

**Relational services:  
service design fostering sustainability and new welfare models**

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**Abstract**

*There are services that require intensive interpersonal relations to work: the relational services. If we recognize a value in these services, particularly to foster sustainability and promote a new generation of social services, it's necessary to create the basis for its consolidation, i.e., the design of solutions that enable them to diffuse.*

*However, it places a huge question for designers: are we able to deal with this kind of service, considering that interpersonal relations cannot be directly designed? Is there an specific approach that could enable us to do so? How?*

*To propose an answer to these questions, this paper presents and analyzes a solution entitled "Lodge a student at home" which is consider here as a paradigmatic example of the path that can be followed by service designers to deal with relational services.*

*Keywords: Service Design, Design for Social Innovation, Relational Services, Welfare, Sustainability*

## 1. Case study: **LODGE A STUDENT AT HOME, an intergenerational house sharing**

Recent research projects<sup>1</sup> looked for social innovations, i.e., people creating solutions outside the mainstream patterns of production and consumption: from childcare to care of the elderly, to obtaining supplies of natural food products; from looking after green spaces to alternative forms of mobility; from the building of new solidarity networks to the realisation of unprecedented housing typologies and shared services (Manzini 2005a).

The result is that a particular service model was found, a model deeply and profoundly based in the interpersonal relationships between participants. It was called **relational service** (CIPOLLA, MANZINI, 2009)

One case study collected by this research project, exemplifies this emerging service model. It is called "Lodge a Student at home". The solution matches two demands: it provides a service to improve the quality of life of elderly people in search of company and security, and students looking for low cost accommodation.

Large European cities like Milan are characterised by a huge demand for students' accommodation (in 2008 nearly 40.000 places are needed in the city) and an increasing number of elderly people living alone in town (in 2008, 280.000) and needing a little help in every day activities. In addition, the price of rooms in Milan is one of the most expensive in Italy forcing students to live in nearby cities and to commute everyday. Universities in Milan are not able to offer short time solution to students' accommodation problems. In parallel, assistance demands to elderly people living alone in their own houses are increasing.

Megliomilano is an association which realised that independent elderly people could provide young students with low cost accommodation in exchange for a little help, particularly considering the high amount of unused empty rooms in their houses.

The association started a communication campaign on June 2004 and received offers from elderly people with at least one room free in their house, and a lot of requests from students. A Pilot project with the first 12 cases of intergenerational house sharing started in November 2004, in collaboration with the Politecnico di Milano. Previous experiences were successfully developed in Piacenza and Como, two small towns in Italy. In Milan, it is the only case and it is expected to have quite a big impact due to the dimension of the problems it is addressing. There are similar cases also in Barcelona and in London.

In the last years, "Lodge a Student at home" was consolidated involving an increasing number of students and elderly people. In 2008, the association starts to expand its activities to answer the demands of graduate students and other more mature groups, mainly professionals that are forced to commute everyday and looking for financially accessible accommodation option in Milan.

The association have started up and given its continuous support – from 2005 to 2008 - to 100 cohabitations. Recently a important Italian journal (Repubblica) have produced an article promoting and praising the service (Dambrosio, 2008).

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<sup>1</sup> EMUDE (Emerging User Demands for Sustainable Solutions, 2006) was a programme of activities funded by the European Commission and coordinated by the INDACO, Politecnico di Milano, the aim of which was to explore the potential of social innovation as a driver for technological and production innovation, in view of sustainability. To this end it sought to shed more light on cases where subjects and communities use existing resources in an original way to bring about system innovation. From here, it pinpointed the demand for solutions that such cases and communities express, and pointed to research lines that could lead to improved efficiency, accessibility and diffusion. This project was extended to Brazil, China, India and Africa through the project CCSL (Creative Communities for Sustainable Lifestyles) backed by UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme).

## 2. The relational service model

The better way to introduce the *relational* service model - presented by “Lodge a Student and home” and other solutions - is starting to describe its opposite model, called *standard* service model.

In the *standard service model* [agents] and [clients] are performing predefined roles. The service activities subsist in the performance between the two. It's the image that usually comes to mind when we think about “services”. The “point of intersection” of the service performance occurs when the two distinct areas, the provider and the client area, meet. The paradigmatic example of the “intersection area” or interface is the “service-counter” and the usual example is a bank. This example illustrates how in these services, the encounter between persons is intermediated and based on a specifically designed apparatus. The quality of the interpersonal face-to-face encounter between the participants is not considered an essential requirement to a satisfactory service performance.

Considering the conventional, *standard, service model* - which corresponds to an intersectional interaction model (client + agent) - the *relational service model* introduces a circular interactional model. The circularity serves to illustrate that this model is based on an approach where the solution is co-performed and the benefits are commonly shared between the participants. The roles between agents (representing the service provider) and clients are not clearly defined (CIPOLLA, 2008).

“Lodge an Student at home” is based on encounters between elderly people and students, creating a convergence of two social needs in one solution: elderly people have empty rooms – their kids have grown up and left home - and young students need accommodation. Here, it seems easier to distinguish the client and the agent (service provider) in the student and the elderly person respectively. But the service, being performed in the elderly's home, involves him/her personally and essentially. The student's presence change his/her everyday life. In other words a relational service like this requires high level of interpersonal qualities like *intimacy and trust*, more than any other kind of service.

Relational services are those which bases it operation in the high quality of interpersonal encounters between participants. These services strictly requires these qualities, i.e., the service interaction intrinsically take place in a personalized way. **“Relations” is the keyword used to define the interpersonal quality of these services.** This word indicates that persons need to be firstly considered and perceived as a “presence” rather than the “roles” they perform in the service (CIPOLLA, 2005).

## 3. Relevance of the relational services

“Relational” services, like “Lodge a student at home” are able to provide innovative answers to big challenges we are facing today.

### **Relational services and sustainability.**

The relational approach have potential to contribute in the promotion of sustainable lifestyles. Be able to share is one of the prior interpersonal requirement for sustainable solutions. Sharing is not only about “programming” a time schedule to use some object, but the act of sharing require the ability to be convivial, to be close to other people and relate. More the solution is sustainable, i.e., more it can promote a reduction in the environmental impact due to sharing activities, more it requires from participants the ability to relate.

In our case, “Lodge a Student at home”, the solution is based on “sharing” resources, in this case, the pensioner house. It is a solution that avoids the construction of more buildings in the city, at the same time using at the best existing resources (the empty rooms available in the elderly houses). But live together everyday life as elderly and students are doing, is more interpersonally complex than to only to go down and share a washing machine placed in a common condominium area. Therefore, to promote sharing activities, it is necessary to be aware and understand how to better deal with the different levels interpersonal encounters required by each relational service to work.

### **Relational services as a new generation of social services.**

Public administration is continuously challenged by increasingly complex problems, due to the emergence of new social issues, such as ageing of population, new diseases, new work patterns and high unemployment rates. Services and infrastructures that should address those problems often refer to old models, based on a social and cultural context that no longer exist. New solutions are needed.

Our proposal is that the identification and empowerment of existing relational services and the design of new ones, has a important role to play in this new required framework, if adequately based on new policies and criteria for the development of public services. These services are able to offer new possible solutions - proposing a revision of the role citizens can play. In this sense, "activation" has become a key word in European Union programmes on social issues (Barbier, 2005). The solution “Lodge a Student at home” is an example. It supports two social groups to actively solve together its respective demands: housing for students and support for elderly people. Particularly here, the benefits for the public administration are increased when the house involved is also part of a social housing programme. The solution promotes a double use of the same apartment. At the same time, the student contribution complements the (pension) income of the householder.

The value of relational services in giving answers to social challenges are being also considered in non-European countries (CIPOLLA, BARTHOLLO JR., 2006, CCSL project, 2006)

## **4. Designing relational services**

Social innovations – and the relational services they can give rise to - represent isolated cases, based on a casualty or in a particularly favouring local context. Sometimes a social innovation can be so informal that they couldn't be easily perceived even as a “service”. Examples can be found in informal networks of mutual help or spontaneous collaborations between people in the neighbourhood.

However, if we recognize a value in these services (in improving sustainable lifestyles or promoting new welfare models), it's necessary to create the basis for its consolidation and diffusion. This mean to create service solutions that support them to develop and diffuse.

The first important point to be considered is that relational services cannot be designed in itself. It can be just “enabled”. Interpersonal relations between people are cannot be previewed and controlled. It depends on a series of factors that designers must not, and more important, cannot deal with (CIPOLLA, 2005).

Therefore, relational services can be only enabled. In this sense we can talk about a “enabling solution”, i.e. “we must imagine and enact enabling solutions specifically thought up to facilitate the diffusion, and increase the efficiency, of this kind of promising organisation” (Manzini, 2004, 2008).

“Lodge a Student at home” is considered here as an good example of an enabling solution. It is a service run by an Association, developed to organize the spontaneous and informal cases on which elderly people make their houses available to students, facilitating the diffusion of this cohabitation modality and consolidating all the benefits it brings to specific participants and to overall society.

Consequently, it is a solution that enable many specific relational services to exist, i.e. effective cohabitations between persons, like Carla and Antonietta, Francesca and Liliana or Annamaria and Nicola. As the term “relational” indicates, the interpersonal relationships are the main dimension that need to be favoured in these services. In our main example, “Lodge a Student at home”, to effectively activate a cohabitation it is necessary to overwhelm three main difficulties:

- ❑ the high intimacy demanded by a cohabitation.
- ❑ the trust required by pensioners to open their houses to young people
- ❑ the intergenerational challenges that come into light in everyday life

Considering that the enabling solution, run by Megliomilano Association, promotes the following process:

1. a psychologist carry out the selection process and interviews with students, matching the profiles in order to couple a pensioner with the student;
2. members of the association visit the elderly houses in order to know them personally and their specific characteristics and demands;
3. after the match, a member of the association visit the elderly house with the student, introducing them to each other and, after some time, they are leaved alone to establish a direct face-to-face contact;
4. the elderly and the student have a week to give a feedback to the association confirming if they want to start the cohabitation or not;
5. if yes, the cohabitation starts and a contract is signed;

During the cohabitation:

- ❑ the association provides the users with free legal assistance and free psychologist support;
- ❑ they also ask for feedback from the users, following them in the process, particularly intermediating everyday life conflicts;
- ❑ meetings are organized by the association (with elderly, students or both) and conducted by psychologists in order to facilitate the cohabitation and prevent conflicts.

To stimulate the cohabitation, the enabling solution offers to participants some benefits, based on the partnership established by the Association with two relevant partners: the Milan Municipality, which offers to elderly a financial contribution to maintenance and improvement of the house conditions; and a internet provider which offers free internet access to students.

## 5. Conclusions

Considering “Lodge a Student at home” as an example of an enabling solution for relational services, it’s possible to affirm that service design discipline can play a fundamental role:

- ❑ in exploring the landscape of social innovations initiatives, detecting diffused, spontaneous and self-organized services – relational services – as a source of new ideas for problems that cannot be solved under the usual or *standard* service solutions;

- in generating solutions that support their development and, possibly, their extension to different local contexts, widespreading its benefits. It means to design enabling solutions - that support people in creating their own relational services.

The key point here is the concept we have in mind about what a service is. If service design discipline puts its focus also in *relational* services – not only in *standard* ones - a world of new possibilities can be opened for its theory and practice.

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