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Discourses in Design Research: Historical, Critical, and Speculative Perspectives

Peter Lloyd
TU Delft, The Netherlands

Theodora Vardouli
McGill University, Canada

Moa Carlsson
Edinburgh University, UK

Arlene Oak
University of Alberta, Canada

Anna Talley
Edinburgh University, UK

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Peter Lloyd, Theodora Vardouli, Moa Carlsson, Arlene Oak, Anna Talley, and Haian Xue

Editorial: Discourses in Design Research: Historical, Critical, and Speculative Perspectives

Peter Lloyd^a, Theodora Vardoulis^b, Moa Carlsson^c, Arlene Oak^d, Anna Talley^e, Haian Xue^e

^aTU Delft, The Netherlands

^bMcGill University, Canada

^cEdinburgh University, UK

^dUniversity of Alberta, Canada

^eTongji University, China

*Corresponding author e-mail: p.a.lloyd@tudelft.nl

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Abstract: The field of design research is now over 60 years old but, despite comprehensive archives existing, such as the DRS Digital Library, little systematic historical research has been done looking critically at how concepts in the field have developed over time. Studies looking at how certain discourses have come to dominate in design research, and those that have been disregarded, are long overdue. The theme-track *Discourses in Design Research: Historical, Critical, and Speculative Perspectives* invited submissions engaging historically and critically with ideas and concepts that have helped shape the discipline of design research. The papers share a concern both with origins and histories, but also uses and misuses of terms that might be familiar to us as design researchers, yet still carry complex meanings. The theme-track papers represent a way of viewing design research and design in a careful, multi-layered, and textured way, revealing an affiliative network of concepts and approaches with which to take the sub-discipline of design research history forward.

Keywords: Design research discourse; historical analysis; critical studies; genealogy

1. Introduction

“Genealogy” is an idea and method touched on in half of the papers for this theme track, revealing a historical orientation in thinking about the complex origins and trajectories of concepts relating to design research and design within varied social, technological, political, and cultural contexts. Associated concepts drawn or derived from Michel Foucault’s works, such as “archaeology”, “governmentality”, and “environmentality”, also form common reference points in the papers that follow. In using these concepts, and other critical conceptual frames, this theme track begins to construct a more contextual and critical view of the design research discipline and design as an activity.

The field of design research is now over 60 years old but, despite the existence of comprehensive archives (for example, the DRS Digital Library [1]), little systematic historical



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research has been done – with notable exceptions – that looks critically at how concepts in the field have developed over that time. More studies looking at the discourses that have come to dominate in design research, and those that have been disregarded, are long overdue. *Discourses in Design Research* invited submissions that engage historically and critically with ideas and concepts that have helped shape the discipline of design research. Ultimately, this theme track seeks to energize the development of a sub-discipline that considers the history of design research and that fosters dialogue about its scope, methods, and consequences.

Our theme-track call received 48 submissions and, after peer-review, twelve were accepted for publication and presentation in two sessions. The papers accepted are rich, nuanced, and sophisticated in their analyses and results, with their arguments built from drawing on diverse datasets and archives. This is in keeping with developments in the broad field of the Digital Humanities, in which computational methods and AI-powered tools can enable innovative ways of considering historical discourses, including design research, that are more focused on networks and communities of practice (Vardouli et al 2024). Our central aim in organising this theme track was to gain an understanding of discourse as both a central concept in design *research* and a method through which its history might be critically examined. Many papers develop that understanding, while other papers focus on discourse as it relates to design as an activity, or to adjacent fields of study, such as STS and systems thinking.

The large diversity of papers is underpinned by strong shared conceptual foundations. For many, philosopher/historian Michel Foucault is the primary touchstone, but Hannah Arendt, Bruno Latour, Etienne Wenger, and Marshall McLuhan, to name a few, also lend their weight to historical inquiries. As one might expect, there is much reference to epistemology and its qualification, for example epistemic sovereignty (Harles, 2026), epistemic constriction (Brownsword et al. 2026), epistemic obstacles (Catros 2026), epistemic crisis (Wang and Cao 2026), epistemic boundaries (Cantalupi 2026), and practical epistemology (Oyarzun 2026). Eleven out of twelve papers refer to the concept, illustrating the overall focus on how knowledge is constructed and used.

As with all historical research, much of the past bears in interesting ways on the present. Many papers reference Artificial Intelligence (AI). For example, *The History of the Black Box* considers the idea of Explainable AI as an extension to the historical systems and representations described in the paper, whilst *User-centered Dread* relates AI to the unintelligibility of seemingly intelligible user interfaces. A future where AI plays an increasingly large role, both in the process and subject of research as well as in the processes and outcomes of design, needs robust concepts with which to think. This theme track provides some of those concepts and foregrounds the study of the past as yielding conceptual innovation.

We have divided the theme track into two sessions for the conference. The first session - *Genealogies, Archaeologies, and Architectures* - concentrates more on design research as a subject of historical inquiry, while the second session - *Critiques, Black-Boxes, and Translations* - focuses more on design as a discipline, designing as a practice, and the adjacent fields of systems and cybernetics.

2. Genealogies, Archaeologies, and Architectures

Design Knowledge Archaeology: Developing the body of design knowledge and theory (Auernhammer, Bekamiri, and Drake 2026) takes Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) as an inspiration, exploring three methods for viewing the origin of design knowledge structures. From more conventional historical methods that attempt to get at "knowledge that has been present but unrecognised" (p.5)—for example, knowledge relating to Black and Indigenous cultures, to techniques involving the latest LLM's to identify new themes in the historical data of design research—the paper offers generative starting points to those who wish to explore different ways of knowledge construction, while also giving hints of where a more detailed analysis could lead.

While much discourse about design and design research presents design as a force of progress in the world, it also retains a curious air of political neutrality despite key thinkers, such as Horst Rittel, identifying its political nature and potency as a political device. This is a strange juxtaposition. *The P in Design: Towards a genealogy of the political in the field* (Cantalupi, De Rosa, and Galluzzo 2026) seeks to explode this neutrality by looking closely at the many entanglements between politics and design that have occurred in a number of significant movements since the late 1960s: these include, radical design, participatory design, critical and speculative design, social design, design activism, adversarial design, and transition design. The authors' analysis "[reveals] how design's epistemic boundaries have been drawn and redrawn through ideological, technological, and social transformations" (p.2). The paper argues that the political is constitutive of design (as design is a crystallising element of the political) not a 'take it or leave it' addition.

Design Research Labs as Sites of Epistemic Sovereignty: a critical genealogy across four generations (Harles 2026) also draws on the work of Foucault, in this case his 'genealogical method', to examine the idea of a 'lab' in design research. This is an idea that has grown in popularity over the last decades (e.g., fab labs, policy labs, bio-design labs) but that reaches back to architecture labs at MIT in 1881, as well as to the design labs of the Bauhaus. The association of a 'lab' with scientific activity is self-evident. Yet in design, the meaning of the 'lab' tends to denote a culture of experimentation and experimentalism. It is more akin to a 'making' environment, wherein things can be made in controlled conditions for close examination. The result of this paper's reflection on labs across time is to recognize that "design's epistemic ambitions are repeatedly asserted and repeatedly deferred" (p.2). Latour has shown how knowledge produced in scientific labs is socially constructed (Latour and Woolgar 1992), perhaps similar to a type of design which, the paper states, "represents a platform for collaborative inquiry" (p.3). The paper invites us to consider the contrast between design labs and design studios, a more traditional place of design exploration.

Aside from the concept of a design lab, what can we observe in laboratories? Shifting from the idea of a lab as a site for designing in one form or another, to the idea of the lab as a site for design research, we have the paper, *How to Observe Design Practices*. Here, once again, the authors draw on 'archaeology' to contrast two different ways of observing the 'black box' of design practice throughout the history of design research. The first mode of observation involves being out in the field - as an ethnographer, anthropologist, or social scientist - engaging with work in the settings in which it unfolds. The extended study of the Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) by Albena Yaneva (2009) is a representative

example here. The second mode of observation involves the experimental and controlled conditions of the laboratory, exemplified by Charles Eastman's (1970) protocol analysis of expert designers. The paper argues that researchers should pay more attention to the traces left by designers: "like detectives, they search for and observe traces left behind by humans, whether intentionally or not. Like a detective, they formulate hypotheses about the mechanisms that produced these traces. Like a detective, they follow the trail in search of new clues that may confirm or refute these hypotheses until they get to the bottom of the story." (p.10)

How have ideas developed through the DRS conference series? In a similar approach to Gray et al. (this volume), we have the paper *Problem-solution co-evolution research in the DRS Conference Community (2001-2025)* (Biskjaer, Halskov, and de Rooij 2026). Here, the authors trace the roots of a particular term and explores its growth. One of the most highly cited papers in the journal *Design Studies* is *Creativity in the design process: co-evolution of problem-solution* by Kees Dorst and Nigel Cross (2001). This paper charts the journey of their co-evolution theory by looking at how the term has been used, developed, and critiqued in successive Design Research Society conferences. The concept of 'co-evolution' seems to be simultaneously specific and general, which perhaps explains its popularity and wide application. At a somewhat abstract level, the paper illustrates the process through which ideas are, in psychologist Piaget's terms, accommodated and appropriated by a research community, and draws attention to the rich set of connections and core language that results.

An often-overlooked part of design methods is their performative aspect, that is, their deployment in specific situations by specific actors. The design methods movement originated in the 1960's and Gray, Chivukula and Asad (2026) look backwards and forwards at the epistemic challenges that design methods foment in their paper, *Toward an architectural model of design methods: Meta-methods, proto-methods, and method building blocks*. The authors discuss how methods and practices inter-relate and the various architectures of their construction. The paper argues that methods 'encode' procedural design knowledge in a seemingly rational way, foregrounding concepts such as 'validation' and 'optimisation'. However, this focus ignores the 'performance' of methods. The paper combines the prescriptive, presentational, and performative aspects of methods into the familiar STS concept of the 'assemblage' – those humans and non-humans working together. It further categorises methods into meta-methods, emphasising ethics and values; proto-methods, emphasising personal configurations of practice; and method building blocks, emphasising the reusable elements of design methods. Design methods are a unique contribution of the design research discipline. this raises the idea that methods may also be a uniquely designerly way of constructing practical knowledge in a form that is widely accessible to designers and non-designers alike.

3. Critiques, Black-boxes, and Translations

Critiques, Black-Boxes, and Translations foregrounds cultural and technical inflections of key discursive tropes in design and design research. Translating industry: The reception and evolution of industrial thought in early modern China by Chaolu Wang and Ruping Cao

(2026) describes how concepts of design and design research developed through a number of related discourses connected to Chinese industry. The paper focuses on how the Western concept of 'industry' and 'technique' were translated into Chinese concepts with slightly different meanings. Such concepts sparked the growth of a network of knowledge in China, initially focussed on the military but subsequently focussed on wealth and consumer growth, which the paper - as other papers in this Theme Track have done - traces using Foucault's genealogical analysis. The paper takes a broad sweep through history, drawing on primary and secondary texts from the mid 1800s to the early 20th century, and effectively situates the development of ideas about design alongside significant social and political developments both within, and involving, China.

In *Translating Industry* (this volume) the activity of design is framed as a 'black box', a commonly-used term that has a rich lineage. We tend to use it to refer to a place that accommodates all the things we are uncertain about or that we do not understand, but that might nevertheless transform one thing magically into another. The term 'black box' has a long history of usage in many technical (and non-technical) disciplines but *The Black Box in Spatial Planning: Visualisations of indeterminacy in cybernetics and model theory* (Brownsword, Jasper, Herr, and Fischer 2026) explores its deployment in the context of spatial planning. The origin of the black box, viewed in the paper as a site of 'epistemic constriction', dates back at least to 1951, but it has become newly relevant in our current AI context, and widely used, as the paper explains, in flow diagrams around the world. The black box perhaps represents an overlooked element of how complex problem situations transform into generalised solutions, rendering uncertainty representable. While conceptual black boxes are deliberately opaque, the paper warns that "transparency, paradoxically, creates new layers of expertise rather than simplifying existing ones." (p.21). The idea of a rational move leading to an undesired outcome – in this case increased opacity – reoccurs in *User-centered Dread* (Urquhart and Lawrie, this volume).

Flow diagrams, and inevitably black boxes, feature in Lucía Jalón Oyarzun's multi-layered paper *Environmentality's integrated design: ISO standards as infrastructural semiotics* (2026). Here, Arun Agrawal's concept of 'environmentality' (2005), derived from Foucault, is drawn on as "a form of power in which control is exercised not through the subjection of individuals but through the design and modulation of the environment." (p.1). As such, 'environmentality' is used as a theoretical backdrop to explore the very practical information contained in the guidelines for international standards (ISO). The paper centres on ideas of 'signs', 'semiotics', and 'infrastructure', concentrating on the Ulm School of Design as a site of conceptual development. The idea of standards, and specifically of ISO 19650 on Building Information Management (BIM), the putative subject of the paper, is a natural extension of this, representing what the authors term a 'practical epistemology'. Interestingly, standards represent a normative way of achieving things in a much more successful way than is achieved by the also normative approaches of design methods. Standards, of course, prescribe much of the world around us and purport to make things work seamlessly, but the philosophical positions and foundations for standards form a fascinating and unlikely partnership in the paper.

The origins and uses of the term 'design system' is the subject of Nielsen, Vistisen, Inie, and Biskjaer's paper *Exploring current understandings of 'design systems': Toward a conceptual framework* (2026). Starting with the design methods movement, and particularly the work of

Commented [AO1]: Do you mean here 'environmentality'?

Christopher Alexander (1978), the authors describe how the pattern languages of Alexander were translated into the software design of HCI. After considering a broad literature related to 'design systems', they suggest three 'logics' to more tightly define them. These logics are: *elements*: libraries, patterns or guides that contain the multiple parts of which a system is composed; *properties*: things that design systems afford designers - consistency, a shared language, scale; and, *agents*: the range of professionals who interact with the system. Together, they argue, these categories can make for stronger terminological consistency, and for more effective translations between practitioners and research communities.

The final two papers of the theme track are also in the realm of HCI. They borrow a critical lens from a well-known theorist (Jang and Bolter 2026) and fiction writer (Urquhart and Lawrie 2026) to reveal striking perspectives on familiar designing practices. *Historicising Speculative Design with McLuhan's Tetrad* (Jang and Bolter 2026) looks at corporate, concept-design videos to explore a difficult time-shifting research discourse: HCI and 'techno-optimism'. The authors apply Marshall McLuhan's tetrad as a framework for historicising past futures to the corporate-concept video, which they argue is a type of softly disruptive design fiction. In contrast to *The P in Design* (this volume), corporate videos are a (seemingly) non-political type of designing, firmly excluding the 'P' from design. The contribution of this paper, as with *Design Knowledge Archaeology* (this volume), is through illustrating a framework with which to critically inquire about the past.

The approach of horror-fiction writer H.P. Lovecraft is the lens through which the concept of 'user-centred design' is explored in the enjoyable and provocative *User-centered Dread: A Lovecraftian critique of design* (Urquhart and Lawrie 2026). In "highlighting how users are led into states of incomprehension and even terror through supposedly benign design work" (p.1), the paper examines the darker, less comprehensible, consequences of design, and particularly the way in which seemingly-rational design decisions can lead us to conditions of dependence, isolation, and confusion. The paper draws on a rich set of examples, often drawn from film, to underscore the weird, otherworldly aspects of the way that designs can make us feel, particularly when they are highly 'usable'. In the words of the authors: "the horror lies not in the failure of design, but in its success" (p.8). This framing has particular resonance for contemporary developments in AI and recent discourses around 'more-than-human' design, where deceptively simple, and seemingly easy-to-use interfaces usher in unlimited and incomprehensible machine power.

4. Conclusion

The papers in this theme track represent a way of viewing design research and design in a more complex and layered way than many contemporary research papers acknowledge. If on the surface the papers in this theme track seem quite different from one another, closer reading will reveal an affiliative network of concepts and approaches with which to take forward the sub-discipline of the history of design research.

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Commented [AO2]: This sentence isn't too clear to me – I changed 'to familiar' to 'to familiarise' but I'm not sure that is capturing the intended meaning; perhaps it is meant 'to defamiliarise'?

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About the Editors:

Peter Lloyd is Professor of Design Methodology at the Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering, TU Delft. He is Chair of the Design Research Society, President of IASDR, and Editor-in-Chief for the journal *Designing*. He is also the founder of the DRS Digital Library.

Theodora Vardouli researches design and architecture's entwining with digital technologies and computation. She is an Associate Professor at the Peter Guo-hua Fu School of Architecture at McGill University where she directs the Computational Design Exploratory (CoDEx). Before joining McGill University, She completed a PhD in Design and Computation from the MIT Department of Architecture.

Moa Carlsson is an architectural historian and architect, with a PhD in Architecture from the MIT School of Architecture and Planning. An Associate Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, she has also trained in history of science at the University of Cambridge Department of History and Philosophy of Science.

Arlene Oak is Professor of Material Culture and Design Studies at the University of Alberta, Canada. She completed her PhD in Social & Political Sciences from the University of Cambridge, Has an MA in the History of Design and Material Culture from the Royal College of Art, London, and a BFA in Design and an MSc in Clothing and Textiles from the University of Alberta.

Anna Kallen Talley is a researcher in modern and contemporary design history and theory. Her primary research interests include graphic design and communications technologies, digital objects and infrastructures, the relationship between design and political

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theory/philosophy, design and political economy, design ethics, and the curation of design. She is DRS Online Editor and recently completed her PhD Thesis on the relationship between communication design and post-factual news.

Haian Xue is Professor at the College of Design and Innovation, Tongji University. His work explores wellbeing innovation, experience and emotional design, design for humanistic spirituality, alternative epistemologies, introspective methods, and the cultivation of design connoisseurship.