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PAD

via Francesco Soave 15 – 20135 Milano – Italy
via Roma 171 – 90133 Palermo – Italy
info@padjournal.net – editors@padjournal.net

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TOOLS

**ENERGY TECHNOLOGIES
& DIGITAL AWARENESS**

Towards Energy Sustainability in the Digital Realm

A Compass of Strategies between Natural and Artificial Intelligence

Michele De Chirico

Università Iuav di Venezia
Orcid id 0000-0001-8942-4886

Raffaella Fagnoni

Università Iuav di Venezia
Orcid id 0000-0001-9136-3912

Carmelo Leonardi

Università Iuav di Venezia
Orcid id 0000-0003-1988-3010

Ami Licaj

Università degli Studi di Firenze
Orcid id 0000-0002-0697-0441

Giuseppe Lotti

Università degli Studi di Firenze
Orcid id 0000-0002-8066-5998

Manfredi Sottani

Università degli Studi di Firenze
Orcid id 0000-0001-6603-0809

Annapaola Vacanti

Università Iuav di Venezia
Orcid id 0000-0002-7992-8623

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Abstract

The digital is not an intangible entity. Contrary to the belief that the digital world reduces the physical footprint of human activities, its environmental impact is far from minor. To foster sustainability, accessibility, and inclusion requires the creation of complex and multidimensional strategies to encourage long-term behavioural change. In this scenario, concepts such as sobriety and moderation emerge as an alternative sustainable model. The article critically overviews concrete practices for balancing digital energy usage. An analysis of contemporary strategies is presented through two main parameters: firstly, a distinction is made between solutions that use artificial intelligence to optimise efficiency and solutions that use natural intelligence to rethink traditional consumption paradigms. Secondly, design strategies are categorised into three drivers: reducing digital activities by resorting to low-tech or analogic alternatives, adapting resources through artefacts responsive to energy availability and quality, and replacing traditional technologies with biobased and bioinspired solutions. The results highlight the necessity for a post-anthropocentric vision in design and provide a compass of strategies to apply to the energy transition in the digital realm.

1. Introduction

Humanity faces a critical global emergency due to climate change and biodiversity loss, impacting both the environment and societal structures. This crisis requires a paradigm shift from solely technological solutions to profound changes in thought models and lifestyles. Essential is the development of new relationships between humanity and nature, emphasising an interdisciplinary approach and the crucial role of design. Indeed, design emerges as a pivotal catalyst for change, synthesising complex environmental challenges into actionable, visionary strategies. This new design paradigm aims to integrate technology purposefully and strengthen the bond between humanity and nature, driving innovation for the benefit of the entire planet. Ultimately, design helps individuals and communities adapt to change, overcome challenges, and move towards a sustainable future (Lotti et al., 2022).

[Design] can make revolutions in science, technology, history, or politics visible and bring them to life. When design is used well, it changes lives and, with it, the narrative. It can be top-down, bottom-up, or infiltrated from the side, but in all of these different strategies, and especially the bottom-up strategy, design is very powerful because it can help the infiltration. (Antonelli, 2022, p. 95)

The practice of “giving form” is challenged to grapple with the realities of living on a compromised planet, inspired by the work of pioneers like Victor Papanek, Tomas Maldonado, and Yona Friedman. Since then, the landscape of design has transformed: objects are now designed not only for aesthetic or functional needs but also in response to environmental sus-

tainability and circularity. The shift from tangible products to intangible services marks a significant dematerialization in design practice. Moreover, design has broadened its scope, aiming to affect behavioural change and tackle complex societal challenges. Yet, these changes are initial steps; the full impact of these shifts will emerge only through a radical break from past practices and by engaging deeply with the local contexts. The task of conceiving and constructing alternatives grows increasingly challenging, even as design capabilities have advanced to a point where they can craft futuristic scenarios with cutting-edge technologies and artificial intelligences, pushing the limits of what is conceivable (Fagnoni, 2022).

Amid the global challenges associated with the circular transition, digitalisation and its associated technologies have emerged as key enablers for sustainable development and integration. This marks a shift toward more sustainable practices, highlighted in the framework of the “twin transitions” where digital transition acts as a facilitator for efficiency and innovation. This synergy between ecological transition and digital transformation fosters enhanced sustainability across diverse sectors (Muench et al., 2022). Yet, the role of digitalization in addressing the interconnections between energy transition and climate change has been inadequately addressed in investment policy formulation (UNESCO, 2015). Furthermore, the concept of circularity remains underdeveloped in the digital sphere, and the environmental impacts of escalating digital usage are frequently underestimated (OECD, 2022).

While digital technologies are instrumental in analysing climate data and enhancing planning and efficiency – thereby conserving energy and minimising resource consumption (World Bank, 2016) – the pervasive “myth of digital” conjures an illusion of limitless power and absence of boundaries (McGovern, 2020). This illusion masks the significant environmental impacts of digital ecosystems, including their substantial direct energy consumption. The concept of digital sustainability necessitates a paradigm shift from the tangible to the intangible, recognizing that the digital realm, often perceived as an ephemeral cloud, indeed consumes significant amounts of energy, materials, and space.

The article proposes a critical overview of concrete practices for balancing the energy usage of the digital. The disciplinary context is developed in the dedicated section, where the first reading parameter is defined: a distinction is made between solutions that leverage Artificial Intelligence to optimise the efficiency of devices and platforms, and solutions that use Natural Intelligence to rethink traditional paradigms of consumption in the digital realm. It follows an overview of design strategies, categorised into three main drivers: reducing digital activities by resorting to Low-Tech or analogic alternatives; adapting the use of resources through artefacts that are responsive to energy availability and quality; replacing traditional technologies with biobased and bioinspired solutions. In the discussion section, such strategies are critically analysed, assessing their effectiveness, limitations and potential impact on long-term sustainability. Conclusions outline the goals and next steps of the authors’ joint research activities.

2. AI & NI for Promoting Sobriety in the Digital Realm

The sustainability challenges of today call for a departure from the norms of continuous expansion and acceleration. Concepts such as moderation and sobriety are emerging as viable alternatives, proposing a radical downscaling of resource exploitation, not as a compromise but as a fundamental principle (Franz, 2022). Aiming for a more balanced, moderate, and sober life is the only possible answer to the multiple crises of the contemporary world. Degrowth is thus understood as a new scenario, freeing human identity from economic representations (Seibert et al., 2021), developing an ethic of low consumption, and “finding reasons for elegance in scarcity” (Lynch & Southworth, 1994).

Specifically, this study promotes digital sobriety and moderation as a paradigm shift that positions designers to significantly influence the environmental footprint of digital content through its creation, accessibility, and consumption, necessitating the extension of eco-design and circular principles to the digital realm, which, despite its intangible perception, has substantial environmental impacts (McGovern, 2020; Paoletti, 2021).

Sustainable strategies in the digital domain include enhancing energy efficiency, modifying regulatory constraints, encouraging sharing, designing for decarbonisation, and managing usage growth (OECD, 2021; The Shift Project, 2024). Key actions involve establishing a quantitative framework for digital strategy redirection, optimising deployment to minimise electricity consumption, restricting data-intensive uses to control data growth, and educating stakeholders on developing lean and

resilient infrastructure (The Shift Project, 2024). The concept of sobriety by design plays a pivotal role in this context, reflecting an ethical commitment to environmental sustainability and earth-centric design. This approach influences the development of digital goods, ensuring they are crafted with a focus on resource conservation and an energy-saving approach.

Our investigation focuses not on calculating energy and resources consumption, or quantitative negative impacts – which falls outside the scope of design discipline expertise – but rather on identifying specific issues through the research of good practices for digital sustainability, conveyed by design choices that embody the concepts of sobriety and moderation and that define their aesthetics and usability.

The world we inhabit is more a product of human creation than natural evolution, where every aspect of our environment bears the imprint of human ingenuity (Simon, 1996). Human influence is categorised into four degrees of “natural-ity” (Proserpio, n.d.): from entirely natural, like forests and oceans, to human-designed but naturally-produced, such as farms, to fully human-made objects and systems like democracy, and finally to technologies like machine learning, which can independently create, as demonstrated by AI-generated media (Manovich & Arielli, 2024). In today’s technological panorama, designers can exploit both Natural Intelligence (NI) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) (AIColabs, 2024) to produce artefacts that are energy efficient and more sustainable. This study considers these opposite approaches as one of the parameters available for critical reading of design strategies for sustainable digital goods.

NI, the cognitive capacity inherent in biological entities, is characterised by an ability to perceive, reason, and adapt organically, influenced by genetic, environmental, and experiential factors. NI evolves through slow biological processes, shaped by evolutionary pressures over millennia. An established design trend ascribable to biophilic design emphasises the value of reproducing the functioning of dynamic and complex natural systems in order to design in balance with planetary cycles and temporalities.

Conversely, AI represents the zenith of human technological endeavour, leveraging algorithms and machine learning to process and analyse large datasets. AI is propelled forward by continuous research and technological updates, evolving rapidly in capabilities and applications across various industries like healthcare, finance, and transportation. The inherent capability of AI to process enormous amounts of information and find patterns within it at an inhumanly fast rate offers the opportunity to seamlessly manage and control the energy consumption of digital artefacts.

This shift towards digital sobriety and moderation sets the stage for exploring specific design strategies that can effectively reduce, adapt, and replace digital practices to promote sustainability.

3. Design Strategies: Reducing

Reducing digital consumption involves implementing minimalist design principles that directly impact energy usage. Over the past decade, the growing energy consumption of computing systems, from large-scale supercomputers to personal laptops, has become a significant concern driven by

economic, environmental, and implementation practicalities (Beloglazov et al., 2011; Belkhir et al., 2018).

In 2020, the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector contributed from 1.8 to 2.8% of global greenhouse gas emissions, with projections indicating an increase of up to 830 million tons of CO² by 2030 (Andrae & Edler, 2015; Belkhir et al., 2018). Even mobile phones, despite their relatively low energy impact, are part of an infrastructure that requires considerable amounts of electricity to function. In 2018, the global impact of mobile communication technologies was estimated at around 2,135 million tons of CO², highlighting the need to adopt strategies to reduce the environmental impact of our digital activities (GSMA & Carbon Trust, 2021).

Considering the broad impact of digital technologies on daily activities and the ongoing digital transition in public organisational integration, an evident contrast arises between the urgent demand for transformation and its relative impact on the documented environmental crisis. The paradox is evident in the breadth of media resonance regarding the energy required for the activation and sustenance of our technological devices, as well as for the operation of data processing centres (Diguet & Lopez, 2019). This paradox also manifests concerning issues related to the extraction of metals and materials used in the production of our digital tools (Pitron, 2018). In recent years, various proposals have been put forward to resolve this dichotomy. These proposals pursue different objectives, including the pursuit of balance in promoting sustainable development initiatives through adopting

new technologies or optimizing existing processes, as well as considering ecological issues as a driving force for broader reflection on digital society (Fing, 2019). This approach is commonly known as Low-Tech and entails exploring the conditions of an information society within a crisis context (Tomlinson et al., 2012), promoting sobriety, understood as the adoption of Appropriate Technologies (Schumacher, 1974), and low impact, characterised by simplicity that makes them potentially less efficient but richer in resources, as well as the local management of resources (Bihouix, 2014).

4. Design Strategies: Adapting

Adapting digital practices to energy availability is crucial for advancing sustainable methodologies. This alignment is not only necessary but imperative as almost all human and non-human activities depend on energy, primarily derived from the Sun, which fuels photosynthesis, structures our days, and delivers essential nutrients (Van Aubel, 2022).

The contemporary scenario of ever-increasing energy demand is dominated by technology and poses sudden challenges that are increasingly fraught with pitfalls. It is therefore particularly significant to urge an in-depth reflection on the energy issue in relation to the digital realm that is capable of driving change and proposing alternative visions (Lotti, 2022) in an attempt to stimulate a paradigm shift in the Earth vs. Sun dichotomy. Interaction with the Sun and its energy possibilities become central; in contrast to fossil fuels, limited and polluting energy sources (Earth), it represents a potentially unlimited source of energy (Sun). Solar energy is to be interpreted with a double

valence: on the one hand, as a source that generates energy, and on the other hand, as a Natural Intelligence approach, such as solar technology like NI. In this view, solar energy effectively responds to current energy challenges by proposing adaptable, scalable and sustainable models. It plays a crucial role in the energy transition to a fully renewable supply, ensuring not only the availability but also the quality of the energy needed. This kind of energy is not limited to its most common uses: the long-term goal is to naturalise the resource, fully integrating it into the realm of digital sustainability.

Solar energy is inspirational because it also suggests a model of an adaptive approach that, in the pattern of regenerative design, renews and restores materials and resources to ensure resilience by counteracting the concept of a linear and degenerative economy that involves the use of resources that are then discarded after only one use. Considering time in a circular, rather than linear, manner leads us to imagine alternative methods for re-new, re-store, re-source. The ability of design to reframe the narrative on complex topics is essential to fit this alternative energy reality into a shared vision, facilitating the transition to a post-fossil fuel future and preventing solar energy from becoming as problematic as asbestos in the 21st century (Van Aubel, 2022).

5. Design Strategies: Replacing

Embracing biologically inspired alternatives in place of traditional technologies marks a profound shift in our design paradigm.

This strategy of replacing begins by redefining the relationship between humanity, nature, and technology: where design

through a post-anthropocentric vision shifts from a human-centred perspective to a relational view, where it becomes an intermediary between “the life of the form” and the “form of life” (Goodwin, 1994, 2007). In this context, nature takes on the role of co-designer, highlighting the need to move beyond the use of simple ecological tools, leading to new design processes and methodologies based on biological principles, where nature is not relegated to a marginal or final role but is integrated from the beginning of the design process, actively operating as a co-designer. This approach emphasises a deep and functional integration between natural systems and human innovations, promoting solutions that are not only sustainable but also intrinsically connected with the living fabric of our planet, perfectly in line with the regenerative design model.

This model aims to create design systems that not only minimise the negative impact on the environment but actively improve and regenerate natural resources. Regenerative design goes beyond sustainability, aiming for an integration that restores, renews, and enriches ecosystems and communities, where designers are invited to consider nature not just as a source of inspiration or a resource to be preserved but as an active partner in the design process (Mang & Reed, 2012). Moving towards this paradigm shift, co-designing with nature means not only drawing inspiration from it, as in biomimicry, but also exploring new Biobased solutions that can replace materials or even processes as in the case of bio-HCI (Biological-Human Computer Interaction), namely the use of microorganisms as Living Media Interfaces (LMI) and Living Bits that integrate living organisms, such as algae, bacteria, and fungi, into the digital world (Karana et al., 2020).

The use of living organisms as interfaces for digital systems introduces a revolutionary approach leading to significant innovations, including a drastic reduction in energy consumption linked to digital interfaces, offering a more empathetic and engaging user experience, and paving the way for new design paradigms that integrate natural elements in replacement of processes that have been 100% digital until now (Licaj & Matteucci, in press).

6. Discussion

To further analyse and make sense of the three principal strategies in digital sustainability (reducing, adapting, replacing) we elaborated a diagram (Fig. 1) that illustrates the intersection of Artificial and Natural Intelligence in relation to the former. Our analysis is based on relevant exemplary cases that – although being for the most part experimental practices – push forward the design discipline with regard to the impact of digital artefacts.

The first axis showcases how AI and NI can be leveraged to reduce digital consumption. Formafantasma¹ portfolio focuses on offering both a bright and dark colour scheme, preferring the second as it reduces screen brightness and energy consumption of OLED screens. It also uses system typefaces and a simple structure to avoid unnecessary HTTP requests, and informs the user on the weight of the images before downloading them (Fig. 2).

1 <https://formafantasma.com/website>.

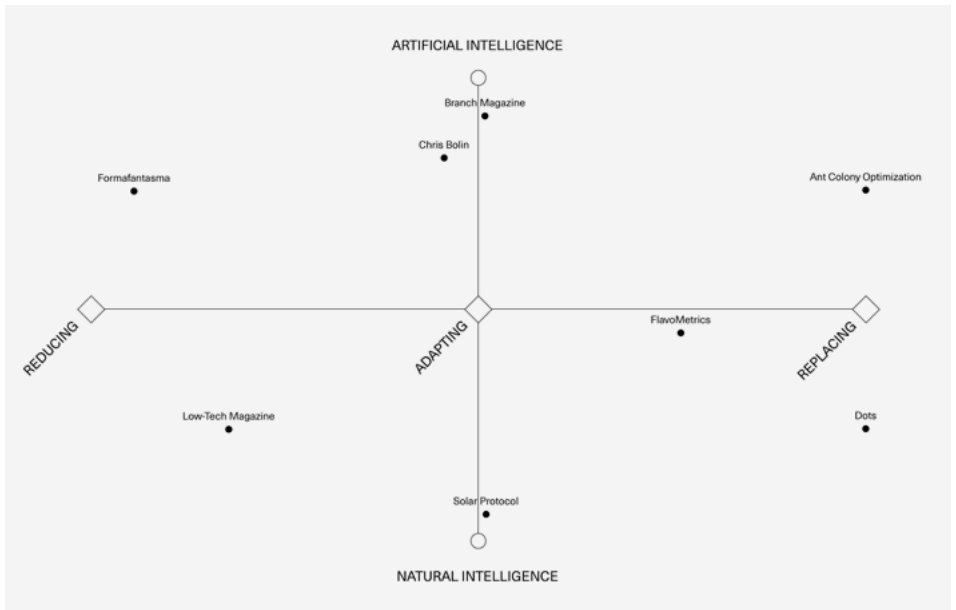


Figure 1. Diagram showcasing the relationship between the main drivers for sustainable digital design; AI and NI are on the vertical axis, while three design strategies are on the horizontal axis, i.e. reducing, adapting and replacing.

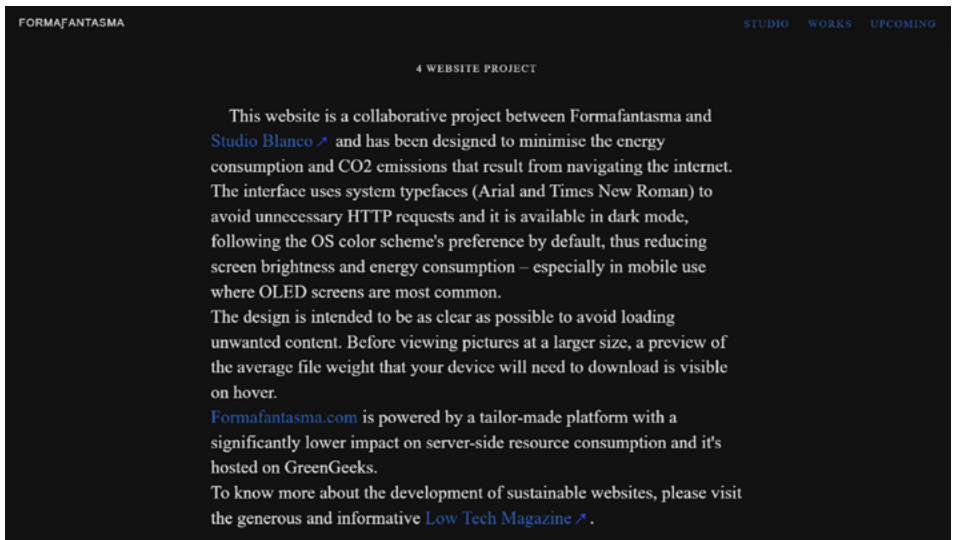


Figure 2. Screenshot of Formafantasma website [accessed on June 19, 2024].

LOW←TECH MAGAZINE

This is a solar-powered website, which means it sometimes goes offline

About | Low-tech Solutions | High-tech Problems | Obsolete Technology | Offline Reading | Archive | Donate | NTM

Rebuilding a Solar Powered Website

You're looking at a completely rebuilt version of the solar powered website, which now allows you to turn off the dithering compression and see the original images.

June 13, 2023 written by kris de wecker, marie otsuka, noel roscom, abing marie verdeli Translations fr de es



Figure 3. Screenshot of Low Tech Magazine [accessed on June 19, 2024].

Moving from left to right, Low-Tech Magazine² uses a similar approach about UI choices. Also, it is solar-powered (a battery indicator visually shows the energy available and informs of the chance that the website may go offline). As the server is located in Barcelona, this territorial integration highlights the importance of designing and implementing energy infrastructure and digital services considering local specificities, a key approach in addressing environmental challenges and optimising resource efficiency (Fig. 3).

These cases adopt minimalist design principles that directly reduce energy consumption. While effective in raising user awareness and having an immediate impact, they need to improve scalability and acceptance. Their success depends heav-

² <https://solar.lowtechmagazine.com>.


ily on broad user engagement and behaviour change, which can be challenging to secure. Moreover, low-energy websites' aesthetic and functional constraints may not be suitable for all digital applications, particularly those requiring high data throughput or rapid interaction.



Figure 4. Screenshot of Branch online magazine [accessed on June 19, 2024].

Adapting the appearance and user experience of digital artefacts to energy availability is a central strategy to align more closely with sustainable practices (Vacanti et al., 2023). Both AI and NI are extremely useful in these examples. AI is leveraged by Branch Magazine³, which adapts its UI to grid intensity, through a grid intensity API and the user location. As the intensity grows, the experience of navigating the magazine changes, with images being hidden by default, and the logo and background highlighting the state of the grid (Fig. 4).

³ <https://branch.climateaction.tech>



**You must go
offline to view this
page.**

Disconnect to continue

Figure 5. Screenshot of Chris Bolin experimental website [accessed on June 19, 2024].

Chris Bolin⁴ uses another strategy to offer a critique of the contemporary excess of connectivity, fostered by social media. The content of his website is hidden unless the user goes offline (Fig. 5).

As opposed to these examples, Solar Protocol⁵ uses NI to complement and adapt the website's fruition: by placing servers in sun-optimal locations, Solar Protocol monitors their activity and builds an open network active in eight countries and six continents, directing data traffic to the server receiving the most sunlight at that time (Fig. 6).

These innovative approaches could struggle in areas with unpredictable solar energy availability or underdeveloped infrastructure. Adapting user interface elements based on energy availability is a progressive step towards sustainability, but it might lead to inconsistent user experiences, potentially affecting user engagement and satisfaction.

4 <https://chrisbolin.co/offline>

5 <http://solarprotocol.net>

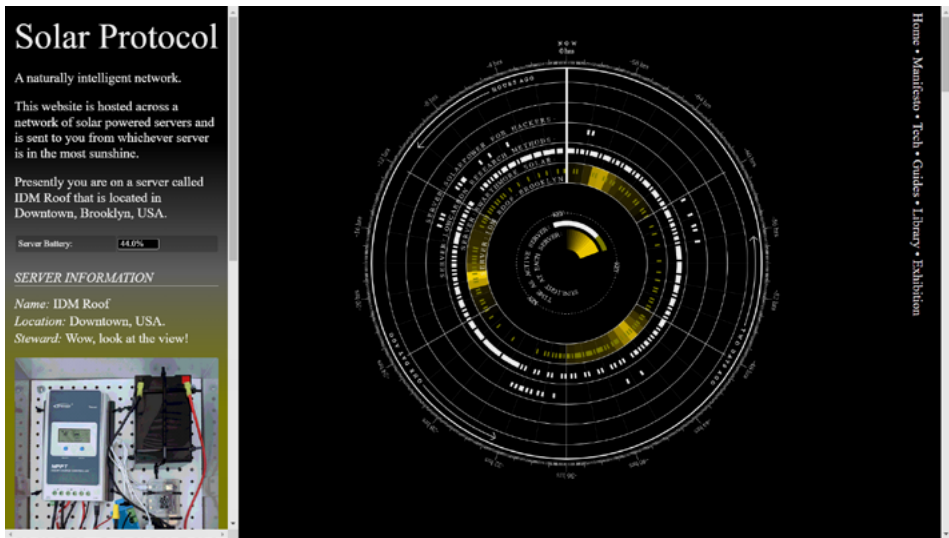


Figure 6. Screenshot of Solar Protocol website [accessed on June 19, 2024].

Replacing is a strategy in which traditional technologies are substituted with innovative, often biologically inspired, alternatives. FlavoMetrics (Risseeuw et al., 2023) uses computer graphics and simulations to aesthetically represent Flavobacteria, a type of microorganism known for its iridescence and reactive behaviours. This tool allows users to adjust various environmental parameters such as growth, humidity, and lighting conditions to observe how these changes affect the appearance and behaviour of the Flavobacteria, opening up new possibilities for using living organisms in interactive designs, providing a foundation for developing new functions and modes of interaction between the biological and digital worlds.



Figure 7. Screenshot of Dots Project website [accessed on June 19, 2024].



Figure 8. Ant behaviour as inspiration for the metaheuristic optimization technique (credits: Wikimedia Commons, 2007).

The Dots project⁶ by Studio Dust, showcased at the 2015 Rotterdam Stadsmakerscongres, visualises the invisible matter of air pollution. It uses a device to capture fine dust particles on paper, providing quantitative data through light reflection analysis. The resulting dots on the paper vary in shades of grey depending on location and timing, offering a visual comparison of air pollution levels in various areas, such as the northern Netherlands and the traffic-heavy zones of Rotterdam (Fig. 7). Ant Colony Optimization (ACO) is an algorithm inspired by the behaviour of ants searching for food. Ants lay down pheromones to mark paths that should be followed by other members of the colony, leading to efficient routes being reinforced and inefficient ones diminishing. ACO has been used successfully in solving the travelling salesman problem, routing of vehicles, and other optimisation tasks (Dorigo et al., 2001) (Fig. 8).

7. Conclusions

Design generates proposals to tangible and (seemingly) intangible problems – digital sustainability – through the discipline of design, here understood with the concept of “to act”. This requires a critical and radical rethinking of the designer’s role, which extends beyond the creation of objects or spaces to the design of adaptive and sustainable digital systems. In its role as mediator, design must consider the complexity of interconnected crises, developing solutions that not only respond to the climate emergency but also guide society toward more democratic, responsible and conscious values. Raising consciousness and informing the community are essential

6 https://studiodust.nl/?page_id=612

to activate sustainable, meaningful and accessible practices. Social aspects play an active role in this cause, and design can help build a more conscious society, where energy is seen not only as a technical resource but as a fundamental element in our relationship with the Planet.

The integration of AI and Natural Intelligence in design aims to minimise the environmental impact of digital technologies through a blend of theoretical and practical strategies. This approach promotes a multi-dimensional model of digital sustainability. However, overcoming resistance to minimalist or adaptive designs requires engaging users through educational initiatives and incentives that encourage energy efficiency.

The next steps of our work aim to structure a path of research and experimentation on the integration of the concepts of sustainability, energy consumption, and design that are developed within two specific laboratories: CTRL+JUNK LAB from Università Iuav di Venezia⁷, and Sustainable Design Laboratory from Università di Firenze⁸. The shared goal of involving communities and stakeholders in promoting sustainable and circular design practices highlights the need to develop innovative methods to reduce environmental impacts and improve resource efficiency.

Specifically, in the next steps, the research will focus on advancing sustainability, energy efficiency, and design through a series of hands-on experiments via a series of workshops

7 <https://sites.google.com/iuav.it/iuav-centro-studictrljunklab/ctrl-junk-lab>

8 <https://www.designforsustainabilitylab.com/>

exploring strategies to reduce, adapt, and replace digital design paradigms with more sustainable ones while assessing their energy impacts. Also, a further upcoming goal is to identify a more specific area of experimentation where energy impacts are at their highest, such as public events.

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BIOGRAPHIES

Valentina Auricchio

Assistant professor of the Design Department of the Politecnico di Milano. Her research is focused on Design Methods and managing strategic design projects with small and medium industries including Design Thinking processes. Her main interest is in design processes, methods and tools and their application within different sectors for strategic innovation. Member of Polimi DESIS Lab and of the international DESIS Network.

valentina.auricchio@polimi.it

Leire Bereziartua Gonzalez

She is an Industrial Design Engineer, from the Mondragon Polytechnic School (Mondragon Unibertsitatea) and Politécnico di Milano. She is currently part of the Deusto Design Research Group team and teaches at the Faculty of Engineering, at the Bilbao campus of Deusto University. She teaches several subjects related to Technical Graphic Expression in different engineering studies, both at grade level and master level, also "Sustainable Design" and "Laboratory III: Experience and Service Design" in Industrial Design engineering studies. She is also part of the Deusto FabLab team (creativity, innovation and development centre for new products, services and experiences) as FabExpert, she has made FabAcademy during 2018. In addition, since 2018 she collaborates with projects within the Digital Industry Cathedra. In 2014 she holds a master's degree in Teaching Training, which helped develop her teaching skills further, and since the 2019/2020 course she is in PhD adventure, specializing herself in Circular Economy, new technologies and Renewable Energies.

leire.bereziartua@deusto.es

Mario Bisson

Associate Professor at the Department of Design of Politecnico di Milano where he teaches and has taught Industrial design, Visual elements for the project and Color at the School of Design. He is currently Scientific Director of the Color Laboratory of the Department of DESIGN, he is promoter and co-founder of the Interdepartmental Laboratory of Politecnico di Milano EDME (Environmental Design and Multisensory Experience). In 2013 he is co-founder of the MDA Association (Mediterranean Design Association) that deals with topics related to Environmental design.

mario.bisson@polimi.it

Beatriz Bonilla Berrocal

PhD candidate in Design at the Design Department of Politecnico di Milano, member of Polimi DESIS Lab. Her research interests focus on Design for Social Innovation and its application both in business and communities.

beatriz.bonilla@polimi.it

Stefana Broadbent

Associate Professor in the Design Department of Politecnico di Milano. Between 2014 and 2016 she was Head of Collective Intelligence at Nesta, UK's innovation agency. Previously Stefana was a Lecturer in Digital Anthropology at University College London where she led the Master in Digital Anthropology. Her research interests are in the area of digital and sustainable social practices.

stefana.broadbent@polimi.it

Alessio Caccamo

Alessio Caccamo, PhD (1991) is Information Designer and Junior Researcher (RTDA) at Sapienza – University of Rome. He combines theoretical research with applied research in Communication Design - specifically in Data Visualization and Information Design - focusing on pedagogical, sociological and critical aspects, i.e. the human-data interaction. Co-Head of the SID Group – Design for Education, he specializes in Design for Learning, researching through design hybrid projects both analogue and digital for learning environments.

alessio.caccamo@uniroma1.it

Massimiliano Cason Villa

Designer and Ph.D. Student at Iuav University of Venice, he pursued his education with an interdisciplinary outlook, somewhere between Interior and communication design, attending the environment of makers and digital fabrication.

Since 2019 he has been collaborating with the startup Design Differente, taking care of participatory didactics projects on Circular Design topics, with partners such as the Municipality of Milan, La Triennale di Milano and the SOUx school of Milan. Since 2022 he has been teaching at the New Academy of Fine Arts in Milan; today he is a student at the Doctorate in Science of Design at the Iuav University of Venice, with a research focus on Design and Circularity studied under the lens of product life cycle assessment tools.
mcasonvilla@iuav.it

Francesca Cellina

Researcher at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI), Francesca Cellina has a background in both environmental engineering (master) and social sciences (PhD). She performs trans-disciplinary research activities to foster the transition towards a low carbon society, particularly in the domains of mobility and household energy consumption. She exploits ICT tools and devices in participatory, living lab interventions that leverage co-creation and co-design methodologies to engage individuals and stakeholders in real-life interventions aimed at triggering societal transitions.

francesca.cellina@supsi.ch

Davide Crippa

Architect and Ph.D. in Interior Architecture and Exhibit Design, he attended the masters of Italian design, completing his training with an interdisciplinary outlook. In 2004, he founded the Ghigos studio and since then has been pursuing a wide-ranging research among exhibitions, installations and projects of international relevance. From 2007 to 2021 he taught at the Milan Polytechnic and the New Academy of Fine Arts in Milan; today he is a Researcher at the Iuav University of Venice, where he is investigating the potential of interaction design and new digital fabrication technologies with a view to the circular economy, with a thematic focus on the sustainability of installations.

dcrippa@iuav.it

Marta Corubolo

Researcher at the Design Department of the Politecnico di Milano. Her research interests cover service and strategic design and social innovation, community centered design and collaborative services, with a specific focus on the incubation and growth of local initiatives and their relationship with the private and third sector. She is a member of the Polimi DESIS Lab.

marta.corubolo@polimi.it

Michele De Chirico

He is a PhD student in Design Sciences at Università Iuav di Venezia. His research relates to design of materials, focusing on design for the sustainable management of production waste and on materials as contextual actors and cultural meaning-makers. Since 2020, he has also been engaged as a lecturer in courses dealing with design and materials and design history and criticism.

mdechirico@iuav.it

Barbara Di Prete

Architect and phd in Interior Architecture and Exhibit Design, is an associate professor at the Design Department of the Politecnico di Milano, where she carries out research between urban, exhibit and interior design. In 2004 she founded the Ghigos studio, designing exhibitions, installations and projects for institutions of international relevance (Maxxi, Expo2015, MoMA, Milan Triennale, Venice Biennale). Since 2015 she has been coordinating the Specializing Master in "Design for Public Space" provided by POLI.design. She is currently following funded research for ENEA, CAP, Regione Lombardia, investigating the instances of sustainability in the energy, environmental and social fields.

barbara.diprete@polimi.it

Raffaella Fagnoni

She is full professor of Design at Università Iuav di Venezia, where she teaches design laboratories and civic space design. She also directs the PhD school in Science of Design. She has lectured abroad, in Iran and China, and has coordinated local and international research groups, both public and privately funded. Her research topics focus on design for social impact,

service design for public interests, social innovation, reuse and recycling, and design for sustainability, with the aim of intervening in emerging issues through active stakeholder involvement and the enhancement of local heritage. She is focused on the ongoing role of design in contemporary society, considering environmental emergencies and the state of alert in which our planet finds itself, working on the circular economy, local territory, waste recovery, and care for people and habitats.

rfagnoni@iuav.it

Rossana Gaddi

Designer and PhD. Associate Professor at the Department of Architecture of the University "G. d'Annunzio" of Chieti-Pescaia, where she deals with Communication Design and enhancement of local resources and the territory. She took part in national and international seminars and research programs on the topics of innovation for cultural and territorial enhancement, and Communication and System Design for social inclusion.

rossana.gaddi@unich.it

Letizia Giannelli

Research fellow affiliated with the Service Design Laboratory at University of Florence. With a background in video production in the documentary film industry, her current focus is on research on Service Design and its applications in the textile industry.

letizia.giannelli@unifi.it

Debora Giorgi

Phd and Architect, she is Associate Professor in Design (ICAR/13) at the Department of Architecture, University of Florence (DIDA-UNIFI). President of the CdL in Textile & Fashion Design, visiting professor in international Universities, she teaches the Laboratory of Service Design at the CdLM in Design and works on design for services with a particular focus on social innovation and collaborative services.

debora.giorgi@unifi.it

Pasquale Granato

MSc in Computer Engineering, he has built a long career developing complex applications across various domains. He is currently a researcher at SUPSI (University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland), focusing on renewable energy, particularly solar energy, and sustainable mobility. Pasquale is also an expert in games and gamification, integrating innovative approaches to enhance engagement and learning.

pasquale.granato@supsi.ch

Luca Incrocci

Industrial and UX/UI designer with a background of experience in graphic and service design. He is currently a researcher at the Service Design Lab at the University of Florence, focusing on service design methodologies applied to the textile industry.

luca.incrocci@unifi.it

Carmelo Leonardi

Product designer and Ph.D student in Design Sciences at Università Iuav di Venezia, Carmelo Leonardi graduated from the same university in 2022, with a master thesis titled "Melior de cinere surgo, design of a new ecological material derived from Tephra and its applications" which allowed him to deepen the concepts of social and environmental sustainability in design.

cleonardi@iuav.it

Ami Licaj

Research Fellow at the Laboratory of Design for Sustainability at the University of Florence with a PhD in Design, obtained in 2018, on Data Visualization entitled "Information Visualization. Intersubjective Liquid Discipline." Passionate about processes - and the "designerly" way of dealing with them - applied to all things digital/social/intangible/future. Academic career includes activities as Visiting Professor, national and international seminars by invitation, and design courses in other universities.

ami.licaj@unifi.it

Evelyn Lobsiger-Kägi

MSc Environmental Sciences ETH, she has been researching and teaching sustainable development and energy behaviour at the ZHAW (Zurich University for Applied Sciences) for 15 years and is now co-leading the “Energy Behaviour” Team at the Institute for Sustainable Development. Her main focus is on the participatory development of sufficient and energy-efficient interventions at household and neighbourhood level. She works in a transdisciplinary manner with cooperatives, energy supply companies, municipalities and NGOs to develop and test practice-oriented approaches.

kaev@zhaw.ch

Giuseppe Lotti

Full professor of Industrial Design, is President of the Degree Course in Product, Interior, Communication and Eco-Social Design of the Department of Architecture (DIDA) of the Università degli Studi di Firenze. He is scientific manager of research projects at the European Union, national and regional level. He is the author of publications on the culture of the project. He has been curator of design exhibitions in Italy and abroad. He is the technical-scientific coordinator of the Interior and Design District of the Tuscany Region – dID.

giuseppe.lotti@unifi.it

Marco Manfra

PhD candidate in Innovation Design at the University of Camerino and former research fellow at the University of Ferrara. He was Visiting PhD(c) at the Architecture Faculty of Lisbon University. He is professor of the course “Processi del design per l’impresa sostenibile” in the I and II level Master’s degree program in “Design della Comunicazione per l’Impresa” at the University of Ferrara. He carries out research activities mainly in the field of design for social and environmental sustainability - with eco-social approach -, theories and culture of the project, media ecology, and regeneration of marginal territorial contexts.

marco.manfra@unicam.it

Raffaella Massacesi

Architect and PhD. Communication designer. She is Assistant Professor in Design at the Department of Architecture of the “G. d’Annunzio” University of Chieti-Pescara, and sole director of university spinoff SOS-Habitat. Her research interests relate to digital design, webdesign, environmental communication, communication for public utilities.

raffaella.massacesi@unich.it

Luciana Mastrodonardo

Architect and PhD. Assistant Professor at the Department of Architecture of the University “G. d’Annunzio” of Chieti-Pescara where she deals with Architectural Technology and process sustainability. She took part in national and international seminars and research programs on the impact of sustainability at various scales and in different dimensions, through metabolic and qualitative studies.

l.mastrodonardo@unich.it

Michele Mauri

Researcher at Politecnico di Milano—Design Department, he’s co-director of DensityDesign Lab. Within the laboratory, he coordinates the research, design, and development of projects related to the visual communication of data and information, particularly those related to born-digital data and Digital Methods.

michele.mauri@polimi.it

Claudia Morea

Architect and PhD in Design for Sustainability, she is currently adjunct professor at BA Textile & Fashion Design, University of Florence. Expert in Life Cycle Assessment, she focuses her research on the spread of sustainability assessment capabilities, with specific regard to engagement and sustainability empowerment.

claudia.morea@unifi.it

Stefania Palmieri

Associate Professor at Politecnico di Milano, PhD in Industrial Design. She is Head of Relations with Businesses and Professions for the School of Design - Integrated Product Design. Her research and teaching activities deal with methods and processes, with particular attention to innovation processes in relation to different productive, organizational and cultural contexts, in which to enhance and strengthen the collaboration between University and business. She is part of the Scientific Committee of the interdepartmental laboratory EDME, which deals with digital technologies, immersiveness, new relationships and synergy of knowledge.

stefania.palmieri@polimi.it

Fabiola Papini

She holds a double degree in Communication Design from the School of Design, Politecnico di Milano, and the Shanghai International College of Design and Innovation, Tongji University. She is co-founder of an independent magazine and digital designer at a Milan-based information design agency. Her interests range from data visualisation to digital design, sustainability, and editorial design.

fabpapini@gmail.com

Adrian Peach

He is a practitioner and teacher, has spent three decades working with a diverse range of international brands from Alessi to 3M, with prestigious architectural practices including Antonio Citterio and David Chipperfield, with artisans and industries. He has collaboration with several research centres and universities in Europe and Middle East, like Academy of Art, Architecture and Design (UMPRUM, Prague), Domus Academy (Milan), German University in Cairo (Berlin and Cairo), German International University (Cairo), Istituto Marangoni (London), KLC (London), Istituto Europeo di Design (Milan), Hochschule Hannover, Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft (HTW-Berlin), Hochschule der Bildenden Künste Saar (Saarbrücken), Kunsthochschule Weißensee (Berlin) and Università di Bologna.

info@adrianpeachdesign.com

Silvia Peluzzi

Designer, she graduated with honors at Politecnico di Milano in the Master's degree of Product Service System Design. In 2022, she participated in an international mobility program at FH Salzburg where she studied Design & Product Management. With a background in Interior Design achieved with distinction in the year 2021, she had a previous mobility at LAB University of Applied Sciences in Finland.

peluzzi.silv@gmail.com

Giovanni Profeta

Giovanni Profeta holds a PhD in Design from Politecnico di Milano, where he completed his thesis titled "Displaying Open Cultural Collections: Design Guidelines for Cultural Content Aggregators" within the DensityDesign research lab. As a researcher at the Institute of Design of the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI), he conducts applied research projects focusing on data visualization and algorithmic methods for accessing and analysing cultural collections. Additionally, he is also the teacher of the Interaction Design course in the Bachelor of Visual Communication and the Master of Arts in Interaction Design and the teacher of the Data Visualization course in the Bachelor of Data Science and Artificial Intelligence.

giovanni.profeta@supsi.ch

Grazia Quercia

PhD in Communication, Social Research and Marketing from Sapienza University of Rome and Adjunct Professor of "Laboratorio di Design Transmediale" at University Guglielmo Marconi, she is a member of the editorial board of the "Transmedia" series by Armando Editore and a member of the research unit GEMMA (Gender and Media Matters). Her research interests include cultural and creative industries, media ecology, transmedia design, participatory culture, sustainability communication and gender studies.

g.quercia@unimarconi.it

Lucia Ratti

Designer and Ph.D. student at the Design Department of Politecnico di Milano, her research activity touches different intersections between design and sustainability, ranging from urban biodiversity to circular exhibit design, to the energy transition and its diffusion. Since 2019 she has been an assistant in didactic activities in the Interior Design Bachelor Degree of Politecnico's School of Design, and in 2020 she started working with the association Repubblica del Design, where she takes care of the design and implementation of participatory design-didactic workshop, with partners such as the Municipality of Milan, Milan Triennale, and SOUx school of architecture for children.

lucia.ratti@polimi.it

Agnese Rebaglio

Designer and Ph.D., Associate professor at the Design Dept. of Politecnico di Milano. Her research activity focuses on designing innovation processes of urban contexts, from a perspective of sustainability and social inclusion. Scientific director of the Specializing Master "Design for Public Spaces" provided by POLI.design. She is currently developing research on design for urban regeneration and energy sustainability promoted by design. Promoter, for the Interior Design Degree Course, of GIDE (Group for International Design Education), a network of European design schools that collaborates in educational programs.

agnese.rebaglio@polimi.it

Chiara Rutigliano

PhD candidate in Sustainability and Innovation for the Design of the Built Environment and Product System at the University of Florence. Designer with experience in graphic and innovative service design, particularly in the study of user experience and relationships in complex systems. Currently his research is focusing on traceability and transparency in the textile industry.

chiara.rutigliano@unifi.it

Carla Sedini

She is an Assistant Professor at the Design Department of Politecnico di Milano and PhD in Sociology. She is a member of the D+S research group at Polimi, where she combines and integrates social research and design. She has been researching and teaching issues related to Territorial Development, Social Innovation, and Quality of Life, with specific attention to fragile populations. She published a book titled "Collectively Designing Social Worlds. History and Potential of Social Innovation".

carla.sedini@polimi.it

Andreas Sicklinger

He is Full Professor in Industrial Design, focuses his research interests on three main fronts: Design as Science (human factors and new human factors), Design Education and Future Aesthetics, Design for Territory and the Mediterranean. He worked for Aldo Rossi on the projects Schuetzenstrasse e Landdsberger Allee in Berlin, covered the role of Product Manager in the retail sector. He has been professor and head of department at the German University of Cairo from 2012 to 2018. He has published books and articles on topics of his research interest. He is member of the Committee of the Institute of Advanced Studie of University of Bologna and Distinguished Visiting Professor at Malaysia Italy Design Institute, Kuala Lumpur.

andreas.sicklinger@unibo.it

Abhigyan Singh

Assistant professor at the Department of Human-Centered Design of Delft University of Technology (TU Delft), The Netherlands. With a background in new media design, anthropology, and IT engineering, his research examines social, cultural, and economic aspects of emergent local energy systems and services. His research makes theoretical, conceptual, and methodological contributions to the emerging disciplines of design anthropology and energy research. Abhigyan's work has earned him awards such as the WWNA Apply Award (2021) from the European Association of Social Anthropologists' Applied Anthropology Network (EASA-AAN) and Cumulus Association's 'Young Creators for Better City & Better Life' Award. In addition to his academic work, he is Co-lead of the Social and Economic Value Sub-task of the International Energy Agency's Global Observatory on Peer-to-Peer Energy Trading (GOP2P).

a.singh@tudelft.nl

Manfredi Sottani

He is a Designer and PhD Candidate (Curriculum in Design) at the Department of Architecture, University of Florence. He carries out research activities at the Design Sustainability Lab (Department of Architecture, University of Florence, scientific supervisor Prof. Giuseppe Lotti), specifically in the field of Digital Design, Sustainability Design, Communication Design and Strategic Design for Territorial Systems. He also participates in regional R&D as well as in international and European projects.
manfredi.sottani@unifi.it

Davide Stefano

Architect and PhD. Researcher in Real Estate Valuation at the Department of Architecture, "G. d'Annunzio" University of Chieti-Pescara, where he deals with cost estimation of post-earthquake reconstruction, relationships between urban quality and real estate values, and price formation of raw materials in the construction sector.
davide.stefano@unich.it

Suzanna Törnroth

She is an Associated Senior Lecturer (PhD) in Design at Luleå University of Technology, Sweden. She researches on the feminist technoscience perspectives of emerging technologies in human and non-human worlds. Particularly, her recent research delves into the ecological and multispecies perspective of solar energy technologies, following a dissertation titled called: "Solarscape: The power of humanity in designing solar imaginaries, entangled worlds, and critical sustainable futures". She also has a practice-based design and urban planning background in Sweden, Singapore, Dubai, Copenhagen and Maldives.
suzanna.tornroth@ltu.se

Anna Turco

She holds a degree in Design, Visual and Multimedia Communication from Sapienza University of Rome. She is the recipient of a research scholarship entitled "Visual Communication Design for Natural Capital and Material and Immaterial Cultural Heritage." Since 2022, she has been pursuing a PhD in Design at the Department of Planning, Design, and Architecture Technology at Sapienza University of Rome and works as a teaching assistant in the Communication Design Laboratory, the Public Space Design Laboratory, and the Design and Representation Laboratory. She has participated in the European project "Conference on the Future of Europe" in Brussels, Strasbourg, and Warsaw, addressing issues related to climate change, environment, and health. Her areas of scientific research focus on Visual Communication Design, specifically Environmental Graphic Design, applied to public space for reactivation and regeneration purposes.
anna.turco@uniroma1.it

Annapaola Vacanti

She is a Research Fellow at Università Iuav di Venezia, where she teaches in design laboratories for the curricula of Product design and Interior design of the master degree design courses. She obtained a PhD in Design at the University of Genoa in 2022. Her research focuses on Interaction Design and the opportunities offered by data-driven tools and Artificial Intelligence for design, exploring the challenges that lie at the intersection between technology, human factors, and sustainability issues. She is working within the iNEST (Interconnected Nord-Est Innovation Ecosystem) project, funded by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR). Alongside her academic career, since 2018 she has been art director and organizer of TEDxGenova, an autonomous event operating under official TED license for the local dissemination of valuable ideas.
avacanti@iuav.it

Francesca Valsecchi

She is an Associate Professor at the College of Design and Innovation at Tongji University and director of the Ecology and Cultures Innovation Lab. She develops research on more-than-human design and the challenges of the post-development paradigm. Her research includes published, speculative, and exhibition works about mapping ecosystems, ethnography of waterscapes, ecological data, and urban-nature interaction.
francesca@tongji.edu.cn

Gijs van Leeuwen

PhD Candidate at the Department of Human-Centered Design of Delft University of Technology (TU Delft), The Netherlands. His research is concerned with relations of power and politics, and how these co-evolve with emerging energy infrastructures and technologies. Methodologically, he is developing a transdisciplinary approach that is based on design anthropology. He has a multidisciplinary background with two Master's degrees in Energy Science and Philosophy of Science, Technology, and Society.

g.e.vanleeuwen@tudelft.nl

Desirée Veschetti

Designer and research and teaching assistant at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI), she has been involved in research dissemination projects concentrating on accessibility and cultural heritage. With her background in editorial and interaction design, she incorporates these skills into SUPSI's Bachelor in Visual Communication program, teaching in courses centred on Creative Coding with Machine Learning and User Interface Design.

desiree.veschetti@supsi.ch

Devon Wemyss

PhD Science and Technology Policy Studies, she has been researching in the field of energy digitalisation and behaviour change at the ZHAW (Zurich University of Applied Sciences) for 10 years. Her main focus is on collaborative processes to activate climate-relevant behaviour change, particularly looking at how digital tools can support these changes in the long-term and at large scale to move beyond research.

wemy@zhaw.ch

Chenfan Zhang

PhD candidate of the Design Department of the Politecnico di Milano. Her research interests include design for social innovation, community and community development, and service design. Member of Polimi DESIS Lab and of the international DESIS Network.

chenfan.zhang@polimi.it

Francesco Zurlo

Ph.D., he is Dean of the School of Design of Politecnico di Milano. He is full professor of Industrial Design. His research interests are concentrated in strategic, systematic and creative research through design, focusing to the impact of business innovations and human flourishing. Professor Zurlo is the Director of the Design + Strategies research group, he is a member of the scientific committee of the Observatory of Design Thinking for Business of the School of Management of Politecnico di Milano, and of ADI Index (the most important organization for assessing the best design in Italy).

francesco.zurlo@polimi.it



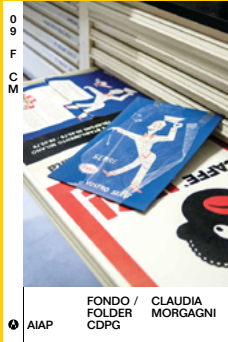
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AIAP
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20129 Milano

www.aiap.it
aiap@aiap.it
biblioteca@aiap.it



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