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Citation (APA)

Tassinari, V. A., Ozkaramanli, D., Colombo, S., Secomandi, F., & Singh, A. (2026). Ethics, Values and Culture Symposium. In D. Fassi, A. Meroni, L. Galluzzo, D. Selloni, D. de Sainz, N. B. Torretta, E. Bertolotti, M. Corubolo, A. De Rosa, & More Editors (Eds.), *PDC 2026 - Proceedings of the 19th Participatory Design Conference 2026, Vol. 3: Workshops, Situated Actions, and PDC Places* (pp. 165-168). Association for Computing Machinery (ACM). <https://doi.org/10.1145/3789493.3797338>

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Ethics, Values and Culture Symposium

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Abstract

This half-day symposium at the Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering (IDE), TU Delft, explores ethics, values, and culture in design research and education across IDE's three departments: Human-Centered Design (HCD), Strategic Product Design (SDE), and Design for Interaction & Social Innovation (DOS). The program features four 20-minute presentations of four IDE researchers (Özkaramanli, Colombo, Secomandi and Singh) from the three departments, followed by Q&A and a final panel moderated by Tassinari, addressing Design Anthropology for Social Change; Design under Pressure: Exploring the Tensions in Design Ethics; Designing for Mutual Recognition and Human Freedom; and Designing Feminist AI: Towards Inclusivity and Empowerment. An accompanying exhibition of provotypes, developed by approximately 400 master students, creates a material dialogue with researchers. The symposium is conceived as a dialogic and generative space of encounter and co-creation, engaging researchers, educators, PhD candidates, and students, aiming to generate internal discussion within IDE, strengthening the dialogue across the departments on the ethical and political implications of its ongoing design research and pedagogy and connecting it to the international design community through PDC Places. By hosting this event, IDE creates a plural, reflexive space that acknowledges the entanglements of design with patriarchal, colonial, and anthropocentric frameworks while exploring embodied, feminist, and decolonial ways of knowing, practicing, and teaching design, inviting participants to collectively reimagine what it means to do and teach design otherwise.

Keywords

design dilemmas, design ethics, decolonizing design, feminist approaches to design, design justice

ACM Reference Format:

Virginia Alice Tassinari, Deger Ozkaramanli, Sara Colombo, Fernando Secomandi, and Abhigyan Singh. 2026. Ethics, Values and Culture Symposium. In *Participatory Design Conference 2026, Vol. 3: Workshops, Situated Actions, and PDC Places (PDC 2026 Vol. 3)*, June 15–19, 2026, Milan, Italy. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 4 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3789493.3797338>

1 Introduction

At the Faculty of Industrial Design Engineering (IDE), TU Delft, design research increasingly faces the urgent task of responding to societal and ecological challenges that are as ethical and cultural as they are technological. Across our three departments—Human-Centered Design (HCD), Sustainable Design Engineering (SDE), and Design Organization and Strategy (DOS)—an important emerging theme is how we engage with ethics, values, and culture in design. These dimensions shape not only the decisions we make in research and practice, but also the assumptions that underlie them, helping us to design in ways that are transformative, regenerative, and just [12]. These dimensions are central to participatory and socially engaged design, which at IDE is understood not as a settled method but as a site of tension, negotiation, and critical reflection. Reflecting on ethics, values, and culture encourages IDE researchers and students to become more critical, reflexive, responsive, and pluralistic in their practices, which are core skills in our recently renewed master curricula featuring courses such as designing responsible AI, social design, design justice, and consequences of design.

Aligned with the 2026 PDC Places call, the symposium foregrounds participation as a negotiated, situated practice [14], attentive to power, conflict, and marginality. It asks how participatory design can contribute to radical re-imaginings of the past and future beyond modern, extractive, or techno-centric frameworks, and how internal participation and discourse-building across departments with rather different histories and design cultures can foster pluralistic, ethical, and reflective design research, scaffolding collective discourse-building across the three departments. The symposium aims to spark internal discussion at IDE, generate a shared intellectual ground on design research as meaning-making, and spark a conversation on its value, ethics, and culture, while connecting with the international design community through PDC.



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ACM ISBN 979-8-4007-2470-1/2026/06

<https://doi.org/10.1145/3789493.3797338>

Within this broad inquiry, in this symposium taking place in spring 2026 at IDE TU Delft, four IDE researchers (Ozkaramanli, Secomandi, Colombo, and Singh) explore these questions through four intersecting lenses: Design Under pressure: Exploring the Tensions in Design Ethics; Designing for Mutual Recognition and Human Freedom; Designing Feminist AI: Towards Plurality and Empowerment; Design Anthropology for Social Change.

A final roundtable moderated by Tassinari closes the Symposium, reflecting on the pedagogies of socially engaged design practices. These four lenses – chosen to represent the variety of IDE research on ethics, values, and culture – frame investigations into the ethical, cultural, and political implications of design, both in research and in teaching, and provide the conceptual foundation for a PDC Place at IDE TU Delft. We imagine this Place as a threshold—a space where design research and education meet the lived practices, gestures, and struggles that shape ethical, cultural, and political life. Rather than a conventional academic event, this symposium will be a space of encounter and co-creation, where researchers, educators, PhD candidates, and students come together with practitioners and community partners to explore how questions of ethics, values, and culture unfold through design practice and pedagogy at IDE. In line with the vision of PDC Places, this symposium engages with questions that matter—locally and globally—asking how design research and teaching can respond to issues of power, participation, and plurality in situated, reflective, and transformative ways. Our aim is to generate an internal discussion within IDE, involving colleagues, researchers, PhD candidates, and students, and to interface this dialogue with the international design community through PDC. The symposium will be accompanied by an exhibition of provotypes developed by over 400 master students as part of their first cross-departmental master course at IDE, TU Delft. Provotypes [2] are ethnographically informed, technically functional artifacts designed to expose tensions and challenge existing assumptions. By making implicit conceptions tangible, they create opportunities for reflection and discussion, prompting researchers to question current practices and imagine alternative possibilities. These provotypes act as material provocations, entering into dialogue with researchers during the symposium and serving as the centerpiece of a collective knowledge production exercise. This format brings together the perspectives of design researchers and design students, fostering experimentation, reflection, and collaborative inquiry across the faculty. By hosting this symposium at a technical university such as TU Delft as a PDC Place, we aim to create a grounded, plural, and reflexive space that acknowledges the entanglements of design with modern techno-scientific, patriarchal, colonial, and anthropocentric frameworks, while experimenting with alternative, embodied, feminist, and decolonial ways of knowing, practicing, and teaching design.

By hosting this Place at a technical university such as TU Delft IDE, the PDC Place Symposium creates a plural and reflexive environment that acknowledges the entanglements of design with patriarchal, colonial, and anthropocentric frameworks while experimenting with embodied, feminist, and decolonial ways of knowing, practicing, and teaching design. The symposium embodies the PDC Places principle that participation is both practice and political stance, attentive to tensions and refusals that risk going unheard.

It invites participants – within the TU Delft IDE participatory design community and the PDC community at large – to collectively reimagine what it means to research, teach, and practice design otherwise, as acts of reflection, care, and solidarity.

2 Practical symposium overview

We plan a half-day hybrid symposium, held in person at IDE. The expected duration is approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes, with around 50 participants, including colleagues, researchers, PhD candidates, and students. The session could be recorded, with the video presented at PDC and/or a selection showcased at the Provotypes exhibition.

- 14:00-14:10 Introduction (Tassinari)
- 14:10-14:30 Exploring the Tensions in Design Ethics (Ozkaramanli)
- 14:30-14:50 Designing for Mutual Recognition and Human Freedom (Secomandi)
- 14:50-15:00 Break
- 15:00-15:20 Designing Feminist AI: Towards Plurality and Empowerment (Colombo)
- 15:20-15:40 Design Anthropology for Social Change (Singh)
- 15:40-16:20 Round table & open discussion (moderated by Tassinari)
- 16:20-16:30 Wrapping up and opening of the exhibition

3 Design under pressure: Exploring the tensions in design ethics

Design is often celebrated as a creative problem-solving discipline. Yet the challenges we face today, such as migration, climate breakdown, social inequity, and the accelerating rise of AI, are too complex, systemic, and value-laden to be “solved” in any straightforward sense. When design operates under this kind of pressure, ethical reflection becomes not just relevant but essential. This topic examines what it means to design ethically in conditions of uncertainty, tension, and conflict, and asks how we might reimagine ethics not as a constraint on creativity but as a generative and critical force within design practice [7]. While questions of social and moral responsibility [8] have long accompanied the field from calls for socially responsible design to critiques of its pragmatic ethics; design ethics remains fragmented and often narrowly focused on individual responsibility. Too often, ethics is confined to personal codes of conduct, overlooking the broader political, institutional, and economic systems that define what designers can or cannot do. This research instead approaches ethics as an ongoing practice of grappling with moral dilemmas which are moments when competing values, perspectives, and responsibilities collide [3]. By exploring dilemmas as sites of reflection and creativity, design ethics [5] can help practitioners navigate complexity and act with both sensitivity and awareness.

Three central tensions frame this inquiry:

- Agency vs. Systems: Designers are urged to act responsibly, but how much responsibility is possible within the wider political, social, and economic systems that shape design? What does responsibility mean when agency is distributed across many actors and institutions?

- **Problem-Solving vs. Problematisation:** Design culture often privileges speed, action, and innovation, whereas ethical thinking demands slowing down, questioning, and confronting discomfort. How can critical reflection and problematisation stimulate creativity instead of causing paralysis?
- **Methods as Ethics:** Every design method—whether personas, prototypes, or co-design workshops—embodies a. assumptions about people, futures, and values. How do these methods shape the ethics of design practice, and how might we re-examine them to expose their political and moral effects?

By working through these tensions, this topic invites participants to rethink design ethics as a situated and generative practice, one that helps designers respond to unexpected dilemmas and act with care amid uncertainty. It asks how ethics can be defined from within design, while drawing from philosophy, anthropology, history, and cultural studies to enrich its understanding.

4 Designing for mutual recognition and human freedom

This topic explores how design can actively contribute to human freedom and social justice within emerging technologies, particularly in areas such as artificial intelligence and service interfaces [6]. Drawing on service design, post-phenomenology, and the philosophy of technology, it examines how design choices shape interactions, relationships, and power dynamics between designers and users [9]. A central insight in this research is the concept of “coerced recognition” [10], where users—through interactions with interfaces—are subtly conditioned to perceive themselves as subordinate or “other” relative to the designers who craft these systems. These dynamics, often invisible, have profound ethical implications. Recognizing these mechanisms opens a space to design for liberation, envisioning interactions where designers and users mutually acknowledge each other, co-creating engagement and meaning. Possible avenues to foreground mutual recognition in technology-mediated contexts include:

- Speculative design of alternative interfaces that actively promote mutual recognition, such as AI front-ends that enable feedback loops and negotiate power dynamics in real time.
- Critical analyses of existing service interfaces, tracing where coerced recognition may be embedded and proposing design interventions to transform these relationships.
- Story-driven or interactive design fables that dramatize the transition from coercion to mutual recognition, making phenomenological experiences of users tangible in poetic or narrative forms.

Through these approaches, the topic emphasizes that design interventions are not only tools or products, but ethical and relational acts that can shape more inclusive, emancipatory, and just technological futures.

5 Designing feminist AI — Towards plurality and empowerment

Continuous advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) offer great potential to transform sectors such as healthcare, government, and

education. At the same time, such technological evolutions raise significant ethical concerns, particularly regarding the lack of plural and diverse perspectives informing AI development and application. This deficiency can perpetuate systemic discriminations and reinforce inequalities, shaping technologies that often prioritize profit over justice, inclusion, and societal well-being. This topic examines how a feminist approach to AI can challenge power structures and foreground empowerment, participation, and pluralistic perspectives in the design and deployment of AI systems [13]. Feminist AI goes beyond gender questions alone, exploring how technologies can be designed to empower marginalized and vulnerable communities, support equitable participation, and promote ethical and just practices. Central to this approach is data feminism, which emphasizes participation, embodiment, and pluralism in data and AI practices, enabling designers to create systems that reflect diverse perspectives and lived experiences. Potential actions to address AI from a feminist lens include: critically assessing existing AI systems and applications, identifying embedded biases, and exposing power imbalances and embedded forms of oppression; proposing design approaches and methodologies that prioritize empowerment, participation, and justice for marginalized and vulnerable groups; developing design interventions, narratives, or critical prototypes that exemplify feminist AI principles in practice. Through these activities, the topic adopts feminist perspectives to emphasize AI as a relational and ethical practice, where technical innovation is inseparable from questions of justice, inclusion, and social responsibility. Participants are invited to explore how feminist principles can shape the design, development, and deployment of AI to foster equitable, pluralistic, and empowering technological futures.

6 Design Anthropology for Social Change

Neighborhoods and communities are increasingly treated as test beds for sustainability transitions. This topic explores how design anthropology can inform energy and climate transitions, focusing on fairness, inclusion, and non-market value exchange, including reciprocity, gifting, sharing, and bartering, and considering perspectives from non-Western relational worldviews [4]. Much of contemporary transition thinking, policy, and design rests on neoliberal assumptions: that people are rational, self-interested actors motivated primarily by financial incentives. While partly true, this perspective sidelines the social and cultural dimensions of everyday life and overlooks alternative modes of exchange and cooperation emphasized in non-Western contexts [1]. Beyond self-interest and rationality, our behaviors, desires, and values are shaped by social relationships, such as with partners, friends, neighbors, and communities, as well as by diverse social, cultural, economic, and moral frameworks [15]. Design anthropology reframes local transitions by attending to the plurality of social relations and the myriad ways people exchange value beyond market transactions. Communities routinely share tools, gift time, barter skills, and reciprocate care; traditions from mohalla customs and time-banking to Ubuntu-inspired mutual aid illustrate how well-being often depends on relationships rather than transactions. In energy and climate work, this may involve neighbors co-managing solar energy, circulating surplus heat or produce, or organizing care networks during extreme weather events. A just transition, therefore, is not only about

technology or price signals—it is about relations, obligations, trust, mutual care, and recognition. This theme can be explored through three strands:

- Design for Social Relations: *How can design transitions strengthen existing social ties and create new ones that enhance trust, fairness, and mutual support?*
- Design to Diverse Reciprocities: *How can design enable gifting, sharing, bartering, and other non-market exchanges alongside financial mechanisms, including tariffs, platforms, and policies that recognize care work, local knowledge, and collective ownership?*
- Designing from Non-Western Perspectives: *How can design grounded in non-Western relational worldviews support community-led transitions, reinforce social ties, and legitimize non-market forms of exchange within infrastructures, services, and policies?*

Methodologically, this research theme combines ethnography with co-design, mapping value flows, prototyping services, and co-developing tools with residents and stakeholders [11]. The aim is practical: to produce concepts, pilots, and policy insights that help communities transition in ways that are equitable, culturally grounded, and relationally rich.

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