7. Framing designing practices from the margins. The case of Off Campus San Vittore

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This chapter discusses the original contribution coming out of the research activities we, as part of the ImagisLab research group, are conducting in dialogue between prison and society, proposing designing as a collaborative generative practice towards the shaping and sharing of brand-new language out of the pluriverse pushing calls from the margins of society. According to Hannah Arendt (1958), storytelling paves the way to the construction of the public space, considered as a space of inquiry, of identification of common interests, and of (public) discourse building. This practice-based contribution offers both a phenomenological and theoretical framework to the ethical design dimension for public and social systems, and it represents a prototype of designing that does not aim to resolve, but to make sense of, critical, pluriverse and transactional perspectives. It highlights key issues and potentialities in an increasingly polarized society of which prison is a reflection. We aim here to provide further meanings to support design agonism (DiSalvo, 2015) and social transformation by design, overturning marginalization as a problem to marginality as a site of resistance (hooks, 1984),

and showing how design can help generate new narratives, informed by the courage and contradictions of human conditions emerging from the margins of society.

Specifically, we address here our ongoing activities within Off Campus San Vittore (SV), a space of the Politecnico di Milano opened within the SV jail, where we are currently working at the production of participatory narratives to connect the inside to the outside world, putting them in a virtuous relation, identifying potentials (also for society at large) within the prison but also questioning prison's intersectional power dynamics (hooks, 1989; Quijano, 2020 and Mignolo, 2021) that trigger prison's social dynamics and exacerbate societal polarizations. Moreover, the *heterotopia* (Foucault, 1995) of prison functions as a *state of exception* (Agamben, 2003) evidencing societal (*bio*)*power* (Foucault, 2003, 2010) dynamics. Foucault (2003) identifies *biopolitics* as a kind of statification of the biological, working on a demographic scale.
The scientific, socio/political technologies and developments achieved between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries have made it possible to have an effect on the population, acting on issues such as epidemics, environmental conditions, and birth rates. Matters of natural life have become politically regulated.
Following Foucault's work on the birth of imprisonment as a punitive method, it could be argued that prison is a biopolitical invention, and that biopolitical tensions are reproduced on different scales and to different degrees on the various actors that live within the jail system.

By means of our exploration with a San Vittore Situated Vocabulary (SVSV) – an infrastructuring (Karasti, 2014) activity involving inmates, police officers in prison, educators, sanitary operators and volunteers, in generating a vocabulary of concepts key for those living/working/ volunteering in prison – we aim to bring together pluriversal (Escobar, 2018) and agonistic (Mouffe, 2013; DiSalvo, 2015) points of view on common subject matters. This enables us to explore how marginality can be considered *a site of resistance* (hooks, 1984), where language can hold a regenerative potential for society at large.
The SVSV keywords become entry points to the stories of oppression often to be found behind criminal biographies. These stories emerge

spontaneously in the StoryLab, a weekly workshop of collaborative storytelling and biographical stories collection with inmates.

In fact, by collecting inmates' stories, we are investigating how these fragments make sense of one's own human condition (Arendt, 1958) eliciting a collective reflection about contemporary society's injustices and issues of biopower. If the SVSV can be considered an *agora* (Arendt, 1958) for identifying/questioning or contesting understandings of common interests, StoryLab can be understood as the *theatre* (Arendt, 1958) where stories are enacted, enabling the identification of *heroes* (Arendt, 1958; Bertolotti *et al*., 2016), addressing common interests, and contributing to the construction of the common realm (of which the prison is an example).

These stories reveal an entanglement of bodies and politics, whose depictions are to be considered inherently biopolitical.

After a close exploration of the philosophical framework from which we depart (hooks, 1989; Foucault, 1990, 1995, 2003, 2010; Hartman, 2008; Freire, 2017), we will address how those key theoretical contributions are currently serving as a basis for our own experimentation, where the SVSV and the StoryLab interact to generate a critical discourse on prison's (and, conversely, societal) biopower dynamics, exploring how the narratives created from these *margins* (hooks, 1984) can work in both critical and affirmative ways, and function as an engine of societal transformation. Starting from this case study, the paper (re)assesses the political role of designers beyond a solutionist approach, as story listeners and facilitators of social transformations from the margins.

7.1 The theoretical framework

In Off Campus SV, we are currently exploring the potential of philosophical frameworks to enable reflective, critical and affirmative forms of designing practices in a prison environment. One of the philosophical insights we are using as a conceptual framework of our designing experimentations is Foucault's understanding of the prison as the place of the biopolitical *par excellence*.

A place whose violence needs to be unmasked and addressed:

> The real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize
> the workings of institutions that appear to be both neutral
> and independent, to criticize and attack them in such a manner
> that the political violence that has always exercised itself
> obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can
> fight against them (Chomsky and Foucault, 2006, p. 41).

In his seminal work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1995), Foucault explores story's ability to act as a counter-narrative to prevailing hegemonic narratives that perpetuate the *biopolitical process of inmates* (1995) dehumanization and marginalization. Through the act of telling their own stories, inmates experience their (under)explored potential to disrupt mainstream representations of criminality and punishment. In Foucault's understanding, stories possess the ability to re-assert humanity in contexts – such as prisons – where humanity, together with responsibility and freedom of self-determination, is often denied. In this sense, they can help to re-discover the denied, insulted humanity of those called by Paulo Freire (2017) the *oppressed*. This process of *liberation* (Freire, 2017) and self-emancipation can work in transformative ways, where the oppressed is not only freed from oppression, but in this act of self-determination also frees the oppressor, in a dialectic interplay between oppressor and oppressed:

> […] dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is not
> a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders vio-
> lence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed.
> Because it is a distortion of being more fully human, sooner or later
> being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those
> who made them so. In order for this struggle to have meaning,
> the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which
> is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors,
> but rather restorers of the humanity of both (Freire, 2017, p. 13).

Freire's method identifies key issues such as power dynamics under-pinning social oppression in situated contexts (Haraway, 1988). It explores how they resonate with diverse publics and questions

them. His method uses language's potential to address and name oppression, functioning as a dispositive of self-determination and re-affirmation of humanity (of both the oppressed and, dialectically, of the oppressors).

Foucault's idea of biopower and Freire's cathartic power of language intersects with Hartman's concept of *critical fabulation* (Hartman, 2008), articulating the empowering potential inherent in narratives of the past within oppressive contexts. In detail, it involves the reimagination of marginalized histories to challenge dominant narratives justifying prisoners' confinement, their *punishment* (Foucault, 1995), and to unveil hidden power dynamics. Critical fabulations offer a powerful lens through which to understand and engage with inmates' stories, often silenced or distorted by prevailing stereotypes, revealing the complexities of human lives entangled within the justice system. Through the fabulation of oppressed pasts – and, particularly, the narration of the unsayable, of the gaps in history retaining stories of violence and oppression – unexpressed disruptive, transformative potential can finally come to the surface. In the prison context, critical fabulation can help to both challenge hegemonic narratives as well enable inmates' self-determination, together with the re-affirmation of their own humanity, paving the way for identify in the past underseen potentials, which can function as sparks of future *roads to justice* (Staszowski and Tassinari, 2020). As such, it can work in prefigurative ways, supporting the envisioning of a future society (inside and outside prison), where humanity is more fully recognized, respected, and valued. By supporting processes of self-determination, critical fabulations work as acts of resistance from the *margins*. As such, they offer a method for resistance and subversion within the prison's system of control, surveillance, and biopower (Foucault, 1995), enabling inmates to rediscover agency over their own narratives, and to reclaim ownership of their own identities and agencies within an often disempowering, de-humanizing environment. Fabulations of an oppressed past holds a dialectic of *radical resistance* (hooks, 1987) against oppressive power structures. They can foster spaces for resistance coming from the *margins* of hegemonic, stigmatizing narratives, not allowing prisoners to have access to a *fuller humanity* (Freire, 2017) and right of self-determination.

7.2 The case study: Off Campus San Vittore

This theoretical framework is currently serving as a base for our experimentation at the SV prison in Milan. This prison stands as a symbol of Italian prison system, encapsulating a complex history and contemporary challenges. In 2022, Politecnico di Milano and SV jointly opened a space within the prison's walls, from which to re-frame design's role and responsibility in such a polarized and challenging context.
We are currently exploring the potential of our philosophical framework in the interplay between the two projects StoryLab and SVSV.

StoryLab is a weekly participatory storytelling workshop, held with the young-adult inmates (aged 18-27). Its main goals are to empower participants through the production of stories and to foster dialogues about detention within and outside the walls. The activity is carried out using a toolkit composed of a mix of visual and textual prompts, which was developed during previous research experiences (Ciancia, Piredda, 2022; Piredda *et al.*, 2022).

Inspired by the narrative-based design framework *Collecting-Crafting-Reframing* (Venditti, 2017; Ciancia *et al.*, 2021; Piredda, 2021; Piredda and Ciancia, 2022), the design activities are structured in three main phases:

1. collection of fragments: the participants are invited to choose from the toolkit images representing actions, places, characters, emotions, etc.;
2. story-telling: the participants narrate slices of life, anecdotes of their personal stories, mostly biographical issues elicited by the fragments selected;
3. content production and output realization: starting from the stories, participants create artefacts (for example, booklets), and the researchers further elaborate them into digital outputs. This process is implemented within the limits imposed by law and regulations in terms of privacy and the willingness to respect and protect the participants who are awaiting trial.

The narrative material collected is processed in different outputs, with the intention of both giving back to the participants as well as

communicating the collected stories to the outside world. Even more important is the relationship of trust that this weekly and enduring workshop allows us to build with the participants. Thanks to StoryLab, it finally becomes possible to speak, to be listened to, and to listen to others. This storytelling activity brings the participants closer to one another, enabling more personal, intimate forms of conversations. SVSV is an infrastructuring activity aimed at building a shared vocabulary between inmates, prison officers and operators, bringing together points of view in a shared, agonistic, collective discourse that is both dissensual (Mouffe, 2013) and pluriversal (Escobar, 2018).

Figure 1.
StoryLab. The toolkit.
Picture by Lab Immagine,
Design Department,
Politecnico di Milano.

Figure 2.
StoryLab. The booklet.

The SVSV revolves around a set of four words, chosen by the young adults in a participatory workshop. The meanings of these words are then discussed amongst them and with other key actors, to find new definitions filtered through their diverse experiences in the prison. These definitions compose together a situated vocabulary and are used to develop different kinds of outputs to be agonistically pro- posed and further discussed within public events, seminars, and wider panels of experts and civil society representatives. Arendt's conceptual framework can here help us to further articulate the political potential of words (Staszoswki and Tassinari, 2020).

Figure 3.
Situated Vocabulary of San Vittore (SVSV).
The words.

According to her (2017), human identity unfolds through action and speech and every personal manifestation of identity is enacted in an already existing web of human relationships, contributing to shape not only the personal identity, but also the life of those to come. In this light, identity is both relational and narrative. Drawing on Bruner's (1990) notion of agency as intentional states and Holzkamp's (1992) grounds for action, Jens Brockheimer (2009) proposes a view of narrative imagination as a practice of agency. Storymaking not only uses established cultural patterns, but also involves experiences, ideas that can reinterpret or break these patterns. Through the construction of meaning and the reworking

of one's experience as a storytelling subject, StoryLab and SVSV in their interplay hold the potential to bring the individual to reframe one's own experience by more clearly identifying one's own agency, taking accountability of one's own past and future.

The biopolitical power to be read in inmates' stories and bodies is currently questioning our role as designers, together with its (bio)political implications. Biopower in prisons manifests for instance through brutalization of prisoners' bodies by interiorized forms of control as self-punishment/self-inflicted harm, but also through prisoners' hierarchization, based on the social markers of race, gender and class, thanks to which the already existing intersectional power structures are eventually reinforced. As designers, we can work here in identifying and questioning these intersectional power structures, within and outside the prison's walls.

When looking at the political implications of our work in SV, we acknowledge there is a careful balancing of the *politics of translation* (Spivak, 1982) involved in the act of listening to/translating inmates' stories. This is currently helping us to *re-vision* (hooks, 1984) our role and its political responsibility, re-framing it from being problem-solvers to mediators between contesting actors, infrastructuring forms of (re)humanizing common discourse, where transformative potentials can finally be envisioned.
By telling their own stories (StoryLab) and finding their own words (SVSV), prisoners are currently emerging as individuals, with rich inner lives, struggles and aspirations, revealing them to be more than just offenders who need to be punished.
They are reaffirming their own humanity and exploring possibilities of self-determination within the histories of oppression hiding behind their own histories of crime. By actively engaging with a process of (re)humanization (Freire, 2017), the oppressors, for the first time, discover the custodial system and how it is to be oppressed, by acknowledging that to somehow oppress de-humanizes the inmates, and so have the possibility to experience a re-humanizing, caring way of dealing with inmates, enabling their self-determination beyond crime, without falling back into mechanics of biopower and punishment (Foucault, 1995, 2003).
This process of re-humanization is pivotal for re-discovering human

dignity and worth - even in histories of crimes - and therefore foster a more compassionate and just society. By regarding SV as a laboratory of a more just future society, we aim here to disarticulate prison's hegemonic narrative polarizing the *good* and the *bad*, those who are inside from those outside, and to envision a radical transformative possibility from the *margins*, highlighting the potential of prisoners' points of views and stories to illuminate our society's contradictions and possibly envision a fairer society.

7.3 Towards a re-visioning of design practices

In their interplay, SVSV and StoryLab act as infrastructuring projects drawing on the potential of language and storytelling (Foucault 1995; Hartman, 2008) to contest prevailing narratives perpetuating prisoners' de-humanization and marginalization. By questioning the idea of punishment and its biopolitical implications (Foucault, 1995), they open possibilities to re-assert humanity where it is mostly negated, and to envision a transformative potential in the untold, unacknowledged histories of oppression. Concrete narrative practices of resistance manifest the transformative potential of stories in de-humanizing, oppressive contexts, highlighting matrixes of power (Quijano and Ennis, 2000) underpinning histories of oppression. Critical fabulations can enable processes of self-determination, where prisoners can liberate themselves from oppression and, dialectically, at the same time, from the oppressors' oppression (Césaire, 2001; Freire, 2017), emancipating themselves from prevailing narratives of confinement and punishment.

By infrastructuring *spaces of exception* (Agamben, 2003), we are working towards the generation of counter-narratives that function as collective resistance against the disciplinary mechanisms inherent within the custodial apparatus. Languages' and stories' counter-hegemonic potential to design from the margins as spaces of *radical openness* (hooks, 1984) become tangible here.
To generate a common language without forcing what is at the fringes into a consensus (Rancière, 2010; Mouffe, 2013), but rather exploring

forms of agonistic, democratic, dissensual discourse-building (Keshavarz and Mazè, 2013; DiSalvo, 2015), is currently enabling a collective process of (re)alphabetization (Freire, 2017), self-determination, and identification of social injustices underpinning one's own histories of violence, laying the ground for more just futures.

Foucault's idea of storytelling as a means of promoting healing and resilience (Foucault, 1984), enters into interplay with both hooks as well as Freire's understanding of self-determination of the oppressed experienced as a form of pedagogy. With this current experimentation, we assume the stance of *critical* (Freire, 2017), *radical pedagogies* (hooks, 1994, Fazzolari, 2022), where words and stories can support inmates in engaging in processes of critical self-assessment and identification of power structures underpinning their histories of violence. *Situated* (Haraway, 1988) vocabularies and stories can help enhance design's capacity to heal and *care* (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), reaffirming humanity and self-determination. On the other hand, by means of generating common vocabularies and stories, prisoners are currently navigating the discursive structures of confinement, forging pathways towards self-determination and re-humanization, even in the biopolitical mechanisms of the prison apparatus (Foucault, 1995, 2003).

Prison is serving as a magnifying lens, through which the need to reassess design beyond solutionism becomes more visible. Our current exploration is revealing designing practices beyond colonial, modern underpinnings (Vázquez, 2020) as a form of reflective praxis of the oppressed, a praxis of liberation, regeneration, and reciprocal care. In this sense, we can consider Off Campus SV as a laboratory for society at large, from which to *re-vision* design's practices beyond the disciplinary (Foucault, 1995), modern/colonial framework (Quijano and Ennis, 2000; Mignolo, 2021), towards a pluriversal perspective.

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