

PROCEEDINGS

Cultures, Practices,
and Change 02



third international conference
of the journal *Scuola Democratica*

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and/
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University of Cagliari
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Education never stands still—it moves, adapts, and transform in response to new realities, while reshaping society in turn. This collection explores some forces defining learning today: digital tools, intercultural dialogue, artistic expression, and the call for ecological responsibility. At its core, education remains a space for negotiation and reinvention.

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Vol. 2

**Cultures,
Practices,
and Change**

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THE UPTURNED SCHOOL: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY EDUCATIONAL CO-DESIGN EXPERIENCE FOR 'EDUCATING FURNISHINGS' AND UNCONVENTIONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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This contribution aims to explore the pioneering vision of the 'upturned school' as an innovative educational paradigm for the learning of children and young teens. This vision is rooted in anti-authoritarianism, individual freedom, and participation, in a perspective, still relevant today, that invites us to rethink the school as a contemporary environment, freed from ministerial rigidity and capable of reflecting the evolution of educational needs (De Carlo, 1968). Aware that from the formation of children can derive the creation of a future society that is more or less free and creative (Munari, 1977), and that this formation can take place through that "very serious business useful for understanding the world" that is play (Mari, 2011), the upturned school promotes an unconventional learning environment. This environment is designed so that young people can innovate and transform thinking into reality. Inspired by the ideas of 'prepared environment' (Montessori, 1931) and environment as a 'third teacher' (Malaguzzi, 2010), it is rooted in a fundamental question: if teaching aims to train and teach how to think, how to live in today's world, how can school train people, if it does not pose the question of bringing young people closer to the very concept of happiness? (Santojanni, 2016). In this complex framework of positions, questions, and expectations, a didactic workshop experimentation was launched involving students and teachers of the CdL in Community Design of the 'Federico II' University of Naples, joined by lecturers from the Humanities Department, in the development of a co-design process with the 'Europa Unita' State Comprehensive Institute in the Salicelle district of Afragola (NA). The interdisciplinary approach supports an operational methodology where the pedagogical design of learning environments coexists with the architectural design of spaces, furniture, and educational objects. The latter were co-designed starting from the needs and desires of the school community and based on pedagogical criteria that revolve around certain keywords relating to the current experimental models of education, which promote the idea of interaction, flexibility, and open to the world of the implicit. The design outcomes – presented in November 2023 as part of the 3rd edition of the "Afragola Film Festival of Architecture and Design – Beyond the Vision" – are proposed as evolving answers, versatile containers for nurturing thought, "elastic" containers that expand the spatial dimension, opening the school to places, territories, the world, cultures. These environments are conceived as labs where nature and artifacts mix and coexist dynamically, where the interior is an intimate space that becomes plural as it opens up relationships. Within this framework, the construction of a more inclusive, sustainable educational future inspired by

children's creativity takes a bold step forward and welcomes the non-conformist utopia, which gives backspace to the pleasure of life (Vittoria, 1987). In this way, children and youths, as social innovators, become the protagonists of peer experimentation, capable of challenging the adult world, and can play the role of 'pattern destroyers' and activators of visionary 'models' of a desirable future.

Co-design experience, Interdisciplinary Approach, Learning environment, Pedagogical Models

INTRODUCTION

The 21st-century school faces a crucial challenge: preparing new generations for an uncertain and ever-changing future while fostering well-being and resilience. This goal requires rethinking traditional educational models, emphasizing the integration of disciplinary knowledge and transversal skills. Such integration transforms schools into environments simulating contemporary challenges, teaching students to address them while going beyond the transmission of knowledge, seeking to mitigate the risks of error and illusion (Morin, 2015). Education, by bridging thoughts and knowledge, transcends misunderstanding and fosters the recognition of others through the ethics of dialogue. It must nurture, from early childhood, a vision of the future rooted in care for oneself, others, and the community (Manzini & Jégou, 2003). This path values quality of life over economic rewards, rethinks lifestyles, safeguards the environment, and broadens our concern to humanity as a whole (Norman, 2024).

Within this framework, the "Upturned School" emerged—an interdisciplinary educational experiment involving first-year undergraduate students from the Bachelor's in Community Design (Co.De.) at the DiARC, Department of Architecture, "Federico II" University of Naples, and 3rd-grade pupils from the I.C. "Europa Unità" in the Salicelle district of Afragola (NA). Their interaction revealed a model redefining education, starting with learning environment objects to offer tools for meeting contemporary challenges.

As part of the "Materials, Technologies and Structures for Design Studio", ¹ the innovative contribution of design to creating furniture and materials for primary schools was explored, employing co-design approaches. This initiative arose through a co-creation process involving children, teachers, and experts in pedagogy, design, technology, and architecture, envisioning environments both stimulating and welcoming.

¹ The Studio, divided into two sections, A and B, took place during the 2nd semester of the a.y. 2022-23. It was structured around 3 modules: Technologies and Processes for Design (Proff. Block and Falotico), Structures for Design (Proff. Portioli and Cascini), and Materials for Design (Proff. Liguori and Caputo).

The school was reimagined not as a static container but as an organism populated by objects reflecting children's needs, fostering the flourishing of imagination (Meschiari, 2020). This aligns with European and national policies, including the European Green Deal's "Priority Themes of the European Education Area" and the "Goal 4 – Quality Education" of the 17 SDGs in the 2030 Agenda, which promote equitable, inclusive, experiential, and practical learning.

Children provided insights into their educational and recreational needs through drawings and interviews. Complementing this, seminars enriched students' knowledge, supporting concept development and refinement. Noteworthy lectures included "Educational Design for Learning Environments" and "Safety and Compliance of Furniture Products: Focus on Childhood and School Furnishings".² These sessions bridged pedagogical theories and regulatory frameworks, enabling informed and meaningful design solutions.

1. THE THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Faced with the growing complexity and multi-disciplinarity of the design process, a three-phase approach was defined, guided by Munari-inspired methods emphasizing "tactile design" and play to develop ways of proceeding to arrive at a solution to a problem (Munari, 1981). The Studio combined theoretical insights, such as the environment as a "third educator" (Malaguzzi, 2010), with hands-on exercises to connect with the truth of things (Pallasmaa, 1996).

The studio explored innovative schools by examining drivers of change in learning spaces, analysing operational models and real-world examples in Italy and abroad, and identifying areas for improvement through research insights.³

The project embraced student-centred learning, using experiential approaches to foster growth and inclusion, aligning with INDIRE's "Manifesto 1+4 Educational Spaces" and its effective strategies for learning environments (Tosi, 2018). The studio explored pedagogical theories and their spatial implications, focusing on Maria Montessori's "prepared environment" and its adoption abroad. Hermann Hertzberger's "Open School" exemplifies the importance of creating "non-official-spaces" – areas defined by interactions and activities rather than fixed functions – highlighting the role of design in fostering dynamic educational environments. (Hertzberger, 2019).

The inquiry explored shifts from traditional didactic models to innovative learning paradigms, driven by constructivist theory⁴. These principles informed

² The lectures were delivered, respectively, by Prof. Flavia Santoianni from the Department of Humanities at the Federico II University, and by Dr. Serena Petaccia and Dr. Arianna Visintin from the company CATAS.

³ In particular, the latest School Building Report published by the Fondazione Agnelli, which has long been committed to promoting innovation in education and training.

⁴ In particular, reference is made to Piagetian neo-constructivism, which has challenged the idea of stage-based structures of knowledge, moving toward more flexible structures of knowledge (see Gopnik, A., Meltzoff, A.N., *Constructing the World: A Theory of Cognitive Development*, McGraw-Hill, Milan, 2000. Carey S., Gelman R. (1991), *The Epigenesis of Mind*,

methodological activities where students developed prototypes of educational devices, embracing play as a meaningful way to understand the world (Mari, 2011). A systemic approach analysed the performance, material, and usability of innovative furniture, involving deconstruction and reintegration to create scaled models for classrooms, hallways, and outdoor school areas.

The central element of the studio, serving as a bridge between the theoretical-methodological phase and the design phase, was the direct involvement of children as end-users, guided by the goal of forming individuals bringing young people closer to the very concept of happiness (Santoanni, 2016).

Through interviews and drawings, children expressed their needs, offering valuable insights for designing “educational furnishings”. Developed with flexibility, integration, and personalization, these designs foster inclusive, participatory spaces that support learning and empower children to innovate and bring their ideas to life, reflecting Munari’s (1977) belief in education’s power to shape a freer, more creative future society.

Fig. 1. Exhibition panels explaining the translation of children’s desires into “educational furnishings” projects (edited by B. Toledo and L. Montella, 2023)



2. DESIGN OUTCOMES IN EXHIBITION

The results of the design experimentation were presented in November 2023 during the third edition of the “Film Festival of Architecture and Design in Afragola – Beyond Vision”, emerging as dynamic and evolving responses.

During the study day, it became evident that the approach adopted promotes experiential and informal learning, fostering participation and creativity as tools to challenge traditional models and imagine new educational scenarios.

Fig. 2. Some Images of the Study Day (photo by M. Block, 2023).



A critical retrospective analysis of the pedagogical criteria guiding the co-construction of the furnishings and educational objects – focused on key terms relevant to contemporary and experimental education – allowed for the articulation of a clear and structured narrative of a “formative design of learning environments”.

In the context of the experimentation, two main types of educational models emerge: “experimental models”, which explore new forms of learning and interaction, and “current models”, which integrate identity and sharing with a more established approach (Santoianni, 2017).

The “experimental models” of education emphasize interaction and flexibility, fostering openness to the implicit world of experience (Reber & Allen, 2022). These principles are exemplified by projects such as *Kids Kaleido*, a sensory garden with four platforms dedicated to stimulating hearing, sight, touch, and smell. Similarly, *Jump On* presents a sensory pathway where students generate music through play and physical activity. *EduMotion* features a modular system for outdoor free-body games, encouraging movement and peer interaction.

The bodily dimension in learning is further highlighted by *Sempering*, a mat divided into sections teaching colors, numbers, fruits, and animals, integrating cognitive and physical learning. *Giostrina*, made from recycled colorful materials, combines

sustainability with sensory stimulation for perceptual development. *Cart*, a multi-functional cart, inspires creativity by offering diverse uses for children.

In school environments, *COC*, a furniture system based on collaboration, organization, and composition, and *Kuber*, an informal study station with mobile structures for individual and group activities, promote flexibility. Additional examples include *Emotional Wall* and *Ties*, colorful modules for diverse activities engaging the emotional dimension. The *Ruota delle Emozioni* encourages emotional expression, while *Totorem*, a modular and transformable “gentle giant”, integrates collective and imaginary identity in classrooms.

Projects like *Tavuli*, *8 AGON*, and *Othoni* stimulate curiosity, collaboration, and creativity through transformable forms, fostering implicit learning. Along this line is *TreeTris*, a furniture system evoking the organic nature of knowledge, complemented by *Code Flower*, a flower-shaped desk symbolizing the connection to nature.

The *re-CIRCLE* project creates a psychomotor pathway using modular containers to teach waste sorting, enhancing perception through colors, sounds, and lights (Santojanni, 2010).

The “current models” of education are characterised by their focus on the concepts of identity, sharing, and balance (Wenger et al., 2002). The interconnection between individuals is expressed through projects such as *Rainbow Circle*, which symbolises unity as a collective strength, and the *Ponte dell’Accoglienza*, a symbolic structure that connects diverse identities and reduces cultural and social distances. Other projects, such as the one dedicated to fragility and the *Casa dell’Accoglienza*, explore the emotional impact of diversity, fostering an inclusive and empathetic approach to education.

Bee Your Bee, a system of modular niches for play and study, and *Sundome*, a refuge space designed to protect without isolating, exemplify child-centred educational design that also encourages sharing.

Projects such as *31salvitutti*, a safe haven for every student, further highlight the integration of protection, creativity, and collective participation in educational spaces.

Finally, tools such as *Tino il cestino*, a metaphor for the interweaving of diverse identities, and *Colored Belt*, a belt made from recycled materials that becomes a socialisation game, demonstrate how educational design can foster innovation and interaction through active and shared engagement.

The composition of these educational furnishings, deliberately free and adaptable to diverse contexts, aims to anticipate learning environments conceived as laboratories where nature and artifacts blend and coexist dynamically.

DESIGN x la SCUOLA

progettazione di arredi e oggetti educanti per gli ambienti di apprendimento

A cura di **Flavia Santoanni**

La **progettazione formativa di ambienti di apprendimento** si può esprimere attraverso la progettazione architettonica di arredi e oggetti educanti. In questo progetto, gli arredi e oggetti educanti sono stati co-costruiti sulla base di criteri pedagogici che ruotano intorno ad alcune parole chiave relative alla formazione attuale e sperimentale.

I modelli **SPERIMENTALI** della formazione promuovono l'idea di **INTERAZIONE**, di **FLESSIBILITÀ** e aprono al mondo dell'**IMPLICITO**.

INTERAZIONE e **FLESSIBILITÀ** caratterizzano i progetti per l'esterno come **Kids Kaleido**, un giardino sensoriale composto da quattro pedane in cui ciascuna rappresenta la possibilità di stimolare l'udito, la vista, il tatto oppure l'olfatto. Interpreta la conoscenza incorporata e l'apprendere con il corpo come **Jump on**, un percorso sensoriale in cui gli studenti possono produrre musica, divertirsi e giocare oppure **EduMotion**, un insieme di moduli per stare insieme all'aperto con giochi a corpo libero. Il corpo è protagonista dell'esperienza, che diventa condivisa nel **Tappeto Interattivo**, un tappeto-gioco diviso in quattro aree che consentono di imparare colori, numeri, frutta e animali. Ideato per i bambini più piccoli, coinvolge la dimensione corporea nell'apprendimento insieme a **Giostrina** che utilizza materiali riciclati e colorati per lo sviluppo percettivo. **Cart** collega esterno e interno, è un carrello funzionale, che può servire in più modi aprendo la mente del bambino all'idea di diverse possibilità creative.

Kuber

Emotional Wall e Tiles sono sistemi di moduli colorati che possono servire per attività diverse e coinvolgono la dimensione emotiva, come la **Ruota delle emozioni**, un gioco per esprimere ciò che si prova. **Tavuli** è un oggetto educante che vuole lasciare gli studenti liberi di fare esperienze. Stimola l'esplorazione costruttiva, la curiosità e la collaborazione. È trasformabile, adattabile, promuove la creatività e l'**IMPLICITO**, perché gli studenti possono intuire le possibilità trasformative dell'oggetto senza che gli vengano esplicitamente spiegate, come **8 AGON** e **Tavolo EM**, che mostra in modo implicito la creatività negli ambienti di formazione, promuovendo ambienti con diverse configurazioni e allestimenti sensoriali.

tavuli

TreeTris è un sistema di arredo classe che incontra l'idea della conoscenza come organismo, radicata all'interno di un ambiente naturale che viene suggerito implicitamente, come in **Cade flower**, un banco a forma di fiore che si richiama alla natura. Implicito è anche il percorso psicomotorio di **re-CIRCLE**, un sistema di contenitori modulari attraverso il quale gli studenti apprendono la raccolta dei rifiuti utilizzando il corpo e valorizzando la stimolazione percettiva con diversi colori, suoni, luci.

I modelli **ATTUALI** della formazione condividono l'idea di **IDENTITÀ**, di **MISURA** e di **CONDIVISIONE**.

I concetti di **IDENTITÀ** e di **CONDIVISIONE** hanno preso forma in **Rainbow Circle** che mostra l'interconnessione tra le persone; l'unione, anche e soprattutto tra persone diverse, fa la forza; nel ponte dell'accoglienza, che costruisce una relazione tra identità diverse e consente, attraverso la sua costruzione, di collegare le distanze tra sponde che si trovano lontane, avvicinandole; oppure nel progetto **Fragile/ Anti-fragile** che riconosce l'impatto emotivo legato al concetto di diversità e nella **Casa della Accoglienza**. **Tino** il cestino utilizza come metafora l'intreccio delle diverse identità e nello stesso tempo ripensa l'ambiente in modo flessibile promuovendo interazione attiva che produce innovazione.

L'apprendimento attuale è **A MISURA** di studente. **Alveare**, nicchie componibili per il gioco e lo studio, hanno un potenziale educativo che risiede nell'immaginare spazi a misura di bambino e nello stesso tempo nell'incentivare la condivisione, mentre **Sundome**, uno spazio rifugio per i bambini dove possono giocare e studiare, protegge ma non copre, separa ma non isola, come **3salvitutti**, un rifugio che consente ai bambini di stare insieme per giocare e studiare.

Sundome

Fig. 4. Some Images of the Exhibition Setup (photo by M. Block, 2023)



These spaces transform interior intimacy into plural experiences as they open up to relationships and invite us to rethink the school as a contemporary environment, freed from ministerial rigidity and reflective of the evolving needs of education (De Carlo, 1968). This framework seeks to take a bold step toward building a more inclusive, sustainable, and creatively inspired educational future, one that embraces a visionary ideal that challenges conformity and rekindles the delight of living (Vittoria, 1987). In this context, children and youth, as social innovators, actively shape desirable futures and redefine the boundaries of traditional educational paradigms.

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As the **main organizer** of the conference, **Scuola democratica – Learning for Democracy** is a cultural association and academic journal dedicated to enriching the scientific and cultural debate on school, university, education, work, and lifelong learning in an organic and cross-cutting manner. Scuola democratica is supported by a scientific network of more than 100 scholars and aims to be a meeting ground, nationally and internationally, between the various disciplines concerned with issues in education and training.



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