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Editorial: Designing Proximities

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Proximity, we feel, is not a concept that has been explored in-depth, in design research. Now in the post-pandemic era, with the further acceleration of information and communication technology (ICT) transforming our tools for connecting over distance, notions of proximity are increasingly challenged. Coupled with the complexity of societal problems, the so-called ‘systemic turn’ in design, as well as an awakening to the importance of multi-stakeholder collaborations to address these challenges, and the drive for transitioning to preferred scenarios of living, being and making, means that proximity is emerging as an important consideration in social design and design for sustainability research. This raises the question: what do we need close proximity to, as researchers, as designers and as citizens?

Proximity has the potential to invite a broad range of perspectives in design research, however as a concept for open consideration it is still in its infancy and resides in specific pockets of design research. Ezio Manzini’s book on the subject frames the work of papers in this track situated at the scale of the city or the region, where **proximity as an outcome** of the design process is already being actively and explicitly pursued. Two further papers focus more specifically on **proximity as an approach** or precondition for achieving outcomes within a specific multi-disciplinary, collaborative or participatory project context. All six papers bring to the fore and explore the phenomena of **different types of proximity**, the identification of which we see as a valuable outcome of the track, making them available for further development and consideration by design researchers working within different contexts.

Proximity as an outcome of design is explored by *Palmieri et al*, who propose that access to goods and services within local socially-connected communities of Paris can be made possible through block-chain technology. The authors consider that designers have a role to play in simplifying the complexity of such technology so that it can be accessed by the different actors in the system as well as communicate the value in their participation. Similarly, ICT is proposed by *D’Elia, Monaco & Malakuczi* as a means for increasing proximity to, and within,



the maker community in the rural region of Lazio, Italy, where greater geographic distance as well as an absence of shared values and goals makes communities of practice challenging to galvanise. Greater connectivity within the regional network could allow for a maker community that can respond to community needs or imperatives as they emerge. Yet crucially *D'Elia, Monaco & Malakuczi* preliminary research highlights the relational challenges, which cannot be overcome simply through physical closeness, therefore design must address varying and complex barriers to proximity to realise the potential of the network.

Meanwhile *Fassi & Vergani's* paper, which presents two approaches to enabling communities to develop more socially-oriented spaces within the 'Nolo' region of Milan, considers proximity not only as an outcome of design influences and processes, but also the importance of **proximity as an approach** in design research which is at once a slow, relational, and considerate practice (built between the academy and the situated stakeholders over many years) and co-located (allowing for close collaboration and participation). Here the temporal nature of proximity shifts: the activities of everyday life are enabled within 15 minutes of 'home' yet, are reliant on long-established relationships which builds proximity between actors. The displacement of cars implies the removal of 'speed' and is replaced instead with the slowness of walking, chatting and meeting. Nearness in space, local neighbourhoods, knowledge, and relationships and proximity as an approach is also covered in *Sedini's* paper that looks at hybrid economies in hybrid cities. Again, Milan, noted as a place embedded in a historical accumulation of knowledge, expertise, and connections in making and production, the attention of the author here, is in identifying proximities of networks that entail cognitive, geographical, organisational, social and institutional elements; all of which favour the hybridity of business and the role that design can play in revealing these. Hornbuckle's paper also considers how proximity is a central consideration in design research approaches, and how design research is a translational practice which addresses distance in technological innovation between projects, stakeholders and wider audiences. Conversely to *Fassi & Vergani*, Hornbuckle's research explores project contexts where there are great distances between actors and reveals the design methods adopted to increase cognitive and social proximity, to support the adoption of alternative materials, processes or practices. Similarly, to *D'Elia, Monaco & Malakuczi, Townsend et al's* work recognises the catalysing effect of the PPE imperative during the COVID-19 pandemic on communities of practice. This presented the opportunity to consider multiple notions of proximity – of users to the design process, of healthcare workers to infection, and of circular stakeholders to the design decision-making process.

For each of the papers we have identified some emerging conceptual themes that relate to different types of proximities and design research. In its broadest interpretation we may think of nearness in **space, time, or relationships** with each of the six papers offering different accounts and overlaps, on varying forms of designing for proximity. When reviewing all the papers we have further identified a more nuanced understanding that extends to more

reflective categorisations, including designing **proximities, networks, knowledge, and proximities of making and production** with each paper offering insights on how we may engage with design.

Nearness in space, local neighbourhoods, knowledge, and relationships run through the three papers of *Palmieri et al*, *Sedini* and *Fassi & Vergani*. By working at different scales and physical proximities, through representational mapping and co-design methods the authors present opportunities to configure new proximities and social solutions within a physical neighbourhood and digitally. What emerges is the situated practices as forms of knowledge and the importance of these when designing **relational, cognitive, institutional, and physical proximities**.

Sharing the cognitive dimensions of proximities, in Hornbuckle's paper, translational design practices are presented to address different **proximities of knowledge** between experts, stakeholders and the wider public. By categorising different design approaches, Hornbuckle offers insights to tackle the divergent knowledge proximities that can exist in complex science and technology projects and offers ways in which these can be overcome. By way of contrast, proximities of making and production and proximities of resilience in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are both explored by *D'Elia, Monaco & Malakuczi* and *Townsend et al*. These different contexts one geospatial and the other proximal to the human body raise questions about resilience and supply chains at a local and global level, as well as exploring nearness to the body and **proximities of safety and disease transmission**.

While these papers take us a step closer towards articulating how different types of proximity play out in design contexts and how design may interact with and harness proximities to support social and sustainable transitions, they have inevitably raised some important questions and revealed tensions and dichotomies. Who or what is excluded when we seek to increase physical proximity to the hyper-local? How do we reconceptualise the value of 'closeness' in design practice when an ICT-enabled relationship strengthened through shared values, a common purpose and affection can reduce thousands of miles to nothing?

About the Authors:

Rosie Hornbuckle is a Research Fellow at UAL working across disciplines, and sectors, and in multi-stakeholder contexts to develop design methodologies for complex systemic transitions.

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