

WHEN DESIGN *takes* CENTRE STAGE



As the European Commission encourages member states to boost design-driven innovation through the creation and implementation of Design Action Plans, **Jo Caruana** speaks to key stakeholders in this area to discover what this could mean for the sector, and beyond.

Design isn't just about the way things look but also about the way things work. With this in mind, the European Commission places great importance on accelerating the take-up of design in industrial and innovation activities at European, national, and regional levels because it knows that design creates value and contributes to competitiveness, prosperity, and well-being in Europe.

In fact, the importance of design as an activity to bring new ideas to the market has been recognised by the Innovation Union – a flagship initiative of the Europe 2020 Growth Strategy. Through it, the EC hopes to be able to increase the use of design for innovation and growth across Europe, raise awareness of how design-driven innovation increases efficiency in public services and drives business growth, and create capacity and competencies to deliver these policies.

As a result of this, the EC has encouraged all its member states to develop Design Action Plans, translating political vision into programmes and actions that develop national design resources and encourage their effective use in their respective countries. Locally, the design sector is composed of more than 600 enterprises employing 1,269 individuals, of whom around 40 per cent are self-employed. Notably, the sector

generated a healthy €26 million in 2010, and numbers have continued to rise since.

Explaining the concept behind a design policy, Anna Whicher, Head of Design Policy at PDR – a design consultancy and applied research centre within Cardiff Metropolitan University – in Wales, highlights that it is a government intervention aimed at stimulating the demand for, and supply of, design in a country or region or city. "The increasing awareness and use of design in government is arguably due to two trends," she explains. "Firstly, there's a paradigm shift in government understanding of innovation, and, secondly, there's the stronger and changing nature of evidence making the case for design."

Dr Whicher highlights that, since the early 2000s, the remit of innovation has continuously expanded and evolved from a purely technical standpoint to a relentless focus on the user. "As part of this broader definition, design is being recognised as a driver of user-centred innovation that can co-create solutions that are desirable, viable and usable in the private and public sectors," she explains.

Moreover, she continues, "policy processes are also changing. Policy will always be data-driven, and researchers have been able to build

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an economic case for government intervention for design. Beyond that, design advocates have been able to convince policymakers, by involving them in design projects, to gain a tangible and practical experience of the added value that design can bring. Data opens the door but it is the wider impact of design that enables policymakers to take those first steps through the door on the journey to a design policy."

There are some very clear statistics as to why it is recommended that design policy should be implemented by policymakers and governments across Europe. To begin with, according to Maeda's 2019 Design in Tech report, since 2004, over 100 design agencies have been acquired by multinational companies such as Google, Facebook, Accenture, McKinsey, Deloitte and IMB – with 60 per cent of them having been acquired since 2015.

"Big business is recognising the value that design can add to products, services, systems, processes and strategies," Dr Whicher continues. "Similarly, governments are also internalising design expertise. The UK-based innovation foundation Nesta estimates there are more than 100 policy labs around the world and mapping was performed for the EC identifying more than 60 policy labs across Europe. These policy labs are multidisciplinary government teams that use a range of innovation methods – including design – to actively involve the people in public service and public policymaking. However, the Innobarometer studies on trends in EU businesses have shown that 56 per cent of European SMEs do not use design at all or do not use it systematically. Without government intervention, SMEs will fall behind the curve."

Highlighting the Design4Innovation EU Interreg Project that is currently supporting the EC's mission to encourage member states to develop their own national Design Action Plans, Dr Whicher goes into detail about the collaboration

between eight European partners exchanging expertise to integrate design into innovation programmes and to support regional and national governments to develop Design Action Plans.

"Between 2017 and 2021, Design4Innovation is co-funded by Interreg Europe through the European Regional Development Fund," she points out. "To develop these Design Action Plans, the Design4Innovation partners have mapped out design ecosystems, identified our systemic strengths and weaknesses, and, thus, developed targeted actions to enhance the performance of those design ecosystems," she continues.

In addition, "over the course of the last three years, we have also reflected on the critical success factors for Design Action Plans. After all, design is about testing and iterating. We are taking a design approach to developing our Design Action Plans, and will support each other to develop, implement, monitor and evaluate those plans," she notes.

Locally, the Valletta Design Cluster has been a partner in Design4Innovation since 2017, joining seven other innovation agencies from Spain (Galicia and Barcelona), Poland, Greece, Belgium, Latvia, and the UK with the aim of supporting mutual efforts to promote and sustain design activity.

"In this project and at the Valletta Design Cluster we understand design as a problem-solving tool that can be adopted by business and by the government to focus on real needs and to provide user-centred solutions that effect positively the well-being of the target users and of society at large," explains Caldon Mercieca, manager of both Valletta Design Agency and Design4Innovation Project.

"One of the early steps we undertook through the project was a mapping exercise wherein the local design ecosystem was assessed in terms of where it stood and how this compares to



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ANNA WHICHER,
HEAD OF DESIGN POLICY, PDR

our partner regions. Over the past three years, we have also had seven workshops hosted by the various partners, aimed at developing solutions to address some of the gaps that were identified."

In Malta, it was found that these gaps related to three main areas. "Firstly, we have a lack in dedicated facilities to assist newcomers in the creative sector, including design-intensive practitioners, coupled with a lack of concrete space for networking and collaborations between new and established operators as well as between practitioners coming from various disciplines and practices," Mr Mercieca notes.

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CALDON MERCIECA, MANAGER, VALLETTA DESIGN AGENCY AND DESIGN4INNOVATION PROJECT

“Secondly, while we have generic financial support for start-ups in practically all sectors of the economy, we have noticed how several European countries and regions are using design vouchers, which are locally unavailable, to facilitate the provision of design services and solutions to businesses that do not traditionally engage with design.

“Thirdly, we have an under-representation of the sector within constituted business bodies that needs to be addressed if we want to maximise the benefits of design within the wider economy.”

Already, work on the Valletta Design Cluster community space for cultural and creative practice has reached a very advanced stage. The infrastructural works for the project, led by the Valletta Cultural Agency, is receiving support from the European Regional Development Fund, and should be completed in 2020. And, apart from having a direct impact on the immediate neighbourhood through the upgrading of the formerly derelict building of the Old Abattoir, and of the adjoining streets, as well as the creation of a new public garden on the roof of the site, the project will create new spaces and facilities that are currently unavailable to the creative sector.

“These include a ‘makerspace’ equipped with traditional and digital fabrication tools, a co-working space supported by meeting and conference facilities,



a food space for community projects, and a number of studios for more long-term based teams of practitioners.” Mr Mercieca explains.

“The physical facilities in which investment is currently being made are a critical tool that we see as complementary to the already ongoing work to provide support to creative practices in their very early stand-up phase, including students and pre-start-ups, as well as an excellent platform to encourage fruitful encounter between practitioners coming from various fields within and outside of the creative field.”

Meanwhile the Malta Business Bureau (MBB), which is tasked with a key role in the development of enterprise policy and which provides support in the tapping of EU funding opportunities, has recently been involved in a couple of EU design-led innovation activities.

The first was the MBB’s appointment as Ambassador for the European Commission’s Design for Europe initiative, wherein it successfully piloted the first Design Support Programme in Malta. “At the time, the programme was set out to showcase to business and public services the benefits they can achieve by integrating leading-edge design,” Ana Vella, Senior Executive at the MBB, says. “We joined a network of international ambassadors which was vital to extend the reach of the project, ultimately helping more of Europe’s enterprises to understand how design can help them provide better products and services, and increase the standard of living for EU citizens.”

The MBB later completed the ‘DesignShots’ Horizon 2020 project, together with two major Design for Europe partners in Luxembourg and Greece. “European cases have shown that design support initiatives are being implemented in some countries. This is a response to the increasing recognition of the importance of design. In general, governments have started to understand design as a tool for innovating products, services and systems.” Ms Vella continues.

“However, challenges still need to be faced in order to introduce design as an overarching approach within SMEs. Since SMEs represent the majority of the European economy, governments are to raise awareness and enhance the understanding of design by

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ANA VELLA,
SENIOR EXECUTIVE FOR BUSINESS
ADVISORY AND SUPPORT, MALTA
BUSINESS BUREAU.

promoting and sponsoring design support programmes. These programmes can focus on raising demand for design in SMEs as well as on building capabilities among designers: from consulting or advisory services and mentoring, to training and dissemination of information about the economic value of design.”

“Through our experience, both as local stakeholders supporting design-led initiatives and as international partners within EU innovation projects, we have built a strong basis with industry in Malta and we have also engaged key public stakeholders along the way, involving them in our design and innovation policy sessions,” she says.

“It now gives me pleasure to look back on our journey of design support initiatives which, five years



on, have served as a catalyst for some really excellent ecosystem development projects currently in motion. As we look to the future, we are actively supporting the implementation of a Design Action Plan for Malta, which is currently being devised.” Ms Vella concludes. ■

Launching the Valletta Design Cluster's Action Plan

a platform for European exchange and collaboration



Through the Interreg Europe project "Design4Innovation", the Valletta Design Cluster has built important links with several European partners coming from eight European regions and working on design as a tool to support SMEs. We are now converting these learnings into a Design Action Plan that will guide the Valletta Design Cluster's interaction with the local creative business community for the coming three years.



During the past three years, the Valletta Design Cluster has been actively engaged in Design4Innovation, an EU-funded Interreg Europe project addressing design and innovation within European SMEs. In this collaborative project, partners from eight European regions came together to exchange experience and to develop new opportunities for collaboration with the scope of enhancing the appreciation of design and its benefits to society and economic activity. Apart from Malta, partners in this project hailed from Wales, Barcelona, Silesia, Galicia, Flanders, Latvia and Greece. During the first three years of the project, each partner has involved a whole network of regional stakeholders to map its design ecosystem, identify lacunas and areas where additional support is warranted, and work on a Design Action Plan that would guide the respective organisation in design support initiatives during the second phase of the project covering 2020 and 2021.

For the Valletta Design Cluster, a project under the overall responsibility of the Valletta Cultural Agency, this has been a thoroughly instructive and useful process, coming at the build-up phase of the organisation and of the planned facilities and support structures it is working on during this early stage. The project provided ample opportunities for exposure to good practice on a European level both to the Valletta Design Cluster team as well as to multiple stakeholders that have been involved in the project throughout this initial phase. In particular, there has been active participation from the University of Malta, the Malta Business Bureau, the Malta Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Malta Enterprise and Arts Council Malta, the latter in view of its strategic role with respects to the cultural and creative industries. We have also had critical contributions from the Economic Policy Department of the Ministry of Finance in relation to economic research assessing the uptake of design activity by Malta-based firms, which provided insights into the most effective investment options we need to consider particularly in terms of start-ups and micro enterprises.

Our emphasis throughout the project has been based on three premises. Firstly, we see design as an empowerment tool providing a problem-solving technique that can be applied in a whole range of socio-economic contexts for the benefit and wellbeing of society. Secondly, we want to develop the Valletta Design Cluster as a platform for encounter, networking and collaboration on an international level, opening up opportunities for practice-based learning and for community-led initiatives linking creative activity and social good. The centrality of the creative community in this context is fundamental, as the strengthening of the internal capacity of design operators in Malta is one of the overall objectives of the Valletta Design Cluster. Finally, we want to make design practice and applications accessible to as many social and economic players as possible. This means that a lot of our work is with non-design organisations and businesses, understanding their concerns and needs and finding ways of connecting them with design practitioners where such collaborations can be mutually beneficial. Underpinning all of this is the understanding of design as a user-centred approach towards problem solving.

During the first three years of its operations, the Valletta Design Cluster will be building on the experience gained so far from Design4Innovation and will be taking it forward through its own Design Action Plan. Contributions into this plan have been coming from two main sources. On the local level, our interaction with stakeholders and local practitioners in various fields has provided us with indispensable awareness of how local operators work, their concerns and aspirations. We have been organising workshops, study visits, trainings and capacity building meet-ups for small and micro local operators with a very encouraging turnout and participation. On the other hand, during visits to our project partners, we have gained insights and absorbed useful learnings from practices in design support and community engagement. These range from workshops with independent makerspaces and co-working spaces in Cardiff, to innovation vouchers run by the Barcelona Design Centre and Innovation Flanders, among others.

The Valletta Design Cluster's Design Action Plan for the second phase of Design4Innovation will have a three-pronged approach. On a basic level, the completion of the renovations of the Old Abattoir site in Valletta and its conversion into a community space for cultural and creative practice is our first target. This space will provide a concrete platform for people and small operators to work from, develop their ideas, network and grow. The varied offer in the space ranges from a makerspace, a coworking area, a number of meeting and conference facilities, studio spaces, and informal meeting areas where various activities can be undertaken. Secondly, we wish to explore the implementation of a design voucher scheme, based on the international insights gained through the project. This tool will provide non-design organisations to access design expertise and apply this within their own business environment. Support and collaboration with our European



The currently ongoing conversion works at the Old Abattoir site in Valletta, funded through European Structural Funds, shall transform this site into a curated space serving as a platform for cultural and creative practitioners, providing makerspace facilities, a coworking space, various meeting areas, and a number of studios for collaborative work. The space and facilities have been co-designed with future users and informed by experiences of the various European partners from the Design4Innovation Interreg Europe project.



partners will continue throughout the implementation of this scheme so we ensure we translate our partners' learnings into concrete benefits for our local beneficiaries. Thirdly, we would like to facilitate a national process where awareness of design and its benefits to social and economic wellbeing is given its rightful recognition. We have been laying the ground for this through collaborations with the Malta Business Bureau and the Malta Chamber of Commerce, together with support from various areas of government.

Making the first few years of operation of the Valletta Design Cluster a success is our overall mission. This means making this experience a fruitful one for all the people, firms and organisations that interact with us during this critical initial phase. Through Design4Innovation, we aim to work on this objective by being open to European collaboration, serving as a platform where the local community of practitioners can grow through meaningful engagement with the wider society both locally and internationally.

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