This paper reflects on the valorisation and appreciation of design in the urban space, framing, describing and analysing three projects that matched design, the city, informal learning and mobile technologies. Teaching design in an informal context is at the core of these experiences that are discussed as representative of three different approaches: an iconic approach that starts from renowned design products and personalities, a didactic approach which deals with design as a discipline and finally a monographic approach that focuses on specific aspects of design.

1. Valorisation and recognition

The design culture is closely ingrained in the urban fabrics of contemporary industrialised cities but some of them show an exceptional relationship with design. Since the golden age of the Italian design, after WWII, Milan has become iconic of the Made in Italy, crossroad of great masters, productive districts, firms and brands. Milan is frequently identified with design and this identity becomes exceptionally evident during events such as the fashion weeks and Salone del mobile that transform the city into a big fair and a continuous show. The value of these happenings is clearly unique but it’s also true that they show only a little part of what design is and has been in Milan. The mundane mood of Fuori Salone disappears at the end of these weeks and design goes back to showrooms, design offices, universities and museums, out of the mind of great part of citizens and, maybe, not even known by tourists. When the lights turn off, recognising design and its contribution to the city is only for those who work in the field, and requires information and interpretation for the others, for non-experts who are interested in the matter or for amateurs that desire to deepen their knowledge.
Education and knowledge are at the basis of the process of recognition of the design contribution in its less known or evident forms across the city, a knowledge that can be expressed at different levels of deepening. It could indeed mean comprehension of the design culture and knowledge of its history but also the simple acquisition of basic information. Two approaches that sub tend a double interpretation of what design is or can be: on the one hand design is seen as an heritage to be preserved and communicated, a complex cultural phenomenon firmly grafted in the society and, in a way, mirror of its evolutions, but, on the other hand, design is seen as a discipline that can be taught starting from its very rudiments.

These two approaches, that we could name valorisation and education, are not contradictory, even if they are clearly addressed to different audiences, characterized by dissimilar levels of knowledge. They share indeed the willingness to foster the understanding of what design is and how it can be recognised across the city.

If the valorisation approach looks at what design has been in the past, the educative approach trains the designers of the future, but cannot disregard the knowledge of design history. Learning is therefore the common aim of the two approaches that share also the need to let people know that something relevant to design culture is just around the corner: an active exploration of the city that involves people physically and not only mentally, a process of discovery that intends the city as a space for informal learning.

This approach is not far from that proposed for museums and cultural institutions by Hooper-Greenhill, who describes learning as “physical, bodily engaged” whose styles are influenced by “the nature, pace and range of this bodily movement” (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). According to the English scholar, informal learning is based on the physical experience, is intended as performance, “enactment, intervention, participation, involvement and response” and people “are characterized as active, using their emotions and imagination to participate and engage with experience as they encounter them.” (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). The minds-on, bodily engaged activity of discovery across the city is also empowered by the possibility to be close to the design artefacts and by the feelings that stem from being there (Lord, 2007). The affective nature of informal learning suggested by Lord for museums introduces the idea of contextual learning, one of the cornerstones of the constructivist idea of informal learning (Hein, 1991), that attaches great significance to the context.

Providing people with contextual content about design while wandering the streets of Milan can be achieved with different tools, not last the use of a traditional tourist guide, but it’s undeniable the potential of smart devices, such as smartphones and tablets, that match internet connection with location awareness through GPS systems. Smart devices can indeed offer LBSs - Location Based Services (Oomen, Brinkerink, & van Toor, 2011), that means delivering contents coherent with the position of the users in the city.
devices are powerful tools to deliver contextual contents but it’s crucial the way these contents are told, in other words the tale that will accompany people during their experience of learning and discovery across the city.

2. Target audience

The two approaches described above, valorisation and recognition, together with the choice of employing mobile technologies to involve users in an active discovery of design through the city of Milan imply a reflection on the audience potentially interested in this kind of experiences.

Amateurs or design students that already have a basic knowledge but want to deepen their understanding on specific aspects of the discipline could appreciate the valorisation of design culture and history, preferring detailed information on a particular industrial design product or on the designer who created it. The educative approach best suits with people with no knowledge on design or with teenagers (e.g. high school students or pupils) that are interested in the field. Beginners may be satisfied with basic information about the iconic objects of design or about the masters and the brands that made the Italian design renowned all over the world.

Valorising design as an heritage means approaching it as a cultural asset that could be exposed in museums (as actually happens in design museums) and the curatorial choices as well as the interpretive materials can be targeted to diverse users, from experts to children.

Different audiences may require also different social configurations: an experience designed for amateurs best suits with a personal activity or, at most, with a very small group of people while, on the contrary, teenagers could prefer a social experience and be engaged in an activity that involves their friends. Beyond the clichés, the social aspect of a cultural experience is not simply an adding pleasure but it’s a source of satisfaction at the very heart of the experience and people’s behaviour is dependent on the social context of the visit and on the nature of the group (McManus, 1996).

Together with the choice of the social configuration to be fostered during the urban experience it’s also useful to define the kind of experience people will be involved in. Considering indeed the city as an open-air museum filled with cultural assets to be discovered and valorised means deciding if people will follow a linear tour, a free tour or if they will be involved in a structured activity such as a game.

A linear tour between two points, which follows a fixed sequence of stops, points of interests, may be suitable for people with no previous knowledge as it happens with the traditional guided tours in museums. On the contrary a free tour may suit for amateurs that like to wander the city and encounter traces of
the design intervention as modern flâneurs, or to discover them following interpretive materials or memories. The tour model, be it linear or free, may not be suitable for people that like to be involved in a more active experience, shifting the focus on entertainment rather than on learning.

3. Approaches to recognition and valorisation

Matching the audiences with the two approaches described above we can highlight three possible ways of valorising or recognising design in the city.

The less expert audience, that we imagine composed by young students or people with no previous knowledge, can be addressed starting from renowned objects or personalities of the Italian design. This way of educating to the recognition of design across the city can be named iconic because it provides people with hints and very basic information about well-known products. The objective of this approach is to offer a summary knowledge of design that doesn’t go much beyond the stereotypes but it’s able to arise interest and foster further deepening.

A second way is instead addressed to people with no previous knowledge in the field but already motivated to deepen their understanding and to approach design as a discipline. It can be defined didactic because it talks about design in the same way it’s dealt in schools and universities. The design discipline is presented as multifaceted, characterised by diverse specialisations and built up with the contribution of actors from different fields. This approach could be relevant for high school students interested in training as designers and accessing university courses.

The last way of valorising design looks instead at amateurs and people with a previous knowledge in the field, interested in deepen specific aspects of design or their knowledge on authors. It can be defined monographic because is highly informative and deals with the subject from a specific point of view, aiming at providing detailed information.

These approaches — iconic, didactic, monographic — are at the basis of the three design experiences described below that share the willingness to foster the valorisation and the recognition of design across the city with the help of mobile technologies

3.1 Approaches in practice

The projects cover a time span of three years, from 2011 to 2014, and are the results of a unique line of research that explores the potentials of mobile devices in fostering informal learning and engagement during cultural visits.

The first developed project is LfAC, Looking for Achille Castiglioni (Spallazzo, Ceconello, & Lenz, 2011). It dates back to 2011 and was created in collaboration with SMAC — Studio Museo Achille Castiglioni — with the aim of valorising the vast production of the Italian master of Design in Milan, exploiting
both the rich collection of documents, drawings and prototypes conserved at the museum and the richness of stories connected to the different projects.

Looking for Achille Castiglioni is a bilingual mobile location-based tour with eighteen PoIs, divided between industrial design, interior design and architecture, located in downtown Milan and mostly within walking distance from Studio Museo Achille Castiglioni. The tour doesn’t provide a defined path to be followed and users are free to decide where to go, looking at the map on their mobile’s screen, deciding to follow one of the three thematic routes, highlighted by the colours of the placeholders, or to enjoy all the points of interests of a district or just following the nearest point of interest on the map. Each location activates a short video with images, photos, sketches and drawings and an audio description of the building/project for a total duration of about one hour.

This project can be ascribed to the monographic approach because it deals in depth the design production of a single designer, Achille Castiglioni, and addresses an audience of connoisseurs, with a previous knowledge on design and architecture, looking for novel information about the author and eager to be surprised by unknown projects and anecdotes, images and videos. The language of the interpretive audio is therefore calibrated on this kind of audience, is highly informative and includes also some technical words. In this case the balance between information and engagement weighted in favour of learning and the experience itself is designed to favour the learning activity. The tale that structures this experience is made of several short stories, all describing a unique attitude towards design, that users organize according to their desire and physical paths in the city.

The other two experiences stem from the Play Design! project developed between 2013 and 2014, and designed to acquaint the young public to the design field with enjoying learning activities. Promoted by the Design Department of Politecnico di Milano the project resulted in the creation of two mobile urban games aimed at diffusing the design culture among high school students, one — D.Hunt — with an unsophisticated approach and one — D.Learn — with an articulated structure.

D.Learn, which stands for Design Learn, is as example of activity encompassed in the didactic approach, as declared in the title. It’s a role-play mobile urban game that involves students of the fourth and fifth year of high school, interested in pursuing a graduate program in design and in participating in activities of orientation. Four teams of three players compete to win the renowned Compasso d’Oro, the Italian award for design, by playing as product designers, interior designers, communication designers and fashion designers, the four courses activated at the School of Design of Politecnico for the bachelor degree in Design. During the game each team wanders the streets of downtown Milan with the help of a smartphone which locates the other teams,
asks questions and informs on the progression of game, a card deck that gives hints for the correct answers and a paper map that locates the points of interest. Each team must answer questions about its disciplinary field and about those of the other teams and collect much info as possible. In this experience, as in the previous, the tale is made of single stories about design and designers, that players organize according to their game strategy. But there is also a bigger story in the background that makes players pretend to be designers competing to win the Compasso d’Oro.

The collaborative and competitive approach of the team game is designed to achieve different aims: to foster engagement in the activity, thanks to competition; to stimulate social engagement among the members of the team who may not know each other and finally to simulate the condition of a design studio that requires the joint works of its employees to achieve good results. Furthermore the game does not propose a fixed order of points of interest in the city to be followed to complete the game, and each team must decide its own strategy to maximize the result. This aspect has been designed in order to underline the strategic nature of design and the activity of playing is a design project itself, that requires the collaboration of different competences, represented by the three tools, and strategy.

D.Hunt, Design Hunt, as suggested by the title is a urban mobile treasure hunt that brings young high schools students on the trail of Italian design. The game starts in front of Associazione Bruno Munari where players find out that the Zizi Monkey, the famous toy designed by Munari and awarded with the first Compasso d’Oro, has been kidnapped. Users are therefore involved in the game playing the role of detectives and follow the traces that Zizi leaves in different points of interest across the city. By solving simple enigmas about very known products and designers, players progress in the game till the final solution. This experience is an example of the iconic approach described above, because it employs very simple dynamics, a treasure hunt, to foster basic knowledge on design and its personalities. In this case the balance

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Fig. 1 - From left: a screenshot of LfAC, D.Learn kit and players collaborating.
between engagement and information leans towards enjoyment, resulting in a poorly informative but highly involving activity. The audience of this project is made of very young students, involved in an engaging activity and guided through a fixed path designed to make them learn something. The tale, indeed, is already written and the story accompanies players through all the steps of discovery till the final solution of the enigma.

4. Discussion and future works

The three experiences described above are not the only developed in the line of research that explores the potentials of mobile technologies for informal learning, but are relevant in the discourse about design and the way of valorising and recognising its intervention across the city.

The projects represent three different approaches to valorise design, employing a narrative structure and exploiting mobile devices, but they share also other features, such as the ability to stimulate an active exploration of the urban space and the recognition of the contribution of design as well as the use of contextual contents. The narrative structure of the three projects indeed, despite dealt in a very different way to match different audiences and approaches, has the potential to stimulate both the involvement of users and the process of unveiling design in the city.

The valorisation and recognition of the design intervention is also facilitated by the employment of mobile devices that locate users in the city and guides them to the nearest point of interest in LfAC and provide game dynamics in D.Hunt and D.Learn. The three projects exploit indeed the potential of contextual contents that are highly relevant when dealing with the material culture, with design and architecture, providing the right information just where they are needed, in front of the object of interest or in an suitable place.

The employment of mobile technology on the one hand is therefore very helpful in offering a location-based service but on the other hand it could hinder social involvement if not correctly employed. The experience matured with LfAC demonstrated that using a smartphone as a unique tool for a visit experience well suits only with a personal experience (Spallazzo et al., 2011), especially if mainly based on audio contributions. The experiences developed later have implemented this teaching: D.Hunt indeed uses audio contributions sparingly in order to allow the sharing of the monitor and of the experience while D.Learn introduces two physical tools — paper map and card deck — to avoid the social isolation due to the use of a device and to foster social engagement and collaboration. Physical tools are also helpful in maintaining the contact with reality, a relevant aspect if the aim of the project is to stimulate involvement and exploration of the urban space. The main difficulty in designing informal learning
experiences is to find the right balance between information and engagement according to the targeted audience and to the kind of experience proposed.

From this point of view, Looking for Achille Castiglioni on one side and D.Hunt on the other are in opposition, being the first more focused on teaching and the second on enjoyment. D.Learn tries indeed to maintain the balance between the two instances, combining game dynamics with structured information about design. It’s not surprising that mobile urban experiences designed as role-playing games have great potentials for learning (Klopfer, 2008; Raessens, 2007) because they match a well designed narration with social collaboration and competition.

An open question about the experiences described in this paper and in particular about the games is whether they are really helpful in teaching something about design or if they are at least able to facilitate the recognition of design contribution. Users tests conducted about LfAC demonstrated the efficacy of the system in teaching something new (Spallazzo et al., 2011) but further studies must be conducted on the two games to verify their actual effectiveness. Furthermore the good results in terms of social engagement and involvement in the game achieved with the use of physical tools in D.Learn suggests exploring further their employment and the integration between physical and digital, pushing ahead the intertwining between these two worlds for learning purposes.

References


