

Conversations 2020: **Reset**

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Conversations 2020 started with a contribution written a year ago: July 2019. I don't think it's rhetorical to say that it seems a century ago. The tragedy of Covid19 is, in fact, one of those events that force us to push on the reset button. That is to reorganize our thoughts in the light of something new that has happened in the meantime.

Re-reading the contributions of those who participated in Conversations 2020 during the year, I find that everything written in those months is still important and urgent: the ecological crisis remains more catastrophic than ever. And the support to be given to a new season of social innovation, driven mainly by ecological motivations, remains a priority. But now, the pandemic crisis, as it has happened and is still happening, forces us to rethink everything that has been said and done so far. In this 2020, in fact, things happened that until the day before would have been unimaginable: entire production systems have stopped; billions of people have closed themselves at home and then changed their way of living and thinking. In my view, all this is not only the expression of a tragedy. It is also a social experiment of a nature and dimension never seen before, whose medium and long-term effects have yet to unfold. But what we can and must do right now is to observe what has already happened and try to draw some lessons from it.

The following notes are a personal contribution to the discussion: they are two basic observations, the meaning of which is still to be interpreted, and three practical observations, which I think could have immediate design implications.

Basic observations

The unimaginable can happen. Millions of people can be convinced to change their behaviors drastically and overnight. The mega-machine of economics and finance can be stopped. And all this not because a meteor hits the earth. But because, somehow and with different motivations, people decide to do it. It is necessary to better understand how all this has been possible, to draw from it how a similar change could be replicated, in a virtuous way, to redirect behavior and production towards sustainable and resilient ways of living and producing (and to do it before the on-going ecological catastrophe becomes an even bigger and more dramatic tragedy than it already is today).

"Nature" cannot be controlled. The Covid-19 crisis, which adds to the environmental crisis, has changed, and is changing, the framework in which the relationship between humans and nature is perceived. What is emerging is the idea that nature is not inert and passive, but an entity that reacts to our

reckless actions. Not only. In this context, another idea is emerging: the one that we, the humans, are also "nature". That is, that we are part of that larger living entity that we call Earth.

Facing all that, today's novelty is not so much in the emergence of these ideas (which, as such, are not new), but in their large-scale diffusion. That is, in their potential to undermine the anthropocentric vision that, until now, has guided the culture and practice of Western societies (and therefore, so far, of design).

But for this to really happen and lead to positive results (which is not obvious), this philosophical reorientation must intertwine with actions. That is, with experiments on what this really means.

What will be the implications of these basic observations?

Waiting to find answers to this question, below, I summarize some practical observations that, I believe, could affect our way of seeing, practicing and supporting social innovation right now.

Practical observations

Re-territorialisation. After decades in which, in the name of globalization, connectivity, virtualization, and of what appeared to be the economic convenience, those in power operated as if the territory did not exist, today, many people and entire institutions seem to have noticed its importance. That is, the fact that we and our human affairs are inevitably immersed in a physical space. *This observation should lead us to propose regenerative strategies (based on the reconstruction of the relationship between human beings and the places where they live) with more force and more chance of success.*

Micro-sociality. For many people, the lockdown period meant the (re)discovery of micro-sociality. That is, the value of getting in touch with those who live really close, in the same building and/or in the same street. Therefore, we have seen this type of sociality emerge everywhere: there have been those who organized themselves to help the elderly or people in isolation. There were public bodies and voluntary associations that coordinated hyper-local initiatives. There were local stores that sent groceries home to those neighbours who were unable to move. There have been bookstores that found ways to support local cultural activities. *This observation should lead us to reflect on the issue of proximity (physical and otherwise) and its role in social innovation.*

More online life. With the lockdown, a large number of people have been forced to overcome the threshold of practical and psychological difficulties in the use of digital technologies in sectors previously not practiced. The result has been that many have begun to consider it "normal" to do online

activities that, before, were considered to be normal in the physical world. As it is well known, this fact has implications that can be both positive and negative. The direction we will take will (also) depend on the design choices. In fact, these technologies can have opposite effects: they can push towards an increasing de-localization, individualization and virtualization (and this has been the dominant trend so far). Or, they can go in the opposite direction, supporting new place and community building processes.

On this ground, design for social innovation could and should play an important role. The goal should be to support the generation of a *new kind of communities of place*. That is, *communities that live in hybrid, physical and digital spaces, where the latter (the digital spaces) supports the former (the physical ones)*. And where places refer not only to us, the humans, but also to all the other living and non-living entities that, with us, constitute the web of life.