

27



**ART AND DESIGN  
IN THE  
WORKPLACE**



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**PAD**

via Francesco Soave 15 – 20135 Milano – Italy  
via Roma 171 – 90133 Palermo – Italy  
[info@padjournal.net](mailto:info@padjournal.net) – [editors@padjournal.net](mailto:editors@padjournal.net)

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**0. EDITORIAL #27**

**Art and Design for Well-Being in the Workplaces** **005**  
by Annalisa Dominoni & Irene Sanesi

**I. THE THERAPEUTIC ROLE OF ART AND DESIGN AT WORK**

**DHesign (Design + Heritage) for the Workplace.** **016**  
**Italian Design and Heritage Between Identity and New Narratives**  
by Annalisa Dominoni & Irene Sanesi

**Beyond Aesthetics.** **036**  
**The Strategic Role of Art and Design in Renewing Italian Corporate Spaces**  
by Marzia Tomasin

**Weaving Prosperity. Opening Textile Factories to Art and People** **057**  
by Paolo Franzo

**II. A DIALOG WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD**

**Curating. Creating a Space of Sharing** **076**  
by Gabi Scardi

**Work Transit Hubs. Art as a Tool for a Cultural Welfare in Metro Stations** **100**  
by Silvana Donatiello, Mariarita Gagliardi & Edoardo Amoroso

**III. NEW DESIGN NARRATIVES FOR HEALTHCARE**

**Beyond the “White Cube”. Intersecting Art and Design in Hospital Spaces** **123**  
by Virginia Marano

**The Impact of Design on Healthcare. Restorative Interiors** **148**  
by Sara Iebole, Silvia Pericu, Chiara Olivastri & Luca Parodi

**IV. AESTHETIC SENSE**

**New Aesthetics for House and Workspace.** **177**  
**From the War Against Smells to the Search of Perfumes**  
by Pierluigi Panza

**Performative Storytelling Design. Intertwining Art, Storytelling Design, and Neurodesign for Empathetic Connections in Workplaces** **201**  
by Eleonora D’Ascenzi

**V. BIOGRAPHIES**

**About the Authors** **222**

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**EDITORIAL**  
**#27**

# Art and Design for Well-Being in the Workplaces

**Annalisa Dominoni**

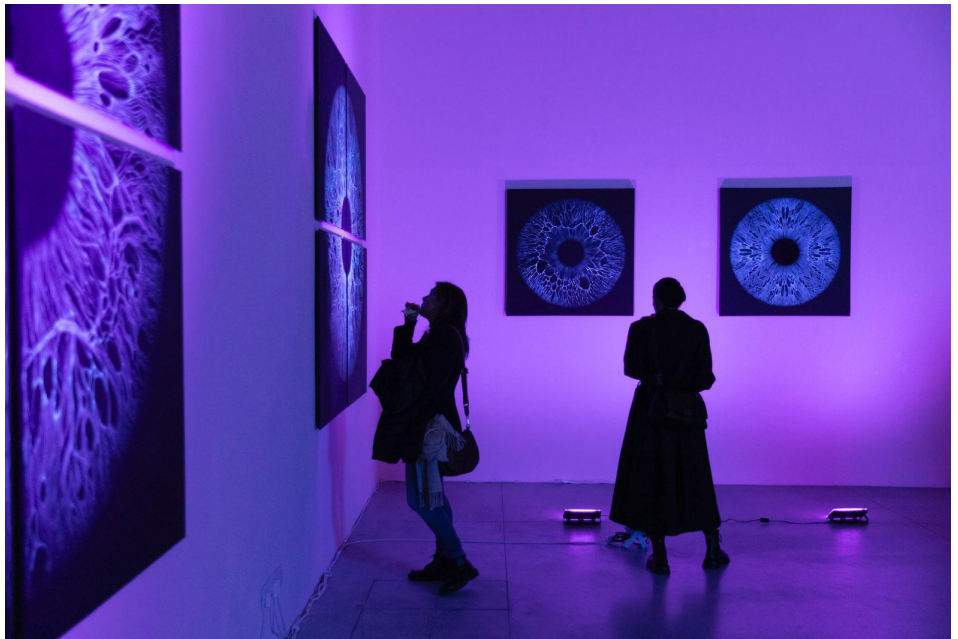
Politecnico di Milano

Orcid id 0000-0003-1667-9786

**Irene Sanesi**

BBS-pro

Orcid id 0009-0004-2798-414X



005

**Art and Design in the Workplace** examines the transformative potential of art and design in generating “cultural welfare” by extending creative practices beyond traditional heritage sites, museums, and galleries into “non-canonical” spaces. These include collective workplaces, corporate offices, professional environments, transit hubs like metro stations, and care venues like hospitals. The overarching aim is to enhance the quality of life by creating more comfortable and aesthetically enriching environments and products. This thematic exploration delves into the intrinsic relationship between art, design, health, and healing, informed by action-research cases aligned with the European Commission’s “New Agenda for Culture 2030”. This policy initiative positions the intersection of well-being, culture, and health as a core pillar of European cultural policy. Furthermore, the 2019 WHO Europe Region Report, “What is the Evidence on the Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Well-Being? A Scoping Review”, establishes a direct correlation between cultural and creative engagement and improved health and mental well-being, highlighting associated gains in soft skills. The design process addressing these issues incorporates a multidisciplinary approach rooted in the New European Bauhaus (NEB) principles, an initiative by the European Commission that aims to create sustainable, inclusive, and aesthetically pleasing living spaces. Integrating art and design into unconventional spaces serves a dual purpose: fostering employee well-being and encour-

aging generative approaches to collaboration. For example, introducing art into workplaces and other non-traditional venues nurtures partnerships, co-design initiatives, and new opportunities for interaction among cultural institutions, stakeholders, and contributors. These interactions transcend conventional visitor roles, fostering inclusivity and participatory citizenship.

The cultural heritage's role in contemporary society is moving from a preservation-focused model to an innovative, community-centred approach that integrates heritage into daily life. "DHesign (Design + Heritage) for the Workplace. Italian Design and Heritage Between Identity and New Narratives" underlines the crucial therapeutic potential played by art and design to enhance health and well-being. Additionally, it examines cultural institutions' role in "cultural welfare" redefining cultural sites, including museums, as "innovation laboratories" that promote civic engagement and community identity. Italy's unique cultural landscape, rich in historic and artistic assets intertwined with local communities, exemplifies this transformation through a "diffused museum" where cultural experiences extend beyond traditional museums to workplaces and public areas, encouraging public interaction and participation, emphasizing accessibility, inclusivity, and sustainability. The aim is to envision a future where cultural heritage in Italy can be valorised, designing a stronger identity through new narratives able to be a catalyst for social innovation, economic resilience and the well-being of future generations.

By examining case studies and recent trends, "Beyond Aesthetics: the Strategic Role of Art and Design in Renewing Italian

Corporate Spaces” by Marzia Tomasin, offers insights into this evolving phenomenon, showing how the concept of cultural welfare emerges as a key theme. Art and design in the workplace have evolved from mere aesthetics to strategic assets. Examples like Pirelli’s *Art at Work* project and Lavazza’s corporate museum illustrate how this integration can significantly improve employee satisfaction and productivity. Looking ahead, the study explores prospects and challenges, arguing that this integration represents a transformative paradigm with the potential to alter physical environments, organizational dynamics, and social impact. Bridging theory and practice, the study contributes to literature on cultural welfare and organizational aesthetics, offering strategies for companies to enhance work environments and corporate culture while aligning with global workplace design and responsibility trends.

Paolo Franzo’s “Weaving Prosperity: Opening Textile Factories to Art and People” explores whether it is possible to imagine a future for fashion manufacturing in Italy, particularly in the textile sector, which promotes new models of relations between workplaces, people and products, thanks to art and processes of care, in a perspective of renewed prosperity. The investigation is based on three case studies – Bonotto, promoter of the “slow factory” that has brought artists and artworks inside the factory, Lanificio Paoletti, committed to the protection of the Alpago sheep and the enhancement of the territory through events such as The wool road, and Lottozero, a creative hub for textile research and experimentation. The analysis reveals a reorganization of Italian manufacturing, in which factories become places of living, learning, and growth, capable of “weaving prosperity” based on virtuous



relationships between people, working spaces, and resources, in line with a sustainable and desirable future.

The relationship between the works and the space, understood as a context, not just a physical one, is consciously described in the article “Curating. Creating a Space of Sharing” by Gabi Scardi, looking at the field of professional practice and welfare. The *Nctm e l'arte* project by ADVANT Nctm Studio Legale discusses how culture, and more particularly contemporary art, can significantly enrich life within professional spaces, becoming a shared repository of common meanings, an opportunity for exchange, a common good, capable of affecting the quality of life and work, as well as serving as a strategic lever, as a vehicle for an image of momentum and openness. It was about understanding the people visiting the firm and their interactions. Great attention was paid to how art was integrated into the firm’s interior and thus to the quality of the experience of those working there or visiting it, establishing a meaningful dialogue with the outside world to make the professional community space an open, porous and stimulating workplace.

Through design that increasingly integrates artistic practices, uncommon art places are generated, where everyday journeys are converted into experiences of introspection and cultural connection. It is, therefore, necessary to re-imagine urban transit spaces as vital components of the cultural and health ecosystem. “Work Transit Hubs: Art as a Tool for a Cultural Welfare in Metro Stations” written by Silvana Donatiello, Mariarita Gagliardi and Edoardo Amoroso, explores the transformative power of metropolitan art stations in Europe,

presenting them as hubs of well-being within the contemporary urban scenario. These transit hubs, characterized by high foot traffic, offer unique opportunities to integrate art into daily life. Such interventions enrich the aesthetic and sensory experience of the users involved and contribute significantly to their well-being and mental health. This analysis is part of the broader context of cultural welfare, which integrates social and cultural well-being, recognizing the importance of access to culture and the arts as fundamental to the quality of life of individuals and communities.

Thanks to the transformative power of art, metro stations can evolve into sanctuaries of serenity and reflection, contributing to the overall well-being of city inhabitants and redefining the role of public spaces in contemporary urban life.

By focusing on contemporary artists and their work within hospital settings, Virginia Marano's "Beyond the 'White Cube': Intersecting Art and Design in Hospital Spaces" presents insights into the dynamic relationship between art, health, and healing, revealing new possibilities at the intersection of art, design, and medical spaces. These artists critically engage with the medicalization of their bodies, challenging conventional health narratives and questioning institutionalized understandings of care and illness. Collectively, their practices disrupt the hospital's historical dominance as a site of power over the body, transforming it into a space where the complexities of human experience – pain, illness, care, and resilience – are embodied and expressed. The hospital becomes a place of active resistance and self-representation, where vulnerability is strength, and the body becomes a site of agency, knowledge, and creativity.

It reveals potential for radical reimagination within regulated hospital environments – redefining care, emerging new forms of knowledge, and creating spaces that honour embodied realities.

Although new care horizons are advancing, the quality of healthcare facility spaces does not keep pace despite evidence that physical spaces influence mental, emotional, and physical health. “The Impact of Environment on Healthcare: Restorative Interiors” by Sara Iebole, Silvia Pericu, Chiara Olivastri and Luca Parodi presents a project that reimagines the care spaces of the Obstetrics Department at Santa Croce Hospital with a domestic approach, implementing restorative design improvements that utilize environmental generativity factors. It is necessary to bring the outdoors inside and create indoor – biophilic – environments that reference nature in obvious and subtle ways. The objective is to humanize the hospital environment, reducing stress, improving health outcomes, supporting pain management, and promoting a general sense of well-being through the use of light, materials, objects, and forms that evoke nature and recreate its essential values, equally emphasizing the sensitivity and perception of the target alongside the functionality of the spaces, addressing heterogeneous elements from chromatic decorations to furniture components.

The importance of designing an environment capable of stimulating all senses to balance the human body and gain well-being reaches its peak with the contribution of Pierluigi Panza “New Aesthetics for House and Workspace: from the War Against Smells to the Search of Perfumes” that, starting from the connection between odour and domestic memory,

offers an analysis on the advancements in an architectural design concerning smell for new houses and new workplaces, they, therefore, proceed in the wake of an aesthetics that dialogues with neuroscience. The relationship between aromas and theories of space is framed at the genetic level and molecular mechanisms involved in the perception, recognition and memory of smells, thus allowing the clarification of the functioning of the olfactory system, which still remained largely unknown. From an operational point of view, this involves both the rediscovery of odorous materials, such as wood and the industrial creation of particular perfumes and the relative study of machines for their diffusion. The adoption of an urban odour plan would mark the introduction of the aesthetics of odours within the urban management regulations and also in the workplace of big industries. The necessary actions of sanitizing environments and controlling forced ventilation can provide an opportunity to introduce respect of perfume patterns in architectural design. Looking ahead, in “Intertwining Art, Storytelling Design, and Neurodesign: Cultivating Empathetic Connections in the Workplace” by Eleonora D’Ascenzi, future research should prioritize the hybridization of disciplines to boost productivity and team cohesion while exploring the co-design of such experiences in partnership with health specialists and human resources managers. This contribution examines the strategic role of “performative storytelling design” as an innovative approach that combines storytelling design, immersive technologies, and performative art to foster empathic connections by encouraging perspective-taking, strengthening team cohesion, and promoting shared corporate values.

The variety of work paths presented, different for how and where art and design are experienced, demonstrates the extraordinary liveliness and contemporaneity of the theme. A further step forward is represented by the opportunities for organicity for these experiences and actions within a real system, also through modelling the proposed formats. The governance of innovative projects, such as those that make art, design, and heritage interact with the workplace, has a key role in sustainable and participatory growth and a civil economy.



# THE THERAPEUTIC ROLE OF ART AND DESIGN AT WORK

# DHesign (Design + Heritage) for the Workplace

## Italian Design and Heritage between Identity and New Narratives

**Annalisa Dominoni**

Politecnico di Milano

Orcid id 0000-0003-1667-9786

**Irene Sanesi**

BBS-pro

Orcid id 0009-0004-2798-414X

### **Keywords**

Cultural Heritage, Design, Contemporary Art, Well-Being, Cultural Welfare.

### **Abstract**

This paper re-evaluates cultural heritage's role in contemporary society, moving from a preservation-focused model to an innovative, community-centered approach that integrates heritage into daily life. It redefines cultural sites, including museums, as "innovation laboratories" that promote civic engagement and community identity.

Italy's unique cultural landscape, rich in historical and artistic assets intertwined with local communities, exemplifies this transformation through the concept of a *museo diffuso* - "diffused museum" - where cultural experiences extend beyond traditional museums to workplaces and public areas, encouraging public interaction and participation.

The title "DHesign (Design + Heritage) for the Workplace" underlines the significant therapeutic potential played by art and design to enhance health and well-being. Additionally, it examines cultural institutions' role in "cultural welfare" supported by the World Health Organization's 2019 findings. In advocating a "CESG" model, the issue calls for adding a cultural dimension to Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) frameworks, integrating heritage as a driver of ethical leadership and sustainable business practices. It aligns with the 2022 ICOM museum definition, emphasizing accessibility, inclusivity, and sustainability, and encourages museums to actively contribute to community development. The aim is to envision a future where cultural heritage in Italy can be valorized designing a stronger identity through new narratives able to be a catalyst for social innovation, economic resilience and the well-being of future generations.





*Mostra Bloom*, artwork by Francesca Pasquali, Florence, 2024 (courtesy Irene Sanesi and BBS pro).



*We Wish You* by Antonelo Ghezzi, Prato, 2021 (courtesy Irene Sanesi and BBS pro).



# 1. Cathedral Thinking

Non è con l'occhio che si vede ma col cervello.  
Plinio il Vecchio, *Naturalis Historia*

Having (finally) overcome the logic and the approach (of the 1980s and 1990s of the twentieth century) of cultural deposits according to which that same heritage was perceived as “oil” (a limited polluting resource), a new contemporary interpretation has redeemed and rediscovered its identity and participatory, community, communicative and civic value.

In this context, the cultural places are no longer straightforward containers of goods but are taking on the profile of real laboratories of innovation and spaces for collective thinking. This change of paradigm and meaning finds particular meaning in Italy; it is no coincidence that already two centuries ago, travelers, intellectuals, and artists undertook their cultural journey along the Boot, the “Grand tour” (a pioneering vision of Italy) driven by the desire to visit and be visited by the artifacts and the Italian landscape. We can reasonably affirm that this tour was not defined as “great” only for its extension and for the arduous vicissitudes of reaching places outside the guidelines of the time (think of Paestum), but because it represented a physical journey to discover something intimate and spiritual, a connection and a deep understanding of the cultural heritage.

Today it is necessary to dust off the fateful question “for whom?” and not only “how?” we operate, live, exist. It is crucial to reclaim a systemic mindset, as indicated by the found-

ing fathers,<sup>1</sup> without creating separations and reductionisms, in a space-time dimension that is constitutively created to last and to survive those who promote it. Thus, in the same way, places of culture must reflect and promote this vision, responding to the challenges of the present with a new approach that integrates cultural heritage into daily life and the community.

This evolutionary trajectory that emerges from periods of trauma such as the pandemic and wars, represents a call to support innovation paths not only individual projects and good causes. This is a fundamental point to trace the path by walking together: each in their own daily life, in their neighborhood and in their city, feeling part of something that is not a global village but a community of people. A new and contemporary form of community, whose references and roots have been the cave and the tree, the square, the fountain and the cathedral, in which we are more children than heirs. Museums, not only those dedicated to art and design collections, are, in all aspects, agents and levers in the contexts in which they are located, with a pivotal role, often unaware and unexpressed, in the broad social, economic, civic, and educational fabric. Consider, in fact, the demo-ethno-anthropological museums that protect and enhance history and identity also through the valorization of craftsmanship, traditional uses, and customs, as well as corporate archives and museums,

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1 Art. 9 of the Italian Constitution: “The Republic promotes the development of culture and scientific and technical research. It protects the landscape and the historical and artistic heritage of the Nation. It protects the environment, biodiversity and ecosystems, also in the interest of future generations”.

custodians of the corporate heritage that in Italy is connected with the animus and the genius loci.

It is in the virtuous contamination – between goods and activities, *locus* and corporate culture, between landscape and sensible use of natural resources, between customs, traditions and aesthetic forms of products – that the arduous game of maintaining our authenticity is played and will be played. It is a development model that has ancient roots and that starts from an objective fact: Italy is a country for about 70% of its territory is made up of small and medium-sized municipalities with less than six thousand inhabitants, with a system of widespread micro-enterprises that are still the backbone of the many production chains. The world of fashion has understood this, and investment funds are acquiring not only the brands but also the chain of third parties that provide quality and unique services, without which it would be impossible to guarantee the so-called “enchantment economy” (Sanesi & Guidantoni, 2011), an economy of beauty of which we are considered the *Belpaese*, with a simple, and at the same time enlightening, definition of Made in Italy according to the historian Carlo Cipolla: the beautiful things that the world likes. In this context, cultural and creative institutions, starting with museums, must understand that new questions such as welfare and sustainability must be added and considered to the well-used (and sometimes even abused) instances of protection, promotion and valorization, in a changed and changing present. A wish to be formulated for cultural institutions is precisely that of standing out from the crowd, not certainly through an anachronistic form of distancing, but rather as a subject capable of expressing a new leadership. A leadership that will

still be founded on roots and history without, however, being the exclusive basis, integrating it with practices of inclusion and sustainability actions. Nurturing visions of the future that welcome, not only in intent, but also in governance and management tools, this perspective, means giving culture, art and design an opportunity to respond to the primary needs of protection, promotion and enhancement. It also means being able to guarantee more contemporary dimensions that are given by cultural production (not only, therefore, preserving the past, whatever it may be) and by the construction of the dimension of perspective (*cathedral thinking*).

By *cathedral thinking* we mean the mindset of cathedral builders, such as Notre-Dame in Paris, the Duomo in Milan, or the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, the latter designed by the architect Antoni Gaudí, who began working on it in 1883, fully aware that he would not live to see his masterpiece completed (the cathedral will be finished in 2026). The architect stated:

It is not a disappointment that I will not be able to finish the temple. I will grow old, but others will come after me. What must always be preserved is the spirit of the work; its life will depend on the generations that will pass on this spirit and keep it alive.

The motivating principle behind the mindset of cathedral builders can be applied to numerous fields of knowledge, starting with managerial sciences, by embracing a long-term perspective. This approach challenges us to dream big, collaborate, innovate, and persevere.



*Still Life* by Chiara Bettazzi, Prato, 2021 (courtesy Irene Sanesi and BBS pro).



*L'arte è carta da parati per ricchi* by Giulio Alvigini, Prato, 2024 (courtesy Serena Gallorini and BBS pro).

## 2. New Art and Design Contaminations in the Workplace

The variety and multiplicity of Italian museum institutions and their typification (see the concept of diffused museum coined by Antonio Paolucci) finds them linked to the territory, even geographically speaking, through a continuum between artifacts, architectural emergencies, and landscapes. We can configure this status: museums – diffused museum – territory, not only as a photograph of the state of the art but as a canon, paraphrasing Harold Bloom (Bloom, 1994). What we intended to share with this issue of PAD dedicated to Italian design and cultural heritage between identity and new narratives, is a contribution of reflection aimed at intercepting some cases and a series of good practices that are designing a sign of paradigm shift, tending to go beyond the canon. Experiments, research, actions, which are trying – sometimes even as attempts – to explore new forms of contamination through artistic action “inside” the workplace. The idea is not (only) to transfer the works elsewhere, with respect to their orthodox and common spaces (museums, galleries etc.), a practice that should not be excluded in any case. It is rather a process transfer by redefining the perimeters of the workplace, which are also like museums, multiple and varied: factories, professional studios, shops, hotels, laboratories, etc. It becomes interesting to move the immaterial and intangible dimension of art and design, the process and not just the product, since it is from the impact of a process management borrowed from artists and designers that generative and inspiring results and impacts are expected (Dominoni, 2019).

Globalization first and Artificial Intelligence today are dismantling and giving a new meaning to the 80s/90s model,



when the so called “4As” of the Italian production system were configured in the traditional manufacturing sectors: clothing (and personal goods), furniture (and household items), automotive (including mechanics) and agri-food.

We can reasonably affirm that other concepts have been added to the concept of production that have gradually filled the initial void with respect to the intimate and close link between production and georeferencing. In fact, how much of the success of the 4As depends on where the sectors are located?

A lot, in some cases. In Italy, the place is history, so much so that current productions almost always have more distant origins and sink their roots into the past, keeping habits and procedures intact. It is also intangible heritage that becomes a lifestyle, with some great common denominations and an infinite series of local declinations of extraordinary tangibility, when they move the economy, without necessarily being slow or “zero kilometer”. The productive part has acquired awareness of this link – between the business generated by art and design, and the territory – with different intensities depending on the case, moving from ideal situations of co-design and authentic collaboration between museums, examples of culture, and businesses, to forms of blatant parasitism devoid of any valorization or relationship. In between, a variety of nuances. The link is not limited to historical and historicized aspects but expands into the construction of policies and strategies of sustainable development. In other words, it is essential to identify models that push the productive and corporate world towards a positive and constructive “exploitation” of the competitive advantages of the locus and make the world of cultur-

al operators aware of the benefits of a relationship between communicating vessels. The worlds that are outside the cultural limes have so far been seen and experienced as occasional partners, communities are mostly considered public, not consumers (consumers and producers of content at the same time). Only by moving into the virtual locus an awareness has been acquired of how much the user is worth as a person in terms of choice and relationship.

And yet, the supply chain of aesthetic goods has strict rules: it is no coincidence that a red car rather than a design object, a plate of pasta, or a coat, become a personal experience as a permanent happening because they are filtered through one's own experience, and therefore capable of generating knowledge and perception of quality. The “wow” effect (translated today to the network and the virtual world) is no longer enough. Reality needs quality, and we will be increasingly measured on this parameter in the future without being able to take anything for granted and made in Italy, not only as made, created, and produced in Italy. But also as thought, designed, and inspired in Italy. It is well told without neglecting the value chain, and it activates a widespread protagonism of places and communities.

### **3. Art / Design for Health and Wellbeing – Care Resources**

The Italian cultural heritage, a sign of identity and historical testimony of the country is today faced with a profound rethinking of its educational, fruition, communicative, economic, and social role. Within this perspective, the concept of well-being as “one health” plays a new and central role,

including care in a perimeter that is certainly broader than in the past: protection of real estate and personal property, attention to people and their needs. In a very effective way, Anglo-Saxon countries call the heritage, emphasizing the aspect of the transmission function of values to which we as citizens are heirs. Coincidentally, but interestingly, the initials of the English word health are the same as heritage, almost as if to signify a subtle and lasting link between heritage in its multiple components: material and immaterial, and well-being, also in its multifaceted elements: physical, psychological, spiritual, relational.

Following the publication by the WHO-World Health Organization in 2019 of the report *What is the evidence on the role of the arts on improving health and well-being? A scoping review*, the most extensive and in-depth ever carried out on the subject, the debate on the relationship between culture and health has ignited, also following the effects of the pandemic on individuals and society. The report establishes a direct relationship between participation in cultural and creative activities and the improvement of mental health and well-being, also bringing benefits at the level of soft skills.

Many European countries have already implemented recommendations from the European Union to integrate cultural welfare policies (an Italian neologism defined in the Treccani Atlas for the first time in 2020), but important advocacy work still needs to be done, not least in our country.

Believing firmly in the soft power of cultural welfare means assuming art and culture, in their multifaceted expressions,

as health resources and resources for the care of individuals and communities, as stated in the manifesto of CCW – Center of Cultural Welfare.<sup>2</sup> It is demonstrated, as attested by the WHO Reports, the underlying virtuous relationship and this relationship managed in a strategic way becomes the tool to re-read the policies and actions in the territories: “Culture is closely connected to individual and collective development; social cohesion and the biopsychosocial health of communities are at stake” (Sanesi, 2023).

Many examples today demonstrate the importance of the therapeutic contribution of architecture, art, and design to redevelop places of hospitality and care and create environments in which there is a deep harmony of space, light, and beauty. In recent years, scientific research has been revitalizing, investigating the interrelations between culture and health. Neuroscience, medicine, and psychology worked with cultural organizations on a path where theory accompanies practice. Research confirms that culture is a determining factor in psychological well-being.

The privileged relationship between cultural participation and the state of health arises following the publication of epidemiological studies, which have demonstrated unequivocally that the intelligent use of leisure time is associated with an extension of life expectancy and a reduction in certain degenerative diseases, like Alzheimer’s disease or cancer. Culture is generally considered “entertainment” and therefore brought back to

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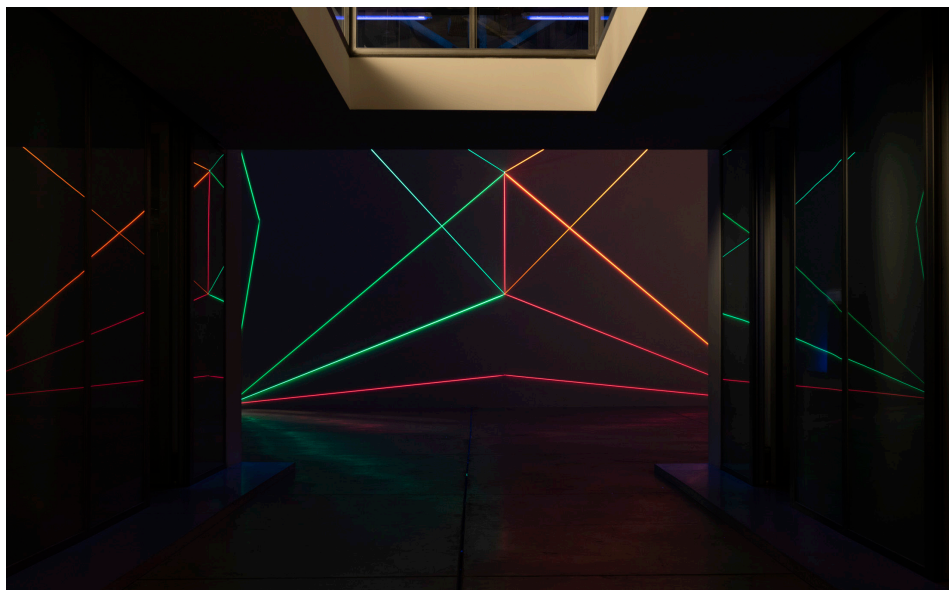
2 <https://culturalwelfare.center/>

the superfluous; however, cultural activity takes on a precise value, proving to be an essential tool able to prevent cognitive decline, mitigate stress conditions, and contribute to general welfare (Grossi & Ravagnan, 2013). As already included in the European Agenda for Culture 2018, the report of the World Health Organization, WHO 2019, attests that art and culture are important health resources for care, health promotion, and building equity and social quality (Fancourt & Finn, 2019).

Today more than ever, these interrelationships become strategic to address the human and urban convalescence that individuals and communities face. Artistic approaches can be considered as complex or multimodal interventions, combining several different components which may concern the aesthetic involvement, the stimulus of imagination, sensory activation, the evocation of emotions and cognitive stimulation. It may also include social interaction, behaviors, physical activity, involvement in health issues, and interaction with care settings and spaces. The perceptual-sensory characteristics of the environment assume a strategic value in the design of architectural spaces, giving emphasis to psycho-emotional aspects and semantic value to spaces as well as art and culture that affect moods, feelings, and emotions. Visual arts, architecture, music, and literature have the power to decisively affect mood improvement through immersive experiences of beauty, wonder, and transcendence. It also makes evident the need to prevent and not just cure. Hence, it is important to have a strategic alliance between design, culture, health, and social education to retrain care environments and increase the spread of well-being (Dominoni, 2022).



*Mostra Texture*, artwork by Renzo Bellanca, Florence, 2024 (courtesy Serena Gallorini and BBS pro).



*The form of light* by Vincenzo Marsiglia, Prato, 2022 (courtesy Irene Sanesi and BBS pro).

## 4. Integrating Art and Culture into ESG and Sustainability Reporting

The acronym ESG stands for Environmental, Social Governance and represents, in the economic/financial field, the activities related to the responsible investment of those companies that, in addition to profit, integrate objectives, tools, and actions of the so-called social responsibility (the inevitable acronym: CRS – Corporate Social Responsibility). ESG is a sort of contemporary crossroads that is becoming, fortunately, a trend. The data (speaking of “the trend is your best friend”) tell us that companies that have taken environmental, social and governance indicators into serious consideration are growing at a sustained pace, as are the investment funds that are displacing competitors with results and lower volatility. The purely economic, financial and patrimonial approach is undoubtedly outdated and considered reductionist even in the for-profit world (today happily contaminated by the introduction in our legal system – first in Europe – of benefit companies), with an acceleration linked to the push of millennials, who have now appeared on the market not only on the demand side but also on the sustainable leadership side.

There is no need for a careful eye to realize that among the non-financial reporting factors, the C of Cultural is missing (for a new crossroads), and the cultural (and creative) factor cannot be considered only within the social or environmental theme. The tools that tell the story of a company (profit, non-profit, benefit) in a final (accountability) and perspective (business plan and forecast) are key needs today more than ever. They are a reading key that is also cultural. Where cultural meaning embraces a multiplicity of meanings: from the theme of the tan-

gible heritage of our assets as a memory of a past that cannot be relegated to a nostalgic stereotype or a postcard landscape to the intangible heritage as a heritage of knowledge and skills (also in companies), irradiation of the former and unique ability to generate imagination. Again, culture is a contemporary production capacity and support for digitalization that is not a mere prosthesis (Sanesi, 2021).

The reasoning on CESG becomes a significant viaticum also for museums and their capacity not only for accountability but as a new sustainable approach through filters that are not only ex-post (and/or fake) but perfectly embedded-integrated with the vision and mission of the cultural institution.

We, therefore, like to imagine (with healthy pragmatism) that contamination represents one of the most significant challenges of the meaning of our future, that the ESG criteria will soon be contaminated by the missing C, also thanks to an action of the players of culture such as museums, in an olivettian vision that considers the company as an organism within an ecosystem and an agent of change of that same system, capable of being the innovator that guides the imitators in the wake of an Italian way (Sanesi, 2024). But what exactly is meant by C of cultural? It means the humanities, of which art and design are part as ambassadors of a cultural and identity approach. In the land that generated the happy marriage between exact sciences and soft skills, we cannot leave the humanities outside the door, not in an Italy that, together with museums, recognizes itself in artistic and anthropomorphic icons: the “David” in Florence, the “Lion” in Venice, in architectural emblems: the



“Colosseum” in Rome, the “Mole” in Turin, the “Duomo” in Milan, in expressions of nature: the “Volcano” in Naples.

The new definition of museum that comes from the International Council of Museums (ICOM 2022) reflects the evolution of the role of public and private museums in recent decades and includes concepts such as accessibility, inclusiveness and sustainability, also specifying that museums must communicate and operate not only professionally, but also ethically.

A museum is a permanent non-profit institution at the service of society that conducts research, preserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums promote diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically and professionally and with the participation of communities, offering diversified experiences for education, pleasure, reflection and sharing of knowledge.

This definition highlights – compared to the previous formulation – how today’s museums are called to assume a role of responsibility towards society, not only as places of conservation, enhancement and promotion of culture, but also as places that actively participate in the dynamics of the community and the territory in which they are located, contributing to their social and ethical, as well as cultural, development.

“Accessible and inclusive”, underlines the ICOM statement, two terms that are very close from a conceptual point of view, but not always from a feasibility point of view: is an accessible museum, that is, one whose use is designed for everyone, consequently also inclusive? In Italy, these concepts are ad-

dressed superficially, and there is a lack of shared definitions and, above all, clear regulations. It would be time to rethink the definition of “museum,” not only from a regulatory point of view but also from an organizational one, incorporating the theme of design into the redefinition of this new concept and assigning it a strategic role in terms of feasibility.

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# Beyond Aesthetics

## The Strategic Role of Art and Design in Renewing Italian Corporate Spaces

**Marzia Tomasin**

Atelier Cultura

### Keywords

Art in Enterprise, Beauty, Sustainability, Corporate Social Responsibility, Employee Wellbeing.

### Abstract

This article explores the emerging role of art and design in Italian workplaces, highlighting how their integration redefines professional spaces, enhances employee well-being, and boosts company performance. The research offers insights into this evolving phenomenon by examining case studies and recent trends. It shows how workplace art and design have evolved from aesthetics to strategic assets. Examples like Pirelli's Art at Work project and Lavazza's corporate museum illustrate how this integration can significantly improve employee satisfaction and productivity. The concept of cultural welfare emerges as a key theme. The article also assesses the impact on ESG reporting and sustainability, confirming that art and design integration is becoming essential in corporate social responsibility strategies. Looking ahead, the study explores future prospects and challenges, arguing that this integration represents a transformative paradigm with the potential to alter physical environments, organizational dynamics, and social impact. Bridging theory and practice, the study contributes to the literature on cultural welfare and organizational aesthetics, offering strategies for companies to enhance work environments and corporate culture while aligning with global workplace design and responsibility trends.

## 1. Introduction

In the Italian business landscape, a paradigmatic transformation is taking place: the integration of art and design in the workplace. This phenomenon goes far beyond the purely aesthetic aspect, as it redefines organisational dynamics to the benefit of corporate performance and employee well-being (Lewandowska, 2015). The analysis of emblematic cases and emerging trends aims to provide an in-depth overview of this phenomenon, which increasingly fits within a strategic perspective, with significant repercussions on corporate social responsibility and sustainability. The binomial art and business usually recalls philanthropy or sponsorship in which art is a lever for marketing and promoting the company. However, this vision has become obsolete and reductive. In recent years, a new business model has emerged that conceives art as an intrinsic element of corporate activity, starting with the reinterpretation of workspaces. This innovative approach highlights a fundamental organic link between art and enterprise: matter. A factory<sup>1</sup> shapes matter and matter produces, just as art without matter cannot exist. When these two worlds intersect, a unique ecosystem merges production activity and artistic expression, generating multiple benefits for the company, its employees and society as a whole.

### 1.1. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed methodological approach combin-

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<sup>1</sup> In the article, the term factory refers not only to the factory equipped for a specific production but to the entire corporate working environment, i.e., offices, research centers, laboratories, and production plants.

ing a qualitative analysis of company case studies selected according to the following criteria: structured art-business integration programs active for at least 2 years, accessible documentation on art interventions, sectoral diversity, and a documentary analysis of company reports, specialist publications, archive material, interviews with managers responsible for art projects, employees of the companies analysed and artists involved. It is important to emphasise that this research field has significant limitations regarding available data and scientific insights, as it is still a relatively unexplored phenomenon in the academic literature. The often experimental nature of art-enterprise initiatives, coupled with the lack of standardised metrics for impact assessment, makes a comprehensive quantitative analysis complex.

## 2. Art and Enterprise

Three major organisations – Lavazza, Pirelli and UniCredit – have embodied this link between art and business with foresight, albeit in different ways. In Turin, Lavazza's executive offices are located inside the Nuvola, the architectural jewel designed by architect Cino Zucchi. This building transcends mere functionality and is configured as a true cultural ecosystem that includes the Lavazza Museum, an events space and an archaeological area. These are the remains of an ancient Paleochristian basilica dating back to the second half of the 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. discovered during the 2014 works, which were integrated into the original project (Fig. 1). A restaurant, a gymnasium reserved for employees, an underground car park and a garden square, which serves as a point of contact between the different elements, complete the offer that this



**Figure 1.** Stefano Gagol, *Archaeology of the Anthropocene. Long Before Us and After*, site-specific installation in the Lavazza Museum, Art Site Fest, 2023.

historic Italian company has conceived for its employees and the community, as almost all of these spaces can also be used by the public. In this context, the design of the offices and shared workspaces, which are spacious and flexible, and in which everything is taken care of down to the smallest detail, allow employees to make use of the best technologies in a unique environment in which art, history and memory come together harmoniously.

Art in work is the message launched by Pirelli with the project *A Beautiful place. The art of manufacturing* is the basis of the 2021 Annual Report.<sup>2</sup> A Beautiful Place is a factory, a beautiful place because it is capable of generating and inspiring beauty. That is why the company asked many international artists to

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<sup>2</sup> The Pirelli Annual Report 2021 can be downloaded directly from this link: [https://corporate.pirelli.com/var/files2021/IT/PDF/PIRELLI\\_ANNUAL\\_REPORT\\_2021\\_ITA.pdf](https://corporate.pirelli.com/var/files2021/IT/PDF/PIRELLI_ANNUAL_REPORT_2021_ITA.pdf).

visit manufacturing plants in China, the United States, Romania, Brazil and Italy to draw inspiration from architecture, technology, people, sounds, and create works made of matter and ingenuity. Manufacturing is art and art has become an integral part of the factory. Thus was born the work *Il Giardino del tempo* created by the ceramist Giovanni Mengoni, who, in the Settimo Torinese factory, molded a vase on a potter's wheel using the Etruscan bucchero technique. In the factory in Rome, Georgia, the famous artist Lisette Correa, known as Arrrtaddict, created a special mural at the local Pirelli factory (Fig. 2). *Your Journey Starts at the Hands of Pirelli* is placed on the walls and floor of the large entrance hall inside the factory, where colours and images stand out to arouse awe and wonder in the viewer. The message is clear: the factory is experienced as a beautiful place where skillfully worked material can be generated.



**Figure 2.** Lisette Correa, *Your Journey starts at the Hands of Pirelli*, mural created in the Pirelli factory in Rome (USA), Pirelli, 2021.



In a completely different context, UniCredit's art collection stands out as one of Europe's most prestigious corporate collections. With holdings ranging from archaeological finds to classical and contemporary works of art, UniCredit has made its collection accessible in corporate spaces, museum facilities, and, more recently, through an innovative online museum.<sup>3</sup> Spreading knowledge and artistic experience as factors of growth and cultural development demonstrates this organization's concrete commitment to corporate social responsibility. It testifies to how integrating art into the corporate fabric strengthens the company's identity and shapes a corporate culture capable of doing good for employees, the territory, and the community.

### 3. Mapping Corporate Art Collections in Italy

What emerged from the study and first mapping of 57 corporate collections of modern and contemporary art in Italy goes in this direction. This is discussed in the book *Il segno dell'arte nelle imprese. Le collezioni corporate italiane per l'arte moderna e contemporanea* which is edited by Ilaria Bonacossa with Marianna Agliotone, Costantino d'Orazio and Marilena Pirrelli (2024). This study aims to promote a little-known phenomenon and valorize a different entrepreneurial model inspired by corporate cultural responsibility that conceives companies as engines of economic, civil, social, and cultural growth. Art, particularly young artists, find support in businesses just as businesses discover art a great ally.

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3 The UniCredit art collection can be viewed online at this link: <https://artcollection.unicredit.eu/it/unicreditartcollection/>.

And this is Antonio Alunni's thought:

The many corporate collections enclosed in this volume tell of values rooted in Italian industry, including restitution, from companies to art and, through it, to the local communities and vice versa, in a game of reciprocal contamination. Because art and artists give companies and entrepreneurs an original and wide-ranging look at the world and the most topical issues and, through emotions, help generate innovative ideas.

(Confindustria, 2024)<sup>4</sup>

The genesis of a corporate art collection often has its roots in the passion of an enlightened entrepreneur, but there is also a growing awareness of the strategic role of art as a corporate asset, capable of generating not only economic but also social and relational returns. An investment in cultural capital is thus configured, recognising the company as an entity that not only produces culture, but also embodies and actively promotes it.

### 3.1. ALA for ART

This is demonstrated by the cases of companies mentioned in the book such as ALA, an international leader in the supply chain sector for Aerospace, Railways and High-Tech. The decision to establish its headquarters in the Teatro Mediterraneo at the Mostra D'Oltremare in Naples is a statement of intent. In 2021, the company launched *ALA For Art*, an innova-

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<sup>4</sup> Confindustria, press release, Confindustria presents a volume on art collections held by companies, 06 May 2024 <https://www.confindustria.it/home/notizie/Confindustria-presenta-un-volume-sulle-collezioni-d-arte-custodite-dalle-imprese>

tive programme exploring contemporary artistic languages' role in the workplace. Contemporary art was chosen because it reflects the company's values and, in particular, ALA's attitude to innovation and experimentation. The strategic placement of the works in shared spaces transforms art into a catalyst for employee interaction and discussion. It promotes a new artistic sensibility within the organisation (Fig. 3).

The collection is designed to be in dialogue with the life of the company, to convey the complexity of the artistic and cultural landscape of our times, and to become an engine for visibility and relations with the territory. This initiative embodies the conviction that the present time needs art and beauty.



**Figure 3.** Alberto Tadiello, *Luciferasi*, work created for the second ALA Art Prize, ALA, 2022.

And factories need it, too. Quoting Dostoevsky, one could say that if beauty will save the world (Dostoevsky, 2024), it is not necessarily the case that everything that is art is beautiful. Art achieves its purpose when it places itself at the service of beauty, of which it is investigation, discovery, celebration, and song (Mancuso, 2018). The presence of artworks in corporate spaces translates into a daily nourishment of creativity and beauty, stimulating the generation of innovative ideas. In addition, art in offices, production facilities, meeting rooms, or environments shared by the corporate community acts as a powerful social aggregator, reinforces a sense of belonging, and positively influences productivity.

### 3.2. Irinox Wonder Will

Irinox, a leading manufacturer of blast chillers and high-quality preservation systems for the professional and domestic sectors, as well as stainless steel switchboards, has embraced art as an integral part of its corporate identity. Its art collection is conceived as a shared heritage between the company, its employees and the community. Irinox's approach goes beyond simply displaying works of art that are placed in spaces that all employees can enjoy. The company has created a true artistic ecosystem, inviting artists to come into the company and share their visions through interviews accessible to all employees. This initiative generated a unique cultural contamination, enriching the working environment with new perspectives and creative stimuli. A particularly significant project was realised in collaboration with Aiku - Arte Impresa Cultura of the Ca' Foscari University of Venice. This partnership resulted in an artist residency and the creation

of a site-specific work: the neon installation *Wonder Will* by Matteo Attruia (Fig. 4), positioned inside a production department. Matteo Attruia is an Italian artist who works with words, using different means of expression such as road signs and illuminated signs. And it is precisely a luminous sign reproducing the words “Wonder Will”, the work he designed for Irinox. Attruia plays with language and meanings, transforming the well-known *Wonder Wheel* inscription of the Wheel of Wishes on Coney Island in New York into a more profound message relevant to the corporate context. It is, therefore, not a mistake. *Wonder Will* simultaneously evokes the desire for a fantastic future and the collective will necessary to realise it. To make the work more participatory, each bulb of the approximately 140 that make it up became the container for a personal wish of Irinox employees – a single word handwritten directly on the glass by each collaborator.



**Figure 4.** Matteo Attruia, *Wonder Will*, site-specific work realised with the involvement of company employees, Irinox, 2022.

The work became a daily invitation to individual action. The Irinox example shows the relationship between art and business works when they are generative. Art is integrated into an organisational model that enhances it not as mere decoration but as an art-thinking strategy to stimulate innovation through the sense of art and its expressive power.

### 3.3. Bonotto's Cultural Investment

Bonotto is a textile manufacturing company founded by Luigi Bonotto in 1912 in Molvena in the province of Vicenza. It is also known as the *slow factory* as it uses mechanical machinery and opposes mass production in favour of the highest level of craftsmanship, made with care and the slowness that such a process requires. “Art has pollinated the company!” (Bianco, 2017, p. 42). So says Giovanni Bonotto, son of the founder and now the company's creative director. This expression encapsulates the essence of a true cultural investment that has fostered the birth and development of a unique and distinctive corporate culture. In particular, the Bonotto Foundation, established in 2013, represents the culmination of this cultural commitment. With a heritage of more than 24,000 works of art, ranging from works of art to audio documentation, books and posters, the Foundation aims to create an innovative dialogue between art, business, and contemporary culture. The works are exhibited within the company's premises, from offices to production lines and warehouses, and can be viewed by workers, suppliers, customers, and even the public by appointment. In Bonotto, art is not a static element but a tangible presence, alive and to be touched, strategically scattered in the company's infrastructure.



**Figure 5.** Yoko Ono, *Dream*, installation for the Yoko Ono Lecture at Ca' Badoer, Venice, 2013, photo Mario Bozzetto.

This choice keeps alive the link with the company's history and projects production into the future. An expression of this approach is the positioning of Yoko Ono *Dream's* work of 2013 (Fig. 5), donated to Luigi Bonotto on the occasion of the Foundation's opening, in the company's beating heart. As well as the video works by Giovanni Fontana – as Bianco again highlights in his work – were created inside the company in symbiosis with the production environment and together with the workers, in a mixture of antique looms, people at work, and onomatopoeias of mechanical sounds.

#### **4. Innovating the Enterprise with Art**

Contemporary art can generate innovation in the enterprise. The book *Innovating the Enterprise with Art* (Paolino et al., 2018) explores this issue, particularly the method adopted by

the Fondazione Ermanno Casoli that demonstrates the effectiveness of collaboration between the worlds of art and enterprise. The concept of art is associated with the concept of innovation, in particular about the possibility of integrating and generating knowledge, fostering the rethinking of work processes, spaces, products and corporate organisational practices. Artistic intervention in companies is not limited to the creation of objects. Still, it takes the form of an opportunity to reconsider the most standardised activities, reinterpret everyday working materials, and develop future-oriented strategic thinking. In this context, art becomes a true management tool capable of stimulating creativity and innovation at all levels of the organization.

## 5. ESG Factors and Sustainability Reporting

In recent years, art has emerged as a powerful vehicle for corporate social expression. In parallel, a growing interest in environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors has been observed, and this has been stimulated in part by new regulations on sustainability reporting and non-financial information. With art as its most vivid and tangible manifestation, culture is central and pervasive within the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined in the UN 2030 Agenda. This convergence between the business world, culture and art offers companies the opportunity to contribute significantly to the achievement of the SDGs, and to establish themselves as true cultural actors, supporting contemporary art and enriching the social fabric of the communities in which they operate. Of particular interest here is a recent study conducted by the new *Observatory on the Management of Artistic Heritage* of the



Institute for Transformative Innovation Research (ITIR) of the University of Pavia, in collaboration with ARTE Generali, Banca Generali and Deloitte Private, which offers an in-depth overview of the role of art and culture as drivers of social and economic sustainability. The research involved 29 European organisations and represents a first step towards a broader and more constant monitoring of the impact of art and culture, in line with recent European regulatory developments, from the *Green Deal* to the *Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive*. A particularly relevant finding emerges about the knowledge and use of the framework *Culture|2030 Indicators* by UNESCO, a tool designed to assess the contribution of culture to sustainable development objectives. It is noted that 38% of respondents know this framework and only 7% use it. This gap underlines that much work must be done to integrate cultural activities into sustainability strategies fully. Despite these gaps, it is encouraging to note that 74% of the organisations surveyed express interest in developing more structured methods to measure their social impact, while 60% are inclined to assess economic impact. As for Italian organisations, the study shows that only 12.5% publish annual reports on their websites, which is significantly lower than in other European countries such as Spain (41.1%). In terms of impact measurement, the research reveals that organisations tend to favour qualitative over quantitative indicators. This study is an important step towards a deeper understanding of the role of art and culture as drivers of sustainable development. It paves the way for further research and, hopefully, more advanced impact management and evaluation practices, with potential implications for corporate sustainability strategies.

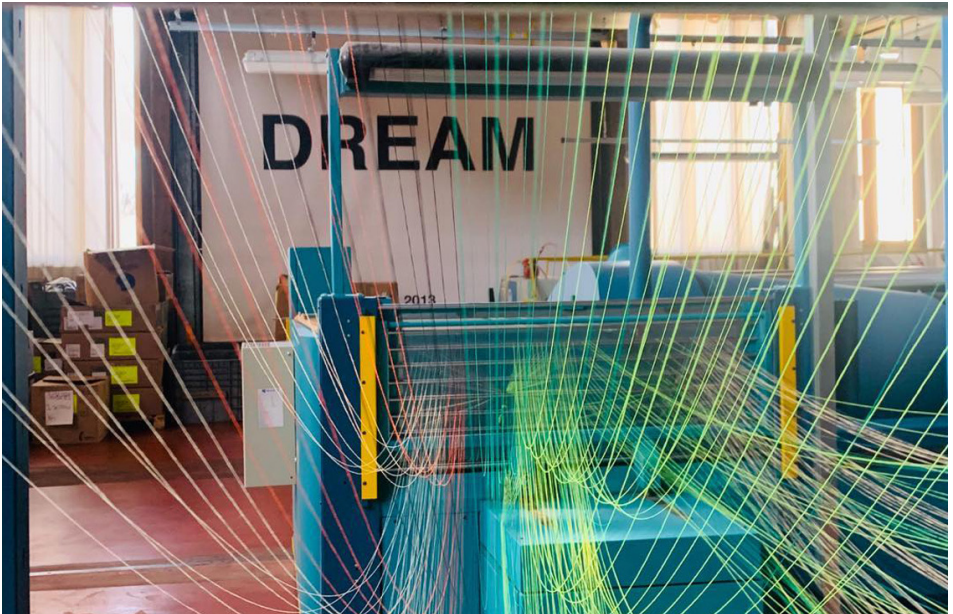


Figure 6. From the Bonotto company website, the image represents the interior of one of the workspaces.

## 6. Design and Work Spaces

We have talked about art in the workplace, and its benefits, but the same can be said about workplace design, which plays a crucial role in ensuring the well-being of employees. Going beyond mere functionality, a well-designed space can become a potent activator of productivity, creativity and satisfaction. The contemporary approach to *workspace design* conceives of the workplace as a complex ecosystem, where every element – from lighting to acoustics, from furniture layout to collaboration areas – contributes synergistically to creating a positive and stimulating employee experience. This evolution of design is intertwined with an expansion of the concept of corporate welfare. Forward-thinking companies are integrating services beyond classic benefits, embracing a holistic view of employee

welfare. This may include creating spaces dedicated to relaxation and meditation, areas for physical activity, or providing psychological support services. The ultimate goal is to create an environment that not only optimises work performance, but also supports the physical and mental health of employees. This integrated approach recognises that a well-designed workplace is crucial not only for operational efficiency, but also for attracting and retaining the best talent in an increasingly competitive and demanding labour market (Fig. 6).

## 7. Art Economy

Today, it is possible to speak to all intents and purposes of an economy of art and culture, even for businesses. The study *Economy of Beauty 2024* carried out by Banca Ifis found that companies investing in art and culture, more than 700 in Italy, produce a total of 192 billion in annual revenues and record productivity 1.4 higher than the average. According to the Banca Ifis report, companies that produce cultural investments achieve benefits both internally and in their positioning towards external stakeholders. Besides translating into a productivity increase compared to companies of similar size and market segment, this also results in a 2.2 times higher salary growth, demonstrating an impact on skills enhancement. The Italian companies active with projects on art and culture are mainly located in Lombardy, Veneto, and Emilia-Romagna and operate mainly in the production sectors of fashion, mechanics, and agri-food. The objectives pursued, which were investigated in depth through a survey involving entrepreneurs and territorial institutions such as the Chamber of Commerce, essentially touch on four areas of intervention:

52% build solid relations with territories and communities, 23% communicate with their external stakeholders, and 12% use art and culture as tools for innovation and creative stimulation, and 12% focused on employee and collaborator engagement.

## 8. New Trends

In the age of artificial intelligence, science and technology are proving valuable tools for artists and businesses. The new techno-scientific paradigms have opened up innovative perspectives, generating unprecedented synergies that redefine the relationship between the art and business worlds. Integrating new technologies in artistic creation within companies opens up unexplored frontiers of creative expression and innovation. This phenomenon goes beyond the simple use of digital tools and takes the form of a real fusion of art, technology, and corporate culture (Fig. 7). Such an approach stimulates a multidisciplinary dialogue within the company: engineers, designers, and artists collaborate and generate a fertile exchange of ideas that can lead to unexpected innovations, not only in the field of art but also in the business process themselves.

In-company artist residencies represent another innovative form of collaboration between art and business. In these programmes, companies open their doors to artists willing to immerse themselves in the corporate environment for a certain period of time. This exchange goes far beyond a simple invitation to a creative person; it is a true cultural dialogue in which the artist can explore, be inspired and create within a context usually alien to artistic production.



**Figure 7.** From the D20 ART LAB website, *Data River*, data art experiment carried out in the Susegana plant of Electroflux, 2023.

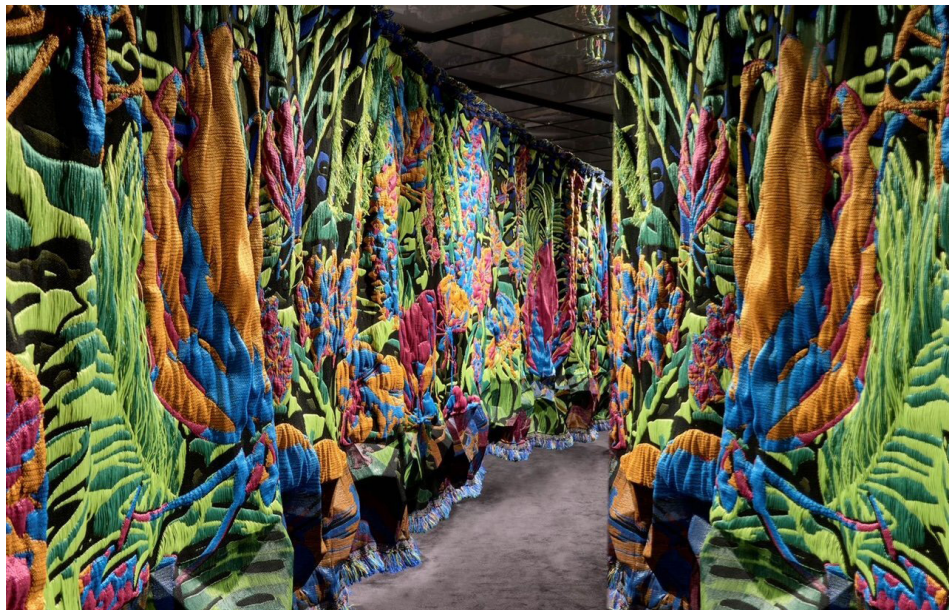
During their stay in the company, artists can access spaces, resources and often the employees' skills that allow them to experiment with unique materials and processes. This immersion in the corporate world can lead to creating works that reflect on issues such as innovation, production or work dynamics, offering new perspectives on art and business. For companies, hosting an artist-in-residence means spreading creativity in their spaces, stimulating lateral thinking among employees and potentially seeing their processes and products in a new light. It is an experience that can enrich corporate culture, promote innovation, and positively influence the company's image and reputation. In Italy, several projects have been implemented, such as Artificare, presented by the MacLab laboratory of the Department of Management of the Ca' Foscari University of Venice, with the activation of artist residencies in several small and medium-sized enterprises in Veneto.

## 9. Conclusion

Today, we are witnessing the emergence of a new form of artistic commissioning, representing a significant turning point in the relationship between art and business. This phenomenon that recalls the concept of the courage of commissioning (Morace, 2021)<sup>5</sup> which emphasizes the importance of a bold and far-sighted orientation in interpreting and integrating art into the corporate context. This attitude must start with the entrepreneur who initiated and led the company, as it requires a long-term vision, the ability to look beyond immediate benefits, and to understand the intrinsic value that art can bring to corporate identity and culture. Therefore, the integration of art and design in the work context represents a stimulating challenge for the future and promises to redefine the company's role not only as an economic entity but as a real actor of cultural and social innovation. Companies espousing this vision will have the opportunity to distinguish themselves in the competitive landscape by creating workplaces imbued with beauty and capable of inspiring, promoting innovation and contributing significantly to the cultural advancement of society.

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5 The concept and expression “the courage of commissioning” was elaborated by Marzia Tomasin and placed in a historical context that refers to the history of the realisation of the Sistine Chapel and in particular, to the brilliant intuition of Pope Julius II, who had the courage to entrust the task of frescoing the vault of the chapel to Michelangelo, who was a sculptor and who until then had only painted the Tondo Doni. This contribution is part of the book cited in the references.



**Figure 8.** Miguel Reguero, *Gardening the trash*, a live exhibition for Fuorisalone Milan, Bonotto and Miniwiz, 2017.

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# Weaving Prosperity

## Opening Textile Factories to Art and People

**Paolo Franzo**

Università degli Studi di Firenze

Orcid id 0000-0003-1043-5692

### **Keywords**

Prosperity, Textile, Fashion Manufacturing, Well-Being, Artworks.

### **Abstract**

For years, the fashion system has been questioning how to reduce its negative impact on the environment and society, clashing with the need for constant economic growth. Climate, humanitarian and health crises have fueled the debate on the excessive centrality of GDP as a universal measure of prosperity, often pursued at the expense of environmental and human resources. This reflection prompts a redefinition of the concept of prosperity, no longer just economic, but as a virtuous relationship between people, space and resources, in line with a sustainable and desirable future. The contribution explores whether it is possible to imagine a future for fashion manufacturing in Italy, particularly in the textile sector, which promotes new models of relations between workplaces, people and products, thanks to art and processes of care, in a perspective of renewed prosperity. The investigation is based on three case studies: Bonotto, promoter of the “slow factory” that has brought artists and artworks inside the factory; Lanificio Paoletti, committed to the protection of the Alpago sheep and the enhancement of the territory through events such as *La via della lana (The wool road)*; Lottozero, a creative hub for textile research and experimentation. The analysis reveals a reorganisation of Italian manufacturing, in which factories become places of living, learning and growth, capable of generating prosperity based on relations between people, spaces and objects.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the fashion industry has found itself at the centre of an increasingly urgent debate concerning environmental and social sustainability. The fashion system, increasingly driven by economic-financial aspects and rapid, linear production models, is now under pressure due to its impact on people and the environment. The climate, humanitarian and health crises of recent decades have amplified awareness of the limits of the traditional economic model, based on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the main, or even sole, indicator of prosperity (Stiglitz, 2009). This system, focused on continuous economic growth, often neglects the social and environmental costs of production, fueling a “GDP fetishism” that places economic growth as the ultimate goal, to the detriment of human and environmental well-being (Latouche, 2012).

The concept of prosperity, hitherto considered almost exclusively in economic terms, has been the subject of increasing critical reflection. The very etymology of the term “prosperity” refers to what is in line with hope and what is preferable for the future, thus calling for a reinterpretation that goes beyond mere economic parameters (Moore, 2023). According to this view, prosperity can no longer be understood as the accumulation of material wealth, but rather as a relational condition, capable of including social, human and environmental well-being.

In this context, the fashion industry is faced with the challenge of reconciling two seemingly contradictory trends: on the one hand, the need for economic growth to sustain production and employment; on the other hand, the growing demand for sustainability from consumers and communities,

which requires fashion companies to rethink their production models and core values (Fletcher, 2014). This implies not only a reduction of environmental impact, but also a new interpretation of prosperity that includes human well-being and the relationship with territories.

Starting from these premises, the contribution questions whether it is possible to imagine a future for fashion manufacturing in Italy, particularly in the textile sector, which sees a redefinition of the relationships between work spaces, people and products thanks to art and processes of care, in the perspective of a renewed prosperity. Specifically, some examples of transformation of work spaces into places of integration between fashion, design and art will be investigated, promoting processes of cultural innovation and community well-being (Villari, 2013). The analysis will focus on three representative case studies: the textile company Bonotto, promoter of the idea of the “slow factory”, the wool mill Paoletti, committed to involving the public through the event *La via della lana*, and Lottozero, a creative hub integrating art and textile production in an innovative space.

In recent years, several fashion brands and large textile manufacturers, such as Ratti, Zegna, Prada and Trussardi, have shown a growing interest in connections with art, going so far as to establish real collections exhibited in dedicated spaces, often located outside the production areas. However, this contribution focuses on a different approach: not on art separated from production, but on art that enters directly into the factory, transforming it into a place where economic prosper-

ity, achieved through manufacturing work, is accompanied by cultural prosperity; workers are not only seen as instruments of production, but as members of an active and growing community, nurtured by artistic and social connections.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Fashion is a complex system that intertwines creative, technological, economic and social dimensions (Craik, 2009). As Kawamura (2005) points out, it is not just a form of artistic expression, but a cultural phenomenon that reflects and shapes society. However, in recent years, the commercial and financial aspect has assumed an increasingly preponderant role within the fashion system, profoundly influencing the functioning and the strategic decisions of the brands, including the appointments and dismissals of creative directors.

Since the end of the 20th century, with the advent of a few large global holding companies dominating both luxury and fast fashion, the focus on economic performance has in many cases supplanted the centrality of creativity (Entwistle, 2000), disregarding the environmental, social and cultural impacts of fashion. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has historically been used as the main indicator of economic progress and national prosperity. However, as Stiglitz (2009) points out, GDP has significant limitations, as it only measures the production of goods and services without taking into account environmental sustainability, quality of life, or social well-being. According to this critique, the exclusive emphasis on GDP leads to economic policies that ignore environmental degradation, increasing inequality and deteriorating social relations.

This view is particularly relevant to the fashion industry, which has historically relied on rapid economic growth and production models that prioritise efficiency and cost-cutting at the expense of sustainability and care for land and people. Latouche (2012) deepens this critique, linking it to the concept of “degrowth” and proposing a radical rethinking of the relationship between economy and society. According to the author, prosperity cannot be reduced to infinite growth on a planet with limited resources. Latouche argues for a “prosperity without growth”, where prosperity is defined by harmonious human relations, ecological sustainability and a reduction of superfluous consumption. In recent years, a relational view of prosperity (Moore, 2023) is gaining ground, which promotes the idea of prosperity that fosters human well-being through social, ecological and cultural relationships, rather than through the mere accumulation of material wealth. The contribution therefore questions whether fashion textile manufacturing in Italy can be the promoter of an alternative vision, whether the factory can be transformed into a new, permeable and training place; a space of prosperity, open to incursions of art, design, people, knowledge and methodologies that have been excluded until now.

This investigation is part of the phenomenon of exhibiting craftsmanship and manufacturing that global fashion brands initiated between 2008 and 2009, particularly in Italy and France (Franzo, 2016). On the one hand, artisans were brought into the city, inside brand shops, often in shop windows, to showcase manual labour and, consequently, the value of the products; examples are: *Gucci Artisan Corner*, a project started

in 2009 by which the brand brought some artisans inside its shops, allowing customers to discover the different stages of making shoes, bags, watches or jewellery; *Behind the intrecciato*, a 2016 project by Bottega Veneta at the Dubai Mall, that included three iconic bags from the Vicenza-based brand, enlarged to become temporary pavilions inside which to discover the processes of making and weaving bags, with videos and archive pieces; *Fatto a mano for the Future*, Fendi's 2011 project hosted inside one of the Harrods shop windows in London, where a performance between artist Rowan Mersh and artisan Cyril Letellier was visible, allowing people to reflect on the contemporary role of the artisan (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1.** Rowan Mersh, *Fatto a mano for the Future*, Performance for Fendi, 2011 (Courtesy Rowan Mersh).

On the other hand, many fashion production sites, located in the provinces, have been opened to the public for visits and activities, hosted schools, associations and institutions to transfer knowledge and awareness; the most relevant example is *Les Journées Particulières*, an initiative of the luxury group LVMH launched in 2011 and now in its fifth edition, which consists of opening to the public dozens of production sites of the group's brands located in peripheral locations and small towns scattered throughout Europe (Fig. 2). This phenomenon therefore responds to the need of international luxury brands to make the value of their products tangible, to distinguish themselves from fast fashion brands through a storytelling made of people, places and know-how that encourages forms of consumer loyalty.



Figure 2. LVMH, *Les Journées Particulières*, 2013.

The approach followed by the case studies investigated in this contribution is different, whose objective does not appear to be to show what they do and their manufacturing skills, but to transform the very idea of the factory and the role played by those who work in it (Franzo and Moradei, 2021), opening the doors to art and design and becoming places of the “craft of combination” in which to encourage interactivity, experience and learning (Lundvall & Johnson, 1994). The industrial district (Becattini, 1998) of the Italian province, in crisis from a production point of view, is thus proving to be an ideal territory for generating change, approaching the idea of an “evolved cultural district” (Sacco & Tavano Blessi, 2005).

### **3. Methodology and Description of Case Studies**

The research was conducted by adopting a qualitative approach, which led to the selection and investigation of three case studies representative of the concept of prosperity, significant for their ability to promote new social, cultural and creative dynamics within Italian textile factories. The data were collected through an initial desk analysis phase followed by a visit to the companies investigated, which allowed for a direct and immediate observation in the field of the transformations taking place in the work context and in interpersonal relations.

The case studies selected are representative of three different fashion districts: Lanificio Paoletti for the wool district of Follina, in the province of Treviso; Bonotto for that of Vicenza; Lottozero for the textile district of Prato. The company characteristics are also different: Bonotto is a listed company, recently acquired by the Ermenegildo Zegna group; Lanificio



Paoletti is a family business, where the tenth generation of the family still controls the activities; Lottozero is a very recent reality, founded about 10 years ago in one of the most important textile districts in Europe. A common element in all three cases is the fact that they are run by a couple of siblings: Marco and Paolo Paoletti; Lorenzo and Giovanni Bonotto; and Tessa and Arianna Moroder in the case of Lottozero.

### 3.1. Lanificio Paoletti

Lanificio Paoletti, founded in 1795 in Follina, in the province of Treviso, is one of the oldest textile companies in Italy, specialising in the production of full-cycle, carded pure wool fabrics. For over two centuries, the Paoletti family has kept the tradition of wool processing alive, combining artisan techniques handed down from generation to generation with technological innovation. In recent years, the wool mill has embarked on a path towards design and contemporary art, consolidating its ties with the territory and helping to redefine the relationship between manufacturing, culture and community.

With respect to the subject of this contribution, one of the most emblematic initiatives of this openness is *La via della lana*, an annual event that invites the public to explore the factory's production processes and reflect on the connections between art, design and the textile industry. During the event, the doors of the wool factory open to visitors, who can watch craft demonstrations, participate in workshops and interact with international artists and designers. The factory spaces become a temporary incubator, a place for art installations, performances and exhibitions that are intertwined with the manufacture. The aim of the project is to show not only the

final product, but also the creative process behind its creation, emphasising the value of raw materials and sustainability. The event highlights the importance of the Alpago sheep, an indigenous breed that the wool mill is committed to protecting and enhancing, promoting a responsible use of local resources. An example of this is *Federe*, a site-specific installation presented by the Greek collective Hypercomf during the 2019 edition of *La via della lana*, consisting of a 15-minute short film that explores the relationship between industrial looms and the employees, with the aim of emphasising the social and spiritual interaction with the machines, their developers and the society they feed with their products. The short film dialogues with cubes of discarded textiles from which soft hand-shaped seats emerge, contrasting their delicate comfort with the chaotic volume of waste products (Fig. 3).



**Figure 3.** Hypercomf, *Federe*, site-specific installation presented during *La via della lana* at Lanificio Paoletti, 2019.

### 3.2. Bonotto

Bonotto is an Italian textile company located in the province of Vicenza, renowned for its innovative approach to production, combining traditional craftsmanship, sustainability and contemporary art. The company coined the concept of the “slow factory” as a response to the accelerated industrial pace typical of fast fashion (Vaccari & Vanni, 2020). This model is inspired by the philosophy of the “slow” movement (Fletcher, 2013), promoting quality production that values the natural times of textile creation and rejects the logic of hyper-production. The slow factory aims to restore a harmonious relationship between humans, work and nature, emphasising an attitude of care and attention to detail, both in production processes and in the management of human relations.

Over the years, Bonotto has invited over 300 artists to interact with the factory and create in situ artworks that are displayed in the company’s spaces, including the production and warehouse areas. Currently, the factory houses 17,000 artworks, occupying 10,000 square metres of space and creating a constant dialogue between art, workers and production. This context stimulates the creativity not only of workers, but also of visitors and customers, offering an immersive experience that goes beyond mere manufacturing (Fig. 4).

As evidence of its commitment to art and culture, Bonotto also established the Bonotto Foundation, an organisation dedicated to the preservation and promotion of a collection of works, audio and video documentation, posters, books, magazines and editions of Fluxus artists and international verbo-visual research developed since the late 1950s.

As Giovanni Bonotto points out, the company is strongly

influenced by the vision of his father Luigi, an entrepreneur and pupil of Marcel Duchamp, “according to whom one must live every day as a great artwork”. This has led over the years to place home, factory, family, friends, employees, suppliers and artists on the same level. It happened, and still happens, that workers collaborate with artists while they are in action inside the factory, generating a connection between art and textile manufacturing. This approach has led all the employees of the company, from the top management to the workers, to “wear the spectacles of imagination”, to borrow the words of Giovanni Bonotto, and thus to take a sideways look, to observe things in a new and open way.



**Figure 4.** Bonotto, view of the factory with Yoko Ono's 2013 work *Dream* in the background (ph. Marco Gavasso).

### 3.3. Lottozero

Lottozero is a creative hub and textile experimentation centre located in Prato, one of the historical capitals of textile manufacturing in Italy. Founded in 2016 by sisters Tessa and Arianna Moroder, Lottozero aims to be a meeting point between tradition and innovation, craftsmanship and new technologies, art and design. The aim is to create a fertile environment for research and development of cutting-edge textile projects, offering a collaborative space for artists, designers, researchers and companies.

One of the distinctive elements of Lottozero is the Kunsthalle, an exhibition space that serves as a platform for exhibitions, installations and performances related to the world of textile art and contemporary design. Here, the intersections between art and manufacture are explored, with a focus on the material dimension and experimental textile research. Through thematic and solo exhibitions, Lottozero has given space to a variety of artists and designers, promoting dialogue between different creative fields (Fig. 5).

The role of the Kunsthalle goes beyond that of a mere gallery: it is configured as a space of dynamic interaction, where art comes into direct contact with industrial and craft processes. Thanks to the presence of a textile workshop within the complex, artists and designers have the opportunity to experiment with new techniques and materials in collaboration with the Lottozero team. This creates a continuous cycle of contamination between the aesthetic dimension and the productive dimension, leading to the emergence of new projects that challenge the conventions of design and fashion.



Figure 5. Lottozero, Kunsthalle.

Lottozero, thanks to the Kunsthalle, regularly promotes artistic residencies, during which creatives from all over the world can spend a period in Prato working on their own projects. The residencies offer the opportunity to come into contact with the rich textile heritage of the Prato district and to engage with local manufacturing realities. These residency programmes have led to the creation of textile works and collections that blend contemporary innovation with traditional craftsmanship, uniting past and future in a path of constant evolution (Conti & Franzo, 2020).

#### 4. Discussion

The analysis of the three case studies reveals a common perspective that overcomes the traditional dichotomy between production and culture, suggesting a profound reconfigu-

ration of textile manufacturing in Italy. These companies, although different in size, context and history, share an innovative and expanded vision of prosperity, which is not limited to economic growth, but includes cultural, social and relational dimensions. The emerging themes, transversal to the three cases, are the openness to the public, the integration of art in the workplace and the continuous dialogue with the territory.

#### 4.1. Redefining the Factory Space

In the cases analysed, the factory is no longer seen as a simple place of production, but as an experienced, open space, capable of generating social and cultural value. At Lanificio Paoletti, for example, the event *La via della lana* transforms the factory into a place of informal learning and encounter between craftsmanship and contemporary design. This shift of the factory from a closed and productive model to an open and communal one underlines the importance of the experiential and cultural dimension to enrich the value of textile products. Similarly, Bonotto's idea of the "slow factory" reconfigures production spaces as places for contemplation and reflection. Art, integrated directly into the work areas, is not seen as a mere decorative element, but as a tool to rethink industrial rhythms and human relations. The "slow factory" promotes a form of prosperity that includes human and cultural growth, questioning the productivist approach that dominates the contemporary textile industry.

Lottozero also adopts a similar perspective, transforming a disused industrial space into a creative hub where research, production and innovation coexist. Its Kunsthalle, an exhibition space for textile and contemporary art, promotes a

dynamic interaction between artists, designers and manufacturers, blurring the boundaries between art and fashion. Lottozero demonstrates how a manufacturing space can become a cultural and creative reference point, supporting new talents and strengthening the local and international textile network.

#### **4.2. Art as a Catalyst for New Perspectives**

The crucial role of art as a catalyst for change emerges. Art is not only exhibited, but becomes an integral part of the production process and company life. At Lanificio Paoletti, the invitation of craftsmen and designers to work inside the factory is a concrete example of how art can interact with production, creating a direct dialogue between creation and manufacture. This exchange not only enriches the final product, but also elevates the cultural role of the factory in the territory.

At Bonotto, art is a philosophical component that permeates the entire company. The invited artists do not merely decorate the rooms, but contribute to a radical reinterpretation of the rhythms and values of industrial work.

Lottozero also fits into this vision, promoting textile art as a means of redefining the boundaries between industry and culture. Its function as a creative incubator allows young designers and artists from all over the world to experiment with new languages and techniques, merging research and innovation with textile craftsmanship.

#### **4.3. Prosperity as a Multidimensional Concept**

The cases analysed allow us to understand how it is possible to rethink the concept of prosperity, not measuring it solely in terms of turnover or productivity, but including human, social



and relational aspects. Lanificio Paoletti promotes a vision of prosperity that stems from dialogue with the territory and its specificities. The factory becomes a meeting point between past and future, where economic sustainability is intertwined with cultural sustainability. Bonotto's "slow factory", on the other hand, proposes a form of prosperity that rejects the rhythms imposed by the global market. The company community is seen as a collection of people, not production tools, and art plays a fundamental role in creating a more human and reflective work culture. Finally, Lottozero offers a vision of prosperity linked to experimentation and knowledge sharing. Coworking and accessible production facilities make Lottozero an open laboratory, where prosperity is generated by cooperation and innovation.

## 5. Conclusions

The three case studies demonstrate how the integration of art, openness to the public and attention to human relations can transform the textile sector into an engine of cultural, as well as economic, change. The factories and workshops analysed not only produce textiles, but also generate new ideas of community, sustainability and innovation. Prosperity, in this context, is not only defined by turnover or profit, but by the quality of the relationships created between people, spaces and objects. At a time when the fashion and textile manufacturing industry is increasingly dominated by global and financial dynamics and is confronted with demands for greater sustainability, these models of cultural innovation represent virtuous and replicable alternatives.

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# A DIALOG WITH THE OUTSIDE WORLD

# Curating

## Creating a Space of Sharing

**Gabi Scardi**

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

### Keywords

Art, Care, Welfare, Law Firm, Nctm e l'Arte, ADVANT Nctm.

### Abstract

As a person involved in curatorial research on contemporary art, I would like to present an experience centered on a law firm, ADVANT Nctm Studio Legale. Indeed, in 2010, the then Nctm Studio Legale launched *nctm e l'arte*, a project dedicated to contemporary art that is still alive today. Introducing art into an unconventional space with a strong professional connotation may seem to be a challenge, all the more so making the place a physical and conceptual platform that allows its visitors to interface with contemporary art, to live it as an experience, and to grasp its true meaning. Such intent required careful work on the relationship between the works and the space, understood as a context, not just a physical one. It was about understanding the people visiting the firm and their interactions. Great attention was paid to how art was integrated into the firm's interior and thus to the quality of the experience of those working there or visiting it. This was in addition to the idea that a professional community is necessarily defined within itself and in relation to its context. For such reason, further work was devoted to establishing a meaningful dialogue with the outside world. Efforts were therefore made to make the firm an open, porous, and stimulating place. A program was created that provides an opportunity for exchange with a broader public. In addition, artistic projects relating to the territory were launched, starting with the city where the firm is based, Milan. Several initiatives dedicated to the city's public cultural heritage were promoted. One of the most important initiatives concerned a fundamental artistic urban nucleus in the city's central park, Parco Sempione. Among other things, the initiative represented, within the firm, an opportunity for reflection and an essential experience of relations with the public space and public institutions, not only municipal ones. On the whole, the project aims to create a space of sharing and to convey the vision of a professional reality strongly connected to the phenomena of the present, capable of a narrative of meaning and endowed with a strong planning perspective, capable of stimulating a sense of individual and collective belonging.

## 1. The *Nctm e l'Arte* Project by ADVANT Nctm Studio Legale

Rooted in first-hand experience, this contribution is consciously placed in the field of professional practice rather than academic theory. At the same time, developing within the conceptual framework of the relationship between professional dimension and welfare, it discusses how culture, and more particularly contemporary art, can significantly enrich life within professional spaces, becoming a shared repository of common meanings, an opportunity for exchange, a common good, capable of affecting the quality of life and work, as well as serving as a strategic lever, as a vehicle for an image of momentum and openness.

The text thus intends to provide a cross-section of an exercise in grafting contemporary art into a purely professional environment, a long-term exercise whose meaning derives from critical reflection as well as from the relational work that accompanies it.

As a person engaged in research, writing and teaching, and in curatorial practice concretely experienced alongside artists, I wish to introduce the experience of the *nctm e l'arte* initiative: an artistic direction experience born within an associated firm, ADVANT NCTM Studio Legale.

The adventure, still ongoing, began in 2010. At that time, the then NCTM Studio Legale, established in 2000, already had several offices, the main ones in Milan, Rome, Genoa, Brussels and Shanghai.

The Milan and Rome offices were, and still are, located in buildings in the city centre. Both include offices, numerous meeting rooms and spaces for meetings and conferences; both have been renovated on the firm's initiative.

The 1940s building housing the Milan office, of considerable size, was previously used by the Italian Post Company. The renovation work involved the six existing floors above ground, plus two underground levels, the courtyard, the terraces and, among other things, a total revision of the internal layout. The building in Rome is a sumptuous historical palace, including a typical 17<sup>th</sup> century church, now deconsecrated but perfectly preserved and used for conferences. The renovation was entrusted to architect Antonio Zanuso for both offices, who opted for rational but welcoming solutions, strong in character and great stylistic sobriety.

The London office is likewise located in a central area of the city. Its interiors are linear and functional; its main features include glass windows that allow a broad view of the elegant cityscape.

Such renovations, accompanied by meticulous rearrangements and the inclusion of high-end design accessories, express a cultural inclination.

Moreover, at that time, the firm showed a project-oriented passion in various ways, starting with the periodic organization of book presentations, which were opportunities to open up to an external audience. The Milan office was particularly active in such respect.

The idea of involvement in contemporary art based on a specially conceived project emerged in 2010 and was defined over a year of meetings, encounters, and internal discussions.

From the very beginning, the project distinguished itself from other cases of professional firms' involvement in contemporary art thanks to the choice to entrust its artistic direction to an experienced professional figure; this was done not only to

legitimize but also to depersonalize the choices so that they could represent a diversified and plural reality as a whole. Furthermore, from the outset, in the generative conversations during the gestation period of the initiative, reference was made to art in its role of producing meaning, decidedly removing it from the interstitial function of filling space and beautification, and from being a status symbol. Its capacity for interpretation and active revival of reality was highlighted, along with its transformative power due to the deep connection with the main issues of contemporary debate: artists tend to feel part of a social fabric and an era, and are moved by a commitment that simultaneously concerns art and the world; they are inclined to immerse themselves in the heart of places and situations to bring out specific characteristics and elements, which will then be the subject of their varied operations. Their desire is not to maintain the present but to impact the future through the micro-changes that dialogue with art can induce in those who experience it. *nctm e l'arte* was born on said basis, emerging as a genuine journey of meaning made up of a complex of complementary activities, always linked to an overall vision and closely inter-related. Wanting to avoid episodic occurrences, the aim was for a comprehensive and systematic conception of the project's different parts from the beginning.

The main components include the creation of a collection, understood not as a simple sum of objects, but as an oriented and consistent set of works relevant to a chosen direction and support to many artists from the planning phase of their work, with support for production and the establishment, since 2012, of a semi-annual call for scholarships promoting international mobility.

Furthermore, a dialogue is always open with public artistic institutions such as museums, exhibition spaces, and national and international exhibitions. Collaborations have been undertaken with up-to-date cultural entities, among others, the MAXXI in Rome, the PAC and MUDEC in Milan, the Venice Biennale, and the Manifesta in Kassel.

There are numerous moments dedicated to the firm's professionals, from workshop proposals to visits to exhibitions and shows of particular interest.

Even more numerous are the activities that involve opening the space to persons gravitating around the firm and to an external audience through the organization of meetings with meaningful protagonists of the cultural *milieu* and exhibition and performance moments, even of a highly experimental nature. All the more so since acquisitions are always occasions for personal focus on artists, with meetings and temporary installations of large sets of their works. The main idea behind such initiatives is to contextualize the work and provide keys to access the author's poetics.

The numerous meetings with artists see motivation in the contribution that can come from direct knowledge of paradigmatic figures with respect to many qualities that are also fundamental for professional and social life: curiosity, vitality, proactivity, impulse, tenacity, and zeal, and the ability to always find new and original ways to achieve one's goal, whatever it may be.

There is also a strong desire to contribute to moments of ferment in the cities where the firm has offices, starting from Milan, where initiatives have been carried out during special events, primarily the Milan Art Week. In said situations, per-



performances and ad hoc interventions were produced by artists such as Elena Mazzi and Marinella Senatore, Emilio Fantin, Driant Zeneli, Jérôme Bell, Alexis Blake, Luigi Coppola and Christian Nyampeta, Marilisa Cosello. These were all ways, some radical, of giving new meaning to an otherwise highly regulated space, contributing over time to building the sense of the place that adds to the existing one (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1.** Marinella Senatore, *Protest Forms Memory and Celebration*. *Public opinion descends upon the demonstrators*, performance, photo Francesca Brizi, © *nctm e l'arte*.

Finally, the strong connection with the country's substrate, to whose cultural life one wants to make an active contribution, emerges both in the organization of activities outside the space and in the realization of territorial and permanent public projects, with considerable energy devoted to such commitment. Standing out among these projects are the restoration of Alberto Burri's Teatro Continuo and the attention dedicated to Arman's Accumulazione e Seduta Musicale, two large works located in Milan's largest public park, Parco Sempione, and always concretely available to be enjoyed by any visitor (Fig. 7).

The recovery of Teatro Continuo took place in 2015 thanks to the synergy with the Municipality of Milan, Triennale, and Palazzo Albizzini Collezione Burri Foundation, while restoration and enhancement of Arman's work are currently underway. Situated between macro-design and micro-architecture, these two works represent elements of great value in the city's heritage and are symbolically emblematic of a way of conceiving art as deeply linked to the idea of democratic urban living (Fig. 8).

In its entirety, therefore, *nctm e l'arte* aims to be a sort of cultural infrastructure for the country.

While there is always a concern to avoid genericity in favor of specificity in methods and content, on the other hand, there is constant dialogue with the context, both internal and external; a dialogue that takes place conceptually, not just formally.

It is a matter of taking into account at all times where one is and creating beneficial relationships, whether it is the profes-

sional environment in the strict sense, and thus the quality of life and work within it, or the relationship between the professional environment and the city or national context that form its platform.

As concerns the internal environment, the project provides for an integration of contemporary art works and interventions in a space that is not designated for such purpose and is instead charged with its own specific purpose.

As concerns the choice of works, a guideline was decided early on: that of privileging a semantic area consistent with the professional mandate of the commissioners. The choice, which has strengthened over time, has thus been to focus on the theme of justice, rights, sustainability and social equity. Said themes are present in the works of numerous artists among the most interesting in the current scene. But above all, it seemed important to avoid genericity and anchor the works to the reality of the situation; all the more so since they are destined to be a common repository of meaning for those who animate it. Starting precisely from the importance attributed to real sharing, careful structuring of governance has been implemented since the project's first steps: in the firm, there is an Art Committee, composed of various partners of the firm, with a three-year rotation, which periodically meets in formal meetings to examine together with the curator every cultural proposal, evaluating its interest, feasibility, and significance concerning the Firm and its history of cultural production.

In some cases, decisions have been delegated to a collective choice involving the entire firm.

A delegation of young generations of professionals from the firm also participates in the Art Committee meetings, who

receives special attention in terms of initiatives and themes addressed.

The first concrete expressions of *nctm e l'arte* arrived at the end of 2011 when the Milan space was lit up by Carlos Garaicoa's installation *Nuevas Arquitecturas*, and then, in 2012, with the entry of a work by Kiki Smith and a four-handed work by Claudia Losi and Salvatore Arancio.

Garaicoa's installation consists of seventy-six suspended luminous elements, shaped in the form of stylized architectural structures. Multiform, delicate and airy, made of simple and ordinary materials, evocative of domestic objects - the paper lamps we all know - *Nuevas Arquitecturas* was then adapted to the spaces of the Milan Office, before being transferred, after several years, to the Rome office; its presence is pervasive, and its metaphorical and poetic charge profoundly modifies the atmosphere of the place. The central message is linked to planning, to the energy of building, and to the fact that the intensity with which one lives depends on the possibility of keeping desire, attention, and vision alive.

Kiki Smith's work, *Pyre Woman Kneeling*, also of museum relevance, is instead a sculpture: a tribute to the victims of witch hunts. The phenomenon, which lasted centuries and was the cruel and unjustifiable cause of an enormous number of deaths, is today understood as emblematic of the power asymmetries and repression of every form of right and autonomy that women were subjected to for centuries. The artist conceived the work as a public monument for the city of Nuremberg, the European epicenter of witch hunts (Fig. 2).



**Figure 2.** Carlos Garaicoa, *Nuevas Arquitecturas*, 2002, photo Mario Tedeschi, © *nctm e l'arte*.

*Idol Rock*, by Salvatore Arancio and Claudia Losi, is a series of silkprints reproducing a mysterious monolith, ancient although apparently precarious. On these photographs, taken by Arancio, Losi has finely embroidered a constellation of lichens that, adhering to the rock, silently but tenaciously, inject into the whole a sense of natural growth, of future. The work combines fascination, ecological concerns and a consideration of the laws that underlie natural phenomena. And nature becomes a source and object of reflection, and a stimulus to initiate a process of awareness regarding our relationship with the context, starting from the environmental one (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Kiki Smith, *Pyre Woman Kneeling*, 2002, photo Andrea Rossetti, © nctm e l'arte.

While Arancio and Losi are at work on this installation, Adrian Paci, an Albanian artist by birth, Italian by adoption, is working, with the support of *nctm e l'arte*, on a challenging video, *The Column*. It shows a block of marble quarried in China and embarked on a long journey. On the way, a series of stonemasons work on it, transforming it into a finished product. The work thus refers to the theme of the voyage, understood in its existential dimension. Still, it also alludes to the phenomenon of factory ships and, thus to the theme of labor and production conditions that are all too often pushed to the point of extreme exploitation (Fig. 4).



**Figure 4.** Claudia Losi e Salvatore Arancio, *Idol Rock*, 2012, photo Mario Tedeschi, © *nctm e l'arte*.

At the same time as *The Column*, the artist's *Centro di Permanenza Temporaneo* also enters the firm: a photograph in which we see many people of different origins crammed onto a self-propelled ladder of the kind generally used as access to aircraft. All around an expanse of concrete, we are in the maneuvering area of an airport. The ladder, however, faces the void; the aircraft is not there. A sense of uncertainty dominates the image. The work thus combines a decisive comment, made explicit by the title, concerning current events, with the ability to move from the particular to the universal, coming to speak of a broader existential condition: that of all those who feel stuck, suspended in nothingness, waiting for a future without certainty (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. Adrian Paci, *The Column*, 2012, © nctm e l'arte.



These early works have been followed over the years by many others, acquired from the artists' galleries of reference or as a result of the artists' collaboration in the conception and production phase; after Losi and Arancio and Adrian Paci, this was the case with Adelita Husni-Bey, R   Di Martino, Uriel Orlow, Micol Roubini, Francesca Marconi, Francesco Bertocco and others. Be that as it may, the works are identified beyond the criteria of age, notoriety, nationality of the artists or technique, and are instead revealed in their artistic quality, meaning, and their ability to grip reality.

Today, as the firm continues its activities - among other things, an alliance has been formed with other European law firms, and the name has evolved into ADVANT Nctm - *nctm e l'arte* continues to be a defining element, and indeed has gradually established roots.

The spaces, with their eminently professional aspect, have produced a strengthening of the already chosen direction, that of justice and rights.

Such themes not only acquire meaning and resonate within the firm, but also help to intercept the sensitivity of professionals and stimulate their participation in the project; all the more so since coexistence with the works, for those working there, is a daily occurrence.

Such coexistence is one of the central factors of the project and is at the heart of the curatorial work.

From the outset, the desire was to consider the firm's space as an ecosystem in which to organically insert the works, so as to create an integral environment in which the artists' visions could resonate with the architecture and design of the place, and with the activity carried out there.

The spaces proved to be ductile and permeable, ready to host the works. These, adapting to the layout of the common areas, meeting rooms, many of the offices, some of the corridors and even the courtyards, worked as a respectful counterpoint to the disciplined architectural regularity. Nor is this a purely formal matter: the presence of the works has brought with it the possibility of ranging, activating different, infinite visions. In addition, the distribution of the works varies, their configuration is continually renewed by means of a periodic rotation intended not only to make the space visually interesting and stimulating, but to communicate it as a dynamic system, constantly evolving; as a point of intersection of visions that are each time different.

The idea is that what counts above all is the quality of the experience of the place; an experience of use that is felt when actually experiencing the environment.

## 2. Curatorial Work as a Contribution to the Sense of Place

From a curatorial point of view, fostering the experience of place means designing as effectively as possible the arrangement of works in the space so that they are enabled to contaminate the environment and reach out to its visitors. This requires taking into account their characteristics and those of the space itself.

In the case of *nctm e l'arte*, this has involved continuous experimentation in relation to the specifics of the situation, the architectural characteristics of the different venues, and the activity taking place there.

From the outset, we have been oriented towards works that, on the one hand, can be a prism through which to look at the

most up-to-date contemporary world, and on the other, are endowed with a strongly symbolic character.

Suffice it to think of the works that first entered the firm, those already mentioned, by Carlos Garaicoa, Kiki Smith and Claudia Losi/Salvatore Arancio and Adrian Paci, or those immediately following, including Zineb Sedira's *The Lovers* trilogy, Pieter Hugo's monumental photography and Adelita Husni's *Bei Agency: Power-Play* series.

The series of large photographs *The Lovers*, of which there is a triptych in the collection, is linked to the project *Shipwreck: The Death of a Journey*. These are images of shipwrecks, still floating, in some cases leaning against each other as if to support each other. The images were taken in 2008 in Mauritania, a few kilometres from Nouadhibou. Shipwreck focuses on a portion of coastline that was once one of the most important shipyards in West Africa; today it is one of the few places in the world where old boats are abandoned without first being dismantled. Between the sand and the sea, large rusted wrecks lie like skeletons or continue to float, occasionally dumping wreckage on the shore.

Imbued with a poignant sense of elegy and a surreal epic, these images can be seen as metaphors for the idea of persistence. Their meaning resonates even more if we consider that large numbers of people converge to Nouadhibou from all parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, driven by the hope of being able to embark for the Canary Islands; while others land on said shores on their way back from Europe, after being rejected by society or the sea. Many of them make a living from the informal micro-commerce of materials derived from the dismantling of boats. The author, Zineb Sedira, was born in

France in 1963 to Algerian parents. She grew up in Paris, then moved to London, where she trained as an artist and began making videos and installations. In her work she manifests, from the very beginning, an interest in postcolonial discourse and issues related to the diasporic condition, and notions of origin and memory (Fig. 6).

The large photograph from the *Permanent Error* series taken by Pieter Hugo at the Agbogbloshie tech waste dump on the outskirts of Accra, Ghana, deals with similar themes.



**Figure 6.** Adrian Paci, *Centro di permanenza temporanea*, 2008, photo Mario Tedeschi,, © nctm e l'arte.

Agbogbloshie is one of the most polluted places in the world. It is the destination of huge quantities of electronic waste, mainly European, which often arrive there illegally. In Agbogbloshie, Hugo proposed to the men who live in the slum and work in the dump to pose in front of the camera. The result is a series of monumental portraits. In these images there is a short-circuiting of the notions of progress, obsolescence and collapse, while a series of considerations about the relationship between the African continent and the West emerge. The images thus condense some of the most strident contradictions of the present. Adelita Husni-Bey's work is different. The themes dealt with are power and independence, an omnipresent system of pressure and influence that influences our behaviour, hierarchy, but also potential forms of alternative pedagogy that can stimulate critical and independent thinking and a feeling of cooperation and responsibility. Micro-utopias, systems of resistance, options for civil disobedience and self-determination: these are the themes that the Libyan-Italian artist Adelita Husni-Bey addresses in her works. Her work thus combines an ideal character with a link to an extremely topical global scenario. *Agency: Power-Play* was an exercise in social simulation. It took place at the MAXXI in Rome, in a hall overlooking the city, and involved a large group of high school students. The students divided into groups and created a real stage in the background, then acted out a series of situations and simulated different types of power relations typical of our society. The inspiration for this work came from the educational methods used in England as part of Citizenship Studies. Husni-Bey's idea was to trigger critical and collective feelings in the students.



Figure 7. Zineb Sedira, *The Lovers*, 2008, photo Mario Tedeschi, © *nctm e l'arte*.

To come to the present, today's addition to the collection of a series of drawings inspired by the disasters of war by the Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué seems most appropriate. While environmental and eco-climatic issues have come to the fore, for example, with the acquisition of a work by Jonas Staal, an artist who with extreme radicalism calls for attention to the future of the planet. Together with the jurist and activist Radha D'Souza, Jonas Staal has in fact conceived the performative activation of a court dedicated to judging climate crimes, the *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes*. In addition to prosecutors, witnesses and a large number of participants, the court features a series of seventy-four portraits of now-extinct animals, the *Comrades in Extinction*,

painted by Jonas Staal himself. It is they, these non-human ancestors, who bear witness to past climate crimes within the context of the court cases that the artist stages, and who contribute, through the exercise of legislation, to the collective effort needed to guarantee a future for the living, including humans, at a time of evident eco-climatic crisis.

Consistent with the guidelines chosen in relation to the firm's professional mandate, the work thus sees the environmental and legislative themes closely linked; not only that, but if Staal denounces climate injustice and its destructive effects, he at the same time attributes to the law the power to aim for a better world.

Again, with their broad presence, the series of paintings and the video permeate the firm's environment, offering an answer to a need for meaning.

### **3. Inhabiting Spaces, Questions, Relationships**

Welcoming works of such a tenor means transferring their meaning, ideal tension, and metaphorical energy into space, creating spaces that think.

Their presence, firmly rooted in reality, is a decisive invitation not only to reflect on the questions that the present poses but to inhabit them, to confront particular and crucial questions, focusing in-depth, and at the same time, widening the visual angle, moving from the specific to the universal, just as artists do.

However, working towards such reinvention, first and foremost semantic, of a pre-existing space through the grafting of

ever-new visions requires great respect: the place is traversed by precise requirements, and the works, in turn, cannot be subjected to inappropriate conditions. The challenge of arriving at a proper exhibition dimension, enabling them to unleash their meaning, albeit within a space not designated for that, and active in everyday life as the nerve center of a professional activity, requires specific ideational trajectories. The work of curatorship – a term etymologically linked to that of care – thus consists of the challenge, which is continually renewed, to place the works in context without emptying them of their prerogatives and their autonomous meaning, and to redefine the space, to renew it from the inside by acting so that the meaning of the works pervades it; in a nutshell, working carefully on the display and on its potential in terms of content presentation and storytelling.

It is therefore a process of continuous experimentation. In the frequent rearrangements, the possibilities offered by the space and the different possible relationships with the architectural elements have been exploited to the full. For example, in the Milan office, the photographic works by Paola di Bello relating to Burri's Teatro Continuo and its restoration mark the junctions from one room to another, while the stairs that connect the floors create a very strong set-up conceived together with the artist herself. And it is again Di Bello's photographs that mark the transition to the conference room area, as well as the room itself, in which their partially asymmetrical arrangement deliberately interferes with the regular course of the interior design of the room, giving it a new rhythm.





Figure 8. Paola Di Bello, *Teatro Continuo di Alberto Burri*, Parco Sempione 2015, © *nctm e l'arte*.

But the direct interaction with the architecture is only one of the elements that contribute to success. The idea is that a professional community can be defined not only internally, but also in relation to its context.

For such reason, further work was dedicated to making the firm an open, porous, propulsive place, and to building a meaningful dialogue with the outside world so that the program of meetings and events would be an opportunity to share with a wider public. The culmination of this effort is the artistic projects activated throughout the territory.

It is clear that, understood in its overall design, unfolded over time, the project *nctm e l'arte* goes far beyond the idea of 'dressing' a place; intertwined with the daily life of the firm, it consists rather in a commitment to take care of it through an uninterrupted process that involves the most diverse components and aspects, from the most tangible, spatial to the psychological and relational ones.

The direction of this work of care is that of a co-evolution of the project itself and the firm, with the works of art as a sharable repository of contents and values, points of view, positions and postures, and the environmental dimension that encompasses them with a sense of organic integrity in which the space, intellectually stimulating, arouses a sense of relationship and belonging, with effects at an aesthetic, personal, relational and professional level.



**Figure 9.** Jerome Bel, performance *Compagnia Compagnia*, on Alberto Burri's *Teatro Continuo*, Parco Sempione, 2016, photo Paolo Sacchi, © *nctm e l'arte*.

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# Work Transit Hubs

## Art as a Tool for a Cultural Welfare in Metro Stations

### **Silvana Donatiello**

Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II  
Orcid id 0009-0002-6640-4609

### **Edoardo Amoroso**

Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II  
Orcid id 0009-0002-2371-0542

### **Mariarita Gagliardi**

Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II  
Orcid id 0009-0005-1684-3103

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the transformative power of European metropolitan art stations, presenting them as hubs of well-being within the contemporary urban scenario. These transit hubs, characterized by high foot traffic, offer unique opportunities to integrate art into daily life. Such interventions enrich the aesthetic and sensory experience of the users involved and contribute significantly to their well-being and mental health. This analysis is part of the broader context of cultural welfare, which integrates social and cultural well-being, recognizing the importance of access to culture and the arts as fundamental to the quality of life of individuals and communities. Through design that increasingly integrates artistic practices, uncommon art places are generated, where everyday journeys are converted into experiences of introspection and cultural connection. It is, therefore, necessary to re-imagine urban transit spaces as vital components of the cultural and health ecosystem. Through the transformative power of art, metro stations can evolve into sanctuaries of serenity and reflection, contributing to the overall well-being of city inhabitants and redefining the role of public spaces in contemporary urban life.

## 1. Introduction

In an era when the complexity of urban life seems to be constantly growing and the working dimension dominates much of everyday life, the issue of well-being, defined as the psychophysical health status of citizens, has become crucially important. The mass urbanization that has affected the contemporary city in recent years makes it as a complex node of interconnected spaces and networks, where daily routines and tight schedules follow an increasingly accelerated pace, profoundly affecting individual and collective well-being. This phenomenon has brought economic development that has not gone hand in hand with the quality and the health of the city itself and people, urban space and human relational capacity (Petrillo, 2006). While on the one hand, economic activities and new productive sectors of tangible and intangible networks have spread, on the other hand, problems and malaise related to inadequate housing, infrastructure, and work transit and spaces have ramped up exponentially (Pompei, 2019). Today's modern city represents the space where the psychological pressures and stresses associated with an increasingly fast-paced and dynamic system manifest most frequently. This complexity has reached such a level that it can no longer offer adequate answers to the problems of the *system-city*, which is continually subjected to entropy maximization processes, increasing its unlivability and chaos (Gargiulo, Papa, 1993). While in some phases of urban history, cities have grown by maintaining a balance among their parts, ensuring harmony among the various spheres of collective life, in recent decades, congestion and overload due to rapid urban transformation have generated incompatible conditions between the different functions

of the city (work, social life, travel) has gradually weakened. The interaction between the dimensions of work and personal well-being has become increasingly difficult to balance. Complex, often unpredictable phenomena have transformed the urban fabric into a field of unstable forces, where the absence of effective tools and inadequate management procedures help perpetuate a feeling of disorder and alienation. This imbalance is evident not only in the material conditions of urban spaces but also in the psychological and physical well-being of the individuals who live and work there.

In this scenario, a crucial need emerges: to create spaces and moments of pause that interrupt the incessant sequence of daily and work commitments and offer individuals the opportunity to regenerate. Indeed, in recent years, new ideas and experimentation have emerged that find an increasing relationship between urban transformations and citizen well-being. The American philosopher John Dewey, already in the 1920s, proposed to think of public space as an environment in which humans are not just passive spectators but cooperate closely with the environment around them. The growth of the individual starts from experience in its social dimension.

The individual is thus integrated with his environment, reacting and acting with it. Therefore, educational experience and individual growth must start in daily life and the social space in which the individual lives. It is thus helpful to understand what the “social” uses of public space in contemporary cities can be, or what they can become, and especially the function that artistic production can assume in these processes.

These new configurations of spaces are referred to by Edward Soja, at the beginning of the 90s, as “third space”, lived space

(Morone & Nunziante, 2012). This new paradigm involves the transformation of public places from simple transit places to social spaces of concentrated well-being through artistic, cultural, visual, and generally “symbolic” experiences.

Among them, the article focuses on working transit spaces, such as subway stations, which, from being crucial nodes where urban life is concentrated, can also be transformed into unexpected well-being spaces, as in the case of *metro art*. These innovative transit hubs offer unique opportunities to integrate art and design into daily life. Such interventions enrich the aesthetic and sensory experience of the users involved and contribute significantly to their well-being and mental health. Art stations, as an essential part of urban cultural welfare, exemplify how public spaces can be rethought as functional places and as catalysts for social, cultural, and psychological benefits. They redraw the boundaries between public space and personal experience. They offer a break from routine and create a deeper connection with the surrounding environment as true *sanctuaries* of calm and introspection.

## 2. Cultural Welfare and Design

Design has long overcome the traditional concept of form and function to evolve into a powerful tool for generating well-being and cultural welfare. It is no longer a discipline concerned only with functionality but a true social actor capable of promoting non-canonical settings for creating welfare through art and culture. A science capable of abandoning, from a community perspective, the traditional, performance-based welfare model to pave the way for welfare co-designed by people (Manzoli & Paltrinieri, 2021).

In close connection with urban regeneration and placemaking, design is capable of transforming public spaces and urban contexts, contributing to the social well-being and mental health of communities in a field of application extended to places of public and collective gathering (Fig. 1). In this sense, it takes part in a design reinterpretation of spaces that are generators of physical and mental well-being and promoters of an inclusive culture. Through the application of integrated and shared design methodologies, it becomes essential to understand better how emotions, particularly positive ones, can become inputs for interaction and alignment of people’s intrinsic needs toward their intentions, aspirations and goals that are not only personal but also social (De Luca, 2016).

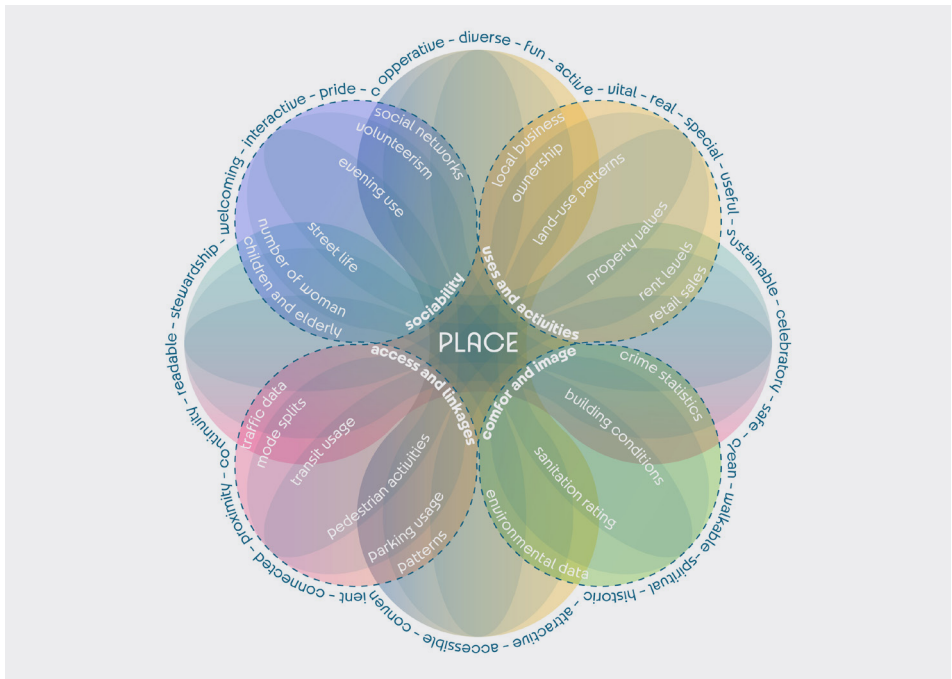


Figure 1. xxx, Placemaking: field of action, 2024.



One of the most interesting trends in this context is how it contributes to the promotion of places that are not born with a primary vocation related to culture or art but, through targeted interventions, can become catalysts for cultural innovation. These spaces, particularly workplaces and places of transit to and from work, are rethought to accommodate artistic and cultural activities, promoting widespread well-being beyond mere entertainment. Design becomes a bridge between community values through placemaking, a practice that can transform public spaces into meaningful places for the community. This process is not limited to the physical appearance of the environment but focuses on the human experience, social interactions, and the mental and physical well-being of users. By encouraging people to reimagine and reinvent public spaces collectively, this practice insists on transforming urban areas into incubators of social life in a process in which design plays the key role of a catalyst for innovation and urban regeneration. By working in synergy with urban planners, architects, psychologists and sociologists to create spaces that foster encounters, sharing and well-being, the discipline becomes a tool of empowerment for communities, allowing them to express their needs and actively contribute to the transformation of the environment. Hence, the emergence, especially in recent years, of the *One Health* concept, an approach in which the inextricable link between people's health and the ecosystem is of crucial importance.

A declining and multifaceted practice closely linked to Goal No. 11 *Urban Health* of the 2030 Agenda: making cities inclusive, safe, resilient. These are logics on the path of citizen

welfare centered on a holistic view of closely related human, animal and environmental health (De Angelis, 2023). Urban regeneration is one of the fields in which design demonstrates its social potential:

The future healthy city does not require such a radical or futuristic vision. On the contrary, it presents a more *peaceful* approach that places mental health, well-being and quality of life at the forefront of urban planning and design. An approach defined as *restorative urbanism* that is based on the principles of research on restorative environments and solid scientific evidence showing how urban design can support mental health. (Roe & McCay, 2021)

By acting on degraded or underused spaces, these places become actual platforms for community participation and the development of wellness initiatives. In this context, design becomes a tool for prevention and treatment, integrating into a holistic approach to public health that also includes the quality of the spaces in which we live and work. In this framework, the designer's role evolves into a mediator between the functional needs and the psychophysical well-being of users, becoming an interdependent figure within multidisciplinary teams engaged in the design of welfare-oriented spaces and services. This integration takes place in a transparent manner, that is, without disrupting people's daily activities, but rather enriching them through design solutions that act on the social, cultural and work spheres by raising the quality of life. One of the most illuminating examples in this field is the study *Welcoming Workplace*, carried out in collaboration with the British Council for Offices. The British research drew up workplace

well-being guidelines, exploring new trends on how to experience workspaces and crossing places, such as hallways and informal meeting spaces. Aiming to promote positive interactions among workers and improve their mental and physical well-being, the guidelines highlight how the design of these spaces can directly influence employees' mental health and sense of belonging, confirming design as a highly relevant tool that can implement determinant strategies.

*Art stations*, for example, not only represent a virtuous example of the integration of art, architecture and design, but play the crucial role of catalysts for broader social benefits, offering food for thought on the multiple functions of urban infrastructure. Indeed, these are not simply places of passage, but become spaces that invite pause and contemplation, transforming the daily experience of subway travel into an opportunity to regain one's well-being. (Salvatori, 2020, p. 266)

### 3. Art Station History

The history of subways in Europe is intertwined with the urban and social evolution of the continent's major cities. Traditionally, the subway has been conceived as a purely functional infrastructure, aimed at meeting the growing mobility needs of the urban population since the mid-19th century. However, since the 20th century, metro stations have gradually taken on a more complex and articulated role, becoming not only crucial nodes for urban transportation, but also true spaces of artistic and cultural expression, capable of reflecting the historical and social identity of the cities in which they are located. The so-called *Metro Art* is therefore part of a broader process of re-evaluation

of urban public spaces, which has seen art assume a fundamental role in the regeneration and redevelopment of modern cities. One of the most emblematic examples of this marriage of art and infrastructure is the Paris Metro, whose first line was inaugurated in 1900, on the occasion of the *Universal Exposition*. The architectural design of the stations, entrusted to Hector Guimard, was inspired by the *Art Nouveau* style, which is distinguished by its sinuous and organic forms. The wrought-iron structures, which became a symbol of Parisian modernism, evidenced an uncommon aesthetic intention for an infrastructural work, anticipating what would become, over the century, a real trend in major European capitals (Fig. 2). The Parisian metro did not only respond to urban mobility needs but also contributed to the creation of a visual and cultural identity that would be consolidated over time (De Fusco, 2000).



Figure 2. Hector Guimard, Paris Metro entrances, 1900-1912.



Figure 3. Alexey Dushkin e A.F. Strelkov, Novoslobodskaya subway station, Moscow, Russia, 1952.

Subsequently, the subway's role also assumed strategic importance in reaffirming identity values in nations. In particular, in the 1930s and 1940s, the construction of the Moscow subway was conceived as a real ideological project (Fig. 3); building *palaces of the proletariat*, underground monuments aimed at celebrating socialist ideology, using socialist realist art as a tool of political propaganda with the ideological intention of catering to the *masses' welfare* (Lee, 2022).

The innovative approach of conceiving subways not only as transportation nodes but as true underground exhibition spaces has subsequently influenced numerous European metropolises, including Paris, London, and Stockholm (Fig. 4), each developing its own interpretation of the art-public transportation union, summarized in the recurring expression *Metro Art*.



Figure 4. Per Olof Ultvedt, T-Centralen subway station, Stockholm, Sweden, 1957.

The integration of art into public transport infrastructure has taken many forms, ranging from permanent installations to temporary exhibitions, from architectural interventions to performance art, thus creating a continuous dialogue between urban space, passengers, and creative expression.

In this context, the case of Naples emerges as a pioneering and paradigmatic example, standing out for its ambitious vision and significant impact on the urban and social fabric of the city. This vision was realized through collaboration with internationally and locally renowned artists, who contributed site-specific installations, sculptures, mosaics and architectural interventions. The peculiarity of the Neapolitan case

lies in its ability to integrate contemporary art into a highly historically and culturally stratified urban context (Fig. 5):

The subway becomes an *underground museum* and can be referred to as *catacombs of beauty*. This is not a novelty for Naples, where the underground element is a common feature and this distinguishes it from other cities. It still retains a precious archeological heritage, which rises with every new project for a station. So, the underground but contemporary museum connects with the tradition and the history of the city. (Brenici, 2019, p. 12)

Naples' art stations are not limited to containers for works of art but take the form of actual urban regeneration interventions capable of redefining the identity of the neighborhoods in which they are inserted. Moreover, the case of Naples highlights how art metros can act as catalysts for economic and tourism development.



Figure 5. Peter Greenaway, Chiaia-Monte di Dio subway station, Naples, Italy, 2024.



Figure 6. Óscar Tusquet, Toledo subway station, Naples, Italy, 2012.

Art stations have become attractions in their own right, helping to redefine the city's image internationally and stimulating tourist flows to areas previously considered peripheral. This phenomenon is part of a broader debate on the role of cultural infrastructure in urban development, highlighting how investments in art and culture can generate tangible economic and social benefits (Fig. 6).

Even turning our gaze eastward to the other side of the world, it becomes evident how the role of art within stations can redefine and communicate social and cultural aspects. It proves crucial for subway stations in Tokyo, Japan, a country known for pioneering advancements in progressive train systems, to





**Figure 7.** Luis Nishizawa, Keisei Ueno Station, Tokyo, Japan, 1981.

preserve traditional elements while integrating aesthetics that resonate with their distinct identity (Seangsuk & Upala, 2024). Various aspects of the marked identity of the place appear within the stations, such as the use of the colors red, yellow, and gold and the depiction of cartoons that have a mental and emotional influence on youth in the development of the country in terms of culture, customs, and traditions (Fig. 7). In this way, citizens are directly involved in everyday life in the community narrative to discover the unique cultural dimensions of the surrounding community (Jeannotte, 2016), while promoting passenger services, economic tourism and promoting social values.

#### **4. Off Spaces: The Role of the Art**

I have been drawing in the subway for three years now, and although my career aboveground has skyrocketed, the subway is still my favorite place to draw. There is something very *real* about the subway system and the people who travel in it; perhaps there is not another place in the world where people of such diverse

appearance, background, and life-style have intermingled for a common purpose. In this underground environment, one can often feel a sense of oppression and struggle in the vast assortment of faces. It is in this context that an expression of hope and beauty carries the greatest rewards [...] These were not the people I saw in the museums or in the galleries but a cross section of humanity that cut across all boundaries. (Haring, 1984)

Renowned artist Keith Haring, in his collection *Art in Transit: Subway Drawings*, offers a unique perspective on the subway's role as a public space and artistic canvas (Fig. 8). Haring's insights on the subway as a unique space of encounter and artistic expression apply to the contemporary context, within which subways constitute a social microcosm. They remain one of the few urban spaces where people from different social, economic and cultural backgrounds mingle daily, constituting a mirror of urban society, with its challenges (overcrowding and alienation) and its potential (connectivity and diversity).



Figure 8. Keith Haring, New York subway, New York, United States, 1980s.

Based on these reflections, art in subways has become no longer an act of rebellion like the one carried out by Haring in the years of the insurrection of the ideology of the street and the creative ferment that from 1976 until beyond the 1980s disrupted art, music, film, and poetry, but constitutes a cultural policy that, through a conscious strategy, aims to integrate art in stations, recreating the unique identity of each city, capable of reflecting its culture and history, with the aim of enhancing the urban experience and promoting the well-being of citizens, providing an accessible platform for exhibiting art to a wide and diverse audience, overcoming the traditional barriers of museums and configuring themselves as *obligatory museums*, within which a population in transit is involuntarily forced to pass, but in which they certainly receive stimulation from works selected according to the idea of cultural nomadism, which intercepts between attention and inattention the gaze of a hasty, instantaneous and indirect public (Oliva, 2016).

Metro Art has, therefore, played a crucial role in democratizing access to art, bringing works of high cultural value into everyday spaces frequented by diverse audiences, promoting a more inclusive and participatory form of art enjoyment, and implementing an inclusive and participatory model of art appreciation that overcomes the traditional socio-economic barriers associated with conventional museums (Fig. 9). Public art is increasingly seen as a tool for social cohesion and improving the quality of urban life. Such interventions not only enrich the aesthetic and sensory experience of the users involved but also contribute significantly to their well-being and mental health by reducing the stress of commuting.



Figure 9. Julien Colombier, Châtelet subway station, Paris, France, 2024.

There is a demonstrated relationship between commuting and psychological and physical health. According to the Fifteenth General Census of Population and Housing, there are almost 29 million (48.6 percent of the resident population) people in Italy who commute daily to their place of work or study. Travel times and distances for commuters continue to increase, potentially significantly impacting the environment and mental health (Taino et al., 2019). A study by the American Psychological Association highlights how cortisol levels rise as commuting times increase (Evans & Wener, 2006). Although there is evidence that the level of perceived stress is higher in cases of car commuting, factors such as duration, control, physical and cognitive strain, and travel predicta-

bility negatively influence mental health, regardless of the mode of transportation (Wener & Evans, 2011). This obviously depends on personal travel mode preferences, transportation efficiency, proximity to stations, and other determinants. Subjective well-being (SWB), as well as mood, improves, therefore, with improvements related to different travel parameters. (Ettema et al., 2011). These factors also affect transportation policies, partly because trips that are experienced as more satisfying are more likely to be sustained for a longer period. As a result, policy evaluation should focus on factors related to the stress of commuting and, therefore, work transit hubs. Exposure to art during daily commutes can have positive effects on mental health, offering moments of reflection and beauty in otherwise hectic contexts, acting as catalysts for social cohesion, fostering a sense of community and belonging to reconnect people with their city and each other, promoting collective well-being. In a place typically characterized by swiftness and speed, the juxtaposition of museum and infrastructure can be appreciated, requiring reflection, contemplation, critical judgment; those mental activities that are seemingly antithetical to the obligatory rhythms of mobility nodes could be successfully defined as new human attitudes and behaviors (Castagnaro, 2014).

## 5. Conclusion

At a time when the speed of modern life and information overload profoundly affect psycho-physical well-being, the creation of spaces that facilitate moments of pause and reflection therefore becomes a fundamental necessity. Interventions that blend art, design and well-being, as in the case of

art stations, demonstrate their transformative potential, redefining the way public spaces are experienced and perceived by the community, attempting to provide a concrete response to the growing problem of social alienation. The transformation of these transitory places into spaces that stimulate imagination and interaction gives rise to a new context in which individual and collective well-being are nurtured and connected.

Design, as a cultural welfare actor, goes beyond its aesthetic or practical function: it becomes a tool for urban regeneration, promoting a holistic vision of well-being that can reconcile people's physical and mental dimensions. Moreover, art and design within places of everyday life and community not only improve psychophysical well-being, but also foster phenomena of social aggregation. These spaces, transformed by artistic presence, become catalysts for empathy and connection, not only between the individual and the art, but also between the people themselves. Through shared art, a sense of belonging is generated that strengthens social ties, stimulating the creation of more cohesive communities and promoting a collective well-being that goes beyond the individual dimension. Particularly in work contexts, art not only improves the work environment but also fosters creativity, productivity and interpersonal relationships, contributing to a more serene and harmonious work environment. The concept of cultural welfare, supported by increasing research, shows that art and culture are not simply tools for entertainment or decoration, but fundamental elements in people's health and well-being. It is in this perspective that European and global policies that recognize the importance of collective well-being and health

through the integration of culture and creativity in urban spaces. It is clear that the integration of art and design in urban contexts represents a fertile field for experimentation. The growing awareness of the importance of well-being in citizens, and particularly in workers, can no longer be limited to physical and material aspects, but must also include cultural and artistic aspects that can improve their capacity for connection, empathy and collaboration. This perspective paves the way for new ways of conceiving work and productivity, making culture and design central tools for building more humane and inclusive work environments and contexts.

Ultimately, art and design in places of transit and work offer a new paradigm of interaction with urban space. Art stations, like cultural workshops in work spaces, are not just places of transit or production, but become true laboratories of social innovation and catalysts for change. Investment in the integration of art into these spaces is, therefore, not merely an aesthetic issue, but a strategic choice that can have profound positive effects on the quality of life in our cities. As evidenced by the success of numerous projects around the world, the combination of art, design and well-being is one of the keys to building a more balanced, sustainable and, above all, humane urban future.

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# NEW DESIGN NARRATIVES FOR HEALTHCARE

# Beyond the “White Cube”

## Intersecting Art and Design in Hospital Spaces

**Virginia Marano**

Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut

University of Zurich

MASI, Museo d’Arte della Svizzera italiana, Lugano

Orcid id 0000-0002-7348-9877

### **Keywords**

Art and Design, Hospital Spaces, Artistic Intervention, Embodied Knowledge, Vulnerability and Care.

### **Abstract**

This paper explores hospitals as contemporary sites of artistic and critical creation, focusing on the artistic practices of Panteha Abareshi (they/them), Marcus Coates (he/him), Jesse Darling (he/him), and Carolyn Lazard (they/them). It investigates how their personal experiences of pain, illness, and hospitalization inform their artistic practices, emphasizing the intricate relationship between visual representation, embodied knowledge, and medicalized environments. These artists critically engage with the medicalization of their bodies, challenging conventional health narratives and questioning institutionalized understandings of care and illness.

Abareshi’s performances, videos, and sculptural installations confront the medical surveillance of their body, using gestural forms to critique objectification, power, and the able-bodied gaze. Coates’ projects engage with mental health by offering alternative representations of personal. Darling reworks medical objects in their art to subvert the sterile environment, questioning the dynamics of vulnerability and care. Lazard’s multi-disciplinary practice, including video, performance, and installation, explores the nuances of caregiving and patienthood, offering new ways to understand care within healthcare settings. experiences, rethinking the roles typically assigned within psychiatric contexts. By focusing on these contemporary artists and their work within hospital settings, this contribution offers insights into the dynamic relationship between art, health, and healing, revealing new possibilities at the intersection of art, design, and medical spaces.

## 1. Hospitals as Contemporary Art Spaces

Contemporary shifts in art and design have led artists to explore spaces beyond the traditional “white cube” gallery, with hospitals emerging as critical contexts for artistic intervention. As paradoxical spaces of power and care, hospitals are where institutional frameworks of regulation and discipline intersect with personal experiences of illness, pain, and vulnerability. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s concept of the “medical gaze” in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963/2003), hospitals become “coded spaces,” where the medical profession exerts control over the body, objectifying patients and reducing them to cases or conditions.

As Foucault observes, “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (1976/1990, p. 95). Hospitals offer unique opportunities for artists to engage with these dynamics critically, navigating and subverting institutional constraints to reclaim agency, challenge detachment, and foreground lived experience. Suzanne Lacy’s new genre public art (1995) exemplifies this approach, as it “engages audiences in dialogue about issues directly relevant to their lives” (p. 19). Lacy’s *Cancer Notes* (1991) – a seven-day performance conducted at Roswell Memorial Hospital – embodied this ethos. Installed in a vacant children’s ward, Lacy met with patients, doctors, nurses, and administrators, conducting hour-long interviews to document their experiences. She mapped histories and observations onto large sheets of newsprint, diagramming connections between personal lives and institutional systems. This temporary installation culminated in a collective discussion,

transforming the hospital into a space of dialogue, critical reflection, and shared meaning.

In this context, access emerges not as a static endpoint but as a dynamic, generative process. As Hamraie and Fritsch (2019) articulate in their *Crip Technoscience Manifesto*, access is “collective, messy, experimental, frictional, and generative,” positioning creative resistance and interdependence as transformative, world-making practices. Hospitals, therefore, can become sites of friction and possibility, where power is met with resistance, and art intervenes to reveal the complexities of embodied experience.

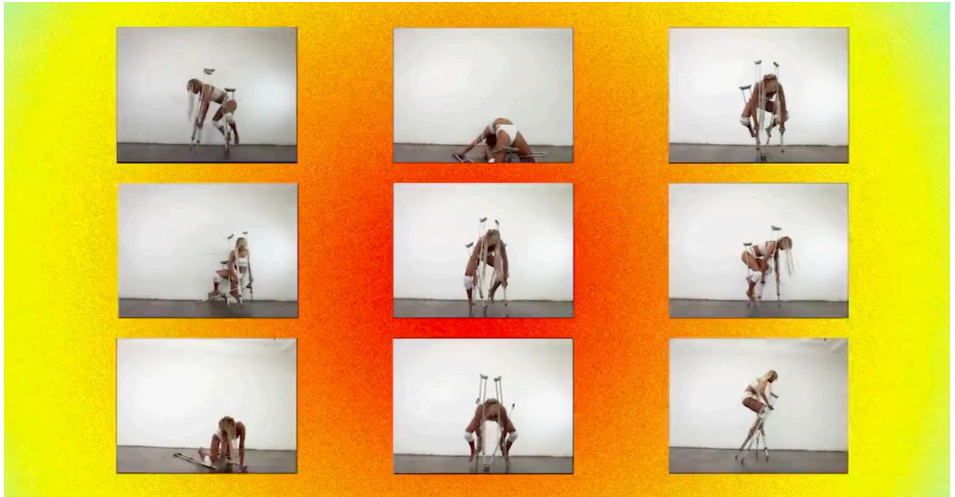
The perspectives of the contemporary artists examined in these pages tend to subvert medicalized frameworks and reimagine hospitals as sites of creativity. Abareshi critiques medical surveillance and objectification; Coates reconceptualizes psychiatric narratives, amplifying marginalized voices; Darling rethinks vulnerability and failure by subverting medical objects; and Lazard redefine caregiving, centering interdependence and the labor of care. Together, their practices radically reimagine hospitals as spaces of resistance: to a medical, de-sexualizing gaze, and to the boundaries of disciplinary art.

## **2. Panteha Abareshi: Body Objectification and the Gaze**

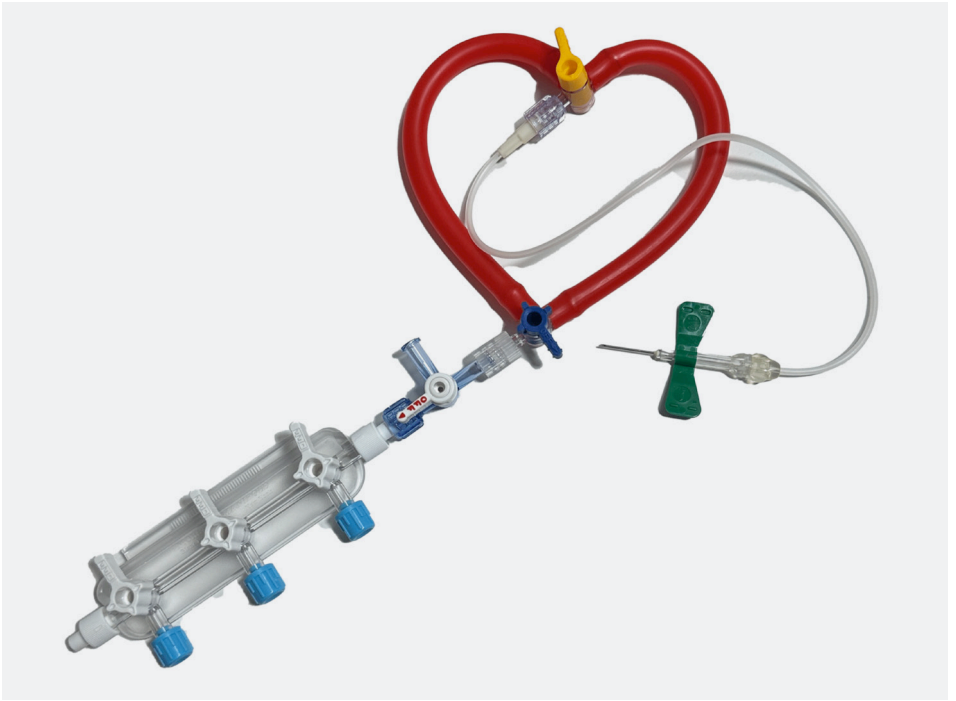
Abareshi’s work engages directly with the lived experience of inhabiting a body that is constantly monitored, examined, and medicalized (Foucault, 1981). As an artist living with chronic illness, Abareshi are keenly aware of how the medical system objectifies the body, treating it as a site for study and control rather than recognizing its subjectivity and agency

(Turner, 1992). Through their work, Abareshi (2020) critique the medicalization process by actively resisting the reduction of the body to a mere object of medical scrutiny. Their art offers specific, embodied critiques that explore how the medical system's power dynamics shape, constrain, and erase the lived experience of disabled bodies.

In *For Parts* (2020), Abareshi critique the medicalization of the body through a performance video that contrasts organic bodily actions with the inorganic, mechanized aspects introduced by medical prosthetics and implants (Fig. 1). This work can be seen as a direct engagement with Foucault's theory of medicalization, in which the body is subjected to constant surveillance, categorization, and regulation (Foucault, 2006). Through repetitive, strenuous actions and the interplay of medical devices, Abareshi's video explores the tension between medical interventions and the embodied, subjective experience of the body.



**Figure 1.** Panteha Abareshi, Image still from (*For Parts*), 2020.



**Figure 2.** Panteha Abareshi, *SWEET FUTILITY*, 2023, medical ephemera, latex, silicone, 30,48x15,24 cm.

The fragmented imagery and distorted soundscapes in the video emphasize the alienation between the body’s internal experience and its medicalized external representation, challenging the idea that the body can be fully understood through the detached gaze of medical science (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). Similarly, in *Invalid Pleasures* (2023), Abareshi’s sculptural installation subverts the very forms of medical devices by abstracting them into non-functional, aesthetically altered objects (Fig. 2). This recontextualization directly critiques the medical-industrial complex, which often reduces bodies to their clinical aspects, stripping them of their personal and subjective dimensions (Davis, 1995).

By transforming medical devices into abstract forms, Abareshi resist the medical system’s drive to categorize and objectify bodies, offering a space for the body’s complexities, vulnerabilities, and agency to emerge. This aligns with Nancy Fraser’s concept of redistribution and recognition, where resistance occurs not just in economic terms but in the recognition of bodies as multifaceted subjects deserving of autonomy, not simply medical intervention (Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

In *5 Alarm (Pull For Help)* (2019), Abareshi engage with the theme of accessibility within medical spaces. The installation features hospital assistance panels placed just beyond reach, symbolizing the inaccessible nature of help in medical environments. This work resonates with Eli Clare’s argument in *Exile and Pride* (1999/2015), where he discusses the emotional and physical alienation felt by disabled people in spaces not designed for them. The dangling cords not only emphasize the physical barriers in medical contexts but also critique the broader societal failure to recognize disabled bodies as full, equal participants in societal and medical spaces. In doing so, Abareshi foreground a central tenet of disability theory: that medical and societal systems are designed with an able-bodied norm in mind, systematically excluding those whose bodies do not conform (Garland-Thomson, 2009).

Abareshi’s *And I Gaze* (2019) further critiques the normative structures of art spaces. The piece asks the viewer to ascend a metal staircase to view a distant video projection, yet even the artist, positioned as both creator and subject, cannot engage with the work as intended. This critique of accessibility mirrors what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls the “freak



gaze,” a term used to describe how disabled bodies are often viewed as spectacles rather than subjects (Garland-Thomson, 2009). Abareshi’s piece points to the ways art spaces, like medical institutions, are constructed around an able-bodied ideal, and how these spaces often fail to acknowledge the embodied experiences of disabled individuals.

In *NATURAL DISASTER* (2019), Abareshi examines the experience of bodily degeneration upon receiving their wheelchair, documenting the cyclical and ongoing nature of illness and disability. Presented on a CRT monitor placed atop a wheelchair, the work challenges ableist narratives of “deficiency” by engaging Tobin Siebers’ concept of “complex embodiment,” which resists reductive binaries such as “better” or “worse.” Instead, the piece foregrounds the lived realities of vulnerability and the dynamic processes of disability. This approach resonates with Garland-Thomson’s (2011) theorization of vulnerability as arising from the interplay between bodies and their environments. She asserts that vulnerability is not an inherent attribute of the body but is situated in its relationship to its context: “The contingent quality of misfitting and fitting places vulnerability in the fit, not in the body.” Abareshi’s work reflects this perspective, rejecting the medical model’s fixation on “curing” illness and instead situating the body within a framework of fluid, relational experiences shaped by social and material conditions.

Finally, *NOT BETTER YET* (2019) interrogates the ableist framework that defines health in terms of linear progress – either “better” or “worse.” This binary is a central critique in disability studies, where theorists such as Lennard J. Davis

argue that the medicalization of the body imposes a normative, able-bodied timeline on experiences of illness and disability (Davis, 1995). Abareshi’s work resists this narrative, presenting the perpetual cycle of illness as an integral part of the body’s existence rather than an anomaly that needs to be corrected. Through the performance on a hospital bed, accompanied by sound recordings of medical professionals, the work challenges the assumption that health is linear, instead foregrounding the lived reality of chronic illness as complex and multifaceted. These works collectively form a critique that is both theoretical and embodied. They provide a specific, concrete resistance to medicalization by engaging with disability theory and critiques of ableism, while also offering a personal and artistic reimaging of the body. Rather than simply resisting the process of medicalization in an abstract sense, Abareshi’s works ground this resistance in the lived experiences of disabled bodies, challenging the norms of medical and societal systems that seek to control, objectify, and exclude.

### **3. Marcus Coates: Reconceptualizing Psychosis in *The Directors* and the Decentering of Medical Authority in Mental Health Representation**

Coates’ collaborative project *The Directors* (2022),<sup>1</sup> extends the critique of medicalization beyond the physical spaces of illness into the psychiatric realm, specifically addressing the stigma surrounding mental health and psychosis (Fig. 3).

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1 I am indebted to James Lingwood for pointing me to *The Directors*, a project by Marcus Coates commissioned by Artangel. James Lingwood was Co-Director of Artangel with Michael Morris from 1991 to 2023.



Figure 3. *The Directors* (stills), 2022, single-channel HD video, 16 min 51 sec.

While artists like Abareshi focus on physical illness and clinical environments, Coates intervenes in the highly medicalized and stigmatized space of psychiatry, offering an alternative approach to representing psychosis.

*The Directors* works with five individuals in recovery from psychosis, each of whom directs Coates in re-staging a significant personal event from their life. This collaborative process is crucial in challenging the traditional power dynamics within the psychiatric field, where patients are often seen as passive subjects of diagnosis and treatment (Rose, 2006). By granting these individuals control over how their stories are represented, Coates disrupts the authoritative role typically held by medical professionals in the portrayal of mental health.

This dynamic subverts the medical gaze and empowers participants to reclaim agency over their own narratives, marking

a stark contrast to traditional psychiatric practices where patients are often reduced to mere case studies (Goffman, 1961). Rather than reducing psychosis to a clinical diagnosis, Coates reconfigures it as a lived experience deserving of empathetic understanding (Laing, 1960). The process of re-enactment, where participants guide Coates in recreating their experiences, presents psychosis not as a pathology to be managed, but as a valid and personal experience. In doing so, *The Directors* challenges the detached, clinical nature of psychiatric care by foregrounding personal agency and the importance of lived experience in the representation of mental illness. This re-framing aligns with broader critiques of medicalization seen in the works of artists like Abareshi, who similarly center lived experience over clinical abstraction (Sontag, 1978).

One of the key distinctions in Coates’ project is the shift away from the sterile, institutional spaces traditionally associated with psychiatric care. Coates’ decision to film in personally significant locations chosen by the participants challenges the dominant medical narrative, which often removes individuals from their lived environments and places them in clinical settings that strip away their subjectivity (Parr, 2008). By situating the re-enactments in spaces that hold personal meaning for the participants, Coates reorients the discussion of psychosis away from clinical detachment and towards a more grounded, subjective representation. This move not only subverts the clinical authority of medical spaces but also redefines care as a collaborative, participatory process, one where the voices and agency of those with lived experience take center stage (Chambers et al., 2014).

The emphasis on self-representation and autonomy in *The Directors* resonates with contemporary approaches in disability studies, which stress the importance of agency in health and care. Coates’ project contributes to the growing discourse on participatory, patient-centered models of care that critique the hierarchical structures of knowledge within medical institutions. Much like Abareshi’s work subverts the clinical use of medical devices, Coates reconfigures the psychiatric apparatus through artistic intervention, reframing psychosis as a narrative shaped by those who experience it. This reframing disrupts the traditional medicalization of mental health, opening up space for more nuanced, empathetic, and person-centered approaches to both psychiatric care and its representation (Bishop, 2012).

Ultimately, *The Directors* offers a potent challenge to the institutional framing of mental health, emphasizing the importance of self-directed storytelling and the power of personal experience in disrupting the authority of the psychiatric system. By elevating the voices of individuals recovering from psychosis and empowering them to represent their own stories, Coates creates a model of mental health representation that is collaborative, empathetic, and deeply rooted in the lived realities of those it seeks to portray.

#### **4. Jesse Darling: Subverting the Medical-Industrial Complex through Art**

In the exploration of embodied knowledge and self-representation, Darling’s work is particularly relevant for its nuanced engagement with the intersection of disability, societal norms, and institutional systems. Darling’s practice spans

multiple mediums, including sculpture, installation, video, drawing, text, sound, and performance, integrating personal experience with historical and counter-historical narratives (Darling, 2018). Darling’s exhibition *The Ballad of Saint Jerome* (2019), for example, uses the figure of Saint Jerome, who heals the lion’s wound, as a metaphor for the dynamics of controlled healing and subtle dominance. The work prompts a reflection on the hierarchical relationship between humans and non-human entities, offering a critique of the paternalistic structures that govern care and healing (Smith, 2019). Central to Darling’s practice is the repeated use of the cane, a mobility aid that, in their work, transcends its utilitarian function. Through works like *Crawling Cane & Comfort Station* (2017) (Fig. 4), Darling transforms everyday objects associated with care and support, turning them into symbols of vulnerability and resilience (Darling, 2017).



**Figure 4.** Jesse Luke Darling, *Crawling Cane*, 2017, steel, aluminum, rubber and lacquer, 73x40x20 cm.



**Figure 5.** Jesse Luke Darling, *Comfort Station*, 2017, steel, aluminum, rubber and lacquer, 78x140x85 cm.

The bent cane (Fig. 5) becomes a metaphor for the body's own failure to conform to societal norms, a transformation that challenges traditional notions of disability and vulnerability (Garland-Thomson, 2009). The steel material used in these sculptures contrasts with the fragile posture of the cane, suggesting both strength and precarity, offering a critique of the way society discards bodies that do not fit within idealized norms of health and ability (Smith, 2018).

Darling's practice critiques not just the physical body but also the clinical and institutional systems that define and regulate it. Their use of the cane as a sculptural object – bent, collapsed, and deconstructed – engages with the institutionalized frameworks of care and control (Foucault, 1982). The cane, in its transformation, becomes a powerful symbol of resistance against the medicalized and normative frameworks that

seek to categorize human experience into rigid binaries of health and illness, ability and disability. Darling’s assertion that “objects are bodily and complicated” highlights the complexity of these everyday objects, reinterpreting them as not just tools but as representations of the body itself, intertwined with histories of power, vulnerability, and control (Darling & Luquet-Gad, 2019).

In their 2018 *Support Level* exhibition at Chapter NY, Darling’s use of mobility aids and objects like commode chairs and hygiene curtains illustrates how physical objects can embody the discomfort and pain inherent in both the medical-industrial complex and societal attitudes toward disability. The commode chair appears to “creep” on the floor, while the hygiene curtain reveals a wound, visualizing the rawness of chronic illness and medical interventions (Darling, 2018). These objects, distorted and reimaged, speak to the larger societal discomfort with disability and pain. Darling’s works navigate the tension between the object’s function and its new, subversive narrative, questioning what is deemed useful or useless, functional or dysfunctional (Jones, 2020). The cane’s anthropomorphic form evokes the human spine or a contorted limb, blurring the boundaries between object and subject, ability and failure, health and illness (Darling, 2018).

Darling’s work also engages with the failure of systems – health care systems, the art world, and societal structures – that are meant to support but often fail to do so. In works like *Collapsed Cane* (2018), the object (Fig. 6) ceases to fulfill its original function, symbolizing the broader collapse of systems that fail to accommodate or support those who do not conform to normative standards (Darling, 2018).





**Figure 6.** Jesse Luke Darling, *Collapsed Cane*, 2017, steel, aluminum, rubber and lacquer, 75x60x0.5 cm.

Darling’s sculptures, through their transformation and collapse, point to the failure of both the medical-industrial complex and the art world to accommodate alternative forms of embodiment, inviting viewers to consider how bodies exist within these failing systems (Butler, 2004).

In Darling’s work, the notion of collapse signifies more than a failure of objects; it serves to portray the failure of systems, be they situated within the realm of healthcare politics or the art world. Whether it is a cane rendered unusable, as in *Collapsed Cane* (2018), or a hygiene curtain revealing a wound, the implication is that systems and objects cease to fulfill the roles they were designed for. Darling’s works explore how bodies exist alongside other bodies within these failing systems. As political economist Raj Patel and physician Rupa Marya highlighted, these systems exist “in the multidimensional spaces around and beyond the individual body-in histories, ecologies, narratives and dynamic of power” (2021).

The bent cane and the wound behind the hygiene curtain invite some discomfort, thus not only visualizing pain and chronic illness but also societal attitudes toward disability. This plays into broader discussions around identity and the intersecting issues of gender, race, class, and the body politic. When addressing self-representation, Darling’s art refuses to objectify pain, avoiding the voyeuristic gaze, a term that disability scholar Garland-Thomson (2009) differentiates from the stare due to its association with asymmetrical power, as it is typically directed at those perceived as “other” due to illness or disability. Instead, his works question medicalization and normativity, with objects like canes transformed to challenge these concepts.

In confronting their own health struggles, Darling highlights the unacknowledged labor involved in creating art while navigating chronic pain and disability. The “hermetic masculine of phallic modernity” that Darling critiques underscore the oppressive demands placed on disabled artists, who must contend with both physical and societal limitations (Darling & Luquet-Gad, 2019). Through this lens, Darling’s transformation of the cane – a symbol of failure and resilience – takes on a new significance, not just as a subversion of function but as an embodiment of a more inclusive, empathetic engagement with the body’s limitations, rejecting the medicalization and objectification of disability (Siebers, 2008).

## 5. Carolyn Lazard: Redefining Care and Patient Experience

Lazard’s artistic practice is deeply informed by their experiences with illness and disability, focusing on how care is administered, experienced, and understood within medical spaces. Lazard’s work frequently interrogates the conventional narratives surrounding health, disability, and the body, offering new perspectives on the patient experience. Their art, which spans video, performance, and installation, is characterized by a commitment to redefining the concept of care within the context of illness and the medical environment. Lazard’s video work often serves as a medium through which they explore the dynamics of care and the patient experience. Lazard documents the often overlooked aspects of care in their durational performance *Support System (for Park, Tina, and Bob)* (2016). *Support System* (Fig. 7) is a 12-hour performance in which Lazard remained in bed and received visitors individually for 30-minute intervals.



**Figure 7.** Carolyn Lazard, *Support System (for Park, Tina, and Bob)*, 2016, 24 gifted bouquets, documentation of performance and collectively produced sculpture, dimensions variable. Courtesy of Carolyn Lazard.

Each visitor was invited to bring a bouquet of flowers, symbolizing care and the tangible exchange within the performance. However, the nature of each interaction was left open to interpretation, creating a fluid exploration of caregiving, questioning who was giving and receiving care. The piece deliberately subverted the art world’s typical focus on endurance by creating what Lazard referred to as a “marathon of comfort.” The performance often revealed a more complex dynamic: what was intended as an opportunity for Lazard to rest sometimes transformed into a scenario where they found themselves tending to the needs of their visitors. This role reversal highlighted the often invisible labor involved in

caregiving and the social complexities surrounding the act of receiving care, emphasizing that the need for support is an essential part of the human experience.

At the core of Lazard’s practice is a recognition of dependence – on medication, medical intervention, and especially on other people. This resonates with the work of philosopher Eva Feder Kittay, who critiques the disability rights movement of the 1990s for its insistence on independence. Kittay argues that this ideal, while often celebrated, is neither attainable nor necessarily desirable. Much like Kittay’s critique, Lazard’s work embraces the realities of interdependence, encouraging a reexamination of the value and complexity of care.

In *A Conspiracy* (2017), Lazard employ an array of Dohm white noise machines to subtly transform the acoustic environment, creating a sensory experience that operates at the edge of perception (Fig. 8). The barely discernible sound produced by the machines challenges conventional distinctions between functional objects and art, inviting viewers to engage with the often-overlooked elements of their surroundings. Initially installed in the elevators of the New Museum, New York, the work prompts a critical reflection on the unnoticed technologies that shape daily life. By utilizing objects commonly associated with medical and therapeutic spaces, Lazard foregrounds accessibility issues, suggesting how these devices can discreetly modulate environments to foster collective care. Through this minimalist intervention, *A Conspiracy* underscores the significance of shared, often invisible, processes of support and interdependence within broader discourses on health, illness, and care (Stabler, 2023).



Figure 8. Carolyn Lazard, *A Conspiracy*, 2017, Dohm white noise machines, dimensions variable.

## 6. Conclusion

Through the works of Abareshi, Coates, Darling, and Lazard, the intersection of art and hospital spaces initiates a profound discourse on the human condition, vulnerability, and institutional control over the bodies. These artists challenge the hospital’s purely clinical conception, revealing it as a space laden with cultural and social codes that regulate identity, autonomy, and subjectivity. Their work exposes the hospital as a site of tension—between care and control, healing and surveillance, agency and objectification.

By offering transformative visions of how hospitals and illness might be reimagined, these artists subvert the medicalization of the body. Abareshi’s gestural forms confront the emotional and psychological dimensions of medical surveillance. Coates decenters the medical gaze, amplifying marginalized voices. Darling interrogates structures defining normalcy and ability through the subversion of medical objects. Lazard redefines care, revealing the labor, intimacy, and agency inherent in caregiving, moving beyond medical sterility toward more profound interdependence.

Collectively, their practices disrupt the hospital’s historical dominance as a site of power over the body, transforming it into a space where the complexities of human experience – pain, illness, care, and resilience – are embodied and expressed. The hospital becomes a place of active resistance and self-representation, where vulnerability is strength and the body becomes a site of agency, knowledge, and creativity.

This investigation urges a reconsideration of the boundaries between art, care, and medical practice. It reveals potential for radical reimagination within regulated hospital environments – redefining care, emerging new forms of knowledge, and creating spaces that honor embodied realities. By interrogating the hospital’s role in shaping our understanding of health, these artists open pathways for designing environments attuned to the human condition’s fragility, resilience, and complexity. Their works offer not merely a critique of medicalization but a vision of what care could be: an act of deep, empathetic engagement that honors the dignity, agency, and creativity of all bodies.



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# The Impact of Design on Healthcare Restorative Interiors

## **Silvia Pericu**

Università di Genova

Orcid id 0000-0001-7023-0432

## **Chiara Olivastri**

Università di Genova

Orcid id 0000-0002-2202-7074

## **Luca Parodi**

Università di Genova

Orcid id 0000-0002-8136-576X

## **Sara Iebole**

Università di Genova

Orcid id 0000-0001-5823-1715

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## **Abstract**

As widely recognized, people's experiences are significantly influenced by their environment, particularly in healthcare settings, which impacts therapeutic outcomes (Galise, 2021). This project proposes a redesign of the Obstetrics department at Santa Croce Hospital in Cuneo, known for high-risk pregnancies and preterm births, through a domestic approach and restorative design improvements that enhance environmental factors. The goal is to humanize hospital environments (Montaccini & Tedesco, 2015) for patients, families, and staff, fostering feelings of welcome and easy access to information. Despite advancements in care, the quality of healthcare facilities often lags behind, even though evidence shows that physical spaces affect mental and emotional health. The project seeks to enhance health, sensory nourishment, and psychological regeneration for patients and medical staff by incorporating materials and forms that evoke nature. Initial interventions included creating homelike spaces with relaxation zones. The redesign prioritizes sensitivity and perception alongside functionality, addressing diverse elements from color schemes to furniture. Stress-exposed individuals require regenerative spaces enhanced by natural elements and light regulation through biophilic design. In the first stage of the ongoing redesign, results from a questionnaire have been shared with staff and patients to evaluate changes in livability and spatial perception. This contribution aims to analyze responses for project advancement while offering critical insights into the limits of light interventions on existing spaces without hindering operational efficiency.

## 1. Healing Environments

An in-depth investigation into the potential contaminations and boundaries in the relationship between art/design and health represents a significant research perspective within the field of healing environments in healthcare, promising intriguing developments.

A healing environment, as defined by McCullough (2010), is one that exerts a nurturing and therapeutic effect on individuals from both physical and psychosocial perspectives. Understanding the dynamics between place, patient, and the healing process is fundamental for optimizing these environments as potential innovation factors in the design of healthcare spaces. A universally recognized reference point is Roger Ulrich's studies from the 1980s, which demonstrated the positive impact of natural green elements within healing environments. His research showed that merely viewing green spaces from a hospital room window could significantly reduce medication use and shorten recovery times. Building on this evidence, the incorporation of nature as a healing tool has gained popularity in recent years. Healing gardens, for instance, are now utilized as therapeutic spaces for dementia patients. Beyond biophilic design in healthcare facilities, this concept encompasses the creation of environments that foster calmness and reduce stress for patients, staff, and visitors. This includes enhancing contact with art, designing harmonious color schemes, and providing sensory stimulation to promote space familiarity and tranquility. This research presents an action-research case conducted by the Architecture and Design Department at the University of Genoa. The focus was on enhancing the regenerative properties of healthcare spaces designated for perinatal and neonatal

assistance at S. Croce e Carle Hospital in Cuneo, considering that the benefits of the transformation should also be understood as a priority for the medical staff who work constantly and uninterruptedly in the facility. In addition to being used for healthcare, the spaces represent a workplace of excellence, whose layout and organizational improvement were strongly desired by the hospital's management and medical staff. The intervention involved interior design modifications to an existing wing, utilizing decorative and furnishing elements that improve spatial perception for both patients and medical personnel. Therefore, the site had to be transformed while active, which presented a challenge to understand the constraints for a light intervention that could bring tangible and measurable benefits to the place of care and work. This highly topical challenge involves maximizing impact against limited resources and where constraints present an opportunity.

Employing methods from Evidence-Based Design (EBD) (Hamilton & Watkins, 2009) facilitated a connection between research on healing environments and practical design applications within an existing context. The EBD approach incorporates users – both patients and staff – in the evaluation process of the design using tools that provide foundational support for environmental planning. Particular attention was given to defining objectives through co-design activities with users, alongside utilizing evaluation or measurement tools to identify the most suitable solutions. This process anticipates gradual interventions over time within the existing building, adaptable according to ongoing research findings and the evolving needs of stakeholders. The design intervention is preceded by an analysis phase and an evaluation phase, de-

tailed in this article. To convert project insights into research questions, extensive references were made to environmental psychology and regenerative factors derived from Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan, 1995). This theory explores the psychological relationship between humans and their living environments as a focal point in restorative design. The overarching goal of this process is to ensure that action-research cases conducted by academic researchers – guided by these principles – become integral to designer training. This integration aims to equip future designers with skills that systematically consider how built spaces can meet the psychological needs of their users (Pazzaglia & Tizi, 2022).

## 2. Research Method and Design Approach

### 2.1. The Role of Domesticity: From Home to Healthcare

The redesign of the obstetrics department begins with a structural analysis and assessment of identified needs, facilitated by collaboration between the project team and hospital staff. To enhance functionality and ambiance, the redesign focuses on key communal areas: the entrance atrium, serving as a welcoming and social space, and the corridor leading to patient rooms. A critical aspect of the design is the implementation of a specific colour palette, strategically selected to mitigate the clinical perception of the hospital environment for both patients and staff. The application of colour alters spatial perception, creating a more domestic atmosphere. In the early 1920s, Gio Ponti initiated a critical analysis of this topic in Italy. In 1928, his reflections on the role of the home were published in the editorial of the inaugural issue of *Domus*.

Ponti succinctly delineated the primary characteristics of the “Italian house,” described as a comfortable space that both embraces and interacts with the natural environment (Ponti, 1928). Subsequent years witnessed a proliferation of projects that focused on this theme. Domestic space is conceptualized as a distinct entity, separate from the external world, yet simultaneously equipped to encompass all essential functions necessary for human survival (Molinari, 2020). Nevertheless, the notion of space remains in a state of continuous transformation and is a subject of extensive contemporary discourse. Today, many projects are grounded in the reinterpretation, reappropriation, and domestication of those interstitial spaces that have long remained outside the embrace of domesticity.

An interesting example of this is the Brera project at Humanitas, initiated in 2023 by the Pinacoteca di Brera in collaboration with the IRCCS Istituto Clinico Humanitas in Rozzano. “In a place filled with powerful emotions, such as a hospital, art possesses a profound and transformative energy”, reads the concept of the project. The format, focused on highlighting the beauty of art and its emotional and communicative power, introduces art into care environments by incorporating elements from masterpieces by thirteen renowned artists, such as Raphael, Hayer, Piero della Francesca, and Lotto. Covering approximately 400 square metres, the art depicts gestures of care and closeness, interspersed with Italian landscapes that blend into unexpected and imaginative views. This aligns with the project’s primary goal: to comfort and reassure the patients. A series of frames designed to create truly immersive experiences, installed through a skillful interplay between “art as care” and “care as art”. These choices seem to encourage a



departure from the hospital atmosphere, favouring a shift towards beauty and everyday life. Ultimately, if the relationship between objects and users is expressed through the material nature of the objects (Maldonado, 1976), the same approach is reflected in the redesign of the obstetrics and department at the Infermi Hospital in Rimini, inaugurated in 2020. In this case, a central role is played by the introduction of hybrid furniture elements, balancing between the home environment and the hospital setting. The installation of site-specific prints in all the inpatient areas serves as a backdrop to numerous new furnishings designed to improve the comfort of children, mothers, and the hospital staff. This mission is shared by other international projects that, since the 1990s, have promoted positive connections between the care environment and other aspects of patients' daily lives. A notable example is Art in Hospital in Glasgow, an initiative that invites artists to create installations, workshops, and artworks within care spaces to make the hospital environment more humane and civilised. Similarly, the more recent rooftop garden project at the Gemelli Hospital in Rome offers oncology patients direct contact with nature, aiming to improve individual and collective well-being.

## 2.2. Co-Designing for Belonging

With the increasing focus on a holistic approach to healthcare that integrates the quality of the physical environment with clinical care, the design of healthcare spaces is evolving to include not only functional aspects but also environmental and psychological dimensions (Huisman et al., 2012).

As widely demonstrated in the literature, the physical characteristics of hospital environments can significantly influence

the psychological and physical well-being of patients and the performance of healthcare staff (Ulrich et al., 2008). The intervention was carried out in two separate wards and two separate phases: this made it possible to collect the evaluations of employees and patients, who provided comments and points of view concerning the first ward implemented. The design choice applied to the first ward came about as a result of a shared design process with the healthcare staff: in fact, the project used a co-design process, finding botanical elements and natural colours the key to a successful project (Figs. 1-3).

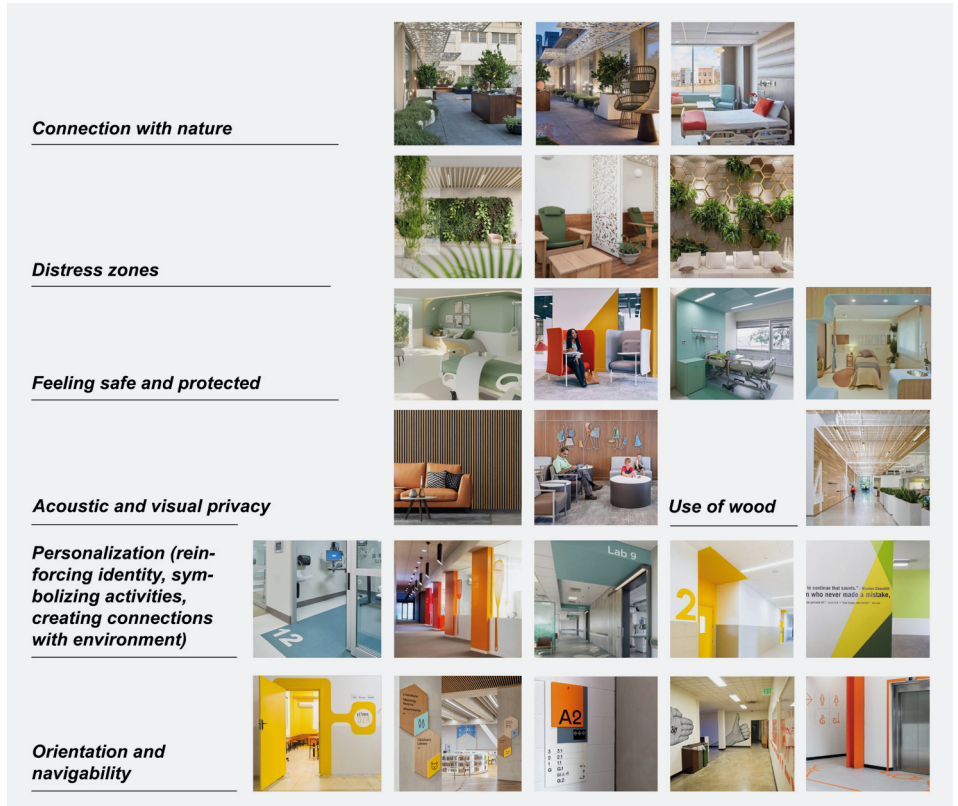


Figure 1. Mind map with inspirational images and keywords (credits: the authors, 2024).



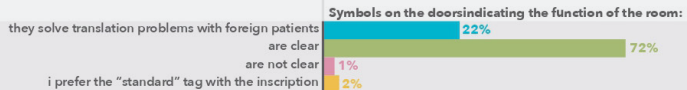
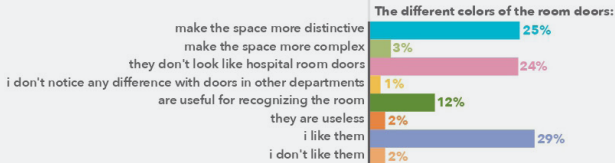
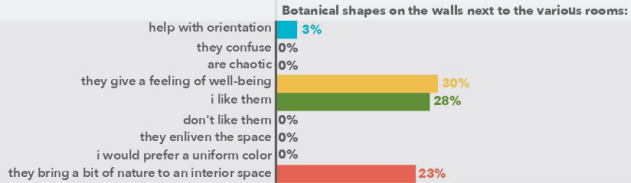
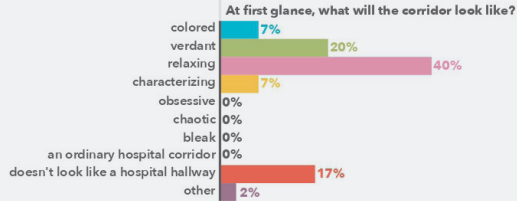
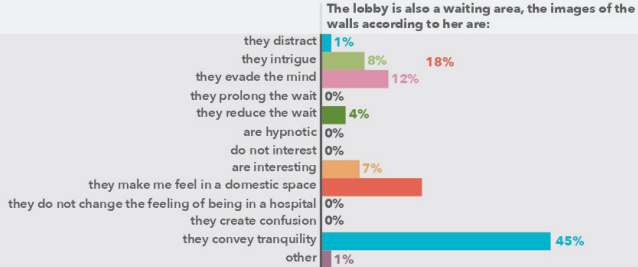
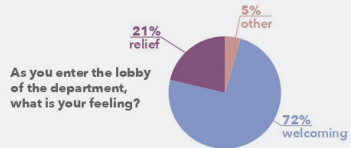
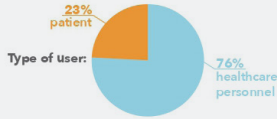
**Figure 2.** Material moodboard built together with the hospital team as part of the project after comparing different proposals and noting the key words of the project (credits: the authors, 2024).

Their operational experience helped identify key issues to improve patients' psychophysical well-being, such as reducing environmental stress and optimising spaces for comfort and hospitality (Andrade et al., 2015). Expected outcomes include an improvement in patients' perceived well-being, which would also positively affect the overall quality of care and staff satisfaction. The project was subsequently evaluated through a survey by patients and staff to understand the strengths and weaknesses encountered after actively experiencing the space in the following months. The active participation of patients and staff through a survey was valuable in defining the design choices applied to the second intervention ward to adapt the space to the specific needs of the users involved (Chaudhury et al., 2005).



**Figure 3.** Final project moodboard (credits: the authors, 2024).

The expected outcomes include an improvement in patients' perceived well-being, which would also positively affect the overall quality of care and staff satisfaction. Indeed, to evaluate the effectiveness of these improvements, in July 2024 and after the wall coverings were installed, a questionnaire was distributed to both patients and healthcare staff to assess the impact of the intervention on the daily operation of the ward (Fig. 4). In this way, after the start of the improvement intervention, it was possible to have a direct and unbiased comparison with respect to the perception of the spaces.



**Figure 4.** Comparative infographic of responses regarding perceptions of renovated spaces, values in percent (credits: the authors, 2024).

The 59 responses - 14 from patients and 45 from healthcare staff - consistently indicated an improvement in the spaces, with 73% recognizing a sense of hospitality and 16% experiencing relief. The botanical wall applications conveyed tranquility (43%), made the space feel more homelike (18%), and helped ease the mind (12%); they also contributed to a sense of well-being (30%) by bringing elements of nature into enclosed spaces (23%). The corridors were described as relaxing (42%), verdant (20%), and not resembling typical hospital environments (17%). The modifications to the doors made the space more distinctive (25%) and less like a conventional hospital setting (24%). The new orientation symbols were clear (72%) and helped address translation issues for foreign patients (22%). Overall, respondents reported a more relaxed, quiet, and harmonious perception of the environment.

The surveys administered to patients and hospital staff revealed an overall perception of a more comfortable and harmonious environment. This sense of calm was notably enhanced through natural colours and botanical-inspired graphic elements, which created a tranquil atmosphere. Respondents reported that the renewed environment fosters a greater sense of serenity, improving their daily experience within the facility. This positive effect was further amplified by the presence of soft, enveloping seating, complemented by wall coverings that help shift thoughts away from the hectic pace of the hospital. These elements have made the space more comfortable and welcoming, enabling patients and staff to engage with the environment calmer and more relaxed.

### 2.3. Restorative Design

Promoting individual well-being within real-world contexts and fostering relationships with physical and social spaces can help alleviate stress and mental fatigue at various scales. In this regard, the principles of environmental psychology (Pazzaglia & Tizi, 2022) have been applied to the S. Croce e Carle Hospital wards. Specific environments can transport individuals away from the sources of mental exhaustion. These settings create an organized whole that facilitates orientation while offering a variety of stimuli that capture involuntary attention without requiring cognitive effort, thereby allowing for the subsequent recovery of directed attention. The proposed action-research case aims to enhance the regenerative properties of existing spaces, enabling individuals – particularly those experiencing intense stress in healthcare settings – to recover cognitive resources and reduce stress levels. Restorative design plays a crucial role in creating regenerative interior environments, which can be achieved through both radical new designs and interventions in existing spaces. Key concepts such as being away, extent, fascination, and compatibility (Kaplan, 1995) are transformed into strategies that enhance connections to nature, optimize lighting, create destressing areas, ensure privacy and a sense of control, reduce noise, and utilize sensory information related to materials, textures, colors, and the specific characteristics of each element. The focus of this research is on the ability of natural contexts to promote regeneration. Elements of visual stimulation referencing the natural world were incorporated to create an environment that allows individuals to feel distanced from everyday life through the use of unique graphics.

The healing environment was redesigned to feature a complexity of stimuli capable of spontaneously attracting involuntary attention without cognitive effort, facilitating recovery from stress. Coherent connections among all its elements characterize a regenerative environment: the visual identity comprises defined components that are easy to interpret due to their color schemes and consistent visual characteristics and conceptual organization. In working with the existing context, operational throughout the restyling process, the initial analysis focused on strategies to enhance factors with a positive impact. The aspects improved through this project – partly realized and partly implementable over time – include:

- **Creation of Destressing Areas:** Spaces designed to ensure emotional comfort and acoustic and visual privacy through careful spatial design, incorporating visually stimulating elements and tactile materials such as wood.
- **Connection with Nature:** Integrating biophilic design principles by introducing regenerative patterns and upgrading spaces that connect with the outdoor environment through loggias and large windows.
- **Orientation and Navigability:** Designing spaces that are easily navigable for all users while reinforcing group identity, symbolizing activities, and fostering stronger connections with the environment.
- **Design of Color and Light:** Thoughtful use of color and lighting to enhance the overall atmosphere.



### 3. The Biophilic Principles and the Project Connection

After clarifying the set goals and the research method to achieve satisfactory results in line with the expectations of healthcare personnel along with the needs and considerations of patients, we decided to pursue the principles of biophilic design as guidelines to elaborate design responses.

Biophilia is based on the concept that humans have an innate affinity to nature and living systems, which can significantly impact their well-being. The term was popularized by a biologist (Wilson 1984), who proposed that this connection to nature is deeply rooted in our biology and psychology. In practical terms, biophilia often manifests in design and architecture by incorporating natural elements into spaces, such as natural light, plants, and organic shapes, to enhance human health and reduce stress. This concept is increasingly applied in various fields, including healthcare, where biophilic design aims to create environments that promote healing and comfort for patients and caregivers.

Modifying hospitals' design by humanizing spaces is possible reconnecting with nature through 14 Patterns of Biophilic Design (Browning et al., 2014) based on scientific research, consisting of a broad view of biophilic design tools and applications as well as opportunities to increase the health of individuals for the different care levels (stress reduction, cognitive performance, emotion and mood enhancement). These strategies can be grouped into three main clusters: benefits of nature in the space, benefits of nature analogs, and benefits of nature of the space, which become the guidelines of the S. Croce Hospital project.



**Figure 5.** Entrance to the department with previous furnishing, wall decoration and corridor aesthetic before the intervention (credits: the authors, 2024).



**Figure 6.** Entrance to the department featuring a relaxation and reception area, equipped with custom-designed furniture and bespoke wallpaper after the intervention (credits: the authors, 2024).

### 3.1. Feeling Protected in a Cozy Space

To execute the project, literary materials addressing the benefits of the biophilic approach, along with examples of designs applied to architectural structures, were thoroughly reviewed. The 14 Patterns of Biophilic Design identified several design strategies compatible with the intervention possibilities offered by the hospital unit. These included the use of natural light, which has been shown to influence the functioning of the circadian system positively (Figueiro et al., 2011), the incorporation of natural materials, the selection of colours that reflect those found in the natural world, and the replication of natural forms, all of which can reduce diastolic blood pressure (Tsunetsugu et al., 2007) and enhance creative performance (Lichtenfeld et al., 2012).

Focusing specifically on the lobby space of the Obstetrics Department, which serves as a boundary element between the external and internal environments, it becomes a symbolic welcome space. It physically opens the doors to the user within a healthcare setting while also mentally transporting them, establishing a connection with nature. Upon crossing the threshold, the environment is characterised by a wallpaper featuring shades of green, bringing the outdoor environment inside the walls (Figs. 5–6).

An interesting observation made by hospital staff was that patients, upon entering, immediately lower their voices and feel integrated into a calming atmosphere.

### 3.2. Details, Surfaces and Space Customization

The personalization of spaces is one of the most significant trends in contemporary interior design, aiming to create aes-

thetically pleasing, functional environments capable of eliciting multisensory experiences. Environmental psychology has highlighted that elements such as textures, materials, and customized tactile surfaces can profoundly influence spatial perception, affecting both the emotional state and behaviour of users (Ulrich et al., 2008). The presented project stands out for its extensive use of space customization, addressing the need to create tailored environments that enhance the overall experience, making the space more welcoming and comfortable. The design approach abandons rigid geometries and straight lines in favor of curved and sinuous forms inspired by natural patterns (Fig. 7), consistent with the principles of biophilia, which suggest that incorporating natural elements into built environments can improve users' psychophysical well-being (Kellert & Calabrese, 2015). This approach favors the adoption of enveloping and soft seating, which convey a sense of warmth and relaxation (Augustin & Fell, 2015). The common areas of the department have been further enhanced using botanical and biophilic forms, which have been shown to evoke restorative sensations in the mind (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989).

A key element of this intervention is the custom-made upholstered seating explicitly designed to fit predefined spaces. The sinuous shape of the sofa, combined with the softness of the botanical elements, welcomes patients into an inviting, domestic, and reassuring environment. Sensory engagement through tactile materials and natural forms significantly impacts the perception of comfort and well-being (Pallasmaa, 2012).



**Figure 7.** Detail of the wallpaper. In the background, the department doors are wrapped in green film (credits: the authors, 2024).

In collaboration with the Tappezzerie Druetta team, composed of highly skilled artisans, the most suitable coverings were selected, ensuring an optimal balance between practical and aesthetic needs. The color palette, developed in harmonious tones, follows principles of visual perception linking color to emotional states, with deeper hues for seating and lighter, brighter tones for cushions and backrests, in line with theories on the impact of color on well-being (Elliot & Maier, 2014). The mobile elements, thanks to their versatility, can be swapped and adapted over time, allowing further customization of the space. The balance achieved between formal, material, and chromatic research has made it possible to create a spacious and welcoming seating area designed to accommodate patients and families during waiting periods or visits. It provides the necessary comfort in potentially stressful situations such as hospital stays.

### **3.3. Wayfinding and Orientation as Elements to Generate Protection**

Other means to ensure comfort include the proper design of the organised complexity, e.g. by means of effective orientation and wayfinding systems that ensure informative comfort. Indeed, among the 14 patterns of biophilic design, we find references to using perspective in interior spaces, which amplifies the perception of the surrounding space while at the same time conveying a sense of protection - therefore helping to reduce stress (Grahn & Stigsdotter, 2010). In accordance with these attentions, the project is also developed on the study of a different perception of the traditional totally anonymous and sometimes haunting corridors, which give patients feelings of disorientation.

In drafting the project, an in-depth study was made of the signicity of colour and its application to wayfinding, in relation to the mechanisms of sensory perception of the environment. According to J. Malkin (1992), a designer and researcher in the field of wellness in healthcare spaces, wayfinding is a general term for what people do whenever they walk or drive from one place to another. People guide themselves through landmarks, using visual elements to reinforce their path or route. In a hospital, the most obvious wayfinding problems are two: corridors that are all the same and doors that are given the same treatment and thus look alike. The design intervention focuses on the colours of the doors, on the range of green, as an element of personalising corridor sections to break the verticality and create more excellent orientation. In addition, on the walls of the corridor (Fig. 8), botanical elements similar to those on the wallpaper in the atrium seem to spill out at the doors; they are stylized designs applied on pre-space, which help to further characterise the entrances to the patients' rooms.

With regard to wayfinding, it was decided to combine room numbers with pictograms that associate essential images with the functions of the rooms and do not require translation, having a high number of patients from non-European countries. Signage, when combined with images, can be more effective and draw more attention by virtue of having combined with a sufficiently interesting element that will be noticed and help to memorize the route (Fig. 9) better. This decision was co-designed with the health care staff after numerous patients experienced a sense of bewilderment due to the placement of exclusive textual signs that were unreadable and difficult to memorize.



**Figure 8.** View of the corridor in the department, showcasing decorative elements installed on the wall and wrapping on the doors, aligned with the green palette identified in the project (credits: the authors, 2024).





## 4. Conclusions

During the Renaissance, the artistic value of hospitals was widely acknowledged, with many historic buildings now serving as popular tourist destinations that blend art and beauty (Galimberti, 2012). However, this relationship between art and health has become less pronounced in modern times. This shift, alongside a growing need for humanized healthcare spaces, prompted the design request from the healthcare facility in Cuneo. This paper outlines the development of a recently completed healthcare interior design project, focusing on key phases of the process. Health ethics, when integrated with effective communication and decorative elements, can significantly enhance the well-being of individuals in healthcare environments. Additionally, spatial reorganization and volume optimization are essential components of a humanization process that reshapes the perception of these spaces. The analysis of case studies reinforces the hypothesis that renovating ward spaces contributes to improving patient recovery. Furthermore, the use of materials, forms, and objects inspired by nature can transform healthcare environments, creating a more supportive atmosphere.

This challenge lies in balancing the intersecting needs, expertise, and methodologies of a multidisciplinary approach. Engaging all stakeholders in the humanization process is essential. Feedback collected during the project phase highlights the importance of the hospital environment in patient recovery. The therapeutic process is enhanced within well-designed, welcoming spaces. The integration of natural elements, communal spaces, and decorative features significantly improves the quality of care and psychological well-being.

A multidisciplinary approach enables collaboration between healthcare and design sectors, helping to mitigate feelings of alienation and isolation in clinical settings. This project aims to improve the quality of spaces within the obstetrics ward, which is already recognized for its substantial medical contributions. The humanization strategy addresses patients' psychosensory needs by incorporating insights from medical sciences, communication studies, and design disciplines. Following the renovation, interactions between patients and healthcare professionals are expected to improve, with restorative features positively affecting well-being and mood. Furthermore, optimal color conditions have been shown to enhance staff engagement and cognitive focus (Del Nord & Peretti, 2012). This initiative represents the first phase of a broader modernization and refurbishment effort, which will extend to other departments in the near future. The same humanization approach will be applied to upcoming projects, with plans for further expansion. Ultimately, the goal is to redefine the hierarchy of design requirements, balancing sensitivity, user perception, and spatial functionality.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that similar humanization strategies be implemented in other healthcare settings, focusing on departments such as intensive care, pediatrics, and geriatrics. Future research could explore the impact of biophilic design elements on patient recovery across different medical contexts, considering the specific psychological and physiological needs of patients in each setting. Long-term studies are needed to assess the impact of these interventions on patient outcomes, staff satisfaction, and operational effi-

ciency. Quantitative research could provide valuable insights into measurable benefits, including recovery time and healthcare costs. Furthermore, the flexibility of healthcare spaces should be prioritized to allow for adaptability to evolving needs and integrating technologies such as smart lighting and environmental control systems could enhance therapeutic qualities. Additionally, inclusive design approaches should be explored to ensure that spaces cater to the needs of diverse patient populations, staff, and visitors. Finally, ongoing collaboration between healthcare professionals, designers, and researchers is essential to ensure continuous feedback and adaptation of humanization strategies.

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**IV**

# **AESTHETIC SENSE**



# New Aesthetics for House and Workspace

## From the War Against Smells to the Search of Perfumes

**Pierluigi Panza**

Politecnico di Milano

Orcid id 0000-0001-8631-3742

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### **Abstract**

The sense of smell has long been expunged from aesthetic reflection. Although we could refer to Condillac and the famous example of the statue that comes to life starting from the sense of smell, the French philosopher himself believed that smell was the poorest sense of determination, the one that least contributed to developing the contents of knowledge (Bonnot de Condillac, 1746). For this reason, in the history of aesthetics, studies on smell remained a step behind those on sight. It was even worse for architectural aesthetics since architectural theories developed around the primacy of the eye that observes space and in centuries when cities fought odors (Milizia, 1781). The treatises on Civil Architecture, which were based on the Enlightenment Aesthetics, are characterized by a reference to hygiene and solutions to fight odors: they are part of what Alain Corbin, in *Le miasme et la jonquille* (1982), called “deodorization” of the XVIII and XIX centuries.

# 1. Aesthetic History of the Relationship Between Spaces, Smells and Perception

## 1.1. Aesthetic Reference Framework

At the beginning of the XX century, in *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie* (1913), Husserl highlighted the “sensitive” roots of the phenomenological constitution of the original and pre-categorical processes. This direction was important to re-establish the understanding of phenomena on a sensory basis and this also triggered the rediscovery of the Italian sensory aesthetics of the XVI century, such as that of Sperone Speroni (1596), that of the French XVII century, such as the subjective doctrine in judging by Du Bos (1719) and also that of the young Goethe, that in *Von Deutscher Baukunst* (1772) refers to the value of the senses to evaluate architectural space. However, the architectural aesthetics of the early XX century embraced the Rationalism expressed in the theories of the Modern Movement of Gropius and Le Corbusier. These theories founded their epistemic principles in the Vienna Circle, which had expelled the senses from the horizon of understanding, as explicitly in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus logicus philosophicus* (1922), where the construction of a language specular to the essentiality of reality is sought. Of course, the thought that Architectural Aesthetics originates from the Vienna Circle is simplified. It fails to determine that both in Wittgenstein and after in Derrida, general theories of meaning are a failure to the extent that their premises transcend. They distort the contingency, which is a frame of irreducible aesthetic phenomena (Perullo, 2011).

The consequence was the affirmation of positions such as those expressed in Adolf Loos *Ins Leere Gesprochen* (1921), with the consequent liberation of architecture from its experience of *Bildung* and its perimeter within that of functionalism. Finally, the technical reproducibility of the artistic object provided a theoretical license for the emergence of Industrial design (Benjamin, 1936). This whole experience takes place in the so-called “deodorization”.

The phenomenological positions were carried out in Italy by Antonio Banfi, Enzo Paci (1966) and by my mentor Dino Formaggio. They kept Aesthetics within the general theory of sensitivity and described architecture as a polytechnic art that responds to the law of transmorphosis of the organic (Formaggio, 1993). Organicity is a biological and formal concept that does not concern only the form but all the sensory dimensions and also the poietic-creative process.

As well as under the sign of Phenomenology, the revaluation of the role of the senses in the understanding of external phenomena has recently occurred thanks to neuroscience, which has its roots in the empiricist tradition. For the empiricists, the Human brain has always been a kind of *tabula rasa*, and they proceeded to understand things only through sensations or through external stimuli. Gustav Fechner (1801-1887), founder of Psychophysics, is believed to have identified an equation to establish and quantify the relationship between stimulus and sensation (matter and soul):  $S$  (sensation) =  $c$  (constant)  $\log R$  (stimulus) (Fechner, 1860). Later scholars problematized this positivist approach, in particularly Robert Vischer (1847-1933), who introduced the term “Einfühlung”

(Vischer, 1873-1893) in 1873 to indicate the emotional relationship of participation between object/stimulus and sensation/user. Translated later into English “empathy”, the term meant the relationship of “sympathy-aesthetic consonance”. Vischer’s successor, Theodor Lipps, in *Asthetik. Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst* (1903-1906) defined understanding art and external environments as identifying feelings through forms, thanks to consonance. This opened a phenomenological understanding of the relationship between stimulus and individual, in which individual experience is an unavoidable, characterizing and non-reducible element in scientific terms and, in other fields, to the birth of the Psychology of art and the Theory of Pure Visibility, with Worringer (1907) and Fiedler (1876). In such fields, starting from Fechner’s *Elemente der Psychophysik*, and in substantial agreement with the evolutionist materialism of Darwin and Lamarck (this brings to the consideration that the brain acquires and stores external information to improve the species), experimental psychology developed with Wilhelm Wundt (1874).

Neuroaesthetics studies, which developed from Behaviorism and experimental psychology, tend to correlate a sensory stimulus to a psychological effect. These studies are taking on value in architectural aesthetics and for their attention to all the senses, including the sense of smell. Semir Zeki<sup>1</sup>, one of the discussed founders of Neuroaesthetics, moves from the Darwinian thesis that the brain acquires information to improve the species. The pleasure of art and architecture

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1 Studied with The Society of Neuroaesthetics Semir Zeki, with Luca Ticini, see [Neuroestetica.org](http://Neuroestetica.org).

would indicate that even through art, the brain receives some of this kind of information. Art and the world of aesthetics would help discern the essential properties of objects, contributing to human knowledge. In 1996, Giacomo Rizzolatti with Fadiga, Fogassi, Welsh, Pellegrino, and other researchers at the University of Parma enriched this perspective with an additional development, the definition of *neuroni-specchio* (mirror-neurons) (Gallese et al., 1996). They found that in some primates, and hence in humans, some neurons activated while performing a specific action fire also when others are observed performing it. The discovery of what neurons are activated by facing definite *stimuli* was scientifically proven through fMRI (magnetic resonance imaging), allowing us to identify in which areas of the brain blood is accumulated for the activation of neurons. This discovery triggered reflections on its possible developments in the field of the design of objects and spaces: it allows to create sensations even in the absence of a real broadcaster of the stimulus, but only with its representation (not the handle of a door but the design of the handle leads to the idea that there is an opening).

Developing from the phenomenological component and also based on Neuropsychology and Neuroaesthetics studies, architectural aesthetics has now focused on the study of the senses and also of smell (Roubin, 1989).

## 1.2. From Sight to Smell

Theorist and designer who has moved in this direction today is Harry Francis Mallgrave, as expressed in his *Architecture and Embodiment* (2013), in which I recognize the convergence of components deriving from Neuroaesthetics and Phenom-

enological Aesthetics. For Mallgrave, space is understood concerning the motor activity of the user and is defined, even phenomenically, with styles and signals. Following the theory of mirror neurons, for Mallgrave, the representation activates a stimulus: if I see a San Sebastiano, my emotional condition is stimulated as if I were pierced. In this sense, emotion precedes reason, and some artistic experiences, such as those of Plessi or Kapoor, have built on this consideration (Nori & Steinhoff, 2007). In Mallgrave, space can be intended to create moods in the users, and in this direction, the task of critics and *media* would be to record emotions. Mallgrave re-reads the entire history of architecture based on these considerations. For instance, Wolfflin argues that we read the narrow medieval townhouses of northern European cities as oppressive because:

[...] in living in and with these forms we sense them to be squeezing together, pressing upward, and consuming themselves in their own tension. The forms of Italian Gothic, by contrast, are more horizontal, wider, and therefore restful. Cheerfulness in life demands a smooth brow, and for this reason the rustication used in the upper reaches of the Finance Ministry in Munich makes the building look gloomy. The Strozzi Palace in Florence counters this effect with its deep bands of rustication around the windows; it “looks grave and distinguished”. (Mallgrave, 2013, p. 124)

However, even in this framework of rediscovery of the senses, the experience of architecture remains dominated by visual and tactile sense, and the sense of smell – which has a powerful intrinsic effect on perception and phenomena – (Le Guérer,

1998) is partially ignored. This happens because the entire theory of architecture is dominated by an “eye theology”, from Plato to Martin Heidegger (1950).

Sight is, for architectural aesthetics, the richest sense, the one that contributes to developing the contents of knowledge and design. However, the *vision* that can be organized around material objects is more than we can see. In fact, we see them as *ephemera*, as Mohan Matthen claims (2018).

Mallgrave also does not decisively take into account the sense of smell in the space definition; he mentions it partially. The smell escapes the “dogma” of architectural theories in disciplining spaces<sup>2</sup> by making Architecture, since the days of the Black Plague, a “total institution”, also capable of dissipating smells odors, as also studied by Michel Foucault (Barbara & Perliss, 2006, p. 18). The reconquest of space for smells in the field of architecture as an artistic practice and in design as an experience of sculpted architecture or, finally, even in the performative use of space, seemed evident with the new millennium.

## 2. The Discovery of Smells in Design: Examples, Studies and Research

### 2.1. The Rediscovery of Perfume in the Project: Examples and Scientific Experiments

A crucial moment was the conference organized in 2010 by Paola Antonelli, together with Moma and Parson New School, which was entitled *Headspace on scent as design. Headspace*

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2 It is a dogma from which Derrida (1987) invites to free oneself.

was a one-day symposium on the conception, impact, and potential applications of scent in design. This event gathered leading thinkers, designers, scientists, artists, professional perfumers, as well as “casual” perfumers (a selection of architects, designers, and chefs invited to experiment with scent) to acknowledge scent as a new territory for design and begin to draft the outline of this new practice.<sup>3</sup>

The last Venice Biennials of art and architecture were also a milestone of the ongoing rediscovery of smell in Aesthetics and architectural theory. In 2013, at the Isolotto, the Italian-Latin American Institute exhibited vases full of colored spices, a work entitled *Los Olores de la Guerra*, by Reynier Leyva Novo (FIG): hundreds of ceramic dishes full of colored and fragrant spices of all kinds.<sup>4</sup> *U from Uruguay perfume* had been created with the essence of flowers and weeds from the farm of the President of Uruguay. The *U from Uruguay perfume* project started in 2012 with a promotional video of the perfume, which had finally taken shape in 2013. Luca Vitone (in collaboration with perfumer Maria Candida Gentile) exposed *Per l'eternità*: rhubarb essential oil, water, and alcohol. It is an achromatic, olfactory sculpture in three notes and is inspired by Eternit (asbestos), a toxic material used for construction. Luca Vitone has created an olfactory image of this material throughout this anamnesis.

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3 MFA in Transdisciplinary at Parson: <https://www.newschool.edu/pressroom/pressreleases/2010/headspace.aspx>.

4 This aspect has also been noticed by visitors: “Visiting the Venice Biennale is always inspiring and what I find fascinating is the presence of perfumed pieces in every edition, which interpret in different ways the power of the olfactory perception” (*Perfumed Art at Venice Biennale 2013*, 2013).



Ernesto Neto, twice, with *Bicho!* (FIG) in 2001 at the Artillery, and *Um sagrado lugra* in 2017 at the Corderie dell'Arsenale, presented works with perfume as a sensorial stimulus. The ending point of these experiences has been *U.S. Air Sculpture® scent atmospheres*, a project by Christophe Laudamiel at the 14th International Architecture Exhibition – the Venice Biennale as part of the U.S. Pavilion.<sup>5</sup> The project constructs olfactory spaces for the five rooms as a sensorial historiography, where smell is a spatial materialization of the functions contained in each room. Scents at *U.S. Air Sculpture® scent atmospheres* are displayed through micro-precise scent dispensers from AirQ, a Prolitec brand, based in Milwaukee. They coined the terms Scent Sculpture and Sniff Personality but left them free to use. Public and professionals alike are encouraged to use new terms to describe new developments and new designs in the olfactory arena. The nose is now becoming as important as the eyes for the brain: to gather information from the environment or from objects inside a space, to appreciate their quality, to feel, to conclude, and, of course, to remember, as explained in Joël Candau's studies (2000, p. 14) starting from phenomenological aesthetics and incidence of personal experience. In one exhibition room, vernacular perfumery was also used to scent houses and cleanse them of bad spirits. The actualizing factor is also that frankincense, like myrrh, is an excellent antibacterial agent. Vanilla and clove, and molecules of vanillin and eugenol, too.

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5 Christophe Laudamiel and Christoph Hornetz, *U.S. Air Sculpture® scent atmospheres* (with two perfumers working at Dream Air's studio, based in New York City: [www.dreamair.mobi](http://www.dreamair.mobi)), in US PAVILION (official curators Eva French Gilabert, Ana Miljacki, Ashley Schafer) at the 14th International Architecture Exhibition – la Biennale di Venezia, June 4-November 21, 2014, curator Rem Koolhaas.

Egyptians, who used a lot of myrrh and cinnamon to preserve mummies, knew all that.

Other experimental examples can be found in the world. The exhibition *The Art of Scent*, commissioned by the Museum of Art and Design in New York (FIG) with architects Elizabeth Diller, Ricardo Scofidio, Kumar Atre and Ilana Altman, was among the first museum exhibitions to focus on the olfactory arts. In order to address the sense of smell, the design eliminates all reference to the visual materials typically associated with perfume, most notably packaging and advertisements. Visitors enter a seemingly empty white gallery punctuated by a series of twelve sculpted wall alcoves. They are invited to lean into the wall, triggering the release of a scented stream of air; in addition to scent, the organic wall surface pulses with sound and ghostly text projections. A second smaller gallery offers a more social environment: a 13 glass-table anchors the room and supports 24 suspended vessels featuring the same twelve works in liquid form. Here, visitors are given the opportunity to appear and discuss their olfactory experiences.

The emphasis on these “on-field” olfactive experiences has also begun to be connected to the universe of design studies and teaching approaches. At the Politecnico di Milano, these studies were started by professor Anna Barbara, author of *Invisible Architectures. The experience of places through smells and Stories of architecture through the senses* (Barbara & Perliss, 2006).<sup>6</sup> Nicola Pozzani,<sup>7</sup> professor of Design with Scents

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6 See also Barbara & Perliss, 2011.

7 <http://postmodernspray.blogspot.com/2014/09/the-scent-element.html> and [www.ssense-perfume.com](http://www.ssense-perfume.com).

at Kingston University London and Olfactory Art & Design at University of the Arts of Bern, in July 2012 has realized the first edition of “Design with Scent” at Kingston University London with colleagues Jo Norman and John Ayres and some students. One of them was Victoria Henshaw, a professor of architecture at Manchester University who dealt with Scent and the urban environment at the time (Henshaw, 2014). One of the most comprehensive theoretical design research in experimentation with perfumes applied to architecture is the thesis *The Smellarium*, edited by Ang Ping Ping for the University of Auckland (2018). This thesis investigates the manipulation of smell within designed environments. It’s divided into two parts: Scents in the City and The Smellarium. Scents in the City is a provocation of the Overflows in Auckland Harbour. Alternatively, through a poetic approach, The Smellarium is a provocation of Scentscapes and the subjective experience. These propositions explore opportunities for people to smell diversely, wholly, individually, emotionally, recreationally, and therapeutically.

Occupying Silo Park and Wynyard Quarter; the sites possess a fragrant history of the timber trade, petro-chemical storage, contaminated soil and vast surrounding sea. These designs are supported by the examination of varying methods including research, perfume explorations, material explorations, scented models, and scentwalks. A series of Permanence, Potent and Particular precedents also interrogate the existing applications of both applied and inherent smells within built environments. By exploring the myriad qualities scent can induce, *The Smellarium* and *Scent in the City* employ scent as an architectural mechanism to produce multi-sensorial spaces. (Ping Ping, 2018, p. 1)

So, currently, smell is undertaking a little Renaissance. Architects and designers are recognizing the full-bodied potential of multi-sensory experiences, specifically olfactory environments. In 2013, Peter Zumthor, in his speech for RIBA Royal Gold Medal, said: “Architecture is not about form, it is about many other things. The light and the use, and the structure, and the shadow, the smell and so on”. In an interview with Margareth Drueding for *Architectmagazine* Joshua Aidlin, of Aidlin Darling Design, also alluded to the relationship between scent and space: “We’re designing to all the senses”, he said. “The human body has an amazing ability to absorb information in many ways” (Drueding, 2013).

Designers are progressively harnessing technology to produce multi-sensory spaces. Various organizations are emerging; for example, Olfactory Media (oMedia) is a new form of media design that integrates scent, visual, audio, tactile and gustatory sensations. DigiScents, Scentcom and Scentee also use technology to develop targeted scent deployment through cartridges, vaporization, ultrasound (Edwards, 2015, pp. 100-101). A new approach to the project is opening up (Armando & Durbiano, 2017).

## 2.2. Examples and Experiments in the Enjoyment of Scented Spaces

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard (1969) writes that the phenomenological “scrutiny of being” pinpoints the heart of architectural experience. Like many other art forms, architecture is confronted with humankind’s existential inquiries. For the Norwegian Architect and Theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz, architecture is “[...] When an environment

is meaningful, man feels at *home* [...]” (1980, p. 23). How can smells make you feel at home and recognize your home from the smell? How can smells get into the design?

To prove how smells can “make us feel at home”, as happened to Marcel Proust, we can base our analytical bases on phenomenological aesthetics and develop studies on the influence exerted on the senses by inhabited spaces, commensurating it with the ability of individuals to register them. This perception is intended by the experience and, therefore, irreducible to general simplifications. We have conducted these studies in the past years and they have been published in the “Rivista di Estetica”. This study shows how space has influenced the senses of the writers who lived there to the point of conditioning their literary creations. In the pages, strong translations derive from the stimuli offered by their homes to the senses, including the sense of smell.

The thesis that supports this research is that places can generate feelings thanks to the intangible qualities that aesthetics can register as “impressions” of the outside world describing, phenomenologically, the atmospheres. Smell plays a role in this understanding since spaces are also emotionally inhabited through this sense, as themed by Elena Mancioppi in “Food, Aroma, Atmosphere: living in affective spaces through the sense of smell” on the occasion of the Smell Festival promoted from Smell-Art and olfactory culture (June 2019): the sense of smell evokes a fabric of associations, experiences and emotions that can be recorded as “atmospheres” (Griffero, 2010). Regarding the contribution of the senses and,

in particular, of smell in the design, the approach moves from the theory outlined above or the studies of Neuropsychology and Neuroaesthetics.

Humans can discriminate over 1 trillion olfactory stimuli (Bushdid et al., 2014, pp. 1370-1372). Perfume has terminology similar to music, an art form of chords and/or notes. Perfumes have three primary chords: head, heart, and base (FIG). Within these chords are notes, which are significant in forming the essence and delivery of the perfume. The first impression of the perfume is received in the head chord where the top notes reside; these typically last a few seconds with the initial spray. Secondly, the heart chord is the theme of the perfume; the notes in this segment are the most powerful, lasting several hours. Finally, the base chord holds the most significant notes; these last several days and linger longest on the skin. Commonly used bases include vanillin (sweet), galaxolide (musky, floral and woody odor) and tonalide (white musk). Today, with synthetic fragrance, we have over 100 fragrance ingredients (Teixeira et al., 2012, chapter II).

The olfactory organs are all located within the cranium, connecting to the brain and central nervous system in close proximity (Weiss, 2004, p. 205) (FIG). It is the most accessible point for the senses. The nose is a bridge between the various receptors. There are different theories on how the brain processes scents. However, in the context of architectural experimentation attempts, it seems to me that the most practiced is the Object Recognition Approach (ORA), which Professors Donald A. Wilson and Richard J. Stevenson founded.

The ORA detects odors (volatile chemicals) against a chemical background through four main components: 1) *Figure ground separation* – detecting new olfactory objects against background odors through sensory adaptation; 2) *Learning* – learning and storing new odor objects as patterns of stimulation which correspond to an environmental entity (combination of volatiles) ; 3) *Pattern matching system* – recognizing odors through pattern matching and drawing upon memory stores; 4) *Representation* – generating a distinct and irreducible representation (Ping Ping, 2018, p. 50).

How do we design with these aspects in mind? Points 1 and 4 are irreducible to an intersubjective approach, cross the foundations of phenomenological aesthetics, and have little intersubjective value. In this case, smell is a universal language that is undiluted and unique for each person. American Artist Andy Warhol attributed the special quality of smell to its ability to transport itself entirely, traveling through both space and time (Barbara & Perliss, 2006, pp. 208-209).

Point 3, on the other hand, is the one on which architectural laboratory design is oriented through the recognition and application of recurring patterns as already used in the field of composition, construction, or urban environments. Therefore, the results of the analysis will merge with the voices of the architectural composition of the project through some patterns and through the realization of a “odor table” to be juxtaposed to the other traditional tables of the architectural project, such as floor plan, uplifts and other elaborations now instructed through the cam and 3D systems, all responding

to the sense of sight. This has been partially tested in a thesis laboratory at the Politecnico di Milano since 2007 (Tartaglia et al., 2007) and, as we have seen, at the University of Auckland in 2018.

The experiments were carried out concerning the design of public spaces; among these, the spas proved to be the privileged field of experimentation.

The project's organizational principle must consider that, as there is an aesthetic education to forms (Summerson, 1963), there is also an education in smells and an irreducible phenomenological reference to individual experience. This last reference, however, also applies to the other design components (space, shape) in relation to the five senses. Throughout all his experience and research, Professor Trygg Engen observed that responses to odors are not innate but instead learned (Zucco et al., 2012, p. 109).

Western culture has long believed faecal smells to be unpleasant. In fact, Sigmund Freud attributed most mental illnesses to the emergence of a disgust for faeces. On the other hand, cultures such as the Masai liked to dress their hair with cow dung, for its dynamic orange color and potent odor representing power. (Ping Ping, 2018, p. 52; Ackerman, 1991, p. 24)

Relativism and odor education are two parameters that will always make the patterns variable and are called to deal with individual experiences. However, the predictive nature of the use of space will ensure that, in the design phase, the intersubjective responses to certain odoriferous stimuli that are synthesized in usable patterns are taken into account.



## 3. Conclusions

### 3.1. Examples of the Enjoyment of Scented Workspaces

As for the sample analysis on the impact that environmental odors have had on the development of an individual and, in particular, on the development of his creativity, I believe that we can further develop the research I carried out at the Politecnico di Milano on the influence of house interior in the literary creation, presented in the *Rivista di Estetica* (Panza, 2014, pp. 231-246) and *Ananke* (Panza, 2018 and 2019).

The body becomes familiar with architecture through engagement, and everybody is unlike. This results in subjectivity of experiences, paralleling the subjectivity of smell and memories. The most emblematic case to be used as a parameter is that of Marcel Proust. Proust mainly illustrates the connection between odor and domestic memory in his book *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927). “This odor-evoked memory overwhelms Proust, when he dips a madeleine into tea, and is instantly struck by a temporal unfolding of his childhood” (Zucco et al., 2012, p. 100).

As regards instead of the advancements in architectural design with respect to smell for new houses and new workplaces, they, therefore, proceed in the wake of Aesthetics that dialogues with neuroscience. As Chantal Jaquet recalls in *Philosophie de l'odorat* (2010), philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, artists, and researchers in communication sciences lead to an interdisciplinary vision of a new place where to live and work. The relationship between aromas and theories of space is framed using the studies of a neuroscien-

tist such as André Holley, a psychobiologist such as Benoist Schaal, or physiologists such as Linda R. Buck and Richard Axel (Nobel in 2004), who have come to decipher the genetic level and molecular mechanisms involved in the perception, recognition and memory of smells, thus allowing to clarify the functioning of the olfactory system which remained largely unknown (Jaquet, 2010).

From the scientific data derived from the empirical responses on the reactions to odors themed in these studies, the experimental courses in odor design in the faculties of Architecture and Design proceed, as we have seen, by creating patterns that can be applied in the phase of architectural composition, also for the workplace, given future uses. From an operational point of view, this involves both the rediscovery of odorous materials, such as wood and the industrial creation of particular perfumes and the relative study of machines for their diffusion.

### **3.2. Final Experiences and Developments in the Workspace**

To these considerations, we can add a couple of examples that develop the relationship between perfume and the project of workspaces. An example comes from the 2024 exhibition *Scent and the Art of Pre-Raphaelites* at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts in Birmingham, curated by Christina Bradstreet, a specialist in 19<sup>th</sup>-century British painting who in 2022 wrote the book *Scented Visions: Smell in Art, 1850-1914* on the relationship between “urban stench” and art. It starts from a historical fact: Victorian England stink terribly, consequently it became the great age of perfumes. In the exhibition, the chosen paintings had to suggest an idea of perfume in the eyes

of the observers.<sup>8</sup> Each of them was associated with a device or diffuser that emanated the scent of the painting. Essentially, they tried to prove that figurative painting is synaesthetic and, therefore, also transmits a specific and detectable sense of smell. The resumption of the figurative on the walls of workspaces can induce neurons to perceive particular odors that are actually absent.

The relationship with scent, moreover, can give a contribution to the creation of more inclusive or queer workspaces. For years, some architectural studios have been moving towards these objectives. QuEAN, founded in 2022, is a network of queer spatial design educators to arrive at an “Inclusion Charter” for architecture schools. In this framework, scent control can adapt the workspaces to be more inclusive, which acts on places by eliminating discrimination. The Spanish group TAKK (Mireia Luzárraga and Alejandro Muiño) works with unusual materials such as flowers, wood, and paper, paying attention to their odorous potential to define “queer spaces”, that is, architectures that promote a “non-normative” use of the space. Adam Nathaniel Furman, a designer who plays with genres, cultural references and materiality to create immersive experiences, proceeds in a similar way. Perfume can actively participate in the creation of immersive workspace. Furthermore, the relationship between ecology and smells can also be developed in the workspace. If the workspace is a big industry, this relationship can be announced from the

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8 The paintings chosen were *Proserpine* (1874) by Dante Gabriele Rossetti; *Thoughts of the Past* (1859) by John Roddam Spencer Stanhope; *A Saint of the Eastern Church* (1868) by Simeon Solomon; *Psyche opening the Golden Box* (1903) by John William Waterhouse and *The Blind Girl* (1856) by John Everett Millais.

outside. This is the case of the Chiesi headquarters in Parma created by EFA Architecture Studio in 2021, which offers a trace of how the theme of ecological inclusion can interact between the inside and the outside, the latter as a frontispiece of the workspace (EFA Studio di Architettura, 2021). In this case, it is represented by the valorization process of the Kilometro-VerdeParma initiative.

We can add a couple of concluding remarks to these experiences. At the legislative level, the adoption of an urban odor plan would mark the introduction of the aesthetics of odors within the urban management regulations and in the workspaces of big industries.

Finally, the current post-COVID-19 situation gives us a further chance. “Modernity” and “Disinfections”, as we have seen, have been a cornerstone since the Enlightenment and onwards in guiding building regulations, leading to the emergence of minimum standardizations commonly seen in work environments today. For example, offices are at the optimum standard when the temperature is 20 degrees Celsius, the light level is 538 lux, and the sound is 47 decibels. These guidelines and their emphasis on comfort define parameters that designers obey, limiting opportunities for celebration of the unexpected and subjective. However, the necessary actions of sanitizing environments and controlling forced ventilation can provide an opportunity to introduce a plan of perfume patterns in the workspaces project.

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# Performative Storytelling Design

## Intertwining Art, Storytelling Design, and Neurodesign for Empathetic Connections in Workplaces

**Eleonora D'Ascenzi**

Università degli Studi di Firenze

Orcid id 0000-0003-2880-269X

### Keywords

Storytelling Design, Immersive Storytelling, Performing Art, Neurodesign, Wellbeing.

### Abstract

The lack of empathy in the workplace leads to conflicts, reduced cohesion, and declines in productivity and job satisfaction (Danna & Griffin, 1999). Building on this premise, this contribution examines the strategic role of *performative storytelling design* as an innovative approach that combines storytelling design, immersive technologies, and performative art to foster empathic connections by encouraging perspective-taking, strengthening team cohesion, and promoting shared corporate values (Gorman, 2019; Green & Brock, 2000). To elucidate this aspect, the paper includes best practices that can foster mutual understanding, collaboration, and team building through value sharing. To test the effectiveness of this approach and provide scientific evidence, the paper underscores the value of neurodesign in quantitatively assessing the impact of immersive experiences on employee well-being, offering concrete data on physiological and psychological responses (Ulrich, 1984). In conclusion, the integration of *performative storytelling design* and its validation through neurodesign techniques emerges as a promising strategy for addressing workplace well-being challenges and optimizing corporate dynamics, particularly when implemented within short time frames and repeated over time. Looking ahead, future research should prioritize the hybridization of disciplines to boost productivity and team cohesion, while exploring the co-design of such experiences in partnership with health specialists and human resources managers.



**Figure 1.** *Performative storytelling design experience* @Eleonora D'Ascenzi

## 1. Introduction

Increasingly, workplace well-being is profoundly influenced by the quality of interpersonal relationships and the capacity for empathy among employees (Goleman, 1995). A lack of empathy can generate distress and conflicts and reduce team cohesion, negatively impacting productivity and job satisfaction (Danna & Griffin, 1999). Recent studies have shown that the quality of interpersonal relationships and the capacity for empathy among employees are key factors for organizational success (Beasley, 2016; Loder 2016). Specifically, empathy – defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others (Decety & Jackson, 2004) – plays a fundamental role in promoting a positive and collaborative work environment (Decety & Ickes, 2011; Jenkins, 2021; Meechan, 2022). Conversely, its absence can lead to an increase in conflicts (Yorke, 2022; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003), a reduction in collaboration, and consequently, a decrease in team cohesion, with adverse effects on the well-being and overall performance of the organization (Barsade & O'Neill, 2014). In light of these considerations, exploring innovative approaches to enhance the quality of human interactions in the workplace becomes increasingly important. One such approach can derive from the strategic function of *performative storytelling design* as an innovative method to stimulate empathetic connections and create a shared value system of soft skills in workplaces through the use of immersive digital technologies that encourage perspective-taking, drawing inspiration from theatrical and cinematic techniques (Arcagni, 2020). Immersive storytelling can create multisensory experiences that engage participants' emotional and cognitive dimensions, promoting behavioral

changes that facilitate mutual understanding (Pressgrove & Bowman, 2021; Green & Brock, 2000; Hughes et al., 2005). This method allows for the construction of a shared experiential environment where corporate values and common stories emerge and solidify, thereby contributing to strengthening team cohesion (Xu & Xiao, 2020). In this context, the present contribution aims to analyze the effectiveness of *performative storytelling design* in enhancing workplace relationships, fostering cohesion, sharing soft skills, and promoting well-being through empathetic connections and improved mutual understanding among team members.

## 2. Unpacking *Performative Storytelling Design*: An Integrated Approach

In the increasingly complex contemporary work environment, the adoption of strategies aimed at fostering a supportive attitude among employees is becoming increasingly essential for enhancing individual well-being and corporate productivity. Among the most innovative and promising methodologies in this area is what can be termed *performative storytelling design*, namely an integrated approach that merges narrative, design, and performance to create compelling interactive experiences that go beyond traditional communication methods. This approach seeks to inspire active engagement and cultivate a profound emotional connection among participants. It is particularly effective in corporate settings for strengthening group cohesion and reinforcing the company's shared values. *Performative storytelling design* leverages innovative tools, methodologies, and techniques from various disciplines, including:

- **Storytelling Design:** storytelling is the core of *performative storytelling design*, given its ability to convey and reinforce values through unconventional experiences that emotionally engage participants. The effectiveness of storytelling in this context lies in its capacity to activate brain areas responsible for sensory perception, emotions, and memory, making messages comprehensible, deeply memorable, and influential in the long term (Zak, 2015). This emotional and cognitive engagement thus facilitates experiential learning that stimulates critical reflection and self-awareness, essential components for enhancing employee empathy and promoting a harmonious and productive work environment (Assmann, 2017).
- **Immersive Technologies:** immersive technologies, such as virtual reality (VR) and specifically 3DoF VR with 360-degree videos, represent a significant innovation in the field of corporate communication, as they allow for transportation into real and engaging environments that offer the opportunity to immerse oneself in unconventional situations, thereby amplifying the sense of presence and participation compared to traditional storytelling (Slater & Sanchez-Vives, 2016). The ability of these technologies to create emotionally powerful sensory and cognitive experiences transcends situated knowledge. It radically transforms the approach to training and internal communication, significantly enhancing engagement and the effectiveness of learning. This mode of total immersion helps make experiences more impactful, consolidating the understanding of the conveyed content and values (Kool, 2016).

- **Performative Arts:** the approach and techniques of the performative arts, particularly theater, are fundamental for developing empathy and interpersonal sensitivity within teams. Theater allows for immersion in scenarios that require understanding others' emotions and experiences (Eisenberg et al., 2015). This process of immersion and identification is thus essential for stimulating perspective-taking, fostering a more cohesive and collaborative work environment where the application of these techniques in a corporate context not only improves the quality of interactions among colleagues but also contributes to creating an organizational culture based on empathy and mutual respect (Brattström & Faems, 2024; Boal, 1979).

*Performative storytelling design*, thus, not only utilizes elements from communication design but also clearly intersects with artistic practices, such as those of the performative arts, to design memorable and impactful experiences. The integration of art and design becomes crucial to the success of this value-driven communication approach, as it enables the creation of experiences that are both emotionally engaging and culturally significant. This synergy strengthens alignment with the concept of cultural welfare, highlighting how these interventions can serve as substantial cultural contributions within the business world and “disruptive” tools for value sharing. *Performative storytelling design*, therefore, represents an integrated and multidisciplinary approach that, through the use of narrative, immersive technologies, and performative arts, can promote empathy, well-being, and productivity in the workplace (Danna & Griffin, 1999; Berns

et al., 2013), offering new opportunities to address organizational challenges and to improve the quality of interpersonal relationships.

### **3. Best Practices in *Performative Storytelling Design*: A Literature Review**

*Performative storytelling design* is garnering increasing interest, particularly within the context of museums and temporary installations, due to its capacity to evoke profound values and personal reflections. However, *performative storytelling design* has not yet found an established application in the workplace, where practices aimed at fostering value-driven initiatives are lacking. To address this gap, it is helpful first to examine best practices that demonstrate how the intersection of storytelling design, immersive technologies, and performative art can produce significant outcomes, creating a shared experiential environment in which corporate values can emerge and strengthen team cohesion (Green & Brock, 2000). Although these best practices do not originate from the workplace domain, they illustrate the potential for team building through value-sharing, mutual understanding, and collaboration.

#### **3.1. The Machine to be Another: Perspective-Taking of Others' Experiences**

*The Machine to Be Another* (TMBA) is an innovative project by BeAnotherLab that combines immersive technology with performative storytelling to facilitate experiences of empathy and interpersonal understanding, thereby promoting a positive value framework. Although the experiences address vari-

ous themes (such as migration, war, body acceptance, among others), the project is distinguished by its ability to integrate virtual reality with direct physical interaction, creating a synesthetic experience that enriches the virtual narrative through tangible elements. A central aspect of TMBA is the pivotal role of the actor, who, though invisible to the user wearing the VR headset, participates in the performance, serving as a crucial bridge between the virtual and real worlds. During the experience, the actor guides the user through an artistic performance that offers a physical narrative alongside the digital storytelling design, creating a direct connection between the physical environment and the digital story. The actor particularly engages the sense of touch by “physicalizing” symbolic objects from the narrative, thereby rendering significant elements of the virtual story tangible. This allows for a genuine sense of immersion, as also noted by Pallasmaa (2007), who identifies touch as the primary interface with the world. This synesthetic approach amplifies the immersive experience, providing a multisensory connection that transcends mere sight and sound (BeAnotherLab, 2023). Thus, TMBA transcends immersive storytelling design, fostering a profound shift in user perception and understanding. The interaction with physical objects, combined with the simultaneous visualization of virtual elements, stimulates perspective-taking, enabling users to experience others’ experiences in a deeply engaging, tangible, and multisensory manner. TMBA employs this combination of VR technologies and artistic performance to promote positive cultural change, encouraging greater social cohesion and enhanced mutual understanding through the stimulation of empathy (Fig. 2).





**Figure 2.** Presentation of the BeAnotherLab research group, @BeAnotherLab.

The immersive experience, enriched by personalized storytelling and physical interaction, not only renders the narrative more concrete and authentic but also stimulates critical and deep reflection on the experiences of others (BeAnotherLab, 2023).

### 3.2. *Così è (o mi pare)*: The Relativity of Truth Between Theater and Immersive Technologies

*Così è (o mi pare)* is a pioneering project that reinterprets Luigi Pirandello's play *Così è (se vi pare)* through the innovative use of virtual reality (VR). Adapted and directed by Elio Germano,

the project is realized in collaboration with the Fondazione Teatro della Toscana, Infinito Produzioni Teatrali, and Gold Production. *Così è (o mi pare)* employs VR to offer a contemporary reinterpretation of Pirandello's narrative, challenging the notion of absolute truth, a central theme in the original work. Through VR headsets, viewers find themselves in the role of one of the story's protagonists: an elderly father who observes a family discussion marked by conflicting versions of the same story debated within the community where the family lives. The work is a touring production staged in various theaters across Italy and demonstrates how immersive technologies can be integrated into the performing arts to explore and expand the understanding of concepts like truth and perspective. The innovative aspect of this experience lies in the opportunity for viewers to explore the scene from multiple angles while maintaining a passive role without direct interaction. Spectators can choose where and what to watch, immersing themselves in a narrative that unfolds simultaneously from different viewpoints. This structure allows for a deeper understanding of the relativity of truth and the subjective nature of perspective. Moreover, the project combines VR with traditional theatrical production, creating a synergy between technology and performing arts. This integration enriches the theatrical experience without replacing it, expanding its expressive possibilities and offering new modes of engagement. The theatrical environment also allows spectators to discuss and reflect on the shared experience after the performance, leveraging the collective nature of the representation. In summary, *Così è (o mi pare)* represents a practical example of how immersive technologies can expand the boundaries of performing arts, offering

an experience that stimulates critical reflection on truth and perspective. It enriches the theatrical tradition with technological innovations while enhancing immersive storytelling with theatrical scripting techniques, fundamental to *performative storytelling design* (Fig. 3).



**Figure 3.** Collective projections of gold production's VR performances, @Nuri Rashid.

### 3.3. Peaceful Places: The Importance of Emotional Experience as a Core Value Message

The project *Peaceful Places*, conceived by Margherita Landi and Agnese Lanza and winner of the 2021 Auggie Awards USA in the category of Best Art or Film, represents a pioneering integration of virtual reality (VR) and performing arts, with a particular focus on dance (Fig. 4).



**Figure 4.** Margherita Landi's performance, *Landi's Cube*, @Nuri Rashid.

This installation is notable for its innovative approach to using VR to explore and amplify the emotional and physical experiences associated with affectionate interactions. *Peaceful Places* is an experimental project that leverages virtual reality to immerse users in an interactive experience centered on affection through the visualization and mimicry of affectionate gestures. Users, equipped with VR headsets, interact with videos depicting five pairs in moments of intimacy: a grandfather and grandson, a mother and son, a mother and adult daughter, and two childhood friends.

Before the VR experience, participants engage in a physical contact workshop that introduces them to a mystical and sensory dimension, setting the stage for the use of immersive technology. During the VR session, users observe and imitate the affectionate gestures shown in the videos, such as hugs and caresses, integrating them into their physical world. This process enables the creation of an instant choreography based on affectionate gestures, transforming VR into a tool that enriches the bodily experience and communicates emotions directly and viscerally engagingly. *Peaceful Places* presents an innovative exploration of affection as a physical act and contextualizes it within a poetic and political message emphasizing the importance of feeling and inclusion. The project shifts the focus from performative virtuosity to the value of emotional experience and human connection, making VR a tool for reflection and personal growth. The fusion of sensory and emotional experiences offered by *Peaceful Places* enhances the understanding and experience of affection, transforming virtual interaction into a tangible and meaningful experience. The project thus demonstrates how virtual reality can be used to simulate and amplify and communicate affectionate experiences, promoting greater awareness and connection among individuals.

### **3.4. Exploring the Potential of Case Studies in Workplace Applications**

Although not yet applied in the workplace, the three projects discussed offer significant examples of how performative immersive design can enhance the work environment by integrating fundamental values such as empathy, the relativity of truth, and the importance of emotional connections.

*The Machine to Be Another* (TMBA) by BeAnotherLab exemplifies perspective-taking, where virtual reality and physical interaction foster a deep understanding of others' experiences. When applied in a corporate setting, this approach could enhance empathy among colleagues, improve mutual understanding, and promote stronger team cohesion. The project *Così è (o mi pare)* demonstrates how understanding interpersonal dynamics can be expanded, particularly regarding the relativity of truth and subjective viewpoints. Adapting to the workplace could address conflicts and promote more open and respectful communication, thus facilitating a more collaborative work environment. *Peaceful Places*, which focuses on human connection and emotional experience, offers a pathway to improving workplace well-being by emphasizing personal connections and mutual support as key elements for individual and collective growth. In summary, these projects highlight how performative immersive design can transform the workplace by instilling values that enhance work effectiveness, well-being, and social cohesion, creating work environments that are more inclusive, empathetic, and oriented towards mutual understanding.

#### **4. The Importance of Providing Scientific Evidence to Translate *Performative Storytelling Design* into Workplace Contexts: The Role of Neurodesign**

Unlike the entertainment industry, adopting *performative storytelling design* in workplace practices involves significant challenges, as it is crucial to ensure that these technologies not only entertain but also contribute concretely to improving interpersonal dynamics, team cohesion, and overall employee well-being. A rigorous and scientific validation methodology is neces-

sary to achieve these goals to provide concrete data for guiding future optimizations and improvements. In this context, validation through neurodesign may become essential for qualitatively and quantitatively assessing the impact of immersive experiences on employee well-being. Numerous neuroscientific studies have demonstrated that storytelling, particularly when immersive, can activate brain areas responsible for sensory perception, emotions, and memory. Zak (2015) highlighted that well-designed storytelling stimulates brain areas involved in emotional response and memory, enhancing the impact and memorability of messages. This improves the emotional connection with the content and reinforces the retention of conveyed information. Similarly, immersive experiences have been associated with releasing hormones that positively affect mood and motivation. Berns et al. (2013) showed that such experiences can induce significant hormonal changes that enhance mood and motivation, particularly relevant in workplace settings where emotional well-being and motivation are crucial for productivity and team cohesion. To provide scientific evidence on the effectiveness of *performative storytelling design*, it is essential to apply neurodesign techniques that allow for a detailed and accurate evaluation of the impact of immersive experiences designed according to the performative approach to storytelling design. The main neurodesign methodologies that could be adopted include:

- **Heart Rate Variability (HRV):** HRV measures fluctuations in heart rate, reflecting participants' states of stress and relaxation. An increase in HRV often indicates better stress management and improved emotional well-being (Boonnithi et al., 2011).

- **Electrodermal Activity (EDA):** EDA measures variations in skin conductance, which are indicative of emotional responses and autonomic nervous system activation. Significant changes in EDA can signal intense emotional reactions or stress (Boucsein, 2012).
- **Electroencephalogram (EEG):** EEG monitors brain waves and can be utilized to study brain activation during interactions with immersive experiences. It helps to understand how and to what extent narratives influence brain activity and emotional responses (Kalas & Momin, 2016).

Measurements obtained through these techniques can provide concrete data on employees' physiological and psychological responses, allowing for an objective assessment of the effectiveness of immersive storytelling techniques in improving well-being and team cohesion. On one hand, applying *performative storytelling design* in the workplace is a strategic communication tool. On the other hand, its validation through neurodesign techniques represents a promising strategy for understanding the extent to which these methods can address and stimulate challenges related to workplace well-being in terms of productivity and team cohesion.

## 5. Conclusions

The integration of art, design, and science can transform how organizations address employee well-being, fostering a work culture that values personal and professional growth while enhancing overall job quality. In this context, *performative storytelling design*, validated through neurodesign



techniques, represents an innovative and promising strategy for tackling workplace well-being challenges. This approach enriches the work experience, improves team cohesion, and enhances employee motivation by creating immersive experiences that elicit deep emotional and cognitive responses, thereby fostering a culture of empathy and collaboration. Scientific monitoring and optimization of these practices using tools such as HRV, EDA, and EEG are crucial to ensure that the experiences are genuinely beneficial. Future research should explore the hybridization of *performative storytelling design* and neurodesign to maximize productivity and benefits for team cohesion. These initiatives must form part of a broader approach to corporate well-being, involving all key stakeholders – including health specialists, design experts, and human resources managers – in the design and implementation phases. This can ensure that the experiences are personalized, relevant, and tailored to the workplace's needs through employee involvement in impactful co-creation. Participatory processes can increase the acceptance and effectiveness of interventions, ensuring that solutions align with the actual needs and expectations of the staff. Therefore, the application of *performative storytelling design* in the workplace, validated through neurodesign, can represent both a novel and promising strategy for promoting cultural welfare and corporate sustainability, encouraging a more empathetic and sustainable organizational culture, attentive to social responsibilities and organizational sustainability, thereby contributing to overall employee well-being and the achievement of ESG goals.

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V

# BIOGRAPHIES

**Edoardo Amoroso**

He is a PhD student in architecture developed by the Department of the University of Naples Federico II. His research focuses on design-related innovation processes through digital manufacturing, operated under his own brand and within the research team on design for all, nature-based solutions, and the use of new technologies for ecological transition and advanced processes in industrial design. He graduated with a master's degree in Architecture in 2023 from the Department Of Architecture (DiARC) of the University of Naples Federico II and, since 2024, has been a member of the Association for Industrial Design ADI Campania.

[edoardo.amoroso@unina.it](mailto:edoardo.amoroso@unina.it)

**Eleonora D'Ascenzi**

She is a post-doc research fellow with a Ph.D. at the Department of Architecture of the University of Florence, with a design curriculum. She successfully pursued a Master's in Research at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, and she now belongs to the Design Sustainability Lab at the University of Florence, where she is currently investigating the role of transformative & immersive storytelling design. She is also Project Manager PE11 (Made in Italy Circolare e sostenibile), Spoke 2 (Eco-Design strategies: from materials to Product Service Systems – PSS) within the PNRR (National Recovery and Resilience Plan). Her fields of interest are mainly related to communication design, storytelling design, strategic design, user experience and neuro-design.

[eleonora.dascenzi@unifi.it](mailto:eleonora.dascenzi@unifi.it)

**Annalisa Dominoni**

She is an architect, designer, PhD and Professor at the School of Design of the Politecnico di Milano. Director of ESA\_LAB@Polimi\_Design at the Department of Design, where she has been responsible for confirming the strategic role of design for space through her research, projects and scientific publications. Principal Investigator of the VEST and GOAL experiments carried out with astronauts on board the International Space Station.

In 2017, she created and directs Space4Inspiration, the first and only MSc course in Space Design, recognised and supported by the European Space Agency (ESA). She is a visiting professor at many universities and has received several prestigious awards, including the Premio ADI Compasso d'Oro.

[annalisa.dominoni@polimi.it](mailto:annalisa.dominoni@polimi.it)

**Silvana Donatiello**

She is a PhD candidate in the international course Habitat in Transition, developed by the Department of Architecture at the University of Naples Federico II. Her research focuses on the ecological transition towards more sustainable settlement, production, and consumption patterns, specifically focusing on Nature Based Solutions, digital manufacturing, and community-based systems. She has a Bachelor's Degree in Architecture and an international Master's Degree in Design for the Built Environment at the University of Naples Federico II. She has been a visiting student at the University of Applied Sciences Fachhochschule Potsdam, Germany.

[silvana.donatiello@unina.it](mailto:silvana.donatiello@unina.it)

**Paolo Franzo**

After receiving his PhD in Design Sciences at the Università Iuav di Venezia in 2019, where he collaborated in post-doc research activities and teaching in fashion degree courses, since 2023 he has been a researcher in fashion design at the Department of Architecture (DIDA) of the University of Florence. His research activity focuses on the futuring practices of fashion design in Italy, with a focus on innovative materials, production chains and the relationship between handmade and tech in a vision of human, social and environmental sustainability. He has been a visiting scholar at the University of Lisbon and regularly collaborates with international research groups.

[paolo.franzo@unifi.it](mailto:paolo.franzo@unifi.it)

**Mariarita Gagliardi**

She is a PhD candidate in architecture, which the Department of the University of Naples Federico II developed. She graduated with honors in the international Master's Degree in Design for the Built Environment and a Bachelor's Degree

with honors in architecture, both at the University of Naples Federico II. Her research specialises in the domains of design for the ecological transition, design for the territory, social design and design for environmental sustainability and circular economy, with a particular focus on the field of Nature-Based-Solution, Internet of Things (IoT), Generative Artificial Intelligence (G AI), and Digital Manufacturing (DM), publishing articles in thematic scientific journals.

[mariarita.gagliardi@unina.it](mailto:mariarita.gagliardi@unina.it)

### **Sara Iebole**

Designer, PhD student at the University of Genoa where she graduated as Master's Degree in Product Event Design at the Department of Architecture and Design. Her research interest is centred in understanding the cultural position and the role of designers in relation to gender studies and intersectionality. Specifically, her research focuses on the bond between gender stereotypes, societal evolution and design product/processes, seeking for a design method for inclusiveness.

[s.iebole@gmail.com](mailto:s.iebole@gmail.com)

### **Virginia Marano**

She is a researcher, curator, and art historian. She is currently a postdoctoral fellow in the Lise Meitner Group "Coded Objects". She holds a PhD in art history from the University of Zurich. Her thesis examined the diasporic dimension in the works of Jewish women sculptors in Post-war New York, previously assimilated to feminism but not yet connected to the question of exile. She was a recipient of several scholarship and research grants from the Swiss government and the University of Zurich. In 2022, she was a SNSF Doc.Mobility fellow in the Art History Department at Hunter College/CUNY. She is the co-founder and coordinator of the research project "Rethinking Art History through Disability" at the University of Zurich. In 2023, she was a fellow researcher at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice, working on the PNRR-PEBA project for the Removal of Physical, Cognitive, and Sensory Barriers in Cultural Sites, funded by the NextGenerationEU program. In addition to her academic activities, she serves as curatorial assistant at MASI, Museo d'arte della Svizzera italiana, Lugano. Her work focuses on developing new approaches to curating exhibitions that emphasize decentralization and collaborative practices.

[maranovirginia@gmail.com](mailto:maranovirginia@gmail.com)

### **Chiara Olivastri**

Architect, PhD in Design, Associate Professor at the University of Genoa, Architecture and Design Department, since 2023. She focuses her studies in service design strategies applied to circular economy and social innovation, collaborating with local companies and public institutions. She is referent of the Desislub Unige team (<https://desislub.unige.it/>) working on research, teaching, and workshop projects focused on urban regeneration, Blueconomy and Design for all. Since 2021, she has been the scientific manager of the research contract with the Barilla company for the development of increasingly sustainable and consumer-friendly products and packaging. In 2018 she won an Italian national "Grant for a PhD research on urban regeneration" promoted by Directorate General of Contemporary Art and Architecture, publishing her doctoral research titled "Con-temporary, Design for the reuse of vacant spaces".

[chiara.olivastri@unige.it](mailto:chiara.olivastri@unige.it)

### **Pierluigi Panza**

After having obtained two degrees and a research doctorate (all three theses have been published), he started teaching in various Italian universities (continuously at the Politecnico di Milano) and became an art critic of the *Corriere della Sera*. He is a member of the Academy of the Arts of Design in Florence, of the Veneto Institute of Sciences, Letters and Arts, of the Italian Society of Aesthetics and of the Italian Society of History of Art Critics. He obtained scientific qualifications in History of Architecture (full professor), History of Art (associate professor), Aesthetics (associate professor). He is the director of the restoration magazine *Ananke. Culture, history and conservation techniques* (Anvur class A magazine), published hundreds of scientific papers especially on Italian art, architecture and 18th century furniture. He is one of the world's leading scholars on Piranesi. In 2017 his volume Museo Piranesi won the European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage, the highest European prize for Cultural Heritage Achievements. He is the curator of exhibitions and member of a ministerial commission. He has published five novels and in 2008 he won the Campiello selection prize.

[pierluigi.panza@polimi.it](mailto:pierluigi.panza@polimi.it)

**Luca Parodi**

Designer, PhD, Research Fellow at the Department Architecture and Design, Università di Genova, UNIGE. He works and teaches in the areas of product, interior and furniture design. His research interest focuses on understanding the cultural position and role of designers in relation to local heritage and contemporary production. His research focuses on the link between product design as a function of cultural transformations and identity enhancement. Currently is a visiting professor at BUCT Beijing, member of the Design Observatory and is a part of ADI Handmade in Italy Commission. In publishing, he writes for the international magazine ElleDecor.it and is a member of the editorial board of the university journal Magazine.

[luca.pardi@unige.it](mailto:luca.pardi@unige.it)

**Silvia Pericu**

Architect, PhD, Associate Professor in Product Design at the Department Architecture and Design, Università di Genova UNIGE, since 2013. Her research interests focus on design's capabilities to contribute to territorial development and transformation in relationship to health, safety and sustainability. Main issues in the research are co-design processes for social innovation and circular design strategies for making change happen towards circular economy. On this topic she coordinated in the last two years the partnership activity of the University of Genoa, in the URBACT III Action Planning Network: "2nd Chance. Waking up sleeping giants, for a sustainable urban development" and the Creative EU "Creative Food Cycles" (2018-20) as scientific manager for University of Genoa research team.

[silvia.pericu@unige.it](mailto:silvia.pericu@unige.it)

**Gabi Scardi**

Art critic, curator, and writer. She investigates art and the public sphere, and contemporary collaborative methodologies, questioning new tendencies and practices. She collaborated internationally with museums and institutions, curating solo shows, group shows and public projects. She is co-director of the review Animot; NAHR President; a member of EoC - Ecologie of Care and of CCW - Cultural Welfare Center. Since 2011 she has been the artistic director of *nctm e l'arte*, a project by ADVANT Nctm Studio Legale. She is director of the course in Socially Engaged Art, at Accademia Unidee, Biella, and teaches Phenomenology of Contemporary Arts at Accademia di Belle Arti di Verona, and modules on Contemporary Art and Public Art at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan.

[gabscardi@gmail.com](mailto:gabscardi@gmail.com)

**Irene Sanesi**

She is a chartered accountant and cultural economist. She is founder and Name Partner of BBS-pro. For 30 years she has been dealing with project and process management, third sector, advocacy, fundraising, taxation, higher education and strategic philanthropy. She has written many publications about cultural economics, sustainability and fundraising. Gestionalia is the title of her column on *Artribune*. She has held, and still holds, institutional volunteering positions in both national and international cultural institutions.

[irene.sanesi@bbs-pro.it](mailto:irene.sanesi@bbs-pro.it)

**Marzia Tomasin**

She is a cultural manager specialized in the design and development of multidisciplinary projects for businesses and organizations. She bases her work on the belief that culture generates value and is a lever for innovation. Since 2016, she has been hosting Periscritto, a podcast dedicated to books and their authors. In 2021, she founded Atelier Cultura, a benefit corporation that integrates culture into the business landscape, guiding companies in creating ecosystems between cultural vision and business strategy. As a journalist and writer, she deals with business and culture: she co-authored *L'Alfabeto della sostenibilità* and in 2024 published *Successi a Nord-Est* (Egea Editore). In 2024, she founded and chairs Agorà, an ETS association that carries out multidisciplinary cultural and civic engagement projects.

[marzia@ateliercultura.it](mailto:marzia@ateliercultura.it)





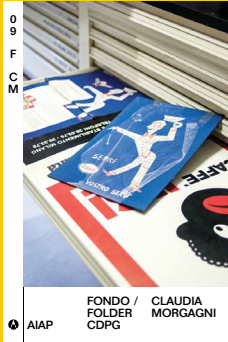
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