

Resonances: Listening as a Tool for Trans-Cultural Storytelling

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1. Catalyst Information

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2. Context of Conversation Topic

As designers, we are often called to focus and extract information from the public and civic context, and elaborate them into insights and research purposes that will inform design projects. Storytelling is one of the most important tools in the research toolbox to communicate the insights we collect in the field, and to engage the research participants, and it is grandly challenged when it faces to serve people and cultures: how are stories built? How will plots, characters, and narrations be orchestrated? Which culture of reference will be displayed? Which critical translations will be performed?

During this active conversation with the participants, we will share and discuss principles and recommendations for a design toolkit for storytelling that leverages *listening* as the key pathway to shape stories across cultures and contexts.

2.1 About the stories from the field

From the experience we collected in design research, we have identified the act of listening - meaning being actively receptive - as the primary action of effective storytelling, with a critical impact on any of the strategies we put in place, being those used to create meaningful relationships with the research participants (listening to learn), or to display research results in a compelling way (listening to create).

We usually associate listening to the act of receiving, but we suggest that design could practice the listening as a property of giving, such as a property of creativity (Valsecchi, Tassi, 2016). Forms and outcomes of a creativity based on receptiveness are more likely beneficial to a storytelling practice that respects and seeks for diversity as an asset for the sustainability among cultures, being therefore a tool for exploration more than expression.

Moreover, respectful storytelling is the outcome of cultural negotiation. In design words, the anthropology notion of transculturality (Welsch 1999) had been an intellectual innovation by redefining the whole concept of culture: “transcultural” is a creative word, and a projection into the future, a vision of cultures that can evolve and mutate reciprocally instead that being normalized. In anthropology, in the complex folding of subjective and social globalisation, individuals already lost their original cultural identity, in favour of the common ground of being in transformation. As if convergence and synchronicity on the future will take over the cultural controversies at the present.

2.2 Exploring future possibilities by embracing the diversity of today's stories

Developing tools to work with controversies and diverging ideas is a key challenge for the design community, a challenge that has been often posed in the last decade (Latour 2008; Margolin 2007; Manzini and Coad 2015), but that we believe still needs to be fully tackled, particularly in processes of design as future-making.

Thinking about the future is always problematic. Current choices and actions might lead to a large number of probable, plausible, or just possible futures (Voros 2003), and, just like presents, futures are not homogeneous entities. Many different scenarios may coexist for different people and the community at any time. Design is arguably the discipline that more than others is concerned both with making meaning visible and legible, and inventing and realizing new possible futures. As such, it can play a crucial role in designing scenarios as “spaces for agonism”, i.e. processes and means to enable creative confrontations between conflicting views (DiSalvo 2010; Mouffe 2009). This “spaces of agonism” is where possibilities can be explored and preferences can be expressed.

During the conversation we will investigate the potentials and limits of listening as a design research tool, sharing insights and discussing how cultural translations require us to re-create identities, establish platforms for dialogue and react to the context, to be able to listen and research through stories. We will try to shape together a toolkit for listening, and understand how it can help shape conversations around the future.

2.3 Structure of the conversation

The conversation will start by briefly introducing the concept of listening as part of design and storytelling (10 minutes), to then engaging participants by collecting their perspectives in terms of key challenges they have experienced thinking of listening within design research processes, or being involved in the users' side (15 minutes).

All the contributions will be mapped in the light of a proposed framework (identity, dialogue, context), looking for affinities and recurrent problems as key items to be addressed with a possible set of recommendations and suggestions (20 minutes).

In the second part of the conversations, the catalysts will share three different stories from the field to further discuss the key challenges emerged through the previous mapping exercise. The stories will provide rich inspirations in terms of approaches and tools experimented in different cultural contexts - we will ask the audience to note down and discuss the most relevant aspects, ask questions, share ideas, to gradually establish the foundation of a possible listening toolkit for design researchers (45 minutes).

We will then reflect on the roles that tools for active listening and for mapping stories and ideas can play when designing possible futures. To do so, we will briefly introduce few examples of future scenarios and speculative visual artefacts built through the juxtaposition of divergent and often conflicting points of view. We will use these examples (and others from the session) as a starting point for a conversation on their agency and potential in the context of current challenges and possible research directions for the future.

3. Organizing research question

What are the main reflections and tools that can help designers pursuing listening as a way to collect stories and give them a voice? We will try to tackle this question in two different steps: 1) what are the challenges in terms of identity, dialogue and context that need to be considered and handled for an effective listening? 2) How can processes of listening and designing scenarios based on a plurality of views help us find and build new optimistic possibilities for the future?

4. Setting Up

We aim to create a 2-hour long convivial conversation, that will alternate moments in which the catalyst will guide and share their perspectives with moments in which the participants will be asked to proactively contribute (see 2.3 Structure of the conversation).

During the first part of the session two catalysts (F+R) will be the engaging actors to discuss listening in terms of challenges, and reflect on the aspects of identity, dialogue, and context in terms of criticalities and recommendations while the other two catalysts (S+P) will map the conversation through notes and drawings. The role will be inverted during the last part, where (S+P) will summarize the emerging reflections and link them to a real example showing how to use listening to shape future scenarios.

Using co-design tools (Chueng-Nainby et al. 2015; Cruickshank et al. 2013), the conversation will be mapped as it happens, to visually capture inputs from the participants and cluster principles and recommendations into building blocks for the design story-listening toolkit. At the end of the day, we will capture the conversation map with photos and assemble a 'Resonances' mini-zine that will be printed and distributed the next day to each participant.

5. Type of space and equipment required

We will need an informal space that allows the team to discuss as a single group (for example by seating in a circle) and a wall or large tables available for mapping our conversation in a way that is visible to everybody. We will bring our stories, photo-cameras, and a portable printer to produce and distribute the mini-zine at the end of the conversation. A magnetic board would be a plus.

6. Dissemination strategy

The 'Resonances' mini-zine that participants will receive will include a summary of the conversation, a brief version of the stories presented at the session, and instructions on how to access the toolkit online. The zine will be also made available online. At the session, we will consider possible ways to further the conversations beyond the event (for example, on a mailing list, social media, or a blog).

We also plan to incorporate the learning in our researches at two different levels: on one side we will keep working on the concept of listening in storytelling, enhancing the first reflection published as part of the collection *The Pearl Diver: The Designer as Storyteller* - towards the definition of a shareable toolkit. On the other side we will continue experimenting with tools for capturing conversations without direct engagement of designers, as part of the research around *Visual Conversations on Urban Futures*.

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Dr. Francesca Valsecchi's research focuses in the areas of digital social innovation, design and (visual) cultures, and open design. She is based in China since a decade. Her practice advocates for more space for information and visual literacy within the social and cultural context of Asian development.

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Roberta Tassi, Principal Designer at frog and Adjunct Professor at Politecnico di Milano, focuses on exploring the role of visual tools in ethnography and co-design processes through academic and professional research (field experiences in Europe, North America, Asia and Africa).

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