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Editorial: Central but Decentered: Repositioning the Practitioner in Design Research Involving Practice

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Abstract: Design research involving practice affords a unique mode of inquiry facilitated by acts of making, generative thinking, and iterative experimentation. The practitioner's perspective is central because it foregrounds the significance of personal engagement with the research problem at hand. Current efforts in the field are nonetheless aiming to expand this inward-looking gaze by attending to the systemic and entangled dimensions of designing. With the increasing turn to relational, posthuman, and decolonial approaches towards that end, it becomes imperative to reconstrue what counts as 'practice' and reexamine whose perspectives are included in such a reconstrual. The present track brings together five contributions dealing with this issue, offering an array of theoretical, empirical, and methodological studies that illustrate how design research involving practice can fully account for the centrality of the practitioner's perspective while also addressing the urgency to decenter it.

Keywords: practitioner-researcher; decentering; entanglement; pluralism

1. Introduction

"Design research involving practice" is understood as a scholarly field in which a design practitioner can take on the role of researcher to "position design practice as either a *central* aspect of the method, or an important part of the outcome, or both" (Dixon, 2020, p. 2, emphasis added). Many nomenclatures exist to describe this orientation, with *practice-based*, *practice-led*, *constructive* design research, and *research through design* being the most prominent. Though carrying different nuances, all of these terms denote that the first-person perspective of the practitioner-researcher is key to understanding, analyzing, and communicating the processes and outcomes of designing in an academically rigorous manner (see Vaughan, 2017). Such a perspective is typically operationalized through acts of making, generative thinking, and iterative experimentation, thus rendering the creative dimension of design practice an integral aspect of the investigative process.



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A longstanding interest to integrate this mode of inquiry with more established traditions like participatory or action research has positioned the field as a valuable research approach committed to the common good, often emphasizing forms of civic participation and public engagement that extend beyond personal or academic interests. This has unfolded primarily in two ways: by inviting participants to shape the direction of inquiry (Ehn, 2008) and by treating design artifacts as research tools that can be experienced, manipulated, and transformed collectively (Zimmerman & Forlizzi, 2014). Despite these ambitions, much work in the field remains anchored in the reflective dimension of design practice (see Schön, 1983), causing participants or artifacts to be “looked upon narrowly from the perspective of the design researcher while eschewing the perspectives of others [shaping] the research” (Knutz & Markussen, 2022, p. 1). This theme track emerges from the recognition that no single standpoint can account for an ethical whole, thus calling for work that can take the pluralization of design (and) research perspectives not as a methodological add-on but as an ontological and epistemological imperative.

More recent efforts to challenge the Anglo-European narrative in academia have prompted a turn to onto-epistemological approaches premised on decentralization. Relationalism, posthumanism, and decolonialism, to name a few, have come to rethink what counts as knowledge and how reality is made or constituted. In resisting the dominance of a singular, central perspective, they, for example, complicate Western understandings of science with indigenous knowledges (Aikenhead & Ogawa, 2007; Tynan, 2021) or question the idea that knowing should mirror a pre-given reality to, instead, treat it as a situated, emergent, and entangled process with many worlds in flux (Barad, 2007; Benjamin, 2015). Design and its related fields have readily embraced this turn, and the discussion around ‘decentering’ is now becoming ubiquitous across a wide range of scholarly outputs (see, e.g., Escobar, 2018; Hernández Ibinarriaga, 2025; Nicenboim et al., 2025).

While most of these outputs concentrate on their implications for design practice and practicing designers, our track aims to articulate the same discussion at the level of research—i.e., in the context of an expanding academic tradition in which ‘practice’ and ‘practitioners’ are not necessarily the beneficiaries of the investigative process but the very vehicles through which this process becomes operational. We thus want to explore the idea of decentering design practice to examine what this means for researchers, specifically when their research is illuminated by their perspectives as practitioners. As exemplified by the contributions gathered in this track, an exploration of this kind is capable of yielding new theoretical, empirical, and methodological outlooks for design scholars, as well as fresh insights for professionals, educators, and students. In short, rather than focusing on how designers could work with decentralization in practice, the track was conceived to invite already decentralized practices to understand how these can problematize the often central and singular point of view of the practitioner-researcher.

An additional layer to this interest concerns how technological systems expose and intensify ongoing processes of (de)centralization. Like many disciplines, design is at a turning point where the use of generative artificial intelligence increasingly evidences how knowledge production is distributed across people, databases, and algorithms but, at the same time, concentrated in certain platforms and infrastructures. This does not mean that technological systems are intelligent in human terms or can produce knowledge on their own, but it does suggest that what we call intelligence and knowledge production can no longer be the result of human ideas alone. Further, it implies a qualitative shift in how designing, researching,

and their possible entanglements can be understood. Even though none of the contributions presented in this track directly deal with this issue, we mention it to remark that design is a privileged practice where such distributed forms of intelligence and knowledge production are very much thinkable and actionable.

The contributions included here are, in any case, diverse. They touch upon practices of sensory engagement, pedagogy and learning, co-design, urban planning, and multispecies collaboration, a heterogeneity welcomed by the track call. Despite looking into different design (and) research topics, they all share a commitment towards advancing design research involving practice in its capacity as *an approach*. Together, they illustrate how to move beyond the identity, agency, and reflexivity of the practitioner-researcher; explore more-than-individual, more-than-embodied, and more-than-reflective ways of investigating one's practice; demonstrate how first-person methods can accommodate multiple perspectives and vice versa; discuss what forms of authorship and accountability are needed when personal modes of inquiry become entangled with complex socioecological systems; and navigate the spectrum between positionality and relationality through concrete philosophical alignments. Ultimately, they propose more plural ways of doing design research through practice, which brings a very distinct set of challenges and implications compared to design research about practice or design practice informed by research.

2. Contributions

Based on a rigorous review process conducted with an international body of experts in design research involving practice, five papers out of forty initial submissions were selected for inclusion in this track. These papers variously address the tension between the centrality of the practitioner's perspective and the increasing turn to research approaches premised on decentralization—relationalism, posthumanism, and decolonialism more concretely. As a result, the track offers an array of theoretical, empirical, and methodological studies that illustrate how to work with this tension and why doing so is critical. Below we introduce the papers by clustering them into three contributory directions, which indicate how the authors account for the central position of the practitioner-researcher while addressing the urgency to decenter it: (1) redistributing agency, (2) integrating perspectives, and (3) traversing scales.

It is important to note that while the position of the practitioner-researcher is what makes such a tension worth investigating, the papers gathered in this track refer to this position with the terms *practitioner-researcher* and *practitioner* interchangeably. We understand this as a result of the current state of efforts in design research more generally, where academic contributions have seen an increasing involvement of practitioners coming from outside of a strictly scholarly tradition. All papers included here nonetheless focus on discussing decentralization academically, through either practical or conceptual work in which the figure of the practitioner-researcher becomes analytically significant. On this note, we turn to the original terms proposed by the authors to ensure accuracy in the presentations that follow.

2.1 Redistributing agency

In *Redefining Design Practice as a Sensory and Decentered Experience*, Azeem Hamid, Umar Hameed, Kristi Kuusk, and Nithikul Nimkulrat present a practice-led study in which the

practitioner-researcher's primary role is that of an educator. The study reports on a workshop held in Lahore, Pakistan, with foundation-year design students participating in a series of sonic, visual, and bodily-based material explorations. The workshop is designed to unsettle the educator's hierarchical position and redistribute agency among students as well as the evolving spatial configuration of the learning site. Learning is thereby understood as a responsive and collective process rather than something to be purposely 'facilitated' or individually attained. By demonstrating the significance of sensory engagement in knowledge production—and doing so in a context rarely represented in mainstream design discourse—this paper also joins an ongoing effort to broaden the epistemics and geopolitics of design research involving practice. In this vein, decentralization is addressed on two fronts. First, the practitioner-researcher is repositioned as someone who still shapes the conditions of practice but learns to relinquish control to the contingencies of practicing with others. Second, design research involving practice is expanded into new territories, both in terms of geographical location and mode of affective-intellectual engagement.

With a different take on learning, Barak Pelman and Edith Bouton mobilize Actor Network Theory in their paper *Projects as Actors in Design Education*. This work conceives of 'the project' as an active participant in studio pedagogy, seeing it less as the material outcome of learning and more as an evolving force that mediates relations among students, instructors, tools, and institutional settings. Through an empirical study of four university courses ranging from architecture to ceramics, the studio is framed as an actor-network where learning becomes a multiparty negotiation attuned to the needs of everyone and everything involved. This form of attunement redirects the locus of inquiry from the reflective practitioner—be it an instructor or a student—to the sociomateriality of the pedagogical practice itself. The study thus shows how projects are both agents and conduits of learning, advancing current understandings of what counts as pedagogical practice and *who* or *what* can be considered a participant in it. In line with the ideas laid out by Hamid and colleagues, this paper illustrates how decentering does not signify the withdrawal of the practitioner's agency but a redistribution thereof across bodies, things, and circumstances.

2.2 Integrating perspectives

Jingyuan Tan and Linfu Zhang also propose a wider conception of reflective practice. Specifically focusing on matters of research design, their paper *Integrating Co-design and Auto-ethnographic Approaches* presents a review of recent literature that aims at strengthening the experiential insights of design practitioners. Here, the authors map how introspection and self-reflection can be integrated into the methods and techniques of collaborative designing. By framing this integration as a move from *design as the performance of expertise* to *design as a process of becoming-with others*, they distinguish five ways to methodologically integrate co-design and auto-ethnography: solo, dialogic, triangulated, cumulative, and solidary. Such a distinction pinpoints emerging questions in design research involving practice, particularly with respect to the multilayered identities, responsibilities, and power asymmetries that practitioner-researchers consciously or unconsciously inhabit. This aspect directly addresses our call to explore how first-person methods can accommodate multiple perspectives and vice versa, and it does so by providing practical suggestions for pluralizing reflexivity rather than carrying it out only individually.

Interestingly, one possible way of pluralizing reflexivity in practice is presented by Ranjani Balasubramanian and Shweta Srivastav in *A Researcher and a Guide Talk into a Paper*.

Written as a dialogue between the authors, this paper not only offers the integration of two distinct perspectives but also *performs* it in structure and content. The dialogue unfolds between a practitioner-researcher and a scholar-provocateur, identities assumed by the authors to discuss matters of positionality through a decolonial lens. By this means, the former contributes her lived experience as an urban planning practitioner, whereas the latter guides the discussion by anchoring it into the broader academic discourse. Such a way of co-authoring interrogates the sufficiency of singular positionality statements to reframe one's research stance as co-constituted, dynamic, and emergent. In advancing dialogue as a method, the paper resists the extractivist logic of interviews and invites us to rethink how practitioner-researchers can stand firm in their commitments while remaining open to change. Integrating distinct perspectives can thus contribute to the articulation of more plural research outputs, as shown in this paper, or operate at the level of research design, as demonstrated in the contribution presented by Tan and Zhang.

2.3 Traversing scales

The third contributory direction highlights the need to move across material or spatial magnitudes, resolutions, and levels of organization to sustain one's perspective as central and simultaneously decenter it. In *The Meandering Practitioner*, Markus Wernli, Kam-Fai Chan, Jonathan Yu, and Joshua Wolper introduce the notion of *meanderability* as a disposition to engage with such an idea. Meanderability is exemplified through a long-term multispecies fieldwork on soil cultures, in which the authors work with farmers, rubble, plants, microorganisms, and environmental processes in rural Hong Kong. This mode of working illustrates how the scales of design research involving practice can traverse from the embodied and the microscopic to the systemic and the socioecological, allowing the practitioner's experience to be integral to their research yet continually reconfigured by forces that displace and exceed it. In this respect, the paper supports the formalization of open-ended research methodologies, where interruptions, detours, and shifting focal points are not seen as digressions but as necessary and constitutive elements of inquiry.

Albeit in different ways, scale shifts can also be traced across the previous papers. The adaptation of a workshop to the evolving needs of the learning space, the multiscalar nature of engaging with studio pedagogy from architecture to ceramics, the integration of self-reflective and collaborative design methods, and the negotiation of one's positionality in an urban planning context all point towards the retention and expansion of the role of the practitioner in design research involving practice. In other words, these ways of traversing scales contribute to rethinking the position of practitioner-researchers by "maintain[ing] the locus of knowledge production within [their] design practice[s] but expand[ing] the nature of such practice[s] beyond individual modes of practicing" (Vega, 2021, p. 271). First-person perspectives are thus neither abandoned nor stabilized. Rather, they are reconsidered across multiple places, letting inquiry remain grounded in firsthand experience yet accommodating the broader sociomaterial and spatiotemporal contexts in which that experience takes shape.

3. Conclusions

The contributions included in this track exemplify how the practitioner's perspective can be decentered while reaffirming its value as an indispensable site of knowledge production. What surfaces is thus not a departure from the first-person singular but a way of diversifying how it is positioned, mobilized, and complemented. Across the studies presented here, first-person accounts are shown to operate in-between individual reflexivity and shared ways of sensemaking, allowing for different spaces and modes of thinking more plurally, both *about* and *through* inquiry. This further suggests a direction from which to explore the decentering of the figure, position, and perspective of the practitioner in design research involving practice without dissolving the epistemic relevance of lived experience. In such a way, the studies lay out new tactics whereby decentering does not squarely entail displacement from a central position but, instead, sheds light on alternative ways of moving, relating, shifting roles, alternating positions, and becoming-with others.

Finally, the contributions raise an important question about how this kind of work may sit within the field's existing classifications. We ask if a new typology of studies is emerging, where the practitioner is simultaneously constitutive and co-productive of their research, and which does not fit with precision into the established categories of the diverse approaches combined in the papers—e.g., the integration of co-design and autoethnography or the development of participatory design workshops through practice-led research frameworks. The decreasing tendency to adhere to a single, predetermined research design, combined with the deliberate interweaving of multiple traditions, also foregrounds the tension between centrality and decentralization. We believe that recognizing and articulating this emerging aspect constitutes an important task for future scholarship in design research involving practice, whether the field is treated as a research topic or as a research approach.

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