Part I: Design for Social Innovation: An Interview With Ezio Manzini

By Sarah Brooks

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http://www.shareable.net/blog/design-for-social-innovation-an-interview-with-ezio-manzini

Ezio Manzini photo via David Barrie's blog.

A recent conversation with Neal Gorenflo led to the idea of a column dedicated to exploring the Shareable tagline – Sharing By Design. As a design strategist and interaction designer, I’m passionate about the role and responsibility of design to create a more shareable, just, and better world; so is Neal, so we’re embarking on a process of discovery through a series of conversations with designers.

Ezio Manzini is an Italian design strategist, one of the world’s leading experts on sustainable design, author of numerous design books, professor of Industrial Design at Milan Polytechnic, and founder of the DESIS (Design for Social Innovation towards
Sustainability) network of university-based design labs. His work over the past 30 years in sustainability and social innovation has coalesced around four watchwords: small, local, open and connected. On a recent Friday morning we spoke via skype and I was immediately impressed with his easy manner, warmth and balanced optimism.

**Q: What's most interesting to you right now?**

**A:** Right now, what’s most interesting me is what we can do to catalyze the most abundant resources we have on the planet, which are our human capabilities. This is, if you want, my motto and it is also a very deep philosophical issue. If we consider that we have a very small heavily populated planet, to move to sustainability we have to make best use of all the resources we have.

We can look to the people of the planet in two ways. We can see 7 billion people on the planet today or 9 billion people tomorrow as the biggest threat and the biggest problem, because we are a little planet. But given that those 7 billion people are you, me, my friends and the people we know, we see them not as problems but as people with capabilities, intelligent operators. So the planet is very rich with potential intelligent operators. What does it mean to enable all the potentialities of so many intelligent people? The system can help in catalyzing the best, or catalyzing the worst. Or in making people more stupid than normally they are. I think this is a very big challenge. This is the biggest challenge with the most potential. Collectivity can help.

There is, in my view, a new model of organizing society and the production and consumption and whatever. When I use the words small, open, local and connected, this is my way of telling the story. People can tell it in another way, but the result is similar. Of course it’s a metaphor: having small entities that when connected, become bigger entities. It’s evident that it comes very strongly from the network. But once it appears, it’s
not only related to what you can do, strictly speaking, in the network and technologies. It’s a way to imagine the way in which the social services are delivered in society and the way in which we can imagine economies that are at the same time rooted in a place and partially self-sufficient but connected to the others and open to the others. This is a very interesting relationship between being local, being related to a certain context and at the same time being open and connected, not provincial or one closed community that risks being against the others. This is an idea that is clear and strong if you talk about the arena where people are dealing with networks, open source and peer to peer. But it can become a very general metaphor, and embed itself in some realities to become a powerful way to organize a sustainable society.

Having dealt with sustainability for the past 30 years, I have had to reframe several times my way of discussing the problem. A lot of sustainability topics were simple to discuss in a naive way 30 years ago because nobody, us included, had concrete ideas on how a sustainable society would have been. Now, luckily, a lot of experiences have been done and good ideas have spread. As a researcher I look for ways to propose a topic in a relatively new way that can help the process to move faster, or find a better direction. Today, for instance, my way to deal with sustainability has shifted toward social innovation.

For me, dealing with the needed sustainable changes that are mainly cultural and behavior change, the pivotal moment has been when I moved from saying “What can I do to help people change behavior?” toward the discovery that a lot of people (even if they aren’t yet so visible) had already changed, and in a good way, their behaviors. And that therefore, the right question is: "What can I do to trigger and support these new way of thinking and doing? How can I use my design knowledge and tools to empower these grass-roots social innovations?"

_Ezio Manzini-Keynote: Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability from Interaction Design Association on Vimeo._

Q. Can you describe one or several specific examples of organic innovation at the grass-roots level and what makes them successful in your view?

A: We can look for example at “zero-mile food”, where not only a new way of eating but also a new relationship between production and consumption, and between the city and the countryside, are established. Or collaborative services where elderly people organize themselves to exchange mutual help and, at the same time, promote a new idea of welfare. Further examples are neighborhood gardens set-up and managed by citizens who in this way improve the quality of the city and its social fabric, or groups of families who decide to share some services to reduce the economic and environmental costs, but also to create new forms of neighborhood.

Once we start to observe society and look for this kind of initiative, a variety of other interesting cases appear: new forms of social interchange and mutual help (such as the local exchange trading systems and time banks); systems of mobility that present
alternatives to the use of individual cars (from car sharing and car pooling to the rediscovery of the possibilities offered by bicycles); the development of productive activities based on local resources and skills which are linked into wider global networks (as is the case of certain products typical of a specific place, or of the fair and direct trade networks between producers and consumers established around the globe). The list could continue, touching on every area of daily life and emerging all over the world.

Looking at such cases of social innovation we can observe that they challenge traditional ways of doing things and introduce new, different and more sustainable behavior. Of course, each one of them should be analyzed in detail (to assess their effective environmental and social sustainability more accurately). However, at first glance we can recognize their coherence with some of the fundamental guidelines for sustainability. First of all, many of them have an unprecedented capacity to bring individual interests into line with social and environmental ones. For example, one side effect is that they reinforce the social fabric, and they generate new and more sustainable ideas of wellbeing, a well-being where greater value is given to the quality of the social and physical context, to a caring attitude, to a slower pace in life, to collaborative actions, to new forms of community and to new ideas of locality.

Behind each of these promising cases of social innovation there are groups of people who have been able to imagine, develop and manage them. A first glance shows that they have some fundamental traits in common: they are all groups of people who cooperatively invent, enhance and manage innovative solutions for new ways of living. And they do so recombining what already exists, without waiting for a general change in the system (in the economy, in the institutions, in the large infrastructures). For this reason, these groups of people can be defined as creative communities: people who cooperatively invent, enhance and manage innovative solutions for new ways of living: social heroes who find in themselves the capability to break the rules of the game (i.e. the mainstreams ways of thinking and doing) and successfully operate in a creative and collaborative way. Given that, the key point for me as a designer is to help these communities to exist and consolidate and the ideas they generate to spread and replicate. That is, to scale-up from being relatively marginal towards becoming more diffuse, and hopefully, in the future, the new mainstream.

Q: What do you see as the most contentious issue in design for social innovation? And where do you stand on the issue?
A: To move in the field of social innovation designers need to define a set of conceptual and practical tools. But, first of all, they have to recognize that design activity is not defined by the products to be designed, but by a specific body of knowledge that can be applicable to a multiplicity of objects and in diverse nodes of the design processes. In other words, if you don’t recognize that design can also be strategic you cannot imagine that design can play an important role in triggering, supporting and scaling-up social innovation.
At the same time, designers must recognize that they are not alone in doing this kind of work, that several other actors are involved with different crucial roles and that, therefore, their original contribution has to be better understood by the other partners (and, sometimes, by the designers themselves.)

Part II: Ezio Manzini on the Economics of Design for Social Innovation

By Sarah Brooks
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http://www.shareable.net/blog/the-economics-of-designing-for-social-innovation

Ezio Manzini is an Italian design strategist, one of the world’s leading experts on sustainable design, author of numerous design books, professor of Industrial Design at Milan Polytechnic, and founder of the DESIS (Design for Social Innovation towards Sustainability) network of university-based design labs. In part one of this two-part interview, Sarah Brooks spoke with Manzini about his design philosophy (“small, local, open and connected”) and building innovation at the grassroots level. In this second part, Manzini discusses the issues surrounding design for social innovation, community-supported agriculture, and the business component of Shareable design.
Q: Are there issues surrounding design for social innovation you feel are important to examine, yet currently ignored? And how do you suggest we address them?

A: In my view, one of the most challenging issues related to design for social innovation is the quality of its results.

In fact, when we discuss traditional products, in general, we have a language and the needed sensibility to discuss their qualities. Vice versa, when we talk about design for social innovation, things are quite different and we still don’t know how to do it. Let’s consider, for instance, a solution based on the sharing of places or products. Given the title of your magazine, Shareable magazine, I suppose that you think that to share is good. And I agree. But, what are the qualities you consider to give this positive evaluation? How do you discuss them? As a matter of fact you can share something in many different ways. We should be able to judge how much effective and economically viable each one of these different solutions could be. But also, and in my view, here is the designers’ specific responsibility. We should have the criteria and the words to discuss different ways of sharing, endowed with different sets of soft qualities. As you can imagine, this is today a particularly challenging issue.

Q: Who are the people you look to for inspiration?
A: I’m doing what I am doing because during research I was engaged in five years ago, I met groups of people who opened a window of new possibilities. I was supposed to search for emerging users’ demands, and I found creative communities. I discovered that they were much more than users – they were the social heroes who where changing the world. Those people became very important to me. Only some years after that discovery I (finally!) recognized that they were an expression (a fantastic expression, indeed!) of a larger ongoing phenomenon: social innovation.
Beyond that, of course there are also some thinkers who have been very important to me. I like to quote Amartya Sen. He's a Nobel Prize-winning economist who introduced me to the notion of “capabilities”. His main work deals with social equity. His approach focuses on positive freedom, a person’s actual ability to be who they want to be and do what they want to do. It’s the idea of empowering the capabilities of people. In my view this is a very strong idea for design. In some way, when you design, you search for problems to be solved. If you take the capability approach, you search for capabilities to support. This is a paradigmatic change in the way that we think. This is connected to social innovation. You don’t ask what you can do to make people behave differently. You ask what you can do to recognize people’s capabilities and help people use those to solve the problems they face.

Q: What projects are you working on currently?
A: Before answering this question I must say that I am a design researcher working in a team. In the last period my team has been the DIS-Unit of Research at the Politecnico di Milano. Here, the projects we have been involved in have been mostly related to what we call collaborative housing (forms of living where people share some spaces and services) and new food networks (improved and de-mediated relationships between the city and the countryside). Beyond these kinds of projects, we have been (and still are) very busy also in promoting and coordinating an international network on design for social innovation towards sustainability (DESIS). It is a network of design labs, based in design schools and design-oriented universities, actively involved in promoting and supporting sustainable changes. I have to say that majority of my time now is absorbed by this kind of work (and I like it a lot!).

Q: Can you describe your new food network projects in some more detail?
A: At present, the most relevant project we have in this field is Nutrire Milano (Feeding Milan). It is an initiative promoted and developed in Milano by Slow Food, Politecnico di Milano, Facoltà di Scienze Gastronomiche and several other local partners. This project aims at regenerating the Milanese peri-urban agriculture (that is the agriculture near the city) and, at the same time, at offering organic and local food opportunities to the citizens. To do that implies to promote radically new relationships between the countryside and the city. That is, to create brand-new networks of farmers and citizens based on direct relationships and mutual support.

The project's first step had been recognizing the existing (social, cultural and economic) resources and best practices. Moving from here, a strategy has been developed considering the emerging trends towards a new possible synergy between cities and their countryside (as the ones towards zero-mile food and proximity tourism). On this basis, a shared and socially recognized vision has been built: the vision of a rural-urban area where agriculture flourishes, feeding the city and, at the same time, offering citizens opportunities for a multiplicity of farming and nature related activities.

To enhance this vision, the program is articulated in local projects (which are several self-standing projects, each on of them supporting, in different ways, a farmer’s activity)
and framework actions (including context analysis, scenario co-creation and communication, promotion and coordination of the different individual local projects). It is remarkable that, in a large project like this (a five-year project involving a very wide regional area), thanks to its adaptability and scalability, a first concrete result (a very successful Farmers’ Market) has been obtained in less than one year since starting-up, that two other initiatives will be realized in the next years and that several others are underway and will be implemented in the near future (keeping in account the very concrete experiences of the first three).

Q: If there was an idea you'd like to see catch on, what would it be?  
A: To find the way to combine, in a positive, sustainable way, the small and local with the global and connected. In fact, humans live in a locality and have the possibility to control a relatively small amount of variables. Therefore, the quality of their experiences and sense of control on their lives are higher if they are rooted in a place and have the real possibility to control some relevant elements of their daily life. If this is true, and this is what I strongly believe, to have a place to refer to and to have the possibility to participate to the definition of your everyday life context are, in my view, two main pillars in the building of a sustainable quality of life. And therefore the sustainable society as a whole.

But, at the same time, we have to recognize that to promote the small and local perspective can also be very dangerous. In fact, it can bring people to jail themselves in closed communities. To isolate themselves. And moving from here, to create a fake identity of who is inside his/hers “gated community”, against all the others. That is what, unfortunately, today is happening in many places in the world.

Vice versa, what we have to search for is to be local and open, at the same time. To create permeable interfaces between communities and places. To cultivate diversity to permit, at the same time, the free flow of people and ideas.

All this, of course, is very difficult: to blend the local and the open could appear to be a quasi-oxymoron. But maybe, it is exactly from dealing with this kind of quasi-oxymoron that a sustainable society will find the ground to emerge. A society that is based on a multiplicity of interconnected communities and places will appear as a large ecology of people, animals, plants, places and products.

Q: Can you speak further about the relationship of social innovation and the public sector?  
A: Yes, there is another important and very concrete point I would like to add to our conversation: until now we have spoken about social innovation (and therefore a collaborative and sharing attitude) assuming the points of view of active people, creative communities and designers. But it has to be said and underlined that this same issue has a very important business side too. If what we have discussed here is true (even only partly true), new forms of organization are appearing and new products and services will be required to fit them. In other words, looking to social innovation companies can focalize the businesses of the future.
In parallel to that and, in my view, even more important and urgent, something similar has to be said about considering the impact of this kind of social innovation on the public sector. In fact, the services traditionally delivered by the public sector consider their users to be passive recipients. What happens if we imagine a new generation of public services attuned to active and collaborative citizens?

Not only: typically, the design and development of public services has been based on top-down processes. What happens if a new generation of services emerges from a collaborative, largely bottom-up, design process?

We cannot deal with what could be the answers to these questions in this interview. But I can anticipate that they will be the core of a program that will be launched in few months. Maybe, we can continue the discussion on this point when the program has been officially presented.