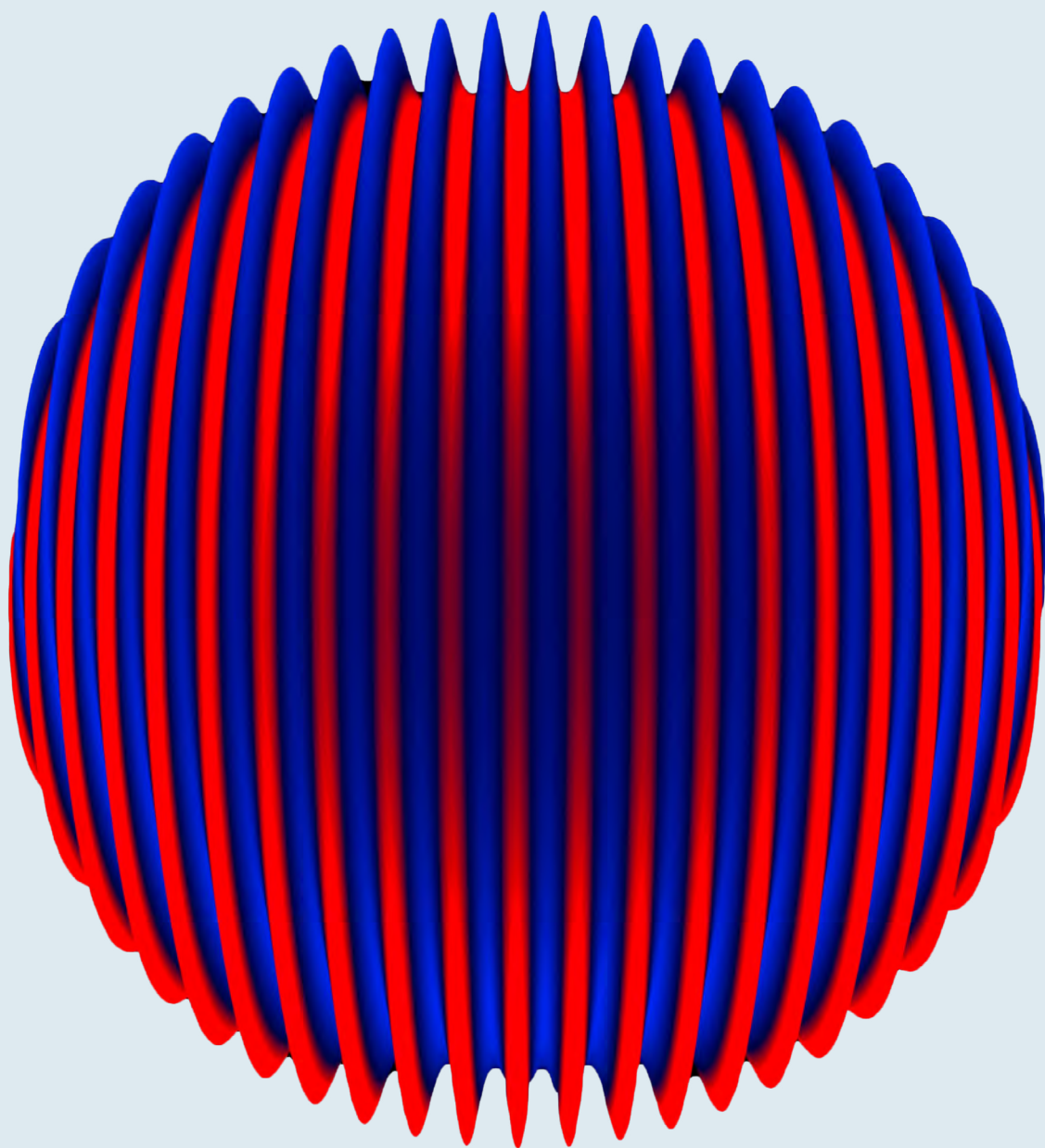




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Design Thinking as a strategic device: facilitators and adoption practices in organizations

Gianluca Carella^{1,2}, Marta Conte³, Cabirio Cautela³ and Francesco Zurlo³

Abstract

Design Thinking (DT) is increasingly positioned as a strategic device for innovation and competitive advantage within organizations. Despite its widespread legitimacy, however, its adoption often remains superficial, fragmented, or symbolic, undermining its transformative potential. While prior research has extensively examined the barriers to DT adoption, less attention has been paid to how adoption unfolds in practice and how it reshapes Design Thinking itself. This paper adopts a critical and empirical perspective on DT adoption, focusing on a dominant conception that frames Design Thinking as a driver of strategic innovation. Rather than treating this conception as a goal to be achieved, the study approaches it as an object of inquiry. Drawing on an exploratory study involving 100 design thinkers working in Italian companies, the paper analyses the facilitators enacted to render Design Thinking practicable as a strategic device within organizational contexts. The findings show that facilitators do not operate as neutral enablers of adoption. Instead, they function as practices of translation and legitimation that actively reconfigure Design Thinking, privileging certain interpretations of strategic value while constraining others.

Keywords

Design Thinking, Strategic Innovation, Design Thinking Adoption, Organizational Change, Design Management

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, Design Thinking (DT) has gained increasing visibility as a strategic approach to innovation, organizational change, and competitive advantage. Within both academic literature and managerial discourse, DT has been framed as a powerful way to address complex and ill-defined challenges by combining human-centred inquiry, experimentation, and iterative learning (Brown, 2009; Martin, 2009; Liedtka, 2015). As a result, DT has progressively expanded beyond the boundaries of the design discipline, positioning itself at the intersection between design and management and becoming a recurring element of corporate innovation agendas and transformation initiatives (Zurlo, 2019).

Despite this growing legitimacy, a persistent tension characterizes the diffusion of Design Thinking within organizations. While DT is widely promoted for its transformative potential, empirical studies consistently show that its adoption often remains partial, superficial, or symbolic (Carlgren et al., 2016; Dunne, 2018). This phenomenon has been described as a form of “design theatre,” in which the surface elements of DT are adopted without engaging with its deeper epistemological and organizational implications (Carlgren et al., 2016).

A substantial body of research has investigated the barriers that hinder the adoption of Design Thinking in organizations. Prior studies have highlighted resistance to uncertainty and change (Ackoff, 1974; Tetenbaum, 1998), leadership misalignment (Carlgren et al., 2014; Dunne, 2018), incompatibilities between design and managerial languages (Kimbrell, 2011; Björklund et al., 2020), and the trivialization of DT (Ersoy, 2018; Zurlo, 2019). Together, these contributions explain why DT initiatives frequently fail to produce sustained organizational transformation.

However, existing research has primarily approached Design Thinking adoption as a problem of overcoming ob-

stacles, implicitly assuming DT as a stable and desirable object whose implementation depends on the right combination of conditions or interventions. As a result, facilitators of adoption have often been framed in normative or instrumental terms, as managerial levers to ensure the effective diffusion of Design Thinking within organizations (Carella & Melazzini, 2023). What remains underexplored is how these facilitators operate in practice, and how they participate in shaping what Design Thinking becomes as it is adopted.

This paper advances the literature by shifting the focus from adoption as implementation to adoption as transformation. Rather than treating facilitators as neutral enablers, it conceptualizes them as organizational translation devices that actively reconfigure the meaning, scope, and strategic role of Design Thinking within organizational contexts. The paper does not address Design Thinking as a generic or plural paradigm, but focuses on a dominant conception that positions it as a driver of strategic innovation and competitive advantage.

Drawing on an empirical analysis of a community of 100 design thinkers operating within Italian companies, the paper examines which facilitators are enacted to render Design Thinking practicable as a strategic device inside organizations. The findings show that these facilitators do not simply ensure more effective adoption; rather, they actively reconfigure Design Thinking itself, shaping how strategic value is defined, enacted, and legitimised in practice, while marginalising alternative ways of engaging with design.

By foregrounding this empirical evidence, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on the evolution of Design Thinking in organizational contexts, showing that adoption cannot be reduced to a matter of speed, scale, or diffusion, but must be understood as a situated process of organizational sensemaking and legitimation.

1. Design Thinking as a strategic promise: between aspiration and practice

Within contemporary organizational discourse, one of the most influential and widely circulated conceptions of Design Thinking positions it as a driver of strategic innovation and competitive advantage. In this view, DT is not merely a set of creative methods, but a strategic capability that enables organizations to reframe problems, explore new value propositions, and respond to uncertainty in dynamic markets (Brown, 2009; Martin, 2009; Liedtka, 2015). This conception has played a crucial role in legitimising Design Thinking within managerial arenas, allowing it to enter domains traditionally dominated by analytical and predictive logics.

DT is frequently presented as a means to bridge design sensibilities and managerial concerns, offering a hybrid approach capable of integrating desirability, feasibility, and viability into strategic processes (Brown, 2009). As a result, many organizations have embraced DT as a strategic lever to support innovation agendas, cultural change, and long-term competitiveness.

However, the growing prominence of Design Thinking as a strategic promise has also intensified a series of tensions. Several scholars have noted that the translation of DT into managerial contexts often leads to a partial and selective appropriation of its principles and practices (Kimbell, 2011; Dunne, 2018). In particular, when DT is framed primarily as a tool for delivering fast and measurable outcomes, its more reflective, exploratory, and critical dimensions risk being marginalised. This tension becomes especially visible in organizational settings driven by efficiency metrics, short-term performance indicators, and hierarchical decision-making structures.

In these cases, DT is mobilised to signal innovation and openness, but its integration into strategic governance remains weak. As highlighted in prior research, such symbolic or performative adoption contributes to a growing gap between the strategic promise of Design Thinking and its actual impact on organizational practices (Dunne, 2018; Zurlo, 2019).

This gap has been extensively discussed in the literature on barriers to Design Thinking adoption. While these contributions provide a robust diagnosis of the obstacles faced by organizations, they often treat the strategic conception of Design Thinking as an unquestioned objective, implicitly assuming that deeper adoption would naturally lead to the realisation of its promised benefits.

This paper adopts a critical stance towards this assumption. Rather than asking how organizations can better implement Design Thinking in order to fulfil its strategic promise, the paper interrogates how this promise is negotiated, translated, and reshaped through adoption practices. Building on the idea that Design Thinking is a situated practice whose meaning emerges through use (Kimbell, 2011), the strategic version of DT is approached here not as a stable model to be replicated, but as a fragile and contested construct that must be continuously made practicable within organizational contexts.

From this perspective, facilitators of Design Thinking adoption acquire a different analytical significance. Instead of being understood merely as enabling factors that help overcome resistance, facilitators can be seen as mechanisms through which the strategic conception of DT is selectively operationalised. By defining who is involved, where DT is positioned, how it is communicated, and what kinds of outcomes are legitimised, facilitators actively participate

in shaping what “strategic Design Thinking” means in practice. In doing so, they contribute to reinforcing certain interpretations of strategic value (such as efficiency, alignment, or speed) while sidelining others related to reflection, critique, or long-term cultural transformation.

By framing Design Thinking as a strategic promise that is continuously reconfigured through adoption, this section sets the stage for the empirical analysis that follows. The next sections examine how facilitators enacted by design thinkers within organizations render this strategic version of DT practicable, and how, in the process, they redefine both the scope of Design Thinking and the nature of strategic value it is expected to deliver.

2. Research design and methodology

This study adopts an exploratory research design aimed at investigating how Design Thinking is rendered practicable as a strategic device within organizational contexts. Given the interpretive nature of the research question and the limited empirical understanding of adoption practices from the perspective of in-house design practitioners, an exploratory approach is appropriate to capture emerging patterns rather than to test predefined hypotheses (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009).

2.1. Research context and participants

The empirical investigation involved a community of 100 design thinkers working within Italian companies across multiple sectors. Participants held roles related to design, and were directly involved in supporting or facilitating DT adoption within their organizations. The study focused specifically on in-house practitioners, rather than external consultants, in order to capture situated perspectives on organisational dynamics, constraints, and facilitators emerging from everyday practice.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

Data collection followed a two-step process combining collective sensemaking and individual evaluation.

In a first phase, participants were involved in a facilitated workshop designed to elicit reflections on their experiences of Design Thinking adoption. During the workshop, participants were asked to identify and discuss the facilitators they had found most relevant in enabling DT to operate within their organizations. This open-ended activity generated a broad and heterogeneous set of facilitators grounded in lived practice rather than in predefined theoretical categories.

The outputs of the workshop were subsequently clustered through an iterative synthesis process conducted by

the research team. Similar facilitators were grouped together, resulting in a consolidated set of facilitator categories that reflected recurring themes emerging from the collective discussion.

In the second phase, these clustered facilitators were translated into a survey questionnaire and distributed to the same community of practitioners. Participants were asked to evaluate the relevance of each facilitator based on their organizational experience. The questionnaire allowed the research team to assess which facilitators were perceived as more or less relevant across different organizational contexts, as well as to identify points of convergence and divergence within the community.

Data analysis focused on identifying patterns of relevance and controversy among the identified facilitators.

The clustering process was conducted through an iterative and interpretive approach. Starting from the raw outputs of the workshop, facilitators were first grouped based on semantic similarity and recurring themes. The research team then refined these clusters through multiple rounds of discussion, comparing interpretations and consolidating overlapping categories.

Particular attention was given to identifying not only common facilitators, but also divergences in how they were perceived and enacted. This process enabled the distinction between recurrent and controversial facilitators, which does not reflect a simple ranking, but rather different modes of adoption emerging from practice.

3. Findings: Recurrent and controversial facilitators of Strategic Design Thinking adoption

The analysis of the empirical data reveals a structured yet non-uniform landscape of facilitators enacted by design thinkers to support the adoption of Design Thinking within organizational contexts. Rather than converging on a homogeneous set of best practices, participants articulated facilitators that differ in scope, orientation, and perceived effectiveness. Two main patterns emerge from the findings: highly recurrent facilitators, which are widely recognised across the community, and controversial facilitators, which generate divergent evaluations among practitioners.

This distinction does not simply reflect differences in perceived usefulness, but points to deeper tensions in how Design Thinking is rendered practicable as a strategic device inside organizations.

3.1. Highly recurrent facilitators: targeted and relational practices

The facilitators most consistently recognised as relevant by participants are predominantly targeted and relational in nature. Rather than addressing the organization as a

homogeneous whole, these practices are directed towards specific groups, roles, or organizational layers, and unfold through continuous interaction over time.

A first cluster of recurrent facilitators concerns direct engagement with key organizational actors, particularly senior management and influential internal stakeholders. Participants repeatedly highlighted the importance of establishing direct dialogue with decision-makers to build legitimacy for Design Thinking initiatives. These interactions were not described as formal presentations of methods, but as ongoing conversations grounded in concrete examples, shared experiences, and situated problem-solving activities. Through this process, Design Thinking is progressively framed as relevant to strategic concerns, rather than as a peripheral or purely creative practice.

A second recurrent facilitator relates to the presence of internal focal points or champions of Design Thinking. Participants emphasised the role of individuals who act as reference figures within the organization, supporting colleagues, translating design practices into organizational language, and mediating between design teams and other functions. These focal points operate as catalysts for adoption, enabling Design Thinking to circulate through informal networks rather than through formal mandates.

Finally, recurrent facilitators include localized and incremental initiatives, such as pilot projects or early involvement of designers in strategic discussions. These practices allow Design Thinking to demonstrate its value within bounded contexts, reducing resistance and uncertainty while gradually expanding its scope. Importantly, such initiatives prioritise depth of engagement over scale, favouring sustained interaction with selected actors rather than broad organizational exposure.

Taken together, these findings suggest that effective adoption of strategic Design Thinking relies on progressive legitimization processes, in which trust, relevance, and credibility are built through targeted interactions rather than through generalized diffusion. A concrete example helps illustrate this dynamic. In several cases, participants described how Design Thinking initiatives initially struggled to gain traction when introduced through broad training programs. In contrast, more targeted efforts (such as engaging a specific senior manager around a concrete strategic challenge) proved more effective. By working closely with a single decision-maker on a real problem, design practitioners were able to demonstrate the relevance of Design Thinking in practice. This initial engagement then facilitated further interactions with adjacent stakeholders, gradually expanding the scope of adoption.

This example reflects a recurring pattern across the data: rather than being adopted through organization-wide initiatives, Design Thinking becomes strategically relevant

through localized and relational entry points, which allow it to be progressively legitimised within the organization.

3.2. Controversial facilitators: transversal and organization-wide actions

In contrast, facilitators perceived as more controversial tend to be transversal and organization-wide in scope. These include large-scale training programs, broad communication campaigns, and initiatives aimed at simultaneously engaging multiple organizational levels.

While some participants reported positive outcomes from such actions, others described them as resource-intensive and weakly impactful. In several cases, transversal initiatives were associated with a dispersion of attention, limited depth of engagement, and difficulties in translating Design Thinking principles into concrete practices. Participants noted that when Design Thinking is introduced too broadly or too rapidly, it risks being perceived as abstract, rhetorical, or disconnected from everyday work.

These controversial facilitators often require significant investments of time and energy, yet do not necessarily result in sustained adoption. Instead, they may contribute to a superficial awareness of Design Thinking without fostering meaningful organizational change. Some participants also reported that overly transversal initiatives can generate scepticism or resistance, particularly when they are not aligned with existing priorities or supported by visible leadership commitment.

The divergence in evaluations highlights a critical tension: while transversal actions aim to scale Design Thinking across the organization, they may undermine the very conditions required for its strategic enactment, especially when introduced without prior legitimization or relational grounding.

3.3. Facilitators as practices of translation and sensemaking

Across both recurrent and controversial facilitators, a common underlying dynamic emerges: facilitators function as practices of translation and sensemaking rather than as neutral implementation mechanisms. By targeting specific actors, sequencing interventions, and framing Design Thinking in particular ways, facilitators shape how DT is understood, valued, and positioned within organizational contexts.

Recurrent facilitators tend to translate Design Thinking into terms that resonate with strategic concerns, organizational language, and local priorities. In doing so, they render DT practicable as a strategic device, while simultaneously narrowing its scope to forms that are compatible with existing structures and expectations. Conversely, controversial facilitators often struggle to perform this translation work effectively, resulting in misalignment

between the strategic promise of Design Thinking and its everyday enactment.

These findings suggest that the adoption of Design Thinking does not hinge on the presence of universally effective facilitators, but on how facilitators are sequenced, targeted, and embedded within organizational dynamics. The distinction between recurrent and controversial facilitators thus provides a foundation for understanding adoption not as a matter of diffusion, but as a situated process of organizational negotiation.

4. Discussion: adoption as a situated and strategic process

The findings presented in this study invite a rethinking of Design Thinking adoption beyond conventional narratives of diffusion, scaling, and implementation. Rather than confirming the existence of universally effective facilitators, the analysis highlights how adoption unfolds through selective, relational, and sequential practices that actively shape what Design Thinking becomes when positioned as a strategic device within organizations.

4.1. From broad diffusion to progressive legitimation

A first and central insight emerging from the findings concerns the asymmetry between targeted and transversal facilitators. Facilitators that are most recurrent across practitioners are not those aimed at transforming the organization as a whole, but those directed at specific actors, roles, or organizational layers. Direct engagement with senior management, the presence of internal focal points, and localized pilot initiatives emerge as more effective than broad training programs or organization-wide communication campaigns.

The findings suggest that adoption operates through progressive legitimation, in which Design Thinking gains credibility and relevance by addressing the concerns of selected organizational audiences over time. This process enables DT to be gradually aligned with strategic priorities, rather than being imposed as a transversal innovation mandate.

4.2. The risks of transversal adoption initiatives

The controversial nature of transversal facilitators further reinforces this interpretation. While organization-wide initiatives aim to accelerate adoption and visibility, participants repeatedly reported limited or ambiguous outcomes associated with such actions. When introduced too early or too broadly, transversal initiatives tend to disperse attention, consume significant organizational energy, and produce shallow engagement.

These findings resonate with prior critiques of symbol-

ic or performative adoption of Design Thinking, where visibility replaces depth and experimentation is disconnected from strategic decision-making (Carlgren et al., 2016; Dunne, 2018). Importantly, the issue here is not the inherent inadequacy of transversal initiatives, but their timing and positioning within the adoption process. Without prior legitimation and relational grounding, transversal actions risk triggering scepticism, resistance, or fatigue, ultimately undermining the strategic promise they are meant to support.

4.3. Facilitators as practices of strategic translation

Taken together, the findings support a reconceptualisation of facilitators as practices of strategic translation rather than as neutral enablers. Facilitators do not simply help Design Thinking “enter” the organization; they translate DT into forms that are intelligible, acceptable, and actionable within specific organizational contexts. Through this translation work, facilitators actively shape how strategic value is defined and enacted. In the case of recurrent facilitators, translation is achieved through proximity, dialogue, and situated experimentation. Design Thinking is framed in relation to concrete strategic challenges, existing decision-making structures, and organizational language. In contrast, controversial facilitators often struggle to perform this translation, resulting in misalignment between the strategic aspirations associated with DT and its everyday enactment.

This perspective reinforces the argument advanced in earlier sections: the adoption of Design Thinking as a strategic device is not a neutral process. Rather, it involves selective reinforcement of certain interpretations of strategic value (such as efficiency, alignment, or speed) while marginalising others related to reflection, critique, or longer-term cultural transformation.

4.4. Adoption as cultivation, not rollout

An important implication of these findings is the need to reconsider the dominant metaphors used to describe Design Thinking adoption. The empirical evidence suggests that adoption is less akin to a rollout or deployment, and more comparable to a process of cultivation. Small, targeted interventions function as “seeds” that gradually build acceptance, understanding, and legitimacy across different organizational layers. This cultivation process requires patience, sequencing, and sensitivity to organizational dynamics. Attempting to accelerate adoption through broad, transversal initiatives may not only prove ineffective, but may actively constrain the transformative potential of Design Thinking by reducing it to a superficial or rhetorical practice. Adoption practices do not merely reflect organizational readiness; they actively produce it.

Conclusion and implications

This paper set out to critically examine the adoption of Design Thinking when it is positioned as a strategic device for innovation and competitive advantage. Rather than treating adoption as a problem of implementation or diffusion, the study approached it as a situated organizational process through which Design Thinking is rendered practicable and, in the process, transformed.

Drawing on an exploratory study of 100 design thinkers operating within Italian companies, the paper showed that facilitators do not function as neutral enablers of a pre-defined methodology. Instead, they act as practices of translation and legitimation that shape how Design Thinking is understood, positioned, and enacted within organizations. The empirical distinction between recurrent and controversial facilitators highlights that adoption does not advance through broad, transversal initiatives, but through targeted, relational, and sequential practices that progressively build legitimacy across different organizational layers.

By focusing on a dominant conception of Design Thinking as a driver of strategic innovation, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of its organizational life. The findings suggest that the strategic promise of Design Thinking is inherently fragile: it depends not only on methodological rigor or leadership endorsement, but on the subtle organizational work through which Design Thinking is aligned with existing priorities, languages, and power structures. In this sense, facilitators do not simply support adoption; they actively participate in defining what counts as strategic value and which forms of Design Thinking are allowed to take root in practice.

Theoretically, the paper advances Design Thinking research by reframing adoption as a process of transformation rather than implementation, and by repositioning facilitators as key analytical lenses for understanding how strategic versions of Design Thinking are constructed and sustained. Empirically, it enriches the literature with practitioner-based insights that foreground the everyday practices through which Design Thinking is cultivated inside organizations.

Finally, this study invites a broader reconsideration of how Design Thinking is discussed, promoted, and evaluated in organizational contexts. If adoption is understood as cultivation rather than rollout, then speed, scale, and visibility cannot be treated as proxies for impact. Instead, greater attention should be paid to the relational, temporal, and political dimensions through which Design Thinking becomes strategic or risks remaining superficial. Future research could further explore these dynamics across different institutional and cultural contexts, deepening our understanding of how Design Thinking continues to evolve as an organizational practice.

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In a time marked by technological disruption, ecological collapse, and systemic inequality, critically rethinking Design Thinking is necessary. DTRS'15: Design [Re]Thinking is a symposium dedicated to examining the evolution of Design Thinking and its relevance in addressing contemporary societal and environmental challenges. Hosted in Lisbon, Portugal, it was organised through a collaboration between the research centres FBAUL/CIEba, ID+, and UNIDCOM/IADE, together with non-academic partners.

The 15th edition marks a milestone in critically reflecting on the trajectory of Design Thinking, its integration with Artificial Intelligence, and its role in creating environmental value, design education, and cross-disciplinary learning.

This proceedings volume seeks not only to advance the discourse but to interrogate it: what kinds of worlds has Design Thinking helped construct, and which worlds has it silenced? What alternative ways of thinking and doing design might open paths toward more just, ethical, and interdependent futures?

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