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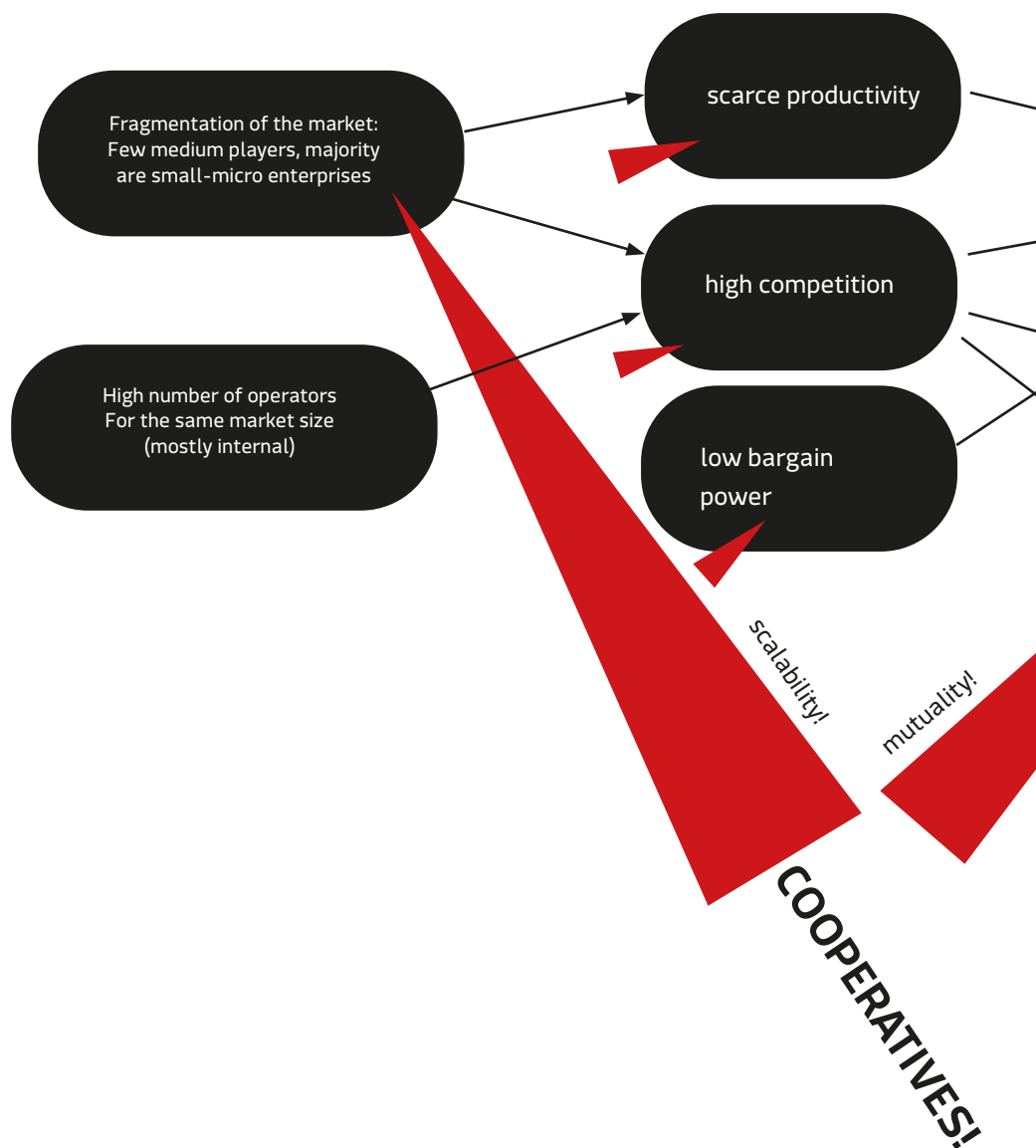
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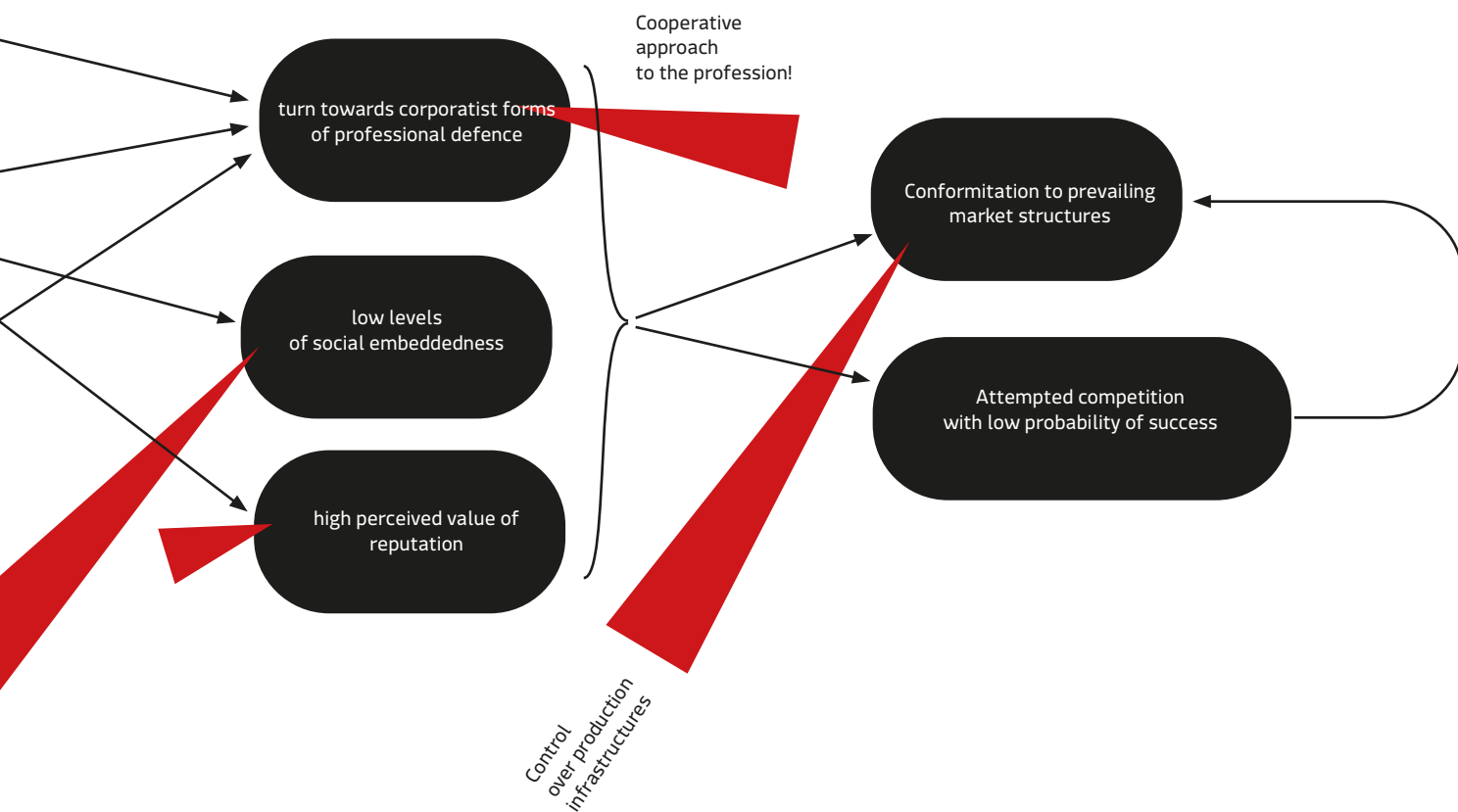
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IL RUOLO DELLE COOPERATIVE NEL DESIGN DELLA COMUNICAZIONE IN ITALIA



Beat the Black of hyper-competitive corporatism
with the Red Wedge of cooperatives
(a graphical abstract)

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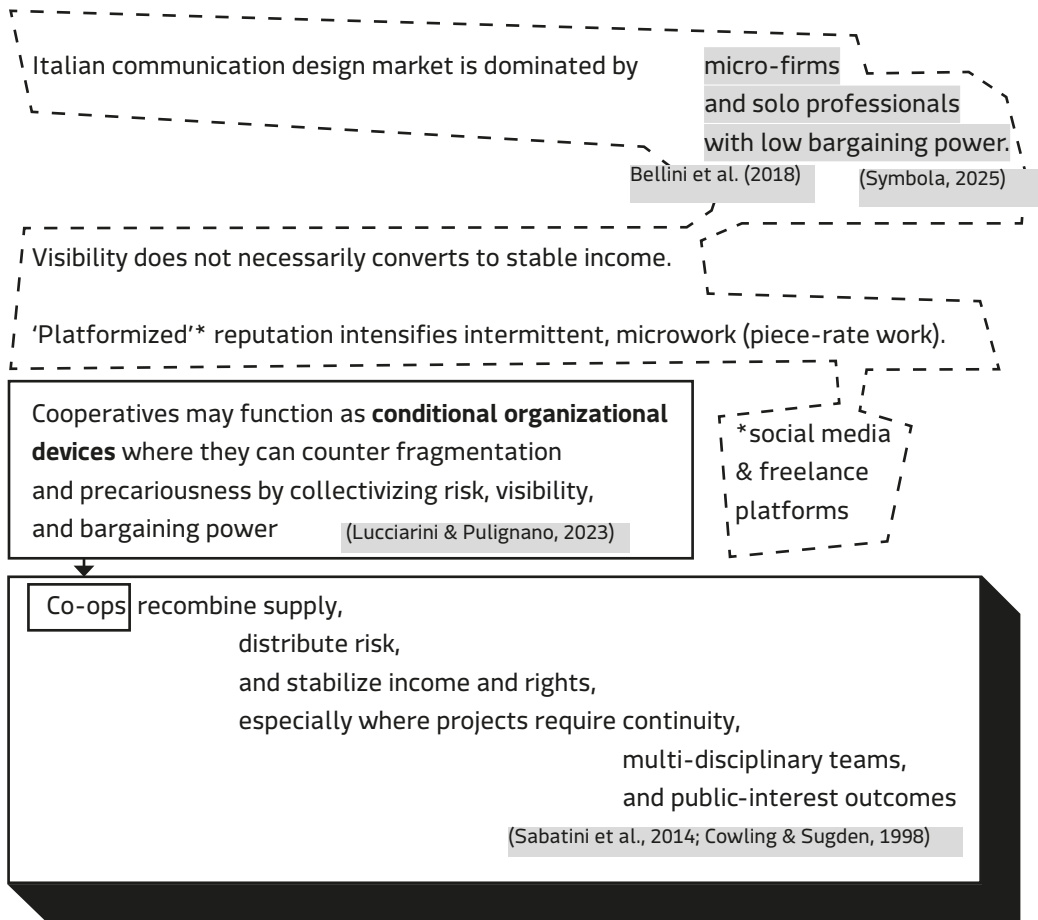
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1. Context

Italian regulation on Co-op
 The Basevi Law of 14 December 1947 established the foundational legal criteria. From the 1970s onward, successive reforms strengthened capital and clarified governance 2003 Company Law Reform: distinction between predominantly mutual cooperatives and other cooperatives with profit distribution is allowed but still under democratic governance. (Zamagni & Zamagni, 2010)

Co-ops replace capital-weighted voting with "one member, one vote," ensuring that individual interests are aligned and collective (Zamagni & Zamagni, 2011, pp. 23–33)

2. Why cooperatives may matter in design market

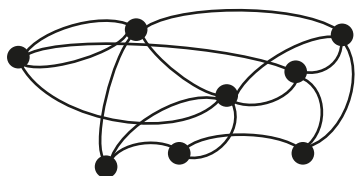
Unlike ad-hoc freelance alliances, →

membership,
rules on intellectual properties,
and internal crediting

turn individual visibility
into a managed collective asset

Co-ops

Evidence shows co-ops can match private firms' performance



→

with fewer conflicts,
lower absenteeism,
and robust employment,
contradicting free-riding predictions.

Co-ops

(Estrin, 1991; Borzaga et al., 2019)

3. Networks, social capital*, and structural cohesion

Cooperation may enable forms of mutual support and redistribution in contexts that would otherwise be hostile.

Co-ops generate trust and positive externalities beyond firm boundaries (Sabatini et al., 2014).
From a network view, their dense, redundant ties
+ increase structural cohesion
—multiple independent paths that keep groups connected despite node loss—
improving shock tolerance and reducing conflict cascades (Moody & White, 2003; White & Harary, 2001).

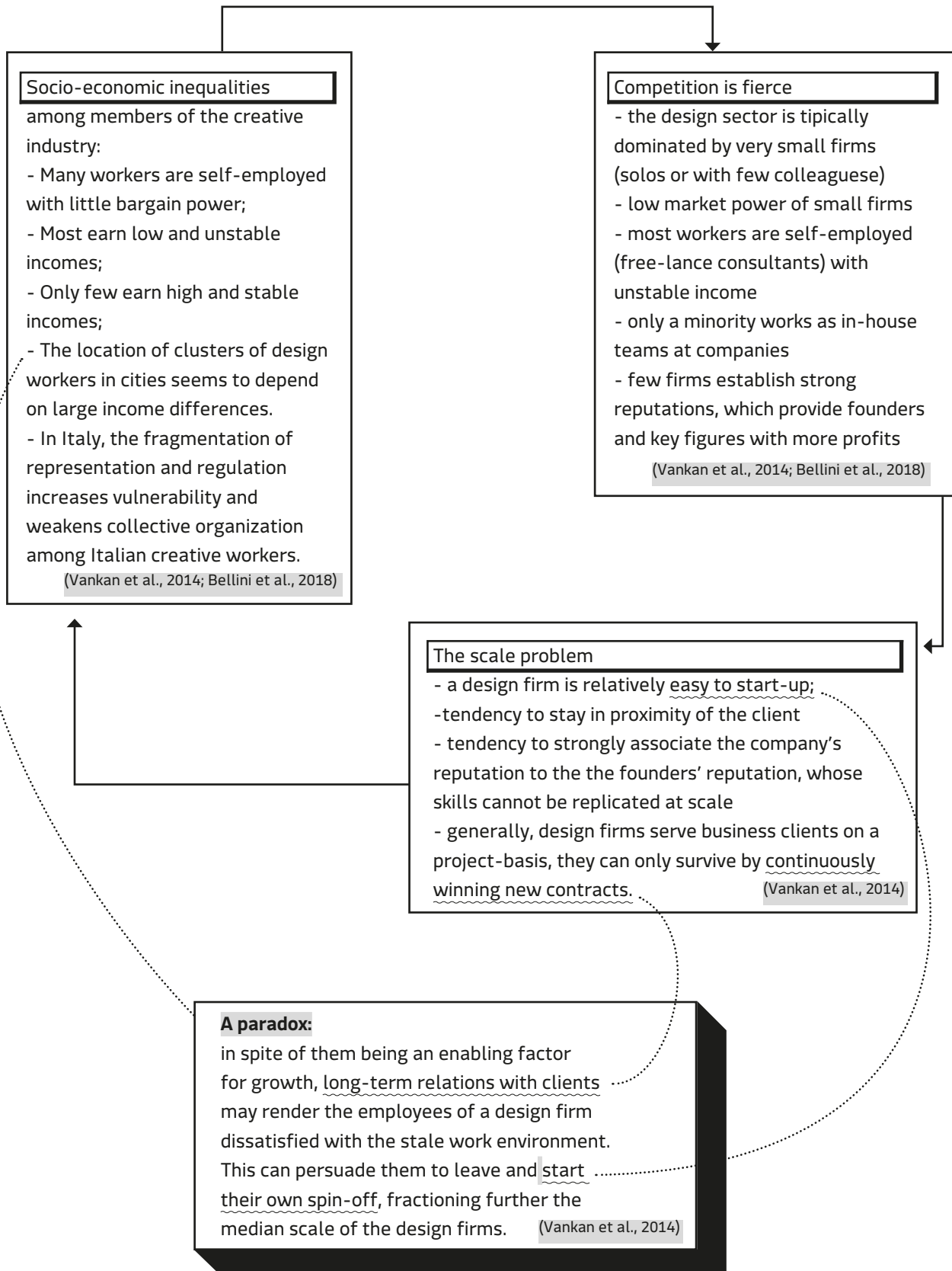
For design organizations this means
+ smoother handovers,
+ substitutability of critical roles,
+ and continuity under staff turnover.

***Social capital & Embeddedness**

Social capital refers to the resources derived from durable networks of institutionalized relationships, which provides members with the backing of the collectively owned capital and access to credit in its various forms (Bourdieu, 1986).

Embeddedness refers to the extent to which economic action is grounded in concrete and ongoing social relations, rather than in abstract norms, trust, or institutional affiliation (Granovetter, 1985).

4. Socio-economics of the design market



5. Method of analysis

Research design		
Exploratory and comparative	research design aimed at	<u>mapping organizational forms</u> in the Italian communication design market, with a specific focus on cooperative enterprises.
Analytical strategy		
The study combines	institutional mapping and comparative analysis	of <u>organizational models</u> (self-employed, capital-based firms, cooperatives), rather than estimating causal effects or population parameters.
Unit of analysis		
Design firms and professional organizations		operating in the <u>graphic design sector in Italy</u> .

6. Data

Primary data sources		
Infocamere (Italian Chambers of Commerce) registers, used to:	identify	formally registered firms;
	distinguish	<u>map firm size;</u> sectoral classification through ATECO codes; legal forms (sole proprietorships, limited liability companies, etc.).
Supplementary sources		
Professional associations (e.g., AIAP, AGI) membership lists; Firms and studios identified through sector-specific websites and professional observatories.		
Market segmentation		
Firms are classified according to EU enterprise size categories (micro, small, medium), (European Commission, 2026) in order to ensure analytical comparability across organizational forms.		
Sampling approach		
Non-probabilistic, multi-source sampling (reference year: 2025); The sample is constructed to capture organizational diversity rather than statistical representativeness.		

7. Limitations

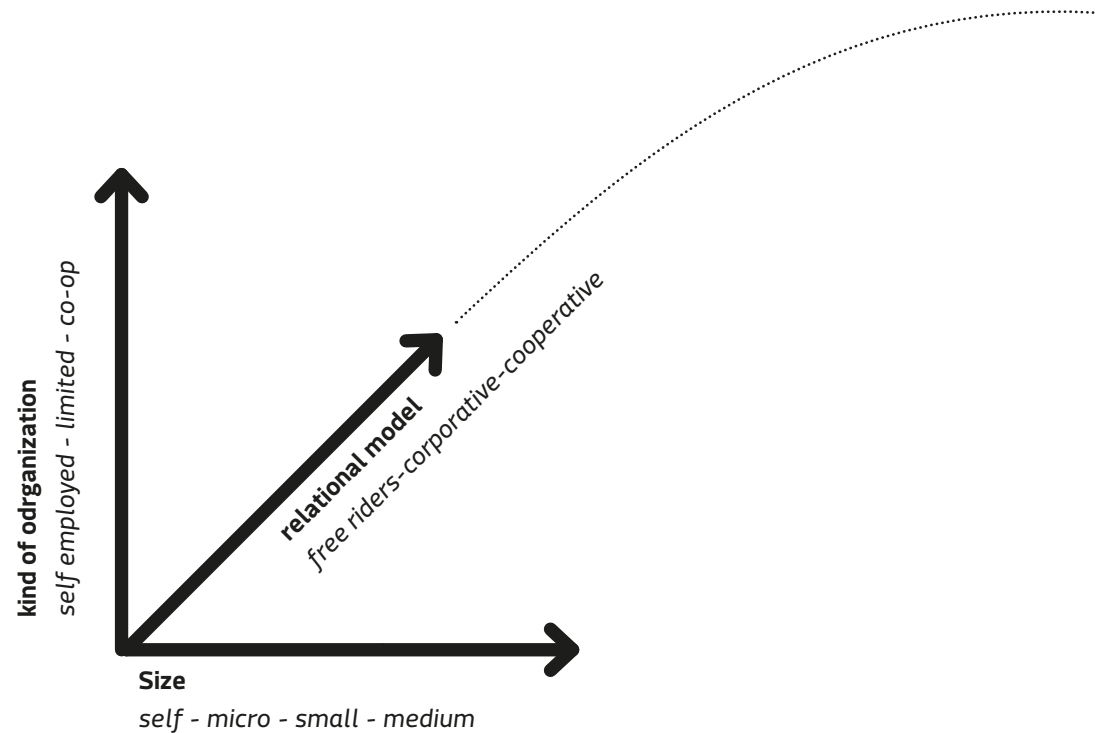
Representativeness: The sample is not statistically representative of the entire population of Italian design firms and should not be used for population-level inference.

Selection bias: The inclusion of professional associations and visible sector actors may over-represent firms with higher reputational or symbolic capital.

Coverage constraints: Infocamere data capture formally registered entities only, excluding informal, hybrid, or intermittently organized forms of creative work.

Analytical scope: Findings are intended to support conceptual and comparative arguments about organizational models, not to measure performance differentials in a causal or econometric sense.

8. The political and socio-economical dimensions of a firm



In this article we mention several models for the political setup of professional networks and socio-economical operating in the domestic market.

The models can be arranged on three axes, an economical entity can be described by its position on these three axes:

kind of organization,
relational model,
size.

In the **relational model**:

for **corporative model** we describe the relational model observed in those professional lobbies

which obtained or plan to obtain
 recognition as a professional register (*albo professionale*),
 with or without a dedicated pension fund,
 to leverage their public recognition to withhold exclusive benefits
 on a political,
 economical and
 personal level

for **free-rider model** we describe the relational model observed in those professionals or firms

which operate in the free capital market as independents
 not compromising their leadership and governance
 withholding the majority of shares
 or retaining apical positions
 adhering to lobbies with mutual interest on need
 whose aim is primarily the profit

for **cooperative model** we describe the relational model observed in those professionals or firms

whose governance is equally shared amongst associates
 and whose aim is to offer workers better terms
 than the ones available on the market (especially for freelancers and solos)

All these models interact on other dimensions of the firm, namely the kind and size of the enterprise.

A cooperative is also a form of lobby,

for all those workers who join it in search of better market conditions
 and representation.

In Italy, this type of enterprise is expressly mentioned in

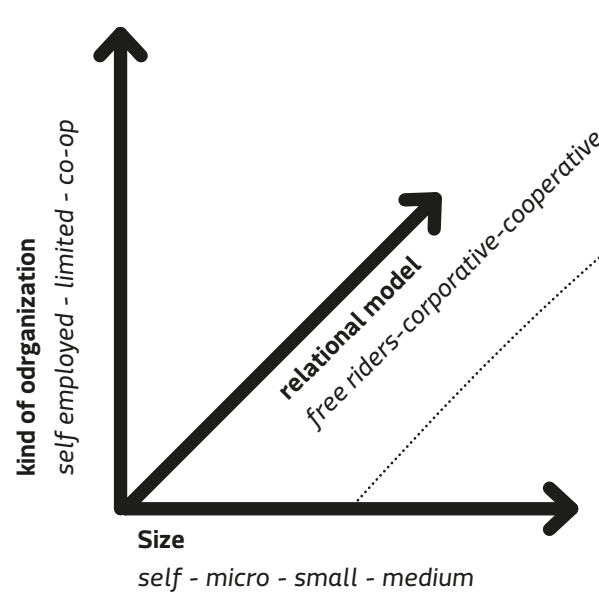
Article 45 of the Italian Constitution,
 which promotes and encourages cooperation
 for its social function,
 mutuality
 and non-speculative nature.

There is therefore a strong socio-ideological connotation,

which then leads to specific legislation
 that characterises membership
 and operation;

it is not merely a convergence of interests between private individuals.

9. Co-ops in comparison with different models pros (+) and cons (-)



The size of design cooperatives is comparable to that of micro or small design firms, yet their number remains very limited
 Bellini et al. (2018)

SME definition

Category	Micro	Small	Medium
Staff	< 10	< 50	< 250
Turnover	≤ €2 million	≤ €10 million	≤ €50 million

(European Commission, 2026)

Micro Co-op

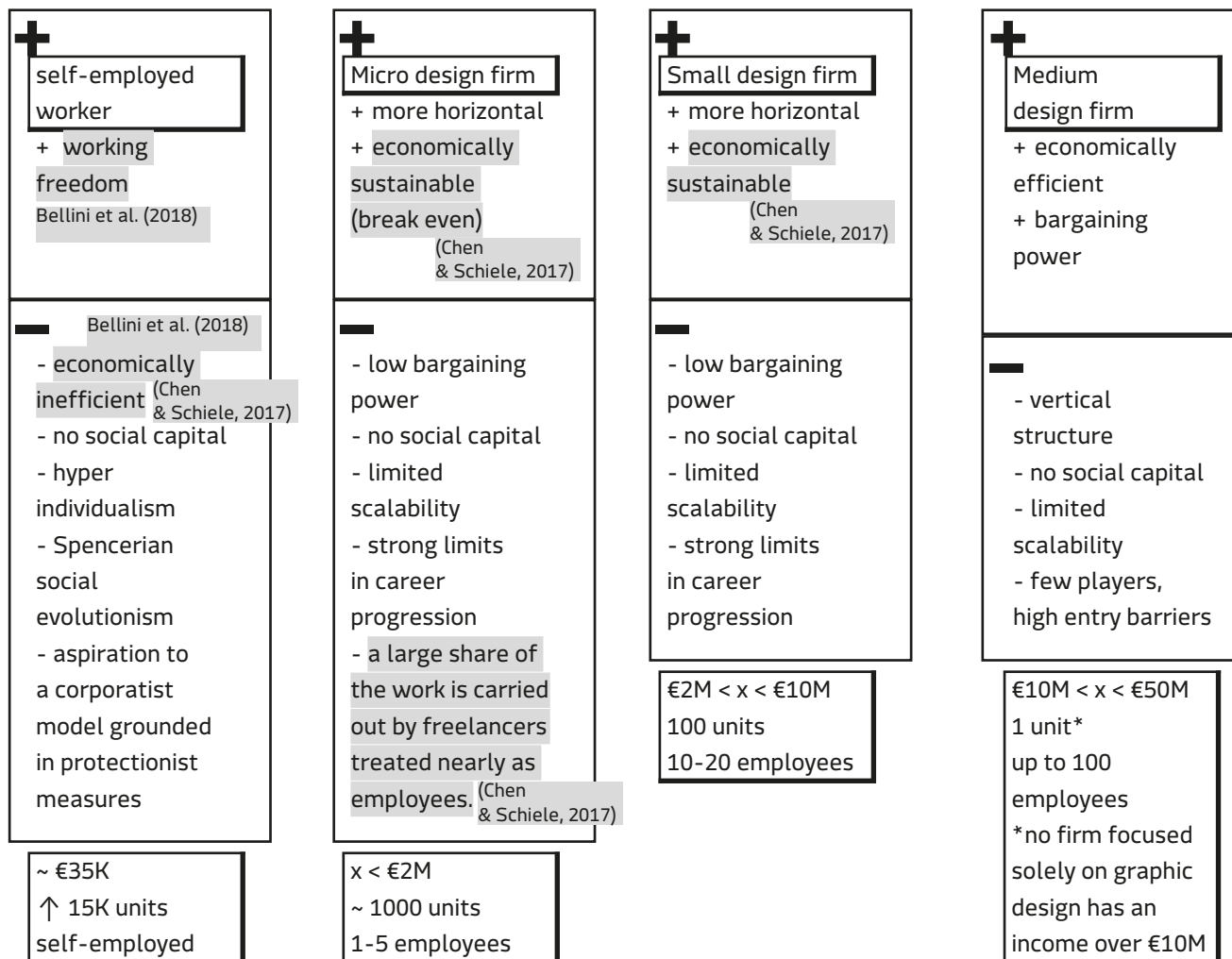
- limited scalability
- unlikely to be accepted by individuals, given the dominant cultural models
- low profit margin
- limits in career progression

Small/medium Co-op/Co-op network

- limited scalability
- unlikely to be accepted by individuals, given the dominant cultural models
- low profit margin
- difficult decision process
- few operating examples

10. The four model size of business (European Commission, 2003)

There are no big graphic design firm in Italy, the biggest seems to be Robilant & Associati SpA, yearly income ~€17,00 million, given that medium size business means > than €10 millions, there are very few players above this size (most likely a couple).



no free riders (3 partners minimum)

+

Micro Co-op

+ social capital

+ horizontal structure

+ share of risk and benefits

+

Small/medium Co-op/Co-op network

+ social capital

+ horizontal structure

+ economically sustainable

11. Challenges of individualistic models

Employment within a micro-enterprise ensures basic labor protections but affords few opportunities* for either reputational advancement or economic mobility.

Freelancers face the absence of career progression, public visibility, and institutional safeguards*.

(Bellini et al. (2018))

Many high-profile designers persist in strategies centered on personal visibility or symbolic capital*, assuming that accumulated reputation will eventually convert into stable income.

(Gandini, 2016)

*The revised 7 founding principles of international cooperation, as formalized at the Manchester congress of the International Cooperative Association, answer structurally to the fragility of the condition of the single worker professional in the capital market (International Cooperative Alliance, 2024).

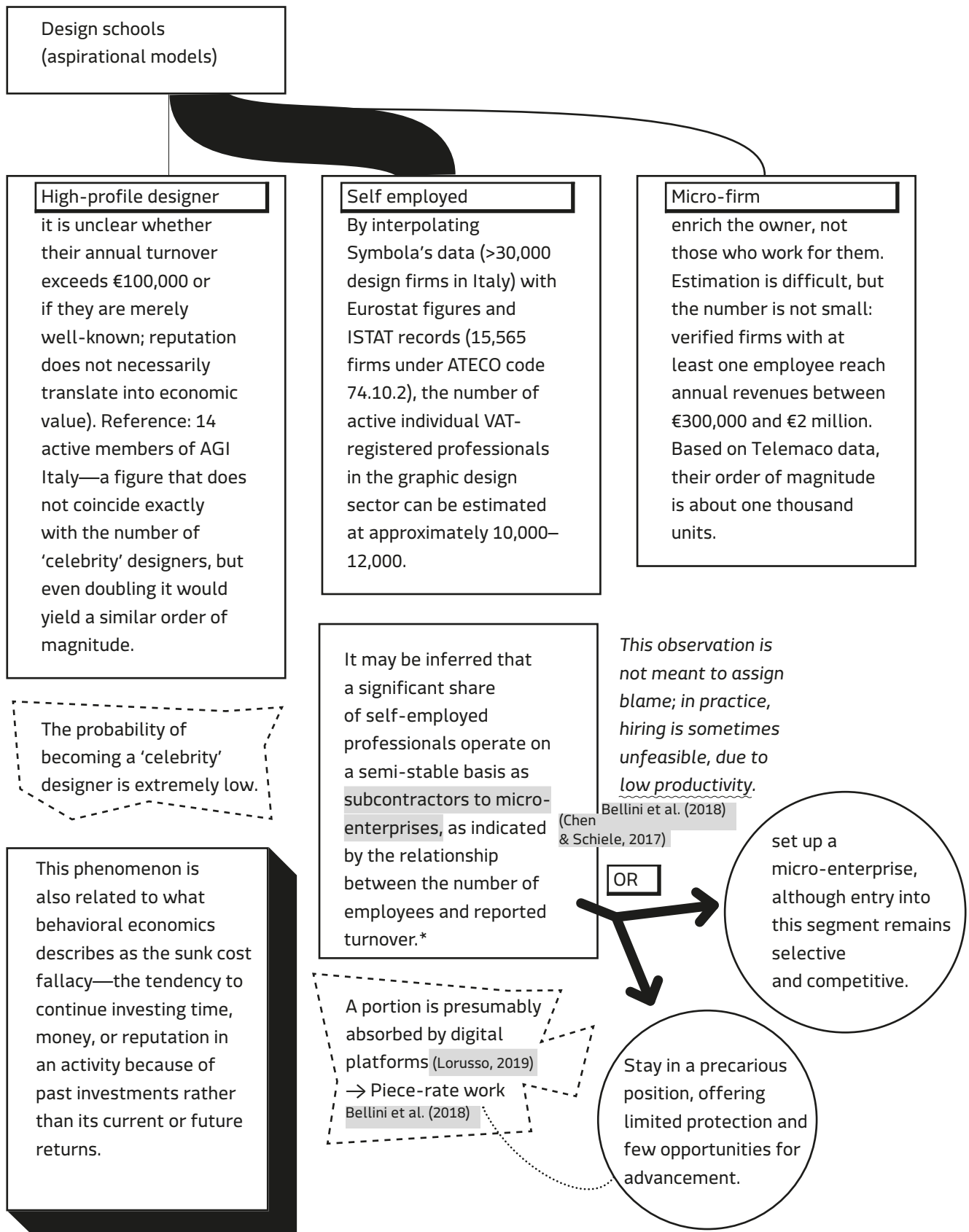
In particular

3) Member Economic Participation
equal contribution parallels democratic control, surpluses are directed toward developing the cooperation itself

4) Autonomy and Independence
a cooperative is an independent organization, controlled by the members, free to operate in the capital market and to deal with institutions

All in all, what unites cooperatives engaged in a wide variety of activities (including the design cooperatives), is the choice to create a business run by members in the interest of the members, which offers immediate advantages over the market conditions reserved for individual free-riders, maintaining an intergenerational perspective and assuming corporate social responsibility from the outset. (Granata, M., 2019)

12. A description of the structure of the market



13. The cooperative model as a cultural framework

The well-being of workers must therefore become
a shared commitment across all labor categories,
 aimed at the redistribution of welfare
 rather than the enclosure of privilege.

This implies a transition from defensive corporatism
 to constructive cooperation
 — *where protections arise
 from solidarity-based participation.*

Cooperatives pursue precisely this distributive logic
 (Borzaga & Depedri, 2007; Zamagni, 2008)

If the cooperative ethos were to permeate the professional culture of design,
 it could reorient competition
 toward collective advancement.

Designers would be encouraged to see collaboration as a strategic asset
 (Menzani & Zamagni, 2010; Zamagni & Zamagni, 2011)

This approach would redefine **cooperative competitiveness,**
 where firms and professionals
 compete on quality and innovation

while simultaneously
sustaining the ecosystem
 that enables their work

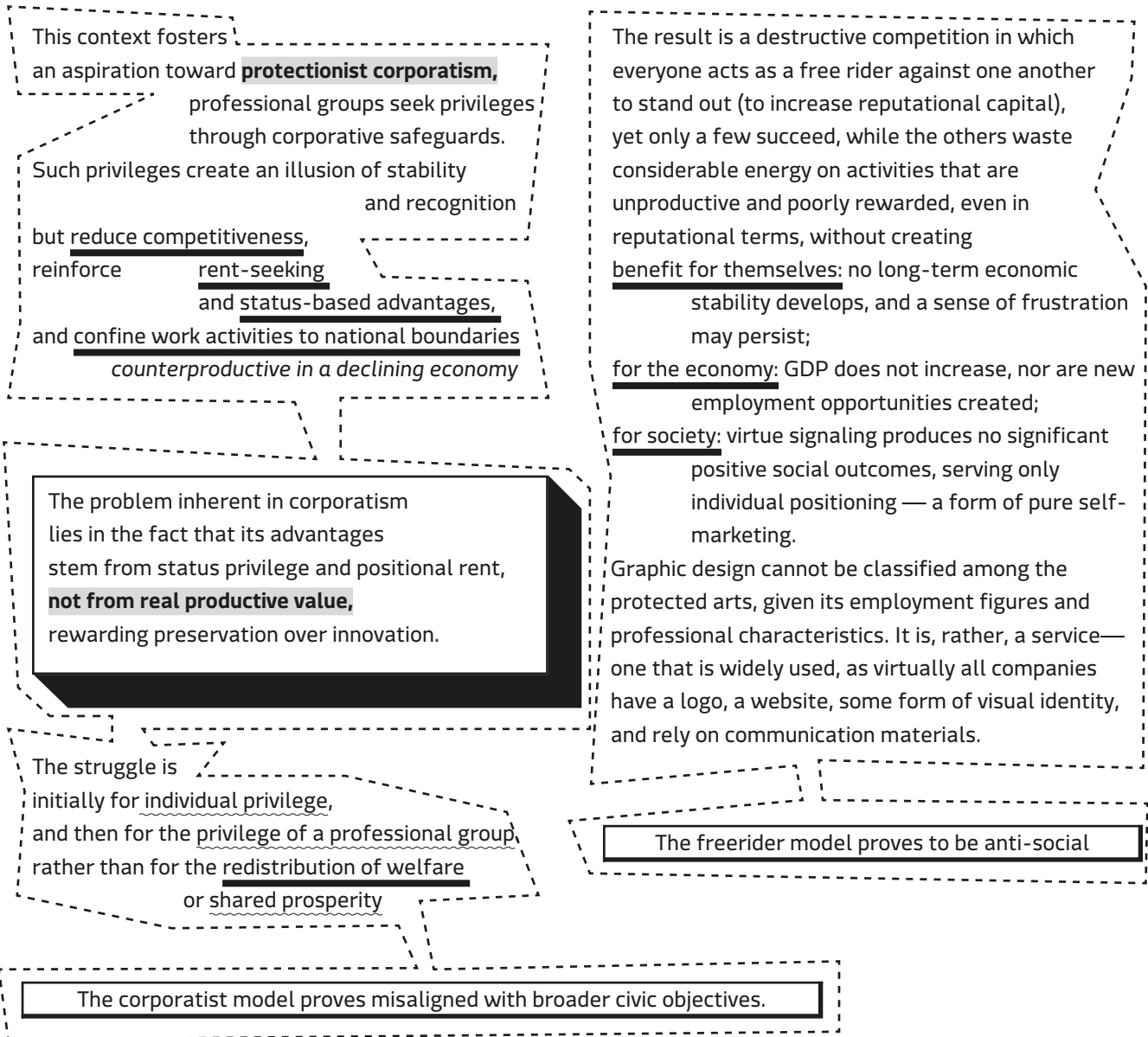
(Borzaga et al., 2010)

benefiting both local and global positioning.

In this perspective, the cooperative model functions
 not only as an economic structure

but also as a cultural framework
 capable of transforming design
 from an arena of isolated excellence
 into a **field of distributed innovation**
 (Sabatini, Modena, & Tortia, 2014)

14. The corporative model vs self employed worker model



Ethical and civic values are oftentimes hard to blend with economic interests and endeavours.

To balance economy with ethics requires a growth of democracy, civic visibility and business excellence.

Sharing values amongst cooperatives and spreading information among and beyond cooperators is a foundational value of cooperation.

Sharing and socializing information is part of the social contract between peers. (Barberini, 2019, p. 48)

15. The cooperative model vs the collective model

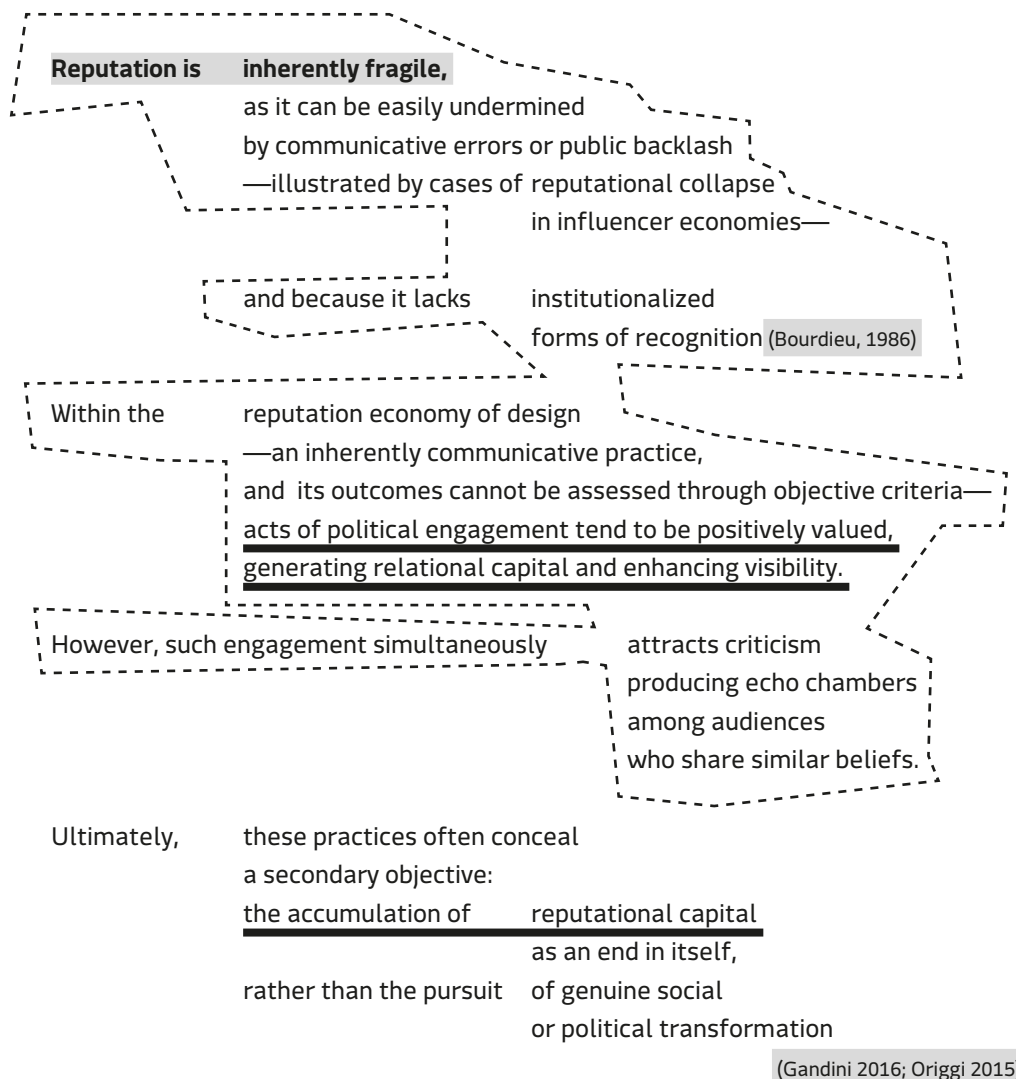
Design work is knowledge-intensive and coordination-heavy.
Co-ops create **economies of scale** in admin, **freeing billable time.**
compliance,
procurement,
and training,
 Lucciarini & Pulignano (2023)

other advantages:
 + internalize reputation; + collective rather than individual goals; + shared responsibility; + distribution of costs and duties; + consolidation of bargaining power; + redistribution of protections and wealth (or loss); + access to credit; + possibility to establish or join consortia and business networks, from which individual professionals are excluded; + eligibility for funding calls reserved for firms or co-ops.
 Lucciarini & Pulignano (2023)

risks:
 -potential for internal free-riding; - focus on group welfare rather than broader contextual (workplace or social) improvement; - strong regulatory mechanisms are required to prevent managerial disorder; - inherent decision-making complexity; - governance may be easily "contaminated": without clear admission and engagement criteria, new members may enter and gain decision-making control; - decision (or voting) processes can be distorted by internal factional conflict.
 Lucciarini & Pulignano (2023)

In contemporary design practice, **a collective** is an informal or semi-structured group of practitioners who collaborate temporarily around shared projects or interests, or opportunistically without constituting a distinct legal entity. Collectives often arise from networks of freelancers seeking to pool visibility and resources for greater market efficiency while maintaining individual autonomy (Manzini, 2015; Merkel, 2019). Their flexibility allows rapid formation and dissolution, but the absence of binding governance exposes them to risks of internal free-riding, decision-making complexity, and limited capacity to produce durable social or economic impact beyond the immediate group. This opportunistic fluidity can enhance creativity and visibility yet often undermines structural cohesion, shared welfare, and accountability. Unlike cooperatives, design collectives prioritize freedom of movement and short-term opportunity over long-term redistribution or institutional stability. (Merkel, 2019; Zamagni & Zamagni, 2011)

16. The fragility of reputation



17. Operating model for design co-ops

Pillars

Democratic governance with execution: general assembly authority; lean board; delegated roles.

Multi-service portfolio: capacity to deliver comprehensive communication design integration. This model not only enables full-spectrum graphic design practice but also embeds design within broader, scalable business processes, expanding its strategic and economic impact.

Shared infrastructure: admin/human resources/legal; customer relationship management and projects management; knowledge base; procurement of software and security.

Knowledge management: internal open-by-default repositories; user-research standards; routine peer training.

Inter-cooperative networks: membership in consortia and centrals; partnerships with social co-ops for high-impact work; temporary business networks for tenders.

Labor policies

Equitable assignment: welfare/mutual funds for leave and training, transparent pay bands linked to competencies; mechanisms that protect intrinsic motivations and reduce free-riding.

Intellectual property and visibility: collective ownership with internal licenses for reuse of intellectual property; standard crediting by role and channel; decision registries for traceability.

Key indicators

Cohesiveness and growth: diversification of services offered within the project portfolio; variety of qualifications and specializations within workforce.

Revenue per member & average contract duration: number of contracts; average turnover per contract; hours worked and personnel employed per contract.

Work quality: Billable utilization; equitable distribution of assignments; member retention; mutual-fund coverage days; personnel actively employed in design activities.

Social capital: Number and depth of cooperative partnerships; amount of investment budgets allocated directly to training, research and development activities.

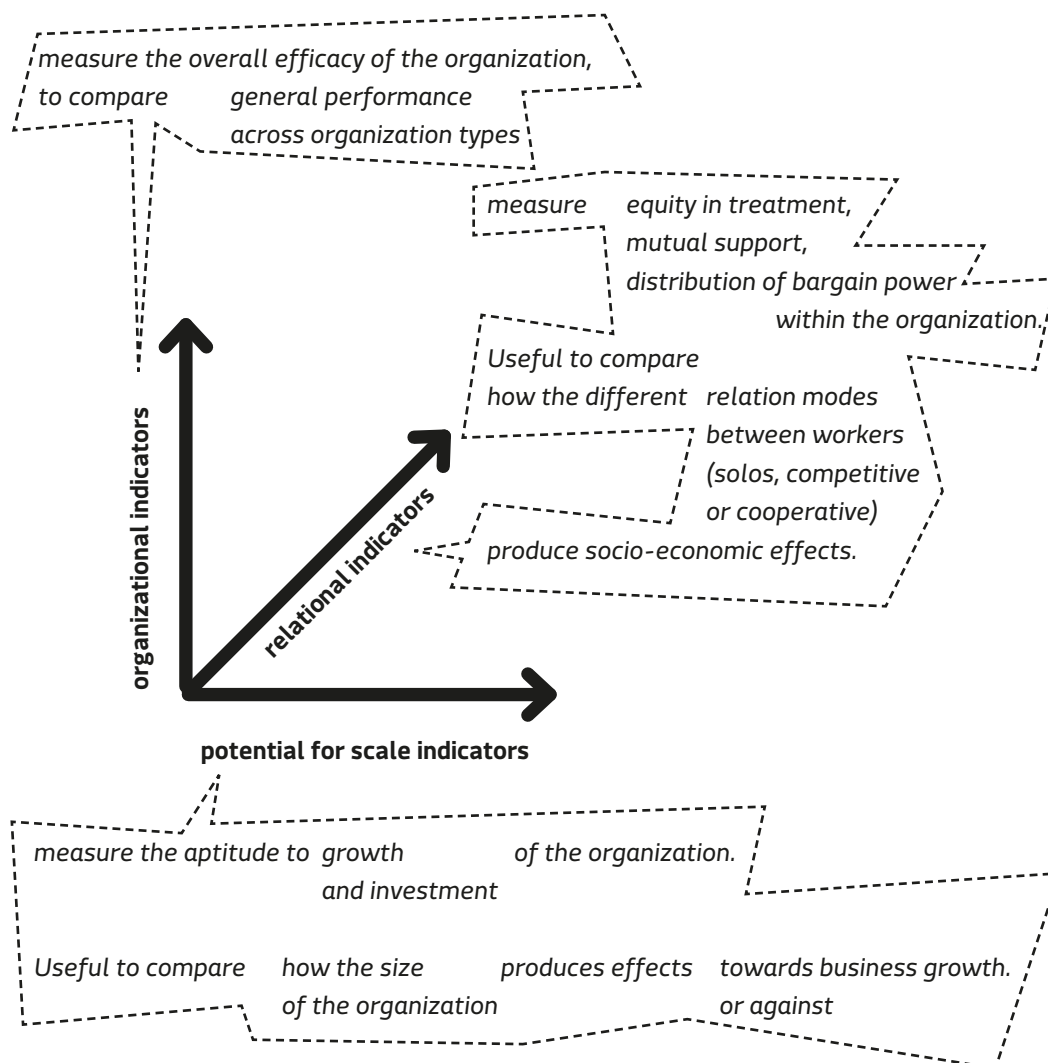
Impact: Accessibility and inclusion outcomes; standardized social balance metrics.

18. A model for tracking performance of design firms

We derive a set of key indicators from literature, to track design firm performance in the socio-economic dimensions we defined previously.

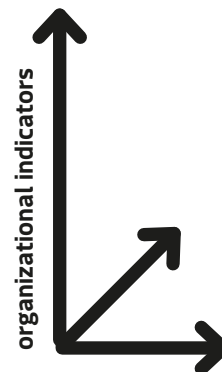
While the indicator set is not exhaustive, its annual application as a benchmarking practice (Gemser & Van Zee, 2002) enables a simple comparative assessment of how these dimensions operate within and across firms, independently of organizational form and size.

Future cross-sectional and longitudinal research could further refine this framework and contribute to a more systematic understanding of the Italian design labor market over time.



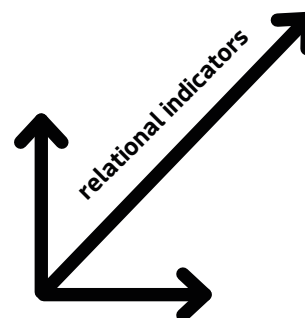
Organizational indicators

Indicator	Metric	Inspired by literature
Project completion rate	% of p. delivered on time, % of p. delivered on budget	Gemser & Van Zee (2002)
Projects involving multidisciplinary (cross-functional or cross-departmental) roles	% of p.; % of p. total revenues;	Filippetti (2011) Gemser & Van Zee (2002)
Projects activated or ongoing as part of strategic relationships with partner businesses or research institutions	% of p.; % of p. total revenues;	Filippetti (2011) Gemser & Van Zee (2002)
Average contract value	mean and std. dev. of p. contract value	Bellini et al. (2018); Vankan et al. (2014)
Personnel with previous entrepreneurial or management experience	amount and % of the personnel in charge of management	Vankan et al. (2014)
Personnel dedicated to "front-end" strategic services (e.g. finding new business opportunities and sectors, providing roadmaps for new products or development of the corporate identity)	amount and % of the personnel in charge of strategic services	Gemser & Van Zee (2002)



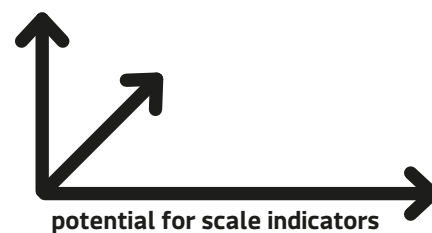
Relational indicators

Indicator	Metric	Inspired by literature
Median and mean variation of individual annual income	% variation over the previous year/s	Bellini et al. (2018); Vankan et al. (2014); Lucciarini & Pulignano (2023)
Workforce above and below the mean variation of annual income	% of personnel above and below	Bellini et al. (2018); Vankan et al. (2014)
Median paid working weeks for individual per year	median of weeks	Lucciarini & Pulignano (2023); Bellini et al. (2018)
Median gap between payments for individual in weeks	median of weeks	Lucciarini & Pulignano (2023)
% of workers who received training in field-specific topics by company's policy	% of personnel over the total; % of personnel per specific professional sector;	Lucciarini & Pulignano (2023)
% of workers who trained in field-specific topics through personal means	% of personnel over the total; % of personnel per specific professional sector;	Lucciarini & Pulignano (2023)
Share of projects activated by the worker's personal network	% over the total of p.	Lucciarini & Pulignano (2023)

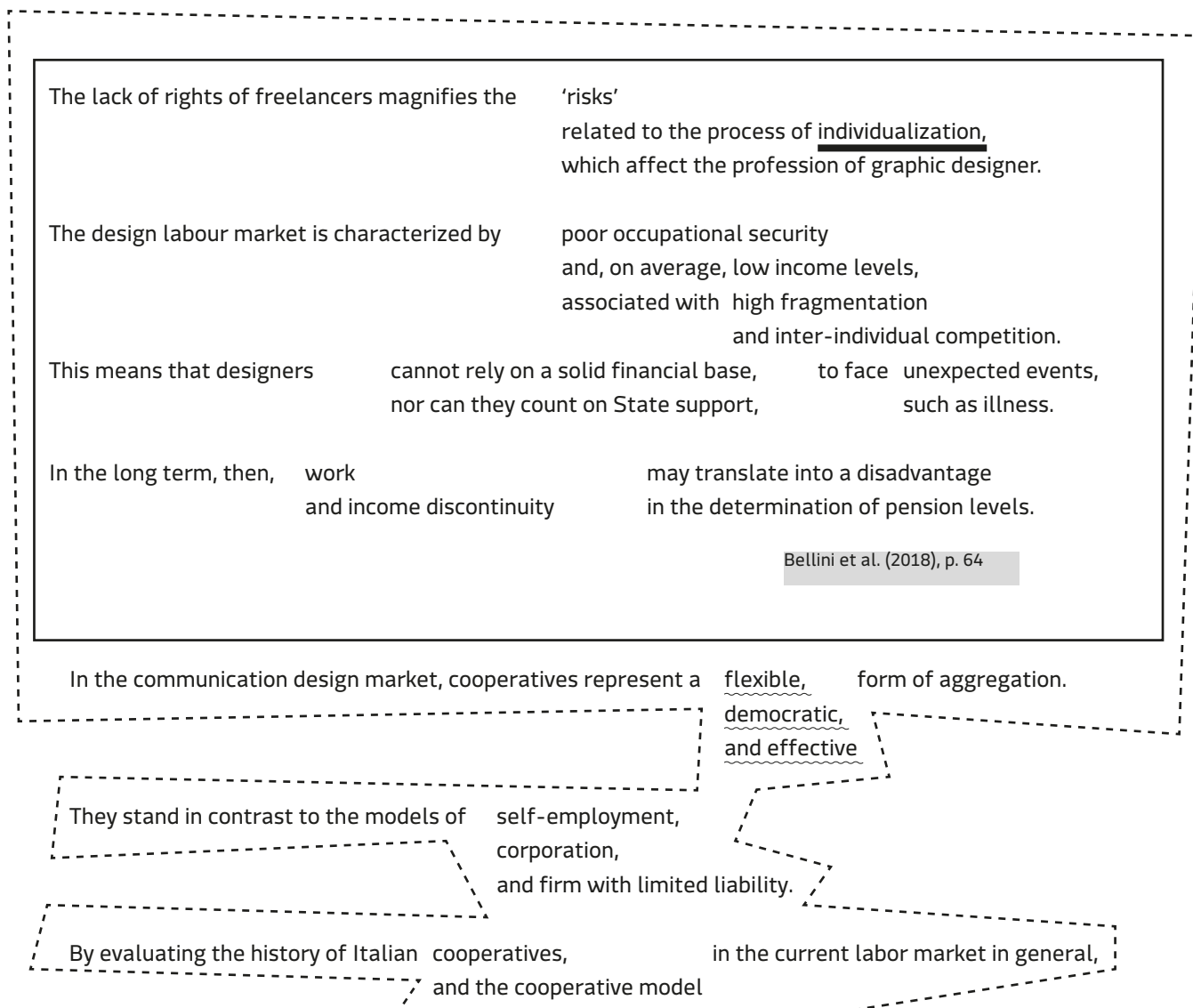


Potential to scale indicators

Indicator	Metric	Inspired by literature
number of full time equivalents (fte) working in the firm	amount	Vankan et al. (2014)
Share of revenues allocated to reserves or investments for R&D	% over the total revenues	Filippetti (2011)
Median team size, per project	median over the total p.	Gemser & Van Zee (2002); Lucciarini & Pulignano (2023)
Share of project with previously acquired (not new) clients (% per year)	% over the total of p.	Filippetti (2011)
Share of projects with new (i.e. not previously acquired) intellectual properties	% over the total of p.	Filippetti (2011); Vankan et al. (2014)
Share of projects making use of previously acquired intellectual properties	% over the total of p.	Filippetti (2011); Vankan et al. (2014)
Share of projects making use of ICT software other than the industry standards for the sector	% over the total of p.	Vankan et al. (2014)
FTEs with higher education in non-design oriented fields	% over the total workforce FTEs	Vankan et al. (2014)
Average duration of client relationships (years)	years	Vankan et al., (2014); Lucciarini & Pulignano (2023)
Number of other design firms the company has collaborations with	Amount	Vankan et al., (2014)



19. Conclusion



we believe that this structure, though complex in its governance, is the superior choice for communication design because it reduces the risks inherent in the self-employment reputation model and offers civil society a service not limited by corporate interests.

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Le cooperative offrono un modello di design della comunicazione che rimedia strutturalmente all'eccessiva frammentazione del mercato. Questa frammentazione lascia una moltitudine di freelance in uno stato di competizione reputazionale, ma privi di un'adeguata tutela aziendale e di potere contrattuale. La governance democratica delle cooperative garantisce che le ambizioni dei professionisti siano in linea con gli obiettivi dell'organizzazione. Il settore italiano del design della comunicazione è composto principalmente da microimprese con limitato potere contrattuale, nonché da professionisti indipendenti che operano individualmente. Un canale secondario, caratterizzato da social media e piattaforme per freelance, offre spesso pagamenti simbolici e capitale reputazionale che non si traducono in un reddito stabile. Le cooperative offrono un'alternativa pratica ai modelli tradizionali, in quanto condividono i rischi tra i soci, contribuendo così a garantire redditi stabili e a tutelare i diritti.

Le cooperative adottano il principio democratico di “un socio, un voto”, assicurando in tal modo l'allineamento degli interessi individuali e collettivi. Questo allineamento strutturale permette alle cooperative di promuovere migliori rapporti di lavoro, con meno conflitti e un minore assenteismo. Questa caratteristica positiva è sia storica (radicata nella necessità di mutuo aiuto tra i lavoratori) sia strutturale (i dati statistici dimostrano una minore incidenza di scioperi e un ambiente di lavoro più fiducioso). Da un punto di vista sociologico, le cooperative aggregano il capitale sociale (derivante dal rapporto tra soci e lavoratori) in una forma più duratura e resiliente rispetto al capitale reputazionale accumulato dai freelance. Un'altra caratteristica sociologica delle cooperative è la loro “coesione strutturale”, che si riferisce alla capacità della loro struttura modulare a rete di arginare l'incidenza degli shock esterni.

In questo articolo, vengono presentati in modo sistematico diversi modelli per la struttura politica e socio-economica delle reti professionali operanti nel mercato interno. I modelli possono essere organizzati e analizzati secondo tre caratteristiche: tipologia di organizzazione, modello relazionale e dimensione.

I tre modelli identificati sono:

- *Corporativo*: il modello relazionale osservato nelle lobby professionali che hanno ottenuto o intendono ottenere il riconoscimento come albo professionale, con o senza un fondo pensione dedicato, per sfruttare la propria notorietà pubblica e trattenere vantaggi esclusivi a livello politico, economico e personale;
- *Free-rider*: il modello relazionale osservato in quei professionisti o imprese che operano nel libero mercato dei capitali come entità indipendenti, senza compromettere la propria leadership e governance, mantenendo la maggioranza delle azioni o le posizioni di vertice, aderendo a lobby con interessi reciproci il cui obiettivo primario è il profitto;
- *Cooperativa*: il modello relazionale osservato in quei professionisti o aziende la cui gestione è equamente condivisa tra i soci e il cui obiettivo è offrire ai lavoratori condizioni migliori rispetto a quelle disponibili sul mercato (soprattutto per i freelance e i liberi professionisti).

Dal punto di vista dimensionale, distinguiamo quattro categorie principali: lavoratori autonomi, microimprese di design (1-5 dipendenti), piccole imprese di design (10-20 dipendenti) e medie imprese di design (fino a 100 dipendenti).

Le dimensioni delle cooperative di design sono in genere paragonabili a quelle delle micro o piccole imprese di design.

Analizzando, poi, la relazione tra le scuole di design e i modelli di riferimento per i giovani designer, emergono tre tipologie: il designer di alto profilo, il freelance e la microimpresa. Il modello del designer di alto profilo è il più ambito; tuttavia, questi individui costituiscono una piccola percentuale della forza lavoro totale, il che significa che la maggior parte dei designer finisce per lavorare come freelance o all'interno di una microimpresa. Mentre l'aspirazione a diventare un designer di alto profilo e la realtà del lavoro da freelance si basano su un'economia reputazionale in cui il vincitore prende tutto, la possibilità di lavorare in una piccola azienda è generalmente migliore in termini di reddito, stabilità e diritti, sebbene limiti nettamente le possibilità di avanzamento di carriera.

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Per risolvere i problemi legati alla precarietà delle posizioni da freelance, vengono spesso considerate due soluzioni alternative, ciascuna con i propri limiti. Una soluzione proposta è il modello corporativista, che prevede la rivendicazione di diritti speciali legati allo status professionale.

Tuttavia, i vantaggi di questa soluzione derivano da privilegi di status e rendite di posizione, non da un autentico valore produttivo, premiando così spesso la conservazione a scapito dell'innovazione. Un'altra soluzione prevede la formazione di un collettivo informale. Sebbene questo modello sia più orientato socialmente rispetto alla tradizionale posizione freelance, manca in modo cruciale di coesione (poiché la sua esistenza è temporaneamente limitata da un progetto condiviso) e non possiede un fondamento giuridico formale.

I vantaggi del modello cooperativo sono numerosi: internalizzazione della reputazione, obiettivi collettivi anziché individuali, responsabilità condivisa, distribuzione dei costi e dei doveri, consolidamento del potere contrattuale, redistribuzione delle tutele e della ricchezza (o della perdita), accesso al credito, possibilità di costituire o aderire a consorzi e reti imprenditoriali, da cui sono esclusi i singoli professionisti, ammissibilità

ai bandi di finanziamento riservati alle imprese o alle cooperative. Ci sono però anche dei limiti: il potenziale di opportunismo interno, l'attenzione al benessere del gruppo piuttosto che a un miglioramento più ampio e contestuale (sul luogo di lavoro o sociale), la necessità di solidi meccanismi di regolamentazione per prevenire il disordine gestionale, l'intrinseca complessità del processo decisionale, la possibilità che la governance sia facilmente "contaminata" (in assenza di chiari criteri di ammissione e coinvolgimento, nuovi membri possono entrare e acquisire il controllo decisionale) e la possibilità che i processi di voto siano distorti da conflitti interni tra fazioni.

Valutando la storia delle cooperative italiane, nell'attuale mercato del lavoro in generale e nel modello cooperativo, si ritiene che questa struttura, sebbene complessa nella sua governance, rappresenti la scelta migliore per la progettazione della comunicazione perché riduce i rischi inerenti al modello reputazionale del lavoro autonomo e offre alla società civile un servizio non limitato dagli interessi aziendali.

THE ROLE OF COOPERATIVES IN COMMUNICATION DESIGN IN ITALY

Cooperatives offer a model for communication design that structurally remedies excessive market fragmentation. This fragmentation leaves a multitude of freelancers competing for reputation, often lacking proper corporate protection and economic leverage. The democratic governance of cooperatives ensures that professionals' ambitions align with the organization's goals. The Italian communication design sector is primarily composed of micro-enterprises with limited bargaining power, as well as independent professionals operating individually. A secondary channel, characterized by social media and freelance platforms, often offers symbolic payment and reputational capital that does not translate into stable income. Cooperatives offer a practical alternative to traditional models, as they share risks among members, which helps provide steady incomes and protect rights.

Cooperatives adopt the democratic principle of “one member, one vote”, thus ensuring the alignment of individual and collective interests. This structural alignment allows co-ops to foster better working relationships with fewer conflicts and lower absenteeism. This positive characteristic is both historical (rooted in the necessity of mutual aid between workers) and structural (statistical data demonstrates a lower incidence of strikes and a more trusting work environment). From a sociological point of view, cooperatives aggregate social capital (derived from the relationship between members and workers) into a form more durable and resilient than the reputational capital accumulated by freelancers. Another sociological characteristic of co-ops is their “structural cohesion,” which refers to the property of their networked and modular structure to resist external shocks.

In this article, we use a systemic presentation of several models for the political and socio-economic setup of professional networks operating in the domestic market. The models can be arranged along three axes: kind of organization, relational model, and size.

We identify three models:

- *Corporative*: the relational model observed in those professional lobbies which obtained or plan to obtain recognition as a professional register (*albo professionale*), with or without a dedicated pension fund, to leverage their public recognition to withhold exclusive benefits on a political, economic, and personal level;
- *Free-rider*: the relational model observed in those professionals or firms which operate in the free capital market as independents not compromising their leadership and governance withholding the majority of shares or retaining apical positions adhering to lobbies with mutual interest on need whose aim is primarily the profit;
- *Cooperative*: the relational model observed in those professionals or firms whose governance is equally shared amongst associates and whose aim is to offer workers better terms than the ones available on the market (especially for freelancers and solos)

From the point of view of size, we distinguish between four main categories: self-employed workers, micro-design firms (1-5 employees), small design firms (10-20 employees), and medium design firms (up to 100 employees). The size of design cooperatives is typically comparable to that of micro- or small design firms.

We then analyze the relationship between design schools and the aspirational models for the young designer: the high-profile designer, the self-employed freelancer, and the micro-firm. The high-profile model is the most desired; however, these individuals constitute a small percentage of the total workforce, meaning most designers end up working as self-employed freelancers or within a micro-firm. While the aspiration to become a high-profile designer and the reality of becoming a freelancer relies on a winners-take-all reputational economy, the possibility of working within a small firm is generally better for income, stability, and rights, though it distinctly limits the potential for career advancement.

To solve the problems related to the precarity of freelance positions, two alternative solutions are often considered, each with its own limitations. One proposed solution is the corporatist model, which involves claiming special rights related to professional working status. However, the advantages of this solution stem from status privilege and positional rent, not from genuine productive value, thereby often rewarding preservation over innovation. Another solution to precarity involves the formation of an informal collective. While this model is more socially oriented than the standard freelance position, it crucially lacks cohesion (as its existence is temporarily limited by a shared project) and possesses no formal juridical foundation.

The advantages of the cooperative model are numerous: internalization of reputation, collective rather than individual goals, shared responsibility, distribution of costs and duties, consolidation of bargaining power, redistribution of protections and wealth (or loss), access to credit, possibility to establish or join consortia and business networks, from which individual, professionals are excluded, eligibility for funding calls reserved for firms or co-ops.

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But we understand also its limitation: potential for internal free-riding, focus on group welfare rather than broader, contextual (workplace or social) improvement, strong regulatory mechanisms are required to prevent managerial disorder, inherent decision-making complexity, governance may be easily “contaminated” (without clear admission and engagement criteria, new members may enter and gain decision-making control) and voting processes can be distorted by internal factional conflict.

By evaluating the history of Italian cooperatives, in the current labor market in general, and the cooperative model we believe that this structure, though complex in its governance, is the superior choice for communication design because it reduces the risks inherent in the self-employment reputation model and offers civil society a service not limited by corporate interests.

BIO

Luciano Perondi

Luciano Perondi, professore associato presso l'Università Iuav di Venezia, vicedirettore dell'User Lab. Dal 2007 al 2018 professore presso l'ISIA di Urbino, di cui è stato direttore dal 2013 al 2016. Membro della commissione di dottorato in Scienze umanistiche presso l'Università Carlo Bo di Urbino. Research fellow presso l'Università di Hasselt dal 2023. Membro delle cooperative CAST SC e Alpaca SC.

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Tommaso Guariento

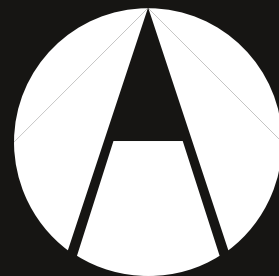
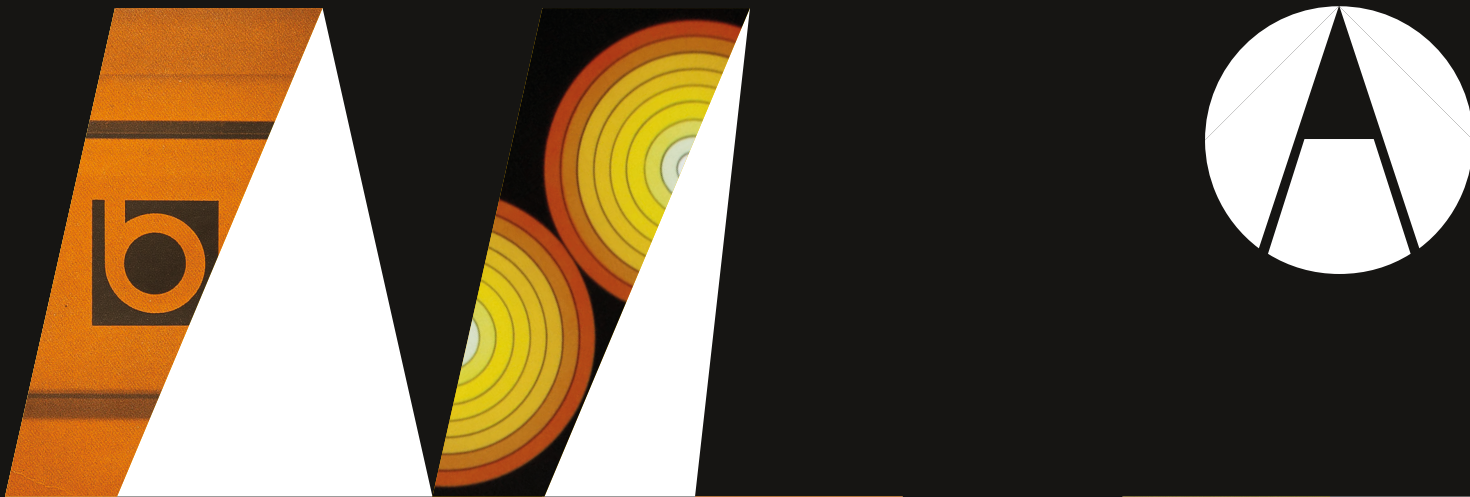
Tommaso Guariento ha conseguito il dottorato in Studi culturali presso l'Università di Palermo nel 2015. Attualmente ricopre un incarico di ricerca post-dottorato nell'ambito del progetto ERC AIMODELS, concentrandosi sullo studio delle diverse manifestazioni dell'intelligenza collettiva, che spaziano dalla filosofia della mente all'economia politica.

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Giampiero Dalai

Giampiero Dalai ha conseguito un dottorato di ricerca in Scienze del Design ed è cofondatore di Alpaca Società Cooperativa e Altri fiumi. È un esperto di usabilità e svolge attività di ricerca nel campo dell'information design e degli artefatti di comunicazione interattiva, con particolare attenzione al design per l'istruzione e al design per tutti.

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BACK THEN IS BACK NOW

DESIGN HISTORY AND EDUCATION IN THE AGE OF AI

Il design della comunicazione visiva ha storicamente fondato la propria legittimità su una pratica consapevole: un'attività culturale radicata in processi riflessivi, competenze incarnate e responsabilità etiche nei confronti dei sistemi sociali, economici e tecnologici in cui opera. Oggi assistiamo a una trasformazione sistemica: l'intelligenza artificiale generativa svuota progressivamente queste fondamenta, delegando ad algoritmi imperscrutabili quella mediazione critica che era il cuore della disciplina.

Questo numero interroga cosa rimane del designer quando la produzione visiva si automatizza. Non si limita a registrare l'impatto tecnologico sugli artefatti, ma scandaglia le conseguenze epistemologiche e formative che questa trasformazione produce sulla pratica progettuale – mappando il valore metodologico della storia del design come risorsa critica, la dimensione artigianale del processo come conoscenza incarnata, e le possibilità di trasmissione di queste competenze nei contesti educativi. Designer, storici e formatori documentano come il recupero critico delle pratiche storicamente radicate nella comunicazione visiva possa restituire agency e autorialità al designer nell'era dell'IA, interrogando come la conoscenza del passato possa diventare strumento per immaginare un futuro in cui l'intenzionalità progettuale non venga semplicemente consegnata a un sistema automatizzato.

Visual communication design has historically grounded its legitimacy in conscious practice: a cultural activity rooted in reflective processes, embodied competencies, and ethical responsibility toward the social, economic, and technological systems it operates within. Today we are witnessing a systemic transformation: generative artificial intelligence progressively hollows out these foundations, delegating to inscrutable algorithms the critical mediation that once lay at the heart of the discipline.

This issue interrogates what remains of the designer when visual production becomes automated. It does not merely document technology's impact on artifacts, but probes the epistemological and educational consequences this transformation produces on design practice – mapping the methodological value of design history as a critical resource, the craft dimension of process as embodied knowledge, and the possibilities for transmitting these competencies within educational contexts.

Designers, historians, and educators document how the critical recovery of historically rooted practices in visual communication can restore agency and authorship to the designer in the age of AI, questioning how knowledge of the past might become a tool for imagining a future in which projective intentionality is not simply surrendered to an automated system.

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