

# AT HOME: MOBILISING CONTEMPORARY DESIGN HISTORY THROUGH CURATORIAL PRACTICE

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## Abstract

In April 2022 *At Home: panoramas de nos vies domestiques* opened at the Biennale Internationale Design Saint-Étienne. Co-curated by three design historians and curators, Penny Sparke, Jana Scholze and Catharine Rossi, the exhibition explored the values and meanings of the home today, and examined how designers, architects and artists have deployed these concepts in their work.

This paper positions *At Home* as a case study in contemporary design history. Based on a collaborative curatorial approach, and focused on mobilising design's past to interpret and communicate the present, the exhibition sought to show the relevance of design history to an international, local and non-specialist audience.

The curators organised the exhibition into five themed sections: *Utopia*, *Shelter*, *Identities*, *Well-being*, and *Connectivity*. Through a selection of international artworks, designs, architectural projects, photographs and films showing design-based responses to these issues past and present, the curators set out to stimulate reflection on the ways the domestic interior interacts with its inhabitants and the external world. They sought to articulate designers' and inhabitants' growing concerns about the climate emergency, widespread inequality, the erosion of the boundary between the private and public self, and the challenging aspects of today's technological advances, and how these affect the inhabitants of the domestic sphere (Taylor et al., 2023). Conceived before Covid-19, researched during it, and exhibited in its aftermath, *At Home* also reflected on the home's changing meaning in light of the pandemic.

The curators sought to include everyday and familiar design objects alongside critical, speculative and political projects in order to facilitate the audience's engagement. The latter included examples of Italian design from the 1960s to 1980s; Recognising the repeated citation of these designers' practice in Italian design historiography, we sought to provide a different perspective by contextualising these architects' work in light of contemporary designerly concerns.

This paper seeks to examine the relationship between the history of design and its contemporary interpretation, how the developing realm of curatorial research methods and approaches can further the relevance of design history today, and how design history can inform curatorial practices and vice versa.

## Keywords

Curation, Contemporary design, Domesticity, Italian design, Design history

## Introduction

In April 2022 *At Home: Panoramas de nos vies domestiques* opened at the 12<sup>th</sup> Biennale Internationale Design Saint-Étienne [1]. As the exhibition's three curators, we drew on our expertise in late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century design history and exhibition-making to curate an exhibition exploring the values and meanings of the home today through the practice of designers, architects, and artists, past and present.

Designed by London-based studio Plaid, the exhibition contained circa 80 international design, architecture, art, craft, and photography exhibits represented through objects, drawings, films, and photographs. It was organised into five themes we saw as core to being “at home” today: *Utopia*, a critical take on the dominance of market-led visions of domestic interiors; *Shelter*, which investigated the threats on the home as a refuge; *Identities*, which explored identity formation through consuming, collecting and making in the home; *Wellbeing*, which positioned the home as a place of physical, mental and environmental wellbeing; and *Connected*, which showed the importance of the home's connectedness to the outside world, through technology or local communities. Exhibits were displayed on low-level terracotta block plinths or within room-like oversized cardboard cubes with window cut-outs. Opening the *Shelter*, *Identities*, *Wellbeing* and *Connected* sections were elongated yellow banners, each with a trio of two-tone images and captions for historical context.

Through the exhibition we set out to stimulate visitors to reflect on the home's design-based entanglement with the external world. Specifically, we sought to articulate concerns around the impact of the climate emergency, housing inequality, and technological advance, on the domestic sphere. Conceived before Covid-19, researched during it, and exhibited in its aftermath, *At Home* was also informed by changing understandings of the home due to the pandemic.

This text explores *At Home*'s design historical approach. It investigates how an interest in contemporary design history, defined by Sarah Teasley as a “history of the recent past through design, or history of recent design pasts”, shaped our aims, argumentation, and approach to display (Teasley, 2019, p. 11). Teasley identifies exhibitions as a vital medium for contemporary design history, as they can “most readily” facilitate effective, empathetic public discussions on design (Teasley, 2019, p. 26). While design curating's roots go back to the 19th century, critical perspectives on its relationship with design history are less established, an absence we



[1] *At Home*, curated by Catharine Rossi, Jana Scholze, Penny Sparke St Etienne, April-July 2022, section Shelter. (Photo and copyright Sandrine Binoux)

seek to address. Reflecting the AIS' Italian design focus, this paper includes a particular emphasis on curating Italian design.

## Curatorial Context

### *Home Futures and Home Stories*

The commission to curate an exhibition on the home was based on Penny Sparke's research in this area. It arrived in February 2020, with opening planned for April 2021. It was framed by the Biennale's theme of *Bifurcations*, which focused on the new practices and approaches emerging amidst today's social and environmental challenges (Cité du Design, 2022).

We were aware of the need to engage the Biennale's diverse audience; both regional and international; and with and without design expertise. We also knew that *At Home* was not the only recent design exhibition on the home. It came after *Home Futures* (2018-2019) at London's Design Museum, curated by Eszter Steierhoffer. Conducted in partnership with IKEA Museum Almhult, the thematically organised exhibition looked at 20<sup>th</sup> century visions of the future of domesticity and compared them with the present day domestic reality (Steierhoffer & McGuirk, 2018, pp. 9-10). It included works by the likes of Archigram, Joe Colombo, Dunne & Raby, Alison and Peter Smithson, Ettore Sottsass and Superstudio. According to Steierhoffer, the exhibition exposed the "recurring – and often

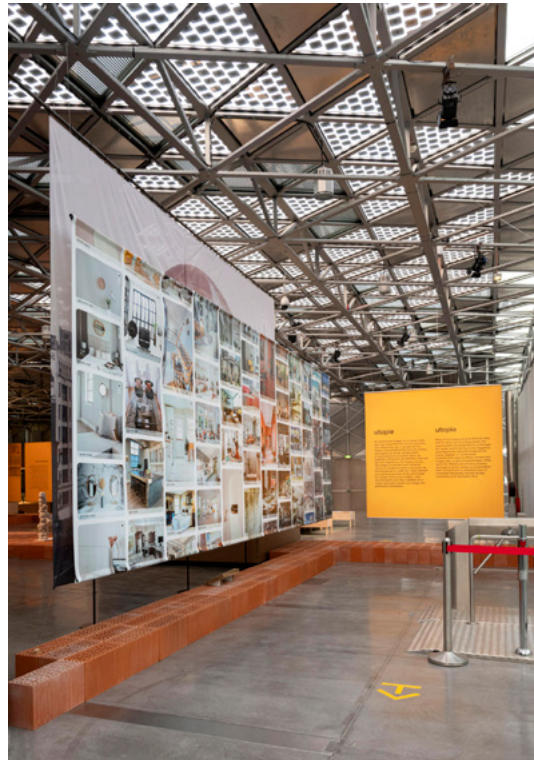
conflicting – themes of the twentieth century that significantly shaped our contemporary experience of the home: efficiency, minimal living, nomadism, self-sufficiency and the changing notion of privacy" (Steierhoffer & McGuirk, 2018, p. 12). Our commission arrived as *Home Stories: 100 Years, 20 Visionary Interiors* (2020-2021) opened at Vitra Design Museum in Germany, curated by Jochen Eisenbrand and Anna Mea-Hoffman. *Home Stories* presented a history of domestic interior design, a discipline identified as "somewhat neglected" despite the home's universality (Kries & Eisenbrand, 2020, p. 8). It displayed twenty "visionary", "iconic" or "influential" interiors, from Elsie de Wolfe's Villa Trianon (1905-1950) to Karl Lagerfeld's Memphis-filled 1980s Monte Carlo flat, and an IKEA display (Eisenbrand & Kries, 2020, p. 8).

While contrasting in focus and approach, *Home Futures* and *Home Stories* shared a concern with the exceptional rather than the everyday, be it the former's speculative focus or the latter's largely canonical or luxury spaces (IKEA excepted). There were resonances with our undertaking; we identified with *Home Futures*' themes and championed interior design's overlooked importance. There were also overlaps in practitioners and brands included, such as Dunne and Raby, Sottsass, Superstudio, and IKEA. However, we were keen for *At Home* to present everyday manifestations of the home alongside more identifiably designer-led offerings to try to better resonate with our audience's experiences and understandings of home.

### *Engaging with the 2020s Everyday*

In February 2020 we couldn't have known how much everyday domesticity was to change. Covid-19 influenced when the Biennale was held (postponed by a year), our curatorial process (conducted online rather than in-person) and our exhibition subject. As publications including 2023's *Interiors in the Era of Covid-19* have identified, the home took on a new potency, new functions, and new meanings in 2020 (Ioannidou, Kirkham, Knott, Scholze & Sparke, 2023). As Mark Downey, Terry Meade and Georgina Taylor stated in 2022's *Domesticity Under Siege*, Covid "had the effect of [...] revivifying some age-old meanings of "home" as sanctuary" (n.p). The pandemic also exposed how the home was not a refuge for all, as increases in domestic violence, depression and homelessness indicated (Campbell & Vallerand, 2020).

The pandemic challenged earlier visions of the home as divorced from external social, cultural, political, economic and natural forces (Kai-ka, 2004). We were keen to show the home as shaped by, but also shaping,



[2] *At Home*, curated by Catharine Rossi, Jana Scholze, Penny Sparke St Etienne, April-July 2022, section Utopia. (Photo and copyright Sandrine Binoux)

broader social, cultural, political, and economic phenomena. This approach aligns with what Fleur Watson (2021) identified as “the new curator” who emerged in architecture and design in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (although such a figure can be traced back earlier) one “‘tuned to’ the ... environmental, cultural, political and social context” (2021, p. 13). For example, we sought to trouble commonly held visions of the home, including its status as a refuge for all, and assert the importance of non-consumerist understandings. We also wanted the audience to have a greater knowledge of how contemporary phenomena and design have historical roots.

### Curating Contemporary Design History

Our attempt to combine an interest with design today and historically aligns with contemporary design history’s growth over the last decade (Teasley, 2019, p. 26). As Fisher and Sparke argue, “design’s past enriches, illuminates, sometimes offers surprising new readings of both its present and its future” (Fisher & Sparke, 2016, p. 5). Contemporary design history

suffers from what Teasley calls “an ‘in-between-ness of distance’ that makes it neither history nor the present” (2019, p. 11). However it can have value, particularly when arguing how design has, can, or could, address the challenges confronting humanity and how they manifest in the everyday home; this engaged position is what Teasley calls a “critical activist stance” (2019, p. 26). For Teasley (2019), this is why effective communication is key for contemporary design history, and exhibitions the most suitable medium to do so, as they “indicate how design plays a role in the construction of public memory, including narratives of past and present” (p. 26).

Curating is a specific mode of conducting and disseminating research (O’Neill, Wilson & Steeds, 2016) that enables different ways of making arguments to published design history. As the following section explores, using the space of the exhibition rather than the pages of a book to lay out our arguments afforded possibilities for different ways of making arguments about design; such as creating non-linear narratives, offering suggestions rather than making explicit positions, and proposing connections between artefacts from different eras, and different historical contexts.

### Curating Contemporary Design in *At Home*

#### *Structuring the At Home Narrative*

Our ambition to engage with the present shaped the exhibition’s narrative. *Utopia* [2] provocatively consisted of a large-scale billboard depicting present-day, social media-like consumerist visions of domesticity. The intention was to shock visitors as they walked behind the billboard and into *Shelter* [3], which opened with Martha Rosler’s large and hard-hitting *Housing is a Human Right* (1989/2017) animation. Following this was *Identities*, which counteracted *Utopia*’s message of consumerist forms of domestic identity formation, most explicitly through Enzo Mari’s Marxist-informed *Autoprogettazione* project (1974) [4].

The two subsequent themes, *Wellbeing* [5] and *Connected* have a long history in design, but have gained new currency and meanings of late. We sought to counter the current narrow, trend-led understanding of the former through the inclusion of social design projects such as Lanzavecchia + Wai’s *No Country for Old Men* (2012) furniture for the elderly, and Michele De Lucchi’s sustainable architecture *Graft Stations* façade additions (2020). *Connected* juxtaposed historical imaginings of the future of technological connectivity [6] by the likes of Martin Pawley, Ugo La Pietra





[3] *At Home*, curated by Catharine Rossi, Jana Scholze, Penny Sparke St Etienne, April-July 2022, section Shelter with Martha Rosler "Housing is a Human Right". (Photo and copyright Sandrine Binoux)

[5] *At Home*, curated by Catharine Rossi, Jana Scholze, Penny Sparke St Etienne, April-July 2022, *Well-being section*. (Photo and copyright Sandrine Binoux)



[4] *At Home*, curated by Catharine Rossi, Jana Scholze, Penny Sparke St Etienne, April-July 2022, *Identities section*. (Photo and copyright Sandrine Binoux)

[6] *At Home*, curated by Catharine Rossi, Jana Scholze, Penny Sparke St Etienne, April-July 2022, *Connected section*. (Photo and copyright Sandrine Binoux)



and Superstudio (whose 1960s and 1970s image-making inspired the section's grid-like structure) with more contemporary proposals for connectivity, which were less about technology and more about creating local communities and neighbourhoods; their important role in shaping the home had come to the fore in the pandemic. The exhibition closed with Liam Young's film *Planet City* (2021), an ecological provocation of future domesticity which we saw as tying together the exhibition's themes.

Notably, while the intention was for the exhibition design to be open and non-linear, enabling visitors to create their own pathways and

connections between the different sections, ongoing Covid restrictions forbade this, and visitors could only experience the sections in the order described here. Nevertheless, visitors could walk largely freely within the individual sections and choose to look at objects and captions in the order they wished, or choose to not look at some objects or captions at all; a reminder of the freedom of interpretation that visitors bring.

*At Home's* thematic, rather than chronological, conception had significant implications for our design historical approach. *Utopia* contained no historical objects at all. The remainder of the four sections combined



[7] *At Home*, curated by Catharine Rossi, Jana Scholze, Penny Sparke St Etienne, April-July 2022, Banner with Julian Shulman photo of Case Study House 8. (Photo and copyright Sandrine Binoux)

exhibits from different time periods, either as images on the introductory banners or as part of the exhibit displays. While exhibition material spanned a 300-year period, from 1690 (Andrea Domenico Remps' *Cabinet of Curiosities*) to 2022 (*Daily Dump* compost containers), in reality the exhibition was skewed towards the present. Over half of exhibits were post 2000, and most were from the 2010s. Design's expansion in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century led to the presence of a broad spectrum of design typologies. We included those with roots in modern design's origins, such as industrially produced chairs, consumer-orientated products, and posters. These spoke to our ambition to include everyday design in the show: several exhibits, such as IKEA products and an Amazon Echo (2014) were likely in the audience's own homes. We also included approaches that have emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, including humanitarian design, design activism, and social design, and several exhibits of radical, critical, speculative or conceptual design, from architects such as La Pietra, Gaetano Pesce and Ettore Sottsass, to Dunne and Raby, Simone Niquille, Superflux, and Liam Young.

Central to our curatorial strategy, and the relationship between past and present we proposed, was the arrangement of the objects selected, as the final two sections discuss.

## The Introductory Banners: Contextualising Contemporary Design

The banners which hung at the entrance to four of the *At Home* sections were key to our approach of comparing and contextualising design past and present. They contained mostly historical images we saw as useful to introduce and explain the section's theme. Their separate presentation and distinct visual identity was intended to invite audiences to engage with them differently to the physical exhibits on display on the plinths and in the cardboard "rooms".

*Well-being*, for example, included Julius Shulman's photograph of the interior of Charles and Ray Eames's *Case Study House 8* (1949) [7], into which they had introduced exotic, rubber and *Monsterae Deliciosae* ("Swiss Cheese") plants. The image resonated with contemporary plant-filled containers included in this section [8], by Patrick Nadeau, Florian Wegenast and Tim van de Weerd; notably, van de Weerd's *Monstera Fugiens* and *Monstera Magnifica* (2014) were inspired by the same Swiss cheese plants that had fascinated the Eameses.

The contextual photograph implied that designers have been looking to bring nature into their homes for over half a century. Crucially, the captions articulated the differing contexts and motivations of the 1940s and today. While the Eameses engaged with the USA's West Coast climate to develop a softer, nature-friendly modernism, the newer designs emanated from their creators' concerns about humanity's distance from the natural world, one they addressed through its incorporation in the domestic interior.

### *Juxtaposing the Present and the Past, the Speculative and the Everyday*

Aware of the canonical repetitiveness of design history (Fallan, 2012; Mareis & Paim, 2021), while we included repeatedly referenced design objects in *At Home*, including post-WWII Italian design works (reflecting Sparke and Rossi's expertise), we sought to avoid the problematic nature of this repetitiveness through the close placement of contemporary and historical, and speculative and everyday, exhibits. In doing so we sought to cast new critical light on the individual works.

*Connected* [9] opened with speculative visions on the possibilities of future technologies, such as Superstudio's *Vita (Supersuperficie): Frutta e Vino* (1971) photomontage with its internet-like all-encompassing grid, and La Pietra's *La Casa Telematica* (1982) and its prediction of the





[8] *At Home*, curated by Catharine Rossi, Jana Scholze, Penny Sparke St Etienne, April-July 2022, plant container by Patrick Nadeau, Florian Wegenast and Tim van de Weerd in *Well-being* section. (Photo and copyright Jana Scholze)



[9] *At Home*, curated by Catharine Rossi, Jana Scholze, Penny Sparke St Etienne, April-July 2022, *Connected* section with Superstudio's *Vita* (Supersuperficie): *Frutta e Vino*. (Photo and copyright Jana Scholze)

screen-filled future home. These were followed by critiques on how previously speculative technological advances are panning out now, such as Niquille's *Homeschool* (2019), which examined the presence of robots in the home, and Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler's *Anatomy of an AI* (2018), which exposed the human and earthly cost of devices such as the *Amazon Echo*, which we exhibited in front of it. Collectively these projects highlighted a shift in tone from utopian speculation to critical concern.

*Connected* was not the only appearance of Superstudio's *Vita* (*Superficie*)

[10] *At Home*, curated by Catharine Rossi, Jana Scholze, Penny Sparke St Etienne, April-July 2022, *Identities* section with Superstudio's *Vita* (*Superficie*), Sottsass's *Superbox* and Mari's *Autoprogettazine*. (Photo and copyright Jana Scholze)



in the exhibition, pointing to how different meanings in objects can be activated in an exhibition setting. Another work from the series appeared in *Identities* [10], alongside Sottsass's *Carlton* room divider (1982) and *Superbox* (1966) (seen in reflection) and Mari's *Autoprogettazine* (1974) (visible in rear). The latter two were included as earlier critiques of the commodified home. We placed these near Ioana Man's *30 Listed Bedrooms* (2014), in which the designer superimposed photographs of bedrooms for rent on Airbnb in London, Brighton, Paris, New York, Hong Kong and Mumbai. The photomontage commented on the homogenizing Westernisation of modern interior design, one driven by globally connected, social-media driven and profit orientated technologies. As these examples suggest, while both Superstudio and Man use photomontage and the idea of global connectivity in their work, the forty-year gap between their practice has led to a marked difference in the nature of their critique and their attitude towards technology.

### Conclusion: *At Home* and Curating Design History

While we approached *At Home* as design historians, the result challenges such a disciplinary position. Our use of captions to provide contextual information hopefully communicated the historical specificity of each of the designs displayed. Nevertheless, a question remains about our mixing of historical and contemporary objects: if the historical differences around

two design artefacts addressing the same, or similar, problem means that they are not as similar as they initially appear, is it possible for designers to learn from the past? If the answer is “no”, that might argue against the possibility of Teasley’s (2019) “critical activist” approach (p. 26) and Tony Fry’s (2009) belief that the role of the past is to create a sustainable future.

The French historian Marc Bloch’s assertion that we need to “understand the past by means of the present” is rather different (Maldonado, 1987, p. 110; Pasca, 1995). Rather than claiming that we can learn about the present from the past it suggests that, when choosing what to interrogate in the past, design historians could take their starting point from the present. *At Home* did just that. We began our research with contemporary issues and sought out what we felt to be important work by contemporary practitioners addressing these themes. In addition, we looked back in time for instances of earlier designers working in related areas, albeit within different historical contexts. This approach tells us less about how to learn from the past and more about what to focus on as historians, and how a design history exhibition can connect with its audience.

Semiotic analysis embraces the difference between the “diachronic” and the “synchronic”, the first meaning looking at time vertically, with the concept of a past, present, and future, and the second looking at it horizontally, seeing everything as part the same, ongoing present (Barthes, 1972). *At Home* was the product of both diachronic and synchronic thinking. It suggested a relationship between the past and the present, but also addressed the notion of contemporaneity. The latter requires a commitment to the contemporary, which suggests that moments in time can be seen to be defined by characteristics which permeate all levels of life and culture. Underpinning *At Home* was the climate emergency, the Covid-19 pandemic, the ever-greater commodification of the domestic sphere, and the fallout of the pervasiveness of technology in the home, amongst other issues of the early 2020s. Shaped by this zeitgeist, *At Home* also afforded an opportunity to write, in curatorial form, a design history of the early 2020s.

*At Home* offers thinking about the possibilities and implications of design history for curating. Communicating contemporary design history through an exhibition, the approach Teasley advocates, enables constructing freer design histories, ones that are more open to interpretation from the audience’s different perspectives; one notable characteristic of the Biennale was its use of design specialist guides who provided their own accounts of the exhibitions to visitors, and who commented on the notable level of discussion that *At Home* prompted amongst them. Curating design

demands thinking about the reception of our research more than arguably happens in published work, and also raises the question of how we position ourselves in relation to both the audience and our subject. This is particularly pertinent with a such a universal theme as the home, wherein we sought to use our design historical and curatorial expertise to critically contextualise and articulate an omnipresent design realm, and discern which design artefacts, and what forms of display, can best communicate our position. Lastly, exhibitions are also inherently collaborative, be it in terms of the curators, exhibition designers, Biennale team, lenders, or audience, and present the possibilities of bringing together different perspectives in creating design historical narratives.

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# EXPANDED ARCHIVE: DESIGNING THE NEW DIGITAL FASHION ARCHIVES

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## Abstract

In the contemporary scenario, technology has allowed the enjoyment of cultural heritage even to users who would have been excluded from this practice due to the dislocation of artifacts in physical buildings, historically deputed to their preservation.

In an article on the possible end of design, design historian Vanni Pasca (2020) praises its mutability about the pervasiveness of digital and upcoming technologies central to the contemporary period.

According to this, the design also finds its application within the new practices of digital display of material held by Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums (GLAMs) (The University of British Columbia, 2023).

GLAMs have developed collaborations to enable the enjoyment of materials through online and offline digital technologies.

Therefore, it has been necessary to reorganize and shape their practices to ensure seamless navigation and enjoyment of such content across entities, spreading knowledge across the community.

This transformation has also affected archives, which represent institutions' historical core and are generally accessible only to insiders.

In this context, the definition of expanded archives was born, both from the point of view of content, where more and more disciplines interact within the same archive and from the point of view of different practices and fields that are applied during the design of an archive to expand the heritage to the community.

The research proposes reflecting on the technology applied to the fashion archive, which allows it to correct its elitist connotation through direct and facilitated navigation of contents (MacNeil & Eastwood, 2017).

## Keywords

Technology, GLAMs, Cultural heritage, Expanded archive, Community design

## Introduction

A shift in the perception of design in society is currently occurring, with a greater understanding of how design is evolving into an “expanded field”, dealing with problems that go beyond the boundaries traditionally associated with design professions and addressing challenges in complex socio-technical systems such as education, health, environmental protection, and social and economic development (Barros, 2023). Adding to the field of education, design finds various applications within the cultural heritage, particularly affecting the creation and management of archives.

As Franceschini (2019) reported in his study, the consideration made by media theorist Ernst regarding new technology applications in this field is relevant. Considering the archive as a diagram that formalizes a process, technology can create a new type of dynamic archive that generates new connections.

This research will explore different types of narratives that have arisen from applying different technologies to archival material. The opening section introduces the series of changes and applications that have recently challenged the traditional methodologies of disseminating knowledge and education through the material possessed. Practices have started to focus more and more on community participation and its relevance in revitalizing new narratives through direct interaction with the material.

The second section explores case studies that demonstrate the usage of technology applied to archives in both cultural and fashion field: Europeana and European Fashion Heritage Association.

The Virtual Fashion Archive example will also showcase a virtuous solution designed collaboratively between the private communication design entity and the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (MFIT).

In the conclusive section, drawing upon the reflection by design historian Vanni Pasca, valuable questions will lead to investigating the best application methodologies and guidelines for an expanded archive.

## Cultural Heritage and Institutions

In the contemporary era, cultural heritage refers to goods belonging to different cultural-historical domains. This includes artifacts, monuments, buildings and museums; each with their diverse values such as



symbolic, historical, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological, scientific, and social significance (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2009).

The social significance of cultural heritage is not exclusively determined by the object's historical importance but rather by the connection and meaning attributed by a community sharing the same values.

In this scenario, institutions preserving and guarding meaningful historical and cultural material have consolidated and implemented cooperative strategies to enhance and disseminate their heritage. The GLAMs, an acronym for Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums, exemplify the willingness to cooperate to enhance and share their heritage. In the cultural industry, these institutions share the same values, such as knowledge keeping, knowledge dissemination, and preservation, with a common objective of providing wider access to information (The University of British Columbia, 2023).

These institutions are grounded in the same principle of free and open dissemination of preserved material meaning to create a cohesive ecosystem where the community can find and contribute to the growth of the heritage value. However, for the cultural heritage sector, “Open”, or “Open Access”, are still evolving definitions, strongly entangled with the pervasiveness of technology within the dissemination process (Creative Commons, 2023).

In recent years, innovations within these institutions have mainly involved creating and developing freely accessible online platforms. These platforms aim to address two essential limitations: the lack of accessibility to a heterogeneous audience and the lack of interconnectedness among different materials. This transition within the field recognizes the importance of presenting contents allowing users to actively engage, shifting from observers to participants and contributors to the development of emerging narratives.

Among these institutions, archives exemplify the urgency of using a design system that prioritize the two needs mentioned: the emergence of novel narratives and the free dissemination of knowledge stored. By acknowledging these requirements, the idea of archives as merely showcases of memories, custodians of a fixed and non-dynamic legacy, is truly challenged. Their traditional image of dark, dusty stacks filled with ancient papers – shifts to the brighter fast and digital version of the information age (Patterson, 2016).

On the Italian territory, an institution coordinates all research,

training, and application activities in describing and digitizing archival assets: The Central Institute for Archives (ICAR). (Istituto Centrale per gli Archivi [ICAR], 2023)

Since its foundation in 1998, ICAR has been involved in promoting and coordinating the development of national standards and fostering the dissemination of international standards, thus ensuring uniformity of descriptions in archival systems.

In fact, through the cooperation of various international institutes and referring to what has been done by the International Council on Archives, archival description standards have been drafted since the 1990s, both on records to be archived and to describe and regulate the preserving bodies, individuals and families. Fashion archives are considered a notable case of a significant shift from the traditional connotation to a modern take on the archive due to substantial transformation over the recent years. The fashion archive's heritage covers a wide range of items, including collections, garments, accessories, sketches, promotional and marketing material such as photographic and audiovisual advertising material and press reviews. Additionally, the presence of fashion-related records in archives, as with fashion collections in museums, has provoked critical debates across the past five decades about their respective function, purpose, validity, management, application, and use from a formalist versus a modernist or postmodernist viewpoint (Peirson-Smith & Peirson-Smith, 2020).

The next chapters will deepen on suggestions aiming to renew the archival aesthetics, promote material dissemination, and improve the archival consultation experience to be more inclusive and participatory.

### **Technologies applied to fashion archives: case studies**

Digital technology is pervasive and universally embraced by the world's youth. In the past decades, its large possibilities stimulated multiple educational and cultural institutions, trying to figure out what to do with it. Nowadays, through digital technologies applied to cultural heritage, users will finally play an active role in cultural heritage, being able to interact directly with the material of their interest. This shift aims to facilitate knowledge sharing and foster the emergence of new narratives rooted in the hidden suggestions that go beyond passive observation.

Technology is compulsory for the establishment of digital archives, with its variety of employments to achieve a common goal. Notably,

technological applications are crucial for the conception of the display space and the selection of the software or databases built using metadata. By the term metadata, we mean descriptive, revealing information about the records and the associated processes on which users can, if they wish, base their assumptions about the authenticity of the material (Ballegooie & Duff, 2006).

Archivists have always been concerned about including detailed information about each item within collections. In the past years, the variety of material and information encouraged the need for a common specific vocabulary. It would allow the unification of archival description and thus allow consistent description of the material, which would create intuitive relations within the digital platforms.

In fashion archives, considered a relatively recent field of endeavor, researchers and academics are trying to conceptualize a common vocabulary that would allow a concordant and accurate way of describing and recording the items. Today, additional metadata must be collected by catalogers to represent significant aspects of historic clothing better (Kirkland, 2019). Moreover, especially for contemporary clothing more and more metadata of different types are required to ensure the specific level of knowledge to describe the fashion material best.

In recent years, several practices have been implemented to create unique databases that allow the consultation of cultural heritage material owned by different associations. On a European scale, the most virtuous case is the open-access website Europeana.

Europeana is a digital platform created by the European Commission and provides cultural heritage enthusiasts, professionals, teachers, and researchers with digital access to material related to European cultural heritage with the aim of inspiring and providing a fresh perspective and open discussion on our history and culture to share and experience our rich cultural heritage (Europeana, 2023).

This database can bring together the cultural heritage material preserved by more than fifty associations within a single virtual space, fostering collaboration among the best researchers, organizations, and top experts in the field to grow and share methodologies.

One of the associations directly collaborating with Europeana is the European Fashion Heritage Association (EFHA). Since 2014, the EFHA has grown, attracting more than 50 European fashion institutions, from small private museums to large national institutions from 15 European countries, united in the objective to unlock and provide free access to Europe's

unique and vast fashion heritage (European Fashion Heritage Association [EFHA], 2023). EFHA is currently active with several projects aiming to refine archival practices within the fashion field while collaborating with various universities to create new narratives from the archival material of their numerous community stakeholders.

In the fashion-related projects EFHA partnered as supervisor, the 5D Culture project stands out as one of the most fascinating and innovative ones. This project focuses on the supply expansion of the existing 3D digital archives for cultural heritage and the promotion of their reuse in education, tourism, and cultural and creative industries (EFHA, 2023). 3D file formats contain data representing three-dimensional space and embedded information needed to render this data (Digital Preservation Coalition; Artefactual Systems, 2021; Digital Preservation Coalition; Artefactual Systems, 2021). These images can faithfully reproduce the scanned object virtually. The transition from bidimensional, typical of traditional photographs, to a three-dimensional approach contributes to enabling an authentic experience for the user, thus eliminating the barrier given by the physical display constraints and displaying limits in the real storage space.

Another experimentation in the virtualization methods is the digital reproduction of iconic selected garments conserved by the Museum at FIT. The Virtual Fashion Archive comes to life in a digital space created for this research. This online archival project brings culturally significant fashion garments beyond the constraints of their physical form and into the added dimensions of motion, interaction, and participation. The virtualization process required the application of both analog and digital techniques, which is necessary for the reverse engineering process of the models. Detailed photographs of the materials will serve as textures and embroidery references for the virtual garments before the fine-tuning of the model on the CLO software, making it possible to obtain the virtual twin of the dress (Virtual Fashion Archive, 2023).

This willingness of museums and archives to collaborate underscores the attempts made by both public and private institutions to transcend the physical constraints and create or recreate novel experiences characterized by the reproduction of natural movement and interaction by the user, who will have the ability to rotate the head and zoom in on the details of the artifact.

Virtual and augmented reality are technologies being experimented with within museum and archival practices. Virtual reality is an immersive, interactive experience presented by a computing device. The

experience incorporates images/videos, including audio, touch, or other sensory elements. This technique takes an image of the entire environment and allows viewers to virtually “visit” the space. On the other hand, augmented reality requires a physical presence among the collection and augments the experience within the physical environment through electronic devices directly operated by the user (Lund & Scribner, 2019).

During the Covid-19 period, these technologies were widely diffused within fashion communication, especially for promotional campaigns and fashion shows, as an alternative for the live presentations (Pompa, 2020). The appropriate usage of these technologies could also speed up and facilitate the research process within the archive, allowing for remote highly realistic consultation.

## To design

Design is a planning practice based on an idea and an ideal. Design historian Vanni Pasca, in the chapter *After the End Speeches (Dopo i discorsi sulla fine)*, from the Umberto Eco and Vittorio Gregotti's book *On the end of Design* (Eco & Gregotti, 2018) resonates about the future of design about the pervasiveness of new technologies. Pasca introduced the concept of “expanded design,” explaining how, starting from the third stage of the industrial revolution, technology profoundly impacted design's frequent changes and evolution.

Since then, design influence and evolution have extended to different fields, not least the cultural heritage one, where established design practices informed by, for example, user experience and design thinking have guided innovative applications and technological advancements to expand the archives, the same way Pasca defined the design itself.

Over the past decades, design thinking has attained global attention since when organizations and educational institutions understood and exploited its core concepts to reach their growth goals and speed up their go-to-market strategies (Auernhammer & Roth, 2023). The closeness of design thinking to productivity is evident: design evolves the creative solutions, understanding and using techniques to produce products and services.

The constant diffusion of design thinking has allowed its application to different fields, which no longer pertain to a physical, designed product but rather to the process itself and to the way solutions might be

attained using certain approaches (Schmidberger & Wippermann, 2023). Integrating design thinking strategies in archival design enables a thorough analysis of the proposed solutions and the problems that must be addressed. This approach aims to achieve the desired outcomes while considering all significant variables and components involved in the process, including externalities. It acknowledges the possibility of interference and allows for modifications throughout the creation process while focusing on relevant features and clear goals, such as the value creation for the community. By embracing this holistic perspective, archives can heighten their design effectiveness and improve their closeness to the community.

In the same way, user experience concepts serving expanded archive enable advanced, rapid, and interconnected usability of the material on the platforms. These characteristics allow the design to be tailored for the community by providing a renewed user experience modeled entirely on the user and the stories that may arise from his interactions with the material. Digital interfaces for archives and cultural collections have become crucial gateways to heritage, and their design has become a prominent topic for interaction designers (Micoli et al., 2020). However, not all archives require the same application of design concepts and practices, as some might not be needed, or materials could have different representational needs.

Since design planning begins with a good, shared understanding of the various goals to be achieved, several primary factors in this research have emerged shaping best practices to keep in mind when building an archive: material, medium, free access, technology, value for the community.

In the future, designing a digital archive should focus on users, materials and the interactions between them in both digital and physical space.

Through the practices mentioned in the research, several value points emerged that are useful for the success of a digital fashion archive project. The material – during sharing any material, determining the right and specific type becomes crucial. As outlined in the initial section, cultural heritage encompasses a wide range of tangible and intangible materials (UNESCO, 2009), each possessing distinct characteristics and requirements. It is the same for fashion, in which materials exhibit their unique attributes with the uniqueness of the industry. As a result, during the design process, the extensive range of material types must be acknowledged, by employing meticulous cataloging to guarantee precise preservation and documentation.



The medium – the accessibility of the material relies on the chosen medium, which need to be suitable for its final purpose. The illustrative examples from the third section demonstrated that the medium could be both a proper digital platform that joins resources from different institutions or a website showcasing 3D images and digital twins (Europeana, 2023; EFHA, 2023; Virtual Fashion Archive, 2023). Therefore, considering the selection of the appropriate medium is pivotal for effective dissemination and accurate comprehension of the material. Factors to consider encompass the distinctive attributes of the material itself, as well as ensuring an optimal user experience while accounting for the requirements of the target audience and available resources.

Open access – addressing the issue of cultural heritage for the community necessitates free disseminating material, without limits dictated by copyright infringement to communicate cross-culturally. This view supports the idea that limitless access to cultural heritage can simplify knowledge sharing and engagement. In the research, it emerged how the democratization of access to cultural resources and the promotion of cultural diversity through open sharing is crucial to fashion archives.

Technologies – as addressed in the third section, new technologies enable the creation of a digital fashion archive to boost community engagement and knowledge transfer. Technology is core to defining and developing different communication strategies through multiple mediums. Lastly, value for the community comes from applying these strategies consistently over time and can be guaranteed by continuous qualitative and quantitative measurement.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the integration of technology and design into fashion archives has resulted in new possibilities for sharing and accessing cultural heritage. The transition to digital platforms and the usage of technology within the archival field have brought about transformative expanded archives that provide to the needs of the community. Collaborative efforts between GLAMs (Gallery, Library, Archives, and Museum) have played a significant role in enhancing and sharing cultural heritage, exceeding physical barriers and reaching a wider audience.

The case studies discussed in this paper, such as Europeana and EFHA, demonstrated fruitful collaborations in the fashion field. The two

illustrative examples showed how a facilitated and seamless navigation of the cultural heritage materials can positively promote active user engagement and the consequent emergence of new narratives. Moreover, with the implementation of technologies like 3D modeling, virtual and augmented reality, fashion archives have surpassed the limitations of physical spaces allowing users to feel immersive and authentic experiences with the items. Design plays a crucial role in shaping the user experience within these expanded archives. Design practices have facilitated the usability of digital platforms, considering the diverse needs and interactions of users. By focusing on factors such as material, medium, free access, technology, and value for the community, archivists and professionals can collaborate with designers to create archives that prioritize the user's active role and capture the requirements and representational needs of the different type of materials.

The actual goal of the digital archives and GLAMs' initiatives should be creating value to the public and serving the community by converting their spaces into places of enjoyment and learning, competing with the entertainment industry while making their financial management models similar to social enterprises (Tufarelli, 2022). Moreover, this paper serves as a foundation for more focused research into the joint of fashion archives, design, and technology. By exploring deeper into specific topics, naming metadata and vocabulary standards, user experience design, or the impact of more disruptive technologies, future studies can build upon the insights presented here, leading to more comprehensive contributions to the field.

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