

Developing collaborative services in local contexts.

*Daria Cantù, Marta Corubolo, Giulia Simeone **

daria.cantu@polimi.it, marta.corubolo@polimi.it, giulia.simeone@polimi.it

Politecnico di Milano, INDACO dep.

Abstract

This paper presents an ongoing applied research case of Design for “place” development (Meroni, 2011): Feeding Milan, energies for change. The project aims at restoring the sustainable food chain and the relationship between the city of Milan and its productive countryside, by activating new de-mediated services for food provision and local tourism. It advances the hypotheses by centring the design process on the communities of shareholders and potential users it is possible to design a high-quality service and, by activating local synergies, it is feasible to get high performance and well-optimised distributed system to support service delivery. The argumentation shows how such these hypotheses have been verified by the design practice during the activation of the pilot projects on the local scale. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the project improvements and to reflect on two years of research of joint work with the local players with whom designers working on Feeding Milan have started to build a significant network of multifunctional and collaborative services.

KEYWORDS: Place Development, Multifunctional Services, Collaborative Services, Sustainable Food Systems, Design for Services, Community Centered Design (CCD).

1. Design for place development and planning by project approach

Service Design has recently taken up the debate about regional sustainable development (Meroni, Simeone and Trapani, 2008). Inspired by Scuola Territorialista's definition of “place” (Magnaghi, 2000) a Service Design perspective defines a “place” as the result of the interactions between the community with its own environment, where Design can contribute

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with its tools and research methods in order to develop new forms of interactions that improve the quality of life in the region (Meroni, 2011). To explore the issue of “place” development, a critical context has been chosen: it can be defined as a rururban territory. By definition, this is the peri-urban area between the urban and the rural (Viljoen, 2005). Often called “fringe locations”, these areas are major sites of population change, economic growth, speculative pressures and dynamic social change, which blur the urban-rural distinction. In such a global type of context and scale, Woodcraft, Hackett and Caistor-Arendar (2011) set the ground for a new “practical understanding and professional commitment to creating new cities and communities that are socially, as well as economically and environmentally, sustainable.” As such, Manzini (2007), draws the need to reconceptualise our thinking on human settlement systems, creating a new paradigm that focuses more on human behaviour and the innovative market dynamics. Such a paradigm should address the question of how to create places that are socially sustainable and how to implement physical infrastructure that is environmentally sustainable. Here, the Service Design contribution seeks to identify the social and functional relationships that aim to generate prosperous synergies inside the region, and to develop services able to activate social sustainability (Woodcraft et al., 2011). Furthermore, the design action regards a new approach to (peri)urban planning, according to the new services to be (Manzini, 2010). As the same, F. Jegou (2010) identifies a design approach based on a micro and punctual scale, where the single projects are grafted into a network of services connected to each other, creating distributed systems of (local) economies. (Mirata and Ristola, 2007).

Working on Feeding Milan project, Designers developed a method of work, which consists of a series of actions and related tools. They move from involving local resources (and infrastructures), which are identified in the analysis phase, and goes towards the creation of solutions to put these resources in touch to boost their collaboration in order to achieve economies of scope. The service is the outcome of such a process and it can be spread out in the region.

As shown in the picture below, the work is carried out at different stages. The overall process operates within a design scenario which is, according to Cantù and Simeone (2011) is “a story of stories”, formed by a selected set of service ideas (the stories). These are the existent and foreseen services that contribute to the creation of a regional multifunctional and de-mediated food system. Within such a scenario, the overall process ranges from a wider spectrum of action in terms of context and solution opportunities. Then it progressively shrinks through the experiment phase and focuses more on enabling those (new) resources that are useful to implement the service. At the same time, adapting the solution in order to give a shape to the service, which can be then replicated up to the regional scale.

Once the scenario is defined, there a first phase of problem setting and context analysis, where the resources and actors are identified and a series of service ideas are designed. Such a process leads to the construction of an album of resources to be involved and a definition of a service types. Then, these types are evaluated and, eventually, re-designed through: a co-design activity by a pool of stakeholders engaged in the experiment and a service prototyping activity, which may be fulfilled at different levels. The light and easy to arrange ideas in this process is the Ideas Sharing Stall. The Ideas Sharing Stall is a desk aiming to open a discussion between designers and city dwellers (cfr. par. 4). The more complex and absorbing one, is the activation of a pilot project (cfr. par 4.2). A real service mock-up to test technical, functional and experience sides within a community of pilot stakeholders. They are selected among the identified resources because, they are already tuned with the service aim (e.g.: they belong to a local network working in the same area, they grow organic produce,

they are city dwellers who just share the same values of the project's and want to be an active part of it...). Design literature refers to them as 'Creative Communities' (Manzini, 2007 and Meroni, 2007).

The experiment enables designers to adapt the service types according to the prototype results, that means, from one side, to enable other new resources in becoming service stakeholders; from the other side, to shape a service, so that it could be implemented in its final, sustainable, replicable layout.

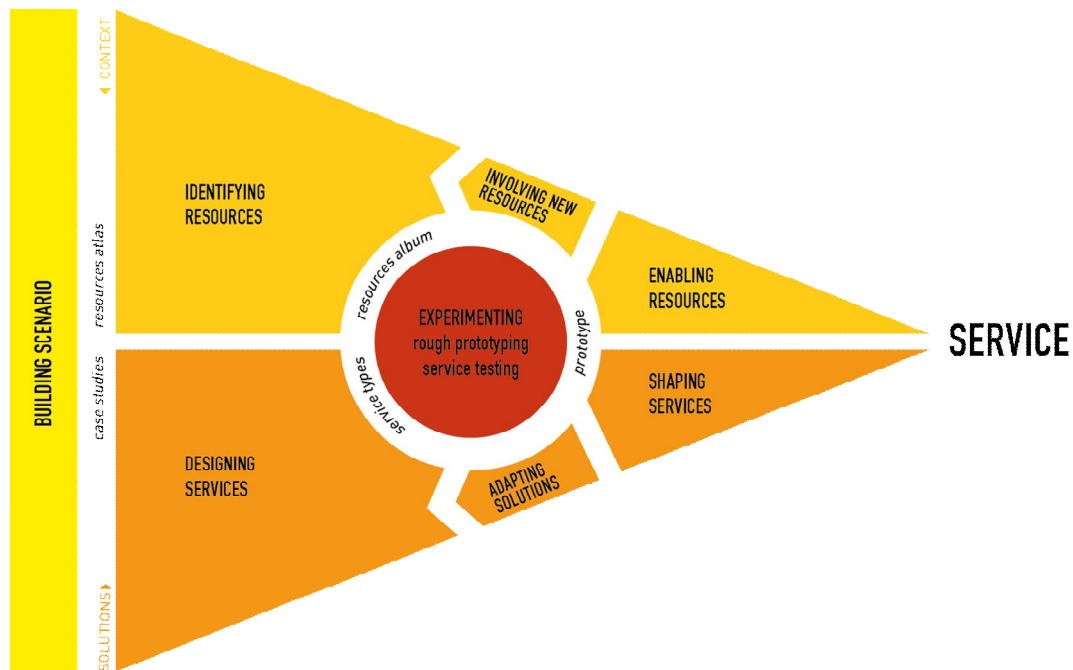


Fig. 1 - Design process for "place" development projects (Simeone and Meroni, ongoing research¹)

2. Approach and strategy to develop collaborative services

The approach presented here focuses on the issue of sustainable urban and regional development as the central objective of the work. This is concerned with the reproducibility of resources. What Alberto Magnaghi (2000) defines as community sovereignty refers to the way in which urban systems are established, to the coherence of production systems with the local resources and entrepreneurship, and to the development of capability and self government by the local community. To tackle such an issue, researchers advanced the hypotheses that by adopting a Community Centred Design approach (Meroni, 2011) it is possible to activate self-managed collaborative services within a community of local players, in order to trigger the systemic sustainable change towards "place" development. Indeed, Community Centred Design approach involves local players in the design process and scales up the consolidated methods and tools of User Centred Design to community size. It also probes behaviour, needs and established a potential networks of relationships.

Working with such a subject, Design professionals should become activists within the community they have to live in and they are part of. They should trigger initiatives to support local players in becoming familiar with the new, co-created, solutions; as well,

¹ This scheme is a first draft of an output of an ongoing national fundamental research granted by Italian Ministry of University and Research (MIUR).

designers should train the communities in self-managing the services. Design practice in a community needs designers to have new competences. On one hand, they need to know the context and its community; on the other, they need to collaborate with non-designers in order to develop creative and feasible solutions which are coherent with the context. Moreover, designers are encouraged to experiment new tools to help the design conversation in the community.

As previously introduced, the main goal for “place” development projects is to start a series of punctual, self-sustainable services managed by the local community. In fact, the availability of the resources and the possibility of having direct control over them, is the distinctive and key factor that enables small business to use resources in a prosperous way. With such a premises, the network strategy is a way of increasing both options and benefits to users and effectiveness and convenience for providers. According to Meroni, Simeone and Trapani (2011) in a networked system, services overlap or complement each other and therefore build different kind of synergies. Services can join because of their similarity of elements and activities, or they can link together because of the auxiliary or supplementary nature of their elements. Thus, these hypotheses should allow to design a distributed system of multifunctional services, where various but synergic activities become convenient and can activate economies of scope. A scenario of networked services grants small business to become multifunctional because it facilitates sharing of resources and infrastructures, as well as optimising common investment. Of course, on a regional scale, there are some places where, due to previous condition, peculiar features, availability of resources, strategic location or the convenience of the enterprises, many functions can overlap and different service models can co-exist. The authors refer to them as service hub (Meroni et al., 2008). These service hubs are the places that make the whole system function because they provide technical and operational support to the smaller business that are running in the same area. These small business, usually, ask for a better infrastructure, but they cannot afford without getting in touch and collaborating with their neighbours. By doing that, these communities create those dynamics that encourage self-ruled behaviour in order to increase quality of the service.

3. Application field: the “Feeding Milan” project

In 2010, researchers had the opportunity to start an applied research project that allowed them to verify the foretold hypotheses, and to put into practice the insight and the theories about *service hubs* they developed in previous fundamental research. In this paper, is presented the case of Feeding Milan project. It is seen as a state of the art project, after two years of work with the peculiar focus on the collaborative and complementary nature of the activated services, that features the project framework scenario.

“Feeding Milan. Energies for change” (Nutrire Milano. Energie per il cambiamento) is a research program promoted by a partnership between academic institutions, such as Politecnico di Milano, INDACO dept and University of Gastronomic Sciences, and Slow Food Italy, with its network of local players in the Milanese area.

It started from the observation that in the Milanese urban area, the demand for high quality, fresh food hugely exceeds the actual, available production, despite the presence of a large, potential “urban larder” known as Agricultural Park South Milan. This is a 47,000 ha wide area of intensive agro-industry, where only 3% of farms practice sustainable agriculture. Moreover, “Feeding the planet, energy for life” is the motto for Expo 2015, highlighting the importance of land use and food provision in the near future. How can Feeding Milan

become a reference for food provision while our city is a negative example? Agricultural Park South Milan is a peri-urban area, lying in the urban fringe where the city boundaries blur into the countryside, giving rise to new conflicts and unprecedented opportunities (Donadieu, 1998).

In such a context, the main strategy to support the demand is to make agriculture the presidium of the area's regional quality. This means revitalising local networks, encouraging the sharing of common principles and optimising resources in order to create a new regional system. The emerging vision prefigures a rural-urban area where agriculture flourishes by feeding the city (de-mediation) and, at the same time, offers city dwellers opportunities for a multiplicity of farming and nature related activities.

Feeding Milan is a project that concerns Design for Social Innovation (Brown, Wyatt, 2010) and social entrepreneurship (Leadbeater, 2007). It fosters service solutions for alternative food provision based on innovation that will support social and environmental goals (Murray, 2009). Such innovative solutions need to be constantly created, tested and re-created. Here designers play the role of promoter of solutions that, once implemented, have to be self-sustainable and managed by the community of shareholders (consumers and producers).

- » The Feeding Milan scenario has been described as “a story of stories” where such “stories” (cfr. par. 1) are the seeds that give shape and substance to the scenario values, being local projects within a framework one. At this stage, designers have activated several local projects; some of them are already running, others are in the prototyping stage and others are waiting to be implemented. To date they are the following:
- » Milan Earth Market: a monthly farmers' market, the first in Milan on public soil. The aim is to create a board of farmers to manage the activity. Running since December 2009;
- » Farmer's Food-box: a weekly home delivery of fresh local food with a logistic system that relies on so-called collection points: shops and offices that collect the boxes to be delivered to the final users. To be released in spring 2012;
- » Super-coop: a concept for a new kind of collaborative supermarket totally managed by customers, who may also be firms. The proposal has been roughly prototyped in January 2011, now is going under a re-design phase;
- » Yes Weekend: the Park's Tour Agency. It's a catalogue of services for “do-it-yourself” local tourism in the Agricultural Park. The services are available in the farms involved in the in place test;
- » B-Trans: a system of routes and bike sharing stations in the farmhouses of the Park, linked to the Milan public transport network. The service will be running by the spring 2012;
- » Pick Your Own: a network of farms for do-it-yourself fruit picking. Roughly prototyped in Fall 2011, now designers are selecting the local players to be involved in the future tests;
- » Local Bread Chain: the first harvest with the pilot farmers was completed in summer 2011 and the first bread was sold in the September 2011 at the Earth Market. The production test has been completed in 2011, some other distribution channels are currently at the designing stage.
- » Local Small Distribution (LSD): is a concept about a “distributed system for food distribution”. It lays on a network of local stores and corner-shops that join in a logistic system to provide local produce to the city. The service is at the early stage of the design process.
- »

Indeed, the Feeding Milan approach to each local project is rapid-prototyping oriented. This means that every local project is generated and discussed with the broad design community of producers and consumers from its beginning, and then tested within a small community of shareholders. In the next paragraph the paper will show some hints of how Community Centred Design practice has been carried out and how the synergies among the projects have been built.

4. Building the local network of actors and services.

In order to verify the foretold hypotheses, some tools and experiences from the design practice of Feeding Milan project have been chosen to display how designers tackle the issues of Community Centred Design (CCD) and local synergies.

The first tool is the “Ideas Sharing Stall” (cfr. par 4.1), within the Earth Market. It is a place where new solutions can be co-designed and tested with the local food community. The stall started as a window to enable discussion between designers, city dwellers and producers coming to the market, creating tangible connections between Feeding Milan and the people who are potential users of the services to be implemented. In order to move from a co-designed solution to a service model, the service called “the Farmer’s foodbox” has been tested and implemented (cfr.par.4.2) in collaboration with a community of pilot shareholders. Concurrently, the restoration of the local bread chain (cfr.par.4.3) has been carried out by a community of farmers, millers and bakers. Here the Earth Market concurred in fostering new forms of relationships and works as distribution channel. At last, combining the already existing system (Farmer’s food box, Local Bread Chain and the Earth Market) designers figure out a concept of diffused distribution service system (cfr.par.4.2).

4.1 From the Earth Market to the network of services.

The Earth Market is a monthly appointment in the city of Milan since December 2009. It was the first developed local project, and it aims at activating a board of farmers responsible for its management and organization.

The process that brought to the implementation of the Earth Market was carried by Slow Food and was made up of a sequence of actions as selecting and recruiting farmers according to predefined quality parameters, starting a dialogue with local authorities to get permission and support, organising the logistic and the turnover among the selected farmers and communicating the event through various platforms and tools.

This process created the basis for a first network among the producers. As far as the market became a regular appointment, new interactions between the producers started to emerge. These were spontaneous meetings to exchange knowledge, start little experiment on new products and debate on logistic issues. The simultaneous presence of the farmers was enough to let these interactions start.

Beside these unexpected and “not designed” synergies, the Feeding Milan team developed the Idea Sharing Stall as a tool to boost the collaboration and networking among all the stakeholders communities involved in the market (producers, consumers, institutions, etc.).

Thanks to the presence of the stall, the Feeding Milan team could improve the interaction and informal communication, thus actively participating in the “community life” of people attending the Market. Through a CCD approach, the stall became a fundamental tool in establishing local connections and potential design collaborations within the community of

farmers and city dwellers. According to Cantù (2012), “the Idea Sharing Stall has proved to be the engine of the framework project, it was able to translate abstract ideas into concrete object for discussion, with a flywheel effect for the development of new de-mediated and collaborative services”.

The main goal was to give the Earth Market the role of a service hub, working like an incubator of new service ideas and facilitating the involvement of available resources, stakeholders and future users in the co-design process and in the implementation phase. The synergies created for a pilot project encourage the development of new service ideas based on the same connections. An example is the first pilot project presented in the Idea Sharing Stall: the Farmer's Food-box, the starting point for several future collaborations between the corner-shops in the city and the farmers (cfr paragraph 4.4).

4.2 The Farmer's Food-box: a new distribution system for local produce.

The *Farmers's Food-box* is a weekly delivery service for local vegetables (cfr paragraph 3), aiming at providing the food produced in the Agricultural Park South to the city of Milan.

As each service idea, it is part of a design process that starts with a concept proposal to be discussed and co-designed within a “selected” multidisciplinary community of experts (designers, agronomists, ICT experts,...).

The aim of this first activity is to produce an initial service idea and to start a conversation within a local community of potential stakeholders through a rapid prototyping approach. This approach allowed the Feeding Milan team to get in touch with the communities (consumers, farmers and institutions) by showing the service-to-be and asking for feedback. Thanks to this process, carried on within the activities of the *Idea Sharing Stall*, Feeding Milan team was able to interview about 100 people and to build a network of future potential users of the service. From the feedback and data gathered in the *Idea Sharing Stall*, the next step was to develop a proposal in order to implement the most feasible solution. The community involved in the discussion was created by expert users of similar services and by the farmers that participated in the *Earth Market*.

The service idea entered then the prototyping phase during which the solution is tested in the future context of implementation, for a limited period of time, involving stakeholders that will run or use the service. The aim of the prototyping phase is to assess the nature of every interaction that will take place both in the network of real actors and in the virtual network of the service community (the digital platform).

To date, we carried on two test phases of the service. The first one took place in June 2011 for 4 weeks and a total amount of 1 ton of vegetables moved from the local countryside to the city. The service involved 3 farmers in charge of gathering the vegetables and packaging the food-boxes, 4 local producers of the “gift product” (rice, pasta, wine as a plus in the veggie food-box), a transport service and 5 corner-shops or offices in the city, called *Collection points*, where the food-boxes could be picked-up by 50 test-users. As a service hub, the *Earth Market* played an important role not only in the design of the solution and in the selection and involvement of the stakeholders, but also worked as an exchange platform to distribute the “gift products” and the logistical and communication tools from the producers and the Feeding Milan team to the farmers.

During the prototyping phase a monitoring and feedback-collection system was activated in order to gather useful insights for the improvement of the service idea solution. According to the results, the Food-box service was the object of discussion of a new series of activities

carried on in the *Idea Sharing Stall* with the aim of enlarging the communities of both users and *Collection Points* and of redefining the quality of the offer.

If the first test phase was dedicated to the building of the solution structure (stakeholders' involvement, interactions' assessment, logistic system design), the second one (November 2011) was focused more on the improvement of the service's quality. The stakeholders' network and the interaction system changed in order to simplify the process. One farmer was identified as a hub where vegetables from other 2 producers were gathered and the food-boxes packaged. The offer was limited to the vegetable products, shortening the actors chain. The transport service designed a new optimized route between a single hub and 5 *Collection Points* identified in the city. The digital platform was improved and new forms of payment were tested.

After almost one year since the beginning of the project, Feeding Milan team designed a final system solution which is described in the *Service Model*, a document that aims at defining both the roles of the stakeholders and a set of regulations and quality parameters to assure optimal standards of the *Farmer's Foodbox* service. The next implementation phase will take place in Spring 2012, involving farmers, lead-users and collection points that participated to the tests and opening up the community to a list of stakeholders that showed interest in the project. The synergies enabled by this pilot project and the connection established with the *Collection Points*, enables new design opportunities to emerge.

4.3 The Local Bread Chain: rebuilding the food chain from the crop to the shop.

Feeding Milan team worked concurrently on other pilot projects that started with peculiar goals and interact with the others in different phases of their development. The "Local Bread Chain" project was born with the aim to rebuild the steps needed for bread production on a local basis, involving farmers from the Agricultural Park South (PASM) in crops cultivation, millers for its transformation, bakers for production and distribution in the city and in the peri-urban areas. The project has the objective of supporting the production of good, clean and fair bread showing the producers the right price and offering the city dwellers a valid alternative to the mainstream food market.

The process began by widening the farmers' market census to other farms and local players to find the actors willing to be involved. Firstly it was necessary to empower the production of wheat growth with ecological methods and to involve the farmers selected in defining the rules for production jointly with agronomists and other experts in order to detect the most suitable varieties for bread making. For the pilot project the farms involved were Cascina Santa Brera, Cascina Lassi and Cascina Forestina, that sowed their fields with Aubusson and Blasco wheat varieties in fall 2010. All of these farms have participated to the Earth Market during the year, thus having the opportunity to meet and to keep in contact with Feeding Milan team and the bakers regularly. Their harvest in June 2011 was milled during the Summer thanks to the collaboration with *Bava* and *Ronchi di Briosco* mills, the closest ones able to guarantee the required quality standards. The "Milanese bread" was finally sold for the first time in September the same year at the Earth Market in Milan by *Grazioli* and *Longoni*, who currently sell it both through the farmers' market and in their shops in Legnano (Mi) and Carate Brianza (Mb). In November 2011 the second year of the project started involving a new farm, Cascina Triulza, with the overall object of producing 240 Q of wheat and to involve new millers in the PASM area by reactivating old infrastructure.

The next step in the development of the project will be to create new distribution services connecting it with already existing systems such as the "Farmer's Food Box", where the

inclusion of the Collection Points actors in the city seems to be promising for the “Local Bread Chain” distribution as well.

4.4 Local Small Distribution (LSD): a distributed system in the city.

From here on a special project aiming to create a diffused distribution system in the city has taken off. The idea is to revitalise local food shops by connecting them to new services or local products distribution. It arose by looking for meaningful synergies among the available resources and specifically from different experiences. The prototype of the “Farmer’s Box” gave us the opportunity to get in contact with the “Collection Point” and to know their activities and ideas. The development and co-design of the “Supercoop” concept for example provided Feeding Milan with a brand new solution for local distribution in the city. Finally the need to optimize the transport and logistics for other services made it evident the opportunity to work on a “distributed system for food distribution”. To this date the project is in its embryonic stages but the network of actors to be potentially involved is already growing and moving ahead in the development of small scale parallel initiatives.

5. Conclusion

The scheme below (Fig. 2) provides a synthetic view of the existing connections between the people and the services developed, enlightening the role of the market as the center where the creation of local synergies started.

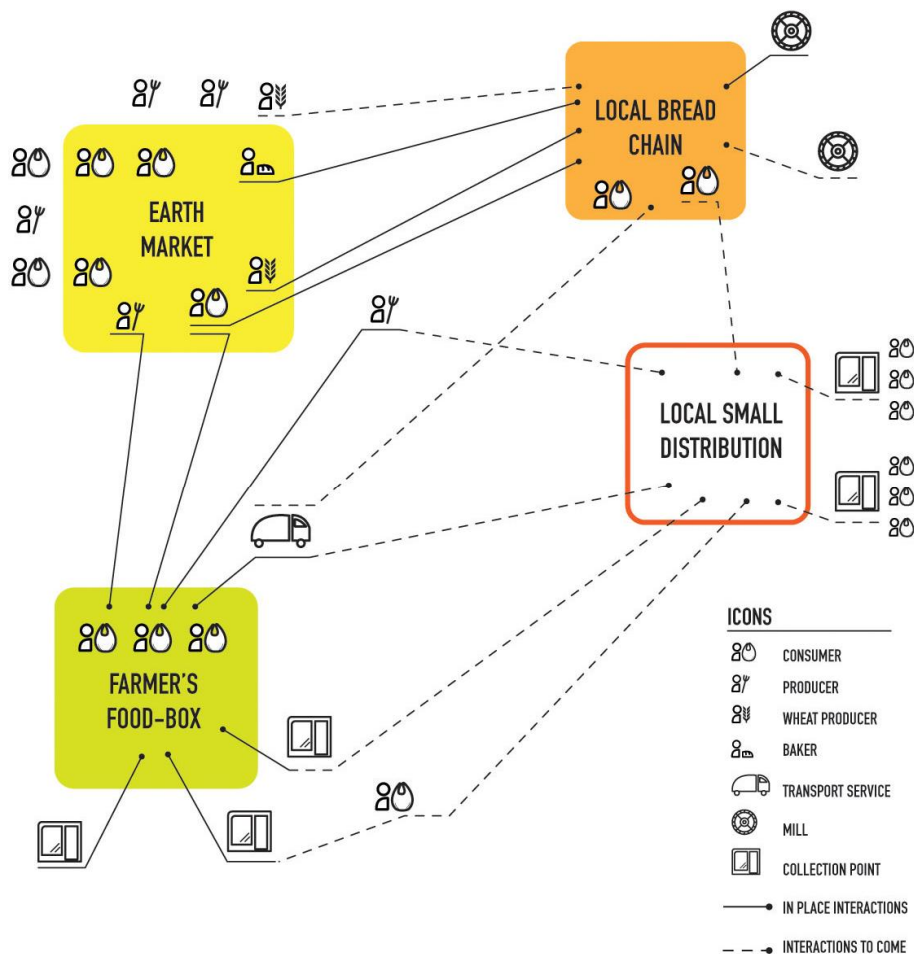


Fig. 2 - Map of the set up synergies in Feeding Milan project (Cantù, Corubolo, Simeone).

By working on field and proposing and facilitating the development of new projects the design activity demonstrates the existing and potential relationships between producers, co-producers and other service providers giving an important contribution in the creation of networks in the territory. By supporting local synergies, the farmers involved in new services development can take advantage of sharing knowledge, ideas and resources such as the transport logistics system. Thus creating economic advantages that allow them to carry on their business.

Working with the local food community from the beginning, adopting a Community Centred Design approach and involving it in the co-design of the services concepts at the “Ideas Sharing stall” in the Earth Market, enables solutions which are manageable by the community itself. It contributes to building their sovereignty. The community, in fact, takes part to the definition of the whole system: by bringing experience and providing feedback from the definition of the new solutions, to the service prototyping phase, to the kick-off of the service, feeling part of it. Furthermore, by the community is able to self-manage the new services through the support of designed service tools. Shaping of the service models and human resources are activated and enabled in order to make it work and, potentially, spread to the overall territory.

In this process designers become facilitators and trigger local change, not only by proposing new solutions, but mostly by working with and within the local community. Designers alongside the local people become involved in the definition of the suitable services, depending on the features and resources of the specific ‘place’. Thus, the tools designed to support the service durability and its management (such as the ‘Service Model’ for example) are developed with a strong local meaning.

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