

By Design or by Disaster: Conferences 2013-2019

Original

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Traversing Territories

1460 days of
eco-social designing
in South Tyrol
and beyond ...

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The background features a layered, abstract composition of paper. A large, irregular white shape is layered over a textured, reddish-brown paper. A thick, black, hand-drawn line follows the inner edge of the white shape, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall aesthetic is organic and artistic.

By Design or by Disaster

Conferences 2013-2019

This annual conference co-developed and continues to co-develop with the Master in Eco-Social Design. It is an occasion for a lively exchange on creative practices triggering eco-social transformations. Guest speakers and audiences come from diverse fields of practice and professional cultures, ranging from progressive local/social entrepreneurial individuals and communities to internationally known designers, researchers and activists. The conference offers a mix of inputs, dialogical-collaborative formats, hands-on workshops and excursions, all undertaken in a convivial atmosphere.

By Design or By Disaster, 2013–2019:

The story of a conference

Kris Krois

Alvise Mattozzi

As it usually happens, when you start something you have only a vague idea of what will happen and how things will unfold. Now, looking back at our five editions of *By Design or By Disaster (DoD)* a sort of coherence – a design – emerges.

At the beginning, however, we did have a concept, an effective team and a strong title. The basic concept was to hold an annual conference which could draw together contributions from design with social sciences and activism, not just to reflect design and sustainability but also as activities, as actual interventions, hence, a practice-oriented or hands-on conference – as we called it.

The team, besides the authors, included Amin Al-Hazwani, Philipp Santa, Jacopo Drago and Hannelore Schwabl who took care of the communication. In particular, Amin and Philipp designed the lettering, which for a long time featured on the blog initiated with the first conference in 2013 and, over time, became the voice of the Master in Eco-Social Design.

As for the title, *By Design or By Disaster*, was chosen by one of the authors (Kris). Thanks also to the alliteration – \di-'za – \di-'za – it worked by being evocative and by lending itself to many rearrangements including disaster-design and design-disasters, not pertinent for our conference, but in their own way, evocative too. For us the title had clear meaning stated in the introduction to the first programme in 2013:

"Sustainability is unavoidable. It will happen anyway by the interplay of disastrous ecological, social and economic trends and events. But we could take initiatives: we can design and develop this transition in a process of collective decisions and actions."

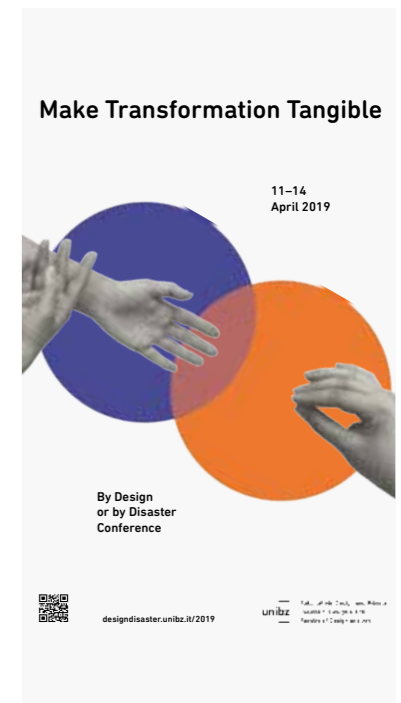
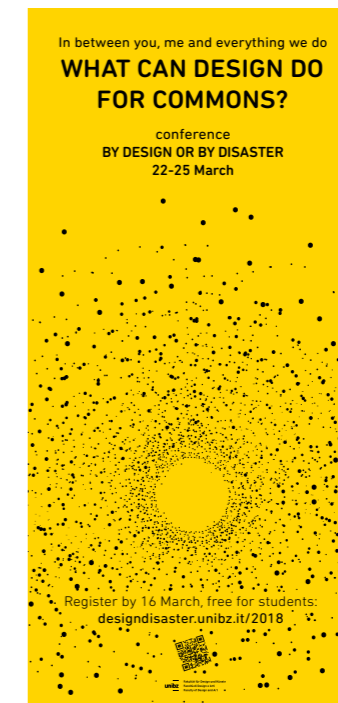
The conference aimed at exploring:

"Design and developments for eco-social transformations by showing, discussing and experimenting within a transdisciplinary and participatory setting."

A secondary, but important, aim of the conference was to create a forum to gather contacts and information in order to develop what became the new Master in Eco-Social Design, launched in October 2015. Within this framework, of a conference and a forum, many things have changed, or evolved. The Master programme is now a reality. The annual DoD conference has become a showcase in relation to what has been done, a forum for discussing the present and the future of the Master, a network for new connections, an event for gathering new and old contacts and friends, and, lastly, a lab for future initiatives and courses.

By Design or by Disaster, 2013–2019

In order to describe how the *By Design or By Disaster* conference series evolved during the years we have identified five tensions that characterise it: **Reflecting – Doing**; **Design – Social Sciences**; **Local – Global**; **Focus – Diversity**; and, **Slow – Intense**. These can be considered coordinates through which we can map the six editions of DoD.



Reflecting – Doing

From the start, in 2013, we aimed at developing a conference which was a place to reflect on past experiences and propose new interventions, while also experimenting and putting into practice the issues tackled through the conference. We built on a long design tradition which gives relevance to practice and interventions, to trying things out and to prototyping, as well as to a shorter tradition established through the project-driven teaching model of our Faculty. So, we came up with the idea of a *hands-on conference*, with talks and discussions combined with design workshops and activities.

In the first edition in 2013 the first day was organised as a traditional conference, followed by two days of workshops allowing participants to experiment with some of the issues related to sustainability and society introduced in the formal part. For the two workshops, we combined designers with local NGOs:

- Cecilia Palmer, who works in the field of sustainable and open source fashion, with Orto Semirurali Garden, a multicultural community garden;
- Brave New Alps, a duo working on issues related to eco-social design, with the citizens' initiative Adam&Epfl, working on the issue of pesticides in Obervinschgau.



The second edition in 2015 – deliberately named *Glocal Design Spring* – was less expansive than the 2013 event. We did not offer an actual workshop, but instead a World Café with practitioners of various fields of design and sustainable development, with whom participants could talk with to organise actual projects. Practitioners included: Enrico Bassi of Officine Arduino, Akrat, a local social cooperative for upcycling in Bolzano, Günther Reifer of the Terra Institute, a business consulting



focusing on sustainability, Sebastian Schütz of youvo.org, Kathrin Böhm of myvillages, Doina Petrescu of Atelier d'Architecture Autogerée, and Anna Serravalli of the Medea – Research Lab for Collaborative Media, Design, and Public Engagement of Malmö University.

In the following years, we always kept this tension between reflecting and doing alive by organising workshops.

We also focused our reflections and discussions on the practice of eco-social designing, giving more and more relevance to the "do-it-together" (DIT) dimension, rather than "do-it-yourself" (DIY). Indeed, we always addressed an expanded idea of doing, which considers what designers and social scientists actually do and can do in the field of eco-social design. We are interested in what kind of projects they do, how they allow other people to engage with the doing, how they do things with others in terms of activism and community organizing. We are always thinking of practices engaged in faceted networks of community activities. In the 2016 edition, we organized a long workshop lead by Open State with the aim of setting up a university community garden in Unibz. It took place before, and not after, the oral presentations and discussion. The outcomes were presented during the more frontal part of the conference.

The 2016 edition was dedicated to *"into the doing"* in order to reflect on *"what is the doing doing"*, i.e. what are the effects of the exemplary practices and projects. Presentations reflected on these topics and included Christa Muller of Anstiftung, about community gardens; Alastair Fuad-Luke – who was just appointed as professor of design research at our Faculty – about antagonism in design and multi-level scaling of projects; Marguerite Kahrl about some of her community projects; Ezio Manzini about social innovation in design and what it can do; and, finally, Dagmar Diesner and Massimo De Angelis about their experience as economics researchers and part of an alternative food network and community based in Emilia.



The 2017 edition, inspired by the research and projects of Brave New Alps, long time collaborators of DoD, was dedicated to practicing eco-social design and how to make it economically sustainable as a professional practice. The title *"Make work work"* was quite revealing as exemplified by Studio Polpo of Sheffield, Raumlabor of Berlin and Isacco Chiaf/Latitude Visual who told the audience about how they manage their eco-social engaged projects and their lives.

The 2018 edition, under the theme of *"commoning"* featured presentations and reflections on projects by Assemble of London and Officine Zero of Rome. The newly introduced mini-talks session offered an opportunity for less established projects and practices to present what they are for and think – it was a firework of commoning-oriented inspirations. This was followed by practice-oriented discussions in an Open Space forum addressing issues raised by the participants to the conference.

Design – Social Sciences

Today, it is becoming more common in design education to explore intersections and exchanges between social sciences and design. When we started with DoD this was not the case. We tried to develop our own way, based on our professional and academic experiences as a designer (Kris) and as social scientist (Alvise). We especially based this on the experiences of collaboration we had gathered while teaching in studio courses of the Bachelor of Design at the Faculty of Design and Art of the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano where, for some time, social sciences and design have been brought together.

We started with the acknowledgment that designers need to understand the social and environmental context and how, therefore, their work and interventions will affect such domains.

We also thought that other professions, for example social workers, should understand the "logic" and the potential of design. So, gradually we moved toward the idea of a stronger integration between social research methods and design practices by integrating practices of design research. This was, in part, facilitated by the contributions of Alastair Fuad-Luke since 2016 and Viktoria Heinrich of the Institute for Design Research of Vienna, who took part in the 2018 edition of DoD.

From the beginning we never tended to follow the theory/practice dichotomy by assigning to social sciences the task of theory and design the task of practice, because we saw design and social sciences as more effective being integrated within design projects and interventions.

We always considered both practices, with their internal modes of reflection, as collaboratively reflecting on and implementing design – what can design do and how can it do it?

Because of the focus on designing as a professional practice carried out by designers, we always brought in interesting perspectives from economists like Adelheid Biesecker, Frederike Habermann, Massimo de Angelis, Dagmar Diesner, and by sociologists like Christa Müller, Susanne Elsen and Gregoire Wallenborn, but also from ecologists, like Stefan Zerbe.



Local – Global

Whereas the tension between the local and the global characterises the entire domain of sustainability, we have tended to always interpret it in a radical way. On the one hand we explore and intervene in very local situations– especially through our workshops – on the other, we always acknowledge and tackle the global dimension.

The radical way in which we have always interpreted this tension is vividly represented in the second edition of DoD in 2015 – that time called, not by chance, Glocal Design Spring – where among our speakers we had Armin Bernhard – pedagogue, co-founder of the Bürgergenossenschaft Obervinschgau. Armin is a long-term collaborator of DoD and of the Master in Eco-Social Design. He has always brought his experience and the experience of others from the Obervinschgau and its struggles for a different kind of agriculture to the conferences. We also had a



speaker with a truly global perspective Aral Balkan, globetrotter and advocate of digital privacy at world level. In between these two levels of local and global we have had a panoply of presentations and activities. Many projects start from a specific local focus but have always tried to address global issues, problematising in various ways the issue of scale.

Focus – Diversity

Another tension, which has characterised our hands-on DoD conferences has been between the focus on a specific topic and the diversity of experiences through which we have explored through our conference themes, as well as the diversity of ways of tackling them.

In the beginning we tended to explore more in general issues related to eco-social design, but by our third edition in 2016, we started to explore specific aspects of eco-social design practices. In 2017 we focused on "*Into the doing. What is doing doing?*", how to keep eco-social design practices viable and economically sustainable, through "*Make work work*". In 2018 we dedicated the conference to the practices of commoning and we called it "In between you, me and everything we do. What can design do for commons?"

We continued having formal presentations by designers, design researchers, social scientists and ecologists, and continuing with workshops, but we experimented with many other formats in order to keep the other tensions between reflecting-doing, design-social sciences, local-global alive. For example, in 2013 the outcome of the workshops were presented publicly in the inner court of the university and discussed

with experts coming from transnational institutions like CIPRA (International Commission for the Protection of the Alps), local galleries and cultural institutions, such as Lungomare Gallery. These experts were moderated by a local socially-engaged design agency, Blufink, who has collaborated with DoD on several occasions.

In other editions we have experimented with various formats of World Cafés, in order to provide everyone the chance to discuss and contribute. In the 2018 DoD, thanks also to the effort of the students of the Master in Eco-Social design, we were able to offer a Pecha Kucha presentation, through which various projects tackling the issue of commoning were presented. We also held a session of the Theatre of the Oppressed (after Augustus Boad), supervised by Sabine Frei, tackling the issue of commoning at work. Through this format many of the participants to the conference re-experienced conflicts and issues related to working together in a just and equitable way.

Since 2015 we initiated a session called "Connecting the Dots".at the start of each second day of the conference where we made a a summary of the first day, Our premise was that it helped everyone recall the various issues tackled and avoid the stress of forgetting something along the way. It also helped everyone to quickly refocus The first time it was delivered by Anja Salzer – anthropologist and social worker who collaborated in the first two editions of DoD – and one of the authors (Alvise), and then by Alvise alone, becoming a sort of tradition of DoD. In 2018

we also enjoyed a real time visual summary by graphic communicator Katrina Günther.



In addition to the various collective discussions, we have had excursions to places relevant for the issues and themes we were exploring. Places included Obervinschgau in South Tyrol and Quercia Lab in Rovereto, Trentino. These excursions allowed us to reconsider the issue tackled directly but in different contexts.

Slow – Intense

The various forms of engagement and discussion we devised were designed to allow intense reflections and discussions, while also allowing moments of conviviality and relaxed exchange helping build the ground for more intense and focused exchanges. As a consequence of this decision, we have always preferred to keep the number of speakers low. This permits more time to discuss and deepen the issues raised by speakers or tackled through workshops. It also allowed us to take long breaks with slow food – often cooked for the participants by Pram Prasad or by our students – or to enjoy the sunny climate of South Tyrol sunny weather and take excursions or walks.

We introduced slow collective activity breaks, by using dance or yoga, including contributions from our teachers, Karl Emilio Pircher and Günther Innerebner and a former student, Lena Rieger, who is also a yoga teacher. We always had a final party in which we could come together and start to pave the way and the energy for the coming year.



Reflecting while going forwards

DoD as a conference, a forum, a network and continually evolving format is finding its feet. Gradually it has become better known, engaged more diverse people



brought together by By eco-social issues. It has become a successful vehicle for showing the students project work in the Master in Eco-Social Design, and become a ground for exchange with other similar courses – such as the Master in Transformation Design of the HBK Braunschweig. In short, DoD is after just six years, an important rendezvous for people interested in design, sustainability and social change.

During this time we have reconsidered and expanded its main tenets. Design has been more

Eco-Social Design adopts Transformation Design

and more addressed as a catalyst for change. Sustainability has been reformulated by stretching its three established facets (environmental, societal and economic sustainability) towards a concept of non-alienated, resilient, just and equitable futures, as proposed by Bianca Elzenbaumer of BraveNewAlps. Design, thanks to its transformative potential, can (and should) lead this revitalisation of sustainability.

This expansive view from the DoD conferences has also entailed an expansion of the figure of the designer and of the things designers do and should be able to do. More and more, as underlined many times by Alastair Fuad-Luke, designers have to cover very different roles and only a few of them have to do directly with what is traditionally considered design.

For this reason, DoD events focused more and more on practices than on projects, focusing on how eco-social design practices can be a viable livelihood, especially for the Master's students.

We are sure that the paths opened up with DoD will continue crossing other paths and revealing new directions. This has certainly been the case up to now.

Acknowledgements

The editors would like to give a special heartfelt thanks to all the students, teachers and partners of the Master in Eco-Social Design from 2015 to the present day, and especially to those who contributed to this book. It is their inspiration, dedication, actions and new perceptions that are gently transforming the way design is being practiced and its positive effects on the near-future, locally, regionally and internationally. In particular, the partners who agreed to being interviewed reveal how important their openness and support for student projects is to exploring new practices.

We are grateful to the students who submitted their projects for publication as we know this required an additional effort in a crowded curriculum. Thanks are also due to some specific individuals: Laura Charlotte Heym for co-ordinating the call for student projects and archiving accompanying materials; Lisa Maria Zellner for the book cover and freehand illustrations throughout; Francesco Piazza and Lisa Maria Zellner for page layout design and lots of time on proofing; Simone Tarozzi for image quality editing. Thanks to Daniel Adlmüller, Anita Ferro Milone, Martina Negroni and Daniel Schiechl for transcriptions of the partner interviews and to Alvise Mattozzi for the translations into English and editing. We also acknowledge all those that provided photographs, illustrations and other materials free of charge to help us compile this compendium.

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We thank the reader who has picked up this volume and hope that you gather sustenance from it!

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Partners

Students and teachers/researchers continuously collaborate on eco-social design projects in “the real world” with dozens of diverse partners from the public and the social sector, civil society and activism, NGOs and citizen groups, farmers, umbrella organisations, research institutes, museums, companies, ... Their challenges and their engagement in transdisciplinary projects provide continuous inspiration, support and conviviality to students and teachers/researchers.

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Credits

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