

Intersectional Design for an Accessible and Empowering World: Views from the 8th Forum of Design as a Process

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Abstract

Intersectionality is increasingly suggested as an innovative framework with the potential to advance the understanding and the action towards contrasting inequalities, by highlighting processes of stigmatisation and by encouraging a critical reflection to move beyond singular categories. The contribution explore the relation between the intersectional approach and design cultures and practices by presenting the main outcomes of Track 2 “Intersectional Design for an Accessible and Empowering World” in the frame of the 8th International Forum of Design as a Process. The contributions collected in this frame represent a wealth of practices, methods and applications that show how the theoretical contribution linked to the topic of intersectionality can be applied to the co-creation of innovation in design-driven practices in diversified geographies.

Keywords

Sustainability
Ethics
Transitions
Systemic Approach
Planet-Centricity

Introduction

The term “intersectionality” was first proposed by Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in her article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” (Crenshaw, 1989). According to Crenshaw’s definition, social positions and identities are multiple and seek to reveal the interconnected systems of subordination that together influence people’s life chances. Extending beyond gender-specific and empowering categories of social identity (youth, old age, disabilities, non-heteronormative sexuality, despised ethnicity, income, religion and more), intersectionality focuses attention on a variety of multi-level interacting social locations, forces, narratives, norms, factors and power structures that shape and influence human life.

Intersectionality is increasingly suggested as an innovative design framework with the potential to advance the understanding and the action towards contrasting inequalities, by highlighting processes of stigmatization and by encouraging a critical reflection to move beyond singular categories, foregrounds issues of equity.

At the beginning of the design phase of the Forum, it emerged the importance to dedicate a specific track to this topic, with the aim to collect innovative and various perspectives from different geographies about the growing relation between the concept of intersectionality and design practices.

The Track 2 “Intersectional Design for an Accessible and Empowering World” collected contributions by designers, key experts and professionals who are promoting design studies and practices with the aim to include the perspectives and worldviews of people who are typically marginalized or excluded. At the same time social justice and equity have been assumed by the different authors as a way of transforming the way in which resources and relationships are produced and distributed to ensure a dignified and ecologically sustainable life for all.

Through a deconstruction of the conventional social orders of meaning, new dimensions of time and space emerged: fluid, changeable and experienced through our interpretations, senses and feelings, with a direct influence on the production of different kinds of knowledge.

Topics

The contributions collected in this volume, which shows the results of the call for papers, represent an application of the concept of intersectionality through design practices which covers various topics, both from a product or service development perspective, and from a more critical or process-related perspective and which covers many diverse territories and contexts. As curators of the Track, we have decided to group them into five main topics, that have to be considered as transversal instead of defined clusters. Each paper has developed one or more topics relating it to specific projects and contexts, leading to the fact that the concepts of intersectionality, empowerment and accessibility could be interpreted and applied in various ways, as an approach, as a methodological driver or as a dimension to be included in design solutions.

The first main topic is related to Empowerment as a key dimension for Design. The contributions related to this topic present the role of Design practices as an activator, or a tool for empowering citizens, communities and local actors in diversified territories, in particular vulnerable ones:

- the paper of Santos da Silva & Severo de Borba propose an analysis of existing social innovation initiatives in São Paulo, Brasil, in order to individuate strategic guidelines to promote the innovation of vulnerable territories through the empowerment of women. In this case, the empowerment of small communities is enhanced by a design-driven process.
- the article by Bárbara Pino Ahumada shows how design activism could have a role for the empowerment of territories and its actors, taking into account the case of Chileans' municipality of Alto Hospicio which is affected by environmental problems due to effects of production chains of textile products related to the Fashion Industry.
- finally, the work of Daniel Moreno, Katherine Mollenhauer and Arturo Orellana shows how service design could serve as a mean for empowering communities, by creating platforms to give equal voice to all the inhabitants of a territory. The process presented has involved more than 2000 inhabitants of Los Lagos, Chile through digital online workshops and events for participatory territorial planning.

The second main topic is related to Sustainability for all. The papers included in this topic consider a broad meaning of sustainability, both addressing the environmental dimension and the social dimension and studying how intersectionality and inclusive design practices could act towards a more sustainable future:

- the paper by Daniela D'Avanzo and Salvatore Zingale address the topic of social sustainability in relation to the identity of a place by applying a methodology based on ethnography and semiotics theory on a neighborhood placed in Roma, Italy.
- the article by Alessandro Pollini, Pilar Orero & Alessandro Caforio presents the experience of the project GreenSCENT in which an approach based on intersectionality, inclusive and Universal Design is proposed to face challenges related to climate change.

The third topic is called "Intersectional Magnifier for Gendered Innovation". Starting from the concept of gendered innovation (Schiebinger et al., 2011-2020) the works included in this section envisages the adoption of a gender-attentive perspective when producing products and services:

- the paper by Sergio Degiacomi, Francesca Zoccarato, Simone De Pascalis, Pietro Crovari and Fabio Catania foresees the application of an inclusive user research process for designing an interactive exhibition about sustainable development and the ONU SDGs.
- the article by Monica Oddone, Marco Bozzola and Claudia De Giorgi propose a reflection on the role of merchandising strategies in cultural communication in order to propose design methods for making communication products more accessible and inclusive.

The fourth topic has been defined “Enabling Technologies for People Autonomy”:

- with the contribution of Yi Zhang and Raffaella Trocchianesi, the topic of inclusivity is addressed through the perspective of sound in museums, particularly those in Lombardy. The research focuses on the study of sound design and storytelling strategies that promote accessibility in museums and evaluates their power to reach different audiences.
- Federica Delprino’s paper moves from an analysis of the process that led to the realisation of various technologies designed for people with disabilities, proposing a reflection on when and how designers should intervene in the creation of their designs to ensure the accessibility and usability of the resulting artefacts.
- the work by Alessandra Bosco, Fiorella Bulegato and Silvia Gasparotto offers a reflection, starting from the evolutionary events of the archive, on the main factors that have characterised the process of the progressive opening of the archive towards inclusion, from the social political cultural impact to the discipline of user experience.
- the article by Luis Erik Hernández Sánchez, Enrique Herrera Lugo, Jaime Francisco Gómez Gómez, Francisco Javier González Madariaga proposes an analysis of the effects of the implementation of universal design principles on the level of workstation exclusion and musculoskeletal symptoms and on the productivity of workers at a metal processing plant in the Guadalajara Metropolitan Zone.

The last main theme is concerned with Design Community-Based Relations. The papers related to this theme emphasise the importance of re-centring the needs of historically marginalised communities in the design-driven process and show the benefits of accountability approaches while discouraging extractive ones:

- Beatriz Bonilla Berrocal’s contribution “Viva! Colinas. Design for tourism and reconciliation in communities of former Colombian guerrillas” exposes the process, and possible outcomes, of designing a tool for integration and community participation in a strategic and complex Colombian area, starting from the historical and social analysis of the territory. It also exposes a possible solution for the development of a tourism product that encourages the connection and utilisation of the community’s unique knowledge through co-creation activities.
- the paper by Pedro Fragoso Lopes and Gonçalo Gomes aims to study the impact of Creative Industries in combating population decline in rural environments, by testing a methodology based on ethnography in the case of Sever do Vouga, Portugal.
- the work of Irene Caputo, Marco Bozzola and Claudia De Giorgi provides an overview of practical applications of product design that explore the relationship between multicultural society and cultural accessibility and aims to reflect on which and how methodological strategies could be implemented within a design process centred on an intercultural approach. It then opens up a series of design questions

related to the world of food, a particularly effective field for the construction of an intercultural narrative.

- the article by Ilaria Mariani, Francesca Rizzo, Grazia Concilio offers an insight into a critical issue related to migrants' access to public services as a barrier to integration, starting with the "easyRights" case study, a Horizon2020 IA project, and its experimentation in four pilot projects, providing a series of reflections on the transformative impact of this practice.
- Last of all, the article by Edgar Andrés Martínez Muñoz and Diana Marcela Giraldo Pinedo draws attention to the possibilities for innovation arising from knowledge exchange practices between craft knowledge and design-led projects, starting from an academic exercise.

Discussion and conclusion

The concept of intersectionality has provided the basis for a long and slow paradigm shift that is still unfolding in the social sciences, legal studies, and other fields of research and practice (Crenshaw, 1989, von Hippel, 2009, Bucchetti, 2015, Costanza Chock, 2018). The link among intersectionality, accessibility and empowerment activates new dynamics able to overcome the segmental understanding of the phenomena connected to discrimination, social exclusion, stigma, etc.

This paradigm shift is starting to transform the design industry as well, promoting multifaceted interventions able to amplify collective efficacy, valuing of marginalised persons and their autonomy, community solidarity and tacit knowledge (Collins, 2010).

The contributions collected during the Forum represent a wealth of practices, methods and applications that show how the theoretical contribution linked to the topic of intersectionality can be applied to the co-creation of innovation in design-driven practices. Among the various aspects that emerged, the collected contributions highlight some transversal aspects that deserve in-depth study from the point of view of design cultures, both in theoretical terms and in terms of the development of shared practices:

First of all, the diverse practices collected show how adopting intersectional approaches makes it possible to develop projects suited to countering global challenges that transcend geopolitical differences while having situated local impacts.

This is the case, for instance, of actions to counter the climate crisis, which produces different effects in relation to different socio-identitary categories of the people affected by it (considering, for instance, of the different impact that effects related to the climate crisis have in relation to gender or income). Adopting an intersectional approach makes it possible to consider the differences of the different communities and improve their empowerment in the construction of counteracting actions that are more inclusive in their impacts, with a view to social as well as environmental transition. Secondly, the adoption of intersectional approaches in design practices supports the construction of projects towards marginalized and not represented communities, while improving the collection of data and information useful for the understanding of localised problems and needs among diverse communities, enabling the description of

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'submerged' phenomena that normally escape institutional frameworks: it allows the construction of tailored tools useful for people autonomy, but also to dismantle systems of inequality.

Finally, the collection of contributions highlights how design-related cultures and practices manifest themselves in differentiated contexts, both in terms of scale (from the building scale to the territorial scale) and in terms of existing and preferred relationships, showing how design and the designers appears as mediators between different knowledges, rather than as producers of the same. The intersectional approach, and the theoretical contribution linked to intersectionality, helps to define design practices that mediate between situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988), that are radically linked to the bodies and experiences of the communities that produce them.

"We must do this in order to deepen the strengths that exist from the differences that we all bring to the table: whether it's from our disciplines, from our resources, and from the intersectionality of our identities. If we can begin to appreciate our difference, we will see the disbursement of power in places where we are creating and intervening." (Amatullo et al., 2021, p.57)

The interplay between the concepts of intersectionality, empowerment, accessibility ensures the identification of hidden structural barriers and supports an understanding of how individual experiences differ¹. The development of design solutions able to capture needs and opportunities that intersect and interact, can offer a real contribute to resolve root causes of inequality, injustice, and insecurity, and at the same time, to improve impact, sustainability, and relevance of responsible innovation initiatives across the globe.

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