

# Ais/Design Journal

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## Storia e Ricerche

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*Diritti ed esigenze*

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# Saggi

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# Social Design on a Spectrum

## With Case Study of Anna Barbara's Ethos of Care

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As Marx puts it in an early commentary, in some rather beautiful sentences, '[through this] I would know myself to be confirmed in your thought as well as in your love. I would know that I had created through my life expression immediately yours as well.' This seems a suitable ambition for what the making of things might once again become — if the moment of the gift-object (rather than the gift-article) were to become the chief analogy by we could define the character of the things we make. (Dilnot, 1993)

*When Dilnot's essay "The Gift" was written in 1993, "gift" was not the problematic word it has become today. Gift now carries the burden of hierarchy. Given the growing awareness of the negative potential of this imbalance, contemporary social design has evolved from empowering people with things, to facilitating a social process, to setting up conditions for debate in which the designer relinquishes her authorship altogether. This paper will explore that trajectory and conclude with a case study that blurs the (artificially drawn) lines among the three models just sketched. The case study will look at the work and ethos of Milan-based, Calabrian-born designer Anna Barbara. Anna Barbara's practice reflects the ethos that Clive Dilnot evokes in his essay "The Gift," but with none of the hubris that gift-giving often implies. Her work supports and gives presence to the initiatives of others and shows that it is problematic to assume that methodologies associated with the notion of giving are obsolete or undemocratic.*

### KEYWORDS

Social  
Power  
Senses  
Materiality

### 1. Introduction

"Social design" is a tautology. Design only ever operates in a social context. "Design for, and of, the conditions of sociability" is closer to what is generally meant by the phrase. Even then, the word sociability is inadequate. It obscures the fact that social relations are relations of power. The tacit and explicit assumptions of power that operate in design become particularly acute when remediation supersedes remuneration, when communitarian values outweigh market values.

Again language hides a host of possibilities and problems. “Communitarian” is meaningless unless there are communities, but what kind of communities are we talking about? The designer’s relationship to any given community is conditioned by whether she is already an insider who identifies closely with its concerns, or an outsider who has no direct experience of those concerns but nonetheless feels compelled to respond. Hierarchies are more likely to affect the latter model. Power is more likely to be more evenly distributed with the designer who is, or by immersion becomes, recognized as a familiar. These two broad power dynamics have led to two dominant philosophies of social design: on the one hand, design that results from collaboration and on the other hand, collaboration as design. The former preserves the act of design as flowing from acquired knowledge and skills, and the latter as an activity that is common to all. The polarity is, however, rhetorical, deliberately chosen to underscore what may seem to be opposite approaches. Indeed, I will amplify the duality with a model that straddles the two, which I locate in the work of Calabrian-born, Milanese designer Anna Barbara whose work is the basis of a brief case study at the conclusion of the paper. In the process, I will also look at how issues of authorship and power are contingent both on the context and ambition of the project at hand.

## **2. Bodies, Other Bodies, Social Bodies**

Historically, design has operated less on the principle of mutual concerns and more on the principle of serving the concerns of the “other”, be it a traditional client-relationship or a non-profit partnership. Since the advent of mass production, design has become a practice of scale — and by extension distance. Immediacy was sacrificed to the benefit of reaching more people. But which people? Even in the traditional context of product design, the word “people” began to be seen as problematic and it is here that we might be able to identify one of the antecedents for “social design”, a term I will continue to use for brevity despite its crudeness.

It is arguable that the current spectrum of practices that attend to the concerns of social bodies — from conventional pro-bono work to the agonistic work of co-design — are a logical outgrowth of attention to the body singular. Among the best known of these bodily oriented practices is that of the American industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss. Dreyfuss, who published *Designing for People* in 1955, and the *Measure of Man* in 1960, was instrumental in the shift from designing for visual shelf appeal to designing to alleviate physical distress. During that same period, Ettore Sottsass also made similar contributions when he designed Olivetti’s first commercial computer to be produced

in Italy — the Olivetti ELEA 9003 for which he was awarded the Compasso d’Oro in 1959. Like Dreyfuss, Sottsass relied on ergonomics, though his work wasn’t for the general consumer, Sottsass’s configurations were intended to make the repair of circuit boards less onerous (Mori, 2019). That said, regardless of how restricted his user population was, Sottsass’s design was duly attentive to the body, even if he didn’t make it the hallmark of his practice. By contrast, Dreyfuss was explicit in his concern for human factors. Dreyfuss’s seminal publications addressed the corporeal impact of design directly with diagrams of the average Joe and Josephine. There is no small irony that his inspiration came from the most famous of Italian designers Leonardo da Vinci, specifically his *L’Uomo Vitruviano* of 1490. An illustration of the ancient Roman architect Vitruvius’s written prescriptions for the ideal man, *L’Uomo Vitruviano* was also informed by da Vinci’s own work with male models. In other words, actual bodies may have also contributed to the drawing’s famous proportions. The presence of idealization and reality in *L’Uomo Vitruviano* may well have spawned the tension between the types of engagement — top down and bottom up — that continue to operate in design now.

Interestingly, half a millennium later, the difference between da Vinci’s perfect man and Dreyfuss’s schematic figures is remarkably slight. Dreyfuss added a woman’s body and substituted “average” for “ideal”. Otherwise the basic premise of standardization continues to reign. Attention to different bodies would become more acute in the late 1960s with the rise of civil rights movements and the growing critique of a consumer-driven societies. Now the physical body and the social body begin to be considered together. In particular, the struggle for disability rights, or as we say today, equal rights of the differently-abled, brought issues of “help” into critical focus. Able-bodied designers found themselves confronted with social and physical differences largely beyond their experiences. Some like Patricia Brown even tried simulating infirmity to approach some level of empathy. But efforts such as hers were, and are, vulnerable to the critique that simulated infirmity doesn’t carry the psychological weight of permanent infirmity.

I would argue that, at least in part, this incommensurability gave impetus to new design frameworks. The other critical factor was, of course, the rejection of the values of conformity, of racial and gender discrimination, and economic structures that perpetuated poverty and discrimination. One response to the cultural imperialism that flowed from such prejudices came from architect, curator, and writer Bernard Rudofsky. Rudofsky made the case that what the West perceived as crafted or informal structures — were, in fact, architectu-

re — an architecture that wasn't professionally produced but one that grew from a community of experience. He didn't work directly with communities but he shared their work in his publications and through exhibitions like *Architecture without Architects* (Museum of Modern Art, 1964). The awareness of other ways of designing and building by "others" that Rudofsky awakened among designers would be taken up by, most notably, Victor Papanek. Papanek, however, was less concerned with validating vernaculars than he was with professional designers' social responsibility to "other" communities. In the early 1970s when Papanek wrote *Design for the Real World* there was little talk of "othering" (cautions from anthropologists and sociologists about the disruptive effects of well-meaning interventions had yet to be taken into account; thus, aspects of the missionary motive still affected design). To wit, Papanek's book is peppered with phrases such as "In African countries many problems still await solutions" (Papanek, 1984, p. 79). Design was still framed as a matter of solving problems, not framing them or negotiating responses. And, in fact, the solution approach is not without merit — he gives the example of the design a pipe-making machine that could be "built in Africa by Africans" (Papanek, 1984, p. 79). (Though note the lack of specificity in location: "Africa" wasn't qualified in any way, nor "Africans"). Furthermore, in writing, "that by freely giving 10 percent of his time, talents, and skills the designer can help" some would argue that Papanek preserved the savior status of the designer. Though, notably, his revised edition of *Design for the Real World* in 1984, valorizes the localized design agency that Rudofsky had drawn attention to. It is interesting, however, to see that while both men credit indigenous people with the intelligence to design, they do not ask about the relations of power in that context. Instead they are romanticized as wholly collective. One would imagine that even in the production of vernacular structures there would be a division of labor based on skills and leadership qualities; in other words, the same divisions and claims to authority that have come under critique in the West.

## 2. Power and Participation

We have seen that for the better part of the twentieth-century the designer was cast as the agent whose objective was the design object. A position, which as sociologist Scott Lash reminds us, is predicated on "Agency-type thinking [which] presumes a subject-verb-object kind of thinking: this is the object, and this is my plan" (Lash & Picon, 2009). This narrow view of agency changed when "my plan" was replaced by "our plan" and participatory design began evolving from its industrial model — participatory design is generally traced to work done in 1970s Norway with union workers to achieve greater power in the work place (Bodker, 2010). It's also worth noting that Lash's critique of

agency employed the word “plan”, as in “goal”, because, in fact, designers have taken up the activity of producing plans quite literally. Thus, in many aspects of social design — service design, participatory design, and co-design — plans are deemed more desirable than finished results like buildings, tables, chairs, and so on. Plans prioritize the intangible “social” in social design. Furthermore, plans are not susceptible to the dangers of a fetishized aesthetics.

As participatory design gained a foothold, it was soon realized that while power may seem to be more evenly distributed by virtue of participation, it doesn't alter the fact participants come to the table with their identities known and roles assumed. This has raised calls for designers “to develop a particular sensitivity to their own biases and change... roles from meta-participant (e.g. facilitator) to participants in order to respond to local values and make adequate participation possible” (Akimenko & Kurre, 2107).

Today, both the explicit and implicit value of participation, namely that it will produce consensus, is being questioned. Among others, Carlo di Salvo, Mahmoud Keshavarz, and Ramia Mazé have been exploring the preservation of “dissensus”<sup>1</sup> as a goal of design. The impetus to privilege continual debate over resolution has its roots in questions about the legitimacy of the designer, or the “delegate,” to adapt Grant Kester's term for the socially-engaged artist, who may be simply “a passive reflection of a prior political entity” (Kester, 1995). In this scenario, the designer is a privileged interloper, not a generous contributor.<sup>2</sup>

Here it must be pointed out that these critiques are directed toward social practices with communities where the designer (or in Kester's case, artist) is a stranger. Such power dynamics are ameliorated (albeit not erased) when the designer/artist has a prior familiarity with, and recognition within, the community. An example of the latter can be found in a work from 1981 by artist Maria Lai (1919-2013). Entitled “Tying to the Mountain” (*Legarsi alla Montagna*), the project was conceived by the Sardinian artist and co-constructed by members of a Sardinian village. Lai and the townspeople tore strips of cloth into bands that they then tied together wrapped around their houses, tying them all to the adjacent mountain. The result was a confirmation of a shared social and physical space — however, temporary — made manifest in individual acts of knotting.

Admittedly, Lai's work may be the exception to the rule when speaking of social design. Over her career, she maintained strong ties to her homeland, its

customs and histories, especially those of the women who lived there. More typically, designers who are drawn to social practice are outsiders. As such, they must negotiate their stance between designing for and designing with. One of the most influential thinkers in this regard is Ezio Manzini. Manzini, an Italian design scholar, strategist, and founder of DESIS (Design for Social Innovation towards Sustainability) embraces the differences among various actors — most especially designers — within a framework that reserves moral judgment and preserves design as central, rather than peripheral, to social interventions. One of the foremost advocates of social and environmental sustainability, Manzini takes the position that there is design intelligence within all people. He also understands that this knowledge operates between two poles, which he calls “diffuse design” and “expert design” with infinite variations within them (Manzini, 2015, p. 40). From this, it flows that the playing field of social design, as it were, is *necessarily* uneven; and in that respect Manzini eschews any utopian ambitions for social design practice; fallibility is built into the process as much as potentiality is. He doesn’t try to pre-empt it.

### 3. Case Study: Anna Barbara

This all-too brief introduction of Manzini’s contributions to the field, which range from his writing (notably *Design when Everybody Designs*, 2015) to his teaching at the Politecnico di Milano, provides a pivot to a more detailed discussion of another designer engaged in the social realm. Namely, Anna Barbara. She, too, is a member of the Politecnico’s design faculty. However, she does not work exclusively in the social design realm, as do Manzini and his collaborators, such as Virginia Tassinari, the cofounder of DESIS Philosophy Talks, or Anna Meroni, coordinator of the Polimi-DESIS Lab.<sup>3</sup>

Anna Barbara’s practice includes conventional architectural clients in China and fashion clients the Middle East; she’s the co-author with Anthony Perliss of *Invisible Architecture: Experiencing Places Through the Sense of Smell* (Skira, 2006) and publishes in her own right on issues such as the senses, time, and design. Moreover, she regularly produces poetic projects of an intimate scale, e.g., a necklace made of the lenses of her husband’s broken eyeglasses. Nonetheless, community engagement has been a consistent hallmark of her work. In an interview with the author of this paper, she said that her impetus to contribute to the social realm was first ingrained in her by her family: specifically, her (educator) mother’s willingness to open their home to virtually anyone in need and her siblings’ work in the realms of justice and disaster relief. Later, her design education at the Politecnico would introduce her to Ida Faré, who taught courses in social architecture (*Architettura Sociale*). Faré,

whose background was in biology, came to be an influential gender studies scholar. Barbara credits her with guiding her students to view design less as a matter of a form-giving and more of a matter of social-giving via form. And it is in that sense that Barbara's practice aspires to what Clive Dilnot sees as the most generous view of design; namely, the inter-subjective gift-object posited by Marx when he wrote "[through this] I would know myself to be confirmed in your thought as well as in your love. I would know that I had created through my life expression immediately yours as well" (Dilnot, 1993).

Two recent projects will show how Barbara approaches the social in the necessarily (and I would argue usefully) compromised spirit of the gift. The first to be discussed is the *Paese Ritrovato* community in Monza, which treats people who have Alzheimer's disease. The second project involves the Calabria-based cooperative GOEL which supports the well-being and work of migrants to build a forceful opposition to the criminal power wielded by the *'Ndrangheta*.



### 3.1. *Paese Ritrovato* (2017-2018)

*Paese Ritrovato* is a private care center for people with Alzheimer's, which is structured as a micro-village. Residents live in apartments with interior courtyards with amenities such as shops, hair salons and a chapel. More than just a safe place with types of spaces familiar from their previous lives, *Paese Ritrovato* is committed to stimulating residents' senses as a way to sustain, as much as possible, cognitive brain function in their patients. They believe that sensory stimulation produces an emotional experience that can produce benefits in patients. Anna Barbara, known for her work on design and the senses, was invited to consider how to enhance the patients' sensory experiences. Barbara began by researching whether smell is compromised by Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia. She discovered that while the condition

does not block the sense of smell, it can block the associative qualities of different fragrances and odors. In other words, someone with Alzheimer's can detect a scent but cannot place that scent. She postulated that patients might enjoy practicing smelling different odors and assigning them new meanings. After meeting with doctors, caregivers, residents, and family members, as well as with colleagues at the Politecnico, an Olfactorium was created with two spaces.

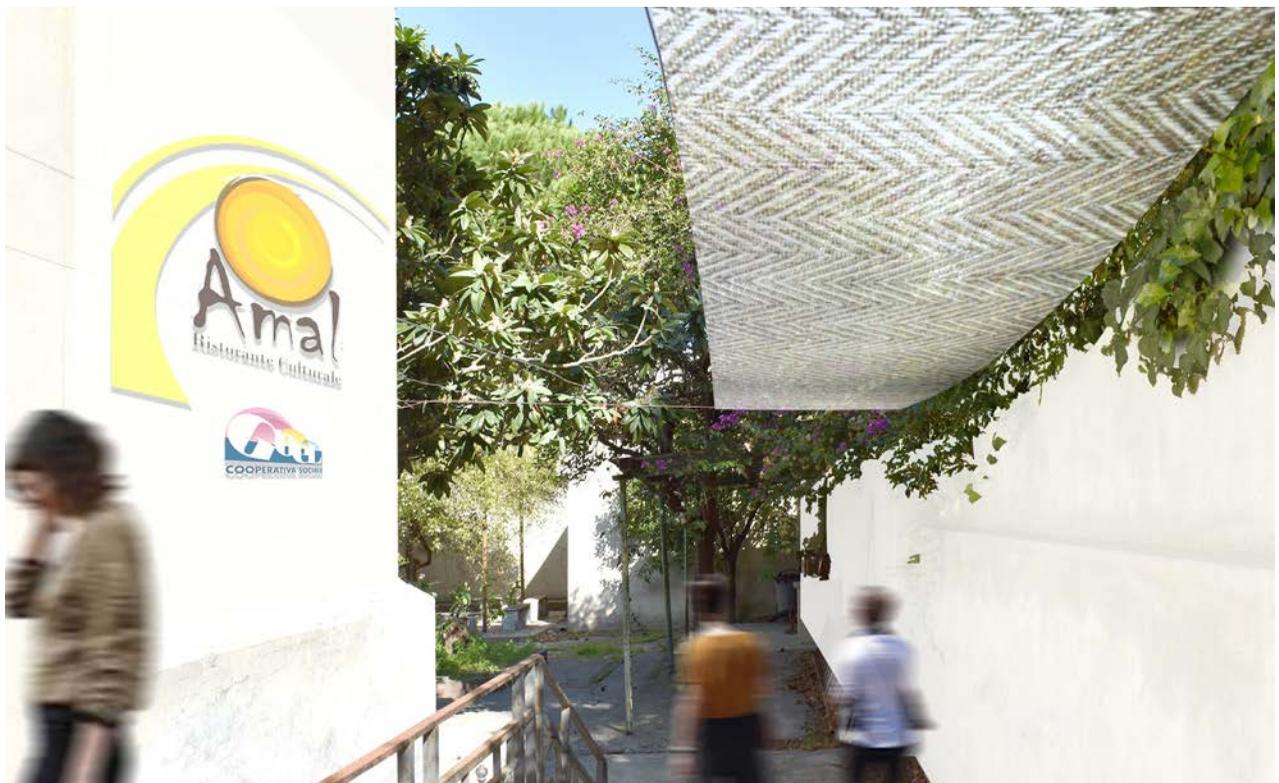
The first space is a library with an installation of images, words, and scents that patients can recombine in order to define a scent or scents on their own terms, as they experience them in the moment. In some cases, scents can also stimulate memories of past experiences. Team member Francesca Ripamonti — a photographer and former student of Anna Barbara — took the lead on that part of the project. The second space is a Sense Gym and engages the entire body. This portion of the project was designed by Barbara herself. She created cotton fabric balls large enough for a person to wrap their arms around and infused them with chypre, floral, citrus, wood, and leather scents among others to create a kind of olfactory garden of fragrances. The balls hang at different heights from the ceiling of the room inviting patients to hug, dance, and play with them, while triggering physical experiences of varying degrees of resonance and novelty. Since all forms of dementia are progressive, she also designed a kit to be used in the early stages of memory loss. The idea is to send a message to oneself in the future, when it is still possible to remember what smells are especially appealing and those that are not. This information can also help tailor future treatments for the patient. Reports from physicians and caretakers at *Paese Ritrovato* indicate that the Sense Gym is much used and affords great pleasure.

### 3.2. GOEL (2019 and on-going)

GOEL is a non-profit community movement based in Locride, a region in Calabria strongly affected for decades by the *'Ndrangheta*, the Calabrian mafia. In operation since 2003, GOEL is challenging the *'Ndrangheta* by building a legitimate economy based on ethically run social enterprises in Calabria. These enterprises involve the recovery of local traditions and production processes that are manifest in a range of ecological products as well as in social spaces like hostels.

Coming from Calabria, herself, Anna Barbara's engagement with this community is one of familiarity, easing the tensions in what she describes as a lively but charged exchanges with her partners. She is motivated, first and fore-

most, by the bravery of their response to the *'Ndrangheta*. GOEL has made the town once controlled by the *'Ndrangheta* the center of their operations. Anna Barbara, it must be noted, takes no credit for the immensity of GOEL's very public refutation of criminality. Her work is to provide scaffolding for the fruits of their labors. Even in developing a platform like a pop-up store or a hostel, she does not position herself as a problem solver but as an interrogator, whose role is to open up possibilities, unsettle preconceptions, and then give form to the negotiated goal, e.g., a store for bioethical and locally-produced products. Not only does her work support the activities of GOEL, it also supports a model of behavior that sits in stark contrast to those whose the silence allows the *'Ndrangheta* to continue to exercise its power. There is no small irony in the fact that such resistance to the mafia often comes from the much-maligned refugees and migrants who many in Italy would prefer not to welcome. Barbara is also cognizant of the fact that the Calabrian region has seen its own population migrate way in great numbers, while political and climate refugees come in greater numbers. Where others see the wave of newcomers as a liability, Barbara and her partners at GOEL see their potential to enrich the culture of Calabria as a crossroads of the Mediterranean region, which as she notes, it once was when it was Magna Grecia.



Interestingly, Barbara started her work with GOEL by designing their showroom in central Milan (The work in Calabria would follow). The space, donated by the municipality, was a property confiscated from the *'Ndrangheta* operation in Milan, just one of the centers of power and money that fuel their operations. There was no government funding to support her work so she relied on private donations to realize the interiors, the furniture, and the lighting. She is now repeating the same process in Siderno, Calabria. She is currently designing the interior for *Ostello Locride*, a hostel housed in yet another space that was once owned by the mafia. She is also designing the headquarters for the newly created *Villaggio Goel*, a complex with a botanical center, a showroom for clothes, a Goel Bio supermarket, the Restaurant Amal, an educational center, and a small chapel. The aim is to overwhelm the negative forces that have been active in Siderno with legal enterprises that give hope and sustenance to the area's increasingly diverse population.

#### 4. Conclusion

The question remains: what kind of "social design" do these two projects represent? While they operate outside of the kind of design-futuring that emphasizes process and visioning over immediate outcome, that prizes community-building over actual building and buildings, the Olfactorium and GOEL projects do support hopeful and hoped for futures. In both cases, the communities in question have already coalesced. Another might question the equity of their dynamics and devoted their efforts to reexamining the fundamental assumptions of each organization. Anna Barbara has, instead, chosen the role of one who listens and interprets, argues and adjusts, but ultimately takes responsibility for the material formulations that she produces.

In terms of power dynamics, the Olfactorium is conditioned by research and interviews but is not a collectively-produced environment, in the sense of full inclusion of those affected most, the residents, due to the incommensurability of expertise and communication capacities. That said, the project does share, along with other social interventions, the ambition to amplify individual agency, and to the extent possible, slow the diminishment of that agency through the stimulation of senses. The extent to which the Olfactorium strengthens the patients' sense of community is yet to be measured, but at the very least, the Sense Gymnasium invites it by virtue of welcoming and accommodating several patients in the same space. Moreover, it meets the larger standard of social design in its reduction of psychological and physical pain and suffering. In this it conforms to humanist scholar Elaine Scarry's assessment of design-writ-large. Scarry argues that things like

chairs, which relieve the weight born by our spines and legs, are “the shape of perceived-pain-wished-gone” (Scarry, 1987, p. 290). Anna Barbara’s scented spheres carry the same intent by eliciting emotions and in some cases memories.

In the case of her work with GOEL, Anna Barbara has designed a space of support for the community’s work in reclaiming agency from the domination of a criminal organization. The fact that Barbara is also Calabrian helps neutralize the balance of power between herself and GOEL. Here, power is a fluid energy generated in their interactions. That energy takes multiple forms: from the social bonds fortified in Calabria, to the built environments that Barbara designs, to the products and services they display which are created by the constituent members of GOEL.

Where some design researchers decry “the position of ‘role-giving’ [as] authoritative and limiting for the true involvement of all the actors in such processes (Akimenki, Kurre), it is unclear whether a social enterprise of scale like GOEL could be effective without the assignment of roles. The same could be said for working with the Alzheimer’s community, which is a composite of authorities: doctors, nurses, staff, patients, families, and designers. Ultimately, one can argue that Anna Barbara’s work is part of a more traditional yet progressive lineage flowing from Henry Dreyfuss and others who deal with the body’s comfort and ability-to-be-social. She, however, expands that emphasis on comfort exponentially by addressing the socio-psychological security of the marginalized, be they patients with dementia or people living in the shadow of the *‘Ndrangheta*.

This is a designer engaged in the social realm of the disenfranchised. She does not attempt to directly mediate the hierarchies that label them as disenfranchised. Rather, her approach is indirect. She generates (negotiated) works of design to *begin* the remediation and social repair that others perform with conversations. In this sense she shares Swedish designer and writer Pelle Ehn’s belief that, “Design artifacts should not primarily be seen as means for creating true ‘pictures of reality’, but as means to help users and the designers to discuss and experience current situations and envision future ones” (Pelle, 1992). Eschewing the dematerialized realm of post-its and schematic planning of other (equally valuable) social design paradigms, Barbara’s practice, in Pelle’s words, conducts “design research through design.”

## 5. Coda

Finally, I would argue that a linear approach to the history of social design (or any history, for that matter) is too inflexible. It doesn't account for work like Barbara's that is a meld of different approaches from the participatory to the authorial.

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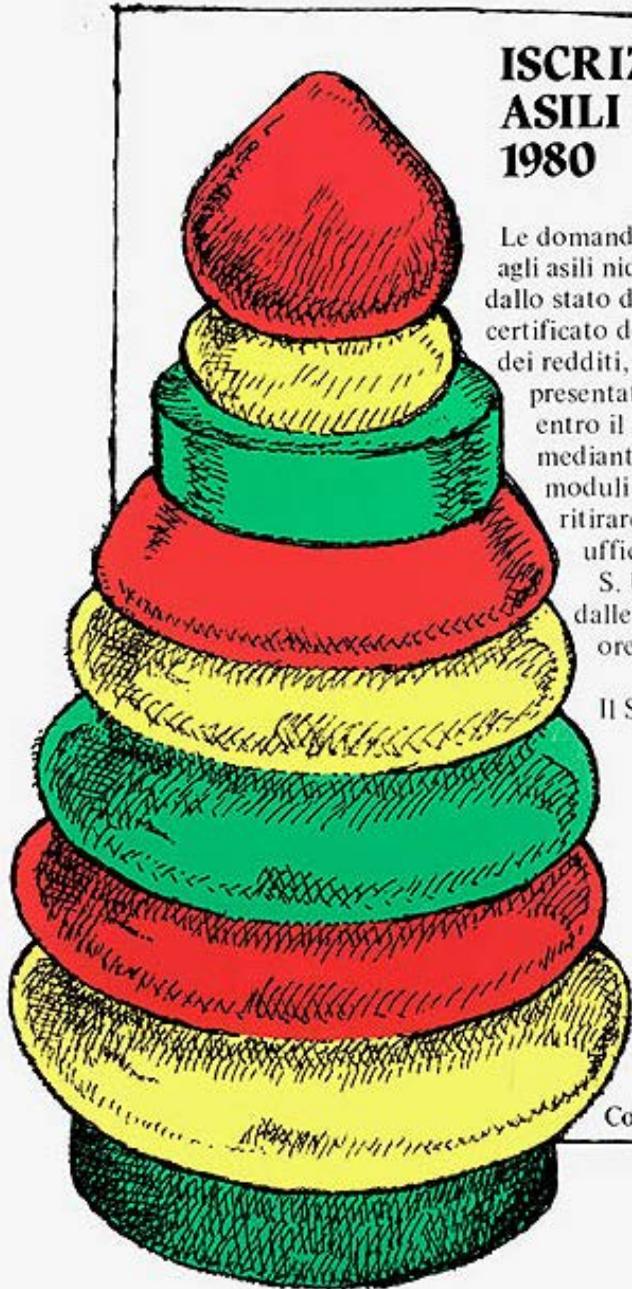
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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Dissensus" was first theorized within the political philosophy of figures such as Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière, who saw a threat to true democracy by forced and enforced communality.

<sup>2</sup> A witty response to this form of self-consciousness and self-effacement can be seen in "Welcome to Seraing", a narrative project, led by Nik Baerten and Virginia Tassinari, in which the designer is cast as a foolish white knight who blunders into social situations. (Yelavich, 2019, p. 113).

<sup>3</sup> Since there have been many articles by and about the work of Tassinari and Meroni, I will not deal with their considerable achievements here. I have chosen to write about Barbara as little or nothing has been said of hers.



## ISCRIZIONE ASILI NIDO 1980

Le domande di ammissione agli asili nido, corredate dallo stato di famiglia e dal certificato della denuncia dei redditi, vanno presentate al Sindaco entro il **30 giugno**, mediante gli appositi moduli che si possono ritirare presso gli uffici di via S. Ubaldo, 13 dalle ore 8 alle ore 14.

Il Sindaco

Comune di Pesaro

Stampa: Agema, stampa: Grafica in ad. in cura dell'off. stampa Comune di Pesaro

Massimo Dolcini, *Iscrizione Asili Nido*, poster, Comune di Pesaro, 1980 (courtesy of AIAP CDPG).

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