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AESTHETIC SENSE

Performative Storytelling Design

Intertwining Art, Storytelling Design, and Neurodesign for Empathetic Connections in Workplaces

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Keywords

Storytelling Design, Immersive Storytelling, Performing Art, Neurodesign, Wellbeing.

Abstract

The lack of empathy in the workplace leads to conflicts, reduced cohesion, and declines in productivity and job satisfaction (Danna & Griffin, 1999). Building on this premise, this contribution examines the strategic role of *performative storytelling design* as an innovative approach that combines storytelling design, immersive technologies, and performative art to foster empathic connections by encouraging perspective-taking, strengthening team cohesion, and promoting shared corporate values (Gorman, 2019; Green & Brock, 2000). To elucidate this aspect, the paper includes best practices that can foster mutual understanding, collaboration, and team building through value sharing. To test the effectiveness of this approach and provide scientific evidence, the paper underscores the value of neurodesign in quantitatively assessing the impact of immersive experiences on employee well-being, offering concrete data on physiological and psychological responses (Ulrich, 1984). In conclusion, the integration of *performative storytelling design* and its validation through neurodesign techniques emerges as a promising strategy for addressing workplace well-being challenges and optimizing corporate dynamics, particularly when implemented within short time frames and repeated over time. Looking ahead, future research should prioritize the hybridization of disciplines to boost productivity and team cohesion, while exploring the co-design of such experiences in partnership with health specialists and human resources managers.



Figure 1. *Performative storytelling design experience* @Eleonora D'Ascenzi

1. Introduction

Increasingly, workplace well-being is profoundly influenced by the quality of interpersonal relationships and the capacity for empathy among employees (Goleman, 1995). A lack of empathy can generate distress and conflicts and reduce team cohesion, negatively impacting productivity and job satisfaction (Danna & Griffin, 1999). Recent studies have shown that the quality of interpersonal relationships and the capacity for empathy among employees are key factors for organizational success (Beasley, 2016; Loder 2016). Specifically, empathy – defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others (Decety & Jackson, 2004) – plays a fundamental role in promoting a positive and collaborative work environment (Decety & Ickes, 2011; Jenkins, 2021; Meechan, 2022). Conversely, its absence can lead to an increase in conflicts (Yorke, 2022; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003), a reduction in collaboration, and consequently, a decrease in team cohesion, with adverse effects on the well-being and overall performance of the organization (Barsade & O'Neill, 2014). In light of these considerations, exploring innovative approaches to enhance the quality of human interactions in the workplace becomes increasingly important. One such approach can derive from the strategic function of *performative storytelling design* as an innovative method to stimulate empathetic connections and create a shared value system of soft skills in workplaces through the use of immersive digital technologies that encourage perspective-taking, drawing inspiration from theatrical and cinematic techniques (Arcagni, 2020). Immersive storytelling can create multisensory experiences that engage participants' emotional and cognitive dimensions, promoting behavioral

changes that facilitate mutual understanding (Pressgrove & Bowman, 2021; Green & Brock, 2000; Hughes et al., 2005). This method allows for the construction of a shared experiential environment where corporate values and common stories emerge and solidify, thereby contributing to strengthening team cohesion (Xu & Xiao, 2020). In this context, the present contribution aims to analyze the effectiveness of *performative storytelling design* in enhancing workplace relationships, fostering cohesion, sharing soft skills, and promoting well-being through empathetic connections and improved mutual understanding among team members.

2. Unpacking Performative Storytelling Design: An Integrated Approach

In the increasingly complex contemporary work environment, the adoption of strategies aimed at fostering a supportive attitude among employees is becoming increasingly essential for enhancing individual well-being and corporate productivity. Among the most innovative and promising methodologies in this area is what can be termed *performative storytelling design*, namely an integrated approach that merges narrative, design, and performance to create compelling interactive experiences that go beyond traditional communication methods. This approach seeks to inspire active engagement and cultivate a profound emotional connection among participants. It is particularly effective in corporate settings for strengthening group cohesion and reinforcing the company's shared values. *Performative storytelling design* leverages innovative tools, methodologies, and techniques from various disciplines, including:

- **Storytelling Design:** storytelling is the core of *performative storytelling design*, given its ability to convey and reinforce values through unconventional experiences that emotionally engage participants. The effectiveness of storytelling in this context lies in its capacity to activate brain areas responsible for sensory perception, emotions, and memory, making messages comprehensible, deeply memorable, and influential in the long term (Zak, 2015). This emotional and cognitive engagement thus facilitates experiential learning that stimulates critical reflection and self-awareness, essential components for enhancing employee empathy and promoting a harmonious and productive work environment (Assmann, 2017).
- **Immersive Technologies:** immersive technologies, such as virtual reality (VR) and specifically 3DoF VR with 360-degree videos, represent a significant innovation in the field of corporate communication, as they allow for transportation into real and engaging environments that offer the opportunity to immerse oneself in unconventional situations, thereby amplifying the sense of presence and participation compared to traditional storytelling (Slater & Sanchez-Vives, 2016). The ability of these technologies to create emotionally powerful sensory and cognitive experiences transcends situated knowledge. It radically transforms the approach to training and internal communication, significantly enhancing engagement and the effectiveness of learning. This mode of total immersion helps make experiences more impactful, consolidating the understanding of the conveyed content and values (Kool, 2016).

- **Performative Arts:** the approach and techniques of the performative arts, particularly theater, are fundamental for developing empathy and interpersonal sensitivity within teams. Theater allows for immersion in scenarios that require understanding others' emotions and experiences (Eisenberg et al., 2015). This process of immersion and identification is thus essential for stimulating perspective-taking, fostering a more cohesive and collaborative work environment where the application of these techniques in a corporate context not only improves the quality of interactions among colleagues but also contributes to creating an organizational culture based on empathy and mutual respect (Brattström & Faems, 2024; Boal, 1979).

Performative storytelling design, thus, not only utilizes elements from communication design but also clearly intersects with artistic practices, such as those of the performative arts, to design memorable and impactful experiences. The integration of art and design becomes crucial to the success of this value-driven communication approach, as it enables the creation of experiences that are both emotionally engaging and culturally significant. This synergy strengthens alignment with the concept of cultural welfare, highlighting how these interventions can serve as substantial cultural contributions within the business world and “disruptive” tools for value sharing. *Performative storytelling design*, therefore, represents an integrated and multidisciplinary approach that, through the use of narrative, immersive technologies, and performative arts, can promote empathy, well-being, and productivity in the workplace (Danna & Griffin, 1999; Berns

et al., 2013), offering new opportunities to address organizational challenges and to improve the quality of interpersonal relationships.

3. Best Practices in *Performative Storytelling Design*: A Literature Review

Performative storytelling design is garnering increasing interest, particularly within the context of museums and temporary installations, due to its capacity to evoke profound values and personal reflections. However, *performative storytelling design* has not yet found an established application in the workplace, where practices aimed at fostering value-driven initiatives are lacking. To address this gap, it is helpful first to examine best practices that demonstrate how the intersection of storytelling design, immersive technologies, and performative art can produce significant outcomes, creating a shared experiential environment in which corporate values can emerge and strengthen team cohesion (Green & Brock, 2000). Although these best practices do not originate from the workplace domain, they illustrate the potential for team building through value-sharing, mutual understanding, and collaboration.

3.1. The Machine to be Another: Perspective-Taking of Others' Experiences

The Machine to Be Another (TMBA) is an innovative project by BeAnotherLab that combines immersive technology with performative storytelling to facilitate experiences of empathy and interpersonal understanding, thereby promoting a positive value framework. Although the experiences address vari-

ous themes (such as migration, war, body acceptance, among others), the project is distinguished by its ability to integrate virtual reality with direct physical interaction, creating a synesthetic experience that enriches the virtual narrative through tangible elements. A central aspect of TMBA is the pivotal role of the actor, who, though invisible to the user wearing the VR headset, participates in the performance, serving as a crucial bridge between the virtual and real worlds. During the experience, the actor guides the user through an artistic performance that offers a physical narrative alongside the digital storytelling design, creating a direct connection between the physical environment and the digital story. The actor particularly engages the sense of touch by “physicalizing” symbolic objects from the narrative, thereby rendering significant elements of the virtual story tangible. This allows for a genuine sense of immersion, as also noted by Pallasmaa (2007), who identifies touch as the primary interface with the world. This synesthetic approach amplifies the immersive experience, providing a multisensory connection that transcends mere sight and sound (BeAnotherLab, 2023). Thus, TMBA transcends immersive storytelling design, fostering a profound shift in user perception and understanding. The interaction with physical objects, combined with the simultaneous visualization of virtual elements, stimulates perspective-taking, enabling users to experience others’ experiences in a deeply engaging, tangible, and multisensory manner. TMBA employs this combination of VR technologies and artistic performance to promote positive cultural change, encouraging greater social cohesion and enhanced mutual understanding through the stimulation of empathy (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Presentation of the BeAnotherLab research group, @BeAnotherLab.

The immersive experience, enriched by personalized storytelling and physical interaction, not only renders the narrative more concrete and authentic but also stimulates critical and deep reflection on the experiences of others (BeAnotherLab, 2023).

3.2. Così è (o mi pare): The Relativity of Truth Between Theater and Immersive Technologies

Così è (o mi pare) is a pioneering project that reinterprets Luigi Pirandello's play *Così è (se vi pare)* through the innovative use of virtual reality (VR). Adapted and directed by Elio Germano,

the project is realized in collaboration with the Fondazione Teatro della Toscana, Infinito Produzioni Teatrali, and Gold Production. *Così è (o mi pare)* employs VR to offer a contemporary reinterpretation of Pirandello's narrative, challenging the notion of absolute truth, a central theme in the original work. Through VR headsets, viewers find themselves in the role of one of the story's protagonists: an elderly father who observes a family discussion marked by conflicting versions of the same story debated within the community where the family lives. The work is a touring production staged in various theaters across Italy and demonstrates how immersive technologies can be integrated into the performing arts to explore and expand the understanding of concepts like truth and perspective. The innovative aspect of this experience lies in the opportunity for viewers to explore the scene from multiple angles while maintaining a passive role without direct interaction. Spectators can choose where and what to watch, immersing themselves in a narrative that unfolds simultaneously from different viewpoints. This structure allows for a deeper understanding of the relativity of truth and the subjective nature of perspective. Moreover, the project combines VR with traditional theatrical production, creating a synergy between technology and performing arts. This integration enriches the theatrical experience without replacing it, expanding its expressive possibilities and offering new modes of engagement. The theatrical environment also allows spectators to discuss and reflect on the shared experience after the performance, leveraging the collective nature of the representation. In summary, *Così è (o mi pare)* represents a practical example of how immersive technologies can expand the boundaries of performing arts, offering

an experience that stimulates critical reflection on truth and perspective. It enriches the theatrical tradition with technological innovations while enhancing immersive storytelling with theatrical scripting techniques, fundamental to *performative storytelling design* (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Collective projections of gold production's VR performances, @Nuri Rashid.

3.3. Peaceful Places: The Importance of Emotional Experience as a Core Value Message

The project *Peaceful Places*, conceived by Margherita Landi and Agnese Lanza and winner of the 2021 Auggie Awards USA in the category of Best Art or Film, represents a pioneering integration of virtual reality (VR) and performing arts, with a particular focus on dance (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. Margherita Landi's performance, *Landi's Cube*, @Nuri Rashid.

This installation is notable for its innovative approach to using VR to explore and amplify the emotional and physical experiences associated with affectionate interactions. *Peaceful Places* is an experimental project that leverages virtual reality to immerse users in an interactive experience centered on affection through the visualization and mimicry of affectionate gestures. Users, equipped with VR headsets, interact with videos depicting five pairs in moments of intimacy: a grandfather and grandson, a mother and son, a mother and adult daughter, and two childhood friends.

Before the VR experience, participants engage in a physical contact workshop that introduces them to a mystical and sensory dimension, setting the stage for the use of immersive technology. During the VR session, users observe and imitate the affectionate gestures shown in the videos, such as hugs and caresses, integrating them into their physical world. This process enables the creation of an instant choreography based on affectionate gestures, transforming VR into a tool that enriches the bodily experience and communicates emotions directly and viscerally engagingly. *Peaceful Places* presents an innovative exploration of affection as a physical act and contextualizes it within a poetic and political message emphasizing the importance of feeling and inclusion. The project shifts the focus from performative virtuosity to the value of emotional experience and human connection, making VR a tool for reflection and personal growth. The fusion of sensory and emotional experiences offered by *Peaceful Places* enhances the understanding and experience of affection, transforming virtual interaction into a tangible and meaningful experience. The project thus demonstrates how virtual reality can be used to simulate and amplify and communicate affectionate experiences, promoting greater awareness and connection among individuals.

3.4. Exploring the Potential of Case Studies in Workplace Applications

Although not yet applied in the workplace, the three projects discussed offer significant examples of how performative immersive design can enhance the work environment by integrating fundamental values such as empathy, the relativity of truth, and the importance of emotional connections.

The Machine to Be Another (TMBA) by BeAnotherLab exemplifies perspective-taking, where virtual reality and physical interaction foster a deep understanding of others' experiences. When applied in a corporate setting, this approach could enhance empathy among colleagues, improve mutual understanding, and promote stronger team cohesion. The project *Così è (o mi pare)* demonstrates how understanding interpersonal dynamics can be expanded, particularly regarding the relativity of truth and subjective viewpoints. Adapting to the workplace could address conflicts and promote more open and respectful communication, thus facilitating a more collaborative work environment. *Peaceful Places*, which focuses on human connection and emotional experience, offers a pathway to improving workplace well-being by emphasizing personal connections and mutual support as key elements for individual and collective growth. In summary, these projects highlight how performative immersive design can transform the workplace by instilling values that enhance work effectiveness, well-being, and social cohesion, creating work environments that are more inclusive, empathetic, and oriented towards mutual understanding.

4. The Importance of Providing Scientific Evidence to Translate *Performative Storytelling Design* into Workplace Contexts: The Role of Neurodesign

Unlike the entertainment industry, adopting *performative storytelling design* in workplace practices involves significant challenges, as it is crucial to ensure that these technologies not only entertain but also contribute concretely to improving interpersonal dynamics, team cohesion, and overall employee well-being. A rigorous and scientific validation methodology is neces-

sary to achieve these goals to provide concrete data for guiding future optimizations and improvements. In this context, validation through neurodesign may become essential for qualitatively and quantitatively assessing the impact of immersive experiences on employee well-being. Numerous neuroscientific studies have demonstrated that storytelling, particularly when immersive, can activate brain areas responsible for sensory perception, emotions, and memory. Zak (2015) highlighted that well-designed storytelling stimulates brain areas involved in emotional response and memory, enhancing the impact and memorability of messages. This improves the emotional connection with the content and reinforces the retention of conveyed information. Similarly, immersive experiences have been associated with releasing hormones that positively affect mood and motivation. Berns et al. (2013) showed that such experiences can induce significant hormonal changes that enhance mood and motivation, particularly relevant in workplace settings where emotional well-being and motivation are crucial for productivity and team cohesion. To provide scientific evidence on the effectiveness of *performative storytelling design*, it is essential to apply neurodesign techniques that allow for a detailed and accurate evaluation of the impact of immersive experiences designed according to the performative approach to storytelling design. The main neurodesign methodologies that could be adopted include:

- **Heart Rate Variability (HRV):** HRV measures fluctuations in heart rate, reflecting participants' states of stress and relaxation. An increase in HRV often indicates better stress management and improved emotional well-being (Boonnithi et al., 2011).

- **Electrodermal Activity (EDA):** EDA measures variations in skin conductance, which are indicative of emotional responses and autonomic nervous system activation. Significant changes in EDA can signal intense emotional reactions or stress (Boucsein, 2012).
- **Electroencephalogram (EEG):** EEG monitors brain waves and can be utilized to study brain activation during interactions with immersive experiences. It helps to understand how and to what extent narratives influence brain activity and emotional responses (Kalas & Momin, 2016).

Measurements obtained through these techniques can provide concrete data on employees' physiological and psychological responses, allowing for an objective assessment of the effectiveness of immersive storytelling techniques in improving well-being and team cohesion. On one hand, applying *performative storytelling design* in the workplace is a strategic communication tool. On the other hand, its validation through neurodesign techniques represents a promising strategy for understanding the extent to which these methods can address and stimulate challenges related to workplace well-being in terms of productivity and team cohesion.

5. Conclusions

The integration of art, design, and science can transform how organizations address employee well-being, fostering a work culture that values personal and professional growth while enhancing overall job quality. In this context, *performative storytelling design*, validated through neurodesign

techniques, represents an innovative and promising strategy for tackling workplace well-being challenges. This approach enriches the work experience, improves team cohesion, and enhances employee motivation by creating immersive experiences that elicit deep emotional and cognitive responses, thereby fostering a culture of empathy and collaboration. Scientific monitoring and optimization of these practices using tools such as HRV, EDA, and EEG are crucial to ensure that the experiences are genuinely beneficial. Future research should explore the hybridization of *performative storytelling design* and neurodesign to maximize productivity and benefits for team cohesion. These initiatives must form part of a broader approach to corporate well-being, involving all key stakeholders – including health specialists, design experts, and human resources managers – in the design and implementation phases. This can ensure that the experiences are personalized, relevant, and tailored to the workplace's needs through employee involvement in impactful co-creation. Participatory processes can increase the acceptance and effectiveness of interventions, ensuring that solutions align with the actual needs and expectations of the staff. Therefore, the application of *performative storytelling design* in the workplace, validated through neurodesign, can represent both a novel and promising strategy for promoting cultural welfare and corporate sustainability, encouraging a more empathetic and sustainable organizational culture, attentive to social responsibilities and organizational sustainability, thereby contributing to overall employee well-being and the achievement of ESG goals.

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V

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She is a PhD candidate in architecture, which the Department of the University of Naples Federico II developed. She graduated with honors in the international Master's Degree in Design for the Built Environment and a Bachelor's Degree

with honors in architecture, both at the University of Naples Federico II. Her research specialises in the domains of design for the ecological transition, design for the territory, social design and design for environmental sustainability and circular economy, with a particular focus on the field of Nature-Based-Solution, Internet of Things (IoT), Generative Artificial Intelligence (G AI), and Digital Manufacturing (DM), publishing articles in thematic scientific journals.

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Sara Iebbole

Designer, PhD student at the University of Genoa where she graduated as Master's Degree in Product Event Design at the Department of Architecture and Design. Her research interest is centred in understanding the cultural position and the role of designers in relation to gender studies and intersectionality. Specifically, her research focuses on the bond between gender stereotypes, societal evolution and design product/processes, seeking for a design method for inclusiveness.

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Virginia Marano

She is a researcher, curator, and art historian. She is currently a postdoctoral fellow in the Lise Meitner Group "Coded Objects". She holds a PhD in art history from the University of Zurich. Her thesis examined the diasporic dimension in the works of Jewish women sculptors in Post-war New York, previously assimilated to feminism but not yet connected to the question of exile. She was a recipient of several scholarship and research grants from the Swiss government and the University of Zurich. In 2022, she was a SNSF Doc.Mobility fellow in the Art History Department at Hunter College/CUNY. She is the co-founder and coordinator of the research project "Rethinking Art History through Disability" at the University of Zurich. In 2023, she was a fellow researcher at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice, working on the PNRR-PEBA project for the Removal of Physical, Cognitive, and Sensory Barriers in Cultural Sites, funded by the NextGenerationEU program. In addition to her academic activities, she serves as curatorial assistant at MASI, Museo d'arte della Svizzera italiana, Lugano. Her work focuses on developing new approaches to curating exhibitions that emphasize decentralization and collaborative practices.

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Architect, PhD in Design, Associate Professor at the University of Genoa, Architecture and Design Department, since 2023. She focuses her studies in service design strategies applied to circular economy and social innovation, collaborating with local companies and public institutions. She is referent of the Desislub Unige team (<https://desislub.unige.it/>) working on research, teaching, and workshop projects focused on urban regeneration, Blueconomy and Design for all. Since 2021, she has been the scientific manager of the research contract with the Barilla company for the development of increasingly sustainable and consumer-friendly products and packaging. In 2018 she won an Italian national "Grant for a PhD research on urban regeneration" promoted by Directorate General of Contemporary Art and Architecture, publishing her doctoral research titled "Con-temporary, Design for the reuse of vacant spaces".

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Pierluigi Panza

After having obtained two degrees and a research doctorate (all three theses have been published), he started teaching in various Italian universities (continuously at the Politecnico di Milano) and became an art critic of the *Corriere della Sera*. He is a member of the Academy of the Arts of Design in Florence, of the Veneto Institute of Sciences, Letters and Arts, of the Italian Society of Aesthetics and of the Italian Society of History of Art Critics. He obtained scientific qualifications in History of Architecture (full professor), History of Art (associate professor), Aesthetics (associate professor). He is the director of the restoration magazine *Ananke. Culture, history and conservation techniques* (Anvur class A magazine), published hundreds of scientific papers especially on Italian art, architecture and 18th century furniture. He is one of the world's leading scholars on Piranesi. In 2017 his volume *Museo Piranesi* won the European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage, the highest European prize for Cultural Heritage Achievements. He is the curator of exhibitions and member of a ministerial commission. He has published five novels and in 2008 he won the Campiello selection prize.

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Luca Parodi

Designer, PhD, Research Fellow at the Department Architecture and Design, Università di Genova, UNIGE. He works and teaches in the areas of product, interior and furniture design. His research interest focuses on understanding the cultural position and role of designers in relation to local heritage and contemporary production. His research focuses on the link between product design as a function of cultural transformations and identity enhancement. Currently is a visiting professor at BUCT Beijing, member of the Design Observatory and is a part of ADI Handmade in Italy Commission. In publishing, he writes for the international magazine ElleDecor.it and is a member of the editorial board of the university journal Magazine.

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Silvia Pericu

Architect, PhD, Associate Professor in Product Design at the Department Architecture and Design, Università di Genova UNIGE, since 2013. Her research interests focus on design's capabilities to contribute to territorial development and transformation in relationship to health, safety and sustainability. Main issues in the research are co-design processes for social innovation and circular design strategies for making change happen towards circular economy. On this topic she coordinated in the last two years the partnership activity of the University of Genoa, in the URBACT III Action Planning Network: "2nd Chance. Waking up sleeping giants, for a sustainable urban development" and the Creative EU "Creative Food Cycles" (2018-20) as scientific manager for University of Genoa research team.

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Gabi Scardi

Art critic, curator, and writer. She investigates art and the public sphere, and contemporary collaborative methodologies, questioning new tendencies and practices. She collaborated internationally with museums and institutions, curating solo shows, group shows and public projects. She is co-director of the review Animot; NAHR President; a member of EoC - Ecologie of Care and of CCW - Cultural Welfare Center. Since 2011 she has been the artistic director of *nctm e l'arte*, a project by ADVANT Nctm Studio Legale. She is director of the course in Socially Engaged Art, at Accademia Unidee, Biella, and teaches Phenomenology of Contemporary Arts at Accademia di Belle Arti di Verona, and modules on Contemporary Art and Public Art at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan.

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Irene Sanesi

She is a chartered accountant and cultural economist. She is founder and Name Partner of BBS-pro. For 30 years she has been dealing with project and process management, third sector, advocacy, fundraising, taxation, higher education and strategic philanthropy. She has written many publications about cultural economics, sustainability and fundraising. Gestionalia is the title of her column on *Artribune*. She has held, and still holds, institutional volunteering positions in both national and international cultural institutions.

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Marzia Tomasin

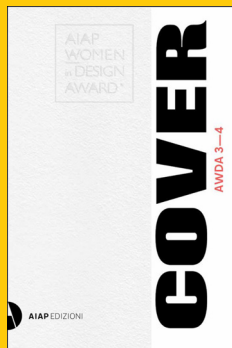
She is a cultural manager specialized in the design and development of multidisciplinary projects for businesses and organizations. She bases her work on the belief that culture generates value and is a lever for innovation. Since 2016, she has been hosting Periscritto, a podcast dedicated to books and their authors. In 2021, she founded Atelier Cultura, a benefit corporation that integrates culture into the business landscape, guiding companies in creating ecosystems between cultural vision and business strategy. As a journalist and writer, she deals with business and culture: she co-authored *L'Alfabeto della sostenibilità* and in 2024 published *Successi a Nord-Est* (Egea Editore). In 2024, she founded and chairs Agorà, an ETS association that carries out multidisciplinary cultural and civic engagement projects.

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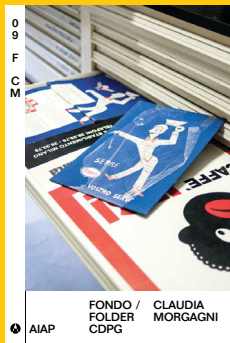
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