



POLITECNICO
MILANO 1863

DIPARTIMENTO
DI DESIGN

POLI.DESIGN
FOUNDED BY POLITECNICO DI MILANO



PARTICIPATORY DESIGN CONFERENCE

19th edition

15 — 19 June 2026
Milan, Italy

www.pdc2026.org

VOLUME 1 — FULL PAPERS

Peace, Dialogue, Coexistence.
Designing for living together.

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THE ASSOCIATION FOR COMPUTING MACHINERY
1601 Broadway, 10th Floor
New York, New York 10019, USA

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ACM ISBN: 979-8-4007-2105-2

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 first volume contains 37 accepted Full Papers. These papers report on substantial and original unpublished research that advances participatory design. All submissions were double-blind reviewed by at least three PC members, one of whom acted as a Meta Reviewer. 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 this Proceedings.

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Designing for Living Together

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Abstract

This essay introduces the main themes of PDC2026 (Peace Dialogue Coexistence. Designing for Living Together) and aims to build a bridge between Design, Participatory Design (PD) and the foci of the conference. In a time marked by escalating conflicts and polarisation, we question whether we have lost our ability to live together and what role PD might play in this. Acknowledging design's historical complicity in structural inequalities and environmental degradation, we nonetheless argue that PD holds potential as a dialogic and infrastructural practice capable of supporting peaceful coexistence. Drawing on key conceptual strands, we frame PD as a bridge-building practice that nurtures empathy, redistributes agency and enables collective imagination. Through engagement with theories of positive peace, environmental peacebuilding, dialogic exchange and post-anthropocentric design, we define design contribution for living together as a relational infrastructure that enables plural publics, including more-than-human actors, to negotiate coexistence. We eventually introduce and comment the main insights from the papers submitted to PDC2026.

CCS Concepts

• Human-centered computing; • Interaction design; • Interaction design process and methods; • Participatory design;

Keywords

Peace, Dialogue, Coexistence, Design approaches

ACM Reference Format:

Joon Sang Baek, Teresa Franqueira, and Anna Meroni. 2026. Designing for Living Together. In *Participatory Design Conference 2026, Vol. 1: Full Papers (PDC 2026 Vol. 1)*, June 15–19, 2026, Milan, Italy. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 9 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3796624.3796625>

1 Introduction

Some argue that to be a designer is, inherently, to be an optimist. Geopolitical analysts report that many young people, particularly in countries marked by conflict, appear more embittered than their parents were at the same age [20, 21, 59, 67, 71]. Anger, distress and distrust in institutions seem to be intensifying. The escalation of military, social and cultural conflicts has become unmistakable, manifesting in fractured forms of human relationship, polarisation

and radicalisation, further exacerbated if not ignited by the climate crisis. As we write, in March 2026, a military conflict has just broken out in the Middle East, which scope and consequences are still unfolding. Have we lost our ability to live together? If so, what voice, role, and impact might design have in fostering peace, dialogue, and coexistence?

These questions, and the frustration they carry, are at the core of **PDC.2026** (www.pdc2026.org) and of a growing reflection within the design community about the role and stance in this scenario. We, authors of this article, are academics based in democratic and peaceful countries, where the rule of law is recognized and there is freedom to research and teach. We raise these questions from a position of comfort, aware of our privilege, yet deeply troubled by current circumstances. We are not resigned to nihilism, rather, we hold on to the hope that any profession, expertise or activity can play a role in the present situation. Much has been argued about what design can do, or not, in response to the world's many crises. We acknowledge that, since Papanek's condemnation of mainstream industrial design as socially and ecologically harmful [64], it has become evident that design is structurally implicated in the production of ecological degradation and social inequality, both factors igniting conflicts [18, 29, 48, 64, 72]. Yet the intrinsic optimism we associate with acts of design — a “propositional activity,” in Margolin's words [51] — leads us to argue that design can support also the human practices that foster personal and interpersonal peace [43, 52].

As an epiphenomenon of this growing sensitivity for what design might do to live together in peace, the past few years have witnessed an increase in design-focused initiatives engaging with these themes. Notable examples include exhibitions at the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum and Triennale di Milano that address conflict and social justice. Educational institutions like Politecnico di Milano have launched design challenges, while global networks like Cumulus and ELIA have established dedicated talk series and mentoring programs. Collectively, these efforts leverage design to speculate on more peaceful futures. Broadly speaking, these initiatives show that design can operate in multiple ways. We encounter speculative projects that seek to raise questions, provoke reflection and reveal hidden patterns underlying conflict. We find proposals aimed at offering pragmatic responses to situations of crisis. Others materialise as artifacts that visualise data and contextual dynamics or prototypes of alternative futures, inviting people to experience different possibilities for living together. We learn from them that peace emerges from the will and capacity to shape the quality of coexistence across differences. In this frame, finding ways to reconsider how we relate to multiple forms of intelligence, enable dialogue among entities and co-inhabit the planet becomes



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ACM ISBN 979-8-4007-2105-2/2026/06
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3796624.3796625>

paramount. Participation is one of the necessary conditions for this to happen.

2 Design and Participation

Community engagement and participation are highlighted as ingredients for peacebuilding [45, 52, 63]. Whilst acknowledging both the potential and the limitations of involving civil society in peace processes, participation is recognised as a condition for dialogue, reconciliation and enduring peaceful coexistence. However, the sharing of perspectives — not only within like-minded communities but across divergent groups — must occur under conditions that bring about peace, which depends on how participation is framed and implemented. As Paffenholz reminds us, civil society reflects the broader society and “is therefore not always the ‘good society’ that can be counted on to support peace and democratisation. Research has found that inclusive, civic, bridging and pro-peace organisations work alongside polarised, sectarian, and occasionally militant civil society organisations” (p.109) [63].

Here a concept that design is familiar with comes into play: empathy, a condition for understanding the needs, viewpoints and frustrations of others. Yet, in situations of conflict, empathy is one of the most difficult capacities to cultivate. There is much to learn about fostering empathy between groups in conflict from the work of Alexander Langer, an Italian activist, journalist and politician who lived in South Tyrol, a region long marked by ethnic tensions. Langer’s work was directed toward enabling cultures to coexist and communicate across differences. In 1994, he wrote a decalogue on the art of living together, in which he prompted behaviours oriented toward mutual knowledge, dialogue and interaction. He wrote: “The more we have to do with one another, the better we will understand each other. (...) Learning the language, history, culture, habits, prejudices, stereotypes and fears of different communities living together is an essential step in inter-ethnic relations” [6, 45–7]. He argued that the presence of multiple ethnic groups sharing the same space should be made visible and understood as the norm rather than the exception, so to “dilute all forms of ethnic exclusivism or integralism in a natural co-existence of many different signs, sounds, smells and institutions” (p. 9). He celebrated the role of those who “mediate, build bridges, jump over walls and explore frontiers.” Might designers be among them? We argue that Participatory Design (PD) and designers can be one such thing.

How PD might foster practices, projects and strategies for living together is the question we now address. To this end, we identify a set of key concepts, drawn from strands of design research, whose principles can inform PD in this effort. This selection is not intended to be comprehensive, but to highlight the dimensions most relevant to our argument.

2.1 Conceptual Strands

Community

A first conceptual strand focuses on the notion of community that lies at the core of several collaborative design approaches. Particularly, we refer to Community-Centred Design, which frames the processes through which social innovation is conceived and developed as a means of generating public value and fostering commoning. [4, 50, 79]. This approach recognises that social innovation

can be controversial and conflictual: heterogeneous actors bring diverse, sometimes opposing, interests that must find ways to coexist within complex systems, where full alignment or shared visions are not always attainable. This resonates with DiSalvo’s scholarship on community-based PD and agonistic democracy [14], which is based on contestation, not consensus, and where PD may expand the ability to dispute. Community-Centred Design operates first through gaining situated knowledge about the community and its habitat, through observation and immersion. It then proceeds to co-design future possibilities with the relevant stakeholders, where design becomes a means of engagement and learning within a community and with the broader society. In this, designers act as facilitators of collective agency rather than problem solvers.

Conviviality

Another strand focuses on conviviality, understood as a lens for thinking and designing, rooted in Illich’s critique of industrial society [41], its productivity paradigm and the modern tools that dominate life. It encompasses ideas such as the Convivial Toolbox [68], Convivial Aesthetics [44] and Convivial Design [27]: they point to the need to rethink design processes and social structures through a reflection on power relations, meaning making and the forms of interaction that sustain people’s autonomy and cooperative engagement with tools and with one another. Accordingly, a toolbox is convivial if it enables participants in the design process to express their imagination with confidence and creative autonomy. Convivial Aesthetics describes a condition that shifts attention from artifacts to communities, social forms and the assemblages of artifacts that support them. It refers to the qualities of immaterial interactions and social configurations that foster a sense of belonging to a larger whole, in which everyone feels able to contribute. Convivial Design, finally, points toward what design could become in a more socially embedded world, and it is tied to an ethos - a set of values guiding how design engages with people, communities and environments. Through its emphasis on agency, capability and co-production, conviviality becomes relevant to PD and invites ethical reflection on the status quo and the imagination of alternatives.

Scenario

The term scenario connects an additional strand of design approaches that we value relevant for PD’s contribution to living together. Linked to Future Studies and Anticipation (the capacity to act in preparation for a possible future state of the world [84]) it refers to a range of imaginative methodologies. Scenario building follows principles that help structure collective conversations about the future. It encourages participants to consider the evolution of hypothetical situations, possible alternatives and the pathways that may lead toward them. As such, it is a collective exercise in imagination that combines actors with diverse perspectives into project-based communities [22] to design around matters of relevance. Design-Orienting Scenarios (DOS) [49] are one family of scenarios: future-oriented narratives that are motivated, illustrated and visualized through solution proposals. Structured around opportunities, DOSs identify, define and co-design transformative initiatives, while clarifying values and capabilities of different actors. They are open collaborative processes, rather than fixed artifacts, retaining an exploratory character [3]. Likewise, Transition Design, which proposes a framework for catalysing societal transitions in

response to wicked problems, seeks to facilitate stakeholders in the co-creation of visions of the future, identifying points where design interventions can be situated [42]. Other strands of work, oriented to critical thinking, are Speculative Design and Design Fiction, which create provocative scenarios to explore alternative futures, question dominant assumptions and stimulate reflection [2, 15, 16] with a political posture.

Experience

Another conceptual strand for our discussion revolves around the notion of experience, which can inform PD processes in multiple ways, particularly when engaging with emotionally and ethically sensitive contexts. Here we consider those approaches that address the emotional and practical impacts of conflict, trauma or exclusion on individuals and communities. Peavey and Ames [65] discuss how Trauma-Informed Design, an approach that contemplates the factors affecting emotional well-being under conditions of stress and adversity, can generate design principles in the field of spatial design. They highlight elements such as human scale, spatial order, wayfinding, communal spaces, accessibility, hierarchy, and symbolism as factors for creating environments in which people may experience inner peace and are likely to act peacefully. Based, instead, on an understanding of others' life conditions, Bodystorming invites participants to experience such conditions through direct immersion, fostering self-reflection, insight generation and prototyping [5, 61]. Extending beyond human-centred experiences, this reflection pertains to our relationships with other forms of agency, questioning how we can sensorially and emotionally connect with non-human living beings, material systems and technological agents.

Power

The work of Costanza-Chock [10] invites us to examine design through the lens of power and the power relations. She advances a strand of reflection on how design practices may reinforce systems of structural inequality and reproduce dynamics of domination at personal, community and institutional levels. Such structural dynamics can be understood as forms of structural violence — a concept that describes how social systems generate inequality and suffering, through established cultural beliefs, political arrangements and institutional structures. Costanza-Chock begins from the observation that those most affected by design decisions often have the least influence over how those decisions are made. Design Justice, which she defines as “a framework for analysis of how design distributes benefits and burdens between various groups of people” (p. 23) [10], proposes a reorientation of design processes toward marginalized people to address challenges through collaborative practices. Design Justice builds on concepts that define structural inequality from different perspectives: (1) intersectionality, which understands ethnicity, class and gender as interlocking systems that do not operate independently [11]; (2) decoloniality, which foregrounds marginalized perspectives — including those of colonized and Indigenous communities — and enables engagement with multiple temporalities and epistemologies [80]; and (3) pluriversality, an ethical praxis of world-making oriented toward the creation of a world “where many worlds fit” [18, 19].

Relationality

Finally, we consider the strand of research that engages with the concept of relationality: the configuration of relationships through

which collective life becomes possible in conditions of mutual respect, reciprocity and active coexistence. This strand encompasses the human-to-human and the more-than-human approaches, acknowledging the radical interdependencies denied by much of modern thinking. Humans often act as they were disconnected from other species, and technologies are thought as subordinate tools or “slaves,” rather than agents within socio-technical assemblages [46]. The term more-than-human refers to the interdependence of living and non-living entities, challenging anthropocentric assumptions and inviting a reconfiguration of how we understand and relate to other forms of life. It calls for a shift toward an expanded embodied awareness and radically different worldviews. As Heitlinger et al. [38] argue, embracing a more-than-human approach “is neither merely including non-humans in Participatory Design processes nor finding methods for their ‘participation,’ but instead a philosophical undertaking” (p.105). Design outcomes cannot be separated from the relations that produce them, which are informed by the understanding of other forms of life. Accordingly, and in line with the origins of PD, we cannot ignore the critical implications of how Artificial Intelligence is shaped and the role of workers in this. Relationality requires deepened engagement and the identification of proxies through which alternative perspectives can be interpreted, entering a logic of co-performance [35] where agency is distributed and collectively enacted.

For us, these strands are intrinsically connected to the ways in which PD can engage with the purpose of living together, particularly through the lenses of Peace, Dialogue, and Coexistence, as we argue here below.

3 Peace

Peace is an act of will rather than a natural condition. It can be understood as a state of mind, body and spirit, a state of harmony with the world around us. Following McCuskey Shepley [52], peace is the ultimate form of beauty. Yet, from every perspective, peace remains an elusive concept. As Bartolucci [1] notes, the conceptual starting point for defining peace has traditionally been war, leading to the understanding of peace as the “absence of war.” While this definition may suffice for scholars concerned with understanding the causes of war, “for those who want to focus on the conditions that generate or maintain peace, such conceptualization does not suffice” (p.273) [1].

3.1 Positive Peace

The seminal work of the sociologist Johan Galtung offers a distinction between negative peace — the absence of violence — and Positive Peace, which entails the presence of social justice and well-being [30]. Rather than defining peace in opposition to war, Galtung reframes it in relation to violence, understood as any action or condition that causes a person's “actual somatic and mental achievements to be below their potential achievements.” Peace, ergo, requires eliminating political oppression, inequalities, poverty, hunger, exploitation and limited access to basic rights. Galtung identifies three forms of violence:

Direct, physical or psychological: it refers to behaviours involving force intended to harm, damage or undermine a person's physical or emotional integrity.

Structural, embedded within systems: it refers to social, political or economic conditions that intentionally or unintentionally produce systemic inequalities preventing basic needs from being met.

Cultural, rooted in the “natural order of things”: it refers to societal norms and beliefs that legitimise or normalise direct and structural violence. It often manifests in discourses that fuel anger, fear, hatred and misunderstanding between groups [12].

Contemporary design discourse is increasingly attentive to these forms of violence. Well-being and mental health, for instance, are central concerns in approaches that address the emotional experiences of people affected by trauma. The mentioned Trauma-Informed Design, along with ethnographic methodologies, seeks to provide both methodological tools and ethical postures for engaging with complex and intractable situations. Equally relevant is the growing reflection on design’s role in reinforcing or challenging the power relations embedded in structural inequalities, that is, structural violence. Galtung’s work [31] resonates with Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach of 1990: violence is any condition that prevents individuals from exercising their substantive freedoms, to “live the kind of life they value and have reason to value.” Building on this, designing for peace should be not simply about preventing conflict, but expanding the conditions under which diverse forms of life can coexist, feel capable and welcome to bring their contribution.

3.2 Environmental Peacebuilding and Ecosystems for Peace

Environmental issues are increasingly becoming sources of conflict. Environmental Peacebuilding, a field of study at the intersection of peace, conflict and the natural world, recognises that a healthy environment is a condition for conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution and recovery [6]. The connection between design and environmental issues may seem self-evident, however, its association with peace is less commonly articulated. It opens a field of possibilities for design, particularly when addressing controversies related to environmental transitions.

Civic participation, social innovation and deliberative democracy are increasingly deployed to address challenges raised by the climate crisis. PD is adopted in these contexts, sometimes with contested approaches and outcomes. Its function is to bring diverse actors representing opposing positions at the table, with the complexity and power dynamics this entails. Such processes may adopt different postures, depending on how participation is framed and facilitated [69]. In peace studies, these integrated configurations of actors are described as Ecosystems for Peace: arrangements that combine bottom-up and top-down approaches, integrate the knowledge of underrepresented groups with technologies and bring together those who argue for the intrinsic value of nature, with those who emphasize human protection and development [6].

Several contributions to PDC2026 discuss the role of design in creating spaces where communities deliberate, imagine and act together. They suggest that one of the most promising ways to integrate participation into policymaking lies not only in improving institutional uptake, but in strengthening the infrastructures that enable participation, informed engagement and collective action

over time, holding imagination, reflexivity and agency together (see: *Participating in Designing Sustainable Futures: The Challenges of Imagination and Envisioning* - by De la Rosa, Broadbent and Jégou; and *Imagination, reflexivity and agency in institutional change and public policy* - by Kimbell and Mortati, in this volume).

3.3 Civil Society Engagement

Thania Paffenholz, a policy advisor specialized in inclusive peace processes, examines whether, how, when and under what circumstances civil society (organisations not purely driven by private or economic interests) can fulfil a peace-supporting role [62]. Inclusion is key for peacebuilding, because one of the main reasons people resort to violence is to contest their exclusion from matters of importance. She argues that, although this is still far from routine, civil society can play a role in local peacebuilding through participation in negotiations, so strengthening sustainability and ownership of agreements. She outlines modalities through which this can happen:

Direct presence at negotiation tables and/or problem-solving workshops, in connection with leaders of the parties, where rooms for discussion are provided without pressure to reach agreement. In design terms, these are “safe spaces” where speculative exploration is allowed beyond existing constraints. A relevant issue here concerns the presence of marginalized groups.

Advocacy and monitoring functions, through commissions or forums observing issues such as human rights conditions during or after agreements. This form of participation can be related to Community-Centred and trauma-Informed Design, approaches grounded in immersion, care and ethnographic sensitivity [39, 65].

Consultation and public decision-making, at different stages of peacebuilding. Here PD can contribute to informed engagement and capability development, alongside supporting democratic competencies on socio-technical governance (see: *Participatory Design as a Unifying Lens for Democratic Digital Futures* – by Mariani and Schade, in this volume).

Shaping public climate, expressing advocacy through activism and culturally rooted practices that enable dialogue and socialisation across groups. This modality of participation resonates with Design Activism [24, 25].

Inspired by Paffenholz, we can see possibilities for PD to enter even peace negotiation phases, not necessarily as a problem-solving tool, but as a mode of constructive engagement with conflict, transforming rather than silencing it and creating cultural infrastructures for agonistic dialogue (see: *Weaving Peace in a World of Conflict: Conversations about Participatory Design* - by Maffei, Rugeles Joya, Campbell and Cipriani in this volume). We can also see the potential for design to contribute at all stages of peacemaking: from prevention of conflicts to alleviation of traumatic conditions and reconstruction of the foundations for coexistence. Pelle Ehn defines PD activities as “peace-making experiments in the small” (p. 292) [17]: hence, those he defines as “PD activists” should join forces with the peace movement, recognizing the limits of their expertise, yet also acknowledging that engagements across parties and borders, even in agonistic contexts, remain areas where PD may contribute.

4 Dialogue

Design practice is often understood as an exchange oriented toward clarifying positions, reaching synthesis, fostering understanding or enabling convergence. Borrowing from Sennett [70], we might say that design can mobilize two modes of exchange: the dialectic, in which the aim is to win an argument, take a stance or persuade; and the dialogic, in which the aim is to understand without necessarily resolving differences. For Sennett, dialogue is not about agreement, but about sustaining interaction across differences, through listening, curiosity, openness to ambiguity and tolerance for unresolved tension. Accordingly, living together is not necessarily a state of harmony, but a practiced capacity to exert listening, remain in relation amid disagreement and prevent, alleviate or heal conflicts. PD, understood as a dialogic practice rather than a consensus-building tool, may offer one such infrastructure for coexistence.

4.1 Dialogue as infrastructure

Dialogue is intertwined with democracy, not only with formal procedures such as voting, but with the ongoing cultivation of active citizenship, deliberation and collaborative problem framing. When democratic systems enter into crisis, the need for spaces of debate and conditions for open collaboration becomes acute [24]. How can design help create the conditions for diverse forms of expression, negotiation and collective learning to flourish?

If dialogic exchange depends on listening and openness, in polarised contexts dialogic capacities do not emerge spontaneously; they must be scaffolded. PD may do this by creating safe spaces for engagement and providing structured ways for participants to articulate concerns and values. In doing so, it supports democracy not simply by “including citizens,” but by strengthening the foundations that allow plural publics to exist and act together [26].

When it comes to conflict and peace, democratic and socio-ecological breakdown are entangled. Environmental disruption and extractive economies generate insecurity, unfairness and unequal exposure to risk, so fuelling distrust and antagonism. Adopting a Positive Peace perspective, climate emergency and ecological degradation become peace questions because they erode capabilities and intensify structural violence. Here, participation through Design Activism can be positioned to transform the conditions that make conflict more likely. Activism can be read as the continuation of design’s cultural agency under urgency, especially as younger generations and self-organised citizen groups mobilise in response to institutional delays to regenerate commons [24, 53].

PD, then, may connect democratic participation and socio-ecological transition in practical way, creating spaces and systems that enable citizens and institutions to co-produce responses to complex challenges. This includes designing for active citizenship through environments that support learning, critical reflection and knowledge exchange, as well as through spaces that facilitate encounter and collective use. Approaches such as Tactical Urbanism demonstrate how small-scale, temporary interventions can prototype alternative uses of space, gather feedback and strengthen community agency before permanent commitments are made. Such iterative experimentation is a democratic competence: it lowers barriers to participation, allows contested issues to be explored and helps build legitimacy through responsiveness. Contributions

to PDC2026 reinforce this interpretation of dialogue across differences as a space in which disagreement, contradiction and even irreconcilable positions are inevitable, yet accepted as politically meaningful (see: *Reframing Participation: Inclusion and Democracy in Participatory Design* - by Villari and Scupelli, in this volume).

Alongside physical infrastructures, design mediates democratic participation through digital ones. Participatory budgeting platforms, consultation tools and civic apps illustrate how interfaces and facilitation logics can either enable dialogue or reproduce exclusion. Here, the design challenge is political: whose voices are made legible, how disagreement is handled, what forms of evidence count and how power asymmetries are mitigated. Well-designed participatory systems can expand participation beyond voting toward sustained civic engagement, deliberation and collaborative problem-solving.

4.2 A Matter of Language

The precondition for dialogue is sharing a language. Linguistics teaches us that language is power: the more we develop our linguistic competence and shape what can be said and how it is said, the more we become empowered citizens capable of participating in democratic dialogue [26, 32]. Vera Gheno introduces the notion of “linguaggio ampio”, which may be translated as “broad language.” [33, 34] It goes beyond inclusion - a term that imply that diversity is incorporated into the norm - and instead refers to widening the symbolic and relational space within which coexistence becomes possible. Broad language leaves room for imagination and representation, thus embracing complexity within a condition of openness. It also entails broadening linguistic horizons, thereby sharpening mental and existential horizons, since language gives form to our thoughts and perceptions. In PD’s terms, this resonates with:

the ethics of listening to those who are experts in their own lives yet are often excluded,

the creative capacity and openness required to imagine alternative future scenarios,

the design approaches that acknowledge the multiple perspectives from which we must begin in our reciprocal efforts of listening and understanding.

The question, then, becomes: how broad can language be and who is enabled to engage in dialogue? From PDC2026, it emerges that the language of participation cannot be reduced to speech and rational argumentation, because these modalities exclude those whose participation does not conform to dominant communicative norms. We may also question whether and how our commitment to engaging in dialogue with other-than-human actors can be framed. Dialogue in these relations requires an expanded understanding: it evolves beyond verbal communication to sensory attunement. It can be a messy co-performance where agency is distributed and enacted across human and non-human actors [35, 57] and must shift to encompass other intelligences, sensibilities, forms of agency and ways of relating, to open up new possibilities for collective survival. These worlds require us to experiment how other forms of life and technological agents can be interpreted and involved. Plants, for instance, are often perceived as “quiet,” yet this is so only to human eyes. Arts and literature help us glimpse vegetal, non-human ways of being and sensing [54]. Mertehikian explores

the creative processes of Latin American artists, showing how they act as mediums, communicating with natural and spiritual worlds. These practices draw on multispecies anthropology and engage with invisible forces [55]. Likewise, Yong [82] reveals the immensity of the world through the senses of animals, teaching us that there is far more beyond what we ourselves can perceive.

The post-anthropocentric shift raises challenges related to dialogue in the context of PD. They include: persuading human stakeholders to engage in dialogues with non-human entities [54, 66, 76, 77, 85] while defining the scale of these interactions to address macro-scale inequalities and injustice [8, 41, 65, 81]; identifying human and non-human actors within complex assemblages [28, 50, 83, 84]; redistributing agency to reduce power gaps [81]; respecting and obtaining the participation of non-human actors [9, 11, 46, 47, 56, 58, 81]; supporting communication and mediating the tensions [69, 75, 77]; and bridging the gap between available and lacking knowledge to sustain dialogic exchanges [36, 67, 79]. The democratic question therefore expands: including ecological limits and non-human interests does not mean collapsing them into purely human proxies. Designing for living together means designing systems and places where people can participate in public life while negotiating coexistence within ecological boundaries.

5 Coexistence

Modern social-ecological crises are not merely technical or economic failures; they are fundamentally crises of metaphysics, the deep assumptions about reality [40]. The drivers of environmental degradation and social fragmentation are rooted in cultural and moral frameworks that dictate our relationships with one another and with the broader community of life. Achieving coexistence in peace, therefore, necessitates a critical reflection on these relationships.

5.1 Living together with others

Many religions and traditional Eastern philosophies frame peace through the lenses of interdependence and relationality. In Christianity, for instance, peace is viewed as a gift from God – a “tranquility of order” achieved when we live in a right relationship with the Creator and in harmony with Its creation. This stands in contrast to paradigms of exploitation and dominance; instead, it seeks to restore an order of creation characterised by interdependence. In Buddhism, inner peace is achieved by realising that all things are interconnected and inseparable; as self-centredness fades through the recognition that our well-being is inextricably linked to that of others, a state of genuine harmony emerges. Similarly, Shintoism finds peace through the respect of the gods dwelling within the natural world, while Confucianism views harmony as a vital dimension of internal moral cultivation that ultimately leads to harmony or social order.

These philosophies have a wider perception of the realm of coexistence. Likewise, in the post-anthropocentric era, relationships based on mutual respect and interdependence must extend beyond mankind to encompass all beings [23]. The growing body of knowledge under this theme in PDC2026 demonstrates a shift in design practices toward establishing these symbiotic relationships. With reference to AI, several key contributions signal a move toward

post-anthropocentric PD (see *Participation and the Troubles with Intelligence* - by Giaccardi, Roudavski and Tironi, in this volume). These include the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into AI development, the use of embodied and performative methodologies, the simulation of non-human agency and the adoption of cosmological reframing. Although these contributions demonstrate a field in transition, the authors highlighted the “gravitational pull of anthropocentrism” (ibid). Specifically, they note that many projects rely on a limited technical understanding of AI and continue to engage with non-human entities through human-centric proxies. The authors argue that design is not only a discipline oriented toward problem solving but also a “field that develops approaches to communication and collaborative decision making,” a shift that necessitates humility to reveal what remains “outside the frame: other intelligences, sensibilities, forms of agency, and ways of relating and world making” (ibid., 5-6).

Similarly, PD is undergoing an epistemic and methodological shift (see *Towards Multispecies Participation in More-than-Human Worlds* - by Vergani, Tomico, Pasari and Forlano, in this volume), expanding participation beyond traditional linguistic dialogue to include ethical considerations. This shift directly addresses the previously noted reliance on human-centred proxies.

5.2 Design for coexistence: finding a middle ground

Coexistence in the anthropocentric era requires redistributing agency to marginalised actors. This involves disagreement, tensions and conflicts that, as discussed, are not incompatible with living together in peace. Rather, this is a dynamic quality of relationship within the bounds of mutual respect, which incorporates tension and difference without allowing them to descend into fragmentation or destruction [13]. Project Tiger, a conservation programme in India, exemplifies the complexity of a post-anthropocentric intervention. It was designed to protect the endangered Bengal tiger from habitat loss and poaching in the early 1970s. The core strategy adhered to a Deep Ecology framework: setting aside vast areas of land as “pristine wilderness” and minimising human interference [37]. By biological metrics, the project is a success, as tiger populations have increased. However, the creation of these reserves required the physical displacement of local peasants who lost their means of subsistence, to create a space for elite consumption. The project’s success is built upon the exclusion of these human communities while the state and the commercial tourism industry benefit from selling “a glimpse of the pristine wilderness” to wealthy outsiders [37, 73]. To guide designers through disagreements and conflicts in practices like this and to mitigate unintended consequences, post-anthropocentric design can benefit from a value system or ethical framework. A notable example is the set of conservation virtues proposed by Hoffman and Sandelands [40]. Imbued with a religious perspective and business mindset, virtues such as humility, respect, selflessness, moderation, mindfulness and responsibility serve as principles for action.

We argue that designing for coexistence in the post-anthropocentric era involves finding a middle ground between

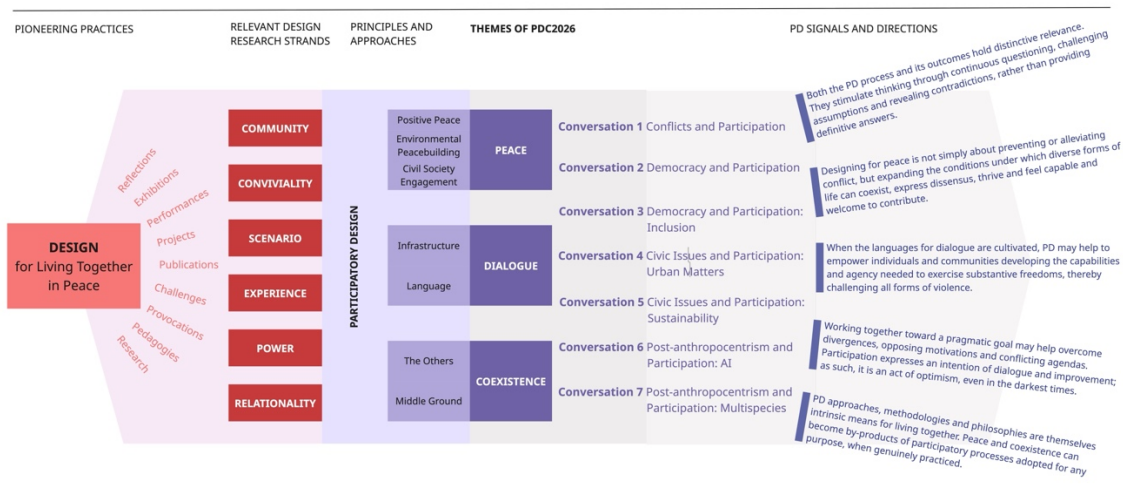


Figure 1: Graphic visualisation of the concepts discussed in this essay with reference to the PDC2026 conference.

anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric values. This implies re-defining human needs beyond self-interested desires and shaping human actions towards the good of the universe [60, 74, 78].

6 Signals

We may define PD as a way for design to engage in dialogue. We argued that dialogue is a condition for peaceful coexistence and that it requires cultural, social and technological infrastructures to take place. We see the connection between peace, dialogue and coexistence as a virtuous cycle, a continuum of efforts that requires dedication over time.

War is a state. Peace is a dynamic process, a tension toward a goal that may never be achieved but must be constantly pursued. In it, the presence or absence of violence is never absolute. Peace can therefore be understood as an asymptotic condition within interconnected realities, whose internal dynamics depend on our actions [1] and design actions.

We see the PD community as deeply engaged in the discourse around these themes, which are rooted in its very history and, at the same time, have resurged with renewed urgency. Faced with the enormity of military wars, the direct violence perpetrated by belligerent regimes and the humanitarian, social and environmental catastrophes that follow, it may seem that no action is possible at our scale or within our expertise. Yet, from the design community, signals of possible, humble, contributions emerge. And so, we come to understand that the efforts of PD toward living together may take different directions we attempt to outline here (Figure 1).

First, both the PD process and its outcomes hold distinctive relevance. They follow the Socratic principle to stimulate thinking through continuous questioning, challenging assumptions, and revealing contradictions, rather than providing definitive answers.

Second, designing for peace is not simply about preventing or alleviating conflict, but expanding the conditions under which diverse forms of life can coexist, express dissensus, thrive, and feel capable and welcome to contribute. A framework of conviviality

— both as the context in which PD takes place and as an outcome it may generate — best captures design practices that sustain autonomy and cooperative engagement, even when challenging the status quo.

Third, PD may work as empowerment at individual, community, societal and even terrestrial levels, if languages for dialogue are cultivated and individuals remain open to negotiating power and critically reshape the relational, ecological and political configurations of collective life. Empowerment involves developing the capabilities and agency needed to exercise substantive freedoms, thereby challenging all forms of violence.

Forth, designing is an intentional act. Working together toward a pragmatic goal may help overcome divergences, opposing motivations and conflicting agendas, in so doing fostering project-based communities. Collaboration may nurture empathy, listening and appreciation of each other's capabilities. Participation expresses an intention toward dialogue and improvement; as such, it is an act of optimism, even in the darkest times.

Finally, PD approaches, methodologies and philosophies, regardless of the specific subject of application, are themselves intrinsic means for living together, when guided by a commitment to understanding and collective betterment. Peace and coexistence can become by-products of participatory processes when genuinely practiced.

PDC2026 is organized around these themes and signals, gathering the design community around a shared epistemological urgency and highlighting the vitality, plurality and experimental nature of PD theory and practice.

We recognize that PD can engage with the dynamic conditions of peace and coexistence in multiple ways, and that reflection and experimentation in these areas are still emerging. This remains a frontier to be explored, one that will likely involve failures, limitations and disillusionments that may stem not only from the well-known difficulties of participatory processes, but also from questions about the recognition and legitimacy of PD across the

diverse contexts and scales in which peacebuilding, dialogue and coexistence take place. In fact, engaging in these domains also requires recognition beyond the design and participatory communities. As participatory designers, we are therefore called to make our work visible, relevant, and accountable to a wider range of publics, organisations and scholars operating bottom-up and top-down in this sphere.

AI use

We have used ChatGPT 5.2 to proofread and streamline text and Google Gemini to proofread the text and format the citations and references.

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