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Peacebuilding: scoping an empathic design approach through speculative fiction

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Despite an apparent period of geopolitical stability following the establishment of the UN in 1945, questions of war and peace remain as perennial concerns. . This paper presents an attempt to scope a design approach for peacebuilding. It grounds its approach on Johan Galtung’s notion of positive peace as justice and John Paul Lederach’s middle-ground theory of peacebuilding but underlines the importance of an empathic dialogue that brings parties in conflict together to find commonalities and develop skills useful in post-conflict societies. The paper scopes an approach through a piece of speculative fiction about a design curator who builds an exhibition to foster dialogue. Three pieces from her fictional exhibition are discussed as potential sources of peacebuilding: the first explores craft clubs; another peace games, a third—resource hubs. The paper builds its observations from these fictions and then identifies a few general observations about requirements for a design-based peace process. We conclude with a discussion on the pros and cons of speculative fiction as a method.

Keywords: *design, peace, design fiction, peacebuilding*

1 Introduction

The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) has tracked conflicts across the world since 1975 and shows a 50 year high in state-based violence, non-state violence and violence against civilians (<https://ucdp.uu.se/encyclopedia> accessed August 30th 2025). In 2024 UCDP monitored 61 active conflicts with 11 of these categorised as “war” (where there are 1,000 battled-related deaths within 12 months). Conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza are most prominent of these, but there are several other incidences recorded in the Middle East with additional armed conflicts in Africa, Asia and Europe.

These figures only cover armed conflicts, however, and excludes well-known conflicts like terrorism in the Basque country and Northern Ireland. If we could add such post-conflict areas to the figures provided by the Academy, along with potential conflicts that are developing, the figure would probably be well over 200. Conflicts directly affect tens of millions of people and indirectly many more, whilst an unaccountable number of people live under the shadow of a forthcoming conflict that is currently in a peaceful state.



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Design, we believe, cannot escape the duty of promoting peace, which is a precondition to many issues designers deal with in the studio. This paper focuses on how designers could promote peace and explores three approaches designers could use to do this. In terms of scope, we focus on post-conflict peacebuilding rather than conflict itself or conflict resolution, two activities that are typically left to generals, warlords, heads of states and diplomats. We also exclude conflict prevention which, as important as it is, requires deep and embedded knowledge of a particular society and requires the monitoring of signs of a potential escalation of grievances into violence and, worse, armed conflict. Secondly, our frame of reference is with local communities and regional actors rather than the state or multilateral organizations like ASEAN or the EU. This local and middle-range focus has been dominant in peace building literature from the nineteen-eighties (see Lederach 1997, 2005; for a critical review, see Paffenholz 2014) and, in our experience, social design tools work best at this scale.

The third dimension to our scope is conceptual. Although we mentioned the word “reconciliation” above, we want to stay away from the systemic implication that a peaceful and cordial co-existence is possible after violence. Instead, we prefer to talk about peace work or peacebuilding instead: these words better capture what we believe is a fact – violent conflicts cannot and perhaps should not be forgotten, but we must learn to live with their implications to create a society in which people can pursue their daily activities without fear and without preparing for conflict. Peacebuilding, as the peace researcher Johan Galtung has suggested (1976) and peace after conflict requires hard work. It is not always possible to build a peace that replicates previously cordial and friendly relationships. Instead, Galtung notes that after a bitter conflict, grief, resentment, bitterness and blame remain and need to be constantly managed fairly and justly so that life can go on despite tensions. Peacebuilding in this sense covers activities like trauma counselling, transitional justice, prejudice reduction, community dialogue and bridge-building, increasing human rights, economic and environmental awareness, and developing a resilient civil society.

This paper focuses on post-conflict peacebuilding. Following Galtung’s classic definitions (Galtung, 1969, p.168), it distinguishes negative peace, defined as absence of armed conflict, from positive peace, defined as the integration of human society, including “‘chang[ing] the minds of people’, change their ideas about other groups, improve contact through exchange... to conflict management alone without other types of integration” (Galtung 1965: 2). The latter definition is utopian but defines a mission for design: finding tools that can create a path from negative to positive peace and from an abstract imaginary to a concrete imaginary (cf. Wilder, 2022).

2 Peacebuilding as empathic dialogue

The concept of peacebuilding is outside the traditional domain of design research, but several tangents make it possible to approach them from within design discourse. Above all, three notable exhibitions have explored peace and conflict: *Conflict and Design* in Genk, Belgium in 2013, *Design and Violence* at MoMa in 2015, and *Designing Peace* at Cooper Hewitt in New York in 2022-2023. The Conflict and Conflict section (pp.142-161) of the first of these explored abstract systemic ideas for peace and illustrated these with visuals from a few projects. The second had a broad definition of violence, mainly dealing with environmental and social—rather than armed—conflicts, but Ola-Dele Kuku’s essay “Conflict Culture (The running mean)” painted conflict as a system disequilibrium seeking another steady state.

The third exhibition is particularly interesting, however. *Designing Peace* (Smith, 2022) includes contributions from political scientists, artists, architects and designers in the form of 15 essays and 44 cases to study five questions about design and peace:

- How can design support humane forms of peace and security?
- How can design address the root causes of conflict?
- How can design engage creative confrontation?
- How can design embrace truth and dignity in a search for peace and justice?
- How can design facilitate the transition from instability to peace?

(Smith, 2022: 14-19)

The exhibition built on Galtung's (1965) distinction between negative and positive peace; the former meaning absence of conflict, the latter justice for parties. From the design perspective, architects and landscape architects explored 18 building and space concepts and maps; visual designers used forms like comics, posters and games; craft makers undertook ceramic and textile projects; and artists developed relational, performative works ranging from peace summits and sports associations to community kitchens. From a social science perspective, political scientists and peace researchers explored the causes of conflicts and causes that make peace but a distant dream. The overall impression of *Designing Peace* is a need for a diversity of design approaches that gives either a voice to the grassroots (as in activist art), an envelope (or holding space) for these voices (as in many architectural concepts), or an expression to such voices (as in communication design). As the designers of the exhibition catalogue note: "[t]o accord with our concept of the publication as a tool for action...we borrowed for its cover jacket the tough linen-embossed lamination you often find on old guidebooks or atlases" (Goggin and James in Smith, 2022: 222).

This message from the exhibitions is in line with recent trends in design research. Over the last two decades design researchers have developed ways to work with immaterial concepts and have taken the discipline from industry to society in many ways through service and sustainable design, social design and most recently to policy (for example, Selloni 2017, Meroni et al. 2018). One strand of work has focused on violence (for example, Davey et al. 2005; Camacho Duarte, Lulham and Kaldor 2011; Hunt 2014; Design and Violence 2015).

Designers are well familiar with concepts used in peacebuilding, as a comparison of two models suggests (Scharmer 2016; Kouprie and Sleeswijk Visser 2009). Below, Theory U — emergent from organisational change — has drawn its inspiration from peacebuilding and conflict studies (Scharmer, 2016, p.30) and a model of empathy (emergent from engineering design) uses a different language, but both build a process that take a starting point, dip deeper into a situation or experience, and reconstruct a new design out of a deep "immersion" in context. Both also build on key concepts like finding common ground, dialogue, empathy, and reconstructed community. One thing we can learn from this comparison is that a design approach for peacebuilding may require a similarly explicit process and method. (Figure 1).

Models like these, however, have usually been created for the world of project work and assume that the process at their core has a starting point or predictable structure that can be managed and— what is more difficult to accept: an "end point" in the process. These assumptions are too straightforward at best, managerial and expert-led in tone, and dangerous at worst in an environment in which politicians arouse resentment, exaggerate grievances and mobilize hate to their ends. Any predictable

process, however benevolent in meaning, can be recklessly misused for mischievous ends. It is possible to say that peace is a project, but this does not imply it is a product in the same physical and transactional sense as a washing machine or a television.

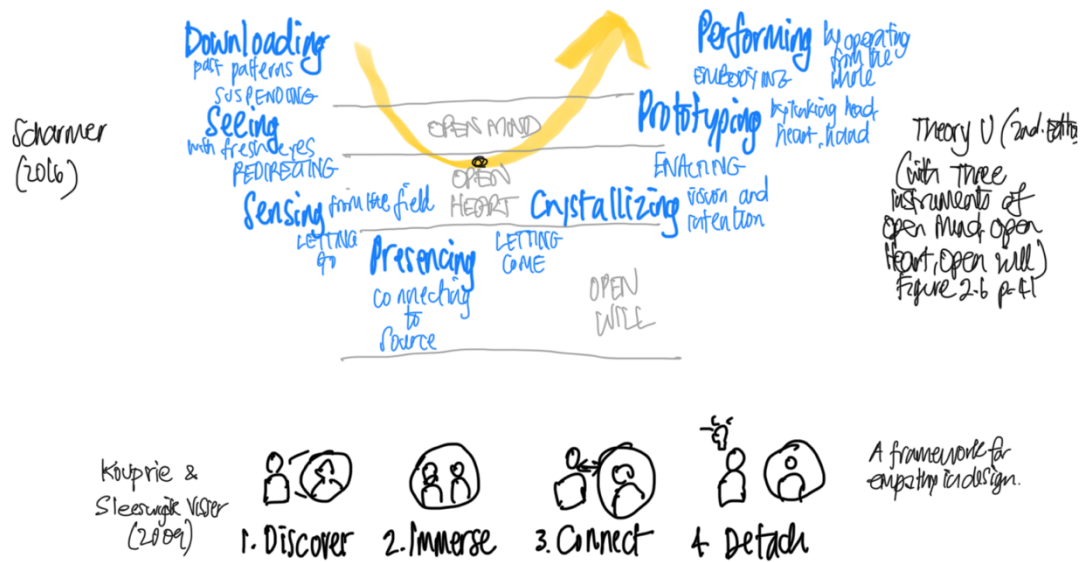


Figure 1. Comparison of Scharmer’s Theory U and the design empathy process of Kouprie and Sleeswijk Visser (graphic by authors)

Peacebuilding literature, by contrast, provides useful cues for a design approach that avoids these pitfalls. In particular, the peace activist John Lederach has proposed an open-ended approach for peacebuilding (2005). His approach provides a flexible way to guarantee listening, empathy and trust-building. His approach recommends focusing on middle-tier organizations like NGOs rather than top-tiers like states and working closer with community “grassroots.” For him, influence and time flow in several directions. Peacebuilding engages in a dialogue that starts from recent events but expands into historical narratives, while also expanding from immediate crisis to futures that prevent crises. In these two dialogues, peacebuilding expands from restoring justice to transforming and renegotiating identities and, based on these transformed identities, elicits truth-telling about the root causes of the conflict. The outcome of these multifaceted dialogues includes creative retellings of who people are, and where they, as people, want to go (Figure 2).

A Lederachian design approach to peacebuilding builds on the idea of dialogue and empathy and creating trust that has been destroyed in conflict. In its heart lies an empathic process that is dialogical and open-ended and focuses on the collaborative work of: collective meaning, prevention and creative and spiritual transformation (see Fig.2 above). Peacebuilding is also non-linear in terms of its concept of time. It has a focus on creating meaningful dialogue about the root causes of the conflict, group, and individual identities which requires a depth of understanding that must be acquired in conversation with the constituent communities. This in turn requires avoiding research-world concepts in conversation and using experience-near concepts and (perhaps) “design things” (Binder et al. 2011) in processes of talking with people. Such a process also needs to work with a diverse set

of local and regional decision-makers, but also not leave visible markers that would be dangerous for participants if the conflict escalates again.

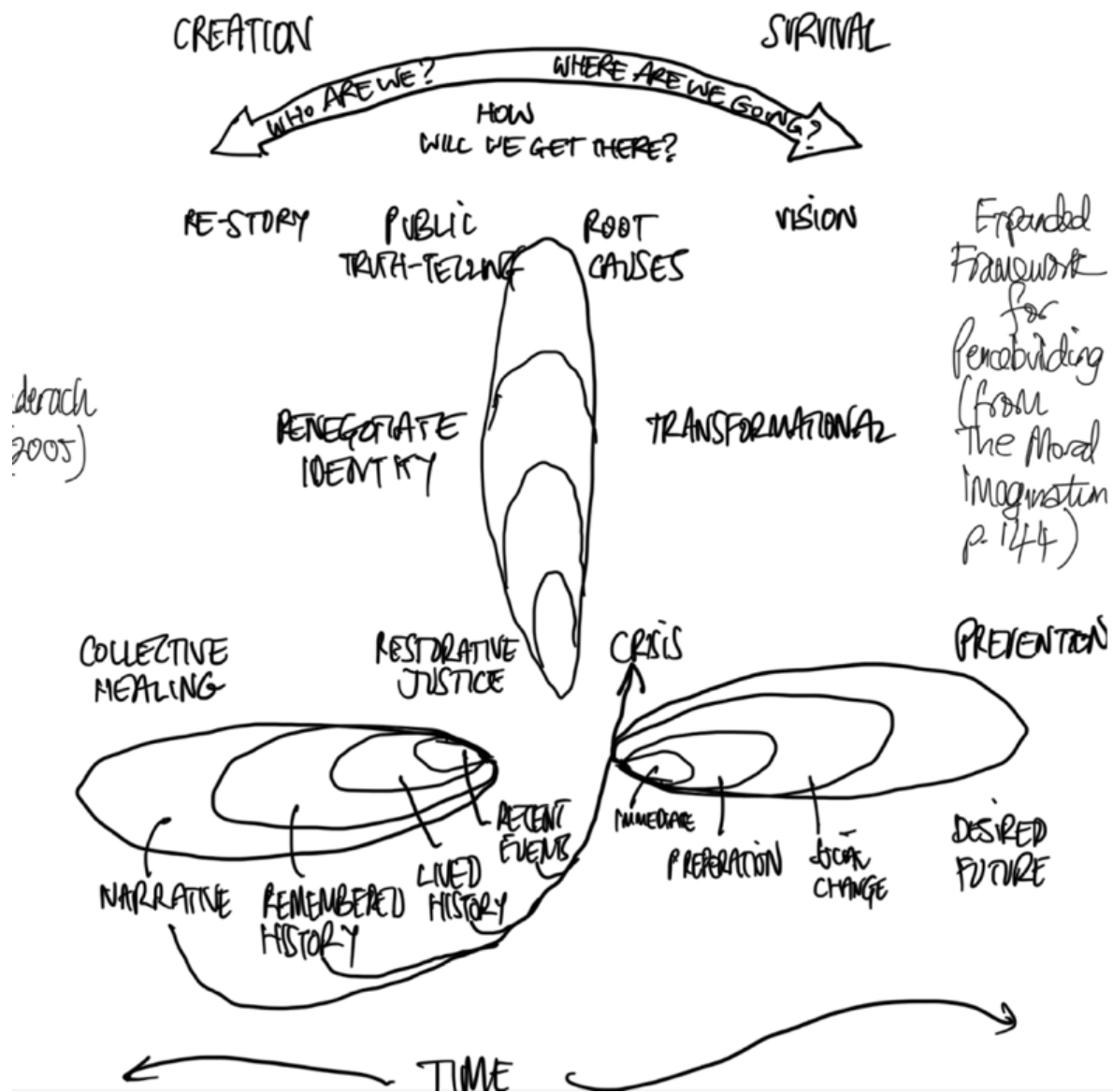


Figure 2. John Lederach's (2005) vision of peace building from Lederach (2005) (graphic by authors)

These requirements lead to a few criteria for a design approach for peacebuilding. Such an approach builds an empathic dialogue that needs to:

1. Be open-ended rather than defined by researchers' agenda;
2. Be grounded in an in-depth understanding of the communities involved;
3. Be experience-near and build on concepts and things that are shared and understandable in the community
4. See designers as facilitators/therapists rather than experts who can define concepts and processes without listening to people

5. Work with time in two ways: it must have long-term perspective, and the process must be non-linear
6. Involve stakeholders (incl. community leaders from civil society) who can create conditions for maintaining peaceful co-existence
7. Must protect the identities of participants if the conflict returns

We believe these criteria will provide safeguards strong enough to counteract misuses of empathy and community. They safeguard against misuses typical to polls (1), simplified and polarizing depictions of communities (2), biases in consultation processes (3-4), hastiness (5) and social biases (6, 7). Sections 4-6 create three fictional concepts for designing for peace and evaluate them using these criteria.

3 Method: speculative design fiction

In this paper, we use the opportunity to scope out a future research direction. We, therefore, use the methodology of design fiction. Design fiction was first popularized by Bruce Sterling in *Shaping Things* (MIT, 2005), and slightly later in *Design Fiction*, an essay by Julian Bleeker in 2009. For Sterling, design fiction is a way to “suspend disbelief about change” and the technique is used for creating stories to explore unreality. The technique has become popular in critical design and in some areas of HCI, as a knowledgeable though slightly rambling Wikipedia article about design fiction witnesses so well (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Design_fiction).

Our use of fiction follows the use of scenarios in IT industry or Web development (Carroll 2000) and was pioneered by Shell over forty years ago (Bentham, 2013). Designers create scenarios, narrative or visual, and then study them to find the interesting or salient aspects to inspire future developments, but they are also used to recognise drivers and constraints. We see design fiction as a methodological artform that provides structure to those informal conversations in the studio or lab that are dialogical in nature. These conversations explore possibilities—but more than that—designers in the studio also respond to what they have heard, talk out loud, and act in processes of generative conversation (cf. Christensen et al, 2017). Though fictional, the process is similar to empathic design in its approach to design (Koskinen 2023: 85-88).

Our approach to design fiction is a form of “speculative fiction”—recognising the genre of “speculative fiction” (Yoshinaga, Guynes & Canavan, 2022) as encompassing climate fiction (“cli-fi”) (cf. Grist, 2023), solarpunk and science fiction amongst many other subgenres. By this moniker, we want to distinguish ourselves from traditional design fiction that focuses on technologies, products and concept prototypes (for example, Bleeker 2009). Instead, our usage is designed to provide empathy with protagonists (people) and the emotional aspects of such characterisations. For this reason, the technique is narrative rather than visual or tactile: narrative fiction evokes an emotional and empathic response from the reader better than renderings, games or models that—in the context of post-conflict—would likely be abstract and experience-far, and would elicit professional rather than emotional responses from design readers. For the same reason, our style is realistic rather than experimental and as such may be viewed as a form of speculative realism (Shaviro, 2014). The purpose of our narratives is to bring readers into the minds of our characters, not to create distance to them

through Brechtian *Verfremdung* (estrangement) (Koskinen et al, 2011 p.95). Thus, our fictional technique is studio-based and did not require ethical approvals.

In this spirit, we developed a protagonist we called Dr. Michelle Jan, a curator from an unnamed design museum. She had been interested in peace since her student years as a peace activist who had studied art history, taken classes in a design school, majored in political science, and gained a masters in Oslo where she had studied with Johan Galtung's former students. She had become critical of how middle-level organizations like the UN had bureaucratized and packaged peace aid, and—following Lederach (one of Galtung's protégés)—was convinced that, as valuable as organizations like the UN and Red Cross were, their approach did not pay enough attention to the importance of grassroots dialogue in civil society as a way to create relationships across dividing lines, be these ethnic, national, gendered, or imaginary (based on outright propaganda). As years went by, she had left the world of peacebuilding and concentrated on curating exhibitions about design objects, graphics and, increasingly, co-designed community activities around food, shelter, migrants, and exclusion, mainly in Europe and Asia.

In browsing a used bookstore in the Left Bank of Paris, she encountered a folder filled with newspaper clips and leaflets about a war in the Balkans. It was a flashback moment for her; after years of curating high-end design shows, she saw bits and pieces of how design could be used for peace, a greater purpose. The folder had been put together by an immigrant and it had examples of peacebuilding after the war. Michelle spent several hours over the next two months, concluded that peacebuilding might be a worthy topic for a design museum, and wrote a curatorial rationale around it. After two years of research into peacebuilding in Europe, the museum opened the exhibition *Designing Eternal Peace* – in a reference to the German philosopher Immanuel Kant's famous pamphlet *Perpetual Peace* – which consisted of extracts from her research showing how ordinary people have built peace, and how designers have facilitated the process. The museum organized peace evenings, hosted conversations between designers, peace researchers and lawyers, and the stories were collected into a catalogue.

In the following, we describe three main concepts from the book that explore three ways of approaching design for peacebuilding on those precedents we identified at the end of our Introduction (above) from *Design and Peace* (2022-2023). These concepts are presented in the form of spreads from Michelle's exhibition catalogue. We first built the idea of Peace Games – in contrast to war games – and wrote a fictional story to explore how a game like this could be played and how it could advance peace building. However, we were not happy with the fact that action in games follows rules and uses materials produced by designers (for example, Siriaraya et al, 2018; Kulzy III, 2019), so we took our lead from the relationist work in *Design and Peace* and explored social interaction-based concepts in two other concepts, *CraftClub*, which explored craft workshops as a peacebuilding tool following Alice Kettle's work in England (Kettle & Millar, forthcoming), and *Recovery Hub* that—unlike *CraftClub*—connected communities with community organizations and local governments. After writing these concepts, we evaluated them as fictional designs to reveal what is common to all of them; what we might have missed or identified gaps in knowledge; before a final creative step, generalized towards a model that could be useful in peacebuilding.

Since the focus is on scoping ways to create empathy in the community, we have left our technical details from the cases we selected. Our interest is in how to create empathy in the community through design.

4 Speculative fiction: Museum of Eternal Peace

4.1 Exhibit 1: CraftClub

In the first exhibit we dwell on, Michelle wanted to explore the idea that ordinary culture can provide social anchors amidst the confusion caused by a war and post-conflict recovery, a time when many of the solidities of everyday life before the conflict have melted into air. Cultural artefacts like paintings, pieces of music, and theatre are often used to start and accelerate conflict and to separate peoples – as warlords who destroy and sometimes reinterpret statues, churches, museums and other cultural symbols well know – but they can also provide relief from conflict as well as identity ‘anchors’ as Colin Breen has shown in Northern Ireland (2023). Here, “culture” is conceived as much more than high culture: newspapers, pictures on the kitchen wall, stories in popular songs and food, and also intangible culture and practices like cooking, weaving, carpentry, having a toast in a bar, and dancing in a local venue – things people do that make them feel at home. These things can create anchors to better times, both those long gone and those ahead.

This is the vision that has animated researchers who have used their craft skills for the greater good. There is by now an extensive literature on craft in the service of various social goals, including intersectional identities, migrants and refugees, and intergenerational identities (for example, Kettle and Millar forthcoming; Hirscher 2020; Petra Ahde-Deal 2014).

Michelle examined how to build peace on these precedents with a contribution that, unlike most cases in design literature, has a male central character to show that craft ideas are not gender-specific. She learned in her research that this piece was inspired by Alcoholics Anonymous and explores a self-help model for peace making (Fiction Spread 1).

In her essay in the catalogue, Michelle draws a few conclusions from this fictive piece. In *CraftClub*, Gert has learned new skills. Doing things with hands was good for his soul on its own, and that learning to design has shown him how things have cultural significance that makes them far more interesting than he anticipated. By observing the teacher, he has learned to discuss objects in a new way, and he has developed bonds with other men in the *Club* that may turn out to be useful. He has learned to see new opportunities and create visions for the future, and these visions may be dragging him away from the aimlessness of veteran life. The *Club* has helped him to break patterns that have kept him from fulfilling his full human potential, Michelle saw.

Michelle’s general conclusion was that *CraftClub* has many desirable features as a design tool for peace. It is open-ended, experience-near, has a sophisticated concept of time, and can involve stakeholders (criteria 1, 3, 5, 6). Yet, it is designer-driven and places designers in the driver’s seat (criteria 2, 4).

Fiction spread 1: CraftClub

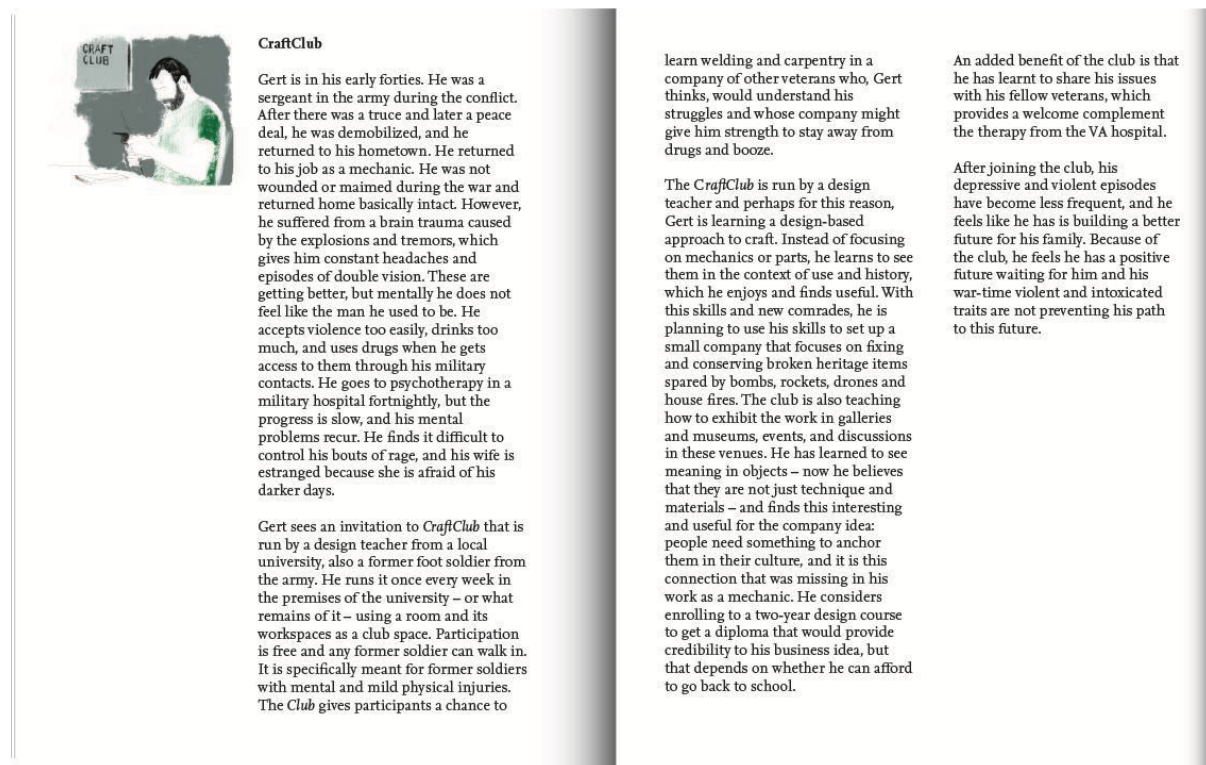


Figure 3: Spread from Museum of Eternal Peace Catalogue: *CraftClub* (Design: Philip Ely)

4.2 Exhibit 2: Peace Games

A second exhibit explores games, another topic Michelle discovered in her research. The market is saturated with war games of various sorts. These range from card and board games to digital and interactive games, many requiring social interaction and usually focussing on armed conflict either at the level of a soldier with a gun (first-person shooter), or at a strategic level in which generals devise plans to beat the enemy in a chess-like environment that delete individual experience as irrelevant (so-called “god games”).

As there are few games that focus on post-conflict peace-making (but see Hunter 2013), Michelle’s second exhibit takes its cue from these games, but turns the table around to explore what a possible peace game might elicit. She selected it because it reminded her of Scandinavian design games that bring people together to create design concepts (Vaajakallio 2012), take people into real environments (Halse et al. 2010), and simulate the functioning of informal organizations in situations of management conflict (Buur and Larsen 2010). From her research, she identified five games designed to create empathy among the parties of the conflict, and named these. *PEACEZINE* explored the uses of gamified citizen journalism, *BBCPeace* a journalistic model, *Sigmund Freud Act Out* sharing emotions, *Theologic* the uses of events and ceremonies to reflect on conflict, and *School Play* for Empathy writing a play to keep stories of wars past alive by collecting stories from pupils’ grandparents. She decided to give *PEACEZINE* as a particularly worthy example. (Fiction Spread 2).

Fiction 2. PEACEZINE



PEACEZINE

Maria is a 12-year old schoolgirl from the village of Bellevue that has just entered out of a four-year armed conflict two years ago. Maria used to be outgoing, sunny and shy, except with three close friends. She has been living in war zone ¼ of her life by now. She cannot hear the frontline, but she can see warplanes and troops in lorries, she has seen injured soldiers in the hospital, hear church bells, and she sees the graveyard growing every week. She knows to duck and cover when she hears a whistling sound from the sky and is used to blackouts and living in the darkness at night. Her mother and grandmother tell her how her grandfather's father dies in WW2, her uncle was killed in the front, and she knows her oldest brother, who is 17, will be sent to the battle after a brief military training in less than a year. She knows the evacuation plan. Her teacher assigns her PEACEZINE in the English language class. She takes her smartphone and notebook and talks with her three friends, all of whom had stories to tell about relatives who are in the front and their comrades who have been killed. Her friend Eva told three stories about her war:

"My cousin Peter is 19 years and has been in the frontline for almost a year. He has lost hearing from one ear. He was wounded three months ago. He lost three fingers. Three friends have been killed. His best friend Andre was fighting for us

even though his family is from the enemy side, Peter cannot because of nightmares. I am very fond of him and I cannot sleep either when I think about him. His girlfriend Petra lives out of town and she cries a lot. Her grandparents say her to leave if the enemy comes closer by telling scary stories from the big war when they raped women when they broke into her village. My little sister Anya is seven but does not play home anymore. She talks about death all the time and her dolls are monsters. Her drawings have explosions and missiles. Before the war she was drawing sunshine and cows. I cry a lot. I hate the sound of the missiles flying over our school. I hate this stupid war. I want to go out with my dog Spotty and see the sheep in the sun again."

The girls cry together. Maria writes a note and uses her phone to dictate it. Maria collects five more stories, two girls and two boys. She learns that everyone is sick of the war, cannot focus on school, and are afraid of going out. The war hurts everyone; everyone is afraid of sudden noises, going out, and everyone is anxious and distrustful. It has made everyone sad and angry and has turned these sunny and happy kids into serious, joyless mini adults. The war knows no boundaries, she learns: the war hurts these children on both sides, whatever media propaganda says.

The teacher gives her a yellow badge, a

diploma for having passed the first level of PEACEZINE, and instructions for the second level. Her classmates vote Eva's story the most moving in the school, and the teacher uploads Maria's letter to a server where it can be viewed and seen by everyone on the region if it is voted to top ten by all pupils in all the five schools of the village. After passing the second level, she learns that Eva's story is published. She is invited to read it aloud in the capital of the province to younger children so that they can learn about war and how it damages children. It is also published in a regional newspaper that gives readers stories to tell their children.

Figure 4: Spread from Museum of Eternal Peace Catalogue: PEACEZINE (Design: Philip Ely)

One thing Michelle noted about this piece is its richness in terms of humane content and how it works in the context of the conflict. It gave children a way to find an expression to their experience of the war. PEACEZINE gave them a way to talk about its effect on their mind and a focus on *them* – as an antidote to war propaganda from the story spinners in national capitals. It also gave them an insight to the enemy: they share the same problems.

As she saw it, this gap between propaganda and emotion created a base for empathy that might not have existed naturally in the confrontation, or might have been lost in the terrible noise of the war. She thought it decolonized perception by giving children ownership of their own experience, and by giving them a way to handle their emotions without intervention from the polarizations and caricatures designed to incite hate through images of “the enemy” or of the (ethnic) “other.” The gap, if properly handled, she concluded, also prepared better days in the future: it gave children a way to see beyond the conflict and those caricatures that would hinder ordinary life after the war is finally over. Children would have something positive to share with the enemy – something other than the bloody enemy stereotypes that the government’s propaganda machines had created to depersonalize the enemy to make them feel distant enough to justify killing.

Michelle thought that in contrast to normative war propaganda, PEACEZINE provided a means for creating empathy, for structuring relations and for bringing life experiences to the foreground. The zine collects material about emotional traumas and brings the war-torn emotions into discussion through local experiences – in this case, through children. As such, these conversations probably had a healing effect in that they show that feelings and emotions are shared by many yet could also have provided a ground for finding help and making decisions regarding how to best help distressed

children. A game like this has many desirable features, she saw. The zine was open-ended, used language that is near to the experience of the children who had been affected by the war, focused on memory in non-linear or episodic terms, seeing designers as mere facilitators who enable these therapeutic processes, and provided a natural way to involve stakeholders (criteria 1-6). A game like *PEACEZINE* also “scaled up” reasonably well, for more and more rich and diverse stories could be added. Of course, it could be manipulated by parents, teachers, journalists and platform owners, and it could expose children to bullying, high levels of surveillance and blacklisting in the eventuality that conflict would erupt again, but, as Michelle noted, it was a good beginning.

4.3 Exhibit 3: Recovery Hub

The third fiction in Michelle’s *Eternal Peace* exhibition has its starting point in service design. This piece demonstrated improved access to services that increase well-being and—in the case of the exhibition—Kantian peaceful co-existence. The fiction shifted focus from craft research and games to the ways in which people interact with voluntary organizations and local government. Michelle called it the *Recovery Hub*, and her selection was inspired by the example of the Conflict Kitchen in Pittsburgh as described in *Design and Peace* (Smith, 2022: 164), although *Recovery Hub* provides a welcome, diverse alternative to the stereotypes displayed in Conflict Kitchen. (Fiction Spread 3).

Michelle underlined in her preface to the catalogue that this piece showed ways to connect individuals and families who suffer from trauma providing help that can start a process of recovery. Hence “*Recovery Hub*.” The idea combined emotional support with practical and financial advice. Like in Peace Games, this process was based mostly on local resources, acknowledging that recovery needed assistance and that most of this assistance had to be mutualistic. Additionally, aspects of the service needed an operational and financial connection to local and regional authorities.

The example reveals the explicit gap between Lederachian local and middle-level actors and showed that such a service had to be designed better. The gap, as she argued in the catalogue, is similar to Peace Games: the realization that if help is required, many—if not most—of the resources needed are available locally. For local people it is important to get help to break the self-imposed and invisible boundaries created by depression and the psychological defences that keep such impositions suppressed. The difference to Peace Games, she claimed, is that those forms of mutual help discussed under *Recovery Hub* connect to collective knowledge and build on it: this is empathy built into societal structures.

Like stories in the previous two exhibits, this story was open-ended, used the language of people affected by the conflict, and although it did identify deficiencies in service provision that initiated bureaucratic action, it saw designers as facilitators and enablers in a dialogue between victims of war and stakeholder institutions like the Red Cross and social services (criteria 1-6). It also scaled up reasonably cheaply, did not require permanent premises, and did not need to leave traces of personal information that could be dangerous in case the conflict re-escalates. It could, of course, be manipulated by local authorities and it was vulnerable to the ebbs and flows of public opinion in far-away countries that fund the NGOs involved through fund-raising campaigns. Yet, for Michelle, it was best practice: a local initiative that connected victims of war to services that could assist in recovery.

Fiction Spread 3. Recovery Hub



Recovery Hub

Mandy is a war widow with two small children. She suffers from emotional trauma of losing her husband and her brother is a prisoner of war in a camp well known for torture. Her days run like clockwork in routines that keep her going and not collapsing. This front hides a mind in turmoil, a mind incapable of making decisions and thinking about the future.

One day she discovers a pop-up space in a local school. It is called *Recovery Hub*. She sees a few people walking in and follows them to the basement of the school. She is greeted at the door, where a volunteer tells her to get some soup from a communal kitchen in the corner and with a full stomach explore the recovery services on the sidelines of communal tables. Visitors are encouraged to first talk to a grief councillor Birgit, a retired nurse who has worked in a now-closed mental hospital for decades. Mandy takes the advice. Birgit finds signs of depression and social withdrawal in Mandy and directs her to talk to Sandra, a psychotherapist in another makeshift booth. Sandra and Mandy converse for 10 minutes, after which Sandra concluded that Birgit's diagnosis is probably right and Mandy would need some help. She lays down several options, including three other booths in the pop-up space. One has a social worker from the local government for financial assistance.

Another has a clerk from funeral home, who is also a therapist by background and has seen hundreds of families incapacitated by grief. Third has a secretary from the office of a local member of the parliament, fourth a representative from Red Cross who can help in food assistance and nutrition, fifth a retired master builder who can with damaged buildings, and a sixth a representative of War Victims Anonymous (WVA), a self-help group modeled after Alcoholics Anonymous. Mandy uses 10 minutes in the social worker, Red Cross, and WVA booths and leaves with notes about how to contact them. All these services are mutualistic and cooperative: no fees are asked, no names taken unless someone wants to leave their name. The purpose of the *Recovery Hub* is to provide useful, concrete touchpoints to help for people who are too burdened by their daily grind of taking care of children, helping neighbors, finding enough food, and finding materials for fixing gaps and cracks in buildings before the winter. Yet, the process of the hub is organized professionally: it proceeds from examination to diagnosis and then help.

Figure 5: Spread from Museum of Eternal Peace Catalogue: *Recovery Hub* (Design: Philip Ely)

5 Closing essay: reflections from fiction

What did Michelle observe when she was curating the exhibition? When she contextualized the contributions she saw the need to present the bigger (post-exhibition) pictures, and she started to see ideas and concepts reoccurring. Fiction Spread 4 has the table of contents of the exhibition.

Her concluding essay had five sections

The importance of community healing. First, she saw that the activities in Fiction Spreads 1-3 each had pros and cons. Each, she thought, had the benefit of having a strong foundation in community which, perhaps in the footsteps of Kurt Lewin's action research (1946), is crucial for their success. For her, this grounding would be a clear benefit vis-à-vis standard user-centred approaches and even more so to design thinking approaches. In these, a good deal of the peace work is done by designers; in the fictions above, peace work is done by people who are suffering from preceding conflict. The stress is where it ought to be: people creating ties that help them to see other people, including their former enemies, as humans.

Parachuting help is not enough: healing long-term community trauma. Second, the fictions showed her that there is a need for grounding any act or recovery in a local community. These acts must have a grounding in the local community to be both realistic and realisable to garner support, and they must be co-designed with the local community for the same reason. A parachute approach from support groups and organisations that fly in hospitals and psychologists is valuable in the immediate crisis, but not in working with the long-term community trauma, a point made several times in studies

of catastrophes like floods and hurricanes (see Erikson 1976; Henk & Jelte 2018; Erikson and Peek 2022).

Fiction Spread 4.




	<p>The Museum of Eternal Peace <i>Foreword</i>..... 3 <small>by the Governor of the Prefecture, Mr Alvaro March</small></p>	<p><i>Peace Games</i>..... 50</p> <p>PEACEZINE BBCPeace Sigmund Freud Act Out Theologic School Play for Empathy</p>
	<p><i>Preface</i>..... 5 <small>by the Head of the Design Museum, Ms. Anna Schmid</small></p> <p><i>Welcome</i>..... 7 <small>from the European Commission and the Cities of Paris, Eindhoven and Warsaw and the Design Museum</small></p>	<p><i>Self & Society</i>..... 87</p> <p>RecoveryHub Night Radio Drop-by Clinic Kitchen for All Park Walks and De-mining Roma for Good</p>
	<p><i>What is the Museum of Eternal Peace?</i>..... 9</p> <p><small>Introduction by Michelle Jan War is Back Peace and Design Kant's Vision of Peace Johan Galtung's Positive Peace Design dialogues for empathy</small></p> <p><i>Healing through Co-Working</i>..... 20</p> <p><small>Craft and Design CraftClub Migrant Farmas Plastic Limbs Community Garden Creative Writing</small></p>	<p><i>Reflections</i>..... 119 <small>by Michelle Jan</small></p> <p>Emergent themes Community healing Parachuting help is not enough Locals as peacebuilders Peace needs caring and protection Peace and its misuses: how not to file conflict</p>
		<p><i>Acknowledgements</i>..... 159</p> <p><i>References</i>..... 161</p> <p><i>Index</i>..... 170</p> <p><i>Colophon</i>..... 183</p>

Figure 6: Spread from Museum of Eternal Peace Catalogue: Contents Page (Image: Philip Ely; Text: Ilpo Koskinen).

Locals as healers. Her third observation was that these acts require collaboration with some key members who have a long-term stake in the community: craft and design teachers in *CraftClub*, media in *PEACEZINE*, and local and perhaps international NGOs and local governments in *Recovery Hub*. Empathy and dialogue are natural processes, but they require formal support of many kinds to be robust and organized into long-term patterns. Without these members, they might be vulnerable to resource cuts and, in the worst case, to those same political ambitions that fuelled the conflict in the first place.

Cellular peace needs protection. Next, she made some critical observations. Namely, every activity she studies had perceivable shortcomings. To address these shortcomings, she concluded, a revised approach might have to apply elements from each: for example, it would not be hard to imagine a coordinated approach in which *CraftClub*, media and local services would work together. However, whether an integrated approach would be needed or not should be a choice, not a default option. Each had value on its own, Michelle thought: it could serve different parts of the community, and if one program fails or collapses for some reason, others would not be affected. It is possible to script acts for one protagonist. Yet, what she saw when she scanned Fictions 1-3 was that there is value in partitioning peacebuilding into smaller independent projects to avoid centralized, regional or national controls that—whilst they might improve their measurable “impact” and make them more cost-effective by replicating them across larger swatches of society—might also make them vulnerable to the risky environment and security breaches of a post-conflict society. It would be easy, she thought,

to use these acts for divisive ends, and who knows what happens in next elections. A decentralized approach may be a better way to increase community resilience, to use a fashionable word.

Peace and its misuses. Finally, she saw that these fictions had several limits. They focused on how to create forms of empathy within devastated communities during post-war peacebuilding and reconstruction. Because of the focus, they had omissions. These omissions consist of technical system descriptions, malicious attacks, or instances of sociopathy, the relationship of the activities to power structures, or the unintended consequences of empathy. She also noted that these omissions are not necessarily shortcomings. Rather, they can be turned into ways to identify coverage gaps to improve future local peace-making. Another risk is the misuse of empathy. Empathy can be directed to strengthen in-group ties and to create confrontation between Us and Them. Michelle did not find examples of the 'misuse' of empathy, perhaps because the cases she collected were open and participation was not 'controlled';, she made a note about the need to monitor empathy used to objectify outsiders and strangers by creating in-group attachments.

After the exhibition opened, the reviews ranged from praise about the worthy cause to murmurs about whether this is design at all. For Michelle, it was a way to bring together design and peace research communities as well as diplomatic communities in a novel way. For her, the exhibition continued recent work in policy design, but with a cause that was existential rather than aimed at improving efficiency. For her, it was also a way to convince the audience that design can be done by everyone, and its base can be immaterial. For her, these were worthy though controversial points. After the exhibition, she joined a research group to explore the potential of design empathy for peace.

6 Conclusions and discussion

This paper has explored how designers could enable peace in post-conflict environments by creating a character, Michelle, a curator who developed an exhibition from grassroots peace-making efforts in a post-war era. It can be seen as a scoping study, designed to develop design approaches in the context of conflict. Within this, we have applied design fiction as a method. The paper is a response primarily to the war in Ukraine, but also a reaction to the current tendency of bullying in international politics and national policymaking. Designing for peace is important, although there is little material around it beyond a few remarks in design literature and three exhibitions, two in New York, USA between 2015 and 2022, and one in Genk, Belgium in 2013.

Our approach has been speculative. Specifically, it has built on the idea that speculative fiction can function as a meaningful social design tool. For this paper, our fictional device was the curator Michelle and an exhibition she curated for a design museum in her home country. To illustrate the content of the exhibition, (and through that, the breadth of local peace-making efforts), we have created three stories that have explored three different aspects of empathy and dialogue. Although these exhibits, as well as the whole exhibition, are fictional, they still generated a new discourse that we could explore, analyse or interrogate. Through discussion we could generate observations about how designers could start to approach peacebuilding in post-war societies.

Speculative fiction, of course, is not evidence-based in the same way as, say, contextual inquiry (Beyer & Holtzblatt, 1998)) or experimental and speculative research (Wilkie et al, 2017)). If we create fictions and then study them, we are still working within our own imagination that can be bent easily to our own biases and interests. Yet, the method demonstrates properties that go beyond this, for such an

experiment follows a Whiteheadian philosophic inquiry (Whitehead, 1985) in that it externalizes imagination, creating intersubjective spaces in the mind for researchers themselves. It also stimulates a discourse that becomes richer from one fiction to another, making it possible to detect developmental changes in this discourse. Finally, it reveals our imaginations, making it examinable for outsiders who can interrogate fictions and our observations from them. In one word, the method creates rigor and accountability that is probably not different from, say, hermeneutics or psychoanalysis in which conclusions heavily depend on imagination but are subject to community constraints, as the classic psychometrician Donald Campbell once argued (Campbell 1975). In this regard, it has similarities to dialogue in the studio: when designers design in the studio, they also convene peers around them, discuss with them, and follow cognitive and generative movements of their (collective) minds. As in empathic design (Koskinen 2023: 85-88), they may notice that some things are interesting, some not, some indifferent. These movements, created in the context of creative work, are observable and reportable, and can be treated as indications of substance or quality or value. A similar precedent can be found in scenario-based design in interaction design (see Carroll 2000).

The stories we have created to examine peacebuilding are fictions. Fictional as they are, they suggest a few things that are useful in turning design concepts like empathy into tools of peace. For one, they show it is possible to create empathy where it matters, in the community, among people who go through their ordinary lives, whether chores or joys. All these three fictions are designable, and 'make real' opportunities for people to immerse themselves into the community and use its resources in healing from the conflict. They also suggest ways of transcending divisive boundaries created by a conflict, a topic we have left largely unexplored in the name of space. In this sense, they are not unlike empathic processes in design literature, as suggested by, for example, Kouprie and Sleeswijk Visser (2009). However, there are significant differences as well. When empathy serves peacebuilding, it is people who need to create and maintain empathic processes, not designers. Another difference is that in the service of peacebuilding, empathy can probably not be as goal-driven as it is in design. The fictions suggest that designers should consider creating empathy-inducing actions without instrumentalising these actions into timeframes for product design. These timeframes are short compared to peacebuilding that may require the work of generations of people. Finally, these fictions suggest that it is important to let empathic processes loose rather than control them. The underlying epistemology should probably be dialectic like empathic design that encourages designers to lose themselves in empathy if it serves the common good (see Koskinen 2023; for dialectic, see Krogh and Koskinen 2020).

If we accept the limitations of fiction and see it as a method among others, the main contribution of our paper is that empathy and listening are important after conflict, and such listening must be grounded in the experience of people who must lead their lives in the shadow of a war. Empathy, following the peace activist John Paul Lederach, is like a yeast: once introduced into the post-conflict environment, it starts to shape it, transforming it into positive change rather than trying to restore the pre-existing world as it once was. The idea of critical yeast (Lederach, 2005: 100), has no specific parallel in design process models but may be manifest through prototype "platforms" or in the way that social innovations are spread more widely within communities and populations through people's ("end-users") own willingness in the early stages of design "roll-outs" to adopt such ways of working or living. Critical yeast is analogous to the idea of a modular approach to seeding ideas and innovations

beyond the centre to the periphery that social designer Hillary Cottam advocates for in her practice-led reflections in *Radical Help* (Cottam, 2018: 175). Designing for peace, we argue, is a process of transformation rather than destruction: the goal is to find ways for people to see things in the eyes of others, and find commonalities that can serve as a ground to build identities that may make a peaceful and just co-existence possible one day without suppressing the violence and horrors of the war and the experience of conflict more generally in everyday life.

7 Disclosure

Authors do not report any conflicts of interest. This paper did not require ethical approval.

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