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Designing equity: Reflections on structural inequities in research publishing

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Fernando Secomandi¹

Abstract

As Managing and Senior Editor of this journal, the author reflects on structural inequities in design research publishing, drawing on his experience moving between Brazil and European institutions. He highlights how researchers from ‘peripheral’ regions of academic knowledge production face systemic barriers – such as limited resources, language challenges, and biases favouring work from the Global North – which often shape editorial decisions and publishing opportunities. These experiences inform his interpretation of *Designing*’s mission as being committed to both scholarly excellence and global equity. He argues that true quality in research depends on inclusivity, fairness, and diverse perspectives, calling for collective action to embed these values within the journal and to make design publishing more representative and just.

Keywords

diversity, design knowledge, ethics, design practice, design research

It is a truism in design research that a designerly way of engaging with the world *as it is* is inevitably infused with a vision of how it *ought to be*, and with an understanding of that transformation as part of pursuing a more desirable state of affairs. From within such a normative stance, I wish to approach the launch of *Designing* not merely as an accomplished project, but as one whose realisation already bears witness to the fact that we can do better. I will pay attention to my own perspectives and role within the journal, focussing especially on the question of social equity in academic publishing – a topic that is both personally significant to me and crucial for the journal to fulfil its mission.

It is likewise a truism that, when addressing topics of inequity, one is expected to offer in advance some form of self-reflection on one’s own positionality. This is meant to shed light on the presuppositions, hidden to a greater or lesser extent, that underlie the opinions one holds or the claims one seeks to make. In the present case, what is up for examination is my standing as Managing Editor and Senior Editor of the new journal. In these roles, I am primarily responsible for the initial assessment and potential desk rejection of incoming submissions to *Designing*, as well as for assigning them to dedicated editors – including myself – according to their areas of expertise.

The straightforward justification for my appointment to this position could be seen as a natural progression from a strong record of research and considerable editorial experience. The complete backstory, however, is full of nuances regarding the challenges and facilitating factors involved in the unlikely ascension of someone who has spent the majority of his life and academic career in

Brazil to so-called world-leading universities and research communities.

Having been raised in a middle-to-high-income socio-economic environment, being predominantly of Caucasian European descent, holding a passport from an EU country, attending good private schools, and enhancing my language and expatriate skills through exchange programs in the US and Germany, I benefited from several advantages. The fact that I graduated from the *Escola Superior de Desenho Industrial* (ESDI, or *School of Industrial Design*), a pioneering university institution with a strong tradition in design education in Latin America, certainly facilitated my first step into the Delft University of Technology (TU Delft), where I pursued an MSc and later a PhD. Precisely from that time come my first recollections of a clearly perceptible gulf between design as researched in a ‘central’ site of academic production, such as TU Delft in the Netherlands, and in more ‘peripheral’ contexts, like those I knew from Brazil. Phenomenologically, for the incoming master’s student and budding design researcher, the experience was of simply being *here*, at the place where design knowledge is advanced. The immediate and easy accessibility to what was perceived as the ‘state-of-the-art’ would only many years

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later come to be recognised for its naïveté – for how colonised an attitude it reflected, for how much of what is produced elsewhere was undervalued, and for how, in some of the most globally conversant places, a provincial mindset can sometimes reign absolutely.

For the same reason that I had unquestioningly assumed the prerogative of knowledge generation according to geography, the decision after my PhD to move back to Brazil and pursue an academic career there had a profound de-centering impact. Returning ‘home’ to raise a family meant decisively venturing far away from the familiar bubble of international design research production. I am not sure if anyone who has not experienced this kind of *withdrawal from the centre* can fully understand how difficult it is to maintain a presence in the international design publishing arena while working in peripheral contexts. I know for a fact that those who manage it often do so through extraordinary effort.

Despite these efforts, many such researchers, including myself, struggle to sustain international visibility and collaboration. Structural factors play a significant role, including financial insecurity, the high cost of attending conferences abroad, linguistic barriers, restricted access to paywalled knowledge, and institutional incentives to publish in local languages or for local promotion. Over time, engagement with the international design research community is perceived as declining, as suggested by the lack of new research projects, grants, collaborations, and publications deemed relevant within the central contexts of academic production. A ‘gap’ begins to form in one’s output, one that becomes increasingly difficult to justify without going to great lengths to explain the complexities of structural inequities present in academic research. This gap, and consequent decline, is all too easy for others to interpret as a sign of lack of interest, shifting career motivation, or simple ineptitude on the part of the structurally disadvantaged researcher.

Beyond that, even in areas where these ‘decentred’ researchers believe they excel compared with their more fortunate peers – precisely because they have learned from unique circumstances or surmounted barriers unimaginable from the comfort of more privileged positions – their achievements tend to be diminished. Work that represents major accomplishments in one context may be regarded as modest or not immediately comparable to outputs produced in more resource-rich environments. Competences developed in those contexts are often questioned on the grounds that they might not translate or replicate effectively elsewhere. Such rationalisations of inequality reveal how readily researchers from the central contexts of academic production can regard peripheral researchers not as *equal others*, but as an underdeveloped version of themselves still in need of education or nurturing.

The *widening* gap in my CV while working in the periphery was, paradoxically, perceived by me as the *closing* of a window of opportunity to compete in the global academic market. As the dark clouds of an authoritarian regime gathered on the Brazilian horizon after 2018, along with the diminishing prospect of a safe and promising academic

career, I was fortunate to once again cross the ocean for a second appointment in the Netherlands, at the same department where I had conducted my PhD research. The appointment as a tenure track assistant professor was, to some extent, a downgrade compared to the tenured positions I had held in Brazil. However, it also came with significant perks. For example, within months of joining TU Delft, and perhaps benefiting from the positive impression I had left among some faculty members and colleagues during my previous stay, I was invited to join the editorial team of the then-prestigious *Design Studies*.

I once again found myself at ‘the place where design knowledge is advanced’, yet this led to an unsettling realisation. In truth, nothing about me had changed, except for one thing: my academic affiliation with the department where the Editor-in-Chief of that journal sat. I would never question my own preparedness for the role, nor the judgement of those who extended the invitation. After nearly a decade of professional experience at two of Brazil’s finest public universities, I had gained substantial knowledge in publishing, academic administration, research leadership, and interdisciplinary collaboration. It would be untruthful to my conscience, however, to pretend that I believed my experience would have been equally recognised had I not changed institutions. For researchers like myself, equally capable but based in peripheral contexts, such opportunities rarely arise spontaneously.

One final step is needed in this biographical chronology to substantiate the principles and values I wish to promote in the new journal. From my privileged position as Deputy Editor of *Design Studies* for 2 years, I had the opportunity to screen all incoming submissions and regularly consult with the Editor-in-Chief, Peter Lloyd, on the criteria used to assess quality and determine whether a manuscript warranted immediate desk rejection. This role provided me with first-hand experience of the full range of design research submitted to the journal, far broader than what ultimately reached the screens and hands of our readership.

Regrettably, I came to notice that a disproportionate number of submissions that did not advance to full peer review originated from peripheral countries and institutions. These rejections were typically justified on the basis that the manuscripts fell outside the journal’s scope or did not meet the established standards of quality, rigour, or contribution. In the context of managing the enormous backlog typical of a highly ranked, broadly scoped journal, it was clear that incentives existed that could encourage complacency in assessments, such as relying on such proxies as the author’s country of origin, name, or institutional affiliation to infer scholarly merit. Little time was available to pause and reflect, and even less to address the structural conditions that shaped both the arrival of such work and its perception as falling short of established standards of scientific quality.

By the time of the corporate overreach incident that ultimately affected *Design Studies*’ trajectory (Lloyd, 2025), I had reached my own moment of *conscientização* – ‘development of critical consciousness’ – and chosen to confront the structural inequities in design publishing from the perspective of the disadvantaged. Just prior to the

resignation of virtually the entire editorial team of that journal, who would later go on to establish this new journal, one particularly significant manuscript was carefully managed through the review and publication process: a bibliometric analysis of geographical inequalities in academic design publishing by [Perry and Pereira \(2023\)](#), which is highly pertinent to the present discussion.

As Peter Lloyd noted in his final editorial for *Design Studies* – an editorial rejected by the team that assumed control of the journal, but later published elsewhere as an act of reparatory justice for both the role of journal editor and the field of design research ([Brereton and Huybrechts, 2024](#); [Lloyd, 2023](#)) – the handling of that manuscript exemplified the kind of differential treatment often experienced by submissions that articulate critical perspectives on dominant discourses, particularly when these critiques emerge from outside and challenge the traditional centres of academic power.

Upon first encountering the manuscript, I flagged it as warranting particular attention due to its potential contribution and polemical significance. It was further circulated internally among all associate editors for feedback, in addition to the standard double-blind peer review process. In hindsight, I agree that this additional scrutiny proved beneficial: the final version was published in the last issue overseen by the former editorial team of *Design Studies*, having undergone an unusually rigorous process. It appeared just before the journal's transition toward a quantity-driven strategy, which may have been less conducive to critical reflection on the dominant model of design publishing.

I was deeply gratified to see that the article was not highlighted merely tokenistically, as evidence of how reflexive or open to critique our editorial team was. Instead, under Peter Lloyd's leadership, it served as a catalyst for prioritising diversity, equity, and inclusion in design publishing during the embryonic stages of this new journal. During the months of discussion among the core editorial group that went on to found *Designing*, our shared concern to challenge design research's geographical bias in publishing also shaped negotiations with our publishing partner, Sage, in whom both the editorial group and the Design Research Society have invested their hopes for a fairer and more transparent publishing relationship. Ultimately, the commitment to addressing structural inequities in academic design publishing became enshrined in the journal's mission, which states:

The mission of *Designing* is twofold: first, to publish research of the highest quality to become the leading journal in the field of design research. Second, to establish and develop design research in all regions of the world to achieve greater representation and increased global diversity.

To my understanding, the best way to interpret the relationship between the two parts of this mission is that they are mutually reinforcing and equally important. A journal cannot truly claim excellence if its foundation rests on narrow geographical or epistemic boundaries. Inclusivity

and diversity are, therefore, intrinsic to the notion of quality. Conversely, a commitment to global representation demands the same standards of intellectual rigour and editorial integrity as any leading scholarly publication. 'The same' standards, in this view, do not entail identical evaluative criteria but a principled and contextually responsive commitment to fairness that accounts for epistemic diversity and historical asymmetries in access to research infrastructures, networks, and linguistic capital.

In all honesty, our internal discussions suggest that the current editorial team is not necessarily united in this interpretation. Some have questioned how the very notion of *developing* design research must be approached with care to avoid a paternalistic disposition. Others set the second ambition against the first and subordinate it, holding that greater inclusivity should not take precedence over securing scholarly leadership as measured by traditional ranking and metric systems, which are paramount to the long-term viability of the new journal.

The reality is that much work and (un)learning still lies ahead for the editorial team in understanding and balancing the issues of excellence and equity following the launch of *Designing*. Experience shows that the new, precisely by virtue of having been made otherwise, is that which can be improved – to return to the truism of designing expressed at the outset. This process has already begun with the call for two new positions aimed at growing and diversifying our team of Senior Editors, particularly in terms of gender, geographical, and epistemic diversity. The current composition had already been critiqued by some members of our editorial team, the publisher, and the anonymous reviewers of the initial proposal. But it could be explained by the need to retain collaborators from the former journal who supported and actively participated in the founding of this one. It was also necessary to strengthen the proposal to publishers by presenting an already established group with proven expertise in running an academic journal.

However, there can be no justification for maintaining such homogeneity as we move into the future. While we acknowledge that each member brings distinct personal experiences and perspectives – some of which may be invisible to others – our focus here should be on the structural basis of inequality. Individual differences can collapse into homogeneity when shaped by broader patterns of access, representation, and epistemic authority that historically differentiate between groups included in gatekeeping positions within academic publishing and those excluded. Addressing diversity, therefore, requires more than valuing personal uniqueness; it calls for deliberate efforts to expand participation across all forms of structural division.

With the support of the Design Research Society, I have been leading a series of conversations with design researchers from diverse backgrounds and regions of the world. These conversations sometimes occur individually and in private, and at other times, they take place publicly and in groups. Many participants have shared their concerns regarding structural barriers to greater diversity, equity, and inclusion in academic publishing, as well as ideas for addressing these issues. Additionally, for the upcoming

biennial conference of the Society, to be held in Edinburgh in 2026, editors of *Designing* will co-chair, together with editors from several other design journals worldwide, a theme track on promoting plurality and equity in the scientific publishing of design research. Beyond personal reflections such as those shared in this editor's perspective, it is crucial that we foster more scholarly research on these topics to inform our collective discussions and guide our editorial decisions.

These initiatives are all ongoing as of mid-October 2025, the time of writing. I conclude with an invitation to everyone involved in design research to consider how we might collectively make the field of design publishing more representative of the global majority. If you believe more can and should be done to address structural inequities, your perspective is valuable. If you recognise that lived experiences and insights from structurally disadvantaged researchers should actively inform decisions and policies, your engagement is essential. And if you accept that genuine progress depends on the meaningful participation of those historically marginalised in shaping the solutions, you are helping to ensure that change is both substantive and lasting.

Let us work together in designing a better journal – one that embodies both excellence and equity.

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