Linking human and planetary health

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1. Introduction

We are currently living on the Anthropocene and what some have called the Epidemiocene, in the middle of wars and environmental devastation, some of them perpetuated for decades. In this context, a conference about Design Research must address uncomfortable, painful but also active and hopeful realities. Thus, our conference this year includes sessions related to behavioral change, designing neighborhoods, legal design, and post-anthropocentric design, as well as our session on Linking Human and Planetary Health.

Health is a fundamental human right and a key indicator of sustainable development. Poor health threatens the rights of children to education, limits economic opportunities for people and increases poverty within communities and countries around the world. Global Health is concerned with the health of populations worldwide as opposed to individuals. Therefore, it explores health issues that transcend national borders or have the potential to impact the world’s economies and political climates.

Furthermore, there is a research interest emerging between human and planetary health as the two are closely interlinked, through its most common issues (physical activity and
nutrition, mental health, environmental quality). The premise of planetary health is that human well-being over the long-term depends on the well-being of the earth, including both its living and non-living systems.

Now that we have experienced a major global pandemic, we have looked at ways of living that have reduced pollution and use of natural resources, yet we have poor global health and declining wellbeing. How do we reframe the role of design for health globally to catch up on these and to act with total responsibility for the future of humans and the planet?

In this track, we invited the submission of papers of designers and researchers whose focus is on the role of design in promoting health and sustainability through the creation of products, services, places, processes, experiences, methodologies, communities and interventions in all areas related to health (human and planetary).

We were particularly interested in papers/presentations from researchers and designers exploring the links between planetary and human health.

2. Track submissions

Five submissions were accepted for publication and presentation, covering different aspects of human and planetary health interconnection.

Bohn et al., provide a very insightful overview paper entitled “Design contributions in generating innovative solutions for human and planetary health”. This offers a unique mapping of the current design research on human and planetary health. Their study suggests that design plays a crucial role in involving different actors and articulating the necessary changes in facing health and sustainability challenges. It concludes that this area merits more research as design still needs to focus more on other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the environment, is to a certain point, expected, given the economic opportunity that such design products can prompt. The lack of research in other SDGs is partly due to the disconnect of our discipline with other knowledge areas, and can be interpreted as yet another wake up call for collaboration.

Two papers, one by Sara et al. (Designing digital health for hip osteoarthritis self-care in Brazil: a study on patients’ socioeconomic profile and media preferences) and one by Tsekleves et al. (‘Making the dust fly’: (a case study of) design research promoting health and sustainability in addressing household infections), although they primarily focus on design research for human health (chronic disease and bacterial infections); they do provide evidence on the interrelation between planetary health and its impact on human health. Both papers share lessons that will help guide design researchers move into this exciting research field of human and planetary health. For the first paper, it would be interesting to see how the researchers eventually implement their findings into an integral information system, and how they link their research to technological aspects that might be detrimental.
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to planetary and human health, such as energy consumption of the system and privacy concerns. The second paper is an example of how behavioral interventions can be conducted in the future, although it is not clear if political, cultural or indigenous knowledge were employed or are intended to be employed as well.

The remaining two papers in this track focus on the relationship between planetary and human health. More precisely, the paper by Matos & Sousa (*Tree Box: Designing embedded and embodied interaction for contemplative experiences in nature rich environments*) presents an interactive artifact designed to connect users to nature-rich environments, in order to enhance human well-being and in turn our appreciation for nature and planetary health. The study draws from detailed psychological frameworks, and although it does not go as far as to propose data collection and evaluation methods of the technological artifact, it can be considered as an interesting literature review-oriented case study. The paper by Ti-Yu et al. entitled “Service Design for Experience in Forest Therapy: A Case study in Xitou Nature Education Area” explores forest therapy as a way of enhancing human connection to nature. Their paper presents lessons on how service design can be employed to develop forest therapy services, in order to foster closer connection and benefits for both human and planetary health.

Although diverse in their content and approaches, what is clear from all the track papers is the need and great opportunities for the design research community to engage more actively in this multidisciplinary field.

We envisage that following the interest and debate these papers will generate at the conference, we will be calling upon the design research community to co-develop a manifesto on design for human and planetary health.