A design strategy for social communing

Social commons, collaborative organizations, and relational goods: a virtuous circle

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This paper presents the relationship between *social commons* and *collaborative organizations,* and discusses a design strategy aiming at improving the first (the social commons) thanks to conceiving developing the seconds (the collaborative organizations). More precisely, the idea is to use design tools and ideas to trigger a virtuous circle thanks to which collaborative organizations reinforce social commons, and social commons create an environment where collaborative organizations may thrive. The crucial point to make this virtuous circle happen is the quality of collaborative services. And, in particular, their ability to establish between involved actors a sense of trust, empathy and friendship. That is, their capability to produce those relational goods that, added up and connected, can produce social commons.

This paper conclusion is that design for social commoning practically corresponds to the one for collaborative organizations, when this design activity succeeds in defining a good balance between the search for solution effectiveness and the one for relational goods

Social commons and collaborative organizations

Social commons are a set of socially shared ideas and values. They are the social glue that keep together and characterize a city, a region and a whole society. They are produced and cultivated by a mesh of interactions between people and between people and the place where they live. They are quite diverse, ranging from the sense of safety in a city or the mutual trust in a neighbourhood, to common views on human rights and democracy; or to open and inclusive attitudes newcomers. They may also be specifc competences, as creativity, design capability and entrepreneurship, when they are sufficiently spread in a society, becoming one of its characterizing aspects.

In the pre-modern societies, social commons had been created by the slow co-evolution of their social forms, their culture and their physical contexts. This co-evolution had a quasi-natural character, in the sense that it happened without being consciously designed.

When social and technological change accelerated and when, as it is happening now, this change becomes highly turbulent, this quasi-natural process doesn't

work and social commons, not being regenerated, are disappearing. Against this dangerous process of social desertification, a new social commons regeneration process must be proposed. And, given that in turbulent time it cannot be any more the slow quasi-natural one of the past, it must necessarily be a design-based activity. I will refer to that with the expression *design for social commoning.*

Facing the present crises, and preparing for the foreseeable future ones, the urgency and importance of social commoning seems to be particularly clear.

Both theory and empirical experience[1] indicate that, in period of crisis, social commons are what makes people able to react and self-organize. And vice versa, when social commons are weak or absent people get lost and tend to totally depend on top-down help.

This is particularly evident after large catastrophs. However, it can also be recognized in everyday life events such as the ones related to the economic crisis or when big new social issue emerges (as for instance the migrant flow in Europe and worldwide). In all these cases, a lack of social commons appears in breakdowns at every level: from the micro-scale of personal interactions, to the macro-level of society as a whole.

This is why social commoning should be strongly enhanced world wide. But, unfortunately, the on-going main trends are not heading in this direction. And, as Richard Sennet writes, "modern society is de-skilling people in practicing cooperation." [2]

Nevertheless, looking attentively at the complexity and contradictoriness of contemporary societies, we

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1 Guerrero, Bodin, McAllister, Wilson continue saying: *"Our study provides empirical support for the ability of collaborative forms of governance to address the problem of fit, but also suggests that in some cases the establishment of bottom-up collaborative arrangements would likely benefit from specific guidance to facilitate the establishment of collaborations that better align with the ways ecological resources are interconnected across the landscape"*
A.M. Guerrero, Ö. Bodin, R.R.J. McAllister, K.A. Wilson (2015). "Achieving social-ecological fit through bottom-up collaborative governance: and empirical investigation". Ecology and Society.
http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol20/iss4/art41/
D. Curtis, *Coping with Crisis: The Resilience and Vulnerability of Pre-Industrial Settlements* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014)
2 Richard Sennett, **Together: The Rituals, Pleasures, and Politics of Cooperation** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

also can see something else: a growing number of pe–ople who are moving against the mainstream trends, inventing new ways of being and doing, re–discovering collaboration and places[1]. And finally, generating also a new wave of social commons.

These initiatives are radical social innovations. They appear as *creative communities*[2] and, when successful, they evolve into *collaborative organizations*[3]: group of people who choose to collaborate with the aim of achieving specific results. Doing that, they can also produce, as a precious side effect, trust, friendliness, empathy, mutual attention and care. Considered as a whole, these values are defined *relational goods*: immaterial goods depending on the quality of human interactions[4].

A virtuous circle and the way to implement it

Collaborative organizations show us that, in contemporary societies, new forms of collaboration and relational quality are emerging. This paper hypothesis is that, moving from them, it is possible to implement a design–based strategy for social commoning. That is, to trigger and sustain a virtuous circle between *social commons, collaborative service* and *relational goods*.

Let's start form these interlinked observations (Figure 1): collaborative organizations, by their own nature,

may produce, at the same time, practical results and relational goods >> Relational goods are produced by human interactions. When many interactions like these happen, relational goods add up and connect assuming a larger social value. That is, they become social commons >> In turn, these social commons create a favourable environment, where new collaborative organizations can emerge, last in time and thrive.

Figure 1. The virtuous circle between social commons, collaborative organizations and relational goods. Where collaborative organizations are social forms in which involved actors collaborate in achieving a result (as collaborative living; collaborative care; collaborative food networks; collaborative production): and relational goods are immaterial goods that depend on human interactions quality (as: trust, friendliness; empathy) and social commons are social values and practices that are collaboratively produced and cultivated by a community (as: sense of safety; diffuse attitude towards creativity, experimentation, collaboration, entrepreneurship; shared visions on what to do, at different scales).

Given that, the question is: can this virtuous circle be designed? Let's start from these three considerations:

• Social commons cannot be directly designed: being the results of multiple actions, they cannot be planned and realized by a single actor.

• Relational goods too cannot be directly designed: trust, empathy, friendliness are results of interactions that, as such, for their human nature, cannot be predefined by someone else.

• Collaborative organizations can be designed. Or better, what can be designed are the conditions to make their existence, and their ability to produce relational goods, more probable.

It comes that, to activate the virtuous circle, we must design for collaborative organizations capable to produce relational good that, in turn, may contribute to the social commons regeneration.

Summarizing, it can be said that a design strategy for social communing is articulated in two steps: (1) to conceive and enhance collaborative organizations endowed with their relational goods; and (2) to create the condition for transforming these relational goods

1 For instance: groups of families who decide to share some services to reduce the economic and environmental costs, but also to create new forms of neighborhoods (the corresponding solution ideas are: cohousing and a variety of forms of sharing and mutual help within a residential building or neighborhood); new forms of exchange and barter (from simple barter initiatives to time banks and local money); services where the young and the elderly help each other, promoting a new idea of welfare (collaborative social services); neighborhood gardens set up and managed by citizens who, by doing so, improve the quality of the city and of the social fabric (guerrilla gardens, community gardens, green roofs); systems of mobility in alternative to individual cars (car sharing, carpooling, the rediscovery of the possibilities offered by bicycles); new models of production based on local resources and engaging local communities (social enterprises); fair and direct trade between producers and consumers (fair trade initiatives.
Ezio Manzini, **Design,When Everybody Designs** (Cambridge, Massachusetts :MIT Press, 2015). Anna Meroni, **Creative Communities: People Inventing Sustainable Ways of Living** (Milan: Polidesign, 2007); François Jégou, Ezio Manzini, **Collaborative Services: Social Innovation and Design for Sustainability** (Milan: Polidesign, 2008).
In the past decade, a growing number of these initiatives merged with digital social networks creating unprecedented networks of people digitally **and** physically connected among them and with the place where they live. Joon Baeck, "A Socio-Technical Framework for Collaborative Services: Designing a Digital Platform for Collaborative Communities," doctoral thesis, Politecnico di Milano, February 2011
2 Anna Meroni defines creative communities as groups of people who have been able to imagine, develop, and manage a new way of being and doing.
Anna Meroni, *Creative Communities: People Inventing Sustainable Ways of Living* (Milan: Polidesign, 2007);
3 François Jégou, Ezio Manzini, **Collaborative Services: Social Innovation and Design for Sustainability** (Milan: Polidesign, 2008).Ezio Manzini, **Design,When Everybody Designs** (Cambridge, Massachusetts :MIT Press, 2015)
4 "Relational goods are non-material goods that can only be produced and consumed within groups, and which are intrinsically linked to relationships and interaction." Carole Jean Uhlaner, (1989-01-01). "Relational Goods" and Participation: Incorporating Sociability into a Theory of Rational Action". **Public Choice**. 62 (3): 253–285.
Luigino Bruni, "Relational Goods, A new tool for an old issue". **ECOS – Estudos Contemporâneos da Subjetividade**. 3 (2): 173–178; Becchetti L., Trovato, G., and Londono Bedoya, D.A. (2016-01-21). "Income, relational goods and happiness". **Applied Economics**. 43(3).

(that are originally limited to few involved actors) in social commons (that are ideas and values shared by the whole society).

Design for collaborative organizations

To conceive and enhance collaborative organizations requires, first of all, creative and viable ideas. In our case, creativity implies to reframe a given problem proposing a viable collaborative solution[5]. Where the viability of this solution is based the fact that, reframing the problem, new assets should become available and new actors should be activated – first of all, the directly interested ones. Examples of solutions emerging from reframed problems are, for instance: families who, facing the difficulties of everyday life, change their idea of privacy and decide to share some spaces and services (in order to reduce their economic and environmental costs and create new forms of friendly neighbourhoods). Another example could be the one of elderly people who, facing the welfare crisis, change the traditional notion of social service (based on the provider/user interactions) and develop collaborative organizations to support self and mutual help[6].

Each collaborative organization is based on a "solution idea" that someone has conceived and has been capable to enhance[7]. Considering the design processes, this creative reframing must be placed in the concept generation phase. But other important design capabilities must be used in other phases to make these ideas real and capable to last in time and thrive. To do so, dedicated *enabling systems* must be conceived and developed: an *infrastructuring* activity[8] aiming at enriching the existing socio-technical ecosystem with new material and immaterial elements (such as: appropriate products, places, services, norms and incentives).

These design activities, aiming at conceiving new solutions and their enabling systems, are important but, for the sake of our discussion on social commoning, are not enough. To trigger and support social communing it is also crucial to move on the qualitative side of the design process and verify if, how and when these collaborative organizations are producing *also* relational goods. That is, to parallel the discussion on collaborative organization effectiveness with the one the quality of the interactions on which these organizations are based. To do that, we must observe collaborative organizations more in depth.

Effectiveness and relational goods

Collaboration implies people doing something together in order to get a result of common interest. In doing that, both the final result and the way to achieve it are important. In fact, people collaborate because they are interested in the result but also because they like that way to get it"[9].

These observations tell us that, evaluating collaborative organizations, two dimensions must be considered: *effectiveness* and *relational goods production*. Where effectiveness indicates the involved actors' efforts requested to get the intended results (in other words, the height of the entry threshold). On the other side, the relational good production expresses the interaction characteristics and their ability to produce values as trust, empathy, friendliness.

Given that, because the relational goods production implies time and commitment a trade off between effectiveness and relational goods appears: the search for the maximum of effectiveness tends to reduce also the time and committment requested for the original relational goods. The result is that, moving in this direction, may generate solution capable to involve a large number of people, but doesn't produce relational goods. And, therefore, doesn't contribute in regenerating social commons.

Vice versa, if the relational goods are very high, collaboration results very demanding (in terms of time and commitment) and its effectiveness decrease (or, the entry threshold becomes higher). Therefore, not many people have the possibility and the will to participate. The result is that cases like this, even though very interesting by several points of view, do not contribute to the social commoning process because the relational goods they produce are confined in small number of highly committed actors (the "social heroes").

At this point the second step of the proposed design strategy for social commoning clearly appears: it is necessary to conceive and develop collaborative organizations capable to balance effectiveness and relational goods. That is, they have to be effective enough to reduce their entry threshold and be endowed with enough relational goods to collaborate in the social commoning process. When this balance is successfully found, the relational goods spread with the related collaborative organizations. And, as it has been already said, doing so, they add up, connect and become social commons.

Collaborative organizations trajectories

Successful collaborative organizations move from a heroic beginning to a phase of maturity, where they become "the new normality". Empirical observation tells us that, during this journey, the evolution of initial ideas and practices can follow different trajectories. In particular, it can maintain or lose, or even entirely betray, initial motivations in terms of relational goods production.

5 Kees Dorst, Frame Innovation, Create New Thinking by Design (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2015)
6 For other examples, see Note 3
7 All these people have been using their design capability. Some of them have had a specific preparation for that; other, the majority, not: they new kind of diffuse design that is spreading in contemporary societies–Ezio Manzini, Design, When Everybody Designs (Cambridge, Massachusetts :MIT Press, 2015).
8 Per Anders Hillgren, Anna Seravalli, and Anders Emilson, "Prototyping and Infrastructuring in Design of Social Innovation," Co–Design 7, nos. 3–4 (September–December 2011), 169–183. Available at http://medea. mah.se/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/emilson-et-al-prototyping-in-frastructuring-design-social-innovation-2011.pdf.
9 Richard Sennett, Together: The Rituals, Pleasures, and Politics of Cooperation (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

A well known example of how initial motivations and social qualities can be lost is Uber: an emblematic case resulting from a trajectory started decades ago with a few heroic car-pooling initiatives, and arrived today to a highly economically successful platform-based solution in which, in the name of the search for effectiveness, the original disruptive idea of peer-to-peer collaboration in sharing a given asset (the car and the ability to drive) has been lost, while the overall solution became an up-dated interpretation of the main stream economy and culture (the most debated issue of the bad working conditions it generates for drivers is another aspect of this same issue).

But this kind of trajectory is not the only one. Even though they are far less well known, there are several other possibilities. A well known case is the evolution from the original, quite demanding experiences of co-housing, to the present advanced forms of collaborative living. A practical application of this possibility is the one proposed by the Social Housing Foundation, in Milan. It clearly indicates that it is possible to improve effectiveness of living with shared spaces and services, while maintaining social quality and producing original relational goods.

Trajectories as this one are, of course, the ones to be chosen when designing for social commoning. To make this choice real, appropriate enabling systems are required. And a multiplicity of design activities, at different scale and with different aims, are to be performed. The crucial design action here is to define, case by case, the best balance between effectiveness and relational goods production. To do that is the most difficult and delicate part of the whole proposed design strategy. The one where a design culture could and should bring an important contribution.