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Critical Reflections on Systemic Design Participation: Ethics, Care and Justice

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Editorial: Critical Reflections on Systemic Design Participation: Ethics, Care and Justice

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Abstract: This theme track examines how participation is conceived and practised within systemic design for complex challenges. Designing for interwoven systemic crises requires the participation of those who both affect and are affected by these systems. Participation is reframed here not as a discrete event, but as a dynamic, ongoing meta-process that reconfigures power relations and influences what is recognised as meaningful data. Synthesising fifteen papers across three sessions, this editorial explores the tensions between care, justice, and ethics, moving beyond performative co-creation toward sustained, power-sharing partnerships.

Keywords: Systemic Design; Participatory Design, Care, Ethics, Justice, Systems Thinking

1. Introduction

Designing for complex systemic crises requires the active participation of those who both affect and are affected by these systems (Jones, 2018). In contexts defined by interwoven crises, participation cannot be viewed as a discrete event or a simple method; rather, it is a dynamic and ongoing meta-process. Following Mosleh and Larsen (2020), we move away from viewing participation as a neatly managed or linear design phase, reframing it instead as an ongoing and complex negotiation within a system of power and diverse temporalities. Every act of engagement reconfigures the system, shaping power relations, influencing what is recognised as meaningful data, and informing co-created interventions.

Building on the work from previous Design Research Society tracks (Landa-Avila et al., 2022; Landa-Avila et al., 2024), we examine how participation is practised within systemic design for complex challenges, asking who is included, who has influence, and how methods might resist the very systems they aim to transform. This track explores the tensions between care, justice, and ethics, framing participation as a systemic intervention and a space of care.



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This track positions Systemic Design (SD) as a purposeful intervention capable of challenging historically dominant, often exclusive epistemologies and ontologies that have defined what is considered legitimate knowledge or practice (Landa-Avila, 2025). We argue that SD reframes participation as inherently ethical and political acts, particularly in contexts characterised by structural inequality, epistemic injustice, and institutional resistance. Traditional "siloe design" often remains ill-equipped, as its linear thinking tends to focus on surface-level problems while overlooking deeper structures, normative assumptions, and historical injustices that sustain systemic harm. Instead, SD aims to offer an approach grounded in complexity, interdependence, and reflexivity for continuous societal learning and a transition to a world that cares for, imagines, and enacts just futures.

2. An overview of the track's sessions and papers

The fifteen papers gathered in this track include research originating from institutions in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, the United States, Australia, Belgium, Sweden, Mexico, and Italy. These contributions address a diverse array of contexts, spanning healthcare settings, environmental remediation, the built environment and architecture, social housing, pedagogy, public policy, inclusive placemaking, incarcerated parents, and the inclusion of d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing people. The papers were grouped into three sessions based on their commonalities.

2.1 Session one. *Care Infrastructures: Designing with, through, and as care*

The first session interrogates the foundations of systemic design, acknowledging how affective, embodied, and lived experiences sustain transition work. Care through these papers is an active, ethical responsibility to maintain, continue, and repair our world, our relations and our practices.

Building on the theme of restorative practice, Zhang (**Paper 945**) proposes participatory design as an emotional infrastructure that helps citizens reconcile their relationship to pandemic-war metaphors. This restoration is a form of care that redirects crisis-generated emotions into opportunities for collaboration and social learning. Gruyters et al. (**Paper 339**), apply the five dimensions of care (i.e., attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, and solidarity) as an ethical guide for systemic design. They highlight the necessity of designer positionality and shared responsibility when working with vulnerable groups like children with incarcerated parents. Price (**Paper 1839**) draws attention to mounting pedagogical pressures within design education, proposing a care-based pedagogy that supports emerging designers working amidst uncertainty and cognitive overburdening through enduring educational scaffolding. This pedagogical care prioritises empathy and the emotional well-being of the student. The focus on care is extended by Antognini et al. (**Paper 2392**), who employ a feminist ethics of care to explore the implicit politics of data in hormonal self-management tools. They argue that a care-ful sensemaking process requires balancing relatability and reflexivity. Finally, Maione and Tham (**Paper 1315**) introduce pen-palling systems as a collaborative autoethnographic method to grow individual agency. This

method prefigures a paradigm of care by centring healthy relationships and self-leadership to sustain the long-term work of complex change.

2.2 Session two. Who Gets to Participate? Inclusion, place and counter-narratives

The second session addresses the nature of engagement, focusing on the conditions under which participation takes place for systemically marginalised groups. Lake et al. (**Paper 358**) examine participatory place shaping through collaborative counter-storytelling, demonstrating how intergenerational narratives can resist oppressive political systems. To address persistent epistemic injustice, Hein-Machado et al. (**Paper 1356**) propose an initial working framework for the equitable participation of Deaf and hard-of-hearing people, moving beyond tokenism to genuinely share power. Expanding on this topic in the context of healthcare, Oliveira et al. (**Paper 796**) argue that equitable engagement begins within the research team itself, where traditional project roles are put aside to allow difference and conflict to be explored through design methods. From a speculative perspective, Baistow and Moline (**Paper 1652**) use socially engaged design to explore blind spots in menopause health and coal ash pollution, creating "coalitions of action" that enable participants to make nuanced, site-specific knowledge tangible through materials-based methods. Closing this session, Datta and Champlin (**Paper 469**) offer a critical account of superdiversity in Jackson Heights, New York, using ethnographic walks to surface invisible forms of systemic participation, such as grey economies and local networks that bridge systemic gaps.

2.3 Session three. Relational Participation: Situated Knowledges, Mapping, and Boundary Objects

The third session explores the relational agency of mediating artefacts and situated knowledges, examining how they challenge institutional biases to facilitate deeper participation and bottom-up systemic change. Ai and Prendiville (**Paper 2443**) demonstrate how visual mapping serves as a systemic research method in high pressure NHS emergency departments, enabling clinical staff to share insights that reshape service workflows and inform later systemic interventions. Perez and Kwon (**Paper 2006**) explore how design-led activities function as micro systemic interventions that influence perceptions and decision making, suggesting that broader systemic transformation can emerge through these situated and ethical design encounters. Deepening the study of mediating artefacts, Niño Cáceres et al. (**Paper 2388**) examine how boundary objects function as mediators of embodied knowledge, proposing a shift towards boundary experiences where sensorial and relational affordances foster deep co-ownership and transformation. Aulisio et al. (**Paper 2300**) further explore how the unstructuring of data influences participation and representation, arguing that a transition from expert-driven representations into open, evolving maps stimulates collective learning and reflexivity in fragile territories. Bringing these concepts to the level of governance, Schmidt (**Paper 2632**) proposes a systemic behavioural design framework that shifts the focus from top-down nudges to fostering bottom-up emergence through well designed choice infrastructure that supports organically arising collective action.

3. Implications on Participatory Systemic Design

The collective findings of this track indicate that participation is itself a systemic intervention that reshapes the conditions of engagement, knowledge mobilisation, and power (Landa-Avila, 2025). It is an act that can either reinforce, balance or disrupt the pathways to shape our present and futures. Meaningful participation must foreground relational autonomy, where individuals recognise their interdependence and act in solidarity to support long-term change to move beyond short-term fixes toward the deep, continuous learning required for long-term societal transitions (van der Bijl-Brouwer et al., 2024).

Furthermore, designers and facilitators must acknowledge that they are not neutral enablers. There is an increasing impetus to be accountable for the impacts and consequences of their work, as designers' methods and positionalities influence what becomes visible and what remains hidden. It involves active decisions about legitimacy, framing, and the construction of truths. To move from systemic polarisation toward meaningful action, SD might focus on objectifying intersubjectivity (Christakis & Kakoulaki, 2021) through inclusive dialogue, transforming individual perspectives into shared logical objects to build collective trust and systemic understanding.

SD urges a continuous reflexivity about the worldviews and paradigms that guide our actions. To advance a just and plural design practice, we must confront the historical epistemic injustices that have relegated or rendered invisible certain bodies of knowledge and experiences. This requires moving beyond performative co-creation to cultivate systems-conscious communities capable of reflexive learning and adaptation. As Vink (2022) highlights, building reflexivity is crucial for designing for plurality in democracy. From emerging practices, micro-interventions, and reframed methods (e.g., boundary objects, ethnographies, and visual mapping), this track aims to advance these explorations.

4. Conclusion

This track brought together fifteen diverse perspectives that interrogate how modes of participation reflect, reinforce, or resist the systems they aim to transform. The contributions demonstrate that the field of participatory systemic design is gaining maturity through critical self-awareness and a commitment to justice-oriented practices and that participation is an inherently political and relational act. This implies that participation in systemic design must not become a hollow panacea; it requires a space where it is deepened and advanced with care and purpose to confront injustice. By embracing the frictions and contradictions of participation, systemic design can foster more honest and transformative dialogues that shape just, plural, and purposeful futures.

We hope this track inspires new ways of practising and being in the field and encourages researchers to move toward sustained, power-sharing partnerships for systemic change.

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