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The Impact of Crisis and Diaspora on Design Culture and Events

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Keywords

Crisis, Diaspora, Creativity, Urban Events, Cultural Vibrancy.

Abstract

The paper aims to investigate the correlation and the symmetry between times of crisis with creativity and new forms of cultural and social life in the cities. The authors' hypothesis is that temporary cultural events, often triggered by the experience of marginal urban groups, could become effective tools to measure regeneration and reactivation for contemporary cities. More and more, nowadays it's evident the increasing relevance and impact of times of crisis to determine unexpected cultural and social transformations, easily traceable in the underground cultural production.

The research compares two dramatic events with irreversible impacts on cultural and social dynamics: the diaspora caused by the war in Kosovo and the economic and financial crisis caused by the pandemic which has drastically shut down investments in almost all cultural and creative sectors of society in Italy. This investigation endeavors to give an account to significant experiences of different creativity models and projects in relation to different social and historical contexts, to observe different development phases of cultural and creative maturity in the urban tissues. The paper, by comparing Pristina and Bologna, will highlight in the conclusion similarities and variations of approaches, engagement processes and the degree of enabling environment.

1. Disseminating Creativity: the Role of Temporary Events in Designing New Forms of Cultural Contents

The contribution stems from the desire to investigate the correlation between crisis, diaspora, creativity, and experimentation expressed in events and the birth of new forms of cultural and social life in cities.

The topic is actual considering the continuous state of exception imposed by governments in the name of biosecurity and health (Agamben, 2020) which, since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, have paradoxically judged culture, in all its plural performative expressions (dance, theater, cinema, exhibitions) and events in the presence of non-essential goods, decreeing their complete interruption through the lockdown. The phenomenon of planned cultural events relies on the synergistic work of operators belonging to the cultural and creative industries sector, which for more than a decade has been recognized as a potential driver of an economic recovery in knowledge societies and subject of strong funding policies (European Commission, 2018; EIT KIC Culture and Creativity, 2021). This newly acquired strategy arises from the awareness gained in European policies of the founding value of culture and its performative expressions (UNESCO, 2005), in the continuous transformation of the individual-community-urban space relationship in the contemporary city. But the severe measures adopted in many European countries are jeopardizing the survival of more than 30% of workers in the sector (Lhermitte et al., 2021).

Therefore, it is vital to observe the devastating effects of the shutdown of the CCI sector to try to imagine in which directions the newly generated *creative diaspora* will go.

If historically the concept of diaspora has always been intimately associated with the abandonment of a territory and the physical movement in search of a welcoming site, in this contribution the meaning of *diaspora* sf [from gr. διασπορά «dispersion», der. of διασπείρω «disseminate»] is extended to the immaterial dimension of dissemination of values. In many of these dispersals the migrants often retain the wish to return to their homelands, maintaining ties to family and friends back home, when possible.

Through this investigation of experiences and events at city scale, the contribution seeks to imagine new physical and immaterial directions that culture and creativity will be able to take through design driven processes and practices applied in designing events.

The traces enable new practices and directions rooted in the dimension of design as agent of change in the contemporary city (Formia, Gianfrate & Vai, 2021) through synthesis and the comparison of experiences that have arisen annually, biennial, triennial, following different models or creating new ones (festivals, exhibitions-market, design week) in Kosovo in the city of Pristina and in Italy in the city of Bologna.

These new forms of events have implemented practices of human, ethical and sustainable social regeneration, of reactivation of abandoned places, of unconventional uses of underutilized spaces and of assets pertaining to cultural heritage, effectively anticipating themes and reflections of the next; post-covid cultural regeneration, today more and more

relevant in the debate on the urban transformation of the contemporary city. The theme of regeneration in the last decade has been explored by numerous subjects, through distinct disciplinary points of view (urban planning-architecture, sociology, design), drawing particular attention to spaces to be reactivated. The discipline of design has become a knowledge of mediation between project cultures, cultural contents and people, the real protagonists of cultural, human and not just spatial reactivation.

Today, the need to find new models to reactivate the spaces dedicated to culture that have been empty for more than a year, the need to regenerate the practices of use by the public in real presence, the need to invent new models of temporary events, or in the case of third countries, to advance towards increased levels of social regeneration similar to Western areas, converges with the current need to in the wider CCI sector in order to avoid a global diaspora of creativity and dissolution of values.

Among the challenges of regeneration, at the crossroads between urban planning, economic, environmental and social issues, the contribution focuses on the practices activated by private citizens or micro-associations of returnees who gathered in collectives, start-ups, movement, and have conceived cultural projects with unprecedented characteristics, with the aim of weaving original synergies and relationships, testing new practices and sustainable tools, mixing different disciplinary knowledge, redesigning new cultural identities of places or homelands. The appeal of the idea of return can be

seen as an expression of the notion that human beings have *roots* and that these should conflate and spatially coincide with culture and territory (Olsson & King, 2008).

Temporary pre-crisis cultural events were the driving force behind:

- Human regeneration;
- Urban exploration and reactivation;
- Sustainable development of an ecosystem of places, actors and relationships (Vai, 2020).

How will the post-crisis events create original impacts in the near *new normal* future?

The methodology adopted is based on the observation of projects developed by the diaspora in Pristina and of post-covid projects in the city of Bologna, selected through desk and field research, interviews, comparison as expression of different design formats (festivals, market exhibitions, design weeks, publishing business); the projects have been selected as exemplary prototypes for the invention of practices for the co-creation of cultural contents, for the original application of tools for their dissemination, for their ability to involve different disciplines, in a unity of space-action-time able to combine creativity, design and innovation. As the result of a newly identified gap in the literature, difficulties have been encountered while analyzing the state of the field as it is. Thus, this topic represents a worthwhile observation as characterized by a lack of extensive pre-existing literature.

2. How Kosovar Diaspora Reflects on Design Culture and Events in Pristina

Massive migrations and diasporas have characterized the history of the newborn state, Kosovo. The genocide perpetuated during the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1999 (Judah, 2002, 2009), has caused approximately 700,000 - 800,000 people to flee their home country. This segment of Kosovar citizens has chosen to start over in Europe or the United States, and to raise their children in the Western World. However, their connection to the mother country remains highly stable, as they contribute to the development of the country within many social and economic perspectives (INDEP, 2015) (Maimbo & Raitha, 2005).

Historically speaking, it is acknowledged the relevant role of conflict-generated diasporas in the economic development of their homelands. Beyond their well-known role as senders of remittances, diasporas can also promote trade and foreign direct investment, create businesses and spur entrepreneurship (Bahar, 2020). This analysis mainly concerns the economic aspect of the issue, leveraging on the concept of *diaspora capital*. However, in this paper the authors want to focus on another concept of capital, based on the transfer of new knowledge and skills, and the creative and artistic *remittances* in the cultural development of Kosovar society in the last ten years, proposing a new concept of *diaspora capital*, that includes also the human capital defined as the asset of talent and ability (Freeman, 1976). In this context, the concept of knowledge transfer acquires new shades when declined into the underground culture and the bottom-up design of temporary events and new cultural content.

Diaspora becomes the catalyst for cultural and design fast-paced development, as well the generator of mind-set shifts through the emulation of a western lifestyle.

Diaspora is the central actor of the dissemination process here examined: through their physical movement, they become producers of new cultural and creative content, material and immaterial, such as temporary events. Migrants leave their countries, acquire new contents and new skills in the industrialized hosting residence; some of them decide to return home, bringing with them a set of new skills that fertilize their homeland. This process allows the creation of new cultural formats in most of the transitioning countries, and the consequent social and cultural advancement of these societies still affected by war wounds.

Hereafter, several examples of successful projects in the cultural panorama of Kosovo which have been initiated by grown children of the diaspora: the magazine *Kosovo 2.0*, Kosovo Architecture Festival, REDO Festival and the Rolling Film Festival (Figs. 1, 2).

The independent journal *Kosovo 2.0* – kosovotwopointzero.com, was founded by Besa Luci in 2010, who has a master's degree in journalism/magazine writing from the University of Missouri's School of Journalism in Columbia. It's interesting to linger on the story of how she got inspired in founding the Journal, reported during a personal conversation with the authors; what is relevant is the empathic need and desire to see its own mother country advancing as other industrialized states, and this story can be considered a model for many other young Kosovars of the diaspora.



Figures 1, 2. Erdhlezeti Festival, 2019, Pristina. © Atdhe Mulla.

At the time she decided to return to Pristina, she was working for a publishing company in New York, when she felt the need to re-channel the energies, skills, knowledge she was investing in the US, and to experiment her own idea of editorial production in her country. She decided to leave the States and move back to Kosovo where she founded one of the most interesting and independent magazines of the country.

A very similar example is represented by the graphic designer Bardh Haliti, who founded with a few friends REDO - redoprishtina.com, a festival about graphic design.

“When I decided to come back it was more of a temporary decision - I thought I’d go back to New York very quickly, but once I was here, I kept meeting people I was interested in, and who were interested in what I was doing” (Moshakis, 2012) (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Pristina by night. © Atdhe Mulla.

Thanks to his decision, the design scene in Kosovo has become a fertile ground and inspired by many international speakers and other artists from the diaspora generation thanks to the attractiveness of the *REDO* festival, which is the first festival on graphic design in the country.

Whether it's individual or a group-led initiative, it can determine cultural and social transformation, or even accelerate it. This is the case of the *Kosovo Architecture Festival* and the *Kosovo Architecture Foundation*, kosovoarchitecture.org. Both the festival and foundation have been established by Bekim Ramku, one of the most important characters in the cultural panorama of Kosovo. He graduated in Kosovo but left the country to continue his education at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London and after the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He returns to Kosovo with the clear aim and vision of creating the *Future Architecture Platform*, which represents nowadays a generator of ideas for the country as well as a design network providing solutions for the difficult social challenges faced by the Kosovar society nowadays. This example gives room to this investigation to highlight the interesting nexus material-immaterial content. This specific festival on architecture, not only has produced new cultural and creative content in the city of Pristina but has also attracted national and international experts and architects who have in the years been involved in the reconstruction and regeneration of urban spaces of post-war city. Therefore, the intangible forms of culture have generated tangible and urban design restoration processes (Figs. 4, 5).



Figures 4, 5. Opera GOF, Kino Armata, Pristina 2019. “GOF” Opera is a physical and virtual journey of three characters that represent human condition in isolation. © Atthe Mulla.

When diaspora is such a great phenomenon in terms of numbers (800,000 people living abroad), projects of *creative* implantation are countless and scattered among very different levels of organizational nature; mapping all these case studies could open room for future research directions in the field. In Kosovo most of the performative and cultural events are completely designed bottom-up without complex bureaucratic obstacles and usually sustained through private funding and sponsorships, as there is very poor legal regulation in the sector. This leads to an almost uncontrolled freedom of event production and event design. As the case of a post-war crisis, the value of culture and creativity contributes also to the field of human rights and these events are often connected and merged with underground movements for the defense of human rights. This is the case of *Rolling Film Festival*, rollingfilm.org, which has become Kosovo's most appreciated event for introducing other Kosovo communities to the Roma community, for supporting Romani artistic expression, and for providing a transformative venue for combating stereotypes and promoting positive inter-ethnic relations. Discrimination is a very problematic issue in a young and inter-ethnic country such as Kosovo, where six minorities co-habit and struggle to make their voice heard. Thanks to the *Rolling Film festival*, this was possible for the Roma community, which during the last edition in 2021 also saw the involvement and the greetings of the Prime Minister. This festival has created a storytelling platform to showcase the real-life stories of Roma people from Kosovo, through locally produced films. The Artistic Director of the *Rolling Film Festival* is a young talented man, Sami Mustafa, who was born in Plementina, a

Roma village close to Pristina. He now lives in Lione, where he has founded *Romawood*, romawood.wordpress.com, an independent film production and NGO. His contribution in terms of artistic and creative skills to the development of such an important initiative in his homeland, is defined as a *creative remittance*, relevant to the country's social enhancement on par with the economic one. The visibility and public acknowledgement of this cultural event has triggered a new strategical form of anti-discrimination, based on the recognition of common values, common identity, common wounds, in favor of social advancement.

3. How the Contemporary Crisis Reflects on Design Culture in Bologna

Aligned with many European and Italian creative cities, the public administration of Bologna has progressively increased awareness about the major impacts affecting the city, caused by the inevitable financial crisis induced by the Great recession in 2008, which had immediate negative impacts on production and distribution of cultural activities (ERVET, 2012). Impacts on the cultural panorama that had been measured through the closure of many art galleries (*Neon, Il Campo delle Fragole, Marabini*), of the main publishing houses (*Editrice Compositori, Cappelli Editori*), of film production and distribution companies (*Downtown Pictures, Revolver*) and the consequent migration of professionals to other capitals of culture and creativity (Milan, Paris, London).

Because of the creative diaspora, institutions had acquired new awareness by rewarding the fragile creative ecosystems through economic and formative incentives and spaces (for

example *Incredibol*, www.incredibol.net, Emilia Romagna Startup) to avoid further dispersion of talents.

A second consequence was the birth of a more collaborative attitude between the creative realities and their involvement in the organization of public events (*Bologna Design Week*, www.bolognadesignweek.com, *Fruit Exhibition - Art Publishing Fair*, www.fruitexhibition.com, *Robot Festival*, www.robotfestival.it) (Figs. 6, 7).

Finally, thanks to this strategic policy intended to revive culture in the city, it was observed an increased capacity for cultural and creative to generate content renewal through these new forms of events, which have acted as punctual actions of human and urban acupuncture (Casagrande, 2010) within the identity of regional cultural and creative sectors (Vai, 2017). Culture and creativity play a fundamental social role for the intrinsic value of cultural and creative production and the intangible added value they generate in terms of individual well-being and social cohesion. The metropolitan city of Bologna counts 26,117 employees in the CCI sector, corresponding to 30% of employment in the region (ERVET, 2018).

The peculiarities of the employment in the cultural and creative system are evident in relation to the high precariousness. The most popular professions in the CCI sector are designers (13.0%) and architects (7.1%), graphic designers or illustrators (6.6%) and photographers (6.3%). Event organizers are 4.8%, communicators 4.7%. Less represented categories are those of video makers, artists, authors, writers, authors, storytellers and directors and musicians, actors and dancers (Fig. 8).



Figure 6. Pavilion de l'Esprit Nouveau, interpreted during Bologna Design Week 2018 by Mario Nanni through the lighting of his works. © Viabizzuno.



Figure 7. Robot Festival, DumBO Space, former railway yard Ravone, Bologna, 2019. © Robot.



Figure 8. Summer--Time, DumBO Space, former railway yard Ravone, Bologna, 2020. © DumBO.



Figure 9. CHEAP Poster Art Festival. Ph. Michele Lapini. © CHEAP.

One year and half after the lockdown, through the movement *Bauli in Piazza - We Make Events Italia*, professionals from entertainment, music, events, self-employed workers behind the scenes, with intermittent, part-time and discontinuous jobs (toolmakers, mimes, circus, audio-video technicians, seamstresses, make-up artists) took to the streets to demonstrate in Milan and Rome (respectively in October 2020 and April 2021) because they could no longer work following the DPCM envisaging anti-covid measures. They asked for one immediate establishment of a fund to be disbursed in monthly solutions to all workers in the entertainment industry and events, both discontinuous and with VAT, covering the period January-December 2021, to guarantee a minimum threshold of income continuity; immediate economic support for businesses in the supply chain based on annual turnover linked to entertainment and events; immediate scheduling of an inter-ministerial table which, on pre-established parameters, imposes the gradual models for restarting the sector, to give a prospective vision and entrepreneurial viability; immediate scheduling of an inter-ministerial table to address the reform of the sector with particular reference to social security and assistance for male and female workers (www.facebook.com/Bauliinpiazza).

In the city of Bologna in the year of the pandemic (from March 2020) all the in-person festivals (*Bologna Design Week*, *Smell Festival*, <https://www.smellfestival.it/>, *Robot Festival*) were canceled, except for *Il Cinema Ritrovato*, <https://festival.ilcinemaritrovato.it/>, which was postponed to create a bridge with the *Venice Biennale Cinema*.

While the 2020 edition of *Fruit Exhibition - Art Publishing Fair*, set for the month of April in the traditional real dimension of 3 days of event, has been redesigned and transferred in digital mode in less than forty days, functional for the translation of the format in the single dimension virtual, scheduling appointments on the Zoom platform, and extending the duration of the event to more than a month. One of the first Italian online exhibition-market experiences, *Virtual Fruit* (20 April - 29 May 2020) took place in full *lockdown*, but it was able to record numerous and unexpected international presences, thanks to its incorporeal version.

The case of *CHEAP Street Poster Art Festival* in 2021 (www.cheapfestival.it) was even anticipating the change of the format. Already at the end of 2019 the collective had made a clean sweep of *festival* annual giving back to the project an unexpected dignity, allowing to make impromptu interventions, whose conception and realization on the street involved only a couple of days. In 2021, *POST* is the concept of the call for artists launched to create an imaginative movement around a new vision of the future, inviting artists to develop co-design actions (Fig. 9).

In the light of these unexpected transformations of cultural production through temporary events, the Culture and City Promotion Department of the Municipality of Bologna this year launched a strategic project to define a new shared tool for culture impact assessment. The project aims to evaluate the transformative power of culture, as a political and democratic vehicle, in the belief that culture creates opportunities for civic leadership and participation that can be measured and told.

The path of confrontation between administration and cultural operators has just started with the construction of a strategic vision of Culture for Bologna.

Although the data evidence a decent cultural participation and strong cultural networks, major cultural players have died out, the independent associations curator of the main festivals did not survive the COVID wave (Dipartimento Cultura e Promozione della Città, 2020) and policymakers continue to support only affiliated cultural operators and do not have the experience of those who build the events behind the scenes of power. The start-up phase of the Research Center for interaction with the Creative and Cultural Industries of the University of Bologna (CRICC) is placed within this context.



Figure 10. Habitans, curated and performed by rapso during CCI Days 2021 – Cultural and Creative Industries Festival produced by CRICC. Ph. Giorgio Dall’Osso. © CRICC.

The CCI Days 2021 Festival presented a series of cross-disciplinary pilot projects to develop new technological solutions to support the innovation of cultural and creative industries. The hope is that these new cultural infrastructures could explore in a design-based perspective transdisciplinary creative practices and creative and experimental methods, capable of generating new knowledge, new innovative production opportunities and business ideas, to provide a multidisciplinary approach to the complex CCI sector after the pandemic crisis (Fig. 10).

4. Conclusions: Creative Diaspora as Catalyst of New Forms of Cultural Events in Post-Crisis Times

The observation of the cultural evolution of post-conflictual events in Kosovo along with the analysis of the crisis caused by the pandemic in the cultural sector in Bologna, highlights the capacity of underground cultural and creative initiatives to accelerate the metabolic speed of social innovation and development. Awareness regarding the capacity of cultural and creative content to social renewal generated by bottom-up and underground events, has become a keypoint recognised also by the European Commission (New European Bauhaus movement, europa.eu/new-european-bauhaus/index_en). Culture and creativity play a fundamental social role for the intrinsic value of cultural and creative production and the intangible added value they generate in terms of individual well-being and social cohesion. This investigation endeavors to give an account to significant experiences of different creativity models and events in relation to the definition of *crisis* but in different historical contexts: war, financial crisis, pandemic.

The term *crisis* was originally used in a medical context, and by the mid-seventeenth century, it took on the figurative meaning of a “vitaly important or decisive stage in the progress of anything” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2021), especially a period of uncertainty or difficulty, trauma.

Whether it’s post-war or post-pandemic crisis, social trauma triggers primitive inputs of wellbeing and well care in human nature. What has been experienced in the CCI sector during the lockdown in Bologna testifies new practices and directions and recognizes the dimension of event design as agent of change in the contemporary society. The creative input caused by extreme times of crisis produces events as containers of new forms of culture, because absorbing the need to overcome the trauma. This step of the process is often developed by specific actors, who because of the crisis fled their homeland, as demonstrated in the Kosovo case.

The dissemination of creativity, whether it’s material or immaterial dissemination, feeds the cultural diaspora caused by the crisis. During the dissemination process, these actors nurture their inspiration with new knowledge, new skills, connections, innovative tools; all this set of creative acquisition become a sort of *creative remittances* as soon as the diaspora returns home, to fertilize the social and cultural soil of their homeland.

The case studies analyzed shed light on the potential of creatives and designers to adapt to difficult social circumstances and furthermore, to become mediums of knowledge transfer;

therefore, design of new cultural content and event production are to be considered such strong catalysts for social innovation, as they respond immediately to social needs and challenges, adopting bottom-up and co-creation approaches.

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