

The role of Design in telepresence robotics experience

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(Article begins on next page)

DESIGN CULTURE(S)

Cumulus Conference Proceedings Roma 2021

Volume #2

ARTIFICIAL ARTIFICIAL
LANGUAGES
LIFE LIFE
MAKING MAKING
NEW NORMAL
MULTIPLICITY
PROXIMITY
RESILIENCE
REVOLUTION
THINKING THINKING

**Design Culture(s)
Cumulus Conference
Proceedings Roma 2021**

Volume #2

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Cumulus Conference Proceedings Roma 2021

Volume #2

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of Art and Design Education and Research

Rome 2021

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SIGN
CULT
URE (S)

ROMA **2021**

JUNE 08.09.10.11
CUMULUS CONFERENCE

OVERVIEW

36 **ABOUT THE
CONFERENCE**

49 **EXHIBITIONS**
all tracks

81 DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
ARTIFICIAL
track

629 DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
LANGUAGES
track

1175 DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
LIFE
track

1425 DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
MAKING
track

1891 DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
MULTIPLICITY
track

2095 DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
NEW NORMAL
track

2604 DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
PROXIMITY
track

3153 DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
RESILIENCE
track

3929 DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
REVOLUTION
track

4383 DESIGN
CULTURE (OF)
THINKING
track

4768 **POSTERS**
all tracks

CONTENTS

36 About the conference
Loredana Di Lucchio, Lorenzo
Imbesi

49 EXHIBITIONS

51 ARTIFICIAL | City of Experiences
George Brown College, Canada

54 LANGUAGES | Post collaboration
as a form of counter-culture: The
birth of new languages
University of Johannesburg,
South Africa

57 LIFE | Design for social problems
in Mexico: living with disabilities
Autonomous Metropolitan
University, Azcapotzalco, Mexico

60 MAKING | New Textile
Topologies: Experiments at the
intersection of surface, textile
and form
The Swedish School of Textiles,
Sweden

63 MULTIPLICITY | Self-Acceptance
to Self-Indulgence
Pearl Academy, India

66 NEW NORMAL | Expedition 2
Degrees
Zurich University of the Arts

69 PROXIMITY | Newcomers: Design
for Immigrants
Pratt Institute's School of Design,
USA

72 RESILIENCE | Designing for
Resilience: Creating new
possibilities for industrial cities
University of Monterrey, Mexico

75 REVOLUTION | UFØ Drift: In
Search of Practice
ArtEZ University of the Arts
Arnhem, Netherlands

78 THINKING | Design and
awareness: user meeting
ESDAP Catalunya, Spain

81 DESIGN CULTURE (OF) ARTIFICIAL

83 A participated parametric design
experience on humanoid robotics
Francesco Burlando, Xavier
Ferrari Tumay, Annapaola Vacanti

99 A systemic vision for the common
good : |C|A|S|E| Goods Mobility
in the fourth industrial revolution
Veneranda Carrino, Federica
Spera

CONTENTS

-
- 117 **Activist Activated: Efficacies of AR Political Poster Design**
Sarah Edmands Martin
-
- 130 **Art, Design, and Mathematics: Software programming as artifice in the creative process**
Carlos de Oliveira Junior, Eduardo Ariel de Souza Teixeira
-
- 142 **Artificial Creativity – Hybridizing the Artificial and the Human.**
Yael Eylat Van Essen
-
- 156 **Artificial Intelligence is a Character? Exploring design scenarios to build interface behaviours**
Andrea Di Salvo, Andrea Arcoraci
-
- 168 **Becoming Janus: The Subversive Potential of Face Recognition Technologies**
Romi Mikulinsky
-
- 181 **Between digital and physical. Envisioning and prototyping smart material systems and artifacts from data-informed scenarios.**
Stefano Parisi, Patrizia Bolzan, Mila Stepanovic, Laura Varisco, Ilaria Mariani
-
- 199 **Consensual (Design) Fictions: co-creating iterative use cases to define technology conceptualization**
David Hernández Falagán, Andreu Belsunces Gonçalves, Kevin Koidl
-
- 215 **Design of robotic for superhuman tasks**
Fabrizio Formatì
-
- 227 **Design, space management and work tools: enhancing human work in transition to Industry 4.0**
Luca Casarotto, Pietro Costa, Enrica Cunico
-
- 237 **Designers' skills for Social Robotics**
Maximiliano Romero, Giovanni Borga, Rohan Sashindran Vangal, Francesco Baldassarra
-
- 251 **Designing for the future by understanding evolving culture based on advancing technology and the changing behaviours that accompany it.**
Nayna Yadav
-
- 264 **Designing Somatic Play for Digital Natives through a Body-centric Design Process**
Seçil Uğur Yavuz, Kristi Kuusk, Michaela Honauer
-

CONTENTS

-
- 279 Designing unpredictable futures. An anthropological perspective on the algorithmical prediction of human behaviour
Giovanna Santanera, Roberta Raffaetà
-
- 290 Digital Creativity Tools Framework
Marita Canina, Carmen Bruno
-
- 304 Digital tools that support students to reflect on their design competency growth paths
John Fass, Job Rutgers
-
- 316 Domestic AI and Emotional Involvement. Design Perspectives
Mauro Ceconello, Martina Sciannamé, Davide Spallazzo
-
- 328 Empowered by Code, to act in real word
Alfredo Calosci
-
- 339 Exploring Digital Inequalities: How Welfare States are disappearing behind an AI
Paola Pierri
-
- 349 From Decoration to Functionality — Research on smart accessories design in the Internet era
Qingman Wu
-
- 360 From the evaluation of acceptability to design of an assistive robot for elderly
Francesca Tosi, Mattia Pistolesi, Claudia Becchimanzi
-
- 376 Future heritage and heritage futures. A design perspective on the activation of Digital cultural heritage stored in archives
Margherita Tufarelli
-
- 386 Going beyond the problem of privacy: individual and social impacts of the use of personal information in connected services
Laura Varisco
-
- 400 Human and Artificial Intelligence for the Cultural Reform of Design
Elena Laudante, Mario Buono
-
- 412 Human Sensibility, Robotic Craft: Toward Autonomous Stonework
Tom Shaked, Karen Lee Bar-Sinai, Aaron Sprecher
-
- 423 Interface takes command. Educational environments, tools and practices to face the new normal.
Alessio Caccamo
-
- 437 Intelligent Voice Assistants: A Review of User Experience Issues and Design Challenges
Lucia Rampino, Sara Colombo
-

CONTENTS

-
- 449 Research on Gender Differences of Adult Head Shape in China
Renke He, Wenxiu Yang,
Wanshan Li, Haining Wang
-
- 461 Speculative Physical Models Created Through a Robotic Process
Sara Codarin, Karl Daubmann
-
- 476 Teaching Design in the Age of Platforms: A Framework for Platform Education
Xinyi Li
-
- 488 The body as an artefact: a case of hand prosthesis
Venere Ferraro, Silvia Ferraris,
Lucia Rampino
-
- 502 The design of human machine interfaces: from data to risk prevention.
Annalisa Di Roma, Alessandra Scarcelli
-
- 516 The Designer in the AI/Machine Learning Creation Process
Frederique Krupa
-
- 526 The encounter between Design and Artificial Intelligence: how do we frame new approaches?
Marzia Mortati
-
- 537 The Perceptual and Dialogical Form of Design between Time, Space and Technologies
Camelia Chivăran, Sonia Capece
-
- 552 The role of Design in telepresence robotics experience
Claudio Germak, Lorenza Abbate
-
- 565 The Venice Backup: Case studies on the use of Virtual Preservation Techniques on Architectural Heritage sites in Venice, Italy
Kai Reaver
-
- 587 Towards a visual-based survey on explainable machine learning
Beatrice Gobbo
-
- 604 Toys and Play, Weapons and Warfare: Militarizing the Xbox Controller
Rachel Berger
-
- 619 Wearing the smart city: Supporting older adults to exercise by combining age-friendly environments and tailored digital public data
Nicole Aimers, Alen Keirnan, Ann Borda, Sonja Pedell
-

CONTENTS

-
- 629 **DESIGN CULTURE (OF) LANGUAGES**
-
- 631 A Sidewalk museum. Exhibiting the collective dimension of the moving image
Nicolo Giacomo Ceccarelli, Marco Sironi, Sabrina Melis
-
- 645 Abstract to figurative, and everything in between: visual design approaches and linguistic codes of a traditional form of animated product.
Vincenzo Maselli, Eleni Mouri
-
- 659 Al-Kafiye: A Symbol of Change
Hala Abdel Malak
-
- 688 Beyondstories. People Narrative makes a Territory
Aureliano Capri, Valeria Michetti, Veneranda Carrino, Mauro Palatucci
-
- 707 Brand in Product. The language of the brand to govern complexity
Mario Rullo, Massimiliano Datti
-
- 726 Creating Visual Identity as Constellation: Methodological Project for a Design Workshop
Ximena Izquierdo, Magdalena Ballacey
-
- 754 Data visualization as a qualitative driver in knowledge communication: an interpretative framework
Giulia Ciliberto
-
- 771 Design and Cultural Sites: New signage methods and languages for fruition, accessibility and storytelling
Monica Oddone, Irene Caputo, Marco Bozzola
-
- 786 Design and the 'Magical magic'. Disney and history, perceived heritage and shared memory
Luisa Chimenz
-
- 800 DEsign DEcide The sign
Tsvetomira Girginova
-
- 811 Designing the Gross. In search for social inclusion
Adrien Rigobello, Nadja Gaudillière-Jami
-
- 828 Finding New Representations of Old Knowledge: a design study of visualizing I-Ching
Yvette Shen
-
- 843 Form is function. Ethics and aesthetics of digital technologies in inclusive interface design.
Letizia Bollini
-

CONTENTS

-
- 852 'Graphicmance'. New Visual Languages between Design and Performance
Giulia Scalera
-
- 865 Inner Geographies as poetic-aesthetic knowing: the inspiration and manifestation of creative doings through an emotively-orientated sensory methodology
Mizan Rambhoros
-
- 883 Italian Pavillion at XXII Triennale di Milano
Ilaria Bollati, Luisa Collina, Laura Daglio, Laura Galluzzo
-
- 895 Language and identity in new Italian design
Stefano Follesa, Peian Yao
-
- 906 Metaphors as Knowledge Activators in Data Visualizations: the case of the Archipelago of Calvino's literary works
Tommaso Elli, Maria de los Angeles Briones Rojas, Beatrice Gobbo, Margherita Parigini, Virginia Giustetto, Valeria Cavalloro, Michele Mauri
-
- 925 Patient Autonomy Indicators: a knowledge visualization tool for patient autonomy support
Wen Zhang, Yuan Liu, Li Hou
-
- 938 Performativity as a language of sense-making for cultural service in local museum
Shu Hongming, Eleonora Lupo
-
- 950 Solid perspectives and optical corrections of spaces in graphic & architectural design
Tommaso Empler, Adriana Caldarone, Alexandra Fusinetti
-
- 962 Spatial construction for ideational meaning: An analysis of interior design students' multimodal projects.
Andrew Gill, Giovanna Di Monte-Milner
-
- 976 Tales of Surprise: Exploring Sense Making Processes Through User Narratives
Miray Hamarat, Ozge Merzali Celikoglu
-
- 992 The Design of Politics: Understanding the Arrest of Cesare Battisti Through the New Media Factor
Noemi Biasetton
-
- 1007 The Enlightenment of the Contemporary Transformation of Chinese Traditional Visual Space Perception on Cultural Sustainability design for all
Jixiang Jiang, Dong Tao
-

CONTENTS

1021 The Interplay between Ethics and Aesthetics in Intelligent Systems-Users Interaction
Gabriele Barzilai

1034 The pluralistic aesthetics of nowadays design
Francesca La Rocca

1049 The role of vernacular typography in the linguistic landscape of multicultural Singapore: A multimodal analysis case study of a gentrified street
Min-Yee Angeline Yam

1063 The Threshold of Language: Design and Soma
Daniela Monasterios-Tan, Susan Sentler, Ginette Chittick

1082 Towards a new design culture of scientific production – Innovating the formats of scientific publication of design
Eleonora Lupo, Beatrice Gobbo, Emilio Lonardo

1098 Translation Design for medicine leaflets. Research and innovation.
Elena Caratti, Antonella Penati, Valeria Bucchetti

1115 Visual dialects. Exploring early design sketching in various design disciplines
John Daniel Öhrling, Åsa Wikberg-Nilsson

1127 Visualizing Offshore Foreign Direct Investments: The Atlas of Offshore
Michele Mauri, María De Los Angeles Briones Rojas, Jonathan Gray, Daniel Haberly, Chris Anderson

1144 What does this symbol mean? Icons as a Language for Emergency
Rodrigo Ramirez

1159 Where methods meet form
Meret Ernst, Maya Ober

1175 DESIGN CULTURE (OF) LIFE

1177 Adopt a costumer - to design new processes and packagings
Maria Benedetta Spadolini, Chiara Olivastri

1190 Autonomy as a Design Principle: Service Design for the Technology Literacy of Older Adults
Houjiang Liu, Miso Kim, Canqun He, Tia Thomson

1208 Bio-revolutions: radical change, design cultures and non-humans
Carolina Ramirez-Figueroa, Luis Hernan

CONTENTS

-
- 1222 Cognitive Ergonomics
Components for Analysis of User
Interface in Healthcare Industry
Mariia Zolotova, Angela
Giambattista
-
- 1238 Connect art and science for a
functional biomimicry in design
Andrea Forges Davanzati
-
- 1244 Development of a test setup for
validating a cognitive assessment
platform within ICU's
Muriel De Boeck, Philippe Jorens,
Guido De Bruyne, Kristof Vaes
-
- 1256 Food design as a tool for social
development: experimental study
in the evaluation of child smell
Lígia Afreixo, Francisco
Providência, Sílvia Rocha
-
- 1272 FUTUR.DRESS. The Superskin for
the Human Body in nearspace
Maria Antonietta Sbordone, Ilaria
Giampetraglia, Alessandra De
Luca
-
- 1286 Hybrid systems of human |
technological | biological
products: a road to a greater
sustainability?
Marco Marseglia, Francesco
Cantini, Alessio Tanzini
-
- 1301 No more whining – natural smart
textile
Nuutinen Ana, Pietarine Heidi,
Kunnas Susan , Korpinen Risto,
Sipola Reeta
-
- 1308 Paving the way to post-digital
smart materials. Experiments on
human perceptions of a bio-
inspired cellulosebased
responsive interface
Stefano Parisi, Markus Holzbach,
Valentina Rognoli
-
- 1325 The flow of emotions in co-
creation
Mariluz Soto, Caoimhe Isha
Beaulé, Satu Anneli Miettinen
-
- 1337 The Food Futures Teaching
Cluster. Food Culture, Visual
Communication Design, and
Collaboration
Peter K. Chan, Ben McCorkle, Rick
Livingston
-
- 1351 The river and the revered: Tracing
the impermanence of the land,
the people and the embroidered
Indrajit De, Saumya Pande
-
- 1364 The Shape of Drugs: a matter of
Human-Centred Design
Antonella Valeria Penati, Silvia
Luisa Pizzocaro, Carlo Emilio
Standoli, Valeria Maria Iannilli
-

CONTENTS

-
- 1377 The Wicked Home: Living Space as Ecological Holobiont
Rachel Armstrong, Rolf Hughes, Nel Janssens
-
- 1392 Three Dimensional technologies: Digitising Nature
Gregor MacGregor
-
- 1405 Towards Neurodesign. The Mental Effort in packaging design
Alessio Paoletti, Lorenzo Imbesi, Angela Giambattista
-
- 1413 “WIT” as a Sustainable Engine Overcoming Mind Fixation in Ideation
Alon Weiss
-
- 1425 **DESIGN CULTURE (OF) MAKING**
-
- 1427 A designed generation: Maker's maturity and social responsibility
Luca D'Elia
-
- 1438 Accumulation of empirical investigation into joint structures in wooden furniture design
Yi Shiang Lin, Ming Huang Lin, Jen Kuan Yau
-
- 1453 Amorphous Stacks: A Low-Tech Construction Method for Jointless Cast Structures
Liqiong Huo, Jongwan Kwon
-
- 1468 An Exploratory Study about Communicating 4D Printing between Product Designers and Manufacturing Engineers
Faten Ezrin Azhar, Eujin Pei
-
- 1482 Biotextiles applied to everyday objects
Viviana Quiña, José Francisco Alvarez Barreto, Cristina Muñoz Hidalgo
-
- 1504 Claudio Alcorso and Post-war Textile Culture
Tracey Sernack-Chee Quee
-
- 1521 Collaborative Capabilities: aural encounters in digital/analogue co-creative making
George S. Jaramillo, Lynne J. Hocking-Mennie
-
- 1535 Collaborative ontology design for Open Hardware and Open Design
Massimo Menichinelli, Emilio Velis, Andre Rocha, Alessandra Schmidt
-
- 1551 Contemporary Spaces of Apparel Design: Embracing both Digital and Physical Environments
Krissi Riewe
-

CONTENTS

-
- 1562 Design Cultures of Making:
Fashion thinking as creative
process and pedagogy
Susan Postlethwaite
-
- 1573 Design culture of playing. The
musical instrument industry: an
important culture of made in
Italy.
Marco Mancini
-
- 1588 Digital encounters in the culture
of textile making: developing a
hybrid craftsmanship for textile
design by fusing additive methods
of surface fabrication with
knitting technology
Delia Dumitrescu
-
- 1600 Distributed design and
production for distributed care.
Investigation on materializing
bottom-up open and indie
innovation in the field of
healthcare
Patrizia Bolzan, Massimo
Bianchini, Laura Cipriani, Stefano
Maffei
-
- 1614 Heterotopia of Space: How
capitalism is alienating and
controlling societies
Sarah Khayat
-
- 1625 I - D (I – Design _ Idiosyncratic
Meta Design) Idiosyncratic
Proceedings on Reading and
Production Meta-Objects in
Contemporary Industrial Design
Mantikou Angeliki-Sofia, Farangas
Athanasios, Zafeiropoulos
Theodoros, Psychoulis Alexandros
-
- 1640 If we can't make it together, we
won't make it alone. The
challenge and potential of
collective making
Lena Håkansson, Stephanie
Carleklev, Stephan Hruza, Anna-
Karin Arvidsson
-
- 1652 Inter-Weaving Culture and Crafts
in Design Education
Puja Anand, Alok Bhasin, Priyanka
Khattar
-
- 1668 Learning through codesign
toolkits. A case study on
codesigning the cinema of the
future
Simone Taffe, Sonja Pedell
-
- 1681 Letterpress: A Survey of Print
Culture or an Immersive Learning
Experience
Alexander Cooper, Rose Gridneff,
Andrew Haslam
-
- 1695 Made by (Material) Frustration
Arielle Blonder, Shira Shoval, Eran
Sharon
-

CONTENTS

-
- 1711 Material culture(s). Research paths in an evolving material design culture, and the connected future designer's attitudes
Doriana Dal Palù, Beatrice Lerma, Claudia De Giorgi
-
- 1724 Mind-mapping in design culture: A tool for ideation in graphic design education?
Philip Jones, Marion Morrison
-
- 1738 New scenarios for developing cooperative platforms for local manufacturing
Alberto Calleo, Giorgio Dall'Osso, Laura Succini, Michele Zannoni
-
- 1752 Playing for change: designing a board game for the circular economy
Thomas David Cockeram, Jessica Clare Robins, Emmanuel Tsekleves, Leon Cruickshank
-
- 1769 Progetto Glume: from milling waste to resource for new materials
Danilo Perozzi, Laura Dominici, Elena Comino
-
- 1785 Re-distributed manufacturing in makerspaces. Towards a model of sustainable production
Louis Rose
-
- 1799 Research on the Application of Lacquer Craft in Modern Accessories
Tianxiao Xie
-
- 1811 The Emerging Fashion-Tech Paradigm in the Contemporary European Landscape
Chiara Di Lodovico, Chiara Colombi
-
- 1825 The evolving role of prototypes in design research: a discussion on terms and meanings
Silvia D. Ferraris, Gabriele Barzilai
-
- 1840 The Making of a Dress: Explicating the Implicit Processes
Adrian Huang
-
- 1857 The shape of wellbeing: investigating an approach for the development of a design requirements framework for design for wellbeing projects
Sandra Dittenberger
-
- 1873 Weaving sequential changes – designing textiles with multiple embedded stages
Riikka Talman
-

CONTENTS

1891 **DESIGN CULTURE (OF) MULTIPLICITY**

1893 Architectural Design Education as an Agent of Change: The Case of the Ultra-Orthodox Branch, Jerusalem
Elissa Rosenberg

1904 “But I’m a lecturer not a therapist”: Educational Coaching – a proposed alternative approach to supporting students through their creative education
Gary Pritchard

1918 Decoding the birth of transcultural fashion
Shipra Kukreja

1934 Design as a medium for an informal learning. INDICOLearning from the interface to the activity
Marina Puyuelo, Mónica Val, Hugo Barros da Rochas

1946 De-stereotype UX Design – Discussing and managing issues related to the clustering of users in the design of innovative solutions
Margherita Pillan, Alessandra Mazzola

1958 Framing diversity: designing hearing aids from a deaf culture perspective
Patrizia Marti

1979 Gazes and Gatekeeping: Reconceptualising the entrance portfolio in the post-colony
Diane Steyn

1994 Hybridity as a culture of making
Maya Ober, Nicole Schneider

2011 Hyper-Contextual Futures in Mexico City
Paolo Cardini, Karla Paniagua

2025 Learning and Differences reciprocally shared and validated: A decade long Participatory Design collaboration between KG Elementary School and AD University
Raymond Patrick Zachary Camozzi, Helene Day Fraser, Caylee Raber

2040 On (un)becoming in Design Academia: A Coloured female’s autoethnography
Cheri Hugo

2058 The Ethics of Knowing a Shared Language and Intention in Design
Lisa Elzey Mercer, Terresa Moses

CONTENTS

-
- 2066 The Neighbourhood Home. System of environments for plural inclusion
Ilaria Longo, Sonia Massari, Alessandro Spalletta
-
- 2081 Universal Visual Languages in a Male-oriented Society
Valeria Bucchetti, Francesca Casnati
-
- 2095 **DESIGN CULTURE (OF) NEW NORMAL**
-
- 2097 A Comparative Study of Online Teaching Modes of Sino-Italian School of Design: A Politecnico di Milano, Tsinghua University, and Tongji University perspective
Fan Chen, Lin Li
-
- 2107 A COVID-19 Horizon Scan Looking for Post-Pandemic Implications for Design
Marcus Foth, Glenda Amayo Caldwell, Joel Fredericks
-
- 2126 A new way of perceiving the locality: economic growth, social inclusion, environmental protection
Fabio Mongelli
-
- 2141 A Sustainable Jewellery Design Practice for Psychological Health after Covid-19
Huiyi Qu
-
- 2153 Autopoietic design; seven components for a sustainable future design model
Gonzalo Raineri Bernain
-
- 2165 Community-led design capabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond
Mariana Fonseca Braga, Eduardo Romeiro Filho, Haddon G. Guimarães Pereira, Emmanuel Tseklevs, Rosângela Míriam L. O. Mendonça
-
- 2182 Cross-Team Brainstorming and a Comparison of Online to Physical Version
Heng-Yi Mie, Hsi-Jen Chen
-
- 2198 Design Education in a Pandemic Context
Harald Skulberg
-
- 2210 Design for Sustainable Healthcare. Cutting the impact of medical products through disposable packaging
Gabriele Maria Cito, Angela Giambattista
-

CONTENTS

-
- 2227 Designing new learning experiences in pandemic time: how digital can support a new didactic in Service Design
Andrea Taverna
-
- 2239 Ecosystem Framework for Community Life Circles based on Life Projects in the Post-COVID-19 Era
Tao Chen, Yong-Ki Lee, Juyoung Chang
-
- 2253 Expansive Video Capture – Up close, personal & specific tutoring “performances”
Brendon Clark
-
- 2265 Gamified e-Learning approached through Emotional Design in the Post-Covid-19 era
Na Wei, Yong-Ki Lee, Juyoung Chang
-
- 2275 Healthcare innovation during the pandemic time: digital technologies to enhance clinic 4.0
Stefania Palmieri, Mario Bisson, Alessandro Ianniello
-
- 2289 Hospitals’ decision-making regarding infrastructural adaptations in response to Covid-19
Pleuntje Jellema, Margo Annemans, Ann Heylighen
-
- 2302 Identifying Factors for Designing a Successful Telemedical Training System for Remote Pediatric Physical Exams
Elham Morshedzadeh, Ph.D., Andre Muelenaer, MD, Jr, MD, MS,, Michelle Morris, Dana Werlich, Margaret Nelson, MD.
-
- 2316 Inter-University Design Workshop: plurality in design education
Inés Alvarez-Icaza Longoria, Diego Alatorre Guzmán, René Harari Masri, Lucero Donaji De la Huerta Santaella, Ana Elena Hernández Palomino
-
- 2332 Kids-centered Pocket Park design. Well-being for children in the urban post-covid context.
Benedetta Terenzi, Anna Laura Pisello
-
- 2347 Nanomedicine and Tourism in the post-pandemic era: smart “mobility & health” through wearable design for lab-on-chips
Claudio Gambardella, Pietro Ferraro, Assia D'Alesio
-
- 2358 Post-pandemic medicines: towards a new normality
Antonella Valeria Penati, Carlo Emilio Standoli, Patrizia Bolzan
-
- 2372 Reaching Audiences in 2020
Sharon Hooper
-

CONTENTS

-
- 2387 (Re)envisioning the contribution of design to the sustainable transition of healthcare systems
Amina Pereno
-
- 2404 Reinforcing Networks of Place-Based Care and Resilience
Julie Van Oyen, Jacquie Shaw, Laura Kozak, Jean Chisholm
-
- 2419 Research on rapid mass production of emergency products based on FDM 3d printing
Xueyan Wang, Dongmei Peng
-
- 2433 Semi-immersive Virtual Habitat to Enhance Relaxation in People with Dementia during COVID-19 Emergency
Silvia Maria Gramegna
-
- 2446 Shifting paradigms in Sustainable Fashion Design education: Studying implications & effectiveness of pedagogical methods adopted in a pandemic setting
Pragya Sharma
-
- 2471 Strengthening city resilience through the re-orientation of a social innovation incubation programme in Covid-19 time. The case of 'The School of the Neighbourhoods'
Marta Corubolo, Anna Meroni, Daniela Selloni
-
- 2487 Telemedicine, today more than ever. The ABBRACCI design concept for COVID-19 patient monitoring
Alessia Buffagni, Martina Frausin
-
- 2500 The Challenges and Benefits of online Education and the possible impacts of the entry of IT firms in the education ecosystem
Nayna Yadav
-
- 2512 The design culture and the challenges of the new normal
Nicola Morelli
-
- 2524 The effects of eye expression on emotion perception
Yi-Hsun Liu, Hsi-Jen Chen
-
- 2537 The value of design in the emergency-driven scenarios. Crafting Ecosystems with data
Francesco Dell'Aglio, Enza Migliore, Chiara Scarpitti
-
- 2551 Thinking With Card: Curriculum-Led Making Activities Integrated with Distance Learning
Benjamin Hughes
-

CONTENTS

-
- 2569 Understanding public health communication design globally during the Covid-19 pandemic: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly
Emmanuel Tsekleves, Mariana Fonseca Braga, Alejandro Moreno-Rangel, Linli Zhang, Mafe Salazar, Hannah Field, Hayley Alter
-
- 2594 “United in isolation. An online letterpress festival”. A community response to the Covid-19 pandemic
Andrea Vendetti, Elettra Scotucci
-
- 2604 **DESIGN CULTURE (OF) PROXIMITY**
-
- 2606 A Design Experience for Interactive Narrative Based on The User Behavior
Yuan Yao, Haipeng Mi
-
- 2619 An answer to the complex representation of territory. The fertile ground of mnemotopes and design of communication.
Clorinda Sissi Galasso, Giovanni Baule
-
- 2630 Attractive Factors in the Experience of an Online User-supported Learning Platform
Min-Yuan Ma, Hsin-Yi Huang, Eric Chen-F Hsieh
-
- 2650 City Branding and Fictional Layers: Reading Istanbul through Filming Locations
Zeynep Arda, Onur Mengi, Deniz Deniz
-
- 2667 Co-Design processes for the inclusiveness of Rome's temporary communities
Gianni Denaro, Luca D’Elia, Safouan Azouzi
-
- 2679 Co-designing the future of a public space and its related services. The case of the Reggio Emilia Ducal Palace and its park
Marta Corubolo, Anna Meroni, Daniela Selloni
-
- 2694 Collaborative Futures: a pedagogical model for delivering future-focused and citizen-centred design education
Marianne McAra, Kirsty Ross
-
- 2710 Communicating social values to children using design solutions
Laura Girdali, Marta Maini, Francesca Morelli
-

CONTENTS

-
- 2720 Creating an inclusive learning environment to support transformative learning and encourage upward educational mobility opportunities for economically or academically under-resourced design students
Michal Rotberg
-
- 2736 Cultural Differences as Challenges and Design Drivers in the Development of Smart Assistive Technology for an Ageing Society
Danying Yang, Louise Moody
-
- 2752 Data visualization and knowledge sharing in participatory design to improve people liveability in urban places
Giovanni Borga, Massimiliano Condotta, Chiara Scanagatta
-
- 2768 Democratizing design: lessons from a case study in the Alpine area
Daniele Busciantella Ricci, Ilaria Argenziano, Marta Gandolfi, Michela Ventin
-
- 2786 Design for Promoting Pro-environmental Behaviours of the Georgian Domestic Workers in Ankara
Ayşe Kaplan, Lilyana Yazirlioğlu
-
- 2800 Design projects as drivers for organisational change in the public sector
Felicitas Schmittinger, Alessandro Deserti, Francesca Rizzo
-
- 2813 Design when you are the other 90%, a student's perspective
Kyle Graham Brand
-
- 2826 Design with Social Justice in Mind. The Case Study of Furniture Design in Elementary Schools
Caroline Gagnon, Claudie Rousseau, Thomas Coulombe-Morency, Sonia Cadoret, Colin Côté
-
- 2846 Evolving future city-based retailing via design thinking: A Chinese hybrid model approach
Yujia Huang, David Hands, Rachel Cooper, Nick Dunn
-
- 2862 Feeling Endem. How travel enhances applied-autonomy in spatial design
Hans Venhuizen
-
- 2878 Global Proximity: case studies of international and interdisciplinary collaboration between the USA, Italy, Guyana and Japan
Valeria Albani, Paolo Cardini
-

CONTENTS

-
- 2887 Heritage and cultural accessibility: the role of design in the creation of an intercultural dialogue
Marco Bozzola, Irene Caputo, Claudia De Giorgi
-
- 2903 Immigrant Cultural Acculturation - A study of Tibetan Clothing in India
Anahita Suri
-
- 2920 Making in Proximity: Design Policies for collaborative making cultures
Lina Monaco, Luca D'Elia, Viktor Malakuczi
-
- 2931 Making practice as narrator of changing social worlds-Textiles and the Scottish Borders, in the 21st century, but based firmly on the past?
Britta Kalkreuter
-
- 2942 Multiple narratives for multiple visions: engaging citizens in building future scenarios for their city through participatory design and storytelling.
Davide Fassi, Annalinda De Rosa, Francesco Vergani
-
- 2955 New Technological Space for Tourists. Design as a Trigger of Experience, Osmotic-Membrane Interface, Know-How Provider and Social Engager
Luisa Collina, Ilaria Bollati, Claudia Mastrantoni, Umberto Tolino
-
- 2968 Placemeaking through Creative Practice: Enabling Change and Empowering Future Change-makers
Cheryl Giraudy, Saskia van Kampen
-
- 2984 Proximity as space of opportunity: connecting people, productions and territories
Valentina Gianfrate, Elena Formia, Flaviano Celaschi, Elena Vai
-
- 2998 Radius 100 model – Working multidisciplinary theories, methodologies and design practice: An approach to social design beyond academia
Dr. Yona Weitz, Arch. Sharon Koniak
-
- 3014 Rethinking User Experience of Parking Garage. Exploring Innovative Suicide Prevention Strategies Through Motivational Design
Sébastien Proulx, Adam Fromme, Leila Akberdin, Maria Basile, Olivia Forsyth, Maya Jenkins, Abby Nelson, Claire Spicer
-

CONTENTS

3031 Signs of the Artisan City
Eleonora Trivellin, Susanna Cerri

3046 Social networks as enablers of
design cultures: An analysis of
multiplex relationships among
members of a creative hub
Sine Celik, Tua A. Björklund

3059 Subversive Design. Designer
Agency Through Acts of
Insurgence
Seth Parker

3072 The City of Care
Anna Anzani, Elena Elgani, Maria
Renata Guarneri, Francesco
Scullica

3084 The power of designing choices
Raffaella Fagnoni

3101 The systemic approach and the
use of new technologies to
communicate cultural heritage
and develop a culture of
proximity
Marco Faccini, Alessandro
Spalletta

3121 Towards a Design Observatory:
crafting a distributed approach
Nina Costa, Vasco Branco, Rui
Costa, Afonso Borges, Raul Cunha,
Ana Catarina Silva, António
Modesto

3137 When a designer encounters an
artisan: a parameter analysis
investigation
Carla Paoliello

3153 **DESIGN CULTURE (OF) RESILIENCE**

3155 0 Textile. A Design Research
applying Circular Economy in
textile field
Maria Antonietta Sbordone,
Viviana Vollono, Carmela Ilenia
Amato, Barbara Pizzicato

3173 A Research on the Sustainability
in Traditional Cave-Dwelling
Construction Skills in Northern
Shanxi Province (Jinbei Area)
Runze Liu, Haoming Zhou

3182 A Study of Zero Waste Fashion
Design and its Possibilities within
a Design for Circularity Process.
Debbie Moorhouse, Tracy
Cassidy, Parikshit Goswami,
Andrew Hewitt

3198 Awareness, compatibility and
equality as drivers to resilience in
sustainable design research
Giuseppe Mincoelli, Gian Andrea
Giacobone, Silvia Imbesi, Michele
Marchi, Filippo Petrocchi

CONTENTS

-
- 3212 Circle Sector: exploring the role of designers in a circular economy
Ben Hagenaars, Niels Hendriks
-
- 3222 Cooperatives enterprise, incubators for the co-design of a new organizational and management model for sustainable development.
Caterina Rosini, Silvia Barbero
-
- 3235 Craft Your Future: Building a circular space through the European digital craft
Chele Esteve Sendra, Manuel Martínez Torán, Eileen Blackmore, Hendrik Jan Hoekstra
-
- 3249 Creativity as a Driver in Social Innovation Processes
Debora Giorgi, Irene Fiesoli
-
- 3264 Design culture (of) resilience. Space & Service design taxonomy, overcoming undefined space & service design contexts
Nansi Van Geetsom, Andrea Wilkinson
-
- 3282 Design education and forest environments – learning from and with living systems
Caroline McCaw
-
- 3297 Design educators in the 21st century: Applying The Compass methodology to prepare future designers as changemakers in a culture of resilience
Catalina Cortés, Alejandra Amenábar
-
- 3311 Design for Social Impact and Crafts Communities in Turkey
Hazal Gumus Ciftci, Stuart Walker
-
- 3324 Design Plugin: Using Design Thinking Approach in Smart Sustainable Cities Education
Tarmo Jaakko Karhu, Martijn Gerhard Rietbergen
-
- 3337 Codesign as an operative framework for Responsible Research and Innovation: the case of Krakow Technology Park
Felicitas Schmittinger, Francesca Rizzo, Alessandro Deserti
-
- 3350 Designing community: creating resilience through collaboration
Jessica Clare Robins, Emmanuel Tseklevs, Leon Cruickshank
-
- 3365 Designing resilience. Design dealing with communities
Carlo Branzaglia
-
- 3371 Designing Resilience. Mapping Singapore's Sustainable Fashion Movements
Harah Chon, Lim Jiayi Natasha, Elisa Lim
-

CONTENTS

-
- 3382 Designing Sustainable Product-Service Systems applied to Distributed Economies in Water-Energy-Food Nexus approach
Renke He, Meng Gao, Carlo Vezzoli, Ke Ma
-
- 3401 Discovering Design Values in the Chinese Pre-Qin Classics
Miaosen Gong
-
- 3412 Eco-lab-orating. Insights from an ongoing intervention with design school faculty
Rakefet Kenaan
-
- 3424 Educating Designers for the Circular Economy: Innovative Digital Resources, Collaborative Learning and Synergic Actions
Lucinda Morrissey, Roberta Barban Franceschi, Ana Margarida Ferreira
-
- 3436 Evolving the conventional curriculum: innovative learning interventions in a classroom to enhance design students' learning competencies
Joselyn Sim, Harah Chon
-
- 3448 Fashion Futuring. Rethinking sustainable fashion design
Alessandra Vaccari, Ilaria Vanni
-
- 3458 FASHIONABLE FAÇADE: textile waste innovations for the built environment
Hilde Heim
-
- 3476 Food Cycles. Redesigning processes and products
Silvia Pericu
-
- 3487 From Objects and Products to Things and Stuff
Clare Green
-
- 3501 Green infrastructures and satellite images: the case study of Munich
Giovanni Borga, Filippo Iodice, Federica D'Acunto
-
- 3516 I Don't Want to Feel Outdated. The dissonance between product attachment and contemporary relevance
Malene Pilgaard Harsaae
-
- 3527 Innovation through circular economy: Tool development for multidisciplinary approach to product-service-system Design
João Sampaio, Ana Afonso
-
- 3544 Lost in transition; Methodologies and tools of Product-Service Systems Design for major life transition
Maria Paola Trapani, Nadejda Cervinscaia, Nadejda Cervinscaia
-
- 3560 Materials Designers. Boosting Talent towards Circular Economies
Laura Clèries, Valentina Rognoli, Pere Llorach-Massana
-

CONTENTS

-
- 3572 Preparedness and infrastructure design for disaster and emergency situations; the key to a resilient community
Noemi Bitterman, Medardo Chiapponi, Alessia Buffagni, Andrea Cotti
-
- 3585 Replicating the Unpredictable: Board Games as Prototypes for Wildfire Evacuations
Thomas Maiorana
-
- 3597 Revised Function Analysis of Sustainability - understanding the complexity of sustainability
Paul Topf Aguiar de Medeiros, Charlotte Sjödel
-
- 3616 Role of Social Ecologies within Social Design and Social Innovation
Neeta Verma
-
- 3626 Slow Engagement & Widening the Frame – Emerging Models of Social Innovation and Design Culture
Diana Nicholas
-
- 3641 Smart, Safe and Green System. A Resilient-Based Strategy for Sustainable Buildings and DIY Design
Cecilia Cecchini, Miriam Mariani, Paolo Mondini
-
- 3655 Strengthen Ties of Social Bonding Through Design from and Emotional Perspective
Deyanira Bedolla Pereda
-
- 3672 Study on the Sustainable Design of the Young Elderly Oriented Smart Wearable Products
Chen Han, Shen Lei
-
- 3686 Surviving in the wild: Sustaining design and social innovation initiatives in Asia-Pacific
Cyril Tjahja
-
- 3699 Sustainable Deliberation; an Empathetic ‘Mantra’
Amita Deshpande, Ranjana Dani
-
- 3715 Teaching and Practicing Service Design and Social Innovation: Experiences with Communities at the Margins in São Paulo, Brazil
Rosana Vasques, Mari Suoheimo, Maria Cecilia Loschiavo dos Santos
-
- 3727 The cot, the pot and other stories
Lena Gupta
-
- 3755 The Materiality of Resilience
Emile De Visscher, Lorenzo Guiducci, Iva Rešetar
-

CONTENTS

3774 The poetics of waste in contexts of satisfactory use and social action

Desamparados Pardo Cuenca,
Patrik Baldan

3795 The potential of Theory of Change to visually model the underlying logic behind service design projects

Luca Simeone, David Drabble,
Kerstin Junge, Nicola Morelli

3810 The SDGs framework as strategic lever for design education.

Simona Maccagnani, Marco Ricchetti

3823 The Tree and The Room: Co-Designing DIY WiFi Networks with Emergent Local Metaphors

Michael Smyth, Ingi Helgason,
Lauren Lapidge, Katalin Hausel

3838 Towards 'regenerative interior design': exploring a student project

Giovanna Di Monte-Milner

3853 Trace: design and responsibility in the Prato textile district

Elisabetta Cianfanelli, Renato Stasi, Matilde De Gennaro, Maria Grazia Soreca, Margherita Tufarelli

3863 Walk the talk: Towards an ecological futures framework for our designed cultures

Håkan Edeholt, Jomy Joseph, Nan Xia

3878 Water infrastructure as leverage for resilient cities: a multi-scalar design perspective on urban flooding

Sophie Leemans, Erik Van Daele

3894 Weaving the New Way of Making from the Andes

Rodrigo Muñoz-Valencia

3912 Working with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in Design Education

Silje Alberthe Kamille Friis

3929 DESIGN CULTURE (OF) REVOLUTION

3931 Alternative narratives data visualization archive

María de los Ángeles Briones Rojas, Michele Mauri

3945 Becoming Lost and Found in Translation

Mark Ingham

CONTENTS

-
- 3963 Critical Thinking in fashion design education - New learning approaches for a systemic change in the fashion industry
Carolin Ermer, Julia Schwarzkopf
-
- 3980 Design as a methodological stance in interdisciplinary research
Valérie Côté, Caroline Gagnon, Lynda Bélanger, Daphney St-Germain
-
- 3996 Design for Fast Track Democracy
Jennifer Schubert, Bastian Koch
-
- 4009 Disrupting governance by Systemic Design and co-creating the public value
Carolina Giraldo Nohra, Eliana Ferrulli, Silvia Barbero
-
- 4025 Disruptive technologies and behavioural change: Design fiction as trigger for critical thinking
Mila Stepanovic, Venere Ferraro
-
- 4043 Does design thinking matter? Empirical study and survey on the effectiveness of design thinking
Hannah Park
-
- 4057 Education formats to integrate Design with Humanities, Politics, Social Sciences & Education
Anna Lottersberger
-
- 4071 Experiments on complex systems mapping around materials.
Flavia Papile, Romina Santi, Beatrice Gobbo, Tommaso Elli, Barbara Del Curto
-
- 4088 Exploring visualizations of design processes from a design activist perspective – a scoping study
Karina Goransson, Anna-Sara Fagerholm
-
- 4105 Fashion-Tech Revolution: Future Frontiers from Products to Processes
Alba Cappellieri, Chiara Colombi, Livia Tenuta, Susanna Testa
-
- 4123 From the product to the object. The speculative design practice as instance.
Chiara Scarpitti
-
- 4135 From trustful empowerment to overwhelming guilt: pedagogy in current activism practices
Alexia Autissier
-
- 4147 Guilty Materiality: why we play down material relations
Stéphane Treilhou, Clare Green
-
- 4160 MANIFESTO! Now: Game Design for Revolutionary Thinking
Julian Hanna, Simone Ashby, Sónia Matos, Alexis Faria, Callum Nash
-

CONTENTS

-
- 4174 Ph.D. Admission System Based Comparative Study in Design Discipline under Chinese Context
Fan Chen, Jing-Yi Yang
-
- 4187 Politics by design
Elisabetta Cianfanelli, Maria Claudia Coppola, Margherita Tufarelli
-
- 4200 Projecting Change: Redefining Preservation in the Era of Sea Level Rise
Liliane Wong
-
- 4218 Realising Discourse: A Strategic Design Solution to the Problem of Addiction
Jason Hobbs
-
- 4239 Reframing development: A proposal on the role of design research in Latin America based on situated views of the world
Juan Alfonso de la Rosa
-
- 4250 Speculative Design for the Public Sector. Design Fiction as a Tool for Better Understanding Public Services
Gianni Sinni
-
- 4263 Speculative Design in Education: Mapping the Landscape
Ingi Helgason, Ivica Mitrović, Julian Hanna, James Auger, Enrique Encinas, Michael Smyth
-
- 4275 Targeting Design Intervention across Levels of Complexity
Tanner Slade, Nicola Morelli
-
- 4288 The Agency of Discursive Design Exists in the Industrial
Karma Dabaghi
-
- 4303 The Patient Revolution. New design perspectives in healthcare innovative processes.
Carla Sedini, Laura Cipriani, Massimo Bianchini, Barbara Parini, Stefano Maffei
-
- 4319 The transformation will not be televised
Peter Friedrich Stephan, Raz Godelnik
-
- 4333 Time and Design. Time as a key parameter for a survey on contemporary design
Enza Migliore
-
- 4351 Walking the Line: Creative Research as Critical Activity for Design
Brooke Chornyak, Tania Allen
-
- 4370 Why we need more somatic culture in design
Silvia Sflijiotti
-

CONTENTS

4383 DESIGN CULTURE (OF) THINKING

4385 Always ordinary, never straightforward: Considering the work of Lorraine Wild
David Cabianca

4403 Anticipatory Design and Futures Literacies: A Need and a Hope
Andrew Morrison, Manuela Celi, Laura Clèries, Palak Dudani

4420 Authorship and automation in the digital design culture
Giuliano Galluccio

4434 Banham's 'Unhouse' as Anti-Interiority: Towards Twenty-First-Century Theories of Design and Domesticity
Helen McCormack

4444 Bodies of Evidence: making in/visible histories in South African Design Education
Nike Romano

4459 Culture and Relationality. Moving towards 'post-rational' modes of design
Tom Ainsworth, Sally Sutherland

4472 Design History and the Decline of Historical Thinking
César Peña

4482 Designers-Thinkers and the Critical Conscience of Design
Sanna Simola

4500 De-signing Ambiguity
James Dyer, Christian S. Petersen

4514 Disruptive Thinking in Design Education
Riccardo Balbo, Elda Scaramella, Serena Selva

4524 Diversified Orientation and Design Value in Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage
Tie Ji, Yinman Guo, Xiaolei Min

4542 Domesticity and digital eugenics: design cultures of Silicon Valley
Luis Hernan, Carolina Ramirez-Figueroa

4551 Exploring Asian Philosophies and Service Culture: the Notion of Dignity
Miso Kim

4562 Fantasia and analogical thinking: a specific reflection on teaching the essence of the Creative Leap
Valentina Auricchio

CONTENTS

-
- 4573 How to teach design thinking to non-design students: enablers and barriers to transfer design research practices.
Gianluca Carella, Michele Melazzini, Xue Pei, Cabirio Cautela, Marzia Mortati
-
- 4595 Not just Thinkers, Makers
Hein Dubery, Kyle Brand
-
- 4605 Radical Interdependence: learning/doing with things
Jaron Rowan
-
- 4615 Rethinking & Appropriating Design Education for a VUCA World
Jan Eckert, Sabine Junginger, Guillermina Noël
-
- 4636 Rethinking Design through Literature
Susan Yelavich
-
- 4649 The chain reaction. How to design a process for transforming museums by rethinking the role of personnel
Alessandra Bosco, Silvia Gasparotto
-
- 4664 The concept of Interaction Design under review: literature review and interviews with qualified informants
Eduardo Ariel de Souza Teixeira
-
- 4674 The Emergence of Modern Design Discourse in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR)
Qassim Saad
-
- 4689 The engagement of visitors in faber's houses and studios. Empirical design research and experimental actions in Lombardy
Raffaella Trocchianesi, Anna Mazzanti, Alessandra Spagnoli, Davide Spallazzo
-
- 4703 Theory under suspicion: criticality and material meaning in practice based research
Marta Camps, Jaron Rowan
-
- 4720 Tokyo 2020: globalization and self-orientalism in the communication of the next Asian Olympic Games.
Claudia Tranti
-
- 4736 Towards borderless futures: How transcultural approaches changed the practice of graphic design
Juliana F. Duque
-
- 4753 Which way to go? Some complicated crossroads facing design culture in Aspen.
Elena Dellapiana, Ramon Rispoli
-

CONTENTS

4768 POSTERS

4769 A visual-analytical approach to phases of transition in people's life paths

Laura Heym, Jennifer Schubert, Irene Visentini, Sofia Sanchez, Alvise Mattozzi

4770 Aeon, in his original meaning of "life", "vital force" or "being", "generation".

Ana Maria Fessmann, Elene Bakhdatze, Vaishnavi Bala, Varshini Janakiram, Janina Hietl, Gianfranco Olivotto

4771 Co-creating prosthetics as fashion accessories for assisting people with disability. The case of hearing impairment

Andree-Anne Blacutt, Stéphane Roche

4772 Collaborative methods: design bridging academia and industry

Teresa Franqueira, Pereira Catia

4773 Craft in Makerspaces: The Potential for Social Change for Sustainability

Alessandra Fasoli

4774 Creative design process for envisioning the future of emergency medical services in smart cities

Vipul Vinzuda, Niall Deloughry, Leonard O'Sullivan

4775 Design and Neuroscience for the UX. Possible tool for Designers

Alessio Paoletti

4776 Design as a tool for participatory transformation of urban space

Jacobo Muñoz Duato, Damià Jordà Bou

4777 Digital visual tool for design project development in a multidisciplinary team

Michela Carlomagno

4778 Education in social design by means of artistic photography

Cecilia Casas-Romero

4779 Enabling Collaborative Turns: A Conversation-Based Approach for Design Workgroups

Sze-Yunn Seah

4780 Experimenting new joints for more sustainable and easier to assemble furniture

Patrizio Cipollone, Viktor Malakuczi, Felice Ragazzo, Michele Russo

CONTENTS

-
- 4781 Exploring the potential uses of ocean plastic and public engagement activities for raising awareness
Xingyu Tao
-
- 4782 Feed: design for Eating Disorders prevention in pre-adolescent age.
Carlotta Belluzzi Mus
-
- 4783 Festival Living Labs: Involving the Festival Community in Sustainable Experimentation.
Marije Boonstra, Aranka Dijkstra, Peter Joore
-
- 4784 Grey matter - Matière grise. When the 'thé dansant' is no longer an option. Imagining an inclusive and intergenerational urban future, placing seniors as productive actors of the civic life.
Jerome Picard, Elida Mosquera, Benoist Desfonds, Matthieu Boustany, Peeraya Suphasidh
-
- 4785 Guided by Voices from the Fields: A case study on earth, plants and fashion design
Piret Pupart, Julia Valle-Noronha
-
- 4786 Heirloom a device for the survival of the fittest memories
Valeria Volanti
-
- 4787 Hybrid Town, Stories in Maps: from China to Milan
Guido Tattoni, Hagit Pincovici, Germana De Michelis
-
- 4788 Identities and sustainable futures
David Serra Navarro, Carme Ortiz Valeri
-
- 4789 Interaction studies applied to Robotic Surgery
Giovanna Giugliano, Sonia Capece, Víctor Fernando Muñoz Martínez
-
- 4790 Intervention of Indian Textile Craft in Design Pedagogy for Social innovation and Economic Growth
Sakshi Babbar Paul, Saroj Bala
-
- 4791 Italia 3.0. An educational strategy to enhance food as Food Cultural Heritage
Monica Bortolussi, Martina Mitrione, Sonia Massari, Alessandro Spalletta
-
- 4792 Kairos: How Digital Culture Heritage can improve society and its development through Systemic Design
Giovanni Capoccia, Veneranda Carrino
-
- 4793 Kinetic calendar for tracking physical and emotional stress in women
Mariel Domínguez
-
- 4794 Knitted expressions. Movement as material in Textile Design
Faseeh Saleem
-

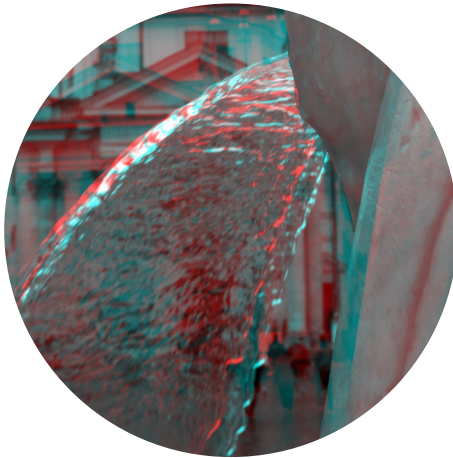
CONTENTS

-
- 4795 Love Leftovers - Useful fictions and what if we could put our memories on sale?
Teodora Ivkov, Luca D'Elia
-
- 4796 Mass media imaginary as a symbol. How image is revealing the crises of our time through cinematic design.
Celia Cuenca García
-
- 4797 Neighborhood Cowork (Cowork del Barrio): Co-creating agents for social change
Sandra Molina, Cynthia Jaramillo, Alejandro Ramirez
-
- 4798 Pen Your Thoughts: A Visual Design Language Study on Student's Learning Progression
Jennifer Samonte Aguilar
-
- 4799 Real-time snow information for tourists - Utilizing AI for tourism - Case Snowman
Marija Griniuk, Maija-Liisa Rautiainen, Jesse Talsi, Päivi Timonen, Michelle van Wyk
-
- 4800 Recycling, refusing plastic use and choosing biodegradable materials for new products
Alexandra Anghelache
-
- 4801 Shifting Mindsets, Bridging Generations
Shiu Heng Sin
-
- 4802 TellMi Ecosystem: an example of Design Process applied to didactic methodology.
Elisa Chiodo, Michele Aquila
-
- 4803 Time Well Spent. Facilitating mindful and meaningful screen use through a 'Design for Humansic Living' methodology
Ace Chia
-
- 4804 Trans/Feminist Critical Making – Design as Open-Source Opposition
Michelle Christensen, Florian Conradi, Marie Dietze
-
- 4805 Visual Exploration Method to Engage Art History with Practice-based Mindset in Design Education
Hanny Wijaya
-

DE
SIGN
CULT
URE(O F)

ARTIFICIAL

D I G I T A L
T E C H N O L O G Y
R O B O T I C



TRACK CHAIRS

DESIGN CULTURE (OF) ARTIFICIAL
DIGITAL | TECHNOLOGY | ROBOTICS



João de Sá Bonelli,
PUC-Rio Department of Arts & Design, Brasile
“If Design is the Sciences of the Artificial, then how can Design theories and practices promote a better quality of life for us, humans?”

Mathias Funk,
Eindhoven University of Technology, Netherlands
“How must design deal with a slow culture shock of the artificial that smart objects manifest in personal or professional spaces? Which forms of business or political machines do we need to reject?”



Patrizia Marti,
University of Siena, Italy
“In the digital age, a new culture of design can flourish to value the complexity and uniqueness of being human, bringing aesthetics, creativity, sense making and value-oriented propositions at the forefront of technology development.”

Giuseppe Mincoelli,
University of Ferrara, Italy
“Data are a substantial part of our life, that we do not perceive and understand by nature. Design is called to empower humans, bridging this new physical and cultural gap between us and our environment.”





DESIGN CULTURE(S) | CUMULUS ROMA 2021
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The role of Design in telepresence robotics experience.

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Abstract | The emerging role of telepresence robotics has led to increased interest on the subject, opening reflections on man-machine-man relationship and their acceptance in the contexts of application. The nature of telepresence robotics lies in the condition offered to users "to be there", in a place, although not physically, through a body, which allows the user to move freely in the spaces. The flexibility of this technology has extended its introduction and testing in high-impact social contexts, such as school, where the remote user for serious reasons may contact the individual or the community in a natural way. For this reason, it is necessary to investigate the perceptual and communicative aspects connected to this interaction and the technological ones, in order to outline an innovative design scenario both for the telepresence service and for the physical and digital artefact, where the robot will perform a very expected social task.

KEYWORDS | TELEPRESENCE, ROBOETHICS, INTERACTION DESIGN, UX DESIGN, SOCIAL INNOVATION

1. Introduction

Telepresence is a technology that integrates video conferencing and robotics systems, allowing one to be present in an environment, even if one is not physically there (Marvin, 1980). This offers the possibility to connect two remote locations, adding the value of movement and presence in that place to traditional systems. Many studies have revealed that a person's quality of life is affected by their inability to participate in activities of daily living with family, friends, colleagues, which is often the case for people with special needs. Telepresence is a technology with great social potential, allowing one to be "virtually" present for people at a distance (Newhart, Warschauer & Sender, 2016). The promise of these robots is that they will be tools that can mediate communication in real time, in different contexts and enable accessibility on different scales. Although these systems have been around for several years and are mature in some areas such as the world of teleconferencing for businesses, there is still evolving research in some areas, especially in understanding their functional/behavioural potential and level of acceptance (Tsui, Desai, Yanco, & Uhlik, 2011). The use of telepresence robotics has attracted particular interest due to its ability to make places accessible that were not, either because of geographical and/or architectural barriers, or because of the special needs of certain individuals (Tsui et al., 2011). Examples of this new open dimension, aimed at overcoming barriers, speak to us of experiments in the context of schools, health care and support for the elderly. This experimentation scenario has given rise to actions capable of overcoming problems such as isolation and social exclusion of weak individuals (Bamoallem, Wodehouse, & Mair, 2014).

An interesting application in this sense, which still needs in-depth study, is in the world of education, where students who cannot participate in school activities have telepresence systems at their disposal. This allows them to watch the class, access content, communicate and interact with teachers and classmates. The use of telepresence robots can improve the life of the telepresence student by watching, listening, moving and interacting in a realistic, independent and live way. Despite the continuous development of technology, capable of supporting these new types of communication, there are still challenges to be faced, starting with a study of the application context and the users with whom to interface (Rae, Venolia, Tang & Molnar, 2015). In general, these robots are designed for a wide range of users and contexts: businesses, hotels, museums, hospitals and schools; this does not allow a distinction according to the context they are intended for, to the detriment of the effectiveness and engagement of the interaction (Figure 1). The impossibility of robots to make non-verbal gestures in support of communication also places a limit on the effectiveness of the message and interaction, but above all on the social presence of the remote user. The contribution aims to analyse human-robot-human interaction and the factors involved, with the potential to be developed. In this it will address in methodological terms the aspects to be applied to a project of experimentation of telepresence robotics in a university context. The aim is to arrive at a robotics project in which there is full knowledge

and awareness of the needs of the user and the reference context, through ethnographic research.



Figure 1. The most used telepresence robot models on the market: Double Robot, Beam, Beam Pro, Ohmni, VGo, Padbot.

2. Robots as a communication technology

The role of robots in everyday life is becoming increasingly important and their numbers will increase significantly in the near future. Service robotics in this regard aims to develop new solutions that can collaborate positively with humans. Telepresence robotics is an application of service robotics, which provides a virtual presence from a remote location, using a videoconferencing system (Kristoffersson, Coradeschi & Loutfi, 2013). Telepresence robotics represents a reference of particular interest in the field of social robots, especially in the field of socially assistive robotics (SAR) through interaction driven by user need through multimodal interfaces. In telepresence, interaction is not only between man-machine, but represents the means of human-machine-human connection, linking two or more individuals. Their nature is halfway between social and physical presence, which is why it is called co-presence in the literature (Nowak, 2001).

With this orientation, telepresence robotics has developed different levels of interaction: the first, between humans and the space to be explored or controlled through the machine, where the robot is an ocular prosthesis, although there is no shortage of examples that equip the body with prehensile arms or other aids; at the second level are those models that integrate camera and screen, using the tablet as an example, bringing people into visual and

auditory connection; while the third level, of more recent configuration, in addition to connecting people through live digital images, aims at the possibility of being directly piloted by both people, in a form that we might now call co-piloting (Desai, et al., 2011). Some features are common to all levels of telepresence: the ability to move, to connect, to videoconference, and to be equipped with sensors. Each of these can be important in reinforcing the human presence in distance communication, enriched also by that set of elements that can characterise and increase the sense of closeness, just as happens between people in face-to-face communication. And it is also by working on the elements proper to social presence that this perception can be improved: by implementing the video and audio system and the ability of the robot to move in the coverage paths, and not only this dimension, because we already have robots capable of moving with a certain level of naturalness of human memory (Vu, Rissanen, Pang & Foo, 2012). In a telepresence system it is therefore essential to consider the ways in which we are able to reinforce a real perception of closeness with the remote user, including through non-verbal communication. In fact, research, such as that of Mehrabian (1980), claims the non-verbal language of communication to be more important than the mere reproduction of words.

3. Robotics project definition

The possibility of connecting people remotely and having them participate in everyday activities has allowed telepresence robotics to be used in experimental activities in different social contexts, allowing issues such as inclusion and accessibility to be addressed (Moyle, Jones, Dwan, Ownsworth & Sung, 2018). The robots used in these experimental and research contexts are the same as those intended for work environments, for which they were born, and for this reason satisfactory results are not returned in terms of a User Centered Design approach. What is needed is a design in which the user is at the centre of the project with his or her own needs and the context for which the robot is intended (Casiddu & Micheli, 2011). The continuous evolution of these artefacts, mainly from a functional point of view, has led to unresolved issues such as the acceptance and ethics of the robot.

Consequently, it is necessary for a robotics project to be explored and compared by different competences, which no longer include only mechatronic and computer engineering, but also disciplines from the humanistic sphere. This leads to a simplification of the highly sophisticated engineering approach to have artefacts that reflect social and cultural changes. The different disciplines (anthropology, psychology, design, engineering) can contribute to the development of answers in terms of robot adoption and perception, through a holistic approach to the topic, in which Design assumes the role of knowledge mediator (Germak, Lupetti & Giuliano, 2015).

Design is among the disciplines that can make a significant contribution at different levels of the robotic project: expressive (in terms of appearance and morphology), passing through language, behaviours and interactions with the user. The contribution can be consolidated

and extended by adopting a co-design approach, in which the actors of the system are involved, bringing knowledge for a shared and accepted robotics project (Freeman, 1984). Through design, robotics can expand its competences to generate value and meaning, creating continuous relationships between technology, human needs and context.

Consequently, telepresence robotics products need further reflection based on the actors and the context of interaction (Stappers & Sanders, 2003). Indeed, in the literature there are more and more experiments in which robots are personalised by the user, even simply through a garment, to identify who is representing the robot.

3.1 Acceptance factors

The concept of acceptance is central to human-robot interaction, as users must be enabled to interact with the tool in a natural and intuitive way. Acceptance of robots depends on several variables and is defined as the robot's ability to fit into a person's life and willingness to be used in the long term (Broadbent et al., 2009).

When designing these artefacts and their interaction with humans, reference is always made to the human body, which is the starting point. However, the continuous search for the resemblance of machines to humans faces several challenges, including Uncanny Valley (Mori, 2012). In general, people are more likely to interact with humanoid robots, but there is a limit beyond which a sense of proxemic insecurity is created in humans as the distances between the two decrease. Assessments are therefore required regarding the physical, expressive and empathic clarity through which the technology becomes recognisable and acceptable (Salvini, Laschi & Dario, 2010), because it is assumed that people's attitudes towards robots are influenced by their appearance and personality, which in turn influence their acceptance (Kiesler & Goetz, 2002). Conceiving, planning and designing robots therefore also requires an effort to anticipate the future, to simulate ideal scenarios, in which pervasive technologies find a balance with the social and cultural dimension of humans, made up above all of relationships with other individuals and with the context (Šabanović, 2010). For this reason, the role and effect of human resemblance must be investigated in different cases and in the final rendering, especially when the morphology of the robot differs from the human one, albeit with a new language, as in the case of telepresence robotics. Precisely in this area, it is necessary to investigate body language and non-verbal gestures, which play an essential role in communication between individuals, enhancing the remote user's sense of presence. Telepresence robots need a deeper investigation into the possibility of extending the language and communication they express.

3.2 Robots as a somatic configuration

Gestures represent an extremely important communication mechanism that allows people to accompany speech and contribute to interaction (Stahl, Anastasiou & Latour, 2018). What is missing in telepresence robots today is the ability to express hand gestures and body posture. Several studies show that the acquisition and mastery of gestures is an essential aspect of human cognitive development, and that gestures not only express their thought, but can also be considered a factor influencing the development of thought itself. Gestures facilitate group communication, as pointing or moving shared objects during a discussion provides a clear spatial relationship for the communicator and group members (Björnfot & Kaptelinin, 2017).

The telepresence robots we find on the market today have very specific morphological characteristics: the head represented by a camera/display (usually a tablet), the body by a vertical rod and the feet by a base with wheels. With a few minimal design gestures, these robots allude to the morphology of the human skeleton, becoming humanised machines with a new language. However, their new morphology still needs some improvements, including non-verbal communication, which is currently absent. Some have tried to equip these robots with arms to overcome these limitations, such as ProP, an experimental telepresence robot equipped with a pointing device resembling a human arm. Another example is the QB robot (Slack et al., 2018), equipped with an anthropomorphic hand manipulator to allow interaction closer to the local user, and have a positive social experience. Moreover, on movement it worked a lot, as it represents a characterizing element of the interaction with the robot, both in terms of naturalness and fluidity, as it represents the biological nature of human characters (Kupferberg, Glasauer, Huber, Knoll & Brandt, 2001). However, if these performances fail and the variety of gestures is limited and repetitive, to highlight the mechanical origin of the robot, the user tends to become detached and uninvolved in the interaction. Human-robot communication codes will therefore assume great importance, implementing those that telepresence already guarantees through the display.

4. Telepresence: an ethical issue

With the advent of service robotics, ethical considerations regarding the privacy and security of users have been raised. An increasing number of robots are entering spaces lived in by humans: private or public spaces, often equipped with cameras and sensors, such as telepresence robots, capable of collecting data (Niemelä, van Aerschot, Tammela, Aaltonen & Lammi, 2019). Telepresence robotics still raises some concerns especially due to the presence of the camera that can collect sensitive data. This is precisely why privacy and security are considered the main barriers for the continued growth in the adoption of these technologies. The ability of telepresence systems to move within remote spaces, even if guided by cameras, raises questions about the physical safety of the user, the environment,

and the robot itself. The robot must be designed to be safe in the environment in which it moves, with the right technological devices. For example, whenever the robot moves, it should provide some form of feedback to people, thus improving interaction with users and ensuring a way to prevent harm. At the same time, the robot should be able to avoid collisions, either against static obstacles or other people. Giving the remote user a physical body equipped with a camera raises additional privacy issues related to the subjects participating in the conversation and the environments being filmed (Krupp, Rueben, Grimm & Smart, 2017).

Regarding the issue of privacy, Calo (2010) in his book *Robot Ethics* writes the chapter *Robot and Privacy* where he summarises the rapid trend of robots towards ubiquity and identifies three main dangers posed by robots in relation to privacy: surveillance, access to private living and working spaces and social impact. These issues translate into the continuous search to solutions for the disclosure of sensitive data related to the user who is not always aware of what is going on. Compromise systems between privacy and the usefulness of robots in the context of their application, for the performance of activities for the creation of human well-being, must therefore be developed. Having a mobile robot equipped with a camera within an environment raises several concerns. Among these is that the robot can be guided, after authorised access by the remote user, to visit and retrieve location data. This also means that unauthorised access is possible and that software security can be circumvented. The data collected by the robot for its operations in the environment must remain inaccessible from the outside, remaining encrypted and authenticated. Unfortunately, these conditions of uncertainty and instability of the technology make its adoption limited despite its great potential in different application contexts. An ethical project must consider these issues from the earliest stages, to arrive at a final product that is accepted by the user who establishes a relationship of trust in its use.

5. Robotics in Education

The education sector, like many others, has faced several changes with the rapid growth of digital technologies and robotics. Education systems have been able to exploit the new opportunities of robotics, which have made the sector more collaborative and accessible to students with different needs. Indeed, robots are considered useful tools to include those with learning difficulties and disabilities in classroom activities, especially with the use of social robotics (Robins, Dautenhahn & Dickerson, 2009). Robots in these environments are used in different ways: from robots as tutors or classmates, to telepresence robots as assistants and teachers (Sharkey, 2016). In the education environment, experiences managed through telepresence support school learning for students who cannot reach school, but also experiences of cultural and language exchange between different groups, where for example new languages are learned with telepresent native teachers. Noteworthy is the fact that the robot can promote collaboration between different actors interacting with each other, with a view to achieve a common goal; this especially in the educational

field allows learning not only by interacting with the artefacts themselves, but by sharing common goals among students, improving their social and relational skills among them. The robot responds to the needs of modern society and manages to be an important tool to increase the motivation of users who interact with it, to be protagonists of the learning process (Benitti, 2012). But even in this context it is clear how the perception of the robot changes according to the different age groups of students and therefore how different measures are needed for a successful interaction. For example, a school-age child does not perceive the robot as a mechatronic device but gives it a set of characteristics that are generally associated with living beings, animism (Piaget, 1929), contrary to what an adult perceives. Most telepresence robots have an industrial appearance, and this affects the developmental needs of different users such as children, who have particular needs relating to the expression of their identity. Just think of the personalisation of technology that takes place all the time, through mobile phone covers, tablets.

5.1 Telepresence in education system: case study in university spaces

The school is a social environment of development and growth, where different groups (teachers, students, administrators, and parents) interact to shape the student's life experiences. In the school context we are confronted with different needs, ranging from the development of the student's identity, image, integration, and affirmation within the group. Attending school has positive effects on the student's self-esteem and contributes to making him an individual capable of relating to society.

In many situations, students find themselves having to leave school for short or long periods of time for health reasons. The provision of training services must be the preventive factor with negative psychosocial consequences. Data emerging from the literature show that students who are unable to attend school face learning difficulties and subsequent problems with social integration (Reis, Martins, Martins, Sousa & Barroso, 2018). Few experiments attempt to address this problem by adopting telepresence robots, with which absent students can go to school, albeit at a distance, finding themselves in a wide variety of situations that change daily. This has made it possible to ensure the physical accessibility of classes and content offered by teachers to distant students. This type of intervention occurs mainly in the early grades of education (primary and secondary), to the detriment of the university context which is still little investigated (Reis et al. 2017). Some solutions for the university are those related to e-learning courses, which offer the possibility of autonomously managing the times and modes of their study, but at the expense of the interaction between student and teacher that fails. Telepresence could therefore eliminate this distance and create new opportunities. The few research on telepresence robots in the university context are those for cultural exchanges with other universities and distance learning for professionals. This is the case at Duke University, where telepresence robots have been used as a teaching tool to engage nursing students in clinical simulations to be passed on to early college students (Shaw et al. 2018).

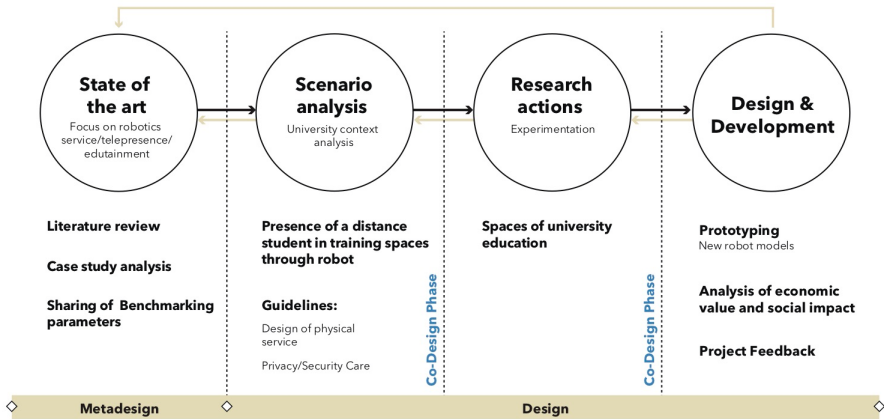


Figure 2. Methodology applied to research on the university context, through an iterative process, in which different professional figures collaborate to arrive at a new product accepted by users. In the process, users take part in the design on different levels.

From this analysis of telepresence robotics in education, new challenges, and research on the context of the university that we intend to investigate and analyse arise. An analysis that involves observing the interaction of students within environments with telepresence robots. The latter will have to be tested by users and evaluated, based on the market offer of existing models, through a multi-criteria methodology to understand the limitations and opportunities for the development of new applications (Elara, Rojas & Chua, 2014). Observation with shadowing techniques will allow to collect data on the interaction between the user and robot, to obtain an understanding of the factors that influence it. As already introduced, a co-design approach is necessary for the success of a user-accepted product, where users are involved in each phase of experimentation and design, where needs are interpreted by different figures. Participatory design succeeds in bringing out the continuous changes between society and technology. With a co-design approach, it is possible to consider the context for which a project is designed with user observation as a tool to investigate the scenario and develop a new proposal. For example, the possibility of co-piloting from both places of these robots, or the possibility of being able to transmit the communication message through body signals. A telepresence robot should be able to express the emotions and moods of the user it is impersonating, thus creating interaction scenarios that are more natural and closer to other users. Emotional design helps to support the design of such artefacts and the creation of innovative interaction scenarios, in which communication must be in a language alluding to that of human beings.

Designing robots for specific environments, such as the educational context, therefore means considering different variables involved in the process to avoid failures, ranging from the perception of the usefulness of the tool, to the level of complexity in terms of usability,

to the study of the robot's own forms of communication (expressivity, movement, speech), because it is known that its acceptance also depends on its appearance and personality (Kiesler & Goetz, 2002).

6. Conclusion and future works

The reflections reported on the technological development of telepresence robotics and the creation of new strategies, capable of managing the relationship between man and machine, are necessary to increase the level of acceptance of these robots, in order to improve their coexistence with man. In this direction, design plays a key role in shifting the focus from a technology-driven process to one in which an ethical approach and acceptance are characteristic. This means putting people, the community, their needs and the social context at the centre of design, to achieve the main requirements of interaction: empathy, involvement and collaboration (Fitter et al., 2018). Evaluating. As with all interactive systems, the experience of the user interacting with the robot needs to achieve benefits, so it needs to be intelligently designed. UX with social robots, such as telepresence robots, must be a central issue in the development of such artefacts (Germak, Lupetti & Giuliano, 2015). The paper introduces several issues related to telepresence, such as the context of use of telepresence, the target user groups and the lack of non-verbal communication to support the interaction. Security and privacy aspects that are still present in these robots and that need an adequate and conscious design must also be considered. Through a co-design approach with the different actors and entities, which take part in the project, it is possible to create a collaborative system, where the maximum transparency and the purpose of the intervention itself is present. Therefore, this study intends to promote and continue the experimentation of a service robotics in situations of discomfort or impossibility of physical encounter of the university student at a distance, where the robot is a tool for inclusion and social progress, through the creation of a new physical service.

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