

# Design Research for Mediterranean Social Development

**Marinella Ferrara.** Istituto Politecnico di Milano

This article focuses on the role and practices of design in Mediterranean countries. The text is based on research within the editorial activities at the *PAD* journal from 2008 to the present, and on the organization of the Mediterranean Design Contest in 2009 and 2010. The article describes a reading of design in the Mediterranean area and proposes a selection of projects developed over the last 10 years or so, within different contexts in the Mediterranean area and responding to emerging problems by exploiting opportunities linked to territorial resources. Documented design activity acquires some relevance in a perspective of design as finalized to promote social and economic development through “social design” innovation.

## Design as a Catalyst of Social and Economic Change

Before examining the types of research design merging in Mediterranean countries, it is important to be clear about the role and purpose of design research today. Design<sup>1</sup> is an activity which analyzes the present and projects into the future,<sup>2</sup> opening new opportunities and visions in order to transform contingent reality by improving people’s activities and welfare.

Designers are good observers. They know how to characterize existing problems, under-

stand needs and social expectations and foresee solutions. The design process involves choices about the future, making connections between local and global conditions, and requires the development of a strategy finalized to a precise result, leveraging resources as well as production and technology opportunities and following a clear implementation program. The result of this “intentional” path generates material and immaterial artifacts (objects and object systems, as well as service and communication artifacts) with strong visual and perceptive relevance, capable of showing

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1. English term adopted by many languages to mean “project”. The term expresses the uniqueness of the discipline and professionalism that deals with the design of complex objects, both material and conceptual, distinguishing it from other disciplines such as engineering and so on.

2. The term “project” is derived from the Late Latin *proiectare*, frequentative of *pro-jacere*, which means “throw forward”.

future scenarios, which trigger changes in the values of things.

In every period, designers' abilities have faced incidental needs, conforming to techno-productive, socio-economic and cultural paradigms alternating in different historical periods, or trying to anticipate new ones.

For as long as two centuries, design research has confronted the "market model", which has seen design develop in the most industrialized countries as a profession specializing in product and visual communication design, commissioned by production companies and targeted at the consumer market. In this model, industrial development has been considered a partner of the humanitarian effort to relieve poverty in underdeveloped countries.

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In the 1970s, this paradigm began to show some weaknesses. As early as in the years before the Second World War, Buckminster Fuller, with a social and environmental activist attitude, criticized the economic-political system faced by design. Fuller encouraged a transition from a competitive to a cooperative economy, where war would no longer be necessary. As a positivist, he strongly relied on design, which makes good use of technology to serve people. And he used to say that "you never

change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, in times of globalization and energy crisis, on the wave of social protest and critical Marxism from the Frankfurt School, new concepts began to spread in culture, outlining a new approach to development, according to a "social model" (Margolin and Margolin, 2002).

Among the pioneers of the social model is Victor Papanek.<sup>4</sup> Despite having a very different approach to Fuller's, in his book *Design for the Real World. Human Ecology and Social Change*<sup>5</sup> (1971) he described design in the age of mass production as the most powerful tool with which man shapes his tools and environments and, by extension, society and himself. But he was critical of the industrial design profession for producing shallow work that wasted natural resources and ignored social responsibilities. The book illustrates the designer's responsibility and potential to effect real change in the world through design.

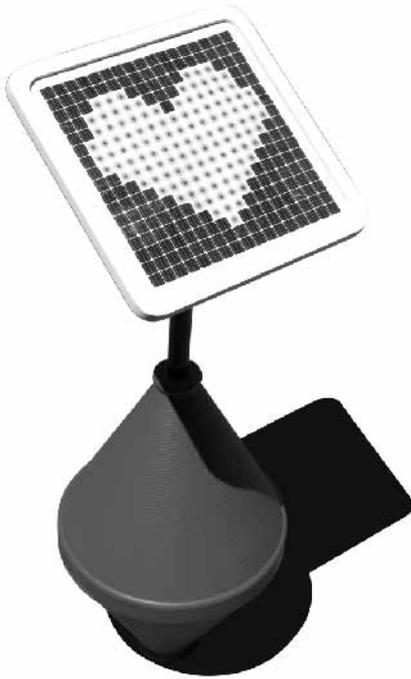
The new social model took shape by asking for a redefinition of goals: placing responsible fulfillment of human needs as a priority, without differences in purchasing power, and including poor countries and disadvantaged groups. Although the "design as a development tool" debate, which took place between the 1960s and 1980s, could be regarded as a crucial stage in the development of today's social design concept, it could not influence the assumption by governments that development is

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3. The American R. Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983) was an architect, designer, inventor, professor at Southern Illinois University, writer and presenter of television programs. He posited a systemic vision of the world and became interested in the topic of sustainability and survival of the human race. Despite the criticism of the socio-economic system of his time, he was deeply optimistic about the prospects for humanity, even during the Cold War period.

4. Victor Papanek (1923-1998) was a UNESCO International Design Expert and Dean of the School of Design at the California Institute of the Arts. He studied at Cooper Union in New York, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and with the late Frank Lloyd Wright. He has specialized for many years in design for the handicapped, the developing world, the sick, the poor, and people in need. He has taught and travelled in seven countries, and lived with an Eskimo tribe as well as with the Hopi Indians of the American South West.

5. The book has been translated into over 20 languages and was one of the most widely read on design in the world.



Giulio Iacchetti, "Floating hearts", *Pages on Arts & Design (PAD)*.

based on economic advancement, with the need for major works and production infrastructures, rather than on implementation of human abilities, from organizational to technological, which produce welfare.

Turning to the present, in the last ten years a crescendo of projects, exhibitions and initiatives has demonstrated a collective movement for "social design" and suggested a new social dimension for design practice and no longer a mere ally of consumerism.<sup>6</sup> The advent of new communication technologies and additive pro-

duction (3D printing), lighter, more sustainable and economic than those of the past, enables a rethinking of development processes, allowing the social and market models to coexist.

The purpose of social design research is now that of understanding how social and economic development could proceed responsibly at the same speed in order to accelerate and amplify "design-driven change." The designer's role is more and more that of identifying problems and directing choices towards selected goals, but also that of being skilful in constructing and managing networks consisting of actors and competences which could be useful in triggering processes, encouraging participation and regenerating logics, as well as directing projects towards a possible solutions scenario.

## Social Design for the Mediterranean

Issues at the base of the structural crisis which has affected the Mediterranean area for centuries are numerous, and problems to be faced in the context of the world economic crisis are very complex. In many countries both in the north and south of the Mediterranean (of course, with their own differences), the lack of protection and support for life, welfare, labor and culture feed a structural uncertainty in everyday life, thus worsening political and social conflicts. Limited economic growth, unjust resource distribution and inadequate access to basic services are today, as in the past, the causes of the emigration of millions of people searching for better living conditions. Irregular immigration has been a cause of death in the Mediterranean for years, and highlights the

6. In 2002 the exhibition "Designs for the Real World" at the General Foundation shed critical light on urban development, ecological design and the developing world; in 2007 the exhibition "Design for the Other 90%", held at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, showcased the global need to refocus design to the underserved 90% of the population; in 2005 the Utrecht Manifest Biennale for Social Design, a new biennial for social design, was launched, and, in 2009, numerous events and exhibitions at this Biennale aimed to strengthen multidisciplinary socio-political debate.

reception system of the most involved countries, such as Italy. The ever growing number of landings makes granting adequate assistance and first aid very hard. Design could contribute to these situations in order to relieve the suffering of immigrants and refugees.

*Design is able to activate processes for the development of solutions towards a just everyday life, even in emergency situations*

Both emigration and civil wars, as in Syria, cause urgent issues, such as protecting the civil population from chemical attacks or improving living conditions for refugees in provisional structures and container homes. The list of problems to be solved can be easily extended. A design solution is desirable. Not in the sense that design could have a direct problem-solving capability, but in that it is able to activate processes for the development of solutions towards a just everyday life, even in emergency situations, like those described earlier, and it can trigger a social and political solution to problems.

## Design for Emergency

Emergency is not a new theme for design. It has often been dealt with in the past, especially in relation to the housing emergency resulting from natural catastrophes, such as earthquakes and tsunamis (Parente, 2014). It has been stressed that the emergency problem must be faced with extreme attention, both from the techno-functional and human psychology perspectives, the latter because the instinctual need for safety must be fulfilled (Antonelli, 2005).

An example of product design for emergency is that requested by the State of Israel. In the 1980s they cooperated with the Research & Development Department of Bezalel Art and Design in Jerusalem in order to improve peoples' standard of living, in a situation of chronic conflict such as the Arab-Israel one. The project was undertaken for the national security plan, and was focused on the application of a device for gas masks, the air blower, which uses positive pressure inside the mask so there is no need to breathe through the filter. It is part of a personal protection kit made up of gas masks with extensions over the body to protect parts such as the head, arms and chest, easy to wear and use by adults, children and even babies (for example, the Mini Mamat portable cradle), thanks to flexible and transparent materials covering the face without limiting vision and movements. There is also a series of accessories to facilitate drinking (such as a baby bottle or straw) and listening to the radio. The efficiency of the masks is enhanced by graphic symbols indicating modes of use. These protective systems, widely used during the Gulf War, are still used today by every Israeli citizen. The Shmartaff kit (the slang term for babysitter in Hebrew) is an official present given by the Israeli government to every Israeli newborn baby. Beyond considerations about how much these products are part of "political rhetoric", this safety equipment makes the Israeli stronger and more resistant.

More recent projects, like those awarded at the international Mediterranean Design Contest in 2009 and 2010<sup>7</sup> (Ferrara, 2011a), focus on the emergency of illegal immigration with the goal of improving reception of immigrants and refugees and providing psychological and physical comfort.

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7. Thanks to the free theme, the Mediterranean Design Contest, organized by the PAD. The *Pages on Art & Design* ([www.padjournal.net](http://www.padjournal.net)) have proved to be an interesting point of observation of trends in Mediterranean design. In fact, there were projects that seek to provide responses to the issues surrounding the Mediterranean.

Floating hearts,<sup>8</sup> by Italian designer Giulio Iacchetti, is a system of signaling buoys equipped with photovoltaic cell-powered LED panels and emergency signaling systems. The project proposes a practical solution while poetically recalling a metaphor. Buoys hold the profile of a luminous fluttering heart and, spread over the Mediterranean, are useful in giving aid to castaways or when positioned at the point of shipwrecks. “A signal to passing sailors and a symbol of a memory which remains still among the waves, less ephemeral than bunches of flowers pitifully thrown from ships after every sea tragedy,” as Iacchetti himself writes.

*Emergency is not a new theme for design. It has often been dealt with in the past, especially in relation to the housing emergency resulting from natural catastrophes*

Brakumo<sup>9</sup> is a comfort kit by Studio Paolo Paladini, who writes: “It is important to provide immigrants who have just landed [...] with psychological support to prevent them from feeling once more on the fringes of a society that is rejecting them. Brakumo includes a cover, a pair of shoes and two boxes. Objects with a plain and essential design that strongly embody the gesture of breaking current patterns. The name of the kit is the transposition of the word ‘embrace’ in Esperanto. Just as the author of this language hoped to establish a dialogue among people through a secondary simple language, our kit is an attempt to

unhinge biases and welcome immigrants as people, [...] with a warm and understanding embrace.”

This year, 2014, students from the École de Design Nantes Atlantique confronted the issue of catastrophe survival for the “Survival” exhibition. Among the projects, Vestais<sup>10</sup> is a brazier used for heating, a welcoming wood stove. On its top, a foldable grill can be positioned on the bowl in order to cook food. Heaters placed on the tripod can be removed to warm oneself. The stove’s location would help share thoughts and ideas among people. As such, it is oriented toward conviviality. It is run on methane produced by a seven liter compost bin and wood placed within the bowl. If the compost bin is not used to light the fire (it takes 24 hours for methanization), it can be replaced by a gas bottle with a universal burner. The cross bars hold and dry the wood and can also be used to dry clothes.

Another project is Armadillo,<sup>11</sup> a health capsule that aims to create a reassuring environment for a person waiting to be rescued. It is a survival backpack that looks like a shell, which includes first aid equipment, GPS and a light, to be easily spotted by rescuers. It also includes an empty pocket, which can be filled according to one’s needs. The user grabs the bag from his house and leaves to look for a safer place. He then opens the shell, transforming the backpack into a cocoon, which he can sit in. Like the Tuaregs, one can sit still a long time thanks to a belt that goes around the knees and back. It is big enough for an adult. The comfortable seat protects the user’s legs from

8. First prize at the Mediterranean Design Contest 2009, product design category.

9. Special mention at the Mediterranean Design Contest 2010, product design category.

10. The Vestais project by the students P. Dufour, I. Le Pays Du Teilleul, M. Leproux, D. Letassey, H. Louradour and J. Rolland was developed with the support of Armor, partners for the “Survival” event, and exhibited at the Salone Satellite, at the Milan Fair during the Salone del Mobile 2014. The prototype was produced with the support of ArcelorMittal SoluStil.

11. The Armadillo project by the students I. Hauck, M. Le Bas, C. Germain, D. Le Cléac’h, C. Sanz and L. Chatain was developed with the support of Armor, partners for the “Survival” event, and exhibited at the Salone Satellite, at the Milan Fair, during the Salone del Mobile 2014.

the hard floor. A blanket made of Goretex® with reassuring colors inside keeps the user warm and dry, while preventing sweat from condensing. Outer parts of the backpack and blanket are a reflective color to make them easy to see by rescuers.

Today, the basic problem for this kind of design is who can promote, finance and produce the product, and finding actors who can distribute the product to interested recipients. Sometimes humanitarian and philanthropic organizations, associations and NGOs do this, and designers cooperate with them to identify problem areas and strategies to ensure that products, services and systems are adequate for humanitarian purposes. Some companies are starting to focus on these themes, and make them part of their strategies in brand promotion.

## Design for Socio-Economic Development in Mediterranean Countries

Awareness that design can be a real agent of development in various realities led design research to respond to less urgent matters than those previously discussed. By considering the current situation of low industrialization experienced in many Mediterranean countries, research explores new opportunities for typical products and local production, or different configurations for actors and resources, capable of creating new value. Projects leverage competences, as well as tangible and intangible resources, typical of the social and territorial context. Some introduce new ideas or organization models; others integrate handmade production with

industrial processes or consolidate technical skills with new technologies.

This is the case of Egypt Design Hub (Di Matteo, 2012), which, in the Salone del Mobile 2013 and 2014, presented, at the Salone Satellite, prototypes from young designers experimenting with new products for local production segments. The project by Nadal Bahr, released this year, is Anub Chair, a wooden chair combining fine craftsmanship from ancient Egyptian production, inspired by animal anatomy, with innovative 3D milling techniques.

*Research explores new opportunities for typical products and local production, or different configurations for actors and resources*

Another case is the Rawtating<sup>12</sup> project, by the Israeli designer Adi Zaffran Weisler, who has experimented with a process for limited series furniture production. He has created a set of tables and stools by combining tree branches, trunks and twigs with plastic during the molding process. The project combines industrial and manual processes and develops a method where the meeting point between the organic and the synthetic is made by the rotational molding process without the need for cold joints or complex adjustments. From the manufacturing process, a new aesthetic language is created out of basic shapes and raw material.

In the context of economic crisis that has exacerbated the uncertainty already present in many countries we find important projects in which design supports the internationalization of productive territories. These projects, developed by design centers, institutions or individual designers, are mainly led by the

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12. Project selected at the Mediterranean Design Contest 2010 and exhibited in 2011 in the Mediterranean Design Exhibition at the Design Hub, in Barcelona.

# Floating Hearts

It is hard separating the beauty of natural landscapes of Mediterranean from the well established fact that thousands of people look at it as an obstacle.

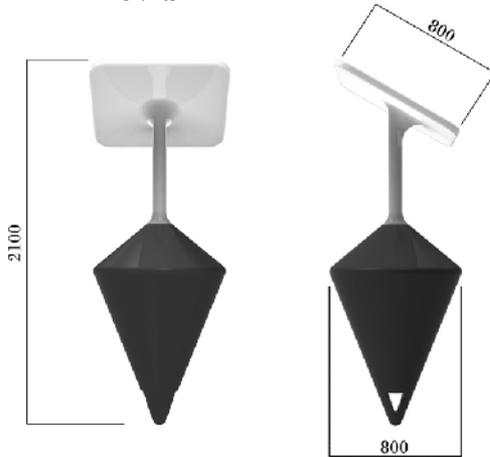
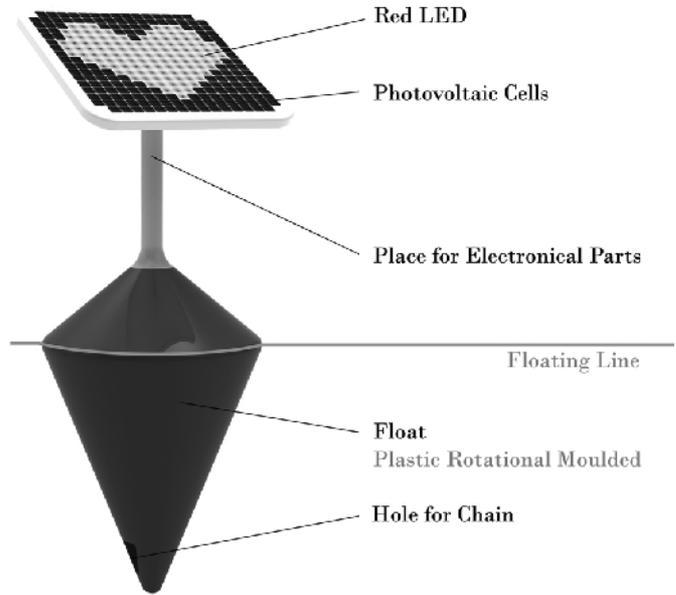
Sailing everyday, men, women and children leave their home country in order to reach a fog end of dream, hope, survival, but many of them don't manage. That edge of sea which separates and connects Africa, Europe and Asia is a sort of last burial ground where an unknown number of watercrafts and refugees lie.

It is said there will be no future without folk memory.

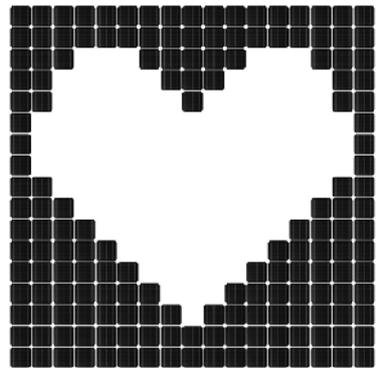
I believe that every single human action does not have to disregard those who sacrificed their lives. Culture,

common projects and politics should pay attention towards people's struggles, such as whom attempted to overtake natural barriers or, even worst, have been discriminated for what they are.

My project consists of an information buoy displaying a lighting heart. It has to be positioned where the shipwreck took place. A kind of warning for sailing people, a symbol for the memory to be kept alive among the waves. Something less vanishing than a bunch of flowers pitifully thrown from the boats every time a new tragedy happens.



*Heart*  
like universal symbol of compassion and love



Giulio Iacchetti, "Floating hearts", *Pages on Arts & Design (PAD)*.

desire to help artisans and small producers to reach new markets and build connections with partners worldwide. In some cases these projects have become a real opportunity to start a company and demonstrate that the process of design-driven innovation can have a strategic role in economic development.

One case is Corque Design (Mestre, 2013), a new sustainable design brand based on cork, a sustainable Mediterranean material. Corque Design resulted from applied design research conducted by the Portuguese designer Ana Mestre with a focus on design solutions with these materials produced in great quantity in Portugal. The brand was internationally launched in 2009 during the Milan Design Week, offers a range of high quality furnishing products and accessories carefully designed by different Portuguese designers and has already produced several limited series, which have been exhibited and commercialized in the European, American and Asian Markets.

Another case is Trochet, a collection of objects between fashion and product design (handbags and soft chairs), made by crocheting a thread obtained from used plastic bags; indeed Trochet stands for trash+crochet. The project is by Diana Rayyan, from Saudi Arabia, founder of Ateeq, a startup helping Saudi women in difficulties and employing them. Objects knitted from used plastic bags by women involved in the project are sold thanks to commercial mediation by Trochet. Founded in August 2012 with two women, the company today employs 50 women and has produced 200,000 plastic bags.

Other projects propose to value agricultural production, agro-alimentary products, local resources and cultures to make them accessible. The ability to value is today a key element of development for production systems, considering the economic, social, touristic opportunities it can bring. Even

merely adding value to typical activities like agriculture, with new and different functions, notably environmental and territorial protection, creates opportunities for places to adopt new economic and social dynamics (Belletti and Berti, 2011).

Over the last few years in Italy, France, Spain and also Greece we have seen a growing interest in initiatives that place tourist, educational and recreational services alongside agricultural production, in detecting and satisfying new consumer segments, and in the fruition of agricultural products and production territories, in order to “dive” into the culture of places and see consumption experiences as opportunities for social and cultural enrichment (Ferrara, 2011b).

*The ability to value is today a key element of development for production systems, considering the economic, social, touristic opportunities it can bring*

The Ametlla+ de Mallorca® (Flaquer, 2012) brand project designed by entrepreneur Barbara Flaquer shares this vision. She and another four people from Majorca have established the 3+1 Company on the island. They produce and package various preparations, based on almonds and other ingredients, for use in traditional recipes that can be cooked in less time, thus complementing contemporary lifestyles. The project aims to revamp the cultivation of the Majorca almond, so that it may still be a profitable activity, while preserving the beauty of the landscape. Company communication is based on typical iconographic elements of Majorcan visual culture, reflecting the quality of the island’s landscape. Attention to product authenticity and the eco-sustainability of production is part of an economic development strategy valuing local territory, although without a return to archaic or autarchic economies.

## Conclusions

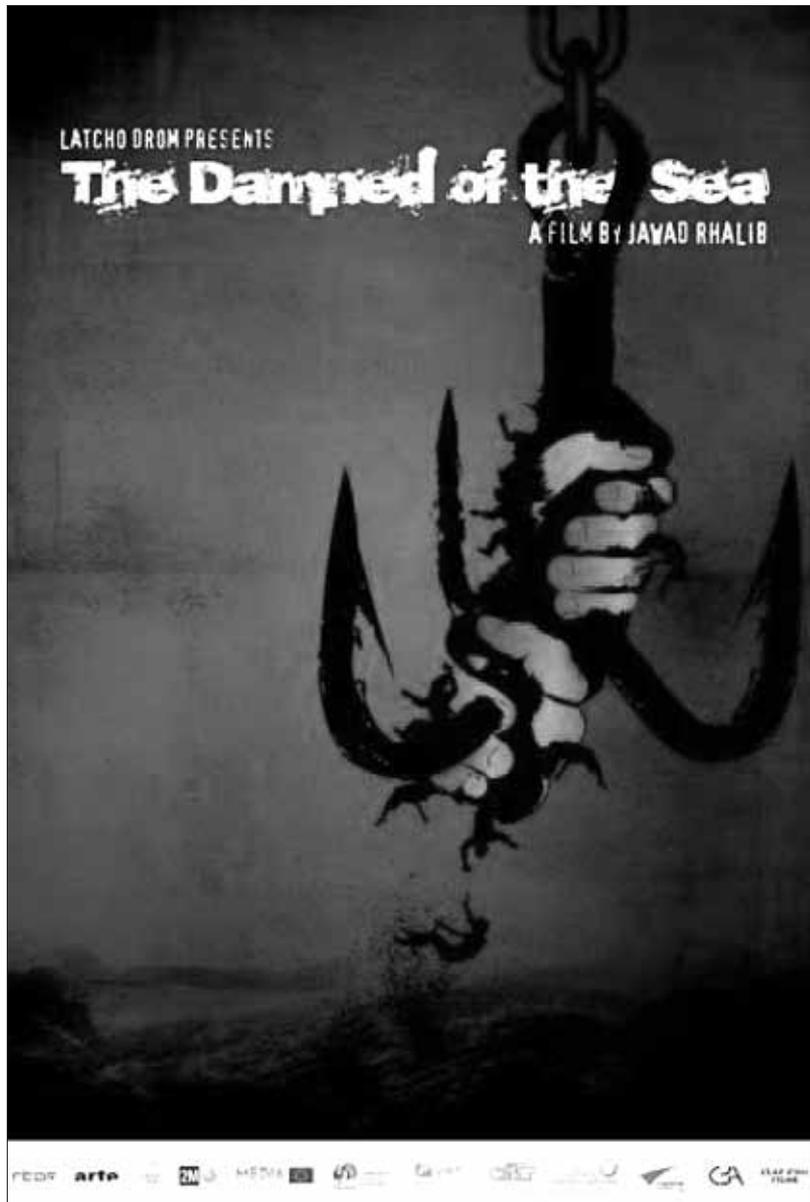
Today, the Mediterranean reality represents for designers an essential challenge for socio-cultural evolution and economic advancement in this part of the world. In this proposed reading, the range of Mediterranean design is highly varied and relevant in the framework of the new “social model”, which directs priorities and meanings in design towards social, as well as economic, innovation. We can see notable attention in the projects to specific realities and the valuing of environmental contexts and human resources.

*Attention to product authenticity and the eco-sustainability of production is part of an economic development strategy valuing local territory*

In adhering to this perspective, we want design to contribute to the development of the hyper-democracy context Jaques Attali (2006) cites as the only chance to avoid a hyper-conflict. This scenario requires us to work on relations, sharing and cooperation between the two sides of the Mediterranean; to try and do new things by designing them together; to promote responsible activities in order to repopulate the sea with people, not only migrants, but new citizens of a new community that could once again invest in its geographical vicinity.

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Poster of *The Damned of the Sea*, 2008.