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on Mediterranean
Urban Spaces
and Cultural Heritage



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O. EDITORIAL #15

Research Alert on Mediterranean Urban Spaces and Cultural Heritage

Marinella Ferrara & Chiara Lecce

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URBAN SPACE ALERT

Design Intervention: Understanding Cairo Informal Areas

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Faculty of Applied Arts and Sciences, Product Design Department

Keywords

Informal Areas, Design Strategy, Cairo, NGOs, Social Design

Abstract

After the January 25th Egyptian revolution, 250.000 Non-Governmental Organizations were active in Cairo alone, with the aim of solving numerous poverty-related problems. In this paper, the unemployment of inhabitants of informal areas is under the spotlight. The aim is to help NGOs establish more sustainable projects serving informal area inhabitants through the intervention of designers. Research aimed to grasp an understanding of the NGOs' problems, micro-projects they undertake and problems facing their target group – the informal area inhabitants – in relation to their projects, in order to investigate how design can intervene. The research results in the analysis of sustainable development in the informal areas of Cairo. As revealed in the NGOs' members unstructured interviewing, poverty in Cairo has four cyclical reasons: lack of education, unemployment, overpopulation and health problems. The analysis concludes that micro-projects face problems and it is hypothesized that they can be solved through a design intervention. Producing outdated products that have no specific target group can be reversed through market research and participatory design. Also, marketing and pricing were better formulated through collaborative strategic design with the NGO team. These results draw attention to the significance of interfering in the local issues to support NGOs sustainable programs.

1. The situation of NGOs post-revolution till present

Much has occurred since the 25th of January 2011 revolution in Egypt, some changes aided NGOs and others did not. For example, the increase in NGOs was foreseen by the government thus fulfilling socio-economic development and charity work under state authority up until the revolution. A year later, not only were some NGO founders taking the lead in pushing the nation forward, but also applying for presidential elections. But after some reshaping of the regime, the situation went from calls for “Bread, Freedom, Social justice” to cries of horror. Both national and international NGOs were continuously accused of receiving illegal foreign funding and consequently, some were shut down. Not only were NGO offices, hardware and documents raided by the state security, but also tens of staff members were imprisoned for up to five years. Four and a half years later, the regime backed down from their public services responsibility. The majority of 45 million Egyptians under 35 years worry about their economic survival. Therefore, in 2014 unemployment increased to 13.4% due to an unskilled workforce and an education system neglected by the state, thus the Egyptian struggle for inequality of wealth remains. Despite that, according to the International Center for Not For-profit Law (ICNL) for NGOs in 2015, Egypt represented the largest and most influential force in the Arab world, due to being the pioneer in NGO law creation (Civic Freedom Monitor: Egypt, 2018). Finally, while NGOs report success stories, the government newspapers are filled with tales of foreign spies working in NGOs (Franz, 2015).

1.1. The call for “Bread, Freedom, Social justice” and the role of design

After increasing the demands of “social justice” – the main slogan symbolizing the revolution – design is asked to contribute effectively to create value at the social level. Today’s social challenges in Egypt are numerous and complex; such as environmental problems, alleviation of social inequalities and sustainable development. Each Egyptian informal area is suffering from hopelessness, illiteracy, and depression, and yet is full of potential, which is why many NGOs suffer while developing informal area inhabitants, as they are more often than not resistant to learning or even work. But once this is overcome, success stories come to life. Providing that design is to play a role in effectively reducing poverty, unemployment, education or any other socio-economic problems in informal areas, it must be accompanied by other fields to produce practical results. Many of the critiques on social design projects lie in the project being too hypothetical or theoretical to be applied in reality. Papanek clearly stated, “Am I on the side of the social good, or will the object that I design be an addition to the catalog of unnecessary fetish objects?” (Papanek, 1985). A question that should be addressed by social designers who intend to design for the real world.

Informal areas are unauthorized settlements, where the inhabitants and their houses have no legal claim to be constructed (OECD, 2018). The population of Egypt has a life expectancy of 72 years and a literacy rate of 72%. The population consists of 90% Muslims, 9% Coptic and 1% other Christians. In another estimate, Egypt has 40.000 NGOs (ICNL, 2015).

However, according to the Ministry of Planning, every eight months, one million people need housing thus leading to 53% of Cairo being informal. These unfortunate circumstances created an initiative by the more privileged to help the poor. Therefore, Cairo hosts 250.000 NGOs, ranging from small NGOs with a maximum of 30 people to larger NGOs with 20.000 volunteers (Egypt Urban, 2018).

Each informal area develops its unique traditions. The inhabitants develop methods for providing for their families according to the needs of the area. For instance, *Manshyet Nasser* in Cairo consists of more than two million people, some of which earn their daily living by collecting garbage and sorting it for resale. In fact, there cannot be one certain definition for informal areas, especially in Egypt. In 2015, the new President created the Ministry of Informal Areas, led by Dr. Laila Iskandar, who worked with informal areas and garbage collectors for 30 years, and consequently based her doctoral dissertation on garbage collectors. According to Iskandar, the way into developing the unemployed isn't in providing them with good housing or money, it's in teaching them vocational skills that will allow them to solve their own problems (Iskandar, 2015). Currently, social designers tend to go into informal areas to define problems. But frequently due to their lack of experience in social research, they get inaccurate results. Robertson and Sobol (2011) state designers need to be aware of their more powerful positions in society - more powerful than the communities they seek to serve. They enter informal communities with the intention to help but they are ineffective as the inhabitants offer misleading information due to a trust issue between them and

the designers. This leads to the designers producing solutions that are not acceptable to the inhabitants as they do not satisfy their needs (Robertson and Sobol, 2011). This study is searching for a design intervention to increase the sustainability of NGO projects addressing informal area unemployment.

2. Investigation Methodology

The research methods described here are essentially design focused and framed by social context and subject area. The methods conducted are interviews, field visits and observations.

2.1. Interviews

Unstructured interviews were conducted with leaders and members of the selected NGOs and with inhabitants of the informal areas in which the NGOs worked. The following interviews took place.

Interview types	In-depth interviews	Interviewees & number of interviews	17	NGO members, founders and leaders
	Short face to face		4	Crochet and clothing experts
	Friendly / under cover interviews		24	Women living in informal areas

Figure 1. J. G. Attia, Interview types and interviewees.

Moreover, further into the project, several interviews took place with people with similar interests to members of NGOs.

2.2. Field Visits and Observation

Field visits and on-site observations were used to observe the environment internally. One of its main hypotheses was to

prove that when a designer/researcher observes the informal area inhabitants with an expert from an NGO he sees further into the problem rather than when visiting alone.

Three field visits were held with the databasing team leader of a local NGO. The aim of the visits was to observe the informal area and its inhabitants at work. The visits involved going into the school that the NGO works with and being led by a number of children into their homes where their mothers were interviewed.

2.3. Samplings

It was quite important to specifically select the interviewees from the NGOs. Since NGO members normally have several reasons to join an NGO, and that is why by time their perception and values vary from one another. Volunteers join NGOs for one of three reasons; professional experience, social life and/or benefiting their community. In the NGOs that had a personal contact inside, it was decided to select members or team leaders and not founders or members of the board of directors. On-ground members are closer to understanding the actual day-to-day problems with the informal area inhabitants and could also offer sincere feedback on the procedures of the NGO. In addition, team leaders have more experience thus their input is rather more output and short-term goal-oriented than the members. The reason NGO founders were not interviewed is that their input is vision oriented. Furthermore, to be accurate about the sampling process, not all interviewees were particularly selected by us, as in some interviews the NGOs were visited and we were referred to the person who is in charge and available for a discussion.

3. Investigation Findings

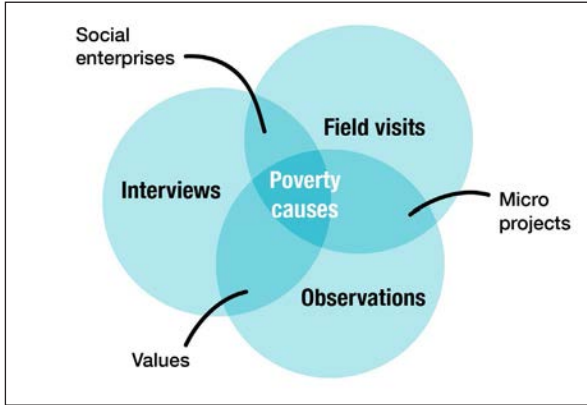


Figure 2. J. G. Attia, Findings overlap.

Below are some of the investigated activities of NGOs as listed by the sample:

Developmental organizations' Activities	Research and mapping	Charitable organizations' Activites	Awareness
	Technical and personal skills development		Feeding
	Crafts		Educating
	Micro - finance credit		Vocational Training
	Children education		Orphans care
	English learning		Health supplies
	Computer learning		Relief programs
	Village development		

Figure 3. J. G. Attia, Charitable and Developmental NGOs activities.

3.1. Interviews' and field visits' findings

The Head of Microcredit of an NGO branch in a private university was interviewed. He describes that their approach is development through the whole family, not just the individual,

aiming to eventually terminate poverty and unemployment. His team in the Microcredit project creates case studies and database analysis then accordingly selects the cases that deserve the equity. On the university student NGOs' scale, the equity is used for relief like health or small business problems. Therefore, the equitable is required to repay the money over 12 months. The NGO also holds computer learning, English and illiteracy programs. They face problems, despite the fact that the team researches about the cases in need through their neighbors, sometimes the individual does not pay off his equity and the NGO ends up losing money. Yet their Monitoring Specialist explains that before offering the people small projects, they hold a modified project planning and soft skills training so the recipients are well oriented before receiving and launching their micro projects. These Micro programs solve only the problem at hand. They provide their cases with microcredit and do not follow up to check on the progress of the project except to confirm the equity is paid. The second interview was held with the NGO Development specialist, who explained the NGO was founded 10 years ago simply for human development. After a couple of years of common relief projects, the foundation decided to alter its approach into a more sustainable one. Then he added that people in need should not be given money but rather receive a means of living and pay back its equity.

Furthermore, in another foundation that mainly works with *Manshyet Nasser* inhabitants, the President explains the main goal is to establish a model for developing informal areas, in order to achieve this, they need to spend around 10 years in *Manshyet Nasser*. Their approach is to contain poverty and un-

employment through education. So they visit schools and target children and help them learn. In around four years they have educated around 1400 children. Moreover – according to the databasing team leader – they aim to document all cases, to tackle their needs, expenses and any extreme situations like health problems. They go to the schools where they help the children, discover which of them are not paying the fees and ask them to lead them to their houses. We went into the school, the leaders already had lists of the children’s names, so we were divided into teams of girls and boys and set off with the children to their homes. We asked about the possible expenses, health problems, educational level, number of electrical devices they have and finally what they expect from the foundation. Some asked for sewing machines as they prefer working from home. The NGO classifies poverty into four levels. The women we interviewed are level two and don’t need help right away. Level four would be a house where the main provider had a health problem and there is no source of income. From this experience, it is deduced that the sample of women interviewed wanted to provide for their families, had the potential but are held back by their traditions. The foundation also aims to create socio-economic empowerment by providing loans to establish small businesses (micro-finance) (Fig. 4).

Socio- Economical Empowerment Micro Projects examples	Tricycles that transport food	Carpentry
	Vegetables business	Electrical business
	Sewing machines	Mechanical business
	Clothing business	Kiosks and small supermarkets
	Accessories business	Ovens

Figure 4. J. G. Attia, Socio-economic empowerment micro projects.

3.2. Social enterprises

The final section of the investigation was about social enterprises. During the entrepreneurship summit Rise Up, a number of NGOs were present for exposure. One was a social enterprise that helps the underprivileged develop economically through building farms on their rooftops. Thus allowing them to grow and sell vegetables. Fortunately, after a couple of years they were approached by corporations aiming at creating gardens on their premises' roofs, but then they convinced their client to rather build a farm and teach their staff about farming. They are currently developing vertical farming as a new product. At the same summit, a social incubator explains that they gather startup NGOs and social enterprises to join. They are mentored for a certain amount of time and are provided with seed funding to start off their projects. An e-commerce social enterprise aims to help underprivileged housewives. The enterprise provides these women with a platform, where people order oriental homemade food and they cook it and deliver it to their houses. Below are some of the activities that social enterprises do:

Social Enterprises' Activities	Roof farms
	Catering
	Seed funding
	Incubating startup ideas
	Training entrepreneurs

Figure 5. J. G. Attia, Social Enterprises activities.

3.3. NGO poverty reduction programs analysis

In order to create a conclusive research about unemployment in informal areas in Cairo, it is logical to continue what other NGOs have developed. Since over the past decades and especially after the 25th of January revolution, thousands of NGOs have started to assist in the development of Egypt. Thus the purpose of the research is investigating the methods the NGOs use to solve informal area problems.

From this, an overall picture emerged of the poverty cycle in Egypt. The cycle starts with lack of education leading to large-scale unemployment and reliance on insecure, day-to-day work to meet basic needs. In Fig. 6, the testimonial of an NGO founder is illustrated. He explains there are 4 cyclic core reasons for poverty. Each of the four can lead to high levels of poverty on its own, let alone if several occurred together.

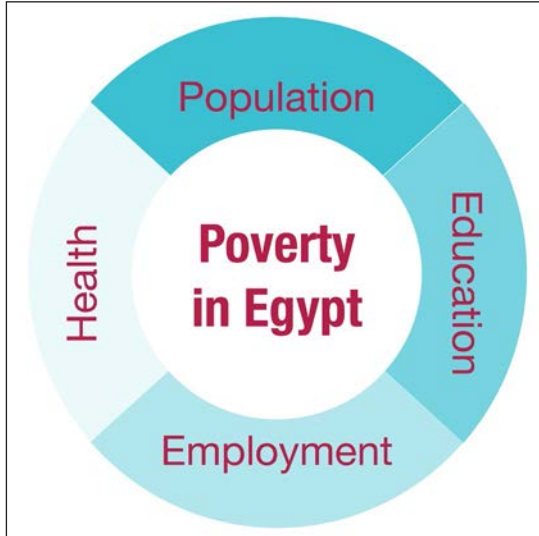


Figure 6. J. G. Attia, Poverty reasons in Egypt.

Despite their unemployment and poverty, most of these underprivileged people get married and have several children, because – according to Egyptian traditions – marriage is one of the noble conventions of life. So more people require houses to live in and, not being able to afford to buy new ones, they build informal houses. The physical conditions of informal living – such as inadequate water supply and sanitation, overcrowding and poorly constructed buildings – lead to health problems, with many people spending a large proportion of their wages on medicines and construction for instance. According to the Ministry of Planning, every eight months, one million people need housing thus leading to 53% of Cairo being informal. These unfortunate circumstances created a fortunate initiative by the more privileged educated people to help the poorer, therefore Cairo hosts around 250,000 NGOs that vary from active working groups in universities to smaller NGOs to large-scale organizations that try to develop Cairo (Why Informal Areas, 2018). As mentioned, after visiting diverse and seemingly successful NGOs, some approaches to solving these problems were observed:

- Classes for the illiterate take place on a weekly basis for people age 40 years and above.
- Enrichment classes for children are held to help with their school studies.
- As for health problems, regular inspection and blood donation campaigns take place.
- For unemployment, NGOs offer equity and loans to help families provide.

3.4. NGOs' Values

All the NGOs interviewed had valid intentions to help Egypt become a better place. They have different visions and values they follow. But they all evaluate their impact similarly. Since it is quite difficult to get accurate statistics of poverty levels, income, and population, the NGOs cannot set a realistic long-term strategy to minimize poverty for instance. They can only calculate what they have implemented and compare it to their and others' previous year's achievements. Since most of the NGOs mentioned in the field research approach the problems with on-ground research and databasing methods, rather than online research or competitor study research, the idea generation and brainstorming taking place internally is limited. When the projects of a charitable NGO are compared with those of a developmental one, it seems that the vision of the charitable is only focusing on encouraging volunteerism regardless of the output created. Therefore, the volunteers get carried away with the work and its motivating and emotionally fulfilling spirit and forget that they are not impacting the community as effectively as they can. We assumed the only way design intervenes in the NGO's process is through styling and marketing. Not surprisingly the intervention of design in the NGO's process is quite difficult and needs a reflective form of practice allowing NGO members and designers to fuse experience. The importance of design for NGOs is to give better understanding of people's interaction with their environment thus giving better solutions.

Therefore, in this study design is introduced to raise the quality bar of their business model through maintaining loyalty with the end user.

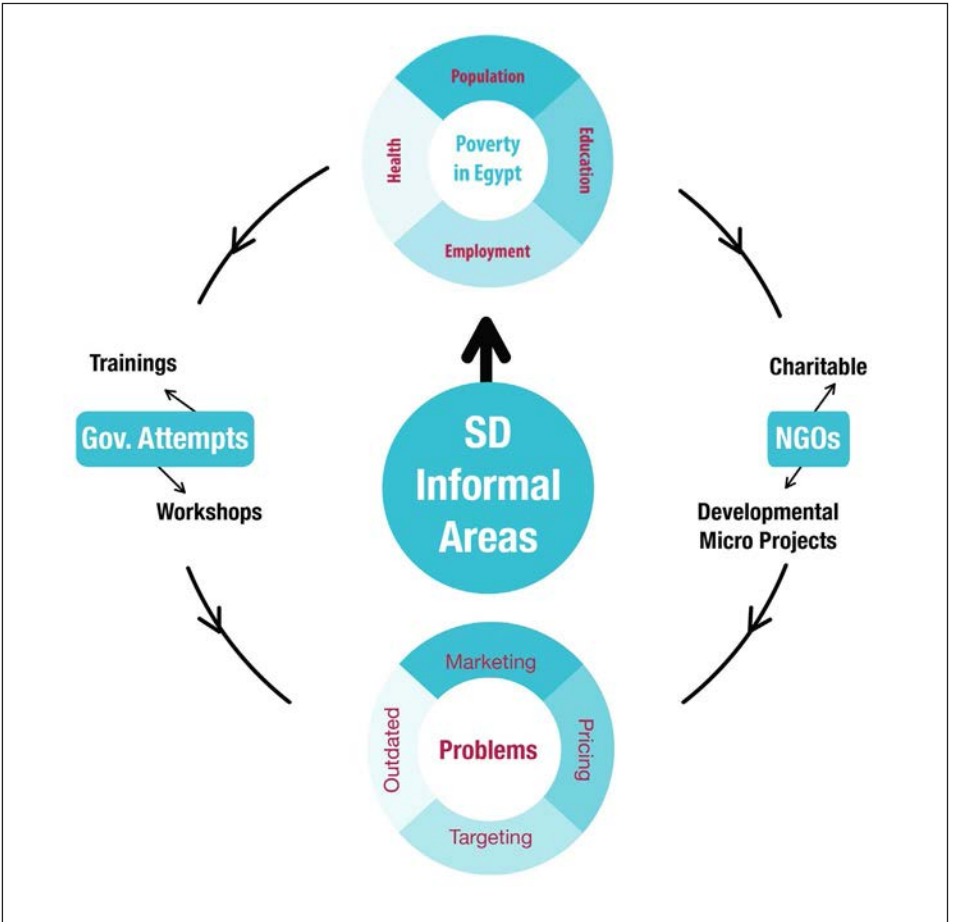


Figure 7. J. G. Attia, Analysis map of problem and solution for sustainable development of informal areas.

4. Design intervention and reflection

One of the NGOs established a sewing workshop in *Ein El-Seera* where informal area inhabitants are introduced to sewing and some traditional handcrafts. The workshop sells their products through seasonal bazaars. It is located in the informal area itself, thus allowing the women to maintain their traditions of working within their neighborhoods.

Due to this, it is hypothesized that unemployment can be treated through; creating a social enterprise inside the NGO, selling fashionable convenient clothing online, that is made by informal area inhabitants targeting Egyptian girls of “Class A”, age range from 20-25. The target finds it difficult to look fashionable while maintaining their cultural traditions. Accordingly – through participatory design – a sample from this target group was selected and guided to design their needs themselves and then have the informal area women sew the products. Finally, the products were sold through a branded online store. It was created to appeal to the aspiring needs of the target group, rather than branding the clothing as the products of an informal area economic development project. “Class A” veiled women are expected – according to Islam – to wear non-transparent and loose clothing, but they prefer shopping at international brand stores who provide a limited variety. When they do find an appropriate item, the risk of finding a number of their friends wearing the same item increases. Another situation takes place as well if the shopper buys a loose skirt for instance but the fabric is transparent, she is forced to find a tailor to add a layer underneath. The research and the implementation phases took almost one year, and during this year the process went around in loops several times.

4.1. Social change implications for design

This research analyses sustainable development in the informal areas of Cairo. People started creating NGOs with several approaches to solving the problems through volunteering and donating. These contributions were either categorized as charitable or developmental projects. Charitable projects can be

further subcategorized into various methods where people in informal areas receive money, medicine and other basic needs. Yet in developmental projects, NGOs focus more on the sustainability of the supportive action, so they do not give money or any basic needs directly, they provide what the individual or family needs indirectly, like education and a source of income like microcredit projects. These methods serve the pursuit of autonomy. Moreover, these micro-projects face problems as well on the long term. Only the NGOs that do regular follow-up notice that most individuals lack experience in planning, marketing and pricing even when given proper training.

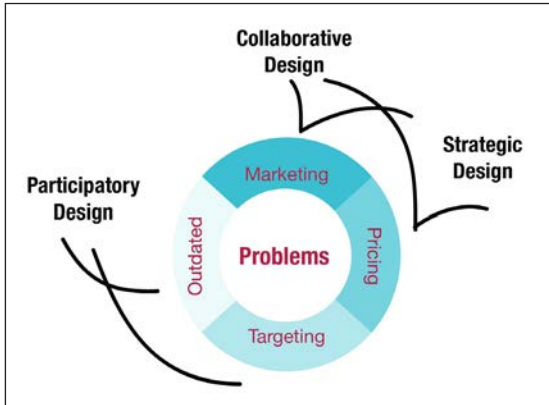


Figure 8. J. G. Attia, Design approaches to each problem.

There are four main problems with micro-projects applied in informal areas (Fig. 8). But they can be approached through design. Producing outdated products that have no specific target group can be developed through research and participatory design. In addition, the marketing and pricing can be better formulated through collaborative and strategic design with the NGO team.



Figure 9. J. G. Attia, Strategic concept map.

Under this context, participatory, collaborative and strategic design intervention took a role in empowering the intervention (Fig. 9). There were three main players; the NGO, the store, the informal area inhabitants and the end user. The flow between all parties is either two way or one way. First, the relation between the informal area women and the NGO is a two-way relationship, where the NGO selects the women, trains them and controls the quality of their products, the women deliver the products and get paid in return. Second, the NGO creates a team that works in the store that needs public relations, graphic, and product design, Social media management, marketing, customer service, and logistics. The relation of the NGO with the team is simple because it only acts as an initiator and supervisor of the team, but gives guidance whenever help is needed. Third, the store interacts with the end user, markets and delivers the products. Therefore, the end user and the women don't interact, but the revenue goes back into developing the informal area through the NGO.

There is no one generic model that could be applied to develop all informal areas, as each varies from poverty levels to habits and capabilities. Therefore, a specific model should be created for each area(s) with similar characteristics. For instance, in this research, all 4 informal areas have similar capabilities and habits yet different levels of poverty. The model created can be applied to all areas but with some variations. The actual result of this research is a plan of how to help four informal areas (*Batn Elbaara, ElMatareya, Mansheyet Naser, ElKonayesa*) that were tested during the research.

For the area of *Batn Elbaara*, a workshop was implemented in the area, equipped with all materials, which could be outsourced to factories that need manpower but lack hiring capabilities. The online store was the final step in the implementation. It was launched on Facebook, Instagram and a website. During the first three weeks, the Facebook page received 7000 likes, two shop partnerships, 20 orders, and two returns.

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MA in Interior Design (Politecnico di Milano), she studied illustration at Central Saint Martins and worked at Cinimod Studio (interior and interaction design) in London. Her work is focused on creating spaces for relations, experiences and participation through urban installations and hands-on workshops. In 2011 she started "Make People Do Lab" a research project on crafts and participatory design practices, based in the Apulian region. In 2014 she joined Entropika, a multidisciplinary design lab based in Athens, operating at the intersection of art, architecture and technology. In 2016 she co-founded Bordo, an interior and visual design practice based in Taranto. Since January 2018 she is part of the Open Design School in Matera, Italy, designing urban infrastructures for public spaces for Matera European Capital of Culture 2019.

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Plasticity Studio

Art and research project established in 2017 by Grazia Mappa e Gabriele Leo in an attempt to investigate the natural and political implications of western design culture. Our multimedia work finds itself at the intersection of contemporary art, and design sociological investigation.

Currently we live and work between Taranto and Milan.

plasticity-studio.tumblr.com

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Camila Soares de Barros

Dance and movement artist and researcher interested in biopolitics, education, creative processes, and in art as power of life. Brazilian, Bachelor of Dance (UNICAMP- Brazil), Specialist in Técnica Klauss Vianna (PUC-SP, Brazil) and Master in Education (UNIFESP- Brazil). In 2017-2018 she integrated the international collective of artists "O Risco da Dança" at c.e.m - centro em movimento and presented her latest dance work BICHO in Festival Pedras'18, in Lisbon-PT. Back to Brazil since August 2018, she keeps investigating BICHO and its developments and potencies in different territories.

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Ahmed Wahby

Graduated in 1992 with a degree in Architecture from Ain Shams University, Cairo Egypt. In 2000 he obtained an MA degree in Islamic Art and Architecture from the American University in Cairo, AUC where he had worked as a research assistant for almost 4 years. In 2008 he was awarded his Ph. D degree in Islamic Art, Architecture and Archaeology from the Oriental Department of the Otto-Friedrich University, School of Human Sciences, Art and Culture, in Bamberg, Germany. Dr. Wahby has been teaching since 2008 at the German University in Cairo GUC, the Faculty of Applied Sciences and Arts in the Design Theory Department. He has also served as the Faculty's Vice Dean for 8 years. He has numerous publications in local and international journals.

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Progetto grafico is an international graphic design magazine founded in 2003 and published by Aiap, the Italian association of visual communication design. A point of reference for such design in Italy from its start, it has also been fully translated into English since 2012. • In December 2017, Jonathan Pierini and Gianluca Camillini became the current editors. • The new *Progetto grafico* offers a critical look at graphics and visuals through a narrative broken up into fragments. Its aim is to offer articles connected in different ways so as to foster a series of transdisciplinary, historical and contemporary considerations. This multiple viewpoint, ranging from very distant to very close, seeks to look at the real both in the broadest terms as well as in a more specialist context. Our belief is that observation, whether of artifacts or representations, as well as production of visuals or graphics can add to today's cultural debate. • Contributions can include visual material, essays and interviews. Each issue intends to explore the storytelling opportunities of the journal.



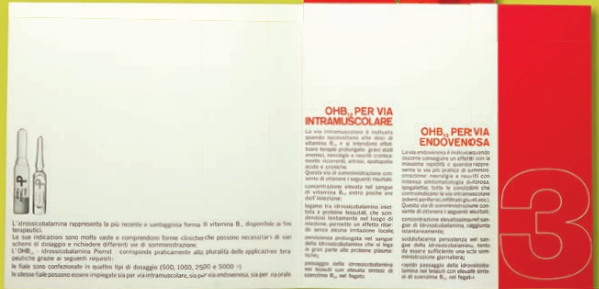
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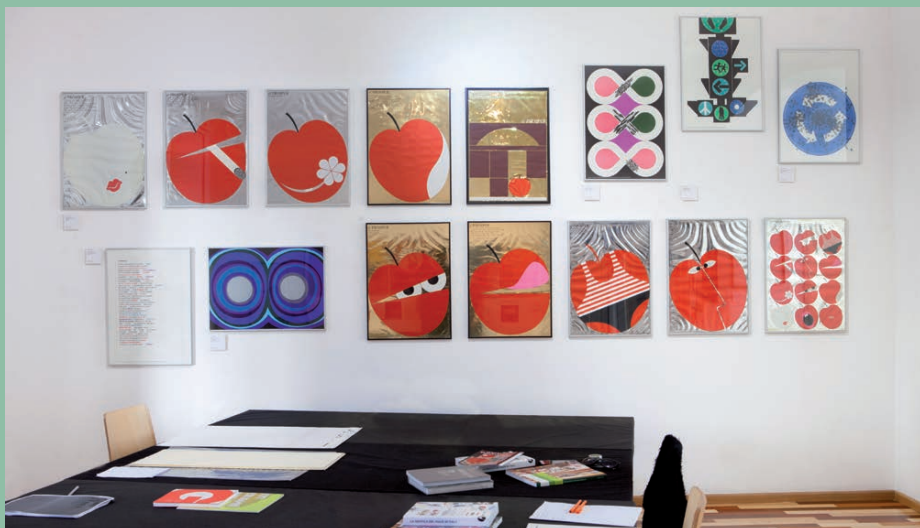
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