

Changing the change

Design Visions, Proposals and Tools

An international conference on the role and potential of design research in the transition towards sustainability

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DAC LINK

A 2.0 tool for sme's design innovation

Abstract

The fast and *fluid* changing market place in a competitive globalized context (Bauman, 2002), the increasingly aggressive competition (due to the reduction of production costs and not only) and the high variability in the usage and mixing of products and services imposes to companies, especially SMEs and Craftsman Firms, the development of new abilities, in order to generate visions and interpreting the signs of these transformations.

It is already proved that, in the future, the companies will not be able to innovate only by means of a strictly technological investment. Looking from this perspective, where companies move towards strategic requirements, design is becoming essential as value of the product-system. In its latest definition (even if not yet univocally established) the design discipline has definitely evolved from the status of "applied-art" or "artistic-creative" discipline, thanks to its multi-disciplinary (or *multiversa*) (Bertola, Manzini, 2004) core, acquiring dignity, as well at economic and managerial level (Fortis 2005, Bettiol Micelli 2005, Rullani 2004...), as possible or even unique way to innovate the system of Italian SMEs.

Following this point of view, the paper presents a specific tool (DAC_Link) that, starting from the principle of using ICT to create communities, aims at creating a permanent meeting place to exchange knowledge and generate innovative projects changing the relation between *young designers* and SMEs *design unconscious*. The tool aims to define a *virtually shared arena*, a place to generate *collective intelligence* (Lévy 1996), supported by both University and Entrepreneurial Associations as *trust generators* (Fukuyama 1996).

DAC_Link capitalises on the potentiality of web 2.0 (<http://tim.oreilly.com/>), properly "Social Read/Write Web" (SRWW), where users can be editors, consumers, distributors and generators of content. Conveniently set, these characteristics create an *open source creative arena, low cost and low impact* to be used both from enterprises and young users.

This project represents the systematization and the rationalization of two years experiences and concrete experimentations within the project DAC Design for Arts & Craft (Arquilla 2006), implementally developed (DAC, DAC_Tool and DAC_Link), by a group of researchers of the INDACO Department of Politecnico di Milano, with the POLI.design Consortium and in collaboration with Confartigianato Brescia (funded by the Lombardy region and Unioncamere _ Convenzione Artigianato).

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Based upon the *action-research* framework, DAC exploits the mechanism of the *design knowledge and technology transfer* (Tasch A.F. 1995) through the *physical transfer of innovation agents* (newly graduate designers) into companies. With the researchers' support, this mechanism leads to developing product, service and communication projects together with the companies themselves. This model is called *human capital growth* (Romer 1989) and adds expertise to the company, in an *action-based perspective*. The project was developed through a practical process of *learning by doing* and *learning by interacting*, through which the companies (before *design unconscious*) had the chance to understand and apply the design innovation potentials, while young designers experienced real working situations, deepening technical knowledge on products and production processes.

The achieved results (38 projects realised with 34 companies on all levels of the production chain and 38 young designers) and the success obtained witness the value of this model, nevertheless finding a visible limit in the irregularity of the event. Therefore DAC_Link aims at structuring this kind of meeting, consolidating its results, starting and sharing new innovation processes through shared innovation.

In conclusion, the DAC_Link challenge is multi-layered:

- on a first level, shortening the gap between Design, SMEs and Hi-Tech Innovation by communicating how a *low risk strategy* based upon Design can produce long-term profitable results;
- on a second level, using Technology itself (Web) to Communicate innovation through new and empirically effective way of communication (*social networking*);
- on a third level, strengthening the relationship between Young Designers, University and SMEs through the Sector Associations' channels;
- afterwards, offering a service able to interpret the needs of young designers according to the constantly changing professional context, granting them a future after Graduation;
- finally, defining an online format that could best synthesize all these aspects into a usable and, above all, useful device: DAC_Link shows at last that shortening the gap between SMEs and Technology through Design means shortening the gap between SMEs and Design in a sustainable way.

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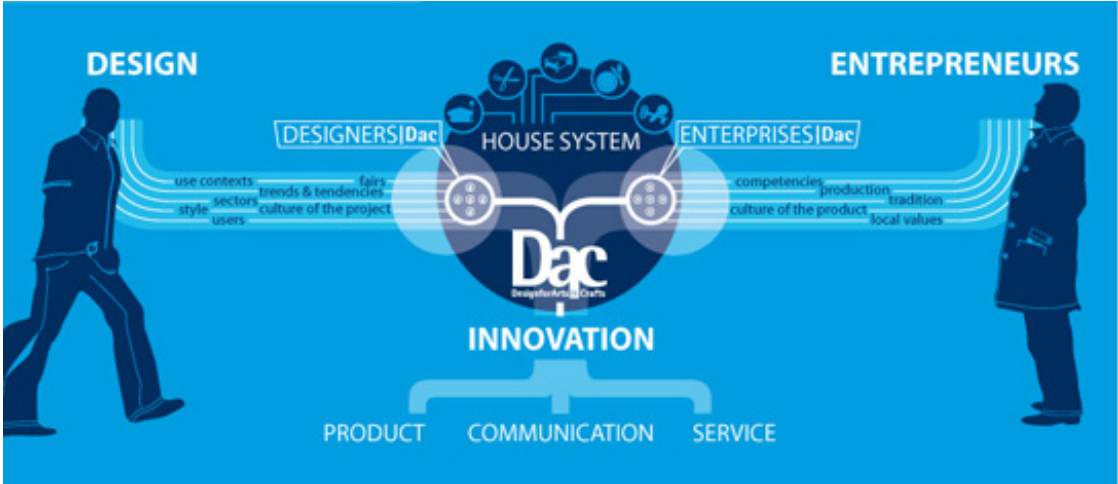


Fig. 1: original DAC model.
The scheme illustrates the process of the first DAC experience, which made 38 selected designers work upon multiform projects based on “house system” destined to 34 selected small enterprises. The keywords reveal the significant resources produced by the actors in game.

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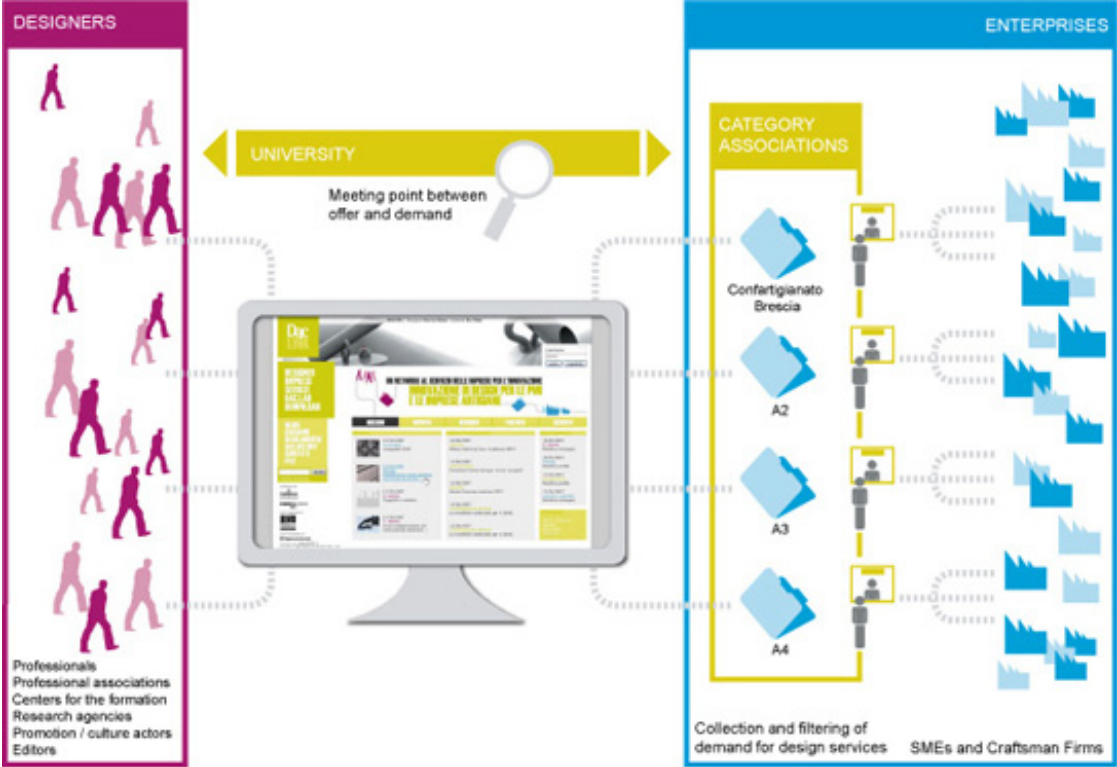


Fig. 2: DAC_Link, system model. It relies on the combined participation of the creative class with enterprises, in a process mediated by associations and coordinated by University. The model aims at extending the DAC experience from a local to a national and global level.

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