



# PARTICIPATORY DESIGN CONFERENCE

19<sup>th</sup> edition

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## VOLUME 2

— EXPLORATORY  
PAPERS

— DOCTORAL  
COLLOQUIUM

Peace, Dialogue, Coexistence.  
Designing for living together.

### EDITORS

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# PDC2026 WELCOME

## PUBLICATION CHAIRS

Many years have passed since the first Participatory Design Conference (PDC) in 1990 and much has changed in our world, but this event remains a landmark forum in the Participatory Design (PD) community. As well as being a significant opportunity for people to come together and meet each other, the conference stimulates submissions providing opportunities for reflection and discussion.

Each edition focuses on a theme that presents a challenge – whether explicit or implicit – for researchers and practitioners in the field. For this reason, the conference Proceedings remain an important reference for many years to come, documenting the evolution of the field. And those from this specific edition will certainly continue to serve as such for a long time, framing further critical reflections on the pivotal role of PD in contemporary society.

This 19th edition of PDC has opened up a discussion on issues that are particularly relevant and timely, both now and in the near future: Peace, Dialogue, and Coexistence. In our fragmented times, these three words represent a really urgent imperative. The challenge today is to take the PD's perspective beyond the realm of academic and industrial research, transforming it into a means of addressing the complexity of the problems facing our world.

The theme of the 19th PDC has, once again, brought the political dimension of the PD to the fore. What emerges is the need for PD to serve as a fair and inclusive framework, one that takes into account the concerns of those with less voice and power, taking a stand for them in seeking a democratic approach to complex problem-solving.

This renewed political dimension of PD invites us to address another aspect that has increasingly characterised recent PDC editions: the endeavour to engage with the perspectives of scholars who are not solely 'internal' to PD. In this edition, this effort has been particularly fruitful, as can be seen from the contents of these Proceedings.

Finally, there remains a strong focus on highlighting, as far as possible, contributions from the Global South, emphasising diverse epistemological perspectives and recognising their crucial value in fostering the growth of the PD community as a whole. Submissions for this edition PDC were over 500 from five continents, across the various categories. Of these, nearly 180 contributions have been included in the Conference and in these three volumes of the Proceedings. This huge collection of material is an enormous potential for the future of PD as a discipline capable of transforming our world into a better place.

This second volume contains 53 Exploratory Papers and 38 Doctoral Colloquium submissions. Doctoral Colloquium submissions address topics related to participatory design theory, practice, and methodology, with particular attention to the conference's overarching theme and specific topics, including global systems and local experiences. They present ongoing PhD research and have been single-blind reviewed by the Doctoral Colloquium Chairs. Exploratory Papers provide early formative insights from theory or practice and present original ideas that aim to expand the participatory design field. The papers were double-blind reviewed by at least two PC members in one review round. Full and Exploratory papers are organized into *conversations*, that is, experimental formats of presentation and discussion of the papers based on triggering questions and authors' interactions. Conversations are built around seven sub-themes: Conflicts and participation; Democracy and participation; Democracy and Participation: Inclusion; Civic issues and participation: urban matters; Civic issues and participation: sustainability; Post-Anthropocentrism and Participation: AI; Post-anthropocentrism and participation: multispecies. These conversations highlight the richness of the topics discussed in these Proceedings.

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Universität zu Lübeck, Germany

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KAIST, South Korea

**Joyce Yee**  
Northumbria University, United Kingdom

**Signe Yndigegn**  
IT University of Copenhagen, Denmark

**Cristina Zaga**  
University of Twente, Netherlands

**Yulu Zhang**  
KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Sweden

# Design for Community Building in Villages

Chenfan Zhang\*  
Department of Design  
Politecnico di Milano  
Milano, Italy  
chenfan.zhang@polimi.it

## Abstract

This PhD research aims to explore the community-building framework through the lens of community-centred design applied in the context of villages. The study follows the Research through Design methodology, incorporating two main components: delving into the understanding of community within the design discourse and deriving insights from a sociological standpoint, and testing theory in a context defined as Clustering Villages in China. A series of principles and a framework will be proposed. Furthermore, the study will explore the legacy of design practices within the village. Insights obtained from this exploration will not only inform the sustainable development of the community but also provide valuable considerations for design groups. Agenda 21 emphasises human resources development and capacity-building as important means of implementation to support sustainable human settlements and rural development. In line with this global trend, a series of policies about rural revitalisation have been published in China since 2017, from the national government to the local government. The focus has gradually shifted from infrastructure construction to human development perspectives. These policies have also influenced the target village, giving it the characteristics of clustering villages. Residents from different villages, original villages, and cities come together, providing the soil for new relationship building. Meanwhile, the practice of design in the context of villages is on the rise. Among these design activities, a focus on the community as a social form has been gaining attention, while the research trend around the community is shifting. Despite this shift, a shared definition of what we mean when using the term community in the design context lacks systematic exploration. Additionally, while the practice of design in the context of villages is increasing, it is currently uncertain how design can facilitate sustainable community development in villages.

## CCS Concepts

• **General and reference** → Cross-computing tools and techniques; Design.

## Keywords

Design for community building, Community, Villages, Design for social innovation, Community-Centred Design

\*Place the footnote text for the author (if applicable) here.



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## 1 Background and introduction

With the society development, such as the increasing of urbanisation, the traditional community has been progressively dismantled [1]. A new trend of ‘fluidity’ is emerging, in which stable and continuous social ties are being replaced by more distributed and fluid networks of relationships [2].

At the global level, sustainable development agendas have increasingly emphasised human development and capacity building as important drivers of long-term social sustainability. *Agenda 21*, adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, highlights the importance of strengthening local communities and human resources as fundamental means of implementation of sustainable human settlements and rural development [3].

At present, China is undergoing a critical phase of rural revitalisation. Policy incentives and technological advancements are driving a reverse flow of populations from urban to rural areas, leading to the emergence of new social networks. As a result, rural regions are increasingly becoming complex relational fields where diverse groups (e.g. migrants, long-term residents, and new settlers) coexist and interact. This dynamic reconfiguration of social structures presents new challenges and opportunities for community building and relationship formation.

In Chinese rural revitalisation policies, villages are classified into several types, among which the clustering and upgrading villages are identified as key settlements for continued development [4]. While the policy primarily provides guidance at the macro-level, focusing on spatial organisation and development orientation, it offers limited discussion of the micro-level social and relational transformations taking place within villages. In this research, the term ‘clustering villages’ is adopted from policy discourse, whereas the analytical focus is extended to foreground the social and relational dynamics. In this research, clustering villages are understood as relational conditions shaped by the co-presence of diverse groups, whose interactions continuously reshape community boundaries, identities, and everyday practices.

Within this increasingly uncertain and dynamic social environment, design for social innovation has gained growing attention and discussion in the design research. It has been described “as a new culture, a new way of looking at the world and at what design can do with and for people living in it” [5]. In this context, the

community plays an important role and is often considered the primary research context. However, despite the frequent invocation of the term, most researchers adopt its definitions directly from sociology, rarely articulating what community essentially means in design research or distinguishing among the different kinds of communities that designers work with, for, in, or of [6].

Meanwhile, as society evolves and the degree of design intervention and contextual extension, designers are “moving towards a role that is more facilitating and/or coordinating in nature” [7]. In other words, designers have become important actors within newly emerging networks, contributing to the construction and maintenance of these relational systems. Various studies illustrate those participatory approaches, such as co-design and co-creation, can result in more accepted and sustainable social innovations, as communities become active partners in the innovation process rather than passive recipients [8, 9]. Nevertheless, discussions around community focus more on engagement, participation, collaborative processes and outcomes [10], while the relationships and networks generated through design interventions remain underexplored and are often treated as by-products rather than as the central study object [11]. In many cases, these relational and networked effects are often what persist after a project ends, making legacy a crucial lens for understanding the long-term impact of design interventions. Beyond immediate outcomes, legacies include the relationships, knowledge, practices, and infrastructures that remain within the community after the design process concludes [12, 28]. These accumulated forms of legacy influence how communities continue to evolve, adapt, and sustain development over time. However, the ways in which design contributes to or shapes such legacies remain insufficiently examined in current design for social innovation research.

In this context, Community-Centred Design (CCD) provides a key conceptual lens and entry point for this PhD research. While CCD is often discussed in relation to the concept of Creative Communities, one of the few definitions of community proposed by design researchers [13], the literal interpretation of the term community-centred offers the potential to enrich the community as a design object, rather than merely as a context for design action. However, in practical research, CCD has primarily functioned as a design approach [14], but its processes, principles and methodological frameworks remain insufficiently defined. Moreover, CCD emerged within the design for social innovation projects in Western design research. Because different society has its specific institutional and civic cultures. When applied to different socio-cultural contexts, such as the rural areas of China, it encounters challenges of translation and adaptation both theoretically and practically.

## 2 The research questions and objectives

By exploring the themes of community, community building, and legacy within the context of villages, the research aims to answer the following research question: How can design contribute to community building for social innovation in villages?

The main questions are also addressed by answering three research questions:

**RQ1:** How are community and community building conceptualised and practised within the field of design for social innovation?

**RQ2:** How can Community-Centred Design be enriched and further theorised to enhance community building for social innovation in the context of villages?

**RQ3:** How can design for community building be developed into a conceptual framework that supports sustainable and long-term community development?

The research objectives include:

**OJ1:** To examine the theoretical and practical research status of Community and Community-Centred Design in the field of design for social innovation through literature review

**OJ2:** To deepen explore of design capabilities, methods, and approaches in related to Community-Centred Design practices that support community building for social innovation in the context of villages.

**OJ3:** To develop a conceptual framework with guiding principles for design for community building that define its designerly ways and integrate the use of legacies during and after design interventions to foster sustainable community development.

## 3 Research methodology and data collection status

The methodology of the research programme is grounded in constructionist epistemologies [15, 16] and the selection of methods is informed by the Research through Design (RtD) approach [17]. In response to research questions, the methods specifically chosen are literature review, case studies, and participatory action research. The overall research process is not linear but iterative and evolving, with the literature review, case studies, and PAR informing and refining one another throughout the different stages of the PhD research.

### 3.1 Literature review

The literature review consists of two complementary parts: the narrative literature review and the integrative literature review [18, 19].

The narrative literature review aims to establish the contextual and conceptual foundations of this PhD research. It explores how the concept of Community has been understood and applied in the field of design for social innovation and examines its theoretical roots and influences from sociology. This review also surveys existing Design for Social Innovation projects situated in rural contexts to understand how design engages with different dimensions of community building and development. Furthermore, it investigates different types and definitions of villages across European and Asian contexts, with particular attention to those shaped by the rural revitalisation process in China.

Based on the conceptual and contextual groundwork, the integrative literature review synthesises insights from theoretical and practical references to construct a more systematic and comprehensive understanding of the research status of Community-Centred Design. Literature sources were identified through Scopus, snowballing [20], case studies, expert recommendations and previous rounds of literature review. The filtering process of final analysis references followed the PRISMA reporting guideline, leading to a total of 60 references included in the full paper literature review as of November 2024 [21].

After completing the manuscript of the integrative literature review, the author conducted interviews with Professor Anna Meroni and Professor Ezio Manzini, which were subsequently integrated into the study. Given their pivotal roles in defining and coining the term Community-centred design [13], these interviews provided insights that helped confirm key viewpoints and supplement information on the early development of the concept, particularly some historical aspects not documented in academic literature.

### 3.2 Case studies

The first round of case selection is based on 1) the DESIS network, which has nearly two decades of experience in design-driven practice and theory related to social innovation [22]. This provided a suitable foundation for analysing the legacies emerging from design interventions for social innovation through selected case studies. As a part of the DESIS Network, the candidate was able to access its archival materials and connect with other DESIS Labs for case data collection. Additionally, three further sources informed case selections: 2) the cases recommended by the interviewees from DESIS Labs, 3) pilot villages involved in the *Future Village programme*<sup>1</sup> in China, and 4) cases identified through participation in the *Social Innovation Festival 2024/2025*<sup>2</sup>.

For the data collection, the concept of triangulation was introduced to ensure the completeness of the core case studies [23]. During the first phases, data were collected through multiple methods, including online secondary research, interviews for primary data, and on-site field visits. These activities aimed to map the current state of community development in villages and to identify potential sites representing similar rural conditions relevant to this PhD research. This phase helped to develop a broader understanding of community dynamics, clarified the challenges faced in community building, and recognised where design might make meaningful contributions.

As the research progressed, a second round of data collection was conducted on selected core cases that aligned with the definitions of community and community building established in this PhD research and that provided sufficient access to empirical data. Fieldwork included in-depth interviews with key community members, participatory observations, and document analysis to capture the dynamics of community building, the emergence of new relationships, networks, collaborations and tensions.

The selected cases also explored how non-professional design activities contribute to community building, complementing existing design research that often focuses on professional practice. Additionally, these cases examined the evolving roles and challenges

<sup>1</sup>The programme responds to China's Rural Revitalisation policy and promotes the implementation of a series of rural development projects in Zhejiang Province. These initiatives focus on human-centred development, the cultivation of rural industries and cultural scenes, the improvement of local infrastructure and digital facilities, as well as the construction of community relationships. The policy also encourages collaboration among returning youth, local villagers, and external talents to promote sustainable and iterative community development.

<sup>2</sup>The Social Innovation Festival 2024/2025 was mainly initiated by BottleDream, a certified B Corporation established in 2011 that focuses on promoting and communicating social innovation (See B Corporation directory: <https://www.bcorporation.net/en-us/find-a-b-corp/company/bottledream/>). The festival serves as a platform that brings together social innovation projects, initiatives, and related activities across China. The author participated in the event as an audience in 2024 and as a workshop organiser for one of the activities in 2025. Therefore, the festival was considered one of the sources for identifying and collecting case studies for this research.

of designers, as well as the different forms of legacy, accumulated outcomes, and long-term impacts generated through design interventions.

In summary, the data collected from the case studies provide an empirical foundation for understanding how design can contribute to community building for social innovation in village contexts and for developing the framework of Community-Centred Design for community building.

### 3.3 Participatory action research

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is incorporated into the final part of this research to address the complexity of villages and to generate new knowledge within the specific context. Within this PhD research, PAR serves as a bridge between theory and practice [24]. An eastern Chinese village in the *Future Village Programme* was selected as the research field. The design of the PAR was also influenced by the principles of design activism [25]. Furthermore, the author introduces autoethnography to analyse personal experience narratives [26], a deep self-analysis reflection on fieldwork during the period of PAR [27].

The first round of PAR was conducted from May to July and from August to October 2024. During this phase, the author engaged deeply with the target village by immersing herself in the local context to identify opportunities for design intervention, guided by the initial framework of design for community building. The research followed two steps of the community-centred design approach: 1) gaining knowledge and 2) encouraging collaboration [13]. Four community-building oriented workshops were organised in the village. Apart from the PAR framework, the author also conducted an experiment to explore how legacy could be leveraged to benefit both subsequent external participants and local participants throughout the process [28].

The second round of PAR was conducted from May to July 2025. Building iteratively on the insights from the first round, this phase responded to the challenges identified through reflection on previous PAR activities, particularly the difficulty of conducting design interventions as an individual design researcher without an existing collaborative project or support grounded in the pressing requirement of local organisations and government. To address these challenges, the second round PAR strategy was adjusted to strengthen community building through a series of collaboratively planned events interwoven with the ongoing work of the resident NGO, ensuring alignment with its mission and vision while also contributing to its future initiatives. The activities were guided by an iterative version of the framework. In the end, a three-day event was organised, bringing together immigrants, newcomers, and long-term villagers who had established strong ties with the organising team.

## 4 Main research challenges

The research challenges emerge from contextual and practical dimensions, reflecting the complexity of embedding design research in the real-world social innovation context. Firstly, common design research terms such as co-design and workshop lack direct relevance or meaning in village settings. How to transfer and adapt these methods and approaches to local customs, social hierarchies,

and communication patterns remains the challenge throughout the PAR process. Secondly, community building unfolds gradually, whereas the PhD research operates within a fixed timeframe. How to preserve the proposed framework and mitigate the tension between the short-term engagement and the need for sustained participation is an ongoing concern? Finally, developing the framework, as new knowledge in this PhD research, within the dynamic rural context requires balancing conceptual clarity with practical adaptability. How can this designerly way of framework remain iterative and flexible while capturing the relational essence of community building?

## 5 Future planning

The PhD research programme is currently in its final year and has completed the main part of the literature review, case studies, and two rounds of participatory action research conducted over the past two years. In the following stage, the research will focus on data analysis, particularly on the further iteration of the framework, which is expected to constitute one of the key contributions to new knowledge in this PhD study.

In addition, one or more workshops are planned to supplement and validate the research outcomes. These workshops will involve professional participants to refine and verify the insights and outcomes. Case-related information will continue to be collected and reviewed until the final stage of the PhD, with the possibility of adding or removing cases as necessary.

Depending on the time constraints and research feasibility, an additional phase of participatory action research may be introduced to enrich the dataset. Furthermore, several emerging research questions and gaps identified through this study are currently under discussion and may inform future research directions beyond the scope of this PhD programme.

## 6 Theme contribution

This PhD research contributes to the conference theme by exploring how design can help build and sustain relationships of new community within rapidly changing rural communities. Drawing participatory action research within the field of design for social innovation and community-centred design, the study focuses on clustering villages, a context in which new relationships are emerging through state-led rural revitalisation and population mobility. In this setting, the research examines community as the object of design and investigates how communities can be built through design interventions.

This research contributes to understanding how frameworks of participation, such as community-centred design, can be reinterpreted within local cultural practices. As a concept and approach rooted in Western design research, community-centred design reveals new intentions and opportunities when applied in rural China. The PhD study demonstrates how participatory design interventions in this context must respond to local social infrastructures, cultural norms, and systems of governance. Furthermore, it extends discussions of inclusion in rural settings by reflecting on the capabilities and mindsets that designers need to transform. Participation, in this sense, is not about emphasising design identities but about recognising and creating the conditions (e.g. boundary

spaces) for mutual understanding, shared knowledge, and the formation of new networks [27]. Furthermore, by tracing how design practices leave behind legacies, intangible and tangible artefacts, knowledge, as well as new cultural and social infrastructures, the research addresses the discussion about how legacies can contribute to long-term sustainable community development [28].

Through these contributions, the research proposes a way of understanding Community-Centred Design not only as an approach of external facilitator approach to participation, but as relational infrastructure, such as bonds for the relationships, for community building. It preserves the continuity of existing communities and supports the new community building in the context of villages.

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