BEYOND MAPS.
A WORKSHOP ON USERS' SENSE OF PLACE AND VISUAL REPRESENTATION AT MILANO-BICOCCA UNIVERSITY

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In a trans-scalar perspective, the Bicocca district extends from the local NIL (*Nucleo di Identità Locale*) to part of Municipality 9, Sesto San Giovanni and Cinisello Balsamo. Recently, the University of Milan-Bicocca, as regards to the so-called '*terza missione*', has remarked its role as a key-pole for the surrounding area by proposing research, educational (and orientation) activities, as well as institutional initiatives based in this post-industrial area of Milan. Within this scenario, our group was in charge of designing a project leading to an artistic image representing the district users' sense of place. By combining geography of perception, urban sociology, participatory design and the *flânerie* approaches, we planned a working process starting from the 'subjective production of images' by the district's users and inhabitants. The project was structured in two phases: (1) December 2020 – January 2021: we organised two workshops by inviting groups of students, teachers and shop owners and working on their mental maps to construct a final image resulting from the two teams' negotiation processes. The reading of the maps was initially inspired by the categories identified by Kevin Lynch (1962) and then moved on to a process of co-construction of a collective image; (2) March 2021: we shared the visual body with a professional illustrator (Carlo Stanga) entrusted with the mandate to translate the images into an artistic product. The essay discusses the visual representation of users' sense of place and the potential legacy upon communication strategies, way-findings tools and education projects[1].

MILANO-BICOCCA AND ITS TERRITORY:
BETWEEN TRANSITIONS AND *FLÂNERIE*

The work presented in this paper stresses the link between our University and the Bicocca district. The former suburb, which was the setting for factories and workers' struggles for decades, in the '90s became a new centre of attraction for higher education and the advanced tertiary sector. In this context, a new, dynamic institution actively involved in our city public life should base many of its public engagement activities on the close relationship with its surroundings and implement actions aimed at improving the quality of life of students, workers and inhabitants in the area. Moving around the Bicocca campus today means having the opportunity to get in touch with the historical and cultural stratifications that shape our neighbourhood. Bicocca may be seen even as a place to be discovered and walked slowly, as a *flâneur* or *flâneuse* would do, experiencing the symbolic, cultural and social aspects that mark such a peculiar urban area. The notion of *flâneur* or *flâneuse* –in use since the late 19th century to designate writers, poets and intellectuals that critically observed people's behavior while strolling among the crowd, and codified in the Walter Benjamin's influential work on the Passages of Paris– is once again of central interest, especially in sociology, geography and arts. It relates to a specific practice of walking and exploring urban places, as well as to a particular type of reflective relationship with people and spaces. In such a framework, *flâneur/flâneuse* can be considered as the object as well as the subject of the analysis (Tester, 1993). Moreover, linkages between *flânerie* and ethnographic approaches have been often studied, having peculiar similarities (Jenks & Neves, 2000).

Only by exploring the interstices we can grasp the *genius loci* of a neighbourhood and we can intercept its soul beyond the superficial largely known representations. Every user, therefore, should find his/her way around the most iconic buildings (the University, Pirelli HangarBicocca, Teatro degli

Arcimboldi), but also get lost in everyday places (whether a cafe, a bookshop, or a post office). Due to this background, this essay aims at describing a project that has sought to 'map' the geographies of the district's inhabitants and to find keys to hold together individual experiences and a collective sense of place.

BACKGROUND: MOVING BEYOND CARTOGRAPHIES

In September 2020, in synergy with the ongoing upgrade of the visual and textual supports providing UNIMIB students' orientation, our Communications Office, by mandate of Deputy-Rector Prof. Maria Grazia Riva, launched a pilot project on inhabitants and users' spatial experience. The target was to integrate the cartography and textual information already widely implemented on our website[2] with an image representing the sense of place of the community that experiences our Campus on a daily basis (i.e., students, faculties and staff but also residents, workers and shop owners). Our group was in charge of conducting this pilot action. Combining geography of perception, urban sociology, participatory design and the *flânerie* approaches, we designed a working process centred on the 'subjective production of images'. The project was inspired by a holistic view on orientation, namely the combination of the sense of place, practices and spatial experiences as parts of a collective heritage. As mentioned in the first paragraph, the action stressed the relevance of our University as one of the actors actively involved in the area. Moreover, this project is included within the initiatives the University promoted to cope with challenges students and staff faced during the pandemic, and specifically to allow future students unable to experience the district for a long period to get in touch with the spatial dimension of our Campus. The legacy of Covid, as defined by Edgar Morin (2020), was thus transformed into the challenge of making the place of university education more intelligible and understandable, as well as more engaging.

METHODOLOGY

The mutual interrelation among environmental percep-
tion, geographical imagination and spatial behaviour is a topic
dating back to a few decades ago (Bianchi & Perussia, 1978; Pe-
russia, 1980; Bonnes & Secchiaroli, 1992); since then, it has left
behind a pivotal legacy on geographical and urban studies.
Within this huge scientific debate, our contribution refers spe-
cifically to the paradigms known as 'geography of perception'
and 'behavioural geography' (Gold, 1980), namely the study of
the relations between spatial experience and the visual repre-
sentation of our sense of place. These paradigms developed
the idea that each person forms a unique, unrepeatable men-
tal image of the environment he or she knows, that is, his or her
everyday geographies. This interpretation, as Geipel (1980) re-
minds us, combines subjective geographical experience and
collective meanings, patterns and narratives. Geographical
knowledge and spatial behaviour (Golledge & Stimson, 1997)
are directly linked to the action carried out by the subject
–with a body and a set of perceptive faculties– in a given phys-
ical environment, and to the influence that the social, cultural
and political context exerts in the construction of geographi-
cal imaginaries. Since the beginning, 'behavioural geography'
and the 'geography of perception' have turned their attention
to the production of mental images, and thus to the link be-
tween spatial experience and cognitive patterns; working on
the reproduction of these images in visual form; in geogra-
phy, this object is called 'mental map', i.e., the representation
that an individual constructs of a given place (Gould & White,
1974). Mental maps are the product of both personal experi-
ence and the interaction with geographical images (videos,
movies, cartography, photos, newspaper, and atlas). Mental
maps have been consolidated as a tool for geographical re-
search, planning and urban studies (Milgram & Jodelet, 1976).
In the work conducted on the image of the Campus, we refer
mainly to Lynch's (1962), Saarinen's (1971) and, considering its
relevance for our city, Bianchi and Perussia's (1978) works.

The multidisciplinary debate that followed the 'Golden Age' of these approaches profoundly challenged and delegitimized their theoretical soundness. However, on a methodological level, these tools still show great validity (Pánek, 2016), especially in projects that aim at acting on the negotiation between subjective image and collective visions, experiences and practices and in the investigations of social representations and constructs (Milgram, 1982)[3]. Moreover, as brilliantly discussed by Greenberg Raanan and Shoval (2014) mental maps offers multiple hooks with other methods presently adopted in space planning and studies. In their work they presented:

> a combination of mental maps and interviews for examining perceptions of territorial boundaries, with tracking technology (GPS) and activity diaries to track the actual use of space (Greenberg Raanan & Shoval, 2014, p. 28).

James (2020) recently revised traditional 'behavioural geography' methods and frameworks, as he claimed that 'while behavioural geography as a sub-discipline has waned, several concepts remain helpful when asking geographical questions' (pp. 187-188), and Pánek (2016) gave a pointing review of promising integration among the use of mental maps and participatory approaches to urban planning. In the specific case under study here, the question was how to promote a dialogue among visual art, social experience and individual meanings of spatial experience.

Working with mental maps

The project was structured in two phases. The aim was to link the subjective production of images, the collective negotiation on the sense of place and the creation of an artistic illustration. The idea was that the collective (shared) mental map of the users would be the background on which Carlo Stanga (a professional illustrator) would base his creation process. The most innovative aspect of the project was the act of providing a professional artist with photographs, textual material and cartographies, integrated by the result of this experimental work

conducted on the sense of place of the inhabitants, students and staff of our university. In the first phase of the project, we organized workshops with students, professors and employees of the university to create a shared map. We immediately recognized the importance of involving the various users in the process of constructing an image of the Campus and the district.

In spite of the limited possibilities offered by the pandemic scenario of October 2020, we organized three workshops in order to obtain a first image of Bicocca from the point of view of the people who habitually visit it for study, business or job reasons. Two workshops were organized in December 2020 (the first on 2/12/2020 and the second on 23/12/2020), gathering a total of 16 participants: 9 students (bachelor' students, master' students, PhD students)[4]; 8 university employees and faculties (professors, research fellows, technical-administrative staff) and a shop owner. All the participants joined on a voluntary basis. Two sub-groups were formed, both consisting of a mix of students and university staff[5]. The workshops followed a standardized structure:

— the meeting took place online on the ®*Webex* platform, with the support of ®*Jamboard* digital whiteboards (available in the *Google* package).

— each meeting lasted about three hours.

— two facilitators conducted the workshop.

— the workshop was structured in a preliminary individual exercise followed by a sequence of group meetings.

Before taking part in the collective meeting, each participant was asked to carry out and send us by e-mail the following assignment:

Try to draw the Bicocca on an A4 sheet of paper. You can use pencils, pastels, and felt-tip pens, and you can choose the colours (even just black) and the style that comes most spontaneously to you. Picture your drawing helping someone (who does not know this space) move around it. In imagining the Bicocca, we would like you to refer to your own personal experience. Don't worry about lines, verisimilitude or aesthetics, design the Bicocca for yourself.

The aim was to bring out the places that each participant pointed as important landmarks. The group meeting was organized in three different stages. The first stage was aimed at enabling participants to present their mental maps. In this phase, everyone told the others about his or her drawing or map, explaining how the flow of representation had taken place: which elements had immediately come to mind, what difficulties he or she had had, the reason for certain stylistic choices or the meaning of certain symbols included in the drawing. In fact, the assignment left a large degree of freedom with regard to the ways of representing Bicocca, and participants followed their own way. The drawings reflect the different ways the Campus-district can be observed. Few participants favoured a 'cartographic' view (Figure 2 and Figure 4), a tendency that is well known in the literature on mental maps (Bianchi & Perussia, 1978). Others, however, drew symbolic objects or sites evoking their personal emotions and experience (Figure 1). A third typology emerged, namely a combination of the 'plausible' image of the area and the collection of symbolic or functional elements linked to the daily life in the Campus (Figure 3).

The second stage consisted in a collective negotiation process led by a facilitator. During this time, the participants sought

Figure 1 Drawing from the first workshop – Bicocca from a Professor's point of view.

Figure 2 Drawing from the first workshop – Bicocca from a PhD Student's point of view.
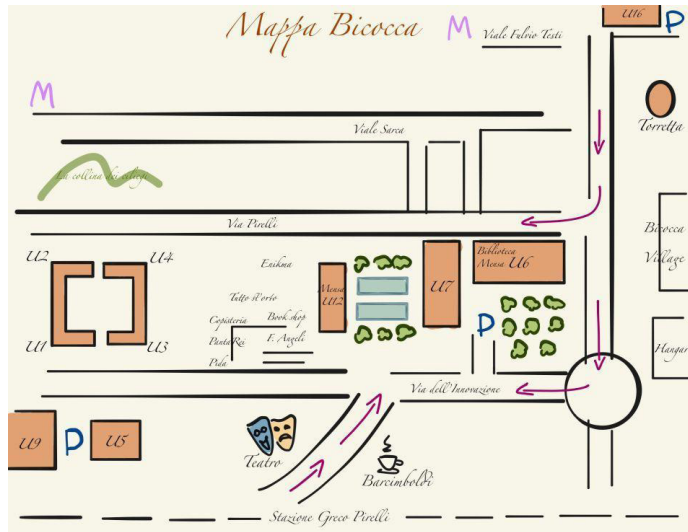
agreement on some spatial indicators. The indicators used are partly based on the classification made by Kevin Lynch (1962), that is, edges (the boundaries of the Campus), paths (i.e., the journeys people make every day to go to work or to reach the means of transport), nodes (the places where these routes meet or converge), landmarks (the spatial objects that 'give meaning' to the Campus as a place where people work and live).

The final stage was the graphic translation of what emerged from the discussion: using the digital blackboard and following the group's instructions, a facilitator drew a collective image. During this last phase, participants were asked to enrich the draft map with post-it notes pointing out missing information or elements that could not be represented graphically[6]. In addition, this moment of summary was an opportunity to continue the discussion on some issues that had not previously been explored (i.e., the presence of human beings within the drawing, the presence of residential and business buildings in the district, the background, etc.). At the end of each meeting, we proposed a final prompt to the participants, asking them to indicate with

a post-it on the map we had created together three places/ objects that help them to find their way and three places related to their biographies.

Throughout the process of the workshops –personal drawing, collective negotiation, final map– two aspects strongly emerged that we would like to emphasise: the role of mobility nodes; the iconic colour of the Bicocca buildings. The words of the participants themselves help us to grasp the depth of their relevance:

> I included the metro stops because the first form of orientation for a person who is not from Milan is the metro. […] I also added the Greco-Pirelli station because, although I have never taken the train there, I used to go with my classmates to take the train, so indirectly it was also an important place for me.
> (M., Student, WS1)

> I wanted to draw the buildings with their colour because when you see a big red building it means you've arrived.
> (S., Student, WS2)

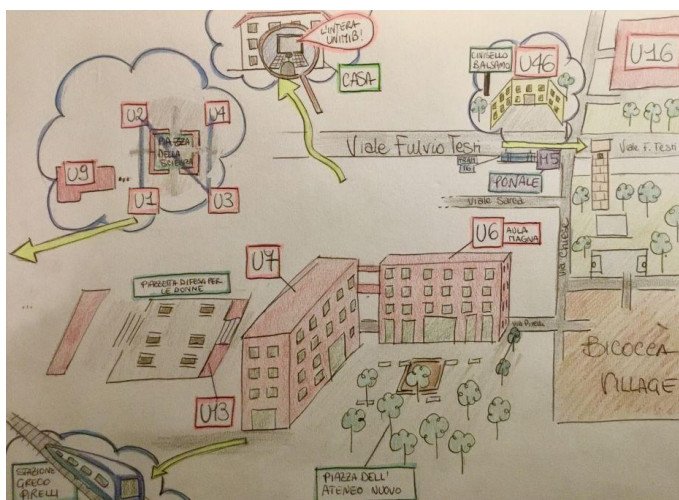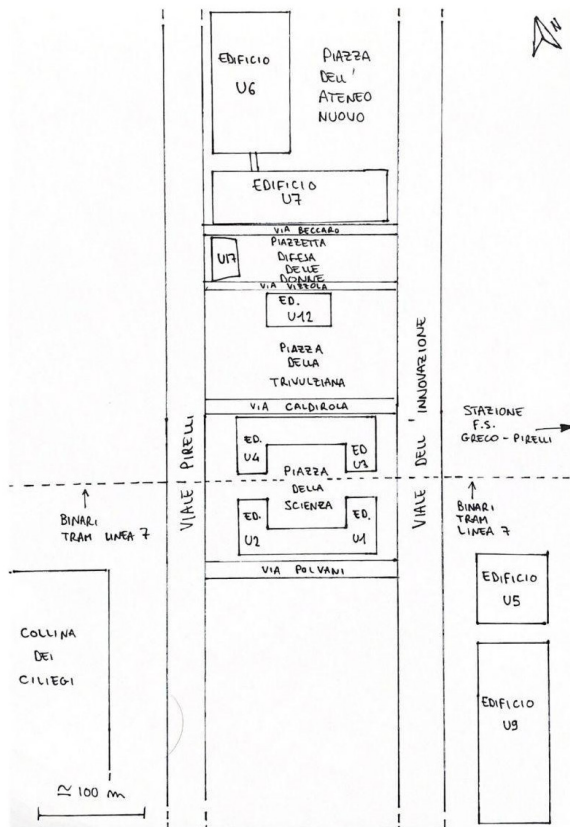**Figure 3** Drawing from the second workshop – Bicocca from a Student's point of view.

Figure 4 Drawing from the
second workshop – Bicocca from
a PhD Student's point of view

If these points might seem obvious to those who know
the Campus[7] and are also represented in institutional maps,
the participants stressed the need to highlight them in a
graphic representation of the area, giving them the status of
'common heritage'[8] and an identity value[9].

In January 2021, the participants in both workshops were
re-contacted, and two representatives from each group
made themselves available for a further online meeting on
4 February 2021.

The aim of the third workshop was to bring together the
two groups that had worked on the project, to share the two
maps that had emerged and to discuss the outstanding ele-
ments: e.g., human presence, places of industrial memory,

inside spots, etc. As a basis for the meeting, we used a drawing that summarized the common elements of the drawings of the two groups. We elicited a discussion, implementing and enriching the drawing and adding some post-its useful for the next step of the project. At the end of the work, the working group produced a map where the elements represented are the summary of edges, paths, nodes and landmarks emerging from the three workshops. The map is a rich representation of users' sense of place.

MOVING TOWARDS ART

A crucial technique of the workshops was the use of mental maps, initially individual and later collective, created as a tool for sharing and explaining the personal and collective sense of place. Working in small groups led to the construction of a collective representation, which became the focal point of memories, experiences, perceptions, habits and visions. Writing, thinking and drawing the campus through the 'sign of the other' (Pezzoni, 2013) was particularly meaningful, mainly because drawing was not a familiar tool for any of the participants; indeed, they had to deal with the detachment, typical of adulthood, towards this medium (Bonaccorsi, 2019). This unfamiliarity allowed for greater concentration, rarefaction and the precise identification of each point.

Carlo Stanga punctually described this stage, by reminding that,

identifying a mental map is like a slalom among memories, cartographic references, experiences and stories. It is a slalom that, instead of avoiding elements, amalgamates them to find correspondences, to unveil the unique identity of that place. In this way, we try to discover the *Genius Loci* by detecting many elements that recur persistently and characteristically[10].

As the first steps documented in the previous paragraph were completed, the image was integrated with key land-

marks and spatial patterns underlined by the literature on
the district (Bigatti & Nuvolati, 2018; Bolocan Goldstein,
2003; Dell'Agnese, 2005). From the individual maps, passing
through the collective one, which was shared, debated over,
and enriched with further ideas, the group constructed a pro-
totype serving as a background for the work of Carlo Stanga
who commented as follow:

> this is Bicocca! a district that settles in the memories evok-
> ing a tangle of experiences mostly significantly positive and
> immersed in an unmistakable atmosphere made of large
> open spaces, colours, meeting places, suggestive names,
> first level cultural services[11] (Figure 5).

As previously clarified, the process called upon several us-
ers who were explicitly asked to participate in a shared activ-
ity shaping the image of Bicocca. The same type of graphics
and illustrations used, while respecting his artistic freedom,

Figure 5 Final Version of Carlo
Stanga work
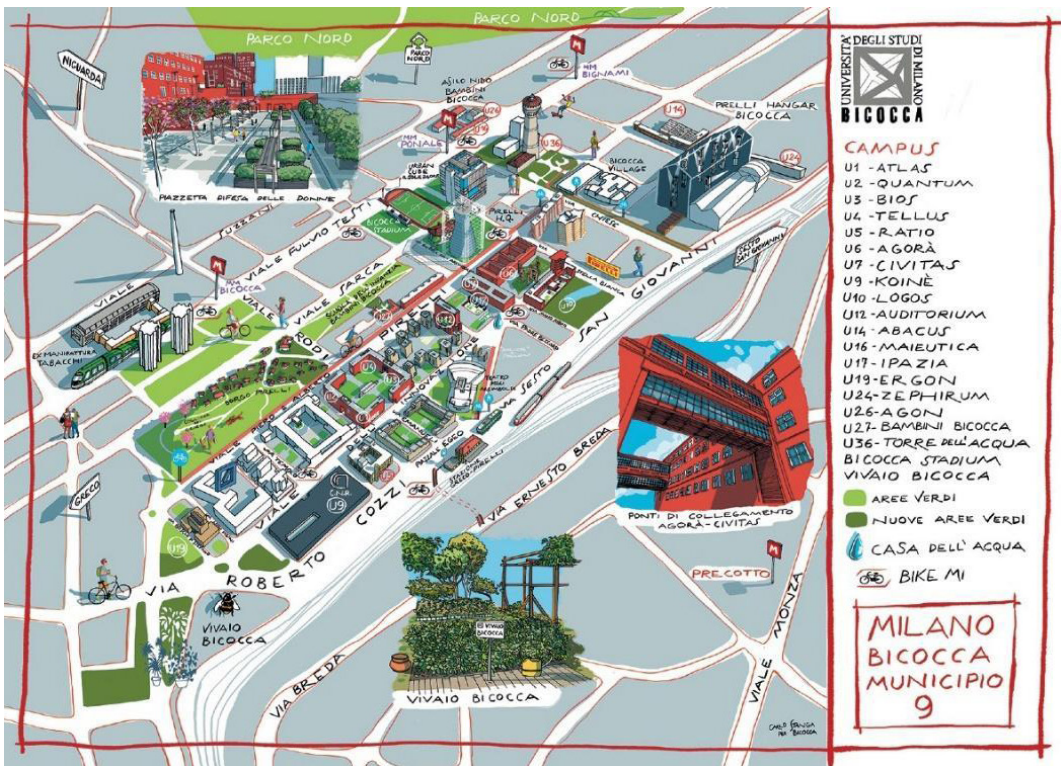
had to reflect the modernity of those spaces, welcoming the persistence of the past. A series of meetings were also necessary with the illustrator to set a cooperative workflow. The drawing of the map –in this case made by a professional artist– was the final step.

BEYOND THE PROJECT: POTENTIAL LEGACIES
ON EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION ACTIONS

Carlo Stanga work (Figure 5) is planned to remain a key image for communicating the sense of place and visually enriching users' spatial experience. The legacy of this experimental work may be identified in a range of actions covering a large spectrum of strategies in the fields of education, communication and students' services. Stanga's image will be adopted as a background for future communication products: working as a logo, as a recognisable iconographic element in future communication strategies. Moreover, Stanga's work has already being pointed as a «visual and iconic landmark» of Agorà-U6 (UNIMIB main building, Figure 6).

Orientation Commission and Communication Office have being planning a new offer for first-year students: the *Bicocca Walking Tours*. At the opening of the academic year, a team of mentors will guide first-year students by walking thematic tours of the campus area. The image of Stanga will act as a visual support integrating cartographic representations. Finally, the work produced can be included in the artistic repertoire of the neighbourhood where, for example, one of the country's most important contemporary art museums is located. As Carlo reported:

> In this case, it was not so different to illustrate, i.e. illuminate, a place such as a university, in fact in the case of Bicocca there is such a close symbiosis between the city and the university that I did not suffer any differences, on the contrary, it was pleasant to understand the strength of this union which is also the secret of the success of this Campus[12].

Figure 6 Carlo Stanga work in
Agorà-U6 hall.

To conclude, a set of implications needs to be further in-
vestigated. By adopting a critical approach to the project's
outputs and applications, we close the essay with three open
questions. The integration of subjective production of imag-
es (e.g. users' mental maps) and artistic interpretation needs
to be critically assessed, as the two processes (or methods)
do not always use the same languages. Furthermore, the
method we followed could be applied to multi-functional
neighbourhoods. Finally, the use of Stanga's work in orien-
tation, communication and training projects is still at a pre-
liminary stage.

NOTES

1 This essay is largely based on the work *From mental maps to art* (Agrestini et al. *in press*) presented at *IMG 2021 Image Learning*. However, this version focuses on the visual representation of sense of place and on the legacy of our work on future district and University urban actions.

2 https://www.unimib.it/servizi/bicocca-orienta

3 Gould and White masterpiece has been recently re-published, reinforcing, decades after the first edition, the relevance of visual representation of personal and social sense of spaces.

4 In this case, it seemed a good opportunity to involve students from the tutoring group of the University's degree courses for two reasons: on the one hand, they are often people who have been attending Bicocca for a long time; on the other, they might have an interesting point of view because of their role and their proximity with a large number of students.

5 We chose to form heterogeneous groups with regard to roles – and with regard to disciplines/departments of origin – in order to allow a meeting of different and interesting experiences and backgrounds. Despite these differences, everyone was at the same level during the workshop, and the working environment was relaxed.

6 This was possible thanks to the possibilities offered by the Jamboard workspace: each participant could interact with the others in the same moment.

7 In fact, the modal split of the Bicocca population shows that most people use public transportation to get to the University (the last survey conducted in 2020 showed that 80% of respondents use TPL).

8 The experience and the significance of the station is shared, even if it would not be part of one's daily routine.

9 The characteristic colours of the buildings aids to recognise that I am/ you are here, in Bicocca.

10 Quote from informal chats with Carlo Stanga.

11 Quote from informal chats with Carlo Stanga.

12 Quote from informal chats with Carlo Stanga.

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How to cite

as article

Agrestini, A., Colleoni, M., Mangiatordi, A., Malatesta, S., Nuvolati, G., Squarcina, E., Zuccoli, F., (2022). Beyond Maps. A workshop on users' sense of place and visual representation at Milano-Bicocca University. *img journal*, *6*, 14-31.

as contribution in book

Agrestini, A., Colleoni, M., Mangiatordi, A., Malatesta, S., Nuvolati, G., Squarcina, E., Zuccoli, F., (2022). Beyond Maps. A workshop on users' sense of place and visual representation at Milano-Bicocca University. In D. Villa, F. Zuccoli (Eds.), ***img journal 6/2022 Image learning*** (pp. 14-31) Alghero, IT: Publica. ISBN 9788899586270