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Editorial: Navigating Pluralism in Systemic Design: Global Perspectives and Diverse Vocabularies

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1. Introduction

Systemic design integrates systems thinking with design practice to address complex societal and ecological challenges. It draws from a wide range of methodological traditions, each rooted in distinct epistemologies, values, and contexts. As the field matures and expands globally, designers and researchers increasingly work with overlapping aims but different vocabularies, frameworks, and ways of knowing. This diversity is a source of richness, but also of practical and methodological tension. Practitioners often work under compressed timelines and limited resources, facing challenges around diversity, navigating dilemmas in selecting, adapting, or combining methods, and translating to different contextual learning environments. The absence of consensus can create uncertainty about what constitutes rigorous or legitimate practice. At the same time, the proliferation of design vocabularies - from systemic design to transformation design, from eco-social design to co-design - reflects a field that is actively seeking new ways to engage with complexity rather than retreating from it. We invited contributions that look closely at how systemic design is actually practiced, named, and made meaningful across different regions, cultures, and disciplines. Rather than trying to resolve differences, we set out to create a space to surface and explore them.

Our call for papers for "**Navigating Pluralism in Systemic Design: Global Perspectives and Diverse Vocabularies"** was proposed to create a space for dialogue and reflection on the methodological and epistemological diversity of systemic design. We welcomed case studies of context-specific or culturally grounded practices, methodological inquiries into how designers and practitioners navigate plural frameworks, theoretical provocations on legitimacy and coherence, and literature reviews examining the epistemologies of the field. The response was both substantial and geographically diverse: the 18 papers included in the

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track span 4 continents, they draw on traditions from participatory action research to Confucian philosophy, and address challenges from household circularity to algorithmic governance of urban skies.

We believe it is critical that the dialogue is informed by studies and practices that enact a diverse range of systemic approaches with work developed in and with communities across the Global South and East, as well as within education, research, and practice contexts, seeking to prepare for a plural world.

2. An overview of the track's sessions and papers

Session 4.3a: Methods in the wild: tools and frameworks for navigating complexity

The first session focuses on how systemic design methods are adapted, combined, and operationalized in real-world contexts. Across these papers, methods are not treated as fixed tools but as evolving, situated constructs shaped by context, constraints, and practitioner judgement. Several contributions explore how specific tools can be refined to better engage with complexity, for instance, Van Rees et al. *(paper 1509)* examine the use of causal loop diagrams in textile innovation, proposing adaptations that make systemic insights more actionable within fragmented supply chains. Similarly, Bhan and Rytilahti *(paper 921)* develop an inquiry protocol inspired by leverage points theory, offering a structured yet flexible approach to identifying intervention opportunities in complex socio-economic systems.

Other papers in this track address the challenge of integrating multiple methodological perspectives. Dumitrana *(paper 2449)* introduces the concept of distributed agency to reconcile tensions between human-centred design and systems thinking in Smart Product-Service Systems, reframing causality as relational and multi-actor. Llagas et al. *(paper 1156)* demonstrate how combining systems thinking, participatory design, and visual communication can address consumer confusion in food systems, highlighting the importance of aligning stakeholder perspectives.

Attention is also given to how practitioners navigate methodological tensions in practice. Wartena and Kuipers *(paper 2657)* propose the 4R equilibrium, rigour, relevance, rapidness, and resonance, as a reflective compass for balancing competing demands in design processes. Nilsson et al. *(paper 1218)*, focusing on circular economy practices, reveal how systemic analysis of everyday household behaviours can uncover overlooked leverage points and inform strategies for "designing for letting go."

Together, these papers illustrate that methods in systemic design are not neutral nor universal; they are actively shaped through use. They highlight the importance of reflexivity, adaptation, and methodological hybridity in navigating the complexities of practice.

Session 4.3b: Who gets to name the system: pluralism of systemic design knowledge

The second session engages more explicitly with questions of epistemology, legitimacy, and power in systemic design. It interrogates whose knowledge counts, how it is recognized, and how plural perspectives can be meaningfully integrated. A central concern across several papers is the marginalization of non-dominant knowledge systems. Lodaya *(paper 295)* critiques the field's reliance on formal academic discourse, calling for greater recognition of grassroots, embodied, and culturally situated practices. This call for epistemic justice is echoed in Song and Zhang's *(paper 682)* comparative exploration of Eastern and Western systemic traditions, which highlights the potential of long-standing philosophical frameworks to enrich contemporary discourse.

Other contributions examine how pluralism can be cultivated and operationalized. Fitzpatrick *(paper 1095)* proposes understanding methodologies themselves as complex, adaptive systems, capable of evolving through reflexive engagement with context and difference. Guo Editoret al. *(paper 1551),* through a scoping review of healthcare design, identify multiple patterns of integrating systems thinking and design. These patterns reveal both the diversity and fragmentation of current approaches.

Pedagogical and critical perspectives further expand this discussion. Kenis et al. *(paper 797)* explore how critical design and "misfitting" can foster pluriversal thinking in education, while Lu et al. *(paper 2940)* translate the historical practices of self-combing women in China into a performative design methodology that enables alternative identity formation.

Across these contributions, pluralism is not framed as a problem to be resolved, but as a condition to be engaged with critically and constructively. The session highlights the need to move beyond inclusion as a rhetorical goal, toward practices that genuinely redistribute epistemic authority and embrace multiple ways of knowing.

Session 4.3c: Rooted and reaching: situated practice, pedagogies, and futures

The third session focuses on how systemic design is enacted in specific contexts, particularly within institutions, educational settings, and culturally grounded practices. It explores how researchers, educators, and practitioners negotiate constraints while opening up possibilities for transformation. Several papers examine the realities of working within institutional systems. van Arkel et al. *(paper 1467)* analyse how design space is constrained and expanded in a public sector organization, identifying multiple dimensions, political, epistemic, institutional, that shape the capacity to engage with complexity. Lam and Cleveland *(paper 1826)* similarly reflect on the challenges of applying Western co-design approaches in Vietnam's textile industry, introducing "đồng-design" as a culturally rooted methodology centred on togetherness.

Educational contexts provide another important site of exploration. Hvidsten et al. *(paper 1871)* argue for game design as a means of fostering systems literacy, emphasizing its dynamic and experiential qualities. Hohl *(paper 1220)* presents "breakfast as a system" as a tangible entry point for teaching systemic thinking, while Mameli *(paper 532)* critically examines how sustainability is translated into design education, revealing tensions between rhetoric and practice.

Finally, speculative and future-oriented approaches expand the scope of systemic design. Wang et al. *(paper 765)* propose speculative co-imagination as a participatory method for engaging publics in alternative futures, combining design fiction with data-driven visualization.

Together, these papers underscore the importance of situated practice, recognizing that systemic design is always embedded in specific cultural, institutional, and material contexts. They highlight how such situatedness can both constrain and enable new forms of practice, pedagogy, and imagination.

3. Concluding remarks

The contributions in this track collectively foreground the opportunities and tensions inherent in the pluralistic nature of systemic design. They demonstrate that diversity in methods, epistemologies, and practices is not merely a characteristic of the field, but a defining condition that shapes how systemic design evolves and operates. Rather than seeking consensus or standardization, many of the papers advocate for more reflexive, context-sensitive, and inclusive approaches. They call for acknowledging the limits of existing frameworks, embracing methodological hybridity, and creating space for alternative ways of knowing and doing. At the same time, the track highlights ongoing challenges: how to maintain rigour amid diversity, how to support practitioners navigating complexity under constraints, and how to ensure that pluralism translates into meaningful inclusion rather than fragmentation. We hope this collection contributes to an ongoing conversation about how systemic design can continue to mature as a field, one that is capable of holding difference, fostering dialogue, and engaging with the complexities of the world in thoughtful and transformative ways.

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