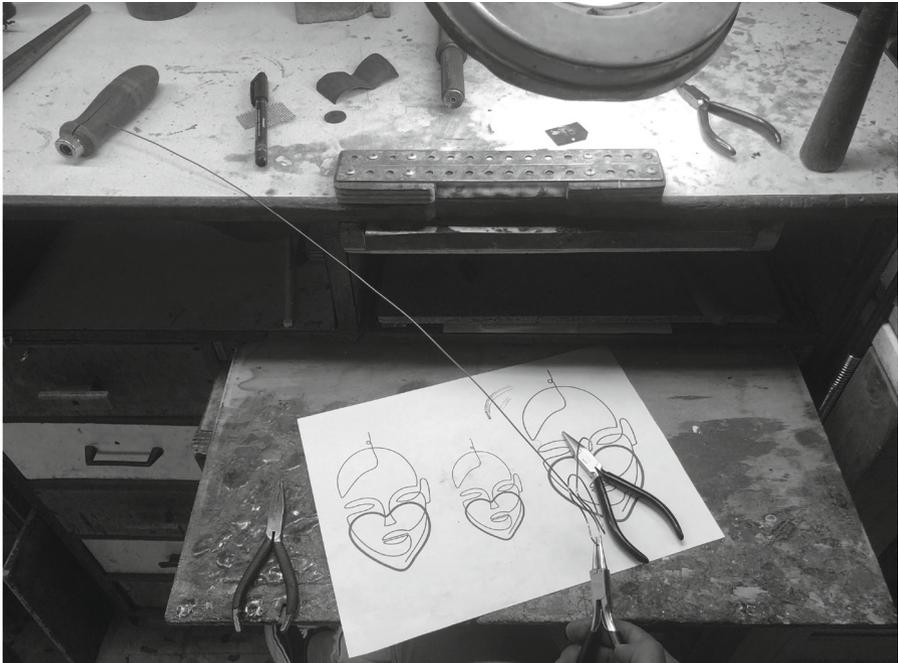


Fig. 3 .Next-Voto by C. Corteggiani. Realization in the workshop of the master goldsmith R. Intorre

⁸ Master's degree course in Design and Culture of the Territory, Laboratory of Design for the Territory, Prof. Viviana Trapani, a.y. 2018/19.

*Edizioni Precarie*⁹ is an operation devoted to graphic design and “artisanal design”; it was founded in 2013 in Palermo by Carmela Dacchille, who was motivated by a poetic reflection on the widespread folk-art in artefacts of everyday use. She carried out thorough research, collection and classification of the paper used in wrapping food in the city’s historical markets, and this led on to collections of notebooks, albums, illustrated stories, produced with hand-crafted, artisanal, calligraphic systems, in a process that is simultaneously design, artistic *post-production*¹⁰, social innovation and urban revitalisation. In fact, *Edizioni Precarie* also presents itself as “[...] a physical place that, in addition to being a design studio and production workshop, is also a container for projects and ideas born from the creativity and commitment of new artisan designers, illustrators, graphic designers and photographers”¹¹.

5 New Domestic and Autobiographical Dimensions: Projects

The proposed educational experience was also greatly affected by the simultaneous outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic and the considerable spatial and psycho-physical constraints to which all were subjected. Thus, some of the projects and objects developed, despite their material and functional diversity, acquired a strong relational and narrative connotation, presenting themselves as devices for exploring new domestic and autobiographical aspects, bearers of symbolic meanings often pertaining to the realm of the sacred.

Federica Pravatà’s work starts from a reflection on the new dynamics of cohabitation as dictated by the Coronavirus, which had us living in a suspended time of almost zero socializing and a new way of working (smart working). Homes suddenly turned into offices, classrooms, gyms, but above all, domestic space once again became a place of welcome, caring, cherishing affections and emotions, and all enhanced by the pandemic. The quarantine in fact provided food for thought regarding the homes we inhabit, in particular, the resilience of the spaces of our small *living machines*, where all the complexity of our private and public spheres was concentrated; and it was often necessary to radically rethink the relationships between spaces, people, and behaviour in order to rediscover new aspects of well-being and security, of both the individual and the family.

The project started from conversations with the artisans in via Calderai, a street in the historic centre of Palermo, still characterised by a homogeneity of production for specific activities: bread and cake making, garden work, catering. The tools, techniques and materials (mainly metal sheets), together with the artisans’s tales fuelled the project idea: a portable, light and user-friendly luminous device (made from reused sheet metal utensils for food preparation and socializing) to be built and sold in via Calderai. In fact, the project uses an aluminium sheet mould used for baking a typical Sicilian cake, to

⁹ Edizioni Precarie’s design idea was selected for ADI Design Index 2015 and nominated for the Compasso d’Oro 2016.

¹⁰ The reference is to the concept of post-production proposed by the art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud [11] to illuminate the peculiar character of contemporary art, which tends to elaborate existing works or objects, rather than to pursue originality and absolute creation.

¹¹ <https://www.edizionipecarie.it/>

create a portable container-lamp, which follows people's movements in the temporary organisation and functionality of domestic spaces.

Ambra Di Bernardi's project was developed in collaboration with Antonino Amato's Fabbrica Artigiana Argenteria, which produces and restores artistic and sacred silverware. The aim was to bring the concept of the sacred back into the home; precisely because of the pandemic, the home, as well as a space for sharing affections and emotions, may become a place to refocus on essential values and rediscover the symbolic dimension of the things that give it its lifeblood. The project proposes the construction of a small and precious "sacred space", to be positioned in a privileged place in the home, to preserve and at the same time showcase memories and values, both personal and shared, through the display of the objects that are most precious and evocative for us; this functionality is unheard of in our cultural tradition, but it may bring to mind the small domestic altars of Shinto tradition (*Kamidana*) often found in Japanese homes.

The object created by Maestro Amato consists of a silver or brass plane; eighteen thin rods of different and decreasing heights are grafted onto part of the edge, supporting figurative elements taken from the Christian liturgy, selected from the silversmiths' repertoire (candelabra, crowns, monstrances, *ex-votos*, thuribles, cross-shaped reliquaries, etc.) and redesigned in such a way as to allow for a miniaturised and two-dimensional production. The possibility of adapting the object to requests for customisation was realized through the design of a system of variations in the relationships between all the elements (the material, the shape and size of the base, the height of the rods, the arrangement of the elements on the plane).

Next -Voto by Carolina Corteggiani is proposed as a *contemporary ex-voto*, conceived during the period of generalised lock-down due to Covid 19. The *ex-voto*, which over the centuries has represented an object of worship, to bond with the divine, in this project is stripped of its devout connotation to become a secular object, the bearer of a complex emotional meaning that reflects a precise historical moment. Like the traditional *ex-voto*, it takes on the significance of a gift and a token of gratitude; but in this particular circumstance it is directed at those people who protected and reassured us in a time of great difficulty.

Through a small and iconic artefact, an armband depicting faces covered by masks, we wish to remember and pay tribute to the work done by doctors, nurses and all the people who have been committed to caring for our health: those who, clad in protective suits, with marks left by masks on their faces after so many hours of work, ensured care, safety and comfort to those in need during the most critical periods of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Next Voto* was handcrafted in the workshop of Roberto Intorre, an architect and goldsmith from Palermo, in 925 silver and brass, from a 1 mm thick foil. Even the elastic clasp of the bracelet, which, in the women's version, allows it to be worn on the wrist, is reminiscent of the medical mask that we have been wearing for so long. *Next Voto* has also been reproduced in a resin version, through an innovative 3D printing process using SLA stereo-lithography.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, it might be stated that the interest and originality of the research and the project presented, in my opinion, consists in having placed awareness of one's own cultural, spatial-temporal and also existential perspective at the centre of the research and project design; teachers and students accompanied the development of a project of great complexity, which was, at the same time, of an extremely concrete nature, transforming a particularly difficult situation (e.g. due to the pandemic), in terms of social relations and working activity, into an experience of introspection and learning through listening and empathy established between all those involved in the process. Moreover, the "extraordinary everyday", in the sense of everyday life outside the norm, that we all experienced during the pandemic, may in any case be understood as an aspect of a more general need to reorient design towards those "anthropological tonalities and themes" that Andrea Branzi has been proposing for some time, for a design culture capable of dealing with ever broader and more systemic states of crisis.

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