

Weaving People and Places: Art and Design for Resilient Communities

Background: Cultures of Resilience—a Cultural Experiment

Contemporary societies are fragile.¹ This fragility has different causes, but a major contributor is the lack of social cohesion within them; or more precisely, their low degree of social resilience.²

The problem is particularly evident when a catastrophic event happens; but it can also be recognized in everyday life events, such as those associated with the economic crisis or the migrant flows across Europe and worldwide. In all these cases, a lack of social cohesion is apparent in breakdowns at every level from the micro scale of human encounters, to the macro level of society as a whole. On the other hand, both theory and empirical evidence indicate that “significant benefits can arise from collaborative forms of governance that foster self-organization and flexibility.”³ Robert Sampson’s account of the “enduring neighborhood effect”⁴ evidences that at the neighborhood scale, prosocial activity reduces antisocial activity and fosters greater community resilience. Sampson observes that those communities that have greater social and civic connectivity and activity respond better to catastrophic events. Tennis clubs become rescue centers and their members a connected network of support services. The barbecue equipment becomes a kitchen, the indoor courts a dormitory, the towels from the shower rooms bedding and bandages – the day to day is repurposed in response to the extreme. Adam Greenfield makes a similar observation about what he calls the “spontaneous infrastructure” that emerged during the Occupy networks’ relief response to Hurricane Sandy in 2012.⁵

What these authors observe is that, after a catastrophic event – when there are no longer normal ways of doing things, and when standard top-down communication collapses – people who know each other and know the place where they live are able to find a way of organizing themselves and making the best use of existing assets. Something similar can happen when facing acute economic and social crisis: networks of people living nearby and organized in open and flexible social networks can give each other not only fundamental practical and economic support, but also the psychological support needed to face difficult and unforeseen events with a sense of togetherness (this is exactly what is *not* happening today in Europe – the migrant issue is revealing a wider dimension of European social fragility).

We can summarize these observations by saying that social resilience requires the existence of groups of people who interact and collaborate in a physical context. Proximity and relationship with a place are what enable these people to self-organize and solve problems in a crisis.

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<http://www.journals.elsevier.com/she-ji-the-journal-of-design-economics-and-innovation>
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2018.03.003>

1 Rockefeller Foundation, “100 Resilient Cities,” accessed March 23, 2018, <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/our-work/initiatives/100-resilient-cities/>; Stockholm Resilience Centre, “The Nine Planetary Boundaries,” accessed March 23, 2018, <http://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries/planetary-boundaries/about-the-research/the-nine-planetary-boundaries.html>; Jeremy Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016); Andrew Zolli and Ann Marie Healy, *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013); Nassim N. Taleb, *Antifragile: How to Live in a World We Don’t Understand* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

2 Markus Keck and Patrick Sakdapolrak define social resilience across three main dimensions: 1) *coping capacities*—the ability of social actors to cope with and overcome adversity; 2) *adaptive capacities*—their ability to learn from past experiences and adjust themselves to future challenges in their everyday lives; and 3) *transformative capacities*—their ability to craft sets of institutions that foster individual welfare and sustainable societal robustness towards future crises. Markus Keck and Patrick Sakdapolrak, “What is Social Resilience? Lessons Learned and Ways Forward,” *Erdkunde* 67, no. 1 (2013): 5–19, available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23595352>; Peter A. Hall and Michèle Lamont, eds., *Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

3 Anglea Guerrero and her colleagues continue, “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.” Angela M. Guerrero, Örfan Bodin, Ryan R. J. McAllister, and Kerri A. Wilson, “Achieving Social-Ecological Fit through Bottom-up Collaborative Governance: An Empirical Investigation,” *Ecology and Society* 20, no. 4 (2015): 41, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-08035-200441>; Daniel R. Curtis, *Coping with Crisis: The Resilience and Vulnerability of Pre-industrial Settlements* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

4 Robert J. Sampson, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

5 Adam Greenfield, “Practices of the Minimum Viable Utopia,” *Architectural Design* 87, no. 1 (2017): 16–25, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/ad.2127>.

6 Cultures of Resilience (CoR) was a two-year project at the University of the Arts London (UAL). It gathered together staff and students from across the University. Its coordinators were Ezio Manzini, Chair Professor at UAL and President of DESIS Network; Nick Bell, Chair Professor of Communication Design at UAL; and Jeremy Till, Head of Central Saint Martins. CoR was also the leading project of a larger initiative on the same topic promoted by DESIS Network in several places worldwide.

7 Ezio Manzini, *Design, When Everybody Designs* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 189.

8 Ezio Manzini and Jeremy Till, eds., *CoR Ideas* (London: Hato Press, 2015), 7.

9 CoR Project participants in the CoR Group: Hena Ali, Tricia Austin, Sandy Black, Marsha Bradfield, Carole Collet, David Cross, Neil Cummings, Melanie Dodd, Rebecca Earley, Anne Eggeburt, Kate Fletcher, Lorraine Gamman, Silvia Grimaldi, Lisa

Accepting the importance of these social forms we ask, “What is the nature of these place-related communities? What can be done to support them?” And, in particular, “What can art and design do for them?”

This theme issue of *She Ji* brings together a collection of papers that reflect on art and design action research that has been delivered in response to a common theme: *Cultures of Resilience*. Initially, the purpose of Cultures of Resilience (CoR)⁶ was to discuss the cultural dimension of resilience and produce a set of narratives, values, ideas, and projects on this topic. But as it evolved, CoR narrowed its focus to one of “place related communities,” identified as a pre-condition for every possible scenario of social resilience.⁷

The CoR project was made viable by the observation that there were already several initiatives underway at the University of the Arts London (UAL) that were dealing directly or indirectly with the issue of social resilience and community building. In view of this, the aim of CoR was to offer these ongoing projects a common platform from which to exchange experiences and discuss and build some original art and design knowledge. In doing so, CoR carried out a *de facto* action research project, where the action thread consisted of several art and design initiatives, and the research thread was the program of discussions and seminars exploring the social effects of the projects. Beyond this main goal, CoR also aimed at including normal didactic activities in the research process, challenging an art and design school to act *also* as an action research agent.

CoR had two phases. The first one, from February 2014 to October 2014, was dedicated to building a group of committed CoR members, and discussing the CoR theme. This first phase had a mainly divergent character, cultivating differences while raising the level of the conversation and, at the same time, deepening and enriching it.⁸

In the second phase, from November 2014 to July 2016, thirteen parallel CoR project teams⁹ agreed to enter a converging process. They were to present and discuss their activities, which per se had very different motivations and goals, from the same point of view: the projects’ impact on social forms. Each explored the same question: how to describe the social forms the projects’ were helping to generate. In other words, during the second phase, the on-going projects were used as references and practical experiences on which to base a discussion about the nature of contemporary communities, the encounters on which they are built, and the role of art and design in staging or supporting these encounters.

Social Desertification, New Tribalism, and Emerging Contra-Trends

To withstand and recover from present crises, and to prepare for foreseeable future ones, our societies should improve their cohesion through strengthening different kinds of social forms. Unfortunately, predominant cultural trajectories appear to be heading in the opposite direction. As Richard Sennet writes, “modern society is de-skilling people in practicing cooperation.”¹⁰ The result is that pre-modern communities – families, neighborhoods, villages – are progressively disappearing.¹¹ At the same time, the intentional communities of the twentieth century – communities driven by strong ideologies, shared interests, and sense of belonging, like political parties and trade unions – are becoming weaker.¹²

Loose, flexible, temporary social networks are increasingly replacing such communities. The effects of this transformation are contradictory, but, for sure, the main and most visible effect is a tendency toward an increasing individualization and displacement of people, which in turn weakens further the traditional and intentional communities described above and contributes to increasingly fragile social systems.

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