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Design For Empowerment

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Editorial: Design for empowerment

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Abstract: This track explores empowerment as the primary focus of design for social change, rather than merely a side effect or outcome of design activity. While existing studies highlight empowerment through design, there is a pressing need for a nuanced discussion on how empowerment is planned, achieved, and articulated within design projects. Our aim is to reclaim the Design for Empowerment research agenda and advocate for a critical perspective. This includes discussions on biases, privileges, and positionality of designers, complex power dynamics in social design settings, and unintended consequences of social design interventions. Contributions explore how empowerment theories inform design practice, provide critical tools for power analysis, present methodologies for discussing levels of empowerment, and capture individual and collective narratives of change. We also examine some of the tensions and dilemmas arising in politically engaged design.

Keywords: Empowerment; Power Dynamics; Social Design; Positionality.

1. Introduction

In an era marked by global challenges and transformative movements, the role of design in catalysing social change has never been more pertinent. Social design projects are seen as tools for empowerment, developing creative skills, fostering civic leadership and encouraging wide participation in public life from all society sectors. However, there is still a significant gap in addressing underlying assumptions and biases within design, such as gender norms and power structures, which need explicit discussion to foster a critical perspective of empowerment in design (Mazé 2019). This discourse leads to broader questions about positionality as well as making design a more intentional agent of transformation in the empowerment journey. It also entails examining the inherent power designers hold in shaping societal changes (Santamaria 2023) and the unintended consequences that arise from our empowerment intentions (Avelino 2021). As such, the challenge remains on how to foster empowerment in design practices, creating conditions that enable genuine empowerment



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throughout the project lifecycle, and how to critically evaluate and discuss empowerment not only within design, but also across different disciplines and practices working towards the same goal.

This track initiates a critical examination of what empowerment means and how it is consciously integrated and manifested in design for social change, urging a shift from incidental to deliberate and strategic empowerment. Our intention is to introduce a more nuanced and unavoidable discussion on the power dynamics and political implications we encounter in situated contexts of design research and practice (Costanza-Chock 2020).

The initial call for papers sought contributions that explored how theories of power and empowerment inform design research and practice, methodologies and tools that facilitate power analysis in design contexts, and explorations of tensions and dilemmas of politically engaged design. Eight papers were accepted, which represent a wide range of contexts and angles on the topic, and start to broaden and deepen the discourse of empowerment through design.

Two papers explain the transformative impact of the making activities on vulnerable individuals in the health sector and its bearing on the designed outputs:

In *A Bottom-Up Transformation: Design Empowering Chronic Disease Management Types and Strategies*, Renxuan Liu and Duan Wu address the growing challenge of chronic disease management (CDM) in an ageing population through a ‘bottom-up’ empowerment lens. Their study critically evaluates traditional ‘top-down’ health service models and proposes a framework where patients are seen as active participants in their health management. The paper outlines four types of design empowerment—knowledge, skill, relationship, and environmental empowerment—which interact to enhance patient agency and manage chronic diseases more effectively. This approach shifts from paternalistic practices to engaging patients as key agents, thereby fostering a more holistic and inclusive health management system. Their methodology leverages grounded theory and case studies to articulate how design can play a transformative role in empowering patients within CDM frameworks.

Similarly, in *Empowerment of People with Disabilities Through Collaborative Making: Exploring User Involvement in Designing and Adapting Assistive Products* by Canlar and Çağla Doğan investigate how collaborative making and participatory design can empower individuals with disabilities by involving them in the design and adaptation of assistive products. Their research builds on Empowerment Theory to analyse personal, social, and physical empowerment through making-related activities, the work reveals the personal empowering effects of being actively involved in creating and modifying personal assistive devices. Power within is achieved through increased awareness and control over personal assistive products, enhancing independence. Power with is fostered through community involvement and collective making activities that strengthen social ties and enhance collaborative skills. Power to relates to the modifications and personalization of assistive products that improve functionality and autonomy.

Three papers propose methodologies that help designers to interrogate the *relational dynamics* in the participatory and co-design processes with vulnerable and marginalised groups:

In *The Co-design Participatory Power Pyramid*, Euan Winton and Paul A. Rodgers provide a crucial tool for evaluating and planning co-design activities, ensuring that all participants, especially vulnerable groups like people living with dementia (PLWD), can contribute meaningfully to design outcomes. The Power Pyramid is designed to articulate various levels of participant involvement in co-design projects, specifically focusing on PLWD. The paper categorizes co-design interactions as 'to', 'for', 'with', and 'by', each representing a different level of participant agency and collaboration. Co-design 'to' represents the lowest level of involvement, where PLWD are merely consulted for feedback. Co-design 'for' involves participants more actively but still under the direction of designers. Co-design 'with' denotes a collaborative approach where PLWD have substantial input throughout the design process. Co-design 'by' signifies projects led and directed by PLWD, showcasing the highest level of empowerment and ownership. The framework aims to enhance understanding and application of co-design in various contexts, promoting a more inclusive and participatory design process. It encourages self-empowerment and independence among participants, asserting that true collaboration in design can lead to more innovative and appropriate solutions.

In *Power Signifiers: the subtle forms of power in design practice with marginalized craft communities*, Seher Mirza discusses how established yet hidden power relations influence craft practices and how they can be renegotiated through reflective design practices. Mirza introduces 'Power Signifiers,' a methodology that leverages non-obvious forms of power for transformative development. The research is informed by a decade of fieldwork with marginalized craft communities in rural Pakistan, offering a profound understanding of how power dynamics can be navigated to foster meaningful and empowering design collaborations with traditional textile communities.

In *Empowerment through participation? Three Case Studies of Social Design Projects with Disadvantaged Female Communities in Hungary* Janka Csernák further investigates the experience of empowerment highlighting its hidden nature, typically associated with the experience of disempowerment. Her paper examines three social design projects that integrate participatory methods to engage vulnerable groups effectively. Csernák uses Healey's engagement model to analyze various levels of participation and their impact on empowerment. The paper identifies barriers such as socio-economic status, education, and cultural norms that affect participation. By applying an intersectional lens, the author provides nuanced insights into how empowerment can be differently experienced by individuals within the same community, suggesting a more tailored approach to participatory design in vulnerable populations.

Lastly, three papers provide critical perspectives and emphasize the importance of recognizing and addressing power imbalances, systemic oppression, and the need for genuine, transformative empowerment in design practices:

In *Towards a Design Methodology Against Oppression*, Bibiana Oliveira Serpa and Marco Mazzarotto present a revolutionary approach to design with the "Design Against Oppression" methodology, developed through the Design and Oppression Network in Brazil. This methodology utilizes six guiding axes that oppressed communities can put into practice with or without a 'designer: popular assembly, dialogues, generative themes, unveiling, collective praxis, and systematization of experience, inspired by critical pedagogy and militant research. This flexible, non-linear approach is designed to adapt to the specific needs and conditions of oppressed communities, promoting autonomy, solidarity, and criticality in design processes. The paper highlights how this methodology can fundamentally alter the dynamics of design projects to combat systemic oppression and empower marginalized groups.

In *Sensemaking about power in anti-oppressive design practice*, Jessica Meharry explores the intricate dynamics of power in design practices aimed at combating oppression. She presents a new framework for understanding power through an anti-oppressive lens, focusing on the nuances of power as both a structural and agency-based element in design processes. Meharry emphasizes the importance of recognizing power dynamics to create ethical and equitable design outcomes that genuinely empower communities rather than perpetuate systemic inequalities. This framework is positioned as a tool for designers committed to social justice, enabling them to integrate a deeper sense of responsibility and awareness of power imbalances in their work. The study combines theoretical debates on power with practical applications in design, advocating for a reflective practice that aligns with emancipatory and transformative goals.

In *The Road to Co-optation is Paved with Good Intentions: An Anarchafeminist Critique of Empowerment Ambiguity in DSI*, Valentina Volpi, Val Mitchell, Stuart Cockbill, and Ksenija Kuzmina critically examine how the concept of empowerment in Design for Social Innovation (DSI) is often superficially used, masking and perpetuating structural inequalities. They argue that the term has been co-opted by neoliberal and institutional frameworks, stripping it of its radical potential to support the status quo rather than dismantle it. The authors propose an anarchafeminist perspective that emphasizes self-critique, direct action, and prefigurative politics, advocating for genuine grassroots empowerment that challenges all forms of domination and oppression. This approach aims to ensure that empowerment efforts in DSI are genuinely transformative and address the root causes of inequality and marginalization.

The papers presented in this track span Global North – Global South divide, include anti-ableist perspectives and contribute to the critical view of empowerment in design. They highlight how contemporary theories of power enhance our understanding and implementation of empowerment intentions. They acknowledge and elaborate on the inherent tensions and dilemmas faced by designers engaged in politically charged contexts, and propose new tools and methods to navigating them.

Through this track we want to *reclaim the Design for Empowerment* research agenda. We seek to cultivate a community that shares, enriches and propagates a collective repository of expertise, strategies and experiences on the topic. Our intention is to foster a fertile ground

for collaborative development of empowerment methodologies, concepts and projects rooted in a variety of paradigms and perspectives.

As we delve into these discussions, we aim to foster a more critical perspective on empowerment, challenging the community to think deeply about the ethical, social, and political dimensions of design practice. This reflection is crucial for developing a responsible and responsive design ethos that genuinely empowers communities and increases our awareness of the potential pitfalls and unintended consequences of empowerment efforts.

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Dr. Laura Santamaria is Research Lead at the School of Communication, Royal College of Art. She specialises in sociocultural and political aspects of design. As founder of *Sublime* magazine, and the Fair Energy Campaign, she has made significant contributions to discourse reframing, shaping collective identities, and enhancing creative capacity in grassroots activism practices and contexts.

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