

Food as a form of care: designing social innovative processes and practices



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Abstract

Food in Italian culture is traditionally considered a form of care for others and, by definition, conviviality, and these concepts extend beyond the stages of preparation and consumption. If we also include the stages of cultivation, production and processing, the concept of care potentially expands far beyond caring for people. While the scientific and grey literature on food and social innovation is rich and extensive, there is still room to explore the relationship between food and *care*, especially regarding the contribution of design in making food a tool of care for people, the environment and cities. Building on these premises, the paper moves from the case of a social innovation policy in Milan to construct a preliminary conceptual interpretation of the relationship between food and the notion of care, exploring how design contributes to strengthening this relationship through shaping strategies and services and of empowering people with entrepreneurial and creative skills, nurturing an innovation culture in society at large. The study builds on the analysis of 7 cases incubated within the program The School of Neighborhoods, promoted by the Municipality of Milan and designed by a consortium of partners including the Polimi Desis Lab of Politecnico di Milano. With the purpose of laying the basis for a conceptual framework to be adopted in ONFoods (a project funded under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan in Italy with the aim of taking a substantial step toward the sustainability of food systems) the authors introduce an interpretation of the cases in which food is a way to: i) care for diversity and inclusion; ii) care for the neighborhood; iii) care for the environment; iv) care for the quality of work. The discourse around the case studies benefits from having been developed in a vibrant urban context in terms of food policies that help shape and expand the city's capacity for experimentation and innovation. The paper discusses the contribution of design in reshaping the notion of care through food, both in supporting the presented social innovation projects as well as in infrastructuring the scouting and incubation process that led to the generation of public value.

Author keywords

Design; care; food system; social innovation.

Introduction

Food has always been a central ingredient in the history of all people of the world. And this is particularly recognized in Italy,

where food is culture and where it is considered one of the highest expressions of caring for others (Montanari, 2011). Defining the dimension of conviviality and care in Italian society are above all the acts of preparing and transforming food and the ones of sharing and consuming it together, which are strongly and mainly related to the dimension of people. However, if we broaden the perspective to all stages of the food chain, from production to the recovery of surpluses or leftovers, there clearly emerges a potential space for the expansion of the concept of care from the primarily human-to-human relationship to the inclusion of the non-human world. The food system is, according to the authors, a paradigmatic sector in which to trigger change towards sustainability, leveraging both the definition of care as a guiding design principle and as an outcome of the design process itself (Meroni, 2012). To explore this area of work, two kinds of premises are needed: a preliminary reflection on the recent debate around care and a reference to the food system and related services as forms of social innovation.

For the purpose of this paper, with the term “care” we refer to the debate that defines care as a relational action of shared responsibility (Fisher and Tronto, 1991; de la Bellacasa 2017; Popke, 2006; Manzini, 2022). When care is considered a collective (not individual) and diffused process emerging from interactions and collaborations, it becomes a process of co-production (Manzini, 2022) involving a variety of subjects, mutually responsible to each other. These actors are all providers of competences, resources and knowledge as well as sharing the same potential attentive capacity which is at the basis of caring. This implies moving beyond the conception of care associated to a performative and delivering model, which envisages a relationship between a producer of care solutions and a person who expresses the need for them (the carer vs the cared for). In this sense the discourse is linked to both the idea of interdependency as well as to the one of caring communities (Krzyszowska, 2019; de la Bellacasa, 2017; Care Collective, 2020). The first acknowledges that our survival is always contingent on ‘others’, and thus on the health of the ecosystem, understood as the vitality of interactions between its species and the environment. The second one builds on enabling relationships of care that include a wider and “flatter landscape of interconnections” beyond humans (Krzyszowska, 2019), pointing to multiplying the potential and unusual subjects and forms of care. Moreover, it addresses a dimension of

proximity as trigger of such interconnections (Manzini, 2022). The Care Collective (2020) goes even further by defining care as promiscuous in its generation and deployment, assuming it to be extensive, diffused, indiscriminate, universal and inclusive. These ways of referring to care beyond conventional approaches can open a room for processes of change (Conradi, 2015) which, supported by emotional processes of awareness, belonging, hope and agency, can feed transformative imaginaries and practices. In Moriggi et al. (2020) everyday experiences and emotions are discussed as crucial determinants of decision-making and these emerge from, and drive practices of care. Indeed, “more radical, transformative change can be fostered via three mutually reinforcing dimensions: ethically informed practices; relational response-ability; and emotional awareness” (ibidem).

While the debate on linking sustainability and transformation to care is relatively recent, the scientific and grey literature on connecting the first two notions to the food system and social innovation are rich and extensive (Ardill, 2022; Viveiro-Pol et al., 2018; European Commission, 2021). In the words of António Guterres, United Nations Secretary-General, food systems hold the power to achieve our shared vision for a better world (UN, 2021). “A food system includes all the elements (environment, people, inputs, processes, infrastructure, institutions, etc.) and activities that relate to the production, processing, distribution, preparation and consumption of food. It also encompasses the outputs of these activities, including their socio-economic and environmental impacts. Food systems are complex, adaptive, multi-actor, multi-level and multi-functional systems that exhibit non-linear dynamics such as trade-offs, synergies and feedback loops. They are shaped by economic, environmental, political, technological and social factors, including cultural norms and lifestyles” (European Environment Agency, 2002). The impact of food systems is recognized as responsible for a third of global greenhouse gas emissions (Crippa et al., 2021) and addressed with strategies aiming at (e.g.: Farm to Fork European strategy) creating a sustainable system “that safeguards food security and protects people and the natural world” (ibidem). Being food so central to the personal and community values, social innovations are spreading within this sector as seeds of change, prototyping innovative partnership, forming new alliances and experimenting with different ways of producing, trading and consuming food. They testify the ambition to enable radical as well as aspirational shifts in lifestyles towards sustainability, and thus there’s an evident need of accelerating their growth, replicability and scaling up, out and deep. This is manifested by European and local policies, research projects and funding schemes, aiming on the one side to understand how to reinforce social innovation capacity to work efficiently and impact, and on the other side to monitor and evaluate their outcomes (AAVV, 2015). Design for social innovation, defined as designer capabilities and knowledge to support cases of social innovation, can contribute to make these initiatives more visible by helping to design, in a collaboration with users and stakeholders, their products, services, and communication strategies, through a set of approaches, sensibilities, and tools that are transverse and range from product to service design, from communication to interaction and strategic design (Manzini, 2015). The design discipline can also play a

role in establishing processes to recognize the seeds of social innovation in society and work to incubate them while empowering prospective social innovators and communities (Meroni, 2019; Meroni et al., 2017).

A case study

Over the last decade the city of Milan has witnessed a renewed attention for the food system as a way to experiment innovative service models and social innovation policies, as well as to feed new transformative scenarios for the city, citizens and the agricultural surrounding.

The role played by Expo 2015 “Feeding the Planet Energy for Life” has undoubtedly contributed to accelerate the birth and growth of programs and initiatives that were already emerging from local organizations, the academic and the private sector and, more important, has transformed and expanded the concept of food system into a system for sustainable development, evolution and care. The Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, launched by the Milan Municipality in 2015 is an international agreement committing cities “to develop sustainable food systems that are inclusive, resilient, safe and diverse, that provide healthy and affordable food to all people in a human rights-based framework, that minimize waste and conserve biodiversity while adapting to and mitigating impacts of climate change” (www.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org). On the basis of such agreement, the city of Milan has adopted a local Food Policy ¹ which created the conditions for additional activities to be prototyped on the topics of managing food waste and surplus (*Local Food Waste Hub*), establishing local food chains for food procurement (Local supply chains for canteens), opening hubs for biodiversity and sustainable production and distribution (Cascina Nosedo, Hearth Market), activating inclusive and accessible food practices (*Spesa Sospesa*, *Recup*, food donations). This renaissance goes beyond the food sector and pervades the city thanks to a series of public policies and private projects on social innovation contributing to shape its identity of vibrant, restless, city and to expand its capacity for experimentation and innovation (Clark et al, 2018). Within such context, the program presented in this paper is a 4-year social innovation policy from the Municipality of Milan, with the goal of giving shape to a process of emersion, scouting, support and growth able to benefit fragile outskirts of the city and to empower citizens in taking action and make things happen (Corubolo and Meroni, 2015).

The School of Neighborhoods

The School of Neighborhoods (2018–23) is a program initiated by the Municipality of Milan (co-funded by the European Union - European Social Fund, as part of the Metropolitan Cities Operational Program 2014–2020) to stimulate and enable social innovation in some disadvantaged areas of the city. The rationale of the School is to create a safe environment for education, experimentation and incubation of ideas proposed by citizens. With a low entrance barrier (an innovative and useful intuition responding to local needs is enough) people are encouraged to propose solutions able to improve the quality of life in the neighborhood. Aim of the program is to attract or make emerge ideas consistent with the strategy of the Municipality for the future of the city and desirable for creating public value: e.g. new models of aggregation,

1 <https://foodpolicymilano.org/>

food-related services, alternative forms of care and accessible and inclusive cultural initiatives.

The program was organized into 3 main cycles of scouting and incubation, impacting different areas of the city in the outskirts. Each cycle was slightly different from the previous one (also because of the outbreak of the CoVid Pandemic), lasted about one year and comprised 3 phases. The first phase consists of scouting and takes a form of *cultural-empowerment*: a free and open program of designed encounters to let needs and opportunities expressed by the neighborhoods meet prospective social innovators. The third phase of prototyping and accelerating solutions is a form of *technical-empowerment* (Meroni et al., 2017), providing personalized support and a project grant to co-finance the first year of activity. The second phase, which consists in an 'Advanced training' is in-between: on the one side, it is about supporting people to tackle challenges and invent innovative responses, on the other it deals with design solutions and developing entrepreneurial skills. An additional cycle of the program was launched in 2022, expanding its reach to the entire city and focusing on supporting the projects in the prototyping phase.

During these 4 years, the School of Neighborhoods was able to attract more than 200 proposals from citizens, and to support and fund 56 of them with a grant up to 30.000 euros each. Politecnico di Milano's Polimi Desis Lab, a research group focused on design for social innovation and sustainability, is involved in program design, delivery of training and incubation formats, and monitoring and analysis of solution scalability trajectories, conducted through field observations, reports and data, coaching sessions, and 1to1 interviews. Building on this knowledge, the authors selected 7 case studies that contribute to build a preliminary conceptual interpretation of the relationship between food (and related services) with the notion of care.

Caring for: expanding the concept through food related social innovations.

In the following paragraphs we will present the cases, describe how they contribute to expanding the concept of care, and how design can reinforce food-related services as tools of care.

Caring for diversity and inclusion

A first cluster moves from the willingness of leveraging food to established connections and links between cultures, to design inclusive and participatory processes of learning and exchange, and to impact on the beneficiaries by involving them in the production of food.

Forno Condiviso aims at strengthening "a community around bread". Through a pop-up, nomadic format of baking together, the solution is envisioned both 'as a school for those who want to learn and a workshop for those who want to experiment' (Forno condiviso, 2021). Partnering with neighborhood kitchens and proposing recipes from cultures represented in the neighborhood, it prototypes a place for learning and building trust and empathy across different backgrounds.

Moving from the same values of diversity and inclusivity, Co-cooking Lab proposes ethnic and circular workshops where "Co-Cookers" (non-professional cooks from immigration backgrounds) teach a class of "Co-Labers" how to prepare typical dishes from their own country, using food surpluses from local markets and sharing the meals during convivial dinners.

These two cases bridge the cultural and convivial dimension of food with a process of care for fragile communities, by involvement, empowerment and upskilling of their members, by creating services and places of learning and practice based on multiculturalism, trust and empathy, and by linking them to nearby enterprises.

Caring for the neighborhood

A second cluster gathers solutions that propose a form of care towards the neighborhood, mainly through service models that activate local production chains and transform food into new products to be distributed through multifunctional spaces and informal networks.

This is the case of *Ibrida*: a community beer that gives a second life to unsold bread recovered from neighborhood bakeries. It is produced in collaboration with marginal areas of the city, to support local entrepreneurship and promote short supply chains. By envisioning itself as an encounter between local breweries, bakeries, and urban gardens, *Ibrida* supports community building: stakeholders act in a double role of promoters and beneficiaries of connections, thus strengthening community's identity, sense of belonging and ability to contribute to its wealth.

Also based on the scale of the neighborhood, *Labciocojob* is a multifunctional place that aims to mix a coworking space with a chocolate workshop, so to "combine the idea of work with that of taste and the pleasure of being together." Its ambition is to support the social activities of the residents of the neighborhood, becoming a place where citizens' needs find attention through access to a welcoming and supportive space, a network of skills and likeminded actors.

In both cases, food is understood as a trigger for establishing and weaving unusual ties within the neighborhood (bakers and brewers, chocolate makers, co-workers, and citizens), which is manifested through spaces, products, and services offered to the community. Food is thus a means of caring for the vulnerable ties of a community, its social and economic fabric, and activates collaborations that can strengthen it from within.

Caring for the environment

A third cluster is related to the environment, gathering cases that promote participatory projects for the renewal of urban spaces with productive and non-productive vocations, the reduction of the use of materials and the disintermediation between producers and consumers.

Ortaja aims at becoming the neighborhood reference point for sustainable initiatives linked to the world of food, agriculture and environmental protection. By disintermediating and making the purchase of sustainable goods more accessible and distributed, by activating projects of urban farming, renovation and cleaning of urban spaces, and by proposing courses, festivals, and cultural initiatives, *Ortaja* has the ambition of stimulating inhabitants to become active players in the rebirth of their neighborhood.

Localized in the biggest peri-urban park of the city, *Fermenta* works on the protection of biodiversity through the participative and collaborative production of fermented beverages. By opening a reflection on the relationship between food, well-being and the environment, the project aims to raise awareness of the impact of food production on ecosystems and climate change, as well as the health consequences. Thus,

the production of fermented flavored beverages is a driver of the relationship between communities and their territories, preserving them and redirecting them toward the production of collective well-being.

These two services are thought as integrated ecosystems offering viable alternatives to the mainstream food systems: they are not individual but community actions of care towards the environment, its biodiversity, and its capacity of regeneration. To recognize the interdependence between humans and the environment is to recognize a dialectical relationship in which the environment shapes humans as much as humans shape the environment (Booth, 2013).

Caring for the quality of work

A final cluster focuses on supporting actors in the entire food supply chain for socio-environmental regeneration through forms of work that respect people, communities, and lands.

Soulfood Forestfarms works on regenerative agroforestry for ecological and cultural transition, enabling it by actively involving private players, entrepreneurs, and farmers as well as citizens as coproducers of food. Advanced educational and experimental formats dedicated to professional farmers are combined with companies' sustainability strategies and with cultural initiatives of citizens' involvement. To give sustainability to agro-ecological production systems, *Soulfood farm* aims at activating a new socio-economic-cultural paradigm in which consumption chains are defined designed with local communities, and consumers become protagonists of territorial regeneration in support and integration to the agricultural organizations. Culturally based urban regeneration practices are indeed those who follow a co-creation approach in their design and development, thus exploring the feasibility of an effective transition towards a more sustainable food system. For creating innovative agricultural ventures based on a solid ecological infrastructure, this practice points out that is necessary to support the redesign of food products and services while maintaining production capacity and enhancing the existing resources.

Discussion

The clusters are a first attempt to define how food (and related services) can expand the notion of care beyond the conventional delivering model, by placing this concept at the center of the design process, these cases reinforce their objective of pursuing and proposing alternative and more sustainable ways of living. Although placed in one group, each practice overlaps with all, reflecting the fact that all these social innovations take on care as a broader notion, which may emerge in one predominant element (e.g., caring for the environment) in the pursuit of which it simultaneously activates other forms of care (toward diversity, community, etc.), thus reinforcing the idea that care must be understood as an integrated and systemic process. More specifically, it is possible to recognize common logics that allow care to be amplified. These logics can in turn be supported and sustained by the discipline of design:

- » *a systemic logic*: many practices, while starting from a specific need or on a particular sector, seek to consider the complex system of relationships and dependencies from which health and wellbeing derive. They also seek to leverage dependencies and emotional bonds to regenerate these interrelations, becoming

seeds for processes of care and just transition. In this case design, bringing a system perspective and using methodologies that allow for the consideration of multiple perspectives, objectives and impacts, allows to address multifaceted challenges as those of the case studies.

- » *a collaborative and inclusive logic*: almost all the case presented are services that imply an active collaboration of the actors involved and shared responsibility: transforming consumers into partners and co-producers, opening up to codesign, activating participatory and collaborative service models. Design, giving shape to these interactions (in time, roles, and space), makes it possible to conceive care as a viable, and effective co-production process. Furthermore, a codesign approach allows for more inclusive solutions to be imagined, addressing the perspectives of diverse and often overlooked stakeholder groups.
- » *a resilient and adaptative logic*: design can support social innovators in shaping solutions adaptable and resilient to change, by using a human-centered design approach, incorporating principles of systems thinking and service design, and designing for modularity and scalability. Additionally, design educates to adopt a continuous prototyping mode: ideas are rapidly tested, monitored and improved. This helps create solutions that provide benefits over time and that adapt to changing circumstances without losing the capacity of producing public value.

When it comes to designing food systems that aim to make a difference in sustainability, initiate processes of change *from farm to fork*, and achieve social impact, adopting a perspective of care can help frame the contribution that design can make. As we have argued, curation can be enabled by the combination of different design logics (emotional and rational, personal and collective, collaborative and systemic) in a co-design dialogue with innovators who can work to address various needs where food can be a component of broader solutions and service offerings.

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